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**Oral History Interview with Jo Ann Benoit**  
**Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.14**  
**Interview conducted by Liz H. Strong on April 14, 2018**  
**at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn**

STRONG: Today is Saturday, April 14th, 2018. My name is Liz Strong. This is for the Muslims in Brooklyn Oral History Project with the Brooklyn Historical Society. Jo Ann, just introduce yourself and say when and where you were born.

BENOIT: Sure. Thank you for the opportunity, Liz. I'm really happy to be here. My name is Jo Ann Benoit. I was born in Brooklyn, New York -- actually, at Kings County Hospital - [date redacted for privacy]. And I was raised in Haiti. I am a Brooklynite -- again. When we moved back here, I moved on the Flatbush side of Brooklyn. And then when I had an opportunity to purchase a property, I did that in Bed-Stuy, so now I'm a resident of Bed-Stuy.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about your childhood -- your memories of growing up in Haiti, your siblings -- anything.

BENOIT: Well, I had a terrific childhood. I grew up in Haiti because of, I guess, custody issues between my parents when they divorced. My mom felt that my grandmother would be, you know, the best person to take care of her child -- of her children, because my brother and I were sent to Haiti. It just so happened that my grandmother lived in Haiti. [laughter] So I was raised there from about the age of two until I was maybe sixteen, sixteen and a half. And I went to school there, did the regular girl, I guess, activities. I went to dance school. I was classically trained in the piano. I -- you know, it was just wonderful. Because my aunts and uncles did the same thing, as well. So we were nine in Haiti -- besides my brother and myself, we had cousins, as well. So my grandmother -- [laughter] you know, God bless her -- [laughter] she raised two generations of children. We would come every summer to New York to see our parents, but we went to school there.

STRONG: What were summers in New York like?

BENOIT: [sigh] Summers in New York were very boring. [laughter] I can't believe I'm saying that now, because I enjoy summers in New York now. But because we didn't have any friends -- our friends were back in Haiti -- and each of us went back to our parents, so we weren't together anymore -- in terms of my cousins and I. So we -- we saw each other, but not on a regular basis as before -- as when we were in Haiti. I did a lot of things with my mom. My grandmother -- my paternal grandmother took me in a lot, as well, because both my parents were working. And then, at a certain point, I think, I probably complained so much that my mom used to send me on trips. So in the summer, I ended up going one summer to Brazil; another, to Canada; I think Switzerland -- just wherever we had family.

STRONG: That's -- how -- how old were you when you first started traveling and going overseas?

BENOIT: Very young. My parents tell me that I was always a great traveler as a baby. I just rolled with the punches. So I think very young. I don't have early recollections of traveling. Maybe the earliest I have are when we probably went to Disney World, of course. [laughter] I was maybe eight or nine. But yeah, my parents always -- I always had family on the West Coast, in Canada, in Europe, so we always traveled.

STRONG: Wow. One thing you told me over the phone was that Haitian culture and history was a huge part of your life -- is a huge part of your life -- and also, the Catholic faith, when you were very young. So tell me about those two aspects of your upbringing.

BENOIT: Absolutely. Well, English is my third language. I learned French at school and at home early on, and then, of course, Creole, because everybody around us spoke Creole in Haiti. The food -- when I cook -- now, because of the American lifestyle, I'll probably make pasta or burgers for dinner, [laughter] but usually I'll make, you know, rice and beans and fish and plantain -- you know. So -- and at home, we speak Creole. And we speak French with the children. My son is in a dual language program -- French and English -- in Brooklyn. So we just -- it's not that -- it's -- it's a -- a conscious decision that I make; it's just who we are. We're Haitian American. So we speak English, we speak

Creole, we speak French. Some of us speak Spanish. So we -- you know, we just bring everything together, and whatever makes sense for us, we just go with that.

I was raised Roman Catholic. I actually spent 10 years at an all-girls school in Haiti. It was Sainte Rose de Lima. And I just was really fascinated by that life. I remember vividly our preparation for our first communion. The nuns did not call it meditation, but we would go in the chapel; it would be very quiet; the lights were very dim; and we would just go inside our secret space and just be silent and, you know, hear the -- the voice of God. [laughter] So that attracted me throughout my life. And as an adult, I practiced yoga, meditation. I'm involved with the mindfulness movement in schools at work. But that aspect of the nuns' lives attracted me so much so that I wanted to become a nun. I did, like, my consecration in terms of -- we call it promesse mariale, which is, like, a promise you do to Mary [Virgin Mary] -- to, you know, live a life of piety and serenity and -- I traveled with the nuns on some missions. And I even convinced them to have me teach catechism before the set age that they had, you know, put out. I think you needed to be either 16 or 17, and I -- I had them agree to allow me to teach at 15. So I would give up one day a week -- my lunch -- to prepare the lessons with the nuns and the other older students, and then Sunday afternoons, I would go to the school and we would, you know, feed the girls in the community, as well as teach them about religion, you know. And it -- it was just great.

STRONG: So were there any particular nuns -- teachers -- that you remember -- characters that left an impression on you?

BENOIT: I think I remembered all of them, because they were so unique. I may have forgotten some of their names, but, you know, I remember the ones that were really strict -- that nobody wanted to, you know, pass in the hallway or in the yard -- and then those that were just -- Soeur Gerard, for example -- I'm sure she's passed away, because even then, I think -- we used to say she was 90 years old. [laughter] She -- if there were a popular character that I could compare her to -- and this is in, like, the best possible light -- it would be Yoda. She was so -- she was short, petite, older -- much older -- and

she just had the sweetest voice and the sweetest demeanor. She just -- we just loved her. She was our grandmother. And then we had the younger ones -- who tried to be tough with us, but, you know, we would persuade them to have some fun with us, as well, when we were older. You had Mere Anne Marie, Soeur Pascale -- just the whole -- I mean -- there were so many of them.

And our Spanish teacher -- I'm forgetting her name -- she was also a nun -- she was from Spain. We had so much fun with her, 'cause she was just clumsy, and we -- [laughter] oh, my God, I hope they forgive us [laughter] for the mischief that we did in class and in the yard. But that experience just -- every time I think about those girls -- 'cause I spent 10 years years with them. 'Cause it was a K-to-13 school. We had some who left in the middle of, you know, our academic tenure there, some who joined us later, but the bond is still just so -- so real and so strong between us.

I have some girlfriends, every time I go to Haiti every year, I see them. They make it a point to come and see me at my mother's house or wherever I am. Those who are here or in Canada, we keep in touch. I mean, thank God for -- I know there are some controversies now with some of the social media outlets [laughter], but, you know, it has helped us to reconnect. There are some that I haven't seen in 30 years, but we still keep in touch via social media.

STRONG: Tell me about -- or a little more about life with your grandmother and who she was.

BENOIT: [sigh] My grandmother was -- I always struggle to find the right word to describe her. I've never seen her have an argument or curse anybody out, but whatever her decision was, it happened. [laughter] Whatever she said was it. She -- what I remember the most about her was her generosity. Whomever came to our door -- whether you were very well-off and just needed somebody to talk to or -- she just knew everybody.

We had people from the government come to the house. She used to cook for the national soccer team -- both the men and the women. So we just had different types of people come over. Her cousin was the mayor of Port-au-Prince at one point. Her grandfather was the mayor of the town where she came from, Arcahaie in Haiti. She was just -- she was entrepreneurial. She had her business, which was sewing and making buttons. And she had land, also, so at least once a month we used to go to the countryside and just -- just collect, you know, all of our organic products -- go to the market. It was just -- I have to say, it was a beautiful. It was -- I had a beautiful and a blessed childhood.

