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## "Useful Wooden Toys": Skateboarding as a Tool for NYC Youth Advocacy

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“Useful Wooden Toys”: Skateboarding as a Tool for NYC Youth Advocacy

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Table of Contents

### **Introduction**

“Skateboarding, Sound, and Space,” .....	1
“The Imaginary Skateboarder” .....	2
“Youthhood and Adulthood” .....	5
“Youth Advocacy and Skateboarding” .....	9

### **Chapter I: HHF in Brownsville**

“The Harold Hunter Foundation” .....	13
“Pre-Registration Day” .....	26
“Talking with the Youth Mentors” .....	34
“Improvisation and Liquid Death” .....	43
“Marcus Garvey Apartment Complex (353 Chester Street)” .....	47

### **Chapter II: Skateboarders and Skateparks**

“Area 51” .....	51
“Skaters Talk with Eachother” .....	53
“Talking to Skaters” .....	55
“Skateboarding, Power, and Liminality” .....	63

<b>Conclusion:</b> “Thank you, Skateboarding” .....	67
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<b>Bibliography</b> .....	73
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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **Skateboarding, Sound, and Space**

Imagine you are walking down a busy city sidewalk where the sounds of car engines, footsteps and muffled voices fill the air surrounding you. Amongst this symphony of noise, you all of sudden hear the sounds of skateboard wheels rolling across the asphalt. The hard polyurethane lets out a crunchy, yet consistent roar against the pavement, one which seems to become reinvigorated with each push the skateboarder takes. It's a familiar sound in the urban jungle and almost immediately recognizable, yet, what lies beyond just this sonic experience may remain a mystery to most passerbys. One might begin to wonder who is creating these sounds, or perhaps why someone appears to find joy in riding a piece of wood attached to two metal axles with four wheels in the first place. What lies beyond the surface of this relationship between an individual and this vehicle that lies beneath their feet?

Perhaps you've heard these sounds before, except concentrated within an enclosed space filled with ramps and railings known as the skatepark. The skatepark objectively serves two purposes in a community that functions almost as a double-edged sword. From a distance, it appears as a skateboarder's paradise, filled with all types of amusing terrain and obstacles for visitors to learn and practice their tricks. Yet, the skatepark also serves as a countermeasure to skateboarding's deep relationship to the urban jungle which many people are familiar with. A large aspect of skateboarding involves doing tricks outside of the skatepark, where the mundane elements of pedestrian life such as a park bench, a parking garage, or the staircase to a building take on a new life as exciting pieces to the skateboarder's playground. This process of reimagining the world is especially observable in the forms of media which the skateboarding



community creates from photography to video projects. Nearly all professional skateboarders make their careers through what is commonly called “street skating”, and such has also played a huge role in the popular appeal of skateboarding as a particularly dangerous activity. In doing so, skateboarders actively blur the lines between what is considered public and private space, where the latter is often where the skateboarder occupies in the popular imaginary. In this sense, one can begin to speculate that street skateboarding takes on an anti-capitalist agenda through its resistance to the notion of private property. This further plays into the popular stereotype of skateboarders as destructive, reckless, and rebellious.

Hence, particularly in urban environments, the skatepark can serve as a strategic move to keep skateboarders from pursuing their activity on private property, keeping their ways of living within closed boundaries while protecting the interests of those with stakes in property that would otherwise be damaged. This isn't to disregard the social benefits of skateparks within communities, however, as many skateboarders would also argue that these spaces have been pivotal to the formation of their relationships to other skateboarders and to the community at large. Many skateboarders actually push to have skateparks built in their communities where there might not be any. Later in this study, we will look further into the dynamics at play within skateparks and as rather important spaces of cultural production.

### **The Imaginary Skateboarder**

Skateboarding can often evoke a variety of different images and ideas to the public imaginary. Along the line of stereotypes, these associations can be both negative and positive, yet, even the positive ones can also have more harmful implications lying beneath. These sorts of projections don't allow people to be real people. Perceived as a countercultural activity,

skateboarders are often depicted as rebellious to mainstream society. Although not all skateboarders fall into this description, some may prefer to position themselves especially in this way. There is an innately destructive aspect to skateboarding, whether it's to the body or the environment surrounding the body. Hence, skateboarding is also widely understood to be a dangerous activity.

The significance of danger is made evident by there being a whole politics behind the use of safety equipment such as helmets, especially when one imagines the high-risk stunts which tend to earn skateboarders their respect. One may be familiar with the notion of helmets being considered “uncool”, whether aesthetically or along the lines of “playing it safe”, therefore removing the otherwise dangerous aspect of skating. This, in turn, presents a sort of cognitive dissonance that occurs among skateboarders, where although the danger of getting seriously injured is clearly understood, the conscious choice to not wear protective equipment transcends all rationality in this regard. The only area of skateboarding where helmets are generally accepted has been in vert skating, where one performs tricks on half-pipes and bowls with ramps standing as tall as 14 feet. Helmets remain practically non-existent in the world of street skating. As pervasive as this attitude seems (one only needs to glance at a busy skatepark or to flip through an issue of “Thrasher” magazine to observe), such is slowly changing with skateboarders such as Andy Anderson, who rides professionally for renowned company Powell Peralta. His unparalleled balance and unique bag of tricks earn him respect within the skateboarding industry, not to mention him choosing to wear a helmet being a defining feature of his individuality and rejection of what's conventionally considered to be “cool”.

In the popular imagination, there lies the conception that skateboarding is a destructive activity in the way that it interacts with the environment. The street skateboarder is not only one

who vandalizes property, but also one who defies both the rules and authority figures meant to enforce such. This idea further plays into the idea of skateboarders as rebellious, which can act out as a sort of double-edged sword. On one hand, images of the rebel can be glamorized, meanwhile, they can also earn a bad reputation amongst a dominant cultural realm which hopes to retain a form of social order.

At the same time skateboarding can be seen as destructive, it is also creative in many ways. Skateboarders often value creativity when it comes to tricks and performing such with a unique style. The foundational cultural products which arise from the skateboarding world come in the form of photography and videography. One will come across hundreds of photo sequences and other shots when flipping through any skateboarding magazine. Professional skateboarders are expected to film tricks to be thrown together into what is called a “full-length” skate video. Video creation is not limited to, and in fact very prevalent outside of the professional skateboarding industry as well. Skateboarding is also heavily tied to other creative outlets, for example music and artwork. Every board company releases several series of graphics a year, the graphic being the design that lies underneath the skateboard. Skate companies design their own shoes, clothing, and other skateboarding parts and accessories to be purchased within a larger market. Not all of these cultural products are visible from outside the skateboarding world, however, there are parts of skateboarding which have found its way into more mainstream markets. For example, skateboarding brands such as ‘Supreme’, ‘Palace’, and ‘Dime’ have found their appeal amongst fashion enthusiasts with their niche, often pricey articles of clothing. They have large social media followings of skateboarders and non-skateboarders alike, and their YouTube videos rack anywhere from the tens of thousands to even millions of views.

With that said, however, skateboarding has a particularly youthful appeal, despite the wide age range its participants fall within. One only needs to step into a skatepark or explore skateboarding within social media (i.e: Instagram or TikTok) to observe this. This notion also exists within the public imaginary, such as how skateboarding has undergone a sort of appropriation by industries that have nothing to do with such. In this sense, skateboarding has a presence within the dominant cultural realm, yet from a position which is separated from the experiences of real skateboarders. As an advertising strategy, one might observe a skateboard being placed somewhere in order to draw an appeal for younger audiences. The same goes for evoking images of something that can be considered as “cool” or “hip”, where the skateboard can magically become the epitome of such with its mere presence. Take, for example, the Disney show “Zeke and Luther”, which ran for three seasons between 2009 and 2012. The plot revolved around two White 15-year old skaters in California who dreamed of becoming world-famous. Neither Zeke nor Luther skateboarded in real life, yet, the use of skateboarding as a representation of something “cool”, especially for its young Disney Channel audience, simultaneously reinforced and fueled the public imaginary of skateboarding.

### **Youthhood and Adulthood**

The skateboarding world’s youthful presence also projects a sense of the skateboard itself existing as a sort of a toy, and further, a lack of professionalism among its adult participants. This is another dimension in which the skateboarder faces an obstacle within the dominant cultural realm. Along these lines, there is often the perceived stereotype of the skateboarder as a slacker, who refuses to fall into the narrative of “getting a job” or more generally, “growing up”. A survey conducted in 2016 by the Harold Hunter Foundation showed how skateboarders tend to

struggle in regards to employment and career development (*Needs Assessment Survey OF NYC SKATERS*, 2016). In 1990, a skateboard company called “New Deal Skateboards” released a 45-minute video titled, “Useless Wooden Toys”. The video features members of the New Deal Skateboards team doing tricks on all sorts of terrain from the streets to skatepark settings. Beneath this, the video’s title serves as a form of commentary on the idea of the skateboard being a useless wooden toy, when in fact, it’s much more. Further, it speaks to typical attitudes created towards adult skateboarders. The skateboard’s reduction to a wooden toy can be seen as a stripping of its cultural significance; its decontextualization in the eyes of those who do not approve or simply do not understand nor care to. Yet, this perception also leaves room for one to fathom the innate power of skateboarding as a cultural phenomenon. In the words of professional skateboarder, Chris Cole: “It’s a strange phenomenon how this piece of wood, four wheels, and a turning system has made so many people so happy” (Electronic Arts, 2007). The skateboard’s reduction to its raw material form, denoted as a wooden toy, serves to hint at the powerful grasp which the skateboard has over its riders.

Even amongst older skateboarders, there is a sense of youthhood that, inextricably linked to a sense of freedom and agency, is retained within the skateboarder’s identity. I once saw a man, wearing monochromatic business attire and holding a briefcase, observing skateboarders at a popular park in Albany, New York. At first glance he looked like he could’ve been a land surveyor or city official, yet, he eventually explained to me that he used to skateboard at this park all the time when he was younger. He had decided to visit the skatepark to relive a part of his youth, which was now standing and watching in awe at how the park had evolved from tennis courts to an established skatepark with obstacles and a larger community. In that moment, his “grown-up” exterior had no power against the emotional grip of his youthful interior, having

been retained from his experiences of skateboarding. Skateboarding therefore serves a powerful tool for destabilizing hegemonic notions of youthhood and adulthood. In this sense, skateboarding can also be viewed as a resistance to these notions of ‘growing up’ within a capitalist system, where the rigid distinction between youthhood and adulthood deem such as unable to coexist with one another. If these notions are understood to be dominating and fixed, then perhaps they can instead be put into motion, or at the very least set off balance, once they stand on and begin to ride the skateboard.

It is important to remember that these projections of the skateboarder’s identity are inextricably tied with other identity markers such as race, gender, and class. The skateboarding community has often prided itself as one which values freedom of expression and universal acceptance. Yet, since its beginnings, skateboarding has carried an ethos which has remained predominately White, male and heterosexual (Yochim 4). Most professional skateboarders fall within this description, although there are also those who do not. Non-male skateboarders have often described their discomfort in spaces of skateboarding. Skateboarding is slowly becoming more open to participants who do not fall within these dominant cultural categories. These skateboarders are making more appearances both in the physical and virtual realms in which skateboarding takes place. For example, one is more often to see a girl at a skatepark who isn’t just sitting on the sidelines, or to come across queer skateboarding collectives such as “Unity Skateboarding”, which has over 40,000 followers on Instagram. The 2018 film, *Skate Kitchen*, follows a group of female skateboarders who explore youthhood and friendship in New York City while also challenging patriarchal systems within the skateboarding community. Within a broader social movement, such films inspire non-male skateboarders to embrace themselves and resist patriarchal systems.

Regardless of this shifting dynamic, however, many skateboarders, professional or not, have continued to express their discomforts as being from a marginalized position in larger society. For example, in May 2020 amidst international protests against anti-Black racism, professional skateboarder, actor and model Na-Kel Smith discussed his own experiences of racism within the predominately-white skateboarding industry. He describes instances of teammates using racial slurs around him, and times he has had to “perform racially insensitive requests for sponsors” (Jenkem Magazine, 2020). In outlining the homophobia and heteronormative attitudes perpetuated within the skateboarding community, Mallott and Pena describe the career of professional skater and punk rocker, Duane Peters. They make a connection between these attributes and the “hardcore, aggressive, and antiauthority attitude” (Mallot and Pena 62). Speaking to this, American professional skateboarder, Brian Anderson, made headlines in the skateboarding world when he came out as gay in 2016, nearly 20 years into his career. He expressed fears of doing so earlier due to the risk of it having a negative impact on his career given the pervasive hypermasculinity and heteronormativity in the skateboarding industry. Yet, Anderson’s coming out was particularly well-received, not only because of the amount of respect he had gained throughout his career as an incredible and influential skateboarder, but also because by then the world had become increasingly accepting of those who are of the LGBTQ+ community. The public focus chose to remain on his reputation as a skateboarder, and less so on his sexual orientation. As a cultural phenomenon, skateboarding, much like the act of skateboarding itself, is continuously in motion and never stagnant. The skateboarding world of today is not the same as it was ten years ago, and so on. It has arguably become much more accepting of those who fall outside its White, male, and

heterosexual ethos, but that's not to say that skateboarding's emphasis on universal acceptance and freedom of expression has been fully realized. There is still a lot of work left to be done.

