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Oral History Interview with Janise Mitchell
Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.075
Interview conducted by Jeanmarie Theobalds at the Brooklyn Historical Society on
February 21st, 2014 in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: My name is Jeanmarie Theobalds. I'm here with Mrs. Janise Mitchell. It is February 21st, 2014 and we are in the Brooklyn Historical Society's Learning Room. Ah, Mrs. Mitchell, could you please introduce yourself?

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, I am actually born and raised in Philadelphia and I moved to Brooklyn approximately, I don't want to give out my age, but approximately 31 years ago. I work in New York City. Social Studies teacher in junior high school. Been living in Brooklyn, as I said before, the last 31 years in different neighborhoods, Park Slope and my current neighborhood, Bergen Beach Marine Park, Old Mill Basin, that area. Love history. Love doing anything related to history and I really am very excited about doing this project, Oral History, because so much of our traditions and family information just comes from listening to you know older people. Not, just can remember being a little girl and going down South to visit my grandparents and --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: What part of the South is your family from?

JANISE MITCHELL: Both sides of my family, my mother and father were from North Carolina. And so some of my fondest memories were just you know being a little girl, taking the family road trips before there were satellite radio in the car, before there was air conditioning in the car and just you know my father waking up very early because it was usually a 14-hour drive and everyone in the seat, including the dog, and just driving you know to Charlotte, North Carolina to visit my grandparents and the extended family and just really listening to their stories and not realizing until I got much older how much family information and how much history were actually in those stories. So I'm just really excited about being here and hopefully someone will use this information and you know for their primary source.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK, so first I'm just going to ask you to say your full name for the record.

JANISE MITCHELL: OK. Janise Mitchell.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And I know you're trying not to get your age in there but --

JANISE MITCHELL: I am proud to say I am 55.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. And you were born?

JANISE MITCHELL: In Philadelphia.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Birthday?

JANISE MITCHELL: My birthday's in April.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK.

JANISE MITCHELL: A lot of family members are born in April, my uncle, my niece, my grandniece, my son, whose birthday is two days next to mine so it's like the first week in April, we have a lot of April birthdays in my family.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: (laughs) OK. I do as well. So tell me who was in the car when you were driving?

JANISE MITCHELL: It would be my parents.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And your parents' names?

JANISE MITCHELL: James and Margaret Reeder. My two older sisters, Michelle and Jacqueline. My older brother, James, Jr. and I was the baby of the family.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. And the dog's name, just so he's not left out.

JANISE MITCHELL: Dog's name was Monte. (laughter) After the painter. His nickname was Monte but his name was Monet, because my sister was an art major and so she wanted to give the dog a very artistic name, so she called the dog Monet. But we called him Monte. (laughs) Because he was a mutt. (laughter)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK, so you were born and raised in Philadelphia.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. So tell me a little bit about you're growing up there.

JANISE MITCHELL: Wow.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: With Monte. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: You know, looking back, I had a wonderful childhood. Really had a wonderful childhood. I grew up in the same house and stayed in the house until I got married and moved to New York. But it was a middle class neighborhood and the type of

neighborhood where you knew everyone on the block. Your neighbors I thought were my relatives because my neighbor, we used to call her Aunt Sally and it wasn't until years later that I realized she wasn't even my aunt, that she was just a neighbor, but everyone called her Aunt Sally. We called the other neighbor Aunt Edna. Aunt Sally had a husband. [00:05:00] [Inaborey], I can't recall his name but we used to call him Uncle. But it was the type of neighborhood where the kids would stay out in the summertime all day. There was no such thing as in those days going to camp. You know, after school was over in the summer you just went outside and you played on the street with your friends and you would stay out all day. You wouldn't come home until dark and it was like this unwritten rule. You know, when it got dark that's when all the kids knew, OK, time to come home, but you know I don't even remember at times that we even locked the doors because the type again, the type of block where everyone knew each other and everyone looked out for each other. I got spankings from my neighbors and you know vice versa. You know we would have block parties. We would have barbecues. But you know just again, looking back, it was just you know very wonderful. I think the joke was years ago there was a very popular series called *The Bill Cosby Show*, and people said, "That was based on your family." And I said, yeah, it kind of felt that way. You know my parents were wonderful people. You know, both of them worked. And they instilled in us a sense of you know you work hard, be responsible. Education was key. Neighborhood school where, again, you knew everyone; the teacher lived around the corner. She had a lot of prestige in the neighborhood. I remember her dearly, Mrs. Robertson. You know, I think I had her for second and third. Her husband was the dentist so you know it's very esteemed members of the community. And again, you know we all looked out for each other and it was just so you know wonderful childhood. You know, when I tell my students you know how I grew up and they go, "Oh, you're making this up." I'm like no, it really was wonderful. They'll say, "You didn't lock your doors?" Well, of course, when you left you locked your doors, but during the day, you know it was not unusual for my neighbors just to kind of walk in and help themselves to something in the refrigerator and vice versa and all the kids would go to each other's homes and that's how we grew up. So it was really a sense of very deep

community ties. Where everyone knew your business. If you got in trouble in school the whole block knew. The whole block knew. There was no escaping, there was no hiding. Um, but again everyone looked out for each other. We took a lot of pride in the block, the upkeep. Every Saturday there was a ritual that everyone would just get up, it was kind of like a kind of unwritten rule and you would just sweep the steps. Because we had these big marble steps and you would see all the neighbors there Saturday morning just sweeping, you know scrubbing the steps to make sure that they were nice and shiny and you know really taking care of their front yards. There was no trash but just really a sense of pride. So again, you know good memories going back. Very nice memories.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Tell me about your parents. Describe your mother and father.

JANISE MITCHELL: Wow. They were fabulous. They were just, again, if I had to characterize them, they really remind you of the Huxtables. My mother was a nurse. She grew up, again both my parents, they grew up in the South and I'm not really sure in hindsight how they made it because they're growing up during the Depression and both my parents were college graduates.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Where did they go to school?

JANISE MITCHELL: Both of them went to Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina. I did not know my grandparents on my mother's side. They died when my mother was quite young. So that side of the family I didn't really know, so she [00:10:00] basically, and it was -- I think six of them. So I had six uncles and aunts on my mother's side. And I know my mother would talk about it. She said it was pretty; it was difficult because her mother died when she was very young, so she barely remembered her mother. And her father was a traveling minister. So here it is in 1930's, this single black man who's a widower trying to raise these children and she talked about how the family, they were split up in the sense where they were sent to different relatives and after her mother died and her father had a lot of difficulty taking care of them. She moved in with one of, I think it, I believe it was my, her father's uncle. So they helped raise my mother and three other siblings. The youngest brother was sent to Philadelphia with my mother's sister. So the family was

somewhat split up, but they really managed, the siblings were incredibly close. My mother would call both her sisters every day, sometimes, wow, five, six times a day, just you know, just to, they were best friends, they were best friends. My mother took a tremendous pride in being a nurse. She was a registered nurse so she would always remind people. And then she became a nurse practitioner. Then she worked in the Philadelphia school system as a school nurse but it wasn't until later on when she passed, when we started going through like the family archives and I realized, I said, "Oh my goodness. Mom really did a lot." She took advanced nurse training at Yale University. Didn't realize that until later, along with her sister who also was a nurse. So we were reading, I said, "Wow, these were some of the first black nurses to actually attend Yale University." Then from there -- I think the story was when she was applying to nursing school there wasn't a lot of money, obviously in the family, but her older sister that, her name was Ruth, that she took in sewing, cooking, cleaning to help my mother go to school. And so it was always this sense of you understood, even though it wasn't always explicitly stated, you understood the sacrifices that the family had to go through and you respected that. And so with my mother being so keen on education, it was this unwritten rule in the family that we understood that wow, the odds were so much against her that the entire family made it, you know her sisters, her brothers, they all did very, very well respectively. My father and my mom were childhood sweethearts. And when I say "childhood," they knew each other from the time they were four years old.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh, wow.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. And I'll tell you a little remarkable story. My parents passed away in November 2010. And they passed away within 36 hours of each other.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh wow.

JANISE MITCHELL: It was -- one of these stories that, it was just meant to be. My father had been ill. He had gotten suddenly ill that summer, who had never, ever been sick. So we found out earlier that summer that he had advanced cancer. I think when my mother realized that he was that sick, mentally I think she just shut down because from her medical training she knew that it was bad. She never expressed her fears to us, but there was definitely a change in her and I think she just lost her will. So [00:15:00] you know,

going through the process of caring for them, between myself and the rest of my siblings. You know we really, really, really, we pulled together. We said you know, whatever time is left with them, we're going to make them as comfortable as possible. So we worked with social workers, we worked, you know with the people from the hospice and when the time came close, my father passed away on Thanksgiving Day, which ironically was his favorite holiday and they were in the same nursing home and we went to see my mother later that day, after my father had passed and we didn't tell her, but I think she knew, because she didn't say much. Then she kind of like just slipped and didn't, like a day and a half later, as soon as we had finished (laughs) making arrangements for my father, phone rings again and it's the nursing home and they said, "You're not going to believe this, but your mother just passed." It was like OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Wow.

JANISE MITCHELL: But I think it was just meant to be and they did a story about my parents in a local newspaper, the Philadelphia Inquirer, about this just remarkable friendship and love that this couple had that you know for someone to have known each other for so long, you know since the time they were four years old. They were next-door neighbors, and to pass, it was sad but at the same time it was something very deeply spiritual you know about their passing. You know, spiritual and you know quite beautiful, you know in the sense that OK, well they're still --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Still together.

JANISE MITCHELL: Still together. Right. Daddy was amazing. Quiet. But he had this dignity about him. You know, where my mother was very verbal, you know she used to maybe liked to talk a lot, ah, my father didn't say much but when he did you stood up and you listened, because he would simply give you that look and we all knew "Oh, oh. He's giving us the look. We'd better, you know hop to it! You know because we're in trouble." You know, he didn't have to say much but you'd just get that look like, OK, I'll make sure this doesn't happen again. My dad was in World War II. He was stationed in the Philippines. So he's in the Pacific arena. I know he was, I believe he was ill maybe from malaria or something because my mother used to say when he came home he would have sometimes night sweats, chills, flashbacks which he never talked about, never able

to talk about, um -- But after World War II went back to school on the GI Bill. Went back to Johnson C. Smith, got his chemistry degree. Taught at Johnson C. Smith for a little while and then the entire, then both my parents moved to Philadelphia, I believe, my memory's not that good, because I wasn't even born yet. I believe it had to be in the 50's, when I think the family moved to Philadelphia.

Because at that point my mother's aunt, who had raised her younger brother, and we called her Mama Carrie, they were very established in another part, well, the suburbs of Philadelphia, a small town called Ardmore, right outside Philadelphia, where that entire branch of the family during the great migration in the '30s and '40s had moved up north, so that entire side of my mother's family on her mother's side, they had moved up north and they had established themselves in this town called Ardmore, Pennsylvania. Now, to tell you a little bit about Ardmore. So the joke was on my mother's side there were the dark-skinned cousins and the light-skinned cousins. My mother's side of the family, they were very, very light skin. Whereas her father, you know again who I never met, [00:20:00] but the way she described him you know very dark-skinned and I think caused some concern among the lighter skinned members of the family, like, oh gosh, the gene pool. (laughter)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: A lot of dark ones are going to show up. (laughter)

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes. (laughs) What is this going to do with the gene pool?

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: It's not sweeter the berry, huh?

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes. Right, right, right.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: The darker the berries. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. And so I remember my mother's aunt, the one we called Mama Carrie. This, I'm trying to think of a, someone today, I could do a comparison. Oh boy. I want to call her like a Brooke Astor. But very, very refined. So on Sundays we would go to Ardmore for the dinners. And you knew there was fine china on the table. You did not place your elbows on the table. The napkin was in your lap. You would say, "Yes, Ma'am. May I be excused, Ma'am?" You know, please pass, I mean just very, very refined. Not snobby. But just very refined, because whatever Aunt Carrie had, I knew she had to work for it. So even at a, you know again, coming from a very small you

know, through the eyes of a very small child, I knew that Aunt Carrie's house was the place where you know again, you would be loved but there was no nonsense. You know you had to be respectful. God knows, you never wore pants. You know, always wore a dress. Your Sunday shoes. And she, for dinner, you know she was a fabulous cook. You know she would have a spread you know throughout the entire table you know and you know I still have some of Aunt Carrie's china that you know is like I don't use it but it's like this is from Aunt Carrie and I'll never use it but boy, they're so beautiful.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But tell me about a meal. What did she make?

