

**VILLAGE PRESERVATION
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview
AYO HARRINGTON

By Sarah Dziezic
New York, NY
August 12, 2020

Oral History Interview with Ayo Harrington, August 12, 2020

Narrator(s)	Ayodele Harrington
Address	-
Birthyear	-
Birthplace	Suffield, CT
Narrator Age	-
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
Place of Interview	remote
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Ayo Harrington Receiving Lower East Side Community Hero Award in 2019
Photo by Whitney Brown

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Ayo Harrington

Sound-bite

“My name is Ayodele Harrington, called Ayo. I have lived on the Lower East Side for most of the time since 1968...I have lived here in Alphabet City most of that time, and in the house that I gutted and helped to rebuild, for the past—going on thirty-two years October of this year...”

“...I became very involved in the homesteading movement. I actually was involved with a group of over a dozen buildings that had a relationship to each other. And the plan was that these buildings that were given slight control by the city to the same organization, called LESAC [Lower East Side Catholic Area Conference] here in this village, would be part of a community land trust. So that people would own the buildings but the land trust would be owned by an organization, and that the organization would be able to keep the intent of affordable housing for all of the buildings...”

Additional Quotes

“We lived on one street. It’s not like a New York City street. It’s a street that goes on for miles, curved around, ended at Main Street. A typical New England town. Small, New England town. One pharmacy/five and dime store, a grocery store, a volunteer fire department. One school for young folks and a high school for others. A Main Street, a Bridge Street. You could not get more of New England than those things in that type of town. But when my grandfather moved there, all the Black people pretty much lived on the same street and in the same area.

First, they brought men, and men pretty much lived in rooming houses, so to speak. Then the men brought women, who they married, and the white folks decided, well, we better do something a little bit more permanent here because we want them to continue to work for us, but we definitely do not want them to live next to us. And now they’re bringing in women, so let’s give them someplace to live. And the designated place that they gave us to live was the street that I grew up in. I grew up in a house that my grandfather built when he married my grandmother, where my mother and her siblings grew up, and all moved away except my mother. So my siblings and I grew up there with my mother.” (Harrington p. 2)

“...there was a regular rotation of people in and out many of the homes in the East Village area. For example, one would be our home, and one would be that of Nancy Rose. Nancy Rose, who served for ten thousand years on the Community Board. They were in her home, and I

can think of another few. They were not names that were famous to me at the time. They were just people that came in and told their stories, and their stories were: I had been arrested, I just got out of jail, we're going to do this voter registration thing, we're going on a freedom ride, we're going to protest here. We're going to do this, we're going to do that. And it really made a huge difference in my life." (Harrington p. 5)

"...I was a mother and as such, needed to have housing for my son here in the neighborhood that, for the most part, I grew up in, philosophically and otherwise, in Alphabet City. I was in an illegal sublet. I didn't know I was in an illegal sublet. I didn't really know a lot at that time about the different structures of housing. And because I insisted on using the amenities in this building, they learned I was there, and soon was taken to court and had a really interesting judge—I'll never forget the judge. But the whole time I was there, I was looking for permanent housing. I saw these people, these women one day looking kind of raggedly and shabby, and looking like they were somewhat on a construction site, but not really construction-ready. And I went up to them and asked them what they were doing. They were telling me they were working on the building on the corner of 10th Street and Avenue C, and that they were renovating it. I asked them a whole bunch of more questions, and they put me in touch with someone, and I contacted that person and before long, was in a meeting. I believe the meeting was in the old Charas building [Charas/El Bohio Community Center]. And I learned about this homesteading effort." (Harrington p. 13–14)

"The head of the Schomburg said, call Ayo for this. And the 'this' was pretty much to—how could I put it—to reestablish the momentum, to monitor the behavior of the federal government with regard to construction, memorialization, and other things, the education, with regard to the African Burial Ground. And there were already people working on that and with them, we created Friends of the African Burial Ground, and immediately started what you need to do when you're organizing and that is you begin holding meetings. You begin asking people to attend them, to account for their behavior and their actions." (Harrington p. 22–23)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Ayo Harrington

Ayo Harrington grew up in Suffield, Connecticut in a farmhouse her grandfather built in the part of town that became designated for Black families, and that developed over time into a close community. She traces her family history back five generations to an enslaved ancestor called Ady Alexander, and outlines her grandfather's move north to Connecticut to work in the tobacco industry as part of the Great Migration.

As a young girl in the early 1960s, she attended various public schools, and, as a teenager, moved to the East Village to live with her older sister, who was active in radical Black organizing happening at the time. Harrington likewise became involved in organizing, volunteering with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and attending the Malcolm X Liberation University in North Carolina. She credits the education she received in Black radical spaces, as well as her history as it relates to slavery, as the foundation of her commitment to social justice.

She was involved hands-on in reclaiming abandoned buildings as housing, including her own home in Alphabet City, which she completed in 1989; she describes having permanent, stable, and affordable housing as a rarity, especially for a Black person living in New York City. She also advocated for the establishment of land trusts to enable housing ownership for people who had collectively reclaimed and rehabilitated residential buildings, and has led numerous efforts to transform abandoned lots into community gardens, including Orchard Alley.

After the birth of her son, Harrington became aware of the disparities in the New York City public education system, which echoed her own experiences with public education as a child. She became involved with parents' rights issues, ultimately taking on various leadership roles that provided resources to parents, and particularly parents of color. She played a key role in the protection of the African Burial Ground, ensuring the federal government's compliance with regard to education, research, and memorialization at the burial site. She also went on to do outreach about the prison system, becoming a founding producer of *On the Count: The Prison and Criminal Justice Report* on WBAI Radio.

Harrington co-chairs LESReady!, a disaster preparedness and long-term recovery organization that emerged in response to Superstorm Sandy, and is currently responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Compiled by Sarah Dziezic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by Village Preservation.

The Village Preservation Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

THANK YOU

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: Today is August 12, 2020 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Ayo Harrington for the Village Preservation Oral History Project and we're conducting this interview remotely during the global COVID-19 pandemic and we're connecting via video conference.

And I'd like to read a living land acknowledgment before we begin. Today, we're on the traditional land of the Lenape people and we acknowledge in this archival recording the Lenape community and especially their elders, past and present, and express gratitude for their stewardship of this land, for contributing to its geography, and for the use of their language as place names. And there have been many stewards of this land over the last few centuries, many events of dispossession including that of the Lenape, and also movements towards reclamation. And we'll touch on some of those histories of dispossession and reclamation that you were part of, Ayo, and that deserve acknowledgment today.

So can you start with saying your name and giving a brief two-sentence introduction?

Harrington: My name is Ayodele Harrington, called Ayo. I have lived on the Lower East Side for most of the time since 1968. I've been back and forth to other places but mostly here. And I have lived here in Alphabet City most of that time, and in the house that I gutted and helped to rebuild, for the past—going on thirty-two years October of this year. I'm a Lower East Side resident.

Dziedzic: And can you talk a little bit more about your early life, and your roots, and some of the lineages that you want to acknowledge?

Harrington: Sure. So my—I think it's my great fifth grandmother, whose name was Ady [phonetic], she was an enslaved woman on the plantation of Congressman Mark Alexander in Virginia. He supposedly had the largest plantation at the time. He owned over 200 enslaved people, at least at the end of the Civil War, because at the end of the Civil War, plantation owners, or people who owned people of African descent, were required to turn over to the

federal government a list of all off their enslaved people. He did this. I believe that there were actually 217 names on his list. There were two lists. He had a list that mentioned their name and their ages. There was a second list that listed their names, their ages, and who their mother was, and in some cases, who the father was.

So Mark Alexander, who had inherited his enslaved people from his father, actually bedded or possibly raped—probably raped—a woman by the name of Ady. Enslaved people pretty much took their last name from their plantation owners and she was called Ady Alexander. Ady Alexander had a daughter, and then the daughter had a son, and that son had a son by the name of Rueben Harris. Rueben Harris was my grandfather. He moved to Connecticut during the Great Migration. He went there to work in the tobacco industry, which was very big in Connecticut at the time. [00:05:01] Pretty much, tobacco owners would go south, and other farming industries would go south, to various towns and convince groups of Black people to move north to have cheap and free—somewhat free—labor. And my grandfather was one of them. He moved to a small town in Connecticut, Suffield, where my family, before I was born, had a farm and mostly worked on the farms of white people.

We lived on one street. It's not like a New York City street. It's a street that goes on for miles, curved around, ended at Main Street. A typical New England town. Small, New England town. One pharmacy/five and dime store, a grocery store, a volunteer fire department. One school for young folks and a high school for others. A Main Street, a Bridge Street. You could not get more of New England than those things in that type of town. But when my grandfather moved there, all the Black people pretty much lived on the same street and in the same area. First, they brought men, and men pretty much lived in rooming houses, so to speak. Then the men brought women, who they married, and the white folks decided, well, we better do something a little bit more permanent here because we want them to continue to work for us, but we definitely do not want them to live next to us. And now they're bringing in women, so let's give them someplace to live. And the designated place that they gave us to live was the street that I grew up in. I grew up in a house that my grandfather built when he married my grandmother, where my mother and her siblings grew up, and all moved away except my mother. So my siblings and I grew up there with my mother.

