

Name of Interviewee: Joseph R. Attamante

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Additional Materials: 2 Photos.

Interviewer: Victoria Lizotte, Donato DiGeronimo, Jane Eliasof

Date: 06/03/2018, 03/20/2019

Location: Crane House and Historic YWCA

Introduction

Joseph R. Attamante, an Italian American, shares recollection of his childhood. First the diverse neighborhood of the former Cherry Street, Pine Street, Bloomfield Avenue, and Mission Street and later his family's home on Midland Avenue. Childhood memories include many adventures on his bicycle and the diversity of the town. He has special memories of the traditional Italian Christmas Eve traditions, and he mentions three men who were positive influences in his life, including his uncle and Montclair Council member Ralph D'Andrea, Midland Avenue neighbor Bill Balch, and Montclair Public School teacher Joseph Belisle.

He discusses his time as a Marine stationed state-side during the Vietnam War, where his English degree from Montclair State landed him a position as a writer. He mentions what things were like during the Newark riots. After the war, he was a high school English teacher. In retirement, he is active with veterans and peace organizations.

Due to technical difficulties, only a portion of the audio from Joseph's first interview was captured ("Joseph Attamante Audio Recording Part 1"). Former MHC Executive Director Jane Eliasof sat down with Joseph a second time to try and capture what was missed in the first interview ("Joseph Attamante Audio Recording Part 2"). The transcripts for both interviews are below, with the more recent interview transcript listed first.

[TAPE 2-Joseph Attamante Audio Recording Part 2, conducted 3/20/19]

This second oral history discussion with Joseph (Tape 2) begins with discussion of his first childhood neighborhood and recollections of the local businesses (former Cherry Street, Bloomfield Ave., Mission Street), including soda fountains and his father's shoemaker shop; he describes the diversity of the residents and business owners. Very vivid memory of wine-making in the basement of the Cherry Street home and traditional Italian Christmas Eve traditions. His family later moved to Midland Avenue. He recalls learning and playing the accordion at school functions. Then he was off to college at Montclair State, served stateside as a Marine during Vietnam; he shares how his feelings about the war evolved. He mentions several men who were very influential in his life. He touches on his teaching career, the Newark riots, and returns to his childhood with recollections of adventures near and far on his bicycle.

[Jane Eliasof (JE) introduces herself. She is the interviewer on this recording.]

JE: This is Jane Eliasof, and I am sitting here with Joseph Attamante at the Montclair History Center on March 20, 2019. And we are recording an oral history as part of the Montclair 150 Years, Many Voices, oral history project. Joe has a second recording as well that is available through our oral history too. *[There had been technical difficulties with the first recording so a second interview was conducted]* So, we'll begin with Joe telling us a little bit about his early years, and when he lived in Montclair.

JE: Hi. I'm Joe Attamante, and I grew up in a place which is no longer there: Cherry Street, which ran parallel to Bloomfield Avenue between Bay Street, or Bay Avenue, and Pine Street. Parallel to Bloomfield Avenue. I lived there until I was seven [00:01:00] so it was my early years, and the number of the house was 5 Cherry Street. There was a hill, and we would go up the hill. In that street there were sort of a diverse mix of people, there were Italian Americans, there were Blacks, and so on. So, I grew up with a diverse group. If you walked, well, up the street, and you took a right at Pine Street, there was a pedestrian bridge which crossed the railroad tracks, and ran into, what is that street on the other side? I can't think of it right now. But in any event, it ran to Mt. Carmel Church in that area, so I remember always going over that bridge to go to church or whatever. Kind of an interesting area. Back in the early '60s there was a redevelopment urban renewal plan. My uncle, Ralph D'Andrea, happened to sit on the board, he was the director Director of Parks [00:02:00] - Recreation and Parks, and Open Lands I think it was at that time. So, they ruled that that area was a blighted area. I don't recall it as a blighted area, but back in the '60s that's what they were doing, so they leveled the entire area, what you see now, and took down the bridge of course, the pedestrian bridge, and all those tracks are gone. There's only that Montclair Station at the end, which is still, I understand that's being -- that's an issue project, it's definitely an issue. But in any event, I recall once he said to me -- I went back there, I think it was '68, '69 --and he said, the only thing still standing was the wine press. My grandfather and my father had constructed a wine press, and to press the grapes they used a house jack, [00:03:00] and it was all concrete. So, I remember them making wine with that. And so, he said the only thing -- it must have been very sad for him. I didn't see it myself.

JE: The only thing of the Cherry Street house was the wine press?

JA: No, of the whole street.

JE: Oh my gosh.

JA: It was the only thing he saw, so imagine how that impacted him 'cause he had grown up there. My uncle [Ralph D'Andrea] is rather well-known in town. He was instrumental in preserving the Bonsal, if you know the Bonsal area, which I've been communicating with them, and that Bonsal Preserve has been under threat apparently, many trees removed. But in any event, that was Cherry Street. Now, I'm thinking if you took a left and went to Bloomfield Avenue there were two things that stand out in my mind. There was a department store, my sisters worked there when they were very young. By the way, I'm the youngest. I have one sister remaining who's 90, and they [my sisters] worked in a place called Joe Becker's, [00:04:00] and it was an old fashioned department store. Across the street from that was a five and dime, which don't exist anymore. On the right on Pine Street was a place called Lewyt's, I believe, Drug Store. And I have memories of that too, of course. Drugs stores in those days not only dispensed ice cream and drugs, but were sort of almost everything, you could pick up almost everything in those days.

So, down the street, if you took a left, I'm giving you sort of the lay of the land here too, there was a place we could cut through from Cherry Street, there was a little alleyway, it was called Mrs. Riley's. And that was an old fashioned candies and bread [shop], and that sort of thing. Across the street from that on Mission, and this building is no longer there, Mission Street, I think it's still empty yet, I think it is, was a shop that my father owned, it was a shoemaker shop, Joe's I think it was called. [00:05:00] I think 260 was the number.

JE: Do you have any photos of it?

JA: I might, I'd have to dig them up. If I do have them I'll bring them.

JE: Please send them along, yeah.

JA: Yeah. And next to him was the Subway Shoeshine Parlor, and that was owned by Blacks. And so, there were always Blacks and whites, and we always got along extremely well. There were trolley tracks down the middle of Bloomfield Avenue in cobblestones. Now that existed until, I think, oh the early to late '50s, I'm not exactly sure when those trolley tracks -- you could find that out -- left.

JE: They're still under there.

JA: Oh, they're buried?

JE: Yeah.

JA: Oh, yeah. So, it was dangerous crossing the street or driving a car cause your wheels would be -- I remember some of that vaguely.

JE: They would veer when you got in the trolley tracks?

JA: You'd be grabbing on to it. And on the left was, let's see, there was Nick Soda's, yeah, I think that was the name, S-O-D-A, that was a poultry shop, people picked up chickens [00:06:00] and things. And I'll think of some of the other stores there.

JE: And did they have live chickens that you'd go for?

JA: Oh yeah, as far as I know. And again, those are not strong memories, but I have memories of it because they would take those chicken feet I remember people had. And I would never eat things like that I remember. Anyway, would you like to know some of my family background?

JE: Yeah, I'd love to have some of your family background. And then what I'd like to get into is if you have any memories, when you say you remember them making wine, just think of those memories from Cherry Street before we move onto your next part.

JA: Okay, good enough. Yeah, I do. And they were both, and I'll segue back to this, they were both from a place called -- my family, both my mother and my father, and my grandparents, a place called Lacedonia, Italy, which is Provincia Avellino in Campagna, Southern Italy, about 60 or 70 miles inland, that would be east, from Naples, just to give you some idea.

JE: [00:07:00] And they're a lot of people from Montclair from Lacedonia.

