

Edited Transcript
Falzone/Murphy
April 15, 2011

Catherine Falzone: This is Catherine Falzone interviewing Marc Murphy on March 24th, 2011 at 7:10 p.m. in the King Juan Carlos Center at NYU.

So, Marc. I thought we could start by talking about where you grew up?

Marc Murphy: Okay. I live in Staten Island and I moved around a little bit, but I live in the Tottenville area and it's a nice neighborhood. That's really it.

CF: So that's where you live now or that's where you grew up?

MM: That's where I live now, yes. I still live there.

CF: Okay. Do you live in the same house that you grew up in, or nearby?

MM: Yeah, I mean, I moved a few times. I've been in that house since 2001, since high school. And I'm still there now.

CF: Okay, and do your parents live in the neighborhood still?

MM: Yes, I live with my parents, two younger brothers, a dog and a cat.

CF: Okay. What was it like to grow up there? Was it like a close-knit neighborhood or...?

MM: Growing up, I moved a few times, but yeah. I went to a Catholic high school on the south shore of Staten Island, which is not too far away, ten minutes from the house and pretty much everybody knew everybody. Nice neighbors and that's really it.

CF: Your last name is Murphy. I take it you're Irish-American?

MM: Irish. Three quarters Irish, a quarter Italian.

CF: Okay. Did that have any bearing on your growing up?

MM: No, no. I'm an American. So that's that.

CF: Okay. How did you decide to work for the Department of Sanitation?

MM: I was in college and my birthday is December 31st, so I am the youngest kid in my grade. In New York they go by that being the last day of the year to register. So while I was in college, the fireman test came out and I couldn't take it because I was too young—I always wanted to be a fireman—and I said, "Alright, well I'll just take the next test that comes out, I'll get any city job

and I'll transfer over." And I took the sanitation test, I got a hundred and three, I got called [for the job] in nine months and that's really how it goes from there.

CF: Okay. So what was the highest score possible? You got five points for living in New York City—they're called resident credits, you get them on any city test that you take.

CF: So what made you want to be a fireman?

MM: I don't know. I just always heard it was a cool job. It was like a manly man's job I guess and everybody sees the red truck and everything. There's actually a picture of me my mother always breaks out to embarrass me when I was like three years old with my red cheeks and everything and a fireman's hat, so I don't know. I just always wanted to do it.

CF: And so how do you feel now, being a sanitation worker instead?

MM: Well actually, when I had four years on the job, I got called in to the fire department. I turned it down 'cause I love my job and it's hard to take a step backwards when you already established four years into a career, you know?

CF: And it seems like seniority is very important in this job.

MM: Yeah, pretty much all you have on this job is seniority. And I'm sure that [it] is the same way, I don't know for sure, in the fire department and everything. Plus the pay grade says you go up every year, you get a raise in pay, so it was kind of hard to take a step backwards.

CF: Right. Did you think about becoming a police officer at all?

MM: No.

CF: Was it all the same test?

MM: No, no. Separate tests for each one. You know, you sign up separately and, no, I had no ambitions of becoming a police officer.

CF: Okay. So what was the process like for getting the job...aside from taking the test?

MM: Well after you take the test, you wait maybe a month or two and they give you a list, they give you your score back, and maybe a few weeks later they give you a list number and the list number is what they base the hiring off of—one obviously being the first guy they call for the job. My list number was 344 and I really didn't hear anything for a few months—I guess another eight months. I took the test in, I want to say, April, and starting in the end of January, they called me and the process began. First you have to get your CDL license, so they take you down to Floyd Bennett Field and they teach you how to drive the trucks.

CF: And CDL is Commercial Drivers' License.

MM: Commercial Drivers' License Class B, so it's like just regular trucks, no eighteen-wheelers. So they teach you and then they bring you to go get your road test. They sponsor you, so you have to go get your road test. So they bring you down there with five or six other sanitation workers-to-be and you take the road test. And that's the beginning. And if you pass, then they put in the next class of sanitation workers.

CF: Okay. What's it like to get that license?

MM: A little nervous and you're driving a big truck. I don't care if you're driving an Expedition or the biggest regular truck out there— [a] commercial truck [is] a big deal and it's a little nerve-wracking. There's blind spots and you can't really see too well and once you get used [to it] though, it's a lot easier. It's just like doing anything. It was a little nerve-wracking, but it was pretty easy.

CF: So were all the rookies trained together as a big group?

MM: Yeah. They bring in maybe a hundred, a hundred and fifty guys were in my class.

CF: Okay. And did you get to know anyone there? Was it very competitive or a more friendly atmosphere?

MM: No, no, it was very friendly. It was a very good experience. Even the teachers there were very good and they're sanitation workers themselves. So they know that you're coming on the job and everybody tries to take care of each other and help out and tell you about different jobs to do while you're on the job. Different places to go and different work things that you could do. So it was pretty comfortable.

CF: Yeah, so like different job assignments.

MM: Right. Some people drive the mechanical brooms, some people pick up the regular day-to-day trash, some people work in the office. You know, there are actually a lot of different things that [a person can] do.

CF: Did you know at that point which job you wanted?

