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Brown, Genevieve

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Interviewee: Ms. Genevieve Smith-Brown

Interviewer: Dr. Brian Purnell

Date: April 19, 2008

Brian Purnell (BP): Today is April 19, 2008. I am conducting an oral history interview for the BAAHP with Mrs. Genevieve brown. Thank you, Mrs. Brown, for participating in this interview. The first two questions before we go into some of your biography are if you could please just state your date of birth and the spelling of your first and last name.

Genevieve Brown (GB): The Date of Birth is 7/12/1937. My name is Genevieve, first name is G-e-n-e-v-i-e-v-e, the last name is Smith-Brown, formerly known as Genevieve Smith-Brooks.

BP: And where and when - - you said when, but where were you born Mrs. Brown?

GB: I was born in Anderson, South Carolina.

BP: Well, eventually you come to the Bronx so how long of your childhood did you spend in Anderson, South Carolina?

GB: I left Anderson in 1954 and at that time I had two sisters previously in college and my family would have had a tremendous hardship since we were farmers to put another one in college. So I came up to spend a summer to live with my aunt and uncle until my oldest sister finished – she only had one year to complete in college and after I got here to New York and I went to business school, I did not return. I must say New York was really very good to me.

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BP: Well I want to get into a little bit of where you lived in New York and the things of that nature but so for about seventeen years you lived in Anderson. So you spent most of your childhood and some of your teenage years down there. You said that your parents were farmers, can you talk a little bit about life in Anderson and how, as a child, the life on the farm shaped your experiences?

GB: In fact, I had a great life. I had great parents. My parents were, I would say, devout Christians. They weren't fanatics but they just believe in just human rights and doing the right thing. Even though the south was segregated, I would say we were shielded from some of the prejudice because my parents told us to rise above your circumstances. They taught us not to be evil or mean-spirited and try to do the best that we could do. So my uncle had an opportunity to purchase a few hundred acres of land back from [inaudible] my grandfather had previously owned from slavery and he felt it was a need to offer his siblings - - he purchased back taxes - - to offer his siblings an opportunity to purchase land. So my parents and my other uncles and aunts purchased X number of acres and I think we owned about seventy acres of land. And we were able to have plenty of food because we produced our own produce, our own livestock and my mother was an excellent home-maker. So therefore when I hear folks talking about being hungry or not having clothes - we did not have commercially bought clothes but my mother was an excellent seamstress. So therefore when you talk about the quality of life, I would say we had it all. Now I didn't realize that we were poor until a few years after I was in New York and I think that I was doing the Great Society and they were drawing the boundaries. They had said that if a family income was under X number of dollars that they were poverty. And then my sister and we all said "Oh but we fell into that category!" But we did not know that. We had

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love. Our extended family was there so therefore I would say we were maybe an exceptional family.

BP: Could you share your parents' names?

GB: My mother's name was Birdie, B-i-r-d-i-e. Her maiden name was Hill, H-i-l-l. And her married name was Smith. And my father's name was Anderson, A-n-d-e-r-s-o-n, initial "D." It doesn't stand for anything and his last name is Smith.

BP: That is fascinating. Did you grow up attending a particular church?

GB: Yes, in fact, we attended the church that my great-grandfather built. He was a former slave and he was a member of a church called Lebanon Baptist Church and he were a few of the slaves that had wanted a place that they could go and worship. And the owners and I guess his slave master that were members of this church, they granted them and their church meeting an opportunity to purchase some land and build a church. So my great-grandfather, his name was Bedney Benson, built this church - -

BP: His name was?

GB: Bedney, B-e-d-n-e-y, Benson, B-e-n-s-o-n, - - he was one of the individuals that helped build the church that still exists. And then my parents, we all were members there, Mountain Spring Baptist Church, and my grandfather, his name was William Anderson, was one of the

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first ministers to pastor that church. So our life and by Anderson being segregated, our life has revolved around the church. That was our social outlet. It was the church wherein they encourage you to do the right thing; they encourage you to try to get an education. They were there in good times as well as bad times. So the church was our social organization and outlet.

