

HOBOKEN FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY
TRANSCRIPTION PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: MINNIE CHEEKS
INTERVIEWER: EVELYN SMITH
DATE: 16 FEBRUARY 2006

TAPE 1, SIDE 1

Q: Mrs. Cheeks, how did you come to be in Hoboken, in the first place?

A: Well, I came to New Jersey -- Jersey City -- to do post-graduate work at the Margaret Hague Maternity & Infant Care Ward, teaching. I met Bob's sister and his mother. His sister had come to the Hague to do her pre-clinical studies.

Q: And both of you were nurses in the --

A: No. She was a student. She was the first Black to come out of St. Francis. She came from St. Francis as a student, over to Margaret Hague, to get maternity. You have to have all of these different

branches of medicine. She graduated from St. Francis, as the first Black. Her name was Regina, and I have a Regina. But his mother was working at the TB hospital there. I met them, and she and I became very dear friends, his sister, and I would come to visit with her. Bob was in service. I just looked at his picture. He had a very glamorous picture there, and I said, "Oh, I could fall for him."

When he came, I had gone back to Jacksonville, waiting to go into the service.

Q: That's Jacksonville, Florida?

A: Florida, yes. Bob was with the Newark Eagles. That was a Black ball team, and he was going down south, to Florida, for training. Not training. They take them down there. What shall I say? They're all going down there now -- summer. They're building them up and what have you, to play ball.

Q: Summer training.

A: The parents gave Bob a letter of introduction. With his mother, everything had to be just-so, you know. So

when I came home -- I was still doing public-health work there, and she said, "Somebody by the name of Robert Cheeks -- I guess it's Gina's brother -- came here and gave this letter of introduction. I told him that you were out in the field." That's what we nurses say. I was a public-health nurse; that's why I said, "out in the field."

But anyway, he and I met, and it was near Easter, so he came, on Good Friday, to the Catholic church for three hours, and we became very good friends in a short space of time. He came back to Jersey, because Mayor McFeeley was appointing him to his position. You didn't take civil service for it then, but he had to take civil service for the captain's seat.

Q: Okay. They were appointing him to his position as -- ?

A: -- a Hoboken fireman. He was the first Black fireman in an integrated company, in the state.

Through our correspondence, on the phone and through the mail, we planned to be married. I was going to Seton Hall, but he said, "No, why don't you come and do your master's here?" So I said, "Maybe I will." So

I came up. We met in, maybe, June, and I came up in August and we were married. We were married at Our Lady of Grace church. At that time his family had been in the church for maybe 100 years.

Q: Wow. I didn't realize his family had been in Hoboken for such a long time.

A: Yes, yes.

I said we were married in the church. It was very nice. We had a nice turnout. We didn't go back to Florida to marry, because he had just gone into the department, but they gave him -- we went to Connecticut for our honeymoon -- but they gave him a week or two off for that. Then we came back, and we couldn't find anyplace to live, so we stayed with his mother and grandmother, and that was on Grand Street and Fourth, up over "Falco's" dress store. Do you have it there now?

Q: No. Fourth and Grand? Let me think. What's at Fourth and Grand now.

A: It might even have been Fifth and Grand.

Q: I think there's a bar, and there's the post office -- the west side station -- and new residences on one side of the street, then a building development on the other side, for about two blocks.

A: Well, anyway, I wish them well, and I hope they let some minorities in there. Because times have changed, and things are better now. But I tried many days and many nights, just to be able to get a place to live we could call our own then.

Q: But you're saying that you stayed with Bob's parents over --

A: His grandmother and his mother. His sister was there, and his brother. But eventually -- They had this apartment building, and I guess we were the last ones, because we got the first apartment up the steps. It was very noisy, because everybody would run up the stairs and all. But we fixed it up. It had been painted, but Bob painted it again, and everybody was coming to see. We stayed there until we were financially able to buy another house. They wanted us to look into a house down

by the Lincoln Tunnel. They were tearing out down there, because they were extending something with the tunnel. I don't know what it was, but he had gone on the fire -- he was a fireman. He had to live in Hoboken, but they were setting it up. They wanted us to move to -- where would it be? Weehawken? Oh, yes. What have you. Anyway, we got the last apartment, because I wrote a letter to the *Journal*, the *Jersey Journal*, explaining that I had been an Army nurse, a Second Lieutenant, in the war, and Bob had been a "High" Captain (I'll tell you that in private).

Anyway, we moved in and we lived there for, I think, about four years. All that time we were looking for a place to live, and none of the realtors would touch it. But Kislak had this house on Bloomfield Street, I saw it, and I called. But I had friends who had gotten the apartment across from us. They were moving out. By this time, the veteran families that were there were having children, and you only had, really, one bedroom and a little living room. It was a small place, but it was home. I had a lot of friends in there. We had a lovely relationship, all of them.

Q: Were all the people in the building former military people?

A: Yes. They were supposed to be.

Q: Oh, that was a requirement?

A: I guess so. That's what they said. They could tell us anything.

Q: And your writing the letter to the *Jersey Journal*. How do you feel that that impacted upon your getting that apartment?

A: Well, I don't know. I was a little disappointed because the Communist Party were the first ones -- the women came, to sit with me, and talk. I knew that wasn't what I wanted, so I didn't encourage them and I didn't see them anymore. Because I didn't have any intentions of communicating with them. They weren't what I was looking for. I was looking for a home and peace, but it was very, very difficult. This house was up for sale, and, as I said, they took Bob in, in his uniform. I went in, and, you see, I was a little lighter then. But

the people across they street and all -- that's on Bloomfield Street -- they were all looking, you know. The next time we went in there we had closed, but Kislak did not put it on his list of vacant places or houses to be sold, because he was afraid of the backlash. So he didn't put a "Sold" sign or anything on it. But when we moved in, the firemen and their wives, the friends of ours, were there cleaning. They were in their bare feet, cleaning, and getting everything ready for us to move in. We moved in, and stayed there for a number of years. My children, the first three, grew up there.