MM: No, you don't really have an option. They just tell you about them, so you go wherever they put you anyway, so I didn't really mind wherever [they put me]. Wherever I would've went, I didn't really mind.

CF: What did you end up doing at first?

MM: I ended up coming to this garage and working behind the truck. When you say that, it means you're on the truck picking up the garbage [or] whatever your function is for that day. Whatever your route is for that day.

CF: Right. So you're district 2, Manhattan.

MM: Manhattan 2.

CF: Can you tell me what your first day on the job was like? And also what day was it, if you remember?

MM: March 22nd. Well, my first day in the district or my first day on the job? Because your first day on the job is when you're in class. You sit down in the class and they talk to you, you have to sign the paperwork...which health benefits you want, which this, which that. They tell you what you're going to be making, what to expect, what uniforms to buy— you know, all that stuff.

CF: So how many days was that?

MM: You're in the class for three weeks. When you take the road test, you don't take it in the garbage truck, you take it in what they call a cutdown—it's like a giant pickup truck. So they teach you how to use the garbage truck, they teach you how to drive the mechanical broom, they teach you all the basic stuff you need to know about the job, about what to do when you're in this situation. You know, pretty basic stuff, and then they send you on your way.

CF: So then what was your first day actually at the garage?

MM: [I'm] going to say it was three weeks from that day. I'll be honest, I don't remember the exact day or probably much about it.

CF: It was a blur?

MM: Yeah, it goes by fast now that I've been on seven years. I completed seven years just the other day on March 22nd.

CF: Congratulations.

MM: Thank you. [pause] Only thirteen more to go.

CF: [laughs] Yeah. Are you going to retire at twenty years?

MM: I plan to. I hope so. I'd like to. I'm actually in college also. I go to CSI [College of Staten Island] at night.

CF: What are you studying?

MM: Nothing now. I'm studying whatever they tell me to go to class for. I only have a year in, so I take one class a semester and I'm going to get my Associate's. I'd like to be a teacher.

CF: Oh ok. What do you want to teach?

MM: I don't know. I coach football at a high school. I've been [there] since I got on the job and I just like being around the school. I like doing it, so gym...whatever I get my major in maybe. I haven't decided yet. I'm undecided.

CF: Was that something you were thinking of before you started working for the sanitation department?

MM: I went to college for a year and a half before I decided to work for sanitation. I went to St. John's University in Queens and I went to SUNY Cortland. And when I got back from SUNY Cortland during my winter recess, they called me for the job and I never went back. I went to work instead.

CF: Why did you choose to do that?

MM: Honestly? Because I went to college to play football, not to go to college. [laughs] And I didn't do so well in the school aspect of it. I didn't take it seriously. I was there for the wrong reasons, you know? So, I said, "You know what? I'm wasting my money and I'm wasting my time and I got a good job here." I knew a little bit about the job. I didn't know about the job, but, you know, you hear about a city job—cops, firemen, sanitation—so I said this is a good start.

CF: What is it about city jobs?

MM: You have health benefits, you could make a living for yourself. You're never going to be rich, but you're not going to be poor. You'll always have work and you could leave after twenty years and do something else. It's almost like a stepping-stone if you plan it and do it the right way.

CF: Right. Are [your benefits] in any danger of being lost at all because of budget cuts or anything? Is that a worry?

MM: It's a worry. It's definitely a worry. I'm actually a shop steward, so I deal with the union from my garage and it's definitely a worry. You have to make sure that people don't abuse the job because then they'll say, "Oh, what are you doing? You could do this, you could do so much more," and we work hard. I'll tell you, to be honest, we work hard, so you don't want to see anybody lose anything.

CF: How did you become a shop steward?

MM: You get voted in by your peers.

CF: And what made you want to do that?

MM: Well I like to deal with it. You know, I like to be involved in my job. I like my job and I like to represent the people. Not everybody knows as much as certain people. Some people just come to work and don't want to be bothered and there's always little rules and intricacies that not

everybody's familiar with, so I like to be the guy that can help them out. And, you know, if somebody's doing the wrong thing or if somebody just needs to know the right answer, they can call. And it also has benefits for me because I don't go nights anymore, which means, in sanitation there's three shifts: the day line, four to twelve, and then midnight to eight in the morning. When you're a shop steward, you stay during the day only. You can only work during the day.

CF: Why is that?

MM: Because the majority of your men work during the day and also because you have to be out in the field on your route. A shop steward also gets his own route. Because he has to be involved in the day-to-day workings of the garage. You know, they don't want somebody to be a shop steward and then work as a garage utility guy in the garage and not know what's going on out in the street.

CF: So you're the liaison between the workers and the union?

MM: Yes.

CF: What's your relationship like with the union, like with the leadership?

MM: Good. I mean, I've only recently got this position last June, so it's pretty good. My [union] representative is in charge of three garages. We get along fairly well. I call him whenever I have questions and sometimes they're stupid questions and he's like, "That's alright. The only stupid question is the one not asked." [laughs]

CF: Right. So, your current job: you're on the trucks and you collect in this neighborhood [Manhattan's Greenwich Village]. Can you tell me what your day is like out on the streets?

