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Otibu, Johnson

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Dr. Jane Kani Edward (JKE): Good Morning Everybody, my name is Dr. Jane Kani Edward, Director of the African Immigration Project for the Bronx African History Project. Today is Wednesday, October 15, 2008. With me here is Dr. Mark Naison, the principal investigator for the Bronx African American History Project, and we have Dr. Bernard Hayford, a consultant for the African Immigration research. And we are conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Johnson—

Johnson Otibu—

(JO): Otibu, O-t-i-b-u.

JKE: Owner of the Sahara African Caribbean Supermarket in the Bronx. So the interview might last maybe one to one and a half hour depending on what you are going to tell us. And before we start asking the questions, if you could please spell your name so we will get it right when we transcribe the interview.

JO: Yes, Ok. My full name is Johnson Obeng, O-B-E-N-G, Otibu, O-T-I-B-U. I am a native of Ghana. I came into this country on December 28, 1978, at the age of 23. Back home, I had a good job, a reputable job—back home, if you worked for a social security bank and the rest, you are considered one of the biggies. [JKE Laughs]. But I listened to the voice of America for so many times, I thought it was a better place for me than the one that I had. I don't know if that was a mistake I made in my life—[Mark Naison (MN), JKE and JO laugh]—how it was a blessing, I have no idea. But to make a long story short, December 28, I came into this country. My initial place of residency was in

Harlem, 150th Street. I stayed there for about three years until— after work one day in the night, because—after I got in here before I realized the land of milk and honey isn't all that—[Laughter]—all that, so—I came here as a visitor—they gave me six months—I walk in here with those legs—when I was leaving the dollar rate in my country was 1 is to 2. And when you are leaving you go to the Bank of Ghana, they give you 800 dollars for your pocket. In those days, that was a lot of money. [Laughs] I had my own little money, plus what the bank gave me, and I walk in here with about \$5,500 dollars. But before my sixth months elapsed, I realized I was like practically bankrupt. So I had no choice but to start looking for employment. Things were not as bad as it is nowadays, so you could easily go to 14th street to the employment agency, and they [phone rings] will look, they will assist you—David, I am not here, please, take all the phones [phone rings]—they will assist you with some kind of—any menial job that you can afford. What I realized was that not only were we facing discrimination from the white community and the Spanish community, but from our own black Americans, too. Because, in essence, I came to find out psychologically that we expose some of their failures in the sense that for the twenty, almost thirty years that I have been here, I have never been on welfare before, I have never been on unemployment. Whatever it takes, I will struggle to make ends meet. In 1982, I was out of work for a while. One of the neighbors that I was living in the same apartment building in Harlem approached me and talked about problems that he's having and the rest with the rent and everything and so—like we do back home—back home, societies like—we live in communalism. Your brother's son is your son, and so I gave a loan of \$800 to help this brother out with the view he will pay me later. Little

did I know, [inaudible], because when I gave him the loan and it's time for him to pay the loan, he didn't. It turned into an argument. The next day, I went to where I was working—well of course, that's a black American. The next day, I went to work. I worked at a place on 63rd street; it's a bigger shop. I worked at a bakery down there. Immigration came in with my name and everything, with the cops on me, and took me away. Because the only way this guy can go away with my money was to have me deported.

MN: Oh my God!

JO: At that time, I was out of status; I didn't have any Green Card. I went in there, stayed there for about three days. I mean, didn't know anybody. When they caught me I had one of my bankbooks on me with a savings of about 3,500 in there. So the law—the judge—when we went to court, the judge set the bail bond at 3,000 dollars. But then there were some Mexicans in the same jailhouse. We all went to court the same day. And I always tell my friends this story and they all laugh. The Mexicans, they gave them a bond of \$500 dollars. They look at the judge and say, “Your Honor, are you crazy? [BH Laughs] You crazy?”—this is how the Spanish woman talked—“You crazy? From my country, I paid \$50. \$50 I paid to come here. You want \$500? Take me home. I come back tomorrow.” [Laughter] He told the judge that—that gave me the confidence. So I stood up, I told the judge, “Look. I came here with money, I lost it. I came here with the intent to study, and I realized it's not all that [inaudible] and that I couldn't get any help. So I don't understand why you are requesting \$500 from the Mexican and \$3,000 from me. Is it because I'm black?” And the Judge [inaudible], and he came back and he said, “Well,

it's not because you're black—we look into your bank book and you have enough money to pay.” I said, “Look. I also have reason to be here. And I have to go home and prepare my case with my lawyer to come in.” So they put the cuffs on me, brought me to 42nd and 5th Avenue to withdraw 1,000 dollars out of the bank. So I took 1,000 dollars out and pay as a bond, and I left at least \$2,000 and change in my account. They gave me three months to pay my dues and bank. Now those three months— the only way out is for me to get married to American citizen. Somebody introduced somebody to me in Ohio. I drove from here, straight to a rural village called Sandusky—

JKE: In Ohio?

