

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of an interview with Meryl Meisler by Cynthia Tobar on December 14, 2016 in New York City. This interview is part of "Cities for People, Not for Profit": Gentrification and Housing Activism in Bushwick. Meryl Meisler has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Meryl Meisler

[Start of recorded material 00:00:00]

Cynthia: So we're beginning. Thank you so much. Today is Wednesday Dec. 14, 2016. Can you please state your name and occupation?

Meryl Meisler: My name is Meryl Meisler. I'm an artist who uses photography.

Cynthia: Thank you so much for participating in the project. I wanted to get a sense of what your earliest memories were growing up, whether you grew up in New York City. Can you tell me a little bit about that time period?

Meryl Meisler: You want to know about my growing up in New York City?

Cynthia: A little bit about your background but whatever you feel comfortable sharing, we can begin working with that.

Meryl Meisler: Okay, I was born in 1951 in the South Bronx, and I lived there until I was aged two-and-a-half. Then my family, my parents, used the GI Bill, because my dad was a veteran, to purchase a new home in Massapequa, Long Island. But every Sunday, religiously, we'd either go to The Bronx to visit my grandparents and aunts and uncles or they would come to us. And so that was my entire life, going back and forth to The Bronx and being out in Long Island.

I went away to college and studied art education. I went to graduate school and in 1975 I sublet a room that was available in a house where a distant cousin lived in the Upper West Side. I moved to New York City in 1975 and I have loved it ever since.

Cynthia: Tell me about that time period in 1975 [unintelligible 00:01:43] in the city and what it was -

Meryl Meisler: Well, 1975 in the city was a time when, well, there were people out on the streets because of cutbacks, budgets and pulling back of social services. A lot of people who were mentally ill and needed to be cared for no longer had a place, and so there was a new influx of homeless people on the street. The city itself was facing bankruptcy. They had problems with bonds and difficult times. New York City had experienced the depletion of people leaving, white flight.

Mine was not the only family that sought a new place out in Long Island. \$14,000, you could own a house. The 1970s were hard times for the city. It was a perfect time for me because I was confused. I'd just graduated from school. I had just come out. I knew I wanted to be an artist. I didn't know if I wanted to teach although my background and college degree was in education. I wanted to make a living as an illustrator. A few years earlier I was accepted to Columbia University for grad school and I turned it down because I feared the city, because all I heard about was people getting raped and robbed. But moving in with these cousins introduced me to their friends who were very different from what I was used to, just all kinds of people, all kinds of backgrounds. We'd go to salsa parties, up to East Harlem and to Lower East Side. You know, just meeting people from all walks of life becoming your friends was fantastic to me.

Cynthia: And where did your cousin settle, where you moved in with him, I guess? What neighborhood was that?

Meryl Meisler: My cousin's home was on 92nd between Columbus and Central Park. The family bought it at a cost of what you couldn't buy a parking garage space now. I have photographs of that block from the '70s because I started just carrying my camera everywhere. People look at some Manhattan photos and think that's the South Bronx. Those are the people that I was with. They're Upper West Side gang members. Still they publish my photos in different countries and label them the South Bronx. I say, "That's the Upper West Side or Central Park West!"

There was a local gang and yes, there were buildings that were abandoned but they were being, you know, renovated or being built up again. There were abandoned buildings. There were the tenements, homes in disrepair or vacant. But I found the city to be a very exciting place and the perfect place for me at that point because you could do anything, you could be anything, and it felt right.

Cynthia: Can we can a step back and find out about what compelled you to be a photographer in the first place? What made you fall in love with the camera?

Meryl Meisler: Okay, what made me fall in love with the camera is it's in my genes. My father was a printer by trade. He was a great photographer. Our family pictures are amazing photographs. My father is Jack Meisler and my father's father, Murray Meisler, were both photographers as well. Anytime I saw my grandfather he had a serious camera and a light meter on him, and he used it.

When people talk about the story of the nanny, Vivian Maier, that she took photographs in Chicago I relate to her. She was a woman who worked as a nanny and never showed them. They were discovered after her death, and they probably were in among the greatest street photographs. I understand how that could be so because even though my grandfather was always taking

photographs, maybe he'd show you one or two. He did it because he had to do it, because that's what you do. If you're a poet, you write poems. If you sing, you know, you sing. Your life, you live it, and so photography seemed natural to them.

Around 1959... I don't remember, I was six or seven years old when I got my first little camera, the Adventurer, from my parents, a little box camera. I took pictures of my family and friends and school trips. It's the same subjects I done my entire life. You know what to do and people trust you. But in 1973, so I had graduated from school, an art education major. I discovered I wanted to become an artist. I had taken an art course for non-art majors and the professor said, "Did you ever think about becoming an art major?" I felt my heart go boom-boom-boom-boom and I called my parents, and they said, "As long as you get this teaching degree so you can always make a living."

It's like okay, I graduated in Art Ed but didn't know if I wanted to teach. I applied to graduate school but I didn't know if I wanted to go or not. Like I said, I was scared to go to Columbia. I got accepted in Wisconsin. They gave me a scholarship. My one Yankee grandmother, Elizabeth Suplinsky Meisler, grew up in Wisconsin. So then, I decided okay, yeah, I'll go to that one. I knew they had a photography program so I thought I might as well learn how to use a real camera. I bought a 35-millimeter camera and enrolled in the Photo 101 course. I'm in a photo 101 class now.

The year before, my final year in college, on a break I went to The Museum of Modern Art and I saw the Diane Arbus show and I was moved because they were genuine photographs of human beings. I was moved. And so, that was an influence. In graduate school I started as an art education major; that's how I got in. I took this photo course, photo 101 and working in the darkroom. And on vacation I started taking pictures of my family and friends, and I made the contact sheets and showed them to my professor.

He looks at them and he goes, "What is this?" I said, "What do you mean?" "Well, what's going on in these pictures? Like these backgrounds, this décor, you know, the people fooling around, everything about it." I said, "This is where I come from." "I've never seen anything like it." I'm like, "Everyone I know, this is where I come from," because of course everyone's home is very decorated and they had ornaments and things that told stories. He kind of said it reminds him of his own work when he photographed Native Americans living in Arizona, that they had things from their cultural upbringing that kind of told a story, like a timeline of their lives.