MM: Well, it depends on what the weather's like. [laughs] I have a good day every day. I've got a great partner and we get along well, we talk and you work. You get up every morning. I'm up by four o'clock in the morning. Sometimes a little later—I tend to get to work on the later side—but every day is pretty good. You start at six o'clock in the morning. You have to be down for roll call. They hand you out your route and when you get your route, you and your partner get in the truck and go.

CF: So every day you have a different route to pick up?

MM: Monday, Wednesday, Friday we have the same and Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday we have the same.

CF: So you work six days a week?

MM: Five days. I'm off one of those days on a rotating day every week.

CF: Do you not usually get a weekend that's two days together?

MM: I'm not exactly sure, but I would like to say every six weeks you get a weekend. A Saturday off. Sunday you're always off unless you want to work the overtime and every six weeks you'll get a Saturday. And then it rotates. It's not always like Monday, then Tuesday, then Wednesday—sometimes it jumps from Friday to Tuesday to, you know. However, they have a written up calendar, [so] however that calendar goes.

CF: Is [it] difficult having that kind of schedule?

MM: No, I guess at the beginning it might have been, but I was nineteen so I was just happy to have a job. I didn't care. So they could tell me when to work whenever they wanted to. But [now,] not really. Actually sometimes it works out to your benefit. It's nice to have a day off in the middle of the week, especially since it's a labor job. By Wednesday or Thursday after doing it for four days, your body's a little tired. It's nice to have a break in between and then go to work for another two, [then] be off one.

CF: Have you had the same partner since you started?

MM: No. I started working with Eddie [Nieves] when I became shop steward in June. Before that, I didn't have my own route, so I basically fell into wherever. You become a fill-in, they call it, and you just fill in to a spot when somebody else is off.

CF: Is it more desirable to have a regular partner?

MM: Yes.

CF: Or did you like the change?

MM: Well it was weird, actually. At first, I was like, "Oh, I'm going to have to work with this same guy every day, it's going to get boring." But now, to be honest, when Eddie's off, I get aggravated because now I'm "Oh, who am I going to get today?"

CF: Is he usually a younger employee or a newer one?

MM: No, because I'm the shop steward, and most of the time you need eighteen or nineteen years to get a route, I have one. Being that I'm young on the job, usually everybody I work with is older than me now.

CF: Okay. So is it rare for a shop steward to be as young as you?

MM: I don't know how rare it is. I'm definitely one of the more junior ones, yes.

CF: Do the shop stewards from the different garages get together at all and talk about stuff?

MM: They have union meetings every month. You go down to the union hall and it's with everyone. There's actually four shop stewards in my garage. And how they work that is one guy

deals with the whole garage and one guy is assigned to each section. In Manhattan 2 it's [broken up into] three different sections. One's from Fourteenth [Street] to Ninth [Street], the other's from Ninth [Street] to Houston [Street], and the other's from Houston [Street] to Canal [Street].

CF: When you are on your route, what's it like? What do you have to do?

MM: I have to pick up garbage. [laughs] We're assigned a certain route. For example, today we start off and our route is Tenth Street from West Ave., from West End [Avenue] to Greenwich Avenue and we got both sides of it, so we just pick up the garbage on the block and you pick up the baskets on the corner and then you go to the next line and so on and so forth.

CF: Do you do the recycling too? Or is that on different days or someone else?

MM: That's someone else. How they do it is by seniority. First they fill in all the collection for refuse—garbage—and then after that's all filled in, then they fill in the recycling for the day.

CF: So the refuse is a more desirable job than the recycling?

MM: Yeah. I don't know if "desirable," you know...some people might like picking up the recycling better. It's probably a little cleaner to pick up paper all day than it is garbage, so I don't know about "desirable," but it definitely shows seniority.

CF: Why would that be a mark of seniority?

MM: Because the collection starts with seniority. The top guy has to go on collection first and then the second guy. Say there are six routes. They'll fill up the first twelve spots with collection, then they'll fill up the next with recycling, and that's because there's not recycling every day. So on a day like tomorrow, on Friday, we don't run any recycling. So all those guys have to either do baskets or go nights or go to another garage. They get sent to another garage where they can fill in, if they're down people.

CF: So it's possible to have to leave your garage.

MM: Yes. I'm a shop steward—I can't leave the garage, but other people, yes.

CF: Is that annoying? Or do people like to stay in their garage?

MM: Sometimes it's a benefit. They call it "out of town." You got to go "out of town," and what they do is if it's on the west—Manhattan is broke up into two sides, west and east—and if it's on the west side, you just go out of town. If it's on the east side, or you go to Staten Island, Brooklyn, the Bronx, you get what they call "hours in the books." They pay you four hours to go to that garage because it's not your own garage. So every time you go out of town twice to one of these garages, you get a day off.

I know guys with 400 hours. So I guess that's pretty good. I don't know if he ever takes off because he's got that many hours. I don't know what he's doing with them, but he has them.

CF: Do you notice a difference between different neighborhoods in terms of their garbage?

