EI-1320
MURIEL PETIONI
BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 1, 1914
INTERVIEW DATE: APRIL 28, 2004
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 89
RUNNING TIME:
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

TRINIDAD, 1919
AGE: 5

SHIP:
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is April the 28th, the year 2004. I'm here in New York City with Muriel—born Muriel Marjorie Petioni. She came through Ellis Island with her mother and sister when she was just five years of age in 1919. The family was coming from Trinidad through Port of Spain. And [clears throat] this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If you would start at the beginning, please, and say your birth date and where you were born.

PETIONI: Okay. I was born in Trinidad, Port of Spain, Trinidad. Belmont was a little town in Port of Spain.

LEVINE: And your birth date?

PETIONI: Oh, my—I was born on January 1st, 1914.

LEVINE: Okay. And your father, what was his name?

PETIONI: His name was Charles Augustan [PH] Petioni.

LEVINE: Okay. And your mother?

PETIONI: My—Rosa Allen [PH]. I don't remember middle name. I'm not sure whether she had one. [laughter]

LEVINE: H—how about her maiden name? Do you—do you recall—

PETIONI: Allen. Oh—

LEVINE: Oh, Allen was her maiden.

PETIONI: Yeah, Allen.

LEVINE: Okay.

PETIONI: Yeah, it was Allen Petioni.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Incidentally, she was born in Georgetown, British Guyana—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: —and went over to Trinidad. South America is just a stone's throw from Trinidad. In fact, on a clear day you can see Venezuela, the—the—South America.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And so she went over to Trinidad in her teens and met my father, [clears throat] and they married.

LEVINE: I see. And was your father's family from Trinidad, going back generations?

PETIONI: Yes, yes. My ancestor, the person from whom—whose name is Petioni—came from Corsica. And he—Trinidad was a—a—well, it was very rich in oil, just as South America was. So many ships i—in their trip to the Caribbean area stopped there to get oil. I'm—I'm assuming that my ancestor stopped off there. Maybe his ship stopped to get—to fuel—get fuel and he just jumped ship and stayed in Trinidad—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: —and started a family.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

PETIONI: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Did you have an extended family there? Grandma—grand—

PETIONI: Yes.

LEVINE: —parents? Aunts and uncles?

PETIONI: Let me say this. The family—the—the—my ancestor, the Corsican married an African woman and had three children. Now, I don't know how many generations back this is, but that's the story.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: He had two boys. They had two boys and a girl. Now, so there are two Petioni lines from the boys, and then the girl married into the Marquez [PH] family and there were a lot a Spanish and French, of course, people who settled on the island too. So the—the—so—so we have three lines of relatives, two Petioni lines and a Marquez line.

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: And so that we have—we have m—most of the family came here to the United States, some before my father and s—many after my father. He—he helped many of them to come.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Financially, and vouched for them. In those days, you had to vouch. People came and say that you would see that they didn't get on the public dole for at least a year or two. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Right. [chuckles]

PETIONI: So—but I still have some relatives at home that I'm not too aware of for the, you know, the spread.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: The only—the only ones that I'm close to are the—my brother and his family, my half brother.

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: And he has—he had three girls and two boys. Three girls stayed in Trinidad. They were educated. Some of them were educated in England but they went back to Trinidad. The two boys came over to this country. One is in Toronto and one is in—in Pennsylvania.

LEVINE: Huh.

PETIONI: They have settled there. Yeah.

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: Now, the other branch of the family, the other Petioni branch, though, they're the people who have relatives still there, second and third-generation relatives.

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. W—now, do you, personally, have any memories of Trinidad?

PETIONI: Yes, I do.

LEVINE: You do? [chuckles]

PETIONI: [laughs]

LEVINE: What do you remember when you think of it?

PETIONI: You know, I think I remember as far back as when I was three years old. We lived on a hill, Layan [PH] Hill, which—and when I went back to look for that hill, it was an—interesting in that there was a very small entrance to the hill. You went up some steps and you went on the hill. And what I remembered was there were—there were just three, four families up on the hill. There were two families just below us. And sort of at the crest of the hill, we had a little home and there was one family above us. I distinctly remember that. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Wow.

PETIONI: And the—the—the people lived above us on the hill had fruit trees. And I remember we'd go up as little kids. Can you imagine that?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: To get fruit from the tree.

LEVINE: What would it be? What kinds?

PETIONI: Huh?

LEVINE: What kinds of fruit?

PETIONI: Fruit. You know, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Mangoes, maybe.

PETIONI: Probably mangoes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah, because those—that was—that's a popular fruit there, you know, on the islands.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Now, when I went back many, many, many years ago, because we came, as I told you, 1919, and I didn't go back until, oh, the '70s or '80s. The—the houses were very close—it was built up.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And a lot of—close together, so I tried to identify our house. And I think—but I'm not sure I identified it because it—there was so much difference because it was so crowded o—on this hill. But I remember we had a—an outside shed for the kitchen. And we had a bathroom. I want to say a—a room to bathe, kind of down from the—down—we were this way on the hill. And towards the—the back, there was a little decline. And the bath—a large bathroom was down there. So we went there to bathe. And we had this shed to cook outside.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And we also had a—what do you call those that you collect water in?

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: You know what I'm talking about. They had big—cisterns would collect rainwater that we used—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: —too. I—I don't think that that was all of our water but I remember that very clearly. I also remember that, oh, there was an earthquake that occurred—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —before I came. And the house shook and things sort of—some things fell off of shelves, but it wasn't any more severe than that. But it was definitely something that left an impression—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: —on me.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, do you know why your father chose to come here when he did?

PETIONI: Oh, definitely. He was a journalist at home and worked for one of the largest papers there. And we were under colonialism, of course. We—British owned us. And he just wrote very—what shall I say? [chuckles] Wrote about the conditions under colonialism and why we should be independent, and he was kind of radical person. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And interestingly enough, the people on the islands, I found, were much more aware of what was going on in the world than people here. They were more world-conscious, world-read there. So he spoke quite openly about what he considered poor conditions under colonialism. And they finally told him—the powers that be finally told him that he would either have to stop writing like that or he'd better leave the country. Because if he didn't, he would be without a job and his family wouldn't be able to get a job, meaning his—his wife.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So he decided to come to America and become a physician because, as a physician, he would have an independent voice.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And in those days, you know, blacks had—most of the jobs blacks had were menial. Even when they were educated, they were menial jobs.

LEVINE: Wh—now, was he planning to go back and be a physician there or—

PETIONI: No, no, no, no.

LEVINE: Or no, he was going to stay.

PETIONI: He came to the land of opportunity where the streets were paved with gold. I don't know whether you know that. [laughter] In those years, this was the land of opportunity here. And people who had a lot came because the opportunities were better, and people who had little came. So, no, he knows—he—no, he wanted to come to America where people are freer, relatively freer. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: And—and where he could continue advocating for the independence of not only the—the British West Indies, or the West Indies, but also Africa. Because there—there was a whole movement for the independence of African countries at that time, even in that time.

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: So he came and when he came, the war was still going on.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: And—World War II—World War I.

LEVINE: War I, uh-huh.

PETIONI: And he—oh, he left us home. And he said, "Well, when I get settled, I'll send for you." So he took a job in the shipyards. And he said that he would be—his job was to climb up on this huge scaffolding for ships, building ships. And he had to—his job was to screw bolts in—in the scaf—in the—in the sh—

LEVINE: In the mast?

PETIONI: I guess so. And screw bolts in something. [laughter]

LEVINE: [unclear].

PETIONI: And he would have to catch the bolt in a cup. Somebody would throw him the bolt. He'd have to catch it in a cup and take the bolt and screw it in a cer—it was like assembly line thing.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And he said people were falling off the scaffolding like crazy, that ambulances were running back and forth all the time. It was part of the background noise, he said, because people kept fall—you know, they'd lose their balance and fall off.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: But he took that job because it was well paid, of course.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And he felt that this would help him to get settled sooner. Well, when the war was over, then he had to go into menial jobs, porter, elevator runner stuff and—because those were the only jobs that were available for, certainly, immigrants and also for even people who had been here who were educated. Jobs for blacks were very limited and I guess for immigrants too, but blacks particularly.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: So he—he took those jobs and went to City College at night and got his pre-med work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And at that time, you—you didn't have to have a degree to go into medical school. As long as you had your pre-med requirements, you could go right into medical school. So after he got his pre-med requirements, he went to Howard—applied to Howard University in Washington, which is, you know, the black—all-black school.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And entered medical school and finished in 1925. In the meantime, my mother—and I don't know—I have a feeling that my father didn't send for my mother. But my mother said, "Look, okay. You're over there a year. I think it's time that we come." [chuckles] So he came the next year with my—my—me and my sister. My sister was three and I was five.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And Papa found at first a room for us for several months until he found an apartment. And we settled in a railroad flat on 131st Street in Harlem, 1—26 West 131st Street in Harlem. And Mama went to work in the garment industry. That was the International Ladies Garment Union.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: That—that took in a lot—a lot—a lot of immi—well, not only immigrants. It was a haven for immigrants, but black people who—she had had some sewing lessons at home. In fact, most—I know you're aware that most women in those countries learned how to sew. They learned how to sew through apprenticeship. They sat with other people, could sew and do embroidery and all that kind of thing.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And that was the way of their earning a living. So she got a job as a finisher on the assembly line. It was a—the garment passed through a series of steps and you had the—the cutters and then you had the operators and you had—anyway, she was a finisher.

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: Which means, I think, she did the job where you cut threads and you s—was sure that the garment was pretty much ready to go on—so she—she got a job as a finisher. And so she sort of made enough money to buy the food and to give us basic necessities. In the meantime—and a lot of immigrants did that, from what I understand. They brought—Papa helped to bring her sisters over and they shared the apartment, paid rent in the apartment—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —to keep going. And of course, after they got settled, they moved out and so on. So when Papa finished in '25 from Howard University Medical School, he went and took a year of internship in—in North Carolina, St. Agnes Hospital, North Carolina, and then came on to New York and started [unclear] in that same apartment.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: It—it was a railroad flat so the first two rooms—actually, the—the—are you familiar with railroad flats?

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

PETIONI: Okay. With two entrances to the apartment, the front entrance went into what would—would be the parlor.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And then you—you had—you walked through the apartment to the back of the apartment where the kitchen and bathroom was. But you could—there was a rear entrance also to the apartment. So you'd go in either the front or the rear.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So Papa took the first two rooms as his waiting room and office.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PETIONI: Examining room. We lived in the back and he had a practice there for maybe a little over a year.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And in the meantime, there was a very wealthy physician up in the next block, in the 100 block of 131st Street, Dr. William Savory [PH]. He had gone to—to Montreal to McGill [PH] and taken his medicine—come back and practiced in New York for many, many years in Harlem, and also had—he was wealthy enough to have part ownership in the "Amsterdam News," which was one of the popular papers then and now, and also in the Victory Life Insurance Company. He had—he had quite a [unclear]. So Papa went to him and said that—"You know, I've just moved into the neighborhood. I've opened my practice down at 26th. And if you have any night calls that you want me to make, I'd be glad to make them for me. And if—I would hope that you would help me—if I needed any advice or backing, that you would help me." And in—in—within a year, Papa made enough money from those night calls and from people who stopped in to put money down on a brownstone at 114 West 131st.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And at that time, it was $6,000. But that was a lot of money in those days. So here again, we—we occupied part of the building for his office and our living quarters. And he continued to help people come, relatives and friends from—from Trinidad to come, give them an opportunity to come and better themselves. And they stayed with us and roomed with

us for a while. And as they got settled, they moved out. But in the meantime, my father's fortunes kept improving because the practice grew.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So—and many of the—many of the doctors, particularly the Caribbean doctors did that. They—as soon as they could, they bought buildings and used the buildings as both living quarters, office quarters and rental quarters.

