



African Immigrants Project

Interview transcription

Bernadine Ahonkhai

Interview date: February 2, 2001

Location of interview: Interviewee's home in Lower Gwynedd

Country of origin: Nigeria

Ethnic group/language group: Efik

Religion: Roman Catholic

Profession: Early Intervention Program Director - works with families of special needs children

Level of education: Ed.D.

Location of residence in Philadelphia: Lower Gwynedd, PA

Dr. Ahonkhai came to the United States in 1976, after the birth of her first child, when her husband came to New York to do his medical residency. While her husband completed his residency, Dr. Ahonkhai did her Master's and her EdD at Columbia University. The family moved to the Philadelphia area in 1982, when her husband got a job. They have always lived in the suburbs.

Dr. Ahonkhai's husband is a vice-president at Glaxo Smith-Kline. They are involved in the Nigerian People's Forum, of which her husband is chairman of the local chapter, and the National Efik Association. She finds that she socializes across class lines with Nigerians here in the U.S.

Interview Transcription

Interviewer: Leigh Swigart (LS)

Interviewee: Bernadine Ahonkhai (BA).

[START SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

LS: Just give me your name to have it on tape.

BA: My name is Bernadine Ahonkhai.

LS: And your country of origin is?

BA: Nigeria, West Africa.

LS: Do you feel like most people know where Nigeria is?

BA: Most people don't know where Nigeria is, so that's why I always say, "West Africa". Hopefully, they know where Africa is. [laughs]

LS: And what is your ethnic group?

BA: My ethnic group is Efik. That's in the Eastern coast of Nigeria.

LS: In the river region?

BA: In the () area. Calabar is my home town. That's where Mary Slessor worked and died, in Calabar.

LS: And your native language is then?

BA: Efik. E-f-i-k.

LS: I've never been to Nigeria, but since I am a West Africanist ---

BA: It's not one of the major tribes or languages. As you know, the major tribes are Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa. Efik is one of ---

LS: The trinity.

BA: Yeah! [laughs] ()

LS: What's the lingua franca spoken in Calabar then?

BA: The language spoken in Calabar?

LS: No, the most common one people speak together ---

BA: Oh! Well, in school, English is a common language, but most people who live in Calabar do speak the language, who've lived there for a long time.

LS: So in the market people would speak Efik?

BA: Efik.

LS: And what about if people come in, if the Yoruba and Ibo happen to come to Calabar, would they learn Efik or do they make you speak their language?

BA: They speak in English. But the Ibos --- most of the Ibos who've been around or who've lived in Calabar for awhile, can speak Efik.

LS: Is there much intermarriage?

BA: Some, some. The families, the parents are more relaxed now. It wasn't when I was growing up. It wasn't encouraged very much. But there is, you know, some.

LS: And your husband is also Efik?

BA: My husband is not Efik. () My family didn't consent willingly that I marry outside of the tribe.

LS: And what is he?

BA: He's from the midwestern part of Nigeria. His tribe is Edo, E-d-o, Edo from the midwestern part of Nigeria.

LS: Do your children speak ---

BA: Our children, because they are raised here in the US, do not the Nigerian languages unfortunately. They do understand some words and terminologies in both --- my language and my husband's --- but they cannot carry conversation in the language.

LS: What do you and your husband speak together?

BA: English.

LS: English, okay.

BA: The family speaks English.

LS: And how long have you been in Philadelphia?

BA: Since 1982. My husband first came to the US in 1975. I was expecting our first child ---

LS: You married ---

BA: We married in Nigeria, and he came out in '75, July --- just got his residency. But I opted to stay back to have our first daughter, who was being expected. And she was born in November that year. And I came up with her when she was three months old.

LS: And your husband had gone to medical school?

BA: He had gone to medical school in Nigeria. He attended the University of Lagos Medical School. I also had finished my Bachelors in Nigeria, at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Then he came out here for his residency.

LS: Was it common then for someone to go to medical school in Nigeria and then do a residency in another country?

BA: In another country, if they so desired. They could stay back there for residency, but for the most part, most Nigerian doctors always wanted to go to the Western world for residency and then go back to Nigeria to practice.

LS: But your husband didn't go back?

BA: We didn't go back. We did explore the possibility of going back, and throw it back and forth about going back home. But once we had multiple children here, and after we waited so long, we decided we didn't want to uproot them. So we decided to stay and have them have their education here.

LS: So only one of your children was born in Nigeria?

BA: Yes. Our oldest child was born in Nigeria. The other three were born here.

LS: So your husband --- where did he do his residency?

BA: At Downstate Medical Center in New York. While he was doing his residency, I was doing my study at Columbia University Teachers College. That is where I got my Masters and my EdD.

LS: Did you like that?

BA: Yes, I did. I loved Columbia. In fact, our son is looking into applying to Columbia. It's a fine school. I really enjoyed the time I spent there studying. I didn't much care for living in New York, but, you know ---

LS: Did you live right in New York?

BA: We lived in Brooklyn, because Downstate is in Brooklyn. So we lived in Brooklyn and I was commuting to Columbia in Manhattan.

LS: So you came to Philly in 1982?

BA: Eighty-two.

LS: And you came to the United States in?

BA: I came in 1976, January.

LS: And right now you are living in? What's this?

BA: Lower Gwynedd. G-w-y-n-e-d-d.

LS: And how long have you lived here?

BA: We've lived in this house since we custom built it in 1996.

LS: Before that you were still in this area?

BA: Before that we lived in Colmar, further north, up north.

LS: You built this house in 1996?

BA: Yes, 1996.

LS: That must have been quite an undertaking.

BA: Yes, it was a fun project.

LS: And so who all lives here with you now, in this house?

BA: The children come and go --- they're in school. When they're not in school, they're at home. But currently, it's my husband and my son, who is a senior at La Salle High School for Boys. The girls are in school. But they do come home when they are on vacation.

LS: He must be right in the middle of the application process?

BA: Yes, yes.

LS: You're probably --- now this is the fourth time you have gone through it?

BA: Yes! What a relief! No more!

LS: People say it's quite intense.

BA: It is quite intense.

LS: And the competition is so ---

BA: Especially him. He's so laid back.

LS: Compared to the girls?

BA: Compared to the girls. And getting those applications out and the essays was almost a nightmare.

LS: Do you have any other relatives in the area?

BA: No, we don't have relatives in the immediate area, but my husband and I have relatives scattered across the country. I have a cousin in New Jersey, I have a cousin in New Hampshire, Boston area, Houston. My husband has two brothers in Florida, two different states, Florida states.

LS: I hear there's a big Nigerian community in Houston?

BA: Yeah, there is.

LS: And your current occupation is?

BA: I'm an Early Intervention Program Director.

LS: At?

BA: That's? What --- what I do.

LS: Early Intervention Program Director --- and who do you work with?

BA: I work for Ken Crest Services and we provide center-based early intervention services for children diagnosed with disabilities. It could be any type of disabilities. This program is funded by the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit. The program services mostly Montgomery County residents but also, umm, there's a really big need, so we do accept a handful of children from Bucks County through their Intermediate Unit.

LS: And these are kids who have been identified by DHS?

BA: These are kids who --- Usually they will have been identified anywhere from birth, anywhere from birth to three, I mean from birth till six. From birth till three, they are service home-based. But after three, they transition into a center-based program where depending on their disability and the level of service --- a child may be delayed in speech and language or they may require the services of an occupational therapist or physical therapist, maybe some physical disabilities. Then we have to meet --- the whole team assigned to the child will meet, come up with an IP [intervention plan] and goals, that the team will be working with the child during the year.

LS: So you could be contacted both independently by parents or on recommendation of schools or ---

BA: It has to come through --- If I just had a call, let's say, from a pediatrician whose patient has some delays and she was calling me to arrange for the child to be enrolled in our program, but all families have to go through the Intermediate Unit. At the Bucks County Intermediate Unit, at Montgomery Intermediate Unit.

LS: That's sort of a central processing ---

BA: A central processing, because the Intermediate Unit pays funds to programs and the program pays for the service and we cannot enroll a child directly through, even if the parent --- I had a parent who says, "I don't want to go through the Intermediate Unit. I want to pay for the program. I want to enroll my child directly." We cannot do that. She has to go through the Intermediate Unit, and the child will have to be screened to determine eligibility.

