

Alberto Cappas Interviewed by Barry Goldenberg
November 19, 2016, New York, NY

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Barry Goldenberg: Alright, so I will just go ahead and start. So we're here in New York City, and I'm Barry Goldenberg. I'm interviewing Alberto Cappas. He's a Harlem Prep graduate, and we're here in New York City. It's November 19th, and I'm super excited to hear your story, and I just kind of wanted to - tell me about yourself: where were you born, where you grew up, about your early educational experiences. That's what I'd love to learn about first.

Alberto Cappas: I was born in Puerto Rico in 1946. I forgot what age I came - I was a little kid when I came here, and I turned to the public school system here in New York City. I graduate from Louis D. Brandeis High School, which is formerly known as the High School of Commerce. Graduated with a general diploma, through basically social promotion. When I graduated from high school, I really had no concept or idea about college, at all. I grew up in a very diverse area, there was a lot of blacks, a few whites, and a lot of Puerto Ricans, and I don't know how my black colleagues found out about Harlem Prep, but they were the ones that went to Harlem Prep, they were accepted to Harlem Prep, came back and talked to me about Harlem Prep. It sounded very interesting, so I went and applied, got accepted. Basically, Harlem Prep was designed for black students, rather than whites or Puerto Ricans. I guess when we started applying, then they couldn't reject us because they were talking about discrimination and things like that, so they couldn't do the same thing, you know, so I guess me and another Puerto Rican girl were the only two Puerto Ricans at that time, in '67.

BG: Yeah, I've been curious to ask you about that.

AC: Yeah, then after I was there graduated, I had a friend, Frank Berger interested in applying. He didn't want to - was very hesitant because

there were no whites in the school, and I told him, "Stop that man, you've got nothing to lose, just apply."

BG: Yeah, why not?

AC: And he applied and he was accepted. Actually, he was used as a - what do you call it - a poster boy. He was the only white kid in Harlem Prep, so they used him to get money - not in a negative sense, they took advantage of the fact that they had a white kid in Harlem Prep, so they used him as a poster boy to go after grants and all of that, basically a black school, most of the instructors were black, the curriculum was basically black - there was nothing about Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans, but just the environment and just the idea of educational discussion and history and what not kind of inspired me, you know, so it gave me the opportunity to go on, and just based on my experience at Harlem Prep, I took an interest in Puerto Rican studies, looking for who I was [light laughter], really.

BG: Of course, that's why we're here, that's what we do.

AC: I was a young person, so I really had no conception of relevance or whatever - education, history. So, I was accepted at the University of Buffalo, there were four other colleagues that were accepted along with me, because I developed a relationship with some of the black students, and we went to University of Buffalo, four of us - five of us all together.

BG: Okay. These were Harlem Prep students?

AC: We were all from Harlem Prep.

BG: Okay, wow.

AC: Donald Anglin, Jeremiah Hussan, his name was Mary Parsons but when we went to UB, he got politicized, he changed his name to Jeremy Hassan, he started wearing that cheeky, that whole thing [light laughter]. Then there was - I forget, this other guy - Freddo Crossman,

he was Panama Indian. Who else? James Collins - John Collins, he also graduated from...

BG: These are all names I can look up in there.

AC: Yeah. Well, John Collins passed away. He stayed at the University - he stayed in Buffalo, and the University hired him as a counselor to counsel black students, but he passed away, I would say almost ten years ago.

BG: Oh, wow.

AC: Yeah. Jeremiah Hussan passed away in Buffalo. Donald Anglin, I have no idea what happened to him - he was actually the smart one who got me into Harlem Prep. He was like a middle class black in our neighborhood, was very smart, but I guess the bad influence and the drugs eventually got to him, because he started hanging out with the wrong people in Buffalo.

BG: Yeah, I know that.

AC: So, he just disappeared, came back to New York City, from what I hear, he got too much involved with drugs, and had to leave New York City because they were after him, and the last thing I know, he was in Chicago. I don't know what happened. Getting back to the positives of Harlem Prep, the amazing thing is that a lot of the students - you might want to research this - a lot of the students I graduated with from Harlem Prep who made it, they became really student activists in the universities, and many of them were responsible for creating black student unions, and really activating...

BG: Yeah, because that was really the rise of black studies at colleges.

AC: Yeah, so Harlem Prep really indirectly, or by accident - it really created revolutionaries [light laughter].

BG: Yeah, which is awesome.

AC: Because I had no idea of assuming leadership to do things, but when I went to university it became natural, and I was the founder of the Puerto Rican Student Association at the University, I was also very influential in getting the University to develop a Puerto Rican Studies department, and we also went after the Medical School and the Law School to admit Puerto Ricans and blacks into the school. Jeremiah was active in that, I was, Donald Anglin - we all played a part in that, and the same, similar thing happened in other colleges, universities, with Harlem Prep students.

BG: Yeah, that's awesome. I wanted to ask you some questions about that.

AC: Go right ahead.

BG: I just wanted, so I get it down - so how did you find out about Harlem Prep? How did you decide to go, and how did you find out about it? I'm kind of curious.

AC: Well, again, Donald Anglin was the first one - I don't know how he found out, but Donald Anglin was the smart one in the neighborhood, and he got accepted, so he reached out to the boys in the neighborhood.

BG: Yeah, and that was kind of it?

