Joe Dayrell

Interview date: February 8, 2001
Location of interview:
Country of origin: Liberia
Ethnic group/language group: Loma
Religion: United Methodist, but not practicing
Profession: Social worker
Level of education: Degree in Accounting from the University of Liberia
Location of residence in Philadelphia: Southwest Philadelphia

At the time of the interview, Mr. Dayrell had been in the States since November '99. He came directly to Philadelphia since he knew people here. His wife arrived before he did; she came on a visitor's visa and then had her status adjusted through TPS. Eventually Mr. Dayrell's political views and associations made fleeing Liberia a necessity; he also came as a visitor and then sought and was granted asylum. He lives with his wife; his four children are still in Africa, in a refugee camp in Ghana.

Interviewer: Leigh Swigart (LS)

Interviewee: Joseph Dayrell (JD).

[START SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

LS: Your name, please?

JD: Joseph Dayrell, D-a-y-r-e-l-l.

LS: D-a-y-r-e-

JD: -l-l.

LS: Okay. And you are from what country?

JD: Liberia.

LS: What is your ethnic group?

JD: Loma.

LS: Loma.

JD: Yes.

LS: And your native language is?

JD: Is Loma.

LS: What region of Liberia do the Loma live in?

JD: They are from the North Lufa County, in the north of Liberia.

LS: In the north of Liberia?

JD: Um-hmm. North of Liberia.

LS: I lived in West Africa for a long time but in francophone, so I don't know Liberia. I've never been to Liberia.

JD: Okay.

LS: How long have you been in the United States?

JD: That will be a little over a year since November '99. So just over a year.

LS: And all this time you've been in Philadelphia?

JD: All this time I've been in Philadelphia.

LS: Why Philadelphia? Why did you come to Philadelphia?

JD: Basic migration. I mean, you come to places where you know people. So I came to Philadelphia because when I came first, the people I came to people were right here in Philadelphia.

LS: And you live in Southwest Philadelphia?

JD: I've always been in Southwest Philadelphia.

LS: Are there a lot of Liberians around here?

JD: A whole lot of Liberians.

LS: Is this the major place they settle?

JD: I won't know from my one year experience. I assume that this is be one of the major places, besides the Northeast also, that there are a couple of Liberians. Then in Southwest we have very close to --- I don't want to name any number, but there are a lot of Liberians in this area.

LS: And who do you live with here?

JD: My wife and I live here.

LS: Okay, just you two.

JD: Mmm-hmm.

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

JD: Relatives? Yeah, I have a couple of relatives. A sister-in-law and my brother-in-law. They all related to my sister, so I am related to them by marriage. Yes.

LS: Is your sister here, too?

JD: No.

LS: And your current job is --- is --- you were explaining ---

JD: Yeah, I work as a social worker, with, specifically, as a therapeutic staff support.

LS: It's temporary?

JD: Therapeutic. Therapeutic.

LS: Oh, therapeutic. Sorry. So that's to help kids in the public schools?

JD: Yeah, basically working with kids. I don't know whether it's specifically only public schools, but right now I working with some of the kids in one of the public schools.

LS: How are you hired? You're hired through the school district?

JD: No, we are hired through agencies.

LS: Okay.

JD: Yes, we're hired through agencies. And they assign us to the school district, with the consent of the parents, the school, of course, the school authorities. We also sometimes work with the kids in the communities, not only in the schools. Sometimes in the homes, you know? Because, basically, these are troubled kids that come from homes that have some kind of problems, so sometimes you work with the kids in the school, it's not sufficient. You have to go in the homes to see the progress of the kid in the home and sometimes to even observe the reasons why some of these kids are troubled in schools.

LS: Is there ever any resistance on the part of the parents?

JD: It depends. Some people do face resistance. But, uhh, in my own situation I haven't faced any resistance, because I work with a kid whose mother is so concerned about his conditions and she wants to see him improve. She's been very supportive. I haven't had any problems.

LS: And you are assigned to a single child?

JD: I am assigned to a single child.

LS: And how old is he?

JD: He's fifteen years.

LS: What school is he in?

JD: Right now he attends Penn Treaty Middle School.

LS: Where is that?

JD: Penn Treaty Middle School is in --- somewhere in Central Philadelphia. I don't know what ---- Girard Avenue, Girard and Montgomery, somewhere there.

LS: Oh, okay, yeah, I know where that is. So every morning you go --- you get up and you're actually --- you meet him at school and then you accompany him?

JD: Yeah, basically, I get up in the morning and meet him at school at 7.30. I'm at the school, I meet him there. And I stay with him through the day. And after school I go to his house, meet him there, and work with him ( ) times.

LS: You make sure he gets his homework done? Are you also monitoring that kind of stuff?

JD: Unfortunately, the job description, I shouldn't be doing that, but there's also some special aid that we provide, because of course so many kids are troubled, as a result they don't do well in school and sometimes I make it my responsibility to help him look at his lessons. Especially the kid I work with, you know, is so concerned with a particular area, his math. He can use some of the help I have, you know, as an adult. And I don't mind helping him that area and he's happy most of time when I help him. Considering his condition, actually, he can use extra help in this areas and so I do give him that personal help.

LS: How do kids react? They are not embarrassed to be singled out in school by having someone accompany them, or they don't have a choice, or they don't resent your presence at all? The kids don't resent the presence of those who are there to help them?

JD: No. To me, it's the contrary instead. Some of these kids, you know --- It depends on the kind of kid, the kind of case, the kind of problem, the kid is facing. For the kind of kid I have, he's happy that I can work along with him. He's even happy that he can get that kind of attention from somebody, and concerning the fact that the group I work with, you know, I work with a kid that is considered or is diagnosed as an autistic kid.

LS: Oh, he's autistic?

JD: Yeah, he's diagnosed as an autistic kid.

LS: Oh, okay.

JD: And so most of the other kids in the autistic class see me as an adult role model, and sometimes they even look up to me, and the kind of work I do, the fact that I work with this kid in this school

environment, this classroom environment ( ), I sometimes try to integrate him within this classroom, this society, the group that he works with, because I want to get him involved with group activities, because it's most of the times individualized. And so I try to get him involved with the other kids. And, thereby, he is happy with the kind of attention sometimes he gets.

LS: 'Cause autistic kids can be very withdrawn, right?

JD: Sometimes. Basically.

LS: So you arrived here and how did you find this job?

JD: Well, first ---

LS: Maybe before we start that, let me go back a little bit, because I'm sure we'll come to that. Let me backtrack a little bit. You've been here a year. Can you tell me a little bit about what your background was in Liberia, what your education was, and how you ended up coming to the United States?

JD: Okay. I have a degree in Accounting from the University of Liberia. That was 1989. You know the country I come from begin troubled in 1990.

LS: Right.

JD: So, in 1990 I escaped and went to Sierra Leone and came back in Liberia in '91.

LS: So you went by yourself to Sierra Leone because things were getting rough?

JD: Well, there was war and I escaped, because people being single handedly pointed out for different reasons, based on sometimes on your tribal orientation or your political views. And people were being eliminated as a result of that, so --- And the area I lived in was dangerous, so we had to escape.

LS: Were you in the north or you were in Monrovia?