BP: Were other African-Americans in Anderson or at least in Lebanon Baptist Church – did many of them own their own land or was it a mix of sharecroppers, tenant farmers and –

GB: It was mostly sharecroppers. You had a few prominent African-Americans that owned their own land but most of them were sharecroppers.

BP: And was there ever, did you ever grow up hearing any stories about violence from whites towards African-Americans? Was that a part of –

GB: It was but you learned to not to deal with it. You learned not to spend your time on the anger and bitterness because otherwise it would destroy you. So what my parents did was try to cut out a path, a road that they thought we should follow. You know, it happened, you read about it, you knew about it but you would you know ask for strength from God and you keep on going. I think one of the plusses that I saw about the Caucasian in the south, if they said that you were good and you were alright, you didn't have to worry about anybody attacking you. If they said they were going to get you [laughs] that was true as well. I think unlike some of the southern prejudice that I found or you find in New York or the different places where it's not said but they were straight up. [laughs]

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BP: Right, I think Malcolm X had a similar; he kind of compared the two regions in a very similar way [laughter].

GB: And in fact, even I think, one of the problems I had perhaps was when I got involved in work, in community activities in New York, I just couldn't understand a person saying one thing and do something different because I was brought up – your word was your bond. For example, a lot of agreements and contracts and credit relationships, you know in the south, blacks were not able to go to the financial institutions and get credit but it was a handshake. That handshake was not only with blacks, the handshake also was white to white. So it was your word. So I couldn't understand if a person said they were going to do something and they didn't. Because no one had a gun to your head so I didn't see the need to lie.

BP: Right. A few other questions about your upbringing and your experiences during the first seventeen years of your life or so: Did you attend school regularly?

GB: Yes. In fact, it was interesting. The first [inaudible] the south, I think it was a time where you went to school during the off-season, not when it was harvest time. But no, we went to school regularly.

BP: What type of farm did your parents run?

GB: It was cotton. And then after I left, I know they did tobacco. Cotton and chickens.

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BP: And did your father have good relationships with the commercial leaders of the town?

Sometimes there is an element of this history in which independent African-American farmers were not able to get the full price for their cotton or they had troublesome relationships mostly with whites who ran the cotton commercial centers.

GB: I don't know about that. I know that they would take the cotton to the mill and that's where they would sell it in the mill. And you must remember back there then whatever problems they had, they certainly did not share it in front of their children.[Laughs] Children had their own place, you certainly were not sitting up in adult conversation. [Laughs]

BP: Not like that. You had two sisters who went to college. Where did they go to college?

GB: They went to South Carolina State. And my other, all of three of my siblings, they all went to South Carolina state. The other thing is we also had some good role models like my uncle that was, that I told you that purchased the land. He was a minister and he was in New York City. He got his doctorate of divinity I think from Yale. And I had my other doctor was a medical doctor. He was the first African-American, he lived in East Orange, that, I think he was on the Republican ticket, was the first African-American to serve in the House of Representatives in East Orange, New Jersey. His name was James Ottoheel. And then I had other uncles that were entrepreneurs and one that was a principal of a school. So we had good role models that when they would come, my parents would have us to go out there and perform or sing a song or recite

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a speech. They were always encouraging us that you got to go to school. So we had wonderful role models.

BP: That's very important. That's good to hear. Were you the youngest?

GB: No, I was the third.

BP: So moving to New York in 1954 - -

GB: '55

BP: 1955, -- you had an aunt and an uncle that lived in New York City?

GB: Right, they lived on Bradhurst Avenue.

BP: And that is in the Bronx?

GB: No that is in Manhattan. It is right next to the polo grounds. Bradhurst Avenue.

BP: How long did you live in Manhattan?

