Craig Rothman Interviewed by Barry Goldenberg
October 19, 2016, via phone, about Harlem Prep

[beginning of recording: discussing how there have been a group of Harlem Prep people who have stayed in contact over the years]

[00:00]

Craig Rothman: Actually, we'd been working together. He was once there - he's someone you ought to talk to at some point. He has a doctorate degree in education as well, and at one point had gone down to Harlem Prep to work as Assistant Director at the school for a period of time, while I was there. That was the first time I ever met him.

Barry Goldenberg: Okay.

CR: Later on we hooked up and got together and did other things. And there's a few others - there's a few other administrators and people that have kind of stayed in the family, if you will, over the years.

BG: Sure. There definitely seems to be a kind of core amount of folks that have stayed in touch, so that's really great to hear.

CR: Yeah, yeah. So ask me some questions and I'll if I can answer them [laughter].

BG: Yeah, yeah, sure. I think I just did this to have it [talking to himself about phone recording]. Are you okay to hear? Can you hear me now at this level?

CR: Yeah, a little bit.

BG: Okay, I was going to maybe put up the speaker to make sure to record it. Okay, so if you don't mind, I would love to hear a little bit about your background and where you were born, where you grew up, where you're from, and eventually how you end up at Harlem Prep. So, I'll kind of start there, if you don't mind.

CR: Sure.

BG: About your childhood, things of that nature - where you're from.

CR: Well, some of this is embarrassing! I'm kind of an open book, in fact, I've written about this in a memoir I've written for my kids, and I was just looking up to see if I had that chapter someplace online, but I can't really find it. I lost some of my files about my experience and how I ended up there. But, I was born in Connecticut, in Hartford, and I was born in '51, so you figure in the late 60s I was still a teenager - a late teenager. About the time that - high school age, or whatever, I had a kind of rough start in education. I wrecked a number of different high schools. The public high school in Connecticut I was kind of asked to leave at one point. My parents had a reaction to that. I was a teenager looking at the world in a different way than my parents were, I'm sure. They suddenly sent me away to a private school in Maine in hopes that that would save my ass, and it didn't. I was expelled from that school. This is a kind of Holden Caulfield type of experience, if you will…

BG: Sure.

CR: …which is the one book that was forced on me to read in high school, and I thought, "well that's a good life. Let's do that!" [laughter] But in light of that, at the same time, my parents made me read other books because my family was very much involved in getting their children to understand life's experiences outside of the lower income, white family that we were, and understand. We had a great deal of diversity in our family, and so they made me read "Manchild in the Promised Land." I don't know if you know that book.

BG: Yeah, Claude Brown. I have.

CR: Yeah, one of the best books I've ever read. That was the kind of reflection - the black version of Holden Caulfield, if you will. I connected much more closely to "Manchild in the Promised Land" than Holden Caulfield's story [slight laughter]. But, long story short,

after I was let go at that school, my parents were kind of wits' end at this point, and I basically left home with a couple of other guys that were doing one period, and so hell, this school's not for me. I kind of ran away and adventured to New York City where I had visited before in some strange ways, and decided that was where my life was going to begin, and kind of grew up in that city, Greenwich village time, in the late 50s.

BG: Okay.

CR: Kind of discovering life, and what happened was I was going through a lot of internal changes, discovering who I was, all of that kind of stuff you hear about, but without going into the minutiae of that, at one point - and you need to know that I'm a Bahá'i, and at the time I wasn't very connected to the faith. My parents were, and my sisters were very committed Bahá'i's at the time, and I wasn't very interested in that - you know, I'm not very interested in religion type of thing, considering what that means as a spiritual being and all that stuff, but part of it was a kind of self-discovery: going to New York and living that kind of street life, really living on the streets in drophouses and all kind of stuff around New York City for a period. At one point, my sisters talked me into going to a Bahá'i school in the summer, where I hitchhiked from New York City, basically took the train up to the most Northern part, Route 95 going to [inaudible], hitchhiked all the way to Maine, and when I was there, I bumped into John Czernieski who was one of the teachers at the school, who was also Bahá'i, so he happened to be there.

BG: Sure.

