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Magassa, Bandiougou and Lassana Fofana

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Mark Naison (MN): Hello. Today is Wednesday, May 14, 2008. And we are here at P.S. 140, at 163rd Street and Eagle Avenue, and we're doing an interview with the custodians of P.S. 140. And this is part of the African Immigration Project of the Bronx African American History Project. If you could state your name and spell it, for me.

Bandiougou Mangassa (BM): B-A-N-D-I-O-U-G-O-U, Mangassa, M-A-G-A-S-S-A.

MN: And what is your date of birth?

BM: 11-02-1964.

MN: Sir, your name?

Lassana Fofano (LF): My name is Lassana Fofano. L-A-S-S-A-N-A. Last name is Fofana, F-O-F-A-N-A. And my date is 09-06-56.

MN: Okay, if we could start out by each of you talking about your country of origin, or where you came from, and then how you ended up coming to the Bronx.

BM: I had my brother came in here first, in 1978, and when I was almost eighteen, and then I come to the capital, Bamako, and he helped me get the visa and then come here.

MN: And did your brother come to the Bronx first, or which part of New York City did he move to?

BM: When he came, he was in Manhattan, 55th and Broadway. So that's where I used to live, with him, so things started getting higher downtown, then we moved up. [Laughter]

MN: Now, did your brother know people from your country here when he first came to the United States?

BM: Yes, when he first came here, he used to know a gentleman named Mohammed Debassi. And they used to live in Paris together.

MN: Oh, in Paris, France.

BM: France, yes.

MN: And your family, when did they first come to the United States?

LF: I get a visa in Mali, Bamako, in 1992, September I believe so. Then come to Bronx, New York because my family, some of them, I think, live in the Bronx. That's why I ended up in the Bronx here.

MN: Now what neighborhood in the Bronx did they live in?

LF: Jerome Avenue and 170.

MN: In the hybrid section. Now, what languages do you speak?

BM: I speak Soninké.

MN: Soninké and French also?

BM: Yes, yes, Soninké and French.

LF: Yes, I speak French and Soninké, Malinké, Bambara all those guys, you know if Africa we've got like fifty different dialects in my country.

MN: And has anyone ever asked you to translate for students in schools, or parents.

LF: Yes, in French.

MN: In French?

LF: Yes.

MN: Now, did either of you know English when you came to the United States.

LF: No, because I went to French school, from first grade to high school. Then, when I first came I didn't know nothing about English. I just learn movies, talk to people, I watch newspapers, you know. But I didn't go to school to learn English. I make my way. You don't have a choice.

MN: Now, you went to school in Mali, or also in France?

LF: I went to school in Mali, Bamako, especially, yes.

MN: And until what grade was your education in Mali?

LF: My education is from one to ninth grade. And from ninth grade I went to veterinarian school.

MN: Veterinarian to work with animals?

LF: Right, exactly, yes.

MN: Okay, and what about your-?

BM: Yes, I did schooling up to twelfth grade, and then when I came here in 1983, I believe in November, and I got the visa to come here. So when I came, I start working, doing dishwashes and things like that, and after a while, I changed my age, and I went to high school.

MN: You went to high school in the United States?

BM: Yes, I get in the school and I change my age, and do everything [Laughter].

MN: That's amazing! And what high school did you go to?

BM: Martin Luther King High School.

MN: Oh, I know that very well, it's very near Fordham, Lincoln Center.

BM: Yes.

MN: And they're very famous for their soccer team. Did you play on their soccer team?

BM: No. [Laughter]

MN: They have the best soccer team in New York City, many of the players are African immigrants, in that school. And their actually known all over the United States, for soccer. Now what religion did you practice in Mali?

BM: In Mali, I'm a Muslim.

MN: And here as well.

BM: Yes, here as well.

LF: Me, too, I'm Muslim. Because in Mali, ninety percent of the population are Muslim.

MN: Now, were there mosques in the United States that you were able to go to when you arrived here?

BM: Yes, when I arrived in here, there was only two mosques which I know, one is on Seventy-second Street, by Riverside Drive, and there's one on Atlantic Avenue they called the Marshall Fields.

MN: Yes, I know that, I'm from Brooklyn, so I know.

