

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

REGINA DENNIS-NANA

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: January 21, 2016

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Lived in Paris, France	
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MA in Development Anthropology from SUNY-Binghamton	1979-1981
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Ran a catering business called Authentic African Cuisine	1990s
Founded a Toastmasters club in Nigeria	2005
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International Healthcare Consultant for Population Technology	
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Washington, D.C., Africa Bureau—Program Development Officer	2001
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Ghana—Office Chief and the Cultural Affairs Specialist from the Public Affairs Office	2005-2009
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 21st of January 2016 with Regina Dennis. I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy.

DENNIS: I hyphen my name to reflect my husband's name, Nana, N-A-N-A.

Q: Alright. And you go by Regina?

DENNIS: Yes, I do.

Q: Okay Regina, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

DENNIS: I was born in St. Louis, Missouri, July 25, 1949.

Q: Okay. First, I'd like to get some idea of the background on your father's side and your mother's side. So, what do you know about your father's family?

DENNIS: I'd also like to mention, Stu, I was born in St. Louis when African-American women could not deliver their babies on the main floors of private hospitals or in the major maternity wards. Therefore, if they could afford it, they were allowed to have their children in the basements of private hospitals. So, I was born in the basement and in the

hallway of Barnes Hospital. This was an upgrade from a horrible experience that my parents had with the delivery of their first child. My parents, a married couple, had their first child, a girl, and named her Janice Marie, at the world renowned Black teaching hospital in St. Louis called Homer G. Phillips Hospital. Black doctors from around the country and the world came to Homer G. to complete their residencies, as it was called. It was also noted for its emergency trauma center.

After Janice Marie's delivery, my mother was informed that she had a girl and the baby was taken away by a nurse. The nurse came later and told my mother that her baby was stillborn. They never let my mother see or hold her child. In those days, women took what the nurses and doctors said as gospel without asking questions. After that horrible experience, my father said "No more of my children would be born at Homer G." So, when it was time for me to be born, he drove my mother to Barnes Hospital, the best private health care he could offer, and they took my mother to the basement in the hallway. This is where I was born, at a time of institutional racism and segregation. Subsequent years, my mother delivered my sister and four brothers in this same fashion. Each time, Daddy said, "Here is your money; give me my woman and baby." From the hospital, Daddy took Mama and me to one of his elder sister's house, Aunt Stell. She welcomed the young mother and me. She made a dresser drawer as my first bed.

Q: Oh boy.

DENNIS: And that's the story of how I was born. As we speak, there is a significant scandal evolving these stillbirths at Homer G. Approximately 100 Black women have come forward with claims that they were told that their babies were born dead and they never got a chance to see their babies nor did they ever see death certificates or anything. The story came to light, because Zella Jackson Price, one of the mothers and a popular gospel singer, found her alleged dead or lost baby through social media.

For reasons that remain unclear, the infant ended up being raised in foster care and adopted by another family when she was 16. Melanie lost her hearing at age three because of measles. The lost child, Melanie Diane Gilmore, now is a woman with young adult children, including a set of twin girls and a boy, of her own. Diane, the name Zella gave her daughter at birth, lived in Springfield, Oregon.

In 2014, Diane's children shepherded detective work to give their mother a special 50th birthday gift: find her biological mother. The only information they had was her birth mother's name, Zella Jackson, their mother was born in St. Louis on November 25, 1965. The young adult children searched social media, mainly Facebook, and found Zella Jackson Price. They sent a text message introducing themselves, asking if Zella had given birth to a child on November 25, 1965 in St. Louis. Texts were followed with DNA testing that proved a match of 99.997 percent correct that Zella and Diane were related. The children arranged a surprised virtual meeting between their mother and Zella. Diane and her children traveled to St. Louis to meet her mother after 50 years of separation. Local news carried the story and it was picked up and broadcasted nationally. Other

women came forward with similar stories of giving birth to babies at Homer G. only to be told their babies had also died, mainly stillborn.

Q: Oh boy.

DENNIS: While my mother has passed, my sister and I have been following the case on her behalf. We are a part of a group of women who have come forward with similar stories of being told their babies were stillborn, even though their pre-natal care visits indicated no signs of abnormalities. Attorneys Al Watkins and Donna Clark Frayne investigated the case. The lawyers told 20/20 television program that they believe the babies were part of a stolen baby ring. Al Watkins believes Melanie Diane Gilmore was stolen from Zella Jackson Price and sold into adoption.

Q: Well that's incredible. Just disgusting.

DENNIS: Yes, it is. So, we're following the situation because my siblings and I believe that we have an older sister out there somewhere, but we don't know where.

Q: Well-

DENNIS: Investigative journalists are probing to verify what transpired 50, 60 or 70 years ago. Hospital records were poorly maintained and kept. Homer G. closed in 1979 and reopened in 2003 as a senior citizen residence.

State and city government offices conducted investigations. U.S. Attorney General for the State of Missouri, Richard Callahan, led the investigation into Price's story. Callahan was unable to find evidence of a baby-stealing conspiracy, and decades-old records put Price at a completely different hospital from the one where she said her baby died. Callahan said the records suggest that Price abandoned her baby, despite Price denying she would never intentionally leave her baby behind. In August 2014, the State closed the case. Attorney Watkins claims the adoption papers have forged signatures.

St. Louis City's Health Department found only two of approximately 50 death certificates applications submitted by families. I submitted an application for Janice Marie, my lost sister. Other families, including mine, were never contacted to inform us of the results. Mothers who had hopes of finding their lost family members are emotionally upset. Moreover, they have lost hope that God will answer their prayers and reconnect them with their lost babies as Zella Jackson Price was reconnected. Instead, the scandal has opened wounds women had buried in the past.

Okay, now we can get back to your question.

Q: Okay. What do you know about your father's family?

DENNIS: I know that my father's family originates from South Carolina and they were Geechees and spoke the Gullah dialect, a language spoken on the South Sea Islands of South Carolina. Gullah is a mixture of African dialects, English, French and Portuguese.

Q: Oh yes.

DENNIS: About 30 years ago, I went through a phase when I wanted to know the origins of my family. I went from house to house and stayed all night with elderly family members and allowed them to cook and talk. From this oral history, I learned that my father's grandfather, Nelson Dennis, was an itinerant minister for the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. The A.M.E. church had been part of the abolition movement to free African-Americans from slavery. Sometime during the 1890's, he was appointed to administer financial and spiritual counsel to churches around Pine Bluff, Arkansas; Little Rock, Arkansas and Clarksdale, Mississippi. He eventually settled in Mound Bayou, Mississippi (MS), where he founded Dennis A.M.E. Chapel. The church was used as a school house during the week. As people migrated "up north," the church relocated to Clarksdale, MS. Several years ago, the Dennis family reunion was held in Mound Bayou. I was overseas and missed going with the family. I later compensated for the missed opportunity by traveling to see the commemorative plaque on the wall of the church that reads "Dennis Chapel."

Nelson married Nancy McClane and the union produced 10 children by 1886, of whom Major Dennis was the youngest, my grandfather. Major Dennis, born in 1886 on Sea Islands in South Carolina. I am not sure which island.

In addition to being a religious minister, Nelson was an entrepreneur. He owned a general store, his own cotton gin and acres of land. After his death and during the Great Migration period to the north, his children sold the family land. Major Dennis or Papa Dennis as we called him, migrated by train to St. Louis sometime in the 1920's. Seemingly, he stopped over in Artiana, Arkansas because that is where my father, Oliver Nelson Dennis, was born. Upon arriving in St. Louis, Papa Dennis supported his family by delivering coal in the winter and ice in the summer. He also hauled household items for people. When people moved, he rendered his services by horse and buggy. In 1929, city ordinances prohibited buggies being pulled by horses in the streets so Papa bought a pickup truck. Family oral history tells us that he paid cash for this truck during the Great Depression.

When it came to buying property in St. Louis, the banks made it difficult for Blacks to secure loans for housing and impossible to obtain loans for commercial property. This was due to the racial restrictive covenant clause attached to housing contracts that prohibited Whites from selling property to Blacks. Given this situation, Papa Dennis had a White "business partner" named Arthur Smith to buy property in his name. Mr. Smith served as the overt/public owner or "Front." Papa was the covert owner. Mr. Smith worked as the store manager and Papa had his kids and grandkids to keep an eye on him. Papa's gravy money was providing services as a bail bondsman.

In 1939, a group of Broadway merchants petitioned the owner of 1316 South Broadway to sell Papa his building. Local politicians supported him. In 1940, Papa acquired the building and moved his business downstairs and his family upstairs. He became the first Black businessman to own property and operate a furniture store on Broadway. He stayed there until redevelopment forced him to move. He moved to 5753 Easton. As kids, my sister, brothers and I would walk to visit him and Mama Dennis. He owned other buildings. So, that's my grandfather and what I know about him. Papa Dennis died in 1973 at 87 years old. He was just a remarkable person and entrepreneur. I still remember him wearing a suit and tie daily.

Papa's children and grandchildren went on to own and operate businesses: moving and storage; restaurants and clubs; a chemical plant; sell luxury real estate and rent property; and retail shop owners in major airports. Others are teachers, lawyers, ministers and a diplomat. For the most part, we are upright citizens who practice social activism. Our civil rights activism has evolved from slavery to modern times: cousins have served as principal advisors during the 1960's civil rights period, black power movement and today members of the family play lead roles in the Black Lives Matter movement. It must be in our DNA.

Q: And what do you know about your grandmother on that side of your family?

DENNIS: My grandmother, Mary "Molly" Speakes Dennis, on my father's side was the eldest child to George Speakes and Sarah House Speakes. U.S. Census documents spell Speaks with an "e". Somewhere the "e" was dropped and current relatives spell their name without the "e." In any case, Sarah was born in North Carolina and her husband George was born in Alabama. This union produced seven children: Mary, James, Albert, Pheldus and Frederick. She had two children that did not live. There are various stories of how Sarah became light-skinned. One version is her mother was raped during slavery by an Irish overseer. Another story is she had a consensual relationship with a White man, presumed to be Irish. This topic requires more family research. Oral stories passed down in the family says that Sarah's mother (not sure of her name and this was during slavery) had a consensual relationship because the father of her children visited the house. When he came, the young children would run from him. She told them not to run because he was their "pappy." In those days, Black women were unable to refuse relationships with "masters" or plantation owners. They were "set-up" and took care of these men who often showed no affection or fatherly interest in the children. DNA tests results indicate that I have five percent match with people geographically from Ireland. Sarah and George were land owners, ministers and entrepreneurs.

Mary Speakes, born in 1887, met and married Papa Dennis in February 1908 in Coahoma, Mississippi. Their first child Nancy (Aunt Scrap) was born in 1909 in Mississippi. Ten other children were born to this union: Charles Herbert (Hub), Estelle, Major, Jr., Leroy, Opal, Cecil, Oliver, Robert, Ruby and Willie. Ora Lee was an adopted daughter. Mama Dennis served as a steward at Wayman Temple A.M.E. Church in St. Louis, where she was active in evangelism and worship. As a steward, she visited the sick and shut-in. She also served on the Mother's Board of the church to advise young people.

Mama Dennis is noted for cooking and teaching her daughters and daughter-in laws to embrace “fixin pots” (cooking large quantities of food) and holding family events. Mama Dennis taught my mother to make sweet potato pies. She always said, “Add plenty of butter and eggs” in your pies. She kept cakes and pies in a china cabinet. I recently learned the cabinet was called a “cake safe or chest.” Now, I have a “cake safe” and prepare cakes and pies like I was taught and pass on the tradition to family and friends, to my three daughters and give family recipes/baking pans as wedding gifts. Mama Dennis died in 1967 at 80 years old. Mama Dennis launched the first Dennis-House-Speaks family unions in 1946 when she had four sons to return safely from World War II. We have been holding them every year on the first Sunday in August. I always planned my home leave and R&Rs around being in St. Louis for the reunions.

Q: We’re talking about your father’s side.

DENNIS: Yes.

Q: Did your grandparents go to college or did they go to high school or what?

DENNIS: No. They did not go to college or high school. They went to grade school. Both of my grandparents on my father’s side came from entrepreneur families. Their parents owned cotton gins, general stores and churches. They were members of the African Methodist Episcopal church. Owing to their entrepreneurship and modest wealth, they were considered among Blacks to be economically comfortable.

Q: Alright. Well let’s go to your mother’s side.

DENNIS: On my mother’s side, they were sharecroppers and they came from Jonestown and the family eventually moved to Coahoma, both towns in Mississippi, which are located not too far from Clarksville in the Mississippi Delta. Coahoma was a thriving cotton industry zone during and just after slavery. This is the same area where the Dennis family settled. I never knew or met my grandfather on my mother’s side, George Perkins. Louise and George were married and had five children: Irene, Ruby, Chester, Wilma (Aunt Doll”) and Grace.

My mother’s mother was named Louise Jackson Perkins. She and her children picked cotton on Mr. John McGee’s planation in Coahoma. Ma’dear, as we called her, displayed enormous courage and was a hard-working woman. A story has been passed down in the family that conveys how she stood up to Mr. McGee to demand a raise for “choppin” cotton. She told him that “she wasn’t gonna chop no cotton for 60 cent a day.” As a result of her actions, on pay day, all workers got a 15-cent raise, earning 75 cent a day.

Ma’dear migrated to St. Louis and George stayed down south. Ma’dear divorced George Perkins after she migrated to St. Louis. She remarried and had one son: Nathaniel Jackson.

My mother, Irene Perkins Dennis, was born on March 3, 1927 and attended school in Coahoma. She attended Hull Elementary School and went to the 11th grade. Hull was a typical one room school for Blacks with children of different ages/grades in the same classroom. Given the family's limited funds, Mama never completed high school. She really, really desired to complete high school. She told us stories of how the bus with White students passed them as they walked long distances to attend segregated elementary schools. It is for this reason that she stressed that all of her children must complete high school and all six of us did. Hull School was a rallying point in 1990's and onwards. Alumnae returned from Detroit, St. Louis, and Chicago to meet old classmates, remember how they survived Jim Crow and reconnect with their past. I accompanied my mother on her first trip to Coahoma in 1998. As I asked her questions, she failed to give me answers. It was not until a cousin who lived in Coahoma explained the "sorrowful memories" that I understood why she or her classmates refused to return to Coahoma in 50 years. The lynchings, picking cotton in unbearable conditions and lack of education and employment opportunities were all explained as reasons Mama and her classmates blocked out Coahoma.

In 1936, my mother left Coahoma for Memphis, Tennessee where she lived with relatives, worked and sent money back home. She eventually took the train to St. Louis around 1944. She got a job in a pickle factory and rented a room from old man Mr. Dennis or Papa Dennis. Papa's sons delivered coal to fuel the pot belly stoves in the tenants' rooms. Oliver, who became my father, came to the room and saw my mother and fell in love with her. He slept at the foot of her bed until he wrote a letter to Louise Perkins in Mississippi asking to marry her. The letter came when they were working in the cotton field. Ma'dear wrote back giving her consent. When the letter came back to St. Louis, they went to City Hall to get married, but it was closed. Mama told us she cried. They went back on Monday and they got married.

Daddy was a World War II veteran. He ran our house as if it was a military base. He was hard on the boys and expected the highest performance from them. He would whip them but put the girls' whopping on the shelf when we did something wrong. I never got whipped, but my sister says she did. I think being the first born contributed to the bond I had with my father. Daddy would teach us military songs: "Stand up and fight-fight until you hear that bell, stand toe to toe, stand blow to blow. Keep punching until you hear that final bell. Trade for blow for blow. Stand up and fight like hell." The moral of the song is you must fight to survive life because the bell may never ring.

He instilled in us to be proud of who you are and to be proud that we're African - to be Black and that we're descendants of a clan in Africa. He didn't know which clan, he just said, we were from a clan in Africa. When I reflect upon these lessons, I believe it was Daddy's way of preparing his children for the discrimination he had faced by those who judged his dark skin as being inferior and less intelligent. We learned we were leaders and not followers and to accept being dark-complexed. In sum, we learned to be "Black and Proud" before James Brown made the expression popular. So, when I was 12 years old, I said that "I want to go to Africa to see my people." Africa was always my destination. My cousin, John Moten, II always reminds me of this early sentiment.

My brother had his DNA analyzed in early 2017 and found that we are 33 percent descended from Cameroon/Congo and 22 percent from the Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast)/Ghana. Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon are two countries that are dear to me. My saying has become true, "Je suis néé Bamilèké sans savoir" (I was born a Bamilèké without knowing it). The DNA report showed that we are 91 percent African, five percent Irish and the rest Asian.

Q: Well then you were born in St. Louis, is it?

DENNIS: Yes, yes.

Q: Okay. Did you grow up there?

DENNIS: Yes, I did.

Q: Okay. You want to talk a little about growing up in St. Louis? Let's start with your early years, where you lived and the surroundings and what you were up to.

DENNIS: My family lived on the Southside on Chouteau Avenue. We moved when the housing market opened up for Blacks and my father bought a house in a section called the West End on Easton Avenue in the 1950's. The Jews were attracted to newer homes in the suburbs and Blacks were getting loans to move into the older city homes. My father was a self-employed person with his own moving company. He had three or four moving trucks. As soon as we could talk, we answered the phone, saying "Dennis Moving Company. If it's worth moving, it is worth moving right. How can I help you?" The rate in the 1960's was "\$12.25 an hour for two men and a truck." Daddy also had a used furniture store and we worked in the store. The neighborhood was clean, made up of homeowners, some renters and small business-owners. Some were: Mrs. Annie who had a flower shop and Mr. Greenstein who sold tombstones.

Q: Well let's talk a little bit about schooling. Where did you go to elementary school?

DENNIS: I started elementary school at Crispus Attucks School on Chouteau Street, now torn down. My mother was the secretary for the family-owned business and homemaker. When my family moved onto Easton, I attended Emerson Elementary School for a year a year and was transferred to Cupples School. My sister, brothers and I walked to school, except on the cold days when Daddy would drive us in one of his trucks. I recently met my third-grade teacher, Ms. Lois Turner, who said, "You loved to read." She told me that I would go to the bookcase and read all of the books, then I would recommend the "good books" to other classmates. She even said that I was always willing to help her and give service to others. Ms. Turner says she is not surprised that I earned a Master's Degree and have traveled the world. In addition, I recently met a childhood neighbor, who told me that I always had high expectations and wanted to do more than the rest of the kids on the block. We moved from Easton Avenue and I spent my last year of elementary school at Benton Elementary School, where I completed the eighth grade. It is for this reason that I

claim Cupples rather than Benton as my elementary school. I graduated from Benton in 1964 and went to Beaumont High School from 1964 to 1968. My elementary and high schools were all public schools.

Q: Alright. What are your recollections regarding segregation when you were young?

DENNIS: In 2017, St. Louis remains one of the most segregated cities in the country. Growing up here, I had no White acquaintances in elementary school. Teachers and students were all Blacks. At Beaumont High School's lunchroom, the few remaining Whites ate together and Blacks ate separately. I do remember one person whom we walked to classes together, can't remember her name. My high school graduation class had over 400 students, mostly Blacks and less than five Whites. When I attended the community college, I met and started to have White, Caribbean and African friends. My world started to change with the exposure to other peoples and cultures.

In the 1960's the demographics of the housing market were changing in St. Louis, so the school population in the city changed. As Blacks moved into the West End neighborhoods, Whites moved out and moved to newly developed areas in the county. In the 1970's Blacks started getting loans for houses in North St. Louis County resulting in a significant loss of population to the City of St. Louis. In the 1970's, the city had 622,000 inhabitants and in 2011 there were only 320,000 people. These changes impacted the composition of the city and tax base. Unfortunately, it has left underserved areas with abandoned brick buildings and vacant lots.

Since returning home in 2014, I observed that race relations have significantly changed, especially among young people. I went out recently to Chuck E. Cheese, an indoor amusement and game center for children, I was astonished to see the number of interracial children. So, one of the outcomes of bussing or school desegregation is more mixing of the younger people. People raised in the 1960's and 1970's may be less comfortable with interacting with Whites than those raised in the 1980's and 1990's.

Q: Well as a very small kid what did you do? I mean was there sort of a group of kids that got out and played?

DENNIS: Of course. We played with our neighbors next door, on the same block and around the corner. Some went to the same schools with my brothers, sister and me. We had bicycles, played board games, and climbed the plum trees in our back yard. At the house on Easton, we lived across the street from Sherman Park. There used to be a public library situated on the hill in the park. We went to the library frequently. Wohl's Community Center, located in Sherman Park was built in the late 1950's just right near our house. In the winter, we had sleds and drove them down the snowy hills. In the summer, Wohl's Recreation Center had arts and crafts programs, swimming lessons and we played sports: softball and baseball. I used to love to participate in gymnastics: jumping and performing stunts on the trampoline. My sister and I were sent to piano lessons and participated in recitals which were held at Wohl. Piano lessons build discipline and after all of those scales, one learns that practice does make perfect.

I was also very much involved in the church. My sister and I often stayed all night with my father's sister, Aunt "Scrap" (Nancy Martin) on Saturday nights and attended Wayman Temple AME Church with her. My mother became Pentecostal. She joined Lively Stone Church of God and raised us there. So, a great deal of my youth was spent in church activities. When I was around 10, I was baptized. I sung in the children's and young people's choirs, served on the usher board and participated in youth programs. We organized car washes and cooked dinners to raise funds for choir robes and trips. This was particularly true for the choir since we traveled to revivals and attended the annual Mid-Western District conferences. I also taught children in Sunday school. When I got to college in St. Louis, I made friends, who had similar beliefs as mine. We would go "Church Hopping," to hear the different church choirs: Kennerly Temple Church of God in Christ; Bostick Temple Church of God in Christ; Bethesda Temple Church of God and House of Deliverance Church of the Apostolic Faith, to name a few. These Christian values instilled in me at an early age form the basis of my character, which has allowed me to practice honesty and integrity, kindness and compassion, patience and perseverance and demonstrate faith in God. While I have evolved from the Euro-centric beliefs to a more modern version of traditional African spirituality called Afrikania Mission. This Neo-Traditional Movement was established in Ghana in 1982 by a former Catholic Priest, Kwabena Damuah, who resigned from the church and assumed the traditional priesthood titles, Osofo Okomfo. The Mission aims to reform and update African traditional religion, and to promote nationalism and Pan-Africanism. Praise services take place on Sundays in several West African countries.

Q: What do you mean by modernization of traditional spirituality?

DENNIS: There are practices, which the Mission, teaches against, such as killing twins, oppression of people, victimization of widows and orphans, slavery and kidnappings to name a few. The Mission supports direct worship of God, singing hymns and praises as well as prayers, upholding all cultural values and traditional African principles.

Q: So, it promotes Africa lifestyle.

DENNIS: Yes, without influences from foreigners, especially Arabs and Europeans, which have been destructive to African culture and resources.

Q: Let's get back to where we left off. Did any of the equal rights movement affect you or did you see it around you?

DENNIS: Well yes. My first cousin, Jesse Hill, Jr. was originally from St. Louis, but lived in Atlanta. Jim as we called him was the first person in the family to obtain a college education. He completed his undergraduate degree from Lincoln University at Jefferson City, Missouri in 1947, a Historically Black College and, where he majored in mathematics' and physics. Black students were unable to attend state-funded graduate schools in Missouri until 1950. The case of Lloyd Gaines, a Black who won a Supreme Court case in 1938 to attend law school at the University of Missouri at Columbia

remained in Black minds. Gaines disappeared on March 19, 1939 under suspicious circumstances and his body was never found. The University granted Gaines a posthumous honorary law degree in May 2006. Undergraduate divisions were integrated by court order in 1950, when the university was compelled to admit African Americans to courses that were not offered at Lincoln University.

To this end, Jim attended University of Michigan where he obtained an MBA in 1949 with a focus on actuary sciences. He was the second Black actuary in the U.S. and the first in the state of Georgia. He was an advisor to a number of political and civil rights activists in Atlanta. In fact, he regularly advised Martin Luther King, Jr. When Jim died in 2012, I was on assignment in Guinea. However, I felt an obligation to attend his funeral because he and his wife had a strong impact on my development. When I was in college, I used to travel to visit him and his family. His wife Azira, would tell me, if you want to talk to him, get up at 4:30 in the morning when he has coffee and reads the newspapers. It would still be dark outside, but I would get up. He and I would discuss national and international affairs. When I started traveling internationally, he could tell me what was going on in that country and drilled me to make sure I knew all of the details. He would have Andrew Young come by the house and we would discuss African current affairs. Andrew Young gave his eulogy and even mentioned that if it had not been for Hill he would have never been able to get elected to Congress. Jim's wife is originally from Cuba. When I visited them, I helped her cook beans and rice, seasoned chicken and other Cuban dishes. I refer to her as my "finishing school teacher." We used to do each other's nails and she stressed to me the importance of dressing professionally. When I was in college, Jim would have Azira take me shopping to buy me business and evening attires.

At these reunions, the family always talked about Jim and his accomplishments and struggles. He would come to the reunions, usually held in St. Louis. He would go house to house to visit each of his uncles and aunts. When he came to Uncle Oliver's house, my parents proudly showed off my sister's and my musical skills by having us play the piano for him and his wife.

I followed Jim's career with great passion by reading articles in the newspapers about him, television programs that discussed civil rights in Atlanta and Selma where he was involved. In fact, I was supposed to go to school in Atlanta, but my parents, especially my father, didn't want me "to go down there" with Jim because he was very much involved with Dr. King and the civil rights movement. With the civil rights marches being blasted on nationwide television daily in 1960's, my parents assumed that I would start marching for civil rights with Jim. They feared mainly for my safety. Nevertheless, I stayed in St. Louis and still got involved in the civil right movement while in college in the 1970's. I protested the Vietnam War, especially after I saw high school classmates and people that I grew up in church return dead. I know of girls who lost their boyfriends/fiancées to that war.

In addition to the war, I was one of the negotiators for inmates requesting basic needs in the 1972 St. Louis City Jail Sit-in. Inmates and selected citizens stayed in the jail's chapel

for three days and held protest in front of the jail for 21 days and night vigils. I wrote a blog entitled, From Amical Meetings to Brutal Beating: 1972 City Jail Sit-in on the Missouri History Museum's History Happens Here website, to document this incident. A follow-up panel discussion was held to assess the current conditions in the corrections institutions in St. Louis and strategies for protesting. It was concluded that there has been a breakdown in what was achieved in 1972. The systems exist on books but are not being implemented. As for protesting, the role of press releases and press conferences in the past were compared with protests today. It was an informative discussion that shed light to young people on how to effectively organize protest. With the age of social media, organizers can galvanize large groups of people to a location quickly. However, the reasons for the protests may not be clear because the leaders fail to hold press conferences and distribute press releases outlining demands.

Q: Well let's talk about your high school days; what were your favorite courses and what weren't?

DENNIS: I was always interested in business and took business classes.

Q: Well were you much of a reader?

DENNIS: Oh, yes. In fact, I had a library card from a very early age because the library was located just in front of our house in Sherman Park. My sister, brothers and I walked there regularly to get books. When the library relocated to Union and St. Louis Avenue, which was a much longer distance from the house, we walked to the library to get our books. My father was an avid reader. He made a pallet on the floor where he would read books between moving jobs. He favored books about cowboys. Today, in my home library, I have a section of his cowboy books to commemorate his influences on my love for books. I am not sure whether my father knew about Black cow herders, a skill acquired from West Africa, who became cow boys in the U.S. I am confident that seeing Daddy read cowboy books and newspapers inspired me to read as well as listen to the radio news stations. My mother read the Bible. As my third-grade teacher said, I was always an avid reader and suggested books to my classmates to read.

Q: Do you recall any books in particular that struck you at an early age?

DENNIS: Yes, I remember reading Little Women, Wuthering Heights, Oliver Twist, and The Invisible Man. I remember reading Pearl Buck's books. No African-American history or books were taught in schools at that time. I remember we had to learn square dancing, which most of us hated and could not understand why we had to learn to dance "White folk's dances."

Q: In high school what were you involved with?

DENNIS: In high school, owing to religious reasons, my social life was restricted from "worldly things" such as dancing, skating and going to sock hop parties. I was a member of the Girls Recreation Association. We supported the cheerleaders and team sports. I

was a pom girl. We sold pom poms to cheer on the Beaumont “Blue Jackets” basketball, football or baseball teams. I attended the football and basketball games on Saturdays.

What else was I involved in? I was a service worker for the principals in the front office all four years of high school. Service Club members provided assistance to teachers and principals. In fact, I was a service worker for Mr. John Bass who eventually became the City’s Welfare Director and a State Senator. In 1972, he and I worked together when inmates protested inadequate conditions in the city jail.

Q: Did you enjoy high school?

DENNIS: Oh yes, I did. Now it’s coming back to me. I took a lot of business courses. In fact, I was enrolled in the business education program. I remember Mr. Hubbard teaching us about machines that would have a television screen and keyboard. In 1965, he suggested that these machines would replace typewriters.

Q: How about during your high school years did you work after school?

DENNIS: Yes, I did. In fact, I got my first job in 1966 when I started working at the National Personnel Records Center, which was located at 9500 Page. The center was the repository for millions of military personnel, health and medical records of discharged and deceased veterans of all services during the 20th century after World War I. It also housed civilian and other related records. The center relocated from Page Avenue, but it is still based here in St. Louis. The job at the “Records Center,” as we called it was part of the Distributive Education Club of America, a club that prepares students for the business world of marketing and salesmanship by teaching vocational understanding, civic consciousness, social intelligence and leadership development. I maintained this 20-hours per week part-time job for my last two years in high school.

Q: What were you doing?

DENNIS: I worked as a File clerk and earned \$1.25 per hour. Two out of 15 persons from my high school took the cognitive ability test and passed it. Janice Watkins-Dozier, a life-long friend from high school recently reminded me that she and I were the only two who passed the test to work at the Records Center. We also underwent the extensive background check to obtain security clearances to work on this student job.

Q: Was the work sort of segregated? I mean were mostly Blacks doing one thing and Whites doing another?

DENNIS: No, the work was not segregated. What I can remember was the government office was fairly integrated. There were both Black and White supervisors.

Q: Were you interested in American or world events through the news?

DENNIS: In high school, I don't think I was very much interested in world affairs. It was when I attended college that I became aware of world affairs and started reading and took more of an interest in world events. I started to read books about Africa. I wasn't involved in world events in high school; I can't make the claim.

Q: Yes. Did you have a feeling that you were part of a major movement in American politics and all, bringing the Black community into the body politic and economic and all?

DENNIS: In high school no. However, in college I was very, very active and in fact it started off with me being a part of the Association of Black Collegians (ABC). We were a student activist group that promoted economic and educational change on campus and in the community. We fought for inclusion of Blacks as teachers and students in college programs, where Blacks were denied entrance or were held to more rigorous standards than Whites. These programs included, nursing and dental hygienic. I was also a member of student government and elected to serve as Treasurer of Student Government at St. Louis Community College at the Forest Park campus.

At that time, we had a large student body consisting of at least 3,000 students; a large campus. In 2016, Forest Park campus had 8,200 students. As Treasurer, I was involved in budgeting student affairs and student activity programs. I led the team to plan events with clubs and organizations on campus. We planned speakers, cultural events and different clubs and organizations would come to the treasurer and my committee. In fact, we sponsored Alex Haley before he published *Roots*, John Henry Clarke, who I later visited his home in New York and Nikki Giovanni. I remember meeting with the international student organizations which was made up of students from China, Japan, Africa and Brazil. I really got my initiation to interacting with peoples from the world as a student. I took a special interest in students who looked like me but did not talk like me, those from Africa and the Caribbean.

ABC promoted equality and protested against the Vietnam War. The group had several Vietnam veterans, who had just returned from the war and were quite hostile against the U.S. government's foreign policy on the war. We also protested against Shell Oil for its apartheid laws in South Africa. In addition, most of us in ABC had parents who escaped the perils of Jim Crow and lynchings in the south.

While we saw education as our way to upward mobility, we were concerned about issues facing our community and the world. To this end, ABC's Forest Park campus organized students to form ABC chapters on other campuses in St. Louis such as Washington University and St. Louis University. We coordinated efforts with these chapters to lead protests against the war and the killing of Black students at Jackson State University in Mississippi. Those were turbulent times. Today, my friends from ABC have excelled to become business owners, teachers, elected officials, lawyers, nurses and leaders in other sectors.

Q: Were your parents sort of pushing you to achieve in college?

DENNIS: Oh yes. My mother had experienced Jim Crow down south and never achieved her goal of completing high school. She enjoyed school and wanted to go so badly. She pushed and instilled in us to stay in school. After high school, she promoted college or vocational schools. So, in our house, education was pushed. My maternal grandmother would say, "Yes, you can." Yes, you can because they told me, "They killed old man *can't*; whipped *couldn't* until he did do." So, there is no such thing as you *can't*. Mama passed this Coahoma, Mississippi proverb down to me. She reminded me of this proverb in 1998, in which I typed and keep hung in my home office. So, I got hit with the importance of getting an education at home.

In addition, people from the church played a significant role in my development, especially encouraging me to stay in school. The church had people from within the neighborhood and individuals in my family, who constantly instilled in me the importance of staying in school and getting an education. They would say, "Baby, no matter what you want to do, education is the way to go." While I saw a number of other young girls in my neighborhood getting pregnant, I decided that I wanted more out of life than welfare and babies. I did not want to have children as a teen-ager. So, I stayed in school and became very active in programs. In addition, I was very active in the church, participated in the Midwestern District Choir that traveled to sing at conferences, particularly at the Assembly of God, Midwest District Conference, where we would go by bus singing at different church events and revivals. I should mention that in the 1960-1970's the community colleges were created and offered an affordable option for low-income students to go to college for the first time. Members of the church choir were attending the community college and shared their experiences, which encouraged those not going away to school to enroll at the community college at home. So, I was very much a part of church youth programs that had a strong impact and kept me from making immoral decisions. In fact, I acknowledge that the church kept me grounded and focused on long-term goals.

Q: Now again this community college was named what?

DENNIS: At that time, it was Forest Park Community College, but today they call it St. Louis Community College at Forest Park.

Q: Now was that college mainly Black, mainly White or what?

DENNIS: No, it was and still is a mixed school. There are three separate junior college campuses here in St. Louis. They are located geographically across the metropolitan area: one on the south side, Meramec campus, and that's basically where the majority of White students attend. Then, there's Forest Park in St. Louis city and that one is basically 50/50 Blacks and Whites. It has more Blacks now but when I was going there it was the first campus of the three community colleges and so for that reason it was fairly integrated. The third campus, Florissant Valley, serves students living in North County both Blacks and Whites.

Q: Socially was there must mixture between the Blacks and Whites?

DENNIS: No, no, no. There was very little mixing between the two races.

Q: While you were in college what were you aiming for?

DENNIS: I was aiming to become a lawyer. In fact, I was taking pre-law courses and planned to transfer to a four-year college prior to going to law school.

Q: Where did you transfer to?

DENNIS: I transferred to Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio. Wilberforce was the first Historically Black College and University to be owned and run by African-Americans. The college was founded by members of the local Methodist Episcopal Church.

Q: Yes, it's named after-.

DENNIS: William Wilberforce the abolitionist.

Q: Yes, in England.

DENNIS: Yes, in England, that's correct.

Q: How did you find that?

DENNIS: You know, coming from St. Louis city to rural Ohio was one of the most challenging periods in my life. I had been "popular" on campus among diverse student groups. Besides my political activities, I found time to learn to go to clubs, parties and dances. When I arrived at Wilberforce, it hit me that I had moved to not any rural America. It was a rough adjustment.

At the community college I had been active in the political movement on campus and promoting social change in the city. While at the community college, I had a student job working with lawyers, public defenders at the St. Louis city jail. I was responsible for preparing documents for lawyers to determine if offenders were eligible for release on their own signature. This required verifying police records, daily activities (if they worked) and interviewing first-time offenders. Based on my findings, I would submit the request for the lawyer to review and submit to the judge to decide if an inmate met the criteria for release on their own reconnaissance.

One day, I met a White priest at the jail who challenged me. He said, "You know, I cannot find any Black ministers to come down here and serve in the city jail chapel. So, I said, "I'll find you someone." So, I found one. Then, I became part of a two-three person singing group. We would sing gospels in the jail chapel. Rather than only a few inmates coming to the chapel for services; the "soulful" format resulted in more Black inmates

coming to the jail chapel service. More and more inmates requested to attend the chapel service. Our Saturday evening service became popular.

Twenty-five inmates at the city jail decided to protest against cold food, lack of hygiene supplies, poor recreation facilities and inadequate medical services. Inmates wanted to take a shower and brush their teeth. They had presented their request to the warden without results. In an interview with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch Newspaper, dated July 11, 1972, the commission of adult services at the jail indicated that blankets had gone unwashed for eight months. I had nothing to do with the beginning plans of the protest. The inmates eventually requested that I help them to present their rights to city authorities. I told them that I was just a student and that I couldn't represent them but, I would identify a lawyer that would help them. So, I found a lawyer who started negotiating with the jail officials on behalf of the inmates.

So, one evening, the priest, soulful minister and mini-choir went to the jail to conduct the chapel service. When we got there, we were told that the "soulful" part of the service had been suspended. So, we stopped going to the jail until we could get clarification of why the services were cancelled.

Late one Saturday evening, I was at home when I got a call from the city jail warden to come urgently to the jail. He explained that the inmates were holding a sit-in at the chapel. The inmates refused to return to their cells until the "soulful" part of the service was returned. He said that the inmates were asking specifically for me to come to the jail. The warden requested me to come down to serve as an intermediary between him and the inmates. The warden sent a police car to pick me up. After talking with the warden, I called members of the Committee for Equal Rights, chaired by Dr. Lucille McClelland. This group was made up of middle-income African-Americans as well as White professionals. The purpose of the group was to ensure that people within the criminal justice system would be treated fairly. In fact, one of the lawyers who I called was a part of this group.

When we got to the jail, I was invited to stay overnight. In fact, I stayed several days because the inmates had really decided to protest in the chapel the lack of soap, toothpaste and hot meals. We were negotiating with the warden and city jail officials. On day three, members of the Committee for Equal Rights came to check on our progress. We were a total of seven citizens involved in the negotiations. The city invited us into the jail, but we were never advised to leave.