BH: In Ohio?

JO: In Ohio. I went over there for like a contractual marriage. I pay 1,000 dollars—we got hooked up to do the papers. Two months into that, I thought I had my whole life ahead of me, finished. And then she went and filed for an annulment, and I don't have any money. It reached a point that I couldn't even get transportation to come back to New York. And I met this black American guy, Buster, who was a fisherman. I tag with him; we go on the Erie Lake to fish. Then I come and stand on the roadside to sell the fish. I look at my position back home when a driver would come and pick me in the morning. [Laughter] You know?

BH: Now you sell the fish on the street.

JO: But that was a gratifying experience. I did fishing for about another three weeks. I got a little money, because I had three months to come here. So I got on Greyhound for

almost 16 hours to come to New York, back again, because I have to go to court. And I came in here—I was on my way going downtown to look for a job and I met one professor. I can't remember this guy's name. And he was a professor at Manhattan Community College. I met him in the train. And he said, "Where are you from?" and I said, "I'm from Ghana." "Where are you going?" "Why is always when all of the Africans come here it's money, money, money, you don't want to go to school?" So I told him my story. And he said, "Listen. The best way out for you to buy time is for you to go and register because fees paid are non-refundable. So you register, and I give you a lawyer to go to court with you." So the only money that I had I went to BMCC and registered as a student. We went to court and the lawyer told the judge that I came in here with money, I paid for school fees for almost one year, and it's non-refundable, and would she give me time to finish the semester and go. The judge bought it and it bought me another three months to finish the semester. Lucky for me—I mean, I know I'm a poor guy. I know where I came from, so—I was working full time as security guard at CVS on 57th street and taking 18 credits at the same time. Because the first semester, I got like A in chains. They put me on the Dean's list. That's why I say, what that guy did was one of the best things that happened to me because I have come to realize that if you are from Africa, and you come to New York—if the person that you visiting lives in the Bronx, that's where you're going to end up—in the Bronx. [BH Laughs.] If he lives in Brooklyn, that is where you are going to end up. If you come and a person is a taxi driver that's all he knows. You end up being a taxi driver. Right now, most of the young ladies coming in, they are all doing homecare. The person who is doing home care—that is all

they know. They have to be—so, if this guy had not reported me, maybe I would have been a taxi driver because the guy I was staying with was a taxi driver. As a matter of fact, he was teaching me the ropes before I got arrested. And when this thing happened to me, that is what helped me to get into college. I went to BMCC and my second year, a Jewish home right here, on Kingsbridge and Westley[?]
—normally they would go to the schools to recruit a few of the students. All this time I didn't have a Green Card, but when they came in and saw my grades, the Dean of Students recommended me. And they saw my grades and everything, they hired me to come and work at their accounting department as a [inaudible] staff accountant without any documentation. And part of the deal was, every course that I took, as long as I get between A and a C minus, to [inaudible], they pay for it. That's how God works. In mysterious ways. So this is how I end up getting a college degree. Because of what happened to me in the Bronx—in Manhattan—When I came out, I decided not to stay there anymore for fear that immigration—those days, they used to go home. They would come to your house, knock on your door—even if you say you are married—they will come in there, go to your bathroom, and check to see if the lady actually lives in the house because they know if the lady lives in the house, in the morning, normally they work [inaudible] and that kind of stuff before you go to work—they do all that. I went through all that. But thank God it wasn't all that bad. I finished BMCC; I transferred to Baruch to do another two years for my BBA. And after that, I said, "No, I'm going to give back to the African community. So I signed up with the Board of Education and was teaching at Dodge Vocational School.

MN: Oh!

JKE: When was that?

JO: Let me see. I left Dodge in 1989-90.

MN: Is that near Fordham road?

JO: Yes.

