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Law, Bob, Oral history interview conducted by Amaka Okechukwu, January 22, 2017, Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.06; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Oral History Interview with Bob Law
Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.06
Interview conducted by Amaka Okechukwu at the Namaskar store on January 22, 2017 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

OKECHUKWU: This is Amaka Okechukwu interviewing Bob Law on January 22nd. We are doing this for the Voices of Crown Heights project for Brooklyn Historical Society. We are currently at Namaskar on Atlantic near Grand and Washington Avenue. So, thank you for agreeing to do part two of this interview. I appreciate it. Could you please, to start off, can you tell me about your entry into radio? We didn't get to that the last interview.

LAW: Let's see. There used to be a *New York Times* advertising campaign promoting *The New York Times* want ad section and the theme was: "I got my job through the New York Times." Well, I got my job through the Civil Rights movement, more specifically, through the Black consciousness movement. I went to WWRL radio as an activist when a group that I was working with in Crown Heights called the Independent Movement for Political Action, IMPAC. We had raised some issues about the film, and more so the soundtrack, really, from the film *Super Fly*. And the music was really great music, rhythmic, good sound, but people were not hearing the lyric where Curtis Mayfield said that the main character, Super Fly -- that his hustle was wrong. Nobody heard that, and the film and the music were romanticizing coke dealing to the extent where the young people that we were dealing with in the street, in the anti-drug kind of campaigns that we were involved in, they were emulating Super Fly even though these little kids in Crown Heights could not afford cocaine. They were wearing coke spoons around their neck, you know, on a chain, as a status symbol trying to identify with coke dealers, since Super Fly was such a romanticized, flamboyant figure of a coke dealer. It even annoyed Ron O'Neal, who was the actor who played Super Fly, who said that that was never his intention. And we went to the radio station to ask them to stop playing

the song "Super Fly" that they had been playing for some time -- it was a major hit and they had been playing it for a few months. So we thought that that was enough. So I went to the radio station. We met with Mark Olds, who was the general manager. We laid out our concerns, and we were very well received, and they took the record off the air. But that was my introduction to radio. And, there was a talk show on Sunday afternoons called *Tell It Like It Is*, hosted by a brother named Bernie McCain, and Bernie McCain invited me onto his show a number of times to continue the conversations that we had begun with the radio station and raise other issues. But I was introduced to WWRL and radio through that political initiative. Bernie McCain was promoted -- he was public affairs director and he was promoted to program director and transferred to a station in Oakland: KDIA. And when he left New York to go to Oakland, he strongly recommended that I replace him. So he was very instrumental in making that happen. He -- and Mark Olds who was the general manager called me and they said essentially, "You came out here some months ago to tell us how to run the radio station. Would you like to come out and help us do it?" And at that time, I was a graphic artist and art director working for a magazine publisher, and that's what my training and experience had always been, from high school, from the High School of Art and Design, to Pratt Institute, to working in a place called Pageant Studios and then Sterling Publications. I was a graphic designer, so it would mean a career change. So you have to hesitate a minute to think about career [00:05:00] change, until they mentioned the salary, (laughs) and the salary in radio was so much more than as a graphic designer. And so I took the job and became public affairs director of operations and became operations manager, then program director, and there's a thing about radio. I found out that that's where I was supposed to have been all the time. Radio gets in you. You know, sometimes you do something and you just realize, this is my calling, and that's what happened when I got into radio. Radio got into me, and that was where I should have always been. And so, that's how I started in radio, basically, from the political initiative and then the support of Bernie McCain.

OKECHUKWU: What was it specifically that you connected so much to it? You know, you're saying that it was, you know, your calling, essentially.

LAW: You know, radio operates in the theater of your mind, so it is an extremely creative process, and you have to be creative on a daily basis and not like television where you will do a television show one day a week -- at that time, the black consciousness movement had created television shows; televisions stations responded. ABC did *Like It Is* with Gil Noble. Bernie McCain always thought that ABC stole his name. His show was called *Tell It Like It Is*, and it was a major broadcast in New York City on Sunday afternoon, and that ABC and Gil Noble, they kind of appropriated Bernie's visibility and the credibility and the reputation, and called Gil Noble's show *Like It Is*. So there was *Like It Is*; there was *Positively Black*; there was a show called *Inside Bed-Stuy*; there were many, everybody had a show, except CBS. Channel Two liked to brag that they never caved in, as they called it, to the consciousness movement, and they refused to create a show for black people, but nobody really noticed or cared because everybody had a show: Channel Nine, Channel 11. Everybody had a show, however, those shows are one day a week, and you could spend all week putting those shows together. On the radio, it's live every day, and if something would happen in the universe radio stations move to respond the same day, and certainly by the next day, the day that say, John Lennon was shot -- then that day and the next day, we responded on the air. You had to demonstrate that you were aware of and part of what we called the rhythms of life in the community we served.come up with, what are you going to do? This is a black radio station, but John Lennon is a major music figure, so what are you going to do today? And so you have to be creative, and we came with what we were going to do about that: We played John Lennon music that was recorded by black artists. So we played Wilson Pickett singing "Hey Jude." You know, we played Aretha, "Bridge" -- I don't know if "Bridge Over Troubled Water" was John Lennon, but she did John Lennon tunes. Almost everybody did, as it turned out. There was a lot of black artists who had recorded John Lennon tunes, so we played song's by them and mentioned that this was a testament to the talent and significance of John Lennon.

and then the disc jockey had to be innovative, creative, right on the spot. On the radio we had to entertain you better than you can entertain yourself, because you could play music, yourself. If you wanted to listen to whatever music, you could play it yourself. But, so what -- there had to be something that separates us from you, and I say that I can program the music better than you. I can pick three or four songs in a row. I can do that better than you can, and I have a disc jockey. The disc jockey made the difference. The personality made the difference. So at home you had the same music that I had, but you didn't have radio personalities like Hank Spann or Frankie Crocker or Jerry Bledsoe in your house, and you didn't have them saying what they say in and around the music. So it was really challenging and creative and big fun to entertain the audience on a daily basis.— I remember I was on the air one day playing with Ken Webb. Ken Webb was in another studio. Ken Webb was a morning radio personality at WBLS, and then, one point, he was working for me at WWRL. And he was in one studio and I was in the other, but through the glass window we could see each other. So I'm playing the music and I'd turn on the mic, and I said -- for the audience to hear -- and I said, "Kenny, are they really going to pay us for this?" (laughs) [00:10:00] He said, "They better." I said, "But this is like the kind of thing that, if you go to an amusement park or something and they have a booth, you can go in and make a record; you have to pay them. So they're going to pay us to sit here and play these records all day?" (laughs) But they did, and they paid you very well, but you had to be innovative, creative, create a lot of things on a daily basis, make things happen in the theater of your mind. See, television says "Stop what you're doing, look at me, and there's no room for your imagination. We will show you exactly what we want you to see." Radio says, "Just keep doing what you're doing; I'm right here. You just keep doing the dishes, cooking the food, whatever. I'm right here, and I'm going to create images in your mind while you do what you do." That's a very challenging and creative process, you know. Radio is -- you just get into it. I did a radio documentary for instance. Couldn't do this on television. I did an interview with Malcolm X. This is years after Malcolm had been assassinated, and I asked the questions. I went through

a lot of other tapes, speeches, comments, things from Malcolm, and had him answer the questions. I asked him about something that had just happened in Crown Heights in the street, and, and the tape that I used to respond began with Malcolm responding to another reporter or something else altogether, but he said, "Yes, I read about that when I was in Paris," now he was talking about police violence, and he was responding directly to someone who had been brutalized by the police in Harlem when he was in Paris some years ago. I was asking him about say, Arthur Miller in Crown Heights, and Malcolm comes on the tape saying, "Yes, I read about that while I was in Paris," and then went on to talk about police violence. I know people who said they were listening. One good friend of mine said he was listening, driving down the highway, and he had to pull over and sit and listen, because he said, "This stuff is blowing your mind. This is Malcolm X years after his death in a real conversation with Bob Law -- because it's going on in the theater of your mind. Can't do that on television. All you get from television is whatever the producer is capable of doing. On radio, we could make some suggestions, and your mind takes over and you create the images. And that's one of the things that was so magical about music radio, listening to disc jockeys. I mean, people used to make listening to the radio part of their daily ritual. When Frankie Crocker worked at WWRL, he used to come on with this rap about, there was seven wonders of the world, and I forgot the line explicitly now, but he would say, that he was the eighth, And he had a whole thing about, "I'm going to put more cut in your strut, more glide in your stride, and more dip in your hip," and he said it rhythmically over "Soulful Drums" a classic soul instrumental by Brother Jack McDuff. We loved that stuff. People used to rush home to hear Frankie come on the air. And when he was at WBLS, he would go off the air playing "Moodys Mood For Love" there are a great many people who know James Moody's song now: (sings) "There I go, there I go, there I go." They'd never heard that on a jazz radio station. That was the song that Frankie used to go off the air, and people would tune in. You wanted to be there in time to hear Frankie go off the air as he did another little rap over the music, He made Moody's Mood a hit again just by using it on his show. And there's Hank Spann. A high school in Brooklyn

would play his show opening at 2pm every day He would say "Put your foot on the rock, pat it and don't you dare stop." But he also said "Brother man, remember before you can get up, you got to get down" and the students knew that in the Black community, get down meant to get serious or to do your best. when he would go off the air, Hank Spann would say, "This is going to do it for this edition of the servers mission (He was known as the soul server)I've got to take two steps to the rear and get out of here." Those of us who worked with Hank, we still say that today (laughs). You know, we're talking to each other on the phone, we say, "All right man, listen. I've got to take two steps to the rear." (laughs) radio is remarkable.

