

PHOENIX HOUSE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

William Fusco

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2014

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with William Fusco conducted by Lance Thurner on October 15, 2014. This interview is part of the Phoenix House Foundation Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Audio Transcription Center

Session #1

Interviewee: William Fusco

Location: Brooklyn, NY

Interviewer: Lance Thurner

Date: October 15, 2014

Q: Let's get started. So this is Lance Thurner and I'm here on Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn to interview William Fusco. It is October 15th, 2014, and this is part of the Phoenix House Oral History project. Now Bill, this is a life history interview, so I would like to start—where and when you were born, and what was your childhood like?

Fusco: I was born on February of 1945. I grew up Sunset Park, close to downtown Brooklyn. My father worked in a chemical factory. My mother stayed at home. Working class, blue collar neighborhood, longshoremen—a lot of longshoremen. We were really close to the docks where I lived, and the docks were all bustling. It was a different area, but you know, but my childhood was, in a way, I cherished it. It was a lot of playing in the street, a lot of street games, a lot of kids, a lot of Irish families with big, big families, a lot of kids. That part of it was really, really nice. We didn't have a lot of money, but it didn't really matter, as long as I could play ball and be with my friends, that was pretty much a nice childhood in that way.

Q: So was this, so to speak, social center of your world—the street, then, playing ball on the street, the classic stickball?

Fusco: Stickball, stoopball, off-the-wall, Ringolevio, Three Feet to Germany—all these

different, tons of games, all the time. A lot of kids, you know, very few cars on the street, and a lot of kids. A lot of big families. The people next door to me had 14 kids, down the block had 10 kids. So a lot of different pecking orders, the different crowds, and the different kinds of ways. But yes, it was a really very lively street life. I always say this to the guys here, two things that happened: television and air-conditioning. Because before those two things, everybody was forced to go out onto the street. We lived in row houses. So two windows in the front, two windows in the back, and it was hot in there. I also cherish the memories because we could stay out until 11:00 or 12:00 at night in the summertime because nobody was inside. It was too hot. And who really paid the price was the men, because the men, I remember, would be out on the stoop with a bottle of beer, and it would be 11:30, and they would be saying, “I can’t get to sleep,” and all that kind of thing like that. And they had to be up at 5:30, 6:00 in the morning. So for them, it was—for me, you know, it was still—the rule was you couldn’t leave the block when you were young. You had to stay on the block, as long as you stayed on the block. But there were 30, 40 kids out. There was a very nice community feeling to the neighborhood for the people that were there.

Q: Now what was your family like?

Fusco: I have an older brother and a younger sister. So there’s three of us and my mother and father. We lived in railroad rooms. It was basically a one bedroom. And then my grandfather lived with us, too, so it was pretty—there was a bed in every corner of the place. But we stayed out mostly. That’s what my family was like. We went to Catholic grammar school and that was kind of—I lived right across the street from the church and the grammar school. So we could run

out the door five minutes before school and get there on time and all that kind of thing like that. Kind of nice, in a way. On a personal level, my mom was a little bit of a night owl. She had a little bit of her own schedule. So she usually stayed up pretty late at night and slept in the mornings, so we would get ourselves together and that sort of thing like that. It was fine in a lot of ways. Some people say, “Oh, didn’t you want your mother?” No. We had it covered. We knew what we were doing. Getting my sister ready for school, me ready for school, and my brother, of course, was the oldest one. He was in charge, so to speak.

Q: So was the family religious?

Fusco: Not really. I mean, no. In the sense of going to church every Sunday and things like that, the kids went to church every Sunday because we were in Catholic grammar school. My mother was Lutheran and my father was Catholic. My father started going to church as he got a little bit older. But growing up, no, it wasn’t a very religious house. The main holidays, Christmas and Easter and things like that, of course.

Q: And did you have extended family around or no?

Fusco: Well, when I was very young, I had a lot of extended family. I lived in two different places. I lived on 54th and 2nd Avenue, and that was right on the docks. That was right on the water in Brooklyn. Then I moved up to 7th Avenue. Down on 54th Street, I had my two aunts that lived right on the same tenements with us, and my grandmother and grandfather. So we were all together. Then I moved up to—about a mile away, when I was seven. Then we really didn’t have

that situation anymore.

Q: So moving on, as you were coming of age, you're a teen and in high school and becoming an adult, what was the presence of narcotics in Brooklyn? Where were they? Did you see them?

Fusco: Well, my neighborhood always had some narcotics in it, and a lot of neighborhoods did. Anywhere closer to downtown, Red Hook, South Brooklyn, there was more narcotics. We were, I want to say, two miles away from there, and kind of like working class. So there was always a presence. Among the young kids, there was a lot of airplane glue and that sort of thing, the 11-year-olds to maybe 13-year-olds, 14-year-olds. The heroin users are like a really exclusive bunch. They would not—we knew who they were, but you didn't—you kind of stayed away from them. A lot of those guys, I think, were out of the Korean War. They were in their late 20s, like that.

Q: So it was an older crowd?

Fusco: Yes. I knew they hung out in a place called Bill's Ice Cream Parlor. You always knew who they were, and they were always scratching, and—you knew who they were. But they were pulling burglaries, and doing things that weren't very good. There was also a gang element in the neighborhood, too. The Latin Kings were there, the Rampers were there, the 8th Avenue Boys were there, the South Brooklyn Boys. You know, all those different elements were there. It wasn't like *West Side Story*, nobody was dancing in the street, but there was an element of racial tension that went on, back and forth. So that was always a part of what happened.

