

Interview with Azigza ("Azi") Hussen on April 19, 2023

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Good morning, Azi, so nice to see you.

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Good morning, good morning, Professor Satrom. I'm doing great.

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How are you today?

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How about you and I, It's just, you know. It's been a minute since we actually had a this kind of meeting. And I appreciate you, for, you know, letting me to be part of this amazing project.

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I'm just so excited that you have the time to talk because you have a pretty amazing story to tell, and I'm really happy to include it.

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So let me begin with an introduction of you. Your short bio, and then I'll introduce the project, and then we'll get started on our conversation.

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Sure! Alright!

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Alright great! So I'm going to read this on my other screen.

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Okay.

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Azigza Hussen, Azi, was born in 1989 in Asmara and now lives with his fiancée in Montgomery, Alabama.

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Thank you.

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Congratulations, he speaks Amharic, Swedish, and English. Azi lived in Stockholm, Sweden, from 2002 to 2017.

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He was a student at MC, Montgomery College from 2018 to 2020, and I believe you were a student in my class

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in 2019.

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Yes, yes.

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His documentary short film can you pronounce that for me?

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Yewub Dar.

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Yewub Dar, yes

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was featured at the International Film Festival in Washington, DC.

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in April 2018, I went to that event. It was very exciting, we'll talk more about that.

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Azi had an internship with the Television Academy Foundation and Warner Brothers in Los Angeles in 2019. That was also a very exciting time in your life.

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Yes.

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Today he is majoring in communication radio television at Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama.

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One of the oldest Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States.

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So a very special place, Montgomery, Alabama, and will graduate very soon in May of 2020.

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Okay.

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Yes.

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Congratulations so close, and in his spare time, which I know you have very little of, as he enjoys writing film scripts, watching movies and working out. So a little background.

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As you know, my name is Heather Bruce Satrom.

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I teach in the English Language for Academic Purposes program at Montgomery College, ELAP.

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This project is called History in the Making: Documenting Stories of Immigrant and Refugee Students at MC.

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The goal is to help others better understand the experiences of immigrants and refugees in the United States. Telling your story will enable others to better understand the challenges that immigrants and refugees face and better appreciate the resilience and perseverance of people in

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your community. So I am so grateful for your participation. You had the chance to read these questions in advance.

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But please note that all of the questions are optional.

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If you want to skip a question, just let me know, we can do that.

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And if any point you'd like to take a break, that's fine, we'll talk for about an hour.

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Sure!

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Could you please tell me your full name?

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So my name is Aziza Hassan. If I have to spell it the az I gza!

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The last name is H. U. S. S, E, N.

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And do I have permission to record this interview?

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Yes, yes, you do.

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So let's begin by talking about your names. I have so much information, so many stories, and now you're living in Montgomery, Alabama, and you mentioned before we started recording that people sometimes have trouble saying your name.

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So I know that you use the nickname Azi.

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I think you've used some other names as well. Can you talk to me a little bit about nicknames,

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the name that you choose, and what your name means to you.

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Well, I mean, I noticed since I grew up in Sweden, and I noticed my name was a little difficult to pronounce for a lot of people, especially Europeans, and I know and I said I just gotta make it easy for a lot of people to just call me rather than

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just like, you know, forcing everybody. Hey, this is how you pronounce it.

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So I just decided to use the first 3 letters. And actually, that came through my foster care family, when I used to live with the foster care family back in Sweden.

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My mother found it very difficult to pronounce my full name Azigza and she one day made a belt like as a gift, a birthday gift.

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She made a you know, belt with with my name on it, and instead of putting Azigza, she just used the first three letters and since then I said, You know, this may be a cool name, so I use the first, you know, Azi, first 3 letters. And this sounded very easy.

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And easy to remember, easy to pronounce, however, even here in Montgomery, Alabama, people know me as Azi and I kinda find it more

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You know, easy just to be known as instead of like not forcing, but trying to push everyone to

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position to know my name. I mean I do have a history, or I do appreciate and understand the reason

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my name, and all of that. I just like, you know.

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I don't

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Make it that much difficult for people to understand where I'm from.

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And I think sometimes when you make films, at least in the past, I don't know if you still do.

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You used another name as well correctly. Can you talk a little bit about that?

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Is it Lij?

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L. I, J. And that's a title.

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Then the reason is because I probably you probably have heard about the Emperor stories back in Ethiopia.

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We had Emperor Haile Selassie and we had also Menelik, and we had all those names and their families they call themselves specifically the kids.

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The Emperor is Emperor, but the kids, since they are family of an emperor, they have to have a title.

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So this title came through, and LIJ means Lij

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Is identifying to, okay, this is a person related to the emperor because nobody had been called or nobody used that name.

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But then lately, people started using that title, as we call here Mr, Mrs, or sir, you know, and a lot of Ethiopians used that.

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And I kinda heard like, you know, back in the days somebody in my family member said, we have some type of blood history and the Emperor Haile Selassie but wasn't identified.

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Or was, wasn't like, you know. We don't have this ancestor.com or donate or not donate. But just send my DNA to find out if I really

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So is it a way to make a connection to your ancestry and to your homeland?

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Yes, but everybody is kinda like you giving, or you don't want to lose your history.

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You give yourself a title and say, LIJ, Lij means like I'm part of my family back in a day, something like that.

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I really like that story. Thank you for sharing that.

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Now we should, it made sense, though when I told it.

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It's a great story. I like that.

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I like learning about that. So tell me about where you were born and the story of your parents, which is a pretty amazing story.

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Well, that's kind of a very long story.

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However, I'm gonna try to make it short and concise and more like, you know, understandable.

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It is a very complicated story, too. When I realized that these scripts that I wrote over the years, I came to a conclusion.

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I got to just make it very easy for people to understand.

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So as a kid or as a child, I was born in a military camp in Asmara.

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Now it's its own country, Asmara is a part of Eritrea, but back in the days in '89, when I was born, it was part of Ethiopia.

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So that's where I call myself, or I call like I say, I was born in Asmara, but in Ethiopia

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But nowadays, if I say so, they will say, but Asmara is in Eritrea

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So why are you saying I mean for me is the same country, although they did have the Civil War, they had all kind of people died, and then Eritrea got its independency from Ethiopia.

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I still believe they're part, the same people, and especially because I was born there

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And I spent my first 2 years in Asmara, and the reason I was there was because my parents met in the military camp during the Civil War and back then between the previous regime and the TPLF

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I don't know what they call it, I should know it by now.

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I do know it, actually just trying to explain. So that makes sense.

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So was a civil war between, for the power, you know, who should lead the country, and because of that the Mengistu, which was the by the time he was the leader and or he was running the country, and he sent all these soldiers to Asmara

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including my father and my mother. They were fighting the Meles or the TPLF

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They call it the Ethiopian Liberation or Eritrean Liberation Front

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Something like that, I should know, by that way, I'm sorry these names, but it was a political party who fought for their rights, or so my parents was there. They met.

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I got born, but.

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So. Your father was a soldier.

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Yes. In the Ethiopian army?

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And your mother was working at the military camp?

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Yeah. She was working at a military camp as a cook. She was cooking food for these soldiers.

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And your parents were very young, too, right?

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They were very young from my understanding. My mom was telling me telling me that story at that time. She was 14 when she was literally joined the military, and my father was also very young, and they met and she just like you know, happened to like him.

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And at some point I believe they lost the war, although they were in, like, you know, fighting the last war.

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So they had to flee the military camp so that's when this story got more, you know.

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Very emotional for me, but I kind of ran down I've told my story so many times.

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I feel like I wanted to show it visually for people.

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So one day, you probably gong to see see, so, she had to flee with me through the desert to Sudan, to the Red Cross camp

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You know, during that time she witnessed so many obstacles.

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People was like dying because of water. People were selling their children because of.

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They had nothing to drink or eat during the like process to arriving to Red Cross Camp in Sudan, and I was again at that time I was just at the time maybe less than 2 years, like a toddler.

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I would say, and I was lucky I was lucky or not lucky actually. God protected me during that time.

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Although my mom couldn't handle to take care of me.

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A soldier who was a very close friend of my father who

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was nearby, and he took me, and just like, you know, all the way to Sudan, It took them, I believe that's why I understand more than 2 weeks just to arrive from Asmara to Sudan.

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Your mother, a teenager going through the desert with limited water during a war situation, heading towards Sudan.

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You're about 2 years old, and she hands you to a soldier to try to get you to safety.

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Yes, so, and God's grace I reunited with my parents again, however, at that time my father was wounded.

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He had to heal, and my mom had to work.

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So they stayed over 6 months in Sudan, and she worked there while she was like trying to help my father, and so on, and at some point an opportunity came like the people who used to live in a Red Cross camp, they got the opportunity to travel to Australia

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Or America, or, you know, go back to Ethiopia because the war was over.

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At that time, like, now, we're talking about 92 or 93 around that time.

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Do you have any memories of that time? Do you remember being in Sudan? No?