AC: And that was how I ended up going to Harlem Prep. Actually, I also got drafted to serve, and Harlem Prep use their political contacts and stop the draft. Probably for other students too, because it was going into '60, the Vietnam War was going on.

BG: Yeah, of course.

AC: And I was lined up...

BG: It saved your life more than anything.

AC: It did, yeah.

- BG:** So, was that the fall of '67 - it started in the fall of '67 in the armory. Were you in the armory?
- AC:** Yes, the state armory.
- BG:** So you were the first year - you started in the fall of '67.
- AC:** There were I think, 66 students - I'm not sure, and we started at the state armory, yeah, and from there we went to a supermarket on 136th street.
- BG:** By the spring, yeah. What was the armory like? Because I haven't met anybody who was there at the armory.
- AC:** To be honest with you, I don't remember. I don't remember a lot of things, to be honest with you, because I had a seizure back in - three years ago.
- BG:** Oh my goodness, I'm sorry to hear that.
- AC:** And - that's okay, if I take my medication. I lost 40 percent of my memory - I'm trying to get it back. So, I got most of it back, but there's a lot of things I don't remember. But the state armory, it was comfortable, they fixed it up to a point that it was educational - it was interesting.
- BG:** Since it was the start - I mean I've interviewed some of the folks later on that the school was kind of like - it was running really well. You were there at the beginning - did things seem organized or disorganized, I mean, did Ed Carpenter...
- AC:** It was organized because it was a small school, and they were able to handle it. The instructors were great and they were really able to spend one-on-one with the students. If I had a lot of questions, I would have one of the instructors or professors just sit down and a really talk to me. So, that was the good part. There were only 65 students.
- BG:** Yeah, so they gave you a lot of attention.

- AC:** A lot of attention and one-on-one.
- BG:** Do you have any specific memories of some of the teachers or classes that you enjoyed?
- AC:** The one I really developed a relationship with was Dr. Ben - Jochannon.
- BG:** Yeah, absolutely.
- AC:** He passed away recently. Yeah, and he was fascinating because he also knew a lot about Latino history, Puerto Rican history, and he also spoke Spanish.
- BG:** Oh, I didn't know that! Everything talked about, you know, African history, and Egyptian, but I didn't know that.
- AC:** Yeah, he talked about it, but predominantly his thing was black culture, but he also had that experience with Latin American culture.
- BG:** What made his teaching so effective? Was it the one-on-one, or what did you remember?
- AC:** I enjoyed the one-on-one, but also all the professors, just the fact that I had an opportunity to hear professors who were right there, so close. It was very different than high school. High school was basically information, not education.
- BG:** How did it compare to Brandeis?
- AC:** I'm saying Brandeis was just social promotion - it was like you sit there, and you listen to the information, and you either take the information, and when you graduate, you're graduating with information. Harlem Prep, there was a lot of concepts. They talked about history, they talked about things that happened, they gave you a real sense of what politics said about, what history is all about, and you really begin to grow intellectually, philosophically, conceptually - you start putting that all together.

- BG [10:00]:** That's powerful.
- AC:** Yeah. At an early age, I started connecting all that. Brandeis - public schools - didn't give me that, didn't give you that at all. So, the fact that I'm writing now an, publishable for your book, I attribute that to the roots of Harlem Prep.
- BG:** I heard that a lot of people - just the inspiration of finding yourself and...
- AC:** I wish I remembered the name - there's another instructor who taught math, and he was fascinating. I never got into math, but him as an instructor...
- BG:** I'm a writer, too. I'm a humanities person, too.
- AC:** Okay, yeah, but he was excellent. He was good. There were a few students that couldn't get into math, but because of him they really got into it. I never got into it, I was kind of always afraid of math.
- BG:** Yeah, you and me both [light laughter].
- AC:** Yeah, I know that. That's the strong weakness I have. Ed Carpenter, he was very humane, often gave you one-on-one, you had another person, Ruth, I think Ruth.
- BG:** Was it one of the nuns? Mother Ruth?
- AC:** Mother Ruth, yeah.
- BG:** She was one of the nuns, right?
- AC:** Yeah, I still think about her. I mean, she was really great, yeah. Really great. And then another thing that people...
- BG:** Yeah, this is wonderful.
- AC:** ...this is an anecdote too, also students, during that time there was a lot of pledges against people that were gay, you know, and there was one gay instructor...

BG: Really?

AC: Yeah, and people started developing a relationship and realized they were all human beings, but before that, I mean in neighborhoods, you know, you'd walk around, they'd goof you, you know, it was sad, it was sad being gay at that time, but also Harlem Prep gave us an appreciation and understanding what it meant to be gay, so we started developing that respect, so that was helpful. I don't think we'd get that outside of Harlem Prep.

BG: Yeah, and as you mentioned, being the - were you the only Puerto Rican student?

AC: Huh?

BG: Were you the only Puerto Rican student?

AC: I think I was the only Puerto Rican student.

BG: And how were you received by the other students, the teachers?

AC: I was seen well, because a lot of the black students that were there also grew up in an area that was mixed black and Puerto Rican. Blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York City, in most areas, have always gotten along.

BG: Yeah, East Harlem and...

AC: Yeah, and I was in Upper Harlem - Upper West Side, the area they call "Manhattan Valley." I grew up in 108th Street and Columbus Avenue, and I grew up with a lot of blacks - like I said, they were the ones that got me into Harlem Prep. If it wasn't for them, I'd still be in the streets looking for work, because I was very conditioned to graduate and go to work. I was never going to graduate and go to college.