### **Youth Advocacy and Skateboarding**

New York City, despite its position as one of the most prominent and wealthy cities in the United States, is also home to some of the largest wealth disparities. With this in mind, there are countless organizations throughout the city whose goals are to serve youth from underserved communities. These youth may come from marginalized backgrounds where identity markers such as gender, race, and class play a role in their disadvantageous position. Systemic barriers often prevent these youth from being able to access social opportunities often reserved for those within the dominant cultural realm; that which is White, middle-class, male, and heterosexual. Youth advocacy programs therefore aim to provide mentorship, career-building workshops, and other programs to introduce these young people to such opportunities they would otherwise not be able to access. Some of these programs encourage students to pursue college and other educational opportunities. In a way, such goals can be viewed as accommodating the dominant cultural realm as they provide a means of integration into its societal expectations. On a conceptual level, these organizations are further situated within hegemonic notions of youthhood and adulthood, their goal being to facilitate the transition from the former to the latter. In doing so, one might even observe a rigid transition from capitalist notions of youthhood into adulthood. Yet, many organizations also have their own approaches to youth advocacy, using vehicles such as sports, music, and the arts as their means of engagement and empowerment.

This is where skateboarding adds an interesting twist to this usual narrative regarding Youth advocacy. What makes skateboarding a particularly useful vehicle in addressing the needs



of underserved youth in New York City? In what ways does skateboarding's interactions with youthhood and adulthood serve to complicate the transitions between such as expected by larger society, where they are continuously informed by the dominant cultural realm? In other words, through skateboarding, how do these organizations both accommodate and confront the mainstream's concept of professionalism? Inevitably, the problematized imaginary skateboarder also intersects with social perceptions of race and class. How do these experiences interact with the experience of also being a skateboarder, particularly under the public gaze? In what ways does skateboarding serve to address racial, class-based, and gender-based disparities amongst New York City youth? How do these organizations, in turn, affect skateboarding itself as a cultural phenomenon?

The organization I will be looking at is the Harold Hunter Foundation, also known as HHF. The organization was founded in 2007 in memory of the New York City born and raised professional skateboarder and actor in the 1995 film, *Kids*, Harold Hunter. According to their mission statement, HHF aims to "use skateboarding as a vehicle to provide underserved youth with valuable life experiences that nurture individual creativity, resourcefulness, and the development of life skills." ([haroldhunter.org](http://haroldhunter.org)).

On a general level, these organizations seek to inspire through skateboarding, leading me to speculate on how such brings to the table a particularly unique approach given skateboarding's complicated cultural presence. In a literal sense, the skateboard is indeed a vehicle, being an object that can be used as means of transportation. Yet, the figurative use of the word, "vehicle", which HHF uses draws attention to how the skateboard has the ability to create value and meaning that extend outside the realm of skateboarding.

A large part of my field work will involve honest conversation around experiences as a skateboarder, and how such has affected the lives of ourselves and others. Growing up in New York City as an avid skateboarder, I've always reflected on how skateboarding has affected my own life both on an individual and social level. This project resonates with me on a personal level as it explores these notions while also maintaining skateboarding as a powerful force in itself. I am an Asian-American, middle-class, cisgender and heterosexual male who will be entering the experiences of those who may not fall within most of these labels. I must constantly reflect on this privilege and understand that my own experiences with skateboarding can never be projected or universalized, especially when skateboarding itself manifests its gifts on an individual level. Self-reflexivity is important to consider, however, it is important to also not center myself in this narrative in practicing such. At its core, this project is about skateboarding and exploring its ability to inspire and empower NYC youth. My aim therefore is to listen and learn from the voices of those whose lives have been positively impacted by skateboarding.

Throughout this study, I will be conducting fieldwork within both private and public settings. Like a skateboarder, I will attempt to navigate these spaces while complicating the distinction between the two as both equally significant sites of cultural production. For example, events within these youth advocacy organizations will be held within public spaces such as at the skatepark, while others may take place at more private settings, even virtually. However, I will be also observing the interactions which take place at skateparks outside the context of these events in order to gain a broader sense of the community skateboarding draws and what appeals for the building of skateparks in these urban spaces. Doing so will involve listening to the voices of those who skate within youth advocacy programs and those from outside, although this isn't

necessarily to make a distinction between either. To be clear, skateboarding can be enjoyed anywhere by anyone.

My interlocutors will mainly include organization leaders, youth mentors, volunteers, and young skateboarders; those whose lives have been affected in some way or another by skateboarding. Our conversations may enter personal territory, as skateboarding itself can be a mediator of intimate feelings and experiences. Especially in the case of youth who already fall along the margins of society, I hope to better understand how skateboarding plays a positive role in their lives. Their voices will contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of skateboarding in the public eye, challenging its negative associations while also expanding the world of skateboarding itself.

My senior thesis will investigate skateboarding as an active agent with the power to influence relationships between people and the worlds which they inhabit. In this sense, I aim to grant skateboarding, whether as an activity or the physical object itself, a form of sentience in my writing. I do this to reflect my belief that skateboarding, as a global phenomenon, continues to take on a life of its own as it both enters and withdraws from the dominant cultural realm, acting as an initiator of social change. In doing so, I seek to push the narrative that skateboarding can play a positive role in anyone's life, but particularly for those who are struggling to reconcile with a dominant cultural system. It may offer a sense of resistance, youthhood, and movement which can escape the grasp of oppressive structures which target poverty, race, gender, and so much more.

Motion is the essence of skateboarding. Skateboarders themselves must navigate real and constructed worlds, youthhood and adulthood, projections of destruction and productivity, and not to mention everything which exists outside of skateboarding. Throughout this ethnographic

study, I hope to learn more about the myriad of ways in which skateboarding inspires its users to keep on pushing.

## CHAPTER II: HHF IN BROWNSVILLE

### **The Harold Hunter Foundation (HHF)**

**Jessica:** [00:24:15] I almost started to kind of develop this sort of psychosocial profile of like, what is a skateboarder? And so we tested that a little bit and that needs assessment. And I found that across all these kind of sociodemographic and racial differences and people who were from New York City or had moved to New York City, lots of money, no money, doesn't matter what race. There were those common characteristics that skateboarders all seem to have.

Growing up in New York City as an avid skateboarder, it was guaranteed that I would hear about the Harold Hunter Foundation (HHF) in one way or another. The organization would often sponsor events in the skate community, and I had some friends who would do volunteer work with them. My relationship with HHF began with a simple email I wrote in 2016 during my junior year of high school. I wanted to get involved through volunteer opportunities, specifically for teaching skateboarding to children given my prior experience with such. Although there weren't any opportunities of that nature available at the time, HHF's Co-founder and Executive Director, Jessica Forsyth, wrote back to me asking if I would want to help out with something else: Harold Hunter Day X, one of their largest annual events. This one in particular would be the ten-year anniversary of Harold Hunter Day and taking place at LES Coleman Playground,

arguably the most prominent skatepark in New York City. In Jessica's words, however, my volunteer work was "not glamorous stuff". I helped out with setting up, for example hanging banners and folding tables. I also helped with cleaning up the skatepark throughout the event and afterward. This part I could assure you wasn't very glamorous. All that said, however, the whole experience was still very meaningful for me. I got to be a part of helping my community celebrate the life of an influential professional skateboarder with an event centered around an activity we all know and love. Not to mention that I also got some free "product" at the end of the day, for example a couple fresh HUF brand T-shirts and a pair of SkullCandy headphones.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to volunteer with HHF again until the summer of my sophomore year in college simply due to schedule conflicts. The opportunity that arose was exciting, though. Knowing that I was an intended Anthropology major, Jessica asked if I could assist with developing and distributing a survey for HHF which they planned to administer over the summer of 2019. I gladly accepted, even though I wasn't able to consistently attend meetings as I was working full-time as a skateboarding instructor at a summer day camp. I remember our first meeting with Jessica along with a few other volunteer researchers in a conference room at a large building in Manhattan, where I assumed HHF had rented out a space temporarily. We went over a survey that had been created by USC as part of a larger, nation-wide research project about skateboarders. After completing it myself, I offered my feedback in terms of how the survey questions could be improved. Eventually, we would help administer this survey among skateboarders in NYC to best fit HHF's model of needs assessment. Our findings from that summer would eventually form the basis of creating another needs assessment survey, this time entirely on behalf of HHF, which I would help to create in the future.

About a year and a half later, I would need to formulate a topic for my senior project as part of my contribution to Bard's anthropology department. I already knew that I wanted my ethnography to revolve around skateboarding in one way or another, and so naturally I was able to land on exploring the political implications of skateboarding within youth culture in New York City. Knowing that HHF has been a key player in supporting the skate community there, I reached out to Jessica to see if she would be able to help me out. So when Jessica welcomed my idea with open arms, along with inviting me to work on another project for HHF, I was quite thrilled to say the least. She connected me with Kevin Ortiz, who would be running a new pilot program in Brownsville, Brooklyn where HHF would host weekly skate clinics for local youth. This made me particularly excited given that I have lots of experience teaching skateboarding to kids, and so I figured that I could play a larger role than just a researcher who stood on the sidelines. Was this not the exact kind of opportunity I was seeking when I first reached out to Jessica all those years ago when I was still in high school?

Jessica was born and raised in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. She was friends with Harold through her younger sister, Priscilla, where he would visit her family's house on a regular basis. This relationship went on from the late 1980s up until 1998 when Priscilla went off to college in Los Angeles. Jessica described her childhood home as a sort of "clubhouse" for Harold, where he would come over to hang out with Priscilla along with a bunch of other skaters who would become influential to the New York City skate scene. Even when her sister was away at summer camp, Harold would continue to come over and was basically considered a member of the family at that point. Later on, Jessica developed what she calls "phase two" of her relationship with Harold through her boyfriend at the time, Jeff Pang, who was the team manager of Zoo York, the company that Harold skated for professionally. She graduated from Vassar

College in 1995, and obtained her Master's degree and PhD in Counseling Psychology from Teachers School at Columbia University.

Jessica may not be a skater herself, but she is very familiar with the cultural atmosphere and is undoubtedly comfortable being around and engaging with skaters. My interview with her was incredibly helpful in providing me with a background for how the Harold Hunter Foundation started and in understanding the kind of work that they hope to accomplish. In her words, HHF seeks to:

**Jessica:** [00:08:25] provide support, advocacy and opportunity for skateboarders in New York City [00:08:34][9.0]

Harold Hunter died from a cocaine-induced heart attack on November 17th, 2006. The funds raised for his funeral were addressed to a PayPal account named the “Harold Hunter Foundation”, which at the time didn’t even exist. Using the money left over, however, Harold’s closest friends and family decided to officially bring the HHF to life. In Jessica’s words, the organization was created to serve youth from troubled backgrounds like Harold himself.

**Jessica:** [00:09:54] OK, well, we have this thing. What do we do with this? And we just thought, OK, well, you know, we want to make sure that we're really always keeping Harold in mind and all of the struggles that Harold had and sort of like being an organization that would serve a kid like Harold. You know, and the kind of issues that he had and stuff like that. [00:10:14][19.5]

Jessica then began to put together a board for HHF that would reflect Harold’s community. It included some of his friends, family, and significant figures from the NYC skate scene that knew and loved Harold. The organization then had its first official Board Elections

Meeting in January 2007. On paper, the original incorporators of the foundation consisted of Priscilla, Jeff, and Harold's brother, Ronald Hunter. Jessica is still credited as a Co-Founder, however, given her dedication to HHF from its early beginnings.

The organization kicked off on a budget of less than thousand dollars, and fundraising had already begun to introduce itself as an issue for the small non-profit. One of their earliest initiatives involved helping Zoo York organize annual Harold Hunter Day, which the skate company had begun celebrating in 2007. HHF also worked to provide scholarships for kids to attend Woodward, an otherwise expensive action-sports sleepaway camp in Pennsylvania with a reputation for attracting professional skaters as guests, even having its own television show called "Camp Woodward". Along with these two initiatives, the organization also hosts an annual "Bridge Run", a friendly event where participants can run, walk, skate, or bike across the Manhattan bridge to raise money for HHF's programming. Harold Hunter Day and the Bridge Run are often paired back-to-back in what is celebrated as "Harold Hunter Weekend".

