

- Good day. You're listening to Ability Radio, You and Your Life. I'm your cohost Amelia Headley LaMont from the Disability Rights Center and I am joined this morning by Iris Bermudez. Good morning, Iris.

- Good morning, Amelia. Good morning, Virgin Islands.

- We are sponsored by VI Lottery, "Making a Difference" and our special guest today is Ms. Elisa McKay. Good morning. Good morning.

- Good morning. Good morning, Amelia. Good morning, Iris.

- It is so exciting to have you here because one of the things we try to cover are, what people are doing in our community and to hear your story, your family's history, your family's connection to the Virgin Islands, I just think is a valuable, valuable source for many of us.

- Okay.

- So tell us about yourself.

- Okay. Well, where do I start?

- Well, okay. Your parents. Let's start with your parents.

- Okay. My parents, Ogese and Hedwig McKay, they were both born here, her name was Hedwig Rash and born here on St. Croix. My dad in 1896, my mom in 1902 and my father enlisted into the Navy as a tuba player, as a naval musician in the First World War a few months after the United States bought the Virgin Islands, so that was 1917. And two years later, my parents got married. Actually, my dad said when he saw my mom, it was love at first sight.

- Aww.

- Aww.

- Yeah. He's, he, he's a romantic, he was a romantic. Yeah. So they got married at the Lutheran Church in Christiansted in 1919 and a year later, my brother was born and five years later, they moved to the States. So I'm the youngest of eight and actually my father was in the States because he had just finished his eight-year, two stints, eight years in World War I and he sent for my mother instead of coming back to St. Croix, he had been playing music and it was during the Harlem Renaissance and he saw that music was paying well, he could support his family and so he sent for her. And that's what he did, he played music but he also worked as a carpenter, cabinetmaker as a young man here on St. Croix. The young boys growing into manhood are apprentices, they're taught like a trade. And so he had that that he did, he was a carpenter by day and a musician by night, yeah. And then the rest of us were born. I'm the youngest of eight and we lived in Harlem and we were not the only people from a Caribbean island. My classmates were also, their parents were first generation to the United States, Caribbean from different islands. So that was comfortable and the families were also as large as ours, very rarely would you see a two, a two-child family. There were usually six to eight, maybe even more, yeah, yeah.

- You know, to me, I worked in New York when I was with the federal government and with the, with the Part D implementation for prescription drugs, we walked Harlem. To me, Harlem is so cultural...

- It is.

- ...because there's so many people from, like you said, different Caribbean islands. I loved Harlem. I wore out so many shoes because I wanted to keep going back to Harlem...

- Oh, fabulous, yeah.

- ...to provide information to the churches, the community organizations...

- Uh-hmm.

- ...because there are many.

- Yes.

- There are many.

- Yeah. And the church that we grew up in, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Transfiguration, is amazing because almost everyone from the Virgin Islands worshipped there, yeah. So that was interesting. And there were, there were people in, at the building that I grew up in, there was family who lived on the second floor, we lived on the fifth floor. And later, later on back in I guess in the '60s, I worked at a, at a, an adult program teaching keypunch and, IBM keypunch and typing and there was a young man by then but a boy who grew up on the second of the building where I lived. He taught Math in that, you know, so he was older, he was my sister's, older sister's age but I hadn't seen him in all those years and then, you know, we connected. So, yeah, I loved growing up in New York. Like, I don't think I wanna live there now, I love St. Croix.

- Did you, did you live near where the subway tracks would run?

- Oh, no. You mean the elevated tracks?

- That's amazing. The elevated, yeah.

- No, the elevated tracks were all the way over on the east side.

- The east side.

- And I lived on the west side.

- West side. Okay.

- And actually just two blocks away from Central Park.

- Oh.

- So Central Park runs from 59th Street up to 110th Street.

- Right.

- I grew up on the 112th Street.

- Yeah.

- So we had access to the lake in the park, we did picnics, we went rowing, I learned to ride my bike in Central Park, yeah. So that was wonderful being so close, yeah.

- Yeah.

- To, yeah, but when you said about the elevated trains, on Saturday mornings, my mom used to go to La Marqueta in the, in the East, in East Harlem to buy Caribbean produce and all kinds of saltfish and, you know, Porgies, all kinds of fish and avocados and seasonings and, unbelievable, yeah.

- When you talk about the Harlem Renaissance, my mind thinks about all the music.

- Uh-hmm.

- The lecturers because I understand the guys, the men used to stand on wooden boxes to give lectures.

- Oh, yeah. Now, I don't know. I'm not that old...

- Oh, okay.