And that's why I make sure every year I take my children to Haiti. It's not the same -- they have different experiences -- they stay in resorts and hotel and what have you -- but I want them to know the people and the land. I want them to know, you know, what has -- what continues to inspire me.

My family and I have been feeding -- and just bringing goods that we collect from donations. So we bring these every year to the people in Arcahaie. And this is, like, the 13th year that we've been doing it. So every summer, the entire family is mobilized. Those who can travel to Haiti, as well. And we just bring, you know, hygienic products, school supplies, clothes, shoes, toys -- whatever we get donated throughout the year. I organize something that's called the "Night of Giving" some time early spring, late winter, where we tell people about that project, which is called Project Ninie's Children. It's Ninie for my grandmother -- her name was Eugenie, and we called her Ninie. And then to also bring awareness to other organizations that I work with and have supported throughout the years. One of them is Little Sun People, which is a daycare in Bed-Stuy. And Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, which is an organization that I worked with as -- when I first came here to New York as a translator and as an ESL teacher. And, you know, other organizations that we've featured are Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project -- they bring in -- they bring resources and actually have case workers support families of Haitian students who come in and who don't know the

DOE's [New York City Department of Education] process in terms of finding an appropriate school for their children. And they just give them support around that.

We have Project St. Anne, which is one of my girlfriends that I went to school with in Haiti -- she does the same thing that we do with Project Ninie's Children, but hers is ongoing. So she has scholarships for children to go to school. I mean, just so many organizations. And that "Night of Giving" is an opportunity for us to highlight those organizations and have our friends and family support them in any way -- either by volunteering, supporting financially -- however they see fit. But all of that stemmed from me seeing the way that my grandmother was with everyone. And I mean everyone. So, you know, that's the legacy that she left me and my cousins and my brother, and that's why I think we're all part of, you know, this community service that we do as a family.

STRONG: Tell me about transitioning back to New York when you were 16. What initiated that? And did everybody come, or was it just you and your brother?

BENOIT: Everybody came -- everybody who was left. Because the older ones, as they finished school in Haiti, they would come here to university. We were all born here, but we were raised in Haiti. It was probably the most traumatic time of my life. [pause] See? [laughter] [pause] I felt like I was ripped from everything I had known thus far. Can we stop for a minute?

STRONG: Of course.

[INTERRUPTION]

STRONG: And I'm recording again.

BENOIT: Okay.

STRONG: So -- your transition to New York.

BENOIT: Yes. And again, I apologize for --

STRONG: Oh, please don't.

BENOIT: -- before. It wasn't something that we had planned. I know that I had three more years in Haiti to finish school. And then, you know, like my older cousins had done,



once you finish school in Haiti, you come to university in the States. So when the first coup d'état that was orchestrated against President [Jean-Bertrand] Aristide happened, the embassy kept on calling the house to basically tell us to leave the country. And I think at that point, my grandmother just got scared and she just told our parents, you know, "We just need to leave."

So we left. We came here. And, you know, I just refused to go to school, because I thought we would go back. Because we were so used -- from '86 to '91 -- to not going to school for, like, two, three months because there were boycotts, there were curfews, there were just -- there was so much unrest and -- so much unrest and so many -- just -- it was -- sometimes, it was just really chaos, but it would always come back to some form or level of normality or normalcy. So I kept on telling my mom, "No," you know, "don't register me yet. We're gonna go back." You know? We had all of our stuff -- our uniforms were made for the year; we had our books. I had spoken to my girlfriends. We were -- we were just ready. Because this was the year -- I turned 16 in Haiti, which was unusual, because I usually spend my birthday, [date redacted for privacy], I'm already in New York. But because we had so much time off because of the insecurity and what have you in Haiti, school ended later. So I had my 16th birthday in Haiti. My grandmother actually allowed me to have a DJ and a party. So I just knew that, you know, I had arrived. I was the oldest of the gang now, because my older cousins had already left. So I -- I was just ready.

And it was -- you know, it was probably the most traumatic experience of my life. I consider myself a native immigrant -- and I'll explain the term. Even though I was born here, I feel that everything that I had to learn about life -- about how people are, what you do -- I felt that I had gotten this in another culture, another country. And when I came here, I really felt -- and even though we used to come during the summer, it was the first time I had gone to a co-ed school, non-uniform school. It was the first time I was learning all in English. So it was an experience of an immigrant, to me. And, you

know, it's -- it just brings me back to our times right now, when, you know, I hear folks say certain things about immigrants -- and I tell them -- I said, "Even for me, if I had a choice, I probably would not be here." Like, a lot of folks who immigrate or who migrate -- you know, I would say more times than not, it's probably because they're forced to. So it -- it just -- you know, it's just been a -- a time -- it -- it was a time in my life that still, very much so, affects me. A lot of the things that I've decided to do around teaching English Language Learners, for example, came from everything that came out of that experience -- that traumatic experience of moving to New York.

But everybody came, including my grandmother. My grandmother eventually went back and would travel back and forth. I did a year and a half, maybe, of high school -- finally. So we came in the fall of '91; I think I started school maybe January or February, 'cause I just did not want to go to school. 'Cause I felt like once I registered, it would mean that I would continue, and I did not want to graduate with strangers -- I wanted to graduate with the folks that I spent 10 years with. So it was -- you know, it was tough.

So I went to high school here. I did the last semester of -- of my junior year, I think -- yes.

And then the -- and then my senior year. And I remember the teachers used to call me the college student who came back to high school. [laughter] And, you know, I -- I -- I don't know. To me, everything was just so easy, 'cause we -- I felt like I had learned all these things before or differently or what have you. And I -- I love school, so, you know, it was -- getting into that mode wasn't difficult. Getting into the culture of, for example, students disrespecting their teacher -- that was culture shock for me. I remember my first day in school, I cried in front of everybody in the classroom, because one of the students cursed out the math teacher. And I just froze in my chair and I -- I just, like, couldn't believe that that had just happened in front of my eyes. And all the math teacher said was, "Okay, well, thank you. That attitude won't take you anywhere" -- whatever he said. But it was just -- it's as if it were normal. And for me, it was -- I don't

know, sacrilege? It was -- anyway, I would have never, ever imagined saying or seeing any of my friends do that back in Haiti.

So that was the beginning of [laughter] my life here. And then college happened, which was great. It was a wonderful experience, because I got to meet a lot of immigrants also -- students who were from every part of the world who came to study. I became involved in almost every organization -- the Caribbean organization, black student organization, political science group, education group, a lot of honor societies. I actually started Miss Pace Caribbean [laughter] at the school -- I went to Pace University. It was just -- and I was, of course, part of the model United Nations team, which allowed us to travel all over, as well. So it was -- you know, I think college saved me in a lot of ways, because besides being involved in community activism with my mom, you know, I just didn't have anything else. So my mom took me everywhere, and that's how I got politically involved. By the time I was in college -- I think I had just started college -- I was working as an interpreter for the vice -- the -- prime minister of Haiti when he would come here. I worked through Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees as an interpreter for refugees who were telling their stories to just different outlets -- different groups of people. It was just -- it was just another life, but it was -- it was the right life for me. [laughter] It was community service, just -- yeah. Everything that laid the foundation for what I do now as a public educator.

