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Wesley Caines Interview

Mark Naison

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Wesley Caines
That's awesome. Hello, Veronica!

Veronica Quiroga
Hi, Mr. Caines. How are you?

Wesley Caines
I am well. I was apologizing to Alison before you all came on about making this so difficult to schedule for you all.

Alison Rini
Oh, no worries.

Veronica Quiroga
No, no worries. I'm sure--I mean, you've been busy obviously, and just with all the work you do, we're glad that you even found a slight time slot to put us in.

Wesley Caines
Yeah. Well, I'm ready. All yours. *laugh*

Carlos Rico
All right, we are recording. So Bethany, you can kick us off.

Bethany Fernandez
All right. So today is July 28, 2020, the time now is 6:34 PM, and we are interviewing Mr. Wesley Caines of the Bronx Defenders. Normally, I would just say that I am Bethany Fernandez as the interviewer, but I think it's more appropriate to introduce the other interviewers here with me.

Veronica Quiroga
Hi, everyone. Veronica Quiroga from the Bronx COVID-19 Oral History Project.

Alison Rini
Hi. I'm Alison Rini, also here with the Bronx COVID History Project. I'm a senior at Fordham.

Carlos Rico
And Carlos Rico here with the Bronx COVID-19 Oral History Project.

Wesley Caines
A pleasure to meet you all!

Bethany Fenandez
And Mr. Caines, we just want to thank you for coming by and just starting to have a conversation with us—sharing your experience, sharing your story, and just, you know, having a

conversation about how you've been affected by the pandemic. So we have to thank you a whole bunch for that. It's an honor. I can speak for all of us that it is an honor to be able to interview you. And I guess we can transition and get started on what we're going to talk about.

Wesley Caines

It's a pleasure to be here, and super humbled that you thought anything I could share would be useful for you. So thank you.

Veronica Quiroga

Thank you for being with us again, Mr. Caines, and--okay! So just to start us off real quick, can you tell us about your role at Bronx Defenders a little bit? Talk about yourself a little?

Wesley Caines

Sure. So I am the Chief of Staff of the Bronx Defenders, and to those of your viewers who may not be familiar, the Bronx Defenders is a public defender, legal aid type organization in the Bronx. We provide representation to poor people in the Bronx who can't pay for attorneys. What's unique about us in some sense—what has become a little bit more normalized across the city and different public defender offices—is what we pioneered which is holistic defense, which is a recognition that people's lives are complex and intricate and that the various systems of our government that intersects does so in such a way that to simply look at any one system and try to resolve a conflict or an issue that our clients have in that system will actually miss the mark of all of the various ways that the implication for that system involvement could play out in the client's life. So, for example, If someone has some interaction with our criminal legal system, that could quite possibly trigger an interaction with our family court system, you know, which could then move--ACS can move to remove a child from a household. And it could simply be something as simple as the police comes to your house and they're going to take you into custody and there's a minor child in the household, and the typical thing that--the policy thing that NYPD is required to do but very rarely does is that they're supposed to call a family member or someone that the parent identifies who could come and take custody of the child until their issue is resolved and they're reunited at home. But what often happens is NYPD will call ACS, and ACS will come and take the child. And then that could quite possibly enmesh our clients in not only the criminal legal system which initiated the interaction but now the family court system where they have to defend their family composition. So my job at the Bronx Defenders, again, is Chief of Staff, and what that simply means is that I provide coordination across the office. My role is somewhat a dual role in that that coordination across the office is across all of our practice areas. We operate in the family court system, the housing courts, criminal court, immigration court. We have social workers and other advocates on staff, and we do our work in a team-based holistic way so that these interdisciplinary teams literally represent like a support for clients when they come into our office. Another area of my job, though, is directing our systemic reform work, which means that I supervise directly our policy team, our community organizing team, our strategic communication and our impact litigation teams. So these four teams are the ways in which we work to address systemic issues, like the things that we see that's repeated over and over again in various clients' lives—things that we can say, you know, “Maybe policymakers just don't recognize how this law—how this policy—is playing out in

people's lives. So what we're going to do is that we're going to put together a strategy which seeks to change that." So that's the other aspect of my work.

Bethany Fernandez
All right.

Veronica Quiroga
Thank you so much for sharing that, Mr. Caines.

