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Bonsu, Sonia

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Sonia Bonsu
Interviewer: Mark Naison and Dr. Jane Edward
Date: September 27, 2008

Transcriber: Danielle Jakubowski

Mark Naison (MN): So today is Saturday, September twenty-seventh, we're here at Fordham University doing an interview for the African Immigration Initiative of the Bronx African American History Project. The person we're interviewing is Sonia Bonsu, an attorney who grew up in a Ghanaian family in the Bronx who ended up going to Calhoun School of Harvard and Fordham law school and is currently a director of development at the Calhoun School. Conducting the interview is the head of our African Immigration Initiative, Dr. Jane Edward. I am Dr. Mark Naison and videotaping this interview is our media consultant **Dawn Russell**. Sonia, could you please spell your name and tell us your date of birth?

Sonia Bonsu (SB): Sure, my name is Sonia Bonsu, S-O-N-I-A B-O-N-S-U and my date of birth is March sixteenth nineteen seventy-seven (03/16/77). Should I talk to you or him? [Crosstalk] [Laughter] Okay. And if I could just make one correction, I'm the director of the - - of Annual Giving.

MN: Of Annual Giving?

SB: I don't want to be more than I am [Laughter].

Jane Edward (JE): Yes. It seems like you're concerned about the experiences of African immigrants in the Bronx. If you could tell us, Sonia, about your background like where did you come, where are you going, and your family background.

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SB: Well I was born in the Bronx, grew up on Grand Concourse, 170th Street. Remember the address eighty west, 170th Street [Laughs].

MN: Eighty west, 170th Street.

SB: And I had two sisters before me, so it was three of us and my parents living in an apartment over there. And we moved from that area when I was five years old and we moved to northeast Bronx off of White Plains Road, 238th Street, and we've lived there ever since.

MN: Now is that a private house?

SB: A private house. We moved from that apartment.

MN: Now how did your parents end up coming to the Bronx?

SB: Well, my father came here on a student visa in 1969 to do some technological work and he came and brought my mother as well with him. And then they had children and it became increasingly difficult to pay bills and take care of us at the same time so they had to give up their desire to go to school and they let, let us do it instead.

MN: But how did they find the Bronx?

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SB: Oh, how did they find the - - well my father knew someone who had come to the Bronx before him, so that was his link to the Bronx. There was another man in his - - in the neighboring village in Ghana, who had come to the Bronx. So that was the only place that he knew where he could come to. That was his connection to the Bronx.

JE: Oh, I know that there are so many different groups in Ghana. I don't know if you can tell us where you're from specifically or your parents, which group?

SB: My father's from a town outside of Accra, the main capital, called Hwedeem. And my mother is from outside of the cultural capital, Kumasi, from - - in a town called **Pame**.

MN: And what ethnic group is your family from?

SB: **Ashanti**.

MN: And what's the religious tradition in your family?

SB: We're Christian.

MN: You're Christian. Was there a Ghanaian community in the Bronx when your parents moved here?

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SB: There was a Ghanaian community in the Bronx when they moved here. I remembered my -
- I guess he isn't my uncle, but everyone that we met became an uncle; became an uncle or an
aunt.

MN: [Laughs]

SB: So all the friends that my parents had, I didn't realize until I was older, that they weren't
actually related to us. But there was a Ghanaian family that lived across - - around the corner
from us when we were on 170th street and they were just like family. We hung out, we were like
[inaudible] friends who they came to meet here and just became close.

MN: What church - - did your family belong to a church in the neighborhood?

SB: No, no. We didn't attend church in the neighborhood. My parents' English, not that it
wasn't so great, but for religious purposes they wanted to go to a church that spoke **Tw**i and the
children, us not - - Twi is the language that we speak in - - where my parents are from. And us,
me and my sisters, they didn't speak Twi well enough to understand the sermons in Twi. So my
sisters went to Catholic school and they were exposed to church through that, and then my
parents would sometimes attend a Ghanaian church.

MN: Now, where was the Ghanaian church located?

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SB: I wish I knew. I don't know the exact address. That was when we moved to the northwest.

MN: Oh, okay.

SB: I remember it was on White Plains Road and I believe it was Pentecostal. And they had a, they had a sermon in Twi so my parents were able to go there and understand.

MN: What sort of work did your parents do?

SB: My father drove a cab for as long as I can remember and they bought a medallion maybe about fifteen years ago, he bought a medallion fifteen years ago. And my mother's worked in a nursing home also for over twenty five years now.

MN: Now did - - how did they learn English? They, they new some English from Ghana - -

SB: Yes.

MN: - - and then did they go to courses or just pick it up?

SB: They just picked it up. They just picked it up on the job, from friends, from us once we started going to school and picked up our - - picked up English we would teach them; little

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things here and there and now my dad is pretty good. My mom was a little bit slower to pick it up, but she's also very fluent.

JE: Can you tell us about your education and experience since you're born in the Bronx and I'm sure your relatives living in the Bronx and [inaudible]?

SB: I went to public school in the Bronx, I went to a pre-school in the Bronx also, which I don't remember the name of the pre-school that I attended, but I started public school in the Bronx when we moved to the northeast Bronx. And it was PS-106. And I attended that school from first - - kindergarten - - through sixth grade. And when I was in fifth grade, my family was introduced to a program called "Prep for Prep," which I'm sure you've probably heard of [Laughter]. [Background talk] Oh really, what **contingent**? Sorry I shouldn't have - -

MN: No, of course - - we - - this is very - -

JE: I forgot.

SB: [Laughs] It's okay. So I was introduced to that program called "Prep for Prep" so I took the test, I was accepted into the program, and I attended both studies of the program, classes of the program, and my public school courses at the same time. Graduated from sixth grade, in I guess nineteen eighty-eight (1988) - - or was it nineteen eighty-nine (1989), and moved on to the Calhoun School, which was a school that I was accepted into on full scholarship. And I attended that school from seventh grade to twelfth grade before I was accepted into Harvard, went there

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for four years, applied to law school and directly after college went to Fordham University for law school, or came here to Fordham University for law school.