JANISE MITCHELL: Ah, there would be string beans, ham.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: How were the string beans cooked? Now get to the details.

JANISE MITCHELL: Ooh, let me see. A little bit of fatback, as you know. Fatback. And you would let the juice marinate. I think you know she would cook them for hours and it was like hours in the pot, hours. (laughs) Probably no nutritionist, you know no nutritional value but who cares, but they were delicious. Macaroni salad, potato salad, the ham with the pineapple and the little cherry right in the middle. Oh my goodness. Roast beef. And then the cakes.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: What kind of cakes?

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, the lemon pound cake. Oh. The angel food cake. And the pies.

Apple pie, blueberry pie, peach cobbler. I'm just, oh, homemade rolls. You know, no self-respecting cook would dare buy you know rolls from the store. Who did that?

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Brown 'n Serves? (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: No, no, that, no. No, again. No self-respect, absolutely not. You were make the rolls the night before. Saturday night. And they would sit in the refrigerator and then earlier that Sunday you would let them you know triple rise sometime and then you would you know roll them into the balls and place them out. It was a long you know process but that's what you did. And, my gosh, thank goodness we don't do that today. But (laughs) --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Christmas and Thanksgiving.

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. Whole Food and Fairway. Yeah. (laughter) But in those days you know, the women, you cooked. So all the women in the family would just gather around

and you would just cook. Now my mother was not a good cook. Which she would admit, you know. Cooking was not her thing. You know she was the you know intellectual of the family. It was my Aunt Carrie, her sisters who also lived in Ardmore, my Aunt Dot. There was an Uncle Tom, you know that side they all cooked, but my aunt, [00:25:00] the oldest one who helped my mother through nursing school --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: No, Ruth, that was Ruth.

JANISE MITCHELL: Ruth. Oh my goodness. Fabulous, fabulous cook. She could open up a restaurant. Just you know my fondest memories would also be just going over to her house you know on, if we didn't go to Mama Carrie's, going to Aunt Ruth's house for Sunday dinners and oh, she could burn. She could burn.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Was it different or kind of the same food?

JANISE MITCHELL: Kind of the same food but it was more of a soul --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: A different level. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. This was a whole different level. The collard greens. Again, the string beans, the ham, oh, the chicken, the fried chicken. Fried chicken. Candied yams.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh, yes.

JANISE MITCHELL: Macaroni and cheese.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Now did you do the macaroni pie? Or did you do like, well, you're from the South, you do the macaroni pie, like it was baked or was it cream?

JANISE MITCHELL: It was baked. It was baked with breadcrumbs. (laughter) Had breadcrumbs on it. You know, the stuff they serve today that's...

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: That creamy stuff? I don't know what that is.

JANISE MITCHELL: I don't know what that is. But it had to be baked. You know, cooking, it was an ordeal like but it was a process but in those days you didn't really go on vacations. You know, you spent time with family, you know cousins, extended families, second cousins. And so everything you did you always did as a family unit. The family barbecues. Even my husband will comment, when my husband and I got married we still lived in Philadelphia. Every Fourth of July and Labor Day, because Mama Carrie had this very, very big, big backyard. And they would set up the barbecue grill and all the relatives would come over you know. The second cousins, the third cousins with their

families and the house would be just filled and everyone would bring a dish and, but you know just fond memories of those annual family barbecues, you know the Fourth of July and Labor Day. And but those were really what you'd consider vacations because again, you know we didn't travel to Europe, we didn't you know go take a cruise. You know if you did travel again it would be to visit family members down South, but as far as vacations, not really. It was just you know really spending time with families. As far as the barbecues though, we are still keeping that tradition.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Very nice.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes. We're still going strong, so even though the elders, as we call, have all departed, and all my cousins, you know, we have our annual family barbecues, it's called 'The Love', because my mother's maiden, her mother's maiden was Love, L-O-V-E. And so on that side there's Loves in New Jersey, Philadelphia, so we, and Delaware. So we have our annual family barbecue and Fourth of July. We don't do Labor Day, and New Year's. And that's where we, we throw down. It's a big throw down.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. OK. What's the New Year's? What's the --

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, New Year's is where all the extended families, all the Loves, again, this is my mother's side; they'll come from all over. We have Loves in Minneapolis, there's Loves from Texas but my cousins live in DC now but oh, New Year's Eve or New Year's Day, family gathering and black-eyed peas. Which you know, that's like a tradition but you know, it's the potluck. But there are certain dishes like my cousin Johnny, no one can do the bean, the black-eyed peas except for Johnny. We don't even know how he cooks them. It's a secret. (laughter) That's not you know, that's not told. So we still try to keep up with those traditions because we said, you know once it's gone it's gone forever. So you know we still try to keep up with those you know traditions. And a funny story with my dad. His family is much smaller. It was my father.

My Uncle Pete, [00:30:00] who was a character. Very sharp. Very sharp. And my father had a younger brother who died I believe in his 30's, 19 maybe '65 or '67, had a brain aneurysm but again, my father's side was much smaller but my mother used to say growing up, the Reeder boys, that was my father's name, R-E-E-D-E-R, the Reeder boys

were quite a catch because very, very handsome. And so my mother was like, “Yes, well I got James and you know Mabel got Pete,” but you know the Reeder boys, everyone knew oh, they could, yeah, very sharp, very handsome. But you know quite a catch. But again this, now I think what I would emphasize on both sides, you know between my mother and my father, you know the sense of a black middle class. Where again it was unspoken, but you knew. And you knew growing up what was to be expected. You’re not coming in the house unless you have a college degree. Now I don’t care what you do with it afterwards, but in this house everyone goes to college. There’s no conversation about it. High school, drop, no. No, no.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I was raised the same way. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: You know in growing up, you know my sister, we would joke. Not anyone could come to our house, you know. The parents would kind of give you the third degree, like “Who are your people?” So if you were riff raff, as they called it, oh, no. No, you’re not coming, no. Just, we’ll hang out with you maybe at the McDonald’s, but you can’t come to my house because my parents, no, that’s just not, you know it’s just my father for saying, “Where do you go to school? Where are your people from? And what college are you planning on going to?” And if the answer was, “Well, I never finished --” “Oh, no, no. It was nice meeting you but you can’t come back here.” It was always again the sense of you know really having a sense of pride in who you are. Now one of the things I remember about growing up in the late ’60s, early ’70s, when I grew up there the block was very integrated. And around the late 60’s and 70’s all of the sudden you see a lot of “for sale” signs. And this was the period of “white flight.” And it was really an eye opener because families that I knew, the kids that I played with all of the sudden, oh, you guys are moving? So one family, OK. You understand. But when you start to see wow, six people within a year moving, you know it really shattered I guess a sense of security like I thought that we were all you know friends, but perhaps maybe that was just from my lens. Maybe that’s what I was hoping but you know I think the reality was maybe there was some underlying intention that I did not allow myself to become aware of. And I don’t think it was the kids per se, I think it was more the parents, who again, I was very always friendly with, no one ever spoke about it. But I

think you know the late '60s, early '70s, you know there were the riots you know happening up and down you know all the major cities including Philadelphia. And I think they had a lot of, I think that was a big factor in what happened to a lot of the block with you know the white neighbors moving out. It was, it was one white family though, they were Greek. They stayed put and they said, "We love this block. We love our neighbors. And we'll never leave." And they never did. They stayed forever. [00:35:00] Now the kids left but the parents and the grandparents, yeah, they always stayed put. Yeah. So, that's what I remember.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK, sorry. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: That's OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So where did you go to school? Because going to school was kind of what led you out of Philadelphia? Or?

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, my elementary school was right up the block. Add B. Anderson. And again, I had great teachers. You know I have fond memories of Mrs. Robinson, you know to this day I can remember some of the books we read. She was just amazing. I remember the spanking she gave me in front of the entire class and then by the time my mother came home the whole block already knew. "Well, Miss Reeder, Janie got a spanking by Miss Robinson," and you knew what that meant.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: You got another one, didn't you?

JANISE MITCHELL: I got another one. Absolutely. You know, "How dare you bring shame on the family. If Miss Robinson had to spank you it was for a really good reason." And it never happened again. (laughter) You know. But. Yeah. I think she spanked everyone at least once. But you were allowed to do that, you know in those days. And you know just, as far as my education, I believe I had a very good education. I was very happy in elementary school. The kids in those days, there was no cafeteria so we would go home for lunch. And like I said, both my parents worked so I had a key. I had to very responsible, you know. I think in hindsight I would have been called a "latchkey kid" but I never considered myself a latchkey. You know, I had a key. My brother would meet me at the front door. We would walk home together. It was literally half a block. Have lunch, maybe a sandwich. Come back and then my brother and I would you know walk

home together. We would have a key and a couple times my brother had something to do and he gave me the key and I obviously lost it because I'm locked out. But you know again, no problem. Neighbors, you know.

Your mom will be home soon. You just go, you go to Aunt Sally's house. You know I went to Aunt Edna's house and you know Miss Cisco's house so again you know neighbors, OK, not a problem. Junior high school as I think most junior high schools, that was a little tough. A little tough. Again, this is the early '70s and neighborhoods were changing rapidly and there was a lot of friction between black students and white students and at that point I think the school had transitioned to mostly a predominantly African-American population. But to get to the school you had to kind of walk through a predominantly white neighborhood. So we wouldn't know, OK after school, you better run. So you know so you would joke but not joke, "Put your sneakers on because for these next three blocks could be some problems," so we would always walk as a group and you would basically walk fast or run until you got to an area that you considered neutral grounds. And then you were safe. So the -- you know I think a lot of junior high, it was a little tough. I don't have a lot of -- fond memories of junior high school. I think it was just at a lost sense. But the high school I went to was a performing arts high school, Overbrook High School and our claim to fame was Wilt Chamberlain went there. Will Smith went there, who I didn't know because he was younger, and that was, that brought up my love for theatre. So I went to Overbrook High School. My sister went to Overbrook High School. So they did a lot with performing arts, theatre, dance and choir. No, music, I'm sorry, music. And I remember I really wanted to go to Overbrook like in the worst way. Now I had always taken piano at Settlement Music School, which is a settlement house which you could get [00:40:00] music instruction and I went to Settlement for years and years and years, but it wasn't a great pla-- you know I could do enough to kind of get by. But there was an audition and I said, "OK, well, I have two options. I know I'm not going to get in as a singer. I'm going to have to play," and the day of the audition comes and I play and I do fairly well. And they were pretty honest with me and they said, "Well, right now we have a lot of people who are auditioning for

the music program who also play piano.” And this is like the quota. And I said, “Well, I can sing.” Now I know I can’t sing a lick. (laughter) They said, “Oh, let’s hear.” I began to sing and I could just see the looks on their faces and I think they took me out of pity. (laughter) But I got into Overbrook High School because --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: She doesn’t know how tone deaf she is.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. (laughter) Absolutely. And I finished a song and you know I had this confidence and I said, “Well, you know what? I don’t care. I am determined to get to Overbrook High School.” And the choir director said, “OK, you are accepted, but my dear, during the performances, you’ll go to rehearsals but during the performances, don’t sing. Just, just mouth the words but you don’t sing.” (laughter) And I was fine with that. And it didn’t really make a difference because it was a large choir and I would have been drowned out anyway, but you know that’s how I got into Overbrook. (laughter) You know because I couldn’t sing. (laughs)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But you could lip sync well.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. (laughs) Absolutely. Overbrook was, Overbrook was nice, yeah. I had a lot of fun and you know the school plays and I think that’s what really attracted me, you know I didn’t really have this, I didn’t really know much about the theatre. But when they had the school plays I would always audition, oh. I have to say one thing about the junior high school, going back. There was actually a music teacher, now that my memory’s coming back to me, Mr. [Jacquay]. And he was so wonderful. And he was a single man and I was pretty militant. Because again, this is you know the early ’70s and you know I wanted to be just like Angela Davis and you know that was my role model, you know I had the big afro and you know ’power to the people’ that was a little bit of a you know hell raiser and I admit it. But I’ll never forget, he had tickets to see a performance. This theatre company no longer exists but was called the Negro Ensemble Company. And that’s where people like Denzel Washington you know got his start and you know a lot of very successful black performers came out of this company. And he had tickets to see a play and I’ll never forget it. It was called *Ceremonies and Dark Old Men*. And he said, “I have two tickets. Would you like to go?” “Oh wow, great!” So he gave me a ticket and gave me girlfriend a ticket. And here we are, you

know the youngest people in this you know the Walnut Street Theatre and I'm like wow, this is really my first time seeing like a live performance. And I can't remember the actors at the time. Oh my goodness. Rosalind Cash. I think is now deceased. And, I can't remember the performer, the main character. Oh, but it just mesmerized me. And it clicked, I said, "I want to do that." You know, it was just like, it was magical. I said, "That is what I really want to do. You know something with the theatre." And I always will credit Mr. Jacquay with you know giving that experience, you know, saying "I think you'll like this," and you know it was just, it opened up so much you know for me. And then when I went to, after I graduated from high school I became a theatre major. Went two years in Connecticut. [00:45:00] Didn't like Connecticut at all. Uch, mistake. Came back to Philadelphia. Went to Temple University and became a theatre minor, but a communication major, because I loved film and media, that type of thing. And that's where I met my husband, and that will be a whole different story. (laughs)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Well, that's part of the story we'll get into here. (laughter)
Come on, now. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh boy. (laughs) It's all good, it's all good.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: As she looks at, forming those, and we're going to X out this minute to this minute. (laughter) So just keep going, tell us.