Bethany Fernandez
Yeah. And so, you know, hearing that you have this sort of holistic approach when dealing with a certain case, I just want to know, like--what were your sort of initial thoughts when you started hearing about the pandemic? Were you sort of worried about whether this holistic approach would be impacted in a way that might be where you might not fully be able to provide that service? I just sort of want to get a sense of where your head was at as a chief of staff when you know you guys are doing such important work.

Wesley Caines
Yeah. So, I mean, it's important to understand that the pandemic affected all of us, right? We're members of the community. We're impacted by the pandemic. We had to move our representation and our operations into the virtual space remotely, and chief concern amongst that is twofold. One, making sure that we're still able to provide the best, most zealous defense for our clients and supporting them through their legal issues that they have, and then also doing that in a way which safeguards our staff, making sure that they're safe in doing that work—because, even during the pandemic, some of our staff have just been required to go into the world to do their work most effectively. So those things were the big concerns. Some of the ways that we responded to those concerns is, for our staff, we secured PPEs, which allowed us to feel reasonably confident that we are making their interactions in the world as safe as possible, but for our clients, we also did the same. We initiated a client's needs survey, which allowed us to solicit resources and provide those resources to clients that were unique to the COVID pandemic. We also went on a vigorous, zealous advocacy campaign to get our city and state governments to recognize not only the seriousness of the pandemic, which I think that they recognized, but also the impact of the community that we represent—which is typically the marginalized black and brown community in the Bronx—and how it is--the state had a moral obligation to reduce that harm and to make, you know, as less dangerous as possible, and as safe as possible for, you know, this marginalized community. So that involved us advocating for the release of, you know, our clients from Rikers Island. That involves advocating for release of people out of ICE detention holds. That involves us, you know, asking and requesting that courts not require in-person appearances by clients and also staff. So some of those things, we were more effective than others in gaining. We were able to get a tremendous amount of people out of Rikers where they were home with their families to give support during this difficult time. We were able to get clients out of ICE detention. But we were also able to provide tangible support to clients. We provided grocery cards. We provided support to make sure that clients had technology where they can access the court systems that were handling their cases. We

provided PPEs to our clients. We mailed masks and gloves to clients who identify those as needs that they had. So just in responding to the pandemic, we have shifted our operations virtually, but we did not shift how we connect to our clients and support our clients. And in fact, our office is oriented and was founded in a holistic way for moments like this. We follow our clients where their needs are and where they are, so--yeah.

Veronica Quiroga

Thank you for that, Mr. Caines. And just because I feel like you're already a little bit on the topic, can you talk to us a little bit about how other Bronxites can access some of these resources—or if they, for whatever reason, find themselves caught up in the legal system, how they can access some of the resources provided by Bronx Defenders?

Wesley Caines

Sure. I mean, one of the responses that we have also had during the pandemic is manning our hotline and responding to community members during the protests following the murder of George Floyd. So we have provided guidance and representation to protesters who were arrested or who have felt that they were abused by law enforcement. We have done notice of claims applications for them to preserve their right to bring suit against those officers and NYPD. But we also have collaborated with the Bronx Community Relief Effort, which is a organization that was, you know, manned and envisioned by both Desmon and Derrick Lewis around how to empower Bronx residents in really upward mobility. And the pandemic struck, and they pivoted. They got a whole bunch of organizations in the Bronx, including the Bronx Defenders, to collaborate on providing support across various verticals, and the vertical that myself and my ED are co-captains of is the Equity and Justice vertical. And through this vertical, we have identified the unique needs of people with systems involvement currently or in their past. We recognize that people who have histories in our government's systems have great barriers that have been erected in front of them to prevent them from being civically whole again. And we did not want to see them further marginalized by the pandemic, so this vertical is specifically tailored to addressing them. We are in the process of providing microgrants to those individuals. We have provided technology to those individuals to access both courts and to access resources online. Other verticals that are a part of the Relief Effort have provided technology and Wi-Fi access as well, for example, because we know that there are a lot of people in the Bronx who just don't have access to the Internet. And to not have access to the Internet in 2020 is in of itself a problem. The pandemic just exacerbates that.

Veronica Quiroga

Absolutely. Absolutely. Alison, did you want to offer your next question?

