



1-26-2005

Coleman, Dennis and Harriet McFeaters Interview 1

Coleman, Dennis and Harriet McFeaters Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: http://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_oralhist

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Coleman, Dennis and Harriet McFeaters. Interview 1. January 26, 2005. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham University.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at DigitalResearch@Fordham. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of DigitalResearch@Fordham. For more information, please contact jwatson9@fordham.edu.

Transcriber: Jon Ray Johnson

Mark Naison: Today is the 26th of January, and we are here with Harriet McFeeters, who is a long time teacher, administrator, staff developer, and assistant district superintendent of the New York School system and this is the - -

Harriet McFeeters: And was born in The Bronx.

MN: And was born in The Bronx.

HM: In the late 20's.

MN: Yes, we've already interviewed Harriet about her childhood, but today I'd like to ask her about the ethnic and racial transition in the New York City school system, which she had a chance not only to see, but to help shape. Now you began by mentioning that when the Civil Rights act was passed in 1964, the New York City school system had to come up with an integration plan.

HM: Yes, a plan for integration, and they established a unit at the Board of Education called the Human Relations Unit. And the members of the Human Relations Unit were people that were not only Board of Ed. Staff people, but they were from universities and community organizations as well. They used to come in on regular time frames to explore the needs of the school system.

MN: Now were you at the central board at that time?

HM: At that time, I was at the central board. I had worked at Public School 146 as a teacher and when the curriculum assistant under Dr. Eugene Moleska, went on a somatical leave, he asked me to come and work with him so I went. And while I was down there as a curriculum assistant, I worked on a curriculum for the Idlewild

Airport, which was at that time a new airport, now of course it's Kennedy Airport, but they needed materials for the children to learn about that. Okay, when the woman came back at the end of her leave, this Human Relations Unit was organized and recruiting staff and so I was asked to join that group and so I went down to work with them. At the time Mr. Fred Williams was the director of the Unit and Ruffis Shorter was the assistant director. And we met, well it was like a brainstorming thing. We had sensitivity training. I remember a Dr. Gene Noble from N.Y.U. was one of the members of the group that did the sensitivity training. And the sensitivity training was to try to get people to understand the need to integrate schools and to integrate staff and to integrate curriculum for this whole, to understand what the implications were of the Civil Rights Act. And for over a year, the unit was about developing materials, exploring ideas and trying to come up with ways that this problem needed to be attacked. And in so doing, the Board of Ed's plan ended up with a number of aspects. One had to do with zoning of the schools. - - They came up with a number of innovations in order to try to be in compliance with the federal law, and one was the rezoning of the school system. They had to look at the ethnic composition of the schools in the city in terms of the children and the staff and when they looked at that, of course they found that there were very segregated schools across the city. And they came up with the idea about busing, which was one of the national efforts. And I recall that there was a school in Brooklyn, P.S. 21 Brooklyn, where the principal was Hadley Sanford, who is currently the [regent]. But her school had a unique situation. It was in south Brooklyn and they had what they called reverse busing. In other words, the white children, this is what was the result of the plan, the white children from Coney Island and the far reaches of Brooklyn were bussed into her school and that was one of

the few successful integration plans, actions that took place during that period of time.

So anyway, the rezoning of the school system called for ethnic censuses in every school and at first they used different criteria to decide what the ethnic census would be. It was like the United States census in terms of categories of individuals. Later that was modified, so that became a challenge for the schools to decide who was who. And they also had a problem with the integration of staff. By the surveys, they found out that the staff was not integrated. In particular, there were very few minority teachers, administrators, and certainly principals and superintendents and when I say minorities, there were practically no, I don't think there were any Latinos. There were very few African Americans. And the other ethnic categories I don't think were represented at all. And so the board had to come up with a plan to recruit and identify personnel in the system who were interested in advancing to supervisory levels and they had to find ways of recruiting teachers from, who were bilingual.

MN: [Now] about resistance and recruitment of - -

HM: Yes, they came up with plans to recruit, let's say administrative and advisory staff, some among those who were already experienced and licensed teachers, I was a part of that effort. What they did was they hired some outstanding educators like Dr. Edith Gaines, who was a principal in Manhattan, an African American woman who was very outstanding. The former principal of Morris High School, I can't remember his name, he was also on the team. And they established staff development centers across the city, one in Manhattan, one in Brooklyn, one in Queens. And the location of the centers were interesting in that they made it convenient for the minorities. The one that I attended was at 197, Manhattan, which was right across the street from the Riverton Projects around

137th Street. In other words they were making it convenient for people to attend. Now previously, people who were interested in advancement in the school system and to become administrators also took coaching courses but they had to pay for them and there were some successful people. I forget the names of the people who gave those courses, but I did attend one of them. And I already had my assistant principals license at the time that I was a part of this task force. And so there was the one with the rezoning to get the ethnic composition of the school more balanced, both in staff and children, then there was a matter of the curriculum development. At that time, there were no textbooks that reflected the diversity of the city or the country or anywhere. And so a push was made to get the publishers to look at that problem and since - -

MN: And this is 1964 and 1965?

HM: Between 1965 and 1970. And there was a great effort being made across the country because this was a national problem to come up with what to do about that and of course the publishers were very resistant because the [didn't] want to change something that was good for them already, but at the same time all of the school systems had to come up with a plan. So ultimately, what happened at first, we had to write our own curriculum, which meant working with historians who really knew the history, and I remember John Handiclarck and he was one that I worked with but there were others who came and lectured to us and exposed us to the history of our culture. And we took trips to of course the Schomburg Library was there but it has since been expanded. And we went to, in terms of the recruitment in the culture, we went to Puerto Rico [with] the Human Relations Unit. We spent time there with their own culture and we helped to recruit teachers from there and we learned about the culture of the islands. And so it was a time

when the Board of Ed. was reaching out in all directions to try to get minority teachers to come. We had to come up with an approach to teaching students who were not English speaking, children a second language, so they came up with the E.S.L. program and this was part of the plan that they put into the Board's plan for integration.

