

THE DENVER AFRICANA PROJECT

IMMIGRATION AND DIASPORA NARRATIVES: AFRICANA/BLACK VOICES IN THE DENVER METROPOLIS

Denver, Colorado, is currently the 23rd largest city in the USA. Fondly known as the “Mile High City,” it is justly famous for the great outdoors as well as the Denver International Airport (the second largest in the world). Denver metropolis has an ethnic population that is 75.7% white, 22.2% Hispanic, 5% black, 4% Asian, and 0.5% Native American. Both the distinct ethnic cultures and the interaction between different groups (including the stories that they have to tell) give the Denver metropolis its remarkable character. The aim of the “Denver Africana” project is to gather the views of one of these groups (Africans and African Americans in the Denver metropolis) on their experiences, challenges, and expectations or projections as immigrants (if they are) and/or Denver residents. Read together, these immigration and diaspora narratives could contribute to a real understanding of the scope and the possibilities for synergy provided by African immigration and the African American presence in the Denver metropolis.

Note: The interviews were conducted in 2016, and some details (including biographical information) may have changed.

University

Anthony Adu, Ghana, 17

Anthony Adu is from Ghana. He is seventeen years old and a sophomore at the university of Denver (DU). He hopes to become an actor and as such is deeply involved in the theater program. He speaks Ewe, Fanti, and English.

Anthony was ten when he moved to Colorado. His father had moved to the US earlier because of better opportunities and he joined him later. He points out however that the distance (with his father living in the US and his mother in Ghana) kind of created a wedge between his parents and they eventually divorced. He thinks that Colorado is a really great place but says that he would like to move to the East Coast so as to widen his acting horizon.

Anthony believes he has come a long way from when he had a heavy accent, which affected him, to now being in a situation where he feels more comfortable with himself. He wishes though that people would be more open-minded within the university environment. He compares the ambiance of his high school (Overland High School) where there was a lot more diversity to the “claustrophobic ambiance” he has experienced at the university.

Anthony sees himself first of all as a Ghanaian (he believes his African heritage is very integral to his life) and then as an actor. He does not really go out of his way to seek out

any group of people to identify with. He was very surprised to find out there is a vibrant Ghanaian community in Denver. Neither he nor his father belongs to that community. Belonging, he says, means attending meetings and even going to Ghanaian stores, something he is not so enamored of at the moment. But he is quick to point out that his culture means a lot to him; he appreciates the discipline and parental guidance associated with African culture.

Anthony has not visited home since he left because to do so requires a lot of planning and is very expensive, but he is definitely working toward that. He is currently a permanent resident and hopes to become a U.S. citizen as soon as possible. He considers himself very productive at the level he is and thinks that Colorado is becoming more vibrant with a lot of people moving to the area. So far, he has auditioned for acting roles in Denver, Littleton, and Aspen.

University

Joke Alao, Nigeria, 60+ □

Joke Alao is a Nigerian (Yoruba) woman who left Nigeria to join her husband in 1981. She never planned on staying put in Colorado, especially since she was already a registered nurse and also worked in psychiatry. She now works as a therapist, a registered nurse, and a social worker.

Having lived in Colorado for 30 years, she does not see what not to like. She likes the weather, even if it is sometimes erratic, and the scenic environment -- especially the mountains. She feels that wherever one goes in Colorado, there would be something to like. She does not like to think of what she might dislike in Colorado because she feels like that is a negative attitude and somewhat like saying what she dislikes about her own country, Nigeria. To her, Colorado as a whole is a very wholesome and supportive environment.

Joke is very committed to her church, Kingdom Connection Christian Center, where she is a church elder. She is also very involved in her community and has been president of several groups, including The African International Support Group, the Nigerian Association in Colorado, and Egbe Itesiwaju Yoruba.

She sees herself as African but she is also at ease with the term "African American." She became a US citizen when the opportunity presented itself. She is proudly Nigerian but also sees herself as a citizen of the world and would do whatever she can to make humanity better. She thinks there is need for a lot of improvement in Nigeria particularly and Africa as a whole, so she reaches out to help her country in whatever way she can. She was in Nigeria in December 2014 and worked with six organizations on healthcare awareness.

Joke believes that everyone can contribute to society, so she encourages people to embrace who they are as well as other people. She believes the problem of race is still very much around, but she feels that people should learn to move beyond such a divisive thought because the world is already so divided. Instead of complaining, she said, we have to realize that “nobody will respect you unless you begin to honor who you are.”

University

Ahmed Andesha, Egypt

Ahmed Andesha has lived in Colorado for nearly thirty years now. He does not think he would leave Colorado because he feels at home here. He left Egypt for better opportunities and because he did not want to be drafted into the military.

He started as a restaurateur before he became a doctor, and he lived in California before coming to Colorado. These days, his occupational focus is real estate.

Ahmed has dual citizenship with Egypt and the U.S and goes home (Egypt) for visits from time to time. He describes himself as Egyptian-American and gets on well with other Americans. He has found some kind of balance in being both Egyptian and American. In his words, “I cannot reject that American part as much as I cannot reject my Egyptian part. The two are different but not contradictory. For me, assimilating does not mean not being Egyptian anymore.”

He rates the news about Africa two (out of ten) but notes that the news reports are based on who is reporting and the facts they have. For instance, Hosni Mubarak (a former Egyptian President) was described as a dictator during the recent revolution. He agrees that there was so much corruption during Mubarak’s regime, but he never saw Mubarak as a dictator. He feels that people are now getting a better understanding of Egypt, especially with Mohammed Morsi (Mubarak’s successor) gone.

Ahmed acknowledges that in the 1970s there was much hostility in the U.S toward immigrants, but he says he has gone beyond that now that he identifies with being American. He feels that Colorado is a place where foreigners are well accepted. However, he did feel a bit vulnerable after 9/11 because of his accent and color. He feels that Egyptians are generally very proud of their history and very sure of themselves, so they usually rise above any form of prejudice because they know who they are.

He is sometimes nostalgic for old Egypt, for the times of Umm Kulthum (the famous Egyptian singer) when the streets were clean. Concerning how colonialism may have impacted Egypt, he says that “the problem isn’t that the British or French arrived, it’s that they left without anyone to replace them but a few ambitious leaders.”

University

Efram Anedo, Ethiopia, 18

Efram Anedo is an eighteen-year-old student from Ethiopia. He also works as a cashier at Office Depot. He has eleven siblings. His mother lives in the U.S. with six of his siblings while his father lives in Ethiopia with the other siblings. He speaks English, Oromo, and Amharic. Everyone in his family is bilingual.

Efram came to the U.S. in September 2014 in search of a better opportunity. He was able to do so because he has an older brother who has lived in the U.S. for about eight years. His brother works for the RTD as a bus driver. His social network includes his family, church, and school. He is a member of the National Honor Society and Inspire Colorado.

He is presently an Ethiopian citizen and a U.S. permanent resident, but he hopes to become a U.S. citizen as soon as possible. He does not really like the Colorado weather because of its fluctuations. He thinks California may be a better option in terms of weather, but he believes his ambition of becoming an aerospace engineer may be better realized in Colorado.

