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Oral History Interview with Sylvia Wong Lewis
Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.24
Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali at the narrator's home on June 26, 2017 in Manhattan, New York

ALI: I'm Zaheer Ali, Oral Historian at Brooklyn Historical Society. And today is Monday, June 26th, 2017. And I'm here interviewing Sylvia Lewis for the Voices of Crown Heights oral history project. If you can introduce yourself by giving your full name and your birthdate and where you were born.

LEWIS: OK. Hi, my name is Sylvia Wong Lewis. The Wong is my mother's name that I carry. But I was born Sylvia Elaine Smith. And I was born in Harlem in n-- [date redacted for privacy], 1952. And -- and then I lived there for a few years, and then we moved to Brooklyn in 1954.

ALI: So tell me a little bit about your family background.

LEWIS: OK. My family -- I come from a combination. I call it a multicultural family. I'm a southern background and also a Caribbean background. And that plays out in terms of ethnically, I'm a combination. My mother is from Trinidad, and they're what they call Chinese Trinidadian, where she's actually Chinese, Spanish, and some Black, I guess. And my father is what they call Creole, and he's a combination of White, Black, and native. So—

ALI: And so your father was American?

LEWIS: He's American. He's from Ocean Springs, Mississippi. And he grew up in New Orleans. And my mother is Trinidadian, but she grew up in New York. She's a product of the New York Public School System.

ALI: OK.

LEWIS: And—

ALI: How did your father get to New York?

LEWIS: OK, so both my family were a part of the early migration of, as they say, the people of color coming up north. So my father's people, my -- my father's -- my paternal grandmother, what I'll call -- she's called, her name is Ma-- Madame Tempy Smith, name -- her original name is Tempy Stewart Smith. And her story is well-documented in the Jackson, in Ocean Springs website and historical society notes and things. So she did a migration of her children, her m-- she was a music teacher. She went to Straight University, S-T-R-A-I-G-H-T, which is a Black, historically Black college, that was founded by missionaries. And it doesn't exist anymore, but it was merged into what's now known as Dillard College. And she also went to the New England Conservatory of Music. People said that she passed, but she was light, light enough to pass, and we can get into the story of passing or not, because she was very proud of being African American. But we weren't called African American back then. I think we were colored. And I'll talk about being a colored girl, a negro and all that later. But anyway, so the family did a, had a family music show. And they performed. The story goes -- and my family's story is that the -- the family's mantra, I would say my father's family mantra is: The show must go on. Like, so when I was growing up, that was a saying I always heard. "This show will go on, OK? I don't know what's going on with you, but this show is going on, so you better get it together. So if you're late, whatever, you're not dressed, this show is going on," right? So that's -- that comes from that. So they performed, and the story of why they left the South and all that is another complicated story, because there was a lynching in the family, there was domestic violence; there was all these things. But I will say this: I heard the story about my aunt and uncles and my father performing on the road, and then making their way to Harlem. So they were part of the Harlem Renaissance. My grandmother was there in 1919, and she started the first music schools for colored kids, which had Jewish kids too, in her school. So, you know, because, you know, Harlem was Jewish. And so she had -- she was also an entrepreneur, and -- and she was involved in real estate. And so it seems to me that each building that she bought, she turned into a music school. And her musical children were performers and teachers. And -- and her background is that

she comes from -- my family, that family in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, they had a dairy farm. And they were known -- I have documented this in my film, *From Shanghai to Harlem,* which includes my mother's family too. I had documented their travels from Ocean Springs to New Orleans through every state all the way up to Harlem. And in the Black -- in the Black media, in the Black newspapers, in *The Chicago Defender* and all of these other small Black newspapers, I had announcements of "Madame Tempy and her musical children will be performing here, will be performing there." And I could see that they actually did perform; it looks like every day. So you -- you know, you -- and so my -- some of my aunts would talk about how my grandmother was like the, the Michael Jackson's dad of her era, because she was like -- I thought she was a nice little old lady when I met her. But they said that she was like very strict, and you couldn't play, and you had to perform even if you didn't feel like it, and you couldn't take a break and all of that. So my aunts would talk about how they would get beat if they didn't want to play, if they didn't want to perform, if they didn't want to sing or dance or whatever they were doing. So that's my father's side. So they all settled in Harlem. And then, meanwhile, on my mother's side -- her people are from Trinidad. Her father is Guyanese. So I'm really a combination Trini-Guy, what they call Trini-Guyanese. And so they came also in about 1919. And my grandfather; my mother's father was also Chinese Guyanese. And this combination is not ever told, I think, taught in the history books; about why is it that you have all of these Chinese and Indian people in the Caribbean? And it -- it is a slavery story, and people should know that it -- it's related to the slavery story. It is a slavery story, because after the African slavery was ended, the plantations still needed workers. And so we had indentured -- those owners brought in indentured workers from China and India, and also from Japan. People -- people don't realize that that's why those Japanese people live in Hawaii, the early Japanese people. And that's why you have Japanese people in South America. And that's why you have Indian people in Trinidad and Chinese people in Trinidad and Jamaica and all of the islands, Cuba, Mexico -- I mean, that's why. And my so people, they called them "coolies," and I understand that the word "coolie" is

almost similar to the N word, in that they were workers. And so my mother's people were those type people. So -- and her background is a combination of like peasant, and her mother was more like a peasant class or merchant class in that they had stores, and my grandfather was more like an entrepreneur. And his name is Henry Cameron Wong, Henry Wong Cameron. So I take the name Wong from my mother's side of the family. And it's because Sylvia Lewis was taken, OK, on the social media. So when I listed my name as, on say Facebook, and I put Sylvia Lewis, there were 100 Sylvia Lewises. So when I added my mother's name of Wong -- her maiden name -- then, you know, it was, it was OK. So—

ALI: So at the time when you were -- you said you were born in Harlem. Did you have siblings?

LEWIS: Yes. I have -- there are four of us. So I have two older brothers. John, he was born in '47. My brother Sydney, he was born in '50, and then I'm born in '51. And then my younger sister, Pauline, she was born in '56, I believe. So—

ALI: And so then you had said you lived in Harlem for a few years and then moved to Crown Heights. Tell me about the move to Crown Heights.

LEWIS: OK. When we moved to Crown Heights, already my paternal grandmother was already in Crown Heights. She lived at 1457 Union Street. Right behind the, the synagogue, the big famous one on Eastern Parkway -- so her house is the first house off of Kingston Avenue and Union Street. And so her house has a big driveway that goes through all the way to the back of the synagogue. So as you -- that proximity shows that, you know, we were very intimately in close -- living close with the people there. So I will tell you, when we first moved to Brooklyn, it was a different Brooklyn than what it is now. It has gone through a lot of different changes. It was very grand. Brooklyn was very grand, and it's -- we lived on President Street. And this is what I was telling you as I -- that I wanted to talk to you about President Street, because living on President Street is a different experience than living in Crown Heights, than what people know. Because even growing up, whenever I told someone I lived on President Street, they would always say, "Oh, you live on President Street?" They were

impressed, because President Street was called "Doctor's Row," and President Street -- even though the— Doctor's Row was really further down from where we lived. We lived between Albany and Troy Avenue on President Street. But my block was full of doctors, and— White doctors and Black doctors. It wasn't just the big mansions of President Street. We lived in a brownstone, but our brownstones were a little bit different than the brownstones in Bedford-Stuyvesant. We had a double stoop, and as you know, President Street is wider than the other streets. And the designers who designed Eastern Parkway from -- I understand from some of the early city planners that they planned President Street to be a boulevard. So I think that's why it's so wide. So as children, we had this -- we played in the streets. And we had a big wide street to play on. So that -- it was really lovely. And the people -- I -- when I tell people that President Street was -- we were integrating. We -- but there were a few Black families there, but I don't think that the White people knew that they were Black. And I say that to say -- when I talk about the three Cs when I started my discussion with color, caste, and class, it's all part of what community -- that's the other C. The community was very lovely. My friends -- my early friends were White kids, Jewish kids, rich kids, middle class kids. And the rest of the kids -- I would say because we lived in our own home -- and each corner was flanked by a small apartment building. And that was where you had more like middle class, little bit lower blue collar class people there. But the people who lived in the block who own these big homes -- and they were mostly single-family homes and two-family homes. Our home was a two-family home, but we lived in the whole house. And so I was talking about how my earliest friend was a little girl named Meg Rubenstein. And her father was a doctor, and my dentist, Dr. Brownman, he was a Jewish doctor. We had a veterinarian, Dr. Rosenberg. I mean, we had a lot of Black doctors, and White doctors on the block that we grew up.

ALI: Now, what did your parents do?

LEWIS: Any my parents were more -- I would say more like a blue-collar family. My mother worked in the hospital at Downstate Medical Center. But when we first moved there, my mother did not work a -- at the -- she worked at home, and I'll tell you -- I'll tell you

what it was. My mother -- and my father was a baker at Sloan Kettering Memorial Hospital. And he was a veteran of World War II during the time when it was segregated. So my father was in the segregated army. And as you know -- I mean, now -- and I'm understanding like, why did he become a baker. And so, because that's one of the jobs that the Black soldiers could do; was cook and do things like that. So anyway, my mother, being Trinidadian, I would say this, that she was very entrepreneurial, and so -- she -- I like to say my mother had the first daycare center in our home for the neighborhood. So therefore, our home life was always a very popular home. It was a home where many people came to. So a lot of children grew up and were raised by my mother. There were teachers who -- who -- word would get around that if you were a young professional and you needed someone to watch your child, you know, you can bring them over to Carmen's house. That's my mother's name, is Carmen, Carmen Wong. And so there were several people now who were, you know, grew up to be, you know, very successful people would who come and tell me, "Your mother raised me, or I lived—" you know -- and I remember, "Oh yeah, I think I remember I used to change your diaper, I used to walk you in the stroller," whatever. Because I was the older daughter, so I helped out a lot.

ALI: And the children that came to your, your home, were they -- they were Black, White, mixed, or—?

LEWIS: They -- a lot of them -- I would say a lot of the kids that my mother took care of were teachers' kids. And because there were -- in the neighborhood we had two schools, PS 221 -- public schools, and then another one called PS 160. And there was a 167 too, on Eastern Parkway and Schenectady. There were more than two schools. Actually, there were a number of schools. And some of these mothers actually were teachers at these schools. And so, these people— some of the kids— when they were little babies, like toddlers or babies, they, you know, stayed with us. So -- but the other part of my story I would say, is because when you grow up in a mixed, mixed up family, every -- and I think a lot of families are like this. Every weekend is like a family reunion. So every weekend was like a family reunion. And so my mother's Chinese West Indian people

were coming over, and then my father's southern people were coming over. After a while, my home at 1502 President Street, became part of what I call the over-ground railroad, OK? [laughter] And I stole that term from the sister that wrote the book, warmer -- what is the -- what's the book that she wrote? It's about the migration of the Black --

ALI: *Warmth of Other Suns?*

LEWIS: *Warmth of Other Suns,* right. And she uses the, that term -- the over-ground railroad is when Black people began migrating, but it was a very surreptitious way of migrating. It wasn't like there was a set time and date and everybody migrated. Each family took their opportunity to come and get on the road and come north, to leave the South and head north, or to leave the islands and head to New York. So my grandfather, my Guyanese grandfather was a very successful entrepreneur in Harlem. So both my mother and father's family came from Harlem. So our roots are in Harlem, and settled -- and then we settled in Crown Heights. So my grandfather— being a Guyanese, very successful— he was also in real estate. He had a -- I'm just doing this little side story so that you know. He had an insurance company as, you know, I'm talking about segregation. So Black people couldn't get insurance, believe it or not. So he had an insurance company, and he had an employment agency, and— I'm trying to think. An employment agency, and I forgot what else he did. But anyway, those were his primary things. And so he was a sponsor. And he sponsored many Caribbean people to come here to Brooklyn. And when I say sponsor, people don't understand that today, because it's a little bit different today. But back then, in 1960, you really couldn't come here unless you were sponsored. And so that meant that you came here having a skill, already educated, and had a job waiting for you. More than likely, these people were going to work for my grandfather, or he had helped, lined up jobs for him. He was so good at this that there was even a statue of him in Guyana, called the father of my people or something. So -- because I understand he sponsored at least 1,000 people.

