

Audio: Speaker 1: Whatever journey we're on, whether it's a 5K or starting a new career or putting out an album or running the marathon, if you can see it, you can be in... If we look for them, we can find the Percy Suttons who raised the money for the first New York City Marathon, set the route for the first New York City Marathon, was the chair of the first New York City Marathon, and got the city to shut down. Things that were crazy.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Hey, everybody, and welcome to Set the Pace, the official podcast of New York Road Runners presented by Peloton. I'm the CEO of New York Road Runners, Rob Simmelkjaer, and we are recording this episode called The Powerhouse that Percy Sutton built live from the Apollo stages at the Victoria Theater in the middle of Harlem Week. We got an amazing audience here just a few hours after a record 5,492 runners, including my co-host who I'm about to introduce, crossed the finish line of the 2026 Percy Sutton Harlem 5K. So welcome to all of you. Thank you for being here.

Now, my usual co-host, Peloton's Becc Gentry is not with us today. She's in London. So in her place, we have an incredibly special co-host, Keisha Sutton-James, who knew Percy Sutton pretty well, I would say, in a way that probably nobody else really could. She was his only grandchild for 25 years, grew up in the same building as he did, and in an apartment right up on 135th and 5th Avenue that of course sat right on the route of the New York City Marathon as a girl. She watched the race that he helped build come around the corner and past her own front door. Welcome, Keisha, to set the pace.

Keisha Sutton-James: Thank you. I'm delighted to be here.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Let's hear it for Keisha Sutton-James.

Keisha Sutton-James: I love it. The whistles. I got a whistle.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, absolutely. You deserve some whistles. Keisha has spent her life carrying Percy Sutton's example forward, including serving as deputy Manhattan Borough president, the same office that Percy held from 1966 to '77, and in this very special year when we are celebrating the trailblazers who built the Five-Borough New York City Marathon that is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, Keisha is honoring her grandfather as a run for the future ambassador. We're going to talk about that, and an honorary grand marshal for this year's TCS New York City Marathon. So welcome again.

Keisha Sutton-James: Thank you.

Rob Simmelkjaer: It's great to have you, and it was great to see you out there working hard like everybody else on a hot, steamy morning in Harlem for the annual Harlem Percy Sutton 5K. And not only did you run, but you ran with a very special runner, a young lady who we're going to meet a little bit later on.

Keisha Sutton-James: Indeed. I can't wait.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yes. How was it running today?

Keisha Sutton-James: It was fantastic. I mean, the Percy Sutton 5K is a tough route. It is a very hilly 5K, so it's not a breeze, but running with Katherine, who you will meet later on, was a joy. And it wasn't just me. I had my brother, sister, cousin M and his little son. So it was a tribe of Suttons out there supporting Katherine.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Doesn't get better. Anybody else run this morning? Raise your hand. Let's hear it. Oh, whoa. Okay. The audience was running this morning. I like it. So you've all obviously recovered. Hopefully you've taken a nap. I took a nap after running this morning. You needed one. It was hot. Well, thank you for running and thanks for joining us. I want to talk to you about Percy Sutton. It's a name that is obviously so fundamental to Harlem, to Black New York, but still it's been some years. A lot of younger people don't know who Percy Sutton was. So who was he?

Keisha Sutton-James: That is a very big question. I will try to make it succinct. Percy Sutton was the youngest of 15 children, grew up in the Jim Crow South, came up to New York. Actually, before that, he became a Tuskegee airman. He was a Freedom Rider. He became an attorney. For those who remember the television show Jag, he was the first Black Jag. Those are the attorneys in the military. He was Malcolm X's attorney. He was New York State's assembly member for this here district, and then became Manhattan Borough president where he had a tremendous impact on this race, which we will talk a little bit about. I'm just taking you through who he was. And then went on also... So he's Manhattan Borough president, the first Black man to run for mayor of New York City. So built a business along with my dad and many others called Inner City Broadcasting.

We owned the first Black-owned FM radio stations in the nation, the biggest one being WBLS here, of course. And then finally, as it ties into where we are in terms of where we're physically situated, when the Apollo Theater was dark

for several years because Harlem was really struggling... It was always a wonderful place for me to grow up, but it was struggling economically. The Apollo was dark. It was on the verge of being sold to a church. So let's think the Apollo Theater was about to become a church, and he bought it, renovated it, restored it, landmarked it, brought in all kinds of amazing Italian and Mexican marble and Austrian chandeliers. And then because he was so far ahead of the curve, because he was a visionary who always thought the craziest things were possible, like doing the New York City Marathon, he created a television show called Its Showtime at the Apollo. He was the creator and executive producer of Its Showtime at the Apollo, which became a huge hit in the '90s, despite the fact that it was on at 1:00 in the morning after SNL.

Rob Simmelkjaer: But you know what? It was funny because I remember seeing that show. I was younger, so I could stay up till the end of SNL and you had to see it and... And this was before the days of TiVo, right? So you couldn't TiVo. You had to actually be there watching at 1:00 AM and people would watch.

Keisha Sutton-James: Absolutely. You didn't miss it. And everybody still knows... Everybody from our age. We're putting our... I got a full head of gray hair. Knows the opening music and so much more. So he put his stamp on politics, media, advocacy, helped... Oh, he nominated Shirley Chisholm when she ran for president in '72. There's so many other little tidbits that a lot of people don't know. That's a little quick rundown on who he was.

Rob Simmelkjaer: And I've told you this before, but this is kind of full circle for me because when I was in about seventh grade or eighth grade, I wrote Percy Sutton a letter at Inner City Broadcasting Corporation and asked if I could interview him for a school project because he was an idol to me, I was interested in broadcasting, I was interested in business and politics. And I was like, "Can I interview you?" And sure enough, his office calls me and I went into his offices in Harlem, as I recall, and sat down and interviewed Percy Sutton. And now I'm interviewing his granddaughter. So how about that?

Keisha Sutton-James: Full circle moment.

Rob Simmelkjaer: It really is.

Keisha Sutton-James: A space that is now branded with the Apollo and the Victoria Theater, two doors down from the

actual Apollo Theater.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, it's incredible.

Keisha Sutton-James: Harlem is tight.

