INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Alyssa Loorya

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Alyssa Loorya conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on September 18, 2023. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Transcriptionist: Azure Bourne	Session: 1
Interviewee: Alyssa Loorya	Location: video call
Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic	Date: September 18, 2023

Q: Today is September 18, 2023, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Alyssa Loorya for the New York Preservation Archive Project. And we're connecting via video call. Can you start by saying your name, and giving a brief introduction of who you are?

Loorya: My name is Alyssa Loorya. I am an urban archaeologist. I also consider myself a historian and preservationist. Most of my work has been pretty much exclusive to New York City. I grew up in the city and I still live in the city. I live not far from where I grew up, actually.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about the place where you grew up and what your relationship to history was like?

Loorya: So, I grew up in, which I jokingly call, Deep South Brooklyn, below the stop of the last glacier. And so in outwash Brooklyn, as you could say, is a neighborhood called Marine Park, and it is the stereotypical quiet suburban neighborhood. Some people have likened it, "You would think you were on Long Island." And I'm like, "Well, technically, we are on Long Island." But it was a very quiet neighborhood. My history with the neighborhood—and I choose to live here now. It was a good choice, it's near a beach, I can get into the city. I'm in what used to be a two-fare zone, which was never really a hindrance in my mind, in terms of getting into New York City, or Manhattan, as you might say. We called it The City.

My dad was a history teacher, and I grew up going into the city taking public transportation going to museums, going to Broadway shows, and basically experiencing everything that is New York. And probably my love of history, I would say, starts with my dad. He taught at Bushwick High School in the [19]70s. And I remember going—every year my mom would take me out of school for a day. I mean, it started like when I was a baby. But once a year, we would go, we would get on the train at Kings Highway and East 16th Street. Back then, you could get on the M train, and you could take it all the way to the other side of Brooklyn—absolutely impossible now—without transferring! So we would take the bus to the train, we would get on, and we'd get off and we would walk over to Bushwick High School. It would be the end of the semester, but I'd get to meet and hang out with some of his students. And so, that really kind of, I guess, started it. Because I used to help him grade his papers, [laughs] all his history tests, when I was a kid. I was one of those—well, my mother would say I was like, "Well you were just one of those super smart kids. You never needed help with homework or anything." And I'm like, "That doesn't make up for the fact that she didn't help me with my homework." But I was just always interested in helping. "Oh, I'm gonna help you grade your papers. What are you teaching about today?" And almost like pretending to play school. Me and a couple of friends, we would play school, so I think that's kind of where it started.

I was also very fortunate to have fabulous grade school teachers, and really, that base in terms of history, was just fabulous. And even friends who I grew up with, many of them did go into education, and they all have this love of history because of the teachers at P.S. 222.

Q: Wow. That is amazing. Can you tell me about favorite neighborhoods or spots that you liked to spend time in as a youth, as a teenager?

Loorya: I loved visiting my grandma, my father's mother. She lived in Cypress Hills, and she was in this fabulous apartment building, where the main entry was actually the fourth floor of the building. So it was built in on a hill, and it was on Highland Boulevard, and the back entrance was four floors down on Sunnyside Avenue. And when you went into the building, you had this fabulous view across Brooklyn, and you could just see all the way out almost to the water. [00:04:58] I don't recall thinking, "Oh, there's the ocean," but I just remember this massive, expansive view going across. It was something that my grandmother and my father would talk about—the different areas, and the neighborhoods. And she was right across from Highland Park, which had a really large, undeveloped area, and there was the reservoir there. And me and my dad used to go on hikes through the park, and walk through the park. So I always had that. That was an area that I really enjoyed and I liked. Even as a teenager, I had friends who kind of lived in the area, so I was just always around that area.

My dad loved public transportation. When he was a kid, he used to love to ride the trolleys, and as a grownup, that translated to—he loved subways. And he liked taking unusual routes, like he wouldn't take the main streets, and we would just drive through all these different areas. Even today, I can get off the Belt Parkway or the Van Wyck, and I can bypass all of these, and go through the streets to find my way into the Bronx because of the way he would just drive in and out. He just knew all these routes. And he had a fabulous memory, so he remembered all the old trolley routes and could compare them to where the subways and the buses went. He would just

kind of navigate in and out of all these areas, like East New York. So I just remember all of these streets in Brooklyn. And of course, they then would eventually tie in to my research because you'd have all of these Dutch American founding families, all these streets that would be named for them, and I'm just familiar with it. So that's an area that I liked.

But I also remember going to Kings Highway, which was nearby, and shopping as a teenager down in Sheepshead Bay, and going to the beach. I went to day camp in Rockaway when day camp didn't happen in school buildings. Brooklyn Day Camp was this expansive property. I was little—it seemed expansive, it's probably not as big as I think it was. I've gone back to my grade school as an adult to talk, and I'm like, "Wow, it's really small!" [laughs] But it was this expansive property, and it was six days a week. You got picked up at 8AM, and you got dropped off in time for dinner. We learned how to swim, and we did boating and fishing, and tennis and volleyball. All sorts of sports, and arts and crafts. It was like sleepaway camp, but in Rockaway, and it was a day camp. And then they opened on Sundays for parents and family. You could come with your whole family and use the pool. And that's kind of how I remember all of it. And Rockaway's another area I can easily navigate, proving how much sticks with you when you're a child.

Q: Yeah, that is amazing. And also, I mean the city can, especially if you rely on public transportation, the city can feel like you just pop up out of the ground, and you don't really understand where you are in relation to the rest it. But there's something about traversing those roads and coming at the same place from a different angle, where you start to make the connections, I think.

Loorya: And it was all the boroughs, except I still don't navigate Staten Island quite as well. But it was really all the boroughs. I mean, it was Queens, it was Manhattan, it was the Bronx. We used to go to the Bronx Zoo all the time. I <u>loved</u> going to the Bronx Zoo. So, I really got to know many of these neighborhoods, these boroughs.

Q: Mm-hmm. So how did you figure out how to kind of channel all these interests and skills that you had, school-wise, into college and what you wanted to study further?

Loorya: Completely accidentally! [both laugh] I wanted to be a photojournalist. As a teenager, I carried a camera around with me all the time. I still have the same camera, a Canon AE-1, and I was always taking photos. I used to go into Manhattan with friends, on my own, at a relatively young age, probably beginning around fifteen. And I just wanted to—I was very fortunate, I had traveled as a teenager even like nine, ten years old, with my parents. And I loved to write. So I just wanted to be a photojournalist, and I thought that would be great. That's initially what I started going to college for. And then fate had other plans, so to speak. [00:10:00]

I had taken time off to help take care of my two grandmothers, who were passing—they passed within a few months of one another. I basically lost a year of college, and when I went back I was taking a couple of random courses. I sat in on an anthropology and an archaeology course. I knew about archaeology. I was always interested in history and archaeology. And I was like, "Oh, I think I want to do anthropology. I think I want to switch." And then it was like, "Oh. Okay, yeah. Yeah, I want to do anthropology." And then I was leaning more toward archaeology.

But even doing New York City archaeology—being an urban archaeologist, purely by accident. I was dead set—I was gonna do Mayan archaeology. And then the summer I was about to leave and go off to Guatemala, I had a massive asthma attack, and I got a good talking-to by my allergist—who knew me since I was three years old—and he was like, "No. I don't approve. This isn't happening."

So I ended up last minute taking the Brooklyn College Archaeological Field School with Arthur Bankoff, and that was it. I was like, "You know, I like this. This is fun. I like New York City history. I want to know more." I love my hometown, I love New York. I love the culture and character of New York City. As you grow, you see things changing, and I was like, I wanted more of this. And I was like, "Okay."

