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Milfort, Fritznel, Oral history interview conducted by Craig Wilder, August 17, 1993, Crown Heights History Project oral histories, 1994.006.19; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Oral History Interview with Fritznel Milfort

Crown Heights History Project oral histories 1994.006.19

Interview conducted by Craig Wilder on August 17, 1993 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

CRAIG WILDER: If you could just briefly tell me what languages you speak at home?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: At home, I mostly speak, I would say 50% Kreyol and 50% English.

CRAIG WILDER: Is that on purpose?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: It comes on naturally.

CRAIG WILDER: If I asked you to just describe the journey from Haiti, your birthplace.

First start off with your birth and tell us about that. Then tell us about your journey to New York City.

FRITZNEL MILFORT: I grew up in Haiti. I did my primary and secondary school in Haiti.

My mother migrated to New York in 1965. I remained in Haiti with my aunt, who was also my godmother, until 1972. When I came in '72, I came in as a resident alien. I went to high school. While I was in high school, I also went to junior high school at night because I wanted to speak English a little bit faster. Also, because the classes were a little bit harder because of my English problem, so I decided to take courses in the evening. A year later, my life in New York was not easy, so decided to get a part time job. Then, when I got my first part time job, the employer didn't want to hire me, just a year later, during the summer. He didn't want to hire me because he thought that I was a student. I went and I lied to the employer and I told him, "Hey, wait a minute. I am not going to school." He said, "If you are going to school, I will not hire you because you will be leaving at a certain time." And I wanted the job desperately, so I told the employer, "I will not go to school." After he gave the job, then I realized I got the job because I needed the money. Before September came, I said, "Wait a minute. You should tell him the truth." I went in and I told him, "Let me explain something. I needed the job, so I told you I wasn't going to school, but I am going to school, but I'm

attending school. I'm telling you a month in advance." I explained the situation to him, told him I need money to buy clothes. The only way for me to get that job was to tell you I wasn't going to school. I needed it so I am telling you a month in advance. He looked at me and said alright. Before that month ended, I kept reminding him that I was going to school to try to be a policeman. The whole week before I left, I reminded him. The Friday before I left, he gave me my money and he told me, "You're a good kid." At that time, it was a printing place. The truck came in and they had to load the truck with papers and stuff like that. I was about to leave, and the truck pulled in. I turned around and I said, "Can I help you load the truck?" What I was thinking that before the term end, maybe the next summer, I won't have to look for a second job. Maybe he will consider taking me back. He liked that and he told me, "Fritznel, I like that. After school, I want you to come in and clean up the place for me." He used to love the way I cleaned up. That was a very good start for me. He also gave me a key to close the place, and I thank him for that. By the way, this person happened to be a Jew. I will never forget that. I really like what happened. It was giving me a good head start. So I graduated high school, and then, I am telling you what happened, this guy wanted to sell the business. When he is selling the business, the guy who was buying the business said, "I want the whole place cleaned. I don't want to have any of your employees." The guy said, "The only employee that I want is not even an employee. It's this guy that comes in off hours." The guy that hired me was shocked and said, "Why do you want to hire him?" He said, "Before I bought the business, I came in and I watched him. He seems to be a good kid. I want him on that job. To me, it was such luck. Somebody is buying the business, and I am not even in there full time, your only there in the afternoon and the person is willing to have me come in. The second employer came in and he opened up the place and the first employer took all the clients. So what I did is I came in in the afternoon, after three o'clock, after school. We didn't have anything to do. For a whole year, he would give me \$10 or \$15 dollars when he has it. If he doesn't have it, I said, "no problem."