MN: Now was there much resistance to your unit and your plans?

HM: Well of course there was resistance, but it was a federal mandate. In order for the schools to, the Board of Ed., well Dennis could tell you some things about that because he saw it from Central. He was on the community school board and he had access to the

--

MN: When were the community school boards set up?

HM: Well let's just say this. The point of the integration plan was the decentralization of the school system. And with the decentralization of the school system, that followed around the time of the 1968 strike. And of course, the strike was reflective of the feelings of a lot of people about what should be and shouldn't be and of course the teacher's unit was very much involved. But it also brought up leadership in the minority community that was there all the time but it gave them a focus to attack and work through and to get recognized. There was a lot of friction.

MN: Were you at Central in 1968?

HM: I was at Central in 1968. and my daughter was a freshman at our high school and I was one of those who did not strike, and I recall going to visit along with Paula Apsos and some other parents of children who were at that school going to see the then superintendent of that area and it was a black woman, I can't remember her name. But we were like the protest parents who were going to see a colleague in a sense to discuss

the integration of the school, some incidents that happened there that we felt were discriminatory against the black students. As far as when the strike came, well again the strike had to do with opposing the idea of decentralizing the school system and giving the community a voice, more control in what was happening. And in my opinion, something really good came out of that struggle because like I said, there was friction, but there were people, diverse groups and, local communities who came together to fight for this community control and among them was a group that was called The People's Board of Education. And a Bronxite who's name was Evalina Antonetti, and a Brooklynite who's name was Milton Valamison and I forget some of the others, but they took over the seats of the appointed elected Board of Education. And what they were after was making sure that the school system had a complete change from what it used to be. And by their coming forward and fighting in this way, other people joined forces with them and it did cause a lot of friction, but it also brought about a lot of progress. And I guess I was a beneficiary of some of that because I was working for the Board of Ed. And they established, Fordham University as a matter of fact, established an institute, a program called the I.A.P. program: Instructional Administrators Program. And it was funded by the [Ford] Foundation. What they wanted to do was to identify and select potential principals and superintendents from minority groups. So they established some chairs down at the Manhattan School, Manhattan Education [crosstalk] - -

MN: Downtown in Lincoln Center.

HM: John E King, who was the former chancellor, or deputy chancellor of the school system had one of the chairs. Paul Slicelam, who was the former principal of Morris

High School was on the committee. And there's an assemblyman from Brooklyn, whom I can't remember his name; he's still an assemblyman, who was on the committee also.

MN: Is this Roger Green by any chance?

HM: No.

MN: Al Vann?

HM: Al Vann. And people like that were on the screening committee to select these people, these 60 people. They had 21 year, 20, each, but it was a 3 year program and in that period, each of the 20 groups of 20 people had a fellowship for a year to study and to become acclimated to the idea of leadership and strategies that were needed to help change the school system. My special philosophy was with the Teacher Core, there was something called the National Teacher Core. And it was a settled program designed to get teachers interested in becoming closer to the community and so that was my thesis and I wrote a proposal that was funded by City College and that was my research.

MN: So this was a national, you wanted to get involved in national recruitment for the New York school system?

HM: Yes, well we did all kinds of things. What I'm saying is the proposal that I funded was to get City College to give them money to do things they wanted to do to enhance their integration program.

[END OF SESSION]

MN: Today is January 26th, 2005 and we are here interviewing Dennis Coleman who has a long time record of political, civil rights, and education activism in The Bronx and this is the first of what we hope will be several interviews. And we'd like to begin by talking about your childhood. Where did you grow up?

DC: I was born in Medical Center in Harlem, which was then Sloans Hospital. During the depression, my parents sent me to Jamaica to grow up with my grandmother in Kingston, Jamaica, in the West Indies. I stayed there until I was 12 years old. But I've brief history of World War 2. So I was in a community in Kingston where there were German prisoners of war, and from there I had to leave as the war got worse with the sinking of ships all around the West Indies and the submarines were able to lead my Pan-American Clipper back to my parents in New York at age 12.

MN: Were both of your parents born in Jamaica?

DC: Yes, both my mother and father were born in Jamaica, but they were citizens here in the U.S. when my grandmother, my father's mother, came up here in the early 20s. She told us that she had to pay 29 pounds to travel on a ship that brought her to New York where she settled from before. So on the basis of her being here, she was able to get her son and his wife, my mother and father, to come to New York.

MN: What kind of work did your father do in New York City?

DC: My father was involved in many different entrepreneurial activities. He was in the trucking industry in the Gerwin Center, he was taxis [driver], yellow cab, and he's best known for the restaurant he owned on Boston Road across from Morris High School, which was the first large barbeque restaurant, and this was during WWII. It operated at Boston Road and 166 Street. He got that as a result of during the war when the economy was good, and taxi business was [tape skips].

Natasha Lightfoot: I was wondering what year your parents migrated from Jamaica to the United States.

DC: I am not sure of the year, but I was born in Medical Center, 1931. So they were here long before.

NL: So somewhere between 1920 and 1930, they were here.

DC: Yes.

NL: Okay. Okay. And I wanted to know well first of all, were your parents involved in the West Indian community that was growing in New York at the time?

DC: Absolutely. Absolutely. Marcus Garvey at the time was very strong and [a] very moving figure. My parents and individuals such as the parents of Bathel Patterson, former Secretary of State. Gil Noble, who has the program "Like it is". [Gil had another cousin]. People like, even Ivan Michaels, who passed away, they all were part of that whole West Indian clique that were supporters of Marcus Garvey and his organizational efforts throughout New York City.

NL: So you felt as though your family placed a particular emphasis on raising you as both American but also having some sort of Caribbean. You and your siblings, did you have any by the way, siblings?

DC: Yes, I have a sister, an older sister, who now lives in Florida in a West Indian community called Lorial, Palm Beach. [laughs] Next to West Palm Beach. She and I grew up together and we both came up from Jamaica at that time.

