

Edited Text to Speech

AR: This is the oral history interview project through the Seymour library and the Cayuga Museum in collaboration with the New York Heritage Sites. This is Alexis Rivers interviewing bill berry over Zoom on July 30, 2020. So bill where and when were you born?

bb: November 8, 1949: The Women's Hospital, which at the time, I believe was affiliated with St. Luke's Hospital in New York City.

AR: Can you tell me a little bit about your family? What your parents did for a living? If you have any siblings?

bb: I'm just going to pick it up once they started to have children. My dad was originally from New Orleans. My mom was originally from Tampa, Florida. They met when they were young, 18. My dad was in the military but, basically, his job was working for what was called the DefenseContract Administration of the United States government that at the time had an office located in Garden City, Long Island. So he commuted; at the time we were living in the Bronx and a section of the Bronx that eventually became known as the South Bronx, when the War on Poverty started in the New York City housing projects, specifically Paterson Projects. My mom basically was an at home mom. She did not work until we were much older, but her primary thing was just maintaining the home.

There were four children. I have an older sister, we're separated by 14 months, and then five years after me is my brother, who passed away a few years ago. Then five years after him is the baby of the family who's currently living in Baltimore. So right now both of my parents are deceased. They're both interred at Arlington National Cemetery. The oldest daughter is out in California. And the youngest daughter is in Baltimore, and I'm over in New York.

AR: Can you describe any family traditions you had growing up?

bb: family traditions? Oh, that's interesting, because I think when you grow up, you really don't think about traditions in a general sense. One thing, I always remember because my family, my parents rather, were very family centric. They did not go out a lot. This is back in the day when adults tended to socialize with one another in the home, you know. It was infrequent that you went out to a club or something like that, because basically after World War Two, a lot of folks could not afford it. I mean, the New York City housing project started as a way of providing affordable housing for military men and women who were returning from World War Two. So I grew up in a well integrated, multi-ethnic, multicultural neighborhood, which is totally different from where the projects are now. But going back to tradition, the regular thing, the holiday times, Christmas was always something that was celebrated. You get to decorate the tree, get under the tree. I remember growing up, always being fascinated. My brother and I shared a bedroom, my two sisters shared a bedroom, and my parents had their own bedroom because it was a three bedroom apartment. And somebody tugging on me, "Santa Claus has been here, Santa

Claus has been here” and you get up and there's all the stuff and you don't know how it got there.

As I got older, and I was still living at home. You know what my younger brother and younger sister, what then became amazing to me, was the tradition of setting up all their gifts and toys while they were asleep. And it just fascinated me how parents do that to make it a joyful surprise in the morning, but you never knew that growing up. I don't think there were any other particular family traditions. Maybe one more was because, as I was saying earlier, my parents did not go out, they would invite other adults by to play cards, listening to music, dance, you know, you're talking about maybe three or four other couples. They would make hors d'oeuvres. As children, the fun part was the next day, and normally this would be on a Saturday evening, so that Sunday we were able to get all the leftovers that were there. So my parents then created our own little family party, because at a certain point in time, the children, we had to go to bed and the adults stayed up. Going back to the holidays at the time, my mom's uncle had a men's clothing store in Harlem, and when he closed the store on Christmas Eve, he would always come by the house. So that that was kind of special, because it was good seeing him and we were always able to stay up later than what we were supposed to, but by and large, those are kind of the few things that stick in my mind as well as any type of family tradition.

AR: You mentioned that it's a three bedroom apartment. Can you tell me anything else about the house or your neighborhood?

bb: The New York City housing projects, the Paterson projects, were either six story buildings or 13 story buildings, generally. It was one elevator per building, except for the 13 story buildings, I think they had two elevators. We lived on the fourth floor. There was an elevator, three apartments on one side of the building, then you have the elevator, you would go through kind of a fire door, and there were three other apartments on that side. Where we lived, our other two neighbors, an African American family, a Latino family. On the fifth floor, the apartment right above us was a white family, I believe from kind of a German heritage thing so that, you know, you grew up interspersed with other people of other cultures.

