



City of Alexandria
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Project Name: *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

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Interviewer: *Krystyn Moon*

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Abstract: Zion Bezu was born and raised in the eastern part of Ethiopia. She came to the United States to study at a college in Kansas. In the summer of 2005, she visited a family who lived in Alexandria, and she decided to stay here. She also applied to change her status from a student visa to a request for asylum due to her family's religious persecution. Since 2005, she has earned two master's degrees. She is the first African immigrant to become a PTA [Parent Teacher Association] President in the City of Alexandria. As a way to keep her children connected to Ethiopian culture, Zion started giving Amharic language lessons. Her parents' emphasis on education has stayed with Zion her entire life, from her own education, to that of her children, and now for students in Alexandria's public schools.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.

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Introductions	
Krystyn Moon:	Here we go. Hi, this is Krystyn Moon and it is July 23, 2015. And we're here at Alexandria Archaeology. And today I am interviewing Zion Bezu. It is an interview that I've been waiting for and looking forward to doing, both in terms of a fellow resident but also a working mom here in the city. So first, I wanted to open it up and start talking about your childhood, and what it was like growing up in Ethiopia. What did your parents do for a living? What do you remember of your childhood? What was school like? You can start wherever you want.
Zion Bezu:	Okay, I was born in [unclear] the east part of Ethiopia—which is Dire Dawa. It's very small, but had different languages. It's over seventy-two languages spoken in that city and very diverse groups.
K.M.:	Cool.
Zion Bezu:	My dad is a businessman and my mom is working in aviation. So, both are working parents raising six kids plus six another adopt kids.
K.M.:	Wow.
Zion Bezu:	So, it's a large family. [laughs]
K.M.:	Large family—yeah!
Zion Bezu:	Large family, yeah. We went to private school and public school as well.
K.M.:	Okay. Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So we mix match. Growing up in Ethiopia, it was beautiful. And, it was beautiful and at the same time, [both laugh] I don't like it—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	The politics—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	It was really, really bad, really bad. Especially religion. We are Christian—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	But our religion is different, it's not Orthodox. As you know, in Ethiopia, it's like you have to be Orthodox, Catholic, or Muslim.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	That's it. But we are Protestant—so, they call us—we have a nickname is—"P'ent'ay," which is "The Perfect One." [laughs]
K.M.:	Really? Okay. Is your family Lutheran?
Zion Bezu:	So, no, Protestant—Mennonites.

K.M.:	Oh, Mennonites. Okay. Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So, that makes it a little hard.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Especially for my dad and my mom—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Which is [why] they don't like politics. They don't want to involve, but there are very powerful politicians, and my dad is a successful businessman and my mom is in aviation, which is very powerful situation and they avoid not to involve. That makes it difficult for us to live in—.
K.M.:	As a family.
Zion Bezu:	As a family. Yeah, for my parents. But for us, it was beautiful to be there.
Education	
Zion Bezu:	School is very strict.
K.M.:	Yes.
Zion Bezu:	Yes, we wear uniform. [laughs]
K.M.:	Yes.
Zion Bezu:	And very strict—even the way we braid our hair is different—.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	And the way we wear our shoes is different—very, very strict.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Education is Number One. They are focused. And the teachers are very strict as well. We do not respond to your teacher with such bad manner. [both laugh]
K.M.:	Not like our kids. [both laugh]
Zion Bezu:	Here is very relaxed. There is, yeah, there are certain ways you address the issue. If you have issues, the teacher says no, that's it. That's the end of it.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	You do not complain.
K.M.:	So, does each school—you have a set uniform for each school is different? You also have different hair for each school and different shoes?
Zion Bezu:	Well, where I went like—uh—I went to Catholic School, even though I was Protestant. My family sent me and my brother—two of us—.
K.M.:	Okay.

Zion Bezu:	We went to Catholic school. My two sisters, they went to French school. And then the other two kids—they went to another Catholic School. So we're just different schools.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	We have different uniform. Mine is yellow. [K.M. laughs] French, it's pink. So, French school, they have a little bit they can do whatever they want to do. It's like, their hair is—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	A little bit relaxed. Of course, everything is in French. No Amharic speaking or anything. So, most of them, the teachers are in French as well. So, for them is different.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So they have a background of French culture.
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah
Zion Bezu:	Mine is Catholic. They are very strict; they are sisters. We have yellow shirt. Under the shirt, we have to wear another shirt.
K.M.:	Really?
Zion Bezu:	We are not going to show any body. [both laugh] Not at all. We have to wear certain socks and shoes. Our hair is every day braided, it's either two or one.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	And not more than that or probably like three. So, our hair always, you know, inspected or like they're looking at you looking at you certain ways. Your dress has to be clean—clean, no mess. [laughs]
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	You have to sit straight. There's certain things that you have to do.
K.M.:	And did you have to raise your hand in a certain way?
Zion Bezu:	Yes, yes.
K.M.:	So, sort of, like this? [demonstrating]
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. [laughs]
K.M.:	And you raise your hand.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	I went to Catholic School, too. [both laugh] You know, I wore a yellow shirt, too. That's why I'm also laughing.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. Otherwise, you get a little hit on the back. The sister—phiff!—that

	means you did not sit straight enough.
K.M.:	Do you remember which group of sisters it was? Was it an Ethiopian group of nuns or—?
Zion Bezu:	No. They are not Ethiopian.
K.M.:	Where were they from?
Zion Bezu:	They are mixed. From British and Indians.
K.M.:	Really?
Zion Bezu:	It was very mixed. Not Ethiopian. We do not have sisters from Ethiopia.
K.M.:	Sisters—okay. Oh, that’s interesting.
Zion Bezu:	They are from outside. So, they’re very strict.
K.M.:	But they spoke Amharic in the classroom?
Zion Bezu:	They don’t speak Amharic. A little bit. Not much.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	But, most of the time they speak British English.
K.M.:	British English, yeah. [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	British English—it’s different.
K.M.:	It’s very different from American English. Oh, yes.
Zion Bezu:	Yes. So. But we do—our school, we learned Amharic as well.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	Because we have one period where we learn Amharic—we speak, we write, everything.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	In that case, we do have a teacher from Ethiopia.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	And our math teacher is also from Ethiopia, of course, numbers are—.
K.M.:	Universal.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, yeah. They are good at it, too, as well.
K.M.:	That’s cool.
After School and Play Activities	
K.M.:	So, besides school, what did you do after school? What did you like to play, or did you do music or sports?
Zion Bezu:	Well, we are in choir—in our church. We do sing. But after school, we do play—play, play, play. [laughs]

