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Oral History Interview with Amy Ellenbogen
Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.01
Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali at Brooklyn Historical Society on July 21, 2016 in
Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn

ALI: So today is Thursday, July 21st. I am Zaheer Ali, oral historian at Brooklyn Historical Society. This is an oral history interview with Amy Ellenbogen. It is part of the Voices of Crown Heights project. I just stated your name, but I would like for you to introduce yourself on the recording by stating your name, your birthdate, and where you were born.

ELLENBOGEN: I'm so glad you didn't say my age, because I got that screwed up. I'm off by like a year or two. So, good morning. I am Amy Ellenbogen. I was born [date redacted for privacy], 1973. What was the last question?

ALI: Where were you born?

ELLENBOGEN: Oh, I was born in the Bronx. Yeah.

ALI: OK. So did you live in the Bronx?

ELLENBOGEN: No, my family's from the Bronx, and they moved to White Plains, sort of by accident. I think there are two things that have to do with that move. One was the building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, to your earlier point.

ALI: And, for the purposes of this recording, prior to the recording, we had a conversation about the role of transportation in shaping where people live, so, yeah.

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah. So, my mom and dad had a tremendous amount of Bronx pride, and didn't really want to leave -- the way they told me the story was that they didn't really want to leave the Bronx, but when the expressway came, it carved up the neighborhoods, had a direct impact on my grandfather's watch and jewelry store, and my aunt and uncle had moved to the suburbs and they started to look around. They also always cited cost; that they couldn't afford the Bronx anymore -- it was cheaper to move to White Plains, and so I grew up in White Plains, New York.

ALI: So tell me a little bit more about your family. Were you -- did you have siblings?

ELLENBOGEN: Yes, I have a brother, David Ellenbogen. He's a musician. And, my mom is a teacher, and she taught in the White Plains school district, and my dad is a rare book and manuscript librarian -- or he was, he's retired now -- at Columbia University.

ALI: OK. And is your brother older or younger?

ELLENBOGEN: He's younger.

ALI: OK, so you're the older kid.

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah.

ALI: How much age -- how much years are you--?

ELLENBOGEN: We were four grades apart.

ALI: OK, and where's your family from?

ELLENBOGEN: My, I have -- I am Eastern European descent. My grandparents on my dad's side were immigrants, my grandfather from Hungary and my grandmother from Poland, and they met at Communist camp -- she was attracted to him for the amazing watch that he had made with the hammer and sickle, like moving on the watch -- clever. And, my mom's side; also Eastern European descent. My grandfather was an immigrant, my grandmother was born here. My grandmother grew up in a Marxist household, where she and her father fought a lot about communism versus socialism. She always told this amazing story about this picture of Karl Marx in her house that she thought was her grandfather, and did not realize who it was, [laughter] and in many ways, I guess he was sort of the grandfather of the thinking of my family. My grandmother, Augusta Dropkin, had a very powerful influence on my life. She was a nurse, and she worked at the God Box uptown, and also was a visiting nurse, and had multiple jobs all her life -- very outspoken person, very wacky, had an incredible memory, and incredible visual memory, which is incredible, because she was blind for the last 15 years of her life, and lived alone, blind, for the last 15 years of her life. And, she went to nursing school in Crown Heights, and my grandfather had been a teacher, and then ultimately worked for the teacher's union -- her husband. He was a violent person, and sort of unliked in my family, and was violent towards her, and episodically,

she would stay with our family if the violence was too bad, and I -- I think that her experience, her incredibly loving nature, her politics, you know, sort of -- I try to carry that with me. She was someone who talked about love constantly, sang about love, sang out of tune about love, and introduced herself to pretty much everyone by saying that she was a Jewish humanist atheist. And, she went to Unitarian Universalist church every week, and as she got older, she would grab hold of people, particularly anyone who would disagree with her -- religious people, and, you know, clutch onto them, and defend her atheism, and try to get them to defend God. [laughter] And she had many, many friends-- especially after my grandfather died-- like, people really circled around her, and cared for her. Yeah, so she was phenomenal. I have one little story about her that just is-- I mean, there's so many stories about her, but-- she listened to NPR all day, so she was very well informed, and my brother, who's kind of -- you know, musician, head in the clouds, artist type, you know, always performing really late, sleeping late into the day kind of guy, gets woken up one day from his apartment - - I don't think it was Inwood, but in that area. His phone was ringing, and his phone was ringing, and my grandmother's saying, "There's a fire in the building next door to you. Get up!" And he's like, "What, what?" So, you know, and she'd been, like, hearing this on the news, and got him up, and got him out of the house. So, yeah, she was incredible.

ALI: What were the years that you-- your grandmother's in your life?

ELLENBOGEN: I mean, she was there until -- when did she die? Only a few years ago. It's probably been three years. She lived into her nineties, and she was always calling and singing love songs. [laughter]

ALI: Do you remember any -- did she have a favorite song?

ELLENBOGEN: So, yes. I mean, she had like a medley of songs that she would string together. She would know maybe 10 to 12 words of songs, you know, and she always sang to me "Once in Love with Amy," and she would -- she would, it was sort of -- I could do it, I mean, she'd be like, "Once in love with Amy / Always in love with Amy / Life is just a bowl of cherries / You live and laugh all day / nah nah nah," you know like,

[singing] "Ha ha ha la," like she had this whole medley of songs. [laughter] Yeah.

ALI: Now, you mentioned her experiences with your grandfather. How old were you when you -- I'm interested, did you know what was happening? Like, how old were you when she'd come stay with your family? Like, did you understand at the time, did you know what was that -- what's happening?

ELLENBOGEN: So, my mom always had a difficult, intense relationship with her mother, and that -- my mom's an only child. I think it was very, very difficult to grow up in the house where there was so much violence, and general, like, eclectic weirdness. You know, my grandmother [laughter] never cooked -- like, you know, she just was always marching to her own drum, and I think that like sometimes, the features that make a grandmother awesome could make a mom more difficult, [laughter] you know. My grandmother also would interview everybody about their heritage, and I remember going through a phase where I would just die when we'd go to -- she went to diners. She never cooked, and we would go to diners, typically Greek diners, and, you know, she'd grill people -- the waiter, she'd be like holding on to his arm and asking him about his heritage, and then she'd be like, "Oh, do you know Dr. Anokopolias?" and I'd be like, oh my God, not every single Greek person knows each other, and then he'd be like, "Oh yes, that's my uncle," and I was like, "What?" Like, that's not supposed to happen, you know. And she was like amazing about connecting people, like, tremendous connector. But anyway, I sort of in those moments could be like, oh, I see how this could be hard if this was your mom. So there was a lot of tension between them, and my mom, you know, shared carefully about what it was like to be a child growing up in a domestic violence home, and also, sort of attributed her own challenges and failures as a parent to that -- not, not just as a parent, but as, you know, a person. And, so I was aware of it, and then I remember her coming when I was in middle school, and, you know, episodically. My grandmother would talk about it, and she'd always say, "Oh, Lou," you know, "He's crazy, something must have happened to him," you know, "But we always love each other," you know, and later, and, I think, working in the domestic violence field for a while, it was only then that I could see how typical that dynamic and that

pattern, you know, was. I think, as a child, it seemed like something that was exceptional, and then it was interesting to understand that in the context of a very clear dynamic and pattern.

ALI: You mentioned that your grandmother -- I'm going to move this back just a little bit, because I don't want you to feel that you have to -- because it picks up, so, you're good. You mentioned that your grandmother identified herself as a "Jewish humanist atheist." How did you identify yourself growing up?

ELLENBOGEN: Oh, interesting. So, my family did not bring me into like a religious education until I sort of began to demand it. They didn't have any Jewish practices that they followed, but also didn't have any secular, Christian practices. And I ultimately started to find that very confusing, and I was so jealous of Christmas. I mean, ultimately, it kind of boiled down to, like, Christmas. Like, "Seems like an awesome thing, why don't we get it?" And my parents are like, "Because you're Jewish." And I'm like, "Well, what do we get?" you know? [laughter] And, my parents have this story about how they -- it feels like so untrue, but, you know, those myths make your family history -- but, like, they went out in the middle of the night trying to find a menorah, to, like, begin to teach me, you know, "This is what you get. You get Hanukkah." And they found a synagogue, and there was a man in the synagogue, and he gave them a menorah, and they were kind of like moved by that, and from there, you know -- I love stories, I love singing -- like, I kind of was into the idea of, you know, learning more. And, we joined a Reconstructionist synagogue. So, you know, Reconstructionism is more egalitarian between men and women, and has a belief that the religion should adapt and change, but also, that Jews are not the chosen people, and I understood later that Reconstructionism had sort of been born out of a way to combat antisemitism -- at least, that is what I read [laughter] -- and that the founder of Reconstructionism felt like one of the fundamental reasons that antisemitism, you know, persists, is this idea of, again, of exceptionalism. So, I wasn't taught that meta part as a child, but I just didn't know too much about that piece of Judaism. You know, and it was a small synagogue, so, yeah -- so I identified as Jewish. And the other sort of

piece of my Jewish identity, I think, had to do with my nose. In the suburbs that I grew up in, it was other people who identified that, like, I had like a big, Jewish nose, and I didn't really understand that, or notice it myself. It was, sort of like, information from others.

ALI: So, do you remember when you started attending synagogue? Like, how old were you?

ELLENBOGEN: I think I was in third grade or fourth grade, around then. And, I loved like the Greek myths, and learning about gods and goddesses of other cultures, and I think that, like, the learning the Bible stories just, sort of like, folded right in there.

ALI: You mentioned -- so part of your identity as a Jewish person was from -- coming from within, but a part was also imposed upon you, in the sense of how people identified your physical features. Do you remember the first time that it happened, and what was your response when someone said something to you about that?

ELLENBOGEN: I don't really have a clear memory of, like, the first time. I remember it being, like, a bigger issue when I got to like middle school, and there was, like -- I also, like, felt a lot of dissonance. There was, like, a lot of people who were like, "Oh, you big-nose, big-nose, big-nose," or whatever, and I'd, like, look at myself and be like, "Really, do I have a big nose? It seems fine to me," but, you know. [laughter] And I think White Plains is a diverse suburb. I think -- you know, there may be about -- I don't know what it was at the time, but like 14% African-American, a high percent of Latinos. It's really, it's really diverse, and there was a group of, you know, of-- there was a lot of Jewish people. Something that I think is really important about my childhood, and really impacted me, was that-- two things happened. First of all, the elementary school that I went to had busing, and when I was very young-- the way I recall it-- my family had one car, which was unusual in the suburbs, and my dad would drive, and my mom was home with me, and we had to walk to school, which was a long walk for a little kid, and it was uphill. [laughter] And then, these, like, buses would come, filled with Black kids. And, my interpretation of that, at the time, was of something that Black kids got that I did not get, in two ways. One, the idea of riding a bus was, like, so cool, like I wanted to be on the big yellow bus, it seemed really fun. And, just, you know, separately, I was

like, "Why do we have to walk, when they come on the bus?" Like, that's -- you know, whatever. So, that was confusing. And, my first friend was one of the kids who came on the bus, Dorian Bank -- she was very sweet and quiet. I'm Facebook friends with her now, but I [laughter] haven't talked to her in years. And, I remember feeling confused about why she could come to my house, but that, like, I didn't have playdates at her house, and she lived in the housing projects. And, I don't know -- you know, I remember sort of overhearing my mom talk to other people about the struggle, being like, "I want her to go to a playdate, like, over there -- how do we, how do we navigate that?" But then, another school -- I don't know exactly the politics, but it was either rezoning, or something happened, and first grade, a heap of wealthier kids joined the school, and at that point, I really felt class and race tensions a lot, so it was like first grade. And the kids who joined in first grade just were much more clothing-oriented. Like, you know, my family just do not value consumerism. I grew up in a house where there was almost no TV, late into my life, no rock and roll music, no popular culture, and maybe in part because of a political stance of my parents, but also just like a lack of interest, desire, or affinity, and just a very practical -- you know, I don't think either of them thought it would be important for me to fit in in any way, and, you know, it's sort of understandable looking at my grandmother, who was sort of like flamboyantly an outsider, and my mom, who has her own sort of artistic leanings. Like, to be in this suburb, you know, where conformity was really important for many people, and I was like an unwilling -- not unwilling, but like I didn't even know that I wasn't like conforming to the expectations of the school -- of the other kids, you know? So, that was a little bit hard. It was very hard. It got harder. But also, by first grade or second grade, they had tracking in the school, which ultimately re-segregated the very integrated school. So, there would be some classes that you would have that were mixed, in terms of race, and then for, you know, reading and math, or whatever, we were divided. And it was clear to me, even at -- you know, in first grade, that not only were we segregated by race, but by class, because, like, the Black kids -- there were not too many, but a few -- who lived in houses, would be in the higher-level classes, and the

kids who came from the projects would be in the lower-level classes, and I was in the lower-level class, so I was one White -- I was the only White Jewish kid in the lower-level classes. There were other White kids, but there was always like a "but" about that kid -- but his dad owns the pizza shop, you know, like he's not like a professional person, or something like that. And, I did not like that, and I remember having like a lot of questions, like -- and of course the questions didn't have any analysis to them, so the questions were, like, "Why are all the Jewish kids smarter than everybody else?" Like, "Why am I Jewish, and I'm not as smart as everybody else?" And, I think those questions really drove me to think a lot about this, how some lack of trust in the organizational -- in the structural decisions that were made, and how they were made -- because I didn't feel like I was in the right place -- yeah. This was a long answer to a question that you asked. [laughter]

ALI: No [inaudible]. What was the name of that school?

ELLENBOGEN: Ridgeway Elementary School. Yeah.

ALI: And, what high school did you go to?

ELLENBOGEN: White Plains High School. There's only one in White Plains that's public.

ALI: How would you describe -- you mentioned your friend Dorian. How would you describe, growing up, your social circle? Who were your friends?