LEVINE: Ah.

PETIONI: It was—it was a very common practice.

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: So—so Papa had a very large family practice, general practice and also, again, became active in national, international affairs. He was one of the early architects of the independence of the West Indies. And I remember he went to Los Angeles to a meeting pertaining to the independence of the West Indies. And also, he—our house was a—a common meeting place for the movement, for the people who—who—[chuckles] advocating for independence of the West Indies and Independent African Movement, people who were from the other island, Trinidad, Jamaica. Jamaica. A lot of people came from Jamaica. Many people—many of those same people from Trinidad and Jamaica and on the other islands moved to England and lived in England too and carried on the movement.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: We were also—it was common for the British Consul to come to our home and visit. So we had many interesting people who passed through our home.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And in many cases, if anybody was in the movement and said, you know, "I will come [unclear]," they said, "Well, you got to go by, see Petioni. He's—you know, he's hospitable and he'll talk to you and give you advice and so forth and so on."

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did—did he find—you mentioned earlier that he thought, as a physician, he would have an independent voice.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Did it work that way? Did he—

PETIONI: It did because—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: The point is that he wouldn't have to beholden to anybody for a job. And once you—you—when somebody's giving you a job, they can tell you what to do and what to say and how to do it. So he said, as a physician—and he said, "Everybody needs a doctor at sometime in their lives, unlike any other profession." I mean, a law—a lawyer, all right. But everybody doesn't have to have a lawyer. Medicine's life and death.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So he said that no matter how poor the people were, they would not only come to him, and if he—if they didn't have money, they would bring food, which was a common practice in those days.

LEVINE: Oh, really?

PETIONI: Oh, yeah. They—first of all, poor people—I found poor people in those days were very—"Dr. Petioni"—and even when I started practicing and following him, "I don't have the money now but I'll bring it when I get paid."

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: We didn't send any bills in those days. And if—if—they'd say, "Well, I don't have it but when I—when I get it, I'll give it to you." And they would bring—as I said, if they had money, they would bring a chicken or vegetables or fruit or some contribution, which helped you to eat too. You know? [chuckles] Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: So—oh, yes. So he—that was—that was why he could continue the work in the advocacy for independence.

LEVINE: Africa and for—

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And also, he became involved in civic work in—in—in—in local politics, if you want to call it that. Adam Clayton Powell—we—our—our main thor—business thoroughfare is 125th Street. It's always been on 125th Street. And for many, many years, we bought there. But we—the only kind of jobs we could get on 125th were menial jobs, scrubbing the floor or cleaning or whatnot. And Adam Clayton Powell of Abyssinian Baptist Church—you've heard of him, the congressman.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Junior. He declared a boycott to those businesses long before the boycott down South.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And saying, "Okay, we spend our money here and you've got to do better than—we have girls who can be salesgirls and secretaries and what not." So my father joined with that movement and boycotted until they started hiring black people, women and men in jobs other than menial jobs.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And that was the precursor to getting black people hired downtown.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: This was a local thing that was successful and we knew we could do it, boycott it. So—

LEVINE: Well, that—roughly, what years was that happening here in Harlem?

PETIONI: [clears throat] Let me see. I have a—I have a hard time with sequence. I think that must have been, maybe '40s or '50s.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: I think. I—I guess it could be researched through Abyssinian Church and Adam Clayton Powell.

LEVINE: [unclear]

PETIONI: Because that boycott was very well known in black history.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Yeah. But Harlem district.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Yeah. So—oh, and he also became involved in—in the medical soc—local medical society. You know, the white medical society didn't admit us. The American Medical Assoc—didn't admit black physicians. So the black physicians got together and organized the National Medical Association.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And I don't know whether you realize it. If—if—if there are two—if two racial groups—the American group is always the white and the national group is—[chuckles] is black. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, that's an interesting—

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: —observation.

PETIONI: I thought you would like that.

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

PETIONI: Yeah. So he was active in the local medical chapter of the National Medical Association to better things, because here again, we had—black physicians had trouble getting training, particularly—any kind of training. Internships.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Graduate medical training. Certainly could not—did not have any facilities for taking—putting people in hospitals and treating them themselves. We had to just send a note to Columbia or whatever and say, "This patient—I've been treating this patient and I feel he has so

and so and needs hospitalization. And I'm recommending that we hospitalize him." We could go visit the patient but we couldn't—had—didn't have any say in—

LEVINE: Wow.

PETIONI: —in—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —treating them.

LEVINE: When did that change?

PETIONI: That began changing in 19—that's a whole another story. This is going to be a three-hour interview.

LEVINE: Oh, [laughter] I'm—fine with me. Whatever time you can afford.

PETIONI: Dr. Louis T. Wright [PH], who had gone to Harvard and interned at Belleview—we couldn't get internships in many of the white hospitals—integrated the—the New York health and hospital system in 1919. Because of, I guess, his Harvard Belleview background, they were able to push him and insist that Harlem—that Harlem, being a black—a—in a black neighborhood, they set him up there. And he was the first black person to integrate the health and hospital system. Yeah, when he first went, they put him in a clinic. But shortly after that, he worked himself up to go upstairs to—to treat people on the wards. So he got there in 1919 and it was not until 1925 that Harlem Hospital admitted black interns. Okay. So that as far as I know, Harlem Hospital was the first white hospital to admit black interns after that on a regular basis. It wasn't a random thing. Every year after 1925 they would take in a certain number—we had a certain number of slots [laughs]—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: —for—for black interns. [chuckles] At that time, they took interns in every six months. Now, it's just one—once a year. But every six months, out of 12—there were 12 that came in that they admitted every six months—maybe there would be four or five blacks, spaces for blacks.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Other than that—other than Harlem Hospital, a person may get an opportunity—it was strictly by chance, maybe because they had

influence—what—but prior to that, we—95 percent of the physicians finished from either Howard in Washington or Meharry in Nashville.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And 95 percent—that's a rough estimate—95 percent had to intern in black-owned hospitals.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Black-owned and black-run—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —hospitals. And there were maybe a dozen throughout the country where we were—where we were—we had a place. There were places for us. [clears throat] And of course, many of the slots were at Howard in the hospital there at—in—in Washington and down in Nashville where the—Meharry was. There was a place at Baltimore, Provident Hospital in Baltimore. There was one in Chica—Cook—Cook County Hospital in—in—because that was a heavily black area, even it was a county hospital, a heavy black area.

LEVINE: This is Chicago?

PETIONI: In Chicago.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: The—in—Homer G. Phillips in St. Louis, black owned. Hospital in New Orleans. But anyway, they were black owned and black run. Yeah.

LEVINE: And Harlem was—was Harlem then the only one for a period of time that was a mix—

PETIONI: Yeah, in New York City.

LEVINE: And—

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: And was a mix and that—

PETIONI: And—

LEVINE: —interns—

PETIONI: Yes.

LEVINE: —could be [unclear].

PETIONI: And that was a logical place because it was in a growing black area, Harlem, you know. Growing with—Harlem became the capitol of—the black capitol of the world.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And Harlem Hospital became the training center for black health professionals, because this is the place we could go. They opened, in addition to committing many black interns—prior to that, they started a school for n—black nurses at Harlem, because there was no place for black nurses to go. And one of the citizens, and it happened to be a Caribbean gentleman, insisted, "You won't let our girls into Belleview and these other schools around. You've got to find a place for us." And after much harassing, the—the powers that be downtown said, "Okay, if you can find a certain number of black girls who want to study nursing to start the first class, we will open a school at Harlem." I don't remember what the number was. Let's say 10. I mean, it was a good number.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: And I could research it if you wanted me to. And so he got—his daughter became a member of that first class and other young women who wanted to st—study nursing. And his other daughter was at Howard with me and was—took medicine. She was a year ahead of me in—in—so she finished in the class of '26—'36. And I finished in the class of '37 at—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —at—at Howard. So—yes, so we have nurses, technicians of various kinds, physicians who have gone back to their countries all over the world, who were trained at Harlem Hospital. Not just black ones but minorities.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Minority people. In fact, one of—one of the women who—who came behind me took a trip around the world one year to visit some of the per—she was a pediatrician—to visit some of her pediatric—pediatricians who had trained at Harlem and went back to their—the countries.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Isn't that interesting?

LEVINE: Interesting, yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. So—so was Harlem Hospital considered a good hospital at this time when they were starting to—to take in black interns and nurse—in nursing school?

PETIONI: It was considered a good hospital and we were very well known for [unclear].

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Because—that's another interesting thing. Of course, most of the black people in Harlem had menial jobs. The women—most of the women had what they call day's work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: There were certain places in the Bronx where they would stand near subway stations. And white people would go and—and standing there to get job.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: And white people would go and—and say, "Well, okay. I'll take you, you, you and you." And it was, like, $3 a day in those days, in those early days, $3 a day for a day's work where the people insisted that you get—I don't know whether they had mops or they didn't want them to use—but they'd have to get on the floor and scrub on their knees, the floor. It was either that or housekeeping where people were of a better-trained caliber. And they went into housekeeping or [unclear]. You know, people got jobs as cooks and butlers. Sometimes couples got jobs as cooks and butlers in wealthy families.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PETIONI: Most of the day—day's work, many people were maybe middle class who could afford a woman to come in for $3 a day once a week or twice

a week or whatever—whatever. And then the—the—[unclear] the garment industry. Those were the two big areas where the average black person could get a job. The garment industry—pay wasn't as good in the garment industry as it was in the—in the housekeeping. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: But it was not as strenuous. And people like my mother, who could not have gone down and scrubbed floors [chuckles] on her knees, had a chance to a better income. But because at that time, $3 a day wasn't a lot but it was in keeping with the economy of that day, so that people were able to manage it. With many of the immigrants, they—they lived together. I mean, whole families lived together so each—that $3, they contributed to the household. They managed to get along.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: So the other possibility and my si—my mother's sister—she brought subsequently—she got a job cleaning railroad cars, Pennsylvania Railroad cars. That's heavy, dirty work. But that pay was very good but it was heavier work. My—my aunt was a widow with a son. And she had to make a living for herself and her son. So she lived with us for a while. And then after she got settled, she got an apartment next—next door. But she cleaned railroad cars until the war—World War II broke out.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

PETIONI: World War II, yeah. And she got opportunity to work in the hospital and get a job as a nurse's aid after working in the hos—in other words, they trained her in the hospital and she was finally able to become a certified nurse's aid. So she was able to quit that heavy job and move into a lighter one as she got older. So that was a poss—that became a possibility too. Let's see. Where were we?

