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## Jawo, Omar

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Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edwards and Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Omar Jawo

Date: October 1, 2008

Dr. Jane Edwards (JE): Today is October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008 and we're conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Omar Jawo in the conference room in our department. Mark Naison is going to introduce himself. Dr. Mark Naison please.

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): I'm Dr. Mark Naison, I'm the principal investigator and founder of The Bronx African American History Project and with me is our new graduate assistant Christopher Carron. So what we always do as our protocol is we ask people to spell their name because—and give their date of birth.

Omar Jawo (OJ): Okay, my name, by the way thank you very much for inviting me for the interview. My name is Omar Jawo, Omar, O-M-A-R, J-A-W-O, so that's how I spell my name. I was born in 1952. I was born in the Republic of The Gambia, then it was a colonial country under the British government and I was born [inaudible]. I didn't know anything about education, we had no educational facilities back at home so I was born in the rural areas. But looking at my uncle, my mother's younger brother was a teacher. He was teaching for the Catholic mission, yes so he decided to take me to school. I was very young, so he took me to school. So that's how I learned, I began my education with the Catholics. So he was a teacher there, so I used to go to school, get to school, sometimes on Christmas he takes me along. Christmas when they're having their party, you know so that's how I get in touch with education, so when I grew a little bit then my uncle decided to take me to school. But you know, we are from rural areas, my ethnic group is Fulanis. Fulanis, we—if you go through history we are known for keeping animals. So we are [inaudible], especially cows. So I spent a lot of years going after cows, going to sheeps, I spent a lot of nights—you know sleep there---. So you know even when I was going to high school—so when I—so at the age of 11, 11, 12, 13 when I passed

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my common entrance I move from the rural areas. Actually when I was in the rural areas—

initially I did one of my primary schools, it was a boarding school called Flobantan, deep in the rural areas. It's a well-known Catholic school. [inaudible] So that's where I did my primary school and I passed and went to the [inaudible], one of the best high school—it was a Catholic high school [inaudible] high school, that's where I did my high school. I did 5 years. Growing up my high school is 5 years. Sorry 6 years, then we extra 2 years, that's preparing for university. Being from rural areas—poverty and whatnot I decided instead of going to continue my 2 years to 6<sup>th</sup> form to go to university, I said you know let me look for a job. So I cut off my education and I went to look for a job and I took a job with the Catholic schools. You know, then I wasn't satisfied. So applied to the School of [inaudible], I took an exam, passed and then I went to School of [inaudible] and did about a year or so, a year or so at School of [inaudible] then you know I left School of [inaudible], applied job, [inaudible]. Worked there for about 10, 15 years.

MN: Now what was the name of the organization again that you worked for? You worked for the Cooperative--?

OJ: Gambian Cooperative Union.

MN: Gambia Cooperative Union. And what sort of—what did that organization do?

OJ: They are dealing—helping farmers. Production, mostly they deal in agricultural production and helping women [inaudible] and people dealing with livestock. [inaudible]

MN: Peanuts?

OJ: Yes, that's our major export. So the major extract of my country was granite. So the country was moving in the marketing of granite. In the '60s, '70s you have this called marketing boards. They are a government department that are involved in the marketing of granite. And processing the--.

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MN: Okay, right, now is Gambia—has a port city?

OJ: Yes, it has a port city. Banjul, called Banjul, that's where a lot of import and export takes place. So it is a very good port—actually it's used by, you know like, Guinea, Senegal, Mali, and other countries. They use a lot of the services of the port. So it is—at least I think it is a very good port.

MN: Right, now how did you get the peanuts to the port? Was it by mostly truck or--?

OJ: They used, they used, the tugboat we have the river, The Gambia is blessed with a small river. You know when the British came in they just—[inaudible]—so they got a small piece of land, very beautiful, you know, it was—we have a navigable river all year round. So that river is used to transport tugs and barges.

MN: So your—so Gambia is surrounded by Francophone countries?

OJ: Francophone countries.

MN: Senegal on one side?

OJ: Senegal on both sides.

MN: Both sides?

OJ: Except the Atlantic Ocean. This is Senegal, this is the Atlantic Ocean, North, South, East, except the West which is the Atlantic Ocean.

MN: Got it. So it's just surrounded by Senegal?

OJ: Yes, yes surrounded by Senegal. So we were at one time one country—was called Senegambia—Senegambia. You have the rulers, same kind of people. So they use the river. The river is navigable, use barges or tug boats, a lot of very, very, it was a very effective way of transporting huge loads of peanuts or granite. And then they use on land, trucks and whatnot to bring to processing centers like different centers that they created around the riverside. When

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they process these loads [inaudible] which is the byproduct of the--and these are all put on ships and then exported to New York.

MN: So how many, what's the population of Gambia?

OJ: Well, recently it has increased to about 1.—I think now 1.3 or 1.5 million. Actually a lot of it is from like in-migration from other countries coming in because The Gambia has a liberal policy and a lot of people come in and you know go yes. So it's a very small country. Very, very small, 1.5, about 1.5 million people.

JE: And you mentioned about your education in The Gambia. You said you went to mission schools, so we understand that the missions were Christian schools. How did—maybe I don't know if you're Muslim?

OJ: I'm a Muslim.

JE: So how did you enter into that.

OJ: Back then there were very few high schools. Government set, what they call examinations. These are West African examinations, not only my country. All the English speaking countries do— exams organized by the West African Examination Council so I started the exams, I passed. And all the high schools are listed. So if you pass, the school—you are interviewed and you go to that school. So, so when I passed, when I passed—I passed my exams but the school didn't pick, the school that I wanted didn't pick me so I went to a junior high school instead. But then, the priest who was in charge of the school where I did my common midterms, that's the exam to go to high school, knew that I, you know that I should have been—so he decided, you know what, okay, when there is an open space at this school then we'll try—and go to this school. [inaudible] So after I stayed at the junior high school for one year, then I moved to high

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school. My second year, I went to the school. But if you pass exams, the school that you selected, the school may pick you, but the principal has the choice, he doesn't take you--.

