

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett, and Christina Grath

Interviewee: Gregory Armstrong

Date: September 22, 2008

Unidentified Person (UP): I'll have you say your first and last name and also spell your last name.

Gregory Armstrong (GA): My name is Gregory Armstrong, my last name is A-R-M-S-T-R-O-N-G, arm and strong.

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): And your date of birth?

GA: 9/18/70, 1970.

MN: That's the year I started teaching at Fordham.

Dr. Oneka LaBennett (OL): Okay, well Gregory we usually start off by asking you where you grew up in The Bronx. Your exact street address, tell us a little bit about the house you lived in or the apartment you lived in?

GA: I grew up in Bronx River Housing Project on Harrod Avenue. We called that—they called us, they called us the dark side because the light would always turn off at like—instead of being on that side of the street would be dark. But there was never no criminal activity going on over there. That was always down the hill. It's a funny story. I grew up in 1455, which became very popular because that building seemed to have the most children. Like when it came to sports, other buildings would team up and play just our building. In every sport. Then when it came to hanging out, you heard of the crew named The Violators and stuff like that from Red Alert? That basically came from my building.

OL: Wow.

GA: Yes, a lot, a lot of people who were deep into hip-hop back then, I was friends, well we basically used to hang out together, Chris Lighty, you probably have heard of him. The CEO of Violator Records, it's amazing that he's a CEO, but we were all partying, he was learning and he

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was managing The Jungle Brothers back then, he helped them. Let me see what else I can tell you.

MN: Now where did your parents come from? Did they originally come from the South or the West Indies?

GA: My mother is from New Orleans.

MN: New Orleans wow?

GA: Yes, she came up, she came up—I always tell her she's not really from there because she left, she came up here by the time she was 10. So I call her a New Yorker. But my father was born and raised here in New York. My great grandparents on his side are from the Caribbean, from Barbados.

MN: Okay Barbados and New Orleans. And where did your parents meet?

GA: You know, I never asked them that. It wasn't in high school I know that. You know what, I don't know. I think it was through a mutual friend.

MN: Right, now did they grow up in The Bronx or they grew up in other parts of New York?

GA: My father grew up in The Bronx yes. My mother grew up not too far from Riverdale in—well I know she, her teenage years she was in Marble Hill.

MN: And what sort of work did they do?

GA: My mother was a legal secretary and my father worked sanitation for 27 years.

MN: And was that typical of the families in The Bronx River Houses? You know, civil servants, you know--?

GA: Not really. Not really to be honest with you I think that I was lucky that you know-- I never thought about it, but later on I thought about it, that you know my father would come and take me out and visit and discipline me. I never saw a lot of fathers to be honest. To be

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honest I never saw a lot of fathers. So, I feel blessed in that. And then also, I could never get a summer youth job because my parents made too much. So it wasn't like everybody else. I wouldn't hardly see their fathers and stuff.

MN: Right. And how many siblings do you have?

GA: Wow. Well I count half brothers and sisters so it would be a total of 7. 4 brothers and 3 sisters. In my mother's household it was just 3 of us. 2 older brothers and I was the youngest.

MN: Now what sort of music were you exposed to growing up? This is, you know, I guess so you're born in 1970. You kind of probably figure you're getting aware about '74, '75 of what you're listening to?

GA: It was hip-hop right out the gate. It was Sugar Hill Gang, it was Rapper's Delight, it was—one of my favorite records, what's this guy? He was a storyteller, I forgot. I knew the songs word for word too--.

MN: Grandmaster Flash no?

GA: It was, oh my god, it's a bird it's plane, I don't even know the words to the song. But it was hip-hop straight out the gate. I didn't—my brothers, my oldest brother was a deejay so you know--.

MN: And what about your parents music?

GA: Soul, R&B, Temptations, Otis Redding, Four Tops. My mother, my mother a little more jazz, she used to let me hear jazz and Aretha Franklin, all day long with my mother. Same song, over and over.

MN: What was the song that--?

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GA: Ain't No Man I think it is. Ain't No Man, no that's the wrong wait a minute, it's something with it, I think it's Ain't No Man, Aretha Franklin, I think that's the right. I don't know if it's the right--.

OL: I know the song you're talking about, I can't think--.

MN: Not Do Right Man?

GA: No, Do Right that's the one, Do Right?

[Crosstalk]

GA: Yes, that one right there, do right. Yes, that song we heard all the time. My father just knew he could sing when The Temptations were on, you know, every Sunday or Mother's Day you know. You know the song for the Mother's Day. I don't know if it was The Temptations, I don't know who made it but you know I always loved my mother's song all day long so--. A lot of music going on in the household.

MN: Now did you grow up going to church?

GA: No, actually I didn't.

MN: So the music was secular. It was from the neighborhood and from your parents. Now what was it like as a child growing up in The Bronx River Houses? You know?