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I don't recall anything about that like, because I was a little kid, and the only thing I'm telling this story is based on my father's and my mother's story.

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They told me this, and I don't remember anything.

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So after that point you went to Ethiopia. Is that right?

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Yes, yes.

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To what part? Were you in the capital?

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First, of course, we arrived in the capital, and that's also when a very unforgettable incident happened.

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The reason we went back to Ethiopia because our my father wanted to build a family with my mother like and me.

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But then I said, as we arrived to Addis Ababa airport, he just left us with everything that got donated to us

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as a family, we had the privilege to travel, first, because we were a family, but he used that for his own benefits, and just like, if he was by himself.

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He has to wait until families travel, so he used that, we came to Adis Ababa, he just left with it back empty handed.

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My mother and I didn't know exactly. I mean, this is a story from her perspective.

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She didn't know exactly what to do. From my father's perspective,

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He was trying to explain. He was there and fighting for almost 7 years, and he missed his parents.

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But I don't know if I can take it as excuses, but he just brought us to Addis Ababa and just left us.

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But the good thing is, she knew exactly where he was from, so... the bus and went there.

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Made a decision, like things that she couldn't take it back, which was leaving me with my grandparents

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my first at least like.. Again, she was a young, and I can understand, and she was also Orthodox Christian, and she was married

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or she had a relationship with the Muslim, and for her thinking about that.

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And she was again really really young I shouldn't know exactly what to do, so she just made that decision.

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to leave me with my father as parent

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Wow, that must have been an incredibly difficult decision, I mean, especially because I think it's in a way a miracle that you were even reunited with your mother when you were separated in the chaos of the war.

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Yes.

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Earlier the soldier that took you managed to get you back to your mother is miraculous

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I think about the chaos of war. So you go to Addis Ababa, your mother decides that the best future for you is with your father's family, your grandparents.

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Yes.

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So let's pick up the story from there. So you're now living.

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You're separated from your mother. You're living with your grandparents?

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Yes, I got separated from my mom and literally, or and what sense I can tell,

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she disappeared from our lives. Then I had no memory or anything from my childhood.

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Except being told that your mom doesn't exist or your mom died, or so those kind of stories I was hearing my first 10 years, and then what happened was around my 10 year.

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birthday, but my father at that time he's living in Sweden, and he said that he wanted me to go to Sweden with him.

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How old were you when you heard from your father, that he was living in Sweden?

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I mean you're asking me when he leaves to Sweden from Ethiopia or when did I hear from him?

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Actually, both questions, so I'm very interested about how your father ended up living in Sweden. Like that to me is a very interesting story, and I've read about.

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Of course, you know, there's a famous story about a celebrity chef who has connections to Sweden. He's originally from Ethiopia as well, and I'm thinking about the connections between Ethiopians and Sweden. Did they have a program to help

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Ethiopians resettle in Stockholm?

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What happened there?

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I think what happened was he got into a relationship. He got married to

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another Swedish woman who had an Ethiopian descent, and Ethiopian heritage, and he had the luck
and

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went to Sweden, by the time I was maybe 5, 6 I do have vague memory of him living, but the only
thing I remember that I was with my parents, grandparents, and he barely came to see me, and
basically he didn't.

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even I didn't even knew that, although that I had a fear, I had a memory of like every time I
hear his voice, or he's coming around

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I'm kind of like hiding in my grandma's, you know, next to grandma, because he just didn't care
anyway, he was scary to me at that time and those kind of memories I do have. Not like father
and son memory like I traveled there. Right.

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We did together a lot. A lot of kids would say that, but I didn't

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Never remember those.

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Did you have a good relationship with your grandparents?

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I rather would say I have so many good memories like every time

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I even think about my grandma, bless her please, I just I got compensated by my grandma.

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Then, because of my father's like, you know, cruelty or personality. He didn't even care at all
like I

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I was hoping to have a father who, I understand, or took a responsibility

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So how old were you when you moved to Sweden?

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Yeah. That's when he again he moved to Sweden around

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when I was 5 or 6, and he lived there for a couple of years, and he went back to Ethiopia

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and that's when he asked me or not asked me

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But just already started the process and said, We're gonna go to,

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I'm gonna take you to Sweden. Until then, I noticed, I mean later on, I'm gonna just understand

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when I connect everything, he still was talking to my mom

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But every time I hear about it well, I didn't even ask, but every time he starts talking, or
somebody else is talking about my mom, I still don't hear anything like well, the only thing I
hear is that you don't have a mom, your mom died, those kind of stories from my

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father's family, even until, like I went to Sweden

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still like, he explained. He used to talk to her all those years.

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All those years but I don't hear like a word about like she existed.

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So I went. I went.

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Was he afraid that you would go live with her, and they would lose you?

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Why did they not encourage a relationship with your mother?

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Why did they not reach out? Do you know why, or is that still kind of a mystery to you?

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Kind of. I would say it's still so confusing for me to not being able to like, you know

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See my mother when I was a younger. I wish I had, because I don't recall that I had a good memory with my mother or father, because both wasn't there when I needed them ore when I was a kid, so I don't know. This is still a mystery. Just to answer to your question, I

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didn't understand, probably because they are religious, perspective from my seat, because my father again he comes from a Muslim background right?

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His long... and my mother is Orthodox Christian.

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Her parents or her father, at least he was a priest

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So probably the religion difference is one of the reasons that they don't want me just like, you know, completely forget my parents from my father's side.

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So you were raised in a Muslim family. Do you now identify as an Orthodox Christian?

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Yeah.

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Or you do. Okay, that's interesting. That's a whole, probably a whole other story about your...

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Yes, indeed it is. I mean Ethiopia,

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We do have culture, and people lives with and once in a family we can find so many religions too not many, but at least those religions that you can find specifically the Orthodox Christians and Muslims.

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And now with our Protestants, and so on. So it is

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accepted to have a Muslim's name mostly if we are talking about names as well, like some people have a very common Islamic name, but they are

0:25:38.000,0:25:49.000
Christian. There's some people are, sounds very Christian, but are Muslim, so that when it comes with religion, so yeah.

0:25:49.000,0:25:50.000

0:25:50.000,0:25:53.000
Well, when people see your name in the United States, your last name, I guessing that they assume that you're Muslim.

0:25:53.000,0:25:54.000

0:25:54.000,0:26:02.000
Yeah, so a lot of people assume that, but I just have to say a word or two, and then that was it so

0:26:02.000,0:26:03.000
Yeah.

0:26:03.000,0:26:12.000
People have assumptions, right? Okay so you grow up

0:26:12.000,0:26:13.000
Yes.

0:26:13.000,0:26:15.000
in this, with your grandmother, your grandparents, in Addis, and your

0:26:15.000,0:26:21.000
Bahir Dar. It's more like northern Ethiopia.

0:26:21.000,0:26:22.000
It wasn't.

0:26:22.000,0:26:26.000
Okay, did you grow up in a, was that a city?

0:26:26.000,0:26:27.000
Is that a small town? What was that like?

0:26:27.000,0:26:34.000
Yeah, I would say, a small city compared to the capital city.

0:26:34.000,0:26:40.000
I would say the place that I was around, there's a small city.

0:26:40.000,0:26:41.000
Okay.

0:26:41.000,0:26:47.000
We still could go everywhere we wanted. But it wasn't as big as the capital city then.

0:26:47.000,0:26:50.000
So how old were you when you moved to Stockholm?

0:26:50.000,0:26:51.000
So I was almost 11. I think I celebrated my eleventh birthday, and then I was 12

0:26:51.000,0:26:58.000
at that time.

0:26:58.000,0:27:06.000
So I would love for you to describe your reactions to Stockholm.

0:27:06.000,0:27:17.000
Different language, different climate, different culture, I mean, completely different experience. Tell me about how you felt when you first got to Stockholm and you didn't really know your father either.

0:27:17.000,0:27:19.000

So we get huge upheaval in your life.

0:27:19.000,0:27:32.000

Yeah, I mean, I still remember the day, the time, how exactly I felt when I arrived at the airport.

0:27:32.000,0:27:40.000

Then when I got out, there was a your winter time. It was March ninth, and it was

0:27:40.000,0:27:45.000

I think it was Saturday, I believe, and

0:27:45.000,0:28:01.000

It was very snowy day, for me it was like completely, completely like opposite to where I grew up like sunny, dry, humid weather, like, you know, the sun.

0:28:01.000,0:28:15.000

You hate, you really get frustrated because it's really hot and compared to the place that I'm coming in, which is Stockholm

0:28:15.000,0:28:23.000

I was like, what is this? Everything was exciting, like the snow, white snow, and the road, like, you know.

0:28:23.000,0:28:27.000

I remember driving. I was sitting next, like you know, window side.

0:28:27.000,0:28:34.000

So I was just looking at it, very excited. Like what is it?

0:28:34.000,0:28:37.000

What is it? I kind of felt like I wanted to.

0:28:37.000,0:28:40.000

No, for the first time, probably a magical experience like.

