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Pointer, Louvenla, Oral History Interview conducted by Craig Wilder, May 7, 1993, Crown Heights History Project oral histories, 1994.006.24; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Oral History Interview with Louvenia Pointer

Crown Heights History Project oral histories, 1994.006.24

Interview Conducted by Craig Wilder at her Carroll St. home on May 7, 1993 in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

CRAIG WILDER: When did you move to Crown Heights?

LOUVENIA POINTER: We moved here to this house, in April of 1954.

CRAIG WILDER: Where were you born?

LOUVENIA POINTER: I was born in South Carolina, in a little place called Holly Hill, South Carolina.

CRAIG WILDER: When was that?

LOUVENIA POINTER: [date redacted for privacy] 1916.

CRAIG WILDER: Did you come straight to Crown Heights from South Carolina?

LOUVENIA POINTER: No, we went to Harlem. I stayed in Harlem until I was in my late 20s, and then we moved to the Bronx. From the Bronx, we moved here in 1954.

CRAIG WILDER: Why Crown Heights?

LOUVENIA POINTER: That's a good question. I tell you, I didn't know anything about Brooklyn until someone called me one morning and said that there was a house here. He had been looking for a house with his new bride, and he said, "I can't quite swing it. The neighborhood is beginning to change." He happened to have been a Black friend of mine, who was a very fine musician. He said, "I'd like to see a wonderful family move there. I know that you have been married not too long, and maybe you're looking for a place to go. This would be a wonderful place." He gave me the name of the agent who had shown him the house, and said, "Why don't you go and look at this house?" It was amazing that he did that, because at the time, I was living in a little house in the Bronx. I had four rooms, no closet space. The second baby was born, and I was just out of my mind for space, but we didn't have any money. Well, didn't have any money at that time. I didn't realize how expensive houses were. We were out looking for houses, and wherever we would go, they would quote these enormous

prices. I said, "Oh, my goodness. I can't see getting out of here at all. I was so burdened that one day I got on the bus, and went up to Saratoga to visit a friend who had a guest house there, because with the two babies, I was just beside myself. No space to live in, no closet space. So I took the crib down to my sister's house, who lived in the same house as I. She had two rooms also. I said, "You keep the babies for me, while I go and get away for a few days. Otherwise, you will have to come up to Matteawan and visit me. I will not be able to survive." So she kept the babies, and I went up to Saratoga. I took my Bible and I took my religious books, and in the morning, I would get up and go out to the college there, and sit outside and read my bibles and pray. I remember one day, very early in the morning, the birds were just flitting from branch to branch. The trees were filled with leaves, and I said, "Lord, there is a place for every leaf on that tree, and every bird. There has got to be a house for me somewhere." And do you know my husband came up to get me that Sunday, to drive me back to the Bronx, where we lived. Monday morning, before I got out of bed, I got a telephone call. This gentleman said, "Louvenia, this is Ferman Fordham." My dear friend, he said, "I'm sorry to call this early, but you know, I just had it on my mind. I saw a house in Brooklyn, and I thought if you were looking for a house, this is the place for you to go." When we walked over here, and walked into this building, and I saw these windows and these floors, I said, "That's the place for us." And fortunately, my parents, and my sister and my brother helped us out, and that's how we got on Carroll Street. This house has been a blessing, not only to my family, but to other friends. It's been a port in the storm. That's a long story about how we got here, but it's a precious one, and I love telling it, because I know that it was designed by God that we should be here. The things that have happened to me and to others since we have been here are just marvelous.

CRAIG WILDER: What organizations were here when you came? What institutions did you depend on?

LOUVENIA POINTER: As a Black, I really didn't depend on any organizations at that time. Of course, the schools. My children went to PS 161. That was quite something too,

because that was the time when busing was such an issue. You know the integrating of schools. It was such an issue to bus children in, out of the neighborhoods, and it brought about quite a lot of conflict between the neighbors, and between parent organizations in the various schools. I put my children in and I always stayed active in the school system, as a parent. There were meetings, meetings galore about whether to permit busing children into the neighborhood, and certainly the people who lived in this neighborhood couldn't see busing their children out to other neighborhoods. So there was quite a lot of conflict going on between the parent associations in the schools. They were always very wonderful to me. I was a musician, and I was always willing to participate and become active in whatever they had in the school at the time. There was always the idea, I think, that as long as there are few Blacks, that was a reality. It's painful to think about at times, but it's true. As long as there were few Blacks, it was alright. But then, when a lot of us came, there became conflicts.

