

Alene Munyemana

**Interviewed August 22, 2007
By Holli Connell
Midway Village Museum**

Alene Munyamana

Holli Connell: If you could please state your first and last name.

Alene Munyamana: Alene Munyemana.

HC: Are you married?

AM: I am married and the mother of three children.

HC: What is your educational background?

AM: When I was in high school I attended [August Lysee] which was a biology chemistry that was more what I was doing and right now I am doing my assisted degree in business and administrative management.

HC: And where do you work?

AM: I work at the Rockford Public Library.

HC: How long have you been there?

AM: Almost 3 years.

HC: And where are you from?

AM: I am from Rwanda which is in Central East Africa.

HC: And when did you come here to the United States?

AM: I came in May 1997.

HC: And then when did you come to Rockford?

AM: I came to Rockford July 2003.

HC: What did you do before you came here to the United States?

AM: I had left my country during when the war was happening in my country so at that time we left the country and went to live in Senegal without counting other countries we went through but we went to Senegal for three years before we came here to the United States.

HC: What was your life like them?

AM: I can say my life was much easier. I had my family around me. I had all my friends. I was in my country I didn't have to learn new languages which I don't mind but my life was much easier for me, just being home have real friends and a family around. Things seem to be much easier for me because of the fact that I was in my country, nothing is like home.

HC: When you had talked about the war going on even though things around you were chaotic because you had your family it seemed better?

AM: No, any time that you are involved or not involved in any type of war it's a hazardous situation it's hard to imagine because you fear for your own safety and you fear for the safety of your loved ones. It's beyond your control so you are hoping for the best.

HC: What made you want to come here?

AM: Actually, I didn't request to come here. Every year the government of the United States has a certain number of immigration visas is the issue so I guess we can say we are lucky we were selected in that number of people who were granted the immigration visa so we didn't have to choose to come here; we were just chosen to emigrate.

HC: Again, how did you make the decision to come? It wasn't a decision you just decided to make. What were the steps I guess at that point?

AM: There are so many steps that you have to go through and it's a long process because first of all there is pre-selection, especially for people who have fled the country, there was a war involved, there were killings involved. So they have to make sure they are taking the right people not criminals. So in pre-selection they have to go into the background. They have to do interviews over and over and then when you pass that now you go to the second interview so now they have to make sure that what you said stays the same or, in the mean time, if they do find out more information about you because at that time they have to go back and check in the country to see that we are not involved in some kind of activities. And after that it takes a while and then you go through the medical tests. So if you have some disease they think that is not curable most likely you would not be admitted. So they won't take you. For example, if you have HIV or you have tuberculosis you are not going to go because they don't want to bring people who have those kinds of diseases into this country. And after that they do the orientation. In the mean time they go back and check again to make sure they stay the same that nothing has changed and then you wait for the results and it's a very hard time because you are not sure what is going to happen. You know we all see ourselves walking but you do not know if you have some sort of disease and then when it comes and you have a list of people you go to the orientation which is more exciting. They tell you about life in the United States once you have arrived. They tell about taking classes for English. Getting in school so it's more exciting phase because you know you are going to go so then they get the papers done and find sponsors for you, they get a ticket and then you get to go.

HC: Now did you yourself come here or with other members of your family?

AM: No, not members of my family because of part of my family was actually killed so there were not that many outside the country because to be able to get the immigration visa you have to be in a refugee status so they can't take you out of your country you have to be outside of your country so that's how it works. You have to have a refugee status before you are granted that immigration visa.

HC: So you came over here alone?

AM: With my children and my husband. At that time I had two children. Two of my children are Rwandan and one is American.

HC: Why did you decide to come to Rockford?

AM: When we came in 1997 we stayed in Chicago because when you come in as immigrant the government somehow the way it works, works with the sponsor, a social organization, to have you coming, to find an apartment for you, to find everything for you. They take you to the place Social Security to get an ID but because of the life we had before we were not going to sit down and wait for people to feed us; we had a good life before. I remember when we came in May in August I started working. I can't wait for these people giving me a check I have to get a check for myself. I have to earn my own money. So after we were working getting used to English we decided to move to a better place because we had a one bedroom apartment with two children and it was real tough so we moved into a two-bedroom.

