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   - Johnson, Sophie, Oral history interview conducted by Amaka Okechukwu, June 1, 2017, Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.15; Brooklyn Historical Society.
OKECHUKWU: OK so, this is Amaka Okechukwu, interviewing Mrs. Sophie Johnson at her home on Washington Avenue. This is for the Voices of Crown Heights project. And it is June 1st, 2017. So to begin, can you please state your name and your birthdate, and where you’re from?

JOHNSON: Of course. Sophie Williams-Johnson, and I’m here at 1035 Washington Avenue, it’s my permanent address at present. And I’m from Baltimore, Maryland. So, I’m a migrant. [laughter]

OKECHUKWU: Can you say your birthdate?

JOHNSON: My birthdate is [date redacted for privacy], 1935.

OKECHUKWU: So start off, can you tell me about growing up in Baltimore? Any memories that you have?

JOHNSON: Oh yes, yes. I’m writing a book about that, it’s almost finished. But I call it "A Great Harvest," something like that. I have to bring it out again to see what it is. But I wrote about it because Baltimore, you know, was a place where many artists got their start. You know, the Ink Spots, the dancing -- different dancing brothers, a whole lot of -- Nat King Cole was a part of there. Billie Holiday, Billie Holiday used to play with my cousin when she was a little girl in East Baltimore. So many famous people came from there. And so, I started putting that also, as I learned about them, I put that in the book as well. And my mother had a very unusual situation, she was the youngest of 13 children, and she was the last of them. There were two marriages by the, her father, and there were five older brothers, I guess one sister, she passed too. Five older ones, and my mother was the youngest of the 13. And the following eight were the younger ones from the second wife. So, they were born down on a farm in Annapolis, Maryland,
and during that time when she was born, slavery was just over, and their -- and her mother and father were free. In fact, I believe they were the children -- is he on my sofa? Oh, stop it. Mm-hmm. Oh, he has a string to play with, something, that's all it is, he wants to play with the string. And the father and the mother, her mother and father were free. And they were the only ones in the family that could read. Well at that time, you know, her mother was living, but she passed after my mother was born. So that was the end of the family net, so to speak. And from there, they went their various ways. Since there were older ones, some were grown, you know, and out in life. The five elder ones, but there were those eight younger ones, and they were shifted to different relatives and different people in different states. And none of them knew about the old folks who lived back in Annapolis, Maryland. They had no knowledge of them. My mother and us—there were three of us, my sister, my brother, and myself—we were the only ones that knew about the older members of the family, and we lived with them. So -- we knew them intimately. So, it’s so interesting to me, even now, when I go to visit the different ones in Philadelphia and Washington, and in— they have been in—Staten Island and New York, and they know nothing about these people. [laughter] Because they were raised as another family, you know? That they first went to an orphanage, and then they were taken from the orphanage by different people, so they were all raised by different folks, and all that kind of thing. But my mother was very fortunate, having been in Baltimore, and had stayed in -- she’s the only one, a cousin took her, and let her stay in Baltimore where she was. And then, I’m named for her. Sophie Siddings, so I have her name. And the oldest brother, Harry, he was -- he did something very smart. He took my mother to meet all her other sisters and brothers. He would take her, you know, to different states. And I think that’s the most wonderful thing that he could have done. Because she was the only one then who knew everybody. And I’m -- we’re the only three who knew everybody. [laughter] It’s very interesting. Because even now, it’s an oddity. I have great, great, great cousins, and they know nothing about me and nobody else. You know? And they see me, and they think I’m a piece of history, “You knew them? You’re that old?” [laughter] It’s
three generations of them in Long Island, and I say, "Yes, yes," I said, "Your grandmother—" You know, their great-grandmother was my mother’s sister. And they say, "You’re still living?" I said, "Yes, yes." They don’t understand that my mother was one years old, and the oldest of the others were like 17, 18, 19, and 20 years old. There’s that much difference between their ages. Then there were the older brothers, who were well in their, your upper twenties, whatever. So, it was a range of ages, and it’s just remarkable, you know, they’re all related, all related. So anyhow, Mother kept a big red pocketbook with pictures of the different ones and whatnot in it. And when the weather was too bad and we couldn’t go out to play, because in those days you played every day outside, you know, we didn’t know what it was to sit in the house all the time. And she would bring the pocketbook down, she’d go up on a little ladder, because she was a shorty, and on top of this big red wardrobe that she had with all the clothes in there, she’d get this big satchel down, and that’s where I get it from. I keep everything in satchels and bags. [laughter] And she brought it down, and she showed me these wonderful pictures. And she said, that’s this one and, you know, there’s that one and the other one. And one was a buffalo soldier, she said Johnny, that was her brother. Johnny was a buffalo soldier, and I had the picture of him in all his regalia; his riding boots, and his, you know what they had, they had to hit the horses with, I forget what you call it. There’s something [unintelligible] stick is that. I might have this picture still in here. But in any case, I shouldn’t stop, just keep talking, because you can look later at the pictures if you want.

OKECHUKWU: Sure.

JOHNSON: Or I can do it that way, or?

OKECHUKWU: Yeah, let’s --

JOHNSON: That way I don’t have to get them out, because I’d be forever talking. [laughter]

OKECHUKWU: So, who was in your household? Because you said you were, you were raised with, sort of, family.

JOHNSON: Well what happened is, early on, when my mother married, she married Maurice Williams, and his father had come from one of the places that’s on fire now in
the Middle East, and let me get it straight. I always call it “Tenua,” it’s not Tenua, it’s in the Middle East, one of the countries— it’ll come back to me— in the Middle East. And also, his father was partly in the place that another Mideastern place. So when he came, he was a sailor. A merchant sailor. And the cousin who showed me his pictures and told me about him, she was raised by him and his wife. Because her mother and father passed away. People died young, you know, and they’re still doing it, you know? But not as much as then. But she, the mother had been a slave. So, when he came over to this country, he did marry a Black woman. And she had been a slave, and I remember her telling me, she says, her feet were so bad, he said all her life, I had to buy her special shoes. And the cousin who was speaking to me, Cousin Delores, I’m named for her too, Sophie Delores. That’s my true name, Sophie Delores Williams. And now I’m Johnson, so I add that on. And she said on her back, it was -- she was laden with the marks, where they had beat her on her back, and she says she never forgot them. She says, "When I got old enough to work for White people," she said, "I never forgot it." She was very tough on it. But she was very gifted, so they didn’t usually fire her. You know, she could -- she was a great cook. Very decorative person. So, you know, she collected antiques in her house, and when I went to her home, it was full of— you got to the doorway, and it was— antiques; all of the walls, the little tables of stuff. And you just edge your way around to get to a place to sit down in the living room, and there’s antiques everywhere. You go back to the dining room, more on pedestals, and all over. And then, the place that was really not as cluttered was her kitchen. Bright paint in the kitchen and all, and she made everything; her tea towels, she made her curtains. And then, when I was a little girl, I was visiting her, and each summer, she’d take us for a little time. I’d spend a week or two with her sister, spend her time, you know, I don’t know if she had brother come. I can’t remember. But anyway, she had a garden. That was my delight. Because when you live in an apartment, you usually didn’t have a garden. You might look down at some green stuff somewhere. [laughter] But you’re always looking at — but here I could walk into it, and it was beautiful. You know, of course she was very decorative with that, and all kinds of plants and flowers
there. And I would sit with my little pen and pencils and things, and draw and write. And then I’d take the beads and other things off the leaves, you know, I’d have a -- and make jewelry and do -- I’d take my putty, you know how you have the putty thing, and I’d make jewelry and put, you know, and whatnot, and decorate it. And then to sleep; take me upstairs to sleep in this room, and it -- in front of the bed, a large chest. And when I looked in it, it was nothing but dolls. Full of dolls from every country. And you can imagine I was delighted. Here’s the Indian doll, Eskimo doll, and all of them in different costumes and whatnot. Oh, I thought I was in heaven. [laughter] I went to her house. And then, when it was time for evening or whatever, she’d take me to the kitchen, she made all the cakes and pies, and what have you. Her husband had a drugstore. And in our community in Baltimore, it’s very self-sufficient. We couldn’t get into the areas where Whites were, they didn’t want you -- well we didn’t even think about going there. We had our own community, and we had excellent resources in the community; he was a pharmacist, we had doctors, our pastors, our churches, everything, you know? So, we didn’t feel deprived by being in a segregated community, because the people that we were living with were so well educated, so excellent at -- we had, during that time, the University of Maryland was not available to Black instructors. Neither was the people at the conservatory; you couldn’t teach there, whatever. We couldn’t even go there and take lessons, you know, it was that kind of life. But we had our own things. And our teachers were so advanced that they, when finally segregation was over, they could go to any college and be there. And some, like my French teacher, she studied in France, she spoke such good French that -- and my -- Oh, my biology teacher, let me tell you about him. He was sensational. He took trips to Alaska. [phone rings] And brought back his artifacts and whatnot. [Interview interrupted.] All right, I should let this go. It should -- well I have this off, so it won’t show up. I just want to see if it’s a relative.

OKECHUKWU: You have a mic on. Wait a minute.

JOHNSON: Ooh, can’t go. I could take it?

OKECHUKWU: Yeah, you got it.
JOHNSON: I got it. I just want to be sure it’s not a relative calling me. All right, I’ll be right back. Uh-oh, they stopped. All right, I’ll see what it is later-- [Interview interrupted.]

My biology teacher, what was he teaching me? Chemistry, he taught all those things, all those subjects. So he went to Alaska, and would bring back the artifacts. And he told us what Eskimos really called themselves, you know, not what White people called them, but what they called themselves. And he made five or six trips. And he was with the first man who put the flag at the North Pole. I can’t even -- see, names escape me from time to time. That’s why I need my notes. It escaped me, who put that flag up. He says, "It was a Black man who was the first one who went to the top of the North Pole, not a White man. He had the flag, and he put the flag up there. And so, he was first." And he says, "He was, he was on the next mission with him." Henson. His name was Henson. Uh-huh. And so, he followed very closely his life and whatnot, and kept a good record. Because he also was a correspondent for the "Afro-American Press." So, the "Afro-American Press" was out of sight in terms of filling the -- our whole community on every -- world events and everything. So, he was one of the correspondents. So when he traveled, he had his signature and whatnot, as correspondent. And so, when he would go places they’d say, "I’ve never seen a Black correspondent before." You know, a Black man’s a correspondent, newspaper correspondent? He was. And so, he traveled throughout his life, back and forth from Alaska to Baltimore. And they have, he made his home a little museum, yeah, so he did that in his latter years. Because I contacted the Enoch Pratt Library to detect, see what materials were there on him. And I think they did send me some things. So, I don’t have them in this particular book, but I do have them, and I needed them for the book, you know, for the book itself. But he was one of my favorite people in life, and I had his death, about his funeral and all, he lived into his eighties, well up into them. Maybe he was 90 or so; long living. But an excellent teacher. But I remember, I’ll tell you something funny now, one project we had to do, of course, is you must go home and create a project, and you can you know, design it yourself and whatever. And I said, "I have -- what in the world can I do?" I said, since I was a musician, I said, "I'll get some
water pipes. And I’ll put them in a tray, and I’ll try to put them according to their pitch, so, like I have a scale.” [laughter] And that’s all I could do, and I took it in. He just said— he just accepted it. But I felt bad, because I knew I had some genius kids in the class, and most of the boys who were into the chemistry and whatnot, and they were designing stuff and whatnot. And I had my little water bottles; my little p—, my little test tubes and water bottles. And I could gong, gong, gong, gong and play [unintelligible]. [laughter] But I felt good having done something, you know? But before that great teacher, I wanted to do more than that, but he didn’t insist on it, he didn’t say anything. Bless his heart. But he told us about his history and all, and that impressed me for the rest of my life. But I’m [unintelligible], so what -- come on, come on over here.

