



## WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies, other reproductions, and reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

- Brooklyn Historical Society is not responsible for either determining the copyright status of the material or for securing copyright permission.
- Possession of a reproduction does not constitute permission to use it.
- Permission to use copies other than for private study, scholarship, or research requires the permission of both Brooklyn Historical Society and the copyright holder. For assistance, contact Brooklyn Historical Society at [library@brooklynhistory.org](mailto:library@brooklynhistory.org).
- Read more about the Brooklyn Historical Society's Reproduction Rights Policy online: [http://brooklynhistory.org/library/reproduction.html#Brooklyn\\_Historical\\_Society\\_Reproduction](http://brooklynhistory.org/library/reproduction.html#Brooklyn_Historical_Society_Reproduction).

## GUIDELINES FOR USE

This transcript is hereby made available for research purposes only. These oral history interviews are intimate conversations between two people, both of whom have generously agreed to share these recordings with the Brooklyn Historical Society archives and with researchers. Please listen in the spirit with which these were shared. Researchers will understand that:

1. The Brooklyn Historical Society abides by the General Principles & Best Practices for Oral History as agreed upon by the Oral History Association (2009) and expects that use of this material will be done with respect for these professional ethics.

2. This transcript is a nearly verbatim copy of the recorded interview. As such, it may contain the natural false starts, verbal stumbles, misspeaks, and repetitions that are common in conversation. This decision was made because BHS gives primacy to the audible voice and also because some researchers do find useful information in these verbal patterns.
3. Unless these verbal patterns are germane to your scholarly work, when quoting from this material researchers are encouraged to correct the grammar and make other modifications maintaining the flavor of the narrator's speech while editing the material for the standards of print.
4. All citations must be attributed to the Brooklyn Historical Society:
  - Oral history interview with Narrator's Name (First Last), Year of interview (YYYY), Identifier/ Catalog Number; Crossing Borders Bridging Generations Oral History Collection, 2011.019; Brooklyn Historical Society.

**Oral History Interview with Taneka Maxwell**

**Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.058**

**Interview conducted by Dorothy Saint Jean on April 21st, 2013 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.**

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: All right, today is Sunday, April 21<sup>st</sup>. We are in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. This is Dorothy Saint Jean, the interviewer for Crossing Borders Bridging Generations oral history project with the Brooklyn Historical Society. Can you please tell me your name and where are you from, your date of birth?

TANEKA MAXWELL: My name is Taneka Maxell. Some people know me as Pink Maxwell. [Date redacted for privacy] I am 30 years old and I was born in Heidelberg, Germany but I was raised mostly in Brooklyn, New York.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Now, tell me, you were born in Germany, how did that come, like and you're from Brooklyn.

TANEKA MAXWELL: Well, my mother and father was in the Army. They got married in Augusta, Georgia in 1980, I believe, '79 or '80. They had my brother and then they were stationed in Germany and so that's when my mother had me there in Germany. So they stayed for a few years and my earliest recollection is actually in Germany being a baby seeing my brother even as the little boy like three or four years old throwing temper tantrums and actually playing in a sandbox with the, you know, with the actual like native German kids. We left Germany, I was about three years old when we came back to the States. We were staying in, I believe it was North Carolina but it wasn't for that long because my mother and father separated. And so my dad went back to Anniston, Alabama where he's from and my mom came back to Brooklyn where she's from.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Were they still in the military at this point when they separated and came to Brooklyn and went to Alabama?

TANEKA MAXWELL: No, they were discharged by that time.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. Can you tell me which part of Brooklyn did you end up coming to and growing up?

TANEKA MAXWELL: We came to Brownsville, Brooklyn. My great grandmother owned a brownstone out there. Her name was Lillian but everyone called her Nanny. She was the matriarch of the family, well known throughout the neighborhood and the house was definitely multigenerational and just different family relationships. We had aunts and uncles and cousins living in a three story brownstone. I went to elementary school, P.S. 335 on Rochester. I remember being in kindergarten there, like that's how early I can remember things, being in kindergarten and just being in, just growing up being in Brownsville was fun. I just remember, you know, just outside playing with the kids, you know, double Dutch, hopscotch, in the summertime going to Howard pool. They started this tradition where there's the community barbecue in I.S. 55 Park which is the junior high school. I attended that school seventh and eighth grade and one of my uncles started this like old time association where they made a tradition of every year for Father's Day to have this huge cookout with music, free food for the community, you know, free non-alcoholic beverages and music and they would play baseball in the park and people would play basketball and the girls would be dancing and their routines. Brownsville was a fun place because everyone knew everybody on the hill. It was Saratoga, Saint Mark's, Prospect, Park Place, Bergen, Pacific, everyone knew everyone. Prospect Plaza was the projects on the hill. They had the sunken in basketball court, which I believe

