BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies, other reproductions, and reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

- Brooklyn Historical Society is not responsible for either determining the copyright status of the material or for securing copyright permission.
- Possession of a reproduction does not constitute permission to use it.
- Permission to use copies other than for private study, scholarship, or research requires the permission of both Brooklyn Historical Society and the copyright holder. For assistance, contact Brooklyn Historical Society at library@brooklynhistory.org.
- Read more about the Brooklyn Historical Society's Reproduction Rights Policy online: http://brooklynhistory.org/library/reproduction.html#Brooklyn_Historical_Society_Reproduction.

GUIDELINES FOR USE

This transcript is hereby made available for research purposes only. These oral history interviews are intimate conversations between two people, both of whom have generously agreed to share these recordings with the Brooklyn Historical Society archives and with researchers. Please listen in the spirit with which these were shared. Researchers will understand that:

1. The Brooklyn Historical Society abides by the General Principles & Best Practices for Oral History as agreed upon by the Oral History Association (2009) and expects that use of this material will be done with respect for these professional ethics.

2. Every oral history relies on the memories, views and opinions of the narrator. Because of the personal nature of oral history, listeners may find some viewpoints or language of the recorded participants to be objectionable. In keeping with its mission of preservation and unfettered access whenever possible, BHS presents these views as recorded.
3. This transcript is a nearly verbatim copy of the recorded interview. As such, it may contain the natural false starts, verbal stumbles, misspeaks, and repetitions that are common in conversation. This decision was made because BHS gives primacy to the audible voice and also because some researchers do find useful information in these verbal patterns.
4. Unless these verbal patterns are germane to your scholarly work, when quoting from this material researchers are encouraged to correct the grammar and make other modifications maintaining the flavor of the narrator's speech while editing the material for the standards of print.
5. All citations must be attributed to the Brooklyn Historical Society:
    - Derico, Jean with Butler, Herman, Oral history interview conducted by Obden Mondésir, January 6, 2017, Voices of Crown Heights oral histories: Weeksville Heritage Center, 2016.027.3.04; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Oral History Interview with Jean Derico, with Herman Butler
Voices of Crown Heights oral histories: Weeksville Heritage Center, 2016.027.3.04
Interview conducted by Obden Mondésir at PS 243, the Weeksville School on
January 6, 2017 in Crown Heights Brooklyn

MONDÉSIR: Well, today is Friday, January 6, 2017, and I am Obden Mondésir from the Weeksville Heritage Center, and I am with Jean Derico and Herman Butler. We are at PS 243 the Weeksville School on Dean Street and Troy Avenue in Crown Heights. This interview is for the Brooklyn Historical Society Voices of Crown Heights project. So, would you please introduce yourself by giving your name, birthday, and where you were born?

DERICO: Good afternoon. My name is Jean Derico. I was born [date redacted for privacy], 1954, in the Bronx, New York.

BUTLER: Good afternoon. My name is Herman Butler. I was born 19-1935, [date redacted for privacy]. I was born in Augusta, Georgia, and I moved to New York at a later date.

MONDÉSIR: Okay, great. So, Ms. Derico, could you please tell me about the -- the first home you lived in and your family?

DERICO: The first home that I lived in that I can really recall was when I moved in Williamsburg, and it was a two family house.

MONDÉSIR: Could you tell me what the neighborhood was like?

DERICO: The neighborhood that I lived in -- I lived in Williamsburg -- 226 Boerum Street. I always remember that, and it was a neighborhood that consisted of three Black families on the block. The rest were Italian, and one Hasidic Jewish family that lived right next door, and the area was mostly factories at that time.

MONDÉSIR: Could you tell me the first home you grew up in Georgia?

BUTLER: I grew up in Augusta, Georgia. I lived in -- we lived in our own home -- private home at 1711 Franklin Street, Augusta, Georgia.

MONDÉSIR: And how long did you live there?

BUTLER: I lived there until I was, say, approximately 18. Then I came to New York.

MONDÉSIR: So, could you explain to me what the neighborhood was like and --?

BUTLER: Oh, what the neighborhood was very quiet, private -- private homes.

MONDÉSIR: And what were the people like? Like the demographics?

BUTLER: Well, mostly the people looked like a family -- looked most like a family and lived there. Everybody that lived there was mostly like one -- mostly like they own their own homes and-- something like family.

MONDÉSIR: Okay, so, Ms. Derico, could you tell me about the first school you attended in Williamsburg and what it was like?

DERICO: The first school that I attended was PS 147. I don't recall the street, but it was a pretty nice school that -- from what I can recall. You know, I don't have any bad memories of anything at that school. You know, just remember being a kid and having fun and running around. I remember the library was across the street from the -- the school.

MONDÉSIR: What was the name of the school?

DERICO: PS 147.

MONDÉSIR: Where was that?

DERICO: It was in Williamsburg, but I don't -- I can't recall the exact location -- the street itself. I -- I can see it. When I close my eyes, I can see it, but I don't recall at that -- at this time.

MONDÉSIR: Could you remember any particular first days of schools that, like, hit you?

DERICO: Well, I remember I had a very nice teacher, Mr. Kennedy, that I -- that I still remember to this day because he was a fun teacher. He liked science, so we did a lot of science. I recall that, you know. Basically, that's it.

MONDÉSIR: And, Mr. Butler, could you tell me what brought you to New York?

BUTLER: Well, I -- I came to New York because of— I would be better living— because, you know, things -- it was nice in Georgia, but I figured I would move up to -- for a better living. That's what I came to New York for -- for people tell me things were better, but it was as I stayed here for a while, but like I had things about to say.

MONDÉSIR: And could you describe when you started working at the Weeksville School, like when and how did you find yourself there?

