SayersJah_CapoteMelody_20250903_audio

jah elyse sayers: [00:00:00] Um, first question is, do I have your permission to record?

Melody Capote: You certainly do.

jah elyse sayers: Okay. Thank you. Um, so to start, can you just tell us your full name?

Melody Capote: My name is Melody Capote. Uh, sometimes it's Moreno Capote. My maiden name is Moreno.

jah elyse sayers: And where are we today?

Melody Capote: We are at the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute.

jah elyse sayers: And what is your role here?

Melody Capote: I am the executive director.

jah elyse sayers: Um, so this is an oral history interview, so we're gonna kind of dip back into your early life, your childhood a little bit if t hat's okay. And you have all ability to say that you don't wanna answer a question or to restart an answer; all of that.

Melody Capote: Okay, no problem.

jah elyse sayers: Um, yeah. So can you tell me a little bit about where and when you were born?

Melody Capote: Ooh. Okay. I was born in, on February 4th, 1957, born to Puerto Rican parents, um, here in East Harlem.

And, um, my mother was raised in Puerto Rico. My dad was raised in New York, more of a New York Rican cool hip guy. And, um, they met at the Palladium, um, which was known for having like special dance nights around Mambo music, and that's how they met. So we were-- I was raised in East

Harlem, uh, originally. I understand when I was born, everybody kind of struggling and trying to make ends meet.

My first bed was actually the drawer of one of the dressers, um, that they had. And eventually the projects, the George Washington projects on 102nd Street and Second Avenue opened and that became kind of their first real apartment. And it's funny to hear about like NYCHA housing today, but back then it was like they had really moved on up.

They were in these brand new spanking new projects and on the east side of El [00:02:00] Barrio, east Harlem.

jah elyse sayers: Where were you? Do you know where, uh, your family was living before?

Melody Capote: Uh, George Washington Houses. Also 102nd Street in the tenement. Mm-hmm. Like they were, yeah. Right, right in the same area. So we were always kind of in that, 100th Street, 102nd Street, 104th Street between second and third avenues.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah. So did you have like other siblings or anyone else that was living in the house with you?

Melody Capote: I have a brother who is actually, I'm only 10 months older than he is, so we're considered Irish twins. My brother, I was born in February of '57. He was born in December of '57, just before the end of the year. So I have a brother.

Yeah.

jah elyse sayers: Can I ask what are your parents' names?

Melody Capote: Right. My parents' names my dad was Alberto Moreno and my mom was Laura. Uh, actually Laura Gago was her maiden name. Yeah. G-A-G-O. Okay. Mm-hmm.

jah elyse sayers: And when did your mom move to New York?

Melody Capote: My mother. The story as I hear it, my mother was born here and was born to my grandmother, who was very young.

I don't think she was of legal age, you know, she was maybe about 14 or 15 years old when she had my mom. And, uh, my grandfather was about three or four years older than she was. And when my mother was just under two years old, he decided that she shouldn't stay here with this single mom 'cause he didn't stay with my grandmother and took my mother to Puerto Rico to live with his sister.

And, um, that sister was married and also, to me, they were another set of grandparents. Um, they raised my mom from age two to 24, a And, um, again, just kind of hearing the stories of her growing up, and kind of was always reminding my mom that she was [00:04:00] black and she was going to be, um, clean and educated and well taken care of, and kind of represented the family. Um, all of the time, kind of, kind of hearing those stories. So my mother was very well educated. My mother got her masters. My mother learned to speak English fluently and, um, taught school. She was a teacher and says that she was raised very strict by this particular aunt who she eventually just called mom, was her mom, because she was gonna make sure my mother stayed on the straight and narrow. And at the age of 24, my mother decided she wanted to come to New York and meet her real mother. So somewhere along the lines of that. That was a big secret to my mom that there was this mother in New York.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: And when it was finally disclosed and my mother wanted to communicate with her, there was a lot of intercepting of letters. My mom never heard from her mother here when in reality, her mother was writing to her quite regularly, and the aunt that raised her would intercept the letters and not let her know of her mom.

So somewhere along the line, my mother finds this out and realizes that her mom is here and she really wants to get to know who her mother is. And at the age of 24, already working as a school teacher, buys her ticket to come to New York. And that aunt, without my mom's knowing, also bought a ticket and was going to be on that flight with her and turn her into her mother as a virgin, as an educated woman. You know, "I give her to you as this perfect young woman." And my mother says, you know, "I didn't know what to do. You know, I never imagined that she would be on the same flight coming to New York."

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: So, yeah, my mom came here and never [00:06:00] went back. I mean, we-- I went back eventually, but made her life here, met my father soon after that, and kind of the rest is history.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: Um. But coming to this country, even as an educator, as an educated woman and as an educator, she couldn't get a job as a teacher. You know? She just, it just didn't work out the way that she had hoped, having all of the education and all of the track record of education and teaching and such that she had.

jah elyse sayers: And can you tell me a little bit more about your father? You said he was cool.

Melody Capote: My dad was-- my dad was cool. Yeah. So my dad grew up in a time and in an area of East Harlem where he grew up with Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Charlie Palmieri, his brother; he remembers stories of the Palmieri's mom. She was a piano teacher in East Harlem. Um, oh my God, who else? Everybody who's, anybody who grew up in East Harlem, that was kind of his, his crowd. My father had a high school education, no college, and worked as an X-ray technician at various hospitals. Eventually he ended up in Mount Sinai Hospital here in East Harlem.

And, uh, you know, was slick, was cool, was handsome, was a dresser. All the things that my mother says, you know, "I met him and I just kind of swooned, oh my God!" This guy, you know, was like sweeping her off her feet and was very much into the music, which is how I learned a lot about music: Latin music, jazz music, classical music.

And my dad was into the blues; he just introduced us to everything. So my mom says, you know, she came kind of very prim and proper, and she says, "Your father just messed me all up, like, I met your dad, and it just was a whole 'nother life." 'Cause he exposed her to a lot of things that she just [00:08:00] really never went partying in Puerto Rico. She never went out. She says that even in Puerto Rico, they would have the Sunday afternoons where everyone would come out to the plaza of that particular town. And even guys that she liked or who wanted to talk to her, everybody was escorted. Right. You had to make sure that, you know, you did things the right way.

And she says, "I get here and it's like a whole 'nother, a whole 'nother world." And, um, so yeah, that was dad, a lot of fun. They were good together. They

divorced when I was about 13, 14 years old, because he was a skirt chaser. He was. That was him. But there was a real love there and the way they were together always worked, um, almost, 'til it didn't. And even in divorce, they remained really good friends and they would date and we would like laugh, like, what are y'all doing? It wasn't an easy divorce, obviously, but she says, "you know, your dad was always very good, a very good provider, good with you guys, good with me." But she just couldn't deal with, you know, his affairs and carrying on. But then, like I said, they just really stayed good friends afterwards, and they'd go on dates. I'm like, date?! Where are you going?! But they were able to maintain a fairly good relationship then. Then he kept studying in X-ray and was given these opportunities to learn other things in the, I guess x-ray technology field and have the opportunity to learn how to use a CAT scan machine before CAT scans were really, you know, known here.

And, um, was hired by the company Siemens, S-I-E-M-A-N-S, to train on these machines that they were cre that they were developing to train others in hospitals. So he was, he, he says [00:10:00] it, he goes, I got really lucky. Mm-hmm. Um, he was making very good money and there would be students from other parts of the world coming to Mount Sinai to learn to work this machine.

Mm-hmm. Yeah. And, uh, eventually there he met, we won't talk about wife number two, but there was a wife number three who was one of these students who traveled to New York to study and they married and he decided to move to Vene. She was from Venezuela. Mm-hmm. And he decided to move to Venezuela, which is where he lived much of his life before his death.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah. When did he move to Venezuela? How old were you?

Melody Capote: Ooh, I must have been, I was definitely, I remember in my first year of college going to visit him and I was at City College. I was a student at City College, and, uh, he moved to Venezuela. And my brother was very upset. My brother was upset behind the divorce.

My brother was upset with kind of all of my dad's behavior. Um, and they finally kind of figured that out. But I was always dad's girl. I was always wanting to make sure he was okay. Um, he had his issues with alcohol. And back then you didn't talk about someone being an alcoholic. He just kind of drank a lot.

Mm-hmm. Right. Usually his Friday paydays, that was the hangout, he would come in kind of really twisted. And I was the one that always, when he got

home, made sure that he was good. he'd come home with music, he'd come with vinyl albums that eventually would just get scratched and messed up: "Let's listen again!"

You know, he put it back on again. Now it's going like through and across the record. But, um, you know, he'd come home that way and my mom was just like, "I'm not dealing with him." My brother was like, "I'm not dealing with him." And I would. And he'd come home with, do you know what cuchifritos are? There are these -- it's called cuchifritos, and there are these stands. A few still exist here in East Harlem. And you could get pig ears cooked, you know, cooked in sauce and oxtail and, um, tongue and [00:12:00] blood pudding. For some folks, we call it morcilla. Um, I didn't know what I was eating. I knew that they tasted good, the sauces especially. Mm-hmm. But not understanding that was oreja was ear or lengua was tongue, but that I was eating real ear and tongue.

I knew the name, I knew the word, what it meant but I didn't realize that's what I was really eating. Okay.

When I realized that's what it was, I didn't wanna eat it at her again. But he would come home and kind of make his messes with the food or warm it up and put it on the stove and forget it was on the stove.

So I was always the one kind of making sure, you know, but he'd always come home with, I remember he's the first one I heard, Nina Simone. He wanted me to hear Nina Simone. And I had to, you know, really, really listen to the words I said to it again. And he put, you know, put the album again. Uh, um, introduced me to us.

'cause then, you know, the next day he played the music again. Now my brother's up and so on. All the Latin music I really learned from him. But things like people like Nina Simone, Richie Havens, little Jimmy Scott. The first time I heard the little Jimmy Scott, *The Source album, I couldn't believe it* was a man singing 'cause he had a very kind of feminine voice.

Um, José Feliciano just. All of these artists, um, jazz artists, rock star, the Rolling Stones I first heard with my dad. So those were kind of the, those are really good memories, although they were difficult times. And this is I guess really just before the divorce, 'cause he was just getting very sloppy and very careless about a lot of his, you know, his indiscretions and the drinking.

But he moved to Venezuela, and we stayed in touch. I visited. My first three trips to Venezuela, he paid for me to come down. I said I wanted to come, and I got to spend time with him, but the drinking was really an issue almost 'til the end of his life. Mm-hmm. You know, and no admission to that there was a problem, you know.

Um, so yeah, that's-- at [00:14:00] some point, gosh, I was already married. I remember I was married. I had my children. They were young. My kids must have been like seven. My oldest was seven. My daughter must have been about three or four. And uh, I don't remember what it was. There was a flooding that happened in Venezuela, but one of these kind of natural environmental disasters that was kind of recurring, and it affected Venezuela. I don't remember what year it was, but my kids were born in '92. Early 2000s, maybe. And he was no longer with wife number three in Venezuela. And he was missing. They couldn't find him. So they weren't sure if it was a result of the floods because people were really gone, really going missing, because of all of the kind of flooding and mudslides that were occurring.

And, you know, eventually he was found, and wife number three, her name is Renee, she was really, really good with him, patient with him. And I remember getting a call from her and her saying, you know, "I don't know if your dad has hepatitis. He's very yellow, his eyes are very yellow. I don't know if it's a result of the flooding, but you know, your dad, he doesn't wanna go to a doctor, he doesn't wanna go to the hospital."

But he eventually ended up in the hospital because what he had was pancreatic cancer. And we weren't so much in touch anymore, but I called him, he was in the hospital, she gave me the number. I called him and he hears my voice and he said, "Hey, boo," like nothing. Like nothing, because he called me "Boo boo."

Um, you know, "Hey boo, what's going on?" I says, "well, what are you--?"

Oh, and he-- they had done surgery and during the surgery he had a heart attack, so they closed him up and didn't really deal with either [00:16:00] thing.

jah elyse sayers: Hmm. Hmm.

Melody Capote: And that's why she was concerned. She's like, "you know, he's really sick and he had this heart attack and I think it's best for him to go to New York."

So he did. I say, "well, come." He says, "you sure?" I says, "come."

And between mom and his sister, my aunt, who's the founder of the center, Marta Vega, I just checked with them and said, "you know, he's really sick and we need to," so everybody was like, sure.

And he was just such a lovable guy, 'cause he just was. So, he came, stayed with his sister who owned the home that my mom was in.

I was already married and out until my mom was like, "he's not staying here. He will not stay here."

But, we all looked out for him. So my mornings were getting the kids ready for school. I always picked up my mom. She did that morning routine with me to take the kids to school, where now we're picking him up. And so this is, you know, we're all in the car. And between his joking and carrying on and my kids trying to figure out who he is, but I remember one time my daughter, who was like three or four years old, she asked him, she says, "where have you been?"

"Where have you been? How come mommy hasn't seen you or heard from you?" And that kind of put him in a space. That, and he was here with pancreatic cancer. He was being treated at Sloan Kettering where he had also worked for some time. And he's like, you know, this little girl reminds me so much of you.

It's crazy 'cause she was very articulate for being four. Like, she just called him on it.

So those are the memories, you know. And um, when we were, when we would come through the neighborhood or come into Manhattan, he would wanna come through East Harlem and go to spots where he figured he might meet a friend or two, stop at the cuchifritos place and pick up some of that as well.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: So, um, yeah, that's where we went back after the surgery. We wanted him to stay here a while, but he went back, I think 'behind a skirt' as well. And, he died in Venezuela. He died maybe a year [00:18:00] later, so, yeah.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah. Where were you living when he was here?

Melody Capote: I was already in the Bronx.