MM: Absolutely. Yeah, they call it "clean garbage" and "dirty garbage," you know what I mean? And I guess all garbage is dirty, but you'd rather be picking up the clean ones. Chinatown is a disaster. I only know this garbage because I've been here all seven years and I rarely go out of town, like I said. Where we are is a nicer area I guess, so there's not as many people, not as much foot traffic and, you know, the garbage is just a lot cleaner.

CF: Yeah. So people are just more careful about tying it up?

MM: About the way they tie it up, the way they put it out. Chinatown actually gets picked up every day of the week, whereas, like I said, I do a route Monday, Wednesday, Friday. The people who work in Chinatown do the same route every day, for the most part. Especially in [the] Mulberry [Street]-Mott [Street]-Elizabeth [Street] area and Hester [Street], they do it every single day. I guess they're more careless because they know it's going to get picked up anyway.

CF: Maybe we can talk now about the blizzard in December [2010].

First of all, what's it usually like to do snow removal?

MM: Long and tiring. You're there for the first day of the storm, the first two days of the storm. I know guys that worked, especially this storm because of how severe it was, sixteen hours that first day. You're pretty much just in a truck, driving around, plowing snow for the whole sixteen hours and it's boring and it's long and it's tired and you're working overnight when you're usually sleeping and it's pretty tough. And then by day two, day three, it starts to slow down and you're still doing the same things—still plowing—but it'll go down to twelve hours for the next few days or until the streets are clear. You could also be on a salt spreader, at that time, and FEL, which is a front end loader, which they use to load the salt into the spreaders.

And that's pretty much it for the first few days of the storm. You get home and if you can sleep six, seven hours, then you get back up and it takes two hours to get into work because of all the traffic, especially from Staten Island. Most of my garbage is from Staten Island.

CF: Why do you think that is?

MM: Well it's hard to get [assigned to a garage] on Staten Island—a lot of senior people are on Staten Island. I don't know. I guess a lot of Staten Island people are civil service. And so they [have to] come here. This is close, you know. I guess Brooklyn, right over the Verrazano Bridge would have a lot Staten Island guys in it too, you know what I mean?

CF: So after this year's storm, which was pretty bad, maybe you could tell me what your impressions were of the storm and then how people reacted to the job that the department did.

MM: Oh, people reacted terribly. What people have to understand, first of all, about the job is [that] it was 29 inches of snow in seven hours. You could've had the army in here—they're not going to clean it up....

CF: ...and over the holidays.

MM: ...any better than we did. Yeah over the holidays. As far as public opinion, it was a lot of snow. People were out, people were traveling. Usually what happens is they call for a storm warning or a storm watch and they'll go on the news and they'll say, "Everybody stay home." And they didn't do that this time. And people were out there driving, cars were stuck everywhere.

It was pretty much a disaster. And once we got behind it, it's very hard to catch up. You know, you'd like to be out there in front of it. Because of the timing of the storm, being the day after Christmas, right? It was the 26th that it started?

CF: The 26th, yeah.

MM: So what happens is all sanitation workers are off for Christmas, it's a holiday. The day before Christmas was a Friday, so usually what they'll say is: "On Friday, listen, we're expecting a very big storm on Sunday. Everybody's working." But they didn't do that. Because of the budget and they're looking to save money, and they thought...to be honest, I don't know what. That's what we hear.

So instead, what they did was call everybody on Christmas Day and said, while they were off home with their families, "Oh, you have to come in to work tonight [or] tomorrow." And I don't know how many guys they got to come in, but probably not as many as they would have if they had known ahead of time.

From that point on, not that many guys were there. The trucks were getting stuck and we just pretty much got behind the storm. It stinks because you don't want a bad reputation, you know? Because usually, we're out there working and nobody wants to hear that you're not doing a good job when you're out there working.

CF: Did people approach you while you were out on the street [or] talk to you?

MM: No, not really. I didn't run into anything, personally. I heard stories about somebody giving somebody the finger and saying, "F Bloomberg!" You hear some stories, but for the most part, no. Everybody was respectful and I think most of the public just understands that when it snows, sometimes it's going to be harder to get around.

CF: Did you read anything in the news or hear anything on TV about the so-called "slowdown"? What do you think about that?

MM: I think it's crazy. To be honest, for sanitation workers, the best way to justify our job, is to go out there during the snow and do the best job that we can. Because then when the mayor and

the deputy mayor are looking to make these cuts, they say, "Wow. These guys really went out there and did a great job. Maybe we'll hold off. We really do need them." So to slow down at a time like that and put people's lives in danger—it just didn't happen.

CF: Was this the worst storm that you worked since you started?

MM: Yes. There was a pretty bad one, I think, in 2006. But the way I look at the storms is how many days in a row I worked. And this one was almost 30 straight. No weekends, no nothing. 30 days straight. From December 26th to January 26th and then I think I went sick.

[both laugh]

MM: For a day or two...

CF: I would imagine.

MM: ...because I needed a break.

CF: So was that typical? For everyone?

MM: Yeah. I mean, guys did more. Eddie worked 44 days in a row. He didn't go sick and his days off caught at the right time when a little more snow was coming and he worked 44 days in a row. And that's not eight-hour days. Most of those days were ten, twelve-hour days.