BUTLER: Well, I started working at the Weeksville School in '6 -- I think it was '67. I was working part time at night, but I was working at -- out of Queens, I was at sheet metal work. We was building cabinets, making cabinets under sinks, and then I came over [unintelligible] - part time. I started part time. Then I -- I think, '77 -- 1977, I started -- I worked to become the fireman at the school.

MONDÉSIR: And what did you think about the school and the neighborhood that the school was in at the time?

BUTLER: Well, at the time, like I say it was -- I consider it like a family. Still is beautiful there, you know, family -- very good. Everybody work -- seem like we be a family, but things might be a little different now.

MONDÉSIR: And do you remember -- were there any faculty that you remember working with when you first started there?

HERMAN BUTLER: Well, mostly just like I said -- most of the things I didn't do too much with the school. I was mostly maintaining [unintelligible] School up near [unintelligible]. I mostly worked -- like trying you know make sure everybody was -- the school was secure and whatever it need -- I tried, you know, to accommodate that.

MONDÉSIR: And, Ms. Derico, what was attending PS 137 like?

DERICO: One thirty-seven: When I left 147, I went to 137, which was in -- I guess -- now they say -- I guess they would call it Ocean Hill Brownsville section. That's when I moved to Bed-Stuy from Williamsburg. It was a little different from what I was used to. It's not that I didn't like it, but I remember that the other school I enjoyed that a little more than I enjoyed 137, and I guess because, you know, it was new to me. And when you're used to one school and you come -- so, I was only in that school for a short period of time, but I mean after a while you make friends, and it's -- and it's okay.

MONDÉSIR: What was the move -- or why did you move from Williamsburg to Crown -- to Bedford-Stuyvesant?

DERICO: Well, I guess my parents moved for more room and whatever, you know.

MONDÉSIR: What did you think of the neighborhood?

DERICO: What did I think of --? I -- as a kid, I lived on Hancock and -- I thought it was the best place in the world, you know.

MONDÉSIR: Did you have any favorite subjects or games you liked to play in school?

DERICO: In school? Well, you know, girls back then we played double -- Double Dutch was our game and handball. So, those were the two -- my two favorites, you know, growing up.

MONDÉSIR: Did you have a favorite subject?

DERICO: A favorite subject -- I would say not really. I mean I don't remember as a kid any particular subject that I felt that I really was truly in love with, you know. I mean I just did my work, you know, whether it was reading, math, whatever. I just -- I was just into all of it, you know, because school was— excuse me— school was very important so it didn't matter what you had to do. It was all important, you know.

MONDÉSIR: And how involved were your parents in your education?

DERICO: Very involved. Very involved, you know. They knew what you had to do when you came home. They made sure that your homework was done. You did that before you were allowed to go outside, and, you know, homework, schoolwork, all of that had to be done, you know. So, their main -- they check your books. They, you know, made sure your homework -- do you have any homework tonight, whatever? They -- they were on top of you.

MONDÉSIR: And where did you go to high school?

DERICO: I went to Central Commercial. I went to Central Commercial, which is now -- it's now on 42nd; which is now the hotel on 42nd and Lexington. I went to Central Commercial because I had an older friend -- well, she was more like my babysitter at the time, and she went there. She went to be a secretary so I decided I wanted to be a secretary. I thought that's what I was going to do because she used to write in shorthand, and I used to, you know, watch her and I said, "I'm going to go to that school. I'm going to be a secretary. I'm going to be the best secretary there ever was." So, that was my goal -- to be a secretary.

MONDÉSIR: And when did you initially decide that you wanted to become a teacher?

DERICO: Well, when I was in high school, I had a teacher, Miss Winslow. Miss Winslow was our bookkeeping, accounting teacher when we were in high school, and I used to do so well in that class, and she said to me, "You know, you ought to be a teacher." And I was like, "Me?" But I was always very, very good in, you know, the accounting, the bookkeeping, always got, you know, 99s, you know, my— that's where I soared when I was in high school in accounting, and I thought that would be it, but when I went to college, I discovered, no, that was not it. And I went with a friend who was in education, and I went -- I just went with her to drop off something, and I was sitting there waiting, and the lady asked me, "Oh, do you want to fill out your form?" And I was like, "No, I don't want to be in education," but she gave me papers and different things, and I started to read over it, and then I just switched in midstream. And here I am now as a teacher. [laughter]

MONDÉSIR: And, so, when you started at Hunter that was when they had the open admissions for CUNY?

DERICO: Yes, they did.

MONDÉSIR: And what were those events like considering that you were in high school and you were getting ready to go to college?

DERICO: It was super, you know. I mean most kids at that time, you know, a lot of my friends they were going. They had their jobs. They were going to jobs, but I was off to college, you know. So, it was exciting, and then to get in the school that I wanted to, you know, to get my first choice, you know, that was even better, you know.

MONDÉSIR: And when did you start teaching at the Weeksville School?

DERICO: I started teaching in 1984. I came in October, the week of Halloween, and I got here accidentally because I— Accidentally: I was supposed to be in PS 81 in the same district. But somehow there was a screw-up when I came, and they told me they didn't have a position, and then I was sent by the superintendent to this school, and he told me, "You have to be top notch if you want to go to that school." So, I ended up here -- 1985.

MONDÉSIR: And, Mr. Britt--

DERICO: Butler.

MONDÉSIR: -- Butler, could you tell me about when the school changed its name?

BUTLER: Well, the school changed its name -- I forgot the exact date it changed its name, but it was Isaac Newton School, and then after, then after they decided by the Weeksville Heritage Museum to name it the Weeksville School, but what -- what -- when they changed it, I really don't know -- 19 -- 19-- 1970, maybe that's when they changed it, but I had forgot because it had been quite some time.

MONDÉSIR: Okay, and so they changed the name of the school because of the dig?

BUTLER: Say -- say that again?