LEVINE: Well, I—I was curious, actually, about your mother and the garment union. Was she involved in getting a union going at all or h—can you—did she talk about the conditions and—and what—

PETIONI: No she—she didn't talk—she didn't talk about the conditions. And I'm not sure whether—I don't remember whether the union was organized. It must have been organized in those days.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: But, you know, immigrants—and even now, from what I hear—you have these hidden immigrants who come and are held 12 hours a day working in sweatshops. But they—they—they knew what they had to go through and they took it in good grace, pretty much.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: And—and all—all of the people—I know all the people I knew and certainly all the people who came here, they knew this was a temporary—they didn't plan to do that for the rest of their lives. So you—you took it and you went on and—and tried to upgrade yourself and—and live better. But they were very good entry—entry-level jobs.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Just as nowadays, many of the—many of the people who come here take jobs as healthcare workers, home health aids.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And that in many cases, an entry level job, many of them are going on to school to—to better themselves. And many of them are fighting for better wages. And many of them have used this job as a means of going into nursing if they like the field.

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: And becoming certified in a hospital organization where they get benefits, where they get pension and sick time and all—all that kind of thing. But Mama was—well, she was the uncomplaining kind and—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: You know. But i—it wasn't—I never heard her quarrel or whine about what she was doing. So evidently, it was comfortable enough for her to be doing.

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: I would imagine she became somewhat Americanized, or she certainly had contact with a number of other women because she did that job in the garment industry. I mean, other words, otherwise she would have been at home. She might not have had the—the social contacts that she had from working.

PETIONI: Well, not really.

LEVINE: No?

PETIONI: That social contact wasn't important to her. We had our own social contact.

LEVINE: Oh, that's true. You were having—

PETIONI: Yeah, we had our own social contact.

LEVINE: —people [unclear]. Yeah.

PETIONI: In fact, my father—and I—you know, I've seen it work. The people come from other countries organize societies to bond. So there were—many Trinidad societies were organized. Papa organized a Trinidad Benevolent Society. But there were other Trinidad. There was a Trinidad and Tobago Society—Tobago Society. But people wanted to meet people and hook up with people who were from the same place and who were like them. So in defense, and a lot of the southern people did that when they came up here—I'm renting—we—we're renting a place. Right now, I'm involved with the Trinidad and Tobago Society. So I'm keeping in touch with my roots. And we're renting from the Georgetonians [PH], who have a brownstone. And the Georgetonians are the people from Georgia who came up here and organized years ago—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: —and bought a house. And they meet there and they rent the space out to keep the place going. So this was—so we organ—Papa organized the Trinidad Benevolent Society. And many of the people he knew who had come here before, who—and came since, joined that organization. And we met once a month. [clears throat] We paid—I think we paid dues every month. And if you were sick, you got $7 a week. And if you died, you got a hundred dollars for the—for the burial.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETIONI: And it was a socializing thing. And Adam Clayton Powell's second wife, Hazel Scott—I don't know whether you're familiar with that history.

LEVINE: [unclear].

PETIONI: Hazel Scott's family—parents belonged to the organization when we joined.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: When we organized it, when Papa organized it. And I remember the little girl. She became a—a pianist of—of some renown. And that's how Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. met her and married her.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: So I remember sitting on two—two telephone books. She—she was—started playing when she was three years old. And I remember playing the piano at the meetings at age three. [laughter]

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: So—so that P—Mama didn't socialize with the people at work.

LEVINE: No. She—yeah.

PETIONI: And they may not have been—you know, people at work, they come from distances. Usually, you socialize with people in your own neighborhood anyway, people close to you and easily accessible. So—but—but she had—she didn't work for social—she worked because she had to.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah. But the socialization came. And as—as Papa became a physician, he organized this when he was doing his pre-med.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: But as he [unclear] a physician, then they got into that—that social sphere, other physicians' wives, mainly from the Caribbean.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Again.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Not that—not that we didn't socialize with the Americans, but the Caribbean people, we—we knew and who were like us and had the same culture.

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: So it was natural for us to gravitate towards—towards them.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: And—and it was—so that we had—in fact, as we got older and Papa started practicing and getting settled, we organized a group called the—let me see if I can think of it—the—the Karma Club.

LEVINE: The Comma Club?

PETIONI: Karma.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Oh, Karma. Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Karma, Karma.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And it was a family-type thing. We'd have meetings, which we believed the children were part of the meetings. And then we had the Junior—the Junior Karma Club [laughter] as we got into our teens.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And that was our social—our close social circle. And we rented—in the summer, we would—most of them were professional—many physicians. Some of them were businessmen. And we would rent a house in the summer and all share the house. The wives would sp—spend weeks up there and the whole—the whole group would go up on weekends and have a big house.

LEVINE: This is in the country in New York?

PETIONI: In—one was—let me see if I can think of it. It's on the tip of my tongue. It'll come to me. But, yeah, out—out from New York.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: One year, we went to City Island and rented a house.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And at that time, the beach was nice and wasn't as crowded. It was right on the water and we would have wonderful times on weekends. Everybody would go up there. The husbands and the wives would meet and we'd cook big pots and make ice—homemade ice cream and—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: —and so forth and so on. It was really nice.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PETIONI: Really, really nice.

LEVINE: Well, the Trinidad Club or the—or the Tobago Trinidad Club, did they do other things besides health and death benefits and the whole social life? But, like, could people borrow money? Could people—I mean, were there other aspects that the club offered?

PETIONI: I don't think so. I—it—maybe people—I don't think our pot was that big.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Because these people—in those times, people didn't have a lot of money, be coming back to their $3 a day, you know, thing.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: So that I think they probably kept just money to give to sick and—that—it could be that somebody needed money in an emergency and could pay it back right away. They, perhaps, helped. I—I was too little to—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: —be involved. But I tell you what. We had in those days—and I think it's a Caribbean thing. It may not be—but we had a—a—a situation called susu [PH]. I don't know what the [laughs]—what the origin of that name was. But people, in order to save money—in those days, they made so little money, they—they didn't put money in banks, you know. So they would have a group of friends that they could trust. Let's say, 10 people who said they would pay so much a month into a pot. And they would decide how much, $10, $15, $20, $30, $40. And each of them would decide what week they would collect the money. Let's say, 10

people put, for example—let's say 10 people would put $10 in the pie every week.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Well, every week, one person—they—[unclear] would draw. And one—people would get the $40. Was it 10—10 times—

LEVINE: Oh, a hundred dollars.

PETIONI: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: [unclear], uh-huh.

PETIONI: So—so you could take that and buy something substantial with it.

LEVINE: Oh, what a nice idea.

PETIONI: Wasn't that nice?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Rather than try to put it in a bank. And so that was their way of getting—accumulating a sum of money at one time to do something with. Maybe they need to buy whatever—furniture or clothes or whatever. So that was their way of—of—of accumulating money. Now, that would not be an emergency thing. It would be different. So it could be that the society had a little emergency fund they would lend for short term—short-term loans, a week or two, or month or so.

LEVINE: And this susu would—in other words, it—it would—everyone would get the—

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: —the whole pot at some—

PETIONI: Absolutely.

LEVINE: It wasn't, like, drawing it or anything. It just rotated around.

PETIONI: Yeah, it rotated around.

LEVINE: So everybody got—[unclear] they got—

PETIONI: I don't know whether they drew—maybe they drew what—whether they'd be number one, number two, number three or number four.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: They had different ways.

LEVINE: Right, uh-huh.

PETIONI: Yeah. But it was a very—and they still—some groups still do that. Some groups—Caribbean groups still use that system to save money. They might put $30 or $40 in the pot. So if they would—maybe thinking of buying a home or whatever, they would have a—a good amount of money—

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: —to maybe even put in the bank, which was what they wouldn't do if they were putting money in the bank. You follow what I'm saying?

LEVINE: Yes, I do.

PETIONI: Yeah, because—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —you have an obligation to your friends to save that kind—amount of money.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah, [unclear].

LEVINE: Let me just ask a question about your father. Wh—what was he like as a father? I mean, I—I sort of have a sense of him in the world and—and—

PETIONI: [laughs]

LEVINE: But how was—

PETIONI: You know, he was a very—when I think—I think I was very, very fortunate in my—in my parents. Very fortunate. He was—he had lived and he died around 51—age 51, 50—but he had lived a lifetime in those years. What—now, we feel that 50 is young.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: But in those days, people grew up fast. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And when he was coming along in those countries and still in some of the countries that are [unclear] and—and some of the undeveloped countries, you got a good, strong sixth grade education. Six—the six grades was free education. You got good, strong reading, writing and arithmetic skills. If you had money or if you were very bright, you had a chance to go onto what they called secondary school, so that if you had money, you could pay for that secondary school. If you were poor, were bright, you would get scholarships. If you were not poor or bright—I mean, if you were not bright or had money, you went and apprenticed yourself to somebody with skill. So the girls went usually to learn how to sew. The boys learned maybe to apprentice themselves with a tailor or shoemaker or what—to learn those skills so they were able to make a living. Papa says that when he was coming along, he—he—even though his family was middle class and his father was a government worker, Grandpa would stop by the rum shop on Friday. And they never knew how much money he—he was coming home with. So Papa said he was a boy living in that household with two girls. And it was his job to go and borrow money between—between paychecks—

LEVINE: Pay—uh-huh.

PETIONI: —for—to keep the family till the next payday. So he said he—he would go to the rum—to the tailor, make friends with the tailor and let the tailor teach him how to patch his pants. And he would ta—make friends with the shoemaker [laughs] to make—learned how to [laughs]—so I guess Papa was a kind of raggedy boy. But they went to private school.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: The girls were sent to private school. So—so really, like so many middle-class families, you know, the lifestyle is one thing, but they sometimes get caught in huge credit card bills and all that kind of thing.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PETIONI: So—so he knew—what I'm saying, he knew what it was to be poor but he was well read and well educated, went to one of the finest private high schools. In those days, they called it college. The secondary school was called college and then you went to university—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: —for professional work. And you either went to England or Canada. A few to America, but with England and Canada, of course, you had the—the fact that it was a British country.

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: So he knew what it was to be poor and struggling. And he was very benevolent. He was—he was very aware of poverty and the problems of poverty. And he—I guess he—he sort of emphasized, "Do onto others as you would have others do onto you." And he'd say, "If somebody gives you something, don't—don't refuse it. Don't insult him by refusing it." Even if you had to go around the corner and throw it in the trash, accept it gracefully.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Because people would give you what they could afford to give you. And you didn't—you—you see what I mean?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah, yeah. He was strict but not—not unreasonably strict. I know coming up—well, in those days, there was so few blacks. When I went to school, when I went to junior high school here at 136th Street and St. Lucas [PH] Avenue, half the class was still white because they—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Most of the blacks were concentrated in what we call Central Harlem but—but all around west of Central Harlem and southeast—

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: —was still a lot of black, Italians, Polish—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —Jews—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —living there. So he was strict but he was benevolently strict. He insisted that we all had to sit down for dinner together at six o'clock. And regardless of what his professional [chuckles] obligations were, he was sitting down and expected all of us to sit. Well, that wasn't difficult in those days. You didn't wander around the street [chuckles] in those days—

LEVINE: No.

