

**Transcript for Oral History Interview**

**Conducted for University of Maryland Course HIST 428M- Fall 2015**

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**Interviewer's Name:** Natalia de Gravelles

**Interviewee's Name:** Asha Simon

**Interviewee's Country of Origin:** South Africa

**Interviewee's Current Residence:** Cabin John, MD

**Date of Interview:** 3 October, 2015

**Place of Interview:** Cabin John, MD

Natalia: My name is Natalia de Gravelles. It is October 3, 2015, 10:53am, and I am here in Cabin John, Maryland, interviewing Asha Simon. Asha, how are you?

Asha: I'm fine, thank you.

N: Glad to hear that. So, um, my first question for you would be what brought you to the US?

A: Um, my husband.

N: Mhm.

A: I met him in Thailand, and I was working at a school there and, um, we met, and um, decided we were gonna get married, and, uh, so, he was the reason. Because he's an American citizen.

N: Right. And when did you meet him?

A: I met him 7 years ago.

N: 7 years ago. Okay. So what brought you to Thailand?

A: Um, work. I was um, uh, looking to relocate from South Africa, and uh, my sister was a teacher in Thailand and uh, introduced me to a new school that had just opened up there. So, I decided to leave South Africa and pursue a new career.

N: Okay. So were you born in South Africa?

A: I was born in South Africa.

N: And where in South Africa?

A: In Durban, on the East coast.

N: And when, if you don't mind me asking, were you born?

A: In 1966.

N: 1966. So, that as around the time of Apartheid?

A: Mhm.

N: Ok.

A: Well, yeah. Apartheid was definitely uh happening around that time, but I left South Africa just as the transition was happening in South Africa, the end of Apartheid, that era.

N: Ok so what was it like growing up in South Africa during that era?

A: Um, the truth is I just didn't really know that things were like, different, in other parts of the world. We just grew up, uh, knowing that everything was separate in South Africa.

N: Mhm

A: So that's, what, those were the rules that we learned to follow. And uh until I got a little older, a lot of the news was censored in South Africa, the newspapers as well. So I didn't really have a really good sense of, like, this doesn't sound right. To me, I just thought that was, like, happening all over in the world.

N:Mhm.

A: Until I got older and started understanding, like, hmm, we have separate seats to sit at and when you go to train station, you can't take the first class train even though you have the money to buy the ticket, or you couldn't go to certain beaches because there were beaches for black people and white people, or whites and non-whites. So, that got me thinking a lot.

N: Ok. So, what part of South Africa, specifically, were you born in?

A: I was born in Durban, but lived in, uh, um, a little town called Verulam, which is in KwaZulu-Natal.

N: Ok. And, in your experience, or from your experience, was apartheid particularly different around Durban, in Durban, were there, you know, specific, or I guess unique detail-details, um, that you noticed growing up in Durban?

A: Well, the biggest thing I noticed was like, um, schools were segregated.

N: Mhm.

A: So I went to an Indian school, and there were black children who went to schools more in rural areas where they lived, and then you know, white students went to white schools. So, we never really integrated that way, you know, there were no school activities where you visited a white school or a black school.

N: Mhm.

A: So, that was something that I noticed. Um, also just the beaches, that was like a really big thing for us because we loved going to the beach, but there were signs for non-whites and white beaches. So, obviously the nice beautiful beaches were assigned to the white people. Uh, we just had beaches we could go to that were for non-whites.

N: Okay.

A: So, growing up, those were some of the things that I noticed.

N: Okay. And how did that make you feel as a kid, you know, noticing that there were segregated beaches or other things?

A: As a kid, I was actually ok with it, because that's what we were- that's what we grew up with. But as I got older, and became more aware of the inequality, then I kind of, you know, started to question it, uh a little. But I have to say, like my parents were real rule followers-

N: \*clears throat\*

A: And so we, growing up, we were not one of those, one of those, those rebel kind of families that were-

N: Right.

A: Those we did, I did have friends in my school, whose families, uh, didn't agree with that, and, and they were more vocal about it, and those were the families who were under house arrest.

N: Under house arrest.

A: Yeah.

N: Wow. So, did you have any siblings then- or, do you have any siblings?

A: I do, I have an older sister, and a younger sister, and a brother who still lives in South Africa.

N: Ok. Do your other sisters, uh, do they live in South Africa still?

A: My younger sister is, um, fashion designer, lives in Cape Town, in South Africa, and my brother has, uh, works and lives there as well. My older sister lives in Thailand and um, I'm here.

N: OK. So, how old were you when you left South Africa?

A: I was in my twenties.

N: Your twenties, OK. And what, um influenced you to leave South Africa?

A: Um, uh, I was going through a divorce at that time, and as I mentioned my sister was already living overseas in Thailand, and she suggested to me like, 'hey why don't you come to Thailand, there's a new school opening, and, uh, maybe you can just start fresh, start life over again-'

N: Mhm.

A: And, I had Shanese at the time, she was like, three and a half years old, so I decided to just, go to Thailand, just kind of on a holiday, and just look at it, and take a look at the school. So I left Shanese with my parents, and went to Thailand for about a month, visited the school, interviewed with the head of the school. They liked me and they were, uh, really happy to know that Shanese was a native English speaker-

N: Right.

A: So they, um, offered me a job, and I came back to South Africa, and told my parents that I'm gonna leave, and, take Shanese with me, and the school arranged my visa and all of that. Um, and so I packed up, and left, and stayed with my sister for a little while, and then, you know got my own apartment and started school with Shanese.

N: Mhm. Um, just for the sake of the interview could you, um, describe, who Shanese is?

A: OK. So Shanese \*N clears throat\* is my daughter, she is 23 years old. Her father was, uh, is, South African as well, he's now remarried, living in London. He was a policeman in South Africa so it was really very a difficult time, especially when the transition was happening.

N: Right.

A: Um, so we got divorced, when she was about three years old, and um, uh, I felt like having an opportunity to come overseas might be really good for her as well.

N: Mhm.

A: So, that was another reason why I decided to, when I got this opportunity at the school I decided to, um, take Shanese with me once I got to check out everything, and you know just have her start a brand new life in Thailand as well.

N: OK. So was Shanese primarily educated in Thailand?

