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Marlene Taylor-Ponterotto Interview

Mark Naison

Marlene Taylor-Ponterotto Interview Transcription
Interviewers: Mattie Armstrong-Price
Interviewee: Marlene Taylor-Ponterotto

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Mattie Armstrong-Price (MAP): Hello. This is Mattie Armstrong Price interviewing Marlene Taylor-Ponterotto for the Bronx African American History Project, and also for the work of the Arts and Sciences Anti-Racism Committee, focusing on the institutional history of Fordham. Marlene, thank you so much for being open to talking about your experiences at Fordham and in organizing with Mosaic. I thought maybe we could start off, and I could just ask, if you could talk about your family and what brought you to Fordham.

Marlene Taylor-Ponterotto (MTP): Okay, sure. Thank you, and it's my pleasure to be able to participate in this interview. Fordham is – My journey at Fordham is something that I really cherish because I had no idea back when I started my freshman year in 1975 that it would have the impact it's on my life. I went to Cathedral High School, and back in the seventies, college applications were not as tedious and challenging as they are now. And I just remember getting into two schools, Hunter College and Fordham University. And the decision was based on, I believe, a financial aid decision. Actually, I'd had a nursing scholarship at high school and Fordham didn't have a nursing program. So I also thought, you know, I wanted to go into medicine and health care and Fordham seemed to have other options. So I went to the Upward Bound program, the summer before starting my freshman year. And then that was a great way to transition into being a resident on campus at the Rose Hill campus, and those four years were, again, very exciting. I learned a lot, and it just – I am the first, actually the second person in my family to attend college. My dad, my family and I moved to New York back in the mid 60s, and my eldest sister attended City College, and so everyone was pretty excited when I got accepted to Fordham and Hunter. So yeah, those four years I was a biology major and have a bachelor of science in biology. However, a lot of my distribution requirements – we called them at the time – included theology, philosophy, history, and I took the majority of those under the African American studies department. And I have to say that my experience at Fordham was equally as important – my major and my involvement with the biological sciences versus the African American studies department and some of the distribution requirements were – I felt them the same. And that's what I feel my experience at Fordham was, not just as a pre-med student, but as a member of a community that the African American studies department allowed me. And then some of the friends, in addition to faculty members, the friends who I made then, I'm still friends with to this day. My roommates, and definitely professors like Dr. Naison and Dr. Magnum and Dr. Reverend Calvin Butts, who recently passed away. So those were some of my professors I had early on, who I stayed in touch with throughout the last, you know, 40 years.

MAP: My second question was going to be about what it was like finding community when you came to Fordham. And so it sounds like the African American History Department, African American Studies Department was a really central part of that for you.

MTP: Yes, it certainly was. So, as I mentioned, the – actually, that was the HEOP program that I attended the summer before. I'm sorry, I'm not sure if I said the Upward Bound, but it was the HEOP, which is the Higher Educational Opportunity Program. So, I worked for the Upward Bound program, later on, but I was a student under one of the financial aid packets that had to do with the HEOP program. And that, well, basically, students who were underrepresented, minority students who could benefit from the financial aid, but just a lot of support that they gave us at the time. So the HEOP program, the African American Studies Department, and then some of the organizations, which included the Society of African American Leadership, and just in an informal way, spending time in the waiting area of the African American Studies Department on the second floor of Daly Hall, was sort of like an informal community that was very nurturing and supportive of the students who did participate in those courses and spend time with the professors on campus and of course in the classroom. It was very enriching and really speaks to the fact that despite the minority student – and definitely I'm going to speak about the African American student population being – I believe the numbers back then were 4 or 5% – We still felt close to each other and felt like we were part of the university because of what we felt when we were among the professors in the African American Studies Department, and among our fellow students in the various clubs and the HEOP program in the basement of Keating Hall. So that took up a lot of space there, and having spent time with the students the summer before freshman year and then continuing to to meet with the counselors throughout the year was quite helpful.

MAP: And you mentioned also the Society of African American Leadership as one of the organizations.

MTP: Yes. Yeah, so that was something I believe that was started – So again, I was there from ‘75 to ‘79, and I believe my fellow students – again, they were all different majors, one of my friends at the time who's now an attorney, but I believe he was pivotal in starting it. He was a political science major and he and a bunch of the other students just decided to start this organization and we met and had, in addition to the social events, you know, cultural events – I remember I had never had Kwanzaa and learned a lot about it because that was one of the activities that they put on. We had speakers come in, and then we had get togethers and parties and just, you know, it was really, really part of my experience there that again, I felt like I grew socially because it really allowed you to meet students of different walks of life who – I grew up in the Polo Grounds houses in Harlem. And so I got to meet other minority students from other parts of New York. One of my good friends, Helen Lamb, she lived out in Laurelton, Queens. I spent time with my friend Sarah, who lived, I believe at the time, in another part of the Bronx.

My friend Sonia lived in a part of Brooklyn, New York. So places I had never visited before, but really learned that we exist throughout the New York area and had so much in common. And one of my roommates at the time, she was actually from Tennessee, I believe, and so it was just such an enriching, fun experience. So it made the relentless, tiring pre-med curriculum just a lot more tolerable because your downtime is spent with these very supportive fellow students, as well as the staff and the African American studies department.