So, we were born and raised in East Harlem. I was here until about the age of 12. And we-- My grandfather [his father, Marta's father, and I had another aunt (she passed away, but today would be her birthday, September 3rd) and my grandfather] wanted to buy a home for his children. Mm-hmm. And my grandfather had a third grade education, came from Puerto Rico and works all the jobs one works with little education and landed a job working on the factory line for Ford Motor Company. He learned so much about cars that he grew within the company, so he did pretty well for himself, considering, and he would say it, you know, "considering that I didn't come here speaking English." "I didn't have an education." “I had an education up until age three” [He was] raised by a single mom, who raised him and two brothers. And his dream was always to have his children get out of El Barrio, leave El Barrio, and kind of, again, that "move on up," mentality. When we would go to the beach in Orchard Beach in the Bronx or City Island in the Bronx, and we would drive up, we would drive through the highway and he would always say like, you know, "I'd love to live here," and for him "I would love to have a house for you all here."

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: And sure enough, he bought a house for his three children. I must have been about 12 years old. And we moved from East Harlem to the Bronx into a brand new house. These were new developments. So he really felt such a sense of pride and accomplishment.

He was, at that stage of the game, had already left the Ford Motor Company, but [00:20:00] was working with a landlord at a tenement here in Harlem. And he had the free apartment as long as he was the fix-it man, the handyman. And he took care of the apartment, but he kept that apartment for quite some time, even though we were in the Bronx.

And then the deal was that the older sister, my aunt, again, whose birthday would be today, she had an extra bedroom. And so he would come on weekends and spend the weekends with us, and he had like his bedroom in her house. But he felt so-- and at that point my grandmother had already, his wife, my grandmother had already passed. It was just him. But you couldn't, you couldn't tell him anything, you know, he really was able to, he put the down payment on the house for his children. Yeah. And just felt very, very accomplished. Yeah.

jah elyse sayers: It's huge.

Melody Capote: Mm-hmm.

jah elyse sayers: Was your grandmother also coming from Puerto Rico?

Melody Capote: My grandmother came from Puerto Rico.

They met here and she came as a licensed nurse.

jah elyse sayers: Hmm.

Melody Capote: So, again, just a family of kind of people who kind of really tried to be as accomplished and as educated as possible. But when she came here, she could not get a job as a nurse. Um, was not fluent in English, so that was one strike. And, uh, did kind of, she was the nurse for the neighborhood.

So people who were ill or whose children's were ill, she was able to kind of do that work to keep her connected in that field. But when she met my grandfather, [he said] "no wife of mine is going to work."

jah elyse sayers: I see.

Melody Capote: So she was, when they met, she was doing some factory work, which my understanding is she wasn't happy doing And um, you know, he enters the picture and says, "I don't want you to work."

Mm-hmm. So they lived in the tenement on 102nd Street between 1st and 2nd Avenues Um, you know, as a kid you don't know what's poor or not poor, you know, we were [00:22:00] always in their house. My brother and I, and then the aunt (Marta's sister) had twin girls, and we are six months apart.

So the four of us were always together. Every Friday we were at my grandparents' house. He was a big fisherman. So he would go fishing and bring fish and I remember all that: the cleaning of the fish and the cooking of the fish. And, um, none of the kids-- except for me, 'cause I ate everything-- none of the kids like fish. I always ate the fish.

But that's where his three children would gather every Friday after work: my father, his two daughters, their spouses, my mom and the kids. That was very much the routine. But my grandmother was that the one who coordinated all of that.

Which is the grandmother role, at least back then. She made sure everybody was, everything was in order, everybody was fed. The fish she brought in was clean, cooked, served.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: They were together until I was six years old, when she passed away.

jah elyse sayers: Okay. Young. Yeah.

Melody Capote: I have a funny story about that grandmother. She apparently knew that she had heart trouble, but as children, we didn't know that she was sick. We weren't supposed to know that she was sick. So she would get ready to go to the doctor and we had to help her put a girdle on. We had to help her-- the whole thing was the girdle.

And she would tell us that her boyfriend was President John Kennedy. She loved John Kennedy. We had a photo of John Kennedy up in her house. Right. She loved John Kennedy. So instead of saying she was going to the doctor, she would tell us she had a date with President Kennedy.

jah elyse sayers: Okay.

Melody Capote: And she would say, "shh, don't say anything, 'cause your grandfather can't know that I'm the president's girlfriend." So that was like a big secret for us, but we would never see her dressed up enough. She was always kind of in the housecoat, the [00:24:00] mumus. Right. So when she dressed up to, and back then when you went to the doctor, you dressed up.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: So she would get all cute and all pretty and we would be like, so just so fascinated at how pretty she looked. 'cause she was going to go see the president. Just before she passed, President Kennedy gets killed. Uh, and we are devastated because mama's boyfriend, you know? And so that was when my grandmother, they all explained that it was just a joke and it wasn't for real.

But we as children, and I remember being in school when we heard about his, his assassination and back then they would roll in these big television sets into the class when we were in Catholic school.

jah elyse sayers: Okay.

Melody Capote: And they rolled in the TV and the teacher, the nun, is crying. Everybody's crying. And we're, I was in first grade with my brother and then.

The following year I was skipped to third grade, but I was in first grade with my brother, and the twins were a year ahead of us. My twin cousins. So when we hear the news, we're all like, "oh my god, you know, grandma's boyfriend died."

So, um, that was always, that's always a story still when we tell it, it's just like, when you just don't know.

And she must have died maybe six months after that. She had a heart attack and died. But we were young. We were about six years old when that happened.

jah elyse sayers: Where were you all in school together?

Melody Capote: The school here was called St. Lucy's Catholic School on 104th Street. Between first and second Avenues.

I don't know if it's still there. I think it is. I don't know if it's still a school. I think the church is still there. But, um, we did our communion there, our confirmation there. And, um, when I had to pick a name because they have you pick a name when you're going through, I think it's confirmation. And, um, that was the year that we learned I needed glasses and [00:26:00] I had as stigmatism in my eye.

And my mother didn't really know what all that meant. It just sounded bad. And so I was named Lucy after the school, but St. Lucy was the one for vision.

jah elyse sayers: Okay.

Melody Capote: Or said something to do with the blessing of the eyes or your vision. So she gave me that name. So people will ask, what's your middle name? I'm not really given a middle name.

But when I was little, she'd always say, "it's Lucy. It's Lucy." And I'm like, is it though? We never really use it. But we went to St. Lucy School for about four years : first through fourth grade. Then when we moved to the Bronx, I was already, I had a lot of questions about church when we were here.

I didn't understand telling your confessions to a priest and him saying, "say a few prayers and now you're good and you can receive communion on Sunday." Like, there were things about it I didn't understand. I didn't understand original sin. I didn't understand it. You're born with original sin. I couldn't understand the baby being born with original with sin. Um, so I'm still kind of young.

jah elyse sayers: This is like 8, 9, 10 years old?

Melody Capote: I'm like, yeah, about nine years old, and it wasn't making sense to me. The nuns were mean. The nuns were mean and they were tough. And I remember in first grade, um, the nun we had, I'll never forget her name, sister Leticia.

And she was an old woman and my brother got falsely accused of something that happened in the classroom, and she hit him across the face with a ruler. My brother had chunky, a little full face. He was a chubby kid. And the welt that forms-- and, uh, I went for her. I went for her because I knew he [00:28:00] hadn't done it.

And the way she just, she was just so angry and so mean, and didn't want to hear anything. And we used to go home for lunch with this aunt, the aunt with the twin girls. And they lived right around the corner from the school. We never were allowed to cross streets or any of that. So she picked us up, she sees my brother–and he was the only boy with three girls, so he was spoiled–and she immediately called my mother at work and said, "you have to come." And this aunt was tough. She was always like a tough cookie. That was always her persona.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: And she says, "and if you don't come, I'm going in, I'm kicking this nun's ass. I mean, you've gotta see your son." So my mom came, and my mother was always kind of very proper and everybody showed up at school, and this was just not happening. This was unacceptable. And my mother said, "from this day forward, no one is allowed to touch my children. I don't hit my children."

But that soured me too. That just soured me. And then the following year I was skipped to third grade. He went on to second. But now I'm in third grade with my two cousins.

With the twins. And we happened to first be, you know, they had these classes: 1-1 or 3-1, 3-2 , you know? Yeah. We were all in 3-1 together. And the next classroom was my brother's. So we were always checking on him. My brother then-- he got cute and, you know, when he got older, but then he was so baby, like he was always kind of the baby.

So the three girls, we were always checking on him and making sure he was okay and so on. But we knew-- I knew then something's not right.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah.

Melody Capote: Something was just not right. And then that third grade nun that we had-- who was very young with the extreme from first grade-- [00:30:00] one year, does a school trip and takes us to Palisades amusement park.

Okay. All our other trips were like these boring little trips. Right. She decides a trip to park, we go on the trip and my mother-- we weren't going, if my mother and my aunt weren't going.

jah elyse sayers: Uhhuh. Yes.

Melody Capote: Um, my mother excuses my brother from school so that he can go with us. And this sister was named Sister Georgianne.

She had flaming red hair that always used to come out of that habit. And she was always tucking it back in 'cause they're not supposed to show their hair. And I wonder about her, I wonder what happened with Sister Georgianne 'cause she was young. She was really, really very nice. And, again, I was trying to figure out like, 'cause all the other nuns around us were mean, and she was just so, she was young and it was like, why? As you get older you wonder, why'd she choose this? You know?

And uh, I remember we're getting ready to leave and my aunt is looking for one of the twins-- who was tough. She was a tough cookie. Her name is 'Cina. We called her 'Cina and we're looking for her and we're looking for her. My mother looks up onto the rollercoaster and she says, look, she's on the rollercoaster with Sister Georgianne and the veil is flying.

And so again, that kind of impressed me because I'm what, you know, she's doing what everybody else, what we couldn't do. We were all too small, but those are the things that kind of stayed in my head. So when we moved to the Bronx and my mother's getting us ready to now put us in Catholic school, in the Bronx, I start asking a lot of questions about, and I wanna go to public school with all my friends, who live on the block.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: But I just had these questions and I, my question was around sin. Around, you know, a [00:32:00] priest, really the guys that can make everything all better. And if so, why isn't everything just all better?

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: Um, yeah. A few questions. So they decided, the two moms, my mom and the twin's moms decided, well, maybe not. Let's try public school and see. And we live in a better neighborhood now, right? And so let's try public school. And so we didn't go to Catholic school, we landed up in public school, and every school we went to was like a brand new school. So it really was a really good experience coming into the public school system.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah. Was there just a lot of new development happening around where your house was?

Melody Capote: Well, we came to our home, we didn't even have sidewalks.

jah elyse sayers: Okay.

Melody Capote: They hadn't even laid, you know, cement for sidewalks yet. So it felt very, very much like brand new. And we find, or remember we as kids on the block and it was a lot of black and Latino families buying kind of their first homes and, um, making friends immediately.

And a lot of people from East Harlem or from Harlem. So it felt familial, everybody became these extended families quickly.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: Quickly. And, um, just before we were beginning to move in, and then the sidewalks were laid out and it felt very much like what you saw on tv.

You know, the "Leave it to Beaver"s on TV or you know, these kind of famillies you saw on tv. 'cause it was like, we had a home, ours was a multifamily home, and we were the three families living in one, but it was a home nonetheless. We had a backyard, we had a front yard. We had neighbors still at the age of 12 and 13.

We had to ask permission to cross the street. And the street we were in was then kind of a dead end street. We were it. So that was the only cars coming onto the

block with people who lived there. [00:34:00] But for our safety, we had to just get permission across the street. But you could quickly see how folks were moving in, just the building of community and, um, even that notion of wanting, I remember as a kid, again, I'm 12, 13 years old. I remember the conversations among the men and the women about this being such a good move, a better move: better for our kids, better for our kids, better for our kids. So even the going to school was like, we'd all meet up and we were like a little gang going to school because the whole block would go together.

And even along the way, pick up friends who lived in the housing projects, two blocks away and lived in a house across the street. So it, it was a really nice experience. It was a really nice experience. But we still had the connection here because there were family here, there were friends here, there was food here.

La Marqueta on 116th Street, we, they still came to shop at 116th Street, Marqueta. So there was always that connection to here.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah. How did you make that trip? Was it on the train or on the train or in a car?

Melody Capote: My parents got a car, well, they had a car where we lived here. So, the twin's father, there was always a car 'cause when we would do the beach ,City Island, there were cars. We had at least two cars. But we would go either way because even on the train, it was like to 116th,, my mother used to work at a bank on 116th Street, Banco de Ponce it was called then, and she worked some Saturdays.

So we would come to work or come in with her, go up to park. Well, she was right off of Lexington. We'd go to Park, do the shopping, jump on the train, and go home. But we always had a car as well, so as she learned to drive. I really don't [00:36:00] remember, but there was a lot of that. It was either the train or the car and it was fairly easy to get to and from.

jah elyse sayers: So Saturdays you were coming here. Were there other, like, how often were you making the trip from Bronx to East Harlem?

Melody Capote: I would say we were coming at every couple of, maybe every two weeks, maybe every three weeks. Then of course, they got very used to finding things up where we were. You started finding the plantains and the lau and the catfish and the beans. So it, there wasn't that need, right, to come. And so of course we were doing it very often when we lived here and when we lived with my grandmother.

When my grandmother was alive, we would trek quite a bit to and from La Marqueta, to and from the Botanica.

jah elyse sayers: Which Botanica?

Melody Capote: There was a big one on 110th & Lexington, called Botanica Chango..

jah elyse sayers: Uhhuh.

Melody Capote: Um, I don't fully remember the others. And then I was old enough to remember when we would do the Park Avenue Marqueta run, there was the big, there's a big, it's still there, Botanica Ochun, right? On Park Avenue and 115th Street.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah.

Melody Capote: So I don't know that it still even had that name.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: But I remember that it wasn't, we didn't go to just one botanica, but whatever they needed-- everything from Florida water, which now you can get anywhere, but you could only get it there then; to incense and the charcoal for the incense, and then special waters and perfumes for certain things.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: So that was always on an as-needed basis. Because I know that Marta, my aunt. recalls her grandmother, who would've been my great-grandmother, who we never met, lived in the same tenement, and she had an [00:38:00] altar in her home.

