

Transcript – Yoruba Richen, class of 1994

Narrator: Yoruba Richen

Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist, & Michelle Liu

Interview Date: April 20, 2021

Interview Time: 10 am

Location: Zoom

Length: 1 audio file, 01:03:04

Amanda Knox: Good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. It is Tuesday, April 20, 2021. It is 10am. And I am here today with another Brown University alum who would like to share her story with us. Welcome.

Yoruba Richen: Thank you, Amanda. Nice to be here. My name is Yoruba Richen. I am a documentary filmmaker. I live in New York, I'm from New York. And I graduated from Brown in 1994.

AK: Perfect. Well, thank you so much for being here with me today. I would like to start the interview by going back before Brown. And if you wouldn't mind sharing a little bit about your childhood, what your parents did for work or their educational backgrounds, and maybe even your educational background, pre-Brown.

YR: Sure. [1:00] Well, my mom, I grew up with my mom, Aishah Rahman, who was a professor at Brown University. She taught playwriting. And she retired in 2009, something like that, around there. And so, but before she came to Brown, and before I came to Brown, I grew up, I grew up in, in Harlem, in Washington Heights. And I was born in, in 1972, also, in New York. I grew up in Harlem, and I grew up with my mom. My mom was a writer and a playwright, and she also wrote a memoir. But growing up with her in the, you know, I grew up in the theater. Was very, you know, very [2:00] exposed to theater, and, and, and storytelling, political storytelling, and also the life of an artist. You know, some of my earliest memories are waking up to her, hearing the sound of a typewriter, you know, when, in the dark ages, when we had typewriters, and her writing, you know, and what it meant to really pursue your art and live the

life of an of an artist and try and get your, you know, work out there and, and having something to say. My mom was very political in her work, and a bit ahead of her time, as well. She, you know, an example of this, she wrote a play about a police brutality case in 19 – that was produced in 19 – she’s writing it in the early 80s, really before anybody was talking about, you know, the score scourge of police brutality that we now are seeing [3:00] on video and televising on, on TV. But she was writing about, she was writing about those, you know, those kinds of things. She’s writing about, she wrote a play about Zora Neale Hurston in the early ’80s. Again, before, obviously, Alice Walker had made her pilgrimage to Hurston’s grave, but you know, now we are, these names now are much more familiar and common to the wider public, I think, than when she was doing that work. She is also from New York, and Harlem. So I think, you know, especially at that time, there was, she had, and she had also been a part of the, the sort of Greenwich Village scene in the ’50s and ’60s. So, you know, I grew up seeing New York through her eyes, in terms of the arts, in terms of the vibrancy [4:00] of, you know, of, of New York and Harlem and, and politics.

So, she sent me to, in terms of educational, educationally, I lived in Harlem, but she sent me to a private school on the Upper East Side, called The Town School. And I went there from kindergarten to, to eighth grade. And it was, you know, that was in the ’80s, late ’70s and ’80s. And New York was much more, well, New York is still segregated, but it was much more segregated at that point. You know, it was, you know, white people didn’t come uptown necessarily. And it was just much more divided. And I think something that shaped me, and I actually wrote my college essay about this. I wrote my college essay about [5:00] growing up in Washington Heights and going to school on the Upper East Side, and the different worlds that I traversed with that. I, you know, I took the bus from, from where I live to the Upper East Side, you know, for, for nine years, and really that bus, there was at that time, the dividing line in the city was that 96th Street dividing line, especially, you know, on the east side. And you could really see the difference, you know, in terms of, you know, in terms of racially, economically, so it was a very visual, very visceral sort of everyday thing.

And, of course, I lived in a black neighborhood. And, you know, with, I had a very tight, beautiful building that we lived in. But it was very different than my white classmates, [6:00] for the most part who grew up with, you know, who were, who, for the most part, had a lot more money. You know, we, you know, country houses in the Hamptons. And, you know, one of the

things that I always, that I always you know, that sort of epitomizes that as a youth, we used to go to school on Fridays at 1:15pm. And the reason why we got out of school at, early on Friday, was so they can beat the traffic to get to their country houses.

AK: No!

YR: And yeah. And I actually think that they, they don't do that anymore, because I am in touch with the school. They've been very, and it's a progressive school. I mean, it was, you know, it was also a progressive private school, and they've made, since then they've made I think, a lot of changes around diversity and, and all of that. [7:00] They brought me back to, you know, to talk with me, and, and, and, you know, have me involved, you know, profile me. But at the time, I was, you know, for a long time, I was the only black, African American kid in the class. I had no African American teachers. And it was, you know, it was definitely it definitely shaped my, my view of, you know, who has access to resources, income inequality, I don't think we were calling it back then. But just like, you know, rich, you know, who has access to resources and who had political access, too. That was a time in the '80s, where New York as I said, it was much more racially divided. We were going through our own, you know, police killings, not only police killings, but racist crimes. Howard Beach, [8:00] Mike, Mike Griffith was a police killing, Eleanor Bumpurs, a police killing. I mean, this stuff was happening in New York. It was the rise of Al Sharpton, you know, that's where he came to fame, because he was actually speaking out about these things. We were being, in our concerns, as African Americans generally were being not taken seriously and being dismissed.