The apartment, when you came through the front door, you walked into a kitchen area that was large enough to have the area where you had your refrigerator, the stove, sink, and all that and then an area where you could set up an eating table. Then that would lead directly into a living room, and then the living room would lead into a hallway where to the right, as soon as you left the living room, on the right was the bathroom: sink, toilet, bathtub, because at the time, there were no showers. In fact, I remember when showers were beginning to be introduced in terms of the projects. Now off of that hallway, that's where the bedrooms were. So if you think of a single line, that then branched out three ways: straight ahead was a bedroom, that's where my brother and I slept. To the left was where my two sisters slept, and to the right was where my parents slept.

Giving us a sense of the dimension, the room that I shared: two twin beds, a chest of drawers, down the road, I put up bookshelves on the wall. In my sister's bedroom a full size bed, in my

parents room a full sized bed and in fact...that was also where they had a high chest of drawers and then a low one with which my mom's two mirrors, they had a combination TV, radio, record player that was in their room. In fact, I still have that piece of furniture in my house.

No air conditioning, radiator heating, and the interesting thing during the summer when it was hot, everybody, what you would do is pop open your front door and open up your windows to try to create some level of cross ventilation so that as you move around the building, you always feel your neighbors because nobody, you know the doors would close at night when people went to bed otherwise they will open and you can peek in and folks would say "Hi" and you can say "Hi" to them. So it was a very communal type of way of growing up where people knew one another. Where your mom may say, "We're out of sugar, go next door, get me a cup of sugar" or "We're out of this, out of that." So you had this sense of sharing that I think is devoid today because most folks don't know who their neighbors are, whether they live in a home, or whether they're in some type of multi dwelling complex.

AR: Did your family follow a particular religion? And if so, do you still follow that religion today?

bb: The interesting thing when my parents were married, my dad was Baptist, my mother was raised Catholic. To be able to marry her, he had to agree that the children would be raised Catholic. So that's how we were raised. We went to a Catholic Elementary School, Catholic High School, on Sunday morning mass I was an altar boy. Baptisms, confirmations, all those types of things that Catholics go through. No, I do not practice any form of religion now. I've always had political and social justice issues with the Catholic Church and their position on things that I think are critically important, but yeah, I did grow up in a Roman Catholic household. My mom used to talk about the racism that existed in the church, because the Catholic Church then and probably is still now sadly, Irish, and there was always some degree of discrimination and bias towards black folks. My dad, while he was not a practicing Catholic, he was active, you know, in fundraising drives that would go on, he made sure we went to church every Sunday. From Catholic Elementary School, going to Catholic High School, where there was tuition he would budget to make sure that we were able to have four years of Catholic education. Then after that point, folks make decisions, I don't think anyone in my family went on to a Catholic college. In fact, as I think through it, nope, nobody did and at this point, one sister is probably Baptist and definitely not Catholic. The other sister is more of a spiritualist that may be grounded in Scientology. Um, while I think I'm spiritual, I have no interest in belonging to any type of organized faith-based religious colonization.

AR: What was school like for you?

bb: Elementary school, we had a Catholic Church directory, a convent, a Catholic school, right in the neighborhood. Across the street from that there was a public school, so everybody who lived in the projects you either went to St. Rita's or you went to PS...was it PS 18 or PS 19? I don't remember. But basically the schools were in the neighborhood. So again, children that you would play with you went to school with.

After graduating from the eighth grade, I went to a Catholic High School, a college preparatory school, and back then to get into the more academically elite Catholic High Schools, you had to take standardized tests. I guess the institution I went to, Cardinal Spellman, was in kind of the upper echelon of college prep, academically oriented schools. So I graduated with a regents high school diploma, did all this stuff that that made me eligible to apply to any institution that I wanted to, but I purposely had no interest in going to a Catholic college. So I don't remember applying to any Catholic colleges that were in the Bronx. I mean, Manhattan College was there, Fordham University was there, St. John's University was there. In the New York City area, there were a number of Catholic institutions, but by then I had no interest in a Catholic higher education.

