

JOHANNE BRYANT-REID ORAL HISTORY

Interviewer: Camara Holloway	Interviewee: Johanne Bryant-Reid	Date of interview: October 1, 2022
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CAMARA HOLLOWAY: I'm Camara Holloway, and I'm the project manager for the Romare Bearden Digital Catalogue Raisonné. I'm joined by Josie Naron, coordinator of the Wildenstein Plattner Institute's Oral History Project. It's November 1st, 2022, and we're gathered to interview Johanne Bryant-Reid, co-director of the Romare Bearden Foundation. Welcome, Johanne. Thanks for joining us.

JOHANNE BRYANT-REID: Thank you very much for having me.

CH: Yeah. Um, we'd like to get started learning a little bit about your background before we delve into how you know Bearden and the Bearden universe.

JBR: Okay.

CH: So why don't you start with telling us where you were born.

JBR: Okay. Well, I was born in a small little town called Lincoln Heights, West Virginia. Lincoln Heights, West Virginia was just a fancy name for a coal mining community. I grew up in, uh, coal, Consolidated Coal #9. So, all of the coal mining communities had a number and they tried to give us a fancy name, so we didn't seem so crazy at that time. And I was the third child of a family of four. Born to Leslie David Bryant and Jessie Bryant. My father was a coal miner. My mom was a homemaker.

And, um, when I was 13, my father was actually killed in the coal mine. And so, that left my mom to raise the four of us. This coal mine is famous because, I think it was -- I can't remember. I think it may have been 1978, they had an explosion

that wiped out the entire community. All of the miners were killed. They had to seal the mine because they couldn't prevent the fire. They couldn't get the fire out. And so, it destroyed the entire community. The community is still there, but there are not very many people, because the widows were kind of left to fend by themselves. So, it was kind of like a difficult time for that, that community.

CH: Wow.

JBR: I went to Farmington High School. Graduated from there. Went on to West Virginia University. Had a delightful time there. I studied psychology. Became the first African-American cheerleader that they ever had at the university. This was during the time of, um, Jim Braxton, who went on to play for the Buffalo Bills. Which was, at that time, famous for OJ Simpson. So, he was the blocker that allowed OJ Simpson [laughs] to get all of the -- the points and the miles and the times and the yardage that he actually gained.

And after graduating from college, I moved to Cleveland, and went to work for an organization known as RAN Associates. And this was an organization that was responsible for hiring African-Americans and placing them into major corporations at that time. This was a time when there were very few African-Americans in -- working in corporate environments. And so, I went to work for them as a recruiter. And I recruited -- starting out with secretaries, worked my way all the way up to mechanical engineers, and we placed them in corporations across the country.

CH: Wow.

JBR: Uh, then got married, moved to New York. My husband was a professional soccer player. And we came to New York, and my first job was working with Merrill Lynch. I came in and became manager of their Human Resources Employment Department. Managed that for a period of time. And had a 26 year career working with them. And after 26 years, I was growing weary and wanted to do something else. And so, I was talking to a friend of mine who said, "Oh, I think you ought to go on the board of the Romare Bearden Foundation. You might be great for that." And so, I applied and joined and became a board member. And for eight years, I did the fundraising: galas, events, all kinds of events like that, activities. They then lost their executive director, who was relocating to California. And they asked me if I would become co-director, working with Diedra. And so, the rest has been history. So we've been over there having fun ever since then. [laughter]

CH: Okay, great. So, um, going back to when you were growing up, when did you discover art? How did that come into your life?

JBR: I didn't discover art. Growing up in West Virginia, there were no museums. There was no art classes, there was no mention of art. The only art that I was exposed to as a child was my own drawings, which were little flowers, which I still have some of. And my first real knowledge of art -- happened when I met Mr. Bearden. He was the first person that I knew that talked to me about art, and he sparked my interest.

CH: So, how did you become aware of Bearden and how did you two meet?

JBR: Uh, I was introduced to Mr. Bearden by Russell Goings. Russell Goings was an associate that I knew working with Merrill, and he called me up one day and said, "Hey, I want you to go and have lunch with Romare Bearden." In all honesty, at that time, I had no idea who Romare Bearden was. And so, I did a little bit of research. I looked him up, and then we went to lunch. We went to his studio. Uh, his studio was over in Long Island City, and he took us to lunch at the famous little restaurant that's across the street that he liked to lunch at. And while we were sitting there talking, he was telling me about -- you know, he showed me some of his work in the studio. He was planning for an exhibition. This was in, uh, 1983. I do remember that date.