And I didn't really think about it. Then it was like, "Come help with next year's Field School." And "come help," again. And then one opportunity generally led me in this direction, and one after another. Then all of a sudden, I own a company, and here I am today. Even that was an accident [laughs]. It was all accidental! But it was great. It was just one of those instances of life, the universe, putting me in the right place at the right time, and offering me, "Hey!" this little nudge. It's like, "This is the way to go."

Q: So what was the first project that you worked on with Dr. Bankoff?

Loorya: That was the Brooklyn College Archaeological Field School. I actually took it as a student. So I was taking it for credit, and that was at the Pieter Claesen Wyckoff House in

Brooklyn. And then the following year, I worked on it as an assistant. Then I spent many years working with him on the Brooklyn College Archaeological Field School, basically we dug in pretty much every borough, so many houses. I helped run the archaeology lab, and so we did a lot of good work there.

Q: Can you give me a sense of your—I guess I'm wondering about the first experience of field work, and what you were you exploring, what kind of artifacts were you finding? What were you working on excavating?

Loorya: So at the Wyckoff House—Brooklyn College Archaeological Research Center had a long history of working at the historic houses throughout New York City, and that was the first year that they did Wyckoff. I vaguely remember—it maybe have been in the leadup—they were going to be doing some landscape work, etc., and we were starting to look for the history of the property. If you know the property at all, it's kind of down in what seems to be a valley, but that would have been a very unusual place for a Dutch American farmhouse to have been situated. So we were kind of looking to see if there was anything—any evidence of how the landscape was changed and altered, as well as any remnants, considering how much renovation and buildup had been in the area, if there are had been any remnants associated with the family. I mean, it was largely disturbed, but we did find many, many roads. And it was a good first introduction to archaeology.

I often say that I am as good of an archaeologist as I am because of my experiences working with Arthur Bankoff. We've had over the years, on multiple sites, so many great conversations and

talks of the methodology that he uses. He is one of the best archaeologists I know. And I've come to know a lot. [00:14:59] You know, people joke. It's like, "Oh, I've never met an archaeologist." And I'm like, "Yeah, well, I know lots." So he is a fabulous archaeologist. And his training is old world European, but he also, being a true New Yorker, had this love of history. He and Frederick Winter had started this Brooklyn College Archaeological Research Center, and the goal was to give Brooklyn College students, and other CUNY students, the opportunity to experience archaeology without the expense of having to travel overseas, and also to document aspects of New York City's history, particularly in the outer boroughs.

Q: So what are some of the other projects that you've worked on with the Field School? I guess I'm kind of imagining this being a little bit here, and a little bit there, and maybe building up to what you wanted to devote your dissertation research on. So what were you kind of gathering and thinking that you might want to focus on?

Loorya: So, I mean, I have to say, even though when I did the Archaeological Field School, I was pretty much getting ready to do my final—like after the Field School, I did my final semester, so I was getting ready to graduate. And I was very much into my grades as an undergrad [laughs]. So I was like, "Okay, I'm thinking about this in terms of grades, whatever," but then I was fascinated. I was like, "Why is there another road? Why is there another road?" And it was just that concept of, "Okay, look how much the landscape has changed." You think of Wyckoff House, it's at that valley, but it used to be on a rise, and it looked down on everything. It was completely transformed. And that would tend to be a theme in many of the historic sites that we worked on—the Brooklyn College Archaeological Research Center—largely because it's

New York City, it's developed.

We worked in advance of them putting in a nature center at Marine Park. We did a couple of years of archaeology right off of Gerritsen's Creek, where, in the '70s, Arthur and Fred Winter had found Native American materials and remains. Now, we were on the other side of the creek, and we found a lot of evidence of landfilling and construction debris that was used to fill and stop the creek at a certain point, the development of Marine Park. And all of a sudden, the development was right here in my back yard.

Obviously, I have to say, my favorite project working with the Field School, was the [Hendrick I.] Lott House. It's what introduced me to the Lott House. It's literally in my back yard, growing up, and today. And how it came about was just me, Arthur, and Chris Ricciardi sitting and saying, "Where are we going to do the next Field School? Where should we dig? What should we do?" We had started looking at all the old Dutch houses, seeing how many were left because they were starting to disappear. And I didn't have a dissertation topic or anything in mind at the moment, and it was just like, "Oh, okay. You know that house on the bus route, on your way to King's Plaza?" It was like, "Oh yeah, that's still privately owned. Let's find out what's going on with that. It's abandoned."

And we found a lot of information in the days before the Internet. Sometimes, now, how easily we have become dependent on the Internet for research and looking something up. But we found out and met so many people prior to the Internet, and that is such a lost skill. If I had to go back and do it, I'd probably be able to—but card catalogs don't exist anymore. These things, they're

not there anymore.

And I'm like, "Oh, okay." And that led me to four years at the Lott house. We took what was a three-week—one summer semester—course, and we were doing six weeks. So we doubled the average length of time. And we just did really great history and work on the Lott House, and it led to being on the board of the Lott House. It introduced me to two of my closest friends, one of whom is a direct descendant whose father grew up in the house. [00:20:01] I'm still on the Lott House board. I took a break, I came back. I live in the neighborhood. It's really fostered that whole giving back to the idea of community.

And I never really thought about it when I was younger, or a teenager, even in my early twenties, that growing up—like P.S. 222 and all the kids in the neighborhood, we really were a community. And you don't really recognize it growing up until you have that sense of lookback. But to the point—I don't remember what year it was, but probably about ten years ago—I'm still in touch with a couple of people that I know since I'm four years old that went to grade school together, we had a grade school reunion. We invited the teachers, the teachers came out. I'm still in touch with my sixth grade history teacher on social media. I remember him in sixth grade talking about ancient Egypt, and all these ancient civilizations. He actually brought archaeology into the classroom and didn't just rely on the history book. He used real world articles and examples, and made it more tangible.

But yes, the Lott House was really a great one because we went into it with the concept of "we're going to engage the community." The only reason the house was still standing was

because of the community. The estate wanted to sell the house. They tried to overturn the landmarking. They took it all the way to the State Supreme Court. And for once, the courts did the right thing and favored the side of preservation!

So we went in there wanting to engage the community. We had a lot of support from the Marine Park Civic Association, so it really became this community event. We invited community members who wanted to volunteer to come help out. We had these two women, who, every year came and helped out two or three days a week, even on the smallest of tasks, whether it was helping straighten up the site, or to just help screening. It was a real public project. We made a point to let the community know what was going on. And the then head of the local civic association—he was in poor health and he had a little scooter—Carmine Caro, and he would come visit us every day to make sure we had everything that we needed.

And there's a whole back story to how we got access to the house, etc., and I can fill that in. But right down to—we had access to the house, but the plumbing wasn't working. So Carmine had his cousin come and help. He was a plumber. He said, "I'm going to get my cousin. We're gonna come in, we're gonna take care of the plumbing. You guys need a bathroom, so that you have water. You need more tools." And all these little things. Then he's like, "Give me some information." And so we printed out all this information—some history, a timeline for him, who we were, and he put it on a clipboard, and he'd go around. Everywhere he went in the neighborhood, he would just kind of be like, "This is what's going on at the Lott House. This is what they're doing. They're gonna come talk at the next civic association meeting and keep us informed." And it was really reawakening. It was like, "Wow, yeah. It's the community." And

this is not much different from how when I grew up, it was very much the same. Everyone was involved in what was going on in your neighborhood, and there was an appreciation of the history, which was nice.