Rob Simmelkjaer: It is. So you mentioned that he was born the youngest of 15 in the Jim Crow South. This was 1920. So the height of Jim Crow, right? I mean, it was a very scary time for Black people, especially in the South. And he talked about, despite all that, being born into privilege. What did he mean by that?

Keisha Sutton-James: So his parents were educators and entrepreneurs and activists, and for Black folks in the Jim Crow South, if you were able to get into education and also able to own a business, and they had multiple businesses, you were essentially the creme de la creme, if you will. And I say that not to brag, but because what he learned from his father and made sure I understood and is really a core value of ours is that as to the phrase goes... He didn't say it to me like this, but as the phrase goes, too much is given, much is expected, much is demanded. That is a responsibility. If you have an opportunity that the rest of your folks don't have, the people who look like you, from your neighborhood, even if it's not that, we have an obligation to ensure that every door that we walk through, we're holding it open and bringing other people through. That every obstacle that you, for whatever reason... He was born into a family of educators.

His dad was the principal of the only fully appointed high school in San Antonio. And what that meant was that it had all the same gym equipment and science labs and all the things that the white schools had that Black schools typically, I mean almost never had. His dad was able to secure the funds and be able to provide those resources for the kids in the schools that he headed up, middle school and high school. Phillis Wheatley High School. But anyhow, that it was not just the fact that he went to this school, but that he had such strong educator parents. He was the youngest of 15. His older siblings taught him, his mother taught him. His father was a very strict disciplinarian, really scary strict disciplinarian. Grandfather would always say, "My dad, my father made sure that if you didn't learn it through here, you learned it through here." For those who are just hearing this, the head versus the rear end, the tush.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Sometimes with a little strap, yeah.

Keisha Sutton-James: Perhaps, or a switch from the tree. But that they all got their education. And so he really... That was his guiding principle in life, one of them, and he instilled that in me as well. Life isn't just lovely because you were born into this kind of privilege. You don't just roll on because of that, you ensure that every single person you can help to ensure that those barriers that are there, societal barriers that are there, are broken down. One last thing I will say about this, if I may, is that my great-grandfather, his dad, Samuel Johnson Sutton, would talk about the injured of society.

And I like the framing of the injured of society because it makes it clear that it's not the people who are being lazy or who didn't try hard enough or who are not bootstrappers, because that's the most ridiculous thing in the world, it is the systems that have been created to ensure that these people don't have an opportunity, that these people don't... Whatever the people might be. For us, this is Black folks in the Jim Crow South. It can be women, it can be immigrant populations, it can be whatever it is, but the understanding that systems themselves are the things that are injuring them and that it's not you have to ensure that they are no longer injured, that they are healthy and able to compete and work to fulfill their dreams just like everybody else. So it was that concept of understanding that systems had created their circumstance, if you will.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, he was incredible. He's a legend. We've been talking about his role in creating the Five-Borough New York City Marathon all year long, and we'll be talking about that a little bit more and the role you're going to be playing as an honorary grand marshal for this year's marathon to honor him. So we'll get to all that. But right now we're going to invite our next two panelists to this stage and we're going to continue this conversation about Black history and political power, and then a little bit about the connection with music as well. Dr. Basil Smikle Jr. is a scholar of Black political power in New York and a Harlemit himself. He's a political analyst on MS NOW and a program director of Columbia's MS in nonprofit management. He ran the New York State Democratic Party and has written directly about Percy Sutton and the arc of Black political power that Percy helped build. He is here to take us back to the New York of 1976 and the rooms where the city's future was decided. So come on out, Dr. Smikle. Hello. Nice to have you here.

Welcome to Set the Pace. Great to have you here. And multi-platinum recording artist, Ferg, will join us. He was raised uptown in Hamilton Heights. Ferg came up inside Harlem's creative machine. His father designed a visual

identity for record labels that defined an era of Black music, and Ferg carried that Harlem creativity into his own music. He's here to connect the Harlem Percy Sutton built to the Harlem of right now, and by the way, he's also one of the finishers of today's Percy Sutton Harlem 5K. So Ferg, come on out. Great job today. Welcome, welcome. Thanks so much. All right. So Ferg, I got to ask you real fast, how was it this morning? I saw you cross the finish line with your crew. You were looking good. It was hot out there, but how'd it feel?

A\$AP Ferg: It was great, man. Thank you for having us. And that hill. Did anybody run up that hill this morning? Anybody in here?

Rob Simmelkjaer: A bunch of them did, yeah. Raise your hands again. Absolutely.

A\$AP Ferg: That was lovely. That was lovely.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah. We're sorry. We're so sorry.

A\$AP Ferg: No, I really appreciate it. I enjoyed it so much that I did the walk with my grandmother and my aunt after the 5K. We had a good day in Harlem.

Rob Simmelkjaer: I want to learn more about your running journey as well, but let's start going back to what we were talking about. And Dr. Smikle, the story of Harlem in 1976. Set the scene for us. What did Harlem feel like in 1976?

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: Well, let me zoom out a little bit because it's important to note that in 1975, the city was near bankrupt. And if you've been around for a while, you remember the famous... It was a daily news headline, Ford to City: Drop Dead, because the mayor had asked the federal government, President Ford, for support, and the president was like, "No, we're not doing that." So I grew up in the Bronx and I think Harlem was undergoing something very similar. This is 10 years before crack heroin was becoming really big. A lot of the housing stock was deteriorating.

We saw a lot of that in the Bronx, we saw that in Harlem as well, and if I remember correctly, towards the end of the '70s, early '80s, a majority of the residential housing was actually owned by the city because of property tax default. Crime was starting to go up. And we also started to see fewer city workers on the street because the city didn't have any money. So for example, you had thousands of police officers furlough, thousands of firefighters and almost 7,000 teachers. So the city's institutions were struggling and the

people were struggling because joblessness started to go up and crime was going up, as I mentioned.

Keisha Sutton-James: Yeah. I will say... By the way, you doing the walk after the run, that's young knees and you don't remember the Harlem of these days. These were tough times, but we still always had just such a beautiful community. But I wanted to ask also, from your perspective... I have my own perspective, but given your perspective, he, Percy Sutton, my grandfather, always believed in this city even when the headlines were not there, even when all the things that you just said were not driving that belief. Where's your sense as to where that kind of faith came from?

