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  - Brown Green, Myrah, Oral history interview conducted by Larry Weekes, February 7, 2017, Voices of Crown Heights oral histories: Weeksville Heritage Center, 2016.027.3.03; Brooklyn Historical Society.

**Oral History Interview with Myrah Brown Green****Voices of Crown Heights oral histories: Weeksville Heritage Center, 2016.027.3.03****Interview conducted by Larry Weekes on February 7, 2017 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn**

WEEKES: Good morning. Today is Tuesday, February 7th, 2017, and I am Larry Weekes, the narrator for this interview, from the Weeksville Heritage Society. I am with Dr. Myrah Brown Green, and we are here at the Weeksville Historical Society. This oral history interview is for the Brooklyn Historical Society's Voice of Crown Heights project. Now, if you would please introduce yourself, giving your full name, birth date and where you were born.

BROWN GREEN: My name is Dr. Myrah Brown Green. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts. Do you want the hospital as well? It doesn't exist anymore.

WEEKES: OK. [laughter]

BROWN GREEN: The hospital — I was born in the Kenmore Hospital. They don't deliver babies anymore. And I was raised — but I was raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

WEEKES: OK. And birth date? If you want it.

BROWN GREEN: Oh. [Date redacted for privacy], 1956.

WEEKES: OK. OK. I guess if you could tell us a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in.

BROWN GREEN: My neighborhood was pretty mixed, I would say. In Cambridge, anyone out there that has migrated to New York and live in Cambridge — that lived in Cambridge, or those areas, there were two distinct areas where Black people lived. It was either called — one area was called "The Coast," and the other area was called "The Port." I don't know why they called them that; maybe because The Coast, I think was — well they both — were both near water. But I lived down The Port.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: So, you know, if you told somebody where you lived, they knew what side of Cambridge you lived on. And it was pretty integrated. I remember growing up. Yeah, I would think my best friend, up until high school, one of my best friends was

White, and her family was Irish, I remember. I don't think her father liked Black people. And I found that out when my mother made her a corsage for our eighth grade graduation. And he — we went, we were so excited. She was so excited. We walked back to her house to show him, show her mom and dad, and he told her to take it off. She couldn't wear anything an "N" wore, an "N" made. And that was my reality check, I believe, which was really interesting. Because I didn't see that. I just never — like, those kinds of things, I never thought of. Although —

WEEKES: How old were you then?

BROWN GREEN: Twelve.

WEEKES: Twelve?

BROWN GREEN: I was graduating from the eighth grade. It was our eighth grade graduation.

WEEKES: And how did that affect you?

BROWN GREEN: I was — I'm the eldest child in my family, so I always had to fend for myself pretty much. Like, I didn't have an older sibling to fight for me, or that sort of thing. But I think that the high school that I went to was a great choice. And thank God my parents let me go to that high school, because that kind of became my family, I would say. And my whole thought process shifted. And I don't know if it had anything to do with that incident, because I don't — I never told my mother. And I don't — I just think that we showed up without her in the corsage. Like, we never said anything, no one — my mother never mentioned — maybe my mother didn't notice, because I was the star of the family at that point. And — but it was just strange to me. It was more — I think — and when I think back, I mean, I wasn't allowed to go in her house. I stood at the door. And I heard all of this. And it's so interesting, because he must not have — now that I'm mentioning this to you, he must not — I don't think he came to her graduation ceremony. Because I remember the TV being on and him sitting in a chair inside the room, and it was daytime. So why was he home during the day, you know? Which was another thing. So it was — and they lived in — there were two main projects down The Port in Cambridge, that were right next to each other. One was Newtowne

Court and one was Washington Elms. Newtowne Court is where my family lived until we purchased our first home. And Washington Elms was next door. The White child that was my friend lived in Washington Elms. You could move from Newtowne Court to Washington Elms, but you couldn't move from Washington Elms to Newtowne Court. So that says something. And then when we moved to the house, because that's — we were living in the house by the time I was in the eighth grade. And that's — my friend met me there, so...

WEEKES: Did you continue your relationship with this young lady after that?

BROWN GREEN: No, actually not. And I think it had to do with me going to the high school I went to.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: She went to a different high school, although they were right across from each other. But we just never stayed friends.

WEEKES: What did your parents do for a living?

BROWN GREEN: My mother — my father, he finally got a job working for transit. And he retired as a bus driver. He was a retired bus driver. Well, he didn't want to retire as a bus driver. He wanted to finish that out, but still work for transit, which he did. And he ended up — my father's very talkative, like, he's very — he's one that is, I guess he's social. And he ended up getting a position in transit. When the first IDs came out for seniors to get on it with half price, he was one of those folks that would take the photographs of them. So he wanted to just chill —

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: — the last couple of years of his work experience. And my mother was a — she worked at — she was a home — a mother who took care of us at home. And then she volunteered. I think my brother went to a progressive school. He did. So she would do a lot of volunteering. And then finally she became a para. And then our siblings said, "You know, you really like this. Why don't you go back to school?" So she was able to go to school. My mother got her bachelor's degree at 60, and her master's at 61.

WEEKES: How many siblings have you got?

BROWN GREEN: I have three. So there's four of us.

WEEKES: OK. And —

BROWN GREEN: I'm the eldest.

WEEKES: OK. All right. What kind of fields are they in today?

BROWN GREEN: Everybody has — my sisters, my two sisters, they have master's —

everybody has more than one degree. My two sisters — one, my younger sister, she is a mentor for the board of education. So she mentors all the mentors. She mentors the mentors. So she goes and she does — she does workshops. They come to her and she works downtown —

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: — for the board. My other sister was in — still in Massachusetts. And she is the dean of financial aid for the School of Social Work at BU. And my brother is a lawyer. And it's fascinating, when we think about it, because — I mean, I was the first to graduate out of all of my family, I believe, you know. And my parents were two of the high school students who walked out of Morton High School in Farmville, Virginia, which is one of the schools that's listed in the Brown versus the Board of Education lawsuit.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: So a couple of years ago, they were invited down to the White House to have lunch with President Obama.

