

**Interview with: Jackie Brown Richardson**

**Landmark West**

**Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic**

**1 audio file**

**July 14, 2023**

**Video call**

**Q:** Today is July 14th, 2023 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Jackie Brown Richardson for the Landmark West project about San Juan Hill. So, Jackie can you start by saying your full name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

**Richardson:** I'm Jackie Brown Richardson. Richardson is my married name. I grew up in the Amsterdam Houses. I've lived in the Amsterdam Projects from the time it opened. The cornerstone is 1947, but actually people started moving in, in 1948, so I moved in with my family in 1948. The first buildings they started was down the back, so we lived down in the back in, I think it was 247, and then we moved to 249, so I was there for all that time.

Attended PS 191. I had four other siblings, there are only two of us remaining. And we all went to the school in the neighborhood. My dad was a cab driver, and my mom was a homemaker for her five children, and she was one of the founding members of Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center. During that time the parents were—all of the parents, I don't know how they did it, but in addition to raising their children—and during that time people had more children than they do today—they were very, very active in community events, like Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center, the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, and other community activities, and the PTA in the community. They were very, very active, thus the community thrived with that kind of support from the parents. So that's—want me to keep going?

**Q:** Let me ask you a couple of questions and then we can come back to what you were saying. So before we get into your immediate family, I wanted to ask you about your ancestors, who they were, and how they might have been part of your life growing up?

**Richardson:** Okay, on my mother's side, well, actually on both sides, my mother and father are both from Savannah, Georgia, and actually my mother is from Savannah, but also Sylvania—that's about an hour out of Savannah. And my father, as far as I know, his family is from Savannah. My father was one of ten children. My mother was one of thirteen, but three of them passed. And my memory of my grandparents had so much to do with my values and ideals because, during that time, grandparents were very, very strict, especially on my father's side of the family, they were very religious on my father's side. And for instance, with my grandmother, you couldn't wear pants around her, that was out of the question. [laughs] And when you answered her, we thought it was the strangest thing, because we didn't have to do that here in New York, but we had to answer, "Yes, ma'am," and, "No, ma'am." You could not answer, "Yes," and, "No." As a matter of fact, people from the South, to this day, whomever they are, usually answer you,

“Yes, ma’am,” and, “No, ma’am,” whether they’re white, Black, Spanish, Chinese, whatever, if you’re from the South, and maybe other parts, I don’t know, but you answer, “Yes, ma’am,” and, “No, ma’am,” and that’s a level of respect for your elders that we definitely subscribe to.

In addition to that, my mother’s side of the family lived totally off the land. They killed their own chickens, and pigs, and grew their own food, they did everything, they lived entirely off the land, and so did my father’s side of the family. They were a little less fortunate, so they struggled a little longer, but they made it through, and they came up here. My father was in the service, and then finally they moved—after having five children, they moved to the Amsterdam Houses, which at that time, you had to be a veteran in order to move into the projects. [00:05:00] So my father was a veteran. We moved there and life started there. But the history, the legacy, which we didn’t know a lot of, we didn’t know about African heritage at that particular time, but we had all of those values. And there was a title put on it, but we had all of those high values that were practiced in the family, yes.

**Q:** And how did your parents end up coming to New York? What was that story in the family?

**Richardson:** I don’t really know exactly. I know, at that time there was a very large migration from the South. People were looking for—things were rough, my parents had it rough. They weren’t—they were privileged because they had their lives, and their health, but there was a large migration. And what I found out later on, just by talking to people, is different groups of people kind of move certain places. And most of the people that came to the New York area from the South came from Georgia and South Carolina. And I found out that people that came from other parts of the country may have gone to St. Louis, or Kentucky, or Texas. Now I don’t know which people went where, but I know most of the people, cause I say, “Oh, where—” You know, I have this thing about history, and I say, “Oh, where are your parents from?” And most of the time they would say South Carolina. As a matter of fact, most of the people that lived in the projects were from South Carolina, and also the Phipps Houses, which was right across the street, which technically was really part of the projects. We didn’t see them as separate even though the buildings were not NYCHA buildings, but most of the people that lived in there were from the Caribbean, and many of them were related. So it was one big happy family. [laughs] One big happy family, yes.

**Q:** Well, tell me about the building that you lived in. I don’t know if you remember 247, or if you were too young, but just tell me about the building that you lived in, and the other families that lived there.

**Richardson:** Oh, I remember. I remember. We didn’t move from 247 until I was five-years-old. And that’s about the only thing I remember. I remember when we moved to 249. I remember at five-years-old riding my bicycle [laughs] over to the new building. But the families in 247, as they were in 249, we were a very closely knit community. The families that live in that building, their children still come out to the reunions.

As a matter of fact, the day before yesterday, there was one community person, Miss Walker, Jeanette Walker, she was ninety-six-years-old. She was an icon in the community. Her daughters and her son were probably the most popular teens in the community. And she just passed. And everyone from the project, they come from all over the place to attend services, so we were very close to the people in the building, we were neighbors. You know, you can go in and out, it's not like today, if someone rings my bell, I say, "Who is it? I'm not expecting anyone!" [laughs] That's terrible. I feel so bad, I say, Jackie, you should do better than this. But that's how we were. You'd go to your neighbor's house and you could almost walk in the door. And if they were having dinner, you sat down and had dinner also. As limited—I don't want to say poor—as limited as we were in resources, when you went to your neighbor's house and you ate if they ate.

