

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of an interview with Micheal Bell by Cynthia Tobar on March 17, 2016 in New York City. This interview is part of "Cities for People, Not for Profit": Gentrification and Housing Activism in Bushwick. Micheal Bell 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.

Micheal Bell Part 1

[Start of recorded material 00:00:00]

Cynthia: Today is Thursday, March 17th, 2016. Can you please state your name?

Micheal: Yes, my name is Micheal Bell.

Cynthia: How long have you been a resident of Bushwick?

Micheal: To answer your question, 50 years. I moved to Bushwick in June of '66.

Cynthia: I would like to know basically what your childhood was like – your family background growing up in Bushwick. Describe what your neighborhood was like. You can begin wherever you like.

Micheal: The first thing I would like to say – Bushwick has been – always has been in my life – still is and always will be a family community, a very close-knit community. I can say that because of the time I've been here, I've been in and out of the neighborhood, away from the neighborhood and back. I've been through my ups and downs in life. I moved here. I was six. I'm 66. I've done a lot here.

When I first moved here in '66, I was over on Putnam Avenue. It was great. It was a bunch of kids on the block. There were families on the block. There were struggling parents on the block. There were lots of great people. There was a lady that lived directly across the street who I just thought was the matriarch of the world. Her name technically was Elizabeth [Sintkins]. We just called her Mama. It's funny, because Bernie Mac was always talking about Big Mama. We just called Ms. Sintkins Mama. Everybody called her Mama. That's who she was: big, sat in the house in a chair all the time, but everybody in the neighborhood knew Mama.

I was my mother's only son. My mother had five kids – four girls. I always felt out of place. I would get up in the morning and get dressed right across the street, because there was a guy named Leslie [Ning] who was one of Mama's kids. I mean, I could go through the entire – not only block. I could go through Putnam, Chameleon – who was on Madison and who was on Woodbine.

These days, I find myself reciting to children, who don't know their own family history, who their grandmothers and grandfathers were – sometimes even great grandfathers, because the kids are so young. It was always a community – family, you know? A lot of things have gone on in this neighborhood that reiterate the family feeling. I'm talking about then when you asked the question, because when you hear about Brooklyn, especially Bushwick in the time that I was living here, it's usually negative.

In '66, when I moved in, it was the opposite of gentrification. They were allowing us blacks to move in. Now when you look at that plaque on Bushwick Avenue in Freedom Square, it says that they moved in long before that – so on and so forth – but it didn't appear that way when I moved into Bushwick. In '66, when I moved into Bushwick, [turning point of the '60s] – which is why we were allowed on the other side of Broadway, by the way. Before then, we were not allowed on the other side of Broadway.

Cynthia: What was on the other side of Broadway?

Micheal: Bed Stuy. Bed Stuy has always been quote-unquote a black neighborhood, which is funny because I can think of other times in history before my time how Jackie Gleason lived on that side of Broadway when he was doing "The Honeymooners." But instead of calling it Bushwick, they called it [Bentonhoicht]. They talked about Chauncey Street and the Chinese food – the smell of the food coming from the Chinese restaurant on Broadway. That Chinese restaurant is still on Broadway and Chauncey Street.

[Off-mic comment]

Mm-hmm. Well, that's the new 83rd Precinct – by the way, which is one of the most treacherous precincts in Brooklyn. I have no hatred for the police at all. I've taken the police academy course. I have family on the force, but I've also had dealings with the 83rd – but that's a whole other story.

Cynthia: Take me back to the '60s in Bushwick. How old were you at that time?

Micheal: I moved here when I was six. There's this big church – Saint Barbara's. I used to go to Saint Barbara's for religious instruction. There was a little white kid that went to school with me, and me and him used to get released together. Before we would go into religious instruction, there was a diner-type store. Again, the whole neighborhood was different. Central Evergreen – they were mostly commercial. Now they're housing all over the place, but it was more commercial than it is now. Now it's more residential.

He and I every Wednesday would leave school early to get to religious instruction. We would stop at this diner and eat. He was one of the last of the residents that were moving out. When I graduated college and got grown, I

went to the bank on Broadway and looked up, and he was there. He remembered me. We spoke for a little while, but he was too busy for us to exchange numbers. Then the next time I went to the bank, he wasn't there anymore. He's somebody I never forgot and will never forget. He's part of my original Bushwick.

Then there were the [Sotos] that lived next door to me. What I'm saying is there was still a little bit of everybody in the neighborhood, so it was still a friendly neighborhood, but there are stories of the family called the [Kurtschlong] family that lived over by junior high-school 162. That family, if they caught any of the black kids outside around the school, they would jump them and beat them up. They would go through the schools at times and grab up students, beat them up, and say "niggers go home" and all that kind of stuff.

As I got older, because I never went to 162 – I was part of busing, so I got bused out to Queens. That's the '70s. You wanted to talk about the '60s, which was great. In the '60s we got up every Saturday morning and swept the streets. We had a block association that was very active. I believe it was in the '60s that we were – well, we worked for a lot of political stuff because our parents were doing thing.

There was a gentleman by the name of [Russel Kaufman] who was the head of the block association. He was a lawyer. His wife was Ms. Laurene Kaufman. She was a teacher and whatnot. They were very instrumental in getting things politically together and making people politically aware of things. They organized not only just the block association; we put up trees. The kids had to get up every Saturday morning. We made an arrangement with the department of sanitation. They gave us those big brooms and shovels.

