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Helen Diane Foster Interview

Mark Naison

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Mark Naison
Hello! Welcome...

Helen Diane Foster
Thank you.

Mark Naison
...to one of the most important interviews we have done for the Bronx African American History Project. This is with Helen Diane Foster, an attorney and activist in the Bronx from a legendary family of activists and leaders. Her father, Reverend Wendell Foster, was a member of the city council and a great civil rights leader in the Bronx as well as a spiritual leader. And we could do five interviews with Councilperson Foster, but we're going to do most of this about her experience trying to stop the Yankees from seizing Macombs Dam Park for their stadium. So we'll get to that probably after the first ten or fifteen minutes. But why don't we start off by you telling us a little bit about what it was like to grow up in your family with this tradition of activism.

Helen Diane Foster
Thank you. It is--the question is interesting because I think, or I was going to say, I only know how to do it because I did it. It was expected, but--yeah. So I'm the youngest, and I guess before the term "girl dad" was coined, my father was very much a girl dad and I was a daddy's girl. So--traveled with him all the time from when I was younger doing ministerial things, community things; I was always with him. And he was very--both of my parents are very vocal in making sure that my sister, Rebecca, and myself understood—I don't want to say the struggle because as a child, you don't think of it like that—but understood the environment. It was, you know--my parents were the first black family to move into the Highbridge area—so much so that my mother, you know, comments on changes and actually has a picture of my sister playing in the park down the street, you know, dressed up in a dress and a bow in her hair type of--you know, we don't do that anymore—but they weren't welcomed into the neighborhood. It was mainly Jewish and Irish. And, it goes without saying, they didn't want, you know, *them* there, and they've been living—or now just my mom—for 61 years--

Mark Naison
And what's the address?

Helen Diane Foster
1225 Woodycrest Avenue. So--

Mark Naison
And it's a private house?

Helen Diane Foster
It's a private house.

Mark Naison
OK.

Helen Diane Foster

They actually--my dad, as my understanding, bought the house from the original owner who built it for his bride coming over from Italy and she just wasn't happy not being in Italy. And so very--it was ingrained. Like, I remember us going to see *Billy Jack* the movie as children. I remember conversations—like, I used to love *Hawaii Five-O* and Dad would point out, “You don't think it's interesting that a white man is in charge of the police for Hawaii?”—so just everyday conversations, things were pointed out and we were brought up “To whom much is given much is required.” And both of my parents have advanced degrees. You know, my dad died a week shy of their sixty-third wedding anniversary.

Mark Naison
Wow.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah. The park that is named for him now is a park that we played in. We went swimming. There was the ice skating rink. So it was us never not being a part of the community.

Mark Naison

Right. Did you go to local public schools?

Helen Diane Foster

Actually, I did not. Well, I went to CES 126 for kindergarten and then I went with my sister because Rebecca was basically—or is—gifted and talented. So she--my mother, not being raised in in the United States, wanted an education similar to that which she was accustomed to having grown up in Bermuda, and—you know, like the royal reader and uniforms—and so she went to Nightingale and I always say, you know, “I was grandfathered in.”

Mark Naison

Nightingale is a Catholic school, or--

Helen Diane Foster

No. It's not a Catholic school. It's an all-girls school and now it's--at one time I think it was more Protestant rearing but now, like, everyone goes. It's not specifically, it's not like a Marymount or a Sacred Heart that is--

Mark Naison

Right. Is it in the Bronx or is it in Manhattan?

Helen Diane Foster

It's on 92nd between 5th and Madison. So--

Mark Naison
Wow, OK.

Helen Diane Foster
It's one of the all-girls schools in the Brearley, Spence, Hewitt...

Mark Naison
Got it! Got it. OK.

Helen Diane Foster
...type of thing.

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster
And I got in, obviously because Rebecca was there. Our upbringing, our--we were reared in the neighborhood. We were reared, you know. We played on the street. We walked to the candy store. You know, Tony's Pizzeria was on the corner, so--I have people laughing. The library is on the corner across the street. It's the first place I ran away, and it closed. And I had to go home, and they didn't even notice I was gone.

Mark Naison
[laugh]

Helen Diane Foster
So it was like a runaway that didn't count because no one knew you were missing. [laugh]

Mark Naison
[laugh]

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah, so very much just aware of—and especially going to Nightingale and then coming back—aware at an early age about wealth disparities and race disparities.

Mark Naison
Right. Yeah, and you also--your father's church was in the other side, you know, in Morrisania, so you had three. You had Nightingale...

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah!

Mark Naison

...Highbridge, and Morrisania. And Morrisania is very different than Highbridge.

Helen Diane Foster

Correct.

Mark Naison

So you--that's a hell of a thing to maneuver, those three spots.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah. And very much learning at a young age how to shift or switch.

Mark Naison

They call it code switching now?

Helen Diane Foster

Code switching, yes. And, like, we were involved in the church. We had a thriving young people's department, so we went on bus church trips. And it was really, as you said, that triangle of school—Nightingale—home—Highbridge—the church—Morrisania—and then sprinkle on top of that, my mother being from Bermuda.

