Will Jawando Interview Transcript
June 30, 2022
County Council building, Rockville MD.
Interviewer: Maria Sprehn, with Sarah Hedlund present

Part A

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Okay. This is, June 30th 2022 in Rockville. Okay. Well, thank you so much for coming to talk with us today.

Will Jawando: Thank you.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: You have a very interesting story of getting to Montgomery County and this is what we would like to hear, so. I thought maybe we could start with the story of how your parents met or if you'd like to start somewhere else, that's fine too, but

Will Jawando: That's fine. It's good, good a place as any.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Okay. All right. So yeah.

Will Jawando: None of us would be here if our parents didn't meet.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: This is true. This is true.

Will Jawando: So. My dad, Olayinka Jawando is from Lagos, Nigeria. He immigrated to the country in the early seventies on a scholarship to attend Fort Hays State University, which is in Kansas.

So if you, if you know anything about your US geography, Kansas is a rectangle right in the middle of the country, and Hays is right in the middle of that. So it's literally right in the middle of the country. And it's an old civil war town and Fort Hays State is the university and it's the town you know, less than 20,000 people at that time that my mother grew up in, born and raised.

And she was attending Fort Hays State University. Her parents had been there for several generations, but also like all of us here have had a immigration story as well, and they were Austrian and immigrants from, kind-of, present day Czech Republic, but the Austrian Empire. And through ancestry.com and research, my mom's been able to trace back to kind of the exact town where her folks, her ancestors are from, and also pull the records of how they got to Kansas, which is an interesting story too.

They were given land, her great grandfather, through the Homestead Act, and settled on a hundred acres of farmland in the 1890s, out in in Kansas. And so that's how they got there. But my dad comes, you know, a hundred years later or. Fleeing a civil war: on the tail end of

the Biafran Civil War in Nigeria, very bloody civil war. And somehow, I guess when you're looking on a map, just found his way to Fort Hays State because they were given scholarships and didn't know anything about the US. Not really. And so ended up in this small little town. My mom's obviously a white woman, he's an a black African. And you know, they get together, they meet at a bar called “Daisy Mae’s,” which is where a lot of the college kids hung out. And you know, it's one of those things where not many people, particularly on my mom's side of the family, are accepting of the relationship. In fact, my grandfather, my mother's father never speaks to my father. You know, they never exchange any words. So that's how he got to the US. I can fast forward to how they got to the Maryland if you want, unless you wanna ask some questions about that part?

Dr. Maria Sprehn: No, I think we can go, go to Maryland from there.

Will Jawando: So, yeah, they got together. My, my dad was a couple years, he was a computer science major, and my mother was a graphic artist.

And you know, it's interesting cuz immigration stories are, we all have them in some way, no matter how far back you go. You know, even if you're an indigenous person, you know, someone walked over the ice bridge, you know, millennia ago. And so on my mom's side, you know, I think another one of the American stories, I often say I have both sides of the American immigration story, you know– some white Europeans who were privileged for much of our immigration history to come over and given land and given things. And if you think about it, like my great, great grandfather spoke no English, came here, came through Baltimore in the 1890s, and within 10 years had a hundred acres in Kansas. You know, that's pretty…pretty successful. But they were very middle class, that was when you had to establish everything.

My dad, a different story. Fleeing a civil war, which is another common immigration story for this country. People fleeing violence, fleeing persecution and then they meet, you know, very different stories, different backgrounds, but they meet in Kansas, get together. My grandmother and my grandfather on my mom's side are not happy about it.

My mom's older sister had moved to Washington, DC and was working actually for the CIA and suggested that they move to the DC area, more accepting for their interracial relationship. You know, Loving v Virginia had just passed a couple years before they'd met. It was just, you know, barely legal to have an interracial relationship.

Also for economic opportunity, you know, cause in the middle of the Midwest you are already starting to see, you know, the industries shift in the seventies and, and things start to change. And so my mom, they move, which is another part of the internal migration story for, for many Americans. So they move east and they settle in Long Branch which is in a community of Silver Spring, which is, has always been very diverse, since Montgomery County was Montgomery County, and and was home to mostly African immigrants, central and South American immigrants, Black Americans, so very, a very diverse mix. And it's also affordable, right? It was something that they could afford, right? And so we, we, we live in a very modest apartment there and settle in that area.