GB: I lived in Manhattan to '60, I think about '60, I believe it was. I am not too accurate on that.

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BP: With your aunt and uncle? Or –

GB: Right, with my aunt and uncle.

BP: If you can share a bit, what were their names? And –

GB: The name was Norman A. Augusta-Hill and her name was Sylvene Hill, S-y-l-v-e-n-e.

BP: And I just wanted to hear a little bit about the Bradhurst Avenue section of Manhattan in the 1950's. What was the community like when you moved there? And how did you find that your neighbors and the atmosphere, etc?

GB: Oh, it was an integrated neighborhood. The neighbors in the building, we had a good relationship. I would say back there then, I think it was an environment where people thought it was wonderful to not get [laughs], not to be involved with folks so you would see them and you would say hi. And you'd go about your business. But we certainly was not involved in any community activities. I really don't think there was any in that area. You know, once in the neighborhood, it still is pretty settled and still stable you know you just kind of go back, go about your daily routine.

BP: Did you attend church when you were living in Harlem?

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GB: I did. I attended Shallow Baptist Church. - -

BP: It was called Shallow?

GB: Right. -- And it is located on 131st Street and 7th Avenue.

BP: And your aunt and uncle, they –

GB: They were members of Shallow Baptist.

BP: They were members as well. What type of work did they do?

GB: My aunt, I know she was a practical nurse at Kings County Hospital. My uncle, I really don't know what he did. I know he worked, hmm, I really don't know what type of work he did.

BP: Well perhaps similar to the role that youngsters played in families, perhaps that was more adult conversation.

GB: I tell you what, I'll see can I find out what work he did.

BP: Well, yeah, I am just curious to try to get a sense again of the type of community where you lived.

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GB: I know both of them worked in Brooklyn.

BP: Okay and so the members of Shallow Baptist Church – was it mostly working class and middle class?

GB: It was, right, yes. - - And for some reason, it probably was some type of industrial building that my uncle worked. Because I know it must have been a larger enough company because it was a union place.

BP: So he was a member of the union?

GB: Right.

BP: What were you doing at this time? You mentioned you went to business school?

GB: Right, I went to Combination Business School. And I got a job with a place called Congo Chemicals. It was on 124th street between 7th and 8th Avenue. And they manufactured cosmetic hair products and cosmetic products.

BP: What type of work did you -- You said it was called Congo Chemical?

GB: Right.

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BP: What type of work did you do there?

GB: I was, in fact, I was an interim secretary and I became the secretary.

BP: And could you describe how were your relationships with your employers and other fellow workers? Was it a –

GB: Interesting, in fact, I am still friendly – we are still friendly with my boss. After all these years, in fact, he sold the company and he moved to California. And he went into real estate. He's done very well. He lives in Palm Springs. My husband and I, he is doing a cross country tour with his grandkids so we will be meeting up next March in Atlanta. But we visit each other. We'll be going there. His wife passed about seven months ago. And we'll be going to spend some time with him in September. So we have an excellent relationship, so he says he is pretty proud of me because he's the one that started me off. [Laughs]

BP: So did you work there? For how long did you work for Congo Chemical?

GB: I worked there until it closed down and moved. In fact, it was sold to a company, I think Murray Products. They manufactured hair products and it was sold to that company. And they were out of Detroit.

BP: What year was that?

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GB: I think they must have moved out in '63.

BP: So this was, so it was kind of in the middle of your time in New York?

GB: Right, yes.

BP: Alright, so you're living in Harlem. Well you living around [inaudible] I guess they might call that neighborhood Sugar Hill or Strivers Road near Strivers Road.

GB: And then we moved to 125th street right there at 8th Avenue.

BP: This was with your aunt and uncle?

GB: Yes, right. That was before I moved to the Bronx. I moved from 8th avenue to the Bronx.

BP: So what was the impetus for you moving to the Bronx?