And every Saturday, she would play religious music or sacred music and burn incense and buy the flowers. So she says, "My own mother didn't do that," meaning my grandmother didn't do that, "but my mother's mother did." So Marta speaks about that in her book as how as a child she would go and want to help change the glasses of water that you put in an altar.

Or, "please let me strike a match so I can light the thing, the incense,or whatever." So I know in our family, that was kind of a thing.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: And it was so natural that I can't even say to you it was a special thing or it only happened on the Saturday, or it only happened when there was an emergency.

Clearly when there was something to deal with, you knew you needed a special bath or they were doing something extra special, but it was so ingrained, so much a part of our family life that it wasn't something I could say to you that there was a moment, right? i remember the-- my brother was always scared. Again, he was a punk. Um, I remember we'd go into those stores and he'd see like the statues of Jesus with the open sores or St. Lazarus on the crutches. And you'd see what, you'd see him with the sores. And so all that would scare my brother. He's like, "why are we in here? I don't wanna be here." But it was the decor of the store. It wasn't that we were going in necessarily to do anything with those statues or saints, at least for me. I don't remember that, but it was part of what we did. It was just part of what we did.

jah elyse sayers: What was it like to be coming from the Catholic school and having your questions about original sin and, you know, discipline and then having this other kind of, you going to the botanica and having this other potentially other spiritual tradition also present, like how were you holding those worlds?

Melody Capote: I think that [00:40:00] for the age, I don't know that I would've been able to, to understand it if I wasn't already 12 and 13 years old, right. Because on my mother's side of the family, the aunt that raised her with her husband, they were spiritists.

What is it uhh Scientologists. And they were also into Scientology. I think that's the word. I think that's what she said. So there was, there was kind of this, this way of describing what they were into that had like a name that was acceptable. Okay. Versus saying, "I'm a medium." Or, "I'm a spiritist." And I learned this when I was older. I didn't know this then. But what I do know is that I always heard the spiritism was something that was part of our family. She herself saying that as a child when she would see them working in the home, what they call the white table, or mesas, which are your working spirit.

And she says, you know, the children weren't allowed, but she said, I'd always peek.

You know, we were told to stay in a room. All the kids came and watched from the stairs. So she says, you know, she witnessed possession. She saw people getting possessed. She, recalls time and again, folks coming back and thanking the man who was married to my aunt. His name was Francisco. They called him Paco. He was a Black Puerto Rican man, married to this light skinned woman.

That's got its own story, right? Yeah. Because she's carrying on with my mom about, you know, you're Black and we have to make sure that you're clean and you're pretty and you're educated.

So was he.

But it was like, but he's special. 'cause this would come out of her mouth. Yeah. So my mom says, as she got older, she says that that racist attitude [00:42:00] existed, but we didn't, it wasn't callback, because he worked for the FBI.

jah elyse sayers: Oh, was he coming from the U.S.?

Melody Capote: I'm not sure what the story was there.

Yeah. Or he worked, he, at one point I heard he worked for the FBI, but he was always involved in law enforcement. But he was not a policeman, so I never saw him in uniform. I don't know him. And, and my mom says they moved a lot through Puerto Rico for that reason, they moved to different towns because of his work in law, but I really don't know the full story. But I did hear at one point he was involved somehow with the FBI or something to do with, you know, government law. It's all government law, but you know what I mean? But he was the spiritist.

jah elyse sayers: Okay.

Melody Capote: He was the spiritist, so my mom remembers people coming back to thank him because they're better or they're cured, or the situation was rectified. So he was the one really that folks recognized as, but she says, but he was very demure, very quiet about it. It wasn't something that people were knocking down our doors about. But again, whether it was Scientology. I wanna say it was Scientology that the word my mom used, but whether or not they were actual science, spiritist, you know, connecting it, I don't know. I don't know enough about that.

But, she does say these were regular sessions. There were regular gatherings, the candle burning, the water, the Florida water, the incense burning, possessions. I witnessed possession. So already at 13, 14, I'm inquiring, I'm interested and not interested necessarily in the [00:44:00] religion, but I'm open to it.

And so, my high school years, I am given like a little bit more freedom. I'm allowed to take the train to go shopping with two or three of my best friends. We were always in the village, always shopping in the village, going thrifting in the village.

And um, I remember going in for a palm reading. I remember going another time for tarot card reading. So it was always something that kind of interested me and none of it ever spooked me. So nothing about what they would say or do scared me. So more and more that was something that just kind of interested me.

So we still did the church on Sundays, maybe not every Sunday, but you know, we still went to church.

jah elyse sayers: And where were you going to church?

Melody Capote: We did go to St. Luke when we were in school here. You had to go every Sunday 'cause there was an envelope dated that you made it to church that Sunday, you had to put your donation in.

But once we moved to the Bronx, and that too, it kind of became a thing to do on Sunday. So we would go, all our friends would go to church and we are usually getting in trouble 'cause we're talking and we're carrying on, you know. But then even my mom would say, you know, let's go to church.

And it wasn't an every- Sunday thing, but she'd have like these days of "let's go to church." We would do midnight mass, not every year, and then she would tell us stories about midnight mass in Puerto Rico and how important that we always celebrate Christmas Day in the islands. It's usually Christmas Eve. That's when the kids open their gifts, and we have like January 6th, the Three Kings Day, and I would pick grass and put it in a box and put it in. So we're like, "you did what?" You know, because we didn't know any of this. So she really shared [00:46:00] a lot of that with us.

jah elyse sayers: Did you end up also doing some of those practices?

Melody Capote: Yes. So, and I remember us doing it or trying to do it when we lived here in East Harlem. There was very little grass to find, and then it was winter, so whatever grass you did find, you know, that it was dried up in front of the buildings or whatever.

But, um, she always found ways of adapting it. So she'd buy the Easter grass. Okay, those bags of Easter grass. At Christmas, she's always keep one of the special gifts we wanted or the other thing we didn't get on Christmas day. We got it on the Three Kings Day on the sixth. Because usually there wasn't as many gifts as on Christmas Day.

She'd give us, like, whatever on Christmas and she'd keep a thing and then make sure we got it on the sixth of January. Of course we quickly grew that by the time we get up to the Bronx, we're old enough to know that there's no Santa, there's no three kings. But she kept the tradition going.

So she'd always make sure that we got something on the sixth, but Mom, she was another one real big on music. She introduced me not only to kind of the traditional music from Puerto Rico, but 'cause my dad was big on like the Mambo music, Cuban music, and she had a lot of that too.

But she really introduced me to a lot of the more typical music and artists from the island. And then my mother was real big on artists like Nancy Wilson, Shirley Bassey, Ella Fitzgerald. So my very first record player , she gave me a bunch of 45s. It was on Christmas and the 45s were Dionne Warwick.

Barbra Streisand, "Happy Days Are [00:48:00] Here Again", that was the one. Johnny Mathis! My mom! Shirley Bassey! And this was the American music that I remember her introducing me to, which was mostly jazz or that style of music. So between the two of them, yeah, music was big in our home for sure. And, they really kind of gave us the palette. You know, we really were introduced to a lot of different artists and musical styles. And then dancing Mambo, which now everybody calls salsa. Um, they danced really well together, my parents. And my father, he used to say, "every move a picture."

And he would stop and style and he would do something. "You see the picture, every move a picture." And those were his words. Every move a picture. I'm still friends with an old boyfriend from when I was maybe 14 years old, who knew my dad. And we reconnected maybe four or five years ago.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: And my father's name was Moreno, but everybody used to call him Mo. My friend says, I remember Mo would be playing ball. He would swing and "Every move a picture!" He was a real good handball player and paddle ball player: "Every move a picture!" So I look at him and I'm like, "you remember that?"

He goes, Mel, every move was a picture, every time he moves, he had to, you know, so whether it was dancing, playing ball, you know, whatever. If he was-- my father had gotten very, very heavy, very heavy. And, uh, once we moved to the Bronx, lost a lot of weight and got into this kick of wearing like Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Cardin, and this was the thing. And he was fly. He, you couldn't get more fly and he'd dress up and blah, blah, blah and whatever. And he would say "Every move a picture," however he [00:50:00] knotted his tie. However he kind of moved, we're like, okay, whatever. But this guy remembered that my dad would say, you know, "every move a picture."

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: So when, um, teaching me to dance salsa or mambo, he would put me on his feet. He said, "stand on my feet" since I was little.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: And that is how I learned to understand clave, which is the beat. Yes. That is <claps>; that's clave. It is how I learned to lead, to be led as a dancer, 'cause you're led by the male.

These dips and ways of moving, I learned dancing with my dad. And the older I got, he and I -- I studied dance, that's another one. I studied dance for many years. Especially when I got older and in high school and in college. But when we lived in East Harlem, this is another good story.

We lived in East Harlem and there was a young man named Miguel Godreau. Okay, this is good. This is good. Miguel Godreau, he studied, he studied ballet. He was a dancer. He studied ballet. He was a gay man.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: Dark-skinned, not Black, but kind of dark-skinned Puerto Rican. And he lived on my grandmother's street.

And again, we were always at my grandmother's house. I don't know what my grandmother did that she worked off some barter with him that she would feed him if he taught me and my two cousins to dance ballet. And he did, Miguel was in our grandmother's house two or three days a week, and we learned ballet.

jah elyse sayers: And this is when you were like around--?

Melody Capote: I'm six, seven years old. My Aunt Marta buys us all tutus. We're not, we're not really ready for tutu, [00:52:00] but instead of a leotard, she buys us tutus. So he is coming to the home two or three times a week to teach us and eating. And my grandmother is like feeding this brother.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: I don't know if he lived alone. He was studying, so probably struggling and in the arts and all that, right? The macho men in the street, including my dad, you know, "Look at this guy," "Look at this fruity guy." "Look at this." Because that was a thing, right? The fruity guy. We go to see his first performance, the only performance I ever saw him do, and we go as a family to see Miguel dance.

Blew it out of the park. You hear me? Blew it out of the park! And I remember my dad, 'cause I was, I fell in love with dance at that moment. It was like, that's what I want to do. Like watching him. Watching him. We'd studied, you know, he's teaching us first position, second position.

But we are not doing the leaps and plies and lifting. And uh, I remember my dad being so freaking impressed. Not a big deal. We don't talk about it again. And the next time he sees he's in the street-- we're not allowed in the street at this age, we're in the balcony. <laughs> in the balcony, the fire escape!

We're on the fire escape, and I remember Miguel is coming to my grandmother's house and the guys are in front playing dominoes or whatever, and someone's making like a comment. And my dad saying, "Oh no!" "Oh no!" "You-," in his words, "You've gotta see this fucking guy dance. He's an athlete. He's [00:54:00] an athlete!" But I mean, "every move a picture!" you know, getting up and just kind of like-- look at my hair stand. He was, and I remember hearing him, and then-- we didn't know when they were calling him fruity that it was a bad, we didn't know at that age what it was, but to see my father take that position after being the ringleader of all this crap.

So t

hat stayed with me.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah.

Melody Capote: And I don't know what happens after that. You know, we move, whatever. So we don't really keep that relationship with Miguel. Many moons later, many, I'm an adult woman already working at the Center. I meet Judith Jameson from the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. And I also hear the story, and I'm not sure how this goes, that she married or had a partner, because I'm not, I don't dance-- a partner named Miguel Godreau. I never got to meet him again. I didn't know that. But how many Miguel Godreaus? It had to be him. Right? If you said "Miguel Rodriguez" and then we maybe wonder where, but Miguel Godreau?! And then we see a photo of him and I'm like, "that's him. Yeah, that's him." So for me, that was full circle, and this is after Ailey passes away so Judith is now the head of the company. So I'm not sure where Miguel fit. And again, knowing that he was a gay man, so I don't know that they really married or it was just like her partner, partner in life, who knows? Or partner as a dancer. But when I remember hearing that and it was just like all those, that imagery in my head.

All the imagery was like of a movie. Yeah. And it was him. I see the picture. And then he passed away. He did pass away just before Judith [00:56:00] did and never kind of had-- I don't know that he had a big name in the dance world 'cause that did not become my world. But certainly, you know, they named him and he was part of the Ailey or Judith Jamison experience.

So that was my introduction to dance. And I studied dance for many, many years because of Miguel Godreau and I never could afford professional training. So I was always taking free classes here, free classes there. I was a dance major in college, but then soon dropped it because I discovered Black history and Latino history.

jah elyse sayers: I wanted to ask you a little bit. I'm just going to restart the video real quick.

Melody Capote: Yep. Yep.

If I'm going too long tell me.

jah elyse sayers: I would never.

Melody Capote: Or if it's off topic.

jah elyse sayers: Ok, back on. I wanted to ask you a little bit more about dance. 'cause I remember when we talked on the phone or on Zoom, and you were telling me about when you learned that Katherine Dunham was Black, and you were saying that that was not part of your dance education.

And so that always has made me want to hear more about your dance education. And you were just saying a little bit that, you know, like you couldn't afford some of the teachers in the schools,but then you did study briefly in college. So can you kind of walk me through?

Melody Capote: Yeah.

I, good fortune, I become really good friends with a gentleman named Larry Maldonado and Larry-- Gay man -- I went to school with his brother Bobby in high school. We were really good friends. His older brother was significantly older, ran the Kipps Bay Boys and Girls Club in the Bronx as well, but I knew Bobby. I knew Harold. I meet Larry, and it's like instant, like *everything*. We loved each other. He was a dancer. And we start taking, every time he knew of a class or knew of something, he would invite me to take the classes. And for two summers at City College, we were in a summer dance workshop thingy.

And it was led by a woman, I don't remember her [00:58:00] first name, her last name was Scott. Very light-skinned black woman. And, uh. We are taking lessons with her and she takes some of us, not the full-- but takes some of us to Broadway. And she was in the company, the dance team of *Purlie*, the play *Purlie*.