ALI: What was his name?

LEWIS: His name was Henry Wong Cameron. So he was -- so anyway, these people who came to stay with us in Brooklyn, came to us sponsored through my grandfather; the ones who came from the Caribbean. And then the people who came from the South, came from various ways too, through my paternal grandmother. And when I say various ways, it's like the extended family. So there was one, one family -- a couple -- who was not related, but was the best friend of my grandmother's sister, OK? So it's kind of like that. It's like -- and when they came to our house --

ALI: It's what they call pumpkin-vined family. [laughter]

LEWIS: A pumpkin-vined family, yes. That's exactly what they were. So when they came, they were family. I don't know if my mother ever charged them money. I don't know. But I just know that they lived with us as family, and we all ate. So you can imagine, you have -- you have Creole, southern Creole cooking, and then you have Trinidadian Guyanese cooking. So we were eating, OK? We -- we always had -- my father bakes pies. He's a baker. So, you know, we should be big fat people because of the kind of food. We were eating the best food all the time, and the music too. And I can talk about -- we always heard beautiful music; calypso music, jazz music. My father's people, all musicians and performers and dancers. And so it was very alive with culture. So my -- when I think of my life in Crown Heights -- [Ringing phone.]

ALI: We can pause it.

LEWIS: OK. [Interview interrupted.]

ALI: OK, this is Zaheer Ali again. It's still Monday, June 26, 2017. Continuing the oral history interview with Sylvia Wong Lewis. So when we stopped, you talked about how there were all these different kinds of -- different people in the house as y— when you were growing up. How did you address them when, you know, how did you refer to the, the adults like outside your immediate family that were living with you?

LEWIS: We considered them as family. And how did I address them? I'm glad you brought that up, because that's something that I think about when I meet young people, when I meet little children now, because little children call adults by their first name. But we did not call -- we addressed our -- the people who my, who lived with us, we addressed

them as aunt and uncle, OK? And some -- some people -- even my neighbors, my friends' grandparents I called Mama Brown and Daddy Brown. You know, aunt this, Aunt Nora, you know -- we actually referred to each other with these kinds of affectionate names. And I want to talk about how -- I would like -- I -- whenever I think about Crown Heights and President Street and Brooklyn, I have such warm memories about it because I had such a lovely childhood, and I had such a, a loving community. And the people really cared about each other. And we were in each other's homes all the time. And -- and I mean, White and Black kids. And the -- the mothers and the fathers got along fine. And it was a very diverse neighborhood. It was -- it was the beginning of, when I say class, color, caste -- I did begin to see how there were some people who were very wealthy, and some people who were like moderate means, and some people who were struggling. But because of segregation, I would say, of -- the Black people were somewhat confined to where they could live. Now we -- Black people who lived on President Street tended to be the more successful of the Black community. The -- this was the top of the Black middle class. This was the middle class. This was the hilt of the middle class. These people who I grew up with -- and people say, not everybody had that life you had. And I didn't— you know, when you grow up a certain way, around certain people, you figure, "Well, everybody grows up like this." Even though you know from your own relatives that, no, everybody does not. But I'm just saying that— I, you know— my friends, whose parents were doctors and lawyers and professors and entrepreneurs and teachers and things like that -- we were in each other's homes and we -- we enjoyed friendships and we -- we had multi-generational home families in that, the people that I grew up with -- and even the, the White families were like that, where you had the mother and the father and the mother-in-law and the grandparents were -- it was like that for everybody, where you had several generations living all together. And we all knew each other even though maybe we didn't know each other. You just kind of knew just from seeing. So I just loved that, that we -- we had this, this c-- this sense of community, and this sense of: If you were out of order, if you were what's called out of order, meaning you were acting

bad, you would get called on it. It's not -- it's not like -- it's not like only your parent could discipline you. Your neighbor could discipline you. Your -- your friend's mother could discipline you. So therefore, I had -- like recently, I -- I do a blog about family and community, and I just did a blog post recently about godparents. So it's like almost everybody was your godmother and your godfather. And I don't mean it in that sense like the, the movie, *The Godfather*, where everybody's dysfunctional. But, I mean in the sense of, you did -- like if my mother got on my nerves -- when I was a preteen and a teenager, I remember, you know, having a lot of frustrations with my mother. And I adopted some of my girlfriend's mothers as like my other mother, you know? They were like my godmother. And we didn't go to church to have a ceremony; I just made them my godmother in my mind. You know what I mean? It was just in my heart that I'd rather go be with Ms. Perry than be here, you know, or something, so—

ALI: So you -- you mentioned that President Street had a lot of professionals living there and that these were a lot of your neighbors. Did you -- how did you feel or talk about what your parents did? Because your parents were more working-class people. Did you feel any kind of distinction in dealing with your neighbors or your friends in terms of what their parents did?

LEWIS: Well I -- I think that the only time that I felt that, and I -- there was a *New York Times* article about that, about: When you have poor children, when the summertime comes, when everybody disappears and goes away. And -- and that was about class and caste or whatever for me too. Now, the reason -- I used to wonder why everybody was going to Sag Harbor or Martha's Vineyards, or down South, or to the island. So I always felt kind of jealous and that we didn't go any of those places. And I remember asking my father, "Well, why don't we go to Mississippi? You know? Everybody's going back to Alabama." And he was like -- I don't know if you know that song that Nina Simone sings, "Mississippi Goddam"? Well he was -- he was, had that attitude, "I'm never going back to Mississippi," and "No, I never want to go back to Mississippi, and—" Even though he had lovely memories of the people that he knew in Mississippi, he never wanted to go to Mississippi. In fact, I actually just went to Mississippi myself,

just a few years ago, to pay respects to my great great grandparents and family down there. But I did -- I began to notice some of that, in that some of us went to the public schools. I went to a Catholic school. I went to St. Matthew's. That's on Lincoln Place and Utica Avenue. So that took me a little bit out of my neighborhood and on the other side of Eastern Parkway. And as I mentioned to you, that when I was growing up in Crown Heights on President Street, the borderline was Eastern Parkway. And it's almost -- I would say it's almost like saying that was the difference between white Crown Heights and black Crown Heights, in that we were one of the few families that lived on President Street, and on the other side of Eastern Parkway. And when you -- when I went over to St. Matthew's, and also, I did -- used to go to the summer program at St. Gregory's, which is on St. John's Place and Brooklyn Avenue. As you know, that's— OK, so we're on St. John's, St. John's Place, and then we're also on Lincoln Place— so that's when I really did, you know, kind of venture out of the neighborhood and into other neighborhoods. And really every block was a neighborhood, in a way, growing up.

ALI: So -- so what was it like? Tell me what it's like crossing -- when -- when you were growing up in the '50s and '60s, what was it like crossing Eastern Park— crossing north, Eastern Parkway into--? Did you call that Crown Heights, north of Eastern Parkway?

LEWIS: In -- in our conver-- this is funny that you, you ask that question, because we didn't actually consider anybody -- we didn't consider that Crown Heights. We -- in -- in our minds, Crown Heights ended at Eastern Parkway.

ALI: So Crown Heights -- tell me what the borders of Crown Heights were.

LEWIS: The borderline of Crown Heights— when I was growing up and the people who, that I grew up with, we, in our minds, even though we know there's a map that shows you where it is -- but it was from Eastern Parkway to Empire Boulevard. And it was from Lincoln Terrace Park, which is down, I think on Rochester Avenue. And it's maybe as far as Nostrand Avenue. I don't even think we even went past Nostrand Avenue. So it was really confined into where the hill, is the Crown Heights, the -- the actual heights of Crown Heights.

ALI: And so north of Eastern Parkway to you was what?

LEWIS: Well, on the oth-- I'm just two streets over from --

ALI: Yeah, yeah. But what did you call that?

LEWIS: The rest of that, we called that Bedford-Stuyvesant. I know -- I mean, you know, even though it's not. I know that. But we referred to it as Bedford-Stuyvesant.

ALI: So tell me the experience of crossing from Eastern Par-- well, crossing across Eastern Parkway --

LEWIS: So—

ALI: -- into Bed Stuyvesant.

LEWIS: Right, so it was kind of like you were going into the Black neighborhood, OK? So it was like you had to be careful, because it was more crime over there, and it was a, you know, it -- that was it. It was this --

ALI: What -- what were the -- what were the things that signaled a different neighborhood when you crossed into Eastern? What were things --

LEWIS: Well --

ALI: -- that told you were you crossing into a different neighborhood?

LEWIS: Well, the thing -- the first thing that you notice, that people were hanging out in the streets. And on President Street, people, they hung out on the corner. So that was another thing. If any of us were caught hanging out on the corner of, like, Troy Avenue and President Street, which had a handball court, the -- it would fly -- the -- the -- the gossip would fly through the street. "Oh, I saw Cookie's brother—" oh, that's my nickname, Cookie— "I saw Cookie's brother playing handball with those boys on that corner." So it's like hanging on the corner with those kids. So there was -- and that's where I was saying that you noticed that there was a difference in -- there was some poor kids, and some kids who -- middle class kids, and some rich kids. So, you know, it's like that's where the poorer people live. There's really no better way to say it. And it's because there were more apartment buildings, too. And that was another thing. We weren't -- I wasn't allowed to really go visit friends who lived in apartment buildings, unless, you know, I was going with my family or something. It was like --

ALI: Why is that?

LEWIS: -- I just couldn't, because I think -- I think because my mother is from, you know, grew up in Harlem. And she knows that a lot of criminal things can happen in hallways. So it was a matter of safety. So it was always a safety thing. And so -- I, you know, so I -- I kind of felt that, I think that we were raised that way, that you kind of stay within your block. So we stayed within our block. But up and down President Street was OK. So I could go from one end of President Street to the other end. It was OK. But -- and even to Carroll Street, Union Street, Carroll Street, Crown Street, Montgomery Street, and then Empire Boulevard. Really, Empire Boulevard; you're going down into, you know, another neighborhood. I remember in our backyard listening to the roar of the crowd from Ebbets Field. Can you believe that? I knew when there was a home run because you would hear, "Hey!" You know, you would hear the people -- the roar of the crowd. So I remember that, growing up in, on President Street.

ALI: Did you ever get a chance to go to a game at Ebbets Field?

LEWIS: Nope, I never did. My father loved baseball, but I never went. And -- but my husband just asked me. He said, "Oh, did you ever go bowling?" And I said, "Yeah, I used to bowl." At this bowling alley called Freddie Fitzsimmons Bowling Alley, Alley. And that -- Freddie Fitzsimmons was one of the baseball players from that team. And it was located right near Ebbets Field. And so when I was growing up -- when the -- there's an apartment building living— down there. And so that was like a really fancy place to, to -- that was like an, a lovely place to move to. So—

ALI: So one of the things you said, your grandmother lived right behind or on the, the opposite side of the 770 -- the -- the headquarters of the Lubavitch community. Tell me, if you can, anything about your experiences with members of that community when you were growing up.