HC: In Chicago?

AM: Yes, in Chicago. This time we went to Hyde Park which is by the University of Chicago. So we stayed there three years and then we don't really like this life so much because we wanted a better place for our children so we moved into the suburbs of Chicago, an area called Streamwood. So after we had spent three to five years, that's when my son was born. My husband was offered a job in Crystal Lake. We tried to go nearby but we couldn't afford Crystal Lake because it's expensive and we were like maybe you know we could find a better place, more affordable housing so we moved to Belvedere.

HC: Had you ever been to this country before?

AM: No.

HC: How long did it take you to make arrangements to come here?

AM: I can probably say maybe nine months, more than that maybe. I don't remember exactly because at one time I thought we would totally forget about it because again is not only one person, it's doing so many interviews with these people and they have to send information to Washington and they have to wait for that to come back. So there's so many things they do so is not only for that project but there are there things they are taking care of and if there are other countries involved in the war sometimes there are other priorities so I can say more than nine months.

HC: How old were you when you came over here?

AM: 10 years ago, I was 27 years old.

HC: Did you come here alone or with friends or members of your family?

AM: My husband and my two children.

HC: What was the journey like to come here like what was your travel, what did you travel on, what was it like on the plane or boat and where did you land?

AM: You know when I left it wasn't so much what I was expecting. I wasn't really sure what the United States was going to be like. I was trying to find out; it is a country that everybody wants to go live in. It's a great country, the United States. Is the sky blue? I had some weird things that I was thinking. It's always dark because you hear some of the stories but I think the people were referring to Alaska so it makes the whole United States. It's like what am I going to do in this country if there is never sun. So I remember walking getting into the airplane. We left at four o'clock in the afternoon so we get on; we don't know language. We don't know anybody. We have a friend of my husband who at the time was working on his Ph.D. at the UIC. So we're that's great were going to Chicago so we will be able to find our friend but when we left Dakar it was four o'clock in the afternoon and I remember it was on Tuesday so the flight was from Dakar to Paris so we got to Paris there was no problem because we had been in Paris before and we speak French and so we didn't have a problem because we were comfortable with the language. So then we have to make connection to take American airline to come to the United States and all the people coming were supposed to stop by J. F. Kennedy at New York City so we landed at New York City and what was my impression everybody was so huge. Everything was so huge. I see these big old cars. I see the big buildings. It was crazy. It's like this country is crazy. I was shocked. Everybody seemed too big, big cars, tall men. You see the big cops everything was so big. It's like how do you live in this country and there was so much drama and everything was so big. So we waited for immigration agent to let us know what we were going to do next because we really didn't know and I was actually counting on my husband because he could understand the English better than I was. We waited and they were calling people and people were telling them where they were supposed to go. Originally we were supposed to go to West Virginia, Alexandria. So then they change the itinerary to Chicago so we were kind of glad because we were going to be able to see our friend. Then we took the flight from LaGuardia to Chicago O'Hare and everybody got very sick but again it was May we were coming from a country where it was 40°, a country that is so hot and so we're coming here and May is supposed to be nice but for us it was totally different. So I got really sick with a cold and I was shivering and they gave me a blanket so then we came to the airport and they are talking we don't really understand what they are saying and I'm looking at my husband. Did you hear what they said? The agent said that we could wait until the other people were supposed to, they were expecting another flight and we came in early. So seven o'clock and we were expecting the flight to come in at midnight so we waited for the whole time we don't have a phone number, we don't know who they are. We don't know what they look like, it was just waiting, waiting, waiting. I remember we sat on the bench we were waiting and I said to my husband what are we doing

here? So I didn't like it or we could be homeless here, we have nowhere to go. We don't know anybody; we don't have any phone numbers.

HC: And it was dark?