BG: Harlem Prep did that?

AC: Yeah, and they still do [in reference to high schools today]. I mean, you look today, and the whole mentality - you have to go to school to

get a job - and that's not true. You go to school to open the world, to open the key to knowledge, meet people, you know, that's an education, but in the process, you have a career and you find a job. But, you don't go to school to get a job.

BG: I work with high school students today, and it's just the condition of the schools - only to get a job. What about developing empathy, what about being critical media readers, right? These are different skills.

AC: Yeah, the way we approach it with minorities - if you scare them, they're not interested. "I can get a job. I don't have to go to school to get a job."

BG: How was it - did you notice any changes in the school over the course of a year? I mean, between the fall and the spring?

AC: Not really, because I left for Buffalo, and like I said, when I graduated - I stayed in Buffalo until 1983.

BG: Okay, and you did Harlem Prep in the winter of 1967? Or you graduated in 1968?

AC: In the winter.

BG: So you graduated in '67.

AC: In '67 I graduated.

BG: Okay, so only a semester, a couple of months you were...

AC: Right, right. I left - I came back to New York City in 1983.

BG: Okay.

AC: I stayed until - three years ago I went back to Buffalo, and basically because when I had my seizure, my daughters came back to New York City and said, "Okay Pop, you're going back to Buffalo." So, I went back to Buffalo. I mean, I'm gradually working my way back to New York City. There's nothing like New York City. When I was here, I

did a lot of poetry readings, was very active, involved. I'd like to continue that in New York City.

BG: Yeah, it's a good place to do it. I've been fortunate - I'm not from here, but just meeting people and experiencing the city, has been such a humbling, humane experience.

AC [15:00]: Yeah, New York City has a lot to offer, if you utilize it and take advantage of it. It can also swallow you.

BG: Yeah. That's for sure. I happened to read in - I actually have it - in Hussein's book, that you were part of a student newspaper at Harlem Prep. Do you remember anything about that?

AC: Yeah, it was called "Forty Acres and a Mule," and I was one of the editors - I was one of the leading organizers of that.

BG: Yeah, I'm curious about that, because I haven't read anything about activities, clubs, any of those kinds of things.

AC: Well, "Forty Acres and a Mule," I was very active in it because a lot of the students were not writers - they were not interested in writing, so it basically included a lot of poetry. It didn't include a lot of articles, it was basically creative writing.

BG: Was it mostly student contributors?

AC: Yeah, they're students - student contributors, and it was put together - I think Ruth had a lot to do with it, Mother Ruth. She used that as a way to get the students to improve their thinking, their writing, you know, and she was trying to get people to become writers [light laughter], that kind of thing. I benefitted because I got some of my poetry published there - it was good for my ego, you know?

BG: Of course!

AC: "Wow, I'm published!" [laughter]

BG: You have to start somewhere, you know.

- AC:** Yeah. When we graduated - I forgot where the graduation was held - a lot of these students received awards, and I got an award for creative writing - it's a big thing for me, it's like "wow!"
- BG:** Yeah, of course.
- AC:** But I don't think the publication lasted too long, you know. I think after I graduated, it just faded away.
- BG:** Yeah, because I haven't come across that in any of my other research so far, and I was kind of curious about that.
- AC:** Yeah, I have to look in my archives.
- BG:** Do you have a copy?
- AC:** I might have a copy, I don't know.
- BG:** I mean, I'd love to see it if you do.
- AC:** Yeah, if I do, I'll make a copy.
- BG:** Oh, I'd be so grateful.
- AC:** I'll email it to you.
- BG:** Yeah, and when I go back I'll look at - I mean, I'm trying to think if I have...
- AC:** Do you have the logo?
- BG:** I have seen the logo, yeah.
- AC:** Okay, I have the official one.
- BG:** Yeah, but a lot of stuff obviously I don't have, but I do want to kind of see what folks have, because it's a long time - some people keep things, some people don't - but I've been able to come across some commencement programs, some graduation programs, stuff like that. I'm not sure if I have the '67 one. I don't physically have it, but they're in the archives, I have pictures of it.
- AC:** Okay.

BG: Yeah, it's so fascinating. Did you stay in touch with the school after you graduated?

AC: Not really, no, not so much. I stayed in touch with students, we developed relationships, but not with the school itself, no. No, I don't think so.

BG: Yeah.

AC: I know years later, the politics of it, I was told Harlem Prep was so successful, and like I said, it was graduated students who went to university and confronting administration that they started to find reasons to get rid of Harlem Prep.

BG: That was one of my questions - for such - it grew so much, significantly.

AC: Yeah, it had individual instructors that were great, but I don't think the school was properly accredited, and that's what they used against the school.

BG: Yeah, they had a provisional charter – it wasn't [permanent]...

AC: Right, and then they made it part of the school system, and that killed it.

BG: And once that happened it seemed to go down, yeah.

AC: Yeah, it went back to information, that's what happened.

BG: Yeah, because all of the special parts of it that made it special - the non-credential teachers...

AC: Right, that was destroyed.

BG: Yeah, that's what I hear too.

AC: One of the mistakes Harlem Prep made - it never reached out to the graduates to come back and serve as role models. See, we graduated, and we left. We never came back. And I would visit New York.

BG: But never Harlem Prep.

AC: Never Harlem Prep, and they should have taken that responsibility and reached out. I think if they reached out, we would have come back, you know.