BM: Used to be two, but now they have plenty mosques.

MN: I've seen mosques in the Bronx, and one just opened on Boston Road. So, talk about your work experience. What was your first job in the United States?

BM: My first job when I came was a car wash, for a few months, and a dishwasher in a restaurant. And then, suddenly by luck, my brother told me, he said we're going to go to this school, we're going to go to LaGuardia High School, it's a brand-new high school.

MN: I know where, right near Martin Luther-

BM: So we're going to go there, probably looking for you. So then we went there, and then the lady that's interviewing she said, 'You are the one that we're looking for,' and I've been putting in 15 years over there.

MN: So you began working in the school, working for the school-

BM: For the custodian.

MN: -For the custodian.

BM: For the custodian.

MN: Now you had a visa at that time.

BM: Yes, I had the visa, and this is the security, so therefore-

MN: Now, who go you the first job in the car wash?

BM: In the care wash, I was going with other Africans, just like that, but that, you don't need a-

MN: You can just walk in.

BM: Just walk into, and they hire you if you have opening.

MN: Right. And how did the language issue- did you know a few words?

BM: Nothing.

MN: Nothing, they hired you without-

BM: Without even knowing the language. But when I came, I came here, I believe, I believe on a Saturday, a Monday morning. My brother took me to, there was a class on 72nd Street, English classes they teach, and I started a class.

MN: So you started with a class. Now, when you were working at LaGuardia, were you also going to school at Martin Luther King?

BM: Exactly.

MN: Now was this in the evening, or during the day.

BM: Well, I was working in the evening, from three thirty to midnight. So therefore I have a chance to attend the classes at seven in the morning, until three o'clock, or two forty-five.

MN: Wow, that is an amazing story. Now, did they put you in what they call ESL class?

BM: Yes, ESL classes, yes.

MN: And did you find that helpful, was the teaching good in those classes.

BM: Yes, very good. Very good. That's the reason why I belong sitting here. [Laughter]

MN: Wow, well we'll get back to this. Your first job-

LF: When I went, I came here, in was 1992. I got one best friend Jessa, he leave his job and put me there right away, because he was here long time, he don't have a problem to find a job. And I was new, I didn't speak English.

MN: And what was he working as?

LF: I believe it was a paper company.

MN: So it was a factory?

LF: It was, factory, right, making the box.

MN: Boxes, right

LF: For perfume, or stuff. Then he says, take this one. He took me and took me to the job, then he put there in agreement. And I worked there for three years, then from there I went to school in Queens for a yellow license, cab license. And I quit that job after three years, then I drive yellow cab for seven years.

MN: So you drove a cab?

LF: Yes, yellow cab. Then after yellow cab, I start back and work in P.S. 175, by Brooklyn Boulevard, for two years, then I left it back and started driving in Rockland Country, for Oakland Beckett.

MN: And this was in Rockland County, or was in long-distance trucking?

LF: It was Rockland Country. Deliver bread.

MN: Oh, delivery bread. Oh, you went from Rockland to Midtown.

LF: Right, then I was doing the night shift, and day shift, I was working the school, for three years.

MN: So you were working two jobs, driving a delivery truck and working in the school. How many hours a day did you sleep?

LF: Well.[Laughter] Like four, five, six hours.

MN: Now, in most of the jobs- no, let's go back. When you first started working, first in the car wash, then in the restaurant, were most of the people working with you African, or were they from a variety of different nationalities.

BM: They were a variety of different nationalities. The car wash. So, in the dishwashing, there was a gentleman that I used to have one day a week. So that's the only job that he had and he said if he don't quit that, he's probably not going to get another job. Then he gave me that job. In 1983, there was a payment of forty-five dollars a night that is given me. That was a big. So I stayed on that until June, I think June 2, 1984. Then LaGuardia, I get to it in August, I don't know, August 1, or August thirty.

MN: Now who set you up with that interview at LaGuardia High School? Was that also someone you knew from your country, or this was somebody you met?

BM: Well, actually this was my brother.

MN: It was your brother.

BM: That's my brother, so he told me that he had a friend, that was talking about there was going to be a school, big, huge opening at Manhattan. And they're going to need many- they have many openings. So I went to there, when I was interviewed, he said okay, we started on Monday night.