My father was in the Army. He served in it from just before World War II until sometime in the '60s. He actually was involved in the Italian Campaign which helped win World War II. He worked as a so-called intelligence officer. When he left the Army, he could not find a decent job after twenty years.

Having said that, my family grew up in this house in a town that was mostly white. So in the schools I attended, there was either one or no people my age my color in my classroom. My best friend lived next door to me. Her name was Joanna, and sometimes we were in the same class and sometimes we weren't. Before I started school in the United States, my family moved to Germany, where we lived for about a year and a half with my father. It's very interesting that the first time that I heard of the word nigger, I actually was in Germany and was called that by a boy in my class who was American because we went to the so-called American school. That's an aside.

So mostly, I grew up as a child in this town in Connecticut. Cows across the street, dairy farm, horses down the street on the Black farm. A brook behind our houses, that was our playground. And the biggest thing that happened in our lives was this myth that there were bears coming out of the woods, or a mountain lion had escaped from a circus. [00:10:03]

So that's how I grew up. But my family did move to the city when I was still pretty young, and I think it was there that racism really began to rear its ugly head and crystallize itself for me. We had moved from what we felt was a safe home. By the way, not only did my grandfather build the house we lived in but he also helped to build the church next door to the house, and we were in the church all the time, Saturday, Sunday. There were always biscuits, always biscuits, always food. My grandmother and her sister were elders. My mother played the piano for ten thousand years there. As a child, my mom went to Morgan [State University] and my father went to Howard [University] and both of their educations were interrupted by the war.

So we moved to the city in Connecticut, and as I said, racism reared its ugly head in so many ways. The school that I went to was exactly what you see today, totally under-resourced, where teachers had little or no expectation, where students were treated badly, to say the least, dismissively. And the expectations were very, very low. It is not something that I knew at that time. I only knew that I was very unhappy to be in a so-called learning environment for the first

time in my life in that city. And that experience is mirrored today here in New York City, the most segregated education system in this country.

So my experiences thereafter in public school were not really great. My family did move to Washington, D.C. after a few years, and I with them. I think that I stayed there for maybe about a year, a year and a half, and it just didn't work for me, in my family, in D.C. I was very lucky to have a sister. My sister, who lives in the West Village here, is very smart. She's always been the smartest person in the room, in any room. And she had just graduated from college, which was not a common thing in our community, and just in our world. But she was really smart. She proved textbooks—math textbooks—wrong more than once while she was in high school. And my family decided that I should come and live with her in New York.

But before coming to live with her in New York, my sister was a member of SDS, Students for a Democratic Society. And she began dating this guy, who was a founding member, as it turns out, of SNCC, which is the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. It is the organization that Congressman John Lewis was the head of early on, and my brother-in-law was a founding member of that organization. In fact, he was the youngest, and his name was Cordell Reagon. And between my sister and my brother-in-law, before I came to live in New York, they tried hard to educate my family about what was happening in the world and how we should respond. And that it was not just about our families but it was about our community, more difficult to grasp as a concept than where we had grown up, where everybody knew each other. We were in each other's yards. We knew each other's everything, pets, cousins, whatever it might be.

And she convinced my sister and I—the sister between us—that we should begin doing volunteer work for an organization in Washington, D.C. [00:15:02] And it was the local SNCC office in Washington, D.C. That is where I got my very first experience volunteering. I was about fourteen, maybe fifteen at the time. And we would go into the SNCC office. There were SNCC offices all over the country at the time. We'd go into the SNCC office, and we'd help with whatever work needed to be done, whether it was helping to deliver the newsletter, the latest newsletter, helping to do something in relationship to it, answering phones, learning about the civil rights work that the organization was doing. I think people may know more about SNCC

now than they did in the past, in that SNCC was kind of forced up on the older organizations and more moderate Black organizations at the time. It was the most radical organization, and it was kind of like, okay, we're going to put up with them because we can't shut them up, that kind of thing, in part. There was such a diverse philosophical thought about how one should go about changing the system and making a difference. And SNCC, at the time, was the most radical. It was prior to the Black Panther movement, so to speak.

I still have pictures of my sister and I. As it turns out, one day someone came into the office, a photographer. Hmm, it's interesting—I've got to find out if it's the one I actually still know—and took pictures of us for the SNCC newsletter, just showing volunteers, people volunteering in the office, and it's a picture of me and my middle sister. But we began to learn, really, about civil rights—we were both very, very young—and how, if we wanted to make change, we had to be the change that we wanted to make.

Working in that office, I came across all kinds of people within the movement. It was amazing. I did not know how amazing it was at the time, including John Lewis, who came through that office regularly. There was also a New York office for SNCC as well. And shortly after, I actually moved to New York to live with my sister. My family felt [laughs], they felt it was really important that I, in particular, out of all of their children, be around people who were more like me and who scared them less. And I definitely understand that, as a parent, sometimes the less you see or know, the more regular your heart can beat, and the more peaceful your mind can be. It was not a bad thing for me. It was a great learning experience because now I lived in a home, fourth-floor walkup in the East Village, with a woman who was involved with SDS, which was Jane Fonda's husband's, Tom Hayden's, organization, and one of the founding members of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. This was great because every day, it was not as if people in the movement went from hotel to hotel like rock stars did during those days or something. They actually went to people's homes and stayed.

So there was a regular rotation of people in and out of many of the homes in the East Village area. For example, one would be our home, and one would be that of Nancy Rose. Nancy Rose, who served for ten thousand years on the Community Board. They were in her home, and I can think of another few. They were not names that were famous to me at the time. They were

just people that came in and told their stories, and their stories were: I had been arrested, I just got out of jail, we're going to do this voter registration thing, we're going on a freedom ride, we're going to protest here. We're going to do this, we're going to do that. And it really made a huge difference in my life. [00:20:01]

At the time, there were lots of people—not myself—lots of young people around the country who were getting put out of schools, public schools, and colleges, for various forms of protest which were not tolerated. And they had no recourse and no place to go. Some of them fled places like Albany, Georgia for their lives because they had protested and now were being threatened with death and that sort of thing.

There was a school that opened in North Carolina called Malcolm X Liberation University. And my sister and my brother-in-law told me about it, discussed it with my parents, and thought it might be a place that I should go and experience. It was an unaccredited school of the world, headed by an educator, but the classes were not orthodox at all. It was just wonderful. And the females lived in one house and the males lived in another house. And our school was on a street called Pettigrew Street. It was the Black street in Durham, North Carolina. So I went there when I was about seventeen years old. I left New York, went to North Carolina, stayed in this communal educational place with people that I already knew some of, including the instructors, who would come in and out, in and about, very similar to what happened when I lived in New York.

In the fourth-floor walkup, there was a rotating cast of politically involved people, and artists as well. I mean, we would go to see Richie Havens, not on purpose, but pop up in Tompkins Square Park playing, or—oh, gosh, what is the name of the other place? There was a place on Second Avenue—Filmore East, which was a big hall, social hall, where political people of the day—and I guess others, it was used for other events—would come to speak, like Stokely Carmichael or Rap Brown, or whoever it might be. I don't recall all the exact speakers but those were the type of ways in which we spent our time.

So I went to school at Malcolm X Liberation University and, as I said, it was a rotating cast of educators, who taught from a Pan-Africanist point of view, from a point of Black Power, from a position of women's empowerment, and it was great. A lot of the tools and resources—I

don't know how that worked—we got from nearby Duke University. It was their library that we used. In fact, I still have my Duke University library card. It's really interesting.

So I know that you don't want to hear about all of those things, but my reason for sharing them with you from my history as it relates to slavery, as it relates to the kind of real education that I got outside of the public education system, really is what influenced the kind of person that I am, the way in which I think, and the commitment that I have to social justice.

I just want to say one more thing, it's very interesting, before I talk about the East Village, and that is about three years ago, we decided—or I decided because I'm very bossy—that my first cousins and I, that we should have a family reunion. So we planned it. We got an oral historian from our church to give us some background that we might or might not have known. [00:25:00] We interviewed each other and found out all of the paths that we've traveled, and how they all started, and how similar they were, and how that was it for Black people while we were growing up. We visited the house that my grandfather built and we were told that there was no one there. So we went up on the porch and we started taking pictures, so on and so forth, and two people came out, white. They owned the house. They were very gracious. We had a great conversation, and one of those was a vice president for Lego Group. The husband said, “We found these pictures. We were doing a renovation about nine years ago.” He said, “And we have been calling the historic society here every couple of years to say we have these documents. We really think they're important, and we think that you should come and get them.” And they never did. It was the best thing that ever happened.

They went inside and brought out a little tiny Macy's bag. I still have it. Inside the Macy's bag was a trove of my family's history. There were tin types in there. There were pictures of my great-grandmother. There were a few letters. One of the letters was dated July 31, 1913. It was a handwritten letter from my grandfather. It basically said—my grandfather who descended from Ady Alexander, who had been enslaved on Mark Alexander's plantation—and it was a letter to my great-grandmother asking for her daughter's hand in marriage, asking for my grandmother's hand in marriage. We in the family refer to it as now Mrs. Williams. My grandmother's name was Mrs. Williams and my grandfather, who we learned through doing a bit

of research, was one of the Black men who had been living in a boarding house when he was brought to the town to work for white people.