WEEKES: So your parents —

BROWN GREEN: For the 60th anniversary.

WEEKES: Your parents really stressed the importance of education?

BROWN GREEN: Well, you know it's so interesting, because I was just talking to a friend the other day who called me for some advice; she's a quilter, and she called me for some advice. And her daughter is my godchild. And she was saying that one of her friends called her — she lives in Maryland. I think she lives in Maryland now. One of her friends called her and said, you know, she's having such a difficult time getting her

children to go to college, or whatever. And she says, you know, it's just hard. So my girlfriend says, "Oh, no, you have to meet my friend, Myrah." Her children thought that college was the last stop before a job, like, you had to go at least to college to get a bachelor's.

WEEKES: Right.

BROWN GREEN: And that's how — we just thought that you just went to — we thought you went to college. Either you went to college, or you got a job where you, you know — you couldn't stay in the house. Like, you weren't going to — your parents weren't going to get up before you and you're still laying in bed. Like, you had to do something.

WEEKES: Yes.

BROWN GREEN: If you were going to be someone that cleaned houses, you had to be the best that you could possibly be. If you were going to be — whatever you were going to be, you had to do something.

WEEKES: Yes.

BROWN GREEN: So college seemed easier, for some reason. [laughter] And my father used to — we lived by these — what do you call those — sayings, because my father, he spoke and he read. My father was well-read. And he used to always tell us, "It's a mighty poor rat who only has one hole to crawl into." And we remembered that. Like you can't — like, there's no excuse for not doing anything, because there's so many options in life, so...

WEEKES: OK. All right. So memories of early school years. What was it like? What was the demographics like?

BROWN GREEN: It also was integrated, definitely. I remember I got the — I remember the air raid drills where we had to go in the basement and learn how to —

WEEKES: Get under the desk.

BROWN GREEN: Yeah, and then there was — we went down the basement, and there were the rations, I remember, standing up in barrels on the wall. I was very intelligent. I was an honor roll student all the time. And then I remember the fifth — well, backtrack. In

the second grade, or first grade — yeah. In the first grade I came down with walking pneumonia, they found out, because you used to get the polio drinks in school.

WEEKES: Yes.

BROWN GREEN: And they'd take your — they'd test your urine, and the whole bit. So I remember them taking me straight to the hospital. And I was there for a while, I remember. When I came out, I stuttered. And that just changed my life. The children were awful to me. I mean, I was — when you talk about being bullied, that was just the thing.

WEEKES: And you just grew out of it, or...?

BROWN GREEN: I still stutter. I have it under control, pretty much. And I believe I'm stuttering less than I used to. So — but then I realized everybody stutters.

WEEKES: To a certain extent, yes.

BROWN GREEN: Yes.

WEEKES: To get our thoughts — our thoughts race.

BROWN GREEN: Oh, yeah. Yeah. So and then in the fifth grade, I had this male teacher. And I remember him telling my mother that he wasn't going to put me on the honor roll, so that I could work harder. And that just devastated me. And from then on, I said, OK, fine. After I got through the gut-wrenching feeling of not being on the honor roll, and doing my crying thing, and just feeling so badly and just pissed off with him, I said, "OK, I'll just do enough. I'll just do it my way." And I don't think I ever got on the honor roll after that, because I didn't care. So and then —

WEEKES: So did you have therapy for the stuttering? Or it just — you just decided to master it?

BROWN GREEN: Well, everybody thought that they could, you know, tell me how to get out of it. I do believe I did go — my mother did take me to speech pathologists and audiologists, and none of them — and I like saying those words, because I couldn't say them. [laughter] And I don't think any of them helped. I think it was more trauma-related from getting needles in the hospital, you know? That was, like, the peak of whatever else I was going through in my childhood. And I had — in the sixth grade, I

had this wonderful teacher. She was working on her master's degree at Northeastern. And she asked my mother if she could use me, pretty much, or if I could travel with her to her class as, I guess, an example for someone who was stutter— I don't know what, exactly, it was. My mother said yes. And I remember going. And I would read and I would be in the front of the class with her. And she was just so special to me. You know? I just felt like she was like a mentor on a certain level. And I was helping her out at the same time, I guess, with her thesis, maybe. And I remember her giving me — which was really fascinating — when I graduated from the eighth grade, because — I'm trying to think if I went to a different — no, I was in the same school. When I graduated from the eighth grade, she gave me a little book on these spiritual quotes, which I still have. And I would get those kind of things in my life from people. And I didn't know that I would actually use them, or certain things would come up. And it's so fascinating. So, and I kept that. She gave that to me as a graduation present. But, so I did go to speech pathologists, and I think that they may have had — I think her master's was in some form of speech, or something, or linguistics of some sort.

WEEKES: OK. OK. Then you went to — you came to New York, and you started at —

BROWN GREEN: I went to Boston, no. I went to Boston University.

WEEKES: OK. And what did you study at Boston University?

BROWN GREEN: Business Administration. And I was there for two years. I wanted to go into fashion from the time I couldn't remember, like, always. And I got accepted. I took the SATs. I went to this progressive high school, which if it were still functioning the way it is, it would be the oldest progressive high school in the country, called the Cambridge Pilot School. And so I went — yeah, I went there. And while there, I took the SATs. I got accepted to all the top women's schools, like Simmons, and, like, all these schools. And Boston University. And I think they gave me the most money. And I was able to afford to stay on campus. So I went to BU, thinking they had one Fashion Merchandising class, and I think that was in the senior year. So I was going through that. I really wasn't interested in being there. And one of my girlfriends said, "Have you ever heard of the school called Pratt?" And I said, "No." And she said,

“Well, they have a Fashion Merchandising department.” So I — at that time, they weren’t computer — you know, they weren’t computerized. So I called, asked them to send me a catalog and an application. And they sent it to me. I put together a portfolio, sent it back. I got an interview. My mother drove me down. I got accepted right on the spot.