JA: Oh, absolutely. That settled in this area, and I think mainly because they had cousins, people who were relatives, that took them in and gave them succor and sustenance, and so on. As long as they needed it. Yeah, the wine. Yeah, they would bring in grapes from California, and those days, they were mixed grapes, and in those days they were cheap. I

think they were like less than five dollars a crate, now a crate is a pretty big thing. In any event, they would blend all the stuff together, and I remember them putting them in the oak barrels, and they would clean those oak barrels out, they'd have to burn them out, and so on, the old oak barrels. They didn't make a lot of wine, but enough for themselves. And my grandfather, and my father did it too, he always had a gallon of wine down by the side of the chair so when they would have lunch or dinner, or whatever it was. In this house at 5 Cherry Street we were on the second floor, and the third floor, [00:08:00] and I remember the third floor was very cold, so in the winter there was an electric heater, which was very dangerous when you're taking a bath or something, but people did those things, no one was ever hurt. The second floor, we lived. They [grandparents] were on the first, but they spent most of their time in the basement in the kitchen, which was a kitchen. So, I spent a lot of time with them, so that's where I really picked up a lot of Italian, so I can still -- can get along with that because they spoke Italian, but there's no one to speak to anymore. And then I'll tell you, my cousin came over in the '60s from Italy, my father's brother, and of course at that time I had to pick it up and speak with him. But yeah, the wine was interesting. My grandfather, just to tell you something about my family, my grandfather was a shepherd, and I don't have a lot of memories of him because he had Alzheimer's later [00:09:00] in his life. It wasn't called Alzheimer's then, it was hardening of the arteries, and so on, and so forth, and he had very bad vision. But he made me a little flute once, and I still have it. It was bamboo, but I didn't have a reed, so you couldn't play it, but still he did it by hand. He carved things...very interesting. I still have a cross, with a spear, and attached to it, and what else was attached? A lantern, the cross of -- and I think my aunt, who was an artist, painted an image of Christ on that wooden cross. Very interesting stuff. But he was pretty good. He also carved things out of brass, my cousin has one of them I think, for making macaroni, and it was like, what would you call that, sort of a wheel thing, there were several of these. But it took a lot of time to carve solid brass into a long spiral implement, and a couple other smaller things [00:10:00] that I recall.

JE: So, when did he come over?

JA: My mother was five years old when they came here, so it must have been early 1900s. My father was 18, so he was much older. And again, from the same town, all right? In any event, in fact the entire family was from that town. Interesting town when you go back there. So, more about the background? Cause he was a shepherd, my father's background, and his father before him, and I think maybe before him, they were shoemakers. In Italian it's *calzolaio*. And his little shop, very small shop, and I remember some of the old-timers coming in there for shoeshines, so that was one of my duties, as I was young I would [00:11:00] shine their shoes, and they would sit there and philosophize, or whatever they were doing there in those days.

JE: In Italian.

JA: Yeah, in Italian, English too, kind of back and forth. But my grandfather lived in the basement, there was a coal furnace, and I remember they had to shake the ashes out, do that kind of thing, and I remember the coal deliveries, and all that business. This would be alien to most people now, I think. And they kept a lot of hot peppers hanging in the doorway.

JE: Was that to dry, or was that to keep away evil spirits?

JA: No, I think it was -- who knows, it might have been to keep away the spirits, but I thought it was too dry. (laughter) At least I did think so at that time, good thought. And the wine press was there, and it was a very small area. Then upstairs was the living room. Now, they used the living room but not a lot. It was something about Italians, they didn't have it covered in plastic, [00:12:00] you always hear this about Italians, but it wasn't covered in plastic, but they didn't use it a lot. (laughs) This is a fond memory, too: Christmas Eves were big in a lot of Italian families, they would get together, and we'd get together there. And I remember when I was a teenager, I worked in a shop, there was a shop right on Grove Street, so I would make it there by six or seven after work. And I have fond memories of that, and then people would exchange gifts, although we didn't do much of that, our immediate family didn't do much of that. When they passed away in the '60s, my grandfather first, and my grandmother died in 1964 I think it was, my uncle took up the flag of the Christmas Eve dinners, and it was a wonderful thing he did every year. [00:13:00] And they must have spent a week or two just assembling everything. He had his mother-in-law living in his home on Grove Street, Grove and Dodd I think it was, so they helped. But he did a very smart thing, they had some people they hired to do the dishes. So, they could enjoy being with us. But he not only did all the so-called seven fishes, but they had a roast, they had all kinds of other things, and it was a wonderful affair. My cousin was always there, and we still see her, my first cousin, one of my sisters would go later. The other sisters stayed with the immediate family, which is interesting, because in most Italian families you'd think they were closer, not true in this case. So, in any event, that was a wonderful, wonderful memory. I have a tape of one of those. I have it on tape of 1984 [00:14:00], no, I have two. I don't know if you'd like to --

JE: I'd love to see them.

JA: -- make copies of them?

JE: Yeah, I'd love to.

JA: They're old --

JE: VHS?

JA: -- yeah, VHS. One is '72 or '74, the other is '84. Still, they're records. What else?

JE: Tell me, so you were at Cherry Street until you were seven, and then where did you go?

JA: Then we moved to Midland Avenue. 114.

JE: And why did they move? Do you know?

JA: I don't really know. I was so young. It wasn't discussed that much. But that was difficult for me because I had so many young friends on Cherry Street, and I had to make new friends, so I kind of withdrew. And I did make a few friends, but I often wonder what would it have been like if I had stayed there, my life would have been completely different. But anyway, so I went to Rand School, and George Inness, and then onto the high school.

JE: [00:15:00] Was the community on Midland as diverse as it was when you were on Cherry?

JA: That's interesting, I'd say it was more diverse. Because there were fewer immigrants there. There were old-style Americans. Next door, I'll tell you about him, next door to

us, and until he passed away, and he passed away after I moved away, long ago, was Bill Balch. And I think you have one of his recordings here, his family went back a long way, William Atlee Balch. And there's a Balch Museum in Beverly, Mass. And when he passed away in 2000, I think it was, he asked me to look over -- take care of some of his affairs. We tried to give some of those things to the museum, and they didn't want them. They took some things, but there were some things they should have taken. That's another story. But he became a good friend.

JE: And what is the Balch Museum about? [Note: Balch family emigrated to America in 1623.]

JA: His [Balch's] family. It was one of the earliest families. There's a genealogy. [00:16:00] I think you have it in the archives, some of his recordings.

JE: I'll have to look it up. B-A-L-S-H?

JA: No, B-A-L-C-H.

JE: C-H, Balch.

JA: So, it's English, low German background. In any event, he was there next door to us, he kept to himself. I remember him playing the piano. But he befriended me, and I would often go over and he'd help me with something like geometry or something. Math wasn't my forte. In any event.

JE: That's why we're English majors.

JA: And I remember looking at the old books. He had a wonderful bookcase, an old bookcase, and I would look at Dante, the Longfellow translation, or look at some other older books. It was fascinating stuff. And I would take care of his cats if he went away, and I would take care of the furnace and that kind of thing. And we would bring him food once in a while. He didn't socialize a lot, but he would occasionally. He kept to himself, but he was a very persnickety person. Across the street was a Mrs. Fischer, [00:17:00] F-I-S-C-H-E-R, next to us at 112 was Miller, notice the names are not Italian American. In any event, those people had been there a while. He was raised in that house, he was born and raised in that house. Very interesting story. So, then what happened was, my brother-in-law, and my sister moved in with us for a while. They lived in the same house, and then my parents helped them purchase the house next door when the Millers passed away, or something happened. And so, they lived next door to us for a while. Okay, a little (inaudible) claim there. But other than that, I'm trying to think of the other people on that street. Yeah, there were some Italian names, [Befatto?], there was a Hungarian family, the Fay's, who were Irish American, [00:18:00] lived next door to Bill Balch.

JE: So, Germans, Italians.

JA: Yeah, Irish.

JE: Irish.

