

Transcriber: Anne Lieberman

Brian Purnell (BP): Today is Tuesday, October 5, 2004. This is the Bronx African American History project's oral history interview. Brian Purnell, the research director, is conducting the interview along with Oghenetoja Okoh, a PhD Candidate in History of the African Diaspora at NYU. Could you please spell your first and last name?

Oghenetoja Okoh (OO): Okay. It's O-G-H-E-N-E-T-O-J-A and the last name is O-K-O-H.

BP: We are interviewing Veronica Buapim. Did I pronounce your last name correctly?

Veronica Buapim (VB): Buapim.

BP: Buapim. Could you please spell your first and last name?

VB: Sure, V-E-R-O-N-I-C-A, last name B-U-A-P-I-M. My Ghanaian name is Nanayaa Amankwah, N-A-N-A, A-M-A-N-A-K-W-A-H, and the Yaa, I'm sorry, Y-A-A and that's it.

BP: What is your birth date?

VB: March 10, 1983.

BP: And where were you born?

VB: I was born in the Bronx, Our Lady of Mercy Hospital.

BP: Why the two names?

VB: What do they mean?

BP: Yes.

VB: Nana means I was named after my grandmother. It's either your grandmother or your great-grandmother. And Yaa means I was born on Thursday. In the Ghanaian

culture, what they do is they name boys and girls after the day they were born, so every day of the week has a different name. Like I have seven brothers. I know all the boys names by heart because, you know, they each have a day of the week [Laughs]. There's um-- Do you want me to go through it?

BP: Sure.

VB: Monday is Kujo. Tuesday is Kwabina. Wednesday - - okay, I don't have a brother named Wednesday, but I will find out for you. It will come to me. Thursday is Yaa. Friday is Kofi. Saturday is Kwabina. Did I say that already?

OO: Tuesday.

VB: Oh no, I'm wrong. I don't have a brother named Saturday. I'll find out for you. Sunday is Kwesi. My mother is also Saturday. It's Ama so that's how I know those. So that's where I get Yaa from. That's Thursday. And Amankwah - - she was one of the queens and I found out that both my parents are from royal descent so if someone hears my name they will know - - Amankwah - - she has royal descent in that name. There's also other names that if you hear right away you'll know it. There's Asantuwa. There's another one, but Asantuwa and Amankwah - - those are big ones. Buapim means if you beat a million, a million will come. My grandfather was a warrior so that's where they got that name from.

BP: If you beat?

VB: Beat a million, a million more will come.

BP: If you beat a million, a million more will come.

VB: Like you can just face anyone.

BP: Oh! I like that.

VB: Yes, I know that's hot.

BP: That was crucial for living in the Bronx.

[Laughter]

BP: Where did you grow up in the Bronx?

VB: Soundview, the Soundview section of the Bronx.

BP: What streets?

VB: Commonwealth and Lacombe and it's right across the street from the Soundview Projects and where we live is in a place called Academy Gardens. It's like a little area.

What kind of houses do they call them - - They're not projects. I forget the name for those type of apartments.

OO: Town Homes?

VB: No, not town homes.

BP: How many stories were they?

VB: Six. That's where I was born and I've been there all my life. They consist of buildings A through M and it's funny [Laughs] because we moved from a one-bedroom to a two-bedroom to a three-bedroom but all within that complex.

BP: All within the Academy Gardens?

VB: All within the Academy Gardens so I would tell them, "Okay, we're moving closer out of the gates. They don't have a four-bedroom so we have to find our own house now." [Laughter.] But, yeah, I've been there ever since I was born. It's like a small community. Everybody knows everyone. Some of the older ladies know me - -

everybody calls me Veronica, but I didn't get my English name until maybe I was a month old because I think they were still thinking about it or they just - - I think they decided to start using my English name when I was about a month old. When I was born they were telling everybody to call me Nana. Some of the older ladies will be like, "Nana," and my friends are like, "Who are you talking to?" I'm like, "Okay, yeah, that's my name." [Laughs]

BP: How many siblings do you have?

VB: I have six - - okay. Between my mom and my dad, they have seven of us. So I have six brothers, but I also have a half brother from my mother's first marriage and I have a half sister from my father's first marriage. So they both had one child from each marriage and they came together and had seven of us. So I'm the only girl. Six boys followed.

BP: So you're the oldest?

VB: I'm the oldest.

BP: How close are they in age to you?

VB: Very close. There's like a year, year, year. Okay, for four years we're in a year apart and then there's a little break - - about a year and a half - - and then another two year break and then the last one is a three year break. So me and the little one - - ten year difference.

BP: Wow. What kind of work do your parents do?

VB: Okay, before my mom had all of us she was working in the bank and due to the fact she was having so many children, she decided just to stay home after the fourth one was born. My father, he was an accountant. I don't remember the name of the company he

was working for because I was small at that time, but he was an accountant for the company and they laid him off and he decided to start his own transportation business and that was Plaza Ambulette. That ran - -

BP: What was it called?

VB: Plaza and Ambulette. That started I believe in '93. That's when he got with some friends and they decided to put it together but after a while I think his friends decided not to do it anymore so it was just him and we ran it from our house - -from our home. Me and my mom, we were very much involved. I got involved when I was about maybe seventh or eighth grade, you know, just answering the phones, paperwork - - my mom was doing a lot of the paperwork also - - calling up hospitals trying to get patients.

BP: So it's transportation company for - -?

VB: For disabled elderly people. Taking them back and forth from, you know, their homes or from the hospital.

BP: How many vehicles does he administrate?

VB: He had - - At first he started off with one and then it went up to three but then unfortunately last year we had to let go of the business - - not even last year, but a couple months ago - - because it wasn't doing so well. I really believe that it needed to move out of the home but it never got to that point and I think we owed a few people but we had to let it go. So Right now, he's trying to start a tax business. He used to do taxes for some of our neighbors. So he got in touch with Liberty Tax Travel. They help you - - it's a franchise - - and they help you put up your own company in your area so that's what he's trying to do now.

BP: What's Academy Gardens like? What was it like living there as a child?

VB: Like I said, everyone knows everybody so you couldn't really do anything because they would start a conversation with your mother. "How's your daughter doing?" "Oh yeah, you know I saw her doing this the other day?" [Laughter] Not that I was a troubled child. I was a good one. [Laughs] That's how it was. It's very closed in because of the gates. You don't really know what's going on on the outside even though you - - okay, before - - it's changed dramatically, because I remember as a little kid everybody was so close and I couldn't wait to become a teenager there because they had so much fun. So many activities went on when summertime came. Everyone was outside. Dodgeball, kickball. They had a summer camp and I remember I used to see my older brother who was living with us at the time. They used to have this thing that they would pick a day and they'd catch you and they will pick you up and they would sing this song and it was like, "Oh-dee-oh, oh-oh-oh." [Laughter] They would go out of the gate and they would then push you right in front of the fire hydrant and they'll wet you. I mean it was just so funny. I was like, "Oh, this is so much fun!" They would usually do it to the guys and one time they caught my brother and we were all looking out the window. We were like, "Mom, they got David." I couldn't wait to grow up because I was too little to go out and have fun. I mean I had fun because the older people were the counselors and they would play all these games with us - - steal the bacon and all that stuff - - so it was fun.

BP: This was a program that existed within Academy Gardens?

