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Wallace, Kojo

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Jane K. Edward, Mike Mohigh, Kojo Ampah and Dawn Wallace

Interviewee: Kojo Wallace

Transcribed by: Michael Kavanagh

Part I

Mark Naison (MN): Hello. Today is January 14th 2010 and this is the Bronx African American History Project. Today, we are interviewing Kojo Wallace, who just won a Jack Kent Cook Scholarship to go to medical school. He is somebody who grew up in Ghana and moved to the Bronx four years ago and his father is a leader in the Ghanaian community in the Bronx. Participating in the interview is Dr. Jane Edward, Director of African Immigration research for the Bronx African American History Project, Mike Mohigh, who is a leader of the African Cultural Exchange at Fordham and Kojo Ampah, also a leader of the African Cultural Exchange and I am Dr. Mark Naison and videography is done by Dawn Wallace. Mr. Wallace, could you spell your name and give us your date of birth?

Kojo Wallace (KW): Kojo is K-O-J-O and Wallace W-A-L-L-A-C-E and my date of birth is September 16th 1985.

MN: Okay. Tell us a little bit about your life in Ghana and your family.

KW: Well, I started living with my Mom and then I lived with my step mother and my other siblings. I was pretty much in school my whole life [He laughs] before here because I went to boarding school by the age of seven. I also went to high school in Ghana so my life in Ghana was pretty much all about school.

MN: What city did you live in [in Ghana]?

KW: I lived in Tarkwa. It's on the southwest coast.

MN: Right. And did you go to school in Tarkwa?

KW: I went to elementary and junior high in Tarkwa but I went to high school in Cape Coast.

MN: Is your family Muslim or Christian?

KW: Christian.

MN: What denomination?

KW: We are all over the place. [He and MN laugh]

KW: My father is a Methodist and my mother is a protestant.

MN: So, education was very important in your family?

KW: Yes it is.

MN: What level of education did your parents have?

KW: Well, they both have professional degrees – just a little bit above high school. They didn't get to go to college.

MN: When did your father move to New York City?

KW: It was around 1988-89 – about 20 years ago.

MN: Did he first move to the Bronx?

KW: Yes he did.

MN: Okay. One of the things that come up is that there is a special relationship between Ghana and the Bronx. Before you came here, what had you heard about the Bronx?

KW: Well, because of the movie that was made about the Bronx, most people in Africa tend to think that the Bronx is still in the sixties [and] seventies where everybody's fighting and there is a lot of crime. That is generally what people think of the Bronx outside of the United States but I

mean I had some family here. I knew it wasn't that, I just knew that there was a strong Ghanaian community here.

Jane Edward (JE): Did you come with your father or your father came first and you came later?

KW: My father came around 1989, around 1989, and I came four years ago so he could file for us to come.

MN: What was the advantage of going to college in the United States rather than Ghana?

KW: There more opportunities. There are more programs to start with so you get the chance to go into more fields if you want to and there are, I find that in the United States, certain programs, for example I'm in the sciences. You get a chance to do more research and have more hands on experiences. In that sense, I think you come out having – being more prepared for the world than say, in Ghana, where education is more about the theories.

MN: In other words, you have better laboratories here.

KW: Right.

MN: So, you excelled when you came to the United States. Was the core education you got in Ghana strong?

KW: Yes it was very strong. I did a lot of science in Ghana and, like I said, the education system is based a lot on theory. If you get to understand that [the theory], when you transfer it to a place like the United States, it's easy to apply. Then, I had a chance to do that in Ghana so it was a bit easier.

MN: In terms of your science education, how much mathematics did you take? Did you go through Calculus?

KW: Yes, I went through Calculus in high school.

MN: And then physics?

KW: Yes. I did Physics.

MN: When you got to Bronx Community College, did you find that you were better prepared than the students who from the United States?

KW: I was. I mean, [both laugh] I was well prepared.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): You had opportunity to attend just about the most glamorous high school in Ghana – in the world. I understand that Kofi Annan is also a past attendant of your high school.

KW: Yes, that is true.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): Can you tell us a little bit about the high school you attend in Ghana?

KW: Well, Mfantsipim School.

MN: Can you spell it for us?

KW: M-F-A-N-T-S-I-P-I-M and it's like you said, probably the premier school in the country. It's a boy's school and it's really competitive to get into it. I had the opportunity to get into it because I actually had a perfect score from junior high school going into it.

MN: This is on entrance examinations?

KW: Yes, the national exam that you take.

MN: And you had a perfect score on the national exam?

KW: Yes. They take ten subjects and I had pretty much had A's, I think, on all the ones.

MN: On all ten subjects?

KW: On all ten subjects.

MN: Wow!