AM: No it wasn't actually dark. One night I got to go outside and it was light and you know I had seen the sun in New York City it was May. Maybe if I came in January it would have been dark; I'm not sure. And we waited, and waited, and waited. I said to my husband I am getting sick I don't know what to do. We can't understand what this man is saying so I said to him just go and I pushed him to talk to him, we have been waiting until everybody was gone. We were not really happy because we were so confused. We didn't know what was going on so we approached a gentleman who was very nice and my husband said you know we are supposed to go to this place but we don't know anybody and they haven't come to pick us up so what are we supposed to do. So we give him the I94 which shows that we got into this country legally and the gentleman I remember he said oh, you are American. So he took us to a hotel. So we stayed there he said you are American no problem we're going to buy you a hotel if these people are not coming to pick you up. We will have to be in charge because they were supposed to pick you up and you're not going to sit here and we went to a hotel for the very first night. So we not only had to find somewhere to stay in a hotel, come on. It was the best. So that was our journey. The gentleman who was supposed to come and pick us up, he would let him know where we went and as we were walking through the lobby we saw him coming and he said you know I am so sorry I'm late. He explained the situation but we really didn't care. We were tired; we want to sleep so we are checking in and he said you are here and tomorrow noon you can check out and you can have breakfast we were exhausted we woke up at 12 so we missed the breakfast and everything. But it was quite an adventure but the ending was very nice.

HC: Did you know anyone here before you came?

AM: We knew my husband's friend but when we came, when we arrived here he actually had left Chicago to Miami so we were not able to meet him but when I left Africa in Cameroon I had talked to some of the people I had met and they told me of some people living in Chicago so they gave us the phone number of those people. They are like once you arrive contact them and that's what we did once we found our apartment. I called these two ladies and they came to see us and they were like what can we do, do you need dishes? Do you need clothes, do you need towels and it was like not only am I in a foreign country these people are just ready to help me. They don't know who I am but they just want to care and I was feeling positive and safe in a foreign country that you don't really know anybody but you just see these people who just want to help you.

HC: That probably helps quite a bit coming with two children.

AM: Yes.

HC: They were from your country but did you know them?

AM: No, not really. I didn't know there was anybody here and I didn't know how big the country was. I just had no idea.

HC: Have you met anyone from where you are from since you have been here?

AM: Oh yeah. But not in the Chicago area, but I've actually met classmates which I had no idea they were here and it's exciting, I remember being in school now your mom you have children. I met my grade teacher I had no idea she was here. I went to visit her and she came to visit me and I was so impressed. She told me how I acted in school and she told me I was smart and all those things you don't know until you become an adult.

HC: Where did you first stay when you came to Belvidere?

AM: I've been living in the same house since.

HC: In Chicago, how did you find a place to live?

AM: The agency who sponsored us found a place for us so and things like that and they actually do grocery shopping for you so when you arrive the fridge is full with food. And I was like what is this thing? This is huge. Everything was so big. I was shocked I was like how can you eat this much food?

HC: Do you feel like that now?

AM: No, but it was so funny. My cousin said he lives in the native land, he's here visiting and he said everything in this country is big. I've been here so many years now that it seems normal to me.

HC: Is there anyone from your home country living in your immediate neighborhood?

AM: In Rockford, yes

HC: Are they a part of your life or is there someone that you talk with on a regular basis?

AM: Actually I just met them, somebody introduced me to them. Yeah, we are talking. Some guy called me Sunday, this is another and he called me and I came home and looked up my phone. And I see this name and I can tell is a Rwandan name and I said to my husband do you know this somebody and he said no and I'm like let me give them a call. So I call the person and they said you call here he was like yeah and I say who are you? I knew he was from my country just by his name and he said someone gave me your name to call you because I want to meet you. I want to meet people from my country. I'm having trouble with English and I want to meet people from my country. So there's actually three people here for my country. I was the first to arrive. And I plan to do something to make us get together maybe once a year because people you speak the same language with more helpful to you than to us. I said you just don't call people who you don't know them. You can't do that; you can't just grab the phone and call people and he was like I didn't know. And I feel strongly to help them to tell him in this country you don't just grab the phone just call because the name seems Rwandan.