A: Yes, she was.

N: OK.

A: She worked at the three different international schools that I worked at, so every school that I worked at she was able to, attend that school and that was great for me because she got a tuition waive-

N: Right.

A: At every school that I worked at, so she got a great education, and I didn't have to pay too much money for it.

N: Right. So, in terms of your own education, where were you educated, uh, for university?

A: For-OK. So, I went to a primary school in Verulam, in my little town where I was, uh, living. High school was a couple miles away from my primary school. And then when I finished school I went to a technical college, it was called the ML Sultan Technical college, did a course there and got work as a personal assistant, uh, in Durban, worked there for a couple of years, and then went back to night school, and studied, and um worked on my credentials. And then when I heard this opportunity was coming up in Thailand I um, did uh, ESL course, and that kind of helped me to get my foot in the door to work in international school, because I got certified in ESL, and then when I moved to Thailand worked and then saved my money and went to summer school every year just worked on my credentials until I got my MA in education.

N: OK, and ESL is English as a second language?

A: Yes.

N: OK. So, did you grow up speaking English?

A: I grew up speaking English, Afrikaans, Zulu.

N: Wow. So, would you consider yourself fluent in all three?

A: Uh, no I would say fluent- obviously English is my second language. But I could get by speaking and understanding some Afrikaans which is very much like German. Zulu, we had some workers, my dad had a driver and, uh, uh someone helping him at home, uh to clean the yards, our gardener. Our maid as well was Zulu, so in order to communicate with them we needed to learn the language. So, I could speak and understand some of it, but I wouldn't say I'm fluent in it.

N: Right.

A: And then, a little bit of Hindi, because my parents when they didn't want us to understand them they would speak in Hindi, but we learned some Hindi, so I kind of got a grasp of that as well.

N: OK, so which did you speak at home, growing up?

A: Growing up we spoke in English.

N: In English.

A: Mhm.

N: Ok, and would you say, growing up, learning to speak these languages influenced your own cultural identity as a kid?

A: Yes, um, definitely. Like, um, I'm a fourth generation Indian, from India, I don't know which part of India we came from, but basically our ancestors were brought to South Africa as indentured laborer to cut sugar cane. But they brought all the cultures and customs with them, so, you know, my mom dressed in a sari every day, and we followed the religious, um celebrations, like Diwali, is a huge celebration. It's kind of like Christmas, but we call it Diwali, it's the festival of lights.

N: Mhm.

A: My parents, you know, my mum cooked Indian food, uh, we attend weddings that are all very traditional and you know, we grew up a little more on the western side, but my mum was very traditional.

N: OK. And, how many generations of your family, um, were living in South Africa?

A: Three, by then.

N: OK. So, did you stay very closely connected to your extended family, like your grandparents, cousins?

A: Yes, very closely. Um, we lived, when we were little, lived with my grandparents.

N: Mhm.

A: My paternal grandparents. So, we were very close to them, we had a huge- we have a huge, extended family in South Africa. But, I wish I had talked with my grandmother more, as I got older, to understand more about my roots, because I would love to go back to India one day and find about where we came from. But all I know about them is that there were six, seven ships that left from different parts of India, and our ancestors were on one of those ships.

N: OK \*clears throat.\*

A: And they were brought to South Africa. So, I don't know a lot of our back history.

N: So, you're fourth generation Indian. Is that on your maternal, or paternal side?

A: I think it's from both sides.

N: Ok, so both of your parents are Indian.

A: Yes.

N: OK. So, in terms of culture shock

A: Mhm.

N: What was- was there any culture shock when you moved from South Africa to Thailand?

A: \*laughs\* Yes, there was. I think my sister made it really uh, the transition, she made it really easy for me, because I learned to speak, I call it taxi Thai, if I were to get into a taxi, just to, you know, tell the driver where I needed to go, that was a little easier for me. He did make some parts like living with her and she kind of showed me the ropes of you know living in Thailand, what it was like, so she made it easy for me. But some things were hard, for example, when I went to the new school, one of the teachers said to me 'don't ever tell the parents you are divorced.' And I said, 'why?' And she goes, like, well, this is the Thai- Chinese school and they don't really like it if they, they you know know you are divorced. So, you should keep that a secret. And I was like well, I left South Africa to start a new life-

N: Right.

A: And I don't want any secrets, you know. But being dark-skinned, I have to say, you know, that was one of things, that was a bit of a culture shock to me, because you know, in Thailand, not everyone, but a lot of the people feel like having light skin, is, you are beautiful if you have light skin. So Shanese was, is, dark-skinned and so am I and um, I found out like when she was at school she was having- she didn't have a lot of friends and you know she was in kindergarten, and I was a kindergarten teacher as well but she wasn't in my class. And I would ask her every day, "so darling how was your day?" And, uh, she said, "I don't really have any friends." And I said "why?" And she said "Nobody likes to play with me." And so I talked to some of the kids in her classroom, and I knew them, and we would all be all on the playground together, and you know, hang out with them-

N: Mhm.

A: And they said to me, uh, so they called me teacher. And they said, "Teacher, you need to, uh, wash Shanese with soap." And I said, why? And they said, "You know, because her skin, it's brown, and it's uh, it looks uh, it's dirty." And I said, "It's not dirty, that's the color of our skin." And they said, "You should tell her to drink white milk. Because you know she drinks chocolate milk every day, and that makes her skin brown." \*N laughs.\* So these poor kids, these Asian children were kind of being raised that way, and I think parents wanted them to drink white milk. So they just told them, don't drink chocolate milk, it's gonna make your skin brown. And so the kids felt like Shanese's skin color was a problem.

N: Mhm.

A: For some reason, mine, it wasn't a problem to them, because they loved to hold my hand, and hang out with me, but Shanese was little, and they just isolated her. And so she, uh would just play by herself most of the time until, I sat down with the kids and talked with them and said, "She's not dirty, this is the color of our skin" and, and so eventually she got more friends which was nice. But she always grew up with this complex that she wasn't beautiful. Because we spent 15 years in Thailand-

N: Right.

A: And so she basically was a teenager there.

N: Right.