K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	I played volleyball with our mom. She is—she loved to play volleyball, so that’s why I really loved to play volleyball.
K.M.:	And she’s pretty tall, too?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, she’s tall. [both laugh] So it’s like our culture is not “closed door” like here. It’s open after school. You come home. You eat a little snack and you share with your friend. And then you go out—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And then you play.
K.M.:	You run around and—.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. You run around free.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	No worries. [laughs] No care for nothing. Play with your friends. Run around with your friends.
K.M.:	Come home for dinner, right? [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	Yes, of course, you come home for dinner. Of course, parents everywhere—they are watching you.
K.M.:	Oh, yes. That’s good.
Zion Bezu:	So, yeah, and parents are involved, too. They love to play and they play soccer. If they don’t play, they will sit, bring tea, coffee outside and they have their own social and then as well as watching you.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So it’s kind of open. I played soccer with my dad, too.
K.M.:	So you played soccer with dad, volleyball, soccer with mom. Did you play games like hide-and-go-seek?
Zion Bezu:	Oh, yes. We do. And then we go to the bush and all those nature things.
K.M.:	Oh.
Zion Bezu:	Oh, yes.
K.M.:	Did you like to catch things?
Zion Bezu:	Yes. Actually, there is—we playing with animals. We never play—.
K.M.:	Not around here. Not like that.
Zion Bezu:	We never play right now, but we do have like those wild animals in the back of our—where we lived. But at that time, we think they are cool and then we—they run after us and we just run.

K.M.:	What kind of animals were behind, behind your—?
Zion Bezu:	Those wild cats—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	And lions and—.
K.M.:	Wow.
Zion Bezu:	And then there's—yeah. We don't think about it.
K.M.:	Wow. [laughs] Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	But during daytime, they don't, you know, see you, so they don't bite you.
K.M.:	Yes, so it's at nighttime.
Zion Bezu:	Nighttime. So sometimes we pull their tails.
K.M.:	Really?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. [K.M. laughs] They make noise, we run.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	But daytime they can't see very well.
K.M.:	Oh. That's good to know. [both laugh] Were there snakes and things like that?
Zion Bezu:	There were a bunch of snakes—.
K.M.:	Yeah. What type of—.
Zion Bezu:	But we don't have cobra. We do have other snakes. Big, small, different?
K.M.:	You mean like—are black mambas that far north, or is that more central?
Zion Bezu:	Central.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	We do have it. But we do have asps. We do have—not as dangerous as they kill people. Plenty of—.
K.M.:	Plenty of dangerous snakes. [both laugh]
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Did you have pets growing up?
Zion Bezu:	Yes. We do have four dogs—.
K.M.:	Four dogs, okay.
Zion Bezu:	About twelve cats.
K.M.:	Really? [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	My dad loves cats.

K.M.:	Oh, that's cool.
Zion Bezu:	But I'm a dog person.
K.M.:	Are the animals inside or outside?
Zion Bezu:	They are very much inside.
K.M.:	Really?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	Okay. All of them?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, kind of like our house is huge. So there's four dogs and then the cats are—When he starts, he has two cats, then they give birth, he keeps one, then he keeps one. It was just cute and then he keeps one. There were two cats, they kind of became twelve cats—.
K.M.:	Pretty fast, actually! Yeah. Okay—oh, that's great.
Zion Bezu:	So he has twelve, and he has—uh—we have four dogs, and we do have goats.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Like we have like six goats. I do.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	But I start with two.
K.M.:	You start with two?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
A Large Family	
K.M.:	So, you also have twelve siblings?
Zion Bezu:	Right.
K.M.:	What—why did your parents decided to adopt so many children?
Zion Bezu:	You see, it's like six of them is from out of our city. They are family members.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Where they live the education is end six grades. So they have to come to us. So my mom and my dad is—they have “open door” house, so they accept them, let them finish their school, they put them in the work.
K.M.:	Oh, that's great.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. So one rule in our house is: if you are eighteen, if you're not in college, you're out of the house.
K.M.:	Yeah.

Zion Bezu:	So, there's no excuse.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Or you have to work.
K.M.:	Or you're working, yeah?
Zion Bezu:	Or you have to be college. Yeah.
Religious Persecution in Ethiopia	
K.M.:	So, you brought up earlier, you talked about the politics of Ethiopia a little bit. But your mom and dad in the 1970s—I know—I don't even know if you were born then—but there was a lot—I'm thinking of Haile Selassie, and when he was overthrown in 1974, and then all the turmoil that happened after that. I was hoping you could talk a little bit about some of the conflicts at that time between like, Ethiopians, and between Ethiopians, among them, and then Somalians and Eritreans, the Jewish community, how they fit into all this. Cause I know, we've talked about this a little bit.
Zion Bezu:	Well, about Haile Selassie, I don't know him at all.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	I was born in Mengistu Haile Mariam's—uh, that year.
K.M.:	The reign. Is that [19]75 or [19]78?
Zion Bezu:	That's [19]76.
K.M.:	[Nineteen] seventy-six. Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Well, in Ethiopia, it was [19]66 that he took over.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So, I'm not—I don't know that much about Haile Selassie. We're not doing any politics as well.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So, at home we do not talk about it. But I heard about it a little bit. What I heard is he's cool guy, [laughs] he's good for, you know—.
K.M.:	For Ethiopia.
Zion Bezu:	For Ethiopia. Those sort of things.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	But in Mengistu Haile Mariam, I witnessed—um—so many things with my parents—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Especially with my dad. My dad is very religious, strict, and, you know,

	religion. And then he preached and then he act what he's preaching, so he walked the talk.
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Being that—uh—he has so much problems with the government there.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	The one rule that they have: you cannot carry Bible in public place—.
K.M.:	Really?
Zion Bezu:	Or anywhere. Yes, in our—uh—in Mengistu Haile Mariam, that is a rule. My dad wouldn't take it. [laughs]
K.M.:	Right, right.
Zion Bezu:	So he put a Bible in front of his office—like his desk. Because he's reading it during daytime—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	While he was working. So, and the police did come, and they see him, they would take him. He would take the Bible in prison as well! So—.
K.M.:	Wow!
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, it was—uh—kind of, yeah, so they keep doing that. And then he could—you are not allowed to go to our church. If you are—if they catch you going to the church—kind of we hide to go to church—.
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So if they catch you, they would put you in prison. Especially, they do meeting—community meeting on Sunday, and then, of course, again. [slight laugh]
K.M.:	Yeah, yeah.
Zion Bezu:	My family goes.
K.M.:	Is it, was it all religions?
Zion Bezu:	No, it's only Protestant.
K.M.:	Only Protestants that went through this. Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So, we go to Sunday church. Monday, of course, they will come and pick him, them up.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And they put him in jail.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	But—what—he never give up in there. So, he's just praying and still preaching in the prison with the soldiers. It's kind of, like, uh, you know,