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: Well, I think there are a couple of things. One, the community always supported itself. When no one else would, the community supported itself. You started to see a lot of that in the Bronx, as it said where I am, organizations like Mid-Bronx Desperados, Banana Kelly and others. The community said, "If the government's not going to help us, we're going to help ourselves," and Percy, in my view, was one of the principles of that mindset, in part because he had a religious tradition or believed in a religious tradition that was about the gospels being lessons in social justice. And so there was always this movement to blend faith and political and economic power. But he was a Kappa, which we've talked about. Remember Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated? I am not, as you can probably see from the black and old gold on my feet. Alpha Phi Alpha. But all of the D9 organizations were created for the purpose of lifelong service to community, and so I'm sure that that grounded him as well. And being so adjacent to and embraced by Malcolm X. I mean, this is a lot coming into his head and his heart and then pushing that into community, that empowerment and the importance of building institutions was first and foremost.

Keisha Sutton-James: Yeah. You want to say something?

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah, I was going to talk a little bit about some of the themes of family and family progress within families that you see in Harlem. Your family story certainly is one of those. Even my family, my great-grandfather came to Harlem from St. Croix as a young boy, and then my grandfather and my father all lived in Harlem to me and now my kids. So you have that story to a degree as well. You grew up a little bit uptown, but your father really, as we said before, was a designer. That was the entree into this world of creativity. Designed the Bad Boy logo and-

A\$AP Ferg: The Uptown Cat logo for Andre Harrell. He did stuff for Bill Cosby, stuff for Russell Simmons, stuff for Teddy Riley. You name him, he knew them and did stuff for him.

Rob Simmelkjaer: What was that for you? What kind of an entree was that for you into this world? Because we always talk about how it's hard to be it if you can't see it, and you, because of your father, had a chance to see some of this creative genius. What kind of impact did that have on you as a young person?

A\$AP Ferg: I was just talking about this yesterday. It gave me a head start, like a great head start. A lot of people in this industry are men, some of them are misguided because they don't have leaders in their life to breed them into being a leader or following their own thoughts or just being an individual even. So my father, he instilled a lot of different things in me that led me to becoming who I am today. So yeah, I got a head start. So I give it up to my family, not just my father, my mom, my uncles, my aunts, because I had a great household. So when people see the product of what's happening now, it's not like I'm doing all of this by myself. I got a great community and family behind me.

Keisha Sutton-James: I want to pick up, if I can, on what you just said, that last word, that community, because tying together what the both of you just said, one of the things that I know to be true is that what you described, Basil, in terms of the community taking care of one another, that was one of the core kind of operating principles of being Black in the Jim Crow South, is that despite the fact that we weren't going to get any parody, any equality from any kind of system that was built and owned by the white world, we were providing for ourselves. And that is what your father did for you, and I'm sure many others. I mean, the whole crew, but I'm sure people that we don't know who are also famous and who have come along behind him. And you, by the way, I will say, were being very coy, if you will. Coy or what's the word? Somebody else, somebody give-

Rob Simmelkjaer: I don't know.

Keisha Sutton-James: I read about your family in James Weldon Johnson's Black Manhattan. I was like, "Simmelkjaer. There's only so many Black Simmelkjaers out there."

Rob Simmelkjaer: That's true. That is true. That's true. My great-grandfather was an interesting guy, an actor, a

political figure, Harold Simmelkjaer. Yes, absolutely.

Keisha Sutton-James: Yeah. Okay, I will get back on script. I apologize. So just kind of taking us back to what the time was like. So my grandfather was the Manhattan Borough president through this period, and through it, he was able to build some relationships with some interesting people. And I thought I'd ask you, Basil, as the studied, the academic on the panel.

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: Just trying to make my mama proud.

Keisha Sutton-James: I love it. Tell us more about the Regency Power Breakfast and what you know about the Regency Power Breakfast and also Percy Sutton's part of that and things along those lines.

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: Well, it was interesting. The Regency down on Park Avenue, still a good power breakfast spot, by the way, and it has been for decades a location where business leaders, governors, members of Congress, all kinds of elected officials would come and have their sort of private power breakfast.

A\$AP Ferg: Can I go there?

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: Absolutely.

A\$AP Ferg: I just walk in there?

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: Yeah.

A\$AP Ferg: Or I got to call you to get the...

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: No, not me. I got to call somebody. No, actually, you could just go. The food's actually not bad, and you could just go and there are a lot of folks wheeling and dealing in there. And these are the relationships that... And this is why I always talk about, I wrote a piece about this just two days ago. Inside and outside game. This is what's really important. And one of the things that Percy Sutton did extraordinarily well was understand that protest is one strategy, but knowing how to maneuver through the bureaucracy and pull the levers of power to get what you want through government or the private sector in partnership was something that he excelled at. And that's how the relationship with the Rudins came into play, which is how all of this developed.

Rob Simmelkjaer: That's right, the Rudin family, and they were

key parts of what would become the Five- Borough New York City Marathon. And we were talking before about, and this has been a part of the theme of the storytelling, it was Percy Sutton who really got with this group of people. You had Fred Lebow, you had George Hirsch, our recent chairman, and they're all talking about this idea. Of course, Ted Corbett originally had the idea of running the five boroughs of New York City in the Marathon. He was like, " Well, wait, we got to be able to cross from Staten Island to Brooklyn over the Verrazzano- Narrows Bridge." None of them thought it could be done.

Keisha Sutton-James: He who?

Rob Simmelkjaer: Percy Sutton.

Keisha Sutton-James: Thank you. I just thought we'd make (inaudible) .

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: Say his name, Percy Sutton.

Rob Simmelkjaer: It was Percy Sutton who said, " We got to get over that bridge and we can do it." And to your point, Dr. Smikle, he figured out how to get the right people in the room and get in the mayor's office ultimately to make that happen. That's why we're all getting together on Staten Island every first Sunday in November.

