

Clifford Jacobs Interviewed by Barry Goldenberg
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I: Alright, well, I am here, this is Barry Goldenberg, I am here at QPTV, interviewing CJ Jacobs. He attended Harlem Prep School, in Harlem, and this is, today November the 18th. It is around 11 o' clock or so, and we are going to get started. So I guess to kind of begin, just tell me about yourself, where you were born, where you grew up, family life – I know you mentioned Harlem in our informal conversations before.

CJ: I am, my name is Clifford Jacobs, and I was born and raised in Harlem. I was born in 1954, which means that next year I will be 60 years old, and I have an older brother and sister, and a younger sister—so there is four of us all together. And my name parents were also born and raised in Harlem—they were born in 1920-21. So my family were longtime Harlemites. I believe my grandparents settled there around 1910 or so. I spent my most of my life in most of my life in terms of education going to Catholic school, from the first grade through the pretty much most of high school. But, that is where my story actually begins in terms of Harlem Prep. I went to Catholic school which was, you know, for working class families in Harlem at that time, being able to send your children to Catholic school was equivalent to, say, to sending your child to a prep school in an academy somewhere—like Andover and the more elite academies. And our parents didn't want us to have to deal with some of the hassles that some of the public school kids were going through, like having people, you know, take your lunch money from you and they just wanted you to—they wanted us to be able to learn. There was also, you know, the Catholic system. At that time, they were into discipline and they weeded our corporal punishment as needed, so you know, we got hit with rulers, and we were disciplined very strongly. So, that's another reason why I think our parents thought it would be good for us. And so pretty much I was going to Catholic school and graduated from elementary school—I think that was in 1969—and I started, I applied to a number of schools. Cardinals Hays, in the Bronx, was where I ended up attending and, but I left Harlem Prep [Cardinal Hayes] in 1972, and switched to Harlem Prep. So should I just continue—

I: Yeah, so when did you—when did you finish with Catholic school? And then—

CJ: You mean officially?

I: Yeah—then move to Harlem Prep. What dates—

CJ: My catholic school experience ended in the spring of 1972.

I: Ok.

CJ: Because I was only at Harlem Prep for one year.

I: Ok.

CJ: I only went there one year.

I: And that was after—

CJ: Yeah, I was in catholic school up to my junior year, so basically all I did was my senior year at Harlem Prep—that was my last year before going to college.

I: Ok.

CJ: And how that came about was that around that time I was very active with a lot of, you know, political organizations. I was in a group called the High School Youth against War and Fascism. I was totally against the Vietnam War. Um, I was on a committee, it was called the Prisoners Solidarity Committee—and this committee tapped busses for family members at Attica where Rockefeller had sent—I was very politically conscious, I was very politically aware. So, I had written an essay for one of my classes, when I was in Cardinal Hayes, that was *really* critical of the Catholic Church—I mean, you know, I accused them of having, you know, an investment of diamond mines in South Africa when it was Apartheid. And, I mean, I just, you know, and I was reading, you know, the Black Panthers newspapers and all these radical things—

I: Sure—so you were plugged in.

CJ: So I was—yeah, definitely, so I wrote this, you know, this essay which they never said anything about. I wrote the essay in, that would have been like in the fall of '71.

I: This is again, before you were at Harlem Prep—

CJ: Yes, this was at Cardinal Hayes in the Bronx. And then one day, I don't know, I didn't sit in my assigned seat, and my instructor said, you know, 'sit in your assigned seat' and I said 'I'm not doing it.' I was just being, I was challenging authority, so what they did was, they pulled out this essay that I had written like 6 months before and it was this whole thing—oh, in addition to that, we, myself and some of my friends, we were responsible for what was called the Black Students Union. So we had hung up posters in the room we used to meet up at, of posters of Malcolm X, of Eldridge Cleaver, and you know, all these, you know, 60's black radicals. So school took issue with that 'cause you know Eldridge Cleaver was like a convicted criminal.

I: Yeah.

CJ: I forgot what his crime was but it was something horrific and they just took issue with that. So anyway, I felt that I had to my bring my parents in and there was this big meeting where they were going to try to, I guess, [pause] 'you make me a better Catholic or whatever the case was.' So, two of my friends and I had heard about this school Harlem Prep and I was thinking about it this morning as I was coming to work, because what we did was one day after school we went to Harlem Prep and we signed up to go there starting in the Fall. I never discussed this with my parents, I never asked them for their permission,

nothing like that—I just came home and told them that I am not going back to Cardinal Hayes and that I am going to Harlem Prep. They were not happy *at all*.

I: I believe it.

CJ: They were not happy at all. And I was thinking this morning, how did I have the guts to do and not ask them their permission? I was only, what, like 18 years old. Um, and at that time, you know, Harlem Prep, as we say, the word on the street was that it was an alternative high school, mostly for, you know, drop outs, Vietnam Vets, and former addicts and stuff like that.

I: It didn't seem like you fit the mold for that.