So now he's still living in a boarding house somewhere and he's asking for my grandmother's hand in marriage. And I don't know it word for word but in essence, he's writing and he's saying, "Dear, Mrs. Williams. No doubt you are surprised to be hearing from me. Now, Mrs. Williams, I have been..." something about talking to your daughter for some time now. His exact words were, "I love her and I believe she has become to love me. Now, Mrs. Williams, I am askin' for your daughter's hand in marriage and, Mrs. Williams, I see no reason why you should object. Now, Mrs. Williams, if you will tell me," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, it goes on and on. And he says, "Now, Mrs. Williams, let me hear from you as soon as possible." And so on and so forth.

So can you imagine what a treasure that this handwritten letter is to my family? To be able to connect that kind of history in the African American world is difficult but because this town in Connecticut—Suffield, Connecticut—did not value the history of an African American family, we were able to retrieve these documents to keep them within our family. So that's an aside but it's one of the things that I think about, and that is satisfying to me, in that we have been able to share that letter with all members of our family. The fact that he could write, the fact that he could read, and the fact that he was persistent, the fact that he had a plan, and then all of the other things that we know about my grandfather, the descendent—and myself—of an enslaved woman.

So I came back to New York—

Dziedzic: Thank you so much for sharing all those details. It's really wonderful to hear.

[00:30:01]

Harrington: So I came back to New York and, at seventeen, quite a few things happened to me. I did go to live in North Carolina. My father died when I was seventeen. My father died on his birthday, which is April 17. So that was a really significant year for me. Eventually, I did go back to where my family moved in Washington to help my mom take care of my younger brother and

sister. You know whole families have these kids and then like, years later, they have some others? So it was great.

It was there that I finished school and all of that sort of thing but also, it was there where I decided to become involved in theater. At the time, there was a new theater that was opening up. I was in college and I was actually taking theater production in college as one of my courses, and this new theater was also opening up in Washington, D.C. called the DC Black Repertory Company. I didn't know it then but it was the sister theater to, here in New York, what was called the Negro Ensemble Company. The Negro Ensemble Company is where every older person who was in theater of African descent came through. Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman, Lynn Whitfield, and all of those who have passed on over the years. Every movie star, every theater giant of African descent, came to New York and came through the Negro Ensemble Company. Every theater playwright that you can imagine, that is where their plays began and/or, on occasion, went to Broadway. Robert Hooks was an actor, a director, and one of the founders of the Negro Ensemble Company, but he was from Washington, D.C. and decided to take what he had done in New York, and what he had done in Chelsea—actually, he had done a whole theater movement in Chelsea—and created it in Washington, D.C.

So I became involved in his theater there, the DC Black Repertory Company. I didn't get any great parts there, I must say, but we had really great classes. I did lots of work on the side during theater productions. That's where I lost my stage fright. The plays were all Black. They were all great. They all made you think. They all made you want—desire—to make a difference.

One day, the ex-wife of my brother-in-law came to the theater. My brother-in-law, as you might recall I said, was a founding member of SNCC. He was also a founding member of a famous group from the '60s called the Freedom Singers. He and his previous wife had been members of that group. She was a singer herself. She had formed a few a cappella groups and she came and she was the vocal director at the DC Black Repertory Company, and there she became my vocal coach. I had, of course, known her for years in New York. I had known her in North Carolina. And now she was here with the DC Black Repertory Company. As she always did, like I always do with forming a group of some kind or an organization of some kind, she co-founded Sweet Honey in the Rock, the a cappella singing group. I was not a member initially,

although in all of our classes, in all of our theater, we sang together and all those kinds of things. She founded Sweet Honey in the Rock and for the two years after it was founded I did travel with Sweet Honey in the Rock [sounds of thunder rumbling in background] a little bit on the East Coast. But we had all been members of the theater so we were already close, and here it is, almost fifty years later. It's actually the forty-ninth anniversary of Sweet Honey in the Rock—forty-eighth or forty-ninth—and the theater itself.

So I sang with Sweet Honey in the Rock and, as you know, Sweet Honey in the Rock is an a cappella group. [00:35:03] There have been over twenty-one women who have been members of the group over the past decades. The commitment is to sing about the history of African descent, people of African descent, to empower people through music with stories about struggle, about success, about injustice. And I think my very favorite song that I ever sang with that group is about Haiti. I don't even remember the name of it but it goes—and it's about when the Americans turned away boatloads of Haitian refugees. And it's like, [singing and tapping beat] "I looked at the Statue of Liberty and she didn't wave at me. Well, I looked at the Statue of Liberty and she didn't wave at me. I was born in Haiti and they threw me into the trolling sea." So those are the kinds of songs that Sweet Honey still sings. We're all still very close.

So working in a theater, singing with Sweet Honey, made me get the bug for the theater and the desire to return to New York, so that's what I did. I won't go into my failed attempt to be a Broadway star, and a name known in every household across the country, but especially of those of African descent. But I did do some theater. I did do a little bit of television. But ultimately, I became a mom, and it was when I became a mom that I really had to focus on settling down in one area. And as a mom, with someone that I had to take care of, and someone I had to put in the education system, I had to be concerned about the impact of the education system on my son.

It was almost immediate that I recognized the disparities and the inequities in the school system. For some naive reason, I was under the impression that I could put my child in a school and that everything would be okay, and that was not the case. When I returned to the Alphabet City area and looked at the schools that were available to put my son in, I refused to put him in any. They were horrible. They were failing. There were very few students in most of the

buildings. The behaviors of the staff and the expectation was low and obvious. So I lied, which a lot of other parents in this Alphabet City area did, and used my sister's address and put him in a school in the West Village. It was better and it was worse. The racism was immediate. His teacher was horrible to him, and only in recent years did he tell me about some of the things that she did to him that caused the class to laugh at him in front of a classroom filled with white students.

There was a time early on when I was also caring for my nephew and my son in that same school, and where a young girl by the name of Lisa Steinberg was killed by her white lawyer father, who had illegally adopted her. My nephew was in her class, and it was that incident that caused me to organize parents around some of the resulting issues for our children. And the fact that in this school, that I became involved with the parent association, that I realized that Black and white children were treated differently for the same violations so to speak.

One thing that stood out, and still stands out to this day, was that there was a white child, blond, who brought a Swiss Army knife to school and he was told by the then-principal, which I witnessed, "Put it in your pocket and just don't take it back out of your pocket, and take it home, and don't bring it back to school." [00:40:14] And then not long after, I was in the office and there was a Puerto Rican parent with her very young child, and they were about to suspend the child. He had a fingernail file that he had brought to school, and they were going to suspend him. And that's when I really became actively involved in trying to fight against the racial injustices. There were tons of other examples but that's the one that continues to stand out, and continues to be a topic of discussion and concern for parents of color today, that our children are treated differently.

We're talking about education but we could be talking about COVID-19 and the healthcare system, or mass incarceration and the criminal so-called-justice system. But I became involved in trying to figure out what parents' rights were, which of course means you go outside of your immediate system. So I began to gather the documents that explain what parents' rights were, what different terminology meant within the education system, what are the outlets, where are the people, where are the places that I can learn, and went from the school to the community school district, and then to parent's organizations citywide. It was a journey but it was a short

one. With my background in organizing, and I might say theater as well, it was a short one that led me to the chancellor's office of the system at that time.

And shortly after, I became the head of an organization called the United Parents Associations. It was an organization that started in 1921, which was pretty much a white woman, white gloves kind of organization. It existed before the teacher's union. The teachers had no union. This organization was pretty much there to support teachers, but because they didn't work for the system, they couldn't be prevented from doing things by the system, so to speak. This organization was very powerful in that they even had Eleanor Roosevelt as one of its supporters. So in the middle decades of the organization, they were the ones who started things that are now annual happenings in New York City. The organization was powerful enough to be able to rent an entire train to take people to Albany to lobby. And it is now known as Lobby Day. It happens in March, but decades ago, this was the organization that started it. It is also the organization that started to document and collect data about schools. It is the organization that started what is now known as the—I don't know, the high school, there's a book that every year, the system used to give to middle school students so that they could have an idea of what schools were available for them to enroll in.

Anyway, that organization was different when I came around. It was really about school governance, and this organization helped to create some of the things that we take for granted today, and when I was the head of it. We represented two hundred thousand parents of children in the public school system, which is quite a few parents associations. We helped to create what is now called the Office of Family Community and Engagement. We were—and I—a founding member of what is now called the Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council. [00:44:59] We are the organization that caused—there is a book that details what parents' rights are. It's called *Parents Associations and the Schools*. Parents' associations, for example, are required by state law. A lot of parents don't know that, that it's required. They think it's just something that maybe you should do. It can be a very, very powerful platform for parents, and particularly parents of color, which is why schools often don't support and try to control parent associations. But our organization helped to usher in some of the things that are in existence today for parents. We also—I can mention a whole bunch of them, but that is the organization that I headed.