Mark Naison

Right.

Helen Diane Foster

So we went to Bermuda for Christmas. We went to Bermuda for Easter. What I often say to people to make them understand: "Bermuda is our down South." The way that kids are sent to their grandparents during the summer, it was the same thing, except ours was Bermuda. And it was very—and that's a whole different culture—but it was very important, still is. It's still those, you know—not Nightingale—but those three. That triangle of home—Highbridge—the church—Morrisania—and Bermuda are still in play.

Mark Naison

Right. Now was your father from the South?

Helen Diane Foster

My dad was born in Elba, Alabama, which is--what? [laugh] Yeah, Coffee County. I tell people—and you, Dr. Nason, might remember, but you other gentlemen look kind of young—but years ago there was a Miller commercial about the flood and how Miller, instead of bringing beer, brought water to Elby--Elba—Daddy used to call it Elby—Elba, Alabama. That was the second flood; the first flood happened when he was a child. And he was orphaned at 12. There were no reform schools—I mean, orphanages—in the state of Alabama for black kids. So he was sent to a reform school, went to live in Birmingham with his older brother and his wife for a hot minute, and he always tells the story of "what men mean for evil, God means for good," that his brother's wife was less than nice to him and would, you know, lock him in a room. And

he was a ferocious reader. And he spent time reading books and pointing out places around the world, especially in Africa, that he would go, and he ended up going there. And his first cousins, when we had family reunions when we were younger, would tell the story of how they would all be picking cotton and the white sharecropper or the owner of the land would pay Daddy to read to his kids because he was so well-educated—not necessarily formally—and they called him Wendy. And they would say--

Mark Naison
[laugh]

Helen Diane Foster

They'd get mad because we're out in the fields picking cotton and he's on the porch reading. But Dad said he knew that wasn't for him, so the first time he was sent out to the fields he was picking it all wrong and chopping the wrong part off. And that's how he got this special job. And he always said, "I promised God, if he got me out of the fields, he wouldn't work with his hands." And we'd laugh because I was like, "You kept that promise."

Mark Naison
[laugh]

Helen Diane Foster

Because probably other than changing a light bulb, everything in terms of house maintenance [laugh] and stuff had to be done by someone else.

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster

So he, yes, was from Alabama, a member--was a minister in the AME Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church. He was sent to a parish in Bermuda in 1962, and my mother came home from school in 1954, and, you know, the rest they say is history. Her girlfriends said there's a new young minister on the island and no one can get his attention, and he was up--Vernon Temple, Southampton was then—and to some, now—maybe considered the country. And he really revolutionized--like, he built the church. He was responsible for the building out of the basement.

Many of the men—the boys who then went on to be men in government—came through his church and his Sunday school, who he sent to Wilberforce and other universities. So my parents--

Mark Naison
This is from Bermuda.

Helen Diane Foster
Excuse me?

Mark Naison

This is from Bermuda?

Helen Diane Foster

From Bermuda, yes.

Mark Naison

This is all in Bermuda, he did all these things.

Helen Diane Foster

Yes.

Mark Naison

Wow.

Helen Diane Foster

And they were married in 1956, and then came to the United States. And then he was sent back to St. Paul's AME Church in Bermuda, which is considered the, like, cathedral church.

Mark Naison

Right.

Helen Diane Foster

And so that is how Bermuda factors in, and everywhere—even if you read on his history there—was very much an activist, very instrumental in the desegregation of the island and also brought historical or internationally known figures—Roland Hayes, Ossie Davis—people to the island and challenged the status quo. My parents settled in the Bronx, and we laughed. He looked at houses in Queens, but if you know my dad, he was like, he's not going to pay a toll to go home.

Mark Naison

[laugh]

Helen Diane Foster

They saw a house in New Rochelle and my mother was like, "That's too many trees."

Mark Naison

[laugh]

Helen Diane Foster

And amid--like, before Striver's Row was Striver's Row, we're going to buy a brownstone in Harlem, and my mother, being new to the country, said, "Are you going to fly me in on a helicopter?" because, you know, Harlem was not the Harlem that it's becoming in terms of the

gentrification. And, you know, for example, Inez Dickens' father was the one who the house we lived in kind of did a walk through and said, "It's really solid, Rev."

Just an older house, so not many closets. And his connections—because they spent so much time in Harlem and at one time my dad owned a restaurant in Harlem—that his connections are deep with, you know, like, Percy Sutton and...

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster

...Basil Paterson and, you know. When Congressman Rangel, when I spoke to him when my dad died, he said, "You know, half the stories won't be told of what Reverend Foster did for us and what they call the—who are they? The Harlem Four or the--

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah. So he told--we talked a lot obviously as he got older and he really just at the end was, like, a simple man. And he said all he wanted, asked God for, was a family, and that's, you know, that was it. And so in terms of, like, not wanting a large congregation—very much wanting to be in the ministry—an extension of that was helping people out. He told us for years that on his headstone he wanted that he did not scatter his Father's sheep, meaning that he was true to his calling in the ministry and true to helping people.

Mark Naison
Now, did he have the church in the Bronx before the house?