LEWIS: OK. All right, because I hear a lot of -- I hear a lot of negative West Indian/ Jewish dialogue narrative going on, and I will tell you that when I -- when I was first --

ALI: When you said you hear that, you hear that --

LEWIS: Well—

ALI: -- where?

LEWIS: Well -- I mean, when people -- when I tell people I grew up in Crown Heights, they always associate with the problems that the Caribbean and the, the Jewish people have. And they never -- they don't even know what I'm talking about when I say, well, "I don't know, you know, we actually used to get along with the Jewish people very well." It's -- both cultures had what I call migrations, OK, or different groups came in. So when you say the Lubavitchers— now, when we— when my grandmother lived behind that synagogue, it was not the Lubavitchers. It was the main synagogue for the Hasidic Jewish people. And when I first -- I'll give you my first memory of moving in our home on President Street. We were -- I was standing on the stoop, and hundreds of these Jewish men and boys with their black coats and black hats would go, walk through the neighborhood on the way to that synagogue. And then hundreds of mothers and babies would be following them. And back then, they did not drive. They did not have televisions, phones. They didn't -- they were different. They were the early, old school; the early, early, old school Hasidic Jews. Now, beside them -- this is what I'm telling you. There was three different -- I would say three of four different kinds of Jewish people that I grew up with. Now, in the local bakery, there were the Auschwitz survivors, and they had tattoos on their arms. These were the people who worked in the shops. And the bakery store that we used to go to all the time on Albany Avenue between Union Street and President Street, was a little bakery, and it was run by these Hasidic Jews. They had the Auschwitz Jewish ladies as the people who worked there. And I could tell even then that they were different from the Hasidic Jews. So now you have these European Auschwitz survivors. Then you had the Mrs. Markowitz and the regular Jewish kids that lived in the neighborhood. They were just like lower class, middle class, regular New York Jewish people. They had been here for years. They lived in an apartment building right there. They were like the predominant Jewish community. And then you had people like my best friend Meg Rubenstein's dad. He was a doctor. And I think his brother was a congressman. So --

and then, you know, Jacob Javits lived across the street. Shirley Chisholm lived across the street. So we -- I could tell that there were different types of people who were so-called Jews. Ok, later, the Maccabees came, and the Lubavitchers came. That was later. And that kind of happened, you know, over time. So it was like -- and we got along very well with -- I'm saying in early times. So when we -- my brother and I, Sydney, my middle brother -- we would stand there on the stoop and watch the Jewish people walk through the neighborhood, because they only walked, and it was like a whole en masse thing. It was like a phenomenon to see, because they would be on both sides of the street and it would be hundreds of them that would just be walking and walking and walking. And I believe it was part of their religion that they had to walk. It wasn't like they could just jump in a taxi. Like they have taxi cabs now, and, and vans and all that or drive -- they didn't do that back then. And they -- they dressed a certain way and all of that. And I remember my brother thought that President Street was named for them. Because he thought they all looked like Abraham Lincoln, President Abraham Lincoln [laughter]. And so he was like, "Why -- when are we going to back home, you know, to Harlem?" And he was like, you know, "I like President Street because it's all of these presidents all over the place," you know? And I -- I -- you know, we joke about it now, because, you know, I said, "Well, why did you call it -- why did you call them presidents?" He says, "Think about it." He says, "We were little kids, and to us, they looked like Abraham Lincoln." You know, with the tall black hat and the big black coat and the beards and things. So, I said, "Yeah, I can see how you would think that." Yeah—

ALI: So tell me --

LEWIS: So—

ALI: Tell me about your experience. Why -- why did you go to St. Matthew's and not to the public school? Do you know why?

LEWIS: Well, I think that -- I think that my parents felt that a Catholic school would be a better school. And I think a lot of Black families did that, because— as you know— the Catholic schools in Brooklyn; we had Black Catholic schools and we had White

Catholic schools. I mean, if -- if you guys were— at the Brooklyn Historical Society, you know— were to look into that, you'll see it was like that. There are certain schools that were kind of known. But -- although, St. Matthew's wasn't totally Black. It was a mixed school. It was, you know, we had Italian kids and Irish kids and Spanish kids, so it was a mixed up school. And so I think that my parents felt that this -- Catholic schools -- and you did get a better education. There was more discipline; you had to wear a uniform, everything. And actually my claim to fame is that I survived Catholic, a Catholic school education. Because in school, even back then in public school, they could beat you. They could yell at you. They could shame you. They could slap you. The -- you know, you were inspected. Your hands, your clothes -- you were inspected because we wore uniforms. They checked your collar; they checked your socks, your shoes. You had to be correct. So just think -- I mean, that's a -- it's like that, I know, in the Caribbean where -- and I think that's what appealed to my mother was like this is the way it is. It's like, when you go to school, you respected the teacher, you respected yourself. You went there to learn, you learn your lesson. And so -- and so -- but I would say this. One time, Sister Margaret Mary said to me -- I think I was in the fourth grade. She said to me -- and I was always the top in my class too, smartest one in the whole school. Always straight A's, always one-hundreds; even with the extra credit I'd get 115, that kind of thing. And I was -- I had the kind of mother that if I got a 95, she would say, "Well, where's the other five points?" Right? And then, if I say, "Well, the teacher said read chapter one and two," she would say, "Oh, no. You read up to chapter 10, so that when you go to class, you know as much as the teacher." So that's the kind of upbringing I had. So it was very focused on education. So anyway, my grandmother -- my Chinese grandmother from Trinidad comes to school, takes me to school, picks me up, everything. Even though she lives in Chinatown, but she stays with us during the week, or maybe after work or whatever. I guess she was -- she was my gra-- my babysitter, too. So she picked me up, and then Sister Margaret Mary asked me one day, she said, "Who is that Chinese lady who picks you up every day?" So I said, "Oh, that's my grandmother." And then she said to me, "Oh, no wonder you're so smart." Right?

So I told this story to friends later in life, and they said, “Oh, that’s so racist.” And, “How did you feel?” And I said, “To be honest, I felt -- I did not feel insulted.” I knew exactly what she meant, because there were some unruly kids in class that didn’t do their work, and she was saying all the Chinese kids were smart, and I was just as smart as them. So I wasn’t offended. But in a way, it is a racist thing, because she was saying, "Well, you’re a little Black girl, and you’re just as smart as the other kids. And you’re not like the rest of those Black kids, who are dumb," you know? And so I didn’t -- I didn’t feel offended. But, you know, when I -- whenever I share that story, people would say, “Oh, that’s such a racist thing.” And they were racist. The -- the nuns were, were racist. Because I remember thinking that I wanted to be a nun. And -- and -- and the nun said that I couldn’t be a nun, because I was a colored girl. And -- but I didn’t believe her, anyway. I said, “If I want to be a nun, I can be a nun.” You know, I remember thinking to myself. So -- so I really -- I really felt that when I -- when I got finished with St. Matthew’s, and when I went to Wingate, which is a public high school— now, Wingate is another story, because Wingate had been already going through— my older brother went to Wingate. So -- and he was part of the first group of Black kids to go to Wingate. And I don't know if people realized that Wingate used to be an all-White school. And it was one, one of the top schools in Brooklyn. And it still was when I got there. But when I -- OK, when I went to Wingate, at--

ALI: So this is ’65?

LEWIS: Mm-hmm, and I was a freshman. I was a freshman, because St. Matthew’s went up to the eighth grade. And a lot of the kids at Wingate came there after junior high school, so they came as tenth graders. So there was always a small group of ninth graders. So I was part of that group. But I realized that this is going to be easy, because when I got to Wingate, I -- I had straight A’s. I was very -- I had ready everything. I had done all of that work in the eighth grade, in the sixth grade, actually. The work that I had as a ninth grader at Wingate I had already done in the sixth grade at St. Matthew’s. So in that sense -- in terms of math, science, English, literature, and geography, I was up on everything. I knew everything, you know. I read all of those

books, even though the books were missing a lot of chapters about Black history and Latino history, Caribbean history. And -- but all of those history missing chapters I got at home anyway, because I come from that kind of family. I'm in that generation. I'm 65 years old. So, we learn a lot of our culture and history at home. And people like John Hope Franklin and my neighbors who were, you know, as I said, my grandmother graduated from college, so, you know, we were around educated people all the time. So we, you know, had libraries and books in our homes and everything, so we -- I knew history. So -- and that would get me in trouble, because I can always argue, "No, that didn't really happen," and, you know, "and the, the slaves were not happy," and "Africa is not a dark continent," and all that ki-- all that kind of stuff I remember experiencing, and --

ALI: So what kinds of things did you do when you weren't in school when you were growing up in Crown Heights?

LEWIS: OK. So the -- I was just -- knowing that I was going to meet with you today, I was thinking about how I had -- I was a girl scout. I was sent -- like, I went through a Black Catholic education. I also was in a Black Girl Scout Troop. And the Black Girl Scouts are different from the White Girl Scouts, and I never knew that until I, later in life, after having been a journalist and worked in, in the communications and different non-profits and I had an opportunity where I was the communications director for the Girl Scouts here in New York and Suffolk County. And I couldn't believe what the little white -- and it was an all-White Girl Scouts. And I couldn't believe what the little White girls would get badges for. And I was like, we would never get a badge like that in the Black Girl Scouts. You know, because they would make a little basket or they'd draw a picture and they'd a little badge, where we really had to do things. We really had to go in the community. We had to, like, wash a building. We had to read stories to little children. We had to take care of old people. We had to paint a wall, or we had to clean a basement. We had to clean a whole block that was covered with debris. I mean, we actually did real community work. And so that was one thing. So --

ALI: Your troop was, was based in, in Crown Heights, or it --

LEWIS: No, actually my troop was at the -- it was called First AME Zion Church, and it was on MacDonough Street. And this -- to show you how community was -- Mama Brown and Daddy Brown -- that's Dr. Aaron Brown, and he was once the president of Albany College, in -- a Black college. And he was also vice, one of the first vice presidents at LIU. Anyway, his wife, Mama Brown -- we'd call her Mama Brown -- she was a teacher and a professor. And that was her church. And she just saw me, and said, "You know, my granddaughter goes to— a girl scout— And would you like to go to?" And that's the kind of thing that happened in, when I was growing up, where people cared about you. If they -- so when people went away or whatever and I didn't have anything to do or what -- people really said, "Oh, what's your daughter doing? Oh, maybe, OK. Well why don't we, we bring your daughter with my daughter and well do things together?" That kind of thing happened all the time and that, I believe, contributed to my, you know, love of knowledge and community and, and helping people, and all of that. So I was a community activist and a community volunteer from the time I could remember.

ALI: And what church was this?

LEWIS: This is at First AME Zion Baptist Church. First AME Zion -- it's actually a Methodist Episcopal church. It's on MacDonough Street, First AME Zion. And I looked it up last night to see if it still existed, and it does.

ALI: Now -- now, did you go to that church?

LEWIS: No. I just belonged to the girl scouts there. And speaking of: Did I go to that church? That's another thing. I went to a lot of churches. And because I come from a multicultural family, I also -- I also went to the Buddhist temple on Canal Street, because my grandmother being a Buddhist, so I would go with her, and we'd sit there, and, you know, and I was wondering when the action was going to happen. And, you know -- and a Buddhist temple is very quiet. And I would sit there like, "Yeah, OK. Is anything going to happen here?" You know, because I also went to a Catholic church, and then everybody on my block, on President Street, they went to different churches. And they went to Cornerstone Baptist Church, they went to St. Phillip's Church on Decatur Street. They -- oh, just so many churches. Reverend Townsley had a church.

