

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

SHIRLEY MOTAUNG

*Interviewed by: Daniel F. Whitman
Interview Date: February, 18, 2010
Copyright ADST 2014*

[Note: This interview was not edited by Ms. Motaung]

Q: Shirley, I am so happy you came to talk about yourself and the development of your career. As you know, one reason we are talking is because you had a Fulbright grant early in this century. In this complicated society where everybody has a different origin and a different background, please tell us something about your childhood, the community where you grew up and your early education.

MOTAUNG: My childhood is complicated but is not complicated. I grew up, both my parents, my mother and my father are still alive but they are not educated. My mom was a domestic worker.

Q: In Pretoria?

MOTAUNG: By that time I grew up in Kagiso and then I matriculated in Soweto at Middlelands High School at that time being raised by parents who were not educated.

Q: Not formally educated.

MOTAUNG: Yes, but not knowing the different careers of what one can follow in terms of that. So I matriculated at Middlelands High School but due to the struggle, what we went through by the time, it was sometimes kind of difficult to get into the university because of finances.

Q: When? In the '70s, '80s?

MOTAUNG: In the '80s.

Q: About when was the matriculation?

MOTAUNG: '87.

Q: So going from the X to the university was a problem because of the unstable atmosphere at the universities.

MOTAUNG: Yes, based also on the financial implication because by that time we didn't have a lot of financial means like now where students can get student loans. In our time, it was kind of difficult to get all those kind of things.

Q: If you could have chosen in '87, which university would you have attended?

MOTAUNG: I would love to go to X University but based on the financial implication, I couldn't go there.

Q: Was there a backup plan?

MOTAUNG: I had a backup plan. My second university was to go to either X by that time which has the medical university of South Africa. If that didn't work, the last plan was to go to the technikon. We used to call them technikons where now they are called the UOTs, the University of Technology.

Q: Which are sort of comparable to community colleges in the U.S., I think.

MOTAUNG: Kind of, yes.

Q: I know there is no exact equivalent but it is tertiary education, not the complete university bachelor's degree.

MOTAUNG: No. It was more of a diploma. Based on the financial implication, I went to Technikon Pretoria. Technikon Pretoria was predominantly white. I was the first black person to be accepted in that technikon.

Q: The first black person in the Pretoria Technikon.

MOTAUNG: To study national diploma in medical technology.

Q: Why Pretoria?

MOTAUNG: The reason why I went to Pretoria Technikon at that time is because we used to have all the riots with other technikons, but my reasons for that were because I was looking at the finances and I didn't want to go to a technikon where they would strike. I would rather go and study and finish.

Q: This was very bold of you. You became the first non-white at this place.

MOTAUNG: Yes. It was not easy.

Q: Tell us about that.

MOTAUNG: It was not easy because they used Afrikaans and that is one of the languages that has caused us all this uproar and so forth in South Africa.

Q: Which I think was the last straw in what brought on the Soweto riots, the use of Afrikaans.

MOTAUNG: One of them, yes.

Q: You spoke Afrikaans. You didn't like speaking it, but you did.

MOTAUNG: I had no option but I ended up going to an Afrikaans university, a technikon.

Q: You had to be in a different city.

MOTAUNG: Yes, it was a different background. I am not Afrikaans speaking, I am not English speaking. Here I am with an Afrikaans doing science in Afrikaans.

Q: So you had a basis for Afrikaans but you were not comfortable in the language.

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: That is already a great challenge. What about people's acceptance of you, socially?

MOTAUNG: It was difficult because of the white lecturers, it was all white people, if you don't understand, you are on your own so you have to translate Afrikaans to English so that you can understand. So imagine.

Q: Simultaneously in your brain. Not easy.

MOTAUNG: Yes. Imagine translating a medical term from Afrikaans to English so that it can make sense to you. It was not easy. By this time the lecturers, they couldn't compromise. They couldn't care less, if I can put it in that way. You were on your own.

Q: Were you the only person in the class who was not an Afrikaans native speaker?

MOTAUNG: By that time we were only two Africans who couldn't speak Afrikaans.

Q: They did not care. It was for you to make the accommodations, not for them.

MOTAUNG: Our policy for the technical schools by that time was Afrikaans so you couldn't really argue at all.

Q: So you were learning the subject matter in the language at the same time.

MOTAUNG: Yes and clinical matters, clinical subjects in Afrikaans which is not easy.

Q: And the subject was?

MOTAUNG: At that time I did medical microbiology, chemical pathology, hematology, cell pathology, clinical chemistry, anatomy and physiology, biological chemistry, calculation and statistics, physical science.

Q: That's an incredibly rigorous course. That's like medical school.

MOTAUNG: It is a medical school.

Q: But it is a medical school that does not issue the M.D.

MOTAUNG: It doesn't. It channels you through a pathology route so you can be a researcher or work in the lab, test samples.