Five days after I was elected to be president, I was sued by the vice president of the Board of Education for calling her a racist, in that she had made a speech in which she said, “Poor Black and brown kids within the system didn’t have anyone to look up to except for their teachers,” which of course is absolutely absurd and false. I was terrified that I was sued, but ultimately I was very happy because it took an organization that was well-known, but not known in every household, to a point where every news station was reporting about this Black parent being sued by the vice president of the Board of Education, and wanted to know the backstory. So it provided a platform for us to tell the backstory, and also kind of catapulted us into a position of being able to sit at the bargaining table as opposed to the bake sale table, which is where the system likes to keep parents.

Throughout a series of interactions, being on panels and that sort of thing, discovered that I couldn’t really talk about the education system without talking about the prison system. And I kept finding myself on panels with the same people and we were talking about the same thing, that the failure in one was why the other resulted. So we did make a lot of progress as an organization within the education system up into the state, but it was not really sustainable because parents come and go, and we always seem to be reinventing the wheel. We could be talking about community gardens but we’re talking about education. And my next stage was to work for the New York State Assembly, and I was an education specialist for the person who chaired the education committee. It was there that I wanted to make a difference. So that I worked on the laws that changed the governance system from a school board to, in fact, the system that we have now, which is mayoral control, which I’m not necessarily in favor of but it’s not my choice. I work for someone bigger who’s making this decision and my job was to have input or to not. I did have some input into it.

I also worked on the laws that required that there would be a school leadership team, and also the development of the CEC [Community Education Councils]. So those are some of the things that I worked on when I worked for the New York State Assembly. But at the same time, I also worked on prison issues. Every Saturday for many years—for eight years actually, maybe more—I co-produced a show on WBAI Radio called *On the Count: The Prison and Criminal Justice Report*. All of the people who were on the crew, and also my co-host, were people who

had been formerly incarcerated. We provided a voice to talk about how the education system failed the African American community, and deliberately so. How the mass incarceration profited corporations and individuals intentionally, and how it was no different from my grandparents and their parents who had been enslaved, whether it was slavery, whether it was any era after that, through which laws and policy was determined in a way that made people of color the ones who earned the income for white people to benefit them. [00:51:31] It's just all the same discussion. It's the same situation and it really has not changed.

So here I am in the East Village, having done those jobs. I also worked for a woman's center whose job was to take women who had been marginalized, and who had maybe married, maybe not married, maybe had children, maybe their children were grown, maybe they had educations, maybe they didn't have educations. So either they had an education and now had to figure out how they could get into the workforce—did they even have the skill to get into the workforce to be able to take care of themselves and their families? Or maybe they had had no education, so we partnered with places like Pace University to do a rapid education for such women, so they could have the skill to get into the workforce. I did that for a long period of time.

But also, I was a mother and as such, needed to have housing for my son here in the neighborhood that, for the most part, I grew up in, philosophically and otherwise, in Alphabet City. I was in an illegal sublet. I didn't know I was in an illegal sublet. I didn't really know a lot at that time about the different structures of housing. And because I insisted on using the amenities in this building, they learned I was there, and soon was taken to court and had a really interesting judge—I'll never forget the judge. But the whole time I was there, I was looking for permanent housing. I saw these people, these women one day looking kind of raggedly and shabby, and looking like they were somewhat on a construction site, but not really construction-ready. And I went up to them and asked them what they were doing. They were telling me they were working on the building on the corner of 10th Street and Avenue C, and that they were renovating it. I asked them a whole bunch of more questions, and they put me in touch with someone, and I contacted that person and before long, was in a meeting. I believe the meeting was in the old Charas building [Charas/El Bohio Community Center]. And I learned about this homesteading effort.

So everybody, of course, is familiar with the whole squatting movement here in New York where, after everything was burned out, burnt up, under-resourced, no garbage picked up, very dismissive treatment from the government, that people fled. Buildings were burned, sometimes, and often deliberately by landlords who'd rather collect the insurance and stop getting fined by the city, if the city bothered to fine them. Lots of drugs, lots of really bad things here in the neighborhood. So a lot of squatting took place for a lot of reasons, whether it was for bad reasons, because I'm going to take over this building and sell a lot of drugs, and nobody's going to bother me because the block is half vacant anyways, or whether it's because I really have no place to stay, and I'm going to take a chance that I might be safe and try to barricade myself inside this building for me and my family.

Whatever the reasons were, there was this squatting movement, and as usual, when something occurs that a government or a municipality has no policy for or no laws with regard to, they create them. And for squatting, it was banned—not outlawed, banned—but the city did create some programming and funding in order to renovate these buildings that they found themselves now owning in the form of hundreds. [00:55:02] And particularly here in Alphabet City.

And so it was this movement that I happened upon while looking for housing for myself and my son, and as with education, as with prisons, became immediately engulfed and involved and began to understand some things that I learned through my pan-Africanist philosophy and education, that land is really important, ownership of land. The land that my grandfather owned, the land that we walk on. Having any ownership mentality of it or ownership of it is extraordinarily important. And I became very involved in the homesteading movement.

I actually was involved with a group of over a dozen buildings that had a relationship to each other. And the plan was that these buildings that were given slight control by the city to the same organization, called LESAC [Lower East Side Catholic Area Conference] here in this village, would be part of a community land trust. So that people would own the buildings but the land trust would be owned by an organization, and that the organization would be able to keep the intent of affordable housing for all of the buildings because they would lease the land back to the building for a certain period, but there would be these provisions in it. The land trust

technically still exists and there are nine buildings that are owned by the land trust, but it required, over the years, individuals to sacrifice one day out of the week, usually a Saturday, for all of us to come together to actually gut these really horrible buildings—buildings that were in a horrible state, from garbage to non-industrial resources. So we're talking white buckets, walking up six flights of stairs with two buckets in your hand and walking back down with drywall, or whatever else you knocked out that you'll have to replace later and walking back down six flights of stairs. Rarely was there a big tube that you could throw it down into a trash bin or something. And we did that for many years.

It was not until 1989 that we finished our building. The year that we finished our building—and I'm here on East 4th Street between [Avenue] C and [Avenue] D—there were two other buildings that just were about completed. All together forty-two families in three buildings moved onto this block in 1989. Some moved in around 1990. Some might have even waited until 1991. But let's say '89 the buildings were completed. And when we moved into our buildings, the block was still more than half vacant. On the block though was one community garden. It is called Parque de Tranquilidad. Parque de Tranquilidad is a result of the Green Guerillas movement. The Green Guerillas is still an organization but was a greening, community gardening organization that was started by people like Liz Christy who was the artist, as the story goes, lived on the Bowery and said to some neighbors supposedly, why don't you all do something about this vacant lot with all this garbage or whatever it was. And supposedly the story is that they said, why don't you do something? And supposedly—I'm saying supposed to all of this because it sounds ridiculous—a light went off in her head and she said oh yes, let me do that.

So whether or not the Green Guerillas already existed or she joined them or she helped to create them, establish them, I'm not sure but together, ultimately, they came up with this plan where they would do what they called seed bomb, mud bomb—I think it was mud bomb, mud bombing—and they would go to the various vacant lots. [01:00:05] And if they couldn't get into them, they would just throw mud balls in, and hope they would sprout into some kind of plants of foliage. And for other places, they actually started to clear the land. The first one being the infamous, or famous, Liz Christy Garden that is located on the corner of—actually Second

[Avenue] to Bowery and Houston Street. It used to be called the something Bowery Farm, Garden and Farm [Bowery Houston Community Farm and Garden] but now it is called the Liz Christy Community Garden. Liz Christy went on to bother the City of New York so much about greening and taking care of their property and vacant lots that they finally decided to hire her. That's what people do. They hired her. She became the executive director of the Council on the Environment.

The Council on the Environment was the name of a program under the jurisdiction of a city agency. I don't remember which one. It was the first greening program that the City of New York ever had. Liz Christy remained the executive director until she passed away, but how it relates to where I live, Parque de Tranquilidad was one of the community gardens that she helped to start. So when we moved to our block in 1989, that community garden was there but was having struggles around resources, and the mid lot was owned by a church or synagogue that ultimately did sell it to the city, which is very interesting. But that community garden was there.

So now on my block, you had three pieces of land that were owned by the people who lived in their buildings, and you had one community garden that was owned by the City of New York and a synagogue, but [pauses] people who were stewarding it, taking care of it, considered it to be their land that they were taking care of that they were developing. And across the street from it was a huge open vacant land where, around the same time, a group of people decided to clear that land and turn it into a community garden.

There was also another piece of land on the block. It was the worst piece of land on the block. It was totally vacant, totally filled with garbage, rats, trash, gangs, cars, refrigerators. And on this block, by the way, the City of New York rarely came to pick up garbage. That's another thing. So when I actually moved onto the block and looked around at what I had to face, the very first thing that I did was what my sister taught me to do: start an organization, start a movement, have a mission, have a name, and then convince people to agree, if they wanted to.

So in order to improve the block, we created a block association. There was this opinion that one had existed at some point previously. So we agreed to keep the so-called previous name, which no one has ever been able to document, but we created a block association. And then what's the purpose of a block association? Well, our first purpose is to clear the land on the

vacant lot and to turn it into something. And so I still was working on some of the other buildings that were being renovated, that were part of this land trust, and also working on the green spaces to either support them or to convert them into community gardens. That's kind of how I got involved in both the land ownership concept of both housing and also community gardens.

