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Nicholas, William and Margery

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Interviewees: William and Margery Nicholas
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
October 21, 2004

Mark D. Naison (MDN): Hello. We'll start with the basics: This is the 79th interview of the Bronx African American History Project. Today is October 21st, 2004 and we're at the home of William and Margery Nicholas in Bay Shore, NY. So I'd like to start by asking how you both came to the Bronx and when you moved to the Bronx; were you married when you moved to the Bronx?

Margery Nicholas (MN): No. I came to the Bronx with my mother, father, and sister in 1934. And we had lived on 7th Avenue.

MDN: In Harlem, so you moved from Harlem to the - -

MN: Harlem to the Bronx. And when I came to the Bronx the first time I really had any contact with the people was when I joined St. Augustine Church and Billy now - - I call him Billy, that's William - - he lived across the street.

MDN: Now what street did you move to from - -

MN: Union Avenue, 974 Union Avenue.

MDN: And that was between Union and where?

MN: Between - - Prospect was the next avenue over. When I lived on Union between 163rd and 165th.

MDN: Now when your family moved from Harlem to the Bronx, did they know other people who were living in the Bronx? Do you know why they made that move?

MN: They moved to the Bronx but I'm not sure whether they moved because they knew somebody out there - -whether it was just an area that my father heard about and decided to move because when we moved into 974 there were only two black people who lived in the building, all the rest were white.

MDN: Right. Now what sort of work did your father do?

MN: My father worked for the post office.

MDN: That's the major story; when we're talking about the 1930's almost all of the black families that I know who moved to the Prospect Avenue area had fathers who worked in the post office.

MN: My father worked in the post office, he worked the Concourse and my mother was a stay at home mom.

MDN: And was your family southern or Caribbean?

MN: Well my background is Caribbean, both my mother and father were born in the Caribbean. My mother was born in Barbados, my father in Barbados, and they met here in New York and they got married. And they lived on 99 St between Columbus and Central Park West, and then after they moved from there they moved to 7th Avenue and then from 7th Avenue to the Bronx.

MND: OK now William, when did your family move to the Bronx - - or did you move yourself?

William Nicholas (WN): No, no. I was born and raised on Hunt St. and 3rd St. between [Inaudible] and Amsterdam across from Columbus Hospital. My mother - - my father died in 1925 and my mother moved into the Bronx in 1929 in 11 - - No, it was 1072 Union Avenue.

MDN: Now, this was your mother by herself?

WN: Yes but my father died when I was ten years old.

MDN: Right, do you know how it was your mother came to move to the Bronx?

WN: Well my mother she had two sets of children 13 and 14, I'm the only one living. And she came from St. Juan Hill with the oldest set of kids, which was 10. And after they came I was born on 163rd St, the last four: Gladys, Margery, Billy, and I, and I'm the only one left.

MN: Tell him how you came to the Bronx.

WN: How did I come to the Bronx? My mother just moved.

MDN: Right, now how old were you when she moved to the Bronx?

WN: Well that was 1925, I was eleven years old.

MDN: OK, now when you moved to the Bronx was the neighborhood predominately white?

WN: No, the house I moved in 1072 was white, by an Italian and he was still living there.

MDN: No what elementary - - did you go to junior high or elementary school?

WN: I went to elementary school and regular school, to eighth grade and that was - - I went to junior high school.

MDN: Do you remember the number of the school you went to?

WN: The first school I went to was PS 46 between Amsterdam and St. Nicholas Avenue. And the second school I went to was up by the theater at PS 169.

MDN: Right and then when you moved to the Bronx?

WN: When I moved to the Bronx I went to PS 51. And from PS 51 I went to Textile High School.

MDN: Right. Now what school did you go to Margery?

MN: I went to PS 93 in Manhattan when I lived on 7th Avenue. And then after we moved to the Bronx - - oh before I moved to the Bronx I started Hunter College High School and then after I graduated from Hunter College High School I went to Hunter College. And that was while I was in the Bronx I graduated.

MDN: Now did you become a teacher ultimately?

MN: Yes.

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MDN: OK, now what was the neighborhood like when you moved there? What were your first memories of Morrisania?

MN: Well, my first memory of the neighborhood was I was thrilled because a girl that I knew from Manhattan moved in - - I was in 974 and she moved into 978 [Inaudible] And we had been friends before so it was quite a thrill. And we enjoyed each others company and then when I joined the church I met a lot of girls - -

MDN: This was St. Augustine?

MN: St. Augustine's Church. I met a lot of girls that belonged to St. Augustine's and we had a wonderful time. The neighborhood was what I would say was a thrill - - you know you could go out whenever you wanted to and come back and you never felt afraid of walking at night or what not.

MDN: Was there any racial tension because it was - -

MN: Not that I experienced when I lived in the Bronx on Union Avenue and we had a superintendent of our building who was like a police man. He was like oh - - you couldn't sit on the stoop, you couldn't do anything. He ran the whole block, even Bill across the street knew about him. [Laughs]

MDN: Now how was the shopping in the neighborhood?

MN: Oh, well downstairs after 978 there was a laundry and then a candy store and a grocery store. And then if we went down across 163rd St. to 161st St. there was a complete area of like markets where you could buy fresh fish, you could buy vegetables, and it was - - everything was out on the streets, it was really a place where you could shop. Then if you walk down 163rd St to

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3rd Avenue, which was like five or six blocks, there was an A&P and we used to shop in the A&P there on 3rd Avenue and bring the packages up the hill. Oh I remember that.

MDN: Oh yes that's down the hill. Now, one of the things we heard about in the 30's was there was this area where black women would line up for domestic work. Do you remember that?

MN: I remember seeing people standing on the corner of - - it's where the train - - let me think.

