



Fordham University  
**Fordham Research Commons**

---

Oral Histories

Bronx African American History Project

---

10-4-2019

## **Mesa, Gloria**

Bronx African American History Project

Follow this and additional works at: [https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp\\_oralhist](https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_oralhist)

 Part of the African American Studies Commons

---

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

Transcriber: Allison Lecce

**Jane Edward (JE):** Okay, my name is Dr. Jane Edward, I'm the director of African immigration research of the Bronx African American History Project, department of African and African American Studies at Fordham University. Today is Friday, October 4, 2019 and I'm conducting an oral history interview with Ms. Gloria Mesa of the Bronx Neighborhood Health Action center. The interview will last for about 45 minutes to an hour and it's taking place at the Tremont Neighborhood Health Action Center, 1826 Arthur Avenue, Bronx, New York. So Gloria please, if you could spell your name, your full name, so that it will be helpful for the people transcribing the information.

**Gloria Mesa (GM):** Yes, so my first name is spelled G-L-O-R-I-A and my last name is M-E-S-A. Gloria Mesa.

**JE:** Thank you, Thank you Gloria. So I have some few questions that I want to ask you. And I'm going to start with brief background information if you can tell me about your country of origin in Africa, for example, your place of birth, and what kind of religion you adhere to, or some of the languages that you speak and other information that is related to your background.

**GM:** Ok, so I was born in Kinshasa, it's the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo um there are many languages spoken there so I grew up speaking French – French is my first language – and Lingala is also spoken in the Congo and then there's also different languages spoken depending on your ethnic group. So Kikongo is also a language that I'm able to understand but I don't speak it fluently, and Gimballa is a language from my mother and my father's ethnic group, I don't speak it but I'm able to understand bits and pieces of that as well. And I speak English of course, living in the US and I'm okay with Spanish so I'm um, my

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

Spanish level is not fluent, per se, but I'm definitely above, like, intermediate level of understanding and writing.

**JE:** So some of the languages that you mention, are these languages indigenous to Democratic Republic of Congo or are some of them from outside of the country?

**GM:** Um these are languages from the Democratic Republic of Congo. So most of these languages are Bantu languages cause my people are Bantu people, so yeah. And as far as religion, I know you asked about my religion, I grew up Roman Catholic both my parents were Roman Catholic and that was the religion we practiced when I was younger and as of right now I would most likely identify myself as being more of a spiritual person per se instead of adhering to one specific religion.

**JE:** And why is that?

**GM:** Um I believe there is like a higher power out there a hundred percent but I'm not sure that I agree with how, with different religion, as far as like being Protestant, being Catholic, being Muslim, so there's different...I feel like people have created different separation of structures to separate us and for me I just try to focus on the higher power, not really paying attention to where it's coming from, and just understanding that whether it's a Muslim, Catholic Protestant or et cetera there are definitely things that you can learn from all different religions.

**JE:** Okay thank you so much. And you said you were born in Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo. So when did you come to the United States?

**GM:** I came to the United States about 17 years ago. Yeah, so my family and I came and we immigrated to North Carolina and I was raised in a city called Greensboro, North Carolina and we lived there and I went to elementary school there, middle school, high school and for college I went to a college about 45 minutes outside of the city where I was raised.

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

**JE:** So you say you immigrated 17 years ago, is it in 2000 or 2001? 2002?

**GM:** 2002

**JE:** 2002. Okay. So you went directly to North Carolina?

**GM:** Yes.

**JE:** So your parents came here for work or they just feel like they want to leave Congo they want to come to the United States?

**GM:** So my parents came to the United States mainly to provide their children with better opportunity when it comes to education and just better employment in the future. So my parents actually had really good jobs back in the Congo, but when it was time to think about what the future looked like for their children, they realized that the Congo may not be able to give us everything that we are capable of having. So we played the diversity lottery, which is a opportunity that's given to many countries outside of the United States in order to come to the US. So we played the diversity lottery and we won our combination. And that's how my family and I were able to come to the U.S. So we came here for like education and just, you know, chasing the American dream I guess.

**JE:** The American dream that everyone wants to achieve here.

**GM:** Yes [laughter]

**JE:** So how was the process for the diversity visa, to come to the United States?

**GM:** The process was ...[pause]... I feel like it was a bit lengthy, like lengthy and very, very costly, that's what I remember. Lengthy in a sense of...you have to apply but there's really no guarantee of who's going to win, you know, you just apply, you give it a chance, but as far as who wins it's up in the air. And, um, I remember at the time we didn't have a consulate office in the Congo, so we actually flew to Cameroon to get our visas there.