Concerning his social life, he believes that it is easier to make friends with people back home. He says that because of the extreme individualistic atmosphere in the U.S. he has to learn to “live alone somehow” because “people don’t trust one another here... because there is a lot of crime here and people are very scared. Like if I ask someone to borrow a phone here they think I am going to steal their identity.”

He does not quite get along with other Ethiopians because he feels they are trying to forget their culture and adapt to American culture. And even though he has friends from other places in school, his English “gets in the way,” so he hopes to improve his English.

On a scale of one to ten he rates the reportage on Africa a five and hopes that the negative news would not impact him negatively because of how it affects people’s perception of Africa. For instance, he says, “I have gotten weird questions like somebody asked if my dad stole my mom and forced her to marry him.”

His favorite thing about Africa is the weather and culture. He would very much like for people to experience that.

University

Monica Labiche Brown, Seychelles

Monica Labiche Brown did not always like Denver. When she first moved to Denver, she noticed a lack of diversity -- something that was rather conspicuous in Washington, D.C. where she worked at the World Bank for twelve years. However, as she began to expl

ore different social networks, she noticed that there was a growing African community. She began to feel at home and actually thinks that of all the places she has lived in the U.S., Colorado is the place that feels like home.

Although the main reason she moved to Denver was to be close to her parents (as her father's health was failing), she is quick to add that she was also drawn by the fact that (according to her research) it is one of the places with "the most entrepreneurs and the most start-ups." She also noticed that Denver has "a lot of educated people and a high number of highly educated African Americans". This entrepreneurial spirit gave her the business stamina to take risks and start her own organization, Africa Development Promise.

Monica has struggled over the years to come to terms with her shifting identities. She tried to fit into different groups without much success until she embraced a deep personal awareness of her unique identity. She was born in Seychelles, but grew up in Uganda. However, Seychelles was under British rule at the time and her mother maintained her British passport even when they moved to Uganda. Her father became a citizen of Uganda, but because of the political upheaval during the General Idi Amin administration, her father lost his citizenship and became stateless. He had to move to the US as a refugee while she and her mother fled to Seychelles after living in Uganda for fifteen years. Two years later, her father sent for them and she came to the US in 1976. They lived in South Carolina for a while and she attended an all-girls African-American college at Spelman College in Atlanta. At the college, she was referred to as the "African girl". At Seychelles, because she was not fluent in Creole, she was referred to as "Kenya born" (the way outsiders were referred to) and while she was growing up in Uganda she was not fully accepted as an Ugandan. Because of all these identities, she has come to accept herself as different, yet she proudly identifies with her place of origin, even though she does not have a dual citizenship status. She is just an American citizen because as a child she always wanted to be an American citizen. However, she has a very good relationship with other Africans, especially since her organization has to do with international development.

She also gets on well with other groups. She is married to an African American and believes that "we all have our own prejudices and we carry them with us." She said that when she first moved to the U.S., she did not understand why Africans were very misunderstood and why she would be asked many ridiculous questions, especially about her perfect diction (English). She feels that she has come a very long way from that time and that there is a lot more diversity now. But she believes that every group should be involved. For example, she says that most Africans are still influenced by a colonial mentality that makes them see African Americans through the white man's point of view. She thinks that it would do everyone a lot of good if we all consciously seek to understand one another. For example, she advises other Africans to embrace their communities instead of just sticking to their kind.

She rates the media attention on Africa 2 ½ over 10. She says there is so much negative perception of Africa as if there is an insistence that Africa must remain backward. Lau

ghing, she says, “I think the most positive we had was President Obama going to Kenya .” She feels that because of the negative perception mostly gleaned from the media, people neglect the fact that a lot of other things are happening in Africa, especially the economic and business potential in Africa at the moment.

She is not about to leave Colorado anytime soon; she points out that a lot more people are in fact moving to Colorado. “We used to be a secret and now it seems the secret is out.” She thinks that Colorado, in terms of change, is going through what cities go through. In terms of blending into her community, she has a diverse board of directors in her organization and belongs to an African American sorority, Delta Sigma Theta. Here is what she wants people to know about Africa: “When I’m speaking in universities or high schools, I tell them: don’t limit yourself to the United States and what’s going on here, there’s a whole world out there. Africa is growing to be a giant and people need to pay attention to what is going on there and they can be a part of its growth.”

University

Delcio Yuri Matthew Cajicua, Angola, 21

Delcio Cajicua has dreamed of coming to the U.S since he was ten years old, and his mother, who works for the government in a financial position, encouraged him. His father owns a publishing company. Delcio has been a student at the University of Denver (DU) since 2013. Before moving to Colorado, he was in Houston for eight months in order to learn English. Upon recommendation from friends, he chose DU and immediately fell in love with the environment.

Delcio is not a U.S. citizen and hopes to go back to his country after graduation, but he appreciates the social environment he has so far experienced. He says he has been fortunate to find good friends who helped him through a difficult moment when he had a problem with the law because he could not communicate well in English. He also gets along well with other Angolans and Africans.

He is curious about what he sees as gender segregation as if boys and girls can not hang out together, although he observed an exception during the Fourth of July celebrations.

Even though he has enjoyed the warm friendship of Americans, he says that 95% of Americans he has met “perceive Africa as a jungle where there is no electricity or the Internet .” He would like to encourage Americans to “visit Africa and see its beauty.”

He does not believe that he has faced much outward discrimination, although he suspects he might face bias when applying for a job.

University

Lucy Clark, Uganda, 46

Lucy Clark is a forty-six-year-old woman from Uganda. She works as a systems analyst in a hospital. She came to the U.S many years ago when she could not get admission in to the only university in Uganda at the time. Because she had an uncle who lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma, she came as an international student at a junior college.

Being self-driven, she moved to Texas where she attended college and also met her husband. Her husband's job brought them to Colorado. Because her husband is American, and her children too, she does not see herself moving back to Africa. She considers herself a U.S. citizen but her identity is African. She has been home (Uganda) a few times with her family but felt like an outsider. Having spent more years in the U.S. than in Uganda, she feels that her place is in the U.S. (even though she misses a lot of things about Africa). She is consoled by the fact that her mother lives just a few minutes away and she has a sister who lives in Los Angeles.

She is thankful for the opportunity that coming to America has given her and considers herself very lucky. She is not enamored of the term "African American." She describes herself as an African and feels that as she gets older she is becoming more Ugandan at heart, even though she is no longer interested in Ugandan citizenship. She feels that she has utilized her potentials to the fullest and relates to people as they come into her life and not just based on color.

She is likely to leave Colorado just because she does not like snow and she does not like the food. Generally speaking about America, she just feels that one is so caught up in the speed of life.

On a scale of one to ten, she gives the reporting about Africa a three. She finds it funny that she still gets asked if she lives in a tree. This perception of Africa persists because she feels that, sadly, a lot of Americans are not widely traveled or informed about other people.

Her social network includes community organizations and church activities. She speaks Luganda and English.

