

Landmark West!

Oral History Interviews on San Juan Hill

Interview with: Leonette P. Joseph	Time: 01:43:28
Conducted by: Fanny Julissa García	1 Audio File, 1 Transcription
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Bio: Leonette Philline Joseph was born in New York City in 1954 and grew up in the Amsterdam Houses at 248 West 62nd Street, Apt. 2B until 1977, at which time she and her family moved to Lincoln Amsterdam House. The area where Amsterdam Houses now stands used to be part of San Juan Hill, a neighborhood destroyed through urban renewal. She is a retired special education teacher and creative arts therapist. Recently, she launched a new career as a model and appeared in a commercial for the popular Netflix series, "Squid Games." Leonette is the daughter of renowned artist Cliff Joseph, co-founder and director of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, an organization founded by a group of artists as an art strike to protest New York museums for their exclusion of Black artists and curators in major art exhibitions. Leonette's mother worked for the city and assisted families filing compensation claims with the city when they were displaced by urban renewal in other neighborhoods. In her retirement, Ms. Joseph still resides in the area where she grew up and has participated in discussions about the redesign of Lincoln Center's west wall which faces the NYCHA Amsterdam Houses (which replaced a portion of San Juan Hill).

Leonette P. Joseph

This interview has been extensively edited for clarification by the narrator, resulting in a document that departs significantly from the digital recording. Due to the edits, the timestamps may not always align with the text.

[00:00:03] **Fanny Julissa García:** Okay. Today is October 22nd. It's a Tuesday. The year is 2024. My name is Fanny Garcia and I'm here interviewing Leonette for Landmark West. And before we get started, Leonette, do you consent to this interview for the archives?

[00:00:33] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I do.

[00:00:34] **Fanny Julissa García:** Okay. Thank you so much for joining me. Could you please give me your full name and a brief introduction about you and your relationship to Landmark West and how you heard about this project?

[00:00:50] **Leonette P. Joseph:** My name is Leonette Philline Joseph. I mention my whole middle name because it's the combination of my grandparents' names, Philip and Emeline. They had also named their daughter Philline. So, I'm named after all four of my grandparents and also my aunt. My paternal grandmother was Leontine. My parents changed the ending for me. And, of course, I have my paternal grandfather's last name. So, in between, I have my maternal grandparents. I just love that about my name so I always use my middle initial when signing my signature.

[00:01:32] **Fanny Julissa García:** Can you tell me how you spell your first name and middle name?

[00:01:36] **Leonette P. Joseph:** My first name is spelt L-E-O-N-E-T-T-E. Leonette. And my middle name is spelled P-H-I-L-L-I-N-E. Philline.

[00:01:47] **Fanny Julissa García:** I love that name. And I can already tell you're a born storyteller because one of my favorite questions to ask people is the origin story of their name.

[00:02:00] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Interesting.

[00:02:00] **Fanny Julissa García:** So you jumped right in.

[00:02:02] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Interestingly, I was supposed to have been Michelle Leslie Joseph. My mother told her coworker what she was going to name me (they were pregnant at the same time). Her coworker delivered first and named her daughter Michelle Leslie. My mother was annoyed that she stole it. But, I won because I got my four grandparents.

[00:02:26] **Fanny Julissa García:** Yes, you did win, I love that. So, Leonette, tell me your age, your birthday. And tell me about your relationship to San Juan Hill.

[00:02:43] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I turned 70 on April 20th. I was born in 1954. I lived in the Amsterdam Houses, where San Juan Hill was (unbeknownst to me until very recently). Part of San Juan Hill was torn down to put up the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) complex called Amsterdam Houses.

[00:03:09] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. And tell me when did you live in Amsterdam Houses?

[00:03:15] **Leonette P. Joseph:** My parents were living there when I was born. In fact, they had moved there so soon before my birth that my grandmother had my mother stay with her so that she wouldn't be too involved in the lifting and setting up the apartment, She had her return home so she could keep a watchful eye on my mother until it was time for her to deliver. My parents moved from Brooklyn. They had been trying to get into housing in the Bronx and they were not happy to move into San Juan Hill. Now that I know more about the condition the community was in, I understand why they wanted to go back home to the Bronx where they had both been raised.

[00:04:02] **Leonette P. Joseph:** My mother also said many times that God knew best because God knew what the community was going to turn into and what was going to happen to the Bronx. She was, eventually, very glad to be raising us where we lived instead of in the Bronx which, during my adolescence, appeared "bombed out." The South Bronx looked like a war zone after an epidemic of fires and landlord abandonments.

[00:04:28] **Fanny Julissa García:** Tell me a little bit about your parents and their life here in New York.

[00:04:36] **Leonette P. Joseph:** My parents were both the offspring of immigrants. My mother was born in New York. Her parents had come here from Barbados. My maternal grandmother was born in Barbados; my maternal grandfather had been born in Guyana. They both grew up in Barbados, and came here where they got together, married and started their family. My dad was born in Panama. He was the last of his nine siblings to be born in Panama. Four other children were born after that. So my grandparents relocated with quite a few children. I believe my paternal grandmother was born in Jamaica, but raised in Panama. My paternal grandfather was born and raised in Antigua and went to Panama to build the canal. That's where they met, married and started their family.

[00:05:47] **Fanny Julissa García:** I always love to meet a fellow Central American.

[00:05:52] **Leonette P. Joseph:** We didn't know that my grandmother had been born in Jamaica. So Jamaica is not included in this. When my brother was a kid, he merged Guyana, Panama, Barbados and Antigua and named us "GuyPanaBajaTiguans," However, since Barbadians are referred to as Bajans, the "Ja" from Jamaica was included inadvertently.

[00:06:22] **Fanny Julissa García:** That's really beautiful to incorporate all of your ancestral backgrounds.

[00:06:30] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Had he known my grandmother was born there, I'm sure he would have included Jamaica deliberately.

[00:06:37] **Fanny Julissa García:** You said that your parents first arrived in Brooklyn and were trying to move into the Bronx?

[00:06:47] **Leonette P. Joseph:** When they first married they lived in the Bronx. As a young newlywed couple eventually found their way to Brooklyn. I believe that may have been influenced somewhat by my father going to college in Brooklyn (he went to Pratt Institute). They had been robbed in the Bronx and didn't want to stay in that apartment anymore. I think that's why they made that move.

[00:07:17] **Leonette P. Joseph:** They really wanted to get back to the Bronx, in better housing, and had applied for city housing. Since my father was a World War II veteran they had a priority to Amsterdam Houses and that's where they were called to go. I learned recently in a film about San Juan Hill that if people turned down what they were offered, then they weren't likely to be offered housing in NYCHA again. So, that's the position they were in (with a baby on the way). Thus, they accepted the apartment in the projects.

[00:07:55] **Fanny Julissa García:** What part of the Bronx were they in?

[00:07:59] **Leonette P. Joseph:** The Morrisania area.

[00:08:04] **Fanny Julissa García:** Why did they not want to move into Amsterdam Houses?

[00:08:09] **Leonette P. Joseph:** It was the condition of the neighborhood that seemed to concern my mother. She arrived at San Juan Hill [the Lincoln Center construction site was being cleared]. The surrounding tenement situation was very bad. All this luxury high-rises that are here now weren't here. I can remember, when I was in my late teens or early 20s—as we noted a luxury high-rise going up on Amsterdam Avenue in the 60's—my mother said, "You know, one day this neighborhood is going to be a neighborhood of the very poor and the very rich." She called it. There's not a heck of a lot for the middle income people in between.