MN: Now, when the Christian schools recruited Muslim children, did they try to convert them?

OJ: No. There is no forced conversion.

MN: So there was no pressure on you?

OJ: No pressure.

JE: So how did you end up up here?

OJ: Well, that's a good question. In 1994 we had a coup d'etat in my country. Well before that I was involved in social work because in 1982 I ran for [inaudible], so I did one year—so I was involved in social work. Then in 1990 to 1994 I was working for an NGO.

JE: What kind of NGO?

OJ: It's a community NGO. Community NGO, so I was involved with that community and then we had a partnership with a Canadian NGO called the Nova Scotia Gambia Association. They had the funding, they had the resources, they were looking for partners to interview kids. A lot of kids in West Africa countries, Muslim countries, you know you have kids that recall [inaudible]—visit a lot of West African cities you see the kids learning. So they decided to form partners with the local NGO so it was true that I was you know was able to interview to be part of that work. As a [inaudible] project, and then after the project ended I joined the university teaching, as a teaching assistant. Then politics, government—not involved here, I was in the university in social work, I got involved in politics. So somebody called [inaudible], we want to form a political party. We form a political party because we don't want the military rule or [inaudible] government which was 30 years almost. So that's how I went into politics with my friend, we form a political party, you know, I got involved in politics, you know against military

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rule. We wanted civilian rule, so we formed our own party, after the elections it didn't go well.

So I feared for my life, feared for my family. So I came to the United States on political asylum.

So that's how I ended up in the United States.

MN: So you came—you applied for political asylum?

OJ: Yes, I did.

MN: And received it?

OJ: And received it, yes.

JE: You applied from there or--?

OJ: No. I came in here, applied here.

JE: When was that?

OJ: In 19—I came in 1997. January, 1997 and I applied, I was granted in 1998 and my family came in 1999.

MN: So first you applied and then once you got it you could bring your family?

OJ: I could bring my family.

MN: So was your family still in Gambia?

OJ: Yes my family was still in Gambia.

MN: Were they safe?

OJ: To me, all the time, I couldn't sleep, it isn't right. My home was the political headquarters of my party. So my telephone number—and I used my brother's post office box, you know to do the communications, so my home was the political headquarters so well before I came to the United States I had the experience all the time of people coming in trying to look who am I? You know—but every, every, every day in America [inaudible], I just had to say you know what to

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save my—to save life and limb just, just let me go away before--. Then it was—just moving from military rule to a civilian rule, so it was just, it wasn't safe for me at all. So then I left.

MN: Now did you know people in the United States who could take—you know—help you get political asylum?

OJ: I didn't know anybody here. I didn't know anybody. I came in—I came to the United States [inaudible], I came and went to the State Department, we went to Washington, met officials of NGOs, I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anybody. So nobody helped me. That you know, that I know. I just applied and you know went through the normal process. You have to go through the normal process, you have to go through the normal process.

MN: Now were you in Washington when you were applying? Or you were here?

OJ: No I was in New York, here in The Bronx.

MN: And how did you find The Bronx?

OJ: There are a lot of Africans here. Bronx is--.

MN: So people there know that The Bronx is where Africans live?

OJ: Yes. Bronx, Bronx, Bronx have a lot of Africans. [inaudible] As I always say, even when I'm talking to my kids, I say you know what, you may be new to the problems in America but we are not new to America because Africans we are coming to America.

MN: And Senegambia was one of the major places were brought here from.

OJ: Yes, yes. People were brought here, and you go through history like [inaudible] brother, he took his ships, sailed in here, he came to the Americas right before Columbus, so he's documented. So Africans have been coming here, they have been living here in the United States, we don't know where but there are records that show, you know, Africans--.

MN: Now where was your first apartment in The Bronx?



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OJ: I was in Fenton—Fenton--.

MN: Fenton Avenue?

OJ: Just by the number 5 subway. There are a lot of African friends there that I, that I knew, some of them are still around some of them went back to Africa.

MN: Did you find a mosque to worship at when you came here?

OJ: No, not, I didn't—there aren't many mosques. The only mosque that I knew was the one at 196<sup>th</sup> Street--.

MN: The big mosque--.

OJ: There are smaller mosques which are in The Bronx, but you know—they are sometimes far from one's residence. [inaudible]

MN: When you came here initially, you were applying for asylum, what sort of work did you do?

OJ: When I have the papers I, I did security job. First I did the security job, but then you know the opportunities here in the United States—I said you know what, let me go to school. So I decided to go back to school. First I started with the—because I was fascinated by computers, I said let me learn computers. I went to, I think it's city or state sponsored training program for people who want to join the workforce. It's on Fordham here, not far from here, actually because of the proximity here, it's how I found Fordham University. I used to work, by—I used to take the 12 bus, I passed it and I see Fordham University, I used to go just on Grand Concourse. So Grand Concourse, the historic building which has a clock just near the--.

MN: Oh, right, I know the building. And so that's where the training program was?

OJ: 6-month training program.

MN: Now Fenton Avenue was that way? So you walked from Pelham Parkway subway stop.

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OJ: For 6 months I'd been passing Fordham University. 6 months I'd been going by Fordham

University, so I started to learn more about Fordham University, okay alright, so I finished the 6 months training there, I was a security guard--.

MN: And where were you working as a security guard?

OJ: I—just in town, you know--.

MN: These are mostly at businesses?

OJ: Yes.

MN: But not universities?

