

The following interview was conducted with Elsa Yosef for the Star City Treasures Americorps history project. It took place on July 14 at F Street and the interviewer is Trisha Spanbauer.

Good Morning

Elsa Yosef: Good Morning

TS: I guess we'll start off with your childhood. Can you tell me something about...

EY: Yea, my childhood was not too good. Umm. My mother she died. I did not know her.

TS: Okay

EY: And I have uncle. I was with my uncle till about nine years old, and he have children. Umm, like five children. He, he umm, put them all of them in school, and not me. You know. Umm. When I ask him why me, I want to go to school too. And he tell me yeah now you do work, homework, in house. Umm, like maid, like everything. I was angry about that. You know, very angry. My father, he get married to another woman when my mother died. Also, umm, my father's wife she is not nice to me. You know, she is very bad to me. I cannot live with my father. So, umm, about nine and a half years old I left the place, because small village is, they are farmers over there. And I left the village and I go to big city. And, umm, I don't know anybody in there, umm, but I start to work. Umm, I take care of kids, like children. Uh, I watch children, and a little bit of work, like do dishes and little bit of cleaning. I was too young. After that I work continue, you know, until about twenty-one years old. After twenty-one I know my husband's sister. She be my friend. I meet my husband by her because he is her brother. And about twenty-one years old I get married. When I get married I have one child. One girl. Umm. She's um, about a year and a half. She is died. She was sick, and after that I don't have any baby. I don't know why.

TS: How long did you stay in the big city? Is that Massawa?

EY: Massawa, yeah Massawa. I grew up mostly over there. Uh, yeah, whole my life until I get out from there. From Massawa.

TS: And that was because of the war in Eritrea?

EY: Yeah, when it was war. Me and my husband, we decide to escape from Massawa to Sudan.

TS: Okay

EY: Yeah, we escape from Massawa to Sudan. He used to work like, a shipman. And uh, in Eritrea and Sudan and I was housewife in Sudan. And um, after that, after six years we live six years in Sudan. From Sudan after six years we decide to come to United States.

TS: When you fled Eritrea did you do that, umm, by car...

EY: no, walked...

TS: or did you have to sneak out

EY: walk...

TS: or did you walk to Sudan.

EY: we walked twenty-one years. I mean twenty-one days.

TS: Twenty-one days of walking?

EY: Yeah, we all walk. We have one camel. We have like nine people. Umm... you know, sometimes I ride the camel, and the other people. But mostly we walk.

TS: So you took turns taking the camel and then sometimes you would just walk.

EY: Right.

TS: Did you have a lot of possessions with you? Could you take much with you from your home or was it just you?

EY: No, just me. I don't even take my clothes. Yeah, I didn't take anything, because you know when you escape, we are scared. If we have luggage or we have a lot of clothes in something. Um. If they catch us they put us in the jail. So, we don't take anything. Yeah, and we came to Sudan. Um. We live in Sudan, like six years. After six years we decide to come United States. And, uh, we go to Red Cross. Uh, we tell them our problem as a refugee and they send us to America.

TS: So, did you take a plane?

EY: Yes, I come by plane.

TS: Was that your first time seeing a plane?

EY: Yes, my first time.

TS: Was it scary?

EY: Yeah, scary.

TS: I remember my first time.

EY: I was nervous.

TS: They are loud.

TS & EY: (Laughter)

TS: So when you came to the United States, what year was that?

EY: When I came in 1986, we come off first in Dallas, Texas.

TS: Okay, Dallas.

EY: Yeah, Dallas, Texas. I like Dallas. Um. When we came here I was excited to go to school, to learn English. But my sponsor, they tell me. You know, they don't have budget because they bring lot of people, lot of people. And they want them to work. And I tell them I don't know how to, no English, no nothing. They tell me that's okay you will learn over there and they put me in work. Name, Western Hotel. I start there for my first job in three days.

TS: Three you days after you came to American you started working at Best Western?

EY: Yes. (Laughter)

TS: Wow. Were you cleaning rooms?