JA: A mix of people. But we didn't socialize-- we didn't know many of those people by name. You know, people would wave, but it was kind of interesting that that didn't go on there, whereas I think at Cherry Street if I had lived there longer, I think that would have happened, a little more socialization. But in any event, I developed friends from Central Avenue who were Black, and some of them have passed away. I was in touch

with...there was a John Davis, there was an Edward Teal, I know he's passed away, who was my age group. I didn't maintain those friends a long time, just through high school, that sort of thing.

JE: So, what are some of the memories you have of either Rand School, or Montclair High School?

JA: Rand School, okay. And I'll do George Inness too. Since my mother forced me to [00:19:00] play the accordion, and so I had this accordion, and I took lessons. There was this very famous guy, Tedesco, who I think was a distant relative, he had an accordion, a music store. So, I went there for lessons reluctantly, but I went. So, I could play pretty well. When they had a Latin concert or something like that, they'd ask me, and I had to haul my accordion literally as a kid, and this thing was heavy, I'm holding it, putting it down, holding it, putting it down, to the school, to the auditorium to play Stars and Stripes Forever, that was one of my favorites, John Phillip Sousa. And anything else, I remember there was a Latin concert, so that was a big memory, it was Rand and George Inness at least initially. There was a teacher there, I'll talk about a couple of influences, one of the influences in my life, Bill Balch. Very big influence. In fact I spoke -- I gave the eulogy at his [00:20:00] funeral. And my Uncle Ralph [D'Andrea], I'll tell you more about him, and a Mr. Belisle, who was a teacher, a science teacher. Now, in sixth grade it was, I think fifth and sixth, I guess I was a naughty boy, I think I talked. So, in those days if you talked and the teacher -- I remember one teacher who shall remain nameless-- I can't remember her name anyway--they would put you in the book room if you were a bad boy or something. I was relegated to the book room.

JE: Describe the book room for me.

JA: It was a small room.

JE: Like a closet.?

JA: Yeah, a closet adjacent to the classroom, it was where they had books and things, and there was a window, and I actually enjoyed it. It was supposed to be a punishment. So, there I was, and I remember one time, Mr. Belisle came in, he started talking to me, and he was very friendly. And I had him as a teacher in sixth grade, [00:21:00] and so we kind of developed a good relationship there. In a way he sort of rescued me in a way because -- well, I shouldn't say, it sounds sexist, but the women teachers would do this to me. One time I was putting on a jacket...it was in fifth grade I think, and she apparently had been to Mexico, and I understand her being upset, and I think the edge of the jacket had caught a clay figure, something like a cup, it broke. She was (inaudible), and my mother was called in, the whole thing. But it was an accident. I think I was forever blamed after that. That was one teacher. So, in any event, Mr. Belisle, and then I had him for science later on in seventh grade, or eighth grade, one of the two, yeah science, general science I guess it was. Then he formed a club at the YMCA, which was much more open than it is now, the YMCA people would go in, and we'd play ping pong, there was a club [00:22:00] for kids, and I think it was called the Eagles. We'd go on little trips. Went out to West Jersey, Annandale, that area. I remember looking at frogs. He sort of influenced me--he was from New Hampshire--in developing a love for nature, and it's stayed with me since. I'm sort of an environmentalist, a preservationist, much to the

chagrin of some of the officials in town because I'm the local curmudgeon, but that's the way it is. He lived at the Y. I don't know too many people who live at the Y.

JE: Permanently?

JA: Pretty much, yeah, as far as I know. And then he would go back home occasionally. I don't know which town in New Hampshire. And he would work at the Y desk, I remember even in high school I went to visit him a couple of times. [00:23:00] And I tried to find out later about where he was, what had happened, and I never was able to. And that's sad. Cause there's a bible he gave to us, cause he came to some of the family events, a graduation or something. He was Joseph A. Belisle, inscribed it [the bible] to me, to us. And I remember him sitting there at that desk, and we would talk. And one time we were talking about truth, beauty, and the good, Plato. I don't know how that happened, but in high school, he said well you're not -- but in any event. So, he was a great influence on me. I wish I had been able to find him later, it's rather sad. But in high school I became very withdrawn, I was a very shy guy. But some of the people you might have here, I don't know if you have them on record, the Rutan's also lived on that street, on Midland, they were across the street. And one of the Rutan girls, I remember, she said, "Hello, Joe." out the window.

JE: Was that Grange? [00:24:00]

JA: Pardon?

JE: Grange, was that?

JA: Grange, no, last name was Rutan, R-U-T-A-N, yeah. And they were a large family, I remember them kicking footballs out in the street. You really want this kind of memory?

JE: I would love those kind of memories, yeah.

JA: My uncle [Ralph D'Andrea], I mentioned something about my uncle who was on the council. He was also a football coach. You know the Clary Anderson Arena?

JE: Uh-huh.

JA: And then there's the Fortunato Field. Next to the Clary Anderson, because they ran out of parks to dedicate, that little park is dedicated to my uncle. There's a stone with a bronze plaque that was dedicated back in early 2000 sometime.

JE: And his name again?

JA: D'Andrea, Ralph. He was principal of Lincoln School in Nutley, he was also a coach. Interesting story of the football team and the baseball team, the Greater Newark Tournament. [00:25:00] When I was in my graduating year, '61, the team was undefeated except for one game, and that game was against Nutley. I remember saying this at our 50th reunion, it was Gary Testa who was one of the quarterbacks—he's since passed away—and one or two others of the players, and I said, you know, I wasn't at the game cause I was working in Shop-Rite, but I heard about it cause they lost by a field goal. And I said the only game you guys lost my uncle was the coach, and I said I'm sorry but -- (laughs) -- he was a good coach. When they did the dedication there were a couple of the players there, and I remember a couple of the Black guys who were linemen, of course you called them negroes back then, it was Black people, and they loved him. They said he was a tough guy, you know, when they block and do all that stuff, he would not just tell them what to do, he would do it [00:26:00] too, so they

respected him a lot. But he was very well respected in town. In fact, Donato can tell you something about him too.

JE: We actually got more of a football collection now as well.

JA: Do you?

JE: Yeah. I'd be interested to take a look and see what I find with his name. So, some of the -- you mentioned the people who were influencers, did Mt. Carmel Church play a role in your life?

JA: Not that much. Not that much. In fact, at one point they wanted to make me an altar boy, I never did that. I never did it, thank God, but that's just aside. But no, I went to church kind of -- my father was not a church-goer. And I think that was common with a lot of Italian families, I'm not totally sure. He was more of a scoffer about the church, to be honest, and I picked up some of that. He was an independent thinker that way. He was not educated, neither one of them were, but he read a lot, and we would often discuss newspaper articles and so on. So, in any event, I remember you had to go to confession, right? Well, I would trudge over the -- notice the word I'm using, "trudge," and I would go there and I would go to confession, reluctantly again, grudgingly maybe. And then when I got a little older I said I'm not going to go to confession, and I stopped. And I didn't tell my mother. So, my mother -- my father and I would go to mass, when I was very young I would go to mass, but later my father and I would go, and my mother would be doing something, she would go earlier or something, for the holidays. So, it was Easter or it was Christmas, or something like that. But I think we went mostly to make my mother happy. Whereas in my family, my nephews and nieces, they are very strong Catholics. Interesting, isn't it?

JE: Yeah.

JA: Yeah. So, no Mt. Carmel. I was baptized there. It's still there. Apparently there was a battle there. They were going to close it. And that would have been a loss [00:28:00] because historically I think it means something, it stands for something. We did go to Immaculate Conception too. That's still there.

JE: After you moved to Midland? Yeah.

JA: Yeah.

JE: So, you graduated Montclair High School, where did you go to college?

JA: I went to Montclair.

JE: Living at home.

JA: Yeah. The influence on that, because I mentioned I could have gone to Drew, I had been accepted there, or Rutgers, and my uncle was the influence. He said you need to have something practical, and he said teaching and so on.

JE: Was it Montclair Normal School at the time? Or did it become Montclair State College?

JA: It was Montclair State at the time. I think it had just --

JE: Just switched.