And we were also able to go outside. We were outside all day. Our parents didn't worry about us being outside. We were able to go outside. There were a couple of unfortunate incidents that happened to children in the project, but for the most part, it was just having a good time, we knew when to come home for dinner, and we were very good friends. My mother, who was a kind of a private person, but she had friends in 247, and then we moved to 249, and she, we had friends there. As a matter of fact, my next-door neighbor from many, many, many years is like an angel to me today, Linda Alexander, because she's just done so much for my family. And she was probably a bit younger, maybe ten years younger, so growing up, we really didn't socialize, but you get to a point in your life where it doesn't matter what the age is, you know. I'm seventy-four, she's, I think, sixty-two, but she's such a resource in my life to this very day, and for years she was a neighbor in 249. [00:10:00] And so that's the kind of network we had.

And we've given—our organization that we continued after Spencer Mayfield started the reunion organization, we've given boat rides where we would charter the Circle Line, and we would actually have four or five hundred people on the boat, and we chartered the boat. We raised money to do what we had to do, and we chartered the boat, and people that were not from the community, they were in awe, because they said, you know, "I've never been on a boat ride where everyone knew each other." It was just hugs, and, "Oh, my God, I haven't seen you since public school," and, "Oh, my God, it's so good to see you!" I So it was just a joyous, joyous, joyous time for years. And even today people say, "Are you all still giving a boat ride?" We say those days are over, over, over, and no more boat rides. But that's how connected the community was, because they still came back, years later. And last year when we did this beautiful journal, a lot of the people that lived in the community, a lot of the people that lived—

[INTERRUPTION]

**Q:** Okay, resuming our recording, you were talking about your recent reunions.

**Richardson:** Oh, yes, the book, the reflections, is chock full of people from the community who sent in ads to put in the journal, and they said such wonderful, they made such wonderful celebratory comments about the community.

Can you see me?

**Q:** No, I'm just hearing.

**Richardson:** I brought the books in here; I ran and got the books. [Sarah laughs] But you would really get an idea. For the 75th, we have given out, the organization, we've given out sixty-one awards to people in the community over the thirteen years that we had the organization. And we also, for every resident ninety and over, we gave a beautiful bed throw, a beautiful bed throw, and there was about twenty-two of them. We gave a beautiful bed throw. And we had four centenarians, those that were—

**Q:** Wow!

**Richardson:** Yes, yes, we had four centenarians. And for each one of those we gave a beautiful, long proclamation from the mayor naming that day—I think it was July, I'm not exactly sure, 27—their day. It was a beautiful proclamation. And I think that, I think that three of them are still alive, yeah. And we also gave out four scholarship awards to high school, those that graduated from high school and was attending college, for five-hundred-dollars. That's what our organization did, yeah, for the community. And it was a beautiful program, it was beautiful, we had everything out there for the children. And nothing was sold, everything was free, it was complimentary. We had bouncies, and food, and educational materials, the library was out there, and so—

And we said, this is it, we're not doing anything else, Harold and I said, this is it. You know. I've had some issues. I lost my son, who was very active in the community, and then all of a sudden, what are we doing this year? We're back in it again, [laughs] for July 29th, we're back in it again, doing it, and we just sat down here until twelve-o'clock last night ordering toys and educational supplies for the kids. So, what can you do? Once a community person always a community person.

**Q:** Yeah. Well, let me ask you some more questions about back when you were younger. Do you know why your family moved from 247 to 249?

**Richardson:** A larger apartment. 247 was a two-bedroom, and 249 was a three-bedroom, so it was a larger apartment.

**Q:** Can you describe that apartment, the one that you grew up in, to me, just the way that it was laid out and decorated? [00:15:00]

**Richardson:** It was a basic two-bedroom apartment. You know, the apartments were, they weren't super small, they were somewhat comfortable, not too much closet space, but it was a comfortable apartment. I don't remember too much about 247, because you know, I was young, and I left there at five-years-old. But it worked out. You know, sometimes all the stuff that I have in here, and I have a very large apartment, I was like, "How did my mother do it?" I mean, the closet space was like, there was hardly any closet space, and I was like, how did she raise five children in this apartment? But she did. And I don't remember it being particularly crowded or uncomfortable or anything like that. You know, you have one mind, you think differently, and you're not living for, quote unquote "privacy," we didn't think like that. You know, we were all there together. We had our little areas that were ours, but we didn't need—even when my kids come here, because my husband and I adopted three. He has four girls, I had one boy, and then we adopted three who were my relatives, they were my great niece and nephew. And when one of them comes here to help me out, as soon as he does, he's, "Hi, Aunt Jackie," goes in the room, BAM, the door is closed. This whole thing about privacy, that's all they think about. But when we were growing up, there was no privacy like that. You didn't have your own bedroom. We had to share, and that was really a very important part of our family structure, sharing. And chores, we got up every Saturday morning, you weren't going anywhere, [laughs] until you got your chores done. And you knew you had to do that, there was not a big issue about that. So, in terms of the actual layout of the apartment, I don't really remember the layout, except that it was a two-bedroom apartment.

**Q:** What were some of the things that your family did together, whether it was your whole family or parts of your family?