NL: Okay. And you felt when you came back to New York, were you very, were you received as, you know, I was thinking more so in the context of school as well what whether or not peers in school saw you as very different from them, or were there other West Indian children in the schools as well that you might have bonded with?

DC: No, we did not have many West Indians that we bonded with those days. We tried to become part of the mainstream once we got here. However, my sister in going to Howard University was part of the West Indian Students Association and remained strong and identified with the West Indian Students Association. This entire background from the West Indies was one in which was very, very [indulged] in my mind. You see that in the early days of the West Indies as individuals were fighting for independence of their countries, the labor unions and the labor organizations, we were the ones that were able to bring about a change and gain independence in the country. So I as a youngster witnessed the strikes that the labor unions had laid down in the West Indies before the war. I knew the organizer's songs that they sang and I knew the different leaders and all that they stood for. When the war came - -

NL: You're talking about WWII?

DC: WWII came, it tended to disrupt the organizing efforts of the individuals because everyone wanted to win the war and they went for all out war effort. But in coming up here, I recognized that the need to remain always in an organizational effort with those of like minds to be able to get the best for the community and the best for those of us that were at school.

NL: What school were you in when you first came back?

DC: I attended what was then Junior High School 40, which was on Ritter Place. So I lived near 63, but 63 said I was too far advanced and they sent me over to Junior High School 40. 63 was closest. I was living on Fulton Ave and 168th street and there I was exposed to everything and that area of Fulton Ave, but at Junior High School had turned out to be a wonderful, wonderful. It's Union Avenue, Prospect and Ritter Place. It's now

a playground because on that site where the school was, where the playground is, is where the school was, and the playground was on the other end. And when they rebuilt the new school, they rebuilt it on the original playground.

Cory Bangham: I just want to ask Mr. Coleman, I'm Cory Bangham from the African Studies department. How would you compare your schooling in Jamaica with your schooling in The Bronx? You mentioned that they felt that you were too advanced when you went to enroll.

DC: Even in Junior High School I was still advanced, too advanced.

CB: So what can you tell us about [your teachers] in Jamaica?

DC: I was kicked and though we did not have accelerated, or rapid advance, or I.T.C., I was skipped a year in junior high school after coming here because I was repeating a lot of the different things that had been taught in the West Indies prior to age 12. It gave me good insight into saying things that you were taught long before 12, quite a bit, yes we can absorb as students. And I've always felt that early education that I had in preparing to come up here that others in this public school system could and should be doing the very same thing. But at Junior High School 40, one of our [?] great individuals, Larry Ellis, proved this point about, [?] ran track for Dewitt Clinton along with a number of others; Dr. Maurice Philips was the dentist, Penny Holiday, Corby's, - -

NL: When did you enter Clinton High School? It was about 1940 something.

DC: Yeah, it was.

MN: It was after the war?

DC: Oh yes.

MN: It was '48, '49?

DC: No, - -

NL: It was about 1950 I think.

DC: It might have been earlier, well I'll figure it out.

MN: So you're talking about this experience at Junior High School 40.

DC: Yes, at Junior High School 40, I immediately got into being active in the school.

We had a monitoring group that the principal selected in which I became a part of and moved all the way up. The dean of the school was Mr. Mordules, who's son later became involved in our, at district eight. A number of different individuals from J.H.S. 40, later, we saw in educational circles in the '60's. These were teachers and they were some of the very wonderful group of teachers. What was most disappointing about J.H.S. 40 to all of us was when we went to Dewitt Clinton H.S. [after] graduation, as we entered freshman classes, which was then 10th year, we were told that we would have to repeat some of the courses. I graduated an honorable graduate from J.H.S. 40. First person to shock me was the French class that I registered for, where I was told that I did not have a regular French teacher. And I mentioned a name and the head of the language department said 'oh yes we know her. She's visited Paris in a couple of summers and she knows some French, but you still have to repeat French all over again because despite all of those things, you can not compete. First the individual turned up, I was defiant. I said well, I've got good marks and so on and what not and I felt that I could go ahead and compete. Just as I found out that the others in my class were so far advanced in the French Language that I was stunned. And it was too late to go back and repeat. But that was my first baptism, my first open knowledge that despite J.H.S. 40 with all of the wonderful things that were going on and how we came out as honor graduates, that went on to then Dewitt Clinton

H.S., that we were told that despite coming out in honors, we were not good enough to compete with those who were entering Dewitt Clinton from other sections of The Bronx. I've never forgotten that. It was a stunning setback for me because I had thought that I had moved into the mainstream and was really functioning and doing well in the mainstream, but that set me back.

NL: Did you go to a city college?

DC: Before that, I continued to remain active in the community. I was with the Youth Council of the N.A.A.C.P.

MN: What year did you join the Youth Council of the N.A.A.C.P. and where did it meet?

DC: It met at Trinity Episcopal - -

MN: Church?

DC: Yes, 166th Street. And the time that I was there, Audrey Reed was the president. And we had in our Youth Council, the current Borough President of Queens, who met her husband - -

CB: If I may, Mark, to round out the picture about the students in the same school you attended, could you give us an idea as to the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the students at 40. Dewitt Clinton mentioned students coming from all over The Bronx to Clinton, but I know the also came from Manhattan, from Harlem at that time. Could you tell us a little bit about the make up of the student body at these schools and the teachers at the school as well?

DC: Yes, before doing that, I just want to say, Penny Marshal, who met her husband, she lived on Washington Ave, not far away. And a nice group of community was from that area, including Ed Doctoral.

MN: He was in the Youth end of the N.A.A.C.P. chapter - -

DC: No, but he wasn't. He was over in that community and we got to know about those.

The Johnson sisters, Mary Johnson, and the Johnson family, they were from the same block over there with L.A. Marshal - -

MN: On Washington Avenue?

DC: On Washington Avenue. The Reeler family, but we all got to know each other.