Every Saturday we went out and swept the streets. We cleaned the cars and cleaned the entire block. The city didn't do that; we did that. We as children knew that was our job, and we looked forward to it. We got up every morning and cleaned our block. We drank sodas afterwards and made sure the soda cans were... We did things together. We had block parties. I played in a band. I learned music. I didn't think about it. It wasn't until I was grown and in college, looking back and was talking to other people – what, you guys didn't do this?

Next to Mama was [Pop Fish]. Pop Fish had two daughters who were grown, Beverly and Marilyn. Beverly's husband at the time was Rich Douglas, who god bless him just died last year at 77 years old. Just before he died, he put out a jazz CD, his first jazz CD. He taught me music in the '60s. [Cora, Anna, Reese, Everett, myself, and Leslie] played in a band. We made up music. Cora, Anna, Reese and them would make up dance steps and make up customs. I'm talking about for real – sew the costumes together. When the

block parties came, we did that. We performed all over the place, but we didn't feel like we were performing; we were just performing music and doing what we did.

That was the '60s in Bushwick: Everybody was singing and everybody was in a band. [Popsie and the Brothers of Peace] was a group that was around that was playing all over the place. Crown Height Affair – people heard about them in the '70s, but they were playing around Bushwick all throughout the '60s. Half of them were a part of Popsie and the Brothers of Peace. In the '70s, you heard about Denroy Morgan and that whole crew. They were right around the corner on [Cania] Street. They did ["Cha Ja Love"].

What I'm saying is there were a lot of things going on here in the '60s. In the '70s it got even more tumultuous, because people like King died. There were more concessions, now. The Shirley Chisholm campaign popped off. They had us kids working on that, campaigning all over the place and putting fliers all over the place.

Cynthia: What year was that campaign?

Micheal: Shirley Chisholm was around junior high-school. I was in junior high-school around '71 and '72.

Cynthia: What was the demographic of Bushwick at that time?

Micheal: The demographics of Bushwick are really interesting because it showed through the school system. When I was first in the school system, it was all white, Jewish young men and women – great people, but there were no minority teachers. Well, nobody expected it to be, because it was the world at the time.

In '68 there was a strike. When we went to school, [audio dropout] had five kids. We all went to school, came back home, and said there was a strike. My mother said, "Hell no." She took us back to the school. The principal's name was Mr. [Roach] at the time. She told Mr. Roach, "I've got five kids. You're not sending my kids back home. They're here for an education. If I've got to teach them my damn self, they're not going to miss out on an education."

My mother, Madeline Van Scott, Ms. Loyd Day, Jackie Loyd Day, Norma Cologne, Vivian Clemens, Ms. Simms – I don't remember Ms. Simms's first name. There were about four or five other women, but they literally told the principal hell no. They marched us back into that building. The whole time the strike went on, 299 had classes going.

When the strike was over, Mr. Roach in some kind of way cut a deal with them. They actually volunteered for two years, just coming in and being

parents. Then he got some kind of a stipend going for them, so they got a \$75 every two weeks stipend. It parlayed them into eventually becoming full-fledged teachers. My mother died as a retired teacher from the Board of Ed.

These are some of the things that I remember about the '60s and that came out of the '60s. It's some of the things that I remember about community. There were three movie theaters on Broadway at the time: The RKO Madison, the [Moese Gates], and I forget what the other one was called. Right now, one of the theaters is a church that's right under the train station. Where McDonald's is right now on Broadway was the second. Right across the street, there's a school – the school that Bertha... They started some social justice movement that started up in the Bronx. They now have a school. I'm sorry the name escapes me now, but it used to be a theater. It's now a school, the Acorn School.

It's funny, because when I graduated college in the '80s, I moved to the Bronx. One of my first jobs was working at a place called the Theater Off Park. It was a theater on 135th Street and Park Avenue. Bertha Lewis was there. She had just come from the south. She and I – she had got control of the theater or was helping to try to save the theater because it was dying. I walked in one day and said, "Hey, I went to college. I do acting. I do tech work." She said, "Oh really? Well, come on and let's see what you can do, because this place is falling apart. It'd dying, and we've got to fix it." So Bertha and I worked together for a couple years. We got the theater on its feet.

On my 25th birthday, we threw a huge party and fundraiser. All the who's who of New York showed up. It was a real big success. The theater started flourishing. They got rid of me and Bertha and got two other people. They started running the theater after that.

Bertha went to Acorn, which was just a bunch of people complaining about their landlord. She parlayed that into one of the strongest groups that have movements for tenant's rights in this city now, which is Acorn. That's how it started. I was surprised to see the school pop up on the corner of the neighborhood that I started. I guess I told you that story to say that the story goes more than just Bushwick. It comes full circle.

Cynthia: Picking up on the '70s and being a junior high-school student, you had mentioned volunteering for the Chisholm campaign. Can you tell me a little bit more about that era and how that transitioned into what was going on [overlapping noise]?

Micheal: It wasn't a thought. It wasn't a volunteer; it's what we did. You got up. You went to school. You got involved. You didn't even think about I'm involved in a movement or anything. This is what's happened. This is what's got to be done. Shirley Chisholm's going, oh wow, we've got a system to run? We've

got to do this. Before that, you've got to remember, there was Free Angela, the whole Panther movement...