OKECHUKWU: So as someone that has worked in black radio, can you speak about the relationship, or if there's a relationship, between I would say like black radio or black media more generally, and sort of black political engagement over time, the role that radio may have played in movements or even electoral campaigns and your experience with that?

LAW: Radio gave black people a voice. Radio gave [00:15:00] the movement a voice. Had it not been for radio, there would not have been a movement just as there is not a movement now because there's no longer any black radio. In the Civil Rights movement, WAOK was the major radio station in Atlanta, Georgia, during the Civil Rights movement. And SCLC office was in the same building as AOK, and they would let Martin Luther King and others from SCLC come up to the studio at any time, and come in and say something is happening. Now they used to do this thing: "We interrupt this program…" So they would do that regularly. "We interrupt this program. Here's Dr. King, he wants to tell you what's going on in Birmingham right now." Which is what made people around the country -- or people in that city, and eventually people around the country, as other black radio stations would report on what was going on, where white radio would not. So that when the March on Washington, for instance, people heard many articulate black voices for the first time since it it was broadcast nationally. People heard Martin Luther King do "I Have a Dream." That was not the speech; that was the closing, and people had never heard him around the

country. People didn't know; hadn't heard him. Black people had heard him many times. "I Have a Dream" was the closing that he used on many of his speeches. In fact, Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker and Andrew Young advised him not to use that tired "I Have a Dream" closing in Washington, D.C., and he agreed not to do it. Then he said he got out in front of that crowd, he'd just feel things. You know, the Holy Spirit (laughs) just said, "No, you better use this one again." And that became immortalized. But Black people had heard him. Not only had Black people heard him, they heard Reverend Sandy Ray, Dr. Gardner Taylor; Reverend William Augustus Jones. they heard great preachers. And so what he was saying moved us, didn't scare us, but as a result of the visibility that he had in the black community with the black social gospel, much of it presented to the black community on radio, we were already familiar with that energy that everybody else in the country felt for the first time with that March on Washington speech. Black radio had already prepared us, but black radio gave voice to the black political initiatives in this country, while white media ignored it, or trivialized it, or selected, just as they do now, their own handpicked Negro spokespeople who black people listening never even heard of. And if it were up to white media, we would be poorly informed as to what is going on in the black community. Now, I was at a rally in Harlem in the early 60's with Malcolm, and Malcolm held up this big, poster-sized picture of Whitney Young, and he said, "Does anybody in this crowd know who this is?" People were looking at each other. "No, no, never heard of him." He said, "well, this is one of your new leaders," because the Urban League, and whoever owns and controls the Urban League, had hired Whitney Young. Black people never heard of Whitney Young; don't know why he was even selected. It's not that he didn't do the job once he was there, but it was not a job that we had required of him. But black media -- white media was demonizing say, Malcolm, Stokely Carmichael. Black media, on the other hand, was giving voice, so people understood what Stokely was saying. They understood where Malcolm was coming from. So you will see some years later, Malcolm is a hero everywhere. There's a US postage stamp with Malcolm's picture on it. But we were saying, we knew that all the time. We knew

that he was heroic all the time. But had we listened to just white media, we would have had to come to the same conclusion that most whites came to at that time, based on how white media was deliberately characterizing black leadership. Black radio gave black people a voice. Now, what is important about that is that blacks who were -- who had visibility [00:20:00] were clowns and buffoons: Amos and Andy, people like that, Stepin Fetchit. Black radio put black voices on the air. The black voices -- at that time, you had to have what was called a radio voice. They used to say, you need to sound like you belong on the radio. So they had some great voices, great sound, and they were very articulate, which made them sound very intelligent. So disc jockeys, even though they had nicknames like Hotrod and, Dixie Drifter, The mighty Burner, Jack The Rapper, things like that, but they deliberately spoke with a real articulation, which made black people proud to hear them. They didn't even care what they were saying, but they were no longer the voices of buffoons, and the disc jockeys were the first black motivational speakers. So, disc jockeys used to say things like, "With all my friends, it's understood; whatever I do, I do it good." You know, and, "I might laugh and might joke but I don't miss a stroke," and they would say that rhythmically. They'd say it over the music. And black people were inspired by hearing those kinds of comments, as well as by hearing those strong voices that weren't Stepin Fetchit. You know, they weren't mumbling; they were talking. And on radio, you're supposed to sound like you are proud of who you are and what you're doing, so you would teach the broadcast staff, that when you say the call letter of the station say it with a sense of pride. So if the call letters are WWRL, you have to say, (enunciates) "W-W-R-L." Always say it like your proud of the station you know, (enunciates deeply) "You're listening to W-B-L-S." and it carried over, you had that kind of an attitude with the overall presentation. It made black people really feel good to hear that. And then they were playing music, and they were playing music that we always danced to, listened to; but our music was always on the back roads out in the juke joints, -- it was the chitlin circuit. Now, all of a sudden, our music is being played on the radio, and the guy on the radio is talking about the artist like the artist is a great person. All of that helped to create a sense of pride and

self-esteem on the part of black people. So black radio was essential in giving voice to black America, and then it was essential in giving voice to the black political movement. So most of those radio shows, or radio stations, rather, had a talk show. So Bernie McCain was talking -- in New York, Bernie McCain was talking on WWRL every Sunday afternoon. There was a brother named Cal Shields who was talking on WBLS at midnight for maybe about two hours, Monday through Friday. Radio stations around the country had talk shows, and on those talk shows, black personalities that were being ignored by mainstream, or what they call mainstream media, were talking to black people on those talk shows. Black radio, like I say in my film, black radio operated like an electronic Underground Railroad, taking messages all over the country, taking Black voices throughout the country. Now that there's no black talk, so now you don't hear from Maulana Karenga anymore. When I was on the air, you heard from him regularly. We heard from The Last Poets. You know, not their recordings, but members of the group on the air with me. You heard from Sonia Sanchez and Pam Africa. If I was on the air, Michelle Alexander would have gotten even more exposure into the black community than she gets now. When I was on the air, I put Winnie Mandela on the phone, from her kitchen in South Africa, taking calls from people around the country when my show was the first nationally broadcast black talk show in the country. We put Winnie Mandela on the phone until the South African government interrupted and disconnected her line in the middle of the conversation. But she had been on the air for about an hour before they found out, talking to people calling her from Kansas City; calling from Detroit, Chicago. In 1984 during his presidential run Jesse Jackson went to Syria to rescue a black pilot, Lieutenant Robert Goodman, [00:25:00] everybody is poised waiting to hear: Is Jesse going to get him? And is the President Assad -- would Assad release a political prisoner to Jesse Jackson? Somebody, I think it was Nixon or Reagan, that they had gone to Syria for something else and never even mentioned Robert Goodman. The white house had written off this black airman. And Jesse got him; secured his release. But when he did, a brother who was working with him, who was part of the trip, called me while I was on