**JE:** There was no US embassy in Congo, in DRC?

**GM:** At the time, yes. I feel like there could've been a US embassy but I feel like there was, maybe, there was something going on where we just could not get our visas there, which I'm guessing there was just not a representative here.

**JE:** I think the problem is because some consulates, they don't issue visas in South African countries.

**GM:** Yes.

**JE:** Like in the case of South Sudan for example if a South Sudanese wants to come to the US they get their visa either from Nairobi, Kenya or Khartoum, Sudan.

**GM:** Ok so I think that could've been the case, there wasn't someone in Kinshasa who was issuing visas. So that's why we had to go to Cameroon which was the closest, um, place near us for us to go to get our visa. So like that entire process, not that I'm a little bit older, like it was very expensive for my parents, because I come from a family of five people in total. So I have two older brothers and two older sisters and I'm the youngest of 5, so just supporting the entire family, like that's a very expensive measure but altogether I think coming to the US through the diversity visa is one of the best methods to do it, just because all of your documentation are in order. So we came here. We had like our green card and everything like that, and after 5 years we were able to apply for citizenship in the US, so that was a really nice process, just because the immigration process can vary for many people depending on how you enter the country.

**JE:** Yeah. Some people came as refugees, others came as, uh sponsored, by others.

**GM:** Or student visas.

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

**JE:** Student visas, yeah. Ok, so the diversity visa means that when you come by yourself, then you have to take care of yourself. Your parents had to take care of you guys, and paying for your school, fees, everything.

**GM:** Yes. We were definitely sponsored by someone, but at the same time you know the way the society is set up in the US when you win the diversity visa it's really important to understand that when you come to the US you either have to go to school or you have to work because we live in a taxpayer society so they make it very clear ahead of time, for people to know that ahead of time. So although we were sponsored by someone it was still a very costly process overall, and we knew ahead of time what we were signing up for when we came into this country. So we knew you either had to go to school, or you had to find a job, so you couldn't just come to this country and do nothing. You had to do something with your life to come here.

**JE:** I just want to check this. Ok.

**GM:** So my parents, they sent my three older siblings before, so my older sister and my two brothers came before. They came a few months before us, and then, um, because my parents had their jobs they couldn't just up and go they had to take, you know, absence of leave with their work. It took a few time for preparation for that to take, so we came about five months after them. Five, six months.

**JE:** And then you settled in, uh, North Carolina.

**GM:** Yes, Greensboro, North Carolina.

**JE:** Greensboro, North Carolina. And uh your parents are still there?

**GM:** Yes, they're still there, they've been there ever since, and yeah I live in New York by myself. I'm the only one in my family who's here.

**JE:** So when did you come to New York?

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

**GM:** I came to New York fall of 2017, so almost 2 years. Um, after I finished school, I was working with American Red Cross and after that finished I was trying to figure out like what my employment was going to look like for work after finishing university. And I was applying for jobs everywhere so I got an opportunity to do an Americorps turn with the department of health and mental hygiene, so that's what brought me to New York.

**JE:** Ok, and you went to school, primary school, middle school, high school, all in Greensboro?

**GM:** Yes.

**JE:** And university, which university did you attend?

**GM:** I went to Winston-Salem State University, it's a university in Winston-Salem in North Carolina.

**JE:** Ok. So it's a four-year degree?

**GM:** Yes four year degree, it's a historical Black college as well, and yeah, it was a really good experience for me

**JE:** Ok, so how do you explain that good experience compared to others?

**GM:** Ummm. So I grew up in a very suburban neighborhood in Greensboro, so I didn't have a lot of people that looked like me, in the neighborhood I grew up. So my parents wanted to put us in a place where we had quote unquote access to good education. So at the time we were, we had a house and that's the neighborhood where we lived. However, um, my college experience is a little different than what my high school experience was, just because I after high school I wanted to immerse myself in the Black American culture. So I started doing research and finding out more about what does it mean to attend a historically Black college, finding out more about the histories of those colleges. And so I applied and I attended the university and um it was a good experience for me because I think I got more, I got, my experience there is so much more

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

than just a degree. I got an experience that is gonna serve me for the rest of my life. So when I was in college, I got the opportunity to study abroad and that's something that you know not everything takes advantage of when they're in school and I was very thankful and very appreciative to be in a school that gave me those opportunities. But it was also like where I studied abroad. So I studied abroad in Nairobi, Kenya and I went to Bahia in Brazil, so it was in places where you could learn a lot about Black culture in a global aspect, that was really, really good for me. And, um, just being challenged at a level and getting out of my comfort zone was a really good experience that I think it has allowed me to be the independent woman that I am today because of having those experiences.

