

Interview with: Harold Thomas

Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic

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Landmark West

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Q: Today is April 26th, 2023, and this is Sarah Dziedzic, interviewing Harold Thomas for Landmark West for the project about San Juan Hill. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Thomas: Good morning. My name is Harold Thomas, and I was born in Brooklyn, New York of Caribbean heritage. My parents were from the Danish West Indies, The Virgin Islands now, but that's where my mother, father, grandfather, two older brothers, and I'm the first real Yankee cause I was born in Brooklyn. But it's been a very interesting, dynamic life, and I just recently celebrated seventy-five years young.

Q: Congrats. So I'm gonna ask you a broad question, you can take it where you like. Can you tell me about the place where you grew up?

Thomas: I grew up in the Amsterdam Houses, located on 61st to 64th Street on Amsterdam Avenue. But the unique part of is it that it goes over to West End Avenue. It was designed from what I recall, from what I researched, by some famous architects, and also was landscaped by these great fabulous New York folk. And the design of the Amsterdam Houses, what there was six buildings up front, and then it was built three levels going down. So it was very unique that when you were playing around the trees, that were little back then, now they're seven stories high—so each ten years on a tree is each floor, like one floor is ten feet, and when you see a six or seven story tree it's sixty to seventy-years old. So we grew up, there was benches, there was play, you know, we had a playground. We had a hill from Amsterdam going down, so there was sleigh riding, motor scooters, making our scooters out of a two by four, a milk crate and two skates that you stole from your thing. We had cars that we made out of, you know, our parents when the baby grew we got the big wheels and we could make a wagon.

Growing up at Amsterdam was one of the most unique experiences that I—when I realized much later, and it was actually the Amsterdam Houses was an experiment in integration. In 1947 it was still very segregated and the only way you can get into the project is you had to be a veteran. So the families, the veterans were from all over, you know, America in parts, so on each floor—we lived in six-story buildings, the first top buildings was thirteen stories, so they was the big buildings. But as you went down different sets of stairs you had different two or three buildings that was connected, so between 61st and 62nd, even though it was one, and neighbors, all the apartments to doors was open. Growing up, each floor had a different set of people, maybe someone from Italy, someone from Jewish, someone from Germany, someone from the islands, someone from Canada. The second floor might have had someone from

Spain, someone from Argentina—it was a mix of people, initially a combination, and it was a very unique—you know, my mother had to call Jimmy's mother to see if it was alright for him to have dinner. And when I say community it was a very different set of energy like today, but as everything else, seventy-five years ago we celebrated 1947 they build the buildings.

Q: Can you talk a little bit more about what that experiment in integration was like, and what that community was like at that time?

Thomas: It started out with just a mixed set of races, religions and all. There was churches in the neighborhood, so Good Shepard Church was a hundred something years old. Saint Paul's on 63rd. So those were the two schools, you know, had Sunday school, there was Catholic and Protestant. And growing up, we had the school right across, 191 they built for the project. So it was a combination, as I looked at it now, some of the people from the tenements across the street, we just knew them as other buildings but ours was new, that was the new kids on the block. And in the third grade a whole set of, from June to September, [0:05:00] a whole set, a part of my third grade disappeared. We had no idea where they went when you're six-seven-eight. What happened was they were starting to build Lincoln Center. We had no idea what it was, we just saw the bulldozers come, and within two or three months the entire block disappeared, and the block next to it. And in a little while they went from 60th Street all the way down to 65th.

Q: Wow. Let me go back and ask you a few more things about the apartment that your family lived in. Do you remember what floor it was on and the apartment number?

Thomas: Apartment 3E, 229 West 62nd Street. And in the '40s, in the tenements, the bathroom was in the hallway. In the turn of the century, they built these buildings on 63rd Street, they were two-sided, but they built them and the bathroom was in the kitchen. So this was at the turn of the century in 2000, [correction 1906] so that was a big whole step, and I remember the footed bathtubs in some of our friends'—cause the project was from 61st to 64th, but from West End to the middle of the block there was a little cul-de sac, and on the right-hand side was these buildings called the Phipps Houses. Well, come to find out that Phipps was a multi-millionaire, and one of the lady activist of abolitionism told him to start building some buildings for the next set of generations from the turn of the century 2000 [correction 20th century]. This is fifty years later. So our—back in the day, the 2000 [correction 20th century] Phipps Houses was turning, and now the Phipps Houses was now the Amsterdam, was the new kids.

Actually, Thelonious Monk lived in 63rd Street, and we used to see him deliver his song, dressed to the nines in these maxi coats and furs and hats, but he would be on the corner of 63rd Street spinning around, so we didn't know what that was. But he was actually composing some of his music, and from the

cars going past—this is what we hear later—but he was be-bopping and jazz, and changed the entire history. And we used to see people like Max Roach, and Harry Belafonte—just passed, to be ninety-six, what a beautiful number. But all of those people used to visit him, we didn't know who some of them were, but these were the top musicians and artists of the area coming by Monk to just get some of his wisdom. And he would come in our playground sometime and they would talk trash, and we would talk trash right back, cause his shoes was always immaculate, and his nails done, and he had hats, and just, he was a giant figure. And for us little kids he was just, who was that? Mr. Monk. But he was fascinating to see.

And growing up, because right from West End the tracks of the trains that used to bring food up, so there was no buildings. You could sit on the set of benches way down the third level, and look over to Jersey. So we grew up very, very interestingly, just very—my brother used to take us, he knew every ditch in Central Park, he was an adventurer, we was the artsy one, but he was always—so he used to take us over to Central Park. He knew where the birds was, he knew where the nests was, he knew where the goldfish were, and he used to take us fishing down to the Hudson River. We'd get a little bit of plastic line, actually get a worm from the garden out front, put it on the thing and drop a low line, and we would catch these little crabs that maybe was three inches. We actually brought four-five of them, my mother said, "I am not cooking that. Keep it." But it was just so funny to be able to catch crabs from the Hudson River right across our block.

Q: Let me ask you a couple more questions about your family. What kind of work did your parents do?

