

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of an interview with Micheal Bell by Cynthia Tobar on April 20, 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 2

[Start of recorded material 00:00:00]

Cynthia: Good afternoon. It is April 20th, 2016. We are here for session two of our interview with Micheal Bell at his home on Putnam Avenue. We wanted to open up sort of where we left off earlier. I was wondering if you can speak a little bit about women in Bushwick growing up.

Micheal: Women period in Bushwick were doing what women did. We moved here in '66. There was a strike, a Board of Ed strike, in '68. When we went to school, they told us to go home. My mother marched us back to the school and said, "No, you're not sending my kids home. I've got things to do."

My mother, whose name was [Elaina Stevenson, Norma Cologne, Jackie Lloyd Baye, Alma Simon, Gerald, Ms. Sims – I don't remember her first name. I just remember her name was Ms. Sims. Her son's name was Gerald. He was in my class. A whole bunch of the mothers went back to the school and said no. The principal took them into the office. They took us back in the school, and we went to school during the strike. Afterwards, he spoke with those parents and made a deal with them. They stayed on and became [parras]. My mother retired in her life as a teacher out of that.

Women in Bushwick in the '60s were mothers. They were doing what they had to do to raise their families. They were doing it under the most adverse situations. Like I said, this is '66. Civil rights were still being fought. They had not been achieved yet. They didn't cry about the situation; they made things happen.

I'm proud of those women and always will be. It's one of those reasons why I don't understand a lot of the things that I see today. Everybody complains. If you're uncomfortable, you're going to complain, but sometimes that's all people do. Other times, people complain while they're doing what they have to do to do what needs to be done. Those are the women that I grew up under. I will always remember and am glad that I lived through that time under those women.

Cynthia: Tell me more about that role and how that segued into education overall in Bushwick.

Micheal: Education was always key. That was the foundation of everything that we did. Again, this is the '60s. It wasn't something – even though they taught it, it had to be pounded in your head. It was just a given. You went to school. You did what you had to do.

Two-ninety-nine was a very good school. I had very good teachers in my elementary school, not to mention the fact that my mother was downstairs on the second – on the next floor down – but there were active parent-teachers. Parents were active.

School, things we did after school – it was all connected. Like I said, Bushwick was a family neighborhood. I knew the parents in the next block; the adults in the next block knew me. They knew my mother. I couldn't do anything in this neighborhood. I'm talking all the way past Gates Avenue down doggone near to Chauncey Street and all the way down to the other side to Harman Street. Before you got home, you would know it. Your parents would know it. You knew better than to sass anybody, because then they'd box your ears, bring you home, and your ears would get boxed again. It was just that simple. You just didn't do it. It was a different time.

Cynthia: You talked in our previous segment about going to college, coming back, and then making your life back in the city – how your life somewhat came back full circle. Before we go back into that era, there's another era that we overlooked that would be great to get your perspective on: the 1970s in Bushwick.

Micheal: Late '60s, early '70s, after... Well, Broadway burned on three different occasions. The [blackout came]. There were three blackouts, actually, but it only got looted on two, the night that King died. At one time we jokingly referred to Bushwick as the burning bush, because it was burning every night. There was a fire somewhere. Most of it was arson.

Now, this was something that was my pet peeve: You always saw people on the news saying, "These people burned down their own neighborhoods." No, we didn't. We didn't burn down anything, and what burned down didn't belong to us anyway. Those that were leaving and didn't want to leave it burned it down. Arson wasn't done by the people that didn't own the property. It would do them no good. Broadway, during the looting and stuff, a lot of that got torn up and looted. That's what happens during riots and during those times.

It came full circle about a year ago. I was out at a friend's house out in Jersey. I go to synagogue out there sometimes with them as respect to my friends and the invitation, and my own particular interest in the history of religion. We were having a conversation after one of the high holy days, and having meals and eating.