So there'd be these fights that would happen. There was a public pool, Sunset Pool, and it was a very big pool. And that was always like, the Puerto Ricans hung out on the bleachers, the other guys hung out over here, the Italian guys hung out over here. So there was always a little tension that went on with that. You had to navigate the neighborhood, so to speak. As far as marijuana and things like that—but first of all, let me say, there was a ton of bars. You cannot believe the amount of bars that were in this neighborhood. Park Slope [Brooklyn] comes close, but they didn't nearly have as many bars. I know along 8th Avenue, from 39th to 60th Street, 21 blocks, I think we could name maybe 25 bars. And 7th Avenue had maybe about 10 or 15 bars, and most bars had a different slant. There were some bars that only the Finns went to—the Finnish people. There were bars that were for just older people, and they played older music, and everything like that. And people would, on a Friday or Saturday night, go down the street and hang out in the bar.

Q: So your family is Irish mostly?

Fusco: No. My mother was Scandinavian and my father was Italian.

Q: Was Italian. And so did you hang out with the Italian kids?

Fusco: Irish and Italian. It was more Irish, but it was definitely Irish/Italian, and a smidgen of Scandinavian. So there were a few guys around like that.

Q: So growing up here, let's say, in your teens, what did you expect for your adulthood? Where

were things going, and what were you thinking of doing?

Fusco: I lived kind of a double life, in a way. I didn't know we were going to talk about my childhood. My brother wound up going to the school, Brooklyn Prep [Brooklyn Preparatory High School]. I had never really been interested in school, and when it came to taking the tests for Catholic high schools, I didn't pass them. I didn't pass any of them. So I was going to go to aviation school in Long Island City. I thought that would be OK. Again, I had no real interest in school. For me, the only thing you really wanted to do was not get left back. That was like the plague, when you got left back and you weren't with your crowd anymore. So that you didn't want. But other than that, I did what I had to do to pass. And then all of a sudden, I had this shot at going to Brooklyn Prep. They gave me an exam. I took it. And somehow they said if I really wanted to try it out, I could go there.

I had always worked. I worked from when I was 12 years old. I mean, I worked before that, but a couple of days after my 12th birthday, I was delivering newspapers. I delivered newspapers seven days a week. So I had to pay for my own school if I went. It's kind of—if you didn't want me to do something, that's exactly what I wanted to do. So my father told me something, he said, "You know, listen. They said that you could go, but you know..." I said, "No. I'm going." That's because it just struck me that way. I struggled through four years of school there, and I got a great education. But I had no social life at that school. Those kids, I don't know, I am thinking about it now—I didn't think about it this way, then. I didn't have anything in common with them. So I really didn't have—I went to school there, I played football there. But other than that, I never hung out with anybody from there. I had nothing. So I had that, and I had my

neighborhood crowd that I grew up with, and hung out with, and that was my social crowd, so to speak. So I almost forgot the question, but that's what—and as far as narcotics were concerned, it was marijuana, alcohol, pills, barbiturates. Probably for me, well, I started using glue when I was 11 to maybe 13 or 14, and then smoking pot, then drinking, and pills came a little bit later, 16, like that. It's funny, we stopped sniffing glue—that's what we would call it—because it was just too uncool. It was too uncool and the older guys would just be like, "What the fuck are you doing?" And they would be on your case about it, "You stink. You know that?" So you got the message that this was not the thing to do.

And the street corner was a real pecking order as you got older. The older guys, they expected you to stand up and do what you needed to do. You were either a punk or you belonged. That was it. If you were a punk, you were just going to be abused. That certainly was not where you wanted to be. And you would get tested. You would get tested as you went along. Some of them, just a few of them, but a few of those guys were really bad news. They were really bad news. In some respects, drugs took care of the violence. Before the drugs, it was a more violent neighborhood. When the drugs took over, it was everybody for themselves, and the violence was more stealing and robbing, and things like that, but not the same kind of —

Q: So can you explain that a little bit more? So as you are getting more and more into drugs, you start with the glue, and eventually you are smoking weed, and there are pills and whatnot. It wasn't simply that you were getting older and getting into these things, but these things were coming into the neighborhood; is that what you...?

Fusco: Well, we always—when I say “we”—the people in the neighborhood, we always had drugs. So a lot of the people I hung out with would sell. We would buy—we would get a kilo, and then you would break it down into nickel bags. Some guys would sell nickel bags, getting \$2 on the \$5 bag, or—no, it was not \$2. It was \$1 on the nickel bags. So if you got \$1, and you sold at 20 or 30 of them, you made \$20, \$30 for the night. It was a little bit more, you know, \$30 was not bad money. It was pretty good. It was like \$150 today—maybe \$100. But it wasn’t \$30 like you have today. So there was always this distribution system that was going on, with almost all the drugs that were in the neighborhood. And my neighborhood always sold on the street corner. When you went up further into Fort Hamilton, and Bay Ridge [Brooklyn], and other places like that, you didn’t see that. As you went more downtown, you saw that.

Q: Yes. So as you’re getting more and more into these things, did your relationship with your parents change?