Thomas: My mother did factory work, cause dad, he ended up going into the Merchant Marines. So he would travel around the world, he would send these wonderful gifts, but we saw him twice a year. I was little, my two older brothers, they all grew up in the Virgin Islands, so they grew up with dad. But I didn't. But I grew up with—I was busy, I was fun, mischievous, always a little taller than most folk; I'm six feet-two, I've been that probably since fifteen. But in junior high and elementary school, 191, being they used to line you up, I would get the oatmeal cookie with no raisins. The peanut butter, they ran out of jelly, and the peanut butter was so thick. [0:10:02]

Q: The tall ones were in the back?

Thomas: The tall ones were way in the back, so they was higher, and it was fun. And I never took that on personally, I was always tall, dark, and handsome. That's what I look like now. [Sarah laughs] But that wasn't the deal back then.

But I grew up with encouragement from the community. I grew up with mentors that were culturally different, that they were some of the college kids came back to teach right in the community. So a young lady named Jeanie Parnell, she taught us theater, so we actually had a theater after-school program. And we did *West Side Story*, and there was no white kids, so the kids, all the Jets was black. [Sings] “When you’re a Jet you’re a Jet all the way...” And we learned all that, we did *Guys and Dolls*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, all the current plays, she was involved with. We also had speaking, or writing, the regular basketball and all. And I was fortunate enough to be the one that used to have to welcome the parents to our after-school programs. “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the third grade so-and-so...” So I was always actively involved in the arts and various thing. As a teenager I did some modeling, I used to play basketball, of course, and then one of them little guys poked me in the eye purposely, and I stopped playing basketball that day.

Q: Wow. I’m sorry.

Thomas: [Laughs]

Q: What kind of activities did your family do? Can you talk about your siblings a little bit more?

Thomas: I have two older brothers. One was four years older, and one was eight. My older brother was very active, he was, you know, an artist early in his life. They were singing doowop then, so he had a little voice, he wanted to lead but he did background. And he was very active in music, he started to play the upright bass. And my other brother, like I say, he was the adventurer, he used to walk from our project down to Chinatown. He used to walk, like I say, he knew Central Park, he knew Riverside Park. We were very fortunate to grow up in Central Park, three blocks over. Riverside was six or seven up. My mother had us go to the library every week, and we had to take out two books—two books of your choice, and you can pick what you want. And even though we had to do book reports from school, she said you’re gonna have these books and I want you to read back to me. We had to take handwriting back in the day, you had to do A’s, a whole sheet of B, but you also had to do it in script. So my handwriting to these days is like people say, “Wow!” Cause some people, I’ve seen them hold a pen and I’ve never seen how you can hold a pen, but it’s part of that you had standard stuff. And so they were very active, and I was active, we used to do, sell a little lemonade, but my mom went to work, so on Saturdays we would cut up some potatoes and we’d sell French fries. So that was a whole big thing, and my two other partners, I just said, “Well there’s fifty-cent extra, so I’m taking it because we used my mom’s oil.” Just me being mischievous.

We had a very interesting young life, and as they started to build Lincoln Center they used to invite us over, the Hotel Empire was there, so they used to take the kids from the neighborhood—very fortunate, we got to see Leontyne Price, we got to see opera, at Christmas time we would get two or three bags of

goodies because the hotel would give us a thing, and they would give us a party at the Lincoln Center for the after-school, you know. So it was very, very culturally enriching, the after-school programs. There was actually one in the projects, so we could rent for twenty-five dollars or something and you could give a party for either a birthday, or you know, free if you was living in the buildings. We had a very, very nice growing up. So even though we were quote “poor,” we were not poor, we were just low income.

Q: You said the after-school programs, they were a relationship between PS 191 and the Lincoln Center institutions?

Thomas: Well, the Lincoln Center was separate. The 191 was actually after-school program from three to five-thirty or six. But Lincoln Center always had different things that they started to involve some of the young people in, and elders, so it was a community. They did do reach-out at certain times. [0:15:03]

Q: And what was it like once those buildings got built up, architecturally? How did that change how you moved around through the neighborhood?

Thomas: Well, when we moved in the buildings were completed. So the different area—Broadway was busy, the Coliseum was there on 59th Street, which was the first where they brought the circus and things. Central Park started on 59th Street so there was different, those kinds of different things going on. So we was involved, they had a—PAL, it was a Police Athletic League, so that was part of [unclear] High School, which is now St. John’s University. But all of that, we grew up very, you know, things in the community that we could do.

Q: So many of the depictions of this area and the whole reasoning behind why the tenements were torn down was because the area was described as being “rough,” or “dangerous.” What I’m hearing from you is that there was a lot of opportunity for cultural activity and people, so what, you know, what kind of truth is there to that depiction?

Thomas: Well, the dynamic to that, my older brother did say right a few blocks down there were gangs. So it was in that area, but the projects somehow, we have 156 trees that are now grown. We’re probably the only city blocks that have that many trees, because there was the three levels, it was designed by an architect. But there was gangs. We didn’t have a lot of—for some reason, our little three blocks was perfectly isolated, but it was still a community that was like—the famous musician, Tito Puente, used to come and perform down at our, you know, block parties. We used to do block parties and they would block off the street, so we had that once a year. Always, can go back to the Amsterdam, the last weekend in July, and there’s an Amsterdam Reunion, it used to be in the schoolyard in 191, and then it evolved over to 64th Street. So I used to—at twenty-four, I had moved back to the Virgin Islands, I just wanted to

see my roots, and stayed thirty years. [Sarah laughs] It was the most interesting dynamic to meet cousins. So growing up Amsterdam was a unique experience that a lot of neighborhoods, even they though they be that old, they never had, I think, the unity that we used to share.

Q: Was there community coming from the fact that so many of the families there were veterans' families?

