Joan Gandy-Williams

Interview date: December 7, 2000
Location of interview: the DHS building in Center City
Country of origin: Sierra Leone
Ethnic group/language group: Mende
Religion: Roman Catholic
Profession: Social worker for the DHS
Level of education: B.A. in Sociology/R.N./M.S.W.
Location of residence in Philadelphia: Overbrook

At the time of the interview, Ms. Gandy-Williams had been in the States since 1973. She originally arrived in New York, but shortly afterwards moved to Philadelphia to join a brother living there. She worked as a nurse upon her arrival. She gave birth to a son in 1979. When he was 4, she took him back to live in Sierra Leone. He lived there until he was 13; she visited him every two years. She doesn't socialize much with other Sierra Leoneans and has been a U.S. citizen since the late 70s. She started the Convent Girls Association, but is not longer active in it. She participates in some activities for the Tegloma Association, but in general finds associations divisive.

Interviewer: Leigh Swigart (LS)

Interviewee: Joan Gandy-Williams (JG)

[START SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

LS: Could you give me your full name?

JG: Joan, J-o-a-n, Gandy-Williams.

LS: And you are from what country?

JG: I am from Sierra Leone, West Africa.

LS: And what's your native language?

JG: Mende. I'm a Mende.

LS: You're a Mende?

LS: And you grew up in ---

JG: Sierra Leone.

LS: But what city?

JG: Blama, B-l-a-m-a. Kenema District. Small Bo(?) Chiefdom.

LS: Is that ---

JG: Southeast.

LS: In the Southeast?

JG: Small Bo(?) Chiefdom. 'Cause that's how we identify ourselves. Small Bo(?) Chiefdom.

LS: Small Bo(?)?

JG: Yes. Chiefdom.

LS: What other languages do you speak?

JG: I speak Krio.

LS: Did you ever live in Freetown?

JG: Yes, I lived in Freetown. I have three grown brothers there.

LS: Can you tell me a little bit about your schooling in Sierra Leone?

JG: Yes. I went to an all-girls boarding school for my elementary education. That's Saint Joseph's Convent.

LS: In ---

JG: Moyamba.

LS: And is that because you were in a small enough town where they didn't have schools or this was a better school or ---

JG: It's actually, only few people can afford that, because I'm travelling, I'm on boarding school. So it is not open for everybody. It's only for those who can afford it.

LS: Is it Catholic?

JG: It is Catholic. I am Catholic.

LS: The Catholic influence in Sierra Leone is from Ireland?

JG: Ireland, mostly. There are few British priests and nuns in between, but it's predominantly Irish.

LS: There must be a lot of Anglicans in Freetown, or only Krios?

JG: There are, yeah, the Krios, yeah. Church of England, Methodist Church.

LS: So you went to primary school and then what happened after that?

JG: And then I went to an all-girls boarding school, Holy Rosary Convent, in Bo.

LS: And after you graduated?

JG: I went to Marampa(?) mines(?), to the nursing school there.

LS: Did you practice as a nurse in Sierra Leone?

JG: I didn't finish nursing school there. I just did a year there, then I left and went to Liberia. Political strife was beginning at that time.

LS: What year is this?

JG: And that's in the North. '67. That's in the North and I am from the Southeast. So my family was afraid for my safety. So I left, came back home, went to --- came to Liberia. I went to Firestone Nursing School.

LS: Firestone had a nursing school there?

JG: Yeah, they had a big hospital, a big nursing school staffed by Americans ---

LS: In Monrovia or ---

JG: In Harbel.

LS: Where their operation was?

JG: Yes, where the rubber plantation is. Harbel.

LS: How did that work? Did you make contact with that school when you were in Sierra Leone?

JG: I had my cousin's husband younger brother who was a supervisor there. And he told my sister, my older sister that it was a very good school and it would be great for me to give it a try. So I sent in an application --- our director is from Texas at the time, Mrs. Peterson. I sent an application and I was accepted. They called me for an interview. I went for the interview in November. The class didn't start 'til January and she suggested I could stay and work as a nurse's aide for that November and December. I did, and by time class opened, I knew how to do blood pressure, take temperature, and all of that. So it was an advantage for me. [break in tape]

LS: And how long was the nursing program there? How long did you stay?

JG: It's three years. And then you have --- it was a free nursing school, but you have to sign a promissory note to work for two years before you can leave, if you decide to leave.

LS: You mean if you leave early? You have to --- ?

JG: After you graduate, you have to --- it's like to payback. You work for two years.

LS: Some place in Liberia?

JG: No, in the same hospital.

LS: Oh, in the same hospital.

JG: Yes, after you graduate you have to stay and work for them for two years.

LS: That makes sense.

JG: The training was free.

LS: Oh, I see. [pause] And then what happened? How did you end up in the United States?

JG: When I was in high school, I had Peace Corps teachers.

LS: [laughs] Okay.

JG: I had Peace Corps teachers.

LS: In English?

JG: From America.

LS: What subject did they teach?

JG: They taught Geography, they taught English, they taught History. They taught everything. And there was a lady from New Jersey, Miss Joan MacKean and a lady from California, Miss Ann Bodik, and Miss Presiado was from Washington, Patricia Presiado, and two guys, Mr. Bojes and Mr. Frigg. They talked a lot about America and they asked us what we would like to do. I expressed interest in nursing. And they said that there are opportunities here, even to further my training. And then when I came to nursing school, one of our teachers was an American lady, Joan Cry and she was very impressed with what I was doing and my commitment to what I was doing, and she suggested that I should give it a try here after I finish. Even if just to come and see if I can advance my education.

LS: So you finished at Firestone?

JG: I finished at Firestone. I worked for two years and the I left, but before I left I applied for my visa in Liberia, as a Sierra Leonean, through the embassy.

LS: You mean you applied to the American Embassy for a visa?

JG: To the American Embassy in Liberia, and, at the time, the average time it was coming through, really, it was ranging from two to three years.

LS: To get a visa?

JG: To get a visa, but when I applied it only took nine months. They approved my visa. So I had made all this plan to save, you know, for the trip and everything, and then they accepted me and approve it in nine months. I did not have enough money. So I had to leave and come home, so I finally came home.

LS: But at that time, did you say you were coming to study or you could just come to sort of visit and then see or how did you --- it was easier to get a visa then, right?

JG: I was really --- I applied for permanent residency at the time. I applied for permanent residency. And a student visa.

LS: And I don't even think you can do that now, can you? Apply for permanent residency from outside the country?

JG: I don't know. I have left for so long, I don't know.

LS: It seems ---

JG: You can apply. I think they deal with the quota system. The American Embassy grants each country a quota of how many people can come in.

LS: And now I think it's the lottery that ---

JG: So the guys are using the lottery now, so I don't know that.

LS: That's true, that's like to get your Green Card, that's true.

JG: But the thing about it is, the year before, surpluses(?) into the following year, so the wait can be really long.

LS: So you arrived in the United States in 19 ---

JG: --- '73. March 27th. I remember that very vividly.

LS: Was it cold?

JG: Actually, it was midwinter. I came, I had no coat. I had on a cotton ( ) with slippers on my feet. We got down in New York and it was snow all over the place. I thought I was gonna freeze to death. But my brother had been here ahead of me. My brother and my younger sister. The youngest three of us are here.

LS: And how did they come? Had they also applied for permanent residency?

JG: Yes, they came on permanent residency. My younger sister applied right after high school. She came right after high school. My brother had studied in New Zealand, and he came back and, as I told you, political strife was starting in Sierra Leone and the government that was there that sent him to New

Zealand was not in power anymore. So he couldn't get a job and he got very frustrated. He went to Liberia, but there wasn't much there for him to do. So he came here for job opportunities at the time.

LS: And he and your younger sister were where in the United States?

JG: My younger sister was in Washington. My brother was here in Philly.

LS: So they came and met you in New York?

JG: Yes, yes. My brother, my brother met me in New York.

LS: And then he brought you back to Philadelphia?

JG: No. I had come to work at Saint Vincent's in New York, Saint Vincent's Hospital. I communicated with them. I arrived Wednesday. I went for interview Monday. I was supposed to start work the following Monday. I couldn't deal with New York. I was crying every night. So I talked to my brother in one of my conversations. I told him I wanted to go back home, I didn't want to stay. And my brother said, you may want to come down here and see, maybe this is not as hectic as New York. I mean, it's a culture shock when you come from Africa. People move at their own pace. I was doing that in the subway, somebody almost knocked me down. Kind of dragging my feet, taking my time.