0:28:40.000,0:28:50.000

Yeah, so my first 3, 4 days I was inside. I never went out from the house or the apartment we lived in.

0:28:50.000,0:28:58.000

But then 5th, 6th day, somebody, I think my family member from my father's parent side.

0:28:58.000,0:29:09.000

They wanted to take me out like just to walk around the neighborhood and that's when I touched the snow for the first time by my hand.

0:29:09.000,0:29:12.000

The snow, and I was like it was like they were doing a snowball

0:29:12.000,0:29:17.000

They had a kid. I was like wow, okay, I was just like, you know, it was cold, but because of I was excited

0:29:17.000,0:29:29.000

I didn't even felt anything, and I start making my first snowball, and that was a good memory

0:29:29.000,0:29:45.000

actually then right quick actually I felt so sad because my father is working, people that he knows is working, so like they, for the first month, I believe I was home alone.

0:29:45.000,0:29:59.000

Everybody goes to work, and the only thing I enjoy myself was just going to the balcony and just looking at people playing like, you know, until I guess I started school.

0:29:59.000,0:30:09.000

So yeah. So Sweden, Stockholm, compared to the little small city of (?)

0:30:09.000,0:30:22.000

Obviously, it's a huge difference. But you know I was destined to live there, so I had to learn the language,

0:30:22.000,0:30:33.000
the culture, and I also remember when I, for the first time said a full sentence in Swedish.

0:30:33.000,0:30:39.000
That was something. I was speaking with the old lady in a train station,

0:30:39.000,0:30:56.000
I even tried. I thought I said something nice. But unfortunately I I think I said something more provoking or offending, and I said, Okay, I gotta figure this out.

0:30:56.000,0:31:00.000
So those kind of, where I do have. But then again, right quick I couldn't even live with my father.

0:31:00.000,0:31:06.000

0:31:06.000,0:31:16.000
I got replaced because his personality wasn't changed, even if he's living in a well-developed country where kids was respected or female

0:31:16.000,0:31:25.000
was respected. You could just like, every time he got angry,

0:31:25.000,0:31:38.000
he just like, you know, doing something, hitting me, or you know the details.

0:31:38.000,0:31:43.000
So disorienting for you. I can only imagine, like your life, completely upended.

0:31:43.000,0:31:53.000
Yeah, could you, I don't want to interrupt the flow of your story, but adjust your camera just a little bit

0:31:53.000,0:31:54.000
Sure!

0:31:54.000,0:32:05.000
So I can make sure I can see all of you so so I am imagining that as a child you are hopeful for, to develop a positive relationship with your father, and that did not happen.

0:32:05.000,0:32:06.000

0:32:06.000,0:32:11.000
No, I wish I had. I mean, I wish we built our relationship that I know now

0:32:11.000,0:32:17.000
I could call my father, or just at least let him know where I am.

0:32:17.000,0:32:28.000
Unfortunately, I was thinking the other day, I was just like seeing families arrive around the city taking picture, siblings, the graduation picture and sending invitation card and all of that.

0:32:28.000,0:32:35.000
And I was like, who am I gonna send it to?

0:32:35.000,0:32:42.000
I mean, nobody is gonna come, or especially, you know, most important people in

0:32:42.000,0:32:50.000
your life don't even care and I was like well, this is my life.

0:32:50.000,0:32:51.000

0:32:51.000,0:32:55.000

It's kinda like, you know, I'm just celebrating with people that I know when I was.

0:32:55.000,0:33:08.000

You know, growing up here, right? So he literally, I wish I wish, I didn't choose to be born in this family, so.

0:33:08.000,0:33:15.000

But I wish that I had that life where I could just like, "Dad,

0:33:15.000,0:33:21.000

what's going on this weekend? Let's go out."

0:33:21.000,0:33:22.000

0:33:22.000,0:33:24.000

Those kind of you know things, I wish, but I got a phone call when I was here

0:33:24.000,0:33:31.000

I've been here now 6 years. I didn't hear anything from him, and I'm not expecting

0:33:31.000,0:33:36.000

anything from him either. So at least I was hoping...

0:33:36.000,0:33:39.000

I'm so sorry. Did you, so did you then end up living with a foster family?

0:33:39.000,0:33:44.000

A Swedish family?

0:33:44.000,0:33:59.000

Yes, yes, that's what happened. So because of an incident that he was like very angry and using force to try it, to try to make me understand what he was trying.

0:33:59.000,0:34:19.000

Just the I think at that time I remember the police was nearby, and of course I heard about it, that kids never really don't hit the kids so we don't like, you know, force them to do anything, and I heard that at school, and I just happened to call the

0:34:19.000,0:34:28.000

number, and they stopped by, and they saw some huge like bruise on my forehead

0:34:28.000,0:34:37.000

here I mean and they couldn't just accept it. They said, we are just gonna take him for a day or two and figure out what exactly happened

0:34:37.000,0:34:49.000

And when they asked me, I told the entire story what exactly happening at home, and so, and they just decide it should for me to like keep me away for my father and.

0:34:49.000,0:34:54.000

What was your your foster family like? Were they kind to you?

0:34:54.000,0:34:59.000

Yes, actually, I still have a connection with them, and that's something.

0:34:59.000,0:35:13.000

I also very grateful. I finished my high school there, and I started studying in college because I had a good, full-secure family, and she was great, like, you know, I learned a lot about the Swedish culture.

0:35:13.000,0:35:36.000

Even be good as a person, as an individual. So during that time, that's when the completely new, unexpected story happened like my mom, like, you know, my father was just trying to like.

0:35:36.000,0:35:48.000

Let's say, trying to ask my forgiveness to live with him again, and the way he did it was trying to use all kind of techniques like he said, he has been changed, he's not gonna do that again

0:35:48.000,0:36:00.000

And all of that, and listen to but some point, he said that did you know that your mom was living, or is still living?

0:36:00.000,0:36:05.000

And you wanna meet her, and I was like what? What did it come from?

0:36:05.000,0:36:14.000

And that's when I started to know that my mother's was still alive, and she was

0:36:14.000,0:36:20.000

she still kept like trying to reach through... Like to me,

0:36:20.000,0:36:24.000

but he didn't even give her a chance to talk to me

0:36:24.000,0:36:28.000

You discovered when you are in high school that your mother was still alive?

0:36:28.000,0:36:30.000

0:36:30.000,0:36:33.000

Wow, let's come back to that part of the story a little bit.

0:36:33.000,0:36:39.000

I'm curious about, One of the memories that I have, I have a couple of memories about you.

0:36:39.000,0:36:49.000

One was seeing a photograph of you, a school picture of you in Sweden, and it was mostly very white, blond, blue eyed kids

0:36:49.000,0:36:50.000

0:36:50.000,0:36:55.000

And you. Also like to be in the ethnic minority in Sweden,

0:36:55.000,0:37:02.000

Was that challenging for you? Did kids treat you? Did they accept you, or did you always feel different?

0:37:02.000,0:37:06.000

Well, I would say yes, in high school it was actually okay.

0:37:06.000,0:37:12.000

I was more.

0:37:12.000,0:37:19.000

I would say, in the elementary school or

0:37:19.000,0:37:30.000

Although yes, as you saw the picture, he saw that the majority was like, you know, European or Canadian or Swedish students

0:37:30.000,0:37:31.000

I do recall like I had a little challenges

0:37:31.000,0:37:41.000

Yes, and because I had a dialect, or the way I pronounced things because different from them

0:37:41.000,0:37:47.000

But I mean at the end of the day I felt like I was safe.

0:37:47.000,0:37:57.000

It's just more of like when I started working, when I started

0:37:57.000,0:38:04.000

working, that's when I see the real challenge, you know, being accepted.

0:38:04.000,0:38:08.000

But in my high school experience, it was a decent. It was okay.

0:38:08.000,0:38:13.000

I'll wouldn't say that I had

0:38:13.000,0:38:18.000

that much challenges or difficulties

0:38:18.000,0:38:30.000

And I remember when you were at MC a couple of things, one is that there was an international event, a cultural event,

0:38:30.000,0:38:31.000

0:38:31.000,0:38:38.000

And you actually represented Sweden at that event. So what I remember is that I think you do in some ways identify with Swedish culture, or appreciate aspects of Swedish culture.

0:38:38.000,0:38:40.000

Is that fair to say?

0:38:40.000,0:38:45.000

I would say that definitely, because I was a Swede in this here today.

0:38:45.000,0:38:53.000

I don't know all these opportunities didn't come to me if I didn't grow up in Sweden.

0:38:53.000,0:39:03.000

And then the language and culture, and also be good at you know, in college and find my passion.

0:39:03.000,0:39:08.000

So all of that happened because I was in Sweden.

0:39:08.000,0:39:14.000

All these people that have helped me over the years, I met them in Sweden.