EY: I clean rooms, yeah, I clean rooms. Um. If we don't have room enough to clean, we go to help dishwasher. We go to help laundry. You know. You work in everywhere.

TS: And how long did you stay in Dallas?

EY: In Dallas, about... I stay in Dallas about three years and half. Three years and half and um my best friend come from Sudan to Minnesota and um she ask me please come here. Please come here, you know. She want me to move with her. And I say okay and we move to Minnesota. In Minnesota I used to work in Hilton Hotel. Hilton. My husband, he work in, um, Marriott.

TS: Okay. What did he do? Did he do similar work...

EY: He do buss boy. Yeah, I do housekeeping. And English, little bit, little bit, little bit, I learn, little, little, little. You know?

TS: Yeah.

EY: (Laughter)

TS: Did you take any classes when you were in Minnesota at all, or did you just learn it by...

EY: By working.

TS: by working?

EY: Yeah, by working because they talked to me English and I learn little bit. I still my English is not perfect until now. But you know I'm trying.

TS: It's really good.

EY: Yeah (laughter)

TS: So, how long did you live in Minnesota?

EY: In Minnesota, seven years.

TS: And was that in St. Paul?

EY: St. Paul.

TS: Yeah.

EY: Yeah, I don't like Minneapolis.

TS: Oh... (TS& EY laughter) It's bigger.

EY: Big one.

TS: Yeah, um, and then where did you move from there?

EY: Oh, from there. I like to be with my best friend but my husband he don't like the cold.

TS: The winter?

EY: The winter, yeah. And he is saying we have to move and I say okay. We move to Arizona. 1993. Yeah, 1993 we move there. Still working, working in hotel. The same work. Um. I live in Arizona maybe about thirteen, fourteen years. I don't know. I cannot remember. And my husband, he be not good. But almost five years now, he change, he start to drink too much and I start to get sick, you know. And he go to bar and lot of things I don't like. And I tell him okay that's it. We get separated. And he is in Alaska now.

TS: Alaska?

EY: Alaska. He is working in Alaska.

TS: I thought he didn't like the cold. I thought he didn't like the winter.

EY: They don't get out from the ship.

TS: Oh.

EY: They don't get out. Always inside the ship.

TS: Okay, what brought you to Lincoln.

EY: Um, to Lincoln. Arizona okay, When I get sick Arizona is very hot. And I get, um; all the time I cannot breath.

TS: Okay.

EY: You know, when I get sick. So I decide, some people they tell me, um, Lincoln is good air. Um, quiet. You know, because Arizona is a very big city. So I said okay, and I move here and meet you.

TS: Yeah, and so you have been here for about four years.

EY: No, two years.

TS: Two years?

EY: Yeah, Almost, almost. This October coming it will be two years.

TS: Two years. And then, I met you at the Sudanese - with the women who do the English training. How did you get connected with that group? When you came to Lincoln were there some sort of resources that you got connected with?

EY: The English class?

TS: Mmhm

EY: Yeah, um, Teesee, she know the place.

TS: Okay

EY: She used to go over there and when I meet Teesee she tell me she is also from my city - the same city over there in Eritrea.

TS: Okay.

EY: And she tell me if you want to go to school, let's go, and I start to go with her.

TS: Okay. How did you meet Teesee?

EY: Teesee, I meet Teesee, um, when I come and stay in here. I was in mission until I get my apartment.

TS: Okay

EY: And her husband, he meet me in bus station.

TS: Oh, okay.

EY: Yeah, and he ask me, "Where are you from?" And tell him I am from Eritrea. And he "Oh, I am from Eritrea too. I have my wife – I have family"

TS: You must have been very happy.

EY: Yes and he tell me "Come meet them." And I say okay and after three weeks I meet them. After I get my apartment in Lincoln. I meet them all, the husband and everything.

TS: Oh, that is fantastic.

EY: Yeah.

TS: So, um, have you been back to Eritrea?

EY: Yes, one time.

TS: One time, how long ago?

EY: Oh, this July, um, four years.

TS: Okay. Did you see anybody that you knew when you went back? Did you get to see family?