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: And I just add a very quick point because since you talked about family, I had to talk about family. One of my relatives, Thomas Michael, was a co- founder of Marcus Garvey's UNIA. It's on the letterhead. So my family has been in Harlem, from Jamaica... My family's Jamaican. So I've had family in Harlem since the '20s, and growing up in our home, it was always about all of us, all of us and community. And so when I think about Percy, when I think about Malcolm, when I think about in your family and all of you, in the work that all of you have done, it's always about us and community and how we are stronger together, and it's that sense of... I think that power dynamic, and understanding how to leverage that in the city of New York is where he, Percy Sutton... I'm going to say his name. He, Percy Sutton, excelled.

Keisha Sutton-James: Indeed, indeed. I want to, if I can, shift gears a little bit. I want to ask Ferg question. By the way, Ferg, it's so exciting to sit here on this panel with you. I was like, "Is it Ferg-Ferg who's going to be doing this? It's Ferg." So Ferg-

Rob Simmelkjaer: One and only.

Keisha Sutton-James: I know.

A\$AP Ferg: Appreciate you.

Keisha Sutton-James: My grandfather fought for Harlem inside rooms of power, as Basil said. When you think about the platform that he created through the television show, Its Showtime at the Apollo, which really made the Apollo an international destination, cultural destination, but also was the launching pad, both WBLS, the radio station, and the Apollo, were the only places where hip-hop was being brought to larger mainstream audiences. Meaning WBLS was the only FM radio station that had a strong signal that was doing it. And the Apollo stage was the only real theater that would allow rap artists. When you think about that and the fact that your generation inherited that, what did Harlem build that made your career possible in addition to that? I think obviously there's that, but what else is there about Harlem that made your career possible?

A\$AP Ferg: Just to add on to what Percy did is super amazing, and he was an alien to even be thinking in that way. He really was a futurist. And to buy Apollo at \$250,000 and put 20 million into it and start these different programs. And he ran a system that we still use today where we still have to say his name is wild, and I aspire to do that. So that's one.

Keisha Sutton-James: Amen. Everybody should aspire that, right?

A\$AP Ferg: Two, just the energy of Harlem alone, just all of the history. We have so much great things to look at. Everything from Josephine Baker. She refused to perform in front of just Black people or just white people. She said, "We have to integrate. If I'm going to perform here, because they treating me like a queen in Paris, if I'm going to be in Harlem, then it's going to be integrated." That is crazy. Miles Davis. You think about all of these different... It's just so many. Malcolm X walking the streets. It's just so many that come to my mind.

And then you have the neighborhood heroes as well that I see these guys, basketball players and these different guys that inspire me coming up. So Harlem is a very magical place. I do believe we live on top of pyramids or something like that. It's a portal around here that just dishes off a lot of magic on us. And we're very small, so we're very competitive and I think that's what allows us to excel around the world because we battle each other so much to

the point where we're ready for the world by the time we hit the world.

Keisha Sutton-James: Beautiful insight. Beautiful insight. Harlem against the world. Those T-shirts are... It's all about Harlem.

A\$AP Ferg: We can't wait. Harlem against the world.

Keisha Sutton-James: That part. Thank you so much for that. That was beautiful. So I'm excited to introduce, we have another guest here with us. Our next guest has been part of the Apollo longer than almost anyone up here has been alive. He was actually my manager way, way, way long ago. Billy Mitchell first walked through these doors in 1965, a 15-year-old boy running errands, and he never left. Today, they call him Mr. Apollo. He is the theater's historian and its storyteller, and he was here through the lean years and through the day Percy Sutton stepped in to save this place. So no one can take us inside the Apollo the way he can. So please welcome my former manager and Mr. Apollo, Mr. Billy Mitchell.

Billy Mitchell: All right. So let's get to it, everybody.

Keisha Sutton-James: Let's get to it.

Billy Mitchell: All right.

Keisha Sutton-James: So Billy Mitchell.

Billy Mitchell: Yes.

Keisha Sutton-James: Let's take us back. How did a 15-year-old kid end up at the Apollo? And I almost said 1865. I'm sorry. It wasn't that long ago in 1965. And what was it like the first time you walked through the doors?

Billy Mitchell: Well, actually I was born and raised in Mount Vernon, New York, and I am also one of 14 children. Never met my parents. I was in foster homes, et cetera. We got evicted from our place in Mount Vernon and we moved to the South Bronx in 1964. 1965, I'm watching TV, watching the news, and I see this very articulate man, this brother, very articulate, suited down. His name was Percy Sutton. He was running for Manhattan Borough president, and I said, "Man, I like that brother, man. He's very, very the type of guy I want to be." And then they said he was running for Manhattan Borough president. Although I was living in the Bronx, I started campaigning for him as a young 15-year-old, 16-year-old kid. Time went by. The Schiffmans, who I had known since I was a kid, Frank Schiffman started letting me

run an errands for the Apollo in 1965.

So when they shut the place down in '77, Mr. Sutton bought in '81, and I came and applied for a job and Mr. Sutton hired me as an usher. And then they gave me opportunities, opening up stores, co-producing amateur night, being the stage handle, creating tours, group sales, all that. And Harlem gave me a title. Harlem started calling me Mr. Apollo. That's where I got that name from. I've never introduced myself, "How you doing? I'm Mr. Apollo." It's a name that I carry with a lot of pride because my mother was born in the original Harlem Hospital in 1923. That's why Harlem is so deep in my soul and my spirit, because my mother is part of Harlem. I live in Brooklyn, but I'm Harlem. See, Harlem is not just a location. It is a state of mind. It's culture. It's fashion. It's everything that you can imagine that you want. That is Harlem. There are so many Harlems all over the United States. But just this location, New York is just a Harlem.

But Harlem is like... You know you're from Harlem. It's just something where you carry yourself. This brother and I go work... I interviewed him years ago. I don't know if you remember. Ferg, I interviewed you years ago. You went to a comics or something or superheroes or something like that. And see, the Apollo had me doing so many things. When I hear about his career, it puts a smile on my face because I know he's a Harlem dude. Rocky and I were honored a few years ago. We received the Harlem Honors. Harlem is just special.