OJ: I remember they are shops, working shops. They were in shops. So after finishing that 6-month training, I was linked, you know, to a job, to the Bank of New York. They linked me to Bank of New York and I got a job at the Bank of New York as a processor in the lock box department. So that's how I went back, worked there for about 5 years, and I decided you know what, you know I should go to school again. So I applied there's a nearby school called New [inaudible] Institute. So again I went in there, this time, I did what they called office sciences, it's—I did like all the applications, computer applications, medical coding and some other kind of office work. So I did computer applications and did the 2 year associate degree, after completing it, I actually completed exactly on 9/11, 9/11 exactly Tuesday 9/11, that's when I completed my class. Exactly, and that day I was at work, 9/11, and I was at work so I was just about to finish, finish after work come to the college, just to graduate to complete my—so it never happened—so I was at work on Tuesday that morning at the Bank of New York which is just across from the World Trade Center. So after completing there, I decided and I said, you know, I work with the bank, I work for the bank for 6 years, you know I think—what will I do? So I applied for another job, got a teaching job for autistic kids, so then I continue with my bank

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because I was looking for a job. I told you I finished my 2 year associate degree, to have a job in an office, I didn't have a job in an office so I said you know let me apply for a teaching job, so I applied to teaching in a private school in North White Plains where I taught autistic kids for 6 years. But then one day, I said you know what, I still need to go to school, I still need to go to school, so I decided to apply to Fordham. Came in here, picked the papers and, and I said let me apply and when I applied, and given a kind of test here, then I waited and I said I don't know what will happen--. That I'll get accepted by Fordham, I don't know? So then I worked for a few years, I left the bank, left the bank continue with my—I got accepted here, continued with my studies.

JE: So when was that, when you got accepted to Fordham?

OJ: 2006, in 2006, I got accepted here in 2006 and I did my undergraduate about 3 years. I was doing 2 jobs with the school. Doing my bank job, you know, and then the teaching job--.

MN: And going to school? So you did 2 jobs and going to school at once? This is a common theme in interviewing African immigrants. Do you ever sleep?

OJ: They ask me that question. [Inaudible] the paper, I was asked that question, for the Fordham paper, when they interviewed me. I have sleep, but not enough sleep. I have to work hard, work hard and most of my studies, interesting, I used to do it in the subway in between, when I'm leaving my job.

MN: So you would study on the train?

OJ: On the train. It's very quiet because then going back to Fenton, sometimes when you come to East 180, especially winter, the train stops there and then I was waiting for a shuttle to take you to Dyre, so sometimes used to sit a little bit because I know I'm not going to bed, so I go

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home around 1am, 2am and wake up around 6 again, go to another job, come to school again. So

it was just challenging. I decided it has to work out, that's, that's--.

MN: Now, what year did you bring your family over?

OJ: I brought my family in June 1999.

MN: And how many children did you bring over?

OJ: I have 5 children, but I brought 4. 4 children, 3 girls and 1 boy.

MN: And did they go to school in The Bronx?

OJ: Yes, they all went to school, all of them went to college. My son graduated as a computer programmer, he's working for a company. All of them went to college, the 2<sup>nd</sup> to last one is going to college to study sciences, and [inaudible] she wants to go back to Africa and do her, her high school there and then come at a college here. So I have 3 of my kids here, 2 in Africa, my eldest is in Africa. He never came, he never came here, he never had the chance to come here.

MN: Now did they go to public schools in The Bronx?

OJ: Yes, all of them go to public schools. My son went to public school at Christopher Columbus High School, that's where he graduated and then went to SUNY at Farmingdale.

MN: Right. Now where you happy with the education they received?

OJ: I wasn't very happy to be candid, I wasn't very happy because it wasn't as—compared to my background with my education I had from—it was very well-rounded, very tough, very good. I, I would say, I would say I had very good education from the Catholic, from the Catholic education, schools—during my childhood. It's quite different from the education here. Because I remember even at my high school I used to do Latin, French, but it's not done here. Chemistry and physics, you know, we knew all the subjects, up to, last year of high school. So I saw that my kids, were you know, doing maybe 4 or 5 classes like math, science, and the social studies

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but back where I come from we do a lot of, a lot of, a lot of courses before going to college. So it was different, that was a difference, you know, systems are different.

JE: So are there so many people from The Gambia in The Bronx?

OJ: Yes, nowadays. Yes, actually I am [inaudible], all of the people that I'm working with are Gambians. Most of them are Gambians. I work in a private school here, in [inaudible] as a counselor. We have a total of population of 107 African children. And about 100 of them are Gambian.

MN: So in your primary school there are 107 African children?

OJ: African children.

MN: And what school is this?

OJ: P.S. 55.

MN: And what street is it on?

OJ: It's on Park Avenue, and Washington and 170.

MN: I know where that is. So you're near the Claremont Houses?

OJ: Yes, very near.

MN: Now are the—do the African children come from the, the public housing or from the surrounding?

OJ: They come from the project public houses there, or the surroundings there. [Inaudible] And about 90% of the families are from The Gambia.

MN: So you have a Gambian colony in that particular area?

OJ: Yes. There's a big Gambian community there, they have most—they have businesses around that area.

MN: In that area?

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OJ: In that area.

MN: So we should go by there sometime?

OJ: Yes, yes, you have lots of Gambians there. When I first came in—because when I first came in I decided to just go, go into the community, meet people [inaudible] to go to mosque, so we have lots of mosques built by Gambians there. So that's how I--.

MN: And what's the name of the major mosque in that area?

OJ: The major mosque in that area is, you remember the Malian kids who died over there—it's Clay and 166<sup>th</sup>.

MN: Oh, so it's Clay and 166<sup>th</sup> which is up the hill, near the Grand Concourse?

OJ: Yes.

MN: So the people go from this area near Washington Avenue to that mosque?

OJ: No, now they have different mosques everywhere. You have a proliferation of mosques all around that area.

MN: So they have a lot smaller mosques the biggest, the biggest Clay and 166<sup>th</sup>?

OJ: The big one is there, still now, still now people go to that one mosque, but the big, big one is on Clay. But you have one on Webster, you have on Park, you have on Jesup, you have, you have, you have on top of [inaudible], there's a big Ghanaian one on top of 166<sup>th</sup>, it's a 2-story building, very huge, it's the biggest actually.

MN: So that's the Ghanaian—at 166<sup>th</sup> and Webster?

OJ: Ghanaian one up there. No 166<sup>th</sup> and [inaudible].

MN: And 3<sup>rd</sup> okay.

[Crosstalk]

OJ: You know because there is a problem with that building. So--.

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MN: Homeless shelter?

OJ: No.

MN: With the structure?

