

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

VELLA G. MBENNA

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: February 3, 2016

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Information Programs Officer 1999-2001
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the third of February, 2016, with Vella G. Mbenna. Vella, and do you go by Vella?

MBENNA: Yes, I go by Vella.

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

MBENNA: I was born in the fall of 1960 in Holmestown community in the town of Midway, Georgia. Midway is a one stoplight town on the southeast coast of Georgia.

Q: Let me first get a little feel for this. What do you know about on your father's side? Where they came from?

MBENNA: Some family members traced my father's side of the family back to the slave owner (Ball) in Tarboro, South Carolina. The unofficial story is there was a beautiful black female slave whom the master was fond of. She had a child for him and thus my lineage began. I guess that is how we have the light eyes and skin. My grandfather Joe Scott, and grandmother Francena Slater Scott, were children of sharecroppers and I believe inherited the land I knew as theirs as a result of sharecropping. They were beautiful and loving grandparents and I remember almost every detail about their physical features.

Q: What was he doing when you were a child?

MBENNA: My father did not finish elementary school. He only made it to the second grade. He stopped to help with the farming, I am told. I recall that when I was a child, daddy performed lumberjack work with a black business owner called Mr. Bill Carter who was also from Midway, GA. Daddy drove the tractors, cut the trees, limbed the trees, loaded them on the long log trucks, and even drove the timber to the saw mill to be sold. He was a jack of all trades when it came to lumberjacking. That is what he was doing when I was a child and up until he got sick and eventually passed away. However, he shared with us during family conversations/bonding periods that he also did longshoreman work as well as worked in the tobacco and cotton fields well into his adulthood. He also told us that he traveled with other black men and women up and down the southeastern States on something called the "season". So, whatever was in season and workers were needed, a bunch of black folks would band together and travel to that state/city/town to process the crops. Thus it was called "the season".

Q: All right, on your mother's side, what do you know there?

MBENNA: Well, no in-depth research has been done on my mother's side. I recently did a limited search and found that on her mother and father's side, their folks came from South Carolina. I am not sure where in South Carolina, but I will pick up the search later this year. Anyhow, my mom's mother died when my mom was about five years old.

Therefore, she was raised by her older siblings and her tough dad. Her dad was a farmer and sometimes he travelled on the season or to the mill to process the food grown on his personal farm. Thus, the oldest sister (Aunt Bee) and relatives were left in charge of his five children. I was told that he hated leaving them, but he did what he needed to do to keep them housed, fed, and clothed. My mom was promoted to the 9th grade, but when school officials discovered she was pregnant she was not allowed to return to school. They were not as tolerant of pregnancy in school back then as they are now. In spite of my mom's limited education she was and still is very smart and wise. She has been a housewife all of her life raising her many children, but for about a year or so in her early adult life she was a teacher's aide at my elementary school. She is a wise lady and still is at the tender age of 90.

Q: Education does not necessarily insure that somebody is wise or not? So, I am quite sure your mom is a very wise woman indeed. What was your town like as a kid?

MBENNA: Holmestown, the all-black community I grew up in, consisted of hard working, church-going families. We had lots of folks with farms, but we also had folks who were educated and progressed very well in life. We had (and still have) teachers, business owners, medical professionals, cooks, domestics, farmers, hunters, clergy, laborers, night club owners, civil servants, trash collectors, mechanics and the list goes on. As far as the two businesses in our community back then, Mr. Freddie Walthour owned a convenience store with a gas station and laundromat attached. It was very close to our house and we shopped there for emergency items when we could not get to town. Mr. William Varnedoe, we called Buggy, had a convenience store and was a bus driver. He attended our church and would ride us to church sometimes since my family did not have a car in my early years. We also patronized his store. Holmestown had a make-shift park (before the county did a face lift about 20 years ago and made it a real park) and a baseball field. In general, Holmestown was a peaceful community and I hold my childhood memories of it very dearly. We were not too bad off, just secluded because we did not have transportation to regularly get out and about to see what was outside of Holmestown.

Q: I have a certain connection with Georgia. My grandfather marched into it with Sherman. He was an officer in Sherman's army.

MBENNA: That is interesting. So, then you know that Savannah was not burned and destroyed as General Grant ordered Sherman's army to do. The confederates ran across the Savannah river into South Carolina and thus no battle took place. Sherman was quite glad the confederates crossed the river because he did not want to destroy it for two reasons we are told: 1) Savannah was too beautiful to destroy, and 2) he had a girlfriend from Savannah and would have felt bad destroying her beautiful town. Savannah is truly naturally beautiful. My first husband is from Savannah and my first granddaughter's name is "Savannah Vella". I love the word/name Savannah.

Q: What was it like growing up in this rather secluded little community? I mean, did you have many contacts with whites there or practically not?

MBENNA: I felt secluded as far as knowing firsthand what was out there beyond the community except for school, church, the doctor's office, and an occasional trip to Jekyll Island by my two elder sisters and their husbands. We did not get many white people in our community. They were either the policemen who we rarely saw because the community was not violent, or the insurance men. We saw lots of white insurance men selling or collecting premium for life insurance. One thing black folks in our community believed it was "life insurance." At my elementary school in Midway, there were a few white teachers even though the school was predominately black. We also saw white doctors when the home remedies my mother concocted did not work. So, yes, we were black and secluded but not to the extreme.

Q: And your school was all-black.

MBENNA: My elementary school was predominately black. When I got to the middle school, it was in another part of the county, so it was well-mixed. The same for high school--lots of whites and other nationalities in high school. The military community kids went to our middle and high school so we had kids of Asian, Latin, and European heritage.

Q: Let's talk about the elementary school. Were you taught about the pre-integration period and all, or were you aware of the civil rights movement that was going on around you?

MBENNA: I do not recall this being taught or spoken of much in elementary school. Integration was still new and that is why only a few whites went to my elementary school. Some white families drove their kids to Hinesville to go to the predominately white schools, I was told. I knew there was a big movement to help black folks go to better schools and be able to freely move in and out of restaurants and other establishments, but nothing was formally taught in school that I can recall. I learned most of the little I knew via announcements in church, what I heard on the radio, or what I overheard grown folks discussing at my parents' house. So, again, I knew something was going on and knew it was good and bad for black folks all at the same time, but the good was to outweigh the bad for the future of black folks.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

MBENNA: Yes, I read anything I could find. I was a reader and a deep thinker. I would read things and try to figure out why the person wrote it. My mom wanted us to possess knowledge, something folks could not take away from her, she used to tell us. So, it was not a surprise that as poor as we were, it did not stop her from buying two sets of encyclopedias -- one traditional and one set of black encyclopedias. It was the best investment she could have made for me, personally. However, I hated it when the salesman would come to collect the monthly payments. I knew it was tough for my parents, but somehow they paid for the two sets of encyclopedias in full, eventually. It was well worth the worry and money they spent. I read them from first to last and that

may have been one of the seeds that sparked my desire to travel around the world. When my son Michael visited my mom for school breaks, my mom insisted he read them, too, and he did.

Q: As a small child, were you working on the farm or what?

MBENNA: Yes, I worked on the farm. Let's correct the term farm. Farm to me means acres and acres of crops and mostly for commercial purposes and not primarily for the growers' personal consumption. We had fields. So, yes, I worked the fields. I was the youngest girl of my parents' 11 kids and they will tell you differently about me in the field. They would say I did not do much in the fields, but I do recall working with them.

Q: Eleven kids?

MBENNA: Yes, my parents had 11 kids. My father had a few more (laughter). Of the eleven kids, my parents allowed my mom's oldest sister, Aunt Bee, to raise two of them (Howard Jasper and Henry Lee) in Callahan, Florida, where they resided. We saw them maybe once a year when Aunt Bee and Uncle Clarence came to down in the beautiful automobile. So when I speak of my siblings and how we grew up, I am referring to the nine of us physically raised by my parents.

Q: What were you doing in the fields?

MBENNA: If you ask my parents and siblings, they will tell you that I did not do much in the fields. I remember hoeing grass from around the crops, dropping seeds, carrying water to the crops. They will tell you that I would go to the fields and after a few minutes start crying until I was told to go back to the house. I was more involved in carrying of food and water for those actually doing substantive work in the field such as my older siblings and two hard working brothers-in-laws (Albert Anderson and Lewis Roberts). By the way, my parents did not sell anything we grew. We ate all the crops that we harvested. What we did not eat during the harvest period, we prepared for jarring/canning, freezing, or other way of preserving for consumption later.

Q: What sort of house did you have?

MBENNA: We grew up in a four room plank board house. People in the community called it a shack and it hurt all of us, especially my mom, so very much. We had no inside water and used an outside primitive toilet. Actually, I just found a picture of my mother outside that board house and it brought tears to my eyes. It didn't even have steps at the back door. It just had a plank of wood where we walked up into the house. The house had a family area, a kitchen, my parent's bedroom, and one bedroom for the nine children -- boys and girls.

Q: So you had nine kids in one room?

MBENNA: (Nods). Yes, and if our siblings came from Florida to visit, they stayed in the room, too.

Q: How the hell did you work that out?

MBENNA: Actually, I never really thought about it, but my brother Samuel Erwin, when I was home for Christmas last year, gave a speech in our church on how grateful he is to be where he is today. During his presentation he shared a description of that old house. He described the kids bedroom as having a sheet attached to strings and strung across the room to divide it. The girls slept on the steel framed bed and the boys slept on top of old mattresses and/or clothes on the floor. As my two older sisters got married, they moved out and more room was made for us in the bed. I slightly recall us all being bunched up on each other and telling scary stories and sometimes listening to stories, like the black/white issues, through the cracks in the wall between our bedroom and the family room when my family had visitors. All in all, we were happy and never once thought that we were poor until other kids or mean grown folks would call us name. To be honest, we were the prettiest/handsomest and smartest kids in the community, just poor as heck. My mother and father were good looking and I do thank them for passing those good genes down to us.

Q: Let's start with elementary school first. Were there any subjects you particularly liked and any subjects you didn't like?

MBENNA: I liked history. History took me beyond my secluded little community. History made me dream and gave me hope of becoming someone successful later on. Those encyclopedias my parents invested in really help me travel around the world without even getting in a car, bus, train, or plane back then.

Q: Did you find that you were particularly good at school, in school things? I would assume that with what you eventually became, you would have had some sort of spark there.

MBENNA: Oh yes, I was pretty smart from the very beginning of my school years. Again, my parents were quick learners and wise. They just did not have the opportunity to excel. So, aside from the good looks inherited, all of the kids were intelligent. Aside from that, we could not go anywhere so we had more than enough time to just study and read books. My mom did not believe in us sitting around. Even if she knew we needed a break from the field or house chores, she would say "get a book and read it." She knew that sometime we would fake studying, but the fact that she saw us with a book or writing was enough for her. I believe what she wanted to instill in us is that time should be spent doing something valuable instead of horsing around.

I was smart in elementary through high school. I was the first runner up in the school spelling bee in 7th grade. As a sophomore in high school, I was invited and joined the Beta Club for achieving and maintaining a high grade average. Yes, I was smart and with good common sense, too. The best day of my life in high school was being pinned by my

mom during the ceremony when I joined the Beta Club. My dad could not attend, so she and a cousin, Clarence Holmes, attended. It was a great day for me and the beginning of making my dreams come true. I was smart and I realized that knowledge was power and the keys that would allow me to enter into the white world -- like the Beta Club. Yes, what a great day that was for me and my mom.

Q: Boy, I imagine it was. Were you able before you got to high school to sort of indulge in your interests in the outside world?

MBENNA: As far as travel, no. As stated earlier, we only traveled to school, church, the doctor, to the beach sometimes, and sometimes to my grandparents in Gum Branch, Georgia, and probably on one or two occasions to Florida to visit relatives during my childhood. I indulged in my "outside world" interest via books, asking questions to military vets in the community, or asking kids or grown-ups who had travelled.

Q: What sort of games or recreational activities did you participate in as a kid in elementary school?

MBENNA: During physical education (PE) sessions in elementary school, I played hop scotch, marbles, hula hoops, soft ball, kick ball, dodge ball, tag, climbed the monkey bars, and any other games that took place during PE. All kids lived for PE and I was not the exception. I played it all and had fun. I recall breaking my ankle playing dodge ball in six grade. It was painful.

Q: What kind of church did you belong to?

MBENNA: I was baptized as a protestant and still belong to the African Methodist Episcopalian (AME) protestant church.

Q: At the elementary school, did the boys kind of do the boys' things, the girls did the girls' thing or was there much mixing?

MBENNA: You mean, in general?

Q: Yes.

MBENNA: We mixed, especially on the playground. I do not recall a separation of the gender. However, there were boys who thought girls were yucky and vice versa, so they did not mix well with each other. However, in general, boys and girls talked and played together. Of course my mom would always tell us girls to stay away from boys, even at an early age. We knew what she meant so we stayed away from anything like that, but as far as playing and talking, we mingled a lot.

Q: Was there a big town to go to or something?

MBENNA: Holmestown was my community. Holmestown was a community in the town of Midway. Hinesville, a big town to me back then, was a big town in Liberty County and where the government of the county sat. Then, there was Savannah, two counties over. That was considered a big city to us.

Q: Did you go to, not to the biggest city, but the bigger cities and towns?

MBENNA: At what age?

Q: As a young girl?

MBENNA: For Midway, I went to school in Midway and sometimes my parents would let us go with them to the big grocery store there as an outing to buy things we could not raise in the field. For Hinesville, as a little girl we only went to the doctor and sometimes the grocery and hardware stores. However, there was one sure trip to Hinesville every year and that was to buy school clothes from Wilcox General store. For Savannah, I do not recall going there until around middle school.

Q: Did you go the movies?

MBENNA: Are you serious? No I did not. There was a drive-in movie theater in Hinesville, but as a child going there was like “going to the moon.” We did not have money for that, we had no transportation, and besides, my mom would slap us to the moon if we even mentioned it. She believed those types of places encouraged misbehavior, sexually.

Q: As a small child, did you understand that “bad things” were out there?

MBENNA: Oh Yes, my mom would remind us on a daily basis that drinking alcohol, smoking, cussing, sex, fighting, etc. were bad and could enslave us to a life of being a nobody in life, if not dead. When our friends and relatives would tease us of being slaves in prison it hurt. My parents knew that but they had a plan for us and it entailed getting out of Holmestown and making something of ourselves. When they overheard the teasing, they would tell us not to listen to them because they were going to end up pregnant, dead, in jail, on drugs, or not successful in life. I hate to say it but my parents were right. The slaves and prisoners those kids teased are doing well now. So my mother and father were smart and insightful. Thank God for them.

Q: They were very smart.

MBENNA: Yes, absolutely. I love my parents for keeping us from the bad things out there back then.

Q: Did your parents read a newspaper or talk about what was happening in the world or anything?

MBENNA: Yes, they did. Even though they had a limited education, they somehow educated themselves to the extent possible. I am not sure how much they understood, but when a newspaper or pamphlet landed in their hands or at the house, they picked it up. As we got older and would read and comprehend better, we read and interpreted things for them. My mother, 90 years old now, still reads, comprehends, and writes very well.

Q: Anyway, your experience is really that of people who immigrated to the United States, and came out of, particularly Russia, and Eastern Europe, sort of small farms and all. So many were Jewish, discriminated against, so they really didn't have much until they got to the States.

MBENNA: Interesting, but I am not sure of the similarities.

Q: What was your high school like?

MBENNA: High school was better because I start mingling more with kids of other race and nationality. I was very academically competitive so I hung out a lot with smart kids. I had several white friends and was always trying to figure out what they were thinking in order to improve myself. I did not think they were better than me, but I knew they had more opportunities. I wanted to tap into in hopes of having those opportunities too. The teachers were tougher and mostly white. I got the sense that most of the teachers did not really want to entertain blacks unless they were athletes or a clown. Normal smart kids like me felt distant from the teachers. That was fine because my academic achievement spoke for me and the teachers had to acknowledge me after I joined the Beta Club in high school. Prior to that, I was just me in my own little world trying to figure out which white schoolmate I could learn more from to make me successful after high school. There were other nationalities of children in my high school because of the military base. That was great because I considered them as non-black when it came to sponging from them to position myself for success.

Q: Was the military looked upon as the door to getting the hell out of Liberty County?

MBENNA: Yes. The military was the quickest way out. My brothers will tell you point blank that they joined the military to get away from the fields and Liberty County. My way out was college.

Q: Well, in high school, what were your favorite subjects?

MBENNA: I still liked history, but math became of interest. I hated government, home economics, physical education, science, etc. I like math because there was a concrete answer/solution. I hated discussions that led to nothing concrete. This could have been the beginning of my passion for computers -- the liking of numbers. I like numbers, not from a finance/money perspective, but from a there-is-a-solution and I will find it perspective.

Q: Did your parents let you get involved in high school extra-curricular things?

MBENNA: No, not really. I believe my parents were harder on me. You see, I was pretty, smart, and ambitious, so they saw trouble and pulled the reins even tighter in high school. They allowed me to join the Beta Club since it promoted and applauded my academic achievement. Other than that, I could not participate in extra-curricular activities. To be honest, by the time I was in high school, I did not care much about those extra things. I just wanted to study, go to college, and travel the world.

Q: What would a problem child in that society do?

MBENNA: Back in high school, it was someone who teased others a lot, fought, disrespected others' problems and feelings, no respect for older people, drank, cussed, had sex, stole, and smoked. I think the main thing she worried about with us was the "sex/pregnancy" thing because it was human nature that they could not control for long. For the other bad things, I believe they knew they had instilled great values within us so they did not worry about us becoming problem children in regards to those things. They just did not want me to get pregnant at an early age because it would limit my opportunity to succeed in life.

Q: I was going to say, this really stopped an awful lot of young women, particularly the poor background, from going anywhere, because they got pregnant too soon.

MBENNA: You are correct. As mentioned earlier, it stopped my mom from succeeding. She got pregnant in 9th grade and had to quit school -- a great mind but not allowed to attend school. And you know what, my mother used to tell us, especially in high school when she felt us sweet on a boy? She would say, "Leave that boy stuff alone because if you get pregnant, I will tie you to that oak tree out back and beat the baby out of you and I mean it." She meant it!

Q: Oh boy.

MBENNA: Yes, she was that determined that we make something worthwhile of ourselves, even if it meant beating the baby out of us.

Q: My wife was a teacher of English as a second language. She found it was disheartening to see so many of these underprivileged young, particularly Hispanic girls, get pregnant, when they had so much potential.

MBENNA: I bet it was. That is why I love my parents so much. They may have been poor and not formally educated, but they were wise and intelligent. They knew things were changing in the black/white world and it would open more doors for black kids. They knew that if they could just keep us on the straight and narrow, we could take advantage of those opportunities, even if it meant just going in the military to become a chef, a nurse, a mechanic, etc. They just had to keep our mind and body focused on the right things in life even though we (I) thought they were just cruel to us.

Q: Now, when you got to high school, did they have trips or anything like that?

MBENNA: The school offered many field trips, including to basketball and football games, historical sites in neighboring counties, museums, etc. We went to the ones where the school took us and back during school hours. No night or weekend trips. Correction, I went to one overnight trip with the Beta Club in Atlanta and you know what? I was almost molested there -- my mom was right. Even when on educational trips, the potential for bad things to happen was present.

Q: Did you do anything on the military base?