LS: What did you react to? Was it just the number of people, the bustle?

JG: It's the crowd. ( ) the crowd, the cold. [pause] Nobody talks to you on the street. [laughs] Nobody is recognizable.

LS: So you kinda reacted to what we were saying African men sometimes do, just that sort of anonymity, yeah. And even though you'd been in Liberia, away from home, you didn't feel that lonely ---

JG: No, Liberia was like really in Sierra Leone. Only I didn't know the people, but quickly I made friends. In fact, most of my adult friends *are* Liberians.

LS: Are there Mende in Liberia, also?

JG: There are Mendes in Liberia. Sierra Leone has the majority and Liberia has the minority. And there's another group that's very closely aligned with the Mendes, the Vai, whom we call Wanjamas(?). They're all on the border by Liberia.

LS: Oh, okay. Are their languages mutually intelligible?

JG: Oh, yeah, yeah. There's a Vai girl here I communicate with. I speak Mende to her. She understands me, and responds, but her accent is slightly different because she is speaking Vai. But I can understand her.

LS: I hadn't realized that. So when you came to Philadelphia, how did you react to Philadelphia?

JG: When I came to Philadelphia, I was still --- I couldn't deal with the cold, still. I had come unprepared, clothing-wise. We came here Monday. Wednesday, I went out to look for a job. I was looking for a nursing job. We had gone to many hospitals and they were telling us, "You don't have any experience, you don't nya-nya-nya." So we kept saying, "Well, we don't have experience. How we gonna get experience if somebody does not hire us?" There was a hospital that is no longer existing. It used to be on 50th and Woodland, Mercy-Douglas(?). We went there, they interviewed us, they give us a pharmacology test ---

LS: When you say "we," who's "we"? You and --- ?

JG: There were other Liberians who were here who were also looking for a job. And there were three Sierra Leonean guys who had come ahead of me, maybe by several months. So we went and we applied. We had interview. They gave us pharmacology test, we made well. So they hired us as graduate nurses. Which gave us --- at the time when we came, the law in Pennsylvania is you practice under the supervision of a registered nurse. And you have two years within which to take your State Board. But you would practice, you perform all the function, but under the supervision of a US licensed nurse. So they hired us ---

LS: So that's Southwest Philly, Woodland and 50th?

JG: That's really West Philly, 50th and Woodland.

LS: But down toward the Freetown Market?

JG: Yes, on Woodland. A little bit higher. Because the Freetown Market is sixty-something. You really know this community well as an anthropologist, I guess.

LS: No, I just know about that store. It seems to be a meeting place for a lot of Sierra Leoneans.

JG: Exactly. The guys go there and exchange political news. [laughs]

LS: It seems that he's got a money-wiring service and all kinds of things.

JG: Uhh-huh, uhh-huh.

LS: He seems like a very nice man. So did you do that?

JG: They hired me. I was in the OB-GYN because that's where I work mostly in Liberia. That was the last ward I worked in. And there's a Liberian lady I know, she's a friend of mine in fact, she was in the Psych Unit because that's her background, she worked in ( ) in Liberia. And two other guys who were placed in the ( ) ward. But the thing about that hospital was, they were really on the verge of closing and they didn't tell us. So we thought that we had permanent, stable jobs. Four months later, they closed. [laughs]

LS: So what happened then?

JG: I left. I had a cousin in Jersey. And I went and applied at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. And the process was the same, they hired me. My cousin lived in Glassboro, New Jersey.

LS: Where's that? In Southern Jersey?

JG: It is not far from --- let me see, it's not far south. You know Mantua is? Have you heard about Mantua?

LS: Mmm-hmm.

JG: It's slightly beyond Mantua, New Jersey. Or Pitman, not far from Pitman, New Jersey. Where the college is --- Rowan College.

LS: Yeah, I know where that is.

JG: That used to be Glassboro.

LS: So you did the same thing? Were you in OB-GYN still?

JG: No, at Our Lady of Lourdes I was in the Pediatric Ward. I was assigned in the Pediatric Ward.

LS: And did you stay there for two years and became an R.N.?

JG: Noooo. [LS laughs] I registered actually at Rutgers. And I wanted to get my degree in Nursing. Rutgers in Camden.

LS: Now what's the difference --- if you already had training in nursing, what was the difference in getting a degree in nursing? You become an R.N.?

JG: You get a B.S.N. The R.N. I had was at the diploma level. So when you do it in college, it's a B.S.N. you get, Bachelor of Science in Nursing.

LS: And that's what you did?

JG: No. After a year --- everything --- the classes I was taking were very repetitious, as I told you. This was hospital was American-owned, American-run. And so, we were using the same text books. The only thing they were lacking was the science part of it, the chemistry, the biology, and all of that. Because it was so repetitious, I didn't want to --- I saw it at the time that as wasting my money to study what I already know. So I changed my major. I changed to Sociology.

LS: Okay. I'm starting to see how it is you ended up in DHS. [Department of Human Service]

JG: Mmm-hmm.

LS: So you got a Bachelor's in Sociology?

JG: I have a Bachelor's in Sociology, minor in Psychology from Rutgers University.

LS: In Camden?

JG: In Camden.

LS: I didn't know, for some reason I thought that one was ( ) ---

JG: No, it's been there. I got my degree in '79.

LS: So you finished in 1979?

JG: Yes. It is more visible now because of the expansion they have made.

LS: So what then? You have these degrees ---

JG: I had my degree. At the time I was still nursing to go to school, because I needed the money to maintain myself and all of that. So after I got my degree, I had a professor, who's now dead, who said to me --- he said I was very analytical, and I have a good ear and maybe I could do well in social work. But also, as I was still nursing, I was working in a nursing home part-time when my son came. I have son, who is twenty-five now.

LS: And so your son had been in Sierra Leone all this time?

JG: I had my son here.

LS: Oh, you had your son here?

JG: I came with no children, I came alone. Naive, single. [LS laughs] Yes.

LS: So you had a son?

JG: Yeah, mmm-hmm.

LS: This is in late '79?

JG: The first month I started college, I got pregnant. I was living with my high-school boyfriend back home, we met here.

LS: So he came over also?

JG: He came to do his Master's at George Washington. He graduated(?) from FBC(?). We had not seen, because after we graduated from high school, I went to Liberia. And then we lost contact.

LS: And then you met up here? Isn't that exciting?

JG: The community is small, so --- and that way we know each other. Maybe not personally, but the family name can recognize.

LS: So what did having a baby do to your work, to your professional life?

JG: Well, to this day, I really don't how I did it, because when I was pregnant, I was going to school full time, I was working full time, and I had a relationship to maintain full time. It just put a lot of tension on the situation. It was a long distance situation --- he's in Washington, I'm in Camden, and, and --- I really was not ready to have a baby and I really can understand now working with these young mothers. And he made a comment --- when I look back at it I can see how naïve I was. He said to me that people who study in DC, they don't have kids. So how do I know that you going to be productive, if I get involved with you? So my way of proving to him, I got pregnant. Soon after I got pregnant, he did not want to deal with me anymore. [laughs]

LS: Mmm. Yeah.

JG: Mmm-hmm. But he wanted me to have an abortion. I wouldn't, because I am a Catholic and the way I was raised and I don't believe in that. Plus, I was afraid with my life. I didn't want to die in the process.

LS: Because it was illegal then. No, was it illegal? No, it was legal by then.

JG: I don't even remember the political nature at that time. It wasn't an option for me. So I continued to go to school full time. I was going to school in the morning, weekends, evenings. It was like I had a push. So I stayed in school and I worked full time and I had my son in August and I went right back to school in September.

LS: So who helped you take care of your son?

JG: By myself. I got me a babysitter which didn't work too well, because some days I'll be ready to drop the kid so I can go to school, she call me and say she can't baby-sit that morning. Then when my son was five months, Rutgers did open a day care for students and staff, and my son was accepted. So that was very convenient. I can drop him off, go to my classes. After class, I got an older lady next to my apartment where I lived in. I pick my son up, drop him off and then rush. At this time I was working in Cherry Hill Hospital, in Cherry Hill.

LS: Were you breast-feeding him?

JG: I did breast-feed for the first six months.

LS: Yeah, that must have been hard.

JG: Mmm-hmm.

LS: So you continued at Cherry Hill Hospital?