OJ: Yes, structure, you know, so it's not occupied. But they come in to pray once in a while but it's—that place is finally finished—that place is the biggest. You know the one at 166<sup>th</sup>.

MN: Right.

OJ: But it's a new place. But you have, you have some mosques around that area--.

MN: So, so Gambia is a predominantly Muslim country?

OJ: 95%.

MN: 95%, about 5% or 4% Christians and the next group of Christians is Catholics.

MN: Now that neighborhood in The Bronx, where your school is located in—10-15 years ago was known as very dangerous. Do you think that the African immigrants have helped stabilize the neighborhood? Or do they still worry about their children?

OJ: I, I, I don't know if one can say they stabilize the neighborhood. Because looking at, looking at, at some of the kind of work that these people do, a lot of them, and their background—because a lot of them have no training, they are uneducated, poor families. They are very poor. If the families have the income, like other groups, they have the facilities, maybe they would open businesses, gain more capital, gain more resources, have more influence, invest in the community. But if you look at the bulk of them, they all live in subsidized housing. So there, to say that they have some kind of influence, I wouldn't say they have kind of that much.

MN: See what I always worry about when you're in—in the Claremont Houses because I have some former students who grew up there is that the children get drawn into, you know, the gangs or--.

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OJ: So far my experience with the children that I work—the kids I'm working with are elementary school--.

MN: Elementary school kids.

OJ: Elementary school children. None of them, none of them is into that—into gangs. None of the kids. And I've been going to mosque—all those mosques I've been visiting them and I have never heard that, that problem—you know, saying our kids are becoming--.

MN: Now when they become teenagers, do they start to dress in the baggy clothes? You know, and the hip-hop outfits with the pants all the way down or do they keep a more traditional appearance?

OJ: The kids I see, the kids that I see I will see them dressing in that kind of way. They dress just normally like anyone I'm passing, but sometimes they dress in the African dressing. But I haven't seen them dressing like [inaudible], I haven't. [Inaudible] I see them outside, I see them in this school, so I can't say—some of the kids I did see are into that kind of culture.

MN: Do you, do you think the school works well with the Gambian families?

OJ: I think so, I think the school works well. The only thing [inaudible], is to get the parents involved. Because that's not a common thing for us. So that's right now, I'm doing my internship, and part of my internship for my graduate course, I'm trying to work hand in hand with the parents.

MN: Now, you're at Columbia Teachers College?

OJ: No. School of Social Work.

MN: Oh, you're at Columbia School of Social Work? So you're going to get a Masters in social work?

OJ: Yes. By next year, next year.



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MN: Now, what languages to people from Gambia speak other than, you know, English?

OJ: We speak many languages. About 10 different languages if not more. We're a small country, as opposed to Nigeria that speak about over 100. We speak about 10 something or—languages. Like for example, you have Fulani, Wolof, Soninke, Joua, and different other languages.

MN: Now how many of those languages do you speak?

OJ: I speak 3 of them.

JE: Which ones?

OJ: I speak, well apart from the English, I speak my language, which is my mother tongue, I speak Wolof, and I speak Mandinka.

MN: You speak Wolof, and Mandinka?

OJ: Yes. And I can read and write in Arabic too. I do, I try—I was learning Arabic, but I cannot speak it.

MN: Now, do some of the people who you deal with, the parents, speak only the, the African languages or they all speak some English?

OJ: No, they don't speak—some of them speak English. The majority of the parent families that I deal with, the majority of them—they speak Saruli. And if you go there, even the most that you see—the majority of the most they are all Soninke speaking people, Soninke means Saruli. You can either use Soninke or Saruli. They speak Soninke or Saruli. But some of them speak a lot of Gambian languages. Just like me. The majority of them speak my language.

JE: Which is?

OJ: Fulani. Yes, the majority of them can speak my language.

MN: So you can communicate with most of the parents?

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OJ: Yes. We either communicate in English, or in my language.

JE: And [inaudible] can communicate with people from the Guinea?

OJ: Yes, Guinea speak Fulani. Okay, we speak with those guys. We have 2, about 4 students in my school from Guinea. So it's easier for me to communicate, they speak directly in our languages. Even the kids speak dialogue in our own language.

JE: And sometimes you can speak Wolof with the Senegalese.

OJ: Yes. They speak Wolof and Senegalese.

MN: Now are these languages taught in the universities in New York City? Can you take a course in Soninke or Fulani, Wolof, because it seems to me that people need to learn these languages.

OJ: No I don't think—you asked me a question, this reminds me, I asked my professor here in Fordham University, here at Keating Hall, we are doing English I said, we are asked to read books, English books, novels and whatnot and do you know, I asked the question, do you know what is Soninke? Or do you know Chinua Achebe? Professor said no, I don't know those professors, I don't those—I said Chinua Achebe wrote the book called, "Things Fall Apart", do you know? So when you are asking me the other day, take those languages--.

MN: They don't even know the authors--,

OJ: They don't know these authors. Chinua Achebe who is here in America--.

[Crosstalk]

MN: Now, because if this research expands, one of the things we would want to do is to get some of these languages taught at Fordham. I mean that's a big if—we're talking 5 years but you know, this, this has come up before. That you have many immigrants who come—who are, who

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are only comfortable in African languages and when they go to the schools or like—what happens when people need healthcare? And they have to--?

OJ: That's, that's a big, big problem. That's a big problem in right now. My school, I, you know, my community and the school that I'm working in, I actually, I indeed—a lot because Africans who come in there, they can speak English language. Especially the women. So they can learn to communicate in, in our own languages, so I think that while—[inaudible] is able to do that it will definitely help the Africans who come in here because I have been all the time seeing in my [inaudible] with them—people don't have resources, they are lost in the system—so it's a problem. But parents come to me every day to fill forms at the school, [inaudible] their children. So it's--.

MN: And what happens, where does somebody go if they're sick?

OJ: They just go to hospital--.

MN: But then you have to send a translator with them.

OJ: Yes, sometimes. Even to call, let's say you have a case, you have to hire a translator.

MN: And are there translators in these languages that are in the community that you can hire?