the air -- even with the time change I was on the air -- and he called me. Had the hotline in my studio. Called me from Syria and said, "Go on the air and tell everybody, 'Jesse got him.'" So we did, before NBC or anybody. Everybody was waiting to hear, but it was announced first on my show, because I was plugged directly into Jesse Jackson, Jesse used to co-host my show with me, for like a couple of months one night a week, when he was building his campaign, talking about "Run Jesse, Run." Without black radio, none of that happens now. And in fact, —right now, black -- music radio is currently being used as a weapon against black people, particularly black youth. So that the messages are all about killing, it's all killer radio, and the message is: denigrate women, calling for murder, and killing each other. There's a whole campaign to clean up the airwaves. It can't get off the ground; it can't get any real traction because white media ignores it. White media reports on the fact that, how many killings there are in Chicago last year. We sent press releases and information to the same reporter at *The New York Times* who did that story, and is following it, doing updates, and said, "Here's another aspect you might be interested in: the role that music is playing in creating this hostile, murderous environment, and is a major contributor to the violence in the street." She ignored that completely, and goes happily on reporting about the killings. If I were on the air, we would be talking about that connection. I would be talking to psychiatrists, therapists, who I've already had conversations with, but I haven't had them on the air, about the music and mental health, and the influence of music on your behavior. That's all being ignored, but it would not be. And those psychiatrists who are raising that issue, Dr. Elisa English, Dr. Pemberton, those psychiatrists would be on the air with me. People would now know more so who they are, and hear what they have to say about the role of music in mental health. But without black radio, that doesn't happen. Black print media is timid, naïve, ineffective. Black print media newspapers, by and large, are terrible in terms of the role of journalism in a hostile environment. They are concerned primarily with advertising dollars, and they have to be. They don't get the advertising dollars anyway, but they have decided to just be meek and humble until they eventually get some, which is their decision. There's

another school of thought that says you demand it. You say that agency media buyers ignore Black media, you do an editorial that says, "These companies, refuse to advertise in black media," which is true, but black media is reluctant to take such a stand. So, without black talk, a lot of other issues become obscured.— Without black talk, without black radio, and that includes black music radio, we have been removed from the marketplace of ideas, and our ideas are capable of competing with any idea anywhere in the world. Our ideas are as powerful as any ideas from anywhere. However, the only way to control the thinking in our community is to take us out of the marketplace of ideas, and that's where we are without black radio. Black radio is essential in a hostile environment, like the political environment that black folk live in, in this society. We have to find our voice, and black radio gave voice to black America. It helped make sense of our environment, it clarified much of the political trickery facing African Americans. [00:30:00] Because one of the things that white supremacy does deliberately is bewilder the oppressed. It gives many illusions of progress, if you look at TV, there are black folk on TV, on talk shows, on the news shows, news talk shows, plenty of black folk, but they're not allowed to talk specifically about black concerns. They talk about sports, plenty of black people talking about sports; they talk about general issues; you know, they can talk about the economy. The only time they talk about black stuff is when they are brought in to comment on some protests. Some atrocity has been committed; there's going to be a panel discussing the cop who shot the child. And so you've got some black people -- and then they make a point to have at least one black person in the mix who's on the side of the cop. All of that bewilders black people. So we come along saying that there's no black voices. What do you mean? Black Comedians have talk shows, Black entertainers are hosting Grammy awards and other music awards. There's black folk everywhere, but no critical thinking. No serious thought or discussions around critical issues happens anymore, but it used to happen on black talk radio, and black talk radio, in having these discussions, would force television news talk to have to deal with the same issue. if they're talking about whoever, Donald Trump, with the handpicked people that they

have, and then we go on the air and we put Haki Madhubuti on the air, or Doctor Ron Daniels, or doctor Claud Anderson, or let's say, our own panel, of journalists -- Herb Boyd from the *Amsterdam News* -- Bernie Hayes from St. Louis if we put them on to deal with the same issue -- It would bring forth a perspective and analysis that is quite deliberately being ignored. -- for instance, with all the talk going on about Trump and moving forward, nobody has talked to Jesse Jackson or Congresswoman Maxine Waters or Bobby Rush or Charles Barron or any of the Black political personalities that are still trying to organize in the black community. Nobody has talked to Minister Farrakhan, except the hip-hop talk show, *The Breakfast Club*, and they talk to the minister with some regularity. On WVON in Chicago, talk show host Cliff Kelley talks to the minister. But if there was black talk in New York, we would talk to him as well, and force other media to acknowledge the people, wether they approve of them or not, who have real influence in Black America. and we would point out: these are the people that MSNBC, CNN and others won't talk to. We'd say things like that. "These are the people -- I've got Michelle Alexander and Maulana Karenga here, along with Carl Nelson, who's the moderator of a talk show on WOL radio in Washington, D.C. I have a panel with them; lets say the mainstream media is talking about Trumps immigration policies, we go on the air with the people that MSNBC, CBS, CNN,and Charley Rose ignores." And that's what forces them to have to deal with us. We give voice. Black radio gives voice to black America.

OKECHUKWU: Do you have particular memories of maybe responses, you know, blacks operating for events or political things that happened in Brooklyn, specifically?

LAW: Yes. Everything. Everything that happened.

OKECHUKWU: Anything that stands out?

LAW: The were many activist in New York City, there's a group of activists in Brooklyn, operating very much so in Brooklyn, back, say, in the 1980's-- it was say, Al Sharpton, Alton Maddox, Vernon Mason, and me with them, from time to time. They would do a lot of rallies at the Slave Theater; on Fulton street, they would do rallies at Bethany Baptist Church dealing with Howard Beach, Tawana Brawley, Arthur Miller. They

would do rallies, but the rallies were promoted entirely on black radio. They didn't have any leaflets. You know, there was no internet no social media,— they couldn't even prepare public service announcements. They would call the talk shows. They [00:35:00] would be invited to come on the talk shows, and on the talk shows, they would talk about the rally, they'd lay out who was going to speak, what their perspective or their analysis was. They would express their anger, and they would say, "and we're going to be at Bethany Baptist Church tonight at seven p.m. All roads lead to Bethany Baptist Church." "All roads lead to the Slave Theater." The place would be packed. That's how we knew so many people were listening to black talk radio, because the only place we would mention these issues -- and they would come on the air just as guests. When something happened, the white media tells the police department's side of the story, and then on black radio, the people involved from the activist community, would not only tell their side of the story, but they would dissect the police department's response. They would say that the police didn't issue a statement for three days. They gave the policeman three days to come up with a story. Well, and the white press, when the police came with their story three days later, no white reporter would say, "Well, you all waited for three days until you could get your story together, until you can concoct your story." And white media would not use terms like "concoct a story," but we did, and that's what made a important difference. But what happened is (laughs), the example of black radio, and its reach and influence was 1995, and this little demonstration called the Million Man March. That was the largest gathering of black people ever. It dwarfed the Martin Luther King March on Washington. as well as and everything else that has been -- had been done up to that time, and everything that had been done in terms of a demonstration after that felt compelled to used the term "million" -- a Million Fathers March, a Million Mothers March, a Million Women's March. The Million Man March changed the whole -- what do you call -- the criteria, the yardstick. From now on, you had to do a million or more. And, but what happened with the Million Man March is that it was ignored entirely by the mainstream or white media while we were organizing. The only place we were

talking about the Million Man March was on black talk radio. White radio ignored it. About two days before the march, Jimmy Breslin, a columnist for the *Daily News* -- I believe he was in the *Daily News* -- in his column, he raised the question of, with his colleagues: "How did this happen right up under our nose?" He said, "We never even mentioned this. How did it happen?" And it happened because of black talk radio, black talk radio talking to black people. See, the tradition had changed. With white media during the '60s, whenever a black person was on a white talk show, a television show or even a radio show, that black person, Malcolm, whoever it was, was always talking to a hostile white interviewer, and they were challenging whatever we -- that person represented. And so, the black people who came on -- Dr. King, Bayard Rustin -- all the people who came on, they found themselves in a position of having to convince white people that the movement was legitimate. I remember Minister Farrakhan on *The Phil Donahue Show* the first time, and you can see, if you look at those videos, you'll see Phil Donahue standing over the minister, like, pointing to him like, "Don't you understand how white people feel? Don't you understand how what you say affects us?" Everybody was challenged to address white concerns. Black talk radio wasn't talking to white people; it was talking to black people. That's very, very different. We were not trying to make white people more comfortable with our anger. We were talking to black people, trying to clarify, trying to answer questions that black people had, and we had some great people who were able to answer those questions effectively. So we talked about the Million Man March, and if you remember -- you might not remember; this is before your time. But at the Million [00:40:00] Man March, every traditional black and white political personality in the country said "Don't go." Everybody said "Don't go." On black talk radio, we said "Go." Did they go? Who had the real influence in the black community? More than a million men. They heard black politicians, traditional Civil Rights leaders. They heard them say "don't go," but they also heard the people that they actually really did trust, and they heard us explain why we thought it was important, and they came, more than a million. When that happened, I guess what you call the powers that be, the policy makers in this society,

they decided that, "we've got to do something about black talk radio." That began the assault on black radio in general and black talk radio in particular. The Million Man March demonstrated even more than the organizers of the march understood, the reach and influence of black talk media in particular. But black media, had there been no -- you couldn't do a Million Man March now. You know, just as the anniversary of the Million Man March most recently last year did not draw the people like the march itself, and even the follow-up marches, because when they did the anniversary, there was no black talk radio. There was no way to get, not just the announcement that it's going to happen; it takes more than that. It takes people explaining it. If your theme is "justice or else," it's going to take some people explaining the "or else." It's going to take people calling in, black people calling in saying, "I don't get this 'or else.' I don't -- what does that mean?" You need that to happen so you could respond, so you could clarify, so you can create some rhythm out in the community. Without radio, no rhythm, no march.

