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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT— CHUKWUNYERE OKEZIE

Interviewee: CHUKWUNYERE OKEZIE

Interviewer: Virginia Ashworth

Interview Date: November 21, 2009

Location: Marygrove College

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(approximate total length in minutes: 54 Minutes)

Transcription by Nathan Katzin

Summary: Marygrove College professor Dr. Chukwunyerere Okezie was one of 10 siblings in his family's compound in Nigeria. After Zaira University in Nigeria was closed, he moved at the age of 22 to the United States to earn his undergraduate and Ph.D. degrees. Dr. Okezie married in 2001 and describes his growing family and academic life at Marygrove College.

Subject headings: Migration from Nigeria

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Note: Counter index corresponds to track times when loaded into iTunes

00:00

Interviewer: The name of the interviewer is Virginia Ashworth, the name of the interviewee is Chukwunyerere Okezie. The date is November 21st 2009. The place is Marygrove College, and the purpose of this interview is to be used in the Novak Digital Collection at Marygrove College. And you have signed the agreement to be recorded, correct?

Yes, thank you.

Interviewer: And to start, did I pronounce your name correctly, it's Chukwunyerere?

Chukwunyerere. Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Allright. Will you please tell me when you were born and where you were born at?

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I was born in Nigeria, December 26th, 1960... I grew up in Nigeria as well until when I came to the United States.

Interviewer: Okay, and what was life like in Nigeria?

Oh very good. At the time I left Nigeria because at that time in the 80's a lot of things were very good in Nigeria. In terms of the economy and everything was just very good.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit about growing up in Nigeria. What life was like and some experiences that you had.

I came from a very big family. My mother had ten children, five boys and five girls. So growing up was like any other family, other than we had too many in our household. And the life in Nigeria at the time we were growing up was very good. And a lot of, it's a lot of interaction between siblings and also family members. Uncles relations, lot of in-laws. Because of my family being so big, a lot of my older uncles married with extended families and others. So growing up there is a very good communal atmosphere that people shared things, people eat together, people do all kinds of things and also care for each other to a great extent.

Interviewer: Alright. You talk about sharing meals. Would you guys, was it just for holidays or was it on a regular basis. You would get together and do meals?

Sharing meals in most African communities almost a daily based thing, it's not something that happens during an occasion. So in Nigeria for example my mother having ten children and we have other uncles and relations also who are living within the same compound where we are. So there my mother would cook and some other women also within the compound would also cook and everybody would bring at the central place where people would share together every night and every, on every occasions as well.

Interviewer: Okay, and it's...I'm sorry, what is the compound?

Compound.

Compound. Oh, okay.

It's like it's a compound where people live. For example in Nigeria we don't live like, well, even though people might build their homes but when once they build their home for example here, at Marygrove College for example might be our total compound, and this total compound is inhabited by many, many individuals within my family. My uncles, my father's home, and everybody else is there. So people cook and bring at the central place where people share and co-eat and marry.

Interviewer: Alright, could you tell me a little bit more about the interactions that you had with your brothers and sisters and your other family, because you talked- mentioned that a little bit.

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In terms of interactions for me I am the oldest of those nine children. So everybody look up to me for a whole lot of things. So those interactions, meaning that when I go to school and come back. Let's say if my younger brother or sister has taken a class I've taken, for example, in elementary school, wherever. We tend to share ideas, share notes of what happened during the time I was in the class, so what happened, what is currently going on at the time he or she was taking the class. So we interacted that way. And also, in our family, my parents trained us in such a way that we would be able to at least confide in each other, trust each other. Whatever we are going we have to tell each other that that is where we are going in case there is a problem. So with that interaction extends to our other uncles, also within the family. In our family for example, watching of children, or babysitting of children as Americans call it can be done by anybody. Can be done by my uncles, all it takes is for you to say, "Hey, here take my baby. Watch after him or her. I'm going to the stream or I'm going to somewhere else, I'm going to the market." Whatever it is. So there is a lot of interactions among the family members to that regard.

5:00

Interviewer: Okay. Were all of the families as large as yours or was your family like the largest?

Well, I think my family I might say was one of the largest also. Because my other uncle had about six. The other one had seven. The other one has eight. And our grandfather is married to seven wives. So our household is huge. So we have a whole lot of uncles and relations that we are dealing with also and grandmothers and all the rest of them. So there are so many people within the compound.

Interviewer: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about your grandfather and his wives?