STRONG: So I'm curious to learn more about your mother and how she got involved in this community activism and got you involved.

BENOIT: [sigh] Wow. [laughter] I came here -- I found my mom just being a community leader. Even when I was in Haiti, she would tell me about the boycotts that she would organize. At the time, there were a lot of merchants who were mistreating Haitians -- Haitian clients and what have you, and they would stage month-long, 24-hour boycotts in front of businesses. And she was just one of the community leaders with my aunts and uncles. I think at some point, like, the chief of police had their personal numbers, you know? Anything that was happening in the community, like, my family was the

first to know. I became involved, you know, through my mom, in the Haitian community's activism. And there were, like, a lot of things that were -- that happened that actually -- not solidified, but just brought my family together. Around 1990, the FDA [United States Food and Drug Administration] had basically announced that Haitians were the ones who were spreading AIDS.

So my family and many, many other organizations and community leaders got together.

And when I say my family and friends, we had started Haitian Enforcement Against Racism here, which is an organization that's looking to resurface again, given all of the anti-immigrant sentiments and policies out there. And we organized the April 20th, 1990 march over the Brooklyn Bridge that brought over 200,000 -- some people say 300,000 -- people out to protest against the FDA. And then from then on, it was protesting against the [Abner] Louima case. It was the -- like, all of the other police brutality cases. It was -- I mean, you name it, we were -- we were involved in it. So I found my mom [laughter] in this -- in this milieu, I would say. And again, because I didn't really have friends here and because she just took me to every meeting and every protest, that's actually how I chose to go to Pace University. Because we walked across the Brooklyn Bridge so many times, and Pace was, like, right there. You know, like, I would read it all the time and I'm like, "Okay, that's where I'm going to go to school." So it was -- yeah. Like I said, everything is just so intertwined in my life. Yeah.

STRONG: Do we need to take a quick break so you can feed the meter?

BENOIT: Yes.

STRONG: All right. Let's do that and get right back to it.

BENOIT: Okay. Thanks.

[INTERRUPTION]

STRONG: So when we paused, we were talking about your mother getting you into activism, which built your community. The revelation of Pace --

BENOIT: Yes. [laughter]

STRONG: -- coming over the bridge. I'm curious -- your brother's older than you, right? So how did --

BENOIT: Yes.

STRONG: Was it just you and your mother living together at that time? Or -- had he gone on to school?

BENOIT: It was. I think by that time he was out of the house. Yeah. 'Cause he is a few years older than I am. So he was out of the house. And the funny thing is, back then, he used to bother me -- bother me about just -- he used to say, "Oh, you're acting like you're Haitian, you're Haitian." And I'm like, "Yeah, I'm Haitian American." 'Cause he was really into the American culture. You know, he has the sleeves -- you know, the tattoos all over and what have you. And now, [laughter] I don't think he listens to anything but Haitian music, eats anything but Haitian food. He's just -- I don't know. And I bother him about that a lot. [laughter] And as I said, he's one of our most active supporters -- or helpers -- organizers -- with the Project Ninie's Children. So [laughter] -- laughs best who laughs last, right? [laughter]

Yeah. My mom, you know -- just like my grandmother, I -- I saw in her, like, a very independent and strong-willed person. My grandmother was more -- was less forceful -- you know, I would say, meeker. [laughter] My mom -- like, she lets you know what she thinks. And, you know, she's definitely that warrior, you know, woman, and if there's anything about past lives, she's probably one of those Amazonians. [laughter] 'Cause even now, as a grandmother, you know, she's really feisty. And I feel like, fortunately or unfortunately, living in Haiti, you have to be that way, 'cause things are not, you know, easy. But I truly admire her for choosing to live there again with my stepdad -- one, because I feel that she has not given up on the country, but two, it gives me an opportunity to share that part of our culture with my children.

STRONG: So I guess moving ahead a little bit in your story, tell me about your efforts to get involved in the Catholic faith when you came to New York and how that was different, and then how you transitioned from there.

BENOIT: So when I came here, you know, I was Catholic, wanted to be the best Catholic person possible. I joined bible studies. I was in the choir. We had charismatic prayers. I mean, you name it, I was there, my family was there. But the more -- the more I would learn about the policies and the teachings of Catholicism, the more I just became disillusioned and felt that, you know, maybe it wasn't the faith for me. So I would say things like, you know, "I'm Catholic, but I" -- and this was -- will probably be [laughter] -- I don't know -- sacrilege to Catholics, but I would say, "I'm Catholic, but I don't believe that the pope is the representative of God on earth." I would say, "Yes, I'm Catholic, but I don't believe that I need to go tell my sins to somebody to feel -- to repent." So it was just -- when -- when that started to happen, I was just like, "All right. Maybe I just need to look at other options." And my other options were still within Christianity, not anything else. So I had friends who were, you know, of different denominations -- Christian denominations. They would invite me to their churches. And I just -- it -- it just never worked for me. I never felt the connection.

The -- and so I just took it upon myself to just research, you know, what -- what was out there. And in all honesty, Buddhism -- I mean, I -- I don't -- I didn't know as much about it then as I know now, but the little bit that I knew about it was the most appealing faith to me. You know, because it allowed you to be quiet, practice mindfulness. It just -- the lifestyle attracted me. But the problem was, I just didn't know any Buddhists, and I thought it would be very difficult to be a Buddhist in -- in a Haitian family in New York City.

So, you know, I just continued to pray about it. 'Cause by that time, I had just started teaching. I had finished my first master's from NYU [New York University]. And something happened there -- while I was at NYU. I went for a degree in teaching in secondary grades, and I learned about the Moors and their contributions. And I'm sure I had [laughter] studied about, you know, that group of people, but it was -- for the first time, it dawned on me that they were Muslim. And -- and through that, I just started to

read about Islam. And the more I read about it, the more I was attracted to it -- the more I wanted to read. And at the same time, I had a friend who was sending me stuff -- you know, videos and audios and books -- from the Nation of Islam. So for whatever reason, I -- I didn't choose, you know, the route of the Nation of Islam, but that of becoming a Sunni Muslim, based on the learnings and the readings that I did and -- you know, around Islam.

When I -- I didn't tell my family until I -- it happened. So I would say it was maybe a year-and-a-half to two-year transformation. They did notice that I was dressing more modestly. I was wearing a lot of hats or headbands -- you know, headwraps. You know, at that time also, I had -- and maybe two years prior, I had stopped eating meat. So they just thought I was going through some kind of [laughter] phase or crisis. So they were letting me be, because they felt that, you know, I would snap out of it. But in any case, I'm still a vegetarian -- over 20-plus years.

And in December of 1999, it was just clear to me that I needed to take my shahada. And it -- it happened then, and I felt that it happened then for a reason. It happened during Ramadan. And it was -- it was magical to me. If I were to represent it in the, like, movie-like, it would be like that -- that moment when the prince and the princess, you know, meet and you see everything is just, like, shiny and everybody's just, like, so teary-eyed. I just felt that taking shahada at Ramadan was, like, the biggest blessing.