But going back to Mr. Sutton though. Mr. Sutton, I've learned so many life skills and things. I was sharing this with Keisha last night. Even when it gets down to loaning somebody money or having somebody borrow from you, there is a difference. I was going through a time and I went to Mr. Sutton and I said, "Mr. Sutton, I need some money." He says, "Mr. Mitchell, we're friends and I don't want to loan you money because if you don't pay it back, there's going to be a problem." I don't want no smoke from Percy Sutton. So I said, "No, sir. I want to borrow it from you." And he says, "Well, you sure?" He says, "I'll give it to you." I says, "No, sir. I want to borrow it." And he made me sit down and write a promissory note saying when I would pay it back, how much I would pay it back. I do that now even with my kids.

That is something I've learned from... If you want, and I have, I'm going to give it to you, not expecting it back. But if you say I want to borrow it, I want every bit of that back. I don't care where you get it from, how you get it. I want it back. And those type of things I learned from Percy Sutton. Up until the pandemic, I was wearing suits and ties. That was a Suttonism. Now they got us coming

to do Apollo shorts on, t-shirts on, all kinds of sneakers. Mr. Sutton influenced me so much that you can't even imagine. I was sharing with Keisha, one reason why I still work at the Apollo, because I want to keep up what Mr. Sutton taught me because I don't want it to change because things change right before your eyes. Go ahead.

Keisha Sutton-James: I was just going to ask, the suit and tie, what was that representative of for you? What was it that you were-

Billy Mitchell: It made me feel like I was important. Where everybody else was walking around wearing whatever. I felt important. Most people though I used to run the Apollo Theater, and still to this day, people think I'm the president of the Apollo Theater because I've been here so long and held so many positions. But Mr. Sutton used to wear the suit and ties and I used to walk around like Mr. Sutton did. After he left, if there was a little scrap of paper on the floor, he would pick it up. And I started doing that. And people started calling me Mr. Sutton. I said, "I'm Billy Mitchell." But I used to carry those manners because he was so proud of that theater and our culture and this community. As they all know, Mr. Sutton will walk through Harlem and speak to any and everybody. I don't care who you were.

There was a glow and aura about Mr. Sutton that he would make you feel all right even when you were going through... Your spirit was low, Mr. Sutton would hit you with some jewels that would lift your spirit up. He was one of the most influential... I've been so fortunate to have mentors in my life. Percy Sutton, Hal Jackson, Lloyd Williams, David Dinkins, Charlie Rangel. These guys helped me out through my life as an adult, and I've been so fortunate. And then still trying to maintain what we're doing at the Apollo Theater.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yes. Speaking of the Apollo Theater, you've seen a lot of history, more than anybody at the Apollo Theater. I can only imagine some of the nights you've seen, some of the acts you've seen. Can you take us to one, one moment, one night, one performance that really... If you had to go back and see it one more time, which one would you pick?

Billy Mitchell: I'm going to go way back. I was there and saw with my own eyes when Michael Jackson's brothers first did Amateur Night. That was like 1968 or... I was living up in the Bronx and running errands for the Apollo, and I saw that. Another time I gave a tour to Michelle Obama, a

private tour, and she was the one that convinced me to write my autobiography called They Call Me Mr. Apollo. It was Michelle Obama. Another thing, my childhood friend growing up in Mount Vernon, my best friend was Denzel Washington and still to this day. And I remember us coming to see a show at the Apollo and (inaudible) said, "Billy, take the day off, man, because your boy's coming with Pauletta and we want you to have your wife. I'm going to put you up in the box seat." I said, "I don't do box seats. I'll stand backstage." They said, "No, we want to have you hang out with your boy."

And that moment was special because what it did for me was to reflect on where Denzel and I came from. His mother owning the beauty shop in Mount Vernon. My mother used to go over there and get her hair done free because my mother couldn't afford to get her hair done back in the day. I'm running errands. Denzel and I grown up at the Boys Club in Mount Vernon. Now I'm on the board of the Boys Club in Mount Vernon. It's things like that, that it reflecting. Those are special moments. I have so many.

That James Brown and Marvin Gaye paid for me to further my education after high school. I'm not lying because when I used to run errands, that's all they talked about was education, and I was trying to eat and help my mother feed my brothers and sisters because my dad left us when we were a kid. He left with three of my sisters and never came back. So at the age of 16, I was the man of the house helping my mother raise my little brothers and sisters. But the Apollo was the place that I could make money. Mr. Schiffman let me come here all the time.

Keisha Sutton-James: So let me ask you, you remember it was dark for several years. So you knew the Apollo before, you knew the dark years. And then my grandfather and our business, Inner City Broadcasting, formed Apollo Theater Investor Group and bought the Apollo. What do you recall about that, the impact and just what changed in the Apollo when he saved it? Saved it from becoming a church? I always have to say this.

Billy Mitchell: Yeah, and he did because Mr. Sutton, he was a visionary. He knew the possibilities if given the opportunity and the resources and whatnot. So when we did started doing amateur night, he had stopped in 1977. Ralph Cooper, who created... A Harlemiter created Amateur Night at the Apollo from a radio show that was called the Harlem Amateur Hour Radio Show. The reason why he got that show, because he helped the Schiffmans who opened up the Apollo Theater in 1934, he helped them bring programming because Harlem wasn't always a Black community as we see it right now. Harlem was Irish, Italian, Latino, Dutch and Jewish. So when those

others moved out, Blacks started moving in during the great migration and after the Harlem Renaissance, Blacks were moving to Harlem. So Mr. Schiffman says, "I got to find a way to make me some paper," him and his business partners. So they bought the building, which was originally not called the Apollo.

The building was originally called Hurtig and Seamon's New Burlesque Theater. It was a segregated burlesque house. Then in 1932 when then Mayor Fiorella La Guardia became mayor, he closed every burlesque theater in the city of New York. And that building next door was for sale. Frank Schiffman and his business partner bought it and they reopened as the integrated 125th Street Apollo Theater, but they needed to get some programs. So they reached out to Ralph Cooper and Ralph Cooper gave him a suggestion, and to pay him back, they said, "You can bring your talent show from the radio to the stage, the Apollo Theater." And that's how Amateur Night was created in 1934 by Ralph Cooper and brought to the stage. And the first person, female, to win Amateur Night the first year started in 1934 was Ella Fitzgerald. She was the very first. She was about 17, 18 years old. And then as time goes by, you hear about the Jacksons and Gladys Knight and everybody who's anybody got their start on Amateur Night at the Apollo.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Wow.