**JE:** Mhm, exactly.

**GM:** I think if I had chose to go to university where I could do you know things the same way I did in high school, I would just not be as courageous and as brave and as independent as I am today, so I'm very thankful for that experience.

**JE:** And how was your high school, because you're comparing your experiences in college to high school.

**GM:** Right.

**JE:** How was your experience in high school, for example?

**GM:** So high school...

**JE:** You went to public school or private school?

**GM:** I went to public school. I went to public school, the name of the school was Northwest Guilford High School. It was a good school, overall, I made some really good friends. I have pretty good memories of the school overall. But one thing that I think I wish I would have experienced more was diversity. I didn't really have any diversity in my high school, there was



Interviewee: Gloria Mesa

Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward

Date: October 4, 2019

probably like a one to two percentage of Black people in the entire school. So, like, that was kind of, like, hard to cope with, just because I had nobody to really relate with. Like I had my friends, thankfully, I had friends from different backgrounds. So I usually never had any problems making friends. But I think now that I'm a little bit older, I understand the importance of being in places that are diversified, and that allow you to learn from different people. So in high school, I had to constantly explain my identity to my peers all the time. Like, 'hi, my name is this'. And so it was just like it was a little bit challenging to constantly have to explain that because although I'm a Congolese woman, it's like, I cannot speak for the entire Congo or the entire continent. And some of those, some of my peers, they were really oblivious to what it meant to be African. So they, they thought my experience was an experience of what the entire continent had to offer. And I had to constantly remind them that I'm just one person coming from that place of, you know, of a country or a continent. So I can't speak for everyone, I'm just speaking from my experience of what I've been, what I've been able to go through. So high school was a huge identity crisis, I will say for me, it was trying to figure out who I am. And I think the whole notion of being African and proud, I definitely think I got a chance to experience that after high school. In high school, it was not cool to be African, like it was you, you will get teased in school, you know, you will get ridiculed, like it was just not something that you look forward to telling everyone 'Oh I'm African' it is just something that I don't think I was so excited to share with people that Oh I'm Congolese. But now I have no problem being so proud of Congolese heritage and just my African heritage because I've taken time out to really understand my identity and understand why things are the way that they are.

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

**JE:** The number of students, Black students, was smaller compared to the other demographic. So were you getting this um teasing and so on from the Black students or from the other demographics, like the white students and other nationalities?

**GM:** I think it was a combination of almost everything. So, it was, high school I think it's an age where most people are trying to figure out themselves. So I think sometimes kids are just mean because also they're internalizing so many issues themselves. So I got, I don't think I got teased a lot per se but it was a lot of just misconceptions that people had about what it meant to be African but it came from people with different backgrounds. I got questions, I got asked from my Black friends who are maybe African Americans, and white friends who grew up here, also my Hispanic Latino friends who come from another country and came to the US. So it was just like, for example, people did not associate my French-speaking to the continent of Africa. So people automatically thought that because she speaks French, she has to automatically be from somewhere in Europe. For a long time I kind of went along with that, I was like yes we were colonized by European countries but I'm actually African, like I'm not, I don't have any European traits in my ancestry. It was a lot of that, and just people asking you questions like oh my God, do you guys have houses, where you come from, what is the structure of living where you come from. A lot of ignorant questions, but now that I think about it, it's just a lot of miseducation so, in high school, because even now, although I had a very positive overall college experience I think I still was asked some ignorant questions along the way. I just think it differs depending on where people are in their growth and where people are when it comes to understanding what the African continent has to offer. I just think in America, I don't want to generalize it, but more than likely a lot of people growing up here don't have a big understanding of the continent of Africa. Like some people still think the continent of Africa is a country and

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

you have to explain to them no it's a continent and we have 54 countries within the continent.

So, a lot of generalization and things like that.

**JE:** What about your siblings? Are they also working, and are they successful?

**GM:** So I have two older brothers and two older sisters. So starting with my sister, I have a sister who's an IT analyst, she works for Volvo, it's a Swedish company, and they actually have one of their headquarters in Greensboro so she works there. I have a brother who's a chemical engineer, so he works for a pharmaceutical company called Baxter, so he works for them. And I have a brother who's in real estate, so he's a real estate agent. And I have a sister who just finished her degree in biology and she's wanting to go into PA school or something to do in the health field. And for me, I am a public health worker at the moment, and I'm working toward a career in global health. My aspiration is to do the same kind of work that I'm doing here in the US, globally, so a global aspect hopefully.

**JE:** Okay, and you said PA?

**GM:** Yeah, physician's assistant. So my sister who just graduated with a biology degree, she wants to go into PA school to be a physician assistant.