JG: I continued at Cherry Hill Hospital when I graduated from Rutgers. With my work with the patients -- I remember when I go in, the patients kind of liked talking to me because I would stand there and listen, you know? So somebody said, "You would make a good social worker. You really have an ear." This kept coming to me. So I decided that I wanted to go into social work. So after I graduated, I applied to Temple. I wanted to have a different feel for another school. Rutgers did have a program, but it was only at night. And I didn't want to do that, with the baby, so I applied to Temple.

LS: Is that a Masters of Social Work?

JG: I have a Masters in Social Work from Temple. When I entered graduate school, I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep a full time job, and taking of the baby, and really meeting the demands of graduate school. So I applied for a nursing job at Norristown Home for the Aging, that's in Norristown, and I was working there Friday, Saturday, Sunday, ten hour shift.

LS: How did you do that with your son?

JG: I have no idea how I did it, but my son turned out very well, you have to meet him.

LS: I hope he appreciates you.

JG: He does, he really does. I'm really very lucky.

LS: So you brought him up as a single mother full time?

JG: I brought him up as a single mother. I took him home when he was four.

LS: To Sierra Leone?

JG: Yes, I left him there with my older brothers and his family.

LS: Until he was what age?

JG: Thirteen. I went back for him when he was thirteen.

LS: And did you visit him every year before that?

JG: I used to go every two years, and I have not been able to go back since I brought him, because that's when the war ( ) started.

LS: And did you take him back just to relieve yourself of that kind of burden or was it also that he would be educated there?

JG: It was more for the cultural education, and I wanted him to get to know the other family members, his cousins, because two of my brothers have a lot of kids. And I wanted him to get to know the family and also to provide time for me for my studies in grad school.

LS: What was it like when he came back? Did he remember? Did he remember the United States or was it like he had never been here before?

JG: Oh, no, I had to take him around. I had him in ( ) Hospital. I drove him to ( ) hospital, I say, "This is where you were born." I drove him to the neighborhood where we live, I showed the apartment. I took him to the babysitter. He didn't remember.

LS: Ooooh, well, he was only four. My children grew up in Senegal, and the little one left when he was about three and half and, except for pictures, he has just little memories. So, after you got your M.S.W., did you go right into social work?

JG: I changed into social work. I was looking for a job. This is the time Reagan came on and you know there was ---

LS: Great timing, huh? [both laugh]

JG: I thought, "Well, I have this nursing degree, this nursing background, and I have this Masters in Social Work, they just gonna pluck me off for a job." [laughs] It didn't work that way. I was getting offer jobs, but I was rejecting them because I thought the pay was not what I should be getting. After six months of that, then the calls stopped. Then I started panicking. I had an advisor from Temple --- she is dead now --- who was very nice to me. She was more or less like a mentor, you know, I could always called on her anytime. And she was very helpful in maintaining my emotional health, Dr. Ganter(?). So I would always tell her, "You know, I still haven't found anything." She said, "Joan, well, you know, times are bad. There people out there you're competing with who have PhDs and all of that." So she got this job lead for Chester Family Services and she said the pay is that not good. It's not even the pay, she said, because considering that you'll be driving from Philly to go there, she said you will be literally working to go to work. She said, "But I'll tell you something." She said, "It's a good job, because everything you need to know about social work, you will learn in that agency, by virtue of its location and population." She said, "So my advice: if experience is what you want to build on a career, my advice would be for you take it, regardless of what the salary was."

LS: Was that good advice?

JG: It was a very good advice. There was no money in that. I used to be on the highway one and half hours just driving, that is if I get out at a certain time. If I don't, we talking an hour forty-five minutes up to two hours, because I would get caught up in traffic. So I went for the interview, to make the long story

short. And after the interview, I asked about the salary. The director said to me, "We only offer you fourteen thousand dollars."

LS: And you thought, "Awwwww!"

JG: And I remembered what Dr. Ganter told me, so I said, "I'll take it." And I took it.

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

JG: The satellite office was in Media, and I was assigned in the Chester office. So I took that job. After two years, I got promoted to supervisory position. The supervisor who was there had retired and the director thought I was the most experienced in the office and the most level-headed, so she gave me the supervisory position.

LS: What kind of social work was it? What kind of things did you deal with?

JG: We were doing all kinds of things. A little bit of everything you can imagine. I don't know how well you know Chester.

LS: I've only been through there for a couple of times.

JG: Okay. Chester is like Camden.

LS: It's really poor and ---

JG: Very poor, most of the people are on welfare, they are unemployed, low education, high out of wedlock, battery, young teenage mothers, generations of people on welfare. Everybody who worked in Chester really came from elsewhere, surrounding suburbs or Philadelphia, commute to Chester, work. If you go to Chester at 6, it's like a ghost town. It's very bubbly during the day because everybody comes in. Even the business people didn't live in Chester. So, that's the kind of population we were dealing with. We worked with William Penn projects, Chester High School. We worked with the food cupboards, there were several churches around that we will go to help give out food, food baskets. We did family counseling, we were getting referrals from the courts, you know.

LS: Was this a private ---

JG: It's a private non-profit. And we worked very closely with Children and Youth, which was a public non-profit agency. So I stayed in Chester for five years. Then the traveling was becoming an issue for me now. Because by the time I get to work I was so tired, I just wanted to get back in my car and come back home.

LS: And you never wanted to move to Chester?

JG: No, I didn't want to move in Chester. All my friends were here, everybody I knew were here, all my contacts were here. I didn't want to go to Chester. It would have been more isolating for me. So I started looking. I applied at Saint Chris, there was an opening there, a social work position in the out-patient department for an out-patient coordinator. I figured with my nursing background, I'd get it. And I came for the interview and I got the job.

LS: And where is this?

JG: Saint Christopher's Hospital. It was on --- It's one of the children's hospital here next to CHOP.

LS: Oh, okay.

JG: Saint Christopher's, Saint Chris.

LS: That must have been an enormous relief.

JG: It was a relief, it was a relief. So I accepted the job at Saint Chris. I was the out-patient coordinator there. While I was there, in my second year with St. Chris, I had gone to a workshop and I sat next to a lady who was on the board of directors for a health center in Germantown. Covenant House.

LS: Oh, yeah, I just was ( ) appointment there.

JG: So we were just talking during the break, and she asked me what I was doing, what my background was. She has a similar background like I am. So I told her that I was a nurse, I practiced nursing for ten years, and now I have just changed professions, I am doing social work, I am at Saint Chris. And she asked me how much they were paying me [laughs] and I told her and she says, "For all that experience and all that work you do?" I say, "Yes." I say, "That's what they pay me. That's the scale." So she told me about a new program that William Penn was funding. These were pilot projects they were installing in different centers, and that this board she is on, that they were looking for somebody to direct this program for them at Covenant House. She thought I had the kind of background they looking for, that they gonna be posting that opening in a month. That I should contact the director and discuss the position

with her. So I did, and they told me that they had not posted it yet, and when they will post it they will let me know. But it would open, competitive, and they will look at many candidates, and then they will decide from that. I said, "Okay." So when the position was posted, they did contact me and I had already put my resume together and I sent it to them. So I went in. Of all those who applied I was the only one with a nursing background and that was an edge for me. So they hired me.

LS: And that was a great --- was that sort of position you were looking for?

JG: Well, at that time I was really just --- I'm trying to get as much experience, I know a job does not end with just the training. It's the experience. People want varied experience because your functions can vary from time to time. So I didn't mind. It was a two-year pilot project and I knew after two years, I will start looking again but I didn't mind taking a risk.

LS: Right.

JG: And I thought that was great. The project was about doing sexually transmitted disease training. And my area was Germantown. And there was one in West Philly, there was one in North Philly and the director would hire a nurse, five lay home visitors, and outreach workers because you have to saturate the neighborhood with the information and everything.

LS: In what year is this now? What year are we up to?

JG: When did I leave? I left --- I went to Chester '82, '83, '84, '85. I left Chester '86. I was at Saint Chris '86, '87, and then I was at Covenant House '87, '88, '89, because I came here '90.

LS: And your son was still in Sierra Leone?

JG: I went back for my son in '89. I brought him back in '89.

LS: ( ) and that changed ( )? [loudspeaker in background]

LS: ( ) [loudspeaker in background]

JG: Well, they raised him very well. I never had problems with him since I brought him back.

LS: What was it like to not be with your son? I mean, did he still have that kind of connection to you as his mother?