And so, that's how I started to understand photography as cultural history. I was also introduced to the work of Jacques Henri Lartigue. A lot of the WPA photographers inspired me but the work of Lartigue, who as a child photographed his families and friends in his well-to-do Parisian turn of the century life, were so funny. They were so joyful that I knew I wanted to

photograph my family and friends, people I knew my whole life. And I started doing that, but they did possess humor because I'm so close to these people.

And then I wanted to get more detail so I moved onto a medium format camera. I switched out of Art Ed because I already had a teaching degree and my drawing professor Don Anderson became my major professor. My concentration was drawing/ illustration because I wanted to make a living as art. I come from a very ... well, if you might call a "working class" background., working, you know. You need to make a living and you need to have a trade, you know. My father was a printer, his brother an electrician, my grandfather a mechanic. You need to have a profession or a trade, and so I needed to have a trade as well.

But I didn't want to be a commercial photographer because it's not how I photographed. But I did do illustrations. I see in detail. I draw in detail too and I did freelance illustrations for Scholastic, The New York Times, and a lot of other publications. I just needed a steady income because I'm not a trust fund baby. I've always had to pay my way, you know, stay on your own two feet. And the bills came on a regular basis and the checks were always in the mail.

I did use my photography portfolios, because I continued photographing once I moved to the city. I also wanted to study with Diane Arbus' mentor Lisette Model, who was teaching at the new school. I submitted a portfolio of my Long Island series. I called it my "Long Island Jewish American Princesses, but family and friends". I submitted that portfolio to Lisette Model and she loved my work, and I was accepted into her class, and she was very encouraging.

I continued. I was living in the city and commuting to see my mom. You know, she was in Long Island. My parents were separated; dad was in his printing factory in Chelsea. You know, I was photographing what I grew with up, what I knew, the people I knew and loved, and then carrying my camera with me everywhere I went. You know, going out at night, walking along the streets. It was exhilarating and I've just started to show that work seriously now.

But I did get a grant. Almost two years of my life I made a living as a photographer. In the late '78 and '79 there was something called the CETA Program, Comprehensive Employment Trainee Act. It was like the WPA of the '70s and artists were employed to do public work in New York City. I submitted a portfolio to many agencies. The one I was accepted to was the American Jewish Congress. I was one of three photographers who were documenting Jewish New York and I created an archive for them. But I also continued my own personal project which was to me photograph, document, write about my family's coming to America, my roots here, and where my family was now, and research it.

During the time of CETA I also, and I was loaded. I was making \$10,000 a year. I was never so wealthy. I had this steady paycheck. I had set up a darkroom in our laundry room there. And I was getting my steady CETA paycheck, going assignments for them. We had to do community service; for my community service, I chose to teach because I mean I graduated number one at Buffalo State in teaching. But I was scared to teach and I needed encouragement. I taught photography to homebound handicapped adults and to some children at the Education Alliance to get some experience. I wanted to try it out.

Even during that whole time, when I told my dad I got a job, he was like, "Well, when are you going to get a real job?" I went to [CETA Ed] then, and again, I was always freelance illustrating all along. Also during that period, I was going out at night. The disco scene erupted and I erupted with it, and I carried my camera and danced with me everywhere I went. That's why I didn't show those pictures. Well, let's see, I worked for the America Jewish Congress by day. They were wild.

After CETA ended I'm still freelancing. The checks are always in the mail. I needed a steady income and I got a part time four-day-a-week job teaching art photography through the Learning to Read Through the Arts program. I started in 1979 four days a week. I taught first year at the Upper West Side. The second year I was in the Lower East Side. The third year I was in East New York and I was on a waiting list to get a fulltime job with benefits, you know, the same things as we want - healthcare, vacations, going towards a pension, thinking future. I wanted a fulltime job with benefits and I was on a waiting list.

And then a letter came in the mail that number 489361, that's my file number, that your name had come up on the waiting list for a fulltime appointment, a fulltime job with benefits. And it said Intermediate School 291. 231 Palmetto Street. You can show up on this date to interview and basically you could accept a job but if you turned it down, I would be off the waiting list altogether for a fulltime job. So, December 1981, here I am teaching in East New York and I take the time off to go for an interview. I get on the subway and there I am in Bushwick, and it looked like nothing I'd ever seen in person. It looked like pictures of art that I imagine Beirut looked like at the time, or I heard.

It looked like there was a war there last week and now it was just quiet. It was just abandoned buildings and things in [disray] and up the block is this school. I literally walked towards it as if there were ... It's the week before Christmas. Maybe they killed the other art teacher. I went in and I brought my portfolio of my own work and stuff I'd done the last two and a half years teaching, and I accepted the job. When you were appointed to a school, you feel almost like you're a serf. You belong to that district and it's very hard to get out.

But I liked it. It was so challenging and the teachers were so dedicated. The middle school was very hippy. Either you like middle school or you don't like it. I'm one of those people who liked middle school and I found it interesting and extremely challenging. I didn't photograph during the day at school. I barely even carry a camera because the year before, at my last day at school I'd carried my medium format camera to school to take pictures of the kids that day at a party. And somebody had walked into the classroom, which is a big open room ... You had several classes were together ... and looked at me and said ... He's wearing his three-piece suit and he says, "I have a gun. Give me your camera," so I gave him my camera.

I lost my favorite camera that had been with me everywhere since 1976 and even though I replaced it, it wasn't the same. It's like getting a clone of your friend. You know it's not the same person; it just looks like them. When I was working in Bushwick I cried plenty. It was hard and I was like I'm going to keep going. I started noticing, gee, kids are playing. You know, it's like look at the pretty light, you know. Okay, there are low buildings. Okay, those storage buildings ... but it was a pretty light in the neighborhood and families come out, right, and started recognizing things.

I got a point-and-shoot camera and started. By February of 1982 I just started carrying my little point-and-shoot camera and bought very inexpensive slide film because I no longer had time or energy to work in the darkroom. Because if you become a teacher your life is then less of planning and classroom survival and classroom management, AKA classroom survival and trying to tell yourself, "I am going to ride these wild horses. Fuck it."

I photographed. I took a little camera and on my way, out of the subway ... I was living Chelsea by then and on the back, I would just take pictures of what I saw when I looked through the window. Or if I noticed that there was ... Through the window of the school there were like acres of abandoned buildings, you know, burn out buildings. During lunchtime, you had to sign out because it wasn't even safe to out. You had to sign out to show them where you are, and come back in. I would, you know, take a picture of something I saw. If somebody was picking bricks, or they were taking down a building, I photographed it.