My parents divorced when I'm six. And so, and then my mom and I move out and moved even smaller, more shabbier apartment. But that's how we got to that area. But it was a very diverse area and still is.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Great. Great. And so what what was it like growing up then? Do you have any stories from childhood? That I kind of relate to immigration. Well, or to the subculture from different parts of the world. I mean, is there

Will Jawando: Yeah. Well, I mean, I, it was my, my upbringing, all my classmates, it was different. It was tale of two cities, which Montgomery County often is. You know, so early on, second and third grade, I go to a mostly all white school, in Chevy Chase, our Lady of Lourdes, my mom was Catholic. She– they scraped every penny together to send me to Catholic school. And you know, that was a tough experience for me because it was very different from my neighborhood. All the kids were very wealthy, we were not. I was the only black or brown student in my class. And so I experienced a lot of discrimination, both from the teachers and from the students. And so that was a tough period. Then starting in fourth grade, I moved to the public school in the neighborhood, with all the kids that I grew up in the neighborhood with, and different set of problems– like not being friends with everybody for years before and getting bullied and trying to fit in. Dealing with being biracial and that. Dealing with being– with having an African name. Right. You know, because one of the things that's another part of the immigration story– and we're not immune here–is that often the pressure to assimilate is immense.

Whether it's language, name, culture.. and so while some of the first generation or immigrants themselves within their children, there's always that tension of like, particularly my sense of being an African immigrant, but I'm sure it's probably somewhat true for other immigrants too.

It's like you, you don't want to be that. There's a pressure not to be that and because kids are making fun of you and, and, and if you think about the history of, particularly of all immigrants, but particularly of African, you know, in order to justify the transatlantic slave trade, you had to demonize that continent and the people from it, and so there are no, the, the misinformation and the ignorance that go along with particularly at that time, and I would say even now is something that you had to overcome. So I was balancing all those things as a kid, not wanting my mom to drop me off at school, so the kids would make fun of me not really wanting to talk about my dad's name or culture, trying to fit into Black American culture. Just all those pressures. And I don't think that's unique to me. A lot of my friends, I think, grew up in that time, many of whom were either Central American immigrants or West Indian immigrants from the Caribbean. All I think were trying to navigate that similar type of dynamic.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: And when– did your dad impart Nigerian culture as you were growing up with language or stories or food or…

Will Jawando: I often say– like I mentioned, I just wrote this book: “My Seven Black Fathers” and– women are really the culture-givers. In a lot of cultures, and Yoruba culture, which is

where my dad is, it's the same, it's that way. So not really. I mean… so we didn't really have much of a relationship early on. I describe him as an absent presence. He's there for the first six years, but we don't really have a relationship. He's dealing with–which is another common immigrant thing–he's dealing with lack of meeting expectations of family at home, or how he, how successful he was supposed to be here and all those things. And you know, battling depression. And then my parents separate when I'm six, so that's even less contact. So there's really not a ton of… some isolated examples– I have one memory of him sitting me down and trying to, at my mother's urging, make me listen to some tapes, some Yoruba tapes of the Yoruba language, to try to supposedly learn it, but I was real little and it didn't make any sense to me, and so of course, very little stuck. But outside of that, I don't–there was not really a– he didn't talk about home much you know, so there was not much. I get a lot of my appreciation for that side of my culture much later in life, as an older teenager, really.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Oh. Tell us some about that. That's interesting, I mean, that is a typical process as well.

Will Jawando: Yeah.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: To then connect when, right. When you're a little bit older, right?

Will Jawando: Yeah. Yep.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Can you tell us a little more about that?

Will Jawando: Yeah, yeah, sure. You know, a couple big things happened in relation to that side of my family. So my mom's side, I'm very steeped in because, you know, I'm with her. We go home to Kansas every Christmas, you know, like, I ride the tractor on the farm, you know, I know that side. That's the side I'm most exposed to.

And outside of one set of Nigerian cousins that my dad was very close to, who I used to spend the night over with, sometimes when I was younger, I don't really have much exposure to that side of my family. And so a couple big things happened. My grandmother, my father's mother– and he's the youngest of four, from that marriage. My grandfather on my dad's side was Muslim and had three wives. It was one of the reasons I think my dad didn't really have much of a relationship with his dad by the time he's born as the fourth of the first wife, wives two and three are already on the scene with kids. So there was a lot of, you know, disconnection there.

