SAVING PRESERVATION STORIES:

DIVERSITY AND THE OUTER BOROUGHS

The Reminiscences of

Sylvia D'Alessandro

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Sylvia D'Alessandro conducted by Interviewer Filip Mazurczak on October 5, 2017. This interview is part of the *Saving Preservation Stories: Diversity and the Outer Boroughs*.

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.

In this interview, Sylvia D'Alessandro speaks about her childhood in Sandy Ground during the 1950s and '60s, recounting the rural, small-town feel of the community and sharing stories about community members. She speaks about the importance of knowing your history. The Sandy Ground Historical Society, of which Ms. D'Alessandro is a founding member and the current executive director, runs a Sandy Ground Museum, has an annual festival celebrating the history of the community, and has promoted the landmarking of the surviving historic structures including the Rossville AME Zion Church. She also speaks about the society's educational and outreach efforts to raise awareness of Sandy Ground, the oldest continually inhabited African American community in the United States.

Seventh generation Staten Islander, Sylvia D'Alessandro is one of the founding members and current executive director of the Sandy Ground Historical Society. She grew up in Sandy Ground during the 1950s and '60s and is a descendent of Moses Harris, one of the founders of the Sandy Ground Community in the Nineteenth Century.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey | Session: 1

Interviewee: Sylvia D'Alessandro | Location: Staten Island, New York, NY

Interviewer: Filip Mazurczak | Date: October 5, 2017

Q: All right, so it's October 5, 2017. I'm in Sandy Ground in Rossville, Staten Island with Ms. Sylvia D'Alessandro who was kind to take the time to talk to me about her preservation efforts. Thank you for being so kind. Can you please tell me first about your background, your childhood, family, education? I know you're descended from some of the settlers in Sandy Ground. Also could you please give the year of birth? I'm not asking this to be nosey but it's one of the requirements.

D'Alessandro: Well, my name is Sylvia D'Alessandro and I'm a seventh generation Staten Islander. I'm a descendent of Moses Harris who was one of the leaders of this community and some part of my family has lived in Sandy Ground up until 1963.

I grew up here and it was really a great place to grow up. Sandy Ground was always child friendly. It was kind of a close-knit African American community, so much so that everybody was sort of your parents. That may be a product of the times or it may be the product of small town because whatever I did, it got back to my mother before I got home. And if somebody saw me doing something they didn't think I was supposed to, they would say something about it to me and I would respond positively to whatever comment they made.

There was a sense of freedom. I felt that as a child growing up. I was free to wander wherever I wanted to without fear. We don't allow our children to wander like that anymore but everybody kind of looked out for you. There were special programs that they put together for the children. There were things like, everybody would chip in and they'd hire buses and take us over to Keansburg, New Jersey to where they had rides. We would go down to South Beach where they had rides. We would go down to the park down the street here. The men would go down early and haul the tables and then we would bring down food. Everybody would go to the beach and have food. There were things we did as a community. The church was always the center of the activity.

There was always a—and this is something to me requires further research—there was always a positive relationship between the people of Sandy Ground and the surrounding communities which were not African American, an exchange of goods and services. People came here to buy flowers from Monroe's. We went there, we bought our groceries down there or items for the house. And that was Pleasant Plains, Tottenville, the communities that surrounded us and there seemed to be a sense of harmony between the communities that you don't see now.

So because I grew up in the kind of atmosphere that I did grow up in, there's a strong sense of confidence in self. There were things that you had to do through the church, where you had to stand up and say a speech at Christmas or Easter or whatever and it gave you confidence to stand up in front of a group and talk. When I graduated from grammar school, which was P.S. 3, I was the class salutatorian and I didn't have any

problems getting up and giving a speech in reference to the school and the position that I was in. But that confidence came from having people around who cared about you, people around that loved you—that extended beyond your immediate family.

We lived in several places on Sandy Ground. We lived on Crabtree Avenue, which is still there, in a house there. We also lived for a long time on Clay Pit Road, which was a nice environment because my grandparents were across the street and my aunt and uncle owned the house right next to them and then a cousin on the other side. So it was all family.

I used to go over every morning. My mother had five daughters, me being the youngest and I used to go over to my grandmother's every morning and she would comb my hair. Now my grandmother was tied in some kind of way to Native Americans. We haven't really done the research on that, that we should do. So she would braid my hair every morning. My nickname was Dusty because my hair was dusty-colored and she would have next to her a bowl with tea, dark tea and she would put the brush in the dark tea and then brush my hair. And eventually, I guess it dyed it because I don't have dusty-colored hair now. She was quite a lady. She used to tell me stories about Sandy Ground.