they called that the soul in the hole. Like a lot of the basketball tournaments would go on there. It was pretty fun growing up as a kid and, you know, elementary school, junior high school. It wasn't until I was in high school that I really learned about the negative aspects of the neighborhood. They were notoriously known for, you know, gangs and drugs and just shady people. It was kind of hard, you know, starting to date as a 16 and 17 year old because I would tell a guy I'm from Brownsville and he literally wouldn't talk to me because I was from Brownsville. He's like, "Oh, I can't mess with you, you're probably grimy or you got grimy family, I'm not coming to see you." So that's when I really learned about it because there is a section of Brownsville where there's a cluster of about three or four projects [05:00] and that's like the heart of, that's like the heart of Brownsville, but we weren't on that side. Saratoga wasn't on that side.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Now, you're, you said when you were in high school that's when you learned about the negative connotations. Did you go to high school in Brownsville or did you go to high school somewhere else? Where did you go to school?

TANEKA MAXWELL: I went to Paul Robeson High School which is in Crown Heights on Albany Avenue and Bergen, but it was only a 15 bus ride to, I didn't go to school that far from home.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK, and why did you go to that school and not to school in Brownsville?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Well, Brownsville don't have any high schools. So they, we have, you know, the elementary schools and the junior high schools of course but you didn't have any high schools. I chose Paul Robeson because I was interested in business.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. And you mentioned that your father moved to Anniston, Alabama. Did you guys ever go visit or did you...?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Yes. There was a four year time period in me and my brother's life that we did live in Alabama. It was from 1990 to '94, that's second to sixth grade we lived in Anniston with our grandmother. Father was in and out of the home. He was there but he didn't always stay in that house. It was a different experience. It was a hard adjustment. It was kind of sprung on us. I didn't really get a full understanding why we were down there until we got older but this was around the time my mother first got sick. She kept our little sister which she has a different father from after my parents separated. Her name is Mattea. Mattea stayed in New York so we didn't get a chance to really see Mattea develop and grow into a little girl. She was a toddler when we left and, you know, that was hard being away from my mother because just being in the country was different. You know, the girls seemed like they didn't like me, I always had this mean girl experience for some reason in, you know, elementary school and junior high school. I was missing things like beef patties and the sound of the ice cream truck, playing in the fire hydrant, you know, shooting the basketball in a crate on a tree, things like that, playing hopscotch, double Dutch. Those girls didn't do that down there. They didn't know what it was.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: What did they do for social time?

TANEKA MAXWELL: We had yards so we would play around in a yard, you know, play tag or hide and go seek or something, you know. You know, we brought our games down there like red light-green light, you know, we introduced them to some things, but I was really bored. I was really bored. It wasn't so many girls that I made friends with

even as an adolescent. So I pretty much stayed in, read a lot, stayed up under my grandmother. So that's why I was missing New York because I actually had a social life as a kid in New York so that's why I felt, I always felt like Brooklyn was my home.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And so you moved back in the sixth grade. Can you tell me what prompted that move and how, you know, was it an adjustment, a readjustment for you at that point?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Well, we came back because my great grandmother died from a heart attack. And so being that she was the matriarch of the family, she held everybody together, you know, it was a very sad time. She was a part of the Masonic Temple, that's where her funeral was held and it was the biggest funeral I've ever seen. Hundreds and hundreds of people. Very overwhelming to take all of that in and, you know, that was an adjustment because Nanny, she was, you know, my mother's grandmother and my aunts and uncles' grandmothers. They didn't have their mother because my grandmother died when they were young. So now the one who was raising them, their grandmother, died. Pretty much thinking back they were still pretty young too. They were in their 20s when Nanny died but as a child you don't really understand, you know, the difference of ages between the age range of adults. When you see an adult they're just a grown, they're an adult, but as an adult now you know a 24 year old adult is different than a 45 year old adult and they were still young themselves so things were definitely ran different [10:00] because there was no one really to put everyone in their place any more. So like that was the big adjustment but I was still happy to be home and we never moved back to Alabama. We've only visited.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. And can you tell me about your time once you moved back being in Brownsville? Did you see some of your same friends that you left behind or did you make new friends?