Thomas: That was the community part, that we was, you know, color didn't matter. You had neighbors, and we actually, like I say, because of such a diversity, and in the 191 we had Billy Cochiama, his mother and father actually ended up being Malcolm X, and culturally active. There was Dr. [unclear] that ended up, we did not know him. Some of us went on—Gladys Purette went to 191, and then she went back, got her degree and taught for thirty years there, just retired a few years ago. So that was part of, what I would say is unity in the community, way before it was a statement. We actually grew up with a sense of, you had to go to school, cursing was not even allowed, you played—we had to invent games because everyone had Monopoly or Scrabble. Play marbles, we used to play Off the Point, which was taking a rubber ball and stick—the broom from mom. You had to play stickball, and the base was the tree, and then the thing, and the other, and they'd put down a mat.

Christmas time was always fun, cause there was—everyone's house had some Christmas lights, and you had ornaments, and you had glass was bubbled and different things that were classic. And you could visit anybody, and, you know, stop, by and have cookies and cake. So the holidays was always nice. Easter, they had the Easter egg hunt, over in Central Park. One year I won it. [Sarah laughs] I rolled my egg the farthest, the fastest, and I won two tickets to the circus and a gift certificate to Arnold Constable, and I think I got ten dollars, which like was like, yo! So, yes. [0:20:02]

Q: Wow. Now, what about your decision to move to the Virgin Islands? What went into that?

Thomas: I was twenty-four. I had just got a new job at—I was starting to work in the fashion industry, so I was doing some, you know, working in the stores, a warehouse. And I just got a new apartment, and I just painted the kitchen a hot Chinese red, and I bought some orange pots. And I went back for the first time in '71. And they had little planes back then that goes between Puerto Rico New York, so you couldn't fly directly into St. Thomas yet. And I was on the plane, as it was coming to land, I looked out the little window and I saw a rock move in the water. It was a strange to see it, it just moved a little, you know. So when I got off the plane, the person—I asked one of the people there, the lady, she said, "Oh, no that was a turtle." I was so fascinated by seeing that hundred-year-old turtle move in the water. The water's crystal clear. Up here, there's beaches but still, the water—when I went, I've never been in a pool since. I couldn't do the bleach and all.

But when you live in an island, and every day you could wake up and take a morning bath, a swim before you even, you know, you brush your teeth, and you go out there, you come back, and then you go to school, you go to work. You're refreshed. You're smiling. So many of the people there did not do—then I used to—I couldn't understand, I was a Yankee. So all of that didn't matter. And there was these names of people I had never—a Continental, a Garret, and—we are all human, and I was very like, cause I grew up different, and when you're in the island that's all one set—and so I was like, *Peyton Place* was on TV at the time, so it was a little town thing. And I grew up in the project, in the city, and here I'm now in a little town. The road—one way you're going to town, and the other way you're coming. There's no East Side, and sort of let's do this.

But it was fascinating cause I had turkey on the beach for the first Thanksgiving. I was in a swimsuit. It was fascinating when I moved back home, and it was a change, it was a difference, and I decided to stay. We had went back to open a boutique at a new mall in the cruise ship dock. But we didn't know that when you get off the cruise ship, there's forty taxis lined up. So as they come off the boat, they get in the taxi, go to town, they go to whatever. But we were built—they were building this new mall, but it was abandoned because we was on the backside, where everything on that lower level was warehouses back then. And they built this beautiful building, but it didn't work. But it was new for us, and we brought things from New York, cause I was, we had designer friends who did—so we had African clothes, and we had beautiful beaded earrings, we had, you know, glass from—so we had a gift shop that was cultural. We used the local artist also. We had the jewelers who used to make shell jewelry, silversmiths, so we had a shop that was—we had opened an art gallery there. So the local young artists, ones from the high school, you can't show at the big gallery [unclear]. So Origem was an outlet for the community from way back, and we brought in, we combined local artists with that.

And living in the island changed my perception cause I matured there. And when I came back, I was a grown old man, but older and wiser, cause I grew up with a different feeling: the trees, the air. When you hit the city as soon as the plane lands, you feel the heat, the concrete, and back there you're walking down the road, people would give you a ride, you know, pitch in, you know. And you can get from one end of the island—there was one road that goes all the way around, and if you start at the airport you can go up and down the hill. And the hills, man, coming from the city, and then the hill. So a few times, you're holding on, cause these are like one-way/two-way streets, literally like the road, and you're whizzing past, they're whizzing past you cause, you know, the people live there, they're like—and you drive, and you drive on the left-hand side, still. The U.S. Virgin Islands is so way out of tune, but lovely, still.

I go back every year or two just to go. Carnival is the biggest thing in the world. [0:25:00] Everyone wants to be the Carnival Queen. So I'm the King, and they got the little kids, Prince and Princess, so they wear these five-hundred-dollar gowns on these kids. The sleeves come off, and they're supposed to be just—I

always say, “If you’re gonna be a little girl”—they go out of it, there’s chaperones, they pay thousands for sponsors, and they have all of the—it was fascinating. Carnival is when people come back and they really—someone that don’t speak to you all year could say, “Hi, can I get you a rum?” Next week they’re back to not talking. I used to smile, all of it, I’m from New York.

Q: How did you get into design?

Thomas: I was always fashion conscious because I had long arms and sleeves, and I was near people who sewed, cause I used to get my clothes sewn. My older brother actually started, he went to F.I.T., he actually started in that industry as a cutter, so he used to bring me down. And when you see a cutter, these big tables, like the length of this, and it’s piled up with—and they’re using a saw to cut these patterns, it was fascinating. But all my suits was mohair, silk and mohair, silk and—so because I’ve had someone, like the Jewish have someone, you know, your uncle, so I was always dressed. And I enjoyed fashion accessories. I designed myself for many years, cause when you’re young you could whip up the gown for the prom in the school.

And I always enjoyed cooking, so I always said—mom went to work on Saturdays, so we used to have omelets, Western omelet, and we used to fry bacon and sausage, and we got, instead of just toast, buy the English muffin], so I always had that. We had a really nice—never drank the cheap wine, we used to buy a pint of rum and four of us get happy, instead of drinking some—they had the craziest wine names too back in the day.