OKECHUKWU: Can you speak about -- so what was the Black United Front, and how did that come together?

BOB LAW: (laughs) The Black United Front, in Brooklyn. I was reading an article about a liberation front, might have been in Algiers; I don't remember exactly where, but it was talking about, "something, something, liberation front." I said, "You know, the liberation front, that's a good idea," where you get these groups who are involved in the struggle to become part of a -- not a new organization, but kind of like a leadership council, which is the front; and everybody comes together, says what we're doing, pulls together. From time to time, we all identify a project we're going to work on together, the message that we want to get out. Our central theme, we can agree on what that should be. If we want to say "black is beautiful," so we're all going to say "black is beautiful." You know? If we're going to say "register to vote," then we're all going to say "register to vote." So we need to have a front. So I call Viola Plummer from the December 12th movement, I don't know if they were December 12th yet, but it's all the same people. But I called Vi, who I call a lot with stuff like this. I said, "Vi, what about

a front?" And so she said, "Great, that's a great idea. We should do a black united front." And I said, "It should be made up of various groups in the city." So we called a couple of other people Reverend Herb Daughtry, Jitu Weusi -- I don't know who else was in that first meeting -- and we said, "Let's meet at Reverend Daughtry's church," and we did, and we said, "Let's have a united front." They all agreed, Let's -- now let's go. Now that we've agreed" -- it was only about four or five of us in there -- "Now that we have agreed, let's now call some other groups, tell them about this idea, and let's come back in 10 days and have a follow-up meeting and actually form the front." Everybody agreed. Said, "Let's do that." Then, so we left to go and explore the idea, and then saw an article maybe in the *Amsterdam* or even in the general market[00:45:00] or white press, really about a week later, less than that even, that Reverend Daughtry had a press conference and announced that there was now a Black United Front, and that the member organizations of the Black United Front were the Randy Evans Defense Fund, the Sisters Against South African Apartheid, he was the chair, and those are the first organizations that were -- who had joined it, and everybody was invited to become a part of the front. Now, the Randy Evans Defense Fund, that was an auxiliary organization at his church. The Sisters Against South African Apartheid, that was an auxiliary group at his church. So he took those committees at his church that we all supported, he took those committees, made them into separate organizations to become the first groups to join the Black United Front, and then he and Jitu Weusi went about the business of pulling together the Black United Front. And so they -- created their version of a united front.barn by then, and it wasn't the front that we were talking about. They were not leaders of the front as per the organizations who would become part of the front, having to vote on who the leadership would be, although we were not necessarily opposed to any one of them being the leader. But they took the front, and that's how the Black United Front actually got started, and then people joined, and the front addressed political issues. They became part of the protest movement. But they became just another group, -- rather than it being a front, a kind of a council of organizations, it became a single,

separate organization of its own, which we were trying to avoid. It just became another organization, and as another organization, they supported protest movements that we were already doing. And so -- and they supported it primarily through the presence of Reverend Daughtry, even more so than Jitu. Reverend Daughtry was out in front of a lot of the protests, and so now he was involved in the protests as the head of the Black United Front. So it gave the front that kind of visibility. Now, we were there as well, as we had always been. I was there; Viola Plummer was there; other organizations with the Patrice Lumumba Coalition was there—Al Sharpton was there. Everybody else was still there, but the front did not bring us all together into one group. The front just became just another organization. So it was diffused. The real function of the Black United Front did not materialize, and then they had a conference and organized the National Black United Front with Reverend Daughtry as the head of that group and is now the president emeritus of the National Black United Front. And there are Black United Front chapters around the country that do a good job. They have no knowledge of how it got started or you know, any -- the fact that it was never supposed to be just another organization, they have no knowledge of that. So I worked with the front in Kansas City. I worked for a time with the front in Chicago, as they were just addressing an issue, but again, it was just another organization. It was not the unifying of the various organizations that Viola Plummer and I had in mind.

OKECHUKWU: Do you remember, in terms of when it started, if -- I've heard that the murder of Arthur Miller, the, you know, assault of I can't remember his name, he was the young man in Crown Heights who was assaulted by one of those Hasidic, you know, security whatever mobs that they had. I heard that those, some of those events played a role in sort of the formation of the Black United Front. Is that true? Do you remember when those events happened?

BOB LAW: Yes. Those events happened. They did not really create the Black United Front. We had already called for a black united front before. Enough had already happened, and there were plenty of organizations already active. [00:50:00] No, those events did not create the Black United Front. The front, along with everybody else, responded to

those events, so that when people were -- there were a lot of atrocities committed in, seems like in Brooklyn, (laughs) you know? A lot of atrocities committed in Crown Heights.

OKECHUKWU: Like what?

LAW: Like the choking to death of Arthur Miller by the police, the police killing of Randy Evans. You know, Randy Evans was a 14-year-old, sitting just on the front stoop in his housing project in Brownsville, and a cop came out of the building. The little boy said to the cop, according to the witnesses and the cop, the little boy said to the cop, "Are you coming from my house?" And the cop pulled out his gun and shot him, put the gun back in his holster, in front of all those people. So the cop could not deny that it had happened like that, but the cop said that he suffered from a rare form of epileptic motor seizure and temporary insanity. The judge said, "Oh, okay, then you're excused." He was never fired, never indicted, nothing. Just as what happens even now. And the reason we say atrocities, the atrocities were at the hands of the police. Unarmed people, people who were handcuffed just as -- see what happened with Eric Garner, and he is handcuffed and he's subdued and they choke him. Arthur Miller was in handcuffs, put in a police car. He was in handcuffs, and they choked him to death. That's an atrocity. That's police criminal behavior, and so in response to the criminal behavior of the police, the entire community would be outraged. And so, all the activists -- if you were to Google Arthur Miller, and some photos come up, there's a photo of demonstrators walking through the street. Al Vann, who was an assemblyman, at that time is in that march. I saw a bunch of faces, people that you know, who were in that march. The whole community was outraged; it wasn't just the Black United Front, and it was not something that was organized by the Black United Front. Coalitions came together as a front, even though the Black United Front did not help us create those -- that kind of unity and coalition. But they came together, and then, when the other things happened, the brother you were talking about, Stewart -- I forgot his first name -- who was beaten -- when those things happened, there was, particularly -- it wasn't the National Action Network at the time; might have been the

National Youth Movement -- was Al Sharpton's organization, and when Howard Beach, for instance -- the first person on the scene was Al Sharpton and Reverend Jerry West, who went out to that pizza place and had a press conference in front of the pizza place where they chased the Yuseff Hawkins from. The -- and they responded to a lot of those atrocities that were being committed in Brooklyn, and the whole community, because of the nature of those crimes by the police, the whole community was there. It was not any one organization that was inspired or took up the leadership, but the whole community. Elected officials came out, everybody.

OKECHUKWU: Can you -- what do you remember, and you've already spoken about some of this already, but sort of the events around Arthur Miller's murder, response to that?