TANEKA MAXWELL: We made new friends. We've seen some old friends. It was kind of weird and awkward because a lot of people remembered us but we didn't remember them. I don't, I didn't remember a lot of people but that's because they knew we were here one day, the next thing you know we're gone so people would ask. But being down south we don't have anyone to ask about our friends in New York so, so people definitely remembered us. That was weird. A lot of people just seeing us on the streets, our mother's friends, aunts and uncles' friends, just random people, "Oh, you're back, you're up here, where were you?", you know? And I had a southern accent so I had to get back to my Brooklyn accent really fast because people, you know, I was being laughed at because I sounded southern, but that didn't last too long. Probably like within a few weeks I went back to my New York accent. But every now and again the southern is still in my voice. I hear that now at 30 years old.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: The Anniston, Alabama, where is Anniston Alabama?

TANEKA MAXWELL: It is northeast Alabama about an hour and a half from Atlanta, Georgia.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK, so that shaped your accent. And your great grandmother, you said that she was the matriarch of the family, was she from Brooklyn, you know, born and raised here, were her parents from here or?

TANEKA MAXWELL: She's, she was actually from Birmingham, Alabama, so she was the first generation that came to New York. It is a story within our family that she moved up here because her first husband was a part of the Negro Leagues, the black baseball teams, but



she didn't stay married to him, she didn't bear any children from him, but her second marriage was when she had my grandmother and that was her only child. But then my grandmother died young in her 30s when all of her children were young, or maybe 40s, I'm not sure which year it was, like when that happened but. But she came from Alabama. Her brother Prince gave her the brownstone. I don't know his background, like when he ever came to New York or --

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: He came before she did?

TANEKA MAXWELL: I, that's one thing I don't know but I just remember Uncle Prince giving Nanny the house but you know, she lived in Birmingham which is very racist. We've heard a story that one of her brothers actually was lynched back when they were younger. So she was definitely ready to leave Alabama and start a life in New York.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Do you know what year that was or when she, what year she came?

TANEKA MAXWELL: She, it would, she graduated high school pretty early so it's probably somewhere between 17 and 19, I believe. But I would have to do some research.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK.

TANEKA MAXWELL: To find that out.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Do you know around like what year?

TANEKA MAXWELL: No. She was born in 1925.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. And so this was probably before the World War II.

TANEKA MAXWELL: Right.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Yeah. And her being, did she ever go back to Alabama or when she left she never returned back?

TANEKA MAXWELL: I don't know.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK.

TANEKA MAXWELL: I don't know.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Now, your great grandmother, she passed away so you guys were with your mother. Can you tell me about how it was going from, when you went back the last time you were in Brooklyn your grandmother was there, now it's just you and your family members and your mother, I guess your aunts and uncles because your grandmother raised them as well --

TANEKA MAXWELL: Right.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: -- together.

TANEKA MAXWELL: And my grandfather was there also and he was the sweetest man. I just have nothing but great memories of him. I just remember we, no one ever told us when Grandpa's coming but we would see him walking down the street, down Saint Mark's, we'd just see his silhouette, he's just getting closer and closer, and we used to all start running, "Grandpa!" and he always had a bag of green grapes for us every single time. I learned later that he lived on Saint Mark's and Nostrand [15:00] in this apartment building and I remember recognizing it because I had a friend in high school who lived across the street from that building and it was, I was just like wait a minute, that's the building my grandfather lived in. And he used to always take us to the Brooklyn Soldiers Museum that's in Crown Heights on Brooklyn Avenue and Park, no. Saint Mark's.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So this is your grandfather who is your grandmother's former husband or is it your great grandmother's?