ELLENBOGEN: Right. So, I feel like that's very sad. Like I don't, I don't really think I had any friends [laughter] 'til high school. I really struggled to, like, -- to, like, fit into a space, and I think I only really got a group of solid friends in high school, yeah. And, you know, some of it, I think, had to do with really being kind of awkward myself, and a kind of obliviousness to those social, like, mores -- and I think that helps me in my work now, in some ways. Like, I can kind of, like, miss some of the messaging that is probably being said to me, so that's, like, me, internal self. And a lot of it, I think, also -- like, I don't think my parents thought to do things that I see now that other people do, like create friends with parents of kids who are other kids, you know, your age, or set up playdates, or let your kid have the -- I remember like Benetton. Like, there were, like, things that you do so that a, you're not, like, obviously picked on, and b, so that you

message that, like, I could be part of the group. So, you know, I didn't fit into the kids in my class because of those identity issues. I didn't really fit in with the other kids. I just sort of had trouble finding a place. Yeah.

ALI: So, when you did find your place, what was that place?

ELLENBOGEN: Well, I was extremely busy in high school. I mean, once I had the ability to have my own independence, and be, like, a joiner. I was a big joiner, [laughter] and a person who started things. So, one of the things I feel proud of is that I started a theater club in my high school, and it happened because we had a very small theater world at the school. There was one fall play, and one spring musical, and one year, the fall play cast four people, and I was just, like, outraged, because White Plains High School's a big high school. Like, there's hundreds and hundreds of kids, and I thought, "I'm just going to start a theater club, and the deal will be: There'll be a way for anybody who joins to be able to act -- we'll, like, write in parts -- like, that's what this is going to be." And it was called Theater Unlimited. And when I think about it now, I'm kind of like blown by my own -- *cojones*? I don't know. I had never been in a play. I had never even seen a show -- like, I'd never -- I had, like, nothing, no experience, and I started this group. We picked the play *The Man Who Came to Dinner* as our first show. We rehearsed in the hallways of the building -- we had no support from the administration in the beginning, but ultimately, through organizing, and parents getting involved, and all this stuff, we got -- you know, we got a space, and then a teacher who would sit there who was an incredible woman. And, Theater Unlimited still exists, and, I remember my brother, who was there four years later, saying to me that he really hated that I'd started Theater Unlimited, because it had made a place for the kids who were nobody to feel like they were somebody. And that really was like an intense thing to say, because on the one hand, I was like, "Oh, my gosh, my brother was probably -- like -- [unintelligible], [laughter]. "That's crappy," like, "Dave, don't think that," and then on the other hand, being like, "Wow, that's amazing." And it was so true -- it sort of was a magnet for the kids in the school who really hadn't found, like, their people. And we were like a complete open door. And it was big right away. And in fact, a couple years

ago, when I took my son to kindergarten; it turned out that a guy who was bringing his daughter to kinder— to kindergarten too, had been in Theater Unlimited a few years after me, and I knew him a little bit -- you know how it is, like, when you're senior and someone's a sophomore -- you're like, "Uh" -- reproducing that same hierarchical thinking. So, I saw his wife not too long ago, and she said he still has that Theater Unlimited shirt, and it's so soft, and, like, it means so much. It's so amazing to me to have sparked that -- like, to have thought of it, and just done it, and then it's like its own thing that I, like, know nothing about, you know, at all. I'm, like, not— I don't— and it's been like that. So, that's just an incredible experience, and I know that some of the people in that first group went on to do theater, and become performers, and, like -- it's just amazing. So -- so those were those people, and then I was also a part of student government, and I worked on a literary magazine, and I -- I can't even re-- I mean, like, every club. I was like a club person. [laughter]

ALI: And so, out of high school, you then went to college at Columbia. Tell me about your decision to go to Columbia.

ELLENBOGEN: Oh, that's a funny question. So, I had not really even wanted to apply to Columbia. And, in fact, my college advisor, Ms. Holloway, had told me there was no chance that I could get in, and she didn't recommend me applying. And I think -- I think about that a lot. She -- well, for another time. But anyway -- but my dad, you know, was a librarian there, and there was tuition exemption. And, I didn't want to go to Columbia for a lot of reasons. One, I did not want to be in New York City. I wanted to be away from New York City. I had no desire to be part of the core curriculum. That wasn't my interest at all. And, I didn't like the elitism, and I wanted -- I didn't like the elitism, I was like, "I want to go to a SUNY school," like I really wanted to go to a state school. But I also was kind of attracted to some of those little, like, idyllic -- you know, like Haverford and Vassar and Wesleyan -- like, there was like -- you know, I'd go there and be like, wow, this could be cool, to have this little, like utopia-like kind of thing going. But, as I did my college tours, I was really struck by the lack of diversity. Having gone to White Plains, it was something I was accustomed to, and we talked

about a lot, and I thought about it a lot— a lot, a lot, I— there was a whole part of my history where I tried to get rid of tracking, and organizing internally within the schools to change that, and I was influenced by a teacher, Ms. Altman -- Miss Altman -- who later, I found out, was one of the first teachers to be part of Peggy McIntosh's SEED group -- Peggy McIntosh wrote this article in 1989 called "Unpacking the White Knapsack of Privilege" -- "Invisible Knapsack of Privilege," which was like a real watershed article in helping White people understand White privilege, and it was amazing to me to hear Peggy McIntosh speak one time, and talk about how she started SEED at this time, and I knew that Miss Siegel had been part of it -- and I was like, "Wow, you— it's incredible to see—" Like, you think your ideas are your own, or that they, you know [laughter] -- but they're not. Like, it's all coming from different places, and from other influences, and I'm just a product of my time and my place and my upbringing, and all the thinkers that— whose ideas are like percolating down. So, anyway, there I was, going on these college tours, and when I got to Columbia, where I'd come before -- obviously, my dad worked there, and we used to go annually -- I was always on the school newspaper. There was this, like, high school newspaper conference that Columbia hosted that I came to every year, and it was kind of the highlight of my year, because it was a different type of learning, and it suited me. And I got to the Columbia campus, and I was like, "Ah! Black and brown people!" And it just was more vibrant, and it felt right. But still, like, all those other things sort of weighed out, you know, and I went in for an interview, and—completely unprepared for interviews— and, of course, the first question that the woman asked me was, "Why do you want to come to Columbia?" And I said, "Oh, actually, I don't." [laughter] And, as those words came like flying out of my mouth, I was like, "What?" I knew that's not what you're supposed to say at a college interview. I was like speaking -- I was just like, "I don't want to go here." And then I did, I did this pivot, which was also true, you know, I— "I didn't, I don't— I didn't want to come here, but then I started to see how, like, society is segregated, and, like, I'm excited by the diversity of Columbia," and, you know, the interviewer -- she was a White woman -- got very interested and excited

about this, and we had, like, a great conversation. I don't know if that's why I got into Columbia, but that's what I think got me into Columbia, because it wasn't my scores or my grades. They were fine. My scores were terrible -- not terrible, but they were below average -- my SAT scores, and my grades were, you know, like, I don't know -- A minus, you know. But, I had, you know, founded Theater Unlimited, which had an afterschool program that we created for kids, and it was very robust and I, and I had started with some other people this social justice newspaper -- I don't even remember the name of it. So, you know, I think the combination of being an activist, and creating things, and, you know, this analysis, might have been what, you know, got me in. And then, I remember-- really when I got in, like-- trying to decide what to do, because I had always really wanted to go to SUNY Binghamton. That felt, like, right to me, for many reasons. It seemed culturally right. I was scared to go to an elite institution; put off by it. It was hard to, like, say, "Oh, we're going to choose to pay?" because it would be free at Columbia, and Columbia would pay for 50% of my tuition wherever I went. So, like, to pay for, like, this public education, versus, like, a free private education seemed like a hard decision, but my parents were, like -- you know, helped me think it through. And then I remember one of my mom's friends saying that I would meet a husband who would be more, you know, economically -- I don't know, I mean, basically, she was like, "You'll meet a richer boy there," which was like this horrifying thing to say. [laughter] But-- Then, like, I did meet my future partner at Columbia, [laughter] and, yeah. I just want to say, my parents were really strict, and did not let me go to prom, and didn't let me go to prom my junior year, because they -- my dad believed that I would stay up late, and my circadian rhythms would be mixed up, and I would do badly on the SATs, and, like, to this day, will stand by that argument, and be like, "If you had gone to prom, you wouldn't have gotten into Columbia, and you wouldn't have met James," and, like, you know [laughter]. Yeah, and it's only like now that I'm kind of getting over being ingrate about that decision, [laughter] anyway.

ALI: So you were at Columbia from '91 to '95?

ELLENBOGEN: Actually, I took an extra semester, so, yeah.

ALI: OK, so you started in--

ELLENBOGEN: I started in '91.

ALI: One of the organizations that you were involved in, or helped to found, was called ROOTED. Tell us a little bit about what ROOTED was, and what motivated you to found it.

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah. I'm going to ignore that question for a second, because I didn't find, found -- I went back to Columbia in 1998 for my social work degree, and I founded it in 1991. So, what's significant about going to Columbia in 1991 is -- for our conversation -- is that August of 1991 was when the violence occurred in Crown Heights, and August of 1991 was when I left to go to Columbia. And, I really believe that my understanding and analysis of what happened then would have been completely different if I had gone in 1992, or in 1990. And the reason for that is, your-- at Columbia, as in many colleges-- your first year of school, the dorms are set up, you know, either randomly or by design, but without much of your input. And so, that self-segregation process begins in your next year, when you found your people, and you remove yourself from people who may be different from you in their thinking and outlook. And so, in 1991, I was incredibly fortunate to live next door to an African-American guy named Matthew Soden, who is now a doctor in Oakland. And, he had a -- he had a very strong analysis and understanding of race and racism. He had gone to boarding school, was, you know, well-read beyond, like, anything I knew, so even though I had a pretty decent public school education, it was a shock to go to private school, where, like, in my classes, we'd read like a chapter a week and discuss them, and then we went to college, and they're like, "OK, so you'll finish the *Iliad* by next week," you know. And, like, Matt had -- I remember he read like *Soul on Ice* -- like, he was reading all this stuff on top of like what was expected. [laughter] It was so mind-blowing to me that the expectation could be so, so much higher than where I could imagine. It was hard to keep up. So, I remember -- and so technology was different in those days, and there was a TV at the end of our hallway in our dorm. We lived on -- I lived in Carmen on the sixth floor, and, you know, a bunch of us from all over the United States with different political

ideologies would sit and watch the news together, and comment on it, and, you know, Matt would see and hear different things than I did, and we talked a lot, and he, like, busted open my mind. And, you know, one of the things that really stood out for me was his analysis of the commentators. And, I think I said this to you before when the pre-interview -- like, I can't remember if this was like Rodney King, or whatever, but we were watching people rioting, and the announcer was saying that, "There's no excuse for this," or "There's no--" Like, this ongoing mantra of, of dismissing the behavior of the, of the people. And, Matt was saying, like, you know, like, "How can they be so dismissive of this?" Like, just, "This is so one-sided," or whatever, and just helping me see that, like, there's another [laughter] -- there's another side here. And, also, like, media criticism -- like, there was just so much happening in those moments while we were taking in this information. I had very little exposure to TV news -- like, none. And, like, sort of all the sudden watching it, and having somebody not only watch it, but critique it; so, many, many conversations about race, and identity, and about what was happening, and it was very confusing to me as a Jewish person who had been taught that the history of Blacks and Jews were similar, and aligned, and that we'd always work together, and that we were different in the United States in terms of our, of our access, and in the way we were treated, and that it was more similar to that of the African-American experience -- that was sort of, kind of either explicitly taught, or understood, and then this was happening, and I knew not too much about the community. Although I had been to Crown Heights before, and had spent a weekend in Crown Heights -- as part of my Jewish education, my synagogue would take every year -- we would go as a trip, and also to spend a Shabbos weekend living with a family. And also, we had very good family friends who, their -- the father had grown up Lubavitch in Crown Heights, and then, when he married his wife, who was also Jewish but not from the community, they had, you know, cut him off from the rest of the family. And, we had -- we would do Passover with that family every year, and they were around a lot, and he still culturally had a lot of the vibrancy that the Hasidic Jewish community brings to Judaism. So, the community was not unknown to me, and it was

held in a, in a bit of a place of reverence -- not without conflict, because it was like shocking to me that this man's family would have a funeral for him when his wife was a, you know, lovely person -- you know, like that complicated it -- but I certainly was taught that these are people that are doing Judaism in a deeper, more profound way, with, you know, like above us. You know, like, they're doing it the right way, or whatever. And so that was kind of what I had-- I, like, had in my head. And then, there we were, watching the news, and then followed by that, Leonard Jeffries, and so much conversation about Blacks and Jews; like, so much. [laughter]

ALI: So, when you-- tell me what your -- do you remember the first time you heard about what happened in Crown Heights, what you were doing, what your response was?

ELLENBOGEN: I don't remember when I first, when I first heard of it. I mean, also, it was like an amazing summer for me, the summer before -- going to college. My parents left me alone for the first time, and within days, I had my first boyfriend. You know, it was like, "Oh, I have some freedom -- this is what happens when, like, your --" You know, I guess that must have just -- so, you know, and then he was going to his school, we were like figuring that out, and then, what I remember was sort of tension in the air about moving into a place -- I mean, people didn't know if New York City was going to completely erupt into, you know, violence, and I don't really remember, but I remembered enough that, like, when we all were arriving around that time, that people's parents -- you know, especially people who didn't know New York at all -- were particularly fearful about their babies going to Harlem, you know. You know, so, I don't really remember. It's, it's-- yeah.

ALI: There was -- you mentioned that in the air, certainly there were lots of conversations about Blacks and Jews, and August of '91 is Crown Heights -- and race in general. In April of '92 are the responses to the Rodney King verdict. I think it was in the spring of '92 when Leonard Jeffries gave his Empire State speech, right?