MN: Now, what was the biggest adjustment for coming to the United States, you know, things that were hardest for you, coming from Mali. In terms of the people, the language-
?

BM: It was not easy, but to tell you the truth, I was lucky. I had brothers ahead of me, and then my father said to them, you have to do everything, take him to the nice things.

So since then, I'm in their hands. They know the people, how to get the visa, and they gave me the ticket, and I came over.

MN: What about your experience? What was the biggest adjustment?

LF: Well, when I first came to this country, I really liked not much, because the language problem, I don't know what they were talking about. I was confused. I didn't like your food. [Laughter] You know, I was very confused. Then time go by, and now I'm used to, and it's not a big deal anymore. [Crosstalk] -family back home.

MN: About the food, where were you able to get African food when you came here.

LF: At that time, there were few African restaurants in Harlem. Sometimes you get to take the subway from Bronx here and go buy food and come back. Because usually in African we don't eat frozen food. Everything is fresh. You kill your lamb, same day you eat, next day you kill your chicken, you eat. You don't put nothing in the fridge.

Everything is fresh. Rice, everything. You want rice, you grow, you cut, you eat same day. Then, you know, I didn't like the smell, the taste, you know, then now, I really don't care about African food. [Laughter]

MN: Now tell us a little bit about the Bronx neighborhood and 170th Street. What was the variety of people living there at the time?

LF: All Africans, most of the time from my country, come to that section because of the first people who come from Mali was living in that place.

MN: In Highbridge.

LF: Right. But usually when you come to a country and never been you have to get close to your own people. Because communication, language, everything, we have to be together. You work, you put money together in case somebody got problems, send back home, like they're sick, or somebody died. You know, we chip money, we send home, or somebody got problems and want to get money together- we help you. You know, that's why we want to get close together, you know.

MN: Now when you first came, would you say there were hundreds of people from Mali there, thousands, or was it a relatively small number.

LF: When I came it was like small number. Because usually we are French speaking, we go to Europe, like France, Spain. Usually we go to France, almost every Malian, going on eighty-five percent-

MN: Do you have relatives who live in France?

LF: Oh, yes. Lots of relatives in France. As Islamists, we don't have any [unintelligible]

MN: When did you move to the Bronx?

BM: I moved to 99th Street first.

MN: 99th Street in the West Side? What block?

BM: Between Broadway and the West End.

MN: I lived at 317 West 99th Street from 1966 to 1977. [Laughter] So that was, you were one behind.

BM: Yes, I was in 260. And then 260 was 99th Street, and then from there, then my brother moved to- no, I stayed there until my wife came, in 1990, and then we moved together into 156th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam. And then we did we did a full year, and then I told my brother, I say 'Full year? I didn't even save one penny.' So I said, 'That is not the reason that I'm here.' And I say that that is not good for me. Because I'm spending too much, and I've got to do something.

MN: Now, so a lot of Malian immigrants send money back home to their families.

LF: Yes.

BM: Yes.

LF: Always, always. Twice a year.

BM: Even today we do that.

MN: And that's part of the reason for coming? [Crosstalk] That's the main reason! If you could make the same money in Mali-

BM: Is the husbands, their parents is a must.

[Interruption]

BM: So the main reason is to help the family. Because our families' retirements will be those children that he get, and hopefully that they get a better job so pay attention.

MN: So everybody sends money back to support their parents.

LF: Everybody. Their brothers, their friends. You know, sometimes in Africa, Mali especially, the main thing is agriculture, sometime when the season's no good, they don't

have the food. And we have to send relief. Even if you get some from somebody you have to send them.

MN: Now, so your families lived in agricultural regions.

BM: Yes.

LF: Yes.

MN: So you didn't come from a big city. Or did you go to school in the city.

BM: Well, I went to the school in my village, and then until you get to junior high and high school, then you come to the city.

MN: Right. Now, in your village, was it electrified, did people have electricity in their homes?

BM: At that time, no. But today, the people who travel, pay the solar system and put that into the village.

MN: So the remittances, which they call it, from the Malian immigrants here, have led to the economy and the way of life there.