When I actually walked into the masjid, they thought that I was Muslim. And when I said I wanted to take shahada, they looked at me, you know, perplexed. And I said, "Yeah. I'm not Muslim yet, but" -- because my hair was already covered; I had long -- a long skirt, you know, long-sleeved shirt. And I took shahada then. The -- the -- the thing that I remembered about that period was just the fact that, you know, everything happened in community, and I just thought that that's the way it was. But it wasn't. You know,

after Ramadan, everybody had their lives to live. And I did have -- I found great support in the imam of the mosque -- masjid -- and in a lot of the sisters at the time.

And it was just -- I'll just say this: even though my grandmother -- my paternal grandmother, 'cause my maternal grandmother had passed away by then -- was a reverend in the Church of God and was telling me almost on a daily basis that I was ensuring that my soul would burn in hell -- [laughter] -- I just -- every cell in my body believed that being a Muslim was the thing for me.

So -- so it -- you know, and I have to say, even with 9/11, that happened, you know, a few years later, and having people look at me a certain way -- you know, being Muslim -- I never regretted taking my shahada. I think Islam saved me, in a way, in that I -- I had my own apartment -- I was maybe 22nd, 23 when I had my own apartment, my own car; I had started teaching; I had my own money; I could go and come as I pleased; I was traveling; and I just felt -- one day, I looked in the mirror and I said, "Oh my God." Like, "I can fall into so many bad things." Like, I just -- I felt like I needed structure in my life. I felt like I needed guidance. And I -- I just needed something. And, you know -- and Islam was what was given to me. And it really -- it helped me to focus.

I went to school, got a second master's, different certificates, finished my doctorate. I mean, I just -- I really feel that it gave me the focus that I needed. Because there's just so much that was presented to me. I was, you know, dining with government leaders and, you know, going out clubbing with people who actually used drugs, you know? I knew people who came out of jail. Like, it was just -- I just felt like I needed [laughter] -- I needed something. I needed God, [laughter] you know? And that's how I became a Muslim.

STRONG: You said something lovely when we were talking over the phone about, you know, God reaching you through history --

BENOIT: Yes.



STRONG: -- and how that was so uniquely you.

BENOIT: Yes.

STRONG: Can you elaborate on that?

BENOIT: Absolutely. So I love to read about historical events -- you know, just history in general. And I've had Muslims in the past, you know, try to convert me or what have you before I took shahada myself. And I always have the same reaction: "Why do you want me to join this religion of terrorists?" Because the first World Trade Center attempt had already happened, and I would always say, "Why do you want me to come and join this religion where women are suppressed" -- and what have you -- "or oppressed?" So those were the images that I had. But through that first master's and reading about the history of -- of, you know, not just the Middle East, but Europe and that big part of Europe, and the Renaissance and how that came about, and the contributions of Muslim scholars, and then going into Islam itself and reading about what it was saying about women -- and not the -- the interpretations that folks want to, you know, put about -- you know, over 1,400 years ago, women were -- they were property owners. They were business owners. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, married a widow who had her own wealth. You know, where in the West, if you were, for example, divorced -- and that wasn't, like, a popular practice -- like, you lost everything. Everything belonged to your husband, right? So in reading all of these things through history -- so, to me, it wasn't as if someone was trying to persuade me. I just became attracted to it, and I just wanted to know more about that religion and that way of life.

STRONG: So what drew you to Sunni specifically, or the community that you eventually found in Brooklyn?

BENOIT: Again, [laughter] I would drive by there a lot. And one of my friends, actually, told me about the imam at the mosque. And he said, "Oh, you know there's that imam." Like, whenever you'd speak about Islam in Brooklyn -- "I think his mosque is right there." And I realize -- I would pass there all the time, because I -- at the time, I had started to teach in Bushwick, so I had to cross Brooklyn -- 'cause I was in South Brooklyn, to go to North Brooklyn. You know, sometimes I would go that route. And it

just happened that I -- I went to -- to that community. I didn't know much about the differences between Sunni and Shia and even the other subgroups -- like, for example, with the African cultures and what have you. I just went to that community.

STRONG: It was just there. It presented itself.

BENOIT: It was there. [laughter] And it was great, because like I said, from the imam to the sisters, like, everybody was just so welcoming. I worked -- because I was a teacher and I had summers off, I would volunteer at the office and, you know, support the imam there and just meet so many different people. I would travel to conferences. And because, again, I was working in the office, I knew about a lot of Muslim events happening in the Tri-State Area. So it was just -- it was just perfect.

[laughter] When I -- as I continued to travel, I made a conscious decision to go to countries that had either Islam as their -- the major religion, or a significant community of Muslims, just so that I could see how Muslims were living. I went to Trinidad. I ended up going to Senegal, to Gambia, Morocco. And that also actually evolved my understanding of the religion, and I started to understand that the -- the approach that I followed was one school of thought, and that there were just -- not simply different interpretations, but different ways of expressing what Islam meant to one.

And at that time, I was married. And I was thinking about, you know, whether I should continue to cover my hair -- again, because I just saw so many different types of Muslims. And at that time, you know, it was just -- I would say, throughout my years as a Muslim, a lot of -- a lot of what I understood evolved. Like, a lot of what I know and hold dear are the same -- you know, they are the Islamic principles or what have you, but a lot of the way that I am -- so, for example, I stopped wearing the head cover maybe -- I don't know, four years ago. Yeah. As recently as that. I do cover when I go to the mosque -- and I go as frequently as I can. During the summer, I try to take Fridays off so that I can go to salat al-jumma [Friday prayer]. But yeah, there are a lot of

things that I used to do that I don't do, and a lot of things that I didn't do that I do now -  
- as a Muslim.

STRONG: So just -- just following this specific example that you've brought up -- what did it mean to you to cover your hair when you first began? And why was it important to you to make that change?

BENOIT: Covering my hair was just what Muslim women did. And again, you know, I came to Islam not through a particular person's teachings; it was just my own research and what have you. It does say in the Qur'an to pull your veil over your bosom, but you can interpret that [laughter] a gazillion different ways. And then I met really fervent Muslim women who weren't covered.

So -- and it -- I have to say, it was a transition. I probably thought about it at least three years before it happened. As I, you know, was getting older and what have you -- and practicing and seeing how different communities were practicing -- I remember, I went to Senegal. I stayed with a family -- Muslim, pray five times a day -- everybody. You know, they don't drink, they don't smoke, they don't eat pork -- you know, like, all these things. Some of the older siblings had gone to Hajj many times. But they went out, you know, at night to party to a lounge or what have you. And I remembered -- I had my head covering [laughter] at that time. And when I said, "Oh, I'd like to experience that with you." And they looked at me like I had 10 heads. They were like, "No. We won't take you out like this."

So for me, you know, it just took me aback. It made me think about, well, you know, if this -- if this practice of mine gives that -- gives people that reaction, you know, like, what else is it doing? So I don't want to say that I took the hijab off because of other people, but at one point, I was just -- I was telling folks, for example -- if I would go out with some of my colleagues on Fridays -- like, we would go to dinner and then, you know, some of them would drink. And folks would say, "Oh," you know, "you always cover your head." And I would say, "Yeah. I'm Muslim." "Oh, you're Muslim?" Like, and you're here? As if

I'm -- I'm -- you know, as a Muslim, I'm not supposed to have fun with my friends and my colleagues. And it just -- I just felt like I had to explain myself.

Wearing the hijab told people that I was other. And not wearing it, I don't feel less of a Muslim, but I feel that being a Muslim is my -- it's my business. And the people who know me -- like, all of my colleagues at work, all of my family, all of my friends, they know I'm Muslim. You know, so it's -- it's not about shame at all. It's just a decision that I made. And I have to say, I -- I just -- there's no guilt, no shame, no -- I don't feel that. You know, and at -- at some point, I felt it. So here I am, a Muslim who doesn't cover unless she goes to the mosque.

