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Lahens

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Lahens' Interview

St. Catherine University

Restricted to transcript
No audio available

L - What is your name?

La - My name is Lahens St. Fleur. I also go by Lahens Lee-St. Fleur that is part of my adoptive name. My full entire name would be Lahens Antonio Lee-St. Fleur.

L - Ok, that's good. When and where were you born?

La - I was born in Port au Prince, Haiti in 1984, _____.

L - We are going to probably take out identifying details that are that specific.

La - No problem.

L - Just putting that out there. Describe your household as you were growing up? Who was in your family?

La - That is a hard question, especially growing up as a young child. Basically from birth until I moved here into the US, I think I grew up in a house with my grandmother because I think both of my parents passed away when I was very young.

L - Oh, ok.

La - So, I never really knew them _____. When I was about five when I went to live in an orphanage, which was an orphanage for all boys. So, those kids I grew up in the orphanage with, were probably... the way to describe them all would be my people who I grew up with, who would be in my house.

L - So, your grandmother, after your parents passed away and then, the orphanage. Is that still in Port au Prince?

La - That is still in Port au Prince.

L - How many kids were there?

La - When the orphanage started, when I was there we had 16-18 males. It was an all-boy orphanage.

L - And the age range?

La - The age range would range between 5-16 year old kids and I was one of the youngest kids at the orphanage at one point.

L - So how did you like it?

La - You know, growing up in Haiti which people don't really... Some people know a little bit about the background of Haiti, the poverty of it. You know growing up in the orphanage, for me it was a good place because it kept me from the street at least. Finding a place to sleep, [and] at least knowing that I would get some food.

L - Somebody was looking out for you. Did you spend some time on the street?

La - I did. Even though I was growing up in the orphanage, I still spent some time living in the street. Growing up in the orphanage was great. Basically the orphanage is just like a place of refuge and go and sleep and get something to eat. But really once you are born in poverty, in the south; it is really hard not to find other ways to get money. So, I used to spend plenty of time in the streets begging, we... one of the worst slums in Port au Prince is called Cite Soleil and I spent plenty of time there which is close to the...sort of close to the airport, where I would wait to beg for money.

L - Were you begging to tourists or to other Haitians?

La - Sometimes I would try to beg to other Haitians who have money but mostly it is begging to tourists who would be coming to visit the country. And also the orphanage, where I was staying, we used to host people. They used to stay at the house so there was also a source of begging to them.

L - Who ran the orphanage?

La - The person who ran the orphanage he was a former priest. He is an American person who is still the executive director of the orphanage.

L - Were kids adopted out of the orphanage?

La - There were a few kids who had chances to be adopted at the orphanage and it is a very complex situation where some of the folks that would come to visit would really fall in love with particular young man and wanted to bring them into the United States. But the director of the orphanage and was kind of very controlling person and he wanted us to be there to take care of the house, working on the farm and doing other chores.

L - So, on one hand it provided refuge; on the other hand, there was an expectation.

La - Yes, there was a great expectation that if you're going to stay in this house, then you have certain obligations. And adoptions really wasn't something that this guy really believed in.

L - And it really wasn't the goal or...?

La - That wasn't the goal.

L - Providing some refuge in exchange for labor.

La - That's basically it. Like some of the job we had to do. It was a farm that we had to go and work at and it's fairly hot.

L - What were you growing?

La - Watermelons, potatoes...

L - So, crops you could sell in a fruit market?

La - Yeah, we could try to sell it and also sometimes try to use it in the house for ourselves to eat. It's very hard to grow food in this particular climate where you don't really have water to the plants after planting.

L - You're dependent on nature?

La - Yes, basically.

L - So to supplement that work, you would go in the street and beg?

La - Yes, to supplement in order for us to get money, we would go in the street and beg. Because the chances are when you beg, you will probably get a higher source of an income begging than getting in the house. Because the currency in Haiti is a gourde, so if you beg... if a white person gives you \$5 American money, that is a lot of money in Haitian. So, you can use that to buy

certain things. Because in the house we just eat rice, beans and bananas and once in a while, you would get some peanut butter and once in a while, you may get some sort of meat. But if you have money you can supplement and you can go outside of the house and you can go to market and buy some meat, you can buy chicken, certain other food that would be better nutrition for the body.

