

Penn South Archive Project

Narrator: Janet Sullivan

Interviewers: Olive Eng, Cara Aloisio

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Olive: Hi, I am Olive from building 2A.

Janet: Hi Olive from Building 2A. I'm Janet Sullivan from Building 7A.

Olive: What year did you graduate high school?

Janet: 1987.

Olive: So did you have friends living in Penn South?

Janet: I had a few friends. When I grew up in Building 10 across the street, there were four kids in the building. Avi, Avram, and the two sisters, Chitra and Rama. Oh. Yeah, so there were four of us total. And then when I moved over here, there were no kids in my building that I knew of. But I was best friends with Diana and Felicia Neathammer in Building 6. And we went to school together at VCS, Village Community School. And behind me in Building 8 was Nico Triandefelu, and then also who went to our school, Paul Razel in building, I think it was three. I feel like I'm missing somebody. And I was also friends with Linda Stackhouse's kids, Laura and Daniel, who didn't live in the building at the time, but they do now. If I'm missing anyone, I apologize. Oh, wait. And Lara Gerstein. Lara and her brother Remy grew up also in Building 3. And her dad is the one who designed and built the first playground here on 27th Street. The big wood and metal and the sand park.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Yeah.

Olive: I used to love playing there growing up. That's a very iconic part to me.

Janet: Yes, and it's different. The one that you grew up with Janet:

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: It's different.

Olive: But the layout and structures are all like really similar from the photo that you showed me. That's why I was surprised when you said like, "It all got taken down" 'cause I remember like a lot of the same general things are in the same areas.

Janet: The same elements.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Like clinging bars and climbing things.

Olive: Well, even like, yeah.

Janet: But his was, we can show a picture of it later, but it's really cool. Like he was a, and the way he designed the bedroom. They had the same bedroom. No, they had the F apartment. And the dad built the kids' room into a loft with a slide that went out the window onto the terrace. To play at Lara Gerstein's house was like a dream come true. It was so fun. Anyway. Yeah.

Olive: That's awesome.

Janet: Yeah, it was awesome.

Olive: So beside sand or Sandbox Park, where did you hang out in Chelsea?

Janet: When I was a kid?

Olive: Just growing up.

Janet: Growing up? Hang out at something called Grassy Point Woods. I don't know if that's been mentioned yet. But all of the people who I just mentioned, it was the coveted place to go on 23rd and 9th. It was only a stuffed animal store. That's all they sold was stuffed animals. And everyone's top thing on their Christmas list, it's like their most expensive and interesting stuffed animals. It was like a zoo, but for Plushies.

Olive: Oh my God.

Janet: So we would hang out there after school and like, "What are you getting for Christmas?" And we would start in like in June, you know. And also, let's see, we hung out at, there was a record store. Record meaning like albums.

Olive: Yes.

Janet: Not accounting. No. It was a, you know, spinning record store on 23rd between 8th and 7th, closer to 8th, right next to the value hosiery place where all the moms would buy their stockings. Like the stockings that go to here with the little garter belt that my mother would wear. It was just so cute. But we would get our underwear and socks from there. It was a big deal. But next to that was the record store. And so we would hang out there and also covet like, "Hmm, what will I get?" So I got my first three albums there.

Olive: What were they?

Janet: Foreigner 4, Eagle's Greatest Hits. No, Eagle's Hotel California. Jim Morrison and The Doors. Was it The Doors' great, it was The Doors something because I was so in love with Jim Morrison that in the bedroom back there in the pink room, my room, I had a six foot poster of Jim Morrison and I taped it to the ceiling so that I could fall asleep looking at him. I was so in love with him. And one night he fell on top of me. And it freaked me out. And I kept trying to stick him back up there. But anyway. So that was a record store. We'd hang out there. And Gino's Pizza, which no longer exists. Gino's was right next to Marvin's Shoe Store, which was a a three window display shoe store where you can walk in and look at the glass from, it was really cool. But right next to it was a pizza place, Gino's. And they had video arcades. So we would bring quarters and waste all our money there. And that was right next to the chicken place, which is also really good. And HaagenJanet: Dazs later years on 23rd.

Olive: Where was the pizza place?