KW: I had the opportunity to go to that [Mfantsipim] and it is very competitive because you have students like that from all over the country coming to that school. Not only did I get a chance to study science but I got a chance to study it in a very competitive environment, which obviously made me more prepared for college.

JE: And why is it only for boys, not girls?

KW: Well, [he pauses] [MN laughs] there are many schools like that probably because it's a missionary school. The missionary schools build boys schools. There is a girl's school like Mfantsipim which is probably the best girl's school in the country. They will build – be a Methodist boy's school and a Methodist girl's school and a Catholics boy's school...

MN: So this was a Methodist school?

KW: Yes it was.

MN: Are universities in the United States aware of this school? Do they send like recruiters to the schools?

KW: Yes, certain schools get recruiters. Mfantsipim does. There is another school, a school called PRESEC, Presbyterian Boys [School], which was set up by the Presbyterians. If you go to places, from my experiences, in places like Cornell University where I am right now, they have students who are recruited from PRESEC, from Mfantsipim School and other schools like that.

MN: So, when you got to Cornell University, were there other students from Ghana there?

KW: Yes, there were. Some people who were recruited and some people who had applied themselves.

MN: Right.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): How different do you think the high school system in Ghana [is] as compared to the high school system here?

KW: In Ghana, everybody is in the same boat and you have to fight your way to the top. But I find in the United States that high school is structured in a way that you can decide to take classes that don't push you. You can take a less intense section of a class in high school and certain people – because my younger brother went to high school here. For people in the same grade, there were different classes. If you were performing at a higher level, you got a chance to take higher level classes that prepare you better for college while other people got a chance to take classes that were less...

MN: Right. What high school did your brother attend?

KW: He went to Dewitt Clinton.

MN: To Dewitt Clinton? Right. There were some classes that were for college bound students and then others for other students.

KW: Right.

MN: Did you have a goal from an early age of going to a top high school? Was this something in your mind that this is something you strive for?

KW: Yes, I did. That's probably because of my mother because she knew to the point of saying that I'll probably go to Harvard or Fordham or something [Both laugh]. From childhood, I had the talent for the education and I did well in school so she was like you are going to go to this school, you'll probably go to Oxford or Harvard or [unclear]. [Both laugh].

MN: So the expectations were high?

KW: Right.

MN: Did you engage in extracurricular activities, like music or arts or theater, when you were in school?

KW: In Ghana

MN: Yes.

KW: Yes, I played a lot of kye in Ghana which, like some people say, actually the South Americans, it is more like a religion. Everybody plays it and we watch [unclear]. I did a lot of satire. I did a lot of student leadership programs too in Ghana.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): And also I understand you are into music. You play the guitar?

KW: Yes, exactly. I play the guitar

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): Okay. Will you also tell us more about your volunteer work in America? At the time, did you do a lot of volunteer work, besides your academic work?

KW: Yes, I do. It started when I was at Bronx Community College. I got the chance to be in a program which is [called] the Ambassador Program, which is pretty much a group of students who help out with projects on campus. If there's a program going on we'd be the ones who act like ushers and set up the place and give hosts to visitors. I was also head of certain clubs. I was the president of our honor society. We did a lot of those drives, like food can drives, collected money for hurricane victims and stuff like that. I also [had] a chance to room with the Alpha Head to get involved a little bit with a group called Friends of Ghana, which sends medical equipment, scholarships and other aid to people back in Ghana. I've been quite involved over long term work.

MN: During the time you are in New York, where do you live? Do you stay in your Father's apartment?

KW: Yes I do.

MN: And that's on Sedgwick Avenue?

KW: Yes.

MN: What's your perception of the Bronx as a place to live?

KW: Generally, I don't think it's the ideal place probably to raise a family. [He laughs]. In general, I think there is a lot to take from the Bronx. You get exposed to different cultures. It is probably one of the most vibrant places in New York as a whole. There is a very deep concentration of culture here and if one takes a chance to explore it, there is a lot that can be learned from it. I think the Bronx internal is very good for those kinds of experiences but there may be other things that need improvement.

MN: What would you say the obstacles are to raising a family in the Bronx?

KW: Well, for one, there is a relatively high rate of crime. There is the public educational system here isn't the best. Federal statistics show that they aren't [unclear] than in other boroughs and other places in the United States. If you take that into consideration and also the fact that many open spaces where children can really just go out and play, it just seems like it's difficult to raise kids.

MN: Are you glad that you had your education in Ghana rather than here, up through middle school and high school?

KW: I think I would say that. Like I said, I probably wouldn't have been pushed as much as I was in Ghana because everybody is going to take the same classes. It's more competitive. You had to fight your way through.