**Richardson:** Well, what we did—well, of course after going to school, what we did a lot of, my mother, because she had five children, three girls and two boys, we did a lot of outdoor activities. There was a lot of Central Park. My mother didn't have a lot of money, but she had everything well planned. We did a lot of Central Park activities, and we went to Coney Island. Coney Island was "the place." And when you went out to Coney Island there was like the Steeplechase, where, there were regular rides and there was the Steeplechase. It's gone now. Inside you were able to get like a roll of tickets, and every time you got on a ride, they punched a ticket. Well, it was much cheaper than trying—my mother, we couldn't afford to just go on the regular rides out there, so we would always have to go to Steeplechase where we would get this roll of, it's like a little disc, and it had little areas where you just punch and go in. So we did a lot of Coney Island. I think that was a July 4th trip, and then, this was every year.

And then for Labor Day, we would go to a pool in Brooklyn. I don't know what the name of it is, really, it was called Brooklyn Pool, and we would go to the Brooklyn Pool every year. And then of course, just in the community, we had the 59th Street Pool. We had a 59th Street outdoor pool, and we lived in that pool. There wasn't one day we didn't go to that pool. As a matter of fact, at night—I won't tell you who—they used to jump over that fence at night and swim. It was totally illegal. But [laughs] they did it, they would—we would go swimming every day. And then of course, we had the playground right there in the project, and we spent a lot of time in that playground, we didn't need to go out of the community for a lot of fun social activity, we had it right there. You know, we had it right there, we had swings, and the guys had basketball, and they had handball that they played in the park. And we had the swings, I used to love the swings. We would just spend hours on the swings. So we had all of those activities right there in the community.

During the winter we would have—it always snowed. [00:20:00] It's not like today. It always snowed. We would have snow way above our heads. And we had, in the projects, what we called a big hill and the small hill, and the big hill, we would have sleighs, and we would be out all day long, and we'd be freezing. And we would come in and my mother would have some hot chocolate, and we would stick our feet in the oven. We would take off our gloves and put our hands in the oven. And then also, downstairs in the hallways, they had radiators, and we would also take all—we could never have that today—we would take off our gloves, our wet gloves, and we would heat them up, dry them on the radiators, and go back outside again, and just be out there all day long, just having a good time when we could.

Of course, after school we had to come home and do our homework. And there was, later on, there was an after-school program in the evening for teens, and then we had Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center, there were so many activities that we had. We never lacked activities to participate in the community. You could go back today, they got all kinds of security now, but you could go to Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center, it was open. You could go in there anytime. And there was ping pong, and activities, and Carlos Morales was a person I remember, there was a few people before him. He was just a wonderful person. And it was user friendly. It's going through a lot of changes, and I think they're trying to get back to that base now, but we had so much to do in the community. Yes, jump rope, and Potsy, and Skelzies.

As a matter of fact, I don't know where it is—every year, the reunion organization, we would do a t-shirt, a beautiful t-shirt, and one year we did all of the different activities that was on the t-shirt, you know, Jacks, and Skelzies, and Potsy, and basketball, and handball, we put those pictures on the t-shirt. So it was a wonderful community. And then, of course we had—Thelonious Monk lived right there on 63rd Street in the Phipps Houses. And we would see him. We didn't quite understand what that was all about, but he was such a renowned musician, but we really enjoyed seeing—cause he would be, my mother used to sell Fuller (?) products, and she would sell Fuller products to his wife. And so we would always get a

chance to see him. I mean, we knew that he was a great musician, but we didn't realize that he would become as renowned as he did, but we had it all there.

**Q:** What kind of products did you say your mom sold?

**Richardson:** Fuller Products, it was products that you sold from door-to-door. At that time, you could sell from door-to-door, now nobody's opening the door for you, you could forget about that. But it was Fuller Products, and I guess what she did—the funny thing about it is, even though my mother was an entrepreneur, because she didn't actually get a job until she was forty-two, she didn't talk a whole lot about what she was doing, she just did it. And I used to go with her, cause a lot of her customers were in the Phipps Houses, and Monk's wife was one of them. So they were products like lotion, shampoo, deodorant, things like that. And she would go door-to-door. She had customers, and she would go there and open up her little case and sell the products to them, yeah, Fuller Products.

And later on, she sold Coppercraft. She made it work. She was an entrepreneur. She sold Coppercraft, and that was a little bit more labor intensive because she, there were big cases, these were bulky products. They were beautiful 100% copper products, but, oh, my God, when I think about how she struggled to make life better for her family, because they were big cases. And we weren't going selling any Coppercraft! I used to go with her more than anyone, but no one really wanted to be bothered. It wasn't like, "Ma is doing this for us, let's help her." It wasn't like that. Maybe if she had talked about it a little bit more, we would have been a little bit more enthusiastic about getting out there, but we hated it. We wanted to do other things, we didn't want to go out selling any products, but she did it, and I guess she did, you know, pretty well. And that was part of our life here in the projects. [00:25:11]

**Q:** And what about your father, you said he was a cab driver. Did he talk about that at all, or what were his hours like? What were his experiences?