Helen Diane Foster
No, the house came first.

Mark Naison
The house came first?

Helen Diane Foster
Yes. After he left Bermuda, they went to Springfield. He was assigned to a parish in Springfield, Mass. And that's where my sister was born. And then he ended up at Mount Zion AME Church on 116th and Madison...

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster

...which is how he and Malcolm X became close because every Monday they'd see each other and would talk. And so, yeah; the house came first. For a little while they were living in, I think it's Franklin Plaza on 2nd or 1st Avenue and 106th Street. Yeah.

Mark Naison
Yeah, I know that.

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah.

Mark Naison
Yeah. Uh huh. And now you're in the Bronx, then he gets the church.

Helen Diane Foster
In the Bronx, gets the church and—not telling you anything you don't know, but—what we're seeing now in terms of police shootings of unarmed black men and women isn't new...

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster
...in lack of services? That was still going on, and this is right before—leading up to—"The Bronx is burning" where--

Mark Naison
Alright, so we're talking about the late 60s or early 70s.

Helen Diane Foster
Late sixties, yes. Actually, the church that we're in, they got it, renovated it, and marched in for their first service. It was May 7th, 1967.

Mark Naison
Wow. That's just before the Bronx starts burning.

Helen Diane Foster
Right. And the--I would say—and this is from, you know, being a child and looking forward—it almost seems like the change happened overnight, but I understand it didn't.
You know, Woodycrest--I remember when there was the 49 Bus that used to go up Woodycrest and now there's only the 13 that goes up Ogden. It was a thriving neighborhood, meaning, you know, there were people living in buildings. I think they were working, poor and middle-class. And why I say overnight is I had friends in the building, you know, and it feels like to me that one day I woke up and those buildings were abandoned. And so like, I know it wasn't overnight, but that's how it feels.

Mark Naison
But--and that was in Highbridge.

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah.

Mark Naison
Which didn't have a fraction of the abandonment of Morrisania.

Helen Diane Foster
Oh, yeah. I mean, we--yeah.

Mark Naison
Wow.

Helen Diane Foster
When I think of on Forest Avenue where the church is...

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster
...there used to be apartment buildings across the street from the church. You know, of course, Forest, McKinley and Woodstock were always there, but it was a neighborhood. It was people. It was thriving. And it appears to me—and again, this is looking back as an adult into what I was thinking as a child—that the area and the people were not valued, and because they were not valued, the decimation was accepted. You know, it makes me think of with Jordan Peele, “If it had of been a dog, people would have intervened.” And so when I say that, if the people in the area were valued, intervention would have happened so that it wasn't totally burned down and destroyed.

Mark Naison
I still remember I started at Fordham in 1970 and I took the Third Avenue L.

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah.

Mark Naison
And I watched the Bronx burn, and all I could think of is the line from Marvin Gaye's Inner City Blues: “Makes me want to holla, throw up both my—”

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah.

Mark Naison

I mean, what the hell? Why is nobody stopping this?

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Helen Diane Foster

And it was--you know, it made great headlines. The Howard Cosell showing Yankee Stadium during the World Series and in the back, you know, when you panned out there were fires. And I don't think, you know—even to this day—I don't think enough credit, accolades, whatever you want to call it, has been given to those of us—and I don't mean like me—but those of us like my parents and other people I know who stayed despite the fires and went on to want to build it back up.

Mark Naison

Yeah.

Helen Diane Foster

And, you know, I--

Mark Naison

It's interesting. I think of Harriet McFeeters and Bess Pruitt who had this brownstone on 168th between...

Helen Diane Foster

Yes!

Mark Naison

...Union and Prospect and remained incredibly active in the educational system and, you know, were there to help rebuild. You're absolutely right. Those are the...

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah. And, also, for each--you know, when the crack epidemic hit and grandparents now had to raise grandchildren, how organizations and people came together and stepped up. So if nothing else, we are very resilient in the Bronx. And just--you know, my sister, we were driving and she said to me, "Do you remember when the dry cleaner was there?" And I was like, "There was a dry cleaner there?" And she goes, "I guess you're too young. You don't remember," and was telling me, like, there was the fish market, the dry cleaner on 167th, you know. My mother was telling me they had—what are those--I don't know what they're called, but, you know when, like—flower beds...

Mark Naison

Right.

Helen Diane Foster

outside of the window. And it's just things that I don't remember. And so I see the pictures and I'm like, "Aha!" Yeah.

Mark Naison

Yeah. So what year did your father get elected to the city council first?

Helen Diane Foster

He was elected in September or November in the general election of '77...

Mark Naison

Wow!

Helen Diane Foster

...swore in in '78.

Mark Naison

Wow.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Mark Naison

So this was the late seventies...

Helen Diane Foster

Yes.

Mark Naison

when he was elected. Oh my God. You know, that's at the peak of--that's the blackout.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah

Mark Naison

The blackout, where--

Helen Diane Foster

It is literally the blackout!

Mark Naison

Yeah, where the businesses--yeah, you know, it was...