So that's part of what I grew up with, kind of knowing my own history. She also used to have us go and pick this weed in the spring of the year. We would bring it back to her and she would boil it up and the people in the community would line up to drink this tea that she made. I used to tell my husband about it and he said, "Oh, you and your stories." So

we go up to the Native American museum in the Poconos and they have a whole section on medicine. And they talked about this blood thinner that people used to drink in the spring of the year because they thought that your blood thickened over the winter and if you drink this tea, you're not going to get strokes. That's what my grandmother used to do.

My grandfather, Pop [William] Pedro, he was sort of kind of the town mayor. He had been around the longest. He lived to be 107 with all of his faculties. There's a million stories that you could tell around him. He used to drive. He was driving well almost up to his nineties. He'd say he'd go down, he's going to sit at the gas station and talk to the young guys. He also used to be the church sexton and he went over one day to change a light bulb before church. He didn't feel like using a ladder. So he stood on a chair or something and fell. Nobody's due in there for hours. So he had to literally drive—he lived across the street from the church. He had to drag himself across the street and enter the house in order to get help. When he did that, they found out he had broken his hip. We were all frightened because a broken hip in an older person can really mean the end of your life. But it didn't for him. Then he used to still drive once he healed from his broken hip. And he almost hit a horse because there were people who had horses, riding around here.

So they told him he can't drive anymore and it was like taking his legs away, if you know what I mean, because he used to drive some people down to the train—there's a Staten Island [Railway] rapid transit down here in the morning to go to work, drive others down

to the bus stop, stop here at this person's house and have coffee, stop here at this person's house and have something else, pick people up when they came back and forth.

So he was a very big part of all of our lives. As young people, if you wanted to go out and have fun, we had to go down to what we called the other side of the island, down to West Brighton and New Brighton where there were black communities. And I don't know, I guess he didn't sleep at night because he always knew what time somebody came home. He'd come over to your mother's house and say, "So what time did you come home last night?" And you know you can't tell a lie because he was awake and watching, watching after the town when everybody was asleep. Somebody was always looking out for your good in the community.

That's part of what made me interested in preserving this history. Once we went through the—and I wasn't around then, but once we went through the downfall of the oyster industry and then the 1963 fire, we saw that the community was changing. And we wanted to do something about it. So a group of us from the church formed the Sandy Ground Historical Society. The rest is history. We're in the State and National Register for Historic Places. We're a program site for the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. We got the Mayor's Award for our contribution to art and culture in New York City. And we now get students in from off of Staten Island as well as on Staten Island. And we're going to have a ferry boat named The Sandy Ground.

Our board is at the point—like I said, I was on the founding board and now I'm the executive director—our board is getting older and somewhere along the line, we have begun to pull the young people in so they can pick up—take the reins. You need someone who's social media savvy. And it's the young people that will have to pick it up and carry it on.

Our preservation efforts have been to—we own three pieces of property in the area and we will hold on to them as long as we can. Two of them are empty lots so you have to pay taxes on them and so on and so forth. As long as we can, we're going to hold on to those pieces of property. And like I said, we see anywhere from two thousand up school kids a year coming in to learn about this part of Staten Island, the fact that Staten Island offered a safe place for African Americans to come and build a community and given the opportunity, that is exactly what they did. One hundred eighty families, two churches, two schools, self-supportive, interacting with its neighbors, yet still holding on to its culture and its norms.

It was a great place to grow up, giving you the confidence to achieve your full capabilities. I worked for forty-five years in the healthcare administration industry. I worked ten years at disability determinations, twenty-five years at Blue Cross Blue Shield and ten years at Health Plus, always in customer service and my customers were physicians who are the most difficult, I'd have to say [*laughs*]. They're at the top of the food chain and they want to be taken care of. I ended up with a staff of forty-five people who serviced providers, doctors and other providers in the healthcare industry throughout

New York state and part of it was because of my ability to interact with whoever I came in contact with, who was going to be a part of what the plan needed in order to deliver its services. And that's something that I learned from growing up in Sandy Ground. You know who you are and you respect who other people are. So you're able to end up with a win-win situation in terms of what you wanted from them and what they were able to give.

Q: So you said that in the 1960s, things were changing and that led you to decide to start fighting for the preservation of Sandy Ground. What specific changes are you referring to?

D'Alessandro: Well, after the 1963 fire, some of the people who owned property out here, they were too old and they didn't want to rebuild again. So they moved to another kind of living arrangement. If you look at the houses that are still there and the ones that weren't there, they all have lots of property around them. So there was also a lot to do in terms of maintenance and some of the people, including my mother and father decided that they would sell their property and live another kind of life in a smaller unit where they didn't have to do the maintenance. The property at that point was valuable too and it gave people the opportunity to live another kind of life. While you would have liked to see them hold on to their property, you can't blame them for having the opportunity once in your lifetime to be able to live very comfortably.