CH: And what were your first impressions of him when you met him?

JBR: Well, in all honesty, when I first met him, he reminded me of Khrushchev. [laughter] Looked like him. You know, he kind of had that look, and he had on this, uh, one-piece jumper kind of outfit that he was wearing. He was rotund. He had a nice sounding quality voice, and he was -- I could see that he was very sort of gentle and, you know, very kind. And he took time when he was explaining things to you. He would -- he was showing me a work of art, and he would explain why he laid this here and why he put this there. And, uh, it was probably one of the most eye-opening experiences that -- that I've ever had with regard to art. I mean, and at the time, I still didn't realize how significant it was that I was having Romare Bearden explain to me why he chose to put a leaf here on an art painting that -- or art creation -- that he was making. And it was later that that actually sunk in that, Wow, what an experience that I didn't

even realize. You know, sometimes you're going through something and you don't realize what it is that you're going through. And so, that was really very precious. And what he -- um, he wanted to go -- he wanted to have lunch specifically because he had a friend that needed work, and he thought that I might be able to help him find a job opportunity with Merrill.

And I told him I'd do what I could. When I met the gentleman, he'd spent all his entire art -- his entire working career, working in creating art or doing things in the art field. I'm in financial services. I'm like, okay, this is not gonna be too easy. But I found -- I got lucky and I actually found him a position in our operational area, and he was very, very happy. I didn't realize it at the time, because Mr. Bearden did not explain this, but this gentleman needed a job that could provide healthcare. Because he didn't have any health coverage. And he had an illness that was debilitating, and he -- he really needed healthcare. And so, it was a good thing that I was able to help him. And Mr. Bearden in his kindness gifted me with the first piece of artwork that I've ever owned, which was a lithograph that he had created.

CH: Oh, wonderful. So, we haven't heard very much about his Long Island studio. What do you recall about that space?

JBR: Okay. It was, um, it was noisy. 'Cause there was a train going by like every five minutes. Uh, it was cluttered, because he had a lot of activity and things, you know, going on there. It didn't seem like it had much organization, but you could see clippings over here. You could see that he was working on various things, more than one piece at a time. I remember going upstairs. It was a flight of stairs that you had to climb to get

there. And it had great lighting, because there were windows all on this one side, and those windows were what the subway was going by. [laughs] So, that's why you had so much noise.

CH: Do you remember going to his loft on Canal Street?

JBR: Uh, I did on one occasion, but I don't really remember much about that. It was a very quick visit. Russell was picking him up to take him to the -- to work at the studio, so I didn't see very much there.

CH: Okay. So did you, um, ever get the chance to meet Nanette when you were --

JBR: I did not. I did not meet his wife. No. No. I didn't have a chance to meet her.

CH: Okay.

JOSIE NARON: I just wanted to go back for a minute to that, that first meeting you had with Romare. And it was also the first time you saw his art.

JBR: Right.

JN: You -- I mean, you told us kind of your initial impressions of him, but what did you think of the art when you first saw it?

JBR: Well, I loved the art that he was working on at the time. He was working -- he was doing collage work. He was planning for an exhibition, I think it was going to be with the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery. And, uh, I remember the one piece that I looked

at, and, you know, I haven't really focused on this that much, but I -- it was called *Winter*. And it was a collage piece, and it had, you know, a lot of different cutout parts that he was placing, and that's what he was explaining to me as he was putting it together.

CH: So, you got your first piece and you said it was a lithograph?

JBR: Yes. *Falling Star*.

CH: *Falling Star*, okay. And that was the first piece of art that you ever owned?

JBR: That was the first piece of art that I ever owned. Yeah.

CH: Okay. But that started you on a path towards collecting more work.

JBR: It did.

CH: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

JBR: It did. So, after I, um -- it was interesting, at that time, at Merrill, even though it was an extremely difficult job that took a lot of time, like 70 hour weeks. One of the things that they asked us to do was to have some community involvement. And so, I got involved with a women's organization that was in the Lower Manhattan area called the Women's Center. And this was a facility that worked with battered women and they would try and help them find private locations and provide support for them and their children. And I did fundraising for them. And the

fundraising that I did was through art auctions. That's how I began to meet various artists.