MBENNA: I worked at the library on the military base. Right after high school and before I went off to college, my sister and I worked as waitresses at one of the night clubs there but not for long.

Q: Was it Army?

MBENNA: Yes, it was an army base -- Fort Stewart, GA.

Q: Where were your sisters going to college?

MBENNA: Edna Mae went to a mixed-race community college in Brunswick, Georgia, to become a nurse. Brunell, the sister immediately next to me went to Albany State College in Albany, GA. She did not finish, but got married instead. She has been a USPS worker since marriage.

Q: Was your mother behind them pushing?

MBENNA: Oh, yes! Oh, yes! She did and still is with a big stick. She insisted they come home often, and when they came they had to abide by her house rules -- no friends, no staying out or up late, lots of studying, and just a few minutes on the telephone. She did not allow any of that college stuff to take place back in our hometown. We had to behave, dress appropriately, and go to church when home from school. Aside from giving encouragement, she pushed by keeping us straight all the way through college or until we found an alternative like marriage.

Q: Was it sort of in the great plan, or something, that you were going to college too?

MBENNA: Yes. It was either the military or college (or marriage) for us. It was understood that we would be successful and since I did not want to go to the military and did not want to get married right away, college was it. I knew I was going to go to college but I wasn't sure how to ensure I had the money for tuition. I did not ask my sisters the procedures for getting financial aid when they were going through the process -- I was too busy studying. Normally the school counselor would guide you, right? Well, our school counselor, coincidentally who was also African American, told me in a scornful manner that my parents were too poor to send another one to college. I did not bother my

mom with the nonsense from the counselor since this person also was a member of our church and I did not want any ill feelings. Besides, money wasn't going to stop me from making my dreams come true. So, I waited until my sisters came home from college to help me. In the interim, I asked schoolmates who I heard were going to college how to go about applying for financial aid. With all that collaboration, I applied and received more than enough funds to attend college. You can't hold a good girl from Holmestown down. (laughter)

Q: Did people tell you, "Oh, you can't go here, you're a woman, you're black, you know, in other words, naysayers"? Did you have that?

MBENNA: No, I do not recall. You see, no one, even those who had made it, wanted to hold me back. They just thought the odds were against me and I did not have a chance. The school counselor, of all people, was the exception. I believe, in general, the counselor's entire family thought they were above everyone, but not just poor struggling family. Everyone else, from my recollection, in the family, community, and school were proud to know that a poor black girl like me wanted and was determined to get to college.

Q: Well then, when did you graduate from high school?

MBENNA: June 1978.

Q: Obviously a much more difficult future faced you than a white, relatively wealthy, kid. First, had you been working much outside of the farm?

MBENNA: Some. I worked at a café for a Jewish family -- Bob and Marge's Café, in Hinesville. I also worked at the library on the military base, at my high school (Bradwell Institute) during the summers as a janitor and then a clerk, on the military base as a waitress, and a babysitter at several white churches in Hinesville. Yes, that is one thing my mom allowed us to do if we had the opportunity -- work, work, work.

Q: Well, you graduated from high school, then what happened?

MBENNA: I went off to college.

Q: The name of the college was...

MBENNA: I did my first year at Albany State College, a predominately black college in Albany, Georgia. My sister Brunell was attending the same college as a sophomore. After a year, I transferred to a predominately white college called Georgia Southern College in Statesboro, GA. It is now called Georgia Southern University. I guess it moved up in the world.

Q: What was it like? How did you find it when you went there?

MBENNA: At Georgia Southern College?

Q: Yes.

MBENNA: Well, let me say this about my first college. It was quite an experience and just what I expected. I was free and did not know what to do with myself. I had my own tour guide -- my sister. The course work was extremely easy so I made excellent grades. I made lots of black friends. However, most of all I was astonished by so much black brain power all in one location. I felt competitive and wanted to have the biggest brain of all. I was well on my way to studying harder and scoping out the competition when my mom decided that I should move to Georgia Southern College, nearer home. You see, she used to call me a lot at Albany and I was rarely in the room. So, she thought that with all the good grades I was making and all the "assumed" partying I was doing, the college was not that challenging. However, I really think she believed that I was partying a lot and with all those black testosterone floating around at that black college, I would end up pregnant and a failure. (laughter) So, she insisted that I transfer and I did. To be honest, I was a little player at Albany with several boys admiring me, and I also had my real boyfriend, Andre Latta from New Jersey, who was stationed in the military in Germany. I met him at Fort Stewart when I worked at the Library. Anyhow, I was out of my dorm room a lot. I was in class, studying in the library or with college mates, admiring the campus, in bible study, or at sorority events scoping them out to determine which one I would join when the time came. I do not recall any straight out going to clubs and hanging out smoking, drinking, dancing, and doing those types of bad things. Anyhow, again, my mom did what she thought was best and I thank her for it. She certainly was perceptive and wise back then.

Georgia Southern, it was different in so many ways. I was intimidated initially. My roommate Margaret was a white girl from the Atlanta area. She was very nice and just as smart as I was. She seemed to have no hang-ups about sharing a room with me. She was a pre-med student. I really liked her. Eventually, I made other friends at the school. I liked Georgia Southern because it was closer to home and my family visited me a lot. I went home more often than I did when in Albany. It took me only an hour to get home from Georgia Southern, but about four hours from Albany State. Most of all, I liked going there because there was not a lot of competition there. The black folks that went there had money or family fame. For instance Otis Redding, the black singer from Georgia, his kids attended there. There were lots of white and black uppity students, but I simply ignored them because while they were being uppity and looking superb and speaking posh, I was studying like crazy because I was determined to make my own fame. Also, in the end, we were all students and sat in the same desks and got the same homework.

Q: When you say uppity, what do you mean?

MBENNA: Uppity students were those who wore the latest clothes and had a car, bike, or cool games. They wore jewelry and make-up, sweaters tied behind their back, got their hair fixed or cut in a barber/beauty salon, and got their nails done in a salon. In other words, they had money and were snobbish. At least until they got around me. I did not bow to them and did not act intimidated, even though I was. I think they realized that

their money and fame did not faze me, so they stayed away or approached me in a different way (like a normal person).

Q: What about the boys? How were they?

MBENNA: Oh the boys were great -- the white and blacks. They spoke to me and when they did I smiled and spoke back. I felt that some were afraid of me or did not know how to approach me. I was smart and very pretty, but I did not hang out too much or did not act snobbish. It seemed as if they were puzzled and could not figure me out. Anyhow, the boys were not as uppity as the girls and I knew many of them wanted me to be their girlfriend. My military boyfriend, Andre, was still in my life even though he was still stationed in Germany, so I could not get into anything serious. However, with the little “player” instinct in me, I did have a few tender moments with a few college boys, but my heart was with Andre, so I thought.

Q: Did you find your black colleagues sort of giving you a rough time because you were smart? I mean that's got to happen?

MBENNA: No, not really. I knew many were jealous because I had the looks and the brains and a great personality when they either had only one or two of these. Rarely did you find a college girl with all three and I had them all. I use to help some of the black college mates with their homework. No, I wasn't given a rough time. For the most part, I was admired (and respected) and just left alone, from my recollection.

Q: What about the faculty? Did you feel that any of them were singling you out as being the smart girl and pushing you a little harder?

MBENNA: Not really. However, one teacher did and I always liked her because she took me on trips around the world via her stories and the food she brought in to share with us. Others would not eat the food but I did. She told me that she liked that I was open to new experiences. She said because of that she saw me going far in life and I should consider travelling abroad when I get out of college. I never told her what I wanted to do and it shocked me that she saw the “travel” in me. She was of European descent. The other teachers were just teachers. I was not the smartest kid in the college so they did not treat me special or make comments specific to my goals and dreams. I was just a smart black girl.

Q: Did you sense that there were kids on campus who resented you being smart and tried to pull you down?

MBENNA: No, not really. Everyone in college back then was trying to make decent grades to graduate and have fun at the same time. I sensed that some wondered how a plain Jane like me was so smart coming from my background. I think they silently admired me, if anything.

Q: Did you have jobs at the college?

MBENNA: Yes, I worked in the French Language lab as a technical assistant. That was a great job, because I learned a little French. Anyhow, the money was good and I shared it with my mom, as usual.

Q: Any particular areas of studies you felt you really were expanding on?

MBENNA: Yes, I really was developing a passion for calculus. Not sure why, because others hated it, but I loved it. I had no problem spending hours on one calculus problem. When I got the answer I would jump up as if I were a cheer leader. I loved it. I think the love of math/calculus paved the way for me to enjoy my computer class.

Q: Did you realize, because you were in college really at the beginning of this, that this was really going to be something? I mean the fact that the computer was going to be such a powerful tool.

MBENNA: No, I just thought it was something new for folks with money to have in their house for their kids. I had no idea computers would grow so powerful and that the world would become reliant upon them. Nevertheless, I loved my programming class. Anything that was new and different, I wanted to be in on it and I gravitated to computers (I believe) due to my love of computation.

Q: Did you have a chance to play with the very early computers or was it something that was kind of observed?

MBENNA: We had computers in classes and in laboratories. That was my extent of playing with computers until I went out in the job force after college graduation.

Q: How about at home? Was life getting better, would you say or was it pretty much the same?

MBENNA: Only my baby brother was left at home and two nieces who came from their mom's house down the street to live with grandma (my mom). There were fewer mouths to feed so my parents' quality of life was improving. My mom had even purchased a vehicle, a big Chrysler New Yorker, for us kids to drive when we came home from college. My brothers who were in the military were sending money home and bringing nice souvenirs for us and the house. My family was slowly being looked at with status and not like the poor family on the block. College and military were changing our family's image for the best. Yes, things were getting better on the home front.

Q: How old is your mother?

MBENNA: My mother just celebrated her 90th birthday in December 2015.

Q: Was your father much in your life? Did his drinking isolate him from the family?

MBENNA: Of course, our father was in our lives. In my very early years, he travelled sometimes with the season and sometimes had to go where other types of work were in the neighboring counties, but when he wasn't working he came home. Granted, he hung out some with his drinking buddies, but at night he always came home. He wasn't the dominant parent so he was sort of in the background most of the time while my mother ran the show. He talked with us kids and was concerned about our well-being and education. We weren't deprived of not having a father figure around; no, not at all. Yes, he drank but we just got used to it. He wasn't a violent man, just enjoyed his drinks and sat and enjoyed his family and friends. My father came through if we really needed him. For instance, I wanted a bike during my last year in college because I had to move around a lot. When I asked him to buy me one, he took me to hardware store in Hinesville and bought me a shiny new red bicycle. I loved it and I loved him.

Q: What were you looking to do or be and were your colleagues pushing you on or holding you back?

MBENNA: I was looking to land a job with a big company, preferably an international one where I could travel, in the management or administrative field. My schoolmates were encouraging me and I was encouraging them to do well and land a good job. During that last year in college, our conversations were mostly about jobs, salary scale, marriage, children, and travel. Yes, a lot of dreaming and encouragement took place.

Q: Were any countries or areas particularly attractive to you?

MBENNA: No, not really. I knew a little about Korea and Thailand because my brothers had spouses from those countries. Every black person back then dreamed of Africa and I was not the exception. However, I wasn't so keen on Africa when an African student from Nigeria I was fond of for a short while told me that I was going to be his first wife of the many his tribe allowed him to have. So, Africa still intrigued me back then, but wasn't high on my list of places I wanted to live in.

Q: It wasn't your bag.

MBENNA: No, being a prize wife among several wives wasn't my cup of tea at all. Many wives were a new concept to me and after researching it and finding out that it was true, I decided that I would never marry an African. That was funny because I married an African man, from Tanzania, and we are happily married for 15 years this year. Also, as luck would have it, I did my research on his tribe and family before getting too involved. They believe in one marriage -- now, that was my man and cup of tea.

Q: Did you ever go into the military?

MBENNA: No, I never joined the military.

Q: Why not?

MBENNA: It wasn't for me. Even though I love the military and the people who serve our country, it wasn't for me. The travel portion attracted me back in the day, but not the fighting and being told when to eat, sleep, etc. College was best for me.

Q: When you graduated in 78, was it?

MBENNA: That's from high school. I graduated from college in 1982.

Q: 82. So, here you are, where are you going to go? What are you going to do?

MBENNA: Well, months before I graduated, I arranged with my brother, Rudolph, who was assigned to Fort Ord, California, to go and live with him and his Korean family. You see, I knew the opportunities were out west, so that is where I went -- west to California. I purchased my ticket the semester before I graduated and was saving money for this new life. I was ready to go and I did just that upon graduation. I left a week after graduating. I had no idea what I was going to do except work and make money to travel. I had no idea I would meet a man and get married there, at least not so soon after arriving, and not before I had my career up and running.

Q: How long were you married?

MBENNA: I've been married three times. My first marriage lasted about three years. My second lasted 11 months. The current and "last" marriage will reach 15 years this October.

Q: Did you find that marrying so soon was inhibiting you as far as career-wise?

MBENNA: Well, I didn't realize it at the time, but later on I did. I could have been way up the road. However, I look at it like this: if that very first marriage did not take place, my path may have been different and I may not be sitting here today as a retired U.S. Diplomat.

Q: Was he white or black?

MBENNA: He was black. Funny you should ask that because when I first went to California, I dated this white guy. Oh by the way, Andre and I split up the summer I graduated. Anyhow, this white guy was an Officer in the Army there at Fort Ord. We really liked each other. However, my brother Rudolph would not allow me to bring him to the house. He insisted that no white man was going to date his baby sister. So, he introduced me to a black man in his platoon who became my husband about a year and a few months later. Unfortunately, the marriage was doomed from the beginning. He did not understand my need to grow and develop. He only finished high school and then joined the military. He basically wanted me to be a housewife. He had no ambition himself nor wanted me to have any, and that was not what I signed up for in that marriage. So, in my heart I knew the marriage would not last.

Q: That must be a terrible thing for a young woman to be really very talented and then to have a guy who's not very talented. I mean, they feel challenged and it does all sorts of things to marriages, I suppose.

MBENNA: I would not say he wasn't talented. He was smart, had skills, etc. but he wasn't very ambitious. He just wanted me to be at home. I couldn't even go to the store without him wondering who I spoke to or what else did I do besides shopping. It was like being in my parents' house all over again. I was a grown black woman with a college degree and dreams, and I was not going to be sheltered and smothered. Also, by then I had a free spirit. I needed space, time, freedom, etc. Divorce was inevitable.

Q: Now what jobs were you doing?

MBENNA: My very first job was a temp job in Monterey, California. I was all dressed up in my red, white, and blue sailor dress to operate a switchboard at company. After an hour on the job, they let me go. (laughter) I could not handle the flood of incoming calls on the switchboard. I was not taught that in college. (laughter) They were nice about it. I was then sent to work as a salesperson in Monterey for Cambridge International Diet Company. After a few weeks there, Cambridge gave me a permanent salesperson position. I loved the people I worked with in that office and on the phone. Some of my clients were international and some were famous, so it was just what I needed to do to encourage me to follow my dreams. I felt alive!

However, after some months I applied for a government position on the military base to appease my spouse. Even though he told me to take a government job on the base so it would be easy to transfer it when he transferred from Fort Ord, I think he wanted me close to him so he could monitor my coming and going in the city where Cambridge was located. So, when I was called for my first civil service job at Fort Ord, I took it. I was an Administrative Clerk for the Staff Judge Advocate's office. It was awesome being around the lawyers and paralegals. I felt back on track even though I knew I had to work my way up to a substantive position in the civil service.

Q: So, what happened?

MBENNA: Well, I had a child, Michael. Shortly afterwards, my husband was transferred to the Sinai desert. He told me to move back to Georgia since my brother had already transferred to Panama. My sister-in-law was still in California, but my spouse did not want me to stay there with her since she was relatively new to the States. So, he went to the Sinai and I moved back to Georgia and moved in with my parents. I got a job at Fort Stewart, GA in Hinesville working for the Corps of Engineers in the administrative field. It was very boring, but at least I had a job.

Q: What happened when he completed his assignment in the Sinai? Where did you go next or did he get out of the military?

Next, he was assigned to Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, NC. I transferred my position to the Corps of Engineers at Fort Bragg. My spouse had changed that year we were apart -- for the worse. I knew that I had to accelerate getting out of the marriage so one day I said I had enough. I took my child and returned home to my parents in Georgia. It was a challenging time throughout the divorce, lots of fussing, fighting, no money, sick baby, parents nagging me, friends shunning me, etc. However, throughout that period, I knew I would get back on track with my life and career. That is when I got really in touch with my spirituality. I needed strength and getting closer to God gave it to me. My spouse refused to sign the divorce unless I left out any division of bills of property and I agreed to pay them all. I agreed and left the language out and he signed it. Hence the marriage was over inside of three years and I felt like a sparrow -- free and light! Unfortunately, I had no job, about 30k worth of bills, and a baby to care for. So, I applied to work at Fort Stewart, GA again. I knew it would take some time, so I took a job at a 7/11 type store called "Grab a Bag". It was humiliating to work there, but I knew it was temporary.

Q: What's a 7-11 store?

MBENNA: It's a convenience store. It was very humiliating for me because I felt like I went to California to soar, but landed right back in Liberty County, GA selling gas and beer. Even though I had applied to return to Fort Stewart to work, I needed a way out of out of Liberty County again. So I applied and was accepted to the University of Georgia to get my Masters. My sister Edna said she would raise Michael while I was attending the University. By then, being a parent had set in and I did not want to leave my son behind. Coincidentally, before I made the decision I was offered a position at Fort Stewart as a Management Assistant. I took it and felt relieved because even though I wanted my Masters, I needed money and needed to be close to my son since his father was gone.

Q: So you never got your masters?

MBENNA: No, I made several attempts through the years, but as my career took off in the Foreign Service, I did not see the value of it, except for the fact that I had a Masters. I saw how I could move up in the ranks in the Foreign Service without a Masters, so I concentrated on doing my job very well for the Department of State. Actually, I am glad I was called for the civil service position because it was the beginning of my path to join the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, then what happened then?

MBENNA: Once I was making real money again, I moved out of my parents' house which gave me more freedom to come and go and enter the dating scene again. Also, it was during this time I applied for about 50 government jobs outside of GA to get back on track in regards to leaving Liberty County. The Foreign Service was one of them, even though I did not realize what the Foreign Service was. I just applied. Anyhow, now being out of my parents' house, I started dating again. I met a very nice soldier named Reginald Wells from Pascagoula, Mississippi who I fancied. About a year or less later, we were married. Actually, we got married the same week I took a job as a Payroll Clerk (and

eventually moved into a Computer Assistant) position at Kings Bay Submarine Base in southeast Georgia. That's how I got into the computer field and started really loving it. It was hard getting jobs at that base and in general, but sometimes you are blessed to get a position in strange ways. I had recently joined the Order of the Eastern Star. To my luck I was wearing my Eastern Star ring when I went to HR at Kings Bay to apply. This young black man who I spoke with in HR was a part of this affiliation and saw my ring. The rest was history and I started working at the submarine base a month later.

Q: What is the Order of the Eastern Star?