MN: Now what was your elementary school experience like in the North Bronx? Did you enjoy school, was it a, a school where you felt you got a good education?

SB: I did. I enjoyed school, I liked it; I liked going there every day. I can't say that all the students that I was in class with enjoyed school, but it wasn't - -

MN: What was the - -

SB: - - disruptive so that I couldn't, I couldn't learn.

MN: Now was - - what was the sort of ethnic and national composition of the students at your school?

SB: Mostly Caribbean, Puerto Rican, and there was one white girl in my class and I do not, I don't know where she was from, but her name started with a "Z" I still - - I can see her face - -

MN: [Laughs]

SB: - - in my mind because she was the only one white girl in my class of about thirty-five students.

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MN: Now what was the school tracked so, you know, so that they had like a one-class, a two-class?

SB: Yes.

MN: And were you in the one-class from the beginning?

SB: Yes, I was always in the one-class. [Laughter] I think I was in the two-class maybe in second grade or something and then I moved into the one-class and I stayed in the one-class until sixth grade.

MN: Now was, was education very much emphasized in your home?

SB: Definitely. There was nothing more important than that.

MN: And was, you know, your African or Ghanaian identity something that was made a point of pride in, in relation to education? Or it was more just the family, or both?

SB: Explain the question just a little bit.

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MN: Okay, in other words did your parents say “We’re - - we come from a country where we have a lot of pride in what we accomplish. We come here to work hard and we expect you to take it to the next level”?

SB: Interestingly enough they didn’t say things like that to us. I think my sister’s not - - when we talk now as adults, we talk about how we learned more about how we should lead our lives by watching our parents and by the things that they told us. They might say “Don’t go outside and play” or “You can’t go outside and play right now” or “Make sure do your chores, do the dishes at six PM before you take your shower.” Whatever the rule was, those were the things that we heard out of their mouth, but for me in particular I learned more about how I should live my life by watching them. They worked hard. They never missed a day of work; they couldn’t afford to miss a day of work. They put us first. Whenever there was something I needed to do at school, my father was there to drive me. He drove a cab all day and all night and he still chauffeured around all his children everywhere we needed to go. Never - - either we’re - - and, and I think when we were younger we thought, well we’re not allowed to go anywhere on our own. But now looking back I can’t - - I’m so thankful that he was willing to take us everywhere we needed to go and not everybody makes the time for their kids that way.

MN: What kind of hours did your father keep? I mean you’re talking about how many hours he was working.

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SB: He worked in the day-time and my mom worked at night. So for the most part, all [Laughs] the hours that my mother wasn't home. My mother had a eight hour job from I guess eleven to seven in the morning, eleven to seven, eleven to eight in the morning. He would drop her off at work at night at eleven. She would - - and then he would come back and stay home with us because we were young at that time so - - I'm just trying to piece that in my mind - - so he would drop her off at work in Manhattan, come back to the back to the Bronx, sleep at home with us, pick her up in the morning after seeing us all off to school, pick her up in the morning, bring her home, and then he would go back out to work from eight in the morning until ten PM until he had to go back and pick her up again. So all the hours in between, he was generally at work.

MN: Now did he take the yellow cab home or he had a like - -

SB: He rented it.

MN: He rented it?

SB: Yes. So he would have to go and pick it up. He went to go and pay daily.

MN: Tell us a little bit about the cab business when your rent - - the rental arrangement and then the medallion because I, you know, I don't think that most people who are hearing this understand how that works.

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SB: Okay, I - - from what I understand there are lots around the city so there's a, a company that owns maybe a hundred cabs that have all those cabs parked in a lot. My father took the courses to get his driver's license and then got something also called a "Hack License," which you can't drive a taxi in New York City without that Hack License, then he would go down to the lot and they would assign him to a taxi cab. He would take that car and drive all day long, paying his own gas and so on, and then bring the car back at the end of the day and pay whatever the charge was, if it was two-hundred dollars for the cab for the day; the rates have gone up and down over the years. So that's how the rental system works. So someone else owns the car and owns the business, but he's able to go and use the car and not have to pay for any repairs on the car, so he doesn't have to deal with any of that. When he bought the cab, he was able to then drive it as many hours as he wanted. He could go and come and he would park the car at home in the garage. But then at some point later on as he got a little bit older, he didn't want to drive seven days a week, so he would share responsibilities. He found a partner, someone who would - - so he now because he is the business owner, he can drive one day and then the following day he would rent his car out to someone else, who would then drive.

MN: Now were the - - the partners also Ghanaian? Was - - were - -

SB: Yes.

MN: So this - - and was this was a common occupation among people in that community?

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SB: Very, very common. In fact, I read an article in the New York Times, which I thought they were talking about my mother and father, they were talking about the Ghanaian immigration to the Bronx, to New York City. And they said, "Most fathers are cab drivers and mothers work in nursing homes as nursing assistants" and that's - - several of my mother's friends work in hospitals - - either nurses' assistants, nurses, various orderlies, all different jobs in the hospitals. And then the fathers drive cars of some kind. My father did a yellow cab, but there are others who drive black cars and chauffeur people around; my father was also a chauffeur for a short period of time for **one family**.

JE: Okay and given the fact that you were, you **accepted** education in the Bronx, can you give some **comparison** when you were in school - - in the public schools, to the system now?

SB: Like?

JE: **Comparison** between - -

SB: To other public schools or to my own schooling?

JE: To your own schooling.

SB: So you want me to compare my experience at - - in the Bronx public schools to Calhoun?

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JE: No, to the system now.

MN: To what see in public schools now.