TANEKA MAXWELL: My grandmother's former husband. Now, that family structure was unique. You know, sometimes we don't put things together as a child because you just

take what they give you and you don't ask questions because it's not confusing, you're just OK, this is what it is. It wasn't confusing until I hit puberty maturing and when I start thinking about things, when you really start thinking about life and the world and relationships and how things work. My grandmother had four kids and my first, her first born, my Aunt Charlene, is her and Grandpa Charles' first child. Then there was my mother and we grew up, Grandpa Charles being her father. Then there was Uncle Gregory. Grandpa Charles was his father but he also had Uncle James. Uncle James was his father. So I'm like why are we calling Uncle James Uncle James? If that's my uncle's father shouldn't he be Grandpa? So and then there was Aunt Nulla and Grandpa Charles was her father. But then we would have family in Brownsville in one of the buildings called 430 on Saratoga and Prospect, we had family and it was always people saying that they were me and my brother's cousins and I'm like why are they my cousins and not my cousins' cousins? And why do I have a Uncle Timmy that's my mother's brother but he's not the brother of my Aunt Nulla and Uncle Gregory and Aunt Charlene? What is going on? So to sum it up, Grandma had three baby daddies but Grandpa Charles stayed with her throughout all of them. It didn't matter, no matter what those were his kids, couldn't deny it, didn't matter. But it was just crazy because they all were from Brownsville. My mother's father, the family was in 430 down the street, Uncle James was up the street, we always seen him up the street, and Grandpa Charles was right here, and I thought that was pretty gangster, I don't know. But it's just weird. And to this day I see Uncle James, I love Uncle James, you know? But Grandma had three baby daddies.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And so you figured out when you got older?

TANEKA MAXWELL: When I got older. Grandma was popular.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And then I guess your family structure, your family dynamics, your, is kind of different than the traditional family where it's like a --

TANEKA MAXWELL: Very different.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: -- two parent home and because, you know, your parents had separated, you were with your mother and then your great grandmother and then you said you had multigenerational families within the home. Can you tell me how it was having those, you know, all those dynamics with you?

TANEKA MAXWELL: It was fun because I'd get to play with my cousins, you know, like I had an older cousin, she was an older girl, she's six years older than me, then there's me, my brother, my cousin, my other cousin, he was a boy, we were about the same age, and then it was the little ones, my little sister, and then it was my aunt and my mom and then my other aunt who's technically not my aunt but she's the half sister of my uncle because they have the same father, Uncle James. You know, they all at one point was in that house.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK.

TANEKA MAXWELL: And definitely we never went hungry because someone is always cooking, there's plenty of people to cook and to entertain. Lots of laughter, I mean it was fun living in that house and we had a three family brownstone and most houses, people rent those and each floor is their own separate family. We took over the entire house, you know, to us that was normal. You know? we had two kitchens, two living rooms, like six bedrooms, three bathrooms, you know, plenty of hiding spaces to play hide and go seek, ghost stories saying the house was haunted, [20:00] you know, people trying to scare the living daylights out of us saying that someone died in that house. You know,

you know, my family was very interesting because Nanny, she had a bar in the kitchen and I remember this growing up, sometimes people would come over and they'd just be in the back drinking and smoking and Nanny would have her Michelob. She was just such a cool Nanny in the neighborhood but she would serve alcohol at her house. It was very, very different. Then it was, we didn't have an electricity bill because found out in like the late 70s Nanny knew someone who could hot wire the house so she didn't have an electricity bill in like 25 years, like but this was normal to us.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Did your friends ever say, ask you about oh, is your family dynamics like, did they ever try and understand it when you were growing up or was that like no one...

TANEKA MAXWELL: Yeah, some questions, you know, who's, if this is your cousin how, then who's the parent of this cousin and, you know, yeah, we've had questions sometimes. But for the most part, you know, when you're living in an urban setting it's not really that unusual. It's really not.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And right now we're in Crown Heights. Where's the, is that brownstone still in the family or?

TANEKA MAXWELL: That brownstone was sold and that brings me to a very interesting part of our life. That brownstone was sold in 2004? Was it? I graduated college 2004. It was sold in 2004. And after we graduated high school me and my brother like and my cousin and a lot of people in my family went their separate ways and this house meant a lot to me, very sentimental, and I was like how are you all just going to leave the house like that? So I actually lived in that house by myself at 19 years old trying to keep it up. And it was a boiler to heat it and price of oil fluctuates so one winter I'm spending \$75 to