JG: We have more connections that people who have their kids with them because I jumped on it immediately after I brought him. We talk, take him to school. After school, we discuss his program. I was very involved when I brought him back. Because I was concerned about the bonding. He was afraid of me for awhile when I brought him back. Only because of the relationship back home between children and adults.

LS: It is very hierarchical.

JG: Exactly. So if we sit in, he doesn't want to come near me, he wants to go sit over there, you know. So then I'll go sit by him. He was very shy, but I got him out of that.

LS: I have two sons. Sons are wonderful.

JG: Okay. How old are they?

LS: They're only six and eight.

JG: And I enrolled him in high school. Because I didn't think he would have dealt with the public school. He was very naïve when I brought him.

LS: Oh well, yes, of course, compared to American kids.

JG: So I enrolled him in Catholic school. So I had to drive him there. That's how my hours are set here. I don't come in until 9, but I don't leave until 6.

LS: Right, so that you could --- and then he was old enough to be by himself after school.

JG: Exactly, exactly.

LS: So after Covenant House, is that when you came to DHS?

JG: Right when I entered the second term --- it was only a two-year term project --- so when we entered the second year --- it was to end at June --- I started looking for another job. Because I didn't want to be

unemployed. So I had a friend here who died recently. A West Indian girl I was friendly with. She's been after me for years to come here, and each time I was so scared of coming to this place, because of the perception.

LS: What was the perception?

JG: Very stressful, the kind of cases you deal with, high case load, no support ---

LS: Paper work.

JG: Paper work. You really out there on your own. It's like a war zone. I said I am not coming over there. But she said, "I'm dealing with it. Why you think you can't? I think you can do even do better than I do with all your nursing experience and all of that." She said, "You will be an asset to the department." She said, "Give it a try." So when they posted for the exam, city-wide ---

LS: Oh, you have to do a civil service exam?

JG: Exactly, civil service, you gotta take the exam. She said to me, "I got the application for you, you gotta fill it in." And everyday she called me, "Have you submitted the application?" I say, "I'll get to it." Like tomorrow is the deadline, she came to my house tonight and sat down. We did the application and she dropped it off. And she was also taking that exam, the supervisory position. So we went in to the exam and we both passed. So we both came supervisors together. She was of great support for me when I came here. She died recently. [speaks in a low tone] I really missed her.

LS: So you came here in 1990?

JG: 1990, April. April 9th, 1990 I came here.

LS: What's your title here?

JG: I'm a supervisor. Intake.

LS: Supervisor intake?

JG: Social Work Supervisor, Intake Services.

LS: And what does that mean exactly?

JG: Well, we do all the investigations that come to the city and we don't turn down any application for service. If they call, we take it. I supervise five social workers. Some have Masters, some don't, some have B.S.W. We get --- each social worker get eight to ten cases per month. Assign new cases.

LS: And then they all have all the other accumulated ones?

JG: Well, we hope they don't accumulate it. But that's when we come in. So I do those assignments. I conference the cases with them. I give them directives as to what needs to be done. If it is a CPS we have to ---

LS: What's CPS?

JG: Child Protective Services. The state assign them number because we have a centralized in Harrisburg. Within thirty days, you have to make a determination of whether the report is indicated, or it's unfounded and you file it directly with Harrisburg. If it's a GPS, you have up to sixty days to make a determination.

LS: What's a GPS?

JG: General Protective Services. So we --- I give directives, I'm supposed to meet with them every ten days to review the cases and if services are needed when they are indicated or unfounded, because you can go in there for a specific report, the report itself might not be indicated but then you might see other issues: the house may not be adequate, it may not be appropriate for legal habitation.

LS: So social workers actually go out in the field and they go to homes. And do most of cases get referred? Do individuals call up, or are they referred by the police, or by schools, or everything?

JG: You just named them. We get a lot --- many of our calls from the schools and hospitals.

LS: They notice there's something funny going on?

JG: They notice --- well, sometimes they see it.

LS: That kids might be abused?

JG: If they beat them, the bruises might be there. Or you might see a kid that's unable to sit down or hesitates to sit down because their butt is so sore. Or swollen jaw or reddened eye or a kid that may be sleeping. He may not have a place to sleep at home. So he comes to and sleep. Or a kid who may be very aggressive with peers or teachers. So they call it in and we assign it and our CPSs have twenty four-hour response time. They have to be out there. Our GPSs have up to five days to response time. And as I said ---

LS: And GPS just means it's not a child? It could be ---

JG: It is a child, but it is more neglect issues, home filthy or not clean, inappropriate clothing, they are wearing summer stuff in the winter, no heat in the house, no water, no electricity.

LS: But not abuse.

JG: Well ---

LS: That's a different kind of abuse.

JG: Exactly, exactly. If we feel there's service needs, we'll open the case and we'll send it up to our family services center. If we feel there is no need for services, then we just close it. But most of our cases are open.

LS: From your perspective as an African, what's it like to see children in these kinds of situations? I know, obviously, there's rampant poverty in Africa. But what I used to see in Senegal is that kids were definitely disciplined in a corporal way, but people intervened before it goes too far. Because you're never that private. Is that sort of what your perception is, that here things happen that couldn't happen in Africa?

JG: Well, the neglect issue really makes me upset, even though because comparing what people have over there to what people have, even away from individually what you yourself accumulate, all these programs, the agencies, is just bombarding you all the time on TV. The fact that people don't take

advantage of those situations until it gets too worse. Because even --- the situation we have --- if you're not able to keep your child, you can bring the kid here. The kid can be placed temporarily. You can come here and say, "I'm at the end of my rope. I feel like I'm going to hurt this kid. I'll appreciate if you put this kid, take this kid for week, two, or month. I need help." We'll take the kid.

LS: But you don't --- Why do you think people hesitate to do that?

JG: It's many things. Drugs, people are repeating what was done to them. We hear people say "Well, you not going to tell me how to raise my child. When my mother raised me, she beat me." And our response to that is times has changed and this is the law. You can't beat the kid until you hurt the kid. You know? And they say, "Well, what do you mean I can't? I was just disciplining." And I'll say there's a thin line between disciplining and abusing. When you start leaving marks, you're beyond discipline.

LS: What is the law? You're not even --- you're not supposed to ---

JG: Exactly.

LS: Can you spank children or is it against the law?

JG: I think some states you can spank. I think some of those Southern states, you can spank. But people are leaving marks on the children and they talking about discipline. That's not discipline.

LS: You know, my husband's from Sweden and there you can't even spank a child on the bottom.

JG: Oh, Sweden, they are the top of the --- [both laugh] The things that those people do are --- they should be a model for the world.

LS: They have great social services.

JG: They should be a model for the world, Sweden. I really think.

LS: Yes, it's quite impressive.

JG: And what I see in Africa, I think it's more --- and I could be biased, being an African, and, as an anthropologist, interject and straighten me out. [LS laughs] I see the situation in Africa more as

ignorance. I think it's more related to ignorance. You have a lot of women there. Even with this malnutrition situation. In their mind, they feeding the kids, but they feeding the kids with the wrong type of food or the same type of food all the time.

LS: But they're trying to feed them.

JG: But they're trying. It's not like they withholding food from them. We having situations where people are starving their kids.

LS: Because they want it themselves or to punish them or ---

JG: To punish them. They're using this as punishment. There was a lady most recently, maybe two years old ago. Put her two-year old in the basement. And the kid starved to death. [pause]

LS: A lot of this must be substance abuse.

JG: It's substance abuse.

LS: Because that's what you don't see, at least among women, in Africa. I know there's a lot of drunkenness among men but ---

JG: Exactly, exactly. And that's another thing. It's a big difference. And it may have changed now with the war situation, but African women will go hungry before their kid get hungry. They will give the last piece of bread to their child and they drink water and go to bed.

LS: Yes, but do they feed their child before their husband? That's the question. [both laugh]

JG: They feed their husband and then they starve them for the kid. That's true, that's true. You right, you really got it together, but the reason I brought that up --- we have the situations where kids are sexually abused and you go to intervene, and the perp and the victim are not supposed to be together. And you give the choice as to who leaves. And they tell you to take the kid.

LS: Hmm-mmm.

JG: I'm not criticizing though, but that's, that's --- I just, I just found that weird, because to me --- that's just my African mentality. Your children are forever your children. Your husband or your wife can leave you anytime and go marry somebody else. You know? Their choice is there. The children have no choice.