I was from Bushwick, but my father lived in New Haven, Connecticut. I used to hang out on Dixwell Avenue in New Haven, Connecticut, which is where the Panther headquarters was. Because I was a kid from Brooklyn, I was a little faster than the kids from New Haven. It was just a little, small town. They're just different from city kids, you know?

Cynthia: I bet there was a lot of stratification going on in New Haven.

Micheal: Yes. The presence of the Panthers were a lot stronger felt in New Haven. Yale, New England State, Panthers – not a good mix. I don't know if you know the history of the Panthers in Connecticut, but the police in Connecticut were very racist. History will tell you what they did. They shot up the Panther Headquarters, which my father barred me from going to because he knew something was going to happen. Things had already happened. He said, "Stop." I said, "Dad, how can I not go there? That's where everything's happening?" I mean, when I say happening – all of the arts, anything that you wanted to do. All the cultural programs for us came through them, so where else was a kid to go?

Again, when people say politically active and all that, it's one thing to wake up and decide that I'm going to be an activist, and it's another thing for it to just be the life that you were born into. It wasn't only a sign of the times, because now being older, a lot of people – everybody loves Martin Luther King. Everybody talks about Martin Luther King and what a great man he was. Well, I was alive when Martin Luther King was alive. Nobody talked that talk when he was living. A lot of people that are talking about Martin now would say, "Nah, he's going out there and getting beat up." They didn't want to be bothered with nonviolence and they didn't want to end up in the violence movement, either.

I also remember very poignantly the day that King died, because when I was standing on my stoop and when they told my mother, my mother just broke. I've never seen my mother break down like that before. Everybody kept saying, "King is dead. King is dead."

I've always referred to him and heard him referred to as Dr. King. So when people were yelling that "King is dead," I turned around and said, "Ma, we ain't got no damn king." Then I said, "Oops," because mommy was crying. I was confused. I said, "We in America. We don't have no king." Then she turned around and said, "Boy, don't you understand they killed Dr. King?" When she said "killed Dr. King" and I looked in my mother's face, I understood.

Cynthia: How old were you at that time?

Micheal: I was eight. It was just before my ninth birthday.

Cynthia: You mentioned the impact your parents had on your thinking – this not-taking-no-for-an-answer, your mother's activism to get you an education. Can you tell me a little bit about your father?

Micheal: My mother and my father were kind of really different. My father, he just does. You're not going to stop him. Once he puts his mind to doing something, that's it. My mother's the same way, but my mother's more – I guess it's the woman's way. It's more thinking and plotting about it, but at the end of the day, she's the same way. This is what I've got to do, and that's it.

A lot of people take those things as badges of honor or the opposite. For some other people, it just is. There are things in life that it just is. I've come to learn that what is just is depends on the principles that you adopted in your life in the beginning to form the basis of how you live.

Because I grew up in Bushwick, I don't wait for somebody to respect me or disrespect me to show human respect and courtesy for people, because growing up in Bushwick, we learned that there are all kinds of people and you can't just go and do.

There are a whole bunch of different types of people, and you have to think your way through it sometimes. You can't have knee-jerk reactions. I couldn't do something on Broadway, because I knew without people telling me, by the time I got home, my mother would know. It's just that kind of neighborhood.

Cynthia: Tell me about the impact of your neighborhood. Any changes or observations as the '70s progressed?

Micheal: Just for me, and because of the time of life – again, the '70s were great. I partied it up in the '70s, but for the America it was kind of a give-back time. It was the closing of 'Nam, so a lot of people coming home. For the first time we were allowed to work at places that we weren't allowed to work before. Black people were allowed to work in Manhattan and Wall Street. Even though they were low-level jobs, they were jobs that were available that were never available before.

By the '70s, my mother was now – they called her teacher because she got that respect, because she had that strength of character, but she was only a [unintelligible 00:22:49]. At that point, my mother was getting paid in the '70s. I think she was getting paid a \$150 a week stipend by that time.

It was a great time. People were together. Everybody was loving on everybody. Anybody that wasn't, we were all together in trying to correct those people. It was kind of a real good time. It wasn't until [laughs] Noriega – no, not Noriega... I switch into my political head sometimes.

Cynthia: The '70s was also notorious for the fiscal crisis the city was going through around that time. Do you have any reflections upon that?

Micheal: Yeah, that's when things were burning down in Bushwick. They called Bushwick the burning bush by that point. The factories and stuff that I was telling about – a lot things you see now in Bushwick weren't here. From '68 to '73, they burned down a lot of the major stuff. From '77 through the '80s, the rest of it went. That's also when the demographics changed.

Again, when I first moved here in '66, Bushwick was still big, white lawyers and doctors all up and down Bushwick Avenue. The streets were always clean. You drove down Bushwick, and you were proud. It looked really nice. By the mid '70s, it wasn't so much. There was the Inshallah community at the end of Bushwick – not the end of Bushwick Avenue. At Bushwick and Myrtle they owned a couple of blocks coming down towards Decal, between Decal and Bushwick.

Cynthia: Tell me more about that organization.

Micheal: They were a Muslim community, a righteous community. At the time there were also a lot of Israelites walking around. They were dealing with the ideology of economic independence. They moved their crew, their troop – I don't want to call them – I don't want to call them a cult, because they were a religious organization. They used that basis to acquire property, bookstores, a restaurant, and had a very good black presence at that end of Bushwick Avenue. Hm, the '70s. I was in junior high-school and high school between the '70s, so looking at it from that perspective, I was quite busy. I was playing music and doing theater. The mid '70s – I graduated high school in '77.