PETIONI: —like you do now. Particularly girls.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And he said, "Okay, you can talk about anything you want to talk about. I may not agree with what you're saying but you have the right to say anything you want to say at the table." And it was not a scolding table. It was a table where we talked about—he—he was quite a storyteller. So he'd talk about his childhood and his memories and the people he came in contact with and his experiences. And we would talk about school. And it—it was a—it was one of the nicest times in my life, that sitting down around the table with Papa talking about experiences and sharing his experiences with us, and us being able to say—to share our experiences with him. Mama didn't talk much. She was the silent one. But she went ahead with the program and—and was—you know, people say, "You never talk about your mother." But Mama was sort of a—she was a fixture but she was a—like a rock.

LEVINE: Solid, uh-huh.

PETIONI: Yeah, solid, even-tempered.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Went along with Papa, kind, tolerant, not given to a temper. She was a February person, not given—Papa was the one that was temperamental but not—Papa, sometimes he would quarrel with us or quarrel with Mama. [laughs] And his voice would boom, you know, all over the neighborhood. So we'd go shut the windows and doors so people wouldn't hear us. [laughter] You could hear Papa all over the place. [laughter] But he was also interesting, very interesting and—and charismatic and had this bald head. I'll have to show you a picture of him. Bald—he—he was prematurely bald. As a young man, he was bald. When I got done, he had just this rim [unclear] with a big bald head and a high forehead. He said—I think maybe we wanted to use bangs when we were small. He says, "No, no, no. Don't use—don't cover up your forehead. That's a sign of intelligence. A high forehead is a sign of

intelligence. Don't cover it up." [laughter] But he—he gave us many, many [unclear] molds to go by. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: "The race is not for the swift, nor the battle for the strong but for he that endureth to the end." Like the tortoise and the hare. The tortoise is slow and he takes his time—ahh—but he gets there just the same. But that's the way [unclear], whereas the hare, he's so fast. He jumps around and he goes here and he goes there. And sometimes the tortoise is there and he's still back here fooling around. There were many expressions that he gave me that were a good basis for my—for my living—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —that sustained me through the years.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: That were very—and he told me. He says, "You know, you can do anything you want to do if you're focused. You don't have to be brilliant. Just—just—all you have to do is be a good "C" student," he said. "And get focused. You can do anything you want to do." And he was right because I was a little bit above average. But I didn't consider myself [unclear]. But I was—well, I showed enough—I was a cut above the av—average student, partly because—and this is the thing I realized as I got older—because he was pushing me. I came from a good, solid middle class home where he expected things of me. He said, "Now, you—your grandfather was a college graduate. Your father's a college graduate and I expect you to be." That's—that's taken for granted.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: No question. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So he told us that he had high expectations of us. He went to school regularly and quarreled with the principal. And in those days, we had very good teachers but there was still a lot of prejudice, a lot. Sometimes it showed; sometimes it didn't. But we had—in junior high, we had a student government. We had a mayor and a commissioner of records, commissioner of traffic and all that. And I was first commissioner of records, voted. The students voted. Commissioner of records then became mayor. And yet, when Papa went to school and talked to Mrs. Cornman [PH], the principal, because he would go to see

how I was doing and all. And she'd say, "Oh, I don't see anything unusual about Muriel. She's—I don't see her really being"—

LEVINE: [unclear]

PETIONI: In spite of the fact that I was voted by the student body.

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: You see what I mean? She didn't think I was unusual or would amount to that much. I mean, that was the implications. "I don't see what you're making such a big fuss about, you coming here and asking a lot of questions."

LEVINE: Yeah, very destructive.

PETIONI: So that [unclear]. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah, and that—that permeated school for a while. That still permeates the school to some extent. But—so as I said, you know, he said, "You don't have to be brilliant." And as far as success in medicine, as I—after I took medicine, my—I—when I first came back to [unclear], I finished in '37, interned at Harlem Hospital and then worked at some of the black colleges in the South. I—actually, I went to specialize in OB/GYN. And after I'd been there at Homer G. Phillips in St. Louis in my residency for three months, my father said, "Well, I heard of a job for you in—you know, I need some help with your brother and sister. And I think you ought to take it." And this was a job that he found out through friends as a college physician at Wilberforce University in—in Ohio. Xenia, Ohio right outside of Dayton.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: So I—I was college physician there for a year and then I went to Alabama State Teacher's College in Montgomery, Alabama, the cradle of the Confederacy and the site of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King. And then I went from there to Bennett College in Greenford [PH], North Carolina. And I worked at Hampton [PH] for a couple summers. These were all black colleges, [unclear] colleges.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And were you teaching scientific courses?

PETIONI: College physician and—and hygiene. You know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Basic health and hygiene, yeah. And then during the war—I had met my husband in Alabama State Teacher's College. He'd came—come down from Minnesota. He was drafted so when he came home—he was from Chicago. So when he came home from the service in '46—'46, I moved to Chicago with him and was housewife for four years. [laughter] Couldn't practice because I didn't have a license. So—and he, in the meantime, after having had a master's in education psychology, went back to school at [unclear] University and took law while we were in Chicago. And then my family got after me. You know, "We spent all that money on you. You better come on back, practice. Come on back to New York and practice," which I did in 1950. But—let's see. Where was I?

LEVINE: You were saying about your husband and you were in Chicago. I was curious as to what decided you to go into medicine? Do you know what—what it was that—

PETIONI: Oh, yeah. Surely, that was easy. I didn't have any—my—my sister was very talented. She—she—she played—we all took music lessons, incidentally, when we were kids. In fact, when you were a kid in those days, and to some extent now, you had to either take music or take dancing lessons or—or—or learn how to recite, because in those days, you know, we didn't have any—

LEVINE: TV.

PETIONI: —television and very little radio. Radio was primitive in those days. We had crystal sets—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —in the '20s. So we took les—25 cents a lesson—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —from a woman, a black woman called Madam Wade [PH]. She was the teacher in those—and she taught all the instruments, piano, violin, everything. And so I took piano. My sister took violin and my brother took saxophone somewhere in there after he came and joined us from Trinidad. And my—my sister had a—had a flair for playing the violin and played in the high school orchestra. And she had a nice singing voice too. Well, I didn't have any talents. I didn't have any talents like that. But in the meantime, moving up into the brownstone on 131st Street, you know, you answer the doorbell and the telephone for the patients. And I

kind of liked it. I thought, 'Gee, it'd be nice to be a doctor.' So at age 12, I decided I wanted to be a doctor.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PETIONI: So—and—

LEVINE: Did that please your father that you—

PETIONI: Oh, you know it did.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: My brother took medicine too.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: So he—he—he—oh, the other thing he did was he provided us with role models. He would introduce us to the professional—well, we were in a professional circle anyway. But women—he introduced to women, black women who had achieved in the professions.

LEVINE: Oh, my.

PETIONI: So he—when we went to—I told you, he interned at St. Agnes Hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina. And he met the Delaney family, who owned—who ran the—there was St. Augustine College that my—my brother attended before he went to medical—because it was inexpensive. You know, cheaper than going to school here. So this Delaney family ran the college, ran the hospital. They were the—they—they ran the city pretty much professionally. So he met—he was—he was older than average as a medical student [unclear]. So he got very friendly with the Delaney family. And when he came back to New York, the Delaney family referred him, or intro—give him letters of instruction to their children who were here, the two sisters and two brothers.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Now, they had offices on Seventh Avenue between 135th and 136th Street that were—one—one of the—one of the daughters—there were four children up here, two boys and two girls. One was a teacher.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: One girl was a dentist. One boy was a dentist and the other boy was a lawyer. And they all had offices—three of them had offices in this place, office on 100—on Seventh Avenue. So Papa took us—took me. I think my sister must have been too small. Or maybe he took both of us. I don't remember—took us by the office. He said, "I want you to meet the Delaneys. And this is a lady dentist."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So—now, I never met the teacher. I never met her because she was in school. So—and he—so he made it a point to introduce us to—when I was a teenager, the first black woman to intern at Harlem Hospital, Dr.—Dr.—oh, gosh. I'm having a senior moment. [chuckles] Anyway, he went over to her. He had met her. He went over to Har—took me over to Harlem Hospital and paged her. [laughs] She comes out and said, "I want you to meet my daughter. She wants to study medicine." [laughs] And says, "See, she's black. You're black. If she can do it, you can do it too."

LEVINE: Wow.

PETIONI: So—and later, of course, we became good friends because in the mean—she was very young at that—in the meantime, I graduated and started practicing. She was practicing. In fact, she became my—my family physician.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And we finally became neighbors because she lived in this complex in this building and was still living here when I moved in here in 1974.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, when you first met her, d—do you think it had the impact your father had intended? Or do you think it was just kind of under the surface until later that, you know, that here was this woman, and I can do it to? Or d—did you have a strong sense of yourself and that you would—that you would achieve when you were young?

PETIONI: Not really. Well, I was a little—I was a very quiet child and not too sure of myself. You know, my sister was, [chuckles] you know, [unclear]. Yeah.

LEVINE: Same with me.

PETIONI: Yeah. [laughter] No, I was kind of—I didn't feel too strong in myself.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: But you know, that's another thing.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

PETIONI: You know, you plant the seed and [unclear] frequently with water. It may water way after but you plant the seed. So that seed was implanted in me. "You're going to achieve. You're going to be somebody." And the fact that there were people who looked like me, my color, who had achieved—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: —meant that, you know—so you asked me whether it had any influence. I'm not sure whether it had influence overtly, but sort of covertly.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: In my psyche, subliminally.

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: It was there.

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: So—and I think of that now in inspiring kids, that—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —somebody has to believe that you can do. If there's nobody to believe you can do it and keeps scolding you, telling you you're not nothing, you never amount to anything. And this is what a lot happens, even in black families. A lot—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: A lot of parents are so stressed and so frustrated that they—they—I use the word “cuss.” But they demean their children.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Maybe it happens in white families too. I don’t know that much about white families. [chuckles]

LEVINE: I think it does, yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah. But, “You’re no good. You’re stupid. You’re dumb. You’ll never amount to anything.” And they become stupid and—and dumb and not—and—and doing things or getting in jail. So our jails are full of black people, mostly black and Hispanic people. Seventy-five, eighty percent of our people in jail are black people. And you know there’s something wrong with that.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

PETIONI: You know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: So—so—and I found this, that many—who was it? “Manchild in the Promised Land” was one of the early books. And this fellow said he was—he was really going down to destruction. He was a bad—he got into [chuckles] all kinds of trouble. And some counselor somewhere in one of these after-school programs told him, “You know, you’re a bright boy. You can do better than this. Why don’t you straighten up and fly right?” And he said, “That guy”—

LEVINE: [unclear]

PETIONI: —“touched that spark in him.” He became a writer of some renown.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: “Manchild in the Promised Land.” Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. I—[tape off/on] okay, you were saying?