JA: -- switched over, but it was small. Compared to what it is now, it's nuts.

JE: I know, it's huge.

JA: If I go up, I'm lost. So, yeah, and majored in English. I told my -- you don't want to hear these little stories, they're tiny stories. Anyway, somehow I have a love for -- some reason had a love for Irish literature, John Millington Synge, and [00:29:00] Sean O'Casey, and people like that, and one of the professors said, "Was your mother Irish?" I said, "No." (laughter) That just stopped him in his tracks. Do you have to have an Irish mother to love Irish literature? You didn't. That's interesting, isn't it? JE: Okay, we're good.

JA: Okay. Then I graduated, but if you remember, the Vietnam War, that was '65, so all I could do because in those days there was no lottery, there was a draft, so I was 1A. So, I substitute taught, and then of course they called me. And I went, as some others didn't go, but I went, and went to Newark for the Armed Forces qualification test. And they said we need one more for the Marines. [00:30:00] So, I sat there like everyone else, and they pointed to me. And rather than going to Fort Dix, where I would have gone if I were drafted normally into the Army, I went to Parris Island, South Carolina. I called home and said, guess where I'm at? When I got there I thought it was madness, all these people were screaming and yelling, and there I was. And I said, oh my goodness. And I had graduated college mind you. (laughs) So, I got there, and I remember some of the drill instructors saying, "You think you're smarter than everybody,?" I said, "no." You don't want them -- some of the southern task-master drill instructors, right? I never saw any real brutality, but it was -- they would strike people. I guess they couldn't get away with that now. But I never saw any real brutality, what I would consider to be real brutality. But I remember one time someone would complain or something, I said, "Well, look, you had a choice, I didn't. [00:31:00] I was drafted." And I was very fortunate though because I was sent to -- we went infantry training, and I didn't want to stay in to become an officer or anything like this, so they put me, they made me a household goods interviewer, which meant I'd interview people who were being sent over for household goods shipments. And then they said after about six months, oh, you have a degree in English, and they called me in and made me a journalist. Which would have even been more likely to go overseas because they needed combat journalists, but I was fortunate. So, I spent two years at Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station.

JE: Where's that?

JA: That's in North Carolina. And a lot of the guys there had been to Vietnam, and it was very sad because I talked to them, I heard them talk, I saw things, people would [00:32:00] wake up with nightmares, PTSD we would call it now, we didn't then. So, that influenced me. I was opposed to the war even then, so I was mulling it over in my mind... what would I do if I were sent over there... would I go to Canada, which is what some people opted to do? But I never had to make that choice. This is carried over now, I never engaged in any protests, but since I've gotten out I've been involved with a group called Veterans for Peace, we were involved in all sorts of activities to end wars, and so on. One of the guys who was president of that group, since passed away, what was his name? David Kline. Anyways, he'd been shot three times, left for dead. And he said one time, I think this is recorded somewhere, that he saw a muzzle coming toward him, he'd been shot in the knee or something, and he's sitting down, [00:33:00] and he sees him, and then he fired first and killed this guy, this Vietnamese, and he looked at his personal effects, his papers, and he saw pictures, and he saw family, and he said, "This is

wrong what we're doing." And that turned him against it, this fellow is a human being just as I am. So, that's very meaningful.

JE: So, you never went over to Vietnam?

JA: No.

JE: And how long did you serve in the States?

JA: Two years.

JE: Two years.

JA: And that was it.

JE: And then you came home to Montclair?

JA: Yeah.

JE: And --

JA: And then I began teaching, I applied.

JE: Did you face -- I've heard about how there were issues with people who came home.

JA: Not true. All I know is we were very quiet. I remember there was one guy, his name was Webb, and a fellow -- there's only one person I still communicate with who lives in Ohio, the rest of them I don't know what's happened to them, but he was never sent [00:34:00] there either. He was sent to Okinawa. We went to New York City, we were on leave for some reason. And this guy wanted to wear his dress blue uniform, and we said to him, I don't think that's too smart to do. Because we would always wear civilian clothes. So, he did. I don't remember anyone mocking him. He was very self-conscious anyway. But there's a book, which is rather interesting, called *The Spitting Image*, which kind of throws that -- belies that idea because someone researched that, I think his name was Lembcke, there were no recorded instances of anyone being spat on. In fact, the spitting went the other way, not soldiers spitting, but pro-war protesters spitting on the hippies and those sorts of people. But it's not true. That was popularized by the Rambo movies. There were some scenes in that movie [00:35:00] which tried to justify the war, where Sylvester Stallone talks about all that. And I've talked to people too in addition to this literature that there was none of that. People were quiet.

JE: Well that (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

JA: Yeah. It was a very embarrassing sort of thing because I think a lot of the guys realized that this was a mistake, more than a mistake, I called it an atrocity, quite frankly, and I've spoken on it, I've given speeches about it, I've written about it. Some of us feel rather passionately about it. And some of it has been rewritten, history has been rewritten and revised so that it's portrayed as, I think it was Reagan who said it, a noble cause, which I don't think it was. In any event.

JE: So, you came back to Montclair and you started teaching?

JA: Yeah, pretty much immediately. I was accepted at Nutley, they were going to take me there, and then I went to [00:36:00] Hanover Park because I decided that would be better for me. What else?

JE: And that became your career.

JA: Yeah. Pretty much.

JE: What grade level?

JA: High school.

JE: High school, I had a feeling you'd say high school.

JA: Yeah.

JE: And how long did you live in Montclair then? When did you move out?

JA: I was married, when was that, so I was 29. Yeah, 29. How long was that? It was a long time.

JE: So, you lived your formative years here.

JA: Yeah, pretty much. Pretty much. It was a nice house on Midland. I had the whole third floor. Once my cousin, when they left, they were there a couple of years, that was a rather sad story because my father and my uncle hadn't seen each other in 43 years, and they were raised by different mothers because their mother passed away, my grandfather married again. [00:37:00] So, when he brought them over here he got them jobs at Prudential, it took a long time. He was a tailor, I'm sorry, he wasn't a -- my cousin was at Prudential, my uncle was a tailor, but my father had to get them jobs to get them over here. Got them over here, got them jobs, did all this. But they were different people, and it was very sad because I think my father expected something else, but it wasn't the same. One time, this is a funny story, he played the trumpet.

JE: Your father?

JA: No, no, this is my uncle, Vito. One morning, it must have been really early, it's a Saturday, he's playing the trumpet outside of the window and they're trying to get him to quiet down, people don't do that. In any event, yeah, he [Vito] was a tailor. He went back there in '70 or '71, went back to Italy, and I carried some of his bags, and I said, this bag is heavy. [00:38:00] Well it turned out, in those days silver was in the coins, he had amassed this silver to take back to Italy. Anyway, after that, when I went to Italy as a young man, a year or two later, he took me all around that town.

JE: So, he moved back permanently.

JA: Yeah, but not my cousin. He's still here, he's (inaudible), he's not doing very well, no, I have to visit him. My younger cousin, yeah.

JE: One question that I've wondered about, you told me that your grandfather was a shepherd. Clearly there's not a lot of shepherd opportunities here in Montclair. What did he do?

JA: No, what did he do? That's a good question. Well, I know he did this, they used to call them ditch diggers. He did that manual labor for a while, he did gardening for some of the wealthier families. I know this, not too many specifics. He also lit the lamps in Glen Ridge, those gas lamps, he did that.

JE: That's a great --

JA: Isn't that a great --

JE: -- that's a great story, yeah.

JA: Now I didn't see him do it, but I know he did it. [00:39:00] So, all right.

JE: There's a wonderful picture on the Montclair Public Library's historic images database of the Italians digging ditches to lay the sewer on Church Street.