VB: In Academy Gardens. It was under different management and I think they were more about family, you know, getting people together but then I remember when I was about fourteen when I started going to Summer Youth a lot of the people moved out - -

BP: Say it again?

VB: A lot of the people moved out. Different management came in and it all changed. Faces weren't the same. That sense of community or family wasn't there so much anymore. They still had the same summer camp but not many people got involved. You would only see a few kids and the summer there was boring. Like I remember when I was about twelve, before the management came in, everybody would play with each other. We would play this game - - I forgot what it's called - - Manhunt? Was it Manhunt? - - We would play that and it was just fun.

OO: So these were kids that you had grown up with all your life?

VB: Right, all my life. Even older people, you know who they were. But now everybody's doing their thing and the kids are all about smoking. What's going on? Pregnant, you know. This is no good. No good at all. You see them hanging out in the buildings. I could smell weed in my window. What is this? It was crazy.

BP: You didn't see this stuff as a child?

VB: No, you know it happened out the gate. You knew it was out of the gate. Out of the gates, you would see people on the corner. That wasn't surprising to see people on the corner. You would hear it from your window. You would hear some gunshots and stuff like that - - glasses breaking and all that stuff but it wasn't affecting us, you know?

Soundview is known to be - - I mean not as bad as the other projects, but stuff go on there.

Sometimes it would hit Academy because they're right across the street so, you know, sometimes they would try to get in. I remember my brothers had some problems with the kids over there and they actually ran in Academy and they were chasing them in there. It was Soundview against Academy. That's what it was. They had a like little feud and they used to make their own little gangs up. You know, nothing - - little kid stuff. I forgot what they called themselves.

BP: As a child it never escalated to kind of - - violent overtones?

VB: Not so much. As we grew up, yes, because then they used to get in there easily. The security wasn't so great. I mean it's right now - - they're saying, "Okay, you need to show ID to get in here." My brother - - he was part of it. I remember one time he was coming in late--coming from work - - and some people who don't even live in Academy Gardens - - they would come in there and they had some problems with guys outside the gate and the guys from outside the gate shot at him and they missed him but they caught my brother in his ankle. We heard gunshots and we're like, "What's that?" And my heart kind of skipped because, you know, I was like, "Okay, he's not home. Where is he?" and we just heard banging on the door. Thank God it was just his ankle, but we didn't experience this stuff before.

BP: What year did that happen?

VB: It happened about a year ago.

BP: A year ago? How old was your brother?

VB: Nineteen.

OO: Where is he in the line?

VB: He's right after me.

BP: I want to take it back to maybe - - you said when you were fourteen that everything changed so that's - -

VB: About, because I guess that's when I started working. I wasn't really involved in the summer camp anymore but just coming home it wasn't the same.

BP: So this was about the late 90's?

VB: Yes.

BP: What was life like in the early 90's? You described a very vibrant community. Were there many adults present? It seems like you said there were a lot of adults who looked - -

VB: Yes, there were adults present. I think the teenagers who were a little older than us, they were very involved, because of instead of going out to do summer youth they would do it inside.

BP: What is Summer Youth?

VB: Summer Youth Employment. It's just - - I think, yes, the government fund it. They help teenagers get jobs usually at day camps, cleaning up the parks. Those are the basic jobs that you would get.

BP: And there was a program within Academy Gardens?

VB: Summer Youth - - they would send you out to different places and Academy Gardens was one of the places since they had a summer camp there. It was one of the places where they would send the kids. So you could go there when it was time to sign up and request that you would want to work there and Academy Gardens would choose their name and that's it.

BP: A lot of, for you, the older kids - -

VB: They were there.

BP: -- they took their Summer Youth Employment in Academy Gardens?

VB: So it was just so much fun.

BP: And you participated in this camp program as a kid?

VB: Yes.

BP: What did other adults do for a living where you grew up?

VB: Some of them were the organizers of what goes on there. We used to have a barbeque every summer and they were the ones who put it together and that was a lot of fun. It was right across the street. There's a park and we used to go over. That's what I'm talking about family because we used to do this annual thing. We would go over there, have fun. I think 98.7 used to come over there and it was just a cookout we all had a good time. We would play games and stuff. But now, I mean they do it, but it's not - - I don't know if it's me because I'm getting older - - but even my little brothers, "Oh yeah, are you going to the barbeque?" "No. I don't want to go." That's how you see most of the kids. Stuff that we appreciated when we were younger, they don't appreciate anymore.

BP: Did your parents participate in the community activities?

VB: Not really. I mean, they would tell us to go. They would go to the cookouts. My mom went to the cookouts. There was so many of us she didn't really have time to get involved as she would have liked to.

BP: Some of the friends you grew up with - - do you remember what jobs their parents did?

VB: Well, I didn't really hang out with too many people. It was always like a small group but I remember a lot of them had stay-at-home moms. I never really asked them. I just know they were working. Their fathers were mostly working.

BP: Their fathers were working?

VB: Their fathers were working.

BP: And their fathers were around?

VB: Yes.

BP: Fathers lived - -

VB: Well, one of them, she was living with her aunt. One of my close friends, she was living with her aunt and her grandmother lived there and she was living with the both of them.

BP: The general sense is that there were families - -

VB: There was families, yeah.

BP: - - characterize life in the Academy Gardens.

VB: Plus the racial structure really changed. There were a lot more blacks during the 80's to 90's, but now it's more Hispanics living there.

BP: When you were growing up, blacks meaning African-American?

VB: Yes.

BP: Were there many Caribbean and people of African descent too? Or mostly African-American?

VB: No, African-American. Mostly African-Americans.

OO: Were you the only African family?

VB: That's what I'm trying to think. As I know, yes. Okay, no, there was this one guy who came - - I forgot how old I was - but his family was from Nigeria but it was just him and his father. I'm not sure where his mother was but that was one family and now, recently, about three years ago, there's another African family but I'm not sure where they're from. But yes, we were known as the African kids. [Laughs]

OO: Most of your friends were African-American when you were growing up? Did you hang out only with the kids from your neighborhood or was it mixed - -

VB: It was a mix.

OO: - - between neighborhood and school?

VB: When I say it was more African-American now I'm thinking of the friends I had back then. There were more African-Americans but I could only remember - - I had Spanish friends. There were Hispanics living there so it was a mix in my group, you know?

BP: Hispanics from where? Puerto Rico?

VB: Where is this girl from? She was Dominican and the other one was Puerto Rican, actually.

BP: What was P.S. 69 like?

VB: P.S. 69 - -

BP: You went there from - -

VB: Yes, everybody went there. That was the local school right there. It was nice.

Actually, I forgot to mention: I was in P.S. 69 for Pre-K and kindergarten and then I went to Holy Cross, which was the Catholic school across the street. So I was there from first

to second grade and over there I actually had two African friends. There were five of us and there was one Spanish girl. I think she was Puerto Rican. Then there were two African Americans and then there was one Nigerian and the other one was Ghanaian.

BP: How long were you at Holy Cross?

VB: For two years - -

BP: And then where did you go to school?

VB: - - And then I went back to P.S. 69

BP: Why did you go to Holy Cross for first and second grade?

VB: Because my parents wanted us to be in Catholic school. My father is Catholic and he wanted us to be in Catholic school but I think it was getting too expensive so then he didn't have a choice so he had to send us back to P.S. 69.

BP: And you went there from third to - - ?

VB: To fourth - - it goes up to fourth grade.