University

Ahmed Dado, Kenya, 21

Ahmed Dado is a twenty-one-year-old student at the University of Denver (DU). He is a Kenyan living in the U.S. for the first time. Although he has traveled widely throughout the U.K. since his father was an ambassador (and now Governor of Tana River County in Kenya), he nevertheless finds a lot of things strange about America.

Even though he is in the US by choice, his experiences are not different from other immigrants. He does not have any family in Colorado but, because he is very relationship-conscious, he chose DU over colleges in California, Washington, Georgia, and Vermont because DU was quick to respond to his application.

He misses his family back home (Kenya), especially because of the time difference which makes it frustrating to communicate effectively with them. He has met some Kenyans in Denver and is very happy to speak his language with them. Being trilingual makes it very easy for him to relate with them. He also gets on well with the African-American friends he has made.

In Ahmed's view, one of the weird things about the US is the extreme individuality he has observed. He is shocked that people hardly interact with their neighbors and also by the apparent need for personal glories -- that is, the way people pride themselves for achieving something all by themselves.

He would not want to stay back after his education, especially since he wants to start an NGO that would help people. He feels he owes his country that much. He feels that, as a person, inner happiness means much more than just self-sustenance. In his words, "the quality of living here is great, but self-happiness is incomparable."

He is shocked that bills have to be shared and even when he offers to pay for all his friends, they ask him why. He says that even when he shares his meals or money with the homeless people downtown, they are surprised -- as if he would demand something in return.

He is very shocked by the news he hears about Africa and, sometimes, he is even unable to recognize his own country. He does not think that the reportage is fair. He believes that the African educational system is broader in its approach than what he has observed in the US. In Africa, students learn about other parts of the world, but in the US everything seems to be all about America and this affects perception.

Ahmed has a positive attitude and embraces more of the elements that transcend boundaries, such as football and laughter because "laughter has no language." He is also full of humor so that when people ask him if he learned English during orientation week or if he keeps pet lions or if he fights animals for food, he says yes, speaking in a thick African accent for good effect.

He would love people to know above everything else that "Africa is not a country." He is surprised that, upon discovering that he is from Kenya, some would ask him if he knows "Abu from Nigeria. They ask these questions in ignorance because Kenya is in East Africa and Nigeria is in West Africa." He wears a Masai bracelet because it makes him feel close to his home in Kenya.

University

Gunilla Diza-Lusimba, Congo, 16

Gunilla is a sixteen-year-old high school student. She is also a child care specialist. Her social network includes school, church, and community work. After her parents divorced when she was two, her mother decided to leave the Democratic Republic of Congo for the U.S. Gunilla says her decision was informed by the fact that she wanted a better life for her daughters.

They moved to Colorado because there were other families from Congo they knew who were already living there. The Colorado weather also seemed better or less threatening than other possibilities. “Blizzards are a lot less terrible than earthquakes and tornadoes or hurricanes.” She is a U.S citizen because her mother took the necessary steps to become one. She does not have dual citizenship because her home country does not allow it. Her relationship with Congo is non-existent anyway and she does not feel she will ever go back there to live.

She does not feel that there is a lot of negative perception about Africa but would like people to be more open-minded, especially in realizing that there are different countries in Africa and different cultural opportunities there.

She gets on well with other Africans from Congo because their parents have kind of stayed together. She also gets on well with African Americans even though she feels that there are a lot of cultural differences and values between the African ways and theirs.

She feels that coming to America as an adult is very difficult. For example, she says her mother was a doctor in Congo but because of financial and time constraints she could not retrain at that level in the U.S, so she presently works as a certified nursing assistant.

She definitely feels that in terms of education and better opportunities she is far better off here in the U.S, which was what her mother wanted for her and her sister.

Gunilla speaks English and French and would leave Colorado only if she has to go to college elsewhere.

University

“If I could study in Morocco at the level that I’m studying here, I definitely would have stayed”

Saad Hamid El-Belghiti, Morocco, 18

Saad El-Belghiti is an eighteen-year-old student at the University of Denver (DU). He is Moroccan. Although he is new in the U.S., he attended an American school in Morocco and was offered a scholarship to continue his education in America. He speaks Arabic,

French, and English. He likes Colorado a lot, especially when it is not cold, and is enamored of the architecture, but he says "If I could study in Morocco at the level that I'm studying here, I definitely would have stayed."

He misses Morocco everyday. He would definitely like to go back home after his education but, because he has changed his mind a lot of times in the past, he is rather unsure what the next five or ten years have in store for him.

He gets on well with other people. Although he has not really met any Moroccan, he bonds with other Africans, such as his Kenyan friend. He feels a certain kind of connection to other Africans and feels that perhaps that feeling is why the continent is described as the "motherland."

He has no problem connecting with other people because he already encountered a diverse group of people (Mexicans, Koreans, Germans, et cetera) at the American School in Morocco. He feels that people are apprehensive in communicating with other people because they are scared of being judged.

He is not really into television because he feels the Moroccan television did not have much to offer. He searches for news on the internet where he can get multiple sources (rather than a single point of view). He is sensitive to most of what is happening in Africa such as Boko Haram, legal slavery in Central Africa, and even human trafficking in Asia, yet he feels that the beauty of Africa is under-reported. He feels that the reportage about Africa is extremely generalized as if everything happening is about one country.

He would love people to know more about Morocco -- how beautiful it is, the rich and spicy food, their wonderful king and their rich historical heritage. "For example, Morocco was the first country to recognize the United States as a country after its independence."

He also points to the Arabic name of Morocco (Al Maghrib) because all the countries in North Africa used to be Morocco. He does not understand why people do not know this about Morocco or know that tourism is an important part of Morocco's image.

University

Ben Ezeaku, Nigeria

Ben Ezeaku is from Nigeria. He left Nigeria around 1994 following the political problems that arose from the annulment of the 1993 presidential election. He moved to Jamaica, where he taught in a high school. He later moved to Houston, Texas, where he worked for nine years as a field engineer in an oil and gas company.

He became a U.S. citizen through naturalization because he had come to see the U.S. as his home. Nevertheless, he has remained connected to Nigeria since he still has family there. But going to Nigeria has become like going on vacation for him.

He moved to Colorado because at some point he worked in Wyoming but his family did not quite like Wyoming, so Colorado presented itself as a viable option. He likes it in Colorado because it is a place that is very suitable for raising a family. He sees himself as a Nigerian American and gets on quite well with other Africans and other communities. He does not feel that he is likely to change that identity in the future.

Although he likes Colorado because it is family-friendly, he feels that Colorado “does not encourage a lot of small businesses or minority business” because of the rigid regulations, especially compared to other states such as Texas. One instance is the lengthy process for getting a motor vehicle dealer license.

Ben does not have any illusions about a perfect reality. He does not believe in a “perfect situation” but he would have wished for a better perception of Africa. He rates the media reportage of Africa two out of ten. He would like to see the media portray more positive aspects of Africa. For example, he laments the fact that most Americans do not realize the tourist potential of Nigeria because they know only the Nigeria that the media presents.