PETIONI: I’m talking about the village.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

PETIONI: It takes a village to—

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: —raise a child. My sister and I were on 125th Street near the post office. There was a post office be—on west 125th. And we were outside of the—and a woman came up to us and said, "Aren't you two the Petioni girls?" We said, "Yes, ma'am." She said, "Well, don't forget. The eyes of the world are upon you now." Another time, I was attending junior high and I was on my way home. And we were—well, my father originally was a Catholic but he—he dropped out of Catholic—but Mother was Episcopalian. So we used to go to Sunday school at St. Phillips Church. St. Phillips Episcopal Church was located 133rd and—between Seventh and Eighth Avenue. The school was at St. Nicolas. So we had to pass by the church to come home. And we would frequently stop by the parish house because we knew the people in there to say hello and all. So we stopped by there one afternoon. I did with a friend. I don't remember who the friend is. And maybe we hung out maybe 15 to 20 minutes. I got home and Papa said, "What were you doing hanging out the side of St. Phillips instead of coming straight home from school?" Somebody had c—seen me and called him and said, "I saw Muriel hanging out in front of St. Phillips Parish House." So that's the village. It was not only the—the family; it was the village. The whole village expected and—well, as Caribbean people, we formed our own little circle.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Social circle. And there were not that many of us in those days. We were—we were kind of a small group. And most of us who came at that time went on—most of the men went on to—to better themselves studying medicine. Mostly medicine and law, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Dentistry. So you kind of knew each other.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: It was—it was like a small town. And we—we kind of knew each other or knew of each other. We didn't know each other. We knew of each other, because here again, it was a comfort thing. Okay, you see, he's there and she's there and they're doing that. And we—we had the

culture in common and the color in common and all that. So we knew the people were looking at us and expected us—

LEVINE: Yes.

PETIONI: —to—so you had all that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And it does take a village. It takes not only a strong family but it also takes that whole social—social circle that that family belongs to to say, "Yeah, well, how you doing? What are you doing? What are your grades?" You know, "Where are you planning to go to school?" I do it myself now and say, "Well, okay. You're in high school. What are you doing? What are you taking? What do you think you want to do?" It keeps that push so that you know—and—and many organizations in—in the early—well, not so—yeah, many years ago a lot of the girls—a lot of the kids were sent to private schools, because the public schools were just not doing a good job. It's worse now but it wasn't that good then. And the—the middle class, a professional group organized organizations to bring their children together in groups who were in private schools where they were maybe one or two in that private school. And you knew—the chances are that you knew they wouldn't bond with their classmates. So they brought them together in social groups to bond with similar families who were going—upper class families.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And those—those organizations flourished. They met frequently. They had social affairs. And now, when we go to National Medical Association conventions, it is—they're meeting in San Diego this year—doctors—many doctors will take their whole families there.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Where there are activities for the wives and ac—activities for the children. Here, they meet other children from across the country, upper middle class kids from across the country that they bond with. So it's like, if you've been to any kind of school, wherever you go you've got a contact there with people who—who are like you.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: So this is the way the blacks have maintained their middle-classness and—and sort of shared. In fact, we say that if you belong to that—I don't know what percentage—used to be the upper 10 percent—but the

professional—the black professional group—generally speaking, you either know each other or know of each other, because there's a—a sort of a—a—I don't know how to put it. But you understand what I'm saying.

LEVINE: A kinship or a—a—

PETIONI: Well, there—there's not only a kinship but a—a—it's not coming to me. They have formed groups that are support groups.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And invariably, if the person's well known, that name travels.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: So take my name. I have made the—lucky enough to have made the kind of reputation that a lot of people know me because of the many things I've done. So if you call the Petioni name, a lot of people recognize it from my father and from me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And—and I've—I've been involved in many, many org—history makers, 'Who's Who in America," "Who's Who Women in America." I've gotten the—Howard University has given me this—honored me as a distinguished alumni, year of 2000. So that word has spread and that—so that I'm only not known in Manhattan—

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: —Harlem and Manhattan, but throughout the country, I have been very—very active in the National Medical Association, organized the Medical Women of the National Medical Association many years ago, because at that time there were so few of us that we didn't know who were physician—women physicians, who were doctors' wives.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And we never got together. We would go—for example, I belonged to the—the general practice section. So I'd know the girls in that section. Other girls would belong to the Pediatric Section or the Surgical Section, The OB/G—but we never had a chance to get together. And when

affirmative action came in, man—many people started looking for not only a black physician, but—but a black woman physician to get a double whammy out of the affirmative credit. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And they would write me because I'd already done active here. They would write me and say they were looking for a physician, Idaho or Wisconsin or something. They were looking for a black woman physician for this or that. So I said, "Well, gee. I don't know these people." So in 1976 when I went to the convention, I decided to try to get the black women physicians together. And I got some of my friends here who were in different fields. I says, "When you go to the convention this summer, you get the names of all women physicians in your section."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So in a couple days after we got there, we had something like, oh, 30 or 40 names. And we called a meeting and they were delighted.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: We all—we—we organized the Medical Women, National Medical Association. And we started having—in a couple years we started having luncheon and a meeting. And that luncheon was named after me a few years ago, the Muriel Petioni, M.D. Women's Luncheon. Yeah. So—so here again—in fact, we started the soci—Women's Society here. We have a—we have a male/female society, which is a local chapter of the National Medical Association. But then the women decided we needed to get together, because here you had these women who were—for a long time, and there still is a certain s—a little second-classness to women physicians, you know. Ma—male—men have been the dominant group for a long time. [chuckles] They continue to be dominant. So when I finished, most of it—here again, I'm saying that most of us finished from Harlem or Meharry so we knew each other.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Yeah, that bonding. But then we started having affirmative action where one was admitted to—first one to finish from University of Virginia Medical School, another, first one to visit from this medical—where they were alone or one or two, so that when they came out into practice they were very isolated. They didn't know anybody. So we decided we'd organize and invite them to join a society. So we—some of us got lists together again, joined. So we still have—we now have the Susan Smith

McKinney Stewart Medical Society, which is named after the first woman who finished from—who finished from a qualified medical school to practice in the New York City area.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: She practiced in Brooklyn and there's a—there's a school named after her and a nursing home named after her and a high school named after her. She made such an impression—

LEVINE: Wow.

PETIONI: —on—as one of the early black physicians to practice at in New York.

LEVINE: Yeah. Could you say anything about what you had to undergo, being black and a woman? Were—were there—were there different kinds of—[chuckles] of cross fires that you had to withstand?

PETIONI: You know, I was very lucky. And people say, "Oh, you must have had a hard time, one of the early woman physicians." Luckily for me, I did not have a hard time.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: I went to school in—in—in Harlem, finished from one of the—finished from the women's high school where women came from all over the city and went to Wadley [PH] High School. And those women went on to great things, regents and all that. And then I went to NYU for two years. And then my father, having finished from Howard and knowing that it might be difficult for me to get into medical school, suggested that I transfer to Howard for my third year college to sort of, kind of have a little extra "in" to get into school, which I did. I finished my pre-med training at Howard and then entered school, entered medical school. At that time, you could enter after three years if you had completed all the pre-med requirements, which I did. So I entered Howard Medical School after my third year in med—in college and got my degree at the end of my first year medical school. They had that system.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Oh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: So I got my bachelor's degree in '34 and then my medical degree in '37. So—and then when I finished, I interned at Harlem Hospital. So what

I'm saying is that I went to a black medical school, came and went to a hospital in my neighborhood four blocks from where I lived where there were many black interns. So I didn't go through—I didn't have to go through any prejudice stuff.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And then I started practicing. Well, the first year—well, after I—I told you I was a college physician for many years. Finally, when I came back to New York in 1950, I practiced—started practicing in my cousin's office. My cousin preceded me. He finished. My—my father finished in '25. He finished in '30. And I practiced. He had a vacancy in his—he had a—a professional building where has office was and several [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So I practiced there for a while and then, within a little over a year, my father died. So I was able to move into his office. So I'm saying, I moved into—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —familiar quarters and finally, with my father, ready made practice to some extent. So I sailed through there very easily. I—I—I had no hard time. My father said, "Look. You study. I'll find the money to send you to school. Don't worry." And in those days, there weren't jobs available for—for blacks in the summer and—and certainly not for women.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So he found the money. He was very astute businessman. I'm telling you, that guy was—he was smart. [laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Not only did he practice medicine but he knew how to budget. He knew how to have other means of income. He bought property, you know, and all that. So I was lucky.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Now, that was not true of many other—other women and men going into medical school. Many of them had a hard time, not only financially but socially. When I say socially, a lot of prejudice was from other, not only interns but attendings—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —who didn't think women should be in medicine. You know, black women should be in medicine. Many of them had trouble as—as other places opened up after the affirmative action, you—if you were black wearing a white coat, you couldn't be a doctor.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: You had to be somebody cleaning the—so they were disrespected. And sometimes, patients wouldn't even let them wait on them.

LEVINE: Ah.

PETIONI: And particularly, in GYN and OB.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Yeah. So—and they're the ones that broke the barriers and were pioneers in—in [unclear] some of these white hospitals with white internships. And—and even not—not interns, just as medical students.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How is the situation today? Just—just an overview.

PETIONI: It's much, much better.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Much, much better. Women now—women and black women have been admitted to—you name the specialty they have been admitted to.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: The most exotic sp—neurology, neurosurgery, cardiovascular surgery, transplants. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Just one or two but they've been able to break through the barrier. But we fought a long time for that. When I first came back and started practicing in 1950, Columbia would only admit from zero to two students, black students, in—in medical school. Columbia and NYU.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: They couldn't find qualified people. But when affirmative action came in, and because they got government money, they had to find—they found them.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: They found them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And of course, they were surprised that when they found them—of course, not only did they admit them, but many people needn't apply, because Columbia had the reputation. I'm saying Colum—NYU was the same thing but worse. Worse than Columbia. They were not as liberal as Columbia. But when—but when—so when they decided to admit people, they were competing with Johns Hopkins and Harlem and Yale and [laughs] all that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: But they didn't look. They just didn't look, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

PETIONI: So it's much better but there is still—there is still problems, I think with women too—with women generally, but black women particularly. Black people just—and minority—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —women. But the—the color thing is—is very—is quite a barrier. And I think it—maybe it's because of whole history of slavery and—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —and—and being involved in slavery and being in three-quarters of the man and—and—

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: And even after—even after Reconstruction—you know, after Reconstruction, we became senators and congressmen. And then they decided that was too much. "We can't allow that," so they started clamping down on—on black people and pushed them back. And I understand during World War II they were bringing German prisoners to

the United States. And German prisoners were treated better than returning veterans who fought over there.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: So—and here again, as I said, you know, that most of the people on death row throughout the United States are black, falsely accused. Somebody says they got raped or they—or they did this or they did that, and very little—poor representation. And—and they get—they are the accused and other people get away with it. In fact, there have been some cases. I don't know whether you've read that—where it's been found that the people are innocent. No question, and they still won't let them out of jail.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: So when—and the thing that—that's occurred to me through the years in watching this and reading, you get a stereotype and people can't get away from that stereotype. You know, their prejudice is so strong that just, that there's a different sublim—liminally, I think.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: It—it isn't deliberate. People are not always conscious.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: They talked—you—you have read the study about women—black people, actors trained to go to physicians?