BP: Did you notice much of a difference between Holy Cross and P.S. 69?

VB: Well, okay, when I first went there, I was like, "This work is hard." I felt like I had to catch up to the students there. Of course I had to make new friends. Basically, the kids were the same. Maybe teachers were a little more mean like, "Okay, what's her problem?" [Laughter] I remember in third grade I was never - - I was always the good one! Everybody likes Veronica, right? [Laughter] [This lady in third grade, "Veronica, you're talking too much," and that was the first time I got punished. She sent me to another classroom so I was like, "Okay, I do not like it here. What's this?" I knew some

of the people from kindergarten who actually remembered me and they made me comfortable and I was okay. After a while me and her, we resolved our differences.

BP: So you went to P.S. 69 for Pre-K and Kindergarten?

VB: [inaudible]

BP: You went to Holy Cross for first and second?

VB: Right.

BP: Then you went back to P.S. 69 for third and fourth?

VB: Right.

BP: And then where'd you go to school after that? Oh, I.S. 174.

VB: I.S. 174. And, you know, everybody - - well, no not everybody - - some people went to Catholic school but mostly everybody from P.S. 69 went to 174 and I knew a lot of people but I met also a lot of new people there. I guess that's just where you're finding yourself, you know? I hated junior high. Not hated it, but I didn't like it so much as I liked high school because I got made fun of there. My hair wasn't great. I had the puffy hair. It was really thick. I was the darkest girl in the class. I didn't really accept all of that like I accept now. I love my skin color right now. I love it. But, you know, guys would make fun of me. There was this one guy who always used to call me afro from seventh grade. I met him in seventh grade - - "Hey, what's up, Afro?" Because of just my hair and that made me want to get a relaxer. I was like, "Mom, I need a relaxer."

OO: Up until then your mom never straightened your hair?

VB: I used to keep it in braids or sometimes I would try and do it myself. That was a mistake. [Laughter] I had the ponytail and the [inaudible] - - ugh, that was not working.

You know you get the hot comb, and what happens? It looks nice the night when you're going to bed, but you wake up in the morning for picture day and your hair is all over the place. This guy used to call me - - what did he used to call me? - - You know, all the stupid remarks - - "midnight" and all that dumb stuff and they didn't understand how much I hated it, you know.

OO: Was this predominately - - what was the - -

VB: No, it was very mixed. I mean, okay, no. I think it was mixed. It was very diverse.

The only thing - - no, not so diverse because it was mostly Hispanics and African-Americans, so that was it. That was basically it. There was only one Irish girl in my class through the whole thing. So it just made me doubt myself. "Am I pretty? I must be ugly. No one likes me." And then my best friend - - she's around your complexion - - every guy used to talk to her. Like everybody. She had nice hair, you know, what's considered nice hair? Because of what they were saying to me I thought everything I had was not right. That was the time when I was doubting myself all through.

BP: In junior high school?

VB: In junior high.

OO: What was it like going between your home and school? Was there a certain marked difference between the kinds of expectations your parents had for you and the kinds of expectations that you would get from teachers and the kinds of ways that you saw yourself in school, you know, getting from the students and the way you were at home?

VB: Socially I guess - - I kind of knew everyone. It seemed like everyone always expected me to be the one getting the good grades and who was involved. Not that I hated

junior high so much when people weren't making fun of me. I had great friends and I was very involved. I was in the student government, storytelling contests for three years, actually won some of them.

BP: What is that?

VB: Oh, Storytelling contests?

BP: Yes.

VB: You know it?

OO: No, I'm eager to hear.

VB: Okay, you choose a book and I started this in fourth grade. I forgot the book I chose in fourth grade. Basically, you memorize the story and you go out in a group of people, you know, adults and you tell them the story. But they don't just say, "Okay, you're Jack the rabbit." They look how you explaining it and how you're delivering it to them. They go by style and everything like that and I really had a lot of fun with that. Fourth grade, I think I didn't win but fifth grade I won second place. Sixth grade, I didn't enter. But seventh grade I decided to do the story *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*. You ever heard that story?

OO: No.

VB: That's a wonderful story. I love that story. For a while, I still could remember it word by word after I did it because I did it for two years. What first captured me was I loved it on sight because it was about two African girls. One of them was jealous of the other and - - the youngest was jealous of the oldest one and she was about to be married but she wanted to take her place so she was doing everything she could. She had to go

through some process or something like that to get the prince or something and she was trying to put traps in her way. Anyway, the older sister ended up marrying the prince and then the younger sister becomes her servant. I mean, It was pretty long, but I memorized the whole thing and I won first place for two years then I won the district for district eight.

Then when I went on to compete - - after the district there is something bigger.

Superintendent, I think. Superintendent's office? I won second place.

BP: Who sponsored these contests?

VB: I believe it was the superintendent's office. Yes, I think it was them because I remember they made a whole big deal because district eight had never won before. I was actually on the news for it.

BP: So this was within the public schools?

VB: Yes, within the public schools because I competed against other people.

OO: Was this part of your growing up - - telling stories?

VB: Yes.

OO: Was this influenced by - -

VB: Actually no, I forgot how I got involved. I think they mentioned and I mentioned it to my mother. She said, "Yeah, you should do it," but after I did it I found out - - Ghana. That's when I started asking questions. They told stories - - Anansi, the spider.

OO: The Anansi stories.

VB: I really got interested in those. I don't know I guess it was just part of me [laughter] because they're all about storytelling, you know? They have a lot of fables that end with some kind of moral thing of what you should do. They would use a spider to tell it.

There's one story my mother used to tell me - - maybe that's where I got it from because she did used to tell us stories - - about this guy, Balankakoo.

BP: What was his name?

VB: Balankakoo.

BP: How do you spell that?

VB: You know, I don't know, but I guess B-A-L-A-N-K-A-K-O-O, Balankakoo. It was a guy who couldn't - - I think they were servants. They were friends and they worked at the master's house and the masters sent Balankakoo to go fetch something for him and his friend walked out with him and Balankakoo got hit by a truck. [Laughter] That's not funny. [Laughter]

BP: Maybe we should take that off the record. [Laughter]

VB: Anyway, his friend sees this but the thing is, he can't speak. He doesn't know how to speak the language well. I think he can't speak English but his master spoke English. He is trying to explain to him what happened so he's, "Balalankakoo. Market. Street. Go. Truck. Boom! Balankakoo, ohhh." Just like, the way my mother used to tell it was so funny so you know the expressions and all of that - - that was from her. That was funny. [Laughter] I'm sorry. I'm surprised I still remember that. That was our favorite story. "Mommy, tell us the Balankakoo story." Like, why? I don't know. That's pretty harsh, right? But yes, that was the story.

BP: Do you have anything you would like to build up on?

OO: I was actually going to ask how it was like growing up in your household? When did your parents come from Ghana? What place did that have in your lives? You know - -

Ghana. Did they maintain ties with Ghana? Did you guys participate in cultural associations?

VB: My father came here in the 70s. I'm not sure exactly what year he was but he was in his 20s when he came so, you know, the tradition is very imbedded in him. My mom came here when she was fourteen.

BP: What tradition?

VB: The Ashanti tradition.

BP: What does that mean?