Now going to your question, we were in the minority in J.H.S. 40 and to come up from 63 and 169th Street, and 168th Street and those areas, we had to stick together. Later this would open to gangs. The Panther Gang, The Slicksters, and thankful for them because many days I got whipped getting out of 40 to get back to my neighborhood. If I hung around talking to the teachers too late and I had to be going out there by myself, we had the group that came out of where the Sands, they were from 170th Street. That community was predominately white and they would always come down to the school because they didn't want us at 40 and let it be known. There were times when we would be in school and folks in the neighborhood would be around there. Now that the word was out, the school was surrounded and we would have to know which exit we were going out of and to stick together, act like your carrying a weapon, act tough, this was after WWII and don't speak a hint. Boston Road, you were on a little bit [of safe turf] beyond Union Ave and Boston Rd. going through, we would have been okay. But it's not easy in those early days at J.H.S. 40. Folks like Larry Ellis, and Teddy Holiday, and

Maurice Philips, and that whole family, they lived across the street near Jennings Street so they could just get out of school, run right through, and get into the hallways into there and run upstairs to their buildings, not us.

MN: Were you first involved in the N.A.A.C.P. when you were in high school?

DC: No.

MN: This was later?

DC: Yes, I was active in high school.

MN: When you were at Clinton or at Morris?

DC: At Clinton. And then later with Morris as well.

MN: Your parents were politically active people, were politically conscious, or - -

DC: Politically aware? Yes

MN: Did they belong to any organizations in The Bronx?

DC: No, no, they did come out of the West Indian community background under Marcus Garvey and they stayed and remained together. The first group of politically organized and aware group was the N.A.A.C.P. and at that point and at that point, the [pruency] Prospect Union Block Association was an active harmonic group that was functioning quite well and [was] very supportive of our efforts.

MN: Did your parents, when you moved back from Jamaica, were they members of any church in The Bronx?

DC: No, they were living in Manhattan, I Harlem, at 660, St. Nicholas Ave down below 116th street. We attended, In the West Indies we were Anglican. When we came up here we attended St. James Presbyterian Church at 141st Street at St. Nicholas Avenue. At that point, and that was early youth group and choir. And it was at that point, we had our first

exposure to Edna Hawkins, who left St. James Presbyterian Church and came up to St. Augustine as a pastor. When my Parents moved from St. Nicholas Avenue to Fulton Avenue, I still was going down to church on Sundays at St. James Presbyterian Church. But that was not clearly identify as the church or religion because our N.A.A.C.P. group were at Trinity Episcopal, St. Augustine Catholic Church had a youth group that we met with, functioned with, and over in, Reverend Hawkins was developing a youth group over on Prospect Ave. so that all of us as a community of youngsters, despite what schools we were going, then some had even been able to change their addresses and go to places like Roosevelt or Evandachild's High School, we still were able to associate with those youngsters as long as they were from the community.

MN: So the 3 churches you connected to were Trinity Episcopal, St. Augustine's Presbyterian, and St. Augustine's Catholic.

DC: Correct

MN: And the N.A.A.C.P. group sort of worked with youth groups at all three of these churches?

DC: Oh yes, we had a very good, and strong, active youth group.

MN: What were the main issues that the youth group dealt with?

DC: Well we had, a Northside Savings Bank?

NL: Yes on Third Avenue

DC: On Third Avenue below 161st Street, so we learned to, you could join the bank with savings account of 50 cents.

NL: That was part of the school program. We would take our bank books and put in a dime here or there.

DC: So we began with that. We then spread out and tried to see if we could get summer jobs or any other things like that in the area or in the community. We became much larger because of our failures to be able to acquire those jobs or to work in those communities when we know that the youngsters from outside our community were coming in and working right in our neighborhood at the time, so we became more and more aware of it. Even later in the N.A.A.C.P., when [coughs] was too young for the youth group and went to the adult group, we had to lay a picket line around the A&P at 163rd Street and Third Avenue, forcing them to hire people of color.

MN: Do you remember what year that was? Would that be the 50s or would that be still the late 40s?

DC: It might have been the 50s.

MN: So you were dealing a lot with employment discrimination.

DC: Oh sure

MN: Were you ever dealing with housing discrimination? Was that an issue for the Youth N.A.A.C.P.?

DC: No, it wasn't. We had employment. Oh, and we had another youth group that met on Friday night, the merchants on 3rd Avenue did not feel that they were getting the minority community to patronize them in sufficient force. So a fellow by the name of Michaels, Mr. Michaels, at Saks, 150th Street and Third Avenue would have the Saks canteen on Friday nights. Mr. Michaels, along with other merchants, had us coming there on Friday nights socially getting together, interchanging, getting to know about different things. And little by little, he spread out. I remember he would, finding out that some of

us were with the N.A.A.C.P. Youth Council, he donated toasters to the N.A.A.C.P. to raffle so that we could raise money for our N.A.A.C.P. Youth Council back at Trinity.

MN: Did you go with your parents to any West Indian cultural events, dances, dinners, cricket games, or any thing like that?

DC: Oh we went to cricket matches of course.

MN: Where were the cricket matches? Were there any in The Bronx?

DC: Later it came in The Bronx, but mainly it was in Van Cortland Park. Always at Van Cortland Park. And it was quite a trip for us, but having been exposed and played cricket in the West Indies as a youngster, we knew of the different groups and even knew of the clubs that were organized as cricket clubs here who used the same names of clubs as they had back in the islands, the cricket clubs. And even later, some of them organized and they had social clubs.

MN: What about music? What was the music that people listened to in your home?

DC: We had, we never - -

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE]

DC: In the early days, we had a man by the name of "The Duke of Iron", 114th Street, the Anderson family: Velma Anderson, Joan Anderson, who was a top calypso person in those days. He wrote and recorded songs that Andrew's sisters sang and recorded as their own tunes and they had to turn over all the royalties to him.

NL: You're talking about "Rum and Coca-Cola"?

DC: "Rum and Coca-Cola" was one of them.