CRAIG WILDER: How many Black people were here when you came?

LOUVENIA POINTER: I don't know about the whole area, but you can judge from the number that was on this block. When I moved in on this block, [inaudible] there must have been about five homeowners on this block.

CRAIG WILDER: Did most people who lived in this area own their own homes?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Yes, all of them did.

CRAIG WILDER: Was it easy to purchase a house? Was there any resistance to it?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Well, it was easy for me. It wasn't difficult, and the houses were reasonably priced. It wasn't difficult, but I'll tell you one thing. When the Blacks began moving in, there was a quick exodus of people selling their houses and getting out.

CRAIG WILDER: Who did you buy from?

LOUVENIA POINTER: I bought from an agent.

CRAIG WILDER: Were they local?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Yes, they had an office there on Kingston Avenue. They were very nice people.

CRAIG WILDER: The people who didn't own their own homes wouldn't have been in this area?

LOUVENIA POINTER: No, and they were very strict about who lived in the houses, after you bought them. In other words, I had a visitor one night, who lived down the block, one of the homeowners. He came to let me know that this was a very restricted area, and that these were one family houses, and that we were not to rent to anybody. There were to be no roomers. He just laid down the law to me. There would be no rental of rooms, and we have ways of finding out. You were very, very restricted. The idea was that if you cannot afford to live here in these houses without having roomers or assistance or tenants, then you don't belong here. They told me that that was what it was, and that I could expect a visit from the neighbors to see that this was being heeded.

CRAIG WILDER: Was the assumption that Black residents were more likely to need roomers?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Oh yes. Of course that was the assumption. I must say that when we moved here, it looked like that was going to be the case, because I didn't move in here with a Cadillac, and a lot of material. Obviously, we were not wealthy. We didn't have a lot of material goods to bring in. I hadn't thought about that really. I knew I needed a house. I knew we had begun a family. I was a musician. I was looking for a place in a nice area, where when the children were of school age, they'd be able to go to school, and where I could continue to study, maybe to go back and continue my education. I could see it all, without all of that burdensome problem of congestion that I had left in the Bronx, no space and no time to do anything, no freedom of mind. I was just looking for a place where I could go, and live like... like people. When I walked in here, I saw the neighborhood, and I said, "This is wonderful." I saw the house was so spacious. I did think at the time that I would like to have a music studio, and I didn't see any reason why I couldn't have a music studio. There were about nine rooms with a basement area. I could see myself having a music studio, or even a friend come in to stay with us. But then, this gentleman came down here to inform me

that none of this could take place, that we were restricted. Of course, I was always feisty like my mother. I said, "Can you imagine?" I was holding my baby in my arms at the time. I said, "Listen, we didn't move to Carroll Street for approval. We are decent, law-abiding people who just want to grow and to get ahead. That's why we are here. I don't need nine rooms for my husband and me and this baby. If I find someone who I feel could grace my home, they will be here. So you can take that back to the organization." You know, when I got finished talking with him and telling him about my aspirations and what we wanted, what I looked forward to, he stood up and shook my hand and said, "We're glad to have you. We are so glad to have you here."

CRAIG WILDER: This is attached to something you said just a minute ago. You are a musician and you were then. Describe the type of work you were doing when you came here.