MBENNA: The Order of the Eastern Star is a Freemasonic body of women based on teachings from the Bible, but is open to people of all religious beliefs. They are the sisters to the Freemason Order for men. I joined based on a neighbor recommending me to the Order. He said the organization could connect me to good people along the way in my career. I went to less than three meetings in Savannah, GA, after joining and decided to call it quits. It was within that three meetings timeframe that the Kings Bay encounter with the Freemason brother happened. Shortly afterwards, I just forgot about being an Eastern Star person and started living my life. I truly believed the power of the organization scared me -- getting a job because you are affiliated with a group was too much to conceive for this small town girl.

Q: So, tell me about the second marriage.

MBENNA: Reggie was a soldier, as I previously mentioned. He was a true southerner. He had good old southern values and stuck with them. He did not believe in the woman making more money than the spouse and did not believe in the wife being in the streets too much. He was truly backwards and did not realize times were changing and women were moving fast in the social and professional scene within and outside of marriages. He was over the top with me being away from the house if it wasn't at the job or church. He would allow me to go places but took extreme measures such as spitting in the dirt or pouring a glass of water in the dirt on a hot summer day and told me to be back before it dried. I was shocked, but I knew he was serious and rushed home. When he spit on the ground the first time and told me to be back before it dried is when I realized I was in another bad marriage. Again, I felt constraint and a bit scared for my life. What if I was not back before the spit dried? Oh Lord. I thanked God that within the less than 12 months I was married to him, I was invited/offered and accepted a position within the Foreign Service. I truly believe the Foreign Service saved me from something horrible in that marriage.

Q: What sort of job were they offering?

MBENNA: I had applied for the Support Communications Officer (SCO), an IT based position. This is what they offered me.

Q: You had one child?

MBENNA: Yes. Michael James Harris, Jr.

Q: On the civil service side, how did you enter the Foreign Service? Did they put you in a class when you joined?

MBENNA: Once they offered me the position and I accepted, the Department of State HR team worked with the Kings Bay Submarine Base HR team to move me from civil service to Foreign Service (FS). The most important thing about the transfer was the retention of my pay level instead of starting at the bottom of the Foreign Service pay scale. Once I got to Washington and in-processed, yes, they put me in a class.

Q: Was there an entry class?

MBENNA: Yes, there was a class. After the first few weeks of in-processing, I was sent off to Warrenton, Virginia, to the communications school. I stayed for about four months learning all I needed to know about the job I was going to be doing overseas in our embassies.

Q: How were the school and the students out there at the school in Warrenton, VA?

MBENNA: The school was a bit isolated, but very impressive and conducive to learning. I learned a lot. They got down to minute details in the class. No more skimming the top as they do in college. It was all about being ready to do your job the minute you walk in the Embassy. I also had fun with my classmates/colleagues, which were mostly white male. I made lifelong friends during those initial months of training. I recall looking around at the school one day and realizing that I was the only black female and one of just a few blacks in the school. I felt so proud and felt that I had made humongous progress in my career and life.

Q: What was it like in Warrenton, Virginia?

MBENNA: The town of Warrenton was slow paced and I loved it -- sleepy in nature. It reminded me of being back in Liberty County, Georgia. A big plus is that it was a beautiful town with natural beauty and some of the friendliest people I had ever met. This was the right place for technical people to learn. I found little to no distraction in Warrenton, at least not back then.

Q: Yes, well I would think that support communications (Information Technology, as you described it) would not have been a field which had been particularly attractive or that African-Americans men and women were particularly pushing towards at least you don't think of it.

MBENNA: You are correct. There weren't a lot of African Americans in the IT field back then, and especially not black females. Back then most of the IT people came from military background, Navy in particular. With that said, not a lot of black women were joining the Navy. I am not sure why, maybe being on the high seas for so long was not

that attractive to them. So, out of those few who joined the Navy and retired or got out, only a few probably knew about this great opportunity. I also assume that for many who did know about the Foreign Service, they had had enough of the regimented life and just want to go back to their black communities or just do something less regimented. That is my personal view on it. All in all, I was just happy to be there and quite impressed to have been the only black and only female in my support communications officer entry class.

Q: Good heavens. Where were the others coming from? Do you have any feel for where, what their background was?

MBENNA: The rest were all non-black men with one of Spanish and one of Filipino descent -- the rest were whites. Their backgrounds were a mixture of the military, business owners of IT related products/services, government/civil service, and private sector workers.

Q: What were computers doing when you started out? What were they being used for?

MBENNA: Computers were on the desktops. Not every desktop, but they were fairly plentiful. We had shared computers for personal use at Warrenton, but each of us had our own computer in the classroom. In the private sector, computers were being used for airline ticketing, cashiering, main frame processing and data storage, etc. Not much personal computing as we know it now was being done on a wide-scale basis. So, I was excited that my job entailed working with computers and on a daily basis.

Q: When was this, when you started in Warrenton?

MBENNA: June 1989.

Q: Were you and your colleagues excited about getting out in the field and were you thinking about changing to another profession later on?

MBENNA: Oh yes, we were excited to get to our overseas assignments. I personally felt very blessed. To get to travel around the world (after I realized I was going to be working abroad and not in the DC all my career) and working on computers (the newest thing in the world) made me feel like God had personally touched me and forgiven me of all my sins. How could someone raised so poor who had experienced so much disappointment in life and marriage at an early age be so resilient and bounce back so very high. Yes, I was asking "why me" a lot. I loved the Foreign Service and my field. I knew of the other positions in the Foreign Service, but I did not think they would bring me more joy than the field I was in. So I had no desire to move out of it later on, and I did not. I joined as an IT professional and retired as an IT professional.

Q: Once you were out in the field, there surely must have been some other types of jobs you were interested in?

MBENNA: Well, since my major in college was Administration and Management, I was attracted to the work those type of people did in the Foreign Service. The HR field was interesting and I tried to cross over only once but when I did not make it, I was relieved since I knew it wasn't what I really wanted to do. Then, as I progressed and became a manager of IT operations, I was called upon to act as management officer for the embassies on numerous occasions. I found it exciting since it gave me experience in managing all the support fields, to include IT from a big picture perspective. I never tried to cross over because while that type of work was interesting, I was purely a geek who craved IT. Actually, I did one stint later in my field as a Management Officer. It was quite exciting but boring at the same time. So, I returned to my exciting IT field.

Q: Where did they send you on your first assignment?

MBENNA: They sent me to Manila, Philippines. Actually, they initially told me I was going to Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). However, when my assignment officer heard of my pending divorce and that I would soon be a single parent, he came to speak to me and told me that he was recommending that I be sent to a more family friendly post like Manila. I was not very happy about it. He went on to tell me that Congo was about to have a nasty civil war and if I went I would not be able to take my child. He said he knew of my separation from my spouse so he thought Manila would be a better deal for me. He said there would be military guys to date, I could take my child and find reasonable and good household help, and that it was also an interesting period in the Philippines history. I dubiously looked at him. He went on to say that I was the top person in my training class and he was afraid that if I went to DRC with all that was going on there, I may become disenchanted and leave the Foreign Service, thus it would be a loss for the Department of State. I said, ah, ha, he is stroking me because he knows I like to be on top. Anyhow, I tried to smile at him and I recall him giving me a big hug and pat on the back and saying, "Vella, you'll thank me later." I do thank him.

Q: You know, that's quite impressive that he was really thinking about your well-being as well as the Department's.

MBENNA: He was a great CDO. I am not sure we have those types of caring CDO like this guy -- Manny Valdez was his name. I think he is working as a WAE now at the Department.

Q: So you went to the Philippines and you were there from when to when?

MBENNA: Late 1989 to 1991.

Q: What was your job?

MBENNA: I was a support communications officer (SCO). I did a lot of things to include processing telegrams, inventory management, equipment maintenance, customer service, etc. Being an SCO was quite a handful. It was quite a busy time in Manila and I loved every second of it there. I learned a lot on that first tour.

Q: So many of the communicators at an embassy are, at least back in my era, going back to the time of the Roman legions, but anyway, communicators were somewhat set apart at an embassy and tended to be former military men and they worked odd hours and they didn't really mix terribly well.

MBENNA: That is what I heard when I joined and I also saw some of the isolation of communicators at my first few assignments.

Q: Because they were ex-military and isolate, drinking and womanizing were prevalent. It actually became a security problem because foreign intelligence services would throw young girls at them and often tried to coerce them for information. This is kind of how we perceived it at the time. But how did you find it?

MBENNA: The colleagues I worked with in the Philippines were great and honorable. I believed all of them came from a Navy or other military background. They worked hard and enjoyed their family and free time. What I did find is that because SCOs worked in an out of the way place in the facility, they were forgotten and not included in a lot of things, not even functions within the Embassy at times. Thus, folks in the lime light of the embassy community often mistake SCOs for being hermits and having something to hide.

Q: Well, the Philippines, this is true up through the political, economic, and any rank you have, sex was a real problem because there are a lot of extremely attractive young ladies who wanted the connection to an American. I know on the consular side, we've had problems over the years, usually when you get right down to it, it's sex and for sex you hand out visas or something. Was that a problem?

MBENNA: I had no idea about sex for visas. Actually, it was not until much later in my career I heard about this type of corruption. I thought anyone who worked in such a prestigious position would never put their career on the line for such petty things.

Q: How old was your son by this time?

MBENNA: He was about six years old.

Q: So, old enough to go to kindergarten?

MBENNA: Yes, kindergarten.

Q: How was he adapting to this life?

MBENNA: He was adjusting very well. We lived on a compound and there were lots of military folks and their families, who worked at the embassy. He had a best friend called Hennessey who lived on the compound with his family. Also, I had an African American boyfriend who worked at the embassy. This guy sort of acted as a de facto dad for a while

to make our family seem whole. Mike had a Yaya (nanny) who he really enjoyed. He had it all and I think adjusted to his new life very well.

Q: So how did you find the job?

MBENNA: Oh, I thought the job was fantastic. It was easy and what wasn't easy I learned fast. I got an award for doing a fantastic job. I loved the job and the Foreign Service and the Philippines.

Q: It's great to have that experience at the beginning.

MBENNA: Yes, it definitely was. Actually, I had the experience throughout my career -- a few bumps here and there, but all in all a great experience in every country. I know many people who have had bad experience at the beginning and just left or became a very difficult person to work with. The first assignment really does set the tone for the rest of one's Foreign Service career, or at least it did for me.

Q: What sort of things, now that you were a genuine Foreign Service type, you were learning about the Philippines? I mean, were you taking an interest in the country and things outside of your job?

MBENNA: I was learning things I probably would have never known about the Philippines if I had not joined the Foreign Service. For instance, I did not know we had an air force base there. Also, I did not know the history between that country and the U.S. I found out when a Filipino friend told me her grandfather was getting a U.S. government check. When I asked why he was receiving it she told me that he had fought for the U.S. in the war. Amazing! Also, I was astounded to know of a female president. I never heard of such a thing and felt proud to be a woman, even though she was not the president of my country. Yes, my eyes were being opened to the world and how the U.S. interacted with other countries around the globe.

Q: Did you make any Filipino friends?

MBENNA: Yes, I did. One can't leave the Philippines without making a Filipino friend. Anna Del Rosario became a good friend. She was our office secretary. She showed me around and introduced me to her family and friends. She was an attractive and awesome girl. We kept in touch for years, but over the past ten years we have not communicated. I wonder what has happened to her. Last I heard, she had married and moved to Australia. Also, I enjoyed a temporary and very short close relationship with a Filipino guard. He was very handsome and nice, but then this African American guy who worked at the embassy came along that I was smitten with. The Filipino guy had to go. I also had a few professional Filipino friends who showed me the country and how the high society folks lived. We did not hang out much, but when we did, I was always intrigued that there was so much wealth and at the same time, so much poverty in the country. I did not keep in touch with them after I departed.

Q: Who was the ambassador there in the Philippines when you were there?

MBENNA: It was Ambassador Nicolas Platt. You know his son is a famous actor now -- Oliver Platt. He would hang out with us young diplomats sometimes when he visited his parents. Nice family and very nice and supportive ambassador to his team.

Q: How about the echelon of the Administrative/Management section who were your supervisors? Did you find them supportive and all?

MBENNA: Oh, absolutely, very supportive. The management officer, I don't remember his name, but he was supportive. The chief of our section, back then called the Communications Programs Officer (CPO), was John Hughes and my immediate supervisor was Harold Spake. Both were outstanding guys who I respect very much. They were so nice to me and kept giving me more and more responsibility. I handled what they sent my way and what I struggled with, they helped me through it. They all liked me and wanted me to succeed in the Foreign Service. So, the training in Warrenton was good, but what kept me in the Foreign Service were my colleagues and their support in Manila, my first assignment. So, I was happy that my CDO went me to Manila. I truly do not know how I would have made it in Kinshasa.

Q: How long were you in the Philippines?

MBENNA: Two years.

Q: And then what happened?

MBENNA: My next assignment was Lima, Peru. It was a different experience because of the terrorist activities going on there -- the Shining Path.

Q: The Shining Path was Sendero Luminoso, right?

MBENNA: Yes, the famous Sendero Luminoso.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

MBENNA: Ambassador Anthony Quainton

Q: What were your duties?

MBENNA: As you know, in the Foreign Service if you are a Specialist, your duties do not change much country to country. However, you may do more or less of something or have one or two special items of equipment. In Manila we had Foreign Service technicians who fixed big things and did telecommunication installations. In Lima, we did not have those technicians and had to request visits for them from the U.S. So, when we did not have a lot of time to wait for a visit, I found myself on roof tops changing

radio antennas, troubleshooting telephone lines within the mainframe telephone room, etc. My duties in Lima were so much more than I expected and I loved it.

Q: How did you deal or live with this Shining Path threat over everybody? This must have been difficult.

MBENNA: We were taught how to practice safe security and there were areas we were warned to be on high alert if we just had to visit. It was this tour that I came to realize what the word “terrorized” meant. For example, during my first visit home to the U.S. since arriving in Lima, I was lying on my parent’s couch when a strong wind came and slammed the door shut very hard and loud. I jumped up and headed for the closet. When I realize it was just the door slammed, I felt pretty silly. The crazy thing about this is that while in Lima, I never reacted like that and I heard and experienced my share of explosions. I think I coped in Lima because my body was on high alert all the time, but when I was home on the couch in safe USA, I was relaxed. So when I heard the slam something triggered inside of me as if I was hearing a blast for the very first time.

Q: Did you go down to the marketplace and things like that?

MBENNA: Yes, we went to the marketplace, stores, hotels, restaurants, discos, etc. There were some permanent off-limits places, but all in all, we could go to almost any place we wanted to within reason. We had to practice safe security like being vigilant of our surroundings, letting someone know where you were going, carrying our radios to call Post One (the U.S. Marines who served in the Embassy) if we ran into trouble, etc.

I recall one night my colleague and I wanted to go out dancing. So, we went to a disco downtown. It was crowded and jumping. We had just started enjoying ourselves when all of a sudden there was an explosion next door. Folks scrambled to get out of there and so did we. We jumped in our car and headed home. On another occasion, I was on my way to work when I heard a big blast and my car rocked. I looked back and saw this building crumbling. I kept on driving. After a while, I just got used to it and prayed that neither my son nor I would become a casualty.

Q: That was a good attitude and an admirable one as a diplomat. Did you ever think that this is not what I signed on for as a diplomat?

MBENNA: Not really. During our overseas briefing seminar (SOS) I recalled seeing films of diplomats and military assassinations and other acts of terror against U.S. interests. So, even before going on my first assignment, I knew at that moment that it would be dangerous as well as exciting. However, the danger side of it did not make me doubt what I had signed up for -- it made the career choice even more exciting. Back during that SOS training is when I realized that there is nothing “only” good in life. There has to a downside to everything. The danger element of being a diplomat was the downside of my career.

Q: Wow, any more close brush with death there?

Yes, I will share three more: I was at a social with my friends when I was recalled to process a night action cable. I had had a few drinks but I clearly knew that I was not the duty communicator. Nevertheless, I responded by going to the Embassy in my vehicle. I assumed my colleague on duty could not be reached. I could have ignored it, but I knew we were living in dangerous times and the recall would not have been initiated if it wasn't an emergency and time was of the essence. All the guards knew me and my car because I went in a lot during non-working hours. However, that night, I was asked for my badge and I jokingly asked in Spanish, Why? He said something in Spanish back at me and I rolled my window down all the way. That is when he pulled his gun and pointed it at me. I sobered it in an instance and said in Spanish that I was sorry and let me get my badge. I was shaking until I left the embassy that night. I never joked around again. That was scarier than the explosion next to the night club.

Next, I had brush with death via cholera. I love ceviche and ate it anywhere that sold it. I figured the lemon and vinegar would kill the germs so it did not matter where I bought it from. It did not always have to be the fancy ceviche places downtown. So, while on a beach out of town with my son, I had ceviche. Within hours I was in knots. Immediately, we headed back to town and just in time. The profuse diarrhea and vomiting started. Anything I ate came out so I resorted to eating just very cold watermelon. After a few days of the same, I knew I had to go to the embassy health unit. When I did, they said I had contracted something official Americans rarely caught: cholera. They gave me some pills to take right then and a few to take later. Within a few days, I had the Department of State medical unit, CDC, and the Navy medical research team in Peru calling me to ask how I contracted it, how I felt, etc. Also, I was due to go home on vacation, but the medical unit said that I had to wait for a while. They also said what kept me alive, because normally folks die from dehydration pretty quick with cholera, is the intake of the watermelon. Thank God for watermelon. I never want cholera again. I could barely see when the attacks occurred. That was a close brush with death.

Another one was a close call for me and my son. Our house was on a busy street corner. The Peruvians did not drive extremely fast. So when I returned home from carrying my son to the airport to go home for the summer and found my block fence down and a car literally stuck in my house, I got weak and thought the worse -- an act of terror. A tree was knocked down in my front yard, too -- the tree my son would have been in if I had not taken him to the airport. He used to climb that tree and sit in it to watch the traffic and read his books. Also, if he was in the tree, I would have been sitting on the balcony off the room where the car was stuck. So, it would have been a double death or injury for my family. Come to find out after the security investigation, someone who was speeding had lost control after swerving to avoid hitting someone.

So, my assignment to Peru was short, but with the potential to be deadly. God was with me for sure.

Q: Gosh, scary stuff. Now, did you find you were well-integrated as far as with colleagues in the embassy?

MBENNA: No, I still felt the separation within the Embassy.

Q: I would imagine so.

MBENNA: While I was on that assignment, the SCOs were hearing rumors about changing our image and our title so we would not seem like the “help”. It was in hopes of us feeling like a part of the embassy team and the rest of the embassy team accepting us as equal colleagues like they did each other. We were all American Diplomats abroad and one should not feel more important than the other. This was the image I believe the rumor of change was about.

Q: Were the computers moving more towards storage and information? Were you involved with just communication or did you start doing other things in the embassy?

MBENNA: Computers were storing and processing info. We had the big work horse called WANG back then. There were upgrades that made WANG better, but all in all it wasn't the personal computers that were about to hit us in the future.

Q: Were you getting involved with the analyzing of data at all?

MBENNA: No, that was not my job. However, if information or data analyzation was necessary to understand new computers, systems, communications, or related concepts, I did it. My job was to ensure the information/data was available and protected so the officers and/or other specialists could analyze it for reporting purposes or whatever they did with it.

Q: Was the embassy moving ahead at the same pace business was with communications or did you feel like you were sort of lagging behind?