CR: So he heard about my little story, "oh, you're in New York, blah blah blah." He persisted for months, chasing down my address in New York City, wherever I was staying at the time, leaving messages for me, saying, "Look, come by, you can get back into school, this will be a

good thing for you," blah, blah, blah. He was making a big pitch. So finally I relented and went up to Harlem, I connected up with him, and that's kind of how it began. I said, "oh what the hell, I've got nothing else to do, I don't have any real schedule," [laughter], you know, I don't have a real calendar of life going on here, completely arbitrary, and that's how I ended up getting accepted into the school. Their criteria was you are a non-traditional learner, all of that kind of stuff that I'm sure you're discovering about the kind of tenants of the kind of program they are doing. It's kind of an open-education school - there was no walls. The era in progressive education when they were talking about, universities without walls and all of that kind of stuff that was going on in the new wave of education movement at the time. I thought, "this is cool," and so I started going. I was kind of taking the train up from mid-town Manhattan every day, up to school, and I wasn't always consistent, but I spent probably just shy of a year there, and then my life just got so crazy I just had to remove myself from the experience. But, in that time that I was there - and there was a life after that, by the way, which I can explain to you some other time, perhaps - what happened to that kid there, right? But the time that I was there was very significant to that young guy in terms of what he was trying to discover. Who was I, where was I, where was my place in life, you know, did I have any values, did I just want to run off the deep end into drugs for the rest of my life, or run dead in the streets, or was there some other course? I had all these pressures pulling me with my family, I was kind of questioning faith - I had become a Buddhist at the time. I was still doing a lot of drugs, I was making a living at drugs, it was that kind of role, and yet there was this pull - from parents, from friends, perhaps a little bit from the Bahá'i community, people like Hussein Ahdieh - who I'm still very close with, to this day he and I are still very close - and from the experience at the school. One of the things - and stop me if this is getting ridiculous or boring.

BG: No, this is wonderful. This is so amazing, thank you!

CR: There are parts of the details that I'm not even sure I've shared with my wife [laughter] who I've been married with for 40 years. The point is that there was - the part that…let me put it this way. The reason I wrote this memoir, for instance, without going into great detail what I did, was because I wanted my children and my grandchildren and family - it was written for them, it wasn't written for publication, per se -

BG: Sure.

CR: - was to say look, there were a lot of choices I made in my life, and in fact, there were choices that my parents and grandparents made, and my wife's parents and grandparents made, that you don't have to make choices like that today.

BG: Yeah.

CR: So learn from the experiences, but at the same time, feel free to have your own life experiences and experience these things, but they look differently because some of the struggles, things we chose, had to overcome, that we had to discover on our own, I didn't want to leave it hanging. I wanted to share some of those stories, and so there's two threads to this story line. One was kind of a spiritual journey – whatever that is, that's not just a Bahá'i journey, that's a spiritual journey - and so there's many kind of, like my father comes from a Jewish immigrant background, so there's a story to be told there. My mother comes from a different kind of a background, so there's a story, and then there was my own journey there of self-discovery, that is spiritual, and yet life-affirming in many ways. On the other hand, parallel to that, was, as I look back to the earliest, earliest years of my life, based on the things that I saw in my own household with my parents, was this journey of a white male in this country - now, they didn't call it white privilege back then. We didn't have a term for that.

But all along the way, there was this asking myself, because what about being a white man in a country, in this nation, that has all of this racist shit going down, as a historical fact, as a reality, as a social background and so on, and how do I see that? How have I evolved as a white man in regards to race? So, there's a parallel journey, and that journey began very, very early for me. There's a number of different factors along the way that gave me a sense of an awareness. Early on in my life I was exposed to African Americans of all different backgrounds, cultures, and socio-economic things. My closest, closest ties when I was a young teenager were the black kids in my neighborhood. My parents came from that kind of urban experience, or at least my father did as well. So there's that - and so the next big chapter in that in many ways, was then going to Harlem Prep, as a kind of Connecticut kid that came into New York that was a little bit urbanized in my youth experience, had some exposure in the black culture, and all of the sudden I'm one of two or three white kids in an all-black high school setting. So, what was that learning? So that's another step along that journey, if you will.

BG: Yeah, and what was that like? To be one of the white kids at Harlem Prep?