LF: Exactly right.

MN: So they have television now-

BM: No.

LF: Not television. [Crosstalk] [Laughter]

MN: They probably listen to rap from the United States. [Laughter]

BM: Yes.

MN: No, that's- now, have you brought members of your family here to live as well.

BM: Yes.

LF: Yes, of course.

BM: I had my little brother, he came in 1990, and I have another brother, who came in 1994, '95. And the one that came in 1990, the other one that came in 1995, my brother sponsor him and get his papers.

MN: Now, you were trained as a veterinarian in Mali. Do you have any desire to go to school and do that here?

LF: I was trying when I first came, but my problem was English. Plus, you know, veterinarian school, you had to pay here, to go to school. And if I had to work, feed my wife, my kid in Africa, my mother, every family, and pay money to go back to school was not [Crosstalk]

MN: You're working two jobs.

LF: I drop off. I see that doesn't make any sense. I came here to help people, then that's why I was- because over there we didn't pay nothing. The time when I finished school, it was like a hundred dollars, in here, I used to a month over there. I don't know if you got my point.

MN: The money here, it goes a long way there.

LF: Right. And see, it don't make any sense, you know, I better find something else.

That's why I can't be a- you know, I bring my wife, and my wife brought, and people

have been treating me right. In this world, we make our way. Like, I bring you, you have to bring somebody so that-

MN: So everybody helps everybody else.

LF: Right, yes.

MN: Now, when you moved to the Bronx, what did the people who weren't African- how did they respond to African immigrants living in their community? Were they friendly, were they hostile, were they just stand-offish? What was it like, to move into a neighborhood where Africans were relatively new?

BM: When I moved in, before I moved in the Highbridge section, my brother bought a house over there, and he told me that, 'Let's go live in the Bronx.' I said, 'But I don't like the Bronx.' [Laughter] But after I started traveling and doing the business between New York and Angola, Central Africa, that time, my brother was not able to pay the daughter how I worked, so he took my brother and put him in his apartment. So then I stay there, and live there. But the people are nice, they are friendly here. It's a residential area, you know, two, three family-

MN: Oh, so this is mostly houses, private houses.

BM: Private houses. So then we stayed there until around 2005. 2005, and then I bought a house myself, and I moved in.

MN: And what street is it? And congratulations!

BM: This is 1025 Woodcrest Avenue.

MN: Oh, it's Woodycrest, up the hill.

BM: And there's also there's- next to the house that was [Crosstalk]

MN: Do you know about that? This is one of the greatest tragedies in New York History. [unintelligible]. This, I mean, it's hard to describe, I think there were- there was a fire, in a house, and nine people passed away.

BM: Ten children.

MN: Ten children!

BM: And one adult.

MN: And, this was about, what, a year and a half ago, two years ago?

BM: March 17 makes it one year. I mean March 7, 2007.

MN: That was your brother.

BM: That was my brother's house. He lived in that house before I buy mine.

MN: And this was, it was when New York discovered that there were many, many people from Mali. And people came together to take care of everybody. It was amazing. But, so that's the same-

BM: Yes. That's the same house, we facing a.

MN: The last fire, there was a fire in a Dominican, or maybe Garacuana, a social club where seventy-five people died in a fire. You know, people think that fires are not- but they are terrible, terrible.

BM: It's a terrible thing.

MN: Now, what was your children's experience in schools, when they went to- did your children go to public school here?

BM: Yes, my children goes to public school here. All of them. All of them goes to public school, and my daughter, she graduated that without any trouble. She didn't give me hard time, and she behaved in school.

MN: How old is your daughter now?

BM: She is seventeen.

MN: And is she going to go to college?

BM: She's going to go to college. Yes, she is going to go to college.

MN: Wonderful, so she graduated this year.

BM: Yes.

MN: From what high school?

BM: From- I forgot the high school.

MN: Is it in the Bronx?

BM: This is Manhattan, 118th Street.

MN: Is that the one near the East River?

BM: No, I think this is between Eighth and Ninth Avenue, Columbus.

MN: Right near Morningside Park.

BM: Yes.

MN: Okay, I'm not sure what the name of that is but- so when your children started in school, did they speak English, or they were in ESL?

