

Cynthia Dantzig: CD

Myra Armstead: MA

MA: Well, hello, Cynthia.

CD: Hello.

MA: It is really wonderful to finally see you face to face, I was very excited when I first got your email and I made some inquiries and I was shocked that I didn't know anything about Emerald Rose McKenzie. And, you know I determined that I was gonna bring this story forth and of course I got buried in work. And I was so grateful when you wrote again, and the timing is perfect in terms of us being at the top of Women's History Month. You know, of course I could-not criticize-but there is something a little strange about having these *special* months when-(both laughing)

MA: It's like, you know, that this is the only time you're gonna recognize women.

CD: Emerald fits into both of them.

MA: Yes, we finished Black History Month and now it's Women's History Month and I really think that this-there's another layer here, which I'll be talking to you about, and that is the accessibility of higher education to disabled students, which is increasingly important for us. So, let me just read this, for the record: I'm interviewing you for BardCorps, which is a collection of alumni/ae interviews kept by the Bard College alumni office and the Bard College Archives. And I'm making an audio-video recording of this interview. Do I have your consent to submit to this interview?

CD: I so affirm. (raises hand)

MA: Okay. (both laughing) And you have no problem with a written transcription of it in those repositories, as well? Right?

CD: So long as there are no mistakes.

MA: Okay- (both laughing) alright, and we can pass those by you. Okay, so, Cynthia, do you want-well, actually I don't have to ask this question-this is the wonder of technology. I don't have to ask you for your name and the spelling of your name. But can you tell me the years you were at Bard College?

CD: I was at Bard from September of 1950 to the graduation in 1952, Emerald's graduation.

MA: Okay, so you were here for two years?

CD: Yes.

MA: Okay, so tell me what brought you to Bard. Were you a transfer student?

CD: No, I was in high school. I was in high school and I wanted to study art. And there was a senior a year ahead of me, Walter Ferguson, who was a brilliant artist, and I asked him, 'Where are you going to study art?' and he said 'I'm going to Yale.' So I thought 'Okay, I'm going to Yale.' However—another interesting point—I didn't know at the time that Yale did not accept women undergraduates. But, not knowing that, I made an appointment with Josef Albers? You know of—familiar with Josef Albers?

MA: (shakes head)

CD: Well he's probably the most important colorist painter of the twentieth century, written many books, his works are in every museum. You'll look him up afterwards, I'll give you some homework. (both laugh) Anyway, so I went up to see him and he said "very nice" —he had a German accent, he had just come over from Germany because his wife was of Jewish origin and—et cetera. But anyway he said 'Lovely, but you are a girl.' I said, 'Well, yes.' He said, 'well you must—' (laughs) He said 'We cannot take you. But you must go somewhere for two years. Then you will not be a highschool senior, you will be a college transfer, and then we can take you into the school of art as a BFA major—Bachelor of Fine Art.

MA: I see.

CD: So that's what I did, and then I asked several of my friends at Midwood High School in Brooklyn, 'Where are you going?' and about a dozen of them said 'Well, we're going to Bard.' So I said, 'Well, I'm going to Bard!'

MA: Oh, so there must have been some kind of special pipeline between Midwood and—

CD & MA: and Bard

CD: Especially in art.

MA: Yeah. Art continues to be a great strength at Bard.

CD: It's really funny because now everyone has so much trouble getting into any college you have to fill out—I don't know how many recommendations and whatever. I never applied. I just sent Bard a letter and I said I'm coming and they said fine. And with Yale, I never had— (laughs) I just did what Albers wanted. I came here for two years. That's why I didn't stay. I, you know, I never intended to stay more than two years and, fortunately, Emerald was graduating in '52 so it was perfect timing. Although I did in a way regret leaving because Bard was wonderful, really, in so many ways.

MA: Ah. Part of my questions are going to be about your experience, and then some —maybe most— will be about Emerald. But they're intertwined. So I just want to make sure I'm clear. When you applied to Bard and got accepted, you came as a first-year student—

CD: Exactly.

MA: After having completed twelfth grade?

CD: Yes.

MA: Okay, okay, I wasn't quite sure. I just thought—you said you were in high school and then I was thinking 'Was this like an early Simon's Rock kind of thing?'

CD: No. (shakes head)

MA: Oh, okay.

CD: There was no rock and no Simon.

MA: Okay. (both laughing) And so then you went from Bard—you transferred to?

CD: From Bard I transferred to Yale.

MA: To Yale, okay—

CD: It is very interesting because years later people said 'But they didn't take women!' (laughs) But—I mean it was quite nice quite frankly being one of the few.

MA: Ah, okay.

CD: (laughs)

MA: Well, if I were interested in Yale—I have all kinds of questions um, but maybe we'll come back around to that.

CD: Whatever you want.

MA: Yeah, so talk a little bit about the general atmosphere at Bard when you came. You said it was quite nice. Explain to us what you meant by that.

CD: Well it started being crowded in Brooklyn, house by house. In Bard it was a resort. It was country. It was country and just a few houses—Potter and McVickar were my home base, that's where I stayed. I had three roommates. But everything was so quiet and so peaceful and so educational. You could have classes outside. Every once in a while the professor would meet under a tree. I remember one time—I'll tell you this: I was washing my hair, and I thought 'oh my gosh! I have a class!' (laughs) In American democratic thought. (both laugh) Dr. Fred Crane—while he wasn't a doctor—he was getting his doctorate at Yale at the time. But he was teaching the development of American democracy, democratic thought. And we—I ran, put a towel on my head, ran out, and sat under the tree with the class—that was a wonderful class.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Wanna hear a little interesting thing about that class?

MA: Yeah!

CD: You had to write a paper on a topic that related to American democratic thought, and put it in the library, and people would read it, and then they would come back the next week and discuss your paper. And two students refused to read my paper.