MONDÉSIR: They changed the school's name because of the dig?

DERICO: The dig.

BUTLER: The dig, yes, because - because the dig -- right. That's when they changed -- they changed the name after they did a lot of digging and considered the Weeksville because you know, after Weeksville owned the property 'round here, so they changed the name and dedicated the school to the Weeksville.

MONDÉSIR: Okay, and was there a ceremony for that?

BUTLER: Yes, we had a ceremony. They had a ceremony when they changed -- the first one when they had-- matter of fact, they had two or three ceremonies. When they had the digging, they had, you know -- they digging -- when they start digging. Then they had a ceremony after they had done some digging, and then they had a ceremony when they changed the school.

MONDÉSIR: And what was your reaction to the changing of the name and the ceremony and all the pomp and circumstance that came with this?

BUTLER: Well, I -- I thought that was a great thing to do to change the name -- rename the school after Weeksville. He owned the property. [unintelligible] I figured the school -- the school should be -- I mean it deserved to be changed. Not because of Isaac Newton was a school when they first built the school. But the Isaac Newton School the name I

think after a Jewish guy, I think it was. So, they decided about it; being a Black neighborhood and all Black, to change the name to Weeksville.

MONDÉSIR: And before you came to the school, did you hear about -- or when did you first hear about this school's history?

DERICO: Well, I had a college -- a couple of college friends that lived right down the block as a matter of fact, and they used to always talk about this school because it -- my friend -- he used to come here and his brother and sisters -- they used to come to the after school program here. So, they would call out names and say, "Oh, yeah, you know, when I go to, you know, the after school program, this person," they would name names, and so, we always talked about how great this school was, and he gave me, you know, a little history about it. But never thought in a million years that I would end up here, and when I came, I was like oh, you know. He used to talk about Mr. Walks and Mr. Hebron. These are the people that he used to talk about, and these are the people that I'm working with now, you know. So, I had— I heard a lot of good things about the school and about the community that, you know, James Weeks owned this community, you know, and so when I got here I was pretty much excited about it.

MONDÉSIR: And could you tell me what impressions did you have of Crown Heights before you started teaching here and living here?

DERICO: Well, to me it was just another community because for me growing up this area was Bed-Stuy. All of this was Bed-Stuy to me so it was never Crown Heights until I came here and they said, "Well, this school is on the borderline of Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy." So, they mostly identified with Crown Heights, but growing up as a kid, it was Bed-Stuy to me.

MONDÉSIR: And could you tell me about— Oops. [Interview interrupted.] Okay so, because I know that you grew up in the Ocean Hill Brownsville for a while, could you tell me any experiences or hearsay that you heard about the strike?

DERICO: Well, I just knew that they were on strike, but as a kid, you don't really understand anything about strikes and why teachers don't want to be in the school. So, I know that they were striking, and that was basically it. But when I came to this school, the

parents that worked here -- there were about three or four that were part of the Ocean Hill Brownsville Strike. They participated in it, and it was that they went to work when the teachers didn't, and that caused some sort of, you know, problem. Now, you know, I would hear that, but other than that I really don't -- I really can't say about that.

MONDÉSIR: And what was your experience in regards to the strike? Did it affect you in any way?

BUTLER: No, it did not affect me in any way, but I know others that close by -- like everybody but I never took any parts in the strike, but it didn't affect me either way.

MONDÉSIR: Did it affect in any way that the school had to operate?

BUTLER: No, not -- not -- not our school. Like I said, most-- like they had on the TV, about, on the news about people talking about it. But I -- I didn't -- it didn't affect me either way.

MONDÉSIR: All right, let's talk about the Weeksville Museum in the school. Could you tell me when that started?

BUTLER: Well, the Weeksville started when they -- I don't exactly know what date it started -- when it started, but it started when -- when they start -- when they stopped talking and start digging. Then they decide they going to -- they would make -- do a museum in the school because after they did a lot of digging, the Boy Scouts and the college kids come in. They did a lot of digging, and a lot of people -- regular people did a lot of digging, you know.

DERICO: I just want to add that, from what I understand from Dr. Marguerite Thompson, Bank Street was also part of it. So I guess those were the college students -- some of the Bank Street staff and stuff. But Bank Street was part of, you know, helping with that also, besides the archeologists and historians who took part in that.

MONDÉSIR: So, the museum was created after the dig, and -- what was it initially like? Why did they decide to have a museum in the school?

BUTLER: Well, that was up to the -- that was up to the principal and the community and the parents' association. They just figured that we should have a museum so -- so -- so they got together and they put one together. Like say, Bank Street was part of it and they

initiated it, too. So, we had a lot of people coming, a lot of politicians. Some of the politicians came in. So, that's how we really got started.

MONDÉSIR: Can you name some of the politicians that visited?

BUTLER: Well, were there quite a few, sure, like Shirley Chisholm. She was, she was a big -- assisted the school, and then --

DERICO: Marty—

BUTLER: Marty Markowitz [unintelligible] was his school, his very— his personal school, Marty Markowitz.

MONDÉSIR: Oh, Marty Markowitz?

BUTLER: Yeah, Marty Markowitz. Yeah, he'd stayed. I don't care what you did, he was there. Whatever you had he, he would come regardless of whatever it was; Open school, graduation. Marty Markowitz -- we had quite a lot of politicians. Really can't recall the names off the top of my head, but we had quite a few politicians that, that visit to the school.

MONDÉSIR: So, Marty Markowitz -- he was the --

BUTLER: Well, he was the backbone of the school because he loved the school. It was his school regardless of whatever you have, whatever you did, or whatever you had, Marty Markowitz was here. If he can stay for -- if he didn't stay but for two minutes, Marty Markowitz would come. I guess he -- this was, this was his pride and joy, this school he attended.