LS: Do you have kids from, umm --- are there a lot of immigrants in Montgomery County? Do you get any?

BA: Actually, I have a Nigerian kid in the program.

LS: Really?

BA: It was so funny. When her parent called last year, they were referred to me when they called as the case manager. Because once they go through the () process and then the parents have to call to schedule a talk. And when I saw the name, and I said, "Are you from Nigeria?" He went, "Yes, how do you know?" he said to me. I said, "Because I am a Nigerian." Yes, so that's the only immigrant.

LS: I know there are some refugees being resettled in Montgomery County.

BA: That's the only one I have in the program.

LS: Is your doctorate in special education?

BA: No, actually my doctorate is in general education but I have, umm --- Before, I was home for a while with the children, but I was very active in my children's school district. And I used to organize families and, kind of educate them on how to advocate for their children. And one of the families I was working with, who used to have a lot of issues with the school district, just happened to pass my name onto Montgomery County Association for Retarded Citizens. So the executive director invited me to join the board, and I eventually did join the board, and became very active in the field of disability. So when I decided to go back to work, I decided that this is what I wanted to follow (), you know, to work with families with special needs children. So that's how, you know, () part education program and then part other services, therapeutic clinical services, provided in an educational setting. So it all ties in.

LS: And I'm sure the early intervention part is very important.

BA: Right.

LS: Sounds like a wonderful job. And your husband works around here?

BA: My husband is --- currently, he's VP at SmithKline, oh the name changed, SmithKline Glaxo. They just merged. It used to be SmithKline Beecham. It's now SmithKline Glaxo.

LS: Did he ever practice ---

BA: Did he ever practice medicine?

LS: Yes, practice medicine.

BA: Yes, he did practice medicine for a brief period while we were still in New York. When he finished his studies, when he finished residency, he also worked on a fellowship in infectious diseases in both children and adults. So he practiced briefly in New York. Then he came into the pharmaceutical industry by, via Merck, Sharpe and Donne. That was his first pharmaceutical job, and he worked for them for about six years, then took a job with Johnson and Johnson, and now he is with Smith-Kline Beecham.

LS: Does he miss practicing?

BA: Practice? He did miss for awhile, because when he joined Merck(), the deal was that he could still consult. He was consulting with children and also with the area hospitals. So he was still having his hand into the clinical aspect of medicine. But, as he got further up on the hierarchy, he was always here or there, out of the country, and immediate physicians will call, the primary physicians will call --- he's out of the country. So it became very difficult for him to stay with, in touch, with the clinical aspect of his job. So he's not been doing that for awhile now.

LS: Did your husband ever consider doing a residency in another country? In Britain or ---

BA: Actually, no. He didn't apply to Britain at all for residency, apparently because when he was in high school, he had a French teacher who was a Canadian. And the French teacher came back, he returned to Canada after awhile, and he kept in contact with him. Besides he had some friends, friends from high school, who were studying in the US. So that was where his main attraction and focus was. That's why he applied to the US.

LS: You have obviously heard of New York, but had you ever heard of Philadelphia when you ---

BA: Nope! (laughs)

LS: And when your husband got a job down here, what did you think about moving here?

BA: Well, I particularly didn't care much for Philadelphia --- for New York, I'm sorry. Actually, while we still lived in New York, we did talk about moving to New Jersey. And then fortunately the job offer from Pennsylvania came. We weren't looking to relocate into another major city of the US. By that time, we had traveled extensively in the US. In 1976, we drove from New York to California.

LS: Was that wonderful?

BA: We took a two-week vacation and drove across the country.

LS: With the baby?

BA: With the two babies, yeah. And also in 1978, we did two trips. We went to Mississippi. So we had traveled in the country and we knew that we didn't want to live in a major city. We wanted to raise the children in a suburb, somewhere, because my husband comes from a village, a very small village, really local back home. I come from a small, almost like a suburban town, like Lansdale. So --- uhh --- with a lot of green. So we had known by then that we wanted to ---if we stayed in this country, to stay in this country, we wanted to raise our children in the suburbs, only the suburbs. So we were very happy when the job offer came for him to work in Pennsylvania. So we came out here, shopped around, decided that we wanted to stay in the suburbs.

LS: It's pretty around here.

BA: It's really nice.

LS: Your background in Nigeria --- do you come from a family that's educated? Were your parents educated?

BA: Umm-hmm. My father was a teacher, schoolteacher. My mom didn't finish --- she dropped out nursing school to marry my late father. But I have a family of doctors and lawyers and teachers and nurses. My grandmother didn't go into a profession. She also married early. But, interestingly, my grandaunts, my grandmother's sisters were either nurses or doctors because my grandfather had traveled abroad, outside of Nigeria, and he made sure that he sent his sons, my granduncles, to England to study. So education was always a major thing in the family.

LS: Was there ever any disparity between how girls and boys were educated? That's something you often hear about --- that there's a big disparity.

BA: Well, way back, as far back as, probably my mother's, but mostly my grandmother's ---because grandmother's generation did. My great-grandfather educated all his boys, but educated *some* of his daughters. Any daughter who anybody showed any interest to marry, he would marry the daughter off. So some of the daughters had --- you know, like my grandmother didn't go, didn't have much of education because she married early. But I have some --- my grandmother's sisters, some of them were teachers and some of them were nurses. I grew up with two that I know very well, that were retired as matrons of a hospital. But my mother's generation, too, it was the same but it was getting a little bit less, that some of the girls were being allowed to pursue education. Emphasis was still on marriage, but they would let you go as far as you want to go. Our generation, the sky was the limit. They weren't pushing us to marry. In fact, it was the other way around. My parents were saying, "You really need to finish your college education before you marry." So the emphasis was the other way around.

LS: So at what age did you marry?

BA: So I married after I graduated from college, because that was expected.

LS: Is that twenty ---

BA: Twenty-six. Because I worked for two years after graduation.

LS: That was probably a lot older than some people who got married.

BA: Yeeaah.

LS: Have you ever lived in another country besides the US?

BA: No. I've visited in and out of, umm --- even before we moved and migrated to the US, I visited Britain, and I've also traveled around some other countries since --- like France and Rome, but I haven't lived in another country.

LS: Do you have relatives in other countries around the world?

BA: Umm-hmm. Mostly in Britain, but I also have some in France.

LS: There probably aren't too many Nigerians in France, are there?

BA: There's a handful of Nigerians in France, yes, there is. I have a cousin who lives in France.

LS: Do you find that people who have heard of Nigeria, do they have any stereotypes about Nigerians? Or any kind of prior knowledge? When you say that you are from Nigeria, do you feel like people think that's a blank slate, like they are saying, "What's like there?"

BA: Umm, some people who are very, umm --- most people if you say you are from Nigeria they give you a blank stare, they don't know where Nigeria is.

LS: They've never even heard of Nigeria.

BA: They've never heard of Nigeria. But there is a handful, a few, who, among the highly educated Americans, who have heard of Nigeria. And some of them have heard of Nigeria in a negative way. With crime, in not a very nice way. Or have heard of the political situation in Nigeria, especially during the military regime. So you have to ---

LS: And the oil thing?

BA: And the oil thing, right. And those who are highly conversant with Africa and Nigeria, especially, have, also ask you questions about the corruption, the politicians, and embezzlement.

LS: What do you miss most about Nigeria?

BA: I miss family, extended family, because the culture is very much interwoven with the extended family. I remember, when I had my oldest child, I didn't give her a bath until I came over here to meet her father. Because every morning one auntie or the other shows up to give the child a bath. All I had to do was to breast feed her. So you miss that, you miss that close interaction with family and friends. And when I go back, I try to stay for about two weeks. This past trip I went, I was there for about almost three weeks. Because my old schoolmates, friends --- once they hear you're in town, they are calling, they are showing up. They're inviting you to one activity or the other. So I really miss that close-knit interaction with friends and family.

LS: When you go home, do people make certain assumptions about what your life is like here? Do they have realistic views about what life is like here?

BA: No, actually they --- a lot don't. Some of my friends, those who have travelled abroad, you know, have traveled to the US or London, they have a fairly good idea of what life here is about. But those who haven't, always envy us when we go back home, that our life is so much --- they know everything --- it's at our disposal here. Unlike back in Nigeria. For instance, interestingly, even though Nigeria is a big oil country, we still having a lot of problems with gasoline, power(?), a lot of problems with lights, the light is not on for hours ---

LS: You mean like in California?