Q: This is normally a course of two, three years?

MOTAUNG: It's a three year course.

Q: Were you able to do it in three years? You had to learn the language.

MOTAUNG: I did mine in three and a half.

Q: Congratulations. These are very technical areas. What was it coming out of Midlands High School that drew you into this area?

MOTAUNG: I love science, I love research. It was one of the most important things and I channeled my career by that time wanting to see myself as a research professor.

Q: This you found out because of options given to you at the secondary level? How did you know that you loved science?

MOTAUNG: I knew that I loved science based on the fact that I liked to do experiments and I liked to see new things happening. When I joined the technikon, I actually didn't know what medical technology was if I can tell you the truth. I was in the dark so to be honest the name, this was a grand name; medical technology.

Q: Didn't you have to have some courses, some prerequisites?

MOTAUNG: I had science courses. The other thing that was kind of exciting was coming from the high school going there was seeing yourself wearing a white coat, not realizing that everybody can wear a white coat, even people who work as the butcher, they wear a white coat.

Q: A certain social status.

MOTAUNG: Absolutely.

Q: You were in Pretoria which at the time was a very, very conservative city.

MOTAUNG: A really, really, really conservative city.

Q: How did you fit in? You were different.

MOTAUNG: It was difficult because one of the things that really traumatized me was one white guy who was working in the street in Pretoria and shot black people during that time. That was a trauma on its own because by that time, when the incident happened, I was sitting on the balcony where there was just a great room where we used to go and sit there.

Q: This was an incident or a series of incidents?

MOTAUNG: It was just an incident with this white guy and at that time during apartheid they said the guy was crazy. He shot only black people at that time in Pretoria.

Q: So that was part of the culture of Pretoria?

MOTAUNG: Yes. So anything was possible in Pretoria at that time, so that was one of the things that I will never forget, where you in are class and you hear there was this guy who was walking around and shooting people in town.

Q: There was either a law or a rule or a custom that black Africans were not supposed to be in Pretoria after dark.

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: Where did you live?

MOTAUNG: I used to stay outside Pretoria because we weren't allowed to get into the dormitory.

Q: So you went in and out every day?

MOTAUNG: Yes. They told us straight we will accept you but you are not going to stay with our white people.

Q: They said that?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: Historically very important; 1987, you said?

MOTAUNG: Yes, this is '87.

Q: I am not trying to pick on people's sins and their weaknesses but how did they deliver this message? Was it a very harsh message; were they quite official about it?

MOTAUNG: They were official about it because we knew it was the policy and it was also written there in Afrikaans because I could read Afrikaans at that time. They could accept you but forget about staying in the hostel or in the dormitory.

Q: Somebody said this to you? It was in the document?

MOTAUNG: It was in the document. It was documented.

Q: So did you live in one of the areas outside of the city?

MOTAUNG: Yes, that's why they called it the ghetto.

Q: How did you come into town?

MOTAUNG: Using the train.

Q: And you had to get up very early, spend the day here and be back before a certain hour, right?

MOTAUNG: Yes, and it was difficult because we had classes that finished at five, six so it was just difficult.

Q: You had to go to Pretoria Central Station?

MOTAUNG: Yes, catch the train there.

Q: Which is not a very good neighborhood?

MOTAUNG: Yes. I guess by that time because you're kind of not even thinking of safety as long as you can see yourself on the train.

Q: So you did three and a half years of that. I salute you. This normally would have led to a career as a lab technician.

MOTAUNG: As a lab technologist.

Q: And what happened in fact?

MOTAUNG: When I completed my studies there I was also fortunate. I joined the private laboratory. Now they call it Lancet Laboratory. It was one of the most prestigious labs in the southern hemisphere by that time. I was the first black student to join the lab in Johannesburg.

By that time I moved from Pretoria.

What I liked about the lab environment when I arrived there was that Johannesburg white people were not as rigid as the Pretoria white people. I was actually welcomed. I ended feeling like part of the group, irrespective of whether I was black and we ended up getting along with all the white students who were there.

Q: Students? Was this an apprenticeship of some sort prior to employment?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: An internship?

MOTAUNG: Yes. It was after one and a half years by that time. It was one and a half years in the technikon and one and a half internship.

Q: So you in fact moved to Johannesburg after a year and a half?

MOTAUNG: Yes. Even the head of the laboratory was much better. I actually felt at home [in Johannesburg] if I have to compare the two together, Pretoria and Johannesburg.

Q: Let's dwell just a minute on what's happened to Pretoria in the last 15 years. It has changed somewhat. Has it changed at all?

MOTAUNG: It is a different Pretoria now, compared to my Pretoria that I know.

Q: How is it different?

MOTAUNG: Things are completely different at this present moment. The funny part is the same technikon I started is the same technikon I am working at and now they have changed the name. It is now Tshwane.

The other thing is I was also the first black person to be appointed as a lecturer.