DERICO: At that time, he wasn't the borough president. He was -- what was Marty? He was -- I'm sorry. I can't even recall.

BUTLER: I forgot what he was myself, but I know he was -- I forgot what he was, but he loved the school. I'll put it that way, and he really helped -- he helped the school turn around, and he put a lot into Weeksville Museum too.

MONDÉSIR: So, as a teacher with this museum here, how -- were you able to incorporate it into your lessons?

DERICO: Well, that was part -- when I first came here back in '85, you know, this had been going on for a long time. The museum was on the second floor, and the museum --

Weeksville -- every teacher who came into the school had to learn about Weeksville. It was part of our lessons. It was like social studies. It had to be incorporated in everything that we did, you know. Every child learned about Weeksville. They had to, and then we had the Weeksville ambassadors, you know. They had to be top notch. They had to know all about the history so it was part -- it was part of everything. The curriculum was Weeksville, you know. It was -- that was the social study which lends itself to the math, the social studies, everything. Everything was incorporated in Weeksville.

MONDÉSIR: Do you have any favorite experiences with students when you told them about Weeksville?

DERICO: Well, I -- I had so many. It was so many experiences, but I do -- and I cannot remember the year, and I keep saying I'm going to call the teacher that I work with and maybe she can remember the year that we decided that we were going to bury time capsules, and we went up to the Hunterfly Houses; which is now the Weeksville Heritage Center. We buried -- in the back we buried our time capsules. We -- we found things that we wanted to, you know, to put in. We did -- we did bottles. We put them in bottles, and we buried them, and I just thought that was just, you know, one of the, you know, best experience that, you know, with the kids, you know. They enjoyed that, and teachers enjoyed that also, but it's so many -- I can't even begin to, you know, to say the experiences that we had with the Weeksville.

MONDÉSIR: Could you tell me what kind of things were going into the bottles?

DERICO: Yeah, that's why -- I remember the kids -- some of the kids brought in things from home that they wanted to put in. I really can't even remember. I think I -- I -- we put in coins. I think my class -- we put in, you know, coins, money. We put in buttons. We put in pieces of cloth. We put in letters. We put in a lot of different things, and we buried them up in the— you know. We had a whole ceremony. Everybody was there when we did the dig. Everybody had to dig and put their stuff in so—

MONDÉSIR: Cool. Could you tell me about the— [inaudible] [Interview interrupted.]

HERMAN BUTLER: —was part of Bank Street. Dr. Thompson -- she was the -- she was the chairperson of the Weeksville, the Weeksville, and that's why -- I guess that's why she got a lot of the college kids to come over and help from Bank Street, you know. So, that was part of the school doing stuff.

DERICO: And also she was with Brooklyn College -- Brooklyn College and Medgar Evers. So it was -- our resource was huge because she had -- it was part of the Weeksville Museum so it was a lot of information and different things.

MONDÉSIR: So, we had basically three colleges --

DERICO: Yeah, that was --

MONDÉSIR: -- affiliated with the school at the time which was Bank Street, Medgar Evers, and --

DERICO: Brooklyn College.

BUTLER: Brooklyn College.

MONDÉSIR: -- Brooklyn College, and that's -- that sounds really cool. Did Medgar Evers play any stronger roles considering that it's --?

DERICO: Well, I don't -- I don't know if I could say they played a stronger role, but I know that Dr. Thompson -- Marguerite Thompson was part -- she taught at these colleges and what she taught was about Weeksville. She taught about the community so -- I mean, you know -- I mean we -- they even brought classes into the school, you know, from Medgar Evers -- they brought the classes in here, and, you know, we did classes, you know, in the school, but I don't know if I would say, you know -- if Marguerite Thompson was here, she could give you more information about that because she was, you know, into that -- her and June Douglas, you know. They were -- not June Douglas.

BUTLER: Evelyn Castro.

DERICO: Yeah, Evelyn Castro, June Douglas, and what's the other -- oh God. It's been so long, oh God. I can't think of her name. It will come to me. It will come to me -- the other lady. She's—

MONDÉSIR: Did you have a -- a favorite grade that you liked to teach?

DERICO: Me? Oh, God. My favorite is first grade, but I like kindergarten too. So, my -- I even had a combination kindergarten/first grade, a combined class. So those are my favorites because I think that working with the younger children, you can mold them. You can teach them, you know, and they're eager to learn. They want to soak up everything that you give them when they're that young. So, I'm an early childhood person. I like the earlier grades.

MONDÉSIR: And as a parent or when you became a parent, did the way you teach or the way you saw education change?

DERICO: No, not -- not when my son was growing up. I mean I thought it was basically he -- it was basically the same thing.

MONDÉSIR: Did he also get to learn about Weeksville?

DERICO: Oh, yeah, because he -- he came over here to the after school programs and stuff like that. So, he was part of Weeksville, you know. He lived here. I worked here. He lived here most of the time. Once he got out of school because I used to do after school programs and he would, you know, come so he was part of Weeksville too.

MONDÉSIR: And so, what about the Crown Heights riots? How -- were you guys affected by it, and did it affect the way you worked or taught at the school in any way?

DERICO: No. I mean whatever happens -- when you have a class, you discuss it with the children so that they'll understand, but affecting you, not really, you know. You just -- you explain to them what's going on, and you move on.

BUTLER: Well, I— when I look at Crown H— Crown Heights rioted, I really -- I think things didn't go accordingly. I think some part when -- might have went the wrong way and some part went the right way, but I think it's really -- there are a lot of people in Crown Height riots -- I think they did— they didn't get a fair share and some did, but, I know. But that— this way it happened something -- we have to take whatever comes sometimes. Sometimes we not able to do things that we want to do or how we want to do them, but what can you do? You have to, have to live with it.

MONDÉSIR: Do you remember where you were when you heard about it?