JA: My father worked on what used to be, up here, the Montclair Hotel on the top of the hill here, which is no longer there. And I think he was a hod carrier, you know what a hod carrier is, carrying the bricks in wooden forms. Now, he was a shoemaker, but he did that I guess when he was a young man. Again, I don't know the exact years, but he did that, he told me that. He played the clarinet. I never heard him play the clarinet, but the mandolin. And I have the mandolins, unfortunately they're falling apart. I tried to get them put together. And my aunt, who died in '96, she was in the Bloomfield Mandolin Orchestra, wonderful lady, this is my uncle's -- this is my mother's side. Remember, I didn't have very many except for my Uncle Vito on that side. [00:40:00]

JE: Would you say that you -- it sounds like to me that the Italian culture was very pervasive in your life when you were younger.

JA: It was, and it wasn't. Interesting because Montclair High, I was going to say this anyway, was diverse, very diverse. There must have been, I mentioned there were Blacks, also there were wealthy whites, and they weren't Italian Americans. This was before West Essex, so the kids from Essex Fells, who were quite wealthy, and some of the ones from Upper Montclair, so we mingled with them. And I remember, and again, we met just before the reunion, the 50th reunion back in 2011, and there was a Black football player, and so on, and we were talking about this. We said, we all got along, no one ever -- so that wasn't that racial animus, which came a little later, not too much later, [00:41:00] in the '60s and '70s, because I think there was some unrest at Montclair High. Let me say a little about --

JE: Yeah, you address what you want to address.

JA: In '69 there was a parade for Buzz Aldrin, who was a Montclair native in 1969 down Park Street. That's a highlight. And of course his home (inaudible).

JE: Do you remember when he landed on the --

JA: Oh yeah.

JE: -- what was your feeling when you saw a Montclair guy landing there? Did it not --

JA: I wasn't that --

JE: You weren't that impressed?

JA: No, I took it as a matter of course. What else would they do? But no, my sister, now she tells this story, she sat next to him in school, but she was too shy. Old Buzz, he's still around, you know. I don't know how old he is. But he's still around. He's still kicking. That's one of -- oh, I'll mention something else about Bill Balch. [00:42:00]

JE: [noting the time] 11:54.

JA: But Bill Balch, some of the fond memories of him. He had a boat down on City Island, always had these sailboats that he bought. And he would take me, and then when my nephews were growing up next door, he took them too. He was just a nice guy. And later in his life he would serve the neighborhood kids cookies and ice cream. I mentioned that in the eulogy too of him, because he was a wonderful guy, he really was. And a big influence. .

JE: He passed away when did you say?

JE: Early 2000s.

JA: He was 98.

JE: And was his family living with him? Or did he live alone?

JA: He had a nephew that tried to inveigle himself into his life, and I think it was for -- he didn't have much money. And it was very sad. He asked me, he said, would you, he asked me to watch over some things because he was worried about his attorney, and he had a wonderful caregiver too, so I helped. [00:43:00] And I feel good that I did that. It was a good thing to do. Relatives! I'm trying to think, I mentioned Urban Renewal?

JE: You mentioned -- yep. Make sure you got everything you want covered, and then I have a couple more quick questions to ask you.

JA: You mentioned the service, right? The riots in '67 I was in the service.

JE: Down in North Carolina.

JA: Yeah, but we would come on weekends. And so, I would drive people up, and they'd give you some money for gas or something. So, there were some guys who were living in Newark who happened to be Black, and I remember dropping them off on a Friday, I guess it was, Friday late, and dropping them off, and okay, we'll pick you up on Sunday. Well, the riots intervened, they weren't there. So, it's like what's happening, I had to get back to the base. They managed to get back, [00:44:00] but they told me that, you know, they were in civilian clothes and everything, but they were put up against the wall by the National Guard, and they said wait a minute, let me get my ID, I'm in the service. And they managed to get back, that's just a little story. And I remember one other time I could see the smoke. This time I must have taken a plane, yeah, I could see the smoke coming up from some of the fires in Newark.

JE: Wow.

JA: During the riots.

JE: Wow.

JA: So, that's a story. There's someone else who did a film of that, they called it the Newark Rebellion. You might have that on file somewhere.

JE: Newark Rebellion I haven't heard. There's another one that we did, I think it was Newark 60 -- or Riot '67, or something like that.

JA: Yeah, someone did a film about that. I talked to them, yeah, see if you can find it.

JE: Yeah, let me just go through. So, the '60s, what do you remember [00:45:00] about JFK's shooting?

JA: Well, I was in college '63, and yeah, I do remember that. That was something. It's hard to put that into words because so many years have passed, so much has happened. Of course I was in shock. And I was still a young man. A friend of mine, for some reason he wanted to go to The Village, it was either that night, or the night after, and so, we went to Greenwich Village. I didn't drink, but we drank, so maybe I was impacted more than -- you know? But I came back that Sunday, and of course that Sunday who was it that was shot? Ruby was shot. That was a nightmare because the way those things occurred in that sort of pattern, a feeling that there was more to it than -- although that's never been proven-- [00:46:00] than met the eye, and was accounted for in the Warren Report, right? Who knows.

JE: And is there anything else in terms of what you would do, and how you would play after school when you were younger?

JA: Yeah, we played. (laughs) Whereas kids don't play --

JE: No video games? (laughter)

JA: We missed out on that one. But no, no, kids, you always had something to do. I remember riding bikes all over Montclair. I mean, you could, the traffic wasn't -- and you'd go to Upper Montclair, we'd go everywhere on bikes. And in those days they would spray, it must have been DDT for mosquitoes, and we'd ride through those clouds. I'm lucky I haven't come down with some horrible disease.

JE: Or an extra arm or something.

JA: Thinking there was nothing to it. But yeah, I mean, simple things. [00:47:00] You would, well one person had a BB gun, I never had a BB gun. You'd run around, you'd play. Oh, cowboys and Indians, and you'd have cap pistols, and stuff like that. Do kids still have cap pistols?

JE: I don't think so.

JA: But I mean, you know, there was no -- and you know, rough house or whatever. Yeah, and you'd go down to -- I remember going down to Toney's Brook, which runs under the school, and there was a big deal, there were some tunnels, and you'd have a flashlight and you'd explore under there. You'd walk around and you'd think the street is up there, and you'd hear the cars, and the high school is above. And just exploring. And there were hills between, let's see, there was a hill at Central Avenue, there was another hill, was it Walnut or Chestnut? These were hills, we called them the hills, and they weren't developed, but they were little mounds, they weren't very high, [00:48:00] and we would go to those and play. But simple things.

JE: And you would leave in the morning, and you'd come back at night, and your mom --

JA: Yeah, well sometimes she was worried. One time, some older kids tied us up, and my mother -- she got this guy to come with a club looking for me, and there we were. What was it? I was tied to a tree or something. They did it as a joke. But he was ready to give it to him, this guy with a club. But luckily I was okay. That was the scariest moment. And then Eagle Rock was a big thing. That was a big place to go to before -- I mean, it's relatively developed now, it wasn't so developed. Yeah, I would go to Mills Reservation, which is a long way from Midland. We'd go up there, and go up there. And oh, Garrett Mountain was a big destination. You could ride a bike along Valley Road, there were quarries there.

JE: Where Lambert Castle is now. Towards there.

JA: Yeah, there were quarries there, and it was dangerous. [00:49:00] But when you're a kid you don't think that's dangerous. And again, it wasn't developed, not like it is now. I've been there recently and it's just not the same.

JE: Do you have anything you want to -- any burning thoughts that you -- I know you had your list. And we've covered some fun stuff.

JA: No, I appreciate the opportunity to do this.

JE: I appreciate your patience with us with the [technical] problem that we had [with the first recording], and I hope that all of this works well. I'll be mortified if it doesn't.

JA: I hope so. I'll never forgive you. No.

JE: Please do.

JA: Thank you, Jane. Appreciate this. Thanks.