Q: Yeah. And it also sounds like real effort on your part to not make it seem like you're there to be separate, or to fix something, or to apply some sort of approach that no one else could understand. That the potential's always there to make connections, and to explain, and to achieve that kind of engagement that you're talking about.

Loorya: Even professionally, as Chrysalis [Archaeology], working with the city agencies and clients—obviously, the decisions remain with them, but my best advice is always that it's okay to let people know what's going on with the archaeology. People are interested in it, let them know what's going on. Engage the public in certain aspects. You bring to a community board the plans, the design, things that need approval. Who's to say you can't also share a little bit of the cultural history that's going on, as well, in their neighborhood?

Q: And then even learn some, too, from the people who've lived there for all that time. [00:25:03] Can you talk about some of the things that you found at the Lott House, and what it was like to share that with the neighborhood?

Loorya: Oh, so many things! They really were fascinated. There were neighbors across the street who would come out every day, and ask what we found today, etc. But most of archaeology, it's the small, everyday things. It's generally not history-changing, in the sense of you're going to

rewrite a history book. But it is contextual-changing, in terms of understanding how people who came before us lived, and a little bit of what their life was like. And in many instances, they may be dealing with things that we're still dealing with today. And they may have had different means and methods, different products. So there was a lot of pottery, but there was also hair clips, and someone lost a beat up gold locket. There was the privy, and all these doll heads in them, where, I guess, someone didn't need their little dolls anymore. And just the heads were left with these beautiful porcelain dolls, hand-painted with glass eyes, that was fabulous. Those were great. The little pieces of everyday history.

And then of course, one of the things that we were interested in was the history of enslavement. If we would find any remnants or indications, some tangible evidence, of the enslaved who had lived on the property. We knew from documentary records that the Lotts were among the largest slave-owning family in the historic town of Flatlands. But then we also know that when Hendrick I. Lott inherited the property, including the slaves from his father, that they no longer continued on the property. [Note from Loorya: There is an unfolding history, which I am continuing to research, of free persons of color living in Hendrick's household beginning in 1800. There are also manumission documents signed by Hendrick for multiple years post-1800.] There's, as early as 1805, between then and the 1826–27 period, when Emancipation happens here, there's only one enslaved person in one record, and no other evidence of the enslaved. So we didn't know if we would find anything. It's in the North. Often, when you learn about slavery in grade school, the focus is always, almost exclusively on the South. And happily, that has been beginning to change. But in the South, you had larger plantations, you had slave quarters, you had separate housing for the enslaved. And that wasn't necessarily the case in New York City—a

much smaller area, properties not necessarily as large. You have comparatively smaller numbers of enslaved in a given household. When we say the Lotts being the largest slave-owning family, the most they ever had was twelve slaves, which is twelve too many, but that is the history.

And oral history in the neighborhood, and old photos, showed this one building adjacent to the Lott house. And as oral history and history often goes, it was like, “Oh, well, that had to be the slave quarters.” So one of the things that we were interested in doing was to see if we could find this building, and to determine if there is evidence that it was lived in, and was it an 18th-century structure, or early 19th-century structure, even, that had housed enslaved or African Americans. The answer to that was no, it was a post-1850 building. It was not stone. The foundation was stone, but it was made of brick.

The oldest portion of the Lott House, which dates to 1720, was not on its current site. It was further to the east, and was moved there in 1800, when Hendrick I. Lott built the larger portion of the house. So we were, with just a little local, oral history, we were starting to develop this larger story, and there was clear evidence that this was a kitchen. [00:29:57] The amount of animal bone, and pottery, and just all the evidence strongly pointed: this is a kitchen. We did find one plate in the kitchen. And this is where, as an assistant, or a teaching assistant, or running a field school, the goal is to allow the students to dig, so you don’t always get a chance to go in and dig. But when sometimes you find something really cool, I’d be the bad one. I’d be like, “Okay. C’mon, everyone go out. I want to dig that out!” [laughs] And there was a near complete redware plate. I got super excited, and I’m like, “Okay. I’m gonna go excavate this.”

And it stands out solely because, when we took the plate out—which was falling apart, but we had all the pieces—we noticed that on the bottom of it, there was incised in it, an X. And there had been research coming from southern sites that enslaved persons had been marking vessels, generally hollow vessels, with this mark. And it went through phases. Is it cause of ownership, etc. The generally held concept is that it was enslaved persons marking these hollow vessels for ritual purposes. And here we had this at the Lott House. And we were like, "Wow. Okay. Do we know if this has ever been—this hasn't been found in New York City before. I haven't heard of this ever being found in New York City before. Wow, okay. This is cool. All right, we're just gonna sit on this because we're just gonna digest, and we're not gonna do anything. And then until we just put all the information together and see what's going on."

And shortly after that summer's field school—and this was the first year, this was 1998—shortly afterward, we had gotten a call from the then caretaker. Because the not-for-profit had put a caretaker in the house, they had started fixing it up. So maybe it was a year later—it would have to be a year later—started fixing it up, cleaning it out, put a caretaker in the house. And she calls us up, and of course, anyone coming into the house, we were all like, "Here's the whole history. This is what you gotta know." She was like, "Oh, I'm cleaning up, I'm organizing, and I bumped my head in the closet, and it went up. It's a trap door. The ceiling in the closet is a trap door!" And we're like, "Wait, what?!" So we went, and she's like, "And there's something up there." And we're like, "What's up there?" She's like, "Rooms." I was like, "Okay."

So we all go over, and we go and explore. And we get a ladder because it's more than six feet up, and we're all about 5'5". And yeah, there must have been a larger open staircase because when

we went through the trap door—and we knew the kitchen had been redone in the 1920s when they got running water—but go through the trap door, and then there's treads of a stair that go to the second floor, and then there's these rooms on either side. And they had doors that latched on the outside, one had a cutout. And then we're looking at the chimney stack going through it. And we're like, "Well, that's odd. What's that blackened spot? And why does it have—it looks like a flat surface." It looked like a patch. It looked like there had been a cutout in the chimney there, and it was patched. We're like, "This is really odd." And it's also an odd repair because it very clearly looks like a flat bottom, and then it makes a curve, like an arch. And we're like, "Do you think people were staying in here?" And this is the oldest portion of the house. So again, taking a page from research that had been done in the South, we decide, "Okay. Let's get some light up here"—because there was no light, no windows—"and let's look a little closer," cause flashlights weren't cutting it. We go, and we have several areas of floorboards that, by our interpretation, and also, we brought in the architect for the project, and he's like, "These are just here. They've got the original nails in them." [Note from Loorya: The architect was brought in to assist with identification of architectural context and ultimately to assist with removal of the floorboards once documented.] So we decided to be like, "Okay. Taking another page from the South. Do you think there's anything under these floorboards? Things fall through the cracks of wood floors all the time." So we stick our head under the sides where there's gaps to see if we can see anything. And we're like, "Let's remove the floorboards."

So we had the architect with us. We documented everything. We removed the floorboards. And we're on the southern side of the house—cause there's two rooms, one on the south, one on the north. [00:35:00] We're in the southern room and there are corncobs, and there are a couple of

scattered corncobs, etc., which is not unusual. But then there are these two corncobs, and we're like, "Those don't look like they're just scattered in there." They appeared to be very deliberately placed, and they approximated the shape of that X that we had seen on the bottom of the plate. Again, very atypical, being from New York, it's like, "Okay. We're gonna investigate everything. We're going to take everything with a grain of salt." And we're like, "Okay. We're not gonna assume it's anything. Let's start bringing in other people. Let's start reaching out to the academic community." And that's exactly what we did.