L - And really at such a young age, having to look out for yourself.

La - I had to look out for myself for a long time. I'm growing up, not really knowing what happened to my parents and growing up in the orphanage where I was one of the youngest kids at the orphanage. I basically had to tell myself if you want the other kids to beat you up or do you want to grow up and make your way through? When I moved into the orphanage I got started dancing. That was one of my other things to prevent the other kids from bullying me because I wanted to show them. Even though I may be the youngest kid in the house but I also have something special that some of the other kids in the house don't have. So I started dancing and once they saw that part of leadership in me, then I become part of them and they finally accept me for who I am, not for something else.

L - You had to kind of prove yourself.

La - Yeah, growing up in a house with all kids who are coming from the street. A lot of the kids who were in the house were all street kids and you need to find ways...

L - And the rules of the street aren't the same.

La - It's not the same. The rules in the streets: it's all men for themselves. In the house, there may be certain rules that you have to follow but once you're in the street and if you don't look out for yourself #1, who's going to? Stealing, begging, sleeping on dirt floors, those are things growing to when I was living there. It's difficult.

L - But you're a kid and it's what you know. And you just try to take care of things?

La - You just have to try to take care of things and try to take care of myself because if I don't, then who's going to? I don't want to end up being one of those kids. When I walk around the country, you see dead bodies on the side of the roads because there are a lot of kids who are dying because they don't get some food the night before. And that is the majority of the death in Haiti is a lot of kids are dying because of [mal]-nutrition and it's very sad. So if you don't go to the market and try to steal that piece of bread, knowing that if I don't steal it I may get caught but...

L - But I can't survive without sustenance?

La - Yep.

L - Wow. So, how long were you in the orphanage?

La - I was in the orphanage for about seven years; and I grew up there and I danced. And in 1996, when I came here to the US, actually my first ever trip to the United States was with the orphanage and we came here in 1995. I think spring or fall of 1995, to raise money for the orphanage and we had this dance group in the orphanage, so we came and we did the upper Midwest tour of dancing to raise money. And that was my first ever taste of America, of a bigger world.

L - Right and specifically, a US world.

La - A US world because the thing is, when we were in Haiti, when you would watch T.V., for the two hours of electricity that you would get and you would finally watch T.V., you would see the American commercials and you saw the land of the beautiful and the plenty. And I always wanted to come to the United States and we found out we were coming here in 1995, I was thrilled. The US it's a new world at one point I said ok the US is very far and until I move here to the US and started learning and it's really not that far away from Haiti.

L - When you first came, were you French-speaking? -Creole-speaking?

La - Both. Our first trip here was all of us. It was for a short trip, it was basically from October through December and all of us were supposed to go back. There were a few of the older kids who spoke English very well because they had been here to the United States but a few of the youngest ones, like me, had no clue.

L - In terms of schooling, were you getting any education during these years?

La - Living in Haiti? No. No education whatsoever. Even if we had the chance to go to school, right away, the guy who ran the orphanage will call us out of school because we had certain obligation because education for him wasn't really the first priority for us.

L - It was maintaining his...

La - It was maintaining the orphanage. It was cleaning, going to the farm and keeping things clean because we had a lot of visitors who would constantly come.

L - To look nice and I'm sure, you can correct me, orphans project a certain image.

La - Yep.

L - What do you think the image that the director wanted to project visitors without the orphans?

La - Basically it's showing us to those people saying I'm doing something for them. And one of his things he always used to tell us, "I found you in the street. If you do something bad I have no problem throwing you back in the street again."

L - Really coercive.

La - Really coercive. So when we were there, it was like those are orphan kids I find in the street and I'm trying to provide for them and I'm giving them an education, an opportunity, teaching them certain values. All in all, it was just a game and it's just a show to the white folks who come to visit the county say, "You're doing really good things for those kids so we will give you a check to benefit you."

