COLUMBUS AVENUE AND THE UPPER WEST SIDE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Cassandra Medley

Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District

2019

PREFACE

The following is a transcript of an oral history interview with Cassandra Medley conducted by Leyla Vural on May 20, 2019. This interview is part of the Columbus Avenue and the Upper West Side Oral History Project. The Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District has sponsored this project.

Cassandra Medley (born in 1949) is a playwright and has lived on Columbus Avenue at Seventy-third Street since 1973.

In this interview, Cassandra Medley talks about growing up working-class and Black in segregated Detroit when the economy was thriving and good jobs were abundant. She recalls her early interest in theater and the emergence of the civil rights movement. Medley moved to New York in 1971, right after graduating from the University of Michigan, where a professor had told her that New York was the only place to pursue a career in theater. Medley still lives in the apartment on Columbus Avenue at Seventy-third Street that she moved into in 1973. She describes the "funky" Upper West Side neighborhood that she found then, a predominantly Black and Puerto Rican area that was at once "personable" and "dangerous." She recalls drug dealers on the corners who looked out for you if you got to know them; white families who were starting to renovate the brownstones on the numbered streets; young people like Medley herself who were trying to make it in theater, music, and art and moving to the neighborhood because of the cheap rent. She describes changes in the neighborhood, as professionals moved in and boutiques and cafés filled the retail spaces, making the area safer, but also more expensive and less economically and racially diverse. And she notes that the neighborhood is feeling more diverse again. Having just retired from the theater faculty at Sarah Lawrence College, Medley talks about her plans and reflects on New York City's pivotal role in her career and life.

The interviewee has reviewed, edited, and approved this transcript. Readers should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of an interview and, therefore, does not read like a polished piece of written work. Time codes have been included to make it easier for readers to match the transcript with the audio recording of the interview. Time codes may, however, no longer be completely accurate because of edits to the transcript. Where there are differences between the transcript and the audio recording, the transcript is the final document of record.

The views expressed in this oral history interview are the interviewee's alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Columbus Avenue Business Improvement District.

Interviewee: Cassandra Medley
Interviewer: Leyla Vural
Interview date: May 20, 2019
Session: 1 of 1
Location: New York, N.Y.

Vural: [00:00:00] Alright, it is Monday, May 20th, 2019, and this is Leyla Vural interviewing Cassandra Medley for the Columbus Avenue and Upper West Side Oral History Project. Thank you.

Medley: [00:00:13] You're welcome.

Vural: [00:00:14] So, oral histories usually begin at the start of a person's life, so can you tell me where and when you were born and something about how you grew up?

Medley: [00:00:22] I was born and grew up in Detroit, Michigan. And it was in the early fifties and Detroit was a thriving town, and Americans only bought American cars and it was never going—the bubble was never going to burst. And my parents were janitors in the New York public schools—in the Detroit public schools—and the Detroit public schools were excellent at that time—*everybody* was in the public school. Everything depended on the auto industry in Detroit.

[00:01:01] We had an *amazing* museum [Detroit Institute of Arts], which is known for its impressionist work and African mask collection. The prominent white families, whose wealth had been made by the auto industry, really supported the museum, symphony, library, etcetera. So, growing up there—and I actually participated in an arts program sponsored at the museum and became a child actor as a result. So, then went on tour with these children's theater companies in the suburbs and outskirts of Detroit, doing children's plays and so on.

Vural: [00:01:41] So, tell me, how do you remember yourself? What were you like as a kid?

Medley: [00:01:47] I was very curious, very secretive. I was always in love with the theater and I loved TV—the first TV [chuckles] generation. And I felt—and I was tiny, I was very small, so I didn't do that well in athletics, so I always depended on my intellect, I would say. And always listening.

[00:02:24] I learned to listen because I'm from a family where children are supposed to be seen and not heard. But my family was working-class African-American, or Negro as we said then.

[00:02:48] And so I always listened. My father was a great storyteller, and his mother, my stepmother—my step-grandmother—was a *wonderful* storyteller. And my mother had a facility with language as well.

[00:03:04] So, it was listening, listening. It was a *very* racially segregated world. My parents moved on the street when I was two and I think they were the second or third Negro family on the block. And I remember signs. I remember white neighbors with these "For Sale" signs in their yard. And in *our* house the white family had been in the process of renovating their attic and they stopped. It looked like they had fled in the middle of the night.

[00:03:45] So, the neighborhood became an all Black, working-class neighborhood, except for one white family. They couldn't afford to move and they made an island unto themselves. But the grandmother eventually became very close friends with my mother, and that's a story that I want to write about someday.

[00:04:14] But it was everybody—the Irish were here, the Polish were here, Jewish, German, Mexicans sometimes mixed in with the Black neighbors—but everybody working in the plant, as they called it, the plants, GM [General Motors] and Ford and Chrysler and Great Lakes Steel.

[00:04:34] If you were a young man or woman, you didn't necessarily have to finish high school. And your jobs in the factory were forever, for your lifetime, with these amazing benefits. The news was always on the periphery when you're a kid, but I always had a strong sense of the power of the unions, and [Jimmy] Hoffa and how he disappeared and how high-paying jobs, total security. And that's what it was like growing up.

[00:05:17] Plus, when I was about seven or eight, these Soul records started coming out because that was when this factory worker, Berry Gordy, started this company, Motown, in his own house. And we were just *thrilled.* All that great music and we were very proud of it. It took a few days before other cities could get the music back in those days, so we were very proud that we were the first with the music and the first with the dances. But it was a time when American Bandstand, the famous teen TV show, was all white. And then Dick Clark started having Black singers—Chuck Berry, The Supremes, The Temptations, Marvin Gaye—and then there would be a few Negro couples dancing on the floor, teen couples. So, yes, that was the time.

Vural: [00:06:18] And did your family talk about race?

Medley: [00:06:21] Of course. They had to because you couldn't avoid it. My mother—actually I came across an article, she never told me about it directly, but she had been written up in the papers because she was in a neighborhood restaurant—they must have just moved to Detroit because I was described as two years old in the paper, and I know they moved to the neighborhood when I was two.

[00:06:47] Mother went to a restaurant, she and her friend, and they were refused service, and they sat there with these two-year-olds all day until they were arrested. And she brought a lawsuit supported by the Michigan NAACP. I have the article, which I have embossed. But, yes, so there was always something. There was always—

[00:07:15] My father was one of the first Negro streetcar and bus drivers. So, that's—you know, the first—there's all that. And the stress of that. And finally, eventually he did quit after a few years. And when we left the neighborhood out into the white world, you're shopping, you're out in the streets, and experiences with race prejudice all the time—absolutely.

[00:07:40] And I remember when Martin Luther King came to Detroit in 1963. And this was when he gave the preview to his "I Have a Dream" speech. And I remember it was a *huge* psychological challenge to walk down the public downtown Detroit main street with a sign, protesting. And there were the discussions, overhearing the discussions between the adults: Would you do it? Will I do it? Will I? And my parents—with my parents marching down the street, very quietly. People on the sidelines of Main Street, Woodward Avenue, white people, all watching us.