Q: You are a real pioneer. When were you appointed?

MOTAUNG: I was appointed at the university in 1998.

Q: Before it was Tshwane, it was still Pretoria.

MOTAUNG: By that time it was Technikon Pretoria, yes. Before the merge because the TUT was just five years old.

Q: And Pretoria became Tshwane about two or three years ago?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: Was this the plan, to be the first to do this and the first to do that and the other?

MOTAUNG: It was just kind of a coincidence. I always look at it everything is like the first; the first to study there as a student, the first to work there. Again, the first female Fulbrighter at the same university. So sometimes I don't know how I can explain this. I must be the first. And the first again, the first in South Africa to earn the degree in tissue regeneration of articular cartilage.

Q: The first what?

MOTAUNG: The first scientist with this experience. There is no one in South Africa who is working in this field.

Q: But this is a field in other countries. That's why you needed to go out.

MOTAUNG: Yes, there was no one who was working with this. That was one of the things that was . . .

Q: Tissue regeneration of articular cartilage, which I see there is a connection to arthritis.

MOTAUNG: Yes. Not only people with arthritis can benefit from this. Even sports injuries can benefit because the minute you are playing any kind of sports and you've got a knee injury, it becomes OE, osteoarthritis at the end.

Q: When did you know you were going to study tissue regeneration of articular cartilage?

MOTAUNG: Actually, this was not my first plan. My first was to study tissue regeneration of skin. The reason for that is because we don't have a skin bank in South Africa. If you got burned and you've got an 80 degree burn, you can die because we don't have any other alternative. So that was one of my main motivations.

Q: So burns were a concern to you.

MOTAUNG: Yes, especially looking at South African people staying in the squatter camp. Come winter, there are lots and lots of cases of burned people from the squatter camp based on the kind of heating devices that they use. So I realized there is a need in our country. As long as we have these people, we are always going to have this problem. That's why I decided, now I want to have my own niche area and my niche area is now going to be skin regeneration. The reason for that is because we don't have a skin bank.

Q: A skin bank has to do with compatibility, blood typing? It's like an organ transplant?

MOTAUNG: Exactly. It's like an organ transplant. So I realized we didn't have one and that is one of the main reasons that had driven me to apply for Fulbright, so that I could go and study that.

Q: Had you seen people suffering from burns in townships?

MOTAUNG: Yes. Actually not even just in the township. There was a case where people were badly burned with chemicals but they can die because they don't have any alternative, medical devices that can help. So that was one of the reasons.

Q: At any point did you want to be a medical doctor?

MOTAUNG: Yes, I wanted to be a medical doctor but based on the finances and knowing my background there was no way that I would be able to do that.

Q: There are other ways to help the world and you found another one.

MOTAUNG: Exactly. Now I am a doctor and I am actually a much better doctor because I am a research doctor.

Q: After your internship at Lancet, then what?

MOTAUNG: After my internship at Lancet I worked there, got qualified, graduated. Then I become senior technologist. Then I joined Government Hospital where I was in charge of the lab at Leratong Hospital in Krugersdorp. Then I worked there for two years. After that, I introduced one thing with hospital interns which they never used to do, which is we had to have a slot from the lab where we can train them in terms of what type of blood sample they must draw for certain tests, what they need, explaining all the lab procedures. After realizing I was kind of doing well in that, that was one of the things that motivated me to apply for lecturer position in the university.

Q: So you assisted at this teaching hospital with interns intending to be medical doctors but you facilitated their work in the lab?

MOTAUNG: Yes. More on the lab side.

Q: In fact, you trained them.

MOTAUNG: Yes, I trained them. After training them then I realized that I can join the university.

Q: You trained medical doctors. Instead of becoming one, you trained them. So we are now at about 1990, something like that?

MOTAUNG: That's when I joined the university in 1998.

Q: In Pretoria? So Pretoria, Johannesburg, Pretoria?

MOTAUNG: Yes and when I arrived in Pretoria in 1998 was the scary part, it was too scary. I was in charge of the lab. They advertised the position for a casual position. I dumped my full time position, HOD, in charge of the lab to come and join the Technikon Pretoria for the part time or casual position. There was very scary. I was brave to do that.

Q: So you gave up a head of the department, full time position to do something part time.

MOTAUNG: To do something that is just a one year contract position.

Q: Not knowing what would happen after one year. Was it the attraction of being a teacher at a university?

MOTAUNG: I was kind of naive and very brave because to be honest, my parents were not happy about this change. When I told them this is just a contract position. After a year the position was going to be terminated. My parents were like, "You are leaving a full time position with being in charge of the lab? Here you are and now you want to go" and blah, blah, blah.

Q: I would have said the same.

MOTAUNG: My senior refused to take my resignation letter. "We cannot afford to lose you. His name was Chris. I am not taking your resignation letter. You can go there and work for a year. As soon as they kick you out you can come back."