OJ: I don't know—I know only one person who I have been working with in my—the school to—helping parents to volunteer at the school and to organize into kind of a community organization. I know one person who speaks English and speaks Soninke. I think he does some translation but there are very few. There are very, very few who do that.

MN: Do some people then not go to a hospital because they're afraid that they—they're sick and they're afraid they can't communicate? Do you think that that adds to problems that people, may stay home when they're sick.

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OJ: Maybe. That may be the cause because they can't speak the language, or they just decide to go to a pharmacy, they can buy all that over the table medications, you just buy it there. Because they can't talk to the doctor, who can help them, you know? Maybe--.

MN: Now, now do the children end up being the ones who--. Like the children--. So the children are bilingual or trilingual?

OJ: In most cases. Even at school kids help to interface between school officials and the parents. Kids have been doing that. That's true they do that.

MN: If you were going to pick 3 languages that should be taught at let's say Fordham for the African immigrants in The Bronx. The 3 most important languages other than French, English, and Arabic, what would you chose? The most common ones.

OJ: Well, I base my, I base my choice on the number of immigrants from different countries in Africa. Gambia is just one country, I won't say a lot of Gambians as compared to Nigeria, which is a bigger country. They may have more people in The Bronx here, or Ghanaians. You have a lot Ghanaians here and they have different Ghanaian languages. But right now, where I'm working with, within the area I work in?

MN: Yes.

OJ: I think just within that area, that area, just within that area may be more than 1,000 students of Soninke speaking children.

MN: Okay, so Soninke would be your first choice?

OJ: Yes, Soninke, my choice. If you move from that area, maybe you want to go to Harlem area, around 150 something.

JE: 125.

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OJ: 125<sup>th</sup>, you have lots of Wolof and Fulanis. So it depends, it depends where, maybe, where you are located. Where the immigrants are so--.

MN: And from Mali it would be more--?

OJ: Bambaataa.

MN: Bambaataa. Because people mentioned to us Soninke, Manike, and Bambaataa are Malian.

OJ: In Mali, and even a little bit of [inaudible]. Because Mali is just—a lot of Malians in Senegal. Like [inaudible], those areas it's just nearby same border so they may speak Wolof. So it's, the thing is to find out the number of people coming in from different areas because here we have some Fulanis, not many in this area. But if you walk—go into Harlem, you know you may have a lot of them.

MN: Now, what about the teachers in the school? Do any of the teachers speak African languages?

OJ: No teachers--.

MN: Because that would be something to have teacher training. If somebody wants to be a teacher in The Bronx, they should be able to learn an African language.

OJ: Not only, not only to learn the African language. I think, apart from that, teachers would be kind of culturally competent. Not only to know the languages, but to know the cultures of these people. That's a starting point.

MN: What are the, what are the biggest cultural tensions in the school between teachers and the families? What do you think are the biggest problems?

OJ: It's communication problems. The communication problems, can't communicate with these people when they come in. And that's, that's, that's a big problem. You see a parent coming in, you know, can't understand what the teacher is saying, you know. Teacher say something,

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maybe the parent—is thinking that you know, so that’s a big problem, especially when you have a kid who is having behavioral problems. So that’s, that’s a, that’s a—it’s a real problem.

MN: And then you—you’re brought in in that situation to mediate?

OJ: To mediate, or get in touch with the parents, talk to the parents. Speak to the kids, also try to be a link between the teachers and the parents to help, you know, so I do that. And part of my duties too is to kind of let them know African culture. I am supposed to do kind of a, kind of help train staff to [inaudible] types of African cultures, African languages. Especially is now, post 9/11 it was a problem for us as Muslims a lot of in the—in public sometimes you have lots of problems. You come in as a Muslim. I even experienced it when I was working downtown after 9/11.

JE: Can you tell us more about that because that’s the next question that I wanted to ask—like how, how do Muslims experience life after September 11<sup>th</sup>?

OJ: To some it was difficult. It’s difficult. I, I remember one incident, just immediately after 9/11, at the bank where I worked. I normally like to dress the way you see me dressed sometimes I dress like this especially on occasions like today. You know, we have the end of Ramadan. So it’s a feast. Back home, in my country today is their feast, they have Ramadan there, they eat. And that was yesterday. So I normally like to dress like this. I remember the incident-- I came early in the morning with my bag and my food and you know, just when you came into the bank you have to swipe to go and then there is a security—they check your stuff. So I remember coming in with my stuff, I have people ahead of me and people behind me. So I came in, those in front of me they all left, they were checked—so when I came in security asked to check my bag. Security checked my bag, I give to security to check my bag and I asked the security, why didn’t you check the bags of those people ahead of me then check my bag? I went to my supervisor,

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and I told my supervisor, I said this is not correct, you know I experienced it. Sometimes too like, you come into the train, people see you, they just get off and get away from you. You know, or people look at you in a way, you know, in a way that you know, it's not the kind of look you're expecting from--. So I—different people see it in different ways. [Inaudible] It wasn't easy, really it wasn't easy.

MN: Was it difficult for your children? Did they experience any issues in school or in the neighborhood where they lived?

OJ: Not really, not many, not many. The only one that had difficulties was the small one. Once he came in here. The small one, it was, it was she had difficulty just because, one you have to—the way, [inaudible] bring the first kid from Africa, back in Africa there is not that much control, like in here. You have endless space, kids can play, kids can go, sometimes if you're nearby family your kids can leave your house in the morning at dawn and return in the evening. So kids can do anything, so my kid came in, it wasn't easy for her to adjust. It wasn't easy, it wasn't easy and you know sometimes [inaudible]. For a few years, before things started—the older ones didn't have that problem, didn't have that problem.

JE: Besides the mosque, does the Gambian community have the community organizations that deal with their own things?

OJ: No, that's the reason why I decided an organization. The only thing I know is the mosque.

MN: Now what—so you formed an organization?

OJ: I'm trying to form.

MN: Right now?

OJ: Yes.

MN: An association for Gambians in The Bronx.

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OJ: No, not Gambians only—the idea is, the thing is for all African families, not only, not

Gambians. But since I'm going and working with Gambian parents, so I'm discussing that—

when I get my disclosure—Maliens, Guineans--.