We were talking, and one of the gentleman said to me, "Oh yeah, Bushwick. My family is from Bushwick. My dad used to tell me stories. He was telling me how when we left, we weren't going to leave anything, so we just burned the goddamn thing down." I just looked at him like, yeah, I know what you're talking about. I was there. What could you say? It is what it is. That's what people do when they flee a neighborhood.

Cynthia: What areas did you witness get destroyed on Broadway? Those were mostly the businesses, correct?

Micheal: All of it. Broadway still does not have real businesses on it to this day. There used to be J. Michaels on Broadway. There was a jewelry store. They had major stores all up and down Broadway. There were three movie theaters at one point on Broadway. After the riots and looting, it never opened back up. About 15 years ago they started putting little stores and businesses. Now with the new gentrification, you see all kinds of stuff coming on Broadway again. Again, that's the politics of living in America.

Cynthia: What was [overlapping noise, off-mic] the one from July 1977?

Micheal: '76 and '77 were very good deals for me, personally. We had fun in this neighborhood. Things were going very well. Bicentennial year – '76. Good times. '77, I left for college.

Cynthia: What made them good?

Micheal: There was work. People were about their business. Obviously I graduated high school six months early. I was DJing. I was performing. I was doing a lot of things. Again, people were working. Just the country itself was in a happy place. It was the bicentennial year, the spirit of '76. It seemed that the less problems...

We were also in the aftermath of the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement. There was a feeling of getting some of the benefits of the fight. We were still living in that, but then politically – who was it? [Lady] was in office about then. Was it Oliver North who went and made the guns for coke deal?

They sprayed paraquat in '76 and '77, which killed all the good marijuana that used to be around, so there was no marijuana around. Coke, which was \$100 to \$150 a gram, went down to \$25 a gram. I went away to college, and everybody was progressive and trying to get things done – go to school, be athletes, and so on and so forth.

I came back in '81, and there was this new stuff called crack. Some of the best in the neighborhood were out to lunch on crack. Nobody could trust anybody anymore. It was a whole different world. For me, it's not like I was out here in

it to see it progress. I went to this little tiny college in Upstate New York. The first year I didn't even come home. I stayed on campus the whole summer. Another vacation I went to Lenox, Massachusetts and spent some time at a Shakespeare company at a place called [Lamont]. Needless to say, even when I was home, I was coming in and out, doing my thing, really not in tune to what was going on. When I came home to actually live in it, it was a whole other world.

Cynthia: Who did you know in your circles who was affected by this?

Micheal: I lost two sisters. I'm just going to leave it at that. I lost two sisters. I literally buried two sisters. I buried a lot of people, but you can't get no closer than my eldest and my youngest.

Cynthia: How can anyone ever recover from that type of a loss?

Micheal: Funny word, recover. You don't recover. It's life. You continue. You don't recover; you just continue.

Cynthia: Were there any missions that you saw from people in the neighborhood to try to counteract what was going on in regards to education and outreach?

Micheal: All of that was done. It's been done all over the nation, but it was... See, when you understand that none of that was an accident and was all set down on somebody's board – plotted. All of those things that society or people in the society may do to combat it – that's all in the process. It has its cost. It was done for a reason. It was effective, because it took a population that was becoming mobile and progressive, and it put a stop to the momentum. It's just that simple. I'm not going to say it stopped it, but it slowed it down and really threw a lot of gook in the workings. The country is still trying to recover from it.

Cynthia: Let's talk about that momentum and how it manifested in your life.

Micheal: When I got out of college, I moved to the Bronx because I got married. I started driving a yellow cab. On the one hand, I didn't notice a lot of it in the negative because I wasn't out in the world like that to experience that. Like driving a cab, you're in the car 12 hours a day, minimum. By the time you finish – you're driving 12 hours, and then you go try to switch with your partner. You pass out, you get up, and you do it again. On the other hand, since I drove the night shift, I made good money because the freaks come out at night. They're always running around in cabs to do what they want to do, so I was making good money.

Cynthia: The nightlife in New York –

Micheal: Oh god, the nightlife in New York was crazy. I started driving a cab before the Javits Center was built, before 42nd Street was cleaned up. It was sin city. The lights never went out. It was open season, 24/7. It was a different New York – a very different New York.