MAP: That makes a lot of sense. Did you spend most of your time on campus or were you like visiting friends–

MTP: A commuter? No, so I did live on campus the first two years. And then I stayed home the last two years. So living on campus, that was fun. And we lived in Spellman Hall, which is an all girls – well, was an all girls dorm, at the time – and just learned a lot about each other. A lot of things did come up in terms of learning about how people saw each other and preconceived notions about different cultures. And, you know, I'll just fast forward because you may or may not ask this question, but I remember some women – young ladies – who had not known about African American hairstyles. So at the time, you know, post-civil rights, people were still wearing their hair natural as they do today, but not as – How can I say this? So Afros were a thing, but also people were straightening their hair. And straightening could be anything from using a hot comb to actually using chemical relaxers. Unlike today, where, you know, so many women probably wear their natural hair. But back then we still were – a lot of the classmates were straightening their hair, had different styles, similar to mine now, so some of the Caucasian women had never seen that, and they didn't know what – they were like, "You're ironing your hair?" So we talked, and we would have meetings in the dorm and just talk about things, and, you know, from one extreme to the other, my fellow friends would – some of them were upset about the fact that it was looked at sort of like, "Oh my gosh, you're ironing your hair" as opposed to, "So I'm going to teach you about, you know, African American hair and why we do what we do." And so there was a lot of discussion and those two years in Spellman Hall were quite, you know, a learning experience, I think, for all of us.

MAP: It sounds like you were carrying a burden – or bearing a burden – of education and also kind of needing to push back against some, maybe, willful ignorance on the part of white students at the time.

MTP: Yes, yes, for sure. And even things like you almost felt as though you – when you were around other African American students or Latino students – it's almost like you felt supportive and more comfortable on campus than when you were by yourself. So not – not fear of, you know, violence or anything like that, but just uncomfortable and almost insecure, for sure as an African American biology major. I believe my year I was the only female graduate with the biology degree in the Fordham College. So not general studies, not other schools, but the Class

of 1979 Rose Hill. So my classmates were mostly Caucasian, and a few Latino, but the competition – just historically, right, pre-med students are known to be, I think, one of the most competitive – I guess next to math – but, you know, just the culture of a pre-med student and the approach to learning and getting ahead is extremely competitive. So, here it is on this. I'm this Black little girl from Harlem who barely speaks up like I do now. I mean, I was someone who barely spoke up in school. And this is like grammar school in high school, right? And my teachers would constantly tell my parents like, "She would have gotten an A if she participated in class," but I stuttered as a child. So I was always apprehensive about volunteering what to say, but also known as shy, which is quite the opposite of what I am now. (laughs) Anyway, I – And when I found what I felt passionate about, which was healthcare and disparities, later on – I actually, in addition to practicing medicine, am on various speaker bureaus for various pharmaceutical companies around HIV and AIDS, and health disparities, and the medications, et cetera. So that's something that once I became passionate about issues in health care – But as an undergraduate student sitting next to, maybe, a Caucasian male whose father is a doctor and he's comfortable saying something and speaking up about some complex equation in general chemistry or in chordate morphogenesis, and I was just learning and taking in everything, and did well, but still was nervous about speaking up. And so Fordham taught me a lot about that because I learned that if I don't speak up, I won't be able to move forward. But a lot of those tools came from my fellow – my friends, and the African American Studies department. And I don't want to, you know, dismiss how relevant my first year biology professor, who passed away a few years ago, Dr. Daniel Sullivan – who I got an A in that course because – and I still remember the textbook like it was yesterday, but his style of teaching was phenomenal. And I just really – I stayed in touch with him as well. But the other courses were quite competitive, especially in the chemistry, physics, general chem arena, so much so that I saw, slowly, some students who started out pre-med, bio majors, changing their majors. And so – but I hung in there and stuck in there and, you know, was able to apply to graduate school – a PA program – and got accepted after that. So, yeah.

MAP: Yeah. Within the department, were there – in addition to Professor Sullivan – ways that you were able to find support, or did it feel very kind of isolated within the pre-med?

MTP: Yeah, it pretty much did, except for the fact that we did have a minority pre-med club. So there was a traditional Fordham club, which I think it's still in existence, Laennec, the Pre-Med Society, which was mostly white men, young men. And then we had AMPS, which was the Association for Minority Pre-Health and Biology Students. And I – by my second year, I was the president of that. But I became involved with having, you know, that organization, and that was helpful, as well as, as I mentioned, the HEOP program, which did give us support throughout the course of our four years at Fordham. But the pre-med – so pre-med is one thing, but being a biology major is something else, right? So there are students who are pre-med, but they could be an art major, and they were just taking the requirements to apply to med school. But the students

who were in the rigorous chemistry major or biochem major or biology major, that's where it almost felt like you were in competition with people who didn't have the same background as yourself. And not that you always have to, but the support and the camaraderie was not there. Like you just didn't feel like you could – there were two Hispanic classmates. One is a physician now, Richie Torres and – Oh my gosh, I forget the other one's name – but we were friends and we looked out – but again, they were Latino males who were in the Biology major track as pre-med students.

MAP: That sounds like a gauntlet, like a very difficult kind of process to persist within.

MTP: Yes.