MN: Now one of the things I thought of, if you would ever like to use Fordham University as a meeting place, we might be able to help, you know help you get a room sometime.

OJ: I would be most pleased.

MN: Yes, because that's one way we could--.

OJ: I really am, I'm very serious about it because I've already started. I wrote a constitution, you know the one to register a 501(c)3. I told the parents, I said you know what, all these after school programs [inaudible], that come to the school, they are contracted with the City. They can't have these programs. You know, who can help you better than yourself?

MN: The other thing that I think of, we may be able to get you some student interns to work with you, because there are a lot of, a lot of African students who come from The Bronx. You know the families, because a lot of these students did very well. So some of our students are from African families and might want to work with you on this. Or even non-African students.

OJ: Undergraduate students?

MN: Undergraduate students.

OJ: That would be good. But it's something that I really, I haven't got the resources yet, I am trying to get the community, trying to get them together. I did travel up to Manhattan, we got a lot of mosques, I went to a lot of mosques just to tell them, you know what, we have to come together right now, only the mosque. People use only mosques and--.

MN: So that's the only organization?



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OJ: If there is any, know that organization is on political basis. It's either there opposing the government back at home. Yes, that's--.

MN: Now have you had any contact with elected officials in The Bronx?

OJ: Nobody yet. Nobody yet, but I'm working with one Gambian who also does translation. I'm working with one Gambian he has a contact with--.

[END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B]

OJ: I've not yet had any contact with elected officials, but I know it's something that I will do in the future.

MN: Because apparently Michael Benjamin and Helen Foster both are interested in reaching out to the African community.

OJ: I know that, I'm involved in the, in the new organization they formed actually, originally they took me as the secretary but I couldn't because of my job. It's called APIC, African Peoples Empowerment Committee. We formed this--.

MN: It's called A-P-E-C?

OJ: A-P-E-C.

MN: African Peoples Empowerment Committee?

OJ: So that is—and trying to work with Ms. Foster, Michael Benjamin and all the politicians, I don't know them. But we are trying to form it. We've been having meetings. I haven't met Foster but some of the members of the APEC did meet Foster. This was like political—this was a meeting to politics, this is what our issues of employment, all the problems.

MN: Now because we've worked pretty closely with Helen Foster in this project and she's been a major supporter. In fact we actually honored her last year at a fundraising event. So I mean she'll--. I mean the other thing is if any other members of this organization want to come in here

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and, you know, participate, or you know, you know we'd be very happy to and also don't

hesitate to ask us for help. Because you know, we have access, you know to the university facilities but also to a lot of students. Who might want to work with you know because we—a lot of Fordham students volunteer to work with schools and community organizations.

OJ: Okay, maybe in the next few months or so because, I'm, I'm, I'm—the only thing that is holding me is my college work, going up and down, the internship but I'm very serious about this organization, to get them organized. That's the only thing that will help, that's the only thing. Get them organized, go to the school and get involved in the education of their kids. That's the big problem that is lacking within in the African communities. They are not, not many of them, many of them are not involved, they don't know what is happening in schools, they don't know what is happening in school and then you know, just some people like I said—because post 9/11 some people are afraid to come in public, you know, view and whatnot so these are many things that we have to work to help our children in public schools. So you know, it's a, it's a huge—you have a huge number of kids in public school according to the university professor in economics, I think [inaudible], about 120,000 with their children in New York City public schools. So that's a lot of—many children, and thousands of them, tens and tens of thousands of them--.

MN: Now what are the relations between the Christian Africans in The Bronx and the Muslim Africans? Are there, you know, do people negotiate or talk with each other or work together?

OJ: I can speak, let's see, I can speak, let's say for the Gambians because I know people who are Christians when I see them. But maybe I wouldn't know for Nigerians, I wouldn't know for maybe Guineans, but for Gambians, we have [inaudible]. I, I, I had a Gambian, I was living with a Gambian Christian, we knew each other, our families knew each other before here. So very,

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very good relations. And our country, our country, we have good relations, Muslims and

Catholics have very good relations. We attend each others feasts. When the Catholics have their

feast, you'd think it's a Muslim feast. When Muslims have feast you think that is a Catholic—

because you see them work together, so we don't have that problem here. Sometimes people

export problems away from home, we don't have that. We [inaudible] our Christian brothers and

sisters from The Gambia. We still keep in contact. My, my Christian individual, I'm telling every

now and then keep in touch. Family visits us, my family visits them.

MN: Now, now what sort of work do the Gambian men do in New York, most of them?

OJ: Most of them, most of them unskilled jobs. Either security, a few of them in construction,

very few, but most of them either working in restaurants. Most of them, most of the Gambians

are doing unskilled jobs.

JE: What about the women, do they come out or they stay home?

OJ: Some of them, like the Soninkes that I'm working with, the majority of their women are stay

at home, and that ethnic group, one interesting thing about that ethnic group, the Soninkes, who

are the majority of the people who are around the area that I am, they are not very into Western

formal education. So bulk of them, bulk of the Soninkes that you will meet have never been to

school.

MN: At all?

OJ: At all, they've never.

MN: So, they're not literate in their own language?

OJ: They are literate in their own language. When I'm saying school I mean Western education.

Western education, so it's—Soninkes are not—I mean kids here that we have in this school, this

school where there are Soninkes, parents never went to school. So they are not into education,

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they are into business even back at home they are into business. So they are [inaudible] from Western education.

JE: So what kind of business do they do?

OJ: They do have—like selling foodstuffs, you know? Daily necessities, that's what they get involved—maybe some kind of, kind of either restaurant job or delivery.

MN: Now, are there Gambian businesses developing in The Bronx?

OJ: Yes, near my, near my area you have some Gambian--.

MN: Now, you live now on what street?

OJ: I live on Davidson Avenue.

MN: Between where and where?

OJ: 176<sup>th</sup> and 177<sup>th</sup>.

MN: Near Tremont, the little--?

OJ: Tremont, yes.

MN: Okay, that's easier, yes I know how to get there.