I did that for 14 years. I worked in Bushwick for 14 years, but like I said, it's hard to leave. I could have left because I ended up starting a photography program or being invited to start a photography program for the kids. I got my students cameras and ad darkroom. I was free to create my own curriculum and I decided to make it about Bushwick because I noticed that the buildings, even though they were dilapidated, the half wrecked down, they were beautiful. There was a story there. I knew there was something important.

These were limestones. These were mansions. I mean these were beautiful, beautiful structures.

I wanted to know what's with this neighborhood so I started researching it and going in to the [Brooklyn] Historical Society. There was no internet but going in to find side collections at the Historical Society. I made the history of the neighborhood the focus of my curriculum with students and they photographed and wrote about the neighborhood. They drew about it. I became part of a group of art educators who called ourselves Artist Teachers Concerned. Our concern was showing, exhibiting socially motivated student artwork.

Students could write about the things important to them in their lives, their own struggles, their own inspirations, things that they were concerned about and express it through art. And we started showing the work, not on the bulletin boards, where, you know, kids, they imitate what they see. If you see fire that's going on in your neighborhood, kids torch the bulletin boards. Like you knew you had a good bulletin board if no one set it on fire.

We started showing the students' work in galleries, side by side with professional artists, side by side with famous artists. If a student's work got featured in the New York Times, you know, it's ... A piece that they about their school not being built. It opened without a certificate of occupancy. There were hanging live wires. There were things not finished. It was unsafe physically and they made gigantic question marks about things that they would change about the school if they could and they wrote about it. They circled them with red. They even put in a big [unintelligible 00:22:47]. That piece was up in The Whitney Biennial.

When you're a creative person, you're an artist, or any kind of person with a passion, if you go into teaching or any job take your passion and put it into it. That's not the only way. I think that's the most fun way to do it and it comes through as true. And so, I was enjoying it at that point because if you're there for one year, two year, three year ... By 14 years I mean you know generations of families. You know kid's cousins. It's different. You're part of it, and I stayed there until I went on sabbatical, and then I wanted a change of pace.

If you're going to do a career, because I was career teacher, you know, you do it for three years. You just shake it up a little bit. I was working in digital media and I wanted to go to a school where I could teach art, using computers. While on my sabbatical, I interviewed and found a different school that happened to be in Manhattan. But those 14 years in Bushwick were very special and I'm glad I kept those pictures, because I didn't know I was capturing a time that not many people were looking at.

Cynthia: What were some of the issues that you observed in the art that students were making through, the art that you were making, that resonated with you about the day-to-day life for residents in Bushwick?

Meryl Meisler: Well, things that I found that resonated with me in Bushwick was that on the surface it could look like you're in a war zone, but you weren't. People were living there. They were living like anywhere else. This is their version of Americana. They were finding joy. They were finding laughter. They had friendships. They fell in love. They had fights. They had squabbles. They were parents, cared about their children. Children cared about their parents. You know, like the same thing everywhere else. And they were coming to school sometimes in distress. There were some kids came to eat, but also nourished. They were getting care. They came to feel welcome.

The teachers cared very deeply because they could've left, but there was also a lot of laughter and there was also a lot of joy. You know, if you have a slab of concrete, a dandelion will grow through it. Kids had sparks of energy and excitement. In fact, one of the reasons I did switch is that after I won a national teaching award and the superintendent offered me a job in a new school they were starting up at the district office, an alternative school. And I said, "No, I'm in the middle of a really major project I'm working on with the kids." I would apply for grants and get them to supplement the income of the school.

If you're an artist you're used to applying to get grants and getting rejected. You apply for them as an educator. It's like, "Fuck ..." I'm so good at it that I would get a lot of grants to supplement big projects we wanted to do. They even offered me a job grant finding at the district office. I said, "That's not what I want to do." I said, "That's what I do because I have to do it, but I really like being with the kids." I didn't want to be in an office, but they said they were starting this new school. I said, "Well, I am interested in working with computers, teaching it as an art medium." They said, "Then we will have a lab, a computer lab." So, I gave it a try.

The era, it was an installation that we were building a [goal]. The theme of the installation "You're never too young for AIDS education" was for the medical facility. Or what was it, [two arrows]? [Unintelligible 00:27:13], and kids had their questions and we found out the answers through our studies. I also got licensed to teach about AIDS and HIV, so that's about the time as well, and I feel we had to finish this project, you know, because, I made a commitment to it. And I also want to see it through so I said, "If you can wait until the following year, fine."

And I started at another school, this alternative school in same building as the District Office on Bushwick Avenue. We needed the school year '93, '94 and it was a school that was basically for students who needed special services, special education, but their parents or guardians wouldn't sign for it, and I

didn't like it. I like a range of kids. I like to see the spark in their eye. I like to get a bit of excitement. I think it's good to be able to have a heterogeneous classroom setting. There were the kids who have different qualities and behavioral problems or learning disabilities. That's fine, bilingual, but fine, I like a mix.

I learned that being in the classroom with every child that had difficulty was not for me. We couldn't go on a school trip together without, you know, something happening. It wasn't the population for me. As a teacher, anyone going on to teach, it's like every school has its own culture. It's like a family. It's like saying you're coming from Mars and you can move at any human household. Not all humans are the same and every family is different and so, yeah, you've got to get a feel for what it is and it wasn't the right place for me.

In the second year when the computer lab opened, they gave it to somebody else, you know, a principal's daughter. And I said, "Okay, you know, I'll make things work my way, you know." But I was ready for a sabbatical and so I decided I'd do a sabbatical, I'll look for a new situation. That school ended up closing. It wasn't functioning right. It wasn't just me, okay. But not every teacher feels for every grade, for every population, for everything. I think people who teach in situations where everyone has such learning and emotional issues, give them credit. It's not an easy job. It takes a special person. I wasn't that special person for this group and it wasn't the right setting for me.

But then again, I guess the school wasn't working right anyway so it closed. So, I switched and that's the only reason I left Bushwick. Probably if I was still at 291 I still probably would have there until I retired.

Cynthia: And what were some of the most memorable moments I guess you saw all those 14 years you were teaching, or those years you were teaching in Bushwick? What things stand out in your mind of the neighborhood as -?