L - Right, because we feel bad that there is such terrible poverty and here is someone who is doing something to help.

La - To help those kids so we feel the obligation to give this resource to help him but in the end, when you look at it...

L - He too was out for himself.

La - He was out for himself which is very sad. -Really, really sad.

L - I think with the poverty being in the developing world, that at a young age, you saw some of the worst...

La - I saw some of the worst and right now, for me growing up here in the United States, I've lived in two different worlds. I've lived the poverty world and now I'm living the middle class world.

L - And so in between ... I need to get to that part of the story. You came here to dance, to raise money for the orphanage and something happened.

La - Yes, something happened, something major happened. This guy – this priest, he was a priest and eventually he's not a priest anymore, something major happened that the older kids who had been here to the US before had met some people. There were some accusations against the director of the orphanage of abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse. So the older kids that knew people there wanted to tell their stories. In Haiti, there isn't a law against sexual abuse victims or physical abuse victims.

L - Street kids.

La - Yeah, street kids. Who are you going to believe the street kids or this guy who built a house for those kids?

L - There was no access to justice.

La - There was no access to justice. The justice in Haiti is very horrible. The thing is, if I was in Haiti right now, I could do a claim. What are the chances and I'm going to give you this amount of money to make sure it goes through and it's all about the money. When we came to the US, we thought this would be the best opportunity to tell our stories. This guy has been physical abuse, sexual abuse on us and if we don't tell our stories, then it's going to continue to happen, so we tried. We tried to tell the story when we were in Detroit and that's where it happened. It

happened in Detroit, where we were performing. At the end of the show, we went to try and greet people who are waiting for us in the lobby and by the time we got out, there was about ten Detroit cop cars in the campus of where we were performing. Sister Andrea who was... that was her institution at the time.

L - And what was she doing there?

La - She was the vice president of the college.

L - An important administrator.

La - An important administrative person and there were Sisters and the Sisters stayed there and they had a place right on campus. We told exactly what was going on.

L - It must have taken a lot of courage.

La - It took a lot of courage and at the same time, we were extremely afraid because we know if this didn't happen eventually, we're going to have to go back to Haiti and there would be consequences. What consequences would happen and for me being one of the youngest kids, is he going to kick us back in the street.

L - This was the chance.

La - This was our chance. This was the opportunity we thought ok, he is here in the US he is an American person this would be the perfect place to...

L - Was he successfully prosecuted?

La - There has been countless people around the United States who have been trying to prosecute this person. Actually right now there is a big case against him and it never happened. And eventually we went back to Haiti in December 1995. And there was about three of the older kids who ended up staying because they knew people in the US ___ I think when we came here there were 12 of us. So out of the 12, 9 got to stay and the rest of us went back. And the ones who went back were extremely, extremely nervous because we knew exactly when we got back to Haiti what was going to happen. He's not in the US anymore and he can do anything he wants. Were we going to end up going back to the streets again some of us? For me, not really having family members in Haiti, the orphanage was the only place I knew. If it means going back living in the street again, sure I would do it, because I didn't want to face any negativity what the guy would do.

L - So, you went back and what happened?

La - We went back, he talked to us. When we went back there was this other part of the orphanage where a lot of kids with disabilities. And I end up being sent there cause here in the US, they find out I myself had a heart problem. And so basically they told me I couldn't dance

anymore which was for me very difficult because dancing was one of my most thing that got me to the US in the first place.

L - It was one of the only things that was yours.

La - It was the only thing that was mine and now to take it away from me was extremely hard. And it was like someone punching you in the gut and saying the one thing you love you can't do anymore. You can't have it anymore. For me, it's like what... I don't really have any purpose because dancing was my thing. And when I was in Haiti, I had a chance to dance with the Haitian Ballet Company and really enjoyed it a lot. It was a place where a lot of the diplomats' kids would go and I was one of a few Haitian kids who had a chance to do it. And then I went back to tell them I couldn't do it anymore, now what am I supposed to do?

