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Lionel Spencer Interview

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Carlos Rico

...right now. All right. Welcome to the Bronx COVID-19 Oral History Project. We got a special interview here today with student, artist, writer, man of the people and my friend, Lionel Spencer. Happy to have you here.

Lionel Spencer

Thank you. I'm grateful to be here.

Carlos Rico

So, just to start it off, you're a hip hop fan, and I was just wondering: if you were to give your life until this point an album title, what would it be?

Lionel Spencer

My life an album title? That's a good one. Maybe "Another Spencer Story."

Carlos Rico

All right. You want to explain it or just...

Lionel Spencer

I have five brothers, and we're very close. And so I feel like my life story--it has to be understood in connection with theirs, so it's another Spencer story. It's not the Spencer story...

Carlos Rico

Yeah.

Lionel Spencer

...right? Just--it's another.

Carlos Rico

Another story. So let's talk about that. Let's talk about your family—like, how you came to be in the Bronx and your family.

Lionel Spencer

Well, I was born in the Bronx, born and raised in the Bronx. My dad was born in New York City. Where exactly? I'm not sure. I want to say maybe Harlem. My mother was born in Savannah, Georgia. My father's people, or some of my people, are from North Carolina—the Buford County area, specifically a small town named Pantigo—and my mother's family was pretty much from Savannah, Georgia. So my dad's--my grandparents, born and raised in North Carolina, at some point decided to move to New York City for various reasons. Some of them were associated with oppression and run-ins with the KKK. So they thought it best to move to New York City to raise their children, my dad and my aunts. As the story is on my mother's side, I actually don't know. *laugh* I actually have no clarity as to why they decided to move to New York and leave Savannah, Georgia, but they came. My mother and father met in the Bronx in New York City, married, started having kids and one of those kids was me, so...

Carlos Rico
There you go.

Lionel Spencer
...that's how we ended up in New York, in the Bronx specifically.

Carlos Rico
So from the very beginning, you've seen the Bronx over time, right, since you were born, changed as time goes on, and you had your brothers as well. How integral were they in this whole story that we're talking about?

Lionel Spencer
I mean, they're very essential to the story and to my story because, you know, pretty much any challenging time—challenging aspect—of my life is also a challenging aspect of their lives, so yeah. So to speak, we've gone through battles and war together, so--and I'm the second to the youngest. So I have four older brothers, which means a lot of teaching and a way of living was passed down to me through them. So--yeah, I think they're, you know--I'm like what I like to call myself a pack animal. I am part of a group. *laugh* You know?

Carlos Rico
Yeah.

Lionel Spencer
I am part of a group.

Carlos Rico
I have four sisters, so, you know--kindred spirits in a way, but you know. I'm the only boy, so I've never had a brother. So, you know, I can only imagine.

Lionel Spencer
laugh

Carlos Rico
But I understand what you're saying—pack mentality. Most definitely. A lot passed down to me. You're still in contact with them today?

Lionel Spencer
Yes. First, I want to apologize. They're doing some renovations downstairs. I live in a private house, so they're doing some renovations on the first floor. So there will be some hammering and maybe some drill noises. I apologize.

Carlos Rico
Yeah, well, I love hammers.

Lionel Spencer

Yes, I am definitely in contact with my brothers. And I think even more so--I know we'll probably get into it more, but—we've been more so in contact after my dad's passing because we have do a lot planning around, you know, trying to find a way to memorialize him and realizing that's definitely something we need to do together, that it's not something we can do separately. So we're planning a trip to go to where our grandparents and great grandparents are from, Pantigo, to spread his ashes. You know, my dad was cremated. So more recently, in terms of all six of us together, we've been in contact a lot more, but even if it's not all six of us, we're, you know-- maybe we'll touch base once a week. So that's kind of regular.

Carlos Rico

That's beautiful, you know. I hope to have that connection as I get older, and, with my family, you know, I don't want to separate or spread apart—even though we're all over the place. But that's very beautiful to hear that you guys are still close together. So, I mean, we can go right into it, right? Like, COVID-19: what were your initial thoughts as this was happening? Because you're living in the Bronx right now in your own house with your family, right?

Lionel Spencer

Yeah.

Carlos Rico

And so what was your thoughts as it was starting to emerge?