MAP: With AMPS, the pre-med association, were there ways that as president – What was some of the work that you did as president of the –

MTP: So, we did have speakers come in. We had speakers from all the different – so the title is Association of Minority Pre-Health and Biology Students. So, pre-health could encompass other areas in healthcare, like nursing, or radiology, ultrasound technicians, or psychiatry, pharmacy. So, I remember we did also go on trips to different sites. So one area we went to was actually – and it's when I became interested in the, and understood about the PA profession, which was fairly new in 1978 – was a visit to Harlem Hospital's morgue. So I remember going there and just seeing PAs in action, like the pathologist, but also learning about what other professions in healthcare were available as a biology student. So, we also had speakers come in and talk about their professions, and the students among themselves would discuss different challenges that they faced as a pre-med student at Fordham. So we gave support to each other and that was helpful. That was quite helpful. And to have on my resume when I applied to graduate school and PA school, it was helpful because it – I started to, I think, then attain leadership qualities, which I normally was not that type of a student. Again, I was shy and withdrawn, but really that started to really allow me to step up and really start to have my voice heard when it came to – and also learn a lot about what it took to really see what the world of medicine encompassed for – where basically the reason I went into medicine had to do with disparities and addressing things which still unfortunately exist. But back then my essay spoke to the fact that access to care, education, just so much not having minority physicians who look like patients in the communities that they serve, was something that we needed to address and really try to, as graduates in the class of '79, to really say, "Okay, we are that generation who benefited from the civil rights era, and now it is our job to really step into those areas, whether it's healthcare or politics or education, and really address those issues, which really put those in communities of color at a disadvantage." So, I felt like that position as a president of that organization and speaking to fellow students, that was something that we shared and really wanted to help address.

MAP: Yeah. How would you say you were kind of politicized around health disparities and structural racism within the healthcare field?

MTP: So you mean now or –

MAP: Kind of like, were there experiences that you would point to as having formed the analysis that you shared?

MTP: Yeah. Okay. So, my mother is probably the most important person. Well, one in my life for sure, she passed away in 1998, but who was significant to my decision of becoming a healthcare provider. She had various chronic illnesses, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, high cholesterol, and not knowing obviously as much as I know now about practicing medicine, to live with her and to see the obstacles she faced with even getting proper care. The emergency room, like – accompanying her to the emergency room was something that I felt was one of the first things that I noticed, that I questioned and said, "Okay, we've got to do something about this." Using the emergency room for primary care was basically what was happening at the time. I didn't realize it, but you shouldn't have to go to the emergency room to get refills of your medication, or show up in the emergency room if you have an ache or pain, show up in the emergency room if you feel dizzy. So primary care, which I'm a strong advocate for, you know, just in terms of just one of the areas where we continue to lag, and addressing diseases that could be prevented, end stage of diseases like hypertension and diabetes, things like strokes and heart attacks. We still are, for African Americans, heart disease is still the number one killer, and mortality and morbidity continues to – you know, I could go on and on. This would be a topic in itself, but I also am one of the top HIV providers in New York, and I have about 200 patients who I've had for the last 20 years who have come with me to the different medical centers where I've practiced. Those numbers continue to be disproportionately affecting African Americans. And again, those factors like stigma, like access to care, just so many things that were present back then are still evident now, just different diseases. A heart disease continues to be the same, but when I was in school, HIV was not a disease yet. So going to the ER with my mom, going to appointments with her where I would advocate for her, but also not having physicians or providers in the emergency room who looked like her, who could understand, but more importantly, her primary care provider just didn't seem accessible, sometimes, sometimes not, and she would just wind up going to the ER. Right now, my patients don't use the ER. You know, they contact me by work phone and say, you know, "I have this. I have this cough, but not a fever and shortness of breath," and I can guide them to which one should go to the ER and which one shouldn't, because we still, as African Americans, show up in the ER more than patients who are in a better socioeconomic status, the majority being Caucasian in New York City. We show up with end stage disease complications like, you know, the strokes and heart attacks that fill up the ICU are largely because there were diseases that could have been treated

on an outpatient basis, and by the time we show up, the kidney disease, end stage kidney disease, is already there. So dialysis, et cetera, et cetera. So seeing my mom and being with her in the emergency rooms, and accompanying her to appointments and noticing the frustration that she felt with the system, is something that was definitely pivotal to my decision to not only go into healthcare, but to try to address the disparities, which I empower my patients with every day.

MAP: Yeah. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. What you're saying about the persistence of forms of inequality is sort of sobering. That's, yeah. In the seventies, were there kind of like political currents that you were interacting with, whether through the African American Studies program or in the city more widely? Were there political organizations that you were part of, or were there movements that you were kind of inspired by at that time?

MTP: So, currently, in addition to primary medical care, as I mentioned, I have a specialty area in HIV and STDs. And so, not during school, but definitely once I started practicing, and the HIV epidemic with something that started in the mid-eighties in the – I was practicing at a hospital Beth Israel Medical Center, actually in a detox unit, and it was sort of my second job, and I just wanted the experience to treat the medical complications of patients who came in to address their either alcohol dependency or drug use, and a lot of intravenous drug use was happening at the time, similar to now with the opioid epidemic, and so we were detoxing these patients, but we started to see not only the withdrawal symptoms, but fevers and lymphadenopathy and pneumonias that we had never seen before. And lo and behold, it was, you know, the beginning of the AIDS epidemic and opportunistic infections, which they usually died from within a few days to a few months. And so the organization Act Up, GMHC – so things that were not that – I saw males who were impacted by the AIDS epidemic. I quickly learned a lot about them and how they addressed really facing the government and the communities with issues around medication being FDA approved, or whether it was the treatment of patients, there's so many commonalities around the treatment of patients who were HIV positive and minority patients, right, and Black patients, when they show up in a clinic. Just preconceived notions about what they're there for. So I've had the privilege of working in areas like the Upper East Side, Lenox Hill Hospital. My other passion is cardiology and it's sort of like full circle that as my patients are living longer with this disease, they develop heart disease earlier. Many studies have shown that although they're living longer and essentially a normal lifespan, there is continual inflammatory response and inflammation is happening earlier in every part of their body, whether it's the nerves to cause neuropathy or whether it's their heart to cause heart disease. So lifestyle changes are important and key in a patient who's HIV positive. No smoking, exercising, taking their meds if they have one of these chronic illnesses. But in any event, I had worked in the interventional team at Lenox Hill Hospital. And to see the difference when you're in an Upper East Side part of Manhattan and compare that to what happens at Harlem Hospital in Central Harlem, and just the availability for certain medications and the clinics and – just such a difference. And so I've taken all of my experience at the various centers where I've worked and

