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Oral History Interview with Bob Law

Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.05

Interview conducted by Amaka Okechukwu at the Namaskar store on December 21,
2016 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

OKECHUKWU: All right. It is, what, December 20th?

LAW: Dec-- oh.

OKECHUKWU: Thursday -- or Wednesday, December 20th, 2016. I -- this is Amaka Okechukwu, interviewing Bob Law, at Namaskar, on Atlantic Avenue, between Washington and Grand. And if -- just beginning, if you could say your name, your birth date, and how long you've lived in Crown Heights.

LAW: [laughter] This is Bob Law. Let me use my radio voice. Hi. This is Bob Law. This is Bob Law, and it's -- I lived in Crown Heights forever. I was born in Crown Heights, what is now Crown Heights, on Bergen Street and -- I was born on Atlantic Avenue, in Interfaith Hospital. And when I was born, it was called St. John's Hospital. It is now Interfaith Hospital. And I was raised in the Kingsborough Projects on Bergen Street at Buffalo Avenue. And the hangout area was what is now called Crown Heights. We grew up in -- all -- in this entire area. Eastern Parkway to -- you know, Fulton Street, part of Bed-Stuy, all the way down to Grand Army Plaza. All of Empire Boulevard. Ebbets Field was a shrine for us when I was growing up. So the whole area that was Crown Heights -- and it -- I'm -- I was born in 1939. And so -- and I lived in Crown Heights -- I lived in the Kingsborough Projects -- until 1960. Want me to keep going?

OKECHUKWU: What memories do you have of growing up in Crown Heights?

LAW: Crown Heights; when we were growing up, this community seemed to be the whole world. Everything that we ever expected was here. There used to be a TV show sponsored by Sealtest Milk or Silvercup Bread. And -- I think it was Sealtest. And they had a -- it was called, uh, "Sealtest Circus." And it was on television. And they had a strong man named Dan Lurie. Well, Dan Lurie's gym was right down on Pitkin

Avenue, right in our neighborhood. So we would see him on television and then go down on Pitkin Avenue to buy magazines -- I bought a bicycle down there -- and Dan Lurie was there. You know, Arthur Murray was on TV, and Arthur Murray's Dance Studio was also right there in our neighborhood on Pitkin Avenue. The most famous baseball team in the world, the Brooklyn Dodgers -- and the New York Yankees -- they were in New York. But Brooklyn, Ebbets Field, was on Bedford Avenue, within walking distances of our houses -- our homes -- where we lived in the projects. And the projects were very, very different then than they are now. The projects had landscaping. They got painted every spring. The benches outside were painted. The apartments were painted. In those days, it was all lead paint. So I remember that we would have to go spend a night with my grandparents over on Macon Street then -- whenever they -- when they painted annually, when they painted the projects, because you couldn't spend the night there. You couldn't breathe in the fumes. But they had their own security force. The par-- the grounds were landscaped. It was a whole different kind of a community in the housing projects in those days. And the Kingsborough Housing Projects was erected where the heart of the Black Weeksville community was -- had been. So now we know why they chose that location to put up the housing project. [laughter] But it destroyed the -- a major segment of Weeksville. But we had no idea, at the time, any knowledge of Weeksville at all. I went to PS 83 and had learned that that building; a school at that location, the first school at that location, was constructed by the people of Weeksville. And it was called the something School for the Colored Children. But growing up there, we did -- when I was growing up, baseball, in the inner city, was what basketball is now. Everybody played baseball -- every form of baseball: stickball, punchball, softball, hardball, throw the ball off the wall...you know, it -- every kind of -- everything you could do. And so we grew up really in love with baseball. And we played stickball seriously. We -- but we had everything that we -- and looking at television, and seeing the rest of the world, we had everything that we saw on television. If the Ringling Bros. Circus was on TV, it came to Madison Square Garden.

Our parents would take us there. We -- everything -- we didn't seem -- we didn't feel excluded from anything. We thought we had a piece of everything. In fact, we would -- from time to time, we, as kids, would ask our parents, "Are we poor?" Because we -- you know, at that time, there was no real middle class, no clearly defined middle class. There was working class and rich. But we would -- we knew that -- and if you look at the movies, the rich people had chauffeurs and waiters and servants, and the poor people lived in tenements, and that's all you saw. When we knew that we didn't have servants and waiters, but we lived in an elevator building, [laughs] you know. We -- and we had everything that we asked for. We had bicycles for Christmas and -- we knew -- but we knew we weren't rich. But somehow we didn't feel like we were poor, but since we weren't rich, we wondered, "Well, what are we? You know, we're not rich, so we must be poor. But we're not like the little munchkins that you see in the movies *The Gas House Gangs* [sic], *The East Side Kids*, all those -- you know, those people. But it -- but growing up in Prospect -- in what is Crown Heights was almost like a fantasy. We -- you -- we would read com-- Archie Andrews comic books. And Archie Andrews in the comic books lived on clean, suburban streets -- no litter, houses back with a lawn in front. Well, we didn't see that. Everything around us was a brownstone, except we had doctors who lived on President Street and Carroll Street. So we would go to visit the doctor within easy -- it wasn't walking distance from our house, but, like, a few minutes by car. We were now on a street that looked like the street in the Archie Andrews comics. You know, everything that we saw, somehow we also had access to. And so we just kind of thought that -- this is as children. As growing up, it was even -- looking back, it was a really joyous kind of a time to grow up in Crown Heights. There was racism. But we didn't realize that, because the kids that grew up with us, the kids in our little group -- what you might call our gang -- was -- were Black and White. They were Italian, Jewish, and Black. There were Caribbeans. In that days they used to call them West Indians. But they -- the kids that we grew up with had no Caribbean accent. You know, we didn't know that they were from the Caribbean. And we would go visit their,

their apartments around the holidays, and they would have relatives, and the relatives would have accents. We said, "Well, what is that?" And I remember the first Caribbean accent I heard, from one of my friend's grandmother. I thought that was the most melodic, most wonderful sound. I kept telling, "C'mon, let's go over here and sit by your grandmother! When your grandmother talks, it sounds like she's singing," you know? And -- but --

OKECHUKWU: Where were your parents from?

LAW: They were from Georgia and -- Pembroke, Georgia -- and Lauren -- Laurens County, North Carolina. From North Carolina and -- and Georgia. But the -- I forgot what I was going to tell you. But we didn't -- oh, we didn't know -- we didn't have a problem with each other based on race. So we used to go everywhere as a group. We would walk from where -- from Bergen Street and Buffalo Avenue to -- I don't remember the name of the street -- out to Brownsville, to Betsy Head Swimming Pool. We would walk out there. We'd go swimming at Betsy Head. We would walk back, all the way back home. You know, it's like they -- the people say, when we were growing up, we would share soda, candy. If you said "Eggies" -- if -- So if you bought something, and somebody said, "Eggies," before you could say, "No eggs," you had to share it. It was just the code of the street, [laughter] right? And so kids would say, "Eggies," and you -- "Oh, man." Then you had to share. And everybody did. You drank out of the same soda bottle. Nobody ever got sick. We would go -- we'd be out all day, riding bicycles all over, going out to Prospect Park, and nobody ever got lost. Nobody ever got bruised. Nobody ever got kidnapped, you know? Nobody ever got jumped by a gang -- when we were little kids. But as we were growing older, into, like, the early teens, there was -- there were gangs. And there was a real gang culture. The, the heart of the gang activity, in New York City, was Brooklyn. And there were gangs, like, gang called the Tiny Tims, and the Pythons. I remember all of those. But the Tiny Tims, the Pythons, legendary gangs. As we become a little bit older now, into the early teens, now it's our

turn to be the gangs. The gangs became the Bishops and the Chaplains and the Corsair Lords. The Corsair Lords are from Kingsborough, you know.

