

**Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Liberia Diaspora Project
Oral History Interview - Diaspora Public Hearings Participant
Project Organizer: The Advocates for Human Rights, Minneapolis, MN, USA
Funder: Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, MN, USA**

Interviewee (A): Georgette Gray

Interviewers (I): Mark Kalla, Ahmed Sirleaf

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I: Georgette, I'm one of the volunteers who participated in the TRC process. I'm an attorney at Dorsey & Whitney and we're in a conference room here because we have some good recording equipment. So, as you know I think, we're recording this call so we can get an oral record for the Minnesota History Center. And I – you received a packet in the mail, right?

A: Yes, I did.

I: And there's a form here that says you give your rights to the interview and copyright to the Advocates for Human Rights. I think Ahmed said you're signing that and sending it back?

A: Yes, I do have that packet, yeah.

I: OK, yeah, so I think we'll need that—for you to sign that and send it back, but I just wanted to make sure that you'd seen that.

A: OK

I: Alright, thank you Georgette. So, as I mentioned to you before, what this is about – it's not necessarily about the substance of your testimony at the public hearings. But the Minnesota History Center, according to my understanding, and why they want to do this project with the Advocates is that they do track immigrant communities that come to Minnesota and settle down and engage in significant events that are considered historic events in the state. So that they document that, you know, for future generations to reference. So they consider the public hearings of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission diaspora project of the Advocates as a significant historic event. And so they've asked us to talk to key individuals who participated in the event, you know, about your participation, the circumstances around your participation, the expectations and stuff like that. So that's what this is about.

A: OK

I: So, we have a list of questions here to get your input on and I think the first one is: Why did you decide to participate in the public hearings here in St. Paul?

A: I was involved actively with the Advocates for Human Rights and when I was asked to testify on issues related to the experiences of Liberians I had a story that I could share, myself, so I thought it was beneficial to the process.

I: Did you have to talk—or did you talk to anybody else about, you know, the implications of testifying to family or others?

A: I discussed it with my husband, yes, and I just told him—he thought it was OK, it wasn't anything that contradicting or contrary to any experience I had had, so he was comfortable with that.

I: And how do you feel about your decision to testify?

A: I feel good about it. I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to do that in that setting. It was a public forum but open and I felt good about what I did.

I: How did you feel as you were—the hearing was approaching? I mean, it was sort of a new thing – how did you feel as you were approaching the time to testify? Was it an emotional time?

A: Um, it was in the sense that I tried to recap a lot of my experiences because I didn't really know what exactly was going to be asked of me during the process and I had to revisit my experiences—things that I had buried—and just talk ... and I had a refreshed memory of what happened. So, it was 'a reflecting time,' I'll call it. A time to reflect on what actually ... in my personal experiences, I had.

I: So you did this to prepare for the actual testimony? Did you talk to family and friends about your time in Liberia at that time – to prepare?

A: Uh, no, because I had actually recently talked to a lady who wrote a book on—not on my experience [sic] generally—but she had done a story about Liberians and she was just interested—she's a writer—and she was just interested in knowing people's stories, so I had recently talked about my experience with her. She came over to my home and met with me and we just talked it over, so it wasn't something that I had to go recap—I mean, do a lot of—I was just concerned about what kind of questions were going to be asked, whether it was going to be a lot of disclosure and stuff like that. That was my concern.

I: What did you expect to happen at the hearings?

A: I had no expectations. I just knew that there were a few people that was involved in the civil war that were going to be in Minnesota during those hearings and they were gonna be testifying as well, and people that was in my community, that had, I mean, participated in a lot of different ways. Some people were sharing their own personal experiences—it was something I was looking forward to because we live and work with people within the community and we really didn't know what other had gone through ... so it was like a learning process as well as an emotional one.

I: Did you talk to some other people there that you hadn't known before about their experiences?

