



African Immigrants Project

Interview transcription

Massa Washington

Interview date: June 18, 2000

Location of interview: Interviewee's home in West Philadelphia

Country of origin: Liberia

Ethnic group/language group: Gola

Religion: Roman Catholic

Profession: Journalist / Job development coordinator

Level of education: Bachelor's degree not completed

Location of residence in Philadelphia: West Philadelphia

Ms. Washington first fled Liberia, where she worked as a journalist, in 1990. She returned to Liberia after two years, but in 1996 fled again, this time to Ghana. In 1997 she got a visitor's visa for the United States and went to stay with a friend in Atlanta. She applied for Temporary Protected Status, but returned to Liberia before it was granted in order to participate in the upcoming elections. She fled again to Ghana in 1999, after threats upon her life, and then came to the United States on a visitor's visa. She applied for asylum and was granted it.

Ms. Washington feels that the Liberian associations in Philadelphia recreate the ethnic divisions that exist back home, and she refuses to be a part of them. She is, however, a member of the Association of Liberia Journalists in the U.S.

Ms. Washington served a member of the Community Advisory Committee for the African Immigrant Project.

Interview Transcription

Interviewer: Leigh Swigart (LS)

Interviewee: Massa Washington (MW)

also present: Vera Viditz-Ward (VW), project photographer

[START OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

LS: Tell me your name, just for the record. So it's on the tape.

MW: My name is Massa Washington.

LS: And you are from what country?

MW: Liberia. West Africa.

LS: What is your ethnic group?

MW: Gola.

LS: Gola?

MW: Yeah.

LS: Where are they from in Liberia?

MW: The western region of Liberia.

LS: In the western region of Liberia. What's the biggest town in that region?

MW: Tubmanburg. That's the city, actually.

LS: Your native language then is?

MW: Gola.

LS: And your age is?

MW: I am thirty-five.

LS: Can you tell me a little bit about what your school experience is?

MW: School?

LS: Yes, school, education, training, all that.

MW: Right. I attended the Saint Teresa's Convent School for Girls, all-girls school in Monrovia. It's run by Catholic nuns and is considered as one of the top eight high schools in Liberia. But it's actually ---

LS: Were you born in Monrovia?

MW: Yes. I was born in Monrovia. It actually runs a kindergarten all the way to high school. Yeah.

LS: And you did that all the way through high school?

MW: I did that all the way through tenth grade, from kindergarten to tenth grade, I stayed at the convent. But in my last two years of high school, I spent it at the Assembly of God High School, where you have both boys and girls. Which is ---

LS: And the other one was just girls?

MW: Yes, uh-huh, yes.

LS: And you weren't living there? You were living at home?

MW: Yeah, I was living at home. I wasn't boarding at the convent. They weren't boarding then. Initially when it started, it started as a boarding school for all girls in the early '30s. But then as the years went on, things changed and they weren't accepting students to board anymore. So we went there as day students.

LS: And then what happened?

MW: And then in my last two year of high school, we had a military coup. I was in the tenth grade. That was in 1980. We had a military takeover. Things went bad for my family, because my father is a plumber and he was into private business with some friends. And it happened that one of the owner of his business was the sister of the president of Liberia at that time. President Tolbert 's sister actually had a share in my father's company and my father also had a share. And he was the general manager. And when the coup took place, things went bad. Their business was confiscated, my father was out of a job because he was the major breadwinner. My stepmother work as a clerk at one of the civil laws court. You know, just normally as a clerk. So my father was the major breadwinner. He had, like, eight children, plus my stepmother and everything. So when the coup took place, their business was confiscated and he was out of a job for like three years. So a lot of changes took place within the family. I had to change school, because where I went to school at that time, at the convent, it was like some twenty minutes ride from where I lived, because we lived at a suburb. We live in a suburb then. And so when things went bad, I had to change to a nearby school where I could just walk to school to save on transportation and stuff like that, because my father no longer had a car, he no longer had anything. And then also --- yeah, basically,

'cause of that, my brothers and sisters had also to change schools to somewhere nearby to accommodate the situation. And I stayed in the Liberian Assembly of God High School for two years and graduated in 1981. Yeah. Because of the situation, I couldn't go to college right away. I did want to go to the university. It was my dream, because a lot of my girlfriends and schoolmates from the convent were going on to the University of Liberia. And things were bad for me. My father didn't have the money and I couldn't go to the university because of several reasons. So I started training to be a journalist. And () training and I was finally recruited by the Ministry of Information as a cadet in training with the news agency. That was in 1983. And umm ---

LS: Who did you train with?

MW: I trained with, uh, couple of people who are considered big names now. At the time, it was --- one of the warlords who was then Deputy Minister. The major --- one of the warlords in the Liberian civil war --- he's a journalist by training. He's a journalist. He worked with the radio station LBS. As matter of fact he was trained at that station. And so at the time, when I went to the Ministry of Information as a cadet in training, he was like Deputy --- Assistant Minister or something like that. And I trained under him as well. And I also trained under --- I trained under a couple of big names, Liberian journalists, and stuff.

LS: Did you train individually with them?

MW: No, I mean, the Ministry, it was, it was a program sponsored by the Ministry. I trained with them. That was like 1983-84, and then in 1985, VOA, the Voice of America local program in Liberia, was training Liberian journalists and I was selected as one of the Liberian journalists to be trained, because --- one, I was a female and they were trying to encourage more females into the area, because at the time our journalism was predominantly a male dominated profession, and they try to encourage female journalist, especially from, you know, just coming from school and all of that. So I was recruited by the local Voice of America program, but under the auspices of the Liberian Broadcasting System. I was trained by VOA. For, actually, radio program in broadcasting. And then after that training, I worked with the Catholic radio station which was then Radio Veritas, umm, for like less than a year, producing health programs for the

Red Cross, because I was a Red Cross volunteer, a youth volunteer through high school, and after high school I still volunteered some time with them. So I also introduced the Red Cross health program and we focused on health issues concerning Liberians, but I was particularly concerned with women, Liberian women's stuff.

LS: So what kind of things did you ---

MW: We look at health issues like basic --- you know, what was happening with women in terms of teenage pregnancy, childbearing. We did a program called the Three N's(?) that was a form of contraceptive, natural contraceptive program, called the Three N's. And that kind of thing for women. And sometimes we did programs on women and children health issues, like if your child has diarrhea what to do. How to keep your environment clean when you have a baby. How to take care of yourself as a mother, when you have a baby, so that when you breastfeed you don't transmit disease to the child through breast-feeding. All of that. And we tried to promote breastfeeding as one of ---

LS: You have a lot of water coming down --- [thunderstorm is raging outside; MW gets up and returns]
All right.

MW: So I did that program with the Red Cross. And I did --- in the same time, I was like doing some work with the Catholic radio station in broadcasting, but I never fully went into broadcasting, even though I was originally trained for that. I realized that I preferred print form of journalism best, because for me at that time I thought broadcasting was a bit limited. I thought it limited my potential as to what I could do as a person, and as a Liberian journalist, and as a female journalist. So I ---

LS: In what way?

MW: Well, I felt it did not, umm --- it did not, umm --- I did not have the time to realize my full potential, because at the time, you see --- I think --- I guess it also has to do with this stereotype, in Liberia of basically Africa, most of the time female broadcasters, especially if you are doing disc jockey, or whatever like that, people don't see you as a very serious person. Okay? You are spinning music, your

vocabulary or your slang's on the radio. So people don't really see you as a very serious person, unlike if you are a newscaster, reading news or writing new script or stuff. They tell you it's a more super --- you know, kind of thing. And you know, the parents would be not very, very receptive towards their daughter being a female disc jockey.

LS: And were you ever a disc jockey?

MW: No, I was never --- I mean, what happened is, during the course of the war, I did do music, during the course of the war. I started something called the requests program. But at that time Liberia was divided, we had a war, I was caught up on the side with Mr. Charles Taylor and his rebel movement. And they had captured the radio station and they needed all journalists to work and I was going to school (). And I went to work and I said, "Well, okay." Because I didn't want to be seen as being, you know, allying myself with one warring faction at the time. So I said, "Well, the best I can do is, I will do requests." So that, you know, through my requests I can link Liberians who are apart at this wartime, because we had people on the different sides of divide. And so through my requests program, what I did was, I was receiving requests from Liberians who () who didn't know where their families was. And I would play it, and their families who were across the other side of the country, or across the other side of the city, they'd hear, because at the time, you know, the radio station was still going, the frequency, everything was okay. And I'm glad I did that. Because at the end of the war, I mean, a lot of people said, "Oh, through your requests program, I heard --- I knew that my husband was alive () or I knew that my brother was alive." And so I felt good doing that.

LS: Wow. When did that phase of the war end?

MW: Oh, that was in, like, 1990. Really, the war happened --- had just started in 1989, December. And by 1990 the entire country was, you know, upside down. Our area was captured by the rebels of Mr. Taylor. You know, Mr. Taylor had a lot of local support, because at the time, we had Samuel Doe who was the president then. He came as a military person, and, uh, uh, later on, he became elected. Even Doe, he was

an indigenous person. People were, like, hoping for an indigenous president. So they embrace the coup.

But being a military person, not being educated, not understanding the politics, things went bad.

LS: Samuel Doe was from what ethnic?

MW: He was Krahn. He was Krahn from the southeastern region. So things went bad and so when Taylor launched the rebel war it was successful in that the local people embraced him, because it was like everyone was fed up with Doe. Everyone was fed up with Doe. So they encouraged, they embraced Taylor. He didn't have to fight for a lot of the villages and towns that he captured. People just --- even the local army --- people just --- random --- the youth just joined him. So he just like kind of walked through villages and stuff. In less than --- I think one time the BBC network program said his movement was like the fastest rebel movement they had ever witnessed, because he just swept across the country like that overwhelming because people were not opposing him.

LS: Is he American-Liberian, Taylor?

MW: He's, he's, he's mixed. Fortunately or maybe unfortunately, he's something like myself. His father is from a Gola ethnic background like myself and his mother is from American --- America-Liberian descent. So he is like mix. My mother is like from Americo-Caribbean descent, way back. But my father family is indigenous. So Taylor and I were, like --- you know, we have that in common.

LS: Go back to your family. There's eight children. Where are you in that spread of children? The oldest?

MW: No, I am the third.

LS: From your father's first marriage?

MW: No, interestingly, my father never married my mother. In Africa, it's a bit different. It's a bit different. The men have been allowed to have as many wives and as many women and sometimes people tend to get extreme(?) like that. I am like the only one from my mother and my father. But my father has eight children --- I'm one of the eight --- with some of his other women as well.

LS: And he's Christian?

MW: Oh, yeah, my father's a Christian. As a matter of fact, he's --- he's from the Pentecostal faith or whatever.

LS: Hmm. And that church doesn't have any problem with ---

MW: Obviously, um, you know, we did have some problems as kids growing up, because my stepmother also came in with her set of children. Because sometimes we would like to think that it was a marriage of convenience. My father had his children. My stepmother had some experience, and she came with her set of children. So these children from all these background had to mix under one roof, you know, under one roof, and pretend to be a very normal family. It was not very easy because even when you have siblings of both parents, you do have individual differences and stuff. Now you have all of these children coming together under one roof from different, different backgrounds. It was not very easy growing up, because we fought a lot, we fought each other a lot. But I'm glad to say that at this point we're matured, we've grown, we're past that stage, we're very, very close now. Interestingly, my stepmother children will be closer to me than some of my siblings from my father. In fact, I have one of my brothers [brother's name omitted at request of interviewee] --- he is actually my stepmother's son, he is not my biological brother -- but we are very, very close and I wouldn't like to think that anyone would think he's not my brother or vice versa. We are very close. And I have another sister who is actually from my stepmother. We are very close. We're the closest than all of the children. So, you know, in a way we were able to move on. I think, we were children and a lot of things they didn't confront, but ---

LS: So the model for what Liberia should do is right in the family? [both laugh]

MW: Well, you see, I don't think it was a very good arrangement because I personally didn't like that. And in a way, maybe that's why I'm taking this long to really establish myself in terms of a family, still, because it's like --- I really wouldn't want to live my childhood in terms of that family, you know, setting, the way it was. You know, I really wouldn't, because I think it has a lot of disadvantages. A lot of

disadvantages. The children can be disadvantaged. Sometimes there are things that you think you deserve naturally from your parents, maybe their attention or what they could do for you but they are limited because they have other children there. They don't want to be seen as being biased. For example, my father wouldn't want to be --- to think that --- he wouldn't want his wife to think that he loved his children better than her children. These children were also in the house. But they came to live in our house, my father's house, and everything --- so even sometimes when we fought and we said things, nasty things to them like "After all, you in my father house. Get out!" and stuff like that, he would take serious issue with us. He was like, "All of you are my children." And sometimes we felt very deprived. And you know --- I'm sure my stepmother had her own share of problems, because she was dealing with these children who she didn't --- you know, she didn't gave birth to. Who were all different. And she had to cope with us. At the time, then, maybe we didn't really understand. We were young. But now that I am a woman, I think she did her best. She didn't --- well, she could have done some things differently, but I think she did her best.

LS: It wasn't such a bad job after all?

MW: It wasn't such a bad job after all. And, you know, today we can all sit and laugh and eat together as a family. But for me, I would prefer if I was married to one man and have maybe just two kids or maybe just three kids. Maybe because I am different from my parents in the sense that I have had more exposure and maybe I am more educated. In other words, I've had more opportunities than they had in their time. So I wouldn't like to repeat their mistakes. I think it's left with me to make better of what they couldn't do best. I wouldn't like to repeat their mistakes.

LS: How long have you been in the US?

MW: I have been here --- actually 23rd of May was, like, my one year here.

LS: And how long have you been in Philadelphia? You came directly to Philadelphia when you came to the US?

MW: Umm, I came originally to Maryland, where I have a girlfriend from school. A childhood friend from school. She's been in the States, like, some seventeen, eighteen years. So I came directly to her and then I stayed with her for three days, and then I just sort of didn't that I wanted there to stay there, and then I have some friends, family friends here in Philadelphia, who were actually saying to come to them and I was, like, deciding which of these family friends to be with and then finally everyone kept convincing me Philadelphia is the place that's easier for immigrants. We have a lot of Liberians, a lot of other Africans, a lot of other immigrants who are sympathetic. You will get things done faster. So I came here to Philadelphia three days after I arrived. So by the 25th or 26th I was here and I've been here ever since.

LS: And you live in West Philadelphia? Who do you live with here?

MW: Now I share this house with a girlfriend from home. Yes. She's actually someone who I hired back home when I was --- when we started this Women's Movement. I was in charge of recruiting women from the different communities to work along with us. And she was one of those I recruited from one of the communities. And she eventually became our regional supervisor for the, you know, vernaculars for the languages and I'm glad I did that. We work very well together and everything. And now here I am --- I'm sharing this place with her.