BM: Well, they were in ESL, because usually we would speak our dialect at home, so that way they can also know that.

MN: So you speak Soninké.

BM: Yes, at home.

MN: At home.

BM: Even my kids, I tell them not to speak English, because that will prevent them from learning Soninké, and it is very important to know the Soninké. Maybe one day you work for the United States government-

MN: No, no, we need people- I was talking with some community organizations, and they were saying we need to have many more people in the schools who speak African languages. And Soninké is one of the languages.

BM: Soninké is one of the languages.

MN: And, you know, they should be more taught at the universities, like we should get Fordham to teach Soninké, and what were some of the other languages you mentioned?

LF: Bambara, Malinké, you speak Arabic too.

BM: I used to, but now I'm forgetting it. [Laughter]

MN: No, but these are all languages that we need to know because in the schools, some of the parents who don't speak English, how are the teachers going to communicate, if you don't have an interpreter, who speaks Soninké or Bambara, or Malinké. Before you leave, I want you to write down all the languages you speak, so we can- actually, let's do that now. So Soninké is S-O-N-I-N-K-E?

BM: Yes.

LF: Yes. Exactly.

MN: Soninké. Bambara, B-A-M-B-A-R-A, Malinké, M-A-L-I-N-K-É. And then, French? And Arabic. [Crosstalk] [cell phone rings] [Laughter]

BM: [on phone] Hello, my love. I am very sorry, I'm doing an interview, I'm in the middle of an interview. Talk to you later. Goodbye.

MN: So these are three languages that we should probably be teaching at the colleges so that more people will know this. But you're making sure your children know these languages.

LF: Yes.

BM: Yes, I want them to know because-

LF: It's part of their culture.

BM: Suppose each of them want a job at the embassy in Mali? So you already know the language sometimes permitting easier to get the job.

MN: Now, are there newspapers published in the United States for the Malian community in those languages. Is there newsletters or anything that's written in those languages that is- that you could give your children to read?

LF: No, usually it's in French.

MN: It's in French.

LF: Yes, it's in French. Because French is the official language in Mali. It was colonized by French, and you to French school.

MN: Is there a newspaper, a regular newspaper for the Malian community in New York City?

LF: In French.

MN: In French. And what is the title of this?

LF: I don't know. [Laughter]

MN: Because we should order it.

LF: Because I'm very interested because- this is English country, I already know French, and I don't have to worry about French news. That's my point.

MN: Right, so that once you learn English- Now what about music? When you came here, was there a place to hear Malian music, or music that would make you feel more at home?

BM: When I came, my brother's wife, you know, she always listened to Malian songs. So that's the only place that I listened to it. [Laughter] At my brother's house, yes. Other than that, sometimes they have singers, actors that comes in here, sometimes maybe every six months, there's one that comes, and that is live in-

MN: And where would be a theater, or a hall, where a Malian singer would perform? Are there any places in the Bronx, or more in Harlem?

BM: Nothing in the Bronx that I know.

LF: There's one on Broadway and ninety, ninety something. I was there for a music show. On Broadway, around 96th or 98th Street.

BM: There's a theater there that they-

MN: Oh, the theater there.

BM: -that they use. Most probably, that's where they go.

MN: Now, what sort of music do your children listen to? Do they listen to the American, or-

BM: My children, they listen American, and very rarely, if they do listen to African. But they do watch African movies.

MN: And are there video stores where you can rent out these movies?

LF: Oh, yeah.

BM: Yes, yes, plenty.

MN: Right. So their connection to African culture is through the movies, and is there much African music performed in clubs, or that isn't part of the culture?

BM: Well, one of the things, I never went to clubs.

MN: Was that part of the Muslim tradition, you don't-

LF: No, we don't. Some people, but, it's not common.

MN: Now, do both of you attend mosque in the Bronx?

BM: Yes.

LF: Yes.

MN: And where is your mosque located?

BM: Sometimes I go to 172-

MN: Write that down if we can.

BM: 172 and Joseph. And sometimes I'll go to 166th and Clay. So those are the two mosques that I go, mostly, but I rarely go to the mosque, because most of the time I have- I'm in two jobs.

MN: Right, and so you have another job as well.