Everybody -- everybody -- the church was a very big, important part of my background and just upbringing. Just -- everybody went to church. And we went to each other's churches. But I noticed that the Catholic Church was not all of that friendly, because I did bring a girlfriend of mine from -- my neighbor -- to church with me, and I remember that she was frowning on, on me, like, "Why did you bring her?" And, "She's not Catholic." That kind of thing. So I -- I did learn a little bit about, you know, how Catholics were so strict about being Catholic.

ALI: Now, were you -- as far as the -- the -- the -- the Catholic Church was concerned, were you considered Catholic? Had you gone through the rituals of --

LEWIS: I actually --

ALI: -- Catholicism?

LEWIS: Yeah, I actually did. I went through -- I actually went through all of the sacraments. I had my first communion, and then I had my confirmation, and, you know, and I went to -- I did all of the sacraments that you do, yeah. And so that's why I call myself a recovering Catholic, because I haven't been going to Catholic church ever since. But -- but I -- I feel that having a Caribbean background, I think that it especially gave me a good sense of about tolerance for various spirituality. Because even today, you go to the Caribbean, especially -- especially Trinidad. We all know each other's holiday. We know the Ramadan; we know Christmas. We just know and tolerate everybody's holiday, and we know about it. It's not foreign to us. We know what everybody does. We know what -- all of the foods they eat. We know the songs and the candles and the -- we just understand it and live with it, and we understand it. And so, I grew up with that sense of tolerance. And so I would say that my sense of religion is one thing. I learned early about religion and spirituality and what the difference was. And -- and I -- I would say that on the Buddhist side -- my Chinese grandparents -- I would ask them like, you know, why -- "Grandma, why don't you go to church?" And she was like, "My church is in my heart." And I was like, "Well, oh." You know? That shut me down, you know, it was like, I don't have to go to church to be spiritual and for God to -- whatever. I don't have to do that. You know, just because you're doing that doesn't make you

better. So -- so I -- I learned early about those kinds of things that you can't really judge people because of the church that they went to or the religion that they had. And I was also -- I was going to say because of my Jewish background growing up in Crown Heights, I realized that I'm very Jewish in that I grew up with Jewish people. So I know a lot of holidays like everything shuts down on Friday and Saturday and opens on Sunday. And when I -- when I left New York and say, moved to California, I realized that when I met Jewish people who grew up out there and not in Brooklyn, that they -- they told me themselves, "You know what? You're more Jewish than me." Because I know what it's like to go in a kosher shop. I know how to cook kosher food. I know how to clean a kosher home. You know, I know what a kosher home is like. Because I lived with kosher people, and I understand about, you know: Have dairy here, separate dairy, separate meat; separate all of those things. I understand that. I lived that. I saw that. I witnessed that. I know that you're not going to eat lobster and shrimp in a kosher home. When you go in a kosher fish market; Rabbi Raskin's son has a big, has about 20 big fish in a, in a tub. And you pick the fish you want. He has a wooden hammer. He takes -- it's still alive. He has a hammer; he hits it on the head, and then chops the head off and cleans it and gives it to you. It's not like, you know, it's not like going in your fish market or -- and Bernstein's, what we call Bernstein's -- it was a, like a, the early A & P. And -- it's on Kingston Avenue between Eastern Parkway and Lincoln Place. That's where everybody would go get their groceries. That's where we got our groceries. And so that's why I'm saying to you that we actually lived very peacefully with the Jewish people. And I'm saying people like my family; southerners and Caribbean people -- we lived very well together. We lived with each other; we supported each other, we helped each other, we cared about each other, we were friends with each other. Yet, we lived our separate lives, but we did not have the kinds of problems that began to happen as the neighborhood changed. And when we, we say the neighborhood changed, it's just that different people were moving in. Not only the Caribbean people were different, and the Black people were different, the Latino people were different. Even the Jewish people were different. And like I remember Mrs.

Moskowitz, she let me know, those people are not like -- I'm not like those people. You know, it was like she was trying --

ALI: How did she let you know?

LEWIS: She was just letting me know that, like, when the Lubavitchers and the Maccabees came in, then she was like, "Look. I don't know. I'm just as surprised as you about these people, OK?" She said, "I'm from, you know, I'm from Brooklyn here, and I grew up here." And, and she's not Orthodox, and she's not Hasidic, so she was just like I was. She was like, "Look. You know, this is -- these people need their own protection, and this is what they're doing." And so, you know. And that's what I was saying. It was the beginning of white flight and black flight. And I witnessed two white flights and two black flights in Brooklyn, in Crown Heights, on President Street. So -- because after a while -- after a while, the White people started moving away. And then -- and then over time, they actually moved back, you know, like they're doing now. And the same thing with the Black people. The -- the more bourgeois Black families moved out of, moved off of President Street. Where did they move? They moved to Westchester and Connecticut. And -- and the -- and then the -- the White people, like say East New York, they totally left, you know. A lot of White people just left, and then they came back. And then new people came in. So, as I was saying to you before about the Caribbean people who came and stayed with us -- they were sponsored, but there was a point where my mother didn't, did not -- our home was open to a lot of people. I would say it was like maybe a five-year time frame where -- or maybe seven years -- where we had people in our home and then they would leave. And that's why I was saying there was a little bit of that bourgeois kickback thing going on, because that's when I got that sense about culture and class thing where I realized that some of the bourgeois people -- families -- were saying, looking at us like we were bringing down the neighborhood, because we let these people in our home. And it was like -- I remember one of our neighbor's mom -- one of the mom's said to me, "Who are those people in your house?" You know. And I remember I didn't know what to say. You know when a, an adult addresses you, you -- and you know that you're not supposed to tell them anything?

And -- and then I said -- oh, I said, "I have to go ask my mother something. I'll be right back." And then I told my mother that the lady asked who were they in the house. And then she was like, "Well, you tell her if she wants to know who is in your house, that she needs to come talk to me, and that she has no, no business asking a child adult questions like that." So what am I supposed to say to Miss Lady, OK? So [laughter] I had a script. Anytime anybody asked you, "Who are these people?" You say, "That's family." And she said, "I don't care what color they are." You know, "That's family." So we had Spanish people from Guatemala living with us. We had dark-skinned Black people from Alabama living with us. We had Chinese West Indian people li-- and whoever they were, they're family. That's my aunt, that's my uncle, that's my cousin. Period. And that's the end of that story. And that's what my mother would say, "That's your script. If anybody asks you, that's your family." So—

ALI: One of the groups you've mentioned are the Maccabees. And this was the security patrol that the Hasidic community developed in the '60s. Did you ever have any encounter or stories about the Maccabees?

LEWIS: Not with the Maccabees. Yes, I did, and not -- not -- I didn't personally, but my -- my aunt did, who was, you know— I told you my grandmother lived in the house right behind the temple, right? And my grandmother lived there, and then she passed away. And then my aunt and her children and gr-- grandchildren would be there. So this is a different group of people, OK? And so my gran-- my aunt and my cousin were having a domestic— disagreement, we'll put this— an argument. And -- mother and son. And I believe my cousin either threatened her or even did hit her, and she called the cops. And -- but she didn't call the cops and said that her son attacked her. She said somebody was attacking her and a Jewish woman that lived there, near her. And they were there -- the police came -- the Maccabees were there, and so she did a false -- what do you call it -- false—

ALI: Report?

LEWIS: —report. And she ended up being put in jail. And so that's how I -- that's the, a brief encounter with how the Maccabees were, you know --

ALI: Had you -- I mean, what did you know about the Maccabees? Or did -- did -- what did people tell you, or did you know to --

LEWIS: We were fear-- we were fearful of them, but we were also -- I tell you what -- we were fearful of them. But you know what? We felt like it really made our, our street safe. We felt that -- and I have to tell you -- I felt that I lived in the safest neighborhood in the world. Nothing was going to happen on, to any of us, because they were patrolling all over the place. And so I felt like -- I felt safe, really, even though they weren't really there to protect us. They -- I understood that they were there to protect themselves from us. But -- because they did view us, the Black people, as like the predators or something. But I -- my parents, we felt that, you know what? No one's coming in this neighborhood causing any problem; not on this street, not on President Street. Because these Maccabees and these Lubavitcher people have this covered. We are covered for safety. There's nothing going to happen. So when that, that incident happened— later on— many years later; the little boy getting -- the -- run over by the ambulance and all of that, I -- I know about that too, but --

ALI: So -- so I'm interested. You said you were fearful, but also felt protected. What caused you fear?

LEWIS: Well, because we knew that they had a -- we knew that they were -- I guess we could say -- I guess you could say we knew that they had a kind of, like, look. They were looking at us like we were the predators in -- so I think that this is something that all Black people, people of color, feel. See, we can -- we live life by interacting with everyone. And I think— you and I talked about this. We, as people of color and Black people, we have to interact with everybody. And so we have that, that experience of interacting with everybody. And we know that we are accepted or not accepted, and we're treated fairly or not treated fairly. And we -- during the course of the day, we've had so many mic-- micro aggressions, as they say, that you have to pick and choose. So you have to like, you know, a lot of it goes with the territory. So, but we understand that the -- the -- the -- the Orthodox and the Hasidic Jewish community, they live away from society. They live in their own world. We understand that. And we know that those

people, the Maccabees and them, are really there for them. It's not like I would go to them and say, "Oh, I'm having trouble; this person is trying to rob me." I would never go to them, and— But we actually -- and we can talk about policing. We had a bad experience that I witnessed where my brothers, coming from St. Matthew's— so they were little kids; I think I was six, my brother Sydney was seven, and my brother Johnny was maybe ten— and we were half near my mother. We were half a block behind them, and they were skipping along, and then we saw these two cop cars swerve onto the sidewalk to block them, and threw these two little boys against the wall, and spread their legs, and pulled out their pockets and lifted up their shirts. And -- and this is my brothers, right? Seven and ten. And then -- and that's when I learned that my mother was a marathon runner, OK? Because she booked. She was running. And I -- she was like leaping and running. And I was like, "Whoa!" And we ran up there. My mother was like, "What is going on? Those are my little boys. What are you doing?" And then the c-- the cop -- in the cop car was a little Jewish lady from the synagogue. And then she comes out and she says, she yells at the police too. She says, "What are you doing? Those are little babies. I told you I was robbed by two teenagers." So, that's what I mean. That was a clear incident of how: You're a Black kid, a Black -- two Black boys who were roughed up, thrown ag-- my mother was hit and thrown to the floor. And if it wasn't for this Jewish lady, who they had in the car -- they were driving her around; trying to find the teen-- two Black teenager who stole her bag. But they took these two kids, my brother, my two brothers, and knocked my mother to the floor. And -- and my brother, who is now, you know, just a year -- he's a still alive. Sydney, he remembers that. He said, "Yeah, and the Jewish lady said, 'What are you doing? They're like babies.'" And I -- what did they have in their pockets? My brother -- because it was right there on the sidewalk. My brother had— believe it or not— Sydney had his turtle, a little baby turtle. And he had some bottle caps. And my brother had -- he had caps -- there used to be cap guns. Well, he had just a roll of caps. It's like a red roll with little dots on it. He had caps and some baseball cards. And that was thrown on the floor. So that was one bad experience, right?

ALI: What was the conversation that you had as a family after that incident?