AR: Did you have any hobbies or special interests as a kid? Was there anything sort of popular in the way of music or books that you remember?

bb: I was a child that grew up, that enjoyed playing by myself. I had the little cowboys and Indians, the military figures. I remember I had a, there used to be a TV program called "Howdy Doody," I had a Howdy Doody Marionette that I used to play with. Then you had different, you know, outdoor games that children played, things called *(unclear)*, oh, Johnny On the Pony. Girls used to play hopscotch, we kind of took that over and marbles and skellies, where, you know, you had soda bottle caps and you had a diagram and you had to shoot these bottle caps into certain areas. So it was just like urban-based games. Hide and seek was always a big one, a game called War where you had two teams, and one team would go out and hide all over the place, and then the other team had to find them and if you were tagged then you went to jail, and you couldn't get out of jail. I just remember, your team came and tapped the bench and set free and then the game would continue until everybody was eventually caught.

When I was describing the grammar school I went to and the public school, what separated them was a park with basketball courts and softball fields, and a sandbox and monkey bars and slides and that whole bit so you would utilize that park. Then typical urban stuff during the summer, somebody got a wrench, opened up a fire hydrant, and that's how people cooled off because there were no pools there were no swimming pools. Nobody had second homes where they could take the family to go to so the fun was to open up the fire hydrant, people would run through (and) get wet, cars would come by. You took a soda can, put it over so you can create the stream and then you would splash the cars and that whole bit. Some cars would go through slowly because they figured they can get a free car wash, but it was stuff like that. Then eventually, because of the effects on water pressure, the city decided to put sprinklers on the hydrant so then you had kind of a more shower effect, but it was basically games like that.

Roller skating, stickball, sometimes touch football, basketball, the types of things that were easily affordable. During the holidays, or somebody's got a basketball, well, while the basketball was theirs, it was like the community basketball. If you had to go home, but there was a game going on, somebody would hold your ball. So...from football, to basketball, to softball, I mean, when I was growing up, I was on a softball team, interestingly called the Mohawks. Through the local park, there was a softball league and your team would register and play in that whole bit.

So it was kind of impromptu organized sporting things that enabled children to play and get to know each other. One thing I should mention, and it was not so much a family tradition, but maybe in a community tradition, this was back in the day, that if you were doing something that you should not be doing any adult could chastise you and tell you stop and you stop. This is back in the day when police actually walked a beat. So you had community policing. So you knew the police officer in your beat. This is back in the day where you have butcher shops and fish markets, and you could literally go to...the butcher shop and say, "My mom needs this, can she pay you later?" and folks would wrap up what you need, "Here you go" and then write your name in a little book and whenever you could settle you can settle. So the overall ambience is totally different from today because people had relationships that were of a trusting nature which probably does not exist today. And it was a real sense that, you know, today we hear this, "Oh, we're all in this together." Well that's a crock, a blank, because that's not true. But back then, people really felt that they were all in it together. And if I can lift you up and better you, I was also lifting up myself and bettering myself. So the sense of community was a real sense of community that you do not necessarily find today. Even when we use this term community.

AR: You went to college. Can you describe that for me?

bb: Yeah. Interestingly, I originally thought I was gonna go to Howard University, because I was interested in going into a black institution. I wanted to major in pharmacy, and how it at the time had a School of Pharmacy you would do two years of undergraduate work, then you transferred into the College of Pharmacy for three years of training because I wanted to be a pharmacist looking at research. I was waiting to hear whether or not I was going to get a full scholarship to Howard because my parents definitely could not afford it, but in the meantime I was also accepted to the City University of New York. At the time, Hunter College had two campuses, one campus on 68th Street in Manhattan and the other one up in the Bronx. So I decided, because that semester at the City University started earlier than Howard's I figured, "Let me go here, I'll get a chance to meet some people, and then when it's time for me to go to Howard, I'll go to Howard." To kind of abridge the story, by the time I heard from Howard, I was deeply involved in going to classes at Hunter College in the Bronx, so I didn't take Howard up on its offer. I figured that, after two years, I would just transfer from the City University to Howard.

Well I found out that my ability to handle chemistry courses was not what it should be, so I abandoned the idea of being a pharmacist and kind of having that scientific thing. It was interesting, I went to college in the mid-60's, and to give you a sense of the dynamics: my first year in college, which was in '67, the image of being a college man, you wore a shirt and tie. I mean folks would come to school in kind of a semi formal attire. I remember having females who wore white gloves because that was kind of the expectation.