MN: Now people say in some neighborhoods in the United States, if you are a good student, people will tease you or make fun of you. Is that something that would happen in Ghana or is there respect for education such that no one would be teased for being a good student?

KW: In Ghana, people who did very well in school – who do very well in school – are the jocks, I guess. As it is here in the United States, if you do very well in school, you get more respect.

MN: Oh, so you are like the football star? In Ghana – Here, you would get it for basketball or football. In Ghana, it's for being a good student. [Both laugh]

KW: Yes

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): Can you tell us a little bit about your Father? He has been here for 20 years. He has been able to get you here and now you are at Cornell. What did he do here? What was the experience like for him?

KW: Well, my Father is a taxi driver. He drives a yellow cab. Initially, when he came here, he wasn't planning on staying for very long so he didn't try to go to school or anything. But, obviously, he is still here and his main goal is to make sure that the next generation that comes after him has better opportunity to get a chance to better themselves. That is what he is doing mainly. He is also a very good leader because he was also involved in many clubs and organizations in Ghana and he said he is actually the president and founder of an association for people from my part of the country in Ghana.

MN: What is the name of the organization?

KW: It is Sekondi –

MN: Hold, could you spell it?

KW: That's S-E-K-O-N-D-I and then there is a hyphen T-A-K-O-R-A-D-I. Sekondi Takoradi is a twin city. Where we come from there is a city called Sekondi and one called Takoradi but they are in the same general area. They easily put them together as Sekondi Takoradi.

MN: That's a very interesting phenomenon because many times – immigrants who come to the United States form organizations based on their city or their region. This was true of Jewish or Italian immigrants. Is this characteristic among Ghanaian immigrants or is it unusual of people from your region?

KW: It's usually done. There are many classes of societies like that in the United States. That is, I find that Ghanaians are more communal. We try to have – there is a family oriented thinking that goes on a lot among Ghanaians. They always try to link up and do projects together and look out for each other. It's very common in the United States to find a group like that.

MN: Now, would this association have a soccer team that would play another association? Or, is it more like the associations to have events to bring themselves together rather than have a team?

KW: They [the associations] link up many times. For example, if someone in one association dies, the other associations may invite them to the funeral ceremony. It's not just an exclusive thing going on; they actually link up once in a while to help each other.

MN: One of the big issues we've seen in terms of the African immigration to the Bronx is transnationalism and people sending money back home and building houses. How did your Father create opportunities for people in Ghana when he was living here?

KW: No. He's tried to bring over some other relatives from the count. For the most part, his efforts have been in the form of helping, say nephews and nieces, have an education; paying for their education, paying for their tuition and helping [pay] our medical bills. Also, helping them find a place to live. That has been his main goal.

MN: So he takes care of a lot of people.

KW: Yes he does.

JE: You mean here in the US or in Ghana?

KW: Back in Ghana.

JE: Okay.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): Does he plan to retire here or eventually go back to Ghana?

KW: I think he will eventually go to Ghana because he spends most of his adult life in Ghana. I find out more people who do that have stronger associations to the country so they are always more or less yearning to go back.

MN: Does he have a house to go back to?

KW: Yes, he has. He has one.

JE: You mention at the beginning about the state of you Mother and then your stepmother. Could you say something about your Mother?

KW: My biological mother is more, like I said, very much into education and all her efforts were geared to helping me attain the best education. My stepmother was more like family oriented, proudly help [ing] us develop our social skills. They were different in that sense.

JE: Is your step mom here or in Ghana?

KW: She's in Ghana.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): Are you the bright spot in your family or do you have siblings? If so, did the others have college experiences? [Are] they in college and are they doing [well] like you are doing?

KW: I have an older brother who is talking college classes and is also in the Navy. I also have a sister who is working on becoming a nurse. I have a younger brother who is in the University of Buffalo. We are all into different projects trying to better...

MN: This is the US Navy or the Ghanaian Navy?

KW: US Navy.

MN: Or does Ghana have a Navy? [Everybody laughs]

KW: Yes, they do. [He laughs]

MN: They do? [He laughs]

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): After school, after graduation, [are] you looking for work or going back to Ghana or stuff like that after you graduate from school, after you graduate from medical school?

KW: After medical school, I plan on basing here in the United States but I also want to help out a lot in Ghana. When I was in Ghana, I used to complain about the same thing – about the whole brain drain issue. Our brightest people going out and never coming back to help. I [unclear] that the United States, for instance, we have Ghanaian doctors who are heading to places like NYU Medical School and people in Harlem Hospital. I've met a couple of them and meanwhile when you go back to Ghana, we don't have those specialists. I think in 2004, we only have five urologists and three of them died in a car crash. The whole country just had two urologists. Meanwhile, if you go to places like the United States there are many specialists like that who come from Ghana. Even though I would want to base here, I know there is a need for people to at least try to go back at least once in a while to help out and that is part of my plan.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): I think your generation, in a way, there is a whole lot of prospects for Ghana as a country and Ghanaians as a whole – as a people. Your ability to organize, mobilize and your intelligence puts you in a position to provide lessons magnificent for Ghana. Do you see yourself gearing towards politics or public life besides medicine or parts of medicine in the future?