OKECHUKWU: As a musician, was that cultivated from a young age?

JOHNSON: Yes. Oh yes.

OKECHUKWU: Can you speak a little bit about that?

JOHNSON: Yes. I, at the age of 10, I started studying music. We had a professional teacher in the community, her father had been a very fine musician, orchestral leader, and what have you. And come on, ooh, come on. (whistles) No, he thinks he can get into everything. If you lie still, you wouldn’t get in trouble. Now be close, be still. Stay still.

OKECHUKWU: If he stays still [inaudible].

JOHNSON: He’s so curious. He can’t help it. He’s all right, he’ll stay still for a while. If he doesn’t, we’ll shoo him away.

OKECHUKWU: OK. But as you were saying?

JOHNSON: Mm-hmm. And she had started a studio, and of course, somebody told my mother about it and all. And I started studying with her. Which was a wonderful thing. In fact, all three of us started -- my sister as well, my mother sent, also. All; if she sent one, she sent all. The only one that kept walking to the music lessons was me. [laughter] Sister was more interested in dance, and she was off to do her thing. And brother was more interested in gymnastics and basketball, and whatnot. So, he went
his way. Then at school, at church, the sister of Cab Calloway was a member of our church, at Sharp Street Methodist Church, one of the old pioneer churches in Baltimore. And she had vivid red hair, I'll never forget it, with freckles. I had never seen anybody with red freckles and all that, she did. And she was very unique. But she announced one Sunday that she was going to start classes teaching any children who wanted to learn the violin. And they could start with her. And so, naturally mother had us marching again, all three of us. [laughter]

OKECHUKWU: How old were you?

JOHNSON: I was about eight. Maybe nine. So, I went onto the classes, and I went with my case, you know, and whatnot. And I'm the only one that kept walking with a case. [laughter] Sister soon put that down. I don't even think she started. And brother fooled with it for a little while, and he was -- I didn't have any company to go, so it was me. So, I was the one that just was interested in music from right on, you know? Straight on. We lived on a block where there were some fabulous musicians. Right up the street from us, you know, one of the old first shows, Broadway shows, what was it? It'll come to me, "Blackbirds." The guy who wrote it was living right up the street from us. And the person that did the choreography was in the same area, they were right there, above us. And as a result, our church had the benefit of a lot of the wonderful musicians who otherwise were on Broadway. They were on their way to Broadway with their show, black— What was it? "Black Bells," black something, I can't remember what it is. Another one who was in that, too, was the woman who played Mama on television for a long, long time, with one of our black shows, Rosellen [unintelligible]. She danced in the Blackbird, she debuted in it. I saw her picture and all. Because she became very [unintelligible] to my family, I'll tell you about that later here in New York. So in any case, they started that, and then there was a guy who had a boys' choir, a large boys' choir, Wilson his name was. And Robert Wilson was one of the singers on that choir. And they came to get my brother, and for him to join. And mother didn't want it because of other reasons [laughter], for her, to join a boys' group. And brother didn't want it either, because he said, "I can't sing." [laughter] So that didn't go any
farther than there. But those were some of the influences that I had in my life. And on top of that, right across the street from us, was a radio station. WCAO. And of course, we had never been in it, we just see it sitting up on the hill, there it is. But they moved, and from time to time they would put their music in the trashcan, you know, like the orchestral parts that they didn’t use? Once they used them, I went over there and pulled music up and took it home, it was -- of course the violin parts are very high, they always be serenading up above everything else. And they were hard to read, I said, "I don’t even have the keys on the piano to play these. I don’t think." [laughter] But I would look at the music and just study it, you know? I thought it’s so wonderful. And then, they moved. So, the caretaker who was taking care of the, of that mansion there, he had a daughter. And she became my best friend. And she sang. So when the place was closed down, you know, for activity, we could go over there and go to the piano, I could go to the piano, because I had no piano at home. And I could play the piano there, and she would sing. So that was very good. So some of the teachers there at— What it is, Black teachers got together, and they formed a group to have a music school for us, since we couldn’t go to the Peabody Institute. So, and later on, some of the teachers from Peabody joined them, so they could expand. But I was one of the first students there, during that time, and I had a wonderful piano instructor, Mr. Herman Schwartz. Will never forget his name, because on his arm was tattooed his numbers. He had been in the Nazi camp, concentration camp. And he showed me, you know, his name’s here. And he said, and they tried to break his -- they’d break his fingers, so he wouldn’t ever play the -- one of the hands got that kind of treatment. And he could still play, but he says, "I could not play with the fluency that," you know, "I used to." Because of that, he said, "But you can do it.” And he got me ready; he was getting me ready for concert work, he really, really did. And I had a wonderful experience with him. And that’s when I met another great musician, who was just a little older than myself, four or five years older than myself. And he had his own choir, about, it got, it grew to about 30 or 35 voices. But it started, of course, with less. And it grew, and this was a gentleman I met as a young girl, and he became my husband in time. And we
formed a team. At that time, he came to hire me to play for his choir. He says, he was so formal, he said, "I will come and ask your mother’s permission if you can come and play," and he did. He came, sat down and talked to my mother. I was so impressed. And my mother said yes, and so I went to practice, you know, with them. And I played for them until we graduated from high school. So because of our situation, we were on television, we were on -- I remember my first television appearance was with the choir. And I played solos. Never forget it.

OKECHUKWU: What was the name of the choir?

JOHNSON: It was the Baltimore Community Choir. And we were all teenagers. We were all kids. There wasn’t any grownups in this. Just him, and he organized it, and taught it. And through him, I learned how to accompany, because he took special care, because he was a very good pianist himself. And he took very good care to make sure I played things properly, you know, as the accompanist. So, he was my first teacher of, to accompany in music. And long -- and we went from school to school, you know, to give concerts and whatnot. And we had our own Black MC on television. His sons, we were all in school together, you know? So, he had us to come onto his radio show, so we were -- not radio, he was on television by then. Radio at first, then television, so my first television appearances and all of that. You know, we didn’t have a television in our house, but at least I’d know I was on there. Somebody saw it. But anyway, those were my younger days, in school; full of music. I was part of the band, we had a band. And I couldn’t -- didn’t want to play any of the k— horn instruments or whatever, because I played piano. The band instructor, who came from Oklahoma, he was used to the large, large bands, and these large, elaborate kinds of setups, and he taught us the same way. So six o’clock in the morning, we had to be there to -- for the band practices. And so, we’d know our setups, you know, for -- and then be in the marching band, when they had the football games, oh, all the stuff. I have my hat yet, from that event, I kept the hat. [laughter] That says "band." Being a band member, I was so proud of it. And so, I -- well, what did I do? I couldn’t take a piano around, so he says, you can play the glockenspiels when we’re marching. And then after glockenspiels, unknown,
it was the cymbals, first it was the cymbals. I hated that. They were so loud, and I was very shy, you know? And that brought too much attention to me. I didn’t like it at all. But I did the best I could with it. And then— he says well, he goes— give me a treat, he says, "I’m getting a work that’s for piano and band. So, you can play the piano parts."

So, he gave me something that I could do, and I was very happy for that. So that happened before I graduated high school. And I played with the band, and soloed with them, and so I had some very nice experiences, but all within a Black community. All—and I didn’t tell you about my cousin, the one who told me about my grandfather, you know, and his background. She married a gentleman who was working for a pharmacist. This is how it happened. And he did such fine, good work, and so the pharmacist says, helped him to go to school. He went to Howard University, and graduated, you know as a, as a licensed pharmacist. So when the gentleman died, he took over, he gave — left him everything. The business, the house, the whatnot. So my cousin was with him, and she made all the cakes for the restaurant. And on Sundays, we’d go after church and go down to that restaurant, and have these delicious desserts and all, like I’ll never forget it, I remember how they tasted too. [laughter] So, that was a little fine part of life that we had, you know. And let me see. And primarily that was it. There was just so many churches too that we -- I was playing at first for a storefront church, that was my first assignment, you know, I found. And, because I started at the age of 10. So by 12, I was playing for the auditoria, the little concert at school, you know. I could play, you know, scores for their musicals. I’ll never forget it, the first one was "HMS Pinafore." You know? The English thing. I loved it. That’s the first time I’d heard it, too. But I loved it. And then, from there, played for a little storefront church, piano for a while. And then I went to the Baptist church, and right away they start singing things I didn’t know. You know? And I -- no music for it, and I’m just sitting there wondering "Oh, how can I follow this?" And, "Oh," I said, "I don’t think I can stay here." [laughter] I didn’t stay too long, I decided that I, I should go. And I went to another, a— it wasn’t a storefront, but— it’s a home church. So, I played -- now this church, Mama went with me to this one every Sunday, because after church they
served dinner. [laughter] So, Mama was right with -- and they always had chicken dinners; fried chicken dinners with biscuits and the whole thing. So Mama and I had a treat on Sunday, and I stayed with them for a good little while. And as I got older, of course, my husband and I, we went away to school together. And then, over time, it was unfortunately that my mother had to move to Philadelphia, because one of her sisters became ill. And asked if Mother would come and help her. Now my mother was in her sixties then. And my sister didn't want her to go at all. She says, "I'm going to keep the home here, maintain this apartment, and your brother's house." Because I was, we were living in brother's home, her -- my mother's brother's home. And she said, "I'm going to maintain it for you," because she felt like Mama would have to come back. And I went on with her, because I couldn't see my mother to go away by herself. And I went there and stayed with her for a while, until Mother became ill herself. This is what happened eventually, and she had to come back to Baltimore. Yeah, so she got back to -- so there were interruptions in the flow of things that I would have liked to have done. I had scholarships to Howard University, to Fisk University. If I wanted to go, you know, whatever, and I knew I didn't have the background behind me to help me stay there. At least I thought I didn't. I really did, but I didn't know that. [laughter] Because my cousins, the Washington cousins, were very prominent in education, and in medicine. The oldest brother had his own practice in New York by this time, private practice, and he worked with all the name people. He knew Count Basie, he was a nurse for his -- Well, he was a doctor for his wife when she broke her neck or something, and he was there to help that. And he knew Cab Calloway, he knew all the show business people. He was a show business person's doctor in New York. And the one in Washington, one of the brothers, related to him, was also head of the— It was in the pharmacol— pharmacological unit at Howard University. And what was the area? Physiology, physiology is more his thing. Because he developed that whole department himself. When he came, he came the year I was born, 1935. See how much older these other people were? And how family— his mother was my mother's mother, sister, the mothers were sisters. My mother and his mother were sisters. But they were
so far distant in age, she was the eldest of the family, my mother was the youngest. It was a contrast. And he was already head of the division of physiology at Howard University in 1935, when I was born. So, what a difference. And so, anyhow, my mother used to take us to visit, like her father did her, her brother rather did her, to meet the others so we would know them. And he would always stand us up and quiz us down, "How are you doing in school? What are your favorite subjects? Are you doing your homework?" and he was just like a scholar would be with us. And we were scared to death. [laughter] Because we weren't used to it. And he was questioning us down, "Now what do you want to do with your life? What do you intend to do?" You know, he’s asking us basic questions that we should have been thinking about. You know, even when we were young children, I know I must have been no more than about eight or so, nine, when I was going there to see him. And that was Brother Roscoe McKinney, Dr. Roscoe McKinney. He became the dean of the medical department in Howard University. And he, they didn't have live specimens for the students to work on. And he’s the one that went around to different hospitals and got live specimens for them, and he got cadavers. So they could actually see how the body was really formed and whatever. He set it up. And then he was there for some 30 years or more, then he was -- Then he became emeritus and he was traveling to other countries teaching. And when I got here to New York, because we eventually came to New York with one of the pastors from Baltimore, we traveled up with him, he wanted to take us, and we came up, and we were working with his church. And it was James Methodist Church, that’s in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Which is a very prominent church now, very much so. And he, let’s see, where, when did I leave off? I’m trying to see how I jumped from Dr. Roscoe to James Methodist Church. Let me just see.