The negotiations became complicated and heated. The mayor and other government officials got involved. The inmates were persistent. They became very confrontational and insisted that they would not end their peaceful protest in the chapel for basic rights and reduced holdover time in the jail. So, the mayor and police chief made a decision without consulting the warden. The warden Alphonso Lark and Edward Tripp, Director of the Department of Public Safety were Black. The mayor and police chief were White. They eventually brought in 25 riot police with full gear and dogs. The police officers thought that those of us who the city had invited in to participate in the negotiations,

particularly those of us who were dark-skinned, and I am dark-skinned, were inmates. They thought that I was one of the inmates and so they beat me and threw me in with the inmates to put me in a cell. But, one of the other African-Americans who was very light-skinned and small in stature, Betty Lee, who was editor of "Proud" magazine here in the city, pulled me back and told the riot officers, "She is not an inmate." Betty, who is deceased, suffered dog bites on the calf of her leg that required stitches at the hospital and I still have scars from dog bites on my legs from that event. Pearlie I. Evans, Brother Bob Williams and Charles McClelland were citizens who were invited in as negotiations but were never invited out before the beatings started in the jail chapel.

Q: Oh boy.

DENNIS: With the tear gas going and the chopping through the roof of the city jail chapel, we eventually got outside, where we held a sit-in on the city jail lawn for the next 21 days.

Q: What was the final outcome?

DENNIS: Initially, the protest ended on August 2nd. October 1972, the city agreed to the following conditions: improved food services; recreation facilities updated; medical care provided; visitation rights extended to friends, family and attorneys; more social workers hired; community relations with city jail authorities improved; jail maintenance improved; and an inmate advisory board established. The final outcome was the city voted for a tax increase and built a new jail with better facilities. The city jail closed in 1999 and the St. Louis Justice Center opened in 2002. The Missouri History Museum recently had me to write a blog and added this historical event on their website History Happens Here: From Amical Meetings to Brutal Beatings: The 1972 City Jail Sit-In, co-written with Bob Williams. The July 20, 2017 blog was followed up with a January 30, 2018 panel discussion on updates of the Justice in the Prison System and comparisons of past and contemporary protest strategies. Both activities sparked attention on long-standing issues with the justice system. While we had made some progress in 1972, it was concluded that the progress was lost with lack of citizen oversight.

The city jail incident took place while I was still attending Forest Park Community College. It was my last year at Forest Park. Betty Lee and Dr. Lucille McClelland held a meeting and decided that they must get me out of St. Louis before something tragic would happen to me. I had been applying to colleges and decided to go to Wilberforce University located in Wilberforce, Ohio. They collected funds from leaders in the community, such as Dr. Donald Suggs and Dr. Lee Blount helped packed me up and sent me off to school. Ted Hudson, Hudson Embassy gave me a radio/record player. The Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority contributed funds. I really felt an obligation to do well at school because my family and community had galvanized resources to protect and support me.

Q: What was the campus of Wilberforce like?

DENNIS: Wilberforce's campus is located a few miles from Xenia, Ohio. There is nothing in Xenia, but cornfields as far as you can see. So, imagine coming from leading a major protest in a city and then landing in rural cornfields. I was in total shock. I asked myself, "Oh my God, what have I done?" How did I get here and how was I going to survive and stay in this rural hick town? And so, I didn't appreciate Wilberforce at first. It was too much of an adjustment, but I stayed on and I got involved in journalism. I started writing articles on school programs and activities in the community. In fact, an article on the 4-H Club led me to becoming a member of the club. As I reflect back on this period, it was my first introduction to rural daily life and rural people as well as my ability to develop coping skills. I learned about growing crops and farm life. I remember going to farm-house get together and tasting moon-shine made from of course, corn. These humble beginnings laid the foundation for working and socializing with rural populations all over Africa. Hard work, but rural people do know how to party in their manner. And, when I departed Wilberforce, the farmers killed a goat and barbequed it for me.

To support myself, I cleaned houses for professors living in the community, including those who were retired. With a keen interest in history, I was referred to an older gentleman named Dr. F.A. McGuinness, who had written a book about the history of Wilberforce University. He told me, "There must be boxes of my book sitting in the basement of Shorter Hall." Shorter Hall is the oldest dormitory on campus, actually it was the hall where I lived. I went to look for those books and I found them. I eventually interviewed him about the history of Wilberforce University, wrote an article and got it published in the university and local newspapers. I was nominated and received an award under Who's Who among Students in American Colleges and Universities in 1974. The award was for the scholastic, leadership and extracurricular activities related to articles and work in the rural community.

Q: What were social affairs like on the campus?

DENNIS: Fraternities or sororities organized social activities that attracted most of the students on campus. That was just not my cup of tea. I was still interested in politics, social change and community issues. I saw those "Greek" organizations as a waste of time. While in college, I never spent time going to dances, drinking alcohol or getting high. I can thank my strict religious upbringing for shielding me from these "evils." I never did them in St. Louis and didn't see a need to start at Wilberforce. I never played cards and still don't today. In 1988, I joined Iota Phi Lambda, Alpha Zeta Chapter in St. Louis. It promotes professionalism and business development among African-American women. Moreover, it served as my linkage with home while overseas and when I returned on visits, I could attend current sorority activities.

Q: You were involved in what type of circles?

DENNIS: I mentioned the farm communities. I was also captivated by people who came from the East Coast. They talked differently and they were widely diverse. The majority of African-American students on campus came from the East Coast. There were students whose parents came from the southeastern states and the West Indies. I started to hang

out with the international students who had heavy accents. In the dorm, we cooked and shared foods. I taught them to eat “greens” and they taught me to prepare and eat spinach dishes with several meats at one time. In fact, if I went to any dances it was to the African dances, particularly the Nigerians and the Ghanaians because they were the ones who were coming to the U.S. at that time. Senegalese, Guineans and Malians were rare as compared to today. The Francophones went to France or Belgium to study. They did not start coming in larger numbers to the United States until the 1990’s.

Q: Were you aware of the Foreign Service and what it was doing at all?

DENNIS: No, I was not. The Foreign Service and the Peace Corps were never introduced or presented to me as options for jump starting a career in international relations or diplomacy.

Q: How about politics? Were you involved in one?

DENNIS: Political parties and the elections and things?

Q: Yes.

DENNIS: At Wilberforce, we used to go to Dayton, Ohio to attend political campaign rallies and other events in Dayton. Dayton is 58 miles from Wilberforce. We had a political science professor who was very active in getting students to participate in political rallies. I don’t remember going door to door handing out papers. However, I do remember standing in front of malls and grocery stores to distribute campaign literature and getting people to sign petitions.

Q: When were you at Wilberforce, what years?

DENNIS: I was at Wilberforce’s campus from 1972 to 1973. I transferred so many credit hours from the junior college that I had enough credit hours to finish in one year. The counselor advised me to take additional class loads each trimester, 21 credit hours, so that’s what I did. Wilberforce had and it still has a cooperative work study program. This program allows students the opportunity to work, often in their field of study, a trimester and return to the university with cash to support their educational needs: books, transportation and other living expenses. I was in a pretty unique situation.

In August 1972, National Urban League Conference was held in St. Louis. I attended this conference, just before taking off to Wilberforce. At this conference, I met Walter G. Hooke, a manager from United Parcel Service (UPS), who impacted my life immensely. H-O-O-K-E was a White American. He said that I was a very dynamic, active young lady and when I get to Wilberforce I should write him about job opportunities. When I got to Wilberforce, I wrote him and told him that I had arrived at Wilberforce. Not only did he come to visit me; he brought along with him at least eight regional UPS personnel managers. The managers worked with the work study coordinator at the university to design the UPS/Wilberforce work study program. I became their very first student. They

offered me a position in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago or St. Louis. I said, well you knew, I don't want to go to California, that's too far. Having been studying with all these people from New York and the East Coast, my eyes were half open and wanted to see the other half, so I told them to send me to New York City (NYC).

So, in 1973 I took NYC by storm to work for United Parcel Service. At first, I worked out of a satellite recruitment office located on 231st Street in the Bronx. I'll will never forget how overly protective of me were the men in that office. These were all White Americans. They treated me as if I was their own young daughter, coming from the Midwest, and coming to the vicious big city of New York. So, they found me a nice studio apartment with one bedroom and a combined kitchen/living room in the Bronx. It was a basement apartment in a private home. I lived there and I walked to work for one year. The second year, I was transferred to the national headquarters on 43rd Street at the time. I stayed in New York for two years, from 1973 to 1975. That is the year, I went totally international. The other part of the deal with Wilberforce was for me to take two classes at Fordham University to complete my degree requirements at Wilberforce. I did so and transferred the credit hours back to Wilberforce and attended graduation in 1974. My parents came to my graduation along with my father's brother and his wife, Uncle Willie and Aunt Irma. They were proud of the first girl in the family to graduate from college. Two other men had graduated from college.

Q: Well, how did you find New York? I mean people speaking with a strange accent and rushing around.

DENNIS: Oh, my god. It was the most intriguing place I had ever been in all of my life. I just loved it and maintain that New York is one of my favorite cities in the world. It is a city that never sleeps! In my office, I was very much involved in recruiting. My duties consisted of recruiting personnel, mostly men as drivers, helpers and package handlers for the hub, the place where packages were sorted out and loaded onto trucks for delivery. I also conducted "Talk and Listen Sessions," a conflict resolution program whose skills served me throughout my professional life. I would go into the hub to mitigate disputes between managers and loaders or drivers. At that time, the hub employed mostly men. I think I was the first woman in management that UPS ever hired.

Q: Ah!

DENNIS: That's true. One of the pre-requisite for the work-study position at UPS was that I learn to drive a stick shift truck. I'll never forget it. I did not know how to drive a car, certainly not a truck. So, I came home to St. Louis and went to Uncle Willie, who had a sizable moving company with several trucks and employees. Uncle Willie instructed one of his workers to teach me to drive a stick shift truck. At UPS, I was not required to go out and deliver packages, but I had to drive the truck so that I could recruit and supervise the men who drove the trucks. So, that was part of my duties.

Also, I held meetings with different community groups, clubs and organizations to recruit employees. I went to the Chinese, the Italian and Black sections of NYC. This was during

the time when UPS needed to maintain equal employment balances among different ethnic groups. So, I got to know all of the ethnic clubs and their associations. It was through these contacts that I got invited to attend receptions and meetings at the United Nations. That's when I said, "Oh my God, the whole world is here." Since I was giving jobs and could not accept gifts, I received invitations to attend receptions at the United Nations' General Assembly.

I looked forward to attending the annual General Assembly receptions with representatives from the embassies and consulates. I would just say "Wow." At these receptions, the women dressed so elegantly and with fine clothes. I said to myself, "All I want is one piece of fine cloth and one piece of gold. I didn't know then, but these women wore 18 or 22 karats gold jewelry and frowned upon 14 karats used in the U.S. It seems that everybody spoke another language. So, I said to myself, that I must learn to speak another language fluently. Today, I have spoken different languages through the years, mainly African languages (Wolof from Senegal, Dioula from Côte d'Ivoire, Somali, Bamilèké from my husband's people's language - and some Fulani from Cameroon). While I have not maintained my level of fluency in these languages, I continue to speak and write French fluently, which is the official language for 24 African countries, representing 120 million people of former French colonies. Haiti is also a former French colony, but 80 percent of its 11 million (as of 2016) spoke Creole and 20 percent spoke French. Most of the countries I worked and lived in were francophone African. As for clothes, I now have fine clothes from all over. I have 18 karat gold sets as the women wear across Africa and Asia.

Q: In this job I think you would run into problems dealing with the Teamsters.

DENNIS: Yes. In 1974, UPS had a major strike in NYC that caused the company to lose clients as well as significant cash flow. The end results were lay-offs and I was one of those persons who was asked to transfer to another city. I told management that I didn't want to be transferred. Instead, I wanted to go overseas. What is ironic is that my mother came to NYC to visit me and considered it a "very wicked city." She told me that she was coming to pray that God would give me a mind to come home. Instead, my mind was absorbed toward Paris. I started to study French on my own in NYC and took classes at Alliance Française on the east side of Manhattan. I had already taken French at Wilberforce, where a foreign language was a requirement. I had a lot of trouble with it then; so, was not excited but was motivated when I learned that half of Africa speaks French and became determined to become fluent. I took classes at Alliance Française in the evenings after work. This is when I decided to start saving money: I stopped going to the jazz clubs, stopped going to Broadway plays, and stopped hosting dinners and get togethers at my studio. I got serious about saving my money and putting more money in the bank to prepare for going overseas. My parents always told us to put aside for a rainy day. Daddy had a bowl of coins for tough times. So, I always had a culture of savings. This practice was reinforced by an expression from my god-mother, Pearlie I. Evans: "Spend, Save and Share."

I had applied for several scholarships. I went to the main branch of NYC Public Library down on 42th Street to find information about study abroad programs. I read a book entitled “Study Abroad Programs,” and I started applying to different universities in France and Belgium. Paris and other French towns seemed very expensive, but Belgium seemed to be affordable. My contacts in Belgium essentially helped me to navigate acceptance at the University of Mons in Belgium. I had enough money for airfare and to support myself for a year. I have always maintained a saving account and had saving bonds taken out of my checks at work, even on my first job at the Records Center.

I was determined to travel across the Atlantic Ocean on Boeing’s new 747 Jumbo Jet which had come out a few years earlier. I wanted to fly on that thing. It was featured in the New York Times as the “Queen of the Skies.” Size and speed of the 747 were features that captured me. So, in 1975, I paid \$417 for a Trans World Airlines (TWA) coach ticket to fly directly from John F. Kennedy (JFK)/New York to Charles de Gaulle International (CDG)/Paris.

Q: So, this would be your first time out of the States, was it?

DENNIS: Yes. This was my first trip outside of the U.S.

Q: Well, what were your immediate reactions when you got to Paris?

DENNIS: My reactions were as if I had landed in another world, more futuristic. The airport’s circular terminal connecting seven satellites with boarding gates reminded me of a scene out of the Jetsons cartoon television show. Overhead, the escalators were covered with tubes-shaped ceilings to protect passengers from rain and one can look up and see the sky. When I arrived in Paris, I was armed with my classroom repetitions/dictées. I was confident that I could speak French. I quickly learned that people couldn’t understand me. I was speaking, but it shocked me that after all of that time and money spent learning to speak French at Alliance Française no one could understand me. I didn’t have the flow, tone, pronunciation or intonations. I didn’t have any of it. I’ll never forget; the taxi driver asked me, “Sont-ces vos valises, mademoiselle? (Are these your suitcases, young lady?) He spoke so fast! I was in shock, I didn’t even know how to respond to him. Fast forward, today, French people are confused by my French accent. They tell me that I speak good French with an accent that makes it difficult to determine my origins. This is a result of my living in France, Belgium and in different francophone African countries. I learned to adjust my French to the different settings: standard grammatical for work and “petit Française au quartier.”

In the taxi from the airport, the cars seemed so small. The little “deux cheveaux” (two engine cars). Coming from America, where everything was so much bigger. I said, “Oh, my god, these look like cars for children. Arriving at a host family’s apartment, which was located in the 18th “arrondissement” (division), on the third floor, I was introduced to winding stairs going to the third, fourth and higher floors. The lack of elevators seemed strange to me at the time. Space in the apartment was so tiny compared to my small studio in New York. The toilets were just appalling. There was the version where the

tanks were in the air and you pulled a chain to flush the bowl. Then, the squat/Turkish versions in public places (with tanks and water from the floor). It was a big adjustment to find a coin before you go to the bathroom in public places such as stores. Today, I have fallen in line and make sure I keep coins for the toilet when I am in France. The toilet paper was more like writing paper. It was brown-colored and so thick that I wrote letters on it and sent them back to U.S. Those were some of my first impressions of Paris, “the city of love.”

Then, there was the food. The French don’t joke with their food. Nothing was instant and few “dry spices are used.” Store front grocers with fresh fruits and vegetables still decorate the streets today. Meals must be freshly cooked and of good quality. It seemed to me that the French live to eat and spend hours at the dinner table with family and friends. No eating on the run in Paris. It is for this reason, I enjoy going to the French world in France or in Africa. Now, I create this environment in my home among my friends and family who enjoy dining at the table with fine linen, plates and silverware.

Another thing I noticed the first time I went to Paris was that baguettes, wine and water were just everywhere. People walked home with their freshly baked baguettes and bottles of table wine and spring water, just like I had read in my text books, but now I was really seeing it firsthand. By the time, I went to Belgium, I had fallen in line with French culture and was carrying my own freshly baked baguettes with bottles of wine and water to accompany my meals. It may have been cheap wine and I would drink a half a glass to make it last longer. I also got addicted to cheeses and “charcuterie” during this time. Today, I have cut back on the cheeses and charcuterie, but I still enjoy “foie gras.” I now understand that it comes in season during the end of the year holiday season in France and in the U.S., including in St. Louis.

In Paris, I was welcomed by a Guinean family. I met his uncle in NYC. He was one of many African art dealer friends who befriended me one day in New York. They stopped me in the street and asked me if I was the wife of one of their colleagues who recently arrived come from Senegal. I became good friends with this group of art dealers who sold African art to collectors and to museums. These friends have been my source of contact all over Africa. When I arrived in Abidjan, they organized a dinner to receive me and introduced me to their wives and children. One of them took me to his shop and told me to pick any piece of art I wanted, my first collectors’ item.

Back to Paris, the uncle arranged for me to stay with his nephew who had a typical small apartment in the 18th arrondissement, where most people of African descent lived. After a few days, I went to live with his uncle. He was a World War II veteran who married a French lady and stayed on in France after the war. They lived in a community called St. Denis on the outskirts of Paris. The wife took me to open air markets or boutiques daily to shop for our meals for the day. Thanks to her, I got a solid foundation in French daily life, language and culture. She spoke NO English, so I had to learn to communicate in French and listen closely. She was patient and we cooked together: lots of French one-pot stews or meats with sauces accompanied by “pomme de terre sauté” (stir-fried potatoes).

Q: Well, tell me about Belgium. What was it like there?

DENNIS: My experience in Belgium was filled with adjustments. The Université de Mons had a program for English speakers who wanted to learn to speak French. Unfortunately, the school had mailed me a letter to my old address in New York and the letter was forwarded to St. Louis. I had already departed for Paris. I went straight to the University of Mons, where I was informed that the program had been canceled. The registrar gave me a long list of schools to apply to in Brussels. I never felt so disillusioned in all of my life. So, I went back to Brussels and rented a room at the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association). At the same time, I was going through this list to find a place to study French. The first place I checked was the "Chambre du Commerce du Bruxelles." It offered French and Dutch classes. This was the most affordable program to study French in Belgium and the majority of the students were immigrants from Yugoslavia, so I had lots of Yugoslavian friends who was in my French classes. They taught me to make their tomato and cream-based soups and stews. In fact, these women were studying French to work in Belgium homes as housekeepers. My new friends helped me find work cleaning Belgium houses. At the YWCA, I had Moroccan girlfriends who taught me to make couscous with lamb stew. I acquired a taste for these meals and make them today.

Eventually, I enrolled at IFCAD (Institut de Formation de Cadres pour le Développement), a school for missionaries who were going to work in Africa. The school was originally founded to train African administrators. Students attended IFCAD from Canada, the U.S. and other parts of the world, including China; I remember there was a Chinese young lady, Ming Long who was in that class and she was learning to speak French to become a diplomat for her government. I stayed there and I finished that course. Nevertheless, it was a very, very challenging experience. In fact, the instructor told a Ghanaian lawyer and me that we would have difficulties speaking French properly. I was so discouraged. No matter what we did, we couldn't satisfy that instructor. We finished at the lower level of the class, but we finished. I was always discouraged going to class, but I did learn very solid French grammar and structures. The school administration supported us to stay at the school. In fact, at the end of the class, I received a scholarship to attend the "Institut International de Droits de l'Homme" (The International Institute of Human Rights) July 1976 session for legal experts from all over the world. The sessions, held in Strasbourg, France, brought experts together to discuss cutting-edge topics related to the protection of fundamental rights.

Housing was challenging in Brussels. After the YMCA, I moved to the "commun" of St. Gilles. Saint-Gilles is one of the artistic centers in Brussels and filled with student life. In addition, it had a large Congo-Kinshasa population. I found an affordable studio in St. Gilles. I'll never forget this place. The building was a house that had been divided into three-four studios for students. My studio was located on the first floor. It consisted of a bed, a small face bowl to wash your hands. For cooking, it had a little two-eye hot plate. To go to the toilet, you had to go upstairs. It seemed that the other people living in the building never flushed the toilet. There was a bucket sitting next to the toilet, because the pull chain to flush the toilet was always broken. The landlord never repaired it. I had

enough of getting water to fill the bucket and taking it upstairs. So, I had to find other means to use the toilet. I held myself until I got to school, which became a problem.

Q: Yes.

DENNIS: That is when I started to use newspaper to do my personal business, wrap it up and take it to the trash can.

Q: Good for you.

DENNIS: Yes. That's what I did right there in Belgium, the capital of Europe. I did this, I guess, for about two or three months. Betty Lee, the person who was beat in the city jail with me, heard about my challenges in Brussels. On one of her annual trips to France, Betty came to see me in Belgium. She saw firsthand my living condition and came back to the States and told another friend who was a part of the Committee for Equal Justice, Dr. Lucille McClelland. Betty and Dr. McClelland sent me money so that I could move into a better place. I took a bigger studio with the luxury of my own bathroom - complete with a functioning pull chain to flush the toilet, a real luxury. I also had a two-eye hot plate for cooking.

Q: That must have been tough.

DENNIS: Yes, it was tough, but for me with my own toilet, I had moved up in the world.

Q: Did you have any idea of what this was all going to lead to?

DENNIS: No. All I knew is that I was studying French. I was still planning to study international law. Unfortunately, the same year I completed French, which was a requirement to study at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Free Liberty University of Brussels), the Government of Belgium passed a law increasing tuition for all foreigners originating from developed countries. The new amount represented a threefold increase in tuition. With this price increase, I tried to make a case that while I'm from a developed country, I'm a low-income minority. It fell on deaf ears. All they saw was an American. I knew that there was no way I could afford to study in Belgium, so I started making plans to return to the U.S., since my funds were running out. Deep within I wanted to stay in the French world, because I could hold a two-way conversation. I found it empowering and inspiring to communicate with native French-speakers, Belgium or Zairians (now, Congolese) nationals. I said to myself that I had to find a way to stay in the French world.

Allow me to mention that while my life in Belgium had its challenges, I do remember the enriching life experiences. It was in Brussels that I learned to interact socially with White Americans, not related in a work environment. I participated in events at the United States Information Agency (USIA). Coming from segregated St. Louis, I had never had a White American friend. While I had worked professionally with Whites, we returned to our communities after work. I met a young lady whose husband was working in Brussels for an American company. We would meet at United States Information Agency (USIA)

to attend cultural events together. Afterwards, we went for “demitasse” (expresso coffee) and visited Belgium tourist sites. This friendship, based on speaking English and forgetting French for a couple of hours a week, taught me that I had more in common with her than with Belgium nationals even if it was no more than our preference for hamburgers served on a bun rather than “steak tartare with a raw egg yolk on top.”

I always dreamed of going to Africa. I looked at the cost of going to Ivory Coast from Belgium, as it was called then; it changed its name to Côte d’Ivoire in 1986. Airfare was too expensive for my budget. To make matters worse, the Ivorian Embassy in Brussels told me I would have to have a round trip airline ticket to obtain a visa. There was no way I could afford a round trip airline ticket. My life was at a standstill in Brussels, until one evening. I was sitting in the train station at “Gare du Midi” having a “demitasse.” I overheard two Moroccan young men sitting behind me discussing their plans to travel to Africa by train from Gare du Midi. I turned around and I asked them in French, “Ai-je vous entendis dire qu’il y a un train qui va en Afrique?” (Did I hear you say that there’s a train that’s going to Africa?) Oui, (yes). They said it in a matter of fact way, as if it was a fact that everybody knew and why I didn’t know about it. So, I went and asked Amelda a girlfriend from Barbados if this was true. She said yes, Belgians go on vacation to Morocco each year. I told her I’m going to Africa. So, I inquired some more, did my homework at USIA’s American library, and found that the Strait de Gibraltar, a narrow strait of eight miles, connects the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Wow, my dream since I was 12 years was about to come true: go to my ancestral homeland, Africa. I wrote my mother and told her to cash the rest of my savings bonds and send me the money. I didn’t tell her what I was going to do. I tried to get one of my girlfriends from Sierra Leone, Eva to go with me. Eva wrote her parents telling them she was going to hitchhike to Africa with this American friend. Her father quickly sent her some money to stay in Brussels. She backed out and stayed behind in Brussels. Eva and I are still the best of friends. We chat regularly through social media.

Eva accompanied me to “Gare du Midi” to help me with my three blue Samsonite hard back suitcases. I have never travelled as a hitchhiker with a back-pack trapped on my back. Eva put me on the train to Africa. The most unforgettable experience was me telling her, “Girl, I am going to Africa to find the people who know what to do with my hair.” It is for this reason, I have had the most intricate traditional and modern African hair styles. With all of the Senegalese hair braiding shops in the U.S. today, one no longer has to travel to get real braids. While they have “Americanized braids and North American styles have become popular back in Africa, it is still possible to ask for the traditional braiding styles Daba, (the lady who braids my hair braider in St. Louis,) gives me.

At the Belgian customs border, my suitcases were searched. I had a manual portable Smith and Corona typewriter among my personal items. The customs officials in Brussels questioned me about it. When I got to the border control in Spain, my typewriter was missing. I’m not sure why, but it was missing!

The SNCB (French National Railroads) passed from Brussels, Belgium to France and then on to Spain. I always remember the French ladies who offered to share their meals with me. They broke off a thick piece of bread (pain de champagne) to give me along with some wine and cheese. The fast rail train rocked us on the tracks from Brussels to Valence to Barcelona to Madrid and finally Malaga. From there, I caught a ferry to Tangier, Morocco crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. On the ferry, I had a negative experience that turned into a positive one. There were some Moroccan men, who tried to steal my passport. One tried to befriend me, while the other picked my pocket. I told them, in French, if they came over here again, they were going to find out that I'm a real Black American out of St. Louis. And they ran away.

Two young White ladies saw how I defended myself and got rid of those guys. They realized that I was an American and came over to introduce themselves after all of the commotion settled down. They were from one of those states on the east coast, which I can't remember. They explained to me that they had rented a car to drive from Tangier to Casablanca and offered me a ride. So, I rode with them from Tangiers to Rabat, Rabat to Casablanca. They dropped me off at the cheapest hotel that we could find. We had Fodor's Travel Guide for Europe and Morocco on \$5 a day. The hotel was located in what they called the "Ghetto." Do you know what the Ghetto is?

Q: What?

DENNIS: Have you ever heard of the Ghetto in Casablanca?

Q: Well I've heard of the casbah.

DENNIS: The what?

Q: The casbah.

DENNIS: What's a casbah?

Q: Well it's sort of a very native area of Casablanca.

DENNIS: Okay. No, I have not heard of casbah. Well, maybe that's another name for this neighborhood. I remember something called the "Ghetto." It is where Senegalese, Malians, and people from other West African countries reside until they find an illegal or legal boat, if they receive papers, to cross the Strait of Gibraltar to go to Europe. Sometimes, they're waiting for somebody to send money, a passport or papers or whatever else to travel to Europe. Sometimes, they wait months and find odd jobs to eat to live day by day. So, I met them at this cheap hotel where I was staying. Actually, they didn't have much, but they were protective of me. These men showed me how to eat on a limited budget at the souks (open-air markets), rather than going to restaurants. I stayed in the Ghetto for a couple of weeks. I realized that I didn't want to stay in Morocco. I still wanted to go to "Black Africa." I found Morocco interesting. It was clear that there had been racial mixing between the Arabs and Africans. However, Abidjan was beckoning

me to get there as if my life depended upon. I still did not have the money to buy a round trip ticket. To make matters worse, my travel coincided with the year the Western Sahara conflict erupted and Americans were not allowed to cross the Sahara Desert by land. I ended up taking a flight from Casablanca to Nouadhibou, a port city and the graveyard for ships. The flight stopped-over in Nouadhibou and continued on to Nouakchott, both in Mauritania.

On that flight, I met a White American, whose name I don't remember. He worked for an agency that I had never heard of: USAID (United States Agency for International Development). I told him of my situation. He was friendly and appeared safe. He invited me to come home with him and his son. I remember the son being an adopted boy from South America, about 10 years old.

Nouakchott, at that time, was a sandy desert town with little development. There were lots of one-story square concrete houses that were painted in pale blues, greens and rose colors. Nothing attractive. This is where I saw my first tents with camels parked behind them and sheep roaming around without barriers. These tents seemed to be everywhere. I learned that the nomads had fled the droughts in the desert and came to the city to set up their tents. The place did not look like a city and certainly not one where I wanted to stay. There were more dark-skinned Africans here than in Morocco, but the nomadic Berbers were more visible. Arabic is the official language. French is also spoken because the country was colonized by the French. Men were dressed in long sky-blue cloths with open sides so the air can flow and one can see the white under garment and blue head/face wraps. Women wore long black wraps, including head coverings. The place seemed depressing to me.

I stayed with the USAID family for a few days, then he found a missionary couple who were taking the 328 miles road trip for eight hours from Nouakchott to Dakar. The couple was going to Dakar to shop for food items not available in Nouakchott.

Today, Nouakchott clings to its traditions making it one of the least developed places on the continent. Most African countries have a modern capital city. The country does operate Mauritanian Airlines International, which is one of the most reliable airlines between Conakry and other cities up and down the West and Central African coasts. The internet exposes people to life in other countries, creating desires for changes among the youth. Those long black dresses have been replaced with bright colorful cloths. Unfortunately, generations of people continue to provide free labor and girls are sexually abused by masters in what the United Nations classifies as the last country in which is a slavery stronghold. Today, Libya also has active slave markets of African migrants who are auctioned for \$400.

When the missionaries and I got to the border between Rosso, Mauritania divided by the Senegal River from Rosso, Senegal on the other side, the Senegalese consulate officer asked me where I was coming from and where was I going. At the end of his rigid interrogation, he said, "Bienvenue chez toi" (Welcome to your home). Tears rolled down my cheeks. I was overwhelmed with joy that I had arrived Black Africa and I could

understand and respond in French. The missionary couple and I continued our road trip to Dakar. Upon arrival, they let me out in the center of “Place de l’Indépendance.” This was my loneliest moment in all of my travels. This section of the city was bustling - busy with lots of people walking, cars, buses and taxis. I flagged down a taxi and asked the driver to take me to the cheapest hotel in town. After I settled in, I started looking for the Doumbia family, who I knew in New York and they were relatives of the Syllas. I had met Mr. Fode Doumbia with his wife, who I later learned was his second and preferred wife. At the main family house in Dakar, he came periodically from NYC to visit the family and the first wife. I called the telephone number and the first wife answered the phone. She had heard of me and told me to come on over. I took a taxi to 73 rue Tiers, not far from Place de l’Indépendance. I lived with this family for six months. On one of my transits through Dakar en route to Conakry in 2012, I reconnected with them. One of the sons, now an adult with his own family lives in the house and received me warmly.

Q: Oh boy.

DENNIS: Oh yes. After a short period, maybe about a month or so, I was no longer a guest, but became a member of the household. This meant that I had chores to do like everybody else in the family. I went to the market daily to shop for food, help with preparing meals, including serving food in large bowls. I took care of the children, especially when the women went to their Sunday meetings, weddings and burials. I did everything that everybody else did in the household. As a result of this experience, today I cook Senegalese food just like Senegalese women and people don’t understand how. I often get comments such as “This food tastes like a Senegalese woman cooked it.” “Are you sure you did not hire a Senegalese to come and make this Tiep Bou Dien.” Tiep is the national dish of Senegal made from fish, rice with vegetables. I learned to make Mafe a peanut stew cooked with vegetables and Yassa, a chicken marinated in lemon and Dijon mustard. Through this experience, I reinforced the art of preparing food to unite family and friends. My mother would remind me that I left St. Louis “fixin pots.” In addition, you never make just enough for your household, but add for visitors who will just stop by. This was a familiar practice to me because it is done down south in America and used to be done in St. Louis. With the women, I got my first initiation into “rubbin” my body down at night with “beurre de karité” (shea butter). Interesting, the French tried to market a modernized version of karité, but the Senegalese women failed to buy it because it had lost the odor and consistency. Today, karité or shea butter is a million-dollar industry along with black soap.

During 1976 to 1977, I taught Business English at Lycée Maurice de la Fosse on a local contract with the Government of Senegal. I earned 59,000 CFA (equivalent of \$120 USD) a month and a government housing voucher. I departed Senegal before the housing voucher was processed, but I did get paid regularly. The people and Government of Senegal truly welcomed me “home.” When I started teaching at Lycée Maurice de la Fosse, I moved from the Doumbia extended family house. The family helped me rent a room with an elderly Lebanese lady. She was a clairvoyant and told me that she saw me leaving her on a boat. I didn’t believe her and paid no attention to her declarations.

I met American Peace Corps volunteers in Dakar. I started to think about joining the Peace Corps and I was trying to figure it out. All of the information I received indicated that I would have to join back in the States. Then one day, I met Dr. Ermon Camara, an African-American lady, who was from Washington, D.C. She had recently been appointed by President Jimmy Carter to be the Peace Corps "Directrice" (Director) in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. She was in Senegal to strengthen her French communication skills. When she met me, she said, "You're running around Africa and I need you in Abidjan. I need Black Peace Corps volunteers." She said, "When I get to Abidjan I would like to stay in touch with you." So, when she got to post, she sent me a telex at a hotel. The hotel called the house telling me that she had identified a position for me as "an in-field enrollee." As an in-field enrollee, I had to complete all of my medical and dental exams in Dakar and send them to her.

At the end of the school year, I was ready to leave Dakar for Abidjan. In order to travel by air to Abidjan, I needed a round-trip ticket to get a visa. I learned that there were cargo boats that leave from Dakar to Abidjan. So, I went down to the port area to inquire about ships that traveled the Atlantic Ocean between Dakar and Abidjan. I learned that there was a cargo boat that originated from Abidjan and traveled to France with a stop in Dakar. At the seaport, I was told to go and talk to the captain of the boat. I remember it was early in the morning, 3 or 4 am, when the ship docked in Dakar. I met the captain and told him that I was trying to get to Abidjan to join the Peace Corps. He was a Belgian national. When I started telling him that I studied French in Brussels. He asked me questions about Belgium and I started naming the names of towns where I had visited: Huy, Charleroi, Liege, Bruges and Ghent to name a few. He was impressed. He told me, "Go and buy the cheapest ticket you can find and come with your bags; we sail tonight." I rushed to buy my ticket and packed my bags. Upon boarding the ship, the captain gave me his cabin. He and his wife moved to another cabin. I was served the best steaks, "frites" (French fries) and wine --- I ate the same food that was prepared by the ship's chef for the captain. I spent the five or six days reading and looking at the Atlantic Ocean all the way down to Abidjan. The name of the cargo vessel was Tonkoui, after Mont Tonkoui in Man, Côte d'Ivoire. I understand that the ship has been retired, but I'll never forget my first trip down the Atlantic to my long-desired destination, Abidjan. Upon arrival, I showed the port immigration authorities my Peace Corps documents and a temporary entry visa was stamped in my passport. I had finally stepped onto the soil of my destination since I leaving NYC in 1975: Abidjan!

From the seaport, I took a taxi to the Peace Corps' office. I arrived on a weekend so nobody was in the office except the security guard. He contacted the secretary, Louise, who instructed him to put me in a taxi to her house. She received me so warmly. I recall her house being simple with a combined living and dining room. It was clean and very homely. She fed me and called the director who eventually came and picked me up. The Peace Corps' new volunteer training/orientation session had already started. The next day, I traveled to Abengourou in the Eastern Region of the country, next to Ghana. When I got there, the 59 volunteers were White, except for one other Black female. The other volunteers thought that I was a teacher since I was Black and already spoke French. I said "No, I'm a volunteer too."

To complete my Peace Corps application process, I was signed up as an in-field enrollee. Madame Camara sent my application documents to Washington, D.C. and they were rejected because Peace Corps was no longer recruiting “generalists.” I had already started work. She told me that the rejection was not about me, but her. As “la directrice,” she could decide to bring on in-field enrollees if positions existed that could not be filled. The position she wanted me to fill had been vacant for two years. Peace Corps/Ivory Coast was unable to get a volunteer to accept to create a Business English Department at a management school. The volunteer would have to recruit students to attend classes at companies. It seemed as if the position was tailor made for me. With my UPS experience and having taught English in Dakar, I was confident and ready to roll. In addition, the position required the volunteer to have some basic listening and speaking French abilities to participate in staff meetings. I had all of these requirements and more! I was so enthusiastic about my new job and overwhelmed about finally being in Abidjan. I had contacted my old colleagues at UPS, who sent me business terms and expressions to teach the Ivorian business managers.

When my application was rejected by Peace Corps Washington, Madame Camara advised me to contact my U.S. Congressional Representative. The person who was beat in the jail with me, Pearlie I. Evans, was the manager of the First Congressional District office in St. Louis. She contacted Congressman William “Bill” Clay, Sr. and within 48 hours, a telex was received at the Peace Corps/Ivory Coast office indicating that my application was being processed. I was overjoyed but felt obligated to do an outstanding job because my congressman had gone to bat for me. I became a star volunteer during my tour of two years.

My first year, I created the Business English Department at “Centre Industrielle de la Gestion d’Entreprises (CIGE),” a parastatal, partly-owned by the Ministry of Education and partly by private companies. To help me recruit students for my program, CIGE provided me with a monthly taxi allowance. Disappointingly, most of my students were White Frenchmen, because they were the Director Generals of companies in the 1970’s. After creating the department and completing the first year, I suggested to Peace Corps that we shouldn’t provide our services to French executives in Africa. I argued that we should provide these services to Ivoirians, but there were not enough Ivoirian managers to be recruited into my class. Peace Corps/Abidjan decided to pull its resources from the management school. CIGE recruited a former Peace Corps Volunteer who remained in country to manage the department and teach the course.