- ...to the Harlem Renaissance but during my time, Malcolm X would be on 116th Street and Lenox Avenue. My dad actually played for Marcus Garvey's meetings during the '20s. When, yeah. So he got to meet Marcus Garvey. He really did a lot, yeah. And my mom, I mean, they were partners. When I look back and think about how they raised us, my mother had begun nurse's training here but then when she got married and then, she didn't continue. And she really didn't work, maybe I could remember one time that she might've worked some place because she just felt like she wanted to do this but she was devoted, they were both devoted to raising us and it seemed like they had this path that they, besides, you know, feeding and clothing us but to keep us happy, you know? It was like, we just really had a happy house. So that was, that was wonderful and they, you know, my dad made out furniture, my mother sold out clothes, you know, it was, it was fabulous. Wasn't perfect but it was great.

- That might explain why you have such a sunny disposition. Truly, truly.

- Thank you. Yeah, I got it from them. You know, they were, that's the way they were, especially my dad, you know?

- Yeah.

- He was, like, he didn't carry anything. No baggage, you know? If you would say something, like oh, you know, complain about something happening, so he's, "Wasn't that yesterday?"

- [laugh]

- You know, "This another day, let it go." you know, yeah, so [laugh].

- That's great.

- He should be around today to talk to, tell people that [laugh].

- Exactly [laugh].

- So, okay, you grew up in New York.

- Uh-hmm.

- When did you come to St. Croix or how did your parents, when did your parents decide to?

- Oh, okay. Well, before they decided to come back, they come back in '62 but in 1955, I was given a trip by them for my 18th birthday and I came here with my mom. And so she stayed for three months, I stayed for a month and we lived with my aunt for that period in, ooh, I'm having an adult moment. Watergut. She had this huge house in Watergut and she worked for the Herbert Grigg Home, she was the head nurse there. And she had a sister, they were both, I'm not sure how old they were, I was 18 but you know how people seem really old. Both of them were single, they never married, and my Aunt Marie had a cottage in Frederiksted. And so every weekend when I was here during that month, we went out to Frederiksted for the weekend and it was wonderful, it was this little house, this little cottage, it had a couple bedrooms and, you know, of course a bath and a kitchen. And when you walked out the back door, you walk right into the sand and the sea was, oh, it was fabulous, yeah.

- Let's go back to New York for a minute...

- Okay.

- ...because I just wanted to know if while you were living in New York, while you were growing up, did your mom keep the Virgin Islands nutrition, food, Crucian cooking?

- Oh, yeah, yeah.

- Or did she become Americanized?

- No, the only thing that I could say if you would call it Americanized is that Crucian food, there's a lot of carbs.

- Yeah.

- My mom gave us a lot of greens. I mean, we had a lot of vegetables. We had carbs but not to the degree that I see people who eat, because I don't eat that way either. I didn't raise my daughter that way. I mean, we had spinach and kale. You know how people are into kale now?

- Yes.

- I grew up on kale. I grew up on kale. I grew up on the tops of the beets, the beet greens, all kinds of greens. Eggplant, well, they eat eggplant now but not a lot of carbs, you know, just isolated, you know, but basically a lot of green and we ate pumpkin and we ate, but my mother did. She did all the Crucian way of cooking, yeah. She made her own hot pepper sauce, you know, she baked all the time. There's so many of us, you know, she baked breads and she was into like whole wheat flour, she was into, as a child, they had a juicer, so they make carrot juice. I mean, they were into health. They, my mom said that although she was trained as a nurse, she wasn't into medicine. She was into the natural way of healing, of living, you know, so, yeah, so that's what we had.

- Okay.

- Honey, we didn't have a lot of white sugar. Brown rice. I mean, we were, we were raised on all of those kinds of things where I don't think brown rice was a staple here, I think it was white rice. But my mother used to listen to, oh, I'll think of his name in a minute but she listened to a nutritionist on the radio and she adopted all those traits, all of those ways of cooking and eating, yeah.

- That's great.

- I think it was Victor H. Lindlahr was his name. You remember, oh, I thought you recognized that name. Oh, okay.

- No.

- Yeah.

- No. Wow. Yeah, because you would think that because you lived in the Virgin Islands or she lived in the Virgin Islands, you know, since carbs are so important in our diet now on, in the Virgin Islands, that this was happening back then but based on what you're saying, it really, in a sense, it really wasn't. People were more...

- I get with a lot of other people but in our, in our home...