OKECHUKWU: Traveling.

JOHNSON: Yeah, I was traveling, we did travel to here— oh, oh— and so did my cousin. As I told you, he went across the seas. And this is what happened. I had to jump to New York because after I got to New York, I would go to different stores and pick up books. So, I got these red books, I have some of them still. You know, so when my son have all
of the World Books, and I got them from somewhere, I don't know where. And when I was going through one, as I skimmed, I said, "Let me just check "Medicine" to see what’s going on." And I look at this picture, I said, "This person looks familiar," and it was my cousin.

OKECHUKWU: Wow.

JOHNSON: He was bent over a mic-- a young man had a microscope, and he was bent behind him, looking down at it, you know, like, at whatever specimen he had. And he was teaching over there. He would go off on his sabbaticals and teach. He would not stop working. So, even after he had reached the point where he would ordinarily have retired from his medical duties, he was still working. So they said he’s an emeritus, and he never stopped working for Howard University until, to his, to his dying time, his death time. He went to other countries, and I opened up a book of knowledge, and there he was. It was the most impressive thing. Just so, it was touching and impressive. And I had a cousin, up in the Bronx; she’s one of the older members of the family, related to them, those five that were first born. The, most of them looked like they were White; they were blue eyed, very fair people. That was the first group. [laughter] The second; it was like you and me. You know? They had a little more of the African American heritage in us. Because my grandfather got off that boat as a merchant seaman, and he set up business down in Baltimore. He had a boarding house. And he had -- he kept horses, and he would rent them out. So people wanted carriages, you know, to sell things on the street, he could rent them out. And then he provided meals for them, and a place they could sleep. He would go to the embassy and get names of the ones who were coming off the ship and then, you know, he could contact them. And that is how he set himself up in business. So, let me see now what I have -- let me connect that to the other thing. So that was how we got all mixed in [unintelligible] we look different. You look like my cousins now. You and my daughter, that’s my daughter over there at the bottom. And not my daughter, that’s my sister, the small picture is my sister, my older sister. And my daughter’s on the left, my brother’s on the right, and my son is in the middle, oh that middle picture, those three
musicians, he’s on the right, on the end. Yeah, so I got my whole family, and my two favorite heroes up there. [laughter]

OKECHUKWU: I see!

JOHNSON: Yes, I got them all there in a bunch.

OKECHUKWU: So why did you come to New York? What motivated you to move to—?

JOHNSON: Oh, well that’s what I wanted to talk about, from Baltimore, one of the ministers there -- Well, they took a great interest in my husband, because he was ministerial material, and he’d studied in the AME Church, and he was a licensed pastor in the AME Church. But that didn’t, you know, limit him. And I’m leaving out a big slice of things I need to tell you. And basically, at my church, Sharp Street, was where the NAACP held its monthly meetings for Baltimore.

OKECHUKWU: [inaudible]

JOHNSON: Oh, I have to leave this alone. Held monthly meetings for the NAACP. And the woman who was in charge of it was Lillian Jackson. You’re going to get to know that name eventually, I’m going to see that you do. And she ran it, she had had a stroke, and it had twisted her mouth to one side, because she had it on one side of her body. And whenever she took a picture, she had her good side, you know? Good face. She didn’t stop for anything. And her husband was very fair, and everybody thought he was a White man. And I, since I had some of my own family look like that, I understood it, you know? But a lot of people didn’t understand, but he was very mild and meek, very nice gentleman. And he just helped her do whatever she wanted to do. And he made movies. So as she moved around, he would take the pictures, and you know, do that, and record her, and all of that. Excuse me. And in her time, she started with maybe 2 or 3,000 members in Baltimore for NAACP to 15,000 --

OKECHUKWU: Wow.

JOHNSON: -- for the whole state of Baltimore. She went out to the counties. Nobody had bothered doing that. And all the counties and whatnot. And she recruited. And so, Baltimore had the largest NAACP in the South. Anywhere! No, no agency had 15,000 members. Baltimore had it. So, she was— she wasn’t idle. So as a result, they had good
contacts. So any time entertainers came to Baltimore, we had a theater like the, like in Harlem. Harlem has its, now I can’t forget the name of that.

OKECHUKWU: Apollo?

JOHNSON: [laughter] The Apollo, my daughter worked there all these years, I better not forget. But my mind slips on names, and then it comes, yeah so, the Apollo. We had the Royal Theatre in Baltimore. And all the entertainers came, every one of them. And during that time we were growing up, my mother would always have tickets, because she -- well, I have to say, she and Daddy had parted, they had their own home and everything, everything was going beautiful, and I was the baby. I was, I was about six months old when she left him, and with all of us. And she came to New York. [laughter] With her brother, and stayed. And she didn’t stay too long. Because the street life of New York was too much, she says, for her young, youngest son. He was just in knee pants, and he was running behind older boys; they were putting him on the back of wagons, or on trolleys, and he was riding down the street, and she was about to have a fit. [laughter] So, she says Baltimore’s better to raise children. So, she didn’t stay too long. She went back to Baltimore, to the family household place. You know, where family was, and raised us in Baltimore from there on in. Our father came to visit, and he liked outside life. He went to the post office and worked in the post office, but he didn’t stay. He was in World War I, too. And he lost a finger in World War I, so he was a part of, every age we’ve had members in world wars. From the buffalo soldiers on up. In the, in the wars, and he was in the service. So when he came out, it was a lot, a lot of years, but we were in middle school, in elementary school, he started visiting us. So, we did get to know him. And he was a very likeable gentleman. And mother was -- he never stayed, he just had to come and visit, and then out the door [laughter] he went. And he would bring us fruits and vegetables, because he was selling, you know, selling that. He liked to be, he called himself a, what’d he call them? Like a huckster, he would have his vegetables, and he had his -- he brought his cart, his wagon, and his horses, horse and cart, and we were looking out the window, and he would stop in front of our door, and then we knew Daddy was there. And he took my brother and sister in
the cart, and he said—so I was too young, he wouldn't take me. I think he was afraid I'd fall out of the wagon. He said, "She's too young, Amelia." So he took them, and he took them to the country. And he would always do—and they would—he would take them to a place where there were springs, and they could see real water coming up from the ground, and then when I got older, he took me too. I got a chance to ride, and get the water, and he had some for Mama, and we took it home. He wanted to show us a side of himself. You know? And what he, what kind of life he really loved and knew. So anyhow, so we had—and then he'd bring us things. But he never stayed, you know, and so it was—so that's the way that went. Out the window, so to speak. But I came to New York and—both of us, Shellman and I, after we were finished. We had finished, you know, school, local schools, and we were working at James Church, James Methodist First Church. And he was the assistant, he was a youth minister and the choir director, and I was the organist. And we brought another friend too, who was a great singer, and she was the secretary of the church. So, we all three had vacated Baltimore. [laughter] And for a while. And we had a lot of experiences with churches from there until now. And I think the most I've stayed is, I stayed with the Episcopal Church, Shellman and I, for seven years. Because my son was an altar boy there. And then, Shellman got a little bored, he went onto another church, and I went off too, and, with a Catholic church, and then that church disappeared, and it doesn't even exist now anymore. It's in Bushwick area, and it was a beautiful, well designed Catholic church with the large pillars of white marble, and altar's—just a gorgeous place. Just like the church I had served in Baltimore, I served a Catholic church there, too. And today now, it doesn't exist. There's nothing there that says a church was even there.

OKECHUKWU: Wow.

JOHNSON: Unreal, but you know, things do disappear over time. Same thing happened in Baltimore. When, the time we were here in New York, and Martin Luther King was killed, the president was killed, so we experienced all of the mob stuff that went on in the community. The chaos; they tore up Bushwick’s, was it Bushwick Avenue? Tore it up. And it was from here to there, it was just nothing. Just desecrated.
OKECHUKWU: Were you living in Bedford-Stuyvesant at the time? Or where were you living?

JOHNSON: At first, yeah, we came on first to, right in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Yes. It was the historic, the historic district, it’s still called that, where Boys and Girls High School is, you know where that is? We lived right across the street from there. Beautiful homes, they’re still beautiful. Yes, and in fact we were living in the parsonage of the church. That’s why we were there, you know? So, we stayed there until that pastor got ready to -- his father passed and he was a pastor and had a wonderful pastorate, so he had to go, he was going back; he’d be senior minister there. So he left, and his wife didn’t come anymore either. So, we were stuck. And what happened is, the church didn’t know what to do with us, because we were there with him, and he was gone. They stopped putting heat in the parsonage, they weren’t going to heat the parsonage for us. We were there with blankets and pillows and covering up my little baby girl. And they just left us, so we both said we’re going to get, we going to get away from here. Yeah, stop dealing with it.

OKECHUKWU: [laughter] Sorry.

JOHNSON: We’re going to get some jobs, and we’re going to move out of here. So, we did. We both went to work in Manhattan. We went to Macy’s. We said, what’s the best place we can get a job real fast? We bet, we think. And we did. I worked for a buyer who was buying all the hats in New York City, and Staten Island, everywhere. She was controlling everything. What a nuisance she was. [laughter] But, she didn’t bother me, because I did my work and I kept my mouth shut. And Shellman was in the music department, and he was selling music and instruments downstairs. So, this is how we just went on. We went, and then I looked and I started walking in Bed-Stuy, right down the street from where we lived, the next block. There was a sign up. You know, apartment available. I went right on in, and then we just moved down the street. God was good to us. [laughter] He didn’t let us suffer. We went on, and we went on to work from there. And I stayed with a, we stayed, I stayed with a very fine church over in that area. A Lutheran church that—we served at one. That one’s disappeared now; they
called us up and let us know that church is no longer. They said, "Would you please come back?" I said, "No, I couldn’t do that now," because I had allegiances, you know, other places. They said, "You could come, Mrs. Johnson." The church doesn’t exist anymore. So, these are things you realize. Then when I went back home, I couldn’t get to my mother’s house, because she was on one side of that highway, and they cut the highway straight through the streets. And that cut the city in half, you know? So the Black community was really stretched out, you know? It was really sad. I said my mother’s on the other side of this street, and I’m on this side. [laughter] I have to take another route to get around that, you know? And that was to set up the harbor. You know? You know the, all the -- in upgrading that they were going to do to the city, and it’s beautiful down there now. Absolutely gorgeous. So that’s where we stayed, right at the Harbor Hotel. You know, last time I went. But we came up here to New York, we found it a rough place. Because there were no Black principals in the schools, so we started in education, dealing -- we joined District 17. Well, we came from there to, we moved from that area to Crown Heights. So we’ve been living here in Crown Heights, been around for a lot of years.