Keisha Sutton-James: And really quickly, he not just created, he was executive producer and host of it, and he was the person who came to my grandfather to say, "Mr. Sutton, we have to save the Apollo. It's going to become a church." So Ralph Cooper's name really, really, really needs to be lifted up. He is a hero, a Black Harlem hero, as far as I'm concerned.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Just incredible. It's funny, this is probably the least running talk we've ever had on this podcast, but I love it. Absolutely. It's amazing. And we're going to-

Keisha Sutton-James: Education.

Rob Simmelkjaer: 100%. No, whoever's out there, I know you're out there, you're running, you're listening to this podcast, and you're like, "When are they going to talk about running?" Well, you know what? You've learned a few things about Harlem, about New York history on this podcast. But our final two guests are going to tie things back to running a little bit. Kristina Lopez works in marketing actually right here at New York Road Runners. She's a third generation Caribbean American, born and raised in New York City, and a

volunteer leader with her run club, Harlem Run. Shout out to Harlem Run, who does a great job getting people moving up here in Harlem. So Kristina knows these streets and this running community very, very well. Come on up, Kristina. There she is. There she is. Hello. Nice to see you. And joining us also is... I want to make sure I get this name right. Katherine Yerolemu. How'd I do? You'll tell me when you come up.

Keisha Sutton-James: You can correct.

Rob Simmelkjaer: You can correct. Oh, there. She's over there. The young runner that Keisha has been mentoring as part of the New York Road Runners Run for the Future program. And Katherine, you "graduated" from that program this morning with your run at the Percy Sutton Harlem 5K. Congratulations.

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: Yeah.

Keisha Sutton-James: High five. High five.

Rob Simmelkjaer: How'd I do on your last name? Let's hear it. Okay, close enough.

Katherine Yerolemu: All right. Well, Yerolemu.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Thank you. I could never have done that. Perfect. Yes. So how was the run this morning?

Katherine Yerolemu: It was really great. I really did enjoy it. It was one of my first times being in Harlem and just being in that area, and it was honestly just amazing. It was honestly one of the most fun times I had really this year.

Rob Simmelkjaer: And how was it running with Keisha? How was the dynamic? How was the teamwork?

Keisha Sutton-James: I had fun. I don't know, Katherine, did you have fun?

Katherine Yerolemu: Yes, I did have fun.

Keisha Sutton-James: Yes. We did a practice 5K two weeks ago approximately, and I was just like, "This one is so special." She's such a bright light, just an incredible smile. And we had a whole bunch of things in common. Everything except for the fact that she is a STEM brain and I am not at all, but I love that about her and she's amazing.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Fantastic. Well, we're very proud of that program, Run for the Future. We had 60 young ladies like yourself run this morning and graduate. I think it's the biggest class we've had in some years, and it was really special to see you all cross the finish line today. And that program's not about creating Olympians, that's about getting people who really haven't been running before active and moving and hopefully moving your bodies for a long time. Do you think you'll keep running?

Katherine Yerolemu: Yes, I definitely will keep running. I really enjoyed running, and it's honestly been one of my most favorite hobbies that I'm going to continue.

Rob Simmelkjaer: That's what we like to hear. Fantastic. Now, Kristina, let's turn to you, my colleague from New York Road Runners. You are not only a member of Harlem Run and a dedicated runner, but you also are a pacer, right? You do some pacing for other runners. Talk about that and what it means both as a runner up here in Harlem and as someone who helps people get to finish lines. You're kind of passing the baton in a lot of ways on to others who aspire to do things in running.

Kristina Lopez: Sure. So I'll start off with how I ended up with Harlem Run. They were founded back in 2013 by Alison Mariella Désir and Amir Figueroa, and once I kind of started working at New York Road Runners, I was one of the non-runner people, and I knew I wanted a home run club. I saw Harlem Run out there and I started doing little runs here and there, but I was terrified. I'm into marketing, so I'm into merch. I had my little Harlem Run hat. I would tag them on social media, but I wouldn't go to any runs in person. And eventually I did go to a run and I saw how welcoming the community is, and then I began pacing and then I became a co-captain of Harlem Run. And one thing that comes to mind from my journey with them is just how scared I was and then how much I've progressed.

So now I've done eight marathons and one ultra marathon, and I know what it's like to not want to be seen running and then to cross a finish line with everyone cheering and you're like hands in the air, smiling at the camera, making it look easy. And Harlem Run really helps me with accountability too. So there's times when I might not want to show up for myself, but I know I have run club Monday night, 7:00 PM at Marcus Garvey Park, not by accident by design. We meet at this historic park here in Harlem and I do it for my community.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Nice.

Keisha Sutton-James: Amen. She has inspired me. I don't know about anybody else out there, but eight marathons. Wow. Wow. Okay. Now, so the finish line though is obviously a really exciting time, and I just wanted to ask you, Katherine, we were together, but what did it feel like to cross this finish line, your official first? Because we did our practice 5K, but for your official first 5K, what did that feel like for you?

Katherine Yerolemu: Honestly, it really is indescribable. It was honestly just an amazing feeling and just rush of just happiness that I felt, because it was one of the most, I guess, official things that I've done so far, and it honestly just made me really happy. It was amazing.

Keisha Sutton-James: You should feel proud. I feel like it's a big achievement.

Katherine Yerolemu: I feel very proud, yes.

Keisha Sutton-James: Yeah, I remember my first 5K, which for some runners, for many runners, that sounds like nothing, but especially this particular one, because again, it's so hilly, to get that done, it feels good.

Rob Simmelkjaer: I want to ask the same question actually to Ferg, who I watched cross the finish line this morning. And I don't know much about your running history. So I want to talk about that. This wasn't a first 5K for you, was it? Talk about you, Ferg, as a runner.

A\$AP Ferg: Yeah. So this wasn't my first 5K. And whenever I don't get a chance to hit the gym, that's the least I try to do is a 5K. So yeah, I started running with my boy Kwasi Kessie, or some people will say Kwesi, and he did about 14 marathons. Yeah, so I grew up looking up to him. He's also a stylist and we work together. And yeah, he was just always running and running and running. And I didn't really know much about the world, and like you, it was very intimidating to me. And even the thought of the marathon, I'm leaning into it more now because I feel like I'm in it now. The workout practices I've been doing, I've been doing bootcamps and cycle classes and stuff. It allows me to have more endurance and stuff so I feel more confident when I'm running.