NL: Are you kidding? Wow.

MN: Really? And he was known as "The Duke of Iron", but what was his given name?

DC: Cecil Anderson.

MN: Cecil Anderson.

DC: His daughter is still alive in California, and they're opening up a museum in St.

Thomas Virgin Island.

NL: Is that where he was from? Or was he from Trinidad?

DC: He's from Trinidad. But he had the first carnival in St. Thomas, organized the first carnival. As a tribute to him, they're opening a museum with his instruments and all the things of that nature. This year, maybe March in St. Thomas, Virgin Island.

NL: Did your parents list to early [Scott], or - -

DC: I was going to say, from their, others came along. Steven Belafonte sang some of his tunes. I had a first cousin by the name of Roy Thompson, who sang with the Belafonte singers and traveled all around with the Belafonte group, the Belafonte background is Jamaican of course.

NL: [Irvin Girvey] wrote the lyrics for the Belafonte music.

DC: Yes, se's from Long Island.

MN: Did you ever get a chance to hear Caribbean music at venues in The Bronx live?

Were there any places where the calypso artists would play live in The Bronx?

DC: Not to my knowledge. Mostly, I as a youngster went to functions at Webster Hall in Manhattan, which is a huge place [crosstalk]. On 14th Street, or 34th Street or something like that?

NL: Webster Hall is close to 14th Street, now it's on 11th Street, so I don't know where it originally was.

DC: I think it was 14th Street, it might have been, but I know it was a huge hall. Year after year, different West Indian groups, weekend, weekend after weekend, different West Indian groups were there, and we kept in touch, young people [from] different Islands and different places, we kept in touch. All the way through then, when Bellefonte came along, [we] even picked up some of the change of Cecil Anderson, “the Duke of Iron” and continued. But basically, some of the very same concepts. To just mention one other person who became a top labor leader who came right out of The Bronx with us is Cleveland Robinson.

MN: Cleveland Robinson from district 65. And he was one of the families who moved to The Bronx from Harlem?

DC: I’m not sure where Cleveland moved from, but Cleveland, as a youngster, I met up with Cleveland through Rev. Hawkins. Cleveland was very good at organizing, and Cleveland had been able to get the West Indian workers who came out of the labor movement in their local islands to join the union. They were meeting downstairs in Rev. Hawkins church. They were organizing meetings and tactics and being active with the youth group. We would be there when Cleve was [?] . Resultly, honor district 65 came Evelina Antonetti. A number of different people who came out of there and was involved in those meetings at Prospect Ave., the old perfume factory, over on Prospect Ave. - -

MN: Prospect and where? What street?

DC: Prospect, the perfume factory was between 165th and 165th Street, on the left hand side going up. It employed a number of people - -

MN: Oh so that was between St. Anthony Apatua and St. Augustine. It was a perfume factory - -

NL: And [Hanstone's] Bakery was there too.

DC: Yes.

MN: And was the perfume factory unionized?

DC: Cleveland Robinson and district 65 unionized it.

MN: And who was the labor force? Was it multiracial? It was mostly Caribbean and African American?

DC: Caribbean, Caribbean. English speaking Caribbean s at that point because that's basically what dominated. We did not have an influx of the Latino population or the Puerto Rican population coming in The Bronx at those early days at that point. Although Felipe Torres, whom I worked with - -

NL: He became a new judge wasn't he?

DC: He [?] as an assemblyman, yes he became a judge, then he became the first Puerto Rican judge in The Bronx. He was from the lower end of [Delphi] Adams Houses, around that area. But they began mobilizing through their travel group, I forget the name of the travel agency, but basically, the area was predominantly Caribbean and African American.

MN: Are we talking about Cleveland Robinson holding these meeting in the late forties or the early fifties?

DC: Oh he did both. He started in - -

MN: He started in the late forties?

DC: One other great Caribbean labor leader, I think he later got deported, was Ferdinand Smith. Was he ever a fit for the National Maritime Union?

DC: [crosstalk]

HM: I wanted to ask Mr. Coleman, when I was growing up, which was about the same time, it was my, it was my impression that there was a significant Caribbean community in the Longwood area of The Bronx over by Kelley Street - -

DC: Where the Tysons were.

HM: [crosstalk] Powell and all those people - -

DC: Yeah, that whole group.

HM: And I was a part of the youth group that went to St. Augustine's Presbyterian Church. But the interesting thing was that as you said, people from all the churches came there to be a part of the youth group because Rev. Hawkings was such a dynamic, and he was young himself

DC: We ran Rev. Hawkings, a first thing into politics was the Stevenson campaign

MN: 1952.

DC: I don't remember if we ran Rev. Hawkings as a delegate to the Democratic Convention. It wasn't Adly Stevens, it might have been free, but I'm free. I know we got him elected against the Democratic machine - -

MN: So you had an independent Democratic club?

DC: Just working people, and that's how I got elected as a State Senator.

MN: You got elected as an independent Democrat?

DC: I went against the machine.

MN: Who did you run against?

DC: I ran against a guy by the name of Murry Lewinter, who later was running The Bronx County Democratic Organization. Once I had defeated Murry Lewinter, he had not been successful in going back to the legislature in any other position from that point

on. We were part of a movement then, myself, Herman Badilo, Bob Abrhams, Bob Garcia was my assemblyman.

MN: What year were you elected to the State Senate?

DC: 1965.

HM: That was before Joe Galiber right?

DC: Oh sure, Joe Galiber came later. Joe Galiber was not elected the first year at all, he was appointed because the Ivan Warner was appointed to Supreme Court Judge, and the vacancy for State Senate came up.

HM: Oh because he was the State Senator.

DC: Because he was a State Senator and Joe Galiber was then placed to fill his seat.

MN: How many African American State Senators were ther when you were elected to the State Senate?