So it was, I remember it being a very, and in the midst of all this, you know, I'm going to these, these different worlds. And, of course, we had, you know, there's also the, the crack epidemic, which is kind of sweeping New York City and different communities. And, and, you know, all the, the anti-apartheid movement, as well, you know, that was something that was, you know, very prominent in New York. And, you know, we would go and marches and, you know, around and, and the, the anti-apartheid movement, [9:00] you know, as the '80s progressed, became, I think, was really something that kind of shaped me in my own, like civil rights, you know, civil rights movement, having been, you know, not born in the '60s, but that movement really being, you know, something that we were all like, involved with, and watching. But at the

same time, all this stuff was, was happening and, you know, it's, it's all the politics and the, sort of traveling between these different worlds.

I also, you know, got a great education, and, you know, thankful for that, and, and made me have to deal with like different people and have to deal in, in multitude of, you know, different circumstances. And, you know, I think my mom helped me navigate that and, and meanwhile, I was doing a lot of theater stuff. So, I was always like in [10:00] acting classes and, and, and exploring that part of myself. And that led me to high school. And so in high school, I was, all my peers, and I was actually about to go to, to, to continue the private school education. I was accepted, I auditioned and I was accepted into performing arts high school in the city, known as the Fame School, it's called LaGuardia [Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts]. That was, they changed the name, I think was like the year before I got there. But I was a theater major. And that was a great experience. Very different from, you know, my, my elementary education, school education. Everyone, you know, it was, it was, an art school, theater, music, dance, and visual art. And everyone was there from all over the city, who were there for their art. And it was incredibly [11:00] diverse. It was really fun. I met great people. Still, some of my best friends are from, from high school. And it was so necessary for me to, you know, to that it was, it was, I don't know what I would, if I didn't go there and I continued to private school education, which of course, my mom wanted me to get the best education. But it just was really a great move, was one of my best moves when I decided to go to LaGuardia. And so that was high school, and I did a lot of theater.

And it's funny when I applied to Brown, so I feel like things are so different now with like, you know, applications. So I remember I applied to like five schools, like I think now people apply to like, so many more, yeah. But five schools, like that's, you know, that's a good, and you had one backup and the you know, and then Brown, and one reach. And I remember, I applied [12:00] to schools that actually did have, you know, that were sort of, at least a few, that were known as, like, you know, to have a theater, a strong theater program. And I remember talking to my, the head of the theater department, and, and they were like, "Well, Brown is not really known to have a great theater department." And I was like, okay, but, you know, I was accepted, I was accepted early, which made my senior year really even more fun and great. And, and then when I got to Brown, and one of the best discoveries was how vibrant the theater department was, and still is. So yeah, that's my, my lead up to, to entering in 1990.

AK: So can I ask you a couple of follow up questions, I'm backtracking a little bit. On the news this morning in particular, I was watching Good Morning America and Robin Roberts was interviewing somebody [13:00] and asking, how should we talk to our children about the Derek Chauvin trial and what may or may not come out of it? If you're comfortable sharing, do you remember having, your mother having conversations with you and kind of learning about and grappling with the racism in, in your community as a child and a young person?

YR: Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think it's, it was something that was, that we always, you know, talked about and discussed. You know, for example, I mean, literally, from the first moment, I mean, I had this and it's sort of the classic, classic thing, in some ways, but, you know, in kindergarten, I remember, you know, we learned about Christopher Columbus, right. And, you know, coming home my mom was like, "Christopher Columbus did not discover America," you know. So from a very early, you know, early age, [14:00] she always encouraged me too, because she knew I wasn't going to get that kind of learning from schools that she needed to supplement my education around, you know, my own people and our history. And so she always said that, you know, from, you know, from childhood books about our heroes. You know, I think of, I remember a book about Benjamin Banneker and George Washington Carver, and, you know, and other folks. And then also encouraging me, too, when we, a little bit older, when we had reports, right, we had to do you know, these reports, and she was like, "Why don't you do a report on Adam Clayton Powell Jr.? He's a really, you know, fascinating and important civil rights person." "Why don't you do a report on," I remember, I did a report on [15:00] Sally Hemings in eighth grade. And you know, who she was. And, you know, so she always, there was always that, and then there was always talk, it was just ingrained of, you know, what's going on. And, you know, we'd watch the news together or, you know, we'd be, as I said, we go to, you know, to, to theater together. And these were just all these issues that that were talking about. And not just about racism, but also about sexism, as well. And in the, the connection of, you know, how African American women in particular, and that those are the kind of stories that she was writing about, you know, in her, in her plays. And so that's really where she was. And I, I also didn't, you know, as I've gotten older, as I've gotten older, and even when she passed, really, you know, really understanding what she was trying to do. I didn't necessarily understand

it as a, as a kid. [16:00] I was like, growing up as a kid, like concerned with my own, my own stuff, but yeah, it was always a part of, a part of my world.