Meryl Meisler: What things stand out? Okay, well, you know, I have to admit the day that a moving truck came to our school to take the one big question mark we made and put it in that truck to bring to The Whitney Biennial and hang it up. And then taking a school trip with the kids to see their work; that was amazing! That's like, you know, incredible.

What things stand out? Just sort of the friendship you usually form with the kid, you know, friendships where they trusted you, where they let you in to lives, or when you had a difficulty and you figured out how to make a lesson out of it. Like, you know, I had a bilingual class and they all came in acting up and really loud. They must have had something during lunch that got them all riled up and the classroom management was not the way I thought it should be.

I said, "Okay, that's it!" and I'd speak in all Spanish. I can speak some Spanish. "Put down your books. We're having a test right now and it's an essay and I'm going share it with your homeroom teacher and your parents: Reasons to be thankful for a free education," and they wrote it out and they wrote it out. And then I corrected (for spelling and some grammar) and did re-wrote it. It could be English. It could be Spanish. And then we took those essays and I taught them calligraphy and we made a beautiful calligraphy pages about them. And then we made a gigantic composition book about the piece, and then we added displays in.

So, doing something that you might have just liked closed the door and walked away and say, "I've got to get another kind of profession," when you figure out another way to do it and that it was all something we learned together. And that they admitted to themselves that, you know, they were there to learn, and why you're there to learn. It stands out as a high moment, taking a low moment and making it a high.

I guess the auditorium, when there were recitals, making this scenery for the plays, you know, all sorts of things. It was fun and I made friendships as well.

Cynthia: And how has Bushwick changed from what you experienced from the time you were teaching to what it is now?

Meryl Meisler: Bushwick has gone through a transformation. I mean who doesn't in 40 years, right? But in the time that I was there I started witnessing transformation physically in the neighborhood. Because like, for example, I said I was always applying for grants to supplement the program and I could see that they were always like blocks after blocks of vacant burnt out buildings. And then they started taking them down... They, it feels like sometimes it was one person in their own little hand truck climbing up and taking down the buildings and leveling them, and teams of people, and it was just like a lot of rubble.

I applied for a community garden to do an Operation Green Thumb community garden with the students, and I did a painting. When you went to the show ... Did you go over to the staff [unintelligible 00:34:16]?

Cynthia: Yes.

Meryl Meisler: And there was a painting of the garden. That was part of my proposal [unintelligible 00:34:22] because I always had to supplement, always wanted, I was not going to stop doing my own work because I was a teacher. Because I taught, so I continued to be an artist, all right. I could not divorce the two from each other, nor would I ever want to.

I applied for an Operation Green Thumb grant to plant a garden on that spot and I get back a letter that's nice. But that land is allocated for a public project. Oh, okay, that's interesting, and I think I ended switching the plan and making something for the front of the school where we planted trees. So, we did a

different a project and low and behold, what comes up in that place, because here I'd painted a garden? Hope Gardens went up there and so they put up this ... Well, it ended up being the last full scale housing project I believe in the United States.

It's Hope Gardens in Bushwick and it was well planned because it was built in the scale of the neighborhood, not these gigantic towers that just don't work for human beings very well. They're built low rise and with garden areas around it and the fencing, and those buildings are still in great condition, you know, a nice place to be. And I started witnessing, over the course of 14 years that other vacant lots, that new buildings were going up and it was obvious it was done with community in mind.

There was a community planning involved and I know there was. I was aware of enough about the Bushwick community because I was researching and then meeting some of the people that there was community input from the politicians and from also, you know, from the neighborhood about what to put in place. And so, it was done mindful of the neighborhood and the community and I think that's very important as part of the success.

To my surprise, in 2007 ... Back then the only artists that you saw or art, obviously, were the kids, many children were extremely artistic. That's how I managed to get respect, because I was an artist. They had a high respect for the arts and because you also see the arts on the walls, the graffiti. The one thing I didn't photograph are all the beautiful murals about people who died too young. Those I didn't photograph because they made me sad. I was looking to photograph things that were uplifting because I didn't want to quit.

I mean I can remember very sad moments. I could bring you stories, but I guess I wanted to focus on the more upbeat, but there was a lot of very sad stories. In 2007, I get an email from someone ... Okay, someone named, you know, [Adam Schwartz]. "I work at IS111, which is that school on Starr Street where my spouse used to work. And Starr Street back when I was teaching there was the crack capital. Oh, I mean if you think about the times, it was also, it was a very hard time. We're not just talking about, you know, African Americans, of the things that led up to the blackout and the riots. And the destruction in Bushwick, it wasn't an overnight thing. It was a buildup of many causes.

There were many things that brought that on but there was also AIDS, HIV, drugs, crack. When I started teaching in Bushwick, it's teachers talking about that the crack babies are coming, they're coming of age. And they will have a whole another level of needs through no fault of their own, because of physiological things that have happened, being born addicted to crack. Or being born to a mom who was on crack, you know, they said the neurological changes ...

That was a hardship, that's for sure, and children who had very special needs. And Bushwick was becoming a manufacturer of crack. It's like Starr Street was known that people made and put out the crack, or my school was over Knickerbocker Avenue. It was known, you know. It had the nick name of 'The Well'. You could get any kind of drug there. I mean I remember when Hernandez Park was down, [Marie Hernandez] Park, but it was a park that you wouldn't go into. There were no playgrounds for the kids to play in, not the Hispanic ... Abandoned burnt out playgrounds. Even the schoolyard was a wreck and there was no place to play that was safe.

Constant [unintelligible 00:40:15] I photographed, going back. So as soon as I got my camera I wanted to photograph the things that I'd found, like a kid playing basketball, putting up, you know, a very used hoop on an abandoned building with the Xs saying that it was unsafe to go with it. And filled with tires all around, but they were jumping for joy. That human being's search ... You know, they lift up, they search, they want, they want to force a love and joy and play.

Cynthia: And you had touched upon this earlier about how in 2007 there was some sort of a turning point. Can you tell me about that?

Meryl Meisler: Okay, essentially, 2007 was a turning point to me, thank you, is that I got an email from someone to saying, "Oh, my name is Adam Schwartz and I got your name from John Napolillo, who was someone I used to work with. "And I'm looking to apply for a community program exhibition at the Brooklyn Historical Society about the changes in Bushwick from 1977 to 2007," he said, "because John always tells me about, you know, like what it was like teaching back here in the '70s and his stories are wild."