HC: Did you have a job or school waiting for you on arrival?

AM: No.

HC: How did you go about finding a job?

AM: I'm a fighter how can I describe myself. I'm that type of a person who can't sit down, just don't do nothing. I do believe in my own independence. I do believe in supporting my own family. I don't believe people helping me when I have two arms and two legs and eyes and I can talk. So I said to my husband I think I am going to get a job. And he was like how so? There was a job at this one hotel in Chicago, the Hyatt. I went and took the subway so this is from a town north which is like by Aurora. So I figured out the line I was going to take, I knew it was the right line and I had this map out. I was going to get out and then go to the hotel. It didn't faze me that I could be lost. It didn't faze me that I could find some bad guys. I didn't think about that. I didn't think someone would harm me what I'm doing wrong and it was daytime and I took the subway underground. And the way that the people speak I can't even understand. And they said Jackson and I didn't understand and I took my map and every time we stopped at a stop I would cross out word and at the next stop I would do the same thing so I was so much into that I didn't want to miss my station. So after he gets the station I think it was that Jackson I got off and went to find the hotel and somebody had told me if you want to talk to a police officer because they knew the town. People are shopping for things, walking around with a map so in my mind I was going to find a police officer and talk to them and ask if they knew where I was going. So I found one gentleman who was a police officer. I wasn't speaking clear English but I could show him that I wrote down where I wanted to go so he actually showed me the way and he is kind to me and he says come with me and I follow him and I went to this hotel lobby, the interviews, picking up the application and then sitting in the hallway. At that sitting with other people who come from different countries and don't speak good English but I was so determined to get a job and I wrote down my name and they called me in the office. The fun part I called my husband; I say guess what; he said what; I got a job and he said how did you get a job. I said I got a job and I am going to be working. So I was scheduled to come for the orientation and that's another story. I could read but to catch the accent that was hard because in Africa they teach a British accent so you have courage to say here at what it is you just don't get it out. When you see it written down you know you understand. So I was I really; don't care what she's saying I will read.

HC: Did your visa limit the kind of work you could do?

AM: No.

HC: Did your husband work outside the home?

AM: Yes. My husband is a chemist.

HC: What did he do when he first came here though?

AM: He worked at a company he was working at some sort of company but he wasn't really a chemist so when you come to this country you can't really get what you wish to get because they still can't trust you, you lack the experience. You don't have the experience and they have to make sure they have the qualified employees.

HC: Where do you see yourself working in five years?

AM: I see myself running my own organization. I actually have started a nonprofit organization and I see myself doing that, helping people because I have been put in a situation where there is so much opportunity. It is up to me just take advantage and do it.

HC: What is your not-for-profit organization?

AM: It's an organization to help kids back home or in other countries, Third World countries to help them because I connect kids with schools here and the reason I did that when you talk to so many young kids they don't know there is Africa they don't know these other countries. It's not because they don't want to. It's just because there is no need for them to know. I guess there's so much going on in every day life that people are busy with their own life and they want to support their families but to me I am kind of from a country which I know so much was going on and I was given the opportunity to be here so to me it means I can give back to my people. So by organization we do collect shoes and we donate those shoes to the children in those countries. Right now I'm sending them to my own country because that's where I know the people; that's where I feel like I know what is going on. I can start from there and then I could just expand.

HC: Are you looking for kids from this country to help with the donation or just people in general?

AM: In general, people and then our organization it's not only helping but I don't believe in people helping themselves so what we're doing, we give them and maybe they can start their own business and they can improve their life and the economy, give the economy a boost, the economy of the country. If Mr. So-and-so has a business they can improve their life but then they boost the whole entire economy for the country so we collect the shoes and send them. We are very new; we are very young. We started in May but it's been great.

HC: I would be interested in finding out what you need for donations.

HC: How did you first get around when you came to the United States? Did you have a car? Did you use the subway?