Dziedzic: I can see how they're so intricately linked in your situation. I wanted to ask about—I guess so this is the late 1980s—

Harrington: Yes. [01:04:56]

Dziedzic: And I guess if you can just continue your story about continuing to focus on your block and your neighborhood as a whole when you started to see—I don't want to say getting traction because you were clearly getting traction because of your skill in organizing, and the people that were a part of your movement—but when did the city start to, as you said, make those laws that interfaced with what people were doing on the ground?

Harrington: So the policies more so than—well, actually it was the state. So the policies within the city, for the most part, but in order to regulate the huge housing stock owned by the city, the state created a law—I don't know the name of it but it's a law that created the development—the existence of housing development fund corporations, HDFCs.

So the nine buildings that ultimately became a part of the land trust, which was in 1987, there is a huge misbelief that the first housing land trust was Cooper Square Committee, which is not true. The very first housing land trust in New York State was actually the RAIN [Rehab in Action to Improve Neighborhoods] Community Land Trust that owns that land still under the nine buildings that I talked about earlier. I forget what I was getting ready to say.

Dziedzic: And they owned the land that your building is on too, right?

Harrington: That's correct. That is correct. So having said that—oh, so New York state law decided to create this structure of a housing development fund corp., HDFC. There are about 33,000 units, citywide. There are 112 buildings within—I'm going to say the Council District, within Council District 2—which would now be Carlina Rivera's. So that's a lot of housing. Most of the buildings abide by the state intent, that was you get to buy them for little or for nothing. But when you say for little or nothing, most of the buildings, it was little or nothing. But for buildings like mine, it was for a lot. Although ultimately we paid \$250 per unit to the city to buy the shares into this corporation. We spent years, every single Saturday, and then one night a week working in the building. And then we spent one night a week in the last three years sleeping in the building to make sure that nobody burned it down or stole stuff, so on and so forth. So we put in a lot of labor in.

About 2,500 units of the buildings citywide actually engaged in this sweat equity, which was really difficult. I mean every Saturday. Had it not been for my sister, who agreed to take my son, and then my son and my nephew every Friday night for years and years while I did this, I would not have been able to accomplish this. So I always give her big props for everything that happens in my life. She was the best teacher ever, politically and otherwise. Even as a parent—I was a single parent—she said to me, okay, this is how you do it. Once you get them in daycare, you look around. You decide which parents you want to have a relationship with. And then you start working with them and convincing them to create a parent network outside of the daycare or outside of the school. And she told me exactly how to do it. So by the time my child was a certain age, I had someone who could take care of him every weekend but one out of the month if I wanted to do that.

We had four children's names. We had their medical records in all of our houses. The kids and the parents knew where all of the cleaning products were. We knew who lived in the house. We had visited multiple times and we could say oh, can you take my son for Friday night? Could you take my kid for the weekend? It was so successful that when one of the boys moved to Florida, he came to stay with me in New York for a month during the summer. [01:10:03] And my son went south, [laughs] and the parent was really great because they were white, and every summer, my son would come back and say, [imitating her son groaning] they took me to the

Martin Luther King Center. They took me to this, that, and the other but they were really trying. So it was a great concept of parent networking is the point that I was making.

So the law, the state law that created HDFCs, the intent was you would get them for little or nothing, however, you want to define that but they are yours in perpetuity. However, when they're no longer yours, they're going to be still affordable, whatever the affordable definition is at the time. They have to be affordable, to remain affordable to the community in perpetuity. So this is: you own it, but you're restricted. And how you're benefitting from it is, if you take care of the building correctly, eventually the building will have no debt. You will have a low rent or maintenance fee. You should be able to improve your plight in life because you have this stable affordable housing. And you should be able to save it because you're not paying thirty percent or fifty percent or more of your income in rent or maintenance. And most of these buildings, the maintenance is extraordinarily low. For some people, it's extraordinarily low. It's still not too high, but many of the buildings in this neighborhood, people are paying \$300 a month for an apartment, up to maybe—I would say the average may be about \$800. Some of those \$800 apartments are three bedrooms, two bathrooms or a duplex, or just a regular one-bedroom but affordable by today's standards, certainly in this neighborhood.

Unfortunately, there are some in this neighborhood and all over, as far as HDFCs are concerned, where people, nobody is watching them. There's no enforcement. And so many of them have been sold for \$750,000 a unit. One in this neighborhood, in which live three of the most prominent so-called progressive leaders in our community, was sold for over \$1 million last year, all of whom know better. And it's simply unforgivable, unforgivable.

Dziedzic: What's the—go ahead, continue.

Harrington: But HDFCs, the restriction is tied to the land ownership. That's the point that I'm trying to make. And over the years, as more and more HDFCs and other housing occurred in this—although squatting did continue on some level as well, continue to occur in this neighborhood, people like myself moved in and you move in, you've done all this work. You're really happy. I have this home. It's permanent, it's affordable. But then you walk by a piece of

vacant land, and it looks like crap, and it causes problems, whether it's a public safety hazard or a physical, criminal hazard. And you really want to make a difference. It's like God, wouldn't it be nice to go across the street and sit someplace in something that's green instead of having to walk for miles?

So that movement was going on at the same time and it was all about land, right? All about land. So the land of living, the land of public green spaces, and all over this neighborhood, there were people involved for different reasons, starting in different ways, who were clearing land near the homes in which they lived, or the apartments that they rented, for really great reasons. And as a result, just skipping past everything, we now have in this community—although we had more—we have fifty-three community gardens located within CD3 [Community District No. 3]. There was a coalition that connects them as well called LUNGS, which stands for Loisaída United Neighborhood Gardens. I am a founding member of LUNGS, and I am on the board of LUNGS. And LUNGS provides connections and advocacy for the organizations. [01:15:04] And a few years back, got part of the [Superstorm] Sandy money from New York's Rising [Community Reconstruction Program] in order to do some flood production preventions within the community gardens. That project is still ongoing but the money is safe and it can be done.

So you've got these two land connections and that, also, has been a real struggle. Many of us who have been gardeners for many years, most of them were Black and brown people working outside their homes and on their blocks, cleaning these vacant lots. Not only Black and brown people but mostly. Most of the community gardens in this neighborhood were started by Black and brown people. If you want to talk about gentrification, that would be a place to begin looking. If you look into a community garden today—let's just say you have a members meeting—you'll find that the majority of people are white. They are not Black and brown. In many of these HDFCs that were meant to be for people who were low to moderate-income, you will find that many of the new people in them are also not Black and brown. They are in fact white.

Not that white people cannot be moderate to low income because they certainly are, but many of those who have moved into these buildings have moved into buildings by circumventing

the intent in the rules. They will say well, I don't have any money, or this is how much money I make. Some of these buildings don't even have the wherewithal to do background checks, so on and so forth. They might take someone's word, or the person can show this is how much money I made last year. But that person is also being supported by their mom and dad. A mom and dad, for a building that might be financially suffering, if they say to the building, well, we can pay \$450,000 for this and just give you cash now. The building will be like, [sighs] that will really take care of our boiler, take care of our new roof. It will take care of this. It happened.

But once people who were used to getting their own way get into these buildings, they have begun to control some of these buildings. So now that there is this citywide feeling by too many that, yes, I live in this building, I've lived here for thirty years, I've done all this work on this building, and I feel like I should get something out of it. I should be able to sell it for a lot of money, and buy a house somewhere, or go somewhere and do something else. But that's not the intent. The intent is not that you get rich off of this investment that you made to benefit yourself and your family. And it has benefitted yourself and your family for decades and decades. The benefit is supposed to go to the community as affordable housing in perpetuity. But there is this effort and movement to change the thinking about this structure of housing, in that we should be able to sell it and make a huge profit. And that is just terribly wrong.

It is as wrong as—speaking of gentrification—a community garden that is predominantly white that does not think there is any reason to be proactive about including people of color, especially those who are indigenous to this community, many of whom will say I don't want anything to do with community gardens because every time I walk by it's closed, or every time I walk by, all I see are white people and when I walk in I do not feel welcome. And that is not an indictment for every HDFC, it is not an indictment for every community garden. I'm speaking about both of those because those are both land issues. They are meant to be land issues that benefit the community.

So it is why I talk about the two of them. So gentrification has really hurt, in many ways, people of color in this neighborhood. Even the schools that I talked about earlier, that I would not put my son into, there were four that were created as so-called alternative schools in order to combat just what I was trying to avoid, meaning under-resourced schools with not-great teachers,

so on and so forth. [01:20:10] And I was one of the probably few people in this neighborhood that was opposed to their being established, spoke out against it at all the places that you needed to in order to testify. I said that those schools might start out to be inclusive and would very quickly not be, and that is exactly what they are today. All four of the schools are predominantly white. A large number of students live in other boroughs. They don't even live in this community.