GB: Well, I thought that hey I am about old enough to move out on my own. [Laughter]. One of the days that we were always taught to have your own. And even though my aunt and uncle certainly did not want me to move out and they said "you know you're not married." I got make this street, I got to take this step sometime in life. So I moved out.

BP: And how old were you when you moved out?

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GB: How old was I?

BP: This is 1960, you said? So you were about twenty-three.

GB: Yes.

BP: Was that uncommon at the time for a young unmarried woman to live on her own?

GB: It probably was not uncommon. It probably was uncommon for my family. I don't think it was uncommon. But our family still wanted you to kind of do the right thing.

BP: Norman Hill and were they related to your mother or your father?

GB: Norman was related to my mother. Norman and my mother were brothers and sisters.

BP: Okay, where did you live when you moved to the Bronx?

GB: I moved to 148th street between Brook and St. Anne's. And that's where I married Herbert Brooks, my late husband Herbert Brooks.

BP: You said you met Mr. Brooks after you moved to the Bronx?

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GB: Right, so it was a good move to move out. [Laughter]

BP: How did you and Mr. Brooks meet?

GB: Through a neighbor.

BP: What was the neighborhood at 148th around Brook Avenue and St. Anne's? What was that neighborhood like?

GB: It was predominantly Hispanic.

BP: Mostly Puerto Rican?

GB: Yes.

BP: And once again, when you moved to the Bronx did you attend a particular church in the Bronx?

GB: No, I still was going to Shallow.

BP: So you would travel down to Manhattan to go to church there?

GB: Right, yes.

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BP: What year did you and Mr. Brooks get married?

GB: We got married in 1962.

BP: And once again, relationships between you and your neighbors – were they cordial?

GB: I had some excellent neighbors in the building. In fact, they looked out for me. I had excellent neighbors in that building.

BP: What type of - was it a tenement? A walk-up tenement?

GB: It was a walk-up tenement. I was on the first floor though! [Laughter]

BP: Was this your apartment that you had?

GB: Right, yes.

BP: And Mr. Brooks moved in your, well, it became you and his apartment?

GB: Right and then we moved to Seabury Place in the Bronx.

BP: Where did you move?

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GB: To Seabury Place, 1555 Seabury Place in the Bronx.

BP: What part of the Bronx is that?

GB: Do you know where Herman Ritter?

BP: Yes.

GB: In fact, it is right across from Herman Ritter.

BP: Oh, that's near Crotona Park East.

GB: That's Crotona Park East. It's the building, Seabury Place really faces - you know where Tristone Church is?

BP: No.

GB: Oh okay, Tristone is adjacent to Herman Ritter.

BP: Oh, okay I only know Herman Ritter because my father went to junior high school there.

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GB: Okay, there is church called Tristone that is adjacent to Herman Ritter and Seabury Place faces, it is about two blocks long, and it faces Tristone Baptist Church. It's at Seabury Place and Boston Road.

BP: That's where you moved from Brook Avenue there. How many years did you stay around the Brook Avenue section?

GB: Only a couple of years.

BP: So, eventually I want to, we're kind of building up to when, I'm curious, when you get involved in Mid-Bronx Desperadoes but again I wanted to –

GB: Well, I get involved in mid Bronx Desperadoes and it started really from Seabury Place.

BP: So this is going to be kind of the place where your community work develops?

GB: Right, yes.

BP: So what was the neighborhood around Crotona Park, Seabury Place and Boston Road - - what was that neighborhood like when you first moved to it?

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GB: In fact, the building that we lived in still was predominantly Jewish. And it was still a stable neighborhood, a working class neighborhood. You had Jennings Street was like an open market for vendors with all the stuff out in the street.

BP: What was the name of that street?

GB: Jennings. It was a thriving little commercial strip there. East 174th Street was thriving and all. You had some of the folks that lived in 1555 Seabury Place, the building in which I lived, owned businesses in the area. So I said “Oh wow. I certainly won’t have to move again.” But boy wasn’t I wrong?