Alison Rini

Yes. So a question that I have for you is, throughout the pandemic—throughout the past few months—what is, like, one case or one individual that you worked with or someone that you worked with worked with that you think about a lot or that affected you a lot, like, related to COVID?

Wesley Caines

Yeah, sure. So one of the major challenges of the pandemic and working to get the people that we represent and stand with home from detention—whether it's Rikers, ICE, or state prison—has been the lack of housing for them, right? So it's a pandemic. People inside were not prioritized and still are not prioritized in testing, and some of those individuals actually had family who were willing to allow them to come home with them but needed to know that they were not infected. So there was testing and there was the need for a space to provide a fourteen-day quarantine before they then entered the household, and that's been extremely challenging. But I want to tell you about a victory that I think kind of speak to how we do our work and how we show up for our clients. We have a client who was formerly in ICE detention, and we were successful in getting the court to release him due to some underlying conditions that made him more susceptible to the virus. The challenge was, he had no place to go. So we had to do the work of finding some place where he could be housed at least for fourteen days during a quarantine. He was in detention in New Jersey. We were able to find a hotel that had been set up specifically to have this transition quarantine period for those coming out of Rikers specifically, but we were able to get him a space in that hotel. And then the challenge became, how was he going to get from New Jersey to Queens? So we then had to secure an ambulance service, which agreed to transport him, but they wouldn't take him without PPEs on, and they wouldn't provide it. So, you know, a staff member literally met this client outside of the detention center with PPEs, which then allowed for transportation by the ambulance service to Queens where they quarantined successfully. So I think, when we speak about holistic work, it may be lost on many people what does that actually look like and what does that actually mean, but behind that curtain, there are a lot of people who really vigorously go and find resources—do that thing that's necessary to really help people stabilize and to get extracted from the system. And I think that's a really good example of how it is various staff members and the organization really came together around one individual to make sure that he was a success.

Alison Rini

That's amazing. Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing that. Another question that I have is, are there any politicians in New York State or City or any policies that have come out recently that have been positive—that have been helpful during the pandemic and have helped the people that you work with?

Wesley Caines

Yes. So there is one policy that we are hoping gets passed and signed in Albany, which is a contact tracing bill which is designed to, you know, make sure that people who test positive participate in the process of public health in a way which keeps us all safe, but there was some concern around the enactment of contact tracing that there was no mechanism explicitly making it concrete that this information that contact tracers would receive was not to be used in a punitive way and was to be used only as a public health mechanism. So the contact tracing bill is in Albany and we are hopeful that, you know, the legislature and the governor will do the right thing, which directly implicates public health during this pandemic. But there's another bill that passed recently not directly connected to the pandemic but I think was earth shifting in this moment in time in the response to the murder of George Floyd, which is the repeal of 50-a—50-

a being the civil rights statute in New York State which shielded law enforcement personnel records from public view—and it really allowed for bad actors to continue to be—to continue the bad acts, first of all, not be held accountable for their behaviors, and really eroded confidence of the community in that we all have the same accountability matrix that's applied to us across the board in our criminal legal system. So I think the passage of 50-a was huge. And there is currently some litigation that has taken place literally this week where the police unions, NYPD, and a couple others in other cities across the state have sued to prevent implementation of releasing this information publicly, but I'm confident, at the end of the day, that it will be held up and that this is going to actually be a good thing for communities of color and other marginalized communities.

Carlos Rico

Fantastic. I really would love to touch upon 50-a right now, but...

Wesley Caines

laugh

Carlos Rico

...we'll get back to it later on in the interview when we talk about the protests, George Floyd and going forward. But for right now, I would like to pivot back to Bronx Defenders as a nonprofit, and, being a nonprofit, it's very difficult. And then being a public defender is very difficult. It doesn't make that much money, right? It's not the job that, you know, gets all the pay, so funding's pretty difficult to come across. So I wanted to ask you, how do you gain funding? Is it strictly through donations? And on top of that, a second question would be, how has this been affected by coronavirus and the pandemic? A lot of businesses are suffering and struggling to stay up with many of the small business loans that are going out from the government and different organizations, so I would love to hear your thoughts on that as chief of staff and how you're going through it.