Oh, umm, I think I met them when I was born, there, in that very compound. So by the time I was born I think I only, he has six wives. Then while I was born, about five or six years old I think he got married to the seventh one. As I consistently tell students here, sometimes marrying seven wives is not of the man's own decision. It is the women that actually stated that they want this woman to come and join the family because of the farm lands that is owned by the family. One person might not be able to do what it takes to do to maintain those farms. So as a result of that then, a lot of these women consistently like to bring in other women who might be able to help them during farming period. So farming to a great extent was one of the reasons why a lot of people engaged in to those polygamous types of activity. But after that generation I think, my father's generation decided that they don't want to continue with that activity. So my father ended up marrying one wife, then had ten of us and the rest of the other siblings also married one wife. So until one decided to have the rest of their children as well.

Interviewer: What were influences, like what influenced you in your home country to- was education a big part of your home country or was it that you came to the United States to do that? Was it more that...

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Well, in Nigeria for example, education is everything. So having an education puts you at an advantage. Therefore then after high school I started a, I started to work in a family business. My father owned a business. And in that business I was there for about five, six years before I came to the United States. But since I don't have, I only had a high school education as at the time, I knew very well that a lot of people... Things would change- economically, things would change in Nigeria. And as a result of that then, if I don't have more than the high school education that I had at the time I might be in problem, in problems in terms of trying to move up because education is one, helps one to do what we call upward mobility. So education is a nice thing to be able help you to move to the next level.

So knowing that fully well then I decided that I wanted to go to the university to pursue a university education. So when I mentioned that to my father my father agreed with me that it's a very good to get education but a lot of the family members thought that it was a very foolish decision because my father had the money, he has everything, so why go to school? Because the money's already there. But I knew very well that the money might finish one day. And if I don't have money, if I don't have education then I might be in deep problem. That was one of the things that led to my coming to the United States. I started in Nigeria to look for what you call, joint admission matriculation board exam. An entrance examination you take to go to university. So I took that exam for many years, after which I decided that I am going to go to university in Nigeria. I was given an admission to do a degree in one of the universities in Nigeria it's called Zairm.

So when I went to Zairm my first year, Z-a-i-r-m, Zairm. When I went there my first year, four students were killed. And when those four students were killed the university was entirely closed. And when the university was closed, we were told that we were going to take an exam after the strike is over. So at that particular time I decided that I might not be able to do it in Nigeria [10:00], and I decided to start to pursue an education in the United States.

10:09

Interviewer: Can I ask about the experience with the four students and what happened at the college?

I have no idea.

Interviewer: Okay, sure.

I don't have any... I was just knew. All we heard was that four students were killed and the college was closed entirely. That's it.

Interviewer: Okay. And then real quick before we move on to your life over in the United States, could you tell me about your father's family business and what that was?

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My father had an importation business. Import export business where we imported fabrics. We imported livestock from Iceland, stock fish. We imported carpets, window blinds from New York, and many other countries. So my father was involved, we were involved in international business and also clearing and forwarding of dues and goods. So my father was one the people who, if he import something from here to Nigeria my father is one of those who will help you to be able to clear from the wharf. So we involved in that business for many years before we came to the United States.

Interviewer: Okay, alright, so, I'm just going to do a quick summary real quick of everything we've covered so far. You were born and grew up in Nigeria. You were the oldest of the children. Your family, your entire family is very family oriented. Even the extended family, it's all one large family. You are, you talked about your grandfather and they brought in his extra wives but it was to help with the farming. And then you did graduate high school. And you went directly into your father's family business. And then after that you decided you wanted to go to college. You started at Zairm in Nigeria, but-

ABU, it might have been you call it- ABU.

Okay. And then when it was closed, after your first year there you decided to pursue education in the United States.

Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright. Can you tell me, where did you come to first when you came to the United States?

12:20

When I applied in the United States actually, a family friend of ours who was in Pittsburgh at the time came to Nigeria for a vacation. So when he came to Nigeria for a vacation at the time he was a student at the University of Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh. So this friend then and I talked about my, the possibility of my coming to the United States. So he took all my credentials and then started an application process for me in Pittsburgh. So the first school I went to was Robert Morris University. It's now University Robert Morris, Robert Morris University. So I studied a business degree because of my background in business. So I went to business school to study business administration and I ended up having a minor in transportation there as well. So I completed that degree, 2005. And after that I decided to...people were wondering whether I would go back to Nigeria at that time. So I said no. I want to read a little bit more.