My Sophomore year, the summer of '68, changed everything. I mean, the kind of counterculture movement was flourishing in San Francisco, hippies, afros, bells, beads, use of drugs, so that the second year you came back and everybody who used to wear shirt and ties and suit up, they come back with their sharp *(unclear)* and bell bottoms and sandals and afros and long hair. It was a totally different mindset, because politically, at the time, the country was at a level

of evil, and college students found themselves having to align, much like today with either kind of a liberal progressive radical front or a conservative “We want things to stay the same” front. At my college, most of the athletes were the traditionalists and the liberal arts folks and the fine art folks were a totally different mindset.

When I started my college career, there was no Black Studies department or any other type of gender or ethnic department, and by the time I left, we did have a Black Studies Department, we had the beginnings of a Women's Studies department. In fact, a few years later, I went back to that department and taught but it was a whole different dynamic and what the City University decided was to make Hunter College in the Bronx its own four year independent institution. So going into my junior year, the college name became Lehman College in honor of a former governor of New York State. Our campus was a few blocks away from the Bronx High School of Science, which at the time was the premier, academically higher echelon, high school, and oftentimes those students would come on campus. And so, in terms of any type of political activity, you had this meshing of high school students with college students, and this is back in the days of Students for a Democratic Society, black clubs, dashikis, afros, that whole bit. It was a time where you became of age based on your political involvement or your cultural involvement.

There was a difference not only in terms of physical apparel, in terms of art, music, culture. Woodstock, *(unclear)*, all of these things where the music to art becomes different culturally than what it used to be and, and it is why we just call it the 60's, because it was a definable moment where the overall society was forced to transform into something that it wasn't prior to Vietnam and political convention conventions, and people exercising their right to vote. So it was a totally different mindset, totally different time period.

AR: So, what made you relocate to Cayuga County, Auburn, from the city?

bb: My background's in higher education. When I left being Executive Assistant to the President of Rockland Community College, my president recommended me to the President of Cayuga Community College for a new deanship they were creating. Went through the interview process, I was offered the position, I had no family, no friends, nobody in Upstate New York. So I came primarily to become Dean of Institutional Initiatives and Strategic Planning at the local community college.

Immediately before then I was at Rockland Community College and that was across, then what was called the Tappan Zee Bridge, is now the Cuomo Bridge. That setting was more suburban. Well, it was interesting to go from being born and raised in the Bronx, working at a number of urban institutions to go to, you know, an institution that was most suburbanly based, and then from there to an institution that existed in a more rural, small rural community. So that's what prompted me to come here.

I came to Cayuga in '97. I bought a house in November of that year, that was my birthday gift to myself, buying a house, and spent most of the winter, spring, and summer of '98 renovating the

house and even when I left the area, I liked the house. I liked the particular neighborhood that I lived in, that I am still living in. So even when I went back down state to work, I was downstate Monday through Fridays, and then Fridays I would get in the car and drive back home, so I was here on weekends and I did that for several years, up to when I retired and decided that I would stay here until I made a decision as to where exactly I wanted to live.

AR: What do you like about living here? What do you not like about living here?

bb: The dynamics of that question have become fluid...my wife is originally from Auburn, born and raised. Two of her children: one daughter is local here in Auburn, the other one is married with two of our grandchildren in Clarence Center. I learned a while ago that if I had to live in Auburn and limit my cultural social activities in Auburn, I would've probably left a long time ago. So I knew that if I was willing to get in the car and drive any place from an hour to two hours in any direction, I could get the type of cultural enrichment that I needed. I continued to like the house even though it's an old house, it was built in the 1870's and there's always something that goes on, that becomes a pain. I also like the fact that I see sky, you know, when you're down state, because of the nature of high rise buildings and everything else, you really don't see sky. I really when I first came up here, and even now you know, at night, you see stars, you see the aura around the moon, there's a different sense of space, you know, your space is expansive, where your space downstate, and where I was living is more constricted just by the nature of the resonances that you tend to live in.