Okay. And P-U-R-L-I-E. And it's my first Broadway play and it's a musical. And I'm seeing dance all around me. I'm losing my mind. And I'm with Larry. And Larry was really just dance was-- he was dance. He was dance. And so Ms. Scott, I remember would always invite us or include us in things that, like the rest of the group most, a lot of kind of white kids in the class, but she always took care of us in that way.

jah elyse sayers: And this is when you were a student at City College?

Melody Capote: I'm not a student. I'm still in high school. Okay. I'm still in high school. So this was like a summer program. We did it for two summers, for sure. I don't think I did a third summer, but we had two summers for sure with her. We went to see *Purlie*, we went to see *Oklahoma*, which I didn't like then.

And we went to see a show on Broadway with Pearl Bailey, Black woman, singer, <inaudible>. Larry's now about two years older than me and was at the High School of Performing Arts. And I'm in school in the Bronx. And before going to high school in the Bronx, I wanna go to the High School of Performing Arts.

And my dad says no way. That's when it was in Times Square. And that's when Times Square was just a real kind of mess. And he's like, no way. And I'm like, way we we're gonna do this. And I submit for the, to, to the, for the audition, do my own choreography. 'cause I'd not been [01:00:00] trained, but right by, I got bits and pieces of everything.

And I remember I did it to, um, my audition was to Midnight Cowboy the, the movie and the theme of the movie. And, uh, my mom takes me, she says, I don't know. I, I'll take you, but your dad already said you're not going. I said, no, because if I get in, he's gonna let me go and blah, blah, blah. And the day of my audition, I'm sick with a fever, but my mom takes me to my audition on the train.

It was freezing. It must been like January, February. I go, I try out, I'm the shortest one, the littlest one in the group. And my number was H one. I'll never forget. And everything they asked us to do as far as you know, flora, I could, I did. And then we do the audition. Couple weeks later, we get the letter.

I'm accepted. Yeah. So I'm, I'm real excited. And my mom comes from, right. I'm like, fuck yes. And she and I put it on the refrigerator, which is where all the good news went in my house. Mm-hmm. Report, cards, certificate, everything went on the refrigerator when dad sees it, you know, and my dad came home and was very excited and very happy.

But he says, you are not going to school on 42nd Street. And of course, this is my trek every day by myself 'cause they have to go to work. So I don't, I get accepted, I don't go.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: So now I'm doing whatever Larry's telling me to do, to do on summers we're doing. But, um, fast forward college, I'm 17, I applied to Lehman College City.

It's a city college, not far, far from my home, but not far from, it's the Bronx. So I'm, I'm home, I'm close, and I get into the dance program and, um, this is 1974

and, uh, I'm in a class of very trained dancers, primarily white girls. Slim, no boobs, no [01:02:00] ass long necks. No curly hair. Right. Just kind of pulled back in buns.

And here I come with a little curly afro, big boobs, big butt. And again, just kind of doing everything that needs, but they were hard on me. Like the, the, the teachers were hard on me. Even the other students were hard on me. And then Lehman was still very white. Really. The, the school's population was still very white.

And, uh, we take, we learned the Graham technique of modern dance. And we learned the Dunham technique of dance. No one ever said to me that Catherine Dunham was black. So while the moves looked different and there was an ease about how I could move with the Dunham technique versus the Graham technique, it was never said to me that she was a Black woman.

jah elyse sayers: And that ease is something that you just felt on your own, like without

Melody Capote: finding out that Dunham was black?

jah elyse sayers: No, I'm saying the, the ease that you felt.

Melody Capote: The ease, yeah. It just kind of felt I was, it was easy, I dunno, somehow just easier to move under the Dunham technique. And, um, it had gotten so in that year that.

I had an instructor who had me ace bandage my boobs. I was constantly being knocked on my butt, like, tuck it in, tuck it in, and like I can't tuck it in anymore. It is what it is. <Brief pause> So yeah, that was a, that was a tough first year. It was my first year and I wanted to dance so badly. So I'm doing the whole ace bandage thing and I'm feeling. To say that I understood what body shaming was. I didn’t.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: I just wanted to dance and fit in with the rest of the girls.

Even the hair thing, like pulling my hair back. I could get to school with my hair pulled back, but once I started sweating Right, all the curls would pop out, Uhhuh. So I remember going home one day [01:04:00] and um, from class, it was just one of those days, I guess, and I came in and I was just like, oh.

And know, carrying on. And my mom and Marta were in the kitchen and I, to get to my room, I had to go through the kitchen and I was just like, you know, ugh. You know, life sucked and. Um, I make mention about the, yeah. My boobs hurt. I make some comment and my mom's said, what are you talking about? And I says, yeah, because you don't wanna go to class and as a dance student you're like in leotards all day.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah.

Melody Capote: If you had an English class or whatever, you are usually showing up at least then with your leotard and tights and maybe, you know, pair a skirt or something over because after that you were back in dance class so you to save some time. So, um, I would, I would dare say, or was probably kind of wrapped up like this all day.

To be in and out of classes. And I make mention of this in my house. My mother calls me back into the kitchen and says, what did you just say? They have you doing what? And I explained the whole bandage thing. So it's her and Marta. Mm-hmm. Founder of the center. Right. And, uh, they go in. Absolutely not unacceptable.

No one is supposed to tell you that your body type doesn't you. And I guess I got this lecture that felt like I was being scolded

jah elyse sayers: Uhhuh,

Melody Capote: which what they, what really doing was just reacting to the fact that I had been asked to even do that. And um, my mother dared me to. Let them do that to me again. Like, no more bandages.

You show up. Like you show up. They're not asking that of anybody else. So this whole thing, and, um, that was it. I didn't do that again.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: But already the experience in the program was one that had me feeling, I wasn't feeling joyful about being, I was trying so hard to fit in and so hard to do what they wanted me to do, but, [01:06:00] um, it, it just, it just didn't feel right for me.

That may, early May, I am in the middle of class and were doing leaps or something, and I fell out. I had actually been complaining a lot about pain in my

stomach for a few months. Mm-hmm. And, um, long story short, I had gallstones.

jah elyse sayers: Okay.

Melody Capote: And in one of the classes I passed out and I'm getting rushed to the hospital and I had something like 20 gallstones and a particular instructor, because I didn't finish the semester, as opposed to kind of, um, giving me whatever the, what incomplete

jah elyse sayers: mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: Failed me, failed me for like four or five classes kind of failing. So, so my mother. Didn't want me to know that they had failed me. I guess it came in the mail or whatever. When it finally comes to, I'm recovered and I'm well and I'm home and I find out that, um, I failed these classes by no fault of I, I failed 'cause I didn't take the final.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah. '

Melody Capote: cause I couldn't take the final and I decided to transfer to CCNY. Mm-hmm. And I, I would take the train to 125th Street.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: Jump on the 100 or the 1 0 1 bus that would leave me right in front of City College. So my mom's, you're traveling alone. I don't want you in Harlem by yourself. I don't want you on the train by yourself.

I don't wanna go by yourself. And I was like, this is what we're doing. And I come into the first class African it, I'm not sure what the class itself was, but it was a dance class. And I come into an auditorium type setting and I'm in the back of the auditorium and I'm looking at the program card and I'm like, it's not a dance studio.

Right. And I'm like, am I in the right place? You know, trying to figure it out. And the instructor who I didn't know then was the instructor, Jesse. And I always forget his last name, Jesse. A black man comes up behind me and he says, you know, can I help you? So I'm trying to [01:08:00] figure out, is this this such and such class?

He says, that's the class. I'm the instructor. Get your ass up on that stage. Were his words and looking. And it was a stage we were in an auditorium and behind a bunch of seats. But I remember, Jah, Uhhuh. Looking at the, when I came in and looking and trying to figure out, is this a dance class? There are big women, small women, black women, brown women, tall women, head wraps, gay legs.

Gay legs. Like, that's why I couldn't figure then I didn't leotard necessarily and it was a jazz class. And, um, my whole world changed. My whole world changed because now I knew I fit, I fit in. Um, there were after that was the first session, so whatever he required of us as far as how to dress or whatever for, I don't even remember, but it was like, oh my God.

Changed. But then they had also officially, um, established a black and Latino studies. I don't even think it was called Latinos. It was black and Hispanic studies program at City College.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: And this class was under that. It was part of the black studies. Even though it was a dance class, you could get a credit for dance or a credit for black history.

And I'm like, black history. And now Marta had already started the center. My mom is working at the center. A lot of the work is being done from home in her basement apartment. And I'm being asked to type and do things and make some money while. So all of this is happening at the same time. Black dance, black history, the Caribbean Cultural Center.

What? Mm-hmm. It wasn't the Caribbean Cultural Center then. It was our long legal name, visual Arts Research and Resource Center relating to the Caribbean, VARRCC is what they called it then. [01:10:00] And all these things start happening at the same time. So I'm studying dance, I go, I take one or two Black history classes.

I meet Leonard Jeffries, who was then the director of the program, professor Scoby. And up until she just passed away about two years ago, professor Samad Mathias, who had been in the college up until the other day. And she remained my friend for many, many, for, for the rest of my life. All my big, um, milestones.

Getting married, having children initiating as in, in the Orisha tradition. She was there for all of it. She was there for all of it. But that's how then I come to this

work. It's through the Black Studies Department meeting people who I'm coming back to Marta and saying, this guy is really, you know, really knows his stuff.

Or I'm, I, I learned about blah, blah, blah, blah. She'd already heard about Leonard Jeffries, but she didn't know Samad. And so I become kind of this

jah elyse sayers: yes

Melody Capote: person who's connecting her to people as well, and connecting them to the birthing of this organization. Mm-hmm. So that's how I come to this work. Yeah.

jah elyse sayers: What was, can you tell me a little bit about the relationship between your aunt and your mother? Sure. You work yourself into there too.

Melody Capote: Yeah. Uh, my mother's claim to fame in this relationship was that she was Marta ex-sister-in-law. Because a lot of people thought they were sisters. But remember my mom is married to Marta's brother, so at this point, they're not together.

Um, as a matter of fact, the house that my grandfather bought for his children, um, there was like some, some family drama there that sister of the twins stayed in that house. Okay. And Marta buys this other house and my mom becomes, we become her tenant.

jah elyse sayers: Okay. And they're in the same area, or?

Melody Capote: Right. They're not too far.

Okay. But it, it, it was, it was ugly. So, um, that [01:12:00] sister stayed, I mean, I guess they bought, bought each other. Whatever happens, you bought out whatever. So my father and my mom are already on the rocks and had had maybe two separations already, but now he's back and they're talking about moving and getting into this house.

And, um, again, I'm old enough now. I'm 14/15, and my mom says, um, I don't, I don't want to get into another house with you 'cause I don't think things with your brother are gonna work out. Which she was very right about. Yeah. So Marta buys the house and my mom becomes her tenant. Marta and her husband buy the house.

She has the one son, Marta had her oldest son then. And so we all, we moved to the house. So we stayed together as a family. My dad was there maybe a year before he left, so Marta and my mom become really, really close. Um, I think my mom from Marta was all things. She was like a mom. 'cause my mom was significantly older than Marta.

Um, was like a mom, was like a sister, was her best friend. My mom was little and tough and my mom had no problem telling you. Like, it was not, not disrespectful, not, but just my mom would say, I don't believe it. I'm sorry. You did it. You did it. I don't believe it. I'm sorry. I don't come back and tell me something different.

If you lied, you lied. I know you lied. You knew you lied. My mom was just like, and uh, while Marta, before Marta starts the center, Marta was the second director of El Museo del Barrio.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: Here on now on hundred and fourth and fifth.

jah elyse sayers: Where was Marta at the time?

Melody Capote: When Marta answers the ad in the New York Times for this position, she goes for the interview here in East Harlem.

El Museo was part of school district four. [01:14:00] So it was a school program.

jah elyse sayers: I didn't know this. Okay.

Melody Capote: This, a lot of people don't know this. So it's, it was started by a gentleman named Rafael Morales. The concept, right? She comes for this interview and she sees the ad in the New York Times. She, I remember again, I was, I'm old enough to remember, but the older we got, and the more we got into this work, I'd hear stories.

So she came thinking she was coming to a museum and she comes for the interview at District four. And, uh, once she, you know, they get through the interview, she says, well, can, can I see the museum? You know, where's this museum? And they take her into a classroom in a closet. Is the collection of the work that Rafael had, I guess done, I guess I don't that I don't remember.

But El Museo was in the closet of a, of a school, of a classroom or office at District four. She takes the job and she, I remember, I remember her coming home saying they offered her the job. And my mother says to her, what do you know about Puerto Rican history or culture or anything? And, and, um, you know, she says, well, you are gonna teach me 'cause you were born and raised in Puerto Rico and you're gonna, and that, that really becomes, and it was constant.

And Marta as well as our Spanish wasn't fluent. I'm fluent now. I mean, I still, I still get stuck. Practicing Spanish was like a thing in the house. We all had to speak Spanish 'cause she had to learn Spanish and she was gonna Puerto Rico and she had, and that was like a thing. And then her first few trips to Puerto Rico and mother says, the only thing you know about Puerto Rico is when you went on your honeymoon and you were in, you know, the tourist, tourist area.

So they do a few trips to Puerto Rico and my mother's showing her and introduced, not introduced, but you know, introducing her to the culture and different things. Um, Marta hires a photographer who since became a very well known photographer, Hiram Hiram Maristany, [01:16:00] um, who was the unofficial photographer for the Young Lords.

Okay. Back in the day. And Hiram lived in El Barrio and they meet up. And so that's, I mean, it just became, uh, a way of learning, a fast track learning. And of course, I think, you know, with her own father and when her mother was alive, learning something about the culture, but this was like speed dating.

Right. Really learning about the culture. And Marta was always deep in the books and learning and researching and connecting and finding and, and so when El Museo it, we had several locations again, and I was always involved. There was several locations. Um, it was located at one point over a funeral home on a 116th Street and third Avenue.