A: And so she always felt that she was not beautiful, because her lighter-skinned friends always got compliments from other people. And some of the things that happened to us, like we would go into the store looking to buy moisturizer, just a normal, regular moisturizer, and I would walk in and the sales assistant in the store would come to us and say, uh, "you should take this one, it's a skin lightener, it will make your skin white, and you know, white is so beautiful." And we would be like, you know, "no actually we're not looking for a skin lightener."

N: Mhm.

A: We just want, a moisturizer, we would have dry skin. And they would constantly try to sell us products that was gonna like make our skin white.

N: Right.

A: So, those were the kind of things that, for me it was a huge culture shock. There were like really nice people in Thailand as well. You know I was like a single parent there, and they were really nice and caring and loving and you know, genuinely concerned about us, but then there were other people that just made us feel really, uh, not good about ourselves.

N: So was that definitely an ideology you saw projected throughout the country, throughout like the culture as a whole?

A: As a whole, I would say yes. Just, if you are dark-skinned in Thailand, generally- it's not everyone- but generally, you are perceived as not beautiful, "oh what a shame your skin is dark and you are," uh, it's kind of like the mentality in India where you have darker skin and then you have more menial jobs to do, if you have darker skin you are not considered beautiful.

N: Mhm.

A: But if you are lighter skinned than it's easier for you to find a husband, and, you may not be so intelligent but if you're light skinned it's like, huh you are so beautiful.

N: Right.

A: So, yeah, uh, I know that that happens in India a lot, it's like with the caste system and all that, and I would say coming to Thailand it's a similar mentality.

N: Did you have experiences with that- have you ever visited India, so did you know-

A: No, I've never been to India. I would love to go.

N: \*movement in kitchen in background\* OK. So, I guess then, as Shanese grew up, do you think you were more aware of that, or she was?

A: I think both of us were- as she got older, I think both of us became much more aware of it in Thailand. She didn't really, you know she was very little in South Africa so I don't think she really felt that difference there.

N: Right.

A: Coming to Thailand, I would say, as she got older especially when she became a teenager, I think she really became aware and self-conscious of it.

N: Mhm. And do you see any parallels between that, and growing up during apartheid in South Africa?

A: \*sink running in background\* Uh, yeah, definitely, I mean as I said coming from India it was the same mentality about light skin and dark skin.

N: Right.

A: So, in South Africa, as well you know people would say like, "hm Asha is such a nice person, it's a pity she's dark skinned."

N: Wow.

A: Mhm, I would hear comments like that, like "oh she's really nice and friendly but what a shame, you know, she's dark-skinned."

N: Right. And how would you react to comments like that?

A: You know, at, when I was little it actually really hurt me.

N: Uhuh.

A: I used to actually cry about it cause my older sister is light-lighter skin, lighter than I am, and mom is very light skinned and my dark was- my dad was on the darker side.

N: Mhm.

A: So, growing up, whenever my sister and I fought with each other \*cough\* she would always call me blackie. So that was my, like my, my name that she teased my with \*N coughs\* that I was, I would like cry about it-

N: Mhm.

A: Just lock myself in the room and like, feel so upset and hurt you know, and so we would fight back and forth with each other and as we got older you know I said to her one day, you are gonna have a- you are gonna marry someone who's black, who's dark-skinned-

N: Right.

A: That was my way of getting back with her. And then you know when she was in high school, the love of her life was a dark skinned boy and that was my, you know my revenge with her like hahaha, you have a dark-skinned boyfriend now.

N: Mhm.

A: They never got married, but it was just, you know, they could've ended up together but it was just you know my kind of, I felt like I had the last laugh with that because she got a dark-skinned boyfriend. \*Laughter.\*

N: Right right. Um, ok. Do you think that you were perceived- that you're perceived here differently than you were perceived in Thailand or in South Africa?

A: Um, not really. I mean when I first joined my school, like where I'm working at now, there was a conference that came up, the People of Color conference. And so one of the teachers, uh, a teacher of color asked me, like, invited me to join the conference. And I was like yeah, great—I didn't know what it was, it was in Philadelphia and I was like great, I get to go to Philadelphia and attend the conference. And I did and it was a conference where there were people of color and, and I you know could relate to some of the things they were talking about but it was my first year in the U.S.-

N: Right.

A: So, I was kind of just feeling my way around.

N: Right.

A: And you know, so, I, I kind of feel like yeah, you know, I am a person of color, I identify with that but I don't feel, I guess at my school I don't really see a big distinction about it because I think everyone's more self-conscious and aware about it. There's a lot of emphasis on equity and diversity at my school. So, I'm not feeling the same as I did in South Africa, or in Thailand.

N: OK. And um where are you working now?

A: I'm working at a private school, it's called St. Patrick's Episcopal Day School.

N: OK. And, are you teaching there?

A: I used to teach, I was a kindergarten teacher for the last five years at the school, and I just transitioned this year into admissions, so I am now the Associate Director of Admissions and Financial Aid at St. Patrick's.

N: OK. So what are some of the major differences between teaching primary education here- or working in primary education here, and in Thailand?

A: Um, well, first of all, all the kids that I have dealt with here are native English speakers, which is, great. In Thailand the biggest difference was, I worked at three different international schools, but a lot of the schools didn't have, uh, very international students-

N: Mhm. \*Sniff\*

A: The students were mostly half and half. Like, they might have had a Thai dad, or a Chinese dad, and a mum who was, uh- oh sorry, it was mostly the foreign kids you- were mostly, uh, parents were, uh, white. Um, French, Italian, Spanish-

N: Uhuh, \*Sniff.\*

A: American, British. Mums were mostly Asian, Thai, or, um, Chinese. \*Sigh.\* So, a lot of the kids were raised half-and-half.

N: Mhm. \*Sniff.\*

A: Um, so a lot of them spoke Thai at home, cause they had uh nannies or au pairs who were, um, Asian, um, so the kids I came- uh, worked with were mostly non-native English speakers. And in my first year of teaching, it was- I was just a brand new teacher, uh teaching kindergarten, and I didn't realize that the level of um, them not understanding me, like the English I spoke, was so great that I just assumed almost like, three quarters of what I was saying to them, I thought they would understand me. And I had a Thai teaching assistant in my classroom and she would sometimes translate for me. But I'm just gonna share one story with you-

N: OK.