CR: Oh, it's an eye-opener. Let me say, before I tell you about Harlem Prep, too, it was after that, because I ended up getting drafted later on, and there were experiences before that that happened too. I'm losing track of it now. Look, I had been in most situations - you know, after the war, you look at this historically, after the Second World War, that is, most inner-cities - look, my sister and I were born in the same house and apartment my father was born in, on Russell Street in Hartford, Connecticut - same hospital, everything. Generations stayed in the same place for many years. Then there was kind of a white-flight movement after World War II, where the GI bill came into play, and my father got a cheap house in a suburban area, so he and my

family - my sister and I, we moved out, which the place that we had moved to was kind of suburban but kind of a citified - it had its city centers and stuff like that, so it was a bit of an urban experience, to the degree you could call it that. It doesn't look like that anymore, it's very suburbia now - but, at the time, it wasn't. A lot of factories, it was one of the leading factory towns, and all that kind of stuff. So, most of the black families did not move out of that. Most of the inner city - most that had the war experience in Hartford did not move out to the suburbs - they couldn't afford to, they weren't even welcome to - there was red line and all kinds of other shit going on. So, and yet my father and my mother, and through the Bahá'i community experience where there were lots and lots of African Americans and Latinos that would come out to our suburban home for meetings as well, and in our household, it all looked normal. But, don't forget - that's a different experience, because it's still mostly white with a few blacks mixed in. Now, this case at Harlem Prep it was for the first time in my experience, which changes your perspective of yourself.

BG: Yes, absolutely.

CR: You're the only white person in the room, and you know, I had a few of those, but not like this. Not like that experience. All of the sudden, you're wondering who your friends are, you're wondering - it's very awkward, and it's teenagers, and it's during the 60s, you're trying to figure out the one way you can get through this one is to 'cross the boundaries' 14:18] and 'kind of talk and walk black,' and try to put on the clothes of the black experience, so they used to call you a "blue-eyed soul brother" and "grey dude" all that kind of language, and you'd smoke some dope together and then [maybe] race would go away - but it never went away [slight laughter]. The reality - of course, the difference is I could always go back to Connecticut. The option for a privileged kid who is white, I can always get on the bus and go back to Connecticut. These kids, from Harlem, that was their home. So, I'm

the interloper. It does change the way you see yourself. For the first time you say, "wow!" There wasn't even a mature enough way to thinking about it at that time. I can look back at it now and kind of say what changed because of that experience? I didn't even know the experience - I was just trying to survive, at that time.

BG: Yeah. Wow. I mean, I have so many questions. Just to circle back so I have the story straight - what year did you start at Harlem Prep?

CR: I think it was '68 or '69. It was probably '69, but I'm not quite sure. I would say '69.

BG: Okay.

CR: Because at some point I left there, and I got drafted February of '71, so something like that, yeah.

BG: Okay, and then when you moved to New York, you had dropped out of high school, correct?

CR: I was what again?

BG: You were out of high school, you dropped out of high school when you moved to New York, right?

CR: Well, I was in the middle of my sophomore year when I stopped. Middle of my junior year, I think it was, when I stopped all education.

BG: You stopped?

CR: Yeah.

BG: And then John Czernieski right, he just happened - you saw him and he kept kind of trying to push you to Harlem Prep. Was that part of the street academy program, were you aware, or was it totally separate - more of an interaction that he found you and encouraged you toward Harlem Prep?

CR: Yeah, he found *me* - that was the only connection I had with the school, and then later on realized that Hussein Ahdieh, who I knew

through the Bahá'i community was connected to it, and there were some other Bahá'i's as well. The Carpenters were, Ed and Ann, and some of the other people there that I – Sandy [Campbell], and stuff. I don't even know if Sandy was behind it, but you know, there were certain connections that made that happen, I'm sure. But yeah, I was at the academy - 125th, 8th, 9th avenue, whatever it was - I don't think that place was the original storefront when I went there. You know, it was just by coincidence that John reached out to me.

BG: Yeah, because one thing I'm trying to figure out is how much role the street academy program had had at Harlem Prep early on. Because at first there was a street academy program and then actually at the end of Harlem Prep's first year they had their own Board of Trustees and they separated it, technically, but I'm not sure…

CR: See, I didn't know about that until recently, actually, I didn't have much knowledge of it honestly. I anxious to read the research and actually read Ahdieh's book, I haven't had a chance to look through it yet.

BG: Okay, that makes sense. You were just there, they were the pioneers [of the school].

CR: Yeah - they were looking for students, and there was a very conscious, I believe, effort on the part of some of the administrators there - certainly Ed, who was the one who interviewed me for the school, to bring in drop-outs, if you will, of all kinds, alternative students of all kinds, both black and white. It was certainly targeted at that neighborhood, at that community. You know that there was a couple of off-shoots of Harlem Prep?