brought them to my current practice at a Heritage Clinic, which is in central Harlem, where, you know, some of the same patients are with me, but also a number of new patients who I treat for chronic illnesses as well as HIV disease. So the political piece, yeah, I think by definition, if you are working in communities of color, you can't not – you can't ignore the importance of politics. Just as a person in high school and college, politics was sort of like, blah, blah, blah, but you cannot ignore the importance of addressing things and really speaking to some of the challenges that we face in these communities. So I have spoken out about Hep C at City Hall and the testing, for offering testing people were, you know, dying from end stage liver disease. The number one reason has to do with Hepatitis C because the baby boomers were not tested. You can be asymptomatic for 15, 20 years and have Hep C, and then go on to develop cirrhosis. So getting testing as a routine lab test was something that I have been involved with and I can, you know, go on to many other organizations over the course of my career. But it's important that we pay attention because we're not only their providers, but we're also their advocates. And so when my patients show up in clinics where maybe they are there for referral and someone is rude or dismissive, you know, "What are you here for?". The majority of my patients who've been with me know to speak up and to advocate for themselves. Some of the newer ones say, no, they can call me on the phone and just say "they turned me away," and I'm like "turn right around, let me speak to the clinic manager or the attending physician and really see that it is your right to" – there are all these patients bill of rights that are on the walls, but no one really allows patients to really feel comfortable with that. Whereas I think historically we just, you know, feel not as empowered, to really feel like we matter.

MAP: Yeah. And if people are being dismissed or not heard or treated disrespectfully –

MTP: Yeah. Yeah.

MAP: I want to come back to your time at Fordham, but I was curious also to hear about when you were talking about working in a detox clinic and the kind of early days of the AIDS crisis. If there were memories of that time or kind of, if you remember sort of how it was that people came to know more about HIV/AIDS?

MTP: Yeah. So there were a lot of, you know, understandably, we knew just what we saw. We didn't really understand what was happening. And definitely in terms of the non-intravenous drug user or non-homosexual male, right? So heterosexual transmission was something that we didn't realize was happening. When I was in the detox unit, as I mentioned, we were treating intravenous drug users who were coming in for heroin or cocaine dependency. And so, when we started to see them getting sick, the intravenous drug users, then there was, you know, of course, the data came out and intravenous drug use is a risk factor for HIV. However, we would see people who are not in that risk group coming in, maybe for detox of cocaine or alcohol or even in the community, and I'll use my sister as an example, right? I had a sister who passed away from

HIV, in the complications of HIV, in 1992. Her husband at the time was a former intravenous drug user. So she knew she was positive in 1988 and then developed a lot of complications in the early nineties, and was probably reinfected. But the fact that we didn't know what we know now, we definitely didn't have the medications, which I prescribe every day. And then I remember probably the hardest thing for me to deal with was when it came to experiencing and seeing what the epidemic has done to our community. And I lived in the East Village, I worked not too – I live right not too far from Beth Israel on East 11th Street, and I was walking with my sister on 2nd Avenue, and she was quite thin. And I just remember the stares. And just, you know, we were looking to sit down at a restaurant, right on the corner of St. Mark's and Second Avenue, and was like, "Oh, no, we don't have any seats available. "And she was like, "It's okay. It's okay." I'm like, "No," I went in and just demanded and I saw seats available, but people were just afraid or, you know, just even to this day, it's just sad that the education that is available online – thank God we didn't have the Internet back then in the eighties, the way it is now. And we know so much now about transmission and risk factors, but back then we didn't. So there was a lot of prejudice and just rude behavior that – and I was glad I was there for my sister when I was around her when these things happened, but that's something that is, you know – I honor her at the AIDS walk every year because if I think of her every day, I wouldn't be able to do what I do. She was the closest person to me in the world and was the sweetest, loving soul. All of those things. She actually had come to Fordham and was part of, I think, the Kwanzaa celebration, and knew a number of my friends there, so she was just a sweetheart. But just to see that type of treatment was happening and unfortunately sometimes still does. So yeah, the fact that we now have one pill a day, and even the injection that's available every other month, so no one has to know why you're coming into the pharmacy or into the clinic because the pills are like one small, smaller than a multivitamin.

MAP: What was your sister's name?

MTP: Jackie.

MAP: Jackie. She must have appreciated so much your support.

MTP: Thank you.

MAP: And that you were working on caring for people who are suffering as she was.

MTP: Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, things were happening so fast back then. I mean, just every time you turned around, and of course in the media, Rock Hudson, and just, you know, famous folks, and then until Magic Johnson – because she passed away the year after Magic Johnson disclosed his status – but I remember, you know, she had been hospitalized when he was, yeah. I remember that November, and we've come so far, and I just wish we had everything we have

today. But a lot of the organizations that we have now are very supportive of the patients and, you know, it's just always interesting and nice to see when people feel comfortable saying that they're positive and they're a doctor, or they're positive and they are a doorman or just, you know, just because it's – anyone can be positive. And these days, the treatment is so much easier.

MAP: And were you – did you have connections with ACT UP or Gay Men's Health Crisis?