He kind of wrote, he said, "I've been looking to find pictures of Bushwick from like 70s or early '80s and up to '90s. And the only thing I could find is, you know, the news journalism pictures of the blackout. I can't find anything. And Napolillo said, "Get Meisler. She was always taking pictures." So, I wrote back to him. Now here I was in life, my 28th year of teaching so I was a little on the edge, a little crispy. And I said, "Well, I have boxes and boxes of slides. They're in the basement. They say Bushwick, but I can find them. I can look through them and, sure, you know, I could scan to you but then I could scan them and you could submit. Sure, why not."

Well, we did. He did the proposal using my pictures and it was accepted, and we had a show at the Brooklyn Historical Society, which was a coming home to me because that's where I did research with my students. That's where I taught them about their neighborhood, that all the great people that came here, or that abandoned theater, the Bushwick Theater, that's just like a big druggie den, drugs and prostitution and dilapidated. You would dare hang out there. It was a magnificent theatre. It was a live board bill. It was the opera house. You know, like Caruso performed there, near Bushwick Avenue, which looked like

a derelict row of mansions. The Mayor of New York City lived there (on Bushwick Avenue). We looked together to find out that they're walking in the shadows of giants, that it's here. They're in a neighborhood where there's great history, recent history, and they are the new history.

So here we were at the Brooklyn Historical Society, and we were going to do a show there. And I was no longer teaching in Bushwick but I remembered it well, of course, and I had these images that were all the [unintelligible 00:43:39]. We put on that show and worked with some local schools here to do it. Seeing the pictures on the wall, I realized that they were beautiful images. It didn't matter if they were done with a snapshot camera or that even some of them had little green spots of mould that I had to Photoshop off and things like that. I knew they were beautiful images.

Also at that time Adam says, "You know, they're going to have a Bushwick Open Studios." It was like, I was thinking oh, isn't that cute? Artists ... I can even believe there were artists there, and to be a part of Bushwick Open Studios It was the second year of doing it and I felt ... At first I said no, then I said okay, and I put some of my photographs in the Life Café on Flushing Avenue. Somebody even bought a picture. You know, it was like a good feeling. I felt like that's pretty amazing. It was all over the arts community. Oh, wow, there's a gay pride parade. It's like, I can't imagine what it's like being a lesbian teacher (in the 1980s_ I mean you just didn't talk about it. It was like, you know, people you were close you just didn't talk about it because ... you weren't out.

When my partner went back to grad school and they came out with the Domestic Partnerships Rights. I was like the first one to sign her up for healthcare and so I had to, you know, go to the office and put my female domestic partner on. But you know, you just didn't talk about it, only with people you spoke to. So, that was incredible to have like this little gay pride parade in this little population but it wasn't what just evolved now. I became obsessed with those pictures. I knew they were really gorgeous and I started printing them my way.

Like I say, my dad's a printer. I'm a printer too, and I use a FIT lab to print them for that show but they weren't my settings. I became obsessed with scanning them, getting an archival printer and printing them my way, and starting to show them to people. But then 2010, and when I'm retired in 2010, I was still obsessed with those pictures. Even though I had other bodies of work that I had gotten known, those underwater images and immersions, I called up the Museum in the City of New York. I pulled a picture. "I have photographs of Bushwick I'd like to show you."

Then he saw them and found them interesting. "Come back, show me more." I was invited to have a show, or submit a portfolio for a show with Soho Photo Gallery, which is a cooperative photo gallery and I'm not a member. But they

always have like a more established photographer invited to show. The person loved these immersion series who was sponsoring me, said to submit that portfolio. “But that’s not what I want to show. I want to show these Bushwick pictures.” “What do you mean?” “I’ve been like printing these. I’ve been working on these Bushwick pictures for three years.” I was obsessed with them. She says, “Well, I don’t know if they’re going to like that but you can submit it,” and I did and they picked it.

In December 2011, I had a show in SoHo Photo Gallery called “Here I am, Bushwick in the ‘80s.” And I wanted to reach out to the Bushwick community because they didn’t really ... Besides the people in the photographs for the show that we had at the Historical Society, very few people from Bushwick came to see it. I wanted the people who were living in Bushwick to see this work, so you know, I Googled. Oh, look at that, there’s a blog called Bushwick Daily. Well, I’ll let them know about it. Oh, look at that, something called the Bushwick Community [Darkroom]. I’ll let them know about it. I just put it out there.

Our approach said it’s an opportunity to show like it was a museum show. Well, people came. People came from Bushwick. The Bushwick Daily sent a reporter who was at grad school for journalism who did a little video piece about it and he came online. Well, I remember walking in on another day and seeing a young woman in a Brooklyn hat, just staring and looking at my work. I go to introduce myself to her and she turns around and she’s crying. And I’m going, “Oh, I’m sorry.” You know, I thought maybe someone died close to her. She says, “Oh no, this is my neighborhood. I am just so moved.” And she was just, “Good to see my neighborhood depicted so nicely.” She was just moved and she was moved to tears.

We’re still in touch with this person. I was like, what to do? This is what I did this for, right? And then so here we are, December, and the show got reviews. People came to it. It was like well received, and more important, was like I knew these were ... Something special about them. They were like Helen Levitt pictures of New York in, you know, in the early 1930s. There was something warm and special and human and something worthwhile showing, of being seen in the right circumstance.

It was actually in my spam folder and basically the email was from someone ... The headline was basically, I found myself in one of your photographs and I am like floored, or by I am rolled over or something like that. It was an email from someone named Vanessa Mártir who said she was a writer who grew up on Palmetto Street where I taught in Bushwick. And she was doing a teaching workshop at Old Bushwick High School and the kids were complaining about how bad the neighborhood is. And she’s going like, “Oh, you have no idea. This is so nice now. Really, things have really changed and it’s really better now.”

And she remembers playing jump rope and jumping on the crack files because they made a good sound, you know. It was like a whole other upbringing, a whole other time period, and you had the teacher in the room. Pretty much you had to have a licensed teacher in the room, said to her, “You should look up the work of Meryl Meisler.” Well, to me that floors me that she’d even know my name, right, and would remember it. On her break Vanessa goes to the computer in the room there, you know, the teachers’ lounge, looks up my name, sees this little article and video done by Bushwick Daily, plays it and goes, “Oh my god!” She sees a picture of her family playing jump rope in front of their building.