A: Because it was so funny. There was one little boy in my class, and, um, he asked a lot of why questions. You know, always questioning why, why. Anyway, so at one time, I had taught the whole day and I was with the class for almost the whole day. And I, uh, I had said something and he was like 'why,' and I explained it, and, uh, I said something else and he asked 'why' again, and I explained why. And by the end of it, you know, and he kept going 'why, why, why,'

uh, at the end of the day I said to him, 'Wei-Wei, because I am the boss, and I said so.' And I was quite frustrated by that time. And so he sat down in his chair, and then he raised his hand and I was like, 'Yes, Wei-Wei?' And he goes, 'Teacher, what means boss?' \*Laughter\* And, that blew me away, I just laughed out loud and I was like, oh my goodness, these poor kids. They probably don't understand anything-

N: Right. \*Laughs.\*

A: -that I'm saying, and I just said 'boss.' And, uh, he was the only one that actually had the guts to raise his hand and ask me, what does boss mean, you know. And so I laughed about it and then I asked my, um, teaching assistant to translate to him. But then I decided you know I had to step back and take it a little slower with the kids.

N: Mhm.

A: And I was a brand new teacher, and I just needed to learn like, gosh, these children are not really understanding what you are saying so I was trying to avoid speaking, like, Pidgin English to the kids-

N: Right.

A: I just wanted to speak proper English with them and I, at the beginning of the year I learned to say in Thai, 'I do not speak Thai.' So my teaching assistant taught me to say, '*pôot tai mâi dâai.*' That means, 'I do not speak Thai.' So it was forcing the kids to like speak in English to me, they needed to go to the bathroom, they needed to raise their hand and say 'I need to go to the bathroom please-'

N: Mhm.

A: And not say it to me in Thai. So I would sometimes kind of um, encourage them to speak proper English. But I just realized, like, they were so little and I just needed to take a couple steps back, not even a step back-

N: Right.

A: To try and make sure, um, they could understand what I was saying to them. So that was a big learning curve.

N: Mhm. So by the time those kids were in, um, kindergarten- is what you taught, right?- How much English had they generally had, how much English education?

A: Uh, not much. So kindergarten, a lot of them just kind of entered the school, either in pre-K or kindergarten, so I would say, the level of English, a lot of them would go for after school classes, to learn more English, and uh, some of them had one-on-one instruction. Some were pretty good, they caught on quite easily. But, I mean, by the time they finished, by the time they got to grade twelve, they could speak and understand English fairly well.

N: Mhm.

A: But it was as slow process for them. So that, for me that was the biggest difference, coming here and talking to kids and them knowing, you know, what I was saying, like the first time. Like, I would call a lot of the students 'darling.' And they didn't know what darling meant, one time a kid asked me, 'Excuse me teacher, what- what means darling?' And I was like wow, OK, that's pretty amazing. So here it's different.

N: Mhm.

A: Kids get it.

N: Mhm. So what language is spoken primarily in Thailand?

A: In Thailand, Thai, I would say is the first language, and then there are a lot of Chinese in Thailand, so I would say Thai, Chinese, there are a lot of Cambodians now living and working in Thailand as well. Burmese, um, so yeah. I would say, basically, those languages and then now English is, you know, much more popular now.

N: Right.

A: In Thailand, so at least, you know taxi drivers, a lot of them can understand some English.

N: Right.

A: So I think, I-I would include English as well.

N: Right. So as you lived, or I guess, as you spent more time in Thailand, did you find yourself more comfortable communita- communicating to your students in Thai, or was it still primarily in English?

A: Definitely in English. I ne- all I learned is taxi Thai, and I didn't, I wasn't really interested to really learn the language. I wish I had learned a little more \*N sniffs\* but then it just forced my students to communicate with me in English. But there were a lot of foreign, foreign teachers that went to Thailand, and they just went native, and they got a Thai boyfriend, and got to learn the language and like speak, communicate with the kids back and forth in Thai, which was, the kids loved that. But, I felt it was a very- it is a very tonal language. And you know you can say a word in Thai that could have the two opposite meanings. For example you could say 'you are beautiful.' In Thai, you could say beautiful is- um, I'm not even sure if I'm gonna say this correctly but it's 'S̄wyy,' that means beautiful. Or, you could say 'suai,' and that could mean ugly. So-

N: Okay.

A: You could say to someone, 'you are very beautiful,' but if you don't say it in the proper way you could say you are really ugly. So-

N: It could get confusing.

A: I didn't, yeah, I didn't take, I, I just, I had no interest in learning Thai, even though I was there for such a long time. I was just felt my job forced me, you know, for the kids to speak in English with me and I didn't really learn it.

N: Right. Sorry, could you spell that word for me? S-s- how do you- suai?

A: It's, uh, s-u-a-y, I'm guessing, but if you Google it you might, try it, it'd be interesting to see the different way that it's spelled.

N: Yeah. So have you had any similar experiences in terms of lapse in communication, um, between you and your students here in the US?

A: Uh, no, not really. I think the language is amazing, I think the kids are pretty, uh you know they all speak and understand Ang-English. There are a couple kids who speak, uh, Spanish, who are Hispanic kids at the school, but I think the level of English is pretty high. So I don't think I've come across any of those kinds of issues.

N: Right. So, um, do the kids that go to your school now, um, do they pick up very quickly on the fact that you're not a native-born American?

A: Uh, I guess my accent is more British. \*N coughs.\* So, like, a lot of the parents and students think I was born or studied in England. Uh, but, for the students I come into contact with, usually for the first few weeks of school we talk about ourselves and, so I would normally share my background with them by the first week of school, um, so, a lot of the students that I've interacted with already know about my background.

N: Mhm.

A: And then, there are other students that I may not have interacted with. At the beginning of the school year, different classes have different projects, and they come around the school and interview people. So this year, I was one of the people who got interviewed and of the five kids that came to interview me, three of them were my former students so they already knew a lot of information about me. But the other two, I hadn't taught, so they had learned something new about me.

N: Right. And do you introduce your cultural background to the kids at the beginning of the school year? Is that something you usually bring up with them? \*Clears throat\*

A: Yeah, we normally do that at Back to School night, with all the parents.

N: OK.