**Richardson:** I think I remember that he worked nights. I think he would go to work, maybe about three o'clock in the afternoon, and come home sometime in the morning. He really wanted to have a fleet of cabs, but at that time, his two sons, they weren't interested in that. You know, we weren't raised to be entrepreneur-minded like so many of the kids are doing today, and it definitely wasn't taught in school. So maybe if they had, I don't know, if they had talked about it a little bit more. They just did it because it was a survival thing. I don't even remember him talking about anything about driving the cab, or any of his experiences driving a cab, he just did it. Yeah.

**Q:** You said you weren't raised to be entrepreneur-minded, so how do you think you—

**Richardson:** I'm about observation. I had a business, it was later on in life, I worked, and then I did some college. And I used to be on a bus—I took a trip to Egypt, with a Dr. Ben, who was a scholar, he had been going to Egypt for many years. And I took an educational tour with him back in the early '90s, I think it was, maybe the late '80s or early '90s. And every year he would take a tour to Egypt, so I went on one of the tours, and when I came back. I had a beautiful portfolio. But before that. I used to be on the bus, and I would just be riding, and I'd look at all the thousands of businesses I would pass, and I said to myself, what is it that I can't have one of these businesses? I said, I can't believe that I'm passing all these businesses and I don't have one.

And so anyway, as it worked out, I saw an article in *Essence* magazine, "Do You Want to be in Business, Import/Export?" And I said—and I'm always suspicious, oh, it was probably a scam, you know—I said, listen, for an investment, for sixty dollars, come on, you could invest sixty dollars. And I did, and they sent books about import/export, and I did learn quite a bit. And then they had another department where, if you had a product from another country and you were be interested in importing it, call this number. So I said, hey, I can't lose, so I called the number, and as it turned out, when I called the number, the person from Egypt who was affiliated—it was called The Mellinger Company—he was right there in the office, and that began just a wonderful relationship, [laughs] and initially I brought in four portfolios, and I showed him what I brought in. And so many people gave me compliments, so I showed him what I brought in, and it turned out, it went from those little four portfolios to a line of twenty-eight products that I would design. They were all leather and handmade, there were beautiful Egyptian motifs on them, and I would wholesale them to stores. And they were in *Essence* magazine and *Spiegel* magazine. So that's where a vision can take you. And I didn't have a dime. I didn't have a dime, it really was a trust relationship, because I didn't have any—I would order fifty to sixty thousand dollars' worth of merchandise, I didn't have that kind of money. But the manufacturer, who was also an incredible artist, he would send me the products and they were selling so fast that I would, you know, get the products, I would turn it over—and they were like holiday products—Kwanza, Christmas—so by right after Christmas, I was sending him his money, and it was a handshake, we didn't do a letter of credit or anything. Yeah, so that's where my entrepreneurial skills came in. [laughs]

**Q:** Wow, just like curiosity and inspiration.

**Richardson:** Yes, it came from my mother, not consciously but subconsciously, you know, it came from my mother, and my father in a way—he was a cab driver, so that's kind of an entrepreneur in a kind of way, yeah. So it was a wonderful business, yeah. [00:30:06]



**Q:** You talked about a couple different things in the neighborhood that you would do recreationally. How did you define the neighborhood for yourself, how you and your siblings defined it, or you and your friends? Like what was your range too?

**Richardson:** My range?

**Q:** Geographic range, like where would you go? Would you take the subway downtown or uptown?

**Richardson:** No, you know what? We didn't travel too much. The only people that really travelled a lot was the basketball, the guys that played basketball. We—I didn't do too much travelling. I went to Central Commercial, so you went back and forth to school. And there may have been activities around the city that I participated in, but it wasn't a lot of travel. You know, as a young person, most of the activities were right there in the neighborhood, because we had the pool there, and also the pool, it was an indoor and an outdoor pool, so we also had that resource during winter. And we had Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center, and there were all kinds of activities in there. And also, during those early years in the projects, we had movies up at the Flagpole, we would see all kind of wonderful movies, so we really didn't have to go out of the community for a lot. We had two community centers, we had one in PS 191, and then we had another one right there in the projects, and there would be dances every Friday. Somebody was always giving a dance there, or there was a birthday party, or there was some kind of social activity.

Then we had social clubs, where we would have names, like my little social club was named [laughs] The Bohemian Queens. Can you imagine? [laughs] They were named The Bohemian Queens, and then the guys had The Conservative Gents, and The Conservative Ladies, they were really the most popular of them. And then my husband's team was, what were they, The Debs or something, I don't know, I forgot the name of their organization. So there was a lot going on, you know, there was a lot going on and we didn't have to leave the community that much, at least I didn't. But the basketball game guys was a big thing, and sometimes the ladies would go ahead.