BP: Before we hear about that, I’m just curious, how did you find the apartment? First the one on Brook Avenue? And then when you and Mr. Brooks moved to Seabury? How did one go about getting an apartment in the Bronx during the early 1960’s?

GB: The one on Brook Avenue, I found through a real estate agent. And the one on Seabury Place, I had an aunt that lived in Seabury so she told me about a vacancy and referred me to the landlord. So that is how we found the one on Seabury Place.

BP: And you mentioned, boy were you wrong that you would never have to move again. Why was that the –

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GB: That's when back there in the sixties when the neighborhood, it started changing when the middle class folks started moving out. You had the development of Co-op City, a lot of the folks moved into Co-op City. You had Espernad Guarding. A lot of African-Americans went into that coop development.

BP: In Harlem?

GB: Yes, in Harlem. So you had opportunities for a lot of your middle class, not only the white but the black decided to get out. You had real estate brokers that seemed to thrive off renting the units to individuals that were on welfare. And they did a lot of block busting. So therefore at that time you had a lot of landlords started using post office boxes so folks did not even know who they were, who the landlord really was. So you had an agent that would show up and collect the rent. In many cases, you had a lot of your Hispanic or African-American families that had large numbers in their family. And most of those dwelling units really didn't accommodate any more than two bedrooms. So if you are talking about large families in a two-bedroom, you can see how quickly you can become overcrowded. So therefore when you, we ended up in an area wherein let's say in community board three you had over a hundred and fifty something thousand folks. There on Charlotte Street, you know the history there, it was slated for a elementary school. By the time the plans came to fruition you know we had lost about one hundred thousand folks but you had units wherein people were sleeping bathrooms. They were just so crowded. You know, people were all over the place. It really became a very inhumane situation. You had landlords that did not honor its agreement with its tenants on making the repairs. You had tenants that did not honor their lease agreement with the landlord. So you had

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a breakdown in relationship between tenant and landlord. Both of them, in my opinion, were wrong. You had code enforcement that apparently had gone on vacation or were comatose. [Laughter] And you had a city without a will to plan. At least, especially I can say, in that particular area.

And we had fires. We knew that arson was for profit. It wasn't that a junkie went to sleep in a building. And if you notice the history of all those fires in the Bronx, you had very few folks that got trapped in those fires. Somebody would tell the other one, "There's going to be a fire set." So most folks had a chance to get out. But it was a wholesale business for everybody. The landlords collected, I mean the owners collected from the insurance companies. The subcontractors – everybody came and got something from the building whether it was the bricks, the plumbing, you name it – whatever fixtures they could take. Everybody profited. When we first tried to say to the fire department and other city agencies that we felt it was arson for profit, they denied it and said we were wrong. Now, we got involved in the project with South Bronx OEDC, economic development, it was called a Seabury Project which we pulled in chemical bank back there then, some of your other not-for-profits and with Model Cities. Model Cities was still operating then. And I also had served, was serving on Model Cities policy board. But what happened was, we tried to, we interviewed prominent youth, adults, business folks, etc. And we started this campaign to try to stop the arson and try to give people some self-esteem, be proud of where they lived. They helped clean up the area. The fire marshals insisted that it was the junkies or someone starting the fires. We said it was arsons for profit. Now the folks that were on the ladder truck, we were more in synch with them than the fire marshals because they knew when they would go into a building and they were working on the floor and the bottom floor blew up on them. They knew it was arson. Later on if you look, I'm sure you have the

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data that the New York Daily news came out with a report of the millions of dollars that the insurance companies paid off to the owners. So, in those cases where the owners maybe couldn't sell the building, children didn't want the building – this was a way for them to get out.