L - You were in this other part of the orphanage...

La - I was at the other part of this orphanage which was about 20 miles away, which was up in the mountains. I went to live there for a couple of months and I didn't like it at all. A lot of the kids I knew were down at the other orphanage and now I'm at this other place where I hardly know any kids and a different place for me. So eventually, I snuck back down to the other orphanage and stayed there for a while, where I got this phone call one hot summer in March, I got this call. Someone says there is someone in the U.S. who wants to talk to you. I was like OK – I'm outside playing soccer, it's dark [outside], no shoes on, in this teeny alley and someone says there is someone who wants to talk to you. Well, who wants to talk to me from the United

States? Could it be someone in Detroit? Could it be the cops calling again to ask some more questions to do some investigation? And someone said, “No, it’s someone else who you met and want to talk to you.” I said, “Yes, well who? I don’t think I built any relationships with people when I’m over there because I feel like we cause more trouble than actually...”

L - Than building alliances?

La - Than building alliances, yeah. But by golly, the person who was on the phone was Sister Andrea. Because during the investigation in Detroit, we ended up staying with her for about two and a half weeks, at the place with the Sisters.

L - You made an impression on her?

La - I guess I did. I don’t know really cause I still... I’m in the US and every single day, I still ask myself, why? That would be a question why. And when I spoke to her on the phone, and she said, “I’m bringing you to the United States because of your heart condition. ____ I spoke to some doctors and they basically said, “If you continue to live in Haiti, the chances are of you surviving, is very slim.” And ok, once again it’s like – Ok great! Great, so I could be dead any second? They said, “Your heart is, a portion of your heart, is bigger than the rest of your chest and when your heart... When you start running, your heart is beating so fast that we are afraid it could pop and stop immediately.” She said, “We would like to bring you to the US on a medical visa, to get some medical care and to see what happens. You can come for six months and then if

you need to have heart surgery, you can have heart surgery. And we will try to figure something out.”

L - Wow. From that point on, your life was on a different...

La - From that point on... When I left Haiti in 1996, March 1996.

L - So, that was four months roughly after meeting her?

La - Four months roughly. I left in December of 1995 and a couple months later, was in an airplane.

L - So, if you hadn't made your way back to the main orphanage, if you hadn't been there when the call came, it's hard to say...

La - It's hard to say, yeah because if I decided to stay up at that other orphanage and not fight it, could have been someone else. There were 9 of us. It could have been one of the other 9 kids.

There is a question I still ask because like I say, there were 9 kids. I think all of us had some sort of physical issues, mental issues going on with us.

L - You came for the surgery and the medical care. And Sister Andrea, did she help negotiate all of that for you?

La - Yes, she did. When I came in 1995 and 1996, and it was like, “You’re coming on a medical visa and we have the doctors. And we’re going to get you medical care right away. And the woman is a very brilliant-minded person. I think she had some big plan already. She had her stuff planned way... because when I moved here and when I came, [she told me] “We have some doctor appointments set up for you, but at the same time, we are also putting you in school.”

L - At 12?

La - At 12.

L - For the first time.

La - You’re going to school. It’s like, “Oh, OK. I don’t speak English.”

L - Did you speak French with her?

La - I speak some Creole. She knew a few Creole words and that was basically the way of our communication.

L - And yet, you had made such a powerful impact and her eyes were open.

La - I guess and she saw... And I think whatever little impact I made that was what caught her eye and once in a while, we will still sit down and talk. “What did I do to make you choose me

out of the 9 kids? Was it my smile? Did I do something that she looked at... -the thing that he does way different than those other 9 kids?"

L - Just some connection.

La - A divine connection that connected everything together. And for some odd reason, I feel they found a way to be connected and we're here.

L - So you started school. Did you need surgery?

La - I started school. I never had to have surgery. And it was basically getting the right shots, getting more sleep, getting love, somebody to care for you. And the doctors eventually told us, "Sister, he is not dying. He doesn't really have a heart condition." I had a heart murmur that they had to check but I never had to have surgery. Basically, the doctor said, "He was extremely, extremely malnourished. He wasn't getting the right nutrition, sleep, love and that's what the heart needs."