MN: That was the school we passed where they were walking in front of my car. Right by the Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

JO: Yes. I taught there for about two years and here again talking about disdain from my own people. One of the female teachers over there—she were pregnant—and a black American kid—this guy's been to school, he doesn't stay in the classroom. Everybody's practically afraid of him. So why is this teacher a very busy teacher—the kid was showing pornographic materials in the classroom. The female teacher talk about it and he held the pregnant woman, hit the head against the glass, the glass broke. I lost my cool over there. I give it to him so bad. I beat the hell out of him. [Laughter.] So the cops came in, the mother want to bring charges against me, an arrest—about a month later, they wrote to me to come to Schermerhorn, the Board of Education—I went over there with some old men with their spectacles like this, sitting over there. They were charging me for corporal punishment. I said “My friend, when was the last time you went to the classroom? Do you know what goes on in that classroom?” Do you see the way he hit? And you send, what we call substitute teachers to go and help. About 65% of New York

City teachers don't live here in the city. They live in Jersey, Rockland County and the rest. And what goes on is that whenever it snows, they would call in sick, they would send a substitute teacher. Sometimes you go to the Spanish class and there's an African teaching the Spanish class. He doesn't speak one syllable of Spanish, and yet he's there. So what do you think the kids will do? They get violent and this argument and all this junk [inaudible]. "Look," I said, "Here, take it. I quit." And I left. They wrote to me, and I said, "Look. I've been there before." And all this time, I didn't have a Green Card until 1990. [Crosstalk, laughing.] I graduated from school—if I show you my marriage certificate you will laugh. I married five times. [MN Laughs]. Five times—

JKE: White, African women—

JO: Black Americans. They will charge you, you marry one of them. They call me for the interview. When I got over there before the lawyer told me she called the house, and the lady is in a drug rehab.

BH: Oh my goodness!

JO: [Laughs] She is in a drug rehab. I have to [Inaudible] with immigration, because I'll be deported. The lawyer told me, "Get out, very fast, on the tenth floor." [inaudible] [laughter] from there.

So finally I landed a job with—before I went over there, one thing I did at Manhattan Community College—when I went there, there was no African Students Union over there. And I formed one over there. I went to Baruch, they didn't have one either. So I formed one over there and I told them, "I don't understand why you are

teaching all kinds of languages here as electives and there is no African language here.”

So we started fighting and we got Hausa to be added to group [inaudible]. I left and it was about that time—I think 1991—that I got a Green Card. So I applied to New York State Tax Department and I was hired, as a tax compliance field agent. I did fifteen years with them, and what I realized was that—even within the state government, despite all the noise that they make about equality and the rest—I never reached a certain level—you never move. So after fifteen years, I realized— not until out of the mercy of the union, they negotiate and you got a 4% raise—that was all you got. There was no movement. Because permission is based on exams. You take the exam, you pass, they put you on a list, and then they will call you for an interview. You might be working in Queens, but they tell you to go an interview in Syracuse, knowing very well that you wouldn’t like the area. [BH laughs.] Ok, you go to an interview—“well, sorry, you’re qualified, but we took somebody else.” Well that went on for fifteen years so finally, September 2004, I told them, “Look. Enough is enough.” I went to Perth Amboy in New Jersey, and I saw somebody with an African store—[inaudible name of store]—I think it was a husband and wife, and the husband died from a car accident—Nigerian Lady—who was selling the shop for 47 thousand. And at that time, I’m still thinking, I had a little money [inaudible.] So, I left, I took the [inaudible] company and I bought the store. I ran over there for about three months, [inaudible], so I ended up here. I moved all of my equipment and everything down here. And I set up this thing—and I moved down here in February 2004. And I have been here since.

MN: Now did you know that this would be a good place to have this business when you bought this store?

JO: No. What I did was—I did a little survey. And I realized after talking to the people and reading the African magazine that I'd go out. I realized that this vicinity—from 176, Park Avenue to 180 on Third Avenue, that small block—they have 8 Ghanaian churches, one Nigerian, and one library.

BH: Eight Ghanaian churches?

MN: In this area?

JO: In this area. Right opposite my store, there is two here, [inaudible], this one, and there is a Ghana—United Ghana Methodist Church.

BH: The Ghanaian churches.

JO: Yes, Ghanaian churches. That's three right here.

MN: So the United Method up there is now a Ghanaian church?

JO: Yes.

MN: Because I knew the minister there fifteen years ago, and now it's Ghanaian church.

JO: No, what they did was this: they have bought their own property on their property on Pelham Parkway that they are fixing up. So they—

BH: Worship here.

JO: Yes, they worship here—the Jamaicans, the owners are Jamaicans—

MN: Ok, so it's a Jamaican church and there's a Ghanaian worship there.

JO: Yes. They worship in the morning and then we worship in the evening.

MN: Ok.

BH: Who is the minister there?

JO: Right now it's Reverend [E. Victor] Accquaah-Harrison.

BH: Oh, [inaudible.]

JO: Yes. Accquaah-Harrison. [Inaudible] Very good, nice fellow, he comes in all the time.

MN: So you did a little research and said, "This would be a good spot."

JO: Yes.

MN: Now had you ever lived in the Bronx?

JO: When that happened to me I moved to the Bronx—

JKE: From Harlem to the Bronx?

