SAVING PRESERVATION STORIES:
DIVERSITY AND THE OUTER BOROUGHS

The Reminiscences of
Robert Thompson

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Thompson conducted by Interviewer Liz Strong on August 11, 2017. This interview is part of the *Saving Preservation Stories: Diversity and the Outer Boroughs* oral history project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Robert Thompson became involved in the preservation of Weeksville through his mother Patricia Johnson, who was one of the founding members of the Weeksville Society. He was the security guard at Hunterfly Road Houses while they were being renovated, living in one of them for several months. He shares his experiences growing up in Brooklyn and living in the Bedford-Stuyvesant during the ‘60s and ‘70s. A filmmaker, Thompson created, *Weeksville: Save the Memories of Self,* which helped to raise awareness of Weeksville’s history. He also speaks of his involvement in preservation in Atlanta, where he leads historic walking tours, and the importance of preserving African American history.

Robert Thompson grew up in Brooklyn, NY, during the 1950s and ‘60s. He is a filmmaker and worked in the TV studio of Bronx Community College, was director of media services at the Pratt Institute and began his own film company. Many of his films, including *The Serman* and *Save the Memories of Self,* focus on black history. He currently lives in Atlanta and leads historic walking tours.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey
Interviewee: Robert Thompson
Interviewer: Liz Strong

Session: 1
Location: Bronx, New York, NY
Date: August 11, 2017

Q: Okay, so the recorder is on. While I'm adjusting levels, the first thing I'm going to say is today's date so that we know that. Today is August 11, 2017. My name is Liz [H.] Strong. I'm here conducting an interview with Robert Thompson about the town of Weeksville and the Hunterfly Road Houses. This is for the New York Preservation Archive Project's oral history project's Saving Preservation Stories. So that's all the information for the tape. So you were just telling me where you and your family are from and what your history is in Brooklyn.

Thompson: Okay, well, I guess our history in Brooklyn started with my grandparents who moved here from a little town in North Carolina called *[unclear]* North Carolina, in the '20s. My mother was born in 1929 and she's still alive. It's really interesting because almost all of us moved back down south. Most of my family that moved here, like I said, in the '20s, almost all of them are now back in the South in some way, which is quite an interesting migration story. Well, the story of African Americans in America's about immigration, about being moved from one place to another *[laughs]*. So that's the history.

My family—I can document my family back to about the 1850s. There was a person in our family named Dianne Dale who wrote a history of our family, at least on my mother's side. The history is called *The Village That Made Us*. She wrote a book actually. It's called *The Village That Made Us* and it's about—she and that part of the family is from—well, reside mostly in Washington, D.C., in Anacostia. We started a museum there too, the Anacostia [Community]

Museum which is part of the Smithsonian [Institution]. My great-uncle was one of the founding board members. His name was Elmore Dale *[phonetic]*.

Q: You can see I'm writing all this down because I'm going to look it up later.

Thompson: Okay. For some reason, our family wound up in the museum business. I don't think it was planned or organized. It just sort of happens that way.

Q: Did it start with your mother or was it something—

Thompson: Yes, I think for me, it started with my mother. My grandparents weren't really all that much into history but my mother was like a real history buff and she was a very exceptional person. Back in those days, back in the '50s and the '60s, museums in New York were free. Being a single working mother, she didn't really have a whole lot of money for amusement parks and stuff that cost money, so we would make sandwiches and we would go to the museums. By the time I was twelve, I probably went to every museum in the City of New York. I kid you not. I mean the Staten Island Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the [National] Museum of the American Indian, the Jewish Museum. I mean, you name it; we went there because it was free. After awhile—I mean initially I would say to her, "We went there already." But she said, "There's a new show." So we would go.

My two favorite museums were the [American] Museum of Natural History because they had these big dinosaurs. I don't know if they're still there but as a kid, you're like five years old and

you see this Tyrannosaurus Rex, like the biggest thing in the world. And the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art], those were my two favorite places because they were so enormous and like I said, it was always changing.

In the Met, they had these model rooms, with furniture and they would decorate it in a period, Louis XIV or early American. In the Museum of Natural History, of course, they have all these stuffed animals in these sort of cycloramas, trying to put them in their natural settings. Again, as a kid, you go into this dark room with these lit displays, it was fascinating. I sort of grew up in museums.

Before we were so security-conscious, there used to be these huge ocean liners, *The Queen Mary* and *The USA*, before airfare was common. So wealthy people would take these cruises back and forth. I was born in ’49, so I wasn’t ten so we’re talking early ‘50s. When the boats would dock, just before they would leave, they would open the boat to the public and anybody could go on. Mother and I and my brother, she would take us onto these boats and we would crash people’s bon voyage parties *[laughs]*. As a kid you never think of it, but now as I look back on it, we were the only black people there. Here’s this woman with these two little black kids, eating these people’s hors d’oeuvres and nobody ever said anything to us, nobody.

My mother was always like if you dress appropriately and you act like you belong, nobody ever will say anything to you. Particularly in those days, during the civil rights, people were sensitive about offending people, but we would go. But everybody would do it. People were going from party-hopping to party-hopping, so it wasn’t that unusual for people to do it but for a woman

with two little black kids, I guess it was unusual. I said at the time, I didn't think anything of it but now that I look back on it. That was the kind of person she was.

When we'd go on trips, we'd go to Washington where we have a lot of family there. We would go to the Smithsonian. I probably went to every Smithsonian museum that there is. Not just the [Smithsonian National] Air and Space Museum which was our favorite but the [Smithsonian National] Portrait Gallery and the Museum of the American Indian, every museum—even the Post Office [Postal] Museum.

By the time I was in my twenties, I was pretty much indoctrinated into this whole thing. I was a filmmaker back then. I was working at Pratt Institute. I was the director of media services there back in—I guess this is early '70s. When did I start at Pratt? No, before Pratt, I worked at City University [of New York] Bronx Community College. That's where I first started in '71. Back then, they called you an audio visual [AV] tech. You were the guy that went to the classroom and showed the films. But back then, they were just beginning to develop industrial television. So colleges were able to buy cameras and develop. We were one of the first schools in the city system to actually develop an in-house TV studio. It was on black and white back then. It was tape. It wasn't digital. You physically had to cut the tape to edit it. You put these little things on it.

But anyway, mother—so this was before she left for Europe. She remarried a serviceman and I graduated from high school in 1967 and I went away to college for my first year. Her husband was stationed overseas. So for something for her to do, she started taking this course at—I want

to say Pratt—on ethnic contributions to New York. Of course being black, they wanted to find out what were the African-American contributions to New York. They had a real difficult time back in those days because there wasn't a whole lot there, so they started to do their own research.

My mother was a very avid researcher and in the process of looking for information about black people in New York, they stumbled across Weeksville. I think it was on a map. They saw it on a map first. And then they did more research and they found out this was a black community and that. It was started by this guy James Weeks. It really grew after the draft riots when a lot of blacks were driven out of Manhattan and came for refuge in Brooklyn.

So she became really fascinated with it. I remember—I guess this was '67, so I was seventeen, eighteen years old. I remember seeing an article in *The New York Times* about what she was doing and it just sort of kind of dawned on me, maybe this is really important. *The New York Times* thinks it's worthwhile to do a story.

That's sort of how I became involved in it through my mother. She was one of the founders of the Weeksville [Heritage] Society and the first secretary. She still has notes that she took from back then. She's also a pack rat, she likes to collect stuff. So she has her notes from the first Weeksville meeting.

I was in school and I came back to New York in '70—yeah, I guess it was—'67, '68, '69, yes, around '70—'69, '70, I came back to New York and I transferred to school back here. My

mother by that time had gone overseas to live with her husband. They were living in England.

I would spend the school year here in the States and the summers in England with them. My mother was always a very adventurous person. She refused to live on the base. She said, "I didn't come three thousand miles to sit on a piece of America in another country." *[Laughs]*. Because American bases overseas, it's like take a piece of Kansas, cut it up. They had their own schools and everything. And there were people on the base that never left the base. They'd spend the whole four-year tour of duty on the base and never leave. My mother—they had the option to living on the economy, so she said she wasn't going to—so we lived in this little town called Rushden, about maybe twenty miles from the base. We were the only blacks, the only Americans and it was the first time I really became aware of myself as an American.

Prior to that, I was an African-American. That was my whole context, a subculture of a large culture. Of course, this is during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, '67, so there's a whole lot going on. So you don't really feel connected to the larger society.

But when you go overseas, the first thing—well, at least in England, they call you a yank. For somebody to think of me that way, was just altering my perception of the world literally because they were the first white people to see my nationality first. They were aware I was black but first I was American and then I was black.

I went to places in England, I would never go—back in the '60s, I would never had gone into an all-white bar, in Brooklyn. I'm not talking about the South. I'm talking about certain parts of

Brooklyn. But I did it without any apprehension. When I came back to the States, I had to like readjust. You can't do this, this is not England. This is not the Midlands. You can't go into that Irish bar *[laughs]*.

When I came back—so that's '71, I had gone to school in Maryland, a small historical black college called Morgan State [University] and I transferred back to New York in the early '70s and that's when I became involved with Weeksville.

I started working for, as I said before, Bronx Community College, which was a unit of City University as a media—AV person. I started to have my own on-the-side film company. I made educational films and videos for the school and then I made mostly African-American documentaries for myself. I had a partner, a guy who's my mentor, his name is Bob Knight and he kind of really taught me pretty much everything I knew or have known about film.