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah, that--it was the--the Bronx had burned by that point and the Bronx was—my words, not his, obviously—but in the scheme of things became, I want to say almost the stepchild of boroughs for New York City in terms of, you know, of course, highways run through communities...

Mark Naison
Yeah.

Helen Diane Foster
...shelters, you know, all of that.

Mark Naison
Waste transfer stations.

Helen Diane Foster
Exactly.

Mark Naison
Everything nobody else wants gets put in the Bronx.

Helen Diane Foster
Exactly. And I think--and you have Riverdale making sure that they're considered Riverdale and not the Bronx. Throgs Neck saying they're Throgs Neck. You know, kind of that, "Oh, and we *happen* to be in the Bronx," as opposed to, you know--I always say "I'm from the Bronx." [laugh]

Mark Naison
Yeah. Yeah, so were you in high school when your father was elected to the city council?

Helen Diane Foster
No, I was in--I think I was in third or fourth grade when he was elected.

Mark Naison
Wow.

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah.

Mark Naison
So that must have been exciting. Or what--

Helen Diane Foster
I didn't know it was exciting. You know, like, I didn't know--and this is going to sound corny, but I was always impressed with my dad. So this was just something else. Clearly I knew it was important then. You know, I got to stay up late, so we got the results. People were interviewing

him, things like that. But yeah, so third grade. And what makes it more interesting—third or fourth grade—is that I was already a daddy's girl and spending time with him and doing things with him. And also he was a full-time minister at the time, and my mother then was a first grade teacher, so he had flexibility. So--

Mark Naison

Now was she working in public schools?

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Mark Naison

So she was a first grade teacher in public school. He was a minister and city council person.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah. She, when he retired or, you know, left office--well, she retired as an elementary school principal in 1993.

Mark Naison

So she then ended up as a principal.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Mark Naison

OK.

Helen Diane Foster

And she had been working as a teacher, you know, with the Board of Education since 1967.

Mark Naison

Right.

Helen Diane Foster

So I would--he had the flexibility. Like, he dropped us at school, he picked us up. For school performances, I remember it being a whole bunch of moms and my dad. And so really being aware of what more he could do as a city council member in terms of--he tells the story of being able to call, you know, NYCHA about an elevator being out at Butler Webster and not getting a return call as Reverend Foster, but then calling as Councilmember Reverend Foster and getting a return call quicker and able to address the issue. So for my dad, as I've said, the council and that elective office was always an extension—and he always viewed it as an extension—of his ministry.

Mark Naison

Right. Now, did this make you want--I mean, you're third or fourth grade. Did you say, "I want to do this when I grow up," or you weren't thinking in those times?

Helen Diane Foster

No, it's funny enough. I always wanted to be a lawyer, and looking back, talking—being able to talk—saved me. And by that I mean I went through elementary all the way through law school with undiagnosed dyslexia. And I was always told, like, "You're not trying hard enough." Just funny enough, Dr. Ronald Gade, who was then-president of St. Barnabas Hospital—I had taken the bar exam and was struggling to pass it—and it was him that said, "Have you ever, you know, got an extension of time and been tested," and then years went by. But I knew I was much smarter than I was labeled...

Mark Naison

Wow.

Helen Diane Foster

...because the only way it would come across was by me talking. I couldn't write it. I definitely couldn't read it. But I knew it. And I think that's why I wanted to be an attorney, because I could talk and make sense where I couldn't write it to make sense or read it to make sense. Yeah, and then when term limits came, I remember clear as day being at—it may have been a minister's meeting with union heads. It was Jim Butler's 420, and Jim Butler was there. Congressman Rangel was there and other ministers, and I'm with my dad. I'm like his--by then I was driving, but, you know, I would do community council work with him.

Mark Naison

Right.

Helen Diane Foster

And I remember sitting there. I mean, it was on, I think, 125th Street. Not the state office building,

I think it's 55 125th Street where Local 420 had an office, and it was in their, like, auditorium, their makeshift big space room. And they're talking about term limits and knowing who is going to succeed—you know, who they want to run for my dad's seat—and them saying "Well, you know, we have a candidate, his daughter." And automatically I'm thinking, "I don't see Rebecca giving up music, what her passion is, to do this." Like, it never entered my mind that it was going to be me—like, that my name--that they were going to say my name. And, you know, my family knows this story because I kept praying, "God, if you've revealed it to them, please reveal it to me," because it's not what I had planned. I was the, you know, five-year plan. I was going to finish college, go to law school, work at the Manhattan DA's office for a little while, get married, buy a house in Westchester, have the babies, and then come back into the workforce—at this point, probably at, you know, a firm. "Because I've done the public interest, now I need to make money because we have two kids" type of thing. And clearly none of that work out.

Mark Naison

[laugh]

Helen Diane Foster

[laugh] But yeah, so to answer--a long way to answer your story, I was very involved in campaigning—knew what it took. The summer after my freshman year in college, I spent the summer working. It was a campaign year and I spent the summer loading and unloading the van to drop tables and desks, tables and chairs for people in front of different housing places or the train to get petitions signed. And then after I did that, then I would drive to Majester Fish and Chips to get food for everyone. And then I dropped the food off. And then I would drive to the campaign office to get--like, I was just a big runner. So because of that, I thought I would be working behind the scenes in politics.