He also wishes that other Americans would be more open-minded when it comes to dealing with immigrants. He feels that a common need drives immigrants -- the search for a better life. With more understanding of the different groups, he believes, America will be an even better place. He also believes that one way that the different groups could come together in harmony is to have a better cultural understanding of one another.

Compared to European countries, he says, the U.S. holds more opportunities for the immigrant to achieve the American Dream because it applauds hard work “and will help you become whatever you choose to be.” The only thing is for America to become even more “open minded to otherness.”

University

"I am just a person, and I'm just an American"

Mario Feraud, USA, 22

Mario Feraud is a music student at the University of Denver's Lamont School of Music. He also works downtown at a sports bar and is mostly recognized as a jazz musician.

Mario's family background is as diverse as the history of America. He is black, although his mother is white, and from Wyoming. After his late mother and his biological father divorced, she remarried. Years later, she was divorced again, but this time the man who Mario acknowledges as his father adopted him as his younger brother (even though he later remarried again). This diversity has helped Mario to have a broader perspective about being an American. His relationship with other people goes beyond race or color. He

believes that people's attitudes towards each other is more important than anything else.

While growing up, Mario had to deal with some level of bullying because some people wanted him to feel different but, according to him, he has been "good at negating those situations" and making them rather laughable. Although he observes that the black community in Colorado is a little larger than the one in Wyoming, he feels a certain kind of sadness that other blacks seem to relate to him based on racial affinity. For him people are just people and sometimes one encounters bad and good people on either side.

One huge impact on Mario's life so far was going to Scotland. He was struck by the level of humility that he encountered from the people. Since coming back from Scotland, he has realized that it is not productive to judge a country you have not lived in. Concerning the reportage about Africa, he acknowledges that only the negative stuff are reported and draws a parallel to the fact that even in Scotland, the people seem to hear only about the negative things in America.

Mario believes that people need to become more broad-minded. For example, he agrees that jazz originated from African oral tradition but does not believe that only black people can play it. He believes that everyone can bring in their own flavor of jazz music like what he experienced in Scotland where he heard jazz played with the bag-pipe flute. He hopes to be known as a musician and not just a jazz musician. He also hopes to relocate to Scotland. In the end, he believes, good music is good music -- just as he sees people as people. He does not prefix his identity. He is just an American.

University

Felicien Manfo Fotio, Cameroon

Felicien did not choose to live in Colorado; love made the decision for him. He left Cameroon, his native country, for Italy in 2008 because he felt he was not getting much education in Computer Science. While in Italy, he got a scholarship to study in France. It was in France that he met his wife and they started dating. He had to go back to Italy because he did not really like France, but he kept in touch with his wife and her family and finally ended up in Colorado to be married to her. He likes Colorado and generally likes living in the U.S. He likes the Colorado weather, the fact that it is unpredictable, and he also likes the mountains. The diversity also fascinates him. He does not quite like the traffic situation, but he believes the food is good.

He is not a U.S. citizen yet because he is still thinking about it even though he is a permanent resident. He misses Cameroon because he has not gone back in years and some times feels kind of lost. However, compared to Italy, he feels that Colorado and the U.S. in general has a lot more in terms of opportunities and realizing one's dream. He believes in hard work and persistence and would like to go back to Cameroon someday, but that could be in the next fifteen or twenty years.

He believes that if he can achieve a high level of proficiency in speaking and writing English, it would help him better. He is already fluent in Italian, French, and Gemba; he wants his English to be as fluent as his French.

Felicien believes in friendship and feels that he gets on well with people, although he has not met so many people. He believes his ideal for friendship will be the same for every group he encounters.

Concerning how Africa is reported in the media, he would rate it a three on a scale of ten. He recalls his experiences in Italy and the shocking questions he got about being an African. For example, he said a few of his friends wanted to know if he lived in a house and one of them even wanted to know if he flew on the back of birds as a means of movement. When he realized they were serious, he was very upset and began to research why people would think that about Africans. He realized they have the wrong information about Africa. That sort of information or perception, he believes, must have some negative impact on how people relate to Africans. For example, an employer might be skeptical about one's exposure to technology and general awareness.

Felicien is even more appalled because of the fact that Africans have to fight for almost everything in order to become anything at all. For instance, a lot of people back home go through so much hardship just to go to school or even have a meal -- things that are considered normal in the U.S. He wants people to know that Africans "are humans just like everyone else, that Africans really work hard and never give up."

The one thing Felicien misses the most is the best pizza. He feels that the best pizza is still the one in Italy. He is still searching for the best pizza in Colorado.

University

Mebrahat Gebremichael, Ethiopia, 30

Mebrahat, a former Denver resident, now lives and works in Jacksonville, Florida as an operations coordinator for a transportation company, but she has very fond memories of Colorado.

Before moving to the U.S., her parents left Ethiopia for Jerusalem and the father first came to the U.S. in 1982 through the help of an associate from Ethiopia. The move was predominantly to find a better opportunity for his family.

Mebrahat has 11 siblings. Four of them were born in Ethiopia, two in Jerusalem and the rest (including Mebrahat) were born in the U.S.

Growing up in Denver, she felt that it was a very small place especially as her family was very closely connected to the Ethiopian community, which was also small at the time.

Even though she was raised in a predominantly white neighborhood, Lakewood, weekends were usually filled with communal gatherings and church activities. These communal gatherings helped her develop life-long relationships that she still maintains till today. She is amazed at how Colorado, and its Ethiopian community, has grown.

Looking back, Mebrahat wishes she had been more involved in the recreational aspects of life in Colorado. Although her family lived near the mountains, she never took advantage of skiing or snowboarding, something she now advises her younger siblings to do. If there is anything Colorado has taught her, it is that she should take full advantage of whatever she finds herself.

She sees herself as Ethiopian-American, and that is how she describes herself to anyone, whether black or white, but she is open to the possibility of a change or shift (in the way she describes or presents herself) in the future. In her words, "In the next ten years within the U.S., I will say yes, my identity will change as the U.S. continues to grow in population. I no longer belong to just one race; we are becoming more of a mixed race people."

She thinks America is a great place, especially because of the diversity in every aspect of life and the bountiful opportunities. However, she feels that because of the diversity there is sometimes a feeling of exclusion when "people are not respectful of those differences."

She is open to the idea of becoming a dual citizen but is only a U.S. citizen at the moment. She would also like to visit Ethiopia some day because she feels connected to it due to her family and communal connections; Ethiopia is the place they refer to as "back home."

Mebrahat gets on well with everyone. While a student at the University of Colorado, Boulder, she got involved in two African associations, which boosted her interactions with other Africans. Her best friend is a Nigerian. Her mentors were from Ghana and Uganda.

She does not feel that the U.S. media has been fair in reporting Africa. She rates the reportage 4 over 10 but notes that one could listen to news directly on the local African channels or stations. She is not affected by the news, especially when people first meet her, because she is usually considered to be African American. However, as people become aware of her Ethiopian background, they begin to associate her with negative news about Ethiopia. She says she usually finds herself educating people about Africa.