But my parents were kind of strict. My father was a preacher and they were kind of strict, they didn't—my mother, like evening community center and all of that. I had friends whose parents were quite liberal and they let them go to the evening community center, but my mother, uh-uh, she didn't let us go to the community evening center. If it was happening there in the daytime, that was fine. And then there were a lot of—I shouldn't say we didn't go anywhere because there was a lot of Girl Scout and Brownie activities, we were always doing something. Going on some hikes, some camping. And then I went to a camp every year, every year we went to a camp, also. I forget these things. Yeah, Trail Blazers Camp, a wonderful—as a matter of fact, I'm still affiliated with the camp, yeah. And my kids, my adopted—my son didn't go because he had a tracheostomy, he couldn't go, but my adopted children, they went to the camp. It was a

wonderful camp, and it still is, they've really expanded and doing some wonderful things, but it was truly basic living, no flushing toilets, none of that. You know, most camps they have, they live in like these cabins—no, it wasn't cabins—you lived in like a lean-to, or a covered wagon, or a teepee, [laughs] and you got up in the morning and you washed out of a spigot. You turned on and put a pan between two sticks. Seriously. And it was rugged, but it was wonderful. And we cooked meals out—they can't do it anymore because of the bears, but we cooked egg on a rock, we learned how to do that, cook the egg on the rock. And we had dinner in a beautiful dining hall, you know, just really wonderful. Really, I don't think there's any camp in the world like Trail Blazers.

**Q:** Where is it?

**Richardson:** [00:35:00] I can't even think of it. It's Upstate New York. I can't think of the name. I'm trying to think, actually where it is, but—

**Q:** Well maybe it will come back to you.

**Richardson:** Yeah, it was just a wonderful camp.

**Q:** It sounds amazing.

**Richardson:** It was really amazing, yeah, it was really amazing.

**Q:** Do you remember some of the businesses that were in your neighborhood that you would go to?

**Richardson:** Oh, yeah, we had—oh, yeah, before Lincoln Center we had a Five and Dime store, we would be in there buying, balls and Jacks, and that was a big game, and chalk, and basketballs and things like that. We had a bakery, a delicious bakery, fresh, homemade bakery. And we also, funny thing, we had a—what do you call it, a live chicken store?—a live chicken store right on 64th Street, it smelled horrible, a poultry store right there. And there was a bar on the corner, which of course, we didn't have anything to do with. There was Pioneer Supermarket. There was Woolworths that was right there, and oh, my God, on Amsterdam there was a wonderful deli that we went to. And in another set of buildings over on 60th Street, there was an old candy store where we used to go and the name of the man was Bubba. He was from the island—he must have made a million dollar in there, but when you went in there it looked like he didn't have a dime.

**Q:** [laughs]

**Richardson:** Yeah, we would go in there, and we'd buy candy and gum and stuff like that. And then there was a man right on 63rd Street and the Circle, Mike the Ice Cream Man, and he had everything, he must have made a fortune, because he was the only one, and we didn't have to go anywhere. We would just go there and go to his truck, and he had everything there. And then he had the ice cream, it was just amazing. And then we had, what else did we have in the neighborhood? Oh, my goodness, all kinds of stores, all kind of stores that a neighborhood has.

We had a regular, like a bodega kind of store, where we went in after we—when I could sneak out to the center, go there and buy—after the center, everybody wants chips and that kind of thing. And we had—I don't know if we had any clothing stores, but I'm sure we did, in the neighborhood. And what else did we have? And then we had St. Paul, the church there. There was a lot going on there, a lot of people went to St. Paul. And then we had the other church in the neighborhood was Good Shepherd, there was a lot that went on there, Reverend White, who, he's in one of our journals, he was part of the—what did they call it when they got on the bus and went down south, the Freedom Riders. Yeah, he was a minister of that church for many years, and he just passed recently. So he did an article for us for one of the journals.

And then of course we had Monk and we had some other famous musicians. We had, I think, José Feliciano in the neighborhood. And we had, what's his name, Bronx DA, as a matter of fact, he came out and spoke at our event, Robert Johnson, who was DA for many years in the Bronx and became a judge. And last year, Ruben Franco, who was, I think he worked for housing for a while. He was an attorney and he became a judge. He came out last year. His mother was one of the centenarians, and he brought her out to the event last year, which was really beautiful. Because over the years he hadn't really been that active in the reunions we were having, but he did come out and he brought his mother. And he was glad, he remembered Harold, who was one of his classmates, and also a friend of mine, Yvonne Culks [phonetic], who was one of his classmates. So, yeah, it was very rich that way. But a lot of stores, all of the stores in the community that was necessary to make a community thrive, we had it, and we didn't have to go far, it was right there. Like any community, the stores, they're right there. The stores and the resources were right there in the community. [00:40:11]

**Q:** What was the kind of demographics of the Amsterdam Houses and the larger neighborhood that you lived in?

**Richardson:** When you say the demographics, what do you mean?

**Q:** Like where was everybody from? You mentioned in terms of like, African American community there were people from the South, and—

**Richardson:** I don't know. Initially, the projects was predominantly Caucasian projects. As a matter of fact, in one of the journals we were able to get statistics from housing in terms of who was moving into the project, and I don't think I have that particular journal, those statistics here, but it was a very mixed neighborhood. It was white, Black, Chinese, Italian, we were all there together, and even though we each had our own cultural norms we were fine. There were no gang wars with Chinese and Black or Italian and Black, or anything like that, we were all right there together. A little later on, you know, people started moving around, moving out, things got a little better. They started making more money, they bought houses and moved to nicer neighborhoods and that kind of thing. Before they brought the drugs in, and that ruined everything, yeah.

**Q:** Well, before we get to that era, I wanted to ask you about, I guess, as you became a young adult—so this is happening in the later '60s, early '70's, right? So what was that time of life for you?