KW: Maybe two years ago I would've said no because I've lived a conservative life for a long time but I also see the need for people to try to help out in rural areas. If I get opportunities to do

that through politics, I'd think I'll definitely take it. I'd probably end up in politics if given the chance.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR MIKE MOHIGH (MM): Have you taken into consideration future president of Ghana?

KW: [He laughs] I don't know about that. I will take that too, I think. [Everybody laughs]

MN: Do you have a specialty in medicine that you are looking to pursue?

KW: I was thinking more about neurosurgery. I mean – that's probably what I'll do.

JE: Now, about the head physicians in the Bronx, what is your experience with the other nationalities that live in the Bronx during the four years that you have been there?

KW: In people that come back from Africa?

JE: No, like how do you relate here? Like Africans who lived today, Dominican Republic.

People from...Mexico?

MN: African Americans.

JE: or White Americans [unclear]

KW: I think, depending on why, the economics are always different. They are certain places where I find that people are just trying to live in their own communities and concentrate on peoples from the same background. There are other places where I find more open and try to get to know people. It's always different were you go. In general, I think that when I come to the Bronx, people think that they just stay in their own communities even though they don't necessarily have hostile attitudes towards people of other communities.

MN: At Bronx Community, did people from different backgrounds mix together?

KW: Yes they do.

MN: Oh, so there was more of that at the college than the neighborhood?

KW: Yes there was. I mean, I find that when I go to places that are in intellectual settings like colleges and working areas it's more of a mix. People seem to be actually interested in trying to find out other people's cultural background and learn from that. Like I said, it depends on where I find myself.

MN: Right. When you came to the United States, what was – were your favorite types of music?

KW: It was probably Hip Hop and High Life, which is a Ghanaian version of Hip Hop.

MN: Did you find that music when you came to the Bronx?

KW: Yes I did. [Both laugh]

MN: Where did you find Ghanaian hip life in the Bronx?

KW: Most of the time [...]

Dawn Wallace (DW): Sorry, my battery just died.

Part II

MN: Okay. When we broke, we were talking about Ghanaian music. You said that you enjoyed Hip Hop and Hip life. Where did you find this music when you moved to the Bronx?

KW: Well Hip Hop was on [unclear] the radios but for Ghanaian music you can easily find them in the African markets or you get it from a friend who had it made it Ghana for him. There is a lot of exchange of music in that sense.

MN: There is a lot of CD's that are...

KW: Yes.

MN: Can you get the Ghanaian music on iTunes?

KW: You can get a few on iTunes.

MN: But it is mostly CDs.

KW: Yes.

MN: What about live performance. Is there much live performance by Ghanaian musicians?

KW: Not many live performers at least not to my knowledge. When we have certain Ghanaian events, some of them actually invited Ghanaian athletes from Ghana. So, we get live performances.

MN: Right. Now we also discussed language. You had mentioned that in Ghana you spoke Fante?

KW: Yes.

MN: And that when you came to the Bronx with all the Ghanaians you had to start speaking Twi. What kind of adjustment was that? How long did it take you to become comfortable in Twi?

KW: Well it was easy for me because when I was seven years my first boarding school was in the Twi speaking part of the country. I was exposed to a language at a very young age.

MN: You went to a boarding school at seven years old?

KW: Yes I did. [He laughs].

MN: Is that unusual?

KW: There were kids my age but in general probably unusual for that to happen. I only did because my mother was trying to get a professional degree.

MN: Are the boarding schools considered more rigorous then give you a better education than the day schools?

KW: At the elementary level, not really. I don't think they do. But maybe at the high school level they do because most of the very high profile schools, I guess, [are] boarding schools.

MN: Right. Now how widely spoken is Twi in the Bronx?

KW: It's pretty much the language that Ghanaians communicate in. In some sense, [that] probably has to do with the geography of Ghana because the Twi became tribes are, more or less, in the central part of the country. People get to interact with them a lot and they travel more widely than other tribes. If you come to the Bronx, for instance, you are more likely to meet people who originally spoke Twi.

MN: Okay. Let's say you start your day in your apartment. Describe the different places that you would speak Twi in an average day? Let's say when you are going to Bronx community. You start off in your apartment.

KW: In my apartment, I'll be speaking Fante.