University

"A lot of people are ignorant when it comes to people from different cultures and different races"

Shewit Gebremichael, Ethiopia, 23

Shewit's parents came to the U.S. from Ethiopia about twenty-seven years ago due to the conflict between Ethiopians and Eritreans at that time. Being from Northern Ethiopia, the parents became a part of the refugee camp relocation program and moved from Ethiopia to the refugee camp in Sudan, where they stayed for two years.

Shewit was born in Colorado and had a very normal childhood. She was oblivious of a lot of things until she got to high school, where she came into contact with other aspects of history aside from slavery. She began to develop a sociological perspective and learn about "systemic oppression." She then experienced first hand what it means to be a minority living in the United States. Shewit is nevertheless very glad to live in Colorado and particularly appreciates its natural attractions. She also feels that it is a very safe place and could be nurturing for children and generally for growth. She is glad that it is not too big but just about right in the middle.

Concerning her identity, she has some conflicting feelings. She describes herself as "African American or American African." Although she has a very rich sense of her roots, she is acutely aware of being different. She feels she does not quite fit into the African American community because African Americans see her as different. This difference is in part due to the fact that her parents have "thick accents." White Americans nevertheless tend to describe her as African American even when they know about her African origin. And then there is her own Ethiopian culture in which girls or women are expected to behave in certain ways. She constantly found herself wanting to fit into any of these groups without success. So, she had to develop a very flexible personality that reflects each culture that has become her reality -- American and Ethiopian. She is very grateful for the strong Ethiopian presence that has been in her life. Her social network includes her Ethiopian community and church activities. Although her identity issue drove her closer to her African roots and informed her decision to study Public Health and African Minority Studies at the university, she has now found a kind of balance, a way to love and appreciate both cultures.

Shewit believes that a lot has changed for the better in racial relations but there is still room for improvement. She thinks that, right from elementary school, the curriculum should include positive aspects of African history, not just about slavery. She also thinks that parents should be encouraged to participate more in the school system. While growing up, she went back to Africa with her parents every two years and her family would usually spend about four months during each visit. The first time she did so, she was so shocked to see how beautiful Africa is.

She does not think that the reporting about Africa is fair. She grades the reports one or two (out of 10) because they always focus on negative aspects. She believes that there is so much more going on and thinks that people should know they can travel to Africa and actually enjoy themselves. In her words, "I think it just goes back to education. I feel like a lot of people are ignorant when it comes to people from different cultures and different races."

University

Jacques Gerber, South Africa, 22

Jacques Gerber is a white South African male who is currently working as an Uber driver and is about to graduate from college. He is twenty-two years old and moved to the U.S. when he was six years old. He speaks Afrikaans, English, and Spanish.

Jacques's family did not leave South Africa because of any feeling of displacement or the war situation. They left because the mother got a kind of promotion working for an international food company. They all moved to Chicago -- him, his mother, father, and twenty-seven-year-old brother, who was not too enthusiastic about moving as he was in a serious relationship at the time.

Jacques later moved to Colorado because he was on the swimming and diving team. Before then, he played cricket. He was also interested in studying animation, but upon reaching the University of Denver (DU) he discovered that only a class was offered on animation. At the same time he had to pull out of diving because a surgery he had when he was seventeen years old caused him serious pain. Although he had to give up two things that brought him to Colorado -- diving and animation -- he fell in love with the place. He loves the mountains, the weather, and the fact that people are a lot nicer in Denver than in Chicago.

After graduation, he wants to start a three-year seminary course because he would like to do missionary work. So, he plans to stay on in Colorado.

Jacques had to renounce his South African citizenship in order to become a U.S. citizen. He says he still maintains his South African passport as he visits regularly and that he can actually apply for a dual citizenship status. He sees himself primarily as South African and has actually thought of moving back, but with each visit to South Africa he realizes he has better prospects here in the U.S. As he says, "I don't necessarily think I'm very patriotic towards being American but I definitely appreciate the privileges I have with being American."

He thinks that he has not experienced any form of discrimination, perhaps because he is white, but he has encountered a lot of curiosity. He says that at DU a lot of students ask him how come he is white if he is African. He is shocked at the level of ignorance in terms of how people perceive Africa. He says that a lot of people think Africa is a huge wilderness and all about poverty and wild animals. "It's true there's a lot of poor situations, there's a lot of bad situations ... but that doesn't mean as a whole the continent is represented through the whole thing." He resents the fact that Africa is perceived as a country and not a continent. He thinks that there should be a type of reorientation of how Africa is perceived and believes that this can be achieved through more community-oriented

d gatherings. He has a few friends from South Africa and he enjoys hanging out with them and speaking Afrikaans together.

He feels he can now realize his full potential anywhere in the U.S. because of his drive and passion. He particularly finds the Colorado ambiance helpful. "The fact that it has 300 days of sunshine a year puts me in a happier mood, a more optimistic mood to do and pursue the things I wanna pursue."

University

What it means to be a black immigrant Muslim in the U.S.

Dunia Haji, Sudan, 22

Dunia Haji is a twenty-two-year-old woman from Sudan. She is currently a student. Her father left Sudan for political reasons because of the tyrannical rule of Omar al-Bashir. Her father moved to Germany where Dunia was born. When they decided to move to the U.S. it was very difficult because of all the technical legalities involved. They remained in Germany for ten years before they were able to move to America.

She feels that Colorado was a wise choice for her parents because they already had family there. Although she is a German citizen, she does not like Germany because of the racism and xenophobia that is prevalent there. She is also a citizen of Sudan. For her to become a U.S. citizen she has to apply to the German embassy and government for a dual citizenship exception, a process which she has begun.

She feels comfortable in the U.S. because it is a place where she sort of came into her own, a place where she comfortably navigates the different identities and ambiguities.

She has a good relationship with people generally, even though she felt a little constrained by Sudanese culture while growing up. Growing up she had to learn to navigate that feeling of wanting to be an insider (a Sudanese) but seen as the "other" because she did not reflect the cultural image that was expected of her. For example, she does not wear a hijab. Her isolation from her community did not work well for her, especially as she realized she was not the only one going through these ambiguities. She also began to realize that her community was beautiful and irreplaceable. So even though she has not lived in Denver in the last five years she still comes back because of filial ties.

She describes her relationship with other Americans is good, though she went to a predominantly white school. She is excited to strengthen that relationship, not just with other Americans but also with other blacks in the diaspora. She never really had any problem with explaining her identity because she is light-skinned but when it comes to identity she sees herself as Sudanese or a Sudanese immigrant (because her current status in the U.S is registered alien). She does not like the term "African American". She prefers "black American."

She feels the reportage about Africa is zero and is surprised at how uninformed Americans are about African countries. She feels that there is so much left out in the news media -- things that go beyond ethnic conflicts or tribal wars. So, even as she feels comfortable with life in the U.S., she feels that she is psychologically affected by the negative perceptions about Africa. She refers to a recent case in Indiana where three Sudanese boys were murdered and how the media was very hesitant in reporting it as a crime. She feels that there are a lot of nuances that are left out when it comes to reports about Africa.