CJ: (seeking to clarify my comment)

I: It didn't seem like you fit the mold as much.

CJ: No, no, not at all! That's why when I started out when we were talking before, I said I may not be your typical, you know, Harlem Prep student—

I: Sure.

CJ: And I think, you know, I was probably at 18 one of the younger— (office phone ringing)

I: If you need to get that –

CJ: Oh, ok, maybe you can pause it for a moment. Sorry.

I: Yeah, no problem, no problem.

(Slight break while CJ attends to phone)

CJ: We're good?

I: I think we're good, yeah.

CJ: So as I was saying, I along with two other friends went over to Harlem prep and we filled out our applications because after I had written that essay, I felt that some of the teachers at Cardinal Hays were—were harassing me. They were always coming over and looking at what books I was reading, and, I, you know, I did not know what was going to happen. I did not know if they were going to be very helpful around graduation time in terms of my going to college and applying to college. So, I just decided that 'that's it, I had had enough, and I wanted to do something else.' So we went over to Harlem Prep and again, it had this reputation that was, you know, that it was for older, dropouts and people like that, so my parents were not particularly happy about it. But that changed nine months later because my time at Harlem Prep was—you know—phenomenal. I had some of the great, you

know, my best teachers ever. I didn't have to constantly fight the school administration—I could just be myself. You know, Harlem and Cardinal Hays, African Americans were certainly in the minority. There was only about, I think there was only about, not even a hundred of us there, out of a student population of about 2400.

I: Wow.

CJ: So that's a pretty big school.

I: Yeah.

CJ: So we were a very small, because it was considered one of the better Catholic High schools, along with Cardinal Spellman, and Regis and a few others. George Carlin also went to Cardinal Hayes [short laughter] --

I: (slight laughter)

CJ: Regis Philbin, and Martin Scorsese, also went to Cardinal Hayes.

I: Quite a group.

CJ: Um, and I can't imagine what it must have been like when George Carlin was there— you know, if he was a funny as when he was young as when he got older. So, you know, I was a good student, it was just that I was having trouble with authority and I had a tendency to question authority, especially in religion classes. Um, my older brother was a history major and somewhere along the line I developed an interest in anthropology. So I was very open minded to other culture, to other systems of belief, and you know, that wasn't—being in Catholic school at that time, Catholic high school, probably was not the best place for me to be because I am seeing the world differently and not through the Catholic way of viewing the world. So when I got to Harlem Prep, I was able to flower and grow because the administration, the teachers, are all very supportive of the learning process. Harlem Prep was located in what used to be a supermarket and we didn't have actual classrooms, we just had like these dividers, so it became known as a school without walls. You know, literally, real walls, but also I think mental walls—there was an openness there. And, um, as I mentioned, one of my favorite teachers, George Campbell, who I tried to get to come here today but he was a little tied up.

I: Yeah, no problem.

CJ: He was an English Teacher, and he taught English literature and he had a class called “Being and Non-Being” and he had us read, you know, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Buber, Franz Kafka, Herman Hess, you know, it was basically a class on existentialist literature and that class just—I *loved* that class, you know, and I loved the reading material which most of those authors we would not have read in Catholic high school.

I: Yeah.

CJ: So, you know, my history teachers—I mean, everyone was just really, really supportive and my grades were phenomenal because I came with such a, you know, my background was good coming from Catholic school. I mean, they did get the education part right, you know, so at Harlem Prep, I became like, you know, like an ‘A’ student, you know, I would get ‘A’s’ or ‘A+’s’ in most of my grades and I think Physics I got like a ‘B’ you know.

I: It’s physics, right... (laughs)

CJ: You know... (laughs) It wasn’t my favorite subject, but I did very well there. Now, I didn’t have all the political stuff to deal with that I did at Cardinals Hays—all the distractions, constantly fighting with the administration. So, Harlem Prep was absolutely wonderful experience for me. So that’s sort of the overview, you know...

I: Yeah—and just, I know you touched on this before we get more into Harlem Prep, I know you touched on this, but I mean, its to, I guess—you said what brought you to Harlem Prep was in some ways, the kind of ability to express yourself, to not have to be confined in a way—

CJ: Right, yes—

I: Because obviously the school population was different then, you know, what you were going to—

CJ: Oh absolutely—

I: So that had to be—

CJ: Oh yes--

I: Probably a turn-off for some students, potentially in the Catholic School, but for you, that diversity seemed to be what you wanted.

CJ: That’s what I wanted. I’m not even sure if I knew that I wanted that, but I think certainly that’s what I needed.

I: Sure.

CJ: And, because, you know, I was questioning, I was questioning everything. You know, again, it’s funny, although it happened many years before, but this year is the 50th Anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, which I remember distinctly. In fact, um, this Sunday my brother woke me up and told me that they were brining Oswald out—I got out and ran to this TV set and so I saw Jack Ruby shoot Kennedy on television.

I: Oh wow.