OJ: It's not that far.

MN: So there's a few Gambian stores there now?

OJ: Not many, I know of let's say one or two. There is one store, two stores actually kind of 99 cent store, you know Gambians working in there. He has his own business and then you have some other—a few Gambian shops I know. I know Gambians also operating restaurants. Very few.

MN: Right, now are your children are college age. Do any of the children of this community end up wanting to be teachers? And then coming back to the schools? Or are mostly going into science and technology and business?

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OJ: You know I—this, all I know is when I meet a lot of Gambians we are not, the problem with a lot of Gambians here when they're coming here a lot of them, something—I don't know what happens but they are not, they don't go to school. A lot of them don't go to school, you have a lot of young men here, instead of going to school they're just continuing working they can't go to school, they can't go to school. So it's--.

MN: So they work 2 or 3 jobs but don't go to school?

OJ: Don't go to school so, we have—compared to the Nigerian community, or the Ghanaian community a lot of them go back to school.

MN: Oh yes, no, no we've interviewed somebody who went to Harvard a young woman. And, and from Ghana, and then Fordham Law School and then you know, another young woman here who's at the Federal Reserve Bank and they're both from Ghanaian families.

OJ: That's what happens—you see the exact—because Gambians are not into education when they're coming here and I understand the young people that come in here, that's, that's the problem we have. A lot of our young people come in here, they don't go to school. You have many young Gambians here in The Bronx but I cannot—you can count the few who go to colleges. We have very of them who go to colleges.

MN: Now, do more women go to college than men do you think of the Gambians?

OJ: I think so, I think so—you have more women going to college. Although, yes you have a lot of—more women going to colleges, I think so. Even like my classes—we have more women in the class. Out of 20 maybe only 2 of us men--.

MN: This is in the evening school so it's only 2 men and 18 women?

OJ: Yes, or sometimes 1 man. Yes, I see that--.

MN: An endangered species.

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OJ: Yes, yes. But trust me, there—a lot of Gambians when they are coming here, they don't go to school. They go into business.

JE: Only spend money.

OJ: They want to make money. So I always advise them, this country has opportunities that you can make use of. You know, go to school, that's the only thing that [inaudible], go to school. But you know, I know a lot of Gambians, young men and women who don't go to school they just--.

MN: They drop out at--? Or never go at all?

OJ: Some of them—never go at all. Some they drop out, start into a few courses and then drop out. You know and they'll drop out.

JE: Okay, let's go back to the issue of culture. Like we have a [inaudible] of bringing our children in Africa. And here they have a different way of how children are brought up. Can you say something about that? Based on your own experience bringing up your kids in The Bronx.

OJ: It's very difficult here. Back at home, just like you said, the African policies, [inaudible] in the bringing of the child. Coming to America it's completely different. America is—the way kids are brought up here, I mean the system has too much to interfere in your family. They have too much interference in how you bring up your family. You know the kids know that, the kids can say, you don't have to talk to me like this, you know? Back at home your kids--.

MN: In other words they'll be disrespectful here?

OJ: Disrespectful yes. Honestly my first time coming in America, yes that was my first time, I didn't think—I didn't have one month here and it was nighttime. I don't remember which part of The Bronx or in Manhattan, I was very young. I saw a woman and a daughter—the woman moved [inaudible]—I don't know what happened, she moved away and I heard the daughter telling the mom, you are stupid. That was first experience I have, the relations between the child

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and the mother. So I said—in Africa, in Africa, we, we, we despite maybe some of us who are open to Western education and like—we still, they are still cemented in our cultures in bringing up our families. You know, we, especially extended families, everybody's involved. Even somebody that you—if your child does something bad outside, somebody, even who doesn't know you, can discipline the child in your absence. You know? So but it's, it's difficult in America here, you can't do much. You can talk to a child, your child can, you know just, even reject you and just refuse to hear what you say. He or she can do anything they like, it's very difficult in America here. It's very difficult. In Africa, it's not that difficult to bring up your child because if you are not there, somebody's there for you. If your child goes out, somebody's there for you. So you know, that's, that's, that's the difference.

MN: Now, I just want to make sure that we get you where you need to be in time so you're going to be going home first? So we have I think about another 10 minutes before we should cut this off just to make sure you get to your class on time.

JE: Another thing, I'm really interested to go to the mosque.

OJ: Who?

JE: Me. Okay, you're interested to go to the mosque?

OJ: Okay.

JE: I don't know how do they--?

OJ: This is what, well like my—I can only say like after doing stuff here, just Fordham Plaza, I can only for instance like when these kids passed away, Malian kids, a woman came in to make negotiations with imam if you want to call it, to the mosque--. And if you want to come to the mosque, you have, you have this woman—some of the parents that I'm working with, they have classes, they have classes for them in Arabic in the Qu'ran. They have classes in my school too.

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If you want you can come to the school, you can come to P.S. 55, they have classes. Very successful women's class in my school. They're conducting evening classes for the parents and at least I want to start leading the fathers class in maybe next few weeks. To teach the fathers English. So if you want you can come in there, start off there and from there maybe you can move from there, move into the community--.

JE: Yes, tell me more about that.

OJ: You, you yes, if you, if you want, if you want bring it up to, to--.

JE: Maybe for example if I want to interview the imam or--?

OJ: If you want I can make all the arrangements for you. If you want to talk to them, if you want to see them, if you want to come to the mosque I can make all the arrangements for you.

JE: And I'll dress properly, I know how--.

OJ: Yes, you dress and you come in and then you know. You can meet women at the school, talk to them, start there, you can come and visit the kids, see what they do, talk to the teachers. And that group is doing very well. They're doing very well, learning English, yes. And then we have the men's group, we have on Saturday. But that's our, that's our, that's our main idea. Get them in, get the parents, know English so that they can know what is happening—get involved in the education of their kids, that's what we want. So that's why we run these programs, that's the only place in New York City that I know does that, my school. My school is the only place--.

MN: Now, do you have a, a good working relationship with the principal of your school?

OJ: Excellent.

MN: Because what's—is it a him or a her?

OJ: Him.