Fusco: My father worked two jobs. He worked in a chemical factory and he worked at night in a restaurant out on Long Island. My mother—I didn’t have a lot of supervision, if that’s the case. But none of us did. I mean, it wasn’t like I was—I see it as a double-edged sword. I don’t see it as all bad, honestly. You know, I know there’s a bad side to it, but I always had possession of my own life. And most of us were like that. I tell the guys here sometimes, I say—we knew so little about each other, it’s weird in a way. A good friend of mine, his name was Joe Russ, R-U-S-S. His whole family, their name was Fornicola [phonetic]. So Joe, obviously, had a different father, or I don’t know. Maybe he was a cousin, I never knew. I never asked him. I never even thought about saying, “Joe, why is your name different than the rest of your family?” So we had this,

when you say “street”, Lance, it was a street life that we just had. It wasn’t all bad. Some of it was good. You know, girlfriends, going steady, and things like that. Different crowds, different corners were more tame than other corners. The corner right down my block was a really pretty rough corner. A lot of bookmakers, that sort of thing, some mafia guys and stuff like that, wise guys. So there was a whole dynamic like that. And then of course, selling drugs. That became later, like when I was 16, 17, that became a way of life down there.

Q: So can you, to kind of move along a little bit, can you explain your path to Phoenix House?

Fusco: Well, let me go through this. I got arrested when I was 18 for a kilo of marijuana. I took the rap and I got five years probation for that. And then I got arrested for an assault, I got arrested for another assault. I was wasted. I had a possession arrest for pills that I got squashed somehow. Now, fast forwarding, when I was 23, I was now using dope. I had flunked out of St. John’s [University] when I was 18, and I was working at different jobs for about a couple of years after that, but now I was no longer working at all. I got arrested in a drug raid. We were dealing a lot of cocaine, and there was—some of the girls that were with us—one girl was very highly connected in the mob, her father was. I had a violation of probation, they were guaranteeing me seven and a half to fifteen. There was a lot of drugs.

Q: So were you part of a ring of dealers?

Fusco: How do you mean?

Q: I don't know. You said that, "we were selling a lot of cocaine." I am wondering who the "we" is.

Fusco: Yes. People I hung out with, the guys I was dealing with, there were three of us that were dealing together. We had this bright idea that we're not going to sell off the corner anymore, we were going to sell out of an apartment, which was always—everybody was hanging out there. It was like the street corner but it was indoors. It was a joke. And of course, we got raided. That's what happened. It was in the newspaper. It was in the *Daily News*, on page five, or something like that. And my probation officer cuffed me to the chair and told me, "You violated on your five years. You are facing seven and a half to fifteen," and I thought I was going away.

Like a lot of people describe, in a sense I was almost relieved, because it got harder, and harder, and harder. Everything became just harder. So, that it was over, there was a sense of relief in it. Even though I knew I was going to do time. I used to have the narcotics guys in my house all the time. They were tracking us. They were all over us and it was just getting to be—and I am sure guys were ratting on people and things like that. That's how they were staying out of jail. That's what they tried to get me to do, and that sort of thing—the first time, they tried to get me to do that. And of course, people would think that if you got picked up by the narcotics, and you got let go, "What did you tell them?" Everybody was getting to be—it got to be really nasty. The whole atmosphere was—people were going to jail. And so it was getting to be—it wasn't fun anymore. So I was relieved. That's what I would say about it.

I have told this story 1,000 times—well, maybe not 1,000, but 100 times—but that's the lead in

to Phoenix House. And the lead in is that my probation officer came back to me and said, “There’s this hospital opening up and maybe you could go there.” I put my head down, and I said, “If you think it would help me, I would try it.” In my mind, I am thinking about pills, and nurses, and all that kind of thing. But I’ve always reflected back to that to see how fast the switch would go off. Getting locked up, and being in the bullpen, and me almost asking God, saying, “If I get out of here, I’m going to stop.” But then as soon as you got out the door, like three hours later, the switch would go off and you would be back doing what you did before. And so that eventually turned into Phoenix House.

Q: So can you explain?

Fusco: Well, they had me going to a COC, a community outreach center, maybe—that sounds right—down in Red Hook [Brooklyn]. I would go down there every day, and they would tell me—I was cleaning up, I white-knuckled it. I wasn’t getting high on dope anymore, but I was doing some pills here and there. And I thought I was doing really good.

Q: And this is before methadone was available, right?

Fusco: Yes. I didn’t know about methadone, nor did I know anything about programs, or anything like that.

Q: And this was an outpatient program?

Fusco: It wasn't an outpatient. It was more like a getting ready to go into Phoenix House. I was there for about a week. The guy's name was Richie Balboa [phonetic], maybe. It was on Court Street, I think, Carroll Gardens [Brooklyn]. And then I went into Phoenix House. It's a little blurry to me, I don't remember—maybe I took the train. I'm not sure. I know I had a bag of some clothes. I guess he told me what clothes to bring, a toothbrush, this, that, the other thing, and that's what I did. I went in the doors of 88th Street and Amsterdam Avenue [Manhattan], and that was the Phoenix House.

Q: And did it feel to you like, "This is the beginning of a new phase of my life?"

Fusco: No. Well, I mean—no. I wish I could say that, but I don't think I was ready to say that at that moment, no. I was a little ambivalent about it, I think. I didn't really feel much one way or the other. The only thing I had in my mind was not going to prison, not doing any real jail time. So that's the way I walked in.