Cynthia: Did you witness any of this burning, any of this tumult?

Micheal: Oh yeah.

Cynthia: Any direct relations to how it affected your neighbors and family?

Micheal: Yeah. Like I said, when the Hot Wheel factory burned down, there were Hot Wheel tracks all over this neighborhood for the next five months. The building was still there and half-burnt, so people were still running it and trying to do things with it.

The Broadway had been looted two or three times. The blackout was '68. Something happened in '71, '72 – somewhere around there. That's when Broadway went. After that, there was no more Broadway. They didn't touch Broadway until now. With the re-gentrification, they're finally starting to put things back on Broadway, but for the past 35 years they wouldn't go near Broadway.

To answer your question of how that affected us, now we had to go over to Ridgewood or downtown to go shopping. Also, looking it from a political point of view from the Board of Education's side, because a lot of things I did at this point was through either the Board of Education or some of these programs – which is another thing. I don't see that anymore, but when I was 13, we all lied to get working papers.

If you come from Bushwick and you lived in Bushwick between the '60s and '70s, the word Harman Street meant everything to you. Now kids are like, "What? Harman Street is Harman Street" – but it meant something to a teenager because you had to go to Harman's to get your working papers. If you didn't go to Harman Street by a certain date, and this was before the end of the school year, you couldn't work the summer. For us, if you were a kid without a job in the summer, you were on the outs because we all wanted to work and make our money. On Saturdays and Fridays we'd all get paid. We'd go out. We'd buy clothes. We'd go to Coney Island. We'd go to the movies. This is again why it was a great time.

We looked forward to going to work. Most of the work that we had the city had set up. There were places for people to come and bring their kids. If you had a kid from 5 to 13, you would bring them. Now, the kids from 14 up who had working papers, we would be the counselors and would take them all over the city – different places, recreation, museums, so on and so forth. That was a lot of the summer youth work, but you couldn't work anywhere without working papers. If you lived in Bushwick, in order to get working papers, you had to go to Harman's Street. That's another way you know who was trying to do what during the summers. Everybody that was trying to do good things, progressive things – good kids were trying to get their working papers so they could go to work. Kids that weren't interested in school and work weren't trying to do that. That's one of the ways you knew who was who.

Cynthia: This was junior high-school and high-school years? [Off-mic]

Micheal: I was bused out to Woodside Junior High School 125 in Queens. This was, again, busing so that we could desegregate. [Laughs] Anyway, I'm not even going to trip on that anymore. I went to Junior High School 125 out in Queens. I wound up eventually graduating from Talent Unlimited High School, a junior Richmond high-school in Manhattan for performing arts. Then I went to Bard College and graduated from Bard College.

Cynthia: When did you leave Bushwick for your education?

Micheal: '78. I graduated January of '77. I went to Brooklyn College in September of '78, because I was tired of being out of school for so long. Then in December I went to Bard.

Cynthia: Tell me about that time for you.

Micheal: I got out of high school. It was a shock, because it was midyear. I went back to school to get a program.

Cynthia: What year was that.

Micheal: January of '77. We went to field period. You get out for Christmas and New Years. Okay, the end of the school semester – you go home for the holidays and then go back to school. Well, I went back to school, and they said, "What are you doing here?" "What do you mean, what am I doing here? I came to get a program." They said, "Well Mr. Bell, didn't anybody tell you? You have all the credits you need. As a matter of fact, you have three credits over." [Laughs] I was like, "Well, what do I do?" "You can come back in June for the graduation, but there are no more classes for you to take."

I took that six months off. I started working at 1201 – no, first I worked for 666 Fifth Avenue. It was [Dorf, Mullen, Jordan, Herick]. Steve Dorf was my boss. I was a direct... Oh god, these things... I was his personal assistant. He used to like to send me out to get beef tongue and all this here kind of stuff.

Long story short, the reason why you see this smile on my face – Steve Dorf left, and it was like the biggest law firm down on Fifth Avenue at the time. His name was up there – Dorf. The next time I saw Steve Dorf's name, he was doing movies. He's a movie mogul now, which was the business I was trying to get into – which is why I was just getting... A lot of people wonder why I'm always changing jobs. It's because what I want to do don't pay money. [Laughs] I'll get a job doing theater or movies. It'll be a one-shot deal, and I can't go back to the last job because I told him I'm going to go be in this movie, and they don't like things like that. So I'm always finding different work. But I saw Steve Dorf. That was kind of a thing for me.

I had fun working there. Steve was a lot of fun. The young ladies that I were working with at the time were fun. It was a big deal, because I'm like this high-school kid who got out early and got this job on Fifth Avenue and all this with this big company. Everybody thought it was a big deal, but it was temporary. Then I started working for Angel Import and Export, which is 1201 Broadway, importing blouses and clothes from India.

What's interesting about that time – and I didn't realize it – whatever I did – and this is a function of what we're talking about, Bushwick – because the way I grew up in Bushwick, everybody was involved with me. When I say the older people, when I was coming up, if you were two years older than me, I couldn't open my mouth if you opened your mouth. If you said "shut up and go sit down," that's the way it was. If you argued, you were out of line because your elder told you to shut and go sit down. Even if they were wrong, you don't... Now people will tell you age ain't nothing but a number. I brought that up to say – because it dawned on me. When I was doing that, when I would come home, the guys that were younger than me – who I would talk to, who I would give money to – and I didn't know this. I only learned this in the past five years, after my mom died and I came back, sitting around with a lot of these young men now that are 40. I'm 56 years old, you know?