Cynthia: [Respondent is displaying a montage of community photos, 00:17:35] You want me to look at the one in the middle?

Micheal: This one. This guy's name is [Herbie Corderro]. Herbie grew up on this block. He was here when I got here in the '60s. His mother and father were here. We all grew up together. This is Herbie's birthday. I forget what birthday it is, but as we do in the community and the neighborhood, we had it right outside. We had a big party on the block for Herbie's birthday. Herbie had who he wanted closest to him – all the kids. All these kids here are now 22 to 25 years old.

Cynthia: Around what year was this taken?

Micheal: It had to be mid '90s somewhere. These two girls grew up in the house directly across the street. This is their brother and my niece. You were asking about my kids and coming up. This, if you can zoom in on that little one there, is my son and my nephew on Easter.

Cynthia: Aw, he looks so adorable. This is all Putnam?

Micheal: This is right here on Putnam Avenue. That would be – they had to be five, maybe. Robert was born in '84, so '89. This is the girls getting the kids together on the block and taking them to Manhattan Beach. I don't know if you can get a picture of the baby dancing on the table because of the tape. Here is my daughter and a bunch of the kids from the block.

Cynthia: Sitting on the park bench?

Micheal: Yes. This is my mother. God bless the day, we lost my mom in 2012. That's the one who was a school teacher who went in and told the school principal that she's not going home. This picture – this is you and who?

Oh gosh, me and the girls from the block.

Cynthia: How old were you in that picture?

Micheal: Probably eight or nine.

Cynthia: You're how old now?

Micheal: Twenty three.

Micheal: This is to answer your question about timing. Long after we're dead, this is going to be archived in somebody's history about Bushwick. That's what we're doing right now. Her grandmother is Cynthia. Then this is one Christmas. That's her and my daughter Michelle.

Cynthia: This is the Christmas picture, right under the one of your mother?

Micheal: Mm-hmm. That answers your question, I guess – the best way I could answer your question about my kids and growing up in Bushwick. This here, I guess you can tell what I was doing at that time...

Cynthia: It was like Mr. Kotter.

Micheal: Exactly, Mr. Bell. I'm at 291. You can see the thought: What did I get myself into?

Cynthia: Teaching what subject at this point?

Micheal: Social studies. This young lady's name is [Fontella]. She was born next door in 1241 Putnam.

Cynthia: Where is she now?

Micheal: Good question. Her dad and her mom moved. I saw her dad about two years ago. Fontella should be about 16 now.

Cynthia: And the children in the one underneath it?

Micheal: Oh, that's personal family. This is my cousin Frankie's son. Oh, this picture here – this young lady.

Cynthia: [Naya]?

Micheal: Yes. I have never seen Naya in person. Naya's mother grew up in that house directly across the street. We were friends from the time we were six years old until she was grown, married – Naya's dad – and we still are in touch. We're still like family. We stay in touch. We keep up with each other. When Naya graduated... When Naya was born, she called and told me all about Naya. When Naya graduated, she sent me Naya's picture in the high-school...

I say all that to say that's growing up in Bushwick. Even now, when you see people that grew up – it's like things are still the same. I thought the world was like that. It was kind of hard going out in the world and seeing a lot of the things that I saw. Whoa, wait a minute. That's not right. People would say I was too nice about things. Sometimes people would look at me real suspicious, and I couldn't understand why. "People don't do that." "What do

you mean, people don't do that? Where do you come from?" But growing up in Bushwick...

Cynthia: Talk to me about the '80s and '90s in Bushwick.

Micheal: In '91 I got divorced. That was hard on me. You make plans, and God laughs. I got my kids every other weekend and every other holiday. They were right here in Williamsburg on South 8th Street, so they were still right here, right down the day-train line.

It was good, because my kids were great. My son played guitar. He was Muay Thai kickboxing champ. My daughter was always doing something. She was always busy. She wanted to be a model, but they said she was too short. In those days they still had real strict height and weight requirements. My daughter's short, you know? But she kept herself busy.