Q: What year was it, when you moved in there?

A: I think it was '59, and I was told that they didn't want any Blacks. They didn't say "minorities," they said "Blacks," uptown. So it was a big thing, in the papers and all, you know. Oh, yes.

Q: Oh. I didn't realize it was in the media.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: But you and your husband, you were the first Black family to move uptown, in Hoboken.

A: Yes. Yes. I was a visiting nurse in New York. I would go from Hoboken to New York, because you could only make --- In Hoboken, with a degree, post-graduate work and what have you, at that time nurses were only getting \$4.00-something an hour for private duty. So I could make more in New York. It wasn't that much more, but it was good during that time.

We were happy. Then we decided that we wanted to start a family, because I had injured my back, nursing; I had surgery, and I could not work anymore. So we went to Catholic Charities, we filled out all the forms and everything, and we weren't getting a baby. I didn't want a baby because I couldn't hold it. I wanted a child that could at least walk. I told them. I said, "I see." The Puerto Rican people were just coming in. I remember working with them in New York and, irrespective of what color they were, they still put "white" on those birth certificates. I was doing, basically, maternity work. The mothers would not go to the hospital; they had their babies at home during that. I told them, "How can

you say that, when this little girl is -- " black. She had nice hair, and it was up there, basically across from the library. That was Park Avenue wasn't it? Yes. The next street.

But I had gotten dressed, to go look at this house [?] -- You're going to have to delete --

Q: No. When the editor gets a hold of it, she'll get it all in chronological order. She'll get it together.

A: Well, anyway, some people who were friends of Bob's -- because I wasn't from Hoboken, or Hudson County -- this is what I wanted to say, too. He had made a name for himself at St. Michael's in Union City. He was the outstanding ball player, and there was something about that in that article there, and what Maloney had to say.

Q: He played a couple of sports, didn't he?

A: Yes. Basketball and baseball. He almost died playing baseball, but he didn't want to give up.

Q: In high school, you mean?

A: No. He was out. He was playing with a Black Little League that was there. He spent a lot of time playing ball, with kids.

This is a funny part of it. We filled out the application and everything, and we weren't hearing from Catholic Charities. We were supposed to get a Catholic child. So I went to Father "Coyle," and I said, "You know one thing, Father? Catholic Charities have not called me about a child, so now I'm going to the state, because I have friends who have adopted, and they've gotten children. I'm not asking for a baby. I don't want a baby, I want a child eight or nine months -- not a little baby. Somebody that's going to pull up and pull around." He said, "Well, Minnie, just so you get a Catholic child. We don't care what you get, we just want you to get it." But when I approached Miss O'Neill, over at the archdiocese in Newark -- I called her, and she said, "Well, you're asking for a baby too soon. We have

people who have been waiting for any number of months, and some years. It depends upon what they want." I said, "Well, I wasn't asking for a baby, I was asking for a child that could at least walk around in the playpen or what have you. Do you have any Black kids?" She said, "Oh! I didn't know you were Black." What did she say? "From the application, I saw your background and I saw your husband's, and we took it for granted that you were white." I said, "No." So she said to me, "Well, when will your husband be off, so you can come over, and we can finalize this?" Bob was downstairs reading. I went down and told him, and he said, "Well, I'm off Wednesday. We'll go Wednesday." So we went Wednesday. They were all happy to see us you know, but shocked. At that time we signed the papers and what have you, and she said to me, "Are you going to take your son home with you, or do you want to wait?" I said, "Well, we didn't bring a toy. We didn't bring anything to offer the child." She said, "Well, Miss -- " I can't remember the social worker's name.

Anyway, she said, "You can go in her car, or go in your car." So I said, "Well, we'll go in her car, since we don't know where we're going." We went over to the orphanage in -- it was out from Newark. We went

out there, and they had babies of all colors, but I didn't see a Black baby. I saw kids who were brown. Maybe they were Spanish or something else. So she brought this little boy in. He was two and a half, and they had him dressed up with a little bow tie and everything. She said, "We're going to have you and the Captain -- " No. She said, "We're going to have you and Mr. Cheeks --" because Bob was not a Captain then -- "in one room, and we'll be on the other side. There was a see-through glass, where they could see us but we couldn't see them.

Well, he stood up there. He was the cutest little thing -- brown -- beautiful. The Sister said to him, "Do you like your mommy? Don't you think she's pretty? Do you like her?" And he --

Anyway, after his little session, we got everything to bring him home. Now we weren't planning to get a child this soon, and he had been there all that time [?] -- The child was denied that. I'm sure that happens in a lot of cases. So he was in the back of that window, in the car, coming home, and the nuns were out there, waving. We came home, and the first place we went was to Jersey City, to Bob's aunt and uncle's. They were good friends of mine. That was the beginning of our "trek" with kids, you know. I wanted a girl, he wanted a

boy. They wanted to know. Later, they asked me did it make a difference with the Captain? Because Michael had asthma. I said, "Well, he can't play ball, but that doesn't make any difference. He wouldn't be playing with his father, and what have you. That would make no difference. We wanted a child.

So they didn't even give me the eighteen months. I wanted a girl. So she called me and told me that they had just the baby for us, the girl. Bob said -- he calls me Reb. He said, "Reb, we just can't do all this just now, because we have to plan for their education." I said, "Yes, I know." But I said something to him another time, when she called me and he was down playing records. I said, "Anything that you want and want it badly enough, God will give it to you, and God will make a way for you." So we went back over to Newark and got Michelle. Michelle was nine months. That's the second child. Then we weren't eighteen months between her, and Miss O'Neill called me and told me that they had this lovely little girl with a button nose, that would fit into our home, with our family, very well. Now people think you select kids. You don't select kids. They have the child there for you. I never -- I couldn't traumatize a child by saying no.