**END OF AUDIO FILE -TAPE 2-Joseph Attamante Audio Recording Part 2,
conducted 3/20/19**

[TAPE 1-Joseph Attamante Audio Recording Part 1, conducted 6/3/2018 - due to technical difficulties, the first 26 minutes of the interview are not recorded]

This original interview (Tape 1) begins with discussion of visits to his ancestral home of Lacedonia, Italy. Joseph then discusses growing up on the former Cherry Street and then Midland Avenue, his college years at Montclair State, time served as a Marine during Vietnam, his career as a high school English teacher, his later work as an advocate for the environment and justice causes, he recounts his family's Italian Christmas Eve traditions, touches on the various political views of the 1960s, and mentions three men who were positive influences in his life, including his uncle Ralph D'Andrea, neighbor Bill Balch, and Montclair Public School teacher Joseph Belisle.

Timestamps -Original interview 6/3/2018

[Interview begins mid-tape, with Joseph Attamante (JA) and Donato DiGeronimo (DD) talking about a man named Rocco Caputo. The conversation then moves to Lacedonia, where Italy. Recollections about Montclair begin approximately 3:00 into the tape]

JA: Rocco, I know Rocco.

DD: He's like a tour guide, like I'm a tour guide here.

JA: He's setting up a restaurant. No, that's not the same guy.

DD: But that's Rocco Caputo.

JA: Caputo, yeah, I'm sorry.

DD: What was that -- I used to hear about Lacedonia as if it was like Shangri-La.

JA: No.

DD: Only cause nobody had ever been there. And then I was finally there it was like -- how did that feel to you when you were there? Because I still think about it every day, that experience, I've been there about five or six times now.

JA: I've been there twice. That first time in '71 or '72 when I was still single.

DD: I felt a connection right away. It just felt like my ancestors walked along here, and I still --

JA: Oh, the second time more than the first I think. I was with my wife, and my cousin was there. My cousins came -- okay, the second time was in the '80s I think, yeah, in the

'80s. And we were staying in a hotel, [Albergo?] in Italian, right? They came and got us because you don't do that. We're going -- [00:01:00] and they had a wonderful place there. But they've since moved to Turin, to Torino, actually Ivrea, which is Northern Italy. But they would have none of it. How did I feel? I remember my wife said this too, the first night we arrived we were -- I was trying to sleep, they were having a feast, *festa* in Italian, and they're playing the trumpets and doing all kinds of things, and I'm trying to sleep. So, she said this is like a Fellini movie, you know, Federico Fellini?

DD: I'll look it up.

JA: You look it up. Look him up, wonderful Italian director. In any event, they take us to their home. And they thought because we were Americans that we'd want pizza. I said, no, no, *mangia tipico*, which means eat typically. Went to this place, you would not know it was a restaurant, and I remember we goin there, and we were having some sort of pasta with whatever it was, [00:02:00] and I said this sauce tastes like my mother's sauce. And that's unusual because each person's sauce is different.

DD: That's exactly what happened.

JA: That happened to you too?

DD: Well, I wound up in a restaurant of my cousin, and I didn't really know my cousin, and it was exactly the same. It was like handed down ... here you are.

JA: And wherever we traveled it looked as though, yeah, the people looked like my wife would say, gee this people look like relatives. Well, maybe they are, I don't know. But anyway, on one of the buildings there was our name, the family name, "Attamante" in stone. So, I don't know. But in any event we walked all around there. Something called a *passeggiata*, which means after a meal or something you'd walk at night. It's called a *passeggiata*. It is a wonderful tradition.

DD: In the summer every family is out, no one's watching television, they eat late.

JA: I hope they still do that. That's right.

DD: They're all just walking arm in arm, and the family just walking around the street and stop and talk.

JA: Even the men do that.

DD: [00:03:00] There's cafes there. They do that in most towns in Italy.

JA: So, you've been there several times?

DD: Yeah.

JA: Good for you.

DD: It's beautiful.

JA: I'm going to give you some more Montclair -- unless you have another question.

VL: No, it's kind of like --

JA: So, I'm going to roll on, do I have time?

DD: Keep going.

JA: To roll on here? Okay, I remember riding bikes in those days of course people didn't wear helmets, I had a JC Higgins, and then I had a three-speed after that, which was stolen at the Shoprite, but we won't go into that.

DD: Where do they buy it?

JA: Sears -JC Higgins was their brand. And one time I ran into the back of a car, we had to straighten it out, but I was all right. But we rode all over up to, and I was thinking about this when I was driving here, Bradford Avenue, you know, Bradford Avenue, and it's kind of uphill. Back there were cliffs and quarries, and I'd go rock hunting there. We'd also go over to Garrett Mountain, which is a long way to go. And there was no [00:04:00] concern about cars, now you'd kill yourself, I wouldn't even do it as an adult riding around here now, but it was amazing. Also, a little tiny memory about riding the bike, they used to spray for mosquitos out of Jeeps, I don't know if you remember this, and we would ride through that mist thinking nothing of it. I'm surprised I haven't come down with some horrible disease.

DD: We had friends who used to work for the County, had a County job, and they would run around in these little Jeeps and spray the squirt things --

JA: You remember this.

DD: -- with this poison. And if they'd see you they'd just spray you with it. And you chased them and said, spray us, spray us.

JA: No one thought of it as being deadly or harmful.

DD: So, we had DDT all over us.

JA: Going back on Midland Avenue, this gentleman had a very big influence on me also, was a man by the name of Bill Balch, who was a bachelor [00:05:00] all his life, and towards the end of his life, I was hoping he was going to reach 100, but he didn't, he was like 99, he wanted me to watch over some of his affairs because he didn't trust his lawyer. He told me. (laughs) So, I said sure, I would. Because I remember growing up with him he would take me out on his boat at City Island. He had a sailboat. He used to take my nephews, the Mostaccios... did you know the Mostaccios? Who were next door, this is my sister's children who are now adults. In fact, one has passed away, if you knew Ronnie, Ronnie passed away. In any event, Bill Balch was a wonderful influence on me. I would spend time there.

DD: What did he do? What kind of --

JA: What was he? An accountant I think. He was in the National Guard for a long, long time, was a warrant officer, just a tremendous influence. In 1969 on Park Street, you probably know where I'm going with this, I remember seeing Buzz Aldrin, there was a parade. Buzz Aldrin who was raised in Montclair by Anderson Park, yeah, by Anderson Park. [00:06:00] They had a big parade for the second person on the moon, which is okay. Where was I? All right, I talked about my ...grandparents...father's shop, I talked about this. All right, I used to take my nephews, well, that's minor, but I remember taking them to see Yankee games at the Yankee Stadium. Get cheap seats.

DD: And sometimes they would take bus rides.

JA: Yeah, yeah. But I used to take them personally when I was older too. There's more I could say, but go ahead.

DD: Keep going.

VL: Is there any --

DD: You've got it all (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) for us.

JA: I'm going to tell you about -- okay, this is a little sad. But when my father passed away -- and, by the way, the way it happened was, how he retired, was that I think it was '69, and I had just gotten out of the service in '68, and he was robbed, and he'd never been robbed before. And someone held a knife to his throat. [00:07:00]

DD: And where was this?

JA: In his shop.

DD: Oh, in his shop.

JA: And then it happened again. And he told me, he said these were not people from around here, because he knew everybody around there. And trusted them, they trusted him. So, then he retired. And it must have really shaken him up because he only lived another five years maybe after that. But he had cancer, and so on. We have moved a shoe refinishing machine, this is a huge thing. Have you ever seen the old shoe shops? This thing is like from here to that wall with the belts and all of this, very heavy duty stuff. Moved it into the basement in Midland Avenue, because he did some work there. Yeah. We decided --my sisters and I -- after he passed away, and my mother passed away, to donate it to the New Jersey Historical Society, which was on Broad Street, I think, in Newark. [00:08:00] They said sure, we'll take it, along with other things, implements, all sorts of things. Donated it to them. So, one day I said we'd like to see a picture of it, and we're going to come down and see it. They said, we don't know where it is. I said, what? You don't know where it is. I was furious. They'd moved. So when I found out, I go down with my sister, and I had written a letter because we entrusted them with this. And the way they got away with it was, once you entrust someone with -- you sign away all your rights. I found out, I did some investigating because I spoke to some of the people and wanted to know where this thing went, because you just don't move something that weighs 500, 600, maybe 800 pounds. It took several men to move it out of the basement only up a couple stairs into a big truck. When they moved they left it there somehow, [00:09:00] and I saw some of the documents, and they were talking to each other via email, some of these people, I got some of this, and they left it there, and apparently someone came, who knows, maybe chopped it up used it for scrap metal. They just left it. But that to me is such negligence that anyone would do that. So, that's a sad story.