OKECHUKWU: Can you tell me about why you came to Crown Heights? Or what motivated you?

JOHNSON: Well, it was just a matter of getting a better place to live. That was it purely and simply. So, we moved a few times, just like young people have to sometimes, you know, as they’re finding their way. And we found a very nice place on Park Place, first we were there, that was one of the first places we moved to, where we had a whole two, two floors. We wanted space, because we started expanding our music studio, and we’d have room for that. And that was a wonderful time. We worked closely with the Brooklyn Arts and Cultural Society [sic].

OKECHUKWU: So was that in the ‘60s when you moved to Park Place, or the ‘70s?

JOHNSON: Yeah, somewhere around in the, the late ‘60s, it would have to be late ‘60s. It’s going towards ‘70s by then.

OKECHUKWU: Right. So, what were your impressions of the neighborhood at the time?
JOHNSON: Oh, we loved it. We loved it. We were now near a tree lined park, you know? And now they built the children’s museum there and all. That wasn’t there then. Because we -- I went to work for the first— as I told you, for the fir— the museum that they left behind. A small place, that’s on Bedford Avenue. You know where it is too, right? You know what’s there too, now? It’s a big eye and health center. And at first, I kept thinking about the address. "The address," I said, "there’s something so familiar to me about the address." I was going to the clinic. And then when I got to it, I said "Oh my God," I said, "this is where the museum used to be." And I walked in, and I saw how they had, you know, opened it up, it’s an open space, and it’s so interesting. And I had so many memories after I walked into there. Because I used to be with the New Muse Museum.

OKECHUKWU: Can you tell me about when you started to get involved with the New Muse? Like how did you get involved?

JOHNSON: Well, you know, through community efforts, I think what got me into it really was, like, BACA, and the association knew me. They knew we were working, and with our own group of, we had our own music arts settlement program. And we worked with different churches to house it. First Church of God and Christ, right on the corner of Park Place and whatever the other street is, and the Episcopal Church, which is down further on Utica Avenue, Utica. And they had a chapel, so we occupied the chapel. We were at the YMCA, [laughter] in Bed-Stuy. And the YMCA had a nice room, so on Saturdays we were there. So, you know, we moved around from time -- but we started in our own home. And we would start at two, we would have the -- giving private lessons to the young people in voice, and piano. My husband was an excellent singer, and he just taught voice, co-director, oh, he was a genius, genius! And so, and then in the summer, I helped him set up the school for the children, and they came during the day. So, we had them all day. And five days a week, they were with us. And then they didn’t stay there all day, because we had classes in the morning, and we had trips for them. You know, the same that they do in summer camps. So, we had music camp. And that was great. I don’t -- I remember walking across, we walked from one end of
Central Park to the other, we had seen, you know, one end of Prospect Park to the other. And when we went to New York and were there, it was wonderful. The Museum of Modern Art, all the different museums. Museum of Natural History, and what have you. We took them everywhere. They got a broad experience about art and culture, you know, with us. And I loved it. Because my two, my two children were in it too. [laughter] You know, which was so wonderful, you know, they were the beneficiary of all of this; all this stuff, exposure. And I think we just got known in the community. We were known. And I was asked to be a part of the new board that they were founding at New Muse. So, I was a board member for it at first. And I was sitting with the one who was our first representative, assembly— what is her name— Assemblywoman; her daughter is now a senator. Think of—

OKECHUKWU: Una Clark.

JOHNSON: Una Clark, yeah, she was a board member along with myself. That’s how I first knew Una. And she was, had been working with daycare centers at that time, all right, so we were part of that first board. I got to really know her and like her. She was very positive, but she was, she was a lot of fun. She’s a lot of life, I liked her. And so, we sat on that board with a lot of the others which you might know, if I can name them all. [laughter] You would know them probably. And some of them ran for public office, and some of them did not, you know, it was varied. So, I was there with that particular program, and I did enjoy that particular program. Oh my gosh.

OKECHUKWU: Can you tell me about what the different activities, like what was at the New Muse? If you were to go to the New Muse, what would you experience there?

JOHNSON: Oh, well you’d experience so much. We had music and cultural arts. There were two departments; I headed music arts, Reggie Workman, the musician, headed the music department. And we were just -- and then there was a planetarium. So we had science, too. So the gentleman, he was an older gentleman who knew science so well, he taught that program. We had a little area that was our zoo. And we kept little small animals there. And the time that we found two rabbits sitting in the street one night. [laughter] We got, I told my son, get a big box, we’re going to put them in, and
we took them to the museum. But we kept them overnight, and all the water they let out. You know? Overnight.

OKECHUKWU: Oh no.

JOHNSON: But I put plastic in all to try to hold it. Well they peed the box, [laughter] out of that box. So, I’d seen I couldn’t keep them. [Interview interrupted.] I’m not going to stay with these people, because these are mostly folks looking for something to sell me. And I don’t want to buy anything. I don’t think I need anything they have, no.

Yeah, so that’s what -- oh, that was your question, was, “How did I get there?” Those activities? That’s just a part of what I’m telling you, that I created; I was able to create programs. I had Kwanzaa; they’d never had Kwanzaa in the community, you know? So, now, so I had Kwanzaa. I had African American history programs. I was aligned with where we had black women artists. And they had some -- they would come and have meetings there. And then they had a lecture series, which was really, really nice. I was a part of that. We had poetry writing, poetry. And a very fine gentleman, he was on the radio for quite a while, I think he’s passed on now. But we had, he had a, such a nice workshop, and I joined that workshop, and I wrote along with them, and I was a part of the book he produced. And I only have one book left. [laughter] I can’t find that one. But somebody says when I get on the internet and have time, I can contact his wife, maybe she can send me one. But he, he antidoted my poems and whatnot, you know; gave me good suggestions about them. And we had a wonderful time. So, that’s just some of what we did. Black history and all; that was our ideal. And even, let me see, what else was special? It was a very busy time, that’s all I can say. And then, we got into the -- what happened? I was at, I was working at the Brooklyn Museum before I went -- no, New Muse first. And I had done such a good job in the voucher program, I made it the, the largest— what is it— financial group of all of the museums, you know, in here, in the --

OKECHUKWU: Can you speak about the voucher program?

JOHNSON: In the voucher program, this is the museum’s voucher program, and the BACA’s.
OKECHUKWU: Can you explain, like, what it was?
JOHNSON: OK.
OKECHUKWU: Or, because we were talking about it before [inaudible].
JOHNSON: All right. Well this is a program where the museum educators came together
and formed a collective, and they received money, you know, from the state, and they
could allow vouchers for community groups to obtain services from the various
museums, who were regulated in the program, who were part of it. And we were in the
program, as our little small museum, the New Muse, we were in it with Museum of
Natural History, Botanical Gardens, and everything. And from Queens Botanical
Gardens, upstate, what is— this one in the Bronx, right? That’s a great one up there,
you know, outside. So it was inside, outside; all the cultural groups were all in there
together. And I had become the highest owner, no, winner of participation, that means
money, for an institution. So, first the head of community service at the Brooklyn
Museum came to visit me, and she wanted to woo me away from the New Muse.
[laughter] I was wooable, it was all right with me. And what happened is also, BACA
here, became affiliated, and had a voucher program. It did some similar things that the
other one was doing. So the two were operating together, and so I went under
Brooklyn Museum, and I was there, I stayed 11 years. And I was a cultural coord—
working with her, Ildiko Heffernan was her name. And such a wonderful, wonderful
lady. And so we worked together very, very well. One of the things, then she allowed
me to have an assistant. I had a, I had a lot of work to do. I had a lot of money to
account for, but not -- and so she said, so, "Well, you can have an assistant." And one
young lady came in, she lived down the street from me. I was living down on Bergen
Street, and not far from, you know, this area, you know, of Bergen and Brooklyn
Avenue, it’s around that area. And she says, "I would like to be your assistant. I’m a
photographer." I said, "Great." So she came in, and she worked; helping me with the
books, she was very good with everything. And what happened is, she was so good, so
then— about four or five, she was with me about four or five years, and— she said, "I’m
applying for an apprenticeship with the community planning board of the City of New
York, for -- as an intern." I said, "Go girl. Go." And she said, "Oh I thought you're going to miss me, and I'm going to --" I said, "No. You take the opportunity and you go. And you do well." She went. She's retired now, after about 25 years of service. She's the Assistant to the Director of Planning for the City of New York. And her, she's always been, always in that building in Manhattan where they are, you know? And it's like the building that's a bridge, you know? I find it's a very unusual situation. But she's been with them, and she's about ready to retire now, getting ready to. And she's assistant; she's about running the place. I went with -- she has a home in Massachusetts, and she invited me up two summers ago. I went up and stayed with her and her partner for a while. It was wonderful, I had a wonderful time. She wanted me to be a part of the concert group they have up there. [laughter] I forget what the name of it is, it's an outside, you know, concerts that they have. And I had always heard about this, and I heard them on the radio. Now I could go and enjoy it and see it. She's so very nice. But she was my intern that went the farthest in that direction. And another one who was an intern with me, and I used to -- I had about 25 or 30 musicians and other cultural artists who I would send for -- I was getting work for everybody, everybody had a little piece of work. My daughter got her first assignment, she went to the TIP program up in the Bronx to teach dance. And then she taught at Magnolia Tree. She taught dance there for a while, too, periodically. And I had a lot of artists busy. And it was so nice. It was so nice. Because they were doing what they wanted to do, needed to do; earned money, and then they had that. Yeah, so that's what happened, so I was, I went on to Brooklyn Museum, and stayed for a good while. Ms. Heffernan, the director, she left me. So, I was the community coordinator for the, for that area.

OKECHUKWU: A couple questions. So in the, particularly I guess in the mid to late '70s and into the '80s, you're working with all these artists. This is also a time period in which there's lot of cuts, you know, to city services, and you know, New York's going through economic crisis. So, what was that like for the arts, being caught up in this sort of --?
JOHNSON: Well it was horrendous for the arts, of course. And so, it was very key what we were doing, you know, giving them, providing them with work. And then, it came a time when they cut us too, the state cut Museums Collaborative, that’s the state program, and I was really surprised that that did happen, but it did. So that -- then we just had the BACA program, and that too became cut off. And what happened is the museum did not keep— what can I say? Museum could’ve kept it going, but I saw what was happening in the museum itself. They were beginning to lean more and more toward the Western art, and what was happening with the current, you know, art situation. And they closed their art school. They had an art school there.

OKECHUKWU: The Brooklyn Museum?

JOHNSON: Mm-hmm. They had an art school, they closed the art school; that was the first thing we saw, to go. And then after that, they cut back on the community gallery, and we knew things were getting tight. And that’s the point when I decided to leave and go to the Black community, and work at Magnolia Tree Earth Center. That’s when I left, around that time, after I’d been there 11 years, they didn’t tell me to go, but I saw what was happening. They were eliminating so much emphasis in that direction, and putting their money elsewhere. And the money mostly was going toward the redecoration of the museum, they didn’t have those marble pillars before. You know what they did to the whole front. All that was part of the plan. Because when I first went there, they were talking about it, and getting ready for it, you know? Mm-hmm. So, it’s always a long time in the making. These things don’t come as a surprise; no really, not really a surprise. But, I was glad I was there for the time I was. I gave people opportunities to work, and it has been -- that was wonderful, wonderful for the community. And then I went on to Magnolia Tree for other kinds of involvement, and a very wonderful experience with them, as well.