MN: Okay! Fante in the apartment [Both laugh]

KW: The moment I leave my house, I will probably speak Twi for the rest of the day until like...

MN: Where would you speak Twi? On the bus? Would you meet somebody?

KW: If I met a Ghanaian on the bus, chances are the person only speaks Twi and not Fante. [MN laughs] I'll speak Twi from the get go until...

MN: Right. What about stores?

KW: Pretty much all the stores speaking Twi. [He laughs]

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Is there a regular thing to meet Ghanaians in the busses and the train? How often do you meet Ghanaians or Twi-speaking people?

KW: It's very often. Now that I have been here for a while it doesn't seem that often. But when you initially come to the Bronx, it's very surprising because you get on the bus and you meet people speaking Twi or Fante. You get on the train and you hear people speaking it so there is a very large Ghanaian community in the Bronx.

MN: What about at Bronx community – were people speaking Twi there?

KW: Yes. There are a lot of Ghanaians in Bronx Community college, a very large community.

MN: Now this is interesting. Is this a political decision to speak Twi rather than English? Is there a politics in speaking a Ghanaian language and turning that into the major language of communication?

KW: Not really. I think it's more a thing of convenience because most people are speaking their language in the first place. And it's easier for Fante's to speak Twi because Fante has some phonetics and some other things that are generally more difficult for Twi speakers to learn. Everybody is just speak [ing] Twi.

JE: And why do you think they speak Twi in the bus for example or on the train? Is it because they don't want the other people to listen to what they are talking about? What's the issue?

KW: Well, they official language of Ghana is English. Then in our home we all speak our local dialects.

JE: And it's here in the Bronx?

KW: Right. We do speak our local dialects are home and when we meet other Ghanaians. It's just easier to do than and its – I just say it's for nationalism but then it has some – Well, then I do speak Twi to people, I almost feel better because I'm with my fellow countrymen and we sharing something that we have in common.

MN: From the outside, for somebody who doesn't know – I would say this is for ninety eight percent of people I describe this to – they are astonished to hear that there are these thirty, forty, fifty thousand Ghanaians in the Bronx who are speaking Twi when they can also speak English. And they're choosing to speak this language.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Yes, precisely. For me, I mean, going out and I see a black person that looks a little [like a Ghanaian]. I go is this person a Ghanaian? I maybe I don't always have to speak English. Maybe the person is an African American or Jamaican. The first thing I say is [words in Twi], without even looking at the person. He says 'How are you?' if the person [unclear] than that must be a Ghanaian. [Everybody laughs]

MN: It's partly to bring together for comfort and security and community because there are so many people that look the same because you can't tell a Ghanaian from a Jamaican...

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): From a Haitian or a Senegalese... so

MN: Right.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): [Unclear] She [Dr. Edward] looked like a Ghanaian the first time I met her. [MN laughs]. [Unclear] As soon as I see her, she goes to gesture. I said oh, she must be a Ghanaian. [Unclear].

JE: Like, for Sudanese, you want to say [unclear] and if he turns, that means he is from Sudan. And sometimes, for myself, I speak Arabic, whether in the bus or in the train, because I don't want people to hear what I am saying. I speak in my own language.

MN: When I was growing up, my parents spoke a language called Yiddish, when they didn't want the children to understand what they were saying.

JE: And that's what we are doing at home but, my daughter listens [She laughs]

MN: So she understands a little Arabic [MN laughs]

JE: Yes, she understands.

MN: Now, what about at Cornell? Were there many Twi speakers at Cornell as well?

KW: Yes. There were probably a 100 Ghanaians students, from undergrads to grad school. We actually meet once in awhile too. We have an association, we have meetings and we have parties and other [activities].

MN: How did you choose Cornell as the school to go to from Bronx Community?

KW: I applied to different schools but I wanted to have the opportunity to have the best kind of education the United States has to offer. Even though Cornell is generally very expensive, as a New York State resident, the kind of college I am in at Cornell I get a reduction of tuition. It makes sense; if I wanted to get the best education, I had to apply to Cornell.

MN: Which of the schools did you apply to?

KW: I'm in CAGS, which is the College of Agriculture.

MN: Right. That was well known when we were in school that was an inexpensive way to go to an Ivy League school

KW: Right

Part III

MN: Was there much of an adjustment academically going from Bronx Community to Cornell or were you so well prepared in Ghana that it was fairly smooth?

KW: Well, I'd say having good experiences helped me. If I hadn't had the experiences I had in Ghana, [it] would have been more difficult because, like I said, the Ghanaian education was based on lot of theory. You have to go through a lot of that before you are done with school. The educational system in Cornell is similar. The work load is definitely more than in Bronx Community College. I had an exposure to that having gone to high school in Ghana so it was a little bit easier for me to transition. I'd say that overall, having both experiences were very good for me.