JANISE MITCHELL: OK. I met my husband on the subway. Oh gosh, this is so embarrassing. But actually it's a little funny story. I was in my last year at Temple and I'm coming home on the subway. And I see this guy and he looks a hot mess. He, well not the sub, we had trolleys. Cable cars.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I was about to ask, I was like Philly had a subway?

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. We do have subways but the underground subways are called the cable cars. So we call them trolleys. So I'm on the trolley and he comes on. He (inaudible) this guy was a hot mess. Of course, he sits next to me. I'm going oh my gosh. OK. We struck up a conversation and he gave me this corny line, I was taking an art history course on Michelangelo. So I have all my books and he says, "Oh. I'm an artist, too. They call me Mitchell Angelo." How bad is that? (laughter) That's awful. And I fell for it. (laughter) I have to admit, I fell for it. I don't even know why. I fell for

the line. And we struck up a conversation and you know we exchanged phone numbers, we go out. And ironically we realized that we knew a lot of the same people. He was taking a theatre class, now I'm going to jump to this part of the story. OK. My husband is Caucasian and when I asked him where he was coming from he said he was coming from a theatre class and I said, "Oh, where are you taking theatre?" And he said, "Freedom Theatre." And I'm thinking OK. Wait a minute. Freedom Theatre is a black theatre company. What the heck is he doing at Freedom Theatre? OK, I want to hear this story. So as my husband tells it was that -- for some reason he was always interested in just doing something else and taking theatre. And he sees this little advertisement in one of the local papers about theatre classes. The company's name is Freedom Theatre. It's in north Philly, not far from Temple University. He said he went up and said he wanted to take theatre and they took one look at him and said, "Are you sure?" He goes, "I'm positive." And the theatre director's name, oh my goodness, what is his name now? Oh, I can't remember. It's on the tip of my tongue. Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful founder of the theatre and again my, I cannot recollect his name. But I remember my husband said he came out and he spoke to my husband and said, "If you're really serious about theatre we can give you some training." And because I was a theatre minor at Temple you know I was also familiar with Freedom Theatre and so when he, my soon to be husband told me we, he was taking theatre at Freedom Theatre I said, "OK, so do you know Johnny Hobbs?" "Oh, yeah." "Do you know Nancy?" "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah." Oh, so we knew a lot of the same people. And then the rest is history. Then we moved up and so we were doing, he was doing theatre and he loved it, he loved it, he loved it. Got married, had my daughter.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I'm going to bring you back.

JANISE MITCHELL: Bring me back, OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I'm just going to bring you back. You're sitting on the city bus and what year is this?

JANISE MITCHELL: This is 1980.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. Did you still have the Angela Davis rocking?

JANISE MITCHELL: No.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. So was this a common occur-- describe [00:50:00] I mean describe the atmosphere. Like your first date in Philadelphia --

JANISE MITCHELL: OK. My first date, he invites me over to his apartment and he said he was a great cook. So he said his specialty was lasagna.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Was it Mitchell meatballs, or anything like that? (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: No, no Mitchell meatballs, but he, my husband --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Spaghetti. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. He can make a serious lasagna. It was a, was it vegetarian? No, it was meat and spinach lasagna. He got the recipe from one of his friends. Italian mother who lived in South Philly who really, I mean phenomenal cook. And she said OK, this is again, his, as told to me, his version. That, "Oh, you're meeting this woman, so this sauce has to be done right." Now you don't buy canned sauce. You have to buy the tomatoes and you have to let that simmer for hours. I don't know if you ever saw the movie, oh my goodness, what's the name of the movie?

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Who's in it?

JANISE MITCHELL: Ah, Ray -- Liotta. Oh my goodness. Not *Goodfellas*. It was another movie. Anyway. But he, in the movie he talks about how you make sauce. When you have to slice those, the garlic like razor thin like you know you see these movies like where they have the razors, that's like yeah, that's really what they do. And then you slice the garlic with the razor so it can be so thin it kind of dissolves and the onions and so the sauce has to simmer for all day. Most of the day. So he's in South Philly and he's, "The sauce, the sauce." We're supposed to eat dinner at 9:00. We did not have dinner until after midnight. Because the sauce, he goes you know and it smells delicious but he goes back in the kitchen. He's starving. I'm like and I'm starving because he said, "Don't eat because the lasagna." So of course, I didn't eat. I'm starving. You know when someone says you're going to have dinner at 9:00 I expect, OK, 9:30 at the latest, not midnight. I'm starving and he's back and forth, back and forth and he's like and I hear the pots, pots. You know he's like oh, he's you know saying a couple choice words about the sauce is not the consistency and he's [growling] and he's stirring the sauce, stirring the sauce. And then the noodles have to be just right and the meat sauce. And

then you know the freshly grated Locatelli cheese. You know, fresh you know mozzarella cheese and (inaudible). So we eat dinner. It's midnight. I think I, there was a --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But it was good.

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, it was good, it was, I think that's when I knew I was going to marry him, because I said --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Literally, I told my girlfriend, I said, "This man can cook." Oh, and the key thing, cannolis.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: He made cannolis, too?

JANISE MITCHELL: He didn't make cannolis. There's a place in Philadelphia, oh again, what's the name of the place? Ah, but it's everyone who's, if you know anything about cannolis in Philadelphia, you have to go to this place. Oh gosh, oh my memory's so bad today. You have to go to this place to get cannolis. If you don't get cannolis here they're not real cannolis. And it's deep in the heart of South Philly so he went all the way to South Philly to bring me these cannolis, I said OK, he really likes me. Because he you know, he went all the way to get me these cannolis. Chocolate chip cannolis and I said, "OK, that's, that's it." You know so it was the lasagna with the cannolis. And you know what's so sad? It's been 30, almost 33 years. I haven't had a cannoli since. (laughter) I'm upset about that. You can put that on the record. (laughter)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Someone needs to go to South Philly and bring you some cannolis. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. Yeah, I haven't had a cannoli, I think that was his point. Get me married and then --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Forget it.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But did he make the lasagna again?

JANISE MITCHELL: Twice. Twice in 33 years.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Hm.

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, part of the reason I asked him not to because I said, “Unless you start the day before, [00:55:00] because if you say we’re going to eat at 8:00, 8:00 means 11:00. If you say dinner is at 6:00, 6:00 really means 9:00. So if you’re going to cook, the day before.” But he does make lasagna but not as much because I think you know we’re both on diets right now but gosh, those are great memories. But that was, that’s his signature dish. And I have the recipe for the sauce. Well, you know depending on where you’re from, you know some people call it sauce, if you’re Italian, some people call it gravy.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Of tomato? With tomato it’s always “sauce.”

JANISE MITCHELL: They call it gravy. If you’re in South Philly they call it gravy.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: In Philly they call it gravy.

JANISE MITCHELL: Call it grav-- oh yeah, oh yes. Oh, you can get in trouble if you call it “sauce.” Yeah. Watch that episode of *The Sopranos*.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I don’t watch *The Sopranos*.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. Where they talk about sauce versus gravy. So we’re watching *The Sopranos* I said, “Yes, yes, yes. It’s gravy.” And the Italian mother said, “Not sauce, gravy.” OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: That went on the lasagna?

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. It’s gravy.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Then what’s --

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, it’s sauce, it’s tomato, but they don’t call it “sauce,” they call it “gravy.” So when we think of “gravy” we think of like that brown stuff.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: It’s the meat.

JANISE MITCHELL: But they call the beef, think of “sauce” they call “gravy,” so think of it like tomato gravy so but they don’t call it “sauce” they call it “gravy.”

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh. Because gravy is always like the cooked of the leftovers from the pans, like the meat and the grist-- and so the sauce is like a whole umph of itself, it has this --

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. So if you're making sauce, again so again I will say, "No, we're making gravy for the lasagna." So it's really a regional thing.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK, I'll go with it.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, it's very regional.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I'll go with it. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: So that's a little bit of history right there. Sauce versus gravy.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Mm-hmm. And then you came up here and said that and someone just said, "What?" (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: But again, depending on where you are people always (inaudible) "We don't it sauce, we call it 'gravy'." It's very regional. Yes, it's like a Philly/New Jersey thing. Yeah.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So how was it the first time you walked into your house for your parents?

JANISE MITCHELL: OK. This is a funny, well funny, not funny --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: How far along was it after the lasagna?

JANISE MITCHELL: Ah, maybe two weeks.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh, OK.

JANISE MITCHELL: Two weeks. It was a very fast courtship. So he's coming over and my sister-in-law, my brother's wife is there. And I'm upstairs, I'm getting dressed you know because he's coming over for dinner. And I hear the door slam. I hear the doorbell ring, then I hear the door slam. And I said, "Who's there?" She goes, "Wrong house!" I said, "What do you mean, wrong house?" I said, "Was someone --" she goes, "That was just someone, you know he's obviously lost." So she had slammed the door in his face. (laughs) He rings the doorbell again and I come down and I go, her name was Jackie. I said, "Jackie," I said, "You know this is Bill." She goes and she apologized.

She goes, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I thought maybe you were a bill collector. I didn't know, I didn't know, I didn't know." Right. Whoo-hoo. OK. Awkward. (laughter) But my parents really accepted him. It was sort of like, "Listen, if you're serious about this relationship, you know, we don't stop you," you know parents are very, very

nonjudgmental. And when he came over, my husband could eat. My parents were just watching him eat. So after dinner you know I'm in the kitchen with my mother and she goes, "If you marry that boy, that's going to be your problem with how you feed him, not mine because mm, he eats a lot, boy. That's going to be your responsibility because I never saw a man eat so much." Right. OK. (laughter) So that was her biggest concern was you know can you cook? Because he's obviously you know [01:00:00] someone who likes to eat so you know.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Had you made the meal or had your mom?

JANISE MITCHELL: My mom. You know I kind of you know helped. I think we just had, you know we're very simple you know, just roast chicken and you know string beans, of course and macaroni and cheese, but you know very simple dinner. She said, "My goodness," because he's eating and he's eating and she goes, "Whooooo. He has a good appetite." (laughs) You know and when we said we were getting married, you know my father did raise some you know some concerns. He said, "Are you ready for this?" And I don't think it was so much the racial aspect. It was, "Are you really ready to be totally independent? Because we're moving to New York," and at the time my daughter was you know not even a year old, like slightly less than a year. And it was you know "We're not going to have Mom and Dad," or even his side of the family, you know, "Can you babysit?" "Can you help me do X, Y and Z?" "You're going to really be on your own." And you know I planned just being young, it's not going to be that bad. Oh boy, was I wrong. Oh boy, was I wrong.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Were you comfortable moving as a family unit in Philadelphia? Because this is what? Late '70s, '80s?

JANISE MITCHELL: Eighties, early '80's, as a family, yes, yeah.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: No cultural issues. No --

JANISE MITCHELL: You know. I think maybe because we were so much in love that if it was there I didn't see it, again. Because he had very supportive you know friends. We had a very small wedding. You know we went to a Justice of the Peace. And I'm all --

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JANISE MITCHELL: Roll their eyes. That wasn't -- civilized so you know. You need to have some type of reception so I think three weeks later we had a reception with just like families and friends you know at their house because they had a you know very you know pretty nice sized house, we could fit you know a lot of people. So we had a reception at the house and he had great friends and again, on my side of the family you know really wasn't a big issue. My friends, um, and when my daughter was born, everyone just loved her. Everyone was just you know they just fell in love with her. So as far as any -- apprehensions or insensitivities, again, maybe I just missed it. I'm pretty sure things were there. But maybe I missed it. There were times I can recall in South Philly, you know we were, in South Philly they have a big open market called the Italian Market. If you ever see the movie *Rocky* where he's --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Running up the stairs?