Then it was, there was another location, I can't remember. And then she identifies a series of storefronts. On Third Avenue between a hundred and sixth, a hundred and seventh Street and a hundred and ninth Street.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: And it was a series of storefronts. And that was kind of the official big, big signage, El Museo, el barrio, the big Taino symbol of the cookie.

Um, and that I remember so clearly, because again, to kinda keep me busy out of trouble, I'm not with the twins anymore. 'cause that, that's the breakup with the, the sister. So I'm not, I'm seeing them in school. The older one, Shena was always kind of like my buddy in a mess, but they were like, it was, it was, it was sad, you know?

So they weren't, we weren't really in each other's lives the same way anymore. And then there's my brother who really didn't wanna know about any of this stuff. So my mom would always say, come after school you're gonna, you learn to give tours, you're gonna learn to do this, you're gonna learn to this. So I would come over from the Bronx after school to do a few hours here.

And that's where I learned Bomba dance. And I started learning more and more [01:18:00] about my culture, just given the nature of the work we were doing. Marta's Learning, I'm learning. Mom's got kind of the great, the grand teacher, although again, Marta just did the work, you know, researching and traveling and meeting and talking and bringing people.

So that series of storefronts was the space I really, really remember well, because you would get mothers coming after school from picking up their kids, coming through the galleries because Mark, the, the exhibitions always recreated some experience in Puerto Rico.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: So from the sounds of the cookie in the gallery to, um, I remember there was an installation that was a replica of the Casitas in the islands.

So it was like a wood, a wood, a wood home built in a gallery, painted the, painted in the colors of the Caribbean and pink and blue and yellow. And I remember that so well because they trained me to be a docent. And even doing, and trying to explain to people what they were seeing, it was like, like, we know what this is.

You don't have to tell us what it is. We know what this is. You know, um, you know, a gallery that always had like a, some film or something running. Uh, so you saw the, the, you heard the water running, you know, the, the, the, the rainforest. You heard the river flowing you. And every time people came, came through families.

I remember mothers after school, I guess 'cause I would get there just after school. You emotional in tears coming back again now with friends and all of that. So Marta got there I think around 1969, 1970. And was there for,

had to be like 73, 72, 73. 'cause already in 74 when I'm in college, she's starting [01:20:00] this. Yes. You know. Um, but so the dynamic between my mom and her was, like I said, my mom was like her best friend like a mom. But my mom had to like, pull her coat. She would pull her coat. My mom had no qualms. Um, her sister.

And then when Marta starts this work, which also required a lot of travel throughout the Caribbean to Africa, South, the whole Dias African diaspora idea. Um, my mom and I are Marta's babysitters. 'cause now she's had her second child. And we all lived in the, you know, the two family homes. So the boys were always with us, and we made sure homework got done. They got to school, they got picked up, they did, you know, we, we were there for her in that way. Um, but my mom absolutely, you know, and my mom was, but, but my, she would always say, you gotta gimme a hand with, you know, this one or the, the, the two boys, usually the younger one was the one I had I handled. Um, so there was, their dynamic was really, really good.

And when Marta left El Museo, my mother stayed for about another year, but as, and then Marta was working on a fellowship, which is what this grew out of, a fellowship. So it wasn't like she went on to form the center. She had this fellowship she was working on, and that's where she decided this work, you know, needs to live somewhere and I'm gonna form this.

And then it was like, Laura, come. Yeah. You know, so she brings my mom over with her. So mom was there for, from the beginning of Marta's kind of professional life in this.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: My mom was there from the very beginning. And, um, so babysitters for each other, friends, girlfriends, the boyfriends, the husbands, the exes, the, you know, all that stuff.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: Um, and I was always a part of it. I was always a part of it. And I remember when, um. [01:22:00] Once I started working with the organization, especially when I started working with the organization, we would

be in the car, we would drive in together, drive home together, and uh, we'd be in the car and Marta would say, we are our own best therapists.

Because that would be where we, you know, things went down at the job or some incident happens. Or even when we would get upset with each other, this would be like the space to like, address it. Address it. You wanna be mad, be mad. You wanna be upset, be upset tomorrow, you better be better. You better get over it.

You know? Or you know, this is how we'll handle it when we get to deal with whatever it was the following day. Um, but my mom, my mom was real no nonsense. My mom was, you could tell by her face, you could tell by her tone. Um, I was had expressed real concern too. 'cause now it was the three of us. All Moreno.

Marta Moreno Vega, Laura Moreno, Melody Moreno. 'cause I wasn't married yet, so my mom was a real stickler for receipts things in writing. I don't want anybody coming and saying that we're doing, you know, something wrong. Um, Marta would always forget receipts and say, I forgot to ask for a receipt.

My mother would say, put it on the napkin. Put it on, you know, it would just, like, I have to make sure we've got all the documentation in place, because before computers, my mom was the one doing the checks. My mom was receiving the grants. My mom was balancing the books. You know, we always had outside auditors and stuff like that, but the day to day was my mom.

So there would be moments where, you know, grants weren't coming in, or money was going out faster than it's coming in. Which we're always experiencing. Um, you know, and, and then, then I really get into this work. Right. I really get into it. So Marta and I are like this.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: She's always close up.

We're like this. And my mom would say, the two of you are gonna be the death of me. Stop inventing and stop doing things that Marta [01:24:00] would have an idea or meet with you and then say, cool, talk to Melody. You know, melody will handle it. Melody will do it. Um, and so my, oh, she would get so annoyed about, she'd get so pissed with us both and she'd say, you know, that's your daughter.

She's not, but that's your daughter.

jah elyse sayers: What was the age difference like amongst the three of you?

Melody Capote: Marta and I have a 16-year-old 16 year difference. Okay.

I'd have to do the math. Marta and I are about 16 years difference. Yeah. And my mother and Marta had to be about, about 10 years Okay. Between them, because my mom was closer in age to her sister who had the twins.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: So that I always saw them together, my mother and that sister. But, and they were always looking out for Marta who was younger and Marta, you know, Marta was always fly and cute shopping and spending.

And the both would be like, you know, wait till she has kids and see she can't spend my, Marta didn't match. She had her son. She still kept, but then, um, you know, that what the dynamic that happened within the family with them. Marta then detaches from the sister. So does my mom, so does my dad and so does my grandfather.

My grandfather comes to live with us. Um, actually Marta had a three family house, so he had an apartment as well. Um, so yeah, the, between them must have been around 10 year difference.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah.

Melody Capote: And then maybe more. And then between Marta and I was about 16 year difference, but we, we, together, we were three musketeers.

It was, it was, it was a lot of, and then if there would be times, um. My mom would be upset with me at the point now that I'm maybe staying out and not coming home, but then I'm coming to work the next day. So then Marta would be, yeah, my Marta would be like, your mom is pissed off. I'm like,

oh, wow. I'm 25, you know?

Okay. And she'd be annoyed with me, like, for the full [01:26:00] day. And finally I'd just go over and say like, get over it, mom. I'm good. I'm going home. I'm going home tonight. You know? Um, but it was always kind of good times,

bad times, luckily a hell of a lot more good times. And the learning, the, all of us, like there's something would kind of, we learned something new about a, a, a place or a thing or the connection.

And that would be like it, you know? Um, and, and Marta would get like obsessed with the thing. Marta would get like obsessed with the thing and with Dunham.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: I meet Ms. Dunham at the center for the first time, and, and when I first hear her name, I don't even, I don't even think I immediately make the connection, but when I make the connection, I'm like, wait, what?

Catherine Dunham, what? And Marta had already done like, research on her. So that's how I learned more about her. But the first time I meet Ms. Dunham, that, and we did a, we did a lot of programming with, with Ms. Dunham in the, in the early nineties. Um. What? Yeah, we, we, I was so honored and I remember, um, we had these, we had a small brownstone on 58th Street and very narrow stairs to get from one floor to the other.

And my husband, um, big six foot two, black Cuban man, she meets my husband and says, you gonna get me up those stairs, Ms. Dunham? You gonna get me up those stairs? So Eddie looks at the stairs, but she was already heavy. She was older, she was a heavy woman. Debbie set. And he looks at the stairs and he looks at her and he looks at me and he says, yeah, I'm gonna get you up those stairs and I'm gonna get you down the stairs.

Well, I don't want anybody seeing me get up these stairs, she said. So he goes, no [01:28:00] problem. I'm gonna get you up the stairs. So how they manage those stairs, how he got her and when she came in, he made a whole thing. When she came in, he had opened the door and Ms. Dunham came in and all her glory. And the same way he got her down those stairs.

But I remember her looking at me, you go get me up. And she just looked, you getting up those stairs. And um, he did. He did. So she made a few visits to the center and then we had a whole exhibition dedicated to her. And when I understood, and I saw the dancers that came through the School of Dunham, the Pearl Premises Percival board, um,

Belafonte Julie Belafonte. Yeah. Um,

the Jeffrey Holder, when I saw everybody who kinda came through the School of Dunham and they all came to the center. I met all of them. Was just incredible. Incredible. I'm sitting here like in history part part of this history. I'm living it, I'm here and sitting like this child, just, they're chatting it up and they're re remembering this and remembering that.

And she's, um, attributed with bringing the first sacred drums, I think from Cuba, maybe Haiti, I'm not, I don't remember now, but bringing the sacred drums to New York City.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: She's kind of get credited with that. Not her, but I mean, bringing those musicians and those dancers to, to New York City. So, yeah.

Sitting around a table like this and just hearing those stories and saying like, who, what's happening? Who is in this room right now? Um, but yeah. Yeah, we did some good work. We've, we've done some, we've done some good work and I think as part of what you're doing now, and, and you know that as [01:30:00] we're now tapping the archives

jah elyse sayers: mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: From the center as, as these things appear. And like some things show up without a name or, or a story, and they come into the office and I remember that day. I remember we were, I could tell you what I was wearing, you know? Um, so the tapping of the archives has really been, I, I'm hoping that that's the centerpiece of what we do as part of our anniversary and beyond, is just kind of looking at all those special moments that we were able to, to document, to celebrate, to highlight, to lift in these conversations.

And, you know that Marta says that she starts the center or this interest in this work. But doing research at the Schomberg Center, who we also didn't know then was a black Puerto Rican man. Right, right. A, what is it, Alfonso Arturo Schomberg or Arturo Alfonso Schomberg. Um. She does this research and she finds, I actually, that's part of our timeline downstairs, she finds a letter from Schaumburg to Nicolas Yang, the writer in Cuba, saying, my brother Langston Hughes is traveling to Cuba and I need you to show him the black community in Cuba.

I need him to understand that we are all connected. So you've got this Afro Puerto Rican man here in New York speaking to an Afro-Cuban man in Cuba

saying that this African, I don't know, I don't know that Langston was Caribbean, but this African American man is traveling to Cuba and I need you to show him that we're connected.

jah elyse sayers: Wow.

And that's where she gets the idea of, from her research. Yeah. We're all over wherever the ships stopped.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: Right. And enslavement [01:32:00] lived. We may be a little different, but we share more in common than we do different. And we're looking at the issues of race, and we're looking at the issues of sacred practices, and we're looking at music and dance as ways of life.

Right. And, and, and coming back to the early conversation about church and church on Sundays, like once I understood. Sacred practice. Once I understood the importance of acknowledging ancestors in prayer every day, once I understood that an altar in my home looks like this, right? My glass of water, my candle ancestral folk photos of ancestors, once I understood through initiation into the Yourba tradition, the Orisha tradition, that this isn't church on Sundays, this is a way of life.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: This is how I live every day, and I can, I talk to spirit when I wake up. I thank God with my word. I pray with my words. A thank you is a prayer, right? I step off the bed and I go, thank you. And I can go to my altar, my ancestral altar, or I can go to my orisha and ring a bell or ring a maraca and speak to them.

And this is something I do every day because it's part of my every day. It's not apart separate from what I, how I live and what I do. And so I, I, I really do believe that that girl at 12 years old who was questioning the church, there was something else that worked there. Hmm. And maybe it was my grandmother's, right?

Because I, I lost my, the one whose boyfriend was Kennedy. Um, I lost her at the age of six. I must have been about six years [01:34:00] old. I was in school. I remember we were in first grade and my mother's mother, the one she came to

be with when she left Puerto Rico, died like six months later. So I looked both grandmothers.

I was about six, seven years old. And for both of those, I had a dream the night before they passed and I shared that. So even, even then, there was like something else at play here. But I, I, I want to think now, as when I, as an adult, I said, I wonder if that wasn't them saying, girl, you need to be doing something else.

Mm-hmm. Right? You need to be at least exploring something else. And we're with, we're with you maybe church ain't it, right? Mm-hmm. It's totally it. Um, but this really, for me, the, the, the, the music, the nights with my father, the, the introduction to all types of music. I remember we had a, she was, she's a poet, well known poet.

I won't, I won't name her, but she worked with the center and one day I had the music of little Jimmy Scott playing and she came over, she was African American, and she comes over to my desk and she says, how do you know. How do you know that music? And I'm like, little Jimmy Scott. So she says, Melody, how do you know that music?

I said, my dad brought me the first album and this is my favorite album of all his albums. That's wild. Like, how would you know? And she just, and she was younger than I was, but couldn't understand how this Latina knew Jimmy Scotts and I, and I every song, because I know every song, every, every lyric. And, um, and that would happen often, kind of something that I would be listening to or something that I would say, I can't think of anything right now.

But, you know, uh, a phrase or something that I would say, and it was like, how do you know that? [01:36:00] And I'm sure I must've done that with some folks too. I don't remember. But it's, it's, it's that memory. And I say you hear the job all the time. It's remembering to remember because we're not that far apart.

You know, the whole six degrees of separation and the connection that we all have to each other without even knowing that we do. Right. So in food, when you look at the, um, the, the planting, what's mangu for the Dominicans, it's mofongo for Puerto Ricans, it's fufu in Africa, it's the planting. Right.