MN: Were you doing community work in Cornell also or the academics just so overwhelming that you did really have much time?

KW: I'm in a group called Cornell Tradition. What Cornell tradition does is – I was actually scouted before I went to Cornell—and it was for students who worked outside the school setting and also went to school full time. They were giving scholarships and asked what they were doing prior to coming to Cornell. I have to work do paid work and also do laundry activity. It is similar to the Ambassador program with the only exception being that you have to do paid work.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Aside from volunteer work, have you gotten a gauge of a regular paid job since moving to the States?

KW: Yes. When I was at Bronx Community College, I was a security guard. I would work the graveyard shift from twelve midnight until eight in the morning and then go to my classes. That was the main job that I did. I also did lots of work as a tutor.

MN: Oh. So there wasn't too much sleeping going on?

KW: Oh, there was. [Everybody laughs]

MN: Where did you work as a security guard?

KW: I worked for NJCC Securities. I worked on Crotona Park and there is a shelter on Prospect Avenue.

MN: Wow. You worked at a shelter on Prospect Avenue?

KW: Yes [He laughs]

MN: That sounds like a challenging job.

KW: It was better than working at Crotona Park because you could actually sit. Even though you have to move around the building – you actually have to do that once an hour – most of the time you are behind a secure place and you actually get to sit once in a while. When I worked on Crotona Park, you actually have to stand throughout your shift outside.

MN: Crotona Park – you were actually working in the park?

KW: No. I was actually working in some buildings called Fifts houses.

MN: Oh, you were a security guard for Fifth's houses? I know where those are on the southern side of the park. So you would stand outside?

KW: Yes, in front of the building. There were about twelve buildings and my job was to stand in front of the building and make rounds through the building and that was less secure. I actually have experiences of people throwing water on me from the roof or something like that.

MN: Did you ever have anybody pull a knife or a gun on you?

KW: No.

MN: When you were working in the neighborhood were there many people from Africa living there?

KW: There were some Africans living there.

MN: Where they from Ghana or more from other countries?

KW: I think most of the people I saw were Ghanaian, which is actually, in some ways, comfortable because at least I would meet some people that would speak to me once in a while.

MN: so they would tell you [unclear]?

KW: Yeah

MN: Ok [He laughs]

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Well, initially you say that the Bronx is not a very good place to visit. But yet, in comparison to the city states in the country, they are more Ghanaians here in the Bronx and other African communities than other places where people can easily have comfortable life and raise family with loved ones family?? Can you tell us in the why?

KW: Why there are more Ghanaians in the Bronx?

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Ye, and yet it is not a comfortable place.

KW: Probably in some sense, it is partly due to community because even in New York in general it is easier compared to other states. You don't have to consistently have to have a car to move around because of the transportation system and it is easier to find a job to do. I think in that people take all that into consideration and realize well I can live in a place where I actually have a community of people from my country and are more likely to find a job and not have to pay stuff like insurance for a car something like. In many cases the families from Ghana who live in the Bronx in the tradition is still very strong and ways in there in their homes and try to make sure their children don't pick up certain bad habits.

MN: That's one of the things. How do you keep the children from being sucked into the streets – with the culture, with the dress, with the negative attitudes toward school, the disrespectful attitudes towards parents?

KW: Some actually choose to send their kids back to Ghana. Some will have their children here, [then] send them to Ghana to be educated until they are done with high school or until they get to high school before they bring them over. They know that back in Ghana there are actually people who would make sure that those qualities are instilled in their children [MN laughs]. Those who don't send their children back to Ghana at least make the effort to make sure that they instill those qualities in their children themselves.

MN: In terms of like the association from your region, do they have events for Ghanaian families where the whole family can go together?

KW: There are some events like that. There is one in particular called the Ghanaian picnic that happens once a year. That is more like a family thing. There are actors that come from Ghana. They play all sorts of [...]

MN: Where is the Ghanaian picnic in the Bronx or it is all over?

KW: They keep moving around. I think the latest one was held in Queens.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Normally around the summer time?

KW: Yes.

MN: Every once in a while, you have an immigrant group isn't able to sort of resist the streets and ends up forming their own gangs. Like the Salvadorians in Los Angeles, formed this gang MS 13 because all the other groups were beating their children up. Is there any sign of this happening among Ghanaians, is there like a Ghanaians thug nation or something [Everybody laughs]. They have a gang DDP. Dominicans Don't Play. You would have the GKY (Ghanaians Kill You) or something (Everybody Laughter)

KW: No [He laughs]

MN: No. That never happened. [He laughs]

KW: I think in general Ghanaians are very peaceful and they sit down settle an issue than actually fight over it. That is probably why the country generally more peaceful than other neighboring countries.