MTP: So Jackie and I did walk the first – so we did do the AIDS Dance-A-Thon back then, by GMHC, before it was a walk-a-thon, it was a dance-a-thon. Madonna was one of those, that was like in '88, '89, and then in '90, I have – the first AIDS walk, I believe – I have that button. We walked together for that. And so GMHC, the most organized, even after I got married and was pregnant, I would still volunteer, because that's the one day I honor her and think of her. And even though my patients always walk, even though our family does, it's like the one day I can just let everything out and think about the impact she had on my life and how much I miss her. The other organizations – oh my gosh – there's so many in the community that started to be created, I think, after we saw how beneficial it was for people to get involved with community based organizations that were supportive of patients who are HIV positive. So I'm a speaker consultant for the National Black Leadership Commission on – it used to be called NBLCA, the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS. The CEO was Virginia Fields, who is a former Manhattan Borough president and a speaker for that, and around educating and advocating for patients. And they've done a lot in terms of treatment and access to care and testing, and there are a number of organizations, Harlem United, so many who might, you know, Bailey House, but also I've partnered with various fraternities and sororities who do things regularly in terms of giving back and educating the community around health care. My church, I have to say – so I was raised Roman Catholic, went to Our Lady of Lourdes and Cathedral and obviously Fordham, Jesuit University. And then my dad was very involved with an organization, a church in the community, where the founder was a community advocate activist, Reverend Eugene Callender, who started the Christian Reform Church back in the 60s, and went on to become the pastor of what's now called the Christian Parish for Spiritual Renewal. So every year we give a Harlem Healer award, and it's given to a community organization or a person who's impacted health care in the community in Harlem. It's on 122nd and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. So I'm involved with that, with nominating and choosing that person, and we've given them to some organizations as well as individuals who have really been on the front lines around health care and addressing disparities in New York and in Harlem in particular. So there's so many, I'm sure I'm forgetting some. I think professors like Dr. Naison, Reverend Calvin Butts, Claude Magnum, they not only taught us the coursework, but they taught us a lot about the reality of how we just had to really step up and not only do what we had chosen as our career goals, but to really be a representative of the people who we were concerned about, and to be in leadership roles. I actually was a speaker for the HEOP – so we had a graduation program around graduation week for the HEOP program. And I remember myself and my friend, who again, I'm

friends with her to this day, Evelyn Ortiz. We had gone to high school together and she's a fellow Fordham grad, and she did the graduation speech in Spanish for HEOP, and I did it in English, and I just remembered just feeling comfortable as I got a standing ovation for something I said. The song out then, the Donna Summer song, I Will Survive, so there was a lot around survival and empowerment and, just, you know, as it was an exciting time in America, and I think being a graduate around that time period really allowed me to feel comfortable with what I'm doing to this day. Actually getting ready to hopefully retire in a couple of years, because I just turned 65, but I can't believe 40 years went by that fast. Gosh.

MAP: You were saying that it was kind of a – you were talking about the music of the time and the spirit of the time. Were there other…You said it was kind of – if I'm remembering correctly – like an exciting time in some ways.

MTP: Yes, yes. Yeah. I mean, I think, even though there were some things that were clearly a learning experience for those who were not around, basically, Black folks before Fordham, they just were not exposed to our culture, our language, the way we look at things. And so it was a learning experience on both ends, but I think we also felt that that was a time for us to, together, really address – I mean, it sounds really simplistic now, given how complex our society is now. But I just remembered, and again, this may have been in high school, but the Sly and the Family Stone song – I forget the title, but I just remember some of the words there, another one. They talk about the different colors and the different cultures and, just together, "different strokes for different folks," and so on and so on, "We got to live together, right?". So, you know, in Marvin Gaye's song, things like Ball of Confusion and just the political arena, but also how we still were struggling around racism and race relations, but how our music uplifted us and really gave us hope for how we were addressing things of such – you know, the Jackson five were like, there was just – music really was important in the souls of our people and definitely on the campus of Fordham, where we had something called disco hour. So every Tuesday, I remember between 2 and 6pm, we would meet on the second floor of the student center, which – we have a student center – and on the second floor we would play music and hustle. And my friend, Sarah, was like the hustle queen, and Desi, who's another friend who we stayed in touch with and, you know, that group of us, we get together several times a year. With COVID we've seen each other less, but we definitely even have a thread that we stay in touch with every few days, someone's birthday, you know, just life experiences, our children, grandchildren, parents, health, etc. But we keep that unit alive. And so this disco hour was fun and uplifting. And regardless of what was happening on campus and how challenging certain classes were and, you know, trials and tribulations of the rigorous academic curricular, when we were together for disco hour, that was our time together. And it was Latino and African American and the HEOP students and the SEL students and the one fraternity, one of the Greek nine, the Alpha Kappa Alpha. They started a line during that time. We wanted to start the AKAs actually, which is the sorority, but – and one of my professors who I just found out a few months ago passed away, Dr. Dolores Morris, she

was an AKA, and she had talked to me about trying to start a chapter at Fordham. But, that was a lot of red tape involved, so we never did, but she was the reason I thought about – and I'm still an aspiring AKA, and have been involved in a lot of their events to this day. But, yeah, so Fordham, the music was key, cause I think it gave us the energy, and we just felt uplifted and refreshed after that disco hour. And then we would have, of course, you know, parties in 555, which was the dorm off campus, or parties in the Kappa Alpha Psi. I don't know, it was one apartment off campus. Like there were a lot of like subcultures of things that we did that kept us together, even though we were all different majors, you know, and we may not have run into each other during the day every day. Yeah.

MAP: That sounds – disco hour sounds amazing.

MTP: So much fun. The hustle. Oh my gosh.