BG: Yeah.

AC: And I'm thinking about that in hindsight, you know.

BG: Sure, of course, it's tough in the moment.

AC: Because we were young, too, so...

BG: And especially when you were there, the school was so new, and I'm sure they were trying to figure out how this all works.

AC: Exactly.

BG: So did you - you had no involvement with the Urban League, then? You didn't come through the street academy?

AC: No, no one was...

BG: It was through your friends?

AC: No, now that you say that, I did have some - we were recruited through the street academy, and then from there we went to Harlem Prep.

BG: Oh, okay.

AC: I'm glad you mentioned that, I completely forgot.

BG: Yeah, no, because in the early years there was...

AC: Yeah, there was street academy, that's right. No, I went to a street academy. Yeah, I was there, for about three months, four months at the street academy.

BG: After Brandeis?

AC: Yeah. After Brandeis, yeah.

[20:00] So when you get recruited, you don't go straight to Harlem, you go to the street academy. But I don't remember the details, but I know I did go to a street academy.

BG: Do you remember if it was a storefront school, or it was like a...?

AC: It was storefront.

BG: It was storefront.

AC: It was storefront, yeah.

BG: Then, you went to Harlem Prep after?

AC: Then I went to Harlem Prep after.

BG: Okay.

AC: We had speakers who would come to speak to us, try to inspire us, prepare us for Harlem Prep, you know.

BG: And these street recruiters just kind of went on the street trying to find students? Is that kind of how...?

AC: Well that's the way - Donald Anglin, he found me, Donald, how they found him, I don't know. I don't know if they advertised through the school or not.

BG: Sure.

AC: But if they did, like I said, it was by accident that I went and that Frank went, because they were basically designed for the black community. It wasn't designed for Puerto Ricans or whites, you know.

BG: Yeah, that's interesting, because I'm always interested in how A., how people initially got involved, and then B., because the street academy program eventually, or the New York Urban League separated from Harlem Prep later on, and it seemed that people kind of went kind of directly there way back in the '70s, but initially it was through the Urban League.

AC: Right. The Urban League basically were there to support the development of Harlem Prep, but I don't think the Urban League was that committed during the long run, it was political. They took from their own priorities.

BG: Yeah. Do you remember, you know, you said, at Harlem Prep specifically, speakers coming - people in the community? Later, in the '70s, there's a lot of activists and musicians and that kind of celebrity buzz around the school.

AC: No, that one no, it was an enclosed kind of group, we didn't have that many speakers come from the outside.

BG: Which is different than later in the years when it grew a lot, and you had all these...

AC: Yeah, this was a very enclosed close-knit group, and the professors basically provided everything. We didn't have any speakers, no.

BG: That's interesting to hear, yeah, which makes sense. Yeah, because, yeah, later on you had - there were all of these people that came. What about - do you remember any interest - the relation with the community? Were parents involved? Were there other community groups at Harlem Prep?

AC: No, no, a lot of the students came from poor families, single families, and parents were not really interested, probably didn't even know what Harlem Prep was. I came from a large family - there were eight of us, and even my brothers and sisters didn't care. No, my mother had no idea - it was the same with other students. So, no, there was no parent relationship with Harlem Prep. There was basically - the students had to be well disciplined in the - to really attend, and they had to do that on their own, because no one was pushing them.

BG: Right, they had to really want to be there.

AC: Yeah, want to be there. Exactly.

- BG:** Was there - there was no admission test or anything like that, was there?
- AC:** No, no admissions, they took care of everything - even the books, everything. We didn't have to look for any of that, they took care.
- BG:** You didn't have to do testing to get into the school or anything?
- AC:** No, no. Socially it was to have get togethers, you know. My brother was more interested in the social aspect of partying and getting to know, because my brother's a year younger than I am, and I took him once to a party, and he developed a relationship with some of the students, so he always went to the party. But he didn't care about the academics, you know, that was the general relationship with everyone.
- BG:** Yeah, yeah. That's interesting. Yeah, I'm so fascinated by the early development of the school, because it really had this art, from my research. It was a small school, and it kind of grew into something really big, and then kind of cult of celebrity, and then it faded.
- AC:** Again, the key was in the instructors - they were really committed. They were really fascinated by coming together and developing the whole concept of Harlem Prep, and pioneering and looking at education with a different approach, you know, but through the years that started fading. They started treating it like a public school.
- BG:** Yeah. That was the issue they were trying to fight against.
- AC:** I know. I hope they do.
- BG:** Yeah.
- AC:** They should really reach out though, to people that graduated from Harlem Prep and try to get them involved.
- BG:** I agree, and hopefully - thank you to your stories and others, I can pull something together and this is what powerful learning looks like.
- AC:** Right. Now how have you found the students? Through Facebook?

BG: Yeah, so various...

AC: There are several of them on Facebook, yeah.

BG [25:00]: Yeah, through Facebook, yeah. There was a class gathering in 2011 and I interviewed one of the kind of organizers, and he gave me a list of emails of people who attended, but, you know, two dozen or so emails, and a few others on Facebook, but there have got to be a lot of people. I have partial class lists from certain years, and one of the things that I want to do is really try to find as many people as I can.

AC: I have a list, it may be the same list that you have.

BG: I don't have a lot from '67, only from the first year.

AC: Okay, I can get you that list.

BG: Yeah, I would be...