**Richardson:** Well, for me I was just busy trying to get my—during that particular time it was a lot going on with the Civil Rights Movement, and you were just trying to figure out, you know, where you belonged. I've always been a kind of researcher, a researching kind of person, so you were just trying to figure out, you know, kind of where you belonged in the whole scheme of things. But I always was a kind of business person. I went to Central Commercial on 42nd Street, at that time, and Third Avenue, so, and most of my friends, well, they weren't necessary interested in business, but we were very active. I was very active in high school, in sports. I liked sports. I liked running, I liked relay races. And I also liked sewing. They had crafts in school at that particular time, they don't have it—then, the women definitely had to, you had to take sewing and cooking and that kind of thing. They took all of that out of the schools. And the men took—the men had woodworking and all of that kind of stuff, so when they came out, it wasn't just about getting a job, they had a skill that they could use. So there was a lot of educational opportunities that I took advantage of during my high school years. I'm trying to think of the name of the club that I was president of, but I've always kind of enjoyed being in like a leadership kind of position. So there was some club, I don't remember what they were, I'd have to think about it, that I used to be a head of in my school years.

And I didn't go directly to college after high school. I went to work. I was into this money thing, oh, times are hard, I need to go to work, [laughs] which wasn't the right attitude, but it worked, everything worked out. I went to the Department of Apprentice Training, down on 86th Street, and I learned a lot there. And from there I went to Sloan Kettering—didn't know that my son would wind up there years later—and worked at the Viral Research Division of Sloan Kettering. And then I've always basically worked in law firms, and so that's been my, you know, it worked for me because, by the time I had my son, I needed a lot of flexibility, because he basically was sick all his life, and needed a lot of surgery. So being in the that,

the companies that I worked for gave me a lot of flexibility, which was more important to me than the money. [00:45:00] So it worked out fine for me there.

**Q:** How long did you continue living in the Amsterdam Houses?

**Richardson:** Oh, my goodness, probably until about 1973, about 1973. Then I moved to Morningside—no, I stayed with a friend of mine up near Columbia, she had an apartment up there on 115th Street, in Columbia Houses, so I moved there for about a year. And then I moved here, and I have been here for a long time in Park West Village. Yeah, until about 1973, that's when I left, but I've been associated with this project, and I still have family that live down there.

**Q:** Yeah, can you talk about how long your parents lived there, and the family that you still have that lives there?

**Richardson:** My mother lived there until she passed, and so did my father. Well, they separated, actually, they did separate. But my mother lived in 249 from about 1953 until she passed in 2010, she lived in that same apartment. Yeah, a long time.

**Q:** So what was your interaction like with Lincoln Center, all the buildings that are part of that?

**Richardson:** Not very much interaction with Lincoln Center except the neighborhood center, which was Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center. I didn't have any interaction with Lincoln Center because, during that time—I mean, they're trying to redeem themselves now, but Lincoln Center was exclusive. You know, if you went to Lincoln Center you had to put on a gown and white gloves. It was only the opera or different—there were a couple of events that I went to there. I went to a couple of operas there because I've always liked the opera, so I had the opportunity. It was like, "You're going to the opera?" "Yeah, I'm going to the opera." I really enjoy it. But I didn't have too much interaction with them. Not like now. Now, they're really doing all kinds of things there in the community. I mean, they really got it going on. They put up a big mural, and matter of fact, I have an event tomorrow there. I was at an event—just wonderful events, a lot of participation from the African American broader community. Just a lot of talent and a lot of entertainment for young people. I've taken my nieces and nephews to several performances, concerts they had there, which were just wonderful. But in the early years we didn't have any interaction with Lincoln Center except to walk through the development to get to the train station, and that was the extent of it. As a matter of fact, you know, they got to the point where they closed off the area, the entry to Lincoln Center. You couldn't enter Lincoln Center from the projects the way it was in the beginning. But I guess things were starting to happen, you know, change, crime, whatever, so they closed it off.

And they are thinking about opening up now. I was reading something recently that their intention is to open it back up. But that was my—I didn't have very much interaction with that. There were little things that went on, I think, that the community participated in over the years, but not very much.

**Q:** Why do you think there is such an interest now for Lincoln Center to kind of look back on its history of how it came to be and revise the way that it—?

**Richardson:** Just generally, things are changing. There's more participation of African Americans. They realized that they really did a lot of damage to the community when they build Lincoln Center. They displaced a lot of people. And I think, as I said, they're trying to redeem themselves, trying to—it's already done, so there's nothing you can do to undo it, but at least you can try to bring something educational and cultural to the community where everybody can be a part of it. And they really are doing it, they have jazz there, we went, say, from twelve to one-thirty, the little park there across from Lincoln Center. They have that big Summer Stage, and they had a beautiful film, I invited my nieces down, my niece and her four children, they came down, and they saw, they had a silent disco and then after that they showed a wonderful film about Missy Copeland, the premier dancer of Swan Lake, who is African American. And they loved it, they had such a good time. They had little disco lights and all of that, so they're really doing a lot. Victoria Benitez, I forget her last name, he's Head of Public Affairs there, a really nice lady, and she's doing a wonderful job in bringing cultural events to Lincoln Center, where previously they were inaccessible, totally inaccessible.