Lionel Spencer

laugh So I don't know if this is a product of trauma or age, culture, whatever, but I tend not to watch a lot of news anymore. I guess, at some point, I felt like I used to look at news as something that provided me with just facts and truth, and then I realized that that wasn't always the case and, in order to get facts and truth, I was going to have to do a lot more work. And so I pretty much decide when I'm gonna do that work, and it's not a daily work that I decide to do. So when the COVID-19, the coronavirus, started hitting the US, New York wasn't the first place it hit, and so I wasn't as concerned. The little bits and pieces I'm hearing, I'm reading about it-- yeah. I wasn't concerned until it really hit the New Rochelle area, and that's when kind of the red flag started going off. And I have some friends who used to live in New York but no longer live in New York calling me like, "It's going down. It's about to be crazy. You need to get out of New York City." *laugh* I have one friend who just kind of--he's watched too much Walking Dead.

Carlos Rico

Yeah. *laugh*

Lionel Spencer

So every day now he's like, "Get out of the state!" You know?

Carlos Rico

Yeah.

Lionel Spencer

So he's calling me like, "This is huge. You got to understand the implications. Yada, yada, yada." And I'm like, "Okay. Yeah, okay. Wow, yeah. I didn't think about that." So I guess that's how alarms started going off for me.

Carlos Rico

Did you sense that in your community? Like--

Lionel Spencer

No, no. There was the, you know--you wouldn't have thought that anyone was alarmed. I mean, I'm thinking the last time I hung out with my dad was, let's say, maybe March 14th or 21st—I want to say, around that time—and I think this is before, you know, kind of like the shutdown or the shelter in place or whatever. I forget what it was called. But, you know, that hadn't happened yet. So up until like March twenty something, I'm like, "This is crazy, but it ain't crazy in New York." Right? And then I think all around that time is when, right after maybe let's say March 14th into, you know, until now...*laugh*

Carlos Rico

Yeah.

Lionel Spencer

...I think everything started closing down, right? Because I think it was March 13th, we were supposed to have my album release, right, and it got shut down because of the coronavirus, right? So around that time is when everything is like it's starting to really become a bit more clear—like this is an issue everywhere in New York, in the Bronx. So yeah, I think those kind--there were little points that kind of started setting—kind of hinting or making it very clear—that this is a very serious issue.

Carlos Rico

And so that happened, right? So March 14th, right—whenever the day it was, the stay at home order, right? So then what was the reaction in your community then or, in your experience, what you saw in your community when things started closing up?

Lionel Spencer

A little bit of panic, you know. I think, you know—like probably a lot of people, but—this is not something I've ever experienced, and I don't think most of the people in my communities ever experienced this. So it was a lot of panic, you know, a lot of conversations around, like--what do you call those things? Like suspicions. Like, "Maybe this is the government doing stuff." You know, just a lot of different opinions about why we were at where we were at. And so, for myself, you know, again, having, you know, school being shut down and then, you know, church being shut down and then there's the restriction from like not traveling outside of the state, there's the quarantining of New Rochelle where people in New Rochelle shouldn't leave New Rochelle.