So it became the Corsairs, the Bishops, the Chaplains, John Quells -- I don't know where that name came from, but it was a gang out in Brownsville. But the gang and the gang activity was not like it is now. In those days, maybe one person in the gang had a gun. And most often it was what was called a zip gun, that they made from a cap pistol and something else in the shop class in school, and you'd shoot the gun, and the gun'd blow up in your hand, you know? The -- so the -- so there wasn't that access to a weapon. Some people who had it--Hardly anybody ever got shot. But they got stabbed. Everybody had a knife. But no -- it wasn't that kind of guns. But the gangs were large organizations; large organizations of young people that -- later on, into the '60s, that the Panther Party transformed into political organizations. And we always felt that the gangs always represented a political potential. And the gangs had a structure. And you know -- so adults looking at those gangs, we now understand, would look at them and say, "You know, we better, we better watch these kids. These kids are -- are not hoodlums. We got to make sure they become hoodlums."

You know the, the gangs had a structure. The gangs had a warlord. So you actually had one guy in the gang whose job, if you're going to have a gang fight, his job was to go meet with the warlord from the other gang and lay out the ground rules; where we're going to fight, what kind of weapons can be used. There was a structure. There was a head of the gang. There was the president. There were some other people who, who kind of were the head of a little division. It was organized by some kids who had no training in organizing, had no-- had not read a military manual, didn't even know what we were doing, somehow just had an, an intelligent instinct and actually organized a structure, which was more threatening than we even knew at the time. But that was the early days. And see -- and then we were -- schoolyard basketball was emerging. And so there were -- but -- but track and field were the major things. There was a guy named Ralph Bass. I don't remember the name of all those other guys -- two or three guys -- a

guy named Critchlow-- who grew up with me in Kingsborough, were guys who won track scholarships to St. John's University. I don't remember what school Ralph Bass went to. But these guys were like local celebrities, you know? They were the legendary runners. And that was long before Black folk could think about going to the Olympics, long before there was any kind of commercial tie-in.

So they were very, very fast, won a lot of medals, got college scholarships, and then went to work in the police department or the fire department. They did not become professional athletes. That wasn't a possibility at that time. And there -- but there was a lot of really excellent athletes on the street. And -- but we lived in Brooklyn on the Crown Heights side of Prospect Park. On the other side of Prospect, Prospect Park -- which is what they call the Parade Grounds, that's where the White kids lived. Baseball scouts went to Prospect Park. So they -- when they went to Prospect Park, they discovered the White kids from Brooklyn. A guy named Ed Kranepool, who played for the Mets. They discovered Sandy Koufax, who was a legendary pitcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers. But Sandy Koufax came from Brooklyn on the other side of Prospect Park.

On our side -- and they found other ballplayers. Not all of them became memorable, like Ed Kranepool. He was just a ballplayer. He had a career. He wasn't spectacular. Sandy Koufax, on the other hand, was spectacular. You know? When you talk about Sandy Koufax, even now, you have to say, "Mr. Sandy Koufax." He was spectacular. But on our side of the park, only one guy made it to the major leagues, and he was not the only ballplayer of that caliber in our community. But -- a guy who went to school and my classmate at PS 83, his -- in PS 83 his name was Herman Davis. When he played centerfield for the Los Angeles Dodgers, his name was Tommy Davis. Most valuable player, but-- but Tommy Davis was not the only professional quality ballplayer in our community. But somehow he was the one who was seen playing ball at Boys High. And Boys High was known for basketball, not at all for baseball. And Boys High trained the coach there -- I forgot his name. I remembered his name for

years. Forgot his name. But [Interview interrupted.] -- let me -- let's see. I'll turn it off.

So you want to ask anything --

OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

LAW: -- or want me just to keep running?

OKECHUKWU: So what were the boundaries of Crown Heights growing up? Because, you know, that's always a question about what -- you know, what is Crown Heights and what is not?

LAW: Oh! The coach at Boys High, his name was Mickey Fisher. And he really trained -- he really taught people how to play ball. He was responsible for a lot of Black kids who were at Boys High. But it -- and it wasn't a Black school at that time. But he was responsible for a lot of kids actually getting college scholarships, basketball scholarships. But Crown Heights -- at that time, Crown Heights was from -- as we understood it, and I don't -- I don't know if these were the official lines, but we understood Crown Heights to be from Empire Boulevard back up to Bergen Street. And then some, it was -- we thought it was Empire Boulevard to Eastern Parkway, and from, say, Ralph Avenue to Grand Army Plaza, which -- that was Crown Heights, for sure. Carroll Street, President Street, then those were the streets -- Crown Street. And I lived on Crown Street for a few years before I moved out of Brooklyn. But -- and Crown Heights is where you wanted to move to. You didn't-- We didn't think about moving to Long Island; certainly not Long Island. But we didn't think about moving to Queens. At one point, all of our families were redlined into Southeast Queens. We didn't know what was, what was happening. We just thought it was hip that we're moving to St. Alban's, and right around the corner is my friend I used -- who I grew up with, I played with all the time. Around -- right down the block is another one. We just thought it was a coincidence that everybody was moving into the same area in St. Alban's. We did-- and Ozone Park, and South Ozone Park-- We didn't know about redlining, in that those are the only areas that were available to Black folk. But as kids, we didn't have a problem with that. But as I was saying earlier, when-- there was racism, but we never

noticed it, you know? We had just normalized the political reality. So almost all the businesses, all the businesses were owned by White people. But the White people were not mean or hostile. There was a candy store on the corner of Bergen and Buffalo, where the Weeksville Society is now— Norma and Sidney Goldfinger, and— which is known as Norma's Candy Store, still, affectionately, by people who grew up there. Norma was like a part of the community. She didn't live in the community, but somebody -- a young woman in the, in the project got married. And her pare— her mother did not send an invitation to Norma to come to the wedding. Norma was irate! [laughter] She was like, "How come I can't come? I'm not family? Why didn't I get an invitation?" And as people came into the -- and the reason we know, when we came into this candy store, she would say, "Are you going to so-and-so's wedding? Well, how come I'm not going?" You know, [laughter] she felt like she was part of the community, and we felt like, "Yeah, Norma ought to be there!" You know. And she, like the other adults -- when we were growing up, all of the adults in the neighborhood had dominion over me. You know, my -- if somebody saw me do something, they could say, "Bobby Law, get off that bench! Don't make so much noise." And, and if I was to talk back to one of those adults -- if you really want to get in trouble, tell one of those adults, "You're not my mother!" If you really want to get knocked out by the time [laughter] you get home, you just talk back; tell her, "You're not my mother." By the time you get home, my mother -- "Did you tell Miss Critchlow that she was not your mother?" You know? [laughter] But -- and all the adults looked out for us, and Norma was included in that. Because one day, we were coming out of her store. And they used to have these little ice cream trucks that drive through the neighborhood, and you call them, and they come out, and they go to the back and open the back of the truck and give you -- serve you the ice cream. So the ice cream truck came around the corner, came around on Buffalo Avenue -- Buffalo Avenue was a two-way street then -- turned around and going up Buffalo Avenue just as we were stepping out of her store. And one of the guys with us said, "Yo, yo, ice cream, ice cream!" So the guy stopped. He got out of his