And through probably a good two years' worth of talking to people and research, and then removing the floorboards in the other room, on the north side, we had more materials that we found. And all of a sudden, on the north side, we're like, "There's all this cloth." And wrapped in the cloth is a pelvis of a sheep or a goat, just a single pelvis, and an oyster shell that has a spat on it—a spat is a baby oyster. Then there's string, and then next to it, this little pouch, is a very, crudely made child shoe, hand stitched, random materials put together. And we're like, "Okay, that doesn't just fall through a floorboard." And we're like, "Okay, time to talk to more people!"

And again, research and talking, and after two years, we came to the conclusion, and we presented that these were deliberately placed by either enslaved persons, or persons who had been enslaved, of that heritage. The corncobs representing the Bakongo cosmogram, which is a West African cosmological symbol, representing—the central, horizontal crosshair represents the division between the world of the living and the dead—and that's a very simplistic definition of the meaning. And on the other side, on the northern side, we had a spirit cache. And that was a big deal because that was—we sort of realized this has not been found before in New York City.

And I'm going back twenty plus years now, cause we're in the late 1990s [laughs]. We're at the turn of the 21st century, and this hadn't been found before. And since then, other sites have got––older sites that had been previously excavated, where these marks had been dismissed—they had been on objects, but we didn't know what it was. So other sites have gone back and looked, and yes, these were here. They've been discovered, just nobody knew what they were. I mean, we even found that at City Hall Park. We found a vessel that was etched with a double XX or cosmological symbol. So that was kind of like, "All right. This site has a lot to say."

And that was a very interesting—not everybody was comfortable with the dialogue at the time, not everybody in the Marine Park community was comfortable with the dialogue at the time. But it was an important dialogue to start having. And that's definitely—we're twenty plus years down the road—that's definitely shifted, and it's a much more welcome dialogue in the community now. And we know so much more in terms of the life of enslaved persons and their descendants, and there's much more research happening into that aspect.

It's also led to one of my side interests, or one of my ongoing research rabbit holes, which is tracing the—in the 1830 census, we have thirteen Black families that owned property [note from Loorya: Black families that were independent households; Heads of House could have owned or leased], and they're all congregated in a very specific area of Brooklyn, not too far from the Lott House. And that's become one of my longterm interests, is tracing—because the records don't go that far, and because the Lotts did not have the enslaved people on the property past circa 1805, we don't have last names. They've been very hard to trace. But it's been one of my sidelines of research interest is trying to trace these families, along with a African American couple who

were paid workers on the property in the 1850 census, and following them.

And how Peter Sudyam disappears from the records around the Civil War period. The last document I have found thus far, relative to him, is from being part of the colored troops during the Civil War, staging on Hart Island. And after we no longer see him in the records, his whole family comes back, and lives and works on the Lott property. His children grow up there with their mother and oldest brother. So tracing their histories, and the immigrant histories of other people on the Lott property. And that's very much part of that story, and always took me back to my history, being from a family of immigrants. You know, the Looryas came in the 1870s. Then other family members come in the 1900s, and it had become this very New York story, a story of cultural changes, new people, new dynamics coming into one's world.

And I became fascinated with Ella Sudyam, who was born in the 1890s on this farm. She witnessed a rapid transformation in her late twenties, early thirties, of this rural to urban, and that was my initial thought for a dissertation was: this landscape transforms, we see it all around us constantly, and it's something that has been happening since day one in New York City. And that became something that I was very interested in looking at, and it's kind of followed through many of my projects. I always have this sense of so many of my projects seem to have a couple of common links that randomly pop up. And they were always threads of significant developmental changes of an area or properties. The American Revolution, which we would joke was following me around my whole career—the Revolution would always randomly pop up [laughs]. And this very much became a center point, this area.

And also, it really does go back to—and I've told this story so many times—being the little kid and not believing my parents when they would say that New York City used to be all farms. And super-smart three-year-old me would be like, "New York City is all concrete. There are no farms in New York!" "Yes, there were farms." "There are no farms in New York!" And it was this ongoing dialogue with my parents. My mom would tell me she remembered when Canarsie was a prairie. And my allergist, who knew me since I was three, told me about bringing home a date, and she lived way in the outskirts, and he starts hearing noises, and there were cows! And I'm like, "Really? [laughs] Really?" You guys are pulling my leg.

And then many years later, I end up digging on farms. One story was like, we found these white glass eggs. And here you have me, Arthur Bankoff, and Chris Ricciardi trying to figure out, "Why do you have white glass eggs?" Are they darning eggs? I'm thinking *Little House on the Prairie*, sewing holes. No, those are made out of wood. It's early days of the Internet, and we post on one of those early discussion groups, an archaeology group, and someone writes back, "What kind of archaeologists are you? Those are hen laying eggs." And my response is, "The kind that grew up in New York City, and did not believe her parents that New York City was farms!" So then we're like, "Hen laying eggs. What are those?" And it was just like, "Ah, okay. Great. So you put these glass eggs beneath your hen when she's not laying eggs, and she thinks she's laying eggs, so she lays eggs." [00:45:01] And I'm like, "Okay. Proof that there were chickens."

And then my friend, Catherine Lott, would share all these photos with me that she found. She had given me, "Here's a box of old photos and negatives from the 1910s. They were my father's.

They always had cameras.” There was this picture—“Oh, that’s Unc.” I mean, he was surrounded by the fattest chickens I’ve ever seen, and just swarms of chickens. And I’m like, “Okay, you have chickens. Oh wait, there’s a photo of the cows, too.” And it was like, “Yup, farms!” And then, of course, my mother being, “I told you I remember when Canarsie was a prairie. You didn’t believe me.” [both laugh]

Q: I want to go back to a couple of things that you said about the Lott House. Dive a little deeper, maybe. So you’d said that there was some tension around discussing the history of enslavement, and I wanted to ask about, I guess how—I mean, this could be maybe how you approached it at the time, or maybe how you look back on it now, twenty years later. How did you advocate? And how do you see things have changed with regard to bringing the history of enslaved people into the social history of New York City?

Loorya: I think from the academic perspective at the time, it was welcomed. I mean, there clearly was other research going on in southern areas. And you know, even history within New York City. There was certainly an interest with work at the Van Cortlandt House, which is the closest thing to a technical definition of a plantation that New York City had, and that’s in the Bronx. So from an academic perspective, it was open. Looking back on it—[pauses] I wasn’t surprised. I knew that some people probably would not be comfortable with it because it was still the time—it wasn’t a very open dialogue. We weren’t at that stage yet, where it was really being discussed more just in the general population, whether it be in newspapers, or incidents of racism, etc. I think it was just one of those topics, at the time, that still remained inherently uncomfortable for people to talk about.

That being said, you should talk about the uncomfortable topics. And I wasn't the only one involved in bringing this story. There was myself, there was Arthur Bankoff, Chris Ricciardi. We were all involved in telling that story. From my perspective, I was very open to talking about it. Now it sounds cliché, but I remember being a young child and watching *Roots* with my parents. You know, it's like, "We're going to watch this. We talk about this." My father worked at Bushwick High School, which was an almost one hundred percent minority school, and I would visit regularly. I knew many of his students. So for me, this was something that I was aware of in history, and I recognized then that it was not discussed, and it was not talked about, and very much felt that it should. But I also knew that it would inherently make some people uncomfortable because of experiences I had had with friends who were people of color, and their experiences, or being with them during an incident or something.