My kids for the most part, when you look at kids today – well, my kids are 29 and 31. They both are college grads. They both are working. They both have families and children. They're productive members of society – none of the cliches. I'm proud of them. They're educated. They're together. They're progressive.

Nobody's perfect. I think my daughter, like most women, runs her mouth too much. My son is not as sensitive as I would like him to be towards women, but it doesn't matter. His wife loves him, so what does my opinion matter? [Laughs] They're in Arizona. They have their children. He's manager at some auto place that sells cars. He's one of the top salesmen, and he's doing great. My daughter is manager. She helps put people in housing and gets their benefits. She went to John James. He does the social justice thing – helps people.

[Off-mic question]

Yeah, she lives next door. We have 1241 and 1245 Putnam. I have the top floor here. She has the top floor over there. My sister is downstairs.

Cynthia: While this was all going on in the '90s, did you stay in education?

Micheal: I kind of backed me way into education, because at some point in time my mom... Well actually, after the divorce – and I was teaching when I got divorced. I had left the laundry company and started teaching because the benefits and all that were better. Then after I got divorced, I had this stupid idea that my responsibilities weren't so much that I could think about being an actor again. That's the first time I left the Board of Ed, which was in the mid '90s.

I started driving again. I was working in the printing business for a while while I was looking for acting work, but that was when I evolved into a techie, which is what I'm doing now. People didn't see me doing enough acting stuff. Then I was coming in and doing readings for people. They liked what I was doing in readings.

A couple of friends that went to college with me, when they spoke about me, they not only spoke about what I did onstage; they spoke about what I did offstage. The first couple of times I was doing some readings for people, and they were talking about ongoing shows that they had and not being able to get techies to do things proficiently for them in the way that they liked. So I stepped in and did a couple of things. I did one for this guy and then one for this guy.

The next thing you know, people were calling me all the time to do tech work. I was like, "Yo, why don't y'all call me when there are auditions?" "Everybody in the network wants to audition. I need what I need, Micheal, and I can depend on you. I can just tell you what I think, you can see it, and you get it done." "Oh, okay." Look, I'll take money wherever I can get it. [Laughs] That's the dance I've been doing since then. I went back to the Board of Ed because that got to be too strenuous.

Okay, segue here. Remember when you were talking about women – the strong women in the neighborhood? Well, it also translated to the Board of Ed. When I went into the Board of Ed in '85, I went in as a parent thinking I could avoid the responsibility of the classroom and the work – the added schoolwork that I would have to do on my own – and still get a paycheck and coverage for my kids, and try to do acting after three o'clock.

Lo and behold, a guy by the name of [Alberto Brian] came in and was evaluating the class, thought I was the teacher, and when he found out that I wasn't the teacher, he kind of got a little upset and sent me down to 65 Court Street. I took a battery of tests, not knowing they were tests. All he did was write this letter, put it in an envelope, and tell me to take it to 65 Court Street. I took it to Court Street. They told me to sit down and fill out these papers, so I filled them out. Then they said, "We need you to take these tests." "Okay." All of this happened in one day.

I walked out with a temporary per diem certificate by the Board of Examiners. Little did I know I took three different tests, passed them all, and they gave me a teaching license that had to be renewed every year. So every year I played the game of 'I'm going to do it this year; I'm going to go back to acting.'

Well, I taught until... Oh, the segue was through the '80s there were black, female principals. After Mr. Brian passed away in the middle of the school

year, Dr. [Neddy Lark] took his place. [Rosa Escoto] was the assistant principal. [Sharon White] was somewhere in the mix of deans or something or other. The next year Rosa went to 111, Sharon took over 291, and Neddy went to 162. For the next couple of years, I bounced between those three ladies and what they needed in their schools. In the mid '90s, I left in '91 after the divorce, came back, and was with Neddy when I came back to 162.

Cynthia: What year was that?

Micheal: About '95 now. I came back to 162. It was me and Neddy Lark.

Cynthia: Where were these schools located?