A: Yes, I did. Actually, cause I had encouraged—I was asked to recommend people that I talked or knew that had experiences during the war and there were a couple of ladies in my church that I had personally heard their own testify—testimony in church and how God has blessed them and some of their experiences and I thought their stories were interesting to share so I had talked to them and they were willing to come to the ceremony, to the process, and they testified also. So we had kind of met and shared stories, so it was a, as I said, a reflective time because you have your own stories and sometimes we have eternal things that we don't share with each other because you think you are the only person that's going through or have been through it,

and then by talking to others you realize that they—that there's a lot of other people walking around with your pain and burden too. So I had a lot of that discussion.

I: What was the experience of giving the testimony like for you?

A: I was there listening to other people, I think the day before? And it was an emotional time because I was listening to people's experiences and things that had happened and I was also listening to what people I knew— I had interacted with—their association with the process, things that they had done, and accusations at that time. It was kind of a mixed feeling because some of the folks that you're walking with, you're working with in the community—you're working to help—and you realize that, hey! They were all contributors to some of the difficulties that *you* had experienced, so it was a, kind of a mixed feeling, kind of deal. But it was nice to know that certain people were involved in certain things, took part in certain things in the country, contributed to it.

I: So, these mixed emotions, can you describe those a little more?

A: Mixed emotions for the losses that we had—the losses that I personally experienced—the lives that were lost, the friends and families that I lost. It was kind of regrettable that, the things that happened and you're looking at people, or you're in the same room with people that you *knew* contributed to the loss of life of loved ones—contributed to the pain that you have gone through, people that contributed to some of the hardship and suffering of leaving the country and living as a refugee in a refugee camp. It was kind of a mixed emotion because sometimes we try to bury the past and try to say, "OK, let's try to move forward." And that's what Liberians in general have tried to do over the years until then the TRC process came about and it's like, OK, let's go back and seek out those feelings, let's go back and seek out those experiences—are you willing to talk about what you went through. That was like coming back for some, for a lot of people that I talked to after the event it was like, OK, it was good thing for us to just talk to somebody about it. It was just reflecting, emotional, going back to remember the people you've lost and trying to forget all and move forward with your life and just realizing that there is nothing you can do about those—there's lot of things that happened. The best individual solution for me was to try to look at people as humans, as my own people, and try not to blame everyone for what has transpired, knowing that there are certain particular individuals that were to be held accountable for what happened in the country. So you can't go on blaming every Liberian you meet or everyone from any particular tribe and saying that everybody from that tribe is evil because the reality is not that—not everyone from any particular ethnic group was evil...certain groups were involved so.

I: Would you say that the participation in the process, Georgette, brought any closure for you?

A: Uh, for me... I had tried prior to the... to the process to bring some closure to it because, um... each of us individually deal with problems or deal with emotions differently. For some of us it was closure; for me—a lot of ways, in a lot of ways, it was good to see and know and face the truth and facts that have been lingering around that it was a 'they-say-I-say-you-say' kind of deal. And then now from the TRC process it was definite: you know who, kind of, in a lot of ways...in a lot of ways, in some ways it's a closure for me, in some ways I had closed a lot of those chapters myself...

I: Is—?

A: To enabled me to move forward.

I: Is there anything that you felt you left out of your testimony, that you wished you could have said, or anything?

A: Um, not, no, because...well, my testimony was meanly general on the experiences that we had... as refugees coming to the United States. Or trying to get us established here, some of the difficulties; especially with women—that's basically what my questions centered around. ...My personal experiences with certain people in the country wasn't addressed ... but listening to others in the room and other testimony, I formed closure too, that I'd left behind what I had to leave mine... because when I look at my own experiences there were more—there were people who had more traumatic experiences than I did and I wanted to just leave it behind, move forward.

I: Were there some things that you heard about for the first time at the public hearings?

A: Oh, there's a lot of things that I heard about, especially when it comes to individual experiences—there were a lot of people I'd interacted with in the community, I've worked with, and I didn't know what they had gone through. But at the public hearing, when they testified how people did things to them and things that they experienced—a lot of stuff I learned firsthand, or first time.