MA: Because you were what—a woman? Or why?

CD: Well, I thought I would write a paper on the development of American Atheism. (both laughing)

MA: Ohhh, I see! And that's, uh, Bard was still attracting quite a few Episcopalians? Is that what—what was the deal there?

CD: So there was several students that said it was a taboo topic. They just wouldn't read the paper because they had—it was shocking. But I found some wonderful material. There was American—there was the Five Star American Organization for Atheism—I mean, Atheists were

just as organized and just as defined as a group. Not all, but those who wanted to join. It was a very interesting paper.

MA: Yeah. You mentioned Fred Crane. When I started at Bard, a long time ago, he had retired. As a matter of fact, he wasn't that long ago retired. He lived in the area.

CD: Yes. I liked him so much.

MA: Yes, and I met him. He was living in Tivoli, as I recall. And he had—he invited me over cause he wanted to meet me. And his basement was just a library. All the walls were filled with books. And I think he had had a little bookstore that he closed and then transferred as many books as he possibly could to the basement. So he said, 'You can take whatever you want.'

CD: Oh.

MA: And so I ended up taking de Tocqueville's two volumes.

CD: Wow.

MA: And he was so thrilled with that and he made some commentary, or he asked me something about de Tocqueville. And, you know, when you come out of grad school you're in a very unique bubble because you're dealing with the latest thinking in your field, and you don't necessarily have the kind of perspective on the evolution of your field, et cetera, et cetera. So, I just sort of summarized democracy in America blah blah blah blah blah. And he didn't say anything, but I could tell that he was a little disappointed that I had been so dismissive. And I didn't mean to be dismissive but I just, I thought it was great—Oh! Here are two volumes of this. I don't have to go to the library to borrow it and he's gonna give it to me. But I think, for him, this is a very, very key text. I certainly have used it many times, you know—

CD: But I'm just so happy that he—I didn't know he got his degree, evidently—doctor. At Yale. And that he stayed at Bard a long—I'm so happy! I really used to wonder whatever happened to him because he was a brilliant teacher, he was really very open to any thought. That's why I selected my wild topic: because I thought it would be interesting. Which it was. But it was off putting to some. And that's okay.

MA: So, you never moderated? You didn't have to.

CD: I had a sophomore review, though. I did have to have a sophomore review of my artwork because I was an art major.

MA: Okay, alright. So now let's turn to Emerald Rose and—I have a lot of questions about her. First of all, how did you meet her? The school was small. It was probably inevitable. (laughs)

CD: Two hundred and forty one students. (laughs)

MA: Two hundred forty one. But you obviously were drawn to each other. Tell me about that.

CD: Well, it wasn't a first—it wasn't being drawn—well, I needed money. So I went to find a job on campus. And one of the jobs was putting rubber tubes into the telephone line and being a telephone operator. You had to take—I don't even remember the details except there were spiders down there and I didn't like it. But then the other opportunity was reading to the blind and you would be paid fifty cents an hour to read to the blind. 'Well,' I thought, 'I can read. Okay.' So I went down to South Hall where she lived, I met Emerald, and from that day, until a very sad day that we had a memorial service for her, she was my best friend.

MA: Ah, that is so sweet. So, tell me what you can about Emerald's earlier biography. She lived in the Bahamas initially—

CD: Jamaica.

MA: Mhm. Did she ever talk about—

CD: Jamaica.

MA: Hmm?

CD: Jamaica. I can't quite do—I said Jamaica. I can't quite—

MA: Oh, it was Jamaica, ah.

CD: I can't quite do the accent but it was lovely.

MA: It wasn't the Bahamas. I think there was a site that says the Bahamas. Uh, okay, so it was Jamaica. Did she ever tell you the circumstances under which her family left? How long was she in Jamaica? How old was she when she came to the States? Do you know?

CD: I'm not quite sure how old but I know she had three or four sisters. She had Vivia, Hermine—Hermine but they pronounced it Herman—Dorrett. Vivia. Lovely names. And James, her brother. And Hermine made my wedding gown because Emerald was my maid of honor.

MA: Ohhh!

CD: How about that. She came to the United States when she was young. But the way that she had been able to see—she had a problem with her vision but she was able to see until about the age, I think sixteen or seventeen. In some kind of an athletic event, she had an incident, and became sightless. She had the slightest bit of ability to detect light, though. And because sometimes I'd be in the room with her and she'd say 'Why don't you turn on the light?' or 'Why did you turn off the light?' And I—(laughs) Cause she could just sense that. But other than that she had become completely sightless.

MA: Yeah, so it wasn't congenital.

CD: No, not at all.

MA: So, she had gone to regular schools. I did note also in some posting that she had attended a school for the blind. Can you reconstruct how her family reacted? You know, what did they do?

CD: Her family was amazing. Her mother, Alma, was one of the—really one of the best women I ever met. She's very calm. Very calm. Mother McKenzie. Everyone called her Mother McKenzie. And whatever happened, no problem. Living with them was Uncle Jay—I don't think that Uncle Jay was actually a relative, a blood relative. But he was also blind and his life's work was translating the bible. I never saw the final product, but he lived to translate the bible. So he was in one room and Emerald had another room and—it was just, it was a community. In Bedford–Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. Bainbridge Street to be exact.

MA: Bainbridge. Yeah, so—

CD: —because there was a backyard that went about a hundred feet. The backyard was bigger than the house. They would have big parties there. The ladies would have church parties. And you should see the hats! Oh, Mrs. McKenzie, Mother McKenzie's friends, they all came with beautiful hats with flowers and roses and oh—there was such—and they would drink their tea. It was a whole different world.

MA: Yeah.

CD: And, the funny thing is, you're talking about Black History Month and Women's Hist—nobody paid any attention to all those things at that time. I mean, nobody that I knew, we were all just one big family.