Meanwhile, that kept me busy after school. One day, I don't know God Bless him, and made a whole lot of money. I don't know how he did it, but he made the place into a big place. And he started making a lot of money. At that time, I graduated from high school. I applied to City College. When you apply, they ask you for three choices. I don't know what my second choice was, but of the three I also applied Lehman College. Of the three colleges, Lehman happened to answer me. I didn't have any choice but to go there. I was still going to work, so I made the schedule flexible. They were very nice to me and then I would go to school. If I had a class in the afternoon, they let me come in in the morning and do my work, and then I would go to school. One day, I was undecided as to what my major was going to be. While I was at the place, the CPA accountant came in. I had a little talk with him and asked him what he did for a living. I didn't even know what a CPA was, so he explained it to me. I said, "Do you make money?" He said, "I make a nice living. I overheard him telling the boss that Marine Midland Bank offered him a job for \$35,000. At that time, that was '75 or '76. Imagine that you are making \$2.00 an hour and somebody is telling you that they turned down a job for \$35,000. To me, that was a lot of money. Then I thought maybe I should go into that field. Maybe I should learn accounting. So I began to look at the courses that Lehman is offering. I thought to myself, if I am working, why don't I go to a private school? I will work my way and pay for a private school I applied for LIU. LIU was asking me a lot of questions about being a transfer student and stuff like that. So I said, "Forget about all of this." Take me on as a new student. Forget about all the courses I took at Lehman, because I don't want any transfers. Take me like a new student. They did that. Lucky enough for me, the job still gave me my flexible time. At that time, I began to have more experience in the printing industry, so they began to pay me more money. So now what I would do in the morning, if I have a class in the morning at 11:00. I use to have my class from 11-4. I would go to work at 7:00, leave work, go to LIU, then leave LIU and go back to work. So I would be leaving at 7:30-8:00, with that, I paid my school. One day, while I was in my third year, the business

boomed and the company bought good pieces of commercial land on the Island. They decided to move to the Island. The owner called me up to his office and said, "You've been with me from day one in the business. You started with me when I couldn't even pay you. I want to make you an offer. You're going to be a supervisor. I want you to move with me to the Island." Now, my problem was I didn't have enough money to stay at LIU. So I said shucks, and he said, "If you want to be a supervisor, I have to be at work from 8:00 to 5:00." I said, "Wait a minute. This is all the way on the island. I don't even have a car." He said, "I will give you transportation. But you have to forget about the school." I decided I would go work for him and see if I could squeeze my school in in the evening and on the weekends. I did that. I made my schedule in the evening and on the weekends. It was tough having to stay full time at the school [unintelligible] and also having to work full time. After the first term, I was at two and a half year, my senior year. I realized I couldn't keep on going like that. It was either you take the job or I quit school, because I was be getting home at 12:00 and then I would have to get up and drive to the island at 5:00 in the morning, because I have homework and stuff like that. One day, there was a truck that was stopping to get materials, and I stood up and I thought, wait a minute. You've been working hard since high school. You've been working two jobs to finish your school. Now you're in your third year and you are doing very well. What if the owner would die and the business would close? You only have one year left. Why don't you sacrifice that final year and finish up college for good? So I called the owner and told him. He said, "I thought we went through all of this. I gave you the transportation that you wanted. Now what's the problem? Are you looking for more money?" He offered me more money. I said, "No it's not that. You how long I've been working to go to school. I want to go back to school." I also had a very good brother who was on the job. He just got married and he got this job. I told him how I felt. He said, "If you leave this job, I don't have a job. My family is going to suffer. But can I tell you something, I feel like I am going to find something else. I think you should do it. I encourage you to do this. I