car -- little truck -- and he came around to the back, and he opened the door. He said, "Yes, what do you want?" And the guy said, "Have you got the time?" So we thought that was hilarious. Like, we weren't buying ice cream. We said, "You got the time?" But if you said that, Norma came out of her store. And she said, "No, no, no, that's not nice. Buy ice cream." So the guy said, "But Norma..." She said, "Buy ice cream." So the guy's -- "Aw, man! Norma said, 'Buy ice cream.' She's one of the adults in the community; I got to buy this ice cream." And then [laughter] Norma said, "And actually, all of you buy one." "Come on, Norma, he said it, not me!" We started trying to explain. "Why..." "Everybody buy ice cream." Everybody did. She was one of the adults in the community. And it was that kind of a community, you know? It was -- there -- we used to talk about how if, if you were there, a young woman your age, and you were out somewhere -- now, the subway stop for our -- for the project -- was Utica Avenue and Fulton Street. So when you'd get off at Utica Avenue and Fulton, and then you had to walk up Herkimer, so you had to walk home. And so maybe if you were coming home late from something -- whatever, an event, whatever -- you might walk a little quickly, trying to get home. But as soon as you stepped into the project, you would slow down and relax. You were now home -- even if it was not right in front of your building, you were home. And you would slow down and take your time and go where you had to do. If you saw a group of guys standing there, somewhere, as you were coming in, you would not try to get around them. You would walk right to those guys, because you know those were the Corsairs. Those were your security. You know, those are the guys who lived in the neighborhood. That was your security. And that security worked. I saw on a couple of occasions -- I remember one occasion, we were all standing in -- a bunch of us were standing in some-- in front of a -- sitting on some benches where we hung out, with a guy who had broken his leg, and so he couldn't get around as much. And we were sitting around in front of his building on the benches. Summer night, just talking and laughing and talking. And one of the young women -- one of the, you know, girls in the neighborhood came around the corner, and she

walked right past her building and came over to us. And as she came over to us, she was crying. Said, "Why -- what is -- why are you crying? What's going on?" And she said, "This guy --" He's a little bit older than us -- she said, "He-- I've been up --up--", we used to call Ralph and Pacific "uptown." She said, "Well, I've been uptown, and this guy's been just messing with me and flirting with me, and -- and so I told him, 'Leave me alone.' And I'm leaving, but I look back and I see he's following me home. And I'm afraid, and I don't want him to even know where I live, because, you know, he's going to be waiting for me tomorrow morning or something to come out." And she says, "Oh, look, here he comes now." So we said, "All right, don't worry. You sit down. Hey man, come here." And these little kids -- and -- we weren't all such little kids by then, but we said, "She's afraid of you, and I want you to turn around, walk back where you came from, don't look back, because she doesn't want you to know which one of these buildings she lives in. If she tells us tomorrow that you did anything at all, we will crack your skull. Now turn around and get out of here." And he, and he was older than us. But we were not such little kids then. He said, "OK, OK." "Don't -- we don't want any trouble out of you. Don't want to -- I don't -- don't let her have to tell us that you harassed her again, 'cause we will come get you, OK?" "OK." And he left. Didn't bother her again. And we really would have cracked his skull, you know? So you can't do this. And so -- but we had such a family, because then we started teasing her about - - because there was a guy -- these two guys who owned a car, who weren't from the neighborhood. And then they used to come and pick her and some other girls up. And we started saying, "See? You like them guys with that car. Where are they now?" [laughter] But it was just jokes. It was just family. It was just a -- it was like a real community, you know? Not at all the way is it now.

OKECHUKWU: What were the demo-- so you mentioned before about Kingsborough, there being Whites in Kingsborough. What were the demographics more specifically of Kingsborough as well as Crown Heights?

LAW: Crown Heights was predominantly White. Kingsborough -- in the early days, when we were small children, Kingsborough was, like, 50/50. You know, Kingsborough was -- was set up to be a model for how diversity works. And so people would come -- social scientists, other people, would be brought to Kingsborough to show how this works. This was Roosevelt's idea. And so -- and Kingsborough was a model for that. There was another project out in -- built around the same time, but I think Kingsborough was the first, then Fort Greene, and then a project in Woodside, Queens. And the project in Woodside -- all of those were really well-kept, really nice. But the project in Woodside was White. That was the first place that I'm aware of where segregation was being employed. But the demog-- but for Fort -- for Kingsborough and Fort Greene, the demographic was really 50/50, but that was very deliberate. And they were -- and there was a formula for being in the project, which -- because the projects were supposed to be a platform to step up. So there was a formula, an income level. And when you got to a -- a higher income, then they would tell you you had to leave. And -- because you're supposed to step up. But-- and you also couldn't be destitute. They, and they were not putting all poor people in the same location the way they do now. They -- they understood about mixed, mixed income, and so Kingsborough had a good mix of ethnic groups. Well, it was Black and White people. But the White people were, for the most part -- well, I guess it was everybody. They were Jewish, they were Irish, they were Italian -- my best friend was a little Italian kid. And, and then Black people. But all of the people were what would be -- ultimately be called "upwardly mobile," you know? They -- everybody put an emphasis on education. We were working class income, but middle class mentality, middle class attitudes. So while -- which is what confused us, why we asked our parents if we were poor. Because we were -- the little girls were going to cotillions. They had debutante cotillions. They would take -- they were -- my sister was in charm school, taking piano lessons -- can't play the piano a lick. Me either. We took piano lessons. Can't play the piano. But -- [laughter] had no interest in the piano. But upwardly mobile, upwardly mobile children are supposed to

take piano lessons. Salesmen would come by selling encyclopedias. Everybody bought the set of encyclopedias. The salesman would knock on the door and say, "Do you have any children?" "Yes, I do." They -- the parents would say yes. "Well, we have just what you need. This encyclopedia's going to do this and open their world and teach them." Well, of course, you know? And what they're really saying is all upwardly mobile people need a set of encyclopedias. Everybody I know bought those encyclopedias. So we -- but it was that kind of demographic, like I was saying. However, as kids, we didn't realize the racism. So there was a restaurant on St. John's Place and Utica Avenue, called Dubrow's. And Dubrow's -- the word was out that during the Easter break, during the Christmas break, during the summer, Dubrow's was hiring kids to clean up and stuff in there. And you got a little bit of money, but you got all you could eat. And so -- again, now, we were not looking for jobs because we needed the money. We were looking for jobs as little kids because we wanted some more money. We wanted to buy stuff, you know; baseball gloves and -- but we didn't have a need for money. So when they said that you can -- it's all you can eat, that was the most attractive part of it that you could get all you can eat. And we would go to Dubrow's every season, and they would say, "Oh, I'm sorry, you're late. The job's already gone." And we would say, "Wow! Man, we came early." And we would -- next year, "Well, you guys got to come before this." We didn't realize that they were turning us down based on race. And one of the reasons is because there were one or two White kids with us. It'd be like seven kids, and five of them are Black. And the two White kids would just suffer. And when the White parents eventually told their kids -- like, my best friend was a little White kid, a little Italian kid -- at one point he just came and said, "I can't be on the baseball team anymore." And he, like-- had an attitude, you know-- said, "I can't hang out with you guys anymore." And he just walked away.