[00:09:15] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you remember the address of the building where you lived and your apartment number?

[00:09:22] **Leonette P. Joseph:** We lived at 248 West 62nd Street in apartment 2B.

[00:09:28] **Fanny Julissa García:** Was that on the second floor?

[00:09:30] **Leonette P. Joseph:** It was on the second floor and it was down in the back where the short buildings are. The higher buildings on Amsterdam Avenue had 12 stories, but we had six. And our building is on the West End Avenue side. There's a big wall, so you can't just walk out to West End Avenue from where we were. The projects are contained without thorough streets. Across the street on West End Avenue looked very different. In fact, there was a parking lot and at one point there was a gas station. There was a fuel crisis when I was a young adult. I remember being on the line on West End Avenue to get gas. I also remember taking my first driving lesson in the parking lot.

Thank God we were in the empty parking lot because five minutes into the lesson, my uncle said, "Okay, hit the brake." I hit the gas and off we went!

[00:10:51] **Fanny Julissa García:** And it was the parking lot for what became the Lincoln Center?

[00:10:56] **Leonette P. Joseph:** No, the west side of West End Avenue is where this gas station and parking lot were. There are high rises there now and a grocery store. I think it was a commercial parking lot. I don't know why it was empty at that time. It would have been like my uncle to get me up early in the morning. Maybe that's why.

[00:11:26] **Fanny Julissa García:** What is the crisis that you mentioned?

[00:11:30] **Leonette P. Joseph:** There was a gasoline shortage in the early 70's. Gas was in short supply and there was a long line that stretched for blocks on West End Avenue. By then I had a car and I remember having to get out there and get in line to get gas. I think your day to get rationed gas was determined by your license plate.

[00:12:07] **Fanny Julissa García:** What year is that, do you remember?

[00:12:09] **Leonette P. Joseph:** It would have been the early 70s. I'm sure if we googled it we could come up with some more details about that.

[00:12:18] **Fanny Julissa García:** And tell me again, when you lived at Amsterdam Houses, what were the years?

[00:12:26] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I was there from 1954 (when I was born) until the spring, May of '77. Then, we moved just three blocks away to 65th Street. The building we moved into is called Lincoln Amsterdam House. I was a young adult at the time. I was told that it was put up for people who were going over income in the projects. That's all I can remember my mother saying about it. I just saw a film about San Juan Hill that validated that for me. Because they mentioned that you had to be within a certain income bracket and if you were over, you couldn't stay there. So, several members of the community, most of whom were Black people who resided in Amsterdam Houses, formed a committee and worked on getting a Mitchell-Lama co-op. Then, people from the projects in that position had priority to get into Lincoln Amsterdam House when it opened. It was a godsend for us. At the time, "Movin' on Up", the theme song for the TV show called, "The Jeffersons" was popular and we moved on up from the 2nd floor to the 22nd floor. We moved from a two bedroom to a three bedroom. We had an apartment on the west side of the building overlooking the Hudson River that I knew was there but couldn't see when we were in the projects. It was a panoramic view. The rail yard was back there then; now there are high rise buildings. Now, I look out my window and I can watch TV across the street in somebody else's house because the screens are so big. When we first moved in, we had a gorgeous panoramic view of the Hudson River and the Jersey skyline. It was just gorgeous.

[00:14:40] **Fanny Julissa García:** Tell me what you remember from the building that you lived on 62nd Street and Amsterdam Houses.

[00:14:48] **Leonette P. Joseph:** We lived on the second floor, so I only had to walk three short flights (the staircases were unusually short).

[00:14:58] **Fanny Julissa García:** There was no elevator?

[00:14:59] **Leonette P. Joseph:** There was an elevator but we never used it. Unless we were coming in with a shopping cart of laundry or groceries. But other than that, we never used it. My mother didn't encourage us to use the elevator and insisted that we stay off of the roof. The elevator didn't always smell so good because people relieve themselves in there so I had no particular desire to use it. The door didn't open automatically either. You had to open a door and then it was an inside door that would close automatically. It was fine. I got my exercise going up three short flights. There were windows at the landings, and there were stoops in front. As you entered the building, the mailboxes were on the left. One of my favorite memories is of Rene Rivera practicing his flute on the landing between the first floor, where he lived and the second floor where I lived. He changed his name to Rasheed Ali when he became Muslim. Rasheed did some research on San Juan Hill in preparation for the reopening of David Geffen Hall after it was renovated. Rasheed and I have a special relationship because we were born exactly a week apart. I get to call him big brother because he got here first. We were in school together; from kindergarten through junior high school we were in the same class. We have a special connection and are still in touch.

[00:17:05] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I also remember Rasheed's brother and his friends playing the conga drums in the evening during the summer. His name is Rashid Ali also (their first names are spelled differently). They were significantly older. When they came out, it was my bedtime. To this day, the sound of conga drums are like a lullaby to me, I find them soothing. The coupling of trains in the rail yard between West End Avenue and the Hudson River is another sound I remember hearing—mostly at night when it was quiet. There were not streets west of West End then. Now there are because the rail yard has been replaced by a residential community. Good Motown, and other popular records was another common sound, because portable record players were in when I was a teenager. We used to sit on the stoop and play our records. There were also children playing outside. You could hear them counting double dutch and playing red light, green light in front of the building.

[00:18:34] **Fanny Julissa García:** What is that game?

[00:18:35] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Red light, green light? It's a game where a counter turns their back to everybody else and says, "red light, green light, one, two, three." While they're talking the other players get to advance from the start line toward the counter. When the counter turns around to look at the advancing players, they have to freeze. Anyone the counter catches moving is out. If anyone gets close enough to tag the counter, at the finish line without getting caught, they become the counter.

Interestingly enough, that game came up when I started modeling in August. I answered a casting ad that asked, "Are you comfortable playing Red Light, Green Light?" I ended up playing that game in a commercial that Netflix and Johnnie Walker Whisky collaborated on to promote a TV show called "Squid Games." It was shot in a sandbox in Times Square.

[00:19:58] **Fanny Julissa García:** I remember reading about this in Times Square.

[00:20:02] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Really? I was out there. I was good at freezing; because they never put me out.

[00:20:13] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. You were an expert.

[00:20:15] **Leonette P. Joseph:** The whole thing is scripted. You'd think that these things are spontaneous but we had spent the whole morning rehearsing. Of course, the celebrity, Lil Dicky was scripted to win.

[00:20:29] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. Very, very cool. Thanks for sharing that. You mentioned Motown. Do you remember what records were playing?

[00:20:41] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I remember that The Temptations were on my portable record player. They were my absolute favorite. I was also fond the Supremes and Gladys Knight and the Pips. I remember taking my records and portable player with me when my church arranged for me to visit with a family affiliated with a church in Maine one summer. I think that congregation wanted to give less fortunate youth a change of scene and shot at new experiences. That's where I got to try water skiing. I was 13 at the time. Taking my records and portable player with me was a way of taking a piece of home along.

[00:21:25] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you remember who was playing the conga drums?

[00:21:30] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Robert, who was Rasheed's brother. He is also Rashid Ali now (they spell their first names differently even though they sound the same). Mario was another one out there with them. They were older than me so they weren't hanging buddies. I was glad when they came out. I'm sure there were other people who were annoyed by it, but I was glad when they came out to play their drums; that was a summer treat for me. I don't have much visual memory because I wasn't watching them through the window. I was in bed listening. In the summertime the sun hadn't gone down yet.