MBENNA: I have two answers. In the two countries I had worked, I believe the embassy was far ahead of the local government and business, from what I saw. As far as businesses in the United States, I saw computing equipment in businesses like airlines, travel companies, restaurants, banking, etc. that did not look like the ones used at the embassy. So, I assumed they were advancing, too, but the Department of State had special computing equipment due to the nature of its work.

Q: Where did you live?

MBENNA: I lived in a lovely villa in a part of Lima called Monterrico. It was quiet and with beautiful homes and lot of nice trees and flowers.

Q: Did you feel under threat?

MBENNA: Sometimes, but again I blocked it out because I knew I couldn't do anything about it. It was the career I chose and it was exciting and dangerous during that period in Peru.

I recall being on the roof of the Ambassador's residence installing a radio antenna with one of my local Peruvian staff. It was an awesome view and a beautiful morning. When completed, we returned to the Embassy and found that a lot of folks were in the safe haven. My colleague hugged me and said he was so very glad to see me alive. I asked what happened and he said there was an explosion at our Ambassador's residence. I told him that it could not be because I just left the Ambassador's residence. He told me that it definitely was our Ambassador's residence it and was confirmed by the security folks that it just happened within 20 minutes ago. The distance between the residence and the embassy wasn't far so it must have happened as soon as we left. Yes, I heard an explosion, but since it was common in the city to hear explosions, I did not give it a second thought and definitely did not think it was the house I just left and was on its roof. I was shocked and thanked God my life was spared. Later, as I got to know more about the Shining Path, I discovered that they were not fond of killing women and children. So, thanks be to God I was a woman and they possibly waited until I got off the roof -- it may not have been the real reason, but it makes me feel good and blessed to think it was.

Q: Well, then, where did you go after Peru?

MBENNA: After Peru, I went to Bonn, Germany. I only did one year in Peru because the Shining Path got so bad that the embassy went to authorized departure. I did not volunteer but when there was news a day or so later that an unexploded device was found at my son's school, my management officer told me that I had to go. That was just a year into my assignment. So, sad as I was about leaving, I was relieved that neither me nor my son were no longer in danger. When several higher ups, to include my CPO from Manila who was assigned to Bonn, heard I was going in evacuation status, I was heavily pursued. Some of the places were Honduras, Fort Lauderdale, Mexico, San Salvador, and of course Bonn. I was not going to other places with issues, so I accepted the offer from my old boss in Bonn. Also, it would have been nice to work for him again.

Q: So this would probably be a good place to stop here.

MBENNA: Yes, I feel drained.

Q: So, we will resume the next time in Bonn, Germany.

MBENNA: Yes, let me just tell you one else I forgot to mention about Peru. It was in Lima I felt like I wasn't given opportunities because I was different -- a female and/or black. I never pursued it or rocked the boat since I was still new to the Department and unaware of recourses available, but I did know it did not feel good being an American overseas where I thought there would be no biases. I was mistaken. One instance was when my current CPO placed a white male in charge in his absence vice me. I was senior to the white male colleague and I knew more and got along with all in the Embassy very

well, including him (the boss). I could not think of any other reason other than me being black or female, as to why I was not left in charge. I was hurt and felt that it had to be because I wasn't like him (the boss), a white male. I kept quiet and kept my pain inside.

Q: Was it because you were a woman or black?

MBENNA: In hindsight, I think it was because I was black. We had another female in the office, a white female. She was OK, but not as good as the male and I. If the white woman was good, I am sure she would have been the acting and not me. To top that, I had more time in the Foreign Service than they did. So if you add in longevity and experience, I truly should have been left in charge. On top of what was happening to me as far as discrimination in the office, my son was having his own experience with prejudice and discrimination at his school. Unbeknownst to me at the time, he was being isolated at school by his white and Peruvian colleagues because his skin color was black. He said (and the teacher confirmed after I had to dig it out of her) that some of the kids would call him monkey with a tail. It explained why Michael never wanted to go out with me without me insisting. It was always a struggle to get him to go places. The white teacher said that it was harmless teasing among kids that age. I was furious with that comment and truly believe that that incident scared my son for life. Since then, he has been very conscience of his skin color, even up to today.

Q: Well, it's still going on in the Foreign Service. Were you aware of any sort of women's movement in the Foreign Service because so much of this had centered on foreign service officers, political, economic, and that sort of thing.

MBENNA: Yes, it is still going on and I saw my share as an equal employment opportunity counselor through the years. As far as the women's movement, I was not aware of serious struggles until later in my career. I met a political officer in Kinshasa who was very smart and articulate. I admired her so much. However, I could tell that folks did not care much for her, but she kept on smiling and doing her job and a good one at that, in my opinion. She and I talked a lot, especially when her colleagues irritated her. Finally, she told me about how she and a bunch of other women had to sue their way into the Department of State Foreign Service. I was shocked and had no idea one could do that. When I expressed my ignorance to her, she told me, "Girlie, you better keep your eyes and ears open as to what is happening around you -- some acts are subtle and some are blatant towards us." She went on to say that because of women like her, the road was paved for women such as myself to get into the Foreign Service easier. What she said sent chills through my body and ignited an awareness in me as to the struggle women (and blacks) had and still have to get in and remain in the Foreign Service. It was when I said to myself, I am American and have the right to serve my country in the Diplomatic Corps, so why should I behave as if I am white. I am a face of America, a black female face. That is when I did not feel embarrassed if my southern drawl came out, stopped perming my hair, and stopped feeling embarrassed when I wore my African dresses to work. I just did my thing in accordance with Department of State regulations and did not care about what others thought or said -- it was my Foreign Service, too. That conversation with her was the most enlightening conversation I ever had about life in the

Foreign Service up to that point. What she said changed how I “did” the Foreign Service and it made my experience much more fun, rich, and rewarding.

Q: So, we'll pick this up next time.

Today is the 18th of February, 2016. Vella, you're off to Bonn, Germany. How long were you there?

MBENNA: Actually, probably about seven months.

Q: Now, you sort of screwed up your face. I take it that it wasn't your favorite spot?

MBENNA: No, it was not. It was one cold place, literally and figuratively speaking. The job wasn't very interesting. The discrimination continued. It just wasn't my cup of tea and I almost left the Foreign Service out of Bonn.

Q: What was your job?

MBENNA: I was still in the communications field; however, my duties were limited to minimal ones -- processing telegrams and copying most of the time -- and opportunities for professional development were non-existent.

Q: Wow! That was something else. With it being a big embassy, like London, there probably were an awful lot of telegrams to process.

MBENNA: Yes, we did -- A LOT! I mean someone had to process the telegrams and do the copying, but not the same people all the time. We had lots of experienced people there, even more experienced than me, but only one or two were assigned the bulk of the substantial work. I guess the supervisor did it to get them promoted since they were his friends. I did not mind processing traffic or copying, but it was all the time and the stress of doing this and the anger of being treated unfairly was a bad combination that made me know I had to leave sooner than later.

Q: Did your supervisor give you more duties? Did you ask for additional and substantive work? Was the supervisor open to suggestions or was it a no-discussion scenario?

MBENNA: It was quite obvious that the work distribution was skewed; nevertheless, I asked/begged for better work. It was not favorably heard. If anything, I believed he prayed for more cables to come in to keep me behind those machines and quiet. (Laughter) I even shared with him that my experience was vast and I had some technical skills picked up in Manila and Lima directly from State Department technicians. It still did not make a difference. So, no, he was not open for suggestions nor did he seem to care about how his staff felt. It was a bad situation and morale was the worse I had ever seen in the Foreign Service, at least mine was.

Q: Why did you not like what you were given to do?

MBENNA: It was a salt mine. You did what you were told by the immediate supervisor or his right hand man and kept your mouth shut. There was no discussion or rotation of duties that I recall. Most of my colleagues were old and waiting to retire, had a big family and were content, or with a medical clearance that limited them to places like Bonn. So, why in the heck was I there. Wow, I had made a bad decision but kept my mouth shut and did what I was told until it started affecting my health. I was stressed and the cardiologist told me that I had to leave the environment that was causing me the stress or I could have a heart attack. That is when I tried to get more duties because I knew that was the issue. When I saw that it was not going to happen, I started looking into how I could get out of the Foreign Service, go back to college for my Masters, and re-enter the Foreign Service later. Before my plan materialized, two volunteer cables came out for two assignments -- one for Guatemala and one for Beijing. A colleague, who was also not happy with the supervisor, and I decided to bid. I bid on Guatemala and he bid on Beijing. We went through the normal channels and lo and behold we got our assignments.

Q: What did the supervisor have to say about you wanting to leave?

MBENNA: Well, as you can imagine I was quite happy about the prospect of leaving. Then, the supervisor came back from a vacation in France to find two of his staff were leaving and all hell broke loose. He did not like the fact that we wanted out and had gone to the extent of requesting to leave, and especially while he was out of town. He read me the riot act and even threatened to call Washington to break my assignment to Guatemala. He really treated me with disrespect and for no good reason. In speaking to the colleague who got Beijing, I discovered that he got a simple slap on the wrist, but I got dragged through the mud like I was a criminal. Anyhow, he did call Washington, but guess who he spoke with? He spoke with CDO Valdez from when I was in training and who bragged about me being the best in my training classes. He gave me a call and asked what in the heck was going on. I could not tell him much because I was still in shock, but I told him that I really wanted that assignment. He told me not to worry, it was mine and the orders were coming very soon to get me out of there.

Q: What about living there?

MBENNA: Living there? Well, I didn't like that either. One, I was in a small apartment and coming from Manila and Peru with a lot more living and entertaining space, I felt like I was living in a matchbox. Also, the people in Bonn had an aristocratic demeanor about them. They had a prejudice side to them in my opinion. I never heard racial slangs but the looks and service provided (or not provided) to me spoke more volume than spoken words. I think it was mostly Bonn because when we went to Frankfurt the climate of the people felt much more relaxed and we got good service. (laughter.) Nevertheless, I needed to leave the country because I was not happy and it was affecting my health. I did not even like the beer and sausages everyone raved about.

Q: I imagine so.

MBENNA: Let me mention something else about why I did not like Germany. The local folks in Bonn did not like kids, it seemed. It was quite obvious they liked dogs more than kids. Now, can you imagine how we (my black son and I) were treated (or not treated) when we went to a restaurants and businesses? (laughter/shaking of head.)

Q: How old was he?

MBENNA: He was about eight or nine. You know, I could not take him to certain restaurants because kids were not allowed, but guess what, dogs were. It wasn't a welcoming, friendly environment at all -- not towards me and definitely not towards my precious child. The whole assignment was a mess and just not welcoming.

Q: What did you do? I bet you started saying, "Get me the hell out of here, fast."

MBENNA: I spoke to the CPO after the conversation with the supervisor and told him about the call from my CDO. As I said previously, he was my previous section chief in Manila and the one who enticed me to come to Bonn. He claimed that he was not aware of the treatment. I told him not to intervene because there were already smart remarks being made that I was his girl. Girl, not as in girlfriend, but his girl because I was "smart" and would be an improvement to the office there in Bonn. That was probably the reason I was treated as such, I would hope so, but I truly believe it was my skin color and level of ambition. The CPO felt badly and told me to do what I needed to do because he wanted me to be happy and not leave the Foreign Service. Thus, I proceeded to my next assignment in Guatemala shortly after my orders arrived.

Q: Okay, so after about seven months in Germany, you were off to Guatemala. How long were you in Guatemala?

MBENNA: Oh, wow, not long enough! Three and a half years, my longest assignment in the Foreign Service.

Q: What was the situation in Guatemala when you got there? What year was it?

MBENNA: Actually, it was April 1994. It was tense in the country because the political situation was not good. A coup d'état occurred shortly after I arrived. Now, I knew why the CPO moved his departure date up quite a bit. Thus, I had to assume the role of chief of the section -- my first time ever and it was challenging, but very empowering. The current boss was supposed to leave much later after I arrived, but he was driving home from Central America to the U.S. So when it seemed like there really would be civil unrest in the country, he decided to leave much earlier. It was fine because it gave me much needed experience of being in charge of the entire section instead of sub-units of the sections as I was at previous posts, except Bonn of course -- I was the "help" there.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

MBENNA: It was Ambassador Marilyn McAfee. She was an extremely nice female. Actually, it was she who empowered me to not be hesitant about making decisions as a chief. Also, she made me start feeling as if I was truly a part of the Embassy vice just another communications officer. When I went to the hail and farewell at her house and shared, as a newcomer, the events that happened in previous countries where I served, she made a joke in front of everyone that disaster followed me and she hoped none followed me to Guatemala. It was a great ice breaker and made other folks know me. After that day, folks spoke to me and even started inviting me and my colleagues to parties and events. We were on the map there in Guatemala, thanks to that Ambassador.

Q: What was the living conditions like for you there?

MBENNA: Oh boy, it was quite nice. It was one of the few countries where you would go out and find your own place to live and the Dept. of State would give you a stipend to pay the rent. I believe it is still like that in Guatemala City. We stayed in a very nice duplex. We had German neighbors, can you believe that. I wanted to hate them, but they were so very nice. We did not become good friends, but we grew close over the years while in Guatemala. Michael was happy when they would go on trips because they would bring candy from the airport to him. Guatemala was naturally beautiful. They had beautiful and exotic flowers year round. My house had fresh flowers every day and lots of them.

Q: Well, what was the work like?

MBENNA: The work was very interesting. It was my first time, as I said, being in authority, even though I wasn't the assigned CPO for the embassy -- he was coming later. I was just acting. It was quite busy. There was a lot of stuff going on, not just with the political scene, but the drug scene as well. The embassy was large and I worked a lot. I was involved with a first-time type of satellite installation in Guatemala. It was quite impressive and I recall an article being in the bureau's paper about it and I was mentioned with a picture included with me and my colleagues standing near the dish. I had two guys, retired military, who worked for me and they were not that enthused to work for a woman, from what I saw. They read the newspaper a lot, had long lunches, talked a lot, etc. We got along and they were not disrespectful to me, but they did not always want to listen to me. However, in the end they always did what I wanted them to do -- I guess it was their military background. They just liked giving me a hard time. I recall placing labels on all the equipment with simple instructions nearby. It was something I always wanted to do so there would be no guessing during a crisis or if a temporary staff came in without a turnover. So, I came in on the weekend to do it. When one of the guys came in he told me to take them down because the guys were not stupid. Of course I did not, but that is when I realized that they had a problem working for me. Actually, through the years we kept in touch and even served at the same post together. We were not close friends, but things were much better than back in Guatemala.

Q: Did you find the distribution of work quite different than the distribution in Bonn?

MBENNA: Oh yes, absolutely. When my boss came he was very nice. Before he came I had already distributed the work fairly. The fussy guys had no complaints about that. So, the new boss just came in, tweaked a few things, and allowed me to continue to lead the communications center in the manner I saw fit. Yes, it was quite different than the boss and duties in Bonn. Also, it was warm and not freezing like Germany. (laughter)

Q: Well now, was your experience confined to communications or was it beyond -- assembling data, analyzing it, you know, other stuff?

MBENNA: No, I was not a part of analyzing data, just making data available. Yes, we assembled data as needed for the folks with the analyzing duties to utilize. We assembled current and archived information. Other than that, it was just the same type duties like my other assignments. Oh I forgot. I also served as acting CPO a lot. In that role, I attended management meetings and was involved with making high level decisions for communications at Post-level. I really liked being a CPO, even on a temporary basis.

Q: On the political side, now we'll talk drugs later, but on the political side, what were you seeing transpire as you did both work and live in Guatemala City?

MBENNA: Ummm. I wish I knew. Aside from the light coup d'état in 1994, I can't recall anything else so earthshaking happening on the political scene that would make me read or listen closer than beyond the norm. Actually, after the coup, I thought the country became quite boring but with a lot of fun things to do and see.

Q: Were there any threats against the embassy?

MBENNA: None that I was aware of. We had crimes, a lot of car theft and petty crimes - lots of them, but no threats against the embassy that I was aware of. I was victimized once while waiting in traffic. A pedestrian hit the back of my car and when I turned around to look, a man snatched my ray bans off my face, leaving a nice gash on my forehead for a while. Also, I am not sure if this was a setup or not against me being an American Embassy staff, but after working late in the afternoon on a Saturday and making a turn at a junction immediately after leaving the Embassy compound, a car came out of nowhere at a fast speed and struck my car on the passenger side. My car hit the wall and did some flips and landed all mangled up. I was lucky to have survived it. Ambassador MacAfee came to visit me at home (nice Ambassadors do that for their staff) and when she saw I was not scarred much, she said I was indeed a blessed lady because of surviving bad events at my previous post and now surviving such a bad accident in Guatemala. I really do not know what happened as to why the car slammed into me, all I know is that I was lucky to come out whole and alive.

Q: Did the drug problem intrude on your work or not?

MBENNA: Having a large DEA operation there impacted my work. We had additional equipment in our inventory to support their operation throughout the country. With that said, I use to fly out in small planes with no seats to provide support on a scheduled basis.

My colleagues went sometimes, too. It was quite frightening and I prayed like heck each time I got on the small aircraft to fly out. We used to land in the toughest spots and the shortest runways I had ever seen. I used to pray so hard in my heart until I swear the folks in the basket seats next to me heard. Those were scary times, but fun as well. I would do it all over again if I had the opportunity.

Q: What about life in Guatemala for you?

MBENNA: Oh, it was really great. Since I was now accepted into the Embassy and felt welcomed, I did a lot of stuff with other colleagues. Also, the Guatemalans were nice people and I had a few Guatemalan friends. I travelled a lot there, and even got sweet on a Guatemalan guy. He was the most gorgeous Latin man I had seen to date. We did not get serious, but I sure did fantasize about having his baby, seriously. (laughter) I had a car in Guatemala, so I did a lot and went to lots of places within and outside of the city. I studied Spanish and was pretty good at it, so I had no difficulty in communicating while I travelled. Actually, it is probably why I felt comfortable travelling. A lot of my travel was just with my son Michael. I had four family members visit me in Guatemala at different times. So, that was nice. We visited Antigua and Atitlan a lot. It was about time family members came to see how and under what conditions “Jane” (what they called me back home) worked. What made the living conditions so extra nice in Guatemala was the spring like weather. It was great all the time and the flowers were breathtakingly beautiful. My house was always filled with flowers. I loved Guatemala. Again, this was the assignment I felt was the turning point for my acceptance into the Foreign Service, so I got invited to lots of house parties hosted by other embassy colleagues. We danced a lot there, a lot! The Macarena song and dance was the biggest hit back then and my friends, Paula and Scott in particular, and I would dance until the wee hours of the morning doing the Macarena. I was very content there and very physically fit.

Q: Well, of course in Peru, you had the Shining Path which took care of an awful lot of the atmosphere.

MBENNA: Yes, you are correct. The little I saw of Peru was great. I am sure if the Shining Path was not present, I could have experienced a lot more. I did visit Machu Picchu while in Peru. Anyhow, Guatemala was much safer and much more fun overall.

Q: Well, Guatemala had quite an Indian cast to it, didn't it? I've seen pictures of women wearing Indian-type costumes.

MBENNA: Yes, actually, my son's nanny was a true Inca. Her name was Juanita. She was raised in the orphanage and was very educated. She fixed her hair in the traditional Inca style and wore the traditional Inca attire every day of her life with me. She had the round and full Inca face. She was very attractive and super nice and caring to my son and me. She was like family to us. I even attended her college graduation and pinned her. That was quite an honor for my son and me.