I: Were there things that you testified about that you wish you wouldn't have talked about?

A: No. There was nothing I regret, to say taking part, no I wouldn't. .

I: Well, what do you think the whole process meant, in general, means to Liberians? The TRC process...?

A: I think the TRC process is—it was a good process, it was a—it *is* a good process; it *is* a good experience. What I... I believe a lot of these people, some people it brought, maybe closure. Some people, from what I... haven't talked to others after...some people it, it didn't do anything for some. But for some it did bring closure—somewhat satisfy, that, 'Well there was a forum that heard my voice, that heard me say what I experienced.' In general, I think it was beneficial to those who had the opportunity. What I thought was: There are thousands of Liberians who went through this process and within the United States and there was, I don't know, less than 1% of us were able to all have the opportunity to go through this process. I don't know how many people, in general were interviewed; I don't know how many people in general had the opportunity to talk about that, but I know the process in Minnesota, we didn't accommodate that many people... that, I mean, like, a percentage of what the number of people in the country, general. And I don't know, generally, what, how many, I mean... there are so many people who wish to have the opportunity too and there are so many people who felt that it was like a beginning and that there is more to be done or there should have been more done, I don't know.

I: What did you feel about—I mean, there were a lot of non-Liberians involved in the process. What was your perception of their involvement?

A: I think it was an educational piece for them. People interact with people, I think for them a lot of people started to get a general concept of what Liberians had experienced. Some people it was like a first time—*firsthand* learning experience for them to see us in a different way. Whether that was good or bad, I don't know... but I think it was a learning experience. It was good for Liberians because we have been more, like, boxed in—into our own selves, into our

own environments, like it's all about Liberians. But the experience is something that other countries and other people learn about us; learn that—learn more about the war that took place... And even after the process, when some publications came out and people at my job would come and ask me, "Well Georgette, what country are you from again? Oh, you're from Liberia, that country that had the civil war! Oh, I'm so sorry that happened to you—did you go through it?" and it prompted a lot of questions. Some were uncomfortable to answer and some were... we were—I was able to handle it but I think it was a learning experience for those who weren't from Liberia and maybe now they'll see us differently, that we're human and... these things happen.

I: Georgette, about the community. I know you alluded at some of the people you work with in the community who testified and you were sort of surprised to learn about their experiences. Did you come away—this is a two-part question—did you come away feeling that, you know, these people were contrite and regretful—if they were on the side, on the perpetrator's side—or if they were victims – did you come away feeling that it, you know, that the testimony helped them by coming out to talk about their experiences? That's one and secondly, how about the community in general: I know Minnesota has one of the largest Liberian populations in the state [sic] and you, being a community leader, what impact did you see on the community coexistence as a whole?

A: The folks that... that testified, whether—some of them that were involved in the process whether they were regretful, I say... I didn't see... I can reflect on one particular person mentally and I didn't see any regrets in there. I think they were kind of trying to justify what—why did they do what they did. ...I didn't hear a lot of the apologies, that, "Oh I apologize for what I did..." and stuff. I feel like... they felt like they were safe once they were in America and nobody could do anything to them because everywhere we go it's like 'This country is the country of law; you cannot attack people, you cannot do stuff.' But there are so many people that I interacted with that walk away. It's like, 'Gosh, if I caught this one in Liberia it would be something else, it wouldn't be like, in America now. I wouldn't do it here because I'm afraid I would get arrested, I would go to jail' ... from that. So for them feeling remorseful and regretful, I didn't see a lot of that coming across. The victims – the people that fell victim to the process, a lot of them walked away, from what I gathered, feeling confident or satisfied that, 'Yeah, at least I told somebody about my story. At least someone listened to what I had to say.' Whether something will be done, whether they felt that, that is something the TRC process was doing something for them, I didn't see any general feeling. But there are so many people that we can each —come and say, 'This person did this to me but, hey, I live with them in the community today.'