0:39:14.000,0:39:22.000

And I understand, I believe I wouldn't, I would say I completely understand the culture how Swedish people are

0:39:22.000,0:39:30.000

the system works, and all of that. So for me, representing Sweden at the culture event, they at MC was something that hey,

0:39:30.000,0:39:50.000

There are a lot of Ethiopians here. I can't talk about it too much, because my memory or my kind of knowledge about Ethiopia was at that time was very vague, very like little, compared to what I know about Sweden, knowing the language or what kind of cookies we

0:39:50.000,0:40:10.000

eat though during the tea time or the food, and even the national anthem, somebody was asking me about the national anthem and the national food of Sweden, and all of that and you know, and for me that was just a basic and I said why not just

0:40:10.000,0:40:16.000

represent Sweden, you know, and especially because I came directly from Sweden

0:40:16.000,0:40:22.000

I didn't just move direct from Ethiopia so I just came directly from Sweden to MC, so that would be better.

0:40:22.000,0:40:31.000

That reminds me of another memory that I have of you, on the very first day when you were in my class, we took a diagnostic. You took a diagnostic test.

0:40:31.000,0:40:32.000

Yeah.

0:40:32.000,0:40:33.000

So I had a writing sample from you, and I remember I had met you.

0:40:33.000,0:40:34.000

I had seen your name, and I read your writing sample, from you, and I remember I had met you.

0:40:34.000,0:40:45.000

I'd seen your name, and I read your writing sample, and I'm used to seeing writing from Ethiopian students and I'm familiar with the language challenges and differences right?

0:40:45.000,0:40:55.000

And when I read your writing sample, I said, this is completely different from any other Ethiopian student's

0:40:55.000,0:41:00.000

writing sample I've seen, and I was like, it looks like

0:41:00.000,0:41:04.000

I was thinking, maybe you had like German background. Looking at these different linguistically

0:41:04.000,0:41:05.000

0:41:05.000,0:41:09.000

And I'm thinking, okay, there is a story that I need to find out

0:41:09.000,0:41:13.000

And so I remember talking with you and you said, you know you explained your background.

0:41:13.000,0:41:26.000

I was thinking just about the linguistic challenges of going from, growing up speaking Amharic, being 11 or 12 years old, having to learn Swedish so that you could succeed academically there

0:41:26.000,0:41:27.000

Yeah.

0:41:27.000,0:41:35.000

Then coming to the United States, having to learn academic English. Like linguistically, it's very challenging what you did because you're doing, you're pursuing higher education.

0:41:35.000,0:41:44.000

So this is not just conversational English. You had to learn academic English, but you had already learned academic Swedish.

0:41:44.000,0:41:45.000

Yes.

0:41:45.000,0:41:50.000

So the the challenges were immense. And yet you've managed to do it.

0:41:50.000,0:41:54.000

So I just find that incredibly interesting. Your story.

0:41:54.000,0:41:55.000

0:41:55.000,0:41:57.000

I do want to talk to you about. I remember you mentioned that there was a teacher

0:41:57.000,0:42:05.000

If I remember this correctly in your high school, who introduced you to photography and film. Is that right?

0:42:05.000,0:42:16.000

High school. It is more of like nonprofit organization that introduced me to do kind of like a media-related projects.

0:42:16.000,0:42:20.000

And the first thing I did was actually holding a mic and that's when I felt that, you know I had the power.

0:42:20.000,0:42:28.000

I could. You know the comfort zone that were, you know, before even holding the mic.

0:42:28.000,0:42:37.000

I didn't even know that I could go and talk to anyone in Swedish language.

0:42:37.000,0:42:38.000

I did, I mean in class, or I talked to my friends and all of that.

0:42:38.000,0:42:49.000

But then completely changed when I heard my voice, and just holding up mic and asking people just like that.

0:42:49.000,0:42:57.000

I just like realized that the power of like, you know, be the interviewer or asking people.

0:42:57.000,0:43:00.000

And I was like, Okay, I kind of like it.

0:43:00.000,0:43:03.000

This is the power of storytelling too.

0:43:03.000,0:43:04.000

Yes, yes.

0:43:04.000,0:43:09.000

Right. You have an amazing story, but you also got to learn other people's

0:43:09.000,0:43:10.000

Exactly.

0:43:10.000,0:43:21.000

stories. So tell me about the nonprofit organization that introduced you to this very important part of your life that now has become the focus of your career.

0:43:21.000,0:43:35.000

Yes, I mean it's called Fanzingo. Actually I believe that there are couple of places here in America that have kind of similar mission.

0:43:35.000,0:43:56.000

And for me that place was a very crucial, because I keep mentioning them with them because they molded me to understand how stories are powerful, to connect people, to change a society, to help other people to be inspired.

0:43:56.000,0:44:03.000

You know, and I spent so many hours and time at that place.

0:44:03.000,0:44:17.000

They are actually because I just don't want to be part of during the high school or elementary school I don't wanna be involved in any criminal activity or just going out and do nothing.

0:44:17.000,0:44:22.000

Or you know. Do you understand? We do have it here, too, as a kid.

0:44:22.000,0:44:28.000

You're always excited to do something that you later on, maybe probably regret.

0:44:28.000,0:44:33.000

And I tried to avoid that by just hiding me in the media lab, where I could just like, you know, experiment, even if it wasn't good.

0:44:33.000,0:44:46.000

I could just like, take the camera and just record myself here or just recording somebody else just to to look, you know.

0:44:46.000,0:44:53.000

Just so I understand how the equipment works, and to understand how people are telling their story.

0:44:53.000,0:45:17.000

So I called that place as my second home, like, as soon as I moved, I finished high school as soon as I finished my class in high school I straight go to that place and met these mentors, and they were talking hey, Azi, you can do that, you can do this, you can do that and all these idea came

0:45:17.000,0:45:22.000
to yeah, fruition. Like, I ended up deciding, hey

0:45:22.000,0:45:26.000
I wanna take my camera or I wanna they were like, you know.

0:45:26.000,0:45:31.000
lend a camera and travel to Ethiopia to meet my mom, and they were excited for me.

0:45:31.000,0:45:36.000
I said, oh, that's a great idea. Let's do that.

0:45:36.000,0:45:37.000

0:45:37.000,0:45:44.000
So they have me to for the first time to travel back to Ethiopia to meet my mother.

0:45:44.000,0:45:47.000
And I came back with so many hours, material

0:45:47.000,0:45:50.000
How old were you when you met your mother?

0:45:50.000,0:45:54.000
I was 17.

0:45:54.000,0:45:55.000
Yes.

0:45:55.000,0:45:57.000
And you made a film about that experience. What's the name of that film?

0:45:57.000,0:46:05.000
It's called "Back to Mama.". It's actually on Youtube and

0:46:05.000,0:46:06.000

0:46:06.000,0:46:07.000
I'll put a link to it later, so that people who are watching this

0:46:07.000,0:46:10.000
If they wanna watch that. One of your, that was your first film that you made.

0:46:10.000,0:46:26.000
My first, ever film, and that's when I just like decided, Hey, this is, gonna be my rock, like I understood as we said earlier, the, I started as a holding a mic and asking people.

0:46:26.000,0:46:32.000
But then, when I told my story and my mom's story in a visual form, totally, I was like I mind blown, I was

0:46:32.000,0:46:49.000
I just understood. Hey, I can actually be something, I can actually tell a powerful story like this to connect with people or to change something.

0:46:49.000,0:46:50.000
And I.

0:46:50.000,0:46:58.000
And you have a connection with your mother? You are in communication with her, and with siblings too?

0:46:58.000,0:47:01.000
I do have a sibling from my mother's side.

0:47:01.000,0:47:08.000
Yes, they do it from my father's side, too. But my connection, or my relationship has very little compared to.

0:47:08.000,0:47:13.000

I talked to my mom or my little brother from my mom's side.

0:47:13.000,0:47:26.000

So that's how it is. But again, if I talked about my first film, that's when I just decided that I want to become my filmmaker.

0:47:26.000,0:47:39.000

You shared with me one time a really powerful memory, about a time when you were in Sweden, and you had this vision of yourself.

0:47:39.000,0:47:41.000

In Los Angeles.

0:47:41.000,0:47:43.000

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Exactly.

0:47:43.000,0:47:46.000

Can you tell that story?

0:47:46.000,0:47:50.000

So the place that I said that I spend a lot of hours after school and weekends

0:47:50.000,0:48:02.000

Called Fanzingo, and they were just, you know, week on weekends.

0:48:02.000,0:48:07.000

You could attend workshops so you could participate.

0:48:07.000,0:48:32.000

And Samuel, he was the basically the the president of the non-profit organization at that time, and he was the one who's holding his workshop and the workshop was about to just like close our eyes and have this mental like

0:48:32.000,0:48:44.000

trip to somewhere in 10 years forward, like he asked us to to close our eyes and think about the place where we see ourselves in 10 years.

0:48:44.000,0:48:54.000

From that day, like at that time, I was maybe 15, 16, I would say, and I, we were more than maybe 15, 16 people.

