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Mardah, Muhammad

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Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Interviewee: Mohammed Mardah
Date: April 14, 2009

Mark Naison (MN): Hello. Today is April 14, 2009. And we are at—what's the name of the organization we're at?

Mohammed Mardah (MM): This organization? Yankasa.

MN: Yankasa Association, and we're interviewing Mohammed Mardah, who was been the head of the Ghanaian association of New York, and is very involved in community affairs in the Bronx and also in schools. So Mr. Mardah, tell us a little bit about your family background, where—oh, also could you please spell your name?

MM: OK. Mohammed is spelled M-O-H-A-M-M-E-D, and Mardah is M-A-R-D-A-H.

MN: And where were you born?

MM: I was born in Accra, Ghana. February 28, 1966. So I'm getting up there in years.

MN: Right, well not as old as I am. [Laughter] And what was your family background in terms of, you know, the work they did and their position in the community?

MM: Yes, it's interesting. My father, Mr. Ali Mardah, was, he was head of the Ghana Publishing Corporation in Ghana for a number of years before he retired. He was one of the executives there. This is in the, I mean, I grew up in the '60s, so I guess in the '70s is when he held that position. And he retired by, I guess, by the time I was ten. He died when I was ten, but he had retired before that, so—and that's basically, you know, my father. My mother, unfortunately, didn't have no formal education. But she was very, very smart. She was a businesswoman. She traveled the world. And how she managed

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that, I wouldn't know because, you know, we'd go to Paris for business and, you know, how do you, you know, how do you negotiate in French if you've never been to school?

MN: That's amazing. And what sort of business was she involved in?

MM: Oh she was involved in just trading, I mean, just buying stuff that, you know, she felt people needed back home in Accra and she would bring it back and sell it for a little profit.

MN: Now did she have a store, or she sold it out of her home?

MM: No, she—she didn't have a store. She had a, you know, a customer base. And she just provided them with the stuff, and they paid her as they sold the merchandise. That's how I found her growing up.

MN: Now what language was spoken in your home?

MM: The language back home was Hausa. Yes, Hausa. My father actually originally is from the northern part of Ghana, which they were Sisaala, they were called Sisaala. It's a small little village up in northeastern, in the upper—right now, today, it's called the upper east region, and it's a town called Tumu. And that's where his father was from, but they were all born in Accra. So they didn't really even speak their language. We all spoke Hausa, which is like the predominate language within the Muslim community in Accra and in other parts of the country.

MN: Now how much education did your father have? Was he a university-educated person?

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MM: Yes, my father was—I'm not sure if he graduated, but I know he had a significant amount of education.

MN: Now the religious institutions, where they near your home? Was it a mosque or an Islamic center? What would it be called in your community?

MM: Yes, it would be called a mosque. And basically, when we were growing up, see we grew up with the whole family in one—in one household. So it's like a compound. So, my father, being the head of the household, had his brothers and sisters all living in the same compound. And so it was—it was very interesting growing up. You had a thousand cousins all living under one roof. And it was interesting growing up.

MN: Now where you went to school, did you go to an Islamic school or you went to a public school?

MM: I started out—I started out going to public school, we would do it—which is a tradition that we have carried over here, unfortunately. We have—we go to school Monday through Friday, regular school, and then on the weekends, we would go to an Islamic school. That's what we did. And we have carried the tradition here. Even today, a lot of our kids go to regular school Monday through Friday, and then on the weekends they come to the Islamic schools to learn about the religion and the culture and all of that.

MN: Now where the schools that you went to multi-ethnic and multi-religious, or was everybody from, you know—

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MM: No, no! All the schools were multi-ethnic as—you know, it was a microcosm of the population, basically. So you went to school in your neighborhood. It was pretty much like here where you get assigned to a particular school. So when you get to school age, basically you apply, and the Department of Education—back home, it's called the Ministry of Education—you just go to the school and you put down your name. They look at you, they do a little test, and they assign you to that school. Usually it's in your neighborhood.

MN: Now, when you were growing up, did you imagine that you would be in the United States?

MM: Oh no. No. Heck no. I mean, this is far, far from it. [Laughs] The United States was a dream, you know. We never, never—I didn't know much about, you know, the U.S. growing up, until probably I got to high school. Yes, high school is where we started to see more of the U.S. and the culture and the—and basically it was more of this Hollywood image. That's what we all saw.

MN: Right. Now, what about—what was happening politically in Ghana when you were growing up?

MM: Well when I was growing up, politically, I—OK, I have to say I grew up during the coup-coup eras. And this is when you have a civilian government and then the military government would overthrow the civilian government, and then they would rule for a few years, and then either they get overthrown by somebody else, or they hand over to a civilian government, and then that government would rule for a few years, and then

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another military leader would feel they're not doing the right thing; he would come in, take over, and that was the environment until, I believe, 1979, when Jerry Rawlings came in with his military guys and just pretty much trying to stabilize the situation. You know, there are different schools of thought on Rawlings. Personally, I admire him. I didn't appreciate some of the things he did in hindsight, of course. Growing up, you know, we were all into this whole revolutionary zeal of the '60s and '70s. I remember, you know, I had a poster of Che Guevara in my room—

MN: Oh, OK. [Laughs.] I know who he is.