But then in the email she says, “And I’m writing and I’m working on my biography right now and I just finished the chapter. That man staring out the window looking at the camera; that is the man who molested me as a child.” And I had a knee-jerk reaction, right, this teacher training in me, and I deleted her email. I was in such shock and then I composed myself. Fortunately, I found her contact in my spam folder, asking to be accepted. So, I had her in contact and I looked at her name. I Googled to make sure she was an adult, you know, to find any background about her.

And I emailed her and said, “Yes, I’d love to meet you,” and we made a date to meet. First, I read ... So, she’d published a book. I ordered her book. I read ... Some of her essays were online. We came to meet. It was in February. It happened to be Mardi Gras, and I can’t remember whatever day. In fact, Tuesday was that day. She looked at my photographs and they were like her life growing up, and her stories were kind of like the stories of the kids in the photographs. I even think I taught her brother.

I said, “You know what, I actually want to show this work in Bushwick.” I had the opportunity to go to Bushwick Open Studios. Deborah Brown, who is an artist, a Bushwick artist, had seen my work at the Historical Society and had been emailing me, telling me she started a gallery. To me, it was a real ... Wow, a gallery in Bushwick, isn’t that wild? Like how cute. Anyway, she invited me to come see Bushwick Open Studios and I did it in 2011. So, that was my first year retired and I went and I said, “This is amazing.” I loved it. I loved seeing the neighborhood. I loved walking the streets. I always felt Bushwick was warm and welcoming. That’s the vibe I always got, that people were friendly, warm, welcoming.

I’d ask if I could take their picture and say, “No, I just didn’t,” and it didn’t matter. But I always had a good feeling and I had the same good feeling. And I said to Vanessa, “I want to get my work shown in Bushwick during Bushwick Open Studios.” And we decided right then and there that we’ll do a show, her writing, my photographs. We’ll find a space, and we did, and we put on a show. Like we came in February and three months later it’s cool, and, you know, a new gallery that was opening up, I read about it on Bushwick

Daily. A new gallery for under-recognized artists, educators, you know, community events. I go, “It sounds right.”

I emailed the person, gave her a link to some of my pictures. She said, “I’d love to meet you.” Her name is Nyssa Frank. We made a date to meet. She’d just signed a lease in The Loom at Flushing Avenue, a space that was going to become the gallery. I said I have a writing collaborator who would like to come too. We showed up. I showed like a few pictures. She said, “I’ll give you a show.” Right there on the spot I say, “Well, how about just doing it for Bushwick Open Studios?” She said yes and that was it.

We put on the show and it was Vanessa’s writing, my photographs, putting it together. When we look in the sign-in book, it was packed, the opening. Someone wrote the words, signed in and said, “Holland Cotter.” I said, “Isn’t that hysterical. Someone pretended they were the critic from the New York Times.” Well, the gallery owner, Lisa’s mother, who’s an artist, says, “That IS Holland Cotter.” He came to our show and he reviewed it in the New York Times.

That was a life-changing event and Vanessa and I collaborated on a show again the following year with other writers who grew up in Bushwick, when the neighborhood ... One of them being a distant cousin of mine who just passed away at the age of 105, Ruth Gruber, who grew up in Bushwick. And it was so informative and so it showed for two years. It’s a living gallery. And then they were going to change what they did for Open Studios. Doing Open Studios that first year, this man comes up and hanging out and says, with a French accent, “Oh, I love your work. You know I bought a building in Bushwick, and you know, show me some pictures. I just love it,” he goes, and says, “Oh, thank you, thank you.”

And then the following year during Bushwick Open Studios Vanessa and I take a break. We walked to 12 Jefferson St. because we hear that there’s a café that opened or a bar, which was like wow, some place to eat and drink, go take a break. We come here and this guy looks and he goes, “Welcome to my place!” It’s the same guy who told me he loved my work. It was Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire, who opened Bizarre. And he said, “This is what I built.” And, “Okay, so let me take you down in the basement.”

He was a filmmaker and he had some of his photographs from his films on the wall. He said, “And I want to turn this to a black box gallery, and I want to show photographers, like your work.” I was like, “Oh great, and how’s it going here, you know, in this place?” He goes, “Well, it’s fine. I just had a little problem. Some people have been stealing the work and walking off with it. After all, it is a bar.” And I’m thinking okay ...

I go upstairs. We’re having lunch and I was saying to Vanessa, “He said I could show work here but it’s you know ... They steal the work off the walls!

I'm showing in museums. I'm going to show work in a basement of a bar?" And she said, "Don't be such a snob." Well, I came back during the fall and I said, "How's it going here? How's the problem with the theft?" He goes up to his picture and he goes, "We bolted it into the wall." Okay, that's good. And there was a wild event going on. I said, "Are you still interested in having me show here sometime," and he said yes. I said, "How about the Bushwick Open Studios in the fall?" He said, "Sure."

Okay, we agreed, but it was a wild night that night, you know. And I go upstairs and I see there's ... Before I even asked him, I saw there was a disco ball and it made me think about the fact that, I was first learned about Bushwick like going to discotheques. Now how does that come back together? When we go back, the night of the blackout, '77, I was supposed to be at the Studio 54, like I did many nights, and I was supposed to go to a private party of one of the owners.

I went with my friend Judy Jupiter and we were about to go out and the lights went out. I go to the subway and there's no subway. There's no bus. Well, we got on our bicycles and go down to Studio 54. It's closed, because we're knocking on the door, it was closed. It was a blackout. The next day I and the rest of the world heard all about Bushwick, this little place that was hot, hot, hot for the wrong reasons, you know. And I just thought, gee, this is some place I was not interested in going to. You know, my family wasn't in Brooklyn and it's like it's not why I hung out in a lot of places. I just never thought I'd ever cross [that path]. Who would think that years later I'd just like end up being here for 14 years?

It hit me, seeing the disco ball upstairs and then going into the bathroom and seeing the disco ball that this is how these worlds collided for me. This is how Bushwick and disco opened together. I had the idea this would be the perfect place to show not just my Bushwick pictures but my disco pictures. But I didn't tell that to Jean. I just said I'll have a show. Then I came back a few months later ... I mean a few weeks later, and I met with Greg Baubeau (Jean's business partner). We're in a show right now down here, and it's my work about Bizarre itself, Bizarre, the unexpected. My g-d, we have some Bizarre images. It's mine and Greg's photographs and Jean's photographs of the owners of the club.