Q: Can you explain or describe the process at Phoenix House at that time?

Fusco: I always tell the story, and it's a little bit why I have such a strong feeling for guys, even today, who come in through criminal justice. Because when I got there, how I thought I needed to participate would be to not cause trouble, and do my work. And that's what I thought it was. So, of course, I was on the service crew. I was cleaning the bathrooms, and mopping the floors, and all those things like that. I got taught how to do the hospital corners, and all those things. None of that kind of functioning ever bothered me, or I took that fairly easily. But I think, in the

beginning, where things would get sensitive in the groups and things like that, I wanted nothing to do with that. That to me was—I tell the guys here, you know, I thought I was being open-minded because they would ask me, “What do you think of...” You know, Lance, like reaching out for each other. And I would go, “Well, that’s nice. If that’s what you want to do.” I always put myself outside the circle, so to speak, in a sense. I didn’t do it in a hostile way. I did it in what I thought was kind of like an accepting way of, “If that’s what you guys do, that’s nice. It’s OK.” I was a white kid in with mostly—I was certainly a minority. There wasn’t a lot of other kids from my neighborhood, from my growing up. But that didn’t bother me either. I really didn’t have a big issue with any of that. I was a little bit outside my element. I was a little bit younger than a lot of guys there. A lot of guys there were in their early 30s; I was 23. So I wasn’t as seasoned as a lot of the guys I was around.

And then—I’ll tell you the story, about a month and a half later—and this is the story of how it happened for me. We were having guests and there was doughnuts. And they said, “You can’t have them. We’re not eating any of the doughnuts. We are saving them for the guests.” I said, “F you. I’m leaving,” and I left, and I walked out the door. Now I was walking down Amsterdam Avenue thinking to myself, “Holy shit. What did I just do? I got a probation officer, I got all this stuff going on. I am not ready to do that.” And I actually found my way back to Brooklyn, back to my neighborhood, and I went down onto the corner where all the stuff was going on. It was funny because it was a lot more empty for whatever the reason may be, and a couple of guys told me, “You want to come downtown? We’re going to go down and score some dope.” And I said, “Nah, I don’t want to do that right now.” I was in this limbo. And I went back in the morning.

Q: Did you stay with your parents that night?

Fusco: No. I knocked on my door to my parents' house and they wouldn't let me in.

Q: And did that—?

Fusco: Did it help me, you mean?

Q: Well, were you shocked? You got angry?

Fusco: I got angry about it, quite honestly. But that's what I felt at the time. Because I told them I was going back. But, I guess, you know, it was what it was.

Q: And so you went back in the morning and was that the moment of...?

Fusco: Yes. That, something there, was the moment of truth. Back in those days, I got my head shaved, and I got put on contract, and I got a general meeting.

Q: Can you explain all that? Why was your head shaved?

Fusco: I talked about it later, at the time, that's what splitting was about. If you left, it was a severe thing. And for me, it was very severe to leave like that. In a funny sort of way, it made me think about leaving again. So you did get that kind of in your head, like, "Man, I don't know if I

want to go through all that again.” But in that stripping down, and I can’t give this—other than say that it was almost like a voice inside me that I didn’t even know was there, in a sense, I know I said something about being lonely. That’s the best that I can describe it, like quivering.

And in that time period, after that, I really said, “I’m going to try this. I’m going to try it.” I put both my feet in the door. The other time I had one foot in the door just out of expediency, and I thought that would be OK. I think I realized, not consciously, but maybe subconsciously, that I couldn’t do that, not there. And that was the powerfulness of it. That’s the unexplained part. I don’t know why exactly, but that’s the effect it had on me. In the past, I didn’t feel an urgency like that. So I bought in. And because I spent my life doing this, I think you come in to a program twice. You come in for outside reasons, and then you come in later on, in a different way, for something that *you* want. And when it’s something that you want, then it changes—everything changes at that point. Everything. You’re no longer cleaning somebody’s bathroom so you don’t go to jail. Everything started to change. It’s a progression. It’s not like, for me at least, it wasn’t a thunderbolt, but it was really some good friends, and people I felt good being with. And I liked the work, I liked the challenge.

Q: You mean the encounter groups and that?

Fusco: No.

Q: Or the kind of running the place?

Fusco: Yes. Well, we were called pioneers. I don't know if you've heard that word before. Well, we were always given the pioneer talk. And the pioneer talk is, we opened up—a lot of us, we opened up a lot of facilities. I was in seven or eight Phoenix Houses when I was at Phoenix House. And in some of the houses we would go in, I was on maintenance. We would do a lot of the construction, things like that. I would drive the trucks and that sort of stuff. I am pretty handy with my hands. We were—I know there's a movie that's about it—we were like a band of brothers. We were a team. Our job was—and the challenge was, of course, to be the first ones in there—before the electricity was there, before the running water was there, and to do all the grunt work. We were in a lot of places. So I started in 88th Street. A lot of people don't know that 88th Street existed. There was maybe 30, 40 of us in there. 85th Street was three blocks away, that was called the Mother House. They were probably in operation eight months, or seven months, before. So there were like 50, 60 people over there, and we had another 30, or 40. So when we were coming in here, and it was still kind of really run down, you know, it was old tenements, so it needed a lot of renovation, a lot of renovation.

Q: So this mode of participating in the Phoenix House, of renovating these places and doing this work, being a pioneer, was that considered part of your therapy?