MN: That's very interesting. You have a large immigrant group, which has pretty successfully kept its children from being drawn into the gang and street culture in the Bronx.

KW: Right.

MN: Do you know of any cases where young people have been drawn into this and the family took action?

KW: Yes. There have been cases where a family takes their children back home to Ghana because they tried to raise the children. They were sucked into situations like that. In many cases, they take the decision to send their children back to Ghana so they can [...]

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): They say let's go for a visit. Let's go back and have a good time this summer. They go there and then the parents take the passport away.

MN: Oh, so they trick them?

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Yes!

MN: Oh, w-ow! This is a community that is very conscious of the dangers and takes action to deal with them.

KW: Right.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): What is your assessment of the Ghanaian contribution towards the general improvement of the Bronx? It [the Bronx] is gradually getting this new image. It is rising again. How do you think the Ghanaian community or the African community has helped in that direction?

KW: In my experience, the African community is helping out when it comes to education. In Bronx Community College, you find that most of the students that are performing very well are African. Even though I had a job a Jack Kent Cook scholarship, last year we had the Kaplan scholarship, which also gives about \$30,000 a year. The recipient was actually from Togo. And we had another one this year who is also from Togo. You find that especially in the sciences mainly Africans are doing very well.

MN: If you go to an Advanced Physics class at Bronx Community you will find that...

KW: ...About ninety percent are African. When took hard class, we were about ninety five percent African.

MN: Fascinating.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Yes. The education there is very competitive. The whole Ghana – like before four years ago – was [unclear]. You really have to struggle in order to get in that.

MN: Fascinating. In the past, they would say that when you had an Advanced Physics class, everybody would be Jewish or everybody would be Asian and now everybody is African, which is interesting – the sort of the ethnic nicheing through sciences and education.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): And there is a man at NASA and he is a Professor. He is one of the top guns. He is from Ghana. He chaired of the Ghana Energy Commission. He is [unclear] the education system to actually introduce more emphasis on sciences. There is more emphasis on sciences than other subjects. That is also helping Ghanaians in that direction.

JE: What other contributions in addition to education and how so?

KW: As a product of education, you find that in hospitals and stuff there many of the nurses are from African background. I know for example that in my younger brother's high school, many of the teachers were African. They have an impact in hospitals and in the educational system. I guess generally in trade because many Africans have stores in the Bronx and do a lot of commerce.

MN: In your neighborhood – you live relatively close to Bronx Community – are there many African businesses?

KW: There are a couple of African stores. Some people who sell African garments. [There are] African restaurants. There are African grocery stores. There are couple African businesses.

MN: Are there any sort of larger enterprises? Are Africans moving into like real estate or investing or things of that sort?

KW: Yes, there are some. I know of one who has a couple of apartment buildings in the Bronx. I think he also has African restaurant right on Burnside [Avenue]. There are some who are financially into real estate.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Are there any challenges that, as a group, Africans face here in the Bronx?

KW: I find that some people think that Africans think that they are better even though that is not true. For example, when I was doing security, there were some people who would actually approach me and try to be hostile. [They would] say stuff like why are Africans always fighting amongst themselves or try or insinuate that the whole African [continent] is a small village and we are just fighting against each other, trying to spread hostility. There are also some people who think that Africans are exploiting the resources in the country. They come in and, in a few years time, they go through the educational system. Then they come out in professions and of course there are other people who think we are better than other people because we are probably being more successful than they are. Depending on who you meet, people tend to either really like us [MN laughs] or have their own perceptions of who we are

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): In Ghana, the African American is called [unclear]. That means my brother in [another language]. The general feeling is that the Ghanaian and the African American are brothers. Your experiences, do you add to that, or do you think it is different – that it is not really that.

KW: I was actually asked this question about two years ago in college. I actually told them in Ghana before you come to the United States we have this perception that we are all family. If I come to the United States, I am going to be easily welcome by other African Americans because in Ghana that is how we treat African Americans who come over. We see them as siblings and we give them that respect and try to um accommodate them as much as we can. Then I realized that in some sense, when you come here, African Americans are more hostile towards Africans than any other group. Even in Africa, I don't expect everyone to like me per say. When I come to the United States, I find that even if somebody who is Caucasian doesn't like me. Depending on

what my contribution is and what my performance is they actually try to give me some sort of respect for who I am. They would many times what is due. Then I find that many African Americans just shy away from Africans and just categorize us into something that is usually negative. It is not the same. You come here having that perception of I am going to be coming to where I can at least be embraced by African Americans and then it's a total 180

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): From your experience, what ethnic group or ethnicity – like is it the American, the Caucasian, the Jamaican – what ethnicity is more receptive to the African immigrants in the Bronx?