AK: And was your mom teaching at Brown while you were in high school?

YR: No. Okay. So, she and I always say that she followed me to Brown.

AK: Oh, OK.

YR: So I, I was accepted right. And then she and, you know, obviously the admissions is different than the theatre department. But the year that I was accepted, her play, one of her plays *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage*, which is about the, these women, these women in the '50s, who are at a home for unwed mothers who are deciding whether to give up their child and, and also simultaneously about Charlie Parker and his last days. So this is 1955. And the play was done, had been performed at the Public Theater, and was very sort of well-known on college campuses. [17:00] It's been done, it's been done, it's been performed on, on the university campus for many years. And so Brown shows that play, to be, you know, to be performed at the Mainstage Theatre the year that I was accepted. So that play was performed my freshman year. And I think, I believe it was the first African American play, play by an African American playwright, that was performed on the Mainstage Theatre, I believe. You have to double check that. And so that's when they, so they established a relationship with, the theatre department establish a relationship with my mom. And then she ended up coming. So that was my freshman year and then she ended up being invited to come up to teach for a year. I think it was my sophomore year, maybe my next [18:00] year, my junior year, forget. And then she was, you know, a tenure, then, you know, she became a tenured professor. So she came after me.

AK: So then having only applied to a handful of schools, did you have like a college counselor or what, what made Brown be one of the schools that you wanted to apply to?

YR: It's going to be very, it's going to be very trivial, like frivolous. So what, okay, so I applied, Brown was not my first choice. Okay, so I remember I got that book. That was like the best that was, you know, it wasn't the US World Report's thing, but it was a book about the best colleges, right. And what appealed to me about Brown was the, they're like, it is the liberalist of the Ivy, most liberal of the Ivy's, I like the size of it, it didn't seem too big or too small. [19:00] You know, what is it like 5,600 or something with the grad, something like that? And it's said that they stacked, like, during the Vietnam War or something, no. Something, it was something like, they, you know, that they had, I forget. It was some sort of antiwar thing where like, the students had, I forget. It was something, I don't remember. But, but yeah, it was the liberal, the liberalness of it. And it said, it's like, you know, obviously academically rigorous, but also really fun. They were like it's also like, ranked the most like fun place. So it was those things. I mean, that was like – and it was close to me. It was, you know, close to New York, but not like so far. So that was good that you know, it was really – and then of course, as I you know, reached out to talk to other people and graduates [20:00] and it just was all positive. It was all great. I remember I didn't have, particularly when I visited, I forget if this is before or after I was accepted. I didn't you know, it's not like when I came there I like fell in love, like on the visit. It was I don't know, it just was like, perfunctory. I did like my interview. I remember liked the guy who interviewed me. So yeah, it was literally because it was fun, political, and academically rigorous. Yeah.

AK: OK. So then, so you're going into Brown thinking that it's these things. Do you have like, what are some of your first memories of being a student on campus?

YR: Oh, jeez. So my mom brought me up and I was in – what's the dorm near the Ratty? The Quad. I was in the Quad. [21:00] My first memory. I had this roommate that I felt like we didn't have anything in common. And I ended up moving out of that room. This, my second semester. It's been a long time. Oh, I do, I do. I remember. Oh. OK. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I have to get back into the head.

AK: Yeah.

YR: So one of the things that I thought was really great was they've, I know, they've renamed it, but the Third World Orientation Program. And so that was when they had students of color – I don't know, I think they've renamed it, but I think they still do it – come early, like a week before. And basically, you know, get to, to know each other. There's different exercises that, you know, getting to know you exercises, [22:00] exercises around race, about being in a predominantly white space, all of that. And, and it was really good. Like, it was really, really good. I, and when the, you know, the other students came after that week, I feel like, there was a, you know, there was some kind of bond between students of color. And, you know, to help, even if it was just a, you know, comforting look, or being up, you know, being one of a couple of people in a certain space, or one of the few people of color in a class, I thought that was a really important week for us. So that was one of my first memories that that was really positive.

And then I, I remember I had a hard time picking classes. One of the things that I wish that I had done better, or that Brown supported a bit more, was the, [23:00] working with your, you know, who's assigned as your, your, what's it called your, your academic counselor, your academic –

AK: Advisor or something?