JD: I was in Monrovia. I lived in Monrovia by then. And I escaped and went to Sierra Leone. And went back to Liberia in '91 when the interim government ( ). And we went through a lot of rough times in '91. Of course, I can't explain the whole thing here now. And then when I went back to Monrovia in '91, I

started working with a firm doing external audits, you know, for a firm. That was between '91 and 1995. Around 1995, I became an affiliate of the Justice and Peace Commission --- JPC --- and because the work I did as a consultant, you know, an external auditor had to do investigation, it gave me an opportunity to affiliate and then, because of my political views with the Justice and Peace Commission, to do some --- I don't know how to put --- investigative reports for them. I did a couple of reports for that. At the same time, working with this other firm. So I was like working two jobs. That's how I started getting interested in working social work, first as an investigator. And then in 1997, because most of the jobs were limited to social work now as a result of the war and kids needed to be rehabilitated, I took a job with, umm, they call it UNAMIL, United Nations Mission in Liberia. I worked in the area, Rehabilitation and Tracing, with an organization there, rehabilitating and tracing kids ---

LS: Kids who had been separated?

JD: Kids who had been separated from families. So I started working with that organization. And at the same time, my original job as an auditor, once in awhile, when I go places to do my job, I would make some reports. Independent reports for the JPC. And then, uh, 1999 --- of course, my wife left for the States in '97.

LS: Oh, she did. So you were already married to your wife?

JD: Yeah, I married. My wife left in '97. And then in '99, things got real tough and there was so much crisis period, people were being antagonized for the kind of work they did. Especially the people who were affiliated with certain kinds of organizations. As a result of that, I --- I won't go through all the details of how I got entangled with situations regarding the government or like that, so --- Things were becoming unbearable. People with opposing views to the government were being singled out. The country had become a little, I mean not a little bit, but had become tensed. People were disappearing. No accountability, especially for human life. If you were doing these kinds of these jobs, people started getting scared, especially with us that were first working with the United Nations and than making some reports for JPC. And JPC had become very vocal against the government. And the president was very

insensitive to people who he considers enemies, especially organizations that are voicing things that he doesn't want to hear. So, in '99, that's how I left the country. Of course, usually if you are traveling, and you know you were the kind of person involved in these kinds of job, you had to leave a very dramatic way. I left in a dramatic ways. And that how I came to the States. [break in tape]

LS: So when your wife came in 1997, was she resettled as a refugee?

JD: Well, she came --- I don't know whether you say "resettled as a refugee" --- but she came. She was on the general amnesty that was granted to Liberians, what they call the TPS, I think it's Temporary ---

LS: But so she didn't come as a refugee here? She came ---

JD: She came as a visitor.

LS: Okay, right. And then she got her status adjusted through the ---

JD: She came as a visitor with the intention of going back. But as things turned out, you know, every time she wanted to come back, I would say, "You better stay. It's not too good. You can't come here." You know, we men can handle the situation faster then women can. So, every time she wanted to come, I would say, "No, you stay. I mean, there's trouble right now." So, but when things started getting more tense, I had to get out. And I had to come.

LS: So she came as a visitor? Did she come to Philadelphia?

JD: She came directly to Philadelphia.

LS: And she stayed and then when there was the general amnesty, she could legalize her status?

JD: Exactly. So she legalized her status and I came in '99. When I came finally, I filed for asylum.

LS: So you came as a visitor ---

JD: I came as a visitor.

LS: And then applied for asylum?

JD: And applied for asylum.

LS: And it was successful?

JD: Yes. Asylum was granted. Of course, you couldn't apply for asylum when you were not in the States.

LS: But can you only apply as a refugee if you've already gone to a refugee camp or something? Or can you be sitting in Monrovia feeling intimidated and then apply to become a refugee?

JD: It depends on your contact. I do not know if I may say "contact", it's the right way, but it depends on how big of an official you are. Because, take for example in '98, when the government ( ) and people like Roosevelt Johnson --- I may say, too, that I have clan(?) relatives. You know? So that was the problem, but it was not much of a big problem. People like Roosevelt Johnson and others that fled to the American Embassy, they immediately opened the place and I think you heard of a situation where the Liberian forces even fired onto the American Embassy compound, killing --- I think they killed one of the guys that were fleeing --- and the Americans opened the embassy to grant them clemency. So probably situations like those, you can get through with them. But ordinarily for others, in the sense that probably ( ) lives have not been publicly noticed by, peoples probably hasn't gone to the media. You know the media publications, sometimes if you don't have sufficient media publications, you --- definitely if you wanted to get out of the country, you have to do it through other means. That's one of the main reasons.

LS: It is not hard to get a visitor's visa? It wasn't hard to get one in Liberia to come here? Because they must assume that a lot of people come as visitors and then apply for asylum?

JD: I don't know what they do ( ) actually. I don't know. But it depends on your intentions. Sometimes, you come as a visitor with the hope of going back because ---

LS: So if they assume that you have the intention of returning then you can get a visitor's visa?

JD: I think, I think --- I don't know but I think that the process of getting a visa to come to the States is a lot different than the process of getting an asylum. I don't know whether people go to the embassy hoping to get a visitor's visa and when they come to the States, apply for asylum. Of course, I think,

people sometimes do come with that intention, but of course if you went to the embassy and tell them that I wanted an asylum --- You know, basically America is the greatest and the most free country in the world. There are other countries that you could go to and apply for asylum. You may get asylum, but you may not be able to provide your own quota to that country. Economically, you may not be able to successfully live. But, of course, people do come with that intention sometimes. I do not know how they go about that.

LS: Did the fact that your wife had already asylum --- Well, I guess she didn't really have asylum because she just went under the general amnesty.

JD: She just went under the general amnesty.

LS: Did that help you to get ---

JD: No, it had absolutely nothing to do with me. And initially my intention was basically coming to see my family, because ( ). My wife left me ( ). We have a family of altogether four children. I had two kids first and the when I met her we had two. So when things were getting tough the fact that I am a man and move around and still get my job done, when she was in the States, I sent my kids to Ghana. There's a refugee camp in Ghana.

LS: All four of them?

JD: And they're still in Ghana.

LS: How old are your children?

JD: Even now. I got two kids fifteen. There is one thirteen --- no, twelve. And there is a baby four years old, almost five.

LS: So fifteen, twelve --- and what was the other age?

JD: Five.

LS: Five, and then four.

JD: No, two fifteen.

LS: Oh, two of them are fifteen? You have twins?

JD: No.

LS: Oh. [both laugh]

LS: Do they have the right to come here because their parents are here? Or how does that work?

JD: Well, I'm personally on asylum and the fact that we are on asylum, ( ) agreements ( ) American government, we live here presently, so, umm, we have the right to file for them. That we have done, and the INS usually go through the case, and give you a certain length of time that they are going to reply. Usually one hundred and twenty days. And then they reply usually, and you send the documents back for them to prepare for the kids to come and join the family.

LS: So you're just waiting now? The hundred and twenty days is not up here?

JD: It's not up yet, so I have to ---

LS: Are you in contact with your children?

JD: Of course.

LS: Well, I didn't know how. You can telephone them and talk to them?

JD: We talk to them on the telephone and the good thing is that the telephone in Ghana is not that bad. The telephone system in Ghana is good, unlike Liberia, so we talk to them once every week.

LS: And you can make an arrangement for them to be near a telephone or something like that? Or it's easy for them to use ---

JD: They got people that have telephone close to where they live. And we usually we call and they go and call them, you know? And that's how we talk, that's how we communicate almost every week.

LS: And they are all together, the four?

JD: They are all together. ( ) as a family.

LS: Can you send them resources?

JD: Of course, yes.

LS: You can and it gets there?

JD: Yeah. sure. Western Union, most of the time, almost every other week.

LS: So it's a very well organized camp.

JD: Yeah, that's the way they survive. We have to work hard and send money to them. That's why we can't wait for them to join us one day. But back to what you asked --- well, like I was saying, you know, sometimes you coming to the States actually to visit, with the intention of going back. But when you come, and then the kinds of things that you hear after you came to the States, and the kind of information that you receive back home, makes you afraid, you know. I'm not kidding you, in Africa, especially Liberia right now, the kind of leader we have, somebody can just [snaps fingers] get lost. And, umm, nobody can seek ( ) for you. People just talk. And some people will condemn and condemn and JPC will come up and say a whole lot of things. That's just it. But your life is gone, and nothing replaces a man's life. If you feel threatened, you know you better stay away.