Janet: 8th Avenue between 23rd and 24th on the west side of the street. And then we were lucky. We had two movie theaters, which was really weird. We had one movie theater for a while. And then the big complex thing went up, which was great. 'Cause then we would just sneak in and just watch some other movie without paying. Am I going to jail? No, there's like a, you can't go to jail after 40 years of doing a terrible, terrible crime of seeing two movies. I'm so sorry. But I did that. We all did that. Where else did we hang out? Lambskins. It doesn't sound cool. So before there was something called Walmart, there was something called Lambskins or Woolworths. And that was on the corner. You'll see like in old photographs. 23rd on the south. No, on the northeast corner was Lambskins. Big red sign. And they had, it was like, we called it the five and dime

store. And they had, I'm pretty sure in the earlier years, they had a lunch counter with the seats that spin like a stool that you could go. It was the coolest thing when you're a kid. Like, "Mom, can I sit on the chair?" "We're not buying anything." "Can I please sit on the chair?" I'll sit on that thing while she goes shopping. But we'd get our school supplies there and stuff. Places to hang out. And the French bakery, which is where Sullivan Street Bakery is now. You know that place?

Olive: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Janet: 9th Avenue. But it was, I don't know the real name of it because we called it the French bakery. And only old people went there. I was young and everyone was old. And really old men went there and they just sat down and they never left all day. So I never felt like I was allowed to sit down there. But we would go there and hang out and get really good food.

Olive: So was that mostly like as a kid? Or the movie theater sounds like it was more teenage years.

Janet: Movie was teenage years. And then we'd go to mostly people's apartments. My best friends lived right there on the same block. And my mom could watch me from the terrace walk to the backside of their doorway. And so I could walk as a little kid and not have to get escorted 'cause we could be seen going to the best friend's house. But if I went to Amanda Smith's house, who did not live in the coJanet: op. She lived on 24th, between 9th and 10th. Those were the days of like crack and stuff. And like I had to get walked home by the dads.

Olive: Wow.

Janet: And my dad would have to walk her home in the earlier years before things change, but... And I had, yeah. So we'd go to people's houses. Oh and Alvin's Alley. Has anyone discussed that yet? Alvin's Alley. So before there was streaming Netflix, we didn't even have the internet. We didn't have computers at home. I grew up with no computers at home and no cell phones and none of that. We had to have quarters. Back then, it was a dime to make a phone call. And call your mother and tell where are you and how long will you be there, and how are you getting home. So we all went to Alvin's Alley, which was on 9th Avenue, between 23rd and 22nd on the southwest side. And everyone went there to rent VHS, videotapes, the big rectangle things

you put in the thing. Maybe you've not seen that yet. Or have you seen DVD players?

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: So VHS.

Olive: I used to have a DVD player growing up.

Janet: That's so... There was grandfather to the DVD player. That's the son. And then the grandfather's put the, it looks like you put a book in it. And then the cats swat it and then you have to fight with the cat. But anyway, that's what we did. We would watch movies and camp out in like someone's parents' bedroom and make cookies and watch movies when we were kids. And when it was over, it was over. And then there was like, you know, oh, MTV was a thing that came out. Music Television. That was a big deal. I don't know. And we'd go roller skating. There was a roller skating rink on 8th Street. We'd go roller skating. And we'd go ice skating over here in our neighborhood. 9th Avenue and 32nd Street. Maybe between 9th and 10th on the top floor of a building. I'm very physical. Even when I type my phone number, I do the digits. So I just have to spatially see. So we would go to that ice rink and hang out there. I'm sure there's other places.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Paper House Party Store across from Jefferson Market Library. And we'd go to the Y and the library.

Olive: The Y?

Janet: There's a Y on 23rd between 7th and 8th, closer to 7th, which was right next to the library. The... What's that library?

Olive: Oh, Muhlenberg. Yeah.

Janet: Muhlenberg Library.

Janet: Oh, that's where the like Crunch Gym is now or something.

Olive: Yeah, yeah.

Janet: I would have to go to 14th Street for the Y.

Olive: Right. I know.

Janet: Yeah. Every time I pass by there, I see like the diner I would get food at, like with my parents after and stuff.

Olive: And the only diner we wanted to go to was Moonstruck when it came out. You know, the Greek diner, the brown, I call it the brown awning place on 23rd and 9th on the southeast corner.

Janet: Chelsea Square?

Olive: Chelsea Square. That's what it's called.

Janet: Yes. Oh my God.

Olive: So that's been there forever. And we just thought that was so not cool because when Moonstruck opened across the street, which is no longer there anymore, it had like sort of like a 50s/80s theme. And it was cool neon colors. And I don't know. We would go there.

Janet: Huh.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Do you know what that is now?

Olive: It's right across... It's on the...

Cara: It's a CityMD.

Janet: CityMD. Yeah.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Yeah.