VB: Ok, you know Ghana - - they have different tribes, and he's from the Ashanti tribe. Their cultures is very different from here - - little stuff. You can't give them something with your left hand because that's like the dirty hand - - forbidden. Don't give me stuff with your left hand. That was one thing that was very important in our house. If you try and give him something with your left hand, he's like "Okay, what are you doing?" He would look at you like, "You're not serious."

OO: So he insisted on maintaining these cultural - -

VB: He insisted on that. Right, all of that is in our family .My mom - - she came here when she was fourteen. She is half Ashanti and half Fanti. Her father was Ashanti and her mother is Fanti. They are very similar. They speak the same dialect, which is Twi. There are only little things that are different but basically, everything else is the same.

BP: Did they get married in the United States?

VB: Yes, they did. They met here. [Laughter] Actually, it's funny because, ok, she was living in Riverside. Okay, let me start from the beginning with her. My grandfather - - he came here - -

BP: Your maternal grandfather?

VB: He came here with my mom, before my mom was born, and she was in her mom's womb. He came here to find a job because things were kind of rough back home and he was working with the United Nations. When he came here, he met the person who is now my step-grandmother, Ivy, who is his wife now.

OO: What year was this?

VB: Oh, 1951 is when he came here, because that's the year my mother was born. He came here to find a job and he ended up meeting someone so him and my grandmother [inaudible] so they got a divorce. He never really got to know my mother because he never went back to Ghana. He came here, started a new life, was working with the United Nations and when my mother was fourteen he decided, "Ok, I want to get to know this girl," so he sent for her. And it was funny because when she was leaving, everybody - - if you're going to America, it's a big thing. "Wow, you're going to the rich country! You're going to do so well!" They used to have this thing when they were in school. They would see an airplane and they would be like, "Oh!" Everybody would think that it's going to America. "Tell this person to come and get me. Oh, I want to go to America. I want to see what it's like." So that was the big thing. When she was leaving she sang a song for mother and her brothers and her sister. She has one brother and four sisters and she was the last but one. Her youngest sister was from a different father, so she the last one

between she and her father. She sang a song for them saying, "If I never see you again, it's God's will." I forgot how - - I think she came up with this song. Basically, it's saying if we don't meet on this earth, we'll meet in heaven. Little did she know, she wasn't going to see her mother like in thirty something years. 'Till this day, she hasn't been back there.

OO: Wow. Really?

VB: Yes. She came over here to live on Riverside Drive, Manhattan. Her father was out a lot and he was married to a West-Indian woman. Where is she from? I can't think of the country right now. I guess it's in the back of my head - - it's West Indian - - They had two kids.

BP: So when she came to the United States, she was living in Harlem?

VB: Riverside's not really - -

BP: Do you know Riverside and where?

VB: 145<sup>th</sup> I think and she went to George Washington High School. So when she came here, she always says that she thinks she brought the afro into this place because everybody had their perm and was like, "Who's this girl?" When she got of the plane she had a colorful coat. It was so bright. They're like, "Okay, where's she come from?"

OO: She came in the 60s?

VB: Yes. She said she was made fun of in school. These guys used to torture her. She'd be sitting in the class and they would walk by her and touch her head and be like, "Oh, my gosh! My hand is cut!" They used to ask her stupid questions. "How did you get here? Did you swim?" - "Are you serious?"

OO: These were the questions that she would confront when she came here?

VB: Yes. "What kind of house - - do you live with lions? Are these your pets?" And they were serious.

BP: Who would ask her these questions?

VB: The students.

OO: Schoolmates.

VB: Schoolmates, these are fellow schoolmates.

BP: These were African-Americans?

VB: Yes, I'm like, what's going on? "What are you doing? Do you swing trees?" Are you serious? But they used to think that because she was from Africa. It even got to the point when she had a close friend for the longest time she told her that she was from the West-Indies because she thought if she told her that she was from Africa she wouldn't be her friend anymore. It was only a couple years. She actually called her up like, "Okay, yeah, I'm African. I'm sorry I lied about that, "Okay, yeah, I'm African. I'm sorry I lied about that," but she explained to her why. It was kind of hard for her in junior high.

OO: So she guarded her African identity?

VB: That was in high school, but when she came here she met one friend. Her name was Ida and Ida was - - I forgot. I think Ida was from South America. Her parents are from South America and Ida was her one true friend. She protected her.

BP: What is your mother's name?

VB: Victoria, Victoria Buapim. At the time, it was Victoria Bumswananim. She embraced her culture. Her parents loved her. They just loved her and they didn't care

where she was from so she felt safe in this girl's house. Usually she hated - - she didn't hate it - - but she would really be over there than to be home because her father wasn't home most of the time.

BP: Your mother's - -

VB: My mother's father.

BP: She preferred to spend time with Ida?

VB: With Ida. Because her stepmother - - not that she wasn't good to her - - her stepmother - - but she wasn't so great. And at the time, her step aunt was living in the house and would be like, "Oh look at her. Look at what she looks like. She's so ugly." One time, they were going to take a picture and she's like, "You don't want that ugly thing in the picture." Stuff like that. If she didn't have this friend I think she wouldn't have known what to do but when she got to high school it was a little better for her but, like I said, she still masked the fact that she was African. I don't know if she did it with all people or maybe she just didn't talk about it but to this friend she always thought she was West Indian.

BP: Your mother, when she came to the United States, she had already known how to speak English?

VB: Oh yeah, they teach you how to speak English in Ghana. I don't know about everywhere, but in Ghana.

OO: It was an English-speaking colony.

VB: IT was an English speaking colony. In the schools, you're speaking English. Only at home is where she'd speak Twi.

BP: Ida's family was from South America?

VB: Yes, but I'm not sure which country.

BP: How did she meet your father?

VB: They met - - he was a taxi driver. And, oh yeah, the one thing I forgot to mention is that he lived a couple blocks away. I forgot where in Manhattan he lived but it was only a few blocks away so she said when she got married for the first time, some of the people that knew her husband knew him - - knew my father - - so it was like a small circle. This person knew this person. She knew some of his friends before she knew him.

OO: These were all Ghanaians or just a mix of - -

VB: Yeah, yeah.

OO: So there was a fairly - -

VB: People knew each other - - this person and that person.

OO: --a cohesive community? This is in Harlem?

VB: Yes.

BP: What's your father's story - - migration story?

VB: He came here after he finished - - he went to school for a little while over there at some college in Ghana. I always remembered he always said that he became the manager of a bank in Ghana very quickly because that was his thing. I think he was about twenty one and I don't know what the reason he decided to come here. He thought it would be better. Everyone is saying, "America, that's the place to be prosperous. That's where you need to go to be successful. He said, actually, when he came here he cried because he was like, "This is not what I expected." He was in a small house with two other people - -

small apartment, not even house - - small apartment, not even house - - with two other roommates. To the people back home, he was like, "I used to get served. What is this?" It wasn't what he wanted. Once he came here, it was hard for him to go back. I think the problem is green card or something but he couldn't go back right away.

OO: This was in the 1970s?

VB: Yes, so he came here and I'm not sure what his first job was but I know while he was working he was also driving a taxi and that's how he and my mom met. She was coming home from bible school with a couple of friends and she got in his cab and it's funny because he was like, "How much you want to bet you're going to be my wife," and she's like, "Ok, no." [Laughs] Like, "Okay, who are you?" but eventually, yes, they got married and had eight kids.

OO: Was she married at the time?

VB: No, this is after her divorce.

OO: Oh, this is after the divorce.