**Q:** Do you have any memories of when families were getting displaced from some of the blocks near Amsterdam Houses?

**Richardson:** I don't really. Harold had more, whom I think you've interviewed. He had more of a memory of that, the year, because I said, oh, you know what, I wasn't aware of that, so I don't really—we're really the same age, but he just was more hands-on, I think. Because I think, he was saying some of his classmates were displaced, and because of the birthday, he's in April, I'm in September 19th, so I missed that year, even though we're basically the same age. So I think that maybe it was during that time, that's why he has a little bit more information, just that year of school, the fact that he was a year ahead of me made a difference. Because I don't remember any of my classmates being displaced, you know it may have been that I just didn't see them the next year, and didn't pay it any attention. But Harold was a little different. Everyone knew Harold, from Amsterdam to West End Avenue, [laughs] and they still do, everyone knew Harold, so he would be more probably aware of things that were going on than I was. I don't remember any of my friends being displaced, or missing and me saying, "Oh, what happened to this one or that one?" But I know it definitely was real—it did take place in a very significant way.

**Q:** We're at about an hour now, but I guess I just have one more question which is that I wanted to ask about your son's activities. You said he was really active in the community, so I wanted to see if you wanted to take some space to describe some of the things that he did.

**Richardson:** [Pauses]

**Q:** Are you still there?

**Richardson:** Mm-hmm. I can't talk about it right now.

**Q:** Okay. I'm sorry.

**Richardson:** Okay.

**Q:** Can I ask about some of the people you did grow up with, what they kind of went on to do in your adult life, some of the other people that you see at your reunions?

**Richardson:** Well, several of the people that I grew up with I'm still friends with. As a matter of fact, one friend of mine, Julia Cokeson [phonetic], who was a very close friend, her parents, her mother and my mother were very close friends, she became a teacher, and we're still friends. [Laughs] I always joke around with Harold, and I said, we'll look at a picture of some friends, and I was saying, "Look at them. This one became a judge, this was an administrator. What happened to me? [laughs] What happened to me? How did all these people become all this, and I didn't become any of that?" And he says, you know, you really shouldn't look at it like that. But, Stella Owens, she became a judge. And Lotus Hurd [phonetic], she became an administrator, I think, with the city. And Julia became a teacher, and I don't know, some of other friends became some other things. [00:55:01]

But most of them, most of them stayed in education. A few of them majored in music, and some of them just were married and were just housekeepers, homemakers they're called, I guess, homemakers. But they all did something positive, you know, for the most part. I don't think any of them, or maybe one of them kind of fell by the wayside and got involved with drugs, which was, a big thing during that time, it was tough. It was tough, there was a lot of drugs that were, you know, brought into the community. And it was tough during that time, we lost a lot of, especially our boys, our men, we lost a lot of them to drugs. And just a matter of fact, just about all of Freddy's friends, his group of friends are gone, yeah.

**Q:** Is that your husband?

**Richardson:** Yeah. Mm-hmm, yeah, a lot of his friends were lost. They're all gone, yeah, they're all gone. And who the heroin didn't get the crack got, so, it's just an awful situation that happened there, so many people lost their children, they lost their children. A few close people I know had some challenges, but they were able to, you know, overcome it and get back on track, and there are a lot of people that didn't.

**Q:** Yeah, that really changed the city quite a lot, and really impacted a generation pretty profoundly, a couple of generations.

**Richardson:** We lost a whole generation of men, to tell you the truth. We lost a whole generation, so as a result we have all these women out here with no husbands.

**Q:** And not just drugs but also the way that the legal system has worked in relationship to that.

**Richardson:** Yes, all of that, and now everybody smokes, blowing their brains out with weed, and before, people get caught with a little bag of weed and they went to jail. It's just been awful. I didn't get caught up in that, but so many people did, you know, just in terms of survival. But we have to figure out a way to make sure that that doesn't happen again, but it's already in motion. You know these kids are running around with guns, and even the project has changed a lot, there was a lot of shooting going on down there, just for nothing, you know, for little things that happened in the community. At one time you could have a nice little argument if you needed to, and you disagreed and you got passed it, and the next day you were friends, or you weren't friends. But this thing about going to get a gun because you did this, that, or you said some little thing, it's just not good. And the people have changed a lot that's moving into the project now. I was just telling Harold that I really wanted to have some educational material—rather than just giving out toys and food, what can we give out that might change their lives of someone that got something, looked into a program? Just yesterday, I was going down to visit the Fountain House, it's just a lovely place, I'd never been down there. Oh, my goodness, have you ever been there?

**Q:** No.

**Richardson:** Oh, my goodness, what a place! If you ever get a chance, you go on a tour there, it's amazing! I didn't know anything like that existed in the city for the mentally ill. It just was phenomenal. It was phenomenal. I was so impressed. And the people, you could just feel the warmth and the love, and just a wonderful place. Because there's a lot of mental health issues now, and they're not getting the help that they need. They keep talking about these programs and every time I look on TV, I see the mayor's doing that, the mayor's doing that, but I'm not getting the resources that I need to make a phone call and say, okay, this is what you can do. But that place is amazing. So I picked up some literature and I sat on the table on the 29th, I was gonna put some literature out there was a resource for people who are



looking for a real—they don't even call them patients, they call them members. [01:00:13] And they have so much down there. You should see the art. I know this is probably not—I don't know, is that San Juan Hill down there? You know what, I don't even know where San Juan Hill is, to tell you the truth. [01:00:26]

**Q:** [Laughs] Yeah, I think it's really small, just from like 60th or 61st Street to 67th or something. Where is Fountain House?