I guess this was what '70—I forget. This was around just before Alex Haley came out with *Roots: [The Saga of the American Family]*, around that time. So I guess this is like mid-'70s, '75, '76. Weeksville got a grant to do an exhibit, to make an exhibit from the New York State Council on the Arts. I helped write the exhibit and there was going to be a film as part of the exhibit. So I made this film called *Weeksville: Save the Memories of Self,* which is the first film about Weeksville. That's about '76. It went on to win the National Trust for Historic Preservation Student Film Award, which I was very proud of.

I think maybe I was twenty, twenty-one years old and there were no black filmmakers that I

knew of back then. Spike [Shelton Jackson] Lee obviously wasn't around. Gordon Parks was probably the only major film—but I didn't know any small people that were doing documentaries like I was.

So through my involvement with the film, I think after that they asked me to be on the board. In the mid-'70s, right after I made the film, I joined the board of directors. I was on the board of directors until I left New York in '89. I'd say from about '76, '77 to '89, I was on the board of directors.

We showed the film. The exhibit and the film opened at the Met. They had a community museum, so we opened the exhibit and I showed the film there. It's been shown a lot of places, on PBS. There was a fundraiser that we did with Alex Haley at the Waldorf back in—I guess I was at Pratt back then—so maybe '80.

That's pretty much—I was involved with a number of the fundraisers, the film. Oh, when they restored the houses, I moved in as sort of, I guess, a security person. It was a work in progress and we were concerned about people breaking in and stealing the copper pipes because it was a museum. There wasn't anybody living there so I moved up to the top floor just so we could protect the buildings as they were being restored. The same people that did the restoration for South Street Seaport did ours. I forget the name of the company but it was the same people. It took about two or three years to restore the houses because it was a restoration as opposed to a renovation. They wanted to do it with the same types of materials and stuff that were used in the original house so it took a lot longer than it would be if they just went in and did it. Then they

did the houses how they looked at different periods in time.

So that has been pretty much my connection with Weeksville. It started with the film—well, with my mom and then with the film and on the board of directors. And then just as a supporter. I think I did probably leave the board before I left New York but I was always supportive when they needed something or if they needed some videos done.

I think I shot a couple—I was the videographer of record there. Whenever we had an event, they would call me and I'd come and I'd videotape it. I videotaped some very interesting people, John Henrik Clarke, Dr. [Josef] Ben-Jochannan, Lynn Jeffries *[phonetic]*, Gil [Gilbert E.] Noble. We used to have an annual fundraiser and they would have a speaker. I was usually the one that videotaped the guest speaker. So I guess in a nutshell, that's kind of been my involvement with Weeksville.

Q: I've been taking notes while you've been talking. I'd love to go back and get more details about each one.

Thompson: Okay.

Q: Because that's one of the great things about oral history is we can go so much deeper than just the records usually are and I'll mine your memories a little bit. One of the first things that jumped out to me is you spent so much time in museums as a kid, I wanted get your thoughts on what kind of view of history you got from being in these museums and then how the way

museums have been curated over the decades has kind of changed in your opinion.

Thompson: Yes, going to the Met and the Museum of Natural History, it was mostly a Eurocentric view of the world and I think that's one of the things that motivated mother and me later on is that there was another story to be told here, that wasn't being told and in order for us to do that, we needed to build our own institutions and hence, Weeksville.

Q: As your mom started to do all this research on Weeksville and uncovering things, do you have memories even before it got published in *The New York Times* article about her talking to you about it or trying—made you get really excited about something—

Thompson: Her best friend—for a long time, we lived in the same building. We lived on Putnam Avenue between Lewis [Avenue] and Stuyvesant [Avenue]. Well, my grandparents bought the house in the '40s, late '40s right after the war. My mother and my brother and I moved in after my mother and father separated. I guess that was early—maybe mid-'50s because I was still in grammar school, grade school. I'd say maybe '56, '57 when we moved on Putnam Avenue.

When she got involved in it, it was sort of listening to conversations over the dinner table with her and her best friend was a woman named Dolores McCullough who was also one of the founding members of the Weeksville Society. So it was just dinner table discussions. I knew they were involved in it.

My mother—she was a real avid researcher. She discovered who was the first black person in

New York, a guy named Francisco during the time of the Dutch. She loved it. When she went to England, she did research into colonial records to find out whether black people were in New York before it was New York, when it was New Amsterdam, and yes, there were.

So those of the kind of things that she would talk about in our discussions. Back then, she would write letters because I was in school and she was overseas. Before the *Times* article, it was just dinner table discussions, very casual, just listening to her and what I call my Aunt Bunnie talk about. So it was family discussion.

Q: Now they start all this research before the Hunterfly Road Houses were even found, right?

Thompson: Yes, that's how they found the Hunterfly Road Houses.

Q: Yes.

Thompson: The research started as a class on ethnic contributions and it's really interesting how they found the houses because they knew they were in that—they saw on the map, on an old map, Weeksville but when they came and laid down the grid, all of that was obliterated. So there was a friend named Joe Hanes who was a pilot and Joe flew over the area and they discovered a street that went against the grid. Then they came down and that's how they discovered the houses. But yes, they knew that Weeksville was in that area.

They had an office—I think it was Kingsborough Houses which is a housing project in Brooklyn.

So Weeksville existed and was an entity—well, they called it originally the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History. That was the original name. Now it's just the Weeksville History Center [Weeksville Heritage Center]. So the society was in existence for a number of years before they found the houses.

Q: Yes. So tell me about when they found the houses. Those dinnertime conversations must have gotten pretty animated. How did that change things?

Thompson: Yes, because the houses were in real dire shape. Nothing had been done to them and they were built in—the estimate is, there's no official record, we think now that the houses were actually built somewhere else and then moved there.

Q: Oh, interesting.

Thompson: But the workmanship from the archaeological work that had been done on the houses, they estimate that they were built in the 1840s. So when we discovered them, that was the '60s. And they were very simple wood frame houses.

So we actually eventually—in one of the houses, somebody was living in, [Mary] Bernice Jenkins. She lived in the house that fronted on Pacific Street. The houses that fronted on Hunterfly Road were in pretty bad shape. So we eventually had to tend them over to keep them from deteriorating, until we could get the money to restore them.

So to answer your question, yes, the society had started first just on the concept of this was a black community. There was a free black community there prior to emancipation. So that was the real buzz, that there was a free black community in New York prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. Because slavery was, at the beginning of America, slavery was legal in all states, North and South. So gradually over the years, emancipation was introduced on the state level in most of the states above the Mason-Dixon Line.

It was just really interesting. It was during the age of what I consider—I'm not exactly sure what people will call it then but we called it back then the Black Consciousness Movement. It was about one, discovering what our real history was; two, about having pride in being black, instead of seeing it as a derogatory state. You know, people—I got a big afro *[laughs]*. People started changing their names and giving their kids African names and wearing dashikis. It was all part of that whole, like I said, Black Consciousness Movement.

Q: And reengaging with the history was—

Thompson: It was part of that, yes. I discovered people like John Henrik Clarke, Dr. Ben-Jochannan who were African American scholars. They would often speak at events that we had. It was the beginning of a new form of consciousness.

You begin to understand not so much that it was a distortion by exclusion. Instead of necessarily saying negative things, you weren't just mentioned at all. So then when you began to find out—even today, as I consider myself to be a student of African-American history in every—almost

every day, I discover a new story about something that I didn't know prior to this. So there's so much history to be discovered still. At this point we've just really scratched the surface in terms of—particularly history as it relates to the time prior to emancipation. I mean it's just really a void in terms of African-American history. It's been really exciting because I still do that. I do tours, walking tours—

Q: Of Brooklyn?

Thompson: Well, I have and I'm planning to, but I live in Atlanta and we just got a—there's this big project in Atlanta called the BeltLine. It's like High Line here in New York, except it's mostly below ground level, street level, and it's an old railroad track that used to circle Atlanta. Back in the '60s, it was abandoned and then about ten years ago, they sort of rediscovered it and turned it into this pedestrian-bike path, and at some future date, light rail.

So my company just got a—and they just finished a section in the neighborhood I live in which reminds me very much of Brooklyn, Bed-Stuy, both in terms of the people and in terms of the social-political activity that's going on now. It's sort of like ten years behind Brooklyn. Because of this construction, there are these huge gentrification pressures that are now rocking the community.

Now the only difference in Atlanta is that the neighborhood that I lived in—and the same thing really is true for Brooklyn and Bed-Stuy. The gentrification—or I prefer the term revitalization—or the change in Brooklyn started back when my grandparents bought that house because that

was an all-white community when they purchased those houses. They purchased it from an Italian family back in the late ‘40s and then of course, what happened back in those days was really interesting, once one black family moved in, there was this white flight. It was this thing called blockbusting where unscrupulous real estate people would install a black person in a community knowing what kind of impact it would have. And all the white people—they would buy up all the houses after the white people would flee at depressed prices and then turn around and sell them at inflated prices to the new blacks that moved in.

That was what was happening in Bed-Stuy in the ‘40s and ‘50s. By the time—‘60s—by the time I was a teenager, Bed-Stuy was like 99.9 percent black, right? I left in ’89 and now I would say maybe Bed-Stuy is maybe seventy-five percent black which is still predominantly black but it’s also been a huge increase in white population. I mean there were no white people in Bed-Stuy when I was growing up. I mean none. The only white people you would see in Bed-Stuy is the mailman and police and the fire department. If you saw somebody else that wasn’t black there—you noticed it. It was just that obvious.