VB: Let me go back to that for a second. Her first marriage she was married to a Ghanaian guy and he was from a different tribe. What is it? I think the Ga tribe. They didn't want him to marry her because they already had picked a wife for him and when he went back home he had married this lady. Now, in Ghana, it's okay for some people to have multiple wives. He married her through, you know, the African tradition. When he came back, my mom found out about it and she wasn't having it so they ended up getting a divorce. They had one child. That's my brother David. While he was here - - my brother David - - he was here from his birth until he was four years old and my mom

decided to send him to Ghana to be raised by her mother. That's when she went back once. That was the only time she went back. That was in 1978 and she hasn't been back there since. She went back there and she took my brother over there to be raised by her grandmother but his father ended up coming to get him and he raised him. He had his new wife and he raised my brother until he was about thirteen and then he came back and he lived with us until he was about twenty and then he moved out. So that's that. And then she was divorced from him and a few years later - - I think 1980 - - she met my father.

BP: You're father was married as well?

VB: As well, he was married. I'm not sure their story, but he met her here. They had one daughter, Margaret. She lives in California now. She was actually from - - was she from Peru? No, sorry - - Panama.

BP: His first wife is from Panama?

VB: Yes, but he said he was about to teach her all the meals and - -

OO: How to cook?

VB: --how to cook fou-fou.

BP: What is fou-fou?

VB: Fou-fou is a Ghanaian food, but I think they - - do they eat fou-fou in Nigeria?

OO: They eat it mostly in West Africa.

VB: I think it's a mostly West-African food. I don't know how to explain it, but the ingredients are mashed potatoes and potato starch and you mix it together and you usually have it with soup or some kind of stew.

OO: It's like a dough.

VB: Yes, like a dough. You can either have it with palm nut soup or my favorite - -  
peanut butter soup. I love that.

OO: Peanut butter soup?

VB: Yes, that's right. It's really good.

OO: So your parents came in the 60's and 70's so they've been here for a while. You  
were born in the 80's.

VB: 1983, yeah.

OO: You said your father maintained a lot of his culture and the culture within the  
household. Did your mother enforce that too?

VB: Yeah - -

OO: What was the place of that?

VB: They're very different. How did you all get together? I don't understand.

BP: What were their names?

VB: His name is Anthony [inaudible] Buapim and she's Vicitoria Buapim and her middle  
name is [inaudible]. They're very different because he's all into the culture and like,  
"Women must be in the kitchen," and all of this stuff. My mom is like, "I'll cook and do  
all of this for you," but she's not saying, "I have to be here." [Laughs] That's something  
that I picked up from her because if I'm going to marry a Ghanaian guy, we're not having  
all this culture stuff in here, alright? [Laughs] If I want to work, I'm going to work.  
That's one thing that's there. She wouldn't look at you like you're crazy if you gave her  
something with your left hand. [Laughs] What's another thing? Let's just say he's more

into culture then she is because I guess she came here at a young age. He was a grown man.

OO: So there wasn't a disjuncture between coming from the house going out to school or whatever? It was just pick-and-choose, mixed bag kind of thing.

VB: Well, I guess I was different from the kids, though.

OO: In what ways?

VB: I would talk to an adult with my hands - -

OO: Behind your back?

VB: Behind my back.

BP: What does that mean?

VB: That's just like being humbled in front of an adult. You can't raise your voice to an adult.

OO: Did you notice these differences within yourself?

VB: I started to notice them more when I was in high school. That was just me but I did start to think about it and I guess people could see that. My teachers - - "Where are you from?" They know that my parents or that I was from another country.

BP: How did American adults respond to that difference of behavior?

VB: They liked it. They're like, "Wow, you were brought up in such a great home." One teacher was just like, "Embrace that. Be proud of where you're from." And she used to tell me all the time that was in seventh grade. Her name was Mrs. Johnson. She was one like she was like, "You have a beautiful complexion. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise." She just helped me. She was really good and my mom used to tell me that as

well. "Don't let people put you down. You're beautiful no matter what." My mom was always - - that's why - - I wouldn't say my self esteem was so low but, of course, like I said, I was doubting myself but my mom was always there to pick me up.

OO: Did your parents talk a lot about Ghana or was it something that was sort of mysterious? Was it talked about a lot or - -

VB: Let's see. I'm trying to think. We knew about the culture because my father - - he was part of this association called Amansie. There's Amansie and Asanteman and Asanteman - - let me get this right. Amansie Association is everyone who is Ashanti.

OO: In the Bronx or in New York?

VB: You know, I just found out they have it in all the states. There would get together at a certain time of the year and each one has their own king. Like they carry on the culture. Each one has their own king. I think it's every year - - you have kingship for two years or something like that and each one has their own king and they would come together for celebrations. They had meetings. I always remembered my father going to these meetings. And then there was - -believe there was Amansie, which is just the people born - - is it the Kwae?

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

BP: What is Kwae?

VB: It is a region in Ghana.

BP: It's a town?

VB: Let's say it's a town, yes, it's more of a town. If you're born within this town - - even if you're not born directly there, you were able to join.

OO: So it's kind of like a district - - like a hometown association or something like that.

VB: Yes. I always remember him going to these meetings so he was very involved in it.

He was even a President at one time of I think the Amansie because Asanteman has kings.

Amansie he was President in the 70's before he even met my mom. There's Asanteman,

like I said, they have them in different states. I remember - - they tape these things and I

remember there was one from Canada so it's all over. I used to remember they had their

Kente cloths and stuff like that and my father used to wear it and at that time we were

like, "Oh my gosh. Why does he have to go out like that?" [Laughs] Everybody is outside

- - summer. Everybody is outside. We're looking out the window like - - I used to back to

school the next day, "Veronica, why was your dad in a toga? Where was he going?" I

was like, "It's not a toga." You're kind of embarrassed, like, "Who's outside? Who's

outside?" but now we're not because it's beautiful.

OO: Did he make you guys dress in these - - ?

VB: He didn't really take us to these things because my mom - - okay, some of this

culture stuff that they do, my mom doesn't really agree with all of it because we are

Christians and some of it she's against it because - - like libation - - they pour to the dead

and that's not Christian. That's against the Bible.

BP: Your mother is - - You said one of your parents is Catholic?

VB: My father is Catholic and my mother is Pentecostal. He doesn't see anything wrong

with it because it's kind of like culture first. He doesn't see anything wrong with it. They

drink at the functions and my mother is like, you know, I think she kind of tried to keep

us away from it.

OO: So you really didn't experience it?

VB: I really didn't experience it.

OO: Did they have events?

VB: They have events and to this day I haven't been to one. You know, I know that's kind of bad. When I talk to other Ghanaian kids and they're like, "You haven't been to the Ghanaian picnic?" They have picnics and stuff like that and I'm like, "I don't know." I know my dad goes to them, but my mother didn't really like to go to these things.

OO: What kind of associations did your mom participate in?

VB: Church, most of the time. Yeah, Whenever she could.

BP: Did you grow up going to a particular church?

VB: Yes, when I was younger we used to go - - I don't remember the name of it, but it was a Ghanaian church.

BP: It was Pentecostal?