ELLENBOGEN: Yes.

ALI: What -- as a Jewish woman in college, what was your response to or feeling about all of these things?

ELLENBOGEN: Oh, so much heartache and conflict, and, you know, tears and questioning -
- I mean, my actual response was that I ended up designing my own major, which was called "Unequally Empowered People of the United States of America," [laughter] and what, the way that came about was, I -- in those days, you'd get this book called the blue book, which had all the course listings, and I wanted to figure out what I wanted to do, and I circled all the classes that I wanted to take, and they were always like "Race, Gender, and Class in Anthropology," "Race, Gender, and Class in Early American History," "Race, Gender, and Class in--" You know, and I was like, "How can I -- I don't want to choose to do just history, that doesn't feel right to me," and I didn't want to like -
- you know. So every single thing, you know, had race, gender, and class, so I was like, "Oh, I want to study inequity, and power dynamics," and I went to the committee on instruction, and asked to create my own major. And again, I'm like -- I think about this -
- if you know anything about Columbia, it's like rigid, uptight, and known for its bureaucracy, but I just didn't even, like question -- like, I was like, "I want to do this, and let me -- like, they should have a course that brings all these things together." They did not have an Ethnic Studies department at the time. That was another battle. And I remember being really surprised; they were like, "OK, you fill out this form, and then you have to find an advisor," and I went to an advisor, and he's like, "Nope, I don't support this -- like, I think you should either study literature," and I was like, "OK, let me find someone else." And eventually, I-- my advisor was a man named Richard Bushman, a historian. Do you know him? Oh my gosh -- amazing. He was so supportive, and kind, and also a Mormon, which factors in, I'm sure. So, he-- I-- but then, I had to find a department that I'd write my thesis for, and ultimately, no department really wanted to take me in, because I guess they don't get money, because I'm not really -- like, I don't know, like politics that I didn't understand. But, the Women's Studies Department took me in. So, I got my own major. [laughter] And I think that, like, ultimately, of all the things that I learned from Columbia -- so, so many -- I learned that you can get what you want in a bureaucracy by, like, you know, advocating for yourself, and just doing it. And, I think I was told that nobody had

created their own major at Columbia in the past 17 years, and there was one other person who was doing something on, like, environmentalism and architecture -- you know, some weird combination of things, which isn't weird anymore. But -- so that was my actual response. And there were so many other things going on, you know, just to highlight -- at Columbia, there was a moment where they were going to end need-blind admissions, which was -- and students organized in protest. That was in '92. Ben Jealous was one of the leaders of that, and then became the head of the NAACP. And then, there was success around that, but it was really old school -- like, taking over a building, and classes shut down, and, you know -- took over Hamilton -- and then, after that, Columbia had bought the Audubon Ballroom, where Malcolm X had been assassinated, and there was organizing to try to not turn it into some science building, or something like that. So, those conversations, very locally on Columbia's campus about need-blind, about what it means for an important historical site of such significance to the Black community and beyond to be turned over to a different purpose -- you know, we had many micro-conversations about those things, but they were having-- happening in the context of Leonard Jeffries', you know, language, and, you know, those ideas of the sun people, and the ice people, and Jews in the media. And, that conversation -- Jews in the media -- was one that we talked about so, so much, and, you know, I think my understanding of that and beliefs around that have changed so much. You know, I lived in LA. There are a lot of Jews in media, [laughter] you know, but I didn't understand. Like, I didn't even know what the media was, because my parents had, you know, really sheltered me from it. And, a sidebar -- Leonard Jeffries -- the position, the person who held it before him, Dr. Edmund Gordon, his wife was a very good friend of my grandmother's. She's a pediatrician, and they had a very close connection, and as I was always talking with my grandma about these things, she was always saying, like, "You should talk to Dr. Gordon," or whatever, which never happened, and I don't think I even really underst-- Like, I had like a dismissiveness about my grandmother that I sort of didn't realize until, like, way later -- I was like, "Oh, she was talking about her. Interesting." Anyway, so--

ALI: So, I guess I've got to look at our topic list to make sure we, kind of, cover stuff. All right. So, we covered some of your responses. So, ROOTED was founded while you were an undergrad, or a graduate?

ELLENBOGEN: No, in graduate.

ALI: OK, so let's -- so what drew you to graduate school in social work?

ELLENBOGEN: I'm also going to back up and say one thing else. I was very active in Columbia in the early creation of an anti-violence center, right -- the rape crisis center. And again, rape crisis centers in the early '90s were popping up all over, and this question of consent, and "no means no," and all these things were -- and the year before me, there'd been a very active group of students who had paved the way. But then I was part of the first cohort of people to be trained in how to do rape crisis response. And the framework that we were building; we were trying to embed an anti-racist approach, and an understanding of anti-racism, and I think that's just important for sort of where I ended up going, and I worked at the rape crisis center a lot, and, you know, so many -- We operated kind of as a collective, so that was my experience of collective decision-making and consensus. It was a consensus-driven process, so that kind of experience, which is challenging, and -- you know, again, you're in college, everyone's crying all the time, and -- and also trying to understand the special place for people who have personal experience with a-- within a cause, and the role for outsiders to be supportive and allies. And, I just learned so much, particularly from someone who always seemed years ahead of me, but wasn't that much older, a woman named Maura Bairley; who is still active in Brooklyn, and doing incredible anti-violence and gender-based violence work, and she ultimately ran the rape crisis center professionally, you know, after college. So, that -- and then I also ran Women's History Month, co-led it with a woman named Sharon Brous, who is now Rabbi Sharon Brous, who is a leader of IKAR, which is a-- which is in Los Angeles, and it's -- she's always named like in the top ten most influential rabbis of United States. I mean, she's an incredible social justice thinker, and it was incredible to be -- we were in the same year, and I learned so much from her, and we were involved in Take Back the Night, and she did a lot of that, and

one of the actions that we did together was -- you know, at the-- at Butler Library, carved into the library are the names of foundational philosophers and thinkers, and we created one with women's names and, and covered it up, which was a huge project, and amazing, and later, when I was in social work school, at the culminating class of a class in policy and social justice change, my teacher put up a photograph of that, and said that he had -- you know, and he's like, "And this is what you can do -- a moment, an action can change the way a person sees a space forev--" And I was like, "Ohh, I did that!" You know, like, I was sort of spacing out in back of the class, and I was like, "Oh, my gosh, that's so cool and amazing," and it was definitely -- I should not take credit at all, it was like Sharon all the way -- you know, I was like there painting, and helping, but -- you know, and then it ripped, because it was super windy, like, the second day, and the administration was really mad, because it was like flapping in the wind. Anyway, I learned a lot about metal grommets in that process. So -- so the point is, I had this undergraduate experience that was so much thinking about these topics, and influenced by incredible, mostly African-American thinkers; Cornell West, you know, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde -- oh, my gosh, Audre Lorde -- Judith Butler -- you know, all these incredible thinkers, and when I graduated from college, I was like, "I'm going to start my own organization to talk about these topics," so -- I don't know. And, I had also done something called Peace Games, where you go into the schools and teach conflict resolution. So, again, reproducing all that activism in high school, and in college, I had been part of like this musical theater that did social justice for kids, and stuff -- like, I don't know, I was so busy. Not too, too academically inclined. [laughter] And, you know, I craved to reproduce those conversations that Matt Sowden, and I, and many others on that floor had when the '91 experience happened, and when Leonard Jeffries -- I really think he came to Columbia, actually -- maybe you can fact-check me on this -- and gave a speech, and that, I remember protests, and I remember feeling very conflicted about the protests, because, like, "Why? Don't you want to hear what someone has to say, and then critique it? And, like, why keep someone out?" And I didn't fully understand that people were paying resources for that, and that came up a

lot when we were planning Women's History Month and we were trying to choose who our speakers were going to be, and who we would give our money to, to speak, and that there was a debate about Camille Paglia, and Andrea Dworkin, and stuff like that -- just, you know, to bring things back. Anyway, so I really wanted that, and I wrote an Echoing Green grant to try to create the program, which I named ROOTED. James Luria, my partner, came up with the name. And, like, designed this whole program, and brought it around to different people to get opinions. I remember actually meeting with Michelle Fine, and getting her opinion on it. I just, again, like I had this way of being like, "Oh, I have something to offer, I'm just going to like call people up." And, it was a different time, you know? Like, I literally called up Michelle Fine -- I'm like, "Can I meet with you?" I met with her, and she was nice. Anyway, so my first year of social work school -- it's a two-year program -- I worked in the Bronx, Fordham-Tremont Community Mental Health Center, working with peop-- you know, in their family violence department, and I really focused on young girls who were in statutory rape cases. It was insanely confusing to me, because I had come from the rape crisis movement where you said, if no, "No means no." And these were girls who, in therapy, would say, "I wanted to have sex with him, but my parents are-- didn't want me to." Like, where does consent come in when you're dealing with a minor? And the cases were really different. Like, sometimes it would be like a 14-year-old and, like, a 17-year-old-- or something, you know, there was a lot. It was just confusing. And sometimes, the parents were involved in these cases, and then they would try to say, like, "Well, if you marry my daughter, then it's OK," and there were all these cultural issues, and -- it was, again, really complicated. And my second year, I put down that as my-- one of my choices that I would -- I really wanted to work at the Gay Lesbian Center, and work with young queer teenagers; that was my first choice. But somewhere on there, I put down that I would work at Columbia University in the residence halls, and my idea was that if I went there, I would try to bring ROOTED, which is exactly what happened. There happened to be a social worker, this man Brian Packett, you know, and he-- I brought him my proposal, and he said, "Actually, there's a mandate to do this kind of work, and

we need to do it," and he partnered me with someone named Susan -- I can't remember her last name -- who ran, like, a house on 114th Street that was dedicated to cultural diversity. And, the idea of ROOTED -- it stands for "Respecting Ourselves and Others Through Educational" -- well, "Through Education." Later, it occurred to me that I could have put "dialogue" on the D, but I didn't figure that out for a very long time, so, "Through Education" -- that we, instead of look at race, class, and gender, which is sort of how everything in my experience had come to me, that we look at things in terms of power and privilege, and in terms of history, literature, art, and that I wanted to break down those, kind of, those lines, and that this group would be very well-trained in facilitation, and conversation, but not be just about navel-gazing. There would be like an action piece that people could do -- that always a little vaguer, but the idea was that first-year residence halls where there's required programming, this group of young people would work in teams to have conversations about these issues. Now I'm flashing back to what had been in place my first year around this, which was horrible, and I remember -- there was an Asian woman, and maybe a Black guy, and they wrote this list, and they were like, "So, what are the stereotypes that you have of Asians?" And it was like this unbelievable education for me that maybe was sort of helpful in like sort of understanding the world, but I was like, "What? That is what people --" you know, and it was like vocabulary, like, you know, like I remember people being like "A banana! Like, you're yellow on the outside and white --" I was, like, "What are you talking about? This is insane," you know? So, like, the diversity training was an education in kind of, like, these -- racist language, and whatever. So, I wanted to counter that. Like, that didn't seem like we were talking about power and privilege. And, I want to back up and say that, where did I get these ideas from? Like, obviously all the classes that I took, and the readings, but also, I had been in San Francisco for a little while, and I worked at a place called WOMAN, Inc. -- Women Organized to Make Abuse Nonexistent -- and that was a domestic violence hotline. And while I was there, I got very active in anti-racism, and there was a woman named Sharon Martinez, a White woman, who ran a course called "Challenging White Supremacy," and it was a

very long, rigorous course, and when you were taking the course, you had to be doing anti-racist organizing. And, I just learned a lot from the "Challenging White Supremacy" workshop, and did -- so then when I was at WOMAN, Inc., we-- I became involved in anti-police brutality work in San Francisco as part of like the work that I was doing. And there was a small group that was just forming, and run by a guy named Van Jones, and we were working on a case about a guy who'd been hog-tied and pepper sprayed. The police officer involved in this fatality was Mark Andaya, and we had very concrete goals of what we were going to do. Van Jones was amazing in many, many ways -- I learned so much from him, mostly just -- he's so compassionate and loving, and, like, you know, easy to connect to, and obviously the world knows this now, I think -- he's, like, a brilliant, fast mind, and I remember being in this meeting, and we were planning our campaign, and like how we were going to talk about how like pepper spray killed this guy, and what our hook was going to be, and he's like, "I got it -- it's like lynch rope in a can. Like, pepper spray" -- like, our goal was to get pepper spray removed from the San Francisco, you know, arsenal, and it was very clear -- like, we're going to go one issue at a time to get these things removed. And so, Lenore Anderson, who now runs Californians for Safety and Justice, which is an incredible organization, was doing research on capsicum, which is the red pepper that's in pepper spray, and how it had been used as a bear repellent. And Van just was like brilliantly able to talk about, like, the media angle, and -- so all of those things, you know, came back into the work that I did when I started ROOTED. Oh -- and I took the Undoing Racism training by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. So, all of that was influencing, kind of, my thinking, if I've gotten my years right. [laughter] At any rate, it all becomes, like, pea soup. And so, ROOTED was amazing. I mean, people -- I remember when I was pitching it, the administrators were like, "Do people want this?" Like, "How do you know people want this?" And this was one of the rare moments in my professional life where I was able to use my personal experience to make a statement, because I'm not a rape survivor and I'm not a person who's survived from police abuse and I'm not someone who has gun violence in my personal life -- those are all these causes that I

have. But I was able to say, "Well, I'm a recent graduate, and I know from my own personal experience that students are going to want to talk about this stuff," and I was perplexed by the skepticism from the administration, because I just felt so right. And so, ROOTED happened; it still exists to this day. Again, a few years ago, I was there for some conference or something, and saw a little flier on the wall that was like, "Is your hair political? Come to a ROOTED conversation!" Like, I'm like, "Oh, this is so amazing!" And every once in a while, we have guests at the mediation center, and I'm doing my spiel about Crown Heights and the work that we do and I'll mention ROOTED, and someone will be like, "Oh, I was a part of that," you know? And I saw -- anyway, so, that's ROOTED.