[00:08:39] And so all of that I definitely remember. And there were so many people that turned out for his march and then to hear him speak, they had to have a separate hall where you could just—you know, audio—hear it on speakers. So, that's where my family sat and heard him. But that was Detroit.

Vural: [00:09:01] And what were your parents' expectations for you?

Medley: [00:09:05] Always—I think from generations back, I think this comes out of enslavement and being prevented from reading and writing—always education. Always. get your education, get that education, get that diploma, advance, do better than we did.

[00:09:29] Also the white working-class, lower-class immigrants, all around us who came from all kinds of situations. Same thing, of course. Get that education. Nobody can take that away from you. You know, do better than we did. So, that's what their expectations always were.

Vural: [00:09:54] And so even though your parents weren't actually in the auto industry, were they in jobs that had similar kinds of benefits and security?

Medley: [00:10:04] Their jobs depended on the amazing benefits they received from the Department of Education, which depended on the auto industry. So, when both parents came to the age of nursing home and death benefits all taken care of.

[00:10:31] So, my father had been in the Coast Guard. He and my mother were both from small towns in Ohio. They came up to Detroit, up where you could make money. Our neighbors were very much from the South, even though my parents were from Ohio, the Black migration up from the South where people would go to Harlem in New York, Chicago, Kansas City, Detroit.

[00:10:59] So, yes, everybody was in it. The neighborhood was single-family homes, pleasant little gardens and little flowerbeds, but the outer rim, the streets of the outer rim of the neighborhood, these hulking—my value—ugly factories. Those enormous slate-grey steel structures, the belching of the smokestacks, the open flames of the oil refineries. Our neighborhood river, River Rouge, so-called Red River, because of all the smelting and all that stuff going into the river, which runs into the Detroit River.

Vural: [00:12:03] A real industrial landscape.

Medley: [00:12:05] Yes.

Vural: [00:12:05] What happened when you finished high school? What did you do?

Medley: [00:12:09] I went to the University of Michigan.

Vural: [00:12:12] In Ann Arbor?

Medley: [00:12:13] In Ann Arbor—and went into the theater department and had a very mostly unsatisfactory time there, even though I did meet a few distinctive professors. At the time—aside from Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, was/is a U-M alum—we were definitely instructed that the genius plays had been written by European men—European, white men. And playwriting classes were provided by the English Department, not the Theatre Department. The implication conveyed was that if you were an automatic genius, you could write.

[00:13:24] So, the University of Michigan—I was part of the Black Power movement, part of the student protest movement We were demanding more faculty of color, demanding Black Studies, these things that are taken for granted now, which were *totally* alien, you know, and were *totally* resisted.

Vural: [00:14:04] What year did you start college?

Medley: [00:14:06] ’67.

Vural: [00:14:08] Yes, so you were right at the start.

Medley: [00:14:09] I was right in the middle—the huge afro and everything, Black Power. It was very, very exciting and it saved me psychologically, because my mind had been colonized by the dominant white culture into believing that being Black was ugly.

[01:14:59] And at the time our professors were not practitioners. They were not having active acting careers or writing careers or directing careers. They were academics in Michigan.

[00:15:22] At the school where I became a professor [Sarah Lawrence College], we are active professionals and the students can see our work out in the world and we can teach from the perspective of being active professionals. And then often when I guest teach at different places around the country, part of the attraction is that I'm an active professional.

Vural: [00:15:48] So, as a college student, were you interested in performing and writing?

Medley: [00:15:54] I did not believe I could write. I didn't have the so-called "genius." I'd take a few steps and then I would stop. I did not have me as a teacher like I teach other students now. Now, I have students—and it's been one of my most gratifying aspects of being a professor over thirty years, having students who come into my class totally intimidated, totally confused, and in a school year, they are writing up a storm. They understand that we write drafts for revision and so on. They find their writing voices. They write as playwrights, memoirists, novelists, short story—it's very exciting.

[00:16:51] But no, I didn't have that. I didn't have anybody to tell me that everything you read—this textbook, comic book—that's draft twenty. Nobody told me that. I thought, oh—I thought Melville sat down and he said, "Call me Ishmael," and went on to instantly have *Moby Dick* published. You know, certainly, nobody taught me in high school or college how the creative

process takes place. The point is—and of course as I say to my students, the way you wrote in high school and a lot in college, but certainly in high school, is not how professionals write. Professionals don't write an essay in a span of forty-five minutes and expect it to be flawless and worthy of instant approval.

Vural: [00:17:46] Tell me about coming to New York. When did you come here?

Medley: [00:17:48] I came here in 1971.

Vural: [00:17:51] So, right out of college.

Medley: [00:17:52] Right out of college. And I came here to be in the theater. My mother gave me $100, and I stayed with an uncle in Harlem, me and my college roommate. He had a larger place. And Harlem was shocking. It was exhilarating, and shocking. And it was *definitely* where you saw racism in the very fabric of the day-to-day New York City. Garbage wasn't collected, but you just take the train or you take a bus twenty blocks down past Harlem, and the street garbage was gone.

[00:18:39] The plumbing was horrible. If you wanted to take a bath, you started your bathwater forty-five minutes before. People trying to live cleanly, decently, and were being stopped at every turn. The stores—are you kidding? The grocery stores sold overpriced, substandard foods. It was nothing like it is now, wherein Harlem is being gentrified. We have this American phenomena, again. So, white Americans decide, start moving back in, buying property in impoverished neighborhoods, and the neighborhoods improve, the services improve with renovations.

[00:19:28] So, I was in Harlem and my roommate and I certainly wanted to have our own place. I got a job in three days. It's nothing like now—jobs were easy to get back then in New York, you'd go to an agency. I was a receptionist—these wonderful lawyers—and they were a small firm of five Jewish lawyers. And I was the receptionist. They welcomed me to New York. And one of them in particular introduced me to *The New York Times.* Wondrous when one has just come from the Midwest.

[00:20:19] But I was looking for a job in the theater. Finally, I found a job as a receptionist, within three months, in the theater. And you want an apartment. There were ads all over, Upper West Side, particularly. So originally, I moved to Eighty-eighth Street, Eighty-eighth and Columbus [Avenue], this brownstone, my roommate and I. And it was the Upper West Side, funky Upper West Side.

Vural: [00:20:58] So, this was still in 1971?

Medley: [00:21:00] Yes. I moved to the Upper West Side, Eighty-eighth Street, and then in '73, I moved to Seventy-third Street. And it was funky. It was very—there would be these spots on a block where an upper middle-class, white family lived in an entirely renovated brownstone, and then they were surrounded with mainly Puerto Rican and Black families. There was more and more of an influx of younger single people—white, Black—moving in because rent was cheap. But it was a very rough—women out alone walked very swiftly at night. Eventually I learned that if you got to know the drug dealers, they'd watch out for you. They were very friendly and they had your back.

Vural: [00:22:09] And where were they?

Medley: [00:22:12] They would be on Columbus or Amsterdam on the corners, or Broadway. We had on Broadway—that little park now, which was Needle Park, and people dealing for their medication, basically, their self-medicating substances. And then there would be, on regular occasions, this police siren and everybody would flee—and sometimes there would be really violent arguments going on, shouting back, late at night, and people would call the cops and then—*pshwoo.*

[00:23:03] But there would be these little enclaves. There was Lincoln Center, Central Park, Riverside Park. And my building, the building was Puerto Rican and Black people.