Anyway, we were very happy with him and with Michelle. He was Joseph. We changed his name to Michael, the first child, and Michelle was Nancy. All of the children we had, as Father said, Minnie made the quickest trips to the maternity hospital "of anybody I've ever seen." So we went to see Jackie, she was ten months, and she was standing up in a crib. I said, "Oh, my gosh. How am I going to manage with three, basically, babies?" But I remembered. I said, "If you want anything and you want it badly enough, God will help you." So we brought Jackie home. That's Jackie over there. You'll see a picture later. She has her hair all cut off.

All of our pictures -- I had plaques that I had gotten, all over this wall and down the hall, we had all the kids' pictures.

Q: [Inaudible] They were destroyed in the fire?

A: Oh, I tell you, that was the most devastating -- and I'm still not finished, because you can never replace the memories and the books and all. Even my grandson (that's Michelle's child), he can't get over the fire. So that was the end of that. They grew up.

Q: Tell me about living up on Bloomfield Street, having three kids and raising them up there, and your remembrances of your neighbors, the neighborhood, and the experiences that you associate with Hoboken during that time, in the mid-'50s.

A: Well, I want to tell you -- and I'm trying to think of a man who was an assemblyman. His wife's family lived up on the same street, in the same block, but further up. They made the statement that they didn't want any animals in their community. It got back to us, and Bob's mother knew him. They grew up, you know. Oh, they were very sorry about that, but that didn't make any difference, because if Michael went out to ride his bicycle -- you know, a little tricycle [interruption] -- let's see. I was telling you --

Q: -- about when Michael went out to ride his bike.

A: Yes. They would call their kids in. Oh, Yes. Yes. We had put a new sidewalk in, and we had done so many things. They just couldn't get over it.

Because, you know, they feel that if you move in, you're going to depreciate the asking-price for their place.

Anyway, then Michelle came. I would put her out in the yard, and they -- big cowards, you know. They'd come by and look, and go on about their business. When then Jackie came, it was the same thing. But we had friends there, because before I injured my back I was attending Seton Hall. I would go there nights, if I had classes during the day, and it worked out. But after, I couldn't go back. But I was in the first group of nurses at Seton Hall. We didn't go on campus; we went in the city. There was a building across from the Law School, and it was just nice. I had nice friends. You find some Blacks, and you find -- [interruption] -- girls is a nun and she had that cross up there. You have to look at it to see. It's the Lord's Prayer, in there. It's a little shelf. We have a priest who is a friend of mine, and his sister was a patient in the hospital. We became friends, so he visits on the holidays and the days of worship or what have you. He comes and has Mass for me, or with me, and what have you. But after people got to know you, and they knew that, because you had much more on the ball than a lot of them had, educationally and what have you,

you were just a special person, you know. But it worked out all right.

After we built this house I would come down, so the kids didn't have any need to be on the sidewalk and all of that, at that time and at that age, because they were down here. But that was it. Michael finished from -- what is it? Bob was a little bitter, because he wanted to go to St. Peter's and he couldn't go.

Q: Why couldn't he go? He was qualified, wasn't he?

A: Yes, but they just didn't do it. They didn't do it. When he passed the test -- he was at a fire, and one of his men, on his group, came out and said, "Oh, Cap, look, I'm almost as black as you are." He wasn't too right. Anyway, when he got finished with him, he never said that again. But we had planned it. We wrote a letter to the Panama Canal. We were going down there. We were just so heartbroken. You qualify for the things and for the position, and then you can't get them.

But I have to tell you -- this day I had gotten dressed, and the fellow was supposed to come and take me to look at the house.

Q: The house on Bloomfield?

A: Yes. The one that we got. We had looked at another one, on Park Avenue. Everybody was up in arms. That's all you could hear. "The Cheeks, the Cheeks, they're coming up! Can you imagine -- " So, anyway -- I told you that they took him in in uniform, and I was dressed -- they said, "Oh, you're light enough. They'll think you're white. This is all you have to go through with, honey." And I'll have you know, when we moved in, every piece of furniture that went in there, or anything else, they were out there to see it. These are the people that, years back, his grandmother used to say would dress up and go downtown, to "see the Italians." They didn't call them that, but I don't use that language, or I won't say. But she said that they were treated the same way when they came, and that's why they had so many churches, of different nationalities, or country life, or wherever they came from. Have you ever

thought about that? All those churches? And the town of Hoboken is only a mile square. But that was it.

Q: What about your neighbors on Bloomfield Street. Did there get to be a point where you became friendly, or you became accepted and your children played with other kids in the neighborhood?

A: Yes. When I was in Seton Hall, "Abey Bier" was in my class. We were in class together. He was married and had children. They lived on Tenth Street, and we were very friendly. I won't say [?] -- but he used to --

Q: Oh, okay.

A: But, anyway, we became very dear friends. And the firemen and their wives and all, we would go out, or go down to the Clam Broth House. There was a place that opened out this way. It was a smaller place, that we would go down there. But I've forgotten all that, it's been so long.

Anyway, Michael graduated, and he was accepted -- I have a drawer-full of invitations. At that

time, they were taking, off the top of the list, Blacks, to give the scholarships to [?] -- so he had a full-time scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania. The only thing I had to do was furnish -- he had an apartment on campus, and I would take the food up for him to cook and what have you. But he graduated. He wanted to go into medicine, but he ran on the grounds of Penn. They had a piece of wire stretched off some way or the other, he was on his bicycle and he ran into it and tumbled over, and did damage to his knee. So he decided it would be too much. So he came out with two degrees, one in sociology and one in psychology, because he was headed for medicine, you see. So when he graduated, Jackie was getting ready to go to college, and she was going to Richmond. (I'll tell you about that, later.) So Penn gave him a scholarship, but it would cost about \$20,000, for the part in it for food and everything. I told him I couldn't do that. Jackie was going to college at that time. So Temple gave him a full scholarship for his master's, with subsistence. So he was straight-A, all along, and today he has a very nice job. Michelle was in defense intelligence at the Pentagon, in the Navy. Yes. And Jackie went to school in Richmond, Virginia Union, and she graduated from there with a degree in social

work, and the same thing here. So it's not all Hoboken, you know. They were upset, because they had never had a Black probation officer. Uh huh. So one of her supervisors was from Australia, and she had inter-racial children. She told her, she said, "Jackie, you go on and take that examination. I know what you know, and I know you're going to -- " She came out almost -- I think she was number four. But before that these social workers probation officers had said if she didn't take the test and pass, they were going to -- you know -- they were going to rebel or what have you. They didn't want her there without that, and then she had more than they had. So now she's a social worker and a probation officer, in the courts.