ALI: So, a couple things I want to come back to as we move into Crown Heights. When you referred to what happened in Crown Heights, you used various terms. Maybe that's how you see it now, but I'm interested in at the time, what was your understanding of what happened in Crown Heights?

ELLENBOGEN: Oh, it's so hard to remember what I knew at the time. I mean, I think rioting and looting -- I mean, and rioting and looting in '91, rioting and looting after the verdict in the-- you know, all of those are sort of conflating, and I saw, you know, angry people making choices that were against their own self-interest, and that logic -- because I saw that logically as not making sense. It seemed, you know, as people say, senseless. But I always had Matt Sowden's voice in my head, you know, not -- to critique that, to be like, "Is this really senseless?" Like, "Is there a time when violence is necessary and violence is a thing that moves the needle in society?" Like, you know -- and people are humans, and you don't make -- you don't get -- logic is sometimes something you get from a place of safety, you know? So, I saw it, and it frightened me -- for myself, for our future, for how messy it is to clean up things after there's been violence. But also, thought, like, you know, I'm a conflict resolution specialist, right? Like the fire and the storm -- out of that, we hope, something good and better comes, and certainly, to this day, like, I talk about how the mediation center was born out of the violence, and made us uniquely qualified to do this anti-gun violence initiative that

I think has been tremendously successful in saving lives. Not to say that I would orchestrate history in this way, but this has been a result.

ALI: OK. So, what are -- what are the ways you would characterize what happened in '91? What is the term that you would use now?

ELLENBOGEN: So, I use the word "violence," in part because -- and you know what, I also want to say, I'm not, like, an expert in what happened. Like, I haven't read any books on it, I-- or if I did, it was a really long time -- I'm not, like, a historian of this period. But, from hearing people--

ALI: Well, I want to say--

ELLENBOGEN: --the reason I--

ALI: --I want you to not feel like you have to give that disclaimer, because part of, part of oral history and the value of oral history is not only the actual, like, facts of what's being recollected--

ELLENBOGEN: Sure.

ALI: --but is the -- what the recollection means, right? So, however you remember it then, but also however you remember it now is, I would say, is as or even more valuable for me as an oral historian. So I don't want you to feel like you -- at any point -- do you have to give a disclaimer about how you may be remembering, because it's -- that in itself is of interest to me. So I'm sorry--

ELLENBOGEN: Well, that's good to know.

ALI: --to interrupt you--

ELLENBOGEN: No, that's good. But also, sometimes people put a lot of extra weight and meaning onto my recollection, or, like, what I'm saying, because of my position. And, you know, it's just one voice that gets a lot of airtime. And -- but, what I, what-- the reason that sometimes I don't love the word "riot" is because I believe there were organized protests within that, right? People came and marched, and then there were people who looted, and, you know, threw rocks, and did those things. And to me, a riot -- to call all of what happened over those three days a riot excludes the, the people who were, like, coming because they were, say, trying to make the statement, "It is time for

Black people to get more services to, to this community," right? So, there were many people involved who were not throwing, you know -- sort of moving from a space of emotionality, and with violence, and that's why -- that's why I choose that word. But sometimes I say "riot," [laughter] because that's pretty common, and I'm not perfectly careful with that.

ALI: OK. So, let's talk about your work with Crown Heights Mediation Center. You talked a little bit about your first memories of Crown Heights. How old were you when you came as a— to visit?

ELLENBOGEN: 12.

ALI: And you said you spent time with the family?

ELLENBOGEN: Mm-hm.

ALI: Do you remember what you did when you were visiting? So, 12, that would have been, what, in '85? '85 or '86 -- because you were born in '73--

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah.

ALI: --right, so '85. Do you remember what your -- I mean what was your, what was your reaction to Crown Heights then?

ELLENBOGEN: You know, it seemed, you know, like, magical. To step into a space that is so different, and yet within something else, you know, was really kind of exciting. I am incredibly interested in other people's cultures, whether it has a relationship to mine or not. I mean, all cultures have a relationship to mine. You know, I would be very excited to go and spend time in somebody's home who practices Hinduism, you know, like [laughter] -- so to me, that was very interesting, and I felt--

ALI: [inaudible] you stayed with a Lubavitch family?

ELLENBOGEN: We stayed with a Lubavitch family. So that's a very common practice; that Lubavitch families open their doors to other Jewish families in a practice called "in-reach," with the hopes that they'll make you, you know, stir the light that's in you as a Jew, and, you know, put you on a path to be more religious, and hopefully join the Lubavitch community. And, so we stayed with family -- I mean, there's many trips that I sort of remember, coming to Crown Heights. Significantly, I bought my bat mitzvah

tallis here, and I remember that moment, in part, because the boy who sold me the tallit was like, "Oh, it looks nice on you," and I was like, "I'll take that one!" You know? [laughter] So, you know -- but, yeah, I remember staying with the family, and a couple of things sort of resonate in that -- of that experience. There's sort of a, like, loudness to the celebration that actually, I love. Like, I love a bunch of people banging on tables singing at sort of different times, like, loudly and out of tune. Which is why, when I tried going to the Unitarian Universalist service not so long ago-- in a search for sort of a spiritual home-- the words were, were right, but like the place was so, like, not me -- you know. It was like so staid, and quiet, and I'm like, "Where's the people like shouting, and like, throwing their fork," you know, like, I don't know, you know? So, I liked that. And, I also remember my mom sort of like debating with the head of the household, the father, about, like, what our Judaism was, and she was sort of saying, "Well, I don't really believe in the stuff, but I--" You know, and he said, "Oh, I see, so it's a club." And she, you know, was like -- you know, she didn't like hearing that, but it really stuck with her, and she's like, "Well, I guess, I guess it is like kind of like a club, like I like doing the things, and being around the people, and it's not like I believe in it or whatever." So, I remember that. I remember there was a girl my age, and talking to her, and like trying to understand what her life was about, you know, and -- I also remember, we weren't supposed to, you know, turn off the electricity, you know, like once -- wherever it was, and we had left our light on -- my mom and I were sharing a room, and, like, at midnight, we were like, "Oh, we're going to turn off the light." [laughter] Like, you know, like we can't do this -- like, not be able to stay by the rules. So, those are some of my kind of memories of that visit. I remember, like, my mom and I were like playing with the wax that was falling from the candles, and they were like, "No, like, that's holy." You know, like just these sort of things from that trip, and -- yeah.

ALI: So, tell me about the circumstances that brought you back to Crown Heights?

ELLENBOGEN: Oh, my gosh. So, to put it in the historical perspective, my partner, James Luria, was part of the digital world, and had kind of -- again, because we graduated in 1995, when 1995 was happening, everybody we knew took like a low-level job in, like,

the internet, because no grown-ups knew anything about it. And, we didn't either. But then, like, we all -- the people, like we -- not me at all, not me at all -- but those people who sort of got those jobs, like, really created like what the Web became, and, you know, the luck of timing, and his own sort of -- he's really smart, he kind of was swept up in that world, and he worked for News Corp. [laughter] And, we [laughter] -- we moved -- there's a lot to be said about that, but we're teaching our kids about this, actually, last night, in terms of Roger Ailes, and explaining how Fox became a thing, and the cable, and explaining the glass ceiling -- like this is a, this is a moment, right? And the fact that James actually helped created Fox.com, and -- you know, he has his own history of being raised by a Communist grandfather -- like, whatever, there's a whole story there. But anyways, so we moved to LA, and he had his own department of, I think, about 40 people that he had just hired, and then the market crashed, and he had to, like, fire everybody except for two people, and it was just, it was just awful. And again, we had no idea what was happening, and he had a signed contract, and there was just so much going on in our lives, and, you know, it was hard for him to find a new job, although he's a writer and he was doing that stuff. But, like, you know, we just -- nobody knew what was happening. And, we actually went to Cuba for a while, and then we went to -- we decided to move to San Francisco, and then that was like a huge mistake-- I mean, it wasn't a huge mistake. I, like, *love* San Francisco, but the economy crashing, and the field of work that he was doing was just, like, evaporating. And, I did not want to move back to New York, but we had a rent-stabilized apartment -- and, this is so important, because James is a poet and a writer, and like really wanted to do that, and the fact that we had a rent-stabilized apartment that we had legally sublet following all of the rules for two years, we had to decide if we were going to come back and take advantage of this, which could have led to him being, like, a poet. And, we spent all the time talking about what to do, and finally, we went to, like, a therapist in Berkeley, like a counselor, and -- you know, we were doing this one session to help us decide. And, she listened to us, and she did that thing about the Chinese character for change, where it's like, I don't know, fear and opportunity, and she was just like, "I don't

normally do this: But if you guys love it here, and you're happy here, I don't understand why you would move back for an apartment in New York City." And we left the session, and we were like, "We're moving back." Like, we had so much clarity. We were like, "Oh, you don't understand -- like, of course you don't understand, you're, like in Berkeley." Maybe she wasn't really in Berkeley, but this is my memory of it. Like, this is one of the most precious things in New York City. And, like, we hav— we have to go back. And, so, James got, finally, a job at Oxygen, and I applied for jobs, and I got three offers, which was amazing. And, one was working, doing, like, liberty work -- 9/11, after 9/11 happened there was all this social work funding, and then I got, I got the job at the mediation center, and, you know, the job at the mediation center seemed so -- like, I seemed like probably the perfect person to run it. Like, I did have a connection to Crown Heights, I had been working on issues between Blacks and Jews, and had an anti-racist framework, and I'd also been doing conflict resolution in schools, and I was a trained social worker, and I was a community organizer, and, you know -- I was afraid, though, that the work was going to be too hyper-local to keep my attention. And we were deciding, and we were deciding, and then, the job from Oxygen -- the person had, the papers were signed for James, and were supposed to be mailed out, and there was another dip in the economy, and there was a hiring freeze. And, right -- like, literally, the person didn't put it in the mail, or he would have had the job. And, that we didn't need -- then he didn't have the job, we still had the apartment, and we were like, "Should we go?" And I was like, "I really want this job." Like, now it's me. Like, you know, now it's me taking us back to New York. So, that is how that happened. And, you know, I had thought that I'd be there for two years, and I've been there for 14 years. It's been amazing. Like, it's been such a privilege to work in the community. I really didn't have much contact with Brooklyn before-- you know, obviously, with Crown Heights, I had a little bit. As my family was really Bronx-centric, they had a superiority to Brooklyn that, like, I was raised with, like, you know, "Why would you ever, like, want to go to Brooklyn?" So--

ALI: Where was your apartment?

ELLENBOGEN: It was Stuyvesant Town.

ALI: Yeah, I wouldn't give that up either. [laughter] OK, so, when you get to Crown Heights, tell me what was your first memory of working there?

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah, so, I walked in on the first day, and there was a leak in the place, and my -- the person who's still my boss to this day, she was the prior director -- she's now somewhere else, but she still supervised me -- was, like, standing and looking at the leak. And this is significant, because now I've had, like, five or six or seven offices -- we've always had leaks. And, it's meaningful, too, because leaks are really hard to fix. You spend a lot of time trying to [inaudible], you spend time, like, fighting with your landlord, and I understand how, if there are racial and class differences, and you have a leak, you can tell yourself stories that, you know, make you feel worse about what's going on, and so, if -- you know -- and can make it harder for you to advocate. And they may -- those stories may be true, you know. Like, maybe -- and that is my first memory, or first moment.

ALI: So you came, but what -- at the time you were hired, you gave a sense of what your-- what made you appealing, you thought, for the job. What were you -- what were you told, or what did you understand your mission to be, or the mission of the organization when you started?

ELLENBOGEN: Community mediation services, neighborhood problem-solving center. There were things about the mission that I didn't quite get, like, I wasn't really fully understanding what a neighborhood problem-solving center was. And of course, as a social worker, we don't talk about problems, we talk about strengths, or at least, that was, again, like the education of my time, was like, "Let's be strengths-oriented. There's no such things as problems, only opportunities." You know, but what I-- and there was a lot of confusion from people about like what this space is. Like, first of all, people don't understand mediation. People don't understand voluntariness. Like, you know, and there's this whole part of the mediation center where neighbors are invited to come in for whatever they need, and we try to help them with whatever it is that they want. And, a lot of times, we try to open up and help them understand what it is they want,

because many times, people sort of stumble in, and they'll be like, you know, "I can't put minutes on my phone," and 45 minutes later, you're like, "They're getting evicted," you know? So, that kind of space doesn't really exist in other places, you know -- we're [inaudible] a store, and there's a check cashing place -- people understand a check cashing place; 99 cent store -- we understand 99 cent store. And then there's this like weird place with fliers all over the window that, like, has lots of information, but, like, who is it for? Is it for Jewish people, is it for Black people, is it for me? Like, could they really help, you know? So, yeah, that didn't answer your question, but [laughter] --

ALI: No, that's good though, because -- so, tell me a little bit about the history of the Crown Heights Mediation Center. You said it was formed in response to the crisis that happened -- and here I am using different words, too -- the crisis that happened in '91. Tell us a little bit about -- tell me a little bit about the history of the center, as you understood it at the time you started working.