MA: Mhm.

CD: Nobody even paid the slightest attention to—because for one thing—this is now to Emerald, one of the classes she took. She had to read a book by Ruth Benedict called the *Myth of Race*. Of course then she had to read it. I read it to her. And Ruth Benedict's point was that there is only one human race, because dogs and cats can fool around all they want but dogs and cats cannot produce an offspring because they are really different races—whatever that means. But people, as we all know, fortunately, of every group can have beautiful children. And do. And so, every time, from then on, whenever I'm asked to put down race on any application, I always write 'human'.

MA: Oh, my.

CD: And my parents were not happy with that because for Yale I had to fill out a long, long form and they had raised ethnicity, national—they wanted to find out if you were Jewish, that's what I found out.

MA: Oh.

CD: Anyway but the thing is I put down 'human' and my folks said 'You'll never get into Yale if you—' I said 'Honesty is more important.' And I've always put down 'human'.

MA: Yeah that was a, sort of an early—the Benedict argument was an early argument for race as a social construction which was—

CD: Which it is.

MA: Yeah which—

CD: Obviously there are physical differences but they're not racial differences.

MA: Exactly, which was unheard of at that time.

CD: Oh yes.

MA: Do you know what her parents did for a living? What Emerald's parents did?

CD: I don't—I may have known at one point. It wasn't anything world-shaking but her mother kept house—beautifully.

MA: Okay, so they put her in a school for the blind, you don't know if that was a pu—would there have been a public school for the blind in New York at that time? I haven't done any digging.

CD: I'm not sure.

MA: Okay.

CD: Not sure at all.

MA: So she didn't talk much about her life as a blind person before coming to Bard. I'm imagining the way you described this trauma to her eye. I'd have to look it up, but I'm thinking maybe a detached retina?

CD: I don't know. She had a number of physical issues which eventually led to her early demise, actually.

MA: Oh. What were some of them that you could—

CD: Well, she had a lack of saliva, a dryness.

MA: Mhm. Was that an issue at Bard?

CD: No.

MA: Oh, okay.

CD: It happened later.

MA: Oh, okay, so the issues facing her—

CD: Nothing at Bard at all. She was just like everybody else except she couldn't see.

MA: Okay, alright. Did she ever tell you about how she heard about Bard? What led her to apply?

CD: No.

MA: Hmm.

CD: Absolutely not. Never came up.

MA: Huh, so I'm gonna guess. Maybe you can knock down some of these thoughts. Was she Episcopalian?

CD: Was she what?

MA: Episcopalian? Was her family Episcopal?

CD: I don't think she—she was definitely religious because she definitely believed in God, and I believe she was Christian, sort of.

MA: Well, yeah, I was just thinking that might've been a connection, you know Bard's Episcopal—

CD: Yeah, I don't think so. I don't think that was a factor. But I know she was religious in her own way.

MA: Yeah, it was— it's striking to me that it was unusual for women of your generation to go to college. I've heard that so much from my mother who—

CD: No, I don't think so.

MA: Well, there were women who were going to college since—you know, I used to teach women's history—but if you look at the proportion, it was steadily increasing. You wouldn't be looked at as some odd person. But as an African-American woman—or as a Black woman, I should say—and as a blind—

CD: (laughs) All these categories—

MA: Blind woman—

CD: At the time we didn't think about any of that. She was just Emerald. First of all she was quite beautiful and as an art major I drew her all the time. In fact, even in the nude—but she made me promise that if I drew her figure I wouldn't put the face, so that—everybody knew it was Emerald anyway. But she was a beautiful woman and a wonderful model and as you know, I ended up carving Karen, her dog, which is in the alumni house. We'll talk about that later.

MA: Yeah.

CD: —I did a woodcut which I'm gonna show you, which you know about too. But she was just a wonderful person. Beautiful, not only physically beautiful, but as a human being. She was just a

good person. And brilliant. She could understand things immediately. As far as going to college, it just was assumed that we would go to college, it was—

MA: Yeah, I mean it sounds like her family had—and she herself was quite intentional about being on a college track—

CD: Absolutely. She wanted to become a social worker. Maybe because of the way she had been treated by social workers. Could be. But that was her goal, and later on we'll talk about how high—she advanced so far in that field she was brilliant.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Great success.

MA: Yeah. But you don't have any particular memory of why Bard?

CD: No.

MA: Okay.

CD: No, not at all. (laughs)

MA: Okay, so she was here and what—talk about her life at Bard. I mean, you've already said she just was a part of the landscape and it was a small place and it just seemed to absorb everyone. Were there other Black people? Black students you remember?

CD: Yeah, there was Ruth [Neal]—I can't remember her last name—who bought one of my first paintings. (laughs) I can't remember her last name now. And, oh there was George Wellington. George Wellington.

MA: These are wonderful people to look up.

CD: Yeah. There were a couple. I know—I really usually don't pay much attention to things like that but—when you bring up the question, in my mind I'm going back, I'm running a cast of characters through my mind and Ruth—whatever her last name was—I can find it for you because she purchased one of my paintings and I have a record of that. And George was—I think he sang in the choir with me.

MA: Mhm.

CD: But there were people of every group. But you didn't think about—now there's such a focus on—I mean there was no such thing as Women's studies or Black studies or this—it was just studies. You just went to learn. The subdivisions of mankind were not so noticeable to us.

MA: Good, good.

CD: Maybe to others, but not to us.

MA: Good that they weren't for you, as students. What was it like for her navigating the geography of Bard as a blind person? How did she get about, go to classes?

CD: Well, she had Karen. Karen was a brilliant animal. Karen was a German Shepard, beautiful German Shepard. I have a photograph of Karen that you'll probably be able to show later. I hope you can do that.