So wholesale development which had not happened down here before was coming into the area and so when I say that the community was changing, it was changing because they're putting up large-scale development which you can see all around us now. We didn't want the history of this community to be lost. So we formed the Sandy Ground Historical Society. As I mentioned, we went to being included in the State, National Register for Historic Places but that really does not offer any protection. All they have to do is to do an archaeological dig and then they can come in and do whatever they want. It really is city landmarking, which we did not find out about until later, that offers you the protection.

So the history has been preserved. We have an archives and our name is certainly out there now through the programs that we offer, not only to the Staten Island community but whoever wants, we have a program that we can take to them or they can come out here to learn the program. I think that under the circumstances, we did a fairly good job of making Sandy Ground not necessarily a household word but it's getting there. And we're hoping that the young people who have an interest in this community and an interest in history would be willing to carry it on.

Our dream has been to have a state-of-the-art museum. We have that second piece of property where we could do that. But it takes a lot of money to be able to do that, or there might be some way where we can add on to this building. We could go up another floor in terms of the codes and sell that other piece to make the money to make that but that's a board decision. We're wrestling with it right now.

We have a fairly good relationship with our neighbors. The guy across the street and the one over here, we have an alarm system and they have my number in the event that the alarm goes up—as well as the alarm systems, they can say, "Well, Sylvia, you don't have to come all the way out." Because I don't live out here now—"You don't have to come all the way out." It's pretty quiet. Sometimes, an animal going across the back might trigger the alarm or whatever. The guy next door, somebody came by with a truck or something and knocked our bricks out. He came over and put the bricks—he did like a bricklayers' job on it.

And of course, this year—we have an annual festival once a year. And I think some of the people around here thought it was a private thing, even though it's in the local papers and advertised that way. So this year I went around, up the side street, Lynbrook, and knocked on peoples' doors and told them that we had this festival going and they were welcome to come. Some of them used to come anyhow but there were others who didn't. I left the flyers with them and they showed up this year and came to the festival and had a good time. We get lots of people from the North Shore who come out but we also want the people who live in this area to know that this is something that they can enjoy.

Another way that they use the museum is that we have a tiger outside with a picture of Martin Luther King [Jr.] and Nelson [R.] Mandela and a lot of them will bring their kids in and take pictures of them by that tiger. We want some of them also to be involved in the museum. So we're working on that too, getting them to come to the festival and to

speak to their school, to send the children out here. They may want to help preserve part of that history because that's their history too now. This is where they live and it can't hurt to have a museum there that tells how Staten Island offered a safe place to African Americans well before the Civil War, the fact that they were able to interact positively with the surrounding communities during all that time.

Q: So when I did a little background research on Sandy Ground, I saw that in Rossville right now, only one quarter of one percent of the population is actually African American. It's now an overwhelmingly white neighborhood. You said that you have a good relationship with the people living here but how have these radically changing demographics affected your life and your work here at Sandy Ground?

D'Alessandro: Well communities change but the history remains the same and we tell the story of Sandy Ground. I don't care if there's only one-tenth or one-hundredth of a percent of African Americans living here. The history of this area from 1828 through, I would say, 2000, still remains the same. That doesn't change. While you hope that there's—and there are some African Americans who have moved into the community, we hope that continues to happen as things become available. But even if it don't, the history remains the same and we're here to tell the history.

The church is here and I assume that that will stay here. It's been here over hundred sixty-some odd years and I assume it's going to stay here. I can't guarantee for anybody else. I can only guarantee for the property that we—and I hope you understand that. If

you look at any town over the last two hundred years, things have changed. There used to be lots of farms. Well, there's not farms anymore but that doesn't make it any less the fact that there were farms that were here.

This was an African American community and that's the story we tell. It's a positive story on how the community was able to survive, how it was able to attract other settlers out here. And it's a different story than what—they were independent. I feel good about being able to tell that story and the fact that my ancestors go back to 1828 which is a lot longer than most of the people around here have even been in the country.

This was my home. This is where I grew up. This is where I learned all of my skills in dealing with people and learned about people that were different from myself, that there's a way to get along. So it could be one-tenth or one quarter of one percent, it doesn't matter. The history remains the same. That's what we're here to tell.

Q: You said that when you held your annual festival, a lot of people thought this was private and you knocked on doors to get some people to come out. And you also said that you have a good relationship with the locals but overall would you say that Rossville's overwhelmingly white population is interested in Sandy Ground?