Vural: [00:23:28] And had your building already been cut up into smaller apartments?

Medley: [00:23:35] My building was built in 1900 as small apartments. I actually ran into—there was a party on in the Hamptons, years later, and I ran into people, this couple, a white couple, and they had been the occupants of my apartment in the 1940s.

[00:23:54] But it was mom-and-pop stores, no drugstore chains, just a drugstore five-and-dime. Five-and-dime that was *really* five-and-dime. There was the hangout bar across the street, and apparently there'd been even more bars in the past. And the hangout bar, when I came, it was transitioning into pub food with younger people, young people, and at that time, the word was get to know a bartender in a neighborhood bar, because a bartender on the weekends would cash your check. There was none of this ATM card—the banks were closed on weekends, that was it.

[00:24:58] And there was the credit card that had come about in the late sixties, you know, with that false sense of belief that you got credit. Oh yes, which is—somebody has to do a historical view or profile of how that transformed our society. I remember as I kid, my mother would put

things on layaway and you didn't get the thing but you would make a down payment, then you paid down your bill and got the item.

[00:25:30] But this whole notion, the ingeniousness of that idea, of snaring people with debt. And I had a lot of credit card debt until later. Somewhere in the nineties, I was hired to write a script, an industrial movie about credit cards. So, they gave me all the material: what you're really paying for when you just pay the interest on your card, and how you're baited to buy even more. And I'm reading all this material. That was a turning point for me. I paid off all my credit cards. I thought I'm paying for somebody's yacht and I will never have this card paid off—I paid them all off and I use a debit card, but I *never* go into debt.

[00:26:36] But at the time, of course, this was all new. And there was no bank card. I remember when the bank cards came—and the first one was a bank that—Manufacturers Hanover Trust, which I think they—I don't know what happened to them, they kind of disappeared. But they were on the corner of Seventy-second and Broadway and they had this, you know, this card and you could punch in and get your balance and actually withdraw money on weekends. That was a very new phenomenon.

[00:27:09] So, you had to get to know the bartender or get out the money that you thought you would be needing for the weekend. And in my case, as a young woman in New York, the first one—movies were $3. Broadway was $10, $15 at most. And I'd always count on, well, my weekend date would pay anyway.

[00:27:42] And I made *very* little money—I was a receptionist in the theater—but I got to know so many people in the theater and it transformed my life, and I got to be in a part of a theater that did develop my awareness that I was a playwright.

Vural: [00:27:58] Was that the Ensemble Theatre?

Medley: [00:27:59] Yes. the Ensemble Studio. But it was a very funky place. Central Park, of course, there was no *Imagine*. You know, Yoko [Ono] hadn't built that part of the park. It was *very*—it was ratty, literally [chuckle] and figuratively. But once I—because I had been warned: Don't go into the park, it's dangerous. And I remember venturing in. Why are all these people here? I thought. And the scope of the park I loved because I'm from an industrial situation. So, the idea of having this expanse of country—faux country, but you know—in the middle of New York City was just *wonderful.* But it was very—it was overgrown in spots, there was the Ramble section of the park—don't go there because it's overgrown, you don't know.

Vural: [00:29:04] But did you start going into the park early on?

Medley: [00:29:07] Oh, yes.

Vural: [00:29:08] Yes, okay.

Medley: [00:29:09] Once I ventured there to say to myself, well, let's see. And I remember I came one summer day, I came back to my apartment and there was a new neighbor, woman, young woman sitting there. And I go, "Hi, welcome, welcome." Very sweltering day. And I said, "Why don't you go to the park?" "The park? I heard it's dangerous." Particularly when you came to New York from the Midwest or the West. I said, "No, it's not at all dangerous. Just go on in. After dark is something else." And there were the boats, the boating and all that. But it was much—everything was much cheaper.

Vural: [00:29:59] So, tell me some more. When you say it was funky, tell me some more. Like what were your—who were your neighbors in the early years?

Medley: [00:30:06] My neighbors were mostly Puerto Rican—the super was Puerto Rican—and Black people. And it was a lot of loud music on the streets in the summer, a lot of people. We had a laundromat right next door and that was funky. It was not spruced up or anything. It was kind of—but it did the job. People would be out on the streets late at night.

Vural: [00:30:40] And what were they doing for work or to make money?

Medley: [00:30:43] A lot of the older people would sell different kind of objects right out on the street. And then there were people who were dealing to make money. And then there were people who were in working-class jobs, the garment district, different kinds of sales jobs. It was very—among the old guard, you didn't have a lot of professionals, at least that wasn't my impression.

Vural: [00:31:12] Because one of the things that really interests me is that even when a neighborhood has a lot of drugs going on, it also has people doing every other kind of ordinary thing. And I think that mix is really interesting—and how people remember that and how they navigate.

Medley: [00:31:34] Children, people with their children. More elderly. It was more personable. So, you knew so-and-so, you knew so-and-so by name. They knew you, and you knew they had several things going at the same time.

Vural: [00:31:52] And did you feel comfortable?

Medley: [00:31:54] Yes. Now, if I was coming home late at night from Lincoln Center or wherever, from a job, from a performance, so I would make sure that I saw so-and-so on the street standing there. I knew what they were doing, but it was—it would help me calm down.

[00:32:19] Now, there were more opportunities—and I have a friend it happened to her—there were more opportunities to be mugged because for so many of the apartment buildings, the opening door was open. It was the second foyer door that was locked. So, you know, somebody could follow you in. I knew several people where it happened. I would make sure—I would station myself in front of my street door at night to just make sure nobody—and then *rush* in.

[00:32:59] So, that was happening. Or you had to look—you came into your street door if somebody was in there already, either homeless or waiting, you know, or whatever. So, there would be that thing. And it was considered—the neighborhood was considered dangerous. Dangerous. The rent was very cheap. And there were a lot of people my age who were trying to make it in the theater, in music and art. So, that mix in the neighborhood.

Vural: [00:33:39] And was that interesting for you?

Medley: [00:33:41] Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And I made friends with some of my neighbors and, you know, everybody was going to—we were ambitious and we—you know.

[00:33:52] But the subways were, you know—but you just tolerated it because it was kind of amazing you could get around so quickly.

[00:34:14] So we, rightfully I think, complained, and it was that we need elevators in the subways. And we now, in 2019, have some elevators. And I think that the movement, the disabilities movement, again one of these rights movements that has made such a difference. But there was *nothing.* You couldn't navigate the subway stations? Well, too bad. And of course there were all the old cabs, and that was the old yellow cab, that was what you— And the buses, when they came, they were great and when they didn't, that was hmm, you know.

[00:34:54] So, you knew instinctively to get to know your neighbors because they would watch out for you and you would watch out for them. But there was a lot more incidents of people publicly fighting and all that. And it would be—now, young people moving to the neighborhood, well, there's a café *everywhere,* same in Harlem, and every kind of opportunity to sit, lounge, relax. Not the case on the Upper West Side, not the case certainly in Harlem at that time. And our neighbors, John and Yoko Lennon, would often be conspicuously seen strolling about.