So I think we tried to introduce it—it's a long time ago—we tried to introduce it slowly, and to bring the conversation. And it was also a period of when there were family members and people who still would be like, "Well, oh no. My family never owned slaves." [00:49:55] And it almost seemed like that was just a gut reaction of a denial that many would take: slavery, you thought about it and you talked about it in the context of the South. You didn't really talk about it in the context of the North. And it was very much an institution here. And most people didn't realize that, or many people did not realize that because it wasn't an active dialogue or conversation. And I don't think for any moment that this—what happened or was found at the Lott House—spurred that conversation further in New York City, or the North, whatever. It was many people coming together, and who just slowly started talking about it. And it's like any idea—it starts

small, and then it just kind of jumps out to different branches. And it just slowly expands, almost organically. I really feel that's the way the conversation, and moving toward that did, spurred on by horrible incidents that happened, not necessarily because of any historic or academic discoveries. But the conversation coming to the forward more so because of terrible acts or incidents—racist acts or incidents—that have happened, that we have witnessed. And as media has become more prominent, and social media has become more prominent, that information is shared more readily, people are increasingly aware of.

And it's interesting because there are moments when I think that we had this piece of history and information at this time, when the world—for lack of a better—or the city, or the general public, was not ready for that big conversation around it. And we got a lot of attention. It was covered. Brent Staples wrote a wonderful article in *The New York Times Magazine* about it, and it got coverage and documentation. But the general public—and I don't just mean the Marine Park community, I mean the larger New York City—it wasn't ready to become more widespread, or known. And one of the things we're doing at the Lott House now, as we're getting ready to hire an executive director and we're doing more programming, is to bring that conversation back into a community that is much more ready to have that conversation. And bringing it into the local schools. So I almost feel like it was a discovery that happened at the right time, but also at the wrong time. It was something that would have gotten more notice, had it happened ten years later.

But that being said, the spirit cache items are on exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York, representing the lives of enslaved New Yorkers as part of New York at its Core. And that's a

nice—I don't want to say testament, but I love that something from so far in the southern extent of the city, cause let's face it, people think of New York City, they think of Manhattan—now they think of Brooklyn, too, but that's because Brooklyn has become a brand—but you don't really think about the outer boroughs, and how it all contributed to this larger history. So to have something from <u>so</u> far out—that people have referred to as the boondocks—and actually be there, representing such a crucial component of the composition of New York City is really fabulous. Because it is a recognition on the Museum's part, and hopefully imparts to others, that the story of New York goes beyond Manhattan Island. And when I give talks in schools or just in general, I'm very much: "New York City could not be the city that we know today without the outer boroughs." And that goes all the way from day one. It goes from, first area settled is New Amsterdam, the tip of Manhattan Island. Second area settled, in 1636, Achterveld, right down here in Marine Park. [00:55:05] Flatlands, farm. And it was settled with the specific purpose of growing food to help support the mercantilism—the capital, the trade—that was going on in New Amsterdam. And then farms were going—obviously, there were farms in uptown Manhattan, in Queens, and in the Bronx—but all of these farms were developing and existed. And people came with incentives from the Dutch West India Company because they needed to provide food so Manhattan could focus on business. And today, Manhattan runs—the blue-collar workers, the cops, the firemen, the teachers, the people who run day-to-day Manhattan or New York City—they live in the outer boroughs. They're still supporting that ability to make New York City run, and focus on business. It's a very different scale. But when you kind of reduce it, in fractions, to its simplest form, you've got the outer boroughs really being the ones building up and supporting the city. You see that all throughout the history of New York, and you see it in the waves of immigration as well.

Q: And now we can also start to see, and acknowledge, that some of that labor was happening by people who were enslaved as well, which is also funneling into building the wealth in Manhattan and just—

Loorya: All of it.

Q: —everything. Yeah. All of it, exactly. All the parts of the city.

Loorya: It's a giant complex of dominoes. They're all related. Actually, I think, it's more like a web. It's like a spiderweb, where every point connects and relies on another point, kind of like New York City infrastructure [laughs]. The infrastructure of the city is a giant web! So it really does kind of interrelate and relate. And I think one of the great things—I'm starting to have some of my projects that they're asking for land acknowledgement statements. And I kind of have a multi-level statement that can be curated for a specific area because you've got native lands, and you've got land that was the wealth and developed with enslaved labor, and then you've also got immigrant labor, and you've got all this coming through to—there was always this one focus. The business of New York City has always been business [pauses]. Or money.

Q: Let me ask you—and kind of move to the side for a second for maybe a policy question. So I have spoken to Joan Geismar, another archaeologist for this—

Loorya: She's wonderful.

Q: —this year's project. Yeah. And so she had talked about, basically, some of the city policies that enable archaeological work to happen under certain conditions of development or infrastructure work. CEQR, I think, is the policy that she talked about, the City Environmental Quality Review. Is that what it is?

Loorya: And there's also a state one.

Q: And the state one [State Environmental Quality Review, SEQR]. So earlier, you had talked about deciding where you wanted to focus the work of the field school, in the past. So I wondered if you could talk about, I suppose, what kind of opportunities that you have to work outside of the city system, I guess, in selecting the places—or whatever power you may or may not have to kind of select where you work. And then, how you get the city involved—or on a national level, or state level—with regard to National Register or landmarking, or things like that. Two part question: what is the landscape like of deciding where to work? And then the second part, when are you interfacing with these kind of city regulatory organizations?

Loorya: So, so of—not a loaded question but—so I do cultural resource management, which Joan does as well, and we don't get to decide where we work, or where we're going to dig. That is decided by where construction is going to happen that might impact historic or cultural resources [01:00:04]. And I always say, I never would have been able to excavate the sites that I have—which I've been phenomenally fortunate in the sites that I have been able to work on—never, ever would have been able to do any of them, as an academic asking to dig because

imagine New York City's response when I say, "Hi, I want to dig up the mayor's yard. I want to go dig in City Hall Park." Or, "I want to rip up the street in South Street Seaport." One, how are you gonna afford that? You're gonna have to put it back. We live in New York, we all know construction, and that was never gonna happen. So doing cultural resource management, where digging occurs, is based on construction proposals and plans. And general rule of thumb, or the way it's supposed to work, any municipal monies that are used in construction or development, whether public or private—because private development does get public subsidies—has to take into consideration whether or not their action will impact historic or cultural resources. And there's a first level review that goes through the Landmarks Preservation Commission, where certain things will get flagged. Also, if you are in a known historic district, or known historic property, or archaeological area, then the project will also get flagged. That's the system.

And then, when we do go to the site, where we excavate is limited to where the impact will be. So you can have this fabulous site, or this huge area, and you know that the really great archaeological discovery—and all hypothetical here—you know that the really great discovery is going to be right there because I know, I saw the edge of the bridewell. We found it. And I know the rest of it is that way from all the historic maps. Well, there's no digging. There's no construction work that has to happen there, so you can't explore further. That's it. You stay within the footprint of the construction. And that provides a predetermined sample. It doesn't necessarily allow for you to "I have this hypothesis, I have this theory, I want to test this, and I want to develop a testing plan to find construction information about the bridewell," or, "I want to find remains associated where they were throwing their garbage outside of the bridewell." I can't target that and go look for that specifically because it may be outside of the construction

footprint.