CJ: So I—I—lived through it. That was, for me, that was the first reality television, which is why I don't watch any reality television to this day. And I'm still haunted by the events of that time. I say all of that to say that, you know, again, this was you know, 1972-73, or the 70's, Civil Rights was still raging. There was the Vietnam War, was in full effect. So here I am, a young man and you know, 18, am I gonna' get drafted, you know. Because I already decided that I wasn't going to register for the draft—they would just have to arrest me.

I: Sure.

CJ: And anyway, yes, I was questioning everything—I was questioning religion. And being exposed to the existentialist writers, I decided one day casually walking home from school, I decided kind of two things (slight laughter): that I wasn't going to have any children—I just didn't want to be a parent and I am not to this day. I have no children, so I stuck with that. And the other thing was that, I decided that God didn't exist and if he did exist, he had turned his back on his creation. You know, and that, I couldn't look to any God to—to—(slight pause) to get me out of my surroundings of being in Harlem, you know. At the time I would see junkies and addicts, and I was like “where is God in all of this?”

I: Yeah.

CJ: And I'm sure that was, you know, the influence of that existentialist class—the Sartre, you know, part of that started, you know, had me asking me asking those questions. So anyway, yes, at that point in my life, I needed an environment like Harlem Prep because the environment of Cardinals Hays was not supportive of a young person asking questions and they did not really want you to ask questions or to challenge certain things. I remember distinctly in one of my religion instruction classes and the teacher was saying, “well, you know, in India, people pay, um, people pay someone to turn this prayer wheel, but that's not praying.” So of course, my hand shot up and say, “well, to them it's praying, and how you can say it's not praying.” They didn't want to hear that, you know, it was the Catholic way or the high way. And, so being in Harlem Prep really kind of—and there is more to that story but I'll stop there because I can tell you about another major development and transition that happened as a result of my going to Harlem Prep. But, I'll (laughter)...

I: No, this is wonderful. I want to hear these stories (slight laughter).

CJ: Okay, well, what happened was that in my senior year at Harlem Prep, there was an essay contest they had sponsored by CBS—

I: Okay.

CJ: And the World Youth Forum. And the essay you know, we were asked to write an essay about what would, you know, eight weeks in Europe mean to you. So I said, “ok, I'll—my writing skills were pretty good, so I said, I'll enter this,” you know, and to my surprise (laughter), I was one of the winners. So I won—I have the newspaper article here, I'll find it. So I won this eight week trip to Europe and I wasn't gonna' go at first because I was

going to go to college, and I had applied to ten schools. I got into eight, didn't hear from one, and I think one turned me down. So, I wanted to work—I used to work every summer, I had a summer job. So I thought the best thing for me to do was to get a job and work, and so I could have money when I arrived on campus. And, my mother said “are you crazy? Take the trip and don't worry about working this summer and if you need money for books or whatever, we'll take care of that.” And, so, winning the trip they gave me \$200 dollars, you know, to spend anyway. It was me and another student and so I spent July and August traveling from France to Italy to Belgium to Switzerland, England, back to France, and you know my political attitude at that time, you know, growing up in Harlem, being in America, was reflective of a lot that was going on. Europe *totally* blew my mind, because it was the first time I felt that people accepted me just as a human being—they didn't care what my color was. I wasn't used to that. I was like, “this is so—” I mean, I remember visiting a family, they were in France, in a town called Anise, and they lived in an old monastery and they were Polish. And we went to visit them and you know, the wife when I walked in gave me a big hug and I mean, she was just like—I mean it was just amazing. Because, I thought that, you know, it was what they call “positive and negative reinforcement.” If you grow up and not that my parents told me this because they didn't, but if you grow up believing that certain people are a certain way, and you go out into the world and (slight pause) that's confirmed because people do act that way, then that's sort of like positively reaffirms what you've been told. But if you go out and everything that you've experienced contradicts that and you don't believe it, so you here reading the Black Panther newspaper and you know, Muhammad speak, I'm thinking that white people are essentially evil, you know, and I go to Europe and it's like (slight laughter), it's like I was on another planet. So it totally, totally, changed my way of thinking, so much so that when I finally got my real first girlfriend in college, she was like part French and German and she did go to Andover Academy, and she was from Massachusetts and everybody was like “what?!” you know. And, but that's what, that's what the European trip—which I got because of Harlem Prep—that's what it did for me. It totally, you know, going to Harlem Prep, for me, even though I wasn't the typical Harlem Prep student, that one year was a life-changing event. It was a life changing event. And then after that, when I got into so many schools and I was the class valedictorian, and all this stuff...

I: Yeah—at Harlem Prep?

CJ: At Harlem Prep. Yeah, it was like (slight laughter), so after, it was like “we are just going to leave you alone because obviously you know what you are doing” whereas before I had a lot of resistance. When I first told them that I was going to the school, they were like, “how could you do that without discussing it without us?” and then afterwards, a lot of people in the neighborhood when they saw what happened to me by going there, they wanted to send their kids to Harlem Prep.