Vural: [00:35:43] And how did you think of yourself? Like did you think, oh, I'm part of a new group that's moving into the neighborhood or—you know, because you were saying like often that's the case when neighborhoods are changing that artists are sort of the first wave of change, and themselves funky and maybe not a lot of money, and then, oddly, that turns into what's appealing for the next wave where money comes in. Do you remember how you thought of yourself?

Medley: [00:36:20] I thought of myself as—first of all, I didn't come to be a writer. I didn't think I could write. I learned that later, gradually. But I thought of myself as a young director coming into the neighborhood. And I was very *relieved* that it was racially diverse. And also, I had never, from where I came from, been in proximity to people who spoke many other languages, so that was strange and amazing and a little scary because it's just unfamiliar. So, Spanish, all the Spanish, Spanish, Spanish. And then picking up—I remember when I visited back home and I found myself casually using a Yiddish word, you know, *oy,* or something. You know, I thought oh God, I'm becoming like the New Yorker. And regionalisms. So where I'm from we say "pop", "soda pop", but here's it's "soda". And all that. But it was the mix of people, the mix of smells in the neighborhood, and of concepts of noise.

Vural: [00:37:50] So, tell me about that. I'm interested in the smells and the noise.

Medley: [00:37:55] Well, I was not at all familiar with outside cooking. I'd never been places—and when people have visited me from the Midwest in particular—there's food everywhere. There was food—there were the carts—the park, the corners. And in the summertime, it was that smell of hotdogs, that salt smell of hotdogs and sauerkraut. And then in the winter, it was the pretzels and there's peanuts. But it was everywhere. If you wanted a snack, a cheap snack, there it was.

[00:38:46] And then coming from an environment where—single-family homes with front and backyards, people know each other. And aside from the occasional fourth of July celebration or maybe on a Saturday on some occasion people might, you might hear their music or something. But this was just this cacophony all the time. It was just—all this traffic, all these people. The density of the people everywhere. So, the Upper West Side being no exception to that, and yet I found it appealing at the same time.

[00:39:36] Now, my friends who lived in what was to become Tribeca—painters, sculptors who moved into these lofts and had to renovate the loft and so on—where you had to *run* from their door into the subway. So, it wasn't *that* bad, because there would be somebody out here, and usually dealing, or we had the sex workers and they would be out. So, there was that unspoken alliance where, you know, at least somebody's here and if I start screaming, I think they'll say something, do something.

Vural: [00:40:26] And you recognized each other from passing—

Medley: [00:40:28] You recognized—once you start recognizing people, that again is some kind of an alliance there.

Vural: [00:40:42] And what do you remember was on the street? Some people told me that what they remember is a lot of medical supply stores. Do you remember it that way in the early days?

Medley: [00:40:54] I remember some medical supply stores. I remember the store that was right on the corner—my corner—Broadway—my corner was Columbus, but Broadway and Seventy-thirdrd Street and it was a medical supplies, pharmacy *and* phonebooth. And, of course, the phonebooths all worked, and every corner had one and this store had one inside. I remember when the phonebooths were a full structure and working and used. I remember all the grocery stores were—one of them is still there—but there was not this specialty thing. I remember that the standard—the Korean fruit market did not exist—the Jewish deli was the standard. If you wanted to get prepared food—your chicken, a few cold cuts—the Jewish deli, bagels. I was introduced to bagels. So, they were—and the ubiquitous Greek coffeeshop with the famous [chuckles]—with the cups, with the, you know, those Parthenon design.

Vural: [00:42:34] The blue-and-white paper cup.

Medley: [00:42:34] Yes, yes. And they were everywhere. And I loved the idea—I remember loving on Saturday—and then for me because of my—when I was in the theater, I also had summers off and I would be supported by unemployment. And then when I eventually became a professor—but that was much later, of course.

[00:43:02] So, in these early days, I loved the idea—I found out that I loved the Greek coffeeshop breakfast. So cheap. And, you know, there was no specialty coffee. It was those hard,

scrambled eggs. Those chefs, they're just—they weren't chefs, they were just fast-order cooks and they just threw it down and that would be—

[00:43:28] There was a lot of these little stores and they would be in between some other larger structure and they'd be selling everything, all kinds of knickknacks, old books, old records. And I would gather—now, it was more from estates—all kinds of—and if you—dusty—and if you had the time and patience—and lots of small bookstores.

[00:44:05] All of that. There was one typewriter repair. Typewriters. Typewriter repair shop. And I had my typewriter. But this concept of juicing and, you know, Starbucks, oh, no. The grocery store: plain old Americana, period, that was it. And I remember this shop, a little ways down from me, and it was elderly ladies, elderly white ladies, and their stuff—and they were so quiet—and their stuff was *truly* five-and-dime, little knickknacks. Again, if you had the patience to go through—

[00:44:56] And the closest equivalent I find to what it was like is still in some of the Dominican neighborhoods in East Harlem and up before you get to Washington Heights, where it's very cheap: cleaning goods and houseware type thing. That was more of what you found on the street at that time.

[00:45:34] The churches—the church in my neighborhood—there were two churches that eventually merged because they had to merge, but at that time they were independent churches.

Vural: [00:45:45] Do you remember what they were?

Medley: [00:45:48] Saint Stephen's and Christ Church. Because I used to work—I was a secretary, briefly, assistant secretary, for one of them. And they had a lot of history and they had

all their records, the burial records, and how they had moved up to the Upper West Side from the Lower East Side and so on.

[00:46:12] So, that. I remember the library, the one that's still here on Eightieth and I think it's Amsterdam. And checking out—you had to check—everything was not digital. That age had not come and nobody could even predict that it would ever come.

Vural: [00:46:40] And when you think back on the sort of early days that you were in the neighborhood, did you have any concept of oh, I'm here to stay, I think this is—I'm going to make this my home?

Medley: [00:46:54] New York?

Vural: [00:46:55] Yes, and the neighborhood specifically.

Medley: [00:46:57] Well, New York, definitely. Now, when I moved into my apartment—tiny, cheap—and at that time real estate was cheap, apartments were cheap—no, I was going to move to a bigger place. Now, I elected to be in a field where, you know—but, oh, one apartment, it was nothing. It took me three days, and then I was just being selective. It was always—it was going to be what it was. It was never going to be any different or change.

[00:47:39] When I was in the theater—and the two people who were the artistic director and the executive director of the theater, they lived on Central Park West. Their apartments were a thousand a month. A *thousand* a month? We were *astonished* that they would pay a *thousand* a month. And it was going to be always what it was. People would say, "Oh, you live on the Upper West Side." Yes, I live on the Upper West Side. And it was always going to be—Ninety-sixth—

if you went to Ninety-sixth Street, *all* of the white people on the train got out. That was the way it was.

[00:48:21] And The Met [The Metropolitan Museum of Art]—you go to the museum—ten cents. The Met itself, pay what you like. And why should there ever be any change?

Vural: [00:48:40] So, tell me about your memories of the neighborhood changing.