JO: Yes, yes. I moved from Harlem to the Bronx. I think I've been in the Bronx since 1984.

MN: And where did you move when you moved from Harlem? To what street?

JO: First—I live on 2075 Morris Avenue. It was a rooming apartment. That's where I rented.

MN: And what was the cross street there?

JO: Anthony—no. Morris and Echo Place.

MN: And Echo, Ok. So you're right near Bronx Lebanon.

JO: Yes. And over there—I will tell you I had a little experience. It was a rooming apartment—we shared the kitchen and everything. So, I had been working and sending some money home. One of my brothers got a visa, and he came here. And this private apartment belonged to a minister. A [inaudible] Baptist minister. My brother arrived KLM around 3:30; I pick him up, we got home around 7. By 8 o'clock he came and knock on the door. He said, "This is a rooming apartment. No visitors allowed. I'd rather he go." I said, "Look. He just came from my country, at least—" He said, "Well I have one room that is vacant. [crosstalk] Why don't you rent it to him?" I said, "Look, I'm not renting any room. I am not going anywhere." Could you believe that minister pulled a gun? He pulled a gun!

BH: He pulled a gun!

JO: And he said, "If you don't get your [inaudible] here, I'm going to kill him. You want to call the cops? Call the cops. We'll see who will be deported." Because he knew I don't have a green card. So those days—

MN: Was he an African?

JO: African American.

MN: African American Baptist minister?

JO: Yes. I didn't have a television in my house so we pick our bag, myself and my brother—that day, we sat on the D train. From 8 o'clock, we'd go from the Bronx, to Brighton Beach, Bronx, Brighton Beach, Bronx, Brighton Beach, until the next day. So we got off to go look for another place to rent. [Laughs] Sometimes when I say this I get very emotional—we've been through a lot. But thank God, it all turns out, it all turns out good. So at least—I leave the area. So when I started looking for a place, I did a little, you know, work, and I realized where the churches are. And I settled up here. The people who are—like this business here now—are the churches. They buy a lot from me. They patronize a lot. They patronize a lot.

MN: So they buy in bulk, the big boxes of—

JO: Yams. Yes. [Laughter] They buy a lot. Sometimes even if one person can not afford to buy a box, they would team up—two or three people and they would share. So as I am speaking, I have about 1,100 boxes in the warehouse in Hunts Point. Another container of about 1,100 coming around November 15—

MN: Now where did they ship the yams—where is the entry port for—?

JO: Port Elizabeth.

MN: New Jersey?

JO: New Jersey, yes.

MN: So then you bring it to store in Hunts Point?

JO: Yes.

MN: And how long have they been shipping yams from Ghana to the United States?

JO: Oh—ever since, like I said, thanks to Clinton again. We used to bring yams in here and they would take it from the airport and destroy it. But after Clinton signed the ECOWAS initiative to assist the African Nations—I think they did a survey, and for every African country they accepted a few produce that you can bring here. The only saddest part is that those leaders over there—

JKE: You mean in Africa?

JO: Yes. They don't have long-term planning.

BH: Foresight.

JO: Yes. They don't have the foresight. The only reason why most of this yam is [inaudible] is that when you bring the yam in here, you don't have an HACCP facility where they will go for quality control, fumigate the yam and everything, and make sure pesticides are in good control any germs are—and so, whenever you bring in here, sometimes they keep they keep it one and a half, two weeks at the port. And then you have to pay—there is a company—on—Jamaican—Jamaican [inaudible] for Agro services. You have to pay for the whole yam to be transported down there, for them to fumigate it, before you can sell it.

JKE: So you pay for that—

JO: Yes. I pay that one too. Ok, so—to open HACCP facility—this is about three million dollars. They give you all the equipment and everything. They look the amount of contents. They look at the level of spoilage. And [inaudible] talk about it. [Inaudible.] Just yesterday I was online with a company—Niro, GEA Niro—in Denmark. They specialize in freeze drying. And I look at the percentage of yam spoilage and even the freight from Ghana down here, I pay \$7,900 per container.

BH: 7,900—

JO: —dollars for every container of yam that I bring in here so—

JKE: So how long does it take from Ghana to the port in New Jersey?

JO: Six weeks. About six weeks. So now, working I'm working with these people, they give me a price for four million dollars—I'm trying to see if I can get a grant or the United Nations foundation—somebody because if we can dry freeze the yams—when you dry freeze the yam, you back home, it won't lose its quality, the taste—and not only yams. You can do that for berries—strawberries, vegetables, everything. It doesn't lose the texture, the taste, the color, everything. And I can put five container loads of yam into one. And the shelf span—the yam could stay on the shelf for up to three years.