Some of them I didn't realize at the time were closer than me... Six years now is not a difference – 50 and 56 – but when I was 16 and they were 10, when I was 20 and they were 15, I didn't realize that I was giving away money because I never had no money. I was poor and broke all the damn time, but if I came through the block and the ice cream man was on the truck or I had 50 cents in my pocket and the kids were like "hey Mike, you got this...?"

When I was driving a cab and other things, I would take them into the city and show them how to get work and hustle work – put up posters and signs, whatever – show them how to kind of get around. I didn't think of it as doing anything, because that's what we did. This is what you do, you know?

Once I got grown – and since she got in my life – people have come to my house. We've been sitting here talking. "Yo Mike, don't you remember you did this and you took us here and did that and took us...?" "Yeah, but so what?" "Yo man, if it wasn't for you, I'd never have left the neighborhood. I wouldn't even know how to hustle. You showed me how to make a dollar." "Yo man, all I did was take you where I was going and doing what I was doing."

A lot of the things I didn't think about are the things that you're asking me about. When I talk to people out in the world, it's not like that all over the place. People didn't take time with their neighbors and the kids next to them or the kids above them – other kids they were close to. They don't seem to take time with each other anymore.

That's always been something I've been proud about in Bushwick: We could argue and fight, but at the end of the day there was still love for each other. There's a guy in the next block. His name is Joseph Jackson. There were two Joes, but the way. Joe Smith – me and Joseph Smith won first place in a talent show. Me, Joseph, and Bobby [Platt] won first place two years in a row in elementary school singing "Love on a Two-Way Street." That's what I'm

saying: the whole neighborhood. We all did something. We were involved in school, the block party. It was just the way of life at the time.

Me and [Cocomo] – we've been friends from first to sixth grade, but the friendship was real funny. His name is Joe Jacks. We called him Cocomo. Well, I didn't know until his son and I were working together. His son and I started working together about three years ago. I was working with a theater company called [Strat]. He had got some work with us. "Oh, you went to school with my dad." He told me Cocomo had alopecia. That's why he was always bald-headed. That's why he was fighting all the time, because he didn't take to people teasing him really well.

I brought that up to say me and Joe went to school together. Me and his son wound up working together years later, and his son had no idea because that was elementary school. We knew each other as friends because we were friends, and that friendship never died or dissipated. Fifty years later – you know what I'm saying? Just because we weren't doing the same things and whatnot, the friendship that we originally had in the beginning didn't change.

Bobby Platt, god bless – he just died last year from sugar. Didn't see Bobby much, but me and Bobby's sisters and everybody are still like this because of the time we spent as kids together. We didn't always like each other. Like kids do in the schoolyard, we fought all the time, but after we fought we shook hands and moved on.

I guess I'm hitting the point of what I think was good about then. I guess it still happens now that way, but it doesn't appear to happen that way anymore. Neighborhoods don't seem to be communal anymore. Personally, I blame it on the system we live in – the large system. Capitalism is a selfish system. It tells you that nobody and nothing is important but capital – bad basis.

Cynthia: Coming back to your time post-high-school [off-mic], you had transitioned to Bard. Tell me about that time of higher education.

Micheal: Wow, Bard. I to this day am in love with Bard, my time at Bard, and my friends at Bard. It was a new change. I went from Bushwick, Brooklyn to Annandale-on-Hudson, which is this little small enclave on the Hudson River that's a taste of god's country. I don't care where you put it. It's right on the Hudson River with a beautiful view of the mountains and skies – and the craziest crew of people, the most eclectic group of people from literally all over the world.

One of my first, biggest lessons is a guy named [Kenny Kausikoff], who is my best friend to this day. I had a lot of principles about community, being very protective about my community and the people in my surroundings. With that,

the first time I lost it, I was yelling and screaming at a young lady, which is something that I don't do – but I lost it.

I was in the hallway, yelling at the top of my lungs. This guy walks out in the hallway. He's got curly hair, rim glasses. He looks down at me and said, "Don't do that," in a very square voice. He says, "Don't do that." "Who the hell are you? Who are you talking to?" "Don't do that." "Who the hell are you to tell me don't do that?" "I live here." [Laughs] I went from being very defensive and about to go and snap somebody's throat to he's right, you're wrong.

It's that thing of Bushwick, that I live here. This is where I live. You don't come from... I don't care who you are, where you're from, or what's going on. You're in my dorm, where I live, and you're yelling at some young lady. Don't do that. That was my first reality check in this whole clash of cultures that I thought was going to be there.

Cynthia: Was it a diverse environment at the time?

Micheal: No, when I attended Bard it was 1,000 acres of land with 700 students. If you put the LAO, which was the Latin American Organization, and the BBSO, which was the Bard Black Student Organization, together, you didn't have 35 people in the room – but it didn't matter at Bard. At Bard, that didn't matter. We were all one, huge community that had a great time. Everybody was crazy, so it didn't matter what your brand of crazy was.

