

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

**DIVINE TARLA**

*Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar  
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**INTERVIEW**



**Figure 1: Powwow dancers in traditional regalia at the Climate Change Conference, Haskell Indian Nations University, Lawrence, Kansas**

*Q: Today is October 25, 2025, and this is a Fulbright interview. Can you state your name and spell it for us, please?*

TARLA: My name is Dr. Divine Tarla.

*Q: Perfect. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up, and what did you study when you went to school in Chicago?*

TARLA: I was born in the English-speaking part of Cameroon and went to the English school system till the K-12. [Kindergarten through 12th grade] Within a month, I had to go to higher education, and the competitive entrance was into the University of Dschang,

the best agricultural school constructed by the USAID [United States Agency for International Development] in the 1980s, where most of the courses were delivered in French. So for twenty-five years, I had to learn primarily in French and later use the language to teach and conduct research.

*Q: Perfect. Can you tell me, how did you get interested in Fulbright and why did you apply to be a Fulbrighter?*

TARLA: When I was just two years in college, three decades ago, a Fulbright Alumnus organised a conference with representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Cameroon where I learned about Exchange Programs, especially Fulbright. They were explaining, and for me, it was so difficult and nearly impossible for me to ever measure to the standards. It is worth noting that I've never seen the professor (Fulbright alumnus) again.

More than a decade ago, later, I was a tenured professor, and a Fulbright grantee came to my office for assistance with his student records so that he could travel, use them for admission abroad. I told him that it would take me a few days to bring the student record together and send it to him. He was so happy, and he told me that he was going abroad for a Fulbright scholarship, and as a student, he needed at least a master's, and he gave me the official address for the Department of State, Cultural Affairs Officer who could mentor me and assist. And I really looked at the conditions. I read for more than a year, looked at it, but it was difficult, because you needed that to be an academic juggernaut and understand American culture. I saw that the alumni will constitute part of the selection committee. And for me, it could be very difficult, because nobody from my college was an alum.

So, that is how it happened. I applied to three universities, and they all accepted me. The University of Georgia, Kansas State University (KSU), Manhattan, KS and Michigan State University at East Lansing campus. They all agreed that they would be happy to collaborate and work with me. At the end of the day, the Department of State selected KSU, which was really difficult for me at the time, because KSU, when I look at the demographics, everybody was white. My professor had a PhD in 1964, long before I was born, so I didn't know how we could get along, and all these types of issues. When I looked online, [I found that] Manhattan, Kansas, is known for the college, the churches, and the people. So I took those three words seriously.

But God is so kind. When I applied, they called me for an interview, and during the session, the chairwoman of the commission, who, I think, should be the public affairs officer, asked me, "You talk of pesticides, do you usually go to the field?" I said, "Yes." She asked another question, "Do pesticide applicators in Cameroon wear gloves?" I said, "None, that is theory, in practice, they don't wear any gloves." She asked another question, "What about boots?" I said, "Not more than 2%." She said, "So for years, when I traveled to the West Region of Cameroon, where they grow a lot of vegetables, and apply a lot of pesticides, I've always wondered whether there is no researcher looking at these issues. And with your background and what you have presented to me, you are really doing the job, and I will beg my co-panelist, if the American government is the one

giving this grant, and then I'm the chairperson, then this is the candidate we have been looking for." Weeks later, I received a letter from the Cultural Affairs Officer confirming that I was selected as a finalist and I should re-edit my application form for submission. In February 2016, the Department of State sent the final award documents, and I received all documents for my DS2019 through DHL. In August 2016, the US Embassy organized a farewell luncheon for us the grantees and welcomed the returnees during the same ceremony.