**JE:** So in this case, that means your parents are proud of your success?

**GM:** I think so, yes, they are proud. Um...I think...personally with my parents, they're very proud but they always encourage me to do more. I think that's just kind of like an African parents mentality, they're like yes you're doing great, but don't get too comfortable, just know that there's so much more out there that you can succeed. They're very proud of all of us generally speaking, they always encourage us to do more, to find out more, to network and just like to never forget where we come from. We come from countries where you can be the smartest person but you may not have the access to education like you do in the US. The United

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

States is not everything but it gives you the opportunity to make something out of yourself. You don't have to be the richest person, but if you go to school and you do your part you can at least get to a minimum way of being able to take care of yourself and your family. So it's definitely a privilege to come to this country and be educated and now be in the work field.

**JE:** Exactly. So do you think that your parents' insistence and encouragement to work hard actually helped you in your work, in your studies, in everything and plays a role in that?

**GM:** Yeah, I think so. So I think when I was younger, both of my parents are like college educated parents, so I grew up in a household where, at a very young age, I already knew that college was something that I aspired to go to because of everything my parents had gone through, like them sharing their experiences with me. Um, however, my three older siblings primarily grew up in the Congo, so me and my sister – my sister and I are the only ones that went through like the entire education system in America. So elementary school, middle school, high school and university. So I think I do appreciate their encouragement and their way of instilling those values in us, at a very young age. But I think it got to a point where I had to start, kind of like utilizing everything that they taught me and then also map out what I would like my life plan to look like. Because I think, you can have parents who give you all the guidance. But there's a time in your life where your parents are no longer going to be there and you're going to start making decisions that are best for you in the long term. So for instance right now, I live in New York by myself, I have no family here, I'm still building like my support group with my friends and people that I'm meeting, so there's been a lot of cases where I've had to make decisions on my own and I'm thankful that I have the values that I got from my parents that I've instilled in me at a young age, but I think for instance like now when it comes to my career and my career plan I think I am the manager of that in a sense like I know what I want to do. And sometimes I

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

have to inform my parents, because they didn't go to school here, you know, so sometimes like I'm working in a public health field and my dad is like oh are you going to be a doctor and I'm like no I'm not going to be a doctor but I'm still going to be in the health field to some degree and assisting in that measure. So I think, um, they definitely helped me a lot with the values that they instilled in me but I also think that it's just my personality as well, it's just the person that I am and a combination of both of that has played a big role to help me to get me to where I am.

**JE:** And do you like the work that you are doing there and do you like New York City in general?

**GM:** Um, New York City is very very difficult, I think it is one of the most challenging experiences I've had to go through in life, but yet the most rewarding one. At the same time, it's really hard but it's really really great as well depending on how you look at it and what your outlook is on it. Um, I like New York a lot because I think it challenges me every day. Like, waking up in New York is a challenge on its own, getting on the subway, commuting to work, there's so many different challenges and I feel blessed to be in the place where I'm challenged to grow professionally and personally every single day. I always knew that after school I was never going to stay in North Carolina long term, so I never thought of New York either but I'm happy that, you know, life, the universe, brought me here to learn. And, um, yes, I love...

**JE:** How-how did you discover New York then? You just...

**GM:** I was applying so when I was applying for jobs I had no barriers of where to go because I love travelling and I'm a very adaptable person so I saw myself as someone who can adapt anywhere, you can like throw me in India and I will be okay, I will figure it out. So as I was adapting – as I was applying, excuse me, New York was the first job that called me back and they were like hey we really like your resume, we want to move on to the next step of you

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

committing to this fellowship for one year. So the fellowship that I did last year was, I wasn't fully hired with the city, it was like a contract for only one year...

**JE:** So the city, New York City gave you a fellowship?

**GM:** Yes, it was an AmeriCorps fellowship. So it was with the department of health and mental hygiene. But it was only for a one year timeframe. And then when I finished that year, I knew that I didn't want to go back to North Carolina...

**JE:** So when was that, that was in 2017?

**GM:** Yes but I did it in 2018, into the fall of 2018. So I was like okay I'm not moving back, I'd like to find full time employment. So, it's the same agency that I did my fellowship in last year, so I was just applying for different opportunities and I got an opportunity to work as a health promoter in the Bronx. So it was like a nice transition into something else. But overall I like what I'm doing, um, I like the idea of public health because you really get a chance to help people, so I love interacting with people, helping people and as a health promoter one of my biggest objective is to inform people of all the programs and services that we have available at my site, so that has been great and also like starting an initiative to really focus on the African community has been like super rewarding for me, because I learned a lot in the process. And yeah, I learned a lot and I was able to really, like, meet great people along the way.