She would want to explore other countries besides the U.S and feels that more funding is needed in Colorado to explore and expand community and culturally oriented activities. Being a self-driven person she does not feel that anything has hampered her productivity. She would like to further conversations about what "it means to be a black immigrant Muslim in the U.S." and also address issues like the anti-blackness that a lot of older generation parents brought with them.

She speaks Arabic, German, and English.

University

"Most immigrants came here to help develop America because it's a country they have admired"

Bola Kpitan, Nigeria, 51

Bola Kpitan moved to the U.S. twenty-two years ago. Leaving her country, Nigeria, was motivated by an obligation to her family. She met an African American back home (Nigeria) and they got married; when it was time for him to return to the U.S., she went with him. Although they lived for some time in Florida because her husband's extended family were there, they later moved back to Colorado, where he had lived before going to Nigeria.

Bola, a fifty-one-year-old woman, has lived in Denver for twenty-one years. She has three children and has worked mainly as a teacher. Even though she still feels connected to Nigeria, she more or less sees Denver as home and cannot see herself living anywhere else in the U.S. She feels this way because aside from the Colorado weather, which she likes very much, she feels that the people in Colorado are more welcoming and receptive to foreigners than people in some other parts of the U.S., such as the South.

Even though she sees Denver as home, she does not want to become a U.S. citizen because she thinks it is better to give her children an avenue to explore their dual heritage better.

Since she sees herself "as a bridge between Nigeria and America," she still tries to stay as connected as she can to Africa, especially through her interest in news from and about

ut Africa. She does not feel that she gets enough in the mainstream media, so she explores other avenues. She says she gets more about Africa through these other alternatives, such as BBC America, Russia Today (RT), Al Jazeera, PBS, and France 24. She especially speaks highly of the late Peter Jennings of ABC News who gave a few respectable minutes to African news. She rates these alternative outlets a high nine, yet she cannot quite shake the feeling that Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, is largely under-reported.

She believes that there are a lot of misconceptions from the news other people hear about Africa, but she has grown above the negative effects of these misconceptions. At the initial stage, she was a bit irked by the fact that people were curious that she spoke English very well. They attributed this to “the fact” that she learned to speak English in America. She did not like that notion because it was not true. Since she now sees the U.S. as home she has accepted to be part of her community, learning the cultural practices. She feels that other immigrants will benefit more if they become positively integrated into the country they have chosen as their new home. She does not believe this acceptance can lead to complete integration, which she does not even advocate as she thinks one should retain the positive aspects of their own culture.

She is very much aware of the dynamics of different people and different cultures in America and believes that America will benefit more as a nation if it fully embraces other people and stops being paranoid. In her words: “Not every immigrant that is here wants to hurt them. 99.9% came here to help develop America because it is a country they have admired...it’s a country they trust.”

Concerning her experiences and relationships, she believes that white Americans seem to be more open and receptive to Africans than African Americans. With the latter group, she perceives a hostile attitude towards Africans, although she generally tries to get on well with everyone. Being a very private person, her life more or less revolves around her job as a teacher and her work in the church. She is cordial to other Nigerians but gets on better with Ethiopians because of the way they bond together and help one another. Although she believes whites are more receptive of foreigners, she nevertheless observes that some of the older whites are set in their ways and cannot seem to free themselves from the shackles of racism. She thinks that one of the problems in America is that most of such people are not as exposed or knowledgeable as they should be. She gives an example of a white friend who did not know the difference between a “visa as a document of travel from one country to another and Visa as a credit card.” She wants Americans to see immigrants, especially Africans, as humans and not “people who live on trees.” She feels that the media has an obligation to show the other side of Africa, such as the big cities, and how educated most Africans are. She is proud that Africa remains one of the richest continents in the world.

Bola feels very fulfilled as a teacher because of how she has influenced her students and through the gratitude of appreciative parents, but she said she would have liked to be a doctor or a healthcare professional. She has not been able to realize this dream because of the “ridiculously high cost” of education. This is not just a problem in Denver but i

n the entire U.S. However, she is happy with what she does, is proud to be an African, and is also very enamored of Denver.

University

Garikai Masawi, Zimbabwe, 25

Garikai came to the U.S. when he was seven years old, which was when his mother left Zimbabwe (their native country) in search of a better opportunity. He thinks that the fact that his uncle was already established in Colorado was a strong factor in her choice of Colorado as the place to settle in the U.S.

Garikai still feels nostalgia for his home country but he appreciates the family structure that he has in Colorado. He has his mother and sister and some extended family members. However, his social network consists mainly of church activities. He works as an accountant and enjoys living in Colorado, a place he thinks has a great weather and is much more receptive than other places he has heard about. He says that, for example, even though he is no longer in the university he can still visit his professors and ask for their help whenever he needs it.

If Garikai had the resources, he would go home (Zimbabwe) often and even relocate there in order to impact his country with what he has learned in the U.S. Like many immigrant students, he also struggled with the issue of identity -- even though he grew up in a predominantly African-American setting. He remembers being called names such as "African boot scratcher," "cotton picker," and "monkey," names he says still haunt him. But with maturity comes understanding. His family befriended an African-American family and they were both able to learn a lot from each other culturally. He sees himself as a Zimbabwean even though he is in the process of getting his U.S. citizenship. Overall, he appreciates the opportunity and available resources that abound in the U.S.

He however feels that the reportage about Africa is quite negative. He says a lot of Americans do not know Africa because they have been there but mostly through the news media, which focuses mainly on the very negative. He was struck by beauty in Africa when he visited -- the warm welcome, beautiful women, food, tourism, and wildlife, to mention only a few. He says when he was in high school what he learned about Africans only connected to slavery and nothing about Africa's positive aspects. He thinks that people should be willing to be educated about one another.

Garikai believes that the negative perception of Africa affect can impact negatively on the African. For example, when he was searching for employment he was asked during one of his job interviews if he had lived with lions. He could not understand why that came up in a job interview. He thinks that a lot of people do not change their identities because they really want to but because they want to fit in. He wants parents to be aware of w

hat their children go through in the stages of cultural and identity shifts. One way to make Colorado better (since it's already a great place to live in) is more public interest in the African community and for people to listen more to different stories.

University

Rory Moore, USA, 20

Rory Moore is a twenty-year-old African American man. He currently serves as the University of Denver (DU) Excelling Leaders Institute (ELI) assistant coordinator for student success. He chose to attend DU because it is a private institution and as such as he feels he will get the most education there. Since he has lived in Colorado all his life he hopes to explore other universities for his education in public health.

He is outgoing and futuristic as well as being deeply involved in activism. He describes himself as a WOO (Win Others Over). He identifies himself as African American, Spanish, gay, and Christian.

He likes that America is a place where people have freedom to pursue their dreams but dislikes the inequalities and racism that are still prevalent. He agrees that his African American heritage has impacted him because he understands "the struggle my people have endured for hundreds of years that are still present today." He is concerned about the challenges that are still being faced in the African American community such as poverty, lack of mentorship, mass incarceration rates, and health disparities. He feels that these are even worse for African American gays, who constitute a "double minority."