Fusco: Well, I don't know. Of course it was. I know the words today, I didn't know the words then. We were a community, we were together.

Q: And you use the term “therapeutic communities” at this point in time, as what you were doing?

Fusco: I think so. Yes, we did. We had a lot of people from Synanon.

Q: You did?

Fusco: Yes.

Q: At this point?

Fusco: Because there was nobody from Phoenix House. It was all people from Synanon. So in a sense, we were always being brought back to Synanon. In Synanon, we started out—there are always stories when Tony Risticato [phonetic] was the director. John Peterson was another director. Sam [Samuel] Anglin was a director. They were all from Synanon, all the staff was from Synanon. So the “old man” would tell us this, and the “old man” would tell us that. And the “old man” was not from Phoenix House. The “old man” was Chuck [Charles E.] Dederich from Synanon.

Q: For Synanon, the basic philosophy was that you never really leave Synanon, that you’re always there.

Fusco: It turned in to that. That wasn’t always the case. It turned into that.

Q: But did it seem when you were at Phoenix House at 88th Street —

Fusco: And these were the splitees from Synanon. So these are the people who left. So obviously, they weren't looking to do lifetime.

Q: But what I'm wondering, then, as you were in Phoenix House in 1968, '69, and so on, did it seem like this is a permanent community for you, or that you were going through a certain kind of transition and then you'd be out?

Fusco: I never thought it was for a lifetime. I knew it wasn't a lifetime. And they told us it wasn't for our lifetime, but it was for a certain amount of time. I think it was around the two-year mark that they would talk about. So 88th Street closed up after two and a half months. The day it was closing up, the day they told us this, there was maybe 30 or 40 of us in there. Guys were crying and pissed off, and kicking the walls. 85th Street came over to try to strengthen the groups that night, and we were being shipped to either Coney Island or Hart Island. I wound up going to Hart Island.

Q: What was Hart Island like?

Fusco: Well you know, it's an island in Long Island Sound. It's pretty isolated, in a sense. You can see the bright lights of the city, you were right there, but you were on an island that—once the ferry stops, I think about 5 o'clock, you were on that island. A lot of people coming over from Rikers Island onto Hart Island—967 numbers, they were called. There was about 400 of us, maybe a little bit more. We were broken out into four different houses. It was a lot of

organization. I worked in the kitchen on Hart Island. I lived in Phoenix, too, with [Alfred] Tony Endre. I worked in the kitchen and that was my—my job was not attached to my house. I was there for about four months.

Q: So this is still relatively early in your process of being at Phoenix House. Did moving to Hart Island make you second-guess whether Phoenix House was really the right thing for you and this was all for your own good?

Fusco: Well, no, I didn't. It was more about the people than anything else. I had good friends. So to me it was more about that, at that point. I mean, this was the part—I wanted to see how I wanted to say this. Hart Island was too big. And you lost a little bit of that intimacy. I don't know if I knew that exactly, but in a way, I kind of felt that. I still had some of my friends, but it was really big. The lesson it taught me for later on was to keep it a certain size and not make it—I am not a big fan of 200, 300 bed facilities. I don't believe in them. Maybe some people do, and they figure out a way to do it. I just think it works better with under 100. So that was my experience. It was a wild place. We had the Nike Missile Base that was abandoned. We had a place for a Civil War camp, with the barracks and everything that was abandoned. We had jungles. Then of course we had the potter's field, where they bury the people that are unclaimed. And we had these beaches, and when you weren't working, you could go sit on the beach and swim. Looking back, it was a really interesting thing. You could work in—which I didn't—but you could work in what they called the powerhouse. And that was shoveling coal into the furnaces that created the electricity for the island. You literally had your own electrical. And it was more a dormitory. Like I say, I was there maybe four or five months—I don't think it was

five. I think it was four.

Q: And then where did you go?

Fusco: To 325 85th Street, which was—we were really cramped in. It was only two floors. We knew we were there only for a short time. We were there for about seven weeks. And then I went to 116th Street.

Q: Yes. On the eastside?

Fusco: On the eastside. I was in the very beginnings—that's the photograph I have of the crew. [Speaking to third party] Do you know where that is? I'll find it after. And we went in, they were all guys. I don't know if we had electric—we might have had electric, but we didn't have indoor plumbing yet. There was about 30 of us and we worked—we had our groups at night, and we worked around the clock, more or less.

Q: Did staff come with?

Fusco: Staff lived with us.

Q: Yes. I'm wondering—at this point in time, Phoenix House was still a city agency, or part of ASA [Addiction Services Agency], the city's addiction services—I want to know a little bit about how, from the perspective of someone who was a resident, how did it seem like it was run?

Did seem like it you had these doctors or staff that were controlling your every movement? Or was it more being run by the residents?

Fusco: It certainly was more run by the residents. Ronnie Clark [phonetic] was my director there, and Ray Dibble [phonetic] was my assistant director, Louie Cabello [phonetic] was a staff member there. They were all from Synanon. They maintained a certain order in the house, but we ran the house, so to speak. And again, there's an attraction to that, I think. But again, and I've said this about Ronnie Clark—and this house turned into a big house for music. We had Jimmy Garrison, the bass player from John Coltrane. We had Kenny Rankin. We had Tony Lopez, who played with Harry Belafonte. We had a ton of guys, a ton of Spanish guys—what with Tito Puente and all those guys like that. So we had guys who sang in the R & B groups in the fifties. This guy from the Ravens, I know, and some really great voices. The house really came into fruition when we got the girls. We wound up with girls in the house. It was right before Christmas. We probably were there for two and a half months and it made it livable. And now they were filling the rest of the house up. That was a big party, and then it became our house. It was a great house.