[00:22:23] **Fanny Julissa García:** Tell me, Leonette, do you remember any smells from the neighborhood or favorite foods at the time? Local vendors?

[00:22:39] **Leonette P. Joseph:** My mother fried chicken. She fried plantain. She made chicken and dumplings. She fried liver and kidneys (always with bacon on the side). She baked brownies a lot. She had a recipe for Dutch Apple Cake that she liked to make when she hosted a church meeting or company was coming over. ~~Carrot cake.~~ I remember carrot cake and my mother having a good no-bake cheesecake recipe.-There were other women in the neighborhood who baked cakes; some sold them. My mother was a baker, so she wasn't buying other people's cakes.-I found out about this as an adult. I remember my mother made "cou-cou," a West Indian dish made with cornmeal and okra that she served with stewed fish. She was glad to have learned how to make that. Mom was hell-bent on getting pork into us for the New Year (for good luck). So that's when she would cook pig's feet and pig ears (I prefer the ears) and rice and peas. She did excellent turkey and side dishes at Thanksgiving time.

[00:24:11] **Fanny Julissa García:** What is your mother's name?

[00:24:12] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yvonne Gloria Joseph.

[00:24:14] **Fanny Julissa García:** That's a beautiful name, too.

[00:24:16] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yes and my dad was Clifford Ricardo Joseph, Sr. because they named my brother after him. He came to be known as Cliff Joseph. He's the artist Cliff Joseph.

[00:24:31] **Leonette P. Joseph:** That's what we were eating. People cooked at home; there was very little eating out and getting takeout. You'd smell bacon frying commonly, also stewed and baked chicken, fried fish.

[00:24:56] **Fanny Julissa García:** What did your parents do for a living when you were growing up?

[00:24:59] **Leonette P. Joseph:** My mother was a stay at home mom. Until my parents separated, my father worked. They had many jobs. My father was a Pratt graduate in Illustration, and he retouched photographs, maybe for Time Life, Inc. There are some things in the house from Time Life, Inc. that my parents' budget wouldn't have made a priority. So, I feel that's who Dad was working for. He would put the negatives on a light box, look at them through a loop, and retouched them with inks. That's how it was done before using Photoshop on the computer. That was his job. That morphed into work as an art therapist. I'm not sure; I think my father might have been doing something else at a hospital, and hooked up with a doctor who wanted to interrelate with the artist in him. He ended up being one of the pioneers in the art therapy profession and going back to Pratt to teach art therapy when the profession was very young and budding. Pratt was one of the few schools that had a graduate art therapy program.

[00:26:49] **Leonette P. Joseph:** That's where my father landed. Before that, he had started his own greeting card company because he saw a void in terms of greeting cards that featured Black people. His company was called Chromatone. I remember he

had a shipment of his cards in the basement of our church on 66th Street, and being there, with my aunts, to helping him count and box the cards for sale. He had a huge briefcase that he would use to take his samples around. Then, he had an epiphany and decided that he really wanted to use his art to promote social justice (I think there may be an interview on the internet of him discussing that). The card company wasn't taking off, which I'm sorry about. I'm also sorry that I can't find anything on the internet about it. Since that wasn't working he started to paint with social justice consciousness in mind. That was during the Civil Rights and the Vietnam eras. So, a lot of his work is commentary on those two issues and it's easy to find when you google his body of work.

[00:28:30] **Fanny Julissa García:** You mentioned that your dad was a vet.

[00:28:33] **Leonette P. Joseph:** He was a World War II vet in the Army.

[00:28:39] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you know how that experience impacted him? Did he talk about it?

[00:28:44] **Leonette P. Joseph:** He talked about the racism. He and my godfather met in the army. When the two of them reminisced together, they would tell funny stories. It was always fun to hear their stories. They told some pretty intense stories as well that were reflective of the racism and the way they were treated. My godfather, Alvin, told me recently that they were a supply team. A few years ago, I was with my nephews and my father; we had gone to Chicago to visit him. When my brother encouraged his sons to ask their grandfather (then 96) anything they wanted to know, one asked if he had ever almost lost his life in WWII. My father answered, "Yes." He said that his unit had just left the area when the Battle of the Bulge occurred. Had they not left, then they would have probably perished there. My godfather says they were sending the supplies out to the front lines.

[00:30:21] **Fanny Julissa García:** When he said that they were the supply, they were the extra bodies, or they were taking supplies to the front?

[00:30:31] **Leonette P. Joseph:** It seemed they were managing the ammunition. and I didn't get the feeling they were transporting it, but their unit might have been. I had never heard my father say what their function was but that's what got conjured up in my mind as my godfather was talking recently. I think they were not as close to the action and the danger, but really important to those who were.

[00:31:06] **Fanny Julissa García:** When your dad talked about experiencing racism, who did he experience racism from?

[00:31:13] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I think white soldiers he was around did things like pull a rifle on him and disrespect his authority as a sergeant. I don't remember the details of the stories and they would be woven into real funny stories. One time they told a story about going to visit one of their fellow soldiers at home somewhere in the South. This particular soldier was bow-legged. They said when they got there and met his family,

the whole family was bow-legged. Then, they said the dog came out and the dog was bow-legged too. They really cracked us up with some of those tales.

[00:32:17] **Fanny Julissa García:** Was humor a huge part of your family's life?

[00:32:23] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I can't say that. I can say when you put these two army buddies together, it was very humorous and the energy between them was humorous. For example, once used his artistic skills to draw a big padlock and hang it on the refrigerator to forbid my godfather to go in the refrigerator. Their chemistry was so funny. Yeah, it was very funny.

[00:33:07] **Fanny Julissa García:** What did your mom do after your parents separated?

[00:33:11] **Leonette P. Joseph:** My mom took clerical positions. I think she pursued that first. I can remember coming home from school one day and finding her home instead of at work. At the time, Mom was working in one of the offices at the Port Authority. The boss had spoken to her very disrespectfully, and Mom told her she didn't accept this kind of treatment and left. So, she was unemployed. I think that experience led to my uncle (who worked for the city) reaching out to help Mom find a civil service job and she ended up working at the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). Her title was Real Estate Manager, and she was involved in clearing sites, like San Juan Hill was cleared. She worked in Harlem and maybe the Bronx. Her job was to do the claims. She calculated how much money people got for the homes that they were displaced from. She was gratified by being able to tell people how to fill out their applications so they could get the maximum. She told them what the entitlements were and what documents they needed to support their claim. She was very gratified by being able to help people not be shortchanged. They were never getting what the real value of their property was, but without the insight that Mom had of the process and the regulations, they would have been shortchanged even more. She was really looking to get the most she could for them, and not all her colleagues were.

[00:35:12] **Fanny Julissa García:** Talk to me about what social justice meant in your family. You talked about how your dad at one point decided to use his gifts?

[00:35:32] **Leonette P. Joseph:** He painted about the Vietnam War and some decisions that were being made when Lyndon Johnson was in office. I remember that my parents went to the March on Washington. I remember that my church was very active. Things that were being pursued were integration, and not only in the schools because on the front end of my life, Jim Crow laws were in effect in the South. An end to economic violence also. My parents were involved in the ways that the church was participating in that. For example, I think the church sponsored the bus that went to the March on Washington. I was young and I was left at home with relatives. I can remember watching the big crowd on TV, trying to see my mother. Which didn't happen.