So then at that time things had started to, because I finished in 1985, at that time things had started to go a little bit... the economy had started to change in Nigeria. So I said well, if the economy is changing maybe they may require people with more than a bachelor's degree. So at that time also my father was involved in a (?) [13:52] by the federal government of Nigeria. So

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my father and the federal government had a big problem because of the business I told you about. Because they wanted some money to be given for some things bribe and others. My father refused so there was a big problem. So my father ended up fighting that lawsuit. And during that lawsuit almost lost a lot of money. Then after I finished my undergraduate here, by at that time my father started to have some monetary problems. Not that- not that he cannot be able to pay my tuition, but I believe I did have a good GPA at the time. That would be a good thing that would be able to get a scholarship. So I told him not to worry about it that I would continue to apply to Universities and see who accepted me to do a master's degree. So I applied in to many schools in University of Pennsylvania. I even applied at Harvard at the time to see if I could be able to get into their school of MBA to do a business administration. The school gave me admission but no money. (coughs) Excuse me. So I decided then that I am going to continue to search for an admission. But fortunately for me, one of my friends was doing a master, a Ph.D. in education, science education. So he was telling me a program, beside where he was doing his Ph.D. He said our program is called counsel, education counseling- educational counseling. He said well maybe if I apply there maybe they might give you the help, who knows? So he said why not try, because I think they have some money. So I applied there. When I applied there and they saw my credential coming from business so they gave me admission. They said, "Well let's try him." So they gave me admission to do the masters for educational counseling. Then, also that came with a fellowship, a master's fellowship. Then I entered a program in '86. It came with a fellowship. I finished that program. It's fifty two credits but I finished it in one year. So when I finished that program I think a lot of people in the program, they were very impressed with how I performed in the program given the fact that my undergraduate degree was not from sociology or psychology, which is a prerequisite for getting to some of these programs in counseling and also social work. So at the completion of the master's program they then asked if I would continue to do a doctoral work in the area of counseling and I said no, because I didn't like the area. I felt that I would not be able to deal with some of the issues or problems that I studied at that particular time. So I decided to move into an area called administration and policy studies. So that area deals with international education, comparative education, education and culture and politics of education. So that is an area that then I applied to receive a Ph.D., and when I applied I they gave me a doctoral fellowship to do a Ph.D. So I ended up getting two fellowships from the University of Pittsburgh, where I did the masters and also did a Ph.D. And the Ph.D I completed it in 1992.

Interviewer: Okay. And I missed this when I first started but what year did you come through the United States?

I came to the United States in 1982.

Interviewer: Alright, can you tell me a little bit about your college experiences in the United States and how it was different from your year at the college in Nigeria?

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I think for me the first year I experienced in terms of going to college basically there is something other than the examination system. In Nigeria most of the exams that we took at the time are essay exams. Multiple choice are things that you rarely see. That is there, but not so rampant as it is in the United States. So when I came to the United States and started my undergraduate education, I had difficulty, first of all trying to cope with those multiple choice tests because I'm not familiar with them. So I had to also go and do a little bit of training on how to take multiple-choice tests. So I went to a resource room, they call it there, at Robin Morris. So there people will put you through studies of trainings with different kinds of tests and how to eliminate and select the right ones and the ones that are similar in answer and the other ones so... I did all that, education and also writing as well. When I was in Nigeria there are things that we spell very differently from the way Americans spell it. Something like colour, flavour, those things that end with o-u-r. So when I started writing here initially I had a lot of problems with some of those professors because they were expecting me to master that American way of doing those types of writing at that time. Until when I confronted it with one of the faculty members I said to them, "What do you want me to do with this exam?" So he also sat me down, then he went through some of the things that are wrong in the things that I was doing at the time. And then once we did that I think I was fine. Then I started to do the rest of my coursework and I think I did very well during the undergraduate days. And that led to the pursuing the masters as well as the Ph.D.

20:08

Interviewer: Okay. Are there any other college experiences that stand out for you other than the multiple choice difference and the little bit of spelling differences with the language.