MM: Exactly. So, you know, we were all caught up in that revolutionary zeal. So we were all behind Jerry Rawlings and what he was doing. Of course, in hindsight, we, you know, we kind of appreciate some of things he did, didn't appreciate much of what he did.

MN: Now he came in as a—with—he came in a revolutionary perspective?

MM: Yes, absolutely.

MN: He came from a Marxist background?

MM: Absolutely he came from a Marxist background. I believe he adored Che Guevara and all these other guys—Castro—and so he pretty much—that was the idea. You know, that Marxist-communistic kind of thing.

MN: Now did your family ever undergo political persecution under any of the governments?

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MM: No, no, we did not. That's a good thing. Maybe certain, certain, certain, certain members of my mother's family did. But not my father's side, you know—

MN: So it was a fairly peaceful growing up years with your family?

MM: Yes, yes. Absolutely. Very peaceful. Very, very peaceful. And being that my father was, you know, considered a leader in the community, you know, it was a very good thing growing up. He died when I was only ten. So that was the unfortunate part of it. But for the most part I think I had a decent upbringing, yes.

MN: Now was your goal to get a university education—

MM: Oh absolutely—

MN: —and stay in Ghana—?

MM: Well, I don't know. You know what, I really don't know. Because I was just too young to understand. But definitely the goal was to get a degree. Once I got to high school, I knew I wanted a degree—a college degree—I knew that. Whether it would be in Ghana or outside of the country.

MN: Now what was high school like?

MM: Oh, the best times of my life.

MN: Wow.

MM: Yes. The best time. High school was great, because I went to an all boys school called Accra Academy. That school was actually established in 1931. And it was

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almost—there were two main, two top schools in Accra, as far as I'm concerned. One was Achimota, that was established by the—I believe it was established by the colonialists. And that's the school that most of the elite at the time attended, until Accra Academy came as sort of a counter to Achimota. And so, you know, there's a friendly competition.

MN: Right. But those are the two elite. Those are the Stuyvesant and the Bronx Science.

MM: Bronx Science. Yes. At least in Accra. And so, you know, it was—and I went to—although I lived in Accra, I went to boarding school. The school is based in Accra. It was only about a mile away from where I lived.

MN: So you boarded at the school? At Accra Academy?

MM: Yes, I boarded at the school, and it was really great. All boys. And you can imagine, I mean, the best years.

MN: Great teachers?

MM: Great teachers, great students, great schoolmates. You know, because of the history of the school, and also—it was almost like the kind of Harvard thing. We had the kids—I mean we—at one point, three out of the seven Supreme Court judges in Ghana went to that school. And their kids went there.

MN: Are you still in touch with your classmates?

MM: Some of them, yes. Some of them. Not all.

MN: Now where did you end up going to university after that?

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MM: Well unfortunately, I ended up going to college here at Lehman. Lehman University—Lehman College right here in the Bronx.

MN: Now how did you end up coming to the United States?

MM: Yes, interesting story. I was, you know, after high school, I did—you got to understand. When Rawlings came in—this is a little perspective, little perspective here, a little background. When Rawlings came in 1979, he shut down the university because a lot of the university students were demonstrating against, you know, Rawlings. So what he did, he shut the school down. All the universities for a whole year. And so there was a gap. There was a gap of one year created. Now, at that time, all college, all university students at the end of your graduation, you were required to do two years of public service. So when that one year gap came in, they split the two years. That means you do one year before you get into the university, and then at the end you do the other year. So I had already finished waiting for admission, so I did my one year. Now at the end of that one year is when a friend of my mother's came and said, "You know, there's really no future here." My mother had a brother that had, you know, did journalism in Accra and couldn't work with his degree. Basically he was doing something totally, you know, out of—so she said, "You know what? Let's see if he can go to the U.S. and do something with his life." And that's really how I—

MN: Now where was this person living—who invited you?

MM: Oh, it was a friend of my mother's.

MN: A friend of—was he in the Bronx?

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MM: No, they lived—they actually lived in New Jersey—

MN: In New Jersey.

MM: It was her husband who was living here, because he was persecuted under Rawlings.

MN: Under Rawlings.

MM: He escaped—Right—he escaped to the U.S. And his wife was a very close friend of mine, so she was bringing her kids over to visit their father. You know, but—

MN: So you ended up in New Jersey?

MM: I ended up in New Jersey for a week.

MN: A week. [Laughs.]

MM: A week, yes. A week. Because I stayed with them, that family for a couple of days and then I had an uncle who lived in Jersey, so I stayed with him. He didn't have that much room for me, so I have another uncle here in the Bronx, who, at the time, was single, and he had a one bedroom apartment, so he said, "You know what, and you might even be better off in the Bronx anyway because there's a lot more opportunities in New York—"

MN: Than there is in New Jersey.

MM: Exactly.

MN: And where was your uncle living? What neighborhood?