I was re-assigned to a new position as an “animatrice rurale” (rural development volunteer) working in rural communities to promote women in development. This position was created as a result of the First World Conference on Women held in 1975 in Mexico City. The conference focused on gender equality and the elimination of gender discrimination; the integration and full participation of women in development; and increased contribution by women in the strengthening of world peace. The Government of Ivory Coast ratified the agreement and opened its “Ministère de la Condition Feminine” (Ministry for the Conditions of Women). I was reassigned to the women’s

ministry given that I was single. It was okay for me, an African-American woman, to travel but not for an Ivorian woman who was married and whose husband was less likely to allow her to travel without him. I was given a car with a driver to take me throughout the countryside to design and monitor economic development programs for women. I started collaborating with the different ministries to integrate women programs into existing programs or to design new projects in agriculture, livestock, healthcare and basic education. The elephant of my trips upcountry took me to Kaniasso, located 717 kilometers (445 miles) from Abidjan, a village about 58 kilometers (36 miles) from Odienné, close to the Mali border. This was my first real initiation into rural Africa and economic development. I worked alongside a Belgian rural sociologist, Thérèse Deneve-Stevelyneck, to design an integrated rural development project for women.

When Thérèse and I arrived in the village, a large ceremony was held to welcome us, complete with women dressed elegantly in flowing colorful gowns called “grand boubous.” Drums, flutes and balaphones filled the air to create the festive mode. The villagers had built new huts for each one of us. We shared a pit latrine for toilet with a shower nearby.

We traveled to 13 villages in the Kaniasso region to conduct focus group discussions with men and women. We also held separate meetings with women to understand their access to land/animals, inheritance, agriculture practices and needs. We assessed chicken houses to determine appropriate methods to improve poultry raising and increase production. We worked with the villagers to develop barriers made from local materials to enclose their small ruminants. Women were trained to vaccinate and care for their animals. Our project collaborated with the technical ministries such as health, livestock and basic education. We also introduced the cross-cutting theme of community governance. We studied who were the gatekeepers to make decisions about what takes place in the villages. This is where I learned of the important roles of “ancien combattants” (veterans), men who fought in World War II or Vietnam for the French and receive pensions. These critical opinion leaders were important in shaping how projects were received, accepted and eventually implemented in villages across Africa. I found veteran opinion leaders in Chad, Niger, Benin, Cameroon, and other villages in la Côte d’Ivoire.

We conducted research for four months in Kaniasso and two months in Abidjan to finalize the draft and submitted it to the Belgian government. Besides being introduced to planting ignames that stayed underground for two years or fonio, a nutritious grain in the millet family noted for diabetes prevention and weight loss, we became familiar with Kaniasso’s economy and reasons for slow growth. The project we designed addresses solutions to our findings.

I was fascinated by the role the drums played in announcing our arrival to villages to prepare for meetings. The sound of drum beats, or the original telephone as I call them, can travel and be understood for three to seven miles. The long-distance messages were sent on a relay system from one village to the next and everybody would show up for the meeting. Sometimes in the evening the villagers taught Thérèse and me to dance. These informal sessions under the moonlight with a few women and men to drum beats remain

vivid in my mind. Whenever I hear Malian or Maliké music, it still urges me get up and swing my arms.

To prepare for the animatrice role, I studied Dioula, a dialect of the Bambara spoken in Mali. We did not travel to Mali during our stay in the village. In Kaniasso, I practiced speaking and listening to Dioula even though we had a translator. In fact, I learned to speak Dioula well enough to understand the content of meetings and upon my return to Abidjan, I negotiated prices in the market without vendors asking me questions about my origins. Wow, this was real fun!

Toward the end of my Peace Corps tour, I started looking for what I was going to do next. Of course, I had a return ticket home, so I said I wanted to go home to St. Louis. After all, I had spent a year in Belgium and I traveled throughout to every country except Portugal in Western Europe during that time. I spent one year in Senegal and two years in the Peace Corps. That's four years away from the U.S. So, I was beginning to feel like oh, I really want to go home to St. Louis. However, I found a school in upstate New York that was looking for returned Peace Corps volunteers to launch a new program in rural development. I dropped my bags in St. Louis and headed for upstate New York. At SUNY-Binghamton, I studied "What happens when dams, roads and other infrastructure projects are developed without the input of communities? What needs to be done to mitigate the negative impacts of projects on communities?"

Q: I'd like to take you back to the Ivory Coast. I'd like to take you back to Africa. Can you tell me, what were your impressions of the students that you were all teaching and how they responded?

DENNIS: In Ivory Coast, my students were mature adults and directors of major private sector companies. It was in Dakar that I taught high school-aged students. Oh, my god. The students at de la Fosse were disrespectful in class. I'll never forget the expression that I learned, "Laisse le mouton pissee, Tabaki vendra" (Let the goats pee anywhere, because the holiday when people eat goats will come). This meant that could act like a clown, throw bubblegum and spit balls. Oh, they loved to talk, moved about, laughed at me with my accent and whatever. This was my first teaching experience and I didn't have control of my classroom. Nevertheless, I stayed with it and I had a very good mentor named Nafissatou (Nafi) M'Bodj, who now promotes computers in African schools. She was also teaching English at the same high school. She and I became good friends and we're still friends up until today. As a new teacher, Nafi coached me on how to gain control of my classrooms, connect with students and exercise behavior management. By the end of the semester, I had learned to command the classroom.

And during this time, I met another person who was very influential in my life, Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop. Do you know who he is?

Q: No.

DENNIS: He is a very distinguished Senegalese physicist, historian and anthropologist. In 1958, Dr. Diop conducted research for his Ph.D. thesis at the Sorbonne Université to prove that the ancient Egyptians were African. He conducted radiocarbon studies to test the skins of mummies to prove that they were Black. I had an opportunity to meet him and eventually to teach him English weekly. Actually, his laboratory was located near Lycée de la Fosse. He became my mentor and a sounding board to vet my frustrations of living in a large family setting and division of labor in households. It seems I was being given chores beyond my American capacity. I went to the market every day with a woman from the house. Then, we peeled, pounded spices and cooked the food. In addition, I helped wash clothes by hand. I should mention that in the 1970's Dakar was an Islamic country, rigid and restrictive. Today, people are more open-minded in Dakar. Women wear pants and European style dresses. Back then, I was walking home and in a knee level dress. I was approached by a man who told me "Prenez votre robe au tailleur et dites-lui d'ajouter un peu de panne (tissue)" in other words "take your dress to the tailor and tell him to add some cloth."

Diop walked me through the adjustments of a first-timer living in an African country with Islamic/Arabic influences. He often discussed the impact of Arab slave trade on Africans and the introduction of Islam before the Europeans came with their slave trade and Christianity. In 1987, the Université de Dakar (University of Dakar) was named Université Cheikh Anta Diop (University of Cheikh Anta Diop). In 2016, I led a book study group where we reviewed his book, *Black Africa: The Economic and Cultural Bias for a Federated State*. I compared what Diop predicted as it related to technology and Africa. I plan to make these findings available on my blog.

Q: Did you get any feel for the government of the Ivory Coast, how it impacted on the populace?

DENNIS: You know, yes. At that time that Ivory Coast was in its heyday. Félix Houphouët-Boigny was the president of Côte d'Ivoire and the country met all of my expectations. Abidjan was and continues to be modern, elegant, sophisticated and traditional all at the same time. In 1977, the country already had paved highways, paved streets and thriving cities. It is important to note that apartheid still existed in South Africa. Houphouët-Boigny declared that Ivory Coast was "un pays du dialogue." "We will always talk to other countries." So, they maintained an open-door policy with South Africa, when the world was calling for boycotts against all South African businesses and the government. Houphouët-Boigny didn't promote boycotting the country. He argued to maintain communications with them. So, trade between South Africa and Ivory Coast continued.

I was always very impressed with the level of economic and social development for all Ivoirians. The upper class, middle and lower incomes all had access to quality living standards at their levels. In fact, I remember one year, I came home from Peace Corps for vacation and I brought a young lady named Fanta with me. I met Fanta in the Treichville open-air marketplace in Abidjan. I was speaking in Dioula and she heard me and was wondering where I came from with my accent when I spoke Dioula. Fanta said she would

love to go to America. I told her to save her money and we could go together. She came to St. Louis with me, summer 1978. She was an ordinary primary school teacher. When I reflect back upon her visit, I realize that she had a salary that allowed her to buy a round-trip airline ticket and spending money to come to the U.S. This is not the case for other friends who I met in Senegal, Ghana or Burkina Faso at that time.

I think the Ivoirians have always had a higher standard or quality of life than most of the countries in Africa, other than South Africa and Kenya. I've seen other countries grow economically and improve the quality of life since then. Senegal and Ghana are examples. I measure improvements according to access to water, electricity and availability of items for sale in the markets, especially food. When I went to Ghana in 1978, my God, all of the shops were empty, they didn't have staple food items. They were having political unrest and coup d'états. This was in the age of one-party political systems. Today, Ghana has multi party-political elections. If citizens are not pleased with the incumbent government, they will vote them out. This was the case of the 2016 elections in Ghana. The peaceful transfer of power has resulted in steady economic growth and foreign investments. During my February 2017 visit to Ghana, I was pleased to see sky-scrappers being built by local and foreign investors.

In 2016, Nana Akufo-Addo became President-elect and was inaugurated as the 5th President of the Fourth Republic of Ghana and 8th President of Ghana on January 7, 2017. He will serve one term of four years in office until 2021. This type of transfer of power has led to economic growth. Ghana marketplaces and shops, owned by Ghanaians and Lebanese are well stocked. Everything is available in Ghana. Senegal and Ghana have developed affordable housing for low-middle income families. Electricity and water shortages are rare in urban zones and efforts are underway to improve access in the semi-urban and rural areas. These are tangible progress which local people enjoy. Consolidation of democracy goes hand in hand with development. Once countries hold several elections, investors, both from the diaspora and foreign, consider the country stable and are willing to make investments.

Corruption is the primary issue that countries in Africa must address. Local citizens and investors are drained of having to pay bribes. Politicians who run anti-corruption campaigns and pledge to deliver corrupt free services must respect their promises. Tanzania and Rwanda offer models to address current day corruption. Citizens across the continent are growing politically mature and turn to the ballot for change. When the ballot fails, civil war is evident as seen in Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. Cameroon fails to address its corruption problem and people feel helpless because President Paul Biya, 84 years old and 35 years in power, fails to step-down and allow credible elections. In 1994, the U.S. government closed USAID due to fraudulent elections.

In late 2016, the dormant Cameroon unification crisis woke up when francophone judges were assigned to the judicial system in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions. The Anglophone lawyers and teachers trade unions protested the appointment, leading to two persons killed and 100 persons arrested. By October 1, 2017, the situation

escalated to Anglophone Cameroonians declared independence from Francophone Cameroon. Ambazonia became the homeland of Anglophone secessionists. The Biya administration responded to the separation by sending the military to execute repressive measures of arrests, shootings in the feet, torture and other crimes against humanity, including rape. Social media depicts photos of daily atrocities and property destructions in Cameroon.

The root cause of the Cameroon problem dates prior to Cameroon's independence in 1961. Southern and Northern Cameroons were administered as a United Nations Trust territory. By the time British Southern Cameroons and French Cameroun gained independence in 1961, the French territory was more economically developed than its British counterpart. The two unequal former colonies became a single federal state; however, the disparities between the two were not addressed resulting in politically and economically marginalized Anglophone areas.

On October 1, 1960, Cameroon was reunited under one government based in the French section. The country was divided into eight French-speaking provinces and two English-speaking provinces with the promise of functioning as a homogenous country. Through the years, little has been done to include the Anglophones into the French administration. Biya's administration has ignored the Anglophone pleads for infrastructure and economic development resulting in the current crisis. When one travels from Yaoundé or Doula by road to Bamenda, the passable roads stop at Bafoussam. A road trip that should take five hours takes 12 hours. Potholes on the one or two lanes creates unbearable delays. People from Bamenda have been request road improvements for over twenty years.

International organizations have sought to mediate between the Biya administration and those calling for separation but no solution has been reached. English-speaking Cameroonians from Akwaya, a collection of villages located between Nigeria and Cameroon are taking refuge in Cross River state in Nigeria. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that they have registered 5,000 Cameroonians and estimate that 15,000 more are sheltering in the villages. UNHCR anticipates that a total of 40,000 refugees will settle in Cross River by the time full-blown war is declared. In my opinion, this historical error caused by slavery and colonization could be corrected by the United Nations and the African Unions recognizing the Ambazonians who have distinct linguistic and cultural ties.

Q: I was thinking, let's see, then you moved back to your time at where, what was the name of the place in New York you were studying?

DENNIS: Binghamton, located in upstate New York.

Q: At Binghamton. You were there from when to when?

DENNIS: I was at Binghamton from 1979 to 1981.

Q: What were you studying there?

DENNIS: I studied Development Anthropology under Dr. Michael Horowitz, a noted scholar on nomads and one of the founders of the Institute of Development Anthropology at SUNY-Binghamton. The Master of Arts degree program prepared students to conduct social soundness studies to determine the impact of large-scale economic development programs funded by the World Bank and USAID.

Q: How do development anthropologists perform your duties?

DENNIS: As a member of a multidisciplinary team, development anthropologist reviews various impacts of the local population's environment, society, and economy. We critique and contribute to projects and institutions that design and administer projects that seek to improve the economic well-being of the most marginalized, and to eliminate poverty. It is for this reason we are sometimes called the "barriers of bad news." The social soundness analyses anthropologists produce often speak on behalf of the vulnerable populations and includes changes to mitigate negative impacts of their livelihoods and cultures. I have worked on health care, agriculture, education and governance projects to design, implement or evaluate impacts of sustainable development projects. I have worked closely with local populations to identify potential changes and transmit them to technical teams to point out the disruptive nature of projects. Development anthropologists promote social change with respect of socio-economic and cultural norms.

Q: Who were the students? I mean the people who were with you? And also, were they Peace Corps veterans too?

DENNIS: Most of the students were from within the anthropology department. They had been encouraged to take classes in this new branch. Some of the students anticipated careers working for the Department of State, World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or one of the large non-governmental organizations such as CARE or Save the Children. A handful of us had returned from Africa and Latin America as volunteers. The program had just begun to attract Peace Corps volunteers. I remember Tom Painter, a returned Peace Corps volunteer who was in the rural sociology program at Binghamton. He took classes in the development anthropology program. There must have been about three or four of us who were Returned Peace Corps Volunteers.

Q: How did you find the courses?

DENNIS: The theoretical portions were initially difficult like any graduate school, especially since I had been out of school for a while. I spent a lot of time familiarizing myself with anthropological literature and concepts. I eventually enjoyed my studies because it allowed me to reflect and interpret what I had experienced in my travels in Europe and Africa. Concepts such as cultural materialism, structural functionalism, cross-cultural studies or social soundness had meaning. We also took soil science or livestock courses at Cornell University, which was an hour away.

The highlight of my experience at Binghamton was of course, getting my M.A. degree and then studying French. Prior to Binghamton, I did not have a certificate from an American institution to document that I had really studied and spoke French. I only had a diploma from Belgium that didn't have enough credibility in the U.S. So, counselors at SUNY-Binghamton advised me to study French in conjunction with my Master's degree, which I did. All of my research for my Master's degree was done in French and I took translation courses at the Comparative Literature Department at Binghamton. So, I simultaneously studied for the masters and earned a certificate in translation from Binghamton. I am proud of earning this certificate.

Unfortunately, a horrible incident happened to me during my studies at Binghamton, which was more than disturbing. A man attempted to rape and kill me.

Q: Oh my god.

DENNIS: This was a 20-year-old White man, who helped his father provide maintenance where I lived. I never knew his name. I just knew him as a worker. I lived in a house that had about three or four bedrooms, which had been converted into one room studios for students. He lived across the street from me.

He knocked on my door at 2 o'clock in the morning and said that he needed to check for a gas leak. He said that he had checked everybody else's place and wanted to check mine. So, I opened the door and he went into the small kitchen area, where the stove was located. He knelt down and looked under the stove. He didn't have any tools, only a pair of gloves. He got up from the floor and moved toward the front door as if he was leaving the studio. Rather than go out the door, he slammed it and announced he came to rape me and if I screamed he would kill me.

At that moment, he grabbed me by putting his arm around my neck. The choke hold caused me to be in a tonic immobile position and unable to speak. The two of us tumbled onto the bed and eventually crashed to the floor. I tried to resist him with all of my physical capability but was struck by his inordinate upper body strength. During the process, he broke the zipper on my nightgown. He managed to lie on top of me, groping me and he put his finger inside my vagina. When he lifted his arm off of my neck and throat to remove his penis from his pants. I felt his penis on my thigh. When I could speak, I pleaded for my life, "Please don't kill me, do what you want to do, just don't kill me." I was pleading with him for my life. Then, he suddenly stopped and said, "I can't do it and I am stupid." He rolled off of me. In an effort to seek safety, I persuaded him to go onto the porch.

We sat on the porch steps and talked about it and I asked him why me, he said that he had seen me and felt this was the only way he could be with me. He insisted that the landlord had called and told him to check for the gas leak. I told him that I will check with the landlord and if there wasn't a gas leak, I will decide what to do. I asked him to leave and he left. I noticed that he did not have shoes on, only his socks. As he walked down off the

porch, he told me not to say anything to anybody about his visit. I promised that I would keep my mouth shut.

Q: What did you do then?

DENNIS: Distraught and terrified, I called a close friend, Frances Thomas, in St. Louis and told her what had happened. I was hysterical. I did not want to alarm my mother or father. Frances calmed me down and told me to lock my door. We assessed my options and determined the alternatives of whether to report the incident to the police or not. I told her that if there was a really a gas leak, I will just move and not report it. However, if there wasn't a gas leak, I will report it to the police. She told me that if I reported it that I could expect to be treated as a criminal and it will be up to me to prove my claims. She asked me if I could handle the harassment and humiliation. She reminded me that if I didn't report it; he is likely to come back and the next visit could be worse. I told her that I would prefer to report it and deal with the consequences.

I had seen a sign advertising a Rape Crisis Center on the university's bus. I called information who dialed the center. I told the female representative what had happened. She called a cab to take me to the police station to file a police report. I took my nightgown with the broken zipper as evidence. The rape crisis representative met me at the police station and was supportive and comforting. I remember the police officers being less than polite and extremely disrespectful. I later learned that police commonly condemn sexual assault victims and women who file complaints are discredited by the entire criminal justice system: judges, jurors and the police officers/detectives. Victims are in a losing position even before they begin to prosecute. This is largely due to traditional rape myths, such as: rape claims are mostly false; rape happens only to "bad" women; rapes are committed by strangers; women secretly wish to be raped; rape is a Black-on-White crime or rapists are mentally ill persons.

Q: Yes, I understand.

DENNIS: I learned from the landlord that she had not sent anybody to check on a gas leak. So, I decided to prosecute. I went through counseling sessions at the rape crisis center. I read books on who rapists are and how they target their victims. I was trying to understand why this happened to me, how people viewed victims and would respond to me. I also had believed some of those traditional rape myths until it happened to me. This research and education on rape victims and their attackers allowed me to cope with this situation, see the bigger picture of prosecution and to stay in school. In retrospect, I think that this experience prepared me to remain calm during future crises in my life: the Somali ambush, potential airplane fires, Haiti earthquake and aftershocks and the ability to negotiate with challenging host country officials on behalf of the U.S. government.

Q: What happened after the police report?

DENNIS: There were articles in the Binghamton newspapers on the incident. The negative publicity meant my name was discussed all over campus. I was still in shock and

afraid to live in my studio. An African-American professor and his wife invited me to stay with them a few days. There was one other minority student in the anthropology department. Her name was Claudia Chang, a Chinese-American. Everybody else was White American in the anthropology department. When the incident happened, the Whites didn't know how to console me or say anything supportive. They withdrew from me and made me feel as if I had done something wrong. During my rape crises research, I learned that family and friends respond to disclosure in a counter-productive manner because they are surprised and just don't know what to say or do. I gave my fellow classmates the benefit of doubt. Claudia and her boy-friend (a White American) embraced me and took me home to stay with her for weeks, until I could move to another studio.

I should also mention that Black students on campus wanted to protests on my behalf. I negotiated with them to hold off and let's fight the case in court. If I lost, we can then consider alternative methods to highlight the incident. They were concerned that other Black female students could become victims of sexual assaults in Binghamton.

At that time, Broome County had a population of about 225,000; it was located at the three Interstate highways. IBM and Link Aviation had its manufacturing industries located in Binghamton as well as major hospitals and the liberal arts branch of the State University system (SUNY-Binghamton). The population, which had been predominantly working-class White for decades, was starting to show signs of diversity by reason of a recent southern mini-migration and the SUNY branch influence, which attracted international students and faculty.

Q: So, you stopped campus riots which was an honorable thing to do.

DENNIS: Yes, it was the right thing to do at that time. Since there was no gas leak, I decided to press charges and prosecute my attacker in court. The prosecutor's office did their investigations.

Q: Oh boy. Did you go to trial? What was his charge?

DENNIS: Yes, I went to trial. My attacker denied having been in my studio. He was charged with first degree sexual abuse. The trial was a case of my creditability against his. The Evening Press, Binghamton, NY, January 27, 1981 ran an article entitled, Verdict in sex case a test of credibility.

Q: Do you mind talking about your experience as a victim in court?

DENNIS: No, I can talk about it better these days without getting emotional.

The incident took place May 25, 1980 and the trial occurred January 21, 1981. During the lapse in time, articles were written in the newspapers and I was running around to the prosecutor's office and Rape Crises Center to prepare for the trial. The preparation for the

trial took place during my last year of graduate school. I managed to stay sane, focus on my studies and maintain my grade point average.

As the day of the jury selection approached, Patrick Monserrate, the prosecutor correctly assumed that I would be the only woman of color in the courtroom. He had drilled me on the type of questions I could expect the defense to ask and how I should respond to them. I later learned that as prosecutor, he was concerned that my dramatic African dresses might be a put off to some of the prospective jurors. He recently shared with me, “I needn’t have worried. When Regina arrived in court, she looked like a New York City fashion model: two-piece suit with hair done and makeup tastefully applied. We were ready.” This is why I say that I have obtained my cultural equilibrium. I am capable of adapting to all settings.

For the trial, the prosecutor decided to allow me to sit next to him at his counsel table, rather than in the spectator section (outside the bar), which was unusual. He had never sat a plaintiff next to him. The judge inquired, “Can you do that?” The prosecutor replied “Yes.” In January 2018, Patrick, who went on to become a judge, told me that he had never seen or heard of a prosecutor accepting this type of sitting arrangement. He did it for my trial and has never done it in his 60 years of practicing law.

During the jury selection, Maurie O’Brien, the defense attorney, a lifelong Binghamton resident and a proud representative of the Irish community, regaled prospective jurors by describing the Davis family as a model member of the community and how the viciously false accusations of “this woman” (pointing at me) had caused great pain and suffering to the Davises. Robert Davis, Jr. was the accused attacker.

When it came to the prosecutor’s turn, he reminded the prospective jurors that I was the only person of color in the courtroom. He asked them, “How “we” would feel if any of “us” were faced with trying to convince a roomful of people from a different race of the value of our truth.” He went on to ask each prospective juror to listen to Regina’s story. A jury of nine men and three women were selected.

Q: How did the trial go?

DENNIS: I was the prosecutor’s first witness. He asked me, “Who is Regina Dennis?” I narrated my life until coming to Binghamton to study and live on Clarke Street, where the incident took place. I told them of growing up in St. Louis, going to school in Ohio, working for United Parcel in New York City, traveling in Europe and studying French in Brussels, traveling to Africa by train and boat and my service as a Peace Corps volunteer.

He stood and asked me a second question, “Why is Regina Dennis here today?” I explained the incident in details that took place as mentioned above. This was the easy portion of the trial. The cross-examination experience was everything that I had read about and more. It was one of my worst experiences in my life. The defense attorney’s line of questioning was designed to intimidate and confuse me. I was on the witness stand

for a total of 3 hours and 10 minutes! Forty minutes responding to the prosecutor and 2 hours and 30 minutes for the defense!

Other prosecutor witnesses included the prosecutor's investigator, the rape crises center representative and the police.

I kept my composure on the witness stand while I told my story. For the cruel cross-examination, the defense attorney asked me tough questions and really treated me inhumanly. He repeated the same question in different manners in an attempt to cloud my thinking so I would tell a lie. He accused me of luring the Davis young man into my studio and making up the story about the attack to avoid paying that month's rent. Implicit in the defense attorney's questioning was that I was a liar, stupid, a schemer, a bad tenant and some sort of African low life. While in the presence of the jurors, the prosecutor later explained that I spoke with "exquisite courage and self-control." I did not raise my voice. After the two and half hour cross-examination, I walked confidently out of the court room, ran to the bathroom and flowed a river of tears.

Q: So often this is the case, you know. There are references made to this type of questioning by the defending attorney.

DENNIS: Yes, I learned from this experience.

Q: I was wondering whether you would mind talking a bit about the defending attorney turning you into the victim all over again. I mean some of the questions that you were asked. Because I'd like to get this on the record about what a person in that particular time and that particular place had to go through.

DENNIS: OK. I became the accuser. In fact, the young man's attorney accused me of fabricating the story, of going after him, and even enjoying being with him. I never even knew the name of the accuser. But, through my research about sexual assaults, I learned that the defense's line of questioning was classic and standard. The defense attempted to degrade my past experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was accused of setting up my house to trap men in Binghamton.

He accused me of dressing inappropriately, which was far from the truth. Still in my African mind-set, I wore my long African dresses and tops. Most of the time, I would wear an "Afro" hair style or a scarf because I didn't have somewhere to braid my hair in Binghamton. As a graduate student, I sometimes wore jeans and tee-shirts. I didn't have time to wear makeup and all of those beauty items. More importantly, I was an older graduate student, who had been out of school for seven years working and traveling the world. I was on a partial scholarship until I proved that I could maintain a 3.0 grade point average. So, I was basically in a student mode and dressed in a student fashion. So, dressing up and going out was not part of my behavior. Here are some of the questions I was asked on the witness stand.

Questions regarding my birth...

Q: And you came here from where?
A: I came from Abidjan, West Africa.
Q: And at what age?
A: I came from where at what time first?
Q: From Africa at what age?
A: I was born in St. Louis, Missouri.
Q: Oh, you were born in St. Louis, Missouri?
A: Yes.
Q: Did you go from St. Louis back to Africa?
A: No, I did not.
Q: I thought I heard you say that.....
A: I am originally from St. Louis, Missouri. I was born and raised and attended all education schools in St. Louis until I went to Wilberforce University in Ohio.

Questions regarding his name....

Q: Now you readily recognize this man today, do you now?
A: Yes.
Q: I mean you appear to. When was the first time you learned his name?
A: When this....after this incident or during this incident.
Q: And do you know what that name is now?
A: Yes.
Q: What is it?
A: Robert Davis.
Q: Had you ever known his name before?
A: No, I had not.
Q: Isn't it true that you always called him Mr. Davis when you would see him going to school up and down the street?
A: No.

Questions describing his dress...

Q: Was he dressed?
A: Yes, he was dressed.
Q: Have a shirt on?
A: Yes, he did.
Q: Long sleeve?
A: I don't recall.
Q: Any idea of the type of material?
A: No.
Q: Or the color?
A: No.
Q: Whether he was wearing pants or not?
A: He was wearing pants.

Q: The kind of pants that he was wearing?
A: I do not recall.
Q: The kind of shoes he had on?
A: He did not have shoes on. I do recall that.
Q: No shoes?
A: No shoes.
Q: So, you got a man in your apartment fully dressed but no shoes on?
A: True.
Q: Did he have socks on?
A: Yes.
Q: Were there shoes left on the porch to your knowledge?
A: No. There were no shoes on the porch.
Q: Now throughout all of your testimony you make no mention of his making any attempt to unclothe himself. Isn't that true?
A: Yes.
Q: He apparently maintained a full dress upon himself?
A: Yes.

Questions regarding the content of the Supporting Deposition....

Q: And although you described the wandering hands, he apparently made no attempt to put his private parts near you in any manner?
A: Yes, he did.
Q: This is something you forgot to tell us about?
A: I wasn't asked. I am only saying what I was asked.
Q: And the police didn't ask this of you either?
A: Yes, they did.
Q: But, you didn't mention any of that in your complaint against him, did you?
A: Yes, I did.
Q: You recall signing what they call a Supporting Deposition to accuse him of this incident?
A: Yes, I do.
Q: And it's your best recollection that you stated in there that somehow or other he put his private parts, meaning his penis or something of that nature, against your body in some manner?
A: Yes.
Q: You put that in here?
A: I did recall saying that to the police. Whether or not they put it in the police report, I am not sure.
Q: But you're sure that's what he did rather than just talking about what he had in mind at least as to what you have testified to that he announced his intention to you first, "I am going to rape you" or I am here to rape you?"
A: Yes.

Questions regarding putting his hands on me.....

Q: And it's at that point that somehow or other he puts his arm around you?

A: Yes, around my neck, not around my waist.

Q: Around your neck?

A: Yes.

Q: And he is standing on the side of you.....

A: Yes.

Q:in some manner?

A: Yes.

Q: Was he on your right side or on your left side?

A: I don't recall.

Q: Did he put his right arm around your neck or his left arm around your neck?

A: I don't recall.

Q: Now apparently upon getting his arm around your neck, the two of you somehow or other fell onto the bed. Is that correct?

A: Yes

Q: Was he still somewhat to the side of you in some way?

A: He was on top of me.

Questions about accuser being clothed and putting his finger in my vagina....

Q: Still got his pants on?

A: Yes.

Q: And apparently his pants were buttoned up and everything?

A: I can assume.

Q: I mean he made no preparation at least clothing-wise to get himself in a ready position where he might rape you. Is that true?

A: What do you mean?

Q: Taking his pants off or dropping his pants, unzipping or unbuttoning his pants?

A: On the bed, no, but when we fell on the floor, yes, he did unzip his pants.

Q: Was that before he put his finger in your vagina or after?

A: Before he put his finger in my vagina...I am sorry...afterwards. I am sorry.
His finger was in my vagina and this followed.

Q: So apparently, he had to take his finger out of your vagina in order to unzip his pants. Is that how it went?

A: Yes.

Q: Did he pull his penis out?

A: No, he didn't.

Q: Well, after he unzipped his pants what happened then?

A: Yes.

A: He removed his penis and I felt his penis on my thigh.

Q: Which thigh?

A: I don't recall which thigh, just on my thigh.

Q: Then what happened?

A: And then ...I was pleading. I said, "Do what you want to do, just don't kill me.
Do what you want to do just don't kill me."

Q: Then what happened?

A: And then he....during my plea he stopped and he said, "I am stupid. I can't do it."

Q: And then what did he do?

A: He just sat there.

Q: Did he put his penis back in his pants?

A: I imagine he did.

Q: You were there. Is that what happened?

A: Yes.

Q: Now you didn't mention any of this in your direct testimony?

A: Mention any of what?

Q: That he pulled his penis out of his pants, that he's on top of you apparently and his penis is coming in contact with your thigh?

A: That's because the lawyer did not ask me.

Q: Did you tell this to Mr. Whiting before you took the stand today?

A: I told this at the police station and we did discuss this.

Q: Did you tell this to Mr. Whiting before you took the stand today? {Repeating the question with emphasis}

A: I don't recall.

Q: This would be quite an indignity, would it not, Miss Dennis?

A: Yes.

Q: Now this morning was not the first time you talked to Mr. Whiting, is it?

A: No.

Q: When was the first time you talked to Mr. Whiting?

A: Two weeks ago.

Q: And did you come to his office in the justice building across the street?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: And it is your testimony in the courtroom today that at no time did you ever tell Mr. Whiting about this man taking his penis out of his pants and putting it against your thigh, that you had never told him that only because he had not asked you that question directly?

A: I do not recall that. I do not recall telling Mr. Whiting. I do recall telling the police department and I would assume they included it in their report which was forwarded to Mr. Whiting.

Q: So, if this portion of the incident is in the police records, at least you and Mr. Whiting never discussed it either today or a couple of weeks ago when you went to his office and talked to him. Is that correct?

A: I am not sure.

Q: Now that you felt this man's penis against your thigh, was it hard or soft?

A: It was hard.

Q: Did he ejaculate?

A: I don't recall.

Q: Well, after he's gone home did you find that your body had been desecrated with filth?

A: No.

Q: Did you have to go clean yourself or your clothing?

A: No.

Q: It is your testimony today that he put his penis back into his pants and zipped his pants and he is still hard and hasn't done anything yet?

A: I am not sure what he did.

Q: Now you indicated, I believe, in your direct testimony today that once he got his finger in your vagina, that it was there about a minute. Is my recollection accurate on that?

A: Yes.

Questions regarding the struggle on the bed to the floor.....

Q: Miss Dennis, all I want you to tell me and describe to me is in what manner you were struggling. Tell me what you were doing. Now, you are falling to the bed, you got your left arm behind you. What are you doing with your right arm?

A: I am hitting him on his back, hitting him to let me go.

Q: On his back. And this is at the point where he's got his arm around your neck?

A: Yes.

Q: And he threw....Did he throw you away from him?

A: No. He threw me on the bed and he fell on top of me.

Q: Had you struggled standing up for any period of time?

A: No. It was an automatic throw on the bed.

Q: Automatic?

A: Yes.

Q: So, you were struggling in a standup vertical position then for at least over two minutes?

A: No, we were not. We were not standing up struggling.

Q: How long were you standing up struggling?

A: We were not struggling at all standing up.

Q: But he's come to you, said "I am going to rape you," got his arm around your neck and from the time of putting his arm around your neck to falling on the bed how much time has elapsed?

A: I would say two to three minutes.

Q: That's quite a long period of time, but you are standing for two or three minutes with one arm behind you apparently?

A: No.

Q: And one arm hitting at him?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you make any attempt to kick him or push him away with your legs before you fell to the bed?

A: No.

Q: He had already announced why he was there?

A: It was at the same time. It was not "A" and the "B". It was "A" and "B" at the same time.

Q: Did "C" come immediately following to that particular....

A: No. There was no standing. We have gone through his several times that there was no standing and I would appreciate you not trying to imply that there was something going on standing.

Q: From the time apparently, he got his arm around your neck apparently very little time elapsed until you fell on the bed?

A: True.

Q: When you fell to the bed, what did you do with your legs?

A: I was kicking.

Q: And how long did you struggle on the bed with your kicking?

A: Do I have to answer this question? You have been going over and over the same thing.

THE COURT: One more because I think that particular point is relevant.

A: Two or three minutes.

Questions suggesting, I cooperated with the accuser and enjoyed the experience....

Q: Don't you say in that deposition when he had his finger in your vagina, that you lay there and told him to the effect "Do what you want to do?"

A: Yes.

Q: And that while he was doing that you spoke calmly with him?

A: I spoke calmly. I spoke in a calm voice, "Do what you want to do, just don't kill me."

Q: Now you are telling me that the language you used in the deposition which was the calmness was only in the manner in which your voice was modulated. Is that correct?

A: Yes. It was the tonality expressing fear.

Q: And all of that was put on. Is that correct?

A: No, it was not put on.

Q: The tonality?

A: No, it was not put on.

Q: You were calm?

A: I was calm. I was fearful for my life.

Q: Which was it? Were you calm or in fear of your life?

A: It was both.

Q: Yet, he had no weapon?

A: I did not know what he did not have.

Q: Were you afraid of something you didn't know he did not have...

A: Yes.

Q:such as a gun?

A: Yes.

Q: Yet you knew this man, had seen him around and you knew what he was not of that nature?

A: No. I did not know that he was of that nature or I would not have allowed him in my apartment or in my place.

Q: Now throughout this whole incident....Do you recall in your deposition saying that all this time he had his finger in your vagina that he had you by the throat? Recall that?

A: Yes.

Q: Well, which is it? Did he have you by the throat or by the shoulder while he had his finger in your vagina?

THE COURT: I think we pretty well exhausted that area Mr. O'Brien.

A: Thank you, Your Honor.

Q: You must have been intimidated in that setting.

DENNIS: I wasn't intimidated because by this time, I had lived, worked and had sincere social White friends, not related to work. My exposure removed the mistrust of Whites and I was not be afraid to speak up in any setting. The prosecutor and his team conducted research on the background of the assaulter. They found out that his father was working as the building maintenance manager. If anything broke down or anything happened on the property, the student renters would call the father. There were three apartments in that building. They cut the grass and kept the place up. The assaulter helped his father. So, I knew the father by name, but I didn't know the son except for seeing him occasionally help the father.

The prosecutor's team not only found out about his high school wrestling experience but found out that he was the troubled one in the family and was often the source of conflict. His family consisted of his parents, two sisters and him. One of the sisters was considered very successful and always did the right thing. She made good grades in school, she was a high achiever, so her family was very proud of her and always gave her praises.

On the evening of this incident, the parents had celebrated her birthday. They had taken her out to a restaurant. He was home, but he didn't go. The other sister was also at home. She testified that if her brother had gone outside the house, she would have heard him because he wore heavy shoes that made a loud clump, clump, clump sound. So, she didn't hear him leave the house.

Q: Was there a specific angle or situation that helped the prosecutor to solve the case?

DENNIS: During his summation, the prosecutor put the lie of the defense's tactics of Denial, Distraction and Distortion to test. He portrayed for the jurors the level of nobility under pressure that I had demonstrated for all to see during the trial. He buttressed my version of events with other coincidental facts contained in the evidence. He outlined points in my testimony and suggested that other items of evidence which corroborated my story. Among them: my phone bill with a 45-minute call to my friend in St. Louis which began at 2:38 am, her description of her attacker's upper body strength was

consistent with Davis' high school/college career as a wrestler and the clincher was I had described my attacker was fully clothed except that he was in his stocking feet.

The prosecutor went on to say that I knew he was running around in his stocking feet because he had gone to my apartment. More importantly, he reminded the jurors that they knew he was running around in his stocking feet because the defendant had told them so. He read the portion of Davis' testimony when he described removing his boots around midnight.