Olive: I haven't been to the Chelsea Square Diner in a while. But I just got so excited when you mentioned it because I was watching "Succession" last night and they have a whole scene in the Chelsea Square Diner. And I was like, surely they didn't shoot it on location. But you can see like the Gristedes and that like beautiful architecture from London Terrace in the background. I was like, oh my God.

Janet: Oh, and London Terrace.

Olive: Oh, yeah.

Janet: London Terrace. They used to have doormen at every station at every opening on the 24th Street and 23rd Street side. And my best friend lived on 24th in a brownstone. So we, when it was windy and cold, you know, the more you get closer to the river, the colder and windier it gets.

Olive: Oh, yeah.

Janet: So coming home from school, going to her house, not mine, it would get really windy and we'd cut through London Terrace 'cause we were friendly with the, you're not supposed to do that. Like they're not, you're not supposed to go in unless you have a reason to be there. But they would let us go in and cut through and save a whole avenue of cold. They were so nice to us. Yeah.

Olive: So did you have any friends in London Terrace or any of the other like...

Janet: Yeah, so London Terrace. I had one friend from high school. He was more of an acquaintance. He is a big, I'm so proud of him. He's Julian Wachner. He is the conductor at Trinity down the southern tip. He's, yeah. But he would, we would go up there and listen. He would wear a cape to high school. And he had like pianos and more pianos and cape. He could play everything and anything. He was pretty incredible. But that was the only friend I actually knew in London Terrace. But I knew a lot of families across the street on 24th on the brownstone block.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: I knew the Amanda Smith family. He was my best friend growing up. Like I had keys to their place. I still do even though they moved to Brooklyn. And then the Jared Smith family. And my mom worked for his mom selling art at the Smith Gallery on Madison Avenue, which is where a lot of the art around here is from. And then the Coopers. They also went to Village Community School. So there were a lot of families on that block.

Olive: Where is Village Community School?

Janet: 10th Street and... Oh my god. West of Hudson. What is wrong with me? I only went there for like eight years. Whatever

Olive: 12th?

Janet: What it's called? 10th Street, Washington. 10th and Washington? Yeah, 10th and Washington. And I've got that really good portrait that Mimi Van Olson painted of it with a lot of the people you'll recognize from some of the photos in front of VCS as a portrait. She was a portrait and, pet portrait and people portrait person. And a lot of the coJanet: op people and neighborhood Chelsea people hired her to do family portraits and pet portraits. So when you go into people's apartments, you'll see that like, Felicia and Diana Hammerschmidt, who live in Building 6, their stepfather just died. And so when we were cleaning out his place a month ago, we found another one. So I just put it up in the hall and took down another painting because I like that one so much. And it was like inscribed to Felicia.

Olive: Wow, that's awesome that there's such a like signature...

Janet: Yeah.

Olive: And.

Janet: Yeah.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: And Mimi Van Olson still has a walkJanet: in studio today at the first floor of her brownstone on Hudson and maybe Jane or Hudson and something. Yeah, she's still a huge part of the community. And my mom and her were friends because they were 100% Armenian heritage. And my mom sold art. Mimi made art. And so both of their kids were hybrids like me. Like half Armenian, half something else. And so it was just fun to like see someone who like, oh, you look Jewish, Italian. And outside of New York, everyone's like, "You're Jewish. You're Italian." I'm like, sure. Yeah, sure.

Olive: Where you go to high school?

Janet: Packer Collegiate Institute. I got a scholarship when I was 14 for sports. So I only made honor roll the first year. Actually, my father, I'm laughing. So my father died. No. So my father died like one month into high school. And my mom made me, you know, she was really a good mom. So she made me get the honor roll the first year. And then I just didn't try that hard after that. But I loved that

school. It was the best place for me 'cause it was small. And I was used to VCS, which is like teachers who care and take the extra time.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Like, yeah.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: So it was great. It was a good school.

Olive: What sports did you play?

Janet: Basketball, volleyball, and softball.

Olive: Wait, and you got a scholarship to - -

Janet: To play sports.

Olive: High school for sports.

Janet: But I had to have, I was like a good student. I was a good academic student. But it's a lot to keep the grades and to play varsity sports. So I mean I still, I did well enough, but I didn't maintain all As for the rest.

Olive: Wow, I feel like that's just so much pressure. Like in high school to be on like sports.

Janet: I love it. But that why my, I love, I was someone who moved. And I still move today. Like I don't play sports, but what I do is I do yoga. I do Pilates. I teach Kundalini yoga. I mean like all the stuff I did then, I somehow still kind of do now. But yeah.

Olive: That's cool.