MAP: Was there like a – this shows my ignorance – but was there like a specific dance associated with that?

MTP: Hustle? Yeah, hustle. Right. So, I wish I would have gotten together a couple of pictures to share screen, because – I may be able to, let me just see something. I don't know if I have a sec here. My friend Sarah has got a great picture of her dance. Well, we had a fashion show at the end of the year. And she had been one of the, I mean, for sure, the main hustle queen, and I learned from her. So that was – I'm just seeing if I can click on, let's see, albums. And my goodness, I know there's some, oh, well, let's see, maybe…going to see if I could find that picture of her coming down the runway, doing her – yeah, no, I can't find that, I mean, Fordham had a lot of pictures. Sarah's photos, let's see, I was going to try to share the screen if I could find this picture of us together. And there's a picture of me with the minority student organization. So let's see. So, I don't know if you can share screen. I mean, there are – let's see, because some of these latest pictures are me with some of the things I've done in the last few years, the last like 10 years, but I was looking for older pictures that we had. And I don't know if, you know, there are MOSAIC pictures here, but I'm looking back to see if I can locate Sarah. I actually was married at Fordham's chapel there, because it's just that precious to me, and my husband of nearly 30 years attended Iona College. And so we had a lot in common because Fordham and Iona, I know their basketball teams, you know, the football teams, there's a lot of rivalry. So we had a lot in common. I didn't know him back then, but we found out later on how our lives overlapped when it came to Fordham and Iona.

MAP: Yeah.

MTP: So yes. Yeah, I can't find that picture of – see, yeah, everything is MOSAIC. And I was looking for that one picture of me on campus with Sarah. So I've spent a lot of time with my sons

on the campus since graduating, when Dr. Naison has some of the African American History Project events or my younger son has sat in his classroom and been able to listen in. That's the one who's graduating this year from Howard. And so, you know, it's like one big family, like Mark Naison has definitely been important around the culture of the Bronx and minority students, and the importance of educating the Fordham community as a whole about how important and significant that history is, because some people just are not aware that they're sitting right in the middle of such rich culture. And so the African American History Project – and it's gone on to the Italian American History Project. My husband is Italian, so he grew up in the Bronx, so he was able to be interviewed as well when that project started. So yeah, it's been great. I don't know if you can share screen? There's a picture in the back of a football game back in like '75, '76. I don't know. Can you see? Let's see, if I click share screen. Okay. So this picture here…So I don't know, you see, that's me. That's my friend Helen, that's my friend Sonia, and we're in touch now all the time. Like, that's...This is behind Keating Hall, again, one of my visits to Fordham. I'm not sure what I was there for. This is Sarah Morales. This is the professor I mentioned, my biology professor, Dr. Sullivan, who I found out had passed away back in, I believe it was 2020. This is my friend Helen and that's one of Dr. Naison's cultural events around jazz. So my friend – this was the award ceremony where I spoke, and my friend Evelyn and I had spoken at this HEOP award ceremony. And so my friend Sarah, who's quite an artist, had actually sketched this brochure and our names, again, it was 1979. These are some of the events that Mark has had since then. And this is something that was on the news in 2015 which led to the resurgence of an alumni association around Black and Hispanic students, currently called MOSAIC. In 2015 there was some information that was relevant to addressing racism on the Rose Hill campus. And so we had a silent vigil, and there's Mark and the faculty, as well as students, who were interviewed back in 2015 around some issues that were happening in the dormitory here at the Rose Hill campus. And so that started a group of alumni to congregate and discuss and really bring back the organization that had been involved with the campus and the students, the graduates. And we now have an average of 20 to 25 students who are involved with what we call MOSAIC. So, I'm looking – I was hoping – that's my friend Helen. This was a student who graduated who's part of one of my – I have a mentorship program for students who want to go into medicine, and she is currently a PA student at the College of Mount St. Vincent, but shadowed me at Montefiore Medical Center, and definitely interested in addressing disparities. She's from upstate New York, but her heart and her passion for really addressing health care is just phenomenal. So I was happy to be instrumental in her getting into PA school. Here's my son and my husband with one of the jazz initiatives that Dr. Naison has started every October, and some jazz artists who were there. And we come and support that as well, because acknowledging – this is one of the former co-chairs of the, what was then back in the eighties, the Black and Latino Alumni Association, is Felicia Gomes Gregory. And we met around the 2015 incidents. That's my husband and I when we got married. This is Marion. Marion is also part of the important resurgence of the African American and Latino Alumni Association, which we currently call MOSAIC. And it's strong, and we continue to do things like hold these mixers

in different parts of New York, but this particular one is something that Kathleen Adams, who's a graduate of Fordham, is a co-owner of a restaurant in Harlem called Angel of Harlem. So there's Marian Bell, as well as Felicia, and some other graduates who involved with MOSAIC. I was looking – I keep looking for – I mean, I can go on and on. Zero Tolerance for Racism was an initiative that started after the racist acts were brought to light. This again is the Silent Vigil. I was looking for me back then, a picture I may have had, but the more I go, the more I come into. Okay, so this was me as the president of the Association of Minority Pre-Health and Biology Students, with fellow students there. So that was back in probably '78, '79. And that was taken right in front of – I want to say in front of the physics building. Maybe Dealy Hall, but yeah, I'm glad I found that after scrolling down. It's like, it's got to be here! Something from back then. Yes.

MAP: Yeah. And you shared the – there was like the program of the event that you and Evelyn Ortiz spoke at, I saw earlier?