I remember coming home—well, I guess I still call New York home, coming back to New York, maybe about four or five years ago and getting off at the station where I lived, and I saw these white people getting off. I was like, “What is going on here?” I mean it’s in neighborhoods that I wouldn’t go into when I was a kid. They were moving there. I guess they didn’t know any better.

Now the same thing is happening in the community I live in Atlanta. It’s called West End and because of this new BeltLine that they brought in, housing prices have really skyrocketed. But

the difference is that—it's not so much a difference. The same thing is that the change in the West End actually started maybe twenty years earlier. That's when that neighborhood started to change from predominantly white to predominantly black. And because the AU Center, the Atlanta University Center, Morehouse [College], Spelman [College], are like right across—are our neighbors. A lot of faculty staff and students moved into the neighborhood. It was more of an upper-middle class black gentrification as opposed to the houses being broken up into rooming houses and stuff.

I work out of a museum called the Hammonds House Museum. The name Hammonds is from a doctor who bought the house back in '79. It took him five years to restore the house to its original condition. The house was originally built, we think—we don't have accurate records, but about 1870. And he restored it back to the condition it was when it was first built.

So that's when it started. A lot of black teachers, faculty members, staff members, students, once they graduated, they moved into that neighborhood. A lot of people—a lot of black families who lived in the North—the houses were so cheap down there back in those days, that they would actually buy a house. Instead of putting their kid on campus and paying dorm fees, they would buy a house, install their kid there, renovate the house, rent out the rest of the rooms to other students and their kid would wind up living there rent free.

I know of at least three or four examples of that. When the kids graduated, the parents moved into the house. The kids, they wanted to go back to New York. The parents said, "Forget New York. I'm tired of New York." So they stayed in Atlanta, their kids went back to New York, and

that's how that neighborhood became.

Then after the—so that was the first black wave and that happened I would say in the late '70s-early '80s. Then around 2008, after the last market crash, there was another wave of mostly black families, professionals that moved into the neighborhood. Again the houses, you could still get a three, four bedroom house on a quarter acre lot for one hundred thousand, seventy-five thousand dollars. So there was a huge influx of young, intact black families, professional families with kids. That was another thing, the community didn't have any kids because for one, the schools sucked *[laughter],* and it just wasn't considered a family community. But since 2008, there's been a three or four hundred percent increase. A lot of them home-school their kids and then they opened up two charter schools in the neighborhood. So they either send their kids to the charter schools or they home-school them.

About two years ago—I would say there were about a dozen families that moved from Texas together as a group and they all settled in the West End and they started a church in the community.

Q: Not to interrupt but to take it back to Brooklyn.

Thompson: Yes, okay.

Q: That's all right. I mean it's fascinating but to take it back to Brooklyn—

Thompson: The analogy is the same things that are happening in Brooklyn are happening—

Q: Exactly. That was going to be my next question, how are you seeing this happen in Bed-Stuy?

Thompson: It's almost like déjà vu—the same things that happened in Brooklyn are now happening in this community that I live in.

Q: Right. So talk to me, you were saying that the revitalization of the black community in Bed-Stuy kind of started with this home ownership thing with your grandparents moving in and then there was this manufactured depression of the value of the houses, and then what? What picked up after that?

Thompson: Well, I think those houses pretty much stayed the same for the whole time I was there. On the block that I lived at, on Putnam Avenue between Lewis and Stuyvesant, I would say eighty, ninety percent of the people owned those brownstones—and they're incredible beautiful brownstones, Brooklyn, you know. I think Bed-Stuy has some of the best brownstones in the city, still today, and the most. I mean you can go block after block after block of just these really incredible brownstones. And the house we lived in had never been broken up into apartments because when we bought it, we bought it from a private family. There was a chapel in the house.

Q: What?

Thompson: Yeah. Where they did their own christenings in the house, with a little thing where they put the water and where you could christen the child. So they had a chapel down in what I guess was the—where me and my brother's room was what was the service quarters basically. Then there was the chapel and then the kitchen. We had a backyard with a cherry tree in it. And this incredible woodwork. I hated it as a kid because that was my job, was to dust.

Q: *[Laughs]*.

Thompson: It was all this very ornate, very handcarved and you had to get in—my grandfather, he'd come by and do one of these numbers—

Q: Rub it with his fingers *[laughs]*.

Thompson: Yes, just to check. It had these little curlicues and stuff. You had to get in there. That was our job. It was all wood paneling. The whole house was these cherry wood staircases and the wood paneling like this, with the molding, but everything below it was wood. These huge French wooden doors. It was a beautiful house. It's still to this day a beautiful house.

Q: Is it still in the family?

Thompson: No. But it's in a black—okay, when we—it has to do with that migration I was telling you about. So when my grandparents retired, they moved back to North Carolina.

Q: Ah ha.

Thompson: They sold the house to a black family. So this is what, ’67, ’68. I’m in college, my mother’s overseas, so there’s really nobody there and they wanted to get out of New York. At least my grandfather wanted to get out of New York. I don’t know about my grandmother. So he sold it to a friend of his who still owns it. They bought the house in ’67 and it was a fraternity member. My grandfather was in some Masons or something—I don’t know—and this was one of his fraternity brothers and he had seven boys and he couldn’t find an apartment. No one would rent to him. I mean from like seven to thirteen, seven teenage boys so he couldn’t find—so my grandfather—I think he sold the house in ’67, maybe for twenty thousand dollars. But he probably only maybe paid ten for it. So he thought he was—he doubled. And then there also was the sorority. He probably could have gotten a little bit more for it but in ’67, that was probably the average price for a house like that, plus like I said, he probably gave the guy a break. Now the house is probably worth a million and a half.

I’ve been in the house fairly recently, a couple years ago. When I go to New York, I always go by and see the family, just to see the house because there’s so many really incredible memories there. Actually they’ve improved it because my grandfather did a lot of—what did my mother call it? Bootleg kind of stuff in the house *[laughs]*. I guess people now would call that tacky back then. Now it’s folk art. He would take old appliances and repurpose them. I remember when the first TVs came out—this is way before your time—the tubes were circular. They weren’t square. So when they finally came out with square TVs, he bought a square TV and then he took the old TV and took the picture tube out of it and put a candelabra in it. Back in those

days, they made very beautiful cabinetry. Those were the kind of things he did. My mother hated and my grandmother hated that kind of stuff but you know. So the house was full of that kind of what we call folk art now.

Q: *[Laughs]*

Thompson: But they kept all the woodwork and the molding. It had the wet ceilings with all the decorations in it, a crystal chandelier. It was a beautiful home. It was always kept immaculate. There were certain rooms we just couldn't even go into as kids. And it had the plastic seatcovers *[laughs],* which they'd take off when guests came. It was a family house. My grandparents lived on the first floor and the parlor floor. Then me and my brother, my mother lived on the third floor and the woman I was referring to who was my mother's best friend, which I called Aunt Bunnie, she lived on the fourth floor. There were no locked doors. One day, I might be eating dinner with my grandmother. The next day I might be eating dinner at my mother's and the next day, I might be eating dinner up at Aunt Bunnie's house. It was that kind of atmosphere.

Q: So they were living together and they signed up for their class—

Thompson: Together.

Q: Together and they did research together.

Thompson: They were best friends for awhile, from the moment she moved into the house which

was—they must have known each other for—she died recently, a couple years ago. So god, what am I? I'm sixty-seven. They must have known each other for over fifty—because when they met, I was a little kid. So they must have known each other almost sixty years.

Q: Wow.

Thompson: And they traveled all over the world together. Once my mother was overseas, she would come visit her when she was in England and even when she came back, they would go on trips all over the world together. I remember back in the '70s, nobody heard of bed and breakfasts in the States, so they would go to Europe and they would stay in bed and breakfasts all over Europe. They would go by themselves, just those two. They went to Africa, all over—Alaska. They were like real, real, real tight.

She was like family. I called her Aunt Bunnie and when she introduced me, "This is my nephew, Robert." It was like that. She passed about two or three years ago.

That was the kind of family attitude—and I see that, I have a friend who is originally from New York but we didn't meet until we were down in Atlanta and he moved back to New York and he lives in a very similar situation. It's a three generation house. And his grandkids—well, the woman he married, her grandkids, they'll be popping up unannounced *[laughs]*.

But it was a really incredible lifestyle. I never really—we weren't poor. I always cringe at these depictions of black families where there was all this crisis and they're worried about white

people. I really didn't—I thought I lived the average American life. I never wanted for anything, materially or otherwise. My mother, at the beginning of the year, she took me and bought me new clothes for school and for Easter and all of that.

She always had a good job. She worked for the city, for rent control. Of course, we lived with my grandparents and so I don't think we ever got a rent increase. I think she paid the same amount, maybe one hundred dollars a month for twenty years, as her salary increased. I remember one time, I remember my aunt telling me this story, that my grandfather came up and he was very sad. He was telling my mother, "I'm going to have to raise your rent like twenty dollars." And she had been paying one hundred dollars for like sixty-seven years and she had a really good—she was a court stenographer. So we lived rather well.

I would remember my mother would go to—she was an excellent seamstress and she would make all of her clothes. She would go to like Bergdorf [Goodman] and Bloomingdale's and places like that and look at the clothes. She would say, "They're charging this much for that? This is only twenty dollars worth of material. I can do this." And then she would *[laughter]*.

They had knock-off patterns, you know. So she would go to these fancy department stores, look at what they have, unzip it, look at it, see how it was made and she would go home and make it. So she was always dressed to the T and people I guess thought that's all she did with her money was buy clothes but she made all that stuff. Back in those days, a two hundred to three hundred dollar dress was a fortune. So she would make it for maybe twenty, thirty dollars worth of material and maybe a week of labor.