	kind of one by one they are changing in there. [laughs]
K.M.:	Yeah, yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So finally, I think they give up on him and then they give him this sort of gift that he can, permission he can carry Bible, he can go to church.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Because they're tired of him. [both laugh] So, he got that permission.
K.M.:	It was effective!
Zion Bezu:	Yes, it was a big, big journey for us. [said quietly]
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	It was. [said softly]
Resettlement Policy in Ethiopia	
K.M.:	We also talked earlier about—that your family is also diverse, right? That you—the different populations—.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	That is. Do you want to talk a little about that, too?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, I mean, like I told you, we are in the east part of Ethiopia. And then we are diverse, our family is extremely diverse.
Zion Bezu:	So, after Mengistu left, of course, there is the new government which is right now, and then there was sort of a political switch. And there is another rule: you have to go where you came from, the original place.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So, for us, we mixed, so—.
K.M.:	So, there's no place to go.
Zion Bezu:	Nowhere to go.
K.M.:	And the place—is it sort of tied to like Oromo vs Amharic? Or is it—?
Zion Bezu:	It's Oromo, Amharic—it's like Oromo, Amharic. Uh—there is Falasha, which is Jewish mix.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	And Eritrean, a slight of mix of—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Different things. And you know, sort of different types of, you know—.
K.M.:	Right. Language and religion, too.
Zion Bezu:	Religions and everything. Yeah. So, for us, especially for my parents, there's nowhere to go.

K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Even for them, they are mixed as well.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So, when they told them, “Oh, you have to leave.” Now, the city that they born and raised and they built this business and—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Then they told them to go. And then they say, “Okay. This is—we are mixed. Tell us where to go and we will go.” [laughs] And they couldn’t figure out—okay, we have Oromo, we have Eritrean, we have Falasha—all those mix! It is just unbelievable!
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So, finally, it’s like, this is your place. We can’t take it. [both laugh]
K.M.:	Okay, so they got to stay.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. The east part of Dire Dawa because of parent—like my parents, most of them, I would say, one hundred percent of them, is mixed.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Because of that—that city only is the only city that rule doesn’t apply.
K.M.:	Yes. Is it near Djibouti?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Okay. I was just trying to imagine on the map where it is.
Zion Bezu:	Yes, very close to Djibouti, Somalia.
K.M.:	Yeah, oh, so yeah—you have those borders as well.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
Sent to College in the United States	
K.M.:	So, how did you end up coming to the United States?
Zion Bezu:	Well. [laughs] I came as a foreign student, which is a student visa.
K.M.:	Um-hm. Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	My parents sent me here to study. Again, it’s a Mennonite school, which is really nice—uh—in Kansas City. [Hesston College is located in Hesston, Kansas.]
K.M.:	What was the name?
Zion Bezu:	Hesston College—it was very small—.
K.M.:	Yes. [laughs]

Zion Bezu:	It's very strict school and very loving school. They—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	They sent me there. It's because they believe in education and religion. So, it was a wonderful experience. At the same time, it was like homesick. You know, like—.
K.M.:	Oh, I'm sure.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. There were so many things. It was very—it was not city-wise, it's like a countryside of, you know—very, very small—there is one store, one gas station, [laughs] one hotel—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Just sort of you separated, but it's a really wonderful school.
K.M.:	And what did you major in there?
Zion Bezu:	I did computer information systems.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	That was my major.
K.M.:	And did you do any extra-curricular activities there or sports?
Zion Bezu:	I did. Volleyball. [both laugh] I played volleyball. I played basketball, just for fun.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	I tried everything. [laughs]
K.M.:	Well, it's good. Were there other Ethiopians at the school?
Zion Bezu:	There, we were fourteen of us.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, in my time. We were fourteen.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	But that is the largest group—.
K.M.:	Really? That they ever had?
Zion Bezu:	They ever had. Yeah.
K.M.:	And then, so did you create—did you all live together? Or did you have a different—?
Zion Bezu:	It's a campus, so you're living in school. So. Ah, sort of we see each other

	at church—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Or study groups. It was like we studied in the nighttime. Cause for us, English is second language.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So we have to study extra.
K.M.:	So, yes.
Zion Bezu:	At nighttime, people sleep, we studied.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	It sort of was hard. I mean, you have to study the whole Bible in order to pass.
K.M.:	Okay. Ohhh.
Zion Bezu:	So you have to score ninety-seven in Bible—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	In order to pass even though give all the subjects a hundred, but if you do not get ninety-seven, the minimum—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	You are failing the whole subject.
K.M.:	Ohhh.
Zion Bezu:	You're not going to graduate.
K.M.:	Uh-oh.
Zion Bezu:	So, that is hard.
K.M.:	That is really hard. Really hard.
Seeking Asylum in the United States	
K.M.:	And then, so you went to school, and then did you go back to Ethiopia? Or did you, were you able to change your visa status?
Zion Bezu:	I did change my visa status—using my—uh—problem, which is religion, of course. I decided to be—follow my parents' religion as well. And being that, I know I'm going to have a little problem back home. [faint laugh]
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Um—even though it's changed, right now it's more—we get a little bit freedom like the other one, the other Mengistu times—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Still—.

K.M.:	Persecution.
Zion Bezu:	Yes. A little bit.
K.M.:	So did you apply for asylum?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Okay. And then did—So, usually with asylum, you get a sponsor, or like the church will help. How did that process work for you?
Zion Bezu:	No, I just applied.
K.M.:	You did it yourself!?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	Oh, that's cool.
Zion Bezu:	So, I just hired a lawyer—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Then I did it. That was my experience. I don't want to—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Say anything—.
K.M.:	Okay. I've seen a variety. [both laugh] But that's cool.
Zion Bezu:	For me, it was my experiences—it's good enough. And it's more than, you know like, so I don't mind. So I do have a video that taken in my city, whatever it is.
K.M.:	Oh!
Zion Bezu:	So, I do have that. What I experienced with my family is more than enough.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So.
K.M.:	Yeah. That was amazing, that's great. So, did you apply for asylum then while you were in Kansas?
Zion Bezu:	No, when I came here.
K.M.:	Oh, to Virginia?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, Virginia. I do have a family in Virginia. Of course, I got homesick like I told you. [both laugh] So I and my family decided to bring me here. [laughs]
K.M.:	Okay, that's great.
Zion Bezu:	And when I came Alexandria, I mean I loved it, the first time I saw it. I was supposed to go back to Indiana to finish my other education.

K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	But I chose to stay in Alexandria because I love it—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And more relaxed. And I see more diverse groups. And I think this is my place.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So I stayed in Alexandria, and then while I'm staying, I applied for asylum.
K.M.:	Asylum. Okay.
Zion Bezu:	It's my decision.
K.M.:	Yeah. And then did you become a naturalized U.S. citizen, too? Or you, trying to figure out how to do that?
Zion Bezu:	Oh, well, I'm qualified to do that, too—actually, I was—uh—for me—uh—I have to be a dual citizen.
K.M.:	Uh-hm. Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Because I have a family back home.
K.M.:	Right. And now you have children here.
Zion Bezu:	Here. I'm sort of, I wasn't decided to stay in, to go back. I have mixed feelings. So—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	I didn't know that they have a dual citizen until this year.
K.M.:	Yes.
Zion Bezu:	And now I found out, I was like—okay, so, yes.
K.M.:	Do you want to pursue dual citizenship for your children too?
Zion Bezu:	Yes. For them is—I don't think they will qualify.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	They didn't go as far as that. You know—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Because they are born and raised here.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So, think they are, they—I'm not sure—.
K.M.:	Yeah, I guess you would have to apply to the Ethiopian government for that.