But she married. She has one little girl, Jill. Michael doesn't have children. Let's see. Michael. Michelle. Jackie. That was the three children we had there. Then I took some girls, because I wanted them to know their heritage. So the girls, this was their place, then I would take -- Jack "Bier" was Michael's friend. I would bring him down for a couple of days, when we would come --

Q: Oh. Down here.

A: Yes.

Q: "Whitesboro."

A: So I would bring Donna Rapetti, and I want you to see the letter from her. I would bring her down. She would be a girl for Michelle, but she was a little older than they were. And Jack and Michael were about the same age. Then I started (and Bob's grandmother did the same thing) -- because I always wanted to have a nursery for children, an orphanage, and an old-folks home. So I got a little of both.

But you asked me about the neighbors. The Schultzes were on our left, and I can't think of the family's name that was on the right of us. But they had children, a lot of children. They were nights over there with us, and then nights over there.

Q: The children would sleep over at each other's houses?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And they'd come down here and sleep. But the firemen, any time they had a

meeting down here, or a convention or anything, everybody would come over. We had a lot of friends. But I wanted them to know their heritage.

Q: Tell me something about Bob's family. You said they have a long history in Hoboken?

A: Yes. Bob's grandmother -- well, she was basically German. She and the Eckhardts (you perhaps don't remember them), she was very friendly with them. But she was there, and she was picked up during the First World War, because they thought that she might have been a spy. Oh, yes. Right here in Hoboken. She said they used to have -- the "Kerf & Essels" had a place here (they went out of business), they had one in Hoboken. I can't think of the street. Anyway, they made precision tools --

Q: Oh, yes! K&E.

A: Are they still there?

Q: It's an apartment complex. The building is still there, and the park is still there.

It's between -- what is it? Third and Fourth and Jefferson and Adams -- the "K&E" building, yes.

A: Well, anyway, she was a young woman. As I said, his mother was born there, too. Margaret. His grandmother was Sophie Wood, and his mother -- you wouldn't know her, because they were out of Hoboken. They bought a house in Jersey City, and they went out there to live.

Q: Now do you know when his family came to Hoboken? About what time was this, when they were living there?

A: Oh, they were in Hoboken for years, but they weren't in the house on Fourth Street, where Bob was born, because the grandmother had her home. She was a midwife, and she had "males," and she had a daughter by the name of Helen.

Q: And what was her name?

A: Bob's grandmother.

Q: Sophie Woods. Yes. She was well known and well respected. A nice person. She was the one -- we lived with her and Bob's mother. The sister was there, the brother was there. His brother, Walter, was very well known in Hoboken. When they moved to Jersey City he was in the service. He'd been into the service. He married an ex-nun, who was in charge of Greenville Hospital. He was in charge of the lab there at Greenville Hospital. He acted ugly with his wife, but we won't go into that. But she was a lovely person. You could tell she was a nun. He died not too long ago. I guess he might have had -- I never smoked, but he and Bob were great smokers, and they wouldn't give up. So he died a young man. He had quite a few kids. They were in Syracuse. That's where they all went to school, there, the girls and the boy. Walter Cheeks was his name.

As I said, he was well known. And Gene, Regina Cheeks, she got her RN, and she was working in New York. She would go over to -- because she could make more money. She was supervisor of the pediatric unit there, at "Seidenham" Hospital. But the neighbors -- oh -- everybody would just fall all over you. Everybody was just as nice as they could be, after they got to know everybody, but my kids had their friends, and they didn't

need the others you know. I see Michael Plunket, but he's younger than the kids, you know. He'd be along with, I guess maybe with Jackie. He lived across the street from us, and he's a police sergeant. I see him on television. You know, cops periodically have Hoboken, and I look to see if I can recognize any of the areas, but I can't. But Michael I --

Q: Well, Hoboken has changed a great deal.

A: Well, I'm telling you, it's here in the paper, where they have all of this property and all, and somebody -- Hoboken -- oh, I don't want to take up your time with that. But it's in there -- Hoboken, Hoboken, New Jersey.

Q: "Property damage."

So what do you remember about Hoboken? Now Hoboken is kind of like a bedroom community for a lot of young professionals that lived in New York.

A: I was reading that.

Q: It's like a bedroom community. But what kind of community was it when you and your family were living there? Or even when you were living with your husband's family, before you found your own place, uptown? How would you describe it back then?

A: Well, when I was living on Grand Street, I was going to work and going to school. I didn't have much time, other than going to mass.

SIDE TWO

A: When we moved up to "uptown," as they called it, people began to think that we were human, too, so everybody -- you'll read that letter from my girl --

Q: Miss "Repetti?"

A: Yes. That's Sister "Repetti." Sister Donna. And, honey, when she comes, she has her on "jeans," and the other nun that worked with her, she's a principal at one of the schools up there, at a high school. But she's just a doll, and she was always a doll. Her sister and her family, they were all supposed to come

here the day after Christmas. I was glad that they didn't, because nobody was here. They come for Christmas, and then everybody goes back, you know. Jackie is the only one who's near. I have them in Georgia, I have them in Alabama. The one in Georgia, her son is here now, but he has to go and find himself a place, because I just can't be dealing with young people again. I didn't intend to say that on that tape, but -- I love them and they know it, and everybody ends up right here.