KW: I wouldn't exactly pick one that I would label as being more receptive. Certainly, in terms of someone giving me respect for who I am and what I have achieved and giving me what is due, I'd probably say Caucasians. But then I find that there are many African Americans who are also very accommodating. I've actually had a couple who have acted as a family towards me and who have shown me, guided me in the country. I wouldn't label anyone as being more accommodating. And if I had to choose, I would probably say, in terms of being somewhat actually going out of their way to be accommodating, I would say African Americans have done more. In terms of people just being more respectful and giving me what is due and not necessarily trying to be my best friend, I would probably say Caucasians.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): What is your relationship between Ghanaians and Nigerians and Togolese? What is it between immigrants from African countries here in the Bronx? Generally are they competitive or cordial?

KW: Generally cordial. I find that we are all trying to better ourselves. Most of the time, we [would all/ do things together. In of course there is everybody's form nationalism going on. Everybody wants to make sure that their country comes out top. There will be cases where somebody will be like Nigeria is better than Ghana or Ghana is better than Nigeria or something like that but in never goes towards even hostility. Even though they mean it, it is more on the playful side than actually being hostile toward other people from African nations.

MN: How do African Christians and Muslims get along in the Bronx? Is it generally cordial and peaceful?

KW: it is generally cordial. I mean, in. I know in back in Africa, there are problems saying Nigeria between Muslim communities and Christian communities. In places like Ghana, we all live together in this very much cordial and it's pretty much in the same in the Bronx. Once you leave Africa we all live together, we all share.

MN: In your family, is there a preference for who you should marry?

KW: No, my Father is very liberal. [MN laughs]. I know there are families that have some sort of say guidelines for who you should marry. But, my Father may have his preferences but even when we were kids, he always said he would always allow us to explore and have our own choice.

JE: If you are going to marry, whom are you going to marry? From Ghana or from the US or whatever...

KW: Well [Everybody laughs]

KW: I actually don't have girlfriends, I don't really mind. Once I like you, I like you. It doesn't really matter who you are. I was actually joking...

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Are you married?

KW: Yeah, I'm not married.

JE: He's not married. Do you see him? He is young. [Everybody laughs]

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Well, do you have a girlfriend?

KW: Yes, I have a girlfriend.

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Do you mind telling us about the person? Who she is and where she is from?

KW: Not really. It's really personal. [Everybody laughs]

MN: Right. You know we have done this for a long time. Are there some things that you would want to tell? These interviews are in the public domain. They are in the Bronx Historical Society. Some of them they are being made into DVDs. People may even use them in a class. Is there anything you would want people to know about Ghana and Ghanaians that you would like to tell our audience?

KW: One thing I would always like people to know about Ghana is that we are very peaceful people. Most of the time, we are excited to learn to things, we are trying to enter new fields and meet people and share ideas. That is something that I always want people to know about in particular. Certainly, there are other African nations but I find that people are a bit cautious when they are dealing with Africans. I don't necessarily think they have to do that. I think if you open up to other Africans, you learn a lot. Most of the time we have backgrounds that have exposed us to a wide range of experiences in life. I think anyone can benefit from that and I hope that people actually try to get to know us and just, learn, share ideas amongst ourselves.

MN: I think that is a wonderful introduction to the African Cultural Exchange at Fordham and what it is trying to do.

MN: Dawn, do you have any questions?

DW: Sure. I was wondering what you think in general, not you personally but in your country, is the attitude toward women? Do people see women as equal? Do they see them as maybe they should be more submissive? What do you think?

KW: In my culture, women are equal. In certain part of the country, women actually have more power than men. For example, women get to choose the king of the tribe in certain parts of the country. In Ghana, women are generally more submissive because of a generally harder because how the culture itself is set but, the women are treated as equals and sometimes even as superiors in the country.

DR: I heard something about women having a traditional independence because a long tradition of selling stuff in markets and so on. Do you think there are that has something to do with it?

KW: I think it does. Even in general, even when you take it outside Africa, that trend is going on as initially women that they have as much power and they were more of the ones who stayed at home and now it's definitely contributed to the increase in the population of the world. But we see that generally that as women are exposed to education and get their chance to be more independent, those trends start changing. Just form that I am pretty sure. That played a role in places like Ghana.

JE: To add to that, actually historically women from West African are known of their trade activity, they have been involved in trade and the material system, which encourage woman's positions in power, actually help in that in that aspect. That's why you find most of the women in West Africa, whether economic or political power, as compared to other women in other regions of Africa, especially eastern or southern Africa

Kojo Ampah (KA) OR Mike Mohigh (MM): Right. Exactly. Women have power, political or economic power.

[End]