LOUVENIA POINTER: I had been the organist of a church in Manhattan, and I was teaching privately. I had private students. Before the children came, I had done some theater. I was just singing and teaching and concertizing. So when I came to Brooklyn, when the children were born... I had two children before I moved here. Noel was born after. When the children were born, I was no longer in the theater, because I did not like the idea of leaving my children to go on these trips out of town with the theater. I had many opportunities to do so, and as a singer, I knew Hall Johnson, the dean of Black writers and arrangers. I knew him well, and he had invited me to go with a group to Germany, to do some concertizing there. My first baby was born at the time, and I turned it down. "The career has to go on hold," I said, "because I need to raise my children. I will not leave her to be kept [unintelligible] by anybody but me. I want to do that." And so, there were opportunities when I could have gone out of town, even with *Porgy and Bess*, but I didn't go because of the children. I insisted on sacrificing the career, if that's what you want to call it, for the children. When I moved here, I was depending upon teaching and concertizing here and there, occasionally, and playing for various churches. Of course, I had to do that, because my husband was a postal worker, and with a house this size, with just a postal salary, it was impossible for him

to carry it alone, so I had to assist. I assisted then by taking every piano student I could get, every voice student I could get, and believe me, I had to get a lot of them, in order to make a difference. Finally, my sister said to me, "You went to New York University and your subject was education. Why don't you see if you can get a job in the school system?" It was then that I went down and applied, it was in Brooklyn, to be hired by the Board of Education as a teacher. My first teaching job was a girl's high school. I was there for seven years, I think, before it closed, because that was also a casualty of the integration movement. They closed girl's high schools and sent all the teachers and students to various schools over the borough.

CRAIG WILDER: You said before that your family had helped you to get the house. Where was the family at?

LOUVENIA POINTER: My mother and my father were living in Harlem at the time. My sister and brother were living in the Bronx. We've always been a very close family, and they were very supportive and very helpful. I knew that if I could get in here that I would make it, because I was willing to do whatever necessary, to make whatever sacrifice. And I had a talent. I could teach, and play for churches and for funerals. I played for many, many funerals, anything to make ends meet, to pay the bills, and to make it for my children.

CRAIG WILDER: When you were doing your private tutoring, where did the children come from? Were they from the area?

LOUVENIA POINTER: No, from the various churches. As I say, I always played for churches, and people would always recommend a good teacher. A few of them were from the area. I had a couple of students who lived down the block. But there weren't that many of us here at that time.

CRAIG WILDER: So these were all Black children?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Yes.

CRAIG WILDER: So your family was a big help to you when you got here?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Yes.

CRAIG WILDER: When you looked around at that time, were the other families here close-knit, or were there family ties here in the community for the other groups?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Yes, I would say so.

CRAIG WILDER: Do you think that that is still true today?

LOUVENIA POINTER: I think so. Yes, because we attended the Block Association meeting the other night, and it's so interesting to see the difference in the appearances of the people now, because we've all gotten that much older. I moved here in 1954. They were all talking, and they have children who no longer live here. They've moved away, they've gotten careers and they are professionals. They're all doing so very well. It's just a joy to see us. Those of us, we can still get together and have our meetings and talk, and enjoy each other. At Christmastime, the members of the Block Association meet. Now we formed a group where we go to see a play at Christmastime, and then we have dinner. We come together as a Block Association and have dinner. We all brag and boast about our children and what they're doing, and the success. It's wonderful. I would say it's been a marvelous experience to see how the homeowners on this block, and I would say it's the same with the other blocks around. If this block can be an example, they're doing very well.

CRAIG WILDER: When did the Black community start to get their own social organizations or clubs?

LOUVENIA POINTER: I don't know when the Kingston-Carroll St. Block Association... I can't pinpoint the date really, but I can almost say, because Olive, my daughter, was about 5 or 6 years old, but very friendly and very active little girl. She knew everybody in the community before I did. I remember going to a Block Association meeting. This happened to be at the home of one of our White neighbors at the time, Dr. Smith's. We were discussing paving the alleyway, and I think one of our Black neighbors was working with the one of the city departments, and he had been chosen by the organization to do a lot of work in preparation for this big job of paving the alley back there. I think that was Mr. Morris. Yes, Mr. Morris held a very important position with the city, and he had been chosen to do a lot of work and a lot of the

planning for the paving of the alley. As I walked in to the meeting that night, someone introduced me, "This is Mrs. Pointer from 1382." Nobody knew me. I had been here but I had kept very quiet, in the house with the children. Then I was pregnant with Noel. "This is Mrs. Pointer." So they very politely nodded and said hello. Then someone said, "That's Olive's mother," and it was like a light broke open. It just lit up the whole room, "Oh, Olive's mother." So I must say that Olive is really the one that got us introduced to the neighbors.