STRONG: I want to ask you about another specific example that we talked about over the phone.

BENOIT: Yes.

STRONG: And I know you don't want to share the name of the imam --

BENOIT: Yes.

STRONG: -- or the community you were a part of, but can you tell me a little bit about the unique role your religious community played in how you chose to form your own family as an adult?

BENOIT: Yes. So after my first marriage -- which didn't work out, of course -- [laughter] obviously -- and I was married to a Muslim -- it was, you know -- it just was not a -- a great experience overall. Like, outside, we looked like a young Muslim couple, happy, but in the home, it was just -- it was really a struggle. For -- for many different reasons. And there was some abuse, as well. But when that relationship ended -- you know, the community wanted -- you know, as any other community, wanted to see me married again -- 'cause, you know [laughter] -- you can't be a single Muslim woman walking around -- whatever. I -- I don't know what the reasons were. And I just felt pressured to find someone to marry. And to them, I just felt like it didn't matter whether the person was old enough to be my grandfather or not -- you know, to them, it was just, like -- it had -- marry a good Muslim brother. And that was a problem for me, because I had

married a quote-unquote “good Muslim brother,” and, you know, that didn’t work out too well for me.

But in any case, you know, I reconnected with some old friends I met -- you know, J.P., who I have my family with now. And Jean-Price is not Muslim. We have two beautiful children. But the community just wasn’t going for that. And I remember even with him, he took a taxi a few years ago, and the taxi driver was a Muslim man. And, you know, he was talking to J.P. about, you know, just what was going on in the country. And for whatever reason, J.P. said, “Oh,” you know, “and Jo Ann is a Muslim.” And that man -- he told me -- turned around as if, you know, like, hell had opened up, and he just started to yell and scream and curse at J.P. for being a non-Muslim man with a Muslim woman.

So it -- it’s so interesting, because I say this and it just -- it just tells me how far we’ve come, but how much further we need to go. And again, I -- I know that there are a lot of Muslim folks -- Muslim brothers and sisters who will, you know, not agree with what I’m saying, and -- and -- even just being with a non-Muslim man, but -- I’m happy, you know? We’re happy. We have beautiful children. I fast. I pray. We have prayers in Arabic all over the house. I don’t have an issue with it. He doesn’t have an issue with it. When the children -- when my son is out of school and we go to the mosque, you know, I take him. He knows about salat; he knows about Islam. I -- so I don’t know -- I mean, I -- I -- I don’t know what to tell people who don’t think that this is right. ‘Cause it’s right for me and my family.

STRONG: Tell me about meeting J.P. and starting that relationship.

BENOIT: [laughter] That’s -- that was tricky -- or awkward or what have you. He actually met me when I used to cover. And as a matter of fact, the other day, I asked him if he -- if that attracted him to me, because I was different -- I looked different, I dressed differently. And he was like, “Oh, no” -- just nonchalantly -- “it just didn’t matter.” [laughter] But I think it did. [laughter]

STRONG: [laughter]

BENOIT: But we met through mutual friends. And at first it wasn't even -- it was not love at first sight. [laughter] But, you know, shortly after, we just -- we just connected. And I think at first, we didn't see each other as that, because he had gone through his divorce and separation and I had gone through mine. And I think they happened around the same time. But, you know, he's seen me through my, I guess, evolution or transformation. [laughter]

And like I said, Jean-Price is -- he's just everything and more that I imagined in a partner -- in his level of clarity with who he is. And therefore whether I'm hot or cold, up and down, like, that does not phase him. You know, everything is -- you know, "It's your decision, Jo Ann." And I'm really grateful. You know, I thank God for -- for bringing that person into my life. Because I think if that weren't the case, whether I was with a Muslim or a non-Muslim, it would have probably shaken my faith. Because I was at a place -- when the community pushed me to the side at first -- where I -- I was really thinking about whether or not Islam was for me. But, you know, I -- I kept with my prayers. And, you know, I just asked God -- I said, you know, if I came to this to be part of a community, then let me find another community, you know, that will embrace me. If I'm -- if I was brought to this for my own development, just let me stick with it, you know? Just guide me, you know? And I feel like I've gotten the guidance.

I am part of another community in Brooklyn. There's none of the -- of the -- again, like I said earlier, I don't feel guilty for anything. [laughter] I don't feel guilty about any of my decisions. I think in the end, it will be, you know, between me and my God, you know? Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about your children and bringing them to your new community and, you know, how you involve this in your family and involve your family in this.

BENOIT: So my son, Johnatan, he's seven and a half, and my daughter Jian is one and a half. They -- I don't know, they're just going with the flow, I guess. It's interesting,

because I pray with them in -- in Arabic -- and sometimes in English, but -- parts of the Qur'an. And -- you know, I'm not sure that they're really clear about it. I know that Johnatan, for example, thinks that the imam speaks too long -- like, [laughter] at jummah service. And then if we go, for example, to a wedding, you know, he thinks that the priest talks too long. Like, anything, I think, for a -- a little boy that doesn't allow him to play with his toys or his gadgets is just boring. But they do understand that, you know, I'm Muslim. They understand the difference between a masjid and a church -- well, at least Johnatan; the baby is still a baby.

And I -- I -- I'm hoping that when they are old enough, that they make decisions that will help them grow, that will help them live to their fullest potential, and that will make them happy and make them live a life of service. So whatever that is, I'm hoping that I am open enough to accept it and support it. I certainly -- you know, I would love for them to be Muslim or to grow up Muslim and live like Muslims. But I will definitely teach them about Islam -- and tell them about where I came from, as well. I mean, they know, 'cause every time we have a wedding or a baptism or something, they're -- they're in a church, as well. So they understand that.

Interestingly enough, I've brought my children to the masjid, and to be baptized. [laughter] It's funny, but it may not be funny for some people. And I just -- I just want them to -- to be open and accepting. So if -- I definitely told my family that we're not going to Bible study, 'cause I'm not going to a church every Sunday to do first communion and what have you. If they are old enough and that's the route they want to take, they can do that. You know, and then we'll -- we'll just take it from there. Thus far, we have not had any -- any clashes around our faiths in the house -- practices or -- or any of that.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about your new community in - your new religious community in Brooklyn. How is it different from the old one? What kinds of support or challenge do you get?

BENOIT: I am certainly not as active in the community as I was with my first community.

But it is a community where, you know, you'll have -- and you'll see -- many more sisters who do not cover on a daily basis -- on a regular basis. It's a community that, I feel, is more diverse -- not just in ethnic groups, but in -- just cultural representations of Islam. [laughter] And it's -- you know, I -- I'm just blessed [laughter] to have found it, and I'm blessed that it's not too far from our home. You know, and we support it, you know, as best as -- as we can. Yeah.

STRONG: What else did I want to ask you about this? You told me that you take summers off sometimes to take your kids on Fridays to class?

BENOIT: Yes, to --

STRONG: And how is their education growing, and how are you involving them that way?

