Interviewer: David Marash
Interviewee: Valerie Capers

[00:39]

David, the one thing I'm a little bit concerned about, I'm mentioned it to Margaret too, but she said it was OK. I don't really really have the gospel in my background.

[00:57]

Oh, you're very funny. My Christmas contada is really a very eclectic work and of course being a musician and you know, being African American I love gospel and I'm aware of gospel and there were sections (if you want to ask me about that sometime) of the contada that I used the gospel musically because that was the way it was going to work.

[00:32]

Well I do know that I was six when all of that happened and from the stories that I've heard from my relatives, my grandparents and uncles and aunts and things they've talked about it. It was really, it was quite devastating for my parents particularly during the time when I was in the hospital because I was really gravely ill and they weren't sure that I was going to survive and daddy worked for the post office as did so many African Americans and things that were artists in that era in New York. It was a way that they could have a very secure economy for having a family and all. Others just told me that daddy could go to work for weeks and just was so grief stricken about it and my mom used to sit at the window. I just started 1A in a brand new beautiful public school building and I hate to tell you the lot now is all rubbles and anyway, she used to sit at the window, I understand, and look at the kids and start to cry when they'd come in for school. All of that didn't touch me because I was in the hospital at the time. But I was at the Children's Hospital at Columbia Pres and I was actually in isolation for over two to three months in that hospital because I had gotten ill from a strep throat that was undetected and that was before antibiotics and things like that. As a matter of fact, the last really visual thing that I remember and I've thought about it years later is I remember seeing kind of ghostly figures around me and they didn't have faces and they looked white. They looked like ghosts and I realized it had to be the doctors and the nurses who were working around me at the time. Once I started to get well and to recover, things became very positive. My mother and father were very concerned about how I was going to be educated and what I was going to do, so the social services worker at the hospital, who was terrific, because by the time I left hospital, I had learned to read the braille alphabet and she had conferences with my parents and told them about a wonderful school in the Bronx where I could get a fantastic education and that they could expect that I would be able to get a good education, enough so that I could be independent and take care of myself when I became an adult.

[03:35]

That's true. I wasn't there to experience it. When I started going to school, anything that might have bothered them or upset them or caused them concern was something that they never displayed to me. It was always encouragement. They seemed to be determined that this education was going to be a very important part of my life and something that I had to do and that they had to focus on in order to make it possible for me to have as normal a life as possible.

[04:23]

Yes, I certainly will. It was the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind.

[04:36]

That is absolutely correct and one of the things that was wonderful about being at the school is that they had – I think of so many things I experienced at that school and it was a school that provided an education for me that my parents could never have afforded. It was really almost having a rich girls education. I went there and lived there and came home on the weekends and what was so wonderful about the school was they had all the text books in braille, they had all the equipment that one needed to use for mathematics and geography, certain kinds of maps that were like the jig saw puzzle maps where you could pull out the countries or states or whatever you were studying or the universe if you will and you could feel the shapes and I remember sometimes we had geography tests where we had to put the map of the United States or South America or North America or something like that together and the science department had all sorts of opportunities. And then of course there was the music school and the music school they have was just incredible, a wonderful library, fine instruments and everything was there.

[06:06]

That was another experience entirely. Just getting back to the institute, one of the things that was good about it was they had a wonderful campus and so there was wonderful mobility. There was freedom of moving about. We had a baseball field. We had baseball team, softball and that was quite insisting. That was a very noisy baseball game I can tell you. But we did all sorts of things in the third and fourth and fifth grade in lower school we had gardens and I haven't since then tended a garden or weeded or grew anything, but they provided marvelous opportunities that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

[07:34]