Medley: [00:48:48] The first sign, as I recall, in the eighties, early eighties, and these boutique stores. And that's strange. And at one point in my memory, they were outposts. So, [chuckles] somebody was selling these very expensive blouses, skirts, so forth, in the midst of—and then we had a bookstore move in. I remember I got to know her. Tiny little bookstore.

Vural: [00:49:27] Where was that?

Medley: [00:49:28] That was about Seventy-four or -five [Seventy-fourth or Seventy-fifth Streets] on Columbus Avenue.

Vural: [00:49:33] Do you remember what it was called?

Medley: [00:49:35] No. I knew her and I know she was there I think to '86, '87. Yes, and it was very small. And wow, there was another boutique clothing store. And we would joke. What is this becoming Madison Avenue? And they were just these tiny little stores where—the signal was you would not shop there unless you were getting a gift for someone, at least on my level, or you were on another economic level. And then another one. It was kind of like a dandelion and crabgrass type of [chuckles] thing.

[00:50:29] And then high-rises started up. And we had had a theater, a movie theater on Broadway and Seventy-third that closed, and the cinema on Broadway and Sixty-sixth, which is now where Century 21 is, yes, and it was all art films.

Vural: [00:50:48] At Seventy-third and Broadway?

Medley: [00:50:50] No, it was where Century 21 is now. Sixty-eighth and—

Vural: [00:50:56] Oh, right, of course. What am I saying? Of course.

Medley: [00:50:58] Yes. So then it was suddenly shut down. There was a box store moving in. And then it started really—it seemed to be very, very rapid. *And* the rents went up and the demographics started shifting.

Vural: [00:51:28] And this would be in the eighties?

Medley: [00:51:30] Ah-hum. So, my Puerto Rican neighbors disappeared, and many of my Black neighbors. Now on the street there are two women my age and we greet each other on the street.

Vural: [00:51:55] Two African-American women?

Medley: [00:51:56] Ah-ha, my age. And suddenly it was—and the dealers disappeared. Now, Lincoln Center just seemed to spiff up and they had these little tables out there now and the fountain was—just was there. It wasn't redesigned like it is now, but it was there and you could sit out there, and there were more concerts.

[00:52:35] Now, there was—I remember—I don't know when it started with the concerts in the park. And in that case with the park—and there was always Shakespeare in the Park, which I

loved—and so you knew you could enter the park at Eighty-sixth Street and the number, the crowds, provided safety coming and going. And it was just so exciting—you had to wait all day. They've changed that, thankfully. You had to wait *all* day to get a ticket. Or I had a friend who had a friend, you know, so I had a ticket.

[00:53:18] But it became easier to come home at night. And one of the reasons for that was because more restaurants. And these restaurants had these outside tables, and in the inclement weather and in the winter weather and so on, there was just more traffic on the street and more—it began to be more white professionals on the street. And my neighbors, the demographic of my neighbors, shifted.

[00:53:54] And we also had in our neighborhood small theater companies, because again the real estate was cheap. We had one theater that was actually in the basement of the church that is on Eighty-sixth and Broadway. So, the real estate made such a big difference. But, yes, there was more traffic on the street that was—at night—that was coming from all kinds of events, that was comprised of people with means or young people, whatever. So, there were *many* more white professionals or people that were—I say professionals, they were, overheard in their conversation, where they were going to and from work, and the way people were dressed.

Vural: [00:54:53] Not so much in the arts anymore.

Medley: [00:54:55] Well, not so much clothing that suggested that they were without means. And in this country, unfortunately, it also so often designates another kind of segregation. And so that's what was happening. And suddenly when I'd come into my building at night and there would be another woman, a white woman, I'd get a look of a bit Do you belong here? Who are

you? that kind of a look. Or the door would be—the person would close the front door quickly because they didn't know whether I belonged there until I got my key out.

[00:55:55] So, these were the different changes taking place. The restaurants were great. The prices started escalating. And it was many more white families you saw moving in. The park was getting a spiff up, and when [John] Lennon died in '80, then we had her [Yoko Ono's] renovation of that part of the park. And so we were like oh, the Upper West Side. Oh, you're at the Upper West Side! And it became—

Vural: [00:56:46] Do you remember when you realized oh, it's not funky anymore, it's something else?

Medley: [00:56:56] I remember it coming to me gradually. When I would—coming home from work, going to work, coming home from a performance of some sort, or if I'd stayed out *really* late or coming home early in the morning and so on, that oh, it's feeling very different. The obvious sex workers—gone. I think that the police were responding to the needs of the new demographics.

[00:57:39] So, on the one hand, and I said this, I remember saying when people would ask me, well, it's nice to be coming home and walk past these cafés and so on or just people coming and going from their various events and, you know, feeling that I'm one—that my safety—it's not an isolated situation. That's very nice. However, on the other hand, people of a certain demographic, having to do with money more than anything else, were being locked out. So, that's how I felt.

Vural: [00:58:29] Do you remember when the AIDS epidemic hit?

Medley: [00:58:35] Oh yes, I had many a soul brother die of AIDS. I most definitely do. And in ’82, ’83, ’84, so a very, very dear friend of mine, very close friend of mine—he lived at Seventy-third and First Avenue. Now, Seventy-third and First Avenue was the last remnant of what it used to be like on the Upper West Side, with the funky shops and the apartments—they had apartments that were still with the bathtub in the kitchen. So, but I definitely, yes, I definitely remember that. I will never forget it.

Vural: [00:59:27] And did it hit in the neighborhood as well?

Medley: [00:59:29] Oh yes. So, there were people who I would nod to—they were just familiar, familiar faces—and then seeing that they were sick and then not seeing them. Yes.

Vural: [00:59:56] Do you remember when the neighborhood started to smell different?

Medley: [01:00:04] When it started to smell different. Well, when it started to—it was less of that really garbage—the services were improving. So, yes. And I try to think about how when I’d read about early New York and I think every one of these cars was once a horse-drawn—oh my God! What was that like, those horses, all those horses in the summer? You know, it’s just—and whenever there was a garbage strike, you got, oh, yes, returned to the way it often was.

[01:00:51] The other thing was that garbage in the apartment—apartment garbage—there were cans and there they’d be. But as time went on, the cans were rifled through. So, the poor were there, coming through there or there—more people begging on the street were there. And that was a change.

Vural: [01:01:28] When do you remember that starting?

Medley: [01:01:30] I can't put a date on it. I just know that there was a shift as the people who had some forms of very good jobs, as demonstrated, as evidenced in the way they dressed and in their accessories and so on, and that's followed by a wave of entrepreneurs who say, okay, let's put this clientele—you know, let's adapt for the clientele. And then that was followed by people who have nothing. And then we had the drug thing. And then we had the AIDS thing. So, that was the place to go if you wanted to beg and hopefully get something, and often it still is.

[01:02:30] But at the same time, the whiff—speaking of smells, in the summer particularly—so, you'd go past these specialty stores and you'd get a *whoo* of perfume coming from the interior of a store, some specialty scent that they were displaying. And so it would be all that, too, with it, yes.

Vural: [01:03:03] Do you remember some of the early specialty stores, like The Silver Palate?

Medley: [01:03:07] Oh, yes, The Silver Palate was right down on the first floor of my building.