It was worrying me. Every time I would call, "What about my resignation letter? I need to finalize everything."

He was a funny man. "You're crazy. You are not going to resign."

Q: This man really valued having you.

MOTAUNG: Yes. I said, "Chris."

He said, "You are not. Even from the head offices they refuse to take your resignation."

I said, "And so what?"

He said, "No, you can go and work there. We won't pay you but at least we will keep your job."

Q: That's remarkable.

MOTAUNG: I really felt bad. I felt bad about this whole thing.

Q: About leaving people who were so loyal to you?

MOTAUNG: Yes and I also want to go and see the other side and I know people always say I was going to X. To me it was not green to say because it was a contract position for a year so I won't call it green. Maybe I'll call it blue.

I said to myself, "I need to do it."

Q: It was the prestige of teaching at a university.

MOTAUNG: Yes. After realizing I did such a good job training all these interns, then I realized that I can do it. Why barricade myself? The sky is the limit.

Q: So leaving with some doubts and yet with some very friendly departure from the hospital. You came to Pretoria to teach where you had been a student.

MOTAUNG: Yes. Then I teach there for a year and then during the, I knew this was a contract and I knew this contract must come to an end. And I was kind of happy about the moving. I made peace with that. Come October when I was supposed to finalize everything, the head of my department by the name of Professor Hugh, what a great man,

Q: Hugh?

MOTAUNG: Yes. He said to me, "We are reviewing the terms of your employment, everything, your probation. We might offer you a full time job."

Q: So they are fighting over you, between Johannesburg and Pretoria?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: Each one needed you more than the other.

MOTAUNG: They gave me a full time job. Then I went back to Chris. "Now I've got a letter. Now I hope you will be happy. I've got a full time job."

Q: Chris was very unhappy.

MOTAUNG: "I am happy now. I have a full time job. Now you guys have to continue with my resignation letter." It was not easy. It was like, sometimes you don't realize how good you are to people until you have to leave and you can see.

Then I came here since 1998 up to 2010 after joining the university, being the first female Fulbrighter. They gave me all the opportunities. I had the support of this university from the DVC level. There are the people I cannot leave behind, who have contributed plus the one and the only Monica Joyi.

Allow me to say, these people have contributed.

First of all:

Errol Tyobeka, a professor

A medical doctor, Prince Nevhatal

Professor Johannes Peter

Professor Danny Detoit

Monica Joyi

Q: Monica Joyi began one phase of her career as an employee at the U.S. Consulate in Cape Town. Later she moved to Pretoria to be working in the Fulbright commission. Is that when you met Monica?

MOTAUNG: I met Monica when I was a student applying for a Fulbright scholarship.

Q: In Pretoria?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: At that time she was working placing Fulbright candidates. You say the first female. What do you mean? The first female

MOTAUNG: There was no one in Tshwane University who was applying.

Q: At your university. You knew Monica socially? How is it you found out about the Fulbright?

MOTAUNG: The Fulbright in our university always hosted all the different kinds of scholarships that one can apply for so Fulbright was one of them. I started working on my application and then I called Monica and explained this is what I am interested in. By that time she said, "No, apply for the Fulbright scholarship. See what we can do." Then I applied for the Fulbright scholarship.

Q: She was part of the commission at that time?

MOTAUNG: She was program coordinator.

Q: Which was, we should explain, an independent entity outside the U.S. embassy with the support of the South African government in the form of an office provided using funds from the U.S. government.

So, you met Monica. Then what?

MOTAUNG: I met Monica, and then I applied for a Fulbright scholarship with her guidance and helping me because I wanted to do this but knowing as a matter of fact that I had no expertise, she really helped me a lot.

Q: This was when?

MOTAUNG: 2006.

Q: The year that you went, 2006. So you were working at the technikon until that time?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: And Monica guided you through the process?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: And made you the first of the first of the first?

MOTAUNG: The first in the university, the first, first, first.

Q: Did you say it was UC Davis?

MOTAUNG: Another thing that is interesting; you choose three universities on the scholarship. My first was University of California, second was Rice University in Texas and third was Loma Linda University in California. Out of the whole group of I don't know how many we were by that time, out of all the students that were there, I was the only person who was able to be placed on my first university that I chose.

Q: Also the first to get the first.

MOTAUNG: Yes. My first was University of California, UC Davis. That was the first and I managed to get there.

How I got to UC Davis was when I attended the bone morphogenetic protein conference in Japan. It was a BMP conference so I was in Japan in 2004.

Q: Did the technikon send you?

MOTAUNG: Yes. They paid and they send me to attend this conference. When I arrived there I met the pioneer of the BMP, Professor Hari Reddi.

Q: From, let me guess, UC Davis?

MOTAUNG: Yes. I went straight to Professor Reddi because by that time, you know how it is as a student and you always read articles you understand if you do research. You read articles and then it happens that you see the real people that wrote those articles.