BA: Like in California. I was saying, it's interesting, I mean, (), we're not that backwards. () And then, of course, right now the economy is so deplorable. Our currency is so --- has no meaning right now. I remember our first few years here, probably ten years --- I came in 1976 --- yeah, in the seventies and early eighties, up to mid-eighties, our currency had more value than American dollar, believe it or not. You can ask any banking institution and they will confirm that. But now it's --- our currency has no value, practically has no value. Which is impacting on the quality of life back home.

LS: Do you support people at home? Do you send money home?

BA: Yes, well, we do have to. We do support the families. My husband, his father died when he was nine. My father died our first year of migrating up here, but we both have aged mothers at home. We have brothers and sisters, and cousins and nephews, who look up to us, so we do try to ---

LS: Do you send it as bank transfers or Western Union? Or how do you ---

BA: Well, what we do is --- sometimes we do. When I was in Nigeria, this past time, I didn't have extra money, so that time my husband did send. We try not to do that because the bank fee is so high. So we try not to. But fortunately there is always --- my husband and I go home every six months, sometimes less. I just came back, and he has a business trip to Belgium, and some African countries, because they have studied, they have to study in Nigeria, too. So he will be going to Nigeria in two weeks. So we are lucky to be able to go in and out of Nigeria and so we can just bring a lump sum of money and we don't have to worry about bank transfer.

LS: How do you usually fly to Nigeria?

BA: Mostly, we use British Airways a lot. But this last trip I didn't use British Airways because I was trying to fly out right after Christmas and I couldn't get a flight on business class until the 30th of December and I didn't want to wait that long, it will be eating into my vacation time. So I ended up traveling with Lufthansa for the first time. In all of my twentysomething years of living in the US, I hadn't flown Lufthansa but it was a very nice flight, very nice service, too.

LS: When you went to school --- so I know you went to the University of Ibadan --- but what was your primary and secondary school education like?

BA: I went to a Catholic school, what they call the Holy Child nuns, mothers. I went to a convent school -- Holy Child Convent, it's called, was called, for my primary education. And then Holy Child Secondary School for my ---

LS: Are you Catholic?

BA: I'm Catholic. I was raised Catholic.

LS: Are a lot of Efiks Catholics?

BA: No, actually, I think, (). We have a large number of Catholics and we also have a large number of Presbyterian.

LS: Are there any Muslims?

BA: No.

LS: They're all Chris ---

BA: All Christians. In my area all Christians.

LS: The Archdiocese of Philadelphia has just started an African Mass once a month.

BA: Oh, really?

LS: The first one was last Sunday.

BA: Are you Catholic?

LS: No, I'm not.

BA: Oh, how do you know? Oh, because of your involvement --- yeah, oh, that's interesting! I just spoke with someone in the Archdiocese, because I was making inquiries. In my family, also, we have some priests and nuns. So, one of my cousins who is a priest, I was making for some inquiries for him, and I spoke with a priest at the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. He didn't even advance me that information, knowing that I am a Nigerian.

LS: () it's the Archdiocese, it's called the Ethnic and Immigrant Ministry. It just started, so they probably only have about forty people. Most people of them are Nigerian. The priest is a Monsignor. His father is from Cape Verde, so he is half-African.

BA: Oh, really, oh, wow.

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

LS: What do you like best about the US?

BA: I love the US because of the cultural diversity, the opportunities, the immense opportunities one have to excel in whatever you want to excel in. The educational opportunities, because one of the things in Nigeria that has happened in the recent past up till now is a lot of closures of the schools and institutions.

LS: Of higher learning.

BA: Of higher learning.

LS: For financial reasons?

BA: For financial reasons. Usually the instructors are not paid and then they go on a work stoppage, which is taking the students much longer to graduate and I'm not even sure about the quality of education now. Because when we went to school, we could apply to further education in any institution of learning outside of Nigeria --- to also have people from Nigeria furthering their education in Cambridge, Oxford, any of the Ivy League schools here --- but it really is one of the things that really makes me wonder and upset about the Nigerian education currently because of the way we have been. Our system of education was so good, was so strong, a few years ago. But now I'm not sure where that system, you know, what all the stoppage is doing to ---

LS: What year did you graduate from high school?

BA: In 1964.

LS: And do you even find that between the time you graduated from secondary school and --- Do you have younger siblings?

BA: Mmm-hmm.

LS: And at that time had there been a deterioration or is it since then?

BA: No, it didn't come --- it's been --- let's see, I would say things really took a dive in the eighties, although there was a period of interruption during the Nigerian Biafran War. I was in the university then. There was some disruption there, because of the civil strife. But then, after that, things stabilized, and in the eighties with the frequent changes in the government, military government. And then, one of the governments, I can't remember which one now, took over all the schools from the foreign entities that were running the schools, the ones who more or less Nigeria-ized the whole system, but they didn't do a good job after they took over. Because, I mean, I had a very good primary and secondary education. We had schools that were run by the Roman Catholic Church, also the Presbyterians, some of the Protestant schools we had. In fact, my brother, one of my brothers, went to a Presbyterian high school, that was where he got admission to, and they were very good schools. They were very good schools, when we were growing up.

LS: And so you went through your A-Levels. It was the British system.

BA: Right, with the British system. And then to the university after that. And the university system, too, was very good, very competitive.

LS: What are considered as the really top universities in Nigeria? Like the University of Ibadan was one?

BA: Yeah, fortunately, the university of Ibadan --- I have to say University of Ibadan was the top-notch. Everybody wanted to get into University of Ibadan in those days, but of course ---

LS: And Calabar is supposed to be good , too.

BA: Calabar was, once these other states were created in the seventies and eighties, so they were all coming up with their universities. But, before, while I was in the university, we only had --- we had University of Ibadan, University of Lagos, University of Nsuka in the east, very east in the Ibo section, and then University ABU --- Ahmadu Bello University --- in the north, for the northerners. So these were the four universities in Nigeria. But with the creation of more states, the states that, you know, creating their own universities. So it's now almost every states has a university.

LS: What was it like --- when you went to gra --- it must have taken you awhile to get through graduate school if you had four children, no? How long ---

BA: No, no, because I did my graduate studies, umm, I had already my EdD. I had defended my dissertation, was in 1980. I had two of my first two girls, and then I was pregnant with my third daughter as I was finishing my ---

LS: Okay.

BA: She was born in 1981, and I defended my thesis --- I actually graduated pregnant. Actually I was carrying her in May of 1980.

LS: I had my first son. I think that was why I finished my dissertation.

BA: But I was done my course requirement. I was just working on my dissertation, so ---

LS: And that must have been really hard if you didn't have extended family and you didn't have ---

BA: No, we had to depend on babysitters.

LS: American babysitters or did you find Nigerians?

BA: No, no, unfortunately we didn't find --- it was American babysitters that we had to --- you know, I used. There were no Nigerians, and I didn't have, umm, any --- I had a cousin in New York who was also in school, herself. She was, umm, she's a professor in a college in Rhode Island right now, but, umm, sometimes she would baby-sit us. My, umm, especially on weekends because she was also in school, in graduate school. But I had to depend mostly on American baby sitters.

LS: I am finding now that a lot of --- the strategy of African immigrant women having means now is to bring over a matriarch, their older female relative to live in the house. Did you ever consider doing something like that?

BA: Actually, when we were going through the American Embassy getting a visa, people, uhh --- a gentleman (general?) said to my husband and I, "Why aren't you getting somebody?" because I was

pregnant. When we go for visa, I was pregnant. And my husband and I were very private, and we just said we thought bringing somebody, a young somebody, to a strange country, what if she's --- And then when we were hearing from friends. We had friends who had done that and it turned out to be a nightmare, because these kids come, they are completely out of hand, and wanting all sorts of things. And then we heard of cases where they had brought a female and she's pregnant and the family's mad at you, because of what you have done to their child. So we just got scared and said, "No, we don't want to bring anybody. We don't want that responsibility."

LS: Well, it would be a big responsibility. And if you bring someone older, I imagine it's extremely isolating for the person.