MTP: So which –oh yes, the HEOP. Right so HEOP there, Higher Educational Opportunity Program, not only helped with financial aid, but support from the counselors –they call them tutor counselors – to really address retention. I just want to make sure – my laptop battery is showing me that it's a low battery. So let me put this cord in and hope that I don't lose you in the zoom call. Okay, there we are. Okay, great. So this is a picture of me in my first year of PA school and me practicing at Montefiore Medical Center, where I was in from 2011 to 2017. So Evelyn and I spoke as – yeah, that picture of the pamphlet that actually Sarah Morales made. So this is Sarah. So this group here are like my crew. We were all roommates, except for Desi, who lived in the male dorm. But Sarah Morales, Helen Lamb, and Sonia Sanchez – and Evelyn wasn't there that day – but we get together regularly. We were at an Upper West Side restaurant there. Desi and Sarah were quite the Fordham disco dancers, the Hustle King and Queen. Now I lost my place. So this is my son who came to homecoming with me. He's currently at Howard, so we make it sort of like a family event. Like Fordham is so much a part of – as I mentioned, my sister Jackie had come to community school events. My sister Eileen, my sister Stephanie, the youngest sister, was part of the Upward Bound program, which was held on campus. And so, yeah, it's just been that important in my life. So I – yeah, I don't know where, I lost my place, so I'll just – because I can go on a picture tangent, so don't mind me, but I'm glad I found those and I'm glad you got to see the pamphlet where Evelyn and I were chosen as the speakers for HEOP.

MAP: Thank you. I want to respect your time in terms of the evening, but if you would be open to speaking about the 2015 events and the emergence of MOSAIC and that kind of organizing.

MTP: Okay, yes, so it was brought to my attention – I'm trying to remember if Mark had reached out or if I had seen something in – you know, we get the paper. How I found out about it – I remember hearing about it and just feeling like it's important that we get together with fellow

alum and students to find out what was going on. Because I remember one incident that was told to us had to do with members of, I want to say – I'm not sure, I don't want to misquote which sporting event it was, but that a group of black female students were walking by and they were being taunted, and some comments being made towards them. And then there were other things, things written on the doors of the dorm rooms. And then other students came out and spoke about it, and, you know, you can easily google "Fordham and racism" and some of the articles come out in The Ram that were published at that time. But this was quite alarming because even though we did have differences among the students back in the 70s, and I'm generalizing and speaking specifically about my time there, I don't remember any specific, very mean things that were happening in 2015. I don't remember things to that degree. And so, and I think it came from the fact that one, it was that time in America where, "Okay, we're post civil rights. What are we going to do now? And we can learn from each other and move forward." And that had to do with the music, I think the political arena, I think, you know – and not that things were perfect, but I think we were hopeful. In 2015, I think the political climate in this country – it was quite different. Some things, quite honestly, after Obama was president, there were things that were – people were just not happy, and they felt comfortable saying certain things that normally I think they wouldn't have, and I don't want to get into specific folks now who are running for president, but people just felt more comfortable being racist. Blatantly racist. And so they thought it was okay. And even on a Jesuit campus, how dare you. Like, how dare you think that that's okay? And if you don't know, take a class with Dr. Naison, or take another class. You're on one of the top university campuses in New York, the education is there, and the access to professors and organizations – like we have so many more organizations than we had back in the 70s. And so there's an organization for everyone, but they were just blatantly racist things. And again, I think we can, you know, I can google "Fordham 2015 race relations" and the examples are there, but they were ugly and felt like I had to speak up and I had to be part of this resurgence of an organization where the alumni would be vocal and help the Fordham community really address this, because that's not the Fordham that I remember and knew of. So we got together, as I mentioned, the two former co-chairs, Marian Bell and Felicia Gomes Gregory, and they were involved with other alum going back as far as the 1960s who were involved at these meetings, and we decided that we had to do something. So we were even asked by administration to speak about what they can do, and examples of things that they could really incorporate into the Fordham administrative roles. I mean, the Chief Diversity Officer position was not something that had been present before then, and really making certain – I know Dr. Naison was involved with having certain courses be part of the orientation, that had to do with understanding and really acknowledging and learning about where you are in the Bronx and who the people are who are surrounding you, and quote unquote, "opening the gates," and not feeling closed in, that we're protected and closed in, but we don't know and understand and respect the culture of the people who are living in the Bronx. And so we slowly increased our numbers, but have done things from attending plays on Broadway that have to do with – so last year we attended, I want to say The Piano Lesson…what is the play we — oops, shucks, I was going to go back to –

because it's definitely in the…So some of the things MOSAIC has done, we had the Chief Diversity Officer come speak, we had Dr. Naison come speak, we have attended, as I mentioned, plays, we've had mixers, we have done events around career, we've sat up panels where Maria Aponte, who is the former I believe, the organization that gets students ready upon graduation for their careers. And I don't remember that organization being there when I was a student, but she's definitely made her mark around that organization and department at Fordham and is still involved. But we've sat on that panel for students, mainly the juniors and seniors with our various career choices. I just want to see if when I screen share, I can show the things that MOSAIC has done. We actually have a Facebook page. Okay, so at homecoming, of course, I had a MOSAIC alumni chapter. So these are some of the events that we've done. Our former provost who passed away a few years ago, who attended some of our events, our Chief Diversity Officer here, Kathleen Adams, who I mentioned is the co-founder of the Angels of Harlem, but she's again, one of the strong leaders along with Felicia and Marion. This is Death of a Salesman, which we attended last year. And that's my oldest son, Christopher. So I get the family involved with the importance of Fordham in our lives, just because they're always doing good things. So MOSAIC stands for "Multicultural Organization Supporting Affinity, Inclusion, and Community." This is again, one of the – can you see these pictures?