0:48:54.000,0:49:06.000

Most of them were much, much older than me. However, when we just like all of us, took us maybe 5, 6 minutes

0:49:06.000,0:49:29.000

workshops, exercise, and when we came back from that mental trip everybody was sharing a story where we were, where they see themselves in 10 years the place, the weather, and exact location, who they are meeting and what they are doing exactly at the moment, and out of that and I start telling

0:49:29.000,0:49:41.000

a story. I saw myself, in a skyscraper in Hollywood, in the middle of like an office, was signing a contract for my first

0:49:41.000,0:49:56.000

future, I'm sorry, my first feature film that was, you know, accepted by a Hollywood producer and people were just laughing at the time. They were like, Wow!

0:49:56.000,0:50:00.000

Why are you imagine that, like, you know, the people who were at the workshop?

0:50:00.000,0:50:08.000

Maybe they laughed because they just like believe that it's not a reachable or so

0:50:08.000,0:50:20.000

But then the workshop leader he was like, Hey, I mean, this is a workshop that we just doing need to make it work.

0:50:20.000,0:50:27.000

This probably is possible. Those words were, it actually helped me to fight for it.

0:50:27.000,0:50:29.000

0:50:29.000,0:50:34.000

And later you ended up going to Los Angeles with your internship.

0:50:34.000,0:50:39.000

Yes, moving forward, even if it wasn't a movie.

0:50:39.000,0:50:52.000

The script contract signing, but least I found myself in a skyscraper in the middle of Hollywood, in Burbank, in the Television

0:50:52.000,0:50:57.000

Academy Foundation Headquarters. I was signing it.

0:50:57.000,0:51:06.000

And then I was just like a deja vu for me. At that moment somebody was taking a picture of me while signing my internship contract. I was like

0:51:06.000,0:51:10.000

Where did I saw this, where did I saw this moment?

0:51:10.000,0:51:30.000

And I connected to that workshop, and I sent a picture to Samuel and he looked at, the first thing he said, I wish they didn't laugh at you at that time, but I mean again, it wasn't exactly the, wasn't exactly what I was happening

0:51:30.000,0:51:38.000

Is not the first film contract, but at least it showed me it's possible.

0:51:38.000,0:51:41.000

As long as we were fighting for that dream, like

0:51:41.000,0:51:46.000

I remember seeing that photograph of you, signing that contract in Los Angeles.

0:51:46.000,0:51:52.000

Maybe you can share that photo with me, and then I can post it so other people can see it.

0:51:52.000,0:51:53.000

0:51:53.000,0:51:58.000

I wanna not go fast forward too much, I'm gonna go back a little bit.

0:51:58.000,0:51:59.000

0:51:59.000,0:52:01.000

So I would like to know about the time when you decided to leave Sweden and come to the Maryland, DC

0:52:01.000,0:52:14.000

area. What drew you to this part of the world? And how did you discover Montgomery College?

0:52:14.000,0:52:25.000

Well, that's a good question. So, as you understood in our conversation, I was away from the, my heritage or my history

0:52:25.000,0:52:33.000

my culture, because of my foster care family, and I was just trying to learn more about the Swedish culture.

0:52:33.000,0:52:44.000

So I was literally very far away from my culture. So I grew up in that family, Swedish family, and when I decided to move to the US.

0:52:44.000,0:52:45.000
is because again, it's connected to that workshop, it's connected to my childhood dream to be in the US

0:52:45.000,0:52:58.000
and finishing a degree, and all of that is connected to just you know, being a filmmaker was difficult too. Then Sweden, then in America.

0:52:58.000,0:53:06.000
So I said, I just have to move to a place where I can actually see myself.

0:53:06.000,0:53:20.000
And that decision came actually during a time where I had a very difficult time or challenges in workplaces.

0:53:20.000,0:53:21.000
You know, the invisible racism.

0:53:21.000,0:53:41.000
I could feel that, I couldn't talk about it, but I could just feel that I wasn't accepted in that work environment, you know, people were just seeing me as different and I don't know why, it was a lot of challenges

0:53:41.000,0:53:46.000
I said you know what, I'd just rather you know, continue to fight for my dream.

0:53:46.000,0:53:51.000
Although I found myself in better position than most most of my peers.

0:53:51.000,0:53:59.000
Like, you know, high school students, I was working for national TV, and I was traveling, and so many places I was doing freelance work, and all of that.

0:53:59.000,0:54:05.000
That was exciting moment, you know, but it's still I have to fight to be accepted.

0:54:05.000,0:54:12.000
I said, naw, I'm not gonna just put all this effort to be accepted here.

0:54:12.000,0:54:18.000
I can just go anywhere I want, and that's when the US.

0:54:18.000,0:54:22.000
trip, moving to the US came in, and I said, you know what, I will work a year.

0:54:22.000,0:54:26.000
And then, after this, I'm gonna just go to the US.

0:54:26.000,0:54:33.000
And I, during that time I looked up so many places, so West Coast was my first priority.

0:54:33.000,0:54:35.000
But then I realized that the tuition for college was higher.

0:54:35.000,0:54:44.000
I couldn't find a scholarship, and I also looked at other film school.

0:54:44.000,0:54:50.000
Most of them was not like, you know, accepting foreigner students.

0:54:50.000,0:54:58.000
And again it's all related to the tuition, although I was very interested to pursue film degree

0:54:58.000,0:55:04.000
And then I also ask myself, how much do I know about my my culture?

0:55:04.000,0:55:08.000
So if I moved to Maryland, what would I do? Where would I be?

0:55:08.000,0:55:15.000
So I just happened to talk to an Ethiopian

0:55:15.000,0:55:25.000

guy through social media. And he said, in Maryland there is a place called Silver Spring, and many Ethiopians.

0:55:25.000,0:55:38.000

And I said, really, okay, so I Googled it and all these, Google, you know, Map and Google Earth and I studied so many places before I even came to the US.

0:55:38.000,0:55:52.000

And I just decided, I said you know what, maybe that would be a great place to reconnect to my culture, but also actually study in community college.

0:55:52.000,0:55:58.000

We have such a large Ethiopian American community here in Silver Spring and in DC

0:55:58.000,0:56:17.000

and the surrounding area. Was it challenging to connect with Ethiopian Americans here, or did you find that they were welcoming and easy to get to know?

0:56:17.000,0:56:18.000

0:56:18.000,0:56:19.000

Actually, I mean if I can just start telling how my first week and a second and then move on, it was like I didn't thought I was in the U.S.

0:56:19.000,0:56:23.000

I didn't thought that I was actually living in the US.

0:56:23.000,0:56:35.000

In the first 3 weeks, because everywhere I go I saw people from, you know, where I come from, and Sweden compared to that, like, I'm barely seeing an Ethiopian.

0:56:35.000,0:56:51.000

And I said, I asked one, did I move to Ethiopia? Or did I leave? My experience of the Silver Spring area was so yeah, you know, for me it was like I didn't know exactly how to feel, like excited

0:56:51.000,0:56:57.000

or worse because what am I gonna do now? You know?

0:56:57.000,0:56:58.000

But I was lucky. I was just going to the store.

0:56:58.000,0:57:03.000

When I talked to someone, I didn't know the language

0:57:03.000,0:57:07.000

So when I talked to, they're just like Ethiopian

0:57:07.000,0:57:14.000

They speak Amharic. When I go to the cafeteria or in a coffee shop, I hear somebody talking in Amharic

0:57:14.000,0:57:18.000

And I go to like 711 or a CVS

0:57:18.000,0:57:25.000

I see somewhat. I'm like, wow, okay, this must be something, maybe I never thought I would have.

0:57:25.000,0:57:26.000

I thought maybe just like you know, a couple, or people that are here and there. Yeah, probably me.

0:57:26.000,0:57:36.000

But Silver spring area was full of Ethiopians, like I could meet

0:57:36.000,0:57:37.000

everywhere I go, there was someone

0:57:37.000,0:57:41.000
Did you remember how to speak Amharic? Because a lot of time had passed

0:57:41.000,0:57:42.000
Yes.

0:57:42.000,0:57:44.000
Did you have? Were you rusty?

0:57:44.000,0:58:05.000
I mean the good thing was because during the high school time, I was given the like mother language professor, like you could have a choose, if either, they give an option, either learning another language or learning your own language in high school so I said I want to learn in my Amharic language.

0:58:05.000,0:58:07.000
in high school. So this professor came twice in a week.

0:58:07.000,0:58:18.000
He kept me actually going. That's the only person I've met.

0:58:18.000,0:58:27.000
And in Sweden, when we so he make me read, although I wasn't,

0:58:27.000,0:58:32.000
I'm not a fast reader, at least he kept me talking to him.

0:58:32.000,0:58:37.000
He kept giving me assignments, so at least I understand the basics of Amharic

0:58:37.000,0:58:45.000
So I, and then once in a while there was some festivals that I attended, that's something I think I would say.

0:58:45.000,0:58:53.000
Helped me to keep my mother language

0:58:53.000,0:58:54.000
Did you feel like you were home in a way when you saw, like faces that felt familiar to you?

0:58:54.000,0:59:06.000
Or you heard Amharic, did you have a sense of feeling at home when you were in Silver Spring?