DD: You said you were in the service. Where were you -- did you get drafted?

JA: Yeah, I was drafted. That's a funny story too. Because in 1966, which was sort of when the Vietnam War was really picking up.

DD: You were 23 maybe.

JA: I had finished college.

DD: Where did you go to college?

JA: I went to Montclair. So, I was 1A now. Some of the guys who went down who played football, I never played football, they were not drafted because they had some injury. So, there I was, I'm sitting there, completed the test--the Armed Forces qualification test-- and I'm sitting there, and they said, we need one more for the Marines. [00:10:00] Look here, look there, me. So, I thought I was going to Fort Dix. So, I ended up at Parris Island with everyone yelling and screaming at me. You've seen some of the movies. You should see some of those movies, it's true -- like Full Metal Jacket and all of that. But anyway, drafted --

DD: You graduated Montclair State what year?

JA: Sixty-one, and then finished college in '65.

DD: So, then you were out of college a year or two.

JA: Well, almost, not even quite a year.

VL: Was there anyone drafted with you from Montclair that you knew?

JA: No, no. Well, wait, I found out there was one later. His name was Suffes, S-U-F-F-E-S, Park Street towards the end by the cemetery.

DD: So, what happened at Parris Island?

JA: I'll tell you. At first they had me -- well, they send you to something called ITR, which is Infantry Training Regiment, everybody has to go [if you are] in the Marines, Camp Lejeune, [00:11:00] which is up the road, it's in North Carolina as opposed to South Carolina. And the graduation is a big thing for the Marines and all that, and my parents came down by train, and all that business. So, I didn't know what I was going to do. And then they made me a supply person. So, I would interview people who were being sent overseas, officers who were being sent overseas, their household goods, I'd work with civilians, it was a pretty good job. And then they called me in after about six months and they said, we see you have a degree in English, so they made me a journalist. So, I was a journalist, a writer. And that would have been even more reason to go to Vietnam because they needed people like that. So, I was sent to Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station, which is again in North Carolina, you can look it up, and expecting that I would receive orders to go overseas, never did. In fact, have you heard of the [00:12:00] Tet Offensive? You've heard of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. Just after that, we were discharged. It was amazing because I thought we were going to be "extended" -- that was the term.

DD: You were there two years.

JA: Exactly two. In March of '68, the Tet Offensive was in January and February, we thought for sure we're staying. So, we celebrated...a couple of us...there was a guy from South Orange, [Farnam?] was his name, and we left, and we were very happy, let me tell you.

DD: So, you stayed stateside the whole time.

JA: Absolutely. And there were other people who of course I was drafted with who either died or got heavily into drugs.

DD: How did you feel about being drafted at that point?

JA: I was opposed to it. I was opposed to the war, period, because of all the reading I'd done. But if I had been -- I would have gone. But I would have gone in protest. That was an interesting sort of thing. I was torn because I said, "Gee, I know people are going to Canada, would I do this?" [00:13:00] but I never had to really make that choice. So, I was spared in a sense. In a number of ways I was spared because I know people who weren't.

DD: Your career after that was what?

JA: Taught. I went into teaching. After first I applied to Nutley, and was accepted there in Nutley, and then because Hanover Park was a little closer, cause I was living in Parsippany at the time, so I quickly decided to go to Hanover Park.

DD: So, you were an English teacher at Hanover Park.

JA: For 27 years.

DD: High school.

JA: Yep. And then I left, and I've been out a long time out of teaching, a long, long time. But I've been doing all sorts of things. In fact, you don't want to know this though, involved in environmental causes. I just arranged a meeting -- I pick up on my uncle with this -- I was coordinating something to watch over a park which is being sort of devastated in our area, and I do a lot of this.

DD: Are you still in Parsippany now?

JA: No, Morristown. [00:14:00] Yeah, that's my love now. There's a group called Veterans for Peace, I'm active with them. I'm also, even though I'm not Jewish, there's a group called Jewish Voice for Peace, which is advocating for Palestinian rights, and I'm involved in that. So, I do all these things. I take after my uncle like that. He was very involved in all these things.

DD: But was he more conservative than you are?

JA: Absolutely. This is where we disagreed, about the Vietnam War. We had quite a disagreement, but I always loved and respected my uncle. I want to tell you another story about him. Every Christmas Eve he would have a big get-together because it was tradition with Italian families and the seven fishes. So, we would invite everybody there, including my sisters, only one [of them] ever went -- my older sister. She went later for coffee. I don't know why that was. But they were always invited. I loved going. And of course my mother and my father, and I'd see my cousins there, Leanne[00:15:00] and [Ralph?] Jr. You know, Ralph Jr. passed away, too. My first cousin. And George, I don't know if you knew George and Rae. My aunt, did you know my aunt? Ralph's sister?

DD: I know them, yeah.

JA: My aunt was quite a character too. My aunt -- okay, anyway, they would do this big dinner, and I'm telling you she was a Fastiggi, and the Cestones, that was Leann's side. They were such hosts and hostesses, she was wonderful. And her mother, Mrs. Fastiggi, Lena was her name, she lived with them, I think they were divorced, for 50 years. You don't hear about that much. She lived in that house. In any event, they'd do a wonderful spread, really wonderful. That was one of my highlights. I have one of those things on tape with my mother and father dancing.

DD: You started to talk about in regards to politics, did they fight over that? [00:16:00]

JA: No, not there. We'd have little talks but --

DD: That was a big thing in the '60s during this war, we were having dinner and everybody was fighting. My mother... I went to Montclair State, and my mother was like, "I'm sending you to college, " ...not that they were paying for anything because it was so cheap.

JA: We paid, I paid.

DD: I paid too. [She'd say] "I'm sending you to college, and we're getting a Communist."

JA: Really? You were opposed to the war too?

DD: I was at Montclair State. Yeah, we were --

VL: During that time at Montclair State, it was pretty common to see riots or protests on college campuses --

JA: No.

VL: -- did Montclair ever have any of that?

DD: No?

JA: Not there, I don't remember any. You were a little later.

DD: I'm after him by a couple of years. And during that time Montclair was pretty conservative, Montclair State was pretty conservative. Yes, very. And they would have these guest speakers come in.

JA: I don't remember this at all.

DD: And Mark Rudd was --

JA: Mark Rudd, sure. Protest at Columbia.

DD: -- at Columbia. A very famous name, he was at Columbia, was actually from South Orange --

JA: Free speech. [00:17:00]

DD: -- at Columbia University, and they led, they took -- at Columbia and at Berkeley during those years, they took over the administration's office.

JA: At Columbia for sure, not at Montclair. Not at Montclair?

DD: Not Montclair, no. But he was the person in charge of that, so he was a big name.

JA: But also out in Berkeley was Mario Savio, free speech movement. You can look these guys up -- you probably know about this. You've got to read about all this stuff.

DD: But it was very interesting. So, this was going on, and now the whole world is fighting, like our world is fighting, our parents were very conservative, we were like the war is crazy. And Mark Rudd came to Montclair State to speak in --

JA: See, that I didn't know.

DD: -- well, this was probably '68. And he spoke, and Montclair State being so conservative, they were throwing things at him.

JA: Is that right?

DD: They chased him off the stage. He eventually -- now after that the FBI was [00:18:00] trying to arrest him, he wound up moving to Cuba and living in Cuba for a long time.