BM: Yes, because I have never gone to any mosque, any, at least a year now.

MN: Right, and what about your children, do they?

BM: My children goes every Saturday. They go study the Koran at the 172 Joseph Avenue.

MN: Now where is Joseph Avenue, is that in Highbridge?

BM: Yes, [unintelligible] and then that's the way it goes.

MN: Do you see yourselves staying in the United States, or returning to Mali?

BM: Well, returning to Mali would be one thing, even if I get rich, I go there vacationing. Otherwise, totally I wouldn't be staying here. If I can afford a house then I can afford to leave. Especially when it's time to start retiring, which is maybe my pension will be able to support, and I might pay for a cheaper place in Africa if it is possible. Then I'll go to live there. Otherwise, this is the place that I will live, and hopefully die, too.

MN: What about you.

LF: Yes, same story, because all my children was born here. I got eight children, five was born here, only three was born in Africa. And there is no way I'm going to take them back. I have to stay with them.

MN: Right. Now your eight children, did they all go to public schools here?

LF: Here, yes, they all go to public school. Yes.

MN: And have you been happy with the schools they've gone to.

LF: Of course, yes. They don't have any problem with school.

MN: Do you think that the African children in the schools work harder than the other children, or is that a leading question? [laughs]

BM: Well, it depends. If the parents, at the home, they pay attention to their children, and they give them help, they are going to work hard. They are going to work as hard as others. But if they don't, and when they come home, this help that they are supposed to receive, they are not receiving, and you don't watch them, then it's going to be harder for them.

LF: Because a lot of fathers, they are not able to go to school, they don't know how to do everything, you teach them to do their own work. Some think that they won't [unintelligible] But people who can't speak English, or can't read, you know, are able to help their kids and have them do well.

MN: Now, both of you have more education than some of the other parents.

BM: Most of the parents. Because for example, my father's children, he put us in the school in Africa, all his children. But there are some families that they don't want to go to school. They don't know the value of it. But my father did know the value-

MN: So what happens if you have families who didn't really go to schools in Africa, and their children are in school here, and the children need help.

BM: Then, in that case, it depends on which relatives they mix together. For example, my children. If my brother's children have a hard time with studying, then they're going to assist them.

MN: So help also is in education, or if there's a family who doesn't speak English well, somebody who speaks English will help them with the teacher, will come to a parent-teacher conference.

LF: Yes.

BM: Yes. There's a- my wife, she never went to school in Africa, but they see that, they study. They start their little thing. So they help little by little.

MN: Right. So your wife here has gradually gotten an education.

BM: Yes, well, not that dutifully, but she goes under. When I took her to school in 1990 after she came, and she says, 'Whoa, man.' She doesn't speak the language, she told me she's not going. SO by now, her first child is seventeen years old. And now, she knows the importance of it.

MN: Now what does your daughter want to do, in college, and after.

BM: I sit down with my daughter, and I told her, I said, 'What I like, if she can, to be a pharmacist or doctor. If she cannot, then just do something else. She can be a teacher, she can be a-

MN: No, it would be- Are there any young people from the Malian community who are now becoming teachers in the Bronx, and speak the languages. In other words, someone like your daughter, who speaks Soninké, would be very valuable as teacher.

BM: Yes.

LF: The problem with that is, we just came here, like the last seventeen, twenty years.

MN: Right.

LF: We don't have those kids-

MN: The kids are not that old.

LF: Yes, that's the problem. But we're getting there.

BM: My brother's children, two of them, or three of them, are all in the school, I believe.
And his first, she want to be a scientist, so, she's doing much better.

MN: So in the next ten years, we are going to see the Malian children, teachers, doctors,
lawyers!

LF: Hopefully.

MN: Maybe even a politician. The next councilperson from Highbridge. Do the elected
officials in the Bronx help your community.

BM: Oh, yes.

MN: So, who are the elected officials who have stood out the most for being helpful.

BM: The president of the Bronx community.

MN: Bronx Community College.

BM: Not the Bronx Community College, but-

MN: Community Planning Board?

LF: No. Are you talking about Carrion?

MN: Oh, oh! Do you mean Carrion. He's been very supportive?