Q: [laughs] What were the grocery stores like near the Amsterdam Houses? How did you get the things that you needed?

Thomas: Well, there was actually, on 64th and 65th, there was a Pioneer grocery store, which was a big one. But they had little, what you called bodegas back then, and we had the candy store, we had places that sold, a little store like a Woolworths, but it was a Five & Ten Store, nothing cost more than a quarter, probably, but Five & Ten was the name of it. And they was on the strip of 61st, 62nd to 63rd, 63rd to 64th. On the other side of the projects was there—but these small little stores, we had the Irish bar, we had the Italian, little pizza shop. So Fridays, you couldn’t eat meat, so we used to get fish or pizza. And we didn’t know what the hell it was, but it was, I guess Catholic-related. So we grew up with all of that, to this day I still, you know, you remember, but then I do eat a hamburger just because.

Q: And you said the gallery that you opened, this gift shop that you opened was called Origin?

Thomas: Origem. we used to different words, the “Ori” was for Original, and the Gem is that we’re coming back home with gems.

Q: Nice. Can you talk about coming back to New York, deciding to move back here?

Thomas: When I moved there in ‘72/’73, they had never had a hurricane in fifty-six years. So the Virgin Islands every quote “hurricane season,” you would board up the house, with the nails, literally with the nails, and you’re blocking it in. You buy a bunch of water and food just in case the hurricane comes. Well, our grandparents saw the last one, and it was fifty-six years. The third year I was there, Hugo came. Hugo devastated—I was hanging out in Miami with some friends, I said, “Oh, I’m gonna miss”—“Stay a couple of more days.” I said, “No, the hurricane’s coming,” you know, so. And my roommate was going up to Kentucky, so we needed someone in the house. I said, “You know, what? I’m leaving.” I left the Tuesday or something like that, got in the Wednesday, and the hurricane was supposed to come Thursday, I said, “Ah, well.” My friend said, “Go get some water.” So I bought two gallons of water. [whistles]

The hurricane came, Hugo landed. I had never been, it was like the express train going past your stop. [0:30:02] The wind uprooted big palm trees. The wind and the rain, it was pitch black, the lights all went out all over the island. Some crazies stayed in their boats. It was the most devastating, fascinating—I’m doing like in the movie, throwing buckets of water. The ceiling blew off, so all it was the galvanized, and the water’s pouring down, each four feet down the galvanized. I’m on the top floor, I’m on the third floor, soaking wet and scared to death. There’s no one there, there’s no—but you’re dumping this water and everything I had at the time got wet. Some people lost their entire, everything. They was in the bathroom. Furniture blown out, the wind took everything—concrete, the hotels. Hurricane Hugo changed the dynamic of the Virgin Islands. And it’s never been the same. They’ve been coming every since.

So when I had to move back, Marilyn came, or something like that. And I was on the top floor of the house. I just lost everything: fine art collection, clothes, jewelry. Everything was like blown away, soaking wet. There’s no way, they had tarp, tarpaulin on the top of the roof. You couldn’t get water. Ice, forget it. People was lining up at the gas stations, and everything was soaking wet, but it was refreshing to see everybody was the same. I had not known what that meant until you go through a disaster like that where no one—all the riches you got means nothing if there’s no—the wires, St. Thomas used to have the wires running from tree to tree. Months, almost a year or two later, some sections of St. Thomas down the hill never got electricity back. Candles, canned goods, unbelievable. FEMA came through and saved us, but it was—

And I said, I had to go back. I came to New York, I was homeless. Me, who was thinking, you know, and when I say, “me,” now, my cousin said, “How were you actually homeless?” Cause when I landed, I could stay with friends. But the word “homeless” did not, it wasn’t a word out back then. You know, a bum who drank on the corner. Now the homeless are not—they are all every level. And some of them make six-hundred-dollars a day with the begging. And I realized some were lawyers that just said, the hell with—this is years ago. And they make more money collecting fifty-cent—now they ask you for a dollar, but back then—but three hundred quarters is seventy-five dollars. That’s a lot of money. But it’s part of—when I came back, I just reinvented myself again, so I’m a fashion commentator and producer and a fine art curator. I do catering. I’m a stylist, you know, it’s just the myriad of things I’ve always been involved. And I’ve been fortunate. I had a few jobs, boutiques and all, but I never worked for the government as a postal worker or an office job. I was, knock on wood, very fortunate to live from the art of what I’m about.

Q: When you came back, how did that feel to have to—was a “have to” reinvent yourself, or “get to” invent yourself?

Thomas: It had to, cause I had nothing, literally. Not so much the clothes on my back. But, yes, I had to reestablish some of the connections, new people. it was 2000, like 1999 or something, so it was the new decade coming: computers are gonna explode and all the hardware stored that you—but I was new to the city, the new city. But I adapted real quick because that’s what you do as a freelancer. So, you could work for anybody you have to, and after the assignment, if they were crazy, you leave them alone, and if they call you back, it works.

Q: What kind of relationship did your family continue to have to Amsterdam Houses while you were living in the Virgin Islands?

Thomas: It’s still magical. I have friends that I know for sixty-seven years. My best friend, Jackie Brown Richardson, we just sponsored the 75th Anniversary of the Amsterdam Community last year. [0:35:03] We had a throw down, blow away block party with everything. We had a Latin band, we had DJs. We had a set of—we did a parade. When we opened the village, we came down the block with this band playing. And we had a Little Princess of the event. We really went all the way with our 75th. But every two years we used to do a boat ride. We’d rent the Circle Line, sell four hundred tickets. People come from all over. I used to fly in from the Virgin Islands. People came from Puerto Rico. People who was on vacation, planned their vacation when they were away to be in New York for the Amsterdam reunion.

Q: Did your parents continue to live there?

Thomas: My mom stayed there. By the time dad came back, they had gotten separated, so he moved. He had another family in Maryland, so I have another younger brother. And my mom stayed right in Amsterdam for sixty-something years.

Q: Did she ever talk about how that community changed from the time when it was maybe similar families, young families?