AC: But I've had it for a while, so a lot of the numbers may be gone.

BG: Sure. Yeah, it's tough, I don't want to call people "cold call," I just want to send an email, because people are busy, it was a long time ago, and who am I - kind of a random person - but there's so much...

AC: Well, Frank Berger you definitely have to talk to. I still maintain a relationship with him, so I could talk him into it.

BG: Yeah, I would love to, and to hear as many people as I can. One thing I've - and you've touched on this a little bit as well, but [one of the things that] I'm so fascinated with on Harlem Prep, and again you've touched on this and from what I've read, but their educational philosophy. Did they - they didn't promote any type of - I mean, this was a raging time of civil rights and...

AC: No, they were very objective. They were basically promoting - they want the students to develop a strong educational foundation, and that was their goal.

BG: Right. They couldn't care less about black power or...

- AC:** No. They stayed away from that. You want to get into black power, that's your choice, you know. We'll give you the educational foundation to make choices.
- BG:** Right, you can if you want, but we're not going to...
- AC:** They didn't push any philosophy on that. No, they didn't.
- BG:** It was about graduating.
- AC:** You graduate, we'll get you into college. For example, I got into several universities.
- BG:** Okay.
- AC:** But, I decided to go to Buffalo, because it was the closest school to me - in New York State, I didn't want to leave New York State.
- BG:** Yeah, I know, there's a lot of reasons that make sense. That's what I've kind of read too - and I've seen some of Ed Carpenter's grants that he's wrote, which is interesting, and he's talking about how our main goal is to get students to college, and we don't promote any specific ideology, but yet you guys all became activists after that anyway, though.
- AC:** Yes, well, the knowledge they give you, you develop a consciousness. You wake up and realize there are problems in the world, in society, and so you make that connection. But yeah, everybody became an activist - everybody I knew, anyway [laughter], and everybody who graduated with me, they all became activists, which really changed that university.
- BG:** Yeah, for the better.
- AC:** Yes, for the better.
- BG:** That was the era of - there weren't, in the early '60s there really weren't any black studies programs, or Puerto Rican Studies, or women's studies - that kind of happened in the late '60s, early '70s.

- AC:** Right, so that's one thing you might want to look into throughout the country.
- BG:** Yeah, get involved with that.
- AC:** Because I was told that that was one of the reasons also that they did away with Harlem Prep. That it created too many "trouble" students.
- BG:** I mean, I've talked to some folks, and they've kind of said they thought Harlem Prep got too successful.
- AC:** Exactly.
- BG:** That people thought, "It's okay, we'll give money to you, but your [Harlem Prep, black and brown] students are more successful than our white students, and we don't like that."
- AC:** Right.
- BG:** So they kind of thought, "We're going to stop funding you," and it [makes sense] the polices, and today's not any different, right? I mean...
- AC:** Right.
- BG:** It's okay if you go to Brooklyn Tech, but if you go to Harvard, or University of - then we're not happy with that.
- AC:** Yeah. They took care - we didn't have to pay anything. If you want an education, they'll give you an education.
- BG:** Yeah, yeah, I mean you've answered a lot of questions. Definitely, I'm fascinated about the first - the beginning of the school.
- AC:** Well, it left an imprint. Every day I think of Harlem Prep - it doesn't leave my mind, because it really gave me my foundation in education.
- BG:** That's what strikes me so much, and what's drawn me - I've been honestly so humbled to talk with people like yourself, that went to school about 45 [years ago] - I mean, people are still thinking about it,

and that's what makes me realize, "Here's a story I need to get out" - people want to learn about it.

AC: Right. A lot of the things that I do in my life, I attribute to Harlem Prep. For example, I haven't done it in a long time because of my seizure, but I did workshops on development, self pride, with young people - get them to appreciate who they are, you know, on the planet, and get them to begin to realize who they are. Look in the mirror and talk to yourself, you know, that kind of thing, and then I wrote a book called "Never Too Late to Make a U-Turn"...

BG: I saw that on Amazon.

AC: ...which also deals with self-development and I use that in schools. So, that's, again, all that comes from the roots of Harlem Prep, because that - basically that's what they taught me [light laughter], so now I'm passing it on....

BG: Pass it forward, right?

AC: And passing it on. And the same thing with the educational pledge. Have you read my educational pledge?

BG: Yeah, yeah, I did, on the website, yeah.

AC: That also can be attributed to Harlem Prep. With all that, really, it's a - I learned all that at Harlem Prep.

BG: I wish all schools were like that, right? I was working with high school students and we've kind of been researching Harlem Prep together a little bit, and they're so fascinated - "I wish our school was like Harlem Prep, this isn't really happening." Yeah, any other questions - or any other thoughts about Harlem Prep, or things you feel like you want to share that I haven't asked, or any other reflections?

AC: No, not that I can think of now, but I'll get back to you if anything comes up that missing in this interview, I'll let you know.