Vural: [01:03:13] What did you think of that? Because that was a really early kind of gourmet—

Medley: [01:03:16] It was very early. And one—well, there was this Italian, old Italian restaurant, actually when I arrived, they were there. Very reasonable, very Italian. And once I was sitting there, came home from some late night engagement, I was having dinner by myself and these two men next to me, white, Italian men, they were like from central casting—the accent. And they were going on and on and one was really cursing up a storm saying all kind of F words, all kinds—you know. And I'm basically writing—I'm sure I was writing—I'm in my own world—and one of them stands up and tells the other one, "There's a lady present, you don't talk like that." I was just—[chuckles]. Well, thank you, you know.

[01:04:30] So, The Silver Palate was "What's that?" And then looking in. They seemed to be working very, very, very, very, very hard, all the time. We had them and we had the Italian restaurant and we had a lot of mice. But everybody has a lot of mice, I think, in the walls and dealing with that was always an issue. And particularly the landlords before George [Beane] were like, oh, boy. And I didn't know how to handle the situation. And they'd come and put poison down. Then you'd see the mouse creeping across the floor just begging you—because it had been poisoned. It was just *urgh,* all kinds of—

[01:05:28] But I do remember them and their book and so on. And I didn't—I looked in, I noted it, and I didn't pay that much attention. I remember the woman who seemed to be the top proprietor to it.

Vural: [01:05:49] Sheila Lukins, I think was her name.

Medley: [01:05:52] I guess—yes. And so what happened to them, do you know?

Vural: [01:05:55] So, they sold the business and it still exists in some form—I think the sauces that they made or the jams—but completely different people. And I'm not sure, but there were two women originally and one of them has died.

Medley: [01:06:11] Oh.

Vural: [01:06:14] And I think they had had a falling out at some point and sold the business.

Medley: [01:06:18] Ah-ha, ah-ha.

Vural: [01:06:20] But people have talked about it as kind of one of the early markers of change.

Medley: [01:06:26] Oh, yes, they were, they certainly were. It was takeout. Was it takeout or no? I can't remember.

Vural: [01:06:33] It was, yes.

Medley: [01:06:36] Yes.

Vural: [01:06:36] Food you could buy, prepared food.

Medley: [01:06:38] Yes, and I don't think I ever—I don't think I ever bought anything from them.

Vural: [01:06:44] And then they also made, I think, jams or sauces or things like that.

Medley: [01:06:48] Yes, because they'd make dressings and things like that. Yes, I remember them. Right in my building.

Vural: [01:06:55] And do you—was there at point at which or is there—maybe this hasn't happened—where you thought, oh, I am here to stay?

Medley: [01:07:03] Well, yes. One, it's what I can afford, given the choice of career. And it's a five-story walkup. It keeps me in shape, but I would prefer an elevator and so on. But I came to realize—because of getting to know new neighbors, getting to know what they were paying, getting to know people all over the place, and the real estate and so on—that I have the most reasonable rent. That's it.

[01:07:42] So, yes, I'm there. That's home. I travel around the country. I love traveling. I love nature. I go places where I can hike. But there is something—and I will say to myself—I'll be out in these *magnificent* forests, snowcapped mountains, all these fir and pine trees—and I'm

going to Alaska actually in two weeks—and people—I know friends who have these very modest and quite formidable places that they live, looking out on vistas, gardens, and they have space, space, space, space, space, and quiet all the time. So, I will say to myself, *why* am I returning to this funky, crowded, noisy place?

[01:09:06] The one element that keeps my stress down is the park, the proximity of the park, both parks, actually. But, you know, why? Why am I one of this population, whatever it is, 350 million or whatever of the United States, and then these quirky, these weird, you know, eight-and-a-half million people? What is it about this place? Why?

[01:09:35] And, you know, I'm not *really* stuck, because I am a middle-class person in this country, I've got insurance, a pension, you know, I'm not at all destitute. I moved classes, actually. And there are many places cheaper to live. But when I'm elsewhere, in beauty, serenity, and the few times—it's one of the few times when I get to drive, because, you know, we don't have to do that. But it gets to be about after dusk and I'm just kind of *urrrr.*

[01:10:30] I remember the students [chuckles] who were out of state students coming from New York to University of Michigan, and it was something about—it would be getting dusk, six, seven o'clock—and [in meak voice] "Oh, I don't know what else to do." I'd think, *what's wrong with them?* But I have that.

[01:10:46] I love the density of culture. There is *always* something to do. And often—often—it's free. Very modest prices, you know. And then there is the occasion when I splurge heavily—I saw Glenda Jackson in *King Lear*. But there is this—and it's unbeatable in this country, because LA, you've got to have a car and people don't walk, even San Francisco, I didn't feel it like—I've not been to New Mexico and so on. But people retreat to their homes. Their home is their

sanctuary. And here, like Paris and London and Rome, people are out. And if you want to be out—there are times when I've had enough, but I love it around me. And, you know, let's take a walk up here and see what's up here. I *love* it.

[01:11:46] So that about the Upper West Side, I love that. The pedestrian traffic on the streets. It's more racially diverse—gradually more, it seems to be.

Vural: [01:12:05] You mean this neighborhood specifically?

Medley: [01:12:07] Yes, this neighborhood specifically. And people in the cafés and so on. I'm very ambivalent about what's happening with Harlem, because where are the poor people going? Where are the people who can't afford it? And I know people who grew up in Harlem, and this notion that now it's desirable. You see, so, now what? And people—the prices going up.

[01:12:41] But I have a—and I think everybody, wherever you're living, if you live there for a while, you have a friendship network, you have a network of acquaintances and all that. But the notion that if I go to a cultural event or a party, and then afterwards, I have to get in a car and put that second alertness on my consciousness, not in Manhattan or greater New York City—oh, let somebody else get the train [chuckles]. There's always somebody out. There's always—there's the density of people. And I love walking, and wherever you're walking and okay, what language is that? Okay, is it Russian? Oh, that's Arabic. Oh, what's that? I *love* that. And the challenge of people living with their differences.

[01:13:56] But I'm a New Yorker. I'm a New Yorker. And the little parks in the Upper West Side that have been, you know, refined and all that, that's nice. And little places to sit. And the Natural History Museum, which was again an overgrown, kind of rough-grown spot, because it's

in the back of the main entrance. And all that's now, you know, spiffed, one can sit there and all that.

[01:14:33] But I just love the proximity. And the thing about the Upper West Side, which I love, is definitely how it's centrally located. As my friends—I have a tiny apartment, still this tiny apartment—and my friends who come from elsewhere they say, "You know, the value of this apartment is where you're located." I wish I weren't on the avenue, on Columbus Avenue. So, I have to exist in my apartment mainly with earplugs and so on. But it's home and it's comfortable. And I *love*—I go other places and at a certain time, everybody's in their home or they're in their car on the way to their home or on the way and the streets are *phwoo,* you know, *that's* creepy, or they're in their backyards and stuff—in New York there's somebody. The hurricane [chuckles]. We had a hurricane. Here was somebody, some fool if you ask me, that they were out there *trying* to walk their dog. Here we go.