LS: Yeah. You never considered going to another country besides the US?

JD: You mean after I came? One of the things was, the family connection. The fact that my wife was already here, working, and, of course, you gotta go where your family is. And, like I said --- your question is whether I considered going to any other country, no.

LS: Like Canada or --- ?

JD: The things is, you go places where you already know, ( ). But there are Liberians that also have heard about programs in Canada. I think that they also do accept refugees, but there are people there, that go there, but a very few people. People will tend to stick to areas where most of the people are.

LS: I've heard that is one of the central places for Liberians, is the Delaware Valley.

JD: Exactly, yeah.

LS: Wow. Well, you must be waiting to hear about your children?

JD: I can't wait, especially my baby, four years old.

LS: Boy or girl?

JD: She's a girl. I can't wait. Not only me. She, umm, ( ) all the time. I mean, you know? But, umm, we talk to her most of the time and we can't wait. You gotta wait for the time the INS wants, and they have, you know, they are very effective when they say 120 days. There is no way it can be before. Sometimes if you're fortunate, you know, they gonna treat your case faster, they can reply you ( ) at that time, but, other than that you may just have to wait. And then even after the 120 days, you know, when they reply you that you can send for your kids, then again of course you have to send this document back to Africa, which in this case might be Ghana, and can you imagine again then they have to take that document to embassy, and people have to make sure that they are the right people that have been sent for, you know? And it becomes more difficult for them again, because there are a lot of people that do, people that do all kinds of things.

LS: You get around the system?

JD: To beat the system, sometimes. So they got to make sure they are the people, and sometimes the process takes up to two months, I think.

LS: Do you have parents, then, in Liberia?

JD: In Liberia --- my mother actually died in '91, but my father still lives in Liberia.

LS: In the north?

JD: He live a quiet life, yeah.

LS: Are things pretty calm in the north?

JD: Well, that's where there's a lot of trouble right now, with the claim of, umm --- the president claiming that people are attacking him and the country, so in the north there is a serious problem. And then, you know, there's completely, I mean, the communication system in Liberia is so poor that personally I can't even talk to my father. I haven't talked to my father the last, probably the last three years. Even since I was in Liberia, I didn't talk to him, because there are no means of communication. There were no way sometimes you hear from your parents or your relatives, that side. Somebody would come and say, "Oh, I met so-and-so person and I think the person is okay." And that's just it. I can't imagine, I would really love to hear from my dad one day.

LS: Do you have brothers and sisters in Liberia or someone else who is watching out for him?

JD: Well, I do have a couple of relatives there, but most of the times we don't like to talk about relatives back home because if you are seeking asylum here, they are more in danger. Especially government gets to *know* that you are seeking asylum outside the country, they feel more threatened. The fact that ( ) still we ask for asylum, even though they know that they've threatened our life one way or the other, but then if you ever talk about it, your people at home become more in danger and you know we in Africa, for example, come from very extensive, extended family, and the fact that I am here and sought asylum, it doesn't grant my brother, for example, the right, as a beneficiary. It doesn't grant my father, it doesn't grant my cousin. So I have to be careful with the kind of information, you know, because they are all in danger.

LS: When you went to Sierra Leone, did you go to Freetown or where did you go?

JD: I was in Kenema, actually. I stayed there --- I left Liberia, I think it was in August of '90 --- I was in Sierra Leone, in Kenema, actually. And things were okay, but around --- I think it was May or --- I can't remember precisely. In '91, when Freetown was attacked, on the Liberian border when their war started, things became real rotten for us Liberians. Imagine when I went to Freetown --- I didn't mention earlier that I started teaching at a government secondary school. There was a school in Kenema that I taught the high school. I taught forms four and five. I taught accounting and commerce. And I had the opportunity

to share my experience, working in school with kids. That was basically like my first job, because I came from college in '89.

LS: So you were in your early twenties?

JD: Yeah. I came from college in '89 and war started in Liberia right away. I went to Freetown --- the good thing was that I still had my school papers. So I went to the school and they just did an interview with me and said, "This guy seems intelligent." I started working with the school right away, teaching accounting, and then saw the feedback, you know, preparing the kids from forms four and five. I had an incredible experience working with the kids there. Then when the war started, of course most of the people in Kenema started being bitter to Liberians. In other words, there was this cloud of collective guilt. The fact that Charles Taylor initiated war through Fodesankor(?) in Sierra Leone, so Liberians are ungrateful. And some Liberians were innocent and hunted(?) by the Sierra Leoneans. The reason being that you cannot blame them. They became very angered, the fact that our own countrymen establish a war in their country, and they know that our war was bad. And where the war has got them even up to today. Their war has even lasted far longer than ours. It's a shame. Seriously. And their war even became *deadlier* than ours, amputations and, uhh ---

LS: There were some pretty atrocious things.

JD: Oh yeah, atrocious, I mean, you can't even think about it. And so, because of the collective guilt, we had nowhere to go. So we --- I think it was true, a United Nations organization that helped to repatriate us back to Liberia. At that time, ECOMOG can move into Liberia, there was safety in Monrovia, people were thinking that things were okay. We had interim government headed by Dr. Amos Sawyer into place ---

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

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

LS: Is ECOMOG --- are they active in Monrovia at all now? Are their forces allowed in?

JD: I think after the time I left, already their mission as over. Elections was held in '97 and Taylor was elected president and he --- you know, from time to time, he was bitterly against the occupation of Liberia by ECOMOG. So there was some politics of some ECOMOG soldiers having offices in Monrovia, but to my knowledge, I think, up to the time I left, the entire ECOMOG contingent had left Liberia. Most of them went to Sierra Leone to help establish peace there.

LS: Most of the ECOMOG forces are Nigerian, is that right? They're Nigerian nationals?

JD: Well, Nigeria had the largest force there. I think it's because of their population and the power there and then the resources that they put into ECOMOG. You know, they were at the ( ) of command. So they were more in ECOMOG than any other African country. But they were very good at organization, they did very well for Liberia, they save a lot of lives. And their mission was real good, and to some extent, to a very large extent, one of the most successful missions in Africa was carried out by ECOMOG. Had it not been for ECOMOG, for example, in August of 1990, there was going to be no more Liberia. Let's just ( ). A lot of people was --- were just --- people were just --- I mean, were being demoted to savagery. There was hunger, because there was no access to any ship to enter Liberia, no food. People never had opportunity to farm. You know what I'm talking about. I mean, people were desperate for food.

LS: I lived in Dakar for three years, in the 1990s, and across the street from where my husband and I lived there was a UNHCR processing place. And there were a lot of Liberians coming in. And they'd made their way all the way up to Senegal. But then they didn't want to process them because they said they should have stayed in Ghana and Guinea and the surrounding countries.

JD: And that's one of the things. We became, like, uhh, we --- you know, this idea of collective guilt that --- you'd be surprised, that even in West Africa, right now, some of the people would think that all

Liberians are rebels. The fact that Taylor is the president. He's so stubborn. So you don't even have any neighbors that's in favor of your country. So as a result of that, that collective guilt is passed down to innocent people. And sometimes you go other countries, you want to seek asylum, they don't even --- there's nothing like --- some of the people don't even know the process of gong through, of how you are going to seek asylum.

LS: Someone from Liberia told me that a lot of Liberians are resentful because Liberia in its heyday was always the place where people could come and then they could use it as a stopping-off point to the US. And then when Liberians were in need, the other countries really didn't want to turn around and be that helpful, so they said there is a lot of resentment on the part of Liberians.