**JE:** So how did you do that, given the fact that you came from North Carolina and you're only two years in New York City and you live in Brooklyn and you work in the Bronx. So how do you navigate the city and getting where the Africans are?

**GM:** Yeah so when I came from North Carolina to New York, I visited New York before with my family like a few times. Um, I knew there was a lot of Africans in New York but I was never like super exposed to a specific community. You know when you're visiting it's like periodically

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

you don't really spend a lot of time in one specific place. Um, I've always lived in Brooklyn. So, I lived in Brooklyn – I lived in Harlem for a few months as well, and in Brooklyn there is also an African community, but there's also a lot of people from the Caribbean. So, I live in Crown Heights, Brooklyn at the moment and there's a huge Caribbean community so a lot of Haitians, people from Panama, Dominican Republic, so there's a lot of different – Jamaica – there's a lot of, like, islands surrounding where I live. And, um, when I started working in the Bronx I started to attend different meetings, just familiarize myself with the neighborhood and the place where we work. I started realizing that wow there's a lot of Africans here, and I started asking myself like what is the agency doing to better engage this population. And to my understanding it was that there was really not a lot of work being done, so I was like – I remember when I spoke to my supervisor about this firsthand I was like I don't even think I know what I want to do yet, but I know I want to do something. Because, the fact that we have an action center in the Bronx and we're not engaging African people, like that was a big concern of mine at the time. So I started speaking with our essential communication here at the agency, to start having documentation printed out in different languages. Just because, I do a lot of outreach work and um we have our calendar of events in English, we have it in Spanish, and I was like we have to have in French as well because different organizations that I started being introduced to, for instance African Communities Together, African Services Committee, all these organizations are really good organizations that are doing really great work to interact with the community, however I realized that going to them with just English documentation may not be enough at all times. So, African Communities Together is definitely an organization that I attend their monthly meetings, so I saw a huge increase of, increase of willingness I guess to receive the documents when there was a French portion, just because we cannot assume that everyone speaks English in this, in New

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

York per se, or in the Bronx. So I think including different languages has been a great help as far as outreach to African communities in the Bronx and I think there's just like, it's like a uh, a natural fact. So when I got connected to African Communities Together, and I got connected to [unintelligible], she does a lot of great work with the community, so I just feel like the more you're attending different events and meetings the more you are meeting people, the more you are able to connect with different people who are already doing the work in the communities, and it's all about just connecting those dots. So I love to always emphasize to people when I'm talking about this initiative in the Bronx, is like me working on an initiative to better engage African people in the Bronx is not something that is like so new – it's new for the agency that I'm working with, just because they have never done this type of work before, however there have always been organizations in the Bronx or different parts of New York that have been doing work to support African people. So it's all about us connecting with those organizations and just finding out how we can share resources.

**JE:** Yeah, so that there's no need for duplication.

**GM:** Exactly, so it's not like reinventing the wheel, the wheel already exists, it's all about just connecting the dots to the wheel and for people to know that the action center is here in place and how can we collaborate hopefully on events and um meetings or just anything that we can do to come together to serve the community. Because, what I found out is that when I'm doing the outreach with the African community – or just any community for that matter – people don't even know that we're here, so that's a big barrier in itself.

**JE:** Okay, that's good. And uh, you mentioned that you're actually living here by yourself, and, uh, I'm an African, I'm an African parent. And we always have that perception about our children that they're not supposed to live by themselves, they're supposed to be near us. So, how



Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

do you navigate that or how did you manage to convince your parents that you are able to live in New York and nothing is going to happen to you?

**GM:** Um, that's a really good question. So ...[pause]... I grew up, I think out of my four siblings, I'm the most adventurous one, I'm very different from them, I'm the one that's willing to take chances and, you know, experience things. So, going back to what my college experience was like, I studied abroad twice.

**JE:** So that was your first experience going away from home?

**GM:** Yes, going away from home. And I think although I, you know, when you're studying abroad you're not really travelling alone, you're travelling with the university, however it's still an experience to allow you to get out of your comfort zone. So when my parents saw me going to Nairobi, having a really amazing time, conducting research there, coming back, going to Brazil a few years later, they were just like wow she's able to manage all these things and like I will always stay in contact with them. So what I've learned with my parents is that, as I'm becoming an adult and becoming my own person, they may not always agree with me and what my plans are for my life and for my future, but they like to create an open dialogue between us. Especially my mom, she's really big on always communicating with her, and I think whenever I communicate with her it gives her a peace of mind, so she doesn't have to worry about where I am, how I'm doing, things of that nature. So coming to New York was definitely difficult in a sense of, I think both of my parents are so great but they're also very different individuals. So my father for instance, he was probably like a little bit scared, like I'm his youngest daughter, I'm going to a far place from him, but he's never put his worries on me. So when he's scared or nervous, he kind of keeps it to himself, but when he talks to me he's always encouraging me, like you know you can do this, we've instilled everything in you so now it's time for you to take it