VP: Pentecostal, Ghanaian Pentecostal church. Actually, we stopped going for a little while - - for a long while - - and basically my mom used to just teach us the Bible at home so we would have little services at home. About three years ago we started to go to a local church, Bronx Pentecostal, which is a few blocks away from our house so we actually started to go there. But my father - - actually, I have been through communion and confession and all of that. When I was in Holy Cross, I went to the classes and everything. My father was like, "You know you're supposed to be going to go get communion, right?" We were baptized in the Catholic Church but for me as I grow now, when I'm getting more into the Bible myself, I feel more comfortable in Pentecostal

churches. And I actually would like to be baptized again because I feel now I understand it more now than when I was in second grade and just like, "Okay, yeah, they're dipping me in water." Like I didn't understand what was going on so that's just me. Most of us go to the Pentecostal Church.

BP: How did your Ghanaian culture and your family's history affect how you dealt with people in the Bronx? Dealt with friends? Other cultures? School? How would you describe life being both Ghanaian and black in the Bronx?

VB: I guess there was the title. What am I? Am I African American? Am I Ghanaian-American? I guess I'm the true African-American - - my parents are from African and I'm American. [Laughs] I'm African-American but are you from Africa? When I was with friends and stuff it wasn't really a big deal. We didn't think about it - - only when I came across other Ghanaians. That's when I would like - - especially in high school. There were a lot of Ghanaians in my high school - - more than I had ever come across because in junior high I was the only one but nobody knew I was Ghanaian because it never came up. She's black, you know, that's all they knew. But in high school by my last name - - when people heard my last name they knew I was African. If you just know me as Veronica you're not going to know. So in high school, when I came across other Ghanaian kids and they were speaking Twi and everything then I felt like the outcast.

BP: Do you speak Twi?

VB: I just understand it. I would feel like the outcast so I would feel more comfortable with African-Americans and that's kind of weird because I don't want to feel that way. Like, "Hey, I'm Ghanaian too."

BP: At Stevenson - -

VB: Stevenson, yes.

BP: were these Ghanaian teenagers born in Ghana?

VB: Yes, they were born in Ghana. Like I remember I met the first one. Her name was Tracy. She had just come from Ghana and she was a freshman and she was like, "You don't speak the language? What do you mean you don't speak the language? They don't speak it at home?" I was like, "Well, they speak it at home but we really speak English and I picked it up from my parents when they speak." They all had - - every Ghanaian knew each other. I used to see them - - like they would know me. "Oh, Veronica, hi." They were friendly and everything.

BP: In high school?

VB: In high school. But just felt - - I never really felt comfortable like I could go be a part of their circle.

BP: What was it besides a last name that might have connected you to these other Ghanaian teenagers in high school? Did you share any other cultural traditions, be it food or music or - - ?

VB: You know what's funny. Let's use Tracy as an example. When she came here - - I mean - - it's like everything is so Americanized now. She was trying to be American, you know, whatever that is. Let's say the way she spoke. She would try to use slang and I didn't use that many slang words. What else? The music she listened to. She was up to it. She knew what was out. So there wasn't really that much difference only that she spoke Twi, you know. And maybe like some things like when she came here I remember there

were some things I would have to tell her like maybe the jeans she wore or something - - I forgot. There was something but people used to say stuff like maybe the clothes that she would wear and I'd be like, "Okay, that doesn't really go together." [Laughter] Like, you know, "Switch that."

BP: You met her when you were both freshmen?

VB: When we were both freshmen. I always felt like I had to help them, you know.

BP: Did you become friends?

VB: Oh, yes. We were friends. I was friends with all of them. I was known as the Ghanaian girl that doesn't speak Twi. [Laughter] I'm serious. "When are you going to Ghana, Veronica?" you know, because all of them were born there.

BP: And to your African-American or Latino friends, were you "the girl from Africa?"

VB: No.

OO: You were part of their group? They saw you as a part of their group?

VB: Yes, right. And even later on - - even me and this girl Claudia. Her name was Claudia Anim and she was born in Ghana but me and her - - we were both just from Africa. Me and her were really close because she was just like me only she'd speak Twi. She'd try to teach me. We became friends. She was great, real nice.

BP: Are you still friends with anybody from your childhood?

VB: Let me see. My friend Valerie. She was one of the girls that lived in the Academy. She was living with her aunt and her grandmother. We are still friends.

BP: African-American?

VB: Actually she's half white and half black. What's another one? You know when I think about it it's not that many. There's people from high school that I still keep in touch with - - Dion [inaudible]. She's from Trinidad and Tobago and her mother's from the south. Her dad is from Trinidad and Tobago and her mother's from the south. My friend Stephanie Milian - - she's Dominican. Both of her parents were born there. So these are like my close friends, you know. Yeah, those three girls and then the people I meet here, you know. I've formed some great relationships here as well.

BP: Here at - -

VB: Here at Fordham. And it's funny, because we all just recently went to a wedding. One of our friends got married. [inaudible] Castro. She's Dominican.

BP: One of your friends - - ?

VB: One of my friends from here. From Fordham. And I was looking at the pictures we took and we're so diverse. I mean, we have a Dominican girl, we have a girl who's from Jamaica, no, two girls from Jamaica. Then there's me from Ghana, then there's an Italian girl, then there's a girl who's both Puerto Rican and Dominican and then there's an African-American kid and then there's a Cambodian guy. So it's like we're so diverse. I was looking at the picture and I'm like, "Wow," each culture here, you know? We just accept each other for who we are and we don't even talk about it.

BP: I have some questions. Maybe it's going to take us back a little bit. I'm curious about the story contest and school-sponsored programs like that. Did you do things in public school, in a junior high school and even in elementary school? Were there after-school programs?

VB: Well, I remember when I was in third grade they started the chorus so I was part of the chorus and the choir. What else? I remember there was a time I think everybody had to have an instrument so everyone in the fourth grade got a recorder, you know, and with a recorder, you could only play, "Three Blind Mice" on it. That's all I learned [Laughter] but I think the whole school got, yeah, the whole school got a recorder so that was important that we had music.

BP: Could you take the instruments home?

VB: Yes, we bought it.

OO: They were really cheap - -

VB: I think they were only like four dollars so everybody was able to afford one.

BP: It was just a recorder. There wasn't like a band or - -

VB: No, just a recorder. [Laughter] If you became the professional you could go play in the band. In junior high I was like, "Okay, I want to be involved in everything," so I was in band, I was in a yearbook, student government, like I said.

BP: In band, what instrument did you play?

VB: Clarinet and I remember I told the teacher I wanted to play the trumpet, the trombone, or the flute. And too many people were playing the flute so fine, but I couldn't play the trumpet or trombone because I wasn't a guy. I was like, "What's that?" You know? So he's like, "Well you'll like the clarinet," so I ended up playing the clarinet for about eight years because I also played it in high school.

BP: Junior high school was the band an after school program?

VB: Yes, and also early in the morning.

BP: It was something that you volunteered to do?

VB: I volunteered to do it.

BP: Were you able to take the instrument home?

VB: Yes.

BP: That was something provided by the school?

VB: Yes, and it was only kids in the band though that could take it home. You couldn't not be in the band and just be like, "I want to borrow this." So, yes, only the band class - - we got to take it home.

BP: Were there any sports? Did you participate in any sports in junior high school?

VB: Not in junior high. In high school.

BP: What sports?

VB: Tennis. Yeah. My Junior and senior year.

BP: Had you ever played tennis before?