[00:36:52] **Fanny Julissa García:** What church did you guys belong to?

[00:36:55] **Leonette P. Joseph:** We went to Good Shepherd-Faith Presbyterian Church, which survived the clearing of San Juan Hill and is still there today (it's right next to the Juilliard's store). I understand Lincoln Center had to build around it because efforts to purchase the property failed. That's exactly what happened. It's the little older structure on 66th Street between Amsterdam and Broadway. When I was there it was an integrated church. I understand that Ed White (who was the pastor on the front end of my experience there) went into Amsterdam Houses to actively recruit members to the church. He was a white pastor. There were, from what I understand, European immigrants in the congregation. I remember some of them. I don't really remember surnames much. There was also a Hispanic congregation that used the chapel we had (it was a small congregation). I remember them being there for a while with a pastor named Rev. Araya, if I recall correctly.

[00:38:23] **Leonette P. Joseph:** But my mother used to talk about Ed White going into the community (he was a kind minister; everybody called him by his first name-- not "Reverend Ed"—"Ed"), and actively recruit people. So I grew up in an integrated church, and it was more robust when I was a child. We had a children's choir, an adult choir, a Sunday school, a tutoring program, when we went there. The schools would give students "released time" once a week to go for religious instruction. We got out of school early and we went to the church. We also had Summer Bible School. It was really a robust program with lots for the children—that eventually fizzled out.

[00:39:21] **Fanny Julissa García:** I have a couple of questions. Can you remember the diversity in the neighborhood when you were living there and growing up there?

[00:39:32] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I remember that it was more diverse than it came to be. I remember there being white children in my class in school and eventually it became mostly a Black and Hispanic community. But, when I was younger—in grade school—the children I'm thinking of didn't seem to go as far as fourth grade. They seemed to be gone by that time. I don't know where they went, I was too young to have had an explanation. There were two schools—P.S. 191 served the projects and P.S. 199 served the Lincoln Towers that were under construction north of the Amsterdam Houses.

[00:40:30] **Leonette P. Joseph:** They were segregated. When I was nine—going into the fourth grade,—they paired the schools to achieve integration (it took until nine years after the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision). They paired the schools so that first, second and third grade was at P.S. 191.—Those white kids went down to 61st Street to P.S. 191. Fourth and fifth grade was at PS.199. Those Black kids went up to 70th Street to P.S.199. Both schools kept their own kindergartners. Then, I was again in integrated classes, but with different white kids, many of whom had been living and moving into the Lincoln Towers. We went to I.S. 44 together on 77th Street for intermediate school.

[00:41:28] **Fanny Julissa García:** What did integration mean for you and how did it impact you?

[00:41:34] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I feel I got a better education because I was in integrated classes. I think I also got a wider exposure. When I got to P.S. 199, Lincoln Center was being rolled out and they were sending ballet dancers to do our assemblies and teach us about ballet and we went to listen to the symphony. One of my classmate's father was a kettle drum player for the New York Philharmonic Orchestra under Leonard Bernstein. I feel that my exposure was greater and the quality of my education was greater in fourth and fifth grade, as I approached intermediate school.

[00:42:20] **Fanny Julissa García:** What do you mean when you say exposure? Exposure to what?

[00:42:25] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Exposure to the community because Lincoln Center was being rolled out. I was taken to the ballet. I knew what a symphony orchestra was from first hand experience. I wasn't just reading about it. The trips I was being taken on included that because I was in Lincoln Center's backyard as well. But also, I believe if the schools had stayed segregated, there likely would not have been as broad an education or invitations extended to the Black kids in the community. So I feel that more was referenced. In intermediate school, we were going to the American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut every spring as a school trip. So for three years straight, I was taken to see a Shakespearean play. I think that was by virtue of being amongst kids that they wanted to educate at that level. There were a group of parents who did not want their children in the integrated schools and they opened a school in a luxury high-rise directly across the street from my church on 66th Street, so their kids didn't have to be in integrated classrooms.

[00:44:15] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Ironically, about ten years later—a cousin from the Bronx who is ten years younger than me went to that school. Laurence Fishburne, a Black actor who was on the soap opera, “One Life to Live”—that was filming in the area—also went to that school. I went to pick my cousin up one day and he was outside with the kids. I knew him from the soap opera. So much for having a school that excluded Black children. That didn't last long. My suspicion is that they needed federal funding to stay alive.

[00:45:04] **Fanny Julissa García:** Is that school still around?

[00:45:07] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I don't think so. And I haven't detected that it's someplace else under another name. It's not in that space. You know what else was across the street from that church? The Chinese Embassy was there at one time. I think there's a private club there now, but that building was originally the Chinese Embassy.

[00:45:30] **Fanny Julissa García:** What did it mean for you to have grown up in Amsterdam Houses with the backdrop of the displacement of the San Juan Hill community?

[00:45:45] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I never heard a word about San Juan Hill until recently when all of this interest in San Juan Hill kicked up. I don't recall hearing the term San Juan Hill. Remember, they were building Lincoln Center by the time my brother got here. I was five. So my mother may have remembered, but she's not here for me to ask her. I just knew there were run down buildings and a construction site. Which reminds me, you asked me about local merchants. There was Mikey. There is a dead end street at 63rd that's now named after Thelonious Sphere Monk. At the circular part of that dead end, there was an ice cream man named Mikey. That's where we got our ice cream and our sour straws and candy. On 61st Street, between West End Avenue and the school (in a tenement, with lopsided marble steps that has now been refurbished), there was a man named Bubba who sold penny candy. If you had a quarter, you could come home with a handful of candy, maybe a pocketful. The kids liked those merchants.

[00:47:21] **Leonette P. Joseph:** We had Century Bar (where Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art sits now). On that block there was Pioneer Supermarket. and a convenience store we called the Variety Store. At 65th and Amsterdam, there was a luncheonette. As a kid, I realized that if you took the U-N-C-H out of luncheonette, you had Leonette. You had my name. That's how I remember that the luncheonette was there so well, because we didn't eat in there. There was a bus stop there. Those are some of the commercial establishments that were around.

[00:48:03] **Fanny Julissa García:** So you didn't grow up knowing about San Juan Hill until later?

[00:48:07] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Not at all. I understand there was a very prominent social club. It was an arts-rich community and there was a social club on the very spot the building I grew up in is. Nobody ever mentioned the history of that place or what had preceded it.

[00:48:35] **Fanny Julissa García:** What do you attribute that to?

[00:48:38] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Racism. Now, I understand that San Juan Hill may have influenced some of the people who ended up being noted for the Harlem Renaissance; they may have come together in San Juan Hill or been some of the players in that community. I've heard about the Harlem Renaissance, but nobody ever said a thing about what was going on there in San Juan Hill. I remember Thelonious Monk, he was a fixture on 64th Street.

[00:49:14] **Fanny Julissa García:** You remember him?

[00:49:15] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I remember him. I remember my father passing there with us one day and saying, "See that man right there? That man is a famous musician. And I bet he's making up music in his head right now." That's what my father said about him.

[00:49:34] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. And he would just hang out on the street corner or chatting with people?