I: Wow.

CJ: They wanted to send their kids because now it was like, “oh, wait a minute,” you know, I think a lot of people, at least in, my circle, my family's circle, they had a somewhat negative view of Harlem Prep.

I: Sure.

CJ: What happened to Harlem Prep in the long run, Exxon was a big funding source for, and they got a lot of money because they weren't part of the Board of Education.

I: Yeah.

CJ: Although they were certified in that respect. I don't know if this is 100% true but word had it that, you know, students from Harlem Prep were going to better schools. Now, I went to Brown University, I also got accepted to Columbia. I applied to Harvard, I didn't get into Harvard, but I got into University of Wisconsin, which is where my brother went, and I think like Adelphi and Hofstra.

I: Yeah.

CJ: And things like that. But I ended up going to Brown. Boston University, which is where I really wanted to go. But somebody said, "no, no, go to Brown" and I go, "Brown? What the hell is Brown?" (laughs) I didn't, you know, I knew Harvard, but I didn't really know Brown.

I: Yeah (laughs)—

CJ: And I got a part scholarship, and part financial aid, so I didn't have to pay anything. And, so I, you know, I got into a lot of really good schools and as I was saying, the thing with Harlem Prep was, there was a thought that "well, as long as the graduates, or the students, were going to City College and Brooklyn College, you know" but when they started getting into Harvard and Columbia (slight laughter), I think, you know, the funding sources were like, "*wait* a minute now, let, now they are competing with our sons and daughters kind of thing."

I: Ahh, that's interesting.

CJ: Somehow, they were too successful, you know. You were doing *too* good a job. You're—you're a little bit, sort of encroaching on our territory here because at Harlem Prep, you could not graduate, you could not participate in graduation exercises unless you had a letter of acceptance from a college.

I: Wow.

CJ: So, they could boast truly that 100% of their graduates went to college because that was the rule. You were not getting out of here unless you had an acceptance letter from somewhere. And, so they had 100% of their students go to college. And, so, they were, it was a very successful experiment, and I think you might of had it written down somewhere, but, many say it was the first, you know, charter school, in a way.

I: Sure.

CJ: You know, that's what, that's like a model for, like charter schools—because I didn't really understand charter schools because I don't have children.

I: Yeah.

CJ: But comparing it to Harlem Prep, you know, I get a better idea of what that's all about.

I: Yeah. No, I mean, there's a lot of stuff I want to touch—I want to turn to this school kind of disbandment, that's from what I was able to dig up, that the funding went dry, but from the newspapers I wasn't able to understand, you know, why, but that's a very interesting point...

CJ: I think, yeah, I think they—

I: Were students aware of the funding? How were—were they active in those efforts?

CJ: (pause) I don't know—well, you know what, I think there was a certain level of awareness because, the teachers weren't, you know, the teachers were approachable and many of them became, you know, friends with the students. It was like a community. And I think there might have been times perhaps, when, you know, the teachers didn't get paid because maybe the funds didn't come in. I seem to kind of recall something like that. I do remember also—

I: I know there was an evening school one year, but I'm not sure if it was the year that you were there they had teachers volunteering and teaching parents in the evening, and they were volunteering.

CJ: Oh really? I didn't know about that.

I: Yeah, but I'm—it wasn't every year from what I able to find out.

CJ: I do remember we had (pause), we had a fundraiser and Bill Cosby came on board to help us. Now I remember meeting Bill Cosby, we had this meeting and it was a big concert at the Felt Forum. I don't remember who was there, who performed, but I know there was a big fundraiser. And, other than that, it's very sketchy, I can't remember too much that happened. But, I think, yes, the students, you know, were aware that at times there might have been some problem with the funds coming in.

I: Yeah.

CJ: And, um, you know, again, because we were close with the teachers, and I kind of seem to recall there might have been those moments, where, you know, they didn't get paid or something like that because of the funding. But again, I think Harlem Prep was too successful for its own good. I don't know if that's an actual truth—