VB: No, No. So I was all new to the game. I never even understood tennis. Like my grandfather used to watch tennis and I'm like, "This is boring!" because I didn't understand what was going on but in high school you get to pick what gym class you want to be in so it was tennis and also some weight training. So, it was tennis and I was also in weight training. Tennis and weight training.

BP: In junior high school were there after-school programs? What would you do after school?

VB: After school - - okay, when I got to the eighth grade we had yearbook and we used to stay after school a lot. Student government used to happen in between classes and I

don't believe I'm forgetting this because this is the foundation from where I started a peer leadership program. I'll tell you about that in a second. They used to have this thing - - hold on it's coming to me. The four-part meeting.

BP: Four- part meeting.

VB: Meeting.

BP: Beating?

VB: Meeting! [Laughter] With an "m." Four part beating. That's sounds good. "Today in the news - - " [Laughter]

BP: At I.S. 174

VB: At I.S. 174 and this was under Dr. Turner. I can't remember his friend and I will get you his - -

BP: Was he a teacher at your school?

VB: No, it was like another organization and I can't remember the organizations' name right now but they were trying to get into all of the public schools and it was just about building the students up.

BP: Was his name James Turner?

VB: No, I think it was Ned Turner. Ok. He also worked - - it was this guy, Mr. Terrell, that worked along with him and we would just see Mr. Turner some of the time. He would come and tell us what was going on, but Mr. Terrell was the one who came in and he worked with us and he actually trained me and my friend Valerie to be peer leaders and he taught us what the four part meeting was about and we would work with other students - - with the younger students - - in the four part meetings. What it was - - I'll

give you the four parts. It's self-affirmation, self-concern, self-improvement, and self-reflection. It's just like, you know, self-affirmation - - I'm really happy that I'm here today; self concern - - I'm concerned about the test I'm going to have today; self-respect - - what you respect about yourself; self-reflection - - I really think it was a great meeting. Then we'd have clearing. Clearing anything you want to say. So, this came in. It would happen in between classes just to give the kids a break from what was going on in the classroom and just give them a chance to speak out. If you had a problem you could talk to Mr. Terrell after the meeting or talk to your teacher or they'd show you where the guidance counselor was. This was really great. I felt it was a great program and actually it was supposed to go into the high schools and I think they lost funding and it fell apart.

BP: So this is something that you volunteered once again?

VB: I volunteered and actually I got something for it at graduation. They have me a \$200 grant for high school. I mean it was just a wonderful program and that's how I knew I wanted to get involved with people.

BP: Could anybody participate in this?

VB: How did he pick me and Valerie? It was with all the classes. They tried to get each class in there at least once but there were certain kids that they met - - not daily - - but at least twice a week and they were broken into groups so there would be about six kids in a group. I think the way he chose me and Valerie was because we were just the ones who wanted to do it. We would meet with him at the meetings and stuff like that but it was just a great foundation. If I could find this guy, I'd be like, "You helped me so much."

I've been looking up searches trying to find him but I don't know what happened. It was a great program.

OO: So this, you said, it inspired you to go into leadership?

VB: Yes, to go into leadership and when I went to high school to be in student government because, you know, it was a place for us to voice our concerns and that's what made me want to be in student government. It actually started out in eighth grade and in high school I was in it for four years.

BP: And what's the peer leadership program?

VB: Peer leadership - - I got involved with that after I graduated Stevenson. They had something at Stevenson - - I can't remember these names—Pius XII [Twelve]. Pius XII is an organization. They fund after-school programs and the after-school program that they had at Stevenson was called the Present Force.

BP: The Present - -

VB: The Present Force and they came in there when I was in senior year but I couldn't get involved because I was involved in so many other things but my friend Dion was involved and she started the Step program over there - - the Step Team - - and they were able to carry her and bring her under their wing and the step team - - they were on the Apollo. That was a great accomplishment. Was it the Apollo? The other one. What's the other one?

OO: Star Search?

VB: No, it was the Apollo and I forgot - - the second one they did. It's like the Apollo but I think they had - - well, anyway, it's like the Apollo. It was big at the time. [Laughs] So

they were there and everybody was so happy to actually see people from Stevenson High School were here at this thing - - I can't remember the name of it right now but it's like the Apollo - - and they won and they went back there a second time. They've been in different competitions. They've won them so it was great. They've been traveling. So she - - After high school, she was still involved with that. She actually started to go - - she was working in the after-school program and the person in charge, her name was Katherine Brower, she knew me and Dion were friends and she knew that I was involved in high school. While in high school, in Student Government, Stevenson High School - - they have - - they had - - a terrible track field. The football field was just atrocious. It was ugly and we decided, "Why can't we get a new field?" I was a junior at the time and I was working with these students and also the student coordinator and we wrote a letter. I forget who they wrote to. I think the superintendent, but it got big and we actually got funding for it. It was mostly the seniors involved but we were part of the organizing - - me and Dion - - and it got recognized and now Stevenson has a new field. Of course, after we graduated, but you know, it was - -

OO: Due to your work.

VB: Exactly. So that was one big thing and anyway she knew I was involved in the community and stuff like that so she calls me back last year and she said, "I would like you to come here and try to form a student government," because in Stevenson right now they're bringing in different schools so - - I don't know if you're been hearing about schools within a school?

BP: Yes, the small schools.

VB: So she wanted me to come there and try to form a student government within the after-school program that would help bring unity for all the three schools within Stevenson. So I was like, "Okay," so I went there and at first it was kind of hard - - pretty hard - - because to be in student government and to actually run it are two different things and I went there for bribe because I was like, "Okay, you want me to do this by myself?" [Laughs] So I went there and it was very frustrating because - - okay, within the after-school program and you're asking me after school. This was like to keep kids from going into the streets and actually have something for them to do after school and that was a big thing that was going on in Stevenson.

BP: After you had graduated?

VB: Yes. Actually, it started my senior year but it was still going on so they had a cooking club, hip hop, step. At the time, they had a poetry club; the outings club where they would go out. I loved that club because they would go rafting and go camping. You know, we'd never done these things. We're not used to this so the kids loved it. For me to go there and be like, "Okay, yeah, we're having student government." Who wants to join that? [Laughter] I would get some names and I mean these kids are like, "Okay, no. I think I want to go here, thanks." So I was like, "Okay, how can I get these to come in?" So we went through a whole bunch of stuff. I changed it so many times. It went from being government to saying, "Okay, let's do community work," and some kids actually came in. They're like, "Okay, yeah, I like that," and we didn't do that much stuff but we did sleeping bags for the homeless. That was a lot of fun. Like we actually made sleeping bags so that was a lot of fun.

OO: Wow.