BA: Yeah, the older was mostly --- for instance, our both mothers came to visit and stayed a year and that was it. But they didn't like it. Because it is isolated for them. Back home, people are in and out, people are in and out, friends, families, they working down the street, they stop by and say hello, move on. So they need that constant interaction with neighbors and friends and next-door neighbors. Nigerians don't understand old folks home, but it's taboo for you to send your aged parents to live in a place like that. People really look down on you. It's frowned upon. So people don't do it.

LS: And then you think if your mother were here, and you were gone all day, and your husband is home all day, it's not safe to leave an older person alone ---

BA: No --- alone at home ---

LS: Because they could fall down the stairs or ---

BA: Exactly.

LS: And I agree, but I think of people from outside the United States really are very critical of Americans for doing that, and the thing they don't understand also is that a lot of older people don't want to live with their kids. 'Cause they themselves are American. They're used to independence and they don't want to be dependent on their kids.

BA: Exactly.

LS: On their own children.

BA: Exactly.

LS: It's our culture of independence.

BA: Yeah. [laughs]

LS: Do you know a lot of people from Nigeria here?

BA: We know a handful. In fact, my husband and I are involved in an organization called Nigerian Peoples Forum.

LS: The local chapter was just formed, right?

BA: Right. And he's the chairman of the local chapter. So we do know a handful of Nigerians. We don't know every Nigerian around but we know quite a few. In fact, last week, I was --- we have a friend of ours who runs an auto shop in Lansdale on Broad Street ---

LS: A Nigerian?

BA: A Nigerian, umm-hmm. And I just happened to be driving by Broad Street and I stopped by to make contact with him, and there were two Nigerians there, a Nigerian man and a woman, a Yoruba woman and an Ibo guy. And I had to get their phone numbers. I hadn't met them before. () the guy lives in Pottstown, the woman lives in Harleysville. So, so --- [laughs]

LS: Yeah, and they end up coming all the way up here ---

BA: Yes, right.

LS: So your husband --- what is his position in Nigerian Peoples Forum?

BA: He's the local chair.

LS: A local chair. Yeah, I had heard that, that --- in fact, () told me about that. You know Chef Abu?

BA: Yeah, oh, yeah. I had just talked to him the other day. You know him?

LS: Yeah.

BA: You met him, too. Okay.

LS: In fact, we had a big event at Balch Institute for all African leaders on December 2nd and he catered. And he had to run to the big event you had ---

BA: Right, right, right. He was telling me that he was coming from somewhere, where he had to cater.

LS: He is a very nice a guy.

BA: He is, he is.

LS: What's his ethnic group, I forget?

BA: He's from the North. He's Tiv. He's from the northern part of Nigeria that's between the midwestern and the --- interior north, further north. That's a different tribe, the Hausas.

LS: Do Nigerians tend to socialize by ethnic group or do you mix with people from all over the place?

BA: We mix, because I have friends from all over Nigeria. Going to school, you have to classmates from all across the country. But when I was in primary school and high school, I had mostly girls from --- Ibo girls and Ibibios, which is all in my hometown. So I still have some of those girls as my very good friends. I see them whenever I go into the country. And in Ibadan, at the University of Ibadan, also made friends, a lot of friends from the Yoruba, and I didn't have any Hausa --- you know, the Hausa girls --- I guess they're not ---

LS: They're secluded.

BA: Yeah, they were secluded (). They weren't as present in education as the southern girls. So I don't have any northern girlfriends, because I didn't go to school with anyone.

LS: What about socioeconomic level? Do you find that Nigerians socialize here across class lines in a way they might not in Nigeria? Or do people pretty much socialize across class lines there?

BA: Well, in Nigeria you --- yeah, here we tend to do it because, for instance, we are living in the suburbs in this environment, and we work. And where we live and where we work, we're not --- we don't come in contact with Nigerians of a different socioeconomic background. So you tend not to mix. But the very good thing that the NPF has done, we've met a lot of people who are not at our level. So, we have that contact but just a handful.

LS: So everybody in the NPF, they ---

BA: It's across, it's different all across.

LS: And people do not tend to go into their own class?

BA: No.

LS: But do people even think --- are they still aware that some people have a higher income or they don't even --- ?

BA: They are aware. For instance, let me backtrack. When one of our good friends, I was telling you, the former vice president of Nigeria, was running for the last presidency of the last election and we had a fundraising dinner here for him and we invited a lot of people. Some of them felt (). But we had, we called friends, we got Chef Abu --- I think he gave us his name --- we called people that we knew, and they gave us names, and we invited a lot of Nigerians. And then when I see them, whenever I see them, they come to me, you know, they come to me, we're not at the same socioeconomic level, but we mix. Like when we had the launching in November. It was in November, and, you know, we mixed. We mixed and talked to everybody, you know, we just did. Our daily lives don't bring us together, but then we do meet in social circles.

LS: So the immigration experience acts as an equalizer in some way?

BA: I think so. Back home, too, in Nigeria when I go home, with some of my parents' friends, (). But even my husband --- and my husband is village, too --- when we go to his village, some of his classmates from elementary school, who didn't go beyond the elementary school, who didn't go beyond high school,

but, I remember, when we were home together two Christmases ago and we went to visit some of those guys. So we *do* go to visit there, and same thing in my home town, too. I socialize with my classmates that are not at the same level with me now, but once they know I'm in town, they call me up, I look them up, and, you know, we socialize.

LS: Yes, it seems a lot, certainly in West Africa, that people's peer groups become highly ---

BA: It does, it does.

LS: Did you go through any kind of initiation thing? Did you do anything traditional?

BA: No, not in my hometown, we don't. I don't know whether because of --- because of , we were () so we had a lot of --- earlier on, much earlier than this, was in my husband's village, which is in the interior, we had, we were exposed to western civilization. But my husband did. And my husband did, and he still belongs to an age group.

LS: An age group?

BA: An age group.

LS: And are those the people that when he's home ---

BA: Right, yes.

LS: Yes, that's what I heard.

BA: But I didn't experience that.

LS: It must be such a kind of a --- an experience that brings them together.

BA: Exactly. In my hometown, the difference with my hometown and my husband's, is that in my culture, in my Efik culture --- in fact, one of my classmates and I, she's an attorney back home, we were talking about it --- you tend to go both ways. We relate and socialize with people who are very much above us and we also relate and socialize with those who are very much below us. So, you know, we

don't create barriers to keep you in this social group or that social group. We just mix. There is a free flow, which is very nice.

LS: Do you think some of that might have to do with the fact that most people have relatives in rural areas who would not have the education ---

BA: Right, right, it could be, too.

LS: 'Cause I've had some people say that there are kind of vertical lines, because everybody, even if you are a minister of state, your mother may be back leaving in a traditional home in a village and that does not mean that you have less respect for ---

BA: No, no, not at all.

LS: Of course, when you are a minister of state, all of them come and live with you!

BA: Yes! [laughs]

LS: What was it like bringing up your children and being a professional woman? Did you feel that --- is your marriage very different than it would have been in Nigeria because you were in the United States?

BA: Would my marriage?

LS: Was your husband really supportive? Or --- was he more supportive than he would have had to be?

BA: No, my husband has always --- he's very supportive of me. I guess because when we got married, he knew that I was a professional. I was two years out of college and I was working as a teacher in one of our high schools. So he knew I would always work. Actually, I stopped my career when we moved out here, because of lack of support and after that --- then with multiple children and being in a strange environment, I offered to stay home and raise the children. But he's always supported what I do. When I decided I wanted to go back --- or even when I was home, I was involved in a lot of committee groups. I was very much involved in the schools and I also belonged to, I told you, I was invited to join the board of Montgomery County Association for Retarded Citizens, and also when I was home was invited to join

the Pennsylvania Human Relations Advisory Commission, on which I am still very active. So he supported all those activities because he knew they meant a lot to me, to be involved in one way or the other, either through work or through community involvement or children-related activities. So he's --- it wouldn't have been any different if I were back home in Nigeria, I would have been very much involved in the politics of the country. And he would, also, as I actually said, my cousin is a governor of a state, and he would say, "Are you going to take ()? Are you going to ask him for a political post?" Or even when our friend was running for the presidency, I really thought, my friends said, "Oh, ()," started thinking that I might want to ask for a political appointment. Knowing that Vincent travels a lot. But if that were to happen, too, actually he would support me, going home for --- living partly at home and partly here. But he's been very supportive.