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

upon yourself. And also it's like, he always shares with me about his own experience. So my father comes from a rural part of the Congo, so he's not from Kinshasa, he came to Kinshasa for law school. So he always tells me you know look at my own life path, you know I went to Kinshasa – because my mom was working – so my father coming to Kinshasa, that was his first exposure in a really big city and he went there for law school. So having that experience that he's gone through, I come from a lineage of very courageous people, and although it was a big challenge in coming to New York, I just told them that, I remember after going to Kenya, I conducted research on FGM, female genital mutilation there, and I was really really moved by what I was able to find there. When I came back to the US I was like I definitely want to work in the global health space. And that was maybe like my sophomore year, junior year of college and I was just really headstrong about pursuing a career in global health, and, as I was finishing up college, I used to always tell my parents, even if I get a job in the us, I'm going to get some domestic experience but my goal for myself, I definitely see myself moving abroad, living abroad. I would love to have the flexibility of coming back to America like every six months or so, but I don't really want to live here for a long time. So, when the opportunity presented itself for me to complete the Americorps service term in New York, I kind of presented it to them like hey this a great opportunity for me to be in a place where I'm going to be amongst so many organizations that are doing global health work. So it was almost like, it's going to be a huge sacrifice, it's going to be difficult because we're going to be really far apart from each other, but it's almost an investment for what my future is going to be like. So, it was difficult, but um I can definitely say that I come from Africans and my family is pretty close knit and although I'm not physically there with them, I always feel like I'm going to be there with them. So we have like a WhatsApp group chat, we talk everyday, it doesn't have to be a lengthy conversation, just

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

checking in with each other. My parents always send me packages, like my mom will send me food.

**JE:** From North Carolina?

**GM:** Yes! She will ship it to me, she's like I know you're far away but I know sometimes you don't have time to cook, I'm going to send you food – it means a lot.

**JE:** So she sends you cooked food or?

**GM:** Cooked food! She sends cooked food via the post, like UPS or express mail and she sends me food, my dad makes like homemade ginger juice, so ginger, as you can tell I sound a little bit sick right now, I had a little, some cold symptoms. So he makes homemade ginger juice, and he will send me that so I can prepare for the winter. They're very, very loving people and super affectionate and try their best to, um, be as inclusive as they can with their kids even though I'm far away. So it was difficult, but I think as long as, you know it's the 21st century, there are always ways of keeping up with each other, so as long as we do that I think we'll be fine. Even though my mom is always like oh when are you going to leave New York and I'm like I don't know because I'm considering going to graduate school here so I don't know.

**JE:** You mention something about food, so when you were growing up, did you eat like African, quote-unquote African foods, or you ate American or a combination of both?

**GM:** Definitely African food, so I grew up in a house where my mom cooked like you know Monday through, yeah, the whole week basically, she cooks everyday, or my sister cooked. So I grew up eating really just Congolese dishes.

**JE:** Can you describe some of those dishes?

**GM:** Yeah, so beans is a big staple in the Congo, cassava leaves, we eat a lot of cassava leaves. We have a dish called Fumbwa, which is like a legume with peanut butter, it's like a peanut

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

butter stew kind of thing. Um, we have chicken and goat meat, salt fish, um, fufu, so those are kind of like the things – potatoes – so those are the things that I would be eating often. I was really introduced to fast food when I went to college. I mean obviously when I was in high school I knew what it was but I wasn't really eating a lot of it because my mom would be cooking throughout the week so I didn't have an excuse to. So when I was in college I had the chance to, when you're in college it's kind of difficult to avoid fast food, because it's like a part of your university experience...

**JE:** And sometimes you don't have time to cook real food.

**GM:** Exactly, and it's like easy to grab and it was like on campus available for you, so it was easy for you to just like pick it up and go to class and stuff like that. So yeah but, um, I pretty much ate Congolese food all throughout my childhood and then when I got older and went to university, I was pretty much introduced to fast food and then like me now working in the public health sector, like understanding more about food consumption and the importance of like knowing what you're eating and what kind of food, like the quality, is like, I try to be so much more mindful of what I eat. So, I went through a period where I was vegan, for like three years. Yeah, so I didn't eat anything that had any dairy products or any meat for like three years. And it was a really, really good experience to like have that experience with my body. At the moment, I'm kind of struggling because like I work in the Bronx, and there's a huge food insecurity issue in the Bronx as far as what kind of, what kind of access I have to food here and because I live in Brooklyn it's a very long commute for me. So I don't have the same schedule to cook and stuff as I used to when I used to work in Brooklyn. So I'm, my diet is not, it hasn't been the best.