BH: Three years?

JO: Three years. All you have to do is put hot water on, put the yam in, and it comes back to its natural self. So now, they've quoted me a price for 4 million. The 27th, I'm leaving here to go to Copenhagen to—[inaudible comment from JKE]—Yes, to talk to them and

see because if the United Nations spends all this money treating Africa when—oh I left my notes in my car—when Nigeria alone produces over 20 million tons of yam a year. And yet the yam's span comes from August, September, October, November, December, and January. After February you go to planting season, everybody's starving, there's no yam. Until the next August when they start harvesting. So if I could get financing to put such a project together, we can dry freeze the yam for three years.

BH: Here in this country?

JO: Here in this country or in Ghana. So I intend to set up the equipment in Ghana because like this [inaudible] here, I bought three of them—the one that I have here—I bought three of them from Wisconsin and I ship it to Ghana just this July. Because I spoke to a company in Israel. All they do fish farm. Now, I did a survey in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Ivory Coast, all of them import their fish from outside. They import Tilapia, they import Crocker fish—they even import Turkey parts. When you set up this fish farm, the Israelis will come and set it up for you—that one is big money, it's about 30 million—but they did it in Malaysia, and they did it in Taiwan. And most of the Tilapia we are selling here comes from Taiwan. Ok? It comes from Taiwan. Nowadays when you go to the coast of—there's no fresh fish anymore. It's frozen fish from China and Taiwan. Before you go home tonight, take a box and leave it outside for the ice to go out of it. The next day you leave it soaking in the sun and put it over there—it's like fresh fish all over. And all the systems are there, but the African leaders, all they know is take a loan to build roads because that's where you get the bribe. If you control the road that doesn't lead to any place, you don't even collect tolls—

MN: Like Sarah Palin. The road to nowhere. [Laughter]

JO: —so this is what goes on. So this is my lifetime experience and to end it: After starting this business here, I have come to realize, most of the Africans are the same thing. So what we do through the various organizations like the Ashanti group, or the Akings[?]
—every now and then, we'll go there and talk to them. And are responsible why the children are like that. The education back home, they still believe in corporal punishment. So if you mess up, the teachers will discipline you. Here, it's different. One of my nieces—she was born here—it reached a point, nobody could talk to her. She joined this guy from school, she wasn't studying—I called my—I said “Listen, we're going on vacation to Ghana. I pick up [inaudible name]. Let's go and have a little fun.” I took her to my country, and when I got there, I seize her passport, I seize her return ticket. And I said, “You are going to finish high school before you come back.” Now she work for the post office and, “Oh, Uncle, thank you.”

JKE: In Ghana?

JO: Yes.

MN: Oh, so it straightened her out!

JO: She was a high school dropout, she was a junkie—and you know, sometimes the peer pressure—I took her back to Ghana and I registered her in a boarding school and I said—
[Crosstalk] I said, “You don't want to go, you can walk on the ground back to the U.S.”
[Laughter] I took her passport and for five years—now, she thanks me a lot because they gang that she was in—the five friends that she used to hang out with, when she came

back, three of them had been shot dead, they were living on 125th and LaSalle place in Harlem. Now the remaining two, one got five children, the other have two—she just got her first baby. She work at the post office right here on 149th street. So the discipline that we were brought up with, if the children allow themselves, they do it. Normally when you see the children going good in the school, they are children who had a foundation from back home. Over here—the children born over here, and it is those who are going bad. They are not graduating. They are becoming worse than even the average child that was born and bred here. Why? Because their parents don't have the time. It's not them. They have to pay their rent. I've known families who come here once a month. They will shop, cook, and leave their food for their children—they go to live-in.

JKE: Why is that?

JO: They stay with the old folks and— [Crosstalk] Ok, so you don't know what goes on in your house.

JKE: [Inaudible] They stay there the whole week?

JO: Yes. Yes.

MN: Now where is this?

[Crosstalk]

MN: They're live-in care workers for older people. These are the people that need 24 hour care, and a lot of these are African women.

JO: African women, yes. Because if you come in, and you don't have any papers—by the time you get a green card, you've already spent five or six years. And right now, contractual marriage—they have—they come here to my store, they talk to me. The men go around. Right now to marry somebody—if you marry somebody and they already have one two children in Africa you want to bring, the going rate is 14,000 dollars.

BH: 14,000 dollars!

JO: So by the time you finish working, taking care of an old lady, and paying the \$14,000, your life is already over. Finished. This is what the average African immigrant goes through. Sometimes they come to my store here on Sundays and [inaudible]. I have known people who come to my store and cry. “Why you weeping?” “My old lady is so sick, she's in the hospital, I'm praying to God to save this woman.” Even though she's 90 years old, I'm fasting for the woman, because if she dies, that's my end.