CF: So during that time was the garbage able to be picked up?

MM: Well, what they do is: during a snow, like I said, the first days are all snow. Everybody comes in, you're working on snow only, which means you're plowing, spreading salt. Then from there they start digging out the corner caps, so people can get across the street, [and] bus stops. That'll take two, three days, depending on how bad the blizzard is. Then they'll start with the corner baskets and then they'll start with the collection. In that order. So depending on how fast everything gets done, that's the order that it goes in. So I would say that the garbage did not get picked up for at least a week and a half, two weeks, for that first storm.

CF: Okay. When you're plowing the streets, do you have the same routes that you would have for trash collection?

MM: No, no, what'll happen is you'll get three pieces of paper stapled together: the first route is what you'll stay on until you get called off it, and that's mostly just the avenues, the major streets. They'll have something called tandem plowing where they take four trucks and offset them and you'll just go around West Street all night long. Just make the circle around West Street, Sixth Avenue, Seventh Avenue, Eighth Avenue, Greenwich [Avenue], Washington [Street]. And then, as that starts to clear up, then you go to your second routes, which are a little smaller. And then there are the tertiary routes, which are small blocks: Commerce [Street], Bedford [Street], blocks like that.

CF: I read that sanitation work is much more dangerous, statistically, than police or fire. Can you tell me anything about that? Or the toll it takes on you physically?

MM: Yeah. I wouldn't want to speak for police or firemen—I respect them greatly, you know. That's great jobs and they're saving people's lives, you know? And I don't go out there and save anybody's life, don't get me wrong, but I do pick up, on an average, probably eleven tons of garbage a day.

So physically, to your body, I'm sure that takes its toll. Also, take a winter storm where you're out there for the 44th day in a row, twelve hours a day, driving around that giant truck and you're tired. It gets dangerous. I'm sure accidents...between the truck accidents, between what people throw in the garbage...needles...you don't know what people throw out. They place glass in the regular garbage, you lift the bag up, you scratch your leg and you don't even feel it because it's glass and three blocks later, you're dripping blood and you need stitches. So there's a lot more little dangers. I mean, obviously firemen run into burning buildings, you know?

CF: Sure. [laughs]

MM: [laughs] I'm sure the cops, you know? I'm sure no matter who you speak to, there's different dangers in the job, but I can definitely see how a lot of injuries happen on sanitation.

CF: Have you ever been injured?

MM: Oh yeah. I've had stitches twice, I fell out of the truck and tore my knee, I've been out for my back twice, and I'm probably forgetting a few other minor injuries, day-to-day things that just occur.

CF: So that's typical for most sanitation workers.

MM: Yeah, it takes a toll on your body. It definitely takes a toll on your body. A lot of sanitation workers have back problems, lower back problems, it's pretty much guaranteed. And shoulders, a lot of shoulder problems, from just lifting the garbage.

CF: Do you feel like you're being cared for, health wise? By the union or by the job?

MM: We have great health coverage. I don't think the union or the job could do anything to tell you how to eat or tell you how to take care of your body. I think if you want to eat Wendy's every day, you can eat Wendy's every day, you know? And is that going to affect your job? Maybe, maybe not, depending on the person you are. But as far as the coverage we get, I think [it] is very fair.

CF: Yeah. Are you part of a benevolent society?

MM: No.

CF: And why is that?

MM: To be honest, I do too much on the outside of this job to get too much more involved in it. [laughs] I don't have time to go to meetings. I coach football, I go to school at night, and I don't have time to go to the Italian Society [or] the Irish Society meetings. I'm not opposed to it. I don't think there's anything wrong with it and I think it's actually very good and helpful to meet people and do stuff like that, but I just can't.

CF: So how is it helpful?

MM: Well, I guess just like in any place, the more people you know, the more things you'll know, [and] the more somebody could help you here or tell you about a spot that opened up here. They do study groups for supervisor tests and they help you with that and just as far as getting along.

CF: So like networking and stuff like that?

MM: Pretty much.

CF: Okay. Do you feel like you want to take the supervisor test?

MM: I took the supervisor's test and I am list number 373.

CF: So what would that mean?

MM: Right now, that would mean I'm probably never going to get called. [laughs]

CF: Oh, so you have to wait for 300 plus people?

MM: Yes. And unfortunately now with the economy and the way that they're cutting back, they just laid off 40 supervisors. Not..laid off is a bad word. They demoted 40 supervisors. So they hired them to be a supervisor and they put them back to sanitation workers. I'm sure people's feelings were hurt. They way I look at it is: if you're going to get a promotion, you're going to base a lot of decision on that promotion. Ok, well I just got a promotion, I'm going to be making more money, I can afford more this, I can buy a bigger house. You don't know what people went out and did thinking that they were going to be able to afford it and, unfortunately, with the cutbacks, they got demoted.

CF: What do you see in your future at the department? Are you happy to stay like you are?

MM: I'm happy to stay where I am. I would be more than happy to do twenty years where I am, maybe more. You know, God willing, I'll be able to do twenty years and leave and hopefully school will be done and I'll have another career on line. But if not, I could stay, but I would like to move up. Just with the recent events of all the foremen and all this stuff happening, it doesn't look too good. But I'm in a position where I'm lucky to be happy where I am now, so it's not a big deal to me about the foremen thing. If it comes, it's like an extra.