WEEKES: So you didn’t have any formal art training, or drawing, or anything? Just —

BROWN GREEN: No. I just used to like to draw, and I used to sew my own clothes. I used to love to sew my own clothes. My mother would — we had a sewing machine in the house, and I would sew. And then my mother — yeah. And I would babysit and I would buy fabric with my babysitting money, because I really thought it was fascinating. But I was, like — I was very eccentric. And I think that’s how things — I guess that’s how I expressed myself. Because I said, well, you know, I didn’t really have a lot of friends. I think they thought I was really strange. And I think that’s why Pilot School was just so special for me. And I mean, I would — I didn’t care. I mean, I bought the best — you know, I bought what I wanted as far as one day, would go to school, and I would be a Native American. The next day I was an African. I mean, I’d, you know, I’d just do my thing.

WEEKES: So every day was a different drama.

BROWN GREEN: Oh, yeah. I was just — I was a free spirit. And I think those that were my friends, you know, they accepted that. And I didn’t have very many. And then so I — and that’s how I got to New York, to — I went to — how I got to Pratt. My mother, I remember her giving me for my birthday that year, or that year as a gift, a sewing machine, because she knew I could use it.

WEEKES: So what did you put in your portfolio. I mean, it just — it boggles me because I went to high school for design, and —

BROWN GREEN: Well, they told — well, usually those — I don’t know how they do it now. But usually those programs, they’ll give you, like, A, B, or C. And you can focus on A, or you can focus on B, and you have to interpret what it is that they say. So it probably was — I drew some girls or people with certain outfits, you know, I don’t know. I don’t

even remember. But it wasn't anything. They probably thought I was crazy, too.  
 [laughter] And they said, "Wait, I've got to meet this person!" And it's so interesting. The chair of the department at the time was a woman. And I remember her, when I was there at Pratt, she would allow me — because I really, I was one of those people who constantly remembered my parents, and my dad with his proverbs, saying certain things. And another one he used to always say is, "Never lose by default." So I worked work-study, I had a job at A&S. And then I modeled for Fashion Fair Cosmetics. And some days I had exams. I was a really good student, I feel, so I would go and ask them if I could take the test early, because I had a gig where I had to be at work, and they would give me a totally different test, but I could read the pick — I could tell you whatever any fabric was. I was just so fascinated in fabric. And I think part of it had to do with me sewing my clothes in high school.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: And I would take the test, and you know, they would give it to me, and they would try to stump me, but it just — you know, and they knew that I knew what I was dealing with.

WEEKES: So did you ever go into the garment industry?

BROWN GREEN: I ended up — when I graduated from Pratt, I knew I didn't want to go back to Massachusetts. And while I was in Cambridge, while I was at Boston Univer— no, yeah. While I was at Boston University, I got a job working for Lord & Taylor in Boston. And the way Lord & Taylor works, the system is that in order for you to become a buyer, you go through the program, the business program inside the store. And then once you get to a certain level, you become like a manager of a department inside of the New York store, and then they send you to a branch to run the whole branch. Well, the person that came to the Boston store, I would ask questions all the time. And I worked in — at that time, I just — I tell you, everything has been divine for me. I just happened to be in a department, the pre-teen department, which was new. Like, to have pre-teen sizes.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: They were, like, mid-between children's and adults. And that was, like, a new thing. And Lord & Taylor tried that out. And so I would — I'm always — I'm really good at sewing any— I can sew anything. And I did really well for the department. I was only there part-time, because I was a college student at BU. But I loved being in that environment. And so she and I — I would ask her questions, she would come — you know, I was always dressed impeccably. And I remembered her. And she — and I remembered her name. And it was time for graduation from Pratt Institute, and I didn't want to go home, and I didn't want to — and I didn't have a job. And I remember her — I remembered her name and I called her. And I told her that I was graduating, and I didn't have a job, and I'm really interested in the fashion industry. So she gave me the name of a guy to call for the business program at Lord & Taylor. And I called him. And I had given — [laughter] it's so funny. About a week before, I had gone to a workshop at — no, I remember from high school, we had gone through these steps on how to interview. I'll never forget that. And they talked about these different types of interviews that people would give you, and one was where they'll ask you a question back to back to back, before you answer the last question. But the idea is to answer the last question. Even if they ask you a question and you haven't answered that question prior to that, you're to answer that question prior to that. Otherwise, you get — you know, there's like a —

WEEKES: You get flustered.

BROWN GREEN: You get flustered. Well, I allowed this guy to do this to me. But he knew what he was doing. And I remember leaving there and I was so upset. And I came back to the dorm, and I knew that I hadn't done really all that well. And I got a phone call from him, apologizing. And he gave me a date when to start. So I worked for Lord & Taylor as an assistant buyer for a year. But it wasn't the same people business as I thought it would be. And I remember not being allowed to friend the cooks in the kitchen, you know? I remember being called into the office, and they told me, "Oh no, you can't. You know, that's not — you just can't do that." You know, that whole thing. "You need to friend more of your colleagues," and you need to go out on, you know, go

out with them, maybe have a drink with them, or whatever. And I wasn't interested in them. So anyway, that lasted for a year.

WEEKES: It's, like, you had no desire to get into the creative end?

BROWN GREEN: I didn't know. That was the thing. And I really realized, because it was so fascinating, because I loved dressing the mannequins. But that's not my job. That was not my job. And, you know, Lord & Taylor was a union. You know, I was in that union. What's the name? I can't remember the name of it, with Lord & Taylor, Jordan Marsh, all of them were in that union. And so they had people that moved fixtures, and — but that was my thing. So if I knew about that, I probably would have studied design instead of merchandising, because I was really good at it.

WEEKES: OK. So you did Pratt, and you did what — and then after that, where did you go?