know you're afraid that you leave the job I don't have the transportation and I have to leave the job too. But do this. Leave the job and finish your school." I was waiting for him to get a job. He got a job before we even left the place. So I went to LIU and I finished it up. This was 1981. I got my bachelor's degree in accounting. I wasn't one of the top students, but as a Black student, I was qualified to be interviewed by the big eight firms, Price-Waterhouse and stuff like that. They told me if you're qualified for that, your grade point average much be such and such and stuff like that. So I went to the interview. I am being honest with you. One of the things that I knew... I didn't make the interview for two reasons. One was my accent, two, I wasn't ready with the corporate world. You have to present yourself in a professional way because they look for you to have a nice suit, nice tie, with white shirt under there. I felt like Price Waterhouse didn't take me, not because of what I knew, but because of the way I presented myself. I did not know enough to present myself. Maybe too I didn't have the resources. At that time, I had just graduated and did not have any job. I didn't have the money to go and buy an expensive suit. I didn't have the money to buy a nice tie. Knowing what I know today, I know that I made a lousy presentation. They counted all of that. Lucky me, I didn't get the job, but I ended up with Tri-borough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, doing governmental accounting. That wasn't my cup of tea. The guy I found was a CPA was working for someone else I kept thinking that if that CPA didn't take the job with Marine Midland, and he is coming here once a month to do accounting, and he tells me there is more money to do that, my goal was to become a CPA and do just like what he did. So I got the job, I sat in there and eventually they started to give me more responsibility. One day, there was the assistant comptroller said, "You're too bright. You shouldn't be at the government level. A guy like you should be working at a CPA firm. My ambition was to go with Price-Waterhouse and stuff like that. I remember my interview with Price-Waterhouse was the weekend before Labor Day weekend. When I found out that I did not get the job, I got the results before Labor Day weekend that was one of the worst labor days

that I have ever spent. I felt like a total failure, because when I got the letter, I spent the whole weekend wondering what I was going to do. Finally, I got the job with the TBTA and one day the comptroller looked at me and said, "Hey, you don't belong here. Why don't you apply for a job at a CPA firm?" I took his advice. I typed my resumes, but I didn't send them out. One way we were discussing it and he was pressuring to leave the place. I never saw anyone push so hard. This person was not a Black person. He was also a Jew. He said to me, "Fritznel, the IRS was looking for young people." He said, "Go out and learn real accounting." I said, "Okay, I'll do that." I did not do that. The next day he showed up, did not even give me the time to make the call. He felt like I was too slow, in making the call, so he brought me the application. So I filled out the application and I gave it to the IRS. The first application I gave them was declined because I wasn't a citizen. So he told me, "Why don't you become a citizen." So I applied to become a citizen. Meanwhile, I applied for the job, then the IRS. I had my interview. The first day, I walked into the interview, and this interview was done with a Black man and a White man. They looked at me and they asked me one simple question. Most people, they asked you ten questions. The only question that they asked me was, "What if we hire you, and someone walks in and you are doing an audit and you find something illegal, and the person offers you money. What would you do?" I said, "First of all, I believe that this is a bribe, a bribe is illegal and against the law. Before you hire me, I know that there must be guidelines. You are going to tell me how to proceed with a situation like that. I would have to follow your procedure. I will know that it is illegal." They said, "We don't need to ask you any more questions. You made it right." I found out later that most people said they would call the police or we would report it to somebody or whatever. That wasn't my answer. My answer was that I would follow the guidelines that I was given. I walked out of there knowing I got the job. They told me on the spot. Now my big problem was to get processed for me for citizenship. Luckily, the job started in October, and three or four weeks before that, I became a citizen. So I walked in there