MA: I can show it to you. I don't think this camera—the camera won't pick it up.

CD: Can you do a sharing screen please?

MA: I can. I can share the screen, but the camera won't pick up the—well, I don't know. I'm gonna do it and see if it picks it up.

CD: Okay. You can do that later if you like or any time. But Karen was a brilliant dog and Karen would not let her trip over a stone or a step or whatever and she kind of knew how to get around. And, of course, when I became her reader and her friend, I went many places with her and I would just take her by the arm and we'd walk.

MA: Where did she live?

CD: South Hall.

MA: Yeah that's—okay so she stayed there for those two years you were there?

CD: Oh yes. She had a lovely room.

MA: Mhm. Okay.

CD: She had a phonograph in the room and we listened to talking books.

MA: Oh, okay.

CD: Alexander Scourby was the actor who read them. And so the thing is that although I was only at Bard for two years, I really got a four year education. Because by reading to Em and going to her classes, I picked up those other two years.

MA: So you read all of her books to her.

CD: I think so. I don't think anybody else was involved. First of all, I—I didn't mind the fifty cents an hour—but as I became friendlier and friendlier with Emerald it was just—it just happened.

MA: Yeah, yeah.

CD: So I sort of semi-majored in sociology. (laughs)

MA: Ah, that. I was going to ask you that: so her major was sociology?

CD: Yes, oh yes. She had brilliant teachers. I mean, some of the world's most well-known women were teaching sociology at Bard. At the moment the names escape me, but if you look up a list of important women sociologists in the mid-fifties, many of them were at Bard.

MA: Ah.

CD: Bard had fantastic faculty. In every field.

MA: And I would say that has remained.

CD: Yeah, but the numbers have gotten so large now!

MA: Yeah.

CD: It's so huge. (laughs) It was such—since there was such a small number, you kind of knew everybody.

MA: Mhm. Yeah. So do you remember her senior project? Do you know what she focused on, perhaps? We could look it up.

CD: We could look it up but she was interested in hair but I don't think she took that as her senior project. But I don't recall now. But I know that I read books to her that she used for the project. In fact, one of the field periods—do you still have the winter field period?

MA: January, yes.

CD: My second field period, which was eight weeks off-campus doing something of importance, of interest. And so my first one was at the museum of natural history, because I had always wanted to be an explorer when I was a kid. And so I wanted to work at the Museum of Natural History, and I got a field period and I worked there. With the Department of Preservation and Installation we worked on the Pine Plains exhibit which you can still see in the museum today. But my second field period, I worked with Em on her senior project, which I don't remember. But among the things we had to read was a book by James Baldwin.

MA: Mhm.

CD: And you can imagine, Mother McKenzie in the kitchen making breakfast and lunch, and me reading aloud James Baldwin. To Emerald. And I was not gonna censor James Baldwin even though there were certain words I didn't ordinarily—and haven't since actually used in my—and all of a sudden Mother McKenzie—she said, 'Cynthia, what are you saying, child?' And I went, 'I'm not saying it!' I said— (laughs)

MA: This is what she's reading.

CD: James Baldwin said it. And I have to read it. And she didn't like it.

MA: Mmn-mm.

CD: I didn't particularly like that vocabulary but I certainly liked the book. And Em got, you know, et cetera.

MA: Baldwin was brilliant. So, I mean the fact that she was reading Baldwin in the early fifties does say something about the college.

CD: Oh yes. Oh yes.

MA: Yeah.

CD: It was a wonderful place. Really, truly. A magical place.

MA: Yeah, so, I was gonna ask you about the accommodations at Bard. So there was Karen, and there was you. Was she able to access books in braille?

CD: Oh, yes, some books in braille. Some of the talking books I mentioned were on records. Real records—on a turntable record. But there were braille books as well. Oh, that's—one of my favorite aspects of working with Emerald is she taught me braille.

MA: Oh!

CD: And so I've done workshops on braille since recently.

MA: So there were three ways for her to—

CD: She had a braille typewriter.

MA: Ah.

CD: But it was a heavy, clumsy thing. And then she had the aluminum braille writer where you poke through.

MA: Okay, so she could either imbibe material by listening to it as you read it, listening to vinyl tape recordings or—

CD: No, not tape. Disc.

MA: Disc.

CD: There was no tape. (laughs) This is the prehistoric days (laughs)

MA: Okay, so discs. And then braille, she had some books in braille.

CD: (nods in agreement)

MA: When she produced her written work, she used a braille typewriter.

CD: (nods in agreement)

MA: And then how did her professors read her work?

CD: I guess we typed it in typing. Regular.

MA: So your facility in learning braille—did you help her translate?

CD: I mean, yeah, a bit.

MA: Mhm.

CD: I mean, first of all braille is not just one thing. The alphabet is very simple. It is very easy to learn. You can learn it in five minutes. It's a brilliantly—it's a terrific system. Just one-two-three-four-five-six and a combination of those six. Um, various combinations can give you not only individual letters but actual words. But when you just know the alphabet, that's grade one braille. You have to read very slowly and spell out each word. But with grades two and three, like, one character means t-h-e or 'from', you know, it's the shorthand. And she was very sophisticated. In fact, she could play the piano reading braille music! I'm most admiring of her ability. With one hand, she'd be feeling the notes, reading the braille. And with the other hand she'd be playing it on the piano. And she could actually play the piano reading braille. I think that was one of her—it shows you how intelligent she was. How brilliant. Because that is—first of all, even to read music in braille, but to read it and play it—unbelievable. You know, she was quite exceptional in so many ways. We'll never get to all of it today. But, one of my most admired people, which is why she became my maid of honor at my wedding, which was another interesting story.