LS: And how long has she been here?

MW: In this house?

LS: In the US?

MW: Oh, she's been here since 1998. She actually came on a women's conference that --- she came to represent us. () conference that was sponsored by the USAID/Liberia. And she came and didn't go back. Unfortunately for her, she came in August of '98. And then in September of '98 we had another uprising in Monrovia with Roosevelt Johnson, this other militia, and Mr. Taylor. There was an incidence in US Embassy where someone was shot. A US official was wounded --- all of that. So --- I mean ---

LS: And then she applied for asylum?

MW: Yeah, she just stayed, she just couldn't go back. Everybody would have thought it would have been crazy of her to go back.

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

MW: Umm-mmm.

LS: Or in the US?

MW: Yes, I have my stepmother who is in Rhode Island.

LS: Oh, is that right?

MW: Yes, my stepmother's in Rhode Island. And my sister is also in Rhode Island. I have a sister who is --- the one I was telling about you earlier. She is in Rhode Island with my stepmother.

LS: And your father is ---?

MW: My father is in Liberia. And I have a sister who has just come. She called me two weeks ago. One of my father's daughters --- you know, my father is a typical African man. He has all these children and some of them didn't actually grow up in the house with us. So this one, you know, I don't know very well. I've heard of her. Okay, I've met her like once or twice. But she, like, emerge after the war. You know, the war did a lot of things --- a lot of good things, a lot of bad things. You know, these --- even African men, some of them who are married, on the civilized side, like we will say back home --- like going to the church and all that kind of () --- they still maintain, you know, the different --- the different connections out there in terms of, you know --- because there's this polygamous kind of thing. Somehow I think it's embedded. So my father had some of his children, and this girl is apparently one of them. I don't know her very well. So she called two weeks ago. I wasn't here, but my girlfriend took her number and said, "Oh, someone called and she said she's your sister from home. And she's here in the States, but she's in Texas. And she's calling to, you know, connect, and she wants you to get in touch with her. So

she called.” And I said, “Oh, yeah, she’s one of my father’s daughters. I have heard of her. [LS laughs] I’ve seen her once, but I don’t really know her.” And she’s like, 21, I think. She’s like 21. So we don’t know how many of these incidents will keep coming up ---

LS: There could be a lot of family members showing up ---

MW: But it’s very typical of African men.

LS: Well, yeah, we do know that.

LS: So right now you are working as ---

MW: A job developer, actually called “job development coordinator” or something, but it’s actually a job development job ().

LS: And it’s for?

MW: Warren E. Smith Health Centers.

LS: And it’s for the handicapped? Is that right?

MW: Yes, people who have some form of disabilities, but basically the catchword there is mental retardation. We will work with people who have other forms of disabilities, like physical disabilities, but our focus is the mental retardation.

LS: I want to move on and get your whole story about how it is you ended up leaving Liberia. So go back --- so you were working as a journalist. And then you keep working on through the ‘90s? Is that what you do?

MW: Yeah.

LS: And you moved to print journalism from broadcasting?

MW: Yes, okay, I switched from broadcasting to print. And I was with the Liberian News Agency which is actually broadcasting and print (). And then I switched to the government’s paper. The government has always had its own paper, newspaper, and I switched to that, because I was with the government

Ministry of Information. So I switched to the new Liberian newspaper as a cadet at that time, because I had just decided I was going back to school. So I enrolled at the university. I had actually gone to work as a full time employee, but because I decided to go back to school --- so, you know, I was stripped of certain privileges, like, because it was unethical, you couldn't go to school and maintain a full time job. Which paid more money and everything. So I had a choice: to either don't go back to school, keep the job which wasn't paying too bad according to Liberian standard or get a job as a cadet which is, like, in theory is more like if you were working part time but then still have the opportunity of going to school and still keep the job. So I chose to go to school. And then, you know, switch from a full time employee to, umm, something like an employee in training, or something like a cadet. Because I always thought that if I went to school and better myself, at the end of the day, I could come back and still get maybe a better position, a higher paying job, or something like that. So I --- and I'm glad I did. So I worked with, um ---

LS: Hang on. [break in tape]

MW: So I switched to broadcasting and started writing for the government paper. At first I was assigned just any story because I had just come and I was still pretty young. I was very thin, I weighed I think like eighty pounds ---

LS: Uuf!

MW: And most of the time, to go on assignment --- I remember, my first assignment my editor had said to me, "Do you have a coat?" Because I was very thin. "Do you have a coat or something?" So I said, "No." And he was saying, "You need to get you a couple of coats, because if we send you out there, we want people to take you serious because you are very thin, you are very young." I was, like, the youngest in the newsroom, I had just --- and I was the only female in that newsroom. It had been dominated by males for many, many, many years. So I was, like, the only female and I had all of this, you know, natural --- these biases against me in a way. And then of course there was this thing, too --- like, "Can she do it?"

LS: And if you look bigger --- ?

MW: Yes, if I looked bigger --- the thing was if I looked bigger, people will take me serious, because I was now beginning to go out, interview government ministers, interview bank presidents on policies, and all of that. And here I was --- eighty pounds, very thin, look younger than my years, actually, 'cause --- And then, of course, I was in the newsroom with all these, all these men, and stuff. And so I got me a couple of --- I went to the Red Cross, back to the Red Cross, because I never broke my relationship with them --- they have a thrift store. I went there and got me a couple of coats. [both laugh] Okay, you know, what I did was I got the unisex one that I would wear inside out. Because I didn't have money to be buying, changing all these clothes. So I just went to the Red Cross thrift store. And because I was a good Red Cross volunteer, I got discount and I got me couple of coats, unisex where I could dress --- wear them both side (). And I remember I had like three hanging up in the newsroom. The newsroom was a big hall, with just desks, desks, desks. And it was only the feature editor and the editor-in-chief who had their own offices, so all of us were in the newsroom and you see all these different coats hanging. And I took my own three coats and I hung them up there, right behind my desks. And I started --- and I --- that was in 1985, when I went there with the New Liberian Newspaper. And I stayed with them until 1990, until the war, 1990, when things --- when () with the war and everything, everything, you know, came to a standstill. And then I found myself on the side of Mr. Taylor, because the rebels captured our area and what they did was, they always took with them human shields. So my family was one of the many families that were carried on to Dupont Road. And I was there. And then after the war, actually () I fled to Cote D'Ivoire, the 24th of December, 1990. Christmas Day finally on the bus from Danane to Abidjan, which is like eight hours. Anyway, when I came back to --- I went back home to Liberia in 1992 ---

LS: So you were in Abidjan for two years?

MW: Yes, I stayed in Abidjan for two years as a refugee. At the time it was bad for refugees, because the government of la Cote D'Ivoire did not recognize Liberians as refugees, you know, because, I guess, of political and other implications. Perhaps if they had recognized us they would have been maybe

compelled to do certain things in terms of helping provide certain basic needs for refugees or stuff like that. I remember on, um --- it was, I think, the independence of Cote D'Ivoire? I think. Or it was on New Year's Day, President Houphouët-Boigny was giving his New Year's Day message or something, and he did mention the situation of Liberia. It was 1991 --- the war was still raging heavily in Liberia. And I will never forget one of the statement he made, which I can remember very distinctly, was that he was, umm, he said, umm, people had been asking him about the situation with Liberia and that Cote d'Ivoire played a direct role in the destruction of Liberia and what was the status of Liberian refugees. As a matter of fact, he didn't have any refugees in la Cote D'Ivoire and his reason was --- he went on to justify that he considers Liberians as political guests of the state, but they were not refugees. And so ---

LS: And what did that mean, "political guests"? [LS laughs]

MW: It was like, well, he recognized that they *are* living there, but not necessarily as refugees because ---

LS: Yeah.

MW: You know, of the implication that refugee, the status of refugee had.

LS: What did you do when you were there for two years?

MW: Um, first, I --- actually, I fled the border alone. It was my first time, I had never crossed into la Cote d'Ivoire before. I didn't know la Cote d'Ivoire.

LS: Had you ever been out of Liberia?

MW: Before then I had been out of Liberia, but just one place --- Sierra Leone, where I had attended in 1986 an international youth conference of Red Cross youth, where we had Red Cross youth coming from all over the world --- Sweden, Spain, US, everywhere. And this conference was held in Freetown, Sierra Leone. And I was, like, by this time, I was heading the Youth Department and active in the Liberian Red Cross Youth Congress, so I attended this conference. It was my first time out of Liberia. And then when the war came in 1990 and I had to cross the border into la Cote D'Ivoire, I didn't know anyone, I just went with the rest --- I just went with the rest of the refugees. We had to get out. It was getting bad.

ECOMOG had just come, she was trying to intervene, and somehow, you know, she was helping --- they were fighting the rebels and they were bombarding and then we kept having multiple warring factions emerging. It was just terrible. Everywhere they were committing atrocities. All of the sides. So at that point in time I just figured that if I didn't get out, I would die. I feel that I would not have survived the war if I had stayed.

LS: Were journalists in particular --- ?

MW: Yes, journalists in particular. As a matter of fact, a lot of us had to stay underground for a long time during active fighting because it was dangerous. A lot of journalists had been killed and we finally went to work for the radio station when Taylor himself came and made a press conference and promised that journalists will be protected. And all that kind of thing. And based upon that, my father took me to sign up, you know, reported me to work and I was with the station for awhile. But when I fled into la Cote D'Ivoire, actually I had met a girl Liberian who was a student ---

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE A]

LS: The Liberian government at the time had this bilateral relationship with the government of la Cote D'Ivoire where students in la Cote D'Ivoire, at the university level, wishing to learn French could come to --- I mean, English --- could come to the University of Liberia and then Liberians who wanted to learn French could go to the University of la Cote D'Ivoire, French Department. And at that time, interestingly, I was major in French. I was a French major and I was minoring Mass Communications, Print. And then so I knew a lot of French in terms of written, you know, theory, and that semester when the war actually hit in 1990, when the school was shut down, the university, it was, like, my --- I should have gone for my internship to la Cote D'Ivoire the following semester. So when I met this girl on Dupont Road, she was also displaced, she was a student studying French in la Cote D'Ivoire, Liberian student who had come for holidays, for the Christmas, and got caught up in the war and she had lived there for like five years. So I met her through another colleague who was a cameraman, a motion picture cameraman, she was his girlfriend. And we lived together during the war on Dupont Road. And then when she had to get out, she was very frantic about getting out, she was so frightened because she had not lived in Liberia for five years, and she had come for vacation and the war had caught her dead. She was going crazy. And she was, like, she had to get out and her boyfriend didn't see the need to get out at the time, you know, typical journalist. And so when I finally decided I was getting out, you know, tension and everything was getting too much, I didn't have anywhere to go and she said, "But you can come with me. I've lived there for some time." And she still had her room available, you know, on the dorm, which was actually not very good to take me there on the dorm with her. It was not very good. But anyway I did follow her and --- followed this strange girl and we got to la Cote D'Ivoire and, of course, went there and then we realized that I couldn't be accommodated on the dormitory which was --- we just couldn't do that. Then she tried to find a place for me with another Li --- another girlfriend of hers whom she thought would accommodate me. In the process it just never worked, because a lot of Liberians had been crossing the

border, going to la Cote D'Ivoire, and Liberians were just taking --- you know, just hosting them, not knowing them, and they were also becoming overwhelmed.

LS: Of course.

MW: They were also becoming overwhelmed. So, at that point in time, they just couldn't take any more.

And so we met this Liberian girl, who was just () because they were all students in French in la Cote D'Ivoire, and she was saying to her "Please, you know, this is a friend from Liberia. She's my boyfriend's friend. They work together, she's very nice and everything. She doesn't know anybody here. I can't take her on the dorm. I thought I could do that so I brought her, but please can you take her?" So she said, "Oh, I can't do it. I already got two persons." And, but, you know, and that's true(?). So at the end of the day, what she decided was, she said, "Well, okay." If her scholarship money had come, she said "All right, then. I will rent a room." 'Cause she had --- along with me --- she had carried her two sisters, younger sisters with her. "--- rent a room for the rest of you guys to be there and then I will be on the dorm and I will be commuting." Which was very, very kind of her. And she did rent a room in this place called Aquadou Village, near Benjavielle, you know, out of Cote d'Ivoire, like going out of town. And West Philly is a luxurious neighborhood compared to where --- because she didn't have much money, it was her scholarship money. We didn't have any, too. We had come on her. That was the best she could have done. So she finally found this room, this semi-shack, actually the same shack [MW showing photos?], and she was paying, like, how much? She was paying like fifteen thousand CFA. And that was a *lot* of money.

LS: That's a lot for that little.

MW: That was a lot of money, even --- because she was stretching herself paying it for the three of us --- her two sisters and I.

LS: And you had no electricity and no water?

MW: We had no electricity, we had no water. We used to buy ice water from across the street. I mean, the neighborhood --- it was where a lot of the Burkina () from Burkina Faso, where they grew their cattles, you know, their cows and stuff like that. And so, you know, the cow feces would be all over the place and constant noise and the flies, you know. And the flies, and all the kind of thing --- but it was the best, because I couldn't live in Liberia then. I would have died. That's how I felt. So I stayed there with --- her name is [name of friend omitted at request of interviewee] --- I stayed there with [name of friend omitted at request of interviewee] and her sister and she kept commuting, trying to get us food, and after awhile her scholarship wasn't renewed because the Liberian government could not continue with her own share of the bargain, because it's a bilateral thing. So Liberian student who were on scholarship there in Cote D'Ivoire couldn't benefit from the scholarship anymore, because the university authorities said, "Well, this is a bilateral thing. Our students are not benefiting anymore, we can't continue this program." So that program was abolished and then she had to come there with us. Anyway, stayed there for sometime and then I started looking around and then what I started, I started an English school. Not really school, I used to call it "school" but it wasn't a school. It was just tutorial for French children, for Ivorian children in the neighborhood. I started to do English teaching them with their homework and I called it "Study Class," I called it "English Study Class." And then I went around the village asking the parents to please send their children to this English Study Class in the evening. The children would leave school at three, Ivorian children leave school at three, and then when they come, five o'clock they come to me, and I am with them from five until seven teaching them English, and then the parents would pay, they started paying. And then I ---

LS: Very resourceful.