LAW: Well, again though, it was because it was an atrocity, and it was part of a pattern of police criminal behavior. In the black community, like on black radio, it was being described as criminal behavior on the part of the police, police criminality. In white media, the protests, as now, are described as anti-police. [00:55:00] Black radio helped clarify that, so that black people were comfortable coming out. They're not so comfortable now. All they hear is the white media perspective that this is anti-police. If we say, "black lives matter," then we get some white people to have a sign saying "blue lives matter." So you don't hear any real response to that. At that time, you heard responses from people who really understood. And so the community came out around the killing of Arthur Miller, because see, Arthur Miller had some visibility in the community, not a criminal, not a street hoodlum, you're not where you can say "the guy was coming at me with a knife." You know how they say, when something happens, black people are uncomfortable with the notion that there's that much anti-black sentiment in this society. So black people look for: "Well, the guy must have done something. You know, he's in the wrong place at the wrong time. The guy must have done something; there's more to this story." That makes us feel a little more comfortable with the racism. But with Arthur Miller, there was no room for that. This was a man who never should have been attacked by the police. Witnesses say he was handcuffed, more than one, pushed into the police car, choked after they drove him

away. There was no room, wiggle room for "he brought it on himself." So the community was feeling justifiable or justified in their anger, and fought that. See, and at the time, the demonstrations were just beginning. See, prior to that era, the demonstrations that were taking place in Brooklyn were demonstrations organized primarily by Brooklyn CORE, the Congress Of Racial Equality, and those demonstrations were challenging institutional racism. So we'll be marching in front of the Board of Ed about curriculum; we'd be marching in front of Ebinger's Bakery because of discriminatory hiring policies; or in front of an apartment building because of discriminatory housing policy. So the demonstrations were all very respectable, even if you got a lot of folk. The largest demonstration that we ever had in that era was in front of the Downstate Medical Center, again, challenging discriminatory policies in hiring. But they were all the politics of respectability. This was different. These demonstrations were angry, you know. Those other demonstrations were just making a point that you're doing something wrong here. Not a lot of anger, it was for inclusion. It was "hire us," or it was "rent us the apartment." But these demonstrations were the first time that the community could give vent to its frustration and its anger which it's felt all the time. And organizations like CORE, the congress of racial equality, did not give the black community that kind of an expression; didn't give us a chance to really state our anger, our frustration. Those demonstrations were much more controlled and dealt with different kinds of issues altogether, and absolutely ignored the boiling frustration building in the black community. Then it hits. These demonstrations were not calling on activist see, the other demonstrations were calling on members of the organization to be on the picket lines in the street. These demonstrations were calling on the people of the community to be in the street, and that's what was powerful about it. It was the beginning of a movement where the people themselves felt confident, comfortable, in expressing their displeasure, their anger, their frustration. Nobody had protested police behavior before, so now people are saying that the police are the criminals, and people in the community have felt that all the time. They've been paying petty bribes yo local cops for some time, the store owners have been paying off

policemen. They've been watching police. When I lived in the Kingsborough projects, there was a police car that would pull up into the project, right off Pacific Street, [01:00:00] and go into one of the project buildings-- and the police would park their car right up on the sidewalk, you know, up in the project, and go up into a building where everybody knew that there were these two, three women in that building as I don't know if you call them hookers, but that's what they were doing, not just for the police. People knew that those three women were in there, and they knew that's what the police were doing in there. And then the police come out grinning, get in their car, and casually drive off. People in the neighborhood knew the realities about the police, always. I got pulled over by a cop driving my girlfriend's sports car. It was sports car Had a Triumph TR3, and I didn't have a driver's license. I was a little kid; I didn't have a driver's license. And got pulled over, and the cop said, "Let me see your driver's license," and I said, "I don't have a driver's license." They said -- this was a black cop, and he said, "well, what you want me to do?" I said, "Well, I would hope you would give me a break?" And he said, "Yes, you guys always asking for a break. What are you going to do? How you going to pay for this ticket?" "I've got to ask my parents for the money." "Well, what do you want me to do?" I said, "Well, could you just give me a break? You know I'm not a criminal and stuff, and you know me even." "You guys always want a break. What you going to do for me?" I said, "Well, I have five dollars." "Five dollars," he says, "five dollars? That's just enough for us to get some coffee." I said, "But that's all I have." I was 16, maybe -- no, no, I was at least 17. I said, "That's all I have." He said, "All right, give me the five dollars," and said, "Go ahead." So we knew the police, and how they were in those days. and who the -- nobody in the neighborhood was ever fooled or confused about the police (laughs), you know.

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LAW: And these demonstrations were the first time we're kind of like saying, "Yes, let's tell the truth about the police. The police are criminals. You know, they do engage in

criminal behavior. They do pull people aside and beat them up." Everybody knew that. If you heard that somebody was arrested and they were taken down to the precinct, you expected them to come back all beat up. So, these demonstrations -- I might be getting away from your point (laughs) -- these demonstrations gave voice to the very real sentiments of the larger community, the people in the street, and that's what was new as well as significant about those demonstrations. Those demonstrations helped to launch a new attitude, which helped to launch a new movement where now the masses of the people were willing to come out.

OKECHUKWU: You mentioned -- since we're winding back a little bit -- you mentioned, you know, Al Vann was one of the people who came to the protests along with, you know, the masses of people. I remember a while ago you said that you were involved in sort of early campaigns with Al Vann. We spoke about the kind of -- I don't know if you would say a political regime, Shirley Chisolm, but can you speak more about, you know, Al Vann sort of entering politics in that early period and what you remember about working with him?

LAW: Professor Carlos Russell, who was at the time the dean of the School of Contemporary Studies at Brooklyn College, which was downtown on Livingston Street, and he was a political activist. He and a brother named Reggie Butts created Black Solidarity Day, with a political intention. Doing it the day before Election Day was a strategy on their part. Carlos told me about Al Vann. He brought me to Al Vann, or he brought Al Vann to me. He told me about this schoolteacher trying to get involved in politics, guy named Al Vann. "Let's go work with him, help him." because what we all agreed on, our analysis was that the black political machine in Brooklyn was powerless without any intention of having power. The black political machine wanted to be connected to whatever white machine was going to be in charge. The real struggle for political power and control of the local politics was with a group of Italian politicians. I just remember Carmine DeSapio. I don't remember the other names; there were some other guys who were all part of that machine. And then they fought with a Jewish political machine: represented by the borough president of Brooklyn, Howard Golden;

I think that Howard Golden might have replaced Carmine DeSapio as the borough president of Brooklyn. That was the real political struggle, in Brooklyn, which was fine. I mean, that's how political struggles are everywhere in this country, clubhouse politics, dominating electoral politics. That's how it goes. But the black politicos were not trying to acquire any political power. The black political machine just wanted to be hooked up with the winners. So what we were saying, as we were becoming involved -- we were very young, we were in our 20s, and we're becoming involved in challenging the political establishment in New York City, challenging the political establishment in Brooklyn: these old white men and their back cronies, They'd been there for years. And so, Al Vann was seen as the vanguard candidate, the first candidate that's going to run, not just to get him elected, but to get him elected and put us in a position of influence. Because see, black people even now, especially now, we engage in politics, electoral politics, as the pursuit of elective office, and we consider our job has been done and we have a victory if our candidate [00:05:00] gets elected. Other people seem to understand that getting elected is not the goal unto itself. You want to get your candidate elected so that you can get into a position to change or make policy. Black folk just want to get the candidate elected and then will consider that a victory. So we've got black folk in office now, in borough presidency in Brooklyn, and in Harlem -- I mean in Manhattan. We have a public advocate. You know, we've got people in Congress and as far as we're concerned, that's it. That's the victory. We're celebrating their having been elected whether or not they effect policy, doesn't doesn't matter. We just applaud the fact that there are more black people in office. Well at that time, even then, even then we knew better. And so Al Vann is seen as the vanguard, and his organization was called the Vanguard, but he was seen as the vanguard candidate into establishing a political presence in Brooklyn; not just for Al Vann, but for the political community that was supporting him, working with him to get him elected because after Al Vann, then we need to look at other people. And there were other people who came to work for Al Vann in that first run against a woman named Evelyn Dixon, which was really seen as a challenge to a guy named Carl Butler,

who was the Brooklyn boss, or trying to be the boss, and Evelyn Dixon was Carl Butler's candidate, but we understood running against Evelyn Dixon, we were really running against Carl Butler. And there are other people who came to work with us who went on, later on their own went on to run for office by themselves. The councilwoman, Una Clarke, Una Clarke was part of our group -- we had an organization called the Black Political Action Union. Una Clarke belonged to the Black Political Action Union. Velmanette Montgomery, who is now a senator was part of BPAU she was a leader in the Day Care community back then. Assemblyman Roger Green -- these are all people who worked for us in the Black Political Action Union before they sought public office themselves. Myself and a brother named Bob Speaks were the primary leaders of the Black Political Action Union in a real sense. There were a lot of other people who were active with it, but the leadership was coming directly from Bob Speaks and Bob Law, but with the help and support of a lot of good people. But the idea was to build a political movement, and Al Vann was the candidate, and it was working, and we won, and we got Al Vann elected. It was a really good campaign, but we got Al Vann elected. But somehow, the grand plan, the overall initial plan, always fizzles, you know? Just like the Black United Front, something else happens. Al Vann and the Vanguard never became the centerpiece of a political movement; it was just Al Vann. It was just Al Vann get re-elected every year, but challenging the machine never became part of the agenda. When I, some years later, decided to run against Ed Towns for Congress, Al Vann did not support me. we never got on the ballot. That was the year that the Democratic Party threw everybody off the ballot, because in New York the electoral process is corrupt -- even *The New York Times* did an article, an editorial about how corrupt the process is. The Times was asking, how could every single challenger be guilty of fraud? Because they called it fraud,if they can discredit your nominating petition. But Al Vann did not support me. The early insurgent movement was just not there, He's now with the machine,

OKECHUKWU: So, you talk about you know, sort of him and the Vanguard and this being the sort of distinct thing around getting political power. How did folks feel about Shirley Chisholm who came before him?