GA: A lot of fun actually. A lot of sports, we played stickball every day. We played sponge ball, we played basketball. We were happy to play against the older generation, when we got older. We used to beat them all the time. And then also when I was about, I'd say about 10, 11 they started having, they'd have the jams outside and we would have the old gym shorts, the old gym shorts that were tight and we would run around playing tag whatever the music starting, setting up, we knew there was a party going on. And they really did hook up to the light pole, that's not

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a rumor they really did that. And you know they would start playing, and we'll be happy to find out who's going to perform.

MN: Now did you feel safe growing up in terms of going out and playing, going to school?

GA: You know the sad part is it really was dangerous in my neighborhood growing up. But we were so used to the violence, it was like okay they're shooting down the hill. That was—it was just like no big deal. Okay they're shooting; let's just go over here until they finish or until the cops come.

MN: Really? So you heard shootings?

GA: Yes, there was times that, I mean it was so bad. I'm laughing now, but it's sad because it was so bad that at times, mother's would be out there with their baby carriages and there'd be shooting and people don't even move. They'll just be like oh, there they go again. You know, selling their drugs and shooting, and they got bad and they put a little cop station down there to slow that down.

MN: So this was heroin or, or--?

GA: Crack.

MN: It was crack?

GA: Crack was in the '80s--.

MN: So that's when things, that's when things really started to go with the crack? Worse than the heroin?

GA: Yes. I mean, at least, I didn't know anything about the heroin. But the crack was the big epidemic. I mean people's parents, you've seen them, and then all of a sudden you see them all kinds of night looking strange and you're like wow. And you feel bad because you know it's somebody's father or somebody's mother. And you're like wow.

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OL: Where were you in terms of the 4 siblings in your house? Were you in the middle, younger, older?

GA: Well there was only 3—it was 3 of us in my mom's house. I was the youngest, which means I got away with murder. Because I was able to mess with my older brothers and they had the--. That's why I got to go the parties because they had to watch me. Like if they wanted to stay out late, I had to be with them. So that's how I got to see some of the parties.

MN: And what was school like? Like the elementary school you went to?

GA: School it was, it was fun growing up. I remember my lunch teacher, lunch teacher we would play stickball with him. And if we played soccer though, he'd always find a way to let the girls win and stuff like that but it was fun. Elementary school was fun. I do remember, after 3rd grade I really didn't like doing homework. And the teacher asked me why I don't do it—I used to score high on the test without it—so I used to say I don't need it. And she was like well, to be fair to the other students you have to do it. I said well they should be fair to me anyway—my mother gave me all those little—I used to negotiate. She used to allow me to do that, so I'd try to do that until they would shut me down. But school, elementary school was pretty good, I went to C.S. 102, was a good elementary school.

MN: Now were there organized youth programs out of the community center or you mostly made up your own games as kids?

GA: We mostly made up our own games but there were like—they would have intramural basketball. But not really many things to do. We were only brought in to play basketball, that's it.

MN: Was there an important like mentor in the community, you know, in the projects? You know--?

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GA: Not at all, but the one good thing that I notice the difference now is that we all respected people's—we all respected each other's parents. Like if we were in a hallway and we're talking we see somebody's parent we would lower our voice. Like oh there go Ms. Brown. You know, as we got older we'd be drinking beer in the hallway, we'll see somebody's mother, we'll hide the beer. You know now they just don't care. But there was always one guy, I got to mention his name, it's Mr. Oden, and he used to always yell at us if he see us you know—ya'll need to act civilized, you act like animals. Like if we were running around acting silly--. So back then we respected the elders when they would tell us something, we'd listen.

MN: And did that—do you think it was the crack epidemic which changed that or something different?

GA: Not really, because even during that time, like if you—like a Saturday morning, because that's when Mr. Oden would come, so we'd try to avoid him. He'll come out with his pipe and he would yell at us and tell us to act civilized and stand up straight and walk fast like you have something to do, that was his thing.

Christina Grath (CG): How old was he?

GA: It seemed like he was in his 60s back then, you know? Very sharp man though, now that I look back I'm like wow, it was good to have him around. He was the only one. But none of us, we always listened to him, that's why we hid.

MN: Now, describe the first hip-hop jam you ever went to, if you remember it. And what it was like you know, to see that and to be part of it, like the whole scene?

GA: Well the first one, I got 2 of them. In the first one I didn't fully grasp—because we were playing, I was like 10, 11, I was playing tag, we was running around and stuff. That's what we would do, it's almost like people would start gathering and start playing around and then when

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the music come on, you know, we wanted a crowd so we'll start break dancing, doing stuff like that.

MN: So you, you, you did break dancing when you were growing up?

GA: Yes, we'd get a cardboard box from anywhere. And as long as it was clean and it was smooth--.

MN: Did you have like a crew? Were you part of a break dance crew or it was more informal?

GA: No, I wasn't a part of a crew. It just was buildings. And sometimes other neighborhoods would come like Lambert Houses, they would come. We would just battle. Back then, it—I mean you had the Rock Steady Crew, nobody messed with them. Everybody knew they were the best, but then you had different neighborhoods that would go against each other. And that's how that would work.