Zion Bezu:	I would do this—like they say it’s difficult to make decisions for them. For me, yes, I got it like—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	But, because I was born there—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And I live here.
K.M.:	And then you have permanent residency here.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, yeah. So I have dual citizen preference.
Living in Alexandria	
K.M.:	So, about when did you end up coming to Alexandria then? Do you remember about what year?
Zion Bezu:	Heh-heh, I’m not sure. [both laugh] Well, ten years ago.
K.M.:	So, okay, so, around 2005?
Zion Bezu:	Hmm—about that year.
K.M.:	Well, there was a pretty sizeable Ethiopian population here. And in [Washington] D.C., right?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	And in Adams Morgan—.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	All the restaurants and businesses—.
Zion Bezu:	There are almost two hundred thousand Ethiopians around here.
K.M.:	Think it’s one of the largest in the U.S., right? So—.
Zion Bezu:	It is. It is.
K.M.:	So, obviously, a lot of home here.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	How did you find a place to live when you came here? Did you rely on family or? How—what was that process like? Coming from school, I mean, school and not being in school, it’s a whole different sort of world in terms of navigating where to live and work and eat and all that sort of stuff.
Zion Bezu:	Like I told you, I have a family here. So, of course. [laughs]
K.M.:	You lived with them.
Zion Bezu:	I lived with them. And then I got support with my parents as well—so they come here.

K.M.:	Oh, yeah. Did your parents come and stay here for a long time?
Zion Bezu:	No, he, they are not—they love Ethiopia, so they don't like to stay outside.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	But it's for—the maximum they stay is six months.
K.M.:	Right. Right.
Zion Bezu:	And not more than that.
K.M.:	Yeah, it's a visa issue. [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	Not a visa issue. But they don't want to stay.
K.M.:	Oh! Okay.
Zion Bezu:	They have business there. So they need to go back.
K.M.:	Go back and work.
Zion Bezu:	And work also.
K.M.:	And then when you came here, did you continue going to go to school? Or did you—.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Okay. So where did you end up going to school? Did you go to school in this area?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, I went to school in Alexandria and D.C. as well. So, I—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Finished with my master's degree.
K.M.:	Great. Great.
Zion Bezu:	And, of course, computer information systems.
K.M.:	Yeah, that's great.
Zion Bezu:	But I did my master's in Management Information Systems. And then I went back to school again—for health care administration. So I went to school really good.
K.M.:	Okay. Okay. Great.
Zion Bezu:	And then I took teacher classes a little bit, too. So—.
K.M.:	Okay. To do teaching?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	Did, do you live, and in what part of the City of Alexandria?
Zion Bezu:	West End.

K.M.:	You live in the West End. Yeah. And there's a large—can you describe what's it like living in the West End of the city?
Zion Bezu:	It's a beautiful place. [both laugh] I loved it. The fact is we are, we are very close to everywhere. Where I live is, you know, like two minutes away from the highway, and it will give me access to go in D.C., or the other end of Virginia or Maryland.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So my family is everywhere, so [both laugh]—.
K.M.:	That's convenient.
Zion Bezu:	Sort of. And then, the most attractive thing is the water. I love the—.
K.M.:	Oh—the cool river?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	Right outside the windows here, actually. Um, yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	I know, the blinds are drawn, but usually you can see from here—.
Zion Bezu:	Every Friday I'm here with my kids—.
K.M.:	Oh, really? Down at the riverfront!?
Zion Bezu:	Yes. So you can see us—.
K.M.:	Oh, that's good to know!
Zion Bezu:	So, we bring our dinner. Unless it's cold or raining—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	We are not coming back [today]. But most of the time, usually you will see us Friday—playing ball—.
K.M.:	Oh, over at the park here.
Zion Bezu:	Or soccer. And then we eat dinner and then we just hang out.
K.M.:	Oh, that's great.
Zion Bezu:	So, it's really beautiful.
K.M.:	That's great.
Ethiopian Restaurants and Food	
K.M.:	Near in the West End, there are also like some Ethiopian restaurants and grocery stores. Do you go to those or you do your own cooking here?
Zion Bezu:	I do. I do go there. [both laugh] Of course, we do.
K.M.:	Yeah.

Zion Bezu:	The smell—.
K.M.:	Yeah. The smell.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Where are your favorite places to go with your family?
Zion Bezu:	I—Alma’s Restaurant—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	And Skyline Restaurant, and there’s Enat—.
K.M.:	Oh, I know Enat—down near Little River [Turnpike]?
Zion Bezu:	Yes. It’s so good and we go there—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	To buy a few food. And especially my son, he’s very picky eating [both laugh] and so, unless it’s really cooked very well and nicely, he won’t eat. So—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So those three restaurants is perfect one.
K.M.:	And what are your favorite dishes that you get there?
Zion Bezu:	Well, ah, my favorite food is “kitfo.” It’s easy one. “Kitfo” is—.
K.M.:	Is that the bread?
Zion Bezu:	The bread comes with the meats.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. And everything comes with the bread.
K.M.:	Right. [both laugh]
Zion Bezu:	Ethiopian food. So ‘kitfo’ is a meat. [Kitfo is a minced meat dish.]
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	So, they have a smaller one and a bigger one.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	“Tibs” is the bigger one with onion and pepper. It’s very easy to cook and I like those dishes.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Oh, yeah. But my kids—they love “doro wat” [a stew made with chicken and often served with a hard-boiled egg]—which it takes longer to cook. So—.
K.M.:	Okay. So, it’s easier to go out for it.

Zion Bezu:	Yes, yes. Otherwise, to cook “doro wat” probably takes you four to five hours.
K.M.:	Oh, wow.
Zion Bezu:	So, yeah.
K.M.:	Is it just like a slow-cooked meat or—
Zion Bezu:	It is slow-cooked. There is onions—a lot of onion—and chicken, eggs and—
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	But the way you cook it, the onion have to cook throughout. So it takes a long time.
K.M.:	Long time. Yeah. Yeah. And then are there Ethiopian grocery stores or—?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	It’s okay.
Zion Bezu:	Yes, there are Ethiopian groceries that they sell bread, they sell different meats. Oh, you have to—for our food, you have to cook—you have to get fresh meat to cook certain foods. So, they, of course, they sell fresh meat.
K.M.:	Uh-hm. Is that on Seminary [Road]?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	I know exactly where.
Zion Bezu:	Yes, And there’s more—on Pickett Street.
K.M.:	Oh!
Zion Bezu:	Oh, now, they are spreading. There’s more stores.
K.M.:	Really? That’s great.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
Zion Bezu:	They are spreading everywhere. You can get some “injera” [traditional spongy flat bread.]
K.M.:	That’s right.
Zion Bezu:	We call it “injera”—the big bread—you can find it in gas stations and in 7-Eleven [stores].
K.M.:	Oh, really!
Zion Bezu:	So, it’s amazingly easy.
K.M.:	To find it. Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.