MW: Yeah. And then I started doing not too badly. Then another Liberian guy who had trained with the EOWA(?) came and said "Oh, but why don't we join?" because he was renting an apartment with a big porch or something, you know, concrete house and he said, "But why don't you join with me? Let's take it over there." So I joined with him and went and then they used to call it, you know, Liberian School. It

wasn't really Liberian school. Not a regular school, per se. But in the village they started calling it Liberian School and so he joined me and we started teaching English. And some Liberians started coming also, because some Liberians had problems, couldn't speak English. We started doing that and then when I started getting around, getting to know people better, and things were opening up for me, I decided to go --- I said, well since I was already a university student, major in French, and this was a bilateral program, maybe if I follow up with the university I could be accepted. Because by then my papers had already been --- was already sent to the University of la Cote D'Ivoire because there should have been four of our students --- two girls, no three girls and a male --- who should have gone for our internship that semester before the war. So one of the girls came --- [name of friend omitted at request of interviewee]--- and I was saying to [name of friend omitted at request of interviewee], "Maybe if we follow up with the university, our papers will be there. Maybe they will feel sorry for us and let us." So she said, "Let's try." So we went to the university and we met with this French lady, Madame Coulibaly, who was *so* very good. A real human being. We met with her and explained to her that we were students at the university, major in French, and this was had happened. We would like to continue and our papers should have been, whether she could check it for us, and she was the deputy head of the French-English Program. And she did. She checked it and she said, "Oh, yes. Your papers came but the agreement was not finalized." She said, "So () right now, you know, there's been a hold to that agreement. So we cannot accept you both as students here on that bilateral program. But what I could do for you is I can get you enrolled in the French program here at the university. I can get you enrolled, but you have to do everything all over. We cannot accept your credits from the university, you have to sit an aptitude test." So it's like we were just --- so we did all of that, sat the aptitude test. They placed us and everything. And then she said, "But after some time, you have to find the tuition." Her main thing was to get us in, and then she figured something will work out. So Madam Coulibaly got us in at the University of la Cote D'Ivoire and we stayed there one semester, we did very fine because, um --- but we could not come up with --- at that time they were paying like fifty-two thousand CFA, which was like almost two hundred US dollars, 150 or something like that, at that time. There was *no way* I could have come up with that

amount. There was no way. So we just couldn't come up with it and they kept putting us --- every now they put our names on the list of delinquent students who were not paying, and we'd go to her, 'cause she was interceding for us, we'd go to her and explain, and she would go to the admission department and explain our situation, and they will feel sorry for us, take our names off the list and say, "Okay, you can come to school" because we were doing very fine in terms of grades and everything. But then it became overwhelming for her, because we couldn't continue like this any longer.

LS: Right.

MW: And then one time she called us in her office and said, "You know, this thing ---" We had gone like two semesters now, like a year, and she said, "But I am very sorry. We can't keep you here in the school. You are not paying your tuition at all." You know? Every time they will call her. She was like some, you know, a formal guardian or something because she was giving us clothes, she would give us canned food and stuff. Very nice woman. We just couldn't make it. So she said, "I don't know. I can't continue this anymore. I wish I had the money. I would do it for you, but I can't. I can't." Then I remember I had said to her, "Okay, um ---" Then she had said, "But what I could do for you, I can let you---" because we had, like, the final exam to at least get the A Level Certificate, so she said, "Well, I can let you take the exam, but we are not going to --- you know, we can mark your papers but we won't give you any grades, we won't give you anything, because you have not paid. Because like two semesters you have not paid." So she arranged, and we did sit the final exams that year, but of course we never came up with that money and at the end of the day, we just drop ourselves. [name of friend omitted at request of interviewee] said to me, "But why are we wasting our time? There's no way we can come up with this money. We can't make it." So we just stopped going to school and one time we went to Mrs. Coulibaly and said to her, "We can't continue any longer, this is the situation." And she cried.

LS: Ooh!

MW: Yeah, she cried, she was very sympathetic. She cried. She said, "I am so impressed with you guys, you've come in. you've decided you want to come to school by all means. I am so very sorry I can't do

more than this.” Because she was already sponsoring a Liberian boy who was Gio. She was already sponsoring him. So we dropped. We didn’t get any credits for that one year of work at the university. We didn’t get any credit at all. And then, you know --- when you just continue like that --- I said to her, “But I think we need to go home.” By then the peacekeeping force had started making some, you know, leeways in terms of pushing the rebels out of the city. They had pushed Mr. Taylor all the way to Kakata and stuff. And we kept hearing news that Monrovia was getting relatively safe. The interim government had gone in. They had put in some interim administration. They had things going in a way. And a lot of Liberians were going home. You know, we just decided one day, “Let’s go back.” And that was in February of 1992. And we just pack up one day, I wrote my pa and said, “I’m coming home.” He wrote me back, said, “Do not come because it’s very dangerous, it’s risky.” And I said to him, “I am coming home. I can’t live here.” And so I went back home. When I got back home, I went to the Ministry of Information, my job was still there, my old job with the newspaper was still there. As a matter of fact, they needed an assistant news editor because the news editor had been killed. And then I just decided, “No.” I didn’t want to work for a government media. I didn’t want to have anything to do with the government, because, you know, what we saw --- government officials were targeted during the war, they were killed, and the war was still almost not finished. I had an uncle who was a deputy minister at the Ministry of Information. He was beheaded and his head was actually, you know, lifted around Dupont, and one of my brothers had happened to see it and, you know --- so I said, no, I didn’t want to work for the government media. I didn’t want to risk it. Then I decided to work for the Inquirer, the Monrovia Inquirer. I went there as the only female in the newsroom. And I stayed, I worked with them until, um, we’d organized the Liberia Women’s Initiative, and then when they had the April 6th fighting --- which was terrible, they burnt our offices down at the Inquirer ---

LS: April 6th --- what year?

MW: ’96.

LS: ’96, okay.

MW: Yes, they had a fighting in town. They were chasing everybody, they burned our offices. One of our photographers was killed. He was very, very good at his job. He was killed, which was very disturbing, because he worked directly with me and he had covered the Liberian war extensively. And he was killed. And then after April 6th, I fled again. I fled and went to Ghana. We had an incident with the boat, the Bulk Challenge, where Liberians are on the boat and stuff. So I fled and went to Ghana and I tried a thing with other Liberians to call the attention of the international community towards the plight of Liberians in the boat, but by then a lot of people were lobbying, the international community was very great, and they were lobbying a lot all over the place. And I was on even BBC. I called the BBC, I was, uhh, because Save the Children, Ghana, was concerned about the situation of women and children on the boat at the time and I met this guy who was the head of that program, who had actually worked in Liberia before. So he knew the situation and so when I met with him, we discussing everything, so he said, "But why don't you work along with us? Since you're a media person, you understand the situation better, you can help guide us." So I worked along with them, they gave me small something, you know.

LS: So you worked for Save the Children?

MW: No, but not --- it's like --- I was not really, you know, a staff person, like you know (), "This is a Liberian who knows the situation" So it was like, "Uh-huh." So I helped with that. And one time they had me on BBC, you know, talking about the situation and all of that. And then after April 6, I went back home. I always didn't want to --- no, after April 6th I applied for a visa in Ghana and I was told that I could not get a visa, because I want to come here to the States. Because the wars was not over yet in Liberia. And I was told I couldn't get a visa in Ghana, because it wasn't my place, my station. But then the councilor there assured me that I could get a visa if I went to Monrovia. So I stayed in Ghana a little while and then when the roads reopened, I went back home. Things were so bad, they were so discouraging. They had gone to my house looking for me. They beat one of my brothers with the butt of the gun. He still carries a scar, you know, because he wouldn't say where I was. Of course, he didn't know where I was. And they broke in our house. My father had two houses. One was burnt. Yeah, things

were bad. One of my brothers was killed, not because of me, but [name omitted at request of interviewee] was killed. And it was just so terrible. I couldn't stay. It was so risky. So I went to the US Embassy and I got a visa. I came to the States in 1997. I came in the States in '97, February, but I lived down south where I have a foster sister, someone my father had reared and I stayed there.

LS: Where in the south?

MW: Atlanta, some place called Decatur, and I stayed with her, waiting for the war to be over, to go back home, because by then we had started the Women's Initiative and it was doing fine. We were getting a lot of funding for projects and stuff. And I wanted to go home. I didn't want to stay away from home because things were getting bad for my family. My father and I are very, very close. I've never lived with my mother. [text omitted at request of interviewee] I've lived with my father since eight months, until, uh, I came and there was no one --- none of the big children were around for him. He was the only one. My stepmother had come to the States, to her daughter, and one of my brothers ---

LS: Just because of the condition?

MW: Yeah, because of the situation.

LS: How did your father --- that must have been hard for your father.

MW: Yes, it was difficult for him. When I finally saw him, I cried. It was difficult for him because he didn't know where two of his sons were at that time. One of my brothers had been killed. That he knew of. He was still grieving. He didn't know where the other two were. One turned up in Freetown, actually. () He said he walked across the border. One turned up in Freetown. Later on the other one came, said he was somewhere in one village, someplace he met some people, but at that time my father didn't know where the two boys were. One had died. You know, I have fled into Ghana and he didn't --- he was not hearing from me because there was no means of communication. My stepmother here was going crazy because there was no means of communication either. My father was alone with these other minor children. It was very hard for him. Anyway, when I went back in, when I was going back in, when they

reopened the road April 6th, and I took toothbrush, even toothbrush, because I just couldn't --- their needs --- I couldn't stop imagining what their needs would be. I remember I even took a bottle of mineral water and I guess, you know, after awhile you just flip, because I went to the supermarket and I was shopping, and I was shopping, and I was shopping. So one of my friends said, "Why are you shopping like this?" And I said, "My father is there. They've not eaten for months. Nobody is there with him except the children." He said, "But these things gonna run out ---" I was buying --- it's like I wanted to buy the entire supermarket, I wanna buy entire supermarket. I bought toothbrushes, bath towels, everything. I just --- for me, you know, the need was just so much. And I remember I took this bottle of mineral water --- be like this [shows LS] and when I arrive at the airport, someone said, "Why are you carrying these thing?" I said, "I am taking water for my father." And the man look at me, he like, he said, "But that water is gonna run out." And I said, "Well, at least while I am there, he will have that to drink. When it run out, I will find him more water to drink." Because we were hearing stories. People were dying from diarrhea, which was actually, um --- it had actually been eradicated in Liberia for awhile. Certain diseases were eradicated, but because of the war --- So people were dying from diarrhea, starvation and all that kind of thing. And I was just thinking about my pa. I was thinking of what if I took him some mineral water and stuff, at least while I'm there he's not going to be drinking all those dirty water, because sanitation had broken down. And I took a lot of medication, I took even aspirin. I went to the pharmacy. Because in Ghana, you have to have prescription before you get --- like here. In Liberia it's a bit different, almost anybody can get anything like that official. But in Ghana, they're much more organized, you got to have prescription. So I wanted medication for malaria, for diarrhea, for everything imaginable. And I couldn't get them. So what I was doing was, I was sending different people and some doctor friends I knew, you know, I would go to all of them: "Please, can you do me a prescription for malaria pills, for this, for that. And they were doing it and I was just sending different people, because I couldn't be seen buying all these things. So I carried a small bag, bigger than this paper bag [shows LS] with all these different, you know, medications and stuff. I even carried Vicks. I carried aspirin. And all these things. I carried all sort of things. I just wanted to carry the entire Ghana. So when I got home, my

father didn't know I was coming, because there was no way that I could have communicated. When I got there, he was surprised. He was sitting in the back yard under the tree. They had not eaten anything that day, because --- what they did was, they were only like finding one meal a day now --- and so they will wait, late, so that when they eat that one meal they don't get hungry too early, and then they can go to bed and then --- So they had not eaten yet for that day. They did have something, but they were waiting for that time before they can prepare to eat. And I arrived there just before it was time to prepare. And when the taxi put me down, I had all these things, and the neighbors were shouting, "Oh, Mr. Washington!" And I remember when he saw me, he screamed. I thought he was going to go off. He couldn't believe me. He actually thought I was a ghost and why not? But my father being my father, the first question he asked me was, "What are you doing here?" He said, "I knew you were safe, I knew you were well. As long as I knew you were in Ghana. But what are you doing here?" You know? I said, "But you are here. I had to come. I couldn't sleep. Because I was going crazy." I didn't know what was happening in my family. I didn't know --- when the Bulk Challenge, the boat, finally dock at a village [in Ghana], out of town, I got in a Jeep with some other Liberians and we went there. I was looking for my brothers. I was thinking that some of them will be on this boat. Went there, asking everybody, "Did you see my brothers?" I saw some friends, some relatives, but they had not seen any of my family. You know, I saw some friends, neighbors, none of my family, so I did help some neighbors, but I didn't see any of my brothers, I didn't see anybody, nobody had any news from home, my family, for me, I was going crazy. So I had to go in. Because my little sister, I have a little sister who is in Ghana now on the refugee camp. Um, I took her since she was six. She's fourteen now. At that time, she was like nine and she had been with me all along. She was like my own daughter and she was there. I was like, maybe she's gone. Maybe she dead from starvation, maybe she's been raped now. All these things are happening so I was going crazy. I had to go in. So my father saw me and he asked me, "What are you doing here?" I say, "I came here because you are here." He said to me, "I've lived my life. I really don't care what happen to me. I just don't want any of you guys here with me. It's very risky." He says, "People came here looking for you. They beat one of your brothers, and right now he's in hiding because he knows these boys" ---

one of my youngest brother. So he said, "They beat [name omitted at request of interviewee] up. They almost killed him looking for you. He didn't know where you were." And you know --- he asked me, said, "Do you think your coming here's going to do us any good? It's going to increase my worries. Now I have to worry about you as well. I don't think it was right." He just flipped. I mean, he just --- this man had not seen me for six-eight months, they have () serious war like that, you know he saw me, he just carried on, you know. He was just --- I guess he was frustrated. he was just --- saying all sort of nasty things to me. "I don't understand what you doing here, you want to die, I told you I don't like this job you doing, you choose all of the dangerous job. You want to work for the Red Cross, you want to be a journalist. I don't like this thing. You want to be on the radio, you want to be working in newspaper." Then, uh, what he said? Um. "I don't know maybe if you had not been born it would have been better because, you know ---" He said, he said, "I will live and see you die." He said, "I will bury you and I don't want that." And he started to cry --- anyway --- I started to cry, you know. Then later on we went in --- of course they had to change their entire meal. Because what they were having was like just one piece of fish and a big pot of greens --- you know, greens for the calcium, and everything, for the iron. So what I brought, they changed the food that day. Everybody had something nice and everything. We gave some things to the neighbors and then we talk a long time into the night. [text omitted at request of interviewee] After we discussing everything, he said, "So what are your plans?" So I said, "I've come home." I said to him, "I've come home." He said, "No. I don't want you here." I said, "But where can I go? I don't have money, I don't ---" He said, "I don't know, but you can't stay here." He said, "You can't stay here." Then he said to me, "Do you know that ---" he told me this photographer had been killed. Because this boy, we work as a team. We cover the war extensively. He was very good, very brave and everything. Then he said, he said, "Do you know this boy was killed?" And then my mind went blank. I said, "Who?" He said, "What? This boy who used to come here --- the photographer ()." And I didn't want to realize he had been killed. He said, "And you and he worked together very closely." He said, "So if he's killed, I'm afraid you are going to be killed, because they've been here already looking for you twice. Now your brother is in hiding because of you." So we talk a long time [text omitted at request of interviewee]. I

went to bed, I didn't sleep in my room, I slept in his room with him, we talk a long time and, um, I woke up that morning, you know, I made my decision. And I woke up that morning, I said to him, "I think I will go to the embassy and get a visa and go to the States." Because everybody was coming here. So I said to him "I'll go to the States." Then he said, "I hope you get a visa to go." But by then I had not seen my little sister, who was also cut off from him, because she was with other female relatives. So I went to see her and she had sores all over the skin, because where she was, um, () because they [the rebels] were not burying the dead. You know, as they killed people they leave them, so the ants, the ants were big and they bite you and make sore. When I saw her, she had sores all over the body, she was crying, she was weak. They said she nearly died chewing her food. And she was crying for me all the time. So I took her and brought her back home, took her to the clinic for treatment. So while she was undergoing treatment, I went to the embassy to get my visa and when I went the consular(?) asked me only one question. He said, "How long are you going to live in the States?" And I told him the truth. I said, "I don't know. I don't know." Then he said, "Well, we know you will come back because you love this country." In fact he asked me, "Why did you come back?" I said, "I came to help with the process." And he said, "I don't know if there's much you can do." So anyway I did get a visa. And I left. My father was very happy to see me leave.