BG: I didn't, actually. After its existence?

CR: After. After and during.

BG: Okay.

CR: I'd share that with you.

BG: Yeah, I'd love to [hear].

CR: Smitty - Dr. William H. Smith, he was getting his doctorate at UMass at the time - it's just a sort of headmaster program as part of his training and work as a graduate student, which is where I first met him. He and a few of his colleagues at the University of Massachusetts eventually started a thing called FASSI Prep [spells phonetically] in Springfield, Massachusetts, based on the model that was established by Harlem Prep, and all these guys - literally, it was an offshoot of Harlem Prep. And later on, really, a year or two, I was in the army by then - my mother in Connecticut found it such a progressive way of working - she hated the public school system, she was really radical. She put my two younger sisters into an apartment in Springfield, Massachusetts, and allowed them to go to that

[20:00] school in Springfield. So, when FASSI Prep finally folded, some elements of that school were adopted by the public school system, which I believe is still in existence in Springfield, Mass.

BG: Okay.

CR: Yeah. Now Smitty - and there are a number of other people, Smitty and a few other people, those who are around - Robert Smith and Robert Henderson and those, they would be the best ones to talk to about that, because they were operatives in that whole experience.

BG: Yeah, okay. Last question about entering - when you interviewed with Ed Carpenter, were there any other qualifications that you needed in terms of writing abilities, or anything of that nature, or it really was it…

CR: I don't recall any of that. He sat me down in his office - this is my - it's a long time ago, you have to understand - my recollection.

BG: Yeah, but this is great.

CR: I felt terribly threatened - first day in this school, you know, and I had to meet with the headmaster, because I had had headmaster experiences at a private school in Maine that literally expelled me from the state [laughter], so I wasn't so sure about this label of "headmaster." Ed Carpenter was a remarkable, extremely strong individual - smart as a whip, in my view, but he had this way of connecting with me where I was at, at that time, in a way that was almost off-putting. So the interview was really about, "who are you? What are the things you care about? What are you comfortable in?" He didn't care about any of the academics - we probably talked about music and art, or street life, all this kind of stuff, that had nothing to do with anything to do with education that I had any orientation about in the past [laughter]. He says, "I think you'd do well here." Nobody had told me I'd do well any place. You see what I'm saying? That part of it was powerful for a kid that was completely lost in life. That "hey, you could be successful here - I think you'd do well here. I think you'd fit in well." And I'm like, "are you kidding me? I'm the only white kid that I can see for miles." And he didn't see that. He didn't see that at all, and that set the tone, I think, for what came after that for me. And people like him, and Sandy, certainly John, who I had as a math teacher after that, and some other, some of the mentors and stuff. I remember distinctly, for the first time in my life, studying history the way my mother suggested I learn history. Again, she was a pretty radical woman in many ways. She died pretty young, but she would encourage me to read *Manchild in a Promised Land* when I was a teenager. Who does that in suburban Connecticut? So when I get to Harlem Prep and they have a history course, and it's about African American history. I take the course and it's reading about all the great black Renaissance writers and artists and stuff, and I'm thinking, "this is fantastic!" I was like - it wasn't just listening to Motown anymore, there was a culture behind Motown, there was a culture behind all this

stuff, and that was really - and really, it set the tone for things I wanted to learn on my own, independent of school and education, on my own, reading black poetry and history and all of these things, but it started at Harlem Prep. It said, you have the right to learn this, and by the way, there's a history you're not learning in that suburban school that you can learn here, so it peeked my interest. And look, the music class - I don't know how to describe this, music is one of the most astounding things in the world - one of the music teachers there, who I'm still friends with, name is Doc Holiday, he played with Dizzy and all of these guys, he was jazz - a trombonist. He's in South America now, but I'm still in touch with him. Great, great musician, and he and another guy, whose name I don't remember, who was an African American music teacher that basically - he taught percussion, African drumming, and blah, blah, blah, led music classes out in the front, on the street, and everybody had to get a can or some sort of ribbon thing that they could do cow bell or whatever it was, and here I am, offbeat from all the other kids because I'm white and could not beat a thing [slight laughter]. I mean, you talk about an experience with music - I hated music classes when I was a kid, and my father is a trained - my parents are both trained classical musicians [laughter]. My father is a trained violinist, my mother is a vocalist, they were trained at the Hartt School of Music in Connecticut, and I'm listening to R&B, I'm listening to Motown, and the Rolling Stones, you know! So, to go to a class outside my experiences earlier in education, and I remember the classes out on the sidewalk, just freestyle music, and it's coming out of the trombone and the [inaudible, another instrument] and all these instrument things and making it up - that was a brand new experience for me. And it opened up a whole new world of looking at music for me in many ways. That was when I first started - it was so new at that time. I had a lot of orientation in jazz and blues and stuff from other experiences I had in Roxbury, Boston, Massachusetts, but this was a