YR: Advisor. Yeah, exactly. Your academic advisor. And I just feel like my academic advisor was not particularly helpful. So I felt a little, and you got that big book at the time, and you just like went through the class and like, this looks interesting, this looks interesting. So that I remember being a bit hard, and probably would have made different, you know, it wasn't until I think, like, you know, soph, certainly sophomore, junior year where I began to have, you know, more of a sense of how to navigate that. So that's, that's probably my biggest criticism about Brown is that the, at least at that time, or at least in my experience, that I felt like my academic advising wasn't as helpful as it could, as it could have been. But then I also [24:00] immediately got into theater. So, you know, some of the first things that I did, I was in acting class, you know, my freshman, my first, my freshman year, my first semester. I was auditioning for, for plays. I'm trying to remember what I did my freshman year, but I was immediately in the, you know, in that scene, and that felt wonderful. And yeah, and that was a real, you know, a real big part of my experience, like my entire time.



AK: How did your experience on campus at Brown compare to that of what you were living and experiencing before Brown in terms of seeing these stark socio-economic contrasts, lack of diversity, things of that nature?

YR: Yeah, it's funny. I remember, so, one of the things I do remember when I got there, I was like, oh, I'm back to Town School. [25:00] Well, because first of all a bunch of people who went, I went to elementary school with were there. You know, they had gone mostly through the private school route. And Brown has big, you know, population, are private school students. But it also made me, I think having both experiences of Town School, so the academic rigor, and again, navigating, you know, the wealth, and the whiteness was helpful when I was at Brown. And then also being at LaGuardia, and being around really talented people, and seeing, you know, understanding that, you know, some people were, had qualities that, you know, are more talented than I was. Or, you know, or auditioning, you know, helped me also navigate [26:00] that part of Brown as well. Having, you know, having the arts, having that background in the arts and going into this community, where, you know, in the theatre community at Brown, where you, you also had really talented people, and really smart people, you know, sometimes they were one in the same. So I think it actually was a great, a great background to navigating college.

AK: And also, while you were on campus, there were of course, a lot of local and national events. A couple that come to mind, I think, I think you would have been on campus for the LA riots?

YR: Yeah, absolutely.

AK: The Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas case.

YR: Yeah, totally.

AK: Also on campus, there was the fight for need-blind admissions.

YR: Yeah.

AK: So were any of these impacting your experience? Or were you participating in anything around those, those or other events? [27:00]

YR: All of them. We, I remember that night Rodney King was beaten. And that was in '92. And we all came out on the lawn and protested and had held a vigil. You know, seeing that, that was one of the first times we've seen that video, a video of a black man getting beaten, and, you know, how we all felt. Absolutely. The Anita Hill trial. I remember that was, that, was that '91? So I remember like, kind of following it but not like because, you know, you really didn't have a TV at that time. So you know, you're kind of following it. And that was an ongoing thing like right, the Rodney King thing was repeated and repeated. That was, but the those were, you know, big events. Need-blind, I took part – that's the only time I've gotten arrested. So definitely, we took over the building. Understanding what [28:00] need-blind admission, admissions were and, and why we're fighting for them. Of course, Ruth, Ruth, the former president – was it –

AK: Simmons.

YR: Ruth Simmons finally instituted it. So yes, I took part in that. There was also the first Gulf War that happened, and we went down, you know, and protested. We drove down, I remember and protested the war. There were fights over abortion. You know, I remember going down to pro-choice marches. This actually, I took a semester abroad, and during that time, this is the big LGBT march one of the biggest in DC. And so those are all the things that were, I guess some of the things that we're still fighting about, but other you know, that we were that was kind of the activism on campus. And of course, right before I got, because right before I got there, there was [29:00] the whole sexual harassment writing on the wall, you know, on the bathroom wall. Yeah. So that, I remember that when I arrived, that being a big thing. And there was also, and I was just talking about this actually with a friend of mine from Brown. The whole identity, not identity politics, but PC [political correctness], this whole issue around PC, which you know, now it's like, call it cancel culture, what have you, but that was something that was, you know, being debated at that time as well. I remember, we felt then that it was an, an assault, you know, to call it PC was an assault and it minimizes, minimized the concerns of, you know, people of color, of

women, and LGBT folks. So I do remember it being a political time and being actively engaged, you know, in in these issues,

AK: Can you paint some pictures? [30:00] Do you remember any of those protests or marches or vigils in like really vivid color? Could you share any one for us?