I do think that at its core, people here have a certain spirit. I think that's become more difficult as people find themselves more divided and steeped into kind of a dogma that others may not agree with. In my mind, I've never seen Auburn as the place where I would permanently be. At some point in my career, I had the opportunity to take a sabbatical, which basically then became a year sabbatical and I went to live in Toronto, and it was a different experience living in another country with a different set of cultural norms. I've always said, it would be kind of cool to live in one place for half the year and live in another place the other half of the year, I just haven't decided what that should be. I've thought about completely moving out of the country and talk to people about Costa Rica, Panama, things like that, but there hasn't been any concrete effort to make that happen. In my life, I've had the opportunity to travel around the world, so I have a sense of world cultures and in different people, and how people globally see certain things differently from an American mindset. But for now, I'm okay in terms of being here.

An interesting point is when I kind of settled and because initially when I came up here, I was living in Geneva...no, not yet. No, I was living in Ithaca and was commuting from Ithaca to Auburn, and then stopped doing that as winter set in and driving conditions got worse, and had a good relationship with with a few local motels in the city that enabled me to have kind of a Monday to Friday resonance, and the room would be held for me while I was downstate for the weekend, and I would come back. I've always said that I may not necessarily like Auburn, but I like where I live and probably if I was in a different section. I don't know if I would still have been here, particularly when you get into the idea of a six to eight hour drive twice a week, and the toll that takes on one's spirit and one's physicality. I don't know but I'm here now.

I don't know if I have a good sense of not liking because I'm an adaptive person. So over time, things that I don't like I found ways to adapt to it and I don't necessarily worry about it. I was coming to my wife this morning I said, "Well, I've gone from two squirrels in the backyard, no it's five out here." And I remember there was a period a few years ago where there were so many squirrels, I had to, you know, do a trap and release and take the situation and have hired professional folks to trap squirrels and that whole bit. I used to have, almost once a year, bats in the house, that hasn't happened, but I pretty much adapted to that I could actually capture the bat myself, and then, you know, release it as long as I knew it wasn't rabid or anything. Japanese beetles I dislike because they destroy roses, but you know, I adapt to that. So I guess what I'm saying: anything that I dislike, over time, I found ways to take that dislike, and at least make it neutral, where it doesn't bother me the way it used to bother me. So I'm not sure that I can just tick off a list of these are the things that I dislike, or these are the things that peeved me.

I mean, like, last year, I had major lilac bushes. I mean, I'm not talking about short bushes, I'm talking about big, you know, tree-like bushes that the city made me cut down because they said that it was a pedestrian and vehicular obstruction. I went through petitioning the city, I went to the Historical Association, because, you know, we're talking about an ecological system that has been in existence in this neighborhood for well over 100 years, and that was easily documentable. But nothing could go on, so I totally disliked that. But then what happened, I said, "Okay, now that I have to do that I have to rethink certain areas of the property, and how do I create something that I could be at peace with?" Well it's there, there's been some adjustments, and probably in a few years, it'll be exactly the way I want it, because I guess my personality is if there's something that bothers me, something that I dislike: okay, what's the pathway to move that, at least from being negative to either being neutral, or being positive? I can't just sit here and say, "Well, yeah, I dislike this. I dislike that."

I like the relationship I have with small business owners. I like the fact that you can impact local government, county government, certain city agencies that when you live in a big city or downstate you're not able to do just based on the number of people in the population and the bureaucratic intricacies that exist. So there's that sense of being involved, if you want to be, even though at times, you know, folks take certain positions that hurt the hell out of me again, you know, you try to figure out what's the larger issue? What's the prize you're really after? And you figure out a strategy and go from there.