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MM: Right here in the Bronx, right up the street, not too far from here. Preston Avenue and 183rd street. Right up not too far from here.

MN: No, I know exactly where that is. They just opened up a new Papaye [?] restaurant there.

MM: Yes, yes. Not too far from the Grand Concourse.

MN: Yes. Ok. So you moved in with your uncle and then you decided to apply to Lehman College?

MM: Oh, no, no!

MN: It's a longer—

MM: Yes, there's a long gap. There's a long gap. First you have to get your green card, of course. So that was a challenge. That was definitely a challenge. I spent many sleepless nights over just trying to get myself—

MN: And this is in 1980s?

MM: This is in the '80s. Late '80s. Because I got here—I believe it was September '88 or '89.

MN: So what sort of work did you do while you waited for your green card?

MM: Oh, boy. I did all kinds. I mean, I was a security guard. You can imagine, I was only what? I think I was what? 22 when I got here, very young. So, I mean, no experience whatsoever. The only traveling I ever did was to go to Lagos during summer vacation to

stay with family for a little bit and come home. And that's the only traveling I've done, so—I was—it was tough for a few years.

MN: So you did all sorts of—

MM: I did all kinds of—I did security, I worked with this garment—I worked in the garment district—

MN: Garment district—

MM: Yes, carrying boxes—

MN: Oh my god.

MM: Yes, yes. I did all that. I did all that.

MN: And then when did you ultimately get your green card?

MM: I believe I got my green card in 1994.

MN: So that's after six years.

MM: Yes, after six years. After frustrations and, you know, all kinds of going through hell. You know, first I got married, because that was the easiest to go. And then, you know, I could find the lady on the day of the interview. She kind of disappeared with my money.

MN: No, this is amazing because I—we interviewed a Ghanaian businessman who's an importer/exporter who got married six times [MM Laughs] before it finally—

MM: Well, I didn't have to go that far, but—well I ended up—I met my wife, and I'm still with her today. We have two kids—

MN: Ah, wonderful.

MM: —And that's, you know, that was out frustration. I wasn't really prepared to get married, but I was kind of—I got into it, and then she got pregnant right after we started dating, so—

MN: Is your wife Ghanaian?

MM: No, she's American.

MN: She's American, OK.

MM: Yes, African American.

MN: Now did you—were there mosques in the Bronx?

MM: No, when I got here we only had one mosque that we—and it wasn't even a mosque established by Africans. The only mosque we knew was right there on 168 street and Walton Avenue. That was the only mosque. In all of the Bronx that we knew, that we, you know, we usually go to. That was the only one back then, yes. The only other one was, I think, I think they said there was one 161st that was established by the Nation of Islam at that time, right there 161st, but I've never been there.

MN: So you had a long struggle to get to the point where you could—

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MM: Oh, absolutely. It was a struggle. I really—

MN: Did you feel at any point you wanted to go back?

MM: Oh yes, all the time. I would call my mother and I would tell her, you know, “I—
I—need to come home, I can’t take this anymore.” And, you know, she would just say,
you know, “Just pray, just pray, just pray. Hang in there,” and you know, “Things would
get better.” And another reason I stayed was because it got to a point where my mother’s
business wasn’t doing too well so she wasn’t doing too well, so I figured, you know
what? The little bit that I’m getting here, maybe I can—

MN: So you were sending money back?

MM: Yes I was.

MN: The whole time?

MM: Absolutely.

MN: Ok, well this is the one common thing among every African immigrant, everybody
sends money back home.

MM: Oh yes. You have to. You have to. Because it always seems like everybody’s hopes
is pinned on you. You know, so, not only—that’s added pressure right there. But you
have to. You have to. Because that’s one of the main reasons why you were sent out to
travel to the U.S. Nobody came here to—maybe after we got here we figured the best
way is through an education. But mainly—the main goal—was to make money—

MN: And send home.

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MM: Probably the ones who came before us, probably in the '60s and '70s, those who came, came for education. But those of us who started coming in the '80s and '90s, pretty much is all about money. The education factor came in after.

MN: So when did you begin to see the way towards developing a professional career here after all these different jobs?

MM: Right. I think—I think after I got my green card, my uncle that I was staying with was a teacher. And he used to—he used to teach in Bronx Community College. And I used to just go in there and sit in the class, you know, because I didn't have job sometimes. You know, there would be a break in between jobs. So with nothing to do, I would just go and sit in one of these classrooms, sit way in the back, and just watch. And it was kind of fascinating. And the funny thing is, I could—I literally saw myself. I said, "Wow. I mean, is this the education that—" I mean, some of the stuff—this is college, and some of the stuff I did way back in high school. It's almost like a déjà vu—you know, like, "Wow. This is so easy." You know? "This is so—I could walk through this thing." So that—you know, once I did that, I kind of felt like, "Ok, this is really a way to go. [Inaudible] through education."

MN: And so you attended Lehman College—

MM: Yes, I—actually, I started out at Bronx Community—

MN: —at Bronx Community.