D'Alessandro: I don't know that they're interested in Sandy Ground but they're interested in what this is because this is sort of kind of in the middle of their neighborhood. So if anybody's home, they have to see school buses coming up here and

letting people out. I'm going to let you see the film before you go. There're different occasions where they see people coming in and out. So there must be a curiosity as to exactly what it is. It's the kind of thing that everybody can feel good about, I think. I think it's something that Staten Island should be very proud of, the fact that they offered a safe place for African Americans as early as 1828. You hear what I'm saying? Not many places can say that. But that is a part of Staten Island's history that needs to be told again and again and again. The children, we get children from all the schools around here, they walk away feeling good about their borough, which is what you want.

Q: Yes, especially since a lot of people feel that Staten Island is kind of underappreciated, kind of overlooked.

D'Alessandro: Yes, it's going to be really interesting when the ferry boat comes on and people from both on and off of Staten Island get on a ferry boat named The Sandy Ground. They're going to be wondering, "What in the world is Sandy Ground?" They have a couple of things down the St. George Ferry [Terminal] now, some of our brochures and so on and so forth that tell about us. And the borough president is trying to put together something tied into tourism, wherein they might be able to do a bus around Staten Island.

One of the things about this place is that it's kind of—for people coming over to the ferry, it then means an hour's bus ride to get out here or a forty minute train ride to get out here. So it's kind of hard to get to. It's not right off the ferry and you can walk half a

mile and you're at [Sailor's] Snug Harbor. Take a five or ten minute bus ride to the Alice Austen House. This is going to be an hour bus ride, a half hour train ride. And I've been to other places where they offer like a little bus. You can come, you can get off, you can visit that. You can ride some more, get off and visit that.

So the borough president, [James S.] Oddo, who've been very supportive of us, him and his staff have this program going where they hope they hope to be able to maximize the tourism that comes into Staten Island with the result of the [New York] Wheel and the outlet, to give people another choice of things to do, to come back on another day. So we'll see.

Q: And when you started to fight for the preservation of Sandy Ground after the great fire of 1963, were there any challenges that you faced or did things go smoothly?

D'Alessandro: I'm trying to—we got a late start because we actually started in 1979 and after the fire of '63, the developers had bought up lots of property in the area. So most of it had been bought by the developers or some of it was owned by the city. So you had to really work to get that which is left. The church has two houses that were baymen's houses and like I said, we have this house. The person who owned this house didn't want to sell to the developer. So he sold it to us and of course, [Joseph W.] Bishop who operated the last privately-held blacksmith's shop in the city of New York didn't want to sell to the developers, so he sold to us. The challenge was to be able to get the money to

buy these properties and the foundations and whatnot came through, so that we were able to do that.

Q: So I saw that the museum was opened in 2005, right?

D'Alessandro: Yes.

Q: So in those twelve years, have there been a lot of changes made to the museum?

D'Alessandro: Well, these exhibits stay up for about a year. So usually every year we have a different—every year, sometimes two years, we'll have a different exhibit up for people to come to see. In terms physically, there have not been a lot of changes made to this building. Part of the attraction is the quaintness of it. People come in and say, "Oh, boy, this is great." It's not slick. It's homey, if you know what I'm saying. And like I said, it depends. There have not been lots of physical changes.

Through the efforts of the board and myself, we partner with other museums in terms of programs that we might offer and Staten Island Arts is running something now. We get to interact with a lot of the other museums on Staten Island. They know that the way to go, not only in terms of course but in terms of integration of ideas, is to partner with one of the other places on Staten Island and then you draw from both audiences in terms of coming. So there's a move or flow to encourage that, partnering with other organizations

on Staten Island. Hopefully that will help. In these economic times, that will help everybody to be able to stay afloat.

Q: So you said that two thousand schoolchildren come each year to visit Sandy Ground. That's a pretty impressive number. Are schoolchildren mostly guests here and who else comes? What types of people come here? What motivates them to visit?

D'Alessandro: The majority of the visitors are schoolchildren. We do have adults that come out. They may have seen us at a black heritage parade. They may have seen something in the newspaper. They may have known someone who grew up here. They may be just plain curious about the history. So we attract a broad spectrum of people and we have a membership also. We send out whenever we're putting in a new or different program going.

This program has been fairly successful, the quilt piece of it because now everybody wants to learn how to quilt. The quilt classes, which are sponsored by Con Edison—and particularly the ones where they can put their family on a quilt which is really a great idea because I can photocopy this and I can give it to my grandchildren. Each one can have their own copy of who was where and when. So the quilt classes are a big attraction.

We're also doing something with a couple of genealogists where we help—we teach people about genealogy and how to get a swab and then it tells you what your ancestry is all about. That's also been fairly successful, helping people to know about themselves.