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah. So, I heard different stories about it. I heard that under Howard Golden, the Borough President, there was a group called the Crown Heights Coalition, and that they had really wanted the mediation center, and helped to create-- create it. I also heard that it was, like, neighborhood-led, and there was a lot of people who were walking around in the community talking to people, and that this was a thing that people wanted. I also heard that what people really wanted was, you know, youth programs, and, you know, housing, and jobs, and that there were not a group of people who were like, "You know what we need? A community mediation center." And, I sort of believe that version, to some -- I'm sure it's like a mix of all those things, really, but, the concept of a community mediation center is sort of a complicated -- it's likely not coming from the lips of your average person on the street, unless, you know, it's suggested to them. And, what I understood was that once there was money, you know, allocated for the creation of the center, which was in 1998 -- another part of the story that I feel hazy on, like, what happened between '91 and '98? Like, maybe that's just how things move, but I just find it confusing. The City was looking for an organizational home for this, and the Center for Court Innovation had just recently

formed, and they came to the— to CCI, and asked if they would host it. My understanding was that the first director -- Feinblatt -- wanted to play nice with the City, but didn't really understand how this would fit in to the agenda of the Center for Court Innovation, and was not a strong believer in mediation. I mean I, you know, the Center for Court Innovation was going to be about changing the courts, and the mediation center is community-based, it's not a court-based -- you know, so. So, after 9/11, John Feinblatt became the Criminal Justice Coordinator, and Greg Berman became the director of the Center for Court Innovation. I started at the mediation center in 2002, and when I met with my much-beloved supervisor who is passed away -- untimely death not too long ago -- you know, I had asked him, you know, how secure is the funding for this? And he said, "This program is so beloved, nobody's going to touch it. Nobody will remove this funding." But, John Feinblatt did, and so within, I think, months of me being there, we went from having a budget that was maybe \$375,000 to \$400,000, to what was negotiated to just make sure that our rent was covered, at like \$40,000 a year. And I was 29, I think, when I started working at the mediation center, and new to all of this. My previous job was in -- working for Headstart, as like a low-level person, you know? Really didn't understand, like, what was happening. [laughter] To this day, I never understand what I'm doing, but, [laughter] you know, you just keep trying. So, he was wrong, [laughter] you know, the funding was gutted, and we -- From the beginning of my time there, we had to, like, take a look at our, you know, who we were, what we should be doing, and the direction we should be going in, and who could be our supporters.

ALI: So, the idea of mediation -- this coming out of '91, and this -- possibly this Crown Heights Coalition. Was the -- what was -- who was being mediated? Like what was, what was the idea? Like, was this -- you know, I guess, for a kind of a layperson, hearing this history, that the Crown Heights Mediation Center was founded out of -- I mean, years later, but out of what happened in '91, is the -- I don't know, like, I'm assuming that this is to mediate between Blacks and Jews, because that's how people understood what happened in '91. Is that, is that -- was that your understanding? Like,

is that, is that a stretch, or is that, like—?

ELLENBOGEN: Right, so then— I think the way -- when I got there, I would just only reframe that to say that the mediators were carefully picked to have a balanced group of Caribbean-American, African-American, Hasidic Jews, and that the people who came for mediation were neighbors, and so not all of the time were the neighbors -- neighbors, and family members -- you know, anyone who had a conflict, really. So, the way we talked about it was that: Sometimes, you know, you have a problem with your neighbor. A very typical problem that we used to handle a lot was an upstairs neighbor who had a lot of kids who were making a lot of noise, and the buildings have really thin ceilings, and it could sound continuously like, you know, someone is drilling into your head, as the kids run around and play. And, if you are Black, and you are downstairs, and your neighbors upstairs are Jewish, and this is an annoying situation, and it is close to 1991, a, you may be feeling kind of raw, because the feelings from the violence are still there -- it's a, it's a trauma, it's a community trauma, you know, it's like right there on your skin; two, you may feel that the person is treating you more carelessly than they would have if it was a Jewish neighbor, because you are Black; three, you might not have the comfort level to address this with your Jewish neighbor, and your Jewish -- you know, and to reverse it, like, your Jewish neighbor, you know, may feel like, you know, you have a lot of kids, and kids run, and that this person's giving you a hard time because you're Jewish, and that they'd be more understanding if they were Jew-- like, you know, you can see how these things can be read in different ways depending on your positionality, and your base, and your beliefs, and your community, and all those things, and so the idea was that those conflicts could potentially exasperate, explode into something that is not anymore about your neighbor making noise, but becomes like a Black and Jewish thing, because maybe it spills out onto the street, and you're fighting, and people see you, and, you know, like, people take sides, and people default to their group in that moment, and so the idea was that the mediation center had these team of mediators. So that really, the police, who may get called in these situations if things get really heated, or other neighbors could just come

to us, and for free, we will sit and talk these things out. And, there is one case in particular that always sticks in my mind. It was brilliantly co-mediated -- not -- I was there, helping, but Chris Watler, who still works at Center for Court Innovation, is a brilliant mediator, he is a— he grew up in Crown Heights, he lives now in Bed-Stuy, he is a Black man of Caribbean descent -- did I say that already? Anyway, so he co-mediated this with me, and there were two women who came into the mediation center; a White woman and a Black woman. The White woman was not Jewish, or if she was, she was not part of the Hasidic Jewish community. When they came in for their mediation, the hostility and the anger was, like, palpable. We had to keep them seated separately while we were waiting to get our mediation room set up. And, the Black woman lived downstairs, and she was a nurse, and, you know, had difficult hours, or some-- I couldn't quite remember that, and the White woman was new to the building, and the only White woman in the building. And the Black woman's position was that this White woman was doing two things that were extremely annoying to her: The crazy noise -- and she felt like the White woman was kind of like following her around and, like, banging on the, the floor, and also, the building had a lot of repair problems, and I think the, the tenants in the building were working collaboratively to deal with it with the landlord, and she felt like the woman was, like, making the repairs, and, you know -- and the White woman was like, "This woman's insane. I am doing none of these things, I— Like, I don't know what to say." And as an aside, I have handled many noise complaints, and there is often a moment when you're talking to the person that you're like, "Am I talking to an insane person?" Because people often are, like, saying that the pers— "the noise is following me around." And you're like, "Is this a mental health issue?" And I, I want to say that, like, when there's weird noises, the most sane, logical person will start to try to understand what the noise is about. So, I do not for a minute, like, think that that was what was going on with our lovely woman. This situation between the two of them had escalated, so much that the police had gotten involved, and the boyfriends of both of these women had had a physical altercation. So, this was an incredibly tense situation. I will speed up to tell you what happened. I

mean, we did the mediation -- you listen, and you, you create a space where people can try to, to hear each other. And, at some point, I think Chris said to the White woman, you know, "Tell me a little bit about what you do," or something -- like, there was so much hostility, and, like, yelling, or whatever, and we'd calmed things down. And she said she was a set designer. And so he started asking, like, questions about the set design stuff, and da da da, and she said that she was -- she sewed things. And then, I can't quite remember, but we started to realize that what was happening was that the woman was using her sewing machine, and that one of the legs of the sewing machine was shorter than the other, and so as she was sewing, even though it was so quiet in her house, that was making like this little vibration sound that was sounding like hammering -- and, the woman in fact was moving her sewing machine around, because she was trying to be, like, quiet, and she was trying to be in different places, and so it was following this woman around. [laughter] And, like, how were those two women going to get to that understanding without having this, like, space, and careful questioning, and thoughtfulness? So, when the mediation ended -- you know, the woman agreed to get, like, a rug, and she -- like, it was so easy to problem-solve at that point -- they took a taxi back together. And, you know, it had been like an hour and a half. And I just -- it was such an amazing experience to see, like, you know -- they both felt that it, what was happening was because of their race. They were so clear about that, you know. The White woman was like, "It's because I'm the only White woman in the building," and the Black woman is like, "She is so disrespect-- like, look at these White people," you know? And then, like, an hour and a half later, they're like, "All right, let's call a cab, like, we're going back to the building together," and they're, like, chatting, and you're, like, "Wow."

ALI: How did they get to the mediation center? Was it something that was recommended?

ELLENBOGEN: The police -- yeah.

ALI: So is that, is that typical; like, the police recommend that they come for mediation, or—
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ELLENBOGEN: So, at the time, before our funding was drastically cut, like 90%, we had

created these rip-off referral things, and the police would carry them with them as, like, a tool. So that when they were getting called out to these cases that really should not, like, end up in an arrest, or whatever, they could send people to mediation. I don't know if it's typical, but that was what we did to try to get -- one of the ways that we would try to get cases.

ALI: So, as the years progressed, did your constituency -- what happened to your constituency? Did it change?

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah.

ALI: How did it change?

ELLENBOGEN: Well, once we didn't have city funding to do exactly that kind of work, we -- our funding shifted to do work that did seem very necessary -- you know, that was already on the list. It's not like we were following the funding, but that we always knew that there were, you know, obviously, tremendous issues in trying to get the schools safer -- so we were already working at Paul Robeson High School, where we worked for a decade or more, doing conflict resolution, youth courts -- we started a youth court at MS 61, and a mediation program. So, once we were working in the public schools, obviously we were working with a lot more Black families, because there are not any, not-- there are not any Hasidic Jewish kids in the public school system. Also, we got a grant to do family mediation, and, you know, the Jewish community have their own mediation services, called Mishpat Shalom. And in the beginning, we handled the intake and intake process for Mishpat Shalom, so we were working more closely with the Jewish community, but when the funding, you know, ended, we really couldn't sustain that, and I think there were other changes going on with Mishpat Shalom. So, there weren't going to be too many -- and of course, there are always outliers -- but too many Jewish families that would choose to go to a secular group for family mediation services. You know, we had a few. So we started to do more family mediation, which, in Crown Heights at the time, a lot of it was immigrant parents and first-generation children, and dealing with the kind of cultural differences as your child, you know, learns what it means in this context to be, quote-unquote, "African-American," and the

sort of complicated feelings that the parents have of not having their, you know, home community around them to help with the parenting. So, our demographics shifted in that way -- always being involved a little bit in the, in the Jewish community through our work with Project CARE, and through sort of leadership councils and things like that, but I tried very, very hard to raise money to do work that would be directly about, you know, keeping these communities together. I tried to raise the money through private sources, and public sources, and, you know, I met a lot of people who would just say, you know, "There isn't a lot of political will or interest in this work." And certainly, there's complicated issues in trying to raise that money through the Jewish community, right, because within— There's a lot of money from, sort of like, Jewish foundations. But a lot of those foundations have complicated feelings about the Haredi community, the Hasidic community, and maybe that's not a priority to, to fund there -- and I'd say my experience at the time, and, like, sort of under the Bloomberg administration, there just wasn't -- like, wasn't a place for it that I, that I was successful at finding. So, it was hard -- like, all the work, and doing inter-group work is exhausting and challenging, and ideally, you have more than one person doing it, and when it was not funded, it was challenging.

ALI: So, this is interesting. You know, there have been -- certainly, nothing like '91, but in the years since, there've— there's been these, kind of like, incidents--

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah.

ALI: --that, you know, people's kind of default is to frame it in the context of '91.

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah.

ALI: I mean, this is -- '91 just looms so large over this neighborhood's history in that respect. What -- can you talk about what maybe some of those incidents were, and how your organization, or how you and your organization responded to, or felt you could or could not respond?

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah. So, all along, there's this group called Project CARE, which is its own -- was its own nonprofit organization that had a board comprised of Hasidic Jews and African-American people, some of whom were of Caribbean descent. Clarence

Norman, Sr. was very active in that, Robert Matthews -- and, you know, various Jewish leadership. It was originally housed in the Jewish Community Council work. But prior to my time, there had been an executive director -- so there must have been some small money -- that I believe was well-liked by everybody, and there was some type of impropriety that I don't know too much about. But he was let go, and I think, you know, everybody on that board cared a tremendous amount about it, and like an emotional, whatever, feeling, and, like, love for Project CARE. But, also, had tons of things they were dealing with -- like to run their own organizations, and their own problems, and I think it was just very difficult for that group to financially sustain itself. And, there were some technical problems, like some 990 was never filed, and for like maybe a decade, I went to meetings where people would be like, "What happened to the 990?" You know? Like, it was so boring -- that piece -- but also really important, and there were people who were very active, and then like couldn't deal with the, like, missing 990, aft-- you know, you just can't raise money without it. And I -- I think I played a really important role in that, and was sort of the person who went to almost 100% of the meetings, the person who did all the work, you know, and the person who was very, like, sort of quiet, right? So, my position there was to, like, listen, do some reframing, behind the scenes -- do the ideas -- and I think, with Project CARE, what I learned was that, you know, almost 98% of the work needs to happen offline, and by the time we would come together, everyone should know where we were going, so that we could hash out things that shouldn't -- you know, would not be helpful for people to sort of like spill out loud, and so that space would sort of become, you know, a place of, you know -- We weren't going to get into deep stuff, but I could be, like, a buffer and a translator for people in the communities, and -- So Project CARE would do a bunch of things. Whenever there was an incident, they would gather and talk -- and this was important, because apparently, and I've heard from people before me, you know, in '91 - like, you really didn't even know who to call, or whatever, and I think that's because they didn't know each other, but also because technology was different. So, gather and talk, plan a press conference, make a statement that this is not what we're about, talk

about what we're going to do next, and then, for the most part, like, really not be able to do about [laughter] whatever it was we were going to do next, because people are really busy, and you're putting out fires, and there was no money, and, like, you know -- but, on occasion, we would do something kind of proactively. And, I think the biggest moment was when the Andrew Charles incident happened in two-thousand-- right, 2008, and I think there was a lot of things going on in 2008 in that -- in the context of that moment. And, with Andrew Charles -- so Andrew Charles was an African-American young man who was walking home, as I, as I understand it, and was -- wow I don't, I don't even know how to talk about this, because I don't really know what the facts are, but, you know, was assumed by a member of a Jewish group called Shmira, which is a Jewish patrol group, to have been involved in some earlier incidences, and he was attacked by this Jewish person, or maybe there were more -- I can't quite remember the details. And he was, he was hurt, and violated. And, he turned out to be the son of a police officer, and somebody who was-- you know, his father, and him, were unafraid to talk about what happened. And this sparked a controversy in the Jewish community -- I mean, first of all, it confused people's understanding within the Jewish community, like, do Jews act violently towards other people? That's not, like, the narrative of the community. And, you know, Shmira is supposed to be there to help, and -- But, also, the person who people thought was probably responsible fled, and fled to Canada, and then to Israel, and there was a very long period of trying to get him extradited, and -- and there was this question, as I understand it, of whether Jews turn over Jews to non-Jews when things like this happen. And simultaneously, the Jewish community was not feeling like their police officer in the -- that their police officer, their commanding officer in the 71st precinct was doing his job well. And the Jewish community is incredibly organized -- also, fractured and split in ways that are hard for outsiders to see and imagine. But, you know, pretty uniform when it comes to something that's happening to somebody within their community. So, when this Andrew Charles incident happened, there was so much anxiety, and I got a visit from somebody who worked in the mayor's office, and he said, "We are asking you to take