They get quarantined for fourteen days—I have friends up there--so I think, as more information started to get disseminated and protocols and procedures of what we should need to do, you know—New York strong—I think that's when it kind of set in that this is very serious and this is not going to change anytime soon. So then it's like trying to get established in the new normal. So, you know, it's me, my wife, my son, and my wife's mom. She's been staying with us. She has preexisting conditions, so now it's about, like, “Okay, let's make sure, you know, we're being smart about how we're moving about, you know, going to the supermarket, doing laundry—whatever the case is.” And yeah, that was and still is difficult because you know, going out for birthdays, anniversaries, you know, just to get a breather, you know--all those things seemed like, you know, you're potentially risking your life to go for a stroll. You're potentially risking your life or someone in your household's life to go to the supermarket and I think more and more information I think--you know, the medical field started to learn more and more. So initially it's like, “Oh, it's just people of this age. These are the main cases. Be afraid if you're, you know, this population.” And then you learn that it's not just those people, and so that makes the scenario even a lot more scarier because now I'm thinking about, you know, my own health, the health of my wife, the health of my one and a half year old. How much do they really know, right? Because if they're continuing to learn things and communicating new information, it's like we're behind the ball. So just kind of--we need to be smart. Shut everything down, right? Just shut everything down. And yeah, I mean, I think that that was and still is difficult for a lot of people. You know, I would see a lot of people around, you know, maybe—at the time I was living in an apartment building—people in the front, like small gatherings in the front. I think it was very difficult for people to—and, in many cases, still is—really difficult for people to adjust to not being as social. And so, yeah. For me and my house, we just did our best to travel as little as possible. You know, It was really just to do grocery shopping and do laundry. So those are the only two reasons we went out. I had to start going out after my dad passed because we had to deal with a lot of his things, his actual physical belongings and then maybe stopping at banks to take care of some of his financials. So I was out a little bit more than maybe, you know, my family, but my wife was able to start working from home. She works for the city. My stepmom was able to kind of be safely in the house. So, you know, I think we made it through, but I think, again, none of us really knew enough information, and some of that is--you know, if I'm thinking about myself, that some of it is my fault because of, you know, how I've began to view news. And so let's say I hang out with my dad—14th, I think it is—and then on the 21st or so, I get a call from one of my older brothers saying, you know, our dad has been sick. He's had flu-like symptoms. He hasn't been to work in a while. So then we weren't thinking this is coronavirus; we're just thinking he's a little bit under the weather. So I go over and buy him some things that he needs and then the following week I get another phone call from my stepmom. He's not getting any better. He's not leaving the house. He's not leaving his bed. He needs to go to the hospital. So I go over there. I call the ambulance. They come and they check my dad out, and they say, “You're fine. You're not having trouble breathing. You don't have a fever. You don't”—I guess, “You don't have coronavirus. So we suggest Theraflu, hydrate, hydrate, stay in the house, quarantine.” So they, you know--while I'm walking out with them, I'm saying, “So what should, you know”—I'm asking them, “What should I get?” They give me some things on the list to go get. I run to the store, go get these things from my dad, drop them off and then leave. This is maybe Thursday or Friday. I can't remember the exact date, but a Thursday or Friday. And

then I get another phone call. He's getting worse. This is like Monday at this point. And let's say this is March 30th or something. I can't remember what Friday that was, but he's not getting any better. He really needs to go to hospital. So I'll call the ambulance again. Like, they said that they'll send somebody over. So I go over there, ten in the morning, and they don't come. So I call one of my older brothers. He comes, he meets me at my dad's house and we get my dad dressed. We got him in the car and drove him to the hospital. And so he got admitted, and then a couple days later, they confirmed that it was the coronavirus, that he had the coronavirus. And then a week after that, he passed away. While being in the hospital, it seemed like his health just deteriorated very quickly. And yeah, within like a week from, like, maybe--yeah, let's say if we checked him in Monday, the upcoming Sunday, he passed away. So again, I don't know if everybody had enough information. I was a bit more--after inquiring, I knew that there was something a little bit off about how things were being handled. I knew that healthcare professionals--they were overwhelmed. That was something that, after watching enough of De Blasio or Cuomo's briefings, that I knew that that was a reality, and I think that reality was reflected in how my dad was taken care of. But in terms of being able to know whether or not it was the coronavirus, my uncle-in-law, my wife's uncle--he got sick. No fever, no shortness of breath, but super fatigued, laying in the bed, no appetite, throwing up, can't keep anything down, right? But he's in New Jersey. He calls the ambulance, the ambulance come and get him and take him. It's confirmed he had coronavirus, right? So he's fine. But that happened, let's say, a week before we go get my dad and bring him into the hospital. So at this point, I kind of know that it's not just about the shortness of breath. It's not just about a fever and a cough and the things that were kind of being communicated via the news but that it could be these other symptoms and be that as well. So that's why when I got the phone call from my mother, my stepmother, and she's saying he really needs to go, and I knew his symptoms, I was, you know, adamant about us, like, if the ambulance can't come get him or won't come get him or whatever the scenario is, that we're going to take him. So it's still, you know--for me it's--yeah, this has just been a very surreal experience, and when you start seeing on the news that communities of color are getting hit the hardest and the Bronx is mentioned, you know, I guess it's *laugh* like I was saying, it's kind of novel because I'm born and raised from the Bronx. I don't feel poor. I don't feel oppressed. I don't feel marginalized, though I know what the statistics and the reality is for many people living in the Bronx. And, you know, I didn't necessarily equate my dad's death to us being a part of that marginalized group, but it definitely triggered me to start thinking about that. You know, when I think about just the simple fact that my uncle-in-law was feeling similar symptoms, calls an ambulance and gets picked up, maybe that's because he's in New Jersey. Maybe it's not really what people are saying it is, or maybe that's exactly what it is. My dad didn't get the treatment that he needed because he was a resident of the Bronx. I'm not saying that as fact, but I'm saying that that is, you know--I think that can be a truth. That can be exactly what happened. So, yeah, it's been a challenging situation altogether, but, you know, trying to make our way through it.