[00:49:36] **Leonette P. Joseph:** He would be there on the corner of 64th, near Century Bar. "Straight, No Chaser" might be the name of a documentary they did on Thelonius Monk. Some of that was shot in Century Bar. He lived in the Phipps Houses, which was the other side of that cul-de-sac I mentioned, that dead end street where Mikey was. The projects were there and on the other side of 63rd Street were the Phipps Houses. That's where Thelonius Monk lived. The Phipps houses went through to 64th Street. So, I don't know if he entered his building on the 64th or 63rd Street side, but that's the complex that he lived in. Those kids went to school and played in the street with us. So, to us, they were Amsterdam kids. I remember playing with Thelonius' daughter. It seems that her mother and the mother of children that lived on my floor were girlfriends. So, his daughter and son had occasion to be over by my building sometime. Thelonius Monk's son was close to Rasheed Ali. I didn't know for some time that there was a connection.

[00:51:13] **Fanny Julissa García:** It's so cool that your dad knew who he was.

[00:51:17] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yeah. And now when I hear the history, of course my dad knew. The adults knew who he was. Yeah, the adults knew who he was and the older kids knew who he was.

[00:51:28] **Fanny Julissa García:** Did your parents listen to jazz?

[00:51:32] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Not so much. My godfather was the one who listened to jazz, and he was out in Westbury. At his house, they were listening to classic jazz most of the time. My parents listened to WPAT, which was easy listening music. When I went to my aunt's house, she was playing Motown and all that stuff. But my mother liked easy listening music and WINS, the news station. I can remember her saying, (when we would complain about that), "The world could blow up at 72nd Street and you children would never know it. You never listen to the news."

[00:52:14] **Fanny Julissa García:** What is that easy listening music?

[00:52:17] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Instrumental and show tunes. I know a lot of those tunes because they were playing in my house. When I became a teenager, I brought the Motown sound and Aretha Franklin and James Brown and other soul music to the house. Dionne Warwick was popular in my house too.

[00:52:50] **Fanny Julissa García:** I want to go back a little bit to your mom because your mom helped people with the filing of their claims when they were being displaced from other buildings. Do you think your parents understood what was happening, like the pushing out of communities of color from their buildings or their homes?

[00:53:14] **Leonette P. Joseph:** They didn't talk about it. Like my grandparents didn't talk, to me, about what they experienced in the Caribbean. I don't know if my parents didn't talk about people of color being pushed out of their homes because they didn't know or because they didn't want to burden us with it. I remember being excited as Lincoln Center was being rolled out. I have more residual visual memory of that than I do of the construction site. My brother was too young, I don't think he remembers the construction site as much as he liked it then. I don't remember it. I can't picture construction going on on the east side of Amsterdam Avenue. But I have very vivid memories of getting off the bus on Columbus Avenue as I was coming home from my intermediate school for three years. Every time they opened a new building we went to see where they had the bathrooms. I wanted to know, "Where does this tunnel lead? What's around this corner?" I loved it.

[00:54:33] **Leonette P. Joseph:** My girlfriend and I found a cute man that was working at the gift shop at David Geffen Hall when it was called Philharmonic Hall. That became our route to go home. We gave him a fictitious name and everything; I think we called him Wade Alexander. He dressed so nice. We never spoke to him, but we made sure to pass by and look him over—see what he was wearing. I remember watching Jackie Kennedy arrive for the opening of Philharmonic Hall on TV. I remember my best girlfriend's aunt coming in from Montclair, New Jersey to take us to see the original Supremes at Philharmonic Hall. My godbrother got a part in one of the operas. He was attending Ethical Culture (he had gotten a scholarship to Ethical Culture). I'm not clear about whether that factored into it or not. There was a significant age difference between him and his older brother and sister. When they went away to college, that left him as the only dishwasher in the family. So, when his parents allowed him to buy something big, he bought a dishwasher. Then, he didn't have to be the dishwasher. Yeah, I remember that.

[00:56:15] **Leonette P. Joseph:** After I got my working papers—when I was somewhere between 13 and 15—I was an usher at New York State Theater (now the David H. Koch Theater). That summer, Oklahoma was playing. I remember Rasheed (and some other kids from the projects who were musically inclined) being involved in an outdoor production. It may have been West Side Story. One of our teachers was involved in producing the show at the Damrosch Park bandshell at Lincoln Center and he used some of the kids from the projects. I think the boy I had a crush on was working the lights or something like that. We had unique summer jobs, compared to those who worked as day camp counselors.

[00:57:19] **Fanny Julissa García:** When you watched West Side Story, did you make the connection that San Juan Hill was where you lived?

[00:57:28] **Leonette P. Joseph:** No. I always thought that West Side Story was set, just south of here, in Hell's Kitchen. The first inkling I got that this was mis-information is when I saw Spielberg's remake of West Side Story. As the film opens, they show the intersection markers for Broadway and 68th Street. Ironically, I was sitting in the AMC theater at Broadway and 68th Street watching visuals of what they thought the area

looked like the 1950s. They showed the construction site, which I don't have firsthand memory of and all these little mom pop operations. I thought, "Isn't that a kick in the head." I had just passed through there to get into the movie theater and I thought, "Isn't it something, that this is what has come of that?" I didn't even have to think about what it looks like now because I was there five minutes ago.

[00:58:47] **Fanny Julissa García:** And it's really striking to me that you didn't grow up with the history of it.

[00:58:53] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I really think it tells me how history gets buried. When I saw the film San Juan Hill: Manhattan's Lost Neighborhood (which premiered at the New York Film Festival this month), I found myself becoming verklempt and angry—first of all—at how people were living, the conditions under which people were living because it went much deeper than I knew. I knew that the Phipps Houses had bathtubs in the living room, or the kitchen, rather. I knew that. But, I didn't know as much as I was exposed to in the film. I also saw how much culture was just buried. How could they not tell us about that? With the effort my parents were making to expose me to Black history, I feel if they knew what was in that film, they would have made an effort to share it with me. Yeah, I don't think they really knew.

[01:00:13] **Fanny Julissa García:** Another strange thing that strikes me about your story is your mom helping people file claims from other neighborhoods.

[01:00:21] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Isn't that funny? In a way they both landed in a place to take corrective action. My father was trying to preserve history on canvas and tell it like it was. My mother was trying to do right by people who were in a similar position and she did that till she retired.

[01:00:49] **Fanny Julissa García:** In a sense, she was helping to shape history for generations so that they would get what they rightly deserved.

[01:00:58] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Well, as much of it as they could get. Apparently, the way the regulation was written had one formula to follow that would determine the final payout figure, while there was another formula that would take the same details and come up with less money for people to receive. My mother spoke of a supervisor who tried to persuade her to use the formula that yielded less. She spent years saying, to that person, "Give it to me in writing." (she had no intention of being insubordinate). However, that person never did put it in writing. Apparently, they didn't want to be on record as being crooked. You see what I mean? Mom knew, with union backing, that she was protected as long as she kept saying, "Just give it to me in writing." as though she was happy to comply.

[01:02:01] **Fanny Julissa García:** Smart woman your mom.

[01:02:03] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yeah, she was a smart lady.

[01:02:09] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. I'm sure thanks to Yvonne, many people were helped.

[01:02:15] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yeah, I think so.

[01:02:20] **Fanny Julissa García:** We talked a little bit about the people that you saw on the street. Do you remember any other people? Neighbors, people that came over for dinner, perhaps from the neighborhood?