Q: How did your son do?

MBENNA: He did well there. We were in a community where he could actually get out and walk and do things, to include visiting his friends down the block. The school was great, too. It actually was very good and he enjoying going to school there. He even introduced me to a little blonde hair and blue eyed girl in his class who was supposedly his girlfriend. At that age with a girlfriend, right? However, it did make me think that now my baby was growing up. Mike was a very nice and well-disciplined kid. Actually, the DCM (John Keane, if I remember correctly) and the consular officer (I can't recall his name) used to love for Michael to play with their kids because they said he was so well behaved and their kids became more behaved around him. They should see him now. (laughter)

Q: Did you get involved in anything beyond communications there?

MBENNA: No, I didn't. I wasn't in acting management or any of those type positions -- just acting CPO. So, it was strictly communications business I was involved with.

Q: When you got out, were you aware of the drug situation. I mean were there no-go areas?

MBENNA: I do not recall of any in Guatemala City or the two cities I frequented outside -- Antigua and Atitlan. Naturally, there were cities/provinces outside of Guatemala City where drug activities were taking place and they were a definite no/no.

Q: Was IT/communications going through major changes in the period you were there?

MBENNA: Things were relatively the same, but rumors of the smaller type computers (PC) were abuzz. Things were happening in the world such as the Middle East, drug wars, terrorist activities that made fast and accurate information a must. So, there were even more widespread rumors of a change in equipment coming down the pipe. However, for that place the WANG still ruled.

Q: The Wang, talk about almost a step backwards.

MBENNA: Yes it was, but at that time, it was great technology -- slow, but great because it is how I made my living. I mastered the WANG and had bitter sweet memories of it going away.

Q: How about traveling around? Were you able to get around much?

MBENNA: Yes, I traveled a lot. My son and I took a few trips with some Marines and a couple of secretaries to several ancient Inca ruins deep into a thick and luscious forest. It was fascinating. The Guatemalan man I fantasized about lived in a faraway place in Guatemala. It was not off limits but it was far away, in my opinion. My son and I traveled there with his mom and him to visit their relatives for a special celebration. It was so

remote until I recall thinking to myself, “This is behind God’s back.” Guatemala is beautiful and I wish I had travelled even more than I did.

Q: Did you find that there was sort of a gap between people in communications and the secretaries and the political and economic officers?

MBENNA: No, I saw it coming together as a big happy family living and working abroad. I saw the gap my first couple of tours and it was still present to a lesser degree in Guatemala. However, again, Guatemala was the turning point not just for communications folks, but it seemed like for others, too. Everyone spoke to each other and did things together, regardless of titles and ranks. I attribute it to the nice environment we were working in as well as the Ambassador. She just had that “let’s get along” atmosphere around her, at least for me. She made me open up and started feeling a part of the embassy team instead of feeling like the “help”.

Q: Well, were you concerned or was the embassy concerned with people trying to compromise communications people through girls or money.

MBENNA: Not that I am aware of, but you well know that the concern will always be present, and not just for communications folks, but everyone working at the embassy.

Q: Well, Guatemala is a friendly place. It wasn’t a haven for spies.

MBENNA: I do not know about it being a haven for spies, but it sure was a friendly and beautiful place.

Q: Did you have any presidential visits while you were there?

MBENNA: I can’t recall any Presidential visits to Guatemala when I was there.

Q: Any natural disasters?

MBENNA: I can’t recall any disasters while I was there. It was just a pleasant place all around, in my opinion.

Q: You know your skills were used and you were comfortable there.

MBENNA: Yes, they were being used and I was comfortable. I was comfortable that I was a valuable asset to the communications team and the embassy as a whole. I was talented and my talents were being utilized.

Q: So you left there when?

MBENNA: It was September 1996.

Q: 1996. Where did you go?

MBENNA: I went to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. My first time in Africa.

Q: How did you feel going there? Was your initial reaction sort of like roots, you're going back to where the family came from or not?

MBENNA: I felt fine about going there, even though a Foreign Service white male friend told me that Tanzania was the armpit of Africa. Another person (white female) I met who had just left Tanzania told me the opposite of Tanzania, but that the boss I was getting was not nice. Also, others who had been to other parts of Africa said I would work my buns off in Africa because the people were backwards and nothing worked. I heard all/all negative things about Tanzania and Africa. However, none of them killed the enthusiasm my family (son, and my niece whom I had recently gotten custody of) had about going to Africa. I was Foreign Service and pledged to be worldwide available, so whether it is the armpit of Africa or the backend of another country, it is where my government called me to go. As far as the working my buns off, I looked forward to it because work is what I did and I enjoy fixing what needs fixing or correcting. So, to answer the second part of the question, I was glad to go to the motherland but I was more thrilled about going there as a U.S. Diplomat ready to show the Tanzanians that black folks are U.S. Diplomats. I wanted to make them proud and not necessary bond with my long lost cousin or anything like that.

Q: What was your job? Were you a supervisor or what?

MBENNA: I was not the chief in charge of the entire section, but I had subsections where I supervised Foreign Service Nationals (FSNS). However, when my boss was on leave, I assumed responsibility for the entire section since we were the only two Americans in the section. When not running the entire show in the boss' absence, I did the normal work outlined previously as I did in other countries. There was nothing new except now there were high level and President of the United States (POTUS) visits to Africa that I had to support. I supported Secretary of State Warren Christopher's trip to Arusha, Tanzania, to discuss the Burundi crisis in October, 1996, and I travelled to Kampala, Uganda, to support President Clinton's visit during the month of March, 1998.

So, I was doing more of the same but remote from the Embassy and for high officials in my government.

Q: How did you find the embassy? Was it a well-adjusted embassy or was it tense?

MBENNA: I loved it. It was cozy and very welcoming. The Americans and Tanzanians worked and socialized together. I saw more of what I saw in Guatemala -- people just connecting regardless of their title or nationality.

Q: Were you there before or after the explosion.

MBENNA: I was there during the explosion.

Q: You were there during?

MBENNA: Yes, I experienced the act of terror upon our embassy.

Q: We'll come to that in a minute. How did you find the locals who worked in the embassy?

MBENNA: Tanzania was warm and the Tanzanian people's hearts were warmer. They were kind and welcoming. They would always say "karibu tena" which means "come again" or, "hakuna matata" which means "no worries". They did not get overly excited about anything. They worked hard, but they knew how to relax and wind down. They had their siesta after lunch and their Kilimanjaro beer and nyama choma (roast wild meat) after work and on weekends. They loved to dance, too. Even though the FSNS who worked at the embassy were considered high or middle class, they did not act like it. They were down to earth not just to us Americans, but to their less fortunate or lower-ranking countrymen.

Q: What was the equipment like?

MBENNA: We had the old Wang system to start with, but guess what? Before my tour ended, the personal computers (PCs) with Windows software were deployed. So, work was exciting in Tanzania. I got to be a part of the effort to change out all the Wang computers for PC and train the end-users. Also, I got to work out many of the bugs experienced. I was so blessed to be a part of this transformation for the Department of State. Also, we had to work through the pain of transitioning data and software used for the new system. Yes, I loved the new computers bursting with colors, choices, and faster processors.

Q: I think for many of us bringing in the regular PCs and getting rid of the Wang which was basically a dedicated typewriter, was exciting and a relief.

MBENNA: Well, it was a relief. I did like the Wang, however. I think I liked it because I had mastered how to use and troubleshoot the Wang equipment. So, I had mixed feelings when it came to getting rid of the Wang. I recall the Department did not want us to send them back, so we had to dispose of them in the field -- at Post. When I announced it during country team, several of the officers asked if they could take the sledge hammer and smash the Wang equipment. We had a ball destroying them.

Q: When you got there, how did you find the people in Tanzania?

MBENNA: They were very friendly and hospitable. They reminded me of folks from Georgia -- just plain down to earth and genuine. Actually, it was kind of scary because my son, niece, and I all agreed in amazement that many of the people of Tanzania had the same demeanor as well as physical, especially facial, characteristics as people we knew back in Georgia. I found them people of principle and people who loved family and

friends -- still things you see in southern folks. They had a great work/life balance. They did not over exert themselves and they did not overdue the social life. It was a good balance that I wish I had adopted back then. I would be less burnt out today. I recall seeing them sprawled out on benches or the lawn in the back of the Embassy the latter half of their lunch. They ate their ugali and nyama choma (roasted meat) and drank their Fanta. Afterwards, they rested. I thought initially they were lazy to do that, but then I realize that they knew how to live and balance their life/work style.

Q: Were there sort of basic tribal features which differ really from West Africans?

MBENNA: I do not recall any distinctive tribal features on Tanzanians. They did not mark themselves for display like some of the West African countries. The Maasai people, the nomads, had tribal marks but they were indigenous to the entire East African region and not just Tanzania.

Q: Did you have trouble with men? I'm talking about dating and all. Well, you know, I mean I'm sure you would have been an attraction. One, you're good looking and two, you're an American and I would think that this would be attractive to the Tanzanians.

MBENNA: (Laughter). Actually, the Tanzanian women were very attractive. They were smart dressers, smart wit, and well groomed. So, my good looks, and what not, were not something new to the Tanzanian men. They had all of those in their Tanzanian women. Being an American wasn't too much of a novelty either because there were many American NGOs, Peace Corps, and American Embassy staff in Tanzania. Aside from that, they had many other Western women in beautiful Tanzania. Now, what was attractive to them was seeing the total package of Moma America (what they called me). I was young, black, American, a U.S. Diplomat, treated them nicely, and open to experiencing their culture, especially the food, dancing, and drinks. They found that amazing and appealing. Some said that they wish they were available to pursue me. Even some who were not available flirted like crazy. Unfortunately, I had a boyfriend from the States most of that assignment. However, I did love the attention and them exposing me to their culture in a relaxed and not "obligated" type of manner.

Q: What would you tell them?

MBENNA: When a Tanzanian man had the courage to ask me out, I would ask them why? They felt embarrassed and said things like, "I want to know about black Americans", "you are very pretty", "I want to take you to a Tanzanian restaurant to try our local food", "I want to take you dancing so you can learn the African dances", etc. I loved all of their responses to my question as to why they wanted to take me out. What most I like about the men is that they were not aggressive. I never felt that if I went out with them, they would harm me. However, I do recall one man, a few years older than me, asked me out and I accepted because it was to eat roasted meat and drink Kilimanjaro beer -- my two favorite food and drink items in Tanzania. After we ate and laughed, he asked if he could take me to a hotel. I asked why since we had just eaten. He said he wanted to enjoy me totally. I told him that he was mistaken and I was not that type of

girl. He looked puzzled and said, “I thought it is what black American women like”, after a man takes them out. For some reason, I did not feel insulted. I set the record straight with him and he understood. We went out many times afterwards and he never crossed the line. After that is when I decided to become an Ambassador -- an Ambassador for black American females from the United States. That incident, and a few others in a few of the other countries I was in, made me realize that the world had a wrong perception of black American females. So, I had a separate agenda aside from serving my country. That was ensuring that the world knew that black Americans females were not sex symbols, but we were smart, discerning, professionals, etc. just like other women of the world.

Q: Absolutely.

MBENNA: Yes indeed. It was good to be able to represent that small sector (black females in the United States, and from the South, to boot) to the world.

Q: What were you getting from home, from Georgia? I mean, things were changing there, weren't they?

MBENNA: Things were changing in Georgia. So, my father was getting older and settling down more, that is he stayed home a lot and did not entertain the nagging (as he would put it) from my mom. He just let her talk until she got tired. As far as my mom, she had no more kids at home, even though she was a baby sitter for her grandkids, as needed. Also, both of them were becoming popular, as well as my family, due to the community knowing a little more of my job as a U.S. Diplomat. I used to bring African clothes home and they would dress up and go to church or events, and when folks asked where they got the attires from, they would tell them about me and where I had travelled, etc. So, as I told them once when I came home and saw that their image was changing, “You guys are on the map, huh?” My mom answered, “Sure, why not?”

Q: Was there a church that you felt comfortable with in Tanzania?

MBENNA: No, not really. I really did not know of any protestant churches when I was there. Actually, I never bothered to seek any out because I was scared to go. My Swahili was OK, but not enough to attend church. Going to church is nothing to play with, so I did not want to be clapping or acknowledging something or words I did not understand or know. Therefore, on Sundays, I would read my Bible and do things family oriented, when the kids were there. However, I did go to a Catholic service once with a Marine who was assigned there. Again, it was in Swahili and I barely understood it. So, I decided to just build up my anticipation for when I go home to attempt my church in the States.

Q: When you arrived there, did you feel there was a tension or concern about terrorism or anything like that?

MBENNA: No, I knew the term terrorism in the real sense in that I was in Peru during the Shining Path days. I did not feel any tension when I arrived in Tanzania. Actually, I never concerned myself about being aware of how the world was changing in regards to

terrorism. I assumed the Shining Path was just an anomaly in the world and it was not going to be a trend. So, when I departed, I left all of that concern in Peru, until the attack on the Embassy in 1998 in Tanzania and Kenya. Then, my whole world and outlook on life changed as far as being an American abroad and possibly being a victim. Since that day, August 7, 1998, I have been tense and concerned about terrorism in the world.

Q: Well, do you want to talk about the day of the explosion and what you did afterwards?

MBENNA: Sure. I was due to depart Tanzania for my next assignment the next week. The tragic event occurred on a Friday, August 7th, my father's birthday.

Q: August 7th of what year?

MBENNA: 1998.

Q: 1998?

MBENNA: It occurred between 11 and noon on August 7, 1998. So, since I was due to leave the next week I had promised a lot of Foreign Nationals (FSNS) at the embassy that I would give them anything I did not want. The Thursday before they attack, some FSNS came to my house to select what they wanted. The things they could not carry with them, they asked if I could bring to the Embassy the next day. Also, I was going to sell my car to someone who did not work in the Embassy and he also met me at my house with the payment. Unfortunately, my name was spelled incorrectly in the check so I told him to meet me at the Embassy at around 11:30 with a new check. He said he would.

The next morning I loaded the stuff in the car and went to the Embassy to work. I parked in my usual parking space next to the mini-guard shack which was close to the entrance for vehicles that needed to enter the compound. I got out with a handful of stuff for staff. As I entered the guard shack area to show my ID, a female Tanzanian guard name "Rose" had a job application in her hand to give to me because she wanted to apply for the switchboard operator position about to come open. She said she wanted me to help her get the position before I left because she wanted to move up from being a guard. I told her to keep the application until I returned to the car to get the rest of the stuff. She smiled and said "Thank you Moma". The FSNS called me "Moma" at the Embassy. It was a term of endearment I was told. Anyhow, I went upstairs and distributed the stuff to the local staff whom I had promised the items. Then, I went to my office and opened up and started my morning IT/communications routine. Shortly afterwards, the young lady who had just arrived a day or two before to replace me came in. I needed to give her a turnover briefing because she was going to work alone until the new chief of communications arrived in about a week or two. I shared a few things with her, but before we got to the heavy and critical turnover known as COMSEC, she asked if she could in-process with a particular office because the person in charge was leaving for vacation so she heard. So, I was glad for the break because I could run down to get the female guard application, get the remaining stuff out of my car, and if timing was right, meet the man with the check for my car. When she left, I did a few other things in the

office to organize myself for the next session with my successor. Also, I knew I had to run down and take care of everything on my “to do” list and be back in time for the weekly High Frequency (HF) radio test. However, about 20 minutes earlier I had asked the operator to place a call to the Embassy in Pretoria, South Africa. I wanted to know why they had not accepted the nomination for one of my computer staff to attend one of the “Windows” courses held at the Regional Information Management Center (RIMC) there. It was taking a while so I figured I had better go on downstairs to my car. After leaving the center where I worked and passed the area around the corner where the Front Office was located, I heard a faint phone ringing. I stopped in my tracks, turned around and entered the communication center to find out that it was my phone. So, I quickly went to the back of the center to my office to get it. It was Pretoria on the line and I was glad. I sat in my chair and these words to them, “I am Vella from Dar es Salaam and I was wondering why our system’s staff” Before I finished the sentence the blast occurred because the wall I was facing came back in my face and slammed me into racks of equipment across the room. I recall getting up, brushing myself off and proceeding to alert Washington via my equipment that something bad had happened and to close our circuits for now. Then, I proceeded to check on colleagues in the communications suite and putting communication and IT stuff in a safe. The security selectone sound was loud and constant and annoying but music to my ear to keep me on my toes quickly securing things.

After I was comfortable my communication center was OK, I got my purse and my INMARSAT (Communication system), secured the communications center, and started walking around the corner to get out of the Embassy. When I turned the corner, I saw the devastation that had occurred. Furniture, paintings, parts of the building, window glass, paper, pencils, and much more were in the walk way. I had to carefully work my way through it. When I got to the Executive Suite door, I looked in and saw no one but I thought I was dreaming. The place was in shambles and the window glasses out. Desks were turned over, couches turned over, office supplies everywhere. I then thought, where are they. After about a minute of just staring to see if there was life in that suite, I proceeded to walk to towards the narrow catwalk that connected the two parts of the building. In the center of the catwalk was the stairs that led downstairs behind Post One and out the front of the Embassy. I looked down and saw things and ceiling debris on it. Before I attempted to go down it, I wanted to go to the other side of the door I was facing to see how the other Americans and FSNS were doing. However, before I started carefully walking over stuff again, I recall looking to my right. I saw things I had never seen before when walking that short catwalk and felt hot wind and smelled something awful. I quickly realized that the wall was gone so I could see, feel, and smell whatever was normally hidden by those walls. I was afraid and then I realized something else. It was quiet. I did not hear the security selectone anymore. I had no idea how long it was quiet, but I know I could hear the quiet...it was crazy, but I really could hear the silence. So, I walked on and opened the door to the Admin building side of the building. I heard some cracks but nothing feel. What I saw without even entering deep into the building was complete chaos. It was more of what I saw in the Executive Office, but to a greater extent. It was like a meteorite had hit the Embassy. Even worse was that the entire wall and windows facing the road was gone. I started having a really bad feeling because most

of all I saw or heard no one. Why was everyone gone except me. I backed out of the door and back onto the catwalk and started down the stairs. As I started down the stairs I realized that something bad had happened, something really, really bad. I thought that maybe that if it wasn't a meteorite, then a space ship came down and the aliens took up everyone except me. I wanted to start screaming for help but was hesitant at first because I believed that if there were aliens they would hear me and then take me up. Then I thought, no one would know exactly what happened to us all. So, I tip-toed down the rest of the stairs. When I saw more devastation and how I appeared to be blocked in, I had to scream. I started screaming for help, first a low scream to see if the aliens would come, and then louder when they did not come. After about a minute and a half I heard a familiar voice calling out asking who was there. It was a Marine. I told him it was Vella, the communications officer from the 2nd floor. I wanted to be as clear as possible, even though I knew the voice. Once I told him exactly where I was, he told me to try to climb over the rubble and look for his hands. I told him I was going to throw up the INMARSAT first and I did. With my long, brown crochet purse draped around me in a crisscross fashion, I started carefully climbing until I saw his arm reaching out. I grabbed his hands and he carefully helped me around the mound of rubble. I grabbed my INMARSAT and followed him to a set of emergency stairs to the outside of the building.