There's a lot of people who don't have a clue of as to who they are, where their ancestors came from. You know that, right? So this is helping people to learn about themselves. We started that last fiscal year and we intend to continue it. We got a grant from our city council to do that. We'll see what it brings out. It will be interesting.

Q: Do most schools who come and visit, are they primarily schools with overwhelmingly African American student populations?

D'Alessandro: No, no.

Q: Not necessarily?

D'Alessandro: No, as a matter of fact, it's sort of kind of—well, no, the African American population is more than the ten or twelve percent on Staten Island. So it may be here thirty percent coming here because we get the other schools also to come out. It's a fairly good mix but not as much of a mix as the island is. The island is twelve percent, whatever it is, eight, but it's a lot higher, the African American schools which should be expected. I think thirty, forty percent African American and the others are children of all different backgrounds.

Q: So you said that one of the biggest challenges when you started your preservation works was buying some of these buildings. You said you started in 1979. Have any historic buildings or places related to Sandy Ground been lost since that time?

D'Alessandro: Oh, sure, plenty [*laughs*]. Yes, yes, there was, it was called P.S. 31, a school that serviced this area. That's gone. There was different houses that have been around for awhile. They're gone. The church is still here. This house was from 1898. It's still here. Remember, there were one hundred eighty families at it's height and now you have ten buildings. A lot of the houses were gone. The houses that the Harris brothers [Moses and Silas Harris] lived in are no longer here. Just people living in houses in the community. It was a residential community primarily as opposed to a commercial one.

So it's people's houses that disappeared. When I grew up, the house that was on the corner of Clay Pit and Bloomingdale [Road], sort of kind of in the center of the community, that's not there anymore. Next to it, a descendent of the Harris family's house, that's not there anymore. Next to it was the house where the descendents of the oystermen were, it's not there anymore. I can go on and on and on, up and down the street. So it's primarily houses that would have been—would qualify to be called historic because of the architecture and because of the time, gone.

Q: So you said that there were one hundred eighty families that lived in Sandy Ground. Of course, you're descended from one of them but you yourself don't live here anymore. How many descendents of the original Staten Island free black men and women still live here?

D'Alessandro: Okay, there must be a minimum of eight, eight families that are still represented here.

Q: Still live here in Sandy Ground?

D'Alessandro: In Sandy Ground and I totally intend to interview all of them because they see the changes all the time and they're still seeing it. I saw it up until 1963 when my family's house burnt down. But there are others that are still here and saw the other houses come in on top of it. It will be interesting to see what they have to say about how they negotiate the changes in the community. I think they've made out okay with the specific associations here that they've joined and become a part of and the house that Pop Pedro built and lived in, his granddaughter is in that. I'm hoping to be able to talk to them. Again, there's another part of my family that lives next door because remember, my mother's sister lived here, Pop Pedro lived here and we lived here. So the descendents of my aunt are still there.

Q: So are the Sandy Ground descendents a pretty close-knit group? Do you keep in touch with each other? Do you have meetings sometimes?

D'Alessandro: Well, we did some interviews for historic work and interviewed families of the descendents. Plus there's church every Sunday. People come back to go to church. The church is still here. They come out to any activities that the museum has. So we stay

pretty much in touch with one another through that.

Q: Do most of them live pretty close to Rossville?

D'Alessandro: If you mean do they live on Staten Island? Some of them do. Some of them come as far away as Roseboro, New Jersey. Every Sunday, they come to church here. Their families were part of the founding families of the church and they come down here. They have family on Staten Island.

Q: I supposed I meant not just the members of your church but in general, the Rosses—the Sandy Ground descendents? Do most of them live generally close to Staten Island or they are scattered all over the place?

D'Alessandro: Well, most of them live either on—you have to remember that the church was the center of the activity. It's what tied most of the people together. And there's some that are in Virginia and Florida and North Carolina. But a large number of them still live on Staten Island. A lot of people left Sandy Ground and went to West Brighton where they started the Shiloh AME Zion Church. Some of them went to Mariners Harbor, Richmond, Stapleton, where the black communities were on Staten Island. But it's still close enough to come here, to come back to church.

Q: So it's still a pretty thriving, vibrant church community?

D'Alessandro: Well, I would say so. I would say so.

Q: Do a lot of younger people, families go or is it mostly older people?

D'Alessandro: Well, most of the Sunday services, it's the older people but the young people come in to sing on the third Sunday of every month. From that, they are beginning now as they mature to become more active in the church.

Q: So when you started out your work as a preservationist, how did you learn about preservation? Did you talk to people? Did you read books? Did you contact institutions? Where did you learn how to become a preservationist?