SB: Oh, to what I see in public schools now? I - - I haven't really gone into a public school in a long time so it's hard for me to say but - - and the one I am exposed to through a cousin that I have is a specialized public school so it's one of the better ones. But I would say as I was growing up I feel like - - I felt a little bit more safe in my school now than I think the kids are today.

MN: What about the neighborhood? When - - is it different than when you moved there or was it pretty much the same sort of area in terms of like your block, the immediate area?

SB: That's interesting. I think it's pretty much the same. It hasn't changed; a lot of the families are still there. They've had kids grow up and leave and come back and just like my parents, still own their home. There I'll see so-and-so's parents still there and we can ask about the kids, so the makeup of the neighborhood was pretty much the same; there's a lot of Caribbean families.

MN: Now are there many African stores and restaurants in your immediate area?

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SB: No, not in my immediate area. My mom would go down to the Bronx market to go and get African food or African Stores near the - - underneath the train line that's over there. But there was nothing all the way up in the northeast where we are.

MN: So there's not a good Ghanaian restaurant near you? I'm always looking for that.

SB: My good Ghanaian restaurant is my mother; she's the best cook [Laughs]. He wanted [inaudible] - -

MN: What - - so what sort of food did you eat growing up?

SB: I ate whatever [Laughs] my mother made for me because I didn't have enough money ever. I never got around or anything like that to go and buy food on my own.

MN: So give me a - -

SB: My example of a kind of food?

MN: - - okay, what's a breakfast?

SB: Oh, well breakfast it's, it's not particularly African. It's tea and bread or hot chocolate and toast and that was breakfast - - or cereal, we ate cereal too.

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MN: But - - but dinner would be more African?

SB: Dinner was traditional; a lot of rice and stew. Everything was a stew and then you'd dip something in the stew so it's - - if it's not rice and stew, then it's yam and stew or fou-fou, fou-fou always an African food and some kind of a stew or a soup. So it's always the two: a carb and a - - a very hot spicy stew sauce [laughter].

JE: Yummy.

SB: Yes, very yummy.

MN: Yes, yes. What sort of music did your parents listen to in the house or - -

SB: You know because their work schedules were the way they were, there wasn't much music around the house that my parents played. My sisters and I would listen to the radio so I was - - I listened to a lot of Kiss FM, just regular American radio station. But they did have their tapes that they would play, Ghanaian music, Ghanaian Highlife music every once in a while before they were getting ready for a party they'd put it on.

MN: Now, now what was the social life of your family? It sounds like people were working all the time; did they have get-togethers with friends?

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SB: It seemed like all their get-togethers were at funerals and births. So there is something called an “outdooring,” which is - - it’s spelled “outdooring,” that is the word for the event, but we always say “adoring,” so I didn’t realize until I grew older, but it’s actually “outdooring” and it’s for the celebration of a birth of a child. So after the first year of the child’s birth they would have a big, huge party and invite everybody to it so we’d all get together for events like that or funerals, which also vary - - I don’t want to say they were festive occasions, but they’re not the same solemn where you go to a church and everyone’s quiet with their head bowed. You go to a funeral - - I’ll just point to one not too long ago for my uncle and you’d see there’s tons of people. Everyone is wearing either red or black, or white or black, depending on your affiliation to the family. And it’s just much more emotional, and also happy too, they’re happy going into the funeral. So those, those became - - those moments became social events, that’s when they - - because they were forced to put work aside to go to that event or find a way to fit it in, so it became social and also cultural, culturally responsible just to attend.

Unknown Person: Would you have food and like at the funeral - - after the funeral would you have a get-together? Because that’s what we do.

SB: Well a lot of times the body would be shipped back to Ghana to actually be buried. So the funeral that was here was maybe a memorial serious. Everyone would get together, there would be food and music, drinking, dancing, so it was sort of a party and a, a celebration of that person’s life at the same time.

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JE: And why do you think the others want to take the body back to Ghana? It is common among many Africans like the Sudanese. Like when somebody dies, it has to be taken back to, to their original country so what's - -

SB: They want to - - they want to be buried where they came from. And the Bronx is a great place, but that's not where they came from, it's just where they came to, to find a better life for their family. [background talk]

JE: I was interviewing someone, two guys from Togo that are [background noise].

SB: Oh, okay.

JE: I was interviewing two guys from Togo and I asked them about women's organizing among African women in the Bronx. So if you can tell us about women organizing among the Ghanaian community in the Bronx - - if there's any community - - women's organization?

SB: Actually, I'm not familiar with any women's organizations that are in the Bronx. I know there is an **Ashanti** organization, that's a cultural organization, they get together, they take dues and if anybody's struggling in the family they'll help to pay for [inaudible], but I don't know of any women's organizations, or at least not that my mother or sister or aunts are a part of. Do you know?

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JE: I'm just asking because when I talked to those Togolese guys they say they don't encourage their women to organize because when they get organized they, they meet other women and then they get exposed to other information that they don't like to **exploit**. Like they don't want to **exploit** they're women, that's why I'm asking [laughter].

SB: But that doesn't surprise me, but I'm not - - I haven't actually heard it said [Laughs] until now.

MN: Now you - - you're - - there were three girls in your family - -

SB: Four.

MN: Four?

SB: Two above me, and one younger.

MN: Alright, now were all of you encouraged to achieve and become independent and powerful? Or was - -

SB: [Laughs] Encouraged to achieve, encouraged to become independent is a different thing. I don't think we were encouraged to become independent. But that wasn't necessarily a bad thing; it just wasn't done and I remember, with all their best intentions, when my sister, my - - the first of us who is a gynecologist-obstetrician who's living in Maryland now, when she finished high

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school and wanted to go to college, she wanted to go away to college. That was a big huge deal.