JD: I don't know how to explain that. What ( ) say it would be, like similar to what that person said, but I think it there's something almost, I think, almost close to what you just said. And that's true before 1980 of course you know Liberia and America are traditional friends. A small country with rich resources and very underpopulated. Up to the time, I think, of the last census, it talk about 2.6 million people occupying 43,000 square mile country.

LS: In Liberia there's 2.6 million people? That's all?

JD: That was the last census, I think. The last time I heard a census in Liberia was in '89. And can you imagine from 1990 to 1995, the last report that I saw, about pretty close to two hundred thousand Liberians lost their lives, so that should tell you how many persons, even with the rapid birth rate, there's no way that between that time people can cover the two hundred thousand people that died.

LS: And all the people who've left.

JD: Exactly. So the population has greatly reduced, to a large extent. And to come back to what you were saying, I think the person is somehow correct. Liberia was a very --- economically, it was good. You know the kind of hardships that other African countries face? We didn't face those kinds of hardships in Liberia. Per capita, Liberians' monthly salary could handle his family and do a lot of other different

stuffs, which other African countries did not have. Their economy was not developed up to that level at that time. And people look at, especially in West Africa, they saw Liberia as a small America and people that come from Ghana, Nigeria, because of their large population and fewer opportunities, they came to Liberia as a was, as a stepping stone of traveling to the States and other places. Because the Liberians would come to the States, of course, because of the conditions with the intention of going back. You know, when things are good, you want to go back. So I think your person could be right in that sense.

LS: Before things got bad, the war started in Sierra Leone, what was your reception like? Were the Sierra Leoneans open to you, when you came in and you were teaching school?

JD: They were *very* receptive. I must be very grateful here. They were very receptive. Personally, I received a very ( ) welcome from Sierra Leoneans. They were very receptive. They opened up their villages and --- one of the things, too, was that the reception, too, was on the base of economic benefits that they were getting from Liberians. Liberians, of course, came from Liberia. Some of the people fled earlier, they still had money. You know, the Sierra Leonean economy is not too good. Their money is very bad, very devalued. And the Liberian dollar was stronger in the West African region. I think it was at the time like one Liberian dollar was pretty close to twenty leones. So they had to open up and be receptive. Liberians went to Sierra Leone and bought homes in no time, because the money was nothing. You carry a small amount of Liberian dollars, it's a lot of money. You could buy a home there. And they started developing themselves. Some of them started doing businesses. And then with the relationship Liberia and Sierra Leone have had and you know that there are a lot of Liberian immigrants in America, so people families send money to them almost every other week because that was the only means of income, the only means of survival, like how we have our kids in Ghana right now. One of the basic means of survival. And so there was money flowing into the Sierra Leonean economy. But besides the money and the boost of the economy, they were generally receptive to Liberians. Most people were very friendly.

LS: What's your reception been like in the United States? What was it like to arrive in Philadelphia? Do you find Americans receptive and friendly?

JD: This is the free-est country I have ever seen in any ( ) in the world. I mean, talk about a reception. Americans don't care who you are, where you come from, what you are doing here. You know? So they treat everybody alike.

LS: You think they do?

JD: The point is, all my life here, you know, I mingle most of the time with Liberians, when I come home. But from the time I regularized my status and got a permit to work, all the places I went there was equal opportunity to work as long as you are qualified for the job. And people are looking for people who want to work. For example, my present job, the school, the principal, the teachers, I get a ( ) reception from people. I think, generally, it drives me in the belief that --- you know, I don't if what you call friendly, that would be that Americans are friendly. For example, my wife and I bought this house. Of course, she was here since '97 and started working from that time. We bought this house in June and we came in the neighborhood. I was very impressed by the neighborhood. I haven't seen any problem in any of my neighbors. I border on the north, east, west, south, southwest of my house by, for example, white people and they all are so receptive. They speak to me nicely, we are all friends. I have one friend that comes to work ( ), I think Italian white guy. There's another guy here, John ---

LS: Is this mostly a white neighborhood around here?

JD: I think there are a lot of white people here.

LS: I just don't know this neighbourhood.

JD: There are a lot of white people here. All of them are so friendly and they are so receptive.

LS: Are people curious where you're from? Do they ask you where you're from?

JD: Not really.

LS: Do they know you're from Africa?

JD: I really wouldn't know. I think. When I talked to John --- I don't even --- most of the people even think we're from Jamaica. They really do not know the difference, especially even the school where I work with this kid. Most of the people don't even know Liberia.

LS: I was going to ask you that nobody knows that there's a historical between the United States and Liberia?

JD: They didn't know. Strangely, the school I work in, because of my relationship with the teacher --- you know I try, everywhere I work, I try to build up a relationship, good working relationship. That's the only way you can work amicably in a free environment. And the teacher and I have a very good working relationship and the teacher-in-charge --- I don't know if I may say teacher --- the administrator-in-charge, the advisory that she works in has a program where they usually have, I think, a week for each of advisory, each of them should pick a country where they can depict some of the values of the country and different stuff like that. And she picked Liberia. And they working on a budget on a Liberian project right now.

LS: Are there any Liberian students in that school?

JD: No. I haven't seen Liberian students in the school, but there's a Liberian teacher and there are several other Liberian TSS's there.

LS: You said that the United States is a free country. Is there anything else that you like about the US? What strikes you as sort of the most attractive features of the US?

JD: [laughs] Most attractive feature? Ahhh --- The people are attractive. Very attractive. The people are very attractive. They are so concerned about their health and their livelihood. Most of the time, for example, when I watch TV and listen to the news, I am very impressed with people wanting to stay healthy, stay alive and be healthy. That the other thing that can come next. But I am so impressed with people who are the age of fifty, sixty and still wanting to look, to feel young and healthy.

LS: And get play sports and things like that?

JD: That turns me ( ). To see people, sixty years or fifty years, walking to keep healthy. That shows that this is a country of life. Where people about being healthy, staying alive. And once you are concerned with staying alive ( ), you work hard. ( ) you gotta eat. To eat, you gotta work. So that's basically the point of ( ) of the kind of people the Americans are. And that impresses me a lot.

LS: What are the things that you like the least about the US?

JD: The least? Ah, there you go. What can I say? Compared to where I come from? We come from somewhere where there are diversified problems. Okay, let me pick something. I work in the school ( ), for example, I don't know if I may say it's the least thing that I like about the States. I have no real experience, for example, the private schools. But the public schools, for example, I think authorities are not given a chance to work with children sufficiently. There are two many restrictions on teachers on how to handle kids.

LS: Like how to discipline them?

JD: How to discipline kids. As a result, you have kids that are so difficult to deal with because they know their adults cannot discipline them.

LS: Physically?

JD: Not physically alone. It doesn't have to be physical. But merely the idea that you are impacting discipline in the kids, the kids are off the hook. They are so ---

LS: They know how to play that system.

JD: That kind of system. I think that's because that's where I work, and that's one of the things that I have seen. That kids --- And the thing is, they know what they should be doing. They should be doing. They know right from wrong, but sometimes they do choose to do certain wrongs because they know that they will not be disciplined by the teachers and ---

LS: And you are in middle school. So that's age 11, 10 to 14 or 15??

JD: Yes, something like that..

LS: Some people I have talked to say that they think people work too much in the US. They miss the family. They miss the fact that people don't socialize as much. Does any of that bother you?

JD: I don't know how it bothers me because I socialize when I want to. [laughs] I work a forty hours job. My wife also works.

LS: What does your wife do?