VB: Yeah. We sang Christmas carols at the old age home right across the street. What else did we do? I brought them here. I was telling you about that. I brought them here for one of Dr. Naison's forums. I think it was the African-American forum in February and they loved it because they had *never* been on a college campus so they're looking around, "Wow," and I was like, "You all could actually make it here." You know, all of you don't have to go to community schools. That's like - - they limit themselves so much. You can do so much better! You can make it here. So what if you don't see people like yourself. You be the minority. You come and say, "Yeah, I made it here." They just loved it. After the forum, they didn't want to go home. "Can we walk around a little more?" They went to the library and they were just amazed and I think that it kind of planted a seed in there like, "Okay, I'm going to try to do better." That was - - I really loved that. After the community thing - - it was the Community Service Club - - we changed it and we were like, "Okay, let's do peer leadership." This is all within September the one year and I was there and we started Peer Leadership maybe around March and Peer Leadership was training these students to become peer leaders and hopefully go on and try to help students as themselves even going to the junior highs. That's what I wanted to do, but we never got to do that. I wanted to get speakers, but it was such short of a time so we didn't have much but I taught them about self-respect and safe sex, what it means to be a leader - - all things that teenagers go through and sometimes they would bring up their own topics and we would talk about it and that went so well. That's how I ended the year. We ended the year doing a show called The Respect Show because while we were doing the

peer leadership program we had an organization come by. I think it was - - I can't remember the name but they came and they did a play and theirs was called The Respect Show and it was kind of like a play depicting what teenagers go through these days and it was really powerful so we decided to our own Respect Show about all the topics that we had talked through within the three months and it was a lot of fun. I had a lot of fun and that's how we ended the year. I was supposed to go back in September but unfortunately, I think, funding fell through - - so many changes going on in Stevenson. They just put a new school in there. The director left so they didn't know who they were going to replace here with. They didn't know if they had enough money for it so unfortunately it's not there anymore and I don't even know what's going on with the after-school program, which I think they really need because so many students were involved in that. I don't know. It's just a sad thing if they don't get it back because if they're not in school, they're not in the after-school program, what are they going to do? They got bored. They go get in trouble. And that was the aim - - to keep them out of trouble.

BP: I have two last questions. One is building off what you just said. You described how things changed at Academy Gardens after you turned about fourteen. Even now, you're talking about changes within these opportunities for students at Stevenson High School. What would you say is something that is different from when you were growing up, both where you lived in Academy Gardens and the schools you went to - - high school and junior high school - - compared to maybe what you see now for young people's lives in the Bronx?

VB: I don't know. It seems like some people just don't care. I mean there's this girl. She's a year younger than me - - my brother's age - - and she's going to have her third child and it's just like her life - - no, I don't want to say her life is over but, you know, now she's committed to these children and I feel like she's still a child herself. She looks like a baby and I don't know. Working with these kids has taught me so much - - listening to them when we're in these focus groups. They don't feel like they can go on to college, you know, and I don't know if it was just my year but we knew we could go somewhere. We had dreams, Like we wanted to do things and now everything is either, "I want to be an athlete," or "I want to be a rapper." "Who cares what this person thinks?" There's no respect for adults. They think sex is everything like there's no diseases out there. I mean, just the things that we're saying. Do you not hear what's going on - - AIDS, all these sexually transmitted diseases and I mean thank God we got people to come to talk them because their minds were opened but they put such limitations on themselves and I don't know where it's coming from. I don't know if it's television.

BP: Why didn't you ever feel limited?

VB: I think it's maybe the way I was raised because, like I said, people looked at me and they expected so much from me. Not only in my house but I felt it in school. In my house because I'm the oldest - - basically because I'm the oldest, you know, "You have to set an example for these boys." So from the time when I was young I always had that pressure, "Okay, I have to do well. I have to do well. I have to make the honor roll." You know? That was like a burden on me. I mean, I'm glad it was there because it made me do so well, but when I got to high school, for a second things started getting tough and

when I was in college I was like, "Oh god. How am I going to take this report card home?" I remember when I first failed my first class I was like, "Oh. Can't show that to my dad." I was kind of scared of what he would expect of me. I always felt like I had to be a certain way meaning - - I don't know - - like I had to be the smart one. I have to be the one that was helpful and I guess I kind of built that into my character - - to be respected, I have to respect other people - - and that's just the way I was raised. But I don't know what's going on now. These people are not getting that - - I don't know if it's at home because I don't want to say that because sometimes you come from a great home and your parents are trying to teach you but when you go out into society, you know, when you go out into these schools, what are you seeing there? People using foul language wherever. They don't call people - - I mean I was never used to calling people Mister. What? Who are you talking to? Mister. What is that? That's like no respect but it's just like people are accepting it now. Like, Mister what?

OO: Was this indicative of your peers? Were your peers the same way as you were or were you unique among your peers? This change that you're saying is of kids now - -

VB: Yeah, and it's funny, because I'm not that older than these kids - -

OO: Yeah, but were your peers also - -

VB: My peers, some of them, yeah. Especially, I saw it when I got to high school. A lot of people they were the same way but, you see, they kind of divide people in high school because I mean, I was in the so-called smart classes, you know, and they don't really - - behavior was different. Like I was speaking to this girl who's a year younger than me and she says we went to different high schools. I loved my high school experience. Like I said,

I was involved in so much. I got such a great foundation from high school but she feels like she was kind of cheated in a way. You know, she was - - she feels like they didn't really prepare her enough to where she was going to go and I don't really know what to say about that but I think you just have to - - I don't know.

BP: I have one more question. Do you think that you'll stay in the Bronx?

VB: I don't think so. I mean, I think I'll stay in New York, but it's like I always see myself - - I don't know where I see myself - - but let's just say I want to get out of Academy. That's my main thing. When I was younger, I was like, "I'm so tired of living here." After a while, I just got tired of living in Academy and I say that all the time nowadays because I'm tired of this place. I want to move out. When can I get out the gates? My dream was always like, "Okay, when I'm going on to college, I will leave." But I'm in college, I graduated, I'm still in the Academy but I guess I just dream of myself finally getting the money to get out of here and then pulling my whole family with me. You know, like, that's my thing.

OO: Out of the Academy or out of the Bronx? Are you imagining this as being beyond the Bronx or just getting out of the Academy?

VB: I think just out of the Academy because I don't really have a problem with the Bronx. I really don't and people see the Bronx - - when you say you're from the Bronx, they're like, "Oh, they're poor, they're ghetto." I don't really see it as that. If you're say you're from Soundview you're considered ghetto. Well, I'm not ghetto. That's the stereotype.

BP: What does that mean, ghetto?

VB: Ghetto. Like, all you have in your fridge is Kool-Aid. [Laughs] You know? They have like - - all you eat is fried chicken. You know? Stuff like that. I didn't have enough money to have a complete sandwich so I just used to have mayonnaise and bread.

[Laughs] You know? [Laughs] Stuff like that, you know, like you see everyone on the corner and maybe you do. When you go over there, you're going to see people hanging out on the corner and that's another thing I have to say. It's getting so much more now, like you're seeing - - before, when I was younger, I used to see people in the 20s on the corner. Now, you're seeing kids who are fifteen on the corner. What are you doing there? You know, that's what I want to ask them and after doing the peer leadership thing, it makes me want to just educate them and I think that's the one thing I want to do - - just take them like, "Okay, no, you don't need to do this. Do something else." So many of them are not finishing high school. That's the change I'm seeing. So many of them are dropping out, "I can't do this," like they think the GED is the number one answer. "I'll just get my GED. Who cares? At least I have something. I don't need to go to high school." But who's telling them when you go to college they would like for you to have your four years of high school done. They look at it as a shortcut.

BP: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

VB: I can't think of anything else. No.

BP: This was an incredible interview.

VB: Thanks. [Laughs]

OO: It was a lot of fun.

BP: Yes, and it was the first interview that we've ever done with a person that had a perspective from life in Africa, so it's really tremendous contribution to the rest of the material and I hope we can use this as a foundation to map other interviews of people of similar experience as you or maybe from different age groups.

VB: Yes, I hope so.

OO: Thank you.

VB: No Problem, it was fun.

[END OF INTERVIEW]