Carlos Rico

Well, I first want to say: my condolences to your father and to your family and to everything that happened, right? I think it--personally, I would like to say that something like that is ultimately a tragedy and something that should not have happened and I have frustration from hearing that

story and I have pain and anguish from hearing that story from you, especially because I know you personally and I know who you are and what you're about as a person and as a family man and as someone that wants to give back to his community and give back to your family. It's something that's very painful to hear and something that stirs up something within me. So again, from the bottom of my heart and the rest of the team, right, our condolences and that we are with you and there's anything that you need from us, right, like, we got you. And we appreciate you coming on and sharing the story. It's very difficult as it happened very recently and I can only imagine. I can only imagine. I can't--I've never had that—thank God—but something that I can only imagine is very difficult, so...

Lionel Spencer

Thanks. Thanks, Carlos; I appreciate it, man.

Carlos Rico

Yeah, and so, you know, that--It can be easy to feel anger, right? And what was fascinating to hear from you is saying like, you know, you're from the Bronx, you're born and raised, right? You never saw it as you were being oppressed or marginalized or being misrepresented, right? But you see the statistics and you see everything that's going on. And now we have nationwide protests that are still occurring in many US cities, right, who are advocating and fighting for those things, right—that standing up for the marginalized. We're talking about systemic racism. We're talking about institutionalized racism. We're talking about healthcare, right—the right to healthcare for individuals. So what was that like in your community or if you want to elaborate more on your family, like your thoughts about what's going on and what's the conversation that's continuing?

Lionel Spencer

Yeah, I mean, I would probably say that like the way I functioned up until this point is that I don't like to--it's hard for me to join movements simply because I found just for myself it's almost like with voting. You almost never find something that totally represents or reflects who you are. So because of that, it's always been difficult to be able to feel fully safe with either investing or marching alongside various movements or people who are trying to do good things. But I kind of pick and choose where I kind of march alongside and make sure it's aligned with what I believe. So I organized a Sing for Justice in my community and with members of my community some of my people from my church community to sing songs of God of hope because I felt like that was what the people around me needed and that's what I needed. So that was my peaceful protest. One of my brothers planned a barbecue on Juneteenth to bring together members of our community to talk through issues facing our community. And--yeah?

Carlos Rico

What were some of those conversations like, if you don't mind me asking?

Lionel Spencer

I think some of it was surrounding how we can better use our finances—use the power of our dollars to make difference. I think that was one of the main conversations. And, you know, boycotting various institutions or organizations. So yeah, I think it has encouraged and inspired for us to align ourselves with the spirit of the time. But I know that, you know, at the time--so I think location is important. At the time, I was living off of Pelham Parkway in the Bronx, off of Pelham Parkway and White Plains. And yeah, there are a lot of minorities over there, but it's not one of the--it's probably more Irish, Italian, Albanian. So, you know, maybe there were things going on. From what I can see, there wasn't much protesting. And, you know, there weren't any demonstrations in my area. So--

Carlos Rico

How did that make you feel?