Q: And what did you do after being there?

Fusco: Well, the funny story is when Julio Martinez came to see me in the summertime. Now, I'd known him from the early, early days. And he told me that he wanted me to be Mitch's driver, or I was assigned to be Mitch's driver. So I had to go to 85th Street, and live there. And I told him I wasn't going. He said, "I didn't ask you." And I said, "I'm not going." He called me

an “F-ing asshole” and laughed at me and left. And I didn’t go, I stayed, because I didn’t want to move again. This is where I wanted to be. That was my really great experience.

Q: Deciding to like —

Fusco: By now this was a great house. I had good friends. I don’t know how to describe it. It was just a great house, had a great feeling to it. We not only had morning meeting, we had an evening meeting. That evening meeting was better than the morning meetings. And the music we had, and the different things we had, it was great. It was fun. It was rough and it was serious when it needed to be. It was a really, really good place, really good place. And that’s my really warmest memory, is that house. And Ronnie Clark, in particular. I’ll never forget, we were just moving him in. He took a broom and he started sweeping. I always remember that. I always said, “Wow,” he wasn’t above doing that, and he was really good. That’s where I had my marathons. You know what they are?

Q: Yes.

Fusco: I think a marathon lasted about 30 hours per group, and there were maybe 18 of us in there. And it’s like this really high-level sensitivity group, very hard to describe because you got really rocking at certain points, but it was wonderful. And we were up for all 30 hours, and by the end of it, it was just exhilarating.

Q: Can you describe this kind of in more detail? So I’m imagining you’re in a room, maybe like

this one next to us or smaller—probably a little smaller—but maybe some food sitting on the side where you get up and grab something whenever you need it.

Fusco: You could, yes. It was in like an anteroom. We would be in a room like this, then the food and stuff would be in here, like that.

Q: And were you just sitting in a circle?

Fusco: Yes. And people would tell their story, their whole story.

Q: And you did, too, at this time, then?

Fusco: Yes. With this woman, Ray Dibble and Ron Clark. This was all from Synanon, that was a Synanon—what they did.

Q: Did it seem effective to have this marathon session instead of—you could spread over a week and not exhaust yourselves? Was it effective to do that?

Fusco: I think it's effective that you just stay on that train of thought and that feeling, and let that feeling just take you. After a certain point, you're not taking it anymore, the feelings in the room are taking you. And your staff are guiding, but the feeling in the room—people are telling their innermost secrets. And showing their humanity, or their regrets, their disappointments. It's a chain reaction that starts happening. As one person does it, another person is reminded, and it

just starts. The continuation of it is part of the—you don't want to break that intensity at a certain point, go to sleep, come back tomorrow. You want to keep that going until it's satisfying—I mean, obviously it didn't go on forever, but at the end of it, we were playing hide and seek, and just being silly. Grown men and women being silly. For a lot of people, it was the first time in their life that they cried or laughed in 10, 15, 20, 25 years. Again, I was a kid, in a sense. A lot of guys were much older than me, or older than me, put it that way. To be accepted by the group like that was very powerful for me. And I brought that here.

Q: And when did you leave 116th Street, then?

Fusco: I made what they called re-entry. I moved to Prospect Place in Brooklyn. I worked in acquisition, up in Amsterdam Avenue at 158th/156th Street. So I was a hustler for Phoenix House, hustling donations, different things: money, furniture, food, whatever. And that was my job.

Q: And you were a city employee then?

Fusco: Yes.

Q: Did you stay around when Phoenix House separated from the city?

Fusco: I don't think I was around for that.

Q: That was in '71, and early 1972?

Fusco: Yes, I think I was gone. I was always with the city. Then from Prospect Place—no, I'm wrong. I made re-entry and I went to Putnam Valley. I went to Putnam Valley for two and a half months. It was beautiful. I was a house driver. I went back and forth to the city every day, and all this, that, kind of thing. It was older guys. We were working on beefing up that facility. And then I moved to Prospect Place, and I was in Prospect Place for a while, two months. Then I moved back to Phelan Place in the Bronx, and that was my last house.

Q: That was your last house? Was that similar to the other ones where you building the house up from a rundown structure?

Fusco: I was in re-entry, I worked in acquisition. I kind of had a 9:00 to 6:00 job.

Q: And so, what was it like to leave Phoenix House finally? How did it happen?

Fusco: Well, I was working in acquisition. I heard about—you know, we were part of ASA. And there were two opportunities. There was this youth center they were opening up in Brooklyn, and I had another friend, Vinnie Marino, Vinnie Tessitore, was my friend who was here. Vinnie Marino was opening up a place in Hawaii. So it was Hawaii, Brooklyn, but I picked Brooklyn. I seriously thought of Hawaii, and I got like a little—that's pretty far away. I don't know if I want to be that far away. And Brooklyn appealed to me. I grew up, not here, I grew up in Brooklyn at least. And working with young people, for me, sounded right, sounded like something I wanted to do. I was 25 and a half. I've always said, yes, there were rough times. But the overall is, is it

had changed my life.