BROWN GREEN: I left. I met my husband while I was at Lord & Taylor.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: At one of my performances. I was a founding member of Women of the Calabash. And we did a gig at — it was Kwanza time, which is really busy, Christmas, in the retail business. You're working, like, seven days a week. And I did a performance, and he was there. And he tells the story that he looks — he sees me, and he says, "I'm gonna marry that woman!" I said, "Yeah, that sounds real romantic." So anyway, he gives me his phone number, the whole bit. And I didn't call him until the next year, like, the beginning of the year, because it was so busy. You know, the retail business is really busy. And I didn't call him. And I remember one day calling him, just I said, "Let me call this number." So I called. And his mother answered the phone. And I'm, like, "Oh, damn! He lives with his mother." Come to find out, he was doing his laundry, and he must have been waiting for me to call, after all that time. And he had forwarded his calls to his mother's house.

WEEKES: Oh.

BROWN GREEN: And so — and then from there, we had tea or something, and he told me about the program that he had founded, you know, that he was working on.

WEEKES: Which was?

BROWN GREEN: The Crown Heights Youth Collective.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: And I said, “Oh, I’m going to come and work with you.” He says, “Well, don’t quit your job yet.” And I’m, like, “Well, why not? I mean, the way you talk about it is just so phenomenal.” Finally, I couldn’t take Lord & Taylor anymore, and I just quit. And I said, “OK, I’m coming to work with you.” And that’s how it happened. And then when I got there to this place, I said, “Oh my God, my mother’s going to kill me!” [laughter]

WEEKES: Why? What, what reaction did you have?

BROWN GREEN: It was in the store front. It was just — he was just getting it together. I remember there was, like, a hole in the floor, like a — and you could see from the first floor down to the basement. It was just, like, oh my God! And then I said, “You know, Myrah, get all of those kind of thoughts out of your head. You’re acting very snobbish.” And just think about it, you know? And I thought about my dad, and I thought about my — just growing up. And all the people that I met through my parents and how it had prepared me for what I was about to embark on. [laughter]

WEEKES: And what was the mission of the Crown Heights Youth —

BROWN GREEN: Well, it started out differently, I would say. Maybe it didn’t start out differently, but it was — it ended up dealing more with family, with families. Just being a support system for the family. I remember Richard — you know, he tells it better than me — but there was this Haitian family whose parents were really afraid to let the children come out and play. I don’t know if they were legal, or whatever. And Richard moved — he would do practices in the park, like camp. And I remember him having it at their window so that they could participate, which I thought was so beautiful, you know? And he had so much respect of the people in the neighborhood. And I’d said, you know, “Wow, this man has locks.” It was during that time, it was just — I mean, he was just different looking. And I’m, like, “They’re accepting him?” You know? It was just amazing, you know? And then I said, you know, “I’m going to commit.” And I remember typing our first grant out. I’m trying to think of who it was. And at that

point, we had moved from that first spot, and we had gotten the place where Medgar Evers is.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: Sixteen-fifty Bedford Avenue. It was cold, and I remember the people from — I think it was either DYCD, or one of those places, came to do a site visit. And I had, by that time I had my daughter, our daughter. And it had snowed so bad that day. And I'd met with them, with this woman. And they, for some reason, just said, you know, "We're going to support these people." And that was our first grant. He couldn't get paid, because he had to be on the Board. And I was the only person that was able to get paid. That was the second grant. The little — the small grant was, neither one of us could get paid. We ended up paying two youth a stipend. We were able to do that.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: And that was the first grant ever. And —

WEEKES: So the grant primarily covered rental of space.

BROWN GREEN: It did not.

WEEKES: It did not?

BROWN GREEN: No. I mean, I think for me, I was able to — we ate off of my WIC. He — we did public assistance. We did whatever we — that's basically what it was. I remember we did little fund raisers, like the holidays. I remember us being in the apartment and our electricity or our gas went off, because we hadn't paid it. We just couldn't. And I remember going down the hall to one of our neighbors and saying, "I made this batter for zucchini bread," I'll never forget that. And we were going to sell it at our Kwanza program. And I said, "Something's wrong with our stove." I was so embarrassed. "Something's wrong with the stove," and they said, "Oh, you can bake it." They tried to be nice, you know, they didn't want to embarrass me as much as — I think — but they knew that we hadn't, you know, we didn't have it. And so we baked it in their stove. I'll never forget that, you know. But anyway, and then things just started. We just kept at it. We just kept at it. And, you know —

WEEKES: So did you feel you were realizing your passion at that point?

BROWN GREEN: I was supporting my man. [laughter]

WEEKES: That's passion.

BROWN GREEN: Yeah, I guess. And I understood the vision. I understood the vision. I knew there was some sort of light at the end of the tunnel. I knew that it was good. It was for the good of the people of the community, and I knew what we were doing for them. And I knew that people were coming around, and he was — I knew what we were doing. And then finally, we got our first SYEP gig. But that, of course we don't get paid again for that. They just send youths to you. And I — and during that time, they didn't take pregnant girls, girls that teenagers — usually the teenagers that were pregnant, they really didn't have a place for them, because they were concerned, I guess, that places that you send them would not have anything for them to do. You know, if it was physical. So I remember calling downtown, and I told them, I says, "You tell those girls, you make an announcement of some sort, that — tell them if they're pregnant to be honest about it, that you have a place for them. And send all the pregnant teenagers from around New York to me. And I'll find something for them to do." So they did. And that summer, I put together a program. Those girls did a journal. I taught them how to nurse, and diaper their babies. I taught them about diet. I took them to every museum in New York. You know, each week we would go to a different museum. We would take — you know, I would make like an iced tea, an herbal iced tea for them, and, you know, they would bring sandwiches. If they had children already, they would bring them with them. And so, and that's how the SYUP program started taking the girls. I mean, they saw that they were no different than anybody else.

WEEKES: Right.

BROWN GREEN: But I'm the one that started taking them back in the— in the early '80s. That's when it started.

WEEKES: OK. So you decided to home school — were your children always home-schooled? Or did they go to public school, or —

BROWN GREEN: They went to private school. They went to private school. Do you remember Mrs. Black?

WEEKES: No.

BROWN GREEN: OK, that was, like, a big thing for a lot of people who went to that school.