Lionel Spencer

I don't know. I haven't thought about that. *laugh* You know, I don't know because, you know, the double-edged sword was that maybe a week before I did the Sing for Justice, there was the protest down Fordham. And some people, either part of or not a part of the protest, damaged a lot of property down Fordham Road. So, there was a real fear that whoever these people were in these groups were going to actually make their way down Pelham Parkway and White Plains. So our neighbor actually told me this: "Hey, where did you park your car? You might want to park this place because I hear some of these people are coming to our neighborhood to loot." So at that time, I didn't really--I didn't know what to think, you know, about people protesting or not protesting because all of the protesting didn't seem, for the lack of a better word, maybe organized. So, yeah. I mean, the people in my community—at least in my building, because the building is enough of a community *laugh*—meet people, talk with people. Some of those people lost people, are very generous, wrote me and my family cards. So, you know, I guess it's--for me, it's probably--it's very honest for me to say that it's hard to have the emotional energy to care about that after such a huge loss like mine. So I think that, yeah. I don't know how much I was thinking about all of those things and processing all those things even now because taking care of my family and helping my family through this time has been my number one focus.

Carlos Rico

And how are they doing through all this, your wife and your son?

Lionel Spencer

You know, they're maintaining. I think the more challenging times is, you know, because of— one, having to take care of my dad and then—being kind of the one who's going out to do whatever needs to be done for the house. I've had to isolate several times—sometimes and not knowing, just trying to be safe, you know, not necessarily feeling any symptoms but trying to be safe because I knew I came contact like with my dad at the time, or sometimes feeling some symptoms, feeling like some shortness of breath and like, "Oh, what is this?" And so--

Carlos Rico

Yeah.

Lionel Spencer

That's difficult because me and my wife have a rhythm. We have a schedule. And she's working from home, so if I'm isolated, that means she's working from home and trying to kind of take care of our son. Our stepmom helps out as much as she can, but yes, it falls a lot more falls on her, so I think that's been the most difficult part. And then I think for my son, it's just like I'm not there. Like, you know, I'm not there for however long a time I'm quarantined, and he sees me, he can't hug me, he can't touch me.

Carlos Rico

Yeah.

Lionel Spencer

Those have been very painful situations and times for me, when he's reaching out to give me a hug and I'm like, "I can't, sorry."

Carlos Rico

Yeah.

Lionel Spencer

He starts crying. So, yeah. I mean, it's definitely, you know--I've had to quarantine about three times.

Carlos Rico

Wow.

Lionel Spencer

So the good thing is, you know, first time they weren't testing anybody, right? And I think the last two times I was able to get tested, so I didn't have to quarantine fourteen days or three times. The first time, yes—fourteen days—and the second time, ten. And then the third time, four days. But...

Carlos Rico

Wow.

...it was, you know--testing was more available, readily available, so I was able to run and go get tested. The second time I wasn't feeling any symptoms, but I knew I had come in contact with someone who had coronavirus. So I went got tested, but the test took about, you know, seven to ten days. So, you know. And then the most recent time was like last week. You know, last week I was feeling some shortness of breath, and so, yeah. I went and I isolated and then I went and got tested and the test was going to take seven to ten days. And I was able to actually get to a clinic that could give you rapid, rapid results.

Carlos Rico
Yeah.

Lionel Spencer
So we got tested again and got my results the same day and it came back negative. So, interesting enough—and maybe it's stress, *laugh*—but...

Carlos Rico
laugh

Lionel Spencer
...I got shortness of breath, and I'm like, "Yo!"

Carlos Rico
Yeah. Yeah. I mean, you can never be too careful, right? Yeah.

Lionel Spencer
And not that that's a bad thing. I'm just--it's just very--this is just a strange time.

Carlos Rico
Yeah. Most definitely, you know. How many times did you get tested?

Lionel Spencer
Four.

Carlos Rico
Four times. Wow.

Lionel Spencer
Yeah.

Carlos Rico
That's--whew! I haven't even gotten tested once yet.

Lionel Spencer
It's three times. Three times.

Carlos Rico
Three times. Okay.

Lionel Spencer
The first time, I didn't get tested. They wouldn't take me. *laugh*

Carlos Rico

I know. And all the times you've gotten tested, it was local? Your community?

Lionel Spencer

laugh No.

Carlos Rico

Okay.

Lionel Spencer

None of the times I got tested was even in--let me see. There. There. Yeah, I don't think I got tested once in the Bronx.

Carlos Rico

Okay.

Lionel Spencer

The place that they directed me was, I think I went somewhere in Mount Vernon recently. I went to--where was that test taken? Maybe that one was in the Bronx. There's one test I can't remember, but the two tests--one was in New Rochelle, one was in Mount Vernon, and there's one test that I can't remember right now where it was.

Carlos Rico

Wow. That's--wow.