MAP: Mmhm. Yeah.

MTP: So some of the MOSAIC events at other times, right. There's Omar, you know, people who have been consistent since 2015, 2016 to now. But yeah. This is our last – last year during the freshman orientation we had an event early that year. So again, students and a former president, who actually relocated to Florida, so no longer the president, but we've really been very involved with trying to get the students – yeah, so the provost who passed away was Stephen Friedman, who was quite supportive at the time. So it goes to show that on a level which normally you would not expect that type of support from, with new and upcoming organizations, Stephen was there and quite vocal and quite supportive of our activities at MOSAIC early on. And this was in 2018. So, yeah, this was the play. There was another play last evening, and this was when Dr. Naison came to speak at the meeting back in 2018, and this is a small piece of, again, the Italian American History Project with Dr. Kathleen Lapenta, who interviewed my husband, Fred Ponterotto. This is when we were on the panel that Maria Aponte – it was actually the Global Diversity and Inclusion Conference, and this is Maria with my son Jason, who again attended that. So, so much that MOSAIC, I think in the short time that we've been in existence, has really done and really continues to grow. Yeah, so this was an event that Dr. Naison, that Marion was involved with, again, representing MOSAIC, and this was some event this past November. But she's very, very involved, and I think it takes leaders like Felicia and Marion to really continue to be important with keeping MOSAIC alive and involved with not only the alumni, but with the current students. So yeah, a lot of these are duplicates because I just put in "MOSAIC," but yes. So this is a pretty busy year for me so I wasn't able to make the play last

night, but there is an upcoming – one of the things is giving back. And one of the organizations that Kathleen is involved with, God's Love We Deliver, which is actually from my patients who are HIV positive. I usually have to sign off on them. It's a food pantry where they actually have meals delivered, hot meals that can come in and eat there. So something that the MOSAIC group has done is to volunteer down – It's all the way down the lower East side. And they volunteer there to help make meals for these patients who normally would not be able to have a meal. So that's something I've agreed to do on April 2nd, that Sunday.

MAP: Okay. Is that something that would be open to other people?

MTP: Oh, yes. So it's on the Fordham Alumni website, and the MOSAIC website also. So there's an email that goes out to affinity chapters and – or it's not even an email. It's actually on the affinity chapters page, on Fordham. You can go there and it lists all the activities and people can volunteer.

MAP: Nice. I wonder, do you think it might be worth – it might be a good idea for me to reach out to see if Marion and Felicia might be open to interviews as well.

MTP: Oh, they definitely would, yes. I mean, I'm pretty sure. I don't want to speak for them, but I'm pretty sure. They're very excited about all that we are doing and plan on doing around MOSAIC, because they have sort of taken the torch and continued what they had started back then and what they had in existence, which was quite a pretty comprehensive alumni organization that included not only a lot of the events, but also scholarships, and just so much that they did back in the – I want to say the 80s. So it was after I graduated. And I was probably a new mom back then. So I was not that connected when the boys were younger, but then kind of got back involved later on, once they were in high school and college. But Marion and Felicia were – I believe they were at the Lincoln Center campus. And so that was primarily there. So definitely a different feeling on the campus when you were a resident, versus a commuter. And different experiences. So yeah, but it's still – it was quite instrumental in the lives of the students who got to benefit from all the things that they did for the Fordham family.

MAP: Yeah, yeah.

MTP: So this is part of the God's Love We Deliver, one of the January 22nd, and it says, “Thank you, God's Love We Deliver, for allowing MOSAIC from Fordham to volunteer that morning. They spent time preparing nutritious meals for those who were sick and food insecure.” So one of the things we had identified as things we wanted to help with was food insecurities, and Kathleen identified this organization, which has gracefully embraced our ability to help with volunteering, so I look forward to that. Yeah, next week.

MAP: I actually read a book about God's Love We Deliver in college. Yeah.

MTP: Oh, my goodness! Wow. So many of my patients use their services. And, you know, I just have to fill in their lab tests and their diagnosis and then I sign and stamp and they get a hot meal brought to their homes. Yes.

MAP: It seems like they've been doing just really vital work for so long.

MTP: Yes. Yes, for sure.

MAP: Well, thank you so much, Marlene. This has been just very illuminating, and I so appreciate your being open to talking about your experiences. And at this time of night. I just feel like you're – you've done so much work in so many spheres over the last decades, and I'm glad to have a chance to learn from you, and also know that the interview will be read by others and will help those who are trying to carry the torch today, kind of do that work in an informed way.

MTP: Thank you, you're welcome. And feel free to contact me anytime about anything, whether it's, you know, Fordham, something we didn't get to cover, or things in the community. I live in the Riverdale part of the Bronx, and I had practiced at Montefiore Medical Center for, as I mentioned, about seven years. So you know, health care in Harlem and the Bronx mirror each other in so many ways. Yeah, so anything at all, or just, you know, New York.

MAP: Yeah. And I'll follow up about maybe connecting my partner and Jason and –

MTP: Oh, for sure! Oh my gosh, for sure. For sure. If you google Jason Ponterotto – not to put this plug out there – but Jason Ponterotto and Hilltop Magazine or Howard University, all of the articles that he's written come up. So, yeah. Oh, for sure. I'll let Jason know. I'll send you his email address and his phone number. Yeah.

MAP: Wonderful.

MTP: Okay, thank you. Thank you so much. My pleasure.

MAP: I hope you have a good night.

MTP: Thank you, you too. Take care.

MAP: Thank you so much.

MTP: Okay. Bye, bye.

MAP: Bye.