So she was always dressed to the max and made sure that we were also. I hated it, of course, as a kid. She would drag us to the department stores and try clothes on for us. That was one of the most excruciating things *[laughter]*. But we were always dressed. I'll never forget one time, I was playing sandlot football and I got hurt and I guess my coaches wanted to make sure my parents weren't going to sue them. So they came by the house to check on me. I had a dislocated shoulder and it was these two white guys. You could tell, when they walked in the house, they were like stunned. I don't know what they expected to find but they were like—I mean mouth open, eyes aghast. I was looking at them like, what are you looking at? Then it dawned on me that they really—there's certain periods in your life where like a light bulb goes on in your head, Oh!

Not until that happened did I begin to realize that the perceptions and the images that they were projecting of black people were not accurate. White people, when they actually met somebody that was black and saw how we lived, they were stunned. They thought we all lived in shacks or in the ghetto, in these horrible conditions and it wasn't like that. And everybody on my block was like this. We weren't the exceptions. Like I said, seventy percent of the people, eighty, maybe ninety percent of the people owned their—there were no absentee landlords on my block.

They were either people who owned those houses and they rented it out or they were like us, where they were family-occupied by three or four generations. The whole time I was there, it was like that and I think it's pretty much like that now because fortunately like myself, most of my contemporaries, they understood the value because they had professional parents who told

them, hey, don't sell. Like I said, they were three generations that lived in the house and most of them—when I go back, like the person who we sold the house to in '67, they're still there. Their kids have moved other places because oftentimes children don't really appreciate what they grew up in.

But what's interesting though is that—so this is a four-story brownstone, right? Even though all the kids don't live there, they all have apartments there. So when they come back to New York, they have a place to stay. Because when I came back to New York, I'm thinking, maybe I can go over there and stay in the old homestead. That would be wonderful. So I went there and the name of that family, the Cherry's *[phonetic]*, so I said, "Can I rent a room from you when I come back?" He said, "No, the kids got them all."

So it was a very lower-middle class upbringing. Like I said, I never considered myself to be poor. I never wanted for anything. I didn't get the best of everything. I didn't get the top sneakers. I met a guy—what we called Skips back in the day. You could get Converses which were the big sneakers back in those days and they cost ten dollars *[laughs]*. And my mother said, "I'm not paying ten dollars for sneakers." *[Phone ringing]*.

Q: Do you want me to pause this?

Thompson: No. I love that feature.

Q: It's a scam likely.

Thompson: Let me turn this off.

Q: That would be great. You're making me think of a couple of different things all at once.

Thompson: Go ahead.

Q: One is early you talked about the sense of mission in history and it's not just that they said like life was terrible before emancipation. They just didn't even talk about these communities that were middle class communities, upper-middle class, educated, landowner communities. So it's that kind of a mission that leads your white neighbors to come over having no idea, to have never even imagined that there could be a middle class black family with a good quality of life.

So as your mom and your aunt are unearthing this history of Weeksville, it's the past in conversation with the present in a way that they want to inform and re-inform the neighborhood. So moving forward from that moment, what did they do for community outreach and how did you see that impacting people's imaginations of themselves and of the neighborhood when they started to learn about Weeksville's history?

Thompson: As I said before, this was all happening in a broader social context of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Consciousness, Black Power, Black Pride, the rediscovery of not only African-American but African history. Weeksville, we had an annual luncheon which was fairly well attended.

There was this thing called the Weeksville Lady. We found a picture of a woman from the period dressed in this really nice outfit and so we had somebody make a similar outfit to what the woman wore. It was an old daguerreotype photograph, probably around 1860s, of this really finely dressed black woman. Like I said, we copied the dress and we had—there was a woman that would wear it and we called her the Weeksville Lady. She would go to schools and talk about Weeksville and stuff like that.

Whenever they had school fairs, we did an archaeological—how we found that photograph is that we did an archaeological project. There was a housing development across the street from where our original office was and they were tearing those houses down to build new housing. So we went to the city—because we knew that was where the heart of Weeksville was. So we went to the city and asked for permission to do a dig before they built the new houses.

We found a treasure. We found an old well. Usually those old wells are full of what was back then garbage which are now artifacts. So we found a lot, old bibles, old photographs, all kinds of stuff.

That was kind what was our main outreach, mostly in schools. There was like a Boy Scout troop that came over. The dig was a major outreach because people could see people digging. In a black community, if you see people digging in a place, obviously people are going to be, what are you looking for? Because that went on for a couple of months and in order to do that, we had to make a presentation at City Hall to get permission.

Q: Was this around ’68?

Thompson: Yes, so this is yes, late ‘60s, early ‘70s.

Q: Because there was another one in the early ‘70s, another archaeological—

Thompson: Well, I’m trying to think. This was the one for what was on Bergen Street. That might be the one I’m talking about. I know there was the one where we found most of the stuff and that was probably early ‘70s. So it was probably that one.

Q: The one where the Boy Scouts got involved.

Thompson: Yes.

Q: Okay, all right, yes, yes. That’s the ‘70s one.

Thompson: Like I said, the Weeksville Lady would go to schools. Then there was the Weeksville School. There was actually a school called the—a public elementary school that was the Weeksville School. There was a woman named Marguerite Thompson, no relationship to me who was from Bank Street School and she started a program there. So we had a lot of artifacts there and of course, the school’s named Weeksville and she made a point of integrating the knowledge of the community, at least into that school, if it wasn’t the broader context. That was

again around the time when students were demanding black studies and that black history courses be taught, that there'd be more black faculty at schools.

There was a whole sea change, at least in New York, around that time and we had our niche in it. Most of the outreach were to kids and elementary schools. But like I said, you had a whole school named Weeksville School with a curriculum that was based on all the research that we had done. We had actually took some of the artifacts and took them to the school and there was a room in the school with these pictures of middle-class black people back in the 1850s and 1860s.

So that was mostly our outreach and then the film that I did was shown in a lot of places. Between our physical outreach, the school and the film were probably the main outreach. We were fairly well-known in Brooklyn back in those days and to this day.

Q: Tell me more about the archaeological dig. Do you have any particular memories from it that really stand out?

Thompson: I think that was during the time I was probably—I think if it was the early '70s, I was probably—I might have been in school. I wasn't involved with the dig—

Q: Oh, '78 to '82 is what I wrote down here.

Thompson: Seventy what?

Q: Seventy-eight to ’82.

Thompson: I wasn’t involved in the dig.

Q: Okay.

Thompson: I wasn’t. I made the film and I had kind of started a film company. I was working at Pratt probably by then. Well, ’78, yes. I started at Pratt in ’78, yes. I also started a film company and that was around the time—we were very busy. In addition to doing documentaries, we did a film called *The Sermon* which was about the organization of the National Black United Front which was an organization that was started by a guy named Herbert [D.] Daughtry [Sr.] back around a police killing of an unarmed black man. Some things never change.

That was a whole movement; the National Black United Front became a national organization around police violence, back around that time, late ‘70s, early ‘80s. And we did a documentary about that whole movement. That was around the time when Grenada was invaded. We did an interview with this guy who was the finance minister of Grenada about the invasion.

Q: Wow.

Thompson: We did a lot of documentaries on black life. Then we also did a lot of music videos. That sort of kind of paid the rent as you would say. It was a really good lifestyle. I had a full-time job. I was the director of media services at Pratt Institute which paid a decent salary. And

then I had this production company, Insight Video Productions and we made films and videos, either African American documentaries or music videos. But I really didn't get a whole lot involved with the dig. I was kind of really occupied with—when they would call me to come in, I would come and maybe shoot some video of them doing the dig but I wasn't physically involved in it.

Q: Talk to me about being a security guard at the house then. What was it like living there? I'd love just like a tour of the inside of the house, what was it like living there, your adventures in the evenings, whatever you've got.

Thompson: Only one of the houses—the houses were being in the midst of being renovated. So I lived in the house on Bergen Street that was the one that was the most livable—people had actually lived in it for quite some time. Then the Jenkins family who had lived there for maybe twenty, thirty years sold it to Weeksville and then Weeksville purchased the house and our office was downstairs on the first floor. There was an apartment above that and I lived there. The house was an old, wooden drafty house. You had rodents running through it. So I got a cat and then the cat got fleas. I had to get rid of the cat *[laughter]*.

It was something else. I moved there from a fairly nice apartment in a brownstone, thinking I would save some money because I wouldn't pay any rent. But I couldn't get all of my furniture—somebody had given me this really fabulous couch. I couldn't get it up the steps.

It was an adventure because the house was under construction as I was living in it. It was kind of

holey and drafty. I eventually got a dog for security reasons. I'll never forget one day, I left this chicken out to defrost. The dog ate it. I mean a whole chicken. A whole raw chicken. I came back to the house—when I come back to the house, the dog is usually at the door, jumping. I came to the door and the dog was nowhere to be found. So I went and I saw her, she was slinking in a corner. I said, "What?" And the only thing that was left of the chicken was the wrapper *[laughter]*.

It was so funny, I just started bursting out laughing and I was mad but it was so funny, I couldn't hit her. You got me on that one. You're not eating no dinner tonight. You got mine.

Then my daughter was very young at that time. She would come and stay with me. It was quite an adventure. I lived there for maybe about a year, a year and a half, something like that.

Q: And the other houses that weren't livable, were they still covered in tin?