YR: So the Rodney King, I remember and again, granted memory, you know, it's a long time ago, but I do remember us coming out of our dorms and going on that front lawn. And I believe people made like, just sort of spontaneously, you know, made speeches and talked. I remember people were crying. I remember feeling like, wow, the way they're beating him like a dog is how this country treats black people. And it being the first time that I really like saw that visually, you know. And of course, we've seen that so many, too many times since then. And of course, the ones we don't see. And, yeah, it was just very, and I think people, I think we all needed to [31:00] come together, black people, and others as well, to, you know, be in solidarity to call out our grief and anger. I remember that being a really, a really big, big thing.

With the need-blind, which, you know, we ended up, now I hadn't taken, the organization, and a few organizations that had been working on need-blind, you know, had been pushing it. I wasn't active in that, in that organization, or in those organizations. Something that, you know, I had knew about and followed, but I wasn't active in that organization. But I do remember that day, that this planned takeover of the building. And, you know, I remember, we, you know, that they had started, I think, in the, [32:00] in the morning, and as people were going by, you know, more and more people joined. And, you know, feeling like this was, I do remember feeling like, this is something I'm willing like to take a stand for, and to put, to be a part of this, this movement. We all got arrested at some point, and then they brought us down to the police station. And, you know, and then of course, all the, the charges, I think, eventually were dropped. But it definitely felt important to, for me to take a stand, and I think for others. Even if you didn't quite, you know, people will, will, you know, quite understand the, the, you know, all the different dynamics, and you know, people will, will and you see this with young people today, oh, you know, "abolish the police is unrealistic." You know, "they don't know what they're talking about." You know, "need-blind, [33:00] we have a small endowment." You know, I remember that being the thing. "Brown has a small endowment, so we can't have need-

blind.” But then, of course, you know, Ruth Simmons, a few years later, 10 years later or so, does it. So it just, I always think about that when, you know, we’re looking at as you know, as I’m older, and we’re looking at these movements, and what they say can and can’t be done. I mean, that’s just a small, you know, a small example. But instructive.

AK: Similarly kind of jumping ahead quite a bit, have you participated in any marches or protests recently? And, and ultimately, my question is, do they look the same as they did 20 or 30 years ago?

YR: So this summer, you know, when the uprising began, was obviously during the pandemic, and I didn’t participate. [34:00] But I, in June, I was called, by *The New York Times* to, and their production company, and made a film about Breonna Taylor’s killing. And so I was down in Louisville documenting, you know, making this film in June, documenting what was going on. And, you know, we were, you know, we were recording, you know, taping or filming these, these protests that were specifically in, in Louisville. And the thing that is interesting, and I think this was across the country, you know, and black people kind of saying, obviously, we know this is nothing new, but we see more white people taking part in this than ever before. And that’s the big difference. That’s the big difference. And that is what I think gives hope, some measure of hope that this has reached [35:00] beyond, this is not just a black issue, this is a human rights issue. And I think the young people see that. And, you know, that’s the sort of hope that we have that we can actually institute change. And I think that’s the difference.

AK: That’s a fascinating observation. And I’d like to follow up on that Breonna Taylor documentary in a little bit. But the one other thing I want to ask you about your time at Brown is what was it like to be at Brown, and I’m assuming living on campus while your mom was also there and teaching?

YR: And she always says, “I see you less now than I did when you were growing up.” So sophomore year, no, okay, so sophomore year I lived in the Grad Center. And then junior year, I moved off campus, so junior and senior year, I was off campus. And then I was also away for one semester abroad. So, [36:00] I mean, you know, I’m a 18, 19, 20, 21 year old kid, and not

trying to, like, hang out with my mom. So that, you know, it was really, you know, it did not, I did not, you know, I saw her sometimes, but I wasn't trying to, to hang out. I was, you know, I was in my own world at that point.

AK: So then looking ahead, graduation day comes. Did you have a job lined up on graduation day? How did you obtain your first job and what was that for you?

YR: Yeah. So I knew I was, okay. So '94, I had decided to move to San Francisco. At that time, it was like there was this pilgrimage from Brown, you would go, either going to San Francisco, New York, [37:00] San Francisco, Portland, or Austin. Those were like these places that, you know, a lot of folks were migrating to. So I moved to San Francisco. Oh, so I knew I was going to move to San Francisco. And I did not have a job lined up, but I did work for three summers at a arts camp teaching theater that was started by Brown, also a Brown grad and two of his friends. I had worked there over the summers in western Massachusetts. And that was, you know, great. It was a day camp but we, the counselors, stayed overnight. So it was really a great, amazing experience. And it was an arts camp, and I was teaching theater. And so I had that lined up for the summer. So yeah, so I, I guess that I probably, I would always spend like a little [38:00] bit of time in Providence in the summer and before camp started and then go. And so, so I went, you know, to, to the camp, taught, and – hold on one sec, I'm sorry.

AK: Yeah, no problem.

