Student videographer: All right, and we’re recording, can you say just a few things so I can make sure the levels are fine?

PM: Sure, so...Roderick, what year did you graduate from Bard?

RM: Class of 1980.

PM: So you were [here] from 1976 to ‘80...what made you decide to come to Bard?

RM: Actually, the trees and the grass.

PM: Trees and the grass?

RM: Coming from the Bronx in New York City, a lot of concrete, a lot of noise, so as I pulled up on Campus Row, mother nature just overwhelmed me, and my dad said, “You haven’t even been inside the classroom buildings or talked about the courses.” And I said, “This is the place, this is it.” And he trusted me, and it turned out to be the best decision I made.

PM: Did you apply to other places?

RM: I don’t even remember after that where I applied to, whatever my high school, you know, college advisor gave me a list and I think it went alphabetical order so Bard was right up there, and that was it.

PM: What did you major in here?

RM: I majored in language and literature, and that’s where I got my ability and my desire and my passion for writing.

PM: Are you a writer now?

RM: No, I’m actually just retired as a schoolteacher. But it got me in a world of helping and guiding young students in writing to get over their fear, or burden that they’ve placed on writing. So I felt very successful through that.

PM: So your Bard experience actually was a foundation for what you did later in life.
RM: Yes, yes. Definitely, definitely, because it prepared me not only for the job but for working with people other than my color. And that was a step up from the idea where we have to only be with your kind socially, and only get jobs where you felt comfortable because there were a few African Americans working there. But I was able to work in a totally white environment with no problem, and I thank Bard College for that because I saw the person, and not the color. So a lot of my friends were just amazed at how well I can do that without adopting any prejudices or putting on any fake airs about who I was and what I was doing there.

PM: That’s interesting, you brought up an interesting thing- thirty-five years ago the world was a different place, certainly the United States was, what was it like for a student of color here at Bard in the mid-1970’s?

RM: The first thing, it was comfortable. Can you believe that? In the sense that people said hello to me, people addressed me, students and classmates always addressed me as “Roderick, the person” and not the Black person. But there was one thing interesting, a young lady; well I always call her young, but she was a senior, and she took us around at orientation, and we looked at buildings, we talked, but like you just asked, I had to whisper in her ear I said, “What’s going on with our people up here?” And she said, “Oh you’ll notice that we tend to stay together and you’ll get to notice the lay of the land,” and I said, “Okay”...uh, I started talking to some of the Black girls on campus and they certainly wouldn’t give me the time of day, due to the fact there were more...um, more men than women and they had the choice of the litter. So I saw Pat, her name was Pat Rock, I saw her later on, I said, “What do you do about this situation?” She said, “Go to lunch this afternoon with one of your white classmates, sit down and get very comfortable and talk, and then every so often look over to where we sit, the Black students, and see if they’re pointing at you or looking in your direction. That’ll let you know what’s going on.” So I sat there with one of my classmates and I kept looking over and there’s people pointing and whispering, so I said “Oh damn that’s right, that’s it.” So I did make an impression on some people up here, but here’s something that’s in addition to- the young lady was shaking a little bit, she was kind of nervous, and I asked, I said, “Why are you so nervous?” and she said, “Well I’m from Nebraska, I’ve never been this close to a Black person before, much less a Black man.” And I said “Wow,” and like you said, 1973, it was that way. So I said, “Well, you can relax cause I’m not going to cut you up and boil you and eat you,” and I said, “We’ll become great friends,” and we did; we kept in touch all through our years. But then I sat back in my dorm room that night and said, wow, what an opportunity to be seen as Roderick, who happens to be Black, and then to break down the reverse role of just staying with Black people here, cause the whole other campus was open to me, so I said you know, I’m not going to just relegate myself to the people that I grew up with and stayed with in the Bronx. It was a very good opportunity to see the world up close.
PM: So it opened your horizons?

RM: Very much so. And every year I returned, many of my friends from the neighborhood said “There’s something different about you. Your language has changed, your willingness to talk to people on the street of all different colors.” I said, “Bard College.” You get the chance to practice every day. And by the time I was a senior, you see a Black girl on campus, you say hello, and they speak with an accent, you say “Where you from?” “Nigeria.” I said, “Oh, Nigeria,” you know, all of a sudden the world continues, as a senior, to open up. So I was so prepared to go back to New York City with this diversity that feels like home.

PM: You taught in the New York City schools?