And first started out with meeting females, like Emma Amos and Maren Hassinger, uh, and Nanette Carter. Carole Byard. And then, it grew from there to where I started doing specific shows for other artists, people that I knew, like Ronnie Phillips and people of that nature. That's how we raised money to keep the center going and that gave me my experience with artists. Not only getting to ask them to, you know, provide us with their artwork, but actually spending more time with them, understanding their lifestyle, seeing how they lived. It was very different from those Wall Street type people. And it was, uh, interesting to visit their studios, go to their homes, hang out with them on the weekends and drink wine. And it was -- it opened my eyes to a different world. [laughter] So, it was a lot of fun.

CH: Oh, great. So, what kinds of work when you met these various artists attracted you the most?

JBR: You know, when you have limited -- I found that when you have limited experience or knowledge about art, you just like things that you look at that move you. They'd touch you in some way. Um, so if I would -- I mean, there were some artists that I would look at their work and I was, you know, I would say, okay, I hear you, but I didn't understand it. But then, there were some whose work I would take a look at and it would -- it would raise an emotional aspect. It would somehow touch me in some way, and I could kind of feel what it was that they were trying to create. And I began to realize that I wasn't really that, uh, enamored with realistic. I kinda liked to delve into the more

abstract work, because I could look at it on Monday and it's -- I saw one thing, and then I could look at it later, and I could see something else. And so, every time I looked at it, I could picture a different something coming out of that work. And then, if I talked to somebody about it, that would open other views about it. And it just became a passion.

And I then developed a very close friendship with a dear friend of mine, Roy Crosse, who was an artist out of, um, Trinidad. And he taught me a lot about his art and how he created it. And he introduced me to a number of different people. He was living in Newark at the time. And so, we would always come get together and hang out with Willie Cole and people of that nature, and they would all sit around and talk about their art, drink wine, cook food, play the piano. And have, you know, very pleasant days and time. So, that was my education to art, was actually sitting in a room with a group of artists and listening to them telling me why they did what they did and how they did what they did.

CH: Did you seek any additional advice from Romare Bearden when you were thinking of acquiring pieces or to ask him about what you should be learning about?

JBR: Well, I remember when we -- on our -- when we had our first meeting, um, he asked me the question, "Do you collect art?" And I very honestly said, "No, I don't." And so, we went on with the conversation. We laughed and chatted for a while, and then he said to me, "You know, in life, you're gonna have to learn to get something -- you're gonna have to learn to buy something other than shoes." I had on this fancy, fancy pair of shoes, you know, that -- and he noticed that. And so, he said, "You're

gonna have to buy something other than shoes." And so, I said, "Okay." And so, then he, he talked to me about buying art and he said, "Buy people whose work is going to be significant." Make sure you buy something that people, you know, these people are going to do something with their art. They're not just making one piece, but they're dedicating their life to art.

But I didn't go back to him every time I was gonna make a purchase [laughter] and ask him any questions. I just, you know, if I felt it and if I could afford it, I would just make the -- I would just make the purchase. And sometimes I look back on some of the things I've collected and I'm not -- it wasn't too shabby. I did okay. He may have been able to give me a lot more advice, but I'm sure it would've been much pricier -- and probably out of my pocket range. [laughter]

CH: So, what were the artists that you did end up collecting?

JBR: Well, I collected a few pieces of Romie's work. I had a chance -- I got a lot of Norman Lewis. He was a person whose work I really liked. I met his daughter and his wife, and I collected work from them. Let's see. Um, as I mentioned, my dear friend Roy Crosse, I collected a lot of him. John Wilson. Betye Saar. You know, it was kind of all over.

CH: And you got to meet, like, John Wilson and Betye Saar, and --

JBR: I wouldn't buy it if I didn't get a chance to meet them.

CH: Okay.

JBR: I didn't buy from galleries. Or I would -- I would personally want to meet the artists and buy it direct, because I wanted to know the story. I didn't just wanna have a pretty picture. I wanted to know, how did you create this? Why did you create this?

CH: So you really -- did you feel that you were really a part of the art scene that was happening in New York?

JBR: Um, I don't know that I was a part of the art scene, but I knew a lot of artists and, uh, I hung out with a lot of them. And, you know, got invited to some parties that were kind of nice little parties. So, you know, yeah, I knew a lot of people at that time. Yeah.