He sees Africa as the homeland of African Americans and where his ancestors came from, a place where they were valued in the past. But he finds it interesting that "many Africans don't view African Americans in a positive light. I think many Africans believe that African Americans try too hard to assimilate into white culture."

He is not just interested in Africa because of his heritage but also because he likes to be informed about what is going on in other places. He feels that the media does not pay enough attention to news about Africa beyond crime, violence, and AIDS -- just as the African Americans are usually portrayed as lazy, robbers, and losers.

He feels that in order to move forward the disparities in the African American and the African communities ought to be addressed. In his words: "I think that unless disparities in the African communities are changed and they move from third world countries to second or first world countries then they will continue to struggle."

University

Juste Muzika, Rwanda, 33

Juste Muzika is a thirty-three-year-old man from Rwanda. He currently works for the RTD as a bus driver but hopes to set up a business in the near future as a personal trainer.

Juste describes himself as a free spirit who is also non-judgmental. For someone who has been involved in so much tragedy he displays a very positive attitude. He comes from a very large family but lost one third of his family during the war in Rwanda. One of his older brothers is still missing. He is thirty-eight years old and had gone to Congo for humanitarian activities. Juste is hopeful that his brother is still alive somewhere because he has the right survival instincts. He presently lives with his parents so that they can help his sister-in-law financially while trying to locate his brother's whereabouts.

He left Rwanda in 1994 because of the war. He stayed in Congo for six months. His father left for South Africa but was asked to leave. They then moved to Nairobi, Kenya and lived there for four years. They tried to relocate to South Africa, Italy, Canada, New Zealand, Australia or the U.S. but were rejected because their reason for leaving Rwanda was "not good enough." At last his father reached out to a friend in Italy. This friend knew a Republican senator in Ohio, Mike Dewine. Dewine recommended them to the United Nations and within four months they were in the United States.

After high school at Dayton, he worked as a sales person for Victoria's Secret and at the same time was in the Airforce Reserves studying HVAC. He then later moved in with his parents in Denver. He discovered he did not quite like the HVAC job and switched over to RTD as a bus driver.

He gets on well with everybody and is a U.S citizen. He said he did not have to pay to become one since he was in the military at the time. He likes Denver very much because it reminds him of home. He likes the mountains and does not think he would want to leave. However, he dislikes that Denver is becoming over-populated.

He does not think the news about Africa is fair. On a scale of one to ten he rates it a two saying that "people here are slaves to the media, and the media they are listening to does not always tell the true or full story." He thinks that, because of this, people "assume Africa is a godforsaken place." He listens to Al Jazeera for more balanced reports. Although he is glad to be a U.S. citizen, he still feels very much Rwandan at heart and still does some traditional dances now and then.

He speaks French, Swahili, English, and Kinyarwanda. He considers himself very productive in Denver and hopes to set up a business soon. He also writes on the side. He has a screenplay about child soldiers entitled Raised by the Gun.

University

Edith Okupa, Nigeria, 51

Edith Okupa came to the U.S. in 1999 and lived on the East Coast for 11 or 12 years. She is originally from Nigeria and is now the Executive Director of Restoration Project International, a non-profit organization that “fosters the restoration of hope and rehabilitation of survivors of sex trafficking into communal life.”

Edith came to the U.S. with a visiting visa. She left Nigeria because she needed to get out of an abusive relationship which she had endured for years. She felt she needed to leave because, at that time in Nigeria, “domestic violence wasn’t even criminalized so people got abused indiscriminately without recourse to justice.” She had a daughter but could not immediately leave with her. Her daughter has since joined her and is now a legal consultant in a law firm in Dallas.

Before moving to Colorado, Edith used to work as a business analyst and lived in Maryland. At some point, she felt she needed some kind of change, especially having lived in big cities all her life. Back home in Nigeria, she was raised in a big city. In Maryland, she was beginning to be affected by the hustle and bustle of life and felt she needed a change.

While researching what to do when she moved to Colorado, she came across a program that helped survivors of domestic violence, and then and there, she took an important decision. Toward the end of her course at the University of Colorado, she did research on the determination of parental rights; the research helped her identify some loopholes and make recommendations. In 2013, two of her recommendations were passed into law.

She likes Denver a lot, especially because it is a quiet place. She says she is not an outdoorsy person and living in Colorado keeps her focused on her work. Her social life is very much tied to her work. She has very few friends and always likes to define her relationship with people, so if it is business-related it stays that way. She attends an international church and maintains a network of work-related relationships. She has a lot of passion for helping women and girls who are struggling due to sex trafficking or domestic violence and would always attend pertinent functions or conferences.

Edith is proud of her African heritage and still feels a strong connection to Nigeria, even though she does not want to go back to live there. When asked how she identifies herself, she said: “I don’t identify with a particular country. I identify with a cause. I identify with change. I identify with something that will impact the world globally.” She says she does not really care about where people come from or what positions they have as long as they treat other people with respect. She believes all humans are equal and feels that there is an unhealthy competitive spirit that underlies human relationships. She feels she gets better treatment from Caucasians than African Americans because African Americans sometimes treat Africans like parasites or free-riders. As for other Africans, she feels that, beyond the partying, sometimes it is hard to get real help from them when you need them.

Edith is working toward becoming a U.S. citizen. For her, it just makes sense, especially given the organization she runs where she is looking to expand and contribute internationally. She also feels that there is so much more she can accomplish by becoming a U.S. citizen. For example, she has always wanted to work in law enforcement but cannot do that because she is not yet a citizen.

Edith does not feel that the reporting of Africa is fair. She rates it a three on a scale of ten. When she arrived newly in America, she was a babysitter for an African American couple. As she was helping their child with his homework one day, he wanted to know if people lived on trees in Africa. Edith said "No," and that upset the boy because she had also told him that his teacher lied by teaching him that. The boy cried until his mother came home. At another time, a colleague asked her how she came to America and she sarcastically replied that she swam (across the Atlantic Ocean). The colleague believed her and even went on to ask how many days it took her to swim from Africa to America.

One of the other things that has endeared Denver to Edith is that the disparity between different races is not obvious, unlike in other states, although she still feels that a lot more can be done. She feels that because there are a lot more whites than blacks some foreigners might feel that Colorado is not a welcoming place, but that is not the case. She feels that, generally speaking, the U.S. is filled with opportunities for everyone, especially law-abiding citizens.

Edith sees the world as a place where people can live respectfully and appreciate one another. She is not oblivious of racism though and preaches "community awareness and the need to reorient ourselves" because, in the final analysis, we all breathe the same air and bleed the same red blood.

University

"The major resource of a country is their people"

Ashraf & Jacqueline Sedhom, Egypt, 53

Ashraf is a fifty-three-year-old physician and his wife, Jacqueline, is a banker. In 1985, Ashraf left Egypt because of the economic turmoil and the very unethical way of securing or furthering career opportunities. Ashraf was lucky because his mother, brother, and uncle were already in the U.S, so he began a residency for oral surgery in California and moved to Colorado after the residency.

Jacqueline does not feel that they could leave Colorado because they are already well established in the state. Their social network includes community organizations, school, and church. Jacqueline says they attend a nearby Greek orthodox church because "it is very close to our home religion, Coptic Christianity."