LS: No, they don't have any choice. What is the burn out level like in this job? Do social workers turnover ( )?

JG: People who have nothing but this job, they burn out. You have to have something else.

LS: Your family or ---

JG: Away from your family, you have to have a network of friends. I'm talking about good friends, I'm not talking about people you sit down and talk negative stuff about all day, because they just kill you more. So you have to have that. You have to have interest of things you do, and then you come to work. People who do that and do that appropriately, they not burn out. They very organized. I don't feel burn out here.

LS: So your friend was right.

JG: My friend was right, my friend was right. The first year was difficult because you had too many laws at the state level, federal level, city level, too many forms to fill out, too many papers. I been here almost eleven years. I've tied it down and learnt --- the job is very repetitious with minor changes over time as things come by. But the thing not to do is to procrastinate. If you procrastinate, it will build up. So I try, if the memos coming, I put things where I can reach it when I need them. Give it a glance, and I'm always reviewing my work plan, to make it simple for me. The objective is to arrive at the same goal. So but anything that can help me, I institute in my own work plan.

LS: And you feel like DHS --- that, overall, they have a big impact on the people who need the services?

JG: I really do think so. Because we see so much hurt, so much destruction. Sometimes we get caught up in that. But there are a lot of people that we help and so it's very satisfying when you go to the mall or at

the concourse, people you don't recognize and they see you --- I remember when I left Chester, I ran into a lady downtown that I had helped in Chester. I could not remember that lady and she walked up to me, she said, "Hi, Miss Williams." I'm saying to myself, "Who is she? I cannot remember her." "So you remember me?" Then she called her son's name, then I remembered. She said, "I'm his mom." And she hugged me. That is satisfying. And sometimes, in the beginning, they curse you out because this crisis for them. It's a hard time at that situation, you go in, they don't listen, they just curse you out. They take time away. They think about it. It falls into a place, they call you back, they apologize, and they thank you. So, in that respect, I really never take personally what they say to me. And everyday I get cursed, but I don't take it personally. I just know they are angry and upset because of what is happening.

LS: Do you have an idea, if you had stayed in Sierra Leone, what you would have done? Or is it just hard to ---

JG: I don't think I would have achieved what I have achieved, even though I come from a really progressive family. My brothers are all college-educated. Some of them educated in Europe. Only this one brother came here with us. So I come from a family that is educated but because of the all-powerful man, I don't think I would --- I probably would have been a housewife with all the degrees.

LS: Mmm-hmm. So you would never have had a position of power. You wouldn't have been in the ministry of --- I don't know what.

JG: I probably would have gone and get a job with the social services department, but I am not sure if would have been long-lived. The way I have been ---

LS: Or a political appointment, and then you're out or something.

JG: Exactly, exactly, you know, so.

LS: That's interesting.

JG: Mmm-hmm.

LS: What are the best things about living in the US?

JG: The thing I like about this country is that there is room for everybody, really. You really have to find your own space. It's true there is discrimination and I have had my own piece of it, on both sides. It's not just whites discriminating against me. I get that from blacks, too, you know? But then I have met many decent, good, white people who have helped me along the way. I would not be where I am if it were not for some of those people, and I have met a lot of other decent black people who have helped me along the way. So, having said that, I try not to see the US in a black and white situation. But I'm very aware that it's there. It's there. And when I'm faced with it, I can recognize it. And my response to it always is, "That's your problem and it's your ignorance and you can go on." And I go on with my --- I try not to take that as a burden for myself. I don't do it. So I like the fact that there's room for everybody. I like the fact that if you really work hard --- I really believe in that. That if you really work hard, that you can achieve. Because it's been proven to me. I've been able to get a job. I've never been on unemployment in this country, I've always worked. I told you I came Monday up here and I went out to work --- to look for a job Wednesday and I got a job and I started working. So --- and that's always the approach I have taken ( ) I start looking. And I've been very fortunate to come across people who have been very helpful to me. The late Dr. Ganter, she was very good, she was my advisor in college, very helpful. I think she went beyond the duty of her call, you know? And I thought she was doing it because I was a foreign student. But when she died and we went to her memorial and I heard all these other American students talking about her generosity, then I realized that's just how this lady was, you know.

LS: That's wonderful.

JG: Exactly. What else do I like about the country? I don't like the snow. I don't like the winter. It's very stressful for me during the winter. But I'm much better now. In years past, this would have been a sick day for me. I would be scared to get out in this cold. But it doesn't bother me anymore.

LS: Do you live in Philadelphia?

JG: I live in Philly, in Wynnefield Heights.

LS: Where is that?

JG: It's right off City Line, by way of Monument.

LS: Oh, that's right, you were saying that. And so do you drive here or you take public transport?

JG: No, I commute. The bus is half a block from my house. I just walk over there and I go to 17th Street or 15th to get the bus back home.

LS: So you don't have to be outside that much?

JG: No.

LS: But I know it is hard, though, in winter. What ---

JG: What I really admire about the American way of life is that --- it's this attitude about it's never too late. You can see old people -- that is objective it, how you define it --- but people can go back to school at any station in life. And if you have something to say that makes sense, people can listen to you. It doesn't have to be younger people, it can be even people your father's age, or mother's age. People listen, people want to get knowledge, it doesn't matter where it come from. I like that. I like that very much.

LS: That's something that I always tell people, that there's no given time you have to go to college, ( ) ---

JG: No, you can go anytime.

LS: What are the things that you miss most about Sierra Leone?

JG: I miss the relaxed atmosphere. It's changed now because of all what's going on. But when I was there growing up, you get up in the morning, you open your friend door, ajar(?). It doesn't get locked until everybody is ready to go into bed. Even at night when you sitting out --- you are familiar with the word "veranda" which is "porch" here, you sit in the veranda ---

[**END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]**

[**START OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]**

LS: So you sit on the veranda ---

JG: Uh-huh, you sit on the veranda, and you see the neighbors, they come along. You walking on the street, you can stand there for a good five, ten minutes talking to somebody. The open market, going to the market, you know. The camaraderie with women, you know. I like that. I miss my family.

LS: You have a lot of family here?

JG: I only have my brother and my sister. My sister is in South Carolina, my younger sister, that's the youngest, she is next to me. And my brother, the one I'm next to, he is here.

LS: Your whole family is in Sierra Leone. How have they survived this whole thing?

JG: Well, I did this last --- uhh, this last crisis, I lost a niece. She was killed. And two of my brothers got their houses burned.

LS: Are they still in the rural areas?

JG: No, they are in Freetown.

LS: They are in Freetown.

JG: These two whose houses got burned, they are in Freetown. And my third brother, they looted his house. But --- uhh ---

LS: And your parents have passed away?

JG: My parents passed away before I came.

LS: Oh, okay, a long time ago.

LS: So you are not actively trying to get any of your family members out of there like some people are?

JG: Well, I'm trying to do for my nieces and nephews. Because my generation, we are all grown. My youngest sister, she's married, she has kids of her own. My nieces and nephews, I would like to help. I'm trying to work on that.

LS: You're trying to sponsor them?

JG: Mmm-hmm.

LS: But they're all in Freetown?

JG: Well, I have three brothers in Freetown, married, with their own families. I have a sister; she and her husband work for the UN in Burkina Faso. Then I have my older sister who came to visit me; she is back in the province in Blama. My aunts and uncles, they are --- Blama is our hometown --- they are all there.

LS: And Blama is not one of the zones that's had a lot of problems? That's mostly in the north, with the rebels ---

JG: Well, we have been very lucky, in the sense that when the political destructions started, the town organized itself and the men actually go out at night to safeguard the place. In the beginning, the rebels were coming there. They didn't burn any house there, they looted, they take things, because people run away and left their houses. So they go in there and take what they want. But since they got back this last time, they didn't do any kind of destruction there, really.

LS: So life is continuing --- I know it must be hard to get supplies and food stuffs and things like that.

JG: It's even just being scared all the time. That is very stressful for them.

LS: Oh, I'm sure. I can't imagine. I was in Sierra Leone in '97, right before the things --- I think March of '97, before things fell apart, so ---

JG: Where were you? Freetown?

LS: I was in Freetown. We went out a little bit, but you couldn't really get that far out of town. We went down the coast. It was for my work. We went down the coast a little bit, and I can't remember what it's called, the little town. People said it used be a beautiful part with beaches, and now it was not in very good shape. But I loved Freetown, I love the feeling there. People seemed much less aggressive than in places like Senegal.