0:59:06.000,0:59:08.000
I would say yes, but at the same time also kind of a little overwhelmed.

0:59:08.000,0:59:19.000
I didn't know exactly how to accept it or how to utilize it.

0:59:19.000,0:59:25.000
I mean the first picture I took was in between Silver Spring and DC.

0:59:25.000,0:59:26.000
There is a mural on a wall, it says, welcome to DC.

0:59:26.000,0:59:29.000
But when I see here in Silver Spring or I see here in DC so I flipped that.

0:59:29.000,0:59:41.000
And I wasn't literally across the Montgomery College Art Building, or just a little far from that.

0:59:41.000,0:59:48.000
But so in both direction I could just walk, and I could meet Ethiopians.

0:59:48.000,0:59:53.000
And I said, Okay, this must be a very exciting.

0:59:53.000,0:59:57.000
So yeah, I don't know if that's something to give you

0:59:57.000,1:00:04.000
you know, a full picture, but you know, for me I was

1:00:04.000,1:00:13.000
excited at that time. Just, you know, then attending Montgomery College, also helped me to

1:00:13.000,1:00:22.000
understand it. Better understand how large the Ethiopian community was, or still is, right?

1:00:22.000,1:00:23.000
So, tell me a little bit about your experience at Montgomery College.

1:00:23.000,1:00:33.000
You were placed into an English language program. It's now called English Language for Academic Purposes

1:00:33.000,1:00:37.000
When you were there, I think it was called the AELP, American English Language program.

1:00:37.000,1:00:38.000
Yeah.

1:00:38.000,1:00:43.000
Are you? You had to take a test. You were told. Look, you need to improve your English.

1:00:43.000,1:00:45.000
How did you feel about that?

1:00:45.000,1:01:00.000
I mean, I thought I was good enough to take college classes, and so on, but I noticed that I mean, even if I come from Sweden and studied the English

1:01:00.000,1:01:10.000
Unfortunately I still had so many needed some improvement, but I accepted the challenge because I was focused.

1:01:10.000,1:01:18.000
I said, you know what I came here for a reason, and for one thing, which is getting a degree in this country, so whatever it takes, I will take the challenge.

1:01:18.000,1:01:29.000
So I decided to take that those classes and for me it was just like, you know, experience a good experience.

1:01:29.000,1:01:35.000
Not only the language part, but also I had a good relationship with my professors.

1:01:35.000,1:01:52.000
I think it's because of that, we're still sitting now talking, and you and other professors that I've had didn't just only come to class, because you just wanted to teach a language or you wanted teach English.

1:01:52.000,1:02:01.000
You came to understand what we needed, and trying to support us, and I noticed that and I was so like, you know

1:02:01.000,1:02:16.000
always grateful. I could even witness at some point I mean one of the milestones in my life is to be at Warner Brothers, right? Just to accomplish that internship or to be at that internship.

1:02:16.000,1:02:30.000
The preparation was huge, and you were part of it. You helped me. You weren't just only a professor, but you also tried to, hey

1:02:30.000,1:02:38.000
understand our dream, understand our vision, where we come from, and then trying to support us.

1:02:38.000,1:02:47.000
And Professor Gould who tried to get me into a prestigious university, UCLA, the USC

1:02:47.000,1:02:55.000

And all of that, all this paper work, and try to understand, and for me I was like I never had those kind of experiences in any other schools, except like, you know, Montgomery College.

1:02:55.000,1:03:13.000

So my experience getting all kind of opportunity, do the presentation for Humanities Days, and you know so how I saw that or how I experienced that I wasn't there learning language, or I wasn't there to try to inform myself.

1:03:13.000,1:03:31.000

It was more of like I was getting an experience through you, and understanding American style or American life, and supporting my vision and dream.

1:03:31.000,1:03:32.000

1:03:32.000,1:03:39.000

I remember you sitting in Professor James Murray's office. Do you want to share that memory about preparing your application for the internship in Los Angeles?

1:03:39.000,1:03:44.000

That was like two days before the deadline. I remember that.

1:03:44.000,1:04:01.000

Do you have, you were notified that you have to write a letter of recommendation, for Professor Murray has to write that, and I was like, how is it gonna be possible with that being accepted, but I mean it all goes back to you two

1:04:01.000,1:04:05.000

as well, of course, as much as I put the effort, but it's also because of you

1:04:05.000,1:04:08.000

shared the link. Hey, Azi, This you know, I still remember

1:04:08.000,1:04:22.000

You know I wish I had still had my MC email. Like all the emails that I get from you, I kinda like sometimes get even overwhelmed because you were thinking so much about your students.

1:04:22.000,1:04:28.000

And of course not only about the students, other professors as well, like MC

1:04:28.000,1:04:42.000

for me was not only just there to learn in a specific language or so is more of an understanding and getting help that I need for my future, and.

1:04:42.000,1:04:55.000

I remember just how much Professor Murray, Professor Gould, and I wanted you to succeed because we saw so much potential.

1:04:55.000,1:05:06.000

We saw your skill. We saw your drive, and it was so important to us how hard you worked in putting together your application.

1:05:06.000,1:05:07.000

1:05:07.000,1:05:08.000

I mean. I remember that very vividly, in fact, and I, Could you share before we started recording, you showed something on camera.

1:05:08.000,1:05:14.000

Made me laugh.

1:05:14.000,1:05:15.000

Oh, yeah, of course, I mean, I was like, I just happened to be next to my books.

1:05:15.000,1:05:25.000

And I said, You know what. This is, something that I looked at time to time.

1:05:25.000,1:05:31.000

I don't know if it's visible, is it?

1:05:31.000,1:05:32.000

Yeah. So I mean, it's good.

1:05:32.000,1:05:47.000

Yeah, it's the Grammar for Writing 1 and 2 textbooks that, It makes me so happy that you're still referring to those texts, and that you are still very interested in perfecting your English.

1:05:47.000,1:05:57.000

That means a lot to me. I am, I think, in a language there is a lot in it, like when somebody understands a language

1:05:57.000,1:06:05.000

I think you understand the culture, understand everything else. I believe, and I want to express myself so well enough

1:06:05.000,1:06:06.000

so people can be, I can understand the way I am trying to or the story I wanted to tell.

1:06:06.000,1:06:13.000

I also remember that you at that time

1:06:13.000,1:06:21.000

of course, you're trying to do well in your classes

1:06:21.000,1:06:28.000

You have so much going on, but you also submitted a film to the International Film Festival in DC.

1:06:28.000,1:06:34.000

And I went to that event with Professor David Lott, Professor James Murray,

1:06:34.000,1:06:39.000

1:06:39.000,1:06:40.000

1:06:40.000,1:06:41.000

I believe was there, Professor Serena Gould was there. I think Professor Miriam Zemen was also there, but a whole bunch of faculty came to support you, and that was a really magical moment.

1:06:41.000,1:06:50.000

Can you talk just briefly about that film? The short film that was selected for that film festival?

1:06:50.000,1:06:55.000

Yes, of course. I mean, I think it's everything goes back again.

1:06:55.000,1:07:20.000

My experience at MC so my experience at MC was not only just to specifically learn a specific subject, or just be good at my language, or so again, is more of like supporting everything that I do to get success, so one of the things that I did during my experience, of my time, with MC was trying

1:07:20.000,1:07:28.000

to make a documentary or short narrative back in Ethiopia, come back to the US.

1:07:28.000,1:07:46.000

And finishing and submitting a festival. So I did that with the help with the you know, traveling back to Ethiopia, shot it and came back and edited it, and then try to even get the subtitle support, and I remember you looked at it.

1:07:46.000,1:07:52.000

I remember the professor David Lott looked at it.

1:07:52.000,1:07:59.000

Professor Murray and the process submitting it at festival was also one thing.

1:07:59.000,1:08:13.000

Once I submitted it, I got accepted, and I had to share that moment with you, and you came all the way to the festival and supported me and it was a story, I mean, before talking about specific the story.

1:08:13.000,1:08:19.000

I wanted it to share a story about what's happening around the place, that I grew up.

1:08:19.000,1:08:27.000

Was about to water hyacinths, you know, invading, or the Blue Nile.

1:08:27.000,1:08:50.000

We were talking about the fishes was dying, and I made it more romantic, though, and keep the story embedded in that romantic story between a young fisherman and a young lady who lived in a small village.

1:08:50.000,1:08:57.000

So, if I have to talk about the support and everything that you did to support me.

1:08:57.000,1:09:13.000

And again I mean, I'm always grateful for you came to the festival, supported me, but also just screened it to students

1:09:13.000,1:09:14.000

at MC during Humanity Days

1:09:14.000,1:09:18.000

If you remember, I had all. Yes, I screened that.

1:09:18.000,1:09:19.000

Because and I remember, like, yeah.

1:09:19.000,1:09:28.000

I say about it, too. I remember a couple of your students came to me while I was working at the Writing Center

1:09:28.000,1:09:32.000

They wanted to write that essay about the short

1:09:32.000,1:09:50.000

And I was like, Okay, exciting. Okay, can you imagine how much is helping.