So it was just a sad situation. So what we did was, my building that I lived in in 1555, after the whites had started moving out, I felt that the services in our building were declining. And I approached the landlord. And the landlord said it was untrue and that I was the only one complaining and I kept complaining and he kept telling me that nothing was done. So then I decided to ask some of my neighbors. Did they see a difference? And they said they did. And then when I encouraged them to call the landlord and he told them the same thing that they were the only one complaining.

So we decided that we needed to form a association where you would speak with one voice. And we did. And we gave him a list of demands. We wanted the marble cleaned – we had beautiful marble in those buildings. In fact, when you really look at the buildings they destroyed, the marble just was priceless. We had beautiful marble in the buildings. It was just a nice building. So we gave him a demand to clean up the building. And we started. And as we started bringing our building back up to what we considered our standard, we noticed that the other buildings on the block was deteriorating. So we said it doesn't make sense for us to have our building clean and we still got to go through that block. People got to go through that block to get out the block because it was one way. So we tried to, we went with an organization called Labor. I don't know whether they still exist but they were there. And they had expertise in tenant organizing. So we reached out to them and asked whether they could send someone to help us organize a block association since as we called the different regulatory agencies, we were

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not getting anywhere because they said we were the only one complaining. So we go – we got to get this whole block organized! [Laughs] So we went –

BP: The organization was called Labor?

GB: Right. – and so we now decided, lets see, can we form a block association? So we went to try to get key people from each building. And the people in the building, they were bad. They had thrown garbage in the basement. It was all over the place and the sanitation, it, crime was so bad, sanitation had refused to collect garbage in our block. So what I did was, it's always some kids, you know you can do a lot with kids. There were some kids – there was a little Asian kid and a few other Hispanic kids. So each Saturday morning I got them together and we said, we going to start cleaning the block. So we got some brooms and all from the sanitation department and we would clean the streets. And I got my husband to make sure I could get enough money and the kids would go to the store and buy refreshment after the clean-up. So every Saturday morning they would be there – “Ms. Brooks, are we going to sweep the streets?” Because they wanted to go and get the goodies. And I thought it was sad to see us there cleaning the streets, pulling the garbage out of the basement and the folks looking out at the windows, looking out. And they thought we either was on the government was paying us or we were stupid. Maybe they were right that we were stupid but we kept this up. [Laughter] We kept this up and each Saturday we got stronger, we got better organized. Then we got a grant from Operation Better Block that was a program under the Lyndon administration. We got \$1,000 and we went and got some redwood containers, planters and put some evergreens. And we had these evergreens on the side of each on the stoop, on each side. So our whole block was full of these beautiful

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evergreen, I mean redwood planters with the evergreen. It was just beautiful. We had gotten our parks clean. Sanitation would only come in on Saturday morning at a certain time after we pulled the garbage to a certain location, they would pick up. We called in the police department to try to give us the security to help root out the crime. And then one Saturday night about midnight, the, some two carloads gypsy cab loads came in and they destroyed all the redwood, all the shrubs. When we called the police and told them someone was destroying the shrubs, they thought it was a crank call. They said there are no shrubs in the Bronx in that part in that area. So we got no help. So the next day some of the police and folks, they came and picked up the little shrubs and carted it out to their homes wherever they were. So one of the ladies and she has just died, her name was Lucille. And so we said look –

BP: Her name was?

GB: Lucille Williams. -- so she said, we said, what are we going to do? Because it really dashed our little hope of all the effort trying to get the block organized and cleaned. What are we going to do? It just dashed the hope. So we said we need to – she always maintained that we need to do something through education. There was a building on Southern Boulevard, 1680 Southern Boulevard, that the city was constructing as a direct lease building to build a day care center. We said, well let's check into it. We'll talk about education. Maybe we should start from infancy up. We said because the kids that have been active in the block, that have gotten the parents involved and we, Eldridge Hill, he was a lieutenant fire department, he was able to get us tickets to the bowling alley or to different games. So he was wonderful with providing little freebies for our youngsters at the, in the block association. Some of them had never been

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out of the block you know besides going to school. So when we took them to Carnegie Hall or something or to Yankee Stadium, it was really a big treat. So we decided that yes, it is going to be a day care center. The city did not have all the details. So we decided, we wanted to be the sponsor. We said perhaps we have lost the other generation; we needed to save these children.