- She wasn't.
- Yeah, yeah. We did have carbs. I'm not saying we didn't have any.
- Okay. Yeah, but not like now.
- No, they were...
- Yeah, yeah. I mean, we have to have potato salad, stuffing.
- Yeah, we wouldn't have all of those carbs on one plate.
- On one plate [inaudible] yeah.
- No, it would be one carb, a green vegetable, a yellow, an orange vegetable, you know, something like that. Carrots or yeah, broccoli...
- That's wonderful.
- ...or, but mostly, we grew up, like I said, we grew up on kale that I have to laugh now because people are just discovering kale. I knew kale, so I raised my daughter on kale, you know.
- Amazing.
- Well, okay, you came here, then when you were 18, it was a gift for graduating from high school or just...
- It was just, no, my 18th, no, I graduated 17 but it was my 18th birthday gift.
- Nice. Okay. So what were your impressions of St. Croix at that time?
- Oh, it was like...
- And when was that roughly, more or less?
- Oh, that was in 1955.
- Okay.
- And we took a prop plane. It wasn't, we didn't come here by jet and we, I remember going oh, it was maybe a six-hour flight from LaGuardia I think. They called it Idlewild then I think.
- Uh-hmm.
- And we went from there to San Juan and then we kind of, I don't know how long we waited for our next plane. And then we came over here. So when I saw St. Croix, it was just, I mean, sky, you know, of course I didn't see the sea immediately but just to see the quaintness of it in comparison to living in the big city, yeah, it was a beautiful sight for me, yeah.
- Had they spoken to you about what St. Croix was like when you were growing up?
- Oh, yeah. And we would tease them. We would say oh, you know, did you have electricity and, you know, and they, when, they lived in the times when you had electricity, you know, but I know that my father, when they were married, they lived on Strand Street right up that hill. You know where those stairs, those steps are, those stone steps going up Strand Street from, Frigate, from the block after the government parking lot and it's going up, all the way up to where the Boys and Girls Club is? You know

where that is in Christiansted? Well, they had an apartment there that they paid five dollars a month rent for and they had access to a, to a garden, so, you know, they grew I think tomatoes and something else but I remember, just recently I was looking in my dad's autobiography for something and he said that he had made an icebox for them. And also, when I was growing up in New York, although we had electricity, we had an, did you have an icebox?

- My parents.

- We had an icebox, yeah. And so, yeah, it was, it was, I noticed it when we would visit people and, which is almost a daily thing, that we visit people. They were so hospitable, you know, just, they would just welcome you into their homes and, you know, always had something, some little, something for you to eat and they always had a little finger bowl for you to wash your fingers, you know, and a little towel and, yeah, just really lovely.

- Where was that?

- Here.

- Here? Okay, in St. Croix.

- Yes. St. Croix, yeah.

- Nice. Okay, we're gonna take a little break.

- Okay.

- And we'll be right back. You're listening to Ability Radio, You and Your Life. This program is brought to you by VI Lottery, "Making a Difference". We're back with our guest, Elisa McKay. My name's Amelia Headley LaMont. I'm joined along with Iris Bermudez and we were talking about your experience as a young lady coming to the Virgin Islands for the first time as an 18-year old and your perceptions of the community at that time which was you said around 1955, right?

- Yeah, correct.

- Okay.

- Uh-hmm.

- What happened after this visit? What impressions were made upon you when you returned to New York?

- Well, one thing, staying in the cottage, you know, the weekends, it made me think of, because I went to camp as a child a couple of times. I really was a mom and daddy's girl, so I wanted my siblings to go and I could have them all to myself during summers. But having that experience like camp where I wasn't in the big city, being here on St. Croix was just a, was so different that I liked it yet, and I thought I'd always wanna come back, not, I hadn't thought of coming back to live but that I'd always wanna come back and visit but I didn't come back again until after my parents moved here in '62. So it wasn't a thing, you know, is, when I went back and I had photographs and I showed my friends and they all exclaimed because even now people don't know where St. Croix is, so they didn't know and I remember Nat Cole had this record, The Sand and the Sea. And so they would say oh, you know, they, I was like a celebrity in my, in my, you know, social life there. And so, because no one had, that I knew, no one I grew up with had gone, traveled this far, even flew on an airplane at 18. So the memory of St. Croix, the memory of the quaintness and the memory of all that I experienced here was always in my heart because it made me kind of understand, I don't think understand is the word but it made me kind of know a little more about my parents, you know? It gave me more of a connection even though of course I was connected but because they, you know, they would talk about things as we were growing up and they would have their

little private jokes about things and we would ask them like they would laugh about something and I guess it was an adult thing and they would say oh, it's okay, you know. Or they would say oh, this is what we're, you know, laughing at or this is what, and they would share things with us. So it was like, almost like a little puzzle that I didn't realize had existed that I could put those pieces in place, yeah, so that when they moved back, my mom came first because her father was ill and she came back to take care of him. So we started visiting. My siblings and I started visiting and, yeah, so more and more, I thought hmm, this might be some place that I would wanna come back to or, you know. And when I did think at one point that I would, I came during, I think it was during the spring and I was looking around. I was in the data processing field and I was kind of looking around to see if there was anything that I really felt comfortable as far as work experience was concerned but then I had that longing to be back in New York, you know? It was like hmm, I don't think I'm ready yet, you know? But eventually, I was, yeah.