CH: And is there anything that you remember that was distinctive about that moment when you started collecting in the '80s?

JBR: Well, anything that was distinctive. I just think that I became like a sponge. You know? I was just absorbing and learning and seeing how people lived their lives. When I moved to New York, I was like -- I felt like I was, uh, totally out of my element. I'm coming from a little small town. I'm here, I'm riding on the 4 and 5 train in high-heeled shoes like a crazy person. You know, it was just -- it was a strange environment for me, and it took me a while to learn how to live in the city and feel comfortable. And I think it was that art community that helped tremendously, because they just felt more like home. They felt more genuine. And I, you know, I enjoyed hanging out with them. And I think they helped me over a very tumultuous time in terms of trying to adjust to living in New York City. Now, you

can't get me outta here. But at that time I was like, What am I doing here? It's so huge.

JN: I mean, what were some of those gatherings like? Like, what were people talking about?

JBR: Well, you know, they talked about what was current events at that time. You know, they talked about politics just like we do now. They talked about their struggle. They talked about cre-- they talked about their creations. They talked -- they gave each other feedback. If one group, if one person knew how to secure funding for a grant or some kind of program, they shared that information. It was -- it was kind of like family, you know. And they all came together and they chatted and they talked, and that's how they managed to -- to live their lives.

I mean, it was interesting because, you know, most of them were living in places that -- you know, they were studios. But it's not like it was a plush life at all. It was, you know, sometimes very cold in those big lofty spaces that they were -- you know, it wasn't as warm. And there were minimal amounts of food, but, you know, it was always shared. And so, they -- they talked about life, you know, and how -- what their life was like and how important it was for them to do what they did.

JN: Sounds like a really nice, like, kind of communal feel.

JBR: Mm-hm. It was, yeah. Very much so.

JN: Did you notice any kind of shifts, like, throughout the '80s, into the '90s, like, in that artists' community?

JBR: Well, I noticed that my friend, Roy, was really having a difficult time and he decided to move. And that was one of -- that was another thing that I noticed about them. They did tend to move around a lot. So, one space would beget them to another space, and they were not -- not as settled, you know. They were moving, and probably because of finance, you know, in most cases. I think, you know, if they couldn't make sales. Many of them taught. You know, they would teach classes or they were trying to make sales, they were trying to get galleries to pick them up.

One of the things that we did when we were doing the -- the fundraisers for the women's center, we worked with a gallery and we were able to get the gallery to pick up some of those artists. And that kind of changed their life. And so, it didn't happen for everyone, but we may have saved one or two. Which put them on a different traject-- a different path.

CH: So, at that time, Bearden is an older, well-established artist. How did he fit into this circle of artists that you were connecting with?

JBR: Um, I don't think he did. Those -- the people that I met, I met primarily through -- well, I met some of them through Russell Goings. And I didn't really have that much connection with Bearden, aside from the fact that I had the meeting with him. I helped him find his friend a job. He invited me to an opening, which I did attend. And then I kinda didn't really spend that much time with him. I spent time more with these -- these artists that were emerging at that time. Willie Cole, Fred Brown. You know, those guys were -- they weren't where Bearden was.

CH: Okay.

JBR: But they were -- they were climbing. But they weren't there yet.

CH: Yeah. Yeah. I was just wondering -- you hear that Bearden did mentor younger artists, and so --

JBR: He did. I know he was -- he worked with Emma Amos and she was one of those people that I -- I frequented her studio. And other, other people. But I didn't really -- I wasn't really connected with him and -- him and them. My connections with them were totally separate.

CH: So, in addition to collecting and running the auctions that you were doing, what else did you do that was art related?

JBR: Well, I gave some parties myself, for my friends. And I helped them organize parties and events. So, if they were going to do an exhibition and they needed to kind of pull it together, I was probably their go-to person. That was done just because we were friends, not out of pay. And any way that I could help any artist, I always have tried to encourage them to stay the course. Because one of the things that I did notice is that, you know, it's hard. It's a difficult life. And sometimes they can become somewhat uncomfortable and, and thinking, Well, maybe I should try a different course of action. But I think when something is in you and you -- it's what you feel like you should be doing, then you have to work towards it. And so, I was always there to be an encourager.