fill it up, fill the tank, another winter I'm spending, you know, \$150. That was a very interesting part of my life. That was when, I didn't, my childhood was OK. I didn't really struggle until I became an adult. So and that house played a major role in that struggle when I was trying to really keep it up and we had dogs, I'm trying to feed the dogs, ceiling's falling in. You know, I'm trying to get some type of income coming in, I would rent a room here and there. Think I had like two tenants one time for like two months bringing in just a couple of dollars just to have some food, you know, boil pots on the stove for hot water, slept in my coat because it's cold. You know, it was a lot that I went through because I just, I didn't want the house to fall apart. I was in there for a year and then my aunt, she came back to live in the house and then after that year she lived in the house it was, they sold it because they wanted to I guess part their ways with it.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Why was it sentimental to you?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Because that was the family home, so many people lived there. You know, it was like regardless of where you live you always had somewhere to go. You know, if there are pictures of my grandmother as a baby in the second floor living room, you know, that should mean a lot to someone. You know, and I skipped a critical part in my life. My mom, she passed away a few -- the next year. Because Nanny died in 1994 that summer, June or July. And then after Nanny died, actually you know what? now I'm recollecting is we did go back down south but my mom went with us because her cancer, she was sick, her cancer came back, and there was a doctor down there that she wanted to help take care of her.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Was this Alabama?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Yeah, this was in Alabama. We moved back into my grandmother's house but it wasn't as bad because my mom was there and this, and to see my mother and father together [25:00] and actually blushing and liking each other again was one of the best memories and feelings that I've ever had. And I remember them sitting on a chair and I had a disposable camera and I took a picture of them and that camera got lost and I was just so hurt, but I remember it in my mind how it looks. But that December we were hit with bad news, Grandpa Charles died that December in the same year of '94 but Mommy didn't have any money to go back to New York so we missed Grandpa Charles' funeral. And not too long after that Mommy and Grandma wasn't getting along so she said she's going back to Brooklyn so I'm like yes, we're going back to Brooklyn. But Mommy really got sick, it really was coming back, and I watched her go through chemo, her hair was falling out. She had breast cancer. When she first got breast cancer they actually decapitated one of her breasts in the early 90s. So but you know, that's Mom, I still love her, one breast, bald headed, but when the cancer came back it spread to her brain, that was the toughest part. She wasn't coherent. I used to, I'm in seventh grade and I'm babying my mom trying to hold a normal conversation with her. But she's dying. And she died May '95.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: In Alabama?

TANEKA MAXWELL: In New York.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Oh, she came back, OK.

TANEKA MAXWELL: We came back, yeah. Because Grandma and Mommy wasn't getting along, so. So that was three deaths in less than a year in our family. But we've had deaths prior to that. In '89 Grandpa Charles' first, Aunt Charlene, she died in '89 of

breast cancer. Of, no, I'm sorry, ovarian cancer. So that disease is, it runs in my family and, you know, that was, that's tough on a family. So now two of, out of the four are gone. It's only my aunt and my uncle that's remaining. And they are the oldest people on that side of the family and they're not even 50. So not too many people can say the eldest in their family is not over 50. And I'm 30. So it didn't dawn on me literally until my mid 20s that they're not that much older than me. So my aunt Nulla, the youngest one, who's Grandpa Charles' last baby, she had her son at 16 so that's how me and my cousin is the same age. Her and my mother was pregnant at the same time. She had him in May of '82 and had me in October '82.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So that probably forced her to grow up, having, being a, becoming a mother at 16, having her two older sisters pass away and her father and her great grandmother.

TANEKA MAXWELL: Yes. And living in the house with like my older cousin, the one that's six years older than me, that was Aunt Charlene's daughter. She was still in the house. Then my aunt, she got into a significant relationship, she was pregnant. She was pregnant when my mom died with her second child. So we're all in the family house, she's pregnant with her second child, she have her first child, my cousin, me and my brother and my younger sister. And she's not even 30 yet. That significance, like that did not hit me until I was in my 20s, like it just hit me and I called her and I said, "Aunt Nulla, I appreciate you so much. I didn't realize how young you were. Like I didn't realize that until I became an adult."

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Where does she live now? Is she in Brownsville or is she...?



TANEKA MAXWELL: No, she's in Atlanta, Georgia with her and her daughter. Her daughter, she's graduating high school this year and so...

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. Do you, after your mother passed away did you ever go back to Alabama to visit your grandmother or your father or anything like that?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Yes, I visit Alabama a lot. Well, [30:00] late 20s I was able to visit, you know, when I was in college and things like that, you know, money was, it was hard so I didn't get to visit as much as I wanted to. But we definitely kept in touch by speaking on the phone and things like that. And she, my grandmother, came up for my college graduation. That was nice, her and my father, they came up in 2004. I graduated from Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. So that was a pretty good memory.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And how would you say though going from the little girl who lived in Alabama, came back to Brooklyn, you know, went back for a little bit of time, taking care of her mother, to taking care of this house that's part of the family, you know, really trying to keep it together and hold everything together, and then going, you know, going to Hofstra, how was that? Because you were still in college going through all of that. What, you know, what was going through your mind, what kind of, and you're seeing other students your age not dealing with half the things you were.