She was — I can't remember which college she went to. It was a Black college. But she was pretty known, her day care. It was like a day care, but she ran it like a school. And so all my children went there. And many of my friends' children went there, it was on Washington, and one of those streets over there, like, right before Empire Boulevard. My oldest child aged out. I found another private school for her, a Black institution. And she — and then my other children were aging out, and that school that my daughter was in was going to close. So because we were in the community, we knew the principals in many of the schools, because we used to do things for them. And Richard, you know, he spoke all the time. And so one of the schools, we said "OK, we'll pick the school that we think we could have the better relationship with." And that was P.S. 241. So we went there. We took the children — all of our children there. And it still wasn't — they were going through, because we raised our children vegetarians, which was another thing. I mean, the administration was OK, but they had a hard time in the classroom with the children, because they were vegetarians. They had locks; my children had locks. And we weren't going to cut them because of the time.

WEEKES: What were their ages?

BROWN GREEN: First grade, third grade, fourth grade. Something like that.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: So they were young. And, you know, and they were bullied on certain levels. And I remember my youngest child saying, "Mommy, please let me stay with you. Please?" And I said, "Well, I can't do it this year. But next year, I promise I will set it up so that you can." You know, "I will keep you with me." And so the next year, and I was pregnant, I think, at the time. Or maybe I'd had my son, the fourth child, who never went to any school in the system except mine, until he got to college. I took them all out. Me and Richard said, "We got degrees." We can, you know, we can teach them what we know. We have the Collective. And we ran and we called it Crown Heights Collective Fellowship and Peace Academy.

WEEKES: So did you have other students besides your children?

BROWN GREEN: We sure did.

WEEKES: How many did you have?

BROWN GREEN: We started out with, maybe, 10. People heard that we were going to start something. And we were in one room in this building on Franklin Avenue. And then we got — we would get these calls from schools and places, saying, “I think this child would do better with you all.” So it was a home school environment, but it was public, in a public environment, because it was other children. We were up to, like, almost a hundred at one point. It was private. So we had to — you know, it was tuition-based, but not everybody was able to pay what we had asked for. I don’t even remember what it was, but...

WEEKES: Did you get any grant monies or city funding, or...?

BROWN GREEN: Nope. Huh-uh. It was the parents paid, and people donated. And it was so funny, the first year that we were open, I can’t remember what channel it was. But they did a think on the Justice, what’s his name, Thompson? Not Thompson. What’s the guy who was accused of abusing the Black woman years ago?

WEEKES: Oh... All right, go on.

BROWN GREEN: I’ve got to look for that. [Laughter] But they did the interview —

WEEKES: It’ll come to me. Yeah.

BROWN GREEN: — they did the art — they did the TV thing at our school. That was our first — like, it was our first year. And they came and did it at our school.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: And I remember the woman. I can’t remember the woman, the interviewer. She’s big. I think she’s still on Channel 7, or CNN, or one of those things. Because I remember her saying, you know, “Get me from my left side.” You know? She had, like, a certain side, or whatever. And then —

WEEKES: Thomas. Thomas.

BROWN GREEN: Yeah. Him. You remember when that was — that was, like, in the ’80s. I mean, the early ’90s. And then the school just started growing, and people started

hearing about it, and bringing their people there. We had people coming in from Queens, from the Bronx. You know, people were coming and bringing their children. And then we had — they had, like, a top-notch education. Richard taught every Thursday a history class, a bible — we had bible studies, like bible history. And it wasn't taught from a religious perspective. We knew what we would do as we looked at what was being taught in the world. And we expected our children to be totally prepared. And the Bible is the most taught book in the world. It's, like, the highest-ranking information that people get. So they got bible studies. I taught class. I designed — I was the principal. I became the principal. And then finally, my oldest daughter, she was ready to get out. Like she had — we had taught her everything that we thought we could teach her. And so we felt that it was time for her to go to college. But we didn't know where we would send — so we said, well, let's try to make Medgar Evers our feeder program, where we just put the — but they wouldn't take our children, because the school wasn't accredited by the Board of Regents.

WEEKES: So there was no interaction with the New York City, or any government — ?

BROWN GREEN: Not on top of the table, actually. People were sending — I know this is being taped. But, you know, at this point — they know.

WEEKES: Yeah.

BROWN GREEN: We, you know, Richard was going into the schools and teaching and doing workshops. And I remember what's-his-name, the president of Medgar Evers said to him one day at a meeting, he says, "I want the Board of Ed to get to a place where we can attract Richard Green's children back to our school system." And so anyway, I remember Medgar Evers wouldn't take my daughter. And then Richard said, "Well, I went to Marist, and I went to Catholic colleges." He says, "Let's try St. Francis." So I went and set up a meeting, and I let my daughter out. I'll never forget that. I'll let her out of the car, because I couldn't find parking. I said, "Go up and tell them that I'm coming." So she went up. And then by the time I came back around the block, she had come downstairs. And she said, "Mommy, they accepted me." And that became our feeder school, St. Francis. And they would call and say, "Who are you sending us?"

Because our students were so prepared. And then my youngest daughter, who has always been a rebel, behind our back she went to LIU and applied there on her own. And they accepted her into this — I ended up going back with her, and they were just starting a joint bachelor's master's program in athletic training. And so she got accepted to that program. So she got her master's, her bachelor's and master's from there.

WEEKES: So did they have to do any formal testing? Did they take the SATs?

BROWN GREEN: They did. What we would do was — when is this going to be... [laughter]  
When is this going to be publicized? Are they going to let people hear these?

WEEKES: Yeah, some of them, yes. Yes.

BROWN GREEN: OK.

WEEKES: Well, we can get them to edit it afterwards.