LEVINE: No.

PETIONI: You didn't hear about that?

LEVINE: No. Say it. I don't know.

PETIONI: Yes. It has been felt that black people are not treated the same as white people as far as patients at health care is concerned. So they trained black and white people, who were actors, to go for health care. And there's no question that the black people were treated differently, not given access—

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: —to certain tests or certain opportunities, to—to facilities—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —for the health care.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: Do you remember the story of blue eyes and brown eyes? Do you remember that story?

LEVINE: I don't think so.

PETIONI: Okay. A—a little teacher out west in some little town where they almost had a one-room school—not quite. No. But it was small school.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And she decided to—to teach her children—her third-grade children about prejudice. And she said she got some of the kids together and say, "Now, you all are blue eyes and you all are better than everybody else. And we're going to work this out, that the blue eyes are better and smarter and prettier than the brown eyes." So she did it with the blue eyes. And—and she told that—and—and all the ramifications of the blue eyes being better and stronger. And of course, the—the brown eyes were punished or they were demeaned or—"Well, you don't know," or, "That's not the right answer." "Oh, how stupid." You know, "You're a brown eye. You—you just don't know anything." And she said by the—the end of that experiment, she had the—the brown eyes crying, oh, just—just devastated because they were put in that inferior position. And then they act—they started acting out too. They started being fresh [laughs] and talking up and saying bad things to the teachers and getting in fights.

LEVINE: Ah—but—

PETIONI: But their blue-eyed classmates, some of them were close friends before that. But then when you changed and had the blue eyes were better than the brown eyes, there were fights and all kinds of bad behavior.

LEVINE: That's a great experiment. Yeah.

PETIONI: But then she switched. She said, "Okay. Now, the brown eyes are going to be the better ones." Same thing happened. Same thing happened. And she—that experiment was carried throughout the country. She talked to people in jails. She talked to people in various segments of the population to show how prejudice can be developed—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —and perpetuated, and the effect that prejudice has on people's behavior.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Inter—wasn't it an interesting experiment?

LEVINE: Very interesting.

PETIONI: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, amazing.

PETIONI: So that's what's happened with black people, foreigners, with for—now, of course, we're doing it to the—the Muslims—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —with the nine thing.

LEVINE: 9/11.

PETIONI: They look like this and because they look like that, and Muslims are bad and they—they attacked that—those planes. So everyone is a—every Muslim is a suspect. And they have given newspaper stories of the kinds of disrespect and—and not only disrespect but violence that many of them have had to put up with because some wise guy says, "Okay. So you all are bad people. And"—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: —"we're going to hurt you."

LEVINE: You know, talking about human nature, after 9/11 on the subways and things and people were coming in from out of town to help and all, the—I felt that black and white relations were better than I have seen them.

PETIONI: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: And of course, now we had a common enemy. [chuckles]

PETIONI: Yes.

LEVINE: Right?

PETIONI: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: So we were united.

PETIONI: Yes.

LEVINE: So that's another example—

PETIONI: Exactly.

LEVINE: —of how—

PETIONI: People, yeah.

LEVINE: —people perceive and shift and—

PETIONI: And—and, you know, the other thing is when we get into trouble—you remember with the blackout and all—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: —people got very friendly. They would stop to give people lifts and—

LEVINE: Right, right.

PETIONI: —help and all—

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: Black and white and blue and gray and everybody—

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

PETIONI: —were trustful and helpful and kind. And then that crisis passed and, of course, people [unclear]. [laughs]

LEVINE: Right. [chuckles] I like to think it notched things up just a little bit better.

PETIONI: I think so. I think so.

LEVINE: I—I think it did.

PETIONI: I think so. When we moved over to Teaneck—I moved—moved over to Teaneck in 1955.

LEVINE: Teaneck, New Jersey?

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Yeah, we—I lived here. When—that's another long story. I lived in Chicago. I came home. I left my husband in Chicago and—and sort of started practicing, got established and then he joined me a couple of years later. And after we got settled, we bought a house in Teaneck because we felt that the public school wasn't doing what—right by my son. And if we moved over to Teaneck, the whole family could enjoy suburban living, rather than sending him to private school here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So we moved over there and we were among the first blacks to—to move into the northeast part of Teaneck.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: There was just one family liv—that had been living there for generations. But other than that, people—black people living—[unclear] but not Teaneck. Teaneck was just opening up for expansion.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And many of the people moved in from New York. Many of the Jewish people moved in from the Bronx and Manhattan, blacks moved in from Manhattan. And as soon as we moved in, signs went up—signs for sale w—went up.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Yeah. The stereotype. "Well, our property values are going to go down. There'll be a lot of [unclear] parties. Houses won't be—won't be kept up." And people started selling the homes. But there was a group that tried to hold the—hold the line. So a lot of white people still stayed and encouraged other people to—to settle there. And, however, the realtors, they—they did—they began to do—they would say, "Well, you want to—you don't want to buy. If you're a white person, you don't want to buy. This is going to turn black and you won't want to live in an all-black neighborhood," because we had friends—

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: —who wanted to move—white friends who wanted to move. And that's what they told them. "You don't want to move. In a few years, it'll be all bl—you want to live in an all-black neighborhood." So what—I started—said that to say this, that many of the—the people who moved in had—had—were—well, we integrated and other—other families integrated. So one of the girls who'd finished from Hunter who had black classmates said—she says, "You know, I've—I've had—I've—I've, you know, associated with black classmates but I've never been at a black person's home."

LEVINE: Oh, hmm.

PETIONI: So we got into each other homes and with each other's children. And of course, you get these stereotypes. And since we were all middle class, black people had homes as nice or better than whites. It just depended on what your orientation was. So that was a kind of a shock to some of the—and we—we—we bonded. We formed an organization and we—we even had—we even put on a musical play to—to—to be sort of part of the bonding and all. And I—my husband got—my husband became producer and I was on a chorus line. We had a lot of fun. [laughs] A mixed group. It was really nice. In fact, there was a book written and, you know, I—I think I lent that book out and I haven't been able to locate it. And I've got a lot of books that I've got to look through every—you know. But about the movement to the suburbs.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: Yeah, it was very interesting. But I'm t—psy—I'm—I think you apre—since you're a psychologist, this whole thing is so interesting psychologically of prejudices. And my father used to say that big fleas have little fleas put in their legs to bite them. And little fleas have little fleas and so ad infinitum.

LEVINE: Ah. [chuckles]

PETIONI: But everybody seems to have to have somebody to dump on. You know, all societies, somehow. The Tutsis and Hutsis [PH] and Muslims and non-Muslims and the—the—the—I don't know what it is about people that they—they need to have somebody to—to dump on.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: Have you noticed that? Had you paid any attention to it? Have you thought about it?

LEVINE: Yeah. I think the people who do the dumping are usually the people who don't have a security in themselves. You know, they—they—they've probably been dumped on themselves. I mean, I learned that in the prison, that, you know—I mean, it's just common sense. If you've been abused you probably become an abuser.

PETIONI: But then also—

LEVINE: You know what I'm saying?

PETIONI: —people who have power dump on people who don't have power.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: And try to keep the powerless powerless.

LEVINE: Mmm.

PETIONI: So they can be—retain their power.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: People want power.

LEVINE: Yeah, they do.

PETIONI: You know?

LEVINE: I noticed that.

PETIONI: I—I don't know what it is about human beings. [laughs] They want to—

LEVINE: Yeah. I never wanted power. [laughter] I never liked to tell anybody what to do.

PETIONI: Yeah. I just want to—I just want to satisfy [unclear] and—and the universe. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: But you say, "I never wanted power." I have power now, not because I consciously looked for it.

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: It just happened. You know?

LEVINE: Yes.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, then, you know, that's probably—you're probably a person who—who uses it well. It's when you're going after power for power's sake—

PETIONI: Sake.

LEVINE: —that—

PETIONI: And use it to exploit other people.

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: That's right.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: That's right.

LEVINE: Yeah. How about the Depression, just stepping back a bit? D—how did the Depression in this country affect you and your family?

PETIONI: Well, it was—it was lucky that it didn't affect us. By that time—

LEVINE: Your father was out of medical school and practicing, I guess.

PETIONI: No, you know, I'm thinking about it now.

LEVINE: No?

PETIONI: He was—he was still—he was still either in medical school or struggling. The early part of the Depression where people were selling apples on the sidewalk and starving—but we were able to work. We were working. Mama was working. Papa was working.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Even though he was going to school at City College at night, he—he was working.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: So it didn't affect us because we could keep a roof over our head and—and food on the table.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And as I said, Papa was a very good budgeter. And I remember—I remember when I was going to Howard, I was go—I was a third-year college student going to Howard. And I told Papa I needed a coat. I was wearing a three-year-old coat where the style changed complete. I was wearing one of these wrap coats that came to the knee with fur all around it. And by that time, the coats had gotten longer and no fur. Oh, if it had fur, it had little mink collars. And I said, "Father, you know, I"—so he said, "Can't do it. I've got the money for tuition. You're going to have to go with that coat. And maybe by Christmas I'll be able to buy you a new coat." And he had told us very early. He said, "Don't worry about the outside of you. You cultivate the inside. Once you've cultivated the inside, nobody can take it away from you. But if you have a closet full of clothes and a fire comes, what do you have? No clothes. But if you have money in the bank, you can buy anything that money will buy."

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: So when he said, "You're going to have to"—"Okay." Because we were never clothes—we—we would get new outfits for Easter but we were not clothes—Papa never emphasized clothes or things. He emphasized education. So—so I did—he did give me the coat.

LEVINE: The coat.

PETIONI: Yeah. But he was good. He—he had—he had a plan and he knew what he was making and he—as I said, he invested in property. And he had—he had little—little deals where—all legitimate, but where he could manipulate money and have access to money.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So the Depression didn't affect us. We always had—there was no time I remember that Papa couldn't pay the rent or that we didn't have food to eat.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: But that was due to his planning, as I said. And Mama's hard work, and Mama would—in those days, Mama sewed—I told you, she sewed some. She made our clothes. Until I was 12 years old, she made our clothes. And I still have a picture somewhere of those—we had some strawberry dresses, wearing Sunday dresses.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And my sister and I were posing with our two strawberry—very proud of our two strawberry dresses—w—with strawberry color.

LEVINE: Ah.

PETIONI: [laughs] And after I got to be 12, Mom said, "I'm not sewing for you anymore. I'm sorry. I don't think I can do it anymore." But she would go downtown and—and she was—I think she was a typical immigrant. She would go down and get seconds and, you know, goods that were not first class, had little—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —flaws in them and—and make bedspreads and drapes and curtains and—and things. And she knew where to shop, where she could get—in those days, it was 14th Street.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: That was the [unclear] that—I forget the name.