Thompson: Yeah, they were still covered. They were in the midst of renovation. As they untinned them, there were a couple that were still—when I was there, two of the houses were tinned and one of them was in the process of renovation. One of the things that we would do, that I would do is come by and shoot a little bit, come back a couple weeks later, shoot a little bit, so that you could see the progress. But it was an adventure. That was a kind of rough neighborhood. It still is kind of a rough neighborhood. It was even rougher back then. But it was interesting. It was very interesting living there.

Q: Were you ever called upon to act as a security guard? I mean that was part of your reason for being there.

Thompson: Not really. I think once people realized that there was someone living there and that he had a big dog, we didn't have any real—there were no break-ins while I was there, no attempted break-ins while I was there. Of course, when I wasn't there, the dog was there. I had a big german shepherd. He was a real punk but people didn't know that. I mean if somebody actually broke into the house, he would probably have ran the other way. But the barking kept people away.

Q: My mom grew up in a house that was like a 1800s mess and all the things they had to figure out about plumbing and hardware. You open up one wall and it's like, what is even in there. So I can only imagine what it's like living in an old house while it's being renovated.

Thompson: That's being renovated.

Q: What were some of the things people were finding? What did you have to rig up to make it livable?

Thompson: Like I said, the house that we lived in, people had been living in for a while so they had done a lot to it. It was livable. They had running water and all of that. It wasn't any kind of real physical challenge. It was more the neighborhood. It was drafty, of course. You had rodents running in and out because there were big holes. Every time, I'd patch one and there would be

another one somewhere else. But that was it.

Of course, since there was an office downstairs, there was always something going on. People were having meetings. It was a very close-knit group of folks because when they had meetings, I'd cook dinner and I'd bring dinner down and feed people and whatnot. So it was pretty cool.

Q: You were on the board at that time?

Thompson: Yes.

Q: So how were you raising money for this massive renovation?

Thompson: Grants. Writing grants.

Q: Lots of writing grants.

Thompson: We got money from the National Trust for the grants—for the restoration, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, I think gave that. For a lot of the outreach for the film, we got a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. Like I said, we had a major fundraiser every year but mostly I would say, eighty to ninety percent of the money was from grants from the [New York City] Department of Cultural Affairs and places like that.

Joan was a big fundraiser too. I mean Joan Maynard who was the first executive director. She

was a real go-getter. There was a lot of like twenty-five, thirty-five dollar donations from people in the community, fifty dollars, one hundred dollars here or there and that was mostly from Joan strong-arming people. I would say maybe ten, twenty percent of our budget was donations and then the rest were grants.

Q: Tell me about Joan.

Thompson: I think every institution—if it's going to have a history has to have a Joan Maynard. Somebody who just dedicates their whole life, they don't have any children—well, her one child was grown. She wasn't married and she really didn't have a life other than Weeksville. For an institution like that to prosper, it needs somebody that's willing to devote their life to it. And that's pretty much what she did.

I mean it was like Joan and Weeksville were synonymous. She slept, ate, breathed Weeksville and then when she was selected to the board of directors for the National Trust—that opened up a lot of doors for us. And she was just always willing to come and talk about preservation and history, to the point where she became almost an institution to herself and all that rubbed off on Weeksville. She was really the Weeksville Lady, even without the costume. When you thought of Weeksville, you thought of Joan.

That was her from an institutional point of view. I knew her of course personally and we were friends and she was a mentor to me. For the film that I did for Weeksville, it was my first major production. So she was responsible for that. She was just a very kind, loving person. She was

basically an artist by profession. She was a graphic artist. But once she got involved with Weeksville that kind of went by the wayside. She devoted all her energies, efforts to Weeksville. You know how people say, "Get a life!" That was her life. I don't ever remember her having a boyfriend or a man in her life. I mean for twenty years, maybe more. Like I said, she had a son but he was a grown man by the time she got involved with Weeksville.

Q: How did she get involved with Weeksville?

Thompson: I think she came to a meeting once and she just, like a lot of people, just fell in love with the idea and the concept. Like I said, it was around the time when black people were discovering that we did have a history here in this country and that it was interesting and fascinating. And it was all new and fresh and it's still, to me, is new and fresh because there's still so much that hasn't been told.

I think she came to one of our outreach efforts and then she started as a volunteer and the next thing I knew, she was—being a starving artist, it wasn't too much—being a museum director was a step up *[laughter]*.

There were days, months and weeks when we couldn't pay her. She went back to doing her artist thing. I mean a person with a family would have never—they wouldn't have stayed, they couldn't have hung—it had to be someone like Joan.

When you talk about somebody being all in, Joan was all in. She just had that kind of

personality, very soft-spoken but very intense at the same time. So you could feel the intensity of what she thought about Weeksville and this whole movement of African American history, in a very quiet but methodical and intense way. She was like I said, very personable, very, very kind, a giving person. Yes, a very kind, giving person, and very, very into Weeksville and what it meant.

Q: Tell me something that you learned from her, since she was kind of a mentor?

Thompson: She always had this saying, "You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar." You could nice people to death. How could you say no to this sweet, little old lady? It was just like, "Well, we could use this and we could use that." She would just break your—I don't want to say break your heart but make you feel like, oh, what do you need? What can I give you? By the time she got finished, *[laughs]*, you were looking for things to give her. She just made it sound so alluring.

I think people sensed her dedication and that sense of dedication went a long way to people saying that they would support the initiative. This nice little lady is that intense about it. And she really educated herself, so she could talk about it authoritatively but also with passion and authority, with a sense of why don't you come help me do this? Like, boy, this is exciting! Don't you want to be a part of this?

When she talked about Weeksville, it would be like—she would light up and she could transmit that intensity to other people in a way that few people that I know could. I think she taught me

like I said, that whole phrase, you catch more flies with honey. So even if people are mean to you and they're not really nice, you could nice them to death. You can make them feel guilty about being mean to you by just being nice.

She wasn't a pushover but I can't ever remember her raising her voice at anyone. I wasn't with her twenty-four/seven but even when she—and you knew she was upset about something, she would still talk in this very measured tone and try, "Well, I'm sorry you think that way." She was always very pleasant but she was really intense and single-tracked about Weeksville. Like I said, I think any institution that's going to be an institution has to have at least one Joan Maynard.

Q: At least one.

Thompson: At least one, yes. Some people are lucky and they have more than one but you need at least one, somebody that's willing to give up everything for it. And to encourage other people maybe not to give up everything but to give up something for it. Even if they couldn't match her intensity, they caught the fire.

That was my impressions of her, that's what she taught me about, how to deal with people. Even if people were unpleasant or maybe have designs that are not in tune with yours, is to always be pleasant. You get more out of it than trying to batter. I guess a lot of it was she was a little, tiny woman. She really didn't have any physical power but she has this spiritual, emotional, intellectual power that made up for her lack of physical stature.

Q: This is making me wonder about the early days of the board, those people who caught the fire. What was it like? What were some of the early challenges? How did you figure out those hurdles? What were the interpersonal dynamics? What can you tell me about that time?

Thompson: Well, I think there's always a level of tension between staff and board. The board probably thinking that they need to micromanage and the staff resenting the micromanagement. But I think one of the things that saved or made Weeksville what it is, is that the board was like, we were all friends.

Now I was the baby of the lot. Most of them were my mother's contemporaries. They were like—Joan—ten, twenty years older than me. But they were all like my little aunts. When we would have meetings, like I said, I would cook dinner and we would sit down and have dinner and it was very family. The board had a very family feel. It wasn't necessarily—we weren't looking for donors to be on the board. We didn't think—we didn't have those kind of people in our community anyway. So what we wanted were people who were willing to work and that believed in what we were doing.

But everybody knew everybody. We were all friends. The older generation hung out together. So it was a very close-knit board of people who not only interacted as part of the board but also interacted personally.

I remember snipes about the board but no major battles. Now after Joan left, I mean the board became real professional, got a lot of bankers and lawyers. I think at one point, Hillary [R.]

Clinton was involved with it.

Q: On the board or just raising—

Thompson: Not on the board, but I think raising funds.

Q: Yes, I think so too.

Thompson: I think that's when it really took off. At one point, the chairman of Goldman Sachs was on the board. Those were the kind of people she started to bring—because when she got involved, when she became a New York's senator, then she started bringing in people like that. Then we started getting bank vice presidents and city council people and all that. But before that, when I was there, it was just all local folks from the community who were, like I said, personal friends of one another.

Q: So by the time you left in '89, it was still that way.

Thompson: It was still like that, yes. Not until Hillary Clinton became senator, that's when I started following it. I always followed it from a distance and then I started seeing who was on the board. When I saw this guy from—what's this guy, Blankenship *[phonetic]*? Yes, whoever was the chairman of the board of Goldman Sachs was the chairman of the board of Weeksville.

Q: Yikes.

Thompson: That's when they started getting real money. That's when they finished all the houses and they built the campus and then they built a new building and all that. That was, I guess, the heyday of it. But it had become a whole different thing. By then, Weeksville was a Brooklyn institution. It had been around for twenty, thirty years. It was sort of kind of the most well-known institution in the community by then.

Q: In the Bed-Stuy community?

Thompson: In the Bed-Stuy community.

Q: I guess now Crown Heights? When did that switch happen?

Thompson: Well, you have political boundaries and then you have what I call cultural boundaries. The political boundary says that Bed-Stuy is bordered by Tompkins Avenue in the north, Reid Avenue in the east, Bedford Avenue in the west and Stuyvesant Avenue here. But those are just political definitions.