MM: Yes, I did—I actually did two and a half years at Bronx Community College, and I always tell this story because it's funny. I—after I finished—I think I left Bronx

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Community with 72 credits—at least—out of 60. And I still didn't get a degree—my associate degree—because I was supposed to take a Bio 12, and I took a Bio 23, which is a higher Biology than the Bio 12. But they insisted that I have to take the 12. So I said, you know what? Forget it. I already have admission to Lehman, so let me go to Lehman and get my degree. So that's what I did. I went to Lehman, and I got my degree. And after I got my degree from Lehman, I went back [MN Laughs] to Bronx Community College and I wrote Dr. Marsha Keys, she was the Student Affairs Dean, and when she came on board, I was just—I had been actually elected as the evening students' rep, so she and I had worked closely together, you know, when she came—when she just came on board, so I went back to her, and I said, “Dr. Keys, you're going to have to give me my degree because I've earned it.” She said, “What happened?” I said, “Well, this is it. I took Bio 23 instead of Bio 12, and, you know, they're saying I need the 12 to—and the 23 is higher.” So she says, “Ok, just leave your information, let me look into it.” A couple of weeks later, I get a letter, you know, “We're going to get you your degree, come and pick it up.” [Inaudible][MN Laughs]. It was—it's funny—I got my Bachelor's before I got my Associate's.

MN: Right. Now after you graduated Lehman, what career did you pursue?

MM: Ah. After I graduated Lehman, I—I wanted to go, actually, into education. And I actually got into the Teaching Fellows Program. And, but I had been working at the Pure Hotel as a purchasing manager for a number of years, and so I kind of took time off from the Hotel and did the whole 8 week program with the Teaching Fellows and all that, so. But at the end of the program when I went to resign from my job, they were like, “Well

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we can't afford to lose you, Mohammed." You know, "You're too important because..."
Blah, blah, blah. "I mean, what would it take to keep you here?" So we kind of negotiated a nice little deal and I ended up staying with the hotel. So that's where I am—

MN: Oh! That's where you are!

MM: Yes, that's where I am—

MN: So, and it's a good position—

MM: It's a very good position. I like the independence of it. It's just—it's just me, I'm the purchasing manager. My immediate supervisor is the purchasing director, a guy named Joe Pageant. You kind of remind me of him. [MN Laughs.] Great guy. Great, great guy. I absolutely love him. And we get along great, and so it's—it's a—and the good thing is, I think they see—they see what I do and they appreciate what I do. And that's—that's a good feeling.

MN: Yes! No, if people respect you, there's—and if you have independence—

MM: Absolutely.

MN —and nobody's looking over and micromanaging.

MM: Exactly, exactly, exactly. And it's important because it kind of helped me, during the four years that I was heading the Ghanaian organization. Because without that, I don't think that if I was actually working Teaching Fellows program, I don't think I would have been able to do—because I can leave, I can literally leave the work and go to a meeting down—

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MN: Now that's a very interesting—how did you—when did you become involved in the Ghanaian association.

MM: Oh, I got involved even before I got my green card.

MN: Really?

MM: It started right in this community here, this Yankasa Organization, which is where I came from. [Phone Rings.] Excuse me. Who's this? Excuse me for a second.

MN: No, no. Please.

MM: [On Phone] Hello? Let me call you back. [Inaudible.] Yes, I'm in the middle of something. Ok, thanks.

MN: Now when—is this Yankasa Association—is a Ghanaian association?

MM: [Inaudible]

MN: In Ghana? Or is it only in the United States.

MM: Well, no. It started out in Ghana from what I hear about the history of this organization. It was basically our older brothers and uncles and fathers back home that started this organization. And I believe it came out of the persecution of the Muslims in Ghana back in the late '70s. There was this thing called the Aliens Compliance Order, which basically the prime minister at the time, Dr. Busia, just put an edict out there that all aliens should leave the country. I don't think that's what he said or that's what the order meant, but because of the very—you know—I guess lack of education within the community, they didn't or—in hindsight, or from the history that I learned about that

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particular order, basically what he said is that all aliens should go and register at the Ministry of Interior, in exactly—and basically get arrested in permit. But people misunderstood that to mean that they said all aliens must leave. So that—the—the—the community kind of came together and said, “Well, we were born here. So you can’t tell us to leave.” So the word Yankasa literally means, “Children of the Land.”

MN: Children—Yank-a-sa means, “Children of the Land” in Hausa?

MM: Hausa, yes.

MN: Yank-a-sa.

MM: Yankasa.

MN: Ok.

MM: Yankasa. Now you can— if you say “Yankasa” to a Twi person, “Yankasa,” means to them—it’s the same, same word—it means—Yankasa—it means “We, Ourselves.”

MN: [Laughs]

MM: It’s interesting. If you say, “Yankasa” to a Hausa person, it means, “Children of—”

MN: That is fascinating.

MM: Yes, exactly. But it’s the same—

MN: Now what percentage of the Ghanaian population is Muslim?

MM: Today, I believe it’s got to be at least 49-51. 49 Muslim, 51 non-Muslim.

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MN: Ok, so it's a very evenly divided society.

MM: Very evenly divided and the religion is really actually growing, you know, over the years.