But, my grandmother visits when I'm one, and I don't remember it much. I know it happened because I've seen pictures of it. And I would talk to her occasionally on the phone through crackly lines from Nigeria. But she passes away when I'm like 13. And never saw her, you know, never saw her outside of [when I was] one. And they were Muslim, so she had to be buried within 24 to 48 hours, the custom, and part of the religion. And so my dad

can't afford at that time– you know, we were very low income– to buy a, someone passes away, to buy a ticket, for the next day, right? That's not, you're not gonna be able to do that.

And let alone a visa– all the things you'd have to do, to have the resources to do. And I remember my uncle who was in Nigeria is very– has done well, is very wealthy, and [he was] my dad's older brother. I was like, "Just ask him for the money, so we can go," you know, and, and he doesn't want to–he's embarrassed, whatever the reason– we don't go. So I'm very angry about that. Because I always had… had hoped that I would connect with her and learn from all of the stuff that she knew and that door closed. So that was one kind of big– I think the start of my self-determination, that I'm gonna have to figure it out on my own, you know, at that age. I didn't know that I was thinking that, but that's kind of how I felt. One of my mentors that I talk about in my book, this guy Deen Sanwoola, works at my mom's job in downtown Silver Spring, he's the IT manager, funny enough, the systems network manager, for a job, at a newsletter publishing company. He's Nigerian. That was my de facto after-school program where I ran around every day after school. I end up interacting with him over years and he's always telling me little bits of nuggets about Nigeria, because he travels back and forth, he does business there. And fast forward, he ends up, when I'm 18 years old, offering to take me to Nigeria and paying for the ticket.

So I go with him, not with my father, the first time. And have a kind of pretty transformational trip. My uncle meets me, I see a lot of my family. And everyone's asking me where my dad is, of course. So that's how I first get to Nigeria and kind of.. and when I come back from that trip, I am even more determined. I sign up for Yoruba classes at college and I stopped using William as my name. So my name is William [More Names] Jawando. So Oppa Yemi is my Yoruba name, and, it's a funny story. Prior to my parents divorcing, Yemi was my name. Like at home, at school… I didn't know my name was William. Wasn't told to me, my mom just happened to slide it into the birth certificate, but it was not used. So when they divorced, my mother says, "Your name's William." So from like seven on, I start using William because she tells me to, but prior to that I had only used Yemi. So I tell this story too: so I kind of have this journey with my name, which is connected to my immigration story. I reclaimed that back, when I go to college. I have this big dramatic moment. I go to the registrar and I officially change it. I'm on the basketball team at Catholic University and go to the coach, I'm like, "I need to change to the program." So, but that's all after this trip, and that really kind of kicks off a journey I'm still on– to learn more about my culture, because I had a lot of catching up to do.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Absolutely. And that's not a completely unique story either, but it must have been just marvelous meeting people that– your dad's family when you went to Nigeria. Right. And meeting them for the first time. That's–

Will Jawando: Oh yeah. It was great.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: That must have been just a really great time for you.

Will Jawando: Two years later, we take a trip together, my dad and I.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: And you go back

Will Jawando: We go back and it actually is the kickoff of our reconciliation. I just wrote all about this, but I can talk about it. But he's, he is– that's his first time back in 30 years, you know, Cause like I said, when I go, everyone's like, Where's your dad? Like, why are you here without your dad? Like, what's going on? And so I think a combination of pressure and guilt, but also genuine longing to go back. We end up taking a trip two years later, which is a very transformational trip: we go visit my grandparents' grave, the house he grew up in, visit people I didn't visit the first time, so it was a big… It helped me understand him more. And you know, what he had left and lost in Nigeria and what his disappointments and struggles had been, and, and it made me a little more, I think, sympathetic to him. And it helped us kind of kick off the starting process of reconciliation, getting to know each other better.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Absolutely. And then connecting to that part for, for yourself too.

Will Jawando: Oh, absolutely.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: It was just like, Oh wow, this is me too.

Will Jawando: Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: That's awesome. So. Wow. I guess we could talk for hours…

Will Jawando: Sorry, I'm probably talking, giving you too, too much answer…

Dr. Maria Sprehn: No, absolutely not. So you have a family now and

Will Jawando: I do.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: And how do you incorporate Nigeria? Are you consciously incorporating parts of that side of you into your family life and your children, and what are your perspectives on that?