- And that is so true because I remember when I was in college, we had a class and we had to introduce ourselves and tell the people where we were from, the other students. So I said I'm from the Virgin Islands, I was born in the Virgin Islands and this girl stood up and said, "Well, how did you get here?" I said I swam. And she believe, they, she believed it.

- She believed it?

- She believed it. I said, and then the professor said, "No, Iris, how did you get here?" But it's true what you're saying about those memories because we used to talk a lot about the Virgin Islands, St. Croix and my parents met on St. Croix, so I always wanted to come and see what St. Croix was all about because we had family here.

- Yeah.

- Parents, grandparents came over from Vieques, Culebra during that migration. But it's so comforting. To me, it was comforting to see where my parents met and how we came about being, you know. So I can, I can really understand your feelings about that. But at that time, when I came back, I wasn't ready to stay either.

- Yeah.

- And what was nice too was I'm the only, one of my siblings who met my paternal grandfather...

- That's wonderful.

- ...because my mom's dad came to the States but my dad's dad never did and so unless someone came here, you know, and I did and I think that was '55 I came and I think he passed, like, a few years after that. So before my parents moved here, so that none of my siblings, when they came to visit, you know, were privy to a relationship and, although I didn't have a relationship but I did see him a few times when I was visiting here and he was quite a character. I see where my father got, and my uncle, they're all characters, you know? He was really a character.

- I don't know if you mentioned your dad's name.

- Well, I'm gonna say that, you know, my dad had only seen his father three times in his life and so the, my family name is MacKay, M-A-C, excuse me, M-A-C-K-A-Y but because my grandfather was, my father said he was a father in name only, that he gave him his name but he didn't see him, he didn't take care of him, he didn't marry his mom. And so that, you know, that made my father really feel distant. Well, they were already estranged. He wasn't seeing him, you know, as a boy. Where is he, how is he gonna see him unless he went, came to, you know, look him up? So my father decided when he went into the Navy, he legally changed his name to still MacKay, well, the pronunciation is MacKay but he changed the spelling to M-C-K-A-Y and thus it changed the pronunciation. So he said that, he felt that, you know, he gave him his name, well, so this was his issue with his dad, that, okay, you can take your name back.

- Yeah, it's so funny because, and yet he outgrew all of that and yet he was able to teach you, teach you and your siblings how to be, you know, how to laugh off, you know, hardships and whatnot. So that, that's amazing.

- And, you know, he, yeah. He was, he always said that when he had this experience or lack of with his dad, that if he ever got married, if he ever had children, he would be the best dad he could be. And he was. He, I mean, he made a point of really, even though he worked days and nights. He worked, like I said, as a carpenter during the day and a musician at night, he wasn't absent. I mean, he went to parent-teacher's meetings, he did things with us on the, on the, in the afternoons, on the weekends, he took us row boating. I mean, you know, there were a lot of things he did and a lot of things he did with us so that my mom would have a break. You know, she was with us all day and he, I mean, he even, he mopped floors. He said that was heavy work. So, he helped cook. I mean, he did everything. I mean, he wasn't, like I said, he wasn't perfect nor was my mom but wow, what a blessing to have them, you know?

- So, your father's first name is...

- Ogese.

- Ogese.

- O-G-E-S-E.

- Okay.

- Yeah.

- I'm gonna tease it out of you. So they came to the Virgin Islands, your mom initially with her father, right? Who was ailing?

- Oh, when they came back?

- Right.

- Yes, Uh-hmm.

- Right, right.

- Yeah. Well, my grandfather was here.

- Uh-hmm.

- So she came to take care of him. He was here and he was ailing and that was in '62. They actually, and then my father retired, so he retired at age 65, 66. So you got to do the math [laugh].