A: So, uh, I team taught with another teacher, so we would normally just give them background information about ourselves and uh, and then by the first week of school, we would share- each child would get to share about themselves and then the teachers would share as well. So it's like, we wouldn't give them a whole lot of information just on the first day or second day, but during the course of the week just more information about ourselves.

N: Mhm.

A: And then, as questions would arise in class, or if there was a book that I was reading and it had to do with, about India, or the kids were looking at pictures in a book and we were talking about Diwali, and they would say, 'Look, Mrs. Simon, this person looks like you,' or that and I'd be like, 'Yeah, that's someone who's Indian, but I've never been to India, but I am Indian.'

N: Right.

A: So we look the same. And so, you know, they could make connections and I could relate to it.

N: Right. So what influenced you to want to become a teacher?

A: Uh, that's a very good question. I never thought I would be a teacher. When I was in South Africa, when my sister was communicating with me back and forth, she came home once on holiday. And I was actually um, my neighbor needed some help in school and her mum had got her report card. And her mum just said to me like, "Oh, she didn't do so well and I really, uh- can you just help her, when you are doing your homework can you just sit down and, uh, work with her a little bit?" So I would sit with this girl and I would do my homework, and help her, and we would like chit-chat, and talk her about her homework. So I like, kind of tutored her for a while, and when she got her next report card, she also got an award for the most improved student. So, her parents were so excited about it and my sister \*N coughs\* like, heard about it and she was like "Oh my goodness, you would make a fantastic teacher, I really think you should consider teaching." So I said, I don't think so, and my sister was the one who like convinced me, she just said "I think you would make a fantastic teacher and you should do it."

N: Right.

A: So I was like, OK, maybe I'll just give it a try and so, that's when it all came together, when I decided to move to Thailand.

N: OK. So, in terms of teaching certification, were you able to use the one that you had gotten in South Africa directly in Thailand?

A: Oh, definitely. The ESL certificate that I got actually opened up the door for me to work at my first school.

N: Mhm.

A: Because I had the ESL certificate, which was teaching English as a second language. And while I was working at the school, I decided to do a Montessori course, so that was through the, uh, Montessori School in London. \*Kitchen noises in background.\* So I would, work all year and then over the summer I could, um do these courses. Some were online, and I had a mentor, who was from South Africa actually. And so, uh, during the course of the year there were assignments that I had to work on that would be a case study of a student. So I could actually observe a student in my classroom and maybe, um, observe him and make little observation notes and add that to my assignment questions and mail it to my mentor who would look at it and give me feedback.

N: Mhm.

A: Uh, so back and forth I would, um, do the coursework and then when I got that certification it was great, because then that enabled me to actually be a classroom teacher.

N: Right.

A: Because at the beginning, I had to be an assistant teacher until I got that Montessori certification that enabled me to work as the lead teacher in the classroom, and then there after I just kept going, studying every summer and just working on my credentials.

N: Right. So then, were you able to take that certificate and translate it directly to teaching in the US, or did you have to get a new one when you were- uh, came to the US?

A: Um, w-I think when you work at a private school, I had my MA in education already and by the time I left Thailand I had fifteen years of teaching experience. So, when I came to the US at the private school I didn't need to update anything, except to attend more professional development opportunities, which the school provided.

N: OK. What year did you come to the US?

A: I came, uh, gosh in two thousand and...eight, I think?

N: OK, OK. So, did you start off working as a teacher at St. Patrick's?

A: Yes. As a kindergarten teacher for five years, until my transition this year.

N: OK, this year. Um...so, what did your journey to the US look like? How was it for you?

A: Uh, gosh. My transition was actually good. Because uh, JP, my husband, was already here. He left Thailand six months earlier, to come back to the US, um, and uh, find a place to rent and kind of set up our new home here. Um, I finished up my contract, I had six more months to finish my contract, and Shanese was gonna graduate that year as well, so it all worked out really well.

N: Mhm.

A: Uh, my transition was not difficult, at all, because I came, um, the spring before, I came just to visit, got to see where we'll be living, and I got to, actually go to the school and interview at the school because I hadn't, I didn't have a job yet.

N: Right.

A: And I was just, uh, looking at different opportunities here, and St. Patrick's was one of the schools that I walked into and uh, met the head of the school and talked about, uh, what I was doing in Thailand and that I was gonna be moving, and um, left my CV with them and they were gonna look it over and if there were any openings let me know. So I got to come and visit around DC, it was perfect timing, I came around the Cherry Blossom time, so that was really beautiful, and so I think JP planned that really well, that I came and I had a holiday and then it was really- the weather was really great here. And, uh, when I went back to Thailand, to just finish up my contract, while I was there I found out that I, I'm gonna have a job already, that there was a vacancy here, so that made everything so much easier, the transition, to just leave. The, the thing that was most heartbreaking for me, leaving Thailand was, all of my friends that I had met over the fifteen years that I was there, and then my sister who still lives in Thailand. So, almost every weekend Shanese and I spent our time with her, and her family. So that was the hardest part for me, just leaving, saying goodbye to them and our friends, and then coming here to start all over again.

N: Would you say you have a stronger connection to South Africa or to Thailand?

A: Uh, gosh that's really hard to say, because I feel like I was born and raised in South Africa and all of my family- most of my family still live there. But then I spent fifteen years out of South Africa, just in Thailand, and my sister and her family, just, we were family there as well. So, I kind of feel, loyal to both places. If I had to pick one, that would be really hard for me.

N: Right. So, did you raise Shanese taking her to Thai- not Thailand, South Africa, frequently? Did she grow up visiting, you know, family in South Africa?

A: Yes. We, um, in, in, whenever it was a holiday in, um, over the summer, in Thailand, um I would fly back to South Africa so she could spend time with her cousins and her grandparents, and reconnect with them. But, it was really hard for her, because she left when she was so little, so she always felt like she didn't really fit, in, in South Africa, you know she wouldn't understand the jokes that my cousins would say, or they laughed at something, and she couldn't get it, and it was the South African lingo that they talked, and sometimes they would speak in slang and she didn't understand the slang. So I would say for me it was an easy transition, because going back and forth I was able to adapt. For Shanese it was harder. A lot of her cousins felt like, um, they would ask me like, 'Why does she speak like that?' And she spoke with a very American accent. And they felt like she was showing off when she talked, and it was, she had mostly American teachers when she was in Thailand at all the international schools so, she just picked up that kind of accent when she talked. So I would say for me, my transition was easier. I think for Shanese it was much harder. She kind of had to become like a chameleon and just blend.