BROWN GREEN: Yeah, they're not going to edit it. They're going to just say, "Well, damn! Maybe I'll get a job out of this!" [laughter] One of the high schools would allow my children to take the SATs with their students.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: And you can, I mean, people do that. So we would have them take the PSATs and the SATs with another school. And then the scores would come back to my school. I mean, they put my school — I had a — I ended up with a — I did have a feeder number for the Board of Ed, so we did get that. So they knew. We were — on one hand, we were flying on the radar, you know. But yes, there was testing. However, there were programs during that time where you had to — how did they do that? Where if you — they would almost — they would treat it like you had a GED. And students that — there were programs in certain colleges where if you did one semester, non-matriculated, you — and you were successful in completing the credits, they would matriculate you and give you GED status.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: Which, I mean, we didn't mind, as long as they were in college. So a lot of our students went to St. Francis as on their — their first colleges. And then my

daughters, my two daughters that went there, the older children, they went and got their master's at NYU after that.

WEEKES: OK. So what was the typical day like? I mean, you didn't have all of the facilities of a public school. So what was a typical day for – at the school, the home schooling?

BROWN GREEN: I wouldn't call it home schooling. I mean, it seemed like it was home – I think it was, like, a step above, because it was in public. It wasn't like we were at home.

WEEKES: So, yeah, so you had a more traditional space, as opposed to...

BROWN GREEN: We ran it – it was very strict on a certain level, but then it wasn't. We had a schedule that we dealt with every day. The children got everything that you could think of. Sometimes people would come and sit in the classes and get the lectures, because they were so powerful. So they got history, they got art history from me. They got – I had English – I had teachers coming in. People that were professors, parents who taught English in the college setting. They would come and teach the students. I had – you know, they had language, they had Amharic. And it's so interesting that there was a recent article somewhere where they talked about Amharic. It's, like, the oldest language that exists. And they say those 64 sounds that are the foundation of Amharic is the foundation of all the languages in the world.

WEEKES: And where does it originate? I've never heard of it.

BROWN GREEN: From Ethiopia.

WEEKES: Oh.

BROWN GREEN: So we had someone teaching them that. I mean, we would get people in – parents had friends, we had, you know, Rita Marley would come and visit, and we'd sing with her, and Steel Pulse. I mean, all – just so many – we would get everybody. Dr. Ben would come by. And people would come and eat lunch because we had – we cooked our own lunch, we fed them a vegetarian meal. So people would come, they knew what time lunch was, and they would just come and share with the children. I mean, it was really – there was nothing like it in the country, I feel. I mean, those children and the children that went to the school, all of them are pretty successful.

WEEKES: What are your children doing today?

BROWN GREEN: My oldest child is a professor at Medgar Evers College.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: She teaches English. And she's one of their top professors there, which is so ironic. And actually, she got hired before I did, because I worked at Medgar. I taught at Medgar Evers. And they had hired her, like, a couple of years before me.

WEEKES: This is the one that wasn't accepted as a —

BROWN GREEN: A student.

WEEKES: — student. OK.

BROWN GREEN: Isn't that deep? My second daughter is a — she has a master's degree as well, and she runs the dance program at Dewey High School. So she's a professor and she's able to also — she has an administrative master's, so she's getting ready to look for — I mean, she can be a principal if she wanted. My third daughter got her master's in athletic training. And she did that for a year. She traveled with — she ended up working at St. Francis with their division one teams and traveling. And it was a bit much, so she ended up quitting and applying to LIU — I mean, not LIU, Downstate. She worked for them with an orthopedic doctor. But she would still do games sometimes and be there. And then she decided she always wanted to be in the production business. She wanted to become a makeup artist, so she has a license from one of the top makeup schools in New York, probably the top makeup school in New York. And now she's doing a lot of PA work, because she wants to become a producer. So she's been working on "Elementary" and all of these different programs. And then my son who, he got his bachelor's from LIU in jazz music, and he — I tried to get him to go for his master's, but he got the "Fela" gig. And he ended up with "Fela" when they got the Tony award, and they were nominated and that sort of thing. And he's — and now he's with another play. He's on Toronto right now working on another play, that's going to hopefully come to Broadway in October. But, so they're all successful, taking care of themselves. You know? So...

WEEKES: Grandchildren? I know Summer.

BROWN GREEN: That's who I have. My granddaughter.

WEEKES: Is she going to regular public school, or...

BROWN GREEN: She does go to PS 9. She is there. But her mother does a lot of — we do a lot of extracurricular stuff with her. On the weekend, she got into the junior division of Alvin Ailey, so she does that on Sundays. And then she's at Broadway Dance Center on Saturday. So her weekends are filled with dance. She wants to dance, and she's an artist. And she likes to write and draw, and that sort of thing. But, you know, we have her — we're setting her up, helping to set her up. She has the Alvin Ailey thing. This is, like, I think, her third year with Alvin Ailey. So and then this is her first year with Broadway Dance Center, which has been really phenomenal as well, so...

WEEKES: Are you familiar with what's going on in the public schools? Does it make you feel happy about the New York City public schools, and what's going on there?

BROWN GREEN: I think that there's some good things, that's, you know, that's happening. I'm always sad when art is taken out, or that the arts, you know, that's, like, always the first to go in any situation. And I think that's the only thing that's — I think art is something that will bring people together, like, that's like our connector, is the arts. So I'm sad when that happens. I don't complete— I don't totally agree with the Common Core, which is what is a big issue. And I know parents are allowed to opt out of it. But I understand why it can be very difficult for the students, and part of it is because the teachers are not fully — some of the teachers are not prepared to teach to Common Core. And the reason why I feel that they're not prepared to teach it is because Common Core basically is — and this is only because of my background in interdisciplinary studies — it's an interdisciplinary studies thing. And I think that's where the world is going at this point, being able to connect the dots. Not only with like subjects or topics, but with topics that may not be like any — you know, finding the Common Core within each particular subject and connecting those. So a child should be able to understand how math and art are related, or how science and art are related. My husband and I did a talk on Sunday; we did the lesson for our church on Sunday. And when we were working on it, he and I went through so much to just get it to where it needed to be, because, you know, I made the joke he's left-handed, I'm right-handed;

you know, he deals with a different side of the brain, more analytical. I'm more visual creative.

WEEKES: Right.