Rob Simmelkjaer: So am I hearing you say there's a marathon in your future? I think that's what I'm hearing.

Keisha Sutton-James: I heard it. I heard it. I heard it.

A\$AP Ferg: Yes. But I'm going to need my community to help me get there.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Amen. Amen. We got you right here.

A\$AP Ferg: Make sure I cross that finish line even if you got to grab two legs.

Billy Mitchell: I ran in 1978.

A\$AP Ferg: Yeah?

Billy Mitchell: But I'll never do it again.

A\$AP Ferg: You did it though. You did it. You did it.

Billy Mitchell: Never ever.

A\$AP Ferg: Wait, how did you feel after? How did you feel after?

Billy Mitchell: I hurt myself because I was training the wrong way. You just can't go out there. I was doing 5Ks and 10Ks and all of a sudden, "Yeah, I'm going to do the marathon." And then so many injuries that... You just can't go out and do it. You really have to train properly, you have to wear the right shoes and all these different things, that you got to eat properly. You just can't go out there because I was doing it because guys done my job at the time, "Come on..." And we wanted to wear t-shirts. I ran the 10K in New Jersey, I ran this in Philadelphia. We were fronting like that. And then we came down to the actual marathon, like you said, it's the people on the side that keep you going, because I ran about 18 total, but I walked 6.2 because I couldn't run the whole 26. I was Bleeding. All kinds of things was happening.

Keisha Sutton-James: You're scaring people, Billy. You're scaring Ferg. Don't scare Ferg.

A\$AP Ferg: No, I'm not scared. I'm built for this.

Keisha Sutton-James: Boom. Boom.

Billy Mitchell: He definitely built for this.

A\$AP Ferg: I have to do it.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Let's go. All right.

A\$AP Ferg: But what I was going to say is, at what point did it start feeling like hell?

Billy Mitchell: Actually, it started, but when I got into Queens and then-

A\$AP Ferg: That sounds so crazy to me.

Billy Mitchell: Yeah. Yeah. When I got into Queens, that's when I said, "Oh, I don't know if I can do this, man."

Rob Simmelkjaer: Oh, boy. You got a long way to go in Queens.

A\$AP Ferg: Was you listening to music or like-

Billy Mitchell: No, the people on the side, they were cheering you on because I had a T-shirt-

Keisha Sutton-James: We didn't have headphones, we didn't have iPhones, we didn't have Walkman.

Billy Mitchell: I had a T-shirt that said Alaska, and people were saying, "Yo, I didn't know they had brothers in Alaska, man." I'm not lying. And they were cheering me on. And then I was, at the time, was dating my wife, which Monday will be 41 years. I get married to my queen. Yeah. But I was dating her, and at the end we got to Central Park, she was waiting for me with that silver thing they wrapped around.

Rob Simmelkjaer: The blanket, yeah.

Billy Mitchell: The blanket, yeah.

Keisha Sutton-James: They had those back then?

Billy Mitchell: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

A\$AP Ferg: Come on, Keisha.

Rob Simmelkjaer: I was thinking of the same thing. I was like, "Wow. They had that in '78? Impressive."

Billy Mitchell: They had those silver things when you finish. And I received the medal saying that I finished. I probably finished... I think the race, there was 9,000, 10,000 runners, and I was like 4,000, something like that. That's great. But it's an experience that you will never forget, Rock. You got to go for it, bro. I mean, why'd I call you Rocky. Ferg. One, two, two is three.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Well, there's a hip hop running thing going on right now. We got N. O. R. E., who I don't know if you know, but N. O. R. E. is a big runner. He started a run club, Run Champs. We've had him on the podcast. So is running becoming a thing in hip hop right now?

A\$AP Ferg: Me and N. O. R. E. did a run together. So yeah, we're in cahoots. But I do feel like fitness in general, not just running, but fitness, I feel like, I don't know, it's a shift happening for sure. I see younger guys posting their workout videos outside running and they happy to do it. Before it wasn't cool to do in a way. But I think really the energy is changing. People are really bored.

If you would've went to a hip-hop show probably a year ago or two years ago, it would just be mad boring, but now it's just like... And then that's the reason why Amapiano and all of these other genres is going up. Baile Funk, Brazilian music is going up because they're actually in the party having fun and moving their bodies. We want to move our body again. We want to push up the BPM. So now we are getting a lot of '80s retro-sounding beats because of the vibration is putting out. So now it's forcing us to move our body. We want to do something with all of that energy that's coming into us. So it's definitely going to be more running and more fitness and healthier thoughts within hip hop.

Keisha Sutton-James: I got some words for you calling '80s retro. We're not going to cover that part. I got some words for you. I'm turning my back to you right now, Ferg.

A\$AP Ferg: Well, I was born in the '80s. I'm an '80s baby.

Rob Simmelkjaer: That's not helping, yeah.

Keisha Sutton-James: Yeah. I mean, just a decade or so ahead or so. But Kristina, I wanted to ask, you started running during a hard stretch in your family's life. What did it give you that you'd want for Katherine to know it can give her at this point in her life? Not that this is a bad stretch in her life, but...

Kristina Lopez: Sure. So running has really been with me through a lot of tumultuous moments in my life. I did my first New York City Marathon back in 2015 when my mother was dealing with a rare cancer that she's now beaten twice, and I landed... Yep, thank you. Shout out to my mom. And I landed at the marathon because I just thought, "Oh, people do this for cancer awareness. I'm in my despair moment. Let

me try that out." But I too was like, "I'm never running again." And I never did for about seven more years. I returned to running mainly because of my role as a caregiver in my family to my grandma. I saw the importance of movement as we age, and as my running journey has continued, I've just been able to tie it into all my other interests. So that's what I would encourage for you, Katherine, thinking about how your experience running and everything that you've learned about yourself through your training, through race day is something that you could bring with you across everything else that you do.

Rob Simmelkjaer: What do you think you've learned about yourself, Katherine, through this program and running this 5K today?