CH: What would you say is the connection or the ability that you had to really pursue this kind of passion for art and collecting that stemmed from your background, and how did -- how did you fuse working for Merrill Lynch and this artistic activity?

JBR: Well, that was -- that was done primarily through the -- at, when I was working with Merrill, that was through, you know, this community involvement work. Which was actually a program that the firm Merrill Lynch actually had, and I think some corporations still have, where they try to get their top executives to go out and work in the community and provide some sense of support. For whatever your passion may be. Mine just happened to be an interest in the arts. And so, I was able to work through that. And it gave me time away from the job, because they actually give you some time to, you know, work on these things. And sometimes I would do some other things. Like, I would maybe go to schools, teach graduating seniors how to interview, how to dress for success, how to find jobs. Provide that kind of activity. But any time I could do something that had an involvement with art, that was what I always migrated towards.

CH: And how did you cultivate this, like, learning how to dress for success and navigate the corporate world? Did you get that from your family, or did you have to learn that on the job?

JBR: I had to learn that on the job. When I was working with the minority recruiting firm in Ohio, that was a part of the training that we provided for individuals. We had an unusual approach. Normally when you're looking for people to recruit, to find jobs and place them in corporations, you know, people run

ads and, you know, people apply. We had a different approach. We would -- every Friday night, go to the local bars and pubs. Have drinks and meet the people there. And then, invite them into our offices on Monday and get them prepared for job interviews and help them find jobs. That's -- that was the method of recruiting that we used.

CH: And did they also -- establish the connection that you had to the arts? Did they sort of put you in the path to being able to pursue your interest in art when you discovered it?

JBR: Well, I think working -- working at Merrill, it did give me the ability to have some disposable income. And so, that's what I used it for, was to buy art and to, you know, pursue my passion. Yeah, probably if I had not -- if I had been in some other situation, I may not have had any disposable income and I might not have been able to buy art.

CH: So what does your collection look like now?

JBR: Well, it looks like it needs space. [laughs] Because it's -- there are a lot of pieces and I've actually been giving a lot of thought to what, uh, what I want to do with it, you know, when it comes time to make that decision. Trying to give some thought and plan to that. It's over 300 pieces of work, 300 works of art. And --

CH: And they all share this interest in abstraction that you --

JBR: No, not all. There's some -- there's some realistic pieces. But most are. Uh, well, it's maybe 60/40 split, I would say.

CH: And so, you -- you haven't made any final decisions?

JBR: I haven't. What I, you know, what I do from time to time is I talk to members of my family to see if they have an interest in any specific piece. Or, you know, if they're interested in it. And I find that they're not interested. And even when I talk to a number of friends of mine who -- that might have some collections, they say, Well, I don't know what I'm gonna do with it because the kids don't want it. And so, I'm -- I think about that. You know, there are some things that I would never, ever wanna part with and I'd like for them to stay, you know, close. But then there are other pieces that I could, you know, I could probably part with and place them somewhere. That maybe so other people could get a chance to see them. But it's hard to make that decision. It's hard to kind of decide, what are you gonna do with all this stuff?

CH: Right. Right.

JBR: And I find that as the -- as I get older, that's a question that, you know, looms in your head, you know? I wanna make that decision myself. I don't want to leave it for somebody else to make.

CH: Yeah.

JBR: So yeah, it's a thought.

CH: So, Romare was in a similar predicament. He decided, apparently, with his will, to have the idea for the Foundation.

JBR: That's correct. Mm-hm.

CH: Yes. Did you know anything about the Foundation at the time when he passed, or?

JBR: I did. I knew about the Foundation. I didn't know anything about his will at that time. But I knew about the Foundation and I knew some of the work they did. There was a -- there was a recruiter that I worked with. Her name was, uh, Johnson. And she's the one that interested me in going to the Foundation. She was on the board at one point in time, and then she relocated. But when getting there and starting to work with them, I could see -- because at the time that I started working with them, that was when we had the space. They had the space down on 28th Street, or down in that area. Beautiful space, with a large conference room, exhibition space, large office. They even had space to store the artwork. And so, it was a -- it was a wonderful location that was perfect for events, cultivation events and things of that nature. And he made the decision to share it half with the Foundation and half with his family, with his wife.

CH: So you said that you -- when you started with them, that you used your fundraising skills. And that was what you started doing when you worked with the Foundation.