So schools, good schools, community gardens, HDFCs, these are just examples of gentrification. We could be talking about restaurants, and we can be talking about today's open streets. That's another topic. There was this saying that—

By the way, I love this community. My sister who I always talk about, she taught me so many things. She taught me that the first thing that you say when you're writing a letter is you put your ask right there. She said that is the way to write a letter. "I'm writing to ask," "I'm writing to state," "I'm writing to insist," "I'm writing to invite." You put your ask first because people don't want to go through a lot of stuff. What do you want with me? That's why people hate to listen to long messages when you're leaving a message on somebody's voice mail. What the—I just click it off and I just call the person, what did you want? You know, right? She also taught me how to walk into a room like you belong there, kind of like you're in charge, all of those kinds of things. I love her for that—and forgot why I was mentioning it. Oh, land. [Sighs]

In the late '90s, I was contacted by an old good friend. We went to high school together, and in high school, he was a bone man. He always said, I want to be an anthropologist. I don't even know if I really understood what an anthropologist was at the time so much. But we called him "bone man." His real name was Michael. But we became really good friends. We thought we were the philosophically Blackest persons in an all-Black high school, very funny. We went on to do some travel together. We lived together, and we're just good friends.

I think I may have seen him a couple of times over the decades since high school, but the African Burial Ground had been rediscovered in 1991. With others, I shared my support for memorializing it but was not really as actively involved as some of those that deserve credit for laying down in the street and documenting the remains that were being disrespected, like Senator David Patterson, or others who are now elected officials, and some who—many have passed

away over the years. But they went through a whole process of fighting with the federal government and coming up with a memorandum of understanding that governed how the land was to be treated, and how the descendants of African descent must be involved. It had three parts to the memorandum of understanding. Once that memorandum of understanding occurred, the intention to live up to it stopped with the federal government. By then, I had done all of these other things I mentioned.

And I got a call from my old high school friend, Michael Blakey, who had become Dr. Michael Blakey and had become an anthropologist at Howard University. [01:25:10] He was requesting my help with the African Burial Ground. And the reason he was requesting my help, in particular, was because he had been working with the head of the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] for many years, unbeknownst to me. I also worked with the Schomburg but separate from whatever he was doing. The head of the Schomburg said, call Ayo for this. And the “this” was pretty much to—how could I put it—to reestablish the momentum, to monitor the behavior of the federal government with regard to construction, memorialization, and other things, the education, with regard to the African Burial Ground. And there were already people working on that and with them, we created Friends of the African Burial Ground and immediately started what you need to do when you’re organizing and that is you begin holding meetings. You begin asking people to attend them, to account for their behavior and their actions. You start holding town halls. I remember the really great one that we had at the Schomburg Center and for all of those people from GSA [General Services Administration], which was the government organization that had jurisdiction. We just put chairs up on the stage with their names on them and filmed everything.

But the point of the African Burial Ground and my involvement was also about land. That’s the connection with everything, is land. And this is land on which over twenty thousand people who had been enslaved, and some others, had been buried. That was used as a burial ground on the other side of Park Avenue, Park Place. Park Place was the defining—not wall but place between so-called civilization and so-called not. So Black folks couldn’t be buried within the so-called civilization portion of Lower Manhattan and that was where our descendants were buried. When the governing system then decided that it needed more space other than Lower

Manhattan, they decided that they would build over the African Burial Ground, which was called the Negro Burial Ground at that time. Keep in mind that New York City, or I should say New York State, but it was mostly New York City, at the time was the third-largest slave-holding state in the country. A lot of people think that [scoffs] it wasn't so bad here in New York. Yes, it was bad here in New York. People were whipped here. People were lynched here. People were raped here, sold. People were experimented-on here, without anesthesia, all of those things that happened with people who were enslaved happened here in New York.

And so I think it was—I might have the years a little bit wrong because it's been a minute since I've looked at these facts—but I think it was 1796. Could it have been 1796? I probably have these years wrong. But it was the year that they stopped allowing people to be buried there. The year that they put down the first stone, cornerstone for City Hall, was eight years [later], so nobody forgot between the last year that anyone was supposedly allowed to be buried there and eight years later, that there were twenty thousand people buried there. [01:30:00] So City Hall is built on the African Burial Ground and you could not get more racist, dismissive, and less caring about human beings than deciding your burial ground is not important to us. We're just going to build over it and do what we want, and take what we want, including the only history that you actually have that is visual, after taking you from your land for decades and centuries. This is how we're going to treat you.

So when it came to the rediscovery and the federal government basically figuring we can do whatever we want because nobody's looking right now, that is when I got the call from both Dr. Blakey, my old friend, and Howard Dodson, who was the chief of the Schomburg at the time and who I have known for awhile. And so I helped to create, as I said earlier, the Friends of the African Burial Ground, and really tried to recreate momentum, which was not difficult. I mean, once people heard the charge they came, or heard the call they came rather.

So we worked with the three Black people who had been hired to oversee the development of each of three parts of the memorandum of understanding. One had to do with research. So we worked with Dr. Blakey who had extracted, by that time, I think, seven sets, multiple sets of DNA from about four hundred of the remains that had been taken from the burial ground and moved to Howard University. He, at the time, was trying to keep in some kind of

possession of the African American community, some sets. We had all of these ideas. One idea was that somewhere we would be able to keep some of the DNA so that one day, Ayo Harrington would be able to—even if it was twenty years later or whatever it might be—would be able to go to the DNA database and determine whether or not I had a match.

Now, in all probability, possibility, there would be no match for Ayo Harrington. That is fine. But if there's a match for somebody I don't even know, who lives in Ohio, I would be happy as a pig in shit. I would be ecstatic. I would be satisfied. I would be fulfilled. It would make so much of a difference to my life, something that I could celebrate about that which was stolen from us as a people. That was one intention.

Unfortunately—and we fought that battle for a long time—unfortunately the Army Corps of Engineers were successful in getting back all of the samples, so far as we know. But on the memorialization—but of course, Dr. Blakey and his team were able to find out fascinating bits of information about the African Burial Ground and those who were there. He was able to determine how many of them died—many of them from young children to older people and not much older—died from the weight on the back of their head from carrying things. [01:35:00] There were also those who had been killed. Also was able to show the Islamic—I'm going to say Islamic, and I don't mean it in an offensive way—Islamic-like faith because of the way that they were buried and the direction in which many of the bodies were turned. I say Islamic-like only because I don't really remember which it was and I don't want to be disrespectful. Most of them were women, at least of those that they did research on, and he was able to find out the eleven regions that most of them came from, which was also a satisfying bit of information to everyone of African descent. It was amazing to learn these things.

As far as the memorialization was concerned, that was very interesting because part of it was returning the remains that had been taken to Howard University to their burial place, and then part of it was what is that space now going to look like after they are reburied. What's going to be there? What's going to be on top of them? How do we know? So there was a whole art bidding project that occurred for this component, and the person who won the bid is the person whose artwork now stands on top of the African Burial Ground.

Part of that memorialization process included a caravan that began in Washington, D.C. and that brought the remains to Baltimore, and then to another state, and then to another state, then to New Jersey, and then back to the African Burial Ground. They were accompanied by a number of people with a number of events in cities. The thing about it that is really great was that my son, the one who had been in this racist school and had to endure all of this racist education system, the first job that he got right out of college—or maybe it was even before he finished college—was at the African Burial Ground. He had brought so many people from the African Burial Ground to his school to be speakers, and even his friends who were in college nearby, he would bring them in carloads down to the African Burial Ground, and really became a really great learner of the history of the African Burial Ground, that he was hired to work in their education program. As such, he actually traveled with the remains from place to place and actually helped to create the memorialization ceremony that took place when they were reinterred with people like Phylicia Rashad and Sidney Poitier, and any number of other people. He also was the person who chose the cultural contribution in the form of a singer, a young girl who's a singer named Maimouna. She now goes by the name Mumu Fresh. She is much older and she performs with people like Sweet Honey in the Rock and people like Alicia Keys, people who are not just singers, or people like Common. She doesn't just perform with anyone. [01:40:02] She performs with people who have a social-conscious aspect to how they perform, who they perform with, and who they sing with.

But it was an amazing ceremony that lasted for a few days, and the remains were reinterred. What remains now as part of the project is—well, part of the memorialization and part of the education is that there is a small museum. We had wanted a large museum. There's a small participatory-type museum at the African Burial Ground and in it is the history, as much as has been collected and told from people who were historians involved with its development over the years, like Dr. Sherrill Wilson, Dr. Michael Blakey, Chris Moore. These are the historians who actually told the story. And there are interviews from people who were involved in its memorialization including with me. So for that reason, my granddaughter is not wanting to go to the African Burial Ground because she says she does not want all her friends to be listening to

me. When you get to be a certain age [laughs] they're not that happy. But she was young at the time. She was like, but I went there last year and all we did was look at you!

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask you about what the impact was your son's education when you became involved in drawing awareness around the racism that existed in school, and then what the impact may be on your granddaughter because as you said, these problems still exist.

Harrington: Well, for my son, my son grew up knowing for sure. One of the saddest days of my life was the day that my son said to me—after I explained to him what a cab was and why I was standing there with my hand out when he was asking, “Why is that one passing?” I was like, “Oh, if the light is not on, that means somebody's in it or they're not working.” He began to recognize that, and I'd be standing there with my hand out, and the light would be on and the cab would pass me. And the day he asked me to explain to him why so many cabs pass by when they have their light on, and I had to explain to him why that was one of the saddest days of my life. He could not have been more than five when that happened. Yes, couldn't have been more than five.