BUTLER: Crown Heights? Well, I was -- I was in this area. I don't know exactly if I can point, pinpoint where I was, but I was in the vicinity because I live here when I moved, and I worked here, and I lived close by; only five or six minutes away by car.

MONDÉSIR: Where did you live, like what streets?

BUTLER: Well, I lived up Rogers Avenue -- 101 Rogers Avenue.

MONDÉSIR: Oh, okay.

BUTLER: At Rogers and Prospect. Between Prospect and Park.

MONDÉSIR: And so -- do you remember where you were when --?

DERICO: Oh, I lived -- on Lincoln Road at the time -- Flatbush at the time.

MONDÉSIR: Cool, and could we talk about the -- the charter school that is also at 243? When did they come in and how did that come to be?

DERICO: I think this is -- what -- their fourth year.

BUTLER: Fourth year, right.

DERICO: I think this is their fourth year.

MONDÉSIR: So in two-thousand--

DERICO: We had no say in whether they came in, because we had the room. When I first came to this school and I know he -- Mr. Butler wouldn't know, they had more. When I came, we had over 1,100 children in this school, so all the classes were filled. They were, you know -- and over the years, you know, things change. So we had all this open space, and next thing we know, there's a charter school coming in.

MONDÉSIR: So, when you mean change, that -- like less students started attending?

DERICO: Yes, because they started going to charter schools or, you know, or whatever, you know. We started having this -- well, before -- before the charter school came, they removed the sixth grade. We used to be a pre-K through sixth. So they removed the sixth grade so, okay, that's cutting down, but we still had over 900 kids, and then, you know -- so then over the years, you started getting less and less, and then you had room, and that's how the charter school moved in. They moved in first with that one grade -- sixth grade. Sixth grade went to seventh, and then we had another sixth grade

move in -- seventh. Then they went to eighth grade. You know, so now they're sixth through eighth.

MONDÉSIR: And how has it changed the way you work or your experience with the school?

BUTLER: Well -- well, the charter school and the pr— and the— our school—not our school but the whole school -- see I worked for everything, so, me, it doesn't make any difference either way because I got to work for the charter, and I got to work for the lower grades, so either way it just -- you know, to me it doesn't affect me either way because I got to do the same thing either way you look at it. So, I just I don't know -- I think it -- the charter school might be a little confusing for the smaller kids, but other than that, it doesn't affect me at all because I have to do the charter like I do for the lower grades.

MONDÉSIR: Are there any stark differences that you've noticed with the inclusion of the charter school?

DERICO: Differences?

MONDÉSIR: Yeah like how they operate as opposed to how you operate, as to their environment?

DERICO: Yes. Well well, their environment is totally different from ours. There are things they can do that we can't do, and it makes it difficult in a sense, you know, because when they took the sixth grade out because they felt that they were too old to be with the younger children then you turn around and you put a middle school in with the elementary school. So, that's the difference, and the -- the -- the -- what I can't see, you know, that, you know -- why couldn't we just keep our sixth grade? If that was the case, we could have kept our sixth grade here, you know, but you bring in -- now you bring in a whole middle school or junior high school in, with elementary.

MONDÉSIR: Could you describe the demographics that you've -- or the change in demographics while you've been working at this school with the students? Like what type of students were there initially and how it changed over time?

BUTLER: Well, I -- okay, by change -- [unintelligible] like I say back in -- when I first, when I first came to school, I was, it was something like a family school, OK. Your mother -- your mother probably worked -- your mother, probably -- OK.

DERICO: Worked in the school, or the kids. You're talking about the kids?

MONDÉSIR: Yeah, just the kids.

DERICO: Or you're talking about the staff?

MONDÉSIR: All of it. Like just tell me what the staff was like, demographics, the students.

BUTLER: Okay, well, the staff -- okay, staff was -- no problem. I think staff was a little bit more -- more knit together then than it is now. But the kids were -- obviously they are better the kids -- excuse me.

DERICO: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. [Interview interrupted.]

BUTLER: —came here. Worked at this school. This school -- the teachers was, I would say, 90% White. We only had one Black teacher on this floor, and the third floor; we had two Black teachers. Third floor -- I mean -- third floor we had four Black teachers so -- so then -- I said -- but the kids was totally Black, but the staff was non -- I would say the staff was 90% White, but the problem facing us and the school [unintelligible] they were totally Black, but first together when together the school was more knit school.

MONDÉSIR: And so, how did it change over time? Like how did the demographics change?

BUTLER: Well, it start -- well -- well, I guess by being a Black neighborhood, we just started hiring more Black teachers, later on until now. So now, you know, it's almost -- almost turned around.

MONDÉSIR: When do you think that -- that demographic changed?

BUTLER: Well, it -- I say it was starting, changing during the -- maybe say '70s.

MONDÉSIR: The '70s?

BUTLER: Yeah, during the '70s, they started changing demographics. They got into '90s and the one— and the 2000, then I think that's when they really started changing.

MONDÉSIR: Oh, cool, and since you started in '85 --

DERICO: Well, I was going to say: I started in '85, it was still a great many Whites in here. It was -- it was, you know, Blacks and Hispanics, and we even had several mixed people in the school when I came, you know; teachers that were, you know, mixed. But it was a lot more— we, well— actually it was so many more teachers compared to now. So I would say the majority was still White in '85 when I came, you know. But later, as Mr. Butler said, I think with the neighborhood becoming so much more Black and Hispanic, you saw more Hispanic and Black kids in the schools. But now you're starting to see a lot of Pakistanians [*sic*] and other cultures into -- coming into the schools. And because things are changing, you're even seeing the Whites coming -- the kids are coming back into the schools.

MONDÉSIR: And do you think that -- that goes with the completely changing demographics of Crown Heights also?