The unspoken reason why this case was critical is it was the first sexual assault case to contest the 1974 New York state sex crimes law that stated third party witnesses were no longer required in sexual assault cases. Until then, the law required a woman's report of rape or sexual abuse to be corroborated by a witness, a confession or some physical evidence proving the act had been committed and linking the defendant. Several other women had reported rapes and sexual assault cases in Binghamton. However, not one of them had followed through to go to trial. I told the prosecutor that he had to be stopped, I was willing to go to trial and I was doing this for the Binghamton women.

The jury deliberated for seven hours and as the chimes of the courthouse dome clock tolled eleven or midnight, the jury foreman intoned the unanimous "Guilty" verdict. An all-White jury, consisting of nine men and three women and a White judge, White prosecutor's office had given me the justice the prosecutor argued that I deserved from the people of Binghamton. It was amazing; I won! He was eventually sentenced to five years in jail for first degree sexual abuse. I cried not only because I had won the case, but because I had received justice in this all-White court setting.

Patrick's recent letter to me says that each time he hears the current tidal wave of "guilt by accusation" from women for sexual harassment by men 10, 20, 30, 40 years ago, he is reminded of what and how I did it. He concluded his message to me by saying, "When I hear the multitudes chant 'Me Too,' I see Regina's hand raised to embrace the oath and willing to have her truth tested and I hear, 'I, alone. There is a right way to do everything.'"

Q: Well that really is a horrendous ordeal to go through.

DENNIS: Yes, it was more than horrible. It was my introduction to being back in the U.S. after four years of living peacefully overseas.

Q: Did this hang over you or did this sort of just something that passed on?

DENNIS: Yes, I was traumatized for years. I was quite nervous and really afraid to live by myself. I couldn't live on the first floor or alone. For 20 years, I had to have apartments on the second and third floors even if the building did not have an elevator. Today, I am really security conscious. When technicians come to work in my house, I wait outside or near the door. I make sure my burglar alarm functions. I meet men only in public places.

Somehow, like other sexual assault survivors, you go on with your life and manage your past. When I hear about “#Me Too” victims, I have flashbacks of my incident. However, I draw from my inner strength and remind myself that I came out alive, I was strong enough to prosecute my accuser and more importantly, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I received justice and in an all-White courtroom.

Q: That’s a positive attitude to have for such a terrible experience.

DENNIS: It was a horrible experience but maintaining a positive attitude has helped me overcome numerous traumas and tragedies. I should write an article or something about my assault experience. My experience would be helpful to women to let them know that they should not be afraid to come forward and to go to trial.

Q: Well it’s very obvious that’s true.

DENNIS: Yes. Women should not be afraid to prosecute. Coming forward would not only save them, but it may save communities by stopping serial perpetrators. If they decide to follow through, I urge them to seek counseling and prepare for the trial.

Q: I think they’ve gotten better but it’s probably not much better.

DENNIS: Yes, people do talk more openly about sexual assault cases, especially on campuses and date rape. Owing to the #MeToo Movement, more women are coming forward today than in the past, especially with prominent personalities being accused of assaults and the #MeToo Movement surfacing. So, I think these changes are a good thing. These high-profile assault cases indicate that women have been suffering in silence for years. Moreover, some men feel they have the right to inappropriately touch and feel over women in social and professional settings. Boys must be taught to respect women at an early age.

Q: After this experience, did you get your degree?

DENNIS: Yes, I was determined to stay and get my degree.

My parents and family had wanted me to leave Binghamton because of the incident, but I told them no, I’m not going to leave, I wanted to stay to obtain at least my Master’s degree. I was in the M.A. /Ph.D. program. The experience robbed me of my opportunity to obtain a Ph.D. While I didn’t want to teach, I knew that having a Ph.D. would allow me to access senior level positions to effect social change.

To defuse some of that negative energy and anger from the sexual assault, I seized an opportunity and enrolled into a separate program in translation in the Comparative Literature department at SUNY-Binghamton. Rather than worry about what had happened to me and asking questions why me, I decided to take additional courses in the

comparative literature department and that's how I got my certificate in translation in French and English.

Q: Alright then what did you do?

DENNIS: As soon as I graduated in May 1981, the next day, I continued to study for the certificate in translation. I took that translation/interpretation exam in the Comparative Language Department just about a week after my Master's graduation. I departed Binghamton the following week and have never returned for a visit.

Q: You are brave to have stayed and got your degree and certificate. Well thank you very much. Please add any incidents or something that you didn't mention that happened in this period we've covered.

DENNIS: Stu, I should mention that I found my personal file on this experience which allowed me to add the trial questions. In addition, I was able to locate and contact Judge Patrick Monserrate who is retired and practices arbitration in New York. He sent me a letter in January 2018 with his remembrances from the case. His cover letter states, "From you I learned that there is no criminal case that could not be won, if the main witness were the embodiment of credibility and courage, and the prosecutor was smart enough not to get in her way."

Q: That is really a testimony of your character. Great. I've enjoyed this.

DENNIS: Okay. You know, people often tell me I have a fascinating life. Some believe that God has put me on a mission to unite people of difference ethnic groups, races or linguistic backgrounds. This seems a tall order for me. I think I can have a role toward bridging gaps that divide people, particularly Blacks and Whites in this country and St. Louis. My experiences have taught me that people just don't know each other. Some are raised in homes filled with hate and prejudices. They have preconceived negative ideas about each other.

It reminds me of the Flemish and the Walloons in Belgium, who are different linguistically and culturally. These two groups live in the same country, but the Flemish have requested to separate and form their own country because of cultural differences. Another case comes from Guinea, where Malikés and Fulanis live. Malikés are farmers and Fulanis are herders. These groups dispute over land-use and they have cultural differences. Wolofs, Akans, or Bantus who speak Swahili were divided by English and French colonizers and now live in artificial boundaries. Wherever these different groups live, I find that they all want affordable housing, jobs and decent schools for their children. They assume the other group or class is different from them, without knowing that they are all suffering from corrupt politicians. This is what my travels have taught me. We need to get people to talk to each other and even visit each other homes. In the late 1990's, I promoted home visits between Blacks and Whites in St. Louis. I had never been to a home on the predominately White "south" side of town and when it was their

turn, the Whites confessed that they had never been on the predominately Black “north” side of town. Visits were life changing experiences for each group.

Q: Well, at least your story will get out and will be part of history.

DENNIS: Okay.

Q: So, don't worry about that. That's why I don't dwell on the times that people were involved in foreign affairs but their early lives too.

DENNIS: Okay. Yes.

Q: Okay.

DENNIS: Alright then. Well, thank you very much. It's been interesting talking to you and I look forward to our next discussion at 1:00 p.m. Central Standard Time which would be 2:00 p.m. your time.

Q: Last time we ended our discussion on Binghamton and the rape incident. I think we have completed that very interesting discuss. So, what did you do after Binghamton?

DENNIS: I finally came home to St. Louis. I had applied to USAID for positions, but my application was not accepted. I knew that I wanted to reconnect and learn how to be an American and an African-American as well as to reconnect with my family. I had been away nine years: a year at Wilberforce; two years in NYC at UPS; a year in Belgium and Europe studying French; a year in Senegal “getting my roots”; two years in the Peace Corps in Côte d'Ivoire; and finally, two years at Binghamton getting my Masters. So, when I came to St. Louis I felt totally disconnected from African-American culture and roots. In fact, I often describe this phase as obtaining my “cultural equilibrium” because my Black American culture had gone all the way down and all my other cultures had tilted upward on the scale. I spoke French fluently, had been speaking bits and pieces of Wolof and was fluent in Dioula. So, when I spoke English I had a very, very heavy accent with all these different languages. I am often asked, “Where are you from?” They often say that I still have an accent. Well, I don't see it today. I admit that in 1981, I did have a real heavy accent when I spoke English. I had to readjust to American culinary and eating habits. I had to adjust to my family, culture, and the segregated/racist cultural environment of St. Louis. So, I spent time reconnecting with people. Actually, now in 2016 I find myself in a similar situation in St. Louis. I'm reconnecting with family, friends and the community here, but maintaining my international extended family and friends. I have finally learned to feel comfortable everywhere and to balance all of my cultures. I have become a real Global Citizen and I like what I have become.

When I came home in 1981, I immediately got a job teaching French, as a substitute teacher in the St. Louis public school system. I was fortunate enough to get something called a continuing substitute teacher because the regular French teacher was out on long-term medical leave. So, the school system needed someone for an entire semester and I

filled that gap. I taught French at Northwest High School for an entire semester. The young people in the class did not believe that I was from St. Louis. They found it difficult to believe that someone who looked like them could speak French and had traveled to faraway lands.

Consequently, one day some of my students eagerly came into the classroom, and they said Madame, Madame, “We know who you are.” I said, “Well, who am I”? They said you’re “Bonehead’s daughter.” I said Bonehead? Who is this Bonehead? They said that’s our Little League baseball team coach. I said oh, that’s what you call him? I confirmed that’s my father. They said yes, he told us that his daughter teaches French at Northwest. I said, “Well, now, do you believe that I’m really from St. Louis. After all, Bonehead is my father and Bonehead is from here.” The students finally accepted that I was from St. Louis. This experience convinced the students that I had attended public grade schools, public high school and even launched my higher education at an affordable local community college. My message to the students was that only you can set barriers for yourself. You can achieve whatever you want to become if you apply yourself. They connected more with me and accepted me as a role model. They started discussing their futures and college goals with me. It was amazing how they connected with me when they were confident that I was “one of them” and Bonehead’s daughter. I urged them to just stay focused, determined and let nothing or anybody take their dreams from them.

Q: Well how did you find it when you went back to St. Louis? You’d had all this experience and all, and you’re looking at cultures and here’s your culture, but you’ve been away from it for a while.

DENNIS: Oh, it was very challenging, the same way it’s challenging now. I feel as if I was out of place because my exposure had reinforced my basic values. There was no doubt that two parent family structures are important in one’s life and in a society; honesty pays off, respecting others goes a long way, patience is essential; the ability to be flexible, spending quality time with elders and others are important. Accept others who come from different social, economic or cultural backgrounds than you and expect them to show you the same respect.

I’ve become comfortable interacting with Whites and have White friends, whereas before my travels, I had none. I am a member of organizations that allow me to maintain my international and multicultural interests. When I attend events, Whites often assume that I am from francophone Africa when they hear me speak French. And interestingly, they get disappointed when I tell them I am from North St. Louis, the “Black side of town.” They respond, oh really? As if to say, that’s impossible. And I reinforce it by adding, “I graduated from Beaumont High School.” The popular St. Louis question, “What high school did you attend?” So, I’m always proud so say I went to Beaumont. My presence dispelled the stereotype of Blacks being uneducated, uncultured or certainly not refined and comfortable in all settings. It is assumed that only poor, non-working and welfare recipient families make up this side of town. This is part of the myth that has to be destroyed. I know many well-educated Black professionals who choose to live on the north side. My family never received public assistance. My father, a self-employed

moving man, worked hard to provide for us. Moreover, in our house our parents to independence by encouraging us to work for what we wanted. If you can't pay for it, you don't need it. Daddy taught us to never be ashamed of being Black or of African descent. We were taught to hold your heads high because you are not inferior to anybody. It is for this reason, today, my sister, brothers and I are all home-owners and self-sufficient.

Q: In the time you'd been gone and when you came back, how did you find relations between Blacks and Whites?

DENNIS: Relations between younger Blacks and Whites in the St. Louis area have improved. There is more interaction between them compared to when I left here in early 1970's. This can be attributed to housing and school desegregation. The housing market allowed Blacks from the city areas to move into the county areas. City area were redlined for decades. Redlining occurs when banks and financial institutions refuse to provide loans within a specific geographic zone because they deem people living in the area to be a financial risk. Banks and lending institutions favor giving home loans in Florissant, Dellwood, Ferguson and Berkley....all located in North County.

In the 1970's, St. Louis City had a population of 622,236 residents. In 2016, the number is down to 315,700. Experts attribute the population decline reductions in the manufacturing sector, offshoring of U.S. businesses and racial strife. As to racial tension and a decline in St. Louis' population, one should not ignore the role school desegregation programs played in changing the relationships between younger Blacks and Whites. Younger Blacks were bused from the African-American community to suburban schools. As such they started interacting with White children, participating in programs in school, and some of them developed friendships. I notice that there are more integrated male/female relationships in the area.

There are sections of the county, such as North County and West County, where you have more interracial marriages. When I was growing up, you didn't have many mixed couples, if any in St. Louis city or county. Today, you see children, who are products of these relationships. I think these relationships exist across all socioeconomic levels, not only just the middle and upper income classes, but even the lower level classes of Blacks and Whites here in the city. When you go to places like Chuck E. Cheese, an indoor amusement park for children, where they have birthday parties, it is obvious that racial mixing is widely taking place. I went there about two, three weeks ago for my great-nephew's sixth birthday party. I was quite surprised to see the number of mixed children who were there with their parents, represented by mothers and fathers being Black or White. One would not have found this phenomenon when I was growing up in St. Louis.

Among people over 60 years old, there is limited social interaction between Blacks and Whites in St. Louis. I am noticing people within this age group serve on committees together and home visiting programs to discuss and resolve community issues. This is a good thing.

Q: You know recently there's been tremendous attention paid to Ferguson-

DENNIS: Oh, yes.

Q: Is this a suburb of St. Louis?

DENNIS: Yes, but not too far from the city. I shop in Ferguson, my bank is in Ferguson, and my mechanic's shop is located in Ferguson.

Q: How was it when you came back? What was the situation in Ferguson?

DENNIS: Michael Brown was killed on August 9, 2014. I retired and came home in September early 2014; tensions were still elevated. In fact, when I got on the plane from Washington, DC to St. Louis and I was getting situated in my seat, my knees hit the back of the seat in front of me. The White lady sitting in front of me said, "You hit my seat" in a very aggressive tone. I said excuse me. Then she said, "You did it again" as I'm trying to settle in. Everyone around us looked at her as if to say, what's wrong with her, she's crazy, or what. Then, she looked at me again and said, "You hit my seat again." I turned and told her "Hold up, lady. We're not going to have Ferguson on the plane going to St. Louis. Allow me to settle into my seat." Some of the other passengers chuckled and laughed and gave me thumbs up in my support. They saw that I wasn't doing anything but putting my bag in the overhead compartment and trying to get settled in my seat, like everybody else.

To avoid an escalation of the situation, I called the hostess to move me and we decided that I would move after takeoff. I didn't want to create a scene because that would mean I might get put off the plane or the other lady would be put off. More likely, the two of us would be deplaned.

So, there was extreme tension here. I think the heightened level of tension has declined since 2014. Federal, State of Missouri and private sector investors have worked hard to address the main issues: police brutality, including reductions in traffic stops; more Blacks elected to municipal governments; and youth unrest. The State scrutinized those small local governments throughout the St. Louis region following the Federal Justice Department report after Brown's death that cited Ferguson town's profit-driven court system that frequently targeted Blacks and low-income residents. In 2015, the Missouri court struck down parts of the law and lowered the proportion of most county town budgets that can be financed by revenue from traffic fines and court fees from 30 percent to 20 percent. People are pleased that the report exposed the well-known exploitation of poor Blacks and Blacks driving through these small municipalities. Even me, I had been stopped and sent to court three different times! I had to get lawyers to represent me or I would have had arrest warrants when I returned from overseas.

It will take years to unpeel the layers of mistrust between the police and the community. The hidden reason is that most families in St. Louis area have been affected by racism and police brutality. My own brother, Oliver Dennis, Jr., was beaten and his body thrown along the side of Highway I-70 in 1989. Back then, the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) found three other Black male bodies along I-70, who had been beaten in the same manner. They all had gone to pay traffic tickets in an area known for Klan activities. The NAACP tried to file a class-action suit, but families feared retaliation by the police. Families felt the police would harass other males in the family, so they prayed and refused to participate in the lawsuit. Ferguson was a sign of long built frustration with police brutality and racial discrimination. Furthermore, the continuous killings of unarmed Black males without convictions of White police officers when the evidence leans toward the police are at fault does not help reduce mistrust. This type of justice is just not understood by victim families and the Black communities. The few bad apples on police forces makes it difficult for the good officers to gain trust within communities.

Another good thing that happened is that the Ferguson and Jennings police departments are now integrated into the overall St. Louis County system. Jennings should have gained the attention, because the police department is known for their racial profiling more than any other department in the entire St. Louis area. People, including me, hate to drive through Jennings. My mother lived there and my sister still lives there. Since the Michael Brown shooting, there's been less harassment of Blacks driving through these small municipalities and fewer persons being issued tickets. I recently asked one of a close Black male what it's like to drive these days and he said, "It is lovely, no more weekly harassments, no more giving up hard earned cash for paying traffic tickets or beatings on the knees, elbows and ankles, where bruises are less likely to be seen."

Q: The attorney general commissioned a report on Ferguson. Do you know what were the findings?

DENNIS: The U.S. Department of Justice Report of 2015 on Ferguson, Missouri indicated that police use excessive force when dealing with Black residents in Ferguson and other county municipalities. The report found that Ferguson's population in 2014 was 67 percent Black and that 85 percent of all traffic stops were Blacks residents. These stops generated revenues to support the county budget. It was common to pass through any of those north county municipal courts and find Blacks lined up to pay traffic tickets. Since the murder of the Michael Brown, the Ferguson Police Department has been dismantled and services are now provided by the St. Louis County Police Department. Since the Ferguson Report, there is less racial profiling when driving in those county municipalities.

Q: Do you think that racism is s confined to blue collar workers or is it up and down the line?

DENNIS: I would say it's up and down the line. I think it's much more covert in the upper class but I think to a certain degree it still exists. White blue-collar workers have set up barriers to "protest their jobs" and keep Blacks out of the trade unions (carpenters, plumbers, and electricians). In corporate offices, Blacks are recruited, but face racial discrimination when it comes to advancing up the ladder. These overt and covert forms of racism hold our country back. Inclusion and diversity in the workplace, including in the

Foreign Service is essential to having a healthy workforce that reflects our country. The issue of race relations must be discussed openly. In my opinion, we really need a “truth and reconciliation council” to discuss race in the U.S. When you find young Whites as members of White nationalist groups, something is deeply wrong with the messages they learned in their homes. Racism is a learned behavior. No one is born to hate because of color or ethnicity.

Owing to racist tendencies in Missouri, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) recently issued a travel advisory that calls for African-American travelers, visitors and Missourians, to pay special attention and exercise extreme caution when traveling throughout Missouri given the series of questionable, race-based incidents occurring statewide. The advisory went into effect on August 28, 2017. The advisory responds to Senator Gary Romine State of Missouri Bill 43, which harkens back to the Jim Crow-era. The Bill legalizes individual discrimination and harassment within the State of Missouri, and to quote the advisory “would prevent most individuals from protecting themselves with lawsuits from discrimination, harassment and retaliation in Missouri.”

The NAACP states that it shares the concerns that Black individuals traveling the highways, roads and points of interest in the state of Missouri may not be safe, and that the national office will closely monitor the progress of Governor Greiten’s review of Bill SB 43. The travel advisory has already affected the tourist industry in Missouri.

Q: This may be sort of an aside but you do feel that there’s been progress?

DENNIS: Yes, there has been changes toward progress. In the big picture considering where we started. Jim Crow’s laws that enforced racial segregation and locked Blacks out of education, housing and jobs have changed. The Fair Housing Act 1968 allows Blacks to buy housing where they like. Even if when we move in and are the “only Black on the block for a while, Whites eventually move out.” This happened to me when I brought my first house in St. Louis in 1986. Within five years, the real estate market had enticed Whites to newer built housing developments in North County and moved Blacks into the older city and county houses. To achieve progress, it appears that the country still has work to do before Blacks, Latinos and other minorities achieve housing, education and job opportunities.

My parents and other relatives talk about the days when they could always walk pass but could not be served in certain places in St. Louis such as the Chase Park Plaza, a five-star hotel with fine restaurants. Today, Blacks go there to dine or to watch movies. We attend concerts/plays, where we once could only play jazz or blues after we entered through the back door. Getting loans and access to credit is another area of progress even if Black zip codes pay more for insurance and credit. We can get loans for housing but minority business loans are still more challenging to obtain. These are positive changes.

The area where less progress has been made is education. Black children are bused out of their neighborhoods to promote racial integration, which I feel has not really benefited

them directly. Kids get up early to take a bus at 5:30 or 6 am to travel long distances to school. Test scores have declined. Prior to busing around 1970's, the school facilities and resources in Black neighborhoods may have been of a poorer quality; however, children were taught by teachers who cared and lived in the same communities. Teachers and students saw each other in the grocery store or at church, and teachers and parents got their hair done at the same barber or beauty shops. Teachers were more compassionate and concerned about ensuring that Black kids stayed in school and graduated. Test scores were better. Overtime, due to an open housing market, teachers and other professionals moved out of once thriving communities. Today, these communities have abandoned homes, which eventually are left to deteriorate. Children raised in this environment are victims of poverty, violence, crime and education deficiencies. Black parents ran to North County where the schools were considered better. Whites moved out and rented their former homes to Blacks. Yet, they kept their jobs in the community and continued to govern. These dynamics resulted in the Fergusons, Jennings or Dellwood municipalities where Blacks live but were not represented in government. On the positive side, as a result of Michael Brown's death, more Blacks have run for elections and won seats in these municipalities. County Councils, school boards and other governing bodies are becoming more diversified. African-American police chiefs have been recruited and are building relationships with the communities. The best news was when the City Council passed an ordinance to accept the recommendations from the U.S. Department of Justice. These included: engage the community, reform of the municipal code, implement policies and training for police, bias free-police and court practices, body worn and in car cameras, and the list goes on. These changes were viewed as positive steps toward improved police relations with communities.

Let me add that increasing the numbers of police is NOT the answer to reducing crime in cities. In my opinion, the answer is two-fold. First, individuals returning from war zones (Iraq and Afghanistan) should not be considered for urban jobs as police officers. This goes for both Black and White soldiers. Police officers in general need more training on how to interact with adult Black men. This "fear" of Black men, especially dark complexion, by White officers must be demystified. Officers can't tell the difference between a clean-cut family man and a criminal. All they see is Black skin and in some cases a style of dress, so he is a criminal. This is far from being the truth.

The second part of the issue is African-American family structure has fallen apart. I'm just being honest. Two family households are a thing of the past in the U.S., especially for Blacks. People have children and fail to marry the mother or father of the child. Parents move in and out of sexual relationships when they are young and eventually when they are more mature, they create "blended households." If children are lucky, they are shuttled between their biological parents. Children live during the week with the parent who has custody, legal or informal agreements, and on weekends go to the home of their other biological parent. Boys become more rebellious due to the lack of biological fathers or compatible male role models in their lives.

Girls are angry. In schools, girls are more confrontational with males and fail to show respect for male authority figures. African-American girls lack positive and consistent

interaction with males. In my opinion, this lack of paternal love causes girls to accept love from young men resulting in early pregnancy, low birth weights and school drop outs.

Blacks must address the issue of getting men back into households. In the 1950's Black female-headed households were just 18 percent of households, as opposed to about 68 percent today. In fact, from 1890 to 1940, the Black marriage rate was slightly higher than that of Whites. Even during slavery, when marriage was forbidden for blacks, most black children lived in biological two-parent families. In New York City, in 1925, 85 percent of Black households were two-parent households. A study of 1880 family structure in Philadelphia shows that three-quarters of black families were two-parent households.

During the 1960s, devastating nonsense emerged, exemplified by a Johns Hopkins University sociology professor who argued, "It has yet to be shown that the absence of a father was directly responsible for any of the supposed deficiencies of broken homes." The real issue, he went on to say, "is not the lack of male presence but the lack of male income."

Income disparities were pointed out in The Kerner Commission Report released in 1968 which called for increased job training, funding for public schools and a livable wage for workers. In February 2018, the Healing our Divided Society Report written by the Eisenhower Foundation to assess progress after the Kerner Report acknowledge strides in closing the economic, social and political gaps between racial groups in America. The African American and Hispanic middle classes have grown significantly, and the United States elected and reelected a black man as president. The Eisenhower report says the percentage of American children living in poverty has increased, income inequality and the wealth gap have widened, and segregation has crept back into schools and neighborhoods. "Racial and ethnic inequality is still with us. The Eisenhower report calls for "Organizing around those kinds of issues and the basic principle of equality and equality of opportunity must be done. Bottomline, we still have work to do on resolving institutional racism.

Q: Yes. It's discouraging. Do you have time to go a little farther?

DENNIS: Let me see what time it is. Its 3:40, I should probably start getting dressed to get out of here.

Q: Today is the 12th of February, Lincoln's birthday, 2016 with Regina Dennis. And I'm not exactly sure where we left off. We were talking about the situation in St. Louis and Ferguson.

What was your first job in the Foreign Service? Let's walk through this.

DENNIS: Well, you know I had lived and worked internationally before I joined the Foreign Service.

Q: Yes. Well let's talk about that. Maybe let's pick up some of where you worked internationally.

DENNIS: We have already discussed how I went from Brussels/Paris to teach in Dakar, Senegal and then on to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, where I served as a Peace Corps volunteer.

Q: Yes, we have.

DENNIS: My Master's thesis was on cooperatives and food production among nomadic societies. For this reason, I often worked in nomadic or agro-pastoral countries, including in Somalia for two years. Worked on the design of an agricultural design team where I drafted the social soundness analysis in Abéché, Chad and participated in an evaluation of a health care program in Niamey and Zinder, Niger. I also strengthened health care systems in Adamaoua Province in the northern section of Cameroon as well as Parakou, Benin which are also agro-pastoral zones.

I worked for Africare in Somalia between 1983 and 1985. Africare is a non-governmental organization that was founded by Dr. Joseph Kennedy and C. Payne Lucas in 1970. It is the oldest African-American organization to focus on international development. Dr. Kennedy oversaw international development projects and was very supportive in preparing me for my first international tour after graduate school in Somalia. He hunted down a copy of USAID's Handbook 3 and told me refer to it when designing and implementing programs. I kept that voluminous handbook throughout my career. When my father died in 1984, Dr. Kennedy showed extraordinary compassion on the phone and arranged for my timely travel from Mogadishu to St. Louis.

Africare didn't pay much, but it gave you the opportunity to build your resume by working on development programs in some of the most challenging countries. For me, Somalia was the toughest country I have ever lived and worked. I was there during the presidency of Siad Barre and the Cold War. Politicking occurred between the governments of U.S. and Soviet Union to support their geo-political agendas. Both super powers sought to control the airfield and seaport at Berbera, which was originally installed by the Soviet Union.

Q: Let's talk about Somalia.

DENNIS: Okay. C. Payne Lucas was a dynamic fund-raiser. He sought funds from corporations and other sources, including submitting proposals for USAID agreements and contracts. An additional portion of Africare's budget derived from African-American churches, fraternities and sororities. On the ground, Melvin Foote was the Country Director and I served as the Administrative Assistant, my first international job after graduate school. Africare partnered with rural communities to identify and design rural development projects, such as building wells in villages, planting shrubs for sand dune fixation, supporting women's cooperative gardening project or equipping health care

facilities. The funding groups were encouraged to come and monitor their projects and see how their funds impacted rural populations. This was an excellent approach for African-Americans institutions to link with Africa. Melvin Foote and I hosted numerous dignitaries such as Marian Barry, former mayor of Washington, DC.

I managed the local, international and Commodity Import Program (CIP) bank accounts, drafted and implemented projects and everything else that needed to be done. CIP was a program where the Somali private sector purchased U.S. exports and the funds earned were used to support USAID's economic development projects. I recruited a secretary named Shurki Hayir who had graduated from the Somali National University as a physic major. She was smart and a fast learner. I trained her to assist me to develop women in development programs. After the 1991 fall of Barre's regime, Shurki immigrated to the U.S. and worked for international development agencies.

Q: From all accounts, it's very much a tribal place and a lot of people in pickup trucks running around shooting at each other. What was the situation when you were there?

DENNIS: When I was there, the clan-based opposition groups had not succeeded at overthrowing Siad Barre's Socialist regime. Every day, those of us living in the capital, Mogadishu, would hear rumors about the rebels getting closer. The Somali government spied upon you, your neighbors and workers in the office told police and military what you said and did. All international magazines and journals sold in stores or gift shops in hotels were censored and if there were articles about Somali, they were actually torn or cut out. Somali nationals were forbidden to interact with foreigners. I had a few friends who would risk their lives to come and tell me what was going on, when to stay indoors and which roads to travel. A curfew was imposed during the two years I lived in Mogadishu. We had to be off the streets by 6:00 pm every day or have a "laissez-passer" (an approved authorization). Nobody trusted anybody. This environment created constant fear of going to work or school for locals and those of us who worked for international non-governmental organization (NGO). We didn't have access to day-to-day security briefings at the embassy. So, we depended upon what we learned from others in the NGO community, the United Nations or our local friends.

The key to understanding the collapse of Somalia is the impact of the Cold War super powers. By 1980's, Somali military leaders and the Somali population were just fed up with Siad Barre's regime and his mystical dream to expand the borders of Somalia into the Ogaden. Barre's goal was to unite all Somali-speaking people in the Ogaden, which included parts of Ethiopia. The Somali ethnic flag's single star with five-points represent the traditional areas where Somali people reside. They include: Djibouti (former French occupied land), Somaliland (former British occupied land), the Ogaden region in Ethiopia, the North Eastern Province in Kenya, and southern Somalia (former Italian colony).

Most Somalis outside of the Republic of Somalia were pleased not being connected to Barre's brutal Marxist dictatorship and the country of Somalia. At first, Barre's regime was "winning" the war. Barre controlled the Ogaden and captured cities in Ethiopia.

Given their losses, Ethiopia sought and received support from the Soviet Union to fight back against Barre's military. Weakened by Ethiopian soldiers and Soviet Union military advisors, including 20,000 Cuban soldiers, Barre turned to the U.S. Government, who was keen to foster a partnership with Barre, so that the U.S. could safeguard oil routes by having access to the Berbera Seaport.

Q: Ooh. What was life like living and working under such a strict system?

DENNIS: Living in Somalia had its own set of challenges: curfews, socialist government, isolation, and limited quality of life. Africare didn't have generators until C. Payne Lucas came to monitor our program in 1985. During his visit, he approved generators for our homes and the office, but this was at the end of my assignment. So, during my tour in Somalia, I used candles and hurricane or camping lamps fueled with kerosene as a source of light. I cooked my meals on local charcoal stove tops built into the walls of the kitchen. These custom-made charcoal eyes were practical and convenient, especially since electricity was irregular. I had an electric stove which never worked because of the lack of electricity and it was never grounded properly, so I kept getting shocked when I cooked.

Water for household use was delivered by donkey carts with an oil drum that had been converted to carry water. I ordered cases of drinking water, food and some wine from Peter Justen, a mail order company, in Sweden. It is for these reasons I often say that my real Peace Corps experience was in Somalia because I lacked conveniences. My first year in Abidjan was an easy assignment in terms of housing, regular water and electricity. Abidjan was modern in the 1970's and the government welcomed me by assigning me a small house in the Marcory Residential section of Abidjan rather than an apartment as other volunteers were assigned in Abidjan. The second years was spent mostly in rural areas where I expected to live without modern comforts.

DENNIS: My period in Somalia was a risky time to implement development projects. Travels to our project sites were always scary ordeals. You never knew who was waiting for you on the other side of a sand dune. In Mogadishu, the night guard in our Africare office was often harassed by the Somali police. The police routinely rounded up young men, including the guards who worked for us and forced them to join the Somali army to fight on the frontlines in the Ogaden. These arrests became so frequent that I would go to the police station with the guard's wife to plead for his release. I would argue that we needed him to watch our offices and could not constantly recruit and train guards. The guard was always released. At home, I had an older guard named Issa, who was never harassed.

Q: What was life like for women in Somalia?

DENNIS: Somali rural women like most women in Africa bear the burden of farming, fetching water and having and raising children. In addition, as an agro-pastoral society, they take care of small ruminants, goats and sheep and sell milk. Boys and men are

responsible for caring for camels. Somali women are considered some of the beautiful women on the continent.

Siad Barre's regime gave women "equal rights" in 1975, which meant they could inherit property and girls could attend school. When I was there, women worked in government offices and some held senior level administrative positions. Women were also elected and served as members of the People's Assembly. Before the civil war, Somali women were on a trajectory to change policies in their interest, such as abolishing the practice of infibulation. African women elected to parliaments across the continent have been able to advocate for gender-based issues and pass laws in their favor, Kenya, Liberia and Senegal are exemplary models.

Q: What is infibulation?

DENNIS: Stu, this is an important topic that must be openly discussed and awareness raised of the harmful long-term effects of female genital mutilation (FGM) and to give girls the option of deciding if they want to be "cut." When they are young, they are forced to undergo the procedure. Along with African women, I have actively participated in anti-FGM activities as part of safe maternal child health programs in Côte d'Ivoire, Somalia, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana and Guinea. We educate women and men on the negative health impacts on girls and women. The term genital mutilation came about around 1975 by an American anthropologist, Rose Oldfield Hayes. Before then, it was just referred to as "excision" and "infibulation."

The three types of female circumcision range from the mildest to the severity of mutilation. Type 1, circumcision removes the prepuce of the clitoris, preserving the clitoris. Type 2, excision or clitoridectomy, more severe than type 1 and consists of the partial or total removal of the clitoris with the tissues of the labia minora (small lips). Type 3, infibulation is the most severe and drastic form of genital mutilation. It involves excision and plus infibulation. The two sides of the vulva are attached to each other, either by stitching with silk or catguts sutures (in the Sudan) or by thorns (in Somalia) only leaving a small hole for urine and menstrual blood to pass.

The World Health Organization reports that more than 200 million women and girls have undergone some form of genital cutting as a coming-of-age ritual — and another 3 million girls worldwide are at risk of being cut each year, most of them under the age of 15. In Somalia, women undergo this procedure when they are between three to nine years old. After care consists of traditional herbs and local medicines applied to the wound to enhance healing.

After this experience, girls are traumatized and never fully return to enjoying their childhood. There have been cases of girls who bleed to death or have infections. Those who survive the cutting, experience adverse effects during marriage and pregnancy. Health issues are common, including deep dyspareunia (severe pain during sexual relations), recurrent infections, urinary tract infections, difficulty passing menstrual flow, chronic pain, the development of cysts, an inability to get pregnant, complications during

childbirth, and fatal bleeding. So, the post-traumatic stress of the procedure performed during childhood often lasts throughout a woman's life. Sex becomes a necessity primarily for procreation.

Q: Why is this procedure performed? Explain to me the purpose of this seemingly destructive procedure?

DENNIS: The original purpose is traced back to ancient Egypt, when “pure,” women, meaning those who were virgins, were offered to the Gods. It is for this reason the practice is sometimes called Pharaonic Infibulation or Circumcision. It has evolved into a “rite de passage” to prevent sexual desire, pregnancy and chastity before marriage. Societies that promote female genital mutilation argue it ensures girls are “saved” for their husbands. The practice has erroneously been linked to Islam. Saudi Arabia, the seat of Islam, condemns the practice. In Egypt, the practice is performed among Christian Copts and Muslims. Scholars agree that the practice is not grounded in religion, but cultural. Culture practices vary in different societies. In Central and East Africa, the “rite de passage” involves elongation of the clitoris to enhance sexual pleasure, completely the opposite of suppressing sexual desire as in Somalia and elsewhere.

In 1985, I conducted a social science analysis for an agro-forestry project in Somalia. USAID funded several agro-forestry projects in regions where refugees had cut down trees. The Government of Somalia requested that USAID allow them to implement a project in the Gedo Region. I had supervised the Africare social science study in Jalalaqsi and applied for the opportunity to conduct the survey for the National Range Agency in the Gedo Region, 230 miles from Mogadishu.

The research project identified indigenous trees that had been cut down by refugees and where they were located on the rangeland. We looked at how trees were used in society such as for charcoal, building poles and medicinal purposes. With a team consisting of a police officer for security, nomadic Sheikh (religious leader) and driver/translator and me, we set out to the rangelands around the town of Luuq in the Gedo region of Somalia. Once trees were found, I reported back to the project's foresters, who would return to the location to collect seedlings and plant them in the nursery. We also tested the possibility of replanting local species in a nursey.

One day, I conducted a focus group discussion with a group of elderly Somali agro-pastoral women. The women indicated that they wanted to replant the original tree species to obtain the thorns used during infibulation to make the holes in the vagina. They said that the thorns from the original acacia species were no longer available to make the holes on the outer genital. They explained that they were had resorted to using a secondary thorn bush. However, this secondary thorn bush caused infections, resulting in keloids and knots on the vagina as well as other types of illnesses.

As the anthropologist working with the foresters, the women pleaded with me to help them find and replant their preferred species. They gave me the local name of the species. The catch twenty-two situation for me was that the Government of Somalia and educated

women's groups in the Mogadishu were developing a policy to discourage any form of infibulation. In 1982, Raqiya Abdalla, a Somali woman, had obtained her Master's degree in Holland on the topic and wrote a book called "Sisters in Affliction." This book outlines the procedures and side effects of infibulation. It also outlines the negative impacts and consequences of the procedures. Since the civil war, the author migrated to the U.S. and travels to work in Somali on infibulation and other family care issues.

For my forestry report, I reported that traditional rural women had approached me and requested that the project find and plant the preferred acacia species in which they used the thorns to perform infibulation. After consultations with Somali women in Mogadishu, I recommended that Somali foresters, Somali gynecologists and the Ministry of Health decide how to enforce the new anti-infibulation policy and not replant the preferred acacia species. So, that's what we put in our report on infibulation. I understood that these elderly women were likely to continue practicing infibulation at all costs. After all, the practice is not only about preserving a "tradition" but maintaining an economic livelihood for women who performed the surgery. The unspoken attitude is that it was done to me and others must suffer this same experience.

While in Somalia, I was friends with an Egyptian female doctor who performed this operation in a small private clinic. She would cut and sew up young girls and or "de-infibulate" or open up the threads in preparation for marriages. Another problem women face which is caused by this practice is their vaginas are dry. While the "dryness" is considered as "clean" and a pleasure for the husband, it is reported to be painful for the wife.

One day, I was invited to the house of a Somali girlfriend. I remember going there only to learn that her daughter and a niece had been "cut" or infibulated. She invited me to come over to celebrate the event. When I got there, the two young girls around eight and 10 were sitting on the floor with cloth tied from the top of their thighs to the bottom of their legs. They sat in this extremely humiliating and painful position for 15-40 days during the healing process. They were not allowed to drink water or tea because their bodies needed to "dry up."