N: Right.

A: When she was in South Africa, just become a little more South African and learn the South African isms, and then when she was back in Thailand it was different.

N: Right. And then in terms of coming to the US, do you think it was easier for you to transition, or for Shanese to transition?

A: Definitely for me. I think I had a \*cough\* a much easier transition, just because JP was already here, and he had set up our apartment, and I just sent my shipment through and had boxes to unpack and then had all my things that I wanted near me. For Shanese, it was a whole new ballgame for her. \*N coughs.\* She just, um, I think, she had a very, very difficult transition and I didn't know until a few years ago when we, sat down and talked and she just told me how hard everything was. She just felt like, a lot of the students that she, in her first year of college that she was with, a lot of them didn't have passports, they had never traveled. And so she felt very um, she didn't feel like she fitted in the group. \*Microwave sound in back.\* She had a dorm room with a student who was homeschooled. So she, you know they were just on two different wavelengths. And uh, so I think that aspect for Shanese was very, very difficult. And I was brand new at my new school, and I had just moved to the U.S. and I didn't think, when she first went to college I didn't think, um, I could ask for permission to take leave from school and go help her set up in her dorm room, and be with her for a little while, I didn't know that that was allowed. I just felt like I was new, starting a new job, I couldn't ask for time off, we had just started school. And so, she was kind of left to fend for herself, and later when I found out, when she chatted with me she was like, oh mom, you know all the other parents came and they had, made up the beds for their kids and they went shopping and they bought stuff-

N: Yeah.

A: And, I feel like, I just feel like a little lost, you were not there and so, um, I really felt for her. It was really, um, on my part, I wasn't thinking ahead for her, I just kind of settled myself in and just thought she was gonna be okay. Things were not okay.

N: Did you raise- did you raise her to be very independent?

A: You know, yes and no. \*N coughs.\* As an Indian parent, uh, I always had her close to me and it was, for most the time it was just the two of us. Um, until, uh, my husband came into the picture \*sound of plates in background\* and being American, and he had a different mindset about having Shanese to be a little more free, and you know, and not to treat, be like the typical Indian mother that I was. Uh, so he would always encourage me to you know, let her go out, and be with her friends, and try new things, and, and so I became much more open minded with him, uh, guiding me with that, that was something new for me. Uh, so, yeah sorry what was your question again> I'm so distracted with the noise. Louis? \*calling out to her stepson\*

Louis: Yeah?

A: You need to be a little less noisy please.

L: OK.

N: It was no problem. It was just, um, how independent did you raise Shanese to be?

A: OK. So, now, I think that she's much more independent-

N: OK.

A: Now that she's in college, and she's just, uh, you know I'm here and she's in Milwaukee, and uh, I think she's becoming much more independent and I'm trying to kind of cut off those apron strings. \*Microwave in background.\*

N: Right. Where did she \*clears throat\* first go to school when you moved- sorry. \*Clears throat.\* Getting a cold. Where did she first go to school when you moved here?

A: OK, so she first went to school in Milwaukee, at the, uh, at Marquette University.

N: OK.

A: She was offered a partial scholarship, when she finished her school in Thailand, she applied to different places here in the U.S., Marquette was one of the places that offered her a scholarship. So she went to Marquette for a year, but after a year she just felt that was not a good fit for her.

N: Right.

A: It was a Jesuit, uh university and she just felt like a fish out of water. So she, uh, after a year we decided it might be best for her to take a year off and just work and travel, and do something other than being at school for a year.

N: OK.

A: So that's what she did. She had to be very independent then, find a job, she did waitressing, and babysitting, and a whole lot of other things, and you know, paid her rent and tried to manage on her own for that year, until she re-enrolled and decided to go to the University of Wis-um, Milwaukee in Wisconsin.

N: And is she liking that a lot more?

A: Yes. Definitely.

N: That's good. So, um, how would you describe your perceptions of the US before moving here?

A: Uh, gosh. First of all, I thought I was gonna retire in Thailand, I never really thought I was gonna ever move here. So when, when the, you know, when I met JP and uh, we had to decide quickly because he was gonna be relocated for his job coming back to the U.S. So we had to

decide what our next plans were, because to get the paperwork going for a green card, it was a long, tedious procedure. So uh, we dec- you know we got married, and then he started with all the, the paperwork, um, uh, we- what was the question again? Sorry.

N: Your perceptions of the US before coming.

A: Right, right sorry. Yeah. So I, I had American friends at school and I had you know, talked to them and all of that but- talking to people it's not the same, you know nothing prepares you for it, you're moving to a new country, and uh, to live. And coming to the U.S. I have to say, the one thing that was hard for me was driving on the other side of the road. Because in Thailand, you know, I drove around a lot and had a car. And I had to learn, practice driving on the right-hand side of the road. Um, but what was amazing for me was all the signs were in English. And, everyone communicated in English and in Thailand, if I got lost, that was really hard for me because the signs were mostly in Thai.

N: Mhm.

A: So, um, for me this was huge, to be able to go to a store and look for something if I'm gonna buy something and find my size, and it was so easy to go through and you know see all of that. And if I went to a store and signs were not in Thai, they were all in English so if I needed to find shampoo or conditioner I could actually read the labels, and know what's what. So I, I think that was great to be able to, you know, the English part of it was good.

N: Right. Would you say that, when you first came here, as opposed to when you first moved to Thailand, it was easier or more difficult to interact with people, ask people directions or questions.

A: Definitely here.

N: OK.

A: Definitely here, yes.

N: And, and why?

A: Just, the language, you know I couldn't speak in Thai, all I knew was taxi Thai. So, you know I had to always have a friend with me who could speak in Thai if I needed to go shopping, if I was looking for a specific thing. And here, I could be fairly independent.

N: Right. So why did you choose to, um move to Cabin John?

A: Uh, we were actually living in an apart- in an apartment before this. But um, we know we felt like, um, when we have the money that it would be great to have our own house.

N: Right.