JA: I thought it was only the left wing that did that. I'm joking. You know how that works if you watch the news.

DD: Very conservative campus during those times.

VL: That's so crazy cause now it's like one of the most lib-- it's known as a liberal arts campus.

JA: It's really a liberal liberal. (laughs)

DD: We were all education [majors], it didn't become a liberal arts college till I think '71.

JA: Yeah, that's true. It's true. But not everybody who went there became teachers though.

DD: No, but you studied to be a teacher.

JA: Anyway, I'm going to show you --

JA: This is my uncle being sworn in. In the middle. For the Montclair Council when they were sworn in. I forget the exact year, but it was in the early '70s.

DD: McLaughlin was on the left.

JA: You know these people.

DD: I know some of them.

JA: And this is my father teaching my -- well, they played together, my aunt. [00:19:00] It's not a good picture. That was my aunt, Ralph's sister, that's my father, he taught her how to play the mandolin. And she was a member of the Bloomfield Mandolin Orchestra.

DD: This is the woman?

JA: That's my aunt. And my father there. I don't know what year that picture is.

DD: Now you had how many sisters?

JA: Three. One is left.

DD: No brothers?

JA: No. And I'm the baby. (laughs) They tell stories of handing me, as a baby, to the other one. Cause the oldest one was 14 -- the one I'm visiting today is 14 years my senior.

JA: The one left. So, they would pass me around, you know? I don't know if they were entirely happy about that. This damn kid. In any event, I shouldn't be swearing. Now I'm going to show you -- do we have time for this?

DD: Sure.

VL: Yeah, we have about like five minutes left.

JA: Oh, I could tell you this is Bill Balch, [00:20:00] the fellow I was talking to next door, and he'd always put these flags out on the Fourth of July with my -- that's my wife sitting there. That's when he was in his 90s. As I said, he was born and raised in that house. And I tried to get -- the Balch family is kind of famous. In Beverly, Massachusetts there's a museum, and I tried to get, what did he do, he gave most of his things to the Presbyterian Church, 'cause he was Presbyterian, 'cause people asked me this, and some things we tried to get to go, I said are you interested, I contacted the people at the Beverly Museum, the Balch Museum in Beverly, Mass, and they said "no." But we still were able to give some things. I wasn't able to go up, but some of the neighbors went up there and brought some things.

DD: And Walsh was a pretty big name actually in Montclair.

JA: You knew the --

DD: There's a couple different Walsh families.

JA: Balch, not Walsh.

DD: Oh, Balch.

JA: B-A-L-C-H, yeah, I think it was German-English, [00:21:00] I have his genealogy too. You want to see some of them? Put this around -- this is Bill when he was young, I didn't know him then, but that's his mother, he loved his mother. So, he was a big influence in my life. There were a couple of people. I named three people, my uncle, Bill Balch, of course my parents, other than my parents I should say, male influences, and a teacher, his name was Joseph Belisle, B-E-L-I-S-L-E. You remember that name?

DD: He became the principal later.

JA: I don't know that.

DD: Or the vice principal.

JA: He might have. I lost contact with him. I mentioned that I read, but I would get in trouble too because I was a talker, you probably know that. (laughs) In grammar school. So, they put me in the book room. Maybe that's how I got to love books. [00:22:00] But anyway, they'd stick you in the book room. So, one time he came in there and he started talking to me. And then I had him in sixth grade, and then I had him again in junior high as a science teacher. So, he was quite an influence in my life too. And we had him to the house, and when I graduated he was there. I tried to get in touch with him, I thought he was in Florida somewhere, he must have passed away.

DD: Who were the women in that?

JA: This is my wife. The good-looking one. This is when he was much older.

DD: Is she from Montclair also?

JA: No, no, she's a Staten Islander. Those tough Staten Islanders, boy, I'll tell you.

DD: And the other woman in that picture?

JA: She was a caregiver we managed to get for him. Go ahead, we don't have a lot of time, so you want to -- I've got others still I could talk to you about.

DD: Well, you and I are going to be -- we could do the Italian stuff.

JA: Absolutely.

DD: Separately. Not separately, but a whole other thing with that.

JA: But Montclair [00:23:00] ...really diverse, a wonderful place. And one of the major changes that I notice now --the traffic aside-- is that... everywhere...restaurants! There are so many restaurants here. When I was growing up there were maybe a couple, and nobody went to them because you couldn't afford them.

DD: They all had soda fountains.

JA: Soda fountains were very big. Soda fountains.

DD: Do you know what a soda fountain was? Even if you went into a drug store they had a soda fountain. Kresge's, Woolworth's, you had soda fountains, you would get sandwiches, ice cream, whatever.

JA: Like an ice cream soda. You can still get them in some places.

DD: And there was about twenty of them in Montclair, like soda fountains. No restaurants, and that's where you would go eat.

JA: But there was a place on Park where people would go, the Wedgewood it was called, the Wedgewood. Oh, you know about this place. There was an Old King Cole picture up there, and people would go there sometimes.

DD: Did you go there?

JA: We didn't.

DD: We never went there.

JA: No, but we knew people who did. And then there was the -- what was that? [00:24:00]

DD: The Three Crowns.

JA: No, no, the Three Crowns was smorgasbord. I know that, but I never went. The one on Grove Street. What was the place they tore down, they put in the townhomes now, help me out. The inn?

DD: The Marlboro Inn.

JA: The Marlboro Inn. I took Bill there a couple times later in his life, it was a nice place. And they should not have torn that one down. There was a battle about that one in Montclair.

DD: I worked there for a year.

DD: You did work there? It was lhomey, it was kind of nice.

VL: The last question we have is usually kind of like a catch all.

DD: What does it mean to you to be a Montclairian? What does growing up in Montclair mean to you?

JA: Well, I mean it's always home wherever I go. It's still home. Although I've established a home somewhere else. And I don't think we'll ever reach that level of diversity again, sadly, I think races, [00:25:00] ethnicities, at least when I was growing up. I know later on there were a lot of things that went sour between the races, and ethnicities. But... got along with everyone. People never said you were Jewish or you were -- I don't remember any of this, this prejudice. And people say there was a lot of prejudice towards Italians, but I never saw it. And that was something to be treasured, and it was almost unique. That's a good summary.

DD: Did that emanate from Montclair, or Montclair and your family, and just the way you grew up?

JA: It's hard to say. I can't really assign it. I don't remember a lot of prejudice. In my family there were people that didn't like Blacks, I know that for sure. But not my immediate family.

DD: But one of the things that my friends and I--we say all the time now--is that growing up in Montclair there was such an intangible it's almost hard to explain.

JA: Yeah, it is.

DD: And when you see that next to like [00:26:00] other people like if you grew up in Parsippany --

JA: Or Morristown.

DD: -- and just how the people were growing up, and how they interacted with people. Even on the fire department we started getting a lot more young kids coming on the fire department from Verona and Caldwell, their life experience was so different, and when they had to blend in with --

JA: Even that close? Verona and Caldwell?

DD: Right.

JA: Interesting.

DD: You could see the difference in the kids from Montclair than from Verona, how they just interact.

JA: Probably because of the diversity I think.

DD: Hard to explain though.

JA: Isn't it?

DD: It's hard to explain it in a concrete form.

JA: It is. Now, granted in classes they were sort of separated because there was tracking, if you did very well, and you did all of this, and you had a high IQ you were in the higher level classes. I was not in all higher level classes, but I always was in English. So there weren't many Blacks, there weren't in fact, I don't remember Blacks in those classes. But I don't know why. I never thought of it. [00:27:00]

DD: They used to have opportunity classes cause it was tracking, so they would be --

JA: There was a three-level, a two-level, a one-level, and then a 1A, I was in the 1A in those things.

DD: Is there anything else you would like to add?

JA: I think that's a good summary. What I just told you, I think that sort of thing.

**END OF AUDIO FILE -TAPE 1-Joseph Attamante Audio Recording Part 1,
conducted 6/3/2018**