YR: And I do remember, though, having this one sort of this, like my, this moment in the woods where I said, okay, I'm about to go, you know, to a new city, graduating college, no job, but because of my, you know, my, my degree I have, I'm going with the confidence that something will work out. That I'll, that I'll get something right. And that's a pretty again, privileged sort of thing to have. So, [39:00] Oh, hold on. I'm sorry. Hold on. Hold on one sec. Hello.

[approximate one minute pause in audio and video]

So sorry and I can say a few minutes later to make up for that. Okay, so what was I saying? Oh, yeah. Okay, so right so I have this confidence. I move out to San Francisco. It was '94. This is before the internet blew up, like this is literally before the tech boom. And I couldn't

get a job. I went on one, okay, no, this is what, I went on one audition. So, I got to San Francisco in like August, right. I went on one edition. I knew, you know, because I'd done theater, done theater. I went on one audition and I was like, I'm not trying to do this out [41:00] here. Like, if I was really trying to do this, I'd be in New York or LA or you know, and I need, I want a job, I want a job-job. And I think it wasn't until September, October, I remember not having, not being able to get a job. I did things like telemarketing. No, not telemarketing, doing like, you know, what was, there was like a very well-known women's, women's health care organization out there. I remember making calls for them, doing odd jobs, painting a room, like anything, and I had some savings.

But this is my, I still talk about this. This is my like, most humiliating moment. There was a temp agency I was trying to apply at that is well known, was well-known to be like women owned and like, really gets you interesting jobs. And some of the people that I knew had, you know, [42:00] gotten work through that. And I applied to this temp agency and I got a letter of rejection. And I was like, wait, you're not supposed to get a rejection letter from a temp agency! What is going on?

And so, but it was, I think it was maybe like that first three or four months, it was kind of piecing stuff together. You know, and not, not, you know, not, not, not really getting anything. Then I believe it was in the spring of that year, I had a, my friend who I was living with was working for this environmental organization. And they ended up, she ended up hiring me in Berkeley, UC Berkeley. And, and yeah, and so I started working with this environmental organization. And through that she had, she did work with Bella Abzug's organization, Bella Abzug the of, you know, historic [43:00] activists and she's a former congresswoman from New York, ran for mayor, real spitfire, she had the hats. She had started a women's organization, WEDO, Women's Environmental – Women's Environment and Development Organization. And they were doing work around enviro – looking at like development issues and also environmental issues around breast cancer and looking at, you know, this, these causes between environmental, the environment and women, you know, getting, getting breast cancer. And so they had a project that they were doing, looking at doing a conference in the Bay Area, in particular, this area in Richmond, California, which has the Chevron pump plant was there, they had higher elevation of cancer. And so I was hired to work on helping, you know, this conference. And that was [44:00]

like the first like, kind of job that I had. Through that, you know, I ended up working, you know, working with them on these iss, a couple of other things.

And then I, then I eventually was, got a job at the, The Lawyers Guild, which is a progressive law organization. And they were doing proj – like doing, they were doing things around the, the, this was like 8, '95. And Congress, Newt Gingrich had just taken over as Speaker of the House and passed his, what is it, what was it called? Contract with America. And it was their big right wing, you know, thing that they're still trying to do. You know, cutting taxes, cutting welfare, you know, increasing from [45:00] you know, imprisonment. And, and so the Lawyers Guild started this organizing project to fight Contract with America. And so I was working with them on that. And that was great. I mean, I was doing like really activist-y work. That – do you want me to continue because I can tell – That, so that led me to.

So I, just to go back for a second, I was talking about my theater experience, I also was very, as I you know, as I said, politically active, politically interested. So the other thing that I thought I was going to do is be a lawyer. So I had been, sort of those are the two things that had been, you know, in my head that I wanted to do. You know, either go into entertainment or theater, or directing, or something, or be a lawyer. So this was my phase where I was doing the real like activist work. And that led me to [46:00] applying to a city, the City Planning Program at Berkeley. And the reason why I did it is I had actually taken an urban city – So as I also mentioned, I felt like I got more, you know, really junior and senior year I really, that's when I learned how to navigate the classes that I wanted to take, you know. And I took this Urban Studies class, sei – I guess it was junior year, senior year, and I loved it. I was like, shit, I should have been Urban Studies major, like not political science. And so yeah, I got really into it. And that was an oh, you know, when I was looking at graduate programs and thinking about my next, my next move. Also encouraged by my mother who was like, "When you going back to school?" She was, you know, she was like, "Anybody can get a college degree." So, exactly, [47:00] exactly. So, so yeah, so I looked at, began looking into this, this program at UC Berkeley and UCLA, actually, and my idea was that I would do you know, my sort of grand idea was like, I'm going to do a joint program with law and planning, but I'm going to apply to the planning school first, because that'll help me get in to the law schools. And so I, I applied, I ended up going to Berkeley. And I guess I take the LSATs that, I guess I took the LSATs too, and the GRE. And I'm not a good test taker. I never have been. I didn't do great on the SATs. And anyway, I started

my, that planning program, ended up applying to law school. And of course, you know, Berkeley is like the hardest, like if, like, the hardest law school to get into. My scores were not good. Did not get in. It's all a blessing [48:00] now. And yeah, so that plan was squashed.