There was one guy I know who was, who is active in the community, too. He was beaten up, and the person that beat him, the person's brother lives here in Minnesota and he mentioned that to us, a group of us was sitting and so what, and said, "In Liberia, this one, I would do something to him yet now I can't do anything 'cause if I attack him right now, if I do something to him, I'm gonna get arrested." So, them seeming remorseful?, no.

The community involvement, I think, were a lot of us were excited that at least Minnesota was recognized as one of the largest Liberian communities—concentration of Liberians, and coming here was—coming here or the TRC process or the interviews being done here was significant or meaningful to us. People came out because they wanted to hear firsthand on what people had to say or questions and stuff they had to answer why people did certain things. ...The general morale of the community, I don't know if it impacted it in a lot of ways. People still try to just move on with their lives. They feel like... like generally the Liberians... it's like the war has happened. And that's what I try to tell people always: it's like, it *has* happened. A lot of times we found... we found it interesting that we had some discussions about why people did certain things. And some of the people that interacted or did things at that time, we brought it back and

said, “Oh, they were minors, some of the children, they were young, they were in their teens, they were coerced, they were threatened to participate and do certain things. So generally we tried to find that peace in our hearts and our minds and say, “Ok, you were a child when you did this, now you are an adult. What is—what are you doing right now to correct what has happened or what you did in the past?” We are generally a forgiving group of people so I think people have tried to move on and not... dwell on the past, dwell on what occurred in Liberia.

I don't know if I answered your questions but if I didn't you can definitely rephrase anything you need me to answer specifically.

I: No, I think you've addressed the question: just the impact on the community here in Minnesota, in general. And you've addressed that, so ...

A: Yeah, we're excited that they actually came over to us. It was a good experience for us. A lot of people took off work to go and see and listen. And after those forums usually we have heated arguments out in the—on the sidewalks and something to see how people felt about it. Some people felt the process worked, some people felt the process, just, it was good but the results they expected, thought that maybe after people testified some of them would be arrested and stuff and taken back to Liberia and tried and stuff like that. That was some of the expectations that we—people felt were gonna come out of the TRC process, that people were gonna be taken away from the U.S. and repatriated to Liberia and tried for the crimes they committed but that didn't happen in every case, so, what can we do about it? We just live with it.

I: Ok, I think she—Georgette, I think you've really answered the questions—yeah—you see—ok, go ahead—no, just one real quick one Georgette: So, have you been part of any reconciliation activities, TRC related activities, or other community activities since you testified?

A: I stayed with the community, it's just the last year or so I've kind of... tired to redirect my attention to personal things. But we stay with the community for hearings. I try to keep up with the women's group now – a group was set up to address some of the issues that women experience in Minnesota and ended up coming out of the whole TRC process as well. And a lot of what other groups are doing like the Liberian Women's Initiative is trying to address some of the problems that...the experiences of children because they're dealing with a lot of children that came out of the war, and all of those mentoring—I've mentored with that group as well, and you listen to children and when you hear kids that are teenagers now, they're finding it very difficult to balance their lives because they try to look back to their experiences, things they went through in the war and now they're in a stable environment, they're just trying to find a way that's truthful. I did participate in a lot of reconciliation process and I did talk to a lot of people that actually came out of their feeling that, 'Well, the process wasn't—process didn't work out like I expected.' People expected—there was a very high expectation that the TRC would have taken some people out of our community back to Liberia to be tried for the crimes that were committed.

I: Alright, thank you very much for taking up this time, you know, it's scheduled this Friday afternoon to participate in the Oral History Project with the Advocates for Human Rights... I thank you also Georgette, I appreciate the comprehensive answers and everything. I'm sure it'll be a boon to the History Center. I'm sure.

A: Thank you.

I: Thanks so much. Have a good weekend.

A: You too, thank you very much.

I: Bye-bye.

A: Bye.