On the outside is where I found the CDA (chargé d'affaires) John Lange, our security officer, a few Marines, and some other Embassy officials. I quickly ran to the CDA and asked him if he wanted me to set my INMARSAT. He said no, and that I should leave for the safehaven (the DCM's house not too far from the Embassy). Someone told me that the van was on the outside of the back wall and we walked quickly to the area. I did not want to leave because I knew comms was important but I followed instructions. I dropped the INMARSAT on the other side of the wall once I was lifted up. I then made it over the fence and the driver of one of our Embassy vans waved for me to come and get in. I grabbed my INMARSAT and ran into the van. There were a few other folks on the bus and everyone looked terrified. I then realized that I needed to find the new lady who came to replace me. No one knew but then I heard this cat-like voice from someone sitting a few rows behind me. I looked at the person and the tip of the nose was ripped almost off. It looked bad. I did not recognize the person so I asked again for the lady who was there to replace me. I heard the cat-like voice again, and again I looked around, and this time the lady waved at me and I heard, "it's me, Liz". I had to look closer. It was her and I was relieved. After a minute or so more the driver came in and we drove to the safe haven.

After just some minutes there and realizing that folks could not talk on the radio, I figured the repeater on the Embassy roof was down. So, I ran to find a driver to take me to my house to turn on the backup radio system. I could not find anyone, so I ran onto Toure Drive and tried to wave down a cab, but no one stopped. After about a minute, I was determined to stop a taxi, so when I saw one coming from afar, I jumped in the road and started waving my arms for it to stop. He did. I told him that something bad had happened at the Embassy and that I needed to go home down the street. I asked him if he would take me. He said yes and did. When I got home, my house girl Sabina saw me and immediately started wiping the blood from me and pulling my shirt off. She asked what

happened and I told her something happened at the embassy but did not know what. She asked me to eat something but I told her that I had the taxi waiting because I needed to get back to work. She said OK and told me to be careful. I started hearing talk on the radio and it was music to my ear because I knew the embassy folks could communicate now.

Over the next few hours and days and weeks, I did quite a bit to get communications back up and running at an alternate location in town. It was a lot of work and people pitched in to help. It was really team work. I could write a book about this or even more, making a movie of it would be so cool, now that I can think and speak about it without my heart racing 1000 miles per hour. One thing I admired about leadership that day and as long as I remained there is that Ambassador John Lange really cared about us and stopped to ask if we were OK or had everything we needed or told us to take a rest. He also saw the worth in my expertise and had me tag along to several meetings in case he needed to place a call or received a call. It made me feel really special that he valued his communication's officer. He was a nice and respectful person, even before the attack and he gets in touch with us (those under his regime during that period) every year around that time.

Q: What happened to the Ambassador? The DCM?

MBENNA: We had a chargé d'affaires at that time. We were in between Ambassadors, if I recall correctly. John Lange was chief of the mission. Also, if I recall correctly, the CDA and some others were in a meeting in his office when the attack happened. No one was killed, and I do not recall if anyone in his office that day was seriously injured.

Q: How many people were killed?

MBENNA: Not many in Tanzania. Less than ten. Unfortunately, the female Tanzanian guard at the boot who was waiting for me to get her application was one of those killed that day. It horrifies me to think that if I had not received that phone call and returned to my office, I could have been right next to her or my car, which coincidentally was destroyed beyond normal recognition, and more than likely killed too. I thank God for that phone call and sparing my life.

Q: What did you all do? Was the embassy just shut down?

MBENNA: The building was destroyed, so yes, that facility was permanently closed. We setup a temporary safe haven at the DCM's house for a few days. Then, we took over the Public Affairs Office (PAO) house as a semi-temporary location to work from. I started working closely with the Ops Center and the Information Resource Management Bureau (not called that back then), to secure approval to setup communication with what I had beyond a phone line and fax. The embassy did not have much to work with, but we were able to communicate. Actually, the lessons I learned that day was drawn upon so many times later when setting up safe havens and alternate command centers at subsequent embassies I worked.

Q: Was there a lot of speculation of who set this off and why at all?

MBENNA: I am sure there was, but I was just too busy to participate in the speculation. I let those who got paid to speculate and analyze try to figure out why and who? I had my hands full with ensuring reliable and sufficient communication during that period.

Q: Did you suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD)? You know after something like this, it takes a while to dawn on one what really happened and to remember the enormity of it.

MBENNA: I work better under pressure and that's why I like the IT field and going to those crazy places because that's when I feel alive and perform at my best. That day and the entire month (I stayed three weeks past my departure date) after that day I only concentrated on communications. I had no feeling for anything else and rarely thought of my family. The temporary staff who came to help told me they had never seen anyone like me. They told me that I needed to grieve or show emotions for what had happened. I told them that I could not afford to break down because if I did, who would lead the communication team in such time. One of them told me that one day it would hit me and I would cry my eyes out. Well, at my next assignment in Beirut, when the regional Psychiatrist came for a routine visit, I started crying uncontrollable in front of him after I told him my last post was Dar es Salam. He allowed me to cry. That and possibly the time jumping to the ground when I heard sonic booms from an overhead jet are the only times I experience dramatic PTSD. However, I often think about that day, almost monthly up to the present, I feel like I must be extra cautious and/or ready for the worst no matter where I am. I have never reported these feelings because I do not think they are significant but I do silently suffer from having been through that experience. Not as bad as others, but I do to a lesser degree.

Q: I'm sure you do. How did your boy react to this?

MBENNA: He was in boarding school. He and my niece were in boarding school.

Q: In Tanzania?

MBENNA: No, in Massachusetts.

Q: Where in Massachusetts?

MBENNA: Southborough, at Fay School. My son and niece Valencia were there when the attack occurred. The sad thing about it was when this happened, because I was so work-oriented, and with my kids not being at Post, they were not at the forefront as they would have been if they were with me at Post. I recall a lot of Embassy folks were in this meeting with temporary doctors and Psychiatrists from the States one day when the Community Liaison Officer asked me how were my kids after I had my moment to share with the group. I gasped and said, oh my goodness, I forgot to call the school. She told

me to leave the room right now to call the school. When I called, the administrator was so happy to hear from me. She said the kids were scared but fine. I spoke with them and felt so much better. I recall when I went home and saw Michael, my son, and we talked about the attack, he asked me why did I have to go back to work overseas. I told him that it was my job and I had to go.

Q: So, were you ready to finally leave since you had worked several weeks beyond your departure date?

MBENNA: Yes, I was ready to leave, ready, ready, ready!

Q: So, where did you go? Did you go back to Washington first?

MBENNA: My next assignment was Beirut, Lebanon. Yes, I went back to Washington for consultations, training, and vacation before leaving for Beirut. During the vacation, two sisters (Edna and Brunell), a friend of my sisters, and I went to Freeport, Bahamas, for a nice short vacation.

Q: What sort of a reception did you get back in Washington?

MBENNA: Not what I believe I deserved for the work I did in the aftermath. Only my desk officer spoke with me and that was because I had to see him as a part of my consultations. I saw a few others and they just gave me the, "wow, you are blessed" speech. It would have been nice for the Chief Information Officer (CIO) or one of those big boys or girls directly under him to speak with me and tell me what a good job I did. If I did not enjoy what I was doing, I would have probably quit the Foreign Service due to being under appreciated/recognized. However, I must say the IT person who was my crisis center contact did speak highly of me during and after the event. She kept telling me how well I was doing and that she was proud that someone of my caliber was there taking care of business during such a chaotic and stressful time. However, I got no comments or feedback directly to me from the higher ups. Oh, I did receive a Heroism Award, but then many other folks in both of the attacks received the same award. I recall it came through the pouch directly to me while assigned to Kampala, Uganda. It would have been great if it was sent to the Executive Office to have it presented to me while at Post. Oh well, such is life, I suppose.

Q: Going to Beirut... Beirut is not a garden spot. At one point it was but I would have thought that somebody would have said "This isn't a good idea."

MBENNA: No, Beirut was not a garden spot then, but I did see areas there that showed it was really the Paris of the Middle East at an earlier time in history. Well, my career development officer (CDO) did ask me if I wanted to break my assignment to Beirut, but I told him "Heck, no!" You see, Beirut had a fascinating history that I wanted to know more about. Also, Beirut would be the first post I would be the permanent chief of communication and not just a temporary chief or worker bee. I really had to be politic for

it, so I was not going to give it up. I felt normal and blessed and was definitely going to Beirut. So, I kept my assignment and enjoyed Beirut.

Q: This was being in charge of IT?

MBENNA: Right, this was the first time officially being the chief of communications and I was not going to give it away. Plus, I had already told my kids they could have another year in boarding school which they were enjoying. To tell them I was coming home or going to another Post that would require them to leave Fay School would possibly have sent them into rebellion. They really liked the school they were in, even though we all missed each other.

Q: Were there times when you sort of relived this experience in your sleep or anything like that?

MBENNA: Of course. I relive it each time I walk through an Embassy to work, seriously. I wonder how will I come out, in a body bag or alive to die another day there at the embassy. It is naturally difficult for me to fall asleep, so for the first 15 years after that, I relived the experience in part and in total while I tried to fall asleep. On long plane rides I relived it. Also, when I am at home alone, I relive it instead of watching television. So, yes, indeed I do relive it. I think it was a good thing and still is because if I do not relive it, I would probably be terrified to work abroad. I am not totally over it, but the worst years are behind me, I think.

Q: So what was the situation like there at the embassy?

MBENNA: In Beirut? Well, I don't even know what was going on in the political world during that period in Beirut. I do know that Secretary of State Madeleine Albright went to Syria and stopped in Beirut. Her trip was big news and a first for a U.S. official plane to land at the Beirut airport in many years. Also, I knew something big was still going on in that region because we, the embassy folks, could not travel off the compound and into town, not even with a zillion body guards. A lot of advance planning was required just to go to a restaurant, if it was approved by our security officer. Oh, and do not even think about going to a grocery store. No one went alone. It was always a group of us and when we got to the store, we found there were little to no people there. We had to walk down the aisle in pairs and with several body guards. It was so weird, but it kept us safe so I am not complaining. Then there was the Beirut Air Bridge (BAB). It was the system in which we used to travel via helicopter to and from Beirut since it was too dangerous to fly out of the normal airport. The BAB transported us and all of our personal and official stuff from Larnaca, Cyprus, to the embassy grounds. It was crazy. The chopper could stay on the ground for only a limited amount of time and I mean a "few" minutes. So, it was really a show when a chopper landed. Some staff took their break around that time to help us move pouch bags or just to see the movement off and onto the helicopter of people and cargo. All in all, Beirut was yet another good assignment for me. I grew as a supervisor and became stronger and better as a person. So, with Beirut and Dar es Salaam behind me, I just became more confident and competent as an IT professional and

manager. Even with a male who worked for me who tested my supervisory skill by giving me a hard time and not completely cooperating with me. He used to sit with his leg and arms folded and lean back in his office chair and call me “super woman”. Well, I was not going to fail as a first time chief of communication so I indeed was a super woman. I had a job to do and no one was going to stop me, especially some jealous male subordinate, from ensuring reliable and available communication for this critical embassy.

Q: There must have been guards all over the place.

MBENNA: Everywhere. We called the guards who moved with us off the compound “the nasty boys.” It was good they were there in abundance because I felt protected. I didn’t feel scared at all.

Q: What was your equipment like?

MBENNA: As mentioned earlier, the Department was now moving to Windows and getting rid of the Wang equipment. It was happening in Beirut, too. Thank goodness I had exposure to the new computers and servers in Dar es Salaam. Aside from that, the remaining equipment was standard IT and communications stuff. Of course, we had more handheld radios, contingency equipment, and cell phones than any post I had visited, but with the two attacks on our Embassy compound there in Beirut some years prior, this was the norm. If we had a crisis situation and communication was not up to the task, my head would have rolled. So, knowing my equipment and having the best of it was my key priority there. I had the energy and dedication -- all I had to keep on top of were my equipment and my staff.

Q: What were your living conditions like?

MBENNA: Tight and crammed. I lived in a refurbished hotel style building that was hit during one of the attacks some years ago. It was about the size of this room we are in right now.

Q: About maybe 14 x 14 or something like that?

MBENNA: Maybe. I had a little kitchen area with a hot plate. My bathroom was quite nice, but small. My bedroom and living room were tiny, but nice. It was okay but not quite like the three level house I had in Dar es Salaam and the other big places I had in other countries.

Q: I take it there wasn’t much going out at night or anything like that, was there?

MBENNA: No. I went out a couple of times. Actually, I even went to a disco once with some temporary duty (TDY) staff. It was a tight squeeze on the dance floor because the “nasty boys” had to go on the dance floor with us. I felt so secure, no matter where I went. I recall once when I was at a TGIF Restaurant in the predominately Muslim side of

town. I loved going there because it was on the water and the view was amazing. I loved sitting where I had a great view of the “Grotto”, a big rock that stood very high out of the water. Anyhow, I remember being there and my food had just arrived when the lead nasty boy came and told me to get my bag and let’s go. I looked at my nice steak and potatoes and asked if I could have just a bite. He said, no, and looked me in the eyes and said, now. I recall Phil, my security officer, briefing us to never argue or second guess the lead body guard. So, I grabbed my purse and he took my hands and led me quickly to the vehicle and off we returned to the Embassy compound without a word. Of course, I went to bed hungry that night, but alive! That incident was scary but it did not stop me from going back and to other restaurants if they were approved by security. Beirut was just beautiful and I wanted to experience as much as possible during my one-year assignment.

Q: How about your family back in Georgia?

MBENNA: That’s when they started thinking I was really crazy. They were saying that I just barely survived the attack on the Dar es Salaam embassy and had a chance to not go to Beirut, but I decided to go anyhow. When my mom and I spoke on the phone, I did not hear too much fear in her voice. I heard joy and excitement. She ended her conversations, and so did my siblings and father, with comments like these: “Have fun but watch out”, “Enjoy that crazy place”, “What crazy place are you going next”, etc. My mom started calling me “cat” because it seemed like I had seven lives. My dad would call me, “Richard Kimble”. Richard was an action television character who played in the sitcom “The Fugitive” who always escaped death. So, they were happy and proud of me, but I knew there was a lot of praying going on for me without me knowing. Anyhow, both of them were growing older and getting along better. By then my baby brother had joined the military. Their kids were scattered all over the world, so they enjoyed taking care of the grandkids and enjoying the life their kids were making for themselves and them. In other words, they were enjoying the fruits of their labor and doing a lot of praying.

Q: How long were you in Beirut?

MBENNA: One year. It was a year assignment back then.

Q: And then where did you go?

MBENNA: I went back to East Africa. I was assigned to Kampala, Uganda. When I was in Dar es Salaam, I provided IT/communications support to our President (POTUS) when he visited Uganda. President Clinton was in office. Anyhow, I was so impressed with the average Ugandans on the street asking for advice and information instead of money and jobs from us that I promised myself that I would do a tour there. So, when I saw Kampala on the bid list, I bid and got it.

Q: Could you get out into Uganda?

MBENNA: We could. We could get out and we could do things. There were some restrictions, not as much as in Beirut, but they existed. However, for the most part, we

could roam around freely. I went to the source of the Nile a lot to have picnics and I went to restaurants and even night clubs. My brother who was visiting me, my fiancée, and I drove from Kampala to Dar es Salaam in my new SUV. It took two days but we had so much fun and we felt safe.

Q: What type of work did you do there and did you feel like you had enough work to keep you busy in Uganda.

MBENNA: Oh yes, I was very, very busy there. The existing embassy was in the back of the British Council building and quite tight and dangerous to maneuver in and out. Now that I was more concerned about terrorist attacks, since I had experience, one and almost several others, I saw issues and potential problems when others did not. Anyhow, thanks to the United States, they had a big push to upgrade many of our embassies around the world. The embassy in Uganda was going to be the prototype -- the cookie cutter facility. We had between 12 and 15 months to finish the construction from ground breaking to sitting behind our desks.

My role as the communications chief was critical. I had to ensure communications for the folks there to construct the embassy. My biggest challenge was working with Washington IT/communication folks. I had to ensure, during the fast paced construction, that IT/communication infrastructure was properly in place and equipment to include satellite systems was ordered and at Post when needed. Every day, including weekends, was filled with work. I got out and did things, but I had to make time or did them with the folks who were a part of the construction team and wanted a break. Oh yes, I had plenty to keep me busy in Uganda for the entire two years. Actually, I had to become harder and more demanding during the construction of the embassy. There were times when if I had not spoken up to Washington or my Management Officer or the OBO Director at Post, there would have been many issues with IT/Communication and the move-in date would have slipped substantially. That construction project was sink or swim for me as a manager of IT/Communication projects. So, I spoke up, stood my ground, and all went well. I think I made my name (someone who will get the job done) in the IT/Communication community at the Department as a result of the work I did during that assignment. Uganda matured me professionally.

Q: Well good for you, you know. You must have felt whatever it is, the powers that be, put you in the right place at the right time with the right experience too.

MBENNA: Yes, absolutely. You know I didn't think of it at the time. I just was happy that I had something substantial and exciting to do. Watch out "next assignment" here comes Vella.

Q: Where did you go after Uganda?

MBENNA: I went to Yaoundé, Cameroon.

Q: How long were you in the Cameroon?

MBENNA: Not too long. I was there less than a year, about nine months if I recall correctly.

Q: Did you find the Cameroonians a different breed of cat than the Ugandans and Tanzanians?

MBENNA: Yes, they were a bit more aggressive. I mean not hostile aggressive, but a little bit fast-paced and more sure of themselves but not in a calculated way as the slower moving East Africans. I found them cocky, the people in general, the people in the embassy and the people I met outside of the Embassy. I mean they were nice people but I had to adjust to the different attitude. They reminded me a lot of their neighbors, the Nigerians, but not as intense as them.

Q: Certainly the Nigerians have quite a reputation...

MBENNA: And a lot of them were there, right across the border. They wore the flash clothes and jewelry and drove the big fancy Mercedes. Yes, the Nigerians know how to do it and had an attitude to back them up.

Q: Doing con jobs and all.

MBENNA: Yes, one had to be careful with the Nigerians in Cameroon. Thank God for my husband -- I had married my Tanzanian fiancée just before going to Cameroon. Francis, my spouse, told me that his Tanzanian father taught them to run in the opposite direction when they were approached out of the blue by a Nigerian and be extra careful with those from countries that bordered Nigeria. So, thank goodness I had my own "alert" system to keep my family from getting conned by the Nigerians and the Cameroonians.

Q: How did your marriage work out?

MBENNA: Perfect. Francis is a terrific and progressive man and husband. We will celebrate our 15th year of marriage this year. We both feel as if we are still on our honeymoon. I hit the jackpot with him. He is not the typical African and we do not have the typical American woman/African man marriage folks talk about and shy away from. We are happy and highly blessed and plan to stay that way until death do us part.

Q: Because sometimes the Foreign Service is not exactly conducive to marriages.