I went straight to Professor Reddi. I guess because of my personality, being an extrovert. I said, "Professor Reddi, I want to come to your lab."

Professor Reddi says, "But I don't have funds."

I said, "Don't worry about the funds. Professor Reddi, I am going to apply for a Fulbright scholarship. If I apply for a Fulbright scholarship, will you take me in your lab?"

And Reddi says, "Certainly I will do so."

I said, "Thank you."

Q: You are a very convincing person. This is why you are often first.

MOTAUNG: Then when I came back I knew that strongly because I spoke to Professor Reddi and he was prepared to take me.

So when I arrived and started filling all those applications, Reddi was my first because I had already spoken to him and he was prepared.

Q: I am going to make this less exciting for a moment. Bone morphogenetic protein, is this related to the subjects you were studying?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: Is this related to skin?

MOTAUNG: It induces bone formation. If you've got a fracture, an open fracture, they inject that and it fuses the bone together.

Q: We are talking about reconstructing tissue. That's the commonality in your studies?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

That is one of the things that made me divert from skin to cartilage because Professor Reddi is a cartilage man. If I was going to go to Rice, Rice was for skin. They do skin regeneration. So I did my homework.

If I am going to Rice, I am going to work with skin. If I am going to Professor Reddi, it was going to be cartilage. If I am going to Loma Linda, it was going to be dental.

So I kind of did my research.

Q: You had three plans, but you knew which one you wanted.

MOTAUNG: Yes. If I fall to Rice, I will do skin. If I fall to Davis, if I fall to Loma Linda, I will do dental.

Q: And your preference was to go to Davis and work with this famous person because you had read this and here he was in Japan, of all places.

MOTAUNG: Yes, we met in Japan.

I told him, "Listen, I am going to go for this."

He said, "No problem."

I said, "Will you write a motivation or support me?"

He said, "I will do it." And this man don't know me, his first time meeting me in Japan and here is a South African black girl who is just approaching a white professor saying, "Listen, this is what I am going to do."

He always makes an example. I was one of the good students because even now we are still collaborating and meeting together.

Q: You met him very briefly in Japan. What was it that convinced him that you were the one for him? You described yourself as an extrovert. Was this what made it happen?

MOTAUNG: One of the things about me, I just don't take no very easily. If you say no I will still come and try. I am not going to say no and back off. I just don't back off easily.

Q: He understood your determination based on your reading of him and then meeting him? You confronted him, you challenged him?

MOTAUNG: I confronted him. I didn't ask. I said, "Prof, I am going to apply for a Fulbright scholarship. You don't have funding to have me in your lab. I understand but I am going to apply for a Fulbright scholarship. Will you take me if I win the scholarship?"

He said, "Certainly I will."

Q: He didn't know much about you at that point. So something about your communication with him convinced him this was the right thing to do.

MOTAUNG: I think so. I really think so.

Q: And two years later, you were there.

MOTAUNG: And after I applied and I wrote Reddi everything for the Fulbright scholarship, he accepted me.

Q: There are various stages in the Fulbright; first getting the grant and then getting the placement, right?

MOTAUNG: In the first stage you have to go for an interview, regionally. Then from there they must do a short listing comparing with other provinces. And then I went through with that phase and then I went into the second phase with the national and different regions.

Q: Lots of competition.

MOTAUNG: It is a very competitive thing.

Q: What do you think you told the committee that convinced them?

MOTAUNG: I told them the need in South Africa. Why this research is very important to us. The other thing I also told them; I wanted to have more sharing. I have a lot of tissue engineering sharing coming up which I am busy doing right now.

Q: In teaching? We call it the multiplier effect.

MOTAUNG: Exactly. So that was one of the things I also mentioned to them was why this whole thing is necessary.

Because I had everything in place, it was not only a South African problem; it was international. If you look at osteoarthritis, it is not only South Africa. It is international. If you look at the burn, wound, skin, it is not only South Africa. It is international. If you look at periodontal diseases for tooth loss, it is not only South Africa. It is international.

So each and every thing about my proposal was what ever happened, it was not only South Africa, it was also an international thing.

Q: So this would bring prestige to South Africa by bringing it to the forefront of this field, internationally and this was convincing to the committee. Did they give you a hard time?

MOTAUNG: Very because when I arrived that day, I will never forget. That was one of the most stressful interviews I have ever had. It was in June. I was wearing a warm jacket because it was cold in South Africa when I arrived there. One of the professors, he asked me, "Can you take off your jacket?" I looked at the guy and said, "That means you guys are going to fry me" to break the ice and they laughed and I took off my jacket and then I felt free.

Q: So you have a power of persuasion about you, don't you?

MOTAUNG: I don't know. Then they started interviewing me. It was a one hour interview which was not easy. You must be very clear. You cannot ask somebody to help you prepare. You must know exactly what you know.