JD: She works as a residential counselor with ( ). And we still have the time to party if we want to. Of course, the bills are so high, is one of the things. But I think that's how the country is built and that's the reason why the country is what they are today. With the economy. So, it depends on what you want to do and what you can find time to do. There are a lot of opportunities in this country. Some people are actually have underdeveloped their skills. Some people have certain skills that they have not been able to tap. As a result, they work in areas where they are not comfortable with. And so, because they are not kind of happy with the kinds of jobs they do, they don't find time to socialize much. But I think there are opportunities all over the place. And there also programs for people to change what they don't want to do. I have a degree as an accountant. Good thing, great country, America. I'm working as a social worker. Of course, I have experience working as a social worker, so it means then, I have an alternative degree. My first job, I worked with an agency that used to send me all the way to West Chester. I worked with a company called Germantown. I worked in the production(?) department, even though I was doing that kind of job, working as an accountant, not an accountant, per se, but in the production department, I was the same accounting and kinds of work. But, umm --- [pause] I still changed and did something else that I could do for less time and more money and at the same time be able to explore. So I think there always are other areas of exploration. It's just that you gotta look sometimes. Of course, you don't find the time. And it's based on your schedule. For example, right now, with the time I have, I may still --- because of

the kind of family I got, I want to support, I want to work hard --- I may still try to find another job, maybe an afternoon job, to be able to take care of the bills I get more and more everyday. ( )

LS: You also have a job that when you children come, that you will be on the younger ones' schedule, because of school.

JD: Yeah, probably.

LS: So you came here, you applied for asylum, and then you got a work permit and you got a job. Is that how it worked? Or did you start working before you got asylum?

JD: No. But there was no way to even work because you don't have ---

LS: Well, some people do, under the table.

JD: Some people do work, under the table, or like that. But I never work under the table when I came. The good thing was that my wife was already working and that time, we lived at her sister's house. Her sister owns a house at Belmont Street, where we were living first. We lived there. So all the time I was concentrating on organizing my thoughts and, at the same time, I didn't have the opportunity to work. And I think that was because --- even if I had the chance to work under the table, the kinds of things I saw people doing, I didn't want to jeopardize my opportunity with the INS. I know it's difficult sometimes, but I know I could wait for six to eight months.

LS: Is that how long it took?

JD: Something like that. I knew I could wait, and while she was working I was still going to live. I didn't want to get involved in anything that would cause some kind of problem for me or my family.

LS: How did you get your current job?

JD: There are a couple of people that work in those areas. Of course, they want college graduates and I qualified. I went there. I applied several places.

LS: Did you hear about it from other Liberians or from other ---

JD: Yes, basically other Liberians. It's in(?) the Liberian community. And I had a list of a lot of different jobs. I applied to almost, like, probably close to seven, eight different places. About three places called me back. Two of them wanted to employ me. And I took one.

LS: And are you happy with the salary and the benefits and whatever else?

JD: For now I have to be, but I am still looking.

LS: What would you like to do? Are you certified to be an accountant here? Would you have to go and get another certification as a CPA or --- ?

JD: Well, there are jobs I can do as an accountant. I don't know what you mean if you say, "Am I certified to be an accountant?"

LS: Well, I don't know that much.

JD: But I know --- I understand what you are saying. I think, I think, umm, I still, uh, I think the point is I have to --- one of the problems I have, working as an accountant, is that the level of experience I have working in Liberia, you know accounting is a dynamic kind of discipline. And then things are changing every day. And then, also with the advancement of computers and the different softwares, I do have some skills to work as an accountant, especially with computers, but I am not that confident because things are changing over and over so I still have to develop my skills in those areas. And I return back to my original career.

LS: You have to learn about the American tax system and how all those things happen, too?

JD: That I can ( ) because the company that I worked with in Liberia, I did tax accounting. I know some --- even when I sit and read some of the tax books ( ), you know, most of the most of the Liberian system was fashioned under the American ( ), but I still have to read a lot on the American accounting system. And then I'll be okay.

LS: So sometime you'd like to go back into accounting?

JD: Maybe sometime. It depends what would happen. You can't tell what will happen. Talking with you here today, who knows, you might one day say, "But I talked with a guy who works in so-and-so areas." And if I got something fat(?), working as a social worker, you know? And the good thing is that the university I went to, I did a couple of courses, so administratively I can do a lot of different things. ( ) Except that some of the things that makes me that uncomfortable, even though I can enter into a computer, do a couple of letters, I can do a couple of things but I still have to develop me skills.

LS: Have you thought about taking a course in computers? There is actually a Liberian man who gives ---

JD: I have thought about it.

LS: Nimba Computer. It's in that directory. I just saw him today. Moses Voker.

JD: Oh, Moses Voker. Okay.

LS: If you buy a computer from him, he'll train you on how to use it and how to do all kinds of stuff.

JD: I can do a lot of the minimal stuff in computers, but what I mean is talking about advanced computers. So that's ( ), because I know I can.

LS: Can you tell me a little about your social circle? Who do you tend to socialize with? Do you know a lot of Liberians?

JD: I know a lot of Liberians. I wish I could find people like you to socialize with.

LS: [laughs] So you mostly socialize with Liberians?

JD: Yeah, mostly with Liberians. That's because I have come across, and then one of the reasons, I think, that is because --- the reason why I socialize with a lot of Liberians I think is because of the norms of the American society. For example, it is difficult to mix with different people of different cultures because people who are insecure, I think, are insecure with other people to the fact that I'm married(?), it is not easy for married people to socialize with other people. I am not saying to the extent that they will start

creating infidelities in their relationships, but it has a lot of effect on how you go about socializing with people.

LS: So you are not sure you understand how Americans view all that? Is that what you are saying?

JD: Precisely. And so because of that you are not sure what to say to somebody. You're not sure how the person will accept what you're saying. Like if you go in working areas, one of the basic laws that people have is sexual harassment. And when you read interpretation, for example, you get very scared. So, where I come from --- like, um --- how --- it's common that I would compliment, for example, I say, "Oh, you looked nice. You dressed nicely today". And sometimes, you're not thinking differently, but somebody here is different. The society say that you don't do those things because somebody might feel uneasy.

LS: That's kind of taken to an extreme here, but that's because there are some people who have really abused ---

JD: Exactly.

LS: And there are people who abuse it now ( )! [laughs]

JD: It's all about, you know, ( ) people are free. But most of the times, you see people, you want to socialize, but you don't go out with certain people, you want to mingle, to know about the society because you cannot know a lot of things just from being in your personal community. You'll only be limited to what that community has to offer.

LS: Do Liberians here tend to socialize within their ethnic group? With other Lomas or whatever?

JD: Oh, we, we --- of course, here, I mean, Liberians, I don't know, but I don't think Liberians ( ), one of the things is that I think there's some kind of unity here. People don't look for where you come from. Because most of the parties and stuff, we go to homes, and Liberians hosting a party --- sometimes you don't even need an invitation. All you gotta do find out where it is, and you just go there. The door is open.

LS: So it's completely across ethnic lines?

JD: That's it. Here there's no ethnic problems here --- none that I have seen or that I know of.

LS: Even between American Liberians and indigenous Liberians?

JD: I don't see anything like that, I don't see anything like that. But like I say, even American Liberians, you know, we all --- I don't see any kind of difference between ---

LS: Is there a Loma association?

JD: No.

LS: Because I know there's a ---

JD: There's a Krahn association ---

LS: There's a Krahn, there's a Bassa one, there's a Mandingo one, there's a ---

JD: But even if there was, to be frank with you, I wouldn't bother about those kinds of small associations because, to me, it's just a waste of time. I can understand that people would want to get together to help the people, but I think individually you can help your own family, but what is most important to me is that there should be a stronger Liberian Association or a stronger African Association. Something that can be broader to bring out the best values in everybody. Because to me these smaller associations --- we come from a country, for example, of forty-three thousand square miles and sixteen different vernacular dialects. Big diversity. You cannot come in this kind of place and start creating diversities with smaller organizations. I think ---

LS: It will just recreate the same separations?