LEVINE: Klein's on the Square.

PETIONI: Klein's. Yes.

LEVINE: [laughs]

PETIONI: Yes, Klein's on the Square. That was where you went to get inexpensive clothes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: And so she—Papa gave her a certain amount of money to run the house and she took that money and ran it. And as I said, she had enough—the sewing skills were a big help. A good cook. Not a fancy cook but we didn't eat fancy in those days. We had—I think we'd have maybe—maybe she'd make a cake on Sunday. If we bought a chicken for Sunday—a chicken in every pot, you know, that—some of that chicken would be left over for—for Monday.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: A small piece. Papa was the one. He could get two pieces. But we had to go [unclear]. [laughs] And—but they were good—good managers, as I said, and they were—they were benevolent, strict. We couldn't—I remember when we got to be kind of in junior high and wanted to go visit other people. Papa said, "Well, who are they? What do they do? What's the mother do? What's the father do? I guess I have to go up and see who they are." So he'd go up, [laughs] screen the place before we could go.

LEVINE: [laughs]

PETIONI: And then we could go for parties. We could go for parties. And then it—okay, well, you had to be in by 11 o'clock. "Well, Papa. You know, they don't start serving food until after 11. You can't [unclear]. [laughs] "Okay, you stay until 12." But then it was—my brother and sister and I had to go to the party together. And I—sometimes we'd be a—a little after 12. And we'd sneak in, trying to sneak up. Those stairs squeaked. [laughs] So we had to sneak up those st—hoping they wouldn't squeak and wake Papa and Mama up. [laughs] But we couldn't go to people's houses. Papa wouldn't let us go to camp. "I don't know what happens in those camps. No, no. You can't go to camp." So I think there were two families we—two of my girlfriends that I could visit and whose homes I could go to, and then they became like family, extended family. You know.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: And we all—everybody was going to school and finishing college. They both were college graduates, my girlfriends.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: So—but what's—what sparkled that? What—what [laughter]—

LEVINE: I don't know. It's all interesting. [laughter] I wanted to ask you about your—about your husband, your—his name and your son and his name.

PETIONI: Okay. My husband's name is Willfolk [PH]. He is—his name was Melilieu Spellmeier [PH] Willfolk named after two Methodist bishops. His grandfather was a Methodist minister.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And he was the first grandchild in the family so that his grand—his fath—his grandfather named him after these two Methodist bishops, who he admired, who were prominent in the Methodist church.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: When my son came along—and my husband's from Mississippi.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And the family comes from Yazoo, Mississippi, and I understand at one time the whole city was Willfolks. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: The Willfolks have since then scattered all over the country. And I don't know whether any of the families kept in touch with the—whether—if anybody left at Yazoo City. But it was a southern family, a middle class, southern family. They went to—many of them went to Rust University, which was—in those days, many of the secondary schools and colleges were—were sponsored by churches.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: So Rust University, which was in Mississippi—I forget what town—it had an elementary and a high school and also a college, years ago. But many of the early colleges for black people were—were from m—you know, religious organizations.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So when my son was born, my s—my—my husband wanted my son to be named after him. So he named him Melilieu Augustan, for my father, Willfolk. Well, Melilieu is a funny name.

LEVINE: Yeah. Is it O-O at the end? Is—

PETIONI: L-I-E-U.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

PETIONI: French.

LEVINE: Oh, French. Okay.

PETIONI: French [unclear], Melilieu. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: My son started school here at Manhattan in public school. And he said—he says, "You know, I—I don't like my name. People tease me about it Melilieu, Calilieu. You know. Not sure it's a boy's name or girl name. I don't like it." So when we decided to move over to Teaneck, he said, "I want to change my name. I want to be Charles or John or Henry or some simple name." [laughs] So my husband gave in and said, "Okay, I had a lot of fights over that name too. We'll put—we'll say Charles Melilieu, put Charles in front of the name." By that time, everybody was calling him Mel anyway.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: A nickname.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: So people still know him as Mel but he's—officially, he's Charles M. Augustan—Charles Melilieu Augustan—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —Willfolk. I—I m—I'm sorry that at that time I didn't put Petioni in there because the Petioni name is very well known.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Whereas the Willfolk name is not as well known, particularly in the northeast.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: And it would have been nice to—for him to—for him—people to know—

LEVINE: Know that—

PETIONI: —that he's carrying the Petioni name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Unfortunately, he just got married a year ago, a little over a year ago. So he probably went have any—the Petioni name is dying out.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: Even from the other branches. The intermarrying and the Petioni name is—is dying out, unfortunately.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So he—

PETIONI: But anyway—

LEVINE: He doesn't have children, you mean, your son.

PETIONI: No, he's married—

LEVINE: Just—

PETIONI: —with a woman who has children. But he—the chance, no, he's not going to have any children because his wife is 47, 48. And for her to start having a child now—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —is just not practical. And I don't think—I think he would have liked to have children. But to marry a woman young enough would—would not have been compatible.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: —with him at 50—57 or so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: So the chances are, he won't have any children. The only thing we could do is—I don't know. We can't do anything about it on my line. There—as I said, there are no—the Petionis—we're the only Petionis in the telephone book, incidentally.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And all of those now are mature people who've—who've—would not have any offspring. Yeah, that—all the male—Petioni males have gone now.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So—so that—that's—that's the—now, the Willfolks—the few Willfolks—my husband was an only child. I became an only child because my brothers and sister died in their—their 20s.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: So—so my son is an only child.

LEVINE: Ah.

PETIONI: And luckily—so he didn't have any first cousins. That's why I said that. So luckily, his—he's married into a very tight-knit, loving, close—

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: —family. His wife has a sister and three brothers and nieces and nephews and all. So I'm happy for him because I—I didn't want to leave him here with—kind of isolated without any connections. So—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: I—I—I'm very—I was very relieved. I prayed a long time for that right person to come along and—and she's the right person.

LEVINE: Oh, that's—

PETIONI: She's very worthwhile waiting for. He's very happy with her and she with him.

LEVINE: Oh, that's wonderful. That's wonderful. Well, of all the things you've done, what would you say has given you the most satisfaction or you feel most proud of?

PETIONI: Well, I would say, up to this time, I think I've been a real role model to people, people who've come in contact with me personally, and people who have heard about me. And more and more people have said—in fact, when I went to—two—two years ago, I went to the National Medical Association. And one of the women who was—it was in Nashville. One of the women who was honored as having done a lot in her—I don't remember now what, but she was very, very active in her community, not

only medically but socially. When I say, socially, sociologically. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: She—she had never said anything to me before. And we happened to have been lunching at the same little spot in [unclear] hotel. She said, "Dr. Petioni, I want you to know what—how much you inspired me and other women to do what we've done." And I'm hearing that more and more, just knowing [unclear]. As I said, I—I went in a time when women weren't getting together and started that group there, started the group here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Started the group in the National Medical Association. And you never know how you inspire people. You know, isn't that interesting?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: I know people inspired me when my teachers and—they weren't my teachers. They were—in junior high, I know one of the women teachers was a—there were very few black teachers in those days. She was a writer. She'd written several books.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: And I said, "Oh, gosh. A black woman writing books. Wonderful. You know, she's somebody that's done something." Another woman, and I didn't know how great she was—she was our French teacher, Miss Fawcett [PH], black American, spent years in France and spoke French fluently. And that's all I knew about her, my French teacher. And I later learned that she was secretary of the NAACP and was very active in—in putting out the "Crisis" magazine. "Crisis" magazine was one of the—

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: Was the—the—what do you call it? The voice of the NAACP from the early days. Very, very—had—had written many, many books.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETIONI: Didn't know that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Didn't know that. But she inspired me, as a black woman teaching French.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: How many people did I know that had gone to Paris many years [chuckles] in those days? You know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: So—and I've w—worked—as I think I've mentioned to you, I've been working with the Role Model Program with this organization I belong to, black women's organizations. I've had—been doing for over 20 years.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And several of those girls have been out of medicine and achieved great things. So that—it—the—I was certainly way away from the—the first. But I was among the early women physicians where we're struggling to get equality for women and equality for black physicians, and—and were conspicuous because there were few of us.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Now—

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

PETIONI: —just so many—in fact, there's so many black physicians—black women physicians. They don't feel that—that they need a black—belong to a black society—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: —anymore.

LEVINE: Wow, that's wonderful, in a way.

PETIONI: But they do.

LEVINE: Oh, they do?

PETIONI: Because when they get in trouble, who do they come to?

LEVINE: Ah.

PETIONI: They come to us. Because there's still a lot of prejudice.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETIONI: Overt and covert prejudice.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Now, what—what—Harlem Hospital had a celebration of my life in—in March?

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: In March.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: Big video. I had given them pictures and these pictures, some of these pictures.

LEVINE: Oh, that's wonderful! And that's why you were on TV. Is that—is—was that the occasion when you were on TV recently?

PETIONI: Let's see. I've been—I've been—

LEVINE: You've been on a lot.

PETIONI: —honored so much [unclear]. [laughter]

LEVINE: [unclear] honor now, huh?

PETIONI: No, no. That was—no, no. That—this wasn't on TV, I don't think. This is—this was a—since then.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: But anyway, they—they—they honored me. As I said, Harlem Hospital, because, see, I interned there and then I came back. The last 17 years, I've been president and CEO of the Friends of Harlem Hospital, which is a fundraising auxiliary.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And I've been working with them for the last 17 years as a volunteer heading this organization. And then—and gradually, I became part of that, even though I—well, I guess started out knowing a lot of doctors who worked there. Because the early doctors who practiced at Harlem, that was where they went to hone their specialty skills.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: They couldn't afford to go and study. But they went and apprenticed with the surgeons and the OB/GYN and the pediatricians. They had to learn how to become specialists. They didn't have the paper credentials but they had the practical credentials. So I knew a lot of them and a lot of them knew me and knew my father. So anyway—so at the celebration people had been asking me, what would I like my legacy to be?

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: So I said, "I have decided that I want my legacy to be the establishment of a geriatric center at Harlem Hospital." And I said, "I'm throwing this out in the air and I'm hoping that this would be a Harlem project and that people will contribute much money, little money, dollars, $5, $20, $30 to make this geriatric center a reality." So afterwards, people said, "Oh, Dr., I'm going to help you get this. I'm going—we're going to help you get this. We'll—we'll—we're going to help you get this." And two weeks later, I got a check for a hundred thousand dollars.

LEVINE: Wow. Oh.

PETIONI: Plus a lot of 250 and 300 and all.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: And the interesting thing about that is that it was a shock. I [laughs] couldn't believe it myself. But you know who sent it to me?

LEVINE: No.