Mark Naison

Right. So you end up after term limits, running--

Helen Diane Foster

Oh, so I end up running, had one of the—I was in it, so I'm going to say—one of the most hostile races in 2001. In Bronx County, the relative—like the offspring relative—of every incumbent was endorsed by the county organization except me. The people that, you know--Freddy Farrar endorsed my opponent. Al Sharpton--

Mark Naison

So Freddy was the borough president at that time--

Helen Diane Foster

He was the borough president at that time running for mayor.

Mark Naison

Right.

Helen Diane Foster

He endorsed my opponent. I had two elected officials that endorsed me, which were Congressman Rangel and C. Virginia Fields—who was the borough president at the time—and two unions, which was Jim Butler's 420 and Charles Ensley's, I believe it was 371. I went to, like, union endorsement interviews and I'll never forget one of them—I think it was Unite or one of them. I got everything but a standing ovation when I was done.

Helen Diane Foster

Right.

And I didn't get the endorsement. I didn't realize that deals had already been cut. You know, the Amsterdam News I think didn't endorse me because they said I didn't show up for the interview, and Eric Delon and I laugh because that's when we first met each other. And so this is where I guess ignorance is bliss, being naive to the fact that apparently deals were already made. So,

you know, the big unions knew who they were going to endorse and the newspapers knew who they were going to endorse. So when I went to the New York Times interview, by this time, I said, "Let's not waste my time or yours." The five people in the district who read the New York Times, I pretty much can guarantee it's--I'm going to get their votes.

Mark Naison
[laugh]

Helen Diane Foster

And so if you've already made your decision--like, I need to be in the district, and interestingly enough they were like, "What do you mean?" And I told them how I went to interviews—you know, the Daily News, Amsterdam endorsed my opponent—and they were very interested in, though, and I got the New York Times endorsement.

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster

But it just--you know, it wasn't—happy isn't the right word, but I can't think of a--it wasn't a happy time because it was--like, so many people that I thought were friends of my father's or friends of the family just, you know. What is it? "In politics, there are no permanent friends and there are no..."

Mark Naison
Right.

"...permanent enemies." So yeah.

Mark Naison
Now--wow.

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah. I won.

Mark Naison
And you won!

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah, I won. I lost one ED. The rest I won every precinct, every ED, except one. And the one I lost, I lost by, like, less than ten points.

Mark Naison

So this is very interesting because here you're talking about all the deals that are cut and all the stuff behind the scenes, and it sounds like this is a perfect segue into the Yankee experience.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Mark Naison

So here you are; you're elected to the City Council. When did you find out about the Yankees plans to seize Macombs Dam Park?

Helen Diane Foster

Wow, so. I'm gonna--I gotta make sure I get the dates right. I voted to alienate the parkland for the building of the new stadium, and I remember the event was held at the old Yankee Stadium. I'm trying to get it right. David Cohen? Or Cone? I--sorry. Not baseball, but he was there. And a lot of elected officials showed up, and it was both state and city. And I remember, very soon after that, I had a meeting with a group of park advocates. I remember Joyce Hogi being one.

Mark Naison

Oh yeah! Good friend of mine.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah—Karen Argenti, I think it was—and asking me why I voted, you know, to alienate the parkland. And I said, “Because this is what we're going to get. We're going to lose Macombs, but we're going to get so much more.” And this is where, you know, hindsight is 20/20, that the cart was put very much before the horse in that the vote took place before commitments were made. And this is on the heels of them, the city—which I voted against also—deciding to build in Van Cortlandt Park the water infiltration system instead of up in Westchester. And I remember actually having a conversation with Gary Axelrod and him telling me, “Just go look at the site in Westchester.” You know, “It's not populated by people.” And I remember doing the drive—like, going on a site visit—and—again, I don't know if it was being naive or—I don't know—thinking clearly they're going to choose this location because no park is going to be disrupted. People don't live by. It's in a more industrial area. Blah, blah, blah. So it was after that and I voted against it, and that is when the—and I can't think of the word, but I'm going to call it—remediation or the bone we were thrown was we're going to get a certain amount of millions to invest in parks in the Bronx, because this is happening to Van Cortlandt. And we had many delegation meetings, meaning the Bronx delegation met. And the more I participated, the more concerned I was that the community was not getting what they deserved, and it threw me right back into memories of just the Yankees not being good community partners. And it's kind of, you know, “I told you so.” Everything that I said was going to happen, happened with the building of the new park. And, you know, I keep, you know--looking back, hindsight's 20/20. I remember Congressman Serrano telling me, “You know this is a done deal.” And me and my, you know, youthful, “No, we're going to fight the system,” I was like, “It's not a done deal. Let's get something.” And many of the things in the delegation that I requested that I thought were very reasonable were shot down. And while the stadium is not or was not in the council district, I was the elected official—especially in the city council—that lived the closest, and after Serrano—he lived basically across the street because he lives on 162nd and Grand