- I: Sure.
- CJ: Or if that's a romantic way of looking at it. But I do remember hearing people say that, you know, that they were almost too successful.
- I: Yeah, I believe it.
- CJ: Yeah.
- I: Yeah, and from what I've been able to kinda' dig it up, that the lists of colleges and the acceptance rates—it was remarkable, especially considering these are quote-unquote “drop out” students or, so that's part of the beauty of the school it seems.
- CJ: Yeah, you know, there was (slight pause), at one point, I don't think it was at Harlem Prep because I actually was part of a program when I was in Cardinal Hays and even after I left Cardinals Hays. It was called the Arch Bishop's Leadership Project—initially it was a program designed to get African-American men to go into priesthood but later it just became a leadership development class, and we would meet once a week, we had a book a week to read, and one of the books we read was the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire.
- I: Yeah.
- CJ: And one of the things I remember about the book, and I don't remember a lot of the details, but it was, you know, a progressive book in terms of learning, you know, but it said that a teacher student relationship, the student is not some empty vessel and the teacher is just going to fill that empty vessel with information. The teacher is also learning from the student—there is a relationship, there is an exchange there, and I think that was part of the philosophy of Harlem Prep where you could, you could challenge your teacher and your teacher would challenge you, and somehow you both learned, in the process but you certainly weren't penalized for asking questions and maybe having somewhat of a debate, you know, a Socratic debate you could call it, about whatever, whatever issue. And, I think that way of learning was excellent.
- I: Can you tell me more about the teachers: the type of teachers that were at the school, the diversity of teachers. It is going to be a unique mix from what I am trying to gather.
- CJ: Well, there was George Campbell, who everyone called Sandy, and he and I are still close friends to this day. And, he was my English Literature teacher and (slight pause) his class was always my favorite because we just, we just read some amazing stuff and folks that I still read.
- I: Yeah.

CJ: Sometimes I pick up Albert Camus—I need to read him.

I: Yeah.

CJ: Or sometimes I love to read Kafka, you know, I just need that once in a while. I had a history teacher named George Simmons, and he, what I remember most of the history he taught centered round Africa and Egypt and Ethiopia—

I: Yeah.

CJ: You know, and places like that.

I: Topics you probably didn't get at Cardinal Hayes, right? (laughs)

CJ: Right. Because I don't remember George ever really getting into the American Revolution, so it wasn't really World History, we didn't really talk about World War I or II. Most of his class as I remember centered on history as it related to Africa, and you know, he was, he was pretty radical, and he was Caribbean and he also worked with—there was a Dr. Ben, everyone called him, Ben Yakananan or something like that.

I: Yeah, I've seen his name in the newspapers.

CJ: Yeah, you've probably seen his name in your research. And he had an office on 125th street, and, you know he taught Black history from a very unique perspective. Him and John Henrik Clarke, was another one. George Simmons was part of that, part of that group, and it was kind of a, sort of an Afro-Centric type of history from what I can recall. But there was a lot of that going on at that time.

I: Yeah.

CJ: Where during the Civil Rights Movement when African Americans were trying to reclaim some of that lost heritage, I guess, but anyway, George Simmons was a history teacher. I had, I took analytical geometry, which is like the beginning of Calculus—

I: Sure.

CJ: And my teacher was Versandre Pericles. I don't know why I remember his name, and I think he was Haitian, I think he was from Haiti. Versandre Pericles, and I did really well in it, you know, math was not always my strongest suit, but I loved Geometry—

I: Sure.

CJ: And, I loved Geometry and I always did very well, which might have something to do with that I'm a Free Mason to this day. Geometry is what the 'G' stands for in the Masonic symbol. Um, then, my other teachers, there was Caroline Humphries, she also taught English, I took a class with her, I had a big crush on her.

I: (laughs)

CJ: Um, I think we kinda' hung out one time. I think, you know—

I: So it speaks to the teacher-student relationship that seemed to be unique at—

CJ: It was very unique at, because a lot—I was like 18 and Caroline Humphries must have been, she had already graduated from, um, she went to (slight pause) Vassar.

I: Ok. I have a friend who went to Vassar.

CJ: So she was only like maybe 23, 24, so, you know, the age difference wasn't that great sometimes between teacher and student. So there was a, you know, they easy to relate to. It wasn't like in Catholic school where it was very authoritarian—

I: Yeah.

CJ: And, you know, 'I run the place and you're just here to, you know, do whatever.' So, it was, you know, was very different. But Caroline Humphries was an English teacher and she was very good, she had graduated from Vassar, and she actually, I think she went to Harlem Prep, too. Went to Vassar, graduated, and then came back and taught.

I: Okay. I've seen that. I've seen that teachers, a lot of students that came back—

CJ: Right—

I: To teach—

CJ: As teach, as teachers—I almost forgot about that but I'm pretty sure she graduated from there and then came back, as a teacher. And there was, um, oh, I'm trying you think—whose the, sort of the (pause) dean of student, oh what's his last name, Ed, Ed....um...what's his last name. I can't remember his name—

I: The Headmaster?

CJ: Not the—Ed Carpenter was the Headmaster but there was another gentleman there. It will come back to me maybe.

I: Okay.

CJ: Um, and I'll have to look it up, because some of it, some of it fades—

I: Sure, of course.