MN: Now, what was your favorite break dance move? Do you have any signature moves?

GA: That an electric boogie, but I had—I used to be able to do like the windmill into a head spin.

MN: Windmill into a head spin?

GA: And then back into the thing, and then to a backspin so you know that was a lot of fun, a lot of pain learning it but after a while. You just want to hear people screaming in your background, you know you're doing it right.

MN: So people--.

GA: And electric boogie I used to try to make my heart look like it's coming up the middle. Some move I used to do and I can't even do it no more but I used to like, it looked like a ball was right there and this and like that. That was the best part of growing up. Doing electric boogie and the hyper fast beats and we would go with the beats and stuff like that so that was fun.

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OL: Do you remember when you started break dancing? Like how old you were?

GA: Wow probably about 10. Soon as—first time I saw it—trying to do it.

MN: So you saw it in front--.

GA: I'm sorry it started off with gymnastics. We used to try to do flips a lot. And then break dancing came out and then we started trying to do break dancing.

MN: Now were you at all influenced by like kung fu movies and Bruce Lee?

GA: 100 percent. It was—we used to—when I got older we used to go down to 42nd Street.

Remember they used to have the karate movies there?

MN: Yes.

GA: 2 for 5 dollars. Yes, I'm dating myself. We used to go down there and watch the movies and we would come out the movie theater doing the moves and 5 deadly weapons and trying to stick to the wall, oh yes. And there was always wisdom in those movies. And we used to pick that up and we'd talk about it and stuff like that so that was cool. I miss those movies.

MN: Yes, I mean—I guess they made a movie about the Bruce Lee story which I always see in HBO--.

GA: The funny thing is like Bruce Lee, like Bruce Lee was too commercial for us. We didn't like Bruce Lee.

MN: Really?

GA: No. Bruce Lee, he wasn't in the hood. It's some no name guy that could do some amazing flip or something like that, actually later on Jet Li. I found out Jet Li was in a lot of those movies. So he was like a icon, but Bruce Lee. He's good, but his movies, it was Americanized so--.

MN: So you watched the real, the stuff with the, with the subtitles?

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GA: Sometimes the subtitles, or, or you know we would imitate the mouth like you know, hey where you at? You know how they do--?

[Laughter]

GA: We would always do all of that, so we got a kick out of that so that wasn't a problem.

MN: Now were there gangs in your neighborhood?

GA: No.

MN: That's interesting.

GA: No, that's--the gang stuff came later. I mean there was crews. We would've called it crews back then. It was like 55 Crew was my building. 4th and 55. You know actually my brother who's older than me was part of the Black Spades. So like that was back then. And you had the Zulu Nation, who everybody in Bronx River basically was a part of it. Even if they wasn't pledged or whatever, all that other stuff came later. But it wasn't gangs though.

CG: And the crews would do what?

GA: Well the crews, see the crews, it's funny the crews back then would do everything. In other words you know, they'll dance, they'll break dance, they'll rap, they'll fight, everything. It's like, like if it's another crew and it's music playing we're probably going to dance. And sometimes though, during the dance the guys get a little too close, or they—and then they start fighting and it turns into a fight. You know, we were kids, you know we was silly and sometimes it would turn that way.

OL: Was your mother worried about you and your brothers, like was she worried that you'd get involved in gangs or violence or crack or anything like that?

GA: Just the drugs. That's all she was worried about. She knew we wasn't—she wasn't worried about gangs. Every day, every night I would come and she would—especially, when I was 16 I

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was rapping and I actually had a manager and I used to go downtown to Union Square, like the first hip-hop club, I would go there and I would come back.

MN: What was the name of the club that you would--.

GA: It was called Union Square.

MN: It was called Union Square?

GA: It was called Union Square. I didn't know that was Union Square, but it was called Union Square--.

MN: And it was on Union Square?

GA: It was on Union Square.

CG: Where exactly on Union Square?

GA: Right on 14th and is that 6th Avenue? I think it's 6th—maybe a little further east. And I remember I saw Salt-n-Pepa there when they first started. And they had on Benetton suits. I saw, actually at the time MC Shan had a big beef with KRS-One and that was when it got shut down.

Oh my god, that was—I was only 16 but I remember that.

MN: Now, how did you learn your rapping skills? Is this stuff you practiced in the house, did you have like ciphaz in the—you know where you got in a circle and--?

GA: We did all of that but at first it always starts off with imitating. We would imitate certain artists. All right, this is how I got started. I did the beat box, my friend would imitate--.

MN: Can you still beat box?

GA: Yes.

MN: At the end we're going to the something, I'll do my affordable housing rap.

[Laughter]

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GA: And my friend he was, he was imitating Big Daddy Kane, Raw, I get raw or whatever. And he was doing it and the guy, a local drug dealer in the building, heard me doing the beat box, heard him rapping, didn't know it was another rappers rhymes he was saying, said you guys are good, you should try something. And a lot of early rappers got started by drug dealers. Like a lot of drug dealers would pay for the studio time and stuff like that. Like a majority of them.