LEWIS: I don't remember the conversation. I don't think that we even talked about it. I -- I don't think that my mother talked about it with me. Right? That was a conversation that she and the other adults had about the police and the -- and you have to understand -- my parents, especially my mother, were civil rights advocates, activists. We had already -- my mother was already a campaigner for Shirley Chisholm for Congress before she moved to President Street. So we were already -- we were kids growing up during the Civil Rights era. And my friends that was just here a few minutes ago, that went to the Wingate High School, was talking about, you know, *Brown v. Brown* had been passed just 10 years earlier. So we were in the middle of schools being desegregated, which they should be doing right now in 2017, because all the schools are segregated. But back then, it was all of the schools were White schools. And, you know, we --

ALI: So -- so -- I mean, so you --

LEWIS: So that, that conversation --

ALI: How did you -- so how did you process this? You just witnessed your brothers being thrown up against the wall.

LEWIS: That's right. I know, and I -- that's what I'm saying. It's like, I think that it went into, into the recess of my mind. It's just like learning about my uncle's lynching in Mississippi, when I was trying to figure out, like, "Why don't you want to go back down to Mississippi, Daddy?" And he's not really saying why. And then what happened was that Emmett Till happened. And that magazine, *Jet*, and mag-- *Ebony* magazine was in every home that I grew up in. And I remember saying to my dad, "Dad, did this ever happen to anybody in our family?" Because I don't know if you've ever seen the picture of that boy. It was horrible. It was the most horrible thing. And that was something that we heard about all our lives, right? My mother was always saying to my brothers, "You know what happened to Emmett Till. I want you boys to be careful out there." That was something that, I think if you asked any Black boy who's my age, they'll tell you, that their mother and grandmother told them that. No matter where

they are, down South, New York, California, they all talk about: You know what happened to Emmett Till. So -- all right, so my dad told me, yes, that happened. I said, "Oh, really? What happened?" And he said, "Well, my grandfather's brother was lynched." And so, OK, I'm a little kid when I hear this. And I pr-- I did not process it. I just said, "Oh." And it's like, kind of like when my Jewish friends, when they find out that their grandfather had survived Auschwitz. It's like, or their grandfather didn't survive Auschwitz. It's like, they told you, and you don't really know how to process it. And then you process it later. How I processed that lynching was that as a journalist, I looked it up in the, on the internet. And believe it or not, all of the lynchings that happened is all there. So there are 10 stories about my uncle's lynching. So -- with him begging for his life, how they dragged him through the street -- the whole thing. And then I got re-traumatized by it, by the knowledge and how, whatever happened. So, what happened to my brothers, we're processing that now. My brother who was a victim, he's full of grace and forgiveness in that he says, "Well, you know, everybody's hating on the Jewish people in Crown Heights, but that Jewish lady saved us. Because that cop could have beat us and beat our mother and, and kept going, and nothing would have happened." But that lady stood up and said, "Wait, those are babies. Stop it." And then they'd stopped. And then we just went on our way. And God bless her. And so my brother feels indebted to this Jewish lady that really stopped them from being beat up, because that kind of thing happened, as it is happening now where, you know, the policing -- what they're calling the policing in the Black community. But we weren't in a Black community. We were still in a mixed community. It's just that there was this anxiety about all these Black people coming in from the South and from the Caribbean and all of that. There was that attitude, so there was that fear.

ALI: So while you were a student at Wingate in 1968, there was a big controversy in the school system nearby, Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Do you remember anything about this, the teachers' strike?

LEWIS: Yeah, I do remember that. Right. When that happened, when -- when Reverend Galamison -- first of all -- as you know, Reverend Galamison lived three doors down

from me. He -- I grew up with his son Corky and Mrs. Galamison, Gladys Galamison. So this was the height of civil rights and desegregating the schools and that issue about what happened in Ocean Hill-Brownsville affected everyone, including me and my friends at Wingate. And we went on -- when they went on strike, we left and we protested. I remember we -- a group of us -- 10 of us met in my m-- my parents' dining room, and we had like a meeting to draw signs and have, for our picket signs. And I remember my mother was right there helping us, you know, with the words that we were using. And I remember my sign said, "We want teachers, not politicians." And because we -- we felt that we were being -- we felt that were in the, like pawns in a chess game. The -- the teachers had their union, and they felt that this was when you were having community boards coming in, and wanting to decide what's happening in the schools. And from what I understand, the community board just basically fired all of those Jewish teachers. Well, they happened to be Jewish, but they were White teachers, and said the community board will hire its own teachers. And that was all an experiment, but that really changed New York. That really -- what happened in Brooklyn really, I think changed New York. So I remember that time as a time when education, civil rights, all of things was coming to -- that was my activism, I would say, in terms of where I was walking on a picket line. I had a sign that, you know, that I drew myself, I made myself, and we were -- and I had my sign that said, you know, "We want teachers, not politicians." And then -- believe it or not -- I don't know where they are now, but the -- a lot of the teachers -- most of the teachers were Jewish teachers that I had. And a lot of them were radical. They were not like, you know, like these middle-class teachers. They were radical teachers, like, you know. So I was concerned that -- because I was in that precollege track -- I was concerned that I wasn't going to be able to do my, do my Regents Exam, and also do my PSATs. And so these teachers -- these radical Jewish White teachers set up like an alternative school, believe it or not. And when I -- whenever I talk to my old high school friends, I say, "Well, am I -- am I dreaming, or did that really happen?" But -- so we actually -- these teachers crossed the line, right? Because the teachers were on strike, you know. So they actually set up, like

a kind of, community pop-up school at -- at -- it was at Polytechnic Institute, Downtown Brooklyn, where MetroTech is. I don't even think it's called Polytechnic. But anyway, they had -- and also at City College. And they came from City College, and some of them came from the public schools, these Jewish teachers, these radical Jewish teachers. And they -- the kids who were trying to get their GEDs, they were giving them GED. The kids who -- like for me, I was trying to get my Regents; I was getting drilled for my Regents, for the geometry Regents, the -- this Regents, that Regents. The kids who were trying to study for their PSATs, we were having that. And so they had like -- and also on, on Saturdays too, we could go to school, and we had these volunteer teachers who actually were teaching us little Black kids who, you know, really wanted to keep focused on our schoolwork. And so -- and also, I think I was also already involved in a Model Cities Program. I don't know if you heard about the Model Cities Program.

ALI: Tell me about that.

LEWIS: Well, the Model Cities Program was part of LBJ's kind of poverty, anti-poverty— so it's the anti-poverty movement. And -- OK.

ALI: Put it so that when you move your hand, it doesn't -- OK, yes.

LEWIS: And it was because of the poverty and of all of the problems in all of the urban cities, and so there was this experiment. And I think there were certain cities that were chosen to have a Model Cities Program. So the part that I, I joined was, was a kind of an education. You know, all of it was education, but some of it was also for preschool, preschool stuff, and some of it was even geared to helping senior citizens. But anyway, so I went to -- the Model Cities Program that I was involved with was administered by actually a Trinidadian man. His name was Horace Morancie. And you can look him up. He was the first head of it. And it was an experiment, but it was -- I loved it because it was kids from all over the city -- Black kids, mostly -- from all over the city. We went to college while we were in high school. So therefore, I was already -- I was going to P-- Polytechnic Institute studying physics and chemistry and Latin and all of this stuff, while I was in high school. And as you heard, my friend Raquel said that

even when she got bused to Wingate, because very few people realize that they actually bused Black kids to Wingate, but there was a, a time frame when they did that. They vetted -- and there's that word. We were vetted -- the Black kids were vetted for the kids who would be the most likely to succeed. So of course, a lot of the kids came from my block on President Street, the sons and daughters of doctors, of lawyers, and professors. Even though the program was an anti-poverty program, it was really set up for poverty kids. And we weren't exactly poverty kids, but there were a lot of poverty kids in that program. And when I say poverty kids, I mean kids who don't really have two parents who are working, kids who might be on Welfare, kids who may live in the public housing projects, and kids who had not traveled like we did, and didn't have country homes, and libraries in their house. As -- as I was saying to you -- on President Street, even though I was a -- I was living among these people, I was more like a working-class girl. So I helped people, meaning I -- I babysat. Not all my girlfriends were babysitters. So for instance -- like I b-- I used to babysit for a little girl, Dr. Carrington's daughter. And Mrs. Carrington and Lena Horne were best friends; they grew up together. So when I went over to take care or help Mrs. Carrington, she would have these parties. And one party that she had was almost like a regular thing. And I would say it would be kind of like a pop-up fashion party. And that's where I met celebrities and famous people; there and at Dr. Brown's house. But at her house was -- you would see celebrities and whatnot. And what would be going on? This Jewish couple and this very grand, Black gentleman would bring these clothes in these trunks from Saks Fifth Avenue, Bonwit Teller, Bergdorf. And they'd have these clo-- clothing and fabulous clothes, evening gowns, minks, jewelry. Just fabulous clothes, because these women were fabulous women and went to fabulous, fabulous events. But guess what? They could not shop in Saks Fifth Avenue and try on those clothes, because they were Black people. See we fo-- we forget that. And, because I was wondering, like why with these parties? And then -- later in life -- I didn't even know this. Later in life, it was like, well, why do you think Mrs. Robinson was over there buying her— a party dress? Why do you think--? Mrs. Jackie Robinson, I'm talking about. Why do you

think, you know, Mahalia Jackson was there? Why do you think these people, you know -- it's because you, you know, you may be a famous world star, but you really cannot shop in -- so where did you go? How did I meet Jackie Robinson, his wife, his children, and Roy Campanella? Why? Because they were staying in these, in these very wonderful Black successful people's homes. Why? Because they couldn't stay in hotels, that's why. And back then, we didn't go to restaurants either. You know, we didn't go to hotels, and we didn't go to restaurants. And I lived through this. And I'm still relatively young. But I realize that -- yeah. It's like, still to this day, it's like when people travel and they want to stay with people, I realize my generation is like, "No, I don't want to say with anybody, OK?" Because I had to do that, and so like, "No, no, don't come stay with me either, because I don't want to have all your people in my house, because I can't take it." You know?

ALI: So Mrs. Carrington, that was her name?

LEWIS: Mm-hmm.

ALI: And her house was also on President Street?

LEWIS: Mm-hmm. And her husband was a doctor, and I used to babysit for her. I also had a paper route for, on that block there. And I delivered the *Herald American*. Do you -- ever heard of that paper? And that was Dr. Carrington's paper and, and *The New York Times*. And it's not like a real paper route, because it was just maybe 10 people that wanted the paper. So I would go to the corner store— Mersh was his, what we called him, and he was a Jewish candy store owner. And all of the stores were owned by Jewish people and Italian people, on Kingston Avenue, on Albany Avenue. So -- and -- and I would get the papers. And he would just give them to me, because he knew I was getting them for those people. And I didn't like give him money and, you know, it was more like trust back then. Because how did he know? I could just take them and not pay them. But, you know, so I'd tell him, "I'm here to get Dr. Carrington's and Mrs. Holder's paper," and, you know, these people. Mr. Perry and Ms. Parish, and all of the people that I was getting their paper. And I just would get it, and then I would get like a little quarter or something. So, you know.

ALI: OK. So you graduated in 1969. And then you went off where?