In 2012 in Conakry, Guinea, I was invited by the "Chef de Canton" (Neighborhood Leader) to come for a "fete chez lui" (festival at his house). A neighbor, who was a Guinean trained midwife, told me that the purpose of the festival was to celebrate the "cutting of girls" in the neighborhood. She said she was against this debilitating practice. Neither one of us participated in the event.

Q: This is the sort of practice that is keeping women under control and all?

DENNIS: Yes, this practice encourages gender inequality and controls sexuality. Somali women are kept under male domination and are expected to submit to their husbands. In Somalia, men are often the principal breadwinners and take care of the households. Women may have gardens and sale products, especially camel, goat or cow milks, in the market. Most women respect their husbands and accept verbal or physical abuse.

In terms of infibulation, Somali men are direct beneficiaries and indirect victims of the practice. Directly, he is ensured that this wife is a virgin. However, he becomes a victim by struggling to prove his masculinity by bursting or cutting the threads which is very, very, very painful according to my Somali girlfriends and the literature on this topic. It may take days or weeks before the couple is able to perform what should be a natural act of affection, pleasure and procreation. Instead, couples face disputes due to the wife's experiencing long-term physical and psycho-social effects of infibulation. Some women suffer from depression when it is time to have sex.

It should mention that some Somali husbands are loving and exercise patience with their wives. Some have a level of frustration if they are unable to penetrate the small hole and seek "help" from a medical professional to open the hole, or they use a "small knife." Both the men and women have some level of frustration. And that's why Somalia and other countries that practice infibulation are referred to as sexually frustrated societies.

Q: Were there forces in Somalia at the higher level who would have seen how awful this was?

DENNIS: Oh, yes. In fact, the Somalia Ministry of Health and many of the women's organizations were totally against this practice then and now. There has been a movement against all forms of female genital mutilation for a long time across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. At a conference held in Khartoum, Sudan in October 1984, Africans from 14 countries gathered to share information about in-country activities, successes and failures, and to plan strategies for the future.

Out of the Khartoum conference was formed the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices which has its headquarters in Geneva. It was the sense of the conference that there was no dearth of things for non-Africans to do. They can collaborate with individual Africans on research and education projects, collect bibliographies, assist with fundraising, and perform other activities which are made easy by their access to the electronic, computerized information world. The real work must be done by Africans to change behaviors and attitudes toward the practice.

While governments pass laws and ratify international treaties, the political will to enforce laws and policies to eradicate this practice is lacking. For example, Senegal parliamentarians have lobbied and had laws passed to prohibit all forms of female genital mutilation including excision, the most common form practiced. They have made considerable progress with the help of non-governmental organizations.

I receive emails from a non-governmental organization called TOSTAN based in Dakar, Senegal. TOSTAN actively fights against this practice. It was founded by Molly Melching, an American who has lived in Senegal since the 1970's. I met her when I lived there and she encouraged me to join the Peace Corps. The assumption is that a girl who is not cut is not suitable for marriage.

TOSTAN has gotten men to denounce the practice and get involved in campaigns to promote behavior change messages that a woman is still clean and pure even though she has not been cut. More importantly, men are learning to understand the long-term health consequences of female genital mutilation on their wives and their daughters. TOSTAN has had significant success in Senegal and has expanded to other countries in Africa including, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, The Gambia and Mauritania. There's a whole re-education that's needs to take place in Africa, Asia and in the Middle East to encourage men to marry girls who have not been cut. There are more women protecting their daughters from going through this unhealthy experience. Women protect their daughters by leaving the region or country because the mothers and grandmothers and in-laws will take the child from the mother under the pretense of taking them for another family event and then take them to perform this operation.

Q: So, girls are taken without the consent of their parents?

DENNIS: Yes, the practice creates conflicts within families.

Q: Were you able to operate there? I mean you know, talk about this, and raise concerns about this without getting yourself either threatened or kicked out or something happening to you?

DENNIS: We were able to talk about it and we were never under threat. My role was to support the Somali government's view to stop the practice. Listening to my Somali friends discuss their experiences and how they wished they never had been cut, I became an advocate to raise awareness to decrease the practice. Somali doctors and women in the urban areas were supporting and conducting anti-infibulation campaigns.

There's still a very active movement to decrease the practice by educating men about the facts. When men get involved, they encourage other men not to have their wives and daughters cut. That's the key: get the men onboard and train the women doing the cutting to have other forms of income. The United Nations conducts anti-FGM campaigns to disseminate behavioral change communication messages, such as: FGM is a crime; FGM harms girls' and women's health; it is child abuse; it is a human right violation and one can be sentenced by a court of law to go to jail.

The breaking news is as a result of the Somali civil war FGM is on the decline! Since 1991, displaced Somalis have focused on survival and cultural practices have been set aside including the rituals and ceremonies related to infibulation. The elderly women who performed the procedure have started to die off without training younger Somalis. Somalis born outside of the country are unfamiliar with the practice. Increasingly, modern families refuse to have their girls "cut." The peer pressure and stigma on girls for not being cut no longer exist since. Men accept to marry women who are "open" and have never been cut.

Unfortunately, Amnesty International reports in 2014 that there is a significant increase of sexual assault and rape cases among Somalis women who are displaced in refugee

camps and lack clan protection. The women are without recourse because their attackers are often armed gangs and there have been allegations of African Union peace-keeping forces attacking women and girls, the most vulnerable members of the society. Human Rights Watch also report incidents of rape and says the women are double victims of the civil war and weak government institutions which is unable to provide effective justice or medical and social support. The Government of Somalia responded to the rape crises by creating rape crises points, with the help of NGOs, for women to report cases but the women have little faith in these reports.

To make matters worse, the girls are sometimes required to marry their rapist to avoid shame to their families. Attackers threaten to place pictures of the rape incident on social media. Myths of rape mentioned earlier in the interview based on my experience are perpetuated in Somalia. There are calls for Somali men to support Women's Rights and stop the abuse of women. So, it looks as if Somali replaced the trauma of infibulation with an equally traumatic experience of rape. It will take years to replace traditional systems where women were protected by clans with a modern system of honest police, military and marines.

Q: That is sad. I learned that infibulation is practiced in the U.S. among Somalis. Are you familiar with the practice among immigrants in the U.S.?

DENNIS: I learned that genital female mutilation continues under clandestine conditions among some African, Asian and Middle Eastern immigrant communities in the U.S. In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed legislation prohibiting any form of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the U.S. on minors under 18 years of age. Perpetrators could face fines or up to five years in prison. In 2013, Congress criminalized the knowing transportation of a girl younger than 18 years old outside of the United States for the purpose of performing FGM/C (so-called "vacation cutting"). To this end, the U.S. tracks travel of girls by their country of origins to protect them from the practice until they are 18 years old. The Department of Justice (DOJ) maintains a hotline where people can anonymously report violations or potential violations of the FGM/C statute. Numerous U.S. states have also criminalized the practice. In February 2018, a Bohra (part of India) doctor was arrested in February 2018 for performing genital mutilation in Detroit, Michigan.

Globally, U.S. Congress requires all U.S.-funded programs to report on their specific actions taken to reduce this harmful practice. The Department of State's U.S. Adolescent Girls Strategy includes strategic objectives to promote legal and policy frameworks that empower and advance girls rights; and to end female genital mutilation and address its consequences. These programs are designed with host country officials, are community-led and community-implemented.

Q: Tell me about the tribal conflicts in Somalia. Were rebels organized along tribal group and were they basically against the government?

DENNIS: There were many rebel groups (more than 25) who were organized against the Siad Barre regime. Three main rebel groups existed, who were organized along clan lines. They were: Majeerteen's rebel group was Somali Salvation Front (SSF); Isaaq's rebel group was Somali National Movement (SNM); and Hawiye rebel group, United Somali Congress USC). Barre committed numerous killings of clans and human rights violations, which caused the U.S. to pull support to his regime. He ordered his special forces called "Red Berets" to terrorize urban population and nomads on the rangeland, including women and children. Thousands of camels and other animals, the life line for Somalis, were stolen or killed.

In 1985, on one of our agro-forestry field trips on the Gedo range, rebels ambushed us and surrounded our vehicle. I was scared and just knew that I was "a goner." The Sheikh got out and started pleading and negotiating with them not to harm us. Eventually, the Sheikh had prayer with the rebels and calmed them down. Before I knew it, the rebels started telling us the names of indigenous tree species and where to find them on the range. There were cases where the rebels killed people considered working on behalf of Barre's government. I was blessed to survive this experience.

Q: What sort of protection did you usually have there?

DENNIS: The only protection I ever had was the police escort on trips outside the capital. Non-governmental and private volunteer organizations' staff lacked armed vehicles to travel up country. Instead, we coordinated our trips with the United Nations.

Q: Oh boy. How about our embassy? Did you have much contact or was there one at the time?

DENNIS: As an Africare staff, implementing a USAID-funded reforestation project, we met with the officer who was responsible for agriculture/agro-forestry or the program officer to report on activities. USAID held agro-forestry coordination meetings with private volunteer organizations: Overseas Education Foundation (now defunct at Hargeisa); Save the Children/U.S. (at Qurioley); Africare (at Jalalaqsi); and CARE (at Belet Weyne). As mentioned earlier, the government of Somalia's National Range Agency designed and implemented its agro-forestry program at Luuq. The project responded to the need to replace trees cut down by refugees. The replacement trees were used for charcoal, building poles and medicinal reasons. Sand dune fixation was also an important component of the project. These meetings were held periodically at USAID offices.

On the social side, Louis Cohen, USAID's Mission Director during my time in Somalia, was personable. He maintained an open-door policy to discuss projects or current events in the country. He had a way with reducing the stress and tension of working in Somalia. Mr. Cohen hosted receptions and events in which he included NGO implementing partners such as CARE, Save the Children and Africare. At some events, NGO partners would stay because we were unable to travel home after Somali Government-imposed curfew. I would stay with some of the colleagues that I knew at the embassy. We were a

close-knit embassy family because we depended upon each other for day-to-day survival and safety.

Ambassador Robert Oakley was supportive and kind. He made life so much easier for me in Somalia. He invited me to diplomatic receptions at the residence. When he traveled overseas, he would bring me magazines from France and francophone African countries and I did the same for him.

Stu, let me close the Somali section on a positive note. Afgooye, a town that straddles the Shabelle River 19 miles (30 km) west of Mogadishu is the site where Somali friends would take me on Sunday outings. I would drive separately and meet them for local drumming. To the drums, we danced, Kababé, a local dance. We wrapped cloth around your hips and moved to the beat of the drums. After dancing, a meal was prepared of mouton (lamb) and rice or spaghetti, eaten with your hands. Good clean fun.

Somalis Mogadishu had a wonderful fish market. Fresh Indian Ocean fish was always available. Lobster, by the buckets, was sold for small amounts of money. I learned to charcoal over an open fire or broil lobster in the oven with fennel, garlic and butter. I also made pound cakes with goat or camel milk, the most popular milks available. Goat milk was manageable, but camel, I only tried cooking with it once. This is when vanilla flavor plays a role in adjusting taste. I did drink camel's milk on field trips in Somalia and in Chad and found that Chad's camel's milk is preferable about they provide salt stones to the camels to lick which is transformed in the milk. I also experimented with watermelons, grapefruits and lemons, to make juices. Somali's national drink is shaah (tea) but grapefruit drink and sambasa are wonderful snacks foods. I got introduced to: Somali oils, including frankincense and myrrh originating from Puntland State of Somalia; goldsmiths' hand-made intricate filigree designs; original and elegant one shoulder wraps; and learned to use spices to season tough camel meat and have transferred those culinary skills to other dishes. I have learned the Somali goldsmiths are now found in the Abbi Dhabi, Arab Emirates.

Q: Could you tell me a bit about what you experienced living in a village. What was it like?

DENNIS: You mean back in Côte d'Ivoire?

Q: Yes.

DENNIS: My experiences were positive although living conditions were "rough and basic." The villagers had built huts for us: two separate ones for each of us. Inside the huts, the beds were locally made of a wooden frame with a mattress made of straw and hay that had been woven together with burlap bags. There was a rope made of local sisal to hang your clothes. There was nothing else there. The bathroom was an outside pit latrine with a hole in the ground and I remember we put a lid on top of it. It was not fancy, unlike the latrines you find today in the villages. Today, they are built like toilets,

and you can sit rather than squat. In those days, the latrine was nothing except a hole in the ground with plenty of flies.

Q: Well how were you treated? You say you have African features.

DENNIS: In Côte d'Ivoire, I was treated royally. I'll never forget that when I first got to Kaniasso, our huts were not completely ready. So, the chief of the village sent me to sleep with his wife. I didn't speak Dioula fluently. We communicated in sign language. She was very, very patient and helpful. She gave me another lesson about rubbing your body down with "beurre de karité" (shea butter) at night, because the climate was dry. For this reason, shea butter was sold everywhere in the market. Plus, it was also used for cooking stews. All of the women in the village were kind to me. The rural sociologist and I had someone who prepared meals for us on an open fire.

Another sign of their acceptance and patience with me was shown when I offered to help them cook. I took an interest and learned to cook African food. They would let me help them pound by hand in a mortar with a pestle millet, fonio, corn and rice and peel spices. I had already started cooking in Senegal and continued to do so in Kaniasso. Women in the village made a dish from local brown rice called "malo wousona" and we would eat this rice with various leafy green sauces or tomato-based stews. I found that some of the food looked familiar. For example, a dish made from millet or fonio is eaten with sour milk and sugar. This dish reminded me of "buttermilk and cornbread." A dish eaten in the U.S. down south. My mother used to make it for us. Greens are the national dish in most African countries and they are eaten with your hands, the same way my mother did. As for smoked meat in greens, it originates from Africa. Stews consist of smoked fish or "phacohère" (wart hog), captured and smoked during the dry season. Fresh or dried okra dishes were popular. Some of the villagers practiced Islam and others practiced traditional African spirituality in respect for their ancestors.

Q: It does sound very healthy. Was it?

DENNIS: Yes, it was very healthy food. There were different types of indigenous fruits that came into season. During the colonial period, apples, oranges and bananas were introduced at the expense of downplaying the value of local fruits that just grow wild and come into season annually. The shea fruit is one of those fruits. Shea produces a delicious sweet pulp with a nut. The popular shea butter comes from the nut. In 1995, I encountered a woman selling the shea fruit from on top of head in Niger. She had come to the hospital where I was conducting an assessment. There are hundreds of other fruits, which have not been industrialized. These lesser known fruits, vegetables and grains are untapped markets.

Q: Ah.

DENNIS: Organic oranges are common. They are not orange-colored outside as oranges are in the States. They are green colored and really, really sweet, juicy and just plain delicious. Mangos, large grafée (crossed), were also produced in the northern region of

the country. We didn't make juice out of them or cut them any fancy way. We just peeled them with our hands and ate them. Or, we would just suck the smaller ones, which were stringy and had a lot of juice and fiber.

Q: At that point were there problems with wild animals?

DENNIS: You know yes. Therese and I had returned from a day of field work and she found a snake in her hut.

Q: Whoa.

DENNIS: It was hanging behind the clothes on this cord. She screamed and the men came with their machetes. They chopped the snake up, removed the pieces and cleaned the blood. Unfortunately, we never slept well in our huts after that experience.

During our research, villagers complained of wild animals. Monkeys and “phacohère” (wart hogs). Warding off these animals from farm lands was a problem mentioned during our meetings in the villages. They told us animals would come and feast on farmers’ crops and destroy farm lands, especially if the land was near rivers. Planting thorny shrubs is a solution often introduced by rural development projects to reduce the fear of crop damage. When we traveled between the 13 villages, we would see bands of monkeys running across the roads. Or you would see “phacohère,” wild antelopes and colorful birds. I don’t remember their names, but all kinds of colorful birds existed. I always refer to this type of experience as my natural safari. Through the years, I noticed fewer and fewer animals when I travel up country to supervise or monitor projects. This is directly linked to the lack of political will to protect the environment and link to sustainable economic development. Policies and laws have been drafted and approved, even ratified with international treaties. However, most African governments fail to enforce these policies to protect the ecosystem. Today, cutting trees for timber export and charcoal for cooking have caused animals to hide farther and farther in the mountains. The end result is a lack of balance between the environment and its habitants, both human and animal. In the cities, people say, “le desert vient” (the desert is coming). This is what I have seen in Guinea, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon. I never saw giraffes or lions or any of the “Big Five” (elephant, buffalo, lion, leopard, and rhinoceros) until I went on a safari in Kenya. These animals are now protected in game parks and reserves. When I worked up north in Ngaoundéré, Adamaoua Province in Cameroon, I traveled 580 kilometers (360 miles) each month to monitor health centers and hospitals. During those trips, I saw herds of antelopes, bands of chimpanzees and baboons in the wild. We stopped our vehicle to allow them to pass.

Q: At the village level were you able to observe how the politics worked?

DENNIS: Oh, yes, understanding how and who made decisions, especially as it related to land tenure was part of our assignment. We sought to identify who were the gatekeepers/decision-makers, the role of woman, and how land distribution was organized. What would we need to do to strengthen the role of women and improve their

economic status? We found that villages were governed by a council of elders who had a chief as the leader. The council would have “opinion leaders” who were often small business owners or “ancien combattants” (elderly veterans). I remember that female traditional birth attendants (elderly women) often sat on the village councils.

Q: I've never served in Africa but in many parts of Africa the women basically run the economy, don't they?

DENNIS: The economy as it relates to vegetable crops in rural areas. In urban zones, women are involved in all types of trades in the marketplace. They travel the world to buy and sell products.

Q: What was the role of the men? Were there two different cultures between men and women?

DENNIS: In subsistence agriculture, roles are clearly defined among men and women, according to their age-sex groupings. Young men cleared land, often using the slash and burn method. Unfortunately, this method contributes to deforestation and expanding the dessert. Once the land is cleared, women plant seeds to “fertilize” the soil. Women and children performed back-breaking tasks of weeding, often with a baby on their backs. Harvest tasks are performed by both men and women. I remember that families worked on a communal plot. If women had land, they worked these plots on their own time. Women also grew small vegetable gardens near their huts. Cotton was and still is the major cash crop in Kaniasso. I even have some pictures of cotton bales that were prepared to be picked-up and taken for transformation into textiles.

Q: Did you find that people you talked to had any real concept of what the hell were these Americans doing coming over helping and all?

DENNIS: You know, most of the time when they see professional workers, even as dark-skinned as you are, a “Toubabu” (foreigner or White person in francophone West African countries) or “Obroni” in (Ghana) and “Oyibo” in Nigeria – you are still considered an American foreigner. Foreigners are considered someone coming to bringing or take resources. That’s how Black or White foreigners are viewed by people of lower social status. People of middle and upper social status see you as their equal and sometimes they see themselves as better off than you. Often time, you’re viewed as a person coming to make a positive contribution to socio-economic change. In urban zones, the educated person understands that foreigner governments promote export of their commodities rather than developing the manufacturing industries in Africa.

Q: Did you explain what the United States was all about?

DENNIS: Well, most of the time they knew America is a country like France. This is due to the role Peace Corps volunteers have played in rural areas. Volunteers have been working in villages for decades. People speak highly of volunteers, because we offer them an opportunity to learn to speak and practice “American” English. Volunteers have

trained people in math, science, agro-forestry, agriculture, fish farming and small business development. Now, what I frequently had to explain was what it is like living as a Black American or a person of African descent in America. Once people got close to me, they ask easy questions about foods and family members. They always mention Martin L. King, Jr., Michael Jackson or Beyoncé. Then, they work up to the more difficult questions about racism in the U.S.: former lynchings and recurrent police brutality.

Q: Had Côte d'Ivoire been a source of African-Americans through the slave trade or not?

DENNIS: Slave castles or trading posts existed all over Africa. Ivory Coast, bordering Ghana where the Cape Coast and Elmina Castles existed, was the primary source for ivory, rather than human cargo during the slave trade. Few slaves departed from Ivory Coast. Bingerville, a small town about 18 kilometers or 11 miles from Abidjan, which is surrounded by coffee and cocoa plantations, was the seat of the French colonial government. One of the historical factors of Bingerville is the school built for “metis” (mulatto) children of French administrators and local women. The school educated these children, who eventually worked as administrators in the colonial government. Today, these descendants are well integrated into the society.

The trans-Atlantic slave routes included current day countries all over Africa. West African forts are well known. Slaves also departed other regions including North and Southern countries. I went Safi, Morocco, a shipping point where slaves departed for the new world in 1976. The major source of slaves through the middle-passage was from Ghana. There were 80 different forts/castles built over 300 years to serve as trading posts in Ghana. Each post had slave dungeons built underground. Today, 11 are considered United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites, including the Cape Coast and Elmina Castles. Liberia and Sierra Leone also served as departure points. Bunce Island, 20 miles from Freetown, Sierra Leone was another major departure point. In fact, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia were considered the “rice basin” and that’s where slaves were taken from to plant/harvest rice in the New World, especially South Carolina. In Ghana, people were taken from the northern region and walked down to Assin Manso, the last slave market, where they were fattened, bathed, and wounds treated. Slave buyers would come and purchase their human goods and have them branded before they were walked to the dungeons located under castles/forts. Male and female were held in separate dungeons until they were transferred onto small boats and finally onto ships. I visited Assin Manso in 2017, about an hour from Cape Coast, Ghana, which has been transformed into a memorial site.

While on assignment in Ghana, I was asked by the embassy to organize a Black history month program. To start, I conducted an informal survey, where I asked the local staff and Americans what we should do. The point that came up most often was “What did slaves eat when they got to the U.S.?” They were really interested in knowing the type of food slaves ate. A Foreign Service National (FSN) insisted upon knowing what type of “bush meat” (a delicacy all over Africa) did slaves eat. So, I explained to them that we

have possums and coons because I know that my uncles used to buy possums and coons from Soulard, the local farmers' market in St. Louis and they are still available for purchase. Other food related questions were about the types of day-to-day foods we cooked that have become "soul food." I formed a committee and we prepared a feast of "American Soul Food." The FSNs found the food was quite similar to foods eaten in Ghana: black eyed peas are called "red-red;" greens are called katumbree; grilled fish; rice dishes; cornbread, which is similar to a corn mush prepared all over Africa. These foods are called different names in different places.

Q: Were there many African-Americans coming back looking for their roots at this time?

DENNIS: In 1976, I was in Dakar, Senegal when Alex Haley's "Roots" film came out. African-Americans flocked to Dakar to visit Juffure, The Gambia. Air Afrique had a direct six and a half hours flight from New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport to Dakar. They usually would get off in Dakar, travel by road through Kaolack to the ferry to reach Banjul and continue by road. Later on, more African-Americans decided to visit Ghana, which already had an African-American community. At Ghana's independence in 1957, President Kwame Nkrumah appealed to people of African descent to come to Ghana to help build the country. Teachers, doctors and other professionals came from the U.S. and the Caribbean. This first wave of returnees is starting to expire. Many married locals, had successful marriages and now their descendants are raising their families in Ghana.

Ghana has always been friendly and safe with strong pan-African principles. In 2014, the Ghana census reported that there were 3,000 African-Americans and Caribbeans who reside permanently in Ghana. Many of them have built beautiful houses in Prampram, just outside of Accra, along the Atlantic Ocean and elsewhere in Ghana. Ghana passed the "Right to Abode" law in 2000. Over time, the law has evolved, granting members of the diaspora (i.e., descendants of African heritage who were born in another country as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and return to Ghana to live) the right to remain indefinitely, enter without visas and to work. The numbers are growing as more and more people do their DNA tests and decide to visit and eventually settle in Africa. While in Ghana, I became a member of the African-American Association in Ghana (AAAG). The group has a website with an option for people who live outside of Ghana to join the group.

Allow me to add that I applaud African-Americans who return to Africa to live. If their goal is to reconnect and reclaim their African heritage, I suggest that they live integrated among local people in cities or in rural areas. It is difficult to gain a true African experience when Americans decide to live among Americans on land designated by local authorities, such as Fihankra. Fihankra, located in eastern Ghana, is 30,000 acres of land provided by the people of the Akwamu traditional council and the local government to attract African-Americans who desire to re-settle in Ghana. Fihankra could serve as the place in which African-Americans hold ceremonies to reflect upon our past, sort of "our village." Those who want to farm could do so on this land. They should pay homage to

the local authorities before tilling or building on the land. In reality, the W.B. DuBois Center for Pan-African Culture serves as AAAG's regular meeting and event location.

Q: How were they accepted?

DENNIS: Diaspora who live in Accra, Cape Coast, and Kumasi are totally accepted and well-integrated into the society, when they respect the people and culture. Some have been there for over 60 years. The long-term Diasporas operate businesses and some have created schools (academic, bottled water production and bakeries). Family and social ties have allowed them to participate in socio-cultural events which normally "Obronis" (foreigners) would not be invited. This does not happen when you live isolated with other Diasporas.

Q: What did you do after Somalia?

DENNIS: I left Somalia in 1985 and returned home to St. Louis. As I mentioned earlier, Somalia was the hardest assignment I've had in all my years working overseas. After my experiences there, I decided that I was never going overseas again. I told my mother, who was still living at the time that "I've had enough. I am not going overseas anymore." My skill set made it difficult for me to obtain employment in St. Louis. In 1986, I got a call from Dr. David French who I had met in Abidjan in 1984. He said that he needed someone to work with him to close out a healthcare program. He said that he was returning to the States, but he needed someone in Abidjan he could trust to balance the books of a USAID-funded project. I said Abidjan, a modern city, elegant and sophisticated; yet, traditional at the same time. It has always been my favorite place in Africa, in fact in the world. So, I accepted the position as a Health Care Administrator for about a year and I closed the program down. It was a West/Central African regional healthcare program designed to strengthen healthcare systems in 20 countries. Dr. French had administered the small pox eradication project and saw first-hand the need to improve health care systems.

I returned from Abidjan in 1987 and settled in with my mother. I eventually bought my first house in St. Louis the same year because I was convinced that I was definitely not going back overseas long term. I had tried unsuccessfully to get recruited by USAID. I was short-listed and interviewed but was not retained.

In 1988, I got a call from Drew University's International Health Program office in Washington, DC. They had been searching the entire country for someone to work on their project in northern Cameroon. They specifically needed someone who spoke French and had experience working in nomadic/agro-pastoral societies. They hadn't found anybody with these two qualifications. My name came up and I was offered the position. Harvard International Health Institute was the lead partner, Academy of Educational Development (AED) and Drew International Health Programs were the sub-contractors on the USAID-funded "Maternal Child Health/Child Survival Project."

Well, my mother got the initial phone call and told them to “leave her daughter alone.” She told then I had traveled enough and just hung up on them. Fortunately for me, the person was very persistent and called back again and again until she finally got me. It was Dr. Rosaline C. King, a pharmacist and Director of Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science, International Health Programs. She said there was a position as the Provincial Health Coordinator in Ngaoundéré, Cameroon, located in Adamaoua Province. I had never heard of this place and wondered where it was. I didn’t know much about Cameroon or Central Africa. Map.com or Google didn’t exist in those days, so I pulled out my World Atlas to find Cameroon and saw it was just below Chad and Niger and bordered Nigeria. I rushed to the library to read more about the country. I talked to friends and learned that Cameroon was a politically stable bilingual country, with French and English as its official languages. It had good paved roads, people were friendly and receptive to foreigners, and the three Northern provinces were agro-pastoral/nomadic societies. These are the people I studied in grad school and knew their migration route from the Horn of Africa and Egypt took them to Senegal in the Fouta Toro, to Guinea in the Fouta Diallo and finally to the Cameroon. I liked what I was learning and talked more to Dr. King about the position.

Dr. King indicated that my role would be to coordinate activities with the local government’s Ministry of Health and the Harvard-led team based in Yaoundé. As a USAID-funded project, the Harvard-led team would train nurses and doctors to strengthen healthcare delivery systems; improve hospitals and healthcare centers by improving, upgrading essential hospital equipment; and procuring vehicles for supervision of health centers and semi-urban hospitals. This program was similar to the one I had closed down for Dr. French. Rather than being having a regional focus, this program concentrated uniquely on a specific country.

I was interviewed by Dr. Al Henn, who died in a Kenya Airways crash in 2007. One of the questions he asked was, “How would you handle a French military doctor who refuses to work with you?” I responded that I would include him in all planning and seek to collaborate with him. If these approaches failed, I would move ahead with other project staff to get the job done. Well, I must have given the answers they wanted. With the hopes and view that Cameroon would be similar to Côte d’Ivoire, I accepted the position and packed my personal effects for Adamaoua, Cameroon. I spent 1988, 1989, and part of 1990 implementing this health care project.

In 1987, African ministers of health signed an agreement in Bamako, Mali to integrate essential drugs and primary health care services into community-based health care facilities. The “Bamako Initiative,” as it became known, took on the challenge to link health care facilities to communities. Cameroon had a dynamic Minister of Health, Dr. Joseph Mbeti, who sincerely sought to implement the Bamako Initiative. He chaired Donor Coordination meetings to discuss which sectors which donor would support. These included: maternal child health and vaccinations, computerized management information systems, monthly reporting and transmission, standardized supervision and monitoring of health facilities. Dr. Mbeti stressed the importance of coordinating which donors would work in which geographic locations to avoid duplications of efforts. He also wanted

donors to develop, standardize and utilize national systems. The bottom line was that the Ministry of Health had implemented a Primary Health Care program with GTZ (German Government Development Agency) and Belgium Cooperation agencies. These programs had achieved mixed results. The Government of Cameroon wanted USAID to take the lessons learned from these donors and build upon their successes to develop a new project that would serve as the national program to strengthen and improve the quality of healthcare delivery in Cameroon, especially in rural areas. It was all about designing and implementing policies and strategies as we went along.

Q: How did you find your new assignment?

DENNIS: I really liked Ngaoundéré, a semi-urban and “chef-lieu de département” (Provincial capital) of Adamaoua. At that time, it had paved roads, post office, government offices, a large open-air market and general stores. I had a beautiful ranch house with 120 evergreen trees planted along a paved driveway. The tenant prior to my arrival was an Italian family, who had planted multiple colored rose beds. Behind the house, a small fish pond could be seen from a side porch. I decorated the verandas with bamboo furniture and flowers. The Cameroonian owner had used the house for weekends to ride horses.

Our project office was located at the departmental ministry of health’s prevention and rural health division. For me, the house and office were significant improvements over my Mogadishu, Somalia house. I opted to have my bed, living room and dining room furniture made in Ngaoundéré, which turned out sturdy and attractive. I lived comfortably without the stress of electricity and water shortages.

In the office, I was supposed to work in collaboration with the provincial medical doctor, who was the head of the province and its five departments. This doctor happened to be one of the few remaining French or “colonial” doctors assigned in Cameroon. Note this is in 1988 and there were still a couple of White French doctors in charge of health departments in the country. This particular doctor was the most arrogant and insecure person I had ever met. He did not want to work with a person who was a woman and Black, who had control of the U.S. Government project’s bank account and vehicles. He created bottlenecks and refused to collaborate with me or the “American project.”

Our first clash was whether it was necessary for me to have an office with a toilet and face bowl to wash hands. He told me to go to the “bush” like the men or continue to drive to my house to use the toilet. I had gotten approval from the Yaoundé team to build the toilet. Unsuccessful discussions led me to raise the issue with the “Delegate” (Ministry of Health’s provincial representative). The Delegate approved the toilet and I had it built with a face bowl. This led to a serious war between him and me. He considered me as “disobedient.”

The second battle was over who could control the U.S. Government project funds. He assumed that because he had the “title” and authority, he should manage all health funds in the province. I told him, “Peut-être, vous êtes le médecin-chef, mais c’est moi que

contrôles le carnet de chèques et les véhicules” (Perhaps, you are the medical doctor, but I control the check book and vehicles). He wanted me to let him sign checks for items not budgeted. I told him it didn’t work that way. I reminded him that I manage the project funds/cars and the implementation of the project on behalf of the U.S. Government until they are handed-over to the Government of Cameroon. He was supposed to be my “counterpart”. Since he refused to cooperate and work with me, I worked with Mr. Abicho Masso, an Infirmier Diplômé d’Etat (IDE) equivalent to a Registered Nurse (RN) in the U.S. He was a well-trained and experienced nurse, who became my informal “counterpart”. Working with that French military medical doctor was a real test of sexism, racism and a constant clash of French and American cultures. He was all and more than Dr. Al Henn had described in my initial interview.

Mr. Abicho and I traveled to Yaoundé for project design meetings and returned to Adamaoua to implement activities - without the French doctor’s input. Instead, we worked with Cameroonian doctors and nurses. While in Yaoundé, we coordinated training programs organized by the Academy for Educational Development, ordered medical equipment, kerosene refrigerators, and vaccination materials. I conducted monthly monitoring “tournees” (outings) throughout the province, meaning 580 kilometers (360 miles) each month. It would take a whole week to travel the rugged and sparsely populated five departments (Djerem, Faro-et Deo, Mayo-Banyo, Mbere and Vina) in Adamaoua. The French doctor had limited his travels to the department closest to Ngaoundere, which was Vina Department. Outside of Vina, the areas were mountainous and with dangerous cliffs making it almost impossible to travel without a solid four-wheel drive vehicle. My confident driver “Oumarou” would always tease me by showing me vehicles that had fallen over the cliffs deep into the valleys. Frightening experiences, especially when we would pass large trucks on the narrow winding roads. In the rainy season the roads were slippery and in the dry season we breathed and got covered with red dust from the roads. On the positive side, the scenic views were worth the trips: fragrant and colorful wild flowers grew along the roads and the Fulani nomads herded their zebu cattle with one hump. I miss those beautiful scenes.

Once the Djerem Departmental Ministry of Health representative complained that he could not vaccinate the nomadic children. Drawing from my studies and experience in Chad and Niger, I told him that during the dry season, the agro-pastoralists traveled long distances to seek grazing lands and water for their animals and returned to home-base during the planting season. Going off to look for grazing land and water is called transhumance. I worked with him to identify where the permanent settlements were located and when nomads/agro-pastoralists were not off on transhumance. He couldn’t believe it, we got those nomadic children vaccinated using an approach called “strategie avancé” (mobile unit).

During supervisory visits, the health center staff frequently asked the project for operational funds to run their health centers. I reminded the staff that their own Ministry of Health had budgeted funds for their centers and they should access those funds to cover operational costs before asking for U.S. Government funds. Staff argued that the process was slow and cumbersome. I conducted research to determine how/when funds

arrived to the province and the steps required to access funds. Armed with this information, I designed a course with procedures on how to obtain funds already allocated for all health centers and semi-urban hospitals in Adamaoua Province. We organized five departmental level training programs. Plus, we worked with the provincial government officials to release those funds in a timely manner. It was amazing to see the pride health workers had in using their own government funds rather than funds from foreign governments.

Q: Did the project have successes?

DENNIS: The project became the talk of each department. Health centers' usages increased, mother and children vaccinations increased, maternal and infant mortalities decreased, health centers became demarcated and linked to a public or private health facility. It was incredible to see the positive impact that resources, training and regular supervision could have on the delivery of health services. The French doctor did not believe that a woman was capable of "taking those red dirt roads each two month." After the first year, he saw I was not giving in to him. Plus, he saw the positive health impacts the project was achieving. He changed his disposition and started traveling with me to the five departments. I had to stand my ground and demand respect: no discussions on what he will do with his "nannies" (i.e., girlfriends) when we got to the next departmental capital.

The USAID project developed, tested protocols and medical standards, which became the national standards for all donors, NGO/PVO and government health facilities to use. We even developed a fee-for-service policy that allowed funds collected to remain at the health facility. This type of decentralized health care system empowered village and district health committees to co-manage the health centers. Moreover, committees understood how funds were collected and disbursed. This was a big deal. So, yes, our project was a huge success.

Q: What did you do when you completed your assignment in Adamaoua?

DENNIS: I got married in January 1989. I eventually achieved the project's goal of establishing the office and strengthening health care systems in Adamaoua province. I applied for a position in Yaoundé and was hired at USAID/Yaoundé as the Population Program Coordinator on a local contract which meant a significant reduction in salary. My job was to integrate maternal child health in the same primary healthcare program that I had implemented in Adamaoua, except this was at a national level.

Q: How was family planning viewed? It's controversial as all hell here in the U.S. How about family planning where you were working?

DENNIS: I worked on family planning in both Cameroon and in Benin.

Q: Okay, I let's take Cameroon first.

DENNIS: Cameroon is really where I added child spacing or family planning to my experiences.

Q: How did they feel about that?

DENNIS: Well, the question is how did I feel about family planning? Population Program Coordinator (PPC) was my title. I understood the health care delivery system and issues related to maternal and child health. Honestly, I did not have a clue about technical issues related to population. I started reading and becoming familiar with the concepts and issues behind population and rapid population growth, including depopulation conspiracy theories.

The real education came when a group of Cameroonian women visited my office at USAID/Yaoundé. They said “Madam Nana, we really want you to work with us on family planning programs, because every time a woman dies here in Cameroon, she leaves behind five or six children. And when she leaves those children, the family splits them up and we all have to take care of them.” They went on to say, “We have our own five or six children to take care of; we cannot afford to take care of the children of our sisters’, our mothers’ and other women’s who die during childbirth. We really want you to help us put forth a good family planning program so that we can teach people about child spacing.”

They argued that child spacing methods existed in the traditional system. However, it is on decline or it has died out. According to them, Cameroon modern women prefer to have all of their children early in life, often annually or every two years so they can launch their professional careers. Women feel obligated to have their children to make their husbands and families happy. Therefore, by the time they’re 26 or 28 years old, they have already had six or eight children. Many of the women try to have as many or more children than their mothers. So, this is where women run into health problems resulting in maternal mortality. The maternal maternity rate in 1990 was extremely high at 430 deaths per 100,000 live births according to the World Health Organization. Once these women explained this whole scenario to me, I became much more convinced and excited about the importance of addressing population or child-spacing to reduce maternal and infant mortality issues.

My primary tasks were to complete a delayed Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), organize Rapid Population Assessments for government officials, and integrate natural and modern contraceptive methods of child-spacing into primary health care facilities nationally.

