

Interview 4
Ethnic Group: Caribbean (St. Vincent & the Grenadines)
Date: 1993
Place: Montreal

Demographic Information

Gender: male
Age: mid 40s
Country of birth: St. Vincent & the Grenadines
Occupation: musician, activist, Black history teacher
Year of arrival: 1972
Children: four daughters, ages 19, 16, 14, 9

I. IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE

I: When did you come to Canada?

R: 1972. As a visitor I came around 1964, my sister was here, and some of the rest of the family was in U.S. In North America, as a whole, quite a few of my aunts went to England first and then came over here. You see what happened in the Caribbean was that families moved a lot. People from a better socioeconomic background back then they always sent their kids away to study. And the Canadian government, and other governments, they would give scholarships, and have cultural exchanges. So those people always had the advantage. My family is like that. Kids went away to study, and then they would stay. Or they would go back to St. Vincent for two, three years and then come back. In those days, Canada and St. Vincent were both part of the British Commonwealth, and so to come to Canada was easy. Now there are a lot more restrictions.

I went to New York and I studied music there at [college in New York City]. But I came to Canada, like to [college in Toronto], on cultural exchange programs. So I knew something about Canada. My brother was here. In 1972 I decided to stay here because musical opportunities opened up for me in Montreal. Officially, I was sponsored and I went to Trinidad to pick up my visa, because someone in my family was at the High Commissioners Office in Trinidad. At that time, my sister sponsored me and I wanted to go to school and my wife came here to study and I came here because she was here. We decided to get married, and I got good jobs, working six nights a week. So I stayed here. My sister studied at [university in Ontario], and then she settled in Montreal and I joined here in 1972.

I: What did you know about Canada before you came?

R: I knew a lot. In our schools in the Caribbean, we were taught more about European and North American geography and history than we were from the Caribbean.

I: Tell me about your experiences in Montreal when you first arrived? And about your girlfriend at the time? Did you have problems integrating into the greater Montreal community?

R: No, no. I was involved in many activist groups before I came, and I was trying to teach people and give people a level of awareness and self-esteem about themselves. And I was active in trying to change the school curriculum and all. So I was fully aware what this place was like when I came into it. The only hard adjustment I had to make was with the weather, the climatic conditions. The people were like I was expecting. I was well aware of the whole

North American set-up.

I: Did you attend association meetings? Were you active in Caribbean community affairs?

R: Yes I was, in fact I was on the executive committee for three years, but that was much later. I guess, let's see, I ended that only five years ago. At the beginning I did not have the time because I was a full time musician, and I was on the road, traveled all over, and we did very well, so I didn't have the time.

I: Was it easy to meet others from St. Vincent when you moved here? How did you meet your friends in the Association?

R: I'm from a well known family and so a lot of people knew me, and because I was a musician I was well known. There was no problem, not only getting to know St. Vincentians but also Caribbean.

I: How did you get your first apartment in Montreal?

R: Well, very easy. At first I lived with my sister, and then I decided to take the big step and get married. I knew my way around because I had been there before. I found a nice place. In those days the neighbourhood was quiet, and I paid about \$110 a month and found a really nice place.

I: Did you have any contact with the French government integration programs?

R: No, nothing like that.

I: How did you make contact with the community?

R: People invite me to their house, or we have intimate picnics, and things like that. And there are the formal meetings and association events. I'm very active and I'm always attuned to the Association, and I'm abreast of the public events, celebrations, as a musician I know what's happening.

I: What about the church? Are you an active member of the church at all?

R: Definitely not. My experience has been, that although I'm a profound believer in God and a very spiritual person, but the church, knowing the history of all the different churches, we just see them using and abusing all the time, and they don't preach what they practice. Knowing quite a bit from a historical perspective about the churches, I don't like to be active, I'm really more of a critic (laughs). I was always fascinated with religion. I'm the sort of person who is very curious, about any association and I want to know all about it, who started it and what its history has been. So I do that about history, and I study Black history in a serious way.

I: Are you a member of any Canadian clubs, like Rotary, or political parties?