OKECHUKWU: So you came to Magnolia Tree. Was Hattie Carthan still living, or was she -- ?

JOHNSON: She, well she had passed when I came on. Well, she actually, I knew her from the museum. Oh, hold on a minute. Magnolia Tree was one of the groups that we had
in the voucher program. So I was working with them, you know. [laughter] [Interview interrupted.] Just a minute. I’m wondering if that might be my great-granddaughter coming back. But nobody’s saying anything, so it might be somebody else. She would say by now. [inaudible] got it.

OKECHUKWU: [inaudible].

JOHNSON: Just a minute! I hope it’s the super, but I don’t know who that could be.

OKECHUKWU: Oh, sorry, this is just caught.

JOHNSON: Can I take that with me?

OKECHUKWU: Yeah, go ahead.

JOHNSON: All right. Remember my point [inaudible]. All right. You’re telling me—

OKECHUKWU: OK, we were talking about Magnolia Tree.

JOHNSON: Yeah, Magnolia Tree, in regards to Hattie Carthan. All right, now I knew of, I knew of her already in advance, because of the voucher program. She was a member of the Brooklyn voucher program. So she was with BACA. They could join both, you see, which is so wonderful, they had all these opportunities to do things. A lot of people did books. They did memoirs of their community and whatnot. A lot of collections of books, celebrating their own selves, you know? And that was wonderful, because we had a printing press, that museum has its own printing press in the basement. People wouldn’t know that, but they did. So, I could do all my projects.

OKECHUKWU: Brooklyn Museum?

JOHNSON: Mm-hmm. I could produce all my projects there. I could hire my layout artists, I would have to hire them, and I hired a Black woman; she was great. So, she lived on Eastern— right here on Eastern Parkway, but she had her studio in the city. But I would give her work, and she would probably do the layouts and put everything together for me. And then I would just take it downstairs and get it printed. And if it was too expensive, then we’d have to use an outside printer. You know, they had their limitations as to what they could do at certain times. But they had a wonderful plant there, so anything that was there was available to us through the voucher program. So, Hattie Carthan and the Magnolia Tree was a part of voucher program. So we could
fund some of their programs, and things that they did. And have—groups would buy from us to go through them, you know? They were -- they’d get vouchers, and then they’d go visit Magnolia Tree. So, I became a board member there. That was the first thing that I had done as -- and they invited me to come, along with Weeksville’s—Director of Weeksville, Joan Maynard. She was my good friend. And she invited me to be -- I was a part of that, too. [laughter] They were -- Weeksville was a part of the voucher program as well. Yes, uh-huh. And yeah, I have very fine memories of, of Joan; some of her last days too, you know, she spent with me. But when I went there as a voucher program, I became a board member, and each time, the directors left, you know, so being as a board member, I knew what was going on internally. And so finally, the last director left, and then I said, they asked if I would, you know, want the situation, the job. I said yes, I would take it on. But let me tell you some things that happened. First time we had a board meeting, they had a guard dog. And he was on the first floor. And he was snarling and growling down in the first floor, you know, they had him -- he couldn’t get out, you know, really. But he was -- he looked so vicious, and he was a German Shepherd. So we said, "Uh-oh, this is our first meeting. What are we going to do? We going to go in here, or not?" So finally, we contacted the young man who was acting as janitor, and he just assured us that he can’t get out, he’s all right; he’s secured down there. So, we could go in and have our meeting. One of our meetings we had, and we heard something; some noise, "pow!" And we all ducked down. And through the transit of the building, there was a bullet hole, through the transit of the top of the beautiful, spectacular doorways, you know, and the main doorway was very elaborate with the stained glass and all. Right through it. And I said, "Oh my Lord, what have I—what have I done? Where am I going with this?"

OKECHUKWU: So, was this at the -- where the Magnolia Tree is currently right now? It’s across from [inaudible]?

JOHNSON: They’ve always been there. They are three buildings made into one. I mean they interconnect, and that was all the doing of Pratt Institute. They’re the, they are the result of Pratt Institute’s magnificent design. So they are the fathers of the Magnolia
Center. So they helped Madam, you know, Mrs. Carthan; she didn’t have to pay for
those kind of services, you know? And in fact, even the mayor of New York, he, one
time Mrs. Carthan said, “If you’re going to take that tree down, I’m going to lay down
on this pavement,” and he said, “Oh, Mrs. Carthan, we can’t have you laying down on
the street. We’re going to help you.” [laughter] She used to tell him all those things.
And he was so nice, who was the mayor at that time? I can’t think of his name. Such a
good man, he was a very nice gentleman.

OKECHUKWU: Lindsay? No.

JOHNSON: He was good. He was good. It’s a good while back, you know? That was for
before other mayors. [laughter] That guy— I can— the other day I was trying to think
of the mayor’s name, and could not. Golden. Because his wife, his wife was in a
neighborhood organization too, and they were part of the voucher— she was part of the
voucher program.

OKECHUKWU: Oh, the Borough President, Howard Golden.

JOHNSON: Borough President, no, I can -- now I remember her name and his name,
because she was one of my clients too. She had a beautiful book, and she wanted a
gold cover on hers. It had to be, you know, gold plated. I said, "Oh my God." So I
called my design lady, she came down, and she took care of it. And she did it, she was
great. She was -- she’s a great -- she’s still running her business in Manhattan. But the
only woman I know who was doing such wonderful work, you know, in that area. And
so, Mrs. Gold, Howard Golden gave her a fit though. She said she had been a bit of a
nuisance that way, but not to leave it to my worker. A person I had hired to help her, as
she was ready to put the project down, not bother Mrs. Golden, I said, “Please do her
project. I said, "I think it’s very important if you do her project, she can get you so
much more work." And I had to try to talk to her about it, so she would calm down
about her. Because she was, you know, you know, very particular about everything,
every item. She did a beautiful, beautiful, gold plate front. So anyway, those are the
kind of projects we did for the neighbor-- these are the neighborhood groups. We did
Fort Greene, we did Brooklyn Heights; they all wanted brochures and books. So, you
know, that’s something we could do. Heights and Hill Community Center. I did their brochure, that was a good while back. So, those are the kind of projects that they enjoyed at the museum. Not always just a touring kind of thing. They wanted real heavy projects. Or 10 weeks of painting and drawing, or 10 weeks of dance, you know, so I had to go in all different directions. [laughter] All my people that worked at New Muse, they were working with Brooklyn Museum after I got there.

OKECHUKWU: Well what happened to the New Muse? I mean was it primarily funding, or what --

JOHNSON: Well, yeah, it was funding. Because at the time, it was a political thing too. Because the head of the group, he decided to run for public -- he was running for a public office, and he was -- he was like a backer of other people, you know, who were running. He wasn’t himself, he had others backing. And they weren’t able to get the funds. And I think it was at that time when so many were cut for money, and we knew that they were going to cut down on the New Muse too. And they did. They did. It was just for a time that they funded us. But I guess we could have gotten more from other sources if we’d got the right people together, but it’s hard, you know? It’s very hard for groups to keep functioning, and then still get those runs in. You know? [laughter] That’s a little bit of a trial. So, funds went down and all. So by that time, I was well, well about that time, I was going to the Brooklyn Museum, so I wasn’t in that particular, problem. I went back from time to time, you know, to be a part of things they were doing; you know, to support them. But eventually they ran out of funds. And that happened to so many groups, as you know, during that time. They weren’t the only ones by any means.

OKECHUKWU: So, I know that you’ve been involved in some of the community boards in the area. Can you tell me more about your work with community -- I guess both, is it just Community Board Eight? Or is it eight and nine?

JOHNSON: I was in, first I was in nine, and we were involved, I was involved with nine when I was with Magnolia Tree Earth Center. So I would go to the meetings, that was primarily to be a part of things, and we expanded out while we were there, too. We got
additional funding to become like an owner -- not an owner, but overseer of other programs in the community. And we voted for the Von King Park. They had a band, a marching band, which I'm sure they still have it. [Interview interrupted.]

And OK, you can come. Go ahead. It's his little place he sleeps. Come on. Go here. Come on, right here. Come up, baby. Right here. Come on, lay down. That's it. Lay there. There you go. That's where you sleep, sit down. But he's not going to be a nice kitty today. He wants to explore things. No. You can't be on people's papers, no. [laughter] What am I going to do with him? Come on. Come on. [whistles] Come on. He knows that whistle. Come on. Whistle means business, come on. Lay down. Come on, lay down. Go ahead. Lay down, or you're going to have to go -- there you go. Not on my papers either, no. He wants the little sheet, I took that away, I thought that would discourage him and make him not come down, but here he is. OK, lay on that then. And I don't want you to lay on that, either. OK, sit down. Sit down. Or else you have to go. All right.

So that's -- so what happened basically, you know, in terms of when they got the funding (There we go, he's going the way he should do.) for the, well for New Muse now, the funding, we covered that.

OKECHUKWU: Well we were talking about the community board.

JOHNSON: Oh, community board. OK. In nine, we were -- I was a part of the board at the time when the Jews were giving a raucous -- well that was, no, that was Bedford-Stuyvesant, nine. So, we adopted a community group beyond ourselves, and then we had funds for it. And that was for the band. I thought that would be a nice way for us -- and then we put murals up over there -- I guess the murals are still there inside -- had murals done, and we helped with the band, the after-school programs, and whatnot. So, we had a little money to give them to help with that. So we sort of expanded our sphere, so to speak. And you could adopt as many as you felt you could handle. So I figure, one, which is -- that was a big one. That was enough. [laughter] And that was enough. That was funded under the community, the youth board of the district. Yeah, and let me see. There was some empty -- now I had big dreams. There was an empty
building over the garden, of Magnolia Tree Earth Garden. And I had it named Hattie Carthan Memorial Garden. And we had, and there was an empty building facing it. Every day we were looking at an empty building over top of the garden. I could see terraces all along it, you know? And something really nice. And one of the members of our board, he was in real estate, and he knew that those buildings were, like, condemned buildings, and well, you could easily get property during that time.

OKECHUKWU: [inaudible]

JOHNSON: So, yeah. So that was one of the ideas I had for expanding, you know, to develop those apartment buildings, and then there would be garden apartments. I said, they're going to be garden apartments on Hattie Carthan's Way. So I had the kids petitioning to have that street named Hattie Carthan's Way, on Lafayette Avenue, from Lafayette, where the building was, all the way down to Bushwick, down to the Bushwick Avenue. I think it came into being, they told me it did, but they didn't invite me to come. [laughter] I said all right, it was done. Because I had the kids go out with their petitions to get the signatures. Then we sent them into the community board, after we had, you know, over 200 or so petitioned; names on the petitions. And it did go through. But I had already left the center by the time it did. That's all right. But I had more -- I had an eye for a lot of things, and that one was to get that property. I said, this is where Magnolia could become more self-sufficient. We already rented out the top floors. We had two or three agents who rented up there. And then we had the press. The press came in, down in the basement area. So you know, the place would be able to support itself. And the other thing I saw too is, we had a greenhouse in the back of us. Pratt had given us a greenhouse. And it -- of course it was not as sunny as it should be, it should be more open, you know, to be real, really sunny. But I said you know, we could start the greenhouse program, this was when we were thinking about the environment, and saving the environment and all that. I said, a lot of these churches and all could probably pay less money for their electricity and their heating if they had, getting the sun from the roof. So I was thinking about that being as a business, a nice business for Magnolia Tree to have interns in, and start it. Those are the things I had
in mind when I left. By that time, I was on my way, but those were in my head. Yeah, nobody started that up. No, nobody caught it. But I caught it right at a good point, when it was just starting. Yeah. In my mind, you know?