JBR: Right. On the board.

CH: On the board, yeah.

JBR: That's correct. We did a few galas. We honored some people -- uh, Grant Hill. Every year we chose a corporate sponsor to

honor. And we did -- we did gala events for about six or seven years.

CH: And how did you work to fulfill the mission? How did those events help support you to fulfill the mission of the Foundation?

JBR: Well, the fundraising was specifically to raise money so that the organization could do its work. That's what our board was really charged with. We were charged with trying to raise funds so that we could help the board -- the Foundation do -- do what the programs that they were running. They were running the Cinque program back at that time. They had a number of other programs that they were running. But our -- our task was to help raise funds because they needed money to continue to survive.

CH: Yeah.

JN: I mean, just to go back a step, when you first joined the board of the Foundation, kind of like, what -- what was your understanding of the mission and what drew you both?

JBR: My understanding of the mission was that we were there to perpetuate the legacy of the artist. Yeah. That's what we were there for. And we wanted to do that in every way that we could. And so, we did it in small ways, but in order to keep the organization going, fundraising was just really the name of the game.

JN: Always is. [laughs]

JBR: Couldn't get away from that. You had to raise money to keep 'em going. Have staff maintain the space, you know, pay the bills, pull together exhibitions, things of that nature. All required funding. And I think that's the problem that many artists have. They don't have the funding or the support to get funding so that they can advance their careers.

JN: Yeah. And when you -- when you first joined the board, had Nanette already passed, or --

JBR: Yes.

JN: Okay. And then, it -- like, it was a lot of family members at the beginning, right?

JBR: There were. There were a lot of family members.

JN: How was walking into that?

JBR: There were. And when I joined the board, it was chaired by E.T. Williams. And then there were a number of family members on the board. They were beginning to start to bring on non-family members. That's when I came on board at that time.

CH: Do you know how E.T. Williams got involved with being on the board?

JBR: I don't know exactly. I know that he knew Mrs. Bearden very well, and I -- he was an art collector. But I don't know specifically what brought him there. But he was -- he was there for a while and he was very effective, I think, in helping them advance his -- the legacy in many ways.

CH: So, when you became co-director, your role shifted a little bit. So, what was your responsibility, since you share that with Diedra Harris-Kelley?

JBR: Well, you know, I was -- I was retired from my corporate job and I was moving into retirement. So, I agreed to do this to be a bridge, initially, because the prior executive director, Grace Stanislaus, was relocating. And we were down to a very small -- it was just two, three people. Diedra, a secretary, and myself. And my role -- we were gonna take the job of an executive director and sort of split it into two. My role was going to be to be the back office operational person. So, I was gonna manage budgets, I was gonna manage all the administrative detail, finances, audits, things of that nature, which was something that I had expertise in coming out of a corporate setting.

And Diedra was going to be the person that would run, manage the programs. And we talked about this quite a bit and I said to her, I said, "You're going to -- you should be the face of the organization. You should be the person that everyone knows and meets. And you're the one that's going to push the legacy. I'm just behind the scenes working as the support." And so, we've had that relationship from the time we -- I started all the way up until the current date. And it works out well for us.

CH: I'm just surprised that you have this behind-the-scenes view of yourself [laugh] because it seems like you do a lot for the [Foundation?].

JBR: Well, I do. It doesn't mean you don't do a lot. [laughter] It doesn't mean you don't do a lot. I mean, think about it, now, you're making a film. And there's a star actor or actress that, you know, is getting all the play, but there's -- there's a whole bunch of people in the background that without them, it couldn't happen.

CH: Right.

JBR: So, that's -- that's kind of -- that's kind of the role that I have, and I enjoy that. I don't really like -- although, you know, when I worked in corporate America, I was always doing a lot of public speaking. But it's not something that I enjoy now. I'd kind of just rather be behind the scenes and get everything done that needs to get done. And so, that works better.

CH: So, what are some of the challenges that you see when it comes to preserving the legacy of Bearden and maybe preserving the legacy of African-American artists in general?