- [laugh]

- So he came, but he came back, like, in '60, oh, he came back right after my mom because she came back first because it was a necessity, it was an emergency and she came back to take care of her dad. And then he, you know, wrapped things up and then he, you know, he retired and then he moved back and they rented an apartment and then later built their home. And what they did was when I came in '55 with my mom, a friend of theirs owned the property that they built on, you know, before, of course, they built it and so she started talking to him about buying the, you know, a piece of property, which they did. So then they were happy that they did because they eventually, yeah, moved back and built on it.

- That sounds like my story.

- Yeah?

- Yeah.

- Oh, okay.

- Same.

- So what brought you here? What brought you to St. Croix?

- Well, when I began to visit, I, you know, each time, I mean, I was teaching, so I had, you know, summers off, I had long weekends, I had Easter vacation, so I would come. You know, the fare was really low. And I would come three, four, five times a year. I mean, my parents' friends would say, "You need to take stock in the airline." yeah, because every chance I got and not only, I mean, I won't say I didn't love St. Croix, I had begun to really love it but it just seemed, my mom was 62 when they, or 60 when they moved here, back and I think my dad was 66. And so, they just seemed old, you know, that I needed to make sure they were okay, you know? So I, you know, I just constantly came back and, I mean, but they weren't old of course. They'd garden, they had, they had a farm, they did stuff, you know, but I enjoyed it so much that eventually, I thought okay, I think, and I went back to school. I changed my profession, I majored in English and I felt like I wanted to, I went back when my daughter was three to major in English. And so I felt that I would teach. That was one of the things I always wanted to do. I had been in teaching but in another field. And so I talked it over with my daughter and we decided yeah, that's something we wanna do. So yeah, we moved back and I had the same schedule as she because she went, you know, she went to school and I taught at school, yeah.

- Like you, I'm glad that I raised my children on St. Croix only because it's such a, it's a small community but you know everybody.

- Right.

- So if your kids are doing something, you'd get a phone call. "Iris, so and so is doing this." But that was back then. It's changed a lot now but I felt very comfortable raising my kids here and a lot of people would try to get me to go back to the States, I said, no, no, this is home.

- Yeah.

- This is where I belong right now, you know, because...

- Uh-hmm.

- And I'm sure you felt the same way.

- Oh, yeah. I mean, I moved here in '78. I have not moved anywhere. I did leave here for a year and a half to take care of my grandson when he was born so that my daughter didn't have to leave work but no, this is home. I hear people who have lived here for years and they'll go to the States, wherever they're from and they'll say, "Oh, I'm going home," and I'll say hmm, I never say that when I go to New York. This is home. And my dad used to say that New York was his home away from home because that, this was still always his home, you know, even though he, they had been gone for, like, 37 years. So he would visit, we would buy tickets for them. My mom for Mother's Day, she spent a month up in the States and my dad for Father's Day and sometimes it would connect with, you know, they would be there at the same time but that's what he would say, it's home away from home, yeah.

- We're gonna continue on. You talked on about your career in English but we also wanna cover some other areas that you are quite skilled at. We're gonna take a little break and we'll be right back. You're listening to Ability Radio, You and Your Life. This program is brought to you by VI Lottery, "Making a Difference". We're back. You're listening to Ability Radio, You and Your Life, and our special guest today

is Ms. Elisa McKay. Should we say Renaissance woman because we're covering a lot of ground here this morning?

- You talked about your career in data processing and then you went to study English?

- Yes, at City College in New York, uh-hmm

- Okay. And you taught here too, right?

- Yes, I taught at Central High. I taught for really not a long time, for about five years. It was finishing, getting my bachelor's, working on my, on my masters that first summer after I graduated from City and then moving down here that August. And so by the time those five years rolled by, I was like okay, I think I wanna take a leave of absence. So that's what I did, I took a leave of absence. I felt like I needed to spend more time with my daughter and that's what we did. Instead of putting her on the bus in the morning, I drove her to school and, you know, we just had like a lot of time together outside of the time she was in school, you know.

- Right.

- Not that we didn't have it before but I didn't have that extraneous stuff. I didn't have all of that teaching and grading papers and all of that. And then I was also able to do things with my parents as well, you know. So all of us, you know, my daughter, my parents and I, we would go to the beach, we just do a lot of things together. And then shortly after, I'm thinking in February of the following year because I started the leave of absence in September of '83, and in '84, my mom became ill and so I thought hmm, as the time grew near for me to go back to the next school year, I talked with the principal about not taking another leave of absence but resigning. And I'm glad that I did because she passed in '85. And so, you know, I had that time with her as well, yeah.

- Right, right. Very important.

- Uh-hmm.

- There were some other things that I think our listening audience maybe familiar with but others who aren't aware of, you know, your work, that you also do a lot of art.