OKECHUKWU: What age was that?

LAW: By the time he did that, he must have been 16. And -- but he had -- but he was, like, angry. And then, see, what happens is that his parents eventually told him that the

reason you didn't get all these things is because you've been hanging out with these Black kids. The reason you didn't get this, the that— But it didn't occur to us, because we got a lot of stuff. When I mentioned the Brooklyn Dodgers; there was a TV show then called *Happy Felton's Knothole Gang*, which came on prior to the baseball game. And it was this guy, Happy Felton, who had three kids who would be tested with their basic baseball skills by a major league ballplayer from the Dodgers. And so we watched that on television before every Dodger game, looking at those kids. And we were playing organized sandlot ball. We were in the PAL. And then we got a call from the cop at the 77th Precinct, who was coordinating this, and he said that, "They want one," a kid, "from your group to be on the Happy Felton TV show." And it was a catcher. And he went -- and so everything that we saw was available. So now we're watching all of these kids. But that was not fantasy for us. Next time we're watching, here's a kid from our team, from our neighborhood. We just felt that we had access to the world that we saw on TV and in the movies. We had -- we were part of that, you know. So -- but other kind of things would happen that we just really didn't notice. You have to look back, you know. All of the businesses are owned by White people. Fortunoff, which became the Fortunoff Mall, out on Old Country Road in Westbury, the major Fortunoff store, the source that was on Fifth Avenue -- Fortunoff started on the corner on Pitkin Avenue, this little shop. Well, it never occurred to us that that corner, that property, that opportunity to open a retail store, was not available to my grandfather, you know? It was available to Mr. Fortunoff. Because of the racism. You know, the -- we understood "Work hard, and you prosper." What we didn't understand was that hard work pays off for some more than it does for others. There's a whole structure in place. When we went to PS 83, all the teachers were White. All of the history was white supremacy. It's the same curriculum that exists in the public schools even now. So one of the reasons I brought the lawsuit against the Board of Ed. in 1990, because we can prove that they're teaching distorted information, and they're teaching white supremacy. Well, that didn't occur to us as we read all of that, you know. And we

never noticed that all the teachers were White; all the history was about White people; all the heroes in the world were White. We just never noticed. And our parents never mentioned it. So there might have been some parents here and there who talked to their kids, but the kids I grew up with, our parents never mentioned it. When I was graduating from junior high school and going to go to Art and Design High School, which is what I did -- and you had to take a art portfolio to the high school. And they had an entrance ex— entrance exam. You had to show your capability and whatever else they did. So I went with another kid from the school, two of us. We went to the high school. We passed the exam. They approved of our portfolio. And they accepted us into Art and Design High School. Back then it was called the School of Industrial Art. The -- came back to the classroom, came back to Junior High School 210, on Rochester Avenue here in Crown Heights. Told the art teacher -- believe her name was Miss Doer -- told the art teacher that we had been accepted to this high -- this High School of Art and Design. She said, "I didn't know that you were applying." The woman said, "Had I known, I never would have let that happen." So we go back and tell the homeroom teacher what she said. Homeroom teacher says, "Well, you know, some people are just kind of mean." She didn't tell us this woman was racist. We told our parents. Parents didn't say anything about race being a factor. You know, so we ran into it. And there was another kid. And this sounds like it's, it's not true. There was another kid who -- I don't want to mention his name, but he still comes to the Kingsborough reunions. He -- he really was the best artist of us all. And he went through the art teacher, and she prevented him from going. And he never got into art school, never became an artist, never pursued his craft. But -- and she blocked it, you know? And that was the kind of thing that was happening all around us, but we were not— We were not aware of it, and it did not discourage us, because we just didn't realize what was happening. We didn't know what we were up against. But—

OKECHUKWU: When -- were your parents or your family members involved in any organizations or members of churches or any sort of community institutions?

LAW: My mother was active -- my parents were in churches -- all of our parents, as it turned out, were going to church. Most of them, not all of them. But my parents were very, very much involved in church, Church of God in Christ. In fact, we attended the First Church of God in Christ, and it's still known as First Church. And it was called that because it was the first Church of God in Christ to be erected in Brooklyn. And so—

OKECHUKWU: Where is that?

LAW: It was at 1745 Pacific Street. Used to be a garage, they turned it into a church; 1745 Pacific Street. And it is now -- that 1745 is still a church that is pastored by Timothy Wright. And since Timothy Wright's death, his son David has taken over. Same building, same little church. And a lot of people who grew up in that church -- I grew up there going to Sunday school and singing in the glee club. When I was growing up, when you got to be a certain age, you had to join the glee club. I can't sing, [laughter] you know? Neither could the rest of the guys on the back row [laughter] in the glee club, can't sing a lick. But you get to a certain age, you got to join the glee club. So we did. But now that church, First Church, has since moved to Kingston Avenue and Park Place; huge church on the corner of Kingston and Park -- still in the Crown Heights community. But there was not a lot of political activity available. My mother was active with civic organizations, and with a woman named Maude Richardson. And Maude Richardson is never -- you ever heard that name before?

OKECHUKWU: I ha-- well, you continue, but—

LAW: But Maude Richardson is never mentioned in the history of Central Brooklyn politics. But Maude Richardson ran for the state assembly, and she won. She's the first -- she was -- she preceded Shirley Chisholm. She is the first Black woman to achieve elective office in New York State, certainly in Brooklyn. She is the first Black woman to be elected to public office in Brooklyn, in New York City. From the time that she -- when she won the popular vote -- before January and she was to be sworn in, the assembly met in Albany and redrew the lines and said that now because of the new lines, the district that she won in no longer exists. And they disc— disqualified, discounted her

district and nullified her election. So she was never actually sworn in and never able to serve, even though she had won the popular vote. That's the racism, part of the history of Central Brooklyn. When Shirley Chisholm ran, there was no more mention -- not even from Shirley Chisholm -- never mentioned the, the pave-- the groundbreaking, paving the way, that Maude Richardson had done to make a Shirley Chisholm possible. Maude Richardson was the person who challenged the White male-dominated political structure, and not only was it White male-dominated, it was Black male accomplices who worked right along with Carmine DeSapio, forgot the other guy's name, the little Italian political machine that controlled Central Brooklyn politics. The battle for power in Brooklyn, politically, started out as a battle between the Italians and the Jewish political machines. The Black people were working for whoever wins, you know? There was no real Black political agenda. The Black political agenda was "Wait and see who wins, and let -- and whoever's going to win is going to want to have some of their own Negroes. And we want to be their Negroes. So whoever wins, we're available to them." That was the Black political machine, and it's still very much like that now. But Maude Richardson was the groundbreaker who gets overlooked. Then came Shirley Chisholm, ran for the assembly. And Shirley Chisholm did know what she was up against. She wasn't as naïve as the Black elected officials serving Central Brooklyn right now. She knew what she was up against, and she knew that she was up against the White male machine and the Black male co-conspirators; that they were going to try to block her. She always knew that she was taking on the Black men as well. So she didn't make alliances with Black men politicians, like -- she thought that was going to pay off the way Tish James thought that the first time she ran, that the Black political machine in Central Brooklyn was going to support her. And it was mostly Black men -- or all Black men. And broke her heart when they, when they double-crossed her and did not really come out and support her. She was really hurt, because she trusted those guys. The-- But Shirley Chisholm was smarter than that. And she knew what-- was-- she was up against, so she was able to move more effectively. And then Andy Cooper,