As it was, OK, and only I'll tell you, not until this time, I'm sorry to say that there hasn't been another blind person to go through the Juilliard School. I would have liked to have seen that at some time or another after I left, but here again, that was quite a challenge. You know when I was growing up and I was like in sixth and seventh and eight grade, I remember that the high school students who were very good and had wonderful marks and wanted to go to college, it was always a question as to whether you would go or not because it didn't matter if you had the highest marks possible, the institutions were afraid of having you come to the school because they thought for one thing, they would be open to liability if a blind person hurt themselves in some way, had an accident. Believe it or not there were people who felt uncomfortable about having a person with a disability or a blind person around. They weren't too happy about that. There were faculty members in colleges who felt that they just didn't know how they were going to handle dealing with a blind person and really didn't want the challenge of trying. So doing as well as you could and being very good in what you did and excellent academically, it didn't guarantee you getting into a college at that time and I remember how excited we were when one of the guys in the senior class was accepted to I think Hamilton College. It was really quite an event. So when I came along a few years later, I knew that I wanted to go to Juilliard. I always wanted to go.

[09:24
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I also applied to Banard and I was accepted to both and it wasn't necessarily guaranteed. I would have

to take the auditions and the placement exams and all, but if anybody came along and decided maybe that they didn't think it would be a good idea to invest in bringing a blind person into the institution I could have not been allowed to enter the school. But I have to tell you that in some ways I had it simpler than some others who did go to schools with campuses and at that time it was at 122nd Street and Broadway. 122nd Street between Clairmonte and Broadway just sort of diagonally across the street from Grant's Tomb and Riverside Church. What I knew in going to that school was I knew that the most important thing to get into that school and to maybe be accepted would be that I would have to show an ability to be mobile around the building and of course learning to get around a building is a lot easier than learning to get around a campus. It takes a little more time. So I had to consider what I need to know when I first started the school. Well, I would need to know where to find some ladies rooms. I would need to know where the library is. I needed to know where my classrooms were. Maybe at least one staircase and of course they had an elevator at that time and I had to learn how the room numbers ran and the cafeteria. I never went in there by myself, but those sorts of things. So about after I registered, the next week or so, my father, bless his heart, my father went with me to the Juilliard School and we had my schedule and we walked the halls and I knew where my room numbers were and I knew where at least three ladies rooms were and I knew where the library was and so forth and so on and so when I started school, I had that wonderful sense of being mobile and being able to get around by myself and I know that that helped tremendously because there was so many things to think about. Even with all of that, I came home some nights and I just said: oh, I can't go back. I just can't go back. I feel self-conscious.

[12:01]

I remember sitting in a class room writing down braille notes and never thought about before, the braille notes sounded like thunder to me and it didn't sound like anything when I was at the institute. We were all writing braille and all that sort of business. One day I was walking down the hall and someone had their violin up against the wall. It might have been a viola and I was walking close to the wall trying to be in the right traffic in the hall and I brushed against the instrument and the instrument started to fall and the young lady started to scream and she got it in time and I apologized and I went hope and I said: oh, I don't think I can take this. But you do, you go to bed and you get rejuvenated again and you know that that is absolutely what you want to do. So I did that and I have to say to the credit of the Juilliard School. All of the teachers I had I went to them the first day and I asked them if they would give me a heads up on what would be covered over a few weeks so that I could try to get ahead and I asked them if, when they wrote on the board, would they just say what they are writing and they did. It was really terrific and when I think about from the standpoint of music and studying the piano, I kind of blank out on the first year because what I had to do starting with the end of each year is I had to sit down with my piano teacher and we had to put a program together that would cover all of the periods of classical music (contemporary) and then I would select what I would like to learn for the year. So that was important at the end of the first year because that meant that during my Summers I had to memorize the music because there was no possibility that I could go to the school in the Fall and take on the academics and the other music courses and memorize music. I just didn't have the time and so I had to use my Summer vacations to memorize concherti and sonata's and pralis and fuge's and all that sort of stuff. So that was how I worked things in order to comply with what my requirements were as a -

[14:49]

Well I don't know if that was their perception or their determination, but I knew it was mine. [laughs] I knew that going to The Juilliard School was going to give me -

No. No. It wasn't doubts or non-doubts or nothing. I was there just like any other student was and they didn't seem to, except for adjusting to my needs in the classroom and so forth and so on, there wasn't any – I wasn't pointed out or chosen out as someone who had to have special attention as far as getting an education and coming through The Juilliard School. Some of them may have had doubts about once I got in there whether I would make it or not. I remember Norman Singer said to me, you know Ms. Capers when I saw you register I thought to myself: oh my lord, how will this woman make it. But I think once I got in there and I was moving about and able to organize myself and do the things I wanted, nobody paid any special attention at all.