Wesley Caines

Yeah, that's actually a great question. Our direct representation work is funded. It's funded by the city or the state. So we're contracted to provide legal defense for folks in criminal proceedings. It's, you know, pretty simple; it's enshrined in the Constitution that criminal defendants are entitled to legal representation. So it's that theory that trickled down to us and where our funding of contracts for our funding really is tied to. That also extends to our family court work, to a lesser extent to our immigration work, and still lesser so to our housing work, right? Our civil practice work. Our budget is probably approximately ninety-five to ninety-seven percent funded through contracts. But that work that I just described to you—the systemic reform work, the policy work, the community organizing work, the strategic communication work—we have a mentor program where we mentor Bronx youth. That work—all of it is privately funded. And for that, we have to go out and solicit from wealthy individuals and foundations to really support that work. There's a misconception by many that our contracts, which are funded, actually funds our advocacy and other works, and it does not. It's always a struggle to solicit and receive funding for those works that we do outside of the contracts. As it relates to response to

the pandemic, a lot of our funders are very much aware of the impact of the pandemic on the community and the people that we serve, so there have been a positive response. So I mentioned that we have done a client survey, a client's needs survey and received funding to really provide support for those clients. Again, that was not funded through contracts; that was private donations that did that. We were able to provide with the support of the NBA Players Association Foundation resources to our clients who are incarcerated in Rikers as well as ICE detention, provide them with money in their accounts so they could buy supplies that they needed to help them through the pandemic--like, that work is not funded. It is literally, you know, people reaching out and saying, "We see that you're doing COVID-related support work to clients in the community. How can we help," and then supporting us. So that's the source of our funding, but you're correct. You know, generally speaking, the pandemic has devastated small business, nonprofits and individuals. There are many people who have been furloughed or laid off and who are struggling to pay their bills, to pay their rent. There's a lot of food insecurity taking place now. The Bronx have, you know, the distinction of existing within the wealthiest city in the country, but also having the poorest congressional district within its borders. And that's not lost on us for the work that we do—that these inequalities are historic, that they go back and they're tied to racism and choices that were made, you know, sometimes generations ago, but also quite recently around who to provide support and resources to and who not. So we find ourselves here, and we at the Bronx Defenders do what we can to really provide the support that we think should be afforded all of the people in New York City and New York State.

Carlos Rico

And it's amazing work, you know. Just hearing about the struggle even before the pandemic and now the struggle of hearing about these--or more people having discussions about the systemic injustices that we're facing, especially within New York City, which is the most unequal city in the entire country and congressional district—as you said, lowest income—and what you were saying ties into my next question when it comes to community impact with the Bronx Defenders. So what would you say the impact has been on the community—right, your reception, how they receive you—and how has that impact evolved over time? You kind of touched on it a little bit in terms of your offering of services during the pandemic—the client that was in New Jersey had to go to Queens through PPE. But how would you say that impact has evolved and how do you get your message out there now? So you talked a little bit about soliciting investors and, at the same time, offering your work to people who need representation in a court of law.

Wesley Caines

Yeah. So the Bronx Defenders--we are part of the community, right? And even pre-pandemic, we had engagement and interactions with the community, you know, around popular education, around organizing. The community saw us as,—and still sees us as—a resource. We have continued to provide Know Your Rights trainings virtually for community members. We continue to engage the community around the issues that are impacting them prior to the pandemic and has been exacerbated by the pandemic. So I believe that the community receives us well. But another point that I would like to make is that quite a bit of our staff are, like, born and bred Bronxites who still live literally in the communities where they grew up and are ambassadors for

the Bronx Defenders and who bring that lived experience of the community into our office and into our work. So we are not disconnected from the things that impacts, you know, the community because, for many of us, we are the community. I grew up in Baychester in a section of the Bronx in the Northeast Bronx affectionately known as the Valley, and I now live in Soundview. So it's, you know--I understand the temperature in the Bronx. I understand the things that concern Bronx residents. I understand the tension between public safety and policing and, you know, the respect that people deserve from law enforcement in their engagement, you know, coupled with people's need to feel safe in the community. Those things are not abstract to me. They're lived things for me, and as--it's the same for many of my colleagues.