Micheal: They're here in District 32. Neddy left, and a guy named Mr. [Recivo] came in. In 291 Sharon left and went to 299, which was an elementary school. A guy named Mr. [Panici] came into 291. These were two young Italian... They really had that mafioso attitude type of thing. When I say that, I'm just talking about an attitude of I'm the man, I'm running shit, and it's either my way or the highway. I didn't have a problem with as long as they didn't come in between me and my children, which they did.

At some point in '96 or '97, Mr. Recivo and I had a difference of opinion. He told me to let them kids do what they wanted to do. If they stood on my desk and told me where to kiss, I would sit behind the desk, write an anecdotal, put it in their file, walk around the desk, leave the student there and continue teaching. I told him I couldn't do that.

Cynthia: Was classroom management an issue at the schools?

Micheal: Oh yeah. It was an issue for everybody but me. It was an issue for most of the people that did not understand the dynamics of our neighborhood. Most people that did – and at the time we had quite a few people from the neighborhood teaching. There was Ms. [Vana] from Cornelia Street. Ms. [Reevesbay] lives on Cornelia Street. Mr. [Kitchen] lives on Cornelia Street. There were quite a few teachers from the neighborhood at the Board of Ed, and they were all equally frustrated because the politics of the day was let the kids do what they want. Just write it up, put everything in their files, pad their files with all the negativity that you can so that as soon as they graduate we can go ahead and incarcerate them.

Cynthia: Previously you were talking about black female principals. How was it handled then?

Micheal: Mr. Recivo told me to stop going to those kids' houses. See, before I'd write them up, I'd snatch them by their doggone collar and drag them to their house, because I let them know you can't beat me, and I ain't scared of your mother. I

ain't scared of your father. As a matter of fact, let's go find them. When you pull a kid's card before they can, they got no place to go.

I substituted with Sharon in 299. I was walking down the hall and saw this kid ripping down the bulletin boards – ripping stuff all over the place. "Get over here." The little boy walked up and punched me in my face. [Laughs] I snatched him like this here by his collar and pinned him up against the wall like this here. He was a little kid. This was an elementary school. He's fighting and kicking.

Ms. White saw me. She's hollering, "Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell. Please don't hit him." I'm sitting here laughing. "Okay." I put the kid down. They take him to the office, suspend him, send him home, blah blah blah. I get off at three o'clock. I'm coming down Evergreen. I look down the block, and there are these five or six boys coming. I look in the back of them, and there's a little boy.

He's got four or five brothers, and here they come marching down Evergreen. "Micheal, did you hear what happened to my brother? Some teacher gone and snatched my brother up. We're going to go find him." I sat on the car and started laughing. I said, "Oh really? You're going to do all of that? Did your brother tell you the teacher's name?" "No."

Meanwhile, all of a sudden he's hiding behind everybody in the back. I said, "Come here little boy. Come here and tell your brothers, who were you fighting with? What did I tell you?" I tell kids in a heartbeat, go home, get your parents, and tell them Mr. Bell is the first one – okay? Because half the time, if they're in Bushwick, they're going to know who you're talking about anyway.

His brothers looked at me and said, "Oh, not you, Mike? Not you." His brothers beat him down on the spot right then and there and took him home. I see that kid every day. He's now something like 38 years old. Every time he sees me [feigns being scared].

Cynthia: So back to this difference of opinion you had with this new principal...

Micheal: He was only reflecting the attitude of the time and the era. That's why I bring it up. Children are not a political [potato]. Neither is education. If you look at the history of New York in education between the '80s and the '90s, they had no less than four or five different methodologies of what they should do with children. They constantly changed them. They went from district to decentralized to the SERT schools to now this new thing they're doing with specialized schools. We're not even going to talk about the differences they have done with people in what they call special ed.

None of it has anything to do with education. It has everything to do with politics. For that reason, and the fact that it's not the system – the system is going to be what it is. I'm too stubborn. I take responsibility for my life, my actions, and my attitude. There are certain things I'm too stubborn to concede about.