brand new thing. So, those are the things - things like history, the conversations on the side about politics and human rights. Don't forget the magazines we were reading were not *Cosmopolitan*, they were *Mohammad Speaks* and those kinds of things. So, the political conservations we were having at that time, albeit probably immature and young and probably completely unknown and uninformed I mean, were astounding, and it made me start thinking about those things in a very, very different way than I ever did before.

BG: Yeah. I can imagine that was such a powerful experience.

CR: It was, and you know, I still think I'm not so much reflecting back on my life, although I'm not afraid of any of that, it certainly - that young part of my life informed me, laid a foundation, for a lot of who I am today, I think, and that's fantastic. Hey, hang on one second - I got a call.

BG: Sure, no problem.

CR: [About phone call: I can hold on that one, so go ahead.] Anyway, so there are a lot of those experiences, certainly those friendships with the people - again, not a lot of them were students, because there were students that I was struggling with at the time, and a few soon after that - certainly to those students who went up to Massachusetts and went onto college where I was kind of running around at the time on some of those campuses, but lost track of a lot them, actually - except for people like Sandy, Hussein, you know, and some of the others, a few others there.

BG: Yeah. One thing I know I want to do as I'm trying to do these interviews - I have all these class lists I've been able to uncover, and really try to create an extensive network of folks that I know who are likely to reconnect. I'm hoping I can help to facilitate that. Yeah, you know, what happened - so I think you briefly mentioned at the

beginning when you left Harlem Prep. What happened - why did you leave, and what happened after?

CR: Well, I'm being real straight with you, not that I wasn't being straight with you on other things. Like I said, I was on kind of a journey and I didn't know if I was in charge of that journey or not at the time [laughter], but I was still running around. I was a drug addict at the time - I mean I had a pretty severe overuse of drugs. That put me into some serious problems and situations – I was moving from an apartment - I hijacked an apartment from this guy and ended up living there, that kind of a thing. I had people who were looking to hurt me, and some pimps and stuff that I was doing business with that didn't like my practices, and the woman I was living with got pregnant. I was 18 years old, and I thought man, it's time to make a big change, and part of that big change was to jump out of the city. I had to leave. You should know that I haven't had a drug problem, a drinking problem, since my early, early 20s, and my daughter from that relationship is a part of my family still, and I have grandchildren there, and so I've reconciled a lot of those early choices that I've made [laughter], and I'm grateful that I had the courage and the infrastructure - the family stuff that valued me and helped me get through some of that, and then I got drafted and all of that stuff. I actually hopped on a bus at one point with a guy from the Bronx, a good friend of mine, who I hooked up with. He and I hopped - he grew up in the Bronx, and he bumped me and said let's get out of the city, so we hopped a bus and took all our resources, whatever they were, and went out to Albuquerque, New Mexico, of all places. A number of months later I finally confronted that fact that my girlfriend was pregnant and that I had to confront that and deal with that in some way. So, I went back home, after a few years of being gone from home, and my parents helped me get through it. Then I was about to get drafted, and I had to kind of deal with that was going to look like, because I was not attached to anything. And

later on, after I got out of the army, I still didn't have a high school degree. Eventually got a GED while I was in the army. Literally worked in the army as a medic - I was a conscientious objector, but worked as a medic and trained, at that time, to be a drug counselor for returning vets. So, the big flip around was I knew a lot about what was going on on the streets, and drug addicts, so became a counselor. I thought that was going to be my career - work with drug addicts and people who had addiction problems, and I spent a couple of years doing that, both in the service and when I got out, I ran a halfway house for adolescents with a friend of mine in Massachusetts, and eventually went onto school, got a degree at Rutgers University, in journalism and communications, and urban studies, of all things.

BG: Yeah.

CR: So that brings it kind of full circle.

BG: Yeah, I was just going to say it really kind of came full circle.

CR: Yeah.