Well also at the time, you know in the eighties, when people talk about the issue of maybe race and how that affects an individual and also color, as well for me. The schools have been, I went to the all white institutions. So sometimes I might find myself to be the only black in that very class. So sometimes there are people who are still hung up with those racial issues at the time. When once you come to a class, the thinking would be, "Why are you here?" And the official expression that, "I don't need to be told about it." So and some of the reactions at that time also led to that, until they get to know you, then everything becomes okay. So other than those little experiences I think I was quite fine, you know, through the things that I went, because once people get to know me they warm up a little bit. Knowing fully whether I'm not from here. When they see my name, actually, everybody knows, because a lot of people have difficulty pronouncing my name. And that was why everybody ended up calling me Chuk, because that is easier, easiest way of pronouncing my name because one of my professors said to me, "How do you want to be called. You want me to call you Chuk, let's go with that one." So from there, all the way to the time I finished my Ph.- time, even all until today, a lot of people call me Chuk because it's easier. The other one is too long for them to- you did a very good job of the first time of doing it, of pronouncing it. Yeah. Thank you.

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Interviewer: Alright. So far you came to the United States in 1982. When you first came you went to Robert Morris, for correct?

Yes.

Interviewer: And you got your bachelor's in business, correct.

Yes.

Interviewer: And then your family had asked if you were coming back to Nigeria at that point and you decided not to based on the economy and you wanted to further your education. So you went to the University of Pittsburgh where you got a fellowship, and you received your masters. And then you also received your Ph.D there, correct.

Yes.

Interviewer: And that was in 1992 when you finished.

Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Where did you go then from the University of Pittsburgh?

Well at the conclusion of my studies in 1992, at that time the economy was so bad. So I stayed in Pittsburgh from April of 1992 until the fall, almost December of 1992- 1992. So while I was there I wasn't doing very much of anything, because I was trying to rest because I'd been in school almost ten years consecutively. So after resting then I then decided that most of my friends who are in the Washington D.C. area asked me to move down to Baltimore. So I moved down to Baltimore. So that is where I spent the next seven years. In Baltimore, where I worked with the state of Maryland first. Then I got an adjunct position, an adjunct faculty position at Coppin State College, C-o-p-p-i-n, Coppin State College. It's now university, Coppin University. And I taught also at Morgan State University. Morgan State in that time as adjunct. So until... I left Maryland. I moved into Maryland in 1993 and left in 2000. So I spent seven years there. So I taught at both of those schools as adjunct while also I was working for the state of Maryland.

Interviewer: Okay. What was it like teaching at those schools?

It was quite interesting because the students at least, even though the two schools are also predominantly black we have a lot of white students also in the school. So it was quite interesting for me, because that was one of the experiences that I had right after finishing the doctoral program. When you finish a doctoral program sometimes, a lot of people expect you to perform miracles. But it's not that way until when you start to have a lot of experiences in terms of teaching and other things. Even though I have done a graduate teaching fellowship, also when I was a doctoral student. But then now being given a class of your own, it's quite challenging, making that transition between graduate fellowship, graduate teaching assistant to now having your own classroom. So it was quite challenging, and from those earlier experiences I learned a

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lot of things that it's now helping me up to today to be able to arrange or rearrange the way in which I approach things. Because as I finish teaching each class I sit back and assess exactly what it is that happened in that class. How can I make it better and also for myself and also for the students. Because that is the ultimate thing that a professor should do or a teacher should do in a classroom. After you finish teaching a lesson you have to assess yourself and also assess both the students and also the course you taught and see how well you're doing in those classes and make adjustments as you continue to teach those areas.

26:01

Interviewer: Did it make, did you have to adjust differently at each school for the classes that you were teaching or was it, you would make adjustments at one area and you would carry it on towards the other, at the other school you were working at.

In the two schools I think were basically the same. The only difference is in at Coppin State, what I did I taught the masters and sometimes undergraduates. So when you're teaching masters students and also when you're teaching undergraduate students the requirements for me, it's extensively different. For the undergraduate students I would go to a great extent in depth in discussing certain things because I know if they have a good background at the undergraduate level, they would be able to move on to the masters level. And every student I meet at the undergraduate level for me, I am looking at applicants and an aspiring master's degree candidate. So sometimes students think I am crazy by assuming that, "Well why do you have to measure masters?" Because that is the logical thing for me. That once you finish an undergraduate degree of education you have to move to the masters level. So at the Morgan State I was teaching doctoral level students there. So it's a little bit different there, at the doctoral level because there they are getting people, at least based on our assessment that I am aware at least know why they are there and others. So there, a lot of the readings come from- even though I do prepare extensively to have some of the discussions that we had during our doctoral class, but a lot of the presentations, I know that things come from students and you do a lot of analysis and also guiding them to things that would help them to be able to write their dissertations.