**Jessica:** [00:11:20] But at the same time, you know, because I was managing the sending kids to skate camp, I was getting to know some of the kids and I was getting to know some of the issues that I saw that they were having and stuff. And we were still really trying to keep it as more of, like, a sports recreational organization. So I was thinking very much in terms of how do we support them around what they're interested in doing with skateboarding? Not so much like how do we do all kinds of other things like youth development or workforce readiness or whatever else? [00:11:52][31.8]



At the same time Jessica was doing work for HHF, she was also in the process of getting her doctorate at Columbia. She finished school in December 2009 and walked in May 2010. Between these months, Jessica worked intensely with her childhood friend and colleague Joanna to accelerate the Woodward program and increase the number of kids. Joanna is a licensed social worker, and together the two were able to engage with parents in a more effective way to get their kids involved with HHF. Through getting to know the kids on a personal level along with their families, Jessica was able to make some new observations as well.

**Jessica:** [00:12:41] And she and I did a whole process of meeting with parents and kids and interviewing them and all this kind of stuff. And then just once you kind of do something like that, like now you're in communication with the parents over the process of getting the kid registered for camp. And then you just find out a lot of things about kids and their families just by interacting with their parents. And, you know, and so we started to really get to know the kids. And then I had even more of a sense of what kind of stuff they needed and just from being around. And that was really the first time in 2010 when, like, I was like recognizably the person in this community who was running HHF. [00:13:23][41.4]

Becoming more involved in the process of sending kids to Woodward proved to be an important moment for Jessica in terms of defining the goals for HHF. She was able to directly interact with families and form a level of investment into their lives. It was at this point that Jessica says “things got started”, and HHF began to attract attention from other non-profit organizations such as City Lore. This organization in particular was much more established at the

time, having been run for almost twenty years prior. Within the non-profit sphere, this means that City Lore also had a much larger budget, that of at least half a million dollars, according to Jessica. With this early partnership, HHF was able to expand its programs. In the summer of 2013, the organization was able to fund a trip to the Dominican Republic where several skaters from HHF hosted workshops and donated skate gear to those in need. A video series uploaded to YouTube by Red Bull followed HHF's trip, focusing on professional skateboarder Luis Tolentino as he returns to his home country to inspire and empower young skaters. Around the same time, HHF started a program in Brownsville, Brooklyn in collaboration with a church named "Mt. Ollie Baptist Church", where they hosted skateboarding clinics for young children in the community. They also started a pilot program with City Lore called "Kickflip" that focused on teaching digital literacy as well as other media skills from filmmaking to video game design. At this point, HHF started to focus more on workforce readiness.

As things at HHF began to accelerate, Jessica found herself in a situation where she would have to dedicate ample time to either her academic career or the foundation. From around 2010 to 2015, she described herself as "moonlighting". She would be committed to other jobs as a source of income, while at the same time finding herself dedicating 15-20 hours per week towards HHF. With that in mind, she eventually made the decision to take a break from school in order to focus on non-profit work. In 2016, she received an individual grant from Vassar College, her alma mater, which allowed her to do just this. She took a course in nonprofit management which gave her a sharper background in the work that she would take on, and by 2016, HHF had a much larger budget from different crowdfunding efforts and fundraising from Harold Hunter Weekend. Around 2018, they experimented with another youth development program called the Legacy program, which was intended to prepare young people for college. Jessica actually

reached out to see if I would be interested in helping with this program, however, at the time I was unfortunately unable to do so since I was busy with my own college experience over a hundred miles away.

Now that HHF had various funders and partnerships, the organization started to feel a certain pressure coming from the nonprofit industry.

**Jessica:** [00:19:36] And so the only, you know, they're trying to scale up, which is what a lot of funders do, the capitalist thing where it's like, Okay, great, you've served 20 kids over the summer. Now we want you to serve one hundred, you know? And so that was also another question was does that make any sense? Could we find 100 skateboarders in New York City who want to participate in a digital media class? Is there any reason to do that? And so the question of, you know, do they want to do this program, which had worked really well and it was a really successful program, at least in the eyes of the funder, they really loved it. And I thought it was great. It was great. But it was like, is this what skaters want? [00:20:20][43.9]

It became clear that in order to continue receiving funding, HHF felt pressured to scale up in terms of their programming. Jessica introduces this dynamic as being part of the “Nonprofit Industrial Complex”, which alludes to a dark irony within an industry intended to serve those in need. In response to this pressure, Jessica asserted that HHF should instead focus on what the kids they were serving actually wanted and needed, as opposed to providing this programming purely for the sake of doing so. And so in 2016, HHF created and distributed its first official “Needs Assessment Survey”, which was intended to help inform HHF of how they could best

serve skaters in NYC. One of the questions I asked Jessica was about how HHF appeals to different funders and stakeholders when it comes to explaining the benefits of skateboarding and the work that the organization does. Her findings from the 2016 Needs Assessment Survey were pivotal in providing concrete data in order to continue receiving funding for the organization's programs.

HHF's research project drew from a sample of 300 skaters, the majority of which were born and raised in the city. From this survey alone, Jessica was able to learn a lot more about the population she was working with. According to a summary of the data available from HHF's website (<https://www.haroldhunter.org/blog/needs-assessment-survey-of-nyc-skaters>):

- *65% of those surveyed have never participated in organized after-school or summer programs;*
- *The prevalence of ADHD symptoms is between 3 and 8 times higher than the national rate, which means that they are more likely to have difficulty with school and are at risk for becoming engaged in delinquent activity, potentially leading to high school dropout and incarceration;*
- *And yet, despite regular contact with police, NYC skaters had significantly lower rates of incarceration and criminal justice system involvement than their non-skater counterparts, suggesting that there are inherent benefits to being members of the skate community.*
- *Respondents expressed a need for support with employment and career development*
- *NYC skateboarders who participated in the survey have an often adversarial relationship with traditional schools, as demonstrated by a nearly 50% rate of suspension/expulsion*

Jessica's findings from the needs assessment were pivotal in providing concrete data in order for HHF to continue receiving support. She was able to identify and define a target population of young skaters who struggle in various dimensions of life and aren't able to seek support from other organizations, institutions, and at times even their own families.

Jessica also points out that the traditional youth advocacy program and the way in which they're set up isn't a functional model for the particular kind of kid that HHF seeks to serve. They are often resistant to notions of structure, especially when it comes to rigid settings such as high school. In an interview I did with a 22 year old skateboarder named Mecca, he talked to me about a very similar struggle from his own personal experience.

*Mecca: [00:28:28] I have ADHD and like in middle school, especially high school, like, I struggled with it heavily. So the way I learn, the way my brain works didn't align with school at all. And I'm pretty sure it can attest to like other skaters having ADHD or being neuroatypical and not being helped in that way where it's like they're not getting the attention they need in school and like skateboarding is the one thing that stimulates them. So like, it's something that they look to more than school. [00:29:01][1.4][32.0]*

Mecca's experience speaks directly to what Jessica discussed in terms of how skateboarding provides a way of coping with issues, such as ADHD, which are often addressed inadequately if at all in a rigid school setting. He then told me a story about a confrontation he had with school authorities who were not very receptive to the idea of him skateboarding. As he was skateboarding during lunch with his friends, administrators told them to stop while only confiscating Mecca's board and not his friends'. The policy was that his father would have to

come pick it up from the school, which he didn't as a form of punishing his son. He began to feel isolated from the lack of support from both school and home.

Throughout her experience at HHF, Jessica has gained a sharp awareness of how young NYC skaters' struggles in adjusting to school settings can translate to further notions of what it means to become an adult in our society.

**Jessica:** [00:37:23] But there's also ways that it sort of stunts your growth along other sorts of milestones that mainstream people follow, like getting a job and a family and stuff like that. [00:37:36][13.1]

It's important to note how Jessica uses the term "mainstream" to form a sort of distinction from the way in which skaters operate. In doing so, she validates their way of living as being valuable in itself as a form of resistance to the ideals which are forced onto them.

Skateboarding is a very unique activity in that, unlike other recreational activities used in traditional youth development programs such as organized sports, it problematizes the moral compass of the mainstream world. During our interview, Jessica pointed to an important contradiction underlying my exploration into skateboarding as a tool for youth advocacy, at least in the mainstream sense.

**Jessica:** [00:37:40] And that's what I struggled with a lot. I think about, like, the parents of the little kids in Brownsville, it's like, you know, they have an idea of what they want their kids to do that will help them to survive and come out and thrive. And like getting the kids into skateboarding, I worry that although it's going to keep them alive, now they're like addicted to this thing that

might also get in the way of them going beyond to the places where parents would like to see their kids go. Because I just, you know, skateboarders are like, "I don't want a nine to five job."

[00:38:11][31.0]

It seems that along with all the benefits that skateboarding presents to young people with particular needs, it also presents them with a set of characteristics which may hinder their development within the mainstream's rigid notions of adulthood, what Jessica calls a "nine to five job". When she speaks to school administrators and other stakeholders about HHF's programming, they often express concern over the negative aspects of skateboarding which can affect the growth of their kids. Although an addiction to skateboarding may have its own risks, a child from the same sociodemographic who doesn't skateboard may fall into worse circumstances, for example the school-to-prison pipeline. Through her research, Jessica has found that most of the skaters which HHF targets actually do complete high school. Although they may not necessarily enjoy the experience, they still have the persistence and resilience to complete this necessary step in transitioning from youthhood to adulthood. Her research actually isolates skateboarding as this positive force which has prevented at-risk youth from activities which may truly worsen their already precarious positions in society, for example participating in gang violence.

Later in our conversation, Jessica expanded on the structural issues arising from the "non-profit industrial complex".

**Jessica:** [00:55:25] It's like the people who have been successful in that system, the system being the capitalist free market economy, the people who have won and have had the most success and therefore have

the most excess income are the ones who have the foundations and, you know, it's all corporations, foundations and individuals who are all very wealthy and have been very successful. They've been very successful because they've mastered a capitalist way of making profit. And so then what they do is they basically set up an infrastructure for their funding. They're not paying taxes, right? And they're funding what they want to fund because they believe this is going to be the solution to the problems. But it's like there's an issue with the people who have, in many ways, whether intentionally or not, created the very problems that they're supposed to be fixing.

[00:56:18] [52.1]

Caught within a system that ultimately values profit over care, HHF finds itself at odds with attempting to serve a vulnerable population which other youth development initiatives tend to neglect. Jessica points to how these organizations control the flow of money towards a particular directive, one which would produce the most ideal results in terms of numbers, and would then be able to appeal for more funding as a result. This proposes a self-perpetuating system of nonprofits funding their own endeavors by only seeking to serve populations with the highest success rate. Unfortunately, this does not include skateboarding youth from areas like Brownsville. As Jessica noted, existing programs fail to engage young skaters who often also display a variety of other developmental issues such as neuroatypicality. The systems of power that are at play reproduce themselves through a selective distribution of resources and opportunities.

**Jessica:** [00:33:58] *It's like where you have a concentrated place, where it's like, you know, some pretty extreme poverty and gangs and*



*violence and all of this stuff that makes it a really difficult place to grow up. And then on top of that, you have a kid who's like a thrill seeker, kind of an addictive personality, ADHD, like, all the programs that they have for that kind of kid at school do not appeal to that kid, you know what I mean? And like what the Boys and Girls Club is doing and all these other organizations, the Police Athletic League, these big organizations that do after-school and summer programs and whatever else, like, skater kinds of kids are not participating in that type of stuff. And at the same time, they've found this activity that they do in a very sort of like not-supervised-by-adults or organized way that is really helping them.*

*[00:35:02][63.9]*

### **Pre-Registration Day**

The date is June 26th, 2021. The subway car is slightly cooled by the air conditioning, but heat from the amount of bodies packs itself into the reflective, steel walls. It's a sticky summer day in New York City; the kind you complain about in the heat of the moment (no pun intended), but yearn for once it's gone and the city freezes over. With my daypack around my shoulder, I hold my skateboard like a cane in one hand as it supports my balance on the shaky train.

I'm immediately greeted by the sun's beaming light as I step off the stuffy 3 train and onto the platform of Saratoga Ave. It's a relief that this stop as well as the next few on this subway line run outside, as the tracks follow an overpass that stretches across Livonia Ave. I've never stepped foot in Brownsville before, yet, I begin to inform my initial impressions from various accounts which I had heard from others. My father's voice tells me to "be careful" and

“to not stay out there too late”. I remembered how a friend of mine who lives in Brownsville would often refer to his own neighborhood as “the hood” or “the trenches”. These comments, along with the imagery such evokes, continue to echo in my mind as I take each step. Frankly, I stick out like a sore thumb in Brownsville. Even as we were approaching my stop, I noticed that I was the only Asian-appearing person on the train. Within a composition of Black and Brown bodies stood myself and my skateboard.