LS: Right when you got your doctorate, you didn't work for a number of years until your kids were a little bit older?

BA: Right. Right, I stayed home four years.

LS: How do you think the immigration has transformed you? Has it transformed you? Do you think that if you went back to live full time in Nigeria, it would be hard to reintegrate in any way?

BA: No, because I go home every year.

LS: You go home every year?

BA: Every year I was at home. I am just a Nigerian.

LS: So you don't think anything about living in the United States has changed you?

BA: No, it hasn't changed me. It's given me the opportunity to live the best of two worlds. I am able to go home every year, because I'm able to work and earn a decent living here, so I can afford --- because there are a lot of Nigerians who can't do that. As you know, is very expensive to make these trips but, umm, but, I lost track.

LS: No, whether it would be hard to reintegrate at all?

BA: No, no, it's not because, in fact at one point --- I'll show you some pictures of --- oh, I didn't develop these last pictures I brought --- But whenever I'm home, I just go back into the culture of home life and home living. And living here, too --- I guess, before my husband and I came out here, my husband when he came here in 1975, that was his first trip outside Nigeria. When I was going to college, we had those summer holidays. And my parents on two occasions made my summer vacation to London, to Britain. So I had been out of the country. But I like to say that I did not experience much of a cultural shock, because I had left the country before and at the level of civil --- I should say for me, culture, you know from Calabar, we were very --- you know, there were a lot of expatriates, coming in and Westernizing me in my hometown. So I was very much comfortable. I am very comfortable wherever I am. That's my personality. If I find myself with Queen Elizabeth, I'll hold my own. So I have no problems living anywhere in the world. I also don't forget my roots, where I come from.

LS: What about your children? Have they been in Nigeria often?

BA: They have been. We took them home quite often and they're very comfortable in Nigeria. Of course, they miss some of the amenities they have here ---

LS: Electricity.

BA: Yeah! Electricity! (laughs) (making a funny voice) "It's hot! Oh, it's hot, Mom! Oh, ()!" But they always ask to go. They always look forward to going home. They love to be with their cousins.

LS: When you go, you stay with your family there?

BA: We stay with our family. And they socialize with their cousins, and so they look forward to that.

LS: And they don't get teased because they don't speak Efik?

BA: No. Actually when they were younger, when they were small, when they were kids, the other kids, neighbours, children who come to socialize with them, and they would be teasing them because of their

American accent. But they don't do that now. Everybody's grown to big boys, that they socialize with, big girls. But when they were small ---

LS: Do you think your children --- has anyone of them ever expressed a desire to go and live and work in Nigeria?

BA: Actually, my second daughter has been in Nigeria on her own twice. The first time she --- she's involved with --- let me backtrack. When she was at Harvard, her third year in Harvard, she applied for a grant and got funding to go and do a research study in Nigeria and she opted to do it in her father's village, which is very remote in the interior, it's really local.

LS: What did she do research on?

BA: Childhood immunization.

LS: Oh, interesting.

BA: SmithKlineBeecham was just about to start a study, and so it just, you know, SmithKlineBeecham was involved with it eventually. So I went home and travelled home with her and I left her there. I stayed two weeks; I had to come back. She spent three weeks in the village doing this study.

LS: And how did she do that? Were there enough people who spoke English that she didn't have a problem?

BA: Oh yes, actually. There was a physician, a doctor, the nurses that worked with. But people speak English, even though it's in the village, but there is a hospital and there is a physician and there are nurses and the staff that she worked with. Sometimes she had to use an interpreter in asking the mothers questions. And then this past summer, she went back by herself. She got another grant. She is such a trooper. She applied and got another grant and went back as a follow-up study, to do a follow-up study to that original study, and she was there for five weeks by herself.

LS: And what's her field?

BA: She's in med school. She's interested in doing a dual degree, but she has not made up her mind which area of medicine she wants to go into. But also doing, having an MPH, Masters in Public Health. Because she is also very involved in the reservations here. She is a child who wants to save the world. She makes trips to Arizona. She is working with her professor.

LS: And she's an American citizen, right?

BA: Right.

LS: I know you're a member of the Nigerian Peoples Forum, right?

BA: Mmm-hmm.

LS: Are you a member of any other association? It doesn't have to be an African one.

BA: Oh, MARC. The Montgomery County Association for Retarded Citizens. Actually, I can give you my resume and you can copy all it there. It's all there. Professional associations.

LS: Okay.

BA: I am on the Board of Directors for MARC. Also on the Advisory Board of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission.

LS: Okay. And is then the Nigerian People's Forum the only ethnic association? Or national association?

BA: No, there's the Efik. We have my tribal --- which we try to move away from the tribal thing because that's what is giving us ---

LS: So you have a Efik Association?

BA: We have a National Efik Association in the US.

LS: Is there a local branch?

BA: Yes, the local branch services Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York.

LS: I need to get that information from you for our next edition of our directory.

BA: Oh.

LS: Because I am trying to get all the local African immigrant associations. So it's Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York?

BA: Right.

LS: Can you tell me a little bit about these associations? What do you do with them? What kinds of activities?

BA: They had a meeting, a national meeting, in Houston but I () my timing, the Efik one. I didn't go. What we're trying to do in organizing groups is to try to impact what's going on at home, even though we're here. Because the home folks, at the political level, always want us to come back home, but we think, since we decided to live here we can still be --- we can still influence what's going on in our country for the better.

LS: From a political point of view?

BA: From a political point of view. And also, they can also tap our resources. For instance, when the Efik Association had their conference in Houston, our state governor was in the country. And he was invited to speak to them. As I say, I didn't attend that meeting. So that's what we're trying to do. We are trying to access our politicians and also have --- guide them or advise them on some of the things that they need to be involved in in order to improve the quality of life for everybody in general.

LS: And what do Nigerians politicians say to that? Are they open to your ---

BA: I think they are.

LS: They don't resent you as outsiders coming back?

BA: No, they don't. Because, personally, from my interaction with all of them, even at the highest level -- - as I said, I always use this example, our former vice-president of the country, who --- They're much older than us. I got to know them because when their daughter was in the high school I was teaching in

Nigeria, and establishing a relationship with them, and it's been maintained. They are like parents --- probably not old enough to be our parents, but like a senior brother to me, and his wife. But I always see them. When I went to Nigeria this time, I went to visit them in their home town, in Enugu, and I always talk to them about some of the things that we would like to see. Especially in my own field of education. And also in the issues of disability, African children in general. They are always very receptive. In fact, he was asking me if I should take time off, like a year off, and be more involved with what's going on in Nigeria. And I said to him, "Well, time is coming. The last one is leaving for college. Maybe I'll do that."

[laughs]

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

BA: --- at the state level, some state governors, that makes my job unfortunately --- fortunately, he's my cousin. But that aside, he's very young, he's in his thirties. He's very energetic. He has his MBA from Wharton and he's doing a lot for our state. And there are some young governors who are doing a lot for their states, which is nice. But at the national level there's still a lot that needs to be thrashed out.

LS: There are a lot of Nigerian students in Wharton. There is actually a Wharton African Students Association.

BA: Oh, really?

LS: If you want to get some business (). Tell me about the Nigerian People's Forum. This is a pan-ethnic?

BA: Yes, it's a pan-ethnic group.

LS: And what are its objectives and what are you going to try to do in this local chapter?

BA: One of the things they're trying to do here, not only in the local chapter, but nationally, is to try to change people's perceptions of Nigerians in the US. We do have --- we have a lot of Nigerians who are in different works of life, of professions in the country, who are very successful, doing well, living, umm, reaching out to the communities, and doing a good job of it. But people's views of Nigeria, in general --- for those who happen to know where Nigeria is --- is more on the negative side than the positive side. So we are working to influence that. And at the national level, they are working to, umm, trying to work with the US government to bring some new initiatives to Nigeria to help the government along.

LS: Not an economic initiatives, but political initiatives?

BA: Political, political initiatives. And also through economic, too, because when people have negative impression of Nigeria, they are afraid to go and do business with Nigerians. So they are trying to also change that around, hopefully, eventually.