Q: I have never actually been on a Fulbright selection committee. You certainly didn't have people on the panel who knew the field? They couldn't ask you technical questions, could they?

MOTAUNG: It seems as though one of the people who interviewed me, he flew from America to South Africa. I had one guy who actually could... I don't know. When he asked me questions, he understood.

Q: So you got technical questions as well. You couldn't fake it.

MOTAUNG: Yes. I couldn't lie.

Q: Did you have another moment when you had to say to the technician as you had said to the hospital in Johannesburg, goodbye boys?

MOTAUNG: No, no. I didn't because of all the support. I mentioned all those names.

Q: Were encouraging to do this?

MOTAUNG: Exactly. At some stage the DVC of the university if I am not mistaken, Professor Errol at one stage he was one of the board members or panel, I am not sure about the position but he actually supported my application.

Q: What does this tell us about the changes in South African society from the 1980s to 2004?

MOTAUNG: I would say the right moment at the right time with the change because other people, they look at the things differently. I am going to talk about my experience. I have always said in terms of my career development I was actually fortunate to have the support I have got, based on the people as mentioned in the PC, for instance.

Q: Let me rephrase the question; these same individuals, again I am not trying to look for bad things. But these same individuals twenty years earlier, would it have been possible to have that type of support?

MOTAUNG: During apartheid there was no way. Hell no. There was no way I could have this kind of support.

Q: So the people you dealt with had changed? The institutions, the rules, the whole formula of how society . . . Do you think that the people themselves had gone through some sort of change? You wouldn't know because you didn't know them twenty years previously.

MOTAUNG: I don't know, especially those white guys before, I just knew them after 1994 so I cannot really . . .

Q: So you saw what you saw?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: You did say earlier you found the environment friendlier in Johannesburg than Pretoria but that was ten years before. When you came back at this later time, a different story?

MOTAUNG: It was but still Johannesburg is much better than Pretoria.

Q: But yet here you are in Pretoria.

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: Now, the Fulbright. You went off to study with Professor Reddi.

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: It's more than a dream. It's beyond a dream. Was he surprised when you showed up?

MOTAUNG: He was actually excited, extremely excited because it was a vice versa. Professor Reddi's son who is also studying medical M.D. was also a Fulbright in South Africa.

Q: Was that a coincidence?

MOTAUNG: It was a coincidence because when Monica told me there is one guy by the name of X Reddi in South Africa. Is he not Reddi's son?

I said, "I don't know Reddi's kids."

Q: This is two years later. The son had talked to the father. Maybe the father said I met an interesting South African. You should go there. Did you ever meet the son?

MOTAUNG: No.

Q: You crossed. He went there and you came here.

MOTAUNG: I was leaving. It was a coincidence.

Q: His son left but you arrived?

So you changed your field of study a little bit?

MOTAUNG: It was so cold when I arrived there. To me it was very cold but realizing that when you arrive there, it is not America as you see on TV. I left my comfort. I had a car in South Africa. Now I am going to the States. I don't have a car. Now it is raining, I must catch a cab. Now it is like I am going back to apartheid but a different apartheid. Now I am suffering. I'm cold, it is raining, and it's this.

I will never forget a time when I was waiting for a bus and it was so, it was raining like cats and dogs. I was so wet. I said to myself, "Do I really need to do this? Here I am, from Pretoria, I have a beautiful job, I am OK. Why must I do this?" I was just so cold because of the weather.

Q: But you have always pushed on.

MOTAUNG: So when I arrived in the lab I could see those people, they could read my face. They didn't say anything because I was just so, kind of discouraged. So when I arrived they said, "Are you all right?"

I said, "How could I be all right if I am so wet?"

After that I think that's when they realized who they were dealing with because now you are also in a different culture. Now you arrive there with an accent they say, "Hi, Shirley. Are you all right?"

"How can I be all right if I am so wet?"

Q: What did they do? Give you something dry?

MOTAUNG: They kept quiet because I guess they could see I was kind of pissed off.

Q: You are in the lab and you are soaking wet. You spent the whole day soaking wet?

MOTAUNG: Yes. And the people asking me, are you all right? How you can be all right when you are wet?

Q: They didn't really want to know if you were all right.

MOTAUNG: No. They were trying to help but I could see they were trying to, that didn't work. Then it's fine.

I guess that was one of the reasons I welcomed myself in America. I didn't act as if I was a foreigner. I actually made myself extremely comfortable, more than the American.

Q: You made yourself comfortable in what way?

MOTAUNG: In a way that I didn't allow myself to be a foreigner, to be treated as a foreigner. I allowed myself to be, if you've been in South Africa during apartheid, you have seen them all. You don't rely on anybody to pull you . . .

Q: So these weren't the nicest people in the world? Professor Reddi was but the lab people

MOTAUNG: No, the lab people were very nice but they kind of really couldn't understand.

