AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER


ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): Welcome to America Works, interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce, and this America Works podcast features excerpts from a longer interview with Komla Ewu, who was interviewed by oral historian John McKerley from the University of Iowa’s Labor Center as part of his Archie Green Fellowship project documenting “Recent Immigrant Workers in Iowa’s Meatpacking Industry.”

Mr. Ewu was born in the West African nation of Togo, where he attended college, earned a Masters’ degree and became a respected high school teacher. However, despite his success, conditions in Togo did not enable him to earn enough money to support his family.

Intrigued by America and a chance to better himself, he entered the Diversity Lottery. Run by the U.S. Government, the Lottery permits a small number of qualified immigrants to come to the United States each year. After “playing the Lottery” for 10 years, he won an immigration slot. In this podcast, he talks about how he raised the funds necessary to pay his way to the United States, how he found work on the “picnic line” in a giant Midwestern meat packing plant – (which remains one of America’s most grueling jobs) — and how grateful he is to be an American worker.

His interview is a reminder of how much some of our neighbors have sacrificed to achieve a better life for themselves and their families as they pursue the American Dream.

INTERVIEW

Komla Ewu: I got first of all my Bachelor’s degree in Linguistics. Then, I continued to have my Master’s degree in Linguistics. And I sat for government competition and I was selected, so I became a high school teacher and teaching English as a second language.

It’s very difficult; it’s not like here. When I was teaching, I go alone up to 600 students. 600 students alone! And we have up to 200 students in one single classroom. Very difficult to
manage. And it is not like here where machine can rate, so after an examination, I have up to 1,000 piles of papers to correct all night.

And at the end of the month, you go to the bank—what you earn does not even reach two weeks before, you spend everything. You have to pay your rent; you have to take care of your family—and African family is big: not only your spouse and your children, but you have your parents, your nephew—all those things. And because not everybody is working to earn on a monthly basis, so you are the only person everybody is looking at. So that the situation has become unbearable. And I say, I have to think otherwise. I cannot become anything if I continue that way. So for that reason, I started playing the [Diversity] Lottery Visa.

John McKerley: And when was that, that you decided to make that decision?

Komla Ewu: I started playing the Lottery Visa around 2000, 2001. And I played for 10 good years, yes, before I was eventually selected. And this is how I get here. I won in 2011. OK, yeah. So I came over here December 3, 2011.

It wasn’t easy. I nearly miss it because I was among those last group that should come that year. And like I said it, a mere civil servant in Togo I don’t have that much means to come over. And moreover, before coming over you need to have someone here by who you could stay from the beginning. To find that person wasn’t easy.

So I talked to one of my colleague teacher, who has a brother over here, which is Nigeri. [Oh, ok.] And he said, “My friend, don’t worry. I have a brother over there, I will just connect you with him.” And he accepted to host me; he accepted to accommodate me.

So now: how to pay Visa fee and move over? I had to sell my properties. I had to sell my land. Yes, and so far it doesn’t reached, because when people know that you are desperate, they don’t give the right value of what you are selling. So I sell all my properties, but I couldn’t meet the needed amount. So I went back to my colleague again, and I say—I plead to him to come in to back me so I could get loan from bank. And he agreed—thought he was a little bit afraid, because I’m leaving. What if I didn’t pay? So because he knows me, he has confidence in me and he knows that I’m coming to live with his brother, he accepted. He backed me. And I took loan from the bank. This is how I managed to make it and make ends meet and come over.

John McKerley: Was your first job working at the meatpacking plant?

Komla Ewu: Yes. You know, the problem over here is whenever you come from Africa, your degrees no more matter. You cannot just come over with your degree and find what it was here. So you have to start everything over. So the only opportunity for us to work quickly and pay back our debts is to join the meat packaging plant.

When I came, they tell me, “Well, you have to forget about your title of teacher and see life differently.” I say, “OK.” In the first two weeks it wasn’t easy in my mind leaving my students to become a meat cutter. But I said, “If this is the price, why not?” So I just forget about all those
positions that I have and when I started any. I said, “No. I’m a meat cutter, but I end my life more than when I used to be a high school teacher.” I have honor. As a teacher I was respected, by students, by parents. But financially, I was poor. But now, I’m just a meat cutter, but I make ends meet. I feed my family. I’m at ease.

All those that come here from the Lottery Visa are educated people. And most of them have university degrees. So they are more open minded. They know that this is not where they shall finish their life. This is just a step in the process to the American dream.

Here -- I want to add something, is that United States is a great country. Is a country of dream. And any person can come here and become somebody. That it takes determination. And also education is also key to success. So the only thing I can say again is to thank you and thank everybody. Is for me a pleasure.

The only bad news you can hear is that I’m here alone and my family is still back home because of the broken immigration system. It’s not easy to join families. I’m having two boys and one girl and my spouse who are back home in Africa. I’m still working hard for them to come over but they are still not here yet.

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): You’ve been listening to meat cutter and packing plant worker with Komla “Sam” Ewu, who was interview by oral historian John McKerley as part of his Archie Green Fellowship project to document “Recent Immigrant Workers in Iowa’s Meatpacking Industry.”

To hear the complete interview with Mr. Ewu as well as in-depth interviews with other recent immigrants from Africa, Asian and Latin America who are working in the meatpacking plants of Iowa and Illinois, please visit: www.loc.gov/folklife or just search online for the Occupational Folklife Project. This is folklorist Nancy Groce. On behalf of the American Folklife Center, thank you for listening to America Works.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at LOC.gov