R: No, no, definitely not. Most of these associations want to have an African Canadian as a token person, these groups use us as tokens. They don't want to give you a role on the basis of your qualifications. People who become tokens may do well for themselves but they can't do anything for their community from that position.

I: What contact do you have with non-Vincentians and non-Caribbeans?

R: I teach Black history at the association, and run a weekend school for kids having difficulty with some subject. My subject is Black history. Students from McGill and Concordia come to me to learn about Black history. The universities know so little, that they have to come to me.

I: What about outside the larger Black community?

R: Not politically or historically but musically, I play at Jewish and Italians weddings, I play at

Queen Elizabeth hotel private parties.

I: Do you have any Jewish or Italian friends?

R: Oh yes, I have a lot of friends, and we get along. They respect my views and we get along fine, no problems.

I: Do you go back to St. Vincent and the Grenadines?

R: Well, yes, I used to go a lot when the economy was better and I had more cash. But now my daughter is at [university in Montreal] and I try to put my money into that. The last time I was back was eight years. Lately I have been going other places, like Los Angeles.

I: For work? Or vacation?

R: Well, for work, but then I take a vacation and look around while I am there.

I: Do you have a lot of family still there?

R: Oh yes, a lot, a sister, my parents still have a home there, and my wife's parents live there and have a few beach houses. They just come for visits and come in the summer. Since 1972, I have been back about 12 times, or 14 times. I have gone to Carnival and play and work.

I: And how many times have your parents and your wife's parents come to visit you in Canada?

R: My wife's family, about five times. My own parents have moved to Toronto and they have a second home in St. Vincent. I see the family at holidays, Christmas, Mother's Day, unless it is an emergency. We talk on the phone and keep in touch, but I don't see them all that often.

I: Would you ever consider going back (to St. Vincent)?

R: Yeah, but not permanently. I would have two homes, not to pack my bags and go off from Canada or the U.S.

I: Who makes up your family now?

R: My immediate family? My wife and four daughters, my beautiful daughters, 16, 14, 9 and 19. My wife too.

I: You've never been divorced?

R: No

I: Your extended family?

R: Two brothers, four sisters, lots of aunts and uncles. They are spread off through Boston, New York, Georgia, Bermuda.

II. RELATIONSHIP WITH SPOUSE

I: Ages at marriages?

R: I was 21 or 22, wife the same age.

I: How well did you know each other?

R: Very well, we grew up together we went to college together, and quite some time.

I: Why did your wife, or your girlfriend then, come to Montreal?

R: She wanted to study, she wanted to study nursing. But then we got married, and she dropped out. Now she is into computers, she works in computers now. She got a diploma in computer

programming.

I: Is your marriage like that of your parents? Or is it different?

R: Well, its slightly different. I have a different philosophy of life from my parents. You become a product of the household you grew up in. Its not that different. What's different is that the kids were brought up more loose, I was brought up strict, but my girls are brought up more liberal. You had to be a certain age to have a boyfriend or go to parties when I was a kid, but I think that is nonsense, and they are invited out or having friends over. Sexual conversations, we have a more intimate relationship with our kids.

I: How would your marriage have been different if both of you still lived in St. Vincent?

R: The only difference would be to be exposed in a global difference, but I don't think it would have been very different. Its a whole different society, its quiet, its not outgoing. So we might not have been so outgoing. We go to movies and clubs and dinners. But in terms of our relationship I don't think it would have been much different.

I: In general, would you say the St. Vincentians in Montreal have different marriages.

R: Well, it's hard to generalize, but I can't judge them. I haven't seen a high rate of divorce or anything like that. There are problems, but they might be superficial. Divorce isn't very common among people I know.

I: What would the attitude be in St. Vincent about divorce?

R: In my time it would be different, but divorce now is a big thing in St. Vincent. Women have moved into the economic world, but men used to dominate by economics. Now whoever holds the dollar makes the rules. But, St. Vincent isn't so different from here, its just three or four hours away. The Caribbean is close, you know, so whatever happens here affects us down there.