Carlos Rico

Fantastic. I--your story is something that's inspirational to hear and something that I believe every community should look up to. Every community organization effort should be born and bred, grassroots--it's right there. So I appreciate you sharing that story and sharing your sentiments. And so pivoting off of that, you were talking about addressing systemic issues such as policing and things like that. So in light of the pandemic—and you discussed about it a little bit and just wanting to dive deeper into it—what are the additional struggles that have come from this quarantine? Right, people have been inside. People have been facilitating these discussions about, “What do we want to see our community to look like? What kind of leaders do we like to see? What is it that we want to come out of our community?” So do you want to elaborate a little bit on what these struggles might come working via quarantine—the protests and, with the upcoming election, voter suppression, things like that?

Wesley Caines

You know, Bronx residents want what everyone else wants. They want to live in safe communities. They--we want to thrive. We want to be respected by the government under which we are governed. We want to have resources available to our children as it is available to other people's children. We want policing to look for us like it looks for others. So I don't think that we want anything different. And I think that you see Bronx residents going out and protesting the murder of George Floyd and, you know, numerous other murders that has taken place in New York City, you know, around bad policing, frankly. And I can recall my earliest memory of a police murder was Eleanor Bumpurs, a woman who, in the eighties—I think she was like in her late sixties—had mental health struggles and lived in a NYCHA development and hadn't paid her rent for a couple of months and literally owed less than \$1,000. And she was, you know--the police were called to effectuate an eviction And they went into her home. And the allegation was that she took a knife and came at them, and the response was them to shoot and kill her in her own home. And no one was held to account for that, right? So I think there's a long history, and those who are older than me have their own memories of injustices. And those who are younger than me have more recent instances of injustices. Like buying Skittles shouldn't be a death sentence, right? Like, even--it's always amazing to me that we talk about the reason why someone had a police engagement, which led to their murder, right? As if any of those reasons carry with them a death sentence. And, you know, even though Trayvon Martin wasn't killed by a police officer, he was killed by a white person, as Ahmaud Aubrey was in Georgia, who felt sufficiently empowered and confident that there would not be any accountability for them to

police black life—and, if that black life did not cooperate, it was totally acceptable for them to take that life. And one could argue that they're not wrong; historically, there hasn't been any accountability. So in the same way the Black and Brown community have this historical trauma to reference in dealing with bad policing, like, people who feel that the system is for them and the country is for them have that same historical memory to guide them in their behavior because there have not been any accountability. So I don't think that the Bronx community or communities of color across this country are asking for anything that other privileged communities take for granted. Like, that's all we're asking for—the same treatment, the same accountability, transparency.

Veronica Quiroga

And then--

Carlos Rico

Thanks for telling me.

Veronica Quiroga

And in light of this discussion—this very important discussion, and I would even say dialogue that we're having, or the national dialogue that has sort of resurged since the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery—we've seen this—I wouldn't even say resurgence, because in my lifetime, this is the first time where I've actually seen it take off this big—this movement towards defunding police departments across the country. So from the work that you do at Bronx Defenders and from the work that you've done throughout your lifetime, what are your thoughts on this movement and where do you think that some of these sentiments—you touched on it a little bit already, but—where do you think that some of these sentiments and the impact of these protests are coming from?

Wesley Caines

Yeah. So... *laugh* Even in my lifetime--I'm probably going to guess that I'm a *little* bit older than you. Even in my lifetime, I have not seen this level of response to state violence. Like, literally, I have not seen it. It has usually been the black and brown community calling for accountability with their white allies. The response to George Floyd's murder has just been different. I think there's a recognition that this is something that needs to be addressed. And because of that response, I am very hopeful that we can really get some real concrete systemic change to happen. I think the passage of 50-a represents that. That legislation and proposed legislation had been lingering and batted around in Albany for years, and legislators would tell you—legislators would tell you in confidence—“That will never happen. There's not a scenario where that would happen. Give that up.” And then within a matter of weeks after the protesters came out in response to George Floyd, that passed and was signed into law. We're having discussions in the public space around historic systemic racism, white supremacy as the framework for, you know, just about all of our government institutions and how they interact with the black and brown community. I have not seen that. But I'm also a little bit--the skeptic in me, I'm also a little bit concerned. I think there's a big difference between acknowledging that systemic racism, white supremacy, undergirds a lot of these institutions and needs to be

eradicated. Acknowledging that is one thing. Taking a knee is one thing. You know, proclaiming Black Lives Matter or you stand with Black Lives is one thing. And then actually doing the hard work that will be necessary to really make for an equitable society, I am not totally convinced that our current systems actors are truly committed to. I think they think that this is a moment that requires them to do something without going all the way and doing the hard, necessary work of really transforming our culture. So I'm both hopeful and cautiously, you know, looking at things.