CJ: A long time ago. And, what, almost 40 years ago, you know, 40 something years ago. But you know, all the teachers there were, you know, they were, they were just really, they were just really special. The teachers were special and so were the students. As you saw in the documentary, *Step by Step*, the teachers were just interested in teaching students, and I think, you know, from what little I know about what's going on in the schools today, and this whole idea of, you know, teaching the students to take tests better—if you ask me, I don't think that that's real learning, and those students are going to have a hard time because its information stored in their short term memory, they hold onto it so they can take the test, and then it dissipates afterwards. And I don't know if that's real knowledge. I don't know if those tests tell the whole story. We were, you know, when I was in elementary school, we would have a test, you know, draw a map of the world and label every country. Or, a map of the United States, you had to draw the states and then write in the capital of each, of each one. I could, you know, when I was like in the 6th grade I could tell you who all the world leaders were, from whether it as Khrushchev, or Mao Tse-dung or Billy Bronse in Germany, or Castro in Cub—I could tell you who was who, but I don't know if we are teaching young people about global politics, about, you know, different religions—we're not, we're, I don't know if we are teaching young people. But I digress and I got on my soapbox a little bit.

I: Yeah. No, I mean, I think that's what made, I mean, Harlem Prep unique, that it did do that, and that the curriculum was, when I was reading in Edward Carpenter's kind of Dissertation he wrote, he kept saying how “relevant” the curriculum was, how relevant the courses were, the school—he used to the world relevancy a lot and it seemed to be a lot of what you are touching on.

CJ: Yeah, I would think so—I, you know, I keep going back to my English Class because that was the best class—

I: No, that's great.

CJ: That I've ever taken in my life. You know, reading those existentialist writers spoke to the condition of the human being in society. And here I was in this society, the world was raging about us, you know, again, you had Vietnam, and you know, Nixon had sent troops into Cambodia, which kind of upped the ante, and I was on, actually, I was visiting the campus of MIT when that happened and got chased by Boston police just by accident. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. So you know, the world was alive, it was raging, you know, at the same time, I saw Jimi Hendrix perform twice, we were into, you know, Miles Davis, not Louis Armstrong, because we didn't find Louis Armstrong to be relevant, you know, or we found Miles Davis to be. So everything spoke to the times, and, you know, in addition to draft cards being burned, women were burning their bras, you know, the whole women's liberation thing was coming into full effect. So, you know, the world was aflame, the world was alive, you know, you had hippies, you had all kinds of things going on. I felt, you know, and we felt, my friends and I, we all felt apart of that. It wasn't something that was removed from us, it was something that affected us directly, and I think the curriculum at Harlem Prep, the class discussions, all those things related to what was happening in the world. So, yes, there was a, there was this

sense of that everything was relevant, that this was a living, breathing, curriculum. I had to study Latin for two years, you know, there was no dead languages being taught at Harlem Prep (laughs).

I: Yeah (laughs), right.

CJ: I mean, I appreciate the Latin now.

I: Sure.

CJ: But they weren't teaching a language that was dead and that nobody was really speaking, I mean, what I grew up, growing up in the Catholic church early on, the Mass used to be said in Latin, so when you went to Church that is what you heard. Then, they changed, they tried to become relevant by moving to folk guitars and Congo drums. So, yeah, so I would say, you know, at Harlem Prep, everything that was taught was here and now. You know, nothing—it was relevant, to what was going on. Yeah.

I: Can you tell me more about the study body? I know—it's so diverse, your friends, I mean, and I know some were older, some were married, it seemed—from what I've gathered, it seems like a very eclectic study body, very diverse in a way.

CJ: It was. I ended up becoming part of a small group that consisted of Sandy Campbell, Caroline Humphries, a friend named Eddie—I'm forgetting Eddie's last name. Eddie Tatum. Dawn Seavers, um, and myself. And we used to hang out together as a group quite a lot. (Slight pause) you know, as far as the student population, I know a couple guys had been to Vietnam, like Eddie Tatum, he was, he had served in Vietnam, and we became, you know, very good friends.

I: Yeah.

CJ: There was Charles Johnson, and Charles Johnson and Carl, Carlton—I forget Carlton's last name. Charles Johnson, Carlton and I came to Harlem Prep together, it was the three of us. And Charles had gone onto become a news reporter, and he went to I guess Syracuse, and then he came, and then he came down to Rhode Island where I was living. I was a news reporter in Providence. Then later he gave that up because he was a little disillusioned and he went to Texas. Carlton, I don't know what happened to—I'd like to run into him. I've been trying to find him.

I: Sure.

CJ: Because I want to know how he made out after Harlem Prep. But, you know, I went through, Harlem Prep like a lightning flash, in a way, so, not all my relationships were like deep and long kind of relationships, because I went through rather quickly and some of the names fade from memory. Um (pause), but, you know, the student population was—I felt, you know, accepted and embraced by them, you know, I wasn't like, "well what are you doing here sort of thing," you know. Some, you know, sort of snot nosed kid from Catholic

school, you know, it wasn't anything like that. It was a very warm embracing environment. And I think that's why I did better there because I didn't have to have a lot of political fights, with the schools.

I: Yeah....it makes sense.

CJ: (slight laughs)

I: I also wanted to ask your opinions, I guess, on Edward Carpenter. I mean, it seemed like it kinda' was his school in this way, his brainchild, most of what I am able to find is through his work.

CJ: Um (pause)—

I: I guess the administration as well.