LF: Yes, he's very supportive. Very good supporter of African communities.

MN: Really! Does he come to your neighborhood at all?

LF: When we needed him here.

MN: When you need him, he will come.

LF: He will come, no problem.

MN: Well that's very good to hear.

BM: Even if we don't go directly to him, then we'll probably go to Highbridge Life Community Center.

MN: Okay, write that down, Highbridge Life Community Center is a major place.

BM: It's a Christian place, but they do help us with anything that we have a problem.

MN: So that's- you say it's a Christian-

BM: It's the Christians.

MN: But they work with the Muslims.

BM: They work with anybody. Any problem that we have and it will get to them, they, even if they have to send it to the mayor or any higher, they help.

MN: So in other words, if your community has a problem, you can go to that center and they will help, you can go to the borough president.

BM: Yes.

MN: Have you had any dealings with Councilperson Foster. Her office or- because she, I think is from that- but she hasn't been visible?

BM: Maybe, I don't-

MN: But it's the borough president and the Highbridge Life Center.

BM: Highbridge Life Center, and once you get there, the doors open

MN: They'll open the doors. [Laughter] Now, do they have people there who speak the languages?

BM: No, they don't have anybody that speak the language, but anytime that they need any assistance, like my kids, they want to go to show a case in Albany or go the mayor's office, demanding things, they come and get my kids and then they go.

MN: Right. Are there good summer programs like day camps in your neighborhood for kids? What do they do during the summer, for example, are there camps where they are able to go? Or do they mostly work in the, stay in the family.

BM: Mostly we stay in their family, because the camps always is a good thing, but we cannot afford that.

MN: So you have to pay to be in these camps?

LF: Yes, of course.

MN: Oh, there are no free programs.

BM: Well, there is, but they are like, for example me, in the summer I am working, so I won't be spending any time with my kids. Because once you leave, you're absent, the money's not going to come. [Laughter]

MN: So what work do you do during the summer, in addition to this.

BM: Well, addition to this, I work at LaGuardia High School and a part-time engineer. Three times a week in the afternoon.

MN: Now, the work here involves all the equipment, and the boiler, things like that. So you have to be in charge of making sure everything works mechanical. Now did you

have experience working with engines and boilers back home, or you learned that all here?

LF: I learned that all in here. [Laughter]

MN: Do you have a camera? I want to take a picture of this! Wow.

LF: All from here, school.

MN: So you went to school to get the training.

BM: You have to get this training.

MN: Operating engineers and you're in the union, and the works. Wow. See, they have the cell phones that take pictures, these young people. [Laughter] And also take photos of both of these gentlemen. This is, it's a remarkable story. You're heroes-

LF: This country is very open country. If you want, you can make it. If you want to make it, you make it.

BM: If you work hard.

MN: If you work hard.

LF: You make it. It's very, you know.

MN: I mean, your experiences are just remarkable. What you've accomplished for yourself and your children, and it's- my grandparents were immigrants, so I know what that took, and how, my mother went out to work when she was eleven years old, and factories, and selling things in the street, and whatever- she ended up as a teacher, eventually. But, you know, the next generation.

LF: From what country?

MN: From Russia.

LF: Ah, La Russie.

MN: So, are people now, still coming from Mali? Do they still see this as the land of opportunity?

LF: They see this as a land of opportunity, but after September 11, the United States closed their door, to get visa to come here.

MN: It's much harder.

LF: You can't get in.

MN: So it's a big difference, September 11th?

LF: September 11 mixed up everything.

MN: Now, is this for everybody, or mainly from Muslim countries.

LF: I don't know. It look like from a Muslim country because- but I don't know.

Because my country, for more than three years now, I never see a new guy get a visa.

MN: So, you can't even get your relatives.

LF: No. No more.

MN: Now, even if you're a citizen.

LF: I don't know, I'm not- I'm not a citizen yet.

MN: The thing is- is it a different situation if you're a citizen, you think, or not necessarily.

LF: I'm not sure.

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MN: Because that would be interesting- in some places, you see a lot of people becoming citizens to make it easier. I don't know that much about the law.

LF: Because we just started coming year

[End of Tape One, Side One]

[Begin Tape One, Side Two]