[01:02:40] **Leonette P. Joseph:** People that came over? I remember people coming to the house for church meetings. My mother didn't usually entertain neighborhood folk for dinner. She had a girlfriend, Rosalee Maxwell, who became my brother's godmother. She would come over in the evening. Since my mother was a single mom, she couldn't leave us alone. My mother's friend had a husband that she could leave her children with, so she'd come over and do her hand sewing (she was a seamstress) so she and my mother could sit at the end of the day—when their children had gone to bed—and socialize a little bit.

[01:03:33] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I remember what had been a safe neighborhood where children just played outside together until dusky dark and the lampposts came on. Some moms said, "When the lampposts come on, you come upstairs." But the neighborhood became a heroin infested place.

[01:04:07] **Fanny Julissa García:** What years were those?

[01:04:10] **Leonette P. Joseph:** It was in middle school so I would say '67, '68. Mid to late '60s. I can remember walking along 63rd street to go towards the bus stop on Amsterdam Avenue and the train station in the morning and the addicts would be nodding out east of where the ice cream man, Mikey was set up, in that block. Parents were nervous about their kids getting involved in heroin. Aunt Lee (that's what we called Rosalee Maxwell) was sitting on the couch doing her hand sewing, and she made the comment, "I told Kenneth," (Kenneth was her youngest child, who was a year younger than me,) "I told Kenneth that before I watch him die slow on heroin, I'll kill him myself." My mother was in the kitchen (maybe washing dishes or putting leftovers away) and I could hear her agreeing with Aunt Lee. Since, she agreed with Aunt Lee. I thought, "Oh, she's going to kill Kenneth before heroin does it, that means my mother is going to do the same thing to me." Amazing, how just a conversation like that can make enough of an influence on a child to say, "I won't be getting into that—I'm more afraid of Mom." That was my response at the time. I never said a word in that conversation, but I took it all in. I had friends who would cut in school to go experiment with drugs, but I was hell bent on not participating. I had a "just say no" mentality before that became the first lady's slogan. I always thought, "I'm not getting involved with this." And it really had to do with—having matriarchs, my mother, aunts, godmothers to contend with if I did.

[01:06:27] **Fanny Julissa García:** You had them to answer to.

[01:06:29] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Exactly. And I mean, it was made clear with a sewing needle. I never discussed it with Kenneth either.

[01:06:39] **Fanny Julissa García:** Kenneth is your brother?

[01:06:40] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Kenneth is Aunt Lee's son who had gotten the part in the opera and bought the dishwasher. He used to come over to play and watch TV in the evening. My brother had a friend who used to come over to play too. They were younger than Kenneth and I, they were five years younger than us. One day, Jeffrey looked up and saw that it was getting gray outside and he said, "I have to go. I have to go right now because it's dusty dark. It's dusty dark, I have to go." That's how freely children moved about. You'd either go out to play, they'd go to a friend's house, whatever. Mothers didn't get worried until they didn't show up when the lampposts came on. He said, "dusty dark." I think she must have told him "dusky dark", but he knew what it looked like and he got out of our house fast.

[01:07:40] **Fanny Julissa García:** Needed to report back.

[01:07:43] **Leonette P. Joseph:** It was cute. He was only about 7 or 8 at the time. He was a little guy. But all of that changed when Etan Patz was kidnapped.

[01:07:55] **Fanny Julissa García:** Who?

[01:07:56] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Etan Patz was a child who was kidnapped in Lower Manhattan. That's the first inkling that I had that somebody would take someone's child. I think that was the beginning of people escorting their children to school. His mother had let him go to school by himself for the first time, he was about six. She had been escorting him until then. I always walked to school. My friends and I would walk to school by ourselves. We came home for lunch by ourselves. I only had to prove that I knew to wait for the light and look both ways before crossing the street.

[01:08:40] **Fanny Julissa García:** How old was Etan?

[01:08:41] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I think Etan was about six. And they never found that kid.

[01:08:49] **Fanny Julissa García:** Just a baby.

[01:08:51] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yeah. People used to let their children mature as they matured. I had to cross one street to get to the grocery store; I had to walk from 62nd to 64th. I remember proving to my mother (when I was only about 6 or 7) that I could count my money. I knew how much change I was supposed to get and I could count and make sure I had enough change. Maybe she gave me a dollar or \$2 to go get a loaf of bread. Once I proved to my mother I could do that, and she knew that I would wait for the light at the corner, I got to go to the store. Seven year olds don't get to do that anymore.

[01:09:43] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you remember what year that was or how old you were?

[01:09:47] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Well, if I was seven it would've been about '61, '62.

[01:09:53] **Fanny Julissa García:** Wow. So he was your age, almost.

[01:09:57] **Leonette P. Joseph:** No, Etan was considerably younger than me.

[01:09:59] **Fanny Julissa García:** Okay. He was around six and you were...

[01:10:04] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Etan was about six when that happened to him. But by the time that happened to him, I might have been a teenager or young adult. It was my observation the tide changed after that and people just would not let their children venture. When I was going to P.S. 199, children could go out at lunchtime—because children were going home and they weren't keeping tight reins on kids. One day my friend and I left the schoolyard, (I was not going home for lunch anymore) went into the Lincoln Towers building on 70th Street that was still under construction) and upstairs to look at the model apartments. We were two little girls in the fourth or fifth grade. That doesn't happen anymore. We were respectful of the property and we got back to school on time. Now, even if we had showed up, the construction workers wouldn't have let us in. Then, nobody bothered us. We were down the block and up in the high-rise. Still nobody questioned why we were there. That doesn't happen anymore.

[01:11:38] **Fanny Julissa García:** What does that tell you about now?

[01:11:42] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I think that over my 70 years, I've watched the world lock down, and lock down some more, and lock down some more. Now I'm watching what we used to get in the way of service be taken away or transition to billable. To give you an example, when I was younger, you could go all the way to the gate and see your family off and stay there until the plane took off. You could also take your children to watch a plane land when a loved one arrived. When you, were dropped at the airport, there was someone there to check your baggage for you. Now, you haul it inside, you put the tags on yourself, and you lift it onto the conveyor belt yourself. It's ridiculous!

[01:12:38] **Fanny Julissa García:** You pay for the work that you do when you check in bags now.

[01:12:46] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yes you have to pay to check the bag. It used to come with the plane ticket. Here's another difference. When I was an adolescent about 13, 14 maybe, we went to Florida. Maybe I was a little younger than that; maybe more like 12. Anyway, we went to Florida for Christmas. When we got off the plane (while waiting for somebody or waiting for baggage), I said to my mother, "I need to go to the bathroom. I took two steps away from her and she called me back and close to whisper to me, "If when you get to the bathroom, if the signs says 'Colored and White', you use the

Colored one." She knew I was going to use the clean one. I was a New Yorker. She didn't know if I would-encounter Jim Crow laws. But, she knew if I didn't know how to handle it, there would be trouble. I grew up on the cusp of that kind of change.

[01:14:08] **Fanny Julissa García:** Even though you were living in a more progressive city like New York City, you still were confronted with that when you traveled outside.

[01:14:21] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Here where I lived, I'm sure I was code switching, but I wasn't leaving my community to go to change; change was coming to my community. I sat in a restaurant having drinks when I was in my 20s, 30 at best, across from Lincoln Center. I was having drinks with a guy who was significantly younger than me. I didn't want to date him because he was younger than me (I didn't know then about being a cougar). As I looked out on Lincoln Center, I said to him, "Wow, I watched them build all of this." And his response was, "Damn, how old are you?" It had taken a long time to build all of that so it was a good question, but that's when he got an inkling that he was with an older lady.