La - If you look at it, I've had a chance, being a social work major and I work with kids. And when you hear the stories, which it's true, people don't really think about the heart and for me, that was it. And that's what the doctor said. "He is not dying because of his heart, he is like this because..."

L - His heart is dying because...?

La - “He is not getting the right amount of love. His heart is not getting the love that he deserves and he is not getting the right nutrition that he needs and that’s the reason why he is...” When I moved here, I was 12 years old and 60 pounds. And I still have the same little teeny shoes and same little teeny clothes that I had in my bag when I came to the US. And I still have them in the bag now, just to show them to my kids. My son just today weighed himself. He’s like, “Oh I’m 54 pounds. I’m 7 years old.” I was like, “When I was your age, I was probably 30-something pounds.”

L - It’s an amazing story, and this twist of fate or however [to] understand it. You had a lot of resources made available to you and part of what I’m hearing you say, is to be loved, to be taken care of, that was the most important thing.

La - For me, it was. It was the most important thing. In Haiti, I never had school and I never went to school. So right away, she put me in school and I asked her, “Sister, are you crazy?” “Putting me in a school where I don’t speak English? And now, you’re expecting me to go into a school where I don’t know anyone?”

L - And you’re tiny and you’re foreign...

La - She said, “Well, yes. I’m putting you in school and if you like it, great, and we will see.”

L - Just give it a try.

La - Just give it a try. And basically, the day I went to school, my schedule was basically: school, tutor. School, tutor. School, tutor, food, school, school, tutor. I was being tutored all the time, after school, in the morning.

L - You were trying to make up for...

La - I was trying to make up for the past. And the thing is the English language, to me, is probably one of the most difficult languages to learn. Because in Haiti, in Creole, plural and singulars are the same. I can say one word in Creole; it means 100 something things. Here in the English language, I had to learn all these new things. It was very difficult and I still struggle.

L - I think English has more words than almost any language. Again, you needed to deal with the situation.

La - I had to deal with the situation and I had to tell myself after police starting to know, the three Sisters and I, basically had to tell myself, if you do have a chance to live here, you will have to learn the language.

L - This is reality.

La - This is it. I know I was coming here on a six month medical visa but like I said, Sister was very smart. And after the six month medical visa ended, she had a student visa because a student

visa as long as you're in school. You're not doing anything illegal; as long as you're going to school, you can stay in the US. And once you finish your education, then you have to go back to your country. So she said, "We're going to put you in the school. You are going to monitor it and see what happens." We live in Detroit for two years and I was going to school in Detroit for two years.

L - And there were three Sisters? Sister Andrea and...

La - There were three Sisters. Sister Amata and another Sister named Sister Elizabeth. She in another congregation now, she's a little older. So it was three Sisters and this one teeny Haitian kid.

L - Wow.

La - It was amazing living in the house full of three educated women.

L - American women but also women who had made life choices that pretty much precluded becoming parents.

La - Yes. Living with them was very interesting. I always called them the three cats and the mouse.

L - They were always watching out for you.

La - Always watching out for me. They were always making sure. Sister Amata, who was teaching me how to write, teaching me how to read. And if it wasn't Sister Amata, then it was Sister Elizabeth, who was a sociologist person so she was helping me with certain things. And if it wasn't... those two, it was Sister Andrea, with her education background, so, I was constantly learning new things.

L - You didn't have a chance.

La - I didn't have a chance and to the point until... you know, going to school. I started building good relationships with some of the kids and I started to learn English words. We used to play this game if we're driving. I would see how many words I can read in billboards and that was one of the ways too and part of it. She also put me into sports, which is... and also an easier way I think, to learn English; to be on a team. If you are on a team, even though you are not writing it, you are listening.

L - And communication is essential.

La - For me, that's how I learned a ton of English through sports in itself.

L - And that was something you could do well.