A: And, uh, looked around online for different places, and then saw that this house was up for sale, and uh came to the neighborhood and drove around and liked what we saw, and decided maybe this would be a good fit. So we uh, decided to buy the house here.

N: Where was the apartment?

A: It was in downtown- in Bethesda.

N: OK. So what were your first, I guess, perceptions of the DC area, when you first came here?

A: Um, very international, I loved it. Like uh, one of the things I wanted to see was to go to the White House, and get photos taken there, and to check out all the monuments and all that. But I, I really liked DC. When I came on holiday just to visit, um when it was the Cherry Blossom time cause I love that time of the year, it was just amazing to uh, be here, and the whole atmosphere was uh, it was just a nice, the weather was beautiful, and it was just uh, a nice time to be here. Um, obviously the weather was, you know a big shock to me. I didn't mention that, but one of the things that, you know I had never experienced the four seasons.

N: Right.

A: Living in Thailand, it was either two seasons, the rainy season or the hot season, all the time. And then coming here, suddenly I started experiencing all four seasons, and then um, winter. I'd never experienced snow. I, I experienced fake snow in Thailand. \*Laughs\*

N: \*Laughs\* Fake snow.

A: Because we had a place where kids could go on a field trip.

N: OK.

A: And it was a place that was called Dream World, and they had uh, a place that had fake snow, and um, you know so I had never really touched real snow until I came here. But, JP was really good about that as well, he just, you know, took me to go get the warmest nice down coat I could have, I think he really didn't want me to really get scared of the winter-

N: Right.

A: -decide like, eh, actually I, this is not where I want to be, I think I want to go back to Thailand. So I got all the right clothes to wear, and all of that, and now I'm ok, I know winter's coming-

N: Right, winter's coming.

A: I bring all my warm stuff out. \*Laughs.\*

N: So, were you living in Thailand during the tsunami, I think it was 2005?

A: Yes, actually I was in South Africa at the time the tsunami happened. So I didn't actually know it had happened on that day until we got a text message from my sister, who lives in Thailand, and who was at the beach, but on the other side where it had happened. And she just sent a message to say, ok, just want you all to know we are all fine, everything's OK.

N: Right.

A: And then we were like, what is she talking about? And then we turn the news on, and we just saw what was going on. And at the time when turned the news on it was just like, just 600 or 700 people that they said had died, until every hour by the hour it was just being updated into thousands and thousands. So, yes, we were in South Africa, on holiday at the time that it happened, but my sister was right there when it uh, when it had happened but she was just not like, in that area, so, yeah.

N: Right. What part of Thailand did you live in? \*Microwave beep\*

A: Uh, I lived downtown in Bangkok.

N: In Bangkok.

A: Yeah, yeah.

N: OK. Um... \*shuffling\* so do you have any stepchildren?

A: I do. Uh, two, Louis and Ella. Louis just turned 16, and Ella is gonna be 14 soon.

N: OK. So, how would you describe the process of I guess, getting to know them?

A: Well, they were students at my old school in Bangkok where I worked, so that's where I had met JP actually, at the school. So I taught Ella, as, um in an afterschool activity, so I knew her. Louis was actually one of the buddy readers, his class would come into my class and read, uh to my younger students. So I kind of had, I knew them as a teacher at the school already.

N: Right.

A: So, yeah, that's how we met through the school. JP was actually separated at the time and the kids were in the school I was working at, and we met at a barbeque and then talked and then I realized that he was, uh, going through a divorce at the moment.

N: Right. And how was it for Shanese getting to know both JP and um, Ella.

A: Um, Shanese was an only child for the longest time. \*Laughter.\* So it was a little bit, um, different for her, just I think, um meeting JP she got along well with him, they had a really good relationship. Uh, she was younger, she was a teenager at that time, and uh I think he, she talked with him a lot and, they talked with each other and that was really nice. Um, and then Louis and

Ella, she had, you know at school she had seen them as well and then once JP and I started seeing each other and once it became like, public knowledge-

N: Right. \*laughs\*

A: Uh, they would come, the kids would come and spend weekends with us and all of that, so she got to interact with them as well.

N: OK. And did you all move over to the U.S. together, or did you come separately?

A: We came separately. Uh, the kids moved with their mother, who lives in Bethesda. The, the whole idea about the move was that, uh, their mum had decided she wants to relocate back to the U.S., and it just so happened JP's work was gonna bring him back to the U.S. as well, to any part of the U.S. She decided that she wanted to live in Washington DC, in this area.

N: Right.

A: Which was fine with JP, cause he could negotiate with his uh, former employer to say, OK, I can move back to the U.S., but I would like to be located in the DC area so I could be closer to the kids. So, she moved earlier on with the kids and, settled them into school and all of that, and then JP moved, and then six months later Shanese and I moved.

N: OK. And where does JP work?

A: Uh, he worked for a telecommunications company which is based in Florida.

N: OK.

A: And at the moment he is between jobs. He's in transition.

N: OK. Um, so describe your emotions during the process of getting your citizenship.

A: Uh, gosh, I was trying to like, communicate with different people who had gone through the process, like former friends from Thailand who now got remarried living in the US, Facebook friends from, you know, asking them like, "So is it difficult, what's the process," how- and then, pretty much the, the information I got was like, it's easy, all you have to do is just learn from the book, you know, one hundred questions, you'll be asked ten out of the one hundred. So basically it was American history that I had to go back and learn about.

N: Right.

A: Which I had not learned about before, so that was a good learning experience for me. Um, it caused some anxiety for me, because I just felt like, what if I don't know everything that they ask me, and like, all of that. But it all worked out in the end, you know I went and, listened to the CD everyday in my car to practice all the questions and answers and all of that and, yeah it all

worked out well. So I was anxious at the beginning and once it happened I was like, great. It wasn't so bad.

N: Right. And when did you get your citizenship?

A: Uh, about a year ago.

N: About a year ago.

A: Yeah.

N: So, after you got the citizenship- your citizenship, did you notice kind of like a shift in your relationship to the U.S.?