Q: And so what I'd like to address now, then, is how, when you came here, back to Brooklyn, and you're starting to work with youth for the first time, I'm wondering a little bit about what this organization was like then, and how it compared to your experience at Phoenix House and maybe what the influence became of Phoenix House on your...?

Fusco: We brought the therapeutic community with us, that's just what we did. We keep a pretty tight therapeutic community, Sasha [phonetic], right [Speaking to third party]?

Q: Was this institution going to be on that model?

Fusco: We made it that model. We had an abandoned building, two, three staff—me, Vinnie, and a social worker—and figured out how to put it together. We had to do the same thing, we had an abandoned building. So we go all over again, another abandoned building, you start working on that, fixing it up.

Q: But was this going to be on the model of Phoenix House as being tied to the city in the same way that Phoenix House was part of the ASA?

Fusco: Yes. But it was going to be—not a residence, it was going to be outpatient for youth. Drugs were certainly one of the targets that we were given to address, but we set up the family association. We started getting the kids in and doing the morning meetings, and doing the

encounter groups, and all the things that we brought with us that I knew. That's how I knew how to —

Q: Did it feel like, as you were leaving the Phoenix House after being there for about two years or so, did you feel like, “Well, now I am a therapeutic community pro? I know how to do this, I can bring it wherever I am going?” Did it seem like a program that you were bringing, or a philosophy? What was it that gave you the qualifications to start this place, in your own mind?

Fusco: Just used the tools. I just used the same tools and modified them, of course, because maybe kids were little bit different. Maybe they weren't as much trouble. So the early kids, you had to figure out on their level, more or less. But the groups, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, you see. And the house meetings, the morning meetings, follow the structure and the tools of the environment.

Q: You didn't feel like, “Geez, I should go get a social work degree or a degree in psychology!” or something?

Fusco: No. It's community, and community has a healing power that—I mean, it's so simple. It's so simple that it's not that popular because it's a very simple remedy that you're using. We're first cousins to AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]. That's who we are. We're AA indoors, and the same fellowship, the same bond, the same being your brother's keeper, your sister's keeper, being in it together. All those things like that. It truly is, that's the fellowship and that's the healing process. That's the process that helps you out. Now, in my own belief, I think therapy is

a great thing, but I think it's different. I think that people that have been through this process sometimes know and feel that they need more therapy, or need therapy, the classical therapy or traditional therapy. And that's fine. Or they continue their fellowship with AA and they do that, and that's fine. A few take a spiritual route and get very involved in a church situation, or some kind of spiritual situation, and that satisfies their need, so to speak. You've got to use this as a stepping stone to other things.

Q: So you mentioned, when you were developing this, that you needed to adjust what you learned at Phoenix House to fit the new situation. Can you explain a little bit about what needed changing, did you have to invent new practices, new terms?

Fusco: I know one thing we never did, just to start off, is we never shaved a head. I didn't believe in it, especially for young people. I'll defer judgment on myself, but I think that there may be certain times when people needed a breaking down in that way, maybe. But with young people, we didn't see it. We knew that from the very beginning, that that was not going to be part of what we do. Now, we did have contracts. If you messed up, you did do the dishes all week long. So we did have consequential thinking as part of what we did. We became a lot more family oriented because they still were living in their homes with their families. So we wanted to have that as part of what we did.

The group is a group. If the group needs to talk about boyfriends and girlfriends, that's what they need to talk about. If the group needs to talk about going to jail for 20 years, that's another group. That's a group that maybe adults have. The agenda that the members had, the members

here—and we use the word “members”—was what *their* life was. We instituted very early, by July of that first year we were here, that we would make the outside activities because we were outpatient. But the outside activities were going to be monitored, and we were going to stick together, and go to the beach, go to the movies. Wherever we went, together, in groups, so that we were around people that were drug-free, and stayed away from people that were getting high. So we were establishing in an outpatient setting something that was a little tricky to do because —

Q: At the same time, at Phoenix House, Kevin McEneaney was developing the IMPACT program there, which in many ways is parallel to what you were creating here. Was there any communication going on?

Fusco: No. I mean, you know, I shouldn't say no that quickly. I would have to think about it. Certainly not so much with Kevin, but I was still in contact with people over in Phoenix House. I am sure we talked about different things that we were doing and thinking about.

Q: I'm going to try to be a little quick now to wrap up. Did you see developing the therapeutic community model as part of kind of a larger social movement? So, there's a world conference of therapeutic communities, is that something that you engaged in? Is it something that you saw as being part of a national or global idea?

Fusco: Later on, not in the early parts of that. We struggled for our first eight or nine years. So it really was kind of hand-to-mouth for a while. But I certainly believed in therapeutic

communities. I believed in the model. I believe it changed my life and I've watched it change hundreds and hundreds of lives of people that I've been involved with. So I have no doubt about the model itself as an important tool. I know it gets a lot of criticism, but our model allows you to fail. Our model doesn't throw you out the door when you act out or you misbehave. Our model embraces you and tells you, "OK. Take care of what you've got to do. Clean up your mess." That sort of thing, appeal a little bit to, "You can do it. You have that kind of resiliency," and then accept you as a human being. It accepts you as being part of the family at all times, throughout the whole process. It has its own power. I don't know. I've always heard the criticism of it, and sure, we were developing and you can't—you know, the world in 1968 is not the world in 2014, good, bad, or indifferent. It's just a different world, a different set of circumstances.