CJ: I think, you know, Ed Carpenter, who I believe was actually a friend of my family's—

I: Oh wow.

CJ: I think my father knew him growing up. I don't know where Ed was from, he might have been from New York. Somehow, my family seemed to have known him, going back years for some reason or other. I don't know if my father knew him from the service or, but, you know, he was, you know, he was the brains of Harlem Prep. It was his brainchild, and he was able to do what the Board of Education at that time really wasn't doing.

I: Yeah.

CJ: And it was a sad state of affairs in the end because Harlem Prep was taken over by the Board of Education. And, um—and then, after that, it didn't last, it didn't last long. It kind of went down the tubes. But Ed Carpenter was always encouraging, you know, he pushed the idea that we, that we are basically a family, and he used to have this thing he would say, that “We have come—we have come out of the struggle of the doing into the reality, of the done, for we have done so much, with so little, for so long, that now, we can do anything at all.” Something like that, to that effect, that's just one of the those things that stayed—

I: That stuck with you in some way—

CJ: (simultaneously speaking) with me. Huh? (not hearing previous comment)]

I: It stuck with you still.

CJ: It stuck with me. You know, we have come from, you know, attempting to do something into the reality of having accomplished it. Because we've done so much, you know, with so little for so long, that now, we can do anything. And I kind of liked that! And I kind of,

you know, when you've, when you've struggled for so long, and then you kind of—not so much rest of your laurels, but you can step back and look at and say, “okay, where can we go from here?” Certainly he was a visionary in terms of creating this school, which gave other schools in the city a run for their money. Specially as he could boast 100% college admission on a part of all the graduates.

I: Yeah.

CJ: Couldn't argue with that.

I: Yeah.

CJ: That wasn't happening across, you know, in the other schools, public schools. That's, that's probably as much I can say at the moment. Stop it for a moment—I want to show you something.

I: Sure, absolutely.

CJ: I just want to, it's probably easier--

(short break; CJ shows Barry a video of former Harlem Prep students, teachers, and administrators in another room)

I: Alright, so we're back, and, we've touched on, you know, so much, I—one thing I briefly want to touch on before we go is the space, the supermarket. That must have been so unique to have a school in an old supermarket in that open space atmosphere.

CJ: Yeah, I mean, you know, by doing that, I think—I think the space that you select to do any type of work in has a direct effect on the work to be done.

I: Yeah.

CJ: So by having this open atmosphere, it just reflected the openness of, you know, the open concept of the school, open-mindedness, it just facilitated all of that. And it wasn't, you know, cellular, and compartmentalized—nothing was. It was all, it was all open, and that was reflected in the student population, from older students to younger students, Vietnam vets, you know, former drug addicts, drop outs, you know, you saw—you saw that reflected, you had it reflected throughout and I think that for me, the the first time I actually met someone who was gay was at Harlem Prep, too. And, in fact, I'm sure of that—and so, again, the openness of the space just mirrored the openness of the philosophy of the school.

I: Wow—that's great.

CJ: And I think it accentuated it, it complimented it, and certainly it was an excellent choice, you know. Because you could hear—I could be in the English class and I could hear

George Simmons talking African history, and he's talking about, you know, he might be getting into the slave trade meanwhile, you know, we're talking about Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (laughs) and George is talking about something related to Egypt or whatever, so you heard all this around you, and everything was everywhere—and that was good. And it gave the place a very lively atmosphere, and I remember for the most part, after class was over, some of the students we would go around, and we'd have our own, you know, heated discussions about different things. There was a group known as the Five Percenters. Um, they are sort of a spin-off from the Nation of Islam, but little more street kind of based. And not of, they did not have that kind of hierarchy—but those guys were always willing to debate you about wherever. So even after the classes were over, you know, these conversations would go on. And, I seem to remember being there sometimes 'til, you know, later in the evening it seems. Um, whereas school would let out maybe 4 o'clock or something like that, it seemed like we were there for a lot longer—

I: Yeah.

CJ: After classes were over. Just talking—you know, just talking. And that was good because you always learned new things. I remember Eddie Tatum one time, he was reading a book by Elaine Pagels called the Gnostic Gospels, and I go, “The Gnostic Gospels—what's that?” And he said that these are the other gospels that they didn't put in the Bible. And I was like “what? I had never heard of—Catholic school they never taught us such things.” It was like, I learned, I was exposed to a lot of new things, and that plus the—I wanted to show you this. I'll show you this before you leave. But that, and the trip to Europe, really, just really, really, just turned my life around. I didn't go there because I was having, you know, problems with drugs, or anything like that.

I: Yeah, unlike others I would—

CJ: Yeah—

I: Suspect—some others.

CJ: Yeah—some others. I wasn't having—my difficulty came with, I guess, the authority of the Catholic Church. And my questioning their authority in the way they saw thing and, so I just needed a more supportive environment.

I: Sure.