MN: Now when was this organization created in the Bronx?

MM: Ah. Well before I got here.

MN: So there was a Yankasa Association in the Bronx?

MM: Yes. It started out from the history lesson that I got about the organization, and they actually created the website—I think there's going to be a little history about it—is going to be on the website.

MN: Oh good.

MM: From—from what I understand from some of our older brothers, and hopefully you get the chance to interview some of them for this project—

MN: I'd love to do that.

MM: I can set that up for you. From what I understand, they started out as a Northern Students Association.

MN: Northern Students—

MM: Northern Students—that means children from northern part of Ghana came together and formed a students association because remember back then in the '70s and '60s, they came here mainly for education. So that's how it started. And then, I guess as the years

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went by, one of them went home and met with some of the Yankasa Association back home—some of our brothers, older brothers and uncles and fathers. And they said, “Well, you know what? Why don’t you guys call your organization Yankasa and be an extension of—”

MN: “Of what we have here.”

MM: Yes. Exactly. And that’s how the name [crosstalk.]

MN: Now did they—when you came to the Bronx, did they have this building?

MM: No. No, no, no. We fought to get this building. We literally fought because—ok, so what happened was—as I was coming up, I kind of got pulled into this old Yankasa organization because—you got to understand, Yankasa—it’s a whole. Within the whole, there are components. So there—there are groups from different areas. So the area that I come from—we come from central Accra. So we have our little organization, Accra Central Association. Then we have those from another part of Ghana called the Nima Association. So they have the Nima. And you have those from Kumasi, then you have those from all over—so these are different components. Now the Accra Central—I wasn’t involved as much with the Yankasa, which is the umbrella. I was much more involved in the—

MN: The Accra—

MN: Right. With the Accra Central. And I was the secretary. So we have some issues with the parent organization—with paying dues, and things like that, so we wrote them—I was charged to write a nice little letter, so I did. When I wrote the letter, the president at

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the time of the organization, Alhaji Ahmed Iddris Babar, unfortunately died last year—wonderful man—he’s the one who started me in all this. But anyway, once we wrote that letter, he read the letter, and he was like, “Wow. So you guys have someone that can actually write a letter of this caliber? We need that person in the parent organization.” So he kind of pulled me in—

MN: Into the parent organization?

MM: Yes, into the parent organization. He pulled me in, and I became—I started out as a deputy PRO, and then I moved on up to PRO, and I became the secretary, and from the secretary, that’s where I went on to the nation scene.

MN: Right. Ok. So now the National Association of Ghanaian Associations—

MM: National Council—

MN: Now that organization includes Muslim and Christians?

MM: It includes everybody.

MN: Everybody.

MM: Every Ghanaian organization within the tri-state area, basically. This is the umbrella organization.

MN: Wow.

MM: Yes.

MN: What’s also impressive to me is that it unites everybody across religious lines.

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MM: Absolutely. And it's the only organization within the African Immigrant community in New York, as far I know, it's the only—we, the National Council, is the only organization that has everybody involved.

MN: Well that's very—that's a powerful—

MM: All the other countries have either tribal issues, or ethnic issues, or moral issues, or religious issues, so they can't seem to bring it together. We're the only ones that [crosstalk].

MN: Well that's very impressive. And it's very valuable for everybody else if you're going to try to bring all the African immigrants together.

MM: Absolutely.

MN: Which is, by the way, what Mr. Jahwah [?] would like to do. You know, I mean he's—

MM: There's been some movement towards that arena, but you have you understand: there's the French issue—

MN: Yes—

MM: —the [inaudible] issues—

MN: Anglophone, Francophone—

MM: Exactly. There is that dynamic also playing a part into why we can't get it all together.

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MN: Yes. So this—so you were involved in two different organizations, Yankasa and—
Association—of Ghanaian Associations [sic] while you're also going to school—

MM: Yes—

MN: —and working.

MM: And working. And working. And raising a family.

MN: And raising a family.

MM: And raising a family.

MN: And also getting involved in the schools.

MM: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely.

MN: So—

MM: Maybe, I mean in hindsight—

MN: And sending money home.

MM: And sending money home.

MN: Right, so—one of the things I tell people is the average person I interview sleeps
four hours a night because they work all the time.

MM: Probably, yes. I think that time is exactly what we were going through. I remember
we—when we would go to some of the national council meetings when I joined the
national council in 1996. Because that's what the national council did, which I thought

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was excellent—which is what the found fathers established— was that because of the importance of the organization, the requirement to be a representative—because it was modeled after the U.N.—and basically what they required was that it has to be the top of the top of your organization that’s going to represent each organization there. So it was the president and the secretary. And they had a third rep. Now the third representative could be any member of the organization. That’s just so there is—sort of a—visibility. I mean there is also transparency, basically. You know, and there’s nothing to hide. So if you think your president or your secretary is not doing well, you come back to your original [inaudible]. That, you know, this guy’s not attending meetings, he’s not participating, and he’s not helping our organization, so we need to do something about this guy. That was the concept.

MN: Now it’s interesting, because—did your education at the Accra Academy prepare you for multi-tasking—

MM: Oh, absolutely.