LAW: Shirley Chisholm was a kind of a dynamic personality, and [00:10:00] smart, and people had confidence that Shirley Chisholm was going to do whatever it is she wanted to do. So people were very supportive of Shirley Chisholm. She was a woman, and she wasn't a punk, you know, so people were very supportive of Shirley Chisholm in the community, she was respected by the people in the street. The political machinery I mentioned earlier, the political machinery, black and white, opposed Shirley Chisholm and tried to undermine the things that she would do. I might have mentioned to you before, the woman Maude Richardson, who was the forerunner, she was the first black woman ever elected to public office in New York City and was never even mentioned, not even by Shirley Chisholm. Maude Richardson was really sabotaged by that black and white male-dominated political machine. She won the popular vote, and was elected to the new yore state assembly however before she was sworn into office an immoral emergency session of the assembly was convened and they redrew the election districts and declared Richardson's election invalid since the district she won in no longer existed. Shirley Chisholm, aware of Maude Richardson, protected herself better, Shirley didn't trust or rely on the local machine, she created her own little political movement -- not movement but organization. And, but Shirley Chisholm was fully supported by her community in going to Congress, in fact her congressional district was created as the result of a class action lawsuit file by Andrew Cooper a politically active member of the community. see, Shirley Chisholm was effective in helping to energize the political aspirations in the black community. There wasn't a lot that was done. Those black politicians were up against real entrenched resistance. Under Shirley Chisholm, she could not do anything that eliminated police violence, improved the quality of public education, but she was at least a strident political voice. The black people who are in office now, they don't even whisper. Shirley Chisholm would at least speak for people. She would shout for people who

could only whisper. The black people who are in office now, serving in her congressional district, and all these other seats that people have now, they are very quiet, they whisper all the time. You don't even remember that they are there. You don't see them amount to anything, really, on behalf of black people. There's some confusion as to what their role should even be, and with gentrification, they become even more timid. Now that whites are moving in, they're trying to be very careful not to do anything that whites will disapprove of, and to be very careful to identify with the issues that are important to white people. So, you have a congressional district that has the Albany housing projects in it. The congresswoman never visits the Albany housing projects, Yvette Clarke, has not had any conversations with the Albany housing project people.all of whom are black. All those people who live in that project, if I were to go in there and do voter registration just in that project, if those people would do it, they could vote her out of office. She's not worried about that. Whatever their issues are, their concerns are -- I'm dealing with the people in the Albany houses. Their sons are in prison. Their concern is police violence. Their concern is gang violence, legal assistance, legal help. Their concern is getting their apartments repaired, and the project being made livable. They're more concerned about that than they are about gay marriage. However, the politicians have to be more concerned about gay marriage, because for that is the priority of the new people who are moving into the community. The public schools are pitiful. They begin the assault on the children at kindergarten. The people in the Albany houses, as an example, that's part of their concern: quality education. They don't have even a playground. [00:15:00] I took some brothers into the Albany houses and we painted and repaired and cleaned up the playground. they don't even have slides and swings. That's their concern: making life livable. But the gentrification people, they don't; that's not their concern. They have a park right off Vanderbilt Avenue -- I forgot the street -- Prospect, on Prospect: plenty of equipment, more monkey bars, and building lights, and it's public, and the people who live there, they didn't have to pay for it. You know, the city put that equipment in there. But the politicians don't address the issues affecting blacks only,

they don't have a need to address the concerns of the black constituents. The black constituents are unorganized, particularly the working class. They are unorganized, and not only are they unorganized, they are hard to organize, so the politicians ignore them, but Shirley Chisholm was a person who would have helped us with that park in the Albany houses. You know, Shirley Chisholm did not ignore the powerless. That's what distinguished her from the rest. She didn't have the power to do a whole lot, but she did not ignore the powerless, you know, and these politicians do. They ignore the powerless that is part of,their mode of operation. I hope that answers the question (laughs).

OKECHUKWU: Only a few more questions. So you've mentioned education a few times. Can you speak about -- let's see. Can you speak about -- because you mentioned the Al-Karim School when we were having a prior conversation -- the development of that, but I guess more generally, this move of black independent schooling, considering the way the New York City public school system is (laughs)?

LAW: But what is the question?

OKECHUKWU: The development of the Al-Karim School, and more generally, your thoughts about this move for black independent schooling, at least at the time.

LAW: The Al-Karim School started out of a concern for curriculum and instruction. We felt that too much of who we are, our history, our culture, was left out of the curriculum. We felt that the curriculum in the public schools was teaching white supremacy, in that the curriculum teaches European history as the history of the world. In fact, they call it "world history." If it's anybody else, it's called "Asian history," "African history." European studies is called "world history." You know, they call European music "classical"; they call Duke Ellington "Count Basie jazz." And white folk made up the word "jazz." They call it enjoyable but they don't call it classical. They don't use the terms in the English language that describe esteem, right? So, we felt -- and we could point to a lot of things about curriculum. So we felt that we should have a school that teaches our culture, our own history, our own culture. And so that was the conversations leading to the creation of the Al-Karim School. Those first

conversations leading to the creation of the Al-Karim School took place in my apartment on Eastern Parkway, with the sister Ora Razzaq, who, with her husband founded the school. They were part of that conversation, with activists and only a couple of other educators, and neither Ora nor her husband James were educators. Neither were the activists in the room in those early meetings. We knew what we wanted to do, and why it was so important but we needed help building an infra-structure We were able to get a couple of educators to help just with the, how do you go about doing this; what is the structure to be? But it was because we needed -- we felt that we needed a school that would acknowledge our identity, right? And [00:20:00] move us away from the automatic assumptions or acceptance of white supremacy. And so, that's where the Al-Karim conversation started. Then came Jitu Weusi, who created the Uhuru Sasa school. Now, *uhuru* was Swahili,— everyone recognized that as the word meaning "freedom." So this and *sasa*. So we knew that it was called "freedom school," and "freedom school" gave it more of a political connotation; and it was a bolder step, bolder political initiative, a bolder political step to call the school *Uhuru Sasa*. And then they did a lot of other things in there, with the little children doing black power salutes and stuff. They were black and proud, and they did such a good job academically. The kids from Al-Karim and the kids from Uhuru Sasa were so bright, so sharp. They did such a good job in those schools. We said, "Wow, we need more. We need a whole network of independent schools." It did not catch on with real power and enthusiasm, because at the same time, there was a struggle with the public schools. And Jitu and Al Vann, they were part of that struggle with the public schools, trying to upgrade the public schools, because the -- and we said for years that we have to put the emphasis on public schools, because that's where all the children are. There are so many children in the public schools, we can't ignore the public schools. So the struggle has been around who should be the chancellor, what should be the curriculum, all those kinds of things around the struggle with the public schools. At one point though, as we started to struggle with the public schools, and then compare them to the children in the independent schools. We begin to see that the public schools are

not even educating, that these children, their intellect is being sabotaged in the public schools, in a real sense, even now. So we begin to say, the independent schools are more important than we thought. It's not just about teaching our history and our culture; these children in public school can't even read, no matter what history they're reading. They're reading books that we say teach white supremacy, but the problem is they can barely read the book. So, you know, we're telling them that their ancestors created math and science, but we're saying that to some kids who can't count. So the public schools -- the independent schools take on much more significance as a source of real education for black children, and that's -- see, because most of the people in the education movement, Leonard Jeffries and Molefi Asante -- most of the people who are in that movement who are visible, who are educators, they're dealing with the public schools, because the independent school movement never took on the urgency that it should have, because we didn't quite make that connection beyond the level of curriculum and instruction, to just on the level of overall education. But now we're doing just that as a whole new movement -- we plan to announce in March of this year a new movement where independent schools become the priority. I sued the Board of Ed in 1990 on a class action lawsuit filed on behalf of nine students in the New York City public school system. We tried to bring a lawsuit against the Board of Ed charging them on the level of curriculum and instruction. The curriculum is distorted and incorrect; it is teaching white supremacy; it's anti-black. A reporter asked me, "How so" "Here, look at this page right here. Open up a text -- I have some textbooks. Open up any public school history book. Just pick one and see what it says. I'll tell you what's wrong with that page. Here's a page: Marcus Garvey was a black man who had a scheme to return black people to Africa, and it fell apart [00:25:00] because of something, some shenanigans he was engaged in with a steamship line." I said, "Look at that: Marcus Garvey described as somebody who has nothing more than a scheme to return people to Africa." It doesn't say what the scheme was, but also doesn't say what was wrong (laughs) with returning people to Africa. It just makes these assumptions that this was a bad thing, that he had the Black Star Line. They don't say