JANISE MITCHELL: Before that, where he's training, again, this is in South Philly, he's going through this section of South Philly called the Italian Market where you know it looks like the turn of the century, outdoor vendors, you know, the vegetable peddlers, the meat market, the cheese market, the --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: The farmers' market now. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: It's been there for --

JANISE MITCHELL: It's been there forever. So we were in the cheese store, Di Bruno's Cheese, and you could buy like every kind of cheese imaginable. And at the same time, I think it was in Atlanta, it was going through, the serial killer, the Atlanta --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh right, that guy.

JANISE MITCHELL: Child killings.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Yeah, I remember that.

JANISE MITCHELL: So it was like maybe '82, I can't remember exactly when. And one of the persons you know behind the counter, he makes this really insensitive comment. They go, "Oh, great news. You know, they found another one, one less you know, one less to deal with." And the older guy sees me in the store and kind of just whacks him and goes,

“Watch your mouth. That wasn’t nice.” You know just kind of whacks him like you know don’t ever say that again. But that’s really the, you know the minor things I remember. The neighborhood that we lived in, again, it had been at one point integrated, but you know we moved into my parents’ house because they had another residence downtown, before we moved to New York, but you know all the neighbors, you know they knew him, they knew, you know they loved my daughter. And there was one time, this is maybe the summer before we were moving up to New York. My husband was taking theatre at another place a little further in the suburbs, further away. And my father had lent him the car and he had a flat tire and he has to get the car towed. And he’s riding in the tow truck and my husband says you know, “Take your car to this place.” And he’s riding in the tow truck so they were going through you know the neighborhood is changing and changing and they’re like “Where do you live at again?” And they’re making these really insensitive comments, like, “Oh, working and then near Kunte Kinte Village. Kizzy’s neighborhood,” you know and my husband’s just, he was just sitting there like not saying anything and the comments get worse and worse and then they finally pull up to the house and my father comes outside and he goes, “This is my father-in-law.” And he said the tow truck driver’s face literally dropped and didn’t even charge him. He apologized every which way. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” But again you know, that was not in my presence but you know so I, again, if people had anything to say, nothing was ever directly towards me.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. And going to family gatherings, like cause there’s the nuclear unit but then there’s the larger family.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, I think you know everyone just really accepted us as a family.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Right. And then of course, there was the Ardmores side, you know, the light-skinned are like, “Oh good.” (laughter) (inaudible)

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, [00:05:00] it’s like the joke was, my daughter was born you know and she was very, very fair skinned. To the point where you know leaving the hospital the nurse triple checked my bracelet, like triple checked like ‘Are you sure?’, I’m like, “I’m quite positive, quite positive.” But getting back to the Ardmores side, I can

remember bringing my daughter and you know again, everyone loved her. And you know my aunt's looking at the hair like, "Oh wow, wow, it could be straight." (laughs)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: (inaudible) Good hair. (laughter)

JANISE MITCHELL: You know. I could see their eyes kind of like watching the hairline. "Oh wow, we might luck out this time." (laughs)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh my. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: But I think we're past that, you know, because that --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: That generation.

JANISE MITCHELL: That generation because on that side you know, you could always know my mother's people because they were very fair skinned. Um you know very fine, you know little, not straight but wavy you know and again, I think there were members on her side that definitely you know going through like the '20s and '30s could have passed had they chosen to, but you know they chose not to but you know some of them were definitely fair enough that they could have passed.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK, all right.

JANISE MITCHELL: But you know, but everyone accepted us, you know. Again, I did not feel a lot of the tensions. You know maybe at this point things are slowly starting to change. You know I had an uncle on my father's side and when he remarried, his wife was white and the two kids you know just beautiful, beautiful children and you know the same thing, it was like you know, oh, we have enough issues so we're you know, the kids will be kids, so that's not, we're not going to make that a family issue. You know, we're all going to be you know connected. But even on the Ardmore side, my Aunt Ruthie, her husband, you know they had no children, but my Aunt's husband Ernie, 369th Infantry you know so he would tell us these great stories when he was in France and you know just quite a character. But on my Uncle Ernie's side, you know there was a lot of you know mingling with Italians and so again on that side it was like oh, OK, that's why they look the way they look. So I think within my family this had been going on so it wasn't like --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: A newsflash.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. No newsflash. It was like OK, you know, OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. That's interesting. So you moved up to Brooklyn.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes. And it was rough.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: (laughs) Now did you immediately, I'll let you tell, so what was your first impression of New York? Where did you first move to?

JANISE MITCHELL: I was overwhelmed. Over I'll be quite honest, overwhelmed. I was very comfortable in Philadelphia. And but you know moving up to New York was really my husband's dream because again, he was going to pursue theatre. And so the plan was that hey, we're going to move to New York. I was going to work while he could pursue theatre fulltime. Oh gosh. We were so naïve. (laughter) No, no. (laughs) I think we moved up to New York and we had \$500 saved up. So I'm thinking -- you know we're rich, we're rich. You know we had paid the security deposit so we had the two months' rent already paid for. You know, I'm coming up to New York, \$500 and you know we're good. I'm going to find a job right away. No! I think the first time I had to go to the laundromat because again you know I'm used to having a washer and drier in my house. And then spend the money on the laundromat and saying, "But I have \$500 and now I don't." (laughter) You know that laundry ate up a lot of my money [00:10:00] and oh boy. Groceries and you know the phone bill and you see the money's like wow. Reality hit and then daycare. You know again, coming from this extended family where no one went to daycare. You know you always had, it's in the family to watch children. That was really an eye-opener. Oh, I have to actually find someone to watch my daughter, and they're going to charge me for this.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: (laughs) They're not going hold her because she's just cute and they love her. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. So that was, that was a big eye-opener. It's like wow, um, we need to do something quick. So I just found like some little part time jobs and my husband you know found a job and it was rough going. It was, there's, I can't romanticize it. It was rough going for a couple years, until we got a little bit settled and there were times when I said, "I just want to go back, like this -- let's just move back to Philadelphia. Like this is just crazy." And New York I found was just overwhelming, because if I thought I

was doing well in Philadelphia, it just seemed like in New York everyone was prettier. Everyone was richer. Every, you know everything was just, was in fast motion all the time. And the acceleration, the pace, I just wasn't used to that, you know and I thought I was coming from a big city, but compared to New York Philadelphia is you know, seemed like suburbs and you know in comparison and so I think just getting used to that pace and just like just feeling overwhelmed when we first moved up.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Now did you move into the city or did you move into Brooklyn?

JANISE MITCHELL: We moved right into Brooklyn.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. And what made you choose Brooklyn?

JANISE MITCHELL: OK. Brooklyn, my husband had a friend who was living in Brooklyn. I knew nothing about Brooklyn. You know my father had his cousins and I had uncles on my dad's side who lived in Harlem, like Morningside Heights and my uncle lived on Riverside Drive, Washington Heights. And you know when we were younger going up to New York but just going to Harlem but Brooklyn, I don't know anything about Brooklyn. But he had friends who lived in Park Slope. So a couple maybe a month before we moved my husband had gone up to case neighborhoods and his friends said, "Try Park Slope." So came into Park Slope. And that's where we moved so you know my husband was already up, setting up and my parents drove up with me and my daughter. My brother and my, Bill had already driven up on the U-Haul van. So he's already there. So we're driving to New York and again, I'm thinking I'm living in Brooklyn Heights. (laughs) I'm thinking this is going to be you know the *Cosby*, you know because you see you know the Huxtables because --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh, *The Cosby Show* was already on, so you had this view of --

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. And that's sort of like how I grew up, you know not a house like the *Cosby*, but you know, very nice house and so I was thinking oh man, you know we'll be just like the *Cosbys*. You know Brooklyn Heights and you know we'll, I'll be just like Claire Huxtable. Oh boy. (laughter) We drove up. I'm like, this is it? (laughs) So four-story brownstone --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Walk up.

JANISE MITCHELL: It's like what they call a railroad apartment. Oh, I'm not impressed.

(laughter) I'm not impressed. Oh, OK. Don't say anything. Just make it work. Just make it work. Just make it work. But just feeling like, oh, this is not what I was suspecting. I thought we were going to be like living in Brooklyn Heights and you know really fancy, not Park Slope. And Park Slope in the early '80s was not the Park Slope that we know today. You know it was pretty much a dump. (laughter) If you know Park Slope you didn't go past Ninth Street.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: (laughs) OK. [00:15:00]

JANISE MITCHELL: I'm on 15th Street, so I'm really, oh --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: South Slope?

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. Oh. Oh, you're on 15th Street. Oh boy. Oh my. (laughs) That was the reaction, right, ooh, OK, no, I won't come visit you. And it was a little bit rough. And not knowing anyone really. But there was a Puerto Rican family on the first floor who owned a bodega. And they were just lovely, lovely people. And they really helped me out a lot because you know there were times when you know I just had to run to the laundromat and their mother would say, you know "Don't worry, Mommy, I'll watch your little girl. You know, just leave her here and you can just go to the laundromat and that was the first time I ever had rice and beans, like you know a group in Philadelphia, Puerto Ricans live in North Philly, not in West Philly where I lived so, and she would give me rice and beans and I was like, they were so delicious and I was like, "Oh, can you show me how to cook those?" And you know listening to salsa and you know just seeing the neighborhood transition because again, this is the early '80s and Park Slope were right on the fringe where it's going to be a rapid transformation from this South Slope neighborhood where no one wanted to come into where now it was just you know everyone wants to live in that part of the Slope now. So the first week living there, there was a fight and I'm looking out the window and my daughter's in my arms. You know she's still in diapers, you know, she's just a baby. And there's a fight and I'm hearing this screaming and you know I'm coming from Philadelphia, this nice neighborhood, this

quiet block where everyone knew each other and you didn't lock the doors and your neighbors you call Auntie. And to see this fight --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And you didn't act up in the street, that's for sure.

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, absolutely. And you see this fight in the street, broad daylight, it was shocking. And the guy picks up the one guy and throws him in front of a moving car.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh my.

JANISE MITCHELL: And it's OK, welcome to the neighborhood. Oh. This is Brooklyn. Oh boy. (laughs) Oh boy. But did not call my parents. Nope. I have pride. I'm not going to call them. I will not call them. I'm not going to.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But you called your sister.

JANISE MITCHELL: Actually I called no one.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh.

JANISE MITCHELL: I just, I said that I'm not going to let them know how I'm, you know when they would call, "How you doing?" "Oh, everything's fine." I'm like, oh God, everything's not fine but you know what? It was like make it work. Make it work. Make it work. Park Slope was going through a lot of you know changes.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Even then in '82, '83.

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, a lot of changes. Also you have to remember in the '80s you have two big things happening. Nationwide.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Crack.

JANISE MITCHELL: Crack and AIDS. And they're happening at the same time. And so to see this unfolding before you eyes and how it just devastated, devastated entire areas because coming home you know between the crack epidemic and the AIDS, you know you would come home at night and you would say, "Boy, I hope I don't get mugged." You know, this is in Park Slope. You know I hope I don't you know someone you know attacks me. But I remember on that block we had the Neighborhood Burglar. Everyone knew he was a burglar. So you would leave your house and go to work.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And you knew he watched you?

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, he would be on his steps, watching and you would say, "Gosh, I know he's going to wait 15 minutes for me to get up the block before he's going to break in." And it was extremely frustrating. Extremely frustrating because you simply would say, "I'm going to work and this guy, this SOB, [00:20:00] excuse my French, I know he's going to break into, if it's not my house, he'll be there later this week." And but he was a neighborhood burglar, Frankie.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Now did you knock on your and get, knock on his door and get your stuff back? Did you have time, or did he trade it in already?

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, what happened one day, and this is when my son was born, my son was born in '87.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK and this is Ben?