LS: This is in '97?

MW: That's '97. That's '97, January. My father was very, very happy to see me leave. So I asked him at the airport, I said, "Why are you happy to see me leave? I am worried for you." He said, "Because I know then you will be alive." He said, "I don't care. I've lived my life." So I came to the States in '97. My intention was to stay now, because I was convinced there was nothing in Liberia for me and other friends when I came they said, "Stay, apply for asylum. You will get it. Apply for TPS, other things." But I kept vacillating, you know, I kept postponing, because I didn't want to stay because I have my sister there and I have my father there. And my older sister, who was there with my father, was not doing fine, she had just gotten married, her house was actually burnt, () her house. She lost everything, so she had to

move down to my pa house with her family, her two children, her husband, in my room, in my old room, and it was just very bad. So I knew she was in no condition to help my father and the other boys. So I said I wasn't going to stay. My thing was I will just come and work, do any work, get some money and go back home and help. You know? But then ---

LS: What did you do in Atlanta?

MW: No, I just stayed around. I couldn't work, 'cause I didn't have papers.

LS: Right.

MW: And I didn't want to stay, so I didn't apply for papers then. And I stayed in Atlanta actually four months --- January, February, it was in March before one of my friends finally tracked my stepmother. I went to see her. She cried and she said, "I thought you came to stay." You know? And I said, "No, I'm going back because my father is there." She said, "But what if we try to get him out?" I said, "But how can we get him out? You know you guys are not doing so very well here either." And stuff like that.

LS: They couldn't have applied for him to come?

MW: Because they didn't have status then. They had come on different visiting visas and stuff and the war had occurred. They couldn't go back home, they didn't have status here. And my sister here didn't have status either and she then she had just had a kid, you know, and the father didn't marry her and now she's a single parent. So I came here and met the family here with their own share of problems, plus the one back home. So I decided I will go back, because my father needed me, my brothers needed me. But then by March --- I had come January --- by March things were still not very good, you know. And then one of my girlfriends finally convinced me. She said, "Okay, we're going to apply for TPS for you." And then ---

LS: That's Temporary Protected Status?

MW: Yes. And then I said to her, "Okay. If you bring the papers, then I will fill in the form." And she wasn't joking. She went and got the papers. She went to the immigration office, got the papers for the

TPS, and brought them and said, "Here are the papers. I will sit down here. You will fill this form and I don't see why you don't want to do this." So she brought the papers (). I took another week to finally fill in the papers, the form. When I did, she took me back, went back, turned in the forms in and everything. That was in March. By April, by late April, I received communication from home, from one of my women from the Women's Initiative that things were opening up. In fact, the peacekeeping force had been re-deployed throughout the city. They had some semblance of peace and the UN had gone in and Taylor was negotiating again. The warlords were trying to be reasonable. And she said to me, "The Women's Initiative, we've just got funding for a project now. They gonna provide us office space, they gonna have money there for project staff and stuff. And we need people now. Everybody's gone. I'm the only person here. And I'm thinking if you coming back, to come and work with us, the US aid is gonna be funding our Voters Education Program. And we need people to come and help." And right away I told her, "Okay. I will come." I said to her, "Okay, I will come. If you can help with ticket, I will come." And I committed myself to that so my name was forwarded as one of the persons from our project. And so I abandoned --- I actually left my application in for TPS and I decided to go back home. As soon as I heard things were getting fine. And then I left on --- actually I left the second of July. Which everybody thought was really crazy. 'Cause I called my step mom in Rhode Island and said, "I am going home." I didn't call her in advance because she would have tried to stop me. So after I got the ticket, booked my flight and everything, then I called her and said, "I am calling to say I am going home." And she said, "Where?" You know, she just forgot and say, "Home where?" I said, "Liberia." She said, "You can't be serious. You crazy?" And I said, "Yes, I'm going back home, blah blah blah blah." And then she said, "Okay. Why don't you call me before the end of the week?" But I didn't say which day I was going. I was actually leaving a day before I called her. She said, "Why don't you call me end of the week so we can discuss this thing further?" And I said, "Okay." Next day I was in Liberia already. And I got to Liberia, then my girlfriend called and said, "The immigration has replied you and you know, they've replied." Because I said to her, "When any mail come for me, open it." So she opened and said, "The immigration have replied and they said you should come there, but with evidence of your case. Like why

you can't go." So she said, "I think you stand a chance of getting it and now you're sitting in Liberia." And my visa had run out, because I had just a single entry visa. So I had gone back. My visa had run out. So, uh, you know, I could maybe, I could have gotten a visa to come back. And then --- so after she said, "If they say you should come with some supporting documents" --- which I couldn't have carried and I didn't have. Then they wrote her a second time, because they write you two different times, the response, so they wrote a second time. And each time she called me, she said, "They're writing a second time. You're scheduled for interview appointment, so and so." Then I said to her, "Why don't you just stop?" You know? I was saying to her, "Why don't you just stop? Because I'm not coming anyway." And she said, "Well" --- she made a joke and said, "I have my black dress." She said, "I have my black dress."

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE A, TAPE 1]

LS: So you are still in Liberia?

MW: Yes. So I go back and things are not really too bad now. The international community is serious about Liberia now, I think. Everyone is --- they've produced these proposal for elections, where the warring factions have agreed to disarm and they are --- actually, trying to carry out disarmament, so the different civic organizations, human rights organizations, you know --- activities(?) booming(?) all over the place. People gearing up for elections and stuff. And so I went to the Women's Initiative and started as project officer, then later on, you know, helping and whatnot. That's where I recruited [name omitted at request of interviewee] this girl, the one in this house with me. [text omitted at request of interviewee] we had this funding for voters' education to help to prepare Liberians for the voting process, because people didn't understand what's going on --- the election was being rush, rush, rush, because the international community had finally decided that only elections would have stopped the fighting, because fighting was going on all the time, off and on. So they thought that if we had elections, with one government, you know, it will stop the fighting. So they were like rushing this election, even though we didn't think that Liberia was really prepared for that elections, given the fact that Taylor had more guns, he had more militias, and he still had a lot places under his control. But, you know, people thought that it was, like, President Rawlings of Ghana said it was the iron jacket solution. Okay? Which we didn't think would work out very well. Now Taylor is president. Anyway, we were doing voters education program all over the country, trying to educate people as to how to vote. Not who to vote for but how to vote, what qualities to look for in the leaders, you know, the people who will be voted. We talk about thirteen pillars of democracy, you know, transparency, and all these different things. What to look for. Do not vote idly. Do not vote for people who will just give you rice today. Look at the policies, look at the platform. You know? What will happen to your children? Will that person be able to reopen school? Look at this person's relationship with the international community. Liberia is not an island. She's coming from and nasty civil war and needs all her friends. She doesn't need bad friends. Okay? She needs the right kind of

friends to get back on track. So we're actually educating people as to how to vote, not who to vote for per se, because we couldn't do that, it was forbidden. We couldn't do that. And then --- but in the process of doing this job, of course it became risky, because the factions took exception. Because they thought that -- I remember one time when I was out in one of the communities doing my voters education thing --- we were using the flip chart and PA system and what not --- one of these ex-combatant boys who said he had (), he just walked in. Because we're a group of women, 'cause we targeted women. We felt that women was like an () majority of the population. So we felt that if we target women, it will focus on women, you know. Women could actually control --- they could control the ballots in terms of how many votes. And then we also had a female candidate, which some of us prefer, but of course we couldn't project, you know, the outside. It was --- you couldn't do that. But we figured that, you know, women should now --- why not give another woman a chance? Women will always sometimes tend to be our own worst enemy. You have all these twelve men running for just one presidency. You have one woman running. Okay? And the ratio is like three to five, women to men, or men to women.

LS: Oh, really?

MW: Yes. So this woman is educated. She has good moral standing. She is good to the international community. She's actually an economist. And she seems to be --- she seems to have the preference internationally. So we're like --- you know, "Hey, women, what's up? Why don't you look this other way, too." But in fact it didn't go that way. People felt Mr. Taylor had the more guns. If he didn't win, he would start the war all over. So they just give it to him overwhelmingly. And the woman came second. Well, anyway, we had this incidence where we were teaching voters education and then this fighter who was --- who's disarmed(?) or something like that --- he just came in walking in and insulting and said, "Okay, you are doing this thing. You are trying to educated the women not to vote for Mr. Taylor, but if Taylor doesn't win this election, I know you, I know where you live." But we receive these kinds of threats all the time. Anyway, elections passed. Taylor won. It's felt, well, now that he's president he will look at things differently. He will now realize that he's president of all of Liberia and not only for

Greater Liberia where he had stayed for the past seven years of this war. But unfortunately, immediately he became president, he gained legitimate power, we realize that it was a terrible mistake, because what he did was, under the Abuja arrangement that brought in this new government, one of the reasons that other warring factions agreed to disarm was that there will be an equity in terms of balance in the national army --- geographical balance, ethnic balance, and numerical balance, so that all the former fighters from different factions who were disarmed, those who were capable, who could make good in the army would be absorbed so that it reflects a balance, so that no one faction dominates the army. Unfortunately, it didn't happen, because he was now the legitimate president. He could anything --- so it happened like that. And of course the civil servants who were opposing the war were fired from their jobs. And we had a different --- I mean, the variables was just different all of a sudden. Then we realized we --- our work had to change with the time and the situation. So we started doing another kind of work. We started doing what we call --- we started working with other civic organizations to form this unity, this union, this (), because we realized that they were clamping down on civic --- human rights, the oppressed, you know, people who were speaking freely. People were disappearing, people were dying, stuff like that. You know, Women's' Initiative (), my boss was picked up. In fact, the both of us were picked up. But she was released because, I had written the press release, but she had signed it. It was published. So she was held overnight. And, uh, while her case was pending, I was running the office. I had calls coming in: they would eliminate me, they would do this, they would go into my house.

LS: Were you at your father's home?

MW: Yes. But then I was, like, sleeping in everywhere --- different places. Things were getting bad. My brothers were being threatened. And things were just getting very bad off. Then to make matters worse, in January of '98, I was invited to Rwanda to be a part of this workshop on the regional journalists because Rwanda, you know, had been through her own civil war and she had a situation with the press. The press was divided. In fact, they had some of them preaching hatred through the press. You know, they had a hate media. They had a hate radio station that was preaching hatred. They actually targeted places where

Tutsis could be killed and all that kind of stuff. So the press did have a very, very nasty history in the war in Rwanda. And so now she's trying to reorganize, try to rebuild her image of neutrality and objectivity. And so they had this workshop that was funded by the UNDP or something and I was chosen to help, to be one of the facilitators. So I went to Rwanda for that workshop. That was in January of '98. And it so happened that at that same time, the war in Sierra Leone took full-blown. Okay? It took full-blown. So while I was there at that workshop, Foday Sankoh, his generals and all of them were on BBC like everyday, because --- discussing, you know, the war in Sierra Leone. It was so terrible. And, um, I was interviewed on --- you know, I was interviewed on the situation in Sierra Leone, looking at the role that Liberians played, in terms of the government and I didn't --- I spoke freely, and I said, "Well, the Liberian government does bear her share of responsibility for what is happening in Sierra Leone." And we thought it was not a very good thing to deliberately help to start the war over there, because it was not good for us. We had people there seeking refuge, and besides that we have the Manor River agreement with Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, you know in the pact(?), the non-aggression pact(?) and everything --- and here Liberians was helping to actually to destabilize Sierra Leone, only because our president now wants to get even with those who didn't help him makes himself president by force when he was fighting his war. Which we thought it was --- the situation in Sierra Leone --- it's just the war finishes, Taylor has just been () now. And he can work along with people like --- most of the boys who are fighting there are actually Liberians. They are actually Liberians. We discuss with people in Sierra Leone --- even Liberians who fled the war in Sierra Leone came back home to tell you, certain areas --- when our boys captured, they put the Liberian flag up. Put the Liberian flag up. So that interview was carried, I think, on BBC or something. When I got back home --- and after that, I decided to go back home. So after the workshop, I went home. After the workshop I went home, because now we have a legitimate government and Mr. Taylor was preaching "democracy, democracy" --- and so why not test it? So after that workshop, even though I had this interview and I had written an article for the Perspective news magazine based here in Atlanta which was carried on the net --- so they had all of this information --

LS: Right.