lead on responding to this situation, and we really need your help." And I was like, "I am there! Yes!" Like, this "We can do this," you know, with the help of Project CARE, and we, you know, organized a meeting, and brought a lot of people together, and we had no press there, and we talked things through, and, I was really hopeful at that point in time that, that this would lead to some kind of sustained programming that would, you know, keep education around cultural -- people have, like, lots of complicated feelings about education around cultural differences, but I feel like it would be probably helpful to the Black neighbors to learn a little bit about the Jewish cultures and customs, and what's happening, and, like, what the parade is about, and, like, all of that, and it certainly would be helpful for the Jewish neighbors to have a more nuanced understanding of what, what they think the Black culture is about -- like, that just feels to me like it would be useful, so -- but also through individual storytelling, and so it had been our hope that people would sort of talk about who they were as individuals, and we'd have like a speaking tour, where people of different backgrounds would go around and sort of share who they are and their stories, which is something that I was exposed to as a kid in White Plains, at Ridgeway -- we would have these little panels, and I was like representing Jewish people -- which always confused me, because I was like, "I don't know." You can only sort of talk about your identity in-- if you know about other people's cultures, right? Like, how do you explain -- but anyway, and I'm kind of interested in that. Anyway, so, you know, again, like, meeting, press conference, get the message out that, like, we want to keep the peace, and I think in that case, for a little while, we got a little bit of programming until -- but, no money. And eventually, I, like, could not continue to do this -- this work -- sometimes you're on the phone with someone while they process and think for like an hour, and then you call the next person on your list, and they talk to you, and they're like, "I don't like this, or whatever," you know, and, like, you're trying to help them think, and come to a place, and that's like another hour, and you're like, "Up, I got seven more people to call." And, the Bloomberg administration, you know, didn't provide -- no funds came forth. We did -- and I can't remember the dates on this, but there was a project that did get funding that

we did in collaboration of the Jewish Community Council, which was the creation of a cookbook called *Crown Heights Is Cooking*, which brought together some young women from the communities that lived there to learn about each other, to learn photography, to learn entrepreneurship, to learn layout and design, and they went into their neighbors' homes and learned about food, and food and storytelling, and it was a great project. It was also incredibly difficult, and you could see -- the young Hasidic woman was working on it, and there was an older African-American gentleman, and they were co-leading, and it was -- almost every interaction was -- it was challenging for them. You know, he felt like she railroaded him, she -- you know, and he felt like she didn't respect any of his positions, you know. And, who knows? That may have been their personality, or styles, or may have been their personality styles plus the, the content.

ALI: So, tell me -- so, I guess I'm getting a sense of how the work of the Crown Heights Mediation Center evolves to -- I mean, I think now, probably, your most prominent program -- one of your most prominent programs deals with violence prevention and interruption. There's a subtext to this interview, right, which is: What are the kind of structural forces that shape the dynamics of the neighborhood that have impacted the history of your organization? And I think we've kind of alluded to some of that. I'm interested -- you know, how do you then, you know -- this organization was founded coming out of '91 to mediate, ideally, conflicts that now just occasionally happen with some sense of panic that, you know, is managed, or not, and dissipates. But then there's something else happening that you then begin to focus on, so tell me -- I mean, I've followed a little bit of the story of, you know, the inspiration for the violence prevention work, out of Chicago, but how -- I mean, I read -- like, for example, I read -- and you've laid out your own history, this was always something that you were focused on, and in looking at some of the early reports on the mediation center, as early as, you know, 2005 or '6 or '7, wanting to focus more on gun violence, even before the SOS, Save Our Streets program, starts in 2010. So, just kind of walk me through how this becomes what seems to be -- and you can certainly correct me -- but what seems to be

the centerpiece now of the work that you're doing.

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah. Yeah. So, there was always this conversation about what -- what is most needed: What is the most pressing thing that we should be addressing? And always questionable whether that was Black-Jewish relations -- never seemed quite [laughter] like that was the most pressing thing affecting people. And in two-- so in 2003, James Davis was shot and killed -- he was our City Council member, and a friend, and advocate of the mediation center -- incredible person. My first day -- you asked earlier about my first sort of impressions, and I only talked about the leak, but actually, my first day of work, I went to the 77th Precinct Community Council meeting, and introduced myself, and I mentioned in my introduction that my grandmother had worked at the hospital there, and James Davis was there -- he wasn't City Councilman yet, and he's like, "I was born there -- maybe she gave birth to me!" And when he said "Maybe she gave birth to me," he realized that he, like, misspoke, and everyone was laughing, and then we always had this joke that we were like brother and sister, you know, that like, you know, or whatever -- that we were family, because my grandmother had given birth to him. So, anyway, that's probably a better story of my first day, [laughter] and -- so, that really -- you know, I remember when he was shot. That felt to me like our JFK moment in Crown Heights, like this stunned -- everybody coming out on this street and standing there, like, looking at each other, and Errol Lewis came by in his car, and, like, screeched in front of the mediation center and was like "Ife, get in--" you know, Ife, who we haven't talked about -- an incredibly powerful shaping force at the mediation center, she was the deputy director for most of my time that I was there, and a Crown Heights resident, and very close friend of Errol's -- you know, the two of them peeled off to go to the hospital, and she knew James forever, and like talking with the other people on the street, and people saying, "I played basketball with him." Like, everybody -- *everybody* knew James Davis. And, the crazy, confusing irony of him being an anti-gun violence advocate, and then being killed by gun violence in City Hall -- I mean, and to have been a former police officer -- I mean, he was, to some people, he was like a bunch of contradictions, but really, I don't think he was. I mean, I

think that even like thinking about him in the context of what's going on now, there's so much to learn. I mean, his, like, mantra was, like, "Love yourself, stop the violence." And, you know, it was easy to kind of make fun of him, because he also was someone who just said ridiculous things all the time, and loved to make people, like, uncomfortable, and would say ridiculous things, like -- I had an ongoing problem with him, like, sexually harassing my young staff members, and I was like, "You can't comment on their asses!" You know, like -- you know, he was just not playing by certain rules. So anyway, I think that was like a mo-- a moment of, like, really looking at this -- like, gun violence, and we had a family mediation case that was actually a Hasidic family mediation case, and one of their family members was shot and killed, and in the meantime, the Jewish Children's Museum was being erected, or had been erected, and this was this big mural of Ari's face, who was killed by gun violence -- obviously, very different, all of these are very different, but you just feel this -- or I felt this gun violence, gun violence, gun violence, like, thing, and a bunch of things happen in 2005. One is that Benny Lyde was shot, and Benny Lyde lived around the corner from the mediation center, and his mother, Robin Lyde, really went public with her experience of the shooting, and she came and spoke at the community board, and talked about her son being shot, and begged people, if they knew anything, like, to please, like, help. She really needed resolution around this. And then -- I heard her speak in that setting, and then she walked down Kingston Avenue, and she went into every single business, and her real question was like, "Did anyone see anything?" Like, you know, how -- but what I heard that day -- and I didn't talk to her, I was, like, deeply ashamed, like, you know, I don't know why, but that was the feeling I felt, like -- so, she came in the office, and we had a person at the front desk, and I sat at the third desk. And I think this is sort of important, that for ten years of me working in the mediation center, I sat in the front of the office, like hearing everything that people came in, and stuff. And she came in, and introduced herself to the front desk person, and said that her son had been shot -- I don't know if he had died yet, because he was in a coma for a while, and, like, could -- she was like, "Can you help?" And I just was sitting at my desk,

and I'm like, "What kind of neighborhood problem-solving center does not help when a mother comes in and says, like, 'Can you help me? My son--'" And when he's like right around the corner -- like, what are we doing, like, giving out GED referrals? Like, this is not what we should -- you know, we need -- we need to do more. We have so much more capacity, so much more that we can give -- especially given our position with the Center of Court Innovation, right? We were, like, perfect for this work -- I hear all this, I'm so connected to the community, and through my staff, more connected, and yet, like, CCI has these resources to, like, amplify whatever it is we do, and that was a, a motivating moment. Another thing that happened in 2005 was that I went to a conference. And I've never -- like, now, I realize, like, that was very rare, to go to a conference and actually come back feeling like you learned something, [laughter] but, a woman named Deborah Prothrow-Stith spoke. Do you know her -- ever hear of her?

ALI: She's at -- she was at Harvard for a bit, in the public health--

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah, totally. She -- so, I think she was like an emergency room doctor, and so she spoke about, you know, community violence as like a public health issue, and, like, my mind just went, like, "Rrooaw!" Like, I get this! Like, this is what we have to do, and, like, you know -- but, you know, then I did other things. [laughter] But not really, because -- and then the third thing happened, which is, we had a new commanding officer from the precinct, and we met with him when he came in, and I said, like, "What can we do to help?" Like, I don't know. And he said, "Crime is going down in all areas except for shooting. I really need help with shootings. I really need somebody who can talk to the kids." Like, he basically -- and, like, it was a really different experience than I'd ever had of, like, working with police at all, and he was like asking for help, and he had lots of ideas, and he was like willing to do this stuff. And so, we did what we have always done, and it was sort of like Project CARE-like, or intergroup relationship building, which is, let's bring together a group of people who don't normally sit together around a table. We are conveners, we are facilitators, we are not experts, but this is a safe, neutral space. This is all language from, like, the beginning of the creation of the mediation center. Like, we will invite the neighbors to come in, and

learn what we can, and do some kind of fun facilitation exercise of, like, what are our strengths? What is -- you know, like -- and we will learn what we can. And so, 2005, we started -- we put together this committee, and there was an RFP from the state -- there was funding that was called Weed and Seed, which was, you know, weed out the bad elements and seed the good elements -- like, not my favorite language, but, you know. The grant asked for, like, crazy information on like every single category of anything, and so, and the-- like, you had to have, you had to have a coalition, so we used that group that had already formed to sort of be our coalition for this funding source, and we applied. And we applied year after year after year after year. You had to do an action project -- you, like, there's this granting process that was, like, crazy. We never got the funding. But, the state did a good job, because, like, they accomplished a ton through having put out this crazy RFP process, which is we all built relationships, we understood gun violence, we -- one of the early action projects that we did was the mural on Brooklyn Avenue, under Karim Camara-supported funding for Groundswell -- Groundswell? That's not the name of them. Yeah, that is -- Groundswell Murals -- OK, Groundswell, to do this mural with the Quaker group, whose name I can't remember right now. And, so that was one thing, and then one of the things we identified was that we had a lot of people returning from incarceration, and so we started to put together a resource structure, and we were starting to sort of serve the-- that community, and then, I think it was probably 2009 -- So we, so, anyway, we're doing this work for years, virtually unfunded, which had always been kind of what I did anyway -- like, we're doing the inter-group work unfunded. We did a lot of gardening and food justice work; that sort of has faded away as we've done this other stuff. And -- I lost my train of thought. Oh yeah, so 2009, the Stimulus Act came out, and there was an RFP that had the-- that suggested that you apply as one of the evidence-based practices -- the Cure Violence model, which at the time was called CeaseFire. And, I did not know too much about it, and, like, looked into it, and as soon as I was on their website, I'm like, "This is us," and, you know, Deborah Prothrow-Stith, years before, had sort of planted this in my head, and been shaping it, and, we applied -- it was this tiny

application -- I don't know, five pages? I mean, after Weed and Seed, which was like this crazy document that you had to put together, it's like the easiest thing to do. The mediation center at the time, I don't know, maybe we had a budget of \$375,000 -- like, not a lot of money, and then we got this award, in like August -- I think it was like August of 2009, of like a million dollars [laughter]. And, notably, there's like a map of like who got the Stimulus Act money, and they put little dots, and, like, there was a dot on the map of 256 Kingston Avenue, and I was like, "Oh, my gosh." Like, everything changed in that, like, moment, because, you know -- well, everything changed, we had a lot of money, and I immediately -- I was so excited, but I was also like, "I have struggled so hard to like raise \$375,000. Now, we're going to start this, and it's only two years of funding, and, like, how are we ever going to sustain this?" But, you know, now the mediation center has a budget of over \$3 million. But that's the origin story.

ALI: I mean, I love it. I just want to make sure -- I mean, you know -- I just want to make sure. Yeah, this topic guide is just to kind of like -- all right, we can wrap up, but if you can -- we can actually move towards wrapping up. So, looking back, that would be a major turning point. What would you say are the things that you are -- the accomplishments in your tenure at the Crown Heights Mediation Center -- well, let's start with the first -- are the challenges, or the -- I don't want to say defeats, but the struggles, the major struggles that you have had.