DC: Four. We formed black and Latino crocus that year. Four that year. Very very interesting, I was the only person of color from The Bronx, I was president of The Bronx County N.A.A.C.P. when I got elected. From Harlem, was the president of the N.A.A.C.P. in Harlem, who was Bazzel Patterson. In Brooklyn was the Catholic Interracial Council. A fellow by the name of Jim Shaw, and the other State Senator from Brooklyn is William Thompson, who's son is now the comptroller. So the four of us were for, and - -

HM: And Bazzel Patterson's son is still in the Senate.

DC: Yes, still today. But we had a number of assembly people under us, Edward Stevenson, who served with me then in the assembly, we all participated in the historic "Midnight March" [on speaker Travium] to let him know that he sis not have the votes to

serve as speaker of the assembly because those of us of color would not be supporting him. It created such a turmoil. This was the night before the vote was to be taken, it was on the calendar and everyone, our assembly people, we instructed them and told them that they would be voting present, but not voting [to the drive]. Within those hours at night, Prissy Sutton, Assemblyman Marc Southhold, Bergram Baker, of Brooklyn, within the hours of that night, a sleepless night, negotiations went on and when we met again, the package that they offered us, you couldn't believe the kind of victories that we had had. Bergram Baker became the [director] of the assembly, the first time an African American, I don't know if you remember the days when the Metcalf-Baker Bill was done. Metcalf was a state senator and Baker was the assembly person. We got significant committee assignments that dealt with us going back home. Oddly enough in history, now that both have passed away I can tell you, there were two assembly people who did not attend that meeting. One was Assemblyman Marc Southhold and Assemblyman Arthur Hardwick, of Buffalo, and Assemblywoman Shirly Chisholm, Brooklyn. Those two had not participated in the March with us. We couldn't reach them by phone or anything. Then of course, as history has shown us, they are now very together because they later married [laughter].

JOr: If I may, could you share with us what you feel to be your greatest accomplishments in the senate, politics generally, but I guess particularly some of the issues and legislations that were prominent during your term in office?

DC: I was the first person to upset The Bronx democratic structure in The Bronx as a minority. In leading the Jackson Democratic club and its supporters. I was the first person of color to have been able to do that. The others who were there were those who

had been in the club and had been gofers for years and so on. Like the Joe Galigers, like the Warners, and Ed Stevenson. It took quite a turn when the outside community recognized that they didn't have to depend on the Jackson club to put up whom they choose to put up as so called community leaders. I at that point was reading in Morris High School auditorium, an auditorium packed with people, as president of The Bronx County N.A.A.C.P. I had a following. My opponent, Mario Winter came out with a picture of himself and Martin Luther King, saying that Martin Luther King had endorsed it, when the entire community knew that all that I had been doing from 10, all that I'd been doing with Cleveland Robinson working. The March on Washington, we had 17 buses. Seventeen buses, from Franklin Ave and 168th Street to go down to the March on Washington.

MN: Do you have any pictures of that by any chance because this would be priceless for an exhibit. Do you know anybody who might have pictures of that?

DC: No, matter of fact, attorney Bernard Jackson, who later became a Supreme Court judge, was the president at the time when we did the march on Washington. I was vice president. Former judge, Mary Johnson Lo, who later became Supreme court, Federal judge, a Bronx Supreme Court judge, participated with us.

MN: Did you have a formal headquarters at that time?

DC: Yes.

MN: And where was that located?

DC: At that time, we had moved from 163rd Street from Audrey Green's law office over to our Franklin Avenue and 168th Street. We had a store front office that we maintained as an NA.A.C.P. office.

MN: And this was right near McKinley Square?

DC: One block. Not far away.

MN: And Alfred Green's office was on 163rd Street - -

DC: And Third Avenue.

MN: And Third Avenue, so it was down farther.

DC: It was down farther, yes.

MN: And then you moved up to Franklin Avenue?

DC: Yes. Our meetings then, and because those of us who moved out with the youth council and away from St. Augustine, Roman Catholic St. Augustine Presbyterian, that the bulk of us were there. The folks [lived near] Washington Avenue and others, it was accessible to come to.

MN: Does this mean that you had more of a sort of secular orientation, that you had less of a connection with the churches, or the church connection was still strong?

DC: No, church connection remained strong. Membership at NAACP came through the church connection. It's very interesting. Most of the pastors who came up came out of a very strong church background at Victory Baptist Church.

MN: So the pastor at Victory Baptist was involved - -

DC: Rev. Paine, he came out of [Amisnu] and Adam Powell and organized Victory Baptist Church, which was then the largest Baptist church. Thessalonia Baptist was Rev Dwight.

HM: Well all the churches fed into the N.A.A.C.P. There are people who were interested in that.

DC: Rev. Folks - -

MN: Rev. Folks from, what was the name of his church?

DC: Mt. Carmel

MN: Mt. Carmel, which was - -

DC: He was right across the street from - -

MN: P.S. 40.

DC: No, now he's at P.S. 40. He used to be in what is now the funeral parlor on Prospect Avenue. And then his dinners and banquets were in the hall of St. Augustine because Rev. Hawkins opened up his Baptist Church that they could have their fundraising.

MN: So he helped the Baptist minister raise funds to build a new church?

DC: That's right.

HM: And also a Spanish community, Rev. Hawkins did that. [crosstalk]

DC: Yes, he's right around the corner from 130, that Spanish church that was organized and created, he came out of [crosstalk].

MN: And where was the funeral parlor located, what street?

DC: On Prospect. - -

HM: Was that on 160th Street?

DC: NO, it was, the funeral parlor was on Prospect Avenue, that's where Mt. Carmel Church was. It was on the right hand side, just above 165th Street.

HM: There's a funeral parlor there now right?

DC: I think it's still the same funeral parlor, so it may still be owned by Mt. Carmel.

MN: So he was holding services there until he could get his own church?

DC: Till he got his own church.

HM: And by the way there's a link to the politics and so forth. Rev. Folks later on became very active in the schools. And, did he run for popular legislative position?

DC: No, no. More interesting, Rev. Folks comes out of Jamaica - -

HM: Yes, he was Caribbean, I remember.