JANISE MITCHELL: This is Benjamin. And my son is not even a month old. My husband's at the theatre. And I have my son in bed. You know Jasmine's about five at the time. It's late and I hear something in the kitchen, like maybe 1:00 a.m. And I'm a little groggy and I said, "Oh, Bill must be coming home." Because he would have late nights coming home from the theatre. So I didn't think anything of it and I kind of just rolled back to sleep and then in a split second I jumped back, I woke up, I said, "Oh my gosh." I said, "Why is coming through the kitchen and not the front door?" And then I had a sick feeling. I said, "Oh my gosh, someone is breaking in." And it was a sick, sick feeling. What do you do? You know I have both my children, you know, my son's just, he's an infant, my daugh- -- And I kind of put my son next to Jasmine. You know, they were both sleeping. And I kind of stood up and positioned myself so he can't see. I knew who it is. It's Frankie. And I kind of just screamed top of my lungs, you know and he's literally inside the apartment, you know he had broken the screen gates. One foot was literally inside the apartment. And I just screamed at the top of my lungs, you know, "Just get out of here." And he runs back up the fire escape. I called the cops. You know they came you know immediately. This is you know before cell phone, so I couldn't even call Bill. So he doesn't know anything until he actually gets there. By this time the cops are already left. They did the report. And he's you know we're just sick, we're just sick, we're just sick. So now I have to make this decision. Do I testify in

court? Now OK, two options. You testify there's always a chance that he could get off and if he gets off he's going to be really angry that you testified against him. And now he's going to come after you, full force. Or he could be sent away. So I make that decision to testify. He's not picked up until maybe three days later. And the reason I made that decision, the next day I'm coming out with the kids and good old Frankie's on the steps you know and he's like just staring at me. And I got my nerve up and I stared back at him. And he curses at me. And I said, "OK, you know what? I need to testify against him because I'm not safe because I know that he broke in. He knows that I know that he tried to break in. He might try to come after me to silence me, so you know what? Let me get him before he can come after me. And at this point the cops were actually looking for him because he had a rap sheet that was you know a mile long. And there's a court case and he is sent away and you know so at least he is you know off the street. But there was another neighborhood junkie. We don't know his name, we just called him "the little neighborhood junkie." But I remember a couple years ago, this is after Park Slope becomes very fashionable, we're actually in Carroll Gardens walking, you know Bill and I, we're just walking down Fourth Street and we see the guy. Not Frankie, the other neighborhood guy who used to burglarize everyone's apartment. And he starts staring at us. I'm like, "Oh, gosh. Is he going to say anything and," [00:25:00]

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: You recognized him?

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, he recognized us. He gets up, you know and he has his little bottle you know, he's sitting alone outside the liquor store. And he gets up and he starts walking towards us. And in my heart is racing like oh boy, oh boy, oh boy. He walks up to Bill, he goes, "Oh gosh. Don't you miss the good old days?" (laughter) He goes, "Remember Park Slope? Don't you miss the good old days?" (laughs) It's like, the good old days when you used to rob my house every other day? The good old days? (laughs) No! But it was just like I mean, that's how he remembered it, "the good old days." Yeah, when you could just burglarize the homes with no problem.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: The cops didn't come for a while. (laughs) Those were the good old days, right?

JANISE MITCHELL: The good old days.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I was scared. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, he was the one that, he stole our car battery. (laughter) You know we get out and Bill tries to start the car and the car won't start. He opens up the hood. What do you know? There's no battery. Here comes a guy. "Wow, it looks like you need a battery. Well, guess what? I have a battery here that I can sell you." (laughs)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: With a straight face. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. And Bill took a baseball bat and he said, "You're not going to sell me my own battery. You're going to put that battery back inside my car," but straight-faced. The nerve! You're trying to sell me my own battery. But again, this was you know this was to crack and this was you know -- and then you had you know again the AIDS epidemic which was a whole different issue because we had a lot of people, a lot of friends that we knew from the theatre and you know the music and everyone was just dropping like flies, you know just "Remember so and so? Yeah, he passed," like just so, so many people that we lost during that time period, you know. Which was very sad because they didn't have the medicine back then.

And so a lot of it was just experimental and if you had it, it was pretty much a death sentence, unlike now where you know people have lived you know quite long, even with this illness, but you know 20, 30 years ago no, it was "we're not going to be seeing you maybe past this year, if that." So that was also very you know, it affected a lot of people. You know, my high school reunion, you know we were just going through the pictures and this person's gone, this person's gone, this person's gone, so it was like wow. You know, but you know AIDS, or this one became a crack addict, so it was like wow, so you know I think just going through I think any inner city, those two epidemics were just devastating. And we're just now coming I think full cycle, you know I think it took almost another 20 years to eradicate the effects you know of the crack epidemic, you know.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Right. And then new ones on the rise.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. I think with the heroin --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I can't believe heroin's back.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. Full force.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Full force.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Full force.

JANISE MITCHELL: You know. Hopefully it won't be as bad as AIDS but you know sometimes you just have to be realistic and say well, oh people, you know that could be a user, be safe, you know as safe as you can be. If you're going to be a drug user, ironic as that sounds.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Right. Right. Well, it's mostly fueled by the Oxycotin, that's the --

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. Yeah.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I had my wisdom teeth and I had it once and I was like that isn't, I got dizzy and sick and I was like and I took the pain. I was like I'd rather feel the pain than to feel this "uch." (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Exactly. You know when I had my arm surgery like last winter and it was like after maybe two days like, ah, Tylenol, I'm fine.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I didn't even make it 24 hours on it. I didn't. [00:30:00] I put ice on my and just done, it just --

JANISE MITCHELL: It didn't do anything for me, just kind of made me a little drowsy but I was fine with Tylenol.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Yeah, I got vertigo. I was done. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: You were done. Exactly. Yeah, yeah.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I was (inaudible) mm, no. (laughs) So all right, so now you have two children.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: You're raising them in Park Slope.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And Jasmine, your daughter who I know, she described herself as a "multi-racial." OK, so what was it like, what was that experience in the '80s? What was the experience in general?

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, I think because people were always questioned our relationship because my daughter is so light that they --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But you look alike, though.

JANISE MITCHELL: Right.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: When you walked in I knew. (laughs) I saw Jasmine instantly. There was no question.

JANISE MITCHELL: Exactly. But at the same time, oops. Oh, I'm fine. At the same time a lot of people will question and we never talked about race, per se in the house. Emphasis was on loving these children and letting them make their own choices as far as identity. But I remember when Jasmine was very young, I'm actually in Brooklyn Heights and there's a pretty nice playground that we take her to. So we're in the playground, Brooklyn Heights and this man comes over to me and he says, "Who do you work for?" And I said, and I didn't understand the question. I said, "Who do I work for?" I said, "Oh, I work at a place called Henry Street Settlement." So now he's confused. He goes, "Oh, I thought you worked for a family." And I said, so again I'm still confused. I said, "Mm, no, I don't work for a family." He goes, "Oh, because you know you're so wonderful with this little girl, it's like you treat her as though she's your own child." (laughter) And then it's like, "Oh, this is my child." And he did like a double-take and he said, "Ohhhhh, that's, how lovely, oh, how nice." And kind of left me alone after that. And my sister's husband, he used to joke, he said, "Why don't you just get a t-shirt that simply says, 'Yes, she's mine.' And that way (laughs) you won't even have to have a conversation." Just you know, just put a t-shirt, 'Yes, she's mine' because a lot of would question, they never questioned Bill. But they would always question me. "That's your daughter?" Yes. "Oh, oh, I understand now." I was like OK, yeah, yeah, yeah. I'd be like OK, yeah. "Do I need to clarify any?" You know but um --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Was this in white neighborhoods or was it in?

JANISE MITCHELL: Both.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Both. Oh, you got it both ways.

JANISE MITCHELL: But mostly in white neighborhoods like they would question my relationship because a lot of people thought I was the babysitter. You know, that can't possibly you know be your daughter. I think in black neighborhoods they were more curious but they never questioned. But in white neighborhoods they would just come out and just be blunt.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And you as a family, in one neighborhood or the other, like walking as a family unit, was there --

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, people would stare. They would stare. And like, OK, well you know you would hear sometimes like see their eyes. Oh, she kind of looks like the mom, but I could see the father, so you could you know, you could see it in their eyes, you know riding the subway. You know you would always see people sometimes staring and I would always want to believe that they were just staring because she was just a gorgeous, beautiful baby. But I would just get, you know I just kind of got used to it, like yeah, people are going to stare because you know her hair was very straight. And she is very light-skinned. And there's a private school a couple blocks away, St. Ann's. So when we were going through the process of having her look at some of you know the independent schools and you know the private schools and she had an interview at St. Ann's [00:35:00] and you know she stayed there for the whole day to interact with the students and I came later to pick her up and when she sees me she goes, kiss, she was with all day you know her you know, her classmates for the day. And so she goes, "Hi, Mom." And the look on their face. That's her mother? Oh! OK, I thought she was Asian. I thought she was Indian. I didn't know she was black. Like that. You know, like people, you know they know from her appearance that she is something. But a lot of times they don't equate that something with black. They always equate it with maybe being Native American, with being Hawaiian or being Hispanic, but not, she's mixed with black. She doesn't quite fit that mold of black. But my son on the other hand, people usually don't question. Even though he looks like Jasmine, like they, like almost like identical twins, he's slightly darker. So I think he, I got less of that from my son. I think only because he's just a little you know pale, you know a little pale darker than my daughter. But he gets it, too. You know people, "Are you from Samoa?" No. "Are you

from the Philippines?” No. “Ah, I’m black.” “Really?” “Yeah.” “Are you sure?”
(laughter)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I do know my mama. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. “Are you sure?” “Yes, I’m quite sure, yeah. I’m quite sure.”

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So how was it raising them? I mean, so you let, you didn’t talk about race in the home. You let them discover kind of on their own, but in that context though you know, I mean this was earlier but still it was still a time frame, still of a mindset. I mean even Bill Cosby you know even episodes make today an OK expression, you know there was the ’90s you know he’d say you’d see a group of young black men, young black youth and you would cross the street and walk away.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: You know. And you know there was that you know I moved up here in you know what, 17, 20 years ago and at first there was that but now I don’t you know I don’t feel that sensibility with teenagers at all.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. I think the difference was the neighborhood that we did live in, it was very mixed in the sense that it was a very large Puerto Rican presence. And I think in hindsight people didn’t question in the neighborhood because sometimes they would think my husband was Puerto Rican. Very light-skinned Puerto Rican, but they just, I think a lot of times people assumed he was Puerto Rican because they would talk to him in Spanish sometimes, he would say, “No, I don’t speak Spanish.” And they would say, “You’re white?” And he would say, “Yeah, I’m white.” “Oh, OK. I thought you were Puerto Rican. OK. *Qué pasa?*” So I think living in Park Slope during that time period, because it was very heavily Hispanic and there was this you know big range of ethnicities and colors that I think my children felt very comfortable because they looked a lot like the other kids who were Hispanic and there were all the mixed couples in the neighborhood. And so I think growing up, maybe they felt like well, aren’t all families like this? Like I think most families probably looked the way we looked because we’re all kind of like brown skinned. And again, I didn’t really pick up too much on any type of conflict. And I think again, it may have been due to the neighborhood, because it was, and it was transitioning because it was very heavily Puerto Rican. And so people never

questioned my children's ethnicity. [00:40:00] I mean they obvious saw, could identify me as a black woman. You know my husband, mm, not quite sure, he could be Puerto Rican, he could be Italian. We're going to kind of leave that alone. You know. And I think the school itself, there were mixed families and there were a lot of mixed kids. It was a wonderful school. PS, I'll give a little shout out, PS 107. Wonderful, wonderful school where, and it was really a sense of a community school where I had a para who also was my downstairs neighbor. They were Portuguese, but her daughter was married to a black man. And so again, so you're living in this building where OK, well the people next, down below, like they're a mixed family, you know her daughter and you know she was Portuguese, her husband was Puerto Rican and the kids were married to you know black women, black men and so again, and that was my para that I had in the classroom. And the other teachers. So it was like this real sense of at the time, neighborhood. So even though you know Park Slope in the '80s could be a little you know tough, the people who lived there really looked out for each other. You know we had the 'neighborhood alcoholics', I like to call them. Now it's a very fancy wine store. OK, it's very fancy. But in the day you know you were for a dollar they would just give you like a paper cup of wine. (laughter) Totally illegal, but that's what they did.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And it wasn't even wine, it was like what, Thunderbird or something awful. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. So for a dollar you know you could get a paper cup of wine. And you would have, you know the "neighborhood alcoholics" and they would be on the steps all day. But they were very respectful. Because I would simply say, "You know guys, can you just make sure you put your cups in the trash can?" "No problem, no problem, Mommy, no problem, no problem." And you would come back and they would still be on the steps. No trash. And they would let you know everything that happened that entire day. They'd go, "Oh, the UPS guy was here. Your package is in the laundromat." "Someone else came by. Your friend came by, but I told him that you weren't home yet." So they knew everything happening on the block. And they wouldn't bother you. You know but you know in one sense that they were like your protectors and you know I

almost wished they were there more because they would protect the homes from the crack addicts.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Right, right, right, right, right.