ELLENBOGEN: The major struggles that I've had in the past 14 years? Well, continuous funding -- I mean, there were so many times when we thought we were closing down -- I mean, to the point that we had a moving van once coming, to move us into the basement of Paul Robeson High School, and called it off, because Rabbi Kaplan of the JCRC set up a meeting with the Brooklyn Community Foundation, which was then called the Independence Community Foundation, and, like, explained our plight, and they gave us, like, rent money. So, like, sustained -- you know, sustainability, and the security that comes with sustainability, so that's not too different from like any other nonprofit, but I think that we are a hyper-local program, and that is where we get our strength, and I really believe that. That also is a huge challenge, because why do big

private donors, or why -- some foundations are just not that interested in specifically funding Crown Heights -- or maybe they don't want to fund Crown Heights, right? You know, it's not like funding the YMCA, and you're doing something national. I mean this was, this was my concern when I first came, like, how committed could I be to just this neighborhood -- and I'm highlighting this in part in the context of this conversation, but, you know, I see it sometimes when I am trying to woo a funder, and I can hear them kind of being like, "And why-- would I choose, you know, Crown Heights?" As, you know, as opposed to, you know, "I'm supporting this model that will go into all the schools," you know, but I really think that all change is local, and all -- you know, that localness is really important. So just the idea of, of funders committing to a locality -- and then there's just the politics, right? Like, so something that we really didn't get to is, like, the turmoil that both the Jewish and Black community had, when we kind of lost our top leadership to incarceration and scandal, and, like, when that happens, you, your little grassroots organizations, like, lose out on dollars, you know?

ALI: When you say the top leadership, you're referring to--

ELLENBOGEN: To Clarence Norman, and to Moshe Rubashkin, right? So, those folks who had been really active in Project CARE, you know, and losing Clarence Norman who had been like a huge ally -- but not just losing him, but losing what clout he gained in his time, right? Although, Karim Camara, like, ah, what an amazing human being -- I love Karim Camara, and now Diana Richardson's been a tremendous ally. But, change-- but change is -- there's like confusion, and like, whatever, like, there's things that get lost along the way.

ALI: So, who -- I mean, and then, since you mention Rabbi Kaplan kind of coming in to kind of rescue you at that moment of that low point, what are some of the other allied organizations, community people -- whether they be civic, religious, legislative or elected, you know, that you think have been really important to your work?

ELLENBOGEN: So many, I mean--

ALI: And I have like this list that I just started, you know, and maybe will help prompt, if you can -- and maybe those aren't the ones, but if you can -- this is not going into any

record, so it's only what you say, but if you can -- I'm interested to hear, like, what is the network of, you know, support— [inaudible].

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah, right. So, I'm going to answer that in a different way. Like, before SOS, when we were really struggling, and like this scrappy little thing, I think -- from, from my perspective -- obviously, all this is from my perspective -- I did better at being both an ally and an outside-- and, to other organizations, and other organizations sort of did better to help us. And what was really an interesting shift to me, sort of from, like, a nonprofit head, was what it felt like to go from, you know, every year being like, "Is our door going to close?" -- and it being easy for people to be like, "Save the mediation center!" -- to all of a sudden being in the big leagues, with, like, federal dollars, and like a million dollars, and all the things that you then have to do specific to that thing that make you very busy, and self-involved, and like can't -- you can't do a lot of things for [laughter] other people. I feel like for me, that was like a weird identity shift, and also perception shift, and that we kind of like went from— I think— being like being everyone's darling, like kind of, they want to care for us, to then, like -- I think, and maybe this is just me, sort of people being like, "Hey, why does CCI get all that money?" You know, this shouldn't have maybe gone to them, maybe it should have gone to other people. I did attend a meeting pretty early on -- it was a very interesting watershed meeting. Maybe it was 2010 or so. And, we were funded to do Cure Violence, and there was people from around New York State who were maybe going to get funding, and they weren't committed yet to the Cure Violence model. And so, Chicago brought me in to, sort of, pitch the program, and I pitched it as best I could, and peop-- the tenor in the room completely changed, and Chicago was like, "You know, these groups -- we're not on board, and we really appreciate you." The meeting ended, and a number of people said, "You know, there's a lot of people here who think you got that money because you're White and Jewish, and really did not want to hear from you today, but I want you to know that, like, I think what you're doing's amazing," or, like, you know, I kept hearing that from [laughter] people, and that, and still hear a lot of people telling me that, you know, it's believed that we got the money because I'm

White and Jewish. And, you know, in some ways, I accept that to be true, because I am White and Jewish and had a Columbia education, and an understanding, and like, sort of positioned myself within CCI, that understands how to, you know, write a grant, and navigate things -- like, you know, I don't think that like somebody -- the federal reviewer was like, "Aha," you know, [laughter] "A fellow Jew -- I'm going to give this money to you." But, you know, that plays into all of our work. But this is all a tangent, right? So, in the beginning, you know, I said yes to every single request. Also, I wasn't a parent, and I worked until ten every night, I went to every community meeting, anybody who wanted to use our space, I stayed, and like, whatever, it didn't matter, I was staying up 'til two in the morning anyway, like partying -- it was the good days -- and then, like, we get this money, and we have to do this thing, and like, the space is full, and we can't do things. I'm like, you know -- oh, I know, I was just saying, and then like people are now, like, sort of -- like, all of a sudden, we're like the big players, and in the big league, and have access -- and that was like, "Oh, I'm not-- I didn't realize we had that now." [laughter] Like, you play the game differently when you're at the table, in that one field. So, the fear, as we've done this work, is that we've sort of become experts, and specified, and like sort of became a part of a very specific world, and as Cure Violence has expanded -- So one of our tremendous successes that I like to claim for our team, not for me, but, we were the first replication site in New York State, and cleverly, our organization chose to do research and evaluate the work as we did it, and the research was positive, and I believe that that had a tremendous impact on New York City's decision to adopt the model. I also know that there were grassroots pressures, and many allies, but, I think the combination, probably, of the grassroots people and the research has led to the expansion of this program, which, there's not a ton of research on Cure Violence. There's a-- there's a few pieces, of which ours is one. And so, it is a tremendous, you know, success; to have gone from, you know, doing a little micro-program in a program, and for that to become the model, you know -- not the model, because the model is Cure Violence, but an example, that it could be done and could be replicated, so that New York City could expand, but also, all over the

country. So that's a success.

ALI: OK. OK, I have three more questions.

ELLENBOGEN: That's fine. I canceled my second thing, by the way, so--

ALI: Oh, OK. Well good, I have more than three -- no, it's just three.

ELLENBOGEN: [laughter]

ALI: So, I'm interested -- so one of the things that I'm interested in doing -- there are a couple things. One is thinking of how people relate to the spaces in the neighborhood, right? That's one. Two, I'm interested in how people understand what the forces of change in their neighborhood are, right? So, my next two questions relate to that. So, one is, can you choose and talk about your history with five important locations in Crown Heights -- and this could be a place you like to go, this could be a place you like to work, a place you like to play, a place you always pass by, a place you've always gone to, a place that holds special meaning -- it doesn't have to be long, but I want to -- so, part of this project is to see what the alternative maps are of the neighborhood for people who live there -- a kind of counter-cartography. So, I'm interested in your map of Crown Heights. So, what are the important places for you?

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah. OK, well, obviously, right outside my office--

ALI: And -- I'm sorry -- if you can give me the--

ELLENBOGEN: The exact--

ALI: --if you have specific addresses--

ELLENBOGEN: Sure, sure, sure.

ALI: --because I might create a map out of this.

ELLENBOGEN: So, a couple things to know. When I first started, our office was at 262 Kingston, and then we moved to 256 Kingston, and now we have three offices on the same block, on Kingston Avenue between Lincoln and St. Johns -- 250, 256, and 260-- oh my gosh, now I'm getting confused. Anyway, across the street. And there's two -- you know, so right in front of my office is a whole, like, ecosystem of, of people, and, like, you know, I just love, like, anytime I need a little break, I just can like stand out on the street, and eventually some people that I know come by. Yesterday, I was talking to

somebody, and we were just talking about taking his kid to the beach, and stuff like that, and he said, "You know, I've known you since I was 11 years old," you know, and he's like, "I'm 25 now." You know -- and that's so cool! [laughter] You know, and when he was 11, he was part of this, like, young men's group that we did, a Rites of Passage program, and I've seen him, like, get bigger and bigger and broader and stronger and become a father, and, what an amazing thing to just bear witness to. So -- and, you know, there have been different stores that have opened and closed around us, and for the past few years, have been a barbershop, where, you know, all kinds of activities [laughter] go on, and our relationship has evolved. So, this is just like a really special place, like right in front of the office. And another place right in front of 262 -- I planted a tree there, and [laughter] it's now a big tree! And I, whenever I walk by it, it's different -- years later, the city did the, like, Million Tree Project, or something like that, and so lots of trees were planted, but that one is like a different one. I kind of, like, watching its growth, and sort of the amazing things--

ALI: How old is it? How long ago did you plant it?

ELLENBOGEN: [inaudible] 2003, or something like that. It's like a big tree now. You don't see it like a little stumpy little thing like it used to be. I just kind of like keep my eye on it. And -- so, very office-oriented. Another place that I sort of, like, feel a thing when I go by is Franklin Avenue and Lincoln. So, I think in-- on Franklin and Lincoln, 2010, there were many shootings. There were four shootings on that intersection. And, the program was first starting, and when we first started, we covered a larger -- the SOS program was first starting -- we covered a larger area than we do now, and so we went to do shooting responses there, and that was when I really felt the, the changing demographic, the gentrification. And, we were doing a lot of shooting responses, because when we started, we were doing the whole neighborhood. Kind of all we were doing was, like, showing up at different places, and -- we went to do the shooting response, and the way we do it is we get there early, and we go up to people and say, "Excuse me, did you know there was a shooting here? Would you like to stand with us for a while?" And, we got a lot of people to come, and they were all newcomers. And,

our staff, with the exception of me, were all Black people, and then we were standing with this group -- they weren't all White people, but they were all kind of like 25 years old, [laughter] and even if they weren't -- you know, I'm saying that they're not all White -- they sort of all kind of had, like, a newcomer-like look, or style, or whatever -- I don't know. And, we walked back in, like, this silent -- like, you know, we're like -- oh, and what we all noticed was that there were like young Black kids, not, like, sort of looking at us, as we do it -- which is very common -- when you do a shooting response, people aren't, like, "Is that for me? Should I join in?" But they're listening, and they're watching, and the listening and the watching of the young Black kids, of us there, with a lot of mostly White people, just felt like this -- this was not the message that we wanted this program to be about, and also, what is going on, who are these people, where did they come from? Like, in this sort of, kind of moment of identifying with those kids, and sort of like, or being like, "What are they seeing?" Like, what's the matter-- you know? So, that's like a place that I walk by, and whenever I walk by there -- you know, to walk on Franklin Avenue now is just staggeringly different than what it was, in, you know 2002, and '3, and '4. And I just always have -- I don't know what the feelings are, you know -- like, there's so many White people, and they're walking fast, and there are many stores that are designed to my taste and liking and for my consumption, and I see this fast pace of the White people, and they're in front of some the, some of the storefronts, you know -- people of color standing still, and watching -- especially a lot of older Black men, you know. And, the meaning that I make -- like, I still struggle with what the meaning of that is, but the feeling is not a, is not a great feeling, it's a complicated feeling. The me who is -- the me who was raised in White Plains, and has certain tastes, and affinities -- like certainly, like I said, I kind of like -- I like Gladys's, I like [laughter] the foods and the restaurant, but I feel the displacement, and it doesn't feel good, or right, to be enjoying things and knowing that there were things here that served other people with less access to power, and, they're not here anymore, you know. So, that's how I feel at Lincoln and Franklin. So, that's three. [laughter]

ALI: What do you think of when you think of Crown Heights today?

ELLENBOGEN: I mean, the biggest story is the gen— is the gentrification and the change, and it's visible, it's palpable, it's daily. You know, I felt it when I went on maternity leave. I've gone on maternity leave twice, and so you go away for a couple months, and then you, like, come back, and it's different. You know, I think you were there when I shared a story about how when I first worked on Kingston Avenue, there were like no White people who were not part of the Hasidic community. When I would write reports, and we'd look at the census to try to figure out the population, and like racial population, and you'd look at who was White, and say, "That— Those are the Hasidic Jews," which, you can't, you can't do that anymore to sort of figure that out. So, I remember, there was like one White guy, and I knew his name, and he was very active on the community board, you know, and see him, and say hello to him -- there was like another White guy, and I'd be like, "Oh, White person, hello [laughter] -- I see you." And then, like, you know, years of just being like the only -- the only White person at the community board meetings, with the exception of that gentleman and an older White -- you know, like a few, right, there were a few, but I was the only White person. And then, like, Columbia Journalism School season would start, and there would be, like, a bunch, and then they'd go away, and then, and you know, but, now, it's not even like -- you can't count them, there are so many. So, I think the changing demographics, and the rising rents, and the practices that are going on that are leading to the displacement, and, you know, that feels like what I think about now, when I zoom out. I mean, obviously, my personal experience of Crown Heights, are about individual people who I love and respect, and, like, so honored that I get to spend my time with them, and, you know, and of course, the SOS program, you know -- it's really cool when I hear people talking about SOS who are not me, in a room, and have no idea that I have any connection to it, and they have pride about the program, and feel ownership. So I think about SOS, and, you know, Crown Heights. And the other thing that I always want to say about Crown Heights is that I've always found it to be an exceedingly friendly and courteous neighborhood, particularly the African-American,

Caribbean-American community, and when I lived in my rent-stabilized apartment in Stuyvesant Town, and I would leave in the morning and wait at the elevator, and I would not really acknowledge my neighbors -- I didn't know their name or anything, wasn't particularly interested, and would like ride the whole way -- the whole ride was such an interesting experience, like going, getting there, and then those moments on the subway, where it's like really crowded, and then all the bankers -- like, all the suit people get off, and then, like, again, always being like the only White person at Franklin to be remaining on the 3 train, and sort of recognizing how far Black people travel to get to work -- like I'd be like, oh, that person was, like, "Oh, whatever," and then I get off the subway at Kingston, and all the good mornings, hello, stop, like, "I saw you doing this," like, having to talk to everybody, and how it would take me so long, because I used to be much more time-oriented, to get from like Eastern Parkway and Kingston to the block and a half to the front of my door, because I knew that it was culturally appropriate, and I wanted to connect with everybody I knew along the way -- that sort of sharp contrast between the expectations that I, that I felt like, and here, you -- it's almost like a Southern thing, or what I hear about the South, like, it is expected that I say hello to everyone, check in, check on their health, know about those things, and then I would, like, go home and ignore my neighbors [laughter] because that was what was expected in Stuy Town.