DC: Comes out of the same, my grandmother, was raised by my grandmother, so again it was like homecoming as we came to The Bronx. It didn't matter to me because basically I had been Anglican then, and I'm still away from my Anglican roots even though I was in this, caught up in organizing and moving and mobilizing and doing things of that nature.

HM: You were doing God's work from a different point of view [laughter].

MN: I want to go back now to this terrible experience you had when you were drafted illegally, which Natasha told me about. Perhaps we can go back to your, - -

DC: Yes, during the war, having gone out and seeing, as a youngster, German prisoners in the island of Jamaica, and knowing everything that the Germans stood for, I decided that what I wanted to be was to become a pilot, and many Jamaicans, including my cousin Roy Johnson and some others. Lynch, Lincoln Lynch who later became head of C.O.R.E. in Harlem - -

MN: Oh, right, that name - -

DC: Lincoln Lynch was still alive when active as an Anglican. These fellows left Jamaica and were able to go to fight the Germans in London, in England. They became pilots with the Royal Air force. Lincoln Lynch was a lieutenant in charge of a fire fight squadron. Very interesting that Lincoln Lynch and I were arrested together at a demonstration and we were in the same police wagon being taken after being arrested.

MN: Do you remember where the demonstration was?

DC: Oh it was recent.

MN: Oh recently?

DC: We were arrested in demonstration about Amadu Diallo.

MN: This is the one that Rev. Sharpton organized?

DC: That's right. He and I were in the same police van, arrested at the same time, we go back to our roots in Jamaica and how far back we were going in the struggle, that we're adults, still caught up doing the same thing for the same cause, just as we had learned there, others in the labor movement had done to gain independence. There we were again going in. I remember that the police driver, the way we were, hand cuffs behind us and being seated, the seats were small, so you couldn't brace yourself and turning around the corner and what not, Lincoln Lynch was injured in the van from spinning around. The driver's driving was so reckless in their driving taking us to the police headquarters to be booked at the precinct. And as he rose, stood out in the street, because they lined us up in the street in front of, for everyone to see, as others could march by, there we were handcuffed standing in the street. They weren't handcuffs, they had those plastic holders. Lincoln had the blood coming down from his face and everyone could clearly see along with all the other clergy. Then we were part of the Episcopal Clergy who demonstrated that particular day, for Amadu Diallo, we marched from Trinity Church, Wall Street, we mobilized at Trinity Church, and Lincoln Lynch was at a Parish Church in Harlem. But he came out from Jamaica, organized Harlem C.O.R.E., and very interesting, you have another famous movie actor, [Yafed] Codo. Yafed Codo was part of our Bronx N.A.A.C.P.

NL: Is that right?

MN: He lived in The Bronx?

DC: Yafed Codo was part of our Bronx N.A.A.C.P., lived in The Bronx. Codo was trying his best to become an actor, at the time that James Shoyer was congressman and a very wealthy individual. Our Bronx N.A.A.C.P. went to his to support Yafed Codo in his efforts to put on and to back a play that Yafed Codo wanted to, I forget what role he had in it, and for congressman Soyer to help to raise money. I don't remember what was the results of that - -

JOr: So Yafed Codo grew up in The Bronx?

DC: I don't believe he grew up in The Bronx because he's from Africa, I think, but we knew Yafed Codo then was active with us in our Bronx N.A.A.C.P. in those days.

MN: You mentioned in talking to Natasha that you went to Georgetown University. How did you end up going from Morris High School to Georgetown University?

DC: By a Jesuit Priest by the name of Father John Lafarge. Father John Lafarge was head of the Catholic Interracial Council. And through our contacts in the Civil Rights Movement, I was able to get to him and he wrote a letter of recommendation to Georgetown University, which I had applied to, and later found out that Georgetown University was founded by a black Jesuit Priest in Washington D.C. I was first undergraduate at Georgetown University, but you see during that time - -

JOr: What year was this?

DC: 1952, '51, '52? During that time, because I'd come out as I started saying, I wanted to be a pilot just like these other fellows. I found out that I could go to Fort Benning Field and join the reserves and go and training there, that could eventually lead to being

as navy pilot. So I had a very, I think when I was 18, waiting and was active, joined the Navy Reserves at Fort Benning Field in Brooklyn, traveling out there one weekend each month. I was even called upon to go to active extended training duty with the Naval Reserves at Columbus, Ohio. There we had, at Fort Columbus, Republic Aviation I think was the name of the company, who were putting equipment on planes and we had to be testing the equipment on the different planes. For me this was radio electronics, which was my aviation radio-in. The planes that were tested turned out to be too heavy for the flight deck, but I stayed for months over there and as a result of being on extended active duty, it meant that I was given active duty time and was not eligible for the draft. Upon being admitted to Georgetown, I changed my address in The Bronx and was living on campus in Washington D.C. My sister who had been there at Howard University for years, we were able to stay together, cut down on expenses, and I would travel by bus each morning to Georgetown. Unbeknownst to me, I got my first notification that I'd failed to register for the draft board in Washington D.C. and I was living in Washington D.C. and I did not have a student deferment because I was still going back to Brooklyn one weekend a month from Georgetown to be with the naval reserves at Fort Benning Field. I notified Washington D.C. draft board that I was a student there and they said 'well you didn't have a student deferment or anything?' No, I showed them my navy papers, my naval reserve identification, my navy uniform. I even got picked up on Highway 40 in those days for hitchhiking in my navy uniform to get back and forth because I didn't have the funds to pay. All of that was in the record. They notified me that New York transferred, they knew, and transferred me to Washington D.C.

JOr: How is that, why did that happen?

DC: Well I don't know, I think I must have run afoul of some of the ladies of St.

Augustine, the Catholic Church because at that point, Cornelius Drew was a pastor at St.

Augustine R.C. He later became a monsignor and was transferred to St. Charles

Parochial Church in Harlem. Well at that time, he was head of the draft board. Was he

African American?