CRAIG WILDER: How much interaction was there between your children and other family's?

LOUVENIA POINTER: A lot. There was a marvelous relationship between the children at that time. I would say that with our other neighbors too. They were friendly. They were polite. Let's put it like that. But with the children, they were marvelous. There were only my two little boys, Noel and Billy, and all of the other little boys and girls around here were White and they were here in the house all of the time; Larry Lefkowitz, Audrey Lefkowitz. No problem whatsoever. Every [date redacted for privacy], Mr. Lefkowitz made a point of taking Noel out with Larry, because they had the same birthday. I would call Mrs. Lefkowitz and say, "You can let Natalie come over and play with the children," because Audrey was 7 years older than Larry. They had nothing in common. Audrey needed a little time and space away from Larry. But Larry found it very pleasurable to be with Billy and Noel, and I would say to Mrs. Lefkowitz, "Let Natalie come over and spend some time," and she always did. Larry is an archeologist now, living in Arizona. To this day, he never comes to town that he doesn't come by. He brought his wife here one day, and this was after he had gone to the army, was discharged in the army, had married and had a little girl. He came by and said, "Mrs. Pointer, do you mind if I take Gwen," his wife, "upstairs. I just want to show her where I grew up, and what my home was like when I was a little boy." Sure enough, they did. I stayed downstairs, and he took Gwen up and they walked all through the house. "This is the bedroom, and... Billy and Noel and I were here, and..." walked all around. It was so touching. When Larry would come out of the army on

leave, he'd come here. Mrs. Lefkowitz, I remember she would call and say, "Mrs. Pointer, have you seen Larry?" Larry spent the night here with us, so I said, "Larry, did you go home?" He said, "Oh, I'm going, I'm going." I would say, "Mrs. Lefkowitz, I'll let you talk to Larry." He would come here!

CRAIG WILDER: So the children got along fine. How about the Lubavitcher population, because they were a reformed and conservative population, what about the Lubavitcher population, as they began to increase?

LOUVENIA POINTER: They were not here, but as they began to increase... By that time, my children were a little older then, and getting to be teenagers. They were very isolated. They stayed to themselves. There was no conflict. They just had their own little community that stayed together. Now there may be others who had different experiences, but my experience has been positive. They had their culture, their way of living, their own habits, their own friends, and they stayed here. But no conflict, there was no fighting or anything like that.

CRAIG WILDER: When you first came, where did you attend church?

LOUVENIA POINTER: As I say, I was an organist at the church. In the beginning, I kept my position as organist, and I would go back to Harlem to play and to worship. After a time, I joined the church here in Brooklyn, and I went for a number of years, from the time Noel was four months old, we were attending the Christian Science Church on New York and Dean. We attended there for a long time before I took a membership there. We stayed at Christian Science Church for about ten years.

CRAIG WILDER: How active were you in Crown Heights, in this community when you first came?

LOUVENIA POINTER: So far as the organizations were concerned, the only thing I was active in were the schools.

CRAIG WILDER: What big events do you remember do you remember about the last, almost 40 years?

LOUVENIA POINTER: You mean that has to do with this community in particular? I don't know if it has nothing to do with school. My whole activities were involved in the

school system. Everything in the school system was big for me. Being a musician, all the church events that took place, I was a part of, because I would always play or perform or direct choirs for them.

CRAIG WILDER: How has this area changed, since you have been here?

LOUVENIA POINTER: There were many, many children, of course. A lot of children participating in games in the streets. Now, it's not quite that way. Our children used to play in the street, and at a certain time, they'd come in. We could call them in the house. But now, I guess what's happening in Carroll Street is happening all over the world for that matter. There isn't the involvement with the children that we used to have, because you don't feel that you can quite communicate to the children you see walking up and down the street, like you used to. I'm just getting so much older, it seems that maybe I can't... I can relate to the children. I take that back. Because I hear the children out there playing, but there seems to be a difference somehow in the way the children communicate and play with each other in the street then when our children were out there. Our children seemed to be children. I don't know if I'm explaining that very well, but when we moved here, and our children were out there playing, they just seemed to be children. Now, the children seem to be so adult. You know, even the little ones seem to be so adult.