But they were nice, and Bob was a very good father, as you'll read in that article that Ray -- I don't know where they got that picture. There was another one they had in there, he looked so old. But he was in Greenville Hospital. That's where he passed. But he was good to his children, and he was good to me. Uh huh.

Q: Do you have any stories you could tell, that are like typical Hoboken stories? Things that you wouldn't expect to happen anyplace else, that really reflect the kind of mixed -- Back then, you know, Hoboken was a real mixed community.

A: People with children. Most of the people around were older, and those that weren't, some of

them were in service, especially the men, were just coming home. But, yes, I enjoyed the church and I enjoyed working with the nuns at the school. The kids went to our church school, Our Lady of Grace, and Father Mehan was there then and Father Coyle. I can't think of the other one. But Father Mehan said, "Minnie -- " I used to give to the fund in New York. They had a Sunshine Fund, one of the papers. He said, "I used to give to that, but I'm going to give to you, and your Sunshine helpers," meaning the kids, you know. He would call and tell me or tell Bob to stop by, he had something for me, and he would always give me a check. He said, "Get yourself a hat or something. You need to do something for yourself." He was an old man and everybody thought he was harsh, but he was very nice to us. Father Coyle had known Bob since he was a kid. He was very friendly, too. He's the one that married us.

But Hoboken, with me coming from the South -- the intermingling there was nil, you know, and when I came there -- well, they had different classes of whites, too, you know. They couldn't get over those ten families in the house. Everybody was stopping in the apartment, and if they got a pinstick, they'd come to see Minnie, you know. "What should I do with this?" But it worked out

all right. As I said, some of the people -- I have one friend here, DiSalvo, John DiSalvo -- his daughter was Cheryl -- she might be around your age.

Q: Yes. The name DiSalvo sounds familiar.

A: Yes, well, he died, and Madeleine lives down here. There was some -- well, we don't need to talk about that. But they've done all right. She isn't well, but when you get this age --

Q: Well, how did Bob happen to wind up going to school in Union City and living in Hoboken? This is like high school, right?

A: Yes.

Q: He was a high-school star athlete.

A: Yes, he was on the team, on the baseball -- no, it was basketball. He played everything for them, and they even said, in the paper, if they had had football, he would have been playing football, too. But he said that when they would go away, go out to

Chicago or anyplace, they didn't want to serve him, the other boys, and the priests were there, so they wouldn't eat at different places. They went and found someplace that was good, good quality, and that was it. But he hit the longest ball out -- everybody knows him for that -- out of the stadium up there. But he loved himself some ball. That's why they were concerned that Michael wouldn't be able to play ball --

Q: -- because of the asthma.

A: Asthma, yes.

Q: Now why didn't Bob go to the Hoboken schools? That's what I was wondering.

A: Well, at that time, the Catholics, you know everything -- if you're Catholic, you go there.

Q: Oh. So his family wanted him to go to a Catholic school.

A: Oh, yes. His grandmother was diehard Catholic. Uh huh.

Q: Well, what about the congregation that she was a member of? Was that a mixed congregation?

A: You mean the church?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, all the people, everybody loved Sophie, Miss Wood. Oh, yes. She was a very stately looking woman. She died in her nineties. Yes. But she was always in the church, you know. Bob's mother was in there sometimes, but she wasn't as regular, because she was working. His grandmother was at home. She would cook.

Q: And didn't you mention to me that Bob's family owned a business in Hoboken at one time? No? Okay. My mistake.

A: He had an uncle, Willie Woods, but he brought his family up in Jersey City. Bob, he was nice. He used to go down to Miss Davis's bar all the time. Did you know that the Davis's had the bar, in Hoboken?

Q: No.

A: It was right off Observer Highway.

Q: Oh, was that 88?

A: Yes.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: Yes. They were friends. His wife's name was Mabel. Not Mabel. But I knew the name. Once or twice we went there. He would take me, but I didn't go places like that. I was home with the kids. Uh huh. I wasn't a drinker, so that made the difference.

But we did very well after we got in, because the "Schultz" family, on the right of us -- the sister was secretary to the head of one of the Chase Manhattan, I think it was, banks. Charlie was retired. That was the brother. Then the mother was living when we bought there, and I went out in the yard one day, to hang clothes, and she was -- now you'd say Alzheimer's, but at that time you just said they were senile; senility had set in. But she said to Helen, she said, "Who is that

Black girl over there?" She wasn't too -- you know. But in the end, Helen came to live with me. She lived right here. Summers she was here.

Q: Here in Whitesboro.

A: Yes. And Charlie, her brother, he would come down. At that time he was working for one of the meat-processing plants down there, as a night watchman. He was older. But they wanted us to sell our house -- Charlie did -- and move next door, in his house. Bob said no, he said, "If anybody do the moving, you'll have to do it." And I had Helen down here. We would put all the big furniture and everything over the entrance to that hall, where she couldn't get out. But honey, she could get up and dress in Michael's clothing. Oh, yes. She loved Michael.

Anyway, we had a nice life. But after I injured myself I wasn't able to go out and do things. I wound up with prosthetic hips, prosthetic knees. Oh, yes. I'm all prosthetic. I injured my collar - I don't know I think a lot of this, the bone condition, might have come from when I was very young. That's a problem now. I went to Jefferson, in Philadelphia, and had the neck

vertebraes operated on, and that's why I don't have the use of my hands. My hands now feel like -- I have "fire" in them. But I've lost some weight lately, because I'm not eating right. Then I have diabetes -- a lot of things that hold me back.

But we enjoyed our kids. Then, as I said, everytime they had anything -- my friend was saying the other day, she says, "One, two, three -- wait until you get to the tenth one." Because everybody wanted to come in and live with me you know. I'm talking about the young people. We did very well, and a lot of the girls came out and got different professions, and that's good, because you don't expect that, when they're taken away from their mothers. But they were big kids then. And I had a niece named Carmen that I took. My sister was in Jacksonville, and Carmen came to live with me. She lives in Plainfield now. I think I told you that. Anyway, she's got all of her degrees. She's a school nurse, and she has that course where she can go in and do where the nurses are going now. You go in and you don't know whether you're getting a nurse or whether you're getting a doctor, but the nurses are getting big money for that now.