MDN: Westchester and Prospect?

WN: It could have been because that was the main station.

MN: It's by where the Prospect Avenue station was.

WN: Yes. Probably on the other side.

MDN: So you saw that?

MN: I saw that. And I realized that people were looking for work and that's where people came and picked people up from there to work for them. I remember also the 845 which was near the station and then as you crossed over 163rd St there was a F.W. Woolworth and then if you walked a few steps up there was the R.K.O. Franklin and after you crossed - - oh there was a candy store on 163rd - - had the best egg creams. I remember we used to go there.

MDN: Now did you ever go to club 845 to hear live music?

MN: I've been there once but my father was very strict so I didn't get a chance to do very much of that. There was another bar that I saw - - the, what was it called?

WN: The Rainbow.

MN: The Rainbow. That was between 163rd St and 165th St.

WN: Next to the Loews Theater.

MN: Next to the Loews there was 845 - - his brother worked as a bar tender there. So I went in there but I had very strict restrictions of where I could go and what I could do.

MDN: Now William, where did you first learn to play baseball? Because I've been told that you had - -

WN: Well first let me correct, 1925 was when my father - - 1929 was when my mother moved to the Bronx. Let's just straighten that thing out.

MDN: Right, so 1929.

WN: I was playing ball all my life over on 163rd St. I had older brothers and they forbid me to play ball and I got beat every day for playing ball in the street.

MDN: So you played stick ball?

WN: I played stick ball, I played stoop ball, I played whatever you want to name it playing ball, but that's where my early stages of playing - - when I moved to the Bronx and I went to PS 51 is when I started - - they had the school activities which they had teams and I picked up the ball and started pitching and we did pretty good that first year.

MDN: So they actually had a baseball team at PS 51 and you played other schools?

WN: We played other schools, with you know the same age difference.

MDN: And you found you had a gift for pitching?

WN: Yes and I next went to Textile High School where we won two championships in '34 and '35 - - City Champs.

MDN: Where was Textile Located? Was it in the Bronx or Manhattan?

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WN: Oh it was Downtown in the Chelsea Area. It was between 10th and 11th. I don't remember the actual block but I know they had an annex at 34th St on about 5th Avenue but Textile was 19th St. I think it was between 9th and 10th.

MDN: And so you played on their high school baseball team?

WN: Baseball team yes.

MDN: Now were you a righty or a lefty?

WN: Righty.

MDN: And when did you become aware that there was a chance for you to have a professional career in baseball?

WN: Well we used to play - - I also played for a team, sandlot baseball, New York Crestons, C - R - E - S - T - O - N - S. And it was black club.

MDN: Now, where was that located, the Crestons?

WN: Most of the fellows lived in Harlem but I lived up on West Side, 163rd St in the Bronx so I used to go down there and we used to go up to City College, they had that whole outside auditorium where they used to show parades and things, I forget the name of the field.

MDN: Now do you have any pictures or memorabilia of this team, the New York Crestons?

MN: Sit down, sit down. I don't know if you have the Crestons.

WN: Yes you have a picture of the Crestons - - there's a picture - -

[BREAK IN TAPE]

MDN: So clearly you were one of the top, if not the top pitchers of the city when you got to Textile High School.

WN: At the time.

MDN: Now this all started at PS 51?

WN: Yes I started playing, then I went to the New York Crestons - -

MDN: How old were you when you started playing with the Crestons?

WN: Oh the Crestons? I must have been a kid around 18 - - 17, 18?

MDN: Did you have good coaching in the schools?

WN: Yes there was one fellow down in Chelsea, Harry Downing, and he worked in the after school center and I used to meet there at Textile every day. And I went down there and he taught me delivery, how to pitch, how to finish, you know what I mean? Watching batters feet, so you knew when to - - and I used to go to him after school.

MDN: Yes, and this was when you were in high school?

WN: Yes. And I used to catch it and I would throw and he would show me how to finish so that in case a ball goes either way I was supposed to finish just with my two feet just like that. I could go this way or that way.

MDN: Now what pitches did you throw? Were you mainly fastball?

WN: I threw fastball, curve ball, sinker ball.

MDN: What grip did you use in the sinker ball?

WN: Different things. Sometimes on top with fingers, that was the sinker. Fastball was straight across, and then same with the curve.

MDN: What do you think was the thing that made you a great pitcher?

WN: Speed.

MDN: It was speed, you threw harder than other kids?

WN: Well I threw harder than average, I could make it jump.

MND: And you had a rising fastball.

WN: That's right. A sinker and - -

MDN: A sinker. And you knew how to pitch.

WN: I knew how to pitch.

MDN: Now how did your family feel about this, did they think you should be working instead?

WN: Well all my family was gone.

MDN: You were just living with your - -

WN: Well with my sister, my mother, and you know I had a younger brother who died - - Eddy. He always wanted to catch me but we never really got together.

MDN: Now this was in the middle of The Depression. Were you under pressure to bring money into the family?

WN: No, no. Because at that time there was no money.

MDN: So there were no jobs anyway.

WN: No. And at that time I wasn't working, I was going to school and playing ball on the weekends, you know? And in those days what they did was the teams used to travel - - oh I'd go all over Moshulu Park Way, Brooklyn, [Inaudible] all that. To play for money.

MDN: OK so you were playing for money - - this was with the Crestons?

WN: That's right.

MDN: So there wasn't an amateur issue even in high school?

WN: No, no.

MDN: Who were some of the teams, the names of the other sandlot teams that the Crestons played?

WN: Well I know the only one I would remember would be - -

MDN: Was there a Bushwick team that was - -

WN: Bushwick was semi-pro.

MDN: They were semi pro.

WN: New York Cubans and all those teams, those were all semi-pro.