1:09:50.000,1:09:51.000

1:09:51.000,1:09:53.000

But then I noticed that it was actually helping, and people was like, Wow, this amazing like, they found themselves seen like because of the screening that movie about their culture, too.

1:09:53.000,1:09:59.000

Not only mine, but some Ethiopian students came and said, Thank you Azi for doing this.

1:09:59.000,1:10:05.000

And I'm gonna say, thank you to Professor Satrom and other professors who give students opportunities

1:10:05.000,1:10:10.000

What you just said about being seen, I think, is so important.

1:10:10.000,1:10:21.000

And I do remember students' reactions to watching that film about the environmental problems that were being faced by this community in Ethiopia and the the love story that develops

1:10:21.000,1:10:37.000

And it was really magical to watch students watching your work, and the connection that was made there.

1:10:37.000,1:10:38.000

1:10:38.000,1:10:43.000

That was, that was a really magical moment. And then, after that, so and you were working in the Writing Center at that time, too.

1:10:43.000,1:10:45.000

Yeah, I think I was doing that. I was doing so many things outside of class and was working 20 hours

1:10:45.000,1:10:56.000

at the Writing Center and so many things happening. So, yeah.

1:10:56.000,1:11:08.000

And then I also remember. Can you remind me there was a counselor or advisor who told you about about Alabama State University, right?

1:11:08.000,1:11:12.000

Who is that?

1:11:12.000,1:11:15.000

So Mr. B. Is the Mr. Barber, Rolf.

1:11:15.000,1:11:24.000

He's a

1:11:24.000,1:11:25.000

Counselor

1:11:25.000,1:11:26.000

I don't know his titled by he's working at the I think I forgot it.

1:11:26.000,1:11:30.000

He's not exactly a counselor but he's helping students acquainted in MC.

1:11:30.000,1:11:49.000

He was just meeting students all over, like, you know, talking about different colleges after community college, you know, trying to help students to achieve their dreams by talking to us.

1:11:49.000,1:11:50.000

And he

1:11:50.000,1:11:53.000

His name again, can you remind me?

1:11:53.000,1:11:54.000

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1:11:54.000,1:11:58.000

Mister Barber, Rolf. I had in my mind, but I don't know.

1:11:58.000,1:12:07.000

I tried to exactly see where he works at. Look at the department, but

1:12:07.000,1:12:14.000

That's okay, we can look it up later. But that led you to learning about HBCUs

1:12:14.000,1:12:15.000

Yes, for the first time.

1:12:15.000,1:12:24.000

That brought you to Montgomery, Alabama, where there is a very important history related to the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

1:12:24.000,1:12:31.000

Tell me a little bit about what you've learned living in Montgomery, Alabama, and being at an HBCU.

1:12:31.000,1:12:33.000

How has that affected you?

1:12:33.000,1:12:59.000

Actually for the better, to make me more aware or understand the Black African American history and make me a better person to make, so that I would say here, living in Montgomery, that I

never heard about that place or this place now before I even came, like the only thing I had in my mind living on a West

1:12:59.000,1:13:29.000

Coast, or stay in Maryland, working there so, but at some point, while I was looking at universities to finish my degree, I came across this person was to be here, introduce me to this University, Alabama State University, he told me a brief story or brief background, about the area that this is the

1:13:29.000,1:13:45.000

epicenter of Civil Rights movement were like Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, and Abernathy, or all these names that I mentioned fought for their rights and fought for African American history.

1:13:45.000,1:13:52.000

And the Bus Boycott or the what do you call it?

1:13:52.000,1:14:03.000

The Selma blood... What do you think I had in my mind?

1:14:03.000,1:14:04.000

1:14:04.000,1:14:06.000

I recently was there, too. The walk from Selma to Montgomery.

1:14:06.000,1:14:13.000

And I think Brian Stevenson, who is a civil rights attorney.

1:14:13.000,1:14:14.000

Yes.

1:14:14.000,1:14:24.000

His organization. Equal Justice initiative is based, if I remember correctly. And have you been to the Legacy Museum and to, there's a Monument to Peace and Justice there, too, I understand, a memorial. Have you been to those places?

1:14:24.000,1:14:42.000

Yeah, several times. And I think all these stories that I was just trying to tell came from visiting these places, not only visiting the Legacy Museum or the Peace and Justice Memorial, but also around the city

1:14:42.000,1:14:50.000

You could see a very historical places like where this slavery was like slavery

1:14:50.000,1:15:02.000

trade, and where Rosa Parks boycotted the bus for the first time I refused to go off, or at least leave her seat, and the Baptist Church

1:15:02.000,1:15:09.000

Martin Luther King, and you know, to mention a few.

1:15:09.000,1:15:24.000

So the Museum by itself it gives you the entire picture of, like, you know, the Black African American history, but also you are in the middle of that play, like center of Black history.

1:15:24.000,1:15:37.000

And you understand, from the Southern, by people talking, and sometimes you feel so proud that you're actually in the middle of that story that you've been hearing about on TV, or you've been here.

1:15:37.000,1:15:48.000

Maybe reading about it, and so then you find yourself in the middle of it.

1:15:48.000,1:16:15.000

So for me. Of course it helped me to gain an understand better about the Black history, and and hopefully, of course, someday or sometime, I'm probably gonna express that in a form of a visual, how I understand, because at the end of the day everybody has to have a kind of an inspiration source

1:16:15.000,1:16:18.000

So, my

1:16:18.000,1:16:33.000

You will do that. I think there are so many stories that need to be told about this, and I think it's wonderful that you're in a place with so much rich history where you were able to learn about that very important part of US history.

1:16:33.000,1:16:37.000

Yes.

1:16:37.000,1:16:38.000

Yeah.

1:16:38.000,1:16:39.000

So you're gonna graduate soon. You're gonna get married soon.

1:16:39.000,1:16:40.000

Yes.

1:16:40.000,1:16:54.000

You have big events happening in your life, and I'm thinking now about how, when I first met you, this journey seemed perhaps so

1:16:54.000,1:17:02.000

daunting, so difficult. What have you done, or what do you continue to do when things are hard, when you're tired?

1:17:02.000,1:17:03.000

When you think oh, my gosh, how am I going to achieve this?

1:17:03.000,1:17:10.000

What has helped you, what has sustained you?

1:17:10.000,1:17:20.000

I think at this point I mean again, I'm literally three days away to finalize and finish all my assignments, and just a sit.

1:17:20.000,1:17:33.000

So I never thought I would come all the way to this point to be honest, because at some point, especially during the pandemic, I was literally giving up.

1:17:33.000,1:17:40.000

And then just like, you know, I didn't even know that this day would come.

1:17:40.000,1:18:06.000

But what kept me going is just, you know, this motivations, encouragements from people that I know and including you, and including Professor Gould, including people that I've met here in Montgomery, where I met all the years you know, and everywhere they you know, their stories, their

1:18:06.000,1:18:11.000

encouragement that this day will come, and that you will graduate, that you have a better life

1:18:11.000,1:18:35.000

So think I would say that the good people around me, the people who really believed in me are the reasons that I'm here today, like, if it was for me, I probably just went back to Sweden and just gave up and say, I don't see myself finishing up a college I

1:18:35.000,1:18:37.000

don't see myself building a life here, especially again, everything related to the pandemic.

1:18:37.000,1:18:52.000

So right after I was finishing up my associate at MC, the pandemic broke like March 20, right, 2020.

1:18:52.000,1:18:58.000

That's when everything starts falling apart. We were locked down.

1:18:58.000,1:19:10.000

We didn't exactly know where we are heading, and people were like, you know, feeling the anxiety the depression, and all of that.

1:19:10.000,1:19:24.000

So. But, thank God, we helped each other to go through this, and you were there for me, too, like you know we had all these Zoom calls, sometimes even emails.

1:19:24.000,1:19:28.000

And then suggesting our kind of activities, like, you know, going out for a walk

1:19:28.000,1:19:44.000

And I remember I found a place that I could that could help me to meditate and reflect and all of that and that's literally in White Oak.

1:19:44.000,1:20:05.000

So just to give you a short answer. The reason that I I would say that kept me going is because the relationship that I built with people like you and people like Professor Gould, and your encouragements.

1:20:05.000,1:20:11.000

Did you also participate in the Digital Storytelling Internship program?

1:20:11.000,1:20:21.000

I I did. I think that was either before the pandemic or after.

1:20:21.000,1:20:23.000

Yeah.

1:20:23.000,1:20:24.000

Yeah.

1:20:24.000,1:20:26.000

That was with the professor, Matthew Decker, Professor Jamie Gillan, did you?

1:20:26.000,1:20:37.000

Was that experience helpful for you, too, in terms of like meeting other students or being able to tell your stories through digital storytelling, and helping others?

1:20:37.000,1:20:47.000

Indeed. Actually, the digital storytelling project was also another form or another way to come out from

1:20:47.000,1:20:56.000

my comfort zone and telling a story, using visual again to reconnect with people.