MN: Now were the drug dealers like, you know, people who protected the neighborhood, or were they pretty ruthless, or it varied?

GA: Neither. They didn't protect, but they wasn't ruthless. They just sold their drugs and went about that. As long as you wasn't involved in that, they didn't pay you no mind. I mean they was—at one time it was so bad, like, broad daylight. Parents coming in and out, they'll be selling right there. They didn't even budge.

MN: Did they have shootouts in front of like kids or parents?

GA: Oh yes. One kid got, what's a 12 gauge shot gun, he caught a few pellets in his back when these guys were shooting at each other. Regular shootouts in the open.

MN: In the open, in broad daylight?

GA: Cowboys and Indians back then. Or cowboys and cowboys.

MN: Was this the '80s then?

GA: Yes.

OL: So what was it like for you leaving The Bronx and going down to Union Square? Was that like—did you leave The Bronx often before then, was that something new?

GA: Yes, I've always, you know, I wish I can take busloads of kids and take them out of the projects and see other things. So we couldn't go too far but we would always go to 42nd and watch the karate movies. We would just try to just stay out the neighborhood, we didn't

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understand coming out side and standing in front of the building. Me and my group of friends, you know we didn't want to stay there unless there was something happening.

MN: Now, I want to go back to the rapping part of it. Now, did you write down lyrics and memorize them or more freestyle?

GA: A little bit of both but mostly written and then you freestyle. The thing is about freestyle, the best thing about it is that, it's more spontaneous. Sometimes you come up with more wittier things off the top of your mind and you're like wow, that was a good one, let me write that down. So it always starts off on top of your head, but I didn't do most of my lyrics from the top of my head.

MN: Did you have a little notebook that you kept?

GA: A notebook, later on had a little thing like that, I would record to. Say the rhymes into— most of the time it was a notebook. You know we had, I mean everybody battled back then. But what me and my partner would do, we would battle each other to make our rhymes better.

MN: Oh, really?

GA: Yes.

MN: And you'd do this in your house or--.

GA: Yes, in our house, in the street we would have a friend judge and we would go at it really hard. At each other, and then we knew like, you know, I never lost it and he's never lost, so that's how we feel about it.

MN: Now do you have any recordings from that day, from those days.

GA: No we never recorded that. But I do have some demos. I didn't bring any demos.

MN: Oh, we definitely want to hear--.

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GA: You know what, I know I have some at home. I have like—well I have some that produced.

I'm not on it, rapping because I actually had like a little small studio in Mount Vernon and I have some that I produced. There's other people rapping on it but it was cool. I'm trying to find the ones that I rapped on and it's a—hip-hop is so dirty. I've heard some of my music out there but-- . But they switch up a little so you can't tell. I mean you can tell it's yours but they do a little adjustment here and there, you can't do nothing about it.

OL: Wow. Do you remember what themes you—was it like I'm the best emcee, like what was the main thing that you--.

GA: The change over the years. I mean at one time it was like my rhyme can kill your rhyme. Not I can kill you, but my rhyme would kill your rhyme or my rhyme is-- . You know you just, your rhymes, you try to make yourself sound greater. As you got older, there was a period of consciousness, everybody was talking about like proud to be Black and you know—and then came material after that. I think when Biggie Smalls, I think he made that more popular. Talking about material.

MN: Versace and Gucci and--.

GA: And that came later.

MN: Crystal and--.

GA: Always consciousness was-- . If you notice every rapper from like '80s and the early '90s, they always had at least one song with consciousness on it. Public Enemy's whole album was but a lot of rappers had at least one song.

MN: Did you have a—favorite artists of like the mid to late '80s. People who you really just--.

GA: No doubt. Like the forefathers of hip-hop I call them, and a lot of old schoolers wouldn't like it but I would say, Big Daddy Kane, Kool G. Rap, or just Rakim, and KRS-One. Those 4 is

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all on my CD player. I'm trying to download every song they ever made. I think that's the 4 that-

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MN: I got plenty of those in my office too.

GA: I think Rakim is the best ever though because I think that a lot of people—he was the first that started. Rappers were so simple back then. And then he came along he was like a scientist rapper. How he would put the words—like you—I don't have a rhyming word for this word, he would put 2 words together to make it rhyme with this particular word. He was the first that started doing that. And everybody after him would--.

MN: Which of his jams do you like the best?

GA: Microphone Fiend.

MN: Microphone Fiend?

GA: Yes, everything but Microphone Fiend, I probably still almost know it word for word.

Walking through the hallways of high school singing that.

MN: Can you do a couple lines for us?

GA: [Laughs] Oh my God, on the spot. Alright, can we do it later with the beat box?

MN: Yes. So that must've been--. Did you ever see them in person?