JD: Yes, to me those kinds of things create separations. The thing to strengthen is the family. It doesn't matter where the family comes from. What if I married --- I married to a girl that is Mandingo. Why? I'm Loma. Why do I go and get involved with a Loma association? My wife is Mandingo. She got Vai orientation. What if somebody was married to a Krahn person? The other person is Gio? How do the

person reconcile? The best thing to do is to have a Liberian Association where everybody can come and do things in the interest of Liberia.

LS: Are you a member of the Liberian Association?

JD: Actually, I am still new to the association but, yes, I am a member. And again the association ---

LS: The United Liberians?

JD: The United Liberians. Yes.

LS: Voffee Jabateh.

JD: Yeah.

LS: But you haven't been very active?

JD: Mmm-mmm, mmm-mmm.

LS: I know that Voffee has told me that he is trying to break down some of those ---

JD: Smaller ---

LS: Well, he doesn't want to eliminate them, but he wants people to not --- to think less about their own group.

JD: Their own group --- and be more --- that's it. That's how is should be, to me, you know, being in ( ).

LS: But he's run into some obstacles. [laughs] He's doing some interesting things. They're trying to work with the school district to intervene on behalf of the Liberian students, 'cause some of the ones who are just coming out of the refugee situation and they ( ) schools, they're having a lot of problems in the schools. Their teachers and the students don't understand their dialect of English, so they get put in ESL and then they are very frustrated, because they already speak English, but the pronunciation is so different.

JD: Different, you know.

LS: And then they've been in camps and they have a very interrupted schooling, so they are way lower than the age level, than what they're expected to be. And sometimes they're just not even used to the American school and what it's like to be in a classroom.

JD: They don't know ( ). That's true. They face a lot of problems ---

LS: And so, Voffee is trying to, with some other people in the school, to kind of set up a system where there would be mentoring and trying to help these kids deal with some problems. Do you have any sense of how most Liberians think about their time here? Are they expecting to settle here permanently or are they waiting to see what's going to happen in Liberia? Do they feel like they fit in here? Do they want to fit in here?

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

JD: I think most Liberians actually think their age. People of my age group, of course, I don't know if you want to know my age.

LS: How old are you? I don't know how old you are.

JD: [laughs] Okay, I will be --- What will I be? I was born in 1962, August 5th. So how much I will be?

LS: You'll be thirty-eight? Thirty-eight or thirty-nine? You'll be thirty-nine?

JD: That's very old. [laughs] I'm getting so old now. I think people ---

LS: You have kids, you just --- you're fine.

JD: Yeah, okay. [both laugh] I think people of my age actually are thinking about how ---because if you look back, how long can you stay here to live and make a life? I think people my age are thinking of going back home, and *very* soon, going back home, because that's where you think your place is. Going back home, establish a home. Because that's where, that's where most of your people are, actually. When things are okay, most people are thinking about going back home.

LS: What about people who have brought up kids here? Their kids are growing up American. Do they see that as any kind of problem?

JD: That's going to be --- it's going to be a little problem for most people. For most of us. But we just going to have to cope with the situation as is. The kids that will be here definitely will be for you Americans and we will go right back and live there. The thing is --- the good thing --- we are the kind of people that like to travel and you can always come to visit and go right back but you want to build your country. You want to take some technology, what you see here, go back home and build your country upon what you observe here, the values, some of the good cultures you can take back home and develop your country.

LS: Are Liberians here trying to make changes in what's going on in Liberia from over here? Are they involved politically trying to see if they can guide Liberia to where they want it to go?

JD: I'd say technically --- technically, yes. But if you look at it theoretically, I don't know whether there's any specific group involved in trying to pressure the government. But technically, yes. With respect to the asylum that Liberians are getting, the petitions that Liberians sometimes file to the government, this is all to show that this government that is in place in Liberia is not --- excuse me --- anyway --- [breaks off speaking]

LS: [sotto voce] No problem. What kinds of things have you done with the Liberian Association? Have you gone to any of their activities or events?

JD: Hmm, actually I went to --- they haven't had that many meetings. I went to one of the meetings. Of course last year I went to --- umm, they have some social programs, football gatherings, acquaintance, ( ) cultural troops.

LS: That thing this summer that ---

JD: Yes. Those are the kinds of programs that I went to.

LS: Do you ever run into Liberians that you didn't know are here that you knew back home?

JD: A lot.

LS: Yeah?

JD: I have seen a lot of Liberians here that I didn't know back home.

LS: Well, that's ---

JD: Some of them have been here for ten or fifteen years.

LS: And you didn't know they were here?

JD: No. Seen all kinds of Liberians, a lot of Liberians.

LS: Are you a member of any church? Or are you Muslim? Or are you Christian?

JD: I am a Christian. But I am not active here with church.

LS: You are not active in a church?

JD: No. I am not a member of any church right now.

LS: Because there's a lot.

JD: Originally, I'm a United Methodist. I'm from the United Methodist Church in Monrovia, but I haven't really started being involved with churches here.

LS: There's a lot of Liberian churches.

JD: Okay.

LS: Many of which are in here. Just in case you are ever interested.

JD: What's up? Are you a Christian?

LS: What? Me?

JD: Yes.

LS: I'm a Christian, but I'm not active in a church right now. Well, I'm just asking because I know there are a lot of people who use the church as also a kind of place to ---

JD: To go to. I know what you talking about.

LS: Because there is a really big Lutheran church, a Baptist church, umm. A United Church of Christ, maybe.

JD: I heard about some of the Liberian churches, actually. But, you know, for me, there are things I'd rather do the Liberian way. There are other things that I look at as an international organization. I'd rather gain experience from different kinds of churches, dealing with different people. Not the fact that I don't want to go to Liberian church or whatsoever, but I think that's a universal kind of organization. And

I'd rather not look at a church as somewhere to go to see some different welfare opportunities, exploiting that, ( ) [laughs] for your own personal welfare. I'd rather use the church as a place to worship God, and secondly as a place to enhance my own intellectual abilities. Or like that. That's how I look at it.

LS: Yeah, right. I understand. When you first got to Philadelphia, did you have any trouble with American English? Did you have any trouble with understanding it or being understood?

JD: No. I've never hard any problems understanding Americans.

LS: When you got to the city, I know your wife was here. Did she orient you to the place and show you how to use public transportation? Or who did that? What did you do when you were waiting for your asylum?

JD: I explored on my own, actually. First, I would get in the trolley. The trolley was a way of helping. The trolley would take me all the way --- umm, is it the 13 trolley, for example, will take me all the way to, umm, Market Street and --- where does the end come?

LS: City Hall.

JD: City Hall and Market area, sometimes. And then, when --- of course, where Massa [Washington] used to originally work as a volunteer ---

LS: In the Nationalities Services Center.

JD: Yeah, Nationalities --- and the fact that she's my friend and ---

LS: You knew her from back home?

JD: From back home. We used to work together, went to school together, and all like that. So sometimes I used to go there, when she wanted me to do certain write-up(?) for her or run a certain errand for her. And stuff like that. That was kind of helping me move around, getting to the city. That was one of the ways. Sometimes I would get in the 11 trolley that goes from Woodland to the same area and then I would come back. Of course, one of the basic needs, there are times, you know, I was not used to certain --- certain

things I had not seen at all. And I had to ask questions, at the train station for example, all my exposure in Liberia, you might be surprised that people would think I would know certain things, but there were things here --- for example, I came here, certain machines to operate that I didn't know.

LS: Oh, like to get a train ticket.

JD: Get a train ticket, how you pass, there are the tickets, you know.

LS: To put the thing through.