Janet: Yeah.

Olive: Did you ever move away?

Janet: I did. Well, my mom again, I'm going to praise her, and my dad for making me put my name on the waiting list and get that thing notarized, right? And so... I waited until I was 24 years old until my name got called. But I was on the list since I was 16. So I went to college for two years. Got Lyme disease. Oh, that was a thing.

They didn't really know about Lyme disease then. That was just kind of coming around. So I didn't finish college. But I did the two years, moved back to the city, moved back in with my mom, and then I got my first apartment on 13th Street between 6th and 7th. I pulled the lease out for you. And then my name got called finally when I was like 23, 24 maybe to the apartments. I said no twice to the first two apartments 'cause I didn't like them. And guess where the next apartment was that I had to say yes to. See that wall and that wall? The other side of it was my first apartment. I had to. I begged and pleaded. I was like, "Please don't make me live next to my mother. Oh, please. This is a terrible karmic joke. Please." I begged. They're like, "These are the rules." I'm like, "The rules are killing me." So I moved in right next to my mother.

Olive: Wow.

Janet: And for a while. And then I got an apartment, one bedroom on the other side of the building. And then I got married. And then I left and went to Colorado and moved in with Daniel. And then had a kid. A couple years later, moved to the south. Got divorced five years ago. Moved back in with my mom.

Olive: Wow.

Janet: So it's full circle.

Olive: Comes back to Penn South.

Janet: It comes back to Penn South. It's very comfortable.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Yeah.

Olive:: What did you worry about most as a teen?

Janet: Getting my homework done. Getting my homework done. 'Cause there was a lot of it. I also worked in high school. I worked. So I had sports and worked and making money 'cause I was always putting money away. I was always babysitting since I was a kid. Yeah, I was. I came from like parents with pretty good work ethic. And then I cocktail waitresses in high school. Like on South Street Seaport.

Olive: Wow. My friend actually did a summer job working on a boat like restaurant at South Street Seaport.

Janet: Yeah.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Yeah.

Olive: Pretty crazy.

Janet: It's fun. I mean it's, I worked on the Intrepid too. You know, the Intrepid. I worked it just so that I could go to the Beach Boys concert because, so I waitressed during the Beach Boys concert. And that's something we used to do is we would go to the pier, which is where all the concerts were in high school. And so I saw the Eurythmics, Squeeze, UB40 on the pier and outdoor venues. And then Madison Square Garden's like right here where we live.

Olive: Oh, yeah.

Janet: And so I saw Neil Young and U2. And that's all I can think of right now. But, yeah. But what was I worried about? Like making money, keeping my grades up, dealing with my injuries from sports and, you know, adults. Adults. I found adults really difficult. Annoying.

Olive: Me too.

Janet: I know, right? Ugh.

Olive: Can you tell me more about like your different jobs in high school?

Janet: Sure. I still babysat 'cause I love kids so much. I still do. And honestly, I'm in my fifties and I will babysit. I will. I will babysit. It is so fun. So...

Olive: When did that start?

Janet: Hmm, I did Mother's Helper when I was like 9 or 10 where the mom was still in the house, but paid you to entertain the kid or run interference or do cleanup and food and whatever. And then turned into babysitting. And I babysat a kid in the Cheeks on 25th Street, Hannah Cheek and Matthew Speeler, who lived in London Terrace. I forgot. That's right. And the other jobs I had were, oh, 8th Street with the place to hang out. And so I got, it's where like Patty, not

Patty Smith, Patricia Fields makeup place was, and Reminiscence, which is, I was gonna say Patty Smith. It's not. It's Patricia Fields. And next to it was Bebop Cafe on the second floor. And so I got a job waitressing there. That was like during like MTV stuff. And they'd always have like MTV and like Janet Jackson was always playing. Rhythm Nation, Madonna. Let's see. What other jobs did I have? Because my mom worked for Patty Smith, not the singer, the family who lives on 24th Street. Patty and Sandy Smith. They owned a marine art gallery specializing in Harry Jackson, Western art and marine art. And so my mom sold for them. And then Sandy Smith started. You might recognize his name. Sanford Smith, the antique show, which was new then in the late 70s. And he would rent out this huge warehouse at the pier and get all these antique dealers into one place and charge admission fee. And then people could come and shop. Everybody. And they'd set up little booths. Like it was like they had their own display. It was kind of like an expo. And so at a young age, me and Amanda and the Smith boys and Paul Riselle, like all the people who went to school with the VCS who also lived here or on 24th Street, we would do the coat check or run errands for Sandy. And like, we were all about hustling, making money, doing a good job. Like, yeah. And worked for them. And I even worked for the Smith Gallery in high school sometimes. What else did I do? I feel like I'm missing out. I think I even taught elder exercise. Elder. Hmm. I went to community centers at the welfare houses. What are they called now? Whatever they're called. Section eight or something.