JANISE MITCHELL: Because when they were around, you know the crack addicts didn't break in but you know they didn't bother you. But again I think in terms of like racial identify, you know we didn't push it in the house. You know I just wanted them to form their own identify.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Now why was that? What was the --

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, I don't know if it was anything conscious. We didn't set out to make a conscious decision. It was just that you know, because I actually was very curious about how my daughter would perceive herself because you know people would say, "You know maybe she could pass," and I think she, how she came to her own racial identity, I'm not sure. I'm not sure. But I think she's comfortable enough in her own skin. Now my son, a little bit different. You know, when he was born, you know we were deciding on names and my husband said, "You know we have to give him a name where he can't be readily identified." How we came up with Benjamin I don't know. But you know I think a Benjamin, it sounds so like OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Well, there's Uncle Benjamin.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, you know. Like, yeah, this is like very -- like you belong out in Kansas, like very middle of the road, like Benjamin.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Like Benny, Ben. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) You don't associate.

JANISE MITCHELL: You don't associate the name Benjamin with any type of [00:45:00] ethnicity.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Was there another name that you were considering? Or other names?

JANISE MITCHELL: Not -- actually I wanted to name him Logan, because that was a famous Indian, Native America chief from Philadelphia, my husband said. So we decided on Benjamin because we did make a decision on that because he said, "Growing up biracial, you know he's going to have more challenges than a girl. And so you know, why put

him in a position where he might have to constantly defend who he is, you know just on the basis of your name, oh gosh, Tyrone, hm, he must be black. Tyree, well, he must be black. Before they reject that application, you could be qualified but just on the basis on who they believe you are, for your name,” he said, “I’m not going to do that to him. So we’re going to give him a very mainstream name like you know Benjamin.” OK. I can’t even picture what a Benjamin looks like.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: That’s true. I’m trying to think. Actually I just keep thinking of Uncle Benny. What was it? *The Benny Hill Show*. That’s what I keep thinking of. I’m confusing him, (laughs) (inaudible). But I have two conflicting ideas. So there, it’s true. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Some names if you say them, you already have a stereotype. So you know given a very middle of the road name, you know what? This way he’s not already prejudged. So you know that name, so for my son it really was a conscious decision. And we said, “Listen, you know he’s not going to be Jasmine, he’s darker. And he is going to be perceived in this country as a black man.” And my son doesn’t talk about race, per se. I think he’s more aligned with my daughter, but it’s interesting, he’s in LA now, you know trying to work as an actor. And I think because he, you know you can’t quite read him like well, maybe he could be Italian. Maybe he is Asian, like not quite, Arabic. You know just (inaudible), so you know, they think that because he does have this look that you can’t really pinpoint a definitive ethnicity with it, that you know might give him some options as far as you know roles because he doesn’t quite fit you know any area. But when we moved to that part of Brooklyn, which I call Bergen Beach, Old Mill Basin, Marine Park, there was a couple incidents with my son. He has a baseball coach who lives in Bergen Beach, which is you know very rich, predominantly Jewish/Italian neighborhood.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So you moved, how old was Ben when you moved there?

JANISE MITCHELL: Ah, Ben was about 10. About 10 or 11. So he’s playing baseball and the coach has a house in Bergen Beach and the kids would you know sometimes ride their bikes over. And you know the coach has this beautiful, you know beautiful house. He has a basketball court, swimming pool, so you know the kids would come over. And so

Ben invited a couple of his friends who aren't on the team, just to come to the coach's house because you know, use the basketball court. So, excuse me. It's the summer and Ben comes back to the house. He's pedaling, he's, "Mom! Mom! Mom! Call Dad. Something bad happened." I'm like, "What, what, what?" He goes, "These kids beat up Alonzo." I'm like, so Alonzo is one of his black friends. And my husband immediately gets in the car, like "Where is he?" He goes, "Well, he's you know on his bike but he's you know kind of bruised up and everything." What happened as they were biking, they're both white teenagers in the neighborhood, start circling them in their cars. So they bike a little bit faster and the car speeds up a little bit faster. And they accuse them of [00:50:00] stealing bikes in the neighborhood. You know, "Why you in this neighborhood? You don't belong in this neighborhood." You know, "We see you again in this neighborhood," and you know they take Alonzo's bike and they rough him up. Ben was actually able to stay on his bike and that's how he was able to you know -- pedal back fast you know to the house and so Alonzo actually is walking, and the kids leave in the car. And so Alonzo's looking, you know not beat up, but he's a little roughed up, you know he's obviously quite upset. So my, at this point my husband's in the car and we see Alonzo walking back and we call the cops and they come and they go, "Can you identify them?" And I think Alonzo was, "Well, I don't know about you know, probably could but I don't know if I want to," and you know my husband was just furious and the only thing he could say is, you know "I see these guys; I would just want them dead." And I'm like, "Bill, you don't really," I said, he goes, "Yes, I really mean that like how dare you. You know, there were where they were supposed to be. They were invited over to see the coach. So how dare a group of thugs, you know in a fancy, you know their daddy's fancy car driving around and assume that these kids don't belong here. They're where they're supposed to be." And so you would have a couple cases like that in that particular neighborhood, with my son, you know because he had friends in that neighborhood and sometimes he would get questioned like, "Why are you here?" And then I think a lot of times when people realized he played basketball for that, I'm sorry, baseball for that team and they go, "Oh no, oh yeah, I know you. You're the lucky pitcher." They would kind of leave him alone. And he knew a lot of kids from the

neighborhood; you know I've forgotten how many bar mitzvahs he went to. It was like oh my gosh, another one this week? Like, "How many Jewish boys do you know?" He goes, "A lot." You know so I think my son was always able to navigate. But he's always aware that, "You know what? I still, just because I'm able to navigate, I still am different. So I'm comfortable with all these different groups." You know he has Italian friends, he has Jewish friends and, and they're very, very close but I think he's always aware of that, "You know what? I'm still different from you, and you being chased would have never happened, but it did happen to me and Alonzo. You know and it'll happen again."

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Did Alonzo get his bike back?

JANISE MITCHELL: He got his bike back. But it was you know very upsetting. It was very upsetting. You know what? I think because of the coach, you know word got around that, and the coach was not happy because the coach, you know, everyone knows who this man is and I think the coach put some word out like, "We need that bike."

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh.

JANISE MITCHELL: "We need this bike back." So we got the bike back. Yeah.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So why did you leave Park Slope?

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, the rents. The rents. Oh please. When they started charging more rent than what my mortgage was going to be, that's when we decided to move in. And we moved right at the time when it started getting nice. (laughter) It's like, shucks. Shucks. Oh boy.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But you made it nice. You were part of the reason --
(laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Exactly. And it's like, I have to tell you something. This is for the record. I'm a little resentful. (laughs) It's like we were the pioneers. We paved the way for everyone else and then when it's just when it became safe and lovely with the shops and the boutiques, I can't reap the benefits. It's not fair. And the landlord that we had, oh my goodness, I have to just say I mean they were slumlords. They sold the building. And the new landlords came in and they basically wanted everyone out of the building. And I remember, in the apartment below me, there were two Puerto Rican brothers and they

were musicians and they played for Eddie Palmieri. [00:55:00] So they were always you know traveling and they would just you know, wonderful, wonderful guys. And they were you know the part time superintendent. And there was a white couple on the top floor and they were very nice. But when the landlord came in, in the summertime he would turn on the heat. Wintertime, turn the heat off. He would turn the water off. So you know it was really you know tactics to just make your life so miserable. So we went back and forth, you know Housing Court, Housing Court, you know but it's really war of attrition, like who's going to last? And I said, "You know what, Bill?" I said, "We can't raise a family in you know. These are inhuman conditions, like there's no heat right now, there's no hot water." You know they would purposely do it and I said, "You know, what this is just enough, enough, enough."

So we started looking and we really wanted to stay in Park Slope but oh my goodness. It was like five years too late. I said, "Gosh, you know, it's a little bit too late." Because if I would have been able financially to have purchased something, we definitely would have stayed. But it was really a financial situation but loved it, loved it. You know and again, I don't want to romanticize it because in the early '80s it was difficult but at the same time you know we really had, for us to not have family, we had a really good support system. You know, the teachers at the school because a lot of the teachers live in the neighborhood and so if I needed a babysitter, one of the paras, her daughter would babysit. You know, when my son was born and I went back to work it was literally like three weeks later, oh gosh you know. So again the para, one of her best friends offered to babysit and again, you know this great Puerto Rican woman who spoke no English and so when my son was little he spoke more English than Spanish because in her house they only spoke Spanish.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: More Spanish than English. More Spanish --

JANISE MITCHELL: More Span-- yes.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: You keep saying "para."

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, "para." A teacher's assistant.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. So a lot of the teachers' assistants were at the school and you know and because they worked in the neighborhood they really became part of my family because you know I didn't have my parents close by. And so if I needed anything, so, "Maria, like I need a babysitter." "No problem." Or, Leona was a Portuguese woman, "Hi, can you watch the kids?" "Like no problem, no problem." And so even though the neighborhood was you know going through AIDS and you know the crack, you know we were able to build up a very strong support system, you know through you know extended friends who you know were also you know give us their assistance but that's what really got us through and I hated to leave all of them behind, but I found that a lot of the Hispanic families, it would be interesting to do a study because a lot of them unfortunately got pushed out. And it would be interesting to do a study like when they got pushed out, where did they go?

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Mm-hmm. It's interesting because now there's a phenomena of buying people out. I don't know if it was like a shift in law that happened, because of what happened to you. I mean they would if they want to turnover the apartment in some instances they'd buy you out, especially if it's in a rent controlled --

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. Which we didn't have a rent controlled, you know it was one of the things I didn't know about when we lived in New York but boy, I wish I would have known about it.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: New York is kind of quiet about those things.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes, I know.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: No one talks about that.

JANISE MITCHELL: I know.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: You don't talk about your rent-controlled apartment.

(laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Well, my uncle, the one who, that was my father's, on my father's side, when he remarried he moved to Fort Greene and again this is the late '80s but Fort Greene was not nice.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: You weren't dancing in the park.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, it was, Fort Greene was pretty tough, because my first school was PS 20, which is on Adelphi Street. So this is maybe '84, '83 and I'm working at this school and I'm like you know, [01:00:00] beautiful brownstones but neighborhood was tough. It was a tough neighborhood. But boy, if I had known then what I know now, I would have bought one of those brownstones when they were cheap. But who knew?

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Who knew? Right.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, who knew? Who knew? Who knew? But you know I think that's a cycle of New York like you know the neighborhoods are a constant influx of change. You know constant influx.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Right. Yeah. This wave, I don't know, I find that this wave of change is different.

JANISE MITCHELL: In which way?

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Well, it's definitely more socioeconomic based, but I also think it's outside money based. I think that I mean one of the wonderful things that happened I think is that you know that people bought houses. People have decided you know I want to stay in New York, I want to raise family and I want to own property, I'm not renting. You know, renting changes a neighborhood on a dime.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: That change, but buying settles neighborhoods in some ways. You know, I was like, you know my family has been for decades and stuff and we've seen the change. I mean it started Italian and Jewish, now it's black and it's about to go back to Italian and -- (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: It's going to go back to Italian/Jewish. It's not going to go back culturally specific, but very socioeconomic you know specific and also I find that the big socioeconomic factor I think that's changing the face of Brooklyn is that there is, it's like almost, I say it's like Cuba. There's a false economy that's going on because you have these young kids that move in and they're paying like this X amount for this apartment you know that a working adult can't afford.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But they're getting paid, you know, but to make matters worse, it would be one thing if they were paying that and they had a job that supported that, but they don't. They work at a lower wage-paying job, but they still get to live this lifestyle. So it's like Cuba. It's a false economy.

JANISE MITCHELL: Right.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And I think it's going to be interesting to see how that shakes out over time. Rent --

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JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: -- will level off but I don't think property value will. Which you know, I mean it's good for infrastructure, for Brooklyn, but then you know (laughs) I always say, "What happens to us?" You know I mean, I would have had to leave, I would have to have left my neighborhood by now if you know he didn't come.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely, so --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: It's like Brownsville, I see, but you know the train change, I'm going to ask you about that. Riding the train in and out of Manhattan in New York, did you notice, what did you notice on the trains?