Interviewer: Okay. What areas did you teach at these schools? Was it....did you teach the business or was it?

No.

What is it that you were teaching?

When once you finish the Ph.D., people expect you to teach at the, the area you specialize in your doctoral work.

Interviewer: Okay.

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So my specialization in my doctoral program is education. So all my teaching centered around educational courses. Even I taught educational counseling in the master's program. With all the things I was doing was something that relates to my doctoral preparation.

Interviewer: Where...Sorry...Was there anything else, like any other experiences that you had while you were there. You were there for seven years, so was there anything else that you did while you were there?

Other than doing research. I am going to the libraries and doing other things that a normal faculty member usually do. Advising students. If I am given the chance to do so, because as an adjunct faculty member you are only limited to what you can do. And that is, especially so... Because of that then I try as much as possible to advise informally to students. On how those who wants to move forward to the Ph.D. or those who are currently thinking about moving from undergraduate to the masters program. So that was all I did and when I was eventually recruited here to come to Michigan in 2000.

Interviewer: Alright, so, go back over this section real quick. In 1993 you moved to Maryland because you had a lot of friends in the Washington D.C. area where you were an adjunct at Coppin State College and Morgan State University, correct?

Hmmhm.

Interviewer: And at Coppin you were...

Coppin. C-o-p-p-i-n.

Interviewer: Coppin. Sorry.

No problem. I just want to sure- [30:00]

Interviewer: You were an undergrad teacher?

I teach both. Undergrad and grad at Coppin.

Interviewer: Okay. Okay. And then at Morgan you taught at the doctorate level. Okay. And you were teaching for people going into education. You taught education. And you also spent time doing research there. And you would also help informally by advising your students on where they wanted to go.

Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And then in 2000 you moved here, correct?

Yes.

Interviewer: Will you tell me about that please.

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Well in 2000 as I was at Coppin State I applied for a position here in Michigan and was granted an interview. I did a phone interview with them. With the people in the school of education. I think the woman who was the chair then, Dr. McClanahan brought me here. So I was invited for an interview. Then after an interview and a review of my credentials they decided that they would like to bring me onboard. At the time, also in 2000, they were looking for a director of the African American male programs. We had male program we have here in the college. The name is Griot program, Griot. So I, when I accepted, after my interview with the faculty at that time. Then I came on board and when I accepted the position the vice president at that time. Dr. Novak, John Novak, he was the one that actually spoke to me and told me that I was to be the director of the Griot program. So since then, 2000 until present I have been the director of the Griot program as well as a faculty member in education. So I've taught also undergraduate courses as well as master's courses. Extensively I deal with a lot of graduate students here in Marygrove. Because the Griot program is a master's program that enables those candidates to be able to receive a certification also to work in the public schools as well receive your Master of Education degree.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience since you've come to Marygrove?

32:21

Well coming to Marygrove also is...I don't know, in terms of faculty or in terms of students or both?

Interviewer: Both.

Okay. In terms of students, when I came to Marygrove it was quite an eye opener for me probably because of the type of expectations that I used to have for my students in Maryland. In Maryland in the two schools. So when I came to Marygrove I think I really had to struggle. Because some of the students that I met at the time were not quite up to the level that I would like at the time. So then, after, at least in my first semester, second semester, I then had to adjust to the level of the students because that is one of the things that we have to do. As a teacher you have to scan the environment of where you are. And once you scan that environment then you then adjust your teaching and also your requirements according to the people you are now teaching. I'm no more teaching doctoral students, I'm only teaching master students and therefore I have to tone down some of the things that I am requiring of students. Even though, when I came here at that time I see how the aspiration that all these masters students will also be in the doctoral program. So a lot of- I entered into a problem because a lot of the students in most of my evaluations at that particular time, the recommendation was that they are not in the doctoral program. So, because that was what my focus is to make sure that whatever they are doing at the particular time will prepare them for the next level. But I didn't- I was making an error or so- it's not an error. Even though the students don't see the benefit of it, but I do believe