LEWIS: And I went to Smith College. So how did I go to Smith College? OK. Now, I had intended to go to a Black school. And in fact, I was going to go to Bennett College, or Howard, because my best friend Joan went to Bennett, and then I had several people in my family went to Howard. And -- and I had -- at Wingate, I was, you know, top of my class. I had a very high class rank. And I think I was number 3 out of 3,000 or something like that, but, you know, I wasn't the valedictorian, but I was like just almost there. And Mrs. McCatty, she was the one Black guidance counselor there. She was not my guidance counselor. I had a guidance counselor, a nice Jewish lady, who was not particularly interested in me. She didn't really care about me, but she didn't dislike me, and she didn't like me— whatever, you know. I was just like on her list. And she didn't ask what I was doing, what was I— She didn't care— but, whatever. So anyway -- so that was my plan, was to go a Black college. So then Ms. McCatty -- and I was in AP classes in Wingate. And I loved Wingate. And I have to tell you, they called it the banjo school back then, because it's shaped like a banjo. And I don't -- I don't know if people realize this. It's long and then it's round. And it was a very musical school. It's almost like a music and arts school so -- and we had plays, and sing, and assemblies, and speakers. And so Ms. McCatty was in a, a black -- a Black guidance counselor -- and she was in a Black sorority, and she was friends with Ruby Dee. And so we had a lot of exposures. Growing up, I had a lot of exposures to celebrities and things because I lived on President Street and lived among celebrities. And my grandmother was in the music business, and so I was around celebrities, like Paderewski was my grandmother's good, good friend. And he's a famous classical musician. And the mayor was her friend, so he'd come to her house for dinner and stuff like that. But anyway -- so -- what was I talking about?

ALI: Your guidance counselor.

LEWIS: Oh, wait -- oh, my guidance counselor. So [laughter] she said, "What colleges are you applying to?" So I told her, I said, "Well, I think the, you know, Bennett or Howard, and, you know, maybe Cornell, I don't know." I was kind of like not even sure, because

I didn't really know. And I knew that my parents were working class parents and p-- you know, so I knew that whatever, wherever I was going, I was going to have to do it myself. And -- because my mother wasn't working in the hospital yet. So my father was retired by then, because my father is like 20 years older than my mother. So I had an older father. So he was already retired when I was in high school. When I got in high school, he was retired. And -- and he was in real estate and all that stuff, so he was busy with his buildings. But anyway -- so I said that. And she says, "Oh, no." You know, and I said, "What?" She said, "You're one of the smartest kids in the school, and you're going to Howard?" So, OK. Now, I don't want to say that she's anti-Black, but she was just -- that was at the time where schools like Yale and -- and Smith and Radcliffe and Harvard -- Black students were being admitted to these schools. So she says, "Oh, no. You have to apply to Harvard and Yale and all of this kind --" Well, those were men's schools at the time, but Radcliffe and Wellesley, and all of these schools. So I was surprised. I was like, "What?" And she said, "Oh, no. You have to do this." So she also had Ruby Dee come talk to us; all the Black kids who were in AP classes. And -- and -- no, I would say just a group of Black kids, because there was people not in AP. But she -- Ruby Dee talked to us about going to college, just about going to college. And that's another thing -- because I do college recruitment now for Smith, but I always talk to everybody, whether they're going to Smith or not, about going to college. I say, "You need to -- anybody ever talk to you about going to college?" Because I realized from that experience that we had people who actually came to our school and talked to us about going and getting a college education, even though it seemed farfetched for a lot of us. But we had people that talked to us. So, OK, Ms. McCatty said, "Oh, no. I will not have that. You are going to apply to all of these schools." So, she got me, what's called, a NAACP application voucher that covered the application fee. And she said, "You take this." And she had about 10 of them, and she gave them to me, and she gave me a list of schools. She said, "You'll apply to Radcliffe and Vassar, and Wellesley, Smith --" and all this stuff. And I wanted to go to -- Smith was my top one. And I got accepted there. So I didn't care about the other schools after I got

accepted to Smith, so I was so happy to go there. And I loved Smith too. So that's how I ended up going there.

ALI: OK. So we're going to kind of jump some time here to get back to Crown Heights. So you went off to college, you worked a bit as a journalist, as a teacher. Tell me about returning back to Crown Heights.

LEWIS: OK, yeah. Well, I would say: You know, when you go away to school, it was the first time -- I would say this: When I first went, when I went to Smith, I realized that I was a minority, OK? I had never been treated like a minority, because I grew up in New York -- so I mean, even though we are treated like minorities, but I didn't -- I didn't really understand. So the whole time I was at Smith, I was coming home on weekends. So a lot of things that was happening is either I was -- I saw it, or I saw it after it, or -- so -- I remember asking my mother, like, what's going on in the neighborhood. And so she would be telling me stories like the bodega is now Puerto Rican, it's not Jewish anymore, and the Koreans, you know, have the produce shop, and they sell flowers, and how nice it is, and how it's not all messed up, all jacked up the way it was before, because, you know, when you had -- and it's still like that now. When you go in a Korean grocer, everything is arranged in such an orderly, pretty way. And when you were early New York, 1950, '60, and you went into, you know, like the normal, regular local store, it was not set up like that. It would be all messed up, you know? And especially in a Black neighborhood, you wouldn't get the best stuff. And -- or the bread would be old, the tomatoes would be dented, the bananas would be half-black, stuff like that. So you started to notice that. So anyway, I remember saying to my mother, you know, like, "Oh, I miss --" I remember saying to her, because she was like, "You miss -- you miss the Puerto Ricans? You miss the Jewish people?" Like, because I'm up in Smith College now in Northampton, where it's like a different thing. It's New England, and it's waspy and all that, and they don't even know what Jewish people are, and all that. So I said, "I can't believe it, Ma. I miss the -- I miss New York. I miss the Jewish people. I miss the Hasidic Jews with the black hats and the curly, the c-- I miss all of that." And she was like, "I can't believe you miss it; I -- I want to leave." I remember

she was saying, "I want to leave." She said, "You know what? The White people, left; I want to leave too." And -- and then she was telling me about all of the Black people leaving on the block, you know? Like all of the very ritzy Black people that had chauffeurs and maids, Black maids. They had libraries in their homes, several cars, and houses in Martha's Vineyard, had a yacht, they belonged to the Yacht Club in Long Island and all that. Those people were leaving. And so the people who were left behind were the people who couldn't leave. And so my mother felt like -- she was like one of those people who couldn't -- you know, she was like left behind, even though she wasn't left behind, because the people who were— Those people on my mother's, on my parents' block are still there; the same people. So this -- you know, they didn't all leave. A lot of people left, but it's still very much— very lovely. So I guess I'm saying is that, you know, it went through two white flights, two black flights. Now it's going in -- but the -- the neighborhood still is a very stable neighborhood. That's what I love about it. And I used to sit on the stoop when I was a child, and dream about leaving. I remember that. I couldn't wait to leave, because my -- and my goal in life was to be a doctor on the Hope ship. You ever heard of that? Well, my -- my Trinidadian aunt was one of the first women of color doctors who was a doctor on this Hope ship. And it was a ship, like the Queen Mary, that was a floating hospital. And it still exists, but I think it's called the Floating Hospital. And it went around the world, and it visited different countries. And wherever it went, it took the people from those countries and would put them on the ship, give them the operation, you know, the heart, the broken legs, the brain surgery -- whatever they needed -- and then take care of them. And they would station in a particular country for a few months and move on. So that was my so-called dream, was to be a doctor on the Hope ship. And -- but that changed when I got to Smith, because even though I was pre-med and all that stuff, but when I got to Smith, I -- the first day of pre-med, they gave me a shark head and a fetal pig, and I thought I was going to die. I was like, "Oh, no." It was like my whole dream just said, "No, you don't! You don't want to do this." And so I said, "Oh, I must be -- maybe I just want to be a healer. Maybe I just want to, you know, heal through another way. That's not my

thing." So, yeah. So anyway -- so coming back to -- coming back to Crown Heights; it's been in different parts, because on weekends and stuff, and then, OK. So I graduate and I come back, and I move on over to 1457 Union Street. [Interview interrupted.]

ALI: What, what was --

LEWIS: But I remember -- I just want to say -- I remember before the West Indian parades started, and I -- you know, I know we want to go post college. But I want you to know, I remember white parades on Eastern Parkway. Before the West Indians came there, because the parade didn't come there until '69 or something. When I was growing up, we would go to the Memorial -- the -- all of the big parades, like the Veterans Parade and Memorial Day Parade. They were big parades. They called them Kings County parades, I think. And, because you could hear the drums on President Street. And soldiers, the Black soldiers, the old foreign -- veterans of foreign war soldiers, the WAACs, and all that -- I loved it. I just loved it. So, you know, I do remember growing up on President Street, and I remember the Franklin Avenue Shuttle. Do you remember that? You ever heard of it? Yeah?

ALI: I mean, I know it now.

LEWIS: Yeah.

ALI: But—

LEWIS: But I remember the Franklin Avenue Shuttle. And I want to go back also, when you were talking about my life, early life -- my earliest community work was working at the Home for Aged Colored People on St. John's and Kingston Avenue, where my mother was on the board of directors there. So -- and my job -- and I must have been six or seven -- my job was to the read the news -- to read the newspapers to the old people, and to do arts and crafts projects with them. So I was very steeped in that community service thing. Very -- that was what all kids did, everybody did. Everybody went to church; everybody volunteered in the community, all the time, every day. It was -- that's the way life was. OK. So I go to, go away to college, I come back, and—

ALI: What was it like --

LEWIS: And so --

ALI: -- experiencing the blackout when you were living in Crown Heights?

LEWIS: I was right on President Street when it happened. So -- well, what was it like? It was like -- just like anybody. There -- on President Street, it was very peaceful and calm. It was --

ALI: Why is that?

LEWIS: Well -- I mean, you know -- well, we didn't have any electricity, right?

ALI: Yeah.

LEWIS: We didn't have any lights. So --

ALI: But why -- I mean, so in elsewhere, in other parts of New York, and certainly in Central Brooklyn, there was a lot of fear of --

LEWIS: Yeah, rioting.

ALI: -- crime and --

LEWIS: There was -- there was --

ALI: Why do you think that didn't happen where you were living?

LEWIS: I think it didn't happen for where I was living because the people were in the safety of their homes and everything. But it was very peaceful and calm. We were -- what I remember is wondering where people were. We were wondering where everybody was. Because anybody that wasn't home, we were worried about them. And so that's my strongest memory of, of the blackout was, where was my mother, where was my father, where was my brother? And waiting for -- and then neighbors, like, have you heard? So we were all -- on my block -- and because well, we were still now living around the corner on Union Street. But, you know, my family's on President Street. So -- and we had flashlights, and, you know, and so that's what I kind of remember. We had flashlights and we were, you know, kind of like, have you heard from this person or that person? So there was that kind of anxiety wondering if everybody was safe. So -- but we -- we were hearing about riots and people breaking in stores, Downtown Brooklyn, and -- that's the other thing -- Downtown Brooklyn. I didn't talk about how where we shopped. Where we shopped in Crown Heights; we shopped on Kingston Avenue, and on Albany Avenue, and on Troy Avenue. There were stores there. And I -- my first job

was -- one of my earliest jobs was a kind of a special job. Me and my mother had this job, was— before the Maccabees and before the Lubavitchers— was helping this, some of the Jewish shopkeepers when the Sabbath came. They -- because they were so religious, they couldn't handle money, they couldn't turn off their lights, they couldn't do things. And we -- we were asked, my mother and I -- well, my mother mostly, but, and I would go with her and, to different Jewish ladies that we kind of helped, that we would do that for them. We would come in their home, we would turn off their light. We would collect the money from, you know, for, from the storekeeper, for the store and things like that. So there was a bakery and a tailor and a -- we even had a live chicken place. I'm talking serious kosher. We had live chickens on Union Street and Kingston Avenue. No, Union Street and Albany. It was -- and there was also live fish. That's the kosher fish store. There was a fresh dairy on Kingston and Eastern Parkway. I think there's a school there now, but all of those buildings were little shops. And so I -- I have very fond memories of my early childhood of getting along with everybody, and everybody caring about everybody. And then there was the -- as I said -- the -- the different groups of type of Black people that we lived among, and different kind of White people we lived among. And then, you know, going away to Smith was a very big deal for me. And that helped -- that helped me in terms of the people who didn't think I was good enough to be friends with, all of a sudden wanted to be friends with me. I thought that was interesting. And I remember learning about friendship, and I remember my mother used to talk about, oh, those, those are what you call fair weather friends. And you know how Caribbean people have these sayings all the time, you know? So I said, "What is that?" And she said, "Oh, they're only friends with you when it's good for them, you know?" And so -- anyway -- the -- the bourgeois families said they're going to go to the circus. And I was invited too. And then -- so I was sitting out on the stoop one day, and I saw all of the kids coming home, and they all had been to the circus. So that meant that I was left out, right? So -- so I was left out, and I was, remembered being very hurt. And then my mother was saying, you know, "That's OK, you know, don't worry. It wasn't them. It was their mothers, you know. They're looking

down on me, the mother --" my mother, "-- because I have all these people coming in the house." So I said, "Oh." And then she said, "Don't worry about that, because one day, they're all going to want to be your friend." And so I said, "Oh, OK." So -- but I wasn't really mad at my friends, you know, but anyway -- I'm just saying, those little things, those lessons you learn when you grow up in a, wherever you are. And so -- anyway -- so when I come back, I think that -- there's this sense of -- we had this party, a graduation party. And so that brought a lot of people to my house. It was almost like a wedding, my, my graduation party. I mean, I was going to --

ALI: That's a big deal.