JANISE MITCHELL: When you don't get a seat you start to plot about based on this stop, which people are going to get up. And so when you're on the --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: What stop did it start when you first --

JANISE MITCHELL: Coming into Brooklyn you know like Seventh Avenue --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Is this the N train?

JANISE MITCHELL: The F train.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: The F train, OK.

JANISE MITCHELL: F train. And so you strategically place yourself, OK. I'm going to stand right here because they're, I know this couple. They live in Park Slope. They're not taking this train all the way to Kings Plaza or Kings Highway. It's definitely a Park Slope. They have that Park Slope look so I'm going to stand near them because I only

have two more stops and they'll be coming off. But now what I'm noticing is Church Avenue. (laughter) So that same couple that I was convinced would be getting up, they didn't. They did not get off until Church Avenue, which is predominantly you know West Indians, like oh. And that's when I told her, I said, "That's when you can tell how the neighborhood is changing, because that couple, that white couple, they got up, Church Avenue." I said, "Ten years ago you would have never seen that. You would have never seen that."

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: When I moved here it was coming in on the 4 train. It started, generally it was like Bowling Green, Wall Street, Bowling Green and Brooklyn Bridge. You know, you got on at 14th Street or 42nd Street, you're like, "I'm going to have a street by Bowling Green," and you can ride it. Suddenly --

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: They got off at Borough Hall. Huh.

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. Absolutely.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Well, I'll get a seat by Nevins. Well, a few years later, no more Nevins Street. Huh. And then I noticed like five, six years ago, I got faked out, not even five, like three or four years ago, I got faked out all the way to Crown Heights and all of us were looking at each other on the train going, "Now how are you still on this train?" (laughs) Franklin, we got faked back to Franklin Avenue.

JANISE MITCHELL: Franklin. Franklin Avenue.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: We were just, and you could just see all of us going --

JANISE MITCHELL: Franklin Avenue.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Because we're west, you know and it's like you know the little old ladies, they know how to get a seat better than anybody.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. Now Franklin Avenue's like -- OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Franklin Avenue, I didn't get off at Franklin Avenue for years. That was crack central.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Who got off at Franklin Avenue? There was nothing I needed on Franklin Avenue.

JANISE MITCHELL: And now you know I'm driving by, this is last summer, Boys and Girls High School.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Soon to be called Nelson Mandela.

JANISE MITCHELL: OK. And I'm in the car. And I see you know these two young white girls and they're just you know jogging. And I said, "OK." And then so I go not even to the block and let's say you know white mother pushing a stroller and this is right by Boys and Girls High School.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: What is the intersection of Boys and Girls?

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh. I don't want to say Macon.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Yeah. So it's like Fulton and yeah, so Stuyvesant Heights.
(laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. In fact --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Stuyvesant Heights. That's what you -- it was Bed Stuy,
girl --

JANISE MITCHELL: Exactly.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: My auntie lived down that block on Macon Street and we had to take everything out the car when we parked to see auntie and she was a, I could walk there from my grandmother's house --

JANISE MITCHELL: Exactly.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But we didn't walk there. I walked there when some friends moved there and I walked there and you said jogging, you saw the white girls jogging, and my friend said the same thing, Richard, you know he's from he said and he goes, "I was out late at night and they're like headphones on," and he was like --

JANISE MITCHELL: And then when you go to the supermarket and they have the imported olive oil, that's when you know. You can't just get Goya.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I still have the super bodega. We have the herbs and stuff. I miss that. But my Korean grocer changed that's been there for years, like since I was a little girl years. And suddenly they put in these fancy displays [00:05:00] and I saw, you know there's always been kale and mustard greens and collard greens in the hood, no but

those were those vegan-baked kale. You know the one I'm talking about? The raw food type. It's like --

JANISE MITCHELL: It's like, it's ill.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: At Utica? And St. John's?

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. I know, it's --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I was like, but you don't have any, you're not going to get rid of your mangos and your (laughs) --

JANISE MITCHELL: But you know you start to see you know that change. I think in my neighborhood we haven't seen it yet, to that degree. And I think a lot has to do with the transportation. Because it's all single-family homes. And when we moved onto the block, I think there was only maybe one other black family. We were the only mixed couple on the block and --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So this was what, the '90s?

JANISE MITCHELL: Ninety, maybe '98, '97. But the block was predominantly Jewish, Irish, Italian. And I remember moving into the neighborhood, it was like you know but the housing market, you know for our price and for our budget you know we could get a really lovely house. And so when we looked at neighborhoods you know I did have to go further out to find something you know that was affordable. And it's a very nice neighborhood. It's you know I call it the 'fake suburbs'. You know I have a possum in my backyard. I've seen hawks in my backyard. Occasional raccoon. Because I'm right by, I'm adjacent to the bay. So we see a lot of wildlife. But now I'm noticing the neighborhood definitely the trend is becoming more black. We still have a large number of older -- whites, who have been there forever. And these are predominantly retirees who aren't moving anyplace, like they're not going to Florida. They're not going to Long Island. They've been there forever. So they're not leaving. But I would say on my block, I would say now it's predominantly all black and 10 years ago it was not like that.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: West Indian or?

JANISE MITCHELL: West Indian, yeah, West Indian. Like my neighbors, now they've been there for maybe eight years. They're Haitian. But Barbara, that was the original homeowner, no, she was Italian. But then she moved out to, after she retired she moved

out to New Jersey. And I know when she was selling the house like every buyer was either you know West Indian or African American. You know I saw very, very few white you know prospective buyers, even inquiring about the house.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Yeah, but those are nice single-family homes out there.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, they're nice.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But it is the location.

JANISE MITCHELL: It's the location.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: It's location to transportation.

JANISE MITCHELL: That's what it is.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: The proximity.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, yeah.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I think that's -- my uncle, I always see my uncle, who I don't know (inaudible), I see my uncle frequently, I'll say time to time, one of my uncles because he lives in Queens but he parks by Utica. You know so if I'm out running in the morning I sometimes I see him or if I'm you know.

JANISE MITCHELL: Right.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So it's always been like that commuter --

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. Right.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Kind of drive.

JANISE MITCHELL: So I think that has a lot to do with why you don't see the yuppies.

Because and I understand people want to be close to transportation.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Right. And still an urban lifestyle, too.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely. And I think the closer you can get to Manhattan, the more desirable the neighborhood becomes.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Mm-hmm. Right. I also think also that the development of restaurants in the neighborhood.

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, absolutely.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: They like being able to walk you know around you know --

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. Because now I'm going down. You know we love Fort Greene. And Washington Avenue, which didn't have anything on it, Underhill.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Underhill.

JANISE MITCHELL: Now it's --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Vanderbilt. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: It's like wow, it's like restaurant, restaurants like --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Franklin Avenue is restaurant row.

JANISE MITCHELL: Absolutely.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And good, chef-driven restaurants, you know, good restaurants. My only complaint is that I walk into a restaurant in Brooklyn and I get a look. Because I'm the only one. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: OK, right.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And I said, "Nope." And I was like, "Nope, this is Brooklyn. You don't get to do that."

JANISE MITCHELL: [00:10:00] Well you know, in Park Slope --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh, Park Slope especially.

JANISE MITCHELL: What used to be the little you know, it was like a little, it was a terrible Chinese restaurant like takeout, now you know they made it into this wine bar and it's very nice, you get your tapas and so Bill and I you know we're in there and I have to say I felt slightly out of place. No one said anything. These were all very young couples. But I almost got the sense of "what are they doing here?" And no one said anything but I said, "Maybe I'm just being paranoid," but I just got this sense like are you guys, you really want to have you know, are you really here? So again, the waiter was very polite and I said you know these are very young couples and I was the only black woman in the entire place, you know and I'm obviously older and there was one younger black woman who was with maybe her date who was white. But besides that you know Bill said, "Gosh, either we're getting really old or we're like really out of place." Because it was just this air like, "Of course, you're welcome to sit but just don't linger."

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Wow.

JANISE MITCHELL: And that's the sense, you know, we have gone back. And each time we go back I get that same sense of like, "OK." And it's like there's certain restaurants that now like in Park Slope is like yeah I mean you go but hmm, do you really belong there? And I never felt that before. Now I do. Now I do. I think if my daughter and son were to walk it, it wouldn't be, I don't think they would get that sense. But when Bill and I walk in it's like again, "Hmm, you really belong here."

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: But if the four of you walked in, what do you think?

JANISE MITCHELL: Huh. That's a good question. A good question. I really don't know how to answer that. We have gone to place, like all four of us. And again you know we're so accustomed to the stairs and you know I always like to say it's because my kids are so dag gone good looking so people you know can't help but staring. I think maybe they're curious about how did they meet. You know --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: You just want to say, "Trolley." Mitchell Angelo. (laughs)
And great lasagna. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. Right, I wonder how they met, you know. The kids are obviously grown and you know wonder what they're like, the experience was. There was one restaurant that's no longer there that all four of us used to go on a regular basis. It was called Two Boots. It was on Third Street and Fourth Avenue so we would go there like at least twice a month. And there you never felt anything, because it was a really family oriented. But even Two Boots, we started to notice a change where it became --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Two Boots Pizza or just Two Boots?

JANISE MITCHELL: It was called Two Boots Pizza.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK, yeah, Two Boots Pizza.

JANISE MITCHELL: And then you know, this is like the last 10 years, the change, like do you really still belong? And I'm not quite sure, I can't pinpoint exactly what's going on. I don't want to say you say -- racial. I don't want to go there. Because a lot of the couples are younger. And they did not, they weren't here in New York during that transitional time period. And so they're in a neighborhood now where in a lot of sense it's not integrated as far as economics, as far as ethnicity. You know it's very -- what's the term? [00:15:00] Everyone looks the same. You know, they're young, white couples with a bit

of affluence. You know, they have, they don't cook at home. So they have this money where they're you know going to these restaurants every single night. And so they're reaping the benefits of people like me who you know had to make the neighborhood safe for them to enjoy. And so I get this sense of like -- you're an intruder on my space. You know, so again, I don't like to think that but sometimes it does make me wonder. Like am I intruding in your nice, safe place?

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Right, right. I had a friend who challenged the idea, because I kind of tend to couch it, in terms of racial identity. You know that's my calling card, (laughs) you know as black women, that's what, you know you walk in, that's something that people observe right away, you know. But I had a friend who actually put it a bit more eloquently about the change in New York and he said, "It's not so much about the racial diversity that bothers me." He said he goes, "But it's the diversity of thought." He goes, "When you would meet somebody," and it's true, I noticed there was a shift in the people that you would meet talking to on the subway. First of all there's a shift of someone that you would casually have a conversation with. You know that there was a shift in that people, it seemed to me, it seemed to him, his observation, he goes like, "You would meet that Wall Street guy," he goes, "and suddenly you would have this deep conversation about like music," and blah-blah-blah, because he was a deejay on the side or he collected this and he did that. And he said, he goes, "That's the dimension I feel is missing," you know. And I'm just wondering, part of it, when he's talking about that it's you know the rich, the white affluence and you know, and they're homogenous, means you know and what else do you do.

JANISE MITCHELL: Right.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: You know, like what, you know for me, that's what I observe.

JANISE MITCHELL: You know, I think that's it in a nutshell. Where you don't have the type of diversity, because you know Park Slope at one point, you know not only was it diverse you know, different ethnic groups and socioeconomic groups, etc., etc., etc. But I think you had people that were just interesting. Though there was a musician, Asian musician, Fred Ho. And he played this fusion of Asian rock/blues/jazz and you know very striking,

because he had this Mohawk. And it was not unusual to see him wearing a dashiki and you would see this man like, “Whoa, Fred, that’s some outfit. Like whoa. Like you’re the only one who could pull that off.” You know, Asian guy with the dashiki and a Mohawk and it works.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Is he still around?

JANISE MITCHELL: You know, I know he was suffering from cancer and it was incurable. So I have not heard anything about his passing. I did see a write up about him, oh, I would like to say it was even last year, they had a big article about him. He talked about his cancer. He goes, “Well you know, cancer is cancer.” Like this is what it’s going to be. It’s going to have to run its course before I die.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Did he do workshops or?