MBENNA: I mean, when I joined the Foreign Service I told you I was still married, but I was separated so I was practically single in the first 12 years of my Foreign Service life. I was married to my second husband when I joined but he never came to post and we divorced within months after I arrived. In regards to my current husband, he was not a normal Tanzanian. His family had some status in their society and he was accustomed to the Foreign Service life in that his uncle (actually, his father's first cousin but they called him uncle) was a Tanzanian diplomat and Francis stayed with him in London where he

was posted until he finished his college. So, he had some years living as a Foreign Service family member abroad. Yes, Francis knew the culture of being a family member in the Foreign Service. He came ready-made, so to speak. (laughter) Nevertheless, I had to teach him a lot about the U.S. Foreign Service and being a spouse from that perspective. Through the years, we had our bumps as other marriages had, but thank goodness it was never related to the Foreign Service life style. I am truly blessed and so is my marriage and family. Francis is not a “going out and having fun and spending money” type of guy so that was a blessing.

Q: You really need someone like that as a partner.

MBENNA: Right, so it was really good just to have him as my husband. Even though I enjoyed a good night out, with him now in my life, it was tamed and more fulfilling than just hanging out with friends or alone. Going out for Tanzanians back then meant going to a family function, church, or under tree bars to eat nyama choma (roasted meat, goat meat in particular) before nightfall. So it was good to have someone to slow me down and to have someone to laugh and share “life” with.

Q: What was the situation in Cameroon when you were there?

MBENNA: It appeared civil and calm to me. The president was Paul Biya. Even though it seemed calm, we did hear the locals in and outside of the embassy complaining that the president had served too long and had become ineffective. Thus he needed to go and let another president come in. Our Ambassador was George Staples and I think he did a great job there. He cared for us in the Embassy, too. Anyhow, I do not recall anything earthshaking happening in the country during my short stint there.

Q: Why short-stint?

MBENNA: My security clearance was suspended and I had to return to Washington to get the matter resolved.

Q: So, you went back home to the States?

MBENNA: Yes, I went to Washington.

Q: Doing what?

MBENNA: I worked in the Office of Recruitment (HR/REE). Actually, I was like a recruitment assistant. I was there for about nine months, but it felt like eternity since I was not doing what I love and was good at -- IT/communication management.

Q: In HR, what were you doing? Were you going out and recruiting, actually talking to groups, or taking care of the office work?

MBENNA: Some of everything. Sort of a gopher since I had no clearance. However, I grew to like what I was doing and got good at it. I started out answering emails from IT applicants. There was a serious backlog. When I was caught up, I started helping with determining salary based on the entrant's experience. Then, I started taking phone calls from applicants and folks on the register waiting to be called in. Eventually, I became so good and knowledgeable about how to get into the Foreign Service that Joyce, the lady I worked for, started taking me along on recruiting trips to help out. I even did some on my own. Yes, I was a fast learner of the recruitment/hiring business. Folks were impressed and I was happy; however, deep in my heart I wanted the ridiculous situation with my security clearance to be cleared up so I could return overseas.

Q: Did you have questions from potential applicants about being an African-American in the Foreign Service and the plusses and minuses.

MBENNA: Oh, absolutely, yes I did. I was shocked to hear first-hand of so much incorrect or negative perception that existed among the non-white folks who knew of the Foreign Service but did not join. The few African Americans who had the courage to stand in my line and speak with me really had a lot of questions. I took extra time with them, or anyone who seemed misinformed, about the Foreign Service and how their demographic fit into that type of life-style. I loved talking to them.

Q: Well, did you feel that you were pulling punches or were you telling it like it was to people?

MBENNA: I was telling it like it was. I am not a politician and I knew the Foreign Service life style wasn't for everyone. On the other hand, I knew that those the average recruiter assumed would not like or make it in the Foreign Service, were the ones who would succeed. Thus, I was brutally honest about work and living in the Foreign Service -- no misleading folks because it was just not right and it was my mission to get people who would succeed, not fail, in the Foreign Service. Life was tough already being away from family and friends, so why be extra miserable by giving up everything and starting over in the Foreign Service just to find out that it wasn't how you were told or thought it was at all.

Q: Did you see any lack or insufficiency of black applicants coming in to IT work? Because one doesn't think of this as being a particular field that would be attractive.

MBENNA: Well, there were a good number of African Americans who applied, but I did not at that time see a lot making it through to being invited to join. No, it isn't a particularly attractive field for an African American just looking for a job and happening to have IT/Communications experience. They needed more clarity to pick up and leave or they had to have a passion for this type of work. I think that my stint in recruitment did that and created a network for others to find out the truth and benefits of being an IT/Communications professional in the Foreign Service. I recalled when in Chicago, recruiting, a black female came to my table to jokingly ask about the Foreign Service. When I asked if she was interested she said yes, but it will never happen for her. She said

that she was a single parent, and besides, she did not graduate from an ivy league school. When I told her that I was in the Foreign Service and joined as a separated parent, her interest grew. I truly believe that she went home and applied. I pray she got in.

Q: I was looking at the time. This might be a good place to stop and pick it up the next time. Where did you go?

MBENNA: After my security clearance issue was resolved, I was allowed to go back overseas. My next assignment was Freetown, Sierra Leone in West Africa.

Q: All right, well next time, we'll pick it up.

MBENNA: OK.

Today is the 23rd of February, 2016, with Vella Mbenna. And you're off to Sierra Leone. What year was that?

MBENNA: 2002.

Q: And you were there how long?

MBENNA: Two years.

Q: What was the situation there? Sierra Leone has had its problems over the years.

MBENNA: All in all, the people were happy people and really excited about the upcoming election for the country. They were just coming out of a civil war and trying to get their lives back on track. Some were born into war and never knew what normal living was about. Most of the rebels and child soldiers were integrated into the real Army, but there were still a lot of ex-combatants roaming around with nothing to do. Also, there were lots of camps to help child soldiers and female soldiers get their life back, mentally. So, we were unfortunate enough to see all the spoils of the war from burnt buildings to people with hands and arms hacked off but we were fortunate to get to know some very resilient people, too.

Q: Tell me, when you first got there, how did Freetown strike you? What was it like there?

MBENNA: Well, wow. I was shocked because I had not ever been to a country just coming out of a civil war. At first I felt like I was in a war zone, because UN soldiers were everywhere and the Sierra Leonean soldiers carried guns everywhere. I was scared initially, but the security officer at the Embassy prepared us for what we would see and experience and how to respond to situations. I felt terribly sorry for the people who were mutilated during the war. I wanted to help everyone, but finally gave up and gave money, food, or clothing as I felt extremely necessary. Freetown had lots of old buildings, some were burnt and some with bullet holes throughout them. A war really took place there.

There were always people around somewhere, day or night, wandering around helplessly. It brought tears to your eyes and was when I felt so blessed to be an American. The good side to what I saw in Freetown was the resilient people with the spirit of survivors. They wanted the war behind them and they were moving on. The beaches were nice and the local people, whole or mutilated, came out daily to enjoy the natural beauty their country offered in spite of what they experienced over the past years. I recall my sister Brunell came to visit us in Freetown. She had mixed feelings about the country. She loved the beautiful beaches, the colorful clothes the people wore, and the great food. However, she was horrified whenever she saw a mutilated person or child. She used to repeatedly ask me how I stomach it. I use to tell her the same thing every time she asked -- my stomach is strong and I have a job to do here.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

MBENNA: Ambassador Peter Chaveas. I met him there, and then he retired. Ambassador Thomas Hull replaced him in 2004.

Q: What was the political situation?

MBENNA: I was not a reporting officer so I did not get involved too much with what was happening politically in the country. However, the country was gearing up for an election. There were banners everywhere, rallies, and lots of reporting and speculation on who would be the next president of Sierra Leone to move the country to some form of normalcy.

Q: What was the communications setup? This was a small post, right?

MBENNA: Yes, it was a small post. Actually, I was the only American IT/Communications Officer at Post. It was a one person shop. I was still the chief, but was also a big time worker bee, too. My staff consisted of Sierra Leonean Foreign Nationals. My communications center was very small. I could see from other dusty areas of the building not repaired yet that the prior communications center was very big, with lots of familiar hulled out equipment still present. I used to go by those areas at times and just stare and wonder how it was like before the war. When the embassy re-opened, I assume, instead of repairing the whole communications center, they just did a small corner. I am not sure why. Anyhow, the equipment was familiar, so no problems there. I was afraid at first that I could not handle it after doing recruitment work for nine months. However, the training I got before going to Freetown and my prior IT/communication experience gave me the confidence that I needed to get back out there and provide the IT/communication services I was assigned to do. With me being the only IT/communications American, I had to take care of the entire classified operation. So, there was a lot of hands-on work and customer service I had to perform. I loved it because I kept busy and it strengthened my technical and customer service skills. I worked a lot -- including some weekends and definitely at night for recalls.

Q: Wasn't it scary to be recalled at night and have to travel at night to and from work?

MBENNA: No, not at all. I was used to being recalled from previous posts. Some countries I drove my personal vehicle and others I called for motor pool. In Freetown, my husband (and I) thought it was best to use motor pool, which I did. They picked me up from my house, waited on me, and returned me safely to my house. Usually, the recalls were quick. If there was any remote thought of danger in the town or if my husband wasn't easy with the time of night I was recalled, he would ride with us and sit and talk with the motor pool driver until I came out. I believe my husband supervised motor pool as a General Services Assistant during that assignment, so it was a nice time for him to talk to the drivers.

Q: Did you serve as the equivalent of a backup for any of the other posts, in Liberia or elsewhere?

MBENNA: No, my first year in Freetown I worked alone, so I could not leave for almost anything, not even medical stuff. It had to be an extreme emergency to leave without sufficient notice to bring in a replacement person. It happened once when I had an acute dental problem. I was medevaced to Senegal and they brought in a replacement from our Embassy in Senegal to fill in the few days I was away. However, it was not feasible for me to do temporary duty for any posts. I did work closely with post and the Department to get a second position approved for Freetown. The person arrived at Post after my first year there. So, my last year was much easier and I got to do more fun stuff in Freetown and go to neighboring countries like The Gambia for quick getaways. However, I was never called upon to do temporary duty work at another embassy.

Q: Did you have any major emergencies when you were there?

MBENNA: Not really. However, two things come to mind:

First, when Embassy Monrovia evacuated its staff, they passed through Sierra Leone. Embassy Freetown staff had to facilitate their passage. IT/communications was critical and I had to ensure all needs were met. It was crazy but fun.

Second, when I was left in charge of the embassy for some hours while the chargé d'affaires (CDA) was in a closed door meeting at the palace all morning, the guards who guarded the Embassy and our compound across town decided to walk away from their posts. They were protesting against the company they worked for due to salary reasons. Thank goodness I had the second American position in my office by then. It was very scary because we had no Marine Security Guards yet at Post. I had a few male staff observe the monitors and keep an eye on the door. Coincidentally, the embassy American Security Officer was blocked in the house of the chief of the contract (a South African man) when he went over to see what was going on earlier that morning. The local guards, with weapons of opportunity -- hoes, bags of cement, board, pick forks, etc., had surrounded the house and were daring them to come out. Thank goodness the contract chief and the security officer had their radios and cell phones for me to communicate with them. It was a scary situation that had hit the meeting the CDA was attending. So, at

his first break, the CDA gave me a quick call for an update. He gave me some advice and told me to contact Washington and the MFA. I told him that I had already done both and was working with them to get our officer and the contract chief out of the building safe. He gave me kudos for a great job and went back to his meeting. After some hours had passed, the Inspector General's office of the country was able to facilitate getting the two men out without harm. The CDA returned the same time as the guys were about to return to the Embassy. So, we met and briefed him. I was so proud of myself for handling the situation.

Q: Was this over money?

MBENNA: Yes, over money. They local guards felt that they were not receiving their raise because the local Contractor chief was squandering it himself.

Q: Did you feel sort of out of sight, out of mind, I mean Sierra Leone is kind of not high on the totem pole, I would think?

MBENNA: Initially, when I first found out what had happened, I prayed on my knees in the bathroom "Oh God, please let someone in Washington be there to guide me." You see, I knew Sierra Leone was a small post and off the beaten path. God answered my prayer because Washington was guiding and getting updates from me throughout. However, I must say that for a split second I thought, "Will Washington think this is important and help me through this or will they tell me to handle it because they had bigger fishes to fry." Thank goodness the Department takes all crises involving Americans and its Embassy with the same level of attention.

Q: Did others at the Embassy pitch in? In other words, was it a community effort?

MBENNA: Yes, the staff really rose to the occasion. A few American men working at the embassy pitched in and monitored the doors and the cameras since we had no Marine Security Guard there. You see, we did not know how wide-spread the protest was or if it would move to the Chancery. I had to take all precautions to protect us. My husband who worked at the annex compound across town was monitoring the situation over there and providing me with updates. The front office secretaries made timely calls for me to Washington and the MFA. One American military staff assigned to the Embassy, even though I did not ask him to go, went to the location to try to get the guys out, but came back empty handed. The locals and Americans cooperated and understood why they could not leave the building. Also, the American security officer who was in the house was guiding me from a security perspective even though his life was in jeopardy. Then, the awesome kudos from the CDA along with his advice while at the palace boosted my confidence. Yes, it was a community effort all around and that is what I love about the Foreign Service.

Q: How was the social life there?

MBENNA: Social life, surprisingly, was very good there. The first year I worked and went to the local beach and to church only. I was just too tired from working alone and for very long hours. However, the second year was better because I had help in the office. I got out more and travelled to other beaches outside the city, visited the locals at their homes for special family events, and did more church stuff. I also entertained a lot at my house. We like bar-b-que so a lot of that took place with local staff, UN contacts and friends, and Sierra Leonean local friends. In spite of all the spoils of the war around us, we managed to have a very decent social life.

Q: What was the UN doing there?

MBENNA: They were doing their thing, I suppose. There was a big contingent there and we saw them everywhere.

Q: And so you were there two years?

MBENNA: Yes.

Q: How about your boy?

MBENNA: He was in his first year of college then. His behavior changed and he started giving me problems. He was in college now and the drinking and smoking started. However, he was my sweet baby boy and worried about us a lot. He said he always thought what would happen to him if I got killed overseas. There is no excuse for bad habits, but I wonder sometimes if the smoking and drinking is how he eventually coped with knowing the danger I was in in the countries I worked. Oh well, who knows.

Q: Did you feel that you had gone to a place where people had gone primitive.

MBENNA: Well, yes and no. Yes, in that there were people who were born into the war and who did not know what the outside world was about. Also, some who were not born into war but due to the war they were cut off from the outside world so time stopped for them. No, in that many had ties to the outside world via the media, family members who lived abroad and returned home, via music, and via working for international companies and the UN domestically and abroad. Even though the country wasn't a pretty sight in general, their minds and ambition were not that primitive. Those who worked hard moved forward and helped others move forward, so it was totally not that primitive. The war made them backwards and behind time, but they had the desire to change is what I saw and felt.

Q: It's a very small country.

MBENNA: Yes small, but lush with green mountains and breathtaking with beautiful beaches. The food there, what you could find, was great and they prepared it so well -- almost like my grandmother used to cook.

Q: Hearing particularly about what happened to the children during this time is sad because it had a particular impact on them. I mean they were mutilated, some of them were recruited, horrible situation.

MBENNA: Oh yes, the kids youth was taken away and will never return for some of them. When I met some of them and spoke with them, I saw dark eyes with what seemed like a blank slate or a burning slate behind them. I saw despair and pain. Actually, what I could not see was worse for me than what I visibly saw of them. I could not bring myself to visit an orphanage there because in my opinion the country was ridden with orphans and I perceived it as one big orphanage and not enough care givers for them. What I appreciate the most is the camps, some in very nice locations like near the beaches, they had to integrate the children and women back into society. I am getting filled up just talking about it.

Q: Well, after that experience, where did you go?

MBENNA: I was assigned to Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. What a country!

I did three years there. My brother was in the UN out in the boonies there in Congo, in Goma, where the rebels were. President Kabila, the young Kabila, was in power. He took office after his father was killed, so the climate of the country, political-wise, was them gearing up for the election. You had the rebel, Bemba, and you had him, Kabila, so there was lots of fighting all over.

Q: What was your job? Were you in charge?

MBENNA: Yes, I was the chief of communications. I had two Americans working for me, about a dozen DRC Foreign Nationals and a couple of American staff spouses. I wasn't ever management officer or DCM there because the Embassy was bigger than the one in Sierra Leone. So, I was only in charge of the IT/Communication section and did only that sort of work.

Q: So, what was life like for you and your husband there?

MBENNA: Well, I did three years there, so there must have been something good happening there for us to enjoy it enough to do that third year. (laughter). My brother worked for the United Nations (UN) and was assigned to Goma, DRC in rebel territory. So, having him there made life a little easier and happier. My spouse and I worked a lot there, but we had a great social life as well. My husband worked across town and would keep the car. When he came to pick me up from work and I was not ready, he would sit for hours sometimes waiting for me. Then, when we left, we would stop by a local nyama choma (roasted meat) place and eat. We loved the roasted fish and meat there and it went good with a local "Skol" beer. My husband did not drink but I did partake of a cold beer or two while in DRC. We never went out to clubs, but one did not need to. The folks love singing and dancing and they did them at the yam choma places, at parks, in the street,

etc. They lived and we enjoyed life, within reason. Whenever my brother came to Kinshasa, it was like a family reunion. Then, for about a year he was assigned there and that was so nice. We had a great time in church, eating nyama choma, drinking beer, dancing, swimming in the pool at my house, entertaining at my house, etc. Yes, life was good for my spouse and I. Also, his mom, my two sisters, and my sister-in-law visited us there. They loved Kinshasa.

Q: You know the Congo has sort of had this war, not quite sure who was fighting whom but millions of people were affected. What was going on there?

MBENNA: Wow, that's a million-dollar question. I had too much work to do in IT/communications to try to make heads or tail out of the political scene there. I know the country was gearing up for a big election where the son of Papa Kabila was running. Also, the world knew about the rebel activities in the remote areas of the DRC. Other than that, I just did my IT/communication work and enjoyed Kinshasa.

Q: It's a very rich country.

MBENNA: Yes, rich in so many ways I came to understand while there.

Q: This must have, again, like Sierra Leone, you couldn't just go out, could you?

MBENNA: Not really. The Sierra Leone war was in town as well as in the bush, and I saw and smelled the spoils of it every day, especially since I went there not too far after it had ended. I am sure there were rebels stashed away or mingling in Kinshasa but for some reason they were not visible much. So, I did not feel scared to go out at night, or visit the parks beyond the airport, or hang out at the markets, etc. On some occasions, I even drove in to work for recalls at night, if I had to. I would not have dreamed of that in Sierra Leone.

Q: From your perspective, how did the country react to the election? Was it done well?

MBENNA: Again, not being a reporting officer, I can't speak to this with any degree of confidence/competence. However, just by the word on the street, the election results had the same reaction as in most African countries. Many thought it was fair and just as many thought it was unfair.

Q: I would imagine you had pretty good equipment there.

MBENNA: We had the same type of equipment as I had in other countries. However, because of the DRC history of war and the pending election, I had extra contingency equipment.

Q: Could you get around the city? I've heard stories at various times of the Congolese army at sub-checkpoints and these were usually where you paid them off to keep going or something.

MBENNA: Yes, my spouse and I got around fairly easily in Kinshasa. There were some checkpoints, but the soldiers normally said hello and waved us by once they saw the license plate. Also, for some reason, if they did stop us and they heard my husband's Lingala (he learned it there), his Swahili (the language the soldiers spoke in Kinshasa), or his heavy African accent when he spoke English, they were nice to us. I never recall being detained or harassed in Kinshasa beyond the normal, even when I was alone.

Q: Did you have much contact socially with the Congolese?