MDN: But this was sandlot.

WN: These were sandlot.

MDN: Now did you have coaches at the Crestons?

WN: We had Mark Chandler on the Crestons, and most of the ball players, we knew what we had to do.

MDN: Now were you all high school kids or some older?

WN: Some of them were older than me and some were younger than me.

MDN: Now Mark Chandler, what did he do for a living?

WN: I don't know he lived up in the Bronx - - 165th St someplace.

MDN: So it was a Bronx guy who owned the Crestons named Mark Chandler. Now did being a baseball star get you a lot of attention in the Bronx neighborhood, did people know - - ?

WN: Not really. You know I lived in the Bronx but I was always going to play ball.

MDN: But your neighbors didn't all know you were a ball player?

WN: They didn't know.

MDN: Now when you were playing ball, what year did you start playing in the Negro Leagues, right after high school?

WN: I played the Negro Leagues in 19 - - first time I played with the Black Yankees was in 1933. After school I went with them.

MDN: Now this was after you graduated?

WN: No I didn't graduate then - - I had to go back. After school was out I went with the Black Yankees for two months.

MDN: Oh OK, so while you were in high school you were playing with the Black Yankees in the summer.

WN: I broke my novice, but they never - - they didn't know anything about it because I wasn't playing in New York City.

MDN: Where were you playing?

WN: Well we were traveling.

MDN: So you were traveling with the Black Yankees. Where were some of the cities?

WN: Oh all over Pennsylvania, Brooksbar, and up in Buffalo, New York; Albany, Georgia, all through Savannah.

MDN: So you traveled in a bus?

WN: Yes.

MDN: Now where was the Black Yankee headquarters, what was their home field?

WN: Black Yankees headquarters was on 135th St at Lenox Avenue.

MDN: Did they have a home field?

WN: They had a store. No, they just played different places.

MDN: So this was barnstorming, whoever would play you?

WN: That's right.

MDN: Who was the owner of the team?

WN: I only knew a guy by the name of Sec. And that must have been secretary. But that's all we ever - - "Hey Sec," you know because I'd never met the owners - - I was a young kid.

MDN: Now did they pay you per game?

WN: No they paid me a little bit of money - \$100, \$50, you know? According to what we made on the attendance of the people that came to see the game.

MDN: Were there a lot of older guys on the team?

WN: Oh everybody was older.

MDN: So you were the youngest guy?

WN: One of the youngest.

MDN: Now did you play mostly white teams or white - -

WN: White teams. House of David. All the teams - - everybody - - the Bushwick's was out there, then it was the team that was on the 59th St bridge there, Springfield Rays was a white club. And there was a couple of other teams I don't remember their names. But we played a lot of semi-pros.

MDN: Now when you're doing this was there any sense that someday the major leagues were going to open up, or that's not something you thought about?

WN: No, no. I thought about it because in this here book [Taps book] there's someplace in the page that my coach at Textile, every year they recommended - - all the schools in New York City put out the best ball player in the city. Well, for two years nobody beat me, and my coach Mr. Sullivan knew that I had no chance to win it, but he put my name in it. So they had to give it to the white person, but I had that record here, you know what I mean?

MDN: And did your coach ever say to you “You know if things were really right, you’d be in the majors.”

WN: Well he used to - - we had a big game every Monday. He knew I played weekend ball, he would come and get us and take us to his house to stop us from playing ball. Me and the catcher.

MDN: So the catcher was also a - -

WN: Well he was a white boy.

MDN: But he played sandlot?

WN: Yes. He played up on [Inaudible] over on George and Wilkins, he was a hell of a catcher, a good ball player, and him and I were very good friends.

MDN: Did the white players, who were playing for these other sandlot teams, did they know something was wrong, that the black players didn’t have a chance of going into the professional system?

WN: Well they knew for effect because they didn’t even think about blacks being in baseball until Jackie came along. And you know they tried to sneak some in, but they - -

MDN: It was just such an established factor that it was - -

WN: That’s right. Jackie would at first - - now he played with Newark. He and Larry Doby. I left in ’37 - - ’36 and they won a championship in 37. I’ve got the hat upstairs, up right there in the closet.

MDN: So you played for about four years?

WN: That’s right. No money, and there was no money.

MDN: So you could make more money working if you got a job than you could make playing -

-

WN: Sure.

MDN: And that was true for most of the players?

WN: White players too. They weren't making no money. There was no money in baseball in those days. I mean you look at Babe Ruth and those guys - they weren't getting no money; \$5,000 a year you know as a professional ball player. So you know they can't pay sandlot base ball players no money because it depends on how many people attended the game for that day.

MDN: Right. Now what are your best experiences from the things you remember most about those negro league days?

WN: Well I saw Satchel Neige. The greatest.

MDN: What was that like? I mean OK, you're a great pitcher, but then you have you - - what did he have that you know?

WN: Well, he was fast. He had a terrific fastball and style. He threw from behind his foot, so you didn't see the ball and it was fast. I mean he sat down in the National League, American League all-star teams out there - - beat them. I mean he was terrific and Cleveland - - you know Municipal Stadium. But he was one of the greatest - - the greatest pitcher I've ever seen.

MDN: Now did you ever see Josh Gibson play?

WN: Oh sure, I've seen Josh play. He played for the Pittsburg Crawford's and - - what's the other team he played for - - Chicago something. I don't remember the team now. But they used to go from club to club, the main star players you know?

MDN: Now when you finally decided you were going to retire from the Negro leagues, did you have a job that you had gotten waiting for you?

WN: Yes, well I made up my mind, I couldn't see no future supporting a family on the kind of money that they were making and I just had to get a job because I just had my mother, my sister, my brother was in the service and I felt that I had to get a job. So we used go to this church - -

MN: St. Augustine's.