D'Alessandro: All of them, all of the above [*laughs*]. We also had friends at the colleges who helped us out. Other museums helped us out. As a matter of fact, we got started through someone coming to us from the Staten Island Museum. That's how we got started to form our first not-for-profit and so on and so forth. We got a lot of help from around. If you ask people, they'll tell you and like I said, I don't have any problem asking. You'll get help. Even off the island museums, Staten Island, the New York Historical Society helped us out a lot. And what's her name? When we had our first Sandy Ground Proclamation Day, Joan Maynard from Weeksville [Heritage Center] was our keynote speaker and she had been through all of that over there. So she was able to help us out a lot in terms of what direction we were going in.

Q: So you mentioned your annual festival. Could you please tell me a little bit about that?

D'Alessandro: Okay. The annual festival which the local paper, the *Staten Island Advance* bills as the most diverse festival on Staten Island. What we offer—admission is free. We have vendors set up selling different wares, some of which is Afrocentric in nature. We have entertainment, jazz, blues and steel bands. We have barbecue and that you have to pay for. They're cooked using the secret Sandy Ground sauce which is a recipe that has been passed down from generation to generation and only two men have the recipe at any given time. If you want to go on the list to learn the recipe, you have to learn to barbecue. If anything happens to one of those people who have the recipe for the sauce, it goes to the next person who's eligible to get it. And Pam [Pamela] Silvestri, the foodservice editor for *Staten Island Advance*, she says, "I'm going to get that recipe." I said, "See if you can unravel it." But she couldn't [*laughter*]. People come just to get the barbecue with the sauce. And we do free tours of the museum on that day. We do arts and crafts for children. And people come and they learn—it's another way of learning about us and what it is that we do. We always sell a lot of memberships on that day also.

Q: It sounds like a lot of fun. When is it held?

D'Alessandro: Usually it's the third Saturday in June. We don't want to run into July Fourth with people going away and so on and so forth. We have a list of people who want to be vendors. We never have enough room for that because we keep it inside of the front of the yard because in the back, we pitch a huge tent that goes from here almost down to

the grill and there's a stage set up and tables and chairs for people to come in and sit. They come in and sit and enjoy the music, get their food, enjoy their food. The man who lives behind us up there, what he does is come in and buy his food and sit up on his deck. He can look right into the entertainment and enjoy it. We have a good time with it.

Q: Do you have children, grandchildren?

D'Alessandro: One of my grandsons—that right there is my grandson. That's his son down on the bottom. And I also now have a great-granddaughter. She's not on here yet. I've got to put her on. Yes, she's a year old. I've got to add her. So I'm a great-grandmother.

Q: Congratulations.

D'Alessandro: [*Laughs*]

Q: You look good. Have your children and grandchildren been interested in Sandy Ground? Have they contributed to preserving the place, its memory, et cetera?

D'Alessandro: Well, that young man right there is now on our board and he's the one who's taking the lead with the website and the social media. This young man down here, you'll see in the film. We have a film called, *Sandy Ground: An American Story*, that was done by a young man who used to come out here and play [*unclear*]. He used to come

and play with the kids out here. That's the kind of thing, the interaction back and forth that happens with people from other communities. I used to have people from Pleasant Plains who'd come up to my house or I'd go down to their house, Prince's Bay the same thing. We went to Tottenville High School together, come back and forth, or P.S. 3 together and they would come back and forth. Yes, he's involved. My daughter who you'll also see in the film is very much involved. The baby's not yet [*laughs*].

Q: A key word is yet. So do your children and grandchildren live here?

D'Alessandro: No, they live on Staten Island, yes, but not here in Sandy Ground. But like I said, I have two cousins who are still out here in the house that my grandfather owned and the house that my aunt owned. We're a pretty close-knit family. They're out here all the time and if they're not out for that, they're out for something that Sandy Ground is doing.

Q: What are some future challenges you foresee with regards to Sandy Ground and preservation?

D'Alessandro: Well, money's always a problem. Like I said, our vision was to be able to build a state-of-the-art museum on that piece of property that we bought from Joe Bishop. I don't know if we're going to be able to do that. It costs so much to maintain this—even this structure. But we're going to have to sit down and we're going to have to go through steps on how to continue this.

One of our options is going to have to be—like I said, the board has to make a decision—one of our options is going to have to be to sell a piece of that property to bring in enough money so that we can maintain this, or close this down for four years and sell this piece and see if we have enough to build a state-of-the-art museum on the other *[unclear]*. But it's primarily funds that is—this is a very big piece of property. This house has been here since 1898. We would like it to stay here. The option may be to maybe sell the other piece, add more space onto this because that's what we're going to need long-range and see where we go. It takes some doing to do it.