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that when you are prepared more than the level where you are, you tend to function effectively well. And that that was my assumption at that time. So I entered into some earlier problems with a lot of students who went through Marygrove in 2000 when I came here, all the way into maybe 2005-2006. I'm still struggling with some of the students because of the type of requirements that I place on them. But I think when was it those students complete their masters degree with their certification and attempt to get into the doctoral program. Some of them will come back to thank me, to say thank you very much for the help because without you maybe we wouldn't have been able to do this. And so far we have been able to graduate at least among the first set of people that I met here in 2000, one of them is teaching at Madonna University. He has a Ph.D. now in reading. Everyday we have a conversation he say he never knew that I was trying to help them when I was here. So there are others who are currently, in the doctoral program, so from time to time we talk about some of the things that is going on. Both in their programs and also the dissertation that they're writing. So I have been at least helpful. Even though in the short run a lot of them looked at it as a very bad thing that I was. But at the long run some of them are coming back to thank me for what I did for them.

35:28

Interviewer: That must be rewarding.

Yes those are the joy of teaching because sometimes we don't necessarily get monetary values based on some of those things. But when once you see students you've assisted, taught, and all the rest of them and they are now becoming almost what you are. So it makes one to be very happy. Today we are constantly talking. When he run into problem he will call me say, "Hey, here is my problem. What do you say about this?" I say, "Well here is how you will do it." That's my job. But in the area of faculty I think it's still the same thing in the area of faculty. Most faculty members are very self-centered, if you will. What I mean by self-centered is that everybody has their own discipline. So sometimes you focus on your discipline. If you are not in my discipline maybe I might not talk to you or maybe you will talk through committee meetings. So those types of interactions are there. A faculty member in a university sometimes can be very lonely. You have to sometimes reach out to other peoples and maybe others might reach out to you also. So my experience here at Marygrove has been also the same way. That I have been able to associate myself with so many- someone like Dena. When she heard that I am from Nigeria she invited me over to her house. I went over to the son's graduation. I met the family and we are there. So for her, she travels extensively to many, many countries. So for, how you say, natural things so when she saw me she was quite sharp so we have been trying, even myself, I am trying to bring her to my house because my wife joined me in 2005, 2005. So since then I have been so busy with so many things. In 2005 I was also the chairman of the education department. I was appointed as chair of the education department, which I did for three years in 2005. Since that time I was really swamped with work. Being the director of the Griot program. Being chair of education and also teaching classes was quite extensive so I have not gotten myself out of it because my brain is still very busy with so many things. So that is why I have

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been trying to see how I will be able to get Dena actually to come and visit us. Now we've moved towards her area. So that is some of my experience with faculty has been almost the same everywhere I've been. Most people are very receptive. There are people who also doesn't care. Which is American way. We love that, no problem. This is a free country. Anybody can act however they want to act. But for me I think I have a very positive experience in terms of meeting with faculty. And even still, and even though I had those earlier experience in terms of requirements...but I think of students, well once you get to know them I think you will really enjoy them because a lot of them are coming with a lot of challenges and problems that needed assistance. So I don't make any rules in terms of who comes in. If you stop me on the way and say, "Well, how about this?" I will help if I have the opportunity to do so. And if I don't, if I can't help I will tell you very frankly, "I cannot help with this." And you might find someone else who might be waiting to help you. So that has been also the experience. Even with most faculty members who went through our program. Dr. McClanahan- she is a fantastic woman who helped me to even adjust, when I came here. And there are other people who also- there is somebody like Dena and many other individual faculty members who have been very, very helpful. When something happened they are very quick to say, "Are you okay? Did everything go well?" I said, "Everything went well." So that's, I've had a very positive experience with our faculty here.

Interviewer: You said in the beginning you had to reach out a little bit. Could you tell me a little bit how you reached out to the other faculty members?

Well I think, what I mean by reaching out. Because sometimes when- Americans don't know you very well. Sometimes it is very difficult also for you to say hi. What I mean by reaching out is that you have to say hi. You introduce yourself to people and say, "My name is this, I am from so and so place," and all this so you will create a conversation from there. But if you continue to go your isolated way nobody will talk to you. People will say, "Oh I see you." And they will just wave...and everybody. So that is the way. So a lot of people came to me and said, "Oh I heard you are from Nigeria. Can you tell us about Nigeria?" So we talk, we start a conversation from there. So that is what I mean by reaching out. So most people reached out to me. Asking me a series of questions and I also reached out to them by also introducing myself to them.

40:11

Interviewer: Okay. You also mentioned in there you were busy with everything in 2005, but your wife also came in 2005.