I: Can you give some examples of intermarriage in St. Vincent?

R: We have a small South Asians population, and a few Europeans. Most are Africans and so intermarriage isn't common. Until Vincentians go away and may bring a spouse back there.

I: How would it be looked upon?

R: It would be accepted. It's only recently that Black consciousness has been adopted from Stokely Carmichael, and Malcolm X and others. There are those cases where the nationalists who advocate certain things, but it's not a problem in St. Vincent.

I: Is it a problem in Montreal?

R: People say it is widely accepted here. A few might have their own views but most would accept intermarriage without problems. My own views are based on the fact that the Black race is used for a dumping ground. When there is intermarriage, white-Black, or Chinese-Black, the kids are always considered Black. Why can't there be acceptance of the couple, of the family, and the kids be considered white or Chinese sometimes. Marriage is a personal decision, and people fall in love. My question is based to the Blacks: Are you marrying this person because you are in love, or because you have a complex about this person? Is it that you want your kids to be fairer? Is it that you want acceptance from this person? Or are you really in love. A lot of people get married because of complexes. I cannot be the one, for my race, who is being pushed to the edge all the time.

I: Would couples of Vincentians in Montreal talk about decisions before making them, or

would a husband, say, just tell his wife what he has decided?

R: You have to understand that Caribbeans are a very diverse group, and there are very bad class decisions in the community. That question depends upon the class you are talking about. In certain groups yes, couples would talk, but the more educated people would have a dialogue. Sometimes when I hear Caribbeans talking, I am taken aback at what they are saying, just the way they were brought up, and they might say in St. Vincent we all had to milk the cow or take care of the animals, and I can't relate to that because I never had to do those things. The only animals I had were pets. My Dad was a chemist and druggist, and we had it easy. People generalize too much about Caribbeans, it is very naive of them to generalize like that. We have neighbourhoods like that too. A lot of people came for education and some came for jobs, for economical reasons. Many of them wanted to go back and not settle in Canada. They wanted to build a house at home, or send their family some money, and they had no intention to stay. The Caribbean people are very ambitious, and are not afraid of hard work. They are ready to advance and are ready to help their kids, and their community.

I: What are your views on the roles of women and men?

R: They are equal, we should be equal parents, and there are no special places in society for women. Women can do all the jobs and play a full role in society, not just in the kitchen or taking care of kids. It is a kind of racism. Everyone should be allowed to do what he or she feels they are able to do.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Do you and your wife plan to have any more kids?

R: Definitely not. It takes a lot to give a kid the proper things, the education; all the stuff that kids ought to be entitled to. So if I won the 646 (lottery) and I could have a nanny, maybe we would think about it. But even if we lived in the Caribbean nearby our family, we would have a lot of help from aunts and grandmothers. Still it would be our responsibility to take care of our kids.

I: What are the main things you want for your kids?

R: The best inheritance I can give to my kids is a good education. They need self-esteem and a lot of attention, a lot of care.

I: If you could dream big for your kids, what would you like to see your kids doing?

R: I would like them to be musicians, concert pianist, or jazz, or whatever they want. But they have their own ideas. My oldest daughter at [university], she is taking a progress in journalism. My second daughter, she wants to be a pediatrician. The third daughter wants to be a lawyer. And the fourth one, she is undecided. They have good career ideas, and so I just want to support them in what they want, but personally I would like to see them in music.

I: How much freedom should a child have?

R: I'll give you my personal point of view. It depends on what area you are talking about, certainly full freedom to express their thoughts. A lot of parents cut a kid off and won't listen to their kids. They should have a lot of freedom but they should be cautioned about certain points where you go beyond the limits, you need to contain yourself in other circumstances.

I: Does your spouse have different aspirations for your children than you do?

R: No, she has the same ideas. She wants to make sure that they have a good education a profession that suits them,

I: You want them to go into music, is she more into the doctor, lawyer sort of job?

R: Yes, she wants them to have some secure, something where they can go into business for themselves, and be their own boss. Something that gives them a comfortable life. A teacher would be nice.