OKECHUKWU: Yeah. Can you tell me— I mean since our, the collection is focused on the neighborhood of Crown Heights— can you tell me any, I don’t know, places or locations that you may have memories about in the neighborhood of Crown Heights?

JOHNSON: Well, in Crown Heights, I moved to Crown Heights. So I moved to Bergen Street, between Nostrand and— what’s the other one— Brooklyn Avenue, around there? And since I got there, I started organizing. [laughter] The ruckus from the kids on that block were atrocious. They have wonderful architecture, all those, you ever watch those buildings? They’re beautiful, really, really. And different, and beautiful sections. There was a rental building there, so we had rentees, and most were homeowners. But across the street were five empty lots. And they were, they were deep, you know, dug out deep. And it was full of garbage and all that. So naturally, coming from where I had been and the experiences I’ve had with the environment, and with gardens, first thing I thought about is, we’ve got to put a garden in this place. We can do it. So I started, we met on one of the porches of one of the neighbors. And that was our first meeting. And we formed the, our block association, the Bergen Street Block Association, the 1100 Block Association. And we started from there. And it caught on, we outlined our objectives and our constitution, and our everything. And we went ahead to, oh, to get the buildings, to see what we could do with the buildings. So the city gave us permission to use the buildings, and what happened is, they sold it to us. Sold us the buildings. I paid a dollar for each of those buildings, $1. And I kept the receipts, because I said, “Nobody would ever believe this, so,” I said, “so I’ll always hold this receipt.” [laughter] And these money orders I brought to pay for the building. So, it was in the ownership of the Bergen Street Block Association. So, we had incorporated ourselves, and we were able to get the buildings, that was in the time when the city was getting rid of a lot of property in whatever way it could.

OKECHUKWU: Was this the ‘70s, the ‘80s?
JOHNSON: That was in the ‘80s, uh-huh, yeah. And that, they would get -- just anybody wanted to do a garden, they could do a garden during that time. So that’s what we did. We started with the garden. And it branched out to include everything, sanitation, safety, all the things that mattered to residents. And we had the house that was a rentee’s house, we had them organize within themselves. Because they had tenants, you know, so they could organize; that would be helpful to them. And the garden is still going. It’s more than 32 years old now. The person who was my secretary, was secretary of our group during that time, she took over for the beautification, and she did it for so many years. So, at the church where I am now, I started recognizing some of the community people who have been so wonderful during my time in community work and whatnot. And each year, I have my recitals, I honor a different person. So that person was one of my honorees, what is it, two years ago; Yvonne. Yvonne is -- was an honoree. Two other presidents before me passed away. It’s remarkable, two. They didn’t -- whatever. But two passed away. And I didn’t stop there. So while I was on Bergen Street, so I was there for a little while, and I saw that that was, it was going well, and we needed— We had to move, because our house was being sold, where we were staying.

OKECHUKWU: So were those buildings, before we move to the next point, were they— the ones that you got for a dollar— were they turned into like, co-op apartments, or—?

JOHNSON: No, those buildings, it was empty lots. That's what they sold me.

OKECHUKWU: Oh. And so that was [inaudible] space.

JOHNSON: There was nothing but garbage, yes.

OKECHUKWU: OK, OK.

JOHNSON: Garbage, so they had to clean that out for us, the city had to clean it out. And then I lined up immediately with the plant, a plant-a-tree system, you know, and they would come and bring the produce, whatever. And then we’d get the children on the block, as soon as they saw the grow truck come, they would start running to it. And in times before that, they were just, even when we had Halloween, and don’t even talk about Halloween, they were horrible. They put— what is it— eggs on everybody’s
windows, and, you know, garbage cans were messed up, and thrown over; I mean they just were terrible. So, I said this'll make nice kids out of them. [laughter] Because we have this project. So every time the grow truck would come, my son was with it too, he was an older teen, but he would come and they would help move the plants, move everything into the garden. And we had some nice things, one of the men was very able, and he built a platform. So we had a stage, you know, inside of it. We had so many areas. We had a willow tree that came over, it was so gorgeous. So later on, a storm took it out. You know? Like lightning must have hit that tree, and it went. It was so gorgeous. We had some beautiful things. And now it's beautiful. They redecorated and redid it. So, it's still going on. Yvonne is involved, but not as much as she was. And another gentleman has, you know, who was involved with the youth, he took it over. And he's had some operations, so he has some setbacks. But it's still being kept up, and it's beautiful, beautiful. I was over there earlier in this year. You know, after I had an operation, I went on over to see the garden, because I go every year. And I give them a donation. Let them know I'm still involved, you know, and caring about it. Yeah, so I had Yvonne, gave her some honors when she came. Yeah, and then I moved here. I've been here now for 31 years. So quite a long time. And the same thing happened again. Two presidents at the Park Views Citizens Association passed away. And I was vice president, again, so I had took on the duty of being president here. And that happened at Magnolia Tree. Well it didn't happen in the Brooklyn Museum, but it did happen over there. So I said, "This is not new to me." So I said, "I'll just pick up where they left off, and keep moving." So I handled it, up until five or six years ago. And then, five or six years ago, nobody picked it up from me. And I would talk to some of the neighbors, and nobody wanted to take it on. But we have so many new members coming in, like and that group called me, said, "Ms. Johnson, we're going to have a meeting, will you come and you help us?" You know. I said, "I'd be delighted." [laughter] I was happy. That's because I have a file cabinet full of nothing but, you know, documents about this association. So, I took them, the leading documents, in. So they would have bylaws, they have stationery, you don't have to do any -- it's
already, stationery's been made. The stage is set, just be the players. So, I said, "I'll just watch you all play." But this, "You going to take an office?" "No, no. I'm not taking an office." I'm just going to let them -- and it's been wonderful. We've been organized now just a few months, and we have our meetings downstairs. So they were trying to figure out how they're going to have meetings, you know? I said, "Well, we always used the downstairs parlor." We were meeting in the apartment, you know, to organize. I said, "This is great organizing, but you're going to want to go down." I said, "But first thing you must do is notify the owners of this building what your intentions are." You know, I said, "And do it on our letterhead, do it on letterhead paper, let them know that you're going to do thus and so." Because the first time, they went on their own, they tried to set up the meeting, I saw posters all around, you know, and before you know it, they started taking their posters down. [laughter] Because supers and them, "I didn't know anything was going on," you know how those things can happen. I told them, I said, "You run into trouble if you try, so you must start through the office." So, in other words, to help them do things properly so they don't have problems. And that's all I'm going to do. [laughter] Keep them moving. So I told them they're going to be the best ever. We have -- go ahead.

OKECHUKWU: What were some of the issues that the association would organize around?

JOHNSON: [unintelligible] Well, we organized -- originally, we were organized about better facilities for the building. The heat and hot water were the main problems, just like every apartment building you hear about in the city. Those were the problems when I -- before I came. And they had been on a rent strike for five years before I even came here. And I didn't have a knowledge, any knowledge, the building looked so beautiful and whatnot, everything was so nice. But there had been a rent strike on a few years, I don't know whether it's five or not, but a few years. And we ended up being on the rent strike for five years. I joined up with them, since I got in the building, I just joined it. And it was because the facilities were not being treated well, and the guy who was owning the buildings then was called a slumlord, all in the paper, it was -- yeah, it was all in the papers, and so after five years, then our group was very clever, they had a
lawyer representing them. And a certain amount of time, the court would -- we were ready to go to court with this situation. We had saved over, we had over $15,000— was in the bank account— because we didn’t pay our rent to the slumlord. We put it in the bank. The city took it over eventually, you know, so it was in city hands. I said, "Oh, we’re going from bad to worse." [laughter] And that’s what happened. But then a good landlord finally did take it, one who would take an interest in the place. But we kept on guard. So, for a number of years, I was that, you know, president of the association, and that was a very good experience, at least in moving it along, you know. Now the younger ones, it’s left in their hands. So it’s not going to die out, you know? It’s terrible if you start things and they die out. It’s like the garden. It didn’t die out. It’s still alive, now the new neighbors are there, and they integrated. White and Black can all farm -- not farm, but they have lots, plots in that garden. And they can take care of them. And it’s a very nice place, too; beautiful.

OKECHUKWU: How has the neighborhood changed over --? I mean you’ve been in Crown Heights for a long time, and it’s changed a little [inaudible].

JOHNSON: Yeah, it’s a lot, quite a lot.

OKECHUKWU: Yeah. [laughter] So how has it changed?

JOHNSON: Well, it’s changed in composition, because more people are coming. It’s now biracial, and they’re coming in droves into this whole Flatbush area, really. In almost every area, you’ll find some. East New York, when I’m over there I see the change, and other places. In a sense it’s a good thing, because everything has been upgraded now, and I can -- Even the little stores; they’re fixing up, they’re setting up, they stay up late, and stay out later. They feel more secure, because more people are coming who are coming just to buy. Or just coming just to walk or, you know, be a part of that. You know, and so it’s a good feeling. Mm-hmm. It’s very good. It’s -- it hasn’t destroyed anything, you know? But if people are having a hard time paying their rent, that can happen anywhere. And some of these new ones coming in have trouble, too. They come in here to this building, and some of them go out very quickly. Can’t go out very quickly. Because their rent is extra high. That’s the biggest change that’s happened.
Rent has gone up even more than it was. So they have a more difficult time, you know? And some can’t maintain it. No matter who they are, it’s hard. So, that’s what I was going to say. But what it has done for the community is wonderful. For, in general, for the businesses around and whatnot, it’s a, it’s an upgrade.

OKECHUKWU: So when you came to this building, was it -- this building and the surrounding area, was it majority Black, or was it White?

JOHNSON: Well, there were very few Whites then, you know. You might have had just a few, you know; Hispanics and, mostly, and some Whites. So, it just has -- that has increased a hundredfold since I came here, yes. Mm-hmm. It was mostly Black people, and yeah. Then our Blacks start moving out, you know, if they got enough -- A situation like we had, on the rent strike; once the rent strike was dissolved, the landlord received a great deal of money to fix up things that needed to be fixed up. Everybody got -- all the storm windows we have now came in at that time. New pipes for the burners, oil burners down in the basement. Real bronze pipes came in. The elevator was fixed, because there’s two elevators, you know, in the building. And they both had to be upgraded. A lot of things. A lot of things happened good for the building. But we had a choice. We could have become— not a condominium— but we could have become a co-op. And it was very tempting not to do it. We had the money. But nobody wanted to be responsible for it, except -- I said it’d all be on me, and I knew I, I’d had some health problems, and I said, no I’m not getting to the age where I want to have worries on my head. Then, you know, one thing they’re fighting me in a sense, there were 100, at that time, there were 100 tenants in this building. They increased it to 110, because they built the new apartments. But that’s more recent. But when we finished the rent strike, I knew, people started moving out at night; you hear the trucks, you know, whatever. They’re moving in the night, and gone. Because they never paid the rent during those five years, five, six, or seven years we were on rent strike; they weren’t paying rent anywhere, to anybody. We put ours in the bank. So, as a result, we got something back from that, you know, in terms of all of us. So, we were like 30 or 34 of us, and this is 100 people in here. And I thought it was -- might be a little bit
dangerous, too. [laughter] Because you couldn’t accost these people, you know, about their rent that they owed, they weren’t going to pay it through us. I said, so I’m not going into all of that. But probably a younger person might have, you know? Going ahead, could have developed a co-op, yeah, from the situation. We had enough money to do it. But it wasn’t for me. No, not at this stage in life. I didn’t need more worry, my hair’s white already, I don’t want it to get bald. [laughter] I think it would go bald trying to deal with those problems that would be coming up, coming up the ladder there. But now, it’s very pleasant to live here. So it’s very, very nice. Yes.