JBR: Yeah. Uh, there -- there are a lot of challenges. I recently went through docent training at the Met, which has been kind of interesting. I did it while we were going through COVID, because, you know, I'm at home and so everything was online. You know, you could do everything virtual. And when I'm in that -- when I'm in the museum and when I'm interfacing with people, I see that there's such a huge void when it comes to African-American artists. Yes, there's some progress that has been made. You see some things that are changing. But when I walk through the Met, when I'm there, no Beardens on the wall. I see a -- I see a poster, but I don't see much. And the only

place where I see art of African-American artists is maybe in the contemporary or modern section. Otherwise, it's not there. So, we still have to push very hard to make sure that that historical information is not lost. And I think Bearden is a primary person that we can use to help to push that effort. But there's a lot of work to be done to make sure that African-American artists are not just collected, stored in the storage somewhere, but not publicly displayed except every Black History Month. That's very frustrating to see.

CH: So what do you think the Foundation has been most successful at and in terms of making this -- or meeting these challenges?

JBR: Well, I think the Foundation is successful at pushing Bearden forward through the exhibitions. Through the programs that we run. Through working with even -- our educational program that we used to do more of than we do now with children. Those are things that I think will -- that help to push forward the efforts of Bearden. But they're -- again, we're small. It's two people. And a board, which we're expanding now, which is helping. But it's a big -- it's a big job. It's a big task. And we need more resources. We need more people, and we need to keep working at it.

CH: Mm-hm.

JBR: It's a lot of work.

CH: One of the resources that you do have is the archive.

JBR: Yes.

CH: And at one point, didn't the archive also include Bearden's library?

JBR: The archives does include his library, yes. About over 2000 books, I think. An eclectic collection of books. Some of the books he used to cut out images that he used in the artworks. He's always writing in books that he read, noting things. And books ranging from cookbooks to art books to how-to-fix-this type of books. It's a very eclectic collection of books.

CH: And how do you use that resource?

JBR: We're not using it right now because it's in storage. We're not really using the archival material in a -- in a meaningful way yet. And we should, because I think there are -- there are a lot of exhibitions that could come out of our archives, including the books we've used. We've used it a little bit when we did the one exhibition of [*From*] *Process to Print*. But there's a lot of work in there that if we could get in there and take the time and put it together, I think there are a number of exhibition opportunities that can come out of the archives. A lot.

CH: And a portion of the archive has been digitized.

JBR: Yes.

CH: And will be made available to the public.

JBR: Yes.

CH: So, do you think that that is going to be a way of inviting people into the world of Bearden?

JBR: I hope it will. I think it'll be used in that way. I was just looking at -- a couple days ago, the new information that WPI is putting out there now. And I think that's exciting and I think people will hopefully resonate toward that and learn a lot and see more and help to continue to press on the fact that Bearden was really, like, a brilliant Renaissance man.

CH: So, what is it that you hope that -- you mentioned that Bearden is a Renaissance man. What is really the key idea that you think you want people to remember about him? As an artist and as someone who made an impact on us?

JBR: Mm-hm. You know, I -- I'm sure that there are many people who could speak very eloquently about his artwork and, you know, the beauty that he created in his artwork. But I -- when I reflect back on him, to me, he's like -- I find him to be a very kind, giving, compassionate person that was working diligently every day, although he was creating artwork, to help other people. Whether they were artists or personal friends or whatever, he was just a human spirit that was here to do good and to provide development for people when he could and to give them aid. You know, I think that's a special person. Most people don't -- they're not, they don't live their lives to do that. But I think he lived his life in such a way that he was trying to help mankind. He did it through his art, but he also did it through meeting other people and helping them in other ways. So to me, he was just a very genuine human being. And so, that's what I want people to know about him. Yes, he created these beautiful works of art, and someone can speak very eloquently

about those. But heart to heart, he was just a good, honest human being that was trying to do good in the world.

CH: And so, if you have your -- your druthers, I suppose, what is it that you hope the Foundation can -- can do? What are some of the things that you want to make of the archive, to have the Foundation in terms of, like, what does success look like for you?

JBR: Yeah, I'd like to see exhibitions. I'd like to see a lot of exhibitions come out of the archives because there's a lot of rich material in there. I'd like to see us continue to push the ideas that Bearden had of, you know, trying to make the world a better place. I'd like to see many more exhibitions. I'd like to see more people, the next generation of people, specifically, know who he is. Know who he was. Because that's important. You know, we can't -- it just can't be a little small circle of people. It has to be a broader sense, and it has to be the next generation, specifically. I'd like to see the hip-hop generation, the X, the Y, the Z people. I want them to know who Bearden was and what he did. And I'd like to see his -- his work being used in a way that will help them to understand that. That's what -- that's how I would see success --

CH: Mm-hm.