EY: Yeah. I have, um, my brother. I love him too much, you know, because, um, mostly only I have him, you know. But he's died, he was soldier.

TS: Oh, a soldier.

EY: Yeah, and he died and he have three children and wife and I go to visit them.

TS: Do they live in Massawa?

EY: No, still they live in country?

TS: Oh, okay, did you get to go to Massawa too or did you just go visit them out in the country?

EY: Yeah, I go to the country, I go to the Massawa, I go everywhere.

TS: Have things changed a lot since you lived there?

EY: Yes it is, you know, the old building is not there. All is new because of the war. They build it all again. But the people I know. I don't meet anyone they are not there. You know, yeah, the older people – I don't see anyone.

TS: Can you tell me a little about, um, some of the traditions of Eritrea, um, the food, um, things that you did growing up?

EY: How they grow up their food?

TS: Well, um, can you tell me a little about the food, like what types of food you have – like the flat bread and the coffee that is traditional?

EY: Yes, traditional is what we eat – Injera. We eat spicy.

TS: Yes, very spicy.

EY: Yeah – very spicy and when we drink coffee – we have green coffee and we fry and we ground it up at home and we drink fresh coffee.

TS: Okay, so it's fresh. You just take it right from the plant and you fry it and you grind it. Wow.

EY: Yes.

TS: Are there any more memories from childhood of things that you did in Eritrea that we don't do here in the United States.

EY: Um, no, not really.

TS: Just the same.

EY: Because I was younger then - hair was different.

TS & EY: (laughter)

TS: And when you lived in Sudan, um, was there, did you have to learn a new language when you moved there?

EY: Yeah, I have to learn new language and I think it was easy. English is very hard. Yeah, um, I learn um, you know, I learn very fast without any school. Just I learn from people, the language.

TS: Is there any thing you miss about...

EY: About Sudan.

TS: Yeah, or Eritrea

EY: Not really, no, because I didn't even know over there, you know. So, but Sudan I lived six years there – it was very nice, you know. People nice – they have good heart and now everything is okay. Yeah.

(Interviewer note: Elsa is very proud of her accomplishments in citizenship classes and asked me to include it in her interview)

TS: Have you gotten U.S citizenship?

EY: Almost.

TS: Almost there?

EY: Almost, and now I have appointment end of August.

TS: Oh, fantastic.

EY: Yes, August 31.

TS: Wow.

EY: Yeah, I will go to interview; I hope if I do best on interview - they will want to give me citizenship.

TS: Yeah, so you have been taking classes right here at F street?

EY: Yes.

TS: Well that's fantastic.

EY: Yes, my class is right here. (Motions to the room next door)

TS: Right next door?



EY: Yeah.

TS: Um, what kind of recommendations would you give to people who are coming here for their first time? Who are just new to America from Sudan or Africa or Eritrea? Do you have any advice or what would you say has been helpful.

EY: Um, well, my advice to them is, you know, when you, um, when you get out from your country it's very hard – I know, learn language. We don't have enough education, you know, like I tell you I don't even go to school.

TS: Right...

EY: And, some people they are like me too and it's sometimes hard – it's very hard. The language and if you don't read and writing it's very hard but one thing, American people they are very nice. They help you everywhere where you go, you know. If you tell them I don't know that – they help you, you know. And for the new people I would tell, you know, the first time is going to be hard for them but later it's okay. (Laughter)

TS: And are you enjoying the time here in Lincoln?

EY: Yes, yes, very much.

TS: Alright, well um, I'm just going to ask you a couple more questions and then we'll wrap this up. Now when you moved to Lincoln did you stop working or do you still do housekeeping?

EY: No, you know, uh, three years ago I lost my job – because I am not healthy anymore. I have diabetes.

TS: Oh diabetes.

EY: Yeah I have depression, yeah, stress. I have accident at my work – my back.

TS: oh.

EY: Yeah, and I have a lot of sickness, you know, but they treat me, the doctors, you know. I have two doctors one for my back and one psychiatrist. And I'm okay. I take medication and I'm good.