what happened to the Black Star Line, as though that was simply bad judgement on Garveys part and it doesn't say anything about government opposing him, any resistance to him. Other black leaders, like Booker T. Washington, opposing actively him, you know, Booker T. Washington is explained from where he's coming from much more so than Marcus Garvey in any of those textbooks. Booker T was more acceptable to whites. So, so we brought the lawsuit. David Dinkins was mayor. We thought well thats good; that's what I mean about the black political machine. Good, there's a black mayor, so we have an ally, because they told us to vote for him because he's black, so we did. He's the mayor. We want to bring a lawsuit against the Board of Ed. He instructs his attorney, a black man named R. Peter Sherwood, to block the lawsuit, to file a petition to keep our lawsuit out of court, David Dinkins saying that the court should not have anything to do with education; that should be in the hands of the mayor and the chancellor. We say, "But you're not going to be the mayor forever. The community needs a structure that does not depend on who is the mayor. We want to set a motion in place to change curriculum, to change the whole method of teaching." Regent Adelaide Sanford is on the Board of Regents at the time. Because Regent Sanford is there, we did not name the Board of Regents in the lawsuit. We named the mayor and the Board of Ed. Regent Sanford said, "I wish you had named the Board of Regents, then I would have issued a statement saying, 'we're guilty,'" which is what we thought the mayor was going to do. The black mayor issued a statement that these nine children do not deserve a day in court, they filed the petition to keep us out of court. They were never on our side, but we automatically applauded the black guy being elected mayor. I remember going to be a guest on a TV show about something else altogether when Dinkins -- the night that Dinkins won, and I guess the next day I was going into this TV studio, and there was a couple of people, people who worked there, and one, a white reporter, when I walked by, she said, "Bob, congratulations." "Oh, thank you." You know, David Dinkins was in. People thought, white people as well, thought that that was something that was going to benefit black people. She was congratulating me, because "you've got a guy in office now; that should be helpful for

the stuff that you do." Even the white reporters saw it like that, but the black mayor didn't. First thing the mayor says is, "I'm not the black mayor." There's nobody ever said that. The first Jewish mayor was Abe Beame. The first Jewish mayor never said, "I'm not the Jewish mayor." Certainly, Ed Koch never said, "I'm not the Jewish mayor." Nobody. When there's a woman elected mayor, I can assure you, unless it's a black woman, but if a white woman is elected mayor of New York, she is not going to say, "I'm not the white mayor -- I'm not the woman's mayor." She's never required to say that. What she says instead is that now women are going to get a better deal. And I don't have a problem with that. The woman becomes mayor -- I would support a woman candidate for mayor because women are absolutely denied, and if somebody's going to get in and says, "I'm going to end that denial of fairness for women," that's fine with me. I would not want her to say, "I'm not going to look out for women." If I were mayor, black people are going to be better off. You know? White people are not going to get hurt, but the people who need me the most are going to receive goods and services because they need me the most. That's not what happens when black people get elected to office. So, I forgot what the question was (laughs).

OKECHUKWU: No, that is relevant, and we were talking about, I think initially, education and your lawsuit.

LAW: Oh right, and the black mayor blocked the lawsuit. So, we never got the lawsuit into college [00:30:00] I mean, into court. We appealed and appealed and stuff and ultimately, got turned down by the last appeals court. The judge, Kimberly Wood, I believe was her name, ruled against us, you know. It's a woman judge who had made political transitions becoming progressive. I think she, like Gloria Steinem, used to be Playboy Bunnies, and now they have a real political consciousness. she's a judge, but it didn't make any difference. These black children are still going to be denied. And so the lawsuit never got into court, but that is why the independent school movement becomes the most viable alternative, because see while we have been fighting with the public schools, because there's so many children in the public schools, generation after generation has been lost while we fight with the public schools. So that it turned out:

we are right; that's where the children are, but we should be creating an alternative for them rather than struggling with the schools to restructure the schools, because the Board of Ed, the white educators, people like Diane Ravitch, those people, they will fight us forever,— the historian Arthur Schlesinger, if he's really a historian -- he really was like the secretary, keeping notes for John Kennedy. So when he publishes notes, he becomes a historian. But those people will fight with us forever. You know, they will fight us then their children will fight us. They are happy to engage us in battle because see,that struggle is part of a strategy: keep us engaged in struggle, as opposed to building an institution of our own.

OKECHUKWU: A lot of the schools, the independent ones, have closed over that time.

LAW: Right. Independent schools closed down because the independent schools serviced the population that needed them the most: working-class families, poor families, who can't afford the tuition. And so -- and even though the parents can't afford the tuition, they still send two or three kids to the school, you know, and they just -- and they couldn't afford it. So many of those schools closed down. Some of them still exist. There's a lot that -- excuse me -- there's a lot that still exist, so we're going to try and connect them into a network of independent schools.

OKECHUKWU: So, when did you leave Brooklyn in terms of living in Brooklyn, and what motivated that decision for you?

LAW: Well, I left Brooklyn when I lived on Crown Street, 520 Crown Street between Kingston and Albany. I was just talking about that to a friend of mine. When I lived on Crown Street, the apartment building I lived in had cherry blossom trees right in the front yard, a really nice lobby area. It was a walk-up. I had to walk up to the third floor because it was a four-story building; it was a walk-up. Had to take the space up at the end of the day, you take your garbage out at night.Rain, cold or snow You had to come downstairs, across the lobby, out the side door to put the garbage out. None of that stuff phased me at all. I never even seemed to notice it was a walk-up. I was also 25 years old (laughs). But I never seemed to notice it was a walk-up. And I used to say, "I don't care how much money I make, I'm never moving out of this apartment. This

apartment is great, you know, two bedrooms and stuff. This apartment is great." But then everything changes. I got into radio and I was making a lot more money, then -- but then the landlord's policies changed. They changed the doors, the front door; they pulled the cherry blossom trees out; took the nice little doors out; put these big, heavy black doors, big padlocks. They painted over everything you know, the lobby had a marble fireplace. They painted all over the fireplace, a pea green color. Painted all the walls. They had decided -- it's like they decided, "We don't want this place to be nice; we're going to rent it to black people, and so we don't want it to [00:35:00] be nice." and they rented it to black black and Hasidic. My next-door neighbor was Hasidim. The landlords began to do what they call dumb down. They just started to water everything down. And then I was shown a place called the Towers at the Water's Edge (laughs), overlooking Great Neck Bay, in Queens,with a view from the 17th floor, huge terrace. So a whole different -- and I said, "Well, yes, since they're doing such with this, I'm going to move, and move out." But that was really it. It wasn't like political or anything. It was just a -- the same thing that happens with everybody: they're living in one place, and the quality of life begins to decline. And this, it wasn't -- now over on Crown Street in Crown Heights, the quality of life, overall, wasn't -- it declined a little bit, like in my apartment, was burglarized at least three times. And the last time, I put my key in the door and I could hear footsteps inside the apartment. I push open the door and see little kid going out the back window, and he actually dropped his watch (laughs). You know, so rather them get my stuff, I got his watch. But you know, that was happening, but not -- that was all. It wasn't noisy, or violence in the street, you know. It wasn't terrible, other than the burglaries. The -- and the police were not doing anything about the burglaries because it was predominately black. The way the police now reduce crime overall -- on Vanderbilt Avenue, Prospect Heights, as whites begin to move in, the crime rate begins to go down. Police change their policy, their policing policies. But, it wasn't that. That was the only thing. So it was really the landlords. They had decided to just diminish the quality of the place, and I didn't have to accept that.

OKECHUKWU: Is this the '80s? Around what time?