“Oh no you should stay home, you really shouldn’t go away, you have to stay home.” And so she fought and fought and fought and found herself on campus. And then when she graduated from college, she wanted to go to medical school, and they said, “Well, why do you want to go to medical school? It’s so many years, why don’t you just become a nurse? I mean - - it’s fewer years, you can start working sooner and you don’t have to - - well how are you going to get married and find a husband?” So [laughter] all these different things - - and you know I, I love them to death and I know that if they knew how it would of turned out after, now she is - - she is a doctor, she’s married, she had her children, it was all possible. It didn’t have to be one or the other. If they knew that’s how it would of turned out, I don’t think that’s what they would have advised us. But those were the things that were worth concern to them when their first daughter was growing. So independence, it wasn’t [Laughs] necessarily encouraged, but she fought her way and she set the path for the rest of us [Laughs].

MN: So now - - do - - did your parents maintain very close relations with people back in their respective villages?

SB: Yes they did. We get calls all the time [Laughs] from people in their respective villages.

MN: Did they send money back? Did they help people?

SB: They sent money back, they’ve - - over the years, in the thirty years that they’ve been here, they’ve built homes back in those communities also. One in my mom’s home town, one in my

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dad's home town, one in the - - in the capital of Ghana. So those homes were meant to be built for my parents, that was my parents were the one's that owned the homes, but they built them so that the families that they have there can live in them with the expectation that when my parents retire, they'll also have a place to stay - - or as they visit they'll have places to stay when they go and visit, so yes they - -

MN: And did they bring any people from the village here and help them get settled?

SB: Yes, my uncle, my father's brother came and he also brought his wife after him. And since my uncle and his wife came my mother and father, my uncle and aunt, have always lived in the same home. So when we moved out of our rental into a private home - - it was a two-family home, my mother and father, their children, myself who were on the top floor and on the bottom floor were my uncle and aunt and my cousins who came after that.

MN: And are you close to your cousins?

SB: Yes, well we all grew up together you know [Laughs] so we're very close together.

MN: So it was like the two floors?

SB: Yes. It's like living back home sort of, like where everybody lives in the big house together so we'd at least been very close with them. My parents have several siblings that - - who also

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have come after them and lived in different neighborhoods in the Bronx, but we've always lived in the same home with my uncle and aunt.

MN: So they - - there are other siblings of your parents who live in the Bronx?

SB: Yes [Laughs].

MN: So how many people all together are we talking about with children?

SB: [Laughs]

MN: Your parents, your parents were the one's who started the migration?

SB: Right. My dad came first [Laughs], my mom came after him.

MN: So if you were going to count the number of people who followed in your father's footsteps - -

SB: Wow.

MN: - - what number and - - and their children - -

SB: And their children?

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MN: - - and their grand-children - -

SB: And their grand-children? I'd, I'd - - I wouldn't even be able to count - - at least one hundred.

MN: But yes - - but that's exactly the process we - - you - - and, and everybody is still in contact with one another to some degree?

SB: Yes, yes. All these events I talk about, births and deaths - - always bring - - weddings too, I'm sorry I missed - - I didn't include that one, always bring people together for [inaudible].

MN: What is a Ghanaian wedding like?

SB: It's - - to me it's more like a show than a ceremony [Laughs].

JE: Can you explain?

SB: Sure, sure. My sister had one and it was - - we had it at home at my parents' house, and so you have the wife, or the, the bride and her family are sitting on one side of the room and the groom's family sitting on the other side of the room - - I shouldn't even say the bride and groom, because they're not in the room for most of the ceremony, they're outside. So my sister and her

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husband, or fiancé, were downstairs the entire time and my parents and our side of the family is on one side and my brother-in-law's family is sitting on the other side.

MN: Now are they Ghanaian also?

SB: They are Ghanaian, but they're from a different tribe. They're **Gaun**. So we're Ashanti, and they're Gaun. And that mixing of cultures wouldn't have been optimal, I think a lot of times Ashantis would like to marry Ashantis and Gaun like to marry Gaun, but in this country where it was - - for people who consider it important to marry someone from Ghana, because they're fewer to choose from, it's okay that they're, they're Gaun and then we're Ashanti. Whereas maybe back home, you might get a little bit more pressure to marry someone from your own culture.

MN: Now is there any group from Ghana that you're family would be upset, more upset than others, if - -

SB: If you married into? I don't know, I don't think so.

MN: But what, what about religion? If you married a Muslim or not? Would, would that be a source of tension, if you married a Ghanaian Muslim?

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SB: You know, I don't know. I don't - - yes, it just never came up. Maybe because I'm, I'm Christian and I - - the assumption is that I would marry a Christian, it just never came up. That I can't say for sure that I've ever heard out of their mouths, but - -

MN: Now what were the things your parents were saying about other peoples who you interacted with? What do they say about African Americans, West-Indians, Whites, Puerto-Ricans? Did they have clear opinions about different groups that you were interacting with in the Bronx?

SB: What I know is that - - their - - like everybody who was Hispanic, was a Puerto-Rican.

MN: Oh, okay.

SB: And everybody who was - - so that was just the basic Caribbean stereotype, that was their understanding of the world, is everyone who is [inaudible]. I don't know if that's necessarily changed [Laughs] their mind to this day now because you know better but, that was a simple shortcut. Anyone who was East-Asian was Chinese. So that was the first thing. Beyond that, I think they probably wanted to protect us. They wanted to keep us indoors and away from whatever was going on outside on the streets, outside of our home. And a lot of what was on the street were African Americans and Puerto-Ricans; they were on the street. So by the fault, that they became the rowdy ones who didn't like to go to school. So we were the ones who were coming home and forced to focus on our studies and our chores and get to sleep and go to school

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in the morning again. And they were potentially able to pull us away from what should have been our focus.

MN: So your parents were very careful not to have you pulled into the street culture?

SB: Yes. And because we were female I think they were especially afraid that we would become pregnant.

MN: Now did they have a - - did they see like hip-hop culture as kind - - you know, the baggy pants and that sort of stuff?