BENOIT: So I take vacation during the summer. When I was a teacher, I used to be off for two months. I take my children to Haiti every year. And that's, you know, to help them to just know, you know, that side of their ancestry, of their culture. And when we're here, I take Fridays off to allow me to go to the masjid, because I work Monday through Fridays. Sometimes a holiday might fall on a Friday. I do observe the two major Islamic holidays, the Eid al-Adha and the Eid al-Fitr. But, you know, again, because we're in a christian society -- and I'm using the word christian with the lower "c" [laughter] -- you know, it's -- it's not -- it doesn't allow me to be -- to go to the mosque as -- as regularly as I would want to. Yeah.

STRONG: What is your husband's heritage? Do you -- do you share that as well, or is it different?

BENOIT: Yeah. J.P. is Haitian.

STRONG: Okay.

BENOIT: Yes. My wonderful partner in life. [laughter] And -- yeah. He was raised Catholic. He was raised in Haiti, as well; came here, I think, in his late teens, as well. He's -- yeah, he's Haitian. He's -- he's more Haitian than I am, if -- if that's believable. [laughter] But he -- again, he's just a partner who does not put constraints in our relationships. There are no boundaries or limits. I don't have to agree to -- to do XYZ, and I don't put that on



him, either. So if he does take his shahada one day, I would be very happy, but if that doesn't happen, either, he's a good man, you know? He -- he helps others. He is responsible. Like, I mean, I don't believe that you have to be of a certain religion to -- to be good -- or, you know, to see heaven when you leave this earth.

STRONG: Does your current community believe that, or was it just your -- your former one -- that it mattered whether or not you were married to a Muslim man?

BENOIT: I don't know. I -- [sigh] -- my current community does not, I guess, ask me about it, so I wouldn't -- I wouldn't be able to say whether or not they feel differently. It's just not something that we talk about. I go to the mosque; they see me with the two children all the time. At Ramadan, we go and break fast with the family, and it's just the three of us. Yeah. [laughter]

STRONG: I'd like to ask, then, for a little more details about -- and again, if you don't want to talk about this, that's fine, but -- your expectations of marriage when you first joined your initial community in Brooklyn. Tell me what it means to have the community involved, what the process is like of being intended to somebody -- whatever you're willing to share.

BENOIT: Because I was, I guess, single, no children, [laughter] I was really active in the first community, so they were a bigger part of my life. So because they had that -- that access, I would say, to me, they were very much interested in finding me a husband. And I was actually intended maybe two times before I married my last husband. But they were -- and I'm not saying that they singled me out. That's just the way the community was, you know? They just wanted to see people happy. And for a lot of people, you have to be married to be happy -- or in order to be a full Muslim or to live the teachings of Islam fully, you have to be, like, in a family situation. With this new community, again, because they don't have that access to my private life that my first community did, there is no -- there's no friction. There's no -- yeah. I -- I haven't had to explain myself to anyone. I'll just say that.

STRONG: Okay.

BENOIT: Whereas before, I've had. Like, I've felt like I've had. Folks would just feel like they could come up to me and just tell me that I was sinning and I would burn, you know, in hell [laughter] because I am -- you know, I'm choosing a path that is not the taught path or the expected path as a Muslim woman.

STRONG: Can you explain, just for the record, what it means to be intended and -- and how that works?

BENOIT: Sure. So there's no dating in Islam. So when you're intended, the brother makes his intentions known to your wakil. Usually, your wakil is your father, but because I'm the only Muslim in my family -- [laughter] even now -- you know, the imam was my wakil. So -- and when you would see or meet your prospective spouse, there was someone there with you -- usually your wakil or another designated person. So you were chaperoned -- you're chaperoned until, you know, you get married.

And that period of time -- when you're intended -- is to, one, you know, have the two parties get an opportunity to learn a little bit about each other -- and not a lot [laughter] -- but also, it allows for the -- the negotiations around your dowry. So -- that's one thing, though, I am missing out on [laughter] being with a non-Muslim. But they negotiate your dowry. And it's whatever the woman and her family decide. And then if the brother is able to afford it -- provide it or what have you, then the marriage takes place. I've known folks who were intended for a couple of weeks and then got married. A couple of months. It was certainly not what we see in our society -- you know, folks being together years sometimes. [laughter] So it's -- it is different. There are -- there's a different set of expectations and a different set of practices.

STRONG: So -- do you have to feed the meter or are you -- are you good for a few more minutes?

BENOIT: I'm okay, yeah.

STRONG: What I would ask you, then, is, how did your personal expectations change? What did you learn from your first marriage?

BENOIT: Not to settle. Definitely not to settle. Folks may find this, like, very interesting to understand, but when I was going to marry my last husband, he -- like, something told me that he wasn't the one. But I just had felt -- by that time, I was a Muslim for about four years, and the pressure was on [laughter] for me to be married. You know, and it was someone that I liked. You know, I -- I liked his family. You know, I -- I went for it. But it -- you know, we had no business being married.

The difference here -- I feel that -- you know, I had my son, like, in my mid-thirties, met J.P. in my mid-thirties. I was not only more mature, but I had decided that I would do things for me and not for the community that I belonged in -- not even for my family. Because when I did that, you know, I ended up being the person who was hurt. So -- and that's how I'm here. I -- I'm -- again, I'm happy. I feel very blessed -- in my professional life, in my personal life. You know, and I -- I don't know, I feel like if I had made the wrong decisions -- or decisions for the wrong reasons, I probably wouldn't have been able to say this right now.

STRONG: So I do want to ask a little bit about your professional life, since you mentioned it, and, you know, what drew you to be a teacher and your philosophy of lifelong learning as you told me about. Just tell me anything you'd like to share.

BENOIT: Absolutely. I believe that folks need to have the mindset of being a lifelong learner or lifelong learners. There's so much to learn in life -- from people, from books, from -- from traveling, you know, from the arts. For someone not to be open to different perspectives, I just -- that's, like, a concept that I can't grasp. I have always been attracted to teaching and education, but again, my family wanted me to be a lawyer, so I went to school to become a lawyer. While I was at Pace University, I did an internship in a law firm and realized that that was not [laughter] the route for me. Went back to school that next semester, and I basically told my advisor I need another minor -- something to fall back on. And education was it, because I had already started teaching English as a second language to refugees at a community organization. So, you know,

from teaching catechism when I was 15 to teaching ESL to refugees when I was 17, it was just -- it was there.

So I said, I might as well learn the craft -- the profession. And I went to my advisor; we changed my minor. As soon as that happened, the Department of Education sent my name to this national competition or -- it was the Rockefeller Brothers Fund fellowship for urban education, and I was chosen as a fellow. And with the stipends that they offered and all of the resources that they offered, my obligation was to go into a hard-to-staff school or community. And that's how I ended up starting -- this year is 20 years that I'm with the New York City Department of Education. I started in 1998. And I went to, first, East New York, and then I taught in Bushwick. And then, you know, I continued to go to school. Like I mentioned to you, I've calculated the years that I've gone to school. [laughter] It's 35 years of schooling -- of me being a student -- a learner.

And I went for my second master's, got it in administration and supervision, became an administrator. I worked throughout the city as an instructional support specialist and achievement coach, deputy network leader, director for English Language Learners -- I mean, you name it. It has really literally taken me all over the five boroughs. And now I work at the central office as a senior director. And I support the directors who are at the field support centers working with the schools.

STRONG: Talk to me a little bit about the difference between being in the classroom and then moving to administration.