- Yeah. Okay.

- How did, how did that evolve and what inspires you?

- Well, as a child, I drew. I used to draw. That was something that I like to do. And I also did some mechanical drawing for my dad when he did cabinet making for his clients. But I used to draw just like portraits, you know. And then I kind of forgot about it. And I was telling a friend I worked, and this was like in the, hmm, this was in the '60s, I think mid, early to mid '60s. I was telling a girlfriend whom I am still friends with now, that I had, that I used to draw. We, you know, we were just talking about things we did as a child. And so she surprised me and gave me a starter set of oils and a canvass, some canvasses and an easel and so she said, "Okay, you said that you used to do blah, blah, blah. Okay, let's see." you know. So I remember while I was working at a school and we had, it was at the time when the, you know, when we have President's Day now. At that time, we had Lincoln's birthday off and we had...

- And then Washington's...

- ...Washington's birthday.

- Yeah.

- So we had a snowstorm. I think it was '68 we had this snowstorm. And so we were out for Lincoln's, the snowstorm for Washington's, you know, a good chunk of time. So I took my oils out and I had a Lancers Rose bottle. Remember those bottles? I had one of those with some dried eucalyptus in it and I painted it. And as I was painting, a friend of mine, a coworker who lived east of where I lived, he came by, he called and said, oh, you know, because he was off as well, he worked at the school. And he came by and he saw the, you know, partially completed painting and he said, "Oh, you're going to art school?" So I said no, I said, so I felt like oh, this ism I said, I did this, and he said, "Yeah, right." But so I really felt like okay, this, you know, this is making me feel good and it's looking good. Someone else thinks it looks good. And so I started not painting but I started drawing and cutting out stuff, making cards for my family and friends. And then when I came here, I had begun to do the same thing and, you know, at night, evenings when I create papers at the end of the, at the end of the evening just as therapy, I would, as a meditation, I would make these cards. And I, they were confined to cards. I didn't get into a larger, a larger format until much later and, yeah.

- Are you still making the cards with material?

- Yeah, with fabric, uh-hmm.

- Yeah. Because your, I picked up a couple of your cards and I sent them to the States for, as little, you know, cards and what, thank you cards and whatnot and everybody wanted to know who made them.

- Oh, okay. Well, you can tell them.

- Oh, I know now. I know now.

- [laugh]

- Yeah.

- Because they're sold at the, they're sold at, what's the place in Sion Farm?

- Oh, The Frame Up.

- The Frame Up.

- They're sold at a number...

- They're beautiful though. They're beautiful.

- ...of places on the island, yeah.

- Yeah, yeah.

- I first started making them and [inaudible] at the Compass Rose. This was back in the '80s. Because I started making them in the '80s and a friend of mine said, "You should sell them." She went, you know, I would give little packages of cards as gifts. And so then I said oh, I never thought of selling them, you know.

- They're absolutely beautiful.

- Thank you.

- I love them.

- Yeah. So I started selling them at Compass Rose and then, hey, the rest is history.

- Yeah.

- And you just said you now are doing larger pieces. What inspires you and what kind of medium do you use?

- I use acrylic, well, to paint the backgrounds, I use acrylic and I also use fabric. I cut my images out of fabric. So they're silhouettes so to speak and I also use French paper, Canson is the brand. It's a really nice paper because I used to, when I did the card, well, I still do the cards but initially I used to paint the faces and sometimes they would not come out even and so I started, I decided to use paper and I started cutting them, cutting them out. And so I use, finding sometimes mix media, depending on what I see and find. And as far as my inspiration, it varies. It's, I mean I could hear or remember the name of a song and, like, I think I have two pieces that I call Moondance. One is Moondance, one is Moondance 2. And just thinking of that song and the words to the song, I developed an art piece with people dancing, with, you know. So it could be anything, you know, anyone, any, you know. And a lot of it is related to family and celebration and community, yeah.

- Okay.

- You have a work that to me symbolizes your parents. They're walking away. I forgot what it was called but it is so moving.