Yeah. Ummm, I have been in the United States most many years now. So when I decided that I want to get married. At that time my father was living. That was in, around 1999, when I went to Nigeria for the first time after being here for many years. So I told my parents. They were actually bugging me to get married. Actually, because I said, "I'm still going to school, I don't have a job," and many other things. But ultimately when I decided I want to get married they

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said, “Well do you want to marry overseas or do you want to marry in Nigeria? So, well I can marry either way because I lived half of my life in the United States at the time. I don’t care. So when my family said, “Okay, come back home first. When you come back home then we talk from there. So when I went home to Nigeria in 1999, that time my father was sick a little bit. Then, when he saw me he was okay and all the rest of it. So we started talking about marriage. So, it so happened my sisters had a lot of friends and all the rest of them. So, ultimately they, my sisters, identified one of her friends. So I saw her in passing but I wasn’t interested and I just, after all that I came back to the United States and continued on with what I’m doing because I had a girlfriend here at the time. So anyway, when was the pressure is coming from my family. “Oh, you have to now. Okay do something, or do that, or do that.” So I said, “Okay.” Then I went back home again in 2000. Around December, around this time. So when I went back in December then we started to talk about this issue very seriously. Then they brought in some other women. And eventually I said, “Well, okay this is the one I’m interested in.” So I then made a choice. Really I made a choice I came back to the United States. So when I came back to the United States in 2001 I came back, after the break. So when I came back in 2001, I came back around April. That was in 2001. I came back April, 2001. Then when I came back in August or September, my father died in 2001. So that put everything on hold. Everything. So my father eventually- since I went home I saw him in August then came back in mid-August, my father died in September. I came back to teach. So I had to now, first of all finish my teaching. Because being the first son I have to be there when my father would be buried. Sometimes people because of circumstance might not be able to have that opportunity to go, but I had the chance to go because at that time I had my permanent residence authorization so I could go in and out of the country and come back. So when my father died in 2001, that was around September, so my father was not- did not get buried til’ around December because I was here teaching and I told them I have to finish teaching before I will come back to Nigeria again. So I stayed from September up to in November. Around November, it was around this time I went to Nigeria. My father was buried December 8 in 2001. 2001, that’s when my father was buried, December 8th. Then after that burial then the woman identified that I was going to go out with at the time then, my mother said even though my father is no more living that we have to move on with the relationship. Because at that time I wondered, I said, “Oh my god. What is this all whole sign all about?” So I decided to move on with the relationship. So on December 15th, 14th, 2001, then I went and did what we call the traditional wine, presentation of the wine to the family. Of my mother, that’s... Now we go, when they were paid dowry. You know, paid dowry. And I have to paid dowry to the parents of my wife, and telling them that we are now going to marry their daughter. So we did that and after doing that then we did our traditional wedding on the fourteenth of December in 2001 and then did the actual, did the wedding in also December 15th. We did two weddings. December and umm, December was 14th and December 15th. So after the wedding then, now the question is how is she going to come back to the United States. So she couldn’t come back with me. So she decided to go and finish her law degree. So she went to law school in Nigeria and completed her law school. Then in 2002, when I went to Nigeria for

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the ceremony she got pregnant. Then in 2003 she was with the pregnancy had our baby in 2004, February- March 28th. So she had the baby in 2004. Then after that I now had filed a paper for her to join me in 2004. Then immigration approved that paper and they were able to join me in 2005. So she had another baby in September of 2005. When she had the baby in 2005 then I brought them over in Thanksgiving period 2005. So they joined me. So we went together since then, 2005. So we had another baby in June 2007 on the 25th. We have three kids now.

46:28

Interviewer: Alright. I'm gonna go, I'm gonna come back to Detroit for a little bit. Can you tell me about the area of Detroit and how it's changed, since you've been here for nine years now?