LS: So the national NPF has some contacts on Capitol Hill?

BA: Mm-hmm, oh yes. But Nigeria is a national chair(?). It is making some inroads. We work with the Black Caucus. We were very involved in the presidential elections this year.

LS: How often do you meet?

BA: Actually, we do a lot of meetings on --- phone meetings, emailing, and then maybe once in three months or so.

LS: And how many members are there in the new chapter, this local chapter?

BA: Active members or members?

LS: Oh, I know what you mean. [BA laughs] Do you pay dues?

BA: Yes, we do.

LS: And then active members are people who actually come to the meetings?

BA: Yes. Then we do fundraising. The launching was part of the fundraising. It was very well ---

LS: How many active members are there?

BA: I should say fifty.

LS: Fifty?

BA: Yes.

LS: That's a good number. Do you have any number of how many Nigerians are in the Delaware Valley?

BA: You know, I don't know.

LS: I've heard anything from twenty-five to fifty thousand.

BA: Really?

LS: But that's a big difference.

BA: Maybe somewhere in between.

LS: Do you think there are Nigerians without visas or who have overstayed their visas? There probably are some cases?

BA: There might be some who, with student visa, finished their education and just don't want --- because, with the situation in the country now, if someone finds their way out of the country, they're not in a hurry to go back.

LS: Because there's no ---

BA: Because employment is so bad.

LS: Do you think most Nigerians still come for education? Do most people start up by coming to go to college? Or are people coming now directly to drive taxis or do whatever?

BA: Right, they are coming to do that, too, because there are very few who have come, who won the visa to come out. I remember, this one older guy from my husband's village who's here --- I think somewhere in the Midwest somewhere --- who by virtue of the visa came out, and there's also his wife.

LS: Oh, the diversity lottery?

BA: Right, the lottery thing.

LS: Okay.

BA: So because of, umm, things are so tough at home, people are just --- before, it was to come for education.

LS: Like in the seventies and eighties?

BA: In the seventies and eighties or even before that. People were coming in the sixties. But now it's to just escape the hardship at home.

LS: Do either the Efik Association or the Nigerian People's Forum, do you do anything to help newcomers to the area? To help orient people or help them get jobs or housing?

BA: You know what, I think that's a good idea. Because these are new groups just emerging, but I am sure eventually they will look into that, but they are not doing that right now. They are not doing that right now. But that's something to look into. Because usually when come out, they usually know one or two people. Even when we came, when my husband came out, he had some friends out here who helped him. So when people come out from Nigeria, there's always somebody else at the receiving end to help them settle. They're not just on their own.

LS: They don't just come out like ---

BA: No, so --- but it could be a nice thing for the association to also get involved in some of those things.

LS: Already if you speak English, you're ahead of the game, I mean ---

BA: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm.

LS: A lot of people who come from Francophone countries have a lot of harder time ().

BA: Because they speak French, yeah.

LS: What about the Efik Association --- do they do any language classes?

BA: Not that I know of. But you know what, I just found out from my daughter at Penn, that Penn has been offering some courses in African languages.

LS: Oh, yeah, I can tell you all about that. This is the same Tanzanian woman. I'll tell you all that in a minute.

BA: So, I thought that was interesting.

LS: Because there's a group of Ibo girls, Ibo students who --- basically at Penn, they have an African language program. And if they can get one or two students interested in the language and they can find someone who's willing and trained ---

BA: To teach.

LS: To teach it, they will offer it.

BA: Just one or two?

LS: Mmm-hmm. It's kind of on a tutorial basis.

BA: Wow.

LS: And the teachers don't make that much money, but they get trained. This is a woman from Tanzania who's a linguist, she's a Swahili teacher --- which of course is the always the language that most people study. She trains people to teach their own language, and somebody, I think, some Nigerian students who are Ibo, said our parents came from Nigeria, we don't speak Ibo, we would like to learn it. And so she found someone who's going to teach it, trained him, and now there are something like six or seven of those students, and they are learning Ibo. And it was on their own initiative. In fact, I've always wanted to go and talk to those students.

BA: That is interesting.

LS: So if your daughter could find --- even if she wanted to do it alone and then she finds ---

BA: Because she came and asked me, "Mummy, why don't you come and teach Efik?" Because she told me there is one or two others from an Efik ---

LS: () There have been Hausa ---

BA: Right, right. And so I said, "Oh, okay, I will look into it." But I never did it.

LS: Well, I can give you the name of that person, if you want to call her. It's a nice program.

BA: That's good. That's really good.

LS: You're a Catholic. Are you religiously active?

BA: Yes, I belong to Saint Rose of Lima Church in North Wales, that's the church, this is Lower Gwynedd. So, as a matter of fact, on the 10th of February, the church is ---we just had something in the mail last week that came in --- they want to have a Mass, Marriage Vows Renewal Mass, on the 10th of February at 7. So the children, or the children at school know to come home that weekend.

LS: And you are going to do that?

BA: We're going to do that, yes. Their father and I have been married --- I wonder how many years now? 1974. So it's twenty-six years? Yes, it's twenty-six years. So we will participate in that Marriage Vows Renewal Mass, and the church will be having some refreshments to couples that participate.

LS: That's very nice. Do you socialize with people at your church? Does it also act as a social group for you?

BA: I don't do much socialization with the church group. Mostly with the school.

LS: With the people you --- ?

BA: With my children's school, because it is a Catholic school. So I have some friends who are Catholic, so we have --- when you said that I remembered yesterday one of their mothers that we are friends with, she called me yesterday. She wants me, one of the schools, the Gwynedd Mercy Academy where our children went to, is having a fashion show. So she asked me to go, for us to go together. So I do that kinds of ---

LS: So that's a Catholic school?

BA: It's a Catholic school, it's a Catholic school. And then, most of the people I socialize through in the church, we go to the same church as friends of mine from school. We worship in that church.

LS: What has been your reaction over the years to racial dynamics in the United States?

BA: () twenty-second century! [laughs] Actually, interesting too, Joe Hoeffel is hosting on the 10th of February, same 10th of February, in the morning at MONTCO --- you'll probably be in Massachusetts by then, but if you were in the area, I would have said you are welcome to come. He's just got something through the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission that I'm part of. He is hosting a dialogue on race relations in Montgomery County at Montgomery County Community College, which is down the road on 202. I do follow the racial things in the country and that's it. I haven't have had a lot of negative

experience, but there have been a few along the way, similar experience, sometimes in the stores, people don't know you so they treat you shabbily. But, as I said, I wish it were a little bit further along than it is now. People do perceive you as an African American person normally and treat you accordingly. I know, I still, because I wasn't raised here and I really don't --- I tell people, maybe if I tried in twenty-five years I probably would have lost my Nigerian accent --- but I don't want to do that, because that's me. I'm a Nigerian. Now I'm an American citizen, of course and so I have a dual citizen. But they treat you differently because either you look different or you speak different. We worry little bit about my son, because he's now seventeen and he's driving. You worry about a male, African American male, living in a suburban area, but hopefully --- we haven't had any experiences with him being stopped ---

LS: He just needs to stay out of New Jersey.

BA: Oooh, I know. I hope he doesn't drive that far. But, you know, actually it used to be very bad. We used to live further down 309 and we had a few run-ins with the cops, stopped me for no reason. My husband used to have a Mercedes sedan. I've been stopped driving that. He's been stopped.

LS: And what's your reaction when that happens?

BA: Umm, I just --- I had once () that really got me ticked. I was coming from the supermarket. And I was driving the Mercedes that day, when were living in Colmar, and the cops just followed me until I pulled up on my driveway. Then they stopped me. And I asked why he stopped me. He said I was going above the speed limit. "Why didn't you stop me when ---" he followed me until I pulled me in my driveway. I pulled into my driveway, garage door opened, and then he stopped on the street in front of my driveway. I asked him why he didn't stop me then, if he thought I was really doing that, and he had no reason. He didn't ticket me. He didn't give me any ticket.

LS: What do you think was in his mind?

BA: I don't know. I don't know what he thought.

LS: Do you think it was that sort of thing about seeing ---

BA: I think he wanted to make sure ---

LS: a black person driving a Mercedes?