AM: Most of the time in Chicago it's great there is public transportation, buses, trains so which I think once we lived in Chicago when you take public transportation you know your way out in downtown. So the train might be tough especially in winter time. So we decide just have a tiny car. I drove since I was back home so what I need to do is just go practice and knew the rules, just because it's a new country and then I went and passed my drivers test and so we bought this tiny car for 3000. I found a family from Burundi the husband was saying if you want to go on

the subway he will come and pick you up. He will take you wherever you want to go, shopping. So I've decided to purchase his car.

HC: Do you have that same car still?

AM: No.

HC: Was it hard to find your way around not knowing much English?

AM: No.

HC: How long did it take you before you were comfortable knowing your way around town?

AM: I think I was right away comfortable. I like to discover new places. Again, I like to find things. I like to be independent. I don't like to be asking things. If I get somewhere once I know. If I drive around I can find different streets. Here most streets here are perpendicular which means one street runs into the other one. So I know if I take one street it will get me to the main street and then I will find my way out.

HC: Unless they've changed the street name which they do in Rockford.

HC: Did you speak English upon arrival and if you did not did anyone in your family and how did you learn English?

AM: You know when I was young I was always fascinated by English. I remember in high school I had an English teacher and he was always asking me things in English. Somehow I was good in English. In high school it wasn't really spoken much and then after I was married I had a neighbor who was from Pakistan and I think she had moved from England so she was speaking English and I remember some of my friends couldn't talk to her because they couldn't speak English. They were always asking me to speak to her. How good was my English? I have no idea. But they trusted me. So I always wanted to speak English. I was eager to learn English so I think that made it much easier because I had that need to speak because I like to make friends, I like to meet people and I like to know about things so that is the reason it did not take me that much time to really feel comfortable.

HC: And you said your husband could speak a little English.

AM: Yes, he could speak a little bit of English.

HC: Otherwise you took English classes after you got here?

AM: Yes, we did go to Truman College which is a community college in Chicago so I did take English courses and then actually I remember the class they put me in and I felt I was wasting my time because I knew what they were teaching me so I moved up to the next class because what they were teaching I knew already.

HC: How long did that take you did you take the classes for a couple months?

AM: Yes it was maybe five months. I think I did two courses of English.

HC: How did your knowledge of English affect you and your family once you were here?

AM: It opens up more doors for you because if you could speak English you can get a job. If you have something you don't understand, for instance bills you can dispute that. If you are lost you can ask for directions. If you have children in school you can always go talk to the teacher and then you can ask them what is going on or what is not going on. So once you speak a language you have all these big doors open for you and there are so many opportunities because people, if you don't speak the language, the opportunities are so limited.

HC: How old were your children when they came over here?

AM: One was five and the other one was four.

HC: So with English you started right away with them?

AM: Yes.

HC: Once you were here they were learning English?

AM: Yes.

HC: And the five-year-old did she start school right away?

AM: Yes.

HC: They have always talked English in the home probably?

AM: We always talked French at home and my native language which is Rwandan but then when they went to school I guess it's psychological. You want to fit in a group so you want to speak the language. My children went in right away I think within three months they were speaking English. So actually they didn't go to any program they went right on and they are doing good right now. My oldest is 16 and is in honor classes and I am so excited and my other one she is in honors classes too and it's amazing you wouldn't think back then, we brought them here they had no word of English but now they are at the top of their class. It's amazing.

HC: When you were in Chicago or Rockford did you integrate yourself into the community and how? Maybe involving yourself in organizations, churches?

AM: The one thing I did when I moved to an area I go find a church and I like to meet people. I'm not really involved locally because I haven't found something that I really want. I want to be involved in something that I want to be a part of. I just don't want to go just because I go but I want to believe in something and if it's something I don't do, I'm not going to be productive because I don't like it.

HC: Are there organizations that you are involved in now like your not-for-profit organization? Are there any other in organizations that you are involved with right now?

AM: I am involved right now with the French-speaking group so it's an adult group that meets regularly in a town.

HC: How did it feel to come to a foreign country?