DERICO: Yes. Totally.

MONDÉSIR: So, how has the neighborhood of Crown Heights changed for you?

DERICO: Tremendously. Well, like I said, when I grew up in Bed-Stuy, we had a mixture also, just as when I lived in Williamsburg, there was a mixture. I lived on a block that had a mixture of Black and White, you know, and, you know, all cultures were on my block. But then it so, slow— slowly phased out. The same thing in this area. You know, they -- there were only Blacks and Hispanics. Now you're starting to see a big change, and I think that that's why you're seeing a big change in the school, you know, but they have children, you know. People have children so they're coming to their neighborhood schools so—

MONDÉSIR: So, are there any nearby organizations that you're still affiliated with like -- near the school?

DERICO: Near the --?

MONDÉSIR: Yeah, so, maybe like a local store or --

DERICO: I'm not sure. Affiliated with --?

MONDÉSIR: Yeah, I mean -- so you have like the Weeksville Heritage Center, which is a local institution. Are there other institutions that this school used to be or still is?

DERICO: Well, we used to have so many. We used to have Change for Kids, and there were so many organizations -- Boys and Girls Club, Jackie Robinson. And Jackie Robinson, you know, for us was like part of the school. When I came here, Jackie Robinson; the program, was here, and then it -- it phased out. But right now we don't really have anything, you know.

MONDÉSIR: And I looked at some of the photos, and we were talking about this but Nelson Mandela came --

DERICO: He was -- Nelson Mandela was here in the community. He went to -- when he first got out of jail and he came, you know, to this area. He came to Boys and Girls High.

MONDÉSIR: In what year?

DERICO: Oh, God. He's asking me years. I have— [Interview interrupted.] —now. I don't have any -- there is so much. I mean really -- for me, I can't -- I'm not in the classrooms anymore so it's different, but all my experience with my kids were always very great for me. I just remember one experience that -- that I had with my class, and that's when we went to Gracie Mansion, and the whole process of us going and how we were going to look and what we were going to do, and we got to go to Gracie Mansion when David Dinkins was mayor, and we had -- we had lunch and everything. And I just thought, you know, it was just wonderful, you know. That was one experience, and the other was; one time I took the kids -- you know, you -- you study about all the different cultures and countries and things and so, this particular time -- because I always tell the kids, "Okay, we live in Brooklyn, but we're going to go to this borough." So, we had to go to all the, you know -- we went, took trips to all the different boroughs. So, this particular time we were going to Lincoln Center. So, we had been studying about the Chinese and how they eat and their culture and stuff, but anyway, we were going to Lincoln Center. So, we would get in Lincoln Center, and so, it was -- I guess it was like a big tour of Asians, you know, had come in, you know, to see the performance too. So, one of my students -- okay, these are kindergarten children, and they yell out, "Ms. Derico, are we in China?" because they saw all the Chinese people there, you know, and everybody bust out laughing because, you know, they didn't know, but, you know --

those are the type of things that you always remember and, you know, cherish. But I had so many experiences with my kids that I can just go on talking forever, so I'm going to stop on that note.

MONDÉSIR: Well, so as a teacher and with the students that you have in the area that you're in, do you feel like you have a certain responsibility to make sure they get as much as they can, with the world they have to deal with?

DERICO: Of course. Of course. I think that you have to give them every opportunity because some of them never get out of this community, and some of them don't even know what a wonderful community they live in, and that's one of the things that -- where I have a, sort of, problem with education now. Not in a bad way, but before you incorporated all your firsthand experience, you know, the kids had that firsthand experience when you taught them something, they were able to go out and see and touch and feel and all that kind of stuff, but now everything is so -- you got to pass the test. You got to learn how to do this. You know, you get -- all of that's lost now. The kids are -- to me, kids are losing out because it's not that firsthand experience. You talk about this, but you can't take them on trips because everything is like, "Oh, you got to do this first before you can do that," and so, to me, they lose out.

MONDÉSIR: And when do you feel like schools started teaching -- can I say "teaching to the test?"

DERICO: Oh, it's been like that for a good while now. I can't even, you know, remember, but it's been a long time now. I think everything is more about they got to pass the test. They got to score good, you know, and so you forget about all those other things that the kids need to know, you know, and need to do.

MONDÉSIR: And like what about your interaction with parents? Has that changed since you started teaching until now?

DERICO: For me, it has. For me, I've always been a person that -- I like to know all the parents whether they're my student or not. I like to greet all the parents and speak to all the parents and know all the parents, but now it's just so hard. You don't get to talk to the parents the way, you know, you used to. Things are like you got to move fast.

Everything is here, hit and a miss, you know. It's just different, and I think that the -- and the parents are not the same. They don't come out to the PTA meetings the way they used to. I mean when they used to come, you couldn't even get into the auditorium or you couldn't get into the parent room because it would be an overflow. Now if you have six parents at a meeting that's fabulous, you know, so I don't know.

MONDÉSIR: And what about your students? Like after they've left, have any of them -- well, considering that they're in the first— you teach mostly the first grade, have they come back just to say hi?

DERICO: Oh, yes.

MONDÉSIR: And how was that like?

DERICO: Oh, that's great when you find out that they're doing well. I have one student that— she's a principal. I don't remember what school she's in, but she's a principal, you know, and she was one of those kids that always asked questions and always wanted to know why, you know. She's a principal, you know. But you have a lot of kids that are doing well, you know, and then you have a lot of kids that's gone, that— I mean literally gone, you know, from the same community, because they just never left, and they ended up, you know, in trouble, but, you know. But feels good when you can see them; you can say hi or they remember you, you know.

MONDÉSIR: And, Herman, do you have any favorite experiences that you have related to the school?