[16:40]

The realities were very gloomy. Very dim in the 1920's to be in Alabama and to be blind and to get any kind of education at all or even consider of moving in an area of performing, that just seemed as almost as impossible as going to the moon or something. That was just not something that could be done in the purvey for a Negro child in Alabama in the 20's. Blind as well? Which would mean it wouldn't be so easy to get out of that situation, to leave it. That's tough.

[17:38]

That's correct. And the racial situation. Yes.

[17:54]

Well I think it seems to me, putting myself in that position, my worries would be that I would want that child to survive and to be able to take care of himself no matter how far he or she may or may not get in education, I would like them to know a little bit – whatever they could. My main thing would be to make sure that they would be able to take care of themselves because as a parent I wouldn't be around forever and I would like to know that they would be able to handle day to day living without too many difficulties.

[19:06]

It was in their way of life. They have the church and there is the singing and they have their friends and their community. Singing and music is a very important part was I'm sure in that time too very important part of the Southern African American family and so that would be an immediate way of bringing them into music and discovering that they may have some extraordinary or exceptional talents.

[20:21]

Well, just as you were saying, the gospel that I suddenly became aware of was on radio Sundays. There were so many groups that came sometimes, two and three, one after another and it was just wonderful, wonderful music and I was so happy to be exposed. It's funny, CBS in the morning on radio would have gospel, it would have the tabernacle choir, and then they would have some more gospel and then they would have E. Power Biggs from Harvard. It was just fantastic. That's when I first became aware of the gospel music was listening to the radio as a kid.

[21:27]

Let me see, well the gospel music has a kindred spirit of course. We know that the gospel music developed out of the slaves and the field music and the antebellum and postbellum music of the South and as singers began to, of course they sang by road and began to develop wonderful sounds and harmonies and so forth. The gospel music is so wonderful because it is emotional, it is spiritual, it is rhythmic, it is of course an offshoot from the mother from which not only the more traditional spirituals come but from which Blues came. So we're all connected. You might not necessarily just hear Blues at the surface, but the point is that we belong to the same family; we're cousins or brothers and sisters and it's so interesting to see the popularity of gospel, how it has become such a wide, appreciated type of music and what's happened with gospel is what happened with jazz, in coming from the Blue's and the Delta Blues of the late 19th century into ragtime and swing and so forth and so we find that in the gospel from the traditional gospel music that I would listen to in the morning, Sunday mornings as a kid. The gospel music has expanded. It's become urban, it's become hip, it's become commercial. So the roots of gospel are very, very important in the whole scene of music today.

[24:51]

That's a kind of tough question. You want me to say what I think about how it influences what the audience hears?

[25:21]

I would say in general, masses of people seem to give, particularly the blind person, as you say, maybe because of literature and the Greeks and all that business. The seem to give an additional, second sight. They seem to think that we have a certain connection with things that most people do not have which gives us a very special kind of quality or gift to our music which, I guess in some cases they are hoping they will recognize that gift when they hear it. We do. Even in everyday things, we very often think that we just sense things a little differently. We hear things a little differently. I had a lesson one day in school. I think I told you this David. I was working on something and my teacher says: you don't listen. You simply don't listen. You've got to work on blah, blah, blah. I went to the library because I had an assignment to do and the librarian came to me and she said: now Miss Capers, I imagine you are very sensitive about what you hear and that you want to hear this or that you want to hear that and it was just a few minutes after I was being scolded about not being able to hear. But you know, the thing about it is, that literary concept of what blind people can do is in the back of some minds, but also the thing is that a blind person becomes very skilled in using all of the other senses that they have: sound, smell, touch. And we use them very skillfully which in order to compensate for not being able to see and I think that doing that some people believe that because we are able to do that so well that we do have some special, some additional something that kind of sets us off a little bit from everybody else.