OKECHUKWU: Can you speak a little bit about education? So, I know that you said that you had been involved in District 17.

JOHNSON: That’s right.

OKECHUKWU: You had, you know, children, so what was the experience of education in Brooklyn?

JOHNSON: Well, Shellman and I both were part of the Parents Advisory Committee for District 17, and we were very extensive. My husband had an office in Bed-Stuy, not in -- here in Crown Heights. Crown Heights Education Committee; that was his organization and he handled that out of CDA. Community Development Agency funded it. So he had his office on Nostrand Avenue, and that was a stopping point for us, you know, to do things politically. And when we got here, in this particular community, there were no Black principals. And it was very difficult for Blacks to even get teaching jobs in the district. And a lot of them were going, started going to school, so they could study and, you know, and be able to have some credit, so they could move toward being assistants in the classroom. So, we had some assistants in the classroom. So we were in that situation, and the Jewish group was very prominent during that time, to try to get funds for themselves and for their school. So, there was a hassle there. And it was -- the hassle continued to the exterior, because even on the streets, where the temples and all were, they wanted it quiet certain times of the day. They wanted more movement to be freer to move without the traffic, and something. So that interfered with the people who lived on the side streets, and had cars, and that,
you know, and things of that nature. So, there were a lot of disgruntled situations to deal -- and even at the schoolboard meeting, it got so bad, one ra— one rabbi jumped up on top of the tabletop, my husband jumped up on the tabletop too. [laughter] I wish I had a camera, during those days, we weren’t carrying, walking around with cameras and things, you know? But that was one of those “aahhh!” kind of moments, and everybody gasped. And they were stomping and yelling at each other. [laughter] I thought I lived to see the day, but I saw that too. But Mr. Johnson, who was -- my husband was very much in favor of civil rights and our own rights as Black people. And that we weren’t going to be looked down on, not if he knew about it. And he made his daily -- not daily trips, but maybe monthly trips to Washington D.C. to get the pertinent information to bring it back to the district. So, our district was the first to have the food program for breakfast, and lunch, for the kids. Well, they were going to have lunch, but breakfast and lunch for them. And certain eye tests, which were the designated tests that would test the vision, the side vision as well as looking front. So whether they had, the kids had the ability to move their eyes and still see well. So, there are certain tests that should be given. So, we brought that information back. We were like first bringing a lot of stuff to them. And then, we were involved with PS 289, which is right there at, where is -- 289 is on Dean, well no, Bergen Street. Bergen, you know, it’s where the Brooklyn Children’s Museum is now? Well, that garden; that open space there, that’s the place where 289 is, school 289. So what happened there is they had no Black principals, so naturally Mr. Johnson was head of the PTA. Everybody would go head of everything. [laughter] Got to be the top— so they had voted him head of the Parent Teachers Association. And one night, we were going to have voting for our officers, at that parent night, and we got into the school. The teachers had blocked the way for us to move down the aisle, they had blocked it. They were standing across it, oh boy! The -- so all the women from the projects and all were down and out. And we had soldiers to make sure they were out. They came out. And so, they couldn’t get down the aisle. So, they had to move, of course, and let us come through. And then we
had a meeting, they re-voted Mr. Johnson president again. So, I'll tell you, this is off the record now. You can't put this on the record.

OKECHUKWU: You want me to stop it?

JOHNSON: Yeah. [Interview interrupted.] —come in the school. But he had that rule, and he couldn’t come anywhere near -- my husband was enjoying it. [laughter] He was enjoying it. Because he felt the principal was making a fool of himself, you know? So, the parents would win. Parents won out. He was back, president again. And we went on until our daughter graduated from there, and we had our music arts settlement, we had— We would have final programs right there on that stage and whatnot. Yeah, and I stopped -- during that time, I wrote a lot, you know, because I was involved with the, with the young children and all. I wrote musicals for them, and helped -- even helped to make the, there’d be a dance. They had a dance instructor, so they -- we had to make the costumes for them. I helped the seamstress make the costumes. [laughter] One night, it was so interesting. So it was raining so heavy that night, and I’m supposed to go and help my friend to make costumes. I said I have to go down there and help her with all this, she has all these costumes, you know, the fluffy to-dos, tutus, help to stitch them at the bottom and all. And I went down in the rain to a place, on Lincoln Place, that’s where she lived, and I walked down there in that rain. The next day, I didn’t have any voice. I had no more than [breathing], and we’re supposed to have the closing for our center, for the next, that weekend. I have no voice at all. But thank God, being able to play, all I had to do was play. [laughter] Because I couldn’t sing. I didn’t have any voice then. I had gotten so wet that night, going down there to deal with that. There were some interesting things that happened, you know. That could happen to anybody. Oh, the thing about him [redacted], now I didn’t want that to be on the record.

OKECHUKWU: Yeah.

JOHNSON: But I guess it shouldn’t be on there, right? [laughter]

OKECHUKWU: Well I stopped recording, I stopped recording, so --

JOHNSON: Oh, OK. Yeah that’s off the record.
OKECHUKWU: What was I going to say? Also, you mentioned in the District 17, in the meeting, when they were going back and forth with, I guess— the Hasidic group was trying to get funding for their schools. So what were the, I mean, Crown Heights is a unique neighborhood in the sense that you have, you know, a Black middle class, you have West Indians, and you have a significant Hasidic population.

JOHNSON: Right.

OKECHUKWU: So what was that like in regards to, you know, board meetings, or just generally, what were some of the --?

JOHNSON: Well, that was just the start of things. You know, so during that time, they were just in education, because money was coming through there. And they were attending our meetings, and they were trying to get money for their programs. And a lot of the Black people felt a little resentful about it, you know, because they figured they were a parochial group, and what we were saying, if this parochial group can get the money, then our parochial groups— Catholics and other— they can get funded too. And at that time, they weren't getting funding. So that changed over time. But at that time, it wasn't that way, you know. They were getting it, but they -- Our people were not getting it. And the main thing our people wanted to do also is to move up and become recognized as assistants in the classroom; that came into being, you know. We worked hard for those things. And the place, the, the place where they shut my husband out; that's the first school to have a Black principal. It was the first one. Yeah, he was from the West Indies. I don't remember his name now, come to think of -- it'll come later, I guess. But he was the first Black principal for the district. So we wanted to keep up that kind of interest, you know, in our community, and more Black policemen and all that. Because it was nothing but White policemen walking around. When you went to -- when we went to Bedford-Stuyvesant, when we first came here. But that all changed, you know, began to change. Yeah, so, but it was a fight. It didn't come easy. Those things did not come easily. We had to fight for everything. And I remember for the school, sometimes in the back of the school, or in the trash can, you'd see musical instruments, throwing out stuff. Throwing them out, yes. Well, at the junior high
school where my daughter went, they threw the instruments away, rather than giving them to our children and letting them use them. So a lot of things that weren’t fair, were – those are things we worked on. To the best of our ability, those of us who were involved with the community, greatly involved. And that was a big plus for us; the first Black principal who came in, yeah. First feeding program came up through District 17, yeah. Those were some of the victories we had, which were good.

OKECHUKWU: So, where do you -- I guess sort of wrapping up a little bit, in 10 years, where do you see Crown Heights? What do you think Crown Heights [inaudible] in 10 years?

JOHNSON: In 10 years? Well you can walk around Crown Heights now, and if you haven’t been here for about six to seven years, you don’t know the place. Because changes are happening so quickly now. So in six or seven years, when I come back, I won’t know it’s Crown Heights either, you know, because more changes will have taken place. And there’s a lot, you see how tall those buildings are getting to be? Every place they can find a spot to put a tall building up, they’re doing it. Yeah, they also came to look at the, you know— We have the empty lot, next to this building, and I looked into that, because you know when I first came here, I thought right away, that’s got to be a garden. It was a garden, originally it was a garden. The area where it was the well, you know, that was marvelous, and it’s dug deep into the ground. And it stayed as long as it could stay, you know? [laughter] Really long, they had to root that out. That was a lot of effort to get rid of it. And the trees that keep coming up, every time they cut them down, right by, I said, "Keep on trees, keep—" I want to tell them to keep on living, beautiful trees and all. So, point being I found out that the, that this owner didn’t own that garden. At one time, that had been a part of this building. It had to have been. Because it was a beautiful garden there. But it went into the hands, and it went into the hands of the city. So, the city real estate had it for sale. There was a sign on the— out there, for sale. And an architect bought it, and he was a Chinese young man. I met him, and we had talked, because I had been down to the office to see his, you know, see -- to meet him. And at the time, I was hoping that we could get that building, but there
was no place to -- So what’s happened now, with the new organization, I’ve asked some of them to go and see what’s going on with that, you know, take that on. And the group has, and what I’m getting back is that the guy who had originally had the lease for the building, the deed, he has a -- there’s no deed now. It’s nothing right now. So, I told one of my members— the young man who wants to be the president of the group— I said, "You know, in this life when you want something, you got to ask for it." I says, "Now we’re organized again, and we just go forward to the city, and ask them for that place. Because nobody’s—" They came and they were knocking and banging, and drilling. They even came and looked at the walls, and the chest, and I just want to see what texture are the cracks in the wall, in the back, you know, the ones that are facing there, they want to see how strong the foundation is for this building before they build. Because they could knock it down, you know, with what they’re doing. So something must have formed, something went wrong, and they never went forward. It’s been more than three or four years now since that happened. Yeah, but each year it was something happening, they would bring the drills and start working on it, getting rid of the trees and, you know, clearing it. And they cleared it about three or four times, and Mr. Tree just says, "I’m coming right on back up." They keep coming up. I say, "Keep on coming, trees." But I told this young man, I says, "Go ask for what you want, or you would never know." So they’re going to do it, they’re going to try. Mm-hmm. I said, "You might get it." It would be very nice if that would happen, it would be -- and this is such a lovely group of, of people. They are enthused, they’re anxious, they want to improve things for the whole neighborhood. And we’d wait outside, they started making their plans, you know, how they’re going to work, who’s going to work, and what, there are lawyers in the group, and a lot of -- some of them have had good community experience, some had none. So, you know, it’s a variety. Some said, "I can make good cake. So, when you have a fair amount of good cakes for you." So, you know, it’s such a nice spirit. And I just love it. [Interview interrupted.]

See, now see, that’s it. You want her to love you? Then that’s what you got to do, just what you’re doing now. That’s the way. Mm-hmm.
OKECHUKWU: So yeah, there’s lots of high rises going up.