Bed-Stuy, when I was growing up before we knew about the political things, it was a much bigger place. It was pretty much all of central Brooklyn. Crown Heights, we kind of knew—to us, Crown Heights didn't really start until you got to Eastern Parkway. All the rest of that stuff, before Eastern Parkway was still Bed-Stuy as far as we were concerned. And Bed-Stuy went all the way to Bushwick Avenue. We considered that Bed-Stuy. Then Bed-Stuy going the other way

went all the way to Marcy [Avenue] and then all the way to—I guess that's going west, Bedford Avenue was again the borderline.

It was a different concept of what was Bed-Stuy and it was different than the legal, political borderlines. The same thing with where I live now. I mean there's the political borderlines of what's recognized by the city as West End and then there's what we call the cultural West End which is pretty much the heart of the black cultural movement in Atlanta. And Bed-Stuy pretty much became that. I actually think in the '60s and the '70s, it moved from Harlem to Bed-Stuy. That's my personal opinion.

Q: What is your experience of that?

Thompson: Both the Marsalis brothers lived in Brooklyn first, before they moved to Manhattan. I guess that would have been called Clinton Hill technically but again, we called it Bed-Stuy. Bed-Stuy went all the way to Clinton Avenue back in those days. Randy Weston lived in Brooklyn.

There was a place called The East, which was a black cultural institution, and they had a festival every year and jazz musicians from all over the country would come and perform there. That's been going on, The East festival, for maybe fifty, sixty years.

The Fulton Art Fair, again, Ernie [Ernest] Crichlow, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, all of the great artists that we think of now, all exhibited there back in the '60s and '70s. Lena Horne is from Brooklyn, Conrad [B.] McRae.

Like I said, I think in the ‘20s and ‘30s, it was Harlem, Harlem Renaissance, but in the ‘60s and ‘70s, it was Brooklyn. Then when Spike moved and came on the scene—and to this day—I think Harlem has gentrified. I would say it’s sort of like this, you had Harlem and then you have Brooklyn and then Harlem pretty much stayed here and then Brooklyn came up to here where it was like Brooklyn Academy of Music DanceAfrica, the West Indian Day Parade. You got a million people in the street.

So it was a very, very rich cultural environment that I grew up in the ‘60s, ‘70s, ‘80s until I left. When I go back now, it’s still—there’s a friend of mine—well, there’s a whole bunch of jazz clubs, restaurants.

There were no really nice restaurants in this—well, one in the whole community. Now they’re like on every block; Clinton Avenue, Bedford, Stuyvesant, Lewis, all those blocks have, I’d say, maybe two or three restaurants on each block in the major thoroughfares, on Stuyvesant and—well, it’s not Lewis anymore? What is that called? Something else. Those areas off Fulton Park, Fulton Street going back. Yes, it was always a very rich, rich cultural scene and of course Weeksville and that whole history thing. I think it continues to this day.

Q: You were starting to say earlier about the difference in your mind between revitalization and gentrification. I just wanted to make sure I understood it because I guess I missed some of it.

Thompson: Okay. This is my own definition. To me, gentrification is a bad word. If you look up

the original where the term comes from, it was coined by an English sociologist to talk about what was happening in London at the time back, I think, in the ‘70s, where old neighborhoods, people would come in and they would buy up these houses real cheap, move the existing residents and businesses out and then a whole new group of people would come in and take over the place. The people that lived there before can’t afford to live there anymore.

Revitalization, what we’re trying to do in Atlanta and what I think happened in Brooklyn by accident or by circumstances is that you improve the neighborhood but without forcing out old-time residents and finding a place for them, and having a situation where there is affordable housing along with the more upscale housing and all the businesses and all the amenities that come with it.

You can do that and still have that kind of income, social mix, which I think is still prevalent in Bed-Stuy because most of the people, when I was growing up, they owned their own houses and they knew what they had. Most of the houses that were taken up by newcomers were houses that had been owned by absentee landlords or families that didn’t have kids and there wasn’t anybody to—or the kids had moved somewhere else, maybe to California or something like that and they really didn’t—because I had friends like that too. They didn’t want to move back to the city and they sold the houses. But I go back to the block every time I go home and I would say maybe seventy, eighty percent of the families that were there when I was a kid are still there. Now their grandchildren are in the houses now but it’s the same folks.

Q: Wow. What do you see as the role of history and maybe even landmark preservation in

revitalization? Does it have a positive influence? Is it disconnected? Is it a negative influence to be preserving historic sites in neighborhoods?

Thompson: Well, I think it can be a tremendous asset. In Atlanta, tourism is the number one industry by far. Now New York, you got a lot more things going on but tourism still is a major income generator. So these historic sites generate tourism. So that is the whole modus operandi behind what I'm doing in Atlanta is I live in a historic neighborhood. It's on the National Register of Historic Places. Tourism is the number one industry in Atlanta and Atlanta is the number one domestic destination for African Americans.

So given all those facts, then it would seem logical that you would want to parlay that history. One of the things about history is that it can't be taken away. We will always be—the community that I live in will always be the oldest community in Atlanta. We can have newer communities but you can't have anybody that's older. When you're the first there, you're the first there. That is an economic asset, the history of the city.

So how do you—what we're doing now, now you have this asset, how do you parlay it into resources that help you deal with some of the other issues that you have to deal with. In our community and many black communities around the country, you have this where—we had a Publix come in. They stayed for five years, the Publix goes. They have a Walmart that comes in. God knows how long they're going to stay. Those kinds of things can come and go but the culture and the history of a place is there. It's part of the people. It's part of the place and it can't be—I mean you can ignore it but you can't take it away.

If you are aware of it and aware of what kind of economy and culture you live in, it can be parlayed into—what we try to do is a different kind of economic development. During most of the ‘60s and up until now, most of the economic development has been what I call needs-based development. In other words, you go to a fund and say, “We need this, we need this, we need this.” Nine times out of ten, what happens is that you get a grant, the grant gets spent and nothing is changed. You can’t look at anything and say, “Well, where did the money go?” In Atlanta, in the community that I live in, they’ve pumped in over one hundred million dollars and nothing’s changed, not really in terms of infrastructure.

The method that we like to employ is called asset-based community development. In other words, what are the assets that the community has and how can you parlay those assets into more resources to deal with the issues that you need to deal with. So I got involved with an organization called Creating Vibrant Communities and we did a neighborhood assets survey and we discovered that we had over 120 acres of vacant land. We had people who had farming skills. So we created an urban farming environment. We developed nine community farms and gardens in the neighborhood that employ people and sell organic fresh produce to people in the neighborhood. Using those assets, we’ve dealt with food desert, we’ve dealt with employment. So we’re doing the same thing with tourism and preservation. We’re trying to preserve the neighborhood.

The big thing in black communities has been always, well, let’s spend our own money in our own community. And I’m saying, well, we can do it even one better. Why don’t we get other

people to spend their money? In addition to keeping our money here, why don't we get people from other communities to come here and spend their money too? So that's what we've been doing and I would say fifty to sixty percent of my tours are from people who don't live in the community because it's become a hot new community. Everybody wants to come. Half of the people that come on my tours are people looking to buy houses because they ask me questions about, "What's the police response time? Is that house over there—?" They see a house that's boarded up, "Do you know who owns that house?" "No, I don't." Even if I do, I don't tell them.

So yes, I think culture and history is not only a cultural and historical asset but it can be an economic asset.

Q: Yes.

Thompson: Tourism is a big industry.

Q: I wrote down something you said that really stuck out to me, history is something that can't be taken away. In the case of Weeksville, it feels like you almost lost that story and if it wasn't for this perfect timing of the interest in the schools and the interest in society in revitalizing that history, it might have been lost. People might have forgotten about it.

Thompson: Well, let me put it this way. Like I said, you can't lose it. It can be ignored but it can't be lost. It's always there. The facts are the facts. Now there's a saying that the winners write history. I think that has been the driving force behind history for most of human history, up

until—I think the game changer has been the Internet. Now everybody—I mean I can get on my phone and get on the Internet and communicate with somebody in the Soviet Union for fifty dollars a month on a forty dollar phone. I can talk to anybody in the world.

I think that has allowed—and also I can access—one of the things that really amazed me when I started discovering the Internet, is that I can get on the Internet and access the Louvre [Museum]. I can access the Smithsonian. I can access the London Museum. I can access the [State] Hermitage [Museum] in Moscow. My assets—Akar or Johannesburg, or Cairo.

Then I can communicate. I can go to YouTube and see lectures by John Henrik Clarke and all kinds of African scholars whereas before you had to be in a university or you could go to a library. You can sit in the privacy of your home and get all kinds of information. So I think that the turning point was the access to information, making it—in addition to the social and political changes that happened, the access to information. It's just like the printing press created eventually the Renaissance, the Reformation. So as people got—each communication innovation has ramifications as people gain more knowledge. And with the Internet, it's sort of like it has increased exponentially because it's just not—with the printing press, you still needed a press and books, you had to physically—you just pick up a thing and you can be—so that increases the information supply.

The negative or the part that is sort of counterweight to that is this whole idea of what's true and what's not true. I mean that whole fake news. Fake news is not a new phenomenon.

Q: No, I'm thinking about your mom going to these archives and digging things out of boxes and doing it all the slow way but even then, she's got to verify what is this piece of paper, who put it here, what were their motivations?

Thompson: That really helped me a lot in discovering that you have to get to the difference between a newspaper article and original source material. No, this is a letter written by X, Y, Z, as opposed to a story about a letter written by X, Y, Z, because when you just read the newspapers—I just got finished reading a book on the arguments for abolition. You read the newspapers that were printed in the South in the 1850s and 1860s, you know, like what? Turn of the century, yellow press, the Hearsts. You send me the things, I'll create the war.