JANISE MITCHELL: He did workshops, but you know, but you had people like that.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Yeah. It’s ringing a bell, because I remember, there was something that he, there was a --

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, very, very striking.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I don’t know if it was here, I don’t know if it was at Brooklyn Historical Society, but it was something --

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. Very striking. But you know you had people like that in Park Slope, so people were interesting and you had a lot of artists. You had you know, obviously your musicians, like I said, the people below me you know, the two bros who played for Eddie Palmieri and they would travel and they would just you know come back and you know tell us about their travels. “We went to France. [00:20:00] We went to Australia.” When we first moved to New York we actually had roommates because we couldn’t afford the rent. So we had friends that came up from Philadelphia and so we had Marianne, who was an opera singer. Then we had Justin, he was an actor. So you know you just had these very interesting people who were not boring. So I think in a lot of sense like a neighborhood, yes it’s very nice. You have the restaurants, you have the boutiques but they’re boring. You know, maybe it’s just me being you know, wishful thinking but I can’t have a conversation. You know you have the mothers with the strollers who are actually the man that you, you know because I hit him in the restaurant,

that will be very demanding to the servers about heating up the bottles, but it has to be just right and if it's not, to redo it.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: (laughs) Like you do that at home.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah but just you know and it's like well, this restaurant's for everyone, like hey I'm pro child, you know don't get me wrong but you know but you have I call it the "stroller moms" who feel this entitlement. You know, "I'm entitled to--"

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I personally think there should be a ban on the size of strollers or something, because they're just getting ridiculous.

JANISE MITCHELL: Ridiculous.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I mean for this little tiny little package it's like what five pounds, they're not keeping it till it's a toddler, but I've got this (inaudible) on the subway and they're like squeezing by --

JANISE MITCHELL: Right.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Standing there.

JANISE MITCHELL: And you know coming back, so now I'm rambling. With the Park Slope thing, when we first moved we were, when we were looking at daycare and daycare centers for Jasmine, we had gone to a couple and Bill and I, we looked at each other, we said, "Absolutely not."

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: What were they doing?

JANISE MITCHELL: It was just mayhem. Where you know there was this philosophy, "let the kids just be free." OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: At home.

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. I'm child friendly. But I'm sorry, your two-year old does not have the right to scream on top of their lungs and take out crayons and write on walls because you feel as though they are just expressing themselves. Mom, no. That's just flat out wrong. And that little girl, you know, tries to crayon on my coat, there's going to be an issue. But no. That's, that's not happening. OK. We're not playing that. So we actually ended up taking Jasmine all the way into the lower east side every day. It was this wonderful, wonderful Montessori school. It was called East River Montessori. And again, ironically a lot of the kids, there was a lot of mixed couples. And so I said, "You

know what? There are kids that actually look like my daughter. You know, like little caramel color kids.” So there were a lot of mixed couples, but it was this great Montessori school on East Broadway. And that was before the lower east side became very chic and fashionable, because again, this is you know the ’80s and this was the heyday of the crack epidemic.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: It was still Alphabet City then, the lower east side.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, absolutely. And you know the walk from the subway to the school was maybe seven long blocks.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So you got off at like Essex or --

JANISE MITCHELL: We got off at East Broadway.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh, East Broadway stop, I’m sorry.

JANISE MITCHELL: And it was literally all the way by the FDR, so you know it was long --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Yeah, that’s a haul.

JANISE MITCHELL: And you know --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And the donut plant isn’t there now. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh no. Oh no. No, no. No, no, no, no, no. No. No. We know the donut plant, oh yes. Yeah. That changed the neighborhood. Big time. But you know walking to you know East River Montessori, you know and that really gave her a very strong you know foundation. The actor Luis Guzman, his mother was also Jasmine’s babysitter.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh! (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: ah. So again, you know I think it’s this like this Puerto Rican you know [00:25:00] connection that we didn’t have in Philadelphia but when we got here, you know, we just kind of fit right in because you know I will credit the Puerto Ricans for really taking me under their wing because between you know the Guzman family and some of the teachers at my school, you know the teacher, teaching assistants who were all Puerto Rican, I mean they really you know, became my surrogate parents, you know in a sense. You know like just really looking out for me. Because you know we’re just a young couple with two young kids and we had no clue what we were doing. You know it’s like, OK well we did well today and tomorrow we’ll figure it out itself so we’ll just

kind of play it by ear but that's kind of what we did. You know. And now the kids you know they're grown and they're out of the house.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I know Jasmine; she went to after what junior high...?

JANISE MITCHELL: She went to boarding school.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK. But even after elementary school she left the neighborhood to go to school.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes she did. OK. Ah, funny story about that. Fabulous, fabulous junior high school. It was on 97th and Amsterdam. That's right. It was called De la Salle Academy and I'll tell you a story about this. I worked at the same school that both my kids went to, 107. And you know just because I'm working there I really wanted my kids to be independent. You know, whatever they do, their grade is their grade. If something happens in the classroom, it has nothing to do with me. That's between them and the teacher. You know I really wanted, I tried to keep it as separate as I could. Excuse me. And before I worked there I was working at a different school. And so when we moved there and Jasmine started attending 107, a lot of the parents and teachers never saw me. They always saw Bill. So one day Bill has to work, he goes, "You know, pick up Jasmine." I'm off that day so I pick her up and they question me. They said, you know I felt like a scene from *Imitation of Life*. You know, where they question Sarah Jane. "You're Sarah Jane's mother?" (laughter) "Yes, I'm Sarah Jane's mother." And so when I went to pick up Jasmine they questioned, they said, "You're Jasmine's mother?" Because they had never seen me before. They had only seen Bill. I said, "Yeah." She goes, "Hi, Mom." They go, "Oh, OK, we just never saw you." But you know I said, "Well, now you see me." You know so. "Let me take my child home." But to get back to 107, how did Jasmine end up at the school she went to. And so she was always a very you know academically you know inquisitive, you know, child. And so we're looking at junior high schools and you know and I was pretty much content, you know neighborhood junior high school was very good. But let's just see what else is out there. And that's when she went to the interview at St. Ann's and with the packer, but you know we're just keeping our options open. So I'm in the teacher's lunchroom and I'm about to put my lunch tray in the trash and I see these fliers about this open house. I'm

like what is this? And there's food on it. And it's about this school, or they're having an open house and they're having screening tests, you know about academically you know academically rigorous curriculum for bright, motivated kids. And I'm saying, "Why is this in a trash can?" And I go to the guidance counselor and I said, "I happened to find this in the trash can. What is this?" I said, "Why wasn't this information given?" And she said, "Well, I don't think we had any kids at this school that will qualify." And I said, "Excuse me?" I said, "What about my daughter?" And you know she goes, "Who's your daughter?" I said, "Jasmine." "Jasmine is your daughter?" "Yes. Jasmine Mitchell, that's my daughter." "Well, yes, yes, yes. You know what? I should have thought about Jasmine. You know, well you know, since you already have it, [00:30:00] I think maybe she should take the test."

It was really a matter of luck and fate that I was eating lunch at that particular time and I was throwing my tray into the trash can that I found out about this wonderful, wonderful school, where the information was not even given to, not teachers nor parents.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Wow.

JANISE MITCHELL: Because the guidance counselor felt you know, no one in the school would be interested. No one would qualify, because the school's in Manhattan. Well, we go for the open house. And 97th and Amsterdam and we were still living in Park Slope and I'm like oh my gosh. And it was such an amazing experience, where you saw kids that actually loved school. They wanted to be there. Teachers that love teaching. Like you could just see like this, like they couldn't wait to wake up in the morning so they could teach and the kids like, "I can't wait to like what are we going to learn today?," like just this and really fabulous, fabulous you know and learning community and that's what it really was, it was a learning community. And so she got accepted there. And it was like OK. Now how are we going to get her there? So I said, "Well, you know what? You have to see opportunities because this will not come again. I have to see this opportunity for what it is." And so we practiced a couple times that summer taking the subway. "Jasmine, this is how we do this. We're going to take the F to the A. You get off at Columbus Circle. Then you take 1, get off at 96th Street and Broadway. Walk one block

to De la Salle.” Now we knew part of the way because when she was younger she took dance out, dance classes at Ballet Hispanico. So that was you know the same you know every Saturday get up, let’s go to dance. So it was the F to the A to the 1. So she knew the way but it’s very different when you’re sending your child out in the subway by themselves. And I remember my Portuguese neighbor, Mrs. Lugo. She said, “Don’t worry.” She said, “She’ll be fine.” She said, “God takes care of fools and babies. Got to let her go.” I said, OK, OK, OK. She was fine. You know first day, you know I think she got turned around. But then after that first couple days she was fine. She started telling me shortcuts. “Oh Mom, I can take the F to 14th Street. And the from 14th Street I can take the 1, it’s a more direct route. I don’t have to take --” I went, “Oh, OK.” You figure it out. You figure it out. But you know it’s just a wonderful learning you know community so, and that just opened up a lot of doors. You know, for her. And then from there when she went to boarding school --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: She went to Andover.

JANISE MITCHELL: She went to Andover, which was, you know it was a pressure cooker. But you know I thought at De la Salle they really prepared her. And she did very well at Andover. And from there she went to Williams, so when we were looking at schools for my son, he kind of was resigned, “Well, I guess it’s what we do in this family. Everyone goes away to school.” So when he went to boarding school he went to junior boarding school, because he left and he was in eighth grade. So he was like even younger than Jasmine. It was like, “OK, well, I guess that’s what we do in this family. Everyone, we don’t stay home. We leave.”

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Where did he go?

JANISE MITCHELL: He went to a junior boarding school. It was an all-boys school called Cardigan Mountain School, and that was way up in New Hampshire.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh my goodness.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yes. It’s like a good six hours. It’s maybe 40 minutes outside Dartmouth. So it was like way you know, 91 straight up. And then from there he got a little bit closer to home. He went to Salisbury, Salisbury School, which is in Salisbury, Connecticut. So that was a little bit closer. And I think just being away gave him this really strong sense

of being independent, where you have to figure things out on your own, because there's no Mommy and [00:35:00] Daddy and you have to navigate. You know, you have a strong support system with your, you know your teachers and your friends, but a lot of this navigation, you know you have to figure it out.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: OK, yeah.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, but they both did well. You know.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: It's kind of the reverse. Because you were raised, you know you stayed home till you were married. (laughs)

JANISE MITCHELL: Because that's what people did. Like you know you stayed in your daddy's house until you, you know either went to school or you got married. And so you know it's funny you bring that up because I said, "My goodness. I've only been in two homes. Either with my father or with my husband." There hasn't been like a time period where I had my own apartment. It was always, I've always been with a family. I've never been by myself. So which is totally different from how my children are being raised, totally different. You know it's like, they've been on their own, you know in a sense you know since eighth grade, where you know I've always have been with a family unit, either you know my parents and siblings, my husband and my family. There's never been like this, nope, never had that.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Wow, it's interesting.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah. I want to know what that's like. I can't relate to that. (laughs)

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: (laughs) That's my life. So unfortunately we only have until 5:00 and Sadie just poked her head in.

JANISE MITCHELL: OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So I feel like we've scratched the surface a little bit.

JANISE MITCHELL: I know.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: If you are willing, I would love to meet again.

JANISE MITCHELL: OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: We'll do the same phone tag, that's fine.

JANISE MITCHELL: I mean, this flew by.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Well, you have wonderful stories. Thank you so much.

JANISE MITCHELL: Yeah, I mean this was like, it was like I've known you my whole life. I mean, you've made me feel so comfortable.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Well, thank you. I'm enjoying listening. I love listening. Hence, why --

JANISE MITCHELL: And I love telling stories, because it's what I do at school because you know I teach history and I say, "History is a story." I said, "You're telling a story." So when we do like the Civil Rights and Jim Crow, I talk about my parents and I go you know, "When my parents were growing up --"

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Professor at Yale just came out with the book, I was carrying it around with me. No, I brought my Kindle instead. Jim Crow, thought [spooly] I'll tell you about it, but it's interesting. It was about the idea of how Jim Crow was like growing up and you know in contemporary America and how the ideas of Jim Crow in like the past, and he does it through memory, family memory, of memory and stuff. Do you know who I'm talking about?

JANISE MITCHELL: I know, I know --

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: I'm forgetting his name, but --

JANISE MITCHELL: Right. And that would be a whole different conversation.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: Oh, I'm just suggesting the book. But yeah, it's a whole different, but it's interesting because a lot of what you actually touched on about growing up in Philadelphia and the way you comported yourself within your family, especially in the black middle class family, very much touched up you know that kind of sensibility. But we're going to stop.

JANISE MITCHELL: OK.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: So we're ending this interview. We're going to say thank you very much to Mrs. Mitchell.

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, thank you.

JEANMARIE THEOBALDS: And we will schedule another interview.

JANISE MITCHELL: Oh, this was fun.

END OF AUDIO FILE

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