TS: That's good.

EY: I'm good, but sometimes I think worry because I don't go to work, you know. Always if you stay home it is very boring.

TS: Yeah, it's hard to fill your day with things to do.

EY: Yes.

TS: Um, Can tell you a little bit more about, you said you had one brother. Did you have any more brothers or sisters?

EY: I have by my father one sister and one brother.

TS: Okay.

EY: But, um, my brother the older one – from my mother and from my father.

TS: Okay.

EY: So, the other brothers and sisters, I didn't even know them, you know.

TS: When you lived with your uncle?

EY: Yeah, but I know my brother very well. He is nice to me.

TS: That's good.

EY: And that's why I like him the most. Yeah.

TS: Okay, and do you see your uncle anymore, or?

EY: Oh, when I come back there, um, if he's alive I don't want to see him. Yeah, but they told me he died three years ago. When I get there they tell me that.

TS: Okay.

EY: Yeah, when I get there they tell me that.

TS: When you came to Massawa at nine and a half.

EY: Yeah, nine and a half.

TS: Were there people helped you, um, find a place to stay.

EY: Yeah, when I came there, um, I have like for my mother, cousin. Not close cousin, but they are cousin. And um, she let me, like um, one week with her. And she get for me um, take care of children, work. And, yeah.

TS: So did you or have you seen any of those people since you have been in the United States.

EY: No.

TS: And did you have any friends in the Sudan that who you managed to keep contact with?

EY: Yeah, I have some friends in the Sudan. Yeah, I have couple friends.

TS: Have you seen them at all?

EY: No, because I left them there. They don't come to America.

TS: So, did you come just by yourself to America?

EY: With my husband.

TS: Were there any other refugees with you?

EY: Yes. Yes they was. But when we get to New York everybody different state.  
(Laughter)

TS: And when you got to, um, Texas, they set you up with a job. Did they also find you a place to stay?

EY: Yeah, they pay for us, the apartment for one month.

TS: One Month?

EY: Yes. (Laughter)

TS: And then, um, your friend in Minnesota, do you go and visit her sometimes?

EY: I don't go but I call her.

TS: Oh, that's good.

EY: I call her and she call me. Yeah.

TS: Okay, um, what did you first expect when you came to America. Did you expect this or was it kind of overwhelming. Did you expect such... Did you have any expectations when you got on the plane in Sudan?

EY: Yeah.

TS: Did you think it would be like this, or was it different than you thought it would be?

EY: Well, um, I was expecting when I come to America to go to school, to learn.

TS: Yeah?

EY: But I don't get that.

TS: And so coming to Lincoln was the first opportunity you had to go to school and learn?

EY: Yes, this is my first time.

TS: With the Lincoln Literacy Council. How long have you been going to classes there?

EY: Um, about six months I guess. And when they open I go back.

TS: Will that be in the fall?

EY: Yeah.

TS: Um, when you came to Lincoln - so they told you that it was healthier for you to come here and so did you take the plane here or did you drive? Who brought you here? Did you come with anybody?

EY: Oh, I come by bus.

TS: Um, and then when you got here you went to the Mission.

EY: Yeah, I went to the Mission and they help me. Yeah, I stay in Mission like twenty-five days. Yeah, and then I get my apartment.

TS: Yeah, um, anything else you would like to tell me about yourself or Lincoln or coming to American or about Sudan or Eritrea?

EY: Well, um, the best is America. Yes. Yes, it's the best because Africa is, you know, always they are fighting, always there are war, always people die, you know. America's the best.

TS: Yeah.

EY: Yeah, I would go back to visit if I got money. I would go to visit but I would want to come back. (Laughter)

TS: I guess will about wrap this up, um; I don't have any other questions at the moment so I will stop the recording. Um, so I'm just adding a little bit more to my interview with Elsa. What was your brother's name?

EY: My brother's name is Shemai.

TS: When you left, did he also go to live with your uncle?

EY: yeah, he live with my uncle, but you know, he was not okay there.

TS: Did he leave with you to go to Massawa or did he stay with your uncle?