Cara: Oh, NYCHA?

Olive: NYCHA

Janet: NYCHA. I worked for NYCHA teaching exercise to elderly people, which, so funny, what happened a couple years ago in real life? I mean in now today, present life. I'm doing that again. It just naturally happened. I've been taking care of my mom so long. And plus I teach exercise. I teach Kundalini yoga and Qigong for years and all that stuff. But I'm trying to think. I don't know what other jobs I had. But those are the ones I can think of.

Olive: Oh, how would you describe New York City in 1987?

Janet: Gentrifying. Smelly. Artistic. The big wave of HIV and AIDS had, you know, starting like, I grew up when that was all starting during my coming of age. My sexual awakening was when HIV was spreading. And it was a huge pervasive theme among all of us. Like you'd see condoms. Now this is, I remember this memory. We were

walking downstairs right by the, we were walking through the parking lot right here on 26th Street. We were walking through the parking lot before they had the gates. We just walked into the parking lot. So I was walking in with my friend and best friend, Amanda Smith. And we looked down and I was like, "Oh, a used condom. That's so disgusting." And at the time, she was doing health outreach volunteer work. And she goes, "Jan, if you really think about it, it's actually good. It's a used condom. It means they're using a condom and they're stopping the spread of HIV." I was like, "Ugh, you're so right. But it's still gross. I don't wanna see it." But, but she really like, it was just one of those comments that changed my thinking. Like, oh, okay, that is a good kind of garbage.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: So there's that kind of garbage all over the street, which is a good kind of garbage. I don't know what to say about it back then. Yeah.

Olive: And how would you describe New York City now?

Janet: Wreaking of weed. Every, I didn't curse. Every corner, I, everywhere. Even if I open my windows on the 20th floor, somehow. But, and I'm all for, you know, legalization of all that. But I think New York stinks at a whole new level. And I have lots of friends who are like, "Oh, it smells so good." I'm like, ugh. Okay. But, so it stinks in a different way. And I feel like it's almost like a resurgence of the 70s because it started gentrifying at the end of the 70s, 80s, 90s, 2000s. Who could live here? It's just unaffordable. 10s, 20s. But after the pandemic, I feel like, I don't know if you notice this, but like, you know, the poverty, it's just, it hit so many families and individuals. Like the homeless population skyrocketed. And then I feel like it had the same like watch your back element walking home.

Olive: Oh, yeah.

Janet: And like we used to do, like I got chased into my building in high school with my friend Kirsty Mogenson like a night after a party. And she was like oblivious. And I was, I'm always like, I don't know. So many mafia movies like, you know, sit this way, survey your area, and then relax, and I can relax. So I was like, "That homeless guy is following us." And so we zigzagged. And I said, "Okay, we're gonna cut through the parking lot." This was again when it didn't have those gates.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: I said, "If he follows us through the car parking lot, I want you to run when I say run." He followed us. We started running. He chased us. And I was fumbling just like a horror movie. I was getting my keys out. It was two in the morning.

Olive: Oh my god.

Janet: And I was fumbling. And they had the glass thing, you know, so you could see. I barely got it in. We got in and we closed it. Like pulling it shut. And you could see him approaching.

Olive: Oh my god.

Janet: [screams] It was fucking, oh, sorry. It was flavorfully horrifying. It was horrifying. But it was like, you know, New York was like that. It was watch your back all the time. And then I got a little cavalier in, you know, the later years. And then, you know, after the pandemic, it's watch, you know, be careful again. So that's how I feel like it's changed. But what I think is also different is now, the city has allowed in Target and Home Depot and certain big national chains that they wouldn't let in because it pushed out the smaller, you know, like - -

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Stuff. So that's another difference that I see. But there's still the same cool architecture and eclectic people and artistic energy running through the veins of it. I feel it. I find it everywhere.

Olive: What do you think is the biggest difference between teens then and teens today?

Janet: They're still teens. More access to boredom when we were younger. We could absolutely get distracted by lots of things. But it wasn't all the time. It wasn't a screen in our bedroom. I was not allowed to have a TV in the bedroom. I didn't have a computer. So it was just the no screen thing. And then no screen, not being reachable in your, like some buzzing thing in your pocket. We had to carry dimes or quarters to check in with mom instead of texting. I think that. And I think teenagers or teenagers, I don't know. That's the

only thing I really notice that's different. What do you think is different? Oh, I'm not supposed to ask. Can I ask?