- BG:** Do the other students and everyone - since it was so diverse, not racially, but in terms of thought, did all students get along?
- AC:** There were some students that were naturally very intelligent, and they knew - Harlem Prep brought that out in them, because I learned a lot, also from the students. There were one or two students that were very gifted as writers, and Harlem Prep brought that out in them, and because they were from there, I learned from them - I learned from the students. So, we all taught each other, by accident. We all contributed to our individual growth, you know.
- BG:** Yeah, that makes sense, especially in those early years because - so you never saw the open space classrooms, you would have graduated before?
- AC:** No, we graduated in the school - they should have stayed in touch with us, they should have worked on developing our alumni, and they never did that. Because we went on and got active and doing stuff...
- BG:** You guys were the core - you guys started [it all].
- AC:** Yeah, so that was a big mistake Harlem Prep made. They should have reached out to us as alumni.
- BG:** Yeah. Any other final thoughts? I could ask you questions for hours, but I don't want to take up your time [light laughter].
- AC:** No, go ahead, no problem, I have all the time you want.
- BG:** You mentioned a lot of friends, teachers - you talked about Ed Carpenter. Anne Carpenter - was she there yet, or did she join later? His wife?
- AC:** She joined later.
- BG:** Later, okay. I wasn't sure.
- AC:** Yeah, she wasn't there. The only two people I remember was him, Ed Carpenter, and Ruth. Ruth Dowd, I think.

BG: Ruth Dowd, yeah.

AC: Yeah, it was her last name. Yeah, her, and I was very - again, the instructor that I really got connected to a lot was Dr. Ben. I thought he was fascinating - he knew a lot of languages. And at one time - I didn't even know he spoke Spanish. I thought he was talking about being Puerto Rican or doing something in the neighborhood, and he came over and started talking Spanish to me. That was fascinating.

BG: You never saw anyone from New York Urban League there, right?

AC: Hm?

BG: You never saw anyone from New York Urban League there?

AC: No. The only time we were close to the Urban League - the graduation ceremony, and they had Whitney Young, who at that time was leading the Urban League, he was the main speaker, and then they gave out the diplomas, and then several students got special recognitions, you know. I got the Langston Hughes Youth Award for Creative Writing - they did that basically to encourage me.

BG: Yeah, and it works, which is why affirmation are so powerful.

AC: Exactly. So I applied that also when I deal with students. If I see a certain deficiency in a student, or a certain weakness, or shyness, I'll reinforce by giving them awards or whatever.

BG: Yeah, that's awesome.

AC: So they really - the self-development - self pride and developing that, you are somebody.

BG: Right, that was there goal.

AC: You can achieve your goal, feel accomplished.

BG: And one thing I'm also - and I kind of asked this and you touched on this as well, to kind of come full circle. In some of my other research because there are a lot of alternative schools popping up at the time -

like Black Panther schools in Oakland, there were some schools in New York, and they were really ideological, like do this, this, and this, and you said Harlem Prep wasn't that way. Their entire goal was about the individual.

AC: That's the difference. See, today, there's a lot of anger in the development of these programs by the instructors. They start teaching you black lives matters, or white versus black, you know, and that's where you lose students - you lose students. Harlem Prep, they didn't care. They would educate you. You want to get involved with black life matters, that's your decision, but we're not here to indoctrinate you, we're here to educate you. That's the difference.

BG: Yeah. I've heard in later years, students had a lot of freedom - they could choose what courses they wanted. [Was it like that] at the beginning?

AC: Yeah. It was a very independent mindset.

BG: A lot of freedom...

AC: Yeah, it was a very independent mindset, but they would encourage you. If they see a certain deficiency that you needed, they would encourage you and tell you, "Cappas, you should take this course." So, they would indirectly guide you to make sure that you didn't waste your time at Harlem Prep.

BG: Another thing I've heard between students and teachers is that there was less of a hierarchy between students and teachers. Did you feel that way?

AC: No, I didn't feel that way at all. Maybe later on in the years, but no, there wasn't a hierarchy.

BG: That's what I mean, that there *wasn't* a hierarchy - that's what people said.

AC: Not when I was there.

- BG:** Which is different - so there was no hierarchy, you were close with your teachers, and that's what some alumni have said, they would socialize with their teachers, they were close with their teachers, and they were friendly, which was really unique.
- AC:** Okay. Yeah, there were no egos floating around the place. No way.
- BG:** Which is rare these days, right? [light laughter] Yeah, no, I mean, you touched on a lot of different things, and I really appreciate you sharing your story. Any final thoughts about the school, or...?
- AC:** No, I can't think of anything, but like I said, if my mind comes back and reminds me of something, I'll call you.
- BG:** Yeah, any anecdotes.
- AC:** I'll email you.
- BG:** Any stories, anything you remember.
- AC:** I've got some material, I don't know if you have them.
- BG:** I probably don't if it's student stuff. Most of the stuff I have is from - administrative stuff, like Ed Carpenter documents and the Board of Trustees. There's also a lot less in the early years.
- AC:** Do you have the little brochure? Yellow logo, black cover? Moja Logo?
- BG:** Yeah, I do have that. Do you have an original copy of that?
- AC:** I have a copy of that, and I have an official emblem of the seal that they used on the...
- BG:** You know, I don't think - I've seen it, because one alumni who I interviewed, she had a picture of her graduation and the logo, but I don't think I actually took a picture of the logo, so I would love to see a copy of the logo.
- AC:** Okay, I'll email you a copy.

BG: I've seen it, but I'd love to have it. Yeah, okay, I'll let you go.

AC: Alright.

BG: Again, thank you very much for sharing your story. I'll stop right here.

[BEGIN TO TALK MORE, AND CONTINUE DISCUSSION ON HARLEM PREP]

AC: [Harlem Prep created an educational] foundation, with a philosophy attached to it, you know. They used to emphasize, "You have to look at yourself. Who are you?" And they used to quote Adam Clayton Powell, like washing your hands, washing your hands. I remember that, a lot.