JG: Everything we see now --- believe you me, I was in shock for months and I am still in shock when I see those pictures. If anybody told me ten years ago that this kinds of violence, this kind of atrocities would be occurring in Freetown, I would have, I would have ---

LS: This is what I always hear. People say they cannot believe it because it is just so uncharacteristic.

JG: They laugh at us on the West because they say we are like dogs, we bark, we are like dogs that bark but don't bite. You see, Sierra Leoneans can talk a lot but --- it's all bluff. [laughs] This was shocking to us, it was really, really shocking.

LS: What's your social life here? Do you associate with a lot of Sierra Leoneans?

JG: I don't do with a lot of them, because again, it's the African situation. It's the age difference. The early ones that I came with --- and there is a group of people that I associate with because they are my age group. They are my friends. I have grown up together with them, we're getting old. Not with the new influx of people coming in. I do get in contact with them, maybe around funerals, marriages, christening, and that stuff. My life is pretty --- very quiet. I come to work --- the kind of work I do, I am no good to anybody during the week. And in the weekend, Saturday, I am running all over the place to get things together for myself and then Sunday, I crash to get ready for the next week. My life is very quiet, but it's always been this way.

LS: Is there somewhat of a class difference between people who left Sierra Leone in the '70s and people who are coming now? That the people who came before were from an educated class, they had more money, and now it's people who are ---

JG: And they came independently.

LS: And they came independently. Is it a little bit of that?

JG: There's a big difference, and there's a little bit of that. Because the people who are coming, as you pointed out earlier, they left and run and came. A lot of them didn't come with tools. So there's a gap, there is a big difference there. Some of them are not prepared.

LS: Are there particular places that you know of in Philadelphia where Sierra Leoneans congregate? I mean, I know they do at the Freetown Market. [laughs] But besides that?

JG: Mmm, not really. Unless we have a dance, and there are several fundraising dances that occur during the year. There are organizations ---

LS: Who organizes those? Like the North ---

JG: Convent Girls. Yeah, North American Mandingos ---

LS: --- American Mandingo Association. And the Convent Girls --- oh, are you part of the Convent Girls Association?

JG: I started the Convent Girls. But I'm not in it anymore.

LS: Oh, okay. You know, there's this new organization, that's supposed to be pan-ethnic, pan-whatever.

JG: You were telling me about that.

LS The Sierra Leoneans for Peace and Development. Because, other than that, I see they are very much --- there's the Tegloma Association, there's North American Mandingos ---

JG: Tegloma is, like, all Mendes and you know, there's this sectarian ---

LS: Are they all old guys?

JG: It's a lot of guys who are in their fifties now, and some of them almost sixties, that kind of stuff.

LS: Do you have any idea how many Sierra Leoneans there are in the Delaware Valley?

JG: No, I have no idea. That you may want to look at in City Hall.

LS: Well, the thing is you can't get the undocumented people.

JG: That's true.

LS: So I always ask people to see if I get enough estimates if can try to do a --- Because it's very hard to do, because a lot of people come on visas and they run out and then, you know --- Do most people maintain close contact with Sierra Leone? People who are here, Sierra Leoneans?

JG: I think so. I talk to my family every weekend. On the phone, I call my brothers, I talk to them. I am very much interested in what's going on there.

LS: Is there any email? Is email functioning?

JG: The email is functioning, faxes are functioning. You know.

LS: Do you think most Sierra Leoneans send money back?

JG: Oh yes, oh yes. That's an African burden.

LS: Do you think everyone does?

JG: There may be few who don't. They may not even want to be bothered with that. But a large number of us do.

LS: You do help your family?

JG: I do, I do. I do when I can.

LS: Do you have any sense of how Sierra Leoneans view themselves in relation to American society? Do they think they fit in? Do they think that they're just here for a short time? I mean, how do people ---

JG: A little bit of all of that.

LS: Mmm-hmm.

JG: People who --- Like I said earlier, they try to make the best of the situation they're in. And come to realistic terms based on what's going on. They jump in and do what they can and what they have to do. Then there are other people who --- they gonna sit and wait and they gonna go back as soon as things settle down. So they really are not really committed to doing anything permanent.

LS: You know, psychologically, that must really be hard to not make a choice. And to not know the future ---

JG: I didn't make the choice until the last seven years.

LS: Are you a citizen now?

JG: I've been a citizen five years after I arrived, but ---

LS: Oh, would you have to be a citizen to work here?

JG: No.

LS: Or you wouldn't have to ---

JG: No, you just have to be a resident of the city and a permanent resident, of course. You have to be a permanent resident to work. You have to be legitimate in the city.

LS: Right. [pause] So you started the Convent Girls Association?

JG: I did. I am one of the original founders.

LS: And you are not --- no longer ---

JG: No.

LS: I am trying to think the name of the woman who is ---

JG: Mrs. Lebo? Mrs. Jengo?

LS: Mrs. Jengo, Angela Jengo, yeah.

JG: Angela Jengo, yes. They are very good friends of ( ) and her husband.

LS: Did you just decide you didn't want to do that anymore?

JG: Well, we had decided some of the things we were going to do. We were primarily a fund-raising organization, and the original decision was to make money available to help the kids. And it then went off that into further stuffs that I really didn't think that I wanted to spend my time on.

LS: I invited Mrs. Jengo to this event, but she didn't come. We invited the heads of all associations. So you're a not a member of one of the other Sierra Leone associations?

JG: No, but I participate whenever there is something. If they are fundraising, I will contribute. Tegloma, the reason I'm not in it is, umm, we've left home and one of the problems in Africa is really this tribalism,

and to come here, it's very few of us to begin to divide ourselves again into Mendes, and Mandingos, and Fulas, and Lokas(?). I find it very divisive. So, that's my reason for not ---

LS: I have to say that of all these countries that I see who have associations, the Liberians are extremely fragmented, and the Sierra Leoneans come in second.

JG: We ---

LS: Of course, you have civil wars that are also going on, that are based on these things, so it's not surprising, but I think someone like Voffee is really trying to get us past that and he's meeting a lot of resistance.

JG: He is, he is, he is.

LS: And I really admire what he's trying to do.

JG: He is working very hard. The way I deal with that is, I mean --- and one of the things that's good, having said all of that, is we really do come together in crisis. If somebody dies, we all there. If somebody is getting married, we are all there. If somebody has a baby and is being christened, we are all there. That's ( ).

LS: So that's the good part?

JG: That is the good part, that is the good part. Even if you didn't call people individually --- say if I know, I will call Mrs. Jengo and say, "Oh, did you hear? John is sick. He is at Hahnemann." Ms. Jengo might call Mr. Sheriff. "Oh, Martin did you hear? John is sick, he is at Hahnemann." And then we will all go.

LS: I know Martin Sheriff. Mr. Sheriff is a wonderful man.

JG: He went to school with some of my older brothers.

LS: In the US?

JG: In Sierra Leone.

LS: In Sierra Leone. And I know that all of his children have arrived recently. He's actually, he's the one who is coming over to Bartram High School.

JG: Okay, okay.

LS: I really admire him. Do you go to a particular church?

JG: I am a member of Saint Barbara Catholic Church on Lebanon and 54th. That's the parish I go to.

LS: It is interesting, you know, there's a Sierra Leonean Church here. The Mount Zion United African Church. Do you know about that church?

JG: The one in ---

LS: The one on Chester. It is on Chester and 52nd, I think.

JG: I don't know about that.

LS: It's kind of a --- I don't know what you'd call it --- Pentecostal or something like that. But there are a lot of people who are Catholics and there are people from all kinds of denominations and they get together because it's Sierra Leonean. But the pastor is really wonderful man and they have a Sierra Leone day and they have music ---

JG: Do you know his name?

LS: His name is Joseph Abu. I can give you ---

JG: Oh, I know, Reverend Abu. Are you sure that's not on Woodland? I think they are on Woodland.

LS: Yes, it is on Woodland. You're right.

JG: They are on Woodland.

LS: No, no, no, it's Chester. It's Chest, it's 52nd and Chester. Do you have the directory?

JG: My cousin goes to that church, Margaret Khoumba.(?)

LS: I meant to bring you the directory. Do you have a copy of the directory?

JG: Noooo.

LS: I'm going to send you one today. I meant to bring you one and I just forgot. But I can see that a lot of the newcomers, they're people --- you know, the young adults who come and they're just sort of in shock, they go there and it is a place where they can kind of breathe.