CRAIG WILDER: Is that because of some social change or some pressures that are on them?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Maybe it is. Maybe it's the pressure.

CRAIG WILDER: But to you it's very real. You feel the difference.

LOUVENIA POINTER: Yes, to me, it is. The children are not children the way they used to be. You can see that in the school system. They're not children. It's not their fault, it seems. They are forced to grow up, and they are forced to be so guarded. They can't be free to be children anymore, it seems. It's a pity.

CRAIG WILDER: On a lighter topic, what do you like best about Crown Heights?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Having lived in Harlem and the Bronx, it has an openness to it. I like the spaciousness of the place, especially where we are living here. I don't feel put

upon. I don't feel cramped or hemmed in at all. I just feel free. I find that my neighbors are all friendly. I don't feel restricted. Maybe some neighbors have a different attitude about it, but I don't feel that I have to be on guard every minute. Obviously, some people don't feel like that, because at our Block Association meeting the other night, a policeman came to talk to the group, and the people were expressing their concerns about the neighborhood. Many of the concerns, I just stood and looked and turned my head. I wasn't so aware of all of the things that had taken place. People are afraid of the robberies and the alleys and the lights. They feel that the Blacks in the community won't get the protection that the Whites get. Maybe this is a reality, but it just hasn't struck me. Maybe it is a reality, but it hasn't caused me that much concern.

CRAIG WILDER: What do you like least about this area?

LOUVENIA POINTER: I love this area. It wouldn't be about this area. What I like least is not necessarily this area. How should I put this concern; maybe the selfishness of people generally? The attitude of, "What's in it for me?" That certainly is not just this area, but the idea of, "What's in it for me? If it's not for me, I don't want to have anything to do with it." That always concerns me, because I think sometimes we have to look beyond ourselves and our own personal gains, be concerned with the greater good. That sounds very... whatever, to some people, but that's actually the way I feel. I really feel that people have got to get the point where they look at what's good for the general good, and not just for self.

CRAIG WILDER: What do think would make Crown Heights better? What changes would you like to see, if any?

LOUVENIA POINTER: I don't know. Maybe this is asking too much, but I'd like to see more happen, like what happened at our program the other day. I'd like to see the Jews, the Hasidics, and all of us get together, and just have a nice time as we did at the program. Share the things that all of us have in common. We can see that we all want the same things. We all love our children. We all want to educate our children. We would all like to have the freedom to live and to be ourselves. That was such a beautiful thing. You don't know what it meant to me to be able to throw my arms

around that little Hasidic mother-to-be the other day, and genuinely express a feeling of love and concern and care for her. I felt deeply toward her, because we have so much in common, and yet, we let our religion and our religious beliefs keep us apart. That's not what religion is supposed to be. It's supposed to bring us together. But because my religion says this, and my religion says that, we can't get together and [inaudible] hug each other and show that there's only one thing important. That is, people should get together and love each other. I would love to see that day when those barriers could be broken down. And you know something? It could be, even with the Hasidics, and the Reformed Jews and the Christians. It could be broken down.

CRAIG WILDER: What would you like people to know about Crown Heights? People are often told about Crown Heights and they read about Crown Heights in the paper, but what would you like them to know?

LOUVENIA POINTER: I would like them to know that there are wonderful people in Crown Heights. We have the same aspirations, desires. We have homes, and some of the homes are lovely. We're not all standing in a corner, waiting to hit them in the head and rob them as they go down the street. Crown Heights is not a community of all lawless people. We have so many wonderful, law-abiding, beautiful people, whose desire is only to make a better world, to make a better city, to make better homes for our children. Crown Heights is filled with that kind of neighbor. The Jews are marvelous. I admire seeing them go down the street holding the hands of their little children. I think that's a beautiful sight. Sometimes I just wish that, as a Black community, we would do more of that. That's a beautiful thing to admire, and I think that what we ought to do in Crown Heights, as in all of the other communities, look at the beauty in the various races, and emulate that. See what it is that's beautiful there, and try to take that as an example. I would like to see us, as a Black community, stick together more, get more unified in the things that we want. We can do that without negating anything else another race does. To get together in unity, in peace, in harmony, and in one accord with my Black neighbor, doesn't mean that I have to

negate everything else that goes on in the other, you know. I can love them and be unified with my Blacks also. But somehow many people feel that in order to do that, I've got to put down another, but that's not necessary.