**JE:** So you're back to eating meat.

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

**GM:** Yeah, so I don't eat meat per se, but sometimes I will eat things that have a little bit of cheese or milk in it. So it varies but I think long term I'm working, I'm actually, I was telling myself that I would like October and November and December to be my transitioning months, for me to go back to my plant based diet because I think I feel the best, my body feels the best when I'm eating real food, raw food, some cooked foods as well but I don't have any consumption of meat or dairy. I'm just like, I don't feel bloated, I feel, I have a lot of energy, so yeah that's what I'm working toward again.

**JE:** And what about the foods that your parents send?

**GM:** So, she will send me beans, which beans are just, it's a good protein but it doesn't have any meats inside, so beans are really, really good to eat at all times. She sends me cassava leaves, which, it doesn't involve any meat inside, she sends me sometimes, uh, kwanga...

**JE:** What is that?

**GM:** Kwanga is like the cassava roots I think so we make it into like it's not like potato but you kind of, you eat it like...

**JE:** You boil it?

**GM:** You boil it, yes, you eat it with like legumes and meat if you're interested. So she sends me that, I try to tell her not to send me any food that has meat in it but sometimes she doesn't listen to me she's like oh you need some meat in you. I think because my parents grew up like, of course as Africans we eat, eating meat is a part of like our daily consumption. So when I didn't eat meat, they didn't really understand that, but i had to inform them that, I guess for me my biggest problem is, the more I find out about factory farming and what the animals go through in order for us to have the animal that we have on our plates, after finding out that process I was like I don't think I'm interested to eat any more meats. However, I also think the quality of food

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

that we have back home and the quality of food that we have here is two different things. In America, everything is mass produced, everything is mass production, so it's almost like quantity over quality so they don't care what kind of quality of food you have, as long as you have the food. And I think the food we have access to here are really causing a lot of diseases that people are having, especially like cardiovascular diseases, so I think everything in moderation but the more you know the better choices you're going to make.

**JE:** And even the understanding of fresh food is different here than in Africa. Like for us, in Africa fresh vegetables are, you go to the garden and pick them, and that's fresh. Here, it's a little bit different.

**GM:** Yeah, so we don't have the same access to things as we have at home.

**JE:** Ok, so I think we are almost winding down. My last, uh, my last question that I'm going to ask is what do you think about the discussion about immigration today, especially given the fact that you guys came through the visa, the lottery visa and the changing debate about immigration, and how is that going to affect the African people, especially those that want to come to the US to achieve their American dream?

**GM:** Yeah, I think um, it's, it's really unfortunate that this administration on what their viewpoint is on immigration, just because if you look at the US, and the history of this country, people have been coming here for many years. And so um I think there is not going to be a stop to people coming here, they're just going to find different ways of coming here, which I think we need to acknowledge as people, um, I think African people are really resilient people so whenever we're faced with really difficult situations, we always try to find, to make the best out of that situation. So although it is going to be very difficult for what the future of immigration law is going to look like in the United States, I'm hopeful that there will be ways for Africans to

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

still be able to get opportunities or to go to countries where they will be, um, able to get access to things that they are getting access to. However, it also makes me think of what the political climate is in our African countries. Right, because, when we talk about weather for instance, weather, food, families, most of us are giving up a lot to come to America to chase this quote unquote American dream and we're leaving our countries of origin because we don't have any infrastructures there in place to allow us to live the life that we want to live. So we're coming to a foreign country in order to, you know, have access to education, healthcare, things of that nature. However, I feel like African leaders should think to themselves like what are we doing to our people. Because if our African leaders took charge and actually were not exploiting the African people who are living on the continent, most of us won't have to come here. Like I've lived in this country for almost like, it's getting close to 20 years, and something like winter is still something that my body is not accustomed to and it's like because, naturally speaking, we're not supposed to go through like huge changes of climate like that, you know, like I'm away from my family, my extended family, that I don't see very often, I'm away from like really awesome healthy foods that I could have access to. So, in the continent, there's everything naturally given to us in the sense of like we have all these, we have our families, we have the foods...