BROWN GREEN: And so how do you bring those two together? Well, of course I cheat, because I have a background in interdisciplinary studies. And, you know, and it was a challenge. But I had to, like, say — look, no. You know, he says, “Well, you just do you thing, and I’ll do” — no. The minister asked us to do it as a team, and that’s what we’re going to do. And how do we do that? So, I, you know, I laid it out for him. And he was so proud afterwards. If you’re my friend on Facebook — you are my friend on Facebook.

WEEKES: Yes.

BROWN GREEN: I mean, it’s — another friend went live with it.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: So it’s on there.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: But, you know, so that’s my challenge, you know, in reference to the Board of Ed. Just the whole — just that Common Core piece, and just not being — you know, many teachers not being prepared to teach it, or to get it across. Because — and especially if we — you know, they learn, the teachers learn about learning styles. What’s his name, that does the learning styles? I can’t remember the psychologist’s name. Every child has a different learning style. When I had my school, what I would do is, I would give the parents a test so that they could see what their learning style was. And usually the parent’s learning style was different from the child’s learning style. And I would show them, look, your style of learning is — the way you take in information is different from the way your child takes in information. So why do you force them to take in information the way you take it in? You know, there has to be a way where you have to get out of your comfort zone so that you can help your child. And if you feel that you can’t, then you need to send your child to someone who can, you know, and get that. So, you know, that whole thing, you know, where the learning

styles come into play as well. You know, and just seeing that. But as far as the school system, I mean, there are some good things that are happening. I never thought any of my children would go to a public school, you know, again. And my granddaughter's there, so we make the best of it. My daughter's present a lot, up at the school. And we all stay on it. You know, she has a project coming up; my daughter can help her with the written stuff. She says, "Mom, maybe you can come over later on today or tomorrow and help her with the art part of it," you know? So we all — Richard was just there with my brother-in-law, Alfonso. My daughter's in a — my grand— Summer's in a dual language program. And they're studying Honduras last, they studied Honduras last week, and Richard and Alfonso went and did a presentation and took stuff to the school on Honduras, you know, Honduras. Because you know, Richard's Honduran. You know that, right?

WEEKES: No.

BROWN GREEN: Yeah.

WEEKES: I've seen your husband, I was never introduced.

BROWN GREEN: Oh! OK, he'll be —

WEEKES: I've seen him a couple times at Dorsey's, yeah.

BROWN GREEN: Are you going to be at the show on Sunday?

WEEKES: Definitely. Definitely, yeah.

BROWN GREEN: Oh, OK, so you'll meet him. Well, you know that Alfonso's my brother-in-law?

WEEKES: No. Alfonso Pastor?

BROWN GREEN: Yeah.

WEEKES: Oh, I didn't know.

BROWN GREEN: He's Richard's brother.

WEEKES: OK. I didn't know.

BROWN GREEN: Yeah. Two different mothers, but they're brothers. And Richard's mother made him know him.

WEEKES: OK. Now, you were in Brooklyn during the Crown Heights riots?

BROWN GREEN: I was.

WEEKES: Any recollections on —

BROWN GREEN: Of course. I'll never forget it. We were a big part of it. It got so tough that I was sent to my mother's house.

WEEKES: Really?

BROWN GREEN: I ended up where they sent us — me and the children were sent to Cambridge to stay for a few days, because it was really tough.

WEEKES: Why? Why tough?

BROWN GREEN: Well, Richard was out there. He's the one that kept the peace. This place would have gone up in flames if it wasn't for him, and the things that he went through. And we went — I mean, even afterwards, the residue; parents couldn't find their children, you know, children that were arrested. You know, we had a team that, you know, was helping to, you know, find them. Because, you know, they'd be picked up, and they'd be taken to different sites. It was just really rough. It was rough.

WEEKES: Where was the tension coming from? The community? The police? Or...?

BROWN GREEN: A lot of misunderstanding, I would say. The tension comes from wherever it comes from in any situation. I mean, you've got to find folks that are, you know, everybody has their own opinion. And I'm choosing my — yes, I am choosing my words. But everybody has their own opinion. Everybody has their own ways of life. And everybody, you know, it appears as if nobody ever got along in that neighborhood. And people have lived together forever. You know? And there were — you know, there's certain folks who would have wanted things to happen a certain way, maybe for self — for being in the public eye, and, you know. And then there's those that just wanted to be back to the way it was. I mean, of course it would never get back to the way it was. But I just think that there's a lot of dialog that probably needed to happen, because everybody, like, minds their business until something like that happens. You know? But after the riots, or the "uprising," I would prefer calling it — I remember, I don't know if you saw a mural on Empire Boulevard and between Washington and Flatbush.

WEEKES: This was recently?

BROWN GREEN: It was — no, years ago.

WEEKES: Years ago?

BROWN GREEN: Because it was — that wall was taken down. I think it's owned by Transit.

But I did a mural with some — I had Black girls and we did a mural with Hasidic girls.

And it was so interesting, because when they did the anniversary thing out at the park, the Brooklyn Children's Museum, like last summer —

WEEKES: Yes?

BROWN GREEN: — I met some of the women that we did the works with. And we would do dia— we would have dialog, dialogs so that we could ask each other questions, you know? But it was really something. And then if you look at the play, *Fires in the Mirror*, do you remember that play, by Anna Deavere Smith?

WEEKES: No, I don't.

BROWN GREEN: OK. You'll remember — well, anyway, she did a play on the whole Crown Heights thing. It was a one-woman — she does these one-woman plays. She's from Harvard.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: She went to Harvard or taught at Harvard, one of them. And Richard was one of her characters in the play. So if you can get that, it's on Netflix, I think. You can get it on Netflix now. But it's a play. And she plays — you know, he's one of her characters, because he was one of the important parts to keeping, you know, things intact.

WEEKES: And how do you think — things are better now? Or we never know?