GA: Yes, I used to go to a lot of concerts when I was young. I went to—I've seen let me see, it was Big Daddy Kane, LL Cool J, Eric B. and Rakim, and Run DMC. I think they were all one concert and to tell you the truth, Run DMC tore the house down. I was shocked. With all of those artists there, Run came on and with his most famous line. He said there's been a whole bunch of artists on this stage tonight, but I want to let ya'll know, he said, who's house is this? And everybody yelled out Run's House. And the place went crazy and they did all their hits. Run was

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a great performer. [inaudible] but Run was just so live. LL Cool J, all he had to do, I swear about 2 minutes into his show, his shirt was coming off.

[Laughter]

GA: And that was it, show was over, go home. To this day they still--. I mean I ask women like, they love him forever, he's right. He's right.

MN: Around the Way Girl.

GA: And he's one of my favorites too. It's funny how he gets left off a lot. But he's, he's great too.

OL: So you're going on Union Square when you're around 16 and you're rapping.

GA: I wasn't even old enough to get in.

OL: Wow. So did you think that this is what you're going to do, like what you wanted to do with your life or--?

GA: Definitely. I started doing it when I was 14 and I—we had so many good connections. I mean we knew people who was on the radio. There was a radio station, 89.1, deejay's name was P Fine. We had our song on there which was called Get Loose. It was on there, and it was on the Top 10, it was like stuck at 7 for a little while. So we had this manager, and I wish I could show you the contract, I don't even have it anymore. He left gaps—and good thing my mother was a legal secretary, because she took it to the lawyer and she was like that's terrible. Just rip that up. Because it was like paragraph, paragraph, gap, paragraph, and it was just, he was going to rip us off definitely. And—but I did enjoy the little bit of celebrity because, his name was Myron, I'll never forget—and I was on stage with Salt-n-Pepa. I was on stage with LL Cool J all of them. I wasn't performing but I would be there on stage, you know, right next to them, and that was good. But I remember particularly one show, LL was so popular, Salt-n-Pepa had just came out,

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I'll Take Ya Man is the song, he walked on stage, the crowd went crazy. They were angry

because he just stole that show without saying a word. They were like pushing him to get off the stage. Get out of here, you're killing our show. And it was just, I didn't know he was that popular.

MN: Now, you went to Monroe High School?

GA: James Monroe.

MN: Now did they have like talent shows where you performed at the school?

GA: Yes, they did. And I did perform in my first year there, and my older friend, he lip synced LL Cool J, I Can't Live Without My Radio. And he did Rock the Bells. My friend was like 6'4" so he looked like LL, that was his idol, he had the Kangol. His brother was 6'3", and he had the radio in his hand and I was the dancer, and then I had my own thing, and I lip synced Public Enemy Number One, and they actually have some of that recorded. It's, it's hilarious when I look at it, it was great though.

MN: And so this is, so how many people in the school would come to the talent shows?

GA: Everybody.

MN: So you filled the auditorium?

GA: Yes. I remember at the time the song that was out that was poppin, it was Bismarck, Put the Music Where Their Mouth Is. That was the music at the time. Those were the good old days. Think about nothing but music.

MN: Now when you were in high school, did you think about going to college? Or was that on your radar screen?

GA: Not until my second year. Not until, actually, not until my friends started graduating, because I had messed up and I had got left back and all my friends were graduating and I

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remember having a moment of clarity and I told them, I said you know what, I'm going to be 18 and I can go to jail if I date a freshman. Because they'll be 14 or 15 and that's when--. That summer, I spoke to a guidance counselor and he said I can go for my GED over the summer, and if I passed it I don't have to come back, so I did it, and I passed it in the summer and then that same, that winter I enrolled in college. I was able to catch up a little.

MN: Now, your whole group of friends, did everybody make it intact through their teenage years?

GA: You know it's funny, is the group of us that always traveled out of Bronx River and went—all of us are doing fine. And we talk about it today.

MN: That's fascinating. So you had a group of how many people--?

GA: I would say—now all of us was like, there's like 50 of us. There's so many children in the building, but the core group was about like 5 or 6.

MN: And all of you have landed on your feet?

GA: My friend, he's married, he's living in Staten Island, he has his house. My friend's in Connecticut, North Carolina, me, and who's the fifth one. Okay the fifth one, my friend Alex, he did run into a little bit of trouble when he was young. He followed the wrong crowd a little bit, but he's doing well for himself, he's working, he's never been in trouble--.

MN: Do you think leaving the projects and going—you know to Manhattan, was, ended up being a positive influence?

GA: Well you know what, now that I think about it, all the people I've named, their fathers were in their life. Every single one.

MN: Oh, God.

GA: --say that.

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Interviewee: Gregory Armstrong

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MN: No, no that's important, I mean we've interviewed people. One of our best students grew up in a block in the South Bronx, he said there wasn't one father on his entire block who went to work in the morning and came back to his family. Not one on his whole block, and you know that was a rough situation to grow up in.

GA: I mean my friend next door, his father lived there and that was good though, because we were best friends, and his father was like, a tall, big strong guy and very strict. But it was good because when my father wasn't there, when I saw him, I still like, straightened up and, and that was a good influence. Oh you know what, a sixth friend, he's in the Navy. He's making a career out of it. And I used to see his father too. My friend who lives in Staten Island, his father used to always come over and visit, so I realized there is a connection and getting out of the neighborhood helped a lot. We just knew there was more out there. And all of us spread out too after that.