ALI: Before we do the ten years from now, where would you locate sites of power in Crown Heights? Where is the power located in Crown Heights? And this could be, if you can think of -- it could be organizationally, it could be community, it could be people, it could be -- like if, if I were to ask you, like, in your years working in Crown Heights, where have you found power?

ELLENBOGEN: That's a really interesting question. I mean instantly, I went to that intersection that I just described, but the other side of the street, right, like Kingston and Eastern Parkway, 770, and the Jewish Children's Museum. It was not there when I first started. It's interesting to me that the Jewish Children's Museum is so tall in the space, and there's-- right in front of it is the command center, so the mobile command

center for the precinct, and then in front of 770, you know, they park the Hatzolah ambulances, and people come from all over the world to go to pray, or visit 770, and, you know, many, many people feel that it's like a spiritually powerful place. And, it is. You know, I didn't mention that I saw the Rebbe when I was a kid -- yeah, yeah, big important story. So, I don't remember exactly, but I went to 770 as a kid, and he was still alive, and I was in the women's section as a guest. I remember when the Rebbe came into the space, you know, all the women making space for me to be up front by the plexiglass, and just the excitement, and the awe, and the thrill of the crowd is an incredibly powerful experience, and I always compare it to this time that I was in college, and someone gave me an extra ticket to a Madison Square Garden concert, and we didn't really know what it was. I think we were going because the Proclaimers were on the, the ticket -- it was like ten-year anniversary of Z100, or I don't know what it was. Right, and so there's a lot of different shows, and we don't really know what's going on. I have noted that the audience was not who I thought it was going to be, and I'm picking up on things that, I don't know, I'm not fully there. And, then, this, like, act starts, and fireworks go off, and Jon Bon Jovi gets on the stage, and he sings, like, "Shot through the heart!" And I stood up and screamed for Jon Bon Jovi, with all these people at Madison Square Garden -- this rush of "Oh my God," and I didn't even realize I was a Jon Bon Jovi fan, but I am, and it's amazing, and -- it was a little bit like that to see the Rebbe. You know, I had heard amazing things about him, I didn't -- like, whatever, but just being in a packed room of people being like, "The Messiah," or, like, you know, "Oh my God" -- the Rebbe is like incredibly electric, and he's certainly in the way that Jon Bon Jovi has like charisma. You know, the Rebbe exuded incredible charisma. So, 770 is a place, you know, and I-- next spot I thought of were the little -- similar to us, the Jewish Community Council has these little storefronts around where there are these meetings that occasionally I get invited to, and I come in, and, you know, tremendous elected leadership. I think right now, Diana Richardson is like a fireball of power, and vivacity, and I don't know what will happen with it, because she's, like, new to me. Wherever she's walking around, [laughter] you know, there's a lot of, a

lot of power around her in particular. Yeah.

ALI: Where do you see Crown Heights in ten years? Or maybe there's two questions: where do you see, and what would you like to see?

ELLENBOGEN: Oh. [laughter] I wish I knew more about gentrification, and had examples from around the world of, like, when it works. I mean, I definitely think that there's, that there's got to be a way that a little bit of extra wealth and access to power, if it is— if that access to power yields things that are good for a diverse group of people, could be helpful. I think the problem is, like, when it balances -- I mean, tips over into a place, and, and there's like a sort of forgott— you forget, and invisibilize, and lose the people who were there, and whose rich stories are important -- and not just stories, but their connections— their— to people, and stuff. So, I would -- there's things I want for the neighborhood that I feel are really missing. Who knows what will happen with the Armory space -- I haven't really been a part of that, and I've really been very focused on the northern side of Eastern Parkway, but it feels really lacking to me to have like a large -- like, big— I want to say— air-conditioned [laughter] community space. Like, if St Johns Rec was on steroids, and new, and there was a -- you know -- a place for young people to go. Like there's, there's not enough spaces -- and sometimes there are no -- no, no, no places for young people to go to be safe together, to learn together, to be around elders -- I mean, I do love YMCAs a lot, and the idea of places that there's different kinds of adult education, and youth education, and inter-group education, and, you know— like, where's that in the northern Crown Heights space? And it isn't enough to be over there, because we know that especially, you know, a lot of us New Yorkers -- you know, you ask me to give five spaces, and I gave three on the same block -- you know, our worlds are really small, and so whether it's not like putting a giant space [laughter] everywhere, but there needs to be more community centers. So I would really love to see a way that with the coming changes, there are centers for us to all come together, and that they're not created as exclusionary spaces for only the new, high-income people to go to, nor exclusionary spaces for only Hasidic Jews to come. I mean, we get into complicated areas, but I think we have the capacity, if we have the

will, to navigate those things, so--

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

ELLENBOGEN: Let me see. I think we talked a lot.

ALI: Yeah. I mean, we didn't cover everything on our list--

ELLENBOGEN: That's OK.

ALI: --but that, we kind of got through what we -- I mean, is there anything else you wanted to mention? I knew you took some little notes, so maybe--

ELLENBOGEN: I don't think -- just, I did get -- I did -- yeah. Thank you.

ALI: Thank you. [Interview interrupted.]

ELLENBOGEN: [inaudible]

ALI: All right, so this is -- it's still Thursday, July 21st, 2016, and I'm still Zaheer Ali, and we're still at Brooklyn Historical Society, on the Crown H— Voices of Crown Heights project, and this is an addendum to the oral history interview with Amy Ellenbogen. So, Amy, if you could once again introduce yourself, and your birthdate, and where you were born.

ELLENBOGEN: All right, sure. So, Amy Ellenbogen, [date redacted for privacy], 1973, Bronx, New York. So, I asked Zaheer to put the microphone back on, because I would be remiss if I did not talk a little bit about Pastor Ken Bogan, and the influence that he has had on me and the mediation center. So, Pastor Bogan, when I first moved -- moved, wow, listen to that -- moved to Crown Heights to work there, he had a storefront church right next door to us. And he is from Texas, and it is important to him to have a multiracial church, and he is an activist, an organizer, spiritual leader, he's a singer. But like, he's just someone who loves people deeply -- really likes to just come and connect and talk to people. And so, I first knew him as my neighbor, and then we began to do collaborative process projects. And his name is Bogan -- B-O-G-A-N, and my name is Ellenbogen -- B-O-G-E-N -- and he has told me that his family name comes from -- it's an adapt— adaptation of the slave name from a slave owner whose last name was Ellenbogen, which is really interesting to me, and kind of awesome to me that there we are together, working collaboratively. So, so our relationship has been so

deep and so long. In the beginning, we did small projects together, community cleanup projects -- he always has missionaries come, and, you know, that's an interesting experience. Annually, a group of missionaries will come, and sometimes they come twice a year, and they have done tremendous work in the community, and helped us build a garden together, and then he led some young men's groups that we did together -- he was the co-facilitator that I referenced earlier on the cookbook project -- and he became our first clergy liaison for SOS clergy action network. And he's someone that I've just had the pleasure of having long conversations with about racial identity, about my Jewish identity, about gay and lesbian issues, about the history of organizing. He's deeply intelligent and thoughtful and caring, and someone that I just genuinely love, and I am not married -- as a political decision with my partner, that again, was happenstance, because of timing, right -- like, the point at which we were in our thirties, and would have gotten married, there was not gay marriage, and it felt deeply wrong to both of us to, to go through that experience, to get married when people around us could not. And so we made a stance -- but I had always thought that, like, if we did get married, that it should be him, like he was like my spiritual person, you know? And, not very long ago, he had a stroke, and I visited him in the hospital, and he couldn't speak, but he could sing. And, you know, he was struggling -- he was stammering a lot to try to, try to talk, and then he began to sing "Send in the Clowns," which was just this most heartbreaking moment, you know. Really, I felt like it was really expressing how sad he was, to be in that situation. And, he has recovered tremendously, and annually, he sings at an event we host called the Arts to End Violence Gallery. Were you there? I don't think -- all right, anyway. So he sang as he has in last year's -- he recovered tremendously, and, you know, I helped his family in this incredibly small way that I'm just even embarrassed to say, so I'm not going to mention it, but I recently got a hand-written email from his wife, Miss Betty, thanking me, and appreciating me, and I kept it, just because everything from them is really precious to me. So he's just a phenomenal person, and was a leader in Project CARE, and someone who -- a voice of reason and intelligence. So I just wanted to bring him

into this story. And so, anyhow, another space I would say is inside his church. He's had multiple storefronts since -- like, he's moved around, and this is sort of the way it is when rent is in flux and people keep moving. But we ran our men's-- young men's group out of his church, and he's just always, always opened his door. And, I've never gone to his Sunday services. I'm sure they're joyous, and I know they're multiracial, and as my family sort of like searches for some kind of thing, like, I wonder like "Would Pastor Bogan's church be right for me?" But I think, you know, the Jesus thing would interfere a little bit. So, yeah, I wanted to mention Pastor Bogan, and one other Black man who had a tremendous role in my life is Harry Jefferson, who is the assistant principal of White Plains High School, and all those activities that I mentioned before, you know, I had to interact with him a lot -- he was an incredibly charming person, and I learned so much from him, and, you know, I think about him a lot, and of late have thought about him a lot. He was best friends with Bill Cosby -- they had been in a fraternity together, and one of those sort of, like, moments of dissonance in my understanding was that at White Plains High School, there was a special program for students of color, and they would get to go to "The Cosby Show" and meet Bill Cosby, and it was like another one of those moments where I felt jealous, like, "Why? Why do *they* get to meet Bill Cosby, and I don't, and what's the difference, and da da da," and, like, I luckily, again, had teachers, like Ms. Latari, Ms. Altman, who had worked with Peggy McIntosh, who I could, like process this with, and they could like help me understand social-- the social pressures and-- pressures isn't the right word. They helped me understand institutional and structural racism, and why things like that were needed. So I wanted to honor those people by including the way that they touched my life.

ALI: And, just for the record, what is the name of Pastor Bogan's church?

ELLENBOGEN: Oh, the Greater Restoration Baptist Church.

ALI: OK, and do you know the specific address? It's next door, you said, to you?

ELLENBOGEN: No, so now, it's on St. Johns -- I don't know the exact address. It should be on the Arts to End Violence--

ALI: Is this the church that was next door to where the arts thing is?

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah.

ALI: OK.

ELLENBOGEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's just like right around the corner. Just like one other little story that I feel like is really pivotal -- when I worked at the rape crisis center at Columbia, which then became renamed to, like, the anti-violence center, I had a very close friend, a boy -- a man -- who came to me asking for help around violence. And, I met with him to talk to him in the center. I can't remember how -- we needed somewhere private, and it was a very, like, serious conversation. And he came to me, and it was because he was -- had been violent towards his girlfriend. He wasn't just a close friend, he was an ex-boyfriend of mine, [laughter] and he wanted to help. And, I remember, the two of us just, like, sobbing together, as he was talking about this, and I tried to help him, and there was no -- there was no help. The-- I went to, like, my advisors, and they said, like, "First of all, you should have never had him in here," you know, "This is not a safe-- like once he's here," and I was like, "I didn't really know what we were going to talk about." And secondly, if he gets arrested, like, maybe there will be a mandated program, or -- you know, there are no programming -- there's no programming for that. It's one of those sort of like memories that has resurfaced now that I run a program for young men of color who are, who are victims of violence, and that I'm thinking so much about how to involve men in stopping the cycle of domestic violence on men, and how to stop the viol-- stop the cycle of gun violence, and that, like, moment, of just being like, "Wait, there's no -- there's *no* program for a man who's, like, weeping, who's like, 'I want to stop being violent towards my girlfriends?'" Like, how could that be? How can we think that we're going to solve this problem if we're just like cutting off and incarcerating or using mandated programs for men, you know? And I have become very active in creating programming for gay and lesbian people who were in domestic violence, interpersonal violence issues in the '90s, and in the '90s, in New York, it was almost totally taboo to talk about there being violence in -- at the time, we didn't have the "T," [laughter] but GLBQ issues. It was like, you couldn't

bring that up -- especially women being violent towards other women. And, I had done some of that work in California, and it was like a little bit more advanced there, and then like coming to New York, and starting to try to talk about this issue, the outrage, and the silencing -- the silencing from the domestic violence movement, it was like unacceptable, because we understood domestic violence as operating within the patriarchy, and that, that lesbian women were not, were not getting the privileges of the patriarchy, and so this could not be. And, that, I -- I remember speaking up, and being silenced, and retreating, and we were sort of like, [unintelligible] know what to do -- for many reasons, not just because of the topic, but I was like so much younger than everybody, and it was like my first foray sort of out of the Columbia community down to the West Village to, like, a conference -- like, you know, I didn't know what I was doing. But here I am, again, now, sort of like saying, "A, domestic violence movement, you need to find a way to do preventative work working with men, and b, we are missing this huge population of victims -- of crime victims -- in the way we're allocating crime victim compensation and our services for crime victims, because we do know that men of color are victims of crime, and they're not perceived that way, or receiving services." So, you know, when I sort of look at the narrative of my life, I just sort of see these moments of looking at the center, and being like, "Well, who's being left out? Who's outside?" And, like, "How do I sort of step to the outside, and advocate and change for those on the outside?" Which is a very uncritical place to be. I am not a man, I'm not a man of color, and what is, what is really my role -- what's the right move, and how do I honor those people who are there, but use the power and privilege that I have to sort of amplify that? And, that is what I want to say. [laughter]