Q: Did you educate them about what it is like to be from South Africa?

MOTAUNG: No. Then the problem was they didn't even know South Africa, they didn't even know where I am coming from. Then they will say to you, "How far are you from Nigeria?" I would say, "I am a ten minutes drive." And they believed.

Q: These are scientists?

MOTAUNG: No, no. Administrators.

Q: Administrators who believed you when you said your country is a ten minute drive from Nigeria. People are not very educated.

MOTAUNG: When they said to me, "Your clothes. Where did you buy them?"

I said, "I was naked. I just bought them when I landed."

And some of them were really kind of believing until they realized that whatever I was telling them was I was lying.

Q: You were using irony.

MOTAUNG: I am glad that I did that so that I can also have them to broaden their mind a little bit.

Q: You helped them so we got our money's worth as a government because some of our naive people benefited from knowing you.

MOTAUNG: So they end up understanding. If they asked me something, I say, "Yes."

If they say, "Can you drive in South Africa?"

I say, "No, I've got a giraffe." And they believed me.

They say, "Really?"

“Do you import meat?”

“We don’t eat meat. We eat buffalo meat” and they believed me so whatever I was saying to them, I never wanted to correct anything. I will say it and I will be just very quiet about it.

Q: Did anybody catch on?

MOTAUNG: The only person was Professor Reddi because he’d been in South Africa.

Q: What’s with these people? How old were they?

MOTAUNG: Old people.

Q: Administrators?

MOTAUNG: Administrators all of the age of sixty.

Q: 2006?

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: They thought that South Africa could be a ten minute drive from Nigeria and South Africans drive giraffes?

MOTAUNG: Yes and I couldn’t care less. I just said I am going to do it. Get into the internet and read. They’ve got more facilities than us.

Q: Did this change your view of Davis? This is pretty stupid stuff.

MOTAUNG: We need these people as well, otherwise life would be boring. You need people you can talk nonsense and they believe you and life goes on.

Q: It is fun, isn’t it?

MOTAUNG: Yes. Otherwise if we can all be scientists and all be smart and all be intelligent, life would be boring so I was glad that I can tell all these people. At the end of the day they end up believing that I was kind of pulling their legs but I have made them read. At the end of the day you see them on the internet and started to check and check and check.

Q: This is pretty recent. It’s five years ago.

MOTAUNG: Yes.

Q: I know there is this sort of ignorance. Am I shocked? I am not shocked.

MOTAUNG: We need them as well. We need ignorant people.

Q: What's the advantage of having them ignorant? You said we need ignorant people.

MOTAUNG: Yes. Life would be boring because we would all be smart.

Q: You had children with you at Davis?

MOTAUNG: Yes, I took them with me.

Q: Busy, busy, busy. Children, studies, figuring out the future. In your spare time, collected stamps?

MOTAUNG: Doing research and tasting wine.

Q: How many children?

MOTAUNG: Two.

Q: Two children.

MOTAUNG: The only thing that I will never forget it was the first time the Thanksgiving Day when we were invited, actually we had five invitations. Americans are generous when it comes to Thanksgiving. I was with my kids. The lady came to fetch us. By that time I didn't have a car. I have never seen a big turkey like that. It was a big turkey.

Q: It was a turkey, as big as you?

MOTAUNG: Yes. It was for the first time.

Q: Was that your first fall with the rain and the cold and all that? This was two months after you came.

MOTAUNG: Yes. There were a lot of people that they invited.

Q: These were university people?

MOTAUNG: No, church. I guess it was because I always tell people when you go to a foreign country the first thing you must find is a church. If you find a church, the people from the church will take you out.

Q: Good lesson. So you made it known that you would be available for invitations.

MOTAUNG: Yes. They came and picked me up.

Q: Did you stay in touch with those people?

MOTAUNG: We are.

Q: You are still in touch. This has given many things. It has also transcended nationalities; American, South African. You were working on a common thing. At some point was it less important that you were of a different nationality? Was it more important that you were working on research objective together with people?

MOTAUNG: To me everything was the same because when you are in other people's country you we try to learn them both. First I went for research but not only for research but also for cultural things. I respect both things as 50/50. I know the main aim was to go there but also to understand people's culture because if you don't understand people's culture, you are going to have a problem, but if you understand it, it makes your life very easy.

Q: I think that is part of the point of having the Fulbright scholarships is the 50/50 that you just mentioned. One thing you said to the committee when you interviewed is that you wanted to make clones of yourself. You have now been back three or four years.

MOTAUNG: I just came back in January because I was in Spain, yes.

Q: In Spain, living there?

MOTAUNG: Professor Reddi connected me with the people from Spain for stem cell research. I went and trained them.

Q: You trained Spaniards in stem cell research?

MOTAUNG: With a method where we can do one experiment on stem cells.

Q: Have you created clones of yourself?

MOTAUNG: I am busy now.