K.M.:	I know it—I asked about that grocery store, because I—some Moroccan women I knew from my kids’ preschool, that’s where they would always go for fresh meat.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	And so I’ve always heard good things—.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	About that little grocery store over there.
Zion Bezu:	Yes, it’s really good.
K.M.:	So, cool.
Church and Language	
K.M.:	I want to talk about different types of support systems for Ethiopians in this area. We’ve talked a little about food. And so food is definitely an important thing. Do you also participate in any sort of church organizations or other community organizations—in the area?
Zion Bezu:	I do. I do. [both laugh] I am involved in church, because I have my kids in it’s a really international church.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	It’s a diverse group, I guess. [laughs]
K.M.:	Now, where’s the church?
Zion Bezu:	It’s Springfield [Virginia].
K.M.:	Oh, it’s in Springfield. Okay.
Zion Bezu:	But it’s a really big church. I loved it. Of course, we do have Ethiopian church from our religions—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Which I really love in D.C. Uh, we have over two thousand people.
K.M.:	Really?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	The Mennonite Church?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah—uh—but they call it Protestant.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	It’s not Mennonite.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	So they change it.

K.M.:	It's just Protestant. Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So, it's really a big church, I love, love, love. But, sort of, they—our kids being born here, and Amharic is kind of tough for them, especially for my kids. They speak English more often. They don't even speak Amharic.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Well, I'm ashamed of it. [laughs]
K.M.:	That—it's so typical.
Zion Bezu:	Ah.
K.M.:	You probably speak Amharic to them and then—.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	They answer in English. Right?
Zion Bezu:	Right.
K.M.:	Unfortunately, across the board, that's what immigrant moms and dads tell me. [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	Personally, it's so hard. [both laugh]
K.M.:	Yes.
Zion Bezu:	So, being that, the Ethiopian church doesn't work for them.
K.M.:	Okay, oh—because it's in Amharic?
Zion Bezu:	It's—everything is in Amharic.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	For us, adults, it makes us [feel at] home. I loved it; but my kids can't. So I have to find another church the same religion, and that way, you know, my kids can benefit. So, I love this church. We start going there since they born. So they have different activities. And then you have to involve.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So, because of them I am involved with a lot of—.
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Peoples.
K.M.:	Oh, that's great.
Zion Bezu:	So we exchange culture, really, we change, exchange good and bad things. It's like—.
K.M.:	Do you do the choir there, too?
Zion Bezu:	My kids do choir—.

K.M.:	Yes.
Zion Bezu:	I don't do choir.
K.M.:	You don't—? [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	Ah, yes.
K.M.:	Does the church host—like festivals?
Zion Bezu:	They do. They have international festivals. They have so many things—they have women's tea. They have men's gathering. They have different things for different people.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And, of course, being there's a lot of Ethiopians there, too, I think, a thousand or less—.
K.M.:	Wow.
Zion Bezu:	Between—I would say between five hundred to a thousand people at Word of Life. So we do have our worship, you know, time on Sunday from eight thirty to ten thirty [a.m.].
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	And then Wednesday, too, as well. So in that group we do celebrate all the holy days, all the Ethiopian holy days, and then, everything in Amharic. Even though our kids go to English program.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So, sort of—.
Ethiopian Holidays and Traditions	
K.M.:	Now, which holidays—which holiday is your favorite holiday? Because I'm thinking, is it—Fasika? Is that Easter?
Zion Bezu:	Ah, Easter is nice.
K.M.:	“Jenna?” Is that correct?
Zion Bezu:	“Genna”—is Christmas.
K.M.:	Thank you. [laughs] New Year's? Enku—.
Zion Bezu:	Enkutatash.
K.M.:	Enkutatash. Thank you. And then “Finding the True Cross”? Meskel?
Zion Bezu:	Meskel.
K.M.:	Is that—do Protestants rec[ognize]—do—some of these holidays?
Zion Bezu:	We kind of do some of these holidays. We do all. We do all. But—uh—.
K.M.:	Okay.

Zion Bezu:	We do all. But “Finding the Cross” is like we acknowledge—.
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	But we do all. For example, Enkutatash is coming. You have September 11, which is a really [laughs] good one. [Ethiopian New Year is celebrated on September eleven.] That is my favorite.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	My favorite and Christmas.
K.M.:	And Christmas. Now Christmas is a different day—.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Then how many [day different from] western Christians practice, right?
Zion Bezu:	Seven days’ different. So my kids celebrate two Christmases a lot, days apart.
K.M.:	Yes. [both laugh] Right. So those are their favorite holidays.
Zion Bezu:	They do. Enkutatash—September eleven—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Or it could be September twelve every five years.
K.M.:	Okay. Okay. Okay. So those are their favorite holidays?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Is there something special you do for New Year’s, in particular?
Zion Bezu:	Yes, of course—ah, food, music. For our Christian part is worship and then food, of course.
K.M.:	Is there a traditional dish for New Year’s?
Zion Bezu:	Yes, the one, “doro wat,” and they have to make that—.
K.M.:	Oh—.
Zion Bezu:	All the special foods will be out and the bread. Everything. So it’s really very special.
K.M.:	And then, you mentioned music?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Is it religious music? Or hymn music? Or—.
Zion Bezu:	There is, for us, there’s religion music, but there’s special music for Enkutatash.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Actually kids have to sing.

K.M.:	Oh! Okay.
Zion Bezu:	They will receive money or food or bread. Yeah. Usually they love to receive money. So they have to sing—.
K.M.:	To get the money.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. They have to bring yellow flowers.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	You know, the sunflower. And then they will sing. If they don't have the yellow sunflower, they have to draw. If they can't sing, they will give it that thing they draw and give it to you.
K.M.:	Okay, so children do it to adults? Or all elders? Or—.
Zion Bezu:	Children do it for adults.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	And that is [to] give someone a reward.
K.M.:	Yes, it's nice.
Zion Bezu:	It's really nice for them. Then for adults, there is singing around, there is drink—.
K.M.:	Is there dancing?
Zion Bezu:	Dancing, there's a special drink. So, I don't do alcohol.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	But there's a special alcohol that they drink—.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	Made out of honey.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	So, yeah. [laughs]
K.M.:	It's special—.
Zion Bezu:	They made it here also as well.
K.M.:	Okay. Do people make it themselves?
Zion Bezu:	Yes, they do.
K.M.:	Yeah. I was going to say, I've never seen it in the store. [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	It's yellow and called "tege."
K.M.:	"H"?
Zion Bezu:	"Tege," T-E-G-E, "tege," or -J [It can also be spelled "tej".]