I: What about disciplining practices, do you and your wife feel the same?

R: Definitely. I'm more the stern type, she is more liberal. For instance she would ask the kid to do it, and if they don't then she would do it herself. I would ask and then make sure that the kid does it. I use a lot of bluff with them, and a lot of reverse psychology. I do it for their own good.

I: When your kids were smaller did they play the same games and sing the same songs that you did when you were smaller?

R: No, not at all. The games are more British in Caribbean and the girls are more American or North American.

I: Do the kids receive any Caribbean or Afro-Caribbean education?

R: Yes, I make sure they know their roots. Wisdom is knowing who you are. I corrected that a long time and passed on my legacy to them. They were not allowed to play with white dolls, and we were careful not to give them the idea that white is always better. The kind of slave mentality can do a lot of damage. And its hard to repair it. A kid needs to love his or her own image. I mean, I don't go into white homes and find the parents buying their kids Black dolls. Hollywood does a lot of damage, and my kids need to feel good about themselves. So I corrected that, and they are doing well in school, and they have a bright future because I took care of them.

I: What about food, do you make sure your kids eat African or Afro-Caribbean foods.

R: No, well I make sure that they know about those foods, but they don't have to eat them every day. They are familiar with a wide range of foods from around the world.

I: Are they part of any youth groups or ethnic associations?

R: No, the groups don't teach any Black history or useful information. They have been part of some groups of kids like themselves, but I get into arguments with the people running those groups that they don't teach the kids what they need to know. We never cut ties but my kids were part of the groups but they didn't depend upon them to teach them.

I: How and where do you hope your daughters will meet their potential spouses?

R: I would like to see my four daughters marry Black professional spouses.

I: At the time of marriage would you expect your daughters to be knowledgeable and experienced with sex?

R: Oh yes, that is completely different from old fashioned ideas. Not only sex, but drugs and all that stuff. I took the initiative to make sure my daughters were informed and knew the basic facts of life and the dangers to them. They are very street-wise now. As a musician, I know the value of being streetwise. As a musician you run into all sorts of people, strippers, prostitutes, drug dealers and junkies, all sorts of people.

I: What would the reaction be among Vincentians if a child told their parents they were homosexual?

R: There would be a negative reaction. Because a homosexual was looked down upon, treated as an outcaste. In Montreal, still parents would be very disappointed, because they were just brought up that way. Me, myself, I think it is a personal choice, but I would be very disappointed if one of my daughters, or if I had a son, I think I would have come around to accept it, even if I was devastated at first, to wake up to the reality.

I: Do you think that your parents want the same thing for your daughters as you and your wife want?

R: The parents are different, there is a generation gap. They want them to have a comfortable life, get a good job, and have a good education. Myself, I would like them to have some power, and go a step further.

I: What aspects of your culture do you want to see instilled in your daughters?

R: I want to see them see themselves as African Canadians. I want them to know their history, deep history--I don't want them to lose their culture, their past--and pass that on to their children. Blacks need to contribute to significant change in our problems.

IV. RELATIONS WITH PARENTS

I: If things were tough, can you imagine going back to live with your parents?

R: Me? Well, I suppose that if I had no alternative. But things would have to be really, really tough, I can't imagine that. I like my privacy. And we were brought up to have a lot of respect for your parents and I wouldn't like to subject them to all our family's activities.

I: If they got older, and say (God forbid) one of them got sick, would you expect them to come and live with you?

R: My dad died about 5 years ago, and my Mom now lives with my sister, they sold the house in Toronto. We were brought up in the Caribbean to believe that we have to take care of our parents. The worst thing you could do is neglecting your parents. You would never put them in a nursing home. Regardless of how old they got, we have to take care of our parents.

I: Are there nursing homes in Montreal where Vincentians would go?

R: Yes, but the numbers are very small, only a few are there, and they are by choice of the parents.

I: Tell me about your responsibility to your parents after marriage?

R: In my case my parents are doing well so, financially, I had no need to take care of them, just to be close and see them regularly.