SB: As bad? Or as - -

MN: As bad, as - - as what - - to beware of it. They - - did they connect what was going on in the street to the music and the dress?

SB: I think so. I think that it all became one thing to them. And I think that they just didn't understand, they didn't understand why the pants had to be so low, and why the clothes had to be so big [crosstalk] [laughter]. So yes - - but it was definitely all connected. You could tell by someone's dress who probably cut school that day and was selling drugs on the corner or something.

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MN: Now did you ever, or your sisters, find yourself being teased by other kids because you did well in school? Or feel any kind of pressure?

SB: Not me so much, no. I don't know, when my first sister came here she had some problems because she had an accent being the first one, she picked up my parents accents, so she got teased for that, but for doing well in school? No, and if we did, I guess it just didn't bother us enough to make a dent into my life.

JE: Can you explain more about the wedding? We have to go back to the wedding.

SB: Oh sure, of course, the wedding. So one family is on one side, the other family is on another side and the husband and his family, or his family rather, comes bearing gifts. So they got all these gifts, they came with all these huge baskets with silk, and linens, and lingerie, and perfume; all to present to my sister and our family. And that's in order to - - I guess purchase her or some kind of a dowry. So they'd come bearing gifts and money and then my family spends the entire ceremony or process saying "that's not enough, not enough - -

MN: [Laughs]

SB: - - give me more, that's not enough" and they're - - so it's kind of a negotiation - - they're trying to determine the worth of my sister, the worth of plucking this young flower from her family.

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JE: [inaudible]

SB: Yes, because in our culture you're coming - - you're taking the daughter away from her family and she's going to her husband's family, so you have to do a lot to prove that she's worthy, her family's worthy so - - this didn't happen at my sister's wedding, but I just talked to another, a cousin of mine who happened at his, and he said that they give money to the sister's brothers as well so you, you kind of have to pay off the sister's brothers if they're involved in it so - - and it's not - - a lot of it's not even real money that actually exchanges hands, but it's kind of just the ceremony and process of it. And then before my sister came to - - at the very end of the ceremony back and forth finally I guess at some point they say it is enough and you can have her - -

MN: [Laughs]

SB: - - we allow you, we allow you to take her after you've done all of this. And then my sister appears. But before appears, the sisters of the bride come out. So we come out one by one, and I - - I'm veiled so I come out veiled and then the husband, or the groom, is supposed to be able to identify even me even though I'm veiled and then if he cannot, then that becomes a big theatrical - -

JE: [muffled] [laughter]

SB: And I think they even offered me to him if he wanted also.

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MN: [Laughs]

SB: They know none of it's really going to happen, but they just kind of do it anyway. Then he says "No, no, no that's the one that I want." So they go back and forth for like two hours [laughter]. Just - - yes it was funny; it's a good time [Laughs].

MN: And then once it's over is there a meal and a party or - -

SB: Yes, there's always a party involved in everything [Laughs]. So once it's over there's a lot of food, there's always a lot of food and drink and just dancing.

MN: Now is the dancing traditional Ghanaian dancing or American dancing or both?

SB: It's a little bit of both. I don't want to - - it's not traditional Ghanaian dancing, there are no performances or anything, it's just regular dancing - -

MN: So what's were with now you mentioned - -

SB: - - two-step, I don't know [Laughs].

MN: - - high, high - -

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SB: Highlife.

MN: Highlife. Now what's - - how would you describe that music in terms of - - what is it most comparable to? Jazz, R & B?

SB: I think Highlife's spans different cultures so I would compare it to Soca, like Caribbean music, very quick beats and happy-sounding music.

MN: Now are there places you can listen to Highlife in New York or - -

SB: Not that I know of. I only hear it at parties when - -

MN: And it's recorded music, it's not played live or you've heard live Highlife bands in New York?

SB: I've - - there's a Ghanaian picnic every single year, somewhere Upstate, so I've heard they have bands who will come and play there, but that's once a year. I don't know where there are other [inaudible] places.

MN: So now, what - - what park do they go Upstate to do - - to have their picnic?

SB: It's always at a different park, so I don't know I - -

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MN: Did they go Bear Mountain or Mohansic or - -

SB: No, it would be just like an outdoor - - like a large outdoor area, I wish I, I don't know.

MN: Are there any Ghanaian gatherings in the Bronx, like large-scale gatherings where people come together outdoors in the summer?

SB: I think that's the one, that's the biggest one that most people who are here know about and try to get to every once in a while. I don't go every single year, but like every four or five years I'll go up to that - - the big picnic. There's a huge picnic in the morning and it's all day and people come with their kids and families and then in the evening time, there is a party for the younger crowd, twenty to thirties come out to the party.

JE: And when, when people come to these gatherings or ceremonies, how do they dress?

SB: Mostly American clothing. So not - - for the picnic, your outdoor American clothes.

Sometimes some people will come in their traditional dress and then also for the evening party we would just, just American clothing, little skimpy tops and [laughter] tight jeans [Laughs]; the usual club gear.

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JE: Now were there sports leagues that involved the Ghanaian community like soccer games

that were played which were also events or were people working so much that they didn't really have time for that?

SB: I would say the latter. I - - I don't - - I'm not familiar with any sports teams. Maybe, maybe if we were boys and - - me and my sisters weren't really pushed towards the sports so we didn't participate in any very seriously. But maybe if we were boys there might have been something, but I'm not familiar with any.

MN: Now did you go to ballet or dance classes or take music lessons or any of that?

SB: Not outside of school. There, there wasn't much time for anyone to take me to those lessons so I wouldn't have been able to do that. But in school, even in my public school, they had a music program which came when I was in third grade so I started playing the clarinet there, and that was great. But it's not - - like my sister now has a four-year old and a two-year old and an eight-month old and she's talking about putting them in dance class and this and that and my parents are like "What, what all - - they're like three-years old, what are all these activities going to do?"