WN: Yes. But the man got me the job - - Mr. Mitchell, do you remember him?

MN: Yes.

WN: Mr. Mitchell got me a job on 72nd St at a gentlemen's club. It was a private club for these people who had money, came to play cards and drank and you know all that stuff. So that was my first job.

MDN: And who was this Mr. Mitchell?

WN: Mr. Mitchell was in the church.

MN: Yes.

WN: He was one of the people in the church.

MDN: Did he work at that particular place and that's how he got you the job, or he just had connections?

WN: I think Mr. Mitchell did work down there. I think he did work down there yes.

MDN: Now when did the two of you first meet?

WN: If I told you how we met you wouldn't believe it. She had a sister, we used to go to St. Augustine Church and we used to play basketball down there.

MDN: I know, I saw, we were in the basement of the church after the tour.

WN: So I went around this time I went there and her sister was down there playing basketball.

So I asked her sister, "Where's Margy?" She says, "Well, she's sick." I said well I must go by

and see her. So I went to the candy store and you know that time you could get Jill Ice Cream

[Laughter] I don't know if you remember Jill is a fible for a locate - - Catch this. So I took the ice cream up to her, you know she was sick.

MDN: Oh you took it up to her apartment?

WN: Yes.

MDN: Took some ice cream up there.

MN: I can see my mother looking at him now. [Laughs]

WN: Her mother wanted to know who was this boy coming up here [Laughter] bringing ice cream to her daughter. So that's how we met, and we've been together since 1937.

MDN: Wow. Now at that time were you still playing in - -

WN: No, I had stopped. I had started working different jobs, and I wound up at a bakery.

MDN: So St. Augustine's Church was a very important institution in the community.

WN: The minister married us there.

MDN: Was that Reverend Hawkins?

WN: Reverend Hawkins in his office.

MDN: Right. When you two began seeing each other, was there any family issue or since you were part of the same circle - -

WN: Well, it was no family issue, but I lived across the street, my mother was there, my mother liked her very much and I always said if your mother likes you, you can't go wrong, you know what I mean? So we were going together - - we went together four and a half years before we got married. And her mother and father lived across the street. I could tell you tales that you wouldn't believe.

MN: [Laughs]

WN: I'll tell you the biggest tale. One night we went out and her father and mother got mad at her. And we came in late and they put the safety lock on the door upstairs that she couldn't get in. So we rang the bell and we rang the bell upstairs, but in that apartment there you got the windows, the bedroom was in the front, and that window couldn't have been open more than [Holds out hands] that?

MN: Yes.

WN: And we tried all kinds of ways to get her in. I stood, there was snow on the ground, I stepped off by the curb, made a snow ball, and I threw it through the bedroom window and it hit up against the back of the bed and [Smacks table] fell in her fathers face. That's how she got in. [Laughter]

MDN: That's where it helps to be a pitcher. [Laughter] Now did your parents initially disapprove of him?

MN: My mother and father would have disapproved of anybody. [Laughs]

MDN: Nobody was good enough.

MN: No.

WN: But you have to win them over. And I won them over.

MDN: Now this was on Union Avenue?

MN: That's right.

MDN: You were each a different side?

MN: 974 and 993.

MDN: Now ultimately - - were those houses eventually knocked down?

MN: You know there's a project I understand - -

MDN: That's the Forest Houses. OK I think they're still there because it's 163rd but this is between 163rd and 165th.

MN: Yes.

MDN: Right those buildings are still there.

MN: Oh they are?

MDN: Yes on Union Avenue.

MN: We haven't been up there - -

MDN: I drove up there yesterday. Now, so when you met were you at Hunter or were you teaching already?

MN: Oh no, I was at Hunter.

MDN: So you were at Hunter College which was of course very hard to get into.

MN: Well I came from the high school so it wasn't that difficult.

MDN: Right. And those were mostly teachers who were being trained by Hunter.

MN: Yes.

MDN: Now, when you were dating, where would you go on a date? What was a typical date in those years?

MN: We'd go to the movies.

WN: Dancing. [Crosstalk] We'd went to a lot of parties - -

MDN: Where were the dance - - if you went dancing where would you go to dance?

WN: [Inaudible] [Crosstalk]

MDN: Who were some of the bands you danced to?

WN: Chick Web and the guy - - Chick Web with Don Spec but the other guy at the Savoy - -

MN: Oh I can't remember.

MDN: This was the Savoy Ballroom?

WN: Savoy Ballroom and the Reni. But Reni [Renaissance] was more or less club dancing.

They had a lot of clubs - -

MN: All I went to was club dances because I just didn't go on a regular basis, my father wouldn't have that.

MDN: Now what is a club dance?

MN: Well those were when clubs give a dance and rent the hall.

MDN: OK, well give me - - were you a member - - ?

WN: The Buffalos and the Jolly Fellows, and different people - - within an area, houses of people, they'd form clubs.

MDN: Now this was true in the Bronx? Did you grow up with - -

WN: They had clubs in the Bronx oh yes. But mostly - - they had clubs all over the place.

[Crosstalk]

MDN: But when you were - - in the 1930's and living in the Bronx, was there more things happening in Harlem then there were happening in the Bronx?

MN: Oh yes.

MDN: So you went to Harlem a great deal.

MN: Yes. But you would go down there more often.

WN: With the dances and all the [Crosstalk]

MN: 'Cause I remember going to Spremes for ice cream you know.

WN: Well because then you had Lafayette Theater and the Apollo.

MDN: Do you remember much in the way of political activity in the neighborhood? Were there street speakers or you know any of that sort of thing?

MN: No I don't remember that.