It is one of the hardest academic schools that you'd want to go through. They will put you through the paces. God bless the day, Robert [Coblitz] died three weeks ago. He was a political science professor who has clout in the academic circles. Since World War II he's been in politics. There's another gentleman by the name of [Mark Lidel].

I'm mentioning those two because they really opened my eyes. I thought because of my upbringing in the '60s and the '70s – the political struggles, Shirley Chisholm, and the Black Panthers, and Free Angela and the pan-African movement that I was involved in and Afro-Cuban movement that I was politically aware, astute, and knew how things worked in this country and what had to be done. [Laughs] Shut up and go sit down. In a nice way they looked at me, smiled, and said, "Really?" They were really great professors.

My time at Bard is invaluable in my life. The people I met at Bard – I'm trying to get anybody and everybody that I can to go to a place like Bard, hopefully to Bard. It will open your eyes in a safe environment. The only thing I worry about sometimes is the people that may come from this environment ruining that environment.

Cynthia: Why is that?

Micheal: Because even when I was there, there were a lot of people that would close themselves off from change. It's just that simple. Built into the way they deal, it's very black and white, open and shut. I will come and learn with you but not deal with you. Okay. Some people, and I'm not talking about black or Hispanic people – people bring their baggage with them. Unless you're willing to check your baggage at the door, you're not going to learn.

Cynthia: Tell me about what was going on when you went to Bard and post-Bard. What were your plans at that time?

Micheal: That's always been funny, because I started out wanting to be a marine biologist, but between junior high-school... Now, this is '71, somewhere around there. They built a school out in Brooklyn. They had glass-bottom boats. They did the whole thing of scuba diving and getting... Well, that's where I wanted to go. I had all the marks and everything to get me in there. As far as I was concerned, there was no reason why I wasn't going to this school.

I didn't care how challenging it was. I didn't care what the tests were, the waiting lines – and I beat all those odds, but at the end of the day they said, "That's real nice, Mr. Bell, but we can't accept you here because this school starts at the ninth grade and you've already graduated from junior high-school in the ninth grade." "But can't I just take the classes?" "No, because in the ninth grade, you have to do the ninth grade here because we teach you basic scuba diving and basic this and that. All of those things you need to pass in your ninth grade class so that you can do the lab work and everything else in your proceeding classes after that. Since your junior high-school went from seven to nine, we can't transfer you in because you won't be able to keep up with the work."

I was livid, but in my little brain, being this little revolutionary – you're not going to stop me. I'm going to go on and do things. I'm going to do something progressive. What I failed to mention is that when I first got into 125 and all the political turmoil about not wanting black folks out there, it never touched me. Me, Tracy [D. Pasquali, Vinny Granada, Bernardo Zorilla] – I laughed when I first learned his name. I laughed my ass off. There was [Dorothy Corsack], the loner. These were my friends in junior high-school.

46th Street and [Bliss] is the seventh on the train. I played in the band. First I tried to play sax, and Mr. P said, "Nah, you're not doing too good on sax." So I became a percussionist. I was out there almost every weekend because my school was like the school band that played for all of the groups – Veterans for Foreign Wars.

See, back in those days, every holiday was a real holiday. On Flag Day, we went out and the bands played. On Veteran's Day, we played out in Queens in the parades. We were always doing something. Gus Pardalis, if you look him up, was a great musician and a great conductor. He did a whole bunch of that section of Queens when it comes to music.

Cynthia: Sunnyside has a rich music history.

Micheal: Yes. So you know? [Off-mic comment] I just know in the three years I was there, every weekend and every holiday... When I think of them – because a lot of times, when we played I played – one of the things I played was cymbals. I used to get a lot of blisters and bruising on the back because the cymbals would just get hot in the sun. Between playing them – and depending on what we were doing, sometimes I was playing the cymbals, sometimes the snare, sometimes all of them – I had great times.

I said that to say there's supposed to be all this turmoil and hatred, but I ran all over that neighborhood. The kids would take me out. Sometimes we'd leave school when you weren't supposed to. When I first got there, I failed a couple classes. Not at the end of the marking period, but getting up to it, a lot of times I would stagger and then come home. My mother had my brother smack me up a couple times. By the end of the year, I got it straight.

Because of that, I would have to go meet my brother. After band practice, I'd have to hang out with him. He was in a school called the Bed Stuy Street Academy under [Thomas Monroe Turner]. It was an alternative high-school at a time when there were no alternative high-schools. You may want to look that up, if you look up the history of Bed Stuy. They now have what was the original boy's high-school. It's called the Bed Stuy Street Academy.

They had a Bed Stuy drama workshop, which later became Weeksville United Actors Company. By the time I graduated junior high-school and when I couldn't get into the high school I wanted, I was already in Weeksville United Actors Company. So my little attitude said, "If I can't go to that special school, I'm going to go to a special school for theater. I'm doing theater. I'm an actor. I can do this. You're not going to just send me" – because I didn't want to go to the local high school. That was the kicker. If you went to the local high-school, that was kind of a sentence of death.

Cynthia: Which high school was that?

Micheal: Bushwick High School – the heated dynamics of it. This is something that I saw and was talking about way back in the '60s during the revolution. If you take the same group of kids and you keep them all together and move them from one elementary school – you keep them all together and put them in the same junior high-school, and then if they make it, you put them all in the same

high school, there's no change. There's stagnation. Those kids don't learn anything but to be homogeneous. Then they fight anything different. They fight trying to take it apart. They don't want to move apart. There's stagnation. [Extended, extensive audio distortion and noise]

By the time I graduate high school and they told me I couldn't go to the science high-school that I wanted, I didn't even think of another one. Being young, arrogant, hot-headed, and thinking your smart, I said, well, I'm doing this. I'm good at this. This is what I'm going to do. So I started applying for schools for the arts. I wound up being an actor instead of a scientist.