BA: --- a Mercedes, he wanted to make sure. Well, this was a couple of years ago. Now there are more blacks in this area. When we came in 1982, there were a handful and they lived further up north. So, I think he --- I don't know, (), I mean, I said to him, "I'm coming from the grocery shop and I live here." () which township cops that was anyway. But these are some of the things that ---

LS: If you had an experience and you feel someone is making assumptions because of you being black, when you open your mouth and talk to them and it is clear that you don't have an Americana accent, does that make it better or worse?

BA: Sometimes it is worse.

LS: Sometimes it makes it worse?

BA: Yeah, because I am impatient, yeah, it makes it worse. But because of our level of education and awareness, we don't let that rattle us. We just handle it in a very highly professional manner. I remember another experience with my husband. It was funny. It was Vincent's birthday and I had made a reservation in that rest --- that hotel --- it was one of the very nice restaurants. I made a reservation there for dinner and then when we got there, we stood and then a white couple came after us and stood and then the restaurant woman came and looked straight past us --- we were standing in front of the couple, the couple was standing a little bit behind us, and then asked to help them and we were standing there before. And we were standing there before. We were standing in front, but she just went past us. It was kind of annoying because we --- we just left, we just felt that this is not where we need to spend our money. So we left and we just told her and she was like, "Oh". Well, there is usually an excuse. They do a lot in the stores sometimes. The usual excuse that "Oh, I don't know who came first." But even when you say that -- the other couple stood behind the African American couple. What is that saying to you: we came and

jumped and stood in front of them? So, [laughs] but I mean things like that, we just deal with it and walk away [laughs].

LS: What about your kids? What has it been like for them growing up in the suburbs on the outskirts of a black city?

BA: We have ups and downs. Like I said, we do appreciate that we are --- () when we moved out here was, () real estate, we want a home in a very strong school district because of our value of education. So we were sure in the North Penn School District --- it was then, in the '80s, it was a top-notch school district in this area. And so we do have very good experiences and we also have not very good experiences. But because of my background in education, and I thank God I wasn't working, so I didn't have to deal with the pressure of work and the stress of work as well as trying to raise four kids. You know, our son was born here; then we had three kids. But when we moved out here, the first two children were in a gifted program in New York, they identified "gifted." And it took me all of four years fighting the North Penn School District. The North Penn School District eventually gave in and tested one child, the second one. And the first one was placed in a gifted program. So ---

LS: You mean they didn't want to put them into the gifted program?

BA: Umm-hmm. Because they would not put a black --- African American child in the gifted program. And that's what sparked my involvement in school district.

LS: But then you put your kids in private school? In parochial school?

BA: The last two, yeah.

LS: Oh, just the last two.

BA: The first two finished in North Penn. () But it was a tough battle, you know, their years in North Penn. The second daughter was very good in math. And she was scoring in the 99th percentile. All her external tests were coming in the 99th percentile. And when she was in the sixth grade --- North Penn had for two years a very good math program --- and her math teacher --- who's (), oh, did we fight --- refused

to test her. Children were pulled up, given a test, and if they passed that test they would be placed, you know --- it was just eight or at the maximum ten kids in this program with one teacher for two years, a very good math program from sixth grade on. And he refused to test this child, refused to test this child. There were all white kids in the program. So my daughter would come home very upset. She knew that she was better in math than some of the kids who were put in the program. I asked her, "Do you want to be in this program?" She said, "Yes, I deserve to be in this program." I said, "Okay."

LS: What grade was she?

BA: She was ten years old, in sixth grade. So I took it up with the school, called up the school, made an appointment, decided --- () I made the appointment, the guidance counselor was on the phone to me every day. It was five days or six days until the appointment between the principal, and the teacher and the guidance counselor. The guidance counselor called me everyday trying to dissuade me from coming in because she had talked to my daughter who had indicated an interest in medicine and therefore she didn't want the district to waste money, putting her in a () really good math program, she wasn't going to study PhD Math. And these are true stories. You can go back and talk to them.

LS: It's just so ---

BA: And so I said to her, at one point I just said to her, "Don't call me again. I refuse to take phone calls from you. We are going on with this meeting." So we went to the meeting, and the Principal, Dr. Darmouth, made me sign a letter saying that it is my wish --- it is our wish to put this child in this program, so in case she didn't succeed in the program that they will have to take her out of the program. () Then every child, I said, () whenever a major test is being given to a child, the children are () note from home, "please make sure ()." There was no indication she was going to be tested, she got to school, she was in a science class, she was pulled out to take this qualifying math test. And she passed with flying colors, so she was put in the program. And there was no problem, she did well in the two years math program, but it took a fight.

LS: I know someone who lives in a very affluent neighbourhood of New Jersey, (), and had almost an identical experience as that. It's been ()---

BA: All of them, with all the kids. With the teachers in the public schools, I had to fight to put them in the program where they deserve (). It's not because they're my children, but it's (). So she started that program. And I said, "It's not because they're my children, but I just want them to be challenged, to excel. I don't want them to be bored in school. I'm not asking for you to put them in a program that they don't deserve. But give them the opportunity to participate in the program that they qualify in." So when the third girl started in the public school, and her teacher pulled me aside and said to me, "She should be in the gifted(?) program, but don't call." It was a new teacher, young teacher, too. She said, "Please don't quote me. They will not test her. You need to go fight the principal." So, here we go again with the third one. We start fighting. But then, my son was finishing kindergarten, in Montessori school, and I said to my husband, "You know what? I'm really exhausted, fighting these public schools, the school district." Because meanwhile I was organizing parents, too, to get together to advocate for their children. And I said, "You know, if we can afford the private school money early(?)," I said, "He is a boy and of all the things we hear about black males in America, I really don't want to mess up with him. Because if they picking on him, he start acting wild, it become a discipline problem, and I'm going everyday and fighting them, I don't want to mess up with his self-esteem. So, I would like us to consider a private school for him." And then, when her teacher told me --- for three years, too, she was in third grade, first grade, second grade, third grade --- and they wouldn't test her. So we took them --- because () Academy Elementary School all the children have to go through testing to make sure that the scholastic () --- so they went to the testing and the educational psychologist that talked to them () said to Vincent and I, "If money's not an issue, you really should put her, the girl, too, in a private academic school. That's where she belongs." And then, especially when he told me, and I said, you know, you can take this aptitude testing () the public school, because there are a lot of issues and put her in a gifted program or you can

just put her in a private school, so we took her out and put her in a private school. () [phone ringing in background]

LS: I think it's crazy. You would think a school, with all the kind of accountability they have and the statistics that they show, would *like* to show that they had minority students in the gifted program because it would look good for them.

BA: Umm-hmm, umm-hmm. And, in fact, Aima was the only student in her year that got admitted to Harvard. She got admitted --- I got the letter of admission to apply for early action. And she got admitted. So ---

LS: How do your children identify themselves? Do they identify at all with African American youth?

BA: Yes, they do. They regard themselves as Nigerian Americans and they have friends who are Nigerians and they also have very good friends who are African Americans.

LS: And where did they meet them? In college?

BA: In school. From high school. They still relate to some of their high school friends.

LS: So they had a little bit of a mixed ---

BA: Right, right, and also college.

LS: So, if I saw your children and I said, "Oh, where are you from?" what would they say?

BA: Nigeria. If you ask where they come from, they would say, "Nigeria." Because the way we have raised them, we've always --- I mean, I cook the Nigerian food as well as American foods for them, so --- and then I have Nigerian things in the house so they are used to the culture.

LS: They have that sense of ---

BA: The sense of --- we want them to know who they are. And they can choose to live wherever they want to, but they still know their roots.

LS: Do you mostly Nigerian food?

BA: I cook every kind of food. I love to cook, so I cook every kind of food. I cook Nigerian, also American food. European.

LS: What about --- just bringing up your children, are there certain things that you have tried to transmit, a way of being and acting that you and your husband ---

BA: We've tried to --- first of all, we've tried to have them realize that, umm --- you know, understand where they're coming from. Their backgrounds, their beginnings. They are very conversant with the culture, and the expectations, the cultural expectations. I () because our children () always have in school. I never went anywhere but people always complement them for good behavior, respect to --- you know, politeness and respect because that is how --- we emphasize that in our culture. And also to grow up to be good citizens, to appreciate what they have, and reach out to those who are less fortunate than they are. And to be the best they can be in whatever they can do.