Q: So when did you decide to leave Hoboken, and why?

A: Why did I leave Hoboken? Because I liked the peace and quiet down here. Then I had a problem being good to people, you know?

Q: What do you mean?

A: I was too nice to people, you know. Bob got mixed up with a girl two doors from us, but her husband grew up there, and they were "Normaler," Brian "Normaler." His wife was from Pennsylvania. I said -- I won't say what I said. But anyway -- I'm down here with the kids, and I had her kid, too. In fact, the judge gave me custody of the child. Because when she got pregnant, she -- well, she's not a pharmacist now, I know, because she had a stroke. Her husband is a pharmacist. I don't know where he is now, but I understand that maybe the mother passed. He had moved out. But that child stayed with me wherever I went. Her mother wasn't with her father anymore, and he would bring her down, because she had to come down here, and her husband had to come and take the child over to "Briarwood," to see her. It just

didn't work out, and I just couldn't take it, because she was like another child to me, you know? She'd come in to pick up the baby, have something to eat, or go upstairs. Bob always looked at television in our bedroom, in his big chair. She was up there. And, really, the kids knew something was happening before I did, uh huh.

But it didn't make any difference, because he saw that these kids were educated and taken care of, and the same for me. I just couldn't -- but -- the doctor, all of the friends, said he died from a broken heart because he wanted to get back with his family. He would come down here to see us, you know. And when he got sick, Michael would go and Michelle would go, when she came in on leave from the Navy. And Michael would go when he was out of school. And I went up to see them. I -- and she saw that the money for me and these kids came, just like he did -- nothing was taken from me. If it had been, I wouldn't be sitting here today. He was a good man, but --

Q: [Inaudible]

A: Yeah. Like my mother-in-law said, "Just take the man and give him to somebody," basically.

I would say, "Why don't you take So-and-So to the dance?" Or "Why don't you take them to the concert?" or what have you. Because I couldn't go. Uh huh. Yeah.

Q: What year was it when you finally left?
About. Approximately.

A: Oh, it was in the '70s. I had to take Michael -- well, he went to Penn, but it was easier for me to carry this house. I wasn't working, and I knew he was going to take care of us when I got that little pittance for that house on Bloomfield Street. You know, they split it up -- part for the wife and part for -- he gave it to me. That's Reb's, that's not mine. He really supported us. Yeah.

Q: What was that address again? I'm going to have to go back and --

A: 939.

Q: 939 Bloomfield.

A: Yes. It's on the right-hand side, going up. A friend of ours -- he was from St. Louis, a very nice family, and his wife -- we were friends, and I got them the apartment across from me.

Q: On Grand Street?

A: Yes. No. Grand Street was the mother-in-law. Fifth and Grand. No, no. This was down on Monroe Street. See, we lived in the apartment on Monroe Street. Uh huh.

Q: Okay. That's where you moved from, to Bloomfield.

A: Yes. When I moved from Bloomfield I moved from Hoboken, and I haven't been back there since. But what was I getting ready to tell you?

Q: You were saying something about your friend, whom you got an apartment for, across the street from you on --

A: No, not across the street, across the hall. On Monroe Street. They were a nice couple.

Q: A Black couple?

A: Oh, yeah! Honey, I wasn't -- I don't like -- That's why I wanted my kids to know their heritage, you know. And my daughter Jackie is married to [?] -- but she was married to one of her classmates at college. Uh huh. He was from a very well-to-do family in Washington. But she would go to work, and the neighbors would tell her that this woman would be sitting up on her front porch. So she fixed him. I made a two-room apartment out of the garage, and she moved what she wanted of the furniture, and that was it. But his father was a big man in the education department in Washington. His mother was from Florida, but she had a big position, too. And it was he and the sister, and the sister was a smart woman. You're not recording that, are you?

Q: If you don't want me to --

A: Yeah. No. That's okay. I don't know what, but she got mixed up in drugs, and they had her in

rehab, one of those expensive ones. She was still there. But she was at their wedding, but I think she went down after that, a young woman. She had a nice husband, too. But that's the way things go.

Q: Now back to the people across the hall on Monroe Street.

A: Yes. They were the Findlays. Ray Findlay was the -- what? -- for Campanella and all of the players. See, Bob would have gone up, too, when Jackie and those went up. But he had gone on the fire department. He wouldn't give that up for nothing. But I remember they were making \$45 a week on the fire department. Yes. Yes.

Q: That was quite a while ago.

A: Oh, yes it was. Many years ago.

Q: Okay. Well, now let's talk about you and some background information on you -- where you were born --

A: I was born in Live Oak, Florida.

That's near Tallahassee, and before I was two years of age, the family moved to Jacksonville. That's where I grew up, in Jacksonville, Florida. We had one school there -- high school -- one, in the big city of Jacksonville, for Blacks, you know. When I graduated from that school, I could not go into one of the high-class nursing schools because you had to come from an accredited high school. Can you imagine? It wasn't accredited. So I had to do a half year at "Edward Walters College," on my college work, you know, so that I got credit for that. That's how I was able to come to the medical college in Virginia, for my nurse's training.

But, you see, they talk about equal -- at that time, just like I told you with the nurses -- and I want that to be known, because I'd like to write a book. Everybody tells me I should write a book. But, you know, a lot has happened, because I just can't get involved with that. I can't write anymore. I can't type. I can't do anything. He's got all kinds of computers and all in there. He's really into it. I told him he should build one. That's my grandson.

But I came to Richmond, and when I finished there I went home for a little while, then I

came back to Jersey City. That's where I came to do post-graduate work, I was telling you. The girls, they were getting ready to -- they were talking about -- the word has left me -- but they were going to have nurses -- sign them up, you know, recruit them.