Olive: No, that's totally fine.

Janet: What do you think is different?

Olive: Yeah, I agree about the boredom. Like I think it's really bad for me. I kind of go through phases like two months of like increasing like addiction to my phone. And then I realize like one time, like if I lose my phone for a second or if it's like my parents like take it away or something, then like I feel purposeless. And then I am like, oh my god. This is way too evil. Or I see like these Instagram Reels that are literally somebody like talking split screen with just like the screen of a video game or something. Like to literally program your brain to not be able to - -

Janet: Yeah.

Olive: Receive just one input. And I'm like, oh my god. This is so evil. So I'll like go off of all my like devices and everything. I'll just like call people. I'll like go digital only, you know.

Janet: So proud of you.

Olive: And then I feel purposeless during those times. And then I'm like, oh, I can afford it. And it's just like a ruthless cycle of like deleting social media and everything. But... Yeah, I think that's a big difference. Like I feel like my brain is getting programmed in a really bad way.

Janet: Look what you're doing right now. We're having a one on one talk.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Yes, it's videoed, but like we're connecting.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: It's so cool.

Olive: I think teens are very smart and resourceful like in all times. But today, it just like requires a little bit more work to kind of be able to access that 'cause I think technology's taking

advantage of our developing brains. Yeah. What was your favorite TV show?

Janet: "Brady Bunch." Maybe "The Monkeys." "Brady Bunch." I had a choice. "Brady Bunch" or "The Monkeys" was agonizing. I had to choose one 'cause I have half an hour a day. Anyway, so that's that. Yeah. "Solid Gold" Love "Solid Gold." "Soul Train."

Olive: "Soul train," okay.

Janet: Yes please. Thank you.

Olive: Where did you eat lunch?

Janet: Like at home. Yeah. Or pizza. But at home. Yeah, we did not eat out. I ate out like twice as a kid.

Olive: So you had like a closed campus at Packer?

Janet: Oh, oh, in high school.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: When you say a kid, I just think under 10.

Olive: Oh, sorry.

Janet: Every time you say kid, I'm like, what did I eat as a kid? I also ate, took my lunch in high school. But we would go to the deli. And I'd always get like a Snapple or a Lemon Snapple. Honey roasted peanuts. No, honey roasted cashews and sunflower seeds. That's what I would get.

Olive: Wow.

Janet: I don't know what I ate for lunch. But I would bring my lunch and that would be the treat.

Olive: Where did you shop?

Janet: For?

Olive: Like, I don't know. Fun clothes.

Janet: Clothes? I'd go to Marvin's Shoes as a kid on 20, on 8th Avenue, 24th as a older kid. Tip top shoes. Shopped at Gimbels, Macy's, B. Altman's, rarely Sax Fifth Avenue. Now, high school, Conway's. It was like a discount closeout kind of catchy an H&M type place, but not cool and not snazzy. But I would get the best stuff there. That was like on, they had several places on in 34th Street, 6th, 7th. That kind of avenue. And Reminiscence and thrift stores. And my cousin's closet in New Jersey. So I ended up wearing bell bottoms like six years after it was cool. But I loved them. Anyway, yeah.

Olive: How would you describe Penn South in two words?

Janet: Back then, when I was a kid, I would describe it as old people because everyone was like, "Oh, Janet lives in those buildings. The ones with old people."

Olive: Yes.

Janet: Okay. So that, because there were so few kids. And now, I would describe it as very progressive.

Olive: Yep.

Janet: We have like toddler rooms and bicycle pudding places, storage places, and ceramics, and yoga rooms, and oh my God. Amazing.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Amazing.

Olive: On like the first day at my high school, I met one of my friends at the bus stop for the M23. And we were just talking about like, I don't know, living in Chelsea. 'Cause she lived on like 18th or something at the time. And we were like commuting to school together every day. And she was like, "Oh, where do you live?" And I was like, "Oh, I live in Penn South." Like those big brick builds.

Janet: Those brick buildings.

Olive: And she was like, "Oh, you live in the old person hot spot."

Janet: Exactly.

Olive: So that's kind of how I've referred to it ever since.

Janet: Totally.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Old person hotspot. And when you said brick build, I know something you said, oh, you were waiting for the M23 bus?