So he grew up knowing what I tried to teach him about racism. He's always known. He's always known that we live in a racist society. He's always known that the intent is for boys like him to end up in prison doing work that benefits people who are white. He's always known that the expectations for him were lower, and he has always been, as a result, a really strong person, a really strong person. Soon after he got to college, the first thing he did was to do what his mother does. He created an organization, a club. He accessed club monies. He accessed school vehicles. He traveled with dozens of students to places where he wanted them to learn, to the African Burial Ground, to Black historians who were giving lectures, to those kinds of places. So him gravitating towards being this great educator about the history of the African Burial Ground was very natural for him. So he learned and he's a stronger person because he looks at things without a clouded lens or a lens that's meant to deceive him.

Let's see, so I don't know what else you want to know. [01:45:02] I can tell you that two years ago—my son's birthday is a couple days after Christmas and so it's during Kwanzaa. It's

always like what do you want to do for your birthday because it's so close to a holiday. We're in Kwanzaa and we're already doing different things related to—what do you want to do? It was so strange, and it was really great because I don't think he had been there in years and years and he said, "I want to go to the African Burial Ground." He said, "Let's just look up what is happening at the African Burial Ground today, and let's go to the African Burial Ground." So we went to the African Burial Ground and there was this main educator from the African Burial Ground, Dr. Sherrill Wilson. It was amazingly satisfying. It was a great situation. So I guess in my life, all of the things that are important to me—

Oh, the one thing I want to talk about is I'd like to talk about Black Lives Matter for a second. I have always talked about Black Lives Matter, always. There isn't a place where I don't talk about it. I think I've talked about it at least twice today, outside of this, in different meetings. Here in the Alphabet City area, East Village, the percentage of Black people is low. However, that does not mean that Black and brown people should not be included. So whether we are talking about community gardens, the number of Black people who are involved is minuscule. The desire overall to be proactive about including them is minuscule. There might be a lot of people who slap Black Lives Matter on their community gardens or slap it on their window, or on a shirt or whatever it might be, but those are the same people who were really angry with me when I was on the Community Board and realized that there had been sixteen chances for the then-chair of the Community Board to appoint a Black or Spanish person to chair any committee or task force. There had been sixteen opportunities in that person's tenure.

And when I raised it, people were very upset. When I asked to chair a committee, I was told no because you haven't been on long enough. Within weeks, another person who was a white male, who had been there for the same amount of time that I was, was made the co-chair of a committee. And I was very upset about that and made my concern very public, and I did not get reappointed to the Community Board. Not that I needed the community Board as a platform. I have enough of my own. But it was retaliation. And those same people, who I should not name at this time, but who are elected—were and still are—are responsible for not acknowledging the systemic racism that existed on the Community Board at that time. I mean, there's no way that you have Black and brown people in a room, members of the Community Board, and sixteen

chances for them to be appointed to chair a committee, but instead, you will take a white male and give the white male three chairs in sixteen of those committees. That is intentional, and if it's not intentional, which is what I said publicly, then you're just plain stupid.

So it is exhausting and annoying for me to listen to people talk about Black Lives Matter when they try to kick you out of organizations or structures where there are no Black people or brown people. But that has been the history all too often in this neighborhood. I don't find that it's welcoming to a Black person. I do find that we have to insist on involvement as opposed to being invited to be involved. [01:50:08] I do find that the attacks on our leadership are constant and have been for decades, and you can apply them to every one of those industries, or movements, or entities that I have discussed today. That is still the situation. It does please me though that young folks have gotten the message, the nerve, and the momentum to start a global discussion about how and why Black Lives Matter, that they have tied to four hundred years of systemic racism, humiliation, degradation that still exists in relation to most everything in our lives, including COVID-19.

I co-chair LESReady! LESReady! is a disaster preparedness and long-term recovery group, organization, so to speak. We are what people refer to nationally as a coalition—I'm sorry—a community organization active in disaster, otherwise known as COAD. We developed after Sandy as a result of a huge collaboration between organizations like Hester Street, Good Ole Lower East Side, Henry Street [Settlement], University Settlement, Cooper Square Committee, all of the organizations, and also some healthcare clinics. We are an organization coalition of about thirty-five right now. All of the housing organizations, the healthcare clinics that are in Community Board 3, the arts organizations, the multi-service organizations, the green space, greening organizations. If you mention a type of something—and we, of course with our elected officials, the Community Board, and we have some of our other partners—oh, the American Red Cross is a member. The Salvation Army is a member. We sit on task forces and councils with the Department of Health, also the Department of Emergency Management. And during COVID-19, we sit on the Health + Hospitals Test & Trace Community Advisory Board. We also, as it relates to flooding, which is part of the mission of LESReady!, to get us prepared, we also sit on the Community Advisory Board for the East River Resiliency Project, which is to

change the park, to put in a structure that helps to prevent flooding because a lot of Alphabet City flooded during Sandy.

Even within this situation—my co-chair is Damaris Reyes. She’s Puerto Rican, I’m Black. A lot of people don’t like that. They don’t like that there are two strong women of color who are not willing to take a back seat, and who are going to walk on every piece of pavement and green space in this neighborhood as if we own it, and we have a say in what happens with it and to it. But we do. But early on in COVID, eleven—

And there are several organizations like ours. There are about ten such organizations that are community-based first responders. They are organizations like ours, who have created through lots of collaboration—you cannot do it alone—a disaster plan, which we activate for man-made and natural disasters. This disaster plan was activated for the Second Avenue explosion. That was a man-made disaster. And we worked with survivors for a two-year period. Within our network, we were able to use our resources to get housing for ten of those that permanently lost their homes, one of which was my granddaughter’s second grade assistant teacher, Mildred. [01:55:14] When Mildred walked into the disaster resource center, she looked at me and the first thing she said was, “Thank God, there’s somebody here who knows me.”

So community-based first responders that exist are really important. And we activated again for COVID-19, and we kind of activated for last week’s tropical storm that was over in a day, but of course did not impact as badly on our community at all as some others, who are still experiencing outages and food shortages and spoilages, and all of that on top of COVID-19. It’s kind of like what’s called cascading pandemics, cascading meaning one after the other, after the other, after the other. And early on, the first question that we asked from those who were collecting data in the city and elsewhere was what’s the racial breakdown of the deaths, because we already knew. We already knew in this land in which we live, if there’s a disaster, that those who were going to be hit the hardest are going to be Black and brown. We already know this. We were just waiting for the system to answer that question and when they finally did, acted as if—some—it was a surprise. But really wasn’t a surprise to anyone.

I mean, there are so many stories about such disasters, even in the heatwave in Detroit in the mid-‘90s, almost eight hundred people died from the heat, from the heat. All of them were

Black, some brown, none white. And that was just from zip code to zip code, from zip code to adjacent zip codes. Zip code to zip code is kind of—I don't know if you could use it as an analogy or not about life in America for a Black person. But it's as good of one as anything else, so why not. My zip code though is in my mind, and as long as I'm living, I refuse to adhere to any barrier.

That's it. Anything else?

Dziedzic: [laughs] Thank you for taking my notes and connecting them together in such a cohesive way and for making this your story. I appreciate that. Normally, I talk a lot more but it was really wonderful to hear you, and thank you for all that you've contributed to the city and your intellectual leadership as well. It's so true, like you said, that so much that's being talked about right now are things that you have been drawing connections between, and that your family and your ancestors have been drawing connections between for decades. So I just want to acknowledge that work and—

Harrington: Thank you.

Dziedzic: —for you to be able to connect it and speak it so beautifully is really an honor to hear. As far as the topics are that I wanted to cover, you have connected them all and spoken about them.

One question that I do have is if you could think back to one of the gardens, one of the green spaces that you helped clear, and just describe what it was like to get it to the point where you could finally start planting and start cultivating.

Harrington: Oh, oh, amazing. So Orchard Alley, which is a community garden on my block, and was the piece of land that was vacant but filled with garbage that the block association was established to address as our first goal, our mission. So Orchard Alley is really dear to my heart. It's kind of like a child to me. [02:00:00] It's a beautiful, beautiful community garden and the concept was that it would be an orchard. The reason we wanted it to be an orchard—the reason I

wanted it to be an orchard—is because I already had a little bit of experience with Parque de Tranquilidad and the internal fighting. And also, the one that was in development, El Jardin del Paraiso, across from Parque de Tranquilidad, where the fighting was even worse. The fighting in El Jardin was white versus Puerto Rican. And other the years, mostly Puerto Ricans have cleared it. White people took over it. It was really interesting. I was really not that involved. I would go to some cleaning days, and I would do some other kind of cultural stuff that was happening on the land itself with my son, who was young at the time. But fistfights used to break out there, where one group would, say, do something, and then other folks would say you didn't get our permission. We need to have a talk about this. It's kind of like today, in that same garden, you'll see Puerto Ricans drinking beer and people complaining about that because it's not allowed. No drinking on any city-owned public green space, and I respect that. And then you'll see a group of young white hipsters, so to speak, and they'll be drinking wine or champagne or whatever, nobody says anything about that.