These thoughts prompt me to immediately begin thinking about my positionality. I’m an anthropology student doing his senior thesis research on a youth advocacy program in one of the poorest areas in New York City. I’m also a lighter-skinned Asian person from a middle-class background in the process of attaining a college degree, let alone from a private liberal arts institution. My own identity markers don’t quite reflect that of the individuals I would be meeting, let alone most of the neighborhood in which this part of my research is situated. Although my relationship with HHF goes deeper than just this summer, it feels strange at times that I’m attending this clinic essentially as a researcher. I’m minutes away from meeting the coaches of the skate clinics, and I’m anxious about how they might perceive me at first impression.

I could honestly say the same for the children we would be working with who live in Brownsville. At the end of the day, I am an outsider to the community which I will be entering. At the same time, however, I’m also a skateboarder. On this factor alone, I hope that those at HHF would simply accept me. Yet, even this comfort falls short of the reality that identities are never just one thing or another, and the notion that “we are all skateboarders” can only be truly championed by those who have never been marginalized along the lines of race, socioeconomic class, and other identity markers. Looking towards the benefits of “halfie anthropology”, it

becomes clear that being a skateboarder myself allows me to, although never fully, at least begin understanding the experiences of others as such pertained to skateboarding. The NYC skate community is called a community for a reason, and oftentimes different skaters will have mutual friends or acquaintances that span across various age groups. It isn't uncommon for me to recognize names and faces in public, especially given the various networking capabilities that social media has brought to skateboarding. In this sense, I also assume that myself and those at HHF probably know some of the same people I do. We're also familiar with the different skateparks and street spots that come with navigating the landscape of New York City. With these new thoughts, I start to feel a little bit more confident in myself as I get closer to the park.

As I arrive at what Google Maps tells me is Betsy Head Park, I find myself struggling to find the skatepark. Skateparks, especially in NYC, are usually not only visible spaces but also quite audible, filled with voices and the sounds of skateboards interacting with various surfaces. I know that the skatepark is located in Betsy Head Park, but what I don't realize is that the park is actually split into two sections that stand diagonally from one another across Thomas Boyland Street. When one looks up "Betsy Head Skatepark" on Google Maps, they are met with two results: One called "Betsy Head Park" with a thumbnail image of the skatepark, and another called "Betsyhead skatepark" with a thumbnail image of a strangely distorted panorama of a cloudy Brownsville skyline. Instinctually, I picked the first result as my destination of choice, however, I realize now that the second entry was probably added later on in order to minimize confusion when it comes to actually finding the skatepark. As I walk through the main section of the park, which is much larger than that with the skatepark, I pass by a massive astroturf field encircled by a regulation-sized track field. I witness what may be around a hundred kids, all wearing orange or green T-shirts playing various field sports such as football and soccer. They

also appear to be separated by age. Alongside them are a few adults, presumably youth mentors/coaches, who wear similar colors as they direct the children in what seems like your standard summer youth sports program. I spend an extra ten minutes scouring the main section of the park until I come across the one I'm looking for.

It's about 12pm, right around the time I was told to be here. As I enter the space just outside the skatepark, I immediately see Kevin (whose face I recognize from HHF's website) sitting at a plastic foldable table on his red chromebook. On the table beside Kevin's computer are three stacks of papers, two of which are liability waivers and another to help kids register for the skate clinics. One of the forms is a release form for when HHF wants to promote the skate clinics via photo and video content. There is also a small case of Poland Spring water bottles as well as a plastic gallon on the table. To the right of the table, I see two tall garbage bins: one for skateboards and the other for helmets and pads. Today is supposed to be a pre-registration event, almost like a trial where families could stop by to check out and learn more about what HHF is doing. The skate clinics themselves are supposed to officially start on July 7th, and run until September 2nd. It doesn't look very busy at the moment, but then again the event just started.

I initially met Kevin virtually through email after reaching out to Jessica, and so we are somewhat already familiar with each other's roles and why we're at Betsy Head on this sunny day in Brownsville. I usually find it better to meet someone in person, and upon introducing myself, Kevin is not only kind but also excited to hear more about my research project. I also assure Kevin that I'm also here to help out with running the clinics, and can assist with teaching skateboarding given the amount of experience I have with such. He's happy to hear it, and explains to me that we're sort of keeping it "lowkey" today, and that he hopes to encourage other youth development programs in the neighborhood to collaborate with HHF via these skate

clinics. Local organizations, including schools, could help provide HHF with important things such as insurance, medical support, and storage spaces.

I also notice two younger adults whom Kevin tells me are Bilal and Andy (who prefers to be called Turtle). They seem busy working with two younger children who look very new to skateboarding. At the moment, it looks as if the two instructors are teaching the kids how to stand and stay balanced on their skateboards, a very important first step. I've decided to wait until everyone's on break to introduce myself. Upon meeting Bilal and Turtle, they start to tell me how they are both new to working for HHF, and are both very familiar with Brownsville through either growing up here or just spending lots of time in the neighborhood. It becomes clear to me that this would be an ideal situation, given that they are well-equipped in understanding the issues facing Brownsville youth and know how best to communicate with them. I once again begin to consider my own position as an outsider, but the friendly energy I receive mutes most of my worries. Bilal briefly tells me about a group of young skaters, many of whom are a part of HHF, who make videos under the name, "FilmTella" on YouTube. He says that they deserve more recognition as a way of showcasing a particular demographic of skaters in NYC. I write the name down in my field journal to check out later. Turtle introduces himself as a passionate skate instructor and also a carpenter. He tells me about one of his most recent projects with an organization called "The Laundromat Project", which promotes the arts as a form of community action. Although I'm enjoying my first conversations with the two youth mentors, I try not to hold them for too long as their attention is understandably supposed to be directed towards the kids. With that in mind, I let Bilal and Turtle continue doing their thing and sit down beside Kevin on a collapsible stool with a big "Zoo York" sticker on its cushion.

Given her large and busy role at HHF, Jessica leaves most of the responsibility to Kevin and the youth mentors when it comes to running the skate clinics. On pre-registration day, however, she makes a brief appearance to check in with everyone and see how things were going. This is actually the first time I see Jessica in person since 2019, and so it's refreshing to catch up and talk about what HHF's been up to since. She explains to me that since the COVID-19 pandemic started, much of the organization's activities had slowed down. This caused HHF to shift its focus towards building its digital infrastructure, for example developing ways for the organization to engage with families via an online system. As HHF was just getting back into in-person programming, we were supposed to help parents register their children for the skate clinics via an online portal called "sportsYou". Accessible through a web browser and even a free mobile app, sportsYou was considered a better mode of communication than email, which Jessica said parents don't often check.

During her visit, Jessica also wants to make several points clear to us before getting things started. First, she mentions that the main goal for this summer was to establish more connections within the community via various outreach methods from flyers to collaborative programming. To this, a community organizer named Jamil mentions that he will try to register kids from the nearby Summer Beacon, one of several Brooklyn-based community centers that run year-long programs for families and their children. Jessica also wants to emphasize that our goal with the skate clinics is to simply let the kids have fun as opposed to focusing on strict programming. This makes sense given what she will later tell me regarding at-risk youth, especially those who skate, and their resistance to structured forms of programming. Jessica eventually leaves us to continue the day, and at this point I feel quite comfortable after having met everyone.

At about 2pm, the instructors move their lessons into the skatepark itself. This presents as an entirely new territory from the flatground area outside with its own rules. On a busy day this would be pretty intimidating, especially to the novice skater. Today it looks quite empty, however, and the kids have plenty of space to work on some new skills with Bilal and Turtle. I watch as the two mentors help the kids figure out their balance as they ride down their first ramps. Around this time, a boy whom I actually know from the skateboarding camp I work at arrives at the skatepark. For the sake of privacy, I will just call him “M”.

M and his mother immediately recognize me from just a couple weeks ago, and I’m excited to see him skateboarding outside of our usual structured setting of summer camp. M’s mother explains that his father lives in Brownsville, and so when they visit she usually takes M to the skatepark as well. M is a super passionate kid with a strong emotional sensibility. One of the first things I noticed from spending lots of time with him was his innate care for others, as he would always check in on the other campers if they seemed upset or unhappy. I’m glad to see a familiar face, to say the least. M’s mother is excited to hear about what HHF is doing at Betsy Head, and is eager to sign her son up for this summer’s skate clinics. “Every community has its issues. It’s nice that you come back and try to give,” she tells me.

M asks me to help him roll off a steep drop of about three feet from a slightly-angled platform commonly known as a “hubba”. What makes this particular maneuver awkward is that one has to prepare for the drop as they roll downhill, making for a challenging balance exercise. It also seems like the biggest impact he’s experienced on his skateboard yet, at least from what I’ve seen. Once he drops in from the top, I hold his hand as he approaches the drop with his knees bent and his shoulders square. He sticks the landing a few times with my help, but unfortunately he isn’t able to land it during this session and decides to go skate around on his

own. He's quite comfortable on his skateboard and learned plenty of tricks during his time at summer camp, so I let him freeskate and explore different possibilities at the skatepark. I watch as he drops in on just about every ramp in the park, which usually takes lots and lots of practice. It makes me feel proud to see him taking tricks he learned at camp to different spots and parks, slowly building his confidence as he explores new environments. In a way, this moment captures the essence of skateboarding.

After an hour in the skatepark, we begin wrapping up the skate clinics and prepare for lunch time. While the clinic was running, we received quite a large order of food from a Mexican restaurant named "Tacombi" through a program called "Good Eats", which provides catering services for nonprofits and communities in need. Organized into individual trays of food, we each enjoy a nice platter of chicken tacos over rice and beans with both red and green sauce on the side. It seems like the perfect way to end a productive day of skating under the sun. It's also a time to just sit down and talk amongst one another, and the communal setting makes it feel like we're all just a group of friends, including the kids. One of the boys, who I will name "K", describes to us how his friend just got grounded for throwing rocks from his roof. Again, the group today is quite small, only consisting of myself, Kevin, Turtle, Bilal, and three kids. With that said, there's a lot of food leftover. As we eat, other skatepark attendees, for example local rollerbladers and bikers, come over to ask if they could also have some food. We happily say yes and invite them to eat with us. In Bilal's words, "All Wheels, All Love" seemed to be the sentiment. Other Brownsville residents of various ages would join us too, and even one of the park attendants came over to grab a bite and tell us how much he loved what we were doing, proudly exclaiming, "I love everybody!".



Although today didn't see a ton of action in terms of registration numbers, everyone still seemed to have a great time. There were only a couple of new registrants, and the skate clinic emitted a mellow energy as opposed to chaos, which I'm sure everyone appreciated. This also meant more one-on-one time between the instructors and the kids, which can be seen as a positive in terms of building relationships and making ample progress on their skateboards. It was nice to directly engage with members of the community, especially for it being my first time in Brownsville. Being a part of what feels like an important initiative led by members of the community itself gave me a sense of confidence where I didn't have to feel uncomfortable the whole time. I was welcomed with what seemed like open arms, and to both support and feel supported by the skate community brings a truly warm feeling.

### Talking with the Youth Mentors

Throughout the two months I was able to attend the skate clinics, I got to know everyone a little bit better each day and became very comfortable just "hanging out" at the park. The first youth mentor I interviewed was Bilal.

Bilal is a 26-year old male who grew up in Brownsville. He started skateboarding in high school, and began working with HHF this summer as a youth mentor for the skate clinics. His position is centered around skateboarding, but he doesn't actually consider himself to be a skater. Instead, he is "just a visionary". He starts by telling me about his goals for how he wants to support youth in areas like Brownsville, starting with emotional development.

**Bilal:** [00:06:02] *Do things that help people in spaces like these to develop aspects of themselves and their identity, like have them be*

able to ask questions about themselves and about the world. That shit is very important to me because like, a lot of the times, it's really just not being able to think critically about yourself or about your environment, or not having some sense of identity and branding yourself in a way that might continue to traumatize yourself, or expose people around you to more trauma. [00:06:32][30.6]

Bilal begins describing his experience attempting to recruit a friend he grew up with, who I will call, “LL”, onto HHF’s team. I actually know LL just through skateboarding, and so we were able to bond over this for a quick second before he started to give his perspective on how an environment like Brownsville shapes a young person’s mindset.