CRAIG WILDER: When we talk about the tensions in Crown Heights, they are always talked about. What do you think that the causes of the divisions are?

LOUVENIA POINTER: In Crown Heights, more than any other place?

CRAIG WILDER: Taking this as an example. It's not the only place with divisions, but...

LOUVENIA POINTER: What causes division? A lack of understanding. We don't know each other. You could never get me to say anything negative or unkind about Anna Lipkin, this Hasidic Jewish girl. You could never, because I know her concerns, and I know the love that she has, not only for her family, but the desire that she has to get along with me. And I also know why it's difficult for her. I think that if we try to understand each other, the tensions would, of necessity, be broken.

CRAIG WILDER: Are the tensions that are here being aggravated? Are they being made worse, by the news coverage?

LOUVENIA POINTER: That's probably the worst. That would be the greatest reason.

CRAIG WILDER: Do you see any way to solve these problems? If you had your druthers, how would you go about solving them?

LOUVENIA POINTER: Those of us who claim to be Christians, if we would study the Christian religion, and study what it means to be a Christian, that would do it for us. I suppose you could say the same for those in the other religions, but being a Christian, I have to talk from the standpoint of a Christian. If I follow the teachings of my Christian religion and my Christian background, I could not hate. It would not be tension. There would be understanding, and there would be tolerance. I mean, if I really, really followed the teachings of my leader, which is Jesus Christ. It couldn't be, because that's not what he was all about. If I'm going to use my religion just as a traditional, you know... Just go to church, and go through the form and the fashion of having church and making it a ritualistic thing, Sunday after Sunday, or day after day and not go to the root of that Christian belief, these things can come up, and they will

always come up. But I firmly believe what the Bible says. Jesus Christ is Love, and without that Love, you cannot have peace and harmony. There always will be conflict, and why should it be. This is a big, big world. I look at the news and I look at the fight... You know why there's fighting? All over the world, there is fighting, because people don't believe. People don't trust. People don't trust. People have fear. Fear has done it to us. Fear that if you get, I will be denied. That is not true. This is a big world. I sometimes drive south. We have family in the south. You just go for miles and miles of all of this open space, all of this beautiful area. There is plenty, and that's just going south. You got out west, you find the same thing. Go overseas, to other countries, you find the same thing. This is a big world, and there is room for everybody. It's limitless. The wealth is enormous all over this world. But somehow people are into the feeling that if I allow you to get, that will take away from me. I never feel that.

CRAIG WILDER: Are you hopeful that the tensions here will be resolved?

LOUVENIA POINTER: You have to always hope. Yes, I am hopeful. But I tell you, I don't think it will be solved, unless people speak out and speak the way you and I are speaking now. The problems will not go away. People have to talk about it, and people have to be willing to be criticized when you talk about it. But you have to talk about it and you have to understand, and you have to continue to love. You have to continue to love and you have to talk about it. I'm just hopeful. I went to Cuba last year, in 1991. The beauty of the people there, the sadness. You see the deprivation there, and it's so sad, but the beauty of the people. I was there for five days, and when I came back, it just wrenched my heart to come back. I didn't speak the language. But the love... and it's all over the world. The last night that my son taught, he preached there. We stood on the receiving line before we left the church. A young woman, about 30 years old, came to me. She didn't speak English. Through an interpreter, she shook my hand, she said something to me, and then she took off her earrings and gave them to me. The interpreter said, "She has nothing to give you, but she loves you." Isn't that beautiful? That was in Cuba. That wasn't in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. All the way over there to Cuba, and they had nothing. Very often, they didn't have running water,

very little food, even in the hotel where we lived. They didn't have toilet seats. When the light bulb blew, that was it. There were no light bulbs. So when we went over, because we had heard about these things, we took toilet paper, and light bulbs, aspirin, various things that we thought that they would like. They've gone through all of this deprivation for so long, and yet, there was this love that we are talking about. So strong, and so beautiful, and that's what it is going to take to relieve the tension here. That's what it is going to take. It's going to take love.