LS: Do you feel that --- do they have a pretty Nigerian behavior? I mean, if you took them to Nigeria, would someone be able to see right away that they were not one of them?

BA: No, no, no. Because even as I travel in and out of Nigeria, at the airports when I come in, somehow -- I don't speak like a typical Nigerian, because I --- So I am looked as a foreigner when I arrive. And I used to get so (). But no, they have --- when we arrive --- we don't have that typical Nigerian, umm, façade, you know, in Nigeria. But I do --- when I go to Nigeria, when I go into --- I wear my Nigerian clothes.

LS: You wouldn't be wearing jeans?

BA: I wouldn't be wearing jeans. No, umm-umm. I wear African, you know ---

LS: Because a woman at a certain age shouldn't be wearing jeans?

BA: No, actually, I mean I do wear pants everywhere. I take jeans; it depends on where I am going to.

Like I remember, we were in a --- I was spending the New Year's festivities, so when I went to parties, I

wore pants. But also, there are certain activities that I'll also wear Nigerian outfits, so I do wear both when I'm back.

LS: When you come home, do people consider four children an acceptable number? Or is that on the low side? [both laugh]

BA: Actually, my mother-in-law () because we had three girls she was --- not my tribe, my husband's side, they value more of male children than female children because I know how the conversation --- my mother-in-law is always () me up. And we had an argument and I said, "I can't believe you. As a woman, you don't value female children." Umm, I was young, too. Because I would have stopped at two. But I just felt, I have to prove something, that I can have a male child.

LS: If you could have a boy and a girl, you would have stopped at two?

BA: Yeah, I would have stopped at two.

LS: I knew a woman doing a residency and she was doing rotation in obstetrics and she came home on day and said, "I just want to ask you. There was a Nigerian woman who came in today and, at seven months pregnant, she really want to have an ultrasound. She said I want to know the sex of the child ---"

BA: [groans] Oh, yes.

LS: And when --- and she already had four girls --- and they looked at the ultrasound and said you have another girl and she just broke down."

BA: Oh, my God. Yeah.

LS: And she said, "What was going on?" And I said, "Oh well, () ---"

BA: Family, family. Family pressure.

LS: And you know, they just felt so bad for her.

BA: Yeah, it's family pressure. I had that, because my mother-in-law [break in tape] Even though she had only me as a girl, she had boys, but she didn't care about the sex, so long as they're healthy.

LS: I was in Senegal for three years and I was single, And I went back and I had two sons and people though that was good. But they also thought that I should have a lot more.

BA: Oh, really?

LS: And they kept saying, "Now you're going to have some girls?"

BA: Who said that? Family?

LS: What?

BA: Your family or your friends?

LS: These were just friends in Senegal who were ---

BA: Oh, in Senegal. Yeah, yeah.

LS: They said, "Now you have to start having girls." And said, "No, it's over." [BA laughs] Are there any particular traditions that ---

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

LS: --- African traditions?

BA: Not really. Even growing up back home --- I should say if it were in my husband's village, I remember, there's a big to-do about harvest. But it's usually in a religious fashion, because his mother is very religious, very church involved.

LS: So they combine harvesting with the Christian things?

BA: Umm-hmm, umm-hmm.

LS: It's not a pre-Christian ---

BA: No. But we don't really observe any African tradition as such. We worship in the Christian fashion. Actually, my husband is a Episcopalian. But we're married in a Catholic Church. And are raising the children in the Catholic faith, so we attend Mass together. And he always tell me when the kids --- when the last one leaves home, he will look for an Episcopal church. [laughs]

LS: There's a Kenyan Episcopal Church ---

BA: Oh, really?

LS: --- outside Philadelphia. If he was interested in an African Episcopal church.

BA: I will let him know. But --- he's been very good and gracious in worshipping in the Catholic church with us for these years.

LS: What's your future in the United States? I know you say that you might want to be more involved with Nigeria, but do you and your husband plan to retire in Nigeria? Or do you not know yet?

BA: We probably --- because we have four children, who will probably be living here, we will probably live in both places. Actually, we custom built this house, so we will probably won't put it on the market at anytime soon, unless, God forbid, something terrible happens to one of us. But we don't --- even when we retire, we will probably be commuting, you know, spend half of the year here, maybe spend the winter months in Nigeria because it's nice and toasty down there. Spend fall here, in the US. But, actually, it was towards the end of last year I was thinking more and more about what, now that my son --- the last one

will be leaving home --- and what I really want to do besides --- what else I would like to do. I have always been interested in research. Actually, I saw something advertised recently, a job at a local community college. Director of Education with some teaching responsibilities, and I sent my resume to them. I felt I need to move on to the next level. I have no child at home to tie me down, to look out things(?), so I can maybe branch out now and do some other things. So I'm looking to explore some other options. And, umm, it might be here or, uhh, ---

LS: That's exciting. It must be hard to have the child leave home.

BA: Yeah, I know. It's hard. [laughs]

LS: Do you and your husband generally feel accepted by people here in the United States?

BA: Yes, we do. We have a lot of great friends. We haven't had --- just a few problems that we have even we with the schools because of certain --- the way school --- mostly, it was the public school system, not the private school our kids went to, but the school system --- traditionally, they do those things, so, you know, I'm very much aware of that being in the field. But in general, I was very much accepted by people, by friends, by white Americans. I have a lot of very good white American friends. In fact, the one who called me yesterday, her husband is from very established money family. He owns the Holiday Inn at the turnpike extension and we alternate Christmas dinners in each other's home every year. I hosted the Christmas dinner this year. So I belong --- you asked me about what groups I belong to --- I belong to a big group of this area and I am the only African American in the group of twelve women. So, my husband is very well respected by his peers and ---

LS: Do you have very many African American, native born African American friends?

BA: Yes, I have one of my best friends, a native born African American. She is Dr. Romar(?). She is a school psychologist in the North Penn School District.

LS: I have one final question I like to ask people. We're going to have this exhibit and we really want to communicate to the Philadelphia public what the experiences are like of African immigrants who are here, and the whole variety of places they're from, the ways of getting here. Is there anything in particular that you would like to see Americans understand or have communicated to them in the exhibit?

Because we have photographs, we have text, we'll have some material culture --- although probably not a whole lot because a lot of African immigrants have a pretty simple life materially. Some don't, some do.

BA: When you say "material," what do you mean?

LS: Oh ---

BA: What Africans ---

LS: There's a couple of ideas we have. We will probably have clothing that people wear on special occasions, tea sets that they might make or coffee that Ethiopians might use. We may recreate a corner of a braiding salon, that's what a lot of these women do, and all the kinds of images they have. We may try to do some sort of things where we would have a life story of four or five taxi drivers, that you'd have interviews with, and they could say where they're from, what their education backgrounds were, why they are in taxi driving. Because those are the kinds of places where Americans might interact with immigrants. So it's important that somebody knows that so and so who works at a parking garage is the president of the Eritrean Women's Association. It kind of gives a face, a more complexity to them.

BA: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm.

LS: So those are kinds of things, but is there anything that you would like Americans to understand about African immigrants?

BA: [pause] Mmm. I think what I would like Americans to understand about African immigrants is that, first and foremost, we're human beings, like Americans themselves. We have needs similar to theirs. We mean well. We also work hard. If given the opportunity, we can excel. Some of those of us who have been given the opportunity --- some of those African immigrants are taxi drivers and they have a degree, a higher degree, but because they can't have meaningful jobs --- [calls out to Imo, her son] And there is a tendency to look down upon Africans living here, because they do not have the American accent, but then American accent is a different accent. I usually tell them, I say, "You Easterners speak differently, New Yorkers speak differently, Southerners have the Southern drawl. Why then do you discriminate against somebody who has an accent?" Americans have --- there is an American, a variation of American accents. So what seems to be the problem? I try to --- Africans, other non- --- even Europeans have accents, but

because they're white skinned, they are not looked down upon. Their accents is being accepted, unlike the dark skinned, you know, Africans. So I would like them to accept people for who they are, because that's how I relate to people. I do not go by what people say about a group. I like to have my own personal experience with somebody and then use that as a basis for my own judgment, rather than to judge people by the color of their skin and make a blanket assumptions about people in general.

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]