But I was in this two-year master's program. And the thing that started to happen to me, though, is that the, that first year, at this point, I had not done anything artistic for like, three years. And I started to get really feel like a bit of a crisis, like what am I doing? Like, this is not, you know, this, I'm really missing something from my life. And that's actually when I discovered documentary. And it was because I worked with another Brown graduate who's my friend, who I'm still friends with, who had actually she had actually majored in, in semiotics or MCM, and she had like, familiarized, she knew cameras, and, and, and I had never, I'd never done it before. I mean, both – And she was a graduate program at SSC. And we both were [49:00] frustrated with our programs. And we came up one night with an idea to do a video for our class. Because I was like, I know how to write a paper. I'm, you know, I'm good. Like, I want to communicate these issues, these social issues, in another way that reaches more people. And, and that turned into our first video, my first video, that looked, was looking at the welfare reform changes at the time, and a video looking at how this black community in San Francisco were sort of grappling with these changes. And that became my first video and that was my first aha moment around documentary film. It's like, oh, this fulfills my activist and trying to say something and also my creative spirit and storytelling, you know, and wanting to be a storyteller. [50:00]

AK: So we are running up on time a little bit, and you've had such a rich career. Do you just have any highlights or even lowlights, any points in your career that you really want to mention in, for this historical record?

YR: Yeah. As I said, I can go like five minutes longer too. Yeah, you know, part of career stuff for me, was figuring out what I didn't want to do. So as I said, you know, when I was in that graduate program, and I realized, hm, this is, you know, I don't think I want to be a city planner. What I did in that program, and I finished the program, got my master's, but I actually the, one of the first things that I did is work on an oral history project for the Oakland Museum, looking at the sort of racial, the history of sort of racial demographics in [51:00] Oakland. I worked at a



planning program, planning agency in their media department. So worked with a person who's hired to like shooting videos about these developments. So I really tried to make it my you know, to, to make it particular to focus on what I was increasingly interested in. And, you know, yeah, so that was, that was how I, how I navigated that. But when I graduated, I was like, I really want to try documentary film and I moved back to New York. I worked through, there's actually some Brown, some friends of mine from Brown, who were working for a documentary film company. And I met a voluntary, like working with this film company through those connects. Then ended up at a production company [52:00] with a filmmaker who became a mentor to me. And that was the first, my first film, I was like, a production coordinator, and really understanding the, the, the office and the ebb and flow of production. And then I, so I was freelancing.

And then I actually went over to ABC News, I had an opportunity and I'd always been interested in the news, but never, never taken any journalism classes, never worked on a paper, but ended up being hired, I think, because of my background in in documentary. And I worked at the, I worked for the investigative news department for four years. And that was a really great training for me, in that I was, you know, having to pitch, pitch stories, write scripts, work with the editor, and the cinematographer. And I will say this, you know, it really is about, I did not, you know, I came, I didn't have, I hadn't [53:00] gone to film school, I hadn't gone to journalism school. But I, you know, part of, like, part of my experience, and, and, you know, I tell my students, this too, because I started a documentary program at a journalism school, is that, you know, having mentors, watching, you know, watching your mentors work, watching your colleagues work, taking from that, what you can use in your own work, and then also in, in documentary, watching videos and news pieces, and whatever it is, and seeing what it is you like and what you want to try. I mean, learning by observation I think is super important. And taking risks, that's the other thing.

So, I was at ABC News for four years, I knew I wanted to get back to longform documentary, and I was looking for ways to do that. And I applied [54:00] to a journalism pro, a journalism fellowship, which you basically like pitch them a story and they bring you to, to Johns Hopkins School of International Studies. And you, you know, work on your, your, your, work on your story. It's mostly print journalists and they have a few radio or video journalists, what they called that the time. And then you go overseas and shoot your story, write your story, and then you come back. It's like a semester long program. No longer exists, which is

unfortunate. But that, that fellowship brought me to South Africa and that eventually became my first film. And I, you know, the, the risk is that I took this leave of absence from ABC and I decided not to come back and I decided to, [55:00] you know, what, what I, what I shot there was, you know, I decided that this could be a film. And that was the risk, right, I did not have any, you know, I left ABC, I left comfort, left healthcare, left retirement. But it was a risk that I wanted to take because I wanted to, you know, pursue this, this, even if I didn't know it would come out to be a successful film. So that was that is one of the things that I think is really important that you have to take risks. Also too, writing, learning, knowing how to write, and part of documentary film, a big part of it is writing. Writing treatments, writing pitches, and, and figuring out how you're going to make money, you know, because that is, it's not something that you go to school, and then you immediately get a job.