And so those things are just, just doesn't take us too much to just remember that it's not that far away and we are not that disconnected as, as people. So, yeah, you started this.

jah elyse sayers: You got me fighting tears. Um, I really want to hear more about like your time at the Caribbean Cultural Center and like how things have changed, what's been the same. And I also know that it is currently after 5:00 PM

Melody Capote: That's okay. Okay. Yep, that's fine.

Let me, let me just, that's fine.

jah elyse sayers: Okay. Beautiful. Um, sorry, I was listening too closely. That's why this is here. But, um, Ooh. Okay. Where are we going?

Maybe we can fill in the middle by between, you know, then and now even by like what are, what are some of the things that have like just stayed, like unshakably True about the Caribbean Cultural Center since that time and like how have you stewarded [01:38:00] that?

Melody Capote: Well, I'll tell you, we were on 58th Street for about.

15, 16 years. Mm-hmm. It was a building that our, our then chairman of the board, Franklin H Williams, identified for us. He ran the Phelps Stokes Fund, which was an African student exchange program back in the nineties. And also did a lot of work with, um, indigenous people here, here in, I think primarily here in the states, also students, and finding opportunities for students to travel to and to, to study, uh, higher education, frankly, was also, um, ambassador to Ghana at one point, and also worked as I was not worked, was on the board of Con Edison and then a bank called Chemical Bank.

So he was, he was that guy. And, uh, we, at one point when the center was looking for a home, we were based at the Phelps Stokes Fund, where he had this exchange program, very fancy building on 87th Street and Madison, between Madison and fifth. And here come the three of us, Marta, my mom and I, and we were a little too loud for the space, but we, and we had a nice office down.

It was like a basement space. But he, they had it hooked up beautifully. And a lot of the students who were coming in, particularly the African students, loved coming downstairs. 'cause we always had music and we were always asking them questions. And they were, they were on an exchange program, so they were here for a minute, you know?

And, um, they too shared a lot with us that opened our eyes and taught, taught us. And so he, he, he really got along very well with Marta. And, um, he said,

you all [01:40:00] are too loud down here. You all keep, you know, pulling the students down. I'm gonna find you. We've gotta find you a space. And we started, I mean, it was, we were outgrowing the space.

It was really the bottom line. But he just, and he was always so stern and so serious, and everybody would be like, shh, Mr. Williams, Marta would come in, where's Franklin? I gotta see Franklin. And everybody's, and Franklin would always open his door for her.

Melody Capote: And uh, we started think looking for a new space.

And he said to her, the success of our organizations will be in ownership. I don't want you renting a space. I want you to buy a space. And Marta's like, buy a, are you crazy? Long story short, he identifies the brownstone, the, I guess it was a brownstone on 58th Street that eventually became our space.

It was an abandoned, uh, it was an abandoned building, formerly known as an SRO, single Room Occupancy building. And he identified the building with us and through an arrangement with the Phelps Stokes Fund that he directed, we took a loan and purchased the building and we were responsible for raising the monies to renovate the building.

That's where I get pulled in to learn about fundraising, grant writing, and capital campaigns. Who knew? I didn't know anything about this. But this is, this is how we get the space on 58th Street.

jah elyse sayers: And were you learning this like on the fly?

Melody Capote: I'm learning it on the fly. I'm learning it while doing, and, uh, Marta brings in, um, a consultant or two.

Again, I don't wanna name people 'cause I just don't know how comfortable they'd be, but you'd know a name or two if I, if I said them. And I learned to do proposals. I to do grants. I learned what it meant to do a capital campaign, although that's not really how we did it. But we would raise enough money to fix the floor and we would [01:42:00] move up.

And then the bottom space would be public space. Then we moved, raised enough to do another floor, and our offices moved up. Now we had two floors of public space, and that's literally how we did it. And that's how I come onto the staff of the center. That was like 1986.

jah elyse sayers: Okay. So prior to that, you're just?

Melody Capote: No earlier. 'cause 1986, I got married, 1982, 84 or something like that So I'm learning while doing, yeah. And of course Marta's doing fundraising and, and we're learning together and we're going after bigger money, more money because we're now responsible for this building, plus the programming. And we did it.

Um, the area was Hell's Kitchen. I understand. We were like up the block from where Alicia Keys was raised. Like we were in Hell's Kitchen. And, uh, we outgrew the space. We would, we did great programming in this space and there was a lot of just always activations and events and activities going on.

But now we're, what we're noticing is how the area is changing. And we've been there now, I think about 18 years. Um, you're probably too young to notice, but on ninth Avenue and 58th Street, there used to be the Coliseum.

Melody Capote: The Coliseum was replaced by the Javit Center, which eventually was built further downtown.

But when the Colosseum came down, they built the Time Warner Vertical Mall that's on 59th Street in Columbus Circle. Um, Fordham University build their downtown campus two blocks away, where it's three blocks away from Lincoln Center. John Jay College is up the street. Roosevelt's Hospital literally moves from 58th Street and ninth to 58th Street and 10th and build a bigger building.

Melody Capote: So the whole area is changing gentrification, [01:44:00] um, communities looking very different. And we started maybe two or three years earlier saying, what are, what are we going to do? Like, are, are we, are we relevant here anymore?

And maybe we are, you know, people were coming to us. But it was like we saw the way that the area was changing. And then we get a call from Melissa Mark Viverito, her I will name, because that is how we get the firehouse. Melissa was then on city council and I think then was even Speaker of the City, first Puerto Rican woman to be speaker of the New York City Council.

And she tells us that this is available. My understanding is that in the nineties, quite a few firehouses were closed down in our neighborhoods. And were sitting. Untouched for many years, except for a few rich folks who were able to buy a firehouse and turn it into their home. Again, I won't name names, but

there were a few here in New York City and uh, there was a, it was a competitive process.

We had to put together a proposal about what your dream for this space would be. I understand they had like 50 or so proposals, ours one.

jah elyse sayers: And this is like 2000?

Melody Capote: This is like 2000. Yeah. Um,

in the process of buying the brownstone and doing everything that we did there, Marta then wants to add Franklin H Williams' name to our name because if it wasn't for him and his vision, we wouldn't have gotten the building. And we tried to keep it a surprise and it wasn't. He came one day and saw the name, and then I called Marta, why'd you add my name to the awning?

And we like, really, dude? 'cause it was supposed to be a surprise. Um, and, and, and we did it. The timing was perfect because then he, he got ill with cancer and we lost Franklin, but we had named, that was part of our name for a very [01:46:00] long time. The Franklin h Williams Caribbean Cultural Center. African Diaspora Institute.

So we went from the VARRCC name to this name. Uh, so when we, when we're talking about this move. Um, the sale of that building is what gets us here because although we were, were receiving primarily government money to do the work of this, the renovations on this building state and city money is all reimbursable money, so you have to have the money in the bank.

jah elyse sayers: I see.

Melody Capote: Right. So the building that cost us $225,000 to buy, plus whatever we put in to renovate sold, it's like a few million dollars when we sold it. And the reason we thought come back uptown, or come uptown was that for Marta and I, it was like coming back home. It brought us back to not just Harlem, east Harlem, El Barrio. And so this, this move uptown for both of us was very emotional in that way. And it put us in a space, put us in a location where, um, it kept us grounded in community.

Mm-hmm. And so, um, we, we came uptown, I want to say we came up maybe a little too soon because we were located in a building across the street and we still didn't have like a home or a place for presenting and producing events. But

we partnered with other institutions throughout the area and just stayed very, very visible.

But for some of us, and me included, I I think we may have done that move a little too soon. We could have stayed another year or so before coming up here because there was just so much happening with other culturals in the area. Um, [01:48:00] development, the way it was coming in. Developers coming into the area on steroids.

I mean, everywhere we looked there was work and there is work. I mean, you see it when you come into the street. Yeah. Um, the harsh reality that we were and are on a street that by design has several methadone programs in this area, has a shooting gallery for clean needles in this area, has a high rate of homelessness in this area, has a high rate of mental illness in this area.

And so when we came up. And, and, and actually when the work started on this building, every time we'd have somebody come by and see us and say, what's going on here? What are you putting here? What's gonna, what's gonna happen here? And we would say, a cultural institution, you'd hear responses like, cultural institution?

What we need is schools or daycare or, um, jobs. Jobs for the jobless, you know, for the, for those who are looking for work. Um, you know, so folks, and that's why when I present and speak to folks, it's like we have to position and center culture because it affects everything. Oh, housing, you know, oh, we need housing, we need jobs, we need, and it's, yeah.

But if we don't center the importance of culture, and particularly in this, in this climate, our culture, then education and, uh, housing and employment, we're, we're back to square one. We're always kind of going back to these conversations about almost what's more important. Without the cultural understanding, without the cultural of ourselves and others, the cross-cultural understanding, we continue to be stuck.

We don't, we don't move. Mm-hmm. Um, so we, we [01:50:00] dug deep and created this new home, a state of the arts facility for which still, but when we first opened, but still. Folks, our folks come in and see it and they're like, wow, this is beautiful. This looks like it belongs downtown. And our response is, why wouldn't you want something that's beautiful in your community?

Why do you believe that this belongs downtown? Um, one of the kind of magnetism elements of the center is that people come here and feel at home right away. Yeah, right.

jah elyse sayers: Big time.

Melody Capote: Right away from the way you're welcomed by. And we've had, we've had, we've been very fortunate with staff throughout our life.

Throughout the 50 years, there have been moments where there's, there's just not a fit. You know, we have that, it's just not a fit. But we know that the way we receive people the way, and nobody here is trained to do that. It's just who we are and how we show up. Um, the exhibitions, the gift shop, the, the talks, the workshops, the in-school programs, the afterschool programs, when young people start seeing themselves in these, in, in these instructive ways of delivering education.

When we are, when we are, um, celebrating rap and hip hop tradition by saying, but wait, this isn't new. We have oral traditions that go back thousands of years. Right. And seeing that connection or saying, you know, I often used to do this. When we would, we would do tours, young people in the room, and I'm saying, without saying a word, look at each other and the kids are all silly, laughing at each other looking.

I says, without saying a word, do you know where the other one is from? [01:52:00] What's the connection here? How, what connects you? And then maybe they, maybe they know, maybe they don't. But one of the immediate things is I said, what do you have a, like, what makes you so, you know, oh, our color, our skin or our hair, you know, and, and making it a fun way of being able to understand that this richness lives just in this, this group alone.

And we're highlighting for your, for your purposes, all of the contributions that our people have made. All of the creative expressions that we, everything about us that gets copied and taken from our hairstyles to our jewelry, to our makeup, to our ripped, our rhythms, our music, our food. Oh yeah. You know.

Oh yeah. Even when we address things like sacred practices or sacred traditions, I remember we had, we've had a few where we had, um, an installation of an altar and we have a group of young kids from a Catholic school who said, my mother does. My brother does that. My grandmother. Those uhhuh, they make the connection immediately.

Right. You know, um, we had a, a young kid who said, um, his grandmother burned candles in the bathroom. Or in the bathtub. And I, I almost knew what was coming. And, um, somebody says in the bathroom says, yeah, it's the safest room. It's the safest room in the house. 'cause of the tiles and stuff. And that's exactly what it is.

Right. But it was just like, and they just started among them. And I'm like, dig this. You know, like, just look at this. You know. So I think that from everything that we started as, uh, the basement of our home to, or Marta as an individual, the research and the fellowship program to the basement of our [01:54:00] home, to these temporary spaces throughout the city, and finally ending up in a brownstone.

And now here on the hundred and 25th Street, this is, um, this was supposed to happen. We're supposed to be here. And with all that is happening around us, the building is a landmarked building. The facade of the building is landmarks. And there are a couple of things about this space that must hold true.

If we should leave tomorrow. This has to be owned by a not-for-profit organization, so it cannot go to a developer. Right. So it should always be in the hands of a not-for-profit. The other is, as a landmark building, it must always look like a firehouse from the outside. Um, and for us, what stands true is that

we stand here as a testament of the community that is, that could easily get lost with all of these changes happening and people being displaced and on the, this president administration, the erasure that's happening. Right. And yet, and yet here we are. Right. So that, I like to say that we are, um, as opposed to having a sign going up on a wall that says, African Americans and Latinos used to live here.

We are here. And that is what we stand for as an organization. So still jah from the beginning days till now, difficulties in securing funding, addressing issues of equity. Still today, the conversations of equity, racial justice, social justice. Um, has the work changed? It may look a little different, but not really.

And we're still [01:56:00] addressing the very same issues by which really this institution was born.

Which was putting a, a lens, an Afrocentric lens on our story and telling the story accurately because it's been told so wrong for so long. And that's kind of the, that's the reason for being for us because we know that so much misinformation is out there, has been out there, and now we're being asked to

take away books and close down institutions that tell these stories and the storytelling aspects.

For, for me, I, I laugh 'cause so many things kind of become very faddish. Um, we have been storytelling forever as a people and as an institution. That is what we have done is captured stories. So now for everybody to be talking about storytelling, oral histories and talk. Yeah. I mean, it's wonderful to do that work, but, um, you know, it's, so we capture those stories and then what, right.

Which was how we started this conversation when I said, so what happens with these archives? Right? And that's why we did very intentionally, we opened our archives as an open lab that we're calling the community archives. So folks are coming in, seeing things that people maybe have never, we have young people coming in looking at slides and they're like, what are these right?

Videotapes, beta max tapes, heaven forbid, cassette tapes, um, vinyl albums we were talking about earlier. So we're, we're inviting folks in not only to learn, um, about our history as an institution, but to learn about their history, right? And to see themselves in these archives and to ask the questions and to nudge and to prod and to help [01:58:00] us define how we want to look for the 50th anniversary.

What do people wanna see? What do they know about us? What don't they know about us? That they say, you need to talk more about this. Right? And we know, for example, around the sacred traditions work that we've done, and again, honoring Marta, honoring my aunt, um, even those practices. And that's an Orisha priestess, and she's my godmother in the religion.

She's the priestess as well. These were practices that for years, up until the other day, were hidden, right? Were in the, the basement. Um. We didn't talk about it. You know, you didn't, it wasn't it, it wasn't out there because people don't understand, people call it black magic, people call it witchcraft, people call it whatever, because they don't know what it is.