MDN: OK now I've been asked to ask you about the Bucket of Blood bar.

MN: He'll have to tell you because I've never - -

MDN: OK because several other people have mentioned that to me.

WN: Well there was a bar on 100 - - Stebbins Avenue and Holms St. Prospect Avenue was here [Points] and the next avenue over was Stebbins - -Stebbins Avenue came on Prospect so when you got to Home there was bar right on - - and there was an Italian fellow that owned it named Pete. But they used to have a lot of fights. So the people nicknamed it Bucket of Blood and that's the way it stood. So we said "We're you going?" "I'm going over to Bucket." You know? And that was Stebbins Ave.

MDN: Stebbins at Holms St and 167th. Now they've also asked me to ask about the Joe Lewis Bakery which was on Prospect Avenue.

WN: That's right. If you go up past Home St all the way toward 168th St - - before you get 168th St was the Brown Bomber Bakery. A lot of people don't know that. They used his name, whether it was his or not I don't know. They made bread.

MDN: And did they have a store?

WN: No they just - - it looked like they made bread and delivered it to different places - - maybe to a restaurant you know they'd make them a small loaf of bread - -

MDN: Now they - - also when you got into the bakery business did you work in the Bronx or mostly Manhattan?

WN: [Crosstalk] I worked at first for an old time bakery, German named Godfrey. And the Godfrey family had a bakery on 51st St and 11th Avenue and they made only bread for the restaurants, you know the long sandwich bread that - - and they did that with their business.

MDN: Now is that the Hanscom Bakery?

WN: No, no. Hanscom was the family, they owned Godfrey and Hanscom. That was mostly out of Long Island, that's where that plant was, in Long Island. And they made cake.

MDN: Now were these bakery's unionized?

WN: Oh definitely.

MDN: So if you were in a bakery you had a union?

WN: I was a local [Inaudible] member. Over 70 years I guess, 75. But you had to be in a union. You couldn't work there at that time.

MDN: Now in terms of the sort of - -before we get to your teaching career - -what were the most, other than St. Augustine's Church, the most important cultural organizations in the neighborhood? Now you mentioned Forest Neighborhood House?

WN: Yes that was for kids that wanted to play like the bath house in Harlem and a Y or something that you could - - and George Gregory was - - but the first I ever knew - - I knew of the bath house at 134th St in Harlem, and when I realized that he came out of the bath house on 134th St and came up to Forest Avenue and him and a guy named Jackie Livingston I think, were the two guys up there.

MDN: Right. Now what was your first teaching assignment Margery?

MN: When I first started I used to do substitute teaching. And I used to do it on PS 10, which was Eagle Avenue.

MDN: Between where and where?

WN: Right down the hill as you go - -

MN: Down on 163rd St.

MDN: So you started teaching in the late 30's, substitute teaching or was it more like the 40's?

MN: I think it was later than that.

WN: We were married.

MN: Later than that. We were married in '42.

MDN: Oh you're married in '42. You met in '37 and married in '42.

MN: I think it must have been around what - - I don't remember.

WN: Well Darrell was born, Darrel was probably around four or five years old - -

MN: Well I'm trying to think of just when he - -

WN: Got to be in the 50's

MN: Got to be in the 50's when I started.

MDN: OK so in other words, first you had children.

MN: I had just one son. And then I started substitute teaching and after that I left and I went to -

-

WN: When we moved out here you went to the - -

MN: No, no. I'm talking in terms of when I left 10, I went to 51 and from 51 then I went - -

WN: Oh you went over to 51?

MN: Yes.

MDN: Now 51 is on what street?

WN: Right down the hill as you go down - -

MN: Eagle Avenue is a block over yes, so you walk to the next block.

MDN: That's a lot of schools next to each other.

WN: Those weren't the same schools that I was talking about.

MN: That was not next to 10, 10 was right off the corner of Eagle Avenue and - -

WN: 10 was on a hill right?

MN: 63rd. Yes. And then Eagle - - 51 was closer to Westchester.

MDN: Now by the 1940's when you got married did you then move to Tinton Avenue?

MN: Yes.

MDN: OK so you lived - -

MN: Before we lived at Tinton Avenue we lived on 163rd St, East 163rd St between Prospect and Union Avenue.

MDN: Now that was your first apartment?

WN: We didn't have an apartment.

MN: We lived with someone at first.

WN: That's when we first got married.

MN: Then we moved to an apartment on Tinton, 1105 Tinton Avenue where Andrea - -

MDN: Right now what year was that did you get your apartment? Was it after the war?

WN: It was when we got married.

MN: But we got married in '42.

WN: It was just about '43 just before Andy was born.

MN: '43 yes.

WN: What happened was her sister and her - - we were supposed to have a double wedding.

Their license came late, so I got married October 4th. And they got married October 11th. So that same month October - -well November we were in that apartment.

MDN: So you and your sister both got apartments in Tinton Avenue in the same building.

MN: Same building.

WN: No we were in the same apartment, two bedroom - -

MN: Same apartment at first and there was a two bedroom apartment, she had one bedroom, I had the other.

MDN: OK so you had two couples living in the same apartment.

MN: That's right.

WN: At one time.

MDN: And that's after you got married.

MN: That's right.

MDN: On Tinton Avenue.

MN: That's right.

MDN: And then eventually who moved down?

WN: Her sister had a daughter Andrea. Andy came along so I had to get an apartment, so I got a one bedroom apartment - -

MN: On the same floor.

WN: On the same floor.

MDN: Wow. OK so Andrea was born, and then your son - -

WN: '46.

MDN: OK and you were both - - the two families were living in the same building on the same floor. And the address was - - ?

MN: 1105 Tinton Avenue.

MDN: Off 166th St. [Crosstalk] And what floor were you on?