La - Like certain sports, playing soccer, I was good at it. Being on a team in a country where the game is not that popular. So, in school where you finally learn to play the game and you have a kid from a foreign country who has been playing the game for a long time, then you become the essential part of the team. So, everyone wants to communicate with you. I started making some friends and they started helping me a lot which was in itself amazing because being shy is not my personality. I'm not a really shy person and I had to go head first in there... it's like if you're going to be here, then you truly do need to learn the language.

L - And [to] figure out a way to be.

La - Yes

L - Because the roles you learned in Haiti, I'm guessing they only helped you so much.

La - They only help... Living in the streets, you learn a lot of things. There are people... there are street smart and you have book smarts. Like book smart wasn't for me, street smart that was me and that's what I was used to and that's how I survived. Coming to the US, there was a whole new different learning. You have to learn to read, to write, to spell...

L - And live by a clock and have a lot of expectations.

La - You have to go to bed, bedtime is at this time. That was one of the most difficult things living with the Sisters, it's like, "Oh ok, it's 8 o'clock. You've got to go to bed. Like for me, it's

like 8 o'clock. I will be in the street it will be dark in Haiti and we will still be playing soccer as long as we can find a spot where there is light. We could be playing soccer and now you're telling me 8 o'clock and I have to go to bed? I have to live a whole new different life now.

L - And you went from an all-male environment....?

La - To an all-female environment. I'm still in an all-female environment. A good chunk of my life living with an all-male... From 12 [on] and now you'll be living in an all-female world and environment. There is a schedule; I never had a schedule. You have to be at school at this time. You get lunch at this time, and that was the other thing too, the struggle. Living in Haiti, you get one meal a day. Living in the US, [the] first time where we sat down for dinner, my plate was so big because I knew that could be the last meal I ate, because that's what I was used to.

L - That's how you learned to survive.

La - So the Sisters, "Don't worry, there is plenty more. You can go back and get some more." And it's like, "What! We never had that..." You always pile your plate because you know...

L - It might have to last.

La - There is food in the fridge, there is this. We have snacks.

L - So, just the material difference between the US and Haiti. Was that exciting? Overwhelming?

La - Very overwhelming, it was a huge culture shock for me.

L - Right.

La - Extremely huge culture shock.

L - Going to the grocery store alone could be just unreal.

La - I remember when they took me to, in Detroit, there is Kmart; we went to Kmart. A grocery store holy mackerel! Look at all the stuff.

L - Right, a whole aisle devoted to cereal.

La - There's rice, where we have to fight for it. Here is milk, where you have to go to a place and you get your own milk, you have to milk it from the goats. Now there is a whole place for it. There is ice cream and there is this and there is that. It's like, "Ok this is a whole new different environment." Different world for me so it took me a while really to get used to it. And the culture, the weather in itself also for me, was extremely... coming from 90 degrees to you get a couple months of nice weather and you have six months of horrible weather.

L - Six months of it, huh (laughing)?

La - The first snow storm they got in Detroit, I think they got 10 inches of snow and the power went out at the place we were staying.

L - Did you just think the world was...

La - Here's my words, I told the Sisters, "I hate this place. I want to go back; I hate this place: there is no water, there is no lights. I almost feel like I'm back in Haiti again; there is no electricity, I'm cold." They pile a bunch of sleeping bags on me, just to keep me warm but it was six days of no electricity. It was like, "I hate this place, I can't stand it."

L - All that had been kind of promised by making this move, you saw that maybe it's not secure?

La - It's not the world that television perceived it to be.

L - Yes. That is such, I think... that is so much part of the immigrant experience is that the disappointment of the limits of American wealth and power and freedom.

La - Because when you live in an impoverished country, they only show you the beautiful part. They don't show you the negative part of what could happen. I never really saw the negative part of the United States so it was very hard. And as a foreign person, living in this county and now I have been coming from March and now it's December.

L - And [it's] what's familiar and at least it was warm.