Veronica Quiroga

Absolutely; thanks for sharing that, Mr. Caines. And obviously--so, I want to just sort of get a little deeper into the communities and the different types of communities that you guys work with throughout the Bronx. As a Bronx History Project dedicated to serving the people of the Bronx and amplifying, more importantly, amplifying the voices of its residents, we are always searching for inspiration from people and from organizations that are committed to doing the same work. So I saw in your bio that before becoming Chief of Staff, you worked as the Director of Community Engagement. So can you talk to us a little bit about the different Bronx communities that the Bronx Defenders works with and how you feel your work with the diverse communities of the Bronx has shaped your perspective for where you see the future of Bronx Defenders going?

Wesley Caines

Yeah, sure. So, I mean, anyone who navigates this city and specifically the Bronx knows that communities really filter down to neighborhoods and sometimes even blocks. Like, there could be a culture in one city block in the Bronx, that's very different from the culture on the adjacent block. And I think, you know, part of what makes my work very rewarding is I get to go into all of those blocks. I get to engage the community on their terms. I get to provide to them the things that they identify they would like assistance with, whether it's doing Know Your Rights training or having talks with them about how to navigate the various government systems that either they themselves or family member or neighbor is installed in. I mean, you know, our engagement is across the board. We work with, you know, mental health providers. We work with reentry organizations. We work with employment organizations. We have done workshops and trainings for an array of organizations in the Bronx, including and up to, you know, the New York City Human Rights Commission in the Bronx, including and up to the Labor Department on Fordham Road doing workshops for their staff around the rights of people who have had system involvement as they look for employment. Like, we are everywhere, and we try to, you know, be that resource for information that fills the knowledge gap for members of the community. But that is guided by the community. We are not so arrogant in thinking that we have the answers for any particular community or any particular organization. It's definitely collaborative. It's a conversation. It's an engagement. It's not an ascribing of "This is what we think is best for you."

Veronica Quiroga

Sure, absolutely. And along the lines of that, just how do you feel that some of the work and some of the thought processes that you guys have already engaged in throughout your work with various members of the Bronx community have sort of been amplified on the more national

narrative by COVID-19? So, as you mentioned earlier, we have a whole bunch of new dialogues--well, not new, but a resurgence in the participation of these dialogues about the way that these systems work in complex ways to form a web that oftentimes Bronxites find themselves trapped in. So how would you say that COVID-19 has sort of amplified the work that people are doing to either dismantle these webs or whatever?

Wesley Caines

One of the great things about working at the Bronx Defenders for me is occasionally coming across an email in my personal email that has some conference that's happening or some discussion that's taken place and they have the featured speakers, and it happens to be a colleague doing this in their personal capacity. I think that makes a difference—that the people who do the work professionally at the Bronx Defenders are also committed to that work in their personal lives and do this work in various arenas, both locally and nationally. We're engaged in conversations with various organizations. We have been on the front lines in the protests. We have staff members who were arrested at the protest recently in Mott Haven. Like, we're there, we show up, we support, but we're also having our bodies on the line as well. And that happens both professionally and personally. We have people who feel very passionately about the work we do, and that extends into their personal lives. I think that the pandemic, though, has brought to the surface—not so much for us, but for a lot of other folks who maybe did not want to acknowledge—how ingrained some of these barriers were, and some of these, you know, meshed and meshed systems were in the lives of marginalized black and brown New Yorkers, and specifically in the Bronx. So the pandemic has really, you know, allowed for that discussion to be expanded. It didn't surprise us that the same people who are hyper-surveilled in our family court system and family surveillance through ACS and other partner government agencies and departments are also the same people who were policed a particular way—who are now also the same people who have certain types of employment that tend to be low-level employment that are implicated most in the pandemic, whether they are essential workers or that they were the first workers to be furloughed or laid off. Like, all of these things intersects with how we have recognized that the system has ascribed the space for our clients and many in the Bronx and has erected barriers around that space to keep them there, and the pandemic has simply allowed for others to recognize that as well.