MW: --- which they were not very happy about it. So when I got back home, in late January '98, I was actually walking down a major street when a government minister stop his car and said to me, "Oh, so you had the audacity to sit in Rwanda, disgrace your country? You are one of those who is actually stopping the international community from aiding Liberia. And you have the audacity to come back here?" He said to me, "The thing you're looking for, you will get it." So I reported that incident and they said, "We are going to look into it." Which, of course, was just a bull talk. Then it so happened again, that very week when I got home, the US State Department had released a country human rights report, you know, generally, and the section on Liberia was very, very damaging. She had this list of indictment --- I call it indictment --- on the Liberian government human rights. People getting missing, this, that, all that kind of thing. So the local media, they had this panel discussion every Tuesday, every Wednesday. And I was one of the panelists and we were discussing this US human rights report on Liberia. What I actually said was, "I thought that report was actually an indictment of the Liberian government on her human rights situation but she should see it as a means of trying to turn the cards around. Let her use it as a challenge to improve her human rights situation, and if not she could be remembered ---" I said, "She can either do that, and be remembered as a government that brought relief to her people, or be remembered as the worst government Liberia ever had." So it was that statement --- after I left there, that evening we came to my office at the Women's Initiative --- that was in '98 now, late in '98, they came to my office, and, uh, --- no, that was '99. '98? Yeah, that was '99, January, it was January when I came from Rwanda --- so they came to my office and asked me to come with this guy who was in plain clothes to the Ministry of Justice. When I got there, he took me to an Assistant Minister Office and said --- no, the Minister of Information had sent for me, actually, who happened to have been one of my trainers. When I went there, he said, "You made certain statement this morning over that talk show. Can you explain what you meant when you said this government could be remembered as one of the worst government in the history of Liberia?" So I said to him I was not saying anything until I got my lawyer.

And then he talked that talk(?) --- he said, “Well, I didn’t bring you here to do anything to you. I just wanted this to be a tete a tete, as a journalist, you are one of my trainees, you are one of my best students, a good person but, um, you guys are taking sides and blah, blah, blah.” I mean --- for like almost two hours, he carry on. Like my father. [LS laughs] And I just sat there quietly. I didn’t say anything. Then when I left, the next day, an assistant minister send for me from the Ministry of Justice and I went. And I told my boss I would go.(?) When(?) he said to me, what did I mean by that statement? Because what it means(?) I did, now they were like playing on me now. You know how they ()? They were like playing on this kind of discussion.(?) And they had actually printed, you know, the papers I carried, I printed it, and my picture was in. I think I have the copy --- my picture was in this own story, and they had printed it, and so the government was taking me, like, you know, to the statement. “What did I mean by that? It was an incitement.” And they kept me there for over an hour and, I think, fifteen minutes or something like that. So when they finally released me, I came back to the office and I told my boss, this was what is happening. We found the Justice and Peace Commission. You know, of the Catholic Church. And so they were, like, standing by. And all the human rights groups were like standing by. So they wanted to issue a release that I was being harassed. And then that evening, somebody came to my boss and said he had reliable information that a writ was being prepared for my arrest at the Ministry of Justice for incitement. So that evening, she came to my house late. I had gone back home. And she said, “I think you need to come with me. You don’t need to sleep home tonight. Come with me.” And she live across the other town, part of town. So she said, “I don’t see anything wrong with what you said. They just want to make an issue of it.” And then she said --- we didn’t sleep at her house, we slept somewhere else. And she said, “Someone just tipped me this evening that a writ has been prepared for your arrest, for incitement. You know, they keep playing on this statement.” So I said, “But what was bad in that statement? The statement was, like, two fold: I said you can either do this and be remembered as this nice government and everything, or you don’t do this and be remembered --- so ---“ She said, “Well, we’re not here to argue now. But it’s getting serious.” People were getting missing and things were happening and all that. And she was very, very worried because she had been to prison before. Okay? And she said she came this

close to being raped. So she was worried about me. And they had been warning me before. And they had said they will teach me a lesson. So she said --- Luckily for me, I had a valid visa. What I did was that, after this incident, couple of us were, like, going to the embassy all the time, applying for visas and stuff -- even if you don't use it --- because anytime you can jump on the next boat or something. People were just doing any country, any embassy. So I had a valid visa.

LS: For the US?

MW: Yeah, for the US. Which I was not using. I didn't intend to use. And then when she came to me, she said, "So, we have to decide. Maybe go to Ghana until things calm down or something. Don't worry, I can run the office. I will do fine." She said, "I think it's too dangerous. You can't stay here, because this person who came to inform me is one of our people at the Ministry." Then I got scared. And I said, "Okay. So what do you think I should do now?" And she said, "Well, you stay here. I will go home. I will also go to your home and bring something small and whatnot." So she went to my house, got my, you know, trolley(?), small () thing. She told my pa, "Oh, Massa is spending the weekend with me." And all that kind of thing. Got me ready. Everything. She said, uh --- made some arrangements with the airline, everything. She said, "By twelve o'clock, if nothing happens then, you know, you know you'll be okay. But go to Ghana and be there, just in case, because it's too risky for you now already." What really made the government mad was not the statement I made concerning the US human rights report on Liberia. It was the interview I gave in Rwanda on the situation in Sierra Leone. Which I thought, looking back now, I don't think I should have been so vocal then. I was very direct. You know, if you look at that article now, you will see I was very, very direct. But I was also frustrated and I was annoyed. Also extremely annoyed, because I had been to Sierra Leone and I had worked with some of the Liberians who have fled Sierra Leone as a result of that war. And the way they were treated --- Sierra Leoneans who were so hospitable and so nice to Liberians, all of a sudden they were beating Liberians. Liberians were being, you know --- All sort of things were happening. And I said, "But why?" You know, for this one man, it's not worth it.. So I was annoyed. At the time when I wrote that story, a lot of emotions, I think, went into

it. A lot of things that I said were not diplomatically expedient, concerning Liberia's own involvement in this war. I did give out some very detailed information. I did give out some very detailed information and stuff. And so it was because of that, you know, that they were checking me out. Not because of that radio interview in Monrovia. That's what we realized. And so we knew that in one way or another, they would have got me. Maybe not to do anything, but to teach me a lesson or something like that. ()

LS: So what did you do?

MW: So I stayed to Edith, another girlfriend, after my boss took me. Both she and I, we slept at Edith's that night. And she said, "Okay, then in the morning, I will send someone to Ghana Airways office and get a ticket." Because we had this arrangement with them, 'cause our women were traveling all the time for conferences and stuff. So she said, "I will send there, get a ticket. This guy knew us. Anytime, he can always make space for you. But stay here until you hear from me." So the next morning, she went to the office, sent somebody to Ghana Airways. They got me a schedule for the flight. The two o'clock flight that evening. The thing was, we were watching to see until twelve o'clock, to see what would happen, whether we hear any news or anything. So she came back. We didn't hear anything up to eleven o'clock. Up to twelve o'clock, we didn't hear anything. Then she met someone from the Executive Mansion, you know, some big guy who had said, um, he said, in passing, he said, "What's this little Washington girl, causing all this trouble around here?" And he said, "The thing that's coming up for her ---" You know? So when he said that, she came and she said, "I think you should leave now. Somebody said this, not directly but he said this --- and this person is an authority. I think you should leave now." So --- as usual, we got to the airport, we already had somebody there who obtained a security pass, 'cause she had called him and talked to him and said, "We're just going to the women's conference. You know, it's very short notice, this conference is starting to worry, she has to be in Ghana today, to book her hotel, check in, everything. This conference started. So please, can you pass her through security?" So I --- they didn't touch my passport, I didn't have a --- he just took care of everything. Of course, we gave him some money. So when I got to the airport --- () time, like, () flight and everything. So I got on the flight and

she said, "Good luck to you." So the thing was to stay in Ghana for sometime, but then when I got in Ghana, uh, and I saw things in Ghana and there's something going on with refugees. Taylor is like --- you know, a lot of Doe's former militias from other warring factions are now living in refugee camps around West Africa. So it is very dangerous for us. Some of them have been disappearing and things have been happening. So there's this cold fear on the camp. When I got in Ghana, my girlfriend () and she said to me, "This is what is happening." So I spoke with one of the militia from one of the --- from () faction --- I don't know if you remember this name: he was called General Butt Naked --- that's a guy who was General Butt Naked --- he was very fierce. He fought without clothes on. He's on the camp. So I met with him and I spoke with him for a very, very long time. People have been trying to get into --- you know, to kill him --- Taylor's been sending his boys eliminate people who are running from Liberia, the government hit list, so when I got there, I spoke with this guy, and I gathered some other information and stuff that it was not good for me to stay. So I told my girlfriend. I say, "I got a visa for America. I think I will leave now. It's very dangerous for me." And that's how I made up my mind. I came. But then I said to her, "I'm only coming until things calm down. I will come back." But then when I --- before I came ---

LS: To the US?

MW: I stayed in Ghana for two weeks but my little sister was there in Liberia, and I was saying to her if I could get my sister out, let her be with you(?), I didn't feel comfortable leaving her there now. I had left her there before, April 6th, and she nearly died. So I had some money and my girlfriend sent someone into Liberia, got my sister out, because () she was out of Liberia before I left Ghana. Got her out.

LS: Your little sister?

MW: My little sister. So I settle her in Ghana and everything. before I got out. So when I came, when I contacted home, my boss was laughing, she said, um, you know, that day, two guys had actually gone looking for me, they have asked of me, said they were friends of mine. But she recognized one of them as a security guy and she said, "Oh, Massa is not working." "Okay, we check back." But then she saw that -- you know, they were policing in the office. () One of the office, the workers would (), they saw a

security cop just park across from the street from the office. So they escape through some windows in the office, and then when I spoke to my pa --- I finally --- from here, when I spoke to him, he said, "Oh, I think these people were looking for you, because one of the boys recognized one of these people as security, who came looking for you." So he said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I think I will file for my asylum here. I think I've been playing hero too long. I think I've been playing hero too long." And so --- when I came I just, I just decided that I will file in this time. I will file in this time. So I did. I went to the Nationalities Services Center because I didn't know --- I didn't have any information, I didn't know what to do, where to start ---

LS: When you first got here.

MW: When you first got here. I was lost, I didn't know what to do, where to start, I didn't have money, nothing ---

LS: You were staying with your ---

MW: I stayed with family friends. My girlfriend in Ghana, her husband and children are here. So I came --- while I was in Ghana the original was to come directly to them. But then my girlfriend from school lives in Maryland, so she was saying come directly to her. Okay? But then at the end of the day I decided, well, that she has been here since seventeen, almost eighteen years. That was since high school. And even then we're very close, but I had not lived with her for that protracted period of time. Things have changed now. We've matured, we're all women now, everything. I really don't know how it will be. I didn't want stressful situation, I didn't have money, nothing. So I decided, well, since these people --- they've just come from Liberia, they experienced the war like myself, maybe they will be more patient and more sympathetic, so I chose here. And then people were saying, "Oh, Philadelphia is better for immigrants. It's easier to get by." You know, all that kind of thing. So that's how I --- I () and here I am. But interestingly, people were saying, "Were you ()?" But I was very frightened when I came, because the way I left home, I came with nothing.

LS: Yeah.

MW: I came with nothing. If you --- uh, maybe now that my little brother is now using my room, he's taken over my room at our father's place, but my father had said that for the first month after I left, every morning he looks at my room just like I had just gone to work. Everything was still, you know --- because I just took off. So I came with nothing, Leigh. Nothing.

LS: ()

MW: Yes. This thing I'm wearing, my girlfriend made because she's a seamstress. The one whose family I was staying with in Ghana. She's sews very well, so she made this. I came with nothing. I was, I was buying shoes and clothes and stuff from the thrift store. I mean, they do have some very good things.

LS: Yes.

MW: So I came with nothing. And I was staying with my family friends. We have only two rooms, so I was in the children room. A small bed. So I had the floor, I was on the floor. Which I really didn't mind. The kids are nice children and everything. I enjoy being with them and everything, but just the same, you know --- and it was one of the fear I had really leaving Liberia, because it's like, you know, the fear of the unknown. The fear of the unknown. Starting all over.

LS: Especially when you're an adult.

MW: Yeah, you're an adult. Starting ---

LS: And you also have a --- well, did it take awhile to figure out that you didn't have to be afraid anymore. You must have been living with a lot of fear all the time?

MW: Oh, yes. No, but I still do. I still do have nightmare. You wouldn't believe that. Like, since yesterday, for some reason or another, I've been thinking of my father since yesterday. I've been thinking of him all day yesterday and all day today --- I don't know what it has to do with ---because today's Fathers' Day in America, I don't know. But I've been thinking about my father all yesterday. This

morning I woke up with thoughts of him heavy on my mind. you know? And I keep saying I will not rest this week until I communicate with him somehow.

LS: And can you --- you can't telephone?

MW: It's difficult. Sometimes you can get through, but it's very, very difficult. Sometimes, it's more two weeks ---

LS: Is there a phone in his home?

MW: No, the neighbor has a phone, but sometimes when you call it's difficult to get through. And then sometimes you do call, he's not there. It's just very difficult, but I've been thinking about him seriously, but I still do have this fear. [pause] I mean, I still do have this fear, like I walk into a room. Even a restaurant, I never sit with my back to the door. I never do that. I never sit with my back to the door. And when I sleep, I never sleep, you know, I never () like deep sleep. If I am lying down sleeping and a car pass or just anything, I will wake up because we're still used to not sleeping soundly, because during the time of the war everybody, all the parents, everybody: "Don't sleep soundly. Don't sleep anytime." So now I never sleep soundly. Okay? I never. And, umm, it's difficult to sleep without clothing on. It's difficult to sleep, because we had to sleep in jeans and sneakers because of fear of being raped, because if those boys just rush into the house or something, then maybe if you look attractive or you are sleeping only in your nightgown or something, you may, you know, attract them or something, so we slept in jeans and sneakers all those six years of the war. So I find it very difficult, no matter how hot --- now it is very hot, I will sleep --- even if I don't cover, I will sleep in something. I have pajamas. Because, you know, I feel when I wear the pajamas, I feel closer to being covered, safe. So I sleep in the pajamas. And I never get my back to the door. I go to the restaurant, I never --- I always sit and face the door. Because it's, like, you know, you give your back to the door, you don't know what's coming, Leigh.

LS: Yeah, you're right.

MW: You don't know what's coming. And then, too, there's this fear of guns. I'm so afraid of guns. And America is a society that has lots of guns.

LS: I know. West Philadelphia's probably not the best place for you ---

MW: America has lots of guns. For me, that's even my greatest fear. So even when I'm walking, umm --- so far, people have been nice, they don't bother you to go, but I regulate myself. I regulate myself. From work, I come here. I don't go downstairs again, except maybe I *really* need to get something from the store here, Rite Aid or something. I run across the street and when I'm walking --- and because they say West Philadelphia --- we've heard so many bad things about West Philadelphia, but people they are nice people. They are human beings, maybe things not too well(?) with them, but I don't know. So I don't take chances. When I'm walking, I'm looking, you know --- but it's crazy, but that's how, you know, I feel that I am my own security. I feel that I am my own security.

LS: What do you miss most about Liberia?

MW: I miss my family. I miss my family, my father and my brothers especially. I'm very close to them. And I miss the fact that, in a way, I miss being me. I feel so superficial here. I don't feel very real.

LS: Is that because people don't have a sense of you as a full person or --- ?