But that just lastly, I'll say too, you said highs and lows. [56:00] So I started on that, that film. And you know, meanwhile, taking different jobs in between my work to Democracy Now, as a producer, then went back to South Africa, when you know, when I got some more funding, continued to film, and then I applied for a Fulbright. So fellowships have also been very, very helpful in my career. And, and that brought me to Brazil. So I was in Brazil for a year, almost a year, made another short film, learning Portuguese, it was an amazing experience, and then came back in 2007. And I was like okay, I have to finish *Promised Land*, you know, did the whole grant writing all that kinds of things that you do, and was working on, working for another media organization, and then the economy crashed in 2008, or the [57:00] early – late 2007. Crash crash. Everything dried up, no mon, like it was dry, right? No grant money, every, no job. And I had to temp, going back to temping. And at this time, I'm like, 35, I'm not young. I mean, I'm not like super young. Of course, I look back now, that's young. But, yeah, 35, I think. And I have to temp. And I get a job, get a temp job, this time, I get the temp job. And I'm also at the same time waiting to hear from PBS what they were going to give me funding, completion funding, for *Promised Land*. But yeah, so I'm like filing papers. And I was like, I just came from a Fulbright, I have a master's degree, and I'm like filing papers and being told not to play on the internet. And I was like, what is going on? [58:00] But you know, I have to work, I have to make money. So, so I temp, and it's at that time that I say, you know, if I'm going to be in this business, I really need to figure out, you know, have a steady, figure out a way to have a steady income.

And my mom had taught, as I said, and I, that it always seemed like a way to do your art and to, to have a steady income, have some security.

And so at that point, I – Oh, so what happened was the funding came through from for PBS. And when that came through, I started to reach out to all my academic contacts and say, you know, my film is premiering on PBS. And these are the kind of classes that I can offer. Grant writing, production, blah, blah, blah. And that's how I began my relationship with CUNY, the Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. [59:00] And I ended up teaching various classes, Broadcast News, what they called broadcasting at the time, and International Recording, and then I started the documentary program there. Alright, so that's the whole, the whole shebang.

AK: That's fantastic. That's incredible work. And just really quickly, how is that program going now?

YR: It's great. It started as one, as literally a class that I taught, like a one semester. At the same time, so that was in 2010 or 20, 2012 when I started teaching it, and of course, the documentary industry has boomed and grown so much, much more than you know, when I started, you know. We didn't have streamers, we didn't have, so it's I, did, the Doc Program has now, you know, [1:00:00] it started as one class, then a two-semester class, and now, then last year it became a program actually, it was last year. And it's, it's great. It's, you know, the, the, the university has been super behind it. It's great that it's part of the journalism program. So they're getting the journalism, I call it where journalism meets documentary that were the, you know, journalism and reporting meet the art of film. And, yeah, it's great. And I'm excited to see because literally last year, and of course, the pandemic. So it did kind of, did curtail our program. But that was the year it became a full-fledged program. So this year, we're still remote at this point, but next semester, I think we'll at least be hybrid. And, and yeah, it's, it's great. And I really enjoy, you know, I really enjoy teaching, and the students are, are great, and they're graduate students. And I've hired some of them, you know, on my [1:01:00] projects, or hook them up with documentary companies. Yeah.

AK: Fantastic. Well, before we officially close, is there anything else you would like to share that you were hoping to share with me today that I didn't get to ask you about?

YR: I would just say, just to give a Brown, a Brown closing, shout out, that I think my, I think what I loved about Brown is that it, it allowed, even though I say everything about not feeling support, like wanting more support with academic advising, it does offer so many places of exploration, in terms of artistically and intellectually. And I do remember after my freshman year, like, I'm like, what did I learn? Basically, everything is constructed. And I think that's really good to learn, and to see how, I think Brown taught me how to think and how to see the institute, you know, to [1:02:00] understand institutions around us and how those are constructed and identities as well. And, and, you know, give the, the, that there is, you know, academic rigor and intellect is, you know, something that's supported, obviously, and encouraged. And yeah, just the thinking, that exploration of thought, you know, besides I still, I also still think of some of the great classes that I took, and you know, what I learned and so I definitely think it set me up to do the work that I do, and there are a lot of documentary filmmakers who went to Brown, too.

AK: Well, thank you so much again for your time today. It has been absolutely wonderful to speak with you and your interview will be added to our collection of nearly 300 interviews of other fantastic brown graduates.

YR: Awesome!.

AK: So, thank you much for your time today. [1:03:00]

YR: Thank you, thank you have a good one.

--END--