MN: We were - - one flight up.

WN: No Mary Corbin was one flight up.

MN: No two flights up.

MDN: You were on the second floor and Arthur Crier was on the fifth floor of the building.

WN: No Arthur Crier was up on - -

MN: He was on the other side.

WN: Oh yes he was on the other side.

MN: The building had - -

WN: Two entrances. Once you came in it's the one side - -

MDN: Now by the time you moved into the building was the neighborhood becoming predominately black or were there still a lot of white families around?

WN: No, there wasn't that much.

MN: There weren't that many whites around.

WN: It was - - there wasn't that many white families in there.

MN: Did they tell you about the bar on Union Avenue and 165th St, Hoffman's bar?

WN: Oh that was on 166th.

MDN: No, nobody told me about that, what's - -

WN: Well across the street from 1072 where I lived, there was a German who had two sons and he had Hoffman's bar, right there on the corner. And you know, you go up the block; you come off the train and right on the corner, over the bar - - so that was - -

MN: That was one of the - - but there weren't very many whites.

WN: No there wasn't very many whites.

MDN: So in other words, from the time your family moved in the early 30's to the - - the neighborhood started to change.

MN: That's right.

MDN: So by the 40's it was a predominately black neighborhood.

MN: I would think so in that area sure.

WN: Morris High School was all white.

MDN: When you first moved there.

WN: That place was white. No blacks there.

MN: That's where my sister went, to Morris, graduated from Morris High School.

MDN: Now when you were bringing up your kids in that building in Tinton Avenue, did you feel it was a safe neighborhood.

MN: Oh yes. But we didn't find there were any problems.

MDN: So it was a nice place to live.

WN: It wasn't a bad place. But with just the schools, he was getting ready into junior high school, I didn't like the school and we had to move.

MN: Well we moved to Long Island because his sister passed away and left money for him and had an older sister who already lived out in Rockville Center so we had - - we used to go out to visit her. And he just saw the house next door to her and he liked it.

WN: I asked her who it was, and you know who owned it. And she told me she called Mr. Andos over and we met and we agreed to the hand that he'd hold it for me. And then my other sister was very sick, I even took time off from the job to stay in the hospital with her and they sent me home that morning, I was staying nights with my sister - - older sister was a nurse - - and they sent me home but before I got home I had to come back because they knew she was dying, they didn't want to see her - - you know.

MDN: So did your children go to PS 23, your son go to PS 23?

MN: No.

MDN: He went to what - -

MN: What school did he go to?

WN: He went to the school up the street.

MN: I'm trying to think.

WN: 21 with Eileen. He went with Eileen Cabe.

MN: He went with Eileen Cabe but I can't - - I'm trying to think of the number of the school.

MDN: He didn't go to the same school as Andrea?

MN: No. He didn't go to 23 - - Maybe he did.

MDN: That was the one down the street on Union Avenue. [Crosstalk]

MN: Find out where 23 was. He went to 23 but up to a certain point then he went with Eileen Cabe to her school - - I had a friend whose mother lived on Union Avenue also, right across from

Hoffman's bar and she was teaching in a school and she said she thought he would do better at her school and she took him to her school. But I can't remember the number of the school.

MDN: Now you're trained as a teacher. Were you happy with the quality of the schools at Morrisania from what you know of them?

MN: I didn't know that much about them, but the ones that I did work in, they were fairly consistent with what they wanted of the students and how they went about it. And after I moved to Long Island I used to commute and come back to teach.

MDN: And you taught in the Bronx mostly?

MN: Yes. Well I taught in the Bronx and then when I moved I then did most of my teaching - -

WN: 57 I think you went to in Laurelton.

MDN: Right. Now in those days was the teaching philosophy very different then it is now?

MN: You can bet on that.

MDN: What are some of the differences between the way some of the schools - -

MN: Well to me, the differences were that it seemed as though when you expected a certain standard from the children you got more support from the parents and today, it seems as though parents are making more and more excuses for why their children can't perform or don't perform and if you tried to encourage them to see your way, point of view, they seem to resent it a lot. I just remember having classes where parents came in and they would ask me what could they do to get the children to come up to the standards that I wanted and there was much more cooperation.

MDN: And this was in the 50's and of course before.

MN: And of course I can just remember from my own experience with my mother; don't come home and tell her the teacher said this or said that and something was wrong with the teacher - the teacher was always right. And just don't come home and say the teacher wants you to come in to see her 'cause then I was in big, big trouble. It was the kind of situation when we grew up - - anybody in the neighborhood could tell my mother or my father something about what we did, we were in trouble.

MDN: And everybody was looking out for - -

MN: Everybody. Oh yes.

WN: But especially - - I knew I grew up, my mother had fourteen children, I'll tell you. The last four caught hell. [Laughs] Oh yes, she beat one, she'd beat four. That's the days when you could wip 'em.

MN: [Laughs] Today they'll take you to court.

MDN: Right. Now was there a different sense of dress? Did people dress differently?

MN: Oh definitely. I had to retire when I did because of my knee. I have arthritis in my knee and my classroom was on the fourth floor. And I just couldn't make the stairs. There's no way I could of worn slacks to school, so I was constantly trying to keep this knee warm, and when I look at what not only the kids, but the teachers wear today - -

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

MN: - - that you expect of the children you just can't get. It seems as though they are performing out on the streets. It's not - - but I keep thinking to myself I'm old fashioned, so - -

WN: You are. [Laughter] You are old fashioned.

MN: But even the kids, that I - - the women that I know that are not really teaching actively anymore but are doing programs along the same line of teaching will say the same thing. It's not the same. They prefer to be with younger children than the older ones.

MDN: The older children are disrespectful.