LEWIS: It was a big deal. I mean, it was like even -- engraved invitations went out. It was like getting married. Because when I actually got married, I eloped. So -- I mean -- and, you know, whatever, so anyway -- so when I got graduation, it was a big deal. Yeah, and everybody on the block came. They were so proud of me. So I, you know, I really loved being back in New York, but then I started working and everything, so then -- and, you know, so -- I think that after that, I came back in the, in the '90s. And that's when I, you know -- I believe that I was on President Street when that accident happened. I believe I do, because I remember people coming to my house, and we were running, and we said, what happened, and I remember the boy was a Guyanese boy and he was on -- it happened on President Street, you know, I believe. And -- and it was a, you know, the Jewish ambulance that ran over him, and all this kind of -- and -- and I think that's when I --

ALI: It was a driver that was part of the Rebbe's --

LEWIS: Right.

ALI: -- motorcade that ran the light and hit the two children.

LEWIS: Right, right, right.

ALI: And then the ambulance came, and I think the -- because of the crowd that was gathering, the police instructed the ambulance to take the driver.

LEWIS: Right. Oh, that's right. Yes.

ALI: Right? And leave the kids.

LEWIS: And leave the kid, right.

ALI: Until the city ambulance came.

LEWIS: That's right, because they had their separate thing, yeah.

ALI: So what were your --

LEWIS: And—

ALI: -- feelings, in light of --

LEWIS: I --

ALI: -- all of your --

LEWIS: I couldn't believe it.

ALI: -- kind of experience?

LEWIS: I realized that I had missed -- I had -- I realized that this is not the same Brooklyn that I remember. And these are not the same people, either. I mean, the whole thing. Just -- I could tell exactly what my mother was saying when I was still in, a student. She was like, "You don't know. It's not the same. It's changed. These people are different. It's not -- you're not going to want to come back." You know, she was saying, "Don't come back." In fact, she was saying, "Don't come back." And I was like, "No, I want to come back." And she was like, "No, don't come back. You just keep moving. Keep it moving. You're up there." You know, because I started w-- after a while, I did get a job at *The Boston Globe*. So she was like, "No, keep it moving, no. If I could leave, I'm leaving." In fact, she, you know, has land in St. Croix that I inherited. She was getting ready to move to St. Croix. She was like, "I'm out of here. When I retire, I'm out of here." And --

ALI: How long did you stay in Crown Heights in the '90s?

LEWIS: I stayed there -- well, I was partially there, I would say. Because I was -- by that time, I had a little boy. My ex-husband and I had a, a son, adopted a son as an infant. So he was about five or so. He was born in '84. So by then, we were living in Dix Hills, Long Island, and I was separated, or just separating by then. So I was commuting on the weekend. He -- the -- my son went to school and then I would bring him to Brooklyn. And I call, call myself like getting him into the Brooklyn vibration, you know? So we

were, you know, being with the Caribbean people, go on Flatbush Avenue and get some roti, and be with the people on the block. So he could see how it is being with people on a block where people care about you, or go from house to house and visit everyone, and -- and that's, you know, that's the, the feeling that you want when you go home. It's like, oh, you want this love, you know? And after -- during that time in the '90s, I realized that it wasn't too many of families left that I could do that with. And it was kind of a bittersweet kind of sad, sad feeling. Even today, I, you know, I know that some of my mother's old friends are still on the block, because my parents had passed away by then. My -- my parents passed away in '84. No, '87 and '88. One died, and then the next one died, right after, the next year. So it was my job to keep the house going, and to maintain it. And my brother Sydney lived there, and a cousin actually. An older, elder cousin, Vivian, he lived there. So I was at the house every weekend and so -- but I knew it was different. It was a, you know, the different -- and a lot of people had, you know, changed. And so it was the children or the grandchildren of people still on the block. So to me, I feel that the Crown Heights that I remember is the Crown Heights that people should know more about. It's like, you know, when -- I used to go to the library at Grand Army Plaza, where, even though a lot of public libraries didn't let Black kids or Black people in their libraries, where -- Brooklyn was not like that. And I could go in the adult section and read books, even though, you know, it used to be that you could only go in the children's section. If you were a child, you could only go in the children's section. But at the Grand Army Plaza Library, I could read adult b-- I could go in the adult section and read anything I wanted. Those librarians were wonderful there. And what else did I -- I went to the Brooklyn Children's Museum, which at the time was a big mansion, big old-fashioned mansion, I guess on St. Marks Place. And so I have a lot of like fond memories of old, old Crown Heights. And I like to remember that neighbor, you know, that street, and those neighbors; where we had White neighbors and Black neighbors, and everybody got along, and -- and it was a really nice and safe and, and positive and encouraging and inspiring and, and aspiring, and a great place to raise -- I believe it's still a great place to raise a family. I would -- I

would live in Brooklyn. If -- if I could, I would -- I would live in, you know, if -- I mean, right now I live in Tribeca, and I live nice here. I love it here, be in the middle of everything. But if someone said, "Oh, if you could move, if you want -- If you were to move, where would you move?" I would move back to Crown Heights. I would move back to, you know, our house on President Street or something. Because it's right near the subways, near everything. And now, taxis know how to find you, you know? And -- and I think the neighbor -- the neighborhood is more stable. I don't know, what do you think?

ALI: Yeah, I think -- I mean, I think this is -- it's going through its cycles.

LEWIS: Yeah, it's going through cycles.

ALI: So it sits on that, sits on that kind of upswing there.

LEWIS: Yeah, because see -- in the '90s, I seem to remember, that's when the second wave of White gentrif-- that's the gentrification. That's when White people were coming back. And I noticed that people -- the White people were trying to move back on President Street. And I was -- I believe I sold my parents' house around that time. And I -- and I did --

ALI: You sold it to a Black or White family?

LEWIS: I -- I sold it to a Black family, who was actually distantly related to us, on the Guyanese side. And I waited and -- and -- and the reason why I did that is because I -- I remember my mother, before she passed away in the '80s, I remember her talking about this, like everybody is selling their homes to the Jewish people. You know, that was a big conversation, is that these Jews -- In fact, they did come to me with a suit—with, not a suitcase, but a -- a -- two shopping bags full of money. And a -- a hus-- a -- a husband and a wife, and said that, was I ready to sell? And I was like, "No." And I said, "Is that money?" I remember thinking that, this is really true. People are showing up at your door with cash money. And like my grandmother's house was sold like that on 1457 Union Street. It was sold like that, because my cousin inherited it, and I'm absolutely certain he had no idea about buying and selling property. I'm sure he never owned anything, and he was young. And -- I would say in his 20s, and I think

somebody -- I don't even think that they had, he had the clear title to do anything, because the title was never even cleared from my grandmother's name to my aunt's name. And I said, "How could you sell the house? The title's not even clear." And he said, "Yeah, the guy sold it, and, you know, and I got the money," and that's that. And I said, "OK." So there was a lot of that. And that was the conversation among, among the people. It's just like that was a conversation when I was very young, with the White people leaving. It was like, all of the White people are leaving, and the White people who didn't leave were the ones who could not leave. And there was this sense of being left behind. And so there was this, same thing was happening with the Black people; is that all of the Black people were moving, and the ones who couldn't move were the ones who couldn't leave. And -- and then it changed. And then the White people came back, and then it's changing again. Now the Black people are coming back, the ones who are -- the -- the people who are like younger than me. They're like the age of like -- my son is 33 years old, so they're like your age, you know, 30s and 40s. And they're looking and buying brownstones on President Street, and buying those little mansions on those -- they're not little -- they're big mansions. Like my grandmother's house on Union Street was a mansion. It had 22 rooms. That's a mansion. So, you know, the -- the young people, Black people, and White people are moving back to Crown Heights. And the streets are wide, the houses are big, you have lovely yards, you have basements, you have front yards. Every— you know, it's very safe. And I always say, yeah, I said, "You'll live -- if you live in that neighborhood, I'll tell you, you know, it's nothing -- nothing's going to happen." I mean, that terrible accident happened with the kids, but that was so, so unusual for -- the way that went down. That's not like the norm there. That was just a very unique situation.

ALI: So one more, one more question I want to ask you. You mentioned in our pre-interview knowing one of the narrators from our previous collection, the Pointers Family.

LEWIS: Oh, yeah.

ALI: Can you tell me a little bit about them, just so we can make that connection?

LEWIS: Oh, yeah. Miss Louvonia -- Louvenia or Louvonia?

ALI: Louvenia.

LEWIS: Louvenia Pointer, yes. Well, actually, we knew the Pointers. They were -- see, that's the other thing is that: When you live on President Street, you know the people on Carroll Street, you know the people on Crown Street, and you know the people on Montgomery Street. And you talk to anybody there, they'll tell you that it's like we had our own, like, kind of set. And so -- and all of the kids played with each other, too. So I know kids -- when we were growing up, and my -- my sister, my youngest sister used to go out with Noel, when he was -- he was going out with Natalie Cole. But my sister and him were kind of seeing each other off and on.

ALI: And Noel was?

LEWIS: He was Ms. Pointer's son.

ALI: Yeah.