MBENNA: I enjoyed my DRC staff and did things with them and their families, as time and circumstances allowed. Also, we did church-like things with folks from church. Also, Congolese are friendly people so we socialized with them when we went out to eat nyama choma under the trees or did other fun things. I would not say we socialized with a lot of Congolese, but we socialized with those we felt comfortable with.

Q: I'm told the nightlife is fun.

MBENNA: Yes, eating and dancing. We did not go to clubs but we got the same effect under trees and in social halls and at the parks (and even church). Lots of eating, dancing and just having plan old good meet-up with folks there in Kinshasa.

Q: I know you had a good time there, but did you ever feel you were in danger at any time?

MBENNA: Maybe a few times with the worst being not too far from election and in my community. One Saturday, after coming from the market doing our veggie and fruit shopping, my spouse and I stopped by the Embassy annex to fuel up our vehicle. We heard sporadic gunshots a lot in Kinshasa so hearing a few while on the annex compound did not bother us. When we went to drive off the compound the guard told us that there was rebel activity in the city and it was not safe. We did not live too far from the annex so we decided to take our chances to get home. Once before, my husband was caught at the compound for several days (when I was out of the country on training) during another similar episode in the city and almost got killed on the compound by a stray (or maybe not a stray) bullet.

We asked the guard to let us out and he did. While driving home, we started seeing the streets lined with young men, more than normal, wearing bandanas around their heads and their crotches and holding guns -- some shooting their guns in the air. It was a different scene that what we ordinarily saw so I got a little scared and scooted down in the car. I told my husband to speed up but he said he did not want to draw attention and would drive as normal. When we turned down our street, we saw the normal UN tank that was parked near our house, but with what seemed like more UN soldiers than normal. We also saw the same scene as we saw from the main street with men with guns, strings of bullets across their chests, and the bandanas. They were intimidating and scary to look at. Also, the shooting of the guns had intensified. Before reaching the house, I called our

house guard on the radio to open the gate because we were close by -- that was the norm. When we were in sight of the house, my husband sped up some and we entered our compound. Our driveway was made of river pebbles, so when we got out we heard and saw bullet casings dropping and making clicking sound when falling on the pebbles. My husband said we must keep low and/or crawl to the house door and we did. As we did this, we saw our gardener crouching in the corner of the opened garage like he was terrified. I stopped and asked my husband if we should tell him to come inside. My husband said. No. He said we did not know the situation outside or who would turn on us in that it was very obvious things were not normal in the city and our community. I felt sorry for the gardener but my husband was right. Anyhow, the gardener was in the block garage or could go in the room on the other side of the garage. So, he had some form of protection.

When inside, I was very scared because the shooting intensified. We started hearing big bangs and smelling gun powder and something else we came to find out was drug smoking by the men outside out walls -- something they did, I was told, before they went to war. The furniture appliances in the house were shaking and moving due to the big blasts. I was in communication with the Embassy and was told to stay put until someone could come to get us since the streets were a little too dangerous right then. They took hours, and during that time my husband and I prayed just in case we did not make it alive. Our guard came to the door to tell us to leave because the men outside had set up a post in front of our house as if they were preparing for war. They told our guard that they knew the Americans favored a particular Congo presidential candidate and they would kill us when night came because we were Americans. We were horrified but could not do anything except pray and wait to be rescued.

Two of the RSOs finally came to rescue us. We asked if we could take our gardener out of harm's way and they allowed him to come with us. We asked about the guard and they said, no, their job was to guard the facilities. Before leaving the compound, they told us some instructions on how not to look or gesture in the car. They told us that the men in the street were jumpy and we must remain as calm as possible. We did. We were taken to the USAID apartment building near the Embassy and the gardener went his way. We stayed in that building for a month until the local government was able to comb our compound for unexploded ordinances. They found some, we were told.

So, that was the one and only time I felt really, really scared and endangered in the DRC. After that, it was back to life as usual.

Q: Oh boy.

MBENNA: But I would do it again. I would go to Congo again in the same situation. I would. Call me crazy, but those days were the Foreign Service at its best for me -- hard work, good times, and risk/danger.

Q: Were you getting a little bit tired of Africa by this point.

MBENNA: No, I was not. I was loving it! Also, because Africa was so volatile, colleagues respected IT/communications. They did their radio checks or reported it damaged or missing. They ensured they had backup communication and a plan if all else failed. From what I had seen so far and after the two Embassy attacks in 1998, people who came to Africa came for it all and were serious about their career. I was one of them.

Q: So where'd you go next?

MBENNA: I went to Sudan.

Q: Good God.

MBENNA: Yes, that is what my friends back home and some unadventurous colleagues said -- Good God!

Q: This is what year you arrived in Sudan?

MBENNA: This was in 2008. I also did three years in Sudan. There was so much work to do, and the money wasn't bad too. I had several high visible IT/communication projects (in Khartoum, Juba, and Darfur) that I wanted to see through to completion, so I did a third year.

Q: Well, this was a time when the Sudan had the unfortunate situation of being in the headlines, wasn't it?

MBENNA: Yes it was.

Q: How was it in Sudan?

MBENNA: Sudan was big news back then. Because of it, the Embassy was plagued with visitors such as the Secretary of State, celebrities like George Clooney, our Special Envoy to Sudan, and other high level officials visiting from one end of Sudan to the other with most of them stopping through Khartoum. With that said, I found the embassy busy with a new embassy compound construction project restarting since finally the government of Sudan released our construction material after several years of holding it up. So that project kept me busy for almost two and a half years. Then, there were the genocide/killings in Darfur. Since we had many visitors wanting to go to that area, I had to ensure IT/Communication worked for out there for them and that it worked flawlessly. What a challenge that was. Then, we had the big elections pending that could (and eventually did) separate southern Sudan from the rest of the country, to become the youngest country in the world. Wow, it was amazing to see that development in the south. It was so professionally rewarding to be a part of the IT/Communications planning for our facilities in the south (in Juba). There was never a dull day the entire three years in Sudan for me. On top of my primary IT/Communications duties, I did act as Management Officer on occasions and I also served as the Equal Employment

Opportunity (EEO) counselor for the entire mission there in Sudan. EEO work kept me busy in Sudan.

Q: What type of EEO cases did you see?

MBENNA: A variety of them. Gender (sex) allegations, harassment, and sexual harassment allegations were the most prevalent.

Q: I would assume that being in chaotic Africa, sexual harassment must have been a major factor, wasn't it?

MBENNA: Actually, not really. In most of the other African countries I served I did not hear much or know of any sexual harassment cases, but mind you I was not an EEO counselor at all of those embassies. It was in Sudan that the allegations became more widespread.

Q: From what I understand, as happens in other countries, not just Africa, rape becomes a military tactic. In Yugoslavia, they had rape camps. They would take the young Muslim girls and rape them, just to sort of shame them. It was all very primitive.

MBENNA: Wow.

Q: In Khartoum it was very religious, wasn't it?

MBENNA: I think so. There were very strict Muslims there, but there was also a big protestant community. They cohabitated to the extent possible, I suppose. The Christians were mostly Southern Sudanese. I guess they came up from bordering Sudan or from Kenya.

Q: I thought Khartoum was mostly Muslim?

MBENNA: Khartoum was mostly Muslim, yes, and so was Darfur.

Q: And Juba...

MBENNA: And Juba was mostly Christians from my understanding.

Q: We use the term animist. Did they worship trees there?

MBENNA: Wow, I never knew of anyone worshipping trees there. I am not saying it did not take place, but this is the first I even heard that people worship trees anywhere.

Q: You were there two years?

MBENNA: Three years.

Q: Three years, then what?

MBENNA: Then I took an assignment in the Information Resource Management (IRM) Bureau as the Senior Recruitment Technical Advisor.

Q: What was that job all about?

MBENNA: It was a position above my current grade and it was newly created with no funding and no staff. So, I felt really doomed when I came and found out all of this. Nevertheless, I had to do my best like always. You see, I really wanted to stay in Africa, but for one reason or another it was not possible. My husband had joined the Foreign Service a year earlier. I needed to start thinking about retirement and what was next for my life and what better time/place to do that than during a Washington-based assignment. So, I accepted the seemingly suicidal position.

I went back and it was quite a challenging assignment. I was a recruiter and advisor of workforce hiring and sustainability issues for IT professionals. I also did a lot of administrative work to support my position like budgeting, shipping, copying, etc. Also, I worked closely with the Department of State Human Resource office on a variety of issues related to recruiting and sustaining IT professionals. It turned out to be quite an exciting job and I had almost complete autonomy in what I did, to include recruiting. I really enjoyed it.

Q: Where did you find IT candidates?

MBENNA: All over but mostly at the military bases in the U.S. The military folks really had the skills and discipline to make it in the Foreign Service as IT professionals. I went after them very hard.

Q: And they were also used to working in isolation.

MBENNA: Yes they were. Also, they and their family members were accustomed to living and working abroad and the erratic hours of an IT professional. It was a win to go after military folks separating from the military. I recall joining on a three base recruiting trip with the gentleman in the HR section who had the veterans' portfolio and another of my IT colleagues who had worked in another division at the military. We flew to Atlanta, rented a car and after doing a recruitment gig at Georgia Tech, we drove to Fort Benning, then Fort Stewart, then Moody AFB. We had a ball travelling the backwoods of Georgia to those bases. I also felt proud that I was showing my colleagues my home state and town (Fort Stewart was in Liberty County, GA where I grew up.). Most of all, I was elated to be recruiting for military folks and telling them I was from Georgia.

Q: Did you talk southern?

MBENNA: Of course, I am a proud southerner. Actually, my husband said when I am not in the south I do not have a southern accent, but as soon as the plane lands in Georgia, the

southern accent returns. He is right, but it is automatically. I do not intentionally change it. (Laughter).

Q: Part of the culture, part of the tribe.

MBENNA: Yes. Anyhow, I think I helped the department during that tour. Unless I was really misled by those interested and saying they would apply, I believe I increased some of the underrepresented groups in the Foreign Service like southerners, native Americans, blacks, Hispanic, Asians, and females. I went off the beaten path to recruit like down in small towns in FLA, GA, out in Louisiana, Texas, etc.

Q: It is amazing how many people know nothing about the Foreign Service. You tell them the Foreign Service and they think of foreign in the middle of a desert like the foreign legion or something.

MBENNA: Absolutely. I have a funny story. After my first tour I returned home with a pocket full of money and my mom told me to buy a home with it. So, I went to the local real estate agent to buy a home. The guy jokingly (or not) asked if I was a drug dealer or robbed a bank because young people like me do not walk in with that type of money to buy a home. Black people did not have enough money back then to buy homes and especially not young black females in their twenties. When he asked where I worked and I told him State Department, he asked how I got a good job like that in Atlanta. I told him that I did not work for the State of Georgia, but the Department of State in Washington DC -- Federal government in the Foreign Service. He said he did not believe it, so I pulled out my Diplomatic passport, my orders, etc. and showed it to him. He was still clueless about the Department of State and Foreign Service by his follow-on questions, but at least he proceeded with showing and selling me a nice home which I still have today.

Q: Did you find you were able to get a good number from the African-American community at the recruitment events.

MBENNA: Well, yes, because a lot of African-Americans are in the military. Also, as a recruiter, you find ourselves recruiting folks on your own dime, like in your community, in your church, while on vacation, etc. So, whenever I met an African American or other type of minority who I thought would enjoy this lifestyle and work, I talked up the Department of State Foreign Service.

Q: Did you find they had the education that would be required?

MBENNA: Yes. They needed a degree or experience with certifications. The military folks had one or both, so they were easy. I did not hold back from going after them if they did not have the education required. I went after them to arouse their interest. If I did that, then I was hoping they would go after the required education and credentials.

Q: Did you get much feedback from people who you recruited and who'd gone in?

MBENNA: Not much, but I knew their names and smiled when I saw they had made it or attended a new-hire ceremony and saw familiar faces. I personally preferred not to get feedback or keep in touch. I wanted them to grow on their own within the Department of State Foreign Service. However, I knew what a challenge I had as a black female and minority, in general, in the Foreign Service, so I am always available and willing to help them through cultural issues or issues stemming from allegations of discrimination due to their race or sex. I have had to listen to a few just vent -- sometimes that is all that is needed, a listening ear for something to regroup and go the distance in the Foreign Service.

Q: You did this job, what, until you retired?

MBENNA: I did two more assignments after this one. I was going to retire and had told my friends, but then my husband had issues with his boss and was not recommended for tenure. It was a big and unfortunate mess, but it all worked out for him in the end in that he is now tenured and doing very well. However, it took him about three years to get through this. So, instead of retiring from Washington, I took two more tours to see him through this. I could guide and help him fight better from within because I could research FAMS, policies, regulations, etc.

Q: What was the problem with your husband?

MBENNA: Well, he did not have a problem. He was actually very good at his job and his boss did not know how to utilize him properly. To make a long story short, my husband of African descent who spoke several languages to include French, was already at post a year before his boss (first time in Africa and spoke little to no French) arrived. Francis, my husband, had established himself well in the professional community, with his colleagues in the Embassy, and with the Department. He was doing great as a first tour solo General Services Officer in N'djamena, Chad. I believe it intimidated his boss from the start, thus the plot to discredit him as a Foreign Service person and get him out of the Foreign Service began. He had to go before the tenure board three times before being tenured. He was just tenured last year and the next week the promotion panel came out and he was also promoted. What a blessing. He is now on track and I thank God that the system worked. You see, I recruited a lot of African Americans and other minorities. With all the evidence that pointed to discrimination and harassment against Francis, if the system did not prevail in his favor, I would have felt like I lied to a whole group of people about the Department being an equal employment opportunity employer.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

MBENNA: Ambassador Mark Boulware was the ambassador for most of his tour, then Ambassador James Knight was for the remainder of his tour. Two fine ambassadors

Q: So, you did not retire. Where did you go next?

MBENNA: I went to Kabul, Afghanistan. My husband and I both went to Kabul. In Kabul he was working on his second tenure tour so it was a tense and stressful 12 months. It was during that assignment we found out that he was not tenured. Actually, the first tenure was due to him not having sufficient time to make a decision on. He had stayed behind his classmates to take a year of French. Anyhow, this second time around all was well with his files but just that one EER from hell, even though his other EER was super. Anyhow, when he was notified that he was not tenured he coincidentally received some information that proved he was targeted. Thus, he went to AFSA for help. I am glad I stayed in longer because I helped him do a lot of research and put his case together. So, Kabul days were long, working my real job and then returning home in the evening and helping my husband put his case together to avoid separation. He eventually received a 3rd time at tenure and he was tenured that time around. That was some assignment to Kabul.

Q: What was your job in Kabul?

MBENNA: I was a Management Officer who worked in the Transition section under the Executive Office in Kabul. We basically did the planning and strategizing for the U.S. Government transition from a military led to a civilian led presence in Afghanistan. My portfolios were many but mostly IT and General Services. Also, I was the program manager who kept all the tasks relating to all facets of the transition on track. It was interesting work. I also got to go to Bagram with a visiting team from Washington. We took a chopper and that was kind of cool. I was used to choppers by then since I took them a lot in Lebanon and a few times in Guatemala.

Q: Is that Office still in existence in Kabul since the military pulled out?

MBENNA: No, that office was dissolved when the transition was completed. Actually, that was not too long after I departed. It really felt great being a part of such an important project for our country. I really feel good about my work in the Foreign Service, especially these two things: First, planning for the new Embassy for The Republic of Southern Sudan, then planning for the transition of our government presence in Afghanistan. All good stuff. I did not enjoy Kabul much because of all the personal pressure my husband and I were under, but I did like the job and hated to leave.

Q: Where did you go next or did you retire?

MBENNA: Well, no, I did not retire. I still had to see my husband's third tenure through to the end, so I took the chief of communications position in Tunis, Tunisia.

Q: How was Tunis? I guess compared to Egypt, Libya and some of the other countries in that area, Tunisia was a garden spot. Did you get out much?

MBENNA: All I can say is that it is a hidden secret. That place is so nice. Actually, I found nothing bad about the place except the radicals who showed their head via violent attacks the year I left. Unfortunately, I broke my leg when I arrived and it limited my

travels in country. Also, I was there for only a year and during that year I was recuperating from the leg and busy with lots of big projects.

Q: So, what were your duties in Tunis? Did you go out as a Management Officer or stayed with IT?

MBENNA: I went out as a the chief of communications. Remember, I was not one to jump from field to field. I only took the management position in Kabul because it was what was available in order for me to do a tandem with my husband -- and we needed to be together due to what he was mentally experiencing with his tenure. I had mastered my profession and wanted to retire with that accomplishment under my belt. So, my duties in Tunis were IT/communications related. Of course I did many stints as acting Management Officer, but not for very long periods.

What was interesting about Tunis is that it had not fully normalized since the Arab Spring and the attack on our embassy in 2012. So, one of my mandates, since I was the first permanent IT chief there in some years, was to normalize all IT and communication programs. It was tough because the Tunisian Foreign Nationals (FSNS) who worked there were set in their ways of doing things just to get by and not for sustainability. Also, we were due a big OIG inspection just six months after I arrived. This was the first big OIG inspection since before the Arab Spring, I was told. So, everyone was worried and busy preparing for it, especially my section. To add to the work, I was Post's EEO counselor and I had my share of training and counseling work to do. Yes, that year in Tunisia was quite busy for me and having to limp about four or five months out of that year with a broken leg made it busier and difficult, but I did it. So, after Tunis I was ready to retire. Actually, Tunis was a two year assignment. I was so drained and burnt out until I just could not finish that tour. I needed a rest. So, my husband and I spoke and decided that whatever the results were for his third tenure, we would accept it; therefore, I should not drop dead from stress or exhaustion waiting to see what was ahead for him. We decided to trust God. So, I submitted my retirement papers. Just a month and a half before the retirement seminar started, the tenure and promotion lists came out and he was on both of them. Hallelujah, my husband's career was finally locked in and mine was finally coming to an end. So, I am now retired, praise the Lord!

Q: You certainly had a career.

MBENNA: Quite a career and I do not regret making the career choice that I did. I loved every second of it -- the good, the bad, and the ugly!

Q: What do you think about Africa today? Do you follow the news there?

MBENNA: No. I rarely look back. Since my spouse is from Tanzania my ears perk up when I hear the word Tanzania or other East African countries in the news. However, the other African countries I served were just normal Foreign Service assignments that happen to be in Africa. I enjoyed the continent but the assignments and countries are behind me now.

Q: Do you have any African connections here in Washington?

MBENNA: No, I do not. Of course if I meet someone with an African accent and I feel up to it, I will ask where they are from and chat a bit, if time permits. However, I do not want any relationships or connections with folks from any country I served, at least not serious or lasting ones. Just a “Hi, how are you?” and less than five minutes follow-on conversation is good enough for me. I need to move on to the next phase of my life, and looking back or keeping ties with the past would be overwhelming to me. I now have a clean slate.

Q: Well, I’m glad we got this.

MBENNA: Will I receive a copy of the voice transcription? It would be nice to keep it in my stash of relics and other stuff for my grandkids and their kids.

Q: You can ask for it. Well, it’s been fun. You certainly have had an interesting career.

MBENNA: Thanks to ADST for this opportunity to share my career. This is something I can use to finish preparing my memoirs I have started writing. Thanks again.

End of Interview