MN: Oh yes.

WN: She wasn't in schools today.

MN: But there's nothing you can do about it except hope that the parents see the error of their ways and become more active and more cooperative with the teachers.

MDN: Were PTA's important in the schools in the 30's?

WN: No, not too much.

MN: We had some, but they were not as - -

WN: They weren't as powerful as the ones - -

MN: - - they are now. Actually most of the parents at least in the schools that I taught, they worked. And to get to a PTA meeting wasn't an easy job, but I know when we had open school night that was a chance to really meet some of the parents and discuss with them. But another thing that surprised me quite a bit was to see the difference between foreign students and their parents and American students and their parents. I had a little girl who was German, her name was Goodwin, I can't remember her last name, and she was constantly asking questions and wanting to learn. And when I had open school night, her father came and it was almost like Heil Hitler, you know he was very formal but when I started to speak with him and I asked him how she was doing as far as language at home, he said he had a difficult time because she wanted to speak English and was practicing to speak English, but his mother lived with them and refused to

speak any English at all, so she had to revert to German as soon as she got home to talk to her grandmother, but she was a very, very studious child and she tried her very best. And she made some of the best progress of any of the children in the class at that time. But they really were gung-ho for learning, which was not completely the attitude of the American student; I don't know why but that's the way it was.

MDN: Now, talk a little bit about St. Augustine's Church. What were some of the different activities or clubs that they had there.

MN: Oh. We really enjoyed that church, not only did they have the basketball, but they had the different clubs and we had the choir and you had so many things where I met so many girls, just so many kids, that I made lifetime friendships with and of course it was a great place to meet boys. [Laughter]

MDN: OK so this was a church where a lot of the active young people and the people from I guess you'd call "positive" families would send their children.

MN: Oh yes, definitely.

WN: It was some place in the afternoon to go.

MN: And they had all kinds of meetings. They had Girl Scout's and all kinds of activities for young people and after school - -

MDN: Did they have dances there?

MN: Well I don't remember dances and such. We had parties but not dances and such. Maybe it came later 'cause I know that - -

MDN: Now did you go to - - they eventually had a summer camp, or was that later?

MN: That was later. I think - -

MDN: I think Andrea went to that camp.

MN: I didn't go to that camp.

MDN: Now did either of you have any contact with the Minisink program?

MN: I went to Minisink.

MDN: You did?

MN: I went to Minisink, Camp Minisink. I can remember the first year I went I was never so miserable in my entire life. [Laughter] I had never been away from home and when I went to Minisink, I guess because not only was it the first time, but I was so much older that they treated me almost like a counselor, and I was sort of like shut out of everything. I didn't enjoy it that much at all because I really - - but my mother and father just didn't want to me leave home. But I did go to Minisinc one year.

MDN: Now when you were a young woman, were you in any women's clubs or little groups that did things together?

MN: When I lived in Harlem I belonged to a club that used to meet - - what was the name of that club.

WN: Don't ask me.

MN: [Laughs] You wouldn't remember. But I belonged to this club. And they were a group of young ladies and they used to be on 123rd St at Dr. Marquez' house; Karma Club. And I used to belong to a club in the church that I belonged to when I lived in Harlem, All Souls Church, they had a club and it used to meet with the girls, but I never got that active until after I moved out to Long Island.

MDN: What about you William, were there any clubs you were in, in the Bronx or lodges?

WN: No I was into baseball so I used to travel from the Bronx to [Inaudible] two or three times a week to practice and for our games on the weekend. But I wasn't into joining clubs.

MDN: Now looking back at this whole experience in the Bronx before you moved to Long Island - - from the time you moved there, I guess for both of you it's close to twenty years or maybe in your case a little more, what are the highlights if you're talking about that neighborhood? The things you would remember best?

WN: Well I would remember Manhattan better for the simple reason: I had more activities as far as athletics was concerned. I played football; I had my outfit and everything. I played baseball, played stick ball, we made bows and arrows and things and take umbrellas you know, the ribs of them and tie them up and pick up the [Inaudible] - - and take all the needles off and shoot the bow and arrow and everything. And we always had [Inaudible] 5th Avenue bus used to run down there to [Inaudible] then go down 7th Avenue all the way down to the end and you know we used to take those rides and we'd go to the shoe store and to do things to the people who were riding the buses.

MN: [Laughs]

WN: We used to take mud cakes and throw them on the people sitting up in the bus. But we were kids.

MN: You used to go to the games too for free.

WN: Oh yes well we used to get in free because we knew how to go up the fence - -

MDN: You'd sneak into the [Inaudible]

WN: Oh every day. [Laughter] And then we had two fellows I don't know if you remember - Freddy Linson and Travis Jackson was the short stop and third basemen for the New York Giants. They used to carry a little bag every day, what was in it I don't know - - and we would watch them come down the steps [Inaudible] and back to the speed way and they go in the speed way and we used to ask "Let me carry your bags," and when we get down into the Polo Grounds you have to go through the turn style, they'd take you on the other side. They don't say nothing to the player and we're carrying the bag and we [Crosstalk] But there was only a couple of players that lived up there so the ones who got there first got the opportunity.

MDN: You spent more time in Manhattan when you were living in the Bronx.

WN: Well, I don't know. I was only in the Bronx for a short - - I mean in Manhattan for a short time. But mostly all my baseball experiences and things were done when I moved to the Bronx. I became more aware of baseball and well football I didn't play so much because we had no place to play.

MDN: What about you, what are your best memories, or most powerful memories of the Bronx?