BENOIT: I -- I wanted to be a school-based administrator. I was in the classroom, at that time, I don't remember for how long, but I had also taught in community organizations prior to that. And we had not had an assistant principal for my department. So I said, great, you know, I'll be that person because I was doing a lot of the coordination for the department. And I did my internship at the school. You know, everybody knew that that was my intention. But then the principal decided to go with someone else. And I felt so betrayed. [laughter]

I felt like there was nothing for me to do but to leave the school. And I went and became an instructional support specialist, which meant that I worked with a group of schools and I supported those teachers -- especially teachers of English language learners. In the classroom, I was a history teacher. I also taught in the humanities program, so I taught ELA [English Language Arts] as well.

At some point, I taught dance. It was -- it was great. My students -- I was a few years older than my students, 'cause I started teaching right after college. They made me -- they would check me -- [laughter] you know, when they -- they needed to. They kept it very real with me. And I understood that, for a lot of them, that this was their opportunity to do something else or something better with their lives. So I was really invested in my students.

I became the coordinator of student affairs and took care of all of the events -- graduation, all of those activities in the -- the school. I was the testing coordinator. Like, anything that I could do -- I taught Regents prep classes on Saturdays. I -- I just gave my all to those students. And I feel that when I came out of the classroom -- to this day, I miss it, but I feel that I am able to impact the system in a larger way. So instead of my classroom or my department -- you know, just many more classrooms and many more schools.

I have been able to go into classrooms now through the directors that I support. But, you know, in my work, we've been able to put some initiatives out and support different initiatives that I feel that my contribution is -- is still what I first intended to happen when I first became a teacher. It was to, you know, inspire and to help and to provide access and opportunities to students in -- in this city.

STRONG: I know you have to feed the meter. I have more questions if you have a few more minutes when you come back.

BENOIT: Yes.

STRONG: Would that be all right?

BENOIT: Yes. Yes.

STRONG: All right. And then I promise to get you out of here on time.

BENOIT: Okay.

[INTERRUPTION]

STRONG: So when we paused, you were telling me about your role as an administrator and the impact you're able to have.

BENOIT: Yes.

STRONG: So I wanted to ask you, what opportunities for change do you see? What do you see as, like, your personal mission? And how do you want to improve education in this city?

BENOIT: So my passion is educating English language learners -- one, because I am an English language learner. English is my third language. I feel that I can relate to a lot of their experiences as new immigrants. And just changing the mindset of folks -- whether it's the parents, their teachers, the administrators in their schools, and anyone else who works with English language learners -- for me, it's to have these adults understand that coming with a language other than English is an asset. It's a -- it is something to build on.

Our students don't come, you know, as a tabula rasa -- I don't know how to say it in -- blank slate, there we go. We don't have to dump in information in them as if they don't know anything or they come with nothing. I think when we take the time to understand them and know them and understand the practices that help students -- adults -- whomever -- acquire language and develop language, then I think we will be all the better for it.

I am hoping -- and that's why my son is in a dual language program in Brooklyn -- that he and my daughter become not just bilingual but multilingual, like myself. My cousins in other parts of the world -- whether it's Canada or Europe -- the folks that I've met in Africa and Asia -- they speak more than one language. Like, what is -- what's wrong

with us? Like, why can't we do that? You know, more and more research is showing that being bilingual is better, you know, for our cognitive abilities.

So that, I feel, is my mission -- like, what I want to help promote. And if ever anybody talks about Dr. Jo Ann Benoit's legacy in the New York City Department of Education, is to - - you know, is -- I've worked to provide access and opportunities and, you know, help change the mindset around teaching and learning for English language learners.

STRONG: Total tangent from that --

BENOIT: [laughter]

STRONG: -- but I have to get the story of your portrait.

BENOIT: Oh! [laughter]

STRONG: Because you are the cover girl for this project -- just by chances of fate, it sounds like, that that photograph found its way to us and is now on all of our materials.

BENOIT: [laughter]

STRONG: So tell me the story of -- of having your portrait taken by Chester [Higgins, Jr.].

BENOIT: Oh my God. That's a funny, funny story. I was in Brooklyn crossing the street with my jogging suit on and my head covered, and this gentleman comes to me and basically says, "How would you like to be photographed for an article?" So my first reaction is, Who is that -- and I'm not going to say the word that I was thinking -- and I said -- to myself -- I was with my girlfriend -- and I actually pointed to him and I, you know, said, "This is probably like a crazy guy." And he insisted. And I said -- and being the nice person that I am, I didn't just say, "Oh, leave me alone! Go get a life!" I was just like, "I'm not interested. Thank you, sir."

STRONG: [laughter]

BENOIT: And then he gave me his card. Now, I recognized the name. When I saw Chester Higgins, then I said, "Oh no -- maybe he stole the card from Chester Higgins."

STRONG: [laughter]

BENOIT: 'Cause I didn't know what Chester Higgins looked like. So, long story short, he said, you know, "I'm doing this article for *Essence* magazine" -- this was about 11 years

ago -- “and I would like to photograph you.” He said, “I’ve been” -- and it was around the masjid. He said, “I’ve been walking around here trying to find someone. Nobody wants to talk to me” -- or he said something to that effect. And I said, “All right. I’ll just have to get back to you.”

And I had no -- no intentions of getting back to him. But I thought about it and I said, Oh, you know, let me just give him a call. And he actually said, you know, “I’ll come wherever. You just tell me when.” I called one of my girlfriends. I said, you know, “You need to come to the house with me when that’s happening.” We went up to my roof garden, and that’s where he took the picture. So it -- it’s really interesting, because I saw that picture on social media for something else at all with a poem next to it, and I said, “Oh my God” -- and people would send it to me. So a lot of folks, like, would see it before I would. So I think -- I don’t know. I feel really honored -- [laughter] you can’t even imagine -- that it is the picture that’s being used for this project. When you called me the first time, I said, “Oh, it can’t be one of these folks again.” [laughter] But then when you left the detailed message about who you were and what have you, I was just, like, “Oh no!” First thing I did -- Google.

STRONG: [laughter]

BENOIT: And I saw the picture. And, you know, I went -- told J.P. He was like, “Oh no!” And I said, “Yeah, we have to find out who” -- you know, “who they are and what the project is about.” So here I am, you know? A picture that was taken 11 years ago.

STRONG: Yeah. What a -- tell me about that time in your life a little bit. I mean, we’ve already heard your whole biography, but what is this a snapshot of? What was -- what was going through your life at that time?

BENOIT: I -- I was in education. I -- I don’t know. I -- it was -- I was married at the time, so it was -- you know, it was --

STRONG: First marriage? Second marriage?

BENOIT: First.

STRONG: Oh, that’s right. Yeah.



BENOIT: Yes. I was married 11 years ago. I mean, it was -- [laughter] I don't know what to say. It was just one of those very weird, like, coincidences, I guess -- you know, that I would bump into him.

STRONG: And then that you would decide to call him back.

BENOIT: Yeah. [laughter]

STRONG: What was the experience like of getting your portrait taken? Was it --

BENOIT: I don't -- I mean, it was a good experience. You know, he took a lot of shots. But for me, the -- like, what felt surreal was actually seeing it in the magazine. And that picture was actually the cover picture for the story. So, again, people saw the magazine before, you know, like, I knew it was out, and they would call me -- "Jo Ann, you know, are you in a magazine? Someone looks like you." Because it's a profile picture, so some people weren't too sure. And I would be like, "Yeah, it's me!" You know. I just felt like a celebrity -- I'll say that.