TANEKA MAXWELL: I was just looking at them, they have no idea. I had to grow up fast because when everyone first left the house they went about their way. My cousin went to the Air Force, he's across the country, my brother is with, you know, the mother of his child at the time, they were in a serious relationship, engaged, my aunt, she went to north Carolina, my uncle was somewhere, I think Queens or north Carolina, everyone was out of state. My oldest cousin, Christina, she was in Ohio. No one was there. I was alone.

You know, first, but this happened, first year college, I lived on campus, they were home. Second year they left and that's when I went back to the house and I was going through that. Third year, that's when Aunt Nulla came back. But by then I had a little bit of resentment, you know, kind of distanced myself because I just felt like I had no one to call on to help me. Fourth year I went back on campus, they had sold the house, the house was gone so I had no choice but to move back on campus anyway. And you know, my academic schedule was very tight. I was going to school seven days a week because of the program that I was in and these kids, they're going on spring break every year, partying, you know, I'm like I can just work, I've just got to work and get into my books. I don't have time to join a team, a sorority, a club, a group. I don't even have time to make real friends. I just kept my friends that were home because every weekend that I lived on campus, especially my first year -- my first year I was in Brooklyn every weekend but one weekend out of the entire school year. Always stayed on campus.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Why was that?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Because I just, Brooklyn, that was my stomping ground. I'm so loyal to my friends. I was on that Long Island Railroad back to Brooklyn because I'm like these kids have no idea about my life in Brownsville, I can't relate to them. I couldn't relate. If we weren't in class together I didn't know you. That's how, that's my college experience. I didn't see you on a day to day on the bus, I didn't know you. I didn't make it my business to make friends, you know. So once I graduated I'm in contact with no one but that's, I didn't, and I didn't, I was OK with that. So I didn't have the real college experience.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Do you still keep in contact now after you've graduated college and gone through everything with your friends from Brownsville who you said, you know, you made when you came back from Alabama? Do you still keep in contact with those friends or?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Yes. Yes, I have, I definitely have some friends that I've known since I was a little girl. You know, my best friend, she's still in my life. All the time they support me now, you know, with my writing career, my ventures. When I had my book release party Brownsville took up half the space and that, I was overjoyed by. Because I said at the end of the day I'm with where I started from and they still showed me love. Then especially social networks, we can keep in contact and mutual friends have events like baby showers and birthday parties and things like that. So we, people still come out and they do show support. I definitely get support [35:00] from the people that I grew up around to this day.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And would you say that because your family dynamics, like you said, your great grandmother came from Alabama and your father was from Alabama, were their families originally from here or did they have that same, you know, my family came from, you know, my grandmother or great grandmother came early on during the great migration to Brooklyn or were they all originally from here, could they relate to that?

TANEKA MAXWELL: With like other friends?

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Yeah.

TANEKA MAXWELL: No. No, most people that I grew up around, their family was from New York. Not a lot of people had like roots from the south.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Now looking back having, you know, being a Brooklyn girl, a Brownsville girl, and roots from the south do you think it makes up, do you think that also has something to do with who you are and with how you look at things or?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Definitely because I can see things from a different perspective. I've got to live different lifestyles. People that I grew up with only knew the urban setting. I know about the country setting. I know about traveling to the country setting, you know, taking that road trip down 95 driving to Alabama. That has, that's been done. A lot of people have not experienced that, you know, having authentic soul food, seeing collard greens being grown in the backyard and hanging up the clotheslines and running from stray dogs through trails through the woods. You know? You know, hearing the railroad every day in my backyard. Those type of experiences humbled me and although as a kid, OK, I've complained because it's boring but I'm actually grateful for that experience, you know? Getting a taste of that southern hospitality and things moving a little slower and having a yard, front yard, side yard, and backyard to play in and get to jump in the leaves and throw them up in the air, you know? Being scared because a tornado was coming, got to go down into the basement, those type of experiences, you know, helped me have a broader perspective on the world and how people live. So it makes me appreciate a lot.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Now, you mentioned that your aunt and uncle are the oldest people in your family, they're the elders and they're not even in their 50s, they're still in their 40s. Do you ever want to go and look at, and do research on family history back to Birmingham, Alabama?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Definitely. Because this is, my mom's side is the one side I really don't know a lot of my roots. My father's side I do because my grandmother's still alive. She tells me stories, you know, we dig back into slavery days --

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: In Alabama?