***Bilal:** [00:11:19] His relationship to the industry, I don't think it's conducive for his growth or well-being as a young man, right? Because he's at a critical phase in his life where he's just like, OK, where's the bread? It's not crazy, because again, like all of the heavy industrial complexes that we have at play in a space like this make it very difficult for somebody who is coming of age unless they have access to mad resources, right? [00:11:48][28.7]*

Bilal points to how the conditions of growing up in a neighborhood like Brownsville often create a sort of survival mindset, where the first concern becomes about making money (i.e: “the bread”). He expresses disappointment in the idea that LL is unwilling to serve his own community on the basis that he himself will not be able to monetarily benefit from doing so. While Bilal sees programs such as skate clinics as a beneficial start to improving the lives of Brownsville youth, LL just sees it as a waste of time. This speaks to a larger issue of how these

communities become stuck by perpetuating a capitalist neoliberal mindset that only becomes exacerbated by having grown up in an impoverished neighborhood. A cycle is reproduced which fails to address any structural issues that could be attributed to social inequalities in the area, hence Bilal's emphasis on learning to be critical about oneself and their environment.

While growing up in Brownsville, Bilal participated in various youth development programs from which he expressed having a variety of positive and negative experiences. One of the programs he participated in promoted teaching filmmaking to youth. Through this organization, called "Reel Works", Bilal was able to make a "verité" short film based on his own experiences navigating adolescence in Brooklyn. Also being part of a young adult learning center, part of the deal was that finishing this short film would allow him to graduate high school as he was behind on credits. Around two years after finishing his film, however, the Reel Works used his story and turned it into a feature film titled, "72 Hours: A Brooklyn Love Story". Although the program inspired his love for filmmaking, Bilal felt bitter that his creative property had been stolen and produced into a film both without his consent and without receiving any sort of compensation. He then began to describe to me how he would cope with his frustrations through potentially dangerous activities, and how realizing this allowed him space for self-reflection.

**Bilal:** [00:19:54] Like the shit that I do afterwards, right? I've never been diagnosed with anything, but I do mad, crazy, shit, mad, dumb ass. Like, I shoplifted a lot and I stopped in recent years. But like in general, like I do shit like that when I feel mad, exacerbated it, right? Like when I was in college, just the stress from the environment, I would just go downtown afterwards and I'd use

another stressful situation to try to decompress from it. And I had to unpack that. [00:20:28][33.5]

In attempting to understand himself, Bilal described the connections he found between himself and Harold Hunter.

**Bilal:** [00:21:31] *Basically, my upbringing is also not dissimilar from Harold Hunter's or like the people that he spent time with. So I definitely also come from an addict family, right? So it's like, my mother stopped those habits long before I was born, but my sisters had to grow up in that sort of environment. You never really stop. The qualities that you grow when you're doing that shit are things that you keep like throughout your life.* [00:22:05][34.5]

HHF's mission resonates with Bilal on a personal level. His comments point to how family and generational trauma can have a tremendous impact on the way a young person grows up and interacts with the world. Unpacking these qualities, such as his tendency to get into trouble as means of coping with stress, became an important step towards understanding himself so that he could help others from similar backgrounds.

With all that said, however, Bilal went into working for HHF still knowing that certain non-profit initiatives can end up ultimately harming the population they claim to serve. He hopes to use his experiences to help inform better ways of serving at-risk youth that don't leave them with a "bad taste in their mouth".

**Bilal:** [00:36:41] *So if I'm so now, I'm the guy with these experiences, right? And now I want to make programs that engage youth,*

*right? In a meeting one day, I think I definitely briefly went over my experiences with real works, and I said, You know, the fact that I'm like the fact that I'm working HHF, you should not take lightly right because of the way I've been scarred by the not-for-profit industrial complex, like that shit it hurts and is very traumatizing. But this also means that I trust you guys tremendously, right? And so the fact that I'm here, that means that Imma do the type of shit that I think makes the most sense. [00:37:24][42.7]*

Part of Bilal's role at HHF involves community outreach, where he attempts to build relationships with other organizations doing youth development work as well as other entities such as the NYPD. Bilal has had his own run-ins with the police, however, his perspectives towards them have changed as he views collaboration amongst all parties within a community to be conducive towards creating a better environment for kids to grow up in. Doing so would provide the skate clinics as well as other HHF programs with more forms of support. Accessibility is also a huge focus for Bilal, as he's had several of his own experiences being rejected from certain youth development programs. It's been a special experience for him to do this kind of work, and he is passionate about grassroots initiatives as the intentions are usually in a better place. The lack of funding still poses a challenge for smaller programs, however, and Bilal finds himself in the middle of navigating and reshaping the sphere of youth development programming in Brownsville.

**Bilal:** *[01:13:04] You come down, you sit, and Kevin is out here in the field with you. It's skate community shit, like this is so weird, but at the same time, it's like, grassroots. We're really outside and it*

*feels good to have, you know, your program director pulling up and he's here with you. [01:13:25][21.4]*

The next two youth mentors I interviewed were Turtle and Shani.

I first met Shani around three weeks into attending the skate clinics. She is 27 years old and a mother of two young daughters. Her children were always at the park with her. Whenever Shani was busy with the skate clinics, she would ask one of the local boys whom she knew and trusted to watch them for her.

Growing up in Canarsie, Shani began skating when she was 14 years old. East New York faces similar challenges to Brownsville in terms of being a difficult environment for young people to grow up in. It's demographic most definitely includes at-risk youth, and Canarsie and its surrounding neighborhoods often have a reputation for being dangerous compared to other parts of NYC.

Shani first started skating at Canarsie Park with a couple friends, where she became acquainted with an older man named Lenny. Being a former skater himself, Lenny was able to appreciate the ways in which Shani and her friends used the space, and provided them with water and snacks as modes of encouragement. Eventually, he would suggest the idea of having a skatepark built in the park given his relationship with the mayor. Shani and her friends then had the opportunity to design the Canarsie skatepark, which officially opened in 2012.

Turtle is 29 years old and from Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Like Shani, he also started skateboarding at the age of 14. As a young skater, Turtle met a lady by the name of Tracy Johnson. She provided skateboards for Turtle and his friends, as well as taking them skate trips with her husband. She would eventually help turn Brower skatepark, which at the time was

neglected and bare, into a real skatepark through her connections with the city and parks department.

I spoke with Turtle about his experiences growing up as a skateboarder and the level of support he received from his family growing up.

**Turtle:** [00:15:00] I didn't have too much parental support growing up in skateboarding, and it was only until I won some money in a competition that my mom kind of. Oh, wow. Like, he actually really wants to do this and actually something can come out of it. And it's like, if I would have had that parental support before, you know, I probably could have took things further. You know? And it does go a long way, I realize, like, boy, in a way, it does make you stronger too, because you feel like you don't have all the support.

[00:15:42] [42.2]

Turtle makes the point that although the lack of support can be discouraging, such can also make you feel stronger as an individual because you feel like you're on your own. Parents often have their own idea of how they want their child to succeed, especially when they come from troubled environments and the goal may be to "make it out" of their current circumstances.

HHF mentors appear to fill in as a sort of guidance role for youth who lack certain systems of support for doing what they love. However, this isn't to say that their parents are generally irresponsible. In many cases, they might lack the resources to support their child and hence introduce them to youth development programs, such as in Bilal's case. In any case, the

relationships formed through these support systems can be extremely helpful in steering at-risk youth away from trouble.

During lunchtime at one of the skate clinics, Shani once described to us how she de-escalated a dangerous situation between a teenager she knows, whom I will call “J”, and the police. J stole a cellphone from a 10-year old boy at the park, and the victim’s family ended up reporting the incident to the police. Before officers could arrive at J’s apartment, Shani was able to convince J to give her the phone so she could return it to its original owner. After speaking with the victim’s family over the phone, she was even able to convince them to call off the police search, allowing J to dodge a situation which could’ve potentially ruined his life. Shani later scolded J for doing something so careless, and the rest was left to his parents. Although J wasn’t very receptive to the idea of being saved, perhaps out of embarrassment or shame, Shani insisted that what she did was “all love” and that “he should be grateful”. After all, Shani quite literally saved this child’s life, one who was already in a precarious position as a young, black male from a neighborhood as heavily scrutinized as Brownsville.

Both Shani and Turtle place an emphasis on building these sorts of relationships with younger skaters. They share similar sentiments in terms of treating younger skaters as “homies” without asserting any sort of oppressive authority as an adult figure in their lives. In describing her relationship with a skater she watched grow up:

**Shani:** [00:41:01] *I always fed him, took care of him. That was my little baby. If you mention Shani to him, he just lights up, like, we just love each other. So it's like, you could just have these relationships with kids and it's so crazy. We don't even look at age. We're just skating and that's it. [00:41:18][17.1]*



Turtle describes his approach to building these kinds of relationships with the kids in the skate clinic.

**Turtle:** [00:35:41] One of the kids came up to me and he's like, "Why do I feel like you're my older brother?" And I was like, "Yo, that's how it's supposed to be", like, we're all homies at the end of the day. [00:35:52] [11.0]

Both Turtle and Shani's experiences show that having a positive adult figure in your life who is willing to support you and your friends can really change your outlook, opening your eyes to opportunities pertaining to the activity that you love. With the support they received, both skaters were able to make changes in their respective communities through building skateparks and fostering a new sense of community. During their time as youth mentors with HHF, both Shani and Turtle hope to cultivate similar relationships between themselves and local skaters they work with, reproducing an intergenerational cycle of care.

**Turtle:** [00:24:03] And I just love seeing new kids interested in skateboarding because, like when I was a kid, like I kind of wish somebody was like, "Hey, you want to try this?" you know, like nobody like came to me and asked me if I wanted to try skateboarding and I definitely would have been interested. And I feel like there's a lot of people that would love it and could love it. But if they don't have the access or the means to trying it, then they'll never know, right? Like, it puts a smile on my face to see like a kid's, just like, first time skateboarding, and now it's their passion. [00:24:40] [36.4]

***Shani:** [00:37:27] I love it. This is amazing because first of all, it's in the neighborhood that I live in, so it makes me feel connected to my neighborhood. Yeah, and I'm new to the neighborhood, so it makes me feel like, you know, like I made a difference in a way, I guess, like to the youth in the neighborhood and I like to like, have the opportunity to make a difference in as many people's lives as I can. That's like literally my goal. [00:37:57][29.2]*

Like Bilal, Turtle has his own aspirations for supporting the skate community through projects of his own, one of which is to throw a skate event. His experience with HHF has helped introduce him to understanding what's necessary to get these projects into motion from organization to funding. As a teacher, he wishes to see more consistent skate clinics to accommodate the need and passion of the Brownsville youth who have fallen in love with skateboarding. As a carpenter, Turtle also wants to host his own ramp-building workshops for kids. He's able to combine both his passions in ways that support one another. He is able to combine creative passions and skateboarding, allowing them to inform one another in ways that serve the community.

### **Improvisation and Liquid Death**

The skate clinics would always be scheduled to wrap up around 5pm. Around this time, we would ask the kids who borrowed skateboards and pads to return them to us so we could begin packing up. Unfortunately but also unsurprisingly, this seemed to be the kids' least favorite part of the day since many were just having too much fun to have it come to an end.

However, this was always followed by the part everyone seemed to look forward to the most after a productive day of skating was when we got to sit down and eat together as a group.

It was often scorching hot during the skate clinics, and so it was always a treat to wrap up the day in this way after each session. The food would come in individually packaged trays containing a whole meal, making them easier to distribute. Although we would often receive the same meal, it was incredibly delicious and hit the spot every single time. On a lucky day, we even got a few trays with chorizo (fried sausage) instead of chicken, which was a treat everyone enjoyed. We would also receive orders of water from a company called “Liquid Death”, which promotes drinking canned water in an effort to reduce plastic waste. The cans themselves would look similar to cans of the Corona Extra, however, which made for a funny sight of children and adults possibly enjoying some beer together if one had no idea we were actually just drinking water.

Although the food was mostly intended for the kids and adults within the program, we would almost always end up with extra trays of food left over. We would encourage the kids to take a couple if they needed some food for later. Once all the kids were enjoying their own meals, we would go around and offer the food to just about anyone in the park. Sometimes local residents would come up to us and ask if they could grab a tray for themselves or their families. It was a truly heartwarming experience being able to serve the community beyond just the skatepark, and everyone would always express their gratitude with a warm smile and a “thank you.” At the end of the day, we would simply tell people to “take as much as you need”, and of course no single person would ever just take all of it. We were all part of a community, and so the level of mutual respect and care for one another was considered a given.

There were many aspects of the Brownsville program that seemed improvisational, almost like a work-in-progress. Judging from my first few sessions, it was clear to me that it

wasn't the most structured program. We were a small team, and not everyone was able to be there for the skate clinics each time, including myself.