Concourse—I was the second closest. And as I told the class, like, I have turned off the game because I'm too nervous to watch knowing the Yankees are about to blow it and have heard the roar of the crowd and had to run back and turn the TV on and, like, "Oh my God! We won." And so things like residential parking, "Helen, that can never happen. Residential parking will never work in New York City." And a traffic impact study, and then when I found out that they had done it, they only interviewed fans coming into the stadium. There was never an interview of people that lived in the district. Very interesting, when congestion pricing first came up after the Yankee Stadium vote, many of the things that I was told would never happen—like residential parking, you know, stickers, and studying really the impact of what traffic would be—now that it was impacting Manhattan and how we lighten the load, all of a sudden, everything was on the table. Residential parking was on the table. A traffic study was on the table. Just many things that I thought, if we as a delegation stuck together, we could get more concessions. And it just wasn't the case, and I did not think—and I still don't think—for everything the community gave up, a few tickets to a few organizations in the bleachers during the season is sufficient to a community that has been so detrimentally impacted by an organization. Because it's not just the building of the stadium; it is the mentality of the organization as it pertains to the community in which they work in. Yeah.

Mark Naison

So you found that people were not with you in trying to get more concessions.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah. And I don't--it was never, like, contentious. It was more, you know, during the time of the discussions,"That's a good idea." But at the end of the day, they all voted with county and with the powers that be, you know. Remember, Community Board Four turned it down and everybody that voted against it, Adolfo replaced them on the community board.

Mark Naison

So this was, you know--we had a new borough president at this point.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Mark Naison

Adolfo had replaced Freddy Ferrer.

Helen Diane Foster

Correct. After--yeah. After Fernando had lost the--

Mark Naison

So he completely replaced the community board which voted against him.

Helen Diane Foster

Correct.

Mark Naison
Yeah.

Helen Diane Foster

And it was--you know, many of the people that were on that board--you know, Stanley Schlein was the call person, you know, that was putting the pressure on the community boards, the council person. You know, he was the county's lawyer at the time; they were all still in favor. And it very much felt like, "You got to get your people in order." And so, like I said, our conversations weren't contentious and they seemed, at the time to me, genuine and productive, and things that I was proposing seemed simple and doable. You know, at the time...

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster

...we had double digit unemployment, black and Latino males, Bronx County, highest county of unemployment in the state. So if we're going to build a new stadium, why can't we have, you know—we don't have to call them quotas. Look to fill positions first in community for highly impacted. Let's get those people to work. Let's start real apprenticeships where not only can the blacks and Latinos get into the union; they can get the apprenticeships and then the sponsoring, and we don't have to see people driving in—you know, union folk driving in—from Westchester and Long Island or training in to work at this new stadium. It will be employing people in the neighborhood. I didn't think that was a--I mean, I didn't--whatever. When it was determined, you know, vendors inside the stadium for produce or whatever, let them be local. It didn't seem unreasonable. When I asked that the transportation impact study be done again and talk to the people in the community, didn't seem unreasonable. Asking--and I said this: anyone who knows the Major Deegan, the old Yankee Stadium, the new Yankee Stadium knows that Friday—doesn't matter what time or day before a long weekend—it's packed. So to tell me that the best sense is to have everybody coming off of one exit at the Major Deegan to pull into parking lots that weren't filled--I mean, it's crazy. I literally have on my phone now the Yankees schedule because I got to know which way I can get home during the season. Yeah. So, I mean, it's a lot. And looking back, I very much thank Miss Hogi and those that came and, like, shook me and, like, "What are you doing?" And we really had a dialogue and what's going on, and I didn't know at the time, but I was one of only a few elected officials—both at the city and state and federal level—that actually met with groups. The vendors were horribly impacted. And this is when the saying, "All politics is local,"--when I met with them, it was like, "Why did you? Why did you? Why did you?" And Anne Lindsay at the time had to tell them, "She's the only one that voted against it. She's the one that raised concerns about the vendors." And they had no idea. And so--and I was the only one that would take a meeting with them! Yeah. So it was a lot, and, as we talk, I'm thinking, so I know I'm going like this and not a straight line.

Mark Naison

Yeah. Steven, do you have some questions in addition to the ones that I've asked or thoughts about this?

Steven Payne

Yeah, sure.

Helen Diane Foster

I'm listening. I just--I have a four o'clock that I'm going to push back. I don't know how long--how long did we schedule this for? Sorry.

Mark Naison

Well, I think we should probably stop in fifteen minutes just to be...

Helen Diane Foster

OK.

Mark Naison

...fair to everybody, and then I'll take a picture at the end so we have that too. But--OK, Steven. So...

Helen Diane Foster

OK, yes.

Steven Payne

Sure, yeah. So I was just wondering if you could talk more, just for people who will end up listening to this and probably don't understand all the dynamics at play, but the community--what is it? Community development agreement, is that...

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Steven Payne

...what it was? But it has no--

Helen Diane Foster

Community benefits agreement.

Mark Naison

Community benefits agreement.

Steven Payne

And it has no binding--there's no teeth to it, right? So...

Helen Diane Foster

No teeth whatsoever.