CF: What do you like about the job, aside from the benefits?

MM: The hours. I love the hours. It's six in the morning to two in the afternoon. I can make it home in time when the kids get out of school. I'm at football practice on time. I like the guys on the job. I work with my uncle, actually who's only two years older than me and we've been best friends forever, so that's a good thing. And a few childhood friends. Actually, it was funny, it's like they call[ed] the south shore of Staten Island because I know like ten guys that are all in my garage now, so that's really good. And I like to do manual labor. I don't know how much I'd like it if I had a desk job before it and I was making more, but I don't mind going out there every day and working and breaking a sweat. It gives you a sense of pride to say I went out there and worked hard and earned my money today.

CF: So did you, growing up, talk to your friends about doing this? Like was it ever something that people thought about? [It] just kind of happened?

MM: Yeah it just kind of happened. It's funny because I was saying a lot of my friends got the job that are around my age, or a little older or a little younger, and I think things just go in a cycle. Once one person hears about it in a neighborhood or in an area, they tell all their friends and all their friends take it and that's what happens. And that's pretty much what happened with me. I couldn't take the fireman's test because I was too young and my uncle said, "Well why don't you take the sanitation test? I'm taking the sanitation test." So I said, "Alright, I'll take the sanitation test." And I told a few of my friends and everybody wound up taking it.

CF: So how do people react to you while you're out doing your job? Do you ever talk to people in the street? Do they talk to you?

MM: Yeah. People are generally nice. I mean, for the most part. A lot of people hold their nose when they pass the truck.

[both laugh]

MM: That's a little annoying because it's their garbage. It doesn't stink when it's in their house, but it just stinks when it's...but I understand. But generally people are nice. I say hello to everybody. Since I've been on the same route every day, I get to know the people who live on that route and work on that route and you say hi and you make friends and it's fairly nice.

CF: And if you tell people, like at a party or something, that you're a sanitation worker, what do they think? What kind of reactions do you get?

MM: Mostly I get "That's a good job," you know? I don't think that people look down on it. I think that people think people look down on it. But it's just like any other respectable labor job. If you were a construction worker, would people look down on it? I think the same people that maybe hold their nose when they pass the truck probably look down on it. But I don't know. I guess to each his own.

CF: Yeah. When my brother was little, he used to wake up at six a.m. to see the garbage truck go by....

MM: [laughs]

CF: ..every day. It was his favorite thing. [laughs]

MM: Little kids love big trucks. I think that has something to do with it too. Everybody wants to drive a big truck.

CF: Yes. So how do you feel about what you do?

MM: I love it. I really do. I like my job a lot. I like my partner, I like my route, I like the area I work in...[it's] great. I actually do my great-grandmother's block. I was lucky enough she was alive till I was eighteen so I used to come into the city a lot on Commerce Street and hang out and it's very nice. It's a very nice neighborhood.

CF: Have you noticed any changes in the neighborhood just by picking up the garbage? Have you noticed new people moving in or things like that?

MM: I think a lot of people are moving out to be honest.

CF: Out of the Village?

MM: Yeah, out of the area itself. I don't know about Chinatown. Who knows what's going on down there? There's too many people to even know anything. But it's funny, as you've been on the job a while, you'll get to know [that] usually we pick up this amount of weight on a certain day and lately it hasn't been that much on those certain days. Usually less garbage [means] less people creating the garbage, you know? So I think people are moving out. You notice changes, like they changed the park over. They moved the whole thing [the fountain in Washington Square Park] over. That was a huge project and [you notice] all the construction they do, all the buildings. The Meatpacking District, which, there's no more meat in [laughs], you know? It's totally renovated. You notice the changes from being around.

CF: What do you think about those changes?

MM: Yeah, to be honest, they don't affect me so it's alright. I mean, it's nice, it's pretty, they opened up some nice restaurants and nice bars over in the Meatpacking District and I guess they made it nicer, you know? So I guess it's pretty cool.

CF: Yeah. Do you hang out around here?

MM: Actually, not as much as I should because this is a great area to go. It's got a lot of nice and different things. You can go out to eat, you can go to a bar, you can go to a club, you could hang out on MacDougal Street. There's a lot of different things that you could do and I always said,

we work in the city and we hardly ever go out here. But we do. We'll stay out after work and go out and hang out, all the guys...grab a beer.

CF: So you socialize with your colleagues a lot.

MM: Yeah, definitely. My uncle is going to be the best man at my wedding—he's one of my workers and we're all friends. Most of the guys that got on [the job] are younger now. I'm 26 and a lot the guys are around my age. And a lot of us are from Staten Island, more or less the same areas. You know, Staten Island's not too big. But yeah, a lot of nice guys got on. A lot of good friends. You make a lot of good friendships.

CF: Growing up in Staten Island, did you come to the city a lot?

MM: My grandma lives on Commerce, so I would say once a month we were in this area—the Village.

CF: Is it your mom's mom or your dad's?