MW: No, not that. It's because like I'm being --- I feel caged. That's how I feel. Not that --- I have met some very nice people. Even my new job now, my boss is very nice. Very understanding, everything. But I still feel, uhh --- people don't know me. They don't know me, I don't know them. You know, this trusting. Not that you don't trust people who are being nice, but it is like --- it's like here, life is so uncertain for me, but back home I could predict myself. I could predict what I could get into the next day, I could predict my life for the next five, ten years. I could predict based on planning with my family members, my friends. Familiar environment. For years, I grew up in this environment. Didn't go anywhere else. Everything. So I could predict everything about that environment, in that community. And that is security to me. Security is not like making a lot of money or having a fabulous job or something.

It's just being able to somehow predict your next step or your next move. For me, it's security, I miss that. I miss that. And then I miss, uh, I miss, in a way, you know, the way people look up to you for guidance or like if my neighbors need something done or something, they would come to me: "Please, can you help me do this?" You know, that leadership, in a way. Here, people still need to look on leaders and stuff like that, but in a different kind of way. It's like a user kind of thing.

LS: And you're kind of anonymous here?

MW: Yes. And then it's a user kind of thing. Like, since I've been here, I've done five asylum cases for Liberians. I try to do that, especially Liberians who have cases and they do have problems and they don't know what to do. So I try to do --- in fact last week. I just posted an asylum case for this girl who is Krahn. She's a Krahn person. She has problem. So I do asylum cases for Liberians and stuff like that, but here it is like you --- here it's like you are in ---

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

MW: They will call upon you, but it's only because at that point in time you are necessary. You know, you are necessary. After that, that's it. Unlike back home, they would remember. People would remember. Back home, people would remember. They would remember. It's not like you want a payback for what you've done, but it's like --- well, at least there's people who remembers that life is much more - -- 'cause here it's so fast, everybody is like --- when I see people work two jobs --- which is good sometimes, you need the money, you need to get by. But then sometimes people work doubles, like people are just on the go, go, go. You know, it's like you never stop one minute to pause, take a break, to look back, and see what's behind you, who's there. People are just on the go, just like that. And I keep saying to myself, "Will I, at the end of the day, am I going to fall in line as well?" People are just going, but mind you, people will find the time when they need you, they need you to do something, they need your assistance --- they will find the time. They will find the time. Which is different. In Liberia, people will always find the time, they will always find the time, whether they need you or not. But the thing is you feel that sense of --- you know, you feel needed. You feel needed in a way. You know? I miss that a lot. I miss that humanity, showing concern about human beings. About what makes us human beings, people. I miss that a lot, really. Like in the morning sometimes, I just miss waking up in the morning and just maybe slapping one of my brother across the head, not really hard but, like, you know, tapping him on the head like that sometimes. Maybe he says to me, "oh, sister Massa, don't you know I'm grown up now?" And he is. He's like twenty-two, twenty-three, tall like this. You know, I'm so --- there's so much about it --- I miss that. I wake up in the morning, only my girlfriend and I are here. She works, you know, she does "live-in". So she comes at maybe once a weekend in a month. She was here last weekend. I'm not going to see her again until in sometime in July.

LS: And what does she do?

MW: She does "live-in". She's like a maid kind of person, a nurses' aid, something ---

LS: Oh, a nurse's aid ---

MW: She has cases where she has to live in with the patients and stuff.

LS: Right, tight. So you hardly see her.

MW: So I'm here all alone by myself.

LS: And that's so un-African.

MW: Yes.

VW [project photographer]: Oh, that is so hard.

MW: Yes. I am just trying to get adjusted, because I don't have any family. Maybe if I have a sister or something, you know, she would not mind. But I'm here --- that's why this computer --- I'm becoming like addicted, because I'm online as soon as I come through that door. As soon as I put my bag down, I go straight and get online and check my email. Whether it is just someone sending me --- because we network on Liberian issues --- whether it's just somebody sending me some network thing, whether it will require work or not, I () somebody send me something, it's a form of communication. But I wake up in the morning --- uh, you know, life is so routine. Life is so routine.

LS: Yeah, that's what people like us hate about coming back here.

MW: Yes. yes. That's why I say I feel caged. That's why I say I feel caged. I feel caged in. And sometimes you () --- something happened the other day at Old Country Buffet. My friend took me to the Old Country Buffet and we're sitting down. I went to go and get some salad. And this kid was crying. The parents were sitting there, you know, it was a family thing. I think they had carried the family out to eat out that night. And this kid was going for something and I don't know what happened, but this kid was like crying. Now, I went almost went up like this, you know, to like --- in Africa, you do assist. One person's child is everybody's child. () So I saw myself then actually going to this little boy and saying, "Why are you crying?" Then I caught myself and said, "Oh, my God." You know ---

LS: You couldn't do that.

MW: If I did, I'd --- you know. I could have gotten in trouble. It was child molester, it was pedophile, all that kind of different thing.

LS: Yeah.

MW: When I finally left and went to my seat, to continue eating, and I told my friend what happened, he said, "God bless you!" He said, "God bless you! You think you're in Liberia?" He said, "That child's parents, I bet the parents are watching. If you had touched that child, maybe they would have called the police. They don't know you. You're a stranger. And you're black!" You know? An African would be so spontaneous. I mean, even take that child and bring to my table, try to calm that child down until I find the parent. So I miss that. I miss that a lot.

LS: Is there anyway you can get your younger sister here? Or you don't have the status to be able to do that?

MW: Okay, right now my status --- I don't think I can do that now. I am here indefinitely, according to the immigration. I have full status, I can work, I can live anywhere, I can do anything. If I want to travel, I can go to immigration who will give me US travel document, but just like refugee's kind of thing. But my status here does not include ---

LS: Sponsoring ---

MW: Sponsoring other relatives or what not. Until I can get a green card, I can't get her here. Which worries me a lot because she's fourteen now. She's in a refugee camp. I am so worried. You know, she is having her menses and stuff like that. The refugee camp is not a good place for little girls coming up.

LS: Oh, God.

MW: Anything can happen. So I am so worried about her right now.

LS: Do you have someone who can check on her?

MW: Yes, she's with my girlfriend, like I said. The family I was staying with, the man's wife. She's there. She's very good, she's a disciplinarian(?) and everything. And I trust her, but somehow I just feel that if I was there myself, I would do a better job. She's doing a great job, but somehow I am thinking, "Should I send her back to Liberia?" I am thinking that, you know. Should I send her back until maybe I'm better off and then I can get her over? Or should I leave her with my --- 'cause my friend is trying to migrate. She's trying to migrate and she thinks that she could include her on her list of dependents. Okay? She's done that paperwork. But I'm thinking --- I don't know how long it's going to take. And I'm thinking I don't want a fourteen-year-old, young miss, on that refugee camp. Because I was there --- there are some twelve-year-old girls being messed up.

LS: Yeah.

MW: And I think I'm behaving like a typical mother conscience(?) (). She turned fourteen January.

LS: One think I wanted to ask about was, given your training and experience as a journalist, if you foresee yourself trying to move back into that? Or what would you like to see yourself doing professionally? Or is it too hard to think about that now?

MW: Right now I am looking like, uh --- in a way, sometimes I think Third World journalists can be limited in a lot of ways. They don't get really, you know --- it's not like maybe a Western, like, journalists in a Western country or something like that.

LS: In terms of training or --- ?

MW: In terms of just realizing your full potential or expanding your horizon or something like that. From what I see it's like you always need to balance it with something. Like, it's not --- to me not very, very exotic(?). Especially if you're not --- how many African journalists have written books or done the kind of work that we see, like very good documentaries and stuff like that? Maybe some of them can, but maybe the limitations and --- all that kind of thing ---because most of time the Western media will send in

their own people, because they've trained them. They trust them. Even though you have local journalists on the ground. Even some of the local stringers on the ground ---

LS: I've heard a lot of African journalists say that ---

MW: () Yes, but will always prefer when there's something like --- you know, in journalism school, whenever there's something like that in the making, the West will prefer sending in her own --- so, you know, at the end of the day, maybe all that gratification and everything --- we saw that in the war.

Liberian journalists have stood the test of time, looking at what happened in the war, all of that. We have persevered. At least I am glad to say that Mr. Taylor has not yet bought the press. Some journalists have fallen by the wayside, but generally he has not bought the press, which is a very good thing. Because it's like, the people need decent, honest media persons. I wish politicians were like that. It would make things easier for all of us. And the press in Liberia has fought a very, very tough battle. They're still fighting. We have local stringers who covered the war in Liberia and I am of the opinion that if they were Western journalists, some of them would have been big names today. Some of them would have been big names today, but again ---

LS: They don't have the same opportunities?

MW: No. They don't have the same opportunities. And then sometimes you don't really blame these other international media institutions, because maybe you want people you have trained yourself. You trust them better. But the thing is, journalism is basically the same everywhere except for technology. That's the difference. And technology opportunities, which we don't have. So looking at that, I don't really see myself --- not that I don't trust in my own abilities, but I don't really see myself as an African journalist in this America here, being on par with maybe somebody like Barbara Walters or somebody like that. I don't see that happening in a hundred years. I don't want to, I don't want to --- not that I don't have self-confidence, but I like to be realistic.

LS: It is a different kind of ().

VW: You have experience and you're calling it right.

MW: Yes, I think. So I'm looking at maybe, I'm looking at maybe if I maybe go into conflict resolution. I'm looking at something that is more marketable in terms of internationally --- those kinds of jobs that international communities look at when they are sending in their experts. And then I am thinking that all over Africa now, we have civil wars. Wars, whatever, () form of destruction. And after this destruction period and stuff, you're going to be doing reconstruction, all that kind of stuff. So I am looking into those areas. So if I do --- I'm looking at maybe a face of journalism like developmental journalism. Something like that. Or like conflict resolution, where you can organize workshops on different issues.

LS: I know someone who going that right now who you should talk to --- a Tanzanian.

MW: Yeah., so I'm looking at some. Because those are areas that the UNDP and other UN agencies, even just generally. Most of the time, when the foreign embassies send in experts into Africa now, those are the areas that, you know, basically ---

LS: Yeah.

MW: Basically, those are the areas. Developmental kind of work. That's what I'm looking --- I'm looking. I'm looking.

LS: Do you know a lot of Liberians in Philadelphia?

MW: Umm, I should, but some of them I have not met. Most of them I have reconnected by the way of the Net. Like I said before, that it is one thing that is missing. Back home, there will always be a way to connect one on one somehow. Or even in (). But here it's difficult. People have different hours in terms of work. What time you'll be home. Different activities. People are just on the go. People are so into themselves. They are so ---

LS: Even Liberians who've come here?

MW: Oh yes, oh yes. They just join it. You wonder what happened. People are so into themselves. They are so into this “me, I, myself.” It’s like everything --- so people really don’t have the time. I have some colleagues, even some Liberian journalists, who are here since I’ve been here, over a year now, and we’ve been trying to connect. It’s only by the Internet.

LS: Even when they’re in Philadelphia?

MW: One is just right here in Philadelphia and the other one is right in New Jersey. And it’s only by the Internet. One of the boys used to be a photographer. [name omitted at request of interviewee], very good photographer. He’s in New Jersey. So when I came, another journalist, Liberian journalist, gave me his number. That guy is in Atlanta. He still reports for Network Africa sports program, that’s on cable. So he says, “[name omitted at request of interviewee] is nearby you. Hook up with him and see whether you guys can at least keep in touch.” So I’ve been trying to track him down. I finally --- so I emailed --- somebody send me his email from New York, his email address. Somebody, another colleague, send it from New York. [text omitted at request of interviewee] So I finally email him and then he finally reply. He say, “Oh, somebody email me and say you are here, but I didn’t have your email address. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you, we have to keep in touch.” And every time I say to him, “But New Jersey is just --- you can go three, four times a day and come back. We need to hook-up.” Every time, it’s like we never ---

LS: There’s a problem.

MW: Yeah. Never have the right time. So some of the things I’m saying --- I have, I know a lot of Liberians who --- just by email or maybe someone say something and I say, “Tell that person I’m here. We need to try to connect.” But even with that --- it’s ---

LS: Yes, yes. How many Liberians do you estimate are here?

MW: It should be around six, eight hundred, I think. Because last time --- I have a document in there I need to go back to --- last time when we had this issue with the DED, when it was expiring and people

were so afraid that they were going to be deported and stuff, and we were doing all this work, trying to push forward the DED, () ---

LS: In September, right?

VW: Yes, I remember that.

MW: It was September last year.

LS: What is it? Delayed --- ?

MW: Delayed Deferred Departure. So it's not like a permanent status, it is just delayed. And, I guess, maybe the president was hoping or he thought that maybe within that period of time many Liberians would have been able to rectify their status or something like that. But which still hasn't happened. And when we were doing that work, we got some statistics that it must be like maybe eight thousand or more Liberians ---

LS: And those are the people --- even including people who are undocumented?

MW: No. Basically they were these refugees we were talking about, people who were here, who fit in this category to benefit from this DED.

LS: When you socialize with other people, do you tend to socialize with Liberians?

MW: Naturally, naturally, yes.

LS: And do Liberians tend to go to certain clubs or certain restaurants or do people get together informally? How are their social interactions?

MW: Liberians are not really restaurant going people. Basically, they are party people.

LS: Party people? [LS laughs] So where do they party?

MW: They party at home, house parties.

LS: Uh-huh, they go to private homes.

MW: Yeah, private homes. Like if I'm having something, and maybe I'm deciding what I need, maybe if it's just ten friends around this weekend, I might end up having thirty or forty because all the friends --- "Oh, Massa is having something!" And it's natural to come in, I'm not going to put you out. In fact, I should be happy to see you whether I invited you or not. It's like that back home.

LS: So that aspect of social life has remained?

MW: Has remained. As a matter of fact, people have been seeing me and asking me ---

A: Hey! [A enters room]

MW: This is my friend Aaron. This is Leigh, Vera. Aaron used to be an assistant minister in Liberian government.

VW: Well, now we're just all hot together in Philadelphia. [all laugh]

A: Nice to meet you. [A leaves room]

LS: Nice to meet you. And how did you find this house with the Liberian owner and all that?

MW: Well, Musu found this house. I was over there in ---

LS: You were in North Philly, was that where you were?

MW: No, I was in Yeadon.

LS: Oh, that's right, you were in Yeadon.