JG: Exactly.

LS: And he is a wonderful man. I really ---

JG: I don't know him personally, but my cousin joined the church recently.

LS: Does she like it?

JG: She likes me, she calls me, we talk. She told me that the reverend is Reverend Abu.

LS: Are there any other Africans at Saint Barbara Church?

JG: Anthony, Anthony Parker(?). He is actually Baka(?). Anthony is there. Idris Ishmael is there.

LS: And what about Africans from other places?

JG: There are Nigerians there, but I don't know their names.

LS: Apparently, there's an African Mass about once a month that the Archdiocese has. Have you ever been there?

JG: Yes, they do. Yeah.

LS: What's African about it?

JG: Well, they sing the songs, they dress the altar with dashikis and whatnot, they encourage us to wear our native costume to go.

LS: Does it attract you at all? Is it nice or does it not really make any difference to you?

JG: I think they are making an effort to include us. That's trying for us to feel like we're part of the system. Which is good, it's an effort on their part.

LS: I talked to Father Betz about that and he said, realistically you can't vary the Mass very much, [laughs] and they still do it in English.

JG: But they've changed it in Africa, though. The last time I was at home, I was --- I didn't even fit in because they have interpreted most of the songs into Mende, they were singing it in my own tongue, they beat drums and whatnot, it is very festive.

LS: Father Betz doesn't have drums? [JG laughs] No drums? I told the way he should wear a kente cloth collar.

JG: Where is this?

LS: Father Betz is the one who does the African Mass ---

JG: At the Basilica?

LS: Yes. His name is Tom Betz. I told him he should change his collar to an African --- I was teasing him but ---

JG: The priest in my parish --- that's a predominantly black parish, except around holy days, you will see some of the suburbanites come in, but predominantly black --- and the norms there --- let me tell you a funny story. My high school principal, I run into her in that church after twenty years. She had always gone to the eight o'clock Mass. She decided to go to the ten o'clock Mass this day, and I go to the ten o'clock Mass. And I come out, I am looking at the profile, and I wasn't sure. I said, "Sister Marion." It was her. She just retired, she went back to Ireland in May.

LS: Oh, so she's Irish?

JG: She's Irish, yeah. She was my high school principal.

LS: Amazing. It's funny, there's a Swahili church in the suburbs, and I was sitting next to a Kenyan woman I know. There was a wedding and she said, "There's the headmistress from my school in Kenya." And she said, "I never liked her." [both laugh] She just was screaming(?) back like she was still thirteen years old, like the woman was going to punish her. So it's kind of extraordinary.

JG: I liked this one, because she was very encouraging to us. And then she went for awhile in Dallas before she went home.

LS: When you first got here, did you find that you had any problems with people understanding your English or anything like that?

JG: Yes, there are still people who think my accent is in the way, but ---

LS: Really?

JG: Well, you have to listen to those people's speeches, too, and then you can understand why they are not understanding me, so I would not take all the blame for it. But most people understand me and I get that a lot from my fellow people.

LS: That people say they can't understand them?

JG: Mmm-hmm.

LS: Interesting. What kind of food do you eat?

JG: I eat all kinds of food, but I try to stay with what I'm familiar with. I cook a lot of African foods.

LS: And where do you buy the ingredients?

JG: I go to African Market, I go to the Korean Market on Walnut, they carry everything there.

LS: I keep hearing that Koreans have everything you need for African food.

JG: They eat very much like us.

LS: Like those little fish?

JG: They eat very much like us. I think it's the preparation that's different.

LS: So even when you were here in the '70s, could you get what you could?

JG: You could, but I didn't know at the time when I came, so I was ( ) Kentucky Fried Chicken.

LS: Did you learn as a nurse that that was probably not a good idea?

JG: Aaah, uhh-huh. And then as you reach out to people, you share network, and say, "Where can I find cassava?" "Oh, you go to such and such."

LS: Yeah, it's so funny to walk into the Freetown Market and our photographer Vera said, "You know, I saw Vimto!" [both laugh] And I said, "I have to drink some Vimto." Vera said, "I always hated it." I said, "Well, I just have to."

JG: Looks like blood!

LS: What kind of music do you listen to?

JG: I like all kinds of music. I am not particularly a fan of --- what do you call it? The new one ---

LS: Rap?

JG: Rap. But I am beginning to like it because my son loves it, he doesn't buy the ones that curse and degrade women. But he buys them for the beat and I listen to them because he's playing them all the time. So I'm beginning to have some liking for it. On Saturdays, when I've put everything in place, get my bath, I jump in there, I put African music on. It's part of my way of ---

LS: What do you like to listen to?

JG: I listen to all kinds of artists. I use it sometimes in the morning for my exercise.

LS: To get motivated?

JG: Exactly.

LS: You know how I exercise? I have a miniature trampoline and I put on African music and I bounce. And it's very easy on your joints.

JG: Exactly. That's what I do. I put it on and do all the dances.

LS: Your son still lives with you?

JG: My son still lives with me. He just finished --- he's into computers. He just got a five month position with CBS and he's traveling a lot. Monday, he was in Harrisburg. Tuesday, he was in Allentown. Yesterday, he went Cape May, PA. I don't even know that place.

LS: Cape May, New Jersey?

JG: No, no, no. There's one --- maybe it's not Cape May. Camp May or Camp Hill in PA. Today, he's in Bollington.

LS: Does he like that or is he getting kind of tired?

JG: He doesn't like it, but he is trying, like I did, he is trying to get experience.

LS: So you don't have the American attitude that once your kid's finished high school that they should move out?

JG: No, they have to be ready. You can't just throw them out there. And you know from being in Africa that we really never leave home.

LS: I know.

JG: We really never leave home.

LS: Well, I know that a lot of mothers never want their children to leave. They just take on their in-laws. [both laugh]

JG: In my case, it's not really me. Even though I would never ask him to leave. And I feel that when he's ready, he will make his move.

LS: But that's nice for you, the parent. Did he go to school around here?

JG: Yeah, he went to school here. Again, I put him in Catholic school. Saint Ignatius. He finished elementary there when I brought him. I put him in West Catholic, that's where he finished his high school. Then he went to Penn State.

LS: Did he like that? Or was it a little bit too isolating?

JG: Well, he had to commute. He didn't travel away. He went over there the last two years. But the first two years he went to Delaware County.

LS: People say Delaware County is a nice junior college.

LS: What about your American friends? Do you socialize with a lot of Americans?

JG: I have across the board. I've met them through work. I have met them while I was in school. I have met them just on the streets. You know?

LS: Both black and white --- you don't feel like you connect with one group more than another?

JG: No. I try to accept people for what they are. That's the way I was raised. If the people who respond to me, I respond to them. That's how I am. If you black, and you hostile and resentful, I don't bother with you. If you white, you hostile, you resentful, I don't bother with you. If you white, you friendly, you inviting, you black, you friendly, you inviting, then I reach out to you. I treat people the way they get on to me.

LS: What is your son's identity like? When someone asks him what he is --- ? Does he speak English with an American accent? Or does he have some ---

JG: He speaks English --- he's lost his African accent. He speaks English with an American accent. But I've raised him as an African. I've always told him he is an African. That he should be proud of his heritage.

LS: Well, he had the advantage of actually having a big formative part of his childhood there. But if someone asked him what he was --- what are you, what's your name --- what does he say?

JG: Well, his name is African, too. He says he's African more than American.

LS: He says he's African?

JG: Mmm-hmm.

LS: So he has kind of a dual kind of identity.

JG: Mmm-hmm.

LS: Does he speak Mende?

JG: No, unfortunately, because when I took him I left him in Freetown. But he speaks Krio very fluently.

LS: So he wasn't speaking --- Is your brother married to a Krio woman?

JG: Exactly. But he understands Mende. If I give him instructions in Mende, he carries out the instructions, but he doesn't speak it fluently.

LS: What do you speak with him?

JG: Krio, we speak Krio in the house.

LS: I like Krio.

JG: Broken English, that's what it is.

LS: Oh, no. You know, I'm a linguist and you know it really has a system. It has a whole grammatical system.

JG: You're right.