JD: To put the things through. All those things. There were lot of things I didn't know. Some of them, I would ax people some, I would look at somebody, and not to look stupid. If I would seem, you know --- [laughs] And sometimes I wouldn't mind, I wouldn't be ashamed sometimes asking, because I know I haven't seen them before. To me, ignorance --- not every ignorance is stupidity. But to be stupid is bad. That is, if you are expected to know certain things that you don't know, especially if you were taught a certain thing over and over and over again. But if it was your first time in life.

LS: Someone was just telling me today that there are a lot of young Sudanese boys, they're minors, who have come here unaccompanied from a refugee camp, maybe sixty of them. And their parents --- they have no idea where their families are. They're on assistance. They get food stamps. Do you know what food stamps are?

JD: Yeah.

LS: And they get cash assistance. But now it's all on a card and you put the card in a machine and it tells you how much you have left with for food and how much you have left for cash and then you can --- but it's all electronic. And so they were trying to explain to these boys how to do this and they have never seen any of this before.

JD: I know. They have never seen it before. I can only imagine a lot of things. I never owned a credit card. Of course we don't --- the system is not there. Everything you buy in cash. I never own a credit

card, I never own a --- I mean, systems were --- everything was new to me, but because of my level of education, I could quickly read and understand some of the things faster than somebody who did not ---

LS: Do you think if you hadn't been educated that you might have been more intimidated?

JD: More intimidated. A lot of people sometimes --- you'd be surprised that there are Liberians here who have been here for like pretty close to ten years, that because of their educational level, still are not driving. They don't have a driver's license.

LS: Are they illiterate? They never learned to read? Is it kind of minimal?

JD: Some of them is minimum. Some of them haven't learned to read. It's a serious problem.

LS: Yeah, yeah.

JD: A very serious problem.

LS: And yet there's free literacy and free English classes everywhere. I mean, there's free literacy.

JD: I can't understand that. For example, at the Nationality Services, where Massa used to work, they teach literacy free.

LS: Yeah, you know there is. I remember talking to --- on the street I ran into a guy from Mali once and I started talking to him and ended up asking him if he would write his name down and he just said his name to me, so I figured he probably couldn't write very well. And then I said, "Do you know that to take English or English and literacy?" He said, "Well, I could use some English and literacy." And I said, "Do you know that three blocks up there's a literacy center?" Of course, he can't read the sign. [laughs]

JD: He can't read the sign. How is he going to know that?

LS: He said, "I didn't know that." I said, "I will send you this information in the mail and maybe someone can help you look at it." So there's kind of a lack of information.

JD: I know.

LS: How do you and your wife cook? Do you eat mostly Liberian food or American food?

JD: She cooks Liberian food most of the time. Most of the time she cooks Liberian food.

LS: Is it hard to get the ingredients or can you find them?

JD: No, we can find that there are some --- that's why I like this area. It is easy. They got a couple of African stores around where you can just go [snaps fingers] anytime.

LS: Like the Freetown Market.

JD: The Freetown market. Even the Chinese guy over there knows that there are a lot of Liberians in this area, so we have access to a lot of Liberian food products there. We just go and just buy stuffs there. It's easy.

LS: When you first got here, could you access the health system, the city clinics? Did you ever have to go to a doctor? That was no problem?

JD: Actually, I didn't have to a doctor right away but whenever I caught a bad headache or something, I just went to a clinic somewhere and got treated and that's it.

LS: In the city system, the city clinics or did your wife already have health insurance?

JD: She does have health insurance.

LS: Since you've been here so recently, I don't have to ask what it's like bringing up your children. This is yet to come. 'Cause a lot of people have a lot ---

JD: Yeah, I talk to some guys. They say I should get ready to get another job, that's all. [laughs]

LS: Right.

JD: Get ready to get a second job.

LS: Because of your children coming?

JD: Yeah, they're coming. They'll be more burden. And umm, it's cool, you know, I have to prepare for that. Even though there are good public schools, but I want the best of education for my kids. Some of

them are already managing to go to school while they are in that condition and they will just continue where they stopped, so. But I'm more concerned for my baby. She's just four years. She's turning five. She's still a little baby. The thirteen and fifteen years olds, you know, the fifteen year old, you know my son is already almost out of high school, so he's all right.

LS: But the little one will also adapt really fast.

JD: Yeah, that's the little one, that's the little one. She's the one that I didn't see --- I didn't send to school. I didn't see ( ) growing up yet. And that's my major concern.

LS: Do you have a sense of where you fit into American society, in white society versus black society? Or do you see no difference? Or do you see difference in how white Americans respond to you as opposed to black Americans?

JD: Actually, I don't know. I think it's like a part of human nature, for example, the school I work in. I get closer to most of the black Americans than the white Americans. I don't know whether it's a kind of chemistry but, for example, this one white lady that I am also close to, but that's because we almost work together. She teaches the other autistic session and I am always there.

LS: So you are talking about your colleagues and not the kids in the school?

JD: No, not the kids in the school. I don't even know the kids in the school besides the kid I work with.

LS: Right.

JD: And I think that the reason for that is that, even with black Americans, I don't think that I can count on any friend, let's say I have a friend that's a black American, no. Of course, I have a friend here, a white guy. But even out there we just speak to one another once a while, you know? And that was during the summer when we're easier accessible to come and say hi to one another.

LS: People are much more social in the summertime.

JD: Exactly, then the winter is cool. You don't see people --- people are not all over the place and doing stuff they like. I think, to answer your question, it's like a part of human nature where people tend to just feel [snaps fingers] quickly comfortable with their race and the kind of people that they can quicker get close to. That's why I, most of the time, I am around Liberians and stuff like that. But all the time I try to talk to white people, they've always been receptive. But again, like I said earlier, regarding --- when you ax about whether I do socialize with other people --- that comes to --- that also sometimes, you know the barrier is because of that also. You know, you cannot --- I mean --- I haven't had opportunity actually to work in an organization where I will be able to determine that for true. You know, how I can quicker get closer to white people and closer to black people. Because, you don't have no time to ---

LS: Yeah, yeah, the opportunities.

JD: The opportunities and the stuff like that, to deal with people on the one to one level. I think the first person I talked to, a white person, for example, was the day that I did an interview ---Amy --- what was Amy's last name? She works with JPC. I think she's --- what is she there? A director or something? Like I'm sitting talking with you, interviewing. You know, that was it. And since that time --- and then, of course, I am also, I don't know if I may say close, but I also talked to a lady I haven't seen on the phone. She's my insurance agent. That's because --- since I became insured with Allstate, I have given her like three different clients. So she always calls and we talk on the phone and stuff like that. So she will be somebody that I think if I saw that I can get close to, can be friends, you know? And things like that. But again, it's, it's, it's ---

LS: It's also people don't have time.

JD: Exactly. People just don't have time.

LS: You know American adults who, for example, let's say you're forty years old and you get divorced or something and then you would like to meet new people. But if you are at the same job and the same

thing, you don't even meet people. Because you're sort of in the same circuit, so it's not just people who come to the United States. It's Americans themselves.

JD: It's how the system is. That's why I refer you back to that particular situation, so --- Actually, I mean, I don't know whether that question will come. But I've had no problem with any kind of segregation. I've had no racial problem. I've had no discrimination problem, nothing. I didn't have nothing like that.

LS: Do people recognize that you have a non-American accent?

JD: Of course, yes, people do.

LS: Do people ever say where are you from?

JD: Well, sometimes people do ax and sometimes people still don't understand me when I talk and that's because I lose head(?) sometimes when I am talking and I get used to the usual Liberian, umm --- what do I say?

LS: Dialect?

JD: Not the dialect, but the usual Liberian English. That's how we call it. It's English, but mixed up with a lot of wrong pronunciations and a lot of slangs and, of course, then you lose head(?) and forget about.