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: I forgot to tell you. To get to school, grammar school, we would take the public bus across the street in front of the Department of Health. And there are these two little towers that are still there. Like statuey things. And that's where the methadone, the guys were trying to get, the junkies were trying to get clean would be on methadone. And they would urinate in between that place, which is right where we had to stand for the bus. So it was wreaked of urine. And there'd always be someone like doing the methadone hang. Trying not to fall over. And sometimes, we would have to get walked to and have someone wait with us at the bus stop. And then that particular corner was so windy. I just think this is so notable. So windy that I was holding onto, you know, one of those, not a lamppost, but the street sign where you move your car things. You know, tells you when to move your car. I was holding onto the green thing and my legs were in the air. The babysitter who lived in my building couldn't get me to the corner 'cause I was flying in the air. And she's like, "I'm gonna lose your daughter." And so I was holding on with my feet in the air. And my dad had to come down. Like heavier than me and get me. Now, and then take us to that bus stop. And then Laura Stackhouse, who also lives here, Laura Stackhouse is like maybe five years younger than me. There was a huge snowball fight in like 1977 or 1978 right here, downstairs on the blacktop before we had a blacktop. And the place was covered in snow. And so all us kids could stomp through the snow and go past our knees. But Laura was so lightweight she'd jumped on top of the snow and couldn't break it.

Olive: Oh god.

Janet: And I just remember breaking the snow so that she could go in it. But this, when you said bus stop, that just reminded me of that.

Olive: Yeah. Last question.

Janet: Okay.

Olive: Mets or Yankees?

Janet: Both. I was raised, my dad was a big Mets fan, underdog fan. He was always an underdog guy. So was my mom. But I went to both games. And, yeah. I'm not, I'm just devoted, like I'm more of Knicks. I mean basketball.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Yeah. But that's very cute. Both. Coffee or tea? Yes, please. I'll take both.

Olive: Awesome. So could you tell me more about these photos of the playground?

Janet: Sure. This playground downstairs on 27th Street between 8th and 9th was built by Lara Gerstein's father, who probably has a first name, but I know him as Lara Gerstein's dad. And they lived in Building 3. He designed and built this. It was the first thing we ever had for kids. There was no playroom. There was no romper room. There was nowhere to go for kids. So this was so exciting. So exciting. And he built it for different levels. Like the little kids were to play here, you know. Older kids here. And then the oldest kids could go up really high and drop from these really high monkey bars. But one day, when younger kid went to where they weren't supposed to go and they broke their arm. This is a story. Of course, I never met them. And then something, something, lawsuit, something, something. And then bye - bye to the structure. So this structure was taken down. But it was really cool. And this is a picture of me in high school, balancing on one of the beams. Like I just always loved climbing things. And my daughter loves climbing things. And this is an aerial view. Like looking down. I'm in my Keith Herring shirt, which is a big deal in the 80s. Keith Herring was so big and such an advocate for HIV research. And so, okay, so that was the playground. And behind the playground, this picture is from the original blacktop before it was a blacktop. It wasn't black. It was like gray. And my mom and dad were activists. And my mom was part of the Get the Lead Out, which is get the lead out of the water, the drinking water. And so we had this huge day, I was only, I was less than five. And there were sheets of rolled dark brown paper for painting protest signs and things. So we were all doing that. And my mom also was a part of the stopping the postal service from building a storage unit and a trucking warehouse across the street on 29th and 30th Street on 9th Avenue in the late 70s, which they were successful in stopping. And

my mom required me as a 9 or 10 year old to write a speech and give my first speech, reluctantly may I say that, downstairs at Holy Apostle when they had a political meeting. And so me and Felicia and Diana. I was shoved to go first. And I'm really glad my mom made me do it because I was terrified of anything public. And now, I do comedy and perform poetry. So she showed me that like, you can, you will not die if you just say your truth in public. And she was just so cool. And so this is also a stamp. My dad made rubber stamps on the side. And it says Chelsea Neighborhood Association. So this can be for the archives too. And you guys can go home with this today because we have a bunch of them.

[laughter]

Olive: Yeah. So talking about like your poetry and whatnot, what were like some things that you did as a kid? Like hobbies that you still do them today.