Thomas: Often, we'd reflect on that, cause if you have a history of community—now, they have garbage bins in the center. The benches are all taken. It transformed the unity that we used to have as kids. The elevators, now I'm big so I just barely fit it, but back then—but the community, they started bringing in these other type of folk. They neglected the neighborhood. The trees are still beautiful, but the neighborhood, the community—it has impacted me a whole lot. But some families are still there from our generation. The great-great-grandmother is still there. So-and-so's grandmother is still there, she's raising her grandkids and great-grands.

Q: And how did the makeup—you described it as being really diverse, culturally diverse, diverse in terms of, you know, the different families that were there—how did you see that change when you went back?

Thomas: Well, from early, in the '40s, by early '50s, some of those same families, they started moving on up the ladder, so a lot of the white folks, and some of the Black folk would move into Queens and Long Island, some to Jersey, cause the job was—so that made opportunities for more—Puerto Rico was freeing up so a lot of more Puerto Ricans came, more African Americans—Southern always—New York and South is built in, but some people from the Caribbean came up. So in the '40s and '50s, the whole city, the city's dynamics changed. And so it was—as you grew up you knew all these friends for thirty or forty—you knew the older brother, younger brother, Miss Rivera, Miss—and those days are gone completely. Past thirty years when they started naming their kids Sunshine and Rain and Takabooka and Abaya Boom Jones. But it was part of the '70s, it was part of free—the war in Vietnam was a horror story, you're looking at people, and you're looking at the TV like you're looking at the cartoons. It became so, like, the war in Vietnam changed TV because you could lively see people getting murdered, killed unnecessarily. We didn't know, but we knew it was wrong.

I was like seventeen, they were drafting me to be in the army. At eighteen—I wasn't aware—and a dear friend of mine, and it was in June and my birthday's in April, they said in three weeks you're going into to the service. I said, "What? No way." They said, you know, you can sign up now and come, you know, a little later. I said, "Okay." "Sign on the line." Little did I know that it meant you put an extra year in. So you enlisted when you sign, but it worked out in the universe. I just had to flip when I got in, in October. They said, "You have three years." I said, "What do you mean?" They said, "Well, you signed the—" [gasps]

The other part is that they take you from north and send you down south, and they take the southern boys and send them up to New Jersey, Fort Dix. They break you completely. They change you when you go in service to be a service person. Army, Navy, the Marines were rough, but that's what they were trained to be. But the average person, to go into the service is a life changing—and either you move, or sink, or swim. [0:40:06]

It was so funny—they took me and send me down to Augusta, Georgia. Never been there. They give you a duffle bag when you get off the bus. A duffle bag is a big duffle. And they say, "Okay, get on line." The line is from here way to the—and you're lined up, you don't what line-up be—know what that means yet. It's a way to line up, a way to have your [unclear]. And, they send me—I wear a size 10 shoe, they gave me size 9. They say, how you want—now you line up to get your hair cut. Long hair, Afro and all that. The barber's there, there's three of them cutting hundreds of us. So they say, "How do you want your hair?" I say, "Take a little off." They say, "Okay." They go, one, two, three, four, five. Now, I just saw the person in front of me that happened to. I sit in the chair, they say, "How do you want your hair?" I said—and the kids with the long blonde hair, and the Long Island kid with the—they say, "How you want?" And then, after you get that shock, then you start getting these—but it was growth. I had to learn how to pronounce people's last name, cause Grabowski, Karmanonogi, Kardashian, you know, those kind of things.

It was just fascinating, but that was a change, also, at eighteen, for me. And when I came back to The Amsterdam, it was Vietnam War era, some people had lost people. My brother was actually stationed over—he was in the Marines, so they couldn't send two from the family, supposedly. I ended up in Germany. However, that was—what can you do? A Black guy from the middle of, you know, middle of New York in Germany. I learned to speak enough of it to exist for a year and a half year too. But it was fascinating to be in Europe. Some time we'd get a little day off, we'd go to Heidelberg, or you go to Frankfurt. So those are big cities. Concerts was coming through, cause that's still a central part of Germany.

But it was very, very interesting. And as I saw the neighborhood—I had moved to the Virgin Islands, so I didn't see the decline-decline, but when they dropped them drugs in, when they dropped heroin in the late '50s, families was—every family was devastated in some form. They dropped in all of the projects at the same time. It was free. Then within a minute or two, some families had six kids and four of them was on heroin. They was trying, all of them trying to steal the same toaster. It was crazy. Some families that had three, two of them were caught. The Thomas brothers, fortunately, Mama wasn't having it. So you could not mess up in school, and when the teachers, they'd already got their—so you're gonna get yours, so we couldn't act up. And dad wasn't there. So I was raised by neighbors—responsible—and you know, but all of that to say that's what makes me and most people from The Amsterdam, the old school, was

that we had people—you really, it takes a village to raise a child, true to a good project like that. If Miss Karen saw me coming, “Hello, Miss Johnson.” “Hello, Harold.” “Can I help you to...?” Oh, I’m a gentleman like that. With the kids I was crazy. And when I see mom coming, and they would give me a dime instead of a nickel, so I could get a Creamsicle instead of the Icee. Cause I would—“Thank you!” “Yeah.” [unclear] But it was great, and those are the things that you can never forget. I played jump rope with the fellows, and I played Double Dutch with the girls. I could jump rope. I played stick ball in the afternoon, and we’d go on to the movie. I introduced so many people to theater, live theater.

Q: Can you talk a little bit more about your career doing theater and events?

Thomas: When I went back to the Virgin Islands, because I was early twenties, busy, so I was in—they were starting a folkloric dance company, signed up for that. I got into that. So they were doing like the local stories with dance. We had a great band playing live. The Sunshine Theater Company, that was something being formed by a friend of ours, he was forming a company. He was from Anguilla, a playwright. [0:45:05] We did plays, like I say. We did—well, the Sunshine Theater was different—we was doing original plays written by him and others. We took an old farmhouse in the back, we built a stage, and it was a fascinating—and the Sunshine Theater Company—*Jesus Christ Superstar* was out now; someone wrote a play called *Jesus Christ Lord Today*, so they did a little musical, one hour of it.