Cynthia: You mentioned you transitioned from Brooklyn to the Bronx. How did that separate from your time at Bard?

Micheal: Because I met a woman at Bard who lived in Manhattan. We eventually got together. When we got together after school, we said, "You're from Manhattan. I'm from Brooklyn. We're not going to live in either Brooklyn or Manhattan." For people from Brooklyn or Manhattan, Queens was just out of the question. Queens? Never happen. Staten Island wasn't even part of New York as far as we were concerned, so we moved to the Bronx. I moved to 183rd in the Grand Concourse – 2095, Grand Concourse.

Cynthia: This was after your graduation?

Micheal: Yes, that was in December '81. I graduated in – well, we were married when we moved in. Somewhere in '82... That was when her guardian died. That's how we got together and moved there. That's how I got to the Bronx: a process of elimination.

Cynthia: Tell me about that time period.

Micheal: It was life. Here I am, graduated college, had no clue as to how to go about anything, and really didn't have a chance to think about it because within a month or two of being out of school, I had planned on breaking up with her. I told her that day we were going to break up. I went to Connecticut. I called my father. I mean, I went to my father's house and called that afternoon, just to see how she was doing to make sure everything was cool, because we were still friends. She said, "Agnes kind of died." "What do you mean? I just left yesterday. What do you mean she died." "Just now. I'm holding her now." She hadn't even called 911.

I jumped in the car, came back, and here I was with a wife. We moved to the Bronx. I became responsible. I didn't know... Now, I graduated Bard College with a degree in theater and political studies. What the hell did that mean to the job market? So I jumped in a yellow cab and started driving a yellow cab out of Long Island City, right under the 59th Street Bridge. It's called Midland.

When you come across the 59th Street Bridge, you see this sea of yellow cars. They were the last fleet to have checkers, which I'm proud of. As a kid, I loved checkers, so when I got to grow up and be a driver – to drive the last of the checker fleets is a personal kind of good feeling. I don't know why they discontinued those cars. I thought those were the greatest cars. A bit of New York nostalgia... That was my first job out of college: driving a yellow cab.

[Off-mic question]

Yeah, I loved it. I really did. It gave me the flexibility to do work. That's how I could work with Bertha. As a matter of fact, that's how I found Bertha at the theater.

Cynthia: Was she a fare?

Micheal: Was Bertha a fare? You know what? She was. What happened was I picked her up. She and her boyfriend were together, and I was dropping them off over there. You would never know there was a theater on 35th Street off of Park Avenue. You see there was this theater there. I was like, oh wow, really? So I dropped them off and eventually came back. Yeah, because I didn't know that theater was there. I'd never heard of the theater off Park. Yeah, that's how I met Bertha. I was driving a cab. I met Bertha. That's what I do: I go do theater work, and then I'd go back to driving the cab.

Then my family – I got with my wife, Robin. She got pregnant. I started doing laundry. I started working for Consolidated Laundry. Consolidated finally sold out. They sold out to some 10 or 15... That's how big Consolidated was. They had to sell out their routes to like 15 different companies. They sold the drivers with the routes, but we had the option, if we didn't like the company, to go apply with one of the other companies.

First I went to Sea Crest and didn't like it, then wound up at Cascade. Then I went from there to – nah, don't like this. I started teaching. I taught for the Board of Ed off and on from '80. My son was born in '84. My daughter was born in '86. By the time Michelle was born, I was working for the board.

[Off-mic question]

District 16, which is Bushwick, and 32, which is Bed Stuy.

[Off-mic question]

Again, it was pretty much the same, because when you're communal, you're communal. The problem I had was with the Board of Ed. The reason why I eventually left is the Board of Ed told me that children didn't matter. I had to cover the Board of Ed's ass. The principal literally told me that. I looked at

him like he was crazy. I'm not here for the Board of Ed. The Board of Ed pays me, but I'm here for the kids. What the Board of Ed was doing was not for the kids, which is why we constantly argued.

I was teaching English at the time. At one time I was teaching English, and at one time I was in the reading lab. That's why I was thinking. They were using something called STAR methodology. STAR methodology had to do with the five points. I said, "How are you going to teach a methodology to make kids read the words?"

I had eighth-graders that couldn't read a third-grade book. I was literally bringing them back to phonics, breaking down words and letters, sounding out letters and words, and finding smaller words within the bigger words. They told me to stop doing that and stick to the curriculum. We got into big arguments about that. They told me to stop going to kids' houses. I live in the neighborhood. What do you mean, don't go to their houses? Most of their parents I knew, which was another big thing. I didn't have to know any of the parents, because when I got there, people would say, "Oh wow, do you know Bell is there?" [Laughs] Parents were going, "Yeah, I heard you was here. I want you. That one's mine."

Conversely, while I was in the classroom I would look at kids and do things they would think is unconventional. I'd first say, "Sit down." Then I'd look at them and say, "Go sit your ass down, period. If you sit in my face, I will smack you. Go home and tell your mama, tell your daddy, that Micheal Bell said go sit your ass down before I smack you." They didn't care for that at the Board of Ed. I understand that, but what they didn't understand was you have to give the kids what they need when they need it.