When I landed at the airport, my professor walked up to me and said, "Divine, you are divine. I'm Larry. "Where's your bag?" As we went to the car, I've never been to America, I've never been with a white person. There was nothing good to discuss. He only asked, "How was this trip?" I said, "Really long, close to forty-eight hours." And he replied, "Oh, truly, long." There was nothing to discuss. I turned and said, "I hope I will have a church to attend, because American missionaries are so present in my community, and I thought I could get one." And he said, "Yes, you will get one." In two weeks, I go through an International Christian organization. They gave me this friend, the family friend, with whom I could eat food and talk with them, and I was so happy. When they sent my message to the person, they asked, "Could you mentor Divine? Our friend from Cameroon." He just gave it to his wife and said, "Girls have to go with girls. I'm a man. I will not be working with Divine." That's when I knew that Divine in America could be considered a female. Where I'm from, a culture where [Divine] it's all male. In 2022, two Divine's registered for NGO Go Christian in Texas and I arrived first. The receptionist gave me the key with a female roommate. Hours later, I got a knock on my door stating that the lady didn't look at the gender since most people associated the name to a female gender. Since then, I have seen a couple of female namesakes, a good cultural lesson for me.

From the day Bob Reader (presently a Professor at Dallas Baptist University) became my mentor, I felt at home. I've lived here, back and forth. That is how I could go to present in an all-white ceremony. If you come with an open heart, you could live here (USA). You could enjoy, have partners with whom we could do things [like] in Cameroon. I met one Cameroonian, now American, who came initially from Cameroon through the DV [Diversity Visa] lottery and we later got married. Her name is Geraldine Ambe.

*Q: What does Fulbright mean to you?*

TARLA: Fulbright to me, is connection. You look at a child whose parents— in Africa, we say, are illiterate because they cannot read. Never went to any formal education, and I've gone to school. I've had a PhD. That will remain there; you teach on that campus until you go on retirement. But with the connection that Fulbright gave me, all the resources at the embassy, the Department of State, Kansas State University, were very supportive. I've been able to look beyond the classroom. I can help people go ahead with their businesses in Cameroon, not only in Cameroon, but in other parts of Africa. I collaborate with researchers in many places.

A good example is a case from last year. Community Solutions Program picked my email address through the alumni forum and asked if I would be willing to evaluate applications. I read through those applications, and I was the best [at evaluating] with eighty-four applications that I read and submitted. If you are the best with applications from more than one-hundred countries you have to go through, it's also really satisfying and gratifying because you also learn a lot. So now I'm not only looking at that small community in Cameroon, I'm connected all over the world. From a classroom teacher, I have entered the field of citizen diplomacy and have some soft powers today. For 2 years, I have served as a pioneer Board Member of Fulbright Association North Dakota Chapter and would be the next president from May 2026. Through Fulbright North Dakota, I will stay Connected, keep learning, give back and grow.



**Figure 2: Community Solutions Program Selection Committee Champions' Award (2025)**

*Q: Wow! So what would be your advice to anyone who's considering applying for Fulbright?*

TARLA: The first thing is self-confidence. I got this idea when they were giving us a seminar as we applied for Fulbright. Many people that I know, they can take five years, they plan, they write something, and they never submit. They are not sure they can be the best. So Gerald Chilla, the Cultural Affairs Assistant at the Embassy in Cameroon at the time, said, "we're not looking for the best candidate. We're looking for those who are willing to learn and to follow the application process," If Fulbright is looking only for the best candidate,—If you think that you did not have A+ on your campus, and Fulbright is not for you, I will tell you no, you need to have self-confidence."

They evaluate many other things, apart from academics. Leadership potential from the Fulbright perspective is based on participation in academic, extracurricular, community

and professional development activities, and personal attributes. The potential is in you, and at times the campus didn't see [that], since it evaluates only the academic activities. For instance, I was not the head of the lab. I was not the head of the department in Cameroon, but I believed in myself, I had gained leadership experiences from my exposure in conferences and trips across Africa, Asia, Middle East and Europe. I've been able to explore all these resources and opportunities that Fulbright is offering to us, and today I go back to collaborate with all these colleagues and superiors on different issues. Maybe if politics were more important, maybe if the mark was more important, [but] Fulbright looks at the whole person, and today [it is] a resource, not only to my country, but beyond.

*Q: Can you describe your most memorable travel experience during your Fulbright journey?*

Once I boarded the plane from Cameroon to the U.S. for my Fulbright, I saw myself touring Washington D.C. Fortunately for me, I arrived in September 2016 and I saw the Fulbright Annual Conference (Fulbright at 70: Meeting New Challenges) coming up in early November followed by the Welcome Ceremony (coupled with the African Studies Association Annual Conference) during the first week of December. I used these opportunities to explore the National Mall from Lincoln Memorial to Washington Monument, African American museum, Smithsonian Institute of Asian Art, Capitol Hill and the Library of Congress before going to the White House.