EY: He stay with my uncle but he came every three months to see me. Every three months.

TS: Oh, that's good. And then you said that you met a friend in Massawa and that's how you met your husband. Can you tell me any more about that friend? Did you meet her at working, or?

EY: Oh, my husband's sister?

TS: Yes.

EY: She was, when I used to work, she was neighbor from the people I work with. They was neighbor. She was with her sister too, with her older sister. She's younger. I meet her there.

TS: Okay, and then she introduced you to her brother?

EY: Yeah, when we grow up he keep coming and I meet him there and we get married. They happy. (Laughter)

TS: And how old were you when you got married?

EY: Twenty-one.

TS: Twenty-one. Is that a normal age?

EY: In my country?

TS: Yeah, about in your twenties.

EY: Yeah.

TS: So then you had the one baby that died and that was still when you were in...

EY: In Eritrea.

TS: Okay.

EY: In Eritrea, actually when I was young.

TS: And, um, how old were you when you left to go to Sudan?

EY: Oh, when I came to United States?

TS: No when you left Eritrea to go to Sudan?

EY: I was, I think I was like twenty-two.

TS: Okay, um, and you lived there for six years, um, what did your husband do while you lived in Sudan?

EY: He used to work in ship.

TS: In ship, and that's what he does now in Alaska?

EY: Yeah.

TS: Do you still talk to him at all?

EY: No, right now, I don't feel to talk to him, but someday that's okay we will be friends.

TS: Yeah?

EY: Because he is nice but he don't take care of himself. He drink too much. Yeah.

TS: Okay, so I'm trying to think if there is anything...

EY: That you forget. (Laughter) It's okay.

TS: Um, tell me about your marriage... the ceremony... were there lots of people or a small gathering?

EY: My wedding was only three people that I know and one priest.

TS: One priest.

EY: That's it.

TS: Where did you get married?

EY: At home, then we go to church and that's it.

TS: Okay.

EY: That's because I don't have money, you know.

TS: How long of a ceremony is it? Does it take a long time? Do you exchange words or do you do anything.

EY: It was a Saturday morning, okay, and we go to church, and he bring for us the priest and he come our home with these three people. The three people that are with us and that's it. It was not big. Yeah.

TS: Do you exchange rings? Is that a custom there too or is that just western.

EY: Yeah, I got ring, when I get big – it's not getting on.

TS: Do the men wear rings too, or does just the women wear a ring?

EY: Men too, but you know what men and women they don't care about ring – they worry about it that much. (Laughter)

TS: Um, now clothing wise. Do you have any other customary clothing – like the Sudanese women often have?

EY: Yeah, we have, we call it Zuria. This is our traditional dress. I will show you when you come to my home.

TS: Okay, and um, is that something that you wear every day – that traditional dress.

EY: Not every day, but when it is like holiday, you know. Like holiday and sometimes when I go to church I wear it too. It white dress.

TS: Okay, um, do you have any, were there any traditional footwear in Eritrea and Sudan? Sandals or shoes?

EY: Yeah, I like sandals.

TS: Had you ever had a car in Eritrea or Sudan? Have you ever learned how to drive?

EY: No in America I would be very scared. Nervous, yeah. No I didn't learn how to drive. (Laughter)

TS: Did you husband ever learn how to drive?

EY: Drive, yes, from Africa.

TS: Oh, he learned how to drive in Africa. Did you have a car in Africa?

EY: No we didn't have car but he learned how. He finish high school in Eritrea. He didn't have problems.

TS: Were the schools like the schools here. Do you know at all... classrooms... same type of school structure? How old was he when he graduated from high school.

EY: I think like twenty-three. Twenty-three, yeah.

TS: So it is a little bit longer than it is here.

EY: Yeah, he's older than me by three years, yeah.

TS: Okay.

EY: Yeah, he don't have any problem. His father he work as mechanic.

TS: Okay.

EY: And they have like bicycle shop. Yeah, and so he don't have problem. He learn until high school but he don't go college.

TS: All right, this will conclude the interview with Elsa Yosef on July fourteenth.