Katherine Yerolemu: Honestly, I really did... I heard this throughout the whole six weeks of training that I could do hard things. I want to keep that motto within my life. I could do hard things. And whether it's running a 5K, being something in my career, in college, or just even running the marathon one day, I know that I could do hard things and that I will continue to push on, keep running and keep trying to reach my goal.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Yeah. Beautiful. Congratulations. One of the things we say most about running, especially running a marathon is you learn about how to do hard things. I want to pick up on Harlem Run for a second. Kristina, you mentioned it. Dr. Smikle, I don't know if you know about Harlem Run, but she mentioned Alison Mariella this year who started it, and the story there was she was not seeing running as something that was open to people who looked like her, Black and Brown people, and wanted to find a way to bring people like that into the sport. I mean, it's incredible actually, Billy, when you ran in '78, you were really a rarity. I mean, it was very, very much a white male thing by and large.

Billy Mitchell: The guys I worked with, they were white and Latino, and so I was just joining because we worked together. And that wasn't my thing. I was playing some ball on the block.

Rob Simmelkjaer: You are truly a trailblazer in your own right. But this idea of seeing something that is not for us, and then creating a community and making it in our own way is such a tradition for African Americans in Harlem and everywhere, and I'm sure you can speak to that and all the different forms that has taken, whether it's music, the Apollo Theater, all those things are examples of that.

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: No, I think that's absolutely right, and I'm a member of an organization called... You may know 100 Black Men, and the motto is they are what they see, and so if we can see our folks engaged in running and playing golf and doing all these things that weren't... And I say this all the time, we want to be able to succeed in places and spaces not designed for us. And so the ability to see more folks in these spaces encourages us to continue to break the barriers that have been broken. And I'll just say this very quickly. You noticed I was quiet when everybody was talking about running. I ran one 5K, and this is really a message to you and actually ties to your question because I grew up with... I have asthma.

And so I played basketball and ran track in high school and that was pretty good, but pretty much from there to there, that's it. That's all you got out of me. That was the best 20 yards you can get, but you would get good 20 yards out of me. And it was interesting. I was dating somebody who encouraged me to do a 5K about 2011. And she kept saying, "Just your next foot forward. Just one more foot, just one more step." And I went and got fitted for sneakers. They were expensive, but I got the sneakers, got the outfit, got everything. And I did that 5K, and what was interesting is the asthma went away and it was more about me just putting in the work. And what that taught me was how liberating it is to be unburdened by fear.

And my point in saying that to you, both of you, especially you, and again, to get back to your question is that sometimes the fear of starting is the thing that keeps us from entering, and if we can find ways and find people to kind of bring you over that divide and say, "Look, just little by little, every step you take is a step in the direction of completing your goal," then it won't be mysterious anymore, right? It'll be accessible and that's how we progress.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Wow.

Keisha Sutton-James: Can I piggyback on that?

Rob Simmelkjaer: Absolutely.

Keisha Sutton-James: Yes. So thank you so much for that. By the way, you're just speaking to me, your peer, and sharing that. I thank you so much for really lifting that up because it's hard, right? Whatever journey we're on, whether it's a 5K or starting a new career or putting out an album or whatever it might be, or running the marathon, it's that each step in front of the next. And I will also build on that and say to the point of your dad, Ferg, and my

grandfather and the people who mentored you also, and the 100 Black Men and Alison Désir, and so many of us, is that if you can see it, you can be in and we can follow the model of the people who, if we look for them, we can find the Percy Suttons, if you will, who raised the money for the first New York City Marathon, set the route for the first New York City Marathon, was the chair of the first New York City Marathon, and got the city to shut down, things that were crazy and opening the Apollo.

These are crazy thoughts, but that was put into him by his dad, that you can do these impossible things. And each of us, I think part of what we're doing here as a conversation is talking about the things that are put into us as people that give us inspiration, whether it's through Harlem Run or what have you, that is like there are these little tidbits out there that can show us we can put the next foot in front of the next and run the marathon.

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: Can I just say this very quickly because it really does touch on that point. I teach classes in communications and such, and I saw somebody post this thing and I thought it was really important because he was talking about the brilliance of the Nike Just Do It campaign, and why is the campaign not do it? It's Just Do It. And that just is important because it acknowledges the hesitation. It acknowledges that hesitation, and the key is get over that and push through that. And that's not marketing for Nike, I'm not trying to sell shoes, get my commerce, but the point is that when you're... In all things in life, running, and that's why used to say ball is life, running is life too, there's that hesitation that is so stifling that you just need yourself or someone to help you pull through that.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Despite our partnership with New Balance, we're going to leave that in the show. We're going to leave that in the podcast because it was so good, it was so deep. So we're not editing that out. It was so good.

Dr. Basil Smikle Jr.: I'm going to go buy New Balance.

Rob Simmelkjaer: We say this is a special episode of our podcast, Set the Pace, but this really was a special episode because all of you just brought such incredible stories and insights. And somehow we tied it all back to running, to the New York City Marathon, and of course to Percy Sutton, the reason that we're all sitting here right now in the eve of the race that bears his name. So I want to thank all of you for joining us, Ferg, Dr. Basil Smikle Jr., Kristina Lopez from Harlem Run and New York Road Runners, and Run for the Future freshly minted graduate, Katherine Yerolemu. So

congratulations to you and to my excellent co-host. Keisha Sutton-James, this was fun.

Keisha Sutton-James: Let's do it again. Next time I need my own walk-on music, remember that?

Rob Simmelkjaer: Well, let's work on that. We'll get that done. And of course, I really want to thank you, Billy Mitchell, for bringing the history to this, bringing the perspective. And man, I would love to go back in time with you to that Jackson 5 concert.

Billy Mitchell: I made some hiccups in my life, as we all do.

Rob Simmelkjaer: As we all do.

Billy Mitchell: I'm good now though.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Oh, beautiful.

Billy Mitchell: That's what matters.

Rob Simmelkjaer: Thank you all so much for joining us. It was a really fantastic. Thank you to our audience. Thanks for being here. What a special night in Harlem.

Kristina Lopez: Thanks for having us.

Rob Simmelkjaer: If you like this episode, make sure you share it, subscribe, leave a comment. We will see you next time. Enjoy the miles.