These were wonderful places, but many Africans have been to the same places. My trips to Hawaii and Alaska set me apart from other Fulbrighters. During the Biology Annual Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, I had a presentation on taro, a topic I had been working on for more than half a decade. A researcher from the University of Hawaii at Manoa took me to the campus and I visited the laboratory and irrigated taro fields. After reading and seeing aspects of taro in the native cuisines, tradition and methodology, I learned a lot of lessons that have galvanized my research back home. Of course, I cannot forget my experience at the Hilton Hawaiian Village Waikiki Beach Resort (one of the largest hotels worldwide). The fire dance native to Hawaii, known as Siva Afi, is a captivating display of skill and artistry that has become a staple at luaus across the islands. I cannot forget that experience.

I received my outreach lecture Fund to travel to the University of Alaska, Fairbanks in March, 2017. On the weekend before the lecture, I went to the city of North Pole where the Santa Claus House is the main attraction and I saw a reindeer domestication farm for the first time. I was also opportune to visit Fairbanks during the international Ice Festival with a lot of sculptures that amazed me as we never have snow in Africa and could never have imagined such an event. The next day, I paid a touristic agency to take me to the Arctic Circle on the way to Prudhoe Bay using the Dalton Highway, one of the longest (about a 100 miles) unpaved highways in the United States. I was amazed by the snow coverage, the oil trucks, no passenger vehicles and the road is lined by the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, one of the largest oil transportation systems. As we arrived at the Arctic Circle,

I hoisted the Cameroon flag and the US Embassy in Cameroon would never forget to give positive feedback on the trip.



**Figure 3: A Milestone Visit to the Arctic Circle: (a) Tour group during the Arctic Circle trip; (b) Raising the national flag at the landmark.  
Credit: Divine Tarla**

Fulbright cannot be complete with relationships with people. From the day I met Bob, he and his friends would arrange for my rides, especially when I am going to the airport and

they would wait till midnight until I return. Beyond the immense financial relief of avoiding travel costs, having someone meet me at the airport provided a profound sense of psychological warmth and belonging. This immediate bonding turned a stressful transition into a "welcome home" moment, making me feel like part of a family before I even reached my front door.

Through Bob, we went to several events in Manhattan, and we did Kayaking in Missouri. Before I left the country, we went to the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson, KS. Bob only told me that I was so courageous to do skydiving in Abilene, Kansas (the boyhood home of President Dwight Eisenhower) because he had not done it before. The day I came home to say a final goodbye to the Readers, her daughter, Rachel, asked the parents if it was true that I was leaving for Africa. As they told her that it was my last moment, she started crying that they may never see their brother again.

My story cannot be complete without talking about my experiences with Connie Satzler. She took the family and I to restaurants, especially after church services.



**Figure 4: Memorable Times with the Satzlers: (a) Meal outing in Manhattan, Kansas; (b) Home gathering in Keats, Kansas.**

- a) (from left to right) Divine Tarla, Connie Satzler, Stacia Satzler, Trevor Lambert (son in-law), Julia Satzler and Josiah Satzler
- b) (From left to right) Stacia, Divine, Lambert, Trevor, Josiah, Abbi Satzler (Daughter in-law)

**Credit: Connie Satzler**

The most significant memory for me is the invitation to join the family in witnessing the Great American Eclipse in Wymore, Nebraska. The moment the sky darkened felt surreal. Birds grew quiet, streetlights flickered on, and everyone around me instinctively looked upward in awe. When totality occurred, I felt a mixture of wonder and gratitude. It was not just an astronomical event; it was a shared human experience. Standing there with others, united in silence, I realized how rare it is to witness something so extraordinary together. Through both Bob and Connie, I have come to know their parents, children, and in-laws. They have heard a lot about Cameroon and have even engaged in remote activities with some of them.