MA: Ah, okay. Well, we have to get that story. Let me ask you this. How did the accommodations, the adaptability she experienced at Bard as a blind person, compare, in your opinion, to the world outside of Bard? You know, just walking around in Brooklyn or just—

CD: There was no problem because she took the subway and I went with her any number of times when she would visit clients. She was a social worker. She became a head social worker at the Jewish Guild for the Blind.

MA: Mm.

CD: It's called the Jewish Guild for the Blind, but since everybody that was working in it was pretty much blind, nobody knew who was anybody—nobody knew who anybody was anyway. But she would take the subway, and I remember two things, specifically. People would say 'oh, the poor dog' or 'the poor blind dog' (laughs) Which was funny. Then also she'd climb up the stairs to visit this elderly, elderly woman and this woman would say 'I'm an old blind lady nobody cares about me, glum glum' and Emerald said 'Cut it out!' She said 'Honey, why do you think I brought my dog with me? I'm just as blind as you are. So forget it.' She was terrific.

MA: So the clientele was other blind people?

CD: Yeah, she was one of the head social workers at the guild.

MA: I see. I see, so she never had any problem after she graduated from Bard in finding employment.

CD: None. None whatsoever.

MA: Do you know what she did during her field periods?

CD: Well, one of them I worked with her. Not sure about the others. When I left Bard and she stayed I don't know what she did, or who read to her after. I never thought of that.

MA: So what did you do with Emerald during one of the field periods?

CD: I stayed at her house much of the time reading to her and working with her on her senior project. Which I can't remember. (laughs)

MA: Okay. And so that counted for her as her field period.

CD: Oh, of course.

MA: Yeah, okay.

CD: We'll have to find out, we'll have to dig that up and see what she worked on.

MA: One of the things she was really interested in: different hairstyles. And she would feel people's afros and whatever and she was very excited at that and she wanted to do some kind of study on various hair, but she never did that.

MA: Mm. Interesting. Hm. I mean, you know, that's a field. (laughs) Now, especially.

CD: She was interested in so many things.

MA: Yeah. She does sound like a truly remarkable person. Period.

CD: Yes. Yes.

MA: So tell me about your wedding.

CD: (laughs) It's a complicated wedding but first of all, I'm not particularly religious. In fact I sort of don't have much interest in the whole area of separating people into various groups,

which is one of the things that religion does, unfortunately. But to please my husband's parents I agreed to have a ceremony. So, at the Hotel Bossert in Brooklyn, which was a very, very fancy place, Emerald had agreed to be my maid of honor. And her sister Hermine made my dress. I designed it—puffy sleeves—oh, it was really so beautiful. Peau de soie. Whatever that is.

MA: I guess silk.

CD: (laughs) My photo is—it's up there in a box.

MA: I had a roommate who was funny because she was known for constantly getting peau de soie slippers.

CD: (laughs) But anyway Emerald said that she would come to the wedding, she would be my maid of honor, but she did not want to bring her dog. She said she didn't want people to know she was blind.

MA: Oh?

CD: There was a banister, a bronze banister, a big curving banister. And she swooped down holding onto the banister. She was really beautiful. And she looked lovely. It just—it was a wonderful wedding.

MA: What was her social life like at Bard? We talked a little bit about her academic life. You were her friend and can you say more? Did she have special interests?

CD: A lot of people liked her. She was very popular. People would come to her, sort of with problems. She was not exactly the house mother but people did have various personal issues and she would advise people about them. Sort of practicing for her later career in a way. (laughs) I guess. But she was considered an important person. She was popular as a—she would listen to you.

MA: Was she involved in any clubs?

CD: Don't think so.

MA: I'm thinking—well, she played piano—

CD: Oh, no, she didn't play that well. She played about as well as I did which is not very well.

MA: Mm. So were you in any clubs in particular?

CD: I sang in the choir although I cannot sing very well. But there was a woman named Clarissa Hall. I don't know what's happened to Clarissa. But she had a deep, beautiful voice, and so I would kind of zoom into Clarissa's note—

MA: Yeah.

CD: A nanosecond behind Clarissa. And I could sing. And I loved the whole atmosphere of the chapel and the singing and—nothing to do with religion at all! It had to do with atmosphere and music and fellowship.

MA: And the aesthetic.

CD: It was lovely. Yes. And I didn't mind wearing the robe either. The outfit was lovely. But I had a radio program at Bard.

MA: Okay.

CD: Oh yes! I had a radio program called *Cynthia Presents* and I would sit in the coffee shop with friends and listen to myself on the—I would interview people. Clair Leonard who played the organ—I would interview people about their interests and their work. I interviewed a lot of faculty members. It was quite nice.

MA: Mm. Oh.

CD: At the time it was considered high tech to be able to sit in the coffee shop and hear yourself on the radio. Oh!

MA: Where was the coffee shop?

CD: Well, there's McVickar and the—I don't think they're women's dormitories anymore. McVickar and whatever that line of houses—when you go up the hill

MA: Stone Row?

CD: —at the very left corner.

MA: Mhm.

CD: That was the coffee shop.

MA: Okay.

CD: What is it now?

MA: Okay. So there were no clubs—you only recall that—

CD: I'm sure there were some clubs but I don't remember.

MA: Okay. So I am going to ask—

CD: This is not a club but there was an activity every Friday night at Kappa House down the road.

MA: Okay.

CD: Is Kappa House still there?

MA: Yeah, the house is still there.

CD: They would have jam sessions and jazz and music and it was very nice. That was every Friday night.

MA: Yeah that is now the office of equity and inclusion.

CD: Oh? (laughs)

MA: Kappa House—was that—Bard never actually had a fraternity, did it? No.

CD: I don't think so.

MA: No.

CD: But it was called Kappa House.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Don't know why.

MA: Yeah I think I once knew that history but it's gone now. It's gone.