[01:15:39] **Fanny Julissa García:** He spoke the quiet part out loud.

[01:15:41] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Exactly. He didn't know that. He had been begging me to go out and I finally said, "Okay, I need to give this guy a chance." But apparently he had calculated wrong. It was funny.

[01:15:59] **Fanny Julissa García:** Leonette, I have a few more questions for you. How are you doing? Do you need a break or are you doing okay?

[01:16:04] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I'm fine.

[01:16:07] **Fanny Julissa García:** You mentioned that your father eventually used his art for social justice and did some picketing or protest or advocacy. Can you talk about that?

[01:16:22] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I remember him doing picketing with regards to getting Black art into the museums. The organization they had formed was called the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. I think that was the name of it. I think he and an artist named, Benny Andrews started it. At the time they were living in Westbeth.

[01:16:54] **Fanny Julissa García:** Where's that?

[01:16:54] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Westbeth is another Mitchell-Lama co-op down in the Meatpacking District. One of the buildings that the trains used to go through was turned into loft-type apartments for the artist community, and my dad and his second wife eventually moved there. Dad and Benny Andrews both lived there; I don't know if that's where they met. I would have been an adolescent, I would have been in my mid-teens maybe when they were putting pressure to be on the Whitney Museum. That's what I know about picketing happening and demonstrations happening. I also know that my

father became interested in prison reform. That's something he was still talking about well into his 80s and 90s, by which time he was living in Chicago. Most of his body of work had to do with the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, and the emergence of a more Black Power and Black Pride consciousness.

[01:18:31] **Fanny Julissa García:** Where are your father's paintings now?

[01:18:36] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I don't know the name of the man who he has designated to take care of his work or what exactly the arrangement between them was, but it can be found online.

[01:18:59] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you own any of his pieces now?

[01:19:02] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I have pieces that were personal pieces. For example, when I graduated from elementary school, my father gifted me with a portrait of myself that was inspired by the school photograph I had taken that year. I have an etching that my father had done (maybe when he was in college) of the dog that my parents had to get rid of when they moved into the projects. His name was Jet; he was a black Cocker Spaniel. I have posters of one of Dad's most well known pieces. It's called, "The Blackboard." I believe it's an oil piece. There's a teacher and a student standing in front of a blackboard. Every letter of the alphabet has a reference to Black history. One of the most remarkable things about that piece is that the chalk on the blackboard looks so much like chalk that people are tempted to go touch it to see if it really is chalk. If it was, of course they would damage the painting. Consequently, it's encased in glass. When I saw that painting at the Brooklyn Museum, while it was on tour with the "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" exhibit, I didn't know if everybody knew why it was encased in glass, but I knew why and I was glad.

[01:20:47] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I have posters of that piece in my possession. It was so popular that posters of it were made. His portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr. and one of the Chromatone cards were made into posters too. I think I may have them in my possession. Chromatone was my father's short-lived Afrocentric greeting card company. It was a colorful collection that used our nuclear family as the inspiration. There were stylized illustrations of us on some of the cards. After the children got killed in the Birmingham church bombing, my father designed a black and white card that depicted the little girls with a Christmas tree made from burnt wood debris. I believe it's it was the only black and white card in the collection. I think the inscription was, 'This year, the freedom tree. Martin Luther King wrote a thank you letter to my father for that card.

[01:22:16] **Leonette P. Joseph:** And then there's a mosaic that my father and I made together when I was young—maybe 3 or 4—before my brother was born. It was a coffee table top that got weathered over the years. I shipped it to Chicago when I went to visit my father in 2010 so we could refurbish it together. I have that. When I turned 49, my birthday fell on Easter, and my father illustrated a card with bunnies for me. So, I have that. What I have is family art and reproductions. I don't have the originals that are famous in my possession.

[01:23:16] **Fanny Julissa García:** It's beautiful that you hold on to a piece of your dad. And his creativity and strength.

[01:23:24] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yeah. I think, too, that some of that stuff my brother knows and some of it he wouldn't remember.

[01:23:44] **Fanny Julissa García:** You mentioned you really wanted to talk about Roe v. Wade and the experience of in your lifetime. You had the right to reproductive health care and you've witnessed the overturning Roe v. Wade, what does that mean for...?

[01:24:11] **Leonette P. Joseph:** It just feels like such a leap backwards—some of the things that we're experiencing right now and talking about right now. It never occurred to me some of these things could be rolled back. As I was entering my fertile years, I was aware that I had access to birth control—people were actively working to make me aware, as an adolescent, that I had access to birth control and I could get an abortion if I wanted one. I did not have to go to a back alley to a woman with a coat hanger. That was part of my sex education. To think that's been snatched away, I never considered that. When I hear that people are banning books. Really? It makes me concerned. It's why this election is so important. We've got to turn this tide back the other way or it's going to be hell to pay in this country in a way that I don't think people realize. I think my generation did not sufficiently school the next. We lived in a degree of comfort. That too much was taken for granted and not imparted is my fear. And even amongst those of us who worked very hard to instill pride and potential for choice and elevation, I fear that we didn't teach them to protect what they had enough, to take advantage of it. I don't know that we taught them to value it with a protective consciousness. That's my concern. Even the right to vote, the first year that 18 year olds could vote, I was turning 18.

[01:26:51] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I had been taught the importance of voting and been taught to look forward to it from kindergarten... kindergarten. They took me into a booth (I think they were teaching the kids so that parents would know, just like they teach the kids to stop, drop and roll), they took us in and told us, "If you don't pull the handle all the way over, then it won't engage and lock the curtain. I was also taught to push the handle all the way back because it's not till it gets to the other side that it registers the vote. I knew to tell my mother that from when I was in kindergarten. At 18, I got to vote. That was the first time 18 year olds were allowed.

[01:27:41] **Fanny Julissa García:** What year was that?

[01:27:43] **Leonette P. Joseph:** You're going to make me do the math. Well, let's see, '54, maybe '72. Yeah I was graduating high school in '72.

[01:27:52] **Fanny Julissa García:** Do you remember who you voted for?

[01:27:55] **Leonette P. Joseph:** No, I don't.

[01:27:56] **Fanny Julissa García:** Was it a presidential election or local?

[01:27:58] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I really don't remember. No. What I remember is voting for Obama.

[01:28:08] **Fanny Julissa García:** What was that like?

[01:28:09] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I was working and in order to avoid the long lines at the end of my work day (I was an assistant principal at a school in Jersey, no less) I made sure I was out there when the polls were opening, around six. The poll happened in the Community Center right next door, and some of my elder neighbors were down there in their pajamas. They had just thrown their coat over their pajamas, they said, "I'm not gonna be standing in the line today, but I'm going to be voting." I also remember when the results came out, people were honking horns in the street. And my godsister, Aunt Lee's daughter called me and she was crying. She called me from Virginia. It was some night. We felt the energy here in the city. I remember casting that vote at six in the morning.

[01:29:31] **Fanny Julissa García:** Super early.

[01:29:32] **Leonette P. Joseph:** In the dark, with the elders.

[01:29:42] **Fanny Julissa García:** Leonette, please forgive me, I forgot to ask you about your own career and what you did. I got so excited about your ancestors and your family.