LEWIS: And he was a jazz violinist, and, as I was saying, out of my -- I talk a lot about my mother's side, but my father's side on my grandmother's side was very musical. So we, you know, we knew Mrs. Pointer, because she was very musical. She also gave piano lessons. She was a teacher, music teacher. So we knew her very well. And when my mother passed away, she played the piano at my mother's funeral. And her neighbor Christine Wilshire, who is the daughter of Judge Wilshire, she sang. And so I know -- and I listened to her interview, and I was thinking about what, what she was saying about how her, how her neighbor— who was a Jewish kid— was friends with her son and everything. And he got married and moved away, and he would come back to Brooklyn and bring his family. It was kind of like that. We -- we did have that kind of -- that, that kind of like -- these were our old friends. I— Actually, our old friends were these Jewish kids that lived in, in the neighborhood. It began to get, to be more Black, but it was really a lot of the kids were the Jewish kids that we played with. And then -- but the part about -- I didn't notice this that much, that the -- the -- the White Jewish moms and dads were nice to the little Black kids, but they weren't nice to the parents. So I didn't get that until I heard Ms. Pointer bring that out. And it made me think, like, was my mother friendly with the parents of my friends? And I have to be honest and

say, she was friendly. They were friendly, they were cordial, but it wasn't -- it wasn't quite like with the Black families, where we were in each other's homes and stuff like that. I mean, we were more like the help, I guess, is almost to say. Because we -- as I said, we were more like a blue-collar family. So even in that sense, we were -- I was OK and comfortable with that. I was OK helping to cook or helping to clean, or helping to do any of that stuff that needed to be done on behalf of my mother or whatever my mother said. "I'll send Cookie over, and she'll help you with this." And I didn't mind doing that. And I worked in what I call Uncle Cecil's Cleaners, and it was on the corner of Union Street, Union Street and Albany Avenue, and Albany -- Albany Avenue and Union Street. And it was a dry cleaners owned by a Black family, a husband and wife, and when we cleaned the clothes from the -- the -- the Hasidic Jews, their coats and their hats -- they used to come to us. And we would clean their clothes. And we put everybody else's clothes aside. Because I worked, that was my, one of my first jobs was -- I was 13 years old working in the dry cleaners. And we would take all of their things in. We would wash and clean and press everything, and then send it back out, and that's how we worked with them. We worked with them the way they want, because they can't have their stuff touch other people's stuff. And we said, no problem. We would take their stuff in; clean their stuff, steam it, clean it, do everything, pack it up, and then take it back to them. That's how we worked with them. And my mother did, took in sewing and hemming from the tailor shop, so I, you know, it was -- I work with those people. So I worked, you know, we all worked together. So -- what -- what Ms. Pointer was saying was that, "Oh, they were nice, but, you know, we weren't all that close." And I -- I understood what she meant, that it depended really on how you, you were in the, in the neighborhood. She was a little bit more -- the Pointers were a little bit more, like, elevated than my family, I would say, socially, in that she was a teacher. Now, my grandmother was a teacher, but my mother wasn't. So, you know, it's a little bit different. But we knew them very well. There's a, another brother and a sister, I think, yeah.

ALI: William, and --

LEWIS: William, Billy. Right? And then -- oh, what's the daughter's name? Violet?

ALI: I'm not sure.

LEWIS: Something like that, yeah. There was another one, yeah. But, yeah, there were a lot of kids. And we used to play -- we used to play games on the streets, and we used to play double Dutch. And I was going to say that -- because they say that Black girls play double Dutch. But in, in Crown Heights, the Black boys played double Dutch too. And --

ALI: Double Dutch is hard.

LEWIS: I know it is, but I'll tell you, Noel was one of the few boys who wasn't double-handed. Because, you know, when you didn't have enough girls, so— we would, like, get one of the boys to turn, turn the rope. And it's kind of like an egg beater.

ALI: Right.

LEWIS: And you have to have a beat. And he had a beat, OK? He could do it and not do that, you know, be double-handed.

ALI: [laughter]

LEWIS: You know? So Noel could, could hang with us. But not everybody was a, you know, I had another friend Richard. He could turn a rope too. But not too many of the boys could, could do what the girls could do.

ALI: Right, right.

LEWIS: And we played punchball on the street and skelly, and --

ALI: What's skelly?

LEWIS: It's with the, the bottle caps, when you -- you draw a thing on the -- you draw a, squares and the bases with chalk on the street, and do things like that. So we had our own games, like the old New York City kid games. We -- we had those games. And -- but my thing was punchball.

ALI: And what's punchball?

LEWIS: Well, it's a Spalding ball. And it was like baseball, only thing, you would punch it with your, with your hand. And you pick up the ball and you punch it. And then you run the bases. And it's like basically baseball. And -- and my claim to fame was --

ALI: So when you're saying you're punching the ball, it's like almost like the way people serve up a volleyball?

LEWIS: The way you -- yeah, a volleyball, right.

ALI: OK.

LEWIS: But you -- it was a Spalding ball.

ALI: OK.

LEWIS: So you throw it and punch it.

ALI: OK.

LEWIS: And, you know --

ALI: So your fist is the bat?

LEWIS: Your fist is a bat, right.

ALI: [laughter]

LEWIS: And [laughter] and so -- and I was good at that, and it's because I'm left-handed. And so I could do -- I could do both hands. So we would choose up teams and I was kind of a athletic kid. And so, you know, all the boys always wanted me on their team and stuff, so it's like -- it was good. So there were a few of us girls who were -- me and my friend Joan, we were more like -- what do you call it -- tomboys, in that we could, you know, we could kick their butts, you know? It's like, you, you know, who are you? You know? What can you do? I can do that. So, you know, and it was a lot of that. So I had -- I have very happy memories of President Street and Crown Heights and everything that it had. I -- I was thinking, what did we do? Where did we go when we went to— if you were going to go out to dinner? We didn't go out to dinner that much. But if we did, I would say I went to, went out to dinner with my friend Joan's parents sometimes. And there was a movie house, two movies. One is on Kingston Avenue and Carroll Street, and there was another one on Nostrand Avenue and Eastern Parkway. And there was a Chinese restaurant there that everybody went to. That was like your, your day out to dinner. And it -- Traditional Chinese restaurants back then, they actually served you at your table. I don't know if you remember that. You don't even remember that. But the people actually, in the restaurant, brought your food out

and served you. And that was so lovely, because it was like so, you know, to be nice and come out and have Chinese food. And as you know, Jewish people love Chinese food. So that was -- that was a time where we would actually go out and dine in the same place. So even though a lot of America was segregated and stuff, we actually were around each other a lot. We may not have done a lot of socializing and all of that, but we kind of -- we got along pretty well. And we actually -- even though I gave you that story about the cop, the cops brutalizing my brothers and knocking my mother to the ground and all that, but we actually got along with the police people too. And 71st Precinct was our precinct. And we had the PAL League and, and they had the leagues for the kids to play, and sports and all that. And that was very big. The Girl Scouts, I talk about the Girl Scouts -- it was -- Boy Scouts was really big in my neighborhood growing up. Everybody was in the scouts. And I don't know, you know.

ALI: Did you -- were there -- did you encounter people who were part of, say like, Jack and Jill and things like that?

LEWIS: Oh, yeah. Like on President Street.

ALI: Yeah.

LEWIS: That was the Jack and Jill crowd. Yeah, Jack and Jill -- and the people who would say, meet at Mrs. Carrington's house, they were the women— The moms had this club called "The Girlfriends." And if you look up in the Black, among Black women's history, you'll see Black women had women's organizations that go back, way back to, you know, reconstruction days— even before. And so those women on President Street, those Black women had their own clubs. So when Ms. Carrington would have her parties or things, when they would be, you know, like for clothes and things like that, that would be The Girlfriends. And so that was -- you had The Girlfriends, and then you had Jack and Jill. And you had The Comus? You ever heard of The Comus, C-O-M-U-S? Comus was -- it's a Black gentleman's club. And all of the -- and that's what I was talking about, the color thing, is you'll notice that the more successful Black people of that generation tended to be very fair-skinned. And there was a lot of that going on where you had light-skinned, dark-skinned things. Now, I'm talking about dynamics

within the Black community that the White people don't even know anything about. In fact, sometimes, like I would say Mrs. Alexander, Dr. Alexander's wife, Aunt Nora, I called her, and I was friends with all their kids. And they lived next door to Reverend Galamison. So she was a nurse. Her husband was a doctor. And she was -- she told me she was the director of nurse, nursing at some hospital in like 1930 or something like that. And said, "Well, how did you do that?" I said, "Were you passing?" And she said -- she said, "I wasn't exactly passing." She said, "They just didn't know." And I just didn't correct them. And they, you know, and it was in DC. So I said, "You were the -- you were the director of nursing in a hospital in DC? Like, that's kind of unheard of." And she said, "Yeah." And she said, "My Black friends came to pick me up every day from, from work." And they were Black, clearly Black. And she's Black, but she's very fair-skinned and all that. So she was, you know, and— My grandmother, the same way: Madame Tempy, Madame Tempy Smith, she was very fair-skinned. She went to the New England Conservatory of Music. Now, people say, oh, did your grandmother pass? Probably. But it's not like she is pretending; it's just that they accepted her. She got in, she did an audition, she got in. She -- she finished, and no one said anything. You know? And she didn't correct them if they thought. And so there was -- so, OK, you had The Comus, you had The Guardians, you had the Boulé. These are the men's clubs. You know about the Boulé? The 100 Black men and 100 Black women came during my time as a young professional. But I'm saying during my mother's time, it was -- The Comus was the big deal in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. And they had the -- The Guardians -- that -- those were the Black elite clubs. And there was another club, kind of a frater-- they're fraternities and sororities. And those Black women on President Street, and the Black men, were— a lot of them. Reverend Galamison was in the same fraternity as my husband, the -- what's the main -- not -- not the -- not Martin Luther King's one, but the other one.

ALI: Kappa?

LEWIS: The Kappas.

ALI: Kappa Alpha Psi?

LEWIS: Yeah, he's a Kappa. So -- because I asked him. I said, "Did you meet Reverend Galamison?" He said, "Yeah." When they, he was pledging, he met him. So that was another thing that kept our community very cohesive, is that we had fraternities, sororities, churches. And we had a culture and a sense of community. And that's what I say today is— I miss the most, is that we don't have -- I won't say we don't have it, but we don't have that sense of community that we, that we used to have. But even the music, the culture, all of those things that, you know, we don't have, it's -- that was so prevalent. I think that like in terms of my thing is food, right? I like cooking, I like -- I write about food; I'm a journalist. I'm all into the food and all that kind of thing, and the culture. But -- and you really can't find this kind of food that much in restaurants. You really have to go to people's home to eat really good food. So -- but that's what I mean. It's like, people are not cooking. We're talking about: Every day, it was story time, telling stories over dinner, over breakfast, and even over lunch. When I went to St. Matthew's, I walked home for, for lunch every day. But the other thing was that -- we talked about the kids -- I had to go from my house on President Street to Lincoln Place and Utica Avenue. I had to pass PS 167, where the public school kids went. Now, you know, those kids didn't like us, because we went to Catholic school. And that's the way kids are. They want to fight you because you're, because you're wearing a uniform, and you go to a Catholic school. So it -- talking about taking a long way home, I remember taking a long way home, because I've been chased. Me and Mil-- me and my, a friend of mine back then, her name was Nilda Carabella from St. Matthew's, and we both had long hair, and long braids. And these girls from PS 167 picked a fight with us. And they said, "Oh, I heard you were talking to my boyfriend." And, "You think you're cute." And they chased us, and we ran and we ran. We ran down into the subway at Schenectady Avenue, and then went under the turnstile, ran along the platform, and came up on Utica Avenue. And that was my long way home all the time. I would go all the way down the subway, duck in the subway, commit a crime by not paying the fare, right? [laughter] And run along the platform and come out at Schenectady Avenue, and then cut down Union Street to get to President Street. And then sometimes I

would go all the way down to Rochester Avenue, go to President Street where Lincoln Terrace is, and come up President Street, to avoid being picked on by the public school kids. [laughter]

ALI: OK. So I think that's a good place for us to stop.

LEWIS: OK.

ALI: Thank you so much --

LEWIS: Oh, sure.

ALI: -- for sharing your story.

LEWIS: Sure, I'm happy to share.

ALI: And I'm going to stop the recording now.