CD: Oh, you know 1950 was quite a while ago. I don't like to think about years, but when I think about what age I have attained now it's ridiculous. Because I don't really feel that much different from what I did back then. It was—time is inscrutable.

MA: Yeah. Well you look great and you're wonderful to talk to. So that's good. Let me push a little bit on the front of politics during your two years. Do you recall anything that was really pressing? It was the Cold War. The Civil Rights Movement hadn't really taken off. But there was—you know, I'm a historian, so I can call this up—there was a kind of progressive feeling coming out of World War II as people looked back at the Holocaust and what it was—that we were supposed to be fighting for—especially looking at areas of racial injustice in our country. There was this kind of incipient optimism.

CD: It was incipient because, at the time, we weren't really focused on that. But later on in the 1960s, I personally became—well I don't think you have time, and it's not appropriate for Bard—I became quite involved. I was at the March on Washington when Dr. King made his famous speech. I didn't even take a photograph. Back then it was a different—now, everyone's photographing their meal, their dessert, everything. But there I was with all of these fantastic people.

MA: What about Emerald? Did you talk to her about that? Did she—how did she respond to those things?

CD: We didn't talk about—it was just—it's hard to explain but we didn't pay any attention to that whatsoever really. But then I personally became quite involved later on.

MA: I'm just wondering about her being a social worker, the country becoming very political in the sixties in so many different ways—

CD: In the sixties, yes, but that's later on. And I can, well, some friends of mine and I were able to arrange for the Brooklyn Museum at no cost whatsoever to allow us to put on a huge benefit art festival for the legal defense fund of the NAACP. And earn thousands of dollars. And Jacob Lawrence was one of my friends at the time from—at Pratt. Well, not a close friend but I knew him at Pratt. And so we had some of the world's top artists there and the museum didn't charge us a penny. They talked about the cost of insurance and guards and whatnot but they threw it in. You can't do that now. Can you imagine a major museum letting a group of women who didn't have any particular credentials throw a fantastic event for civil rights?

MA: No.

CD: We got it in the newspapers.

MA: Yeah. That's fantastic. But this never entered later conversations between you and Emerald?

CD: She wasn't interested in politics really. She really wasn't.

MA: It's okay. That's fair, it wasn't her interest. Other than the social work, do you know of other things that she was involved in? Did she come back to Bard at all? Did she—

CD: I don't think so.

MA: Mhm. Yeah.

CD: But she had a wonderful time. She had a really great time at Bard.

MA: Tell me about her career then. You were saying that she advanced?

CD: Well she advanced at the Guild for the Blind and she became a senior social worker. And I can tell you one story that I think is very powerful.

MA: (nods)

CD: She's sitting in her office one day and a couple came and they said, 'Do you have a minute, Miss McKenzie? We have a problem' And she said 'Of course, come in. I'd be happy to, whatever it is.' So they said, 'Well, we want to get married but we have this problem. One of us is something called 'white' and one of us is something called 'black'. And we would like you to first of all tell us what it is and why it's such a big deal and why we can't get married.' So she said 'Oh! That's no problem. I was able to see until I was seventeen so I know what it is and I could explain it.' And so then she said, 'First of all, when did you become blind? How old—' They said, No no, we were born this way. We don't—' She said, 'Oh, just a minute. Here's what it is.' She said, 'Some people have a handicap. They are able to perceive something which really has no difference. You'll never notice it. It makes no difference between you whatsoever cause you don't have this handicap. You can't detect it. But they can detect it. And if you care what other people think, even though they have this problem, then maybe you better not get married. But if it doesn't matter to you what these other people think—and you'll never notice it, it's nothing that really has anything to do with you—you can do whatever you'd like. Get married.' Can you believe that story?

MA: That's fantastic.

CD: (Unclear 46:20) I've told the story in varying dimensions to many students over the years and they always ask me, 'Well did they get married?' I don't know! (laughs) I don't know what they decided.

MA: Was this—this was in the sixties, seventies?

CD: What's that?

MA: What decade? Do you know?

CD: About the 1970s. Well, she lived until '89 so this could have been in the seventies. But it was really an amazing—it was a true story. I mean, I'm not making it up. She told me and she doesn't—I don't remember what they did.

MA: Mhm. But the story is so revealing of her outlook.

CD: Oh, absolutely. And mine. (laughs)

MA: Yeah, yeah, that's great. That is so great. So by the time she retired, what was her rank? Level? She moved up—I guess she was supervising other—

CD: Senior Case Worker, I think it was.

MA: Mhm. And she stayed with the same organization.

CD: Same group. Yeah. Forever.

MA: Did she continue to live in Brooklyn or did she move somewhere else?

CD: Yeah, she continued to live in Brooklyn. I think they moved from Bainbridge Street to a housing project near Pratt. But I don't remember the exact address because I remember visiting her, and taking the elevator to visit her in the tower somewhere there.

MA: So her family—her parents—

CD: Her mother. I never met her father. He was out of the picture long before I—I think maybe he passed away.

MA: Mhm.

CD: Years earlier. Before I met Emerald.

MA: Okay, so they moved within Brooklyn—

CD: Oh yeah.

MA: To—

CD: (Unclear 48:12)

MA: With her family, with her mother.

CD: Yeah.

MA: Okay.

CD: Question is, when I first met Em, I didn't know she lived in Brooklyn. But it was such a convenience for us later on cause we became—I was able to visit her frequently. Cause—

MA: Yeah.

CD: She didn't live that far away.

MA: Mm. Where did you live in Brooklyn?

CD: At different times—I was born in Brooklyn. At 969 Carroll Street. In the back bathroom.
(laughs)

MA: Mm, okay.

CD: My mother told me that story many times. But they moved. Every time the rent would go up, they would move.

MA: Okay.