They have dual citizenship with Egypt and the U.S. Ashraf feels that in terms of tourism Egypt is very nice but America gave them a better life. Jacqueline adds that they do go back to Egypt to visit because they still have ties with the traditions there but at the same time they have also adopted American ways.

Ashraf refers to himself as an “American of Middle Eastern descent” and feels that he has become very successful beyond his dreams. Sometimes, he wishes they lived by the beach but California was not their favorite place and, beach or no beach, Colorado was just a better place for family life. Jacqueline also feels that Coloradans are more hospitable. For instance, “at the bank customers from out of town are always commenting on how nice the people are here.”

Ashraf is thankful for someone like Martin Luther King Jr. whose dream by extension helped foreigners because “he uplifted all second-class citizens. America is a melting pot.” He thinks that even though the western occupation of Egypt was not so good it had its advantages, such as a French man (Jean-Francois Champollion) deciphering the hieroglyphics and a French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps designing the Suez Canal. He does not like that “outsiders” are always being blamed when “they (Egyptians) are at war with themselves.”

He has no regret that he left Egypt. He is not bored in Colorado because they travel a lot. They have been to Bora Bora, Mexico, Costa Rica, Europe, Canada, and Tahiti. He says there is no shame in adapting to a place when one’s goal is success

because “the major resource of a country is their people. Their main resource is their minds, and the mind is a beautiful thing.”

Ashraf and Jacqueline speak Arabic and English and a little bit of Spanish and French.

University

Elisha Semakula, Uganda, 60+

Professor Elisha Semakula came to the U.S. in 1976, on a scholarship, as a Ph.D student. Before then, he had studied at the Makerere University in Uganda, his home country, where he obtained a B.A and a master’s degree in Economics. He also taught at the university before coming to America. He did not have a choice in where he was going to stay in America. As a matter of fact, he says, “I was able to fly out of the country and I came directly to Greeley; I was just shipped here.” That was during the regime of General Idi Amin Dada. Because he had a scholarship with a student visa, it was very hard to change his status. The dean of the graduate school at the time worked very hard on his behalf so that instead of being sent back to Uganda, he was able to continue his education. He finally got his Ph.D in 1980 from the University of Northern Colorado.

Elisha has had a lot of experience as a teacher, an administrator, and a professor. He has a lot of good things to say about Colorado. While working in Jefferson County Public Schools as an administrator who was involved in rewriting the school curriculum, he had many opportunities to travel all over the world and all over the United States and he thinks that Colorado is a wonderful place to live in. He particularly likes the well-balanced weather and the hospitality of the people. He recalls how his wife came to join him in Greeley. His wife's coming here was made possible by the generosity of the people; "Some of the banks in Greeley and some of the churches put together money and they were able to ship my wife here. In fact, we were on the front page of the Rocky Mountain News." Although he feels he has no right to condemn other states but he feels that the people of Colorado are much more welcoming than people in other states. He talks about how his neighbors have taken care of his children and how they have been good to his family.

However, his praise of Colorado does not mean that he is oblivious of the racial tensions that sometimes exist in the society. After working at Jefferson County, he worked for Aurora Public Schools as the director for multicultural education and he says he was appalled at what he encountered in terms of cultural conflicts. "I was amazed at the conflict that existed between different minorities and majorities. I was constantly solving problems." He witnessed a lot of misinterpretations. This led him to organize several committees that were in charge of setting boundaries and defining what is what. That effort led to the establishment of a day set aside to celebrate diversity (Multicultural Day, when students are encouraged to bring food from different cultures).

He has dual citizenship with his wife. He feels the political situation in Uganda or Africa in general is not improving. A travel experience he had with his family in 1979 (in Brussels) also motivated him to become an American citizen. The immigration officers were very rude and rough with Africans. He said it was such a humiliating experience for him and his family that he vowed then and there to get a U.S. passport. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 helped him accomplish that objective.

He is however not confused about his identity. He is an African from Uganda. In some cases though, if it would help communication better, he likes to be referred to as African American. His children are also very conscious of their African roots. In his words, "I made sure they understand that they cannot embarrass us- they cannot embarrass us and bring shame to our name. We are Africans." He is also very aware that his children have experienced various cultures. In fact, he feels that they are more adapted to white American culture because they have lived in Littleton since 1980 and went to predominantly white schools. But there have been a few instances when his children would be riding with their white friends and a policeman would stop them and ask them (his children) for their ID.

Overall, he has a very humanistic view of life and is grateful for all the opportunities he has had as a foreigner. He says that "when people get to know you, they don't necessarily see your color." He is grateful that he has never had a problem in his neighborhood. He is an active member of his church and sometimes he is the only black pallbearer at ch

urch funerals. He says he has been written into a lot of white wills and has been left so many things. He also has a very good relationship with Ugandans and other Africans. But Elisha does not necessarily care where the people he meets come from so long as they are reasonable and have an agreeable character. He believes that if people are knowledgeable about one another, they would get on better.

He had thought about going back to Uganda, especially as a way of contributing to his society, but in 2000 when he tried to do so he met a lot of obstacles. As much as he loves Uganda, he is very unhappy about the political situation and the high level of corruption there.

He does not feel that the reporting about Africa is fair. For him, it's a five out of ten. However, he has learned not to dwell on negatives and to just do the best he can. He feels strongly about the misconception of Africa as a country. "Well, Africa is a continent, not a country. We really need to know more about each other and explore more and see why people do what they do."

University

"The story of Amistad speaks to my family"

Tiara Wilson, USA, 20

Tiara Wilson is a student at the University of Denver. During summer breaks, she works for a finance company. Her social network includes her family, community organizations, and the church. She speaks English and also Chinese. She has lived in Colorado all her life but her mother was originally from Des Moines in Iowa and her father was originally from Philadelphia. She had considered leaving Colorado but ended up attending the University of Denver, but she might leave at some point just to explore other places. She likes the balance between city and nature in Colorado and the fact that people are not too mean or super nice -- just a nice balance to "make one feel accomplished."

With people from other places, such as Africans, Tiara feels that they show a lot more courtesy, are a lot more polite and considerate. She feels people are pretty much the same except that sometimes Africans, for instance, are under a lot more pressure to retain their Africanness. She describes herself as a black American instead of an African American because the expression ("black American") has become more common in conversations and also respects the sensibility of other Africans.

Tiara does not feel any strong connection to Africa, although after watching the movie Amistad her parents were able to trace their origin to Sierra Leone and her father realized that the story of Amistad was also the story of his ancestors. In her words: "I do think that the story of Amistad speaks to my family. We've always said we're fighters and I think that the story kind of reaffirms that." Tiara is glad that her father's family actually came to the U.S. as free people and not as slaves.

On the issue of identity, Tiara is very much aware of certain stereotypes about black women and men. When she takes her nieces and nephews out, for instance, people just assume that they are her children. She also says that when they were growing up her father will often tell her brother: "Be careful about getting angry in public places because people will think you're going to hurt them."