Q: Oh, for the military?

A: Yes. This was just at almost the end of the war.

Q: Which war?

A: The second war. But, anyway, I know where I was when Martin Luther King was assassinated. I know where I was when other things happened to people that were in the movement. And the girls came from all over, out of the country and everywhere. They came to the Margaret Hague to get that course. They would only take three minorities in the class, and I was there when Frank Sinatra's wife, Nancy, had Frankie, Jr.

Q: Oh, you were at the Hague, then?

A: Yes. You couldn't get in for these little -- what did they call them then? [Bobby-soxers] These young kids. He was singing up --

Q: Teeny-boppers.

A: Teeny-boppers. They were up at -- what was the name of the place in New York that was the hang-out, and he was there? But they came, and they had to have policemen up there, because people couldn't get on or off the elevator or anything. They were trying to get to him.

Q: In the hospital. They were trying to get into the hospital, to see --

A: Oh, yes. See, they lived on Monroe Street, too, at that time. Then he moved them up to Hudson Street, then they went to Fort Lee.

Q: Well, that was a barrier crossing of sorts, then, too. Because, as you said, at that time Italians were not wanted uptown, either.

A: But, you see -- and I don't want to say this on there -- but Frank Sinatra, his name was Marty.

Q: His father was Marty.

A: Yes. They made him a captain before the test started you know.

Q: A captain on the fire department?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: I didn't realize he was a fireman.

A: Who, his father? They were poor people. They lived in this house where they have the bathtubs in the hall, up on Monroe Street, from us. He was very well liked, but he was not able to read and write so the fellows would do his reports for him, and he would do the cooking. But they liked him. He was very nice. His mother, Dolly, was the one "to brag at you, though," and she died in a plane accident.

Q: She'd be bragging about Frankie and her husband?

A: Oh, I don't know about that, it was Frankie. Well, he was such a quiet man. You didn't even know that Marty was around. He was a nice man, but she let it go to her head. There was a book about her. I was never able to pay the price for that, because I didn't want to read that. She was supposed to have been a midwife too, but, you know, she bragged about her son. I was really taken aback when he left his wife, Nancy. But that's the way things worked. When they move up, they move out.

But I worked at Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. I used to go from Hoboken to Brooklyn to work, because that was the largest maternity hospital around, even in New York. But when these girls at "Albritton" -- "We'd better go in -- " This was before I was married, and I was finishing up at Margaret Hague. They said, "We'd better go and sign up before they draft us." That's the word I wanted. We went over to New York. I went in one door, they went in the other door. When I went back to Florida -- you only had so much time to get yourself ready to go. And I never shall forget -- my

mother had made a money belt you know and put it around my waist, and when I got to the train station, I had a layover for the next night, because I had to go to Sparta, Wisconsin for basic training. My mother called me that night. I called her, rather, and then she called me back and told me, "If you can, push the dresser across the door." Because at that time, this place they called a hotel or a motel was up over a bar. And people can tell when you're a stranger, you know; when you're not in that neighborhood.

So, anyway, I rented a room, the next morning I got up and got some breakfast. They were serving breakfast. And the taxi took me to the train station, and I went on from Chicago -- that was Chicago that we were in -- to Sparta, Wisconsin. When we went out there, there were ten Black nurses that went there. That was in Topeka, Kansas. That was segregated back, and they didn't have liquor in Kansas.

Q: It was a dry state.

A: We had one girl, she was married to a fellow from West Cape May. He was a doctor. He was overseas, and the other one -- I don't know what she was,

but I know she wanted to be white. There were ten of us, and we were working at the "Winter" General Hospital. That was the army hospital, where they were bringing these fellows in.

Getting back to that -- they said, "We'd better go, because if we don't, they might draft us and put us where they want us to go." So we went there, and that was even segregated, in New York, the signup. I went in one door, and they went out of the other door, and I never saw them anymore. And when I got out to Sparta, Wisconsin, we got the taxi to go to take you to the base -- the base was right there, where the hospital was, you see. We went in there, and, invariably, they would put you in front of the mess hall all the time. That's the one place where the officers would eat. Actually, the nurses were officers, so we ate there. They kind of segregated themselves there, but the other people weren't sitting with us, so we sat there. Then they had the German -- and I don't know whether they were Korean or what -- prisoners -- there, and they were in the dining room, eating with the officers. You wouldn't believe that, but that's the way it was. And you would see them outside, behind the prisoners, with a gun for the regular, the American prisoners, the "Black fellows,"

they'd have a gun, but those white guys were around there, working in the yard, doing everything, just as if they were at home. It was a very prejudice thing.

But one day -- I think it was "Omaha" [Omar] Bradley -- sent a memo, and he said he wanted to meet with the ten colored -- I guess they called them colored, because, you see, they had to call us lieutenants, because that was the service, you know. But they came and picked all of us up, and we went over to De Moines, Iowa. Getting back to Topeka, they had the women, the "WACs," and they would do all their business at night, on the grass, under our windows, because we weren't close to the other buildings. That's why my husband didn't want his sister to go in. He said, "They're not going to treat you right." But that's what they did, the WACs. That's why they had a bad name. You didn't see them, but you could hear them out there.

Q: My goodness.

A: So when he sent for us and we went to De Moines, you know what happened? He was sitting up there with his big cigar. Did he have a cigar or a pipe? I don't know what. But he was smoking, and we were

sitting all around, in a ring. They had chairs for us. He told us that he wanted to tell us something. He said, "You're all good nurses and you're all qualified and everything else, but he said there at this time -- follow me now -- at this time there's no place in the United States Army for Black nurses." Yes, he did. Yes, he did.

Q: And what was his rank?