CG: And how would you say the situation is now in the same building complex?

GA: Actually, I went back to visit and it's terrible. It's, what it is, is maybe because I've been away from it so long, I don't realize how it was. But it's terrible. Like sometimes I want to pull the kids or the parents aside and say you know you live here right? You live here. Because the bathroom—the bathroom, I call it a bathroom because it smell like a bathroom. The elevator, I'm like in 2008 I didn't think that graffiti--. I mean I saw the guy cleaning in the morning and it looks like he's just mad to have to do this. And you look in these people's face every day and when I was growing up my building was the cleanest building, because everybody in that building took pride. The parents, we listened to the parents, we did our stuff outside, we didn't bring it inside. It's a little wild now.

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MN: Now, when you were growing up, was it predominantly Black or Black, Latino, mixed, or were there any White families left?

GA: No White families. My mother said when she first moved there it was mainly White families.

MN: And what year did she first come there?

GA: She moved in like in '67.

MN: Right, and it was predominantly White?

GA: She said it was beautiful. It was amazing.

MN: By the time you were growing up there were no more White families?

GA: There was mainly Black and Hispanic.

MN: Now what would you say the proportion was Black to Hispanic? More Black?

GA: Yes, a lot more. Probably like 70/30.

MN: What about now, is it more even?

GA: Totally even. Maybe more Hispanic yes. Just like how it's going--. But the thing is the difference there is that, the Hispanics and the Blacks when I grew up, we didn't look at them that way. It was just like they're with us. We're all together, you know, we're all in the same boat. Mainly Puerto Rican actually. We didn't know any other Latins but Puerto Ricans. We would joke about the colors at first, because some of them we would say they were getting off a boat even though that wasn't the case and you know it was always about--.

MN: So it was Black, Puerto Rican, but you all grew up the same--? Same music, same culture?

GA: But there wasn't that much cross dating back then.

MN: There wasn't cross dating?

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GA: It was, it was you can hang with the Puerto Rican guy all you want but you wasn't getting a Puerto Rican girlfriend. I don't know, it was just probably both ways too.

OL: When you were rapping and when you were break dancing were there any girls who were doing that?

GA: No, there was always a few electric boogiers that were girls. Rapping, never see any girls, no not at all, not that I can think of. Except for like, actually, when I used to—when I was younger and I used to see them perform, I've seen Sha-Rock and Lisa Lee, I think it was Lisa Lee. I saw them and like, you know, I was in love with them because they were female and they were rapping and they were cute. So we were in love, like oh my God, she's so pretty. You know, and she rapped. And I'm lucky, Jazzy Jay lived in the next building. Yes. I mean I really, really knew I was going to be in music for the rest of my life.

OL: So then where did you enroll in college, and what was that like?

GA: Bronx Community, it was good but what I did wrong is I was working full time at Montefiore Hospital. My mother was saying, you don't have to worry about bills right now, you just got out of high school, you know, just keep your money in your pocket so, I would get paid and, you know, I would run around and spend as much money as anything, and I was taking accounting and I looked at what accountants made and what I made was the same thing, and I'm like I don't need to go to college to do this. Not knowing that I could go further into it. After the first semester, I failed miserably in my accounting test and I dropped out. Because, truth be told, that's the first test I ever failed in my life, and I just didn't know how to deal with it. And I quit, it was too much. And I regret that decision. But even though I had both parents, the negative is, they both had to work, so they didn't have time to really focus on what I was doing. So it was always self—I had to push myself.

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MN: Now when did you start creating a studio? How--.

GA: Okay, let me see. You know what, I gave up rap for about 10 years. And in 19, say '92 there was an old rap tape. And a guy from my job heard it, and he's like oh, I didn't know you did that. And he was talking to me, it's pretty good, you need to get back into it. So I started getting back into it and actually, I started building my studio when I started working here. I was working here at Montefiore. No actually, I'm wrong I started building my studio, like in '97. First thing I bought was a sample machine. And a PC 2012, no I forgot it. Then I started getting all the pieces and track machines going in the studios. But the only reason I started doing that was because the first time I went to the studio, we had a 3 hour session and not to toot my own horn, but the guy told me I made a really, really hot beat in like 40 minutes and he was like you're really talented, you need to go with it. And I got all motivated and started buying all the equipment and stuff.

MN: So you had not done your own beats when you were rapping or did you--?

GA: Well the funny thing is when, when it came to beats, I didn't know that all of those were samples. I didn't know that so when I made beats, I made them all original. And eventually they kind of lacked the professional sound of the pros, because they're sampling from some of the best artists ever. So sometimes I would get that. But my theory was like, you know what maybe one day they'll sample me, you know, and I kept trying to be original. And then I gave in a little bit and mixed a little sample here and there or I would sample just a kick, a snare, horn sounds.

MN: So you have some CDs with your—with other people rapping over your beats?

GA: Yes. Yes, I wouldn't mind bringing that in.