Steven Payne

...if you could just talk a little bit about that--yeah.

Helen Diane Foster

Just what you said. So a community benefits agreement was negotiated. As you said, it has no teeth in it. It was what I will call, you know, a list of recommendations if you feel like doing it. They--it was executed by the Yankees, and I believe it was signed by then-Councilmember Arroyo—Maria del Carmen Arroyo—and Adolfo. You know, Maria, who--we didn't agree, but I--like, we were--I didn't dislike any of my colleagues. Like, it wasn't contentious. I think the only one that it wasn't contentious—it was matter-of-factly—is Maria Baez told me point blank, she's always going to do what the chairman says, she'll never vote with me, and “Your recommendations won't be considered.” So, like when we had placements on different mayoral agencies, I would give a laundry list; I knew it wasn't going to happen, so I'm just trying to set it up. So the community benefits agreement was what the Yankees committed to do as to mitigate the disruption that the building of the new stadium will cause and then, as the title says, benefits to the community. But as you said, it has no teeth. It's not binding. I was quoted as saying “It's like asking the fox to watch the henhouse.” And I told Maria. She was--she said it felt like I was questioning her integrity. I said, “I'm questioning the integrity of the process and a community benefits agreement with no teeth.” And I really feel—and I've said it—that we could have gotten so much more had, you know—like God said to Moses, “Use what you have in your hand”—had we come together as a delegation and really were on one accord in terms of what we wanted the community to have and get out of it. And we weren't, and that benefits agreement was not anything negotiated or produced from, my thought, a place of really benefiting the community. Yeah.

Steven Payne

Was your father very plugged into these struggles at the time, or he kind of had a--

Helen Diane Foster

You know, I think this is where he was a father and he very much didn't want me—you know, I was young—didn't want me to kind of blow it, meaning put my neck on the line. He was my confidant. He--like, I could talk to him, and I think he was very concerned about my wellbeing as his child and the toll it was going to take and eventually did take in terms of relationships, appointments, and—I will even say—like, career trajectory because I bucked huge systems. Like, I'd bucked the Yankees, the county organization and the deals made. When I endorsed--when I was the first elected official in the state to endorse then-Senator Obama, huge! Huge! Because, you know--how do you not endorse the junior senator? Like, we never--he reached out, and he never lived in the Bronx. You know, he didn't represent it. So he was involved, but I think the advice came from a father wanting to protect his daughter as opposed to kind of, like--

Mark Naison

Probably people like Serrano told him, “This is a done deal and you can't do anything about it.”

Helen Diane Foster

Right. And I think he knew the players. Like, you know, Jose Rivera and my dad at one time had been very close.

Mark Naison

Yeah.

Helen Diane Foster

And through all the elections and stuff, they were no longer—you know, the endorsements and running against me—they were no longer close. Stanley Schein was very much the “do it, get it done for the county” guy. I was always cordial. I've known him. But, you know, it was county loyalty over everything, and that's how it played out.

Mark Naison

Yeah.

Helen Diane Foster

But I just have to say. I know, if I had to do-over, I would do the same thing. I could not not—

Mark Naison

Right.

Helen Diane Foster

Like, I am content, happy and know that I did the right thing with voting against that stadium.

Mark Naison

Yeah. And we're happy too that somebody...

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Mark Naison

...stood up, because the Bronx, as you said, is where people put everything nobody else wants...

Helen Diane Foster

Exactly.

Mark Naison

...and where people are taken for granted and the scene is expendable. And you said, “We're not.”

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah, we're not. And we're not, period. And I look, you know--every day, I pass the park on the way to taking my daughter to school and work, and it's not lost on me the impact that park has. Like, that is now, and has kind of always been, like our Central Park. So Saturday and Sunday when the weather is beautiful, just seeing it packed with the community compared to when it was run by the drug dealers and--

Mark Naison
This is Joyce Kilmer?

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah--no, this is old Mullaly. Yeah, my dad's--

Mark Naison
Oh, the Mullaly.

Helen Diane Foster
Like, meaning I see the commitment and contribution to the community paying off for the community.

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster
May not have paid off for me. But, like, I don't think--that's not why I went into it.

Mark Naison
Right.

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah.

Mark Naison
Well, you know, we have to end this, so I want to get a smiling picture.

Helen Diane Foster
Uh-oh. OK. [laugh]

Mark Naison
OK, here we go. And all my friends in Eta Eta Omega are going to like this.

Helen Diane Foster
Yes!

Mark Naison

Know you're from Manhattan and the Manhattan group. But thank you so much for this historical, you know--

Helen Diane Foster

Thank you! This was great, and I appreciate it. It reminded--it's funny. I just got off a call—not just, but about an hour and a half ago—with Tiffany. And she said to me, “You have to be reminded and get back to what your passion is and what you want to do and find a little of that.” So in talking about it, I'm still searching.

Mark Naison

Yeah. But if I--when I think about, again, the triad—Nightingale, Highbridge, Morrisania—that's an extraordinary range of experiences you had to maneuver. And that gives you a kind of social capital very few people have.

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Mark Naison

Able to move between different worlds that way...