[28:00]

In a sense you're right. In a sense you're right. Or the necessity for dealing with reality on a par with everyone else. It always takes more for us to do anything to be accepted on kind of a regular basis than it would be for you or somebody else. We always have to go beyond what is expected, beyond what is basically needed with people who do not have a handicap let's say to deal with. So yeah, we have to. We have to do things in order to even to get ourselves on a kind of level, an average level with visual people and people who don't have disabilities.

[29:13]

God David, I honestly don't know. I know today it has slacked off. I meet blind people all the time who can't read braille at all. Now that we've gotten to the computer age they. To me it would be like being – they can't read braille, they can't write braille and for me it would be like saying I can run a computer, but I can't write with a pen and pencil and we still have a need for being able to write that way as well. I would say that unless, in Alabama they had a teacher who was extremely devoted and very much determined that these boys could read so that the world would be opened up to them, maybe then, but I'm not sure that everybody they came in contact with would be that dedicated or that devoted. A lot of what I learned as far as learning to read braille I learned from sited teachers who really couldn't read braille. They had books with the designs of the letters and things like that. So I would be very interested to hear what they said. Just thinking about the 1920's, I would say that unless it was somebody very very exceptional who would take the time to really see that this young man learned to read and thus opened up the world to him, I am not so sure that that would happen.

[31:09]

A world without sight and without braille. Let me see, I hate to say it, but I think, just judging from some of the remarkable people that I know now and I was very shocked to see that they couldn't read braille or write it. I would say that today, in the 21st century that their limitations for not being able to read or write braille would not be as significant as it would have been 20 years ago. 80 years? Even I don't go back 80 years! I'm being funny. OK. I would say that 80 years ago it would be absolutely without question essential to be able to read. To be able to read the braille and write the braille. Remember we're going back before television and back before computers. The braille was the means of opening up the world, so you had to. You would have to be able to read braille just to get your basic education to read braille if you were going to be a housewife and cook. You would have to be able to read braille and write braille if you were going to communicate with your other blind friends, with letters, with all that sort of thing. You absolutely had to have it then. Now it's not as crucial as it was, but I know people who are getting along very nicely thank you without being able to read or write braille.

[33:33]

Thank you. As I said, they sometimes kid me and call me the dinosaur lady because I go someplace and I take my notes if I need to and so forth, but I am very happy that I do read and write braille. Most of the blind people I know now, it's the age of the ipod and the this and the that and they download the books. The have all ways of getting around. They go to class and take a recording machine. Like for me, that's because I'm used to it, for me it's better to write and to take the notes and that sort of thing, but that's – I'm another generation now, but they really can make it without and that's scary. Now I don't know what's going to happen with one place where it's going to be the same David, there's no place to get around it and that's the blind musician who wants to play classical music. Not jazz because you can work out your own system. I have my own system for working out for lead sheets and so forth and so on then again the computers, they're still not as blind friendly as they should be for writing and for when you do an arrangement and so forth. But the person who, let's say wants to go to Juilliard or Manhattan School of Music or Peabody and the want to play Beethoven and they want to play Bach and all that sort of stuff, they are not going to be able to do it without reading braille music. Braille music is horrendous, it's clumsy, and it's difficult, but it's the best that we have. That's where I see there is not way out. The computer, the ipods, the television and all that, the DVD's and the MP3's, that isn't going to do it when you have to learn a Beethoven sonata for example. You're going to have to get down to the basics.

[35:49]

Isn't it absolutely wonderful? Yeah. It is! It is.

[36:09]

You can hear so many things. I'm afraid this wasn't as dramatic an interview as you might have liked. Sorry I didn't have anything that was tough. You're so welcome. I'll tell Larry that I've met you and I've talked to you. Take care.