MN: Yes, no, we love to see all that stuff.

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GA: Yes, I've got a, I've got so much stuff and I got to call my friend—I got stuff with me on it.

Actually the name of our group was Living Black Energy.

MN: Living Black Energy?

GA: Yes. Because we would, we would, we would—we were a conscious group. Everything about us was consciousness, it was no negativity, it wasn't the same, we hated the stuff that started coming out so we went against that. And we talked about, you know, Black consciousness and being proud of who you are. So and actually that's when people started liking my rhymes better because it had something to it.

MN: Did you still know people in the industry at that point?

GA: Oh, yes. Actually, I went with my demo in hand to Def Jam Studio and asked to speak to Chris Lighty who was the CEO of Violator Records. Warren G's on his label. At that time Warren G was big. And he comes out and he—I felt good because the secretary was like you want Chris Lighty? And she's like I don't know if I—because he's the CEO. He comes out and gives me this big hug and tells me to come back there, I give him my tape, he listens to it, and I really respect him for this because he was very honest, he was like you know what, I expected, I'm going to curse here, I'm quoting him--.

[Tape Unclear]

GA: I listen to Jay-Z a lot, I think that right now, there may be a market for 30s hip-hop. The stuff that we would like to hear and not the stuff that's going on now. Because I'm realizing, I don't understand them no more. I can understand the lyrics, but I don't know where they going like, it's just so like dumb to me. They're dumbing it down way too much. You know, I can't even get into it. So I listen to some Jay-Z--.

[Tape Unclear]

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[END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B]

[Tape Unclear]

GA: She said if you [inaudible]. It's been there like 30 years.

MN: But see that's—but that's I've, I've--.

GA: It seems weird right?

MN: No it doesn't seem weird because it's something that several people told me about their parents. They won't—especially the mothers, they won't leave and they have all these, you know young thugs, but they're respectful.

GA: They're like the—they're the elders of the neighborhood. Everybody knows—it's like an unwritten rule, you respect the elders of the neighborhood. Because why? If you don't, every other thug is going to be on you. Everybody's going to be on you.

MN: So there's still some sort of respect that operated toward the older--?

GA: Like that guy in the paper that robbed that old lady, trust me, he can't go back to his neighborhood. Trust me, he can't go back to his neighborhood, nobody's going to—he's not getting any respect. He might even get beat up. People don't like that.

OL: The guy with the footage in the elevator, beating the old lady?

GA: Yes. Trust me—at least he, at least I know back when I was young, he'd definitely get jumped as soon as he came back. Because they didn't like that stuff. It was always people your age or maybe a little older but never like the elders and the children and the kids. It's funny that's how it is.

MN: Okay, but that's interesting because that's not what people would think but you aren't there. That there's still even as things have deteriorated, some sort of ethical principals operating.

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GA: Yes, there's a lot of that. I mean, not language wise. They, they, they're a little different

now. They say whatever come to their mind, you know as far as that. I was foul mouthed too.

But when the parents came around it was just—let them pass. They'll probably hear us outside,

we would never do it in anybody's--.

MN: Well, I just want to do a little beat boxing? I'll start with the verses.

[MN starts rapping]

GA: I'm actually nervous hold on.

[Crosstalk]

[GA starts beat boxing]

MN: Thank you and we'd love to have any of the CDs that you produced or pictures.

GA: Is there a book, you're like making a book or something out of--?

MN: Well we do exhibits. Like did you see the thing we did with outside my office, the trains.

You know, we could do a little thing like—about your work you know?

GA: That's the only time I got arrested in my life was doing graffiti. A little marker--.

OL: So you did tagging too?

GA: I did tagging. Oh it was all—see that's all hip-hop, see people don't understand rap is rap and hip-hop is the whole culture the way we dressed, everything.

OL: What was your tag?

GA: My tag, I'm not going to say. It was, it was everywhere. It was on a lot of places you know so—I had, that's what I had—that's what I was saying about what my mom did. Is that when I got arrested and she came and she pulled me out or got me out and she wouldn't speak to me for a day or 2 days. That started helping me--.

MN: Now did you have deejaying or a rapping name that you operated under?

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GA: GDA.

MN: GDA?

GA: It was Greatest Devastator of All. That's my initials. Gregory [inaudible] Armstrong. My emcee name is GDA. [Starts rapping a little].

[Laughter]

GA: And it's an old rhyme, and my friend's rhyme, I only know the beginning. [Starts rapping, inaudible]. I got to find that track.

MN: What we could do is what we did for Danny Beatman. We have another display case, we can put up a little display and you have photos and fliers and your CDs and do a little thing for you because--.

GA: I may have some pictures. A lot of Bronx River with the graffiti and stuff. We used to take pictures by it and stuff.

MN: Because there's one more case down the hall which we—you know, if you wanted to put together a display. See people—that's the thing, I can't tell you how many people stop and you know, the Beatman exhibit we have, and it would be the same thing if you put together something.

GA: Okay, I mean this is—I just want to say I hope this—this is a great thing you're doing.