RM: Yes, I did uh, twenty-three years in high school, and seven years in middle school. And some of the old schools in the Bronx, Evander Childs High School being the first, and then DeWitt Clinton High School being my last, with Clinton having the most prestige around the country because of the people that went there. And again, as a teacher, there were very few black men in the department, and what I- the department of special education- and that’s one thing I learned from Bard too, was to look deeper than the surface. And I realized that there are students with special needs, autism, things like that, but there are students who are labelled special ed where there’s nothing wrong with them. But the parents get social security money for having their son labelled by a doctor or a test, and I met these students and said, “I see you’re writing like a Bard professor, I hear you talk, you don’t belong in this environment you need to be in what they considered general education or regular education.” And some of the students were thankful, they were bored to death doing easier work, and others were really nervous, and there was run-ins with parents who said “I need this money.” I said “Yeah but you’re labelling your child for the future.” And I met my wife to be and we were on a crusade, up here at Bard the same thing, I took an issue with it, and we returned twenty-three students in one year back to regular ed, between the both of us. Because we realized they didn’t belong, they had much more potential.

PM: So you credit Bard with a lot of your outlook on the world, and your way of dealing with things, that opened your eyes up and your horizons…

RM: Yes, there had to be something different or something better. And that’s the way I looked at it every year, and when I changed schools, when I came with a reputation, I usually came with a reputation as being a troublemaker. And I didn’t understand it at first but then I realized that everyone, every administration I worked for, liked things status quo. And when you show up to department meetings and you’re raising your hand, and you’re asking questions, and people are getting nervous, especially the administrator, they’re looking like, “Who is this new man that’s
come to teach at our school?” But yet there were other teachers around me were saying, “Thank you, somebody’s finally here with an open mind and an open conscience.” And that’s when they questioned, “Where did you do your undergrad at?” “Bard College.”

PM: Okay, just to get back to Bard, do you remember some of your professors who were especially influential?

RM: Uh, Elizabeth Stambler for poetry, she had passed, uh, Robert…Robert uh, last name, he was my history- no English, it was uh, Michael Jones was it? Latin, and why I liked- I know his first name was Michael- the Latin class was interesting. My father wanted me to take Latin, and I couldn’t understand why till I pressed him. He said, “When I talk with my white friends I want to brag that my son is taking Latin.” *laughs*

PM: *laughter*

RM: I said, “Dad, you can’t mean that.” He said, “No.” I said, “But it’s a dead language, I haven’t- I’m just barely getting over Spanish!” So I finally gave in, I took the class. And that’s when the professor looked around and said, “I have a Black person in my class!” And I’m sitting there real tight-lipped, so he says to me one day I came in, he says, “I need you to speak up in class. You’re the only person of color, but more importantly you’re the only one from a big city environment. I got little town folk here.” So I said, “All right, I’ll do my best.” Came for the first paper, I went home, opened up the textbook, I’m copying chunks out of which I never did in high school, fixed it up and handed it in.” I get it back and in the corner it says “PH.” I looked at some of the others, they said B+ but I had PH, and it said “see me.” Okay, so I went to his office, and as soon as I came in, he said, “Oh Roderick,” and he turned his nameplate around, “Have a seat.” He said, “Do you know what that PH means?” I said, “Well, judging by the way you’ve written it it’s not ‘Doctorate.’” He said, “What sound does ‘PH’ make?” I said, “Ph…ph… ‘f’ sound.” “Now you know what you got on your paper.” I said, “Oh, wow.” And then he said, “Do you have your textbook?” I said, “Sure.” He said, “Who’s the author?” I said, “Dr. Michael…” and he went like this *unknown gesture* and his nameplate said “Dr. Michael.” So there I am copying down in the book of the professor who wrote the book, and he says to me, “I know what’s in the book cause I wrote it.” He goes, “I want to know what’s in your mind, so that we can go further.” And I was so embarrassed, so, uh…disheartened cause I never did that before. There’s no way I could tell my father that this happened, so what I decided to do was get real into the class, and it lit my fire. And the Bard professors had a way of doing that- not putting you down so you never recover, but putting you down to say, “Look, don’t try to pull anything,” but at the same time, encouraged you to do better. So my next term paper was titled “Socrates and the Bronx.” And the title stunned him, he wanted to get into it. And when it was over with, he was passing out the papers and he walks by me, and no paper. So now I’m saying to myself,
“What’s going on now?” And he said, “I see Roderick is sitting there with a puzzled look on his face, wondering where’s his paper.” He said, “Well I want to ask him a favor.” He looked at me, he said, “I want to know if I can make copies of this to show other freshmen what a freshman paper should look like.” So you know I puffed my chest up because I was...and he told me he said that it was interesting of the title, and a quick thing about the title was that Socrates used to be on a corner speaking, and people paid him no mind until they started to gather and listen to his philosophies, and they said, “You know what, this guy is making sense,” and the crowds got bigger and bigger, till the Roman government got a little nervous saying, “This guy could start trouble.” And I’ve seen that in the Bronx, we have religious people out on the corner, and they’re exposing scripture, and explanations about the scripture, and people just keep passing them by, but slowly a couple people stop, there’s a few “amen”s and before you know it the crowd got bigger, they had to move it off the corner because people couldn’t walk. And then I thought of Malcolm X, the way he started that in Harlem, challenging Christians coming out of church with ideas that no one paid attention to him, but after a while the crowds started getting bigger and bigger, till the fact that the police wanted to- and the mayor wanted to know, who was this man speaking and getting all these people together? And he fell in love with the paper, and I felt so proud, and that was really my kick-off to say, “You know what, if I take stuff out of my mind, I put it on paper, this place likes it, so I’m going to write more.” And I couldn’t wait-