Getting that DHS completed was more than a notion. There had been signs of corruption and a stop-gap measure had been issued until it could be effectively managed by USAID. The Cameroon DHS was needed to obtain accurate demographic and health statistics for program planning. This was my first task as PPC and after a year, we had trained statisticians and surveyors to interview 4,000 households (I think) over almost a two-year

period. DHS is the “Bible” for determining the baseline data required to design and implement health programs in a country.

Based on the findings from the DHS, we developed and tested Information, Education and Communication messages based on major languages and geographic focus. Flip charts and handouts were distributed nationally in public and private health facilities. The materials created interest, dispelled myths about child spacing and encouraged women to practice safe motherhood. The messages were practical - educating women that they could have their children and reduce their risks of death by doing what their mothers did: wait at least three years before having another child to allow their bodies to readjust and rejuvenate. In addition, my office trained nurses and doctors on the modern methods of family planning, which were the intrauterine device (IUD), the pill and the new injectable Depo-Provera. I was never comfortable with distribution of Depo-Provera owing to the potential side effects of a long-term method. However, the latter was preferred by women who did not want husbands or family members to “find their pills.” The project trained obstetricians-gynecologists (OB-GYNs) and provided mini-laparotomy kits to perform tubal ligation under local anesthesia. Vasectomy was proposed without success. Few men signed up.

In 1990, when I started the PPC position, Cameroon had 25 safe motherhood and family planning centers in the entire country. By 1994, when USAID closed its doors in Cameroon due to the lack of an open and transparent democracy, USAID had integrated family planning into 250 primary healthcare centers around the country, including public and private hospitals and health centers. I consider this one of my major accomplishment in Africa. I returned to Cameroon in 1996 to evaluate an HIV/AIDS program and travelled to Garoua in the Northern Province. There, I found that nurses continued to meet the needs of women by ordering contraceptives from UNICEF and passing the fees on to the patients. This was a clear sign that sustainable development had occurred when local staff continue systems established by donors/governments and the donors have pulled out. The end results were family size reduced from six, seven and eight down to an average of four children. Illegal abortions declined.

Q: Were you feeling pressure from the male establishment. Did they want more children? Or were they supportive?

DENNIS: Well, surprisingly, men became our greatest advocates. I remember seeing men bring their wives to the clinics for family planning services. This was true for men in urban zones who realized it is harder to house, educate, clothe and feed “extra children.” So, men no longer wanted more than four children, still considered high by international standards, less than the either six to eight family size of the past.

Q: How about the American Government?

DENNIS: The American Government funded the program in hopes of getting the government to plan for rapid population growth. I visited Cameroon in 2015, Cameroon’s maternal mortality rate was 596 deaths, which is higher than the 430 deaths in 1990, per

100,000 live births. Those health professionals we trained have probably retired and the new ones have not been trained. In addition, economic development in the country has failed to keep up with rapid population growth. This is evidenced by the local open-air markets expansion because job opportunities are unavailable and people survive by selling anything, a true indicator of high unemployment.

Q: You said that you worked in Benin? What were the differences between Cameroon and Benin?

DENNIS: The major difference between Cameroon and Benin was Benin had not designed its Bamako Initiative – reorientation to primary health care. Ironically in the late 1980's, Benin was one of the first countries to draft its primary health care program following the Bamako Initiative model. Unfortunately, it failed to put structures and policies in place for implementation. So, it was much more difficult to integrate family planning centers into the hospitals/health care centers because their over-all health care delivery systems were fragile. The first thing we had to do was to advise the government to strengthen the primary health care systems to allow them to effectively integrate safe motherhood centers into health care programs at health facilities. They accepted and we designed the program.

Q: Ah.

DENNIS: So, that meant that you had to make sure a nurse or a doctor had been assigned to a health facility, the site had running water, equipment, a small pharmacy to integrate safe motherhood into the overall health medicine distribution system.

Q: Over time you must have seen quite a change in access to medicine or the education or competence of these various countries, didn't you?

DENNIS: Oh yes. I remember as a volunteer in Côte d'Ivoire, I saw women giving birth in birthing centers with untrained traditional birth attendants (TBA) or midwives. The birthing centers were deplorable. We accompanied medical staff to train TBAs to use sterile equipment. At first, the TBAs were resistant, until they started realizing the training enhanced their own skills and they lost fewer mothers and infants during deliveries. The other change was TBAs at small health posts (a small health facility that provides first aid in villages) were linked to health centers (a larger health facility located in larger villages) and up the ladder to hospitals. In fact, we conducted training sessions at the health care centers and at the health post in the villages.

Q: In Benin and in Cameroon what were the most interesting things that happened to you there?

DENNIS: Okay, let me think. The most interesting thing that happened to me in Cameroon was, integrating family planning corners or activities into 250 health centers. This required extensive travel to all 10 provinces by road and/or air. I never liked the trains in Cameroon because they derailed frequently. I saw the reduction of loss of lives

and improved health of women and children. Now, that's a highlight on the professional side. Those women who initially came to my office thanked me when I departed Cameroon by organizing dinners in my honor and gifts of cloths and pumpkin seeds, an honoring food.

On the social side, one of the things that I'll never forget is that I traveled with my husband to a memorial service. It was for his aunt's husband, the person who took him from his native village, Bangangté in the West Province to Loum, Littoral Province. His uncle put him in school. We went to honor this person in grand style. We were three foreign women married into the family: one from a local ethnic group; a Russian wife and me, an American. African women will "test" you. I got my test during this memorial service.

My husband sent our pickup truck to the memorial site containing a large cow and 25 goats. When we got there, all of the women in the family were responsible for cooking. They assigned the local ethnic wife to help with the fish and the Russian with the chicken. They assigned me to handle the goats. In the most raw and authoritarian manner, the lead organizer threw six dead goats in front of me with their necks hanging to their sides. While they had been slaughtered, they weren't completely cleaned or cut. She ordered me to cook them. Yet, they stole the knives, the water for cleaning the goats, petroleum for burning and cleaning the goat's hair off. They took the steel-wool used for cleaning and scraping the skin. They took all the spices; took everything, just stole everything from my area. I was confused and mad. In spite of this bleak situation, I pulled myself together to get those goats cleaned up and cooked.

Charlotte, a niece, came to my rescue. She reassured me, "Tata (Auntie), don't worry about this. We can do this; I will stick with you." She stuck with me and we went to the market, got more of everything: cooking oil and spices. I told those women, "You don't know me or where I've been." And we burned off the fine remaining hairs, scrapped the rest of the hair off the goats with our newly bought steel-wool and cut the goats into small pieces. The other women came and criticized how I was cooking the goat. Oh, we don't cook goat meat like that. You don't know anything, crazy American." You don't know how to cook goat meat, blah, and blah, blah. I told them don't come over here and bother me, blah, blah, and I returned their insults.

Q: Ha.

DENNIS: And when we finished cooking those goats, we put them in cardboard boxes as they do for large village festivals. I threw the boxes to them. They taste-tested a piece of the goat meat and said wow, we have never had goat meat cooked like this. I said you've never been to Somalia, Niger, Chad or even your own Adamaoua. They didn't realize I had lived in Somalia, where all they eat is goat, camels and cows. I used to cook camel's meat in Somalia daily and I used some of my Somali techniques to prepare the goat meat. They said it was the best tasting goat meat they ever had. That is one of the most interesting and challenging thing to happen to me. This won me respect among the women in the family.

Q: Do you ever cook it back in the States?

DENNIS: Oh yes, I cook authentic African foods all the time. In fact, I just finished cooking a pot of okra stew yesterday and last week I had some “ndole” or bitter leaf greens. I cook different foods from all of the countries where I have lived, including France and Belgium and I consider NYC with its rich immigrant population as a place that has influenced my culinary skills. I collect cookbooks from countries where I visit and prepare those meals. I experiment and create my own dishes with African spices.

Q: So, when you came back from Africa did you go back again after this other time?

DENNIS: Yes, I went to Niger as part of a seven-person team to evaluate the health care program. In 1996, I returned to Cameroon to evaluate a Population Services International social marketing program with the context of HIV/AIDS prevention. In 1998-1999, I traveled to Benin twice. First, to design the national health care program and I returned a second time to integrate family planning into the Primary Health Care system. In between these consultant assignments, I ran a business in St. Louis called “Authentic African Cuisine,” which became quite popular and well known for serving a wide variety of African dishes from across the continent. I catered food for weddings, birthdays, and Black History Month events at universities. I cooked for events ranging between 10 to 200 persons. I am still known around town for the roasted fish and the original Abidjan vinaigrette dressing. I rehabbed houses during this time. My entrepreneur talents flowed during this period.

Q: Let’s talk about how did you meet and marry your husband?

DENNIS: I met Jean-Pierre Nana, “Tinga” while working in Cameroon. He was living in Yaoundé as a single parent raising three girls. I became an “instant mother and started raising Nathalie, 15 years old; Yakam, nine; and Yopa, seven. As I mentioned already, I went to Cameroon in 1988 as a contractor on a USAID-funded maternal child health project in Ngaoundéré, the provincial capital of Adamaoua Province in the northern region of Cameroon.

After one of my provincial “tournees,” (road trip), I returned home to Ngaoundéré exhausted from the long dusty roads around August 1989. I found a note inviting me to the closing ceremony of a national workshop for primary school teachers. Closing ceremonies are often festive galas where local and international dishes are served, lively music bounce from the walls and dancers move vibrantly on the floor as if they are before the judges at Trinidad’s carnival. I was tired from the tournée but decided I could not miss a rare social occasion in this semi-urban and isolated town.

After dinner, it was announced in a very formal manner, “La piste est ouverte” (the dance floor is open) with couples paired up for the first dance. There was a teacher who could dance with just as much energy and flexibility as me. We were dancing Soukous and Makossa, two of the most popular dances all over Africa. Soukous originates from the

Democratic Republic of the Congo and Makossa is the national dance of Cameroon. Along with Soca (Soul and Calypso), these are my favorite music. I also enjoy dancing to the down-home blues.

Rosine, the dancing teacher, wanted to know who this person was dancing just as much or more than her. I also wanted to know who she was. By the end of the dance, we had met and she suggested that when I travel to Yaoundé I should contact her to go dancing. I did and we have remained friends until today. She and her husband, Moise, of 50 years now live in France.

Rosine and my other African girl-friends and I discuss the same topics as those in U.S.... men, children, latest fashions and investment for the future. We discussed marriage and dating. On one of my trips to Yaoundé, Rosine planned a dinner at her home and introduced me to her uncle, Jean-Pierre Nana. Relatives arranging marriages by introducing them to people who they assume would make a good mate for them is common in Cameroon. He was about my height, broad-shoulders and I found him attractive. We enjoyed each other's company and conversation. He had a sense humor, appeared smart and kind. I later learned that he graduated from the Moscow Civil Engineering Institute with a specialty in roads, bridges and tunnels. Apparently, he was interested in me and asked me to let him know the next time I would come to Yaoundé. I called him when I returned to Yaoundé and we went out to dinner. Years later, I asked him why he was attractive to me, he said, "Your beautiful skin and your honesty." Some Cameroonians and women from other African countries bleach their skin. I have always had enough self-confidence to be proud of my dark-complexed skin. I knew he had been married before and thought he wanted an educated wife. I now think that an educated and financially independent woman was more than he could handle. Especially after he lost his job and position of power and I still had my USAID job and had gotten a salary increase.

Q: How did you travel from Ngaoundéré to Yaoundé to spend time with your family?

DENNIS: I flew from Ngaoundéré to Yaoundé by Cameroon Airlines almost every week end. For my return, the airline was often late or canceled causing Tinga to rush me to Camrail, the overnight train company, which I did not like because the train often derailed. The "couchette" or sleeper was clean and comfortable. The weekend trips, running the office and my tournees became very stressful on me, my relationship with Tinga.

Q: Had you considered marriage prior to meeting and marrying your husband?

DENNIS: Yes, I always desired to have a soul mate that would want to travel the world with me. Most men were unwilling to consider putting their careers on hold to become a dependent spouse. I wanted to get married, but the options of meeting single men were slim in the American expatriate community. Men arriving at post were more likely to be married. At social functions, wives were uncomfortable with you associating with their husbands. While I attended functions, I was cautious of how I interacted with my married

male colleagues. Additionally, I found that embassy activities were geared toward families. It is for this reason, I branched out to the broader community where I found social activities. I attended events at the British, French and other cultural centers. I met men, but was always concerned about their motives: getting to the U.S. Tinga had no interest in living permanently in the U.S. or Europe. He was committed to economic development of Cameroon. Plus, he had a comfortable lifestyle.

My family in the U.S. expressed concerns that my travels for work had made me “unstable.” Mama kept praying that God would give me a mind to return home. Daddy said that they would have to make a special man for me because I had too much exposure and education. My uncle compared me to other nieces in the family and said they were married and had kids, what was wrong with me. I never have had a problem meeting man. I promised myself that the next time I meet a man and he asks me to marry him, I will accept the proposal.

Tinga asked me to marry him after six months of dating. My mother and I had a healthy mother-daughter relationship. We talked about any subject. I kept her informed about the evolution of my relationship with him. When I told her that he had asked me to marry him, she asked me if I loved him. I said yes. I went on to explain that he had three young girls. Mama said that if I loved him then I would love the kids the same way I loved him. I told Mama that because I had not raised children that this would be a major challenge and adjustment for me. She advised me that I would no longer be able to pick up and go when and where I wanted with three children behind me. She advised me to think hard and pray on it.

Q: Did any of your relatives come to meet him prior to your marriage?

DENNIS: Yes, I eventually invited Mama to come to Cameroon to meet him and the girls during Christmas 1988. Just as she was preparing to travel, a suitcase with a bomb exploded aboard New York-bound Pan Am flight 103 killing 243 passengers and 16 crew. My brother, Tim, put the newspaper on the kitchen table with the crash blasted on the front page. He had already told Mama not to travel to Africa because it was too far. Mama told him, “Satan, get behind me, I am getting on the plane to Africa.” She came.

Q: How was she received and what were her perspectives of Cameroon?

DENNIS: Mama flew into Douala’s International Airport and we drove from Yaoundé to meet her. We stayed at the Douala Ibis Hotel. I continue to stay at this affordable hotel chain when I travel to francophone cities in Europe or Africa.

All of her misconceptions about Africa went out the window. She was surprised to find cities with skyscrapers, traffic jams and elegantly dressed people. She liked our house; the girls and the respect people gave to elders in Africa. Family members brought dishes to welcome her. Some gave her spending money in both Yaoundé and in Ngaoundéré. We had a lovely Christmas that year. Tinga had gotten a fresh tree and the girls and I decorated it with ornaments, including threaded popcorn.

Q: Did she travel to Ngaoundéré?

DENNIS: Yes, Mama traveled with me to Ngaoundéré and went on one of my tournéeés where my colleague Mr. Abicho Massao and I got diarrhea. We had eaten breakfast at a rural truck stop restaurant that resulted in Mama passing out the diarrhea medicine that I had brought on the trip for her. The girls came up while Mama was in Ngaoundere and I sent them to visit the game reserve at Wa.

The wife of the Provincial Director of the Ministry of Health's, who oversaw our project, welcomed Mama with a parade of two young women and herself carrying food which was beautifully wrapped in table cloths with a neat knot on top of their heads. Mama ate all of the different kinds of food that was offered to her. She really appreciated the greens. Greens are the national dish in most African countries and Cameroon is no exception. There are hundreds of different types of vegetable greens that come in and out of season. USAID-funded vegetable gardening projects provided additional income and nutritional sources for women. I took Mama to open air markets in Yaoundé and in Ngaoundéré to show her that there were more than collards, kale, mustard, turnips and spinach which are common in African-American cuisine.

She could not resist the stylish two-piece maxi blouse outfits made of bazin riche, a cotton cloth originating from Mali and Senegal. Bazin is tied into knots to make symbols then dipped into dyes. The cloth is starched to give it a crisp texture and finally hung to dry. Mama's custom-made outfits were sown and included embroidery as she saw the women wearing them in Cameroon.

Tinga and I decided that Mama's visit would be a good opportunity for us to get married. That's what we did on January 29, 1989. Mama and my colleague from Ngaoundéré, Mr. Abicho Massao served as my witnesses. Tinga's cousin, Benoit and Rosine's husband served as his witnesses. We held a reception at the house where bottles of Cristal Champagne flowed, reputed as one the finest champagne on the market.

Upon her departure, Mama felt she was leaving me in good hands with a responsible man. She had spent an extra two weeks requiring Tinga to purchase her a new return ticket to St. Louis in which he did without hesitation. She enjoyed Cameroonian pineapples so much that she decided to pray over about six of them and put them in her suitcases. I have never understood how she managed to get those tasty Cameroon pineapples through U.S. Customs.

Tinga spoiled Mama more than he ever spoiled me. It appears she replaced his mother who died when he was seven years old. He would often tell me that his mother never benefited from his education. When Mama died in 2008, he sent me \$1,500 as his contribution for her burial. It is customary for sons-in-laws to bury their wives' parents among Bamilèké and other ethnic groups in Africa.

Q: Well how did the marriage work out?

DENNIS: Well, initially it worked out well and we had a good relationship. I continued to work and live up north for about a year. The weekend commutes from the north to Yaoundé in the central region were stressful. My weekends were spent carrying out my wifely and motherly duties: shopping for the next week, making sure the girls prepared themselves for school and attending events with my husband. When the weekend ended, the girls would start crying because they did not want me to go, the flights to Ngaoundéré flight were often delayed or cancelled. In these cases, my husband would shuttle me to the train station to see if I could take the overnight train, which would arrive in time for me to report to work on Monday morning. Once I had gotten the USAID project established and stabilized, I decided not to renew my contract with Drew University. I moved to Yaoundé and joined my family.

Q: Does this mean that you did not work for the project anymore? Were you prepared to drop your life as a career woman to become a wife and stepmother?

DENNIS: While I wanted to be a wife and mother, I was not prepared to become totally dependent upon a husband for all of my personal needs. I applied and received employment at USAID/Cameroon for a new position as the Population Program Coordinator. I was interviewed by James Washington, who was head of the Education, Training and Health Division at USAID/Cameroon. I got the position on a local contract which meant that the salary was equivalent to \$13,000 a year and no benefits, a significant loss compared to the \$49,000 salary with benefits, including travel, housing and educational allowances. My husband had a house and I used local doctors for my health care. I didn't have any health problems beside the occasional colds.

Soon after we were married, he said, let's go for a ride. He took me to the diplomatic residential section of Yaoundé called Bastos. There, he showed me a house he owned and asked me if I wanted to live there. The location was more prestigious than "au quartier," (lower class neighborhood) but when I weighted the size of the rooms, the yard space and even the limited parking, I told him we can make the house au quartier in Oyomabang work. This house had larger rooms than the house in Bastos. There was a spacious yard for gardening, parking cars and there was a water reservoir installed. He installed an electric hot water tank in our bathroom.

Q: That must have been a major endeavor to make changes to a house without the services of the U.S. government?

DENNIS: It was a huge undertaking. I decided to take it task by task. The grass had grown extremely high at the Oyomabang house. I hired a gardener who helped me put order into the yard and keep the grass cut. The roadside nurseries in Yaoundé offered a wide selection of seedlings. To add variety, I got cuttings from U.S. and other embassy colleagues. Some of us ordered bulbs from Jackson Perkins through the diplomatic pouch and shared plants. By the time I had finished running around on Saturday mornings and buying plants from departing diplomats, I had a beautiful garden consisting of birds of paradise, honeycomb ginger, and colorful rose beds replicating the ones I left behind in

Ngaoundéré. We also had a lovely vegetable, herb and medicinal garden, including aloe vera for stomach pains and wounds; and citronella to treat fever and malaria. The mango and soursop trees produced sweet fruit each year in which we transformed into juices and ice cream. We also had the burden of the flies attracted by the mangos, so we swept the fallen mangos regularly.

I rearranged the inside of the house to meet the needs of the family. It is easy to get furniture custom made in most African countries, including among the nomads in Somalia. I had a sofa table made to display art and family pictures rather than have them sit on the floor. Mosquito nets were made and installed on the windows and doors to reduce the incidents of malaria in the household. The house was soon comfortable and felt like the home of a middle-income Cameroonian family. Tinga enjoyed hosting family events and meetings at the house. One year, the group of American women married to Cameroonian men held Thanksgiving dinner at our home.

We frequently hosted the paramount chief of Bangangté, Nji Moluh Seidou Pokam, and his entourage of at least 40 persons. Today, when I visit the palace in Bangangté, people remember me for those elaborate dinners. Tinga traced his descendants to the palace, which made him a noble.

Q: You had those daughters to look after. Did they accept you? What was your experience raising African children?

DENNIS: Building a strong relationship with the girls was one of my priorities as I settled into Yaoundé. I did not want to fit the negative images of a wicked and cruel stepmother nor did I want to be seen as the American coming to impose Western values or spoil them. I found that they were well mannered and respectful. They had lived for two years without a mother figure in the house, so they were accustomed to doing as they pleased. Putting some order in their lives was my challenge. I slowly started introducing changes such as limiting the amount of time to watching television. Yopa enjoyed watching cartoons. Little emphasis had been placed on doing homework and making good grades in school. So, their report cards reflected their lack of studying.

To stress the importance of studying and making better grades, I created an environment to encourage study by transforming a storage space into a study room with two newly custom-built desks with book shelves for Yakam and Yopa. Nathalie, already in high school, had a study table in her room. When we came home from school, they had their “goûter” (snacks) before dinner. After snacks, I would announce, *Candidat, candidat, qui veut étudier avec moi.* (Candidate, candidate, who wants to study with me.) I had no takers. I would have to negotiate with them to study. I always took Yopa first and afterwards I would work with Yakam. Nathalie had a tutor to come to the house to help her. Soon, their grades improved and they understood the importance of studying.

Saturday morning was spent getting ready for the next week. They also had chores such as cleaning their rooms and other sections of the house. While we had a maid to cook and clean common spaces in the house, I insisted that the girls washed and ironed their own

school uniforms. They learned to clean around door knobs and light switches, as my mother had taught me. Nathalie taught me to cook local Bameliké dishes.

The girls and I played games. I was a Springboard to Learning teacher in St. Louis prior to going to Cameroon. Springboard teaches middle grade students about other cultures and the United Nations. I went into schools to present French language expressions and the life of Somali nomads on the range. I became good friends with Melanie, a teacher who participated in the program. After I left St Louis, we continued to follow each other's travels. When I told her, I had become an instant mother, Melanie sent me board and educational games to improve reading and math skills. The girls and I would lay on the floor and have so much fun with those games. We invited Tinga to join in the fun, but he never wanted to engage in our childish games. He seemed pleased to see how my relationship with the girls bloused.

Q: These girls had a biological mother. Where was she?

DENNIS: To help me build my relationship with the girls, I invited Mama Emilienne, Yakam's and Yopa's biological mother to come and visit with her daughters. During those visits, she would reinforce being obedient and respecting me. Emilienne and I divided our tasks to care for the girls. She knew their medical history and would come and take them to the doctors. As a child, Yopa had ear infections and Emilienne knew how to treat it. I managed their education and day-to-day care. This type of biological and stepmother partnership was important for the well-being of the girls. We never had fights or disagreements.

Christmas 1991, we had a beautiful tree, presents and a meal consisting of Cameroonian and American dishes, including an American chicken (turkey) and dressing. In spite of the abundance of food in the house and their gifts, the girls had long faces and I knew something was wrong. When I asked what the problem was, Yopa, the youngest and designated as the spoke person said, "We want to see our mother." I said OK, how do we find her? That Christmas day, we set out to find her. We went to a relative's house located on the hilltop not far from our Oyomabang house. Regrettably, she had moved to live with another relative. We were directed to another location. When we got there. We didn't find her. Discouraged, but determined, we were directed to check if she was living with another relative on rue Mangé, quite a distance across town from Oyomabang. There, we finally found her! The girls ran into her arms full of emotions. I joined and said, "Give me my hug." This was the beginning of a long sisterhood relationship that continues until today.

That evening, I asked my husband how we could live in comfort while the girl's mother was moving from house to house sleeping on couches. I strongly argued that he arrange housing for her. He never told me, but he brought a house for her and that is where she has been living for over 25 years. Did I know that this would eventually become my home when I visit Cameroon? Today, when I visit this country, I may spend a few nights with other relatives, but I leave my bags in my long-standing room at Emilienne's house and return to my room for most of my stay.

Although this story has a happy ending, so many African women who are victims of divorce or spousal abuse lack housing when they are forced to depart their husband's homes. Domestic abuse safe havens or women settlement homes are new concepts in Africa. There is stigma placed on women who are thrown out of their homes due to divorce or who no longer tolerate domestic violence. Emilienne and I have grown to become more as sisters than co-espouse. Co-espouse is a term that refers to women who are or were married to the same man at the same time or different times. She and I were married to Tinga at different times.

Q: This is a wonderful story of women looking out for each other. Is there anything else you would like to add before we move away from discussing your experience as a stepmother?

DENNIS: I considered instilling a spiritual belief system in the home as an essential part of family life and to promote family unity. During the week, the girls and I read the Bible in French and I would translate it into English so that I could understand the scripture and interpret it in French for them. On Sunday, we attended mass at the local Catholic Church within walking distance. Since the maid was off on Sundays, this is when I went to the kitchen and cooked American, Senegal, Somalian, Ivorian or Trinidadian dishes. Baking cakes was another one of our Sunday dinner treats. I taught the girls to bake cakes and they would use my Watkins flavor to make and take cakes to school to share with classmates on their birthdays. Today, I send or offer Watkins flavor and spices as gifts.

Q: I am sure your daughters are now adults. Where are these young ladies today?

DENNIS: I am a four-time grandmother with three grand-girls from Yakam, an agroeconomist, and her husband Sebastian, who live in Bretagne, France. They are: Andrée, René and Maé Regina. In December 2014, Yakam and her two daughters came to St. Louis to visit me. She informed me that she was pregnant. Maé means May or spring and comes from the Bretagne region of France. When Mae was born, Yakam called me early in the morning to announce that she had given birth and I was a "nouveau-née" (new born). At first, I didn't understand the expression. Soon afterwards, my phone was flooded with calls from France and Cameroon congratulating me on being "une nouvelle née." In Bamilèké culture, a person is honored by having a child named after them to ensure they will always be remembered.

Yopa has given us a grand-son named Kwesi, meaning he was born on Sunday, in accordance of Akan naming patterns in Ghana. Prior to Kwesi's birth in January 2017, I traveled to Cameroon. The Saturday before he was born, Yopa and I walked Tata Justin, the wife of a nephew, to the road side to get a taxi. This meant climbing a hill. Afterwards, she continued up another hill to see relatives. All of the walking forced her bundle of joy out of his mother's womb. Kwesi weighted nine pounds at birth and is growing fast. Yopa lived with me during my tour in Ghana as a member of my household. She studied English at the Ghana Institute of Language in Accra and obtained a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Valley View University with an

emphasis on accounting. She has worked for six years on USAID-funded programs. She is also a member of Toastmasters, which contributed to her becoming fluent in English in a timely manner.

Nathalie lives in Paris where she works in gerontology. When I go through Paris, she takes times from her busy schedule to invite me to lunch or dinner. It is a joy to get off the plane and have your adult children pull out their credit cards to pay for five to seven course meals. You know they are doing well.

Q: You must be proud of your outcomes with your daughters. Sounds like they are high achievers and have succeeded in life.

DENNIS: I am proud of all three of my daughters. They are self-sufficient and remember me on birthdays and American holidays with phone calls and flowers. I am forever grateful how they have enriched my life. There is meaning to the Igbo's of Nigeria proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child."

Q: What happened that led to the marriage going sour?

DENNIS: Things started to fall apart after three years of marriage. Finances, professional security and other women were the principle reasons for our separation. My salary improved with the renewal of a U.S. Personal Service Contractor with a salary increase and benefits. Tinga did not want to accept anything from the U.S. government so I never really benefited from the change in my contract except for the salary increase. As a proud African man, he arranged for three of us to travel each summer overseas. We traveled to the France, Norway and U.S. As a true Bamilèké entrepreneur, we combined business with family vacations. In Oslo, he brought and shipped back to Cameroon a container of stock fish, a fish that is dried in zero temperatures and wind in Norway. Broken or surplus fish ended up on our table in some zillion different ways. I had enough stock fish during that period that today I rarely eat this food that has become a West African delicacy.

Another reason things fell apart was there is a strong preference for boy children among Bamilèké men. It is believed that boys will carry on the family name, inherit property and care for parents in their elderly years. Girls may be seen as a burden because they will eventually join their husbands and wear his name. Unfortunately, men who are well educated and have achieved significant socio-economic levels still feel inferior and insecure in society unless they have produced male children. Some men fail to recognize that they carry the Y chromosome to determine if the sex of a child will be a male. This was his deep hidden feelings.

When Tinga was younger, he had one boy child who died as an infant, probably of a childhood disease. Prior to our marriage, we had agreed to raise the girls and move on with our lives. Additional children were off the table.

There came a time when he lost his government appointment at the Office of the Presidency as Director of Public Works, which eroded his opportunity of becoming the Minister of Public Works. The reasons why he was terminated were never disclosed. He was obsessed with wanting to become a minister. During the annual nomination period, he would have me prepare food and drinks to receive anticipated guests. He was never nominated. Coupled with his loss of prestigious position and lack of a boy child in the house, his self-esteem and self-worth hit rock bottom. I tried to be a supportive wife, but he became physically and verbally abusive, which I had no reason to accept. He also isolated me from the friends and professional colleagues I developed in Cameroon. He controlled my movements, criticized and belittled whatever I did. I later conducted research marriage and found that I had experienced domestic violence.

Q: Did you stay in the house under those circumstances?

DENNIS: No. I concealed our marriage problems from his family until the stress became too much. I “reported” his behavior toward me to senior members of the family. We went through traditional family marriage counseling sessions. He would change until he had a crisis outside of the home; he would take it out on me.

One night he told me to go and sleep in the storage area. That is when I packed a suitcase and left. I found myself in a foreign land, alone and in a cheap hotel. I eventually rented an apartment near the U.S. Embassy and USAID/Yaoundé offices and walked to work. Tinga moved the girls to Bangangté and put them in private schools rather than in public school classrooms with 100 students, as I had suggested. The girls would visit me in Yaoundé and we would have crying spells. I traveled to Bangangté to visit them and one of the elderly mothers would send a child to their home at the top of the hill to come down and greet me. These were challenging times for the girls and me.

Q: Oh, sorry you had to have that experience. What did you do?

DENNIS: The events in my personal life transpired simultaneously with the 1990 birth of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the first opposition party in Cameroon. SDF called for multiparty election to take place in Cameroon which was occurring elsewhere in Africa. Due to the lack of response, in April 1991, SDF successfully initiated operations “ville mortes et pieds morts” (operations ghost towns and no walking). The first multiparty presidential elections were held October 1991 that were deemed by international monitors as flawed. Paul Biya, the incumbent president gained 39.9 percent and John Fru Ndi received 35.9 percent and the rest was divided among four other candidates. Paul Biya amended the constitution in 2008 to abolish presidential term limits. He is currently 84 years old and serving a seven-year term which ends in 2018. He expects to stand for the 2018 elections, meaning he will start another seven-year term.

The 1990 law of association or multiparty law included a section on women rights. It abolished an official law that required married Cameroonian women to obtain approval from their husbands before they could travel internationally. Men were upset and disappointed with this loss of control over their wives. My husband insisted that I amend

my U.S. passport to reflect my married name, Regina Nana. I did. The new law went into effect and I traveled without being stopped at the airport.

In 1991, the U.S. Government encouraged democracy in the election process. However, there was an appearance that the U.S. Ambassador Frances Cook supported SFD. The Ambassador argued that the U.S. supports democracy and the will of the Cameroonian people. The disputed 1991 elections and subsequent human rights violations in the country led to the 1993 decision by the State Department and USAID/Washington to close USAID/Cameroon by December 1994. Richard Greene, head of the Health and Population Section departed post around September 1994. I stayed on and oversaw the health close-out plan until November 1994. Afterwards, I departed Cameroon and returned to St. Louis.

Q: What did you do after Cameroon?

DENNIS: I became an international healthcare consultant for a USAID-funded project called Population Technology or PopTech. I returned to Cameroon in 1996 to evaluate a population and HIV/AIDS project. I went to Niger as part of a team to evaluate a health care project. I also traveled to Benin as team leader to design the first national healthcare program for the country of Benin, based on the model from Cameroon. I returned to Benin as a consultant to integrate HIV-AIDS prevention program into the national health care program.

When I was not consulting internationally, I managed my rental property, catered authentic African cuisine and taught French at the elementary and college levels. My catering motto was “Call who the Africans call.” I am still known in St. Louis for my Abidjan style poisson braisé (charcoal fish), Senegalese poulet yassa (chicken in lemon sauce) and Somali leg of lamb (marinated and baked with vegetables). I plan to write an authentic African cookbook based on these recipes and those I have created.

Q: Okay. When did you join the Foreign Service?

DENNIS: In 2000, I learned from a Foreign Service Officer that USAID was recruiting mid-level personnel into a program called New Entry Professionals (NEP). NEP responded to the Agency’s need for mid-level and senior management staff to replace retiring baby-boomers. I reluctantly applied for both Health Officer and Program Officer Positions because I had applied to USAID twice in the past, gone through their lengthy waiting process, had been short-listed twice and participated in interviews. After weeks of waiting to hear from USAID, I would receive a letter informing me that there was a hiring freeze or some other reason that prohibited them from recruiting new direct hire staff. So, for the 2000 interview, I told the panel that this was my third and last time investing time and energy coming for their interviews. Each time, I would be praised for my wealth of knowledge in agriculture, health and community development and experiences; however, I would not get recruited. I later learned that I had been retained and assigned in 1996 to USAID/West Africa, based in Abidjan, but the position was put on hold owing to the office planned to move to Accra.

In 2001, when I received the commitment letter that I had been hired as a Program Officer, I just could not get excited because I had been down that road before. It was only when the security clearance agent came to St. Louis to interview me and check my references that I became more confident that this time, I was really going to advance as a U.S. Direct Hire.

I was working a night job for MasterCard International as a translator for French speaking card holders who called to report that they lost their cards. We would verify and send out temporary cards. The agent came on the job and interviewed my supervisor and colleagues. It is for this reason that I always advise people to never belittle any job. This job allowed the security clearance agent to verify my character, ability to work on a team and, of course, my work ethic: honesty and whether I came to work on time.

Q: Tell me about your initial assignment as a FSO with USAID.

DENNIS: I joined USAID in April 2001 as a Project Development Officer (PDO)/Program Officer and spent a year in Washington. I was assigned to the Africa Bureau where Emily McPhie, an experienced Supervisory Program Officer, was my mentor in the East Africa Division. She was also assigned to work with the U.S. Special Envoy to Somalia, John Danforth from Missouri. I was not directly involved with Somalia, but we often discussed the issues that led to the country becoming a failed state. I had lived in Mogadishu and still followed the Somali scene. I recall Emily being patient and kind. She took the time to explain the role of the Program Office and Officers. I remember she summed it up by saying the program office was the “catch all” office at the Mission. When the Mission Director or Ambassador doesn’t know where to place an ad hoc task, Emily would say, “Be prepared for it to land in the Program Office.” These words stuck with me as I completed my rotations in Washington and in the field Missions in Nigeria, Ghana, Haiti and Guinea. Sure enough, implementing sports diplomacy (baseball and sports for people with disabilities), serving as control officer for high level visitors, or even interpreting Office of U.S. Foreign Assistance Resources (F) new policies established in 2006 all landed in the program office. “F” rocked negatively USAID’s world and slowed the process to request and report on resources. The Ambassador Pamela Bridgewater in Ghana asked me to interpret what this new animal meant and present it to the country team (i.e., representatives from U.S. agencies in a country such as Peace Corps, Department of Defense, Department of Commerce, Peace Corps, etc.). I prepared an information memo outlining who, what and when tasks were to be completed. I recall that the military officer failed to complete their requests for funds. When I inquired why he had not followed the instructions, he told me, I do not have to fill your forms from USAID. When I explained that the new system is a whole-of-government approach, he still refused to complete the forms. In fact, he told me, “I take my orders from a four-star general in Stuttgart, Germany. Later, the colonel standing 6 feet 4 inches came to my office and apologized to me. His four-star general had advised him that all resource requests and performance reports are now submitted under the Chief of Mission and USAID was responsible for preparing the financial request and progress reports. The coordination of these annual reports is every Program Officer’s nightmare. I

developed a system to make it fun and created incentive for the agencies to submit their reports in a timely manner. Program Officers within regions often consulted each other when preparing these reports. Once submitted to ‘F’, I was always proud because the country reports that I led the process had few requests for changes.

Standard duties of the program office included coordinating country development strategies, policy formulation and implementation, programming/budgeting resources, preparing performance reports, public communications and outreach, and coordination with other donors and USG agencies. PDOs/POs ensure cross-cutting issues such as gender, climate change, food security, youth, disabilities and other issues are included in projects as appropriate. Sometimes, we are the bearers of unpleasant news to technical staff, Mission Directors and the overall U.S. Mission, including the Ambassador and the military, when program implementers fail to comply with federal policies and the Congressional Budget.

I launched my career as a Foreign Service Officer PDO in Nigeria. When the bid list came out, there were three positions listed for Nigeria (Deputy PDO, Deputy Health Officer and Deputy Agriculture Officer). Three of us from my NEP class decided to “save” the others from what they considered a tragedy to be assigned to Nigeria. To attract bidders, Nigeria was considered a “difficult to fill post,” meaning officers agreed to stay at post for three years and would receive an allowance for each year. Since, we all were experienced in Africa and in our fields, we did not find Nigeria difficult as compared to the politics of being NEPs in a Mission. While we came with a wealth of knowledge, being a NEP meant that we were considered new to the system and had not “earned the respect not to be questioned or advised how to complete tasks we may have done for years in other positions in other countries.” I found that locals and other Foreign Service Officers ignored your years of working as a USAID Personal Service Contractor in a technical area or programs specialist.

As the PDO, my primary challenge was to learn the Automated Directive Systems (ADS). All of the series are important, but the 200 is the program officers’ Bible to conduct: planning, achieving, assessing and learning; microenterprise development; and International Disaster Assistance.