Fake news is not a new phenomenon. Newspapers, the history of newspapers in America are political. Newspapers started out as political positions of various political parties. Most of the newspapers were written by political parties.

Q: I was just reading about—James Hurley was talking about a newspaper article he found about Weeksville that described it as this horrible, desolate place but it lined up with the time when they were pressuring the city to help them fix some flood damage and the city was saying the property values weren't worth it. So he looks at this newspaper article and he's just like, well, the motivations of the time are so clear, in the way they're trying to shape the public view about the value, not just the place, but the people. So that gets him interested in doing the research, what was—

Thompson: What's the truth?

Q: What's real? How do you find Weeksville?

Thompson: It's even in black communities like Rosedale, Florida; Greenwood—where's Greenwood? Missouri? But during the turn of the century, there were a lot of flourishing black communities which a lot of them—and both in Florida and in Greenwood, I mean they were decimated. At a certain point, when poor whites start to see a black middle class, it became confrontational. The least amount of spark could wind up—well, it did wind up getting both of those communities destroyed, I mean physically.

What she taught me was to go to original source documents as opposed to the press because this whole concept of a free and independent press is a relatively new, I would say late Twentieth Century idea but before that, everybody knew that—like I said, the origins of newspapers were political parties. Those were the first people to write papers. It was not until the turn of the century that independent people—but they were always, like William Randolph Hearst [Sr.], these were business people that had a particular point of view, this whole Manifest Destiny thing, American empire. All of that was fed by the press, in trying to convince people they needed to go overseas and fight.

How many people know about the Philippine War? People know about the Spanish-American War but when you ask people, did you know that we had a war with the Philippines that lasted twenty years and that we killed one hundred thousand people? That we were the first people to

have concentration camps? It wasn't the Germans. It was the Americans. Of that one hundred thousand people who died, most of them were women and children that died from diseases in the camps.

The other thing that really pisses me off is when newscasts say Afghanistan is our longest war. It's not by a long shot. The longest war in America is the war against the native population which lasted for a hundred years. From the time that the country was started until the Nineteenth Century, we were at constant war with some native population. In fact, America has been at war with—and people think, well, that's not a foreign war. Yes, it is a foreign war because they were a foreign country. It wasn't part of the United States. You invaded a foreign country and ethnic cleansed the population, the ones that you didn't kill and you took their land.

Basically, leben space, which was [Adolf] Hitler's justification for the invasion of Europe, is no different than Manifest Destiny. It's the same thing, that a certain race of people has a destiny through their ethnic superiority to enslave other people. In fact, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler references, all I'm doing is what the British did in North America. All of that is fed—a lot of people call Hitler a dictator and all of that. He won election by a landslide. That's how he first came to power. He won an election. The first way he came to power, he won an election by a landslide in what, 1936? But because the press—I mean he became a dictator over awhile. I think we're beginning to have some—a democracy is not given, it's not guaranteed. It can change.

Q: Yes.

Thompson: The history and how you look back on it, in hindsight, you look at Vietnam, even World War I, what we call World War I. The first real world war was what was called the Seven Years War, which was basically between France and England. It was the first war that was fought on every continent. It was even more of a world war than World War I because it was actually, part of it was fought in America, in what we call the French and Indian War. But that same war was being fought as the Seven Years War in Europe, in Africa and in Asia and in South America all at the same time. So that was the first—that was a real world war because every—it was fought on every single continent, whereas World War I and World War II were not fought on American soil.

Q: So what is this relationship with history that you got from your mom? I mean obviously it informs the way you see the whole world, this eye of—

Thompson: History should inform everyone. I think one of the major problems in American politics and government is this lack of understanding of what our history is and that's why we keep on making the same mistakes over and over and over again. You look at the Civil War and Reconstruction, and then what happened after Reconstruction. You had this regression back into Jim Crow—there's a book out called *The New Jim Crow* by this woman called Michelle Alexander that talks about how people are disenfranchised because of mass incarceration.

And there's another book called *The New Slavery*—what is it, oh, *Slavery by Another Name: [The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II]*. Basically, what happened after Reconstruction was this whole mass incarceration and prison labor. So you could

be arrested for vagrancy. What they would do is they'd push the people off the plantation, the sheriff would come by and arrest them and then sell them back to the same plantation they just got off. And that lasted until the '40s. A lot of people—depending on—people don't know that and when I talk to people and do my tours and I tell people stuff—and I would say most people that take my tours are what you would call millennials, people in their late twenties-early thirties, college-educated, and they don't know this.

Q: You said history can be ignored and when history is ignored, they don't know these things. So how does history get rediscovered? You've lived it through pulling Weeksville back together but then—

Thompson: That's how it's done.

Q: Things get thrown down a well and then that well gets covered over and a development company comes and wants to build houses on it but it's not a given that it will be a community like yours, that says, "Hey, wait a second, can we go look in the well for pictures first?"

Thompson: No, I believe in the ultimate goodness in progression and spiritual and moral evolution of the human race. There are dips. There was a saying that [Barrack H.] Obama liked to say—he was quoting someone else. I don't know if it was Martin Luther King or somebody even before that, is that the arc of justice—

Q: Arc of history is long *[crosstalk]*—

Thompson: Is long but always going up with. So if you look at history, instead of going like this, it sort of goes—

Q: Up and down, up and down. Some downs bigger than others.

Thompson: You know, Dark Ages, you have Reconstruction where you have black senators and congressmen, then you have Jim Crow. A lot of people called the period between the '60s and now, the Second Reconstruction.

Q: Wow, I didn't know that.

Thompson: Yes. Now you're having the same thing that happened after the First Reconstruction happening after the second. So you've got this backlash—

Q: Backlash.

Thompson: These people of color got too much power. A lot of people, again in my social, intellectual circle call [Donald J.] Trump, the last great white hope. There was a whole saying called the great white hope. Are you familiar with that? Okay.

Around the turn of the century, there was this black boxer called Jack [John A.] Johnson who won the heavyweight *[unclear]*—and there's a documentary which if you're interested in history

at all, you really need to see it. It's called *Unapologetically Black*. Jack Johnson became the heavyweight champion of the world. I think it was about 1805, something like that, around the turn of the century. So there's this thing that came out where they had to find somebody white to beat him and that became—there was a movie and a play about it called *The Great White Hope*. Again, probably before your time but back in the '60s, a guy wrote a play based on his story. It was called *The Great White Hope*. James Earl Jones played Jack Johnson. And then there was a movie made, again called *The Great White Hope*.

So there's this whole ebb and flow of race relations. In America, you have this spurt and then you have a backlash. The difference now is that most demographers predict that by 2020, the mid-'20s—

Q: Twenty-twenty-four.

Thompson: Yes, that Europeans will no longer be the dominant population in the United States. Some states it's already happening, California and that this whole thing to Trump is a reaction to that. If we don't suppress them now, then we'll lose control of the country.

When he says, "We want to make American great <u>again</u>." So what is that code for? Anybody that's black in America, anything in the past is not good *[laughs]*. So somebody asked him once, "Well, when was America last great?" And he says, "Around the turn of the century." So what was happening in America around the turn of the century? Black people were being lynched. Women couldn't vote and we were in war with the Philippines and Cuba and basically being a

regional bully. We had just finished annihilating the last native population. That's their definition of when America was great. It's probably in terms of that mentality, yes, they're probably right.

Q: You're talking about rewriting history.

Thompson: Yes.

Q: We only have a few minutes left. Can I ask you something?

Thompson: Sure.

Q: Where are all your mom's papers going to be archived and where are all of your films going to be archived? How are these things going to be saved?

Thompson: Well, it's very interesting that you ask that because I just started thinking about that.

Q: Just now.

Thompson: Well, not just this minute but in the last couple years. I've done a number of films and over the years, I've sort of never really—because a lot of them were for other people. I'm beginning to collect them now and I don't know what I'm going to do with them but I'll at least have them, try to collect them. There's a piece that I did called *Notes and Tones* which is a video version of a book that was written by a jazz great called Arthur Taylor. What Arthur Taylor did,

he went to all of his contemporaries in jazz, Marsalis, Ron [Ronald L.] Carter, Abbey Lincoln [Anna Marie Wooldridge], Milt [Milton] Jackson, you name it and he did interviews with them. So we went back and did video interviews. We got maybe about thirty hours and I've never completed it.

Q: Oh, my God.

Thompson: And I don't even know where the tapes are right now. And that's one of the reasons I'm coming back to New York—because I know the person that last had them. Because when I left—well, it's a long story about them. You know, there's always a backstory. But in any event, I left Atlanta. I left the tapes in the custody of somebody. I really have been preoccupied but you're right. Maybe a couple years ago, I was thinking, Wow—and I did a Google search. I know if he took the tapes, he probably—they're on the Internet somewhere. So I Googled it and I couldn't find it. So those tapes are sitting in somebody's office room somewhere. I don't think they're commercially viable but—most of the musicians that we interviewed and Art himself are all dead.

So that's an interesting question. I'm working on it. I decided to every time I come to New York to try to spend at least some of that time trying to recapture—maybe I have a hundred videos that I've shot, that I think might have some historical value, that I don't know where they are.

Q: Wow. And the follow-up question is what about your mom's papers and your Aunt Bunnie's papers?

Thompson: Well, I've just begun to think about that. Mother's, she has this room in her house and like I said, she has her notes from the first Weeksville meeting. She showed them to me.