So we became the sponsor of Seabury Daycare Center which it accommodated eighty-five preschool children and forty after-school children. And the ages were from two years old through kindergarten.

BP: Where was this located?

GB: That was at 1680 Southern Boulevard. Now Seabury, I think in the last five years or more, it, they closed that facility down and they have moved it somewhere over in around the Cross-Bronx Expressway. I can find the address but they, it is still operating but it is not operating at that location. We, it was a wonderful experience when we started Seabury Daycare Center our boundaries were six blocks east, north, south, west. That was when we still had like our hundred and fifty thousand folks. Later on and from the report from Seabury Daycare Center, the staff, we had a staff I would say, over one-hundred families. It was wonderful to see some of the staff that we had hired as aids that did not have their GED go on through school, got their degree, their masters and became directors of many different centers. So we were proud about that. But from the report we got from the directors, a lot of the children was having difficulties learning because many of them were in substandard housing and they were not able to have a good nights sleep. That is when we discovered we need to look at the housing crisis.

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There you had a few of your not-for-profit organization that we were not a part of so we would call them the anti-poverty pimps. But anyway, one was Neighborhood Engage, there was another one Peter Sanchez had down there on the corner of 170th and 3rd Street. And when it was two of those agencies in the two blocks of Seabury. So when you really look at, those of us that were volunteering and getting involved, there should have been no need for us to have done that because they had staff, they had paid staff. They were getting paid to do some of this stuff. So it is like how are you going to do this when now you know we have had the riots, you have had the fires, you have folks not talking to each other? It was just bad blood. We were just really, I would not even say we were a stepchild, we were written off. We said why don't we have a meeting? I was on community board three. Lawrence Burr was the chairperson --

BP: Lawrence?

GB: Lawrence Burr, B-u-r-r - - he was the chairperson of community board three. And he said Genevieve, "You have tried to organize your building, your block but the resources that you going to need to do anything in housing, no one group is going to do it alone. Do you think that you can pull together some folks there and maybe form some type of organization?" And they were trying to do that throughout board three. You had the Bathgate Coalition, you had another Morrisania, I think, Community Housing Corps, you had the Bronx Shepards later on came about – so you had some groups that, they were, we were talking about, everybody talking about trying to do something. And there was a – did I say Bathgate Coalition?

BP: Yes.

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GB: Okay, Xavier Rodriguez was involved with that. So I went around since I wasn't attached to any of the not-for-profit groups and was considered at that time, with no baggage. I said and I asked Reverend Nickerson of Tristone Baptist Church, he was the pastor, whether we could hold a meeting at his house.

BP: What was his name?

GB: Nickerson, Daniel Nickerson. He is deceased. N-i-c-k-e-r-s-o-n. And I was a little disturbed because the churches were not proactive in the community as well. They were there, only opening up on Sunday. So I said to Reverend Nickerson, since people were so paranoid, we did have the facility to at Seabury Place. Seabury opened its doors for operation in 1970. So we had the space but I figured if we had at Seabury, people would have said I wanted to try to run this thing. So I thought let's have it at Reverend Nickerson's place. And we did, we met there and we were able to get people from the Boy's Club, the different associations and all the small tenant associations. And we said what do we have in common? And that is when we all agreed we had a housing problem. We agreed we had a crime problem. We had sanitation – we just had a whole list of stuff. So someone said "Well we are desperate." So someone said "Well let's say we, what are we going to call ourselves?" And we don't want to say South Bronx we said, we are not housing projects, let's get away from this South Bronx stigma. Geographically, I would say we are located in the mid-Bronx. So they said, well okay let's call ourselves the Mid-Bronx Desperate Peoples. So someone said, "Say desperadoes." So that's how the Desperadoes came about.