Yeah. Well formerly I lived in downtown Detroit in Senator Levin's, one of the homes on Jefferson and Rivard, there. So I lived there for almost eight years because I wasn't quite sure that I wanted to stay in Detroit so I rented an apartment there. And one of my colleagues here, Dr. Vivian Johnson, actually she was the one who helped me to look at that apartment. When I came here to tell her faculty how helpful they are, actually. So admittedly, I accepted the position. She took it upon herself, other words, she was a mentor to me. Really helping me to look at things that I need, searching for. Even furnitures and others when I came to Michigan. So eventually I decided that I'm going to live there because in the place, in that place there was at least some security in downtown. So there are guards there who guard the apartment complex so because I'm always on the road. When I'm not at Marygrove, I'm in Nigeria, or somewhere else in the United States. So I decided to rent a place that would be secured for me and my things. So I ended up renting in downtown and lived there from 2000, until 2000 and um...until this year, 2009 March. When we decided that after spending so many years in an apartment complex and not knowing what I'm going to do, my wife said, "Enough is enough. Let's try to buy a home." So...but while I was in downtown I think...who was the mayor that Kwame took over from, it's not Archer is it Archer that Kwame-? Whoever the mayor was when Kwame was there, before Kwame came in. I think they did a very good job in trying to do some things. But not until Kwame took over that they started to do these neighborhood initiatives and other revitalization. So from that time Kwame took over, downtown actually changed. So, when I came into downtown in 2000 I was told at that time that there was what they called white flight, or urban flight. And a lot of whites who used to live in downtown Detroit now saw that a lot of black people are moving into the downtown Detroit then they move to the suburbs. So when Kwame came in, Kwame was trying to bring some of those people back by revitalizing some areas and also now, apartment complexes in downtown Detroit started to go up. Because they have to raise it up to make sure they get the type of people they want in living in Detroit. In Detroit downtown. So that was some of the changes that I saw. And there has been a lot of development in downtown Detroit that led to more of people now coming back to- at least living in the city of Detroit. So those are some of the changes that I saw. That we have now moved into a different area. We have moved away from Detroit. So we are now living in the suburbs.

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Interviewer: Okay. What is... is there a big difference between living downtown and living in a suburb?

Well, umm, all that and, you know, living in downtown for me I lived in an apartment [50:00] complex. So there, of course people do things for you. And now, moving in the suburbs it means I have to do everything now that I purchased the house. So I have to make arrangements of so many things that I'm not very familiar with when they will happen, because when once there is snow, for example, by the time I come out of the building the snow is cleared. I will not have any experience of it until when I drive into the major roads. But now I have a lot of experience about it because I have to take care of it myself. So those are the type of experience that I also do-driving distance, the distance between Marygrove to the suburb and also from downtown. From downtown to here is about ten, fifteen minutes I'm here. From there it takes me about twenty, twenty five minutes to get here, depending on the route. If there is an accident it might take more than that.

50:50

Interviewer: Alright. Let's just go over everything that we've talked about today. You were born in Nigeria in 1960, correct?

Mmhmm.

Interviewer: Okay. You were the oldest in the family. You would help out your younger brothers and sisters as they would take courses after you took them. After high school you went into the family business, and then you went to college in Nigeria. After which, when they closed it you came to the United States. And that was in 1982, correct?

Hmmhmm.

Interviewer: Okay. And you went to Robert Morris and got your bachelor's degree, and then you went on and got your master's and your Ph.D at the University of Pittsburgh. And you finished there in '92. And then after that you moved to the Baltimore area where you were an adjunct at Coppin State and Morgan State. And you participated in research projects there as well as offering advice to your students, advising your students from where to go. And then you applied to Marygrove when they flew you out here. And then you became a teacher in the Master's program. You were the director of the African American male program, correct?

Mmmhm. The Griot program...got that spelling, Griot. The coordinator of it.

Interviewer: Okay. Then you, you had to adjust when you first came here because you were so used to teaching at the doctorate level so you had to adjust a little bit and help the, where the students, they would feel more comfortable in the classes. You had to, the faculty has been warm.

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You know they, most of them have been able to help you. You mentioned Dr. Scher invited you over for dinner to her son's graduation was it?

Yes.

And you mentioned one of the other faculty members helped you with your apartment.

Dr. Johnson, Vivian Johnson.

Interviewer: And you've helped, let's see, you've been...when you first moved here you were living in downtown Detroit. And then just recently in the last year you've moved to one of the suburbs of Detroit. Then you...it was in 1999. Sorry, I'm backtracking a little bit. It was in 1999 when you first went back to visit Nigeria and your parents brought up the idea of marriage. And then you finally, you finished that. You decided to go through with it after your father's burial in 2001. And you married your wife in December, and she was able to move here in 2005. And you guys now have three children and... I think, that's good. Everything correct, did I miss anything important?

Yes. That's it.

Okay. Alright, well thank you very much for the interview Dr. Okezie.

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you for coming. You know sometimes they say, very [54:29] (recording cuts off)

54:29 END