Attendance at the skate clinics was inconsistent, at times. There would be some days where we would be working with over ten children, and some where literally no one showed up. The weather played a huge role in this, as there were days when it would be over 90 degrees out and even the HHF staff were having a hard time cooking in the sun. There were a couple times when it also started raining, and so we would have to quickly pack everything away and call it earlier than planned. I remember one instance where we set up even while knowing that the chance of precipitation was over fifty percent, and we watched as the heavy winds took out one of our tents and carried it a distance of about 50 feet. Any skater would know that rain poses a huge threat to one's safety as well as to the condition of a skateboard itself. Everything from the wooden deck to the metal bearings could suffer some major damage as a result of getting wet.

In terms of efficiency, the skate clinics definitely saw some initial challenges. For the first few sessions of skate clinics, we didn't have our own space to store everything. Instead, everything from the skateboards to the fold-out table had to be kept in two nearby facilities: the Betsy Head Pool and a school called P.S./I.S. 323. It was sweet that they were willing to accommodate us given the work we were doing in the community, however, it wasn't necessarily the most efficient process. Mind you, although both these facilities were within a two block radius from the park, moving everything between these spaces and the park was by no means an easy task. We would have to set aside around thirty to forty-five minutes in order to bring all of our materials over to the park and prepare for the clinics. These materials would include around ten to fifteen skateboards which we kept in two plastic garbage bins, an extra strong garbage bag full of assorted pads and helmets, two collapsible tents (which later became three), a large plastic

folding table (like the kind you play beer pong with), several stools and chairs, and a couple plastic bins with administrative materials such as registration sheets and instruction guides. Not to mention that including myself, we made up a small team of only four people most of the time. To make things easier, we would try our best to hold everything on our skateboards so that we could roll everything from one place to another. Eventually, by the third week, we were able to gain access to our own lockable storage container with the permission of the City Parks Department. It was placed conveniently outside the skatepark right by where we would usually set up, and could fit most of our materials except for the foldable table and one of the tents. This wasn't a huge issue, however, as Turtle would sometimes have his truck in the neighborhood to make transporting these unwieldy items a much easier process.

With all that said, however, the lack of structure wasn't always necessarily a negative aspect. For example, there were days where we wouldn't receive eating utensils with the food, and so someone would have to make a run to the store to grab some. Along with buying the utensils, the person making the trip would always ask the kids if they had any special requests of their own, oftentimes being a bag of potato chips or a can of soda. On really hot days, one of the youth mentors would offer to buy everyone icees from the vendor nearby, who was always delighted by the sight of kids circling around her cart. Turtle once mentioned how slurping on a grape icee makes him "feel like a kid again", which speaks to the forms of connection that the mentors are cultivating with the kids. In a special way, the youth mentors represented a guardian figure who made sure to give careful attention to each child, treating them as individuals. Perhaps this is the nature of skateboarders who care for one another regardless of age.

Even when things seemed slow, the youth mentors would try to make the most out of the day as we held our position at the park. For example, there was one day when no one who was

actually registered for the skate clinic showed up. Instead, we were being approached by curious children and teenagers who didn't seem to have their parents around. The original protocol was to only let kids who were registered with us (via their parents) participate in the skate clinics. Despite this, we knew that we were going to be posted up at the skatepark for a while with all these extra skateboards and pads just waiting to be used. And so, after getting the green light over the phone, we decided to just let the nine kids who were dying to skate borrow some boards and pads for the day. We actually broke our own protocol in order to carry out our mission and accomplish what we came here to do, which was to let kids skate. At the end of the day, was it not our goal to just let the local kids have fun as they try their hands at something new and exciting? I could tell from the joy on the kids' faces once we let them pick out their gear that we had made the right decision.

**Bilal:** [01:14:46] *You literally just have to give the kids boards and just make sure that they are good because generally, like a lot of skateboarding is figuring it out yourself*  
[01:14:55] [8.2]

### **Marcus Garvey Apartment Complex (353 Chester Street)**

The date is August 21st, and we actually have a special event planned for the day. Instead of hosting our usual skate clinics at Betsy Head, HHF has coordinated with the residents of one of the public housing units in what is called Marcus Garvey Village. We would be working with children who lived in the building alongside some parents and other adults. I'm excited for the experience, but I really have no idea what to expect.

The Marcus Garvey Apartments strike me at first sight with their low-rise construction, posing a stark contrast to the towering apartment complexes that stood just blocks away. This particular building has metal features mixed with a tannish brick overlay. Sticking out from one of the walls facing Livonia Ave is a metal logo featuring an encircled tree with a stylized “MGA” just below. Hidden behind a sliding black fence, there’s a considerably large courtyard featuring a colorful playground that looks as if it could’ve been built yesterday. The paint on every surface still appears fresh, and the olive green and cheddar orange playground obstacles show few signs of use or wear. These buildings do not resemble your ordinary “projects”, at least compared to other New York City public housing units I’ve seen and been in. There is even a private security team that patrols the grounds 24/7, keeping a constant eye on who comes in and who comes out. They’re stationed in a small room right next to the fence of the courtyard.

One part that did seem to remain, however, was the amount of police presence on the streets that lined the village. Upon seeing the NYPD squad cars parked conspicuously outside every other block, my first thought when I started walking down Chester St. towards the village was that this particular block must tend to get “hot”. After doing my own research on Marcus Garvey Village, I learned that much of the building’s low-cut design was actually intended to prevent illicit activity within the space. Its chief architect, a city planner named Oscar Newman, insisted that smaller buildings containing fewer apartments would allow residents to feel a greater sense of control over their environments (*A Housing Solution Gone Awry*, 2013). Despite this theory, however, the apartment complex still faced issues over the years such as gang activity which were only met with an increase in police presence. Oftentimes, especially in the case of Black and Brown neighborhoods, the city has seen more policing as the most effective solution to addressing crime. This approach has come increasingly under fire since the Black

Lives Matter protests which sparked again towards the end of May 2020. In the New York Times article, residents complain that the police surveillance is overbearing to the point where they could not even feel comfortable sitting on their own stoops. Knowing this now, I begin to think about how the increased presence of police seems to create a self-perpetuating cycle of imminent crime through pre-emptive action. This ultimately leads to higher tensions within these communities that are already products of social inequality.

It's 3:30pm on a cloudy Saturday, the kind where the grey atmosphere is almost disorienting as the day never seems to change. It almost looks like it's about to rain. Upon entering the courtyard, I'm immediately greeted by a kind, older lady who introduces herself as Ms. Taylor. She's the building supervisor for this particular apartment, and I can immediately tell that she's thrilled at the sight of all the children simply having a fun time with their friends and neighbors. Ms. Taylor's delighted to hear that I'm with HHF, and she offers me a cup of water. Our usual plastic table is out near the entrance with the same release and registration forms stacked on top of it. Kevin, Bilal, and Turtle are already out and about with the kids, following them around as they push around the courtyard. There's a lot of flatground space here and even a mellow ramp towards the back for the skaters who feel extra confident. It honestly seems like the perfect learning environment for any beginning skater.

There are ten young skaters with us today who make up a pretty even mixture of boys and girls. Several of the kids already seem to know how to push around, yet, none of them own their own skateboard. Each instructor works with a different group of kids depending on what they want to work on. Scanning the space, I come over to help a small group of kids learn how to "kickturn" (when one pivots off the back wheels to adjust the skateboard's direction) on the ramp. We spend about twenty minutes working on kickturns, and a couple of the boys are



actually starting to figure it out. I explain that your lower body tends to follow where your upper body goes, and so it's important to lead with your shoulders by almost winding them before initiating the turn. As they work on applying this tip, other kids start to come over to the ramp and work on their own tricks alongside their friends. Some of the kids cheer as one of the young skaters builds her confidence and rides down the ramp by herself as opposed to with Bilal's help. Eventually, the session turns into a "freeskate" where the kids can go around and work on whatever they want without any sort of structured teaching. I can tell that they're having a lot of fun, as some kids zoom through the playground and wait their turn to try the next obstacle. After a while, we pause the clinic to take a couple group photos for HHF to post onto their Instagram story. Everyone is present and smiling, and I feel happy I got to make an appearance.

At 4:15pm, we declare that it's officially lunchtime, and that everyone needs to return their skateboards and pads to the bun. The kids are visibly sad that skate time is over (at least for today), but are also excited to dive into some hot food. As we all enjoy our tacos, one of the boys asks if I've ever heard of "BTS", a South Korean boy band that has reached significant heights of fame in the U.S. and elsewhere. He follows-up my nod of affirmation with a friendly, "You look like that", which I honestly had a feeling he was going to say. I take it as a compliment and return a smile. Then, one of the kids asks Bilal, "Are we gonna be broke skateboarding?", to which he responds, "Not if you make it sustainable". I'm not sure if the child knew what Bilal meant by that exactly.

At around 4:45, we begin wrapping up and everyone gets ready to go home. The kids and their parents thank us, and Ms. Taylor expresses her excitement for the next skate clinic. The security guard watches us as we each carry stacks of skateboards and bags full of helmets and other gear past the fence and out of the courtyard. It would be too difficult to bring everything

back to Betsy Head on foot, and so Kevin calls an Uber for us. After around a ten minute wait, three of us hop into our company-paid Uber, packing about eleven skateboards in the trunk while Turtle volunteers to skate back to the park with a bag of gear.

## CHAPTER III: SKATEBOARDERS AND SKATEPARKS

### **Area 51**

The gum spots on the sidewalk look all too familiar as they create Fourth Ave. From the center of the street looking towards downtown, it almost looks as if you could see the edge of the earth as you can see Atlantic Terminal from almost 30 blocks away. The afternoon sun illuminates the glass Park Slope high rises with a golden hue. As I approach Fifth Street, I start to feel strong gusts of wind punch my face and wrap my loose pant legs tightly around my shins. This single stretch between Fourth and Fifth Street has felt like a wind tunnel, even since high school.

I make a right turn up Fifth Street towards Fifth Ave. Walking up this street, I can already hear the sounds of skateboards hitting the ground accompanied by loud voices and laughter. As you pass the large apartment complex that overlooks the entire park, you can start to get a glimpse of the action taking place behind the painted black fence. Much of the atmosphere hasn't changed since I was twelve years old, only the faces.

It's hard to describe the mixture of excitement and anxiety that comes with approaching the skatepark, even after having already been going there for years. There are definitely times that still feel like the first time, where butterflies fill my stomach and flutter out from my fingertips. Embarrassingly, I remember always having to use the bathroom whenever my friends

and I would first arrive at a skatepark, especially when it was different from our local. Sometimes I owe it to being so excited to skate at a new park, but also the anxiety of being in a new environment with different skaters watching you. It would be intimidating to enter a new space with its own community of locals. Although you have access to the space as a fellow skater, you are still an outsider in other terms.

The skatepark we've arrived at is officially named "Washington Skatepark", although you will probably never hear those words come out of a local's mouth. The park is located within the property of a middle school called M.S. 51, and so it is often referred to as just "51". Others may call it "Fifth", as it lies at the intersection of Fifth Street and Fifth Ave. Compared to other skateparks in New York City, 51 is actually quite meager. To begin, it isn't a full concrete build like LES or any of the other new skateparks that have been built in the past five years. It opened in 2008, and was basically set up in an empty lot that used to be a basketball court years before. The ground itself is now riddled with long cracks, and the skatepark lies on a slight slope going downhill towards Fourth Ave.

The skatepark's features include two plastic ledges that are coated in wax, one of which is twice the length of the other. Ledges are obstacles which skaters use to practice grinds, as they have an edge which can make contact with any surface on the skateboard from the deck to the trucks. Skaters often use the expression, "lock in", to refer to how someone may get into the motion of a grind. The longer plastic ledge is attached by its side to a metal platform of similar height with two small ramps on each end. This obstacle is usually called a "fun box", and from the side it appears as a rusty trapezoid. Towards the back of the park, there is also a curved rail meant for grinds that's called a C-Rail (although it actually looks more like the letter J due to heavy usage and age). Around 2018, someone from the skate community brought in three new

obstacles that were made of cement, making them much more durable. These included another ledge with metal coping (angle iron laced on the edge to help with locking into grinds), a planter ledge (a ledge with a lowered patch of grass in the middle making it a more challenging obstacle), and a brick-laid quarter-pipe with a jersey barrier attached to the back. This wasn't even the first time someone had donated their own obstacles to 51, however, previous attempts had always been unsuccessful since the Parks Department would take them away due to liability issues. In this case, the concrete material made each obstacle much too heavy for a single person to move let alone five.