- Ooh, well, I did two. Actually, I did one that I call, one that, oh, I can't remember the name of it. The first one I did, I did with them walking away and he's got a cane because my father worked, walked with a cane. And they're kind of, the way I cut the fabric so that they don't have like shoulders going out, they're kind of curved over so they look elderly. And I can't remember the name of that one. But then I did another one more recently and my dad used to always take my mom out on dates, you know, when, the house is like on, going toward the south shore and when they were, oh, after they moved in, they had a, they had a cart and a horse. Dandy was the horse's name. And so on moonlit nights, my dad would hitch Dandy up to the cart and he would take my mom for a moonlight ride. And so when we lived in the States, he would take her to, when Radio City had their, he took her, that was an annual date. He took her to different places and, you know, so they, you know, Sings, and going into town. Excuse me. I asked them once if I could take a picture of their sign and although I don't think my parents ever went to Sings, I thought of using that. And I, and I painted the background and I use Sings, the sign, and I have this couple, again he's walking with a cane and they're kind of stooped over and I call it Stepping Out because they were always, because it always makes me think of my parents and my dad taking my mom out. They went to Comanche every year for their anniversary, for an anniversary lunch. Yeah. So, yeah, they...

- That's wonderful.

- They still dated, which I loved, you know?

- That is, that is sweet. He makes it tough on whoever you wanted.

- Right, exactly, exact...

- [inaudible] wanna relate to.

- I mean, he washed our hair when we were kids. He washed all the girls' hair on Saturday in preparation for Sunday church.

- Wow.

- One head at a time. And then we go and my mom would braid it, you know, and he'd watch that, watch that. So that was like, you know...

- Yeah.

- What dad washes your hair?

- [laugh]

- Now another area that you are known for in this community is your devotion to the practice of yoga.

- Yoga.

- Okay, yeah.

- Tell us a little bit about that.

- Well, back in the '60s, there was, and I can't remember how I found out about it. Excuse me. There was a program with a gentleman, Richard Hittleman, and he taught yoga using two people facing opposite directions so you could be the left of the person and the right of the person. And he would give instruction, yoga instructions to them. So, in which that I'm sure they have today. Maybe not his show but I was alerted somehow. I don't remember how I found out about it but I found out about this show. So I'd get up every morning early and I do yoga. And I remember there was an Indian gentleman who worked where I worked and he gave me a little book about yoga and when he gave it to me, I looked at it and I thought hmm, that's nice. And I just put it on my bookshelf. But then I guess, you know, by osmosis, you know, things don't happen by accident and I ended up getting involved and really liking yoga and really understanding the benefits of it and, you know, all of that. And so I began doing it. So that was the '60s and it wasn't until the '80s, '81, there was a gentleman who came down and gave teacher training. And several of my friends who also teach yoga here took that training a long time ago. And then I taught yoga at, Ati Bermudez had the theater dance. She was the artistic director of theater dance. And my daughter used to take dance and then I took it and then I was on the board and I said to her if you ever wanna put yoga on your curriculum, let me know. I was just taking teacher training and then she'd tell me, "Yes, let's do it this summer." It was the summer of '81.

- Wow.

- About six months after I had taken the training. And I just continued training, teaching and then going off island and taking different classes at Kripalu Yoga Center in the Berkshires in Massachusetts.

- My question to you about yoga is there are different teachings.

- Yes.

- From different disciplines of yoga. Which one do you subscribe to?

- I do, I do Hatha. It's the basic.

- Hapa?

- Hatha, H-A-T-H-A. And in, at Kripalu, they have different branches I guess that they have, that they do. And now, they have like a hot yoga, they have a power yoga. I mean, all of it has been Americanized so to speak.

- [inaudible]

- But I like the Hatha because it's basic, you know? And you can do variations of the Hatha yoga, you know. But that's what I do. I even taught children's yoga for a good period of time. I taught at Country Day Summer Camp several years and then I did my own where I went to a couple of daycare centers and gave them yoga for, I mean, young. Yeah. And when I did yoga with young people, their parents always said and especially the boys, you know, not stereotyping but the boys, they said, "We're able to focus

better." and did better at their classes, you know, in school. But they generally, very rarely would I have someone who didn't like yoga like a child a couple of times I did yoga with, they have that great, is it Great Adventure Camp that's at AZ Academy? They've been doing it for several years. Well, the person who runs it is a friend of mine and when I met her and I told her that I taught yoga, I did yoga with them for a couple, a couple of seasons. But some people think it has something to do with religion and they, they're afraid and they might shy away from it but it's the oneness of us all. It's not, it has nothing to do with a specific religion.

- It's very relaxing. And I know for sure.

- It is. And it keeps your spine young.

- Yeah.

- You know, because you're stretching and breathing. A lot of times, we don't breathe. We realize that we might be sitting and all of a sudden oh, I'm not even breathing.

- Yeah.

- And it's the way you breathe as well. It's breathing through the nostrils, getting from the belly all the way up, yeah, from the diaphragm.

- Amazing woman. You are.

- [laugh]

- Well, what do you see for yourself? I mean, you, you're an artist, you're a yoga master.

- Yes.

- I don't know about that.

