

1403

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Saturday, January 26, 2008

Subject: Interview with Cyndi

Location: her house, 216 W. 122<sup>nd</sup> Street, parlor

Time: 11:35am to 1:30 pm

I've been trying to arrange an interview with Cyndi for months, and I thought she wasn't that interested. She warned me that she doesn't have as much time available as Haja. But we ended up speaking for nearly 2 hours. Recording lasts for 1 hr 29 min 53sec.

105P

I called her at 11:05am, as we arranged, and she tells me to come in about half an hour.

84P

On the way to her house there are two men talking under the scaffolding on the west side of Frederick Douglass between 121<sup>st</sup> and 122<sup>nd</sup>. One says to the other, "I was fuckin' mad as a motherfucker!" After I cross to the east side of the street, a woman comes out of a store, greeting two men outside. One of the men says something to her and she assures him that she has cigarettes. On 122<sup>nd</sup> street two men are walking east, not together.

I ring the bottom doorbell three times, as instructed. I don't hear a bell. She opens the front door a few minutes later, apologizing, and I tell her I heard a dog barking, so I assumed somebody was coming. She is wearing faded blue jeans, an old red sweatshirt turned inside-out, and fleece socks with winterish patterns in gray, blue, red, yellow, green, and so on. Her curly brown hair is loose. She asks me to close the second door. As I take off my coat and set it on the bench I tell her that if she needs to get up [to instruct her cleaning guy] I don't mind. She tells me she won't need to. We sit in the parlor.

The first floor has a small front room that I don't get a good look at, the parlor, and another much larger room in the back behind closed double doors. In the parlor a staircase leads upstairs and a staircase leads down to the basement. On that side, there is a park bench, the wooden kind with metal under the armrests, and two wicker chairs on either side. Cyndi and I sit in two rattan chairs on the west side of the room. The bench and four chairs are covered in cushions and pads. Between Cyndi's chair and mine there is a small floor lamp with a florescent bulb and a lovely dresser-type piece of furniture with drawers and a roll-top. Behind her chair on the west wall a low bookshelf is filled with record albums. The south wall is taken up with the double doors. The north side opens into the front room and the hallway.

We chat about the house. She tells me oil is burning, gesturing at a small lamp that looks like a potpourri burner, because the sewer backed up into the basement and they're trying to cover up the smell. [I hardly notice it, but I'm not sensitive to smells.] I say something about bed-and-breakfast and she says they're not doing it anymore. They have a couple of tenants, it could have been them, it could have been us. [Can't remember: tenants are academics?]

6P

169P

We chat about Rukaye and Sandra. I find out that Sandra has downplayed her role in the garden, since Cyndi says Sandra was the one who really dedicated a lot of time.

170P

408

were very good workers. And Haja worked with *several* teams. Because I could only work with them—before I worked for the Board of Ed,

Cyndi would go to work at night, a pastry chef at that point, and health food  
Go to work between 4 and 6pm, stay until sometime in the morning  
Go to bed, get up at 8 when the kids came

So that was the way we got started  
They designed the garden originally,  
Their designs had a peace sign made out of rocks in the center  
And they were kids of the '80s  
And I thought that was kind of cool, because the '80s was really the "Me" generation,  
And the peace sign was more '60s and '70s  
But they wanted a peace sign in the middle  
And the front they wrote out of rocks,  
"Rock garden," in front of a makeshift fence  
We got a fence from Green Thumb but we never did get a, any gate  
[noise from cleaner]  
And the garden actually extended, you probably know,  
To you know, beyond where the two new buildings are now  
And they wrote in rocks, Make love not war

And with the little bit of money that we had gotten from the World Service Committee,  
Which I was a part, at the Harlem YMCA on 135<sup>th</sup> street, they donated \$100 to us,  
So we bought some seeds, we were able to put on a big block party,  
And we bought some paint, and we painted rocks white  
Donation of marigolds, some annuals, from the New York Botanical gardens in the  
Bronx  
And Bill Moore, my landlord, went to get them

618

End of the summer when we were ready to plant  
Some vegetables  
Late at the time, July [to plant]  
Seedlings, all they had left  
All around the rocks marigolds, maybe impatiens  
The kids said, everybody on the block has to help us plant  
Everybody sits on their stoop, you know a hot summer,  
They hadn't helped pretty much  
But a few of the guys made a bench,  
A really sturdy bench that was later eaten up by a bulldozer  
And so they just went,  
Everybody has to plant at least one flower,  
And some people planted two [Haja comes in, exchange greetings, goes up stairs]

Also from Green Thumb: grape vines [music, don't know from where], apple tree, cherry tree

7 7409

Tree had 5 apples on it, everybody, the whole entire block was watching  
Didn't have a gate, anybody could go back there  
We just trusted everybody  
*Almost* ripe, went out there one day and the apples were gone  
[clanking radiator]

Cherry tree was doing well, flourishing  
One day completely broken off, kids, vandals  
Maybe not from the block  
Mr. Wilson and I stood it up, rough wood still green,  
Stood it up with a broomstick, tied some wire around it, and it flourished  
Grew into being a 40 foot tree  
It was bulldozed, eventually  
When that time came, which was very sad, I insisted on saving [some] of the wood  
Friend of ours Louie, now lives uptown with his wife and little boy,  
Lived at 222, he's a carpenter, he carves things, makes things out of wood  
Out of one piece of the cherry tree where you could see the scar  
I always called it the miracle cherry tree,  
I'd always point it out to kids, how it healed itself, and we also can heal ourselves  
Like the cherry tree  
And he made a little box which I have over here actually  
[she goes to show me a round box, with a lid]  
So we have that  
We actually have more of the cherry tree  
Decide what to do with it  
Install some of it, somebody said they would rot  
To put them up [to make a hanging garden]

619

604

Multimedia company, poetry readings, breakdancing on the Staten Island ferry

[As we talk a heavysset cat comes and checks me out, then opens the double doors to the back room. It is spacious and filled with natural light. Cyndi calls the cat out of the room and tells me he will chew up their plants.]