CD: We moved many times all around the Brooklyn area. Not Midwood because they moved eventually when I was about fifteen they moved—they purchased a house, actually bought a house! The narrowest house on East 10th Street in Brooklyn. That was an interesting place.

MA: Let me just ask you one other thing. When you were bringing up this issue of finances—you needed to work while you were in college. How did Em afford college?

CD: I think she had a scholarship... Money never came into the picture. I think she just had a complete scholarship.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Pretty sure.

MA: It'd be interesting to find out if that was an Episcopal Church scholarship, if it was some—

CD: I don't think it was the church, but it might've been some organization that might've supported her.

MA: Maybe her school she went to. A high school for the blind. Yeah

CD: Her family had no great money at all, really.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Yeah. They were always poor.

MA: A few other things—did she share any Jamaican culture with you? As a student or with other students?

CD: No.

MA: (nods) Okay, um, I'm just trying to think. What else? Is there anything about Emerald that you would want us to know and record about her time at Bard that we haven't covered?

CD: I really can't think of anything. Except that she was a wonderful model. And she really was willing to pose any number of times. I did a great—I mean I read to her—and that was the professional part of our relationship—but also, as far as being an art major, I was able to do a lot of artwork. I did a lot of woodcuts—I think you have a picture of—

MA: This is what I'm gonna do now. I'm gonna pull up whatever I have—Okay, so I'm going to show you. Have you met Michelle Murray? Or ever talked to her?

CD: No. Who's Michelle Murray?

MA: We have a house resident faculty program—faculty live in some of the residences. And so Michelle Murray, a political scientist, and her husband, and now little boy live in McKenzie House.

CD: Lovely.

CD: Oh! Look at that.

MA: So—

CD: Oh there we are! (laughs) Oh.

MA: There you are.

CD: Keep going and you'll get to Karen in a bit. Keep going.

MA: This is what Michelle gave. Karen!

CD: Stop, that's Karen. Oh, you can't see her face. But do you see how we're holding each other?

MA: Yes.

CD: That's how we walked. Just sort of—

MA: She's holding onto you with one arm and then Karen with the other.

CD: Exactly.

MA: How long did Karen live?

CD: For quite a few years after.

MA: Here's another one. There's Karen.

CD: Oh there's Karen's lovely face.

MA: Yup.

CD: That's Em's graduation obviously.

MA: Yup. And her graduation again. I looked at these stairs and I thought 'Oh! How did she do that?'

CD: No problem. Hold onto the railing. No problem. One hand on the railing, one hand on Karen.

MA: Mhm. And then, do you know if there's much of a, like a lobby or an advocacy group among blind individuals in the country at the time?

CD: Nope. Absolutely not. Don't know.

MA: Mhm. And there you are again. That's a lovely picture right there.

CD: Oh, this is my photo. I wanted to show how a blind person can experience art. And this is –we went to a museum and–could you go down a little bit further so you could see? And Emerald was able to experience the sculpture. But look at her face. Yeah, yeah. She was thrilled.

MA: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CD: One of my favorite photos that I've ever made. (laughs)

MA: Yeah, she's–

CD: She really had a wonderful time.

MA: She's engaged.

CD: Absolutely.

MA: And then, um–

CD: Oh.

MA: Yeah, she almost is smiling there.

CD: She was smiling.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Yeah.

MA: And then—now actually I wanna tell you. Of the photos that I've seen so far, this is my favorite.

CD: Wow, she was so beautiful.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Really was. Not even just physically, she was an example. **If you had to send a human being to the great beyond to show what human beings can be, she would be the epitome of what a human being could be.** She just succeeded in so many ways being a wonderful person. And she really was. I can't think of any negative aspect at all of her. She was a terrific, wonderful person.

MA: I love that for—

CD: And fifty cents an hour. (laughs)

MA: These are all—

CD: Oh, I know them.

MA: Oh yeah? Tell me about them.

CD: I don't—I don't remember. But I knew them both.

MA: Good people.

CD: Yeah. Good people.

MA: And there you are mingling afterward.

CD: (laughs) Yeah.

MA: And—

CD: Oh, this! This! Stop on this one. This is my favorite portrait I've ever—this is one of my photos of Em. I just, I love that photo. She just looks so beautiful.

MA: And where is she? Do you know? Is this on campus? Or–

CD: Oh, no. I think this was in her apartment at home.

MA: Okay.

CD: She just–do you see her hand? So calm. And just a lovely person.

MA: Mm. And this one, I think, is the most ubiquitous one on campus. If you look her up, I think that's what you see at the McKenzie House site. I mean I'm looking at this coat with the fur (laughs) collar–

CD: Yeah, her hair. I don't know who did that for her. She just was lovely.

MA: Mm. So that was from Michelle. And then let me go look up you.

CD: There's one particular one that I'd like you to see that I sent you. I think I sent four. And three of them I think we've already seen, but the one I wanted you to see is coming up.

CD: What it is is–Alumni/ae House*–at the entranceway to Alumni/ae House... is a carving in mahogany, which is one of my projects at Bard. It was one of my sculpture projects to carve the dog.

MA: Aha.

CD: It was a gift to Bard since it's not just my work. It's Emerald's dog. And that's why I sent you recently the woodcut because, you know, we were talking about Black History Month–not that it really matters in that way to me–but it is true of her identity, and so when people come in and they see the dog, they don't know that it's the dog that belonged to a student of African-American heritage. But if you–if they see the woodcut they–

MA: Here, I'm gonna stop sharing so–

CD: (shares woodcut print on the video call)

MA: Oh! Okay. Lovely. So I'm going to–what I want to do–and we'll see how it works–I want to see if I can get a group of students and faculty and staff, just a small group, to try to put together a little exhibit in the library–

CD: Oh yeah. Terrific.