MN: No, trust me we know [inaudible].

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SB: [Laughs] So it, it wasn't really normal to them [Laughs] that we would be doing all these activities. And they wanted to focus on school and I don't think they saw those activities as part of school at that time so we didn't - - we weren't really involved. But in, in school within the school day if there were any projects or programs, yes we, we were doing those.

JE: Yes that's what - - I think that's what we interviewed **Fatima** and we asked her about her interest in arts and she said actually when she was in, in Nigeria people looked down onto the arts. Maybe that's the reason why. And I think most of the Africans they feel like okay you have to study the hard subjects like English, you have to learn Mathematics and everything, but art, no. It's just something that - -

MN: Did, did - - of the four sisters did any of your people become very serious about music or arts or dance?

SB: No.

MN: [Laughs]

SB: And I don't think it was ever verbalized to me that one was more important or one was more well-respected than the other, but seeing my parents work so hard, I don't think any of us felt that we could throw that away. And in our mind, throwing it away would be going to something that wouldn't guarantee me the ability to take care of myself and take care of them in their old age. So if I had became that same musician, and I wasn't a successful musician, but I

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was living on my life's dream, I wouldn't be able to take care of anybody else but me, if even that so - -

MN: So that, that's interesting the concept - - so the concept was very clear of you were obligated because your parents were doing so much for you, you were obligated to take care of them.

SB: Right, but that was an obligation we put on ourselves, not one - -

MN: Yes, but that's, that's really interesting because it may be the kind of thing that's in immigrant families, but if you went to talk to foreign students, I think that would be - - not be on their minds.

JE: And I think that would also come from our African traditions. It's just that this our obligation, like in Africa for example, **you're going to have to take your parents to**, to a - -

SB: **Same** home.

JE: Like when, when they grow hold you have to take care - - especially the male children, they have to take at least their parents in and take care of them when they're old.

MN: Now that's interesting, you're mother is working in a nursing home - -

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SB: That was the last place that she [Laughs] wanted to be.

MN: - - of, of the people that put their parents in the nursing home, did - - was she disapproving of that?

SB: Not of all of them, but even to this day she talks about certain people who put their parents in a home and never visit them. Their drawers are bare, they have not pictures on the walls, they don't - - they may be mistreated by a person at the institution and there's nothing - - there's no recourse for that person. And then she says, "You know you can tell when you walk into a room who has family and who doesn't, and who has family that cares about them and who doesn't. If you just open their drawer...", because she has to dress them and get them ready to go to meals, "...you open their drawer you'll see that clothes are folded very nicely and they're all orderly and it's, it's always a child who will come and do that for their parent." So - - I mean part of it for her was heartbreaking, but maybe she was appreciative of the fact that that wasn't our culture, that she, that she knew she could look forward to not ending up in anything like that, and even if she did that we would visit her and **knowing** how it can be.

MN: Now, now when you first went to the Calhoun school, did you experience culture shock in terms of being from the Bronx and being from an immigrant family?

SB: There was a little bit of a culture shock. Not as much as I think other people experienced, and I think it was a little bit lessened because we were so - - we were always at home, me and my sisters were our friends. We couldn't go out as much as other people could. So let's say you

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were someone who could go out all the time and you were very much into hip-hop culture, or whatever culture was outside at the malls and so on, you might experience culture shock. But because we were kind of kept away from that culture, and kept indoors, it wasn't as high as other people, so that's the first thing. But what I remember most is that it took me a very long time to put names to faces and I think it's because that stereotype that people say like "all black people don't look alike" and "all white people don't look alike." I think for me I hadn't - - I've only - - I'd only been exposed to that one white girl that was in my class and now I was the minority and everybody else was white and it took me a, a longer time than I expected to remember people's names and I would confuse people for a long time. So that - - I think that was my culture shock.

MN: What about the teaching in the school? Did you find it different than the teaching you had the public school?

SB: It was different, very different. The classes were smaller so we were able to focus on the teaching and there was less disciplinary action being taken and more actual learning going on in the classroom. But secondly, Calhoun is a Progressive, a Progressive school so part of what they do is try to be more interactive. Even at the younger ages, they're not just putting notes on the board and kids are writing and then you go and take the test. There's a lot of discussion, a lot of talking back and forth. We called our teachers by their first names so it, it brought the teacher down to a level where you felt you could relate to them more easily, but you didn't disrespect them. So that was different, just by the nature of the school being non-traditional.

MN: Did you get involved in student activities at the school, student - - what sort of things - -

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SB: Student government, I continued to play the clarinet, I did **forensics**, which was some speech and debate. What else did I - - like, like everything, I felt like I was - - it was, it was such a small school that in order for any activity to really thrive, a lot of people had to get involved and I was doing well so I feel like a lot of the teachers would seek me out and tell me about different things.

MN: Were, were there any teachers who made a particular impression on you?

SB: I think there was a teacher who got me involved in speech, **Sue Wooster**, I still remember, I should probably give her a call [laughter]. But it's because I'm, you could probably tell from watching the video, I'm pretty quiet, I'm not - - I'm a shy, quiet person. I have the friends that I have, I do the things that I do, but I don't always **leap** outside of the box or my comfort zone. And for whatever reason, she just thought I would be good at standing up in front of people and speaking to them, so she asked me if I'd be, be willing to get involved. I was in ninth grade at the time, and I thought "Why would you ask me [Laughs] of all people to do this?" And I did it, and I went to my first competition, and I did okay, it wasn't so bad and I went to another one, and another one, and by the end of the year I was winning competitions.

MN: This was debating?

SB: This is speech. So I would perform speeches for other people.

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MN: Oh, so could you give an example of a speech?