Q: Yes, yes.

Thompson: And she has about seven books of photographs. She's a real collector. She is. So I don't know what we would do with it. I would probably give that stuff to Weeksville.

Q: Yes.

Thompson: They're probably the only institution that would be interested and have the resources to maintain it. So that's probably, at this point, what I'd do with it.

Q: Do they know about the room? You might want to let them know *[laughs]*.

Thompson: Yes. Part of the problem in getting old is that—this is my, what, my third executive director at Weeksville?

Q: Oh, yes.

Thompson: Yes, Tia just left. Just when I got her trained *[laughs]*—

Q: She left.

Thompson: She up and leaves. Because we had developed a really good working relationship. She was interested and all that stuff. I did a similar thing for them. I forget that these are new people coming in and so they brought me up one time just to identify photographs. They didn't know who were in these photographs. We had maybe a thousand slides. So I put the slide, who is that? Who is that? So that's the kind of stuff we're doing now. That kind of brought me back to what you were saying. After I did that, I said, well, what stuff do I have? I have some stuff. Where is it and maybe I should go try and find it.

So I'm dealing with that right now and I've just sort of started that process and probably my mother's papers and Bunnie's papers will go to Weeksville. Bunnie had an incredible art collection. I mean incredible. Every major African American artist from the '60s and '70s. I mean Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Charles [W.] White. I mean her collection is worth a couple million dollars easy. Now her daughter has it and luckily her daughter understands what she has so it's all warehoused and appraised and all that. I understand her position. You got to be careful. Romare Bearden now is maybe worth a quarter million dollars. She got two of them *[laughs]*, two big ones. Jacob Lawrence, these guys are all deceased. Their typical piece goes for six figures. Charles White—I don't know how much—Charles White might be worth a million dollars by himself. It's just a small little hand charcoal piece.

Yes, we're still figuring out how we're going to do that. My mother, in addition to being an amateur anthropologist and historian, she's an incredible fabric artist. Her stuff has been at the

Smithsonian, in *International Review of African-American Art*. Two of the most prominent books on African-American quilting mention her.

Q: Wow.

Thompson: What's the guy with the Smithsonian? I forget his name and another one's Carol [L.] Mazloomi. Yes, both of those books mention her and she's in both of those books.

I mean we've talked a little bit about it and yes, I'll probably get most of that stuff. The art I'll keep, although I wanted to do an exhibit of her stuff at Weeksville. I'd like to do that. I don't know if they could handle Bunnie's collection. I mean just the insurance *[laughs]* alone would break them, but at least maybe some of the pieces from her collection. As an owner and a person that does it, it's really with the stuff of that value; the best way to keep it is unfortunately in storage. It takes a lot of energy and effort and time to mount an exhibit of that nature and I don't think her daughter is like there yet.

But yes, that's an interesting question. We're working on that. Every day, there's a woman in my neighborhood who has this—she turned her whole house into a museum of black collectibles. I mean she has like stuff back from the '30s and '40s, old newspapers, old magazines, old *Jet*, old *Ebony* magazines. Some of that really negative black, Aunt Jemima, Buckwheat kind of stuff, all over the house.

There's a ton of collections. How that begins to—I think that's an idea, a movement that has just

begun. What do we do with all this stuff that's been collected over the years? I think that's what the impetus was behind the National Museum of—I would say ninety percent of that stuff came from private collections.

Q: Oh, absolutely.

Thompson: People who were just, well, I've got Nat Turner's bible, I've had it for—so we're just beginning to develop the infrastructure, the Museum of African American [History] and Culture is the best example of that. And I think for smaller collections, places like Weeksville are the natural repository for that stuff. So now, we have a place to put it.

My mother is very unassuming. She's very incredibly modest. She's like, "Oh, this old junk?" *[Laughs]*. "Ma, don't throw it away."

Q: *[Laughs]*.

Thompson: If you don't want it, give it to me. I'll take it. "This old junk, you want this old junk? I should throw this way." I said, Ma, don't do that. I'll take it, I'll take it.

So we're working on that. It's something that I just started thinking about seriously a couple of years ago when I retired. I retired about four or five years ago, because then I had the time. Fortunately, I'm in a position where I don't have to work and I have the time. I've had the training. I've worked in museums. I know people who do this kind of stuff.

So to answer your question, we're just beginning to develop the infrastructure about how does this—we know it's important. We know it has to be saved. So now we have to build the infrastructure to make it happen and that's kind of where we're at. That's where I'm at.

Q: I wish you the best.

Thompson: It's going to be difficult but I think—that's sort of why I stay in contact with Weeksville and support it in any way I can and why I'm at the Hammonds House Museum and why I do the tours that I do, is to do at least my part in trying to preserve what we have and build institutions. That's the key because we really didn't have—until the '60s, you really didn't have major historical black institutions. Weeksville's probably one of the first actually that had any kind of national representation. It's an operation that's in progress. Like I said, I'm an internal optimist. So I believe that it will be done.

I'm going to in my small way do my part and hopefully by supporting Weeksville in any way I can, that will be part of it. That material will be part of that collection, the first notes from the first meetings, the first photographs. She has all that stuff.

As a matter of fact, when I leave here, I'm here until Thursday and then I'm going down to Virginia to visit her but also there is an event in Hampton, Virginia. Hampton, Virginia is probably the most historically significant location for African Americans in the United States. It was where the first recorded slave transaction took place in 1619. So there you have something

called African Landing Day and it's a commemoration of that event. A Dutch ship stopped at what was then called [Old] Point Comfort and sold nineteen slaves, traded nineteen slaves for food and that was the first recorded slave transaction in what is now the United States. And this was in 1619, so we're coming up on the four hundredth anniversary of that event.

It's really interesting, getting back to preserving history and all of that—there's a backstory to that. There's a gentleman named Calvin Pearson who started this thing called African Landing Day to commemorate that about four years ago. And every year he did it. It was very, very moving. He had people from Africa come over and talk and maybe some local officials talk and they'd have a historian talk. They'd have a film and a lecture.

Then the most moving part for me is that they would have a procession to the spot where they think the transaction took place and then they throw flowers into the water to commemorate the people who were lost on the Middle Passage. It's an incredibly moving scene.

So about two years ago—and he was doing this at Fort Monroe. Now Fort Monroe in Virginia is the oldest fort, one of the oldest forts still existing in America. It was built originally before there was an America and then it was—when the Dutch first moved there, and then it was something else. When the British took it over, it was right after the War of 1812. It's been a military post up until about five years ago when it was decommissioned.

What they did with a lot of these decommissioned forts is they made them into housing, recreational areas. There's this big one in Atlanta, Fort McPherson. In Virginia, in Hampton,

there's Fort Monroe. It's a huge fort. Half of it is being given to the National Parks Service because it's a national landmark.

So in addition to it being the first recorded slave transaction there, it is also where the Contraband Order was first signed. Now the Contraband Order was during the Civil War, some slaves ran away from their masters—the Union captured Fort Monroe early in the war. So slaves from the nearby plantations came to the fort to get what they thought was their freedom. So their masters came after them. It first started with these three guys who ran away. The commander of the fort was this guy named Ben [Benjamin] Butler who was a lawyer originally. So when they came to get their slaves back, they said, this is private property, we want it back. So Ben Butler said, well, it might be private property but if they're property, you're using them to support the war by building barricades. So just like any other private property that's been used for the war, it is now contraband and we're not going to give them back to you.

When that word got out, then thousands of blacks, that's what started the stand-in. So within a week, there must have been about ten thousand black people at Fort Monroe and then it spread. Then the general order throughout the South, before Emancipation, there was the Contraband Order, which meant that—before that, the Union was returning slaves to their owners. So that was sort of the pandora's box for slavery, after they let all these people go, they couldn't give them back. The Contraband Order was the first step in slavery and that also happened at Fort Monroe.

So that's why, and then of course, a couple miles away, you've got Hampton Institute, which

was one of the first historically black colleges founded by white missionaries. I just say that to say that there's this history all over. I just happened to—mother didn't come to Hampton because of that. I didn't come to Hampton but it's there and I'm going to expand what I'm doing to that. But the backstory is that once this thing got really popular—that Fort Monroe is owned by the state and the city of Hampton. They refused to give him a permit. So they took it over and now they're doing African Landing Day and giving him—the whole thing was his. Now they took it over and because it's coming up on the four hundredth anniversary and they gave him like an hour within the two days to do something and the rest of it.

So talking about appropriating history and how it gets lost. What's going to happen to it once they get it? I mean are they going to tell the same kind of stories we were going to tell? Is it going to become commercialized which is probably what happens? On the Fourth of July, it's not about democracy. It's about barbecue and steaks and firecrackers. Why is this date important?

Q: That institutions' thing is a double-edged sword then.

Thompson: Well, see now again being the optimist that I am, that's why I want to spread what I'm doing to Hampton, so that it doesn't happen, so that get the college, get the students involved and say, "Even if the state is taking this over, even if we can't do it on that property where it happens, we can still celebrate it." In fact, we can force them to give us a bigger play and also monitor them, monitor what they're saying, what they're doing, so that if you want to take it over, that's fine but we're not going to let you dilute the message or make it into something

that's entertainment as opposed to education. So it's about even if you can't control it, at least you can monitor it and be a counterbalance to what's being said.

Q: Yes. That's all the questions I have. Thank you so much for coming in.

Thompson: It was a blast, I enjoyed it.

Q: I'm so glad you enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it too. I learned so much from you. So thank you very much.

Thompson: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]