MN: —and doing all these tasks well?

MM: Absolutely. I even think it goes further than that because when I—I went to—I started out in public school. And after, at some point, I was taken out of public school and put into parochial school at the time it was called Harrow International. Harrow International had—it was one of the up-and-coming private schools that was really, really good. It was established by a white lady who was married to a Ghanaian. And who was very, very picky with the students that they selected. The only reason I got in was

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because the owner was a very good friend of my stepmother who happened to be half white. So I got into that school—very expensive, too—very, very expensive. But the experience there—the experience there really—because, number one, you were required to speak English at all times. As long as you were in the school. And then the curriculum was very rigorous. Very, very rigorous.

MN: No, well that's interesting because a lot of the people who I speak to who are educated in Ghana don't have—have a little more of an accent than you do—

MM: Right—

MN: —in their English.

MM: And I think that's where—I believe that's where I developed it. Because we were in class with children of diplomats and, you know, so—you kind of get- you're getting it all. And you were not allowed to speak the local language while you were in school. It was all English. All English at all times as long as you're in school. So I believe that, you know, that kind of helped me with that.

MN: And what was the language Accra Academy?

MM: Accra Academy was you could speak whatever you want—

MN: Whatever you wanted—

MM: Whatever you wanted. But also I think that the, the—curriculum was also very, very rigorous because it was one of the top schools in the country and it was very sought after. So when you got in, you knew you got in based on merit and not because—and

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though some people got in based on who their parents were, of course, but some of us who were probably from middle class probably got in because of merit. And it was actually very challenging. I remember—and I tell people this all the time—I started learning German in Accra Academy. Because the first year I was in Accra Academy we actually had German, Latin, French, and all of these, you know, fancy languages. Unfortunately we had to phase that out because it was really—but it was quite interesting. Accra Academy was the best—I always say those were the best years.

MN: Yes. So you had those two great school experiences—

MM: Yes.

MN: —At the Harrow School—

MM: Harrow International.

MN: Harrow International and Accra Academy.

MM: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

MN: Now when you first got involved with your children's education, what did you make of the public schools in the Bronx.

MM: [Sighs deeply, silence.] All you could hear was the negative, basically. From the media, you know, "This is not a very good school," and blah, blah, blah. That's what you hear. But when you get into schools, you can actually see how much the teachers care. How much the principals care. How much the parents care. Clearly, you know, I believe, you know, circumstances plays a big role in the education of children. I truly believe that.

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I truly believe—and it's interesting—I told this before. I had a girlfriend once when I was here and she lived in Brooklyn. And I remember what made us break up was we went out one night and on the train, she got too drunk—I don't drink—she got too drunk, and she peed on herself on the train. It was so embarrassing. After that I night, I said, "You know what? Forget about it. I can't deal with this anymore." And she was very young. Imagine: I was only 21, 22. So she was about 19, 20. And after she sobered up and I told her it was over, blah, blah, blah, you know. She said to me, "Mohammed, you don't understand." I said, "What is it that I don't understand? Tell me." And she goes, "You know how growing up as a child your mother fed you milk and food and applesauce and all that stuff?" I said, "Well we didn't have all that stuff back home. I mean, I was getting breast milk and all that." She said, "Yeah, but you know what my mother gave me? Beer. That's all we had. So I already have that in my system." I said, "But you have to break the cycle." That's what I told her, I said, "You have to break the cycle." So for—and it goes back to what I was saying earlier, that circumstances plays a major role in upbringing and culture and all of that. Because I believe that, you know, with her, that's all she knew. And unless—and until she breaks that cycle, it's hard to move on. It would be very difficult, you know, for her offspring to do any better unless they get some kind of intervention. And so it goes back to what it I was saying earlier, that I believe that. And I could see it within in the schools. And you have to actually be in it to see it. If you only read what you hear or you listen to radio and TV and all of that, that's all—but it was great. It was great.

MN: And your children got a really good education at P.S. 73?

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MM: Yes they did. I believe they did. I believe they did. And my kid's are doing well.

My son has some behavior issues of course, but he's doing quite well academically, so I believe—

MN: Now how old is your son?

MM: My son is 13 now.

MN: And he's at Mott Hall 3?

MM: He's at Mott Hall 3.

MN: And how old is your daughter?

MM: My daughter's 15. She's at Manhattan Center for Science—

MN: Oh right, on the east side of Manhattan.

MM: And I understand it's one of the good schools.

MN: Right, that's a very good school.

MM: She's doing quite well. She's doing quite well. So I'm really proud of [inaudible]. I am.

MN: Well that's great. And—now did you buy a house in Highbridge or—

MM: No, I haven't bought anything. I haven't bought anything yet. I have an apartment that's really great. I love the building. It's a very small building. And it's clean

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and everyone—I mean it’s funny. I used to live on 197th Street and Sedgwick Avenue in a multi-racial kind of building. It was, you know—

MN: Is that one of those big buildings?

MM: It wasn’t that big. No, it wasn’t big.

MN: It’s near the Veteran’s Hospital?