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BP: You know, that's fascinating. [Laughter] What was the stigma associated with the South Bronx? I understand what you are saying about geographically, you were not in the southern part of the borough, you were in the middle part of the borough. However, I am wondering if you could speak a bit about the stigma of the South Bronx because I think common knowledge would have said that you were in the South Bronx. So what was that stigma associated with the South Bronx?

GB: As poverty spread it, first the South Bronx was down at board one. As the poverty spread, the abandonment of housing, the deterioration and the crime – that's how the lie spread. So therefore you know it kept growing. So we said “hey, now we want to turn this around. We certainly not going to carry the baggage of South Bronx.” [Laughs] We going to carve out a little place in the midst of what they call the South Bronx. That was one of the things you had to shed, you had to try to shed that name. You know even though we may have been riddled with crime, the streets was barren, we had a whole lot of reasons that a person would put us in that category. We were not always believing. You should wear your own labels, you should not wear a label someone else has given you.

BP: A few other, a few questions about before moving, if we have time to move into [END OF SIDE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO] It has been forty-five minutes so are you –

GB: Okay, you can go ahead.

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BP: You said you worked for Model Cities, you were on the Model Cities policy board.

GB: Right.

BP: When did you get involved? Was that the job that you took after --

GB: Oh no, I never, it was never a job. I was just a board member.

BP: Oh, okay. What type of employment did you do after the chemical company left New York?

GB: I worked for, what was the name of that company? Superior. It was a manufacturing place that imported buttons from Jamaica, West Indies and Haiti. So I was a bookkeeper there. And I left that job and became the president of the MBD in 1980.

BP: So the work that you did with Seabury Daycare, that was all just volunteer?

GB: All volunteer. Right.

BP: And Seabury Daycare had its funding from the city?

GB: From the city.

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BP: Now this is a, it is a personal question, but again I think that in this story that you outlined, it is very clear that you are one of many other people involved in all this organizing. But why did you get involved in this? I mean, what inspired you to care? I guess is a good question.

GB: It goes back to my roots. When we grew up on the farm, one of the things my mother, as I said, had beautiful yards and grounds and even during the hard times, we had to sweep our yards. We had no litter in our yards. I mean we, they had a broom, you would go out there and sweep the yard. You had a clean place so I was not accustomed to litter in the streets. I was not accustomed of abandoned cars- that wasn't my culture. And it had gotten to the place that it was embarrassing that each day that you left home you saw this garbage. You came home, you saw it, you saw cars and houses burning and smelt smoke. It's like, how can you live this way? So it was embarrassing for me and it certainly would be embarrassing for anybody to visit me. Now that's against my training, you know. So I felt that after I had made so many calls on trying to get the agencies that were responsible for the quality of life and municipal services that maybe it's time to take matters in your own hands. And it just only started off just trying to clean the building in which I lived and then the block and then it mushroomed. Because still even if we had our block, you still got to walk to the subway station. And I just believe that children, as well as seniors, it is a terrible thing for, if that is the image you see twenty-four hours a day. You know, I believe mentally it has, it could affect how children look at the world if they see graffiti and garbage all around them. We deserve better and more. So that is the reason I got, because of my upbringing. My parents would have cringed if they knew that I was living under conditions like that. But the blessing that I had -- that I could afford to leave, I ought to stay.

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BP: Yes, you just answered, spared my next question. Why not move?

GB: Because I believe in fighting and improving. And I guess the other thing is, as we started, it was so many folks that said we were not going to make it. And that is a challenge. That was a challenge.

BP: You know what Mrs. Brown, perhaps this could be a good place to stop. And if you would be so kind I would like to do a little bit more research and be able to develop some more pointed questions, some more specific questions. So perhaps we can talk more about MBD and then your work with borough president as a deputy borough president in more specific detail.

GB: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]