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Remaining headlines written on Wednesday, January 30, 2008, from notes, not listening to recording

Masters of Fine Arts  
Job with Board of Education  
Project Harmony  
Haja planted all the trees, many of them saplings from Mr. Wilson's garden  
He'd work at night, we'd work in the garden during the day  
Other end, we had *all* that space, vegetables  
[need to ask: Coventry garden?]

1410

A good friend of ours, Bernadette Cozert [find donations]  
Call our friend Arthur who had a truck  
Hydrangeas  
People would come by, how much are you selling it for, giveaways  
As the community got more and more involved  
Giulani  
Didn't become partially permanent until Spitzer agreement  
A huge hole  
Oil tank  
We called it Giuliani's rathole [not sure, writing inaudible]  
The slaughter of all the gardens  
Certainly the Bloomberg administration is kinder, kind of by default

(cat goes downstairs, presumably to basement)  
1989 grants, one of first  
Nonprofit, not NYCares, We Care NY  
They gave out a lot of supplies to community groups.  
All about cleaning up the city, [gave out] garbage bags, gloves, block award, \$1000  
award  
At the same time Project Harmony was developing as a year-round [project]  
Haja grew some great tomatoes, sprouts, beans  
Before the trees really shaded it  
Now it's known as a garden for trees

Hanging tomatoes  
I'm thinking of getting a super tall aluminum ? or ladder and somehow attaching pots  
Tomatoes, basil  
Gourds need a lot of sunlight

Some talk now that this little lot used for parking will be sold [next to Wilson garden]  
Will have to deal with it  
3 or 4 feet belong to the gardens  
[Owner] owns a few houses, they lived here longest

Adverse possession, not likely to win [if go to court]  
City is real estate driven

[I ask about the Doers and Urban Griots, which Haja mentioned]  
Working in the shelter system and one of my favorite jobs  
They write plays  
GEDs, life skills  
Chorus  
Basically a life skills program  
But Board of Ed has changed  
Probably wouldn't consider that education these days  
What's missing now is a good life skills program

411

Set goals, skills, problem-solving  
Not equipped  
Sign up for class, wouldn't show up  
Now making numbers work  
Really a lot missing

Adults hooking them up with necessary programs and skills  
How to deal better with life  
Get GED  
Our superintendent and her associates  
They have to answer to a hard business line  
Really is, all about getting the numbers

620

[I ask for clarification]  
Pretest  
We do a preassessment throughout  
Then post test  
That's for any class: carpentry, computer  
For reading that makes sense  
Carpentry isn't all hands-on

92

Our program is in the Bronx  
ESL, speaking test  
Talking about going to a system  
We give them a standard orientation

The hope is that the post test shows gain  
To show gain not just 1 point  
But up a whole level  
e.g. level 0-1.9 points  
level 6 11.0-12.9 points

we get money If she show gain  
I'm almost for it  
Get pre and post test throughout the year and then do our own assessments

Teaching to the test  
Whether we retain the students to do the post test

People miss three days and are afraid to come back  
Welfare is another *huge* part of this  
Most caseworkers don't know the rules  
Can go to school [and count this as] work assignment  
Everyone  
30 hours  
We can sometimes provide them with 30 hours of study

They basically designed the program

1 big floor of a big armory  
Gung ho  
Put them on the wall

Sense of autonomy  
Bureaucratic  
1970s, late 60s  
We are the largest adult education program in the US  
several thousand students

She was a dynamo  
She wasn't loved by everybody  
Helen Wineberg  
Reserved in many ways  
Didn't ask to be seen  
120<sup>th</sup> st. adult education center  
Initially worked part-time  
Quit my job at the restaurant  
[didn't hear from Board of Ed]  
Had to start another [job]  
Managing a deli on the east side  
Chancellor Green, a black man  
She said, writ Chancellor Green [a letter inquiring about job status]  
A lot of people didn't appreciate [that she put it in writing]  
Within a week, put in the office for staff development  
Interview

You NEVER write the chancellor  
I never dealt with people like this before  
I just had a supervisor rant at me  
[put something in writing]  
It really affected me  
Her sort of eating my brain like that  
She's like totally bureaucratized  
Just the fact she came in like that

At the time I was just so amused by that

The gardens  
The doors  
Grants from ? to do soaps, and ?, economic development  
One of our people  
Don't just be doing what I want to be doing  
Where do you want to take this

414

Let it carry you  
Kitchen Table: reorganizing  
Trying to focus on homeschooling, or families eating together  
Food prep, food preservation, self-sufficiency

L: How does that  
Church 127<sup>th</sup> Street  
Neighborhood  
Street  
10-12 people changing  
People help as they have time  
That's what we are  
Set something concrete not just for ourselves but for the community

527

Our garden has really drawn in people  
Different people from the community  
Concert [even if they visit just once]  
That's what they write about [letters]  
Focus on the garden that they feel a part of something

Last week or 2 weeks ago  
Cat Project [spaying]  
[A neighbor] leaving tins of food  
[that's not what the Cat Project does, but she wanted to feel involved]  
As many ways that you can get people involved in ways that nurture their skills and  
proclivities is good  
Essentially you want people to feel good  
Yvette, the chief organizer of everything in the garden [cat project]

Extended chronology on [projectharmonynyc.org](http://projectharmonynyc.org)