Cynthia: Writing them up wasn't enough?

Micheal: No. What does a kid care about something you put on a piece of paper? He has no idea the consequence of it. Not only that, it doesn't address his actions. That's a coward's way out of doing something. These are my children. What I told Mr. Recivo was, "Mr. Recivo, I get on that 38 bus and transfer to the 60 every day at three o'clock when I get off. In the morning, I stand at the bus stop. I take that 60, and I transfer to that 38 with these kids. On the weekends, they pack my bags in the store, and we sit in the same laundromat and wash our clothes. If they can't respect me and themselves in this building, I can't live in my neighborhood with them. They can't talk to me any way they want to and me just let it go. I can't do that."

He looked at me and said, "Oh really? Well I know what to do with you, Mr. Bell." I said to him – and this is what he didn't like – "You can't do anything to me, Mr. Recivo. I was here when you got here. In September, I won't be your problem anymore." That's when I left the Board of Ed in '96. No, I'm lying. I didn't leave the board. I left 291. I took my temporary per diem and substituted for the next two or three years. I went to 308 for a little while.

I don't like elementary school. I like middle school. In elementary school, the kids are too young. There are certain things they're just not going to retain. In high school, they're smelling themselves. They don't hear you as well. But if you catch them at that scary age, right in the middle of the two... You thought you were a big dog when you were in the sixth grade, but when you got here, you saw that things changed. When you get there this time, this is how you handle that. Try to hold onto some of this. Anyway, that's just my preference.

Cynthia: What did you do to transition after that?

Micheal: I fell into a black hole for a little while. I mean, I worked. I started printing. I got into another relationship, but I wasn't doing any theater. I wasn't doing anything in the arts. I didn't realize how [quite dead surreal] life is. You get up. You go to work. You come home. You eat. You go out. There's nothing, but I never knew that. Before then I was just involved in life, one thing after another.

I think that's what people subconsciously fight anyway in life. When you see people running out, trying to find parties, or even people that are workaholics finding jobs to do – because the worst thing you want to do is have a mundane

life. Life has got to have some kind of spice to it. You go to work. You come home. For a while, that's what I did. A fish has always got to go back to the water, so again I'm doing theater.

Cynthia: Tell me how you fell back into theater?

Micheal: [Stacy Pershau], a friend of mine from college. She called me. She was an economics major.

Cynthia: Around what time was this?

Micheal: This was the late '90s – '98 or '99. She calls me up and says, "Micheal, I wrote a play. I'm part of a writer's workshop, and I'm writing plays." "What? You're an economics major. The only reason you came to the theater was because you were polite enough to try to support me."

I went to a very good college. It's a school called Bard College, but it didn't have very many minorities. There were actually supposedly three black theater majors at that time. When I first came in, I was by myself. No, that's right. Silvia was a dance major.

Anyway, Stacy used to come and try to support me in the theater or whatnot. She's the one that used to tell a lot of people about the work that I did. I did Shakespeare. You do all that in college. I was Leer. I did "As You Like It." I did a lot of the tech work because we didn't have teachers... We had one lady by the name of [Natalia Lunde], who was wonderful. She taught everybody that was interested in learning how to do the behind-the-scenes work.

That's the big Bard family that I talk about. Everybody from Bard – because a lot of people in the arts – some people will only be in front of the lights. They don't want to do anything behind the stage. They might break a nail. Then there are the rest of us that do whatever needs to be done to get the show done. That's the crew I was a part of. Stacy knew that. She used to tell people wherever she went about her friend Micheal Bell in theater.

She called me and said, "I want you to come and see my play. I want you to meet some people." That's when I went up to the Harlem Theater Company and ran into the whole list of people that I've been working with for the past 15 years.

Princess Angelique Monet, Jamal Williams, Michelle – actress on the move... I have a huge crew because of Stacy. Sometimes I sit back and am in awe of the way God works. At that time in my life, I was really down and missing – feeling that hole and had no way of figuring out how I was going to get back into what I was doing.