BG: And I appreciate you telling me - I certainly don't mean to pry, I'm trying to connect the dots and it all makes sense, and it definitely came full circle.

CR: I mean, you talk about getting people together - I would love to be apart of that. I don't think anybody would know me, except the people I mentioned, but I've been curious all my life - I'm a film maker now, I'm a video producer, and I'm always curious about what people's journeys look like, what their stories look like. Everybody - you included – everybody has a journey, and if you ask the right questions, as you were doing, there's drama and there's pathos and there's, you know, there's an art to everybody's story that's interesting if we dig into it the right way. I would be very interested in knowing what those journeys look like for some of those other students.

BG: Yeah, and that's really - I agree wholeheartedly. I have that kind of ethos to. Part of what has been so humbling as I've only begun this journey into Harlem Prep, is - part of what I want to share, and it's really amazing, the stuff I found in the archives, and all that kind of research, hundreds and hundreds of documents of memos - Ed Carpenter, to Hussein, to administrators at Rockefeller Center and all of these amazing memos that really give a kind of administrative, financial arc of the school, so one thing I'm just kind of getting now is these oral histories of folks' stories. I've met with about a half dozen folks in New York, and everybody just has their own story of why they came. It was for a different reason, but in some ways you can see the connection between why Harlem Prep was the place where they ended up, and in some fashion, right, and why - so it's really possible to see that. It's a - you know, I have a list, I met with Sandy last week, and I have a list of 50 people who live in New York, so I hope to speak with them, and I have a class list, so I'm hoping to piece those stories together. That's the larger the goal, whether it all happens or not, there's a lot of moving pieces and all…

CR: Yeah. I think that's fantastic, and there's great value in these kinds of oral histories, I think. I do think that there's - even particularly as a student yourself, as a graduate student, what is cogent about what I think you are doing - and I don't know all that you're doing, I hope to discover more of that down the road - is that when we look at the state of public education, and education in general in this country right now, there's good things and bad things like at any time in our history, but there are things to be learned from places like Harlem Prep –

BG: Absolutely.

- and a lot of the other alternative schools that we ought to gain on - we ought to gain some learning from that and see how it might apply. There's some examples - we've got the Harlem project up there now,

the education thing - I can't remember what it's called, I've lost track of it - one of the educators up there in Harlem right now that's doing this academy that I think during the last presidential thing was one of these lights or something. I can't remember what it was, but there are these going on today. It will be great to see something that you do that can be published and shared with educators to find - maybe there are some things they can apply from that past to today that may be applicable. It'd be very exciting to see that.

BG: Yeah, ultimately that's my goal. That's why I've been so attracted to Harlem Prep, because it's such a powerful institution that we can learn so much from today. I think in some ways, it's that simple - this is a school that has a story should be shared. There's so much we can learn for young people. Not this year, but the last four years I've worked with young people in Harlem, and there's just so much that - to have a teacher, or a student, or an administrator to read about what Harlem Prep did in so many successful ways, or things they could do better or whatnot, would be so powerful. That's absolutely my goal. I hope I'm able to make it happen.

CR: Well I'm sure you will. That's fantastic.

BG: I know you have to run at for, I don't want to hold you, but…

CR: Yeah. What else do you want to ask right now? We can always talk again over time.

BG: Yeah, and I would love to definitely follow-up and digest. I had some questions about - I'd love to hear some of your stories about being in a class or about the open space. One question that - and since you already touched on it a bit just about you being a white student, is - one of the things about Harlem Prep from my research – is that the fact Ed Carpenter said, and you touched on this, really stressed diversity, right? Through diversity we can create unity. Harlem Prep also seemed to have a strong black culture within it of course, because there were

so many African American students. How did that negotiation work in some sense? If you see what I'm asking - if you can speak to how those two things merged and meshed.