[01:15:44] And then of course what's also happened in the Upper West Side is the ubiquitous markets, thanks to the Korean grocers. Always open twenty-four seven. Once more that abundance of—you know, the city never sleeps [chuckles]. You can get this and you can get that—and so even when the restaurants and stuff close up, there's the Korean grocer here and there.

[01:16:16] So, that phenomena. I remember very well when they came to the neighborhood and they really couldn't afford—they couldn't afford a full interior or exterior, so they would be bundled up in the winter and still selling fruits and so on and working *so* hard, and how that built that business up.

[01:16:44] The other thing was the gyms. A gym? There was a Y, I guess. I remember very—when I first came here, Upper West Side, and I include my wonderful park, so, you know, there would be—and in fact the man, who—he died, he was the first runner around the reservoir. You weren't supposed to be running around the reservoir. And he was and I suppose arrested, and he fought for it and they now have his picture up and everything. And through the '70s slowly more people were running, and women, and the transition on the streets because of this more physical activity thing and the gym thing and these different gyms. And the clothing becomes—you know, gym clothing becomes acceptable street clothing, and people are—and how much are you doing? How many miles? And so on. And *New York* magazine—I remember there was no *New York* magazine. Then there was a *New York* magazine. Then they're talking about how the greatest singles bar was the reservoir, running around the reservoir, and how the singles scene because of the bars grew with the whole AIDS thing. It seemed to be in tandem.

[01:18:19] But working out and seeing people working out—you just wouldn't—as I recall, your little flimsy gym shorts—you know, not really, you wouldn't. Now it's—that was definitely a change.

Vural: [01:18:46] So, I want to ask you two things, as I'm aware of the time. One is I want to ask you how you evolved into a writer and a professor—because you were saying before we started recording that you're just retiring from teaching. And the other thing I want to ask you about, because you mentioned it and I think it's really interesting, how you changed classes from a working-class girl to a retiring professor. And I wonder if you could talk about both of those before we say goodbye.

Medley: [01:19:19] I was starting in the theater as a receptionist and I started at one of the premier—I just lucked into a premier job with a premier off-Broadway theater, which was the American Place Theater at the time. And the mentor, playwright Philip Hayes Dean, who I'd met at University of Michigan, was associated with The American Place [Theatre], and was being produced by Wynn Handman, the director of that theater. So, as a receptionist, a job which I looked down on, foolishly, I got to meet Arthur Miller.

Vural: [01:19:53] Wow.

Medley: [01:19:54] You see, I got to meet Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Myrna Loy, you know, these people who—Martha Graham in her wheelchair. So, you know, wow. And these people walking through, coming through. And, also, I began to volunteer. There was an assistant literary manager—a literary manager is like an editor and a literary manager is the first person who sees your work if you submit it. The literary manager then will hopefully pass it on to the artistic director. In those days, they were of course print scripts, hardcopy scripts. And I got to know The American Place literary manager and befriended the literary manager and he, and Handman let me, for free, read scripts that would come through and I would write reports.

[01:20:49] So, I didn't know it, but I was training as a playwright, I was training as a professor. I saw how to break a play down and so on. And eventually the artistic director would also take in regard my comments and then gradually over time I became one of the literary managers, paid and so on.

[01:21:15] So, that was getting—I was getting really my master's degree. I didn't know that at the time. And then, just again by happenstance of contacts being in the area, I was told about the American Place Theater—not the American Place Theater, that's where I was working—I was

told about Ensemble Studio Theatre, and Curt Dempster, the artistic director there. And that was a real shift in my life. So, I went over there and I began training there. There was so much theater in New York at the time.

Vural: [01:21:42] And when was that?

Medley: [01:21:44] That was 1982, ’80, ’82. And there was just so much—because, again, real estate—but in being at The American Place, and then—at the Ensemble Studio Theatre, I came to know other playwrights, befriend them. There was this group of EST [Ensemble Studio Theatre] writers, extraordinary groups of writers. They would hang out faithfully every Tuesday night. They were being produced and they let me hang out with them. Them and another group of people. I again made friends, befriended this man—he died of AIDS—but our group we named Rainbow Studio Collective. That group was *the* most diverse group I’ve ever been in, racially, ethnically, gender choice.

[01:22:33] So, we would meet twice a month and then the Ensemble Studio group, we’d meet every week. And I learned. They trained me. They were being produced. The way they went about writing, which is you have no idea what you’re going to write, you write from *here* [indicates the heart area]. You start with something that is just driving you and you get responses and you rewrite and you rewrite and eventually it starts gaining its own structure.

[01:23:01] So, they taught me and I started writing, and in three years I had something. One of the early things I wrote, which, again, came by way of observing and listening to this Black woman speaking on a city bus—I realized that I have a great ear because I grew up that way. So, by the time my first plays—my first monologue was produced off Broadway, as part of “My

Name is Alice." And so that is still paying [chuckles] many electric bills here and there and so on. And then my second play, "Ma Rose," was very successful.

[01:23:37] But I remember standing on the corner of Fifty-sixth and Tenth Avenue and I had just received my first check. They were going to read, have a public reading of, my earliest play, and I thought: *I'm a writer. That's what I want to do. That's what I do.*

Vural: [01:23:56] What was your earliest play and what was your second play?

Medley: [01:23:59] Well, the earliest play was—I had had an experience of seeing this couple, these two couples, Black Americans, at the University of Michigan in the emergency room, and it was so shattering. I was in there for a whole thing. These two couples were experiencing the shock of one of the women's mental breakdown. It was so shattering that that stayed in my psyche. So, when I started just to write—because my playwriting groups encouraged, "just write anything," so I started writing anything and this thing started emerging.

[01:24:36] And my imagination as to if I had been one of the wives of that couple—it eventually became. And that play really was—they did a public reading and I got my first $60 for that. And then my monologue in "A...My Name is Alice," that was off Broadway, I was asked to write something about women and this whole thing of women coming of age and I thought immediately, I can't do it. And I'm on the bus and I hear this woman—this is what I love about New York, too, is just you can just, oh, look at that, look at that, wow—and I wrote down what I heard from her and that became a monologue that is still produced all around the country.

[01:25:23] And then the third play, the play where I got my first big rave *New York Times* review— So, I'm in the grocery store, I'm writing something else, and I'm in the grocery store

and I'm in these groups now and I, you know, you overhear, I overhear these two women. You just—when you travel the rest of the country you just don't—it's different. And so these two women are talking, two white women, [chuckles] and the woman says, "You know, mother's being taken care of. The nursing home, it's just bankrupting us and she's never going to wake up and we don't know how long the coma is." And I'm just—

[01:26:08] "So, I went to her bedside at three in the morning and I said, 'Mother, I don't know if you can hear me, but we're losing, we're just—you know, after two years, we can't do it anymore. We're just not going to be able to do it.' And I went home. I'm sobbing. How could I say this, uhh. And I get a call from the nurse, 'She's gone.'"