Will Jawando: Yes, we do. It's, it's very important that, you know, in part because I don't want them to be disconnected or feel disconnected. I want them to be fully connected to all of their family. They all have Nigerian names, you know, middle names, Yoruba names. They know what they mean, they know what they are, they know how to spell them. And you know, we have four children, three girls and a boy. They all know they are Nigerian in part, they identify that way even at their [age]-- range is 12 and nine, eight. The three year old may not know yet, but he'll follow along. And we're actually planning a trip to Nigeria. Their first, for them, next year. And so they're very excited about that. They're looking forward to it. And another thing is, they thankfully because of my reconciliation process with my dad, and he ended up…

Part B

Will Jawando: [passing away in 2017]... from cancer

Dr. Maria Sprehn: I'm sorry.

Will Jawando: I appreciate that. But the good news is that before he got really sick you know, he was very active in my daughters' lives– he never met his grandson, but he used to pick them up from school and you know, they called him Baba Agba, which means grandfather in Yoruba. And so that's what they call him, they call him grandfather, so they're connected. They have a connection to him that I didn't even have in that, you know, they understand him in the context of being their Grandfather, Baba Agba and Nigerian. So they like eating Nigerian food. They like it. And so I think there's a connection through, and we have, we've broadened, you know, over time as through my process, I've broadened my network of family, right, that are here in this area.

One of the things about this community, which is so great, not only in Montgomery County but in the DC area, Prince George's County, the larger– the region. We have so many immigrants, and we have a large African population, large West African, large Nigerian population, and I have cousins and friends. And there's a culture here like with many immigrant stories, there's all these cultural events that happen and so they go to those, they're involved. And so they, so they definitely are connected to it in a way that I wasn't at their age.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: And that's thanks to your hard work, right? Because this has to be a purposeful thing.

Will Jawando: Oh, absolutely.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Right. So how wonderful that you're able to happen.

Will Jawando: And my wife's been great, Michelle. I mean, she embraces it. I think her DNA–you know, many Black Americans are Nigerian in the sense that Nigeria had the most number. It's the largest country in the continent, 200 million-plus people. It had a large number of West African ports from which people were transported. So if you are a descendant of an enslaved person here, there's a strong chance that you're gonna have some Nigerian ancestry. And so my wife is– or if you're even in the Caribbean too, same thing with Jamaica or other countries. And so it's funny, when I took her the first time, she said, Well, this is so much like Jamaica. I said, Well, you know what happened? The people came over and were brought in. So she's very, she's really embraced it as well, even as a Jamaican New Yorker, she's embraced the Nigerian culture as well.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Excellent. So we should probably wrap things up here and I would like you just to have the last word. Yeah. Is there anything that you would, like future generations to know about?

Will Jawando: About what?

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Your experience!

Will Jawando: There's a lot on what future [inaudible]

Dr. Maria Sprehn: There's a lot. Yeah. I'm sure that there is a lot. But given your perspective and the way your life unfolded maybe you know, somebody watching this video, maybe in 50 years or so, what do you think you'd like to tell them?

Will Jawando: Well, I just think, you know, it's such an enriching part of our history as Americans to have immigration stories, whether it was forced or, or voluntary. The fact that we were all here has made us a stronger country. It's also been difficult for us to navigate. Right. But I would say that, at the end of the day, being proud of your heritage, learning about it, understanding that you can be both proudly American and proudly wherever your ancestry is from. And I think that has been less so for Africans, in particular too, not just African immigrants. But, you know, when I wore my agbada when I was sworn in, it was a very emotional moment. My dad had just passed. I wanted to do it to honor him. I wanted to do it to honor the one in three people who were foreign-born– 45% of us who are either the kids of immigrants or foreign-born, that make up our county. And also say that you can be both things, you can be taking the oath of office here in the United States to represent everyone in the county, but you can also be a Nigerian American, or Indian American, or Salvadoran American, or Chinese American. I had so many people come up to me–and still do–and just say, Thank you for doing that. I think oftentimes this assimilation pressure is so great and that to be American is to be an immigrant. And I think we forget that and we have to continually remind ourselves about that. And embrace all the different kinds of immigrants from all, every country. Not just the ones that have maybe been favored for some of our history. And so that's what I would say is just embrace it and seek it out and learn it and learn about it and have it be fully who you are. And one doesn't subtract from the other. You can be fully an immigrant, you can be fully American. You're a human being. It's all a part of what makes our country great, what makes you great. And I just hope that people continue to learn that lesson and continue to value it.

Dr. Maria Sprehn: Excellent. Thank you so much.

Will Jawando: Awesome. Thank you.