Q: I'd like to talk about the changes at Phoenix House over the last 40 or more years. The therapeutic model has changed in many ways, partly because of the type of funding that's available through the government, partly because of the way insurance works in the world these days, partly because of research, partly because of changing populations of the residents. How has the therapeutic community model changed here in your lifetime?

Fusco: I think that the people coming into your program dictate, in a sense, how you need to approach it. And I think that the therapeutic community adjusts to almost any situation. I believe it can work for a lot of different situations or maladies that go on in the world, and not only with drugs. I think that that's really what we're doing. I mean, we are taking the whole person, and the whole person can be a lot of things. They can be a little broken, or they can be very broken. They

can have some self-esteem or no self-esteem. You have all different adjustments you make. The adjustment we're making now is a very simple adjustment. We have a lot of kids who are on very severe drugs in the last 10 years. I don't know, I think that's brought a seriousness just by the nature of the drugs that are being taken and I think that the members take on—when they come into their own selves again, they take on a seriousness that maybe, when the kids were all listening to the Beatles, it wasn't the same program.

Q: But what about —

Fusco: They were listening to the Beatles.

Q: —like outside institutional pressures, maybe from the Department of Education, from the city government?

Fusco: We fight every day—every day, one way or another, to maintain substantial residential treatment, and follow-up, and aftercare. So we have a one-year program, which we don't charge any monies for. We do a lot of fundraising. And we have an aftercare—a step down model that's a year and then a year in aftercare. So all, in total, is three years.

Q: But has that changed since the beginning?

Fusco: Well, in the very beginning, we got our residents in '72. We would complete people after a year and a half and then we would have completion groups. In around '78, we got away from

that and made a year in residence, and then we had a year in—by '78, eight years after we started, we had the whole step down model in place the way we wanted it. But it took time for that to happen. And we were underfunded. We were the dark horse in the race. The odds are, we weren't going—there were a lot of the programs. At one time, there were these outreach centers, as they were, these youth centers. There were maybe eight or nine of them in Brooklyn; they are all gone. We kept the TC [therapeutic community] model, and I think maybe because we had a TC model, even in outpatient, we survived those early years. Those early years were really very, very tough, in the way of funding.

Q: Where did funding mostly end up coming from in the first decade or so?

Fusco: It was the city originally, and then the state picked it up in '75.

Q: Right. When the city's bankrupt.

Fusco: Right. We were in Albany with everybody, doing all that stuff, the “City of the Forgotten.”

Q: You were part of that?

Fusco: Sure. Julio was my older brother in Phoenix House. Carlos up in El Regreso, Ron Williams from Stay 'n' Out.

Q: So was there a strong sense, then, of a citywide TC movement, that you were all part of the same thing?

Fusco: Yes. We all came out of the same place. And then the guys from Daytop [Village], too. They, as well, had—a little different, but the same idea. We were all working—we had the luxury, also, of being able to feel our way in those early years, so we could adjust if we needed to. It was *treatment*-centered. I mean, what you're talking about, and what we're battling against, is it being a managed-care center or a funding center. Absolutely, the funniest part is we're still under \$30,000 a year, for a year in residence. We have a doctor on staff—not 40 hours a week, of course, but we have a doctor on the staff, and we have a nurse on staff, and we are still under \$30,000 for a year. That's what's necessary to help people with these addictions. If you're talking about one or two months, you're wasting your time, it's not going to work. Getting used to being clean and sober takes time, and it takes time for that thinking, that way of thinking that you don't even realize you have, for it to start to come into your consciousness, or come into where you can really understand what you're trying to do for yourself. I grew up in a world where there were no programs. So think of that.

Q: Wow. That's quite a difference. Just two more questions for you. One is: Can you tell me about Mitch [Mitchell S. Rosenthal] and how you got to know Mitch?

Fusco: I always liked hearing what Mitch had to say. He would come by the house. I helped Mitch get to New York, I picked them up at the airport. He was a leader. You're asking a guy who was maybe a private in Guadalcanal, "What was [General Douglas] MacArthur like?" In a

way. Did I look up to him? Did I know he was part of our movement? Absolutely.

Q: But what about after your developing this community, NYC [Dynamic Youth Community]? Did you retain a certain kind of formal or informal relationship with Phoenix House or Mitch?

Fusco: No. I did with Julio, I did with certain people. More than that, I mean, Julio was important to me because he became commissioner. So I looked to him and other peers in the field. Mitch, it's a funny thing, we're not that far, but years back, when you said, "Well, you're over in Brooklyn," you might as well have been in Ohio, because the center was Manhattan. And I didn't get over there that much. I was really working a lot of hours here. Certainly, I've always had the deepest respect for the organization of Phoenix House. Again, I wouldn't be here today. Who knows what I would have been, but those pioneers before me certainly made it possible for me to have an opportunity to get my life together.

Q: So finally, is there anything else you would like to add about how Phoenix House, especially after you developed this Dynamic Youth Communities, how it influenced —

Fusco: I believe in the therapeutic community. With all its flaws, and it certainly has some. The concept and what it's able to bring to people is life-changing.

Q: Well, if you have nothing more to add, I think we've —

Fusco: Thank you, Lance.

Q: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]