- What kinds of things you see for yourself in the, in the foreseeable future?

- Wow. Well, I feel like I have a lot, I mean, I'm 80 years old but I feel like I have a lot of time. I mean, I feel blessed to be healthy and, you know, have a, you know, a good mind and a, and a, and a curious mind. You know, I'm, you know, I'm still, you know, the universe is just still a wondrous thing to me, you know. So there's no limit to what can be done or what can be encountered, you know? So I don't know if I see anything yet. I...

- I know you have a, or a little birdie told me you have a trip planned.

- Oh, well. I don't know when that's gonna take place, maybe the end of this year, but my daughter told me that for my 80th birthday, she would give me a trip. She would take me on a trip anywhere in the world I'd like to go. So I kept vacillating, you know, this place, that place and she said, "Mommy," you know, "you got to, we got to find out where we're going to go." So I'm thinking of Cape Town, Botswana and Zimbabwe, yeah. So we have to figure out when we're gonna do it now that I've finally settled down and made a decision. So she's happy about that. Yeah. Yeah. But I've been doing also some freelance writing for the Daily News.

- Wow.

- So, yeah. And I've been enjoying that because I like to write. And I, sometimes my stuff is tweaked but I mean, you know, that's what editors are for, right? But I enjoy it. I, it wasn't something like, that I was looking forward to that, you know, I thought that I would do. I always had this thing in the back of my mind when I'd see in the newspaper if they were looking for a reporter and I would say wow, that would

probably be real fun. But I was always involved with so many other things that I've never, like, even looked toward that. But a friend of mine said to me, "You know, why don't I give your info to the editor and see if he's interested in, you know?" So that's what she did and I've been doing some graduations, I've been doing high school graduations and he told me that I should look, if there's anything that I think might be newsworthy in the community to like just run it by him and if he thought that it was something he wanted me to cover, he would give me that opportunity.

- Have you done or considered doing any children's books?

- Yeah, I have.

- You have?

- I have.

- Okay.

- Actually, I started writing a story. I don't know if it was gonna be a book but a story. I mean, this is when my daughter was maybe 13 or so. But then there's just been so many other things but I have a, I have thought of that, of writing a children's book.

- I just loved it when you talked about your experiences with your father. I thought that was dynamic and I think that that would be a great story for girls to see how powerful or how loving, how gentle your father could be.

- Yes. Yes.

- Or your father was.

- Yes.

- You know?

- Well, you know, I have a friend who keeps telling me that I should write this story, this book about my dad and his tuba. And so she'll always say to me, "Have you started that book yet?" She said, "If you don't do it, I'm gonna do it." I said, well, your daddy didn't blow a tuba, so you can't do it." [laugh] Because she would tell me she's gonna do it, like about her father, you know. So that's something that I think that I would like to do because she gave me the impetus, you know, she gave me the idea. And I think about it around, you know, because as long as I remember, could remember from a child growing up, my dad always played tuba.

- And washed your hair.

- And wash my hair.

- And, you know, I think that's a great story for boys too.

- Yes.

- Oh, of course.

- Oh, my goodness.

- To show them, yes.

- Yes.

- And I mean, even though my dad didn't have that tenderness or that strength from his dad, he was able to give that to my brothers and to me and to my sisters, you know?

- And that's why I said he was amazing because he did that. He was able to do that despite the fact that he only saw his father twice or three times...

- Yes.

- ...or whatever, that is amazing that he could do that.

- Yeah.

- I love it.

- Oh.

- I recall my husband liked to tell us a joke about what your father your said about he just finished his autobiography.

- Uh-hmm.

- And I, I'm sure I'm not remembering it well, he says, "But Ogese, you're 90 years old." and he says, "Volume one."

- Oh. Oh, yeah, he wanted to write another book. He was interested in writing another book, yeah. And, you know, he became an artist at age 90, so...

- Amazing.

- Yeah, because in his autobiography, he had some pictures of his paintings. Yeah. He was, it was after, right after my mom passed and he was mourning and I always saw that there was some senior art classes available and I asked him. And although he was always ready to do things, he was a little hesitant. And then he finally gave in and was so prolific, yeah. And I just did that exhibit with his paintings. You know, I borrowed, I borrowed paintings from people who had bought them on island and then some that we had, family members had and did a lovely exhibit at the Studio Walsh Gallery. And that gallery is long. So it was just amazing to see all of those pieces of art of his. Yeah.

- It was a great event. Well, Elisa McKay, I'd like to thank you so much for you to share your very rich personal history with us. We really appreciate it.

- Oh, thank you so much.

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