There's so many people, I mean, if you want I can have—well I don't know how many people will want to get interviewed, but I know so many people from the beginnings of it. I mean I was basically involved, deeply involved, like I said, with Red Alert, with Violator, Violator Records, and a lot of—Bambataaa used to be in my house, he used to come to my house and hang out with my brother. He wanted me to write rhymes. He wanted me to—I didn't know I could've been one of the first ghostwriters. He wanted me to ghost—me and my friends used to rap but he

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didn't want us—he wanted us to write a rap for some of the members of the Soulsonic Force.

[inaudible] And we almost did it because we were like [inaudible]—I'll never forget that.

MN: Here's the thing, you know, our philosophy is, if somebody wants to tell their story, we'll do it. You know, in other words, we don't go out of our way, you know? We say this is what we do, you know, it's—and if you think that, you know, you want people who really know what they're doing to help you tell your story, that's what we do. If you have any friends who want to do it, you know, we'll do it.

GA: Okay.

MN: And if they like Chinese food, we'll get Chinese food. We get Dominica food, we can do that, we can get barbeque, you know?

GA: Let me ask you this, so a lot of people—have you found that in a lot of cases, the kids without fathers, seem like they tend to have more like problems or--?

MN: Oh, God. Some of the things that we've heard in hear, you know you just or—the kids without fathers--. One guy, there was this one guy who came in who had drug problems all his life, but was there in the beginning of hip-hop, described basically—this was 180th and like Babson Avenue, you know in the '80s and out there by himself. He's 6 years old, he's playing the street by himself. I knew he had no father, and I asked him a question, what about your mother? For 2 minutes, he couldn't say anything, tears started streaming down his face, he described his mother getting beaten and stabbed by different men. And this guy had problems all his life. And he wasn't home free when we were talking. He was the uncle of one of the people we--. Then we've interviewed men who had fathers who were totally abusive to them and their mothers who they beat up when they were 12 and 13 and threatened to kill if they didn't leave the house. 3 different men we've interviewed went through that experience and they've all now

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have landed on their feet, but only after going to jail, going through years of drug rehab. So I mean yes, there's a definite--.

GA: I think more than anything in those neighborhoods fathers are really needed. It helped me, because like I said, my father was strict and I was just as cool as the next man but I knew—my father had this big beard and I hear his voice echoing down the block and I knew you know. But, just like, alright, my father, is just like Boyz N The Hood. You saw Boyz N The Hood? Was like stand up straight, look me in the eye, that kind of stuff. And I live by those things now. You know, so, I really see that.

MN: No, but once—over 20% of the kids in The Bronx are brought up by grandmas. Not even mothers, just grandmothers, who are forced to care--.

GA: And you know, one thing I want to say too, is you know the peer pressure—another thing, the peer pressure in high school is much different than other places. Like peer pressure there when I was growing up was to be cool all the time. Was like, if you're cutting class, you're cool. If you're one of the smart guys, you're not cool. You know I had a—my mother had to tell me because I would not speak a certain way, I would not—like I would be bad just to be with that certain group of people and they used to say you know, they put me in [inaudible] classes and they used to be like you're smarter than them, why are you doing that? Because I wouldn't have any friends if I just totally studied and was good. And it's just sad how people--.

MN: No, no that's absolutely part of it.

GA: Instead peer pressure should be like what college you going to?

MN: My, my son was a basketball player and a baseball player and in junior high he started being cool and just started screwing up and he couldn't go to the public high school that my daughter went to because if you were a cool guy, you couldn't—and an athlete you couldn't do

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well in school. And fortunately he got a baseball, basketball scholarship to a private school where all the cool kids wanted to be smart.

GA: Wow, that's good.

MN: And it was fascinating you know?

GA: Yes, because I tried to go to Murray Bertram but there were like—behavioral issues, problems, so like they didn't accept me. I regret that but you know I realized that the kids, the young kids in the inner cities have it backwards. I try to tell them, I said that nerd is going to be your boss. Take a good look at him. He's going to get you, he's going to get you back. He's going to be your boss, or he's going to be a cop stopping you for wrong signal, just remember that. I think that's why I'm trying to figure out where I can—I want to volunteer and speak with these kids.

MN: I'm trying to do something to get some of like the Fordham football players to go down into these communities. Because they do the same thing here, they band together and don't do as well as they should. And I figured if they went down into the community and saw how kids look up to them, maybe it would not only change the kids, it would change them. I think you're absolutely right. You got to get men in there—these kids with respect.

GA: And not only that, there's that--. Like I was able to see things, I was lucky. A lot of kids only know their neighborhood. You know? My ex-girlfriend is Korean and I live in Washington Heights. There was times we would walk to the store, people would look at her like she's from another planet. Because they're only used to seeing, say Hispanic people there so you know people need to expand a little bit.

MN: Well thank you so much, and stay in touch.

[END OF SIDE B]

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Interviewee: Gregory Armstrong
Date: September 22, 2008
[END OF INTERVIEW]