MA: And we'll see—

CD: Now, when I came up with her family—I think it was about the time that she passed away—her brother and several of her sisters and I think her mom too—and we came back to Bard and donated a lot of her papers to Bard.

MA: Yes, the archivist, Helene Tieger, has them.

CD: Oh, great.

MA: Yes, she has them. And she invited me to come to take a look at them. We have a pandemic so the library isn't open. It would have to be a special appointment. But that's something I would really like to see an exhibit in the library that would display this.

CD: Absolutely.

MA: So that's my goal. We'll have the story and I'm hoping to post this wonderful interview.

CD: (laughs)

MA: Which is our beginning of knowing this—sounds like a wonderful individual.

CD: Well what I'd like to do—I think I told you—the little woodcut—it's not that big. I'm gonna have it framed, just a little nice frame around it. And it could be placed near the sculpture so people would know that there is this African-American, female—

MA: Mhm.

CD: —I mean, she fits into all these ridiculous subcategories of the human kind. But she does. And since we're now celebrating them, might as well acknowledge that she was a member of these various human groups.

MA: Yep. Yep. Well, thank you very much for your time. Is there anything else, Cynthia, you would like to add? Any—

CD: Probably (laughs) but there's just too much. I really—Emerald, as I said, she became my best friend in many ways and her mother, before her mother passed away, she was ill—she brought some dishes to my house. She said she wanted me to have them. Yeah. So I still have them now.

MA: Are you in touch with any of her family? Her nieces, nephews? She never had children, right?

CD: No.

MA: I'm assuming—

CD: She would go out—she went out with many doctors (laughs) but she was never happy because either they were patronizing or taking advantage of her. And she never met anyone who just loved her for herself alone. And she was—she mentioned that a number of times to me. That she just never was able to find a person who appreciated her as a human being and not for some category that she fit into.

MA: Hm. Take advantage of her. Do you wanna say a little bit more about that? I'm curious. In what way?

CD: Well, patronizing because she was blind. I don't know.

MA: Sort of making them feel good about themselves?

CD: I'm not a psychiatrist so I don't know.

MA: Okay. She never found anybody—

CD: Never found the one. She would've liked to. And she and her family had a countryplace in upstate New York where I spent a lot of time with her nephews. I have a photograph, I could find it, but I don't have it right here—

MA: Oh, I'd love that. And I'd love the names of her nephews. If we had an exhibit, maybe they might want to come and see it.

CD: If I could find them, yes. What I—

MA: Yes.

CD: What I have—someone has walked behind you.

MA: Yes. In the middle of a recording. Okay.

CD: There's a photograph—cause Emerald was my son's godmother.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Well, not godmother in a religious sense but in a human sense. So there's a photograph of Emerald with all of her godchildren, her various nephews, and Gray is about in his mid-fifties, but at the time he was about maybe a year old. A year or two old. And there's a photo of all of the— Emerald sitting there with her arms around all of her god sons.

MA: Ah.

CD: And her nephews.

MA: It would be good if you could—

CD: Find them.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Sterling King. I think their names are on the photograph.

MA: Hm.

CD: They're probably still living in Brooklyn.

MA: Okay! So I might write you about that.

CD: Please.

MA: Okay.

CD: And could, meanwhile, I will try to see who I can find. I don't think her sisters probably are still around. I'm pretty sure her sisters are not available. But her children are. And they all—the children knew Em when they were young.

MA: So, now, when did she pass exactly?

CD: I can tell you exactly. She was born September 17, 1927.

MA: Mm.

CD: And she passed into eternity, as they say, on my birthday, 1989. January 4, 1989.

MA: Mhm.

CD: And there was a fantastic funeral. A memorial service for her.

MA: Where was it?

CD: At some church in Brooklyn. I don't remember what church it was.

MA: Mhm.

CD: But I spoke and I think my husband and I—I think we were the only pink persons present.

MA: (laughs)

CD: That might be of interest.

MA: Yeah.

CD: Her mother asked me to speak. So some of the stories that I've told you now, I told at the service.

MA: Well—

CD: And everybody got a copy of the woodcut.

MA: Yeah, maybe there are some students who would want to follow up on some of this research. Well, Cynthia, thank you very much. Thank you so—

CD: It was a pleasure to meet you.

MA: Yeah! Yeah. I feel the same way. I'm a historian, and especially as I've gotten older—

CD: Oh, you're not older.

MA: Well, it's all relative, right? (both laughing)

CD: Yeah. I've spoken a number of times to a Jane Brien.

MA: Oh yes. She was my student, so you can see—

CD: Oh! Really?

MA: Yeah! She was my student when I first got to Bard. She was a very good student.

CD: Well, she's lovely. When I came to visit my fiftieth reunion, well maybe it was my sixtieth reunion—probably. I think it was the sixtieth reunion. (laughs) And nobody else from my class came. We had a—I marched actually, in a commencement ceremony. And then my son came with me and we went and saw the sculpture because I had recently commissioned someone to do a stand for it. Previously, the sculpture had been sitting on the carpet, which is not too good for the sculpture. So I had commissioned a friend who is sculptor to make a stand for it and they had placed it in the alumni house there because the dog was an alum. Oh, the dog got—I think Karen got a diploma.

MA: Ah, okay.

CD: Karen used to attend all the classes. She would sit under the desk and the dog would yawn and people would applaud. (laughs)

MA: Oh! That's so Bardian. (laughs)

CD: Oh, there's so much to tell about Emerald. It's not possible in one conversation but anytime you wanna talk about Em—as I said, she was my closest friend for so many years—it's nice to be talking about—

MA: Well, one way we could do this is if we get a transcription, and you look at it, and if there are other things that occur to you maybe we can get a student to tape record you.

CD: Ah.

MA: And then it'll be sort of a multi-installment kind of—

CD: I love it.

MA: So I am going to stop the recording.

CD: (nods)