1:20:56.000,1:20:57.000

And of course to be introduced to other people around.

1:20:57.000,1:21:11.000

MC so my experience at MC, just through this digital storytelling project.

1:21:11.000,1:21:17.000

it opened up so many doors and places that, and people that I wouldn't meet

1:21:17.000,1:21:29.000

I think, for the fact that this is a bigger college compared to the one that I am in today, and three campuses

1:21:29.000,1:21:36.000

I believe, and all these people I wouldn't meet if it wasn't for digital storytelling project.

1:21:36.000,1:21:37.000

And I happen to have a powerful story about the decision that

1:21:37.000,1:21:51.000

I made. That was a very short story about a moment, you know, is connected to the "Back

1:21:51.000,1:22:12.000

to Mama" short documentary I made, but this time I was just telling it in a form of like, what if, what would happen if I decided to stay with my mom because she offered me to stay with with her, when I met her for the first time, she asked me to stay around her and help her

1:22:12.000,1:22:18.000

do a business, and you know, and and I was just like speculating.

1:22:18.000,1:22:24.000

What if? What would I have been if I decided to actually stay in Ethiopia

1:22:24.000,1:22:26.000

and lived with her, and I noticed like Yes, of course.

1:22:26.000,1:22:38.000

All these opportunities wouldn't come, my dream I wouldn't fulfill my dream, which is about hopefully

1:22:38.000,1:22:49.000

very soon, and then the great life, the although I'm far far away from home at least I'm living a decent life, so I'm grateful for.

1:22:49.000,1:22:55.000

I think, if I remember correctly, that was a digital story about "a fork in the road" where you had to make a choice.

1:22:55.000,1:22:56.000

Yes, yes.

1:22:56.000,1:22:59.000

Is that right? Yeah, I'd love to, maybe you can send me the link to that

1:22:59.000,1:23:05.000

and I can also link that to this, so that people can watch that story as well.

1:23:05.000,1:23:06.000

Sure!

1:23:06.000,1:23:13.000

It's a powerful one, so you are about to achieve a goal. It's taken a long time to get there, but you are doing it.

1:23:13.000,1:23:14.000

Yeah.

1:23:14.000,1:23:17.000

You're graduating, and what are your plans going forward?

1:23:17.000,1:23:21.000

What are your hopes? What do you plan to do for work?

1:23:21.000,1:23:29.000

Where do you want to live? Tell me a little bit about where you see your future going.

1:23:29.000,1:23:36.000

So my plan is still the same as it was when I came to the US.

1:23:36.000,1:23:42.000

Like. I still live very close enough to the film industry.

1:23:42.000,1:23:50.000

However, I mean circumstances or things changes over time, like you know.

1:23:50.000,1:24:02.000

Now I'm not only alone, I have a fiancée who lives with me so every time I make a decision I gotta make sure that I decided not for only my plan, but also include her in my plan.

1:24:02.000,1:24:18.000

But still after graduation, my plan is just at least work for a year or two here in this country, to get settled, to find a place where I can call home.

1:24:18.000,1:24:26.000

Well, I mean, it is home. But I wanna just like you know, settled at some point.

1:24:26.000,1:24:37.000

In a state or in a place where I can just like, you know, where hopefully our kids grow up like, you know, kids, that maybe if God gives us, and so.

1:24:37.000,1:24:54.000

So many students I've interviewed for this project have talked about this idea of home and when you come from a different place, and you've lived in different places like you have, because of very challenging circumstances.

1:24:54.000,1:24:55.000

1:24:55.000,1:25:02.000

Sometimes it's hard to know where you are home. Do you think it's possible that the Silver Spring area might become your home, or do you envision yourself

1:25:02.000,1:25:07.000

Maybe living in California closer to like the heart of the film industry?

1:25:07.000,1:25:11.000

Where do you see home being in the future?

1:25:11.000,1:25:15.000

To be honest at this point, I don't know exactly.

1:25:15.000,1:25:16.000

Yeah.

1:25:16.000,1:25:25.000

Alright to say at this point, that I think I will always be on the run, or just like, you know, relocate myself until I guess settled,

1:25:25.000,1:25:37.000

I feel like I have something to contribute to the community, or at least to have a space a place where I can be accepted, and I can make a living out of what I am passionate about.

1:25:37.000,1:25:45.000

So if I find that place, I'm still looking for it.

1:25:45.000,1:25:49.000

I mean I mean, I'm doing it right now.

1:25:49.000,1:26:06.000

But I gotta make sure that this is not only my choice or my decision, because I'm not living again with myself just by myself, but also living with somebody who also had a dream or still have a dream wouldn't be somewhere.

1:26:06.000,1:26:11.000

And so I gotta try to compromise at some point, I believe.

1:26:11.000,1:26:21.000

You've talked a lot today about family and finding family, and it looks like, maybe now you're moving in the direction of creating your own family.

1:26:21.000,1:26:30.000

I think that's a very key point, because I don't want anything to happen to a family that I want to build like

1:26:30.000,1:26:37.000

I don't want anyone to experience this kind of life that I've had.

1:26:37.000,1:26:43.000

But the list that I'm going to do is just to make sure that I create the safe space, safe

1:26:43.000,1:26:51.000

place, and like a responsibility filled with the responsibility,

1:26:51.000,1:27:02.000

I'm still like, you know, I was very young when I decided I would never have a kid or never have a person in my life, or to my responsibility unless

1:27:02.000,1:27:10.000

I feel like I'm ready enough. So I said, when I think that day will come soon.

1:27:10.000,1:27:14.000
So when that day comes, I make sure that I'll be much, much better.

1:27:14.000,1:27:18.000
parent than my parent was.

1:27:18.000,1:27:23.000
It's been so wonderful to watch you as you've grown in this way and

1:27:23.000,1:27:29.000
how you've moved step by step to reach your goals, and I have no doubt that you'll continue to do that.

1:27:29.000,1:27:35.000
I believe that absolutely. How do you feel today about this conversation, about telling your story?

1:27:35.000,1:27:37.000
What emotions are you feeling?

1:27:37.000,1:27:38.000
I gotta say, actually, thank you for this. You know, it's been a while since I've speak with someone

1:27:38.000,1:28:08.000
so deep, and at least sharing and going back and forth to reflect, and and I just did it, because first I kind of feel like things that I could do for this project is completely small compared to what you helped me to achieve over the years like you know, my experience at

1:28:08.000,1:28:15.000
MC but when it comes to how I feel, it feels good that I'm actually talking about.

1:28:15.000,1:28:20.000
Yesterday I had a very bad day, for example, but just today I woke up and I was just hoping to have a good day.

1:28:20.000,1:28:32.000
But then talking about and realized that, hey, I'm actually on the right path like, you know.

1:28:32.000,1:28:39.000
And thank you for a great conversation. You didn't make

1:28:39.000,1:28:45.000
it look like an interview, it's more of like conversation, and thank you for that. It felt so good.

1:28:45.000,1:28:50.000
I have really enjoyed this conversation today, and I have no doubt that students who watch this will really be inspired by your story. Thank you

1:28:50.000,1:28:58.000
so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I know you're very, very busy.

1:28:58.000,1:29:06.000
Is there anything else that you want to add before I stop recording?

1:29:06.000,1:29:07.000
We covered a lot. We covered a lot.

1:29:07.000,1:29:10.000
I don't know. I think we covered the most... it's the only things we covered so.

1:29:10.000,1:29:20.000
But I mean whatever it's worth, I believe, like we just gotta understand the only thing I can say to students, future students, anybody.

1:29:20.000,1:29:25.000
Or if there's this possibility for them to see this back, Stick to a dream and then try to understand

1:29:25.000,1:29:31.000

other people have dreams too, and I think I don't know

1:29:31.000,1:29:33.000
Strive to be wise, but it's hard to be at this point.

1:29:33.000,1:29:44.000
I just like, you know. Listen to your heart. Maybe something like that to finish it off.

1:29:44.000,1:29:49.000
Yeah, I, I think, listen to your heart. I think.

1:29:49.000,1:29:50.000
Yes.

1:29:50.000,1:29:57.000
Stick to your path. You did not give up, and there were many, many times when I know things got very challenging for you.

1:29:57.000,1:29:58.000
Yes.

1:29:58.000,1:30:03.000
You are creating the life that you envisioned so

1:30:03.000,1:30:07.000
With God's grace, yes.

1:30:07.000,1:30:10.000
Congratulations, Azi, it's been so great talking with you.

1:30:10.000,1:30:11.000
Thank you.

1:30:11.000,1:30:20.000
Thank you, and I appreciate you for this opportunity, and I hope that we, when I come to the Maryland, I probably gonna visit MC

1:30:20.000,1:30:25.000
Just to reconnect with everyone hopefully.

1:30:25.000,1:30:26.000
We would love that, we would love that.

1:30:26.000,1:30:29.000
Okay I'm going to stop recording now.