A: Oh, definitely, especially when I wanted to travel around Europe, because having a South African passport, was, I had to get a visa. I had to make a visa application, and you had to do it well in advance if you wanted to travel. And, uh, my sister is married to a Frenchman, the one that lives in Thailand, and they have a home in France. So every year I um, visit them. But the application process to go get a visa was, you had to pay a lot of money, you had to stand in a line, you had to fill in all the paperwork, and it was a long and tedious procedure. And once I got my U.S. passport, it just, travel for me suddenly became much more painless. So I just joined the line, and went in, and when I, when I traveled with my US passport last year it was just amazing, just ten seconds at the uh, immigration, they just stamped it. And so it kind of opened up a whole new world for me, I think.

N: So do you hold a Thai passport as well?

A: No. Just South African, and then now the US passport.

N: Does Shanese have a Thai passport?

A: No. She always traveled on her South African passport, and hopefully by the end of the year she will have her new passport, because she's gonna have her citizenship, uh interview in a couple of weeks.

N: OK. Um...\*shuffling\* OK, um, are there any, you know as we kind of wrap up the interview, are there any notable stories from your childhood that you'd like to share? Uh, anything that stands out above, you know, the rest. Any memories?

A: Uh, anything relating to the immigration part? Or...

N: Just any stories from your childhood, you know favorite memories?

A: OK, well, favorite memories, I have to say is just hanging out. We have a huge extended family so it's you know, every, usually when it's uh, when I was an international school teacher, Christmas was our favorite time to travel back to South Africa, because in international schools

we usually get two to three weeks holiday, just because most teachers want to go back to their home country. So for me, going back to South Africa in December was just amazing, because it's summer in South Africa, and it's just a very festive mood. It's the Rainbow Nation, everyone, whether you are Indian, white, colored, black, everyone celebrates Christmas in South Africa. Everyone, it's just, it's a holiday for everyone so um, shopping is hectic but then everything closes on Christmas day and people get to spend time with their families. So um, so traveling to South Africa in December was just fantastic for Shanese and myself. Now that I'm here in the U.S., I would love to go back every year in December, just because it is winter here and I would love to get away from the winter and go back to a nice warm place, except that we, we get like two week's holiday when it's Christmas now at my new school so it's just not enough time to spend all that money to travel all the way to South Africa just for such a short time. Um, so, last year I did go though, I think we made a trip in December, just a quick trip to visit my family and my dad wasn't too well so it was a good chance to go and, spend time with them and see them, see everyone. Um, but yeah I love hanging out with my extended family. It's a bit overwhelming at times because we don't see them so often now, it's probably like once a year that, um Shanese and I get to see them. And Shanese doesn't travel every year to South Africa now, she used to when I worked at uh, international schools, but now that she's more independent she sometimes has her own travel plans. Um, so I think that I just loved that about being in South Africa, and just, I miss all the South African products that we can buy over the counter. Just, little things that I grew up eating, special biscuits and chips and all of those things. But now we are trying to find stores like here that sell some international products. Some of the things that we were not available here, I'm in the store sometimes and I say, "oh look there's the chocolate, that's Cadbury from South Africa, and now they have it here." So, and whenever JP's at a store and he sees something familiar that I would love to have, and he would, uh, buy it so we could have it here.

N: Right.

A: And then, as I mentioned, in Thailand my fondest memories are just hanging out with my sister and her family, being with my niece and nephew who are now the same age as Lewis and Ella, so, uh they were babies when they were in Thailand and now they are just all grown up and teenagers and taller than I am. But I get to see them whenever I go to France, which is nice, I still feel connected to them. But my most memorable memories of being in Thailand would be just hanging out on weekends with them \*N coughs\*, or going to some nice places to eat. And all the lovely food in Thailand, that, we all love Thai food so that's, um, one of the things we would do and we had help, um, my sister has a Sri Lankan helper who just cooks lovely Thai food, went for Thai cooking classes. Um, I just loved shopping the streets, all the things that were so cheap on the streets, clothes, and you could buy anything, food and clothes just walking along the main roads in Bangkok or any side roads. And then coming to the U.S., it was a shock for me to walk into stores and to see how expensive the things are. I would always convert in my mind, I was always converting, how much did this cost in Thailand and then how much is it here. It's like six, sometimes ten times more in price than the clothes that I would buy. So I was so grateful that I had bought a lot of clothes while I was in Thailand. So when I came into stores I would walk into the stores and look at the price tag and go, 'No. I could actually get this much cheaper in Thailand.' So that was one of the big differences for me, just even going out to eat in a restaurant, at a Thai restaurant here, here the prices are ten times more than you would pay for

the same thing in Thailand. So, for me those were like, big culture shocks you know. Uh, yeah so I guess when I go back to Thailand I'll be eating a lot of Thai food, and trying to enjoy a lot of that.

N: Yeah.

A: \*Laughs\* Because it's not so affordable here.

N: Right.

A: Yeah.

N: How does the Thai food here compare to the Thai food in Thailand?

A: Well, we've been looking for like, more authentic Thai restaurants, and we always try new places when we see it. But one of the things we say to them is like, when we order a meal, we love spicy food. And even though we say to them we want it spicy, it's never come spicy, we always have to ask for more chili on the side or whatever. So now I started saying to people whenever we go to a restaurant, like "We used to live in Thailand so we ate really spicy food, so can you please make it spicy?" Um, it's not the same, obviously it's not the same as Thailand even though it might be, I'm sure it's a Thai person preparing the food, they just go much easier on the chili powder. It's a little more bland, when they make the food. Um, so you know, often JP carries chilies in his pocket so he can just kind of put it on the side. And he can chew it up, chew on it to make it a little more spicy but it's, yeah it's different.

N: Um, so is there anything else you'd like to tell me before we finish up?

A: Uh, no. I just feel like it's been a great experience you know growing up and living in South Africa, and then moving to Thailand was um, just great because my sister lived there for so long and she's still living there. But, um just having her, having family made a big difference to me. I think if I was just all alone and I didn't have family, it would've been really hard to fit in but, having her already there made my transition so much easier. And then meeting JP in Thailand, and then embarking on a new life, thinking about moving to the US was something I had not considered until I met him and then I just feel like, this is a new chapter in my life, and in Shanese's life, and I love my new job and everything seems to be going well so yeah, I, I think I'm happy to be here.

N: OK.

A: Though I miss my family.

N: Right. Alright, well thank you.

A: Yeah, you're most welcome.