I think that because it's a positive story, people want to hear that. It would be easier—it's easier than if it's a negative story. It's positive about Staten Island. So I'm thinking that we should be able to get support, more support because it is a positive story and it says something about the people that were here, something positive about the people that were here, the greater population.

Q: Since you opened your museum, would you say that the story has become well-known—better known? I know you said there's a ferry boat that will be named after Sandy Ground. Would you say that's a sign that more people are becoming aware of Sandy Ground, the story's better known?

D'Alessandro: Yes, absolutely. We get people from the Harlem Children's Zone, kids from the Harlem Children's Zone coming out here. That's definitely off of Staten Island.

Brooklyn schools come out here. So it's gone beyond Staten Island if you know what I mean. We're a program site for the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. They've included us so that—we have a stamp. Do you know how you can go to an Underground Railroad place and you have that book and you stamp—you get a stamp in your book when you've been to that site? We have that here too now and they're updating the book. We have it in another format but they're updating the book to put us in the book and that's going to give us a much, much wider—when there's a place for people to go to, they're willing to go.

We're talking now to a church group in New Jersey who want to bring their kids over to the museum. It's good to come and see something positive. I don't think—we're not sugarcoating. This is how it was. This is real. It was created by *[unclear]*—it wasn't created by any legislation. This is what was. This is real and it was positive and it was good. Like any other community, any place you go on Staten Island, communities have changed drastically with the advent of the bridge, making it more accessible. But the history still remains the same. That's what we're trying so desperately to hold onto.

Q: So earlier during our conversation, you said that when you first worked to landmark these buildings, you found out later that it was only city landmarking that really offered any real protection. Can you please talk a little bit about the differences between different types of protection and landmarking?

D'Alessandro: If you go for state and national landmarking, you have to go first and do an archaeological dig and the finding from the archaeological dig becomes the base for inclusion for the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Once you've done the archaeological dig and got the information from the ground, you can do anything you want on that ground. With city landmarking, once you get city landmarking, you can't make one change, not even a window without the city saying its okay to do it. So therein lies the protection that city landmarking gives you, that you don't get from state and national.

Q: And do you have any advice for people who maybe grew up in a place that like Sandy Ground has a unique story but because of maybe commercial development, gentrification, demographic changes, its character might be threatened, what would your advice be to people who are trying to become preservationists and want to preserve their unique—

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: —piece of America?

D'Alessandro: Okay, number one, know your story. That's number one. Number two, contact City Landmarks [New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission] to ask how you can develop or present that story to be able to get city landmarking. Once you

get that, you can go for the state and national if that's what you wanted. But again, it's got to be—

[INTERRUPTION]

D'Alessandro: And again and again in order for people to know it. If you say Sandy Ground now, everybody knows who you're talking about. "Oh, yes, Sandy Ground. That's out there on the South Shore where they had that black community, right?" Which is not something that you normally think of in terms of the South Shore of Staten Island. Stay in touch with your elected officials. They all like to have a little project they can have their hands on. So we're in touch with our councilman, [Joseph] Borelli, because he's our councilman. But we're also in touch with Councilwoman Debbie [Deborah] Rose because it's her people who identify with Sandy Ground and come out for our services. We get funding from both of them.

Know your story, touch base with Landmarks. They're helpful. They'll help you which is the thing, we put it all together as one. That's where we kind of missed the ball. But it's out there now, Landmarks knows about us and we'll see what happens. Hopefully you'll come back twenty years from now and talk to either that young man there or the little girl down there and they'll be able to tell you about Sandy Ground and their grandmother who was a part of it and their great-grandmother and their great-great-grandmother and so on and so forth. I think we've done a good job of at least putting the name out and by

putting this information in the New York Public Library archives, is another piece of assurance that this part of the history will continue to exist.

Q: And you said that growing up you knew the story of Sandy Ground. Your relatives told you about it. But when you became involved in preservation efforts, you obviously probably did other things to know the story of Sandy Ground, how you put it. What else did you do to learn the story?

D'Alessandro: Well, first of all, the archaeologists who led the dig filled in a lot of the blanks. Plus I went down to Snow Hill, Maryland and I went to—it was a museum. It was the [Julia A.] Purnell Museum down there and that's one of the names of the oystermen who had come up from that area, Snow Hill. She said, "Oh, this was an old black church and they just abandoned it." I said, "Do you know why they abandoned it?" And she said, "No." So I was able to give her information from Bill [William] Askins, the archaeologist of record at the City University [of New York] as to the laws that they had passed that said you can't come together for religious or educational purposes because they had become a slave state. She said all the records were burnt up in some fire during the Civil War.