BROWN GREEN: Yeah, I think so. I think people are communicating more. I mean, I think people are communicating more. I think that everything's not perfect in our community, in the Black community. I mean, so... And I think we always — there's always room for us to work better together, always, you know? And I think that we have to stop making stuff up in our heads and ask, you know, like — that's why these archives are so important. Not only for this purpose, but in any aspect of anything that

is communicated. You get it directly from whoever it is, if you can. So, I mean, a lot of people don't realize that Richard was the — he was instrumental in keeping this place from really being, like, burning up. People don't know what we had really done. I mean, the gang situation, us being able to go and talk to them. And when they'd come to the Collective, you know. I mean, even — it's so interesting, we were just having a conversation about it. Just even building the trust, I mean, Richard was — he taught a class at Brooklyn College in reference to that whole Crown Heights situation. And we had Hasidic students. He had Hasidic students as well as — I mean, many of them are now in their professions. And Black students, who took this class together. And it was like a dialog between them out in Brooklyn College, which I thought — so there was, like, a Jewish person, I think, and Richard who taught the class together. And they would send the students to our school to teach our students as well. They'd come and do their volunteer hours at our school. But, you know, there was just a lot of — a lot that he's done, which I have to take my hat off to him.

WEEKES: And what is Richard focusing on today?

BROWN GREEN: He is still doing what he does, you know, in reference to helping the community. And he teaches at Medgar. He still teaches at Medgar. And he does a lot of work with the police department. So all the rookie trainings, like when, when an officer becomes a police, he does the rookie trainings, the sensitivity trainings.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: So he goes from graduation to graduation, and he presents, you know, so that people — and then he mentors many of the rookies. So they meet with him once a week. People don't realize that. And he communicates to them. And if anything happens, he gets a call —

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: — from whoever, up top, saying, "What do we do?"

WEEKES: I know you're an art historian, you're a quilter, you're a fine artist. You have so many different things going on. How do you see yourself? What picture of yourself do you paint?

BROWN GREEN: In the past, it was more — just whatever I could do for the community is what I would do. I mean, I always saw myself as someone supporting the community, to make it a better place than I found it. I have a Sikh friend, and both of us were trying to remember this quote by this Sikh person, who says, “Everyone on the planet, whether you’re an artist or not” — I mean, I’m paraphrasing — “should make something with their hands to leave so that the world will be a better place than they found it.” Which I, you know, and I try to do that. I am speaking out more, which is really interesting.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: I don’t stutter as much.

WEEKES: OK, I haven’t noticed it.

BROWN GREEN: And just the speaking out more, and just being there for — I think — I love women, and the power that — and I love women because of the power that they have. What they have sacrificed, what they go through. And I’m working on just constantly empowering whoever it is that I can. The book that I’m working on right now, the black — what is it called? *Brooklyn On My Mind*. Yeah, *Brooklyn On My Mind*. It’s been so long [laughter] and so intense! *Brooklyn On My Mind*, the Black artist, visual artists from the WPA to the present, is what I am working on. And that has been really a labor of love. You know, there are people that have chosen not to be a part of it, which is fine.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: At first I didn’t think it was fine, but, and I would, like, try to convince folks. But it’s, like, you know, why? There’s over a hundred artists in the first volume. And, you know, I keep going back and forth and back and forth. And so it goes to the publisher in the next month or so.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: Thank God! And I’m, like, really excited about who’s in the book. Really super excited. So people will be excited –

WEEKES: I’m excited!

BROWN GREEN: —When they find out who’s in the book.

WEEKES: OK. Do you have a favorite visual arts media?

BROWN GREEN: My favorite? It appears as if quilt making would be. And I still — and I think that I haven't — I haven't quilted in a way where, for me, that it appears to be my favorite, when I think about it. I mean, I think it's something that I love doing, but I don't know if it's my favorite. I've always loved working with fabric.

WEEKES: You find that it's a historical connection, or traditional connection?

BROWN GREEN: I think — yeah. I think, yeah, the history is a big piece. I always said that I wanted to make quilts that heal whoever looks at them, like, that heals the community that heals the people. And I think more and more, it's so fascinating. I have a show coming up on Sunday at Dorsey's. And I had started framing my quilts, because I found that people wouldn't buy them, because they didn't know what to do with them once they bought them in many instances; many folks, not all, but many. So I started framing them. And I found that my work was so good, it was so — it looked so painterly on a certain level that people didn't know that it was a quilt —

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: — behind the frame. So, and I did it also, I framed them so people could just take them and hang them on their wall. Well, I decided — for one show, a show that I had, like, a few, a couple of months ago, someone said, "Well, why would you" — like, "Don't put glass over them." And I was a little nervous about that, to frame them without glass. And I did. And I sold a couple. And I think part of it — and I always — I mean, I'll sew work, but I think people bought them because they could see the stitching and they were connected with them. So I stopped putting glass over them. If someone wants to get their stuff reframed and put glass over it, then fine. But these pieces that I have, that I'm going to have in this show, none of them have glass on them. And I love them, just seeing them unframed, like —

WEEKES: Yeah, I guess it makes it a little more intimate.

BROWN GREEN: It does! That's the word. Intimate. Yes!

WEEKES: It protects it and displays it properly, but also, you can get the — yeah, you can see the texture, then, yeah.

BROWN GREEN: Yeah. I mean, the glass is not there. And I can picture someone taking a little brush and dusting it if they need to. But, you know, to me they're stronger without the glass on top of it.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: And it's almost, like, it's intimate, yes. And I think that you get to — yeah, you kind of get to just really be there with each thread and each little curve of the thread, and even if there's some little things hanging, I mean, that's fine. It's just really something that I'm just really excited about the work that I'm doing now. And even that series that I — the "I Have a Dream" series that I'm going to show. And even that series is, I have an idea to take it to the next level.

WEEKES: OK.

BROWN GREEN: So I'm really excited about that.

WEEKES: I look forward to seeing it.

BROWN GREEN: Yeah.

WEEKES: OK. All right. So we're about done. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about, or add into the history?

BROWN GREEN: No, I don't think so. I mean, I think that — yeah, I think that's it. You know?

WEEKES: OK. We covered a lot of ground.

BROWN GREEN: Yeah, we did.

WEEKES: And I thank you for your frankness, and I thank you for your time.

BROWN GREEN: OK. [laughter] You're welcome!