So that's been going on for decades and decades. So having said that, having that experience way back then, I decided that we should have a garden that didn't have any plots or any sections that people could take ownership of. You had to take ownership of the whole piece of land and not one part of it. So let's have an orchard. That way everybody's taking care of the trees or whatever—and no vegetables because vegetables lead to people feeling territorial. “This is my plot, these are my vegetables. I need my sun.” I mean, honestly, there were fistfights about the fact that somebody had a plot and somebody grew something that grew so tall that the plot didn't get any sun at all. And fistfights about this kind of stuff.

So we decided on an orchard and we decided to call it Orchard Alley. We called it Orchard Alley because it actually went all the way from 4th Street, all the way through to 3rd Street. It was actually four lots, city lots. It's really huge. So we cleared the land. And also, you might recall that I said the Department of Sanitation really didn't pick up garbage on our block. They literally did not. On occasion, they did. So construction companies, people's garbage, just all kinds of stuff was in there. And we went in and we cleaned it out once. The day we started cleaning it out was the day we called it a community garden. It still took years.

Then once we cleaned it out, people moved in. I still have pictures of it. One person moved in and built a small shack. Then he built a second one and he rented it out, the second one. Another person built a two-story shack on the land we cleared, and then we had to start cleaning it out again. But we couldn't just clean it out because there were people now living there. As it turns out, there were eleven people living there. The reason we determined that is because we had to call yet another meeting, and then we had to call a meeting with people who knew better than us living on the block what to do about this. So we called the meeting. It was with Good Old Lower East Side, the Department of the Homeless—I'm not sure it was called exactly that at the time but the city agency—a couple of other people.

It's like, really weird because about two years ago, I found this sign-in sheet. [02:04:59] This was in 1989. I found this sign-in sheet that said Good Old Lower East Side. I didn't realize that my relationship to Good Old Lower East Side went back so far.

—And some elected officials and together they worked, not with us because we weren't the experts. They worked with the people who were on that land to find housing, permanent and/or temporary services, for about seven of the people that were on the land. We don't know what happened to two, but they were there until we started, some were still there until we started to enclose the land. We realized we couldn't just clear the land. We had to enclose the land.

So a tricky thing happened—and I won't mention the organization—but an organization gave us the money to enclose the land. We thought that this organization actually owned one of the plots, and we had been going to them for a couple of years saying, do you own this land? Because it looks like your name but it's a little bit different and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. It was all before computers and you have to go downtown. And they were like, no, no, we don't own it. They actually lied. They actually did own it. [phone rings] Then they let us actually clear the land. They gave us the money to enclose the land with fencing.

And then fifteen years after, it was fully developed with peach trees, birch trees, a strawberry field, a number of other fruits, cherry trees, on that 3rd Street side of the land. The organization called me up and said, that land actually belongs to us and we need it because we want to put some offices there. And we were like, all these years, why would you lie to us? They said oh, our lawyers told us not to tell anyone. We were just naïve. We didn't know any better.

But we knew that was untrue. And we actually took them to court. They won because they could show all of the little letters that I had written saying, do you know who owns this land? So basically they said that she knew that somebody owned it, regardless of whether or not she knew who, or they knew who. So we lost a part of that land.

But the first time that we planted something there, it was actually planted in my living room table at the table that I'm sitting at right now, which is a table that I purchased when my son was born. So it is now almost forty years old. We had moved into the building. We not only had meetings for shareholders here but we had meetings for children too because we wanted to teach them ownership. So we would have them do things in the building. We would have meetings for just the kids, to hear from the kids. We would also take them to places on the block like the community gardens, and also to help us clean up this vacant lot.

So the very first three trees that were planted in this garden were incubated, so to speak, in my living room by my son and another child who lived in the building. She still lives in this building. And we took them to the garden and it was like the whole place was bare, just dirt, these terrible weeds that were really sticky and prickly that kept popping up. That was pretty much all that was there and of course, none of the three survived because we had not yet put in layers of soil that were enriched enough to sustain something living. So the first time that we planted something there was those three trees and it was by those two children. It was pretty cool.

Dziedzic: It's amazing that you still have the same table too.

Harrington: But now, when I walk past that community garden, it's like a child. I mean all of the beautiful branches, all of the beautiful plants, all of the pavement. It took twenty—we had over twenty-five formal groups of volunteers to help us with the development of that community garden over a period of time. I mean everybody from places like banks, to college alumni associations, to corporations, to non-profits like United Way. [02:10:06] A great supporter of the development of community gardens over the years has been New York Cares who, for many years, coordinated volunteer days for public green spaces.

I guess what I left out of this story about community gardens is that they are still at risk. The forty-two community gardens that are owned by the City of New York, every four years, we have to sign—first of all, Mayor Giuliani tried to sell out many of the community gardens from under us when he was mayor. The then-Attorney General Eliot Spitzer took him to court. He took up our cry, and actually sued the City of New York. And as a result, there is a memorandum of agreement—once again—about a piece of land—once again—that requires the city to behave a certain way with regard to a certain number of community gardens. But of those community gardens that are somewhat safe, they are only safe as in every four years, the City of New York requires us to sign a new licensing agreement that basically says, you can do this, you can do this, you can do this, you can have this, you can have this, you can have this. However, if we decide we want to use this land for another purpose, we don't have to give you any warning. We can just do so.

So they are still at risk, and what needs to happen, both as it relates to HDFCs and as it relates to maintain affordable housing, and what needs to happen with regard to community gardens across the city is they need to be called parkland. There is a state law that says any municipality in the State of New York designates a piece of land as parkland, then it must remain as parkland in perpetuity unless the municipality gets permission from the State of New York to use it for another purpose which is very difficult. So Central Park, Prospect Park, Tompkins Square, they are protected by this, but the mayoral institutions of the city have refused to call these community gardens that have existed for, some, almost half a century now, to be called parkland because they always want to have the ability to use them for another purpose. So forty-two of them within Community Board 3 and 2—there are a few in 2—are always at risk. That's why you see places like Elizabeth Street Garden, LaGuardia Community Garden, and some of the ones here, like Children's Magical Garden, have had so many fights with the city about maintaining these as public green spaces.

So the land is the important thing. Keeping it affordable and accessible to the public is primary, and especially, in all of these areas, equity and justice for Black lives is key.

Dziedzic: Can you reflect on what it's meant for you and your son to have this stable, affordable home for so many decades?

Harrington: Oh, gosh. I mean, I probably was a rover, which is one of the reasons why—even philosophically—my mother said, “Please, go to New York and stay with your sister.” [laughs] Okay. But beyond that, I mean, I grew up in a place that my family owned, but after we left, the ownership, the idea of it just disappeared and kind of left me in a place of never thinking about always being somewhere. So I moved a lot.

There's so many worries that one has in life, especially as a Black person, to not have to worry about whether or not, or where, I would be living five years from now—[pauses]. [02:15:02] It's just a primary weight that doesn't figure in my life. I have, for over thirty years, have not had to worry about where I would live. I must say, for the first time though, in many years, for the past couple of years, I sometimes wish that I lived elsewhere because gentrification has destroyed a lot of this community in the ways that I've already described: from housing to public green spaces, to the behavior in the streets, the disregard for lives when it comes to masks and COVID-19. This Karen mentality, that me first, I'm better, you don't exist, it's my right. The quality of life on many of our blocks has really decreased because of gentrification.

It's so funny because I think people think about things like—you always hear this story that, oh, [indicating dread] Black people have moved into the neighborhood. It's funny that, in my experience, it's the other way around. Just to use my son as an example, he modeled for a little while, so he made a little bit of money as a child, and he used to buy me these presents—oh, God, it was always the same thing. I used to have to tell my family, do not let him buy me another lamp. I do not want another lamp. It was just crazy. He'd fixate on one thing and that would be all it was, birthdays, Kwanzaa, whatever, a lamp.

But he also liked to buy me silver jewelry because that's what I liked. So he'd find a place where he could buy me inexpensive silver jewelry. Of course, he didn't do it by himself. He's a kid. And there's this one store that he used to go to on the Upper East Side with my sister, and one day, he went there to buy me something. I think it was like a really inexpensive pair of silver earrings, like ones you—I mean he didn't really have money money. And he was standing

at the door. By then he was about eleven. And he was standing there at the door by himself, and they wouldn't let him in. So that was another story like the cab.

So when people used to ask me when he was growing up, what neighborhood would I not let him be in or whatever, it's the Upper East Side because that's where I know he would have been the most damaged. And when I think about how the neighborhood has gone down, I'm thinking about the people who have moved in, rotating in and out, don't have a vested interest, and it's all about me and how can I enjoy myself. That has really, really contributed to the decline and quality of life. That's otherwise called gentrification.

Dziedzic: That's a really good point.

Harrington: I've got to go.

Dziedzic: Yes, well, thank you. I was going to say thank you so much for your time, and for your clarity, and all the details that you've shared. And I'll be in touch. Don't forget to turn your phone back on. You can turn off the recording and I'll let you know if for some reason I need it in the next day or two.

Harrington: All right, cool, thank you. Take care.

Dziedzic: Thank you. So nice to meet you. Bye-bye.

Harrington: All right, bye.

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