DC: No, oh no. No matter what I tried to do at that point, it mattered not. In 1949, I went through studies and became a Roman Catholic just so that the criticism wouldn't be there about those of us who were going to St. Augustine Community Center and to all the other youth. [?] it meant nothing for us to say okay fine, and it still was not sufficient for those who were in there. We had St. Anthony of Patwa and the other neighboring Catholic parishes, they wanted you to be doing more and helping to recruit more and more persons of color to participate in mass on Sunday mornings and things of that nature. It was basically community, and so I've been going and function like an adult, I at least be interested but as I became more and more known in the community and identified and I had meetings in which all the nuns of St Augustine R.C. Church would come up and attend our meetings. Even some of those nuns who were transferred to Bermuda and other places like that, that's where the order was, we still got cards from them telling us what their doing in Bermuda and things like that and how much they appreciated our efforts with the N.A.A.C.P. The national office of the N.A.A.C.P. was quite pleased with our chapter when they would come in and see Roman Catholic nuns, so many of these females from different parts of the country who were coming out and participating in or reading, and getting up and speaking, giving their views. We're not any religious affiliation or any viewpoints or anything in relation to their teachings, but

basically civil rights issues. Speaking up for what they thought was right and proper. So our chapter became quite well known for its diversity in membership.

MN: So you're an N.A.A.C.P. chapter that met periodically at St. Augustine's Catholic Church, where nuns - -

DC: Well we met at our N.A.A.C.P. office for committee meetings and then we met at Rev. Hawkins' church, St. Augustine. They would come also to St. Augustine, wherever we were.

NL: What happened with your career with the navy?

DC: That's where I'm coming to. So in running around with different young ladies, I was always being called by Catholic priests and tried to be talked to and told what was ethnically correct, [front play] the field in effect, and they were kind of glad when I left to go to live in Washington D.C.

MN: Is it fair to say that they thought you were a heart-breaker?

DC: I'm not sure if that was the proper description [laughter] at that time. At any rate, I later found out Cornelius Drew was aware to the fact that I had moved to Washington D.C. and didn't consider me to be a member of his parish and even though I was going to Georgetown, I had not been transferred my membership to another Catholic parish in Washington D.C. So there were communities that gave the okay to go ahead and draft me, regardless if I was with the navy at that point. The day they drafted me was the date that the navy gave me a discharge and I didn't get those papers until I was in Germany. Because the fight that I'd be making that it was illegal didn't come through until late. I ended up not, although I was drafted and had to serve 2 years, ended up serving only 21 months because the papers from the Pentagon and others came out saying 'oh no, this

man has served already, you took him and you knew that he was already part of the navy and I was relieved.

NL: Where did you serve?

DC: I served in Germany.

MN: This was in the army?

DC: Oh yes, oh yes, and if you want to know what it's like for someone who looks like me to go and occupy force in Germany in those days was not easy. And others have written some glamorous stories about it, but believe me, it was not easy.

MN: There was a lot of hostility from the locals?

DC: I saw hostility from everyone including those of the religious orders dressed like nuns and other things like that, who looked at me with the look of hatred in her eyes as we left, because few remember what Gables had preached to all of the Germans about those of us who are of African descent, what to expect from us coming out there - -

MN: Did you write any diaries of that time?

DC: No, as a matter of fact, oddly enough, Ed Doctoral and I were in the same outfit and we served together all the way from beginning until end. He came out of, was he on Bathgate Avenue?

MN: He wrote a book called Billy Bathgate - -

DC: Billy Bathgate, and Glenn Hymes, Glen Hymes was a theater - -

MN: Because he wrote a book thinly disguised on the Rosenberg case called "The Book of Daniel" where he described the markets and it would make you almost taste the food, it's amazing.

DC: He was one of the first individuals to come along knowing that I had been at Georgetown and I had read the book on Ghandi. I was so moved by it, I gave it to him to read and he came back and he said ‘ you know, I noticed the books that you take and you read, but this is great stuff’. He talked about all from “The Book of Ghandi” how Ghandi went down when the salt tax was done and he said ‘did you see how he organized the people to go down to the seashore and pick up the salt and defy the British?’ And then Dr. Rollings said, one of his parents had been from England, so we really got along great and we learned a lot, we called it Boy Scout Bench, and Dr. Rollings was the only individual in our outfit who never, somehow or another, always got away from going up to do what we call “big walk” on the German frontline, the German boarder where we always had to go that in case the Germans decided to come in and invade and create invasion in Germany, where would they strike and so on. And even then some of the individuals went over and crossed the lines and were arrested by Chezchoslovachian police and others so that the Russians, not the Germans, the Russians, were going to come in and attack us, where would they come from? And Chezchoslovachia was one of those places and we all were together in the outfit. But Boss Doc as we called him, never had to, got away from, through some fluke or other, carried out to the Russian boarder areas to do duty.

NL: Was that a segregated army group?

DC: No, we were integrated then. Truman had passed an integrated [crosstalk]

JOr: So what treatment did you receive from your fellow American soldiers? The military was integrated in 1948, was there some adjustment that had to take place?

DC: Oh sure. The South ran the army, no matter, we had officers from the South, it was integrated when we were there. The only person of color that was an officer was the Chaplain in Germany. No matter where you came from, you tend to follow the same traditions as the - -

MN: Did white soldiers and officer get upset if African American soldiers consorted with German women, was that an issue for them given the Southern attitudes?

DC: No, because once the [fall line] dated an African American. She was targeted in that community as a [fall line] for short [sits] for the blacks and she could not go over on Friday nights with the whites. But all she cared about was getting cigarettes, and other rations that had been given out by soldiers at that time. But in the community in Germany itself, she was labeled. Her papers and immunization and other things like that, police always came and checked the [fall lines] who were with African American bars more than the others.

MN: And there were separate bars for African American soldiers?

DC: Separate bars, yes. We probably segregated ourselves - -

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]