LAW: No, that was the late '70s, around '77, even before that, if it was 'mid 70's 73, 74. But you know, prior to that, Crown Heights was still not bad physically, you know. It's not a bad place even now. It had potential but the community was not coming together as a community the way blacks and whites live together in Prospect Heights. They hang out in the same coffee shops and you know, hang out with each other. In Crown Heights, it was Hasidim, and the Hasidim didn't talk to you. A Hasidic couple lived next door to me, and on one high holy day, the wife did not get home in time before sundown. She knocked on the door; the husband wouldn't let her in, you know, because whatever the high holy day is, you're not supposed to touch anything, you're not labor on any level, and so she went out and got her rabbi. Rabbi came back with her, banging on the door, asking the man if he would let her in. The rabbi would give him permission. He says, "No, not on this day, she should have been here on time." So the rabbi knocks on my door, says, "Can we come through your apartment, get up on the fire escape?" And he says, "The window was open on the fire escape in their apartment he asked if she can go across my fire escape" -- I said yes of course -- there's a little space between each fire escape and it could be a little tricky she had to step over and hold on, and go in. I think the rabbi went in for her. He stepped over the fire escape, goes in, and opened the door for her, and then she goes inside. So, you would think that the next time I saw them in the street, she might say hello. Not a word. In fact, I open the door the next day, she walking out of her apartment. I'm walking out of mine. I say, "Hi." She looks stone-faced, looking straight ahead. Would not acknowledge me. Wouldn't say hello. None of the people who lived in there, the Hasidic couples who lived in there, would even talk to us. There was no effort to be neighbors, And so the building was becoming predominately black, and so as it was becoming [00:40:00] predominately black, then they started to scale it down, and that's when I left.

OKECHUKWU: So, where do you see Crown Heights in 10 years from now? What changes will have happened?

LAW: I don't know. Crown Heights has maintained a certain stability. It never collapsed; it never became a ghetto, and it never went into total decide like so many other areas in the neighborhood -- it could have gone either way. It could have become very upscale, like gentrification is doing, or it could have just collapsed, and it never did. It stayed right there. It is still the same: modest housing, safe enough, clean enough. The criminal activity of the little hoodlums on the street never overwhelmed, they never just took over, as they did in other communities. Crown Heights, in 10 years from now, Crown Heights will be the same (laughs) as it is now, but it always has the potential, if it were possible, for the groups in Crown Heights to actually agree to share the community. Crown Heights is a very segregated community, segregating blacks, Latinos -- there are a few Latinos there -- and the Hasidim. There's no effort to be family. There's no effort to be community. There still is no effort to be community. One group, or maybe both groups think in terms of control and ownership -- but each group is talking about their group owning and controlling the community board, the money for public schools, even though the Hasidim don't have any children in the public schools, but they work to control the school board. Crown Heights is a community that simply coexists, but it does not come together as a community because it doesn't seem to me that there's any desire in Crown Heights to be a community. Now, that's Crown Heights from Eastern Parkway to Empire Boulevard. Now, Crown Heights has extended all over: to Prospect, from Empire Boulevard to Prospect Place, maybe to -- I don't know; maybe it goes to Fulton Street on that side of the Eastern Parkway, which is now called Crown Heights. There is a different kind of a community where there are black people, white people, who are at least hanging out with each other. Their priorities are very, very different. I'm on the mailing list of a block association in Crown Heights on Prospect Place, and they're on my mailing list. I'm sending out flyers that say, "Al Sharpton is speaking Sunday afternoon at the -- at church," or that we're doing a community fellowship breakfast. "Everybody in the community is invited to come and have breakfast. It's not a 'feed the hungry' or 'feed the poor'; it's, we want to create a sense of community. Everybody in the community is

invited to come and have breakfast with us. We'll supply the food." We do things like that. We do other kinds of political forums. We had some brothers from the Central Park Five; we showed their film and had two of the brothers there to speak to the audience. We've done things like that. That's when you get my leaflets. When you get the leaflets from the block association, it's about front yard beautification, and a tree-planting campaign, totally different priorities, and as we send out the invitations to our events, like the food events -- we did a community empowerment weekend just before Thanksgiving, two-day event, a lot of food, entertainment, because we want people just to come together for a fellowship dinner -- none of the white people who get those invitations ever come. And it's a white woman who sends them out, [00:45:00] and she sends me their invitations, but none of those people -- some black people come; none of the white people ever come to anything we're doing at the church. We presented the choir from Bethune-Cookman college, great choir, free, Sunday afternoon. Sent out the same invitations. None of the white people come. There doesn't seem to be any real desire on the part of the people who are moving into the community to actually become a part of the existing community. They seem to have a different agenda for creating a community. It's like when they move into Bed-Stuy and want to change the name. "Don't call it Bed-Stuy." You know, they come to impose their vision, so you've got people who are playing drums in the park on DeKalb Avenue, Fort Greene Park, and as people move in, they start signing petitions and calling the police and whatever to get the drummers removed from the park. They knew the drummers were there when they moved in. They were not planning to come in and be a part of what is there. They come in order to take control of, and change it on their own terms, and the same thing is happening in all historically black communities. That's what gentrification does. So that Crown Heights is the target of that gentrification, of that attitude, rather. Crown Heights always seems to be on the fence. Are we going to be move forward, or become entrenched as we are? -it's not going to collapse and become a really wretched place to live, because the infrastructure is good. The people who live there are not poor people. The black and whites who own homes in Crown Heights over on the

other side of Eastern Parkway, they can afford to be there. They're not, you know, breaking up those homes and turning them into three-family apartment buildings. So the infrastructure is still in place on the Eastern to Empire Boulevard. Now there is the community from Eastern Parkway to Fulton, which is now called Crown Heights. All of it used to be Prospect Heights. The people who are moving in there have money as well, so it's not going to decline, the neighborhood is not going to collapse. More and more, what's going to happen is, more and more of the black people who live there are going to be pushed out, and it's going to become more and more a white neighborhood; and when I was a little kid, it used to be a white neighborhood. You know, it is white people taking the neighborhood back. What is interesting: when you say, "What's going to happen in 10 years?" It will be interesting to see what happens, because even the white people who are moving in have begun to complain that it's too expensive; that this rent is too expensive; this Danish and coffee is too expensive; you know, these groceries are too expensive. This gentrification is about to price even white folk out, so it'll be interesting to see, really, what it'll look like in 10 years. It may be a community that will be forced by circumstance to operate more like a real community. Right now, it operates on a very elitist or classist basis,— it's moving very much toward classism, and so I don't know for sure, couldn't predict, but I don't think Crown Heights is going to decay. You know, it's not going to be a worse place. There are some communities that are worse now than they were 10 years ago, and Crown Heights is not like that, and I don't think that it will become worse, and it might get better in terms of housing stock, you know. It might. It'll do fine, but who will live there is the real question. The way it's going, it is going to be a white neighborhood.

OKECHUKWU: Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience in Crown Heights? Anything else to elaborate on that you've talked about?

LAW: Well, I don't know. I don't remember what I talked about (laughter), to sum it up, let me say this, growing up in Prospect Heights slash Crown Heights was very different than living there as an adult. But growing up, it was a great place to be, and I think I mentioned before: we never noticed the contradictions, and it was a great place to be.

We, as teenagers, we are among the first generations of teenagers, [00:50:00] in American society, our parents and certainly our grandparents were expected to work and even marry in their teen years. we however where the first to experience eight years of suspended responsibility, and while we had no real responsibility growing, you know, from 12 years old, 13, 14, it was great living in that community. We had access to everything that we were aware of. We went to the library on Eastern Parkway and Schenectady and that was one of our trips. We actually would go to the library, take books out of the library, and in fact -- I don't know if I can admit this -- I still have one of the books. (laughter) See, it was a book -- when I say that we never noticed a contradiction: There was a book written by a sports journalist named John Tunis. He did a book called *World Series* about a fictional Brooklyn Dodger baseball team, and in his book -- that's before the Dodgers ever won the World Series. In his book, the Dodgers won the World Series. I loved that book. I took it back and took it out again, (laughs) I took it out and took it back again. As a avid Dodger fan I loved reading that book, and I remember that at some point years later, going through things and boxes: "Oh, look at this! This book is still here." For me It was a wonderful book. I enjoyed it. Me and my friends talked about it. We had know concept of racism, we never knew that John R. Tunis was a racist. He was one of the people who wrote articles against allowing Jackie Robinson to play baseball. You know, he's one of the people doing his column denouncing allowing black people to play in the white league. We had no idea of that, we never knew. I learned that much later learning about history and baseball. John R. Tunis was a racist, but we would not know that. I didn't notice that nobody on that team, his fictional team, was black. Never noticed that, and a lot of things like that happened as we were coming up. It went right over our head (laughs) you know. So it never hurt our feelings, broke our heart; just went right over our head. As we became adults, and then you have to deal more so with the realities in the community. But even then, it was never hard living in Crown Heights. You know, it was not hostile or, it was never hard. It is -- Crown Heights could be the best hope for the future, if it

could be turned into a community. The infrastructure is there. You don't have to come in and rebuild everything, But anyway, that's it.

OKECHUKWU: Thank you. Thank you so much for doing this a second time. Unfortunately, there's another one of these you've got to fill out. (laughter) You all done?

LAW: Yeah.