Once you sit them down and they understand that you're not backing down, they'll respect you for being the person that you are and deal with you accordingly. If they see the Board of Ed make a punk out of you, then they're going to make a punk out of you. They'll tell you the rules and beat you up with the rules. Ultimately I'm a kid. I can break the rules, and it's no big deal, but if you break the rules, you're going to get in trouble and lose your job.

I would tell them, "I don't give a damn about my job, because I own my house. So now what you going to do? Because when I smack you and send you home, your mother's going to look at you and say, 'Who did that?' You're going to say, 'Mr. Bell.' They're going to say, 'Oh, good.'" And those kids knew it.

As a matter of fact, I had a fifth-grader punch me in my face. It was okay, because I snatched him up and hung him up on the wall like this until the principal came. He's a fifth-grader. Come on. Everybody's having a fit

thinking I'm going to go crazy on this kid. I put the kid down, wrote him up. Everybody wrote him up and sent him home.

I'm walking down Evergreen at three o'clock. Six boys are walking down Evergreen like this here. I look up and say, "Oh hey, what's up fellas? What's going on?" "Hey Mike, what's going on? Did you hear about my brother?" "Oh really? What happened with your brother?" "Oh, this teacher..." I looked and saw the little brother. I said, "Oh really?" I laughed. "Did your brother tell you which teacher he was talking about?" "No. I mean, we going to go find his ass right now." "You're looking at him." "You, Mike? You? What happened?" "Ask your brother what happened." They, on the spot, beat his ass.

To this day, every time that young boy sees me – he's 35 right now – every time he sees me he does this [makes gesture 01:02:46]. What he didn't know was the reason why his brothers knew me is because me and his father grew up together. His grandfather's name was Mr. Buddy. On Central between Putnam and Madison, there's a big hole. Three years ago the building was still there. They were using it for a church, but before then it was a factory. This is what I was telling you: Central Avenue was a whole different place.

Mr. Buddy ran that particularly building – the foreman of that building – for as long as I could remember. This is what I was telling you earlier when I said I would stop and talk to some kids and have to run their family history, because they didn't know. Their grandfather died before they were born, or when they were too young to know.

Coming back to Bushwick was just being home, but being home caused me a little more – because I was – I didn't know any better. I did things the way I was taught. Men stood up to boys a certain way because that's what boys needed. This new way of the world of pandering to children – I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but there is such a thing as a woman's way of doing things and a man's way of doing things. The world has switched from...

When I was coming up, for the most part it was the way men did things. You either shut up, listened, and walked the chalk line, or you got smacked. [Affects effete vocal signature:] A woman's way of doing things is trying to – you know? A different world – and I was still dealing in the world that I grew up in, and I'm still defending it for the most part.

Cynthia:

You have a lot to come back to. Do you have any words you want to wrap up with before we schedule the second session to complete your story? I'm interested in learning more about your time in education and how to phased out of transitioning from the Bronx back to Bushwick.

Micheal: What I would like to tell you about, and it also gets back to the question of the demographics in the neighborhood... When I was a kid, there were no black teachers and no black politics. In the mid – after King died – '68, '69 – we start getting all of these things about black history and black people – John Henry and all that kind of stuff – but it was still the same kind of party-line stuff coming down the line.

When I became grown and got out of college, my mother was a full-fledged teacher. There was a whole bunch going on. The politics of the neighborhood was reflected that way. We had big events, community events, district-wide events that revolved around Black History Month, the diaspora. We did the diaspora one year. We did Motown another year. We did a chorus line another year. They were big events that were yearly events that went on at the Board of Ed.

Dennis [Harring] was the politician at the time – one of the politicians. After Dennis, and this is the change, Martin [Felan] – a lot of his political career had to do with my mother and that whole crowd. Norma Cologne, my mother – I think I mentioned Norma being part of this system that went into the schools. Norma was very big into politics in Bushwick – very quiet. She wasn't a politician herself, but she was behind the scenes.

Cynthia: What was her last name?

Micheal: Cologne – Norma Cologne.

[Off-mic question]

Micheal: Yes.

Cynthia: This was in the '80s?

Micheal: '60s through the '80s. You have to remember that that generation was spearheading things. My parents – well, there are 10 years between my mother and father – but they were between 20 and 30 in the '60s. Their age has progressed. They were the young parents. When I moved here in '66, I turned seven years old. My mother had to be all of – if I was seven, my mother was 27, 28, or 29 – somewhere in there.

These were all young parents. When we're talking about the '80s and '90s, we're talking about the same parents at 30, 40 and 50. They were keeping their children together. This is what the fight was. This was the fight that I grew up out of, which is very different than what you see today.

When all of the young, black parents moved into Bushwick when I was a kid, they all had kids from two, to five, to seven, to eight. When my mother bought

our house, a two-family house, we brought a tenant with us from the apartment that we lived in. My mother bought the house, and she brought one of the women out of that building.

[Off-mic question]

Before I lived here, we lived at a place called 487 Saint John's Place between Washington and [Clauson]. There's a firehouse on Saint John's Place. Four-eighty-seven was connected to the firehouse. I want to mention a little bit about that because that building was like [Booster's Place]. We were all one community and one family.

[End of recorded material 01:09:13]