JOHNSON: Every time you turn around, and they had a terrible time on the other side of the park, because they said that would be cutting off their view of the garden, and all -- and that’s true. Because when I’ve seen them come in to measure here, I know they’re going to cut off our view. I can see now all the way up to -- da-da-da-da Street from here and down. I can watch traffic and everything from four or five lights up. But when they build this building, more -- because they plan on building it four or five stories higher than this building. So, it’ll be a loss to us scenically, and then you get so much light, you know, from that, you know, we won’t have that. So, it’s a good thing if he doesn’t want to build. I’m in favor. [laughter] And they want to do a garden. They want to do a garden. When we have Christmas, there’s a young man in the building who, he’s a, he’s a decorator. He decorates the tree. Oh boy, yeah, he helps with decorating, well I hope he’s still here for Christmas. [laughter] If not, the help will do the decorating, but he does a masterful job of decorating; very, very nice. They’re all talented, and they’re eager to work, you know? And I just say go, go, go. [laughter] Enjoy it. Yeah. So anyway, time has been good to me. So, this is the most recent thing I guess I could show you. Yes, all right, because I know what -- we’ve taken about two years now. I’m a part, I’ve got my shirt on, I’m part of this. [laughter] I’m very proud to be a part of it. And since my husband passed away— it’s been eight years now, almost nine— I started teaching, again. I had been just doing my church work, because I’m working with the dolls and that, and that’s fine for me. But I started teaching with young people. You know what happened? Somebody else died, can you imagine this? There was a lady who had been teaching students in the community of where my church is. And that’s the East Flatbush area, for more than— how was she— more than 25 years, she’d had all of her recitals in our church; at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church. And she got sick. Just after my husband had just gone into the nursing home. You know, he was ill too, and when that happened, she said -- well one of the members of the church called me and said, ”You know, Miss so-and-so, she can’t have her recital this year because she’s not well.” Said, ”Would you help?” I said, ”Sure, I’ll be delighted..."
to. So I prepared to help the children that summer, you know, prepare for their recital. And we had a wonderful recital. So at that point, a few of the members asked me— you know, parents— if I would continue with the children. Because this lady was in the hospital, she did pass away. And that’s what happened again. Every time I’m in the situation, somebody’s passing away. I’m like, second in command, or whatever, and I have to move up to first. So, I took on some of the children. And of course, all of them wouldn’t stay with me, you know, it’s one of those kinds of things. But the -- yeah, and I had some wonderful outstanding students that came to me. So I didn’t want a lot, I wanted just some good, interesting students. I had some that were just almost genius, the genius quality, and the three or four of them, they were wonderful. And they have graduated now from, from college, they’ve gone through university. Yes, one has -- the one studied -- the young man, and I have a beautiful picture of him in here. He— this is at the church at the last recital that I gave. Now I just want to show you. Oh boy, I had guest artists with me. But this is just a picture of me in the crowd. Let’s see, where is that? Yeah, I don’t know where it went. Because some of my pictures— during this, I just finished with an operation, I didn’t look that great. [laughter] I don’t know what happened to the picture. But anyway, this -- OK, well this is the way you do things. You don’t put things back, like you’re supposed to put them. This is the -- oh that was the Black Catholic Church up in Harlem. That’s not it. I just put it back into here most likely. Yeah no, that’s [unintelligible] in Brooklyn. All right, well anyway, I can just show you this. This -- these are some of the young people. This young lady, she just finished at Morgan State University, and not Morgan -- oh, that’s Baltimore. [laughter] She’s just finished, you know, the school that’s just right up here, the college that’s right near us.

OKECHUKWU: Brooklyn?

JOHNSON: Bedford Avenue. Bedford Avenue.

OKECHUKWU: Oh, Medgar Evers.

JOHNSON: Medgar Evers, see, that’s just like Morgan State, it’s like oh gosh. Medgar, she’s just finishing Medgar Evers, and she took her two-year training for college. She took
the extra academic, and she has graduated from college. In two years, she was done, and she’s going to be a physician. But she’s an excellent pianist, she’s just great. I’m hoping that she will -- she plays for the church, their little neighborhood church, she’s very active. And when my husband was in the nursing home, that’s not too far from here, she was there playing. She plays as a volunteer, and I didn’t know it until later on, you know, when I had to do— She did her resume here, on my, my machine, and that’s when I found out all about her, more about her. I said, "I didn’t know you were going down there to the nursing home." She said, "Yes, I done some volunteer work."

Sweetest, lovely girl, oh my God, and so gifted. She plays so well. This is, I have -- OK. I don’t know where it is. This is, this is her, I think this is her at piano; her little self. But I had some other pictures, I don’t even know where they went. They all seem to be of her this time. They’re going somewhere. How could they disappear? I don’t know. But anyway, another student, he’s the male student I had. He lived in Long Island. But he was a member of our church, and he would come every Saturday. He’d have his music books on his back, you know, his backpack full of music. And he studied piano and organ with me. And when I took him on as a student, he wanted to start playing the organ right away. And I said well, you must get some basic piano. At that time, I wasn’t teaching piano. So I said, you go to the neighborhood person who’s teaching piano, and study with her for a while, then you can take -- so he went one year with her. He came to me for his second year, and he stayed with me for seven years. And he learned the pipe organ, and the test of it was, I prepared him to play for morning services, you know, everything. And I said now you’re ready to play service. He says, “And where are you going to be?” “I’m going to be at home listening to you,” because I can get it on my, you know, machine.” And his eyes got big, and he didn’t say anything. So, I watched his eyes. I saw. "I’ll be home, but," I said, "Your sister’s going to turn pages for you, and she’s going to help you at the organ; assist you," and I -- What I did, I set up -- I needed, I wanted to train the young people. So, I set up a program in the church, and it was being assistant to me, so a pipe organ assistant. So that was like a title, and I had three students. They would rotate. I’d give them each a
Sunday to be -- they didn’t have to come every Sunday to be with me. They each had their day. And that worked very well while they were students. So as a result, they also were able to say we’re assisting the ministry of music. In that way, they were able to qualify for scholarships from the church when they grad— when they left high school; they each got $500. And I gave them $500 from, you know, from my recitals, you know, each of them. So, they were part -- so I formed a new ministry, come to think of it. I didn’t think of it that way, you know, but that’s what it was. And so, it was a wonderful experience. And that happened after the lady got sick and, and went in the hospital. I went to see her when she was in the hospital. Can you believe she’s in the same hospital my husband was taken to when he got ill in the nursing home? His doctor was also a member, and that is the hospital they tried to destroy; get rid of. It’s in the Slope area. Farther, way downtown, you know, like Third Avenue and something. What’s the name of that hospital? I forgot what it is.

OKECHUKWU: I know which one you’re talking about.

JOHNSON: Yeah, they tried to get rid of that hos— and they did. They made duplexes and whatnot out of it. Ama— it’s just, I can’t believe it. I said this is the place where I went to see the old, you know, the lady, the musical lady, and then my husband was there too, and it doesn’t exist anymore. This is the way things are going, and like fast!

OKECHUKWU: Fast.

JOHNSON: And I told you, when I went back to Baltimore, I couldn’t get to my mother’s house, [laughter] by crossing the street. There’s no street to cross, there’s a highway. You got to go around the highway, get over there. It’s amazing. But this is how fast, oh, it’s— Governments can do things when they want to. They could eliminate poverty overnight if they wanted to, really wanted to. There’s some people who seem to feel if you get it for free, you don’t really appreciate it, and you don’t deserve it. But now they’re giving tuition for free, which is a wonderful thing. So that means these young people that paid money to go. But now the ones after, like my great-granddaughter, she wants to go to school here in New York, she can go with -- just have to buy the books and other things. And boarding, you know, have a place for her to stay, you
know. So, things are changing, and fast. And can you imagine our president is just trying to pull time back. He’s trying to go back to the 1930s and ‘40s, what? Can I tell you that story? [laughter] I have so many stories, it’s why I’m writing the book. In our, in our homestead, there was a potbelly stove. You know, I had never seen one— well, I was just a little girl— everything was new to me. [laughter] I was in, I was in nursery school then. And I looked at that pot, and it’s, some smells came out of it that weren’t nice, you know? The coal, you burn that coal, ooh. And it fills up the room, you know, with those vapors. And he wants to turn us back to those years. What? It’s not happening. Every -- 50 nations are saying no, we’re not going back. How can we go back by ourselves? If we get into trouble, or war, we’re going to have no allies. What in the world? What is he, think he can do? He’s crazy. He was crazy when he started. But you know what? The lawyer who’s working on his papers to dissolve his presidency, they’re working hard on them. And he said, he had such a nice relaxed voice, those kind of people that, those kind of people are deadly; mentally they’re superior. And so he says, "You know, he has not had one day or one whit of community service in his life. He has no preparation for humanity. Everything Brother Trump has done has been for himself, and for physical gain, profit. That’s all he’s known for his entire life." And I thought about that, and those words stay in my mind, because that’s the crux of the whole thing; how he needs to go, how he’s going to go. And I think that he wouldn’t stay. He couldn’t stay.

OKECHUKWU: Is there anything about Crown Heights that you want to say before we end the recording?

JOHNSON: What I can say is, some people look at it and say, "Mmm, White people coming in. Mmm." I don’t say that. I feel very positive about it. Because even if they do come in, some of them are not going to be able to stay for the high rents that are here. But those that do stay are going to be the quality people, you know, that can manage to stay. That’s all I can say. And that goes for us, too. Some of us, our people, have to move out because of the high rents too, you know? That’s why I’m working now, trying to secure my own situation. Because as it is right now, my rent can stabilize, so I’m
working on stabilizing; they can’t raise, won’t be able to raise it after I, you know, submit the various documents. But it’s difficult. It’s difficult, and even the White young people are struggling. They’re struggling too, maybe not as much as we are. But it’s not easy for anybody today. And I’m content to see how things are going to work out. See how things are going to work out. Mm-hmm.

OKECHUKWU: Well, thank you so much for taking the time. I know you’re quite busy, so.

JOHNSON: Yes. But there is one thing I am sorry about, just one thing. And that is, I talk to a lot of cab drivers, because I ride a lot of cabs, but I don’t own a car, I don’t drive. So, my husband never wanted to drive in New York, so he never bought a car. And he was always on time for everything. He was one of those kind of people. I can’t say I do that, but I try. And as I talked to them, and I talked to others in the street, and in the stores, and whatnot; problem is, when our young people seem to grow up, see the sacrifices parents have made to own homes, and have property for them, and they don’t value it. Sometimes, the – what is it, the surface dirt is not even cold over the parents who’ve passed away before they’re selling their house to get away. And for me, it’s a big mistake they’re making, you know? They make a big mistake, because then we lose territorial control. We lose it. And their parents, they worked hard and sacrificed to have their property. And it happens so many times. So, that’s the only thing I would say that’s a sad thing about our people who do own property, you know? Or else put it in the hands of the an— your relatives, you know, to take it. So, it can keep moving and not be offset by, “Oh well, this other person is offering us all this money for our property,” and then buying them out. So that’s the only thing I feel regretful about, really.

OKECHUKWU: OK. Well thank you for taking the time. I know that you’re quite busy, so I really do appreciate it.

JOHNSON: Well I need to sit down and be quiet. I wasn’t quiet, but at least sitting down.

See what, this happens? Let me see, naptime, he’s all right.

OKECHUKWU: He’s sleeping.

JOHNSON: Mm-hmm.
OKECHUKWU: So there’s a release form, [inaudible].

JOHNSON: OK.

OKECHUKWU: -- permission to archive it for the Brooklyn Historical Society. And so, you can sign it here. But this is, it just asks for your name and mailing address.

JOHNSON: And you know some of the people who work at your institution, they used to work with me at the Brooklyn Museum. So I know some of them, you know, when I went over there, I was so delighted to see the young lady who was really overseeing everything for the exhibit that was taking place. She used to work in the -- she was over there in the education division. Mm-hmm. Or curate, within that. Because I worked in the education area, you know, I was in that area. So, it was so nice to see them, you know? Very nice, yeah.