He said, "I want to meet with you." It was February in the middle of a snowstorm in February. June it would be Bushwick Open Studios. He says, "I want to do a book of your work." I said, "A book?" I mean I'd been applying for proposals to have a book published of my Bushwick work from the '80s. "Yes, a book!" I said, "You mean a catalogue?" No, a book!" Well, I think, you know, that's nuts because you don't do anything that fast. I said, "But I really just want it to be my Bushwick work. I want to show my Bushwick and disco." He goes, "What do you mean?" I said, "Yeah, you know, these worlds came together for me and I have all these photographs of disco and no one's

ever seen them.” He said, “Well, can you show them to me?” I said, “Well, I have to find them, yeah.”

And in record pace, I found photographs. I scanned them. I was very familiar with my Bushwick work and images. And I would come to a page in my negatives that kind of talked about the same theme or juxtaposed it. I scanned it and I started showing him in email different things, you know, a building, smoke coming out of a building. And then smoke on the dance floor, a boy rolling in the tire on Palmetto Street. A guy performing, twisted ... He’s like double-jointed into this tire and [these weird things], like making a game. You don’t have toys. Here it is; you could roll down the street in your tire and this guy performing double-jointed in the club.

The schoolyard, the only playground, and you’d come out one day and there would just be a bed. Suddenly you might find a boat one day, a bed. Someone had slept there. A girl sleeping or pretending is sleeping at Studio 54. Here we are in Myrtle-Wyckoff and, you know, with other ladies from the Watch Tower, you know, freaking out there. Still, even now when I go back, it’s still at the same corner I find people. And compared to this very sedate old-fashioned scene ... And a wild party, Star Wars party at Fire Island. You know, my life was a series of contrasts, looking out the school in the back, and seeing acres and acres and acres of unoccupied dead buildings.

Here’s somebody standing in one of these and here’s the dance floor of Studio 54, just packed, packed, packed. They’re the contrasts. A kid with glasses with his briefcase, you know, walking. Like I would say, well, this could be an executive and you could see the screens are broken. There aren’t any gates there yet. They don’t have the window bar gates. You put a piece of board. Here, guys and glasses that opens [unintelligible 01:03:17]. I had the idea to do contrast.

He said, “Okay, it makes sense.” I said, “You know what, it makes as much work to plan the work for an exhibit.” And my partner, Patricia O’Brien, left teaching and then she became a designer in TV. She didn’t design books but she’ll design it. You know, I’ll take them up on this challenge, and we put out a book from February and it was here for opening night on June 1.

Here’s one of those pop-up carnivals. They left it with the dirt and everything else because it was so funky with rides. Here we have the carnival would pop-up overnight. And here we have a disco convention. I did this on ... I also did calligraphy and I would make all the signs for the all school notices and plays. A special welcome from the young astronauts of I.S. 291 to NASA; NASA came to visit. Well here, here’s Star Trek and William Shatner at a birthday party for Bella Abzug.

It is the contrasts. These are the kind of things I found and I photographed, a boy sitting in this gorgeous light, putting on his pair of skates. It’s

[unintelligible 01:04:39]. And here's a Liberace protégé, a look alike, showing me his rings. Kids was impeccably dressed, such pride. You might be a rebel in the street, but such pride and such dignity and such a sense of style. Kids would make fun of me because I wore pants that were not designer pants, you know, no labels. And these girls and twins, you know, it's very much of an artist photograph, and a woman in Studio 54 all duded up.

We did anything. So, I got the idea to do this. Here are two kids, two girls talking in front of a sign and it's for the Marxist Movement. And this X marks here; they were on the buildings, when Vanessa looked at it she said, "Oh, those are where we would play handball, the target." I said, "Vanessa, that means that the building was too dangerous for the fire department to go into it. It meant like don't even go into it." You find what you have and you play with it. If it's crack piles, you jump on them. You make noise, you know.

And here we have Gloria Steinem at Studio 54 at a party for Bella Abzug, who was one of the first women to go into politics in New York. And here's this other woman whispering in her ear. Ratify the ERA, equal rights amendment, so many simple things, equal pay, equal work, some very simple rights. The ERA still has not been passed for many complex reasons. Then Democratic candidate received the most popular votes, and yet the most qualified person, Hilary Clinton, is not currently our President Elect.

We've come so far. We go back so far, right? Muscle boy on Palmetto Street, I mean this is what I saw, and then regular muscle at a discotheque. So Bushwick changed my life. The circumstances, the artist community, the fact that another teacher gave my name to another educator, and we did this, and all of a sudden my work, these little snapshots are important. It's amazing. It's amazing. So Bushwick has changed a lot, but a lot of it's the same. I see there's a lot of the same, in good ways and a lot of it has risen from the ashes. And there are a lot of concerns that, you know, I think everybody is concerned about displacement.

You know things can change for the better but you also want the community, the people who live there, who dig their heels down to be able to stay. And I even [unintelligible 01:07:58] you know, aren't their enemy. They're looking for a place as well. I think with your project I would not be in this city if there weren't things like rent stabilization, affordable housing. I lived in rent-stabilized housing. I live in affordable housing now. If you want to have a diverse city of people from all walks in life, you don't just want doctors, lawyers, businessmen. You don't want just one thing. You want to a rich community of all kinds of people and you want your waiters, you want your delivery people, you want your teachers, you want your nurses, you want your everyone, you want everyone to be able to live and be well and be a part of this city. I think it's extremely important to nurture, continue to have affordable housing opportunities. Or, mortgage programs for people to be able to buy new homes or, you know, just continuing rent stabilization of

[unintelligible 01:09:17]. It should be replicated. That should be the last of its kind.

We need to nourish our public schools, our public housing, our healthcare system, not deplete them like some President Elect and his cabinet would like to do away with. It's like this is not the playground for the 0.1 percent. This is a real city, a real nucleus. It's a place that people talk about for generations, as like it has that energy and it does. Someone just recently was interviewing me about another show and said, "Do you leave the city to get energized, refreshed?" I said, "I come to the city to get energized."