with my citizenship. My first year, they took me through a training course. I studied hard. Everybody was surprised that I was doing so well. The instructor told me that I was going to make a very good agent. In the midst of all of this, I was still going to school. I graduated in October of '81. My last course was taken in the summer. Meanwhile, I had registered again for MBA to start in September of '81. All the money I was earning from Tribal, I was using to pay for my MBA. I was at the IRS also, I was going to school, for my MBA. I graduated in '83 with my MBA degree. The first year at the IRS. Then I was a grade 5. They moved me up from a grade 5 to a grade 11. That is a big jump. I don't know anybody else who worked for the IRS that came from a grade 5 to a grade 11. I was doing tremendously well. I was closing cases much faster than the average agent. The next thing that I know, after I graduated with the MBA, I still go to school at night. Now I was to attack the next thing was to get the CPA. Passing the CPA was hard. Now I was going to school at night, preparing for the CPA exam, because they have review class.. I took the exam the first time in '83 just to test, to see how the exam was. I didn't do well. I didn't prepare and I didn't do well. The second time I took the exam, I did very well. I think I passed one part, of the four parts that I took. I decided to take the test by section. One of the things that I realized about immigrants. The real problem was the language. The auditing was very hard. I took one section at a time. I wasn't certified yet, because you need two years of experience. Because I had the MBA, I only needed one year of experience. The experience must be at a CPA firm. You can be at the IRS, but you must have a high quality of cases that you are doing. The IRS told me I fit in for large businesses that I could go ahead and audit Fortune 500 companies. Now as I sat in there and I am looking at things. Usually when you do a large audit, there is a team leader and then the other auditors. The team leader, looked at me, the team leader who is a CPA, looked at me and said, "Fritznel, can I tell you something? You don't fit at the IRS. Guys like you fit in public accounting. You're bright. You're a young kid. You can do much better. Get your license." These guys got stuck in the job, because after a while, what happens to them

is they get raise after raise, and they bought a house and they have commitments. I didn't have any commitments. He came in one day and said, "You know, I was reading about a firm I heard something about a firm called Mitchell/Titus. It has one of the largest minority black CPAs. Why don't you send them a resume?" I sent the firm a resume. The next thing I know, they invited me for an interview. I went to the interview I met the personnel director. My background was not in taxation. Their problem was they had a lady who was leaving who was in charge of the top spot. They were looking for somebody to take over that tax department. Their firm was mostly non-profit organization. They were only doing non-profit. So what I did, I just walked in there. She asked me if I wanted the job and I said yes. So she let me speak with one of the partners. So I thought this must be good. Then I walked in and spoke with the partner. The interview was done perfectly and I walked out. The lady called me and said that the partner of the firm wanted to speak with me. Usually, with two interviews, you either get the job or not. So I went in and talked to the partner and they offered me the job, but at that time, I was making more money than they were offering. I took about an \$8,000 cut to take this job. The partner offered me the job and he looked at me and said, "If you don't make it at this firm, it's not because you're Black." So I took this into consideration. I took the job. Leaving IRS and took an \$8000 cut. My vision was I know a little bit about non-profit. I have seen a lot of books. I've seen how other accountants do it. I knew now about taxation. Now I needed experience doing public accounting before I would be able to open up my own little office. That was the goal. So now I work at Mitchell/ Titus. The lady left and we had someone else. The tax practice was booming at the firm. These people looked at me; I think they underestimated me. They undervalued me. They said, "This guy is a CPA just came from the IRS and just turned the tax department around. What if we get someone else who has much more experience? We will do much better." So they hired somebody else, a Black guy, with fifteen years of experience in accounting. He's also CPA and he's also attorney. When they hired this guy I was happy. Most people think

you don't have a boss, but I was elated. I was so excited because I felt like I would learn a lot. The shock of my life was that I knew more than the guy did. The reason was theory-wise the guy was very well known. Theory-wise, he knew a lot, but practice-wise, he didn't know anything. To make a long story short, when I realized that this guy they brought in has a practice aside just was trying to test the job. Meanwhile, I am getting killed, the practice is booming and he is getting the credit. One day I walked up and realized everything that happened in the tax department, they thought it was him. I said, "I'm going to show them who is running this tax department. I'm going to a bigger firm now." I applied to a firm Oppenheim, Appel, Dixon. They were very well known. They had a big tax practice. They were working with stock brokers. I just walked in there and they hired me on the spot. When I told the other firm I was leaving, they made me all kinds of offers. Now that I was leaving, they realized they were very unfair to me. I was doing the work and somebody else was getting the credit. I look forward, not back. After two years with the large firm, I felt I had enough experience to go on my own and in 1990, I opened up my own small firm. I started with renting a desk from somebody for \$300, in a real estate office. In 1991, my clientele pace went so much, that I put my money together with the real estate guy and we bought the building that we were in. Now, I have a bigger practice. As you can see, I have other people working with me and I am now also in charge also of [unintelligible] because that was one of my favorite projects. The owner had experience in the furniture business. I had a client that I knew since '82. He has the resources. I combined the two of them together and formed [unintelligible]. Now the guy died, so it's my responsibility to make sure that [unintelligible] continues to run. So temporarily until we find someone, we get things organized and running.