K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	It's from honey, it's yellow.
K.M.:	And it's something to celebrate the New Year.
Zion Bezu:	Yes. And there's another one—"tela"—.
K.M.:	Yes.
Zion Bezu:	T-E-L-A. That one is also alcohol.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	They make it from the different herbs.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	They make it here.
K.M.:	They make it here. Everyone makes it at home. [both laugh]
Zion Bezu:	Well, we don't do that.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So, I don't know how to make it.
K.M.:	Now, you've mentioned sort of the flowers—.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	And the honey drink. There's seems to be a lot of yellow.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Is yellow a certain symbol of something at New Year's?
Zion Bezu:	So, summertime there is rain—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	There's a lot of rain in Ethiopia most of the places. So by September, the rain will kind of faded away and then the sunflower come out.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	That's why you see the yellow flowers—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Everywhere.
K.M.:	Oh.
Zion Bezu:	And those everywhere in the place, it's so beautiful. So they're kind of easy to cut. They will cut. They will bring the bunch. So, that's why you see in the poster, kids holding—.
K.M.:	Large piles of yellow flowers. So, that's—and so it blooms—.

K.M.:	About the same time as New Year's.
Zion Bezu:	Yes. So.
K.M.:	Oh. That's really cool. That's really cool.
Zion Bezu:	And then they wear the traditional clothes, the white—.
K.M.:	Right. So what is the white dress called? And then there's a scarf, right?
Zion Bezu:	It has a scarf.
K.M.:	With the ribbon on the edge?
Zion Bezu:	They can do different styles.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Even the way you braid it, there's—I don't know that much, but they have—the way you braid will tell your story—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	If you're married or not or single or whatever.
K.M.:	So, the way you braid your hair—.
K.M.:	So like today, you have a special—.
Zion Bezu:	This is just a simple silver piece.
K.M.:	Oh, it's beautiful! [both laugh]
Zion Bezu:	Something I play with my hair. But this is not a symbol. But like every culture, they have it.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Um, they braid and they will kind of weave their hair and if they have one—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	In the middle, it's—um, that is a married woman. There's a certain way they braid it.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	And then they are a single.
K.M.:	Oh, really?
Zion Bezu:	Yes, so every culture is different.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Of course, Oromo, they kind of wear the white. And there's something Oromo—.
K.M.:	Yeah.

Zion Bezu:	And then they tie it this way.
K.M.:	Okay. So they tie it on the side.
Zion Bezu:	Their hair is—they kind of hold it like here. And then they cover with the hair pieces—some of them.
K.M.:	Okay, sort of wrap on the side?
Zion Bezu:	Yes. Ah—yeah. It's kind of—.
K.M.:	They part down the middle and then wrap down the side?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Is it in a braid? Or is it like a big pigtail and then twist around?
Zion Bezu:	No, they don't braid it, then they—kind of the hair comes out here.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	So it's my city—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	That's how they do it. And some of them Oromo, they cover it up—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	The scarf.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And some of them, the one I put here—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	In the bottom—.
K.M.:	With the clip—with the crosses on the chain.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	I put the crosses. But they don't put the cross. What they put some circles because the cross is Christian.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	They put right here—.
K.M.:	Oh! On the front—.
Zion Bezu:	And then they pierce—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	From here and then here.
K.M.:	Right. So they pierce from the nose and then, they have a—.
Zion Bezu:	Pure gold.

K.M.:	Pierce here in the ear and then a chain—.
Zion Bezu:	And then all this is pierced, and they put so many golds, and the golds comes here—.
K.M.:	Into the nose.
Zion Bezu:	And then here's covered—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Also with gold. So it's kind of—every—ah—you know, culture—they have different ways.
K.M.:	Different ways of doing things. I guess we would call it adornment, right?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	But it tells people things, too.
Zion Bezu:	It tells, yeah—so they will know—.
K.M.:	A lot about you. [both laugh]
Zion Bezu:	Where you came from.
K.M.:	Right. Oh, that's cool.
Ethiopian Television	
K.M.:	Do you also—um, there's supposedly like an Ethiopian Television Network and Mama Tutu and Ethiopian Yellow Pages? Do you ever use those or look at those?
Zion Bezu:	Oh yes, I do. I do, actually. Tutu, we went the same school.
K.M.:	Oh, really?
Zion Bezu:	So, yeah. It was popular before the Internet—.
K.M.:	Internet—yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Internet took over. But still she catch up, she put in an online version.
K.M.:	Right. There's an online version of it, too.
Zion Bezu:	But they do have TV, too, as well.
K.M.:	Yeah, the Television Network Z Ethiopia as well?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	Do your kids watch programs?
Zion Bezu:	They do. A little bit.
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah. Do they like it or—?
Zion Bezu:	They don't like it, sometimes.

K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	But, well, they are like [pause]—they kind of watch it, then they give up. [laughs]
K.M.:	Right, then they want cartoons or something like that.
Zion Bezu:	Okay. That's it. [laughs]
K.M.:	Yeah. Do they have news programming on—.
Zion Bezu:	They do.
K.M.:	And so you can get a little bit of the Ethiopian news?
Zion Bezu:	Yes, but I don't watch it.
K.M.:	Oh, you don't watch it. [both laugh] You don't watch it.
Zion Bezu:	I'm not a news person.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	So, I don't. But I watch—um—different comedies.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, very good one.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	And then they have dramas—all of those things.
K.M.:	Oh, okay. So, you watch the more entertaining—.
Zion Bezu:	Yes. Yes.
K.M.:	Oh, that's cool.
Zion Bezu:	So they have that a lot.
K.M.:	And is it all—its own separate channel now?
Zion Bezu:	Yes. Separate.
K.M.:	Very cool. Very cool.
Teaching the Amharic Language	
K.M.:	And then, um, we've talked a lot about cultural stuff. I want to go back to that a little bit.
Zion Bezu:	Okay.
K.M.:	So, we talked about food. I know that also you teach Amharic here.
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	Right. Can you talk a little about why you do that? How that started? And why do you think it's so important?

Zion Bezu:	It is important for kids to know where their parents came. They always ask us, “Mommy, what you do when they—You know, why do you write different?” And they want to know! They curious! But, we—unless we teach them, they don’t know.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And in there’s—in Alexandria, I’ve never seen any community service for Ethiopian [language.]
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	They are like Arlington, they have community service which is really good and supported by government.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	But here in Alexandria, I don’t see that—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And we do not have that. In our schools, John Adams especially, they have over twenty percent of Ethiopian.
K.M.:	Oh, in the student body?
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, in the student body. And they—they want to know. They are asking—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And their parents asking. And most of the Ethiopian, they don’t speak English—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So they speak Amharic. So the kids sort of—they lost their communications with their parents.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	It’s like, you know—.
K.M.:	Yeah, they go to sch—.
Zion Bezu:	La-la, they don’t understand us, blah-blah. So, I want empower parents in as well as the kids the way to feel comfortable and then to feel—to get in their parents’, you know, lives.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And for the parents also to understand them. The only way to do that—to teach them culture. So what we do is in the classes—not strict education. But we walk and talk, you know. We do dance, I—we do music—that they love to do. And then we watch, you know, like cooking show or something.