So what we look at, or how we're going to approach it, is very much dictated by where the construction work is going to happen. And it is Landmark's preference that if there are potential significant resources, for construction to be redesigned to avoid those resources, and not to excavate them. To just leave them in place. So you don't then—you could have a really focused, pointed research question of, "We would like to know what is in this well because we know it was filled in"—just hypothetical—"this well was filled in the 1780s." But if the city can avoid and redivert their construction, you would leave it in place instead of excavating it. So it's very, very different. [01:04:57]

And then if you are seeking to research, and excavate some place on your own, you need to get the permissions from the city. So if you wanted to excavate in Manhattan somewhere—and Manhattan's the easiest example to use—they're not just going to let you dig up City Hall for the sake of digging up the area around City Hall, or ripping open streets just to do academic research, or archaeological research. It would be nice if they did. But that's not just true here, it's true anywhere. I mean, a lot of what they're finding in Rome is because every time they expand their transportation system, they come across something. And that happens in many places. They called it the Big Dig in Boston, when they did their transportation system, and it just led to massive amounts of archaeology. I think they may have been a little more open to actually going in and exploring the archaeology.

One of the things I look at—and this is from experience with historic preservation and historic

houses, etc., and lack of funding—is places like Boston and Philadelphia, they rely on heritage tourism. They have a financial interest in heritage tourism, and building and developing, and contributing to it. No such interest for New York City. In New York City, the historic houses are competing with MoMA, Museum of Natural History, the Met. So, very different. And everything else that's in New York. So heritage tourism is probably at the bottom of interest or requirements that the city would choose to focus on. But that being said, there's been a lot of great history [research] done. Cultural resource management has contributed greatly to unknown aspects of history, and the history of everyday people in New York City. And that's all largely through archaeology and research associated with archeology—and the history of the city itself, not just the people. I mean, the history of the city itself.

Q: So the way that it might work is not necessarily that the excavation processes are finding things that then result in some sort of landmarking of a place. It's more that a place already has some regulation requirements to it, or easements or something, and you're going in to manage that, and to assess whether whatever development might be happening, or infrastructure repairs, is going to impede on anything that's existing. But something that people don't know if it exists yet or not because it's underground.

Loorya: In some instances. Because there will be an instance where there's a potential for history. It's a fifty-fifty chance. You <u>may</u> encounter something, you may <u>not</u> encounter something. There are many sites where there is no archaeological research. But then there are others where there are significant archeological resources, and further work has to be done. That happened repeatedly in South Street Seaport, where everywhere we went, we kept finding things,

and we kept finding information. And we were very fortunate to have fabulous partners in DDC, the Department of Design and Construction, on that project.

So it does happen that you do find—there are only two. I don't know if the second one has fully happened yet, I have to check—I'm blanking. The only archaeological historic district was the African Burial Ground and The Commons Historic District, which has an archaeological component recognized as landmarking. Other sites are known for their archaeological importance, but they have not led to archaeological landmarking, or being recognized as an archeological landmark. That doesn't mean that they don't exist, it means it hasn't happened [laughs].

Q: And that's the African Burial Ground in Manhattan, right?

Loorya: Yes, yes. And the Conference House Park in Staten Island—it has another name as well [Aakawaxung Munahanung]. [01:10:00] That also is going to be, or has already been approved––I don't know if that vote has happened yet—as an archaeological landmark because of the Native American component in history.

Q: Yes, I am actually familiar with that one. But I don't know yet if it's gone through the—

Loorya: I'm not sure. I know it's happening, but I just don't know if that vote has happened yet.

Q: So you had mentioned that Chrysalis came about as an accident, also.

Loorya: Yes. [laughs]

Q: So I wanted to see if you would tell that story [Loorya laughs], and then also explain some of the work that you do through your company.

SIDE CONVERSATION

Loorya: Okay, so Chrysalis. Yeah, it did happen as an accident. I was fully planning on going the academic route, and someone had mentioned—and we worked on a lot of projects for Parks, as the Brooklyn College Archaeological Research Center, and also to help them meet legal requirements relative to the process if construction was going to happen. But there was gonna be some work done at Gravesend Cemetery. They were putting in a fence and they needed someone to do archaeology. So they had to go out and put out a request for a proposal bid—the Parks Department—for archaeological work. And someone said to me, "Why don't you put in a proposal for it?" "Why? I don't do that." "No. Put it in. They need some testing. You could easily put a team together." And I was just like, "Okay." So I did. And I didn't think anything of it. I was like, "This is ridiculous. I'm not gonna get it. But sure, why not?" And I got it. And I pulled together a bunch of my fellow grad students, and we did this cultural resource project. And I mean, I just did it as Alyssa Loorya, but I did it.

Then, probably, sometime within a year or so, someone reached out to me, like, "Hey, you did this project at Gravesend. I'm looking for an archaeologist. Can I get a bid from you?" And I'm

thinking, "I don't do this." But then, "Well, okay. Sure. I'm not working. I'm doing research. Sure." I figured, let me do it. And it just kept happening. People just kept coming and asking, to the point where I didn't realize, and my accountant was like, "You need to incorporate." And I was like, "Wait. What? I'm just doing this on the side." And he was like, "No, no. You're really doing this. You're hiring people." I was like, "Okay." [laughs] It just was like, "Sure. All right." And we started calling it Chrysalis. The name was dubbed, or brought about, through Arthur Bankoff, who said that if Chris—Chris Ricciardi, who's my husband—if Chris and I ever started our own company, we should call it Chrysalis. And he's like, "You have butterflies and dragonflies and all that." He's like, "It's perfect. Just call it Chrysalis." And we all laughed about it. This was a few years earlier, we just laughed. It was like, "That's funny. Yeah, that would be good." And then we were like, "All right, Chrysalis. Let's go!" [laughs] And it just happened.

Q: I did not put that together [laughs].

Loorya: Most people do not. Many people cannot even pronounce the word. Most people—people mispronounce Chrysalis all the time. But it just sort of happened. And most people I come across, or most people who come to me for a bid, I'm always amazed that it's still, "I've never worked with an archaeologist. I've never had to deal with archaeology. What do I do?" [01:15:01] And so they just call other people that they know. It's always a bid process. They have to get three bids, and they have to—New York City works on a lowest bidder practice, whether it be for the larger project, or subcontractors etc., you have to go with the lowest bid. And it just sort of mushroomed. I still sit back, and I look, and I'm like, [in a questioning voice] "Still not sure how this happened. It's nowhere near what I planned." But it just happened and

I've been very fortunate. I've had numerous employees over the years. I've had some fabulous staff, some with us for many, many years. And you know, like in construction, there's booms and busts. We've had two employees, but there was one point where we had eight full-time employees. We had a lot of work going on. So I've been extremely fortunate as a small mom-and-pop in a very large city, to be able to do this. And when I think about it, it's twenty years now. And I'm like, "Wait. How did that happen?" [Pause] Like "How did that happen?" [laughs]

Q: Yeah. Congratulations.

Loorya: Thank you. But I remember being in my thirties and having dinner with Simeon Bankoff, and he's like, "Well, there's gonna come a day one day, where we're gonna be that older next generation of all these people that we look up to and look to." And I'm like, "Wait. No, that's not us. We're just the kids!" [laughs] It's like, "Wait. I've been doing this how many years?!"

Q: Yeah. Well, let's maybe take that opportunity to talk about some of the work that you've done through Historic Districts Council [HDC], and I wanted to talk also about PANYC [Professional Archaeologists of New York City]. So maybe let's start with Historic Districts Council. How did you get involved there? What was your kind of perspective, having a different relationship with some of the houses?