CR: Well, I'd love to hear the thoughts of a lot of other people, because I certainly don't have a grand sense of it because I speak from my own experience, but as soon as you walk through the door, you've probably seen it, but you see the logo. Moja Logo. Yeah, it's unity and diversity, or something like that. I can't remember what the logo means, it's been a while, but right off the bat, you say someplace in that picture is me, and so what's different is that white folks usually think of adding black people into the scene, that's what creates diversity. In my case, what the realization was, is that I'm creating the diversity here. It flips around, and it's a life changing experience - you realize, you know, I do a lot of race work today in the work that I do, so I dig into this stuff very closely, but that there is a lot to be said for someone experiencing life - it's kind of like all of us need to get outside of our comfort zone before we can really learn what that zone means, and that's what that was for me. So, on the one hand, I saw the sign and the standard here is that unity and diversity, and unity *in* this diversity - it's a trick term, almost. This is their core value, I don't think I really knew what it meant then, but it definitely felt more comfortable to walk in than to just see signs of black power. I'm not included in that picture - unity and diversity include…and [African] Americans see that too. And at the same time, I say, well, wait a minute, I'm a suburban white kid coming into this black experience, but the culture that is here is not suburban Connecticut. It's not even Greenwich village, you know. And that's what was so invigorating. And at that time, of course, we'd just come off the Black Panther experience and the black is beautiful experience, and all of those kinds of things were going on in the culture around us and the movement around us, so here's a place where not only are we celebrating this as a

standard, we're going to study it. We're going to research it. In our music, in our classes, in the application of mathematics in the study of what things we choose to study in history, and all of those kinds of things. You know, none of that stuff in the history classes there was even remotely expressed in history classes I had taken before that.

BG: Yeah.

CR: And yet, because of that one time, that standard there, and it says something to me about having a moral high ground standard - that they say no, the school stands for this, so how are we going to arbitrate disputes and deal with conflicts? It's going to start the standard. I think that's what that was. I think that's what that really meant to me, and you know, I didn't have many conflicts there, I kind of fit in there. I felt lonely a lot of times, if I was the only one sitting at the lunch table, I didn't know if there was, but the first day or two, I think I shared this with you, going into the bathroom and seeing a big graffiti on the wall saying, "white boy go home." That wasn't real comforting.

BG: Oh, wow.

CR: But that happens, you know. I think there was a white girl in the school at the time - I'm trying to remember her name. Smitty would know, Sandy would know her - he would know all of those people. Sandy knows everybody.

BG: He really does.

CR: He does [laughter]. But, I think that diversity thing was a philosophical thing aligned with what I learned as a Bahá'i from my parents and from other experiences, but to see it in this public display, and to see it so publicly displayed, and you take that against the fact that I was starting to feel like I had no corner to hide in as a white kid, my only recourse was to play out what I thought was me talkin' very hip like a black kid and dressing like it, and walking with a little swagger and

stuff, which is all a false facade. As you grow up and become a man, you realize that's not very authentic. That's what you did as a kid, running the streets, and hanging out with a certain crowd. If I was hanging out with Mexican crowds, I would have had a different kind of swag [laughter]. You know? That's just maturing.

BG: Yeah. I mean, did you feel like students treated fairly? I mean I know you said Ed Carpenter [did] and the teachers, but how was your relationship with students?

CR: I think, I mean, I don't remember having any bad direct experiences, but sometimes it was like, "hey were all going out," and they all went out, I wasn't invited, okay? We're going to go out for lunch. There were enough occasions where I had enough friendships. I had people come down to my apartment - the one I stole on this guy, "hey, come on down to Midtown, hang out at my place on the weekend." So, I had enough of those relationships with people. Tony Sanchez was one of them, his name may have come up. I don't think I remember Tony since then, but that was one of the names that I think came down, and a couple of other people. So there was a few people, but I never felt like I had any major conflicts from anybody. I mean, I kind of fit in, and I was smart enough, street smart enough to know how to get along and do the right things in the right place and not seem like an idiot too mucuh.

BG: Sure. It makes sense.

CR: Yeah.

BG: Cool, cool. I think that's really - I could definitely keep asking you questions, I don't want to hold you again.

CR: Well, let me see what time it is. Give me five more minutes, and then I probably have to kind of prep for this meeting I'm going to [laughter].

BG: I am so, so grateful, and I hope…I definitely want to send you a few things that I've written on Harlem Prep, and whatnot.

CR: Yeah, I'd love that, and I'd love to stay in touch with the whole project, and seriously, to the degree that I can as a media producer, if there's something along those lines that I can help or even consult about, I'd be delighted to help you.

BG: I'm very hopeful for that and I really appreciate it. I might take you up on that when the time comes.

CR: Let me know.

BG: I will. I had a question about - since you were - I won't change topics much, since you only have a few minutes.

CR: Sure.