BUTLER: Well, I really I can't recall -- I can't recall any right off the top of my head, but there have been, you know -- there have been quite -- a lot of things that did happen, but for me to pinpoint one, I really can't do it. I really -- just forgot I guess because, you know, so much has happened.

DERICO: Well, Mr. Butler; if you go somewhere with Mr. Butler, there's somebody going to see him and say, "Oh, Mr. B. That's Mr. B. Mr. B, you still at 243?" and these are grown men now with their own family, but they remember him. "Mr. B. Mr. B, you still there? You haven't changed." So, he does have a lot of students that remember him, and parents -- they remember him. Like I said, he's modest.

MONDÉSIR: Cool, and [inaudible] have any questions. I guess Shirley Chisholm hasn't come back while you were here.

DERICO: I'm sorry.

MONDÉSIR: Ms. Chisholm. Shirley Chisholm.

DERICO: Oh, no, no, no, no. She had -- she -- actually she was here when I was here. She came when I first came, but I mean I don't -- I don't know Shirley Chisholm -- no, no.

MONDÉSIR: Well, I mean -- I mean how did you feel about having a Black woman run for office?

DERICO: Oh, that was great. It was great. It was a good feeling, you know, just, you know, just knowing, wow. She came, you know, to the school when she was, you know -- somebody who looked at 243 and was like, a Weeksville School.

MONDÉSIR: I'll stop it. [Interview interrupted.] —was he -- what was he like when he came?

BUTLER: Like I said, it's been so long I'm trying to think -- I'm trying to recall the time he was here. I don't know, but I think, Koch -- I really --

DERICO: I don't remember that.

BUTLER: -- I can't remember that.

DERICO: I'm sure he probably did but I, he might--

BUTLER: You forget all kinds -- I know when Dinkin [*sic*] *was* here. With Dinkin and all them coming and Mayor Bloomberg [unintelligible] -- I can, you know— but—

DERICO: But, Koch, I don't remember.

BUTLER: I can't recall it.

DERICO: Unless he came when Dr. Thompson was— or something.

BUTLER: Probably Dr. Thompson. I think he did. I can't --

DERICO: I'm thinking too, but I can't remember Koch, Koch.

BUTLER: I, I'm pretty sure he did because [unintelligible] -- he was a big guy. He was such a big guy, but like I say, I -- right off the top of my head, I can't recall.

MONDÉSIR: Okay, and what about the teachers. How have the teachers changed over the time? I mean we talked about demographically, but like, have they changed the way they interact with students, or with other teachers, parents?

DERICO: No, I think every— I think everything is the same. I think now we're getting -- it had sort of went to more minority teachers, but now, you know, Black, Hispanics -- now you're starting to see more White teachers come -- come back, you know, into the -- into the system.

MONDÉSIR: And I'm -- they are -- they are different from the White teachers that you experienced when you first started?

DERICO: Yes, yes, yes.

MONDÉSIR: Could you talk about any differences that you --?

DERICO: Well, the differences that I see is that when I came, the teachers -- they -- they could relate to the Black students. They could relate to, you know, the -- the school -- and they were more into -- like Mr. Butler said, a family. Now the new teachers; they're not so much family. Like: I work here, but I don't consider this a family. Not in a bad way, where -- like I said, everybody worked together no matter what you were doing. If you were doing a class play, everybody helped out. Everybody was part of it; everybody. Everybody went, "Oh, I'll help you. I'll do this. I'll make the costumes. I'll do this. You know, I'll -- you know, I'll play the music. I'll do this." Now, it's like everybody is on their own. Everybody is separate. They don't -- it's not a family, even though we call ourselves a family, but it's not the same.

MONDÉSIR: Do you think it's a difference in generation?

DERICO: I think so.

MONDÉSIR: So, you think this generation is more --?

DERICO: I think this generation is more about "me," you know. Not in a bad way, but it's -- it's how they were raised, you know, and a lot of them really -- they haven't experienced the same thing as the older teachers that were here. This new generation they see things totally different than that, you know, generation before.

MONDÉSIR: Have you had any— I don't want to say clashes, but like— maybe disagreements in like ideology when you're like— when you watch how they teach a class?

DERICO: No, no, because that's not my position, but I just see it being totally -- I just see it being a little different, not in a bad way, but that's how they are being taught to teach, you know, and, you know, back in the day it was different, because no matter what you were you were still a family, you know.

MONDÉSIR: Mr. Butler, who was your favorite teacher that has come through these doors?

BUTLER: Well, I had quite a few favorite teachers. [laughter]

DERICO: You're not going to say me?

BUTLER: I really -- honest I really had quite a few favorite teachers because I figured they were here for the kids. Well, like I say, my -- obviously back when I first started out going to school -- I mean working at the school, well I consider -- we had -- I think Miss Grace Bennett was a favorite teacher, but --

MONDÉSIR: Miss Grace Bennett?

BUTLER: Grace Bennett, I think because she was really a -- her class -- she'd walk out of her classroom and come on downstairs -- she was on the third floor -- tell her class, "Okay, I'm going down to the third floor. I don't want to hear nothing." She'd walk out of that classroom. She'd come down the hallway on the third floor. She'd have about 35, 40 kids in the classroom, and you could hear a pin drop, and I think everybody want their kids to go to Miss Bennett's class -- Grace Bennett. "I want to be in Miss Bennett's class." I think she was one of the favorite teachers but we had quite a few. I had quite a few favorite teachers, but like I say, you know -- but classes -- well, she was favorite teacher too, but -- honestly not the first -- when I first came because she wasn't here when I first came here. She came after I came. Well, but like I say, we had quite a few favorite teachers. I mean the school was on par during then, but now it's kind of tilted a little bit.

MONDÉSIR: So, has your interaction with teachers changed from when you first started as opposed to now, and could you tell me, what's that like?