Right. So the center has taken great care in bringing together leaders, traditional leaders of these traditions from all over the world to have real talk. Right. And talk about these practices in a way that is presented through an accurate lens. We've done that, and we are recognized by that. And I would dare say anybody, particularly in the New York scene who's in this practice would say, yep, Caribbean Cultural Center has done it, has taught, has brought, has.

But now we're in a climate where, again, with this government in this erasure and having us now come out of the closet, if you will, that we're all kind of saying, well, maybe not so much and we need to go back into the basements because religious, religious freedom is being attacked. Um, freedom of speech is being attacked.

Right. We're being attacked. So just a couple of weeks ago we put, we co-sponsored an event called Collective. And is, um, your power, but [02:00:00] I, Isha is calling Spirit to your spirit to move. It's your power. I'm interpreting it wrong, but that's kind of what it means. Almost like a namaste. And, um.

The collective part of that was how are we in a community in this community, in the Orisha community and the Yuba practice? How are we showing up? I don't wanna say to counter what's going on in the world, but how do we respond to it? I didn't even want to react to it.

How do we respond to it? Because we're a large community throughout the country.

And yet, and prayer is good, and processions are good, but where's the action? Why aren't we being vocal and more kind of active in how we as a community show up to say not on our watch? Not on our watch. And so you, young people, activists, organizers, teachers, elected officials who are practitioners of this, and you've, you've received this as share, you've received this crowning, this blessing that tells you, you are sacred.

We're all sacred. You don't have to be in this tradition, but this particular practice tells you you are sacred and we have a power that we need to tap. And so how do we collectively come together to say not on our watch? And that's, that's really been the, the, that's spiritual thread or sacred thread lives through all of our work.

So our art isn't art for art's sake. Right. Right. Our art isn't a luxury, it's not an extra, it's a, as I started, it's part of who we are and how we live. It's how we dress.

It's how we look. It's how we show up. And our sacredness shows up in our breath, our sacred breath. And so through all of [02:02:00] our work, exhibitions, conferences, concerts, education, that spiritual thread is key because I tell you, there are times child that I just say, I don't know how we're gonna make it.

I don't know how we're still here because funding what we do isn't popular. And you might get a grant during COVID and following the killing of George Floyd social justice money was being thrown at many of us. Not so much anymore. And I quite, so did we do that work? Are we done? We good? Right. And the struggle continues to be around funding, securing the funding, um, the issues of equity.

And in this city alone, that's the cultural capital of the world. The way the money is distributed in this city is like this. Yeah. 34. Major institutions in this city get 85% of the cultural dollars. I don't need to name the major institutions. You know who they are.

And then you've got 1500 or so organizations that have to split the 15% that's left.

So it's, it's all of those things. It's what gives me the passion to do the work that I do still. Because I sat up in here since 1982. Yeah. Um, or 84 or something like that. But it's, um, it is a fa this was never intended to be a family business or a mom and pop type of, of shop, but it is a family legacy and, you know, in honor of my aunt and in honor of my mother.

You good?

jah elyse sayers: Yeah. We're back on.

Melody Capote: Okay. Yeah. In honor of my aunt and Marta Moreno Vega, in honor of my mother, LA Laura Moreno, I really do feel a responsibility to assure that at the point where I transition out and I'm already planning my own [02:04:00] succession, this institution has to be here maybe in a different form, in a different way. Um, the leadership, all of you, all of the, the young people coming through here, like y'all got this. But there's, um, you know, there's, there's an umbilical cord I have to this organization and it has to be left in the right hands.

And, um, maybe after 50 years, and we're talking about it now as an organization, what does succession look like? What does transition look like? Does the not-for-profit 5 0 1 C3 model work for orgs of color anymore? And, and if not, what does the model for us look like to be around for another 50 years? And I would say, and maybe we don't need us in 50 years, maybe we're gonna be all good, but we know realistically that's not the case.

So how do we position the organization and the new leadership coming through to allow us the, um, the opportunity in being grounded within community to do the work that needs to be done and be that resource for folks to continue to, to learn and be exposed to all of our great, all of our greatness and all of our genius.

jah elyse sayers: Yeah.Thank you.

Melody Capote: You're welcome. I got a little emotional.

jah elyse sayers: I know. Thank you. Thank you.

There's so many places that I want to go. Hey, now you move in a second. Well, I'm just, I'm thinking about like this question of. F the future and like both, you know, the continuation of Caribbean Cultural Center mm-hmm. But also other orgs that are doing necessary work.

And just the knowledge that you hold from, you know, like learning on the fly. How to do a capital campaign. Right? Um, [02:06:00] and I'm, I guess I'm wondering about some of the biggest, like, lessons that you've learned by doing That, you know, are not necessarily like common Knowledge.

Melody Capote: I, I, oh, a lot of it has been by doing, you're right.

But I think one of the greatest, and, and I keep reminding the staff this, especially as we're planning the upcoming year, one of the greatest reasons I believe for our success as an institution has been in the partnerships that we have forged. We could not have done this alone. We could not have done this without identifying partners. And I'm talking about partners in the real spirit of partnership. We've been throughout history approached by other organizations, not black led organizations, that because they're looking to bring in new audiences or special audiences, which is what they call us, want to kind of put your logo on flyer and maybe use your mailing list. That's not a partnership. Right. Right. And so what we have found, even with non-black led institutions, is that when you show up in, in, in your fullness, in your realness and really wanna work with us, it works.

But for what? For what? For what has been a learning lesson for me and what has gotten us through this process.

And as we plan the 50th, it's let's find the partners. Whether they're individuals and alumnis of our programs or attendees of our programs, but institutional

partners who get it, not who get us, who get it. So that in that partnership we're addressing the issues we've talked about. Right. Um, you know, putting us, [02:08:00] highlighting us on a stage, us as a people on a stage Sure.

But really understanding that we have work to do. And, you know, art that 'cause folks use culture and art interchangeably. We are a cultural institution that uses the arts as one of our tools for getting the message across. That uses spirituality, that uses media. And so the issue even of healing a lot of our work, we know that art heals. We know that art heals.

And we know that as a indigenous people. And African people, the arts heals. We know that arts has been a, a first responder. The arts, the artists have been first responders. And so we are constantly looking for, for forming formidable partnerships with individuals and institutions that believe that.

And while, and this was a lesson brought up to me by my staff a couple months ago, we are constantly on this, um, on the ground and kind of, you know, how do we heal? How do we fix, how do we repair, how do we heal? How do we fix how to repair? This is what we have to do. This is what we have to do. And the question was raised to me in a staff meeting, which was, well, who heals the healer?

Mel, you're Mel. And I'm not saying me me, but as the institution, right. Who's taking care of us. And so looking at an institution that's 50 years old, we don't have an individual donor base at any level. 'cause I'm not looking for big heavy, I mean, I am, if we can get big, heavy donors, but even to say, you know, honor, right.

We've got a thousand, 2000, 5,000 donors who give a hundred a year or a hundred a [02:10:00] month. We don't have that base. And I understand that we may not all come from, uh. We don't all have the wealth, we, we, but we can give and we can support, we can invest in our institutions. We have to.

The money's drying up everywhere else from everywhere else.

Um, but even in those partnerships, like bringing in individuals who are prepared to do some of the work. Yeah. Give time, give money, um, make sure that you have an institution like ours around for your own children or for the future, future generations who come. And that's a whole nother, you know, ball of wax and say, how do you, we have tried every which way to cultivate that.

And it's, it works. Sometimes it's, but we are really making a very concerted effort to make sure that we can kind of get that out of our communities. Because without them, I don't know, to say without us that what if we didn't exist? Will we be missed? I don't know. Right. But y'all keep showing up.

jah elyse sayers: Right.

Melody Capote: And so, um, I'm sorry, jah, what was the question again?

jah elyse sayers: It was like, it was about like lessons learned. The lessons learned, you've learned.

Melody Capote: I, I think for us, the greatest lesson for me has been in the, um, the partnerships that we have established. Because it's been a big part of how we've been able to be as successful as we've been, and it's how those partnerships show up.

It doesn't matter who, it doesn't necessarily mean a partner with a big name or it's just how we show up because it's something we can keep coming back to and building and growing together. So the partnerships have been a great lesson learned. The other is that in a time where there's such an attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion, [02:12:00] we've never been an organization that has said that that's who we are.

We're about diversity, equity, and inclusion. We've, we've never really kind of rung that bell. What we do know, or what we have done is that equity, this whole, this whole, the practice here in this city and this state and this nation is not equitable. Particularly when you're looking at, again, when I started this work in the eighties, we were still using the term minority and we were minority people.

I still hear people reference us as ourselves, even as minority. We are the majority population in this country, the majority population, and until, which is why I feel there's still such a need for the work that we do in this institution, because until we start thinking differently and using different language when talking about ourselves mm-hmm.

Nothing's gonna change. It's, it's, I mean, change is coming slowly and it's coming much slower than it should. We should be leaps and bounds from where we were. 'cause there's a lot about what we are doing today that looks like what we did in the eighties and nineties. And so, you know, that we are still talking

about the, the need for belonging or inclusion, the belonging issue that we have to remind people we are a diverse city, state, country.

Look at, just look at one another. Right? So to have labeled the D-E-I-D-E-I-A, even accessibility, um, we've never had to say it because it's what we've practiced as an organization. But what we've learned is even in that push, the rightful push to be recognized and kind of have those issues addressed, it still gets turned [02:14:00] around and kind of works against us in a way that was never, that's what's never our intent.

You know, it's never the, it's just to the recognition of it and the lifting of it. Right.

jah elyse sayers: Oh, what's an example of it getting turned against you?

Melody Capote: Well, what's happening in this country now, right? Yes. Okay. Just looking at what's happening in this country now. That's government. With philanthropy, where we're going, we're getting funding from, we've had funders, philanthropic funders already begin to tell us to use a different narrative.

You don't have to say artists of color, say community artists. Right. And then as I'm saying that, as an example, and I'm hearing this from other partners, this isn't the other orgs, leaders of, of institutions of color. Um, that's who we are. That's who we work with and for, that's the community we work for, communities of color.

You are all welcome. Everybody else is welcome. But that's why we were created. There were institutions around forever who have taken our stuff, have robbed our stuff, have it on display, won't give it back, who never even cared to make the effort to bring you in the doors. To bring us in the doors. Right.

So there was a need. Right? I think I, as long as race counts in America, there will be a need for institutions like ours because it, it, it doesn't, it doesn't work any other way. And as I said, you know, folks have things in their collections. Some of it's sacred stuff that shouldn't even be sitting in, in, in your, in your spaces or, or on display.

Um,[02:16:00]

we're like, you know, there's this anthropology of us looking at us that really has twisted what we mean when we say inclusion or belonging or diversity. It's, we're still looking, being looked at through a microscope and we're saying, we

are. Here, we are here we are here. Like, so that's, that's kind of what I mean when we talk about these, these issues of diversity.

And again, it's not something we've necessarily banged the drum about. It's just been the nature of the work that we do because we're speaking to an audience that otherwise wouldn't have a space, a safe space to see themselves in. Right. To learn about themselves in, through an, through an accurate lens.

Right. Because you look at the media, you look at the, the, the, the news, the, the, the media. You look at commercials, you look at television, and we're still portrayed in such negative ways every once in a while. Yeah, we do good. But for the most part, there's still this way of how we see ourselves, how we are portrayed.

That, um, you know, certainly does not speak about, doesn't talk to me, doesn't reflect me. So the fact that we have had to do this for so long and have made so little headway, not, I don't mean just us as an institution, but institutions in general. Um, race is an issue. Race is an issue, and the importance of our institutions at least give us a place to be able to say, you know, we count.

Yeah. Or we count. Yeah.

jah elyse sayers: You can I, can I ask, uh mm-hmm. Bring something up that you said in another conversation?

Melody Capote: Sure.

jah elyse sayers: Um, you, it stuck with me so much is that you said there's a difference between being included as an artifact and being included, like, you [02:18:00] know, as people who do things And have spirit.

Um, yeah. I just, it's resonating with what you're saying to me a lot. Um,

Melody Capote: yeah. It's, you know, still, you and I say there are many allies out there, um, who can help and be very, probably be very successful as partners with us and on these issues. Right. But

I can't think of a partner. Or a leader that I feel com I Melody feels comfortable with in saying they could represent equity for me. They can, they can be an ally, they can work with me, right. But they can't be the face of equity for me. As much as they may believe in. And, and I can say, yep, she gets it, he gets it, but they cannot be the face of equity for me.

And so, um, especially knowing that they're foreign in between. So there's still so many that, that look at us as this artifact or that look at us through this, this microscope. Um, but yeah, I, I do believe that I, I can't speak more to it than I have. It just is, it just is what, how I feel and how many of us feel when just doing, doing this work and seeing, um,

what is happening in, in this country and not being angry. Right. Because they just up in arms, I won't say folks being up in arms and really just saying, you know, we, we can't stand for this. We can't accept this. I don't care what color you are, you know, we just can't accept this. Yeah.

jah elyse sayers: I also have like nuts and [02:20:00] bolts questions.

Melody Capote: Nuts and bolts. Okay, go ahead.

jah elyse sayers: We can also, I know we're far over time. It's okay. So, okay. So I mean, two things. You mentioned that there was like, you know, the spike in funding in 2020, and I'm curious just about like the arc of like funding opportunities and higher funding and lower funding and like what navigating that over time has been.

Um, and if there have been like particular times, like you've really had to pull it together and how you've done that, and then maybe a related question and you can kind of choose where to go, is thinking about this, this building and you, you described kind of the process of selling the, the building up 58th street and that being used so that you can get the reimbursements from the, I guess it was the city

On the firehouse. City and state. Yeah. City and state on the firehouse. And you also described it was like an RFP process, I think. Um, so this might be a kind of nerdy urban planning leaning question, but like, uh, what are the kind of, um, policies, tax credits, like that kind of thing that have been important that they exist on a kinda municipal level that makes it possible for this building to happen and to be what it is?