So we had an original play we did. We built a set design. Each character had to play three of four people. So I had to play the devil in one of the scenes, and the aisle was like, you know, at a slant, cause the theater was built on a little hill, and then the stage. I crawled down the center, and there’s people looking at Jesus on stage, I [growls] they jump. So all the way down to the stage, I’m crawling on my stomach, and I’m touching people at the aisles, and they are jumping, you hear people scream [screams]. And then I climb up on stage, and all I got to say is, [bellowing] “So, you are the Christ!” And he says, “Get thee gone!” I slammed down on the stage and crawled off. Next scene I’m in—but it was fascinating.

In the Virgin Islands, theater from *West Side Story*—younger—and then from there I joined the Arts Council. I was involved a lot with the fashion, as a producer of fashion shows, as entertainer, as well as fundraising for the senators and all that. My boutique, they would borrow my beautiful gowns and come back with lipstick and sweat stain. And I’m telling them you have to not wear—but it was a adventure, and there was a couple of art, you know, yearly art, summer-like art showcase—jewelers, vests. So I was always involved. But then I was on the Board of the Arts Council, where they funded different projects. So I had a very active artistic life, and then I was always in fashion, so I’ve done that. I’ve designed clothes. I’ve designed sets. I’ve done theatre, fashion, I’m a consultant to, you know, creative energies, and I would just say that.

Q: Where did you end up finding a new home base after you moved back to New York?

Thomas: I stayed with some—but I ended up in Manhattan, Uptown. Then I started living in the Bronx. But I got my, you know, finally I got a space seventeen years ago, and it's been there since. But I was basically based in the Bronx when I got back.

Q: And how do you find that neighborhood?

Thomas: Each borough has its own little energies, and because I was two blocks from the subway station—I'm right by Yankee Stadium, so all of that zoo every—but it's freed up cause I was on the block, and I faced the back of the court, so I didn't venture out too far up. Something happen and they [unclear] but I stay right in my little five-block radius: subway, taxi, bus going crosstown. It's cool, you can ride into Manhattan in eight minutes, twelve.

Q: When we first talked you mentioned that you'd been asked to do interviews about your old neighborhood, like all of a sudden just in the last year. So I wanted to ask you why do you think that there so much attention right now on the San Juan Hill neighborhood?

Thomas: From what I hear, once Lincoln Center got a hold of—somehow the guilt or something—and they were talking about giving back to the community a lot more, because of the San Juan Hill situation. Because they had displaced thousands of people of color. Whatever little conscious is happening now, that's what I'm feeling. So Landmark West should have funding where they should own the building, they're still battling to keep—you know, and Sean is doing his miracle work, because that's what they do, people who care, like nurses and teachers. So what this is keeping the land, our treasures, in the family instead of, like you say, you know—so I would say, it's a blessing. It's a blessing. With everything else going on, I just say, it's a good feeling.

Q: How would you like to see your history that you shared here be used? What kind of impact would you like it to have? [0:50:05]

Thomas: I recently been doing some interviews with people, and they're fascinated to hear history from someone who lived it: the '50s, the '60s, the Black is Beautiful Movement, I was part of that. The Black Culture Movement, the Gay Rights Movement, all of that, the Women's Lib, I was part of, I was literally part of that. The March in Washington. All of those experiences are things that when you physically are in it and you could share it, it's important. I consider myself one of the voices of the cultural community. And when I say that, it's because of the variety of arts that I've worked with, the many, many variety of cultural people in the arts, all types. And it's been a wonderful experience. So, yeah.

Q: A lot of people who grew up in the city, they end up leaving because they just want to be by themselves, they don't want to be bothered. But as you said, you've been involved in so many different movements, so many different communities. What do you think set you up to be invested in that?

Thomas: I think giving back. It's part of, if you go and experience the world and you could come back to your roots—they just recently started a new program attribute to one of the gentlemen that used to be—but it's about sharing history, cause history is day to day living, and you're here for a minute and then, poof! The Jews and—none of that matters. Your impression, what did you do, and if you don't do right, they send you back.

I think spirits are—I've been here so many damn times. If you act up in spirit world, they send you back to be born. Cause all of this doesn't, none of this matters. The spirit goes back to where it hangs out. I don't know what shape it is, but I think if you act up, they make you human to suffer with this, and then you go back to being a spirit. When I say suffer, no matter what, if you get cut by little pieces of paper, it hurts. You get a piece of dust in your eye, it hurts. You have a house with twenty-two rooms, if you don't get there, you pee on yourself. Simple. We're human and then these races and color—if you get cut and you got green, you're an alien, otherwise blood is red.

Smiles are free. They're the most comfortable things you can give, and you can get it and sometimes it saves you. A smile, a conversation with someone nice, when you just say hello. I walk down the street, say hello. I walk the streets say, "I love that blouse." Or, "Brother, give me them socks," cause when you're in corporate, you got your socks and your tie. You know what I'm saying? Ladies, it's the same thing. If you have a pretty blouse on and a cute earring, or, you know, cause the rest of it is grey and brown—supposedly—now, they got free Fridays and all that stuff. But when I was growing up, the ladies had to have gloves and match the bag, And [makes sound] I love. And I love the freedom of fashion, it's the most bazooka stuff. You could take that print and put it on a dress and make a—I'm just—and you could take the tile, you could take the rug pattern and make a jacket. Fashion is always what's going on, and everything is repeated. Nothing on this earth is new.

They reinventing these beautiful new products that are made out of recycle that goes to garbage, and the earth. Mother Nature is pissed the hell off. These things that are happening now, they're not normal. They are normal because we've done so much wrong to the physical earth, that the physical earth, Mother Nature, said, "I'm sick of this shit." Excuse my language, you edit that out. But she said that. And God said, I agree with you. So we're getting it. It's gonna snow in Florida. It snowed in Haiti a few weeks—months ago. This is the—and one, I don't know how much water that is, when it thaws out in the north, it changes the whole ship. People don't understand—and tsunamis—it ain't no big thing. That water is

more powerful than anything you have moving. And a hurricane, the tornado, that wind, it's not to be played with.