MN: I think friends. I made some wonderful friends in the Bronx. Not that I didn't have wonderful friends or long lasting friends in Manhattan, but once I moved to the Bronx it was not as easy to keep in contact with them because you didn't get on the subway and travel that way, I had to do it for school so I didn't do it socially and I think that the friends that I made in the Bronx were wonderful because we had a lot of friends, the girl next door and the girls across the street and the church. The church group brought in a lot of young people.

WN: And Reverend Hawkins was the greatest.

MN: He was wonderful.

MDN: Now what do you remember about him, so many people - - I'm going to be meeting somebody next who's in charge of the Edler Hawkins Foundation. What made him so special?

MN: Well he was special because he was really good with young people. He really understood and enjoyed young people. When we would get together for groups and clubs and whatnot he was always part of it and he definitely was behind us all the way. And everybody seemed to flock. In other words, the church was not a place you avoided, the church was a place where you wanted to go and if you had a chance, that's where you went. And all of the young people seemed to flock around and he was particularly good with the boys and he had a lot of young men's groups so that it was wonderful to go there. And your parents felt good when you went to the church you see?

MDN: So he made it enjoyable for you and of course you were on your parent's good side.

WN: Well what I remember so much about him, he married us. And I didn't have no difficulty, but the parents didn't want to come, so we got married in - -

MN: We got married in his office.

MDN: Which parents didn't want to go?

MN: Mine.

MDN: They didn't want to come?

WN: They wouldn't come. They didn't agree that we should get married.

MN: They couldn't see anything good in him. [Laughter]

WN: So we did, we got married. I had my sister, my brother, and a friend of hers stood up with her and the last thing I said to her was "This will never be I told you so."

MN: And it got to the point where my mother - - when my father passed away

WN: And we've been married 62 years.

MN: Yes.

WN: And her mother and father are right there in Pine Lawn and I'm trying to get her to go over there with me so I can tell her "We're still together."

MDN: [Laughs]

MN: And if she answers, I'm out of there. [Laughs]

MDN: Did they eventually come around?

WN: Oh yes they came around. I won them over because when I went to - - see we retired in the West Indies, I built a home in the West Indies and everything - - and her father died in '72. Was it '72?

MN: Yes I think it was.

WN: And we went to Barbados, she went down for a wedding in '75 in December?

MN: Yes.

WN: And I sold the house at Rockland Center and I came down in '76.

MN: Then my mother came to live with us.

WN: But when she died she told her I was the best son in law she ever had.

MDN: Now your family is originally from Barbados?

MN: Yes.

MDN: And your family is originally from - -

WN: Virginia.

MDN: Do you still have relatives in Virginia?

WN: I don't know. [Laughter] I haven't seen them since I was four years old. I wouldn't know about it, I really wouldn't know. I know there's a lot of Nicholas', whether they're relatives of mine or not. I remember Walsh and Scott, that was my father's brother, so I know of them. But I don't know where they are. [Inaudible] My sister just died, she was what 92?

MN: Yes.

WN: So a year ago. 92, she was 92.

MDN: Now is there anything else that you would want to say, now on record that we have other than the fact that you've been married 62 years and have this wonderful life, anything else?

WN: I could tell you, it hasn't been easy. [Laughter] No I mean you don't get married and just think well that's it. You have to work on it.

MN: You got to work on it.

WN: Every day. I mean that worst thing [Inaudible] But there's nothing better to the point there's nothing that can happen that we can't sit down and talk about. That's what it's all about. If you don't take time out for that you're just not going to last. But I made sure that it would never be done.

MN: We've worked on it [Laughs], believe me.

WN: We're still working. We're happy. I've been retired; both of us have been retired 29 and 30 years. I retired in '75, she retired in '76.

MDN: And you've lived in the West Indies as well as here?

MN: Eleven years.

WN: Built a home [Inaudible]

MN: And then we realized that we weren't covered by social security and we had no protection -
-

WN: We had to come back.

MN: - - if anything happened - -

WN: No medical.

MN: - - so we decided to come back.

MDN: Right. And you bought this apartment.

MN: Yes.

WN: Not bought. I'm renting. I'm here before this was built, I came up and this was all a drawing board over there. And I picked this apartment and I was in Barbados twelve - - seventeen months I paid rent here and I was in Barbados, just to hold this apartment.

MDN: Now do you still own the house in Barbados?

MN: No.

MDN: So you sold that?

WN: You can't own anything in Barbados and live in New York

MN: No way. Even though we went back every year because we really liked it down there - - it was just a matter of - -

WN: At the time it was good. I wouldn't go there now to live, no way, too expensive.

MN: It was good because your dollar went further down there.

WN: That's what it is. It was good, I mean it was a good thing for us because that's probably why we're still here today. We relaxed for eleven years.

MDN: Much less stressful.

MN: Oh yes.

WN: And the water was right there - - walk out the house and walk up in the water you know. It was good. It had its good points, other than it became very expensive.

MDN: OK well thank you very much. This was a real pleasure.

[BREAK IN TAPE]

MDN: OK Mr. Nicholas, you're telling me something that no one else ever told me, namely that Billie Holiday used to drink at some of the bars on Boston Rd, and if you could elaborate a little bit.

WN: Well the one up there on Boston Rd and Prospect Avenue meet there was a bar and she used to come up there and sit down at the bar and drink. And she also used to go into Freddy's which was another bar.

MDN: Yes. I know where that is.

WN: Well, she used to go in there. The late evening, early morning - -

MDN: So this was in the late 40's or the 50's?

WN: Oh this was mid 40's or 50's.

MDN: OK anything else that you remember about Billie Holiday when she was up there?

WN: Only thing I know was that she was a drinker. She was as drinker I know that. But that's it.

MDN: Any other well known people?

WN: Well there's been a lot of people in and out. But I don't remember the names, I can't call the names off right now 'cause it's been such a long time.

MDN: OK, thank you. [END]