BG: I'm fascinated by that, because again, the later years became this kind of this cult of celebrity at Harlem Prep, a lot of - Charlie Rainbow was there, and Ossie Davis was there, you had all of these people there, and a lot of it was kind of lost.

AC: Yeah, I'm surprised nobody has made a movie about that yet.

BG: You've seen that documentary, right?

AC: No, I missed the documentary. I didn't even know there was a documentary.

BG: I'll send you the link to it.

AC: Yeah, please do. I'd like to see it.

BG: It was made in '72, so it's old, it's only 20 minutes long.

AC: Is that the documentary that gets to - you begin to see how it turned into like, a public school? Or it was strictly Harlem Prep?

BG: No, it was like - it was strictly Harlem Prep, made by Standard Oil New Jersey, because they started funding - which is Exxon, and they started funding the school later in the early '70s. Because later on, the school started having all of this corporate backing. At first it wasn't really like that.

- AC:** No, basically grants on...
- BG:** Yeah, it was a small community school. Do they refer to themselves as a community school?
- AC:** No. No, they didn't. Harlem Prep, Harlem Prep, Harlem Prep.
- BG:** It seems like – now I'm passing [my own] reflections - but I mean, did they seem like they really tried to avoid labeling the school as something this, or that? They weren't about that.
- AC:** Yeah, because they didn't want to be attached to the status quo, it was something different. They were pioneering something, and they wanted to try to maintain that.
- BG:** And there was a lot of turmoil in New York City at the time - the teacher strike was a year later, in '66 there was a teacher's strike, in the public school system people were protesting, Harlem Prep was removed from that.
- AC:** Well see, the students at Harlem Prep, we were young, so we didn't know the hidden politics - I'm pretty sure there was a lot of struggles politically, of trying to take control of Harlem Prep, change its philosophy, change its curriculum, you know, but we didn't see that. We were students.
- BG:** They didn't make you aware of that, right?
- AC:** We were not aware, no. You know, but years later, you begin to realize.
- BG:** The kind of thing I've come across is that there's a lot of love in the school, a lot of passion.
- AC:** They started with that, but I guess that started fading away when the politics started getting too directly involved, you know?
- BG:** It seemed to be they got too big, and they didn't...

- AC:** Right. If they would have organized the alumni, and stayed in touch with the students, that never would have happened. Never would have happened.
- BG:** Yeah, it's a shame.
- AC:** Yeah, it is. Because we have our - another one in Buffalo, I can't remember if he went to...I'll confirm if he did - a guy named Joe Romdon.
- BG:** Okay.
- AC:** He's also from our neighborhood. I don't remember if he went to Harlem Prep or not. I think he did, I'm not sure, but I'm going to find out if he did. But you could ask Frank Berger, because Frank Berger is very close to the guy, the guy's name is Joe Romdon.
- BG:** Joe.
- AC:** Joe. Joe Romdon [spells phonetically].
- BG:** Romdon.
- AC:** Romdon. You could ask Frank Berger, because I'm the one - I don't have his phone number, but I could get it for you.
- BG:** Yeah.
- AC:** Yeah, I mean I forget, I'm not sure, but he also went to Buffalo. Well, he graduated - he went to Monroe College, and from there he called us and we got him up to Buffalo, because he wasn't to happy in Monroe.
- BG:** Yeah, I've been to U-B.
- AC:** But I think he graduated from Harlem Prep. I'll double check. He's someone you might want to interview, too.
- BG:** I would love to.
- AC:** He was - Joe's another one that graduated, went to Buffalo, made a career out of Buffalo - lived there, got married there, and whatnot.

- BG:** So a strong Harlem Prep to Buffalo connection. A high chance of that. I'm always curious to know where students went to school after, as well, you know, like what schools they'd decide to. There's a lot of Fordhams and local schools, you know, but anyway, yeah. Thank you.
- AC:** So you're a graduate? An undergraduate?
- BG:** Yeah, so I'm in graduate school, so working on a PhD, this is my sixth year.
- AC:** I'll give you [this, hands business card]...
- BG:** Yeah. So the last couple years I've been researching Harlem Prep, and I've passed my classes and now I'm sort of full time to try to uncover the story. Thank you so much [for the business card].
- AC:** Stay in touch with me.
- BG:** Yeah, I would love to. I love - from what I've read, I love what you're doing. I've run an afterschool program for the last four years with high school students, having them come to Columbia. Twice weekly we do history together. They do history of the community, whatever topics they want to do, and teach them different assortment of skills. I learn from them, and it's been a really good experience. Yeah, thank you so much.
- AC:** You're welcome.
- BG:** Yeah, so I'm doing research, I'm hoping to write a big book on Harlem Prep.
- AC:** Yeah, I'll save you any information you want to publicize - send it to me, because I'm good with social media. I have a lot of Facebook pages, I also have an online newspaper, and December 1st I'm creating a hard copy of that paper.
- BG:** I would love to, yeah. And the other thing is I could show you it on my phone - here, I can show you [Harlem Prep website Barry is creating].