Q: Yeah, you've lived through it. Yeah. So let me bring it back to the neighborhood, from the whole global outlook. How did you get involved with the reunions of the Amsterdam Houses? [0:55:07]

Thomas: 2000. Sit in the restaurant. Just got back a few year—but the reunion had been going on for years, but then it stopped and someone else had picked it back up. So I always used to come back for years, and when it first started in like the '70s—so we'd been doing reunions the last weekend in July, you could come back to The Amsterdam. So 2000, I'm sitting in a restaurant with Jackie, and we're talking, and we say, you know, Spencer passed a few years ago and why don't we try to see if we could just, you know, call a couple of people. You know, we have someone we call The Mayor in the neighborhood, and she, Pat Ryan, she runs everything in The Amsterdam. Plus, she's an activist that cares about the everyday people. So when the politicians see her, they get nervous. Gale Brewer and the crew say, "Oh, God, here come Pat." And it's alright cause Pat is here to defend the neighborhood. But we decided to talk to her to see if she runs the building and if we could get some of the names from her, people that they may know. And by the time we had finished we had about forty names. I look through my book, she went fifty names. We went through her telephone books, people we remember, we call. And we said, let's do a reunion. Let's bring it back.

Well, we reached out to some of the friends, like ourselves, who don't live here anymore, and then there's a couple of local right in it, still living there—their mother and aunt—and we made a committee called The Amsterdam Reunion Committee 2004. And in a little while, we did our first one. We had—we planned to do this big dance, inside, you know, the night, not realizing they're hanging out in the playground. We had a dance and no one came because—we just didn't—but we said, wow, we could do an oldie but goodie music. They ain't thinking about that stuff; they are there from all over and rockin' n rollin'. So we learned.

But we eventually, we built up our list. We had almost three hundred people by the end of our second or third years. They had some web sites that they created, so people been doing this for years, sending their pictures in. And it was phenomenal. So we coordinated with all of those different—and then we started giving a boat ride every two years, to see everyone go to the Circle Line. And people was coming from all over just to catch the boat ride on the Friday, cause they were coming early cause Saturday's a family day, Sunday we would part, or go to church. Saturday's the big family day, Friday we started doing these boat rides. Circle Line had never seen such a cool group. [Sarah laughs] Four-hundred-something people, four-hundred-fifty people, no incident. We paid for the charter, the food, so you can come on, the little ticket, it covers food, it covers—you know, you buy your little drinks. But we had a band and a DJ for the four hours. We used to just say, put it right back into it. We didn't get to bank a dime, Jackie and I,

never. Every once in a while, I'd say, "Bill them, I'm taking a taxi home cause it's two in the morning." But it was fascinating. So that's our community. So still, to this day, even though it has evolved outward, it's still my community, it's still The Amsterdam.

Q: And, what do you think about the city's kind of original argument for Lincoln Center and clearing so many of the tenements? How do you think the city should kind of balance this desire to make arts?

Thomas: It's part of life. And when they decided to do it—this is the city, so you don't own a thing in there. The land, that the owners of it is like, yo, they did plan that forty years ago. That's what—even though people think it just happened, when they looked at this area, they said, this is perfect. This is midtown, the C Train, A Train, D Train, B Train, crosstown, the West 60s, and it's a hub. This is the beginning of the Upper West Side. People don't look at it like that, but I know that 191 and 199—199 is on 70th Street, and those kids got something completely different. But that's the life, where it evolved. Change is the only thing that's consistent, love and change. And you can't change who you love, but love will change—you know, getting poetic. [laughs] [1:00:03]

Q: So your key is that you basically have to be ready to adapt, and accept—

Thomas: —what it is. In reality, this whole thing is so deep, because they getting ready to get rid of money. And when you don't have money that's where people have killed and battled. But they can't really change all this, in the next—I'm moving back home to the Virgin Islands. Literally, I'm getting the hell out of all of it. At 75, I deserve to be sitting on the beach, pina colada—without rum—just sitting there. Eat a coconut when I want. Put some of the berries in [unclear] and be on the corners. Have my land that the family owns. That's where I'm going back to. And it's not I shoulda did it way back; this is the time for me to come and enjoy the next twenty of this, back home on my land, my family land in St. Johns, where it's a billionaires boy's club, and the presence on Caneel Bay, and all these—they stole 80% of St. John, the island, and claimed it to be the National Park. And they took people from my family lands and other people's family. We indigenous people to the islands. My family go back to the 16/1500s. We go back that far cause we're indigenous island people. And folk from all over—and it had nothing to do with color—but all over have come and taken our land, but we still have some left. But we're going for them soon, but first we're coming back.

And we're called Yankees, so we'll always be called that, even from the local indigenous. Your older brother go away from Indiana, he come back, oh, you think you're better—all of that is so part of the dynamic. But this is my neighborhood, but my Virgin Island roots is going back to. But this has been—I feel always good here. It's home, and when you're little and you have good memories, and even not too good memories—a whole lotta people do not deal with The Amsterdam, cause of some of the that they

went through. And I understand that, I don't ever get—it's listen, life is a trip, a stumble, a fall, a glow, it's back again and you fall back down you get back up, or you go up and you come—but, you're here, you do the best you can with what you got right now with who you're with. Share love, really. But love is an energy, positive is an energy, I radiate that because you give what you get.

I've been blessed my entire life, friends who call me say, "You want to come to Indiana?" "Yes." "You got the time?" "Yes." I could land there with a hundred dollars and come back with seventy, fifty dollars. And we're not wining and dining, we're cooking, and I love cooking so we could—they were toasting and roasting me, and when they're roasting me, they said, "Harold, when I met him, he changed my name to Tilly"—cause I called everyone I loved [unclear]. And then he said, the second thing, "Harold would take a can of tuna fish and a row of crackers and make a six-course meal," and the place went up. Cause I enjoy mixing it—instead of macaroni and cheese with the same stuff, put beets in it. Put, you know, cauliflower with the—sauté the cauliflower separate, then you put it in. Same thing with pasta. Have fun. You in the kitchen, have fun. Smoke a joint, drink a rum, drink coffee, but when you're in there you create with the spices, and you don't need—the salt is a myth, sugar's a myth. Sweet yes, savory, yes.