PETIONI: One of my neighbors. When we moved into Teaneck, they were—I—I [unclear]. But there were three black and three white families who became very, very close, moved in about had same time. We had kids about the same age. And we became—the kids—our kids were running into ea—to each other's houses. You know, it was as if one parent was home, the kids were taken care of. And one of the families, a Jewish family, who lived in the area and then moved—she didn't move out of town. She moved to—after it got all black, she moved over to another part of Teaneck to be nearer her synagogue, which she and I have

remained very close because we still [unclear] others have moved away, you know, out of the neighborhood. Her son, who studied law, became a very successful lawyer and established a—an investment fund and made a lot of money and established a—the Paul Singer Family Foundation. So I invited them to the celebration.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And they came and Paul was so impressed, having known me since he was a little boy, nine years old—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —that he sent a hundred thousand dollars.

LEVINE: Wow!

PETIONI: But—so that's seed money.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: So with that kind of money—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: —I could get down to serious negotiations. So what we're doing, we're working with the Columbia, the dean of—of Health—of Health Science [unclear] at Columbia to—it's going to be a collaboration between Columbia and Harlem situated at Harlem Hospital—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: —to take care of—what I envision is I want it to be a one-stop shop where somebody needed help for their seniors—citizen family, mother, father, sister, brother. Excuse me. They could come to us and we could take care of their physical needs, but we could help them to identify resources in the community, because there are a lot of resources open to seniors. But if you don't know—and many, many older people in Harlem and across the country—they've outlived their children, their relatives, nobody to look out for them. And sometimes they have to—to sort of negotiate the whole process by themselves or some friend that they need to depend on. So we would tell them where all the resour—if they needed Meals on Wheels or whether they needed home health aid, whether they have to get—satisfy their Medicare and Medicaid, housing, whatever. We could get—we could give them advice and refer them to resources.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And also, hopefully, many of them would stay with Harlem and get their medical needs—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —and support needs from Harlem H—or Columbia, because we—we—we pretty much dominate the upper Manhattan—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —you know, medical group. So as I said, we're having meetings with a borough president. She's interested in se—seeking the establishment of geriat—she said that—she said before I made the announcement. So we have applied to her to tell her what we're doing to apply for whatever grants she gives the Department of Aging, which she can distribute. So we're on the way.

LEVINE: Wow, that's wonderful!

PETIONI: Now, that—I like that.

LEVINE: Yeah, that is a legacy worth leaving.

PETIONI: Yeah, I would really like that.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

PETIONI: I would really like that.

LEVINE: How about the American dream? Can you say anything about what it meant to you, your family?

PETIONI: Everything. Everything. Everything that—opportunities are here. In many pla—many countries, of course, you have a st—strict class system, particularly in the Muslim countries and Indians. And also, you have a system whereby, if you don't have money, there are few opportunities to get money. Here, you can come and work as a laborer or clean people's houses. And that happens to everybody, white, black, green or blue.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: You can start off small and do—and it doesn't take away from your dignity or your rec—being recognized. And you can get lost in this country. If you clean houses, you can still be [unclear] with your friends and your social group. And nobody needs to know that you—you're cleaning houses. And even if they know, it's not the worst thing in the world that you're doing domestic work with your hands.

LEVINE: Right, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And that, unfortunately, I think has held black people back and also maybe a lot of white kids back in that black people have been brainwashed in you have to be a white collar worker to be recognized.

LEVINE: Mmm.

PETIONI: So many of the vocational opportunities have been lost, not appreciated and accepted by blacks, or—or not supported by the powers that be.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Because there are many blacks and whites, or poor people [chuckles]—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —who don't want to be doctor, lawyer, Indian chief, or who are not capable of being doctor, lawyer and Indian chief, but who can work with their hands and work well.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Auto mechanics.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Builders, carpenters.

PETIONI: Yeah, superintendents of buildings. Some of those guys—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —get a [unclear] and they learn how to do a little plumbing and electrical and get good jobs.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: But it's not encouraged. And the same thing is happening when I went down to the Bahamas. A lot of those vocational courses were—were just discontinued. So you're not giving kids a chance to—and it's partly

the—partly the population too, because the status comes with a white-collar job.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Plus, in America, the unions have been exclusive. It's been hard for black people to get into the unions, these carpenter unions, electrical unions—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: —and all. And without getting—if you can't get in a union, you can't get apprenticeships and so on. So there's been a whole, I want to call a conspiracy, kind of.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Because there's so many little things like that that happened that blocks blacks from getting into certain areas.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Which means you have—we have a very, very high incidence of unemployment among youth up to 25.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Because they can't get jobs. And then the schools are poor so they're poorly educated. So they can't get jobs.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And I'll give you an example. Since I've been working with the Friends of Harlem Hospital, when we first—17 years ago, there was no landscaping around the hospital. It was just bare earth, even though the hospital's been there for years. And we—as a result of one of the programs, called the Injury Prevention Program, headed by the Pediatric Department, we started—we—we started a—a art class. We started a—a dance class for the kids, after-school activities to take—involve them—after-school activities. And we also started a—a pro—playground renovation project.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETIONI: And we got a woman assigned to us from the Parks Department who worked with the Parks Department, the city and other—to upgrade the playgrounds, to renovate some of the playgrounds, to make some of the playgrounds, the school playgrounds, some of them kitchen pl—gardens and some of them flower gardens. That whole thing.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And this woman who was sort of choreographing the whole thing, hired some—I don't know how she got hold of them. I never heard the story but—but the story I heard was that she got some school dropouts to help her dig and plant shrubs and all. And—and these guys, who were more out of school than in school, but they were still registered in school, so sh—she got one—one young man, who must have been, like, 15, 16. And after he'd been working with her for several weeks, he said, "Miss Bernidad." He said, "You mean people get paid for doing this kind of work?" He says, "I love it. I—I—I plan to do it for nothing."

LEVINE: Huh.

PETIONI: And he was so passionate about it—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETIONI: —that she finally got him a job at one of the nurseries out on Long Island. And then he did so well there that the owner gave him a little shack on the premises to live in.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: And if—if he hadn't been exposed to digging in the earth, he would not have had any idea that this was his passion.

LEVINE: Passion, yeah.

PETIONI: And that's another thing. We keep—doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. But we don't expose our kids to sufficient other professions, even in the medical profession. There are many other things. You've got audiology. You've got physical therapy. You've got—got nurse assistants, nurse this, technicians, all kinds of—

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: If people can't go right to college and medical school, they can take these courses, a two-year college course—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —and start getting a foot in the door and then, later on, go into nursing or whatever.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: The schools have cut out gym. They've cut out music. They have—I know many of the teachers are doing the best they can and they're good teachers. But then they don't take into account the social—the social conditions that make kids angry and restless and—

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: —and—and not able to learn and all. See? So—so we're being—so my father used to say, "For those who hath, more shall be given. But those who have not, even that which he seemeth to have is taken away."

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: A person is struggling to keep food on the table to pay rent, hanging on with their fingernails. But any little thing can throw that budget off completely. Kids get sick and she can't work for two weeks. Or she takes too much time off from work and she's fired because, "We need you. You can't keep taking time off from work to take care of your kids."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: So even when the welfare to work, and they go to work, they're demanding 35 hours. The woman ha—has three kids.

LEVINE: Right.

PETIONI: She's got to work 35 hours to satisfy welfare after a while. A normal person earning a good salary can't even work.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: You see what I mean?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: So it—it's—life isn't fair.

LEVINE: No.

PETIONI: And when people say that, I say, “Well, who told you life is fair?” [laughs] It’s supposed to be fair but it isn’t.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: And even when people well off, life isn’t fair. Some people seem to get sick. Every time you turn around, they’re sick.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Right?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: Now, we don’t know whether it’s—it’s genetic, whether they’re careless in their ways or whether they don’t take care of themselves. But one woman told me who—who was—belonged to Share [PH], she said, “I’ve—I’ve lived a very conservative life. I didn’t drink. I didn’t smoke. I ate what I considered normal.” And—but she says, “I’ve got a double mastec—I’ve got cancer.”

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: “I’ve got double mastectomy. I don’t know what I did that triggered this off.”

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETIONI: She wasn’t poor. She wasn’t deprived. She had a good job. You know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETIONI: So life is interesting. [chuckles]

LEVINE: It is. It is. And we’re just about at the end of the tape. I—I just wanted to say, you’ve seen a lot of changes in—in Harlem.

PETIONI: Yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And that’s worthy of note. Can you say anything, just kind of in a couple of minutes. [chuckles]

PETIONI: Well, I—I've seen changes, from black people being deprived and—and not having a place in the sun, to our achieving a lot of success, and then, as I said, having gone into the—the heights of recognition in this city. However, the thing that ruined Harlem and started the ruining of, really, the country is the drug thing. And it started in Harlem. The—the Mafia decided, "Oh, yeah. We got these drugs and we're going to spread"—just like they planted opium in China many years ago, many centuries ago, they decided, "We'll throw it up in Harlem. Those—those folks are like animals. They—who cares about—we'll give it to them." I guess they—they had no idea that it couldn't be contained at Harlem, that it was going to spread. And it's all over the country, all over the world. And it has ruined us. And this so-called War on Drugs, I'm not sure what's going—I'm not sure whether the war is really a war or whether it's a—it's just a—a name. Because drugs continue to be prevalent, not only the cocaine and the heroin and—but they have these—these cocktail ecstasy and these manufactured drugs that people—so that many, many, many—the whole society is a—is a drug culture. And even people—legitimate people, half of them are taking Prozac—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —which are considered legitimate medicine drugs to—for them to cope with our society and our culture. But that was the beginning of the ruining of our country, I—I think.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: Up to that time, we could sleep outdoors. We could sleep on a roof. We could sleep—you know, people didn't have to lock their doors, except at night. And of course, drugs wiped out Harlem for a long time. You know, people—people moved out, fled, because the things were so bad. Most of the docs were held up at some time during their career. I was—I—it was lucky that my office was held up but I wasn't there. But they held up my secretary and demanded money and—and stuff.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETIONI: So that was be—the beginning of the turn of our culture, to some extent.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: But Harlem has a new renaissance where many, many of the buildings went to the city, because landlords abandoned the buildings. They could no longer keep them up. They abandoned the buildings. The city took

over. The city, I understand, owned 60 percent of the real estate in Harlem—

LEVINE: Wow.

PETIONI: —until very recently—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —when money's been coming in to put up low-cost housing. Not enough low-cost housing, but certainly, they have—low-cost co-ops, low-equity co-ops and—and giving people a chance to buy their homes, people making middle income, 40 to 60,000. The—the total family income being that, they have been given opportunities to buy homes. And then ho—ho—what is—Habitat for Humanity—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: —is putting up equity, sweat equity homes. So things are looking better. As we said, Harlem is getting a better tax base. And it's—of course, the whole city's being gentrified but Harlem is being gentrified. So we should have—the thing we fear is that we're going to lose our base here in Harlem. This has been the capitol—black capitol of the world.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETIONI: Enough people moving in who have money, who are not looking like us, who will be owners. So we hope that if we could get even a quarter black home ownership, we will still have a stake. That's [unclear].

LEVINE: I see.

PETIONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, w—I'm going to close here because we're at the end of the tape. And I've been speaking with Dr. Muriel Petioni, who came here at five years old in 1919 from Trinidad. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]