SB: [inaudible] Well, the speech that I had that took me to eighteenth in the nation, all thanks to Sue **Wooster**, it was a speech by a woman named Elizabeth Eckford, who was one of the first nine Black people to be integrated into the schools when integration occurred. And she talked about, she talked about her evening before and the day of as she went to school and all the things that was going through her mind as she walked to school and people were spitting at her and throwing things at her and they were bused all the way to the school and before the school day even started, they were sent home because it was just so dangerous. So that was, that was the speech that I gave.

MN: And what, what would be your preparation before-hand to perform this speech?

SB: Well first you had to memorize it. It was a ten-minute speech, it had to be memorized and we'd perform for our classmates first before we went and competed against other schools. We worked one-on-one with Sue, you'd perform in the mirror, you would tape it, you would listen to your voice, all different kinds of techniques to try and get as much into the character as you possibly could.

MN: Now are you doing a lot of hand motions when you're doing this - - so is it, is it very dramatic?

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SB: Different people had different styles. So depending - - you might be giving a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King or you might be giving a presidential speech, so there - - depending on what you were doing, you would decide whether that worked for you. I did not, I did not. I chose not to do a lot of hand motions and a lot of movements, I would just - - and it was emotional for me to talk about what she was going through.

MN: How - - so you got into the role?

SB: Right.

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

MN: Now what did you - -

SB: And I'm hardly an actress [Laughs] at all.

MN: So you didn't do theater?

SB: No, I didn't. I didn't. It, it was just speech and debates, a very unique small part of performing. And then I got involved - -

MN: So this is a little bit of a side, what did you think about Obama's performance last night?

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SB: Well I mean I think, I think he's doing a good job. He's doing what he can. I prefer when you give speeches to any debates, I'm sure a lot of people feel that way. Sometimes I feel like he's a little "professory" and preachy about him. But yes, it's interesting when I watch debates I can remember - - I remember back to my own debate days and different things we should and should not do and **form** so - - he's better than I was [Laughs].

JE: Do you go to Ghana? Like - -

SB: I've been once. I went in 2002 and I went for two months. Growing up - - it's an expensive trip so we didn't go back and forth very much - - my parents would go if there was a funeral [inaudible] they would go back home, but we never went all together as a family, I don't think that we could afford for it to happen that way. And then when, when there was enough money set aside, it was my first sister to go back and then when there was enough money set aside again, it was my second sister who got to go. So by the time it was my turn to go, I was old enough that I was doing a lot of summer programs and internships so then it just wasn't convenient for me to go. So I decided to go after I took the Bar Exam in 2002 and that was my gift to myself to just relax and go. And it was wonderful. It was, it was amazing to think that my mother's direct sister, just like the sisters that I'd grown up with, I'd never met until I went to Ghana in 2002.

JE: And how was the experience there?

SB: It was wonderful. I like warm places so that was the first thing that was good.

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MN: The warm temperature?

SB: Yes. Warm temperature places [Laughs]. So that was **number one**, that was great. I just like seeing so much of my family. Being so far away and seeing people who were so close to me and who looked just like me, not just because they were black. They were, they were my family. And it's not look you're going to a place where it's distant family and let's say you have your parents and your grandparents here and now you're seeing second- and third-cousin, this is my aunt who I just didn't know.

MN: Did you - - did any of your cousins look just like you?

SB: Yes.

MN: Okay, so it would be [Laughs] - -

SB: Yes, it was just eerie [Laughs], kind of but, but nice and comforting at the same time. And they know all about us. They know - - like everyone who comes over here, they know every detail about your life and when you did this and when - - maybe they remember the last time they sent you a picture and everything.

MN: This is very familiar Dr. **Edward** [laughter].

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SB: But there is so many of them, whereas go back home then it's hard for me or us to keep track of them.

MN: Now is - - do people want to come to the United States there? So this is seen as - -

SB: Yes.

MN: - - a better opportunity?

SB: Definitely. This is a better opportunity. And especially now that - - well not now that school is so important but school has been important for a long time. And my family in particular is doing better in school back home in Ghana but, there is so few colleges to choose from that college is very difficult to get into. Unlike here where if you want to go college, you can. You can go to community college if you can't get into an Ivy - - there, there's so many options for school whereas it's not the case there. It's - - the college is the cream of the crop, and if you don't get in, that's it, you're, you're now on a different track. So for that reason they definitely want to come here, pursue their education.

MN: What was the adjustment like going from Calhoun to Harvard? Was that a bigger adjustment than going from the - - a Bronx public school to Calhoun?

SB: In some ways. When I was younger I was a very happy person. Everything was fine, nothing really bothered me. Maybe because I was the third child and a lot of the times the babies

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get “babied” but I just was expected just to go along with everything. So I was pretty easy-going. So the transition from my public school to Calhoun was not so bad, but as I got older, things weren’t as easy. I wasn’t necessarily as happy about everything and it was hard because it was so big. Calhoun is a very small school; my graduating class was thirty people. So I went from that to sixteen-hundred people, which is not even that large of a school, but for me it was a very, very big place. And something that people would always ask me when I went to Harvard was “Are there any black people there, are there any people of color there?” and funny enough for me it was the most people of color that I had seen in a long time because there was so few at Calhoun and it was such a school. So I had the inverse reaction when I got to Harvard.

MN: Now among the, the black students at Harvard, were they divided among African students, Caribbean students, and African American or it wasn’t that clear cut?

SB: I think you were aware of it. I mean there are all kind of organizations, Caribbean associations and, excuse me, African association, but there wasn’t - - they didn’t have problems with each other, they didn’t separate themselves. But every month, or every week, there would be an organization who had threw a party or maybe go to a meeting. So it was clear that we from different places, but we didn’t - - there was nothing that we would do to separate ourselves from one another.

MN: Now when was it you decided to go to law school?