USAID/Nigeria had moved its offices from Lagos to Abuja, the new capital. The Foreign Service Nationals were experienced and could run the Mission without direct hires. The highlight of my assignment in Nigeria was assisting technical teams to draft scopes of work to solicit implementing agencies. Once, the agricultural team and I drafted a scope of work for a biotechnological project. It was sent to the Regional Legal Advisor in Dakar and it came back with over 20 corrections from the ADS. The agricultural officer and I were “novices” on bureaucratic policies. We reviewed the ADS and made all of the changes required.

When the Mission was developing a five-year country strategic plan (CSP), the program office organized consultative meeting with the technical teams to determine priorities for the CSP. The Mission Director was keen on getting what were the “true” needs of the

average Nigerian. While we had conducted assessments, surveys and end of project documents, the “true” feelings of Nigerians were buried in the analyses and failed to clearly present the stated desires of the Nigerian populous.

I came to Nigeria armed with local contacts from networking in Washington. At one of these events, I meet a Nigerian lawyer who gave me the name of another lawyer living in Nigeria. When I got there, I contacted the person and her father answered the phone and informed me that the daughter was out of town. When I told him that I was visiting from the States, he immediately offered to pick me up and invited me home for dinner. I did not know who he was, except he was my new girl-friend’s father. I later learned that he was Solomon Lar, a highly respected politician, who had been the governor of the Plateau State. This family became my adopted family in Nigeria.

So, when it came to developing the strategy, I invited my “girl-friend’s father” to meet the Mission Director and discuss first-hand knowledge on what the highest level of government considered as their priorities. That evening, I prepared home-made mango juice and my famous pound cake. This practical first-hand personal database allowed USAID to prepare one of the most practical strategic plans.

Q: Tell me about your experiences with IVLP?

DENNIS: One of the tasks that just drops in the program office is the annual nominations for the Department of State’s International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP) organized by the Public Affairs Section at the embassy. Each year, Mission staff nominates host country nationals to participate in an exchange program where they travel to the U.S. for three weeks and visit professionals in their same fields. As a PDO/PO, I urged technical staff to nominate their host country counterparts and helped staff prepare packages. This positive experience opens doors for host country nationals and allows the Mission to strengthen ties with technical staff. In Nigeria, I nominated a member of the government’s legal team, who reviewed our bi-lateral strategic objective agreements, but lacked the knowledge of how USAID programs were funded and often slowed up the process. The lawyers participated in the IVLP and met with Congressional staff who explained U.S. budgeting process. Afterwards, we got our agreements signed within a timely manner, which meant the obligations of funds by the end of the fiscal year, a critical role of program officers.

I was passionate about the IVLP program because prior to joining the Foreign Service, I was a member of the St. Louis World Affairs Council. The Council hosts visitors to St. Louis from the IVLP. I received international visitors in my home through the World Affairs Council. Once, I received four journalists from Burma, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa. Google: International Journalism and Exchange Program Reception, 1999 and Regina Dennis. For this reception, I involved journalists from local newspapers to meet our international guests. When I joined the Foreign Service, I nominated locals, served on selection panels which is a time-consuming task to read and score hundreds of applications. Once selected, I prepared travel documents for USAID selectees. Another visitor I hosted was from Djibouti. So, I often say that I have gone full circle from being

an IVLP host in St Louis way back in 1999, to serving on the selection panel representing USAID. Now, as I am back home, I continue to host IVLP visitors from France, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere. This is also another why of inviting Whites into my home who would never visit the north side of town.

Q: Was Nigeria dangerous?

DENNIS: I never considered Nigeria as dangerous as it was described. I had a good social network of American and/or Caribbean women married to Nigerians who resided permanently in Abuja. Actually, my tour was enriched socially by these acquaintances. I often say one should NOT go from Nigeria to Ghana on an assignment; where they may find social life limited compared to going from Ghana to Nigeria. Nigerians know how to "chop life fine." I enjoyed three years of hard work and social life in Nigeria.

Q: You mentioned that you were the control officer for President Obama's trip to Ghana. I assume you had served in this capacity before. Tell me about it. How was it different from other control officer tasks you had performed?

DENNIS: Stu, when the President of the United States (POTUS) came to Ghana in July 2009, the world was still enthusiastic about the election of the first Black president in the U.S. When it surfaced at the U.S. Embassy in Ghana that POTUS was coming to Ghana, we were all excited because we knew that it would be all-hands-on-deck and he would come to the embassy to address staff. Everybody thought of having their pictures taken with this president. I was more concerned about what role I would be assigned. These high-level visits derail an entire Mission because you are forced to drop pressing tasks and focus on the visit. Scene setters, talking points, biographies of host country officials and the never-ending countdown meetings must be prepared and attended. In addition to the Control Officer's book, as the supervisory program officer, I established additional procedures to prepare for visits.

Ghana attracted numerous high-level visitors, including President George W. Bush 43rd in 2008, several CODELs, the Helping to Enhance the Livelihood of People around the Globe (HELP) Commission, which reviewed foreign assistance reforms and the U.S. Ambassador to the African Union. I was often assigned as the Control Officer, especially for visitors who were considered high-maintenance. While each assignment had its own set of challenges, handling those with complicated personalities became my specialty in Ghana. My approach was to identify what were their needs and work to achieve them. Some visitors needed someone to be honest with them about simple things. For example, one visitor was concerned about their appearance before attending a Government of Ghana State Dinner. I made some suggestions in which the person took. Another one wanted me to review his speech. The saying, "It is lonely at the top" is a reality.

President Barak Obama and the first family's visit was truly special. President Obama had been inaugurated in January 2009 and visited Ghana July 10-11, 2009. People from other African countries traveled to Ghana to witness this historic visit in Accra and in the

Cape Coast. Sue Brown, Deputy Chief of Mission and the Overall Control Officer, led the visit in Accra and I was assigned to the Cape Coast.

The visit to the Cape Coast Castle highlighted the U.S. government's contributions to the preservation and restoration of United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO), World Heritage sites in Ghana. In the early 1990's, the Government of Ghana with funds from USAID restored the castle with technical assistance from the Smithsonian Museum. In 2009, the Government of Ghana reported that approximately 140,000 tourists had visited the Cape Coast and Elmina Castles and 135,000 visitors went to the Kakum National Park, significantly increasing income to hotels, vendors, and shops in the country.

In June 2009, I was called into the Mission Director's office and told that an advance team was coming to prepare for POTUS' visit to Ghana and I had been assigned to serve as the Control Officer in Cape Coast. I selected a two-person team consisting of Foreign Service Nationals to accompany me: the Development Outreach and Communication Specialist in the Program Office, in which I served as Office Chief and the Cultural Affairs Specialist from the Public Affairs Office. Both had strategic skills that would be helpful in interacting with modern and traditional authorities. I probably made lots of enemies because my colleagues at the embassy and USAID were trying to attach themselves to the Obama visit by serving on my team. One by one, they came to my office to sell themselves.

I traveled with the advance team to the Cape Coast Castle. It was agreed that the president would lay a wreath in the male slave dungeons and tour the castle. On July 1st, the two-person team and I traveled to Cape Coast to coordinate the visit with host country officials. As soon as we arrived, we went to Honorable Ama Benyiwa-Doe, Central Regional Minister's office, where we found an on-going meeting to discuss the visit. She knew the Cultural Affairs Specialist which allowed her to open up and invite us to participate in the meeting. We learned that the modern government authorities wanted to showcase Cape Coast as a tourist destination to promote visitors to the slave castles. The traditional authorities, also in attendance, wanted to host the following cultural events: meet and greet Kwesi Atta II, the traditional Paramount Chief of Oguaa Traditional Area/President of the Oguaa Traditional Council, referred to as "Osabarimba," hold a gift-giving ceremony for the First Lady and children and unveil a plaque commemorating the visit. None of these events had been presented to the embassy or vetted by the White House. The Osabarimba, a seasoned accountant, felt he had been disrespected by not being included in the advance planning process. After all, the Cape Coast Castle is located within his territory and normally all high-level visitors play a courtesy visit to his palace. It was clear that a level of anger existed and the threat to cancel the visit to Cape Coast was imminent. I urged the Osabarimba to officially notify the Public Affairs Office of his request to host POTUS and the First Family. He did so.

With this potential alarming news, when I returned to the hotel, I contacted Sue Brown, to advise her of my findings. She asked me to draft a cable with justifications of why these events should be included in POTUS' visit to the Cape Coast. I drafted cables

presenting arguments why the political and cultural reasons it was important to add these events. There was some back and forward on each point, but security at the palace and the Castle was of major concern.

This was 10 days before POTUS' arrival and time was ticking away. The White House had already approved the laying of a wreath in the male slave dungeons. The White House hesitated to adjust the schedule to accommodate the chief's requests. To get the ball rolling, the Secret Service Lead, Osabarimba and I worked together to resolve each of the security concerns at the palace. The meet and greet got approved. Secondly, the gift-giving ceremony was approved without difficulties. Narrowing down the number of Queen Mothers to participate in the gift giving ceremony met confrontations. Every Queen Mother in Cape Coast lobbied that she was best prepared to host the First Lady. The Osabarimba eventually assigned two Queen Mothers, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Coast and a retired school teacher, to receive the First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS) and other family members.

The third request, the unveiling of the commemoration plaque, was met with a brick wall. The Ghana House of Chiefs, a body comprising of all the country's traditional kings and chiefs wanted to unveil a plaque on the left side of the entrance to the male dungeons. On the right side, there is the forgiveness plaque which was unveiled in 1994 to ask forgiveness from the souls of those they sold into slavery. Human cargo was not only a European business but an African one. African chiefs traded slaves (people acquired from other nations than their own) to the Europeans in exchange for goods.

The Obama plaque is significant because First Lady Michelle Robinson Obama traces her roots to pre-civil war African-Americans in the American South. The First Lady's paternal great-great-grandfather, Jim Robinson, was an American slave in the state of South Carolina, a state to which slave ships arrived directly from this Castle. The traditional chiefs realized that it is rare that a descendant of the slave dungeons returns as the First Lady of the most powerful country in the world. I focused my arguments on the cable on the importance of the plaque to increasing visitors to the castle and the brief amount of time it would take to unveil the plaque. It was finally approved.

On July 11, POTUS and family flew to Cape Coast by helicopter. The landing site had been arranged. Attention to details was valuable in preparing for the visit. Near the landing site, disabled people hung out there during the day. I remembered reading that the First Lady's father was in a wheelchair before he died. I did not want his memory to be linked with homeless disabled people who slept under the stales at the football field which was being used as the landing site. So, the disabled were moved to temporary housing.

The route from the landing site to Osabarimba's palace was decorated with U.S. and Ghana flags. In Akan royal fashion, the Osabarimba and members of the traditional council welcomed POTUS and the First Lady to the palace. Other members of their party remained in the vehicle. Some 35 council chiefs were finally vetted and selected. They came dressed in colorful kente cloths with long shiny gold chains, bracelets and rings. A

holdover area was made available for the chiefs' support staff (i.e., stool and umbrella carriers). Young girls played the flute at the entrance of the palace. Drummers and traditional dancers were in full performance. The mood was festive and full of excitement. The Osabarimba presented his gifts to POTUS and took pictures with the First Couple. More importantly, he granted him access to move freely within his land, a confirmation that African cultures have survived centuries of European efforts to degrade and destroy them.

At the Castle, Mr. Nicholas Ivor, Regional Director of Museum and Monuments Board for Central and Western Regional had assigned Kwesi Essi Blankson, Senior Tour Guide to conduct the tour. Drawing upon my Toastmasters skills, Blankson and I rehearsed the tour several times to add eye contact, vocal variety, and gestures. He quickly gained stellar Toastmasters skills. However, during the dry-run, the Government of Ghana felt that Blankson's Ghanaian accent was too heavy and there was fear that POTUS might not understand him. Honorable Fritz Baffour, a prominent local broadcaster and former parliamentarian from the Cape Coast gave the tour with Blankson making comments. They organized an excellent tour by providing accurate information on the slave trade and the Castle.

The Obama plaque was unveiled. The plaque reads: This plaque was unveiled by President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama of the United States of America on the occasion of their visit to the Cape Coast Castle on the 11th day of July 2009. Since Obama's visit, tourism to the castle has increased to over a million people per year! During my February 2017 visit to Cape Coast Castle, I learned that the plaque is a sought-out attraction for visitors who appreciate taking pictures next to it. Hidden goal met!

At the end of the Obama tour, I was quickly ushered to give the tour to White House staff who included David Axelrod. The museum director realized that I had rehearsed with Blankson and knew the tour well enough to give to others. POTUS went to a holdover room, which we had prepared for interviews with 360 Anderson Cooper and other journalists. When POTUS, First Family, and his staff departed, I had arranged for the drummers to play for me. I danced barefooted in front of the slave castle, my most very memorable dance. The visit was over without incident and it was a tremendous success. I admit that this was the most difficult high-level event I had the privilege of organizing. I plan to document the behind the scene preparations in a book. Hopefully, the book will be added to former POTUS Obama's presidential library.

Q: Let's talk about your involvement in Toastmasters and what you did in Africa.

DENNIS: I returned from Cameroon in 1994 and started giving lectures on Africa in schools (elementary, high school and universities), churches, and museums. After a presentation at the Missouri Botanical Gardens on how to prepare "ndop" Cameroonian greens, a stately African-American man walked up to me and said, "Young lady that was an informative and interesting presentation. Go to a club called Toastmasters and they will help you make it better." I took his advice and joined Grand Center 5000

Toastmasters Club. It is one of the oldest African-American clubs in St. Louis and probably west of the Mississippi. In 1996, the Toastmasters International (TI) Convention was held in St. Louis. On opening night, country flags paraded down the aisle, one after the other, as people cheered for their countries. I sat on the edge of my seat waiting for flags from African countries. Flags from Asia, Europe, Latin American and other continents were carried proudly by their nationals often dressed in their cultural outfits. Africa countries were nowhere to be found, except for a White European-dressed South Africa! I was shocked and amazed. At that moment, I promised myself, if I ever got a chance to work on the African continent again, I would start Toastmaster clubs.

When I first went to Nigeria on a temporary duty (TDY) in 2001, I started asking about Toastmasters. Nobody knew what I meant. In 2002, when I arrived on my three-year assignment, I continued to talk about Toastmasters; however, the move from Lagos to Abuja created a “relocation mode” in the office and it was just not a conducive time to promote a public speaking/leadership club. So, I continued my promotion in the office by using Toastmasters skills to help local technical staff prepare and deliver their projects’ progress reports during technical meetings. The Mission had not completed portfolio reviews and the new Mission Director, Dawn Liberi, wanted to document what had occurred and identify lessons learned for the new country strategy. While Nigerians are great orators, the technical staff lacked the ability to “get to the point” or how to organize their presentation succinctly. By conducting “side-by-side sessions,” they soon gained confidence and began to realize the benefits of Toastmasters. They wanted more of these techniques, but the office was just too busy to start a club.

I decided to advance the idea of a community club outside of USAID. So, I drafted and printed hand-outs and dropped them off in grocery stores, restaurants and hotels in Abuja. I wrote back to Grand Center, my home club in St. Louis to get guidance and sponsors. Judi Sams, my mentor, Rosetta Keaton and Ellen White answered my desperate calls. I set the date and held several demonstration meetings. I explained that we need to form a club and send money to Toastmasters International in California. Nigerians were leery of this new idea where they would be required to pay cash that had to be sent to the U.S. They assumed that I was “trying to chop their money” in a new “4-1-9” Advance Fee Fraud scheme, the Nigerian penal code on fraud. People had never heard of Toastmasters.

Eventually, I learned that a former USAID staff on TDY had made photocopies of the first few manual speeches and held a few meetings. The informal gatherings were never required to contact Toastmasters International nor send charter fees. So, I paid the initial charter fee (\$125) and dues for some of the members in the community club. When they got their manuals, welcome kits and monthly magazines, they were hooked on access to this new found practical educational information.

We held our bi-weekly meetings on Saturday afternoons at Arcade Suites Hotel. The hotel manager was really supportive and donated the space in exchange for the purchase of water and beverages. We met initially as a provisional club in 2004 with original printed manuals from Toastmasters International. We tried to register the club in 2004 but received conflicting information from Nigerian government officials given that we were

the first club to try and register in the country. The government considered Toastmasters as a non-governmental organization (NGO), who wanted to operate in Nigeria; therefore, we were told to get a lawyer to file registration papers. We argued that Toastmasters is a not-for-profit organization and not an NGO, who was trying to operate with an office and staff in the country. Ultimately, we registered Unity City Toastmasters Club in Abuja in August 2005 with elected officers. Toastmasters' records indicate that I was registered as a member of Unity City Toastmasters club during September 1, 2005 to February 28, 2006. I am providing these details because there have been questions regarding who and which club got started "first in Nigeria or West Africa in general." Agora Toastmasters in Abidjan chartered on January 1, 1997 and the club recently celebrated 20 years of existence - making Agora the oldest club in West Africa.

For Nigeria, Ambassador Vincent Sunny Okobi, former Nigerian Ambassador to Togo, attended the August 2005 Toastmasters International conference in Toronto, Canada. He returned to Lagos, enthusiastically geared up to "introduce" Toastmasters in Nigeria. He was unaware of the efforts of the USAID TDYer prior to my 2001 arrival or my efforts in Abuja leading to the August 2005 Unity City club registration. The Lagos-based Eagle Toastmasters club, chartered in December 9, 2005. Unity City, Abuja-based, had chartered members by September 1, 2005. To the Ambassador's leadership and the members' credit, Eagle Toastmasters has consistently functioned, maintained the Toastmasters' requirement of a minimum of eight members in good standing status without interruption. Eagle TI's members frequently attend the annual August International Convention. Today, it is one of the few clubs worldwide with an online option for members and guest to attend from anywhere in the world.

Unity City club was unable to meet or maintain Toastmasters club good standing status after I departed Nigeria for my next post in Ghana. Unity City lacked the ability to pay dues to Toastmasters International. Dues must be paid in USD. This was a lesson learned that allowed me to build upon when starting clubs in future posts. I also learned that it is important to empower host country officers and members so that the club can carry on in your absence. I took note of these lessons as I helped chartered other clubs in Africa.

In Ghana, I learned from a colleague's husband that a Toastmasters club meets at Ghana Cocoa Board. I located the club, which had been founded by Dan O'Laughlin, a returned Peace Corps Volunteer who has spent his entire life working in Africa. Joe Lartey, known as "Over to you Joe" a popular sports journalist collaborated with Dan to start the club. I became a member of the Accra Toastmasters Club. The club held regular meetings, but outside under a "pavilion." Dan and Joe came to my house and asked me to become the club president. I told them that I was just too busy at USAID to take on the role of club president. They would not accept no for an answer, so I became the president in July 2007 for one year. Joe called me the club's "live wire." We moved from meeting under the pavilion to the Ghana Press Centre, home of the Ghana Journalists Association in which Joe was a member. The club grew and increasingly abided by TI norms and standards. Under my leadership, the club achieved Distinguished Level allowing them to have a solid foundation and advance to other levels, in which they did. Following my famous road trip from Accra to Ouagadougou, Club 2E from Ouagadougou traveled by

road to Accra where we co-organized an officers training program in 2008. This is most likely the first informal club officers' training in West Africa. The Accra club arranged a hotel for our guests and a room for the training. The Ouaga group had dynamic members, such as Issfou Zongo, who is now District 94's District Governor.

While in Ghana in March 2017, I visited the Accra Toastmasters club and was recognized for my contributions to the club. It was also pleasure to learn that the Ghana Embassy Club, which I started continues and now have its own "live wires." One person has quit her regular job and built a thriving communication coaching businesses and promoting TI outside of Accra to secondary towns. I am proud of the Ghana clubs' tenacity.

During my assignment in Haiti, 24 clubs existed in the country before the earthquake. I became a member of the Capucine Club in Port-au-Prince. This is where I got really challenged to perform my club roles and gave speeches in French. The rigorous evaluators, grammarian and au counters had field days on me. My use of irregular feminine adjectives or putting the stress on syllables came back to haunt me. My use of masculine and feminine articles on nouns, or example "le for la" or the future tense ending were caught and pointed out by the evaluators. I finally understood how my Cameroonian daughter felt giving speeches in English in Accra.

After the January 12, 2010 quake, things fell apart and nobody was enthusiastic about holding any meetings in concrete buildings. Too many buildings had fallen like pancakes and stood as constant reminders of people buried under them while attending meeting during the horrible tragedy. To make matters worse, aftershocks the size of earthquakes continued, making the buildings more fragile. After the first year, when things kind of settled down, I mentored English speaking a TI club under a tent not far from my compound. At the 2016 Toastmasters International Convention, I meet old friends from District 81 who informed me that Haitian clubs have built up again and the district held its 2015 Spring Conference in Port-au-Prince.

In Guinea, the Embassy and USAID Mission were re-opening after an ordered departure due to military clashes with political protestors in 2009. I arrived at post in 2011 when the office was staffing up. Next to Somalia, Guinea was probably my most challenging assignment in my career due to office politics. Starting a Toastmasters club never moved to a priority at USAID. It was more challenging than in Nigeria to start a club at the Mission, so like in Nigeria, I focused on the community. Mercy Ship, which provides free surgeries, docked in Conakry. The ship had a TI club, in fact, I had been instrumental in helping to start the Mercy Ship club when the ship docked in Accra and I was president at the time. The Accra club conducted a demonstration which led to chartering of the Mercy Ship Toastmasters' club. In Conakry, the ship's club members remembered me and I joined the ship's club. A group of Guinea university students visited the club and Mercy's ship club president asked me to work with them to form a club, which I gladly accepted.

Forming a club in Conakry was difficult due to delayed parliamentary elections. Holding regular club meetings and gathering applications, finalizing charter papers were

just plain dangerous. Alpha Oumar Balde, a member of the proposed club took the risk of coming to my house so we could complete the club documents. On a couple occasions, he was returning home and ran into protestors and/or the military. The roads were blocked, tear gas and fire bombs with tires burning in the streets. Criminals took advantage of the political situation by robbing people of cell phones and money. Knifing people who took taxis was also common during this period in Conakry. When Balde met what perceived to be danger, I urged him not to take chances. In those situations, he returned to my house and we called his family to inform them he would stay until it was safe for him to travel home.

The parliamentary elections were finally held in September 2013 with strong support from the U.S. Government. All in all, the Nimba Toastmasters club was formed in October 2013. I decided, with the consent of the club, to send Balde to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire to attend the District 94's conference. While at the conference, he called me in the States and said, "Ma, TI is not just for students, everybody is here, doctors, lawyers, business people, this is wonderful." The Nimba club eventually became advisors to the newly elected parliamentarians, a hidden benefit that Toastmasters clubs play across the continent and my underlining motivation for starting clubs.

Allow me to mention how the club elections occurred after my departure from Conakry. The country was plagued with ethnic divisions: Fulanis against Malikés. When I asked how they were handling they club elections, the members responded, "Ma, we are children of democracy." The next executive board was well balanced by ethnicity and gender-based. While there, I stressed the importance of including young ladies on the executive board. In fact, I said, "Don't come to my house with all these men, you must bring some women to participate and serve as officers in the club." I remain a member of the Nimba club and attend meetings through Skype.

When I departed Guinea, a celebration was held in the U.S. Embassy's atrium in my honor. Complete with balafon players, acrobatic dancers and speakers from the Toastmaster's group, African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) women's group, embassy staff and refreshments. I will always remember and cherish this memorable event organized under the directives of U.S. Ambassador Alex Laskaris and executed by Deputy Chief of Mission, Ervin Massinga and the USAID Mission Director Michelle Godette. Upon departing Nigeria, Ambassador John Campbell invited the club to hold my last meeting at his residence.

Prior to the forming of District 94, I traveled within West Africa to visit clubs to provide support at my own expense. I wanted these newly formed clubs to succeed with their own flavor but follow the Toastmasters' norms. I rightfully assumed that without an experienced Toastmasters, the clubs could interpret rules on their own. In one club, speakers were not allowed to advance to the next manual speech unless they "Passed." I explained that one does not "Pass or Fail" a speech in Toastmasters. In another club, the evaluations were just too severe, rather than follow the Toastmasters standard of providing feedback with the sandwich approach, which positive feedback with an area for improvement and closed off with another positive point for the speaker. I was serving as

an “Area/Division Governor” without knowing it. Actually, I attended a district training in Johannesburg, South Africa and was reminded of the roles of Area and Division Governors. As an Un-districted area, West Africa did not receive the support from headquarters. I attended club meetings in Dakar, Abidjan, Cotonou, Ouagadougou, Lomé and Lagos. I also provided support to the Liberia club, which was led by Toni Kumi, a Ghanaian whom I mentored and worked with while at USAID/Ghana.

By telephone and emails from Guinea, I guided the FSN Program Officer in Mali on how to start a club in Bamako. Gary Juste, whom I had worked with in Haiti was the Mali Mission Director and supported the club. Ouaga had an experienced person, Susan Strand, who laid a solid foundation. She taught English as a second language and is a former PCV. She is another long-term prime mover in supporting Toastmasters in West Africa. The Burkina Faso team has significantly contributed to creating and supporting clubs by traveling throughout the region. They would stop off at my house on their way to and from Cotonou or Lomé.

As I visited clubs, I urged them to start other clubs in their countries so that we could get enough clubs to form a West Africa District. My pleas did not fall on death ears. I traveled to Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso by road from Accra to attend a Toastmasters meeting on a Saturday. Other members from the Accra club were supposed to travel with me; however, they all backed out, so I agreed to make the long road trip alone, “never, never again.” The bus and 460 miles of paved roads were comfortable but the ride was just too long. I returned to Accra by air.

When I got to Ouaga, I made a passionate plea to continue starting clubs, so that we could have enough clubs to start a district. The dynamic team there in Ouaga, took my plea and ran with it. A provisional district was founded and now District 94 is one of the fastest growing district in the world. A significant delegation attends the international conferences each year. In 2009, Ambassador Okobi’s wife and I were the only two wearing Africa clothes to represent the continent. Today, a large delegation from the region attends the conference in elegant and colorful outfits. In 2016, the conference was held in Washington, DC. It was awesome to see everybody from this district. People from other regions in the world would stop us to take pictures with us. At this conference, I shuttled between members from District 8 in St. Louis and members from District 94. I also visited with fellow Toastmasters from Districts 36 in Washington, DC and 81 in the Caribbean.

The young students from the Nimba club are now working and support the club financially as well as travel within the region as Area Directors. The Guinea team just traveled to Sierra Leone where they are promoting the chartering of a club! Since Nimba is an English-speaking club, all they need from me is guidance with Toastmaster expressions they may translate from French to English. Such as calling the meetings “sessions” or saying they will “play” as grammarian rather than “serve” as or assume the role of grammarian. The club will celebrate six years in October 2018 and I plan to attend.

The West African District is alive and well. In 2017, Burkina Faso has 12 clubs, la Côte d'Ivoire has 15 clubs, Ghana has seven clubs and Guinea has three clubs (including French-speaking clubs), Nigeria has 33 clubs across the country. All of these countries flags meet the requirements of having three chartered clubs in a country to have the country's flag parade at the International Convention. District trio officers (District, Program Quality and Club Growth Directors) now regularly attend regional training/meetings, paid for by headquarters. District 94 holds regular spring and division level fall conferences, complete with speech contest, educational and business sessions. I am proud of the District 94's accomplishments.

Q: You mentioned the earthquake in Haiti. Were you there when it took place?

DENNIS: Yes, I was there. I went to Haiti on a Direct Transfer from Ghana. I was instructed to get to post before the hurricane season, which is June to November. I was on a real high after a successful coordination of President Obama's visit in the Cape Coast. However, I had heard so many negative comments about Haiti, I wanted to hurry up and get there to demystify the country. I figured that it could not be as bad as Somalia and it wasn't! I was assigned as a Food-for-Peace Officer. I had assumed that I would work on health issues, which I did. In addition, when I arrived at post, the Haiti Mission Director, Beth Cypser informed me that she needed someone dedicated to handle disasters. I told her that I had sent members of my staff to train and serve as disaster officers. She said this is what she wanted me to do because Haiti was prone to natural disasters. I told her that I was here to serve. So, I became the Mission Disaster Relief Officer. Haiti was still recovering from Hurricane Hanna in 2008. I started to attend meetings at the United Nations temporary office at Log-base. Beth departed post and Dr. Carleene Dei arrived at post as our director on January 11, 2010.

On January 12, 2010, I was at my desk at the embassy working on disaster trigger indicators. I heard a loud roaring noise, the embassy's building started to shake and I assumed it was a bomb. I could only think of Albert Votaw, who died when the U.S. embassy in Beirut was bombed in 1983. I knew him and his wife from my days as a Peace Corps volunteer in Côte d'Ivoire. They always invited volunteers to their home on holidays and I also used to stop by for tea. His wife, Estee, and I connected because she had relatives in St. Louis. He was really my Peace Corps father. I have a section of Ivorian masks in my house to commemorate him. So, when the building started shaking, I started shouting and praying, "I am not ready to die." I prayed and asked God to spare me because my family had just lost my mother and a great-niece. The office was empty because it was after work hours, 4:53 PM. Papers started flying, light fixtures started dangling from the ceiling. The building was shaking intensely. The young marine guard nervously said over the loud speaker, "Duck and cover. This is NOT a drill. Get away from the windows." I got up and ran down the hall. Stepping over trash cans and water bottles rolling all over the place, I took cover in a closet. After the shaking stopped, the guards toured the building and found me shaking in the closet. In a broken voice, I barely could talk and asked what that was? He said, "Mam, it was an earthquake." I said, "Oh my God, why did you give me this one?"

Immediately, the few of us at the embassy started organizing ourselves. The Consulate Officer was on duty. We all gathered in their section and started gathering information by making land-line calls. Cell phones were out. People came to the embassy and reported the destruction they saw on the road. We fed this information to Washington, specifically to Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton who was on the other end of the land-line. She was attentive and ready to take actions.

Charlene Dei, who arrived the day before the earthquake, went in to gear as the director.

Haitians are the strongest and proudest people of African descent. They demand respect and fear nobody. While they needed foreign assistance to respond to the earthquake, they demanded official authorization prior to the U.S. provided assistance. The Government of Haiti's, Minister of Foreign Affairs rode a bicycle to the U.S. Ambassador to discuss the response and advised him that prior to sending any disaster relief, the U.S. had to send a diplomatic note (i.e. dip note) requesting permission to provide relief because Haiti is a sovereign state. As the Mission Disaster Relief Officer, the task fell on me. I had to prepare a dip note swiftly. I had just returned from home leave and had not unpacked my files. The office files were scattered. I have learned to remain calm during crises and identify the way forward. The electricity and some computers functioned at the embassy. I searched through my thumb drives and found a dip note from Ghana's flood inundation and adapted it to the Haiti situation. The U.S. military planes carrying water started to arrive. I was part of the team to assess the damage on the U.S. military helicopter. The 7.0 magnitude (initially measured at 7.5 and downgraded to 7.0) earthquake had pancaked and slanted houses and buildings. By January 24, Haiti had experienced 52 aftershocks over 4.5 on the Richter scale and had 2,000 aftershocks ranging between 2.5 to 4.4 over the next two years.

I continued to serve, but I shook and did not know it until State Department sent those who remained at post after the initial quake for mandatory R&R to a resort in Santo Domingo. I was met at the embassy's Community Liaison Office (CLO) by Dora Plavetic, a Foreign Service Officer who had been my Deputy Program Officer in Ghana. She returned the favor of hospitality and kindness which I needed so much after the earthquake. She helped me get down to the resort where I had settled in and had a massage. I did not realize that I was bruised on both sides of my body and it hit me what I had survived. That was my first earthquake and I hope my last.

After the earthquake we were still battling aftershocks and clean up when Haiti faced another disaster, Hurricane Thomas and the cholera epidemic brought on by Burmese United Nations peacekeepers dumping their feces in the river. It is not clear why so many natural disasters occur in such a small country. I had experienced working in droughts in Somalia and downstream floods in Ghana, but these types of disasters allow governments time to prepare for responses. With Haiti, pre-warning was rare.

Q: Did you encounter the military during the earthquake response?

DENNIS: Yes, after the dip note was received. The Government of Haiti immediately approved U.S. military to provide relief. I mentioned how USAID colleagues went on military helicopters to assess damage from the earthquake and the response to the most needed areas.

After the emergency phase calmed down, I worked alongside our U.S. military colleagues. We trudged through the tents and rubble-filled streets of Port-au-Prince to bring critical USAID-funded emergency equipment to the National Emergency Operations Center (EOC) built by the military. The European Union (EU) had initially planned to equip the center, but the EU backed out. The DOS and the Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) requested that USAID fill this void. For weeks, I accompanied the military to the Red Zone in Delmas, which was one of the most dangerous and gang-infested sections of Port-au-Prince, where the EOC is located. We traveled in secure vehicles. As the military ensured the connection of the electricity meter, a pending bottleneck in Haiti, I supervised the installation of the computers, printers, TV monitors to bring the center into operations for the current and future hurricane seasons. Other components of the EOC included maps, space to hold press conferences, work stations with computers for the police, fire fighters, urban search and rescue representative, National Weather Service, Red Cross and other offices involved in disasters, such as a government ministry of health or agriculture. Televisions capture local and international news related to the disaster were installed. Screens to monitor U.S. National Hurricane Center, Geological Services also exist. USAID also promoted disaster training for the civil protection team. The functioning center brought tears to the eyes of the civil protection director and staff at the opening ceremony when they saw the equipped center come to life. Madame Jean-Baptiste said, "This is our disaster center and nobody will force us to move." When I hear about disasters in Haiti, I know that they have solid structures to plan and respond. Haiti enhanced my experiences in natural disasters, relief and designing long-term recovery programs.

Q: Well you're back from Africa now. So, what are you up to? Where should we start?

DENNIS: Let's start from when I retired.

Q: Yes.

DENNIS: Let me see. I completed the retirement seminar in September 2014 and came directly to my home of record, St. Louis. In 2006, I purchased a typical Victorian house, built in 1880 with historical red brick paved, located in Hyde Park, a section of the city that is bouncing back. My nephew kept the house and a brother oversaw major repairs while I was overseas, including removing mold and mildew. Upon my arrival, I continued the repair process. Meaning, I bought my building materials and got tradesmen to perform the renovations. I was rushing to get my personal effects from several storage places around town. The storage fees were eating me up each month. My things (HHE) from Guinea were in one warehouse and my new dining room set was in another warehouse. Then, I had things parked in my old house.

Before I could get all of these things out of storage, I had to sand floors, sand and paint walls. In the kitchen, the walls and floors had to be completely torn out and rebuilt. All of this had to be completed before my new kitchen set (a refrigerator, gas range, microwave and dishwasher) could be installed.

It took a lot of energy and patience with contractors, who had other jobs and personal issues. The kitchen project was the last major task. The contractor was caring for his elderly father, who eventually died. I had to finish the kitchen project with another contractor. Luckily, we terminated on amical terms. This is when you miss General Services Office (GSO) and know that you are really on your own. The kitchen renovations took place just before the 2014 holidays. My middle daughter, Yakam, decided to surprise me with a Christmas visit. Yakam came from France with her two girls, four and six years old. The four-year-old turned five on December 24, so that meant a “princess” birthday party with 10 five to seven-year-old children running around the house. The house really came alive. Preparations for Christmas dinner were also underway. All of this in between visits to the zoo and just about every kid-friendly place around town. It was fun having them around the house, but I slept for three days when they departed for France.

In any case, I am now very comfortable in my house surrounded with walls of pictures and art reminders of countries and friends. I host dinners and receptions frequently. I prepare a family fest for Thanksgiving. I call my house, “Living Modern Africa.” More recently, I am finding that people prefer to go to restaurants rather than to entertain in homes. This culture of home dinners is fading away except for family holidays: Thanksgiving and Christmas. I find my “old world” friends continue to host in their homes. Regular sit-down dinners with real plates and silverware have given way for paper plates and plastic forks. I still entertain with plates and silverware.

Q: How are you adjusting to winter after all of those years in the tropics?

DENNIS: I battled January – March 2014 in Washington, DC. It was recorded as the coldest winter in 20 years on the Northeast coast. Temperatures were below zero and snowfall levels hit all-time highs. I didn’t have winter clothes so it was a huge adjustment for me. It was such a horrible experience. With tears flowing, I called Alice Windom, dear friend in St. Louis who had lived in Ghana and Ethiopia for many years and returned to the States. I asked her, “How does one adjust to the winters after so many years of living in the sun.” She said, “Baby, take one day at a time.” By 2015, I was still adjusting and the winter was just as cold. In 2016 and 2017, I traveled overseas. For 2018, I am layering up...two pair of pants and three tops.

Q: Oh boy.

DENNIS: 2015 brought sorrow. My husband, Jean-Pierre “Tinga” Nana passed on April 13, 2015. He had been ill on and off, but refused to get care outside of Bangangté, Cameroon.

As mentioned earlier, Tinga had served as a civil engineer, specializing in the design and implementation of roads, bridges and tunnels. He had been responsible for building a number of major roads and infrastructure developments, including hospitals, hotels, a radio/television station and even the international airport in Yaoundé. Hence, he was well appreciated for his technical skills. Unfortunately, he was never able to stabilize his personal life. Part of it is cultural and the other part is just him being stubborn, in my opinion. We went through our cultural clashes owing to my being an independent American woman and not as submissive as a traditional/local wife. We grew to understand and respect each other. He grew to respect me as his confidant. The family respects me for my contribution to him and for ensuring that the girls obtained solid educational experiences. Two girls have Master's degrees (Agriculture and Gerontology) and one has a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration with a focus on Accounting. She is a bilingual accountant. I am proud of all three girls because they have their own careers and are able to take care of themselves and make financial contributions to their families.

Q: Are they living in the U.S.?

DENNIS: No. Two live in France, one lives in Paris and the other one live in Bretagne, the north-west region of France. The third daughter lives and works in Kinshasa, Congo.

Q: So, do they come and visit you frequently?

DENNIS: Yes. As I mentioned earlier, Yakam came in December 2014 when I was in full renovation mode. I had dual duties of managing renovations and simultaneously getting the guest room ready. I put new twin beds in the guest room for the grandchildren and Yakam initiated the stove and refrigerator by cooking breakfast and meals for the girls.