AM: It is somehow hard in a way. You don't know anybody. Especially when they speak a different language and you've heard all these things before you are talking about a country. You want to watch and be on a lookout. You want to let your eyes wide open because I am a person who don't like to hear negative things about countries or about people. I like to find out on my own. People tend to always focus on the bad and don't focus on the good. I am that type of person that likes to focus on the good before I see the bad. It was a chance for me to go out and build a new home and meet new people and make new friends and here I am.

HC: Were there any problems when you got here either with neighbors or in the workplace that made you feel welcome or unwelcome, problems or good things, welcome or unwelcome?

AM: Really I can't tell you. I don't see the bad even if people are doing it; I just don't see it. If some people try to be mean to me which hardly doesn't happen I see it as their own problem and not my problem and I always try to do what is right. If I am doing my job I know that I am doing my job and I always do my best and I don't focus on the bad. I always think that people have problems but they're not my problems so that's how I do it.

HC: You had mentioned people that helped you when you first got here with towels and food and stuff was there anything else that happened like that right away, very welcoming any other people reaching out?

AM: Yeah, after that I don't remember, I think there was a guy who was from my country we didn't know about and actually he is from my husband's town so he did tell other people who are from my country who were living in the suburbs about us. I do remember the next weekend he came to see us and he took us to eat. So we went to Country Buffet and we were looking at all these people and seeing all this food and we were like what are we supposed to do because we were looking for more of a traditional restaurant and he was like to pay here and you can eat all you can. So we went and got our food and there were people eating and we were just so shocked and then we eat our meat and when we are done we said thank you but you are so disappointed and we didn't know why. Did we have bad manners or did we eat too much or what did we do? Why are you so disappointed and he said you don't eat. We were shocked again.

HC: You only had one plate?

AM: Yeah. I grabbed the small plates. I think I put two pieces of meat on it I think maybe chicken and beef. One person had a big plate filled with meat only and I thought how can you eat meat by itself. So we did talk about the all-you-can-eat. And we thought okay one plate is

enough. We thought with the guy we did something really bad because he was so disappointed because we didn't eat.

HC: What did you think about this country before you came and have your ideas changed with your original thoughts?

AM: I think this is a great country. People don't really see it because what they see, especially when you are overseas is what comes through the news. They show you maybe the news and maybe what's going on but they don't show what it is like to be a regular American. So you don't get to see that much and you see like Opra shows, you see the Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson and you think everybody is rich. You think everybody has a mansion. You think everybody drives a Corvette and lives by the beach and actually when you came to this country that's when you see the reality. That's when you see the American people and regular people you see them in towns, where what you see normal people. That's where you see the people who have a heart who are caring. You talk to them. You see them eye to eye, they make eye contact, you make friends and keep them. I can't tell you how many friends I have that are true friends not just because we met them and they are Rwandan. They call you and ask you how you are doing and is everything okay. That is something you do not see when you're outside of this country and I remember coming to Chicago and I was like Chicago they say that you walk in the street and they shoot you. That's what you see in these movies. You know you see the movies or you have bad feelings about everything because they don't show that to people. In Africa they show you the people that are dying from the HIV, people dying from wars, people dying from hunger they don't show you the normal people which I use in quotes "normal people." We have people that go to work every day who are working in their land, taking care of their families and people who have Ph.D.'s. We have a life like everybody else. In every country there is the highs and the lows. There is the rich and the poor. So we have those people no matter where you go. Probably not on the same level but we do have it. I wish there was something I could do and tell these people, show something nice like it is. Show something more positive and not to discourage people. People come to me and they have said in Africa have you seen a lion? And I said I don't live in the jungle because that's what they're being told. Africa is just like a big jungle. Come on, no. It's not a jungle. Or how did you get here? Did you go to Africa for a weekend? It's like people, where have you been? I don't know if they're being psychotic. I don't know if they're just being ignorant. I don't know if they want to know.