BG: When you were talking about diversity, as kind of the principle of the school, and from my reading - I'm reading budgets and grants from Ed Carpenter about how diversity was important in his dissertation, but then when I talk to students as well, and they seem to agree that they felt like there was always this mutual respect between people and groups, even with people who were different. Did you feel the presence of Black Power or Black Panthers? Were there groups in Harlem Prep, do you remember, of certain groups? Not even necessarily around race, but [ideology], any kind of groups, whether its Muslims, or whatnot? Do you remember different kind of students?

CR: Yeah, I know what you mean. I don't know that there was a direct political expression of things in the school.

BG: Yeah.

CR: It was more frankly an analytic experience. Let's talk about black history matters, let's talk about why black is beautiful, is important - not just politically, but in terms of self-acknowledgement, you see.

The only white guy being there, I said, "okay, I have to acknowledge that too. That's part of my education of being here."

BG: That's powerful. That makes sense.

CR: So it wasn't a political discussion, as much as it was a human discussion, and if you happened to be white in the path of that, here's the deal. I - do you know what Bidwiz is?

BG: I'm sorry?

CR: Do you know what Bidwiz is?

BG: I don't, no.

CR: It's a card game. As you study African American history and culture, find out about Bidwiz, because that will tell you a lot about the culture, okay? I grew up playing Bidwiz with my friends, and it's a game that's played - do you know anything about jazz?

BG: Yeah, a little bit, yeah.

CR: Okay. You know what freestyle jazz is.

BG: Yeah, I do.

CR: Guys, Ornette Coleman, people like that, free jazz was like you start with a melody, you go off in some direction, you come back. Well, Bidwiz is a card game that's played much like that. It's kind of a black version of Bridge, but it's done in the context of a culture that can get very aggressive, and very loud, and very much what they call "talk of the dozens" and talking shit to each other. It's a bravado game. And its expression is purely a black expression. So, if you take that loudness, and that aggressiveness, and that movement, that physicality, that comes out of that experience, and you put that in the context of that last question about people talking about why black is beautiful, it sounds loud, it sounds aggressive, it sounds scary to people who are

not used to that, and it's off-putting - but within the context of that school, it was not. You see what I'm saying?

BG: Yeah, absolutely.

CR: If I was playing Bidwiz in a proper home in Sunnydale, New York with a couple of lawyers, it's very polite and very easy. That's not the way Bidwiz is played, and that's not how the black culture in the inner city looks like, or at least it didn't at that time. So the expression of these things of diversity and welcoming and all of that, and the expressions of black pride and history and so on, it was loud and aggressive - and if that didn't put you off, then you understood that it wasn't about you. It was about a need for these individuals and this community to express itself in its fullness and its loudness and as handmade as they could possibly get it.

BG: Yeah.

CR: And that's an extraordinary experience. That was a much, much more valuable experience for these African American young men and women than it was for me. Although, it was an eye-opener for me.

BG: Yeah.

CR: Where else are you going to get to talk about it in that context, without being accused of being radicals and being left-wing and blah, blah, blah? It was expressing - it was like the Langston Hughes poem of "A Raisin in the Sun." These people are like a raisin - with the heat of the sun and the pressure are eventually going to explode, with the anger that came out of the African American experience in this country, and particularly in that community. All of the sudden, they get a place where it's okay to express themselves? They were exploding.

BG: Yeah.

CR: It's the same thing as the poem in that way today. Anyway, I'm getting up on my platform a little bit too much [laughter].

BG: No, that's awesome. That's really good. That's awesome.

CR: You need to look up the history of Bidwiz in the African American community. It's played everywhere.

BG: I will. I definitely will.

CR: It's very much like a very fine-tuned jazz piece, and it was a very interesting experience for me to learn to play that game.

BG: Yeah, I bet.

CR: I don't any more [laughter]. It's been a long time. Anyway, I should probably get going, but feel free to drop me your notes, and if you have other questions I could answer by email. You have my number now - feel free to call if you need to ask a question.

BG: I will, and I would love to set up a time to chat again sometime down the road.

CR: Sure.

BG: I will definitely email you a couple things to follow up, in terms of a few documents and things you might enjoy reading. Thank you so, so, so very much.

CR: It's my pleasure. It truly is, and I can't wish you more well on the importance of the work that you're doing. I really believe in that kind of work. So best of luck with that, and anything I can do to help.

BG: Will do. I appreciate those kinds of words and will definitely be in touch.

CR: Excellent. I'll talk to you soon. Bye-bye

BG: Thank you again. Talk to you soon.