Janet: I always wrote poetry and stories. I loved it. And when I was a kid, I wanted to be a writer. And I abandoned that dream. But I always did it in my personal life. And then in my fifties, post-divorce, post-menopause, post-apocalypse, post-pandemic, I perform poetry in public. I tour and do comedy. I do comedy here in New York. But they never pay me because it's so competitive here. And I have my first paying job on Monday at a comedy club. So it was very exciting. But like, so I still do that. And what I used to do as a kid, I was always moving, dancing. Always dancing. Even New Year's Eve, like a couple days ago, I was out dancing. I teach exercise. I used to play sports, varsity sports all the time, all year round. And so I do international folk dancing. It's really folk dancing. Like this Thursday, I'm going to Brooklyn to do the international folk dancing. And Israeli folk dancing is on the upper West side. And wherever I travel, I also do those things. So I dance wherever I go still. I teach movement. I teach energy work. And as a kid, I used to have this gift of putting my friends into a trance and putting them to sleep at sleepovers. I would tell them what I called a color story. And I would describe, I, it was like a guided meditation before I knew what that was. When I was 10 to 14 or 15, I would do that on sleepovers. And I could put them in a state and put them to bed. Like the whole room. And I was up by myself. Like twiddling my thumbs. But, and so fast forward, you know, so many years later, I teach Chinese medicine for the past 30 years. I do shiatsu and massage for 30 years. I teach human design now, which is all explaining energy work and how each of our energies interact with each other. And I do guided meditation like over on 30th Street

between 7th and 6th is a place called Hari New York City. It's a kundalini yoga studio. And like when they need me, like the last weekend and this weekend, I teach there. So like all those same things. And because we lived in Penn South and we had affordable rent and my parents didn't make a lot, but they could afford to give me me piano lessons. They could afford for me to do team sports. They could afford to take vacations, which made it so special. 'Cause my mom took me all over the world at a young age. She took me to Turkey. Like she spoke Turkish. She's Armenian who speaks Turkish. And we got to travel. Travel. And so, I don't know. It's just, I was so, I'm so lucky that I got to grow up here with the income that my parents had. And right now, I don't make a lot of money doing what I do. But I can live here. And it's so great. It's so great.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Yeah, so those are the things. And music. I love doing music. I'll be at the open mic next Saturday at four. I don't think I'm gonna sing. But I do play recorder as a kid and piano. And I still play recorder like in a quartet and duets. Like, but they were like 30 year gaps of my interests. But they never left. And they're just really, that is my career. They've just added to it. It's just so cool. And because Penn South is affordable, my parents really gave me a good start.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: I'm lucky.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: Yeah.

Olive: That's so true.

Janet: Thanks.

Olive: Yeah. So could you tell me about this photo?

Janet: This is the first apartment in Building 10. I lived on the second floor with my parents. This is probably when I discovered that the record player was stolen with my Fonzie, my "Happy Days" record that was in the record player. I earned my money. Oh, that was my first album. So that was my first album. I was furious because we got robbed through my bedroom window when I wasn't home, thankfully. But

there was a wellJanet: known drug dealer. And his gang and his friends who lived in the abandoned buildings across the street on 29th Street. And my bedroom faced 29th Street on the second floor with terrace underneath it so someone could climb to the terrace and get to my bedroom. Now, it didn't happen when I was home. But these guys would, I would sleep on the floor 'cause I always fell out of bed for some, I was very athletic and I was athletic sleeper. So I ended, so I was like, I just was like, I'm just gonna sleep on the floor. And one night, a bottle of liquor came through my window and landed by my head and glass shattered everywhere. And I woke up to glass everywhere. And so my parents wouldn't let me sleep on the floor anymore. But we always knew, you know, those guys were always casing the joint. So we always had a timer when we went away. Like to make the lights come on at different times, thinking we're gonna fake 'em out. They figured it out. And they broke in and wiped us out. But here's the joke is, before that all happened, when I would get punished at home between the ages of 2 and 10 when we lived there, my parents were like, "No TV for two weeks." I was like, "No problem." I was like, in my head, I was like, "No problem." I went to my room. I looked out the window. Because the guys would plug in their TV from the lamppost. They'd rig the lamppost, plug it in, get electricity, and I could watch Saturday morning cartoons out the window right there.

Olive: Oh my God.

Janet: It was very, I don't know. We had a very strange relationship, the drug dealers and me. As a little kid. But I was never physically harmed.

Olive: Yes.

Janet: Yes.

Olive: All right. Wow.

Janet: Yeah, and so then we moved to this apartment, which was being vacated by the Wyeth family. And the daughter, Vanessa, now lives in Building 8. And when we moved in, my bedroom was painted this blue, bright blue. And you can still see the blue underneath the pink as it's chipping off near the baseboards. So it's just really, everything's so full circle.

Olive: Yeah.

Janet: I love my neighbors. I could never leave. I hope to never leave this apartment 'cause I love my neighbors and I love the history. So, yeah. Thank you.