Bethany Fernandez

Yeah, I guess I have to thank you for sharing your insight and sort of putting into words some of the things that we just know, like, that are going on and just, like, being able to verbalize that. I guess we can sort of transition. You know, you're giving us all this--although you're already giving us all this insight, I just have to ask, what advice would you have for someone who would like to pursue law, and do you have any sort of specific advice for someone who's trying to pursue work along the lines of what you're doing?

Wesley Caines

Sure. First of all, follow your passion; don't let anyone dissuade you from pursuing the path that you feel is just and right for you. That's number one. And if you are going to choose to work in this arena, always remember to affirm people's humanity. That's super important. People are

not cases; they're people. People are not inmates; they're people. People are not clients only; they're people, right? So always affirm in humanity and the right for all of us to really live and thrive and be safe, you know, in our communities and to be together as a family and to not be deported. You know, like, all of these things are an affirming of humanity. So if you're going to do this work, know the reason why. Know your motive for wanting to do this work. And I would hope that at core is wanting to ensure that no one's humanity is trampled—that no one is marginalized in such a way where they can't thrive or where they can't embrace the wonders that the world have to offer.

Bethany Fernandez

Thank you for--

Wesley Caines

That should not be reserved for some of us; it should be for all of us.

Bethany Fernandez

Right. Thank you so much for sharing that advice. Additionally, I have to ask, do you have any sort of specific advice for people of color who might be wanting to pursue law, just because it might be harder for them to sort of follow their passion, follow their dream?

Wesley Caines

Yes. I would seek out--for those people, I would advise that they seek out mentors. It's not easy, I know, but seeking out mentors that look like you could be very helpful in not making you feel isolated even in the choice that you have chosen. Own your voice. Your experience matters. Where you come from matters. Bring that into the room with you. And, you know, it may not seem particularly relevant, but diversity of perspective is always relevant, and you should never leave your experience or your voice behind or be ashamed of who you are or where you came from. We're all travelers, we come from someplace, we're in a place and we're going someplace. And understanding that all of that spectrum is important to who we are and just owning that.

Alison Rini

I have a question. So I see that you studied at New York Theological Seminary...

Wesley Caines

laugh

...for ministry. Can you talk a little bit about why you chose to do that and how you apply, like, what you learned to your work with the Bronx Defenders?

Wesley Caines

Sure. So you probably have asked the most interesting question at the moment when we have the least amount of time. *laugh* So I--the ministerial degree that I have from New York Theological Seminary is a counseling-based degree. It's a training that, you know, has enabled

me to really deal with people with different faith backgrounds in recognizing the commonality in faith beliefs. I chose to attend New York Theological Seminary, though, because, at the time, it was the only graduate-level educational opportunity that was available to me. What I had not mentioned in this interview to this point is that I had previously been a client—not a client of the Bronx Defenders, but the client of a defense attorney and ended up spending 25 years in New York State prisons—and it was while I was in New York State prisons for that time that I earned that New York Theological Seminary degree. That informs everything that I do. That connects to the advice of not leaving your experiences behind. I carry those experiences with me, I empathize with the people we serve because of those experiences, and I also have a perspective of our criminal legal system and other government systems that most people without my lived experience just would not understand how dehumanizing those systems are. And anytime we have a government system that dehumanizes its citizens, that could never be good. That could never be normalized, and we have allowed it to become normalized. So that is the origins of my New York Theological degree, and the experience that is tied to that on a daily basis informs my work.

Alison Rini

Thank you so much for sharing that. I really appreciate it.

Wesley Caines

You're welcome.

Alison Rini

Another question I have is, a lot of people in the Fordham community—I mean, like, students of Fordham University or faculty—are pretty out of touch with the Bronx except for the small area where the school is. So what's something that you wish people associated with Fordham University knew about the Bronx?

Wesley Caines

It's a great borough. It's the most authentic New York. Like, as students, you get to live and attend school in the most culturally rich, musically diverse, like, borough in New York City. There's literally nothing like the Bronx. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else in New York City besides the Bronx. And I would implore those who attend Fordham to just explore—to go out into the Bronx community and learn about the different neighborhoods, the different people, the different immigrants, and, you know, their experiences, their customs--like, just embrace the diversity. It's very different from going to school in an area that doesn't have this rich complexity of cultures, so take advantage of it.