STRONG: [laughter]

BENOIT: For a little while.

STRONG: Yeah. It's also such a unique picture, because you're -- you're actively praying when he's taking the portrait. So how did the two of you decide to take that image?

BENOIT: He just -- he -- he would tell me, you know -- you know, pose this way or turn that way or do this. And then he'd say, "So when you're making supplication, how do you -- what do you do? What does it look like?" And then that's when I put my hands up. And that's how -- there were many, many pictures, but he chose that one, and I -- I thought it was just a great one.

STRONG: It's a beautiful picture. Thank you for it.

BENOIT: [laughter] Thank you. [laughter]

STRONG: But I had to get that story before we ran out of time.

BENOIT: Absolutely.

STRONG: You know, moving on a little bit, we talked a little bit about Brooklyn, but I would love to hear your thoughts just on this borough -- on how it has changed since the '70s, when you first had a relationship with it, and what your relationship with it is now.

BENOIT: Brooklyn has changed. My mom lived around Coney Island Avenue for a long time. First, we were in Corona, Queens. We had to leave Queens. Sorry, Queens. [laughter] We came to Brooklyn. So my mom was in Brooklyn for a very long time. Because all my other cousins were in Brooklyn, so she was around -- she lived on Westminster [Road], around Coney Island Avenue. And then, when she went back to Haiti and I was old enough and capable of renting my own space, I stayed in the neighborhood. And I stayed there for a very long time -- until I came to Bed-Stuy. Now that I go back, the neighborhood over there is very different. The stores are different. I see, you know, like, different people walking the neighborhood.

And it's the same with Bed-Stuy. When I bought -- 11 -- 12 years ago this summer, most of my neighbors were, you know, African American or, I would say, Latino. But slowly but surely, every time a renter would leave, they'd be replaced by, you know, a white family, a white couple. I'll say this: the neighborhood has changed for the better for me in that I'm happy to be able to walk to a little restaurant three blocks from my house and do what -- you know, get something to eat or walk 10 minutes, go to the bank or what have you. That -- I mean, it's -- everything is there -- walking distance.

I -- I just -- just knowing the history of, you know, the -- the racist policies -- housing policies in this city, I just -- it's -- it's difficult for me to fully celebrate the changes. Because, you know, I know why -- not as much now, but still, you know, it exists -- but more than now -- why black families were not able to afford to buy their properties -- because banks were not lending money to, you know, black and brown people. I know about redlining. I know, like, a lot of the practices that happened in New York. So, you know, I still have that in the back of my mind -- you know, with prices skyrocketing, you know, a lot of folks are moving down south -- moving to, you know, Long Island -- like, wherever they're moving to.

I just -- but at the same time, I will say that a lot of the young families that I know -- the parents of, you know, my son's friends from daycare -- you know, we're all homeowners, you know, in the neighborhood. So there is -- there is that aspect of it, as well. But it's just it's -- it's complex, you know? It's a complex situation. You know, when you say gentrification, everybody has their own meaning of it and their own pros and cons about it. I am blessed that I've been able to buy property and been able to keep it, you know, for so long. And I feel very, very blessed to have tenants that [laughter] take care of the property as if it's their own, you know? And we're really like a big family in the building. But, you know, there are pros and cons to -- to, you know, the changes that are happening.

STRONG: Yeah, in a way, it's living evidence of those historical wrongs continuing.

BENOIT: Yes, yes. In a way, definitely.

STRONG: You also mentioned that it's important to you that your son and your children be a part of programs where they don't feel like they're outsiders, and that that's becoming more difficult to find. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

BENOIT: Yes. So my son is in school out of district -- which, one, as an employee of the New York City Department of Education, bothered me for a long time, but two, because I have at least five schools at walking distance from my house. But they didn't offer the programs that I was interested in. For me, having my son in a bilingual program was very important. And the -- again, the ratings for the schools, you know, wasn't what I -- [sigh] -- it's very difficult for me to talk about this as a -- as an educator, but, you know, we made the decision to put him in a -- a different school, a different zone. But there, in his program, I can count on one hand the students that are non-white.

So for my daughter, you know, we're -- we know where we want to put her for daycare, which is a daycare that is very Afrocentric, you know -- and my son goes to that camp, as well. It -- it really is, you know, providing access for -- for them to straddle both worlds. And -- yes, it's one society, it's one Brooklyn, it's one New York, but on the other hand, it's not. So, you know, we want them to be well-rounded and know who they are, what they

bring as individuals, and what they are able to contribute as part -- as members of a society.

STRONG: So I guess the last question I want to ask you is just -- this idea of, you know, you're so involved in public school education and, you know, these communities locally. What would you like to see change about Brooklyn -- as a society, as a government, as a community, as -- as anything?

BENOIT: [laughter] I think it will happen naturally -- or, I should say, despite policies -- and expectations that current adults have. And that is for Brooklyn to be not just more diverse, but for folks to truly see each other beyond their skin color or beyond their socioeconomic status.

I think that we have a lot -- I have a lot of hope on Generation Y and Generation Z -- whatever those generations are called that are coming after me -- because I see what they do. I see what they're doing. You know, I see their activism. I see them reaching out to folks that are other than them. So that's why I'm saying I think it will happen, despite what folks who came before me -- and even folks of my generation -- are trying to put in place to, you know, keep New York and Brooklyn segregated, for lack of a better term. But, you know, I'm very hopeful. I'm very hopeful for Brooklyn.

I'm glad that it still has its reputation. The other day, J.P. and I were commenting about the fact that even though there are folks who are not from Brooklyn, even if they spent one month or they visited some family in Brooklyn, they'll say they're from Brooklyn. [laughter] So yeah, we are proud Brooklynites. We do everything in Brooklyn. My parents are in Long Island -- you know, my dad and my stepmom. My cousins -- everybody is in wherever. But we are -- we're here in Brooklyn and we love it. I don't know what the future holds, but right now it -- it's working for us. And it's been working for me for however many years. [laughter]

STRONG: When you said you're hopeful about what the next generation can accomplish, can you -- can you give me a specific example of some event you've seen or some interaction that gave you hope?

BENOIT: Yes. I have, you know, colleagues who are 10, 15 years younger than I am -- and even more [laughter] -- that have invited me to, you know, the gatherings that they've had. And one of them was, like, a collective -- like, a support group that just -- the young people have come together and decided, We're going to support whatever the -- the -- the initiative that one of us is taking. And again, it wasn't white, it wasn't black, it wasn't Latino -- it was art, you know? And I saw just people from all walks of life at -- at that event. And I saw -- and what they were talking about -- what the art represented -- it, to me -- it -- it really gave me hope. It was about, you know, us having a voice in what was happening in our community. It was about empowering women. It was about pooling our resources together. So that's why I say that. And it wasn't the only event, but that particular one just stuck with me, and I was just, like, "Yes!" You know? Like, "Whatever it is that I -- however it is that I can support you, let me know."

STRONG: Thank you so much. I, you know, can't keep you too much longer. And is there anything that we should have talked about -- anything I should have asked you -- that comes to mind as an important part of your life story?

BENOIT: I can't think of anything now, but I do want to thank you so much for this opportunity -- you know, to share a little bit about myself and my story with my fellow Brooklynites.

STRONG: Thank you so much for taking the time to come in. You were very generous with the stories you told. And I just -- I really, really appreciate it, so thank you.

BENOIT: Thank you.