who at the time was working for Schaefer Beer -- he was the publisher of *The City Sun* newspaper. Prior to publishing *The City Sun*, he was public affairs director for Schaefer Beer, Downtown Brooklyn. And he was very active in Brooklyn politics. And he sued the government to create the congressional district that Shirley Chisholm ran for. Because at that time -- I don't remember the numbers, but it was something like; you had to have 60,000 people in a district for it to be a congressional district. So he pointed out that there were 60,000 people, all of whom were Black. So this district qualifies -- this community qualifies to become a congressional district. So they drew congressional lines, and they presented that, and they sued the government, and they won. And that lawsuit created Shirley Chisholm's district. As Michelle Alexander puts out --not, has pointed out, rather -- white supremacy, racism, are just in order to protect itself. And so when they changed the law that said, "Now you got to have -- if it was 60,000, now you got to have 100,000." But the Black community in that Central Brooklyn was so Black, and more people coming all the time; people still coming up from the South. They even had a dispute at one point between Blacks from the South and-- who were protesting, complaining, about Blacks from the Caribbean coming into the community, and that they didn't want all these Blacks from the Caribbean coming into this community. And I remember that some of those public meetings were held at the Antioch Baptist Church on 828 Greene Avenue here in Bed-Stuy where they-- and some of them were held at Bethany Baptist Church, which is now Marcus Garvey Boulevard. Wasn't Mar-- I think it was Sumner Avenue then, right? But it was those kind of real peculiar political dynamics going on. But no matter what, the -- the Black population qualified, and so Shirley Chisholm's district remained intact -- until now, with Hakeem Jeffries there, and the, the political plan of the Whites who are moving in is to eliminate that district. So there's a whole other discussion.

OKECHUKWU: What do you remember -- so you started off talking about Maude Richardson and then going into Shirley Chisholm. What do you remember about that

period, your experience of it? Were you interested in politics and sort of keeping abreast of what was happening? Were you engaged in any of that in any way?

LAW: See, during that time -- now we're moving into the '60s, the early '60s. Now, Maude Richardson was the middle '50s. Shirley Chisholm is coming along, late '50s in-- into the -- you know, her being just a -- having a presence in Brooklyn and running for office now as the assembly one -- assemblywoman -- this is now moving into, like, maybe 1960. I don't remember exact-- I don't remember exactly when she ran. It might not have been as early as that. It might've been later than that. But at that time -- now we're moving into the '60s, and there's a political movement happening all over the country. And in Brooklyn was a -- the integrationist part, the early stages of the movement -- was groups like Brooklyn CORE. And I was, like, one of the major players in Brooklyn CORE, early on. Brooklyn CORE was headed by a guy named Ollie Leeds. And Brooklyn CORE was very much an integrationist -- I wouldn't even call it integrationist. It was very much a diversity kind of a political initiative. Most of the people in there were interracial couples. The-- Ollie Leeds was married to a White woman, and they were -- he's Black; he's married to a White woman. Her name was Marge, I believe -- they were great people. Big, fun, great people. All of those people that I met in those early days at Brooklyn CORE, they were really nice people, Black and White, pushing -- but we were pushing for acceptance by Whites. We weren't pushing for Black self-determination. We would have discussions in Brooklyn CORE about what -- how we will know when we are free. And you will know when you're free when you see a Black woman on the cover of *Glamour* Magazine, you know? It was all about acceptance. You know you are free when there are Black people working for *Life* Magazine, and you can get a job at *Life* Magazine. I was an art director. I took my portfolio to *Look* Magazine -- to *Life* Magazine. I had -- I was a photographer -- a, you know, a photo journalist, a graphic designer. I had all of the qualifications and a good portfolio. Couldn't get a job at *Life* -- at *Life* Magazine. So you'll know you're free when you can get a job at *Life* Magazine. Some-- And that began to change where we began

to say we wanted to do our own. We wanted to publish a magazine called *Pride Magazine*. White guy on CORE said, “No, no, no, you’re just re-segregating yourself. If you -- if Black folk own their own stuff, that’s just like segregation. You shouldn’t own your own; you should get acceptance into what Whites own.” And there were a lot of Black people who bought that, because that is called the politics of respectability, where you earn equality. You don’t just get it because you deserve it; you earn it. You show how -- there used to be -- that you -- a White guy, innocently, was telling me, “Listen, you know, I’m with you. I want to help with this.” I said, “But can you --” We were working together as, when I was an art director. And he said, “But you know how it is. You know that you got to be twice as good in order to be considered equal.” And there were a lot of Black people who bought that. But what was happening in Central Brooklyn in politics was now the -- the racism was more recognizable. So for -- so Brooklyn CORE would challenge all the episodes or instances of segregation. So we saw that in, in Brooklyn, in this community where we are now, the— there was a housing -- a racist housing policy -- just like it is now. With all of the condos that are going up, it’s only White people moving in there, right up under the nose of Eric Adams and Tish James. No protests, no hearing, no -- there’s no Brooklyn CORE. See, Brooklyn CORE’d notice that and challenge that. And it was called Operation Living Room. And we would send a Black person in to apply for an apartment -- they weren’t condos then -- apply for an apartment. They would be turned down. We would send a White couple in right after them, and the White couple would state their qualifications, being a little bit less than the Black couple. The Black couple would go in and say, “I’m a teacher, and my wife -- I’m a doctor; my wife is a teacher.” In that male-dominated -- in that male society, they would not have believed that the Black woman was a doctor, [laughter] so the guy would say, “I’m a doctor; my wife is a teacher. And we make -- combined, we make \$80,000 a year.” The White couple would come in and say, “Combined, we make \$70,000 a year.” They would be given the apartment. Then the two couples would come back in together and say, “We’re from CORE, and we’re

charging you with racial discrimination.” So we challenged housing discrimination throughout Brooklyn. We didn’t get so much involved in electoral politics early on. It was a protest of injustice. We challenged the construction of the World’s Fair. By the time Isaiah Brunson, Kenny Rice, those guys, mounted the challenge about the construction of the World’s Fair— not using any Black firms, Black contractors— and did that stall-in and blocked the highway, Grand Central Parkway, so people couldn’t get into the fair. By the time that happened, the Black Power, Black Consciousness Movement was really building. So a lot of us who had been in CORE early on had left CORE and gone into the Black Power Movement. White people say that Black Power ruined the movement, ruined the Civil Rights Movement. They don’t say racism ruined it, you know, resistance to Black initiatives ruined it, but Black Power ruined it. That’s how ludicrous is that? The -- but we -- because Black Power came and White people felt uncomfortable, and so we -- Black Power pushed them out of the Civil Rights Movement. It’s not really true, because those of us who became the Black Power advocates left CORE, left the civil rights organizations, and we became the original Black Panther Party in Harlem. We, be— We launched the Black Arts Movement with Amiri Baraka -- who, at the time, was known as LeRoi Jones -- and built the the Black Arts Theatre in Harlem. Started a whole different campaign with the African Jazz-Art Society, known as AJASS. Elombe Brath and Bobby Gumbs and those brothers who started that -- Rose Nemes and the Grandassa Models and promoting natural hair. We just moved into a whole different direction of self-determination and ownership of our own. Because we did publish *Pride Magazine*, and the— With a brother named Dan Watts, we also published the *Liberator Magazine*. You know. So we began to move in that direction. But White folk -- but Brooklyn CORE in the politics of Brooklyn was a protest movement, and one of the biggest protests -- two things that were major was they were trying to build the Downstate Medical Center, and they were not using any Blacks on the construction site, and certainly not hiring any Black constru-- contractors. So we went down to the