K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And then we will teach them, I teach them—um—the Amharic part.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So, they kind of—when we start, those kids they don't even say a single word.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	By the time the eight weeks, they talk to me. So one of the rules I have is, once you are in my class, you can't talk to me in English. So, you have to talk to me—.
K.M.:	[laughs] Full immersion. [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	Oh, and the first week was tough for them.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	But the second week, they don't know it. They will like, you know, brokenly speak—they start—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	But by the time eight weeks, they even talk to me.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	It's amazing. And then they're engaged. They sing—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	The whole song! And it's like—oh, we have something here!
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And they enjoy it.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So when I told them—oh, today's the last day, they were sort of sad.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	I'm sad, too, to see that.
K.M.:	Do you use the school building for it?
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	And is it after school?
Zion Bezu:	It's after school program.
K.M.:	Oh, okay. So, how many days of the week is it?
Zion Bezu:	Only once a week. Yeah. We just started.

K.M.:	Once a week. Oh, okay. So you did it in the fall?
Zion Bezu:	I did it in spring.
K.M.:	Oh, you did it in the spring!
Zion Bezu:	Yes.
K.M.:	And then, are you going to try to do it again in the fall?
Zion Bezu:	Yes—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	I'm going to do that.
K.M.:	[laughs] Great. Great!
Zion Bezu:	So I went to the—I called Ethiopian Embassy—what kind of material that they have to provide for us. Right now, I wrote the material.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Which is like, you know, me being educated here, I do not have that much. But whatever I have I did it—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Which was really good, actually. When I showed it to them, they said, "This is really good."
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	"Can we copy it?" I was asking YOU to provide me materials!
K.M.:	"You're the experts!" [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	But they don't have it. But they are very interested to bring some materials.
K.M.:	Okay. So, for Ethiopian immigrants—is there not a large—I know other immigrant groups, they start language schools usually on Saturday, like Greek school or Korean school. Is that something that's just starting right now for Ethiopians?
Zion Bezu:	For Ethiopians, we do not have anything.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	D.C., Maryland, here nothing. But in Minnesota, one of my family, they—like I told you, they are mixed.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So, one of my cousins married American. Uh—so he's Ethiopian. So the kids are really mixed, and then, they're sort of, you know, like, "why don't you teach us? I—we want to learn."

K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	“We want to go back to Ethiopia. And then what will, how will we communicate,” which is—they’re eager. So they sort of start a little group and it’s grown and now it’s a school.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Now he has five days a week and it’s a large group.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So, I think that it’s very good—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And then he did SOFTL [unclear] as well which is really good. And so, but D.C. we are the largest—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Ethiopian community. Yeah, even Alexandria, it’s growing.
K.M.:	It’s huge—yeah—and Arlington and Fairfax—right where all three meet—.
Zion Bezu:	Yes!
K.M.:	Seems to be where everyone is coming together. Ah, so, do you see that maybe this is evolving into something larger?
Zion Bezu:	Yes, that’s why I was expecting, that was why I went to the Ethiopian Embassy and—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Ethiopian community in Arlington.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And say, “Look, work with us.”
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah.
K.M.:	And it is also what other immigrant groups have done, too. Is it perfect? It’s something.
Zion Bezu:	It’s something.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And then, even for other people, they will learn our culture.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And then they will make us welcome.
K.M.:	Right. Right. And then, also your children can be proud. I know who I am, right, and where I’m from.

Zion Bezu:	That's true.
K.M.:	Which is sometimes half the battle. [both laugh]
A School Volunteer Now PTA President	
K.M.:	But you talked a little about public schools and doing the afterschool program.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah.
K.M.:	And I want—the last section—I want to talk about is a little about your involvement in public schools, and how you became such an advocate for education in the public schools. First, how did you end up meeting Krishna Leyva over at FACE [Family and Community Engagement, a program run by Alexandria City Public Schools] and the program that she ran? And what was that, what was that about?
Zion Bezu:	Well. Well, I joined public school because of my kids, I think, especially for my son. He has speech problem, like I told you. So we—because of that, the private school wouldn't accept him—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Because they were part of special services. So, the only way is the public schools.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So I joined the public school. And it's a wonderful place!
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Cause I see diverse group—.
K.M.:	Right. John Adams is very diverse. [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	Oh, my goodness! Amazing and large group. And they have lot of programs. Oh, my goodness, it's an amazing program. But, there's little communication, little parent engagement—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Little, you know, volunteers. So, it was struggles. So, I love to help out a little bit. So, I look around. And then I ask most of the people—they don't know the information what they have—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	In the school. So I joined PLTI.
K.M.:	Okay. Now, what is PLTI?
Zion Bezu:	PLTI is Parent Leadership Training Institute. And it is twenty weeks program.
K.M.:	Right.

Zion Bezu:	So they will teach you—.
K.M.:	Yes.
Zion Bezu:	How Alexandria works.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	How the department works. For me, I have no clue about how the government works—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So, how the education part works. So, I learn that and then I create—uh—Bright Choice for Children, which is the—something give for—something for children—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Which is I start with homework club.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So Bright Choice for Children right now serves as homework club for John Adams. Uh—we do have one hundred kids who benefit from it. And then Amharic and then there's—we add some more programs, cooking.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	That is my passion to teach them to bring all the kids and family together. So, uh—So, I met FACE Center—but, uh—Krishna [Leyva]—in that situation like taking those class, involve in the school, and then I take her workshop—.
K.M.:	Yeah?
Zion Bezu:	And then she asked me to help and then—.
K.M.:	Right
Zion Bezu:	That's how—.
K.M.:	Things evolved. [laughs] Right.
Zion Bezu:	So, ah, sometimes, if I ever have time—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	I help her do some work and that's how it work.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Well, so I attend frequently PTA [Parent Teacher Association] meetings. I—the first meeting when I came to John Adams, I ask where's the PTA—?
K.M.:	Yeah.