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Mark Naison

...which you did, and then the experience with both of your parents and the Bermuda connection...

Helen Diane Foster

Yeah.

Mark Naison

...the--you have an incredible background who made you the person you are...

Helen Diane Foster

Absolutely.

Mark Naison

...and it is truly special.

Helen Diane Foster

Thank you.

Mark Naison

And, you know, you're still young.

Helen Diane Foster
Relatively, yes. [laugh]

Mark Naison
No, compared to me, everybody is.

Helen Diane Foster
Yes.

Mark Naison
And I'm still working.

Helen Diane Foster
Exactly.

Mark Naison
They can't kick me out of Fordham no matter what. So the best may be yet to come! But you--

Helen Diane Foster
That is what I believe!

Mark Naison
And look. The thing is, this is an act of courage and of testimony on your part. And it's important that people do that. And also that people know not everybody said it was OK!

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah. That's a big thing for me, and it's funny. I have--

Mark Naison
Not everybody said--it wasn't OK...

Helen Diane Foster
It wasn't.

Mark Naison
...and somebody said it wasn't OK and was told they were going to pay a price for it—and maybe you did...

Helen Diane Foster
Right.

Mark Naison
...but, on the other hand, you have...

Helen Diane Foster
Yeah.

Mark Naison
...the memory of saying it was not OK and knowing you were right! It wasn't!

Helen Diane Foster
Exactly. Exactly.

Mark Naison
So, something to build on.

Helen Diane Foster
Definitely. Thank you so much.

Mark Naison
Well thank you!

Helen Diane Foster
Steven, it's nice meeting you.

Steven Payne
A pleasure.

Helen Diane Foster
How do I say it? Matthew? No.

Mattieu Langlois
Yeah, Mattieu. Yeah.

Helen Diane Foster
Mattieu.

Mark Naison
Yeah, and--

Helen Diane Foster
French?

Mattieu Langlois
Yes. French Canadian.

Helen Diane Foster

Ah! OK. I went to prep school in Maine, and so we had tons of French Canadians. In the area we'd have actually those that--my French teachers were French Canadian. It's a fascinating history, so yes.

Mattieu Langlois

It is.

Helen Diane Foster

And my mother went to Queen's University in Toronto. Well, Kingston, so yeah.

Mattieu Langlois

Yeah, and I'm from Montreal, but yeah.

Helen Diane Foster

Yes, well this is nice.

Mattieu Langlois

I'm glad because it's always a problem that Americans, you know--we know that Canada exists...

Mark Naison

[laugh]

Mattieu Langlos

...but it's like they've never been, so--

Helen Diane Foster

And they never know, yeah. Yes.

Mark Naison

Yeah, and also remember we're here when you need us.

Helen Diane Foster

Thank you.

Mark Naison

You know, and we like to cause trouble too.

Helen Diane Foster

Good.

Steven Payne

And we have like eighty boxes of your father's archives here. I'm sure Jim has...

Helen Diane Foster
Yes.

Steven Payne
...all about it. He comes here on Friday. [laugh]

Helen Diane Foster
I know. I told him I'm going to make it a Friday. I--

Steven Payne
We'd love to have you. Love to have you.

Helen Diane Foster
I definitely will.

Steven Payne
Incredible material in there.

Mark Naison
And they do--Stephen has revolutionized the place. It's really wonderful and welcoming. And this interview people will--this is a very important interview. I mean, it's interesting. I thought the first part would be ten minutes but it was...

Helen Diane Foster
Right.

Mark Naison
...forty-five minutes of incredibly valuable thoughts about the Bronx and its development as well as your family. And so this is really exciting, and even better--I knew it was going to be good; it was even better.

Helen Diane Foster
Oh, good. Now Stephen, do I have your contact information?

Steven Payne
I'll send you an email right after this...

Helen Diane Foster
OK.

Steven Payne
...so you have it.

Helen Diane Foster

Because I would love to definitely come up. And my sister is home for, I think, a little while—meaning 'till June, so that's a little while. [laugh]

Steven Payne

Wow. That would be great because, you know, even in the collection, there's letters from your father to both of you that I'm sure you both would really love to see. I think after Rebecca produced one of Chris's albums, your father did this impromptu--it's probably a five-page review of the album. You know, glowing terms about Rebecca's contributions--

Helen Diane Foster

Of course! Oh, yes, so we're definitely going to do it.

Steven Payne

Yeah.

Helen Diane Foster

All right. Thank you so much. And Dr. Nason, again, thank you for what you do. Tiffany--when I told her I met with you, she was like, "You should have called me. I'd have come." I said, "When we schedule our lunch, I'll make sure you're there."

Mark Naison

OK. I'm always--as everybody knows, if there's food, I'm always there.

Helen Diane Foster

I know! [laugh]

Mark Naison

[laugh] Say hello to Tiffany.

Helen Diane Foster

I will!

Mark Naison

Thank you again...

Helen Diane Foster

Thank you.

Mark Naison

...for this amazing experience.

Helen Diane Foster

Thank you. Bye-bye.

Mark Naison
Bye-bye.

Steven Payne
Bye.