Bethany Fernandez

Thank you so much for providing that insight. I know that, you know, some of us, as we are tuned into, like, the Bronx and the community in and of itself, sometimes, like, there's--we see the effects of when they're not in touch with the community. We hear it in our day-to-day conversations. And I think you giving that sort of insight is really important. Lastly, I would like to ask, you know, looking forward, what do you think is going to happen in the future with the work

that you do, and do you think that some of the stuff that has come forth because of the pandemic, like certain practices--do you think those things are going to stick in the future?

Wesley Caines

It is my hope that the pandemic, as destructive and destructive and deadly as it is, will really usher in a different era for us—not just in the Bronx, for the entire country. Conversations are taking place that I've never heard in my lifetime. And, you know, whether or not it sticks is not something that I could answer. I hope it does. I hope this consciousness of people's experiences across the country remains something that everyone is engaged with and the need for real, true change to happen doesn't leave us when the pandemic does.

Veronica Quiroga

Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing that, Mr. Caines. And more importantly, I'd like to thank you, on behalf of our entire staff and the Bronx African American History Project as well as Dr. Naison, for joining us and for sharing some of your wisdom, some of your experiences. Now more than ever, it's important not only to amplify--I think what this project is doing is not only amplifying the voices of the most marginalized people of New York City, but also the voices of the heroes, right—the people who might have not necessarily had the platform before to share their voices, share their experiences. And through, not necessarily in our interview with you, but through our other interviews and through the work that we've collected in our archive, we've been able to sort of shine light on the voices and the faces of the people. So just to end on a slightly more positive note, what message do you have for Bronxites? Or if you think that there's anything that people should know now or in the future in five or ten years from now when they look through the videos that are in this archive, what is the most important thing that people should know about the Bronx, either related to what you do or just in general?

Wesley Caines

First of all, I want to thank you all for the work that you're doing in archiving this information. And I want to thank you--I'm super humbled that I was even considered and asked to participate in this project. I think that people's stories should be told by the people, by them firsthand, not by others. And I think that that being the case, *this* is awesome. And I would implore you to continue to, you know—we can't do it right now because of the pandemic—but to get average everyday people and allow them to tell their stories and allow them to tell their stories in their way. Don't be a snob around, you know—and that goes for me as well, for all of us—not to be snobs in thinking that there is a way that people's stories should be told. We communicate differently, we announce differently, but it doesn't take away from our experiences. And I think this archiving project is an awesome opportunity to capture the experiences of people in the Bronx in their own words. And five years from now, it is my hope that five, ten, twenty years from now, people will look back on this archive and value it as a piece of, like, history that was told by the common man...and woman. Yes, thank you.

Carlos Rico

Thank you. Thank you very much for sharing that and for being here. You know, we--Veronica said about heroes, right? Uplifting the heroes. And I would have never heard about you. And I

consider you a hero now, and after this interview and going forward, right, Wesley Caines is a personal hero of mine and—I think of the rest of us, too—someone that we should look up to. So we want to thank you for that, for all the work that you've done and all the work that is to be done in the future.

Wesley Caines

Thank you, and I appreciate you saying that. But I just want to say: I'm here because a lot of people invested in me, and I'm here because the work I do is collaborative. So when you see individuals who you deem your hero, think about the many hands that are in back of them propping them up and helping them to move forward. But thank you very much for that, Carlos. I appreciate it.

Veronica Quiroga

Oh! And just real, real quick before we let you go, Mr. Caines, we have--we offer a featured business page on our archive site as well. If there is any specific information related to the Bronx Defenders, would you like us to link anything on our website?

Wesley Caines

Sure, you could link our website. And everything and anything that anyone would want to learn about us, they can access through our website.

Veronica Quiroga

OK. And in terms of contact information, can we just provide whatever is on the website?

Wesley Caines

Correct.

Veronica Quiroga

Perfect. Perfect. Thank you so much for that again.

Wesley Caines

Thank you all.

Veronica Quiroga

Cool.

Carlos Rico

Thank you very much.

Wesley Caines

All righty. Have a good night!

Carlos Rico

All right. Take care!

Wesley Caines
Bye.

Bethany Fernandez
Thank you. Have a good night, sir.

Wesley Caines
Thank you.