TANEKA MAXWELL: In Alabama. My grandmother, she has stories, she's seen the KKK march up and down the street, she's experienced racism and segregation hands-on because she's, she lived in the south. My grandmother lived in Anniston, Alabama her entire life. She's been in the same house, my dad is 55, she's been in the same house for 50 years. She's the oldest person on her street. Every, all her, she only have a handful of friends left, everyone on that street, all the elderly people has passed away. She was telling me a story the other day, there's funerals every week and she always know at least two or three of them, whether it's an old friend or whether it's children from old friends, because it's just getting violent down there, you know, the town is really becoming decrepit and dilapidated because no new, no investment is going into that town. Now, she lives in Anniston but it's borderline Hobson City and Hobson City is kind of historical because, I don't know if it's true today but at one point it was the only 100% black town, just black, American black. And it's small. It's a small town. It's more so like a neighborhood, to be honest, but it's technically a city. And it's being taken over by the young people because the elderly are dying.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Has she ever wanted to leave Anniston?

TANEKA MAXWELL: She don't want to leave. She will stay in that house until, just like she tell me every conversation for the last [40:00] 13 years, every conversation she says

she's going to win \$1 million from Publisher's Clearinghouse. Until she win her million dollars and able to buy a house she's staying in her house.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: She's staying in her house. How has she told you that Anniston has changed? Was it predominantly black, was it a segregated town, what kind of town was it?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Well, Anniston is mixed. It's the majority white but it's a good number of blacks too and other races, they have some Spanish, some Asian, you know, but it's definitely nowhere near as diverse as New York. It's mostly just black and white.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: But how about when she first bought the house 50 years ago when your father was, I guess like five years old? What kind of --

TANEKA MAXWELL: It was black. She was in the, she's in the black, she was in the black section because it's next to Hobson City. It's literally, her house is the third house from the corner. That's Anniston. Once you walk to that corner it's Hobson City. So she was smack on the borderline.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: So she's seen it, you know, evolve and seen other races and demographics move in?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Yes.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. And do you think it's, how do you, you know, a lot of families, like you said you have your grandmother on that side, on your father's side, and you're able to talk to her about things that happened 50 years ago. If you were to go and do this research for your mother's side of the family what do you think you'll find, what do you hope you will find? Like are there any stories from when your grandmother, your great grandmother was in Birmingham or?

TANEKA MAXWELL: I only know that one horrible story about her brother was lynched. Like there's really no, the history really wasn't talked about, like it's not recorded on this side of the family, I guess because everyone is young. By the time they became adults the elderly has passed away, you know. My Grandpa Charles, he can only tell but so many stories because he was married into the family. My grandmother who's Nanny's daughter died when her kids were young. Then you know, like I told you what type of person, Nanny, she was the love of the neighborhood but she wasn't just, you know, an old lady baking pies. She's selling bootleg liquor out her bar and knocking little kids' heads together because they're being disrespectful. She was the hustling grandmother but she was loving to everybody, everyone respected her. No one ever dared to disrespect her. She was like, what's her name? Madea. She was like a Madea, nobody messed with her.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And was your Grandpa Charles from Brooklyn originally, like his family was really from Brooklyn?

TANEKA MAXWELL: His family is from Barbados. So growing up, you know, just learning the different ethnicities and the cultures and stuff and it was just the thing to be West Indian and going to the Labor Day parades I would get my Bajan flag. I'm like well, my Grandpa Charles was Bajan, I'll get my Barbados flag and my American flag, until I realized, and I was like grown, like wait a minute, Grandpa Charles is not even in my blood because he wasn't my mother's biological father. So that was kind of disappointing.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Because you were embracing his culture and his...?