construction site to stop the construction. And we was -- it was CORE, for the most part, which was only about maybe 20 people, out at this big construction site, right across the street from Kings County Hospital, where Downstate now stands. But we were trying to stop it. And we were slowing it down. The ministers in Brooklyn joined that movement. It was Milton Galamison, Rev. Bill Jones at Bethany Baptist Church -- Milton Galamison at Siloam Presbyterian, George Lawrence at Antioch Baptist Church on Greene Avenue, a few others, couple of others. They joined the movement. When they joined the movement, they told their congregations to go out and get on the picket line. The picket line went from 20 people to 200 people. The ministers got involved, and the picket line was big enough to stop the construction. And we actually stopped the construction. That was the hottest story in the city at the time. All the news was covering it. So as the reporters would come to film it and interview people, we would -- myself, a brother named Hassan El-Saheed, down on Washington, Hassan, a couple of others -- we were already kind of moving toward the Black Power stuff -- we prevented the reporters from coming onto Clarkson Avenue and would not let them on the street where the demonstrations were taking place unless they hired Black reporters. And so they hired Bob Teague, a Black reporter. They hired other Black reporters, in order to be able to get on the street. Those Black reporters kept those jobs after the demonstration. That launched their career. The only one of them who would acknowledge that he got his job through the movement was Bob Teague, because after the -- he would cover it. They'd turn off the cameras, and he did his job -- he then -- he put on a sign and got on the picket line, and he picketed. He walked with us. And he said, "I know how I got my job!" [laughter] You know. Used to be an ad on the subway saying, "I got my job through the *New York Times*." "I got my job through the Civil Rights Movement." You know, it was the pressure that the movement put on that literally pushed people to hire people. Like hiring me as an art director for a White publishing company -- you know, a magazine publisher.

OKECHUKWU: Which was that?

LAW: The publishing company was a company called Sterling Publications, and they published youth magazines, *Teen Life*, stuff like that. I don't see -- I don't think those kind of magazines are on the stage— on the stands anymore. But, but -- so that, that movement created some of those jobs, particularly in the media. And with the pressure on the street -- getting away from Brooklyn, I'll be bringing it back to Brooklyn -- you know. But the pressure on the street created jobs for John Johnson at WABC. He was a classmate of mine at Art and Design High School. The pressure on the street caused the people at WABC-TV to say, "We need to -- we got to put some Black people on TV. There's a Black guy working in the art department. There's a Black -- there's a Puerto Rican guy working in the stock room. There's a Black woman who works here part-time and is doing part-time at Harlem Hospital, with something— receptions or something— but she works here. Melba Tolliver, John Johnson, Geraldo Rivera. Put them in a 10-week course at Columbia University, and then put them on the air." That's how they got their jobs. Not from -- not even from any action on their behalf.

[Interview interrupted.]

OKECHUKWU: OK. What was I going to say? How were you --? So you described Brooklyn CORE and this sort of transition, you know, the larger Black movement. What personally got you involved? Like, what -- how -- you know, what -- in terms of your consciousness, like, what compelled you to start --

LAW: See --

OKECHUKWU: —joining—

LAW: -- there was a movement happening nationally, mostly in the South. Friends of mine even, who were going to school in the South, were writing letters back; one guy in particular, talking about the sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. And so we saw that happening. And there was nothing at all happening in Brooklyn. You know, there was no sit-ins, there's no demonstrations, nothing at all happening. And we're saying, like, "We want to -- we hear what's going on, and we would like -- I want to be a part of that. I want to be -- just want to be a part of that movement," recognizing what was

happening. Like I said, the second major thing for us in Brooklyn was Elaine and Jerry Bibuld. When just as a family they challenged the Board of Ed., and we saw them on the -- in the newspaper. A couple; another interracial couple, with three little kids, picketing the Board of Ed. by themselves. So, you know, you see that, and you say, "I got to help with that." And so Brooklyn CORE just organized and drove up there one day with about five, six carloads of people, and jumped out and got on the line and pushed that movement. The same thing the preachers did for us at Downstate we were able to do for the Bibuld family. But we could see what was happening and wanted to be a part of it is really what happened. And there was a brother who was a good friend of mine at the time, James Stewart, and he said, you know, "We, we have a social club." What was happening in popular -- with young Black guys was a social club. We put on parties and stuff, and we -- we'll put on a party, and every -- when we had a party, everybody wear the same suit, everybody wear the same dark suit and be stylish, you know. We were reading *Playboy* Magazine. So [laughter] that's what we were doing. And he said, you know, "This stuff is crazy. This is -- there's stuff happening, and we're not even a part of it." And so we began to say, "Yeah, we ought to be." Not all -- me and him. Not the other guys in the social club. They said, "No, no, no, I'm staying with the parties." So we -- he took me to Brooklyn CORE, you know. And I don't know how he found out about CORE, but he took me to Brooklyn CORE, and we became real players in Brooklyn CORE. And then, what happened is Malcolm X.

See, Malcolm is having— is speaking outdoors. So we're in Harlem, we go to a rally -- this is before he even went into the Audubon. He's doing rallies right around the corner from the mosque on 116th Street. We're going out and we're hearing Malcolm. And they were also interviewing Malcolm on TV often. And Malcolm was being challenged, by Black and White people, on those shows. He would -- James Baldwin -- who was very, very good in articulating our concerns. Baldwin was very good. So they would try to get Baldwin on there, but use Baldwin to challenge Malcolm. Malcolm was very good, you know. And so we began to hear Malcolm. And he would start --

Malcolm said that, "You are involved in a sit-in." He said, "Anybody can sit. A chump can sit. An old woman can sit. You know, when you call it a sit-in movement, you emasculate yourself just by how you set it up. It ought to be a stand-in. You ought to stand, not sit." And so he would just challenge a lot of stuff that we were doing. But he would take it further with his own political analysis. And then we were still there, in the movement, when -- talking about a march on Washington. Then Martin King got involved with the March on Washington, as though it was King's idea. But we were already talking about a march on Washington. The young activists in the Civil Rights Movement; SNCC, Brooklyn CORE, we were talking about a march on Washington. And then Martin King took over the March on Washington. And we could see before the march how the march had changed. It originally was supposed to be what Gandhi had done and bring the government to a standstill on that day -- going to the airports, laying down on the air-- on the runways, stopping the trains -- stuff that we did, those kind of things. So that was not a stretch for us. And then Martin King started talking about it differently to become the march that it became. While he was talking about the march, many of us then decided not to go when we saw what the march was doing. Then Malcolm -- after the march, Malcolm -- I don't know if you ever heard the "Message to the Grassroots" speech -- Malcolm talked about that march and how the Kennedy family took over the march, and the meeting at the Carlyle Hotel, and how he told those Negroes what songs to sing, what streets to march down. Now, we knew he was telling the truth. We were listening to Malcolm, saying, "How did he know this," you know? They-- Because we were there. That's the reason we left. They were saying -- Bayard Rustin was set up in an office in Harlem. They had to approve of the speeches. They wrote the slogans. They designed the posters. They took it out of our hands completely. When that happened, and the march on Washington, just as Malcolm said, was turned into "the farce on Washington," we said we had enough of this. Leaving this. And then -- and that's what moved us out of the Civil Rights Movement, more toward self-determination. But the bombing of the church in