PM: So this was your influence to write? To express yourself?

RM: Yes, that was it, definitely. And then Elizabeth Stambil, my poetry teacher, helped me get the creative thing going after that, so it was a beautiful experience.

PM: Have you had much to do with Bard over the years?

RM: Yes, when they came to my high school, uh, college day, I told them I would set up the table with a young person about to graduate, and one that did, too, and when the students came by, I let the young people there explain, and then when they saw me they said, “Mr. Michael, you went to Bard?” I said “Yes I did.” And I gave them a quick story about things you’d expect to see, and a handful might’ve signed up for that, but that’s one way I helped, and also I sent them information about how it helped me get my job as a teacher. I had to stay put in a system that really is designed for students to fail, and also for teachers to drop out. But I knew I was there for the long run, and ready to deal.

PM: And Bard helped you with that?

RM: Oh yes, oh yes definitely. Because you...you can know how to change on the fly, and you also know how to plant something more solid, and that was the beauty here. Meaning that,
certain times you go to class, and a professor will be out unknown, for a week or two. So in any other college environment they’d say, “Hey, we’re free from the class!” But that professor would send somebody equally qualified, to take the class, and Leon would accept them after an interview with them, and it looked like you never missed a beat. Cause they came ready and prepared. So I just said, “This place is amazing.” Where nothing loses the beat, no matter what’s going on. So yeah.

PM: Interesting. Any...any final thoughts or comments about Bard?

RM: Well, I still-

PM: Your experience, or its long term...you know anything, I, I throw it open to you, as a…

RM: Okay. Well, I like the fact that Leon is still open to ideas of change, and ideas of progress, and that a student here will always have a voice. As a returning student, every time we had a gripe, Leon would come to our dorm where we all had a meeting, and he would listen to everybody. And then respond- I don’t know how he remembered, but he would respond to everybody’s, uh, gripe, and then he would put out a report on what he heard, and then move with the smaller groups, student committee, and changes would be made. And every time I returned, there would be a change. New building, renovated building, new courses, new professors coming in from around the world. And we’re like, “Wow, we got a person FROM South Africa to teach about South Africa and apartheid.” I said, “I’ve never seen that before in my talk among my other college people.” So as long as him and the administration keep moving like this, it’s been beautiful. Open for change and not afraid of criticism. So I always liked that with Bard, because that’s what I took into the world. I was ready to be criticized, and stay on point and not take it personal. And my wife still can’t believe that I don’t get mad, and crazy, or put my foot down.

PM: Bard did that for you too, helped regulate your marriage?

RM: Well it made- yeah. Well you know what it is, it makes you confident without being conflictual. You know, my wife, I say “Why don’t you just say ‘I’m sorry’? That’s what you really want to say.” I said...it’s that, we...learning here, we learn to deal with situations that pop up. But when you recognize a situation, that uh, has all the signs of leading to a negative outcome or, or something you just passed it by. To the threat of being called names and everything. And then later on, I know, my um, my martial arts instructor once said, “We train for the unpredictable, and we walk away from the predictable fool,” as he called it. So that’s why I never had a problem here, I’d also referee from time to time situations that may have happened. I helped my dorm mates because I was, as a freshman I took over as a PC here. And- a peer counselor.
PM: A peer counselor, okay.

RM: And, because no one was there, no senior had picked up the job, and Tewksbury was running wild. So I asked for the job and the security guy said, “You can have it,” and I called a meeting- again, that feeling from Bard, you call a meeting- put out some ideas, and we ran the dorm from there. And I helped the woman who cleaned, because that’s what I did on another job of mine, and um, I realized that this is the place where you can do things and get rewarded. But at the same time, you can do things but it doesn’t matter who gets the credit, it’s the achievement that does it.

PM: That’s great. Okay, well, thank you very much!

RM: Nah, thank you.

PM: Thank you for sitting here in the heat for fifteen minutes.

RM: Oh it’s good, I lost five pounds. *laughs*

PM: Okay, yeah, me too, I can lose some of my reserve- (cuts out)