MM: It is my mother's grandparents.

CF: So did she grow up around here too?

MM: My mother was born here, but at one years old, moved. And my mother's mother lived on Broome Street, my mother's father lived on Commerce. My aunt still lives on Thirteenth Street and Greenwich Avenue. So yeah, I guess there's a little family history in the neighborhood.

CF: So you're New Yorkers from way back.

Do you think your job has changed the way that you see the city? Before you started this kind of work, did you think of the city in a different way than you do now?

MM: I guess only from the point of view [of] seeing the city as a little kid and then seeing the city as a grown-up. I don't know if it's changed...really changed, or changed like my point of view is changed. Like, I used to come and see the big buildings and see, oh it's so crazy and everything. And now, being a grown-up, people are just going to work, doing what they got to do, you know what I mean? So definitely different point of view, but probably just maturity leads to that.

CF: So you don't think that driving up and down the streets all day has made you feel anything different about Manhattan or the Village.

MM: No, no, I can't say that it has.

CF: Okay. Do you know anything about New York that you wouldn't have known otherwise?

MM: Yeah, how to get around. [laughs] Gets a little tricky in certain areas and, other than that, not really. I'm sure you pick up tidbits here and there and...none that I can even recall right now, so I guess they're not that important. [laughs]

CF: So you said before [the interview] that you grew up kind of near Fresh Kills. Did you have any sense of "this is a huge pile of garbage." Was it kind of invisible to you?

MM: Yeah, I guess I knew it was there. You know it's there. It's the Staten Island dump and every time you're on your way to the mall, it stinks during the summer because of the humidity and you're like, "God," but other than that, it just is what it is. When you grow up there, it's there, you know? It's not like it came in while I was there or left. It was there the whole time, so you just sort of are accustomed to it.

CF: How do you feel about it becoming a park now?

MM: I think it's a great idea. I don't know what the dangers are to that at all. I mean, people have been throwing trash in there for a long time and you don't know what's in there.

CF: Yeah, you saw it from space. [laughs]

MM: [laughs] Yeah. See, is that true or is that...

CF: I think that's true. I've heard that.

MM: I was going to say that, but I was like, I don't know, that might've been a rumor.

CF: It sounds ridiculous, but I've heard it multiple times. [laughs]

MM: No, me too, so yeah. Maybe it is true. It's huge and you got to go around it, there's no going through it. Everybody sees it and from, my point of view, it's not really an eyesore because it was there forever. And it's going to be there forever whether they make it a park or [not]. I don't know how successful they'll be with that. I don't know too much about making parks, but I know there's a lot of garbage under there.

CF: Yes, that's true. Do you ever think, now that you're a sanitation worker, about where your garbage goes that you create?

MM: No, not really. I mean, I know it goes on the back of the truck I put it in and then it goes to the dump that I dump it in and I think it gets shipped off somewhere. I'll be honest, I couldn't even tell you.

CF: So it hasn't changed your habits at all? Do you try to make less garbage?

MM: No. No, not really, to be honest. I don't know how you go about making less garbage. [laughs]

CF: [laughs] Pretty hard, probably.

Do you think working in Manhattan is different than working in the other boroughs?

MM: Oh, definitely. I'm sure that working in every borough is completely different than working other places. Just, you know, the guys. There's a thing on the job where you could tell where a guy is from by how he works. Some people work slower, some people work faster. They call it "running," where a guy's a "runner." He'll just get up [get the trash into the truck] and get done and he just wants to get done no matter what, or there are guys who just take their time, nice and easy, work calm, and that, I think, goes by where you work mostly. And you can definitely tell the difference.

CF: So what is your area like?

MM: I'd say we're in the middle. We go out there and do our job every day. In Manhattan 2, all the routes get finished pretty much every single day, barring something happening, and we go to the dump if we can. So we pretty much just go out there and work. I wouldn't say that we run like crazy and I wouldn't say that we are slow either.

CF: What do you think is the biggest misconception people have about your job?

MM: I don't know. To be honest, I never really thought of about it. Frankly, I really could care less what people think about my job. [Both laugh]. Or me. I'm happy so I think that's as far as I ever really concern myself with it.

CF: What do you think you'd want people to know about your job, that we haven't covered already?

MM: What would I want people to know? Nothing. I'm happy with my job and I don't want to tell everybody about it because then they might want my job [both laugh], then they'll be happy too. So the less everybody knows, the better.

CF: Okay. Fair enough. Do you work with any women?

MM: Yes.

CF: Do they collect trash?

MM: Yes, yes. We've, since I've been in Manhattan 2, worked with two women. One was the wrecker operator, which is the sanitation tow truck. That was her spot, eight [o'clock] to four [o'clock]. If your truck broke down, she would be the one that comes out with the tow truck and gets you and it's a pretty hard job because you have to get special training—you have to get a CDL Class A license because you have to drive tractor-trailers. It splits in the middle when it's towed and you need to learn how to drive a tow truck, how to tow a vehicle. So that was one. The other one is actually still working and she has her own route in Soho.

CF: Okay. So just the two.

MM: Just the two in my garage, yeah. There are other women on the job—many women on the job.