JBR: -- is if I could talk to my great-niece, who just went to college, and if she weren't my great-niece, she wouldn't know who Bearden is because I'm always yapping about him. But I'd like to see all of her peers know who Romare Bearden is, what he did, what he stood for, how he created. That to me is success, because that's pushing his legacy further and deeper and deeper.

And then, their kids should do the same. That is what I'd like to see happen.

CH: How do you think the partnership with the WPI is going to be able to help you with that?

JBR: Well, I think it's gonna help us in a number of ways, but first and foremost, it's going to help us get our hands around the work that he created, because we didn't have that. And I can see now as I go out and as I'm interfacing with people, I can see -- I can -- I'm constantly telling, talking to them about this project. And I'm saying to them how important it is, if they have Bearden work, to come forward with it, and not just have it in their little living room and nobody see it but their family. And I think that pulling this together, working with WPI, it will -- it will make that happen. So that we can bring him out of the living rooms and put him into the lives of everybody. He shouldn't be just hidden and only be known by a small group of people. He should be known by everyone. [pauses] And hopefully that's what the catalogue raisonné and this big project will get us to. I know it's gonna take forever, [laughs] but that's my hope. That's what I'd like to see happen. And I'd like to be a part of making that come to fruition.

JN: What do you think is at stake in terms of making sure that, you know, his memory carries on?

JBR: What's at stake? Well, [sighs] you know, I hope money never becomes an issue. And I hope we always have the resources that we need to continue to push it. Sometimes people lose interest. They move on to the next hot thing, whatever that might be. And

I wouldn't like to see that happen. I'd like to see that -- I'd like to see us be able to continue on. We're good now.

JN: Yeah.

JBR: And we're working to make sure that we stay good [laughs] in terms of the economic aspects of it. And I think as long as we can, then -- you know, we keep finding new things. So, I think that makes it exciting, too, because we're learning ourselves. Because, you know, that's a -- most artists, or many artists, I don't know about today's artists, but many of the artists, back in the time, in the early '80s and '90s, they didn't document anything. They were creating work. They were giving it out. They're passing it out. They're creating these -- there's no records. Oh my goodness. Now you're trying to go back and recreate that. That's very hard. And Bearden didn't keep great records. Things were pushed aside and put in garages in different places. Now we're trying to pull it up.

JN: Do you think that, I don't know, like, COVID and the shift of a lot of like, programming online and just kind of this whole digital world opening up a little more is kind of changing any of the ways you think about, like avenues for Bearden?

JBR: I think that, you know, COVID was horrible, but the Zooming out of COVID has changed the world. You know, the platforms that are used now are everywhere. I think they'll stay, even though people are going back into work and doing things, you know, in person. I don't think that aspect will ever change. I think that's like something that's like a -- a silver lining that came out of COVID, that we were able to still communicate. We can find a way to share information. We can reach different people.

I noticed now when we run our Cinque programs, we're picking up international people. We never picked up international people in public programming. But now we have the ability to reach further. So, I like that and I think that that -- that's a big plus, and I think that helps a lot. So, that's one good thing. Although so many people lost their lives, that was a good thing that came out of that time.

CH: What accomplishments do you think the Foundation thus far should be most proud of?

JBR: What accomplishments? Well, I think -- I guess the one major accomplishment [laughs] is that they've survived for 30 years, 30-plus years. That's significant. And they may be one of the few African-American foundations that have been able to do that. So I -- I'm happy that they've been able to do that, and I'd like to see them be able to continue on. And I would also like to see them continue on to bring -- bring on other artists. I think that's an important component. It's about Bearden, but it's also about continuing to bring other artists into the fold because that is what he would've done.

CH: Well, thank you. Is there anything else you think we should know about Bearden or yourself in terms of our conversation that we've had?

JBR: No, I -- nothing, nothing pops in my mind, but if I come up with some thoughts or ideas, I'll be happy to share them.

CH: Okay.

JBR: And I thank you for taking the time to --

JN: Yeah, well, thank you.

JBR: -- gather this insight. And I hope it was helpful and I hope it will provide some insight for people, if they so choose to listen.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]