MN: Oh my.

[Buzzing sound on tape, Remaining Interview Extremely Choppy]

JO: For the next two, three weeks [inaudible], until the agency can find you something else, you have children to take care of, you have rent to pay. [inaudible] The boy— [inaudible]. This boy graduated top of class at Franklin College. Top notch second year student. He took the SAT, got a very good scholarship. [Inaudible]. We didn't have scholarship to come here and study. When he came in here one week after [inaudible]. Now [inaudible]. So [inaudible] five year [inaudible]. [Inaudible for several sentences.]

So most of us left the gold mine to come into dust. We're talking about the American Dream—well for my part, I will say it's good. It helps you to get exposure, it helps you to learn. Because the amount of work that we do in this country. I work sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. The only time I take off is when I'm going to Africa to [inaudible]—I'm going to Denmark right now, I'm going for one week. That is the only vacation I have, Ok? But the amount of hours that we put in—when you go to Africa—Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Gambia, Senegal—just for somebody to sign just one signature for the country to move—if you don't [inaudible]. One letter originates from the typing pool. First, there's—what do you call—a secretary who takes the notes, send it to [inaudible], send it to and proof reader. After it goes to the first press pass secretary, second press pass secretary, executive [inaudible]. By the time it gets to you, it's like four or five days. [Cell Phone Rings, Otibu answers]. Good morning. [Inaudible.] Me de ase. [Thank you in Twi] Goodbye.

So the amount of time and the amount of work that we do here—if we can have that same discipline, and take the same discipline back to Africa, there would be no need for us to come here to be slaves. Right now, they took the slave [inaudible] from our legs, and they've put it on our [inaudible]. Look at the so-called- [inaudible]. The processing fee right now is about 1,500 dollars. They will let you pay all this money, which is non-refundable, before they tell your education is not good. So you don't qualify. In other words, they are attracting the best educated to come and use them here too. That's all I'm saying. [inaudible].

JKE: And sometimes they don't use them. [Inaudible]

JO: Exactly. Exactly.

BH: [inaudible]

JO: That's what my point is. The high-level manpower is gradually [inaudible] because of this [inaudible]. People come here with high hopes. As I am speaking right now, governments in Africa right now pay German interns to go over there to practice. And they pay them in dollars. And yet, you have the state of New York alone [inaudible]. I counted two hundred and thirty one qualified Ghanaian doctors. 2-3-1. [Inaudible] I said, "I counted two hundred and thirty one qualified Ghanaians." And yet, none of them want to go back home. Why? Because of the bureaucracy. You go over there, you have your ideas [inaudible]. But thank God, you can work hard if you know what you are doing. At the end of the day—[laughs.] So, yes.

[Buzzing Stops]

JO: So we left the gold mine to come here. We have now discovered the gold land. We have not started prospecting it. But with God's help—or, like I'm saying, with this equipment I'm talking about—it is very easy in this country to get financing if you can put a good business plan together. And this one thing I will always cherish this country for. They listen to your ideas, and they think—

MN: You were able to get financing from banks?

JO: This business here—by the time I finished college, I had already filed for Chapter 11—bankruptcy—why? Because we work here. We pay taxes here. When anything

happens in Bosnia and all of those places, the U.S. Government will take that money to go and help. Africa is the last place that this country helps. And therefore, the average African immigrant—citizen or non-citizen—you are your families social security, their pension and their everything. And because of the communalistic nature of our society, if you have a great grandmother who is 91 years old, you are feeding the entire chain. You are the one feeding the entire chain.

BH: [Inaudible]

JO: Exactly. If you don't send the money home, somebody is dying. So when I started this business, I tried to apply for a loan. The bankruptcy that I filed for in 1990, it came up. So I said, Ok, I'll resign, I'll took my fair compensation, and I'll sell my business. Now I've got a business that is thriving and they see my bank statement—everyone won't give me a loan but they want to give me a credit card. Say me? [Inaudible] This business here—if it should burn today—it is between me and my insurance company. I don't owe any entity back. Not one cent. And that's how I've tried to keep it. I try not to take loans, use a credit cards, because look what happened to me.

MN: Look what happened to the whole country!

JO: So that is how we came in and the only sad part is, when you come in here—going back becomes so hard. If you don't take time—this year alone, I have sent almost nine people home. One of them a young boy, 21 years old, we buried just last week. Junk food. You can afford it, your mother's not there to cook for you, so you feed on Chinese and hamburgers and the rest. They're dying in numbers.