LS: So if you really get comfortable, then you move back and ---

JD: You move back and you don't talk formally again. And the person --- it's difficult for the person to understand you, but, you know, people are more relaxed talking the way they grew up, the way they know how to talk and all that. I've seen in common among the black people, for example, here. African Americans, to me, they also have a lot of different way of saying certain things. And even though some of them are educated and they do, you know, want to speak in formal, they do speak formal, and most of the times you guys do understand one another, but they forget and regress to their original, uh, uh, uh, uh, I don't know, tone or language or whatever.

LS: And they might do that more with you than with someone like me because, like you were saying, in their head they might see that this is someone who belongs to my group.

JD: Exactly.

LS: So if someone who's really educated would probably not slip back into that with me.

JD: Exactly. That's true. That's very true.

LS: But I think that's the problem with these Liberian kids in the school is that they speak Liberian English but they're not educated so they don't have the other end of the formal spectrum.

JD: Exactly.

LS: So they can't accommodate ---

JD: There's no way for them to bridge the gap.

LS: And, unfortunately, a lot of their teachers have not been very sympathetic. Instead of saying, "I understand that you come from a different place and your English is a little different. We'll have to work on this," they say, "You're not speaking English." And so the kids are very demoralized.

JD: They're demoralized. That's true.

LS: And you just think about what kind of teacher would actually say that to a kid.

JD: There are actually strong kids, African kids, especially African kids. You know, we strong already. We come from --- you know, the kinds of things, for example, that would make the kids depressed here, won't easily depress a Liberian kid, considering what he's come from or what he's going through. Or it could depress him, but he wouldn't show it. Like the other kids ( ) because they know where they come from. Sometimes they just resort to saying, "Well, I think still even better than where I come from. Even though I'm still ridiculed, but it's better being ridiculed sometimes --- not *better*, but I'm ridiculed but I can live with that. But I think still, you know, we still have to work on these problems with them. I think I've heard some Liberians talk about those situations. Like the school I work, there's a Liberian teacher.

He's been here for, like, I think he's been over twenty years. Mr. Perry. He teaches math. And we talk all the time. His accent has not changed. He encouraged me to do some education courses, Masters education courses, and see if I can take up a teaching job since I have accounting background, in Math. He says that there are a lot of opportunities there. I was thinking of doing it, but I am still undecided. Finally, you want to go back home. You want to think about what you would do when you go back home.

LS: I will tell you something. One of the things you can do, if you want to teach, is you teach in a private school where they would like to diversify their faculty and it's really hard to keep Math teachers now because a lot of them want to go into the technology industry. But if you teach at a private school, often your children can go to the school for free.

JD: Wow.

LS: That's one of the benefits. That's one of the things that attract teachers into private schools. Sometimes their salaries tend to be a little bit lower, sometimes than in public school, but then if their kids come free, then the tuition can be six, seven, eight thousand dollars a year.

JD: Serious, and if you add that back to your salary, you know that you are receiving a lot.

LS: And then these private schools really like --- because they don't have, they mostly have a completely white faculty --- and they like to be able to diversify their faculty. And often you don't need to have a certification. You don't need to have the state certification.

JD: To teach in a private school? What do you need?

LS: Experience.

JD: Teaching experience?

LS: Mmm-hmm.

JD: What do I do, for example, if I want to teach in a private school now? I still have to go back to school, do a little couple of education courses?

LS: Let me finish this and then I'll talk to you about this?

JD: Okay. [laughs]

LS: If somebody you know, a relative or friend contacted you from Liberia and said, "I have the chance to immigrate to the US. Should I come?" what would you say? Would you recommend it or not?

JD: What I would say is, umm, "Yes, I think you should do it." The general well-being of a man is not only his, his umm --- because the reason why he would be migrating would be either one or two. One of the basic problems that most Liberians face now is economic problem. But of course there are political problems. And the political problems is the cause today of the economic problem in the country. Because it's easy for educated people like us to stay in Liberia and play deceit with almost one-point-seven million people there and the other people outside the country. But what will happen to our children tomorrow? When I say "play deceit," meaning we can stay there and just play the game the way the government wants it. Join the government. Be a part of the government. Just to survive. But what will happen to our kids tomorrow? What will happen with our values? What will happen to what we believe in? What will happen to what we preach? You understand what I'm saying? So I will say "Yes, migrate, come to the States. Get yourself break. This is a free country, as long as you come here you don't coming to do drugs, you're not coming to fall in trouble. You have a set goal, you have plans, you want to pay taxes, you want to develop the country. This is what America is looking for." I am not saying that America wants everybody to come from any country, just keeping coming like that. But if you have the opportunity, you can manage to come, you come. And this is a country that offers opportunity to everybody, as long as you have a dream to perceive, I would say come. And plan for tomorrow. For us --- like you guys like are the baby-boomers here [LS laughs] --- our time has been --- you've taken pretty close to over ten years out of my age from Liberia. You didn't take it all, but my life there, for example --- I just came from college in 1989. War started in 1990. I really haven't had good life all the time in Liberia because, for me, all the years were growing with a family, going to school, and then going to college. And so you came out. Before you could have your first job, to start having fun, the war came. ( ) war conditions. All

my life, I have worked under the conditions of a war situation. All my life I have worked under traumatic conditions. I've never worked under a real detraumatized situation until I came to the States. Even when I went to Sierra Leone, in '91, I was teaching. It didn't take long, the war started there again. So it's always been like that. What I'm saying is that my life back in Liberia, with my age now, has always been trying to catch up, trying to catch up. As soon as you build up on a certain thing, you build confidence in your own self, by trying to improve your own economic condition, ( ) what you've learned already, and then there's something happens. So it's always been like that, like that, like that. And since I came, in a short period of time, I would definitely not be in a place like this if I was back home. So I would tell somebody, encourage somebody to come if he has a dream.

LS: The last thing that I want to ask you is that we are going to be having a museum exhibit with photographs and other things, so that people can learn about the experience of African immigrants here. Is there anything in particular that you would like Americans who come into this exhibit to know about what it's like to be an immigrant or about what it's like to have to leave your country? Is there anything that you would like to see communicated?

JD: [sighs] Is there anything I would like to see communicated to these people? What would I like to see communicated? In absence of what we have already discussed?

LS: Well, yes. That's kind of a heavy question.

JD: Yes, it's a very *big* question. It's broad, too, though. I think, some of the things I would like to see --- I think most of the things I would like to see happen for immigrants is already happening, especially if you follow the right pattern and have the your status correct, you are in good condition with the government, the immigration, all like that. I think everything is already in place. The only thing would be that how do people get to know about most of these opportunities that are there. The other day, for example, I was over at one of my wife's cousin's place and she showed me a communication for asylees, for example, and the benefits that asylees can have for the first eight months.

LS: And you didn't know about that?

JD: I did not know. I was like, "But geez! Before I even got a job, I could have gotten money from the government. I could do a lot of things." A couple of guys told me that ( ) you can also go to school, get a ( ), and all kinds of stuff.

LS: Yeah, there is stuff.

JD: But people do not know about these things. So I think the only thing would be is to tap information of people, how can they get to know. And one of the things that I would like to see happening for most immigrants, especially Liberians, is a general clemency across the board for people who have not had an opportunity to get asylum. I tell you what, eh? There have been people in this country since 1990. That's eleven years ago, that's a lot of years. If you add 365 times eleven, that is very close to ---

LS: Why have they not been able to get asylum like you?

JD: Some people had a very wrong view about applying for asylum. They thought if you went to apply for asylum, you will be caught and deported. Some people thought that way. Some people applied for asylum and did not know how to present their cases and were probably sent to court ---

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]