Q: Today you were in a meeting to discuss the ethics and legality of stem cell research. That's today, February 18, 2010. What happened at that meeting today?

MOTAUNG: The meeting went well. The reason why I went there is because I know that we've got a problem in our country in terms of stem cells. People don't understand cloning. They always confuse the whole thing. Because I know that I am going to be more involved in stem cells, I like it that they invited me today. I am also glad that for a change the government, the South African government can give us scientists the opportunity to look at their draft, to look at it and to comment on it. I feel honored because it has never happened before. If it has been happening maybe to other people, but

for the fact that I was also invited, then I can also say, this act, the 2008 act, 2010 act and whatever, I was part of.

Q: I was going to say not many governments do this but they have consultative bodies.

MOTAUNG: They do because the Americans do. When Obama became the president, he wanted one of the professors from UC Berkeley for Energy and something.

Q: But that is a special Obama thing, I think. His predecessor did not do that, I think. His predecessor did not encourage scientific input.

MOTAUNG: I was happy with today's one because the department of health mandated the scientists in this and then we all end up forming a task force.

Q: This was a full day discussion. Will there be several full days like this?

MOTAUNG: Yes. It is not finished yet.

Q: How many scientists are involved?

MOTAUNG: We've got people from the tissues network, people from the university, people from industry, we've got lawyers. It is a real diverse group.

Q: This is the department of health.

MOTAUNG: Yes. Today I was extremely happy about our government giving us scientists the opportunity, not only me as a scientist. Labs were there, other private sectors were there, you know in terms I commend. For the first time you hear that they know they are not experts in certain fields and then they want to give it to the people that know so for that I will say thank you, South Africa.

Q: Before we were taping you said in cases like in stem cell research where there are ethical issues in the past South Africa has followed the lead of the United States.

MOTAUNG: Yes, in the past I know we never used to work with stem cells. We've got two different kinds of stem cell if you want me to clarify it. We can talk about the adult stem cell and we can talk about the human embryonic stem cell. I know as a matter of fact, 2004 California was the first state to be allowed to work with the human embryonic stem cell. All the states in the U.S. were using the adult stem cell. That was the difference. So California was the first, 2004.

Q: To allow human embryonic.

MOTAUNG: Human embryonic stem cell but I am not going to go into detail about the American policies, because I guess I got so excited because I was there and I attended a course and that's how I ended up knowing these things.

Q: Is South Africa planning its own independent opinion about these things where before it was following someone else's lead?

MOTAUNG: We are always following someone else's lead. We don't have, even today we are also talking about that but we are glad that they gave us the opportunity so at least some of the people who struggle, we can start comparing. We can compare the European Union, we can compare the American perspective and we can also look at the Asian. We can look at all those things and see how well we can fit in and whatever is going to make it comfortable here.

Q: It sounds as if the methodology you have now establishes its own agenda and doesn't just simply imitate.

MOTAUNG: No, no. You must also look at the needs in our country and we must also look at the resources in our country.

Q: When you say California was the first this was like, this is off the topic but I think the controversy in the U.S. was not whether the research was allowed or not but whether the federal government would fund it.

MOTAUNG: It was exactly. The federal government was funding the other stem cell but was not funding the human embryonic stem cell.

Q: In California, did the state then step in?

MOTAUNG: Then California was the first one in the States that the government can fund the human embryonic stem cell.

Q: This government, federal or state?

MOTAUNG: It is the CRRM, California Institute of Regional Regenerative Medicine.

Q: So in other words California disregarded that there is no federal funding and said we will make our own.

MOTAUNG: Yes. That's why they call it stem.

Q: Was this at all helpful in the arguments you made today?

MOTAUNG: Yes, it was helpful in the argument we made because today when we were there talking about this, one of the things was that now we have to talk about all the definitions. When they looked at the egg, they didn't have the definition of stem cells. That's one thing I ended up proposing, that the definition of stem cells must also be counted.

Q: Adult stem cells are what? After a certain age?

MOTAUNG: Adult stem cells are those that you can take them from the organs or from cadavers. The human one is the one that you can take them even from the embryos.

Q: That's the very sensitive issue in the U.S. but in many other countries it is not as sensitive?

MOTAUNG: In the European Union and Singapore it wasn't.

Q: We have gone up to the present day, February 18th. Is there anything you would like to add about this whole amazing story?

MOTAUNG: I am so glad I can have somebody like you to share my experience so that other people can read this, because I believe this is where it can help other people. Sometimes when you read a book you say, "Oh, my God. Can this also be done? I also want to be like so and so."

Q: So like Professor Reddi, your name will be in the book and one day someone will come to you and say, "May I study with you?"

MOTAUNG: And Professor Reddi will say, "I know Shirley from South Africa", those kinds of things.

Q: Shirley Motaung, what a pleasure to meet you.

MOTAUNG: Thank you.

End of interview