BH: The youth in the area—

JO: Yes. They're dying in numbers. And then you came in here with the view to make life better for yourself, just realize your body is sent back home. Now, they call our homes back there—funeral homes—I have three mansions in Ghana. And the longest I have stayed in one of them is this last vacation when I took my daughters. We left in July and we came back in August. So at least, we spent two months in Ghana. The only time you go in there is when it's time for them to send your body in. Because back home, funerals—they have them in the house. They bring your body in there and the next day [inaudible]. I have three mansions over there, nobody live in it.

BH: In Accra or [inaudible]—

JO: I have one in [inaudible], two in Accra. I rented it to some people who ruined it, I said, "Forget it." [inaudible].

JKE: What about in the Bronx, do you own your own house?

JO: No, no, no. That's one thing. Initially I wanted to buy a house. Then I look at my age, and I said look. November 8 is coming up and I'll be 53 years old. If I lock myself with a thirty year mortgage, what am I doing to myself? At my age I should not be working like this. You know. So instead, I'll take the money to set up business over here and then in Africa. So that it will help me to move back. Like this [inaudible] room, when I started building, if you go through—the goat meat, the Tilapia—I get the goat meat from Austria.

BH: You get the goat meat from Australia?

JO: Yes. I get my goat meet from Australia. That's what I sell here and I supply the African stores. Wholesale. I get the Crocker fish, the red snapper; I get some from Argentina; I get some from Suriname; I get some from Belize. I have all these contacts. Right now, we just—David, David, David—bring me the corned beef on the shelf over there—from—the John Bull corned beef. Right now, I get signed up with Sosio[?], it's a company in Argentina. When the British people went to the colonies, they went with two brands of corned beef. Exeter and John Bull. They were selling—they were selling the John Bull to the colonies from the Fortlands [?], and John Bull, they supply that to—what do you call—the military bases. So somebody

[END OF SIDE ONE, BEGIN SIDE TWO]¹

got smart and went [inaudible] in the West Indies. So somebody registered this patent and he's the only one at Makola Market in New Jersey—he's the only one who can bring this in here. If you bring it, you're going to court. He supplies here, Canada and Africa. So this year, I did the research and I found out and I registered this patent for John Bull. This is my own corned beef.

MN: That's your corned beef?

¹ Note the overlap between side one and side two on the tape.

JO: That's my corned beef, and this is his. I mean, this is a British flag so he can't claim [inaudible] [laughter].

MN: John Bull corned beef!

JO: The character—John Bull—is a British symbol. [MN Laughs] It's a British thing. I registered, I put everything through—I fought and fought and fought—thank God last Friday the USDA finally gave me approval.

MN: So this is your own brand!

JO: Yes. So now I have to look for the money to send to Socio [?] in Argentina, for them to do it so I can be my own boss—if you want some, you come to me.

[Expressions of excitement]

MN: I'm going to buy a couple of cans of this and put it in my office! [Laughter]

JO: No, this is just the samples they brought to me.

MN: Oh, these are samples—

JO: Yes, I show it to the stores—I just got their approval.

MN: Congratulations!

JO: So this is, like I said, we've just landed on the gold land but we haven't—but as far as buying a house and the rest, I will give you myself, actually. My daughter will be out of college in the next two or three years. I have only two girls. I have given myself—

maybe in the next two or three years, I want to move back. I would like to relocate. After the boys, [Construction in the background, inaudible] I'll go and come every two or three months, just to conduct business—because I realize there is no money in Africa [inaudible], that's what's happening. There is no money in Africa. If you go on Delta Airlines and you see the amount of white Americans, West Indians going to Africa right now—and luckily Ghana just discovered millions of barrels of oil. They are going to start drilling in March of next year—once that happens, things are going to turn around. So if you get something, go in right now— [inaudible]—you can afford to sell at a cheaper rate, and the rest, so—What I intended to do is set up business over there, use the same contacts that I have here to ship the stuff down there, and at the same time, try to see if I can utilize the domestic resources instead of importing everything. Like the dry freezing of the yams like we were talking. The goat, for example, I went to Australia—they have a [inaudible] over there. One goat is about that huge. [MN Laughs] Not the small small one that we have over here. If you could get a big land and put some on there, get your own this thing going, eventually we would not have to import meat from outside to feed your own nation. But these people, they are thinking—it's so shallow. How could a nation like Ghana be dependant on foreign donors as part of their budget? It makes no sense. It makes no sense. So let us pray this year that good luck will be on our side for us to get the first black world president—[laughter]—

MN: Wait, where's my hat! What did I do with my hat?