I just got discovered; I'm a sensational senior at seventy-two. But it's so cool. Interviews are coming, the people are calling me, and the same like this. And when—I always say, here's a little fifty dollars, here's a little hundred dollars, just because. Cause I take care of people, I buy earrings for my girlfriends, I buy earrings to just have for friends. If there's someone's birthday I got a few scarfs—like that, is that a scarf?

Q: It's a bag.

Thomas: Ha. See those are the—I buy three of them at a time to just have them. And after I meet with you, like today, I have your number, we're gonna be in touch. You open to call me, we're friends now, just because I know that you care, not that, but—and that's how I be. We can go for coffee, we can go to fine restaurant, we can go to McDonalds. I eat fish sandwich, I eat peanut butter and jelly—love it. The hell with—no, I'm cooking. And I love whatever you got on season. You give me dinner? Happy. [1:05:01] And then sometime you want a croissant, a buttered, toasted buttered roll. Bagel with cream cheese and lox, love it.

Q: Coming back to thinking about what you said in the beginning about you were not poor, you were low income at that time, and how much you've been able to do with that. Finding richness in so many other places.

Thomas: As I grew, it became the person I am. Money means nothing if you don't have health. I don't care how Liz Taylor was roaming around in a wheel chair the last twenty years of her life, and she was

one of the most beautiful—great actress—forget did six movies in her whole career. I'm just saying, but you have money it's to be spent. As soon as you spend it, it comes back. Money is love; if you give it, it comes right back. If you're nice, it comes right back.

But the thing with low income, riches, incomes, it means—you could come from here and be three doctors, I know tons of—all of us ended up judges, and we have all of that out of the same Amsterdam. The nerdy ones went on to be scientists. Really, and that's part of what they was. When we were playing, they was redoing—my nephew went to M.I.T., got a doctorate. He lives in a culture-filled house. He don't have any idea. He got a wife from Washington State I love, with red hair and green eyes, and they're Irish, and I say, "Go on, brother." But I'm saying, that's the love. He grew up in books, and when you do what you enjoy—look at the comfort of this space here. The coffee makers and—so if you work in this kind of atmosphere, you get a lot done. If you want to go for a walk you take a walk. "Oh, I gotta ask." "No." But that's part of, this is the kind of setting to be in, in life. Comfortable chair, you wanna lounge? You come over and cool out, you want to sit in the back here, and mope and cry—just for a little, don't take too long with that shit. You can't do a damn thing about it, most of it.

But that's it. The majority of stuff that happens to us is stuff that happened so long ago we're still walking around with this shit. Walking around with so much past shit that is—everybody, black, white. And we live in that. That's done. And today is just a, tomorrow, this is yesterday today, or today is yesterday. They both the same thing. Tomorrow is—if you get there. And the number 75 freaks me out. Cause literally, I grew up here, right? This is where I used to walk over to Central Park. And to be able to see that—the lung is messed up, I got emphysema and all that—but no arthritis, mentally I'm still alright, still funny, still talk bunch of trash, still have a have a good time with good people, anytime. I could go right over there and find something to whip up, and that's the fun of it. And then you go make the coffee, you go make real good coffee—you know how to make a good coffee, and I know that. So, we here.

And, Sarah, this is the best time of my life, cause I got here. Now tomorrow, who knows, but right now, at 75, the people who was at my party had me in tears, looking and listening to—listening to how they speak about you. You say, get roses; I had bouquets. Sarah, people came up from Atlanta. She said, I'm gonna make the New York party. And I asked, could I host my Florida one at—cause I'm going to New York, and I said, D.C. is Saturday, I'm going out tomorrow. And the people give it to me in D.C., he's the one who started the five cities. I said, well, if you could do it, I could do it. And that's the joy of today. Plan it for tomorrow but if it comes, and plans don't mean nothing, you have to do whatever you're doing right now is toward it. Whatever it is. And if sometime you crash, take sleep out too long, wake up naked with who you're next to, that's all, but I'm just—it's alright. We eat well. We don't have to spend a lot. I love that bag. That's a—when I look over there I see nice taste, those are the touches that make fashion. You got

a classic chain on, but your bag is saying, “Bam, don’t sleep on me.” [Sarah laughs] Doesn’t that make sense in life? To enjoy and have—so I’m glad I could share this morning with you. [1:10:12]

Q: I am so glad that I could share this time with you too. Thank you for sharing so much just details about history, and how I could be living my life better [laughs]. How I should be partying more, all of it. Before we end officially, is there anything else that you want to share that I haven’t asked about?

Thomas: When you speak in an interview, it could keep going for hours. So if there isn’t anything that—you asked, but you said take your interpretation of it, Harold, and do. You were sitting there fascinated, and I’m fascinated looking at you being fascinated, [Sarah laughs] cause I’m fascinated at other people. So when I’m commentating on fashion, I need no cards, I could sit right in there, the model come from back here. Forget if you’re Sarah, don’t worry about me. If you got on a blouse and it has a pocket, and Sarah, you would take your glasses off, and you don’t have to worry. I had a little girl, I told her, don’t worry, you ain’t have to see nothing. Go right out there, spin around. Don’t just do everybody, stop by here, lean on this, go to the files, and then hit the runway. You don’t sit on people’s lap, but you can tickle an old man, anybody. It’s part of the joy of the moment. You’re in this dress or shirt, so don’t tell me you don’t like the color—“I don’t like blue.” “Oh, really,” well this is the end of your career with me because that means nothing. I’m just saying, but that’s part of—so enjoy it, and do go out more, girlfriend.

[END OF INTERVIEW]