BUTLER: No, it's about the same. About the same because I -- I'm a person that can -- I can really work with anybody as long as they -- you know, want to work with me I can work with them.

MONDÉSIR: Okay, cool. Yeah, I think we can finish at 2:00. [Interview interrupted.] What did you think about Miss --?

DERICO: Grace Bennett -- I was going to say that she would be, out of all the teachers -- I mean, like I said it was so many great teachers when I came here, and I just want to live up to their -- what they were, because they were -- they were -- they were great teachers, but she was one of the teachers that -- her kids, every parent in the school wanted their kids to go to her room. She was strict, but yet she loved the kids, and the kids all loved her. And like he said, you could -- I went in her room one day, and that's when I first got here, and I'm looking around the class for her, and I'm like -- finally I said, "Where's Miss Bennett?" They said, "Oh, she went downstairs to the office," and they kept working. They worked not a problem. Nobody got out of their seat. Everybody knew what to do. They would talk to one another to tell each other what they were doing, but that was it, and that's the way she ran her class. And I said, "Oh, one day I want to be like that," you know, but she was great. Now I have a favorite teacher that's here right now, and I -- well, I have two, and I like them for different reasons, but Ms. George -- her and I worked together for many years, and I think she's a great teacher. She's a --

MONDÉSIR: What's her full name?

DERICO: Gloria George. She's a great teacher. She really enjoys what she does, and she really cares about the kids. You can see the -- how she really cares. I'm not saying the other teachers don't care because I know they do, but there's something about her with kids that's just great. And then my other one is Deborah Alexander. She's a speech teacher so -- and she's over -- very great with computers. That's why I love her even more, and so, that's the two teachers that I adore in PS 243.

MONDÉSIR: And what do you think's the thing they all have in common that makes them a great teacher?

DERICO: That they care about the kids, and they don't -- they do things that is totally different from what you would expect -- how they teach. They don't -- you know, it's not like, "Okay, we're going to read this book, and we're going to do these pages, and then—" It's just the way -- the style of how they are able to get the kids to learn -- their

style so that's -- that's it for Miss Derico. Those are my favorite people at PS 243. [Interview interrupted.] —or either I was working, but I do remember the strike, but I can't say where I was and what -- I can't, I don't -- I don't know any details, only from what I, you know, I heard.

UNIDENTIFIED: Is 2002 when the principals were given full autonomy over the building? Is that -- was that part of that?

BUTLER: Yeah.

DERICO: Yeah, that was part -- once the community whatever -- I have to get Mr. Butler -- I'll give it to you when you come back because that's mine, but his, he didn't -- the museum was there, and when the changes of principals and shifting rooms around from being, you know, when -- when the charter school came in, a lot of stuff was moved from here to there. Stuff was broken and missing and thrown in the garbage. It just became a big hassle because the rooms had to be moved, so a lot of this stuff was lost and destroyed or whatever, and so a few of the things that Mr. Butler had down in the basement -- he kind of like held on to some things, and he kept them in the basement, and when Ms. Draft— they were doing a quilting program with Weeksville, and they decided, "Okay we're going to do a quilting project because we want to bring back, you know, the whole Weeksville thing." So, then that's when they did the quilt, and they kind of like opened it up again, and then again it got trashed. The room got trashed again, and Ms. Lamont became the PTA president, and she heard so much about the museum, and she wanted to see it. She wanted to know where it was, but when she saw it, she was devastated because it was boxes and broomsticks and— It was used for a junk room, so she went to the superintendent, and she talked to the superintendent -- the new superintendent that's there now, and that how the school was so important, and she just, you know, wanted the museum to open, and they told her last -- last year in -- what was it?

UNIDENTIFIED: June.

DERICO: June -- okay, open it up. Get it started. So, of course, she really didn't know how to get it started. She was, you know, by herself even though -- like I told you,

sometimes you only have six parents at a PTA meeting. She talked about it, but it was nothing that could be done. Nobody wanted to help her so she came to me and Ms. Alexander and she put on that sad face, and we just hated to tell her no, and then we just started to, you know, do what we could. We just started, you know, finding things and saying, "Okay this was in the museum," and, you know, and I had a lot of things because of me. I used to keep pictures and stuff, so I had pictures, and we were like, "Okay, let's get it done." So, that's what happened. That's how it reopened. So, they -- we had a little-- what we called the grand opening; which a lot of people didn't come because it wasn't really advertised. Now they want to do again, you know --

MONDÉSIR: Another opening?

DERICO: -- another opening.

MONDÉSIR: So, the museum basically existed in the '70s and then it stopped in 2000 and--?

DERICO: Yeah, maybe 2000--maybe three or four or something like that, and then it was -- like I said, it was used for a junk room. Then it kind of opened up again maybe three years later, and then it was destroyed again. So, we're hoping that this time with all the people knowing about it that it will not get destroyed, you know, because people tend to think, "Okay nobody's coming in the museum. Nobody--" You know, we could put this box in there. We can put this chair in there. We can put this in there, and before you know it, it becomes a junk room, you know. So, hopefully it won't happen this time.

MONDÉSIR: Does -- like there are some really interesting things in there like the three panels that you have on both sides, and I'm just amazed that like people would be like, "Oh let's just forget about this." Like I -- I never saw anything like that in my school. So, I guess when you tell me at one point it stopped, I'm a little shocked.

DERICO: Yeah. Yeah, it did. I mean like I said we worked -- we hustled. We got that room together in about a week-and-a-half.

UNIDENTIFIED: Yeah, we were here long hours and on the weekends.

DERICO: Weekends, nights. The two of us and Ms. Lamont, and then of course, like I said, Mr. Butler. No matter what you do, he -- you know, Mr. Butler we need this. We need that, and he's there, you know, so -- that's that.

MONDÉSIR: Crazy. Cool.