[01:26:34] And it reconnected me to a trauma that had happened in my own family with my mother's mother. And the whole family was involved in the trauma, including myself. I went home [chuckles]—it was like taking dictation, just, you know, it went through many incarnations but— And I actually consulted my brother and I said— You know, because my mother was very supportive of my work. "Alice" went all around the country, she saw it and all these things. So, that's great, but this particular play, I said to him, "What do you think mom will— Shouldn't I? Should I?" He read a draft and said, "Don't tell Mom." And that's the play that got all these reviews.

Vural: [01:27:22] Tell me which one that was.

Medley: [01:27:23] It's called "Ma Rose."

Vural: [01:27:24] Yes, I read about it today.

Medley: [01:27:26] These were the times when you couldn't get *The [New York] Times* until very late at night for the next day. I remember people phoning me with "Congratulations." What are they talking about? And then, you know, that review. So, I didn't tell my mother. And then of course somebody recognized the name and sent the review to my aunt, who assumed, thankfully she assumed that my mother knew about it, so, my mother called me and said, "You have something in *The Times*?" "Well," I told her, "it's nothing really. It's, you know—"

[01:28:01] Anyway, but that was—New York saved my life. For one thing, New York got me into psychotherapy. Yes. And, you know, I found my vocation in New York. And it was the people, because I found myself in a tribe of other expats, expats from their native homes. Other misfits, all collected to be in the arts in New York. And that's so exciting.

[01:28:42] And my students—I would say that ninety percent of my students over the years they all—and even now with these exorbitant real estate prices where you've five people in an apartment, but they—and they're *way* out on the outskirts. You have to take a bus to get to the subway and all this. But they want to be in New York. They want to be in this environment. They are working these scrape-by jobs—you know, they're really—first of all, they're in debt like I was never in debt like that. They're in debt due to student loans. But they want this tumultuous environment. Thankfully, they also have more access to media work than I ever did.

[01:29:30] But it's a sensibility in New York. And I love the fact—I go traveling on the subway and there's a man in the subway, silk tie, and there's a man right next to him, homeless. It's something very—you know, a lot of times I don't like it because the stress if something happens. But New York is *unique.* And so that I found a way to be here, that I'm here.

[01:30:05] And everybody asks me, what are you going to—now that you've retired? New York will be the base. It'll always be the base. I love these places that I can go. They're so beautiful. I have friends who have many rooms with views and they thankfully offer open invitations. And one of my friends in Oregon says, "So, now you're going to retire here." *I couldn't to do it,* not for the long haul. I just—*urgh, no!* Where you have to, you know, get in your car and you've got to drive for fifteen minutes or way further in the snow and the hail and all that? And someone else's beautiful house, but it's over there, where? You know, I am not that sensibility. But, yes, it's been great and it's been great to find the Upper West Side. I didn't know at the time when I moved in what a treasure it was. I wish it had an elevator, but it doesn't.

Vural: [01:31:10] So, it's almost five.

Medley: [01:31:11] Oh my goodness!

Vural: [01:31:12] Is there anything you want to tell me before we say goodbye, any reflections you have on the path that you've had from a little girl in Detroit to playwright?

Medley: [01:31:23] Well, I would say that the—so, the thing about the arts, my class thing, was that I got into the arts and the arts is a special tribal thing. Then getting produced and working in television, also. And so that I was able to travel in ways that I never expected. I was able to go to art colonies and meet other people in ways that I would never have done before. As I developed a reputation as a dramaturg—because I'd been a literary manager—so I could give people feedback on their plays, and as my plays began to be produced, it led to my being asked, because of different friendship networks, to teach playwriting classes. So, a playwright friend of mine was the head of playwriting at the University of Iowa and asked me, "Would you come out,

bring your play?" Okay. Then this happened with other playwriting colleagues at Vanderbilt University and Columbia [University], NYU [New York University].

[01:32:27] So, I started amassing this guest teaching reputation. So, then finally I guest taught at Sarah Lawrence [College] and then, "Please come and do another one and do another one." And then, "Let's go for tenure on the strength of your artistic merits." All the while I was being published and produced.

[01:32:47] And so that's the brief history of how I became a professional. But my background had been about "educate yourself." There was something about believing your talent, there was something about my curiosity, and all of that combination.

Vural: [01:33:16] That's stuff to feel good about.

Medley: [01:33:17] Yes, yes, yes. And now we just hope there's more sand in the hourglass as we enter the last or the third act, you know. So, more travel, I hope, and more visitations and seeing more of my friends. As long as we can do that and—all that.

Vural: [01:33:40] And more writing?

Medley: [01:33:42] Oh, yes, constantly I'm writing, writing, writing. Right now, I'm now writing a short play for teenagers that I've been commissioned by way of Drew University. So, I'm doing that till June first.

Vural: [01:33:55] Great.

Medley: [01:33:56] And then I have my book and I have my memoir. Writing, you know, writers write. And my writing groups are all supportive. That's the thing. I wouldn't have these

kinds of groups if I weren't here—other people who are so likeminded and have fascinating lives. And it's the contacts, it's the accessibility that New York gives you that you—it just doesn't—I don't think it's in other places. Maybe some parts of Chicago, maybe.

Vural: [01:34:36] What's your book?

Medley: [01:34:37] My book is about writing.

Vural: [01:34:41] Okay.

Medley: [01:34:41] And one of the things is that there are thousands of them, and they're always appealing to publishers [chuckles], and I have spent thirty years teaching. So, I'm putting all my exercises together in a book and it's going to be like a yoga manual. So, that's that. My memoir is about me and my mother and the ark of that, early memories to her death. And then I have different plays and different all kinds of things going on. Unending. And that's—so happy about that.

Vural: [01:35:17] That's great.

Medley: [01:35:18] Yes.

Vural: [01:35:19] Is there anything else you want to tell me before we say goodbye?

Medley: [01:35:21] I love New York! New York is great! I love New York! It's great. I am *so* grateful to Frederick [Law] Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, even though the city did move out Seneca Village of freed Blacks and Irish people to make the park. That is a blemish on New York City history. But this notion that there needs to be a park here because if there's not a park here, there would be *all* concrete and brick with no place to really breathe. And I wish that New

York's marvelousness—and this is for the whole country—that the gentrification did not include exclusion: racial and economic.

Vural: [01:36:17] That's a real worry.

Medley: [01:36:18] That's a real worry, yes. And so—but do you know that book *The Island at the Center of the World*?

Vural: [01:36:27] I do not.

Medley: [01:36:28] Oh, you must, *The Island at the Center of the World*. And it's a history of New York from the Dutch perspective, with all these records.

Vural: [01:36:37] I will read it.

Medley: [01:36:38] You must.

Vural: [01:36:41] Okay.

Medley: [01:36:41] And that the Upper West Side—my last thing I'd like to say is that there's a book, I can't remember the name, but in the records, the Upper West Side from Riverside to about Eightieth [Street] was a plantation, and the woman, the white woman, eventually—I don't know, it went through some generations—but the white woman who owned the plantation that comprised what would end up being the Upper West Side ended up giving it to, or ceding the land to, this freed slave and he owned this property. Obviously, over time the land was wrestled from his hands.

Vural: [01:37:25] Alright, I'm going to say goodbye. Thank you.

Medley: [01:37:26] Okay. Thank you. This has been fun.

[END OF INTERVIEW]