[01:29:54] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I came out of high school interested in psychology and art, and I focused on the psychology in college. I enrolled in the Gallatin Division at NYU. After spending a year in California, I came home and went to NYU. The Gallatin Division was a university without walls model that allowed you to put your own program together. So I took all of the psychology major courses and a minor in art. Essentially I set myself up to study art therapy at the graduate level. And, I did that. I went and got a masters in art therapy at Pratt, where my father was teaching at the time, then worked in the mental health field for a while. I eventually left that and did training and development. Art therapy was budding, but it wasn't lucrative and it wasn't recognized. I could not get a title as an art therapist, only as an activity therapist.

[01:30:59] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I eventually just went into training and development focusing on CPR. I taught 1200 people how to do CPR while at the American Red Cross and managed a CPR training program for the New York City Department of Health that brought their health professionals into compliance with the regulations. Their dentists, doctors, and nurses needed to know CPR, and I ran that program for a while. Then, I ended up going into teaching and going back to school at Bank Street College of Education to get a Master's in Educational Leadership (that was my second Master's). I worked in school administration for a while and then stepped back into the classroom as

a special ed teacher. I did that until the pandemic, when I taught math to speech-and-language-challenged children over Zoom. One young lady was 17 years old, and I spent the year teaching her the numbers one through five over Zoom. She couldn't even speak to me. She had to use a device. She also learned geometric shapes over Zoom. It was very gratifying to see her progress under those conditions. When they sent the children back to school before they had vaccines for them, I decided not to take the risk, since I was an elder, so I retired.

[01:32:50] **Fanny Julissa García:** Did you start your own family?

[01:32:53] **Leonette P. Joseph:** No, I have no children. I never married.

[01:33:01] **Fanny Julissa García:** My last question is, what does it mean to be from New York, to have grown up and lived here for so long?

[01:33:15] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I think (especially because of where I've lived in New York) it's meant living amongst people who are forward thinking, living in a multicultural situation, being exposed to many cultures. Being exposed to the arts, richly. Any genre of the arts that I would take an interest in has always been available to me a subway ride or a cab ride away. And, I've had opportunities to partake. It's just been a rich, rich exposure that has helped me be open-minded and tolerant of differences in people. One of the things my church did every year was send us to the Passover Seder up the street. So, I've gotten to see how other people live and eat the food they eat and listen to the languages and see the artwork and know that whether I like it or not, music is different I've retired in New York because I don't want to leave this existence.

[01:34:46] **Fanny Julissa García:** You said that you lived one year in Los Angeles. Have you lived anywhere else besides New York?

[01:34:51] **Leonette P. Joseph:** No, I have not lived anywhere else. I chased a love interest to Los Angeles for my freshman year of college. That didn't pan out like I planned, so I ended up back at home.

[01:35:08] **Fanny Julissa García:** How would you describe New York or the meaning of New York in your life to someone?

[01:35:20] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Culturally-rich, stimulating and ~~maybe~~ ever-evolving.

[01:35:40] **Fanny Julissa García:** It's impossible to stay stagnant here.

[01:35:44] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yeah, you can't. I launched a career in modeling. Who thought I would have done that? I grew up battling my weight and just never saw myself as a model. But every time I turn on the television, there's a senior citizen selling something. So I said, "Let me try this. Let me jump in it." A month later, I was in the middle of Times Square promoting a show I never saw and whiskey that I don't drink.

How did this happen? Only in New York. Only in New York. And, ~~back~~ we shot it in a sandbox, too. Incredible! Only in New York.

[01:36:31] **Fanny Julissa García:** In oral history, we always end an interview with a final question and that question is, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you would like to share or that you wish I had asked you?

[01:36:49] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yes. And let's go back to San Juan Hill.

[01:36:52] **Fanny Julissa García:** Okay.

[01:36:55] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I've been involved in some of the dialogue about opening up the Amsterdam Avenue side of Lincoln Center's campus. It was built with a wall seemingly meant to keep the people of color from the projects out. They're making plans to correct that. I'm very glad to see that there are so many different cultures being represented in the arts that are being presented at Lincoln Center now. I'm eager to see that wall opened up. I have been encouraging them to put promotional material on the Amsterdam side, and think about putting some merchants (a gift shop or something) on the Amsterdam side. I'd especially like to see promotional material that encourages the children who live in the Amsterdam Houses to think of themselves at Lincoln Center as performers. And I've also said that I hope Lincoln Center will do something to expose children of color to all of the opportunity and careers that exist at Lincoln Center (I don't know if it's falling on deaf ears or not). No matter what your interests, somebody is using it in some way at Lincoln Center. There's so much potential in the projects. I don't think the kids know that they don't have to be a performer to work there. Maybe they're a fundraiser. Maybe they're a designer. Maybe security is their thing. There are so many roles that are so important. I hope that Lincoln Center will do something to educate, to provide internships, to provide tours geared at young people who are trying to sort out their careers goals.

[01:39:20] **Fanny Julissa García:** Why is that important for you?

[01:39:23] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Because a lot of money changes hands at Lincoln Center. It's an economic enterprise, and it's not enough just to tear down the wall and say, "Come spend money and come see this." If you're going to make them participants, make them participants across the board. Engage them in all the nooks and crannies from maintenance to decision-maker. That's how I feel. I don't know if people are hearing yet. They know that they want kids to know that they can play a flute and that there's a place for Black dancers. But, I don't know if they're hearing yet that kids need to know there is a very wide array of career opportunity there.

[01:40:20] **Fanny Julissa García:** I appreciate that because you grew up going to Lincoln Center where you were a kid and seeing this art and being exposed to it. But do you feel the integration with the community hasn't fully happened?

[01:40:36] **Leonette P. Joseph:** It hasn't fully happened. I see more effort on Lincoln Center's part to make it happen. Now, when I walk the campus, I see some of everybody in the promotional postings. I got to discover by the time I was 15 that there was a job for me at Lincoln Center. My friends were doing silly summer jobs out in Central Park while I was working alongside adults at Lincoln Center. My godbrother got to discover that young on the stage. Recently, the New York City Ballet hired an artist to do portraits of the staff. And I went to see the exhibit because one of my friends who was an usher there was one of the workers whose portrait was painted. I learned from the placards that there are many more jobs attached to putting on a ballet than I realized. I thought, "These kids need to know this."

[01:42:05] **Fanny Julissa García:** That it's a career springboard or a path, right?

[01:42:09] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Exactly. In some cases there were families on staff—like a father, son and grandson on the security team.

[01:42:24] **Fanny Julissa García:** Thank you for sharing that. I think it's important to put on the record and from someone who has witnessed the Lincoln Center over the years and wants to see it do more.

[01:42:37] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Yes. They need to develop and leverage some of the talent that's coming out of the community that the wall has been encouraging to stay out.

[01:42:47] **Fanny Julissa García:** Is there anything else that you want to add?

[01:42:52] **Leonette P. Joseph:** I thank you for this trip down memory lane.

[01:42:58] **Fanny Julissa García:** It was a pleasure to chat with you.

[01:43:03] **Leonette P. Joseph:** It feels meaningful to me to be able to share 70 years of life in one community.

[01:43:16] **Fanny Julissa García:** Unbelievable. Thank you so much. You've lived an incredible life and come from such an amazing family.

[01:43:21] **Leonette P. Joseph:** Thank you.

[01:43:23] **Fanny Julissa García:** Thank you for sharing.