Since I started skateboarding, I've always noticed a generational aspect between younger, beginning skaters and those who are older and have more experience. Experience doesn't only refer to learning tricks and skateboarding itself, but also refers to how much time we've spent in a particular space to the point where we consider it our home (aka: the "local"). As I got older and started to notice younger groups of skaters coming into the park on a regular basis, I couldn't help but see myself and my own friends who were in their exact position at one point.

### **Skaters Talk with Eachother**

I sit with Max at a quieter spot towards the back wall of the skatepark, right in front of the Pablo Ramirez mural and the small yet growing garden that sat before it. Just when we start to discuss the injury risk in skateboarding, we see our friend Jose from a distance take a nasty fall. He holds his shoulder in agony as he stands up and begins walking towards the back of the skatepark where Max and I were sitting. After asking if he's okay, Jose affirms that he's "good", and sits down a few feet away from me on my left. After a few minutes, we check in again to ask if his shoulder's okay. He had dislocated his shoulder again, and actually popped it back into

place himself while Max and I were talking. Jose then asks what we're doing, and I tell him that I'm interviewing Max for the same project I mentioned to him about earlier. At first he seems a bit uncomfortable and begins to announce his exit, but instead I reassure him that he can stick around and chime in if he was interested in doing the interview as well. After all, he does seem particularly interested in what we had been talking about. As he moves in closer to where me and Max are sitting, he makes the comment, "Sidetalk NYC at 51", drawing some laughter. 'Sidetalk NYC' is New York City's unofficial "one-minute street show", where two NYU students interview random New Yorkers in one-minute shorts to be uploaded onto Instagram. Although this is clearly different from my own project, Jose's comment still shows a certain excitement that comes with knowing your voice will be recorded and shared across a wider audience.

With three people in our interview now, I ask Jose to introduce himself for the recording so we could run back over the questions I already asked Max. About ten minutes in, our two friends Paul and Jackson approach us to let us know that they're heading out. Before they do though, Jackson asks if I'm doing the interview and when it'll be his turn. I can immediately tell that he's feeling left out so I invite him and Paul to join us. We then continue the interview, this time more in the form of group discussion as the skaters respond to one another's' answers. Finally, Nelson comes over to see what we're doing when he sees that all his friends at the skatepark are sitting in the back engaged in what seems like a deep discussion. As it wouldn't make sense to leave him out after already having let in several other skaters, I welcomed him to the interview and we continued our conversation with a renewed sense of passion and rigor.

It was clear that this was most of these skaters' first experience being interviewed and recorded. I was able to sense nervousness mixed with excitement as we would sit in a circle on the ground towards the back of the skatepark. I actually remember approaching FT first to see if

he would be down to do the interview, and he was the one who suggested that we instead do it with his friends as a sort of group interview. Although I had my initial hesitations due to the possibility of this possibly affecting how some would answer, I ultimately agreed. It was at this moment that I had a realization: Skateboarding is an innately social activity. By this, I mean that I would be flat-out lying if I said that I would still be skating if I didn't have any friends to do it with. Most of skateboarding's positive experiences I owe to my friends, and there's no one else I would rather discuss skateboarding with given the option. Like many others, FT has formed associations between skateboarding and his friends, where this merge altogether culminates into a vibrant and exciting social life. Groups of skater friends collectively experience the joys and sorrows that skateboarding brings. Therefore, it only made sense that I allow them to discuss these shared experiences together, too. At the end of the day, I also wanted my interlocutors to feel comfortable during our interview. Not to mention that being in any situation with a group of your friends can make for a new and exciting experience, just like in skateboarding. Especially in an interview setting, I found that doing such brought a newfound energy to the table where we all quite literally felt as if we're just simply "hanging out". Is this what being a part of a community feels like?

### **Talking to Skaters**

All of the interviews I did with skaters at 51 became long discussions that covered a wide variety of topics. As Chivers correctly observes, skaters are indeed quite passionate when it comes to talking about their activity (Chivers 80), and most skaters say that they could go on forever if they wanted to. These ideas could pertain to anything from the community to the

activity itself. Having interviewed a wide range of skaters of different ages, including the HHF youth mentors, it was interesting to observe the diversity in answers and experiences.

In terms of its benefits, many of my interlocutors expressed the idea that skateboarding helped form a sense of identity for them, and allowed them to enter a community where they could be themselves.

**Nelson:** [00:44:51] The best thing about skating, I think, is it gives you something to like, identify with. Like it gives you a sense of purpose. It's as simple as just having something to do.

[00:45:02][11.4]

**Jackson:** [00:45:20] *I think the best part of skating is like, I get to express myself. For me, I think I found myself through skating and I was able to find out who I am and express that, like through my skating, but also through how I dress. Everything, like, I'm able to just, like, be who I am myself, you know? I love that.*

[00:45:45][24.5]

Skaters also talked about the ways in which skateboarding helped them cope with various issues that arose in their lives.

**Nelson:** [00:40:45] I got mad, like, anger issues and skating helps with that. Like if I wasn't skating, I'd be like running. You need physical exercise, so it might as well be something fun, you know?

[00:41:16][31.2]

**Jose:** [00:43:10] *People skate for different reasons. Like for me, sometimes, especially when I was younger, I wasn't feeling well or*

*going through some shit. I would just go out and skate, you know, you just kind of forget about all the stress and you just focus on skating. You know, it takes your mind off stuff [00:43:22][12.7]*

Some described using skateboarding as a sort of escape mechanism, implying that such provided benefits to their mental health during stressful situations.

Many skaters also admitted that much of their social circle revolved around skateboarding. Similar to my own experiences, many expressed feeling closer with their skater friends whom they spent a lot more time with than non-skater friends. Some described how they would just go straight to the skatepark from school, or even just cut school altogether to go skate instead go skate with their friends. My conversations with young skaters started to further reveal for me that skateboarding doesn't necessarily inform a disliking for school, but rather that skateboarding provides a way of coping with such dissatisfaction. As mentioned in conjunction with Jessica's observations, skateboarding allowed kids like Mecca to express themselves in ways that are otherwise impossible to do in settings such as school.

While navigating various perceptions of themselves, however, street skaters in particular are aware of how the ways in which they interact with their environments can be perceived as disruptive. While the non-skater may perceive street skating as "vandalism", skaters prefer to instead view such on their own terms.

**Jackson:** *[00:44:31]* Yeah, well, that's why I say skateboarding is a lifestyle, because it forever changed how I look at my environment. I'd be with my girlfriend, I'd be walking and she'd be talking to me, and I'm just looking at spots. I'm like, because there's a stair set



and there's a curb, there's a bench, there's a rail, you know what I'm saying? [00:44:50][19.1]

The definition of lifestyle can vary among different groups and individuals, but essentially it refers to a way of living. If skateboarding is considered your lifestyle, then it must lie at the center of how you view the world, quite literally. Many skaters would agree with Jackson in that being a skater indeed has a profound effect on how you perceive and interact with your environment. Oftentimes this includes the mundane parts of one's environment, particularly urban ones that are riddled with various objects such as benches and stair sets. Whereas people who don't skate may just walk past these urban features, the skateboarder instead recontextualizes such, thus creating a world of endless trick possibilities. It's something that becomes so deeply ingrained in one's worldview that it becomes easy to forget that this was something your brain had to develop over time.

Some skaters find a sense of pride in hosting a rebellious image in the face of the public, especially authority figures such as their parents.

**Jackson:** [00:36:29] But like when I got back into it when I was 16, they regretted giving me a board like so bad because like I was getting hurt. I was out late. I was smoking weed. I was being a menace and I was loving it. [00:36:56][26.7]

In a psychological study titled, "*Creating friendship networks, establishing a social identity, developing a sense of belonging, meeting new people, and building connections with the community: The social capital support health benefits to be derived from skateboarding in skate-parks*", the authors make the observation that there is social capital to be gained from both

holding onto a rebellious identity as a skateboarder, particularly for youth seeking non-conforming identities (Walker et. al 143). Being a male teenage skater at the time, it would therefore make sense that Jackson would attach himself to this identity, especially considering the extent to which such was shared with his peers.

Yet, some skaters may also choose to cling onto this rebellious skater identity as means of dealing with outside pressures to conform. Mecca suggests that this is really just a sort of “defense mechanism”.

**Mecca:** [00:25:10] You're so used to being casted out of certain spaces by certain people that like you have to just like make sure that n\*ggas know who you are and like that you're jacking it, that you're claiming it like, "Oh, fuck you for being like, so dismissive of me because of what I enjoy doing." Like, I'm sure I'm going to be it, no matter what you say. And that's really like how I've felt most times, being a young black skater kid in multiple different spaces.  
[00:25:43] [32.5]

While skateboarding in some ways has helped these youth claim a sense of their own identity, skaters continue to feel pressure when it comes to being perceived by others.

**FT:** [00:04:58] *When I like when it's like the first day of school and they ask you what you do, like as a hobby, I feel cringey if I say skateboarding. I don't like saying that. I feel like everyone else judges you.* [00:05:11] [12.8]

**Mecca:** [00:23:08] *you know, people will be like, "Oh, he's the skater of skaters are this, that, skaters are always doing this, skaters are*

*like that." And it's just like, you don't know all fucking skaters because you have this like one consistent character you can rely on. So to generalize us this way, it's like, a really toxic way of seeing it from an external perspective of like being a skater.*

*[00:23:34][26.7]*

The public perception of the skateboarder becomes complicated especially along the lines of race. As skateboarding has cultivated an ethos of white masculinity (Chivers 29), non-white skaters can start to feel isolated from their own communities.

**Mecca:** *[00:18:02] "Oh, you're an Oreo white boy" shit. There was no cease to that kind of interaction I had with people. It stopped at some point because it's like, I don't have to prove how black I am, like, I'm a skater [00:18:19][16.7]*

More generally, many skaters also expressed feelings of intimidation and anxiety when they first started, especially once having to immerse themselves in an environment full of other skaters. As one skater states:

**Nelson:** *[00:47:39] One of the worst things about skating is like, it forces you to compare yourself to other people. [00:47:46][6.9]*

Every skater can relate to the gut-wrenching feeling of being “the worst one at the park”, and the level of intimidation that follows making for a truly unenjoyable experience. These anxieties can be magnified in the case of non-male or feminine-presenting skaters who enter male-dominated spaces, where they may not necessarily feel welcomed in the first place based

on their own sense of being. Yet, over time, it seems like some skaters are willing to push past this intimidation by seeking their own comfort and focusing on themselves.

**Jackson:** [00:47:56] I had anxiety whenever I pulled up to a new skatepark. But I quickly overcame that, though, because I was like, "You know what? I just want to skate. I don't care. I don't care what these people think of me". And like also, I realize that no one's really looking at me. [00:48:32][35.7]

Other skaters will choose to instead focus on another skater's personality as the main evaluator as opposed to skill.

**Mecca:** [00:22:23] *I think the one thing perceived in skating from skaters is skill. Like if somebody, if somebody is like. I was of a certain degree of skill, other skaters will look at that person differently or treat them differently. I kind of don't fuck with that because it's like for me when it comes to skill, I don't really care how, but somebody is, I care about like, what kind of person they are.* [00:22:48][25.2]

Another skater mentioned that instead of feeling bad, one should instead attempt to break the ice in a way that reduces tensions between skaters within the space.

**IN:** [00:50:59] For intimidation, I feel like when you're at a park, try commenting on their skating. It will definitely uplift your skateboarding. I usually compliment their trick and then they compliment me back. So I feel like there's less intimidation at the park [00:51:32][32.6]

While these three approaches may be viable options for male skaters amongst other male skaters, such may not be the case for those who don't fit this description. During our interview, Shani described to me her own experiences as a female skater in a male-dominated space where she faced discrimination from the community.

**Shani:** [00:17:04] And we're really there to skate and progress and do what you're doing and you're labeling us as whores. Yeah, it's like we're just here because we want boyfriends. It was terrible. It was really hard being a girl skater at the time. I had to ignore all of that. [00:17:21][16.7]

Within a skatepark setting, Shani describes being constantly sexualized as an intruder with ulterior motives. She wasn't even considered a skater. Shani was denied a skater identity by the very community which supposedly valued notions of acceptance, which poses a cruel irony. Chivers makes the claim that while many skateboarders appear to actively challenge dominant modes of masculinity, for example by rejecting notions of competition and physical dominance which seem central to most organized sports (i.e: the "jock" stereotype), they do so without actually challenging existing power relations (Chivers 173). There is a clear contradiction in the ethos of skateboarding that allows for the reproduction of male domination in subcultural spaces.

Along with being bullied by men, Shani also described a sort of toxic competitiveness amongst other female skaters at the time. Again, this was around ten years ago when the skateboarding community saw much less non-male skaters, at least at the forefront. It could be argued that the scarcity of visible female skaters can be attributed to heightened levels of competition amongst such skaters in order to gain recognition and respect from a stubborn community of men who claimed skateboarding for themselves.