Q: How wonderful.

DENNIS: Yes. The other two will eventually get here. I go and see them as often as I can. Looks as if I am in Cameroon once or twice a year. It was so hot and humid in January and February 2017, I cut my trip short due to global climate change impacts on Yaoundé. A city that used to be cool all year around is unbearably hot, without wind.

Q: Were you able to travel to attend the funeral in Cameroon?

DENNIS: Yes. My husband's funeral services and burial were in held in Bangangté, a semi-urban town that serves as the capital of the Ndé Division of West Region. I navigated the visa process, which is just as rigorous as the U.S. visa process. I traveled from St. Louis on a Thursday, got there on Friday evening and slept that night at Mama Emilienne's house in Yaoundé, the wife before me and Yakam's and Yopa's biological mother. The following morning at 6 AM, family members and I traveled from Yaoundé to Bangangté, a three-hour drive from the forest to the savannah zone. I used to drive this

road many times. Mama Emilienne, had prepared an elegant traditional white Swiss lace in “kaba” for me to wear. Kabas are the traditional style for women in Cameroon.

Q: What was the ceremony like in the Cameroons?

DENNIS: Among the Bamilèkés in Cameroon, death marks the end of life-stages and the quality of the burial reflects the status of the deceased. Since Tinga had achieved countless accomplishments, his death was an occasion to mourn and celebrate. The ceremony occurred over two to three days. On Friday, the body was taken from the hospital morgue to the family house. It was washed, dressed and prepared for the wake service that lasted all night. Family and friends came and comforted the bereaved household. Religious songs were sung and prayers offered. Food was prepared to encourage the family to eat. On Saturday, the religious service took place. It was supposed to start at 10 AM, but it actually started at around 11 AM and it lasted until 1 PM. Different organizations to which he had belonged in Yaoundé and Bangangté presented their condolences. Family members were allowed to speak. I had written him a poem which appeared in the obituary, “I remember, I remember and I remember.”

I could have read the poem in English and simultaneously translated it into French myself, but I wanted to show off Yopa, the youngest daughter’s bilingual skills. She had been told that she couldn’t apply herself academically and complete school. I told her father to let her come and visit me in Nigeria in December 2014.

During this visit, Yopa and I agreed that if she didn’t pass the school exam, she would come and live with me in Ghana. Her father sent her to me when I got to Ghana in 2005. When she arrived, she was completely depleted and had low morale, lacked self-esteem. She had been through a lot after my departure from the house. So, I worked with her, put her in an English-speaking class. She wanted to come to the States, but I told her I couldn’t afford to send her to a university in the States which would cost \$40,000 a year but I could pay for her to stay in Ghana and so that’s what we did. She attended Valley View University (VVU) which is associated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church. VVU offers an American style education with American teachers. That is where she attended school for four years and graduated in December 2010. I traveled from Haiti to Ghana to attend her graduation.

Q: Did she translate the poem correctly? Did she get nervous? After all, there were 1,500 people in attendance at the funeral.

DENNIS: Back to the funeral, I recited my poem in English and Yopa translated it into French. I added some humor by telling them how I remember the things that he did and how we had a farm where he grew so many different crops to sell to the local supermarkets. What he didn’t grow that I learned how to cook foods including, asparagus, eggplant and potatoes. I invented all kinds of juices, made from watermelons, oranges, mangoes and papayas that were bruised and we couldn’t sell.

I told a story about how he serenaded me on the Noun River that runs across the farm, about 25 kilometers from Bangangté. I explained that when I first went to the farm, he and I walked along the river and I threw rocks in the river. One day, when I was throwing small rocks onto a larger rock in the river, the larger rock moved and I asked, “What’s going on?” He said “Ce sont mes roches magiques, ce sont mes roches spéciales. (Ma Cheri, that’s my magic rocks, those are my special rocks).” I could pull out the boyish and playful character that had been buried deep within. I asked why it was moving. That is when a big hippopotamus would move around in the water or come up. Of course, I would scream and fall into his arms, and he would get a kick out of rescuing me.

Once a year, the chief is allowed to kill one hippopotamus. The meat is smoked and/or dried and distributed to nobles. Since my husband was a noble, I cooked up our share of hippopotamus into “kondre,” a stew. When I told that story at the funeral, everybody laughed and appreciated it. The Noun River is famous for its hippopotamus. At the end of my tribute, I told them how I had spoken to him just a few days before he died and he promised to call me back. He used to call me and I would ask what had happened. Sometimes he would say, “I called because I just wanted to hear your voice.” Now it is my turn to say, I just want to hear his voice. That’s when I lost it and broke down and started crying before all of those people.

Afterwards, food had been set up in more than 15 different houses to serve the 1,500 funeral attendees. People rallied at different houses to comfort and share in the celebration of life. As I walked between the corn fields to go to the different houses, I met his friends and family that I had not seen in years.

On Sunday, traditional dancing took place. This is part of the ceremony meant to remember the deceased. A picture of Tinga was carried high in the air and family and friends danced in a circle singing praises about how we will miss the way he walked, talked or anything particular to him. His baby sister, Lydia, pulled me into the dancing. I had participated in this type of dancing many times in the past, but it had been awhile. As I danced to the background of wailing and drumming, family members cheered me on. The harder you danced and moved, it is said you are “crying hard” or showing your real emotions for the deceased. This open expression of loss is common among African funerals and helps family members to grieve.

Another aspect of the grieving process is that the wife or wives wear white. So, I wore a white dress when in Cameroon. In the States, I modified the practice as people tend to do these days by wearing something white: a bracelet, earrings, necklace, blouse, shawl or something white. So, his funeral was my first trip in 2015.

Q: Does that mean you travelled overseas again in 2015? Where and why did you travel?

DENNIS: Yes, in August 2015, Karel Nana, a nephew and Danielle held their civil and religious marriage ceremonies. We reconnected while I was in Guinea, my last diplomatic posting. He was studying to become a medical doctor. Christelle, a niece, was also studying medicine in Guinea. Christelle, Karel and I became close family and went

through the trials and tribulations of Guinea's political instability for two whole years. One day, he introduced Danielle into our family picture. I remembered these young people when they were small and when they used to visit our home. I know their mothers well. Karel's mother pleaded with me to return for the wedding because he was born in my husband's house. I knew my husband would want me to represent him and to tell how Karel struggled to get his medical degree in Guinea. Family and friends assumed he and Christelle had it easy in Guinea. This was far from the truth. I decided to come back to represent Tinga for the August wedding. Actually, when Yakam got married he called me and asked me to be his official representative at her wedding. This meant that I made decisions on his behalf. I had no financial responsibilities but representing him meant that the father welcomed the groom into the family. It also carried respect and authority.

The civil and religious ceremonies between Karel and his bride Danielle were held in Yaoundé in August 2015. Danielle obtained a doctorate in pharmacy in Guinea, so her family was proud that she had successfully completed her studies and had already delivered their first child under the traditional wedding system. The traditional marriage took place a year earlier, which allowed the couple to sleep together and to prepare for the elaborate civil and religious ceremonies. The August ceremonies added the legality to the couple's union by issuing a marriage license at the city hall and registering the marriage at Danielle's Catholic Church.

For the civil ceremony, the young couple dressed in elegant African outfits made of the same cloth. The outfits had been designed and sewn in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso where tailors are known for "modèle compliqué" (complicated model) styles of Abidjan, the fashion capital of Africa. African presidents' wives have long traveled to Abidjan to get their clothes designed. Most of the tailors in Abidjan are from Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso. Karel now lives and works in Ouaga and capitalized on his presence to get their civil ceremony outfits sewn. After the ceremony at the city hall, we all drove to the church.

For the church wedding, the couple changed clothes into Western style wedding gown and suit. In addition to the exchange of vows, the services included the christening of their infant daughter and a lively gift giving session where guests lined up and danced to give their gifts for the couple. Danielle sang a beautiful soprano opera to her groom. The church was packed. At the end of the service, I got a note to go the lectern and announce that a "vin d'honneur" (wine/champagne reception) will be held at "Quartier Eleveur" (Breeder's Neighborhood). This is an area where Tinga initially brought land and raised chickens for commercial distribution. Today, Quartier Eleveur is a well populated area with homes, schools and churches. If it had not been for Toastmasters, I would never have been able to spontaneously capture the audience. In a humorous manner, I remarked how nice the ceremony had been and told people that Karel's parents invited them to come for vin d'honneur, which always means champagne and a full meal.

The vin d'honneur was awesome. Charlotte, Karel's mother, family and I had bought champagne and decorations for the modest house. By the time we hung Chinese made décor, the simple unfinished house had been transformed and looked inviting for the

wedding guests. Danielle's family sat inside at a head table. The rest of the house was arranged with tables and chairs. Outside, more tables, chairs and music were set up. People came and ate. Makossa music kept people dancing.

If all of this was not enough, the wedding reception was held at Mont Fébé, a four-star hotel located in the mountains in Yaoundé. The couple came out dressed in elegant evening wear. After the comedians and singers, the Mistress of Ceremonies called on me to talk. I told about Belleview, the neighborhood where Karel lived in Conakry being anything except "belle" (beautiful). I explained how Karel lived without running water and electricity for years. The challenges and dangers of administering medical care to police, soldiers and the general population during civil unrest. The news reported lower casualty numbers and doctors who reported the truth about casualties were punished. As I spoke, people were trying to figure out, who is this auntie? How is she speaking French with all these intonations as if she's a local? The immediate family just responded, "C'est notre Tata Regine, elle est comme ça" (That is our Auntie Regina, which is her character, being frank.).

After Karel's wedding, I spent two weeks in Yaoundé moving from house to house reducing our grief with laughter of Tinga's life and soaking up unconditional family love. I went to Bangangté and Douala spending a month in the country with the relatives because they were all still torn up and very much in shock over our sudden loss of Tinga. They treated me royally. In fact, I was very disappointed with them because they fattened me up. I am still trying to work off those pounds. When possible, I will continue to attend events and represent him as he asked me.

Q: You mentioned that you traveled to France in 2015? Where did you go and what did you do?

DENNIS: In December 2015, I traveled to France to participate in the christening of Yakam's baby girl, Maé Regina Baron at the Catholic church. At the church, I signed the register to witness that my name will live long after my death. This is a tradition to show love and respect for the honoree. After the ceremony, a grandiose festival was held for Maé with participation from the Baron and Nana families. Those were my trips in 2015.

Q: You have touched so many people. Tell me about the young man from Africa who you encouraged to come to St. Louis to study. How did that come about?

DENNIS: In 2016, I traveled to Dakar, Senegal. A young man whom I encouraged to come to St. Louis to study got married. This is a beautiful story.

I met Abdoulaye at a shoe store where he was working as his second job. The conversation started with Abdoulaye introducing me to his sister so she could braid my hair. I found myself sitting on the floor and his sister braiding my hair. Getting your hair braided is a three to four-hour ordeal. Women talk about end and everything. Abdoulaye's sister said, "Regine, Je ne sais pas comment tu peux aider mon frère (I am not sure how you can help my brother). Il est là, il va l'école, fait deux travaux et habite

avec deux personnes dans un appartement de deux chambres. La vie est très chère à Washington, DC. (He is here, going to school, doing two jobs, living with two roommates in a two-bedrooms because cost of living is very expensive).

I told her, “Why you don’t send him out of D.C. to St. Louis. I have an apartment for rent in St. Louis and I’ll let him have it at a family price of \$200 a month. In addition, I’ll take him over to the community college where he can go to school and it’s very inexpensive. Life is much cheaper and easier in the Midwest than in Washington and New York.” They thought about it and, lo and behold, he came to St. Louis. Senegal was my first country in Africa and people welcomed me warmly. I saw it as my opportunity to return the hospitality that was shown to me.

I met Abdoulaye at the airport and, after dropping his bags at my house, I took him to see the apartment. He was surprised and really pleased to see the amount of space that he would have all to himself: two bedrooms, a living room, a large spacious kitchen and his own private bathroom. Then, I took him to St. Louis Community College at Forest Park, the same school from which I graduated. I still knew some people there and told them to look out for him since I was going back to Africa. I also introduced him to the Senegalese community, but reminded him he was in St. Louis to study and not to sell goods.

I started my Foreign Service career and we kept in touch by emails. He found a part-time job by himself, paid his rent regularly and took care of himself. He took public transportation and eventually brought a car. I went about my assignments and saw him on R&R and home leaves. When I got to Ghana, I got an email from him saying that he was graduating from a four-year university, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville (SIU-E). I came back home to attend his graduation. His mother came from Africa, a sister came from Brussels, Belgium with her husband and two kids, another brother came from Colorado or California, somewhere on the West Coast and another person came from someplace else. His father was deceased but was there in spirit. We all converged on St. Louis to see Abdoulaye receive his undergraduate degree, a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration. In the car to SIU-E, his mother cried because she thought about how Abdoulaye had driven 25 miles in the winter to attend classes. When he walked across the stage, his mother and I sat there holding hands and we cried “Il a été diplômé” Il a été diplômé (he graduated, he graduated), with the sounds of Senegalese tom-toms (Senegalese drums)! After the graduation, we took him out to dinner and attended a graduation party for another Senegalese living in St. Louis whose mother was also on assignment in Accra for the United Nations. She had traveled from Accra to St. Louis. Upon returning to Accra, she and I became good friends. It is for this reason a Cameroon proverb says, “Only mountains never meet.”

Three years later, Abdoulaye sent me an email saying he would receive his Masters of Business Administration (MBA) from Webster University! His mother, sisters, brothers, aunt and I returned to St. Louis and did the same dog and pony show. This time, more friends and family came from Europe, Africa and across the U.S. His mother and I did our crying all over each other again. We were just so proud of him. He always listened and took our advice. He watched the company he kept and stayed focused on his goals.

He maintains positive character traits of adaptable, determined, respectful and shows gratitude. Many young people, even from Africa, come to the U.S. with goals and get mixed up with the wrong people. I know some who went down the wrong path and ended in jail or dead. Abdoulaye, he respected and brought honor to his family's name. He is independent. Hard-working and sincere in all of his actions. I feel honored to have him as a god son and in my life.

After all of his educational achievements, I had one more request: join a Toastmasters club and complete your first 10 speeches, then you can confidently depart St. Louis. He joined Downtown Toastmasters club, a club with a business focus. He embraced the program and served as an officer in the club. He really saw the benefits of Toastmasters. When he got his Competent Communicator (completion of 10 speeches), I told him, "Now you are prepared to leave St. Louis and take on the world!!!!"

Q: Sounds like he is a very well educated young man.

DENNIS: Yes, he is well educated, attractive and has credible work experience. However, he is single. He is very selective in the qualities he desires in a wife. I appreciated that he did not have children without being married! No "my baby's mama business" for this young man. I watched him date different women. He went out with African-Americans, whites and Senegalese to my knowledge. Many of these young women saw him as a "good catch" to date, but they were not serious about developing a long-term relationship that could lead to marriage. As he introduced them to me, I wouldn't say anything to discourage him, I just watched. He became melancholy and spent time in the gym and lost weight!

One day, he mentioned that he was going to speak on a panel in Washington, D.C. I offered to fly to D.C. to hear him. He discouraged me from taking the trip. He shoved it off and suggested that I not bother myself to travel to D.C. to hear him speak on the panel. I noticed that he started traveling more frequently to D.C. I didn't probe into his business.

On Valentine's Day 2016, he introduced me to a Senegalese lady by bringing her to my house, a true sign of respect and honor to an elder. I was washing dishes when they came. The young lady said, "Oh, Mommy" I can wash those dishes for you? I said "Oh no, that's okay." I served them tea and we sat at my kitchen table and talked. I really liked her demeanor, her confident, yet simple manner. Plus, she was beautiful. I learned that she had a Ph.D. and was teaching health communications at one of the top universities in Washington, DC. She also traveled globally to design and monitor projects. She had just returned from Ethiopia and offered me a bag of Ethiopian coffee. As she and I talked, poor Abdoulaye got left out of our global health conversation. We spoke the same global health language. Now, I am really sold on her. So, when they left I whispered to him, "We can keep this one." That is when he told me that they're going to get married. I wanted to know more and asked my probing question about the length of their courtship, but it was clear their minds were made up. I thought back to my experience with Yakam

when she decided to marry Sebastian. I knew that nothing I would say could change their minds. Also, I had my own short courtship before I married.

I asked them what they wanted me to do. He said just come to our wedding in two weeks on Sunday, March 6. I assumed it was going to be held in D.C., but they informed me that they had decided to marry in Dakar, Senegal. I understood their thinking and really appreciated their decision to go home to allow family and friends to participate in their joy. Africans who are grounded in their culture, return from around the world to their home countries to get married. I have traveled to Cameroon to attend numerous weddings. I thought about it and realized that having followed Abdoulaye's journey from D.C. to St. Louis, I am the only person who really knows his trials and struggles in my segregated and racist hometown. While he did an excellent job of integrating himself into African-American culture, I understand the insecurities and divisions between African immigrants and African-Americans. Part of the problem is that many African-Americans no longer place a strong value on achieving higher education to move up the social ladder. Artists, tradespersons or scholars know that education is vital. Too many African-Americans who don't know how our parents fought to have access to education feel they can "make it" without going to school. Foreigners from developing countries place the same value on education as African-Americans did when we first migrated from down south. Plus, he is a Black man and racial profiling comes with living in the U.S. Amadou Diallo, the 23-year-old unarmed Guinean immigrant was shoot 41 times outside his home in NYC by four detectives. He was mistaken for someone else. The four plain clothes officers went to trial and were charged with second degree murder and acquitted. Amadou had dreams of being a computer programmer and getting a MBA. Given these thoughts, I decided to attend their wedding in Dakar, Senegal.

Abdoulaye and I planned to travel together, but due to an overbooked Thursday flight, he flew but I could not board the plane. I went back home, upset and discouraged, I considered canceling the trip. I decided to persevere. I know that getting out of St. Louis for connecting flights is difficult these days. St. Louis is no longer has direct international flights. The following morning, I took the earliest Friday flight to Chicago, then to Paris and onward to Dakar, reaching Senegal on Saturday. The wedding was on Sunday, and the very next day on Monday I departed for home. This was my first weekend trip to Africa. I have seen others travel from the U.S. to Africa on three to four-day trips for weddings and funerals. But, I had never done it and will never do it again! Too long a trip to travel in economy class. I returned in time to repack for a sorority meeting in Chicago.

Q: He got married?

DENNIS: Yes, he got married. In Dakar, I told his story in French and a sister translated it into Wolof. The family members laughed and cried when learned of his struggles. After the wedding ceremony, his family went to the wife's family house. When we got there, a gift giving ceremony took place. His wife's family offered his mother, sister and me, the American mother, gifts. Abdoulaye's family, represented by his sister and aunts, in turn offered them gifts. I received a fine hand-woven cloth from the Casamance region of Senegal, two Woodin cloths, a popular African print, and money! This ceremony was just

awesome. I wasn't expecting anything. As an anthropologist, I had read about this type of ceremony, but had never been privileged to participate or been the beneficiary. Each family had a "griot" that spoke on their behalf. Griots inherit their positions as traditional storytellers and praise singers. Historically, they served as advisors and diplomats in the king's palace. Today, they can really animate a gathering with their extravagant outfits, lively songs, dancing and musical instruments.

Q: What's he doing now?

DENNIS: He has a senior level position at a major U.S. financial investment firm.

Q: Oh yes.

DENNIS: He worked nine years at the Federal Reserve Bank in St. Louis, Missouri. Abdoulaye had some challenges advancing at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis after receiving his MBA from Webster University. He finally decided to pursue his professional career outside the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

He recently got a job transfer, joined his wife and they reside in the Washington, D.C. area.

Before we leave our discussion of Abdoulaye, I want to mention that when I would come home on R&R and/or home leave, he would take me to restaurants, plays or musicals. In fact, he would take me to an African-American restaurant called Sweetie Pie's. Oprah Winfrey popularized the restaurant. He would re-introduce me to all the foods there. I was amazed at how he had integrated himself into St. Louis. He reminded me of how I integrated myself in the societies where I lived overseas, including Senegal.

Q: Well, you must feel very pleased with yourself.

DENNIS: Very pleased that I was able to touch his life. Moreover, he and his family have enriched mine.

Q: You mentioned that you renovated houses. How did that come about? What did you do with them, sale or rent them?

DENNIS: During 1983-1985, I worked on the reforestation project for Africare in Somalia. For this USAID-funded project, we built two houses for staff in Jalalaqsi in which I oversaw the construction. I ordered the materials off-shore in Kenya and the U.S. and had them shipped to Mogadishu and arranged to have them trucked to the project site in Jalalaqsi. I worked with a local general contractor to arrange for the different tradesmen to perform their duties: masonry, plumber, electrician, roof, etc. I also rehabbed my first house in Cameroon with my husband. He had a passion for buildings.

My initial interest comes from my father's family. The Dennis' always owned and rented property as secondary sources of income. Carrying on this family legacy consistently

motives me. During 1992-2000, I had four pieces of investment property: three two family apartments (Delmar Boulevard, Tillie Avenue and Wells Avenue) and one four-family building that had been converted to a two-family property (Marcus Street). The idea is to buy at lower price and hold onto them until the neighborhoods and markets change. Then, you sell or maintain the property for rental income. The houses were like children, they always needed something. I specialized in four-bedroom large apartments for large families on the government's subsidized housing program called Section 8. Before I joined the Foreign Service and returned to long-term assignments overseas, I would travel on TDY consultancies to Africa. Upon my return, I found the apartments were in complete disarray. I tried to hire property managers while I was on the TDYs overseas but they came with their own set of fees and used contractors who charged extremely high prices for simple tasks of changing a lock.

Q: Were your investments worth your efforts? Did you make a profit?

DENNIS:I made some profits and I also had some losses. One of the two-family buildings, was located on Delmar, a really nice piece of investment property because I got it at a good price, under \$10,000. St. Louis is a gold mine for affordable red brick homes. Investors come from around to world to buy up property and benefit from tax credits and abatements. In the case of Delmar, I let a relative manage it for me. Wrong move. I got a call from the fire department telling me my building was in flames. Unfortunately, I did not have insurance on that building because I was paying for insurances on the other three. I had planned to use Delmar as my personal residence with a business in the basement. Today, the neighborhood has bounced back and if I had held on to this property, the building would be worth \$250,000. The lessons learned are to never allow relatives to handle your property and always keep insurance.

I lost money on the Tillie building. Relatives kept the property while I was overseas and failed to perform substance maintenance. They were to go to school or organize themselves and just pay the same \$200 as Abdoulaye paid. None of them provided any outside or inside maintenance to the property. When it came time to sell, the property value had significantly declined owing to poor upkeep.

I did make a profit when I sold the Marcus building. I sold it to a church next door. The church had a prison ministry and wanted the building to expand its inmate re-entry program.

Today, I have one two-family property, located on Wells, and the house where I live. Since retirement, I have renovated both buildings. Wells is rented out to two decent paying tenants. Plus, the value of this property continues to slowly increase, just as I knew it would. I have held on to Wells for 20 years and fought the drug dealers and nuisance neighbors. Today, the drugs dealers are gone and the street is peaceful. I promised the neighbors, who are now mostly senior citizens that I would not rent to tenants who are likely to make noise and become a nuisance. The current tenants fit well into the neighborhood.

Regarding my residence, as I mentioned earlier, it has been renovated. When I first brought the house, my mother told me to “throw that house in the Mississippi River.” She could not see the potential and character in this 130-year-old Victorian house. To the contrary, Aunt Irma said, “You got a beauty. The roof can be fixed and that will stop the water damage. The original tin ceiling in the kitchen is rare.” She advised me not to allow anyone to replace it. The original banister and fireplace were still in tack and I have renovated them. There are still some finishing touches to be done, but I am settled for the moment. Similar to all of my other houses in the world, it has become a meeting place to discuss and resolve problems over fine international dishes.

Rehabbing is no joke. It requires patience and good crews. I finally got good technical people to cover electric, plumbing, carpentry and roofing. It has taken me years to develop these contacts and build trust in the quality of their work. They are confident that I will pay them when they complete their tasks. Now is the time when I should invest in more property, but I don’t have the interest to run to the hardware store every day, meeting crew members/contractors and then following up with tenants. I am leaving rehabbing to younger members of the family. So far, few family members are interested in the long-term investments of buying the red brick “gold mines” available at affordable prices in St. Louis. Looks as if nobody has told them what Papa Dennis used to say, “Buy your own house.” Papa believed in paying cash and owning your own house and car. So, I am sharing my experiences with members of the community who desire to own a home rather than rent or enter into a 15 or 30-year mortgages.

Q: Sounds like you could have worked in GSO. Did you ever take a course or had training in repairing buildings?

DENNIS: No courses, I had on-the-job training. My Aunt Irma Dennis taught me the tricks of the property business and I am forever indebted to her. She encouraged me to buy and hold onto my property. She visited each of my properties before I made the investments. We share electricians, plumbers and carpenters. Once I was preparing for a housing inspection for the house on Marcus and needed to install a 40-gallon hot water tank. The guys whom I had arranged to install the tank didn’t show up. I panicked and called Auntie. She came over with her truck full of tools. She told me to grab two large wrenches from the truck and come back for the tool box. We went to the basement and she instructed me on how to remove, sweat and connect pipes. We removed the old pipes. I used all of my strength to twist the wrenches, which was not enough for her. She said, “Turn, turn harder.” I turned the pipes until those old eroded nuts were loose and finally we removed the old tank. By the time we had finished, we had installed and checked the hot water tank for leaks. When the inspector arrived, the apartment passed inspection on the first visit.

Q: Sounds like really hard work. Are other people involved in rehabbing houses in your neighborhood?

DENNIS: Yes. Not enough, but there is a growing interest among young people in rehabbing houses for their own residences and for investments. It is being fueled by

aspirations of a new development project coming down the pipeline. There has been very limited economic development on the north side of St. Louis. The City of St. Louis announced in April 2016 that the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), the U.S. Government's agency for mapping and spying, plans to move to a new and larger facility in St. Louis! This was met with great expectation by the communities surrounding the new NGA offices.

Q: That is good news.

DENNIS: Yes, NGA already has offices in St. Louis and employs 3,100 people. They now plan to expand into a new \$1.75 billion facility on a 99-acre site in north St. Louis. The site will create 5,200 construction jobs. Those of us who live near the development site hope their presence will spark growth and economic development to an area that has been left abandoned for decades. On the south side, the city has invested money, through tax incentives and abatements, to promote small businesses such as shops and restaurants. We are hoping that NGA will spark similar changes and increase services and opportunities for residents. The development site is not too far from my residence. It's likely to increase the value of houses in the area.

I have gotten involved in the development of the Hyde Park Neighborhood Association of North St. Louis (HPNA) and currently serve as the chair. For 2018, HPNA's goals are to focus on increasing membership; increasing homeownership; organizing fund-raisers and providing information through meetings and social events to the community. Currently, there are 63 percent renters and 37 percent homeowners in the Hyde Park Neighborhood. We are partnering with non-governmental and city agencies to access abandoned properties and walk potential homeowners through the process. I am excited about this program because it will reduce renters, homelessness and more importantly, stabilize families.

Early 2018, HPNA, in partnership with Finest 15th, organized a successful housing event to promote purchasing of historic brick buildings in Hyde Park Neighborhood. HPNA also partnered with several other neighborhood groups to organize a Halloween event called Spooktacular for children. Over 350 children participated in spooky outfits, trick or trunk-a-treat and a host of other activities. A pleasant surprise was to see fathers, especially Black men out with their children. This was a lot of fun. The event coincided with hosting three International Visitors Leadership Program guests from Lebanon who helped break down the spooky tunnel and other activities. They got a real kick out of seeing Thriller dancers and interacting with residents by distributing popcorn. One helped Aunt Hattie cast spells with secret potions. The event was a sign that a thriving community exists in Hyde Park.

Q: Do you find that having been a State Department officer makes you a novelty in your community?

DENNIS: Yes. Very much so among both the Black and White communities. Sometimes people don't know how to respond to me. I remain calm and make them comfortable by

discussing local issues to which they can relate. I will not discuss my international experiences unless someone asks me a question. When I am among the White community, they challenge my origins from north St. Louis. They want me to be from Africa or someplace else. It is as if to say that north St. Louis and the public-school system can't produce people who excel internationally.

Q: *Yes.*

DENNIS: I am involved in different international groups: Alliance Française and the World Affairs Council. As I mentioned earlier, the World Affairs Council receives individuals from the Department of State's International Visitor's Leadership Program. I remember once, St. Louis had 12 French-speaking visitors from Africa, representing different countries. A friend from my water aerobics exercise class asked me to come and meet them at her catholic church. It was a very cold and snowy day. I had just returned from Senegal and Chicago and I wasn't able to host them. This was an enjoyable experience to welcome these francophone Africans to my city.

There was another group of three IVLP participants from France that I invited to go with me on Easter Sunday to Friendly Temple Baptist Church, a popular mega Black church. The church seats 3,000 persons. Friendly has a lively service with good gospel singing, shouting and preaching. The church has progressive programs in the community, such as housing, partnership with a bank to reduce the high interest loan agencies in the community, sports and education program for youth, tax ministry to name a few. I find that foreign visitors to the U.S. often want to amplify their knowledge about African-Americans. The international visitors program in St. Louis is doing a better job of fulfilling this unspoken interest.

After church, the World Affairs Council had arranged a brunch with a family in Clayton, MO, a suburb in St. Louis County that borders St. Louis City. It has a middle to upper income population, similar to Arlington or Bethesda.

Q: *Maybe Bethesda.*

DENNIS: Yes, Bethesda. The five to six-bedroom homes are large brick structures with very well- maintained yards.

At the brunch, it was clear that St. Louisans were probing to determine which high school I attended in St. Louis and I always acknowledge that I went to Beaumont in north St. Louis. Some may respond that their mother or grand-parents attended Beaumont. By mentioning Beaumont, it is clear I am not from a privileged background.

Q: *Well I think this is true not only in your sort of Black community but just generally. When you say you're in the Foreign Service people aren't quite sure how to treat you.*

DENNIS: I agree.

Q: And they somehow think that either you're pretty fancy or they don't know what questions to ask.

DENNIS: You are so right.

Q: And you have a real problem diffusing all of this...

DENNIS: Right. It has been difficult relocating and settling down here. St. Louis lacks the cosmopolitan flavor of other large cities. First, nobody really believes that I am settled and will not live overseas again. For this reason, I make myself and my house available for friends and family to interact with me. One Sunday afternoon, I invited some young people and their parents to my home to discuss international careers. People often say, "I want to travel like you" or "I want to become a diplomat." They never say "join the Foreign Service." They ask: "How can I get a job to travel?" So, I decided to invite them to the house for tea and cookies. My sister made a fruit tray. At the meeting, I focused on how to plan and launch international careers. I also invited three other friends who are from St. Louis and have lived internationally: A Returned Peace Corps Volunteer who served in Kenya; a friend who lived in Ghana, Ethiopia and Zambia in the 1960's; and another person who built a house in Ghana where his daughter lives now.

Sitting around the dining room table, we told the optimistic and downsides of living abroad. We all stressed the importance of staying in school, getting higher education degrees, participating in study abroad programs in college and perhaps joining the Peace Corps. I explained that being a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer opens doors for you. Using myself as an example, I told them that some universities offer deferred payments on student loans or offer scholarships for Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. I also mentioned the language and culture skills gained are valuable experiences living in a foreign country.

I mentioned the downside such as time lost from family and friends, and the reverse cultural shock when you return to the U.S. I explained the different U.S. government agencies that offer international careers: USAID, State Department (which requires one to take an exam); U.S. Department of Agriculture; U.S. Department of Commerce; Central Intelligence Agency; private corporations; and the non-governmental agencies. The event was a huge success and I have had the opportunity to follow-up with them. One young lady has traveled overseas and another visited Ghana.

Q: I have to say that my gut reaction is if you want to get people into the Foreign Service you want to expose them at least by high school.

DENNIS: I agree. I am focusing on 5th graders to high school students. We have to get to them while they are young. I am currently hosting a weekly Toastmasters Youth Leadership Program for third to fifth graders at Clay Academy for Exploration and Civics, a public school in my neighborhood. The students are members of student government. It is amazing to see how fast and eager they are to embrace public speaking.

Q: Because when they get to college, they think they're overly sophisticated. For this reason, you want to get the desire for diplomacy burning early on.

DENNIS: Right. I have a young relative who is interested in becoming a diplomat and even wants to become an Ambassador! At family events, he and his brother would corner at family events and bombard me with questions about living abroad and current events. In fact, I always felt I needed to be on top of world affairs when visiting their home. He starts his freshman year in college this year. The other brother is in his second year at the university and majoring in medical anthropology. He wants to become a medical doctor. Positive family role models reinforce what parents promote in the home.

Q: So, what are your plans for the future?

DENNIS: My plans are to document my experiences. Getting this transcript off will serve as a basis for a future memoir. I believe my story offers lessons to obtaining international living experiences in non-formal manners as well as through the more traditional routes of academics, internships, Peace Corps and/or non-governmental organizations or the private sectors. Embedded within my story is the importance of endurance and determination. Additionally, it is important to accept cultural norms of different countries when promoting diplomacy.

Secondly, I plan to document President Barak Obama and the First Family's visit to the Cape Coast Slave Castle which has been on the back burner. Thirdly, I need to write the long-awaited book on authentic African cuisine. It is another one of my projects that has been in the making for years. I am getting closer to making it a reality. I will collaborate with Yakam, the agro-economist daughter, to compile this book. I also have some children stories about nomad boys and girls to finalize.

I also want to promote trade and business with Africa. In 2016, I completed a course at the Women's Business Leadership Center in St. Louis. Following the course, I registered a management consulting firm called "Global Affaires, LLC." This firm will link U.S. corporations with governments and the private sector in Africa, especially francophone countries. I am available to assist companies to navigate meeting decision makers and identifying if funds exist for goods and services. We will also help them to respond to tenders.

I think there are opportunities for small entrepreneurs in the U.S. to work with entrepreneurs in Africa. There are opportunities under the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) for creative companies. U.S. companies must learn to compete in Africa by supporting their products. I believe that U.S. companies can compete with the poor-quality goods exported from Asia to Africa by providing better quality products at competitive prices. I plan to conduct presentations on trade with Africa and provide advice to U.S. companies to prepare them for the long haul of setting up basic structures that lead to regional trade. The days of "commodity drops" to Africa are over.

I will continue to serve in the Hyde Park Neighborhood Association of North St. Louis. There are opportunities to transfer my diplomatic and international development skills within the community. I have been successful in getting non-governmental organizations to work together in our community as well as encouraging politicians to talk to each other. So far, so good. New faces can approach issues without previous viewpoints or past baggage.

I am learning that staying healthy in your golden years is a full-time job in the U.S. Living in Africa, I ate better and walked to work or took stairs more. One has to exercise daily and watch what you eat, especially in the U.S. My weaknesses are cookies and ice cream. In the U.S., cookies are found everywhere and they are so much sweeter than those sold internationally. To work off my extra pounds, I attend water aerobics class three days a week at a public community center. The center is located where I was raised. The center could use some repairs, but the ambiance can't be beat. We all drive long and short distances to get our "free medicine." The session lasts for an hour and 15 minutes. When I leave there, I am refreshed.

The class has grown into an informal support group. We call each other to see why someone missed exercises. If you miss two or three sessions, your phone will blow up with calls wondering how they can help you resolve your issue so you can return to aerobics. If something happens, birthdays, funerals or awards, the ladies and the men come out to support each other. In the water, we tell lots of jokes and solve urban and world problems, especially during those difficult exercises, such as jumping jacks. We do two sets of 150 jumping jacks in different forms. By the second set the instructor says, "Get them up" and hold your stomachs in." He says, you don't have to keep up, but you got to keep moving! We form different informal groups in the pool. For the "tall girls section," the men who come to "save us." In reality, they come to tell us to stop "rattling" or talking while exercising. They end up joining in our lively discussions.

This exercise/support group has turned into a Wellness Group, which encourages a healthy diet. We are under the guidance and care of Dr. Xavier Tipler, the owner of Proficient Chiropractor, who volunteers his time to monitor and track our changes.

We continue our healthy lifestyle by dancing at "the spot," Zuka Art Gallery, where we listen to a live blues and R&B band. The band plays songs from the 1960s and 1970's when most of us were in high school. We take our food and drinks and just have a ball talking and dancing. Now, that we are health conscious, we have replaced our margarita and other alcoholic beverages with spring water accompanied with salads or fruit. No more fried rice, lasagna with four different cheeses or bar-b-que ribs. At "the spot", we show off our weight loss by dressing up. The best part of "the spot" is that the band starts in the middle of the day on Fridays, 1-3 PM, which is good for those who can't drive at night and want to get home to avoid rush-hour heavy traffic.

All in all, I am enjoying being back in the States full-time. I do miss my extended family and friends in Europe, Africa and the Caribbean. I get regular calls and some visits from them. In April-May 2017, my sister-in-law came to visit me from Douala, Cameroon.

While she was here, she enthroned me as the Queen Mother of Children in the family. I wore a traditional indigo ceremonial cloth called Nzansop or ndop. This cloth is worn among Bamilèké kings, queens, nobles, chiefs in the Western Province of Cameroon. The height of the ceremony was when my sister-in-law placed Bamilèké noble beads around my neck. The red beads are worn only by kings, queens and chiefs to symbolize life, maturity and authority. I invited family and friends in St Louis to share the occasion with me. She insisted on cooking all Cameroonian dishes all by herself. She said my cooking is influenced by living in too many other African countries.

The following month, June 2017, I hosted a friend from Abuja, Nigeria for two weeks. I had the opportunity to return the hospitality shown to me while I was on assignment in Abuja, Nigeria. I have been hosted by lots of people who have shared their cultures with me in different places around the world. I find that having a diverse group of friends has enriched my life. As I learned in anthropology 101, gift giving is reciprocal. To this end, I look forward to returning the hospitality that was shown to me by hosting friends from around the world. My immediate family, mentors, long-time U.S. friends, my international friends and extended families have all contributed to making me what I have become and I am forever grateful because, I like what I have become.

Q: Well this has been fascinating.

End of interview