This is an exciting place. It's full of people who have different kind of dreams, or the same dreams. It is a diverse city of people with different ethnicities, backgrounds, religions, families, non-families, where you can dream your dream and help make it come true. It doesn't have to be done with that feeling that the floor is going fall out underneath you. I think when we talk about gentrification we have to talk about stabilization and reinforcement at the same time.

Cynthia: And what have been some positive things that you've seen along those lines for stabilization in the neighborhood, the stuff we have to fight back against this displacement? What have you witnessed? What have you seen happen that has been an improvement on that sort of -?

Meryl Meisler: Are you saying in Bushwick itself?

Cynthia: In Bushwick or the city, because I mean Bushwick is just reflective of what's going on across the whole city, but particularly -?

Meryl Meisler: Okay, well, things that I see that are positive, and whatever someone might about say our current mayor, it's like I see an emphasis on keeping rent stabilized housing, that, you know, not raising the rents ridiculously or destabilizing it. Raising the level for what used to be there ... It was like if you made over, I don't know, 200,000 it became an unstable, destabilized. In a city like New York City you could have two working people making \$200,000 a year, and if they have just [unintelligible 01:12:04] and maybe one or two children, they are just getting by.

So, you need to have some kind of stability. You need to be able to grow old. You need children there to stay there and grow up. I've seen, as a teacher, in the school systems I've seen there are a lot of wonderful progressive schools in New York City, public schools, because I also taught in progressive schools. After teaching in the public schools I retired. I was an art education field supervisor for NYU for five years so I had to visit lots of different parents at the schools. You know a lot of exciting schools where fabulous things were happening.

What I find exciting is that, you know, here I am ... Well, I can walk in the streets and run into former students and parents and they're such nice people. They're still here and they care about the city. They care about this world. I think whatever someone might say about New York City and New York City's public schools, I met some of the most dedicated human beings, working in their schools, graduating from their schools, going on doing wonderful things.

We're not teaching creationism. It's like we're talked about open minded. I think, okay, I think when I hear about when there are meetings about concerns about, say, the Rheingold settlement going on, that the artist community is a part of Bushwick, the artist community, the creative community that's here. Whatever you want to call it, the new arrivals, they're concerned too. They are involved. I might go on to say many people are involved from all walks of life, that there's a lot of community involvement.

You can't put up something Bushwick Open Studios without many, many, many hundreds of volunteers making it happen. I've always found the Bushwick community, like I said, to be very warm, and I'm finding that in the creative community as well, that I'm accepted as part of the Bushwick community. I've never lived or worked here.

Cynthia: But you did work -

Meryl Meisler: I'm sorry. I did work here for 14 years. I don't work here now. What a day, and I've never lived here. I don't even have a studio here. I can't even afford to have a studio here, but I'm considered part of the community. It's very open and people are very encouraging of each other. I mean there are creative communities where people are very competitive. They're not communities. They're competitors or they don't share secrets. They don't share opportunities. Here people share things or encourage and that's very unusual. So, it's very stimulating and I feel very fortunate to have been lifted by Bushwick, as a human being.

And I learned so much by it. I met wonderful people. Like I said, I enjoyed working here. I was challenged. I learned. I got better and that's because other people helped me and I welcomed that, you know.

Cynthia: What do you think is the impact that all this work has had in your own life, I mean your own thinking?

Meryl Meisler: What has this had, this?

Cynthia: The impact, this work that you do and the experience that you've had here in Bushwick, how has it impacted your life?

Meryl Meisler: As an individual, it sounds corny but I am blessed. I am. For me this is amazing that ... Who would think, by showing in a gallery that just opened in

a warehouse that my work would be introduced to the world? And then having a show underneath the subway, and then in a basement bar, ended up becoming my publisher, that's amazing! Who would expect it?

What I've learned from it, and everything [unintelligible 01:16:47] and try to tell other people, and I think this is what shows in my pictures. If I say so myself I think I recognize, then and now, that anyone you meet they're all important. All human beings are important and worthy of your attention. It's like everyone you meet in life there's a reason that you met for a second and you passed. You've changed. You've made contact. And talking to someone who happens to show up at your opening, and then later running in to them, and they're present and they're publishing work.

That's amazing that it's just here we are, and a new show called Bizarre: Assorted Madness and The Unexpected. And these are my photographs from visiting Bizarre itself because this place, this scene, reminds me of a mini version of some of the clubs I went to in the '70s. And a lot of people think these photographs are from like back then. No, this is here and now. This is 2015, 2016 that a community, a neighborhood could be a center where one the most amazing drag queens act, burlesque shows ... There's going to be poetry here tonight.

The woman Nyssa Frank who gave me this first show on a gallery here that she just opened, she's going to be reading poetry there tonight. It's just so a classic open-minded intergenerational uplifting community. That's what I find here and I feel very, very fortunate to have put my foot in the water here and felt it and been rejuvenated. It's like a series of circumstances I would never expect to have happened or thought about it. I've learned a lot of lessons.

If you feel moved by something do it, even if it doesn't matter to anyone else. Whether you draw it, whether you videotape it, whether you write notes about it, whether it inspires you to sleep and do something else, take hold of it, record it. It's important to you and it might at sometime just synthesize into something else. And you don't know we're witnessing history while you're at it. You know some people that move it and shake it. Some people are politicians. Some of us are just like to know just we're part of it, and be able to give our best.

In every situation that you're in put out your honest true self as best as you can and look for that in others. And in this time, I'd say fortunately for me, you know, three, almost four decades later it's like, huh, what a gift. And I also think about, you know, as our country is entering what I consider a very, very difficult troublesome period that I am not happy with the election. I know we're jumping into very dangerous disastrous possibilities, okay, that that's enough and whatever. I want to think, well, look at this. This was a ... In a very difficult time in New York's history some of the most wonderful creative things popped up out of it. People made change.

The day after election, that night I cried like I lost someone very close me. I ached like I had cried for my nephew the year before. I felt that aching. I felt like I was in a funeral. I thought that my country committed suicide, but no, we're still here. We're still here. It's not everything and we will go forth. And if by some miraculous thing something changes in the next few weeks, we learn from it and we're not giving up.

If you look at Bushwick, it's gone through many cycles and yet people who lived here as children are returning, right? It's important. You're in this world. For some reason, you're in a place where you're supposed to be and do the best from your heart, and we will move forward.

Cynthia: Thank you.

[End of recorded material 01:22:38]