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SB: That was in my last year of college, I applied to go to law school. And I actually decided to go to law school because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, that was how I ended up in law school. And there - - being at Harvard so many of my friends - - everybody seemed to know what they want to do since they were two and I didn't have any clue. So everyone was applying here and applying there and I thought "What am I going to do?" And then my parents are asking me "Well what are you going to do? Are you going to come home to get a job?" So there was a lot of pressure on me to figure it out. So I started talking to some of my friends' parents who had gone to school here or professionals and they recommended that if I wanted to continue my education, that law school was a good idea because it - - you could go on and do whatever you wanted to do from there and was a good degree to have. So that's how - - that's when I decided to - - that I would go.

MN: Now when you moved back to New York to go to law school, did you live at home or got a place?

SB: I lived at home just for about a month until a space in the dorm opened up right by Lincoln Center, so I was at Lincoln Center.

MN: And that was all three years?

SB: Yes.

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MN: And then after you graduated from law school, did you move back home or get your own place?

SB: I was at home again for just a few months [laughter]. I was home for a little while; I just couldn't break away [Laughs]. Unless I was on a campus somewhere, I wasn't quite ready to have my own apartment just yet so I would - - I went back home for a little bit and then a friend of mine who knew that I kind of wanted to get my own place, but wasn't - - knew that I was also having a time being ready for that experience, invited me to stay with her in her apartment and we studied for the Bar together. I was taking a second Bar [inaudible] so that was, that was what helped me to get out from underneath my parents' wing- was that experience.

MN: And were they okay with that?

SB: They were fine with it.

MN: [Laughs]

SB: They were okay. **If I'm** the third child - - so by the time they got around to me they were comfortable with all those ideas of people leaving home before you're married, all that stuff; they were fine with it.

JE: But do they call you regularly or - -

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SB: Oh, I was just there this morning before I came over here [Laughs]. I just - - they do call me regularly. If they don't hear from me for a week, they're wondering if I'm okay. But it's not just them, I call them frequently too. And we've become so much closer as I've gotten older - - that that's just normal, me and my sisters talk frequently too, so - -

MN: Now do you think - - you know you have a fairly large family group over here - - do you think that as a whole Ghanaian - - young people who grow up in Ghanaian immigrant families are more motivated academically than the other kids in the Bronx? Is that a pattern you would say or it varies from person to person, family to family?

SB: I think it varies from family to family. I have family members who are not so academically motivated as my family in particular, so I think it varies. But when I say motivated, I'm talking about a difference between college and grad school. So it's not that you wouldn't have graduated high school or something like that. Maybe that's not necessarily answering your question. I guess everyone is academically motivated; to what level you go is different from family to family. But stress in every single family, you're going to school, that's not, not an option I would say.

MN: Now have people in your cohort developed businesses here? Have they built business or they tend to invest the money in buying properties back home or have people built businesses as well?

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SB: I think my parents' generation and my generation are different. My parents and their friends were very concerned with building back home, and they had that direct link to either siblings or cousins or other family that they were taking care of back home. So it made sense for them to build houses for them back home so they would have a place to stay. Myself and my sisters, our generation, not so much buying homes in Ghana. And I think my parents did it because they also knew that they wanted to retire there so they were kind of preparing themselves for that time when they would go back. I don't envision myself retiring there, so I'm not preparing a place or a space for myself so more so my generation is building businesses here. But even some of my parents' generation have stores, those African stores are owned by them.

JE: And I think during my tours in the Bronx actually, most of the Ghanaians stay here. Their businesses - - this money transfer. Most of the money transfers actually is done by the Ghanaians.

SB: Oh really?

JE: Yes.

SB: I didn't know that they were the majority of them.

JE: That's what I realized actually. From that person that we interviewed last year, **Nana** - -

MN: Yes.

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JE: Nana. Yes, he owned this shipping and exporting business.

SB: I do have a friend who said he was interested in doing something like too.

MN: Okay well I - - do you have any more questions Professor Edward?

JE: That's it.

SB: Okay.

MN: What about you?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: I have maybe a couple of things. Do you think that if you met and married someone back at Harvard that - - who was well-educated like you are, but from the Caribbean or another culture, do you think that would cause a problem for your family?

SB: I think that for me, because I'm the third born and my parents have been through this twice, they have softened up by the time they've gotten to me. They've been through it twice with two other daughters, and they've just been here for a longer period of time, so they've seen a lot of families who have insisted, insisted, insisted "You have to marry someone from Ghana, this is - - that's what we expect from you" and they've done it, and they've ended up unhappy. And then they've also seen friends and family who have married someone outside, someone's who's not

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from Ghana and they're very happy, and that has been an educational process for them. So for me, if I did that now, they would be fine. Fifteen years ago? I don't know that they would be fine. I think they would - - if they knew that the person was a good person and they trusted me, they would be happy, but there would be pressure from their friends - - like they, they would feel like they had to answer to other people in the community as to "How did this happen?" kind of - - [Laughter]. But not anymore.

UP: [inaudible] from other races to have Ghanaian friends?

SB: Yes.

UP: And did they have the traditional wedding anyway?

SB: My cousin just married someone and she had a traditional American wedding. By traditional you meant American or traditional or - -

MN: Ghanaian.

SB: Okay. So she had an American wedding, but she had African dancers there. So they incorporated both of them.

MN: And you couldn't train the American family to try and buy her. [Laughter]

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SB: You probably could. But you know there is also something else where now even Ghanaian families who - - two Ghanaians who decide to marry will have some - - they'll have the traditional ceremony, but they'll call it the engagement, and then a year later, they'll have the traditional American ceremony, and that's when they'll sign the marriage license and have an official marriage. So they want to do both, and they do it, and that's how they incorporate both.

UP: So if you have a traditional ceremony one year before, how - - are you considered married?

SB: Well for us, we're married, you know you don't have the license and the paperwork but as far as having children and feeling like you're doing the right thing before the Lord, you're married.

MN: Okay. Well thank you so much.

SB: No problem.

MN: You're wonderful.

SB: Thank you. This is - -

[END OF SESSION]

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