What I - so I'm working on a website, it's uncoverharlemprep.org, and I'm working on this - on your computer you'll see the full website, and it's coming soon, but what I'm trying to do, this part isn't public yet, but I'm talking about how I found out about this school. What I'm trying to do is try to build - like reconstruct the school, like I have class rosters from every year of the graduates, of the courses that were offered - pictures, as many pictures as I can, and stories of alumni who want to post stories. Because I feel like there's been a lot of different efforts over the years - people don't know about it, or whatnot. I feel like if there was one place people could come together - I'm working on doing that, and one thing that I - and I'll ask, one thing that I'm doing as well is putting some of these interviews on, if you're interested in sharing your story about Harlem Prep, so other people can listen. Yeah, so I'm trying to kind of - this is a sample, but build, do different classes, and stories, and you know, oral histories, and photo galleries, and then as I do my research - so I can post different - I sent you one document, didn't I? I think...

AC: I don't remember. I think you mentioned - I think you gave me a link.

BG: Okay.

AC: It could have been the documentary, I'm not sure. I haven't looked at it yet.

BG: Okay, I'll check. Yeah, so I'm kind of trying to pull all of this together to kind of try to create a community for - I mean, get my - I'm interested in research and finding out the story, I feel like there's a bigger, moral, ethical need to...

AC: Well, maybe when you complete your project you might want to encourage some founders to work with you and do the film.

BG: Yeah, so, I would like to take this all the way, but. I'll take this to say whatever materials you have, I'd love to keep you in touch with what I'm doing and...

AC: No problem. No problem. I have all the time in the world. I'm retired, so you know.

BG: Oh, I appreciate it, but be careful what you wish for, or I'll be sending you old documents all the time.

AC: It's okay, bring it on! [laughter]

BG: I've come across a lot of different - cool different things, but a lot are from different years, but I do have - and I didn't bring my computer, but if you'd be interested about the school's founding, I have a lot of documents, like in the summer of '67, with New York - Whitney Young and Eugene Calendar, and all these kind of New York Urban League people in the times talking about starting the school. I have all these memos...

AC: Are you familiar with the Amsterdam News? The publication?

BG: Yeah, yeah.

AC: Okay, because they have a lot of stories.

BG: Yeah. So, I actually have all the newspapers, all the *New York Times*, *Amsterdam News* in an archive, which I want to share as well, but if I come across anything interesting in those early years, I'll let you know. They talked about - they want to hire someone with experience, and they end up hiring Ed Carpenter. They talk about who they want to hire, and I have all these documents, and it's so cool. I have them all on my computer, because they were all kept.

AC: Now that you mention that - I forgot the name of the instructor, but one class that really had an impact on all students: anthropology, because we didn't know anthropology existed in the public school

system, so you know, anthropology was something that really turned a lot of students. Anthropology, yeah.

BG: That's really cool, yeah.

AC: Actually, I think when I went to the University of Buffalo, my major was Anthropology and Black Studies.

BG: Oh, really?

AC: And then I had a minor in sociology.

BG: Oh wow, so you went through all the disciplines.

AC: All that, yeah. So really, it's all an extension of Harlem Prep.

BG: That's so cool.

AC: Yeah.

BG: Yeah, I am just continually fascinated by the impact this school had, even just for a short time - you were only there for a couple of months, right?

AC: That's right.

BG: But it makes a big difference.

AC: I was there about six months.

BG: Six months, that makes sense, yeah.

AC: Six months. But you know, six months because I went in there, I already had some educational foundation - I mean, I did graduate from Brandeis, I did have some kind of commitment and interest in learning, it was just that I was conditioned to go to work, so if Harlem Prep didn't exist, I would have been working in a regular job.

BG: Yeah. Were - I didn't really ask you too much, I mean, were most of the students had dropped out of school, or was it more of a mix? I know you...

AC: It was a mix. It was mixed.

BG: You graduated from Brandeis.

AC: It was mixed. Even Donald Anglin graduated from high school. So, there were a lot of students that already had, had education...so that helped a lot.

BG: Because a lot of the press stuff was all drop-outs, but I didn't know if that was true or not.

AC: No, no. I think that's exaggerating, because they wanted money and grants.

BG: Of course, of course.

AC: But no, to a large extent, most students were already graduates with a general diploma.

BG: But there weren't very many women, were there, when you went?

AC: Yeah, there was - oh yeah, a lot of women.

BG: Okay.

AC: Yeah, definitely.

BG: Because some of the stuff said that there wasn't...

AC: No, there were - no, talking women, there were a lot of women. There were.

BG: Okay, good, good.

AC: Have you seen the picture of the first graduates?

BG: I don't think so.

AC: I'm going to take a picture. It's there. It shows the women.

BG: Okay. I don't think I saw the picture. The first years, I don't have a lot from.

AC: Okay.

BG: It seems to have disappeared, so anything - I'd like to see the picture. I have some pictures of later years, and the documentary I'm talking about shows the outside graduation of '72, but back in '67, that wasn't the case yet. There's no - any, I guess not, any Vietnam War vets?

AC: I don't think so, no. Later on. They started getting drafted at that time.

BG: Exactly, later on there were. How often, I mean, students were a little older - most had graduated.

AC: They were mostly around 16, 17.

BG: So still young. Although in later years they started accepting older students.

AC: Yeah, no, we were young at that time. I think I was 17, 18, when I...

[NOTE: In follow-up e-mail, AC clarifies that most students were actually older, around 21 and 22 and that he was around that age.]

BG: Yeah, interesting. Yeah, cool. I'll let you go, but I thank you. I really, really appreciate that.

AC: Okay.

BG: Thank you again.

[end of interview]