I: If you and your wife needed help, would they help you?

R: Yes, of course when we started out they gave us money to buy a house, and when I was in an accident, my mother was there to help take care of me.

I: Were grandparents in your home as a child?

R: No, they weren't needed.

[Daughters have interactions with their grandparents, by phone or visits. Holidays and birthdays they call. When the girls had sweet 16 parties, the family came from Toronto. They come often, like 5 times a year, and he and the family go to Toronto a few times]

V. RELATIONS WITH OTHER RELATIVES

I: Is there anyone in the family who keeps the family together?

R: Yes, my oldest sister, who lives in Toronto, and she takes the initiative.

I: What events bring the extended family together?

R: My brother's daughter's Sweet Sixteen Party. Before that, my sister came over from England and we all got together to see her. Before that my mother's birthday, and there is Caribbana in Toronto in the summer, and holidays.

I: Any weddings, births or deaths?

R: Only my dad's death five years ago. We haven't had any weddings lately.

I: What are the main attitudes of the community toward the family (in general)?

R: Very good, very supportive of families. My particular family is highly respected because of our background. We stick together and we are well known and we hold good positions. We might disappoint the community because people have such high standards for us.

VI. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE IN CANADA

I: How many people from St. Vincent in Canada?

R: In the whole Canada maybe 20,000. If that much. Probably less.

I: Do immigrants from St. Vincent want to integrate into Canadian society or do they want to maintain their own community?

R: I'd say that most want to maintain a distinct community. There are dances and parties, and holiday celebrations and associations and churches. Most of them want to feel a bit at home while they live here in Canada.

I: Do you feel that the St. Vincent's community is doing well here in Canada?

R: They aren't doing too badly from my knowledge, but they could be doing better. Don't forget that we have faced a lot of racism in this society. Maybe they were doing better 15 years ago, because of jobs. Canada had an economic boom and now because of the recession and the crisis Canada's in, we are confronted with hard time, lost jobs, menial work. And that is based on racism. During the hard times, Blacks are the ones to be fired and the last to be hired.

I: What do you think about other ethnic groups in Montreal? Are there any political problems with other groups, like French Canadians, or Italians, or Africans from French speaking countries?

R: Most Vincentians would complain about whites in general, most don't bother about French or Italians. There have been a lot of language battles and if you can't speak French in Quebec today, it is a problem.

I: What are relations like with the Haitian community?

R: We have friends but we don't have strong ties with the Haitian community. We have to realize that we have the same problems and share the same history. But since they speak French we are divided and the Europeans divided us and colonized us separately. We are trying to bridge that gap; we have East-West conferences referring to the sides of the city, to

bridge our differences. We are too small to get along without each other; we need a confederation of all the Caribbean. There is so much ignorance about different peoples.

I: How would your life be different if you had stayed in St. Vincent?

R: My life would be pretty good, I had a lot of opportunities there. I might have been a revolutionary if I had stayed, but I couldn't have lived my life in music if I stayed there.

I: Does it seem to you that Canada, or Montreal, is changing over time?

R: Oh yes, it's insecurity of the European Canadians. Most are very insecure about African Canadians, and they have a problem competing. An industrial nation like this always needs cheap labour and the global situation is changing. Between all this, the Europeans are changing.

I: Has racism increased?

R: Well, it hasn't increased, but its more vocal. Its always been here. Canada had only a small Black population until the 1960s when the people of the Caribbean started to come here. Now Black people make a lot of noise.

I: What newspapers do you read?

R: Many, Globe and Mail, Gazette, the News and the Vincentian from Caribbean, also the Jamaican papers.

I: Who belongs to your ethnic community?

R: I'm in the whole Canadian community, but different groups like the Vincentian community is also here. Each island has its association, and we do things together. Who is doing better, just from a show off point of view? I'm in favour of a Caribbean association and I would like to see us all associated together in a single organization. Not just in Montreal but in the Caribbean. We are too small to stand alone, we need to form a confederation of all the islands.