A: Oh, he was the general. It was "Omaha" Bradley. He was the head man. And girl, all of us could have gone through the floor. So he said, "Now, Dr. Menninger has said that he would like you to stay and work for him." That's not the army, now. I said, "Well, I'm going home." I came on back home. Most of them did, but this girl, she was a captain and older than us. She stayed, and I don't know whether any of the others -- but you would go down the street, and if one of the nurses was -- well, even for me, they would say, "Oh, Mommy, Mommy, look. There's a Black soldier girl." But they had Puerto Ricans and everybody else. They could go into the Five-and-Dime Store, sit at the counter and eat, and what have you. We couldn't do that. We couldn't do that.

So things have been very tough. You younger people don't know it now.

Q: I know a little something about it. I used to go South in the summer.

A: You did? Where'd you go?

Q: [?] -- segregation. Whiteville, North Carolina. My parents are from there.

A: Well, you didn't have to go from there. You had it right there in Hoboken.

Q: Well, I wasn't aware of it.

A: Well, that's it. You don't have that much. And your father, in his position and everything, that put him and his family on a pedestal. They would respect you more than they would, say Lady Jane, who was right around the corner.

Q: We lived in the right section of town, for people of color. [Laughs] So that was one [?] --

A: Well, getting back to this -- I was all dressed, putting makeup on and everything, had my hair fixed -- you know, my hair, by sitting on this chair, my hair in the back has rubbed all off. They're trying to get me to cut it. My hair would grow long, but it would never get any thicker. I have a pillow, but I couldn't get to it, so I used it today. It keeps my neck straight. But I don't know --

Q: You were saying you got dressed up.

A: Yes. I don't know how the average person would feel, but I felt so -- I don't know how I felt. Because we had soldiers there. We had one or two Blacks. That was all. But we had no social life, unless we went over to Kansas City, Kansas -- or Kansas City, Missouri. We were in Topeka, Kansas, at the hospital. But it's very hard, because nursing was very hard, and during the war you didn't have the fellows for orderlies. We had one fellow, and I will never forget his name. His name was "Shore" something. A young man, but his hands were like this, and he was there as an orderly. Yes. So they always -- and -- we have to teach our children, you know.

You see, my daughter Jackie, over there -- now all of the kids had Italian mothers. One was German, and another one was -- and they even gave me Paula. I was looking for a little girl for my little boy -- not Michael. I had Mark. Mark was -- I forgot about him. We had six children, all total. Anyway, he's a big man in Miami now. He married a Jewish girl. Oh, he was a very damaged child, he had been so mistreated. He came home at five.

There's a long story behind these kids. These kids, when they come, they come with a baggage on their back, don't you kid yourself, whether or not they know their mothers or anyone. I always wanted my children, if they wanted to go and search, I was the type mother --

Q: -- for their natural parents.

A: Yes. But anyway, it's just that, life is so funny. Regardless of how smart they are, or how they work in with society or anything else -- I'm not talking about the white, I'm talking about their schooling and all -- they still don't get the same that the whites get, even for the positions, you know. That's

the thing that bothers a lot of these kids that want to do something.

Q: But there is still a struggle. It's not as open and out in the front as it was when we had organized leaders. [Interruption]

I don't have the mike plugged in, but I have it on record, so that should erase. That should erase that stuff.

A: Well, you tell me what you want, because I don't want to say anything that's going to --

Q: Well, you know -- let me see what --

A: -- about that day when "Kislak" came to the house. I was pressing some things, they rang the doorbell, I went out, and they said, "Come up," he said, "Miss Cheeks, we knew that you were the one that made the call." I said, "You did?" Well, I had cried so that day, because they said they couldn't sell the house to Blacks, because if they did, it would ruin their business. They wouldn't give them a next house to sell, for fear they'd get more Blacks. So when he came up there, I sat down --

I think we were in the living room. The living room was small. We might have sat around the kitchen table, I don't know which. But, anyway, he said to me, "We knew that was you. You know, I'm Jewish," and he had a young rabbinical student with him. He says, "I'm Jewish, too, and he says I'm supposed to be a man of the cloth. So we have empathy for you, because we suffer from discrimination, just like you. But the people won't give us the houses to sell if we're going to integrate the --" So I said, "Well, what more integrating can you do? I live in the city. My husband has a city job. And I said where do you expect me to live?" They didn't tell me, but somebody else said, "Well, now -- "

Q: See, you should let me record. Okay.
We're recording again.

A: Okay. People were saying, "Go down by the tunnel. They're tearing houses down there, and you might be able to find a place to live down there. Girl, I knew discrimination, but that really hurts you. They're going to send you out? And what did Hoboken -- you're not recording, right? Oh! I wasn't going to say that.

Yes, but, anyway, they sat there and they talked, and the salesman said to me, "Mrs. Cheeks, you know what? I'm a Jew, and I have a child that was born with a problem. You know how I must feel, and I know how you must feel." I just felt there was nothing for us to do. Where are we going to live? Finally, they were able to -- we didn't go back anymore, to look at the house. We didn't go together. When we went back, we put our key in the door. We had made the down-payment on the house and everything. It was an experience. Because they were all out there, standing around, looking. Then when we started fixing up our place, putting a new sidewalk in and all (it was all bad up there), I said to Bob, "I wonder if they ever think that we improved the neighborhood." Because we had the brick coat put on, you know, the brick coat that they were putting on, because the outside was -- a lot of the brownstones were chipping off, you know. We went there, took care of it, and put a new stoop on, a nice, red-brick stoop, to go in, with a little platform. It really looked nice. We put window boxes up and I had window-box flowers in the window boxes. Upstairs, between the two windows, Bob got two Christmas trees, and wired them together, and decorated them. Christmas morning, we played Christmas music. Everybody then started trying to

decorate, and do what we had done. But it was just that I needed something -- I was all right in my own home, but I needed something to say to me, "You're human, too." I just cried, and I think I told you before that some of the firemen, their wives and all, were there scrubbing and cleaning. The neighbors got so friendly, because some of them had gone to school with Brian. Others had gone to school with either his sister or brother, or some kind of connection.