MN: What's his name?



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OJ: Mr. Torres.

MN: Mr. Torres?

OJ: Mr. Torres. Louis Torres.

MN: Because we should probably talk to him as well.

OJ: Talk to him, he's, he's very good. He--.

MN: Is, is—I may have even gotten an email from him at some point about--.

OJ: Me.

MN: Yes, it could—because I remember getting something from a Mr. Torres.

OJ: He's the principal. He hired me and I was doing my internship there and then he had a lot of African families, he said you know what, let me hire you. I am the only one I think in this school who is African who is working with Africans trying to help Africans.

MN: Yes, no, because I think this is something that—has anybody written this up in a newspaper?

OJ: Nowhere, nowhere.

MN: Do you want it to be written up?

OJ: I--.

MN: Do you? Because—see one of the things is look, you've done something very important for us by telling this story. It's a very valuable story. We want to be able to use what resources we have to help the things you're doing.

OJ: That would be good. You know the thing is, I've been saying—we Africans are underserved. In terms of public services, social services—we are really underserved.

MN: You should always feel you can call on me and Dr. Edward for help with any project you're involved in.

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OJ: Okay.

MN: And let's say, I have friends in The New York Times and so I can say like, David Gonzalez is a reporter for The Times, who's a friend. I can say, there's an amazing program working with African immigrant parents in P.S. 55, would you like to do a story on it?

OJ: That's the only program I know.

MN: But no—you should, what I'd like you to do is check with the principal first, because I don't want to do anything if he would be upset. And also tell him he can call me to make sure we're all—or Dr. Edward, we're all on the same page.

OJ: Okay, I'll send you his email. I'll talk to him and I'll ask him to email you—I'll give him your email. And ask him to contact you.

MN: Good, good.

OJ: But that's the only program in the City here, and the only one—very few I know a Nigerian working also with the department. He's working like SAPIS—like I'm SAPIS counselor. SAPIS means Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention Services. That's what we do.

MN: Right, which is kind of not exactly what—in other words it's a rubric that allows you to do all these other things?

OJ: Yes, work with the kids yes. We counsel them on drugs, you know, a lot of social skill help them, you know? So that's, that's what we do. But I know, I know me personally, I'm the only one in, in a certain kind of situation. An African trying to help Africans who are—lots of Africans in public schools, you know, whose parents don't know how to navigate the system. They don't know what--.

MN: But it's interesting we interviewed 2 Malian custodians in P.S. 140 in 163<sup>rd</sup> and they said that it's the same thing. They constantly have to translate for families in their community, so this

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is—these issues are very important and you know, please, any help you would like with this in terms of space or networking. If you want an announcement to get out, you know, we have this Bronx African American History Project like listserv of 200 people. A lot of teachers and principals, if you would like to be on that listserv and get all the emails, you can then send out announcements. Because it's a great way to reach all kinds of people.

OJ: Alright, okay, alright. I definitely, I'll definitely work with people who want to help the African community because we really, really need help. People really need the assistance. There are a lot of problems within the African community. And that's another thing people come together. We ourselves first come together try to invest in our kids. Because a lot of—even, even I don't know what the statistics says but I know, after graduating from junior high school, not many go to college too. Not many kids go to college.

MN: Yes, I would say the majority of the students I've had, have been—their families have been Nigerian or Ghanaian. I haven't had a group of people from you know, Francophone Africa. You have somebody from Senegal.

JE: I have a student now and one from Zambia.

OJ: Senegalese, you know, although we are together, Senegalese, they—a lot of them like, my classmates here at Fordham Senegalese. He was Senegalese, he's also wanting to go to Columbia. But Senegalese, a lot of them value education.

MN: But it's interesting the Malian, you know, group you know, hasn't yet made a presence in the universities yet.

OJ: Yes, because they are Francophone, and you know--.

MN: Yes, but now they're a lot—there are so many issues that you've raised that need to be made matters of policy with the elected officials and the healthcare system, the educational

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system, and then the universities need to get on board with this. So, again, this is a new project but we you know, what you're saying is very important and we want to help in any way we can.

OJ: Alright, okay.

MN: So we should probably stop because I want to make sure you get where you're going but is there anything you want to say in conclusion, remembering that this will be heard by people.

Like if you want to make a little speech.

OJ: Thank you for inviting me, for allowing me to share with you my experience and what I know about the African community and what I've been doing. I thank you for that. And if you have any information, you have my email, you can send me information, you can send me—and if you want me to help in any way, since you are involved with you say, African Americans, I would be most pleased. I will work with you to help because right now, I'm looking for people that I can link with, that I can form network, you know trying to help these people.

MN: Yes, and this is something I can definitely—you know we can both definitely work on you. I, you know, have access to a lot of elected officials and scholars so you just, whenever you want something you just ask. But I'm going to also put you on our mailing list which is an information exchange and also—and you can always say, the African community in The Bronx needs this.

Can we have some volunteers? We need a space, we need resources, we—you know. So we'll, we'll make this happen.

OJ: Alright, okay. I would be most pleased, I'll definitely make use of [inaudible] and I know if I call you for help you'll definitely help.

MN: I'm going to give you a BAAHP shirt and it may be too big for you because we're running out of the right sizes but you can use it as like a robe. We have to make a new batch.

[Crosstalk]

Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edwards and Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Omar Jawo

Date: October 1, 2008

MN: And I will drive you home. I will drive Dr. Edward to the subway and then I'll drive.

OJ: Definitely I'll need your help. I'll definitely need your help. Right now what I'm trying to do, especially when I finish my graduate course, I definitely want to concentrate on helping Africans. We want to start something and then you know that will help them. That's a [inaudible] that I think that I want to do. But right now I have some kind of limitations because of my coursework, some other stuff, you know that's the case.

MN: And, and we're just starting with this but if it all goes well this is going to grow and get a lot of attention. In fact, it's growing every day. When we started people were a little reluctant to get involved, they wondered if we were serious, now they know we're serious and committed.

Okay, thank you so much for this, it's a pleasure.

[END OF SIDE B]

[END OF INTERVIEW]