JO: Oh, Obama hat! [Laughter] So that is the experience we've had, but right now, I think the most important things for all the Africans to do is to start looking back home if

we want to break away from enslavement. Because capitalism feeds on something. And if you look at this mortgage melt down, the only place that is breathing freely is Africa. Because there are no mortgages in Africa. Either you have the money to build a house or you don't build it at all. There's nothing like mortgages in Africa. So whatever meltdown you're having, enjoy it. We don't have that problem. [Laughter]. So we hope things will change, but I'll be honest with you. They've made it so hard. Every other group of immigrants, immigrate down here, they get things easy in order to get their documentation. But in order for the African to get documentation—I have to marry six times!

BH: Six times!

JO: Six marriages before—send women to my house—even here, look. When I say that they tried to make things hard—when I moved down here, this neighborhood was not developed yet. That is why Africans built their churches here, because rent was cheaper. The place was run down. When Bloomberg came to power, he started turning the area around. As soon as he started turning the area around, the landlord—the original one died. The new guy who rented the place, I'm paying \$3,500 [?] a year, he thinks it's not enough. I was going to take the entire top—the top had been sitting there for two years, they're not doing anything over there. I said, "Look. The Africans don't have a community ballroom." I wanted to rent it. I went to heaven and hell, but they would not give it to me. Why? Because the Catholic church across the street, uses the room for that same purpose. And when African guys have a wedding and they go and rent there—it's \$2,800 a night.

JKE: A night!

MN: For the Catholic church?

JO: Yes. So these guys—[inaudible]—I did everything, and they wouldn't give it to me until a Spanish guy came in, he wants to use it for an indoor baseball park.

MN: Like a batting cage?

JO: Yes. They are giving it to them, they are fixing it at the moment. Because why? He wants me out so he could get a bigger, higher rent [crosstalk] Yes, I signed a five-year lease. 2010 the lease will expire. They way it's going—actually, he wants me out. Can you believe, last month, I was in Africa—the Africans and the poor people in this area, because of them, I took the food stamp machine. They come here, they buy here a lot. They use my own African lady from Ghana, my home country—came over here to the boy spoke in the language, and told them she can't even have soap to wash her babies and their [inaudible]. And you use food stamp to buy soap and toilet roll. The boy did her a favor, allow her to buy 16 dollars worth of detergents and toilet roll and napkins and the rest, [inaudible]. She said, can you share twenty dollars on your machine and give me the cash? The boy did it, without knowing that she had been paid, there was an investigator sitting outside.

MN: Oh my goodness! So that's those people!

BH: A setup!

MN: There were these people coming in—

JO: Entrapment! Yes. Use my own Ghanaian lady to do that, and the next day, they send me a fine for \$54,000. I went to court last Wednesday, and they told me that since it is my first offense, they will reduce—[inaudible]—it to \$21,600.

JKE: What! My goodness!

JO: I tell them, “Look. I will sell the business and go to my country. [inaudible] My takes are paid.” I blasted them and I walked out. About three days later, they sent me an [inaudible]. They said since I’m not willing to pay the fine, my privileges to accept the EBT in New York were taken away. I said, “come for it.” They dismantle everything—and it cost me a lot. Yesterday, when the guy came in here, he didn’t know. [inaudible]. He spent \$455. He decide to pay, he pull the card out. I said, “Read the sign, I lost it. I can’t take it.” This is one of the indirect ways they squeeze you to get you out. So the African always has the short end of the stick. They utilize the existing facilities to get rid of him. If you go to immigration, they do different interviews. Different interviews. After five marriages—the sixth marriage, they send me to what is called Stokes interview. In the Stokes interview, they separate you. They put the woman in one room, they put the man in one room. And they ask you all of these foolish questions, including, what was your wife’s underpants? [Phone Rings] Last night, when you went to bed, who slept in the front, who slept—[Phone rings again]. Very demeaning, [crosstalk], foolish, unnecessary things, trying to establish that you live together. They will ask you for your keys. When you go home, how many locks are they? Which of these keys open the top? They ask all of these foolish questions, “Where is your kitchen, on the right?” And then,

after you finish, they will bring your wife in the room, and ask your wife the same questions.

JKE: So they want to know if—

JO: So if your wife told them that last night, “my husband slept in a beige pajamas,” and the husband said, “no, I went in the blue pajamas.” [Crosstalk] They put you in deportation, you got to end that marriage, go look for somebody else—you have to file all of these petitions—it’s, it’s just crazy. Thank God, God made the African man such that we hardly jump bridges. We don’t commit suicide that easy. [Laughter].

BH: Resilient!

JO: So no matter what you do, give me your best shot. I’ve taken the worst. That’s why this [inaudible] will forever be cherished. Thank you!

MN: Thank you! This was amazing. This was inspiring. It was really—I think we may want to play some of this to classes—

[END OF INTERVIEW]