Birmingham, Alabama, that did it. They bo-- When they bombed that church, myself, some others, said, "That's it. No more of this nonviolence. No more of this turn the other cheek. No more of this trying to earn -- earn equality from these vicious crackers. Through with that," and stepped away completely from the Civil Rights Movement. We were already more than halfway [laughter] into the Black Power initiative before the bombing of the church. And Malcolm explaining it. Malcolm'd say, "We give them love; this is what they give us." You know, all -- Malcolm was a major factor in changing the political perspective. Now, I remember one night, we went to hear Martin King at Washington's Temple on -- on Bergen Street and Buffalo Avenue; King, Abernathy, and Wyatt Tee Walker. We came out of there saying, you know, "Those guys are right. Those guys sound [laughter] really right." They -- everybody's argument -- those guys were good with their whole rationale. We said, "You know, yeah, they're right." And then a couple of nights later, went to the Audubon to hear Malcolm. You said, "Man, you know, he's right!" [laughter] You know, "These guys -- he's really right." So we had to -- hearing both of those, we had to do some thinking on our own and some study. And so we did, you know. So we were not only hearing from Malcolm and King. We were reading a lot of other things. We were reading Frantz Fanon and *The Wretched of the Earth*. We did a whole lot of stuff; read Du Bois, *Up from Slavery*, did a lot of things. And so our consciousness changed completely, to where we were now -- not on -- on an emotional level but a really sophisticated political level of understanding -- moved toward self-determination. But Brooklyn was where the real activity was.

There was a cultural center in Brooklyn called The East, which was run by Jitu Weusi. And at The East there was -- which is -- There was a street festival every summer out in front of The East, on Claver Place; which is now the street festival that's down in the park on -- Park Place, downtown. And before that, it, it moved into the park, it was, it was up at Boys and Girls High -- High School. But that cultural center was originally a meatpacking plant with a guy named Ricky Reed who was part of our

group. And I remember going to a meeting with him and the White guy who owned it, and negotiating him, buying that spot, turning it into a cultural center called Studio O. And Studio O was exactly what was going on at The East. We had Sun Ra and what we -- avant-garde jazz musicians, Archie Shepp, people like -- you know, and presented there. First time I ever heard Sun Ra -- first time I ever even heard of Sun Ra -- was when we had him at Studio O. And found out that running this spot is a real, full-time job. And that's not something we really wanted to do. And Ricky didn't realize it was going to be that much. So he met -- he said, "There's a guy in Brooklyn named Les Campbell that I want to give this spot to. Let's go talk to him." And so we did, and he gave it to Les Campbell, who changed his name to Jitu Weusi. And he turned it into The East, and -- and did a whole lot more with it, and did -- he did the school; he published a newspaper, *Black News*; he did a lot, a lot more with it. But it was coming out of Brooklyn, not Harlem. But Harlem is seen as the black mecca, because prior to the movement -- well, even during the movement, there was still strong activity in Harlem. But there was a lot of activity in Brooklyn; like Brooklyn CORE, like The East, other things that were going on in Brooklyn -- jazz clubs in Brooklyn. There were as many jazz clubs in Brooklyn as there were in Harlem; the Blue Coronet on Kingston Avenue, another place on Fulton and Utica, owned by the -- Dickie Habersham-Bey and his brother, the Bey brothers. That's the club where Miles was -- they shot at Miles when he was coming out of the club one night, you know? But there was a place, Turbo Village, on what is now Malcolm X Boulevard. I forgot what it was -- Throop Avenue, I think. But there was a lot of activity in Brooklyn that -- Town Hill; on Eastern Parkway and Bedford Avenue was a club called Town Hill. Town Hill played -- would present major-name jazz performers. I saw Kenny Burrell there. And LaBelle, Patti LaBelle and the, and the Bluebelles would perform there regularly. So there was a lot of activity in Brooklyn that just kind of got overlooked by the activity that was in Harlem. Now, the activity was really in Harlem. And people just kind of looked to Harlem because a lot of the most notable names were in Harlem. You know, Malcolm was in Harlem. But

the Harlem Y, where people like Richard -- I don't know if Richard Wright, but Gordon Parks and all of those people lived at the Y before they found a space in Harlem. So Harlem was the cultural mecca. It is where the -- it was where the Black Renaissance took place. But one of the things about the Black Renaissance is that the Black Renaissance did not exist for Black people. Black people never knew there was a Black Renaissance. But the Black -- the Harlem Renaissance was for White people. And when the White people got tired of the Black writers and singers, they just dropped them, and the renaissance was over. There was no Black publishing company that was publishing Black writers. The renaissance -- most of the people like my aunts and uncles who still lived in Harlem, when they lived through the Harlem Renaissance, they never mentioned it. They never knew that there was a Harlem Renaissance because Harlem did not benefit. It was Whites who would come uptown. They were publishing Black writers and, in, for White publishing companies, and the Black writers were being read by White people. The difference between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement is that the renaissance spoke to White people on behalf of Black people. The Black Arts Movement spoke to Black people. We were no longer talking to White people. We were no longer saying, "White man, listen," like the title of Richard Wright's essay. But that's a whole different thing, so— [laughter]

OKECHUKWU: I know we have to wrap up. So would you be willing, after the holidays, to sit for another interview? Because I have plenty of other [laughter] questions to ask you. I guess -- So in talking about, sort of, the Black political mobilization that's happening in Central Brooklyn, in Crown Heights, white flight is happening around the same time too.

LAW: Right.

OKECHUKWU: Can you speak about that and, like, what you --

LAW: Yeah.

OKECHUKWU: -- remember about white flight?

LAW: See, white flight began bef-- while we were little kids and didn't even know what was happening. See, when you look at the tenements on Greene Avenue, Quincy Street, Gates Avenue; you look at those buildings on Putnam and on Monroe, those were-- and in many cases, when Blacks moved in-- they still were one-family homes. Those were -- that's where the most wealthy White people lived, the "carriage trade," they called them. And those were one-family homes. Those White people moved first. They could afford to move. They moved first, but they didn't sell those houses. They kept those houses, and turned them into three-apartment houses, three apartments in what used to be a one-family home. The -- so the white flight was beginning, and Black people were moving in. But the Black people were moving in -- into -- it was a different kind of a neighborhood now. So instead of one family living in this brownstone, now there were three families living in there, and it was going like that all down the block. So now the neighborhood is much more crowded than it was when it was a White neighborhood.

OKECHUKWU: So is that Bed-Stuy or is that Crown Heights?

LAW: That was in both --

OKECHUKWU: Both?