Shani concluded our interview with the idea that, since then, many things have changed in regards to how people are attempting to understand and accept others in our society.

**Shani:** [01:01:35] Yeah, I mean, the world is changing. We're all trying to fit in and understand where we are and understand everybody. It's tough, but we're getting there. And I think that can only be positive, right? [01:01:48][13.0]

Although many of the experiences above may resonate with skateboarders in NYC, my research is also limited in that I only include the experiences of one non-male skater. I would've liked to hear more about female and queer identity formations in regards to skateboarding, however, the two field sites which I used appeared to be scarce of either. This may also speak to the idea that despite our changing world, skateparks are still very dominated by a particular demographic of heterosexual, cisgender males, or at least by those who make themselves visible in that way. Professional skateboarder Brian Anderson didn't come out as gay until nearly twenty years into his career, and Leo Baker didn't come out as trans until about a decade into his own. There is a persistent fear of acceptance that only reveals the gatekeeping within skateboarding as it attempts to hide itself behind a veil of universal acceptance and a "we are all skaters" mantra. For it to be truly equitable, does skateboarding have to experience social change before it can produce the ability to enact such?

### **Skateboarding, Power, and Liminality**

Betsy Head Skatepark opened to the public in 2021 following a park-wide renovation costing almost thirty million dollars. Although skateboarding isn't new to the area, the skatepark opens the floor to new opportunities for youth development. It would be safe to say that many

youth from Brownsville can be considered at-risk, as they are more vulnerable to falling into activities, for example gang violence, which place them at further risk when it comes to the U.S. Justice system. As Jessica notes, a child from this demographic is likely to run into trouble with the law, placing them one step closer to incarceration via systems such as the school-to-prison pipeline. Yet, when one adds skateboarding to the mix, many of these trappings become avoidable.

Many skaters described to me how much they disliked school, and such comments may raise many questions in terms of the efficacy of skateboarding as a tool for youth development. As a head figure of HHF, Jessica describes her dilemma when it comes to engaging with Brownsville parents who express a desired track for their child's success. These trajectories are often informed by mainstream ideals regarding structured education. This raises issues for families when it comes to realizing that such a track may not be possible for their child given the constrained method in which one is expected to take it. It therefore makes sense that schools express a certain skepticism when it comes to accepting skateboarding as a positive activity, especially given the adversarial relationship that often exists between skaters and authority figures within a structured system. However, Mecca's experience points to how it wasn't skateboarding that influenced his disliking for school, but rather that skateboarding helped him cope with the various discrepancies which already existed with him being a black, neuroatypical male in a rigid, predominately-White setting. Mecca, like many other young NYC skaters, felt forced to conform to the standards which were dropped onto him but were never designed to accommodate him in the first place, and any deviation from this was only met with punishment. In the broader picture of NYC youth who skateboard, particularly with at-risk youth, this

dynamic reveals itself to be a self-perpetuating cycle that only serves to reinforce existing power hierarchies. Without skateboarding, this cycle tends to produce severe consequences when a child from a vulnerable population starts turning towards a life of delinquency, crime, and ultimately, incarceration.

Being positioned within a system where you never feel heard can feel incredibly isolating. During our interview, Bilal mentioned that forming an associative identity is often an issue for youth in Brownsville, who face pressures from all directions in determining who they are and who they will become. The mainstream approach in America, informed by capitalist ideals, would be to stay in school and get into a good college so that you can get a well-paying job. However, the ways in which this structured approach is imposed and obliged can feel incredibly oppressive for these youth, only exacerbating existing tensions between themselves and mainstream society. It becomes easy to forget that such opportunities for growth are not designed to accommodate young people from these at-risk communities, if they are even offered at all. As a result, these conditions may lead such youth to choose a path that may seem the most accessible while providing instant gratification in an environment such as Brownsville, for example, identifying with an illicit street gang.

Kevin, along with many other skaters I spoke with, described skateboarding as a means to identifying with a community, and feeling accepted someplace. Along with making friends, young skaters from troubled environments are able to look to older skaters for guidance and support, seeking to fill a guardian/mentor role which may not be fulfillable by other entities such as family members and school authorities. HHF's youth mentors aim to create this sort of relationship with Brownsville youth, as they themselves are familiar with what it's like to grow up in troubled environments with inadequate guidance. In Shani's case, her relationship with J



saved the teenage boy from life-changing consequences with the law. As part of a community, these skaters make sure to look out and care for the younger generation, especially when they observe that such youth lack this support elsewhere. It's also important to note that, during our conversations, the relationship between the older and younger people was never described as a parental role but more so that of an older sibling.

Although these relationships may appear to reinforce a distinction between older and younger people, they do so in a way that allows for the latter to retain a sense of individuality and freedom of expression which is often suppressed in organized activities. Jessica made the point that many at-risk youth in NYC have never participated in an “adult-led activity”, with emphasis on the fact that adults are in a position of power. In turn, skateboarding provides an activity that challenges this power dynamic, as both younger and older skaters are able to share similar experiences on a common ground, quite literally. Skateboarding directly challenges capitalist transitions from youthhood into adulthood through enacting a state of liminality, which Edward Turner uses to describe social relationships in regards to “communitas”. In a traditional youth development setting, such a transition is usually heavily informed by differentiations in age, status, or role (Turner 359). With skateboarding, however, these distinctions become disrupted as both younger and older skaters are able to occupy the same space while maintaining a mutual level of respect for one another.

Even outside the realm of youth advocacy, older skaters continue to earn the respect of younger skaters without having to assert any sort of authority. Kevin calls them the “OGs” (Original Gangsters). Shani calls them skateboarding's “forefathers”. There is an observable generational dynamic around the idea that we, being the present generation of skaters, would not be here doing what we love if it weren't for the sacrifices made by those from the past. To

recontextualize Turner in this sense, “The high could not be high without low, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low” (Turner 360). This can be translated into different aspects of skateboarding, whether as a continuous process of cultural transformation, or even just in terms of learning how to skateboard itself. As Mecca bluntly put it during our interview:

**Mecca:** [00:51:17] You gotta suck before you can get really good.

[00:51:20] [2.6]

## CONCLUSION: “THANK YOU, SKATEBOARDING”

Much of my fieldwork for this project revolved around listening to others’ experiences with skateboarding while also attempting to understand why they love it so much. While it was inevitable that I would attempt to answer this question for myself throughout my many years of being a skateboarder, I hoped that by hearing the lived experiences of others, such would be able to translate into a larger picture of how skateboarding could play a positive role in youth development, particularly for at-risk youth. Skateboarders often find themselves to be a misrepresented population, and so I made it my intention to center the voices of others given my own existing presumptions about what skateboarding has meant to me. From my own social position, it’s often felt like I’ve been able to take skateboarding for granted. This isn’t to deny that such has played a large role in the formation of my own identity, however, speaking with others has indeed made for a valuable learning experience in terms of understanding the power of what skateboarding can do for young people in different positions from myself.

Many of the skaters I spoke to expressed feeling marginalized within the dominant cultural realm in some way or another. It seems that many skaters found that such an activity helped them to find a community which allowed them to retain their sense of individuality. Skateboarding has also allowed them to continue being themselves despite the pressure felt from outside entities such as family and school. This project isn't intended to downplay the importance of such entities, yet, it becomes clear that the way society is currently structured, for example through the lens of capitalism, can pose difficult challenges for those who don't fit the mold. Skateboarding provides a way for youth to cope with their own issues that are often ignored or exacerbated in such settings. Some skaters lacked support from their families, but perhaps only because these families lacked the necessary resources to support their children's passions, speaking to a larger social problem that may not be solvable through skateboarding alone. As a result, they seek modes of support from the skateboarding community which they struggle to find elsewhere. Through their own pursuit of happiness, skaters appear to actively challenge life's obstacles through their resistance to structure, notions of public and private property, and capitalist notions of what it means to grow up in the world. Skaters have a long history of being outcasted as destructive delinquents as they pursue an activity which is deemed to have no productive value in what's considered to be "the real world".

With that said, each new conversation I had was enlightening, ultimately causing me to reframe my original research question from, "how does skateboarding both aid and complicate youth development?", to instead ask, "**how does skateboarding aid youth in actively resisting the modes of power which have been placed against them?**". I learned that skateboarding truly empowers young people to pick their own path and to live life on their own terms despite its many challenges. Organizations such as HHF are only here to support them in this process as

opposed to shooting them down. Being a skateboarding organization, it made sense for HHF to go against the grain in terms of providing support for children who otherwise may never see such within other forms of youth programming. It was an absolute pleasure to have been able to take part in the Brownsville skate clinics where I got to witness kids being kids, simply having fun on their skateboards alongside their friends and neighbors.

The skateboarding community itself isn't perfect, however, and my conversations with some of its members made this very clear. Skaters still experience forms of discrimination from within the community, for example in race, gender, sexuality, and skill. My research was limited in this sense, however, and I would've liked to hear more about the experiences of non-male and non-heterosexual skateboarders for whom these issues are especially present. Doing so would provide a more comprehensive look into the experiences of skateboarders as its community becomes more diverse, at least visibly. Sexual violence is also an issue which is continually being addressed in the skateboarding community, and so it's inspiring to see skaters attempt to do so through community action and honest conversation. If skateboarders make up a community, then the skatepark serves as a communal space to organize and address pervasive issues within it. Yet, organizations such as HHF have also shown that the skateboarding community is not an isolated, self-serving entity. Rather, the skateboarding community can open possibilities for bringing people together through various forms of collective activism. In the words of Audre Lorde:

*"Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist" (Lorde 2).*

I believe that skateboarding speaks to Lorde's idea in a special way, as it has the ability to cultivate a strong sense of community while allowing one to be themselves. Further, skateboarding is able to inspire a sense of freedom in the lives of those who feel trapped within oppressive systems. Existing power relations that cross lines of race, gender, and other identity markers inform the reality of many skateboarders, yet, it's clear that the gradual changes seen in the skateboarding world in terms of diversity are also influenced by the social transformations which occur outside the skateboarding world.

The world of skateboarding, including its inhabitants, are quite complex in its many navigations between mainstream and subcultural realms. During our interview, Jose noted that once someone becomes a skateboarder, they become strangely obsessed with everything about it. I found this to be true in regards to my own experience. My discussion with skateboarders went broad, to say the least, as we would cover topics from the Olympics to the advent of TikTok skateboarding content. We would quite literally talk for hours. I deeply enjoyed all of these conversations, and I absolutely learned more from my research about how skateboarding can truly change someone's life. I also made some new friends along the way. Regrettably, I wish I had more time to expand on other subjects as they pertain to negotiations of identity and conflicting notions of authenticity. Again, to capture the cultural shifts within the atmosphere of the skateboarding world through the voices of more non-male, non-heterosexual skaters would be quite valuable in understanding such through a wider and more inclusive lens. However, the nature of my project caused me to shift focus as I began investing more time and interest into the realm of non-profit work as it pertains to an activity I hold so dearly close.

It undoubtedly takes a lot to be a skateboarder, and the process of becoming one requires lots of patience, resilience, and perseverance. To understand how these qualities can be

translated into other aspects of a skater's life, even within the mainstream cultural realm, is still a question I would like to further explore. In many ways, one would find themselves needing these qualities in order to survive in the world. If not anything else, however, skateboarding indeed provides a unique form of happiness that can't be found elsewhere. Even against all odds, skateboarding teaches you to keep pushing forward.

With that said, I wish to conclude this ethnography with the words of skaters whom I had the privilege of interviewing as part of my research. At the end of the day, I hope that someone who doesn't know anything or has ever been curious about skateboarding can start to learn a thing or two, and perhaps even consider trying it out for themselves.

**Max:** [00:10:35] Once you meet a skateboarder, if you're close with a skateboarder, then you'll understand that like, you know, it's a really positive thing for a lot of people. [00:10:41][6.3]

**Paul:** [00:28:02] It's my happy intake. Like when I'm skating, like, I'm probably taking in the most genuine happiness. [00:28:07][5.4]

**Kevin:** [00:29:03] The feeling of acceptance was the one thing I was yearning for as a kid because, you know, I didn't talk to anyone and I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. And then, yeah, I started skating, and it was the first time I felt finally accepted, like in a group with other people. [00:29:19][15.7]

**Turtle:** [01:00:48] Skateboarding is liberating. It's literally freedom. [01:00:50][2.0]

**Mecca:** [00:47:17] Oh yeah, I mean, a whole lot of shit gets passed down. You know, how like in school they teach you, "Oh, like humans used to learn through storytelling". Like, that's really what skateboarding is. It's like storytelling, like chasing down information and like, that's how things change and evolve.

[00:47:39][21.7]

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