MW: I was in Yeadon. And after a while I needed to move on, because you can't stay with people forever. I mean you can't just ---

LS: Even if they're African. ()

MW: But, Leigh, the thing about is that when people come here, they adopt somehow --- they adopt certain behavior and certain --- you know, it's all, I guess, it's all part of the assimilation process or whatnot. But here, even --- and most Liberians, you will hear them saying, "I can put up this person for

this long.” You know, it’s like --- anyway. So I was there and I figured I needed I needed to move on. And so I was like, I couldn’t afford a place of my own, so I asking a lot of friend who actually had --- is renting a place right --- not far from here --- she had a room at the time, and she was like encouraging me to move in with her, but, uh, I didn’t think, uh, it was --- you know, the crowd(?), whatnot --- so I was delaying, delaying. So when I finally decided, I called her up and say, “Is that room still available?” And she said, “You wasted too much time. I gave it up a long time.” Then she said, “But, you know, Musu just found a new place and she’s looking for a roommate.” And then, because we knew each other very well from home and we had been communicating since I came, so I said, “Oh, I give her a call.” So when I gave her a call, she said, “Girl, it’s wonderful.” She said, “I been thinking who would be the suitable person to share with. I didn’t want just anybody in.” You know, she said, ‘Thank God.’ She asked me, “When can you move in?” So I had to clean that room I call the blue room.

LS: This is a very nice place.

MW: That’s my blue room. I had to clean it. And then we move. We tried to do some cleaning up and stuff.

LS: Do most Liberian send money home?

MW: All Liberians. All Liberians send money home.

LS: And they wire it home?

MW: Oh, yes. Western Union is eating a lot of money.

LS: It costs a lot.

MW: It costs a lot. Every fifty dollars you send it is like fifteen dollars.

LS: Yeah, that’s what I heard.

MW: It’s very expensive. So Liberians *have* to send money home. It is a big source of livelihood for Liberians back home to have to send money home.

VW: Do you know --- do you also have, like what we had for Freetown, is like I have money exchangers back in Maryland, and I can mail them a money order and then my extended family in Freetown, I can call them and they can go get it.

LS: Yes, yes, we have these services. Some Liberians are into it, some Liberians are into doing that. But then you know sometimes there's a little problem. Sometimes it doesn't get there on time or it gets eaten, you know, so because of that, if I was sending money home, I would prefer to deal with Western Union.

VW: Yeah, we don't have that option.

MW: I would prefer to deal with --- it will cost some money, but it's more reliable, I know they will get it. Because sometimes, when you go through these different Liberians services, even when you send barrels at home --- they have the thing where they ship barrels ---

LS: Yeah.

MW: They ship barrels back home and stuff --- some people try to be very reliable and serious about that business stuff. Some people --- you send the barrel, sometime, four, five month, and at the end of it, they suddenly say it got missing or something like that. All that money, all that hard work.

LS: How do you think the Liberian community views its role here? How do people think they fit in here, or do they feel like they fit in? How do people kind of view their position in American society?

MW: Mmm. I don't think a lot of Liberian differ with me very much. Even when I came here in 1997, I lived down South, a lot of people I met they had been here long before the war years, they have come in the early eighties, some of them in the seventies. And they were saying to me, "Oh, what is this we're in now? We're trapped in this place. Is this war ever going to end? We want to go home now. We trapped." A lot of them still feel this way.

LS: That they are trapped in the US?

MW: Yes. A lot of Liberians still feel this way, that they're trapped. Some for varying reasons, but generally people feel that they're trapped here. People always thought that this ---

LS: So if things change, they would like to go home?

MW: Yes, they always thought that this was like a transit kind of thing. But notwithstanding, you have categories of Liberians. We have two categories of Liberians, we always say amongst ourselves. There are those who generally feel trapped here. They know that if things improve right away, they can pack up today and go home and they can fit just right in. They can go home, because they have something to contribute. But there are some who've been here for donkey years, nothing doing around here, have not had an opportunity to improve themselves, and fear that when they get back there, they may not make any meaningful contribution, stuff like that. They also feel trapped here, but at the same time, it's a blessing in disguise for them, being trapped here. And then there's this majority of the people who want to go back, they feel they can make some meaningful contribution, but because of certain situations they can't, so they do sincerely feel trapped.

LS: What about people who have children here? Do they feel that it would be more difficult for them to go home? Because their children don't know Liberia?

MW: Yeah, basically a lot of Liberian families who are here with children, they are here because of the children. They are here because ---

LS: And they stay because of the children?

MW: They stay because of the children. One, because they figure that there may be better opportunities like schools and all, especially with the war. A lot of the schools were destroyed and stuff. So they look at what opportunities they offer the children here. Maybe only in terms of schooling and stuff. But even --- Liberia had very good schools and she still does have some good schools which they are trying to renovate, but every parent would always want the very, very best for their child, for children. And then, too, besides that, some people despite all of that, they want to go home, they can take their children with

them, you know, they're, like, thinking, some of them, "Well, I'm only going to stick here until my child here is maybe of college-going age. Then I'll pack up and go home." So a lot of Liberians are here because of their kids.

LS: Are you a member of any associations here? Liberian associations?

MW: No, I refuse to join any. A few, uhh --- I refuse to join any. Actually, naturally I would be a member of the press association here, and other Liberian, so I have been invited three different times to Liberian community, ULAA meeting, Association of Liberians in the States. And I was asked to present a proposal for the newsletter, they want to do a community newsletter. They were doing one for a couple years, but it went down. They want to revamp it and they were asking me whether I could head that committee and stuff like that, but again, I'm still procrastinating about doing it because --- [interrupted by friend] We'll be done soon. Okay, so ---

LS: Why do you refused to join any Liberian associations?

MW: It's because I still feel that at this association level and at these different meetings, I still see some of the issues that are given permanence, are those issues that tend to divide us as a people and are those very issues that caused some of the problems that we have in Liberia now. I see these issues are still --- have not been addressed in the proper way. You know? Especially when you tend to, uh, you want to --- everything is ethnicity, and I can't really --- I have a problem with that. Okay, I realize that Liberia is a country, we have these different subdivisions, and all of these different tribes, and the geographic history of Liberia is just so complex. The culture, history and everything, but not withstanding, I would like for all Liberians to first remember that we are Liberians first. For me, that's the most importance thing to remember. We are Liberians first. Then later on, you know, we can also remember that I'm Gola, you Vai, or you Bassa, or you Krahn, or you Mandingo. Because after all, it's all part of what we are. But I think the most important thing here is that we are Liberians. [text omitted at request of interviewee] when I went to the first meeting of the Liberian --- the association here, ULAA branch --- last year, when I came, I wasn't doing anything, waiting for papers and all of that. I thought I had a lot of time. () time was

wasted. And then I was really interested in what was happening with Liberians here. Having been a local leader myself, I thought I could just join right in and just move on with everybody else, what they were doing. But then I attended the first meeting and it actually ended up, you know, in the “hala hala(?)” type of thing.

LS: You mean when they're all arguing?

MW: Yes, because the present leadership of ULAA is headed by a Mandingo boy, Voffee. Voffee. Trish [previous project ethnographer] met with him. It's headed by Voffee. But notwithstanding, you have --- it's like there's this ---

LS: Oh, Voffee Jabateh.

MW: Yes, Voffee Jabateh. He's Mandingo. But notwithstanding you have some Krahn people, from Grand Gedeh County, who are also part of the association, who would not work with him because he's Mandingo. And because in the civil war back home, the Mandingos and the Krahns were rivals, they fought. So now we are transporting the vices from the civil war here now. So I look out the window(?), I say, “No.” I don't want to be involved. I don't want to be involved where I would have to, at the end of the day, be forced to choose --- you get my point? --- which group I'm going to be with, which group is doing a better job. But Voffee is ---

LS: So you said this to these people?

MW: Yes. I said --- Voffee is actually doing --- he's trying. You know, he's not --- most of the people here assume leadership responsibilities because there were no leaders around and stuff. And we must give credit for even coming forward. America is a very busy place, you have your full job, some people work two jobs, they have their family and everything. So if someone is going to find time to say, “Well, you know, I will be a part of this association, more or less be the leader, to help, to give us some direction, you must give him a little credit, even if he's not the greatest. But you must give him some credit. Work

with him and see how you can make it work. But instead, “The man is Mandingo man, so we will not agree with him.” I got problem with that.

LS: Well, if it makes you feel any better, I just went to the first meeting of the Senegalese Association and there’s two ones that were formed at the same time and they can’t get together. They’re all Wolof, but they’re from two different clans that have traditional joking(?) relationships.

MW: So ethnicity again. [LS laughs]

LS: Yes, there’s the jokes(?) and the jai(?). I’m telling you, it was just like ---

MW: So ethnicity again. Ethnicity comes into play.

LS: And it’s just too bad, because they all --- and they can’t get anything done.

MW: So, you know, I’ve met with them and we discuss and I said to two of them, “How about if we look at it that Voffee is actually head of the Liberian Association. He’s not head --- this association is called the Association of Liberians in America, Philadelphia, I mean, Pennsylvania Chapter. It’s not called the Mandingo Association. Or the Krahn or the Grand Gedeh Association. So why don’t you look at it like that? Let’s look at its nomenclature and see how we can work ourselves around it.” You know? One of them said, “Oh, you will not be able to work with that administration, because it’s a Mandingo-led administration.” [pause] You know?

LS: Well, that’s too bad. This is the opportunity to get beyond some of that stuff., but ---

MW: And all of the other association meetings I’ve been going to, similar things going on. So I said to them, “You guys are not ready, because we still have this problem in Liberia. Some of us experience it hands on, one on one. We experience, we came to death, we stare death in the eyes so many times like this. Some of you were sitting in America where you felt the war ‘cause you had to finance your family, refugee camps and other places. But not like when you have to sleep in jeans and T-shirt and sit up all night because you don’t know whether the rebels are coming the next morning, if you see your uncle head all over the place before you. So it’s different. So it’s easy for you to sit down and decide that these things

that helped to cause this war and divide us, we still continue in this kind of way. I can't compromise that. You guys are not ready. When you ready, let me know." So I said to myself, right now I am not joining any of these associations. But, if they need me, I will work for any of them. That's what I do now.

LS: Yeah, that's a nice way ---

MW: That's what I do now. So I work ---

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 2]

[START OF SIDE 1, TAPE 3]

MW: One County Association had a meeting all the way in New Jersey. I went, I attended. I had a nice time. So I said to them, "Well, this is how I will do. I'm not going to join any of these thing until you guys decide that we will be Liberians and not necessarily Bassa or Krahn or Gola or stuff. So that's where I am with them.

LS: Are you involved in any church? Are you a member of any church?

MW: I've attended one Liberian church. I was taken to somewhere around, um --- Southwest Philly. But no, I'm a Catholic ---

LS: You're a Catholic?

MW: I'm a Catholic and I'm a typical Catholic. You know, I've went to Catholic girls' schools my whole life and stuff, and, um, because I know myself I tend to get involved very quickly into things and stuff like that. So I figured I'd stop going to Liberian churches. I will go to Liberian churches once in awhile, but I if I start going there regularly or something, I see myself maybe abandoning my relationship with my own ---

LS: ()

MW: Yes. Stuff like that. So I'm thinking I'm going to find me a nice parish around here and go to Mass, but if I have to go to a Liberian church or any other church --- I'm not really a church freak. I will go to church, I like the concept of God and everything, but I'm not like --- some people will (). You know? I can go to any church, I don't really care. I can go to any church, I don't really care. But naturally I am a Catholic. I will go to a Catholic church. If I was going to Mass every Sunday, it would be at a Catholic church.

LS: Yeah. Vera and I have done some work in a church here and it's mostly Bassa. And I didn't realize that for a while until they were only translating into Bassa. And they said, "Well, the Kpelles go to another one ---"

MW: You see what I'm talking about?

LS: What they've done which is interesting is three Liberian pastors have collaborated to made a senior center for the people from all of those churches and they go and pick them up and they're doing basic literacy and all those different languages and they try to get people --- they have interpreters so they can socialize. So they are trying to get around that, but the churches themselves seem to be pretty monoethnic.

MW: Yes, that's what they do.

VW: I'm not sure if it's the same with the Sierra Leonean church.

LS: The Sierra Leonean church is very --- because they only have one.

VW: Right. So that's interesting. It would be interesting to see if they become factionalized like you're saying.

MW: You see, why don't we have a church that would be like --- not necessarily --- well, if Liberians will go there because it's a Liberian church, then Liberians will go there because it's a Liberian church and not because it's Gio church or a Mano church or a Krahn church or something. So the more you do that, Leigh, the more factionalized the country. We don't need that.

LS: I wonder with the churches also --- maybe some of it is that particular missionaries went to different regions ---

MW: Bu that's --- yeah, that's ---

LS: And so more of the Bassas happen to be Lutheran and more of the other people tend to be Baptist ---

MW: Bassa, Kpelles and Lomas are more Lutheran, but the Grebos and the Krahns will be more Pentecostal and more Assembly of God. And the others will be more Baptist.

LS: That complicates it, too.

MW: That complicates it. In my family, my family alone, we have on Sundays back home, if we decide we're going to church, almost everyone will go to a different church, because of the influence. I was brought up in the Catholic school and stuff. So I still feel that way. My father is Pentecostal. When he decides he will go to church, he will go to a Pentecostal church. My stepmother is a devout Baptist, she will go to Baptist church. And one of my brothers is an African Methodist. He will go to ---

LS: Oh, that ---yeah.

MW: So can you imagine?

LS: Can you just talk a little bit about, when you first arrived in Philadelphia, what your first experiences were like? When you first arrived here, how did Philadelphia strike you? What were the things that were difficult or easy or shocking or nice?

MW: Let me start with the negative first. When I first arrived here, what shocked me was that I thought Philadelphia was like --- maybe it's not very fair, but I thought it was like the West Point of America. Back home in Liberia, West Point is an area that would be --- not a ghetto --- but like, you'll find a lot of abandoned buildings, old streets, a lot of people loitering in place, stuff like that. That was the first picture I got. Of course, Philadelphia is an old city and whatnot.

LS: So you were surprised by how rundown it was?

MW: Yes, I was surprised by how rundown.

LS: Atlanta didn't strike you that way? Atlanta's different?

MW: No, it's different. It's different. It's more subtle. It's more subtle. But here it's a bit rough, fast. Well, it's a large city. It's very large and stuff and it's an old city and everything. Then, I realized later that I think it's a black city, Philadelphia is.

LS: Mmm-hmm.

MW: Philadelphia is a black city. Okay? And, of course, there are other things that come with it, with Philadelphia being a black city. I am not trying to be critical of, you know, my kind or anything, but there are other things that come with Philadelphia being a black city. And, umm, I actually wanted --- I was actually rooting for Mayor, the one who was running for Mayor, not John Street. I was rooting for the other guy.

LS: What was his name? Katz, Sam Katz.