**Richardson:** Fountain House is 425 West 47th Street, between 9th and 10th. They had a little, downtown, what did they call that? I forgot what they call that area.

**Q:** Is that Hell's Kitchen?

**Richardson:** Hell's Kitchen. What an area, I mean, [laughs] I don't know why they call it Hell's Kitchen, what a name for an area.

**Q:** [Laughs] Yeah.

**Richardson:** *West Side Story* was filmed right there in the neighborhood. And I was talking about people that came out of the neighborhood, my nephew who came out of the neighborhood, the next generation of course, he became an actor with *The Cosby Show*, and James Earl Jones, and he was in *Speed*. And they're still showing *Speed*, from God knows when. So, he, you know, he ran into some challenges, and, is still having them, so I've been trying to get him some help. But he had a very successful career in acting out there. So that's basically the saga. Yeah, the history of San Juan Hill, but I definitely would like to share these—what's his name has—Sean has—

**Q:** The journals?

**Ricardson:** Yeah, he has a copy of the journals. I don't know if they would be a resource for what you're doing, but it's an incredible journal.

**Q:** I was gonna say, it just seems like it would be really nice to look at, and see that history, and how you've done that as a community organization.

**Richardson:** Yeah, it's amazing, all of them are nice, but this one is really—you know, the graphic artist, we spent hours, nights and mornings, until the wee hours of the morning doing this journal. A couple of little mistakes in it, but we had to either go to print or not do it. So it was a labor of love for sure, and we were so happy that we were able to do that for the 75th Anniversary, and we'll do a little something out

there for the 76th. We're gonna do a tribute to my son who was just amazing in the community, there must have been three-four hundred people at his services in December. He was just, he just gave to the community, he just gave. You know they just talked about how Aaron would take you to Walmart at three-o'clock in the morning, he just gave, he would just give, give, give, give, give. So, I want to do a little tribute to him, because he always cooked burgers—not that that's the best thing today—but he always cooked food for the kids, and he would be out there to try to make a couple dollars, and he didn't make a dime because he would give it all the kids. They used to call him A Train. [Laughs] "Oh, A Train, could we have a burger?" And he just couldn't say no, so he just made—I mean, everyone was so sad, even the children, they couldn't believe that A Train wasn't there. Did you interview Peach from Positive Influence?

**Q:** No, I haven't.

**Richardson:** He has the basketball game down there?

**Q:** No.

**Richardson:** Yeah, he's really been a solid rock in the community, because he's really had all of those basketball games that have kept the young men very, very busy, and actively involved in basketball. He's given games all over the city, and Gail Brewer is like that's her guy, he could do no—she's really very supportive of him, so he's done quite a bit in the community, as well as Pat Ryan, and others.

**Q:** Yeah, I haven't heard of Peach before, so thank you for that. [01:05:00]

**Richardson:** [Unclear]

**Q:** What's the name?

**Richardson:** We call him Peach, but his name is Andrew Blacks.

**Q:** Okay.

**Richardson:** Oh, yeah, he's been in the community, really working in the community for a long time. And usually on that day, he was the one who you know, in addition to Aaron, just gives out food to the community, he gives out this, all kinds of things to the community, yeah, Andrew Blacks. Did you interview Pat Ryan?

**Q:** No, when I called her, I wasn't able to connect, and I think her voice mailbox was full, so I couldn't leave a message. So I figured there's probably a few people that I'm gonna try to get in touch with as we go on through the summer.

**Richardson:** Now, she's the president—well she's a vice president now—of the Amsterdam Addition, but she's been in the community as an activist for many, many years. Her family grew up in the projects, but then she moved over to the Amsterdam Addition.

**Q:** I think Sean knows her.

**Richardson:** Yeah, he should. He's the one—we call her "The Mayor."

**Q:** That's like Harold said.

**Richardson:** Yeah, she's the mayor. We kind of follow her because she's been into politics and trying to help the community in advocating change, and trying to troubleshoot issues, and getting support services for a long time. So I think if you have a chance, I don't know how many other people you have on the list, she would be excellent to interview.

**Q:** That's great to know, thank you.

**Richardson:** You're welcome. You're welcome.

**Q:** I'm gonna stop our recording, I think, and then let's stay on the call for a second and chat about a couple of things. Unless—is there anything else, Jackie, that you want to talk about, like just growing up in The Amsterdam Houses, any other memories that we haven't had a chance to talk about?

**Richardson:** No. I guess, thank God that I was able to survive, and I had such a supportive community. Sometimes we just get together, just sit down and talk about different ones, and how they supported us, and how if it wasn't for them—Girl Scouts that kept us focused, and homework help—that really, it makes a difference. And the community center and the pool. And of course the church—we went to a separate church, we didn't go to a community church, we went to a church uptown on 108th Street. But how all of that, you really need all of that to make it work, and as they say, it takes a community to raise a child, it really does, it really does. So that's kind of like my statement regarding growing up in The Amsterdam. And I thank you for letting me share my story.

**Q:** Thank you for sharing.

**Richardson:** Surely, you're welcome.

**Q:** Alright, let's end our interview there.

**Richardson:** Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]