Zion Bezu:	I need the PTA forum. And then, I—that's what I did.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	The first thing I did—.
K.M.:	Okay, joined the PTA?
Zion Bezu:	The PTA.
K.M.:	And now, so not only are you member of PTA, right? You have a special role for the fall. Or, I guess, have you, are you technically—?
Zion Bezu:	I'm technically—PTA President.
K.M.:	Yeah. [laughs]
Zion Bezu:	Last year—last year, I was PTA President-Elect.
K.M.:	Elect, yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So, kind of in training. So—uh—June 5, officially I am the PTA President—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	For this year. Sort of, I am the first immigrant PTA President for John Adams.
K.M.:	Oh—okay.
Zion Bezu:	I heard that—I'm not sure—but I heard that from one of the school board. I am the first—.
K.M.:	Wow!
Zion Bezu:	Immigrant African from Alexandria—the entire—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Alexandria school—[system].
K.M.:	Is very possible [laughs]. It's exciting.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, it's like, but it's a lot of—uh—pressure.
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So—.
K.M.:	Well, as being one of the first, but also being PTA president, what are your goals for the next year for the students at John Adams?
Zion Bezu:	My goal is empower students and their parents engaged. Um—education should be fun. And then education should be, you know, shouldn't be hard—should be easy, fun. And then parents have to involve their kids' lives. Not sort of—I seen a lot of parents they throw their kids, and they are just like, “Here, go—.”

K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And then they left them—that's it—seven o'clock. The schools open seven forty [a.m.]. Seven o'clock the kids are there, it's cold and freezing. They're standing there. They don't care, some of them. And I ask, it's like, "Excuse me—uh—what's is going on?" These kids are cold.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And they don't know what—what sort of things that we have.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And a lack of communication, a lack of resource. Not knowing there's after school activities—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Before school—.
K.M. :	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Uh—child care. They don't know. So, you know, this parents have to work two, three jobs as well.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So, those—my plan is for next year and this year is to engage parents and then I plan to have—uh—English Second Language classes at John Adams. So if work—.
K.M.:	Yes.
Zion Bezu:	So we might have two classes—.
K.M.:	Oh—for the parents.
Zion Bezu:	For parents.
K.M.:	Oh, that's great!
Zion Bezu:	So, we do the homework lab for the children—.
K.M.:	Um-hm.
Zion Bezu:	And the parents, the same time, they will learn English [as a] second language.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	In that way, we can bring them to the school. So, That is one of the problems is they don't speak English. So they kind of take themselves out of the school.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	So we are bringing them in the school. Is it easy? No.

K.M.:	Yeah!
Zion Bezu:	Especially for me, it's hard.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Why? Like I told you, English is my second language. [both laugh] I am African.
K.M.:	Yeah?
Zion Bezu:	It's some people, they don't know how to act or they don't know how to work with us—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	People like us. So, I don't blame them. But it's kind of—for us, at the same time—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Sometimes, it's like frustrated.
K.M.:	Yeah, absolutely.
Zion Bezu:	I understand they are frustrated, too. They don't know what to do.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	I put myself in their shoes, too. But it's sort of—this is a learning, teaching process. We learn—I learn from them, and they learn from me as well.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	That's what are my goals in the future. And I want more parents to be more friends—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	And that was my goals to bring more people together.
K.M.:	Yeah. Yeah. You did the International Night this spring. Is that an example of some of the things you're talking about? Do you want to describe what International Night was?
Zion Bezu:	International Night is different culture, different country. They came together, and they show their food, their home culture, they dance, [K.M. laughs] they do dramas, so many things.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	That it was sort of for other people, it makes a little bit understanding. So—.
K.M.:	Yeah. Did you, do you remember how many countries were represented at International Night?

Zion Bezu:	About, I'd say, thirty or thirty-five countries—
K.M.:	Thirty, thirty-five—.
Zion Bezu:	A lot more than that!
K.M.:	I'm sure. So Ethiopia was obviously represented. Do you remember any of the other countries?
Zion Bezu:	There is Peru, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Somalia, uh—.
K.M.:	Mali?
Zion Bezu:	Mali, yes. [both laugh] Ghana, Morocco—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Um—Canada, China, Korea, well, Korea also just showed a flag. Yeah. What else we have? We have a bunch of them. I don't remember.
K.M.:	That's great.
Zion Bezu:	But we do have a lot.
K.M.:	Cool. What do you see as some of the greatest successes within the Alexandria public schools?
Zion Bezu:	It's hard. [laughs]
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So many things [laughs]. I'll say—the music department.
K.M.:	Really? Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Really, at John Adams, they have after school—before school and after school music program which is really great.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	And my kids are in it.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	In the morning my son, and the afternoon my daughter.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	So she sings, he plays instrument.
K.M.:	Oh, okay, that's great.
Zion Bezu:	It is really good program. And what else? The art department is excellent; teacher is really good.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	I appreciate it. [both laugh]
K.M.:	Very patient people.

Zion Bezu:	They are.
Challenges for the Alexandria Public Schools	
K.M.:	And then, I think you've sort of alluding to some of this. What are some of the biggest hurdles that we as Alexandrians but also the Alexandria Public School system have, for say, the next five to ten years?
Zion Bezu:	Communication.
K.M.:	Communication, yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Respecting another culture or groups. I'll say it's communication, the lack of communications.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So that, and then, uh—answer the question fully. [both laugh] And the biggest thing is I want to—I'd say for Alexandria Public School to have understanding of kids, all the kids, not partial kids—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	All of them, special needs. There needs to be—need to be, you know, more fund, more budget—.
K.M.:	More support—.
Zion Bezu:	More material resources—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	It's—we need that—.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	Even those between special kids and—there's kids—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	With between—.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	Who is ignored.
K.M.:	Right.
Zion Bezu:	They need to work on it.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	So, that is—.
K.M.:	To make sure they help everyone.
Zion Bezu:	Yeah. Not left them.
K.M.:	Yes! Yes.

Ethiopian Community Center	
K.M.:	So I—we're sort of at the end. [both laugh] Oh, I have one other question. Do you travel back and forth to Ethiopia? Or have you taken your kids to Ethiopia?
Zion Bezu:	Not yet. Next year.
K.M.:	Next year! All right, then we'll have to revisit that question next year! Is there anything else you wanted to add? Any ideas or thoughts?
Zion Bezu:	Well, I wish we do have an Ethiopian community center in Alexandria—.
K.M.:	Okay.
Zion Bezu:	Instead of going to D.C. or Arlington?
K.M.:	To Arlington.
Zion Bezu:	And more funds for it.
K.M.:	Yeah.
Zion Bezu:	The government should support it. It's—Alexandria, they have a large and getting bigger the Ethiopian peoples.
K.M.:	So.
Zion Bezu:	So, they should—.
K.M.:	Create some sort of center?
Zion Bezu:	Yep. Resources—.
K.M.:	From—particularly in the West End?
Zion Bezu:	No, even here—eh—the Houston—.
K.M.:	Charles Houston [School and Recreation Center].
Zion Bezu:	Yeah, around there, there's a lot of Ethiopians.
K.M.:	Oh really?
Zion Bezu:	It is still growing. Even in Old Town—.
K.M.:	Oh, okay.
Zion Bezu:	So—.
K.M.:	So, anywhere in the city? Anywhere—.
Zion Bezu:	In the city.
K.M.:	Just something.
Zion Bezu:	Something, yes.

K.M.:	Perfect. All right! So that ends our interview.
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