Loorya: So I obviously knew of Historic Districts Council because of my friendship with Simeon, who was executive director. So I was always aware of it. Because I'd worked on so

many of the historic houses, and I've always had a general love of New York City history, and aesthetically, certain types of architecture—buildings I've forever loved: the Woolworth Building and the Chrysler Building. And just very naturally, as a grad student I worked at South Street Seaport doing educational programming in schools for them. And it was just a very natural thing for me to weave in the historic structure and the architectural fabric. So it always was, part and parcel, I see archaeology as historic preservation. They go hand in hand, they're not exclusive. You might be using different methodologies and going toward the bringing forth of information in a different manner—we're not restoring buildings, but we're recovering tangible objects—but many times, archaeologists find themselves as proponents for the historic structures that they are working with, or that they are researching. So it was a very natural fit. And I had also been working with New Jersey Institute of Technology developing historic preservation curriculum for a high school. And Simeon called me up, and they were looking for board members. Would I be willing to come and meet the officers, and consider being an advisor to Historic Districts Council, should they come up with issues of Section 106, and CEQR, and SEQR. Just anything relative to archaeology. And I was like, "Sure. I would love that."

Then I was an advisor for a couple of years, and I would become more involved in participating, and I was asked to join the board, and I did. And eventually I ended up as vice president for a few years. [01:20:01]. Largely, I used my branch of knowledge, which is not considered typical when you think of historic preservation, but would come up frequently in some projects. Or people would reach out to Historic Districts Council because they were relatively well known, and would be a go-to if someone were trying to mitigate development or demolition of a historic structure. And if an archaeological component came up, I was a resource for the staff to reach

out to. And that was largely the role.

But I also assisted with writing some support documents to landmark the Lady Deborah Moody House. So I would assist, or pitch in, in writing those. I did for a train station, some relative infrastructure, in terms of "this deserves landmarking because." So I saw my goal as a board member and vice president of HDC was to support the staff as any way I could, the best I could. They were not there to necessarily hear <u>my</u> preservation concerns, which I have—and yes, on occasion, I did bring them. But my role was to support <u>them</u> with my knowledge, or my experiences, if I can—if they needed assistance in any given thing, just as other board members would support in fund raising options, and avenues. And just being there for the staff. They have wonderful staff.

And the mission was very important. I think New York City—much like it's always been that the business of the city has been business, it's always been a "build it up, tear it down," let's build new and redevelop because we're always focused on the future. We're focused on moving forward. And you come to a point where you then have a danger of losing too much. So I thought, and I still believe, that it's an important mission to carefully consider what you're losing when you just tear things down. The notion that it's easier to tear it down and build new, and cart everything away, is something that—and I could be absolutely wrong—is just built-in to the mindset. It doesn't necessarily mean it's true. It could be just as easy and just as cost-effective to <u>use</u> existing, historic fabric, and to incorporate historic fabric into your design. They do it all the time in Europe, where they add on, and build on to historic structures.

I had been at a historic archaeological conference in Old Quebec City, and there was a fabulous boutique hotel, where the owner of the hotel, when he was getting ready to put his new development up, ran into a major archaeological site. And instead of killing the project and fighting it, he embraced it. He created a boutique hotel, where all the rooms feature archaeological artifacts. It tells the history. He reclaimed the wood, used the wood in the lobby. These are things that can be done. So I feel like, in my little part of the preservation world, or what's going on in development, I've tried to promote those aspects.

When I worked on [Hotel] 50 Bowery, which really became an example of small town New York—they say New York is the biggest small town out there—[01:25:00] two independent people had recommended me to the family that owned the property and was working with the development. They were obscure people, people I wasn't regularly involved with, and then it kind of all came together. And then I was debating, "Uh, should I get involved? Sure, I'll talk to you." And then it turned out that I learned my great grandfather owned a store around the corner. And all these histories coming together. They're an immigrant family. My family was an immigrant family. And one of the people I was dealing with, one of the owners, he knew Michelle Young from Untapped Cities. And it kind of all came together. It's everybody—this bringing together. And they were so appreciative of the history. They were a Chinese immigrant family, their father—they were born here and schooled here, and two children were working on this development project, and they loved the history.

And when we realized we had found the remains of the old beer garden, they were very supportive in us doing more research and history. And they both started looking on eBay for

memorabilia—or just items related to this 19th-century German beer garden—and they featured the archaeology in the hotel. They had us save all the brick, all the historic brick, and they featured it as a wall in the lobby. They did an entire exhibit with the history and the archaeological materials. There was a newspaper account we found about a time capsule. They were like, "We have to go look for the time capsule." And we did! Then we made our own time capsule and put our own time capsule into the new construction. And that, to me, is the ideal of what preservation and history and archaeology. It can all come together to tell the stories. It's not about—the story shouldn't be a footnote. They should be part and parcel and embedded into our everyday reality because that is what has made New York City. All those people coming together, all those cultures mixing it up, and maintaining their individuality but also acclimating and becoming part of what it is to be New York City. And I think if I could do more of that, that would be fabulous. So that was a fun one. And we found the recipes for some of the beers on the bottles that we found. And we made them. We made the bitters. We made the beers. We did a lot of experimental archaeology. And I set up events with Historic Districts Council, revolved around it, cause it kind of all came together. It was a great forum.

Q: I also want you to do more of those kinds of projects! [both laugh]

Loorya: In was great. Yeah. Actually, we've been talking about maybe doing some of that revolving around Lott House, which, we have cookbooks. We don't really have the alcoholic ones, but yeah, it was a lot of fun making the bitters. And boy, they were nasty. "People drank this by the glass?! Really?"

Q: Wow. So let me ask you about when you were president of the Professional Archaeologists of New York. When was that, and what were some of the issues that were coming to the fore at that time?

Loorya: That was a long time ago. I feel like, unfortunately, the issues are somewhat consistently the same. It's the same with preservation. You're still banging the same drum of, "This is worth saving and we need to pay more attention." And so it was very much maintaining dialogues with the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Having a seat at the table if they're going to change laws. [01:30:02] Now there's going to be a New York State burial law. There's going to be very specific guidelines and documentation, and ensuring that archaeology continues to have a seat at the table. Archaeology didn't always have a seat at the table. It's relatively recent—you know, '60s and '70s—that archaeology really started to have a seat at the table. And, I mean, I'm no longer a young'un of that group, but when I was first involved with PANYC, people who remember the founding of PANYC, who were involved that early, they were involved. They're still members, but they were more actively involved. Joan certainly knows the history of PANYC much more than I do. And the best thing that PANYC does, and can do, is continuing to ensure that archaeology does not get pushed aside in development. And that sites, whether they be household sites that can teach us about 19th century immigrants and the different cultures among 19th century immigrants—how they maintained their cultural practices and beliefs while assimilating or evolving into New Yorkers living into second and third generation—or burial sites, archaeology needs to have that seat at the table because we look at it from a different perspective than just a preservationist, and obviously a different perspective than a developer. You can't get more different than that [laughs]. And it's a voice that needs to happen.

So when I was president of PANYC and vice president, it was very much trying to maintain those dialogues. And also, I pushed, in hopes of trying to raise a little more public awareness of cultural research management archaeology. Many years ago, the Society for Historical Archaeology had done a survey, and it was identified that the majority of archaeology in the United States occurs as cultural resource management. Overwhelming, the majority of physical archaeology that occurs in New York City is cultural resource management. There's only ever been one or two academic archaeological projects [field schools] that were actually excavating in New York City. And since it lies so heavily within cultural resource management—and just because of the nature of communication of developers and the general public, and city agencies and the general public—the general public is rarely aware, in my opinion, of archaeology and what's going on. I mean, the numerous instances where—we have vests and they say Chrysalis Archaeology on them, and they'll be like, "Oh! What are you doing? That's fascinating!" And I remember just being at South Street Seaport once and getting a random email to Chrysalis's general email, "Hey, we're looking out our office window and we see you. What are you guys doing? That's so cool! There's archeology here?" It's like, "Oh. Okay, yeah." So I think that was one of my hopes, to try and foster a more public conversation.