CF: Did you have a chance to go to the exhibit "This is New York's Strongest"? The photo exhibit?

MM: On Lafayette Street? No. My partner did. Actually, it's funny—I looked in through the windows and, I wasn't really going to it, but because that's on my route. I pick up Lafayette Street, so we were there. Then we were looking in and it was like a little dark in there and they didn't open up until three o'clock. And, like I said, I wasn't too interested in staying after work.

CF: [laughs] Yeah, right. To look at pictures of work.

MM: Yeah.

CF: Do you find it funny that people are interested in this kind of thing?

MM: No. Like I said, I don't want people to know everything about the job because nobody wants everybody to know what they're doing all the time. But I like it, I like the public interest in the job. I think that, especially this year, people don't respect the job that we do as much. Whereas if we cleaned the streets in three days and there was no more snow, it would be, "Hail Sanitation Men!"

I like the good publicity. Especially being the union representative. You never want to hear bad things about the job or about the people you work with or the people that you represent. So good publicity is a good thing.

CF: Are you at all worried about how the public perceives public employee unions, like after all the stuff that was going on in Wisconsin?

MM: Yes, it's terrible. They're going after working people. These are people that are not making a million dollars a year. These are middle class people. All of them. Every single one of them's a middle class person and they're trying to take their livelihood away. I've only heard statistics out of Wisconsin, but if he [Governor Scott Walker] gets his way, it'll be eight percent of their salary that they will not take home. And I don't know how many people you talk to that can afford to lose eight percent of their take-home salary. Wives, kids, houses, cars—it's expensive to live. So it's terrible...and I don't know if it's as much the public or certain people. We're in a very tough time right now, as a nation, as a state, as a city. So you have to concede a little bit—everybody has to. But the way that it looks now, it's mostly on us and I don't like it.

CF: So the union and you are worried that that something's going to happen to you.

MM: I'm sure, definitely. You never know until it's done and they tell you, "Alright, this is what we're going to do," but there have been rumors about what they're going to do as far as making

people work 25 years for a pension or maybe not collecting it until they're 55 and cutting down overtime or cutting down pensionable overtime and you know, like I said, there'll probably have to be some concessions made, but also you have to understand that [when] people took this job, they expected certain things. They signed up for this. And what they signed up for is what they expect. Now, to take that away from them, they might have went a different route, you know? So it's hard.

CF: Do you ever go to events or political actions, like protests or anything?

MM: No. I'm not involved like that. I'll be honest, I know a little bit from reading. I watch it and I read up on it, but I don't read into it enough to even make a stand for anything because I wouldn't know what I was talking about. And there's nothing worse than that. [laughs]

CF: Does your union ever work with other public employee unions? Do you band together at all?

MM: I couldn't tell you definitely, but I'm sure that they do. The cops and the firemen and the sanitation all [have] pretty much the same pension, benefits, all that stuff, so they work together. When one gets one thing, or one gives one thing, then the other one usually follows.

CF: And if you want to be a schoolteacher, then kind of the same thing.

MM: Yeah, kind of the same thing. Yeah, actually my fiancée's a schoolteacher and she's worried too. She's actually more worried because they were talking about laying off seventy-five hundred teachers and she's been there five years and that would still be her if they did that.

CF: That's a lot.

MM: That's a lot of teachers. I don't know what they're going to do with all these kids.

CF: [laughs] Yeah, there's going to be like 40 kids in a classroom.

MM: Running around, crazy.

CF: Yeah. Is she working in Staten Island?

MM: Yes, she works at PS 55 on Staten Island.

CF: Did you guys grow up together?

MM: We knew each other in high school and we started dating, I guess, when I was 21.

CF: Do you plan on living in Staten Island for the rest of you life?

MM: Yeah, I plan on it. I'm not opposed to moving, but I don't see why. Nothing's forcing me out, so depending on what we find together and what happens...I mean, she lives right now eight

minutes away from work. I don't think that you could beat that. So we'll try and stay in the same area.

CF: With all this information we've just collected, what do you want people to get from it? Or how do you want this to be used? How do you see it being used?

MM: I guess as just as information on sanitation. This is a sanitation worker's view of his job. You could probably interview ten sanitation workers and get completely different hour-long sessions than we just had. Because some people may not be happy with the job, some people may see the cuts differently, some people have different—very different—experiences on the job. Everybody goes through different experiences and they could see it completely different. So I guess this is just my point of view of how my career has went so far.

CF: Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you'd like to say?

MM: No I don't think so.

CF: Anything I should've asked you that I didn't?

MM: No, you asked about snow, you asked about the garbage pickup, the slowdown, union. You pretty much covered all bases.

CF: Mmhhh. Well, then we can end here if you want.

MM: Well this is definitely the longest I've ever talked about the job.

I'll tell you, one more thing, the best thing about working for sanitation, especially not being a supervisor or [in] a management position, is I never take my work home with me. I have no stress. Somebody gives me something to do for the day, I do it, and when I'm done, I sign out and I go home and I don't think about it till I get there the next morning. And that cost a lot, to have free mind, you know? And it's definitely one of the best parts about the job.

End of interview.