AM: One thing shocked me when I came to this country is the homeless population. It really does shock me. I still can't believe this is one of the richest countries in the world but you still see people struggling. Hungry, they don't take showers. They don't have anywhere to stay. One time I had an experience that shocked me. I didn't have lunch and I sat down at Mc Donald's. I think that it was the last time that I went to McDonald's maybe two years ago and I bought food; I think it was a chicken sandwich and French fries so I don't eat that much French fries. I ate half and I put half back in the bag and I was coming back from lunch going back into the business and I had a brown bag with my sandwich and I threw it in the trash can and as I was going to open the door. I see this man he came and he grabbed the sandwich and he ate and I was like I was shocked I didn't know what to say. And I talked to the lady and she said they say people do that. I was so shocked that there is so much food, so much big containers of food. So much big stores but these people don't have. It just doesn't make sense to me.

HC: [Interviewer shares her opinion about the homeless problem.]

AM: One time I was joking and I said some of these people have a mental health problem and can't put themselves together but it is a job that you can give to them, that is productive, you can make them feel they are contributing to their own society. Everybody who is working we pay for these people to stay in shelters, we pay tax but they should do something you don't need to be a scientist to pick up litter on the street. You don't need to be a scientist to wash windows you know. I think they need to find some programs. Maybe I have totally different views because I am from a different country but sometimes I wish I just had power to put these people to work and I think it is the way we approach them. They are human beings like me and we all need to respect each other. I have a job today but who knows what can happen tomorrow and some of these people are smart people who just may be made the wrong choice in their life. If I am in a situation where I don't have a job today I'm not going to come to you and say can you give me money. Can you give me a job even if I have to come clean your house? You can pay me that makes sense to me because I am working and I'm earning my money. Then just to come and say can I have money.

HC: [Interviewer talks more about her views on homelessness].

HC: What has been the best part about moving here?

AM: I think the best part of the whole thing in moving here is a peace. The last time I left my country I had no peace at all and I remember having nightmares and sleep again and I had a friend running. I thought it was like a helicopter. This trauma goes on but finally when you can close your eyes and sleep is the best feeling. When you know you are doing something that is supposed to be done. You're not doing something illegal, you're fine. Peace is number one.

HC: What has been the hardest or most disappointing part of moving here?

AM: The hardest was when my husband couldn't find a job and he had biology and chemistry and he couldn't find a job and I was thinking how intelligent he is. I think for my husband was harder to take than myself because I can very much manage to any situation. If you put me in a situation where maybe I have to eat rice every day I probably will survive. Or if I don't have to eat a meal every day I probably will survive but I think it's by nature we manage more easily than a man because the man sees himself as the head of the household and you have to provide for the family. When you can't provide these you feel like you are not a man. You have this ego and pride. Women just go with the flow and we adapt ourselves so easily. Men usually don't talk about their problems but women connect everywhere. I can talk to about my problems because we build up trust in each other and we relate to each other. We don't have pride that we want to protect so you know is there anyone that can do this for me I'm happy to let me know. But men don't believe that they think I am not a man. So I think it was a hard for my husband to take. He couldn't provide like he used to. I think that was hardest for him to.

HC: What do you miss most about your former home?

AM: I miss my family. I was one of 13 children but I miss them tremendously. I miss going with them, just having fun. I do remember that we had nicknamed dad. So we had a nickname for him and we would talk about him and he would never know that it was him. So that's one of the things I missed my siblings so much and sometimes I feel like I just want to move the world to see them again. So that has been the hardest. I don't really miss so much the country because the last time I left it wasn't so great and I don't have good memories. The last memories I had weren't so great. So you see what I'm saying some of these people took my family and took their lives away so I don't miss the country, I miss the people, my family, yeah, I do.

HC: And you were one of how many children?

AM: 13, yeah.

HC: Have you gone home to visit since you moved here?

AM: No, I have not.

HC: Do you think you will spend the rest of your life here?

AM: Not really. No I don't see myself aging in this country. I think aging is hard. I see myself maybe going back home because I am trying to have a closure and I think starting this organization was more I just had to do something good and just get a good example because there are people like me that want to change the world just by doing a small thing. I'm not seeing myself as famous or something but I am seeing myself as changing the world or changing somebody's life, providing a need for these kids so that's what I'm doing.