**JE:** Even the natural resources.

**GM:** Yeah, we have the natural resources, absolutely. African countries are really rich countries and you should ask yourself why are rich countries in this situation and other countries are in other situations because we're being exploited as a people, there has not been many cases where African people are able to take advantage of African resources. So when I talk about immigration, yes, definitely it's unfortunate what this administration is going through as it relates to the US, but I think it's also important to relate it back to the global aspect. Because it's like

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

what are we doing in our countries so that people don't even have to leave, refugees, you know to leave their own country, you can just stay there, because, you know, you want to live there, so it's a combination of both, but I think, um, there's going to always be people fighting for different causes. So, for instance you spoke about the diversity lottery because that's how my parents and I came to this country, um, I was informed this year that now they want everyone who's applying for the visa lottery to have a passport ahead of time before you apply, which when I, when my family and I applied, it was like you just, you send in your application with passport photos but you didn't have to actually have a physical passport at the time. So, changing those regulations are going to leave a lot of people out of the loop and unable to take advantage of different opportunities...

**JE:** Yeah, because getting a passport even is not easy, it's expensive

**GM:** And it's a very lengthy process as well, it's expensive and it might take so many months for you to actually get it. So it's unfortunate but I think it's time for African leaders to also like wake up and to see how African people or immigrants of all nations are treated in these countries so they can reevaluate certain things because it's unfair to be treated like this because most of us are just coming here for a better living.

**JE:** So my last question is are you planning to go back one day to Congo, or are your parents planning to go and resettle in Congo?

**GM:** So um I'm not sure about what my parents dreams are, I think they're definitely getting to the retirement stage so both of them don't really work at the moment they do like work, they sell at a market because it's kind of like an activity for them to do.

**JE:** You mean in North Carolina?



Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

**GM:** Yeah, they sell like Congolese food and my dad sells ginger juice at a local market, a farmer's market.

**JE:** So they have a store?

**GM:** It's not a store, it's kind of like a farmer's market, people come together to sell different produce and stuff like that. So they started selling, they started promoting like Congolese culture by selling like things from our country, so my mom makes like beignets, samosas, pili pili, which is like a pepper and um sometimes she makes like rice and my dad makes the ginger juice and they have a small little business corner where they sell. I'm not sure what they're thinking about, if they're thinking about going back home to resettle when it comes to their full retirement, but for me I definitely would like to go back to the Congo but I'm also not limiting myself to just the Congo. So I'm very open and, like I mentioned, I'm super adaptable, so I definitely have a passion to do global health work. It would be great to do that global health work in the Congo, however if an opportunity presents itself for me to do this global health work in West Africa, East Africa, southern or north, then I'm going there, so I don't have a preference of where I go in the continent, I've only traveled to some countries, not all countries, so I haven't been to the west yet or the northern part, so I would love to get exposure to a new part of the continent that I haven't been able to travel to yet, but I definitely would love to have a house, like my dream is to definitely have a house in the continent somewhere, because I would like to retire between the Congo and the US just because I want to have the flexibility of both. And, um, I just want to, I want to definitely bring back knowledge to my community of all the things I've learned and been exposed to here in the US, because you know having this exposure is such a privilege because some people may want this experience but don't have the means to do it. So I was very lucky to be born in a family where my parents had pretty good jobs in order to support our family to come

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

here. Because, could you imagine we paid our air flight tickets to go to Cameroon for our visas, went back to the Congo and then we had to pay our tickets again to go to the US, so it was a very, very expensive procedure and there's like five kids plus mom and dad so it's seven people in total so that is a lot of money...

**JE:** A lot of money.

**GM:** And also it's like when my three oldest siblings first came here, my parents had to support them for the first few months because they couldn't just get jobs...

**JE:** And they had to find a place for them to live and buy food...

**GM:** Yeah, apartments and cars, so all of that is a process, so, um, yeah, that's like my dream, definitely get a house somewhere on the continent. My parents they do always tell me, if you do get a job on the continent they said they would move with me, so I'm like okay, that's good, they'll come along with me.

**JE:** So they don't have a home now in Congo?

**GM:** No we actually sold our home prior to coming here so no we don't have a home in the Congo at the moment, no, but it would be good to have another one. We did have a home, like our family home, but we don't have one anymore.

**JE:** But you have one in North Carolina?

**GM:** Yes, we did have one in North Carolina.

**JE:** Okay. If you have something to conclude with, then we end there.

**GM:** Um, no I don't think I have anything else, this was a really good experience, it's really good to hear stories of african people and what brings them into this country and what they've been up to coming to this country so I'm thankful that we're able to meet and conduct this interview and I look forward to staying in touch.

Interviewee: Gloria Mesa  
Interviewer: Dr. Jane Edward  
Date: October 4, 2019

**JE:** Okay, thank you so much and thank you for accepting to be interviewed for our Bronx African American History Project. Thank you so much.