**Figure 5: A Once-in-a-Lifetime Eclipse Experience Shared with the Satzlers in Wymore, Nebraska: a) standing together in awe during the event b) Watching the sky darken**

The Great Plains Welsh Heritage Centre, a small museum dedicated to preserving the history and culture of Welsh settlers in the Great Plains, was the spot where we watched the eclipse. They opened their doors to us and we spent an hour admiring the museum and learning the contribution of some Welsh descendants in American history and religion. The organization was very welcoming and even offered us plenty of watermelons for the trip back.

In 2018, I got married, but my wife and I were unsure which path was best for our future because I had a stable career in Cameroon while she was based here in the United States. I returned home right after the wedding to complete my two-year home residency, as required by law. When I finally came back to the U.S.—just a week before the COVID-19 travel ban began—I suddenly had no way to return to Cameroon. Thankfully, I had already fulfilled my home residency, so staying here became my only option, and I faced no legal difficulties. When friends in Manhattan heard about my situation, their kindness overwhelmed us. We received unexpected financial gifts, and even during the pandemic, someone offered to travel just to support us, though we felt it would not be safe. Through all of this, Manhattan truly became our first home in my new country.

After COVID-19, when we were unable to visit Cameroon my family immediately, it weighed heavily on me. Then one day, Connie invited us to spend a weekend in Kansas,

and it became a turning point. We stayed with her in Keats and went to Manhattan to visit friends at a restaurant. Later, there was a beautiful Celtic Angels concert at the Bowlus Fine Arts Center, and then spent the night in La Harpe with her parents. This remains one of the most unforgettable family experiences of my life with her family. It remains the only trip my family has taken to a place that truly felt like another home. When we finally returned to Manhattan, we rested before going to church the next morning, where the warmth was overwhelming. Soon after, we started our journey back to Bismarck, North Dakota—but the memories of that trip have stayed with us ever since.



**Figure 6: A Warm Get-Together with Friends at a Local Cafe in Manhattan, Kansas**  
From left to right: Akondwi Sirrisinwu, Professor Fred Schwenk and wife, Telma Neba, Robbin Cole, Terrance Cole, Ambe Geraldine, Divine Tarla  
Credit: Connie Satzler



**Figure 7: A Warm Welcome from the Coltranes in LaHarpe, Kansas**  
From left to right: Connie Satzler, Telma Neba, Ambe Geraldine, Ronald Coltrane, Divine Tarla, Akonwi Sirrisinwu, Irene Coltrane  
Credit: Connie Satzler



**Figure 8: Family Fellowship at Grace Baptist Church .**  
**(From left to right) Akonwi, Telma, Terri Gasser, Bill (Senior Pastor) Divine,**  
**Geraldine and Nancy Penalosa**  
**Credit: Connie Satzler**

*Q: Perfect. All right. Is there anything else you would like to share?*

TARLA: I would like to see more Americans interested in studying abroad. Because I live in North Dakota, on average, people say it's a very close community. I've met adults in their 50s who never had a passport. And when you meet any person who has been abroad, his approach to things is very different. Even when you disagree, he will have the confidence and good reasons to explain to you why he disagrees with you. Last year, my wife submitted her application to go on a Fulbright to Nigeria, though she wasn't selected. Because as an American, she left Cameroon for America, it doesn't mean she knows Africa. At least for me, I've been to more than 12 countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe, so I have a general view of the world. So after talking to her, she is considering going to Nigeria and working with the people [there]. We know that Fulbright is highly competitive and one of our goals as a Fulbright Chapter is to

*Q: Perfect. All right, thank you! We're going to stop.*



**Figure 9: A Special Evening with Bob Reader and His Four Boys in Manhattan, Kansas**  
**From left to right: Sam, Andrew, Divine, Benjamin, John and Bob**  
**Credit: Divine Tarla**

*End of interview*

## FURTHER INFORMATION

My Fulbright Experience containing more of this information is available in a book entitled: *The Role of the Fulbright Coordinator, Faculty Associate, and Community Mentor in the Success of the Fulbright Program*

URL: [The Role of the Fulbright Coordinator, Faculty Associate, and Community Mentor in the Success of the Fulbright Program: Tarla, Dr Divine N: 9781638819295: Amazon.com: Books](#)

Another documentary about my Fulbright Experience is entitled: *Enhancing Wheat Self-Sufficiency in Cameroon Amid Global Disruptions presented during the FACON24*  
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxOxtz56lu8>