HC: Do you think you will go back to Rwanda?

AM: Most definitely yes. I don't miss it generally but I miss my brothers and sisters.

HC: If you have children, which you do, what you want them to know about your culture from your homeland?

AM: I want to tell them that this is a tragic moment because I won't be able to tell them the truth. I won't be able to explain to them why they do not have grandparents. I want to explain to them why you are here. I need to be able to tell them the truth. I don't want to confuse them but then I need to teach them forgiveness. Because it's very important that people know how to forgive. The things that happen in our life owes to the time we have no control we do have control about our behavior so if you don't control yourself there is no way to improve your life and I try so hard to teach them about the culture. We do eat and cook sometimes the way we do at home. I play the music. I have so many things from my country so I always remind them that I speak the language because I want to be able one day to go back. I don't want to say no don't go back. I want them to go back. I want them to speak the language. I want them to go to villages and speak to their uncles if they are still living, speak to their cousins. I want to find out really who they are. When they asked us if we wanted to change names we said no because changing the name is like saying I don't want to be who I am. I want to be who I am and I am proud. I'm not

afraid to say who I am. Maybe some people want to say they don't have anything to do with their country, I do; it's my country. I am the same as somebody that is in the country right now. We have the same rights. So it's my country, I have the name, I belong to this country.

HC: What you like to do for fun?

AM: I like to listen to music I like to take road trips. I'd just like to drive. Like one time I said to my husband I think you don't have vacation but I don't think we should suffer from that. We are going to go somewhere. So we made sure we had food and we said can you rent a car for us and he did and we went to Canada. I think that was the most amazing idea and I was so proud of myself. So I drove so many hours. We went to Toronto with the children and we have the best time. We miss him but then we didn't because we were having so much fun. He kept calling me and I said stop checking on me. I'm fine. It was interesting just to go because I didn't feel like because he's home he is working that we are on vacation we don't have to be stuck. It was fine with him and it was fine with us so he said okay we are going. He's like have fun.

HC: [Interviewer shares her experiences with road trips].

HC: Are you a naturalized citizen?

AM: Yes, I am.

HC: What has been the most difficult thing to adjust to with American culture?

AM: Halloween. I not home on Halloween Day.

HC: Do your children participate in Halloween?

AM: No. They do want to but I said no sorry kids you are still under my roof I can't do that thing. That's one thing I find about this country people take for granted what they have. Halloween is an interesting holiday because of where it started and what it represents. Because of Halloween it's actually the day that people die so I can't see how you can have fun with that. I don't see why we should have the day. So for me it's a sad day because it kind of reminds me of family members that I lost. How should I have that evil representing? I think if it was the day that kids just got free candy it wouldn't bother me but what bothers me is what comes up with, the darker side of it. I just don't like it. I just don't do the witchcraft. So the first time I said to my husband look what these people have in their windows. I think that was the most shocking thing Halloween. I can't adjust.

HC: Do you celebrate other holidays that you see in American culture and are there others that you celebrate for your culture?

AM: Not really. We have Independence Day. We do Christmas; we do Pentecost, Labor Day. We actually have a Woman's Day but here we don't do it.

HC: Is woman's Day kind of like Labor Day?

AM: It's more like Mother's Day. I think I could say it's close to Mother's Day. It's Woman's Day but it's more like Mother's Day. They give value to women. How women work and how they take care of their children and how women don't get credit for what they are doing. So it's more like Mother's Day.

HC: How do you feel about the current debate in this country about immigration?

AM: I can't say because I came here as an immigrant and I came here legally. I don't believe people should just come in to the country. They should go to the process and everyone goes through. I don't believe it's not fair for some people. If you want to be in this country it doesn't give you the right to come in. Don't force to come in. If people come here as legal they should just be responsible. When I think about it, it sometimes kind of makes me mad because there is the brother of mine that I have been trying to get here in a legal way and to get a visa and then you see all these people here. If you come to this country legally you just have to go through the process. What the law requires. What they do is up to the government but that's where I stand and I think people should apply to go through the process like everybody else.