CRAIG WILDER: That is in addition to your practice.

FRITZNEL MILFORT: Yes, that is in addition to my practice. Ever since I left Haiti, I have been putting in an average of 15 hours every day. Right now, I work 15 hours a day, and I work Saturday and Sunday.

CRAIG WILDER: Can I ask you about a few things that you said? When you first came here, where did you live?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: Right in Brooklyn, in Crown Heights.

CRAIG WILDER: What parts?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: My family still lives on Montgomery Street, Nostrand and Rogers. It was an apartment building.

CRAIG WILDER: How long did you live there?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: About 10 or 12 years.

CRAIG WILDER: Was there a large Haitian community there?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: Yes and there still is?

CRAIG WILDER: Is that why the family settled there, because there were a lot of Haitians there?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: Maybe my mother was looking for the others. My sister said, maybe when mother came, they lived somewhere else, but she realized that she didn't have anybody, so she moved to Brooklyn, so she could see her own people. That probably is what attracted these people, to stay close to each other.

CRAIG WILDER: What high school did you go to?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: Thomas Jefferson High School.

CRAIG WILDER: And then off to LIU

FRITZNEL MILFORT: Yes, Off to LIU.

CRAIG WILDER: Where was the printing firm that you had worked for located?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: That was located in the city and they moved to Deer Park, Long Island. I have been trying for four or five years to reach the owner. I think they went out of business.

CRAIG WILDER: The Haitian community in Crown Heights and in Brooklyn generally suffers from a number of public misperceptions. What type of misperceptions do you see?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: Because we have a language problem, people think otherwise about us because we cannot express ourselves, because of our language. We also have political violence which caused a lot of people to migrate. A lot of people look at us and say, "Wait a minute, these are boat people," and stuff like that. That we are not educated and stuff like that. A lot of us understand and a lot of us deal with the problem.

CRAIG WILDER: What type of Haitian organizations do you belong to?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: Right now I don't belong to any organizations, but I help any organizations whose are doing a good cause. As long as the cause is good I am supporting it.

CRAIG WILDER: What type of things would you like to tell people about the Haitian community in Brooklyn? People who are not Haitian.

FRITZNEL MILFORT: I would love to tell people to give us a chance. We are not what people seem to think of. We are very peaceful people. We don't look for trouble. Things just been rough for us. We have not been given a fair chance. If you meet a Haitian, give that person a fair chance, we will prove to your otherwise. That is what I would say.

CRAIG WILDER: If you and I were to step outside right now and walk through Brooklyn, what things would you show me to represent the Haitian community?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: I would show you the stores that we have. What I have realized that I am very happy about is the people are now starting to be entrepreneurial minded. They are trying to start small businesses and they are trying to keep things in the community. I would love for others African, African Americans, to follow that lead, because we are [unintelligible]. We are just one. Black in general to me, we are just one. If we put our heads together, we can have a very good community.

CRAIG WILDER: What do you remember about Crown Heights?

FRITZNEL MILFORT: I remember a lot because this is where I grew up. I still go to Crown Heights. As a matter in fact, one other thing that I wanted to do, I am trying to get

involved with Medgar Evers College, because most of my people, flocks of them, are in school at Medgar Evers College and I am trying to get into the activities, so I can give something back to the community. Also, to tell them that it's not an easy route, but with hard work, you can do it. There are a lot of young kids out there who need support and help. A lot of us tend to look the other way. We so busy doing other things that forgetting we came from. We forgetting the struggle behind I don't want to forget that struggle. I still go to Crown Heights. I still have family there. It's... I don't know how to describe it. I still call it home.