LAW: -- Bed-Stuy and in Crown Heights. And there were apartment -- see, the apartment buildings were very nice as well, in -- particularly in Crown Heights. There -- the apartment buildings were very nice. As Whites began to move out, though -- like, the building I lived in on Crown Street; at 520 Crown Street, when I moved in there, they had a little fireplace in the lobby. It had cherry blossom trees in the front yard. It was a really nice little place. It was a walk-up. And I remember I used to say, "I don't care how much money I make, I'm never moving out of here. This is a nice block. This apartment is fine." I didn't notice that it didn't have an elevator, [laughter] you know? That wasn't even an issue. But when I left, and -- like, I drive down that block every now and then, my little nostalgia drive -- when you go back there, couple of years after I left and as more Black people started moving into the building, the cherry blossom

trees have been removed. They didn't die. They were removed from the front lawn, front yard. The fireplace has been painted over. It used to be an open fireplace. It's closed up, and they painted over it, all one pea-green color in the lobby. They dumbbed it down, and now the population is predominantly Black. And they did that in buildings and places all over Crown Heights. The other, see, political dynamic in Crown Heights was the -- at that time, the Hasidic community and the Black community, and the Hasidic community was involved in the local community boards and the school boards, and they struggled for power and control. And the Black community didn't have -- the Black community wasn't organized. It didn't have ministers like the Hasidim had rabbis who were organized; who were talking to their constituents, talking to their congregations. The Black community was still doing politics of respectability, showing how hard we can work and how decent we can be. So we would get into fights -- I mean, political fights -- with the Hasidim who were trying to control the school board, for instance, and the Black folk who were, who were the handful of Black folk who were trying to participate in the local politics would say that you don't even have any children in the public schools; why do you want to control the district? They want to control the funds, whatever it is. But, see, they were able to get a foothold, because the people, the Black people who were moving into Crown Heights were coming from Bed-Stuy, coming from the projects, buying a home. And the -- that was our goal, to live on Carroll Street, to live on President Street. That was moving on up. So once you got to Carroll Street, you were now free, and you were upward-- you were not upwardly mobile; you were up. And you were free, and you were successful. I don't want to hear about community struggle. Those people were not interested in getting involved in the struggles with the school board, because I moved over here to be free. And if I have to -- if I have to get involved in political struggles, you just reminded me that I'm not free. And so I don't want to be reminded. So Black people who -- and who lived in Crown Heights would not become involved in the politics of Crown Heights. Now, of course, some did. But it was a small number of people. I was

going to those meetings, and there were some politicians -- Vander Beatty and -- Vander Beatty was one of the political players. Very suspect, very much believed to be corrupt. Wound -- wound up going to jail, you know. And then I think he got killed in his office by somebody's husband, you know, so -- But he, he was, like, a major antagonist. I fought with Vander Beatty over issues in Crown Heights. Seemed like he was always on the other side. Then they were always -- see, that -- that's -- that political machine in Brooklyn always looked for who was going to be the White winner and be on that side. And they still do. And so -- but there's nobody pushing back like we did then. But -- I don't know if that answered it.

OKECHUKWU: Yeah, it does. I'm always interested in the -- both the distinctions between, like, Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy, as well as the sort of shared -- you know, because it was Central Brooklyn, there's a lot of folks going back and --

LAW: Yeah.

OKECHUKWU: -- forth, you know?

LAW: See, the dis-- the distinction made between Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights -- Bed-Stuy was also brownstone homeowners. They had the same money as the Black people in Crown Heights. However, it was all Black, and it was Bed-Stuy. Crown Heights had -- the houses were a little bit different, but not better. They were a little bit different. They were not the traditional brownstones, right? They were a little bit better. They looked like the houses that the White folk lived in on that side of town. And so there were Black people who as a status wanted to live in Crown Heights. They could've just as easily stayed in Bed-Stuy. The quality of life was not better in, in Crown Heights. But it was Crown Heights. It's where the White people lived. And Black people wanted to be with the White people. Black people wanted to be assimilated. They wanted to be accepted. So status was being accepted by Whites. If -- if a -- if you look at *Black Enterprise* magazine, *Black Enterprise* is a perfect example of the attitude of Blacks even prior to *Black Enterprise*. If you look at *Black Enterprise* magazine, when it was-- I don't know if it's still Black-owned, but when it was-- all of the people on the cover

were Black people who worked for White people. It would be the vice president of human relations at the phone company, at McDonald's, and all Black people who had a prestigious title -- no power -- prestigious title in a major White corporation. They didn't put people on the cover, like the Black woman in Philadelphia who owns the bank. They didn't put Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff who own Philly International Records. They didn't do an article on Al Bell who owns Stax Records. You know, they didn't do things on Black people. They never did an article on Ollie Gates, who owns a chain of barbecue stores out thr -- in the Midwest. They never featured Black people who were prominent on their own terms. Always it was a Black person who worked for a major White corporation because -- and that was -- they were -- *Black Enterprise* was reflecting the attitude of most Black people. It was better, and you would be more proud, if someone sent you to -- if your parents sent you to college, and you would come home, and your parents owned this store and need your -- you took business management. When you came back, "We don't want you to come work in this store and help build this into a three-, four-store chain. We want you to get a job at Revlon." Said, "We want you to get a job with a major corporation so I can say my daughter is vice president of human relations at -- at Revlon." That was the attitude of Black people. And it still is. The Black Power Movement changed a lot of that, changed a lot of consciousness -- which is why it needs to happen again. But anyway, that was the difference. It was -- Bed-Stuy was not a, a secondary quality of life, but it wasn't White. Crown Heights was White. So people wanted to move from Bed-Stuy to Crown Heights. When we would go -- when we were kids, we were 16, 17 -- by the time we were 17 and 18, looking for parties every weekend, we'd meet at a guy's house on Hancock Street and say, "Where's the party?" And somebody would say, "You know, there's a party over on Monroe Street." "Yeah, man, but there's a party out on Carroll Street." "Well, that's where we're going." If it's on Carroll Street, if it's on President Street, that's where we're going. And then it got to the point where they would say -- I'm thinking of two guys in particular -- "That's where the White girls are." And those two guys

married White women. But they were looking for White girls before they even met anybody and fell in love -- if they ever fell in love. You know, they were looking for White women to validate who they are. Because they were -- you know, we were like the avant-garde kids. We were driving sports cars. We were photographers and designers and stuff. So we thought we was -- the -- you know, we were the -- the vanguard of the new, the new Negro. [laughter] And so -- but these two guys in particular would look for the parties where the White girls are. And they wanted White girls. They hadn't even met a White girl, and they wanted White girls. And they married them. You know, I've always wondered if, if the -- if they really loved those women or if those women would want to have dated them or married them if they knew that these guys were looking for White women specifically. So, when we can do this again.

OKECHUKWU: Yes. Let's do this again, because I haven't even got to the meat of what I wanted to get to.

LAW: So you got to ask -- don't let me talk. You got to --

OKECHUKWU: No, no, no.

LAW: -- you got to ask me questions.

OKECHUKWU: No, these were, these are -- oral histories are long. So you need -- I need to hear you talk. I need to hear your memories -- sorry. I'll do it. I need to hear about your memories and all of that, not -- it takes time to get to some of that. So, we can figure out a time in January.

LAW: All right. Muntu, come on.