MM: Yes, further—

MN: Further down?

MM: Further down. Further down. About two blocks down. Yes, about two blocks down.

It was a very nice building. Also multi-racial. I mean, that’s the only building where I actually lived with some whites. And it was interesting. I was telling my wife the other day, I said, “You know, I never felt a sense of community that I felt, you know, living here in Highbridge.” I guess probably because probably because of all the community activities that I was involved in, but when I lived there, I didn’t feel that sense of community. Just seems like everybody—

MN: So you walk down the street, everybody says, “Hello”?

MM: Most people. Most people, because they probably know me from ’73, ’74

[crosstalk], you know, from some of the other community activities that we did here. So it’s kind of interesting, yes.

MN: Now had did you get this building for this—for the Yankasa Association?

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MM: Oh, yes! Well, this was—I believe around '90—in the '90s when we started talking about owning our own mosque [Phone rings]. We felt it was time. It was time to do something. So we started out at the president of the organization at the time—Alhaji Ahmed Iddris Babar, God rest his soul, he just passed away last year—we kind of started talking about it. And we said, you know what, this community is growing, and we need to have our own place. So that's basically how it started. We need to have our own place, and we started reaching out. And when we go to social events—because at the time, whenever you have a baby, we usually do everything in your apartment and, you know, you get 50 people in the apartment it gets uncomfortable. But basically—and you—also, within the Muslim community, what we do usually is a little bit of collection at the end of the day for whoever has been bereaved or has some good news, or whatever it is. So we started putting that money away. And then we also established this thing where we said any member of the organization should pledge a minimum of \$100. And that's how we started raising the money. We started [inaudible], it started growing. And the money started growing, and the money started growing, and then at one point there was another building around the corner from here that we saw at first that we wanted to buy. But we didn't have the money. So there was—it started out, we saw that building, we didn't have the money, and because there were conflicting ideas. One was, "Let's get the building, the money will come." And we got the building, and the money didn't come. So we said, "Well that didn't work. So let's put the money down. If we have the money, the building will come." And that's how we were able to, you know, kind of put the money—and on the weekends usually, they would have meetings in my house, and we would split into like three or four groups in three different cars and we would go around, and we would

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call everybody, and we would say, “Is your money ready? We’re coming to pick it up.”

And that’s how we did it. We actually followed these people to their homes and we would pick up the money and bring—and then put it down on paper, and—that’s how we were able to do it. That’s how we were able to do it.

MN: Now did you have an Imam in your community—

MM: Yes—

MN: —before this?

MM: —Yes, we did. Yes, we had an Imam. And the interesting thing is, actually, they had a school—previously they were—the kids were being taught at City College.

Because we had one of the leaders in the community was a teacher there—[Inaudible name]—and so the kids were going to City College. So when I became secretary and with my involvement in Bronx Community College and all that, I said, “You know, City College is a bit far for some of the kids because most of them live here, so I said, “Let me see what I can do with Bronx Community College.” So I was able to get some space in Bronx Community, so we moved the classes there—the weekend classes. So all that actually helped motivate people to say, “Well, you know, we can’t keep shuttling back and fourth from place to place. We need place of our own.” And that kind of helped to get things going.

MN: So how long are the weekend classes? And at what age do they start?

MM: I believe it’s only about 4-5 hours, and usually the kids come in as early as 6, 7.

And as old as I guess, 15, 16—teenagers. And, I mean, there’s been a few that have

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actually went through this whole thing and they're adults now and they own their own businesses and they own their own houses and [inaudible].

MN: Well that's interesting. Do you think that it helps the children academically to have the extra school on the weekend?

MM: Absolutely. I believe so. I believe so. Because not only—not only do we help them, you know, with the culture and the religion and all that, but we also help them with their school work—

MN: Ah. So there's math and science?

MM: The gentleman you were just talking to, he's a math teacher.

MN: Ah.

MM: Yes, he's a math teacher in high school. So guess what? He comes in if you have any issues with your math and everything and takes the time and he explains it, he teaches you. You know, so we have those.

MN: Now do—you know, you have this dynamic, unified community. Do people who are not Ghanaian ever come up to you and say, "I want to become involved."

MM: We haven't had that yet. Because see one of the things that I have tried to do, and it's interesting you bring this up. I've tried to expand our horizons. We seem to be encapsulated. You know, we seem to be in a bubble. And I—you know, I always tell people, "If you really want to grow, you've got to get out. You have to expand. You have to meet people. You have to be out there. Whether it's politically, economically,

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however—you have to be out there, you have to be involved.” And that’s what I try to bring. I was—actually I met, I had met with Reverend Floyd Flake before and, you know, it was at a seminar that was organized by Reverend Wendell Foster.

MN: Yes, I know—very well.

MM: OK, OK—

MN: We interviewed him—

MM: Oh really! He’s a good friend of mine!

MN: —He was one of the first people we interviewed. And also his daughter I know very well. And her major political representative is a former student of mine, Tiffany Rasgrow [?]

MM: Oh really?