And like, I'm just, I'm thinking about like in partially like, like the kinds of things that we need to be fighting for or like, like seeking to maintain on the city level, state level. Um,

Melody Capote: unfortunately I don't know enough about that. And in this whole deal with the building, I wasn't that actively involved.

Okay. Um, so, you know, I, I, I wouldn't want to mislead you on that. There was You started this though with something else that I think could lead, what was it?

jah elyse sayers: It was more about the kind of the funding up and down funding. Different moments of, it's trendy to find Exactly.

Melody Capote: We, we have seen Marta used to use the term flavor of the month.

We see, you know, you'll see kind of spiking in, in funding for, in some moments, moments in time, moments in history. Um, and then [02:22:00] you'll see, you know, the drop. And sometimes we have very low lows. Um, this has historically been the case. It's not changed. The flavor of the month, uh, approach to funding has not changed much.

And it is, it is, it's dangerous. There's no way that our organizations can really plan even year to year, let alone three years down the line or four years down the line. The individual donor piece is key, and it's one that we're hoping that with the anniversary might trigger, um, some folks to really make a commitment to the organization.

Will it really affect our bottom line? I don't think so. At least not, not immediately. Um, but yeah, it'll be, um.

Everything from a social justice issue to, um, you know, a, a, a moment in time, something happening in a particular moment in time where funders will, you, you'll, you'll, you'll, you'll get the invitation to come in. It's not like you're even looking for funding. The invitation comes in or the check comes in the mail.

Right. And this is recent, but this has been throughout, throughout our history. So there's no real way for us as organizations to even when we're asked each year, our fiscal year to do our projections for the year, there's a lot of guessing around that because we don't have commitments. We don't, we don't have long-term commitments, um, from, from many of our partners.

Government has also gotten very strange with their funding as well, and not just under this administration. It's just gotten very strange when prior to getting this building. There was, there [02:24:00] is, um, I mentioned it earlier, there's a group of organizations about 34 that get the significant bulk of the cultural dollars from the city.

And they're called the cigs, the cultural institutions groups. And those are pretty much. The big, major cultural, cultural attractions of the city, the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Natural History, the zoos, the Botanical Gardens, Carnegie Hall, um, pretty much those types of organizations. And it's been a very closed club for a long time.

They were like 30, 30 for a long time. Most recently they've added Studio Museum in Harlem is probably the longest of the orgs of color that's now a CIG, El Museo Del Barrio. We talked a little bit about them earlier, Weeksville. We'll talk about the Weeksville example in a minute. And I think the other is the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning in Queens here.

That's it. Those are the 34. Who gets the bulk of the money from the city who get security funding, who get other kinds of bells and whistles? Energy. The energy bill. Okay. Certain things get covered by the city of New York. I mentioned Weeksville as a separate, as a separate example because just before COVID it looked like Weeksville was going under.

Melody Capote: And a lot of people know this, so I know this is, you know, people know this. And it was during COVID where they were saved, 45, 40 6-year-old organization, they were [02:26:00] saved and added on to the cigs. Good thing I am not knocking any of it. Good thing. Yeah. Um, we are now learning this past year. I heard that there are four or five other orgs of color or led by people of color being considered to be put onto the CIG, which will bring the list to like maybe 40, 40 something.

Again, a good thing when we learned about the cigs and how inequitable the distribution of city funds were, and this is again under Marta's leadership going back 30 years, we wanted to understand who makes these decisions, how, how do we become a CIG? How, what do you know, what do we have to do? And as we were learning by doing the rules kept changing a little bit.

Right. The rules. So because that they're catching up. Yeah. They're understanding that there's this possibility of being a CIG. Um, and Marta kind of fought for this for a very long time. Part of being a CIG is that you have to be on city property or, and, or city owned. Okay, so if you're not, you're out of the running.

This was a city building, so as we did the work on the building and, um, we weren't sure about whether or not CIG was even a possibility, but we kept saying, you know, so what does it mean to be a CIG and how do we become a

CIG? But we, the one thing that kept bringing in Marta's head were Franklin's words of ownership.

Yeah. Remember to own your building own. So we were kind of stuck between the rock and a heart place. Do we keep the building which we've ultimately decided to do, or do we become a city owned [02:28:00] organization or city property, whatever, whatever the definition would, would be. And at one point when we did kind of almost completed the building, the city did come back and say, wanna talk

jah elyse sayers: after it was renovated.

Melody Capote: And I was not part of those conversations. I just heard kind of the bits and pieces afterwards. But Marta said, we're not going, that they don't even wanna pay. We pumped into this space about a project that should have cost us about

3 million, 3.5 million dollars we spent. About seven. 'cause it took so long to raise money. It took so long to 'cause even for us to keep pumping money in and not knowing where we were gain getting reimbursed from was gonna put us in a very difficult position. So the numbers didn't make sense and we decided that we were just going to keep, we were going, going to own it.

But I share that because again, nothing wrong with having the CIG group, but what we understand is this has been a long standing agreement that the city has because the forefathers, not my forefathers father, but the forefathers wanted to assure,<siren sounds> welcome to 125th. The forefathers wanted to assure and protect that their culture, right.

Their traditions would long outlive them. And thus we have these institutions that have been named. We didn't, we were never part of that.And we weren't gonna be part of that back then. So now for us to say, well we need to do the same thing, how do we preserve promulgate, [02:30:00] protect our cultural institutions?

And there's very little room in that closed club to bring other organizations in. I mean, they can, but. That means everybody either the city's gotta up the ante for what they put into the pot to support these culturals, or you gotta pull money away from those other culturals to take care of the other guys.

Uh, in the meantime, that same 1500 organizations that go after the 15% aren't seeing the increases, aren't seeing, you know, it took us just this year, the city

raised, we've been fight fighting for this for about three. We've been fighting for it for years. But in the last three years, we made a great push to see that the agency from which we get our funding, the Department of Cultural Affairs, gets an increase.

Melody Capote: The agency had not seen an increase in 16 years. So more and more of our groups are going to that department, to the Department of Cultural Affairs for funding, but the pot isn't growing, so we get hit more of us. That was, we saw a hit because they brought in more groups to fund them. We are like, how, I mean, we're not saying don't bring in more groups, but how do you bring in and also raise some of your ceiling when there's no extra money being put into the pot?

So, you know, again, equity and the distribution of funds and the cultural capital of the world, if we're still touted as being such folks come and want to visit our institutions in our neighborhoods all the time. Chinatown, little Italy, let's go to the Bronx, hip hop this, but, and yet these institutions aren't getting the funding that we need, you know, Harlem, east Harlem, and so on.

So it's, [02:32:00] it's, I can't fully answer the tax credit piece. I don't know it, I don't know enough about it. Um, I will say, for example, we know we have an additional space now we have this annex location. And, um,

part why that exists, why that happens is that the developer, in order to build their building with city council and the representatives of East Harlem. Reached an agreement that for every building they put up, they have to make a space available to a not-for-profit organization. Okay. Is, I'm simplifying it, but it's what I understood happened.

Melody Capote: So we get the space, which we're understanding, oh, you're gonna get the space for a dollar a year. We get to this space, it's a basement location. It's 5,000 square feet, pretty big. It's a concrete room. We have to fix the space, we have to put pipes, we have to put bathrooms, we have to put floors. We have, we have, we have to.

So at the end of the day, it was very much like this project, except we didn't have the funds up front.

Melody Capote: We, we, we had some unrestricted funding that we were able to move around to get that space moving. But it took entirely too long for that to happen for us as well. That's why we finally had to open in June.

'cause I'm like, we can't keep saying phase two isn't done because phase two isn't happening because money isn't in yet. But there are charges being incurred that were not part of the original agreement or understanding of the city council person in this area. And I've had to pull, bring it to attention just like a couple days ago.

So there are charges, cam charges on the space. We of course have electric, an electrical bill. We have a water bill, we weren't aware we were gonna have to pay. There's [02:34:00] insurance on this base that now has to make sure that everybody over there gets. So it's like, wait a minute, but we're in it. Right? Right.

And so in speaking to the elected officials and going to city council and saying, look, we signed up for this. We're the space is supposed to be made available to artists and other arts organizations for little or no fee, but how will we have expenses related to this space then Not even You all knew.

We were going to have to incur. Now everybody's like, uh uh, so we are in it, we're going to make it work, but we need you to go back to these folks and say, you know, cut it out. And so, you know, at the end of the day, like I'm saying, what was supposed to be free to us isn't, and what was supposed to be this amenity that made it possible for them to build, they're still getting paid.

And all of these other things related to this space that you all thought was for the community, good ain't, you know? And so those are the things that we've been, you know, kind of, um, challenged with battling with, with, because at the end of the day, I would prefer seeing, and this is ultimately what I said to our city councilwoman at the end of the year, the 25, 30,000 that we would be paying in these charges.

Let them make that a contribution to us. Make it a tax write off. That's a big lift for us. It's not a big lift for them.

Melody Capote: even a hundred thousand, $50,000. It's not a big lift for them. But you've gotta come back to them because, I'm sorry folks. You fell asleep at the wheel or you got set up for the Okie-doke.

Melody Capote: Because how is it that no one, when you set to us free, how is it that you didn't know that there were going to be minimally these monthly charges? So as part of the negotiation, kind of thinking this is [02:36:00] for the good of the community and, and maybe not, I won't say it's not, but maybe not.

Melody Capote: So there are all these wheels wheeling and dealing that even when we get kind of, um, versed, you know, and really understand or get better at how the game is played, the game changes.

Melody Capote: You know, so that's where we are.

Nuts and bolts.

jah elyse sayers: Nuts and bolts. I know. We need, we need, we need them. We need to,

Melody Capote: And going to our funding partners, you know, we have some that are steady, that are good. Um, multi-year support's always significant. So if you can get a funder that comes in for three years, two, three or four years, but it's.

If you don't have the, the safety net of another funder who's also going to commit to the extended three or four years, we're back at square one, right? I can't capacity building, I hire a staff person. We got that person on for three or four years now I'm struggling to see how I keep that person on.

Melody Capote: For what, you know, what, what do we shift? Who do we let go? What do we let go? So there isn't, um,

there isn't a str a a a plan in place by philanthropy or in partnership with our organizations to say, how do we make this work? Which brings me back to the succession plan and the transition plan. What is the model that will work for us? Do we merge with another organization? 'cause everybody is struggling.

Job, everybody. Right? So do we merge with another organization? Do we fall under the umbrella of a bigger kind of safety net or organization? Do we rebrand or redefine ourselves? Do we get smaller? Do we decide we can't do all these things? So we'll do this. [02:38:00] Do we sunset? Do we close? Not an option. Not an option.

Don't gimme that thing. But I'm just, but I'm just saying, you know, these are the, these are the conversations at 50 that we're having. We, I just gotten two calls and emails from organizations that are at their 40 mark, um, who are saying, for many of us, we started these organizations. We don't have a retirement plan.

We don't have a 401k. Most of the founders left their organizations are about to leave with maybe some level of a severance package, but realistically, what does that even look like? Right. So these are the things we're all dealing with now. And I have two organizations that have reached out to me saying, you know, how did you do it with the founder left?

And how are you doing? You, we are hearing, you are talking succession yourself. I, yeah. I can't be, how much longer can I be here?

Melody Capote: But I can't get up and leave. Now I wanna make sure this organization is stable. I wanna make sure that we, you know, that, that the plan for succession is one that we can effectively implement.

Um, I have to think about my own future. So, you know, I am okay with stepping down in leadership, but I don't know that I can totally walk away. I want to make sure that whoever stays, whoever comes in, whatever it looks like, that the mission of the organization remains. So does that mean being named to the board so that at least there's somewhere with institutional memory that says Uhuh, right.

But being on the board is, doesn't pay. Right. Right. So those are the things, right, that we are, that we are dealing with now. And I've been thinking about this now for a little over a year. Um, [02:40:00] am I ready? I don't think I'm ever gonna be ready, but I'm more comfortable talking about it. And I'm really, again, because of so many of you coming through the doors that I'm like, you know, we're good.

If there's, there's a future here that says the future leaders, the future, um, um, folks responsible for kind of amplifying this work and amplifying the, the mission. We're good. There are enough of you out there, you know, so that it would be different. I'm like, you know, holy smoke, how are we gonna do this?

There's no one prepared, but there are, there are a lot of folks ready. Um, so that's kind of the process we're going through now and or beginning. We haven't started it yet, but I'm comfortable with the conversation. I'm comfortable with being able to talk about it, you know, with you and assuring that when we do this, and I'm thinking in the next two, two to three years, but in the next two weeks, that when we do this, we do it well.

I'm not gonna say we do it right, but that we do it well. Well enough that I'm comfortable the new person or people. 'cause we're saying, you know, what's the model? Is it two directors? Is it a circle of leadership? You know, we come from

a people that do things tribally in circles and so on. What is the model that works?

Um, I came into the position saying that I didn't want the pyramid corporate model, and we tried different ways and we still fell into the pyramid corporate model. And so, again, if it's gonna take us two years to train in a different model or train in a different model of leadership, if it's going to take us two years to decide what do we look like in two years to kind of fit that model, that's the process now.

And I want to assure that that happens seamlessly or as seamlessly as possible. And [02:42:00] gosh, if we can get out of these four years, right, with a new leader, new leadership in this country with a different, um, narrative and a different agenda. But if not, you know, so all of those things are the what has to be considered for us to kind of determine where are we going, you know, what do we look like in the future?

And having these conversations with other organizations that are all kind of in the same place.

jah elyse sayers: Mm-hmm.

Melody Capote: To see where, where, where we had, where we had, where we land up, where we land up, um, with our heads up high, with our heads up high. So that's where we are.

Yeah. Yeah. I'm like, okay.

jah elyse sayers: I wanna, I want to end there. You do? Okay. Yeah,

Melody Capote: That's fine. Yeah.