MW: I don't know, somehow I was rooting him. I prefer him for Mayor here. Somehow, I figure he would have done a better job. But later, after I tried to settle in, then I realized that Philadelphia, well, as rundown as it may seem, but for someone like me, it's the ideal place to start. It's the ideal place to start, because people are generally nice, I think. People are generally nice, whether black or white. They're generally nice. If you stay out of the wrong crowd, I guess, know your purpose for being here, I don't think you will run into trouble. You may be ---unfortunately, you may be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but the chances are very slim of that happening. Because of the large immigrant community, it's --- psychologically it gives you that feeling of belonging, that sense of belonging. Because, as you move about Philadelphia, amongst black people even, you are bound to see someone who is an African from somewhere or another immigrant from somewhere and that makes you feel good. You know that you are not alone. And so whether you know that person or not, whether they speak to you or not, but the thing is that you know, "Well, we're in the same boat." So you feel good. () that feeling of belonging somehow in a way.

LS: How did you get oriented to the city? Did the people you were staying with tell you how to take public transportation, where the grocery stores were? How did you find out where to go for health care? How did all that stuff happen?

MW: When I came first, the family I was staying with, the father, he has a large heart. He's a good man. He was working with Nationality Services Center.

LS: Oh, uh-huh.

MW: Yeah, he was working with them. And he actually said to me, I was thinking, "How do I go to ()" He kept saying to me, "You have a case, and you're sitting here. Are you going to procrastinate and go back to Liberia or what?" He said, "You have to decide." So he kept pushing, pushing me. So when I finally decided to do it, he said, "Where I am --- you know, they have ---" Because they resettled him, they resettled his family. The Nationalities Services Center. So I went to see them and then I realized they had a volunteer program, so I volunteered my services, teaching ESL and stuff. But then, I went to him downtown, I think, two, three times by the subway, but you can be in a place like Philadelphia and don't learn your way around very fast. Then you're not ready for anything in your life. You have to force yourself to learn your way around. And what I did was, before I started volunteering there, he used to give me tokens, he used to give me tokens when he was getting tokens. So when he'd go away sometimes he said, "Here's one token, here's two tokens. Maybe you want to move around." And I said, "I don't know this place. Where can I go?" He said, "Well, I know you maybe you want to get out of the house." So it worked. So when he leaves and the children leave and his daughter goes to work, I would get up and get on the trolley and I will actually go and get missing. I would go and get lost. And I would keep doing it until I found my way around. And once it happened like that, I would never miss that place again. And I kept that up for sometime. And then sometimes when I started doing volunteer work there, when I'm not working, I would walk around Center City. Just all over, walk. I would walk. One time I went to the Museum on my own, walk around there. Walk around. Walk all the way around the Balch Institute before I even met Trish or Kate, I would walk all around. Because I like history, I walk up to Penn's

Landing and all these places where you have the horses and the carriages and I would sit in the park and look around. And the children --- the children, the kids --- I would watch them and I would listen to them. The kids are very interesting, you learn so from them. The children, yes. I would watch them in the park and I would listen to them. And stuff like that. But I would just walk around a lot. I would walk around Center City a lot.

LS: Did being a volunteer at Nationalities Services Center give you an anchor in your daily routine? Was that a good thing to have done?

MW: Yes. I think it's one of the greatest things I've ever done in this my new life. If not the greatest. Because first I started volunteering with migration in the counseling department and then it happened that at that time they had the Kosovo crisis and so they were receiving families. And there was a lot of work. And so I found myself into this kind of work and stuff. Then after that situation calmed down and there wasn't much to do, so I went downstairs in the English education department and asked whether I could -- - they said they were looking for English teachers. And I went to Christa(?) [the head of the program] and I said, "I've never taught school before, but I think I can do it." So she said, "Why not give it a try?" So she had me one period, one term, like three months, she had me assisting me one of the teachers who was actually a graduate student in English at the University of Pennsylvania. So I assisted him for that term and then after that she asked me whether I could take on that class. I said yes. And it was very good I did it. I'm glad I did it, because there were immigrants I was dealing with, people like myself. And at the end of the day I would give you something they did for me(?). The immigrants, the people like myself, I could relate to them, and somehow I realized that I did very well with them. I realized the only difference was that maybe I have an accent, they have different accent, but we have similar experience. Most of them came from warring countries, Kosovo, you know, other parts. I had some Africans. I've had some Africans --- Senegalese, the girl who did my hair, she's from Senegal and I met her there, she's one of my students. So it was a very, very good experience. Because it gave me --- it served as an eye opener into the American society. Even though I was a volunteer, I was attending their meetings and they gave me a

lot of freedom. I was moving about the place, they gave me a lot of freedom. I could do anything there, of course, with certain responsibilities in mind, but I didn't feel like an outsider. Nothing really --- and at the end of the day, I really thought that I could have gotten a job there, but they didn't have any opening.

LS: Yeah, that's where Tsegaye works.

MW: That's where Tsegaye is.

VW: Oh, oh.

LS: And John Kidane, who you haven't met yet.

VW: Oh, oh.

[text omitted at request of interviewee]

LS: How do you cook here? Do you cook a lot of Liberian food?

MW: Yes.

LS: Can you find the things you need?

MW: Liberians will cook their own food. That is one thing all Liberians have in common, we will eat Liberian food, wherever we are. Almost every Liberian home I have visited here, they cook Liberian food everyday, which is kinda expensive though, but somehow they just do it.

LS: Where do you buy the ingredients?

MW: They have these African shops.

LS: Oh, over in Woodland and --- ?

MW: And then you have these Asian shops, these shops with Filipinos. You know, somehow, the diet is not so different.

LS: Dried fish and ---

MW: Yeah, even though the names of different food, like the Indians, you know, the Asians, they would eat a lot of spice and a lot of the leaves and, um, things that you guys would call roots and stuff like that. But they do eat some of what we eat, like okra and all these things, but they have different names. So they sell these things, that we can buy and than too, they've also targeted the African community in terms of business. So these guys always have all African ---you'd be surprised to know some of the things --- the first day I came here and I went to an African meat market in Atlanta, I was very shocked. They have this crab. It's only found in the swamp. We call it "duka". It's called "duka." It's only found, even back home, even in Liberia, they will not easily just sell it because it's found in the swamp. We call it "duka" -- - "duka" is traditional word for poo-poo crab. You know what poo-poo is like, you know?

VW: Yeah, we know what it is!

MW: Okay. So I was very shocked. And duka is like --- only certain tribes will eat it. Like back home, the Grebos will eat it, but they say it's very sweet, and it has a () food, very good flavor. I was shocked. I went to this place, and the girl, she said, "Look, they have all sort of Liberian food there, I will show you." And she led me by the hand and when I saw that and I say, "Is this duka?" And she said, "Yes, duka ()." I said, "Where they got it?"

LS: Yeah, no kidding.

MW: I said, "Where they got it?" You know, it's a crab, it has, like --- it got hair on it, it got hair on its arms, it's kind of blackish like and stuff. It grows in the swamp, in the poo-poo places. They have this crab here.

LS: That is so funny.

MW: Yeah.

LS: I know that you haven't been here for very long, but do you feel like you fit in here in any way? Do you feel comfortable in Philadelphia? Do you feel like you're accepted by people here?

MW: I'm beginning to feel so now. I'm beginning to feel so now. I didn't feel that way a couple of --- maybe four or five months ago --- but I'm gradually beginning to feel that I'm accepted because I am beginning to interact with more people, not only Liberians, but other people, especially people who actually own this place. When I say "own this place" --- like, people we've met here, Americans and stuff, and I'm beginning to interact with them and I realize that people will be people. Naturally, people will be suspicious of any newcomer. And you coming, you have your fear and your own suspicions, but naturally, I think people will be people, people will be kind at heart. You know? So I am beginning to feel, um --- especially since I got my job. My first two weeks on the job I was so nervous, I've never experienced that. I was not afraid, okay? Because I know fear. I was not afraid. I was just very nervous. I didn't know what to expect. I had never worked here. It's a nice job. It's a very nice job. I mean, they will call it "white collar job." I mean, Africans or immigrants, will say "white collar job." It's a very nice job. So I was like, "Oh my God! Can I do this, will I be able to do this? Can I measure up?" So I had all this fear and I am the only, *only* foreigner. Everybody else is American and everybody else was born in Philadelphia here.

LS: How did you find that job?

MW: A friend of mine who worked there was saying they have a couple of openings, and he say, "But why don't you apply there?" So I actually applied for three openings there, because --- actually it was being circulated internally. And then after that period, outsiders could apply, so I applied for three posting. And I got called in an interview for this one, and I went and it was okay --- but the first two weeks, I was nervous, I didn't know what to expect, it was my first interaction with Americans like this, on a daily basis, especially it is a professional setting. Because it's easy to just meet somebody and just talk on the friendly level, and whatnot, but when people expect something from you, you different and everything, people tend to have their own, you know --- they're looking at you, they're watching you. But now I am passing that. My boss seem to be happy, because she thinks I am doing a good job. I had my first review on last Friday. Last week, made me a month on this job. So last Friday I had my first review

and it was a very good review. And you know, “Yes, I’m very pleased.” [LS laughs] And she’s really --- she’s even saying to me now, “I really hope you will keep this job, because it will be nice having you here.” So now I’m passed that stage. I’m not nervous anymore.

LS: We’ll see if this grant comes through --- [LS laughs]

MW: So I’m not nervous anymore. And then, too, people on the job --- Leigh, you wouldn’t believe it. They’re so nice. You know? They’re so nice. People just want to do their job. They don’t even see you, in a way. Because I had that fear, that I’m different and you know, this thing with, um, we don’t relate very well to our black brothers and sisters here, in a way. A lot of Liberians who have similar jobs, when they go to work they experience this on the job. First they think that, because when you enter here, the first thing is “racism, racism.” So when you go on a job like this, maybe you think it’s the white guy or your white boss who gonna give you a lot of shit. But there are a lot of Liberians and immigrants who complain, “No, it’s the other way.” It’s their own kind who will give them a lot of shit. So I went to this job with all of these thing in mind. And everything. And fortunately, I have not experienced anything like that here. I don’t see it here. In fact, the guy who actually shares office with me --- he is so much a human being. It’s like I’m not even there --- he’s doing his job. He’s very polite, asks all the time, “Are you catching on? Is there anything you need to know?” He gets me documents that he think I need to read to understand the department better. So I am just so grateful. I think God is working miracles.

LS: There’s one thing I want to ask that is really important for what Vera and I have to do, which is --- what are the aspects of Liberian culture and society that you would like to communicate to people here through the exhibit that going to come out of this?

MW: I would like to look at this thing with --- I would like to look at the way Liberians will, um, in a very innocent or naïve way --- you know, they’re so gullible in a way. Like, everybody is family.

Everybody is family. It’s a cultural thing. I can come to your house now. I feel I know you so very well.

I can say anything to you. I can come to your house, you can say, “Massa, come visit me.” Or “Come pick

me up.” And when I walk in your house, I can come to you and say, “Leigh, what did you cook today? I’m hungry, I didn’t eat and home.” And start to open your, your, your ---

LS: Right.

MW: Bowl or something, to see --- and “aincare(?)” When I say, “aincare(?)” --- it’s Liberian English, I mean that I don’t care. Because I feel --- Liberians, it’s like, we’re all one in a way. That’s why it still shock us why we had this war and the kind of war we had. It still shock us, because that’s how we grew up. That’s how we, you know --- Sometimes people think it’s generosity, but it’s a cultural thing. And we had a problem with that when we were in other countries seeking refuge, like in Ghana and other places. People would tend to be more to themselves, but Liberians, they just an open, you know --- an open people. I would say anything to you, and it’s like I’ve been known to you all my life. [text omitted at request of interviewee] And if I had a daughter here now, she would be calling you Auntie Leigh now.

LS: Hmm-mm.

MW: You realize that?

LS: Yes.

MW: My daughter would be calling you Auntie Leigh now. So culture thing, this family thing, this thing about “we are all one.” We have this Liberian ---

LS: Despite the ethnic problems and the associations and all that?

MW: Yes, we have this, this --- the Kru is an ethnic group, it’s called “kukujun”(?) --- no, not “kukujun”(?) --- umm, what’s the thing we say, “we are all one” --- there’s one of the tribes that have --- “we are all one” --- “we are all one.” And I like that aspect of Liberian culture. And another aspect of Liberian culture that I would like to see come out is, umm --- unfortunately we --- the way people --- the history of, you know, the way Liberia was, the whole history surrounding the founding of Liberia is just so unique. It’s just so unique and it’s so different.

LS; Yes. That's a good thing to ---

MW: I would like that to be --- I was even thinking, but we may not have enough time to organize that --- Liberia's Independence is July 26 and we are already in June. Just last time we had a meeting at Kate's, and I was thinking maybe we could do that for next year or another time. I was think, maybe if we sat down, did a very nice, small proposal, and put it together, maybe for Liberia's next independence or something, the Balch could actually have an exhibition and stuff, where you have all these different local Liberian groups, cultural groups and stuff, coming out to reenact Liberia in a way, because the founding of Liberia is very unique. It's different from every other country, any other African country.

LS: That's a nice idea.

VW: It's also very appropriate for the United States, obviously ---

MW: Obviously.

VW: This wouldn't work in Germany, but it sure would work here.

LS: But it is also something that maybe could work because it would to publicize of opening of the exhibit.

MW: Yes, we could do that as a prelude. Yes, I was thinking like something, we could do something called maybe presenting Liberia in the new millennium, because Liberia is the oldest

African nation, oldest African independent nation. Liberia was never colonized. Only country in Africa was never colonized. She's never been through colonization. Okay? Maybe that's

why we fought ourselves and destroyed our country like that, I don't know. Because a lot of the countries that went through the colonization, they know what it is to fight for freedom. They have their country ---

VW: Yeah, but they're still fighting.

MW: They're still fighting, of course.

LS: But that's a good point. And also for people here to also know that the American Liberians, in a way, the kind of the bully class.

MW: The bully class. Interestingly, interestingly, coming from --- I mean, running to freedom, running from oppression and suppression and all the "sions" (?) --- then you coming back and then you decide that the very things you fought against, you will institute these very things. In fact, in the worst manner. It's very interesting.

VW: Interesting. But very human. Unfortunately.

LS: Is there something that I have missed, that you'd like to say?

MW: There's an aspect of Liberian culture that is similar to Black Americans here. I want that --- because we want to see how the two groups connect. In a way, it's very similar here. If you go down South or something, you will see the cities or the towns, our settlements back home, are just modeled and fashioned the same way, even the way of dressing (?). Even some of the --- you know, okay, the English, the pidgin English, has been there, you know, change over the years but you can still catch it sometimes. So that culture somehow survived in a way. It has survived in Liberia in a way and I think Sierra Leone, in a way ---

VW: Same, yeah, that's the Gullah. When I gave you those pamphlets, one of them was on the Gullah, which they knew were from Sierra Leone.

MW: Exactly. So this culture thing has survived over the years. Though there maybe slight variations, but it has survived in a way.

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 3]