MN: Yes, who is a political consultant and works with—

MM: Yes, yes absolutely. [Crosstalk]

MN: But it’s interesting. In talking to you, I just feel there are so many young people in the Bronx who could use this kind of discipline and you know, motivation—

MM: It’s interesting. When I was—during the Teaching Fellows program, we had this professor, Ortiz. And he is a product of the Bronx. And he went through the system, and he started out as a teacher, you know,

[END OF SIDE ONE, BEGIN SIDE TWO]¹

graduated to principal, became a deputy supreme [inaudible] and all that. Yes, so—Oh, hi—you still work here?

Unknown Male: Oh, hi. You still work here?

MM: Yes, just a few more minutes.

MN: OK, couple of minutes, we don't—That's about right. [Quick break in tape.]

MM: So, so, you know, he was teaching the class and we were just talking and he's very much involved with the Fosters because remember, Mrs. Foster was the high school principal, and he knew her very well. So we happened to be just chatting and, you know, he mentioned, and I said I knew her very well, and he said, "You know, Mohammed, you would really be a good principal because you are a product of the community basically. So if you really are serious about this, I could take you under my wing—" Blah, blah, blah. And he was so disappointed when I—[laughs]—when I didn't join the fellows program. It was something that I'm really—

MN: No, you would make a marvelous principal. But it's also—I mean, this organization, this is such a positive atmosphere—

MM: It is, it is—

¹ Note there is some overlap between side one and side two.

MN: —and it's—

MM: And it's growing. I'm not sure if you saw the batch of computers right out there. They've just started computer training right in here. And that's one of the things that I want to do. I'm trying. Right now, I'm not as much an executive as I'm more of an advisor, you know, because I have been involved in this—

MN: But you—

MM: —and I told them, I said, you know, “I'm going to see if I can get a city grant so we can expand the program.”

MN: Yes, and bring in other young people—

MM: Absolutely.

MN: —because this is a positive—

MM: Absolutely.

MM: —You know, it's just like—it's very interesting what Amy—when the young people—we have these six wonderful young people from African immigrant backgrounds. And the ideal is that the African young people who are successful would mentor the African kids, but they said, “We can't just do Africans. We should do anyone who needs help.”

MM: Absolutely. Absolutely.

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MN: And we should also not just have Africans in the group, we should have anybody who wants to help.

MM: Absolutely.

MN: So even though it's an African group, it's going to be more—

MM: Absolutely.

MN: —because the core of that motivation and unity is something that can inspire other people.

MM: I was—I was speaking to a young lady a few months ago when I was secretary general of the National Council of Ghanaian Associations. And she—what she said to me kind of woke me up. She said, “Mohammed. This NCOGA (that's the acronym)—This NCOGA, the rate that you guys are going, you're going to be dead in the next ten years.” I said, “Why Stephanie?” She goes, “Well because I don't see anybody under 30 in the organization.” I said, “Do you know what? You're right.” So that kind of woke me up. So then I said, “You know what? It's time to start reaching out to these young people.”

MN: You have—I mean, Amy's group has some—there are six of them, but they are—each one of them is—and by all means, take—bring them in, talk to them. Amy is amazing.

MM: Oh yes. She's a great young woman.

MN: And then she has a friend Mary Boadu. But there's also Karen Brifu who graduated from Fordham last year, and she works at the Federal Reserve—

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MM: I've heard of Karen, yes.

MN: —and she is brilliant. And charismatic. She could electrify a crowd.

MM: Well that's my goal, is to try to bring all these young people in, you know, kind of have a network. Because there is another group called Star 100 [?], which, I know Dr. Hayford called me about—he wanted to sit down with them, some of their leaders, and talk to them. But that's not an organization, it's just a network of friends and—so I brought them in. I have another group of young people who are trying to organize a parade in the Bronx—Ghana Parade Council—so I have—I was able to bring all these people together. Now that you mention Amy's program, I'm going to try to bring them—
Have a network, I have a plethora of young people—[Crosstalk]

MN: And then there's this young man, Raymond Kobolu [?] who is Nigerian, but born in the Bronx, sent back to Nigeria to go to school because he got in trouble here, came back, muscular like this, but what a solid person. And a great leader. He's worked with the Bronx D.A.'s office in their community affairs, so, you know.

MM: OK, OK. That's good to know. You need to know these things.

MN: They're all through Amy's group.

MM: Wow.

MN: And we will get more.

MM: I've been trying to reach out to Ahmad Dumore [?] who is the Brooklyn Assistant D.A., she's been prosecuting all of those child molestation charges and all of that. I

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believe she has a Ghanaian background, I think her father's Ghanaian. And I've been trying to reach out to her so she can come out and speak to some of these young people.

MN: Yes. But get Karen, because Karen was one of the top leaders—

MM: Karen is the one in—

MN: In Federal Reserve.

MM: Federal Reserve, OK.

MN: And she's a natural leader.

MM: Ok, I will talk to Amy and [inaudible] I'll see how best I can do that.

MN: But in any case, let's end the interview now because I know you're very busy, but we will keep working on this.

MM: Absolutely. I would love to. I would love to continue with this.

MN: Absolutely. And let me turn the power off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]