Lionel Spencer

Oh! Yes. It was--now I remember. It was at an urgent care off Pelham Parkway and White Plains.

Carlos Rico

Okay. So in the Bronx? Got it. Let's say we could pull something up there too, right—like, talk about testing in the Bronx and implications of that—but yeah. And your family, uh, your brothers, are they all local? They're all in New York?

Lionel Spencer

All in New York. Not New York City...

Carlos Rico

Yeah.

Lionel Spencer

...one of my brothers lives in Binghamton, New York—but all in New York City. And, yeah. I mean, you know, depending on where you live, this is all a very different experience. So my brother in Binghamton--

Carlos Rico
True.

Lionel Spencer

His experience has been a little bit different. My brother who lives in Queens, his experience has been a little bit different. I have two brothers who live in Manhattan—or, you know, the Harlem area. Their experience is probably more similar to mine. And my brother who lives actually off of Fordham Road, so he actually was able to see a lot of the damage that was done in his own community. So, yeah. I think that it's been different—and, in some cases, similar—but I think they're all doing a lot better. I think we all have been sobered if we weren't already by the coronavirus, so we're all doing our best to take the right precautions for ourselves and for our loved ones.

Carlos Rico

And then—so a bit of a different question, but—what music have you been listening to to get through all this?

Lionel Spencer

What music? *laugh* So I've been listening to Kamasi Washington. He's produced or scored the soundtrack for Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, and so that soundtrack has been incredible. Robert Glassford scored the soundtrack for--what's the name of the movie? A real recent movie with Issa Rae and--I can't remember his first name, but something Keith. *The Photograph*. *The Photograph*. And so I think I've been listening to those two soundtracks a lot. I mean, I love it. It's just beautiful jazz. I listen to my own music because I feel like it speaks back to me.

Carlos Rico

For those of you who are listening for the first time, @cls_10451 put out his new album *CLS* in March of 2020. What a time to put out an album, right?

Lionel Spencer

Yeah.

Carlos Rico

So what's the response been with that?

Lionel Spencer

That's been...*laugh* varied. The response has been varied. You know, music is a very personal thing, and if something speaks to you, then you speak about it. If something doesn't speak to you, you speak a little of it. And so there's a little bit of each, you know, where for some people it's music that really speaks to them, so they have a lot to say. For other people, it doesn't do anything for them. So that's fair. It's just like anything else. So—

Carlos Rico

True.

Lionel Spencer

I think most recently I shared a project with an artist, an activist, and a creator by the name of Akua Neru, and she actually came and performed at Fordham last spring, I think it was. And yeah. I mean, she seemed to like what she was hearing, and it's always a huge compliment when an artist that you respect, respects your music. So that was very nice.

Carlos Rico

Awesome. Yeah, that's--you know, I've listened to the album multiple times. I support it. I'm going to put it on the website right after this interview is live so everyone can give it a listen.

Lionel Spencer

laugh Thank you.

Carlos Rico

That'll be great. All right. And to end off, right, do you have any words of advice for the people—you know, people of the Bronx, people who are listening to this—going forward?

Lionel Spencer

Got to speak to people? Jeez.

Carlos Rico

Yeah. *laugh*

Lionel Spencer

I would just say be hopeful and diligent, you know. I think those are the two things that have been helping me—is to be hopeful and be diligent. Don't be passive about things that need to be taken care of, and in that I'm talking about our health but I'm also talking about justice. You know, we need to be diligent about those things and not procrastinate, but be hopeful because the pursuit of justice or taking care of our communities and help without hope, I feel like, leads to chaos. So I know hope helps to ground me, you know, because it gives me vision that things can be better—will be better if I take these particular steps. So, yeah. I would just say be hopeful, be diligent, and praise God. *laugh*

Carlos Rico

Amen. Mr. Lionel Spencer, thank you very much for joining us today.

Lionel Spencer

Thank you. Thanks for having me, man. Keep doing the work you guys are doing. You know, it's one of the reasons why I like the BAAHP. That's, you know, why I do what I do with the BAAHP, because, yeah. The Bronx needs this kind of attention and love, and so I think this project is doing that. It's bringing attention and showing love and I'm so grateful for you guys for doing this.

Carlos Rico

Well I appreciate you being here.