TANEKA MAXWELL: And then when I asked my brother he knew, he was like, "Yeah, I knew that." I'm like, what? He was like, "well, how do you think we were related to

them down in 430?" you know? But I was like where is this man, where is Mommy's father then? He was always there but the story is that Nanny didn't like him so she made him stay away and the fact that Grandpa Charles always been by heart the biological father. So I have another set of family from my biological grandfather and I know my cousins that's in my generation, we're about the same age, you know, some of the girls, we still keep in touch on the social networks and everything and I see one every one in awhile around here, but the elderly, the older people, the people from my mom's generation or older, I don't know. And that's, and that's where I can get my mother's history, at least learn how she grew up and when she was a teenager and stuff because she hung out with them because that was her father's family. [45:00] So yeah, I had a very unique family structure.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And so, like you said before, you, your grandmother, she was part of the Masonic Temple? Can you tell me what that is and why was she part of it?

TANEKA MAXWELL: That I really don't know much about. You know, the whole being a part of the, a Mason elite, you know, group. It's almost like a secret society. You got to be in it to know about it. So I just remember she took us there, she took me there several times, used to have their parties, I used to wear my little dress and everything. And I remember she just had a desk, that was her job, she worked there. She was maybe a secretary or something or administrative assistant, I don't know what she was but she was a part of the Masonic Temple and I remember I used to be scared of that elevator. They had the old school elevators where the gate closed and then they manually turned the gear to go up the other floors and I was petrified of that elevator. Goodness.



DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: Now, speaking of your great grandmother, do you ever, the house sold almost 10 years ago, I guess nine years ago since we're in 2013, do you ever go by the old house or?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Yes, and I get very nostalgic.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: How has it changed?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Well, my sister, she actually had visited. When she went there she asked the people who bought the house can she walk through it and they renovated it. They renovated it, it's broken down to all these different rooms and it doesn't look the same. So it's pretty much like a place where people live by the rooms, like they rent it by the rooms.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. And if someone had to say, if someone had to, if you had to give someone, you know, just to sum up about who you are and what is Brownsville, how would you describe yourself and Brownsville?

TANEKA MAXWELL: Well, Browns -- well, who I am today, I'm definitely a well rounded person, you know, very creative because I'm a writer, I have my first book out, *A Scorpion Sting*, under the name Pink Maxwell. And just having those childhood memories, you know, running the streets, walking and discovering different areas of the neighborhood, has, it let me see things at a different perspective. It kind of given me street smarts. You know, you have to be very careful. You can't walk around in certain type of neighborhoods just blind, you know. In my book I mention Brownsville. I had to give them a shout-out and, you know, I had the character mention the like name of some of the streets and the projects and things like that. It helped me grow some thick skin because it's, it can be tough. It can be tough living in the ghetto. Brownsville is the

ghetto, like nobody can't say no, it's not, because it is. Gentrification hasn't even started in Brownsville yet. It's the hood but, you know, you can embrace your past, you can embrace that you were from the hood, you know, but it's up to the individual if they still want to live a certain life and a certain mentality that's not really positive. But a positive thing can come out of the hood because I mean I'm a testament to that. I'm an example. I know people who, just like me, you know. It's not just 100% a certain type of people. People are diverse wherever they live at. So it's just unfortunate that the main reputation, you know, the negative side has overshadowed the positive side of the tight community that, you know, the hill was. So.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: And just because we didn't mention this earlier, what block did you grow up, like what street did you grow up on?

TANEKA MAXWELL: I grew up on Saint Mark's between Howard and Saratoga.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. And what constitutes all of Brownsville, just a map of the area.

TANEKA MAXWELL: Let's see, it's a large area. My opinion, because some people have different opinions on where Brownsville begins and ends, and I was more [50:00] west of Brownsville. So I would say it started, let's see, Ralph, Howard area, like beginning the top of it would be like Atlantic Avenue and the bottom would be something like Sutter, like Sutter Avenue going down Newton, Livonia, like going down to Livonia. Because it borderlines Crown Heights on that side and then it borderlines Ocean Hill and Cypress Hill going towards like Mother Gaston area, like and Atlantic Avenue. Thomas Boyland. Then you'd go into the heart of Brownsville was like this cluster of the projects. That's like Mother Gaston, Rockaway, Pitkin, Belmont area, Livonia. That's where a lot of the

Brownsville houses are. That side borderlines East New York. And so it's, so Brownsville, it's a lot of acres. Probably go across, I don't know, by mouths. I don't know. I couldn't even tell you but it's a sizable neighborhood.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: OK. Great, well, thank you for your time today.

TANEKA MAXWELL: You're welcome.

DOROTHY SAINT JEAN: All right.

TANEKA MAXWELL: Bye. OK, so it was more soul than --

END OF AUDIO FILE