Every year PANYC does a public program, and it's often at the Museum of the City of New York, and that's fabulous. I hoped that we could maybe branch out more to do something a bit more regularly to continue to raise the voice. I personally, and through Chrysalis, when time allows, we go into public schools, and we work with the community on sites where we're able to. Many sites increasingly have NDAs [non-disclosure agreements] and are putting restrictions on

releasing any information to the public. [01:35:03] But it's something I continue to hope that will continue. And something that I'm able to do with the Lott House and the other historic houses. I'm an advisor to the Peter Claesen Wyckoff House, and I've done a lot of work in projects with the Van Cortlandt House. So it's just finding ways to bring it to the public. It is their history, it should be in the public.

Q: Yeah. Are the NDAs are related to—

Loorya: Everything [both laugh]. There has been a substantial increase in the NDAs. Many private developers won't even share information you need for a bid without you signing an NDA first. So let's continue the litigious society we live in.

Q: Yeah.

Loorya: And on city projects, too.

Q: Yeah. Is that just because they want the ability to deal with everything in a terrible way, without [laughs]—without anyone being able to talk to about it?

Loorya: I don't know. I honestly don't know. And some I can understand because you may have sensitive issues or topics, or you may be in a sensitive location. But then there are others, which I just don't understand. So it just seems to be a trend that is occurring at the moment.

Q: We're kind of getting close to our end here. So I want to give you a little bit of a "choose your own adventure." [laughs] Which is just to say, if you feel like we've covered everything that you want to talk about today, then we can wrap up. But if there's anything that you do want to bring up and make sure is included here, then feel free to talk about whatever is maybe, kind of, in the back of your mind that you want to bring forward.

Loorya: There are so many issues to bring forward! [laughs] The topics kind of led to, it's okay to talk about these topics. We need to bring it to the public! I say we need to bring it more to the public, and I have been able to bring a lot to the public, which makes me just want to bring even more to the public, if that makes sense.

And I had, as I said before, a fabulous partner in DDC when we did South Street Seaport, right down to including archaeology in their newsletters to the community, and working with the main office of DDC where me and the assistant commissioner developed an educational program, and we tied together engineering and archaeology, and the development of water infrastructure in New York City. We brought in Hurricane Sandy to it, all of it, and we would go into schools. We brought children to the construction site, and set it up that they could come in and visit, and see the construction, talk to the engineers and the archaeologists, and bring it all together. And this surprised me because one of those kids reached out to me years later when they were in high school. It's like, "I remembered and I looked you up. Can I interview you, and can you answer some questions for me for a project?" And those are the things that I think I wish, in addition to saving—which, preservation is all about saving and it's all why we get involved. Whether it be as an architect, or an activist, or both, or an archaeologist, you want to preserve some aspect of

that history, of that culture. And to just further instill that, that love of that, in kids and the public.

The public is genuinely interested in history when you bring it to them. They might not go out of their way to search it, but they're interested when it's presented. And I would just love for the whole community to come together and work with the city and developers to really put that—it doesn't have to be a big slice. It's not gonna cost tons of money or time. But have it be a little slice of the development of New York going forward. [01:40:03] I'd be very sad—I mean, I see it happening all over—and we all see it—there's so much development going on. Brooklyn is getting a skyline, you know? And while I think that's really cool in one sense, and I may or may not like all the architectural choices, it's cool, and it's creating a new skyline. And the fact that New York City can create a new skyline in less than a decade—and I've documented that with my camera—is incredible. But what do we lose with it? And where do we find that balance?

I was so upset when—what is it, 5 Beekman? Not 5. It might be 5 Beekman—the Beekman tower hid my view of the Woolworth Building. Love the Woolworth Building, and the stories behind it. And it hid my view. And when September 11th happened, and the Twin Towers went down, I have photographs from my father-in-law, in the '30s and '40s, before the Twin Towers, and I have pictures that I've taken from similar vantage points of the Twin Towers, and then nothing. And then the Freedom Tower. I was working in City Hall Park and watching the spire go up, and I have completely different skylines in the space of a decade. That is a phenomenal testament of what New York City is. But where is the testament to how it got there? We shouldn't forget the building blocks. And I hope to incorporate the building blocks. I'm just thankful for the little pieces that I can do. I don't expect that I'm gonna make major changes, or

broad scale changes. If I can, great. But if I can do <u>little</u> pieces, then that's the best. And I'm grateful for that.

Q: Yeah. I think that's kind of how I think about oral histories a little bit, too. If we get somebody's life span a little bit, and the important things of it, it's the best I can do. [laughs] And I love to do it.

Loorya: Yeah, I desperately want to do oral history around Marine Park and the Lott House because the community is very much changing. It's relatively diverse in that we have modern Orthodox, recent Chinese immigrants, and Russian immigrants. We also have a very large component of people who grew up here, our older people. There's this one woman, she's in her nineties. Sharp as a bell. She remembers her mom cleaning for the old ladies at the Lott House, and then making her lemonade. I keep meaning to get—I'm friends with, in contact with Phil Napoli at Brooklyn College. And I'm just like, "I've gotta get Phil to find me a grad student or two, and do oral history in Marine Park. [laughs]. We definitely have to interview Jewel, she's in her nineties."

Q: Wow. Well, I'll put the word out for my contacts as well, and hopefully something can happen.

Loorya: Yeah. Or if you know someone who wants to intern in oral history, a student. We'd be happy to work with them. But yeah, so she's in her nineties. And I'm like, "Gotta do this!" But it's true, it is. It's preserving history. It's preserving people's memories and perceptions, which is

something that's missing from older, older history, you know? You only have select documents. But to hear people talk on video, and on camera. It's just, that's fabulous—I'm glad there's no video on this cause I did not clean my office. I've been reorganizing my house, so—[laughs].

Q: No worries. Yeah. But also the kind of the fabric and the texture of the past, too, can come out through that, as well as through the objects that are excavated, and how we interpret them. And just being able to see something and think about holding it, and relate to something else that we have that's performing a similar function, is so powerful.

Loorya: The more things change, the more they stay the same. Yeah. My best example? They were drinking bottled water in 18th century New York. We have the bottle, imported from Germany.

Q: That is surprising and not surprising at the same time.

Loorya: Yeah, I know. But we were all—I still remember that day when we realized what it was. We were like, "Really? Okay." [00:45:01] And I had a third grader. I was in a school with one of the DDC commissioners, and the third grader was like, "But New York City has the best water, why would they drink bottled water?" And I was like, "Well, let us tell you what New York City water used to be like." [laughs]

Q: It didn't come with the infrastructure.

Loorya: Yeah, it's true. And for me, I've always felt that in order to have a sustainable future, we need to have a well-understood past. And to do that, you need to bring it together. Past, present, and future. And it all comes together.

Q: Yeah. Well, thank you so much.

Loorya: Thank you for inviting. This was fun.

Q: Yeah. I hope to make it to Marine Park.

Loorya: You're always welcome. We're a trek for you.

Q: Yeah. But I do like to go on different treks around the city and see different neighborhoods that I've never seen before. The timing just wasn't right today. But I will certainly let you know if I ever make it.

Loorya: And the weather wasn't right.

Q: Yeah. I was like, "Oh I'll go on a hike through—I'll go up to Shirley Chisolm Park, it will be great." But yeah, not today. But if I am in Marine Park, I'll get in touch. But thank you so much. I'll be in touch, maybe, in the next few weeks.

Loorya: Perfect.

Q: Great. Take care, thank you.

Loorya: Thanks. Bye-bye.

Q: Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]