LS: It does, it's just that it sounds --- but I hear our photographer, Vera, she was at Joseph Abu's church once and we were describing why we were there, because people could see that we'd never been there before, and then she greeted everybody and she said, "If I don't have some pep-pah(?) soon ---

JG: "Pep-pah!(?) [laugh]

LS: And then they invited us home, and --- she's just, umm --- you know, it's just kind of funny. I always tease her, I say, "Oh, I can speak it. I de-go de-come-de(?)." You know --- [laughs]

JG: Yeah, "ah de come, ah de go(?)" "kushay(?)"

LS: "Kushay(?)" But "kushay"'s from Yoruba, right? Someone told me.

JG: Well, there's a lot of Yoruba mixed in Krio.

LS: And Joseph Abu does preach some of the time in Krio. He goes in and out of Krio. So you feel your son has some traditional values.

JG: Mmm-hmm.

LS: What aspect of your culture or of your life as an African immigrant would most like to see transmitted to through exhibit we're going to have? If it's going to have American children coming in, and just mainstream Americans, what would you like them to know most about people from Sierra Leone, or people from Africa more generally, that we could communicate through an exhibit? Either through photographs or ---

JG: We are decent people, until recently, the war. We've been peaceful, very law-abiding, friendly, respectful.

LS: I think we will probably have some sort of section on refugees. And that relates to something that other Sierra Leoneans have said, that this is such as an aberration.

JG: It is an aberration.

LS: That they want people to understand that.

JG: They should see as for what we've always been. This is really an aberration, what you see there.

LS: Well, as you know, when Americans hear about Africa in the media, it's always a crisis. There's never anything positive.

JG: And whatever most people see on TV, that's it.

LS: And they believe it.

JG: Exactly.

LS: They don't question it.

JG: Exactly.

LS: Is there anything that you've purposively abandoned as a Sierra Leonean or an African in coming here? I know you said that you have liked that there is not the same kind of patriarchy. But, so you kind of appreciate --- I notice that you haven't run out and gotten married. [both laugh]

JG: I don't think I'm going to get married.

LS: I've never met a Sierra Leonean woman who had obviously made a choice not to get married. You seem to be happier independent. That's kind of interesting.

JG: It is. Maybe that's one of it. Because I don't think that I would fit in too well if I were at home. Men don't see --- They don't look at you favorably if you're just out there, like, "What are you trying to prove?"

LS: I'm sure in some ways it's easier to be a woman here.

JG: It's much, much easier.

LS: You think so?

JG: Much. much easier.

LS: I guess the only thing that I see in Africa, and my experience is mostly in Senegal, is that everybody --- roles are very clear-cut, you know what you are supposed to be like, so ---

JG: That's a predominant Muslim country, too, so ---

LS: Yeah, it is.

JG: --- so it may be more exaggerated there.

LS: It is. But there is none of this kind of testing you. You know what you're supposed to do. And if you are satisfied with it, then it's set up. The pattern's there, you do it.

JG: You're right, you're right.

LS: And sometimes that takes some of the stress out of trying to figure out how you're going to lead your life. If you are not happy, the possibilities are ---

JG: But the down side of that is a lot of limitations also put on people.

LS: Yeah, you give up one thing for the peace of mind or whatever.

JG: Exactly, exactly.

LS: So what are you going to do in the future? Do you intend to stay here or do you want to retire home?

JG: Well, since the war, I'm really thinking of going and doing something, because ---

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

JG: Yes, I am a trained social worker. I have all the tools to be able to help out over there. And, because of the risk currently involved, I cannot go. But I would really like to go home.[pause] I would like to go home and use some of my expertise over there. You know, I never worked really in Sierra Leone.

LS: Yeah, right, so it would be ---

JG: So I think I have an obligation, now more so than ever, to go and do what I can for them.

LS: And that would be that you would really resettle back there?

JG: I would like to retire there, if it's safe. If the war is over and they are not going out and hurting people anymore, I would like to go back out there. I mean, my son can always be here ---

LS: Now that he's old.

JG: Exactly. And he will be able to stand on his own two feet.

LS: But you haven't built your house in Blama yet? Have you built your house in Blama?

JG: There will no be any problem with that if I decide to build a house there someday. [both laugh] You know, building a house back home may not be as expensive as it is here.

LS: Yeah. Some of the houses are just so elementary. You just put the wall up ---

JG: Simple!

LS: The wiring's on the outside. You don't have to have the code, you don't have to have, you know --- you just build your house.

JG: Simple, simple.

LS:I know a lot of people say that they are building a house back home, that's why I'm teasing you.

JG: No, I haven't built yet, but , ahh --- the safety is really my issue at this point. And, as a woman, even though I have many brothers, our brothers play a big role in our life --- you know --- umm ---

LS: But you feel your brothers would support you in what you want?

JG: Oh yes, my brothers are always supportive.

LS: Maybe this is the moment, if Sierra Leone really needs you, that you can actually do something that most women wouldn't do.

JG: I'm looking at the UN very closely. When I finish this last leg of four years, I'm going to start looking at my resume. Maybe, by way of the UN, I can ---

LS: You know, the United Nations Development Program has a big section on African women. And there are some women, they do things on education --- Anyway, I could even give you contacts with women who do fabulous things.

JG: I'd appreciate it.

LS: They have a lot of money for women. Helping women to realize their potential.

JG: I would appreciate that. I would really like to go there and work with women, work with children. This is what I'm doing here.

LS: Would you recommend immigration to other Sierra Leoneans who want to come here?

JG: Those who have the appropriate tools and skills, maybe, because it's really hard to make it --- not only in America but in any industrialized country --- and if the tools are in place, I think it will be helpful. But to come here with no tools --- and when I talk about tools, I'm talking education, I am talking about skills. I think it's a disservice to those people. Except that people are looking at it from a safety point of view. If I didn't have the educational background, I don't think I'll still be sitting here. I would have gone back home.

LS: Yes, I understand what you're saying.

JG: What do you think?

LS: Well, I see a lot of people who are here who are --- it's interesting, I talked to a man from Guinea. And he works and he's a paramedic and he got the training and got the job when he was in status and now he's no longer in status. And he said something interesting, which is that, sometimes people say we are here, we're taking jobs. But people have to understand, this is a huge sacrifice for me. I would rather be in Guinea. I would rather be with my family. But I am supporting fifteen people and this is not my choice of how to lead my life.

JG: They don't see it that way.

LS: No, and people and --- And he does have some education. But he can't get refugee status, you know? I mean there is nothing going on. So those are the people that I see that are in very difficult position. They can't travel back and forth because they don't have a visa, they're out of status ---

JG: Oh, I didn't know that's what out of status meant. Oh, okay.

LS: Their visas are expired. They're undocumented.

JG: They're underground, we call it.

LS: They're underground. So they really are nowhere. They can't go back to see their families, or their wives, or their children, but they need the money for their families so they continue to be here, and that's a hard life.

JG: It is hard. It's a big burden to carry for one person.

LS: Oh, it's very big and I don't think most Americans --- their view of Africa is so negative from the media. And also they think of the material level. They don't think of anything that offset the lower material level, which is that people have families ---

JG: People have dignity ---

LS: They have close-knit societies ---

JG: Exactly.

LS: And that most people here, most Africans, would give up the material stuff for this other stuff, that's more fundamental. But they don't understand that because, in a way, we've lost that here. So I really understand, I loved living in Senegal, I thought it was ---

JG: If the wars was not in place and all this fighting was not going, it's a nice place to live. Because, it's --- from what I remember and I always have to go back --- because the picture there now is different. It was a peaceful place to live.

LS: People said that Freetown in the 1960s was a heaven.

JG: The Liberians, they would come over, they partied in Freetown, and go fly back in Liberia.

LS: Is there anything else, that I have not asked, that you would like to say or let me know?

JG: I think you have covered everything, everything, And I'm happy. I've made the best of my situation. I have made many good friends, Americans, black and white, other ethnic groups, not just --- I have Korean friends, Chinese friends, Indian friends, Caribbean friends, Iranian friends. So I reach out. I believe in friendship. If I didn't have the good friends I have, I don't think I'd be surviving here. There are people I call on all the time. They are doctors, they are social workers, they are teachers, they just housewives, they retired. My best friend, also my neighbor, is ninety-two. She is Jewish and she gives me a wealth of worldly information. That is something I am getting before I even get there. And I really admire her. She is ninety-two. She works everyday. She's very progressive. If you listening to her, you can't think she's ninety two. Because she is very much on top of things. She reads a lot. So that's good.

LS: That's impressive. I would like to be like that when I'm ninety-two.

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]