AR: How has your neighborhood changed since you moved here?

bb: When I moved here? There were less cars. I used to joke about if you were in downtown Auburn, had a red light, and there were two or three cars at that red light, that was a traffic jam. That has changed, is the number of cars have changed. My immediate neighborhood, there are parts of the neighborhood that are transitional in terms of multiple housing units in one structure, so I dislike that because I think the nature of residential communities are being changed. For me, one of the things, I remember coming here and I used to tell folks, you know, eventually

you're going to start seeing deer in Auburn. Of course folks thought that I had lost my mind; you now have deer in Auburn. I remember saying that I would really like to see a red fox on my property. Well, I had the opportunity to see a red fox on my property. The latest thing I used to say to folks, you know, black bears are coming. They're gonna be here pretty soon. Everybody said, "There you go again, where do you get these outlandish ideas from?" And what do we see now? You have big black bears, adjacent to Auburn and Fleming and some other places. So that whole ecological sense of things have changed that I think has an impact on the community, but by and large I live in a stable community. If people move out, it's because they're going to permanently relocate to Florida, or they're downsizing from a house to rent an apartment because the children are out of the house, they don't need that type of space anymore. All in all, there's been kind of a stable consistency. That is good.

You probably see more folks walking that you don't know, that you don't see, who may be recent transplants, who may not bring the same gentility that I was used to. In fact, the other day, I was remarking one of the things I liked living here is that, you know, you could pass people you didn't know, go "Good morning," they would go "Good morning to you." You know, they don't know you, you don't know them, but it was that sense that I think creates neighborhoods, that creates community. But that's beginning to change. I think the cultural and racial dynamics in this city is changing. I think there are a number of institutional issues that are going through a rethinking process as to who and what they serve and how they serve folks. But, you know, by and large, I always remind myself when I came up here in '97, the motto for the Tourism Board was "Got Milk, Got Corn." I thought that was the most hilarious thing I've ever heard. I used to send people bumper stickers because they were bumper stickers that said, "Got Milk, Got Corn." I used to send it to my friend's house saying, "Can you imagine that, me of all people living up here?"

Then at some point, I started to understand the agricultural dynamics of living in a part of this state that ranks high in corn production, that ranks high in dairy production and started to understand that "Got Milk, Got Corn" had a deeper meaning to it. Folks would say, "Well, do you like living Upstate better than Downstate?" and my response was, and still is, it's not that type of comparison. Each part offers something that's totally different, that's unique than the other part. The issue between Downstaters and Upstaters is that nobody takes the time to try to understand that dynamic. So if you're Downstate, anybody that lives north of the Tappan Zee Bridge is a bunch of hicks and people Upstate look at Downstaters and find that they're arrogant. Well, the thing is that nobody has really taken the time to understand that there are different dynamics that go on. So that if, if you live in a place like Cayuga County, you live in the Finger Lakes region, you understand that how people do things, how they think, are basic to the environment in which they live in, and it doesn't make it better or worse, it just makes it different.

AR: What sort of significant world events have you lived through? Obviously, the pandemic being one of them, and you mentioned the civil rights in the 60's, things like that.

bb: In terms of world events, I've been fascinated with what's going on in Hong Kong vs. Mainland China. I had the opportunity to spend time in Hong Kong on both sides. Hong Kong is

basically two areas separated by a waterway, and it's always had this kind of independent, capitalistic way of thinking, and I was there the year prior to when Mainland China was going to kind of re-embrace Hong Kong and bring it into their form of government. So I find that very intriguing and interesting. I do know we've published some writers from Hong Kong. So, you know, I tend to follow that.

I've been to Thailand, so I tend to follow kind of the political intrigue that goes on in that country. So places that I've been, I tend to see the world in terms of the dynamics that are going on currently, and try to make some sense of that based on my firsthand observations when I was there. In-country, the current political divide continues to intrigue me. I joke about that I need to detox from cable news programs, because it seems that's the only thing that I'm watching if the television is on. Those political dynamics are intriguing to me, and how as a country prepares for a presidential election, that we're falling back into behaviors that do not necessarily reflect the mood of the country and then maybe again, it does. So I think nowadays, most people, it is hard to divorce your localized living and lifestyle because so much of that is influenced by kind of a national ambiance and nuances. In certain cases, you know, global things...maybe, in my younger days, that the world was a lot bigger. Now with technology, with the ways we communicate, that world has shrunk. So I can talk to a colleague in Pakistan, who's well aware of social justice issues in New York and in the United States in general. What has happened is that the world community has, in essence, shrunk down where whatever's going on in the world does have in one way or another an impact on your life, even though you may not easily recognize it.

AR: Well, thank you very much for being a part of this project. I have enjoyed the time getting to know you and this time getting to know more about you.