CJ: I might have been able to go to college directly after my junior year, but I just needed like another year of history—they wanted to see four years of this, and four years of that. So, I just went there to do my fourth year of high school, and it would have been nice to have been there for longer period of time. But, I was there just for nine months.

I: So you graduated—you started in the fall of '72 and graduated in '73.

CJ: Yes. Yes.

I: Correct. Was your graduation outside? Was yours--

CJ: Oh yeah sure!

I: Ok because I saw it in the documentary and I was like that—

CJ: Yeah.

I: That must have been a hoot!

CJ: The graduation was held at the hotel—well, outside the Hotel Theresa on 125th Street and I think—

I: Adam Clayton— (speaking simultaneously)

CJ: Seventh Avenue—

I: Or yeah, Seventh, yeah.

CJ: So, you know, they had like, you know a daise—well, it was bigger than a daise, but like a stage where all the students were there, a microphone, there were people on the street. I remember the new report, John Johnson, came up and covered the story. But yeah, we had the graduation right out in the middle of the street.

I: That's so cool.

CJ: I have some pictures that someone scanned, so I'll show them to you—if I can find them. I'm sure I have them.

I: Yeah.

CJ: But yeah, the graduation was right out—and that was cool because this was something that just made it more community kind of based where everyone, I think everyone just supported this institution. You know, it was based in the community, it was (slight pause)—you know, I don't want to sound corny and say well it was a family thing, but it was, you know, in many ways. And, yeah, it was—teachers that would help students that were maybe haven't a difficult time or a little down on their luck and they were trying to do things for them. And, you know, which as it turns out, I've done here with some of our volunteer producers, you know.

I: Oh wow.

CJ: So there's a lot of that spirit of Harlem Prep that still influences my life, you know, in terms of how I think and stuff.

I: Yeah, I read that it was this community hub—it was a community space as well, sometimes in the evenings and—

CJ: (nods head)

I: Well I don't want to keep you—thank you so much. Any last reflections or anything I missed. I know there are a ton of stuff that I read, but—

CJ: No, I think that, you know, that's like that the heart and soul of it.

I: Yeah.

CJ: I think what I was not able to give you you'll get from watching this new video, which was the most recent thing that was done.

I: Sure.

CJ: And you can hear Ann Carpenter herself—

I: Yeah.

CJ: In her own words, because she was there from the beginning. And you can get a lot of um, you'll get a lot out of her—

I: Sure.

CJ: Her comments and observations, as well as the other teachers who were there, because they were there for much longer than I was.

I: Yeah.

CJ: And they have a very unique perspective on things. But um, let me just—I'm a try and find this stuff. I don't really have to search much because I know it's right here (turning to personal computer), let's see, where is it....

I: I think we got this on record but you were born—you were in—you lived in Harlem, you were born—

CJ: I was born and raised in Harlem, and I lived there until I went away to school and then, you know, I came back briefly and then moved to Queens. But I was born—born and raised...may be here (searching for files on computer).

(pause while CJ searches on computer)

CJ: If not, I can always find it, I have it on Facebook. (long pause while CJ continues searching on computer)

CJ: Oh, here we go—you can come over here and read this if you want. When—make yourself comfortable—when I had won the trip to Europe, the Amsterdam News, this picture was on the front page.

I: Is that you?

CJ: Yes—that was me back then. And that is all I have left of the article. I don't know what happened to the—you know, it continued on the inside.

I: I may be able to find this for you through some of my—

CJ: Okay, it was the Amsterdam News—

I: Yeah, I have access to research to newspapers, through Columbia—so I'm going to find that for you.

CJ: Try—if you can, I would, I would love to get the rest of it but—

I: Absolutely.

CJ: That was the article, that um—

I: So cool.

CJ: And I still have the actual paper article that I cut out. I don't remember, you know, the date that it was in there, but, that's me way back when (laughs).

I: (pause) That's so cool—I'm going to try, I'm going to find that for you.

CJ: (laughs)

I: That's awesome.

CJ: Yeah. That's you know—

I: I love that.

CJ: You know...

I: Do you, do you know the date of that?

CJ: No, um—

I: I'll hunt it down, I'll hunt it down.

CJ: It had to be, um, it has to be, like, well it was definitely '73—so June, May or June of 1973. I left in July so probably June of 1973.

I: I'll write the title down.

CJ: I was 18. (pause) Did they put..? Oh yeah, I got accepted into Adelphi, Columbia, and the University of Wisconsin.

I: That's awesome—you still have it. That's so cool.

CJ: Yeah (laughs) that's unbelievable. Let me just go back here for a moment—I did have, I did have some shots of my graduation ceremony in here at one time. But I'm not sure where they are—those I'm not sure where they are. But if I find them I'll email them to you. (pause while CJ searches on computer) Yeah, I'll have to look for them, I'm not sure where they are. But anyway, that's my story (laughs).

I: No, thank you— so yeah, well, well officially cut—thank you again for, for your time.