So she was glad to have that information. But I went down—I had to go down to Snow Hill and do some research down there. We've done some research in some of the federal records on these things. Of course down to City Hall—I mean [Staten Island] Borough Hall to go through some of their files, land ownership, house ownership, and then into

City Hall to their archives. We did a program with them. And I also went through again the records that talk about who owned what and when out here on Staten Island.

Q: And you said that you had some of your papers archived in the New York Public Library. Could you tell me a little about that, please?

D'Alessandro: Oh, no, we don't have papers—we have some items down there.

Q: Okay, I see.

D'Alessandro: Yes, we have items down there that are on display from here. And we do that with groups. Like I said, in the New York Historical Society, we have a couple of pieces on exhibit there and we have some pieces on exhibit down at the St. George Library [Center] which is kind of the main branch for Staten Island. And when we finish this, which will be the Forty-Second Street branch [Stephen A. Schwarzman Building] which is the head of the New York Public Library, there will be a program down at St. George, where they're going to take snippets of things that I'm saying and what other people say and put together a program with that. Yes, we're excited about that.

Q: So your relationship with the New York Public Library has been positive? They've been helpful?

D'Alessandro: Yes. Most people, if you go to them and you ask for help—I find anyhow—are glad to share whatever it is that they have with you. Just like we're glad to share whatever we have with others. All it does is help to get the word out even further. Does that make sense to you?

Q: Yes. And do you have any plans for archiving or passing on all your Sandy Ground papers?

D'Alessandro: Not at this point. Not at this point. It depends on what the status of this is. If this is satisfactory, then you maintain your own archives. If it's not, then you put them someplace where they will be secure and open to the public.

Q: And can you just tell me a little bit about how the ferry boat will be named after Sandy Ground? Did they approach you? Did you approach them?

D'Alessandro: Our councilwoman, Debbie Rose, suggested that they name a boat The Sandy Ground. The first reaction from the mayor was no. So Debbie—Councilwoman Rose in conjunction with us, we got petitions signed from people asking that the boat be named The Sandy Ground. And when the mayor was doing his—you know, he went around to each borough? That is when he announced that one of the three new ferry boats would be named—based on the petitions that she was able to turn in—that one of the new ferry boats would be named The Sandy Ground.

Q: And will there be information on for example the Staten Island ferry's website or somewhere else about the history of Sandy Ground?

D'Alessandro: Well, I'm looking for some space on the boat [*laughs*]. I don't know if I'll get it. I'll ask. What can they do, tell me no? I've been told no before. But I'm looking for some space on the boat to be able to tell—or to be able to have some information for people who don't know about Sandy Ground who ride that boat. That means tourists, that means Staten Islanders who don't know, to have some space so that we can have something on the boat that tells about us, that we can change or update regularly. That's what I'm hoping for.

I don't know whether they do that or not. I haven't seen it on any—I've seen a plaque but I want some space behind glass on that boat, where people can get information on Sandy Ground and we'll double it up by keeping information down at the ferry terminal when they get off because there is a kiosk down there that has information.

And other programs, my head goal is maybe we'll have Sandy Ground Day on The Sandy Ground boat, where we can give out information to people who ride the boat on Sandy Ground, brochures and so on and so forth. I don't know. Just let it rise and something will come to mind where you can continue to tell your story. We're very excited about that. Most of the people that I talk to on Staten Island are very excited about having the boat named The Sandy Ground. But we'll see where it goes and how it goes.

Q: And when will the ferry boat start to—

D'Alessandro: Okay, there are three boats. They're scheduled—all three of them are scheduled to be done by 2019. I know that there's an effort afoot to try to get one named The Sandy Ground in 2018. So depending on the progress of building—you know they're building the boats down south somewhere. They have to be built and then brought here. There's usually a ceremony when they do the launching. So I don't know whether it's going to be at this point 2018 or 2019 but as soon as I get an indication as to where it is, we'll start a promotion around the naming of the boat, The Sandy Ground.

Q: And have you worked with preservationists in your efforts to landmark, preserve Sandy Ground? Have you worked with preservationists who were involved in completely different projects, maybe to get advice from them or to mutually support each other?

D'Alessandro: Somewhat but not as much as we could have. That's where I think that we should have been more involved with the preservationists in terms of the landmarking. What can I tell you? You learn as you go along. We were absolutely new to this and we followed the advice that we had to get it in the state and national registers, with the archaeologists as the lead people as opposed to the preservationists as the lead people. So I would tell anybody who wants to—who's looking to preserve their history, go first to the preservationists and get from them information on how to proceed.

Q: Just one second. Coming back from the museum, when you opened it, what were your expectations and have these expectations been met?

D'Alessandro: Well, we opened it with the idea that we wanted a facility where we would be able to tell the Sandy Ground story, to tell the Staten Island story and to tell—

[END OF INTERVIEW]