She called me, and I went up there. They kept saying, "You need to come to the readings. We have a writer's workshop, and we need people to read." What happens is the writers write. They go to the workshop, and they need somebody to read the work. They need actors to read the work. Then they go and bang out some more. Then they come back and rewrite and rewrite.

Out of [Frank Severa's] workshop, there was a gentleman by the name of [Garland]. He has a whole crew of writers that are behind him. They're from Frank Severa's workshop. [Gale Euland Elle] – I did the tech for "Green Honey Love" for her. Jamal and I have been partners since that day. I've done so many different works with him I can't even begin to enumerate them. Then we started working with the Heritage House on Harlem. We started doing a thing called "The Glory of Sugar Hill." We've done that a couple of times, which is really nice. All the businesses on Sugar Hill get together. For two weekends we do fashion shows, plays, greetings, jazz music all over. It's a huge festival that goes on for two weekends. Stacy Pershau was how I got back into my life.

Cynthia: It's a nice way to wrap up this session, but before we do it would be wonderful if you could tell me your take on the arts of Bushwick [overlapping noise].

Micheal: It's funny, because I never connected the arts and Bushwick except for with the Board of Ed. When I was in the Board of Ed, and even when I wasn't – whenever I was in school in Bushwick, in 299 we had talent shows. My sisters won a couple of years, and I won a couple of years. It was really great.

In Bushwick itself, all the way back to since I was a kid, we performed in Bushwick. Crown Heights Affair is from Bushwick. Third World, "Try Jah Love," is from Bushwick. In the '60s and '70s, everybody walked around with their instruments playing music. In the schools we always did music. They had talent shows in this area all the time. My sister went to the Apollo because of some of the local events that happened.

I never connected the acting that I do with Bushwick because I started in Bed Stuy. The Bed Stuy Street Academy had the best drama workshop, which was turned into Weeksville United Actors Company. From Weeksville United Actors Company, I went to Talent Unlimited High School. Then I graduated and went to Bard.

When I came back from Bard, I was doing theater in Manhattan. That's where I got my SAG card, at the Irish Arts Center. I never really connected a lot of it to Bushwick. I connected music more to Bushwick. But with gentrification, all of a sudden there are these galleries that are more the Village-type places that are opening in the Bushwick area. It's funny, because I'm used to seeing it in the Village. For them to be opening places in Bushwick... A lot of the old

factories they are changing into lofts are having that artistic feel that was never in Bushwick before.

Cynthia: You have theaters like the Bushwick Starr on Starr Street. You have activism in local community buildings [overlapping noise, off-mic]. There are all these other things. The area is trying to tap into all this stuff that has already existed in the area for so long.

Micheal: It's funny. This is what I wanted to say to you earlier when we started. Everybody wants to move and go to a new neighborhood. I've lived here for 50 years. Why should I move? This is a new neighborhood. [Laughs] I didn't have to move to a new neighborhood; a new neighborhood moved in around me. There's so much that I don't know about the new Bushwick.

Cynthia: It's funny that you call it the new Bushwick.

Micheal: They're trying to change the name to East Williamsburg. See, now this is a conversation that pops into my mind that is really bad. Historically, whenever gentrification – or people come to take over and change something, the first thing they want to do is change the damn name.

Knickerbocker Avenue was [Brauthurster] or something to that nature. It wasn't Wilson until World War II, when we went to war with Germany. Then they decided that it was a German word, so they wanted to change it. But I suspect that Bushwick was once called Bensonhurst, because if you listen to Ralph Kramden, he will tell you he lives off of Chauncey Street and smells the Chinese food from Broadway on Chauncey Street.

In the hospital episode, when he went into the hospital, it's right down here on Bushwick Avenue, but he keeps saying that he lives in Bensonhurst. Now Bensonhurst is someplace all the way... I think what happens is people take the name with them when they move around, which also says something about their political awareness and connectedness. I'm not going to digress into a geopolitical... It was nice talking to you today.

Cynthia: Thank you very much. Thank you for sharing your story.

Micheal: My pleasure.

[End of recorded material 00:55:46]