La - We know, in Haiti, there are two things we have to worry about: the rainy season and then there is summer. We don't have to deal with three seasons. There are two seasons that we know starting in March in Haiti is the rainy season. It's going to rain and if it rain, people the next day get up and go on with their life because you know it's going to be 90 degrees again, that simple. Here in the United States, well summer is coming; you have to deal with the humid. So hot, so you look forward to fall and you see the beautiful colors. The trees are changing colors and winter, six months of it.

L - I think it's incredible how much change one person can navigate in a pretty short time. Do you still dance?

La - I still dance, I still do it. When we had the Opus event, I was fortunate to choreograph two of the dances that were performed at the event. I still do a lot of sacramental dance in the chapel. I have done some stuff with the St. Paul Ballet Company once in a while because it's part of me. It's what got me here to the United States and I still enjoy it.

L - I want to talk a little more about your education. So you were in junior high or middle school when you started? And then you stayed in Detroit for how long?

La - We stay in Detroit from 1996 to 1998.

L - And then you moved?

La - And then we moved here to the Twin Cities.

L - Ok. So by then were you in high school?

La - By then, I was in eighth grade. I finished eighth grade at IHM St. Luke's which is kind of right across from the governor's mansion. I think they just changed their name to a different [one]. I think it's St. Thomas Moore. So I was there just from coming from Detroit. I was there just for one year and then from there, I went to high school, at Cretin Derham Hall High School.

L - How did you like that?

La - Once again, a whole new different...

L - Another situation to adjust to?

La - So it's like going from one change to a different change. I really, it was a good fit. My mom, when we were looking at high schools, she had two choices for me: was either going to St. Thomas Academy or going to Cretin Derham High School. I visited St. Thomas Academy; I didn't like it because I didn't want to wear the military outfit every day.

L - And the marching and the military...

La - And the military style; she wanted me to do it. We made a compromise and she's like, "You can go to Cretin Derham Hall but you have to try the JROTC for one year." And that was fine. I could do it for one year, if I really like it then I can continue with it. But Cretin Derham Hall High School was a really good fit for me. I played four years of varsity soccer there. Made some amazing friends. My most best friends still today are all my high school friends. We still see each other. And my wife, is where I met my wife was in high school.

L - I knew she was a St. Kate's grad but I didn't realize how far back you went.

La - I met my wife my freshman year in high school, starting dating sophomore year and the rest is history.

L - Now you've been married how long?

La - We'll be married this coming June will be five years. We will be married for five years in June.

L - And you have two....

La - Two boys

L - So finally the testosterone is coming back up.

La - Is coming back up a little bit. So yeah, two boys... so CDH, my education there was really great and from there, I went to the University of Minnesota for school. One of my really good friends, my best man in my wedding, was also going there and we thought it would be kind of nice to room together.

L - Did you start studying in social work early?

La - I went to the University of Minnesota wanting to go into law because I really wanted to be a lawyer and started taking a couple classes, theory classes, and I decided I don't think I can.

L - I don't think I want to be a lawyer.

La - I don't want to be a lawyer and then eventually, I thought maybe education and I took a couple education classes. And I did a few volunteer at school, and again, that wasn't really my calling. Teaching kids that wasn't really for me. Because I always wanted to go into the helping profession, the reason for me is because I've always had... I've had a tremendous amount of people who have helped me being the man I am today. And I've always wanted to see how can I give back to my community and how can I give back...

L - Keep that process going.

La - When I was at the U, my wife and I – at the time, girlfriend – we got pregnant. We got pregnant my sophomore year in college and once again, had to make some drastic decisions. I

left the U and went to St. Kate's, the Minneapolis campus to get my Associates Degree. And from there, I got my Associates Degree and I could have decided to do something with it but then I decided I would transfer to St. Thomas. I took one social work class and that's when I really thought ok, this is my calling, being a social worker. I graduated from St. Thomas with my undergrad in social work. And at the time, my wife was going to St. Kate's and got her degree in education; so she's teaching. Social work for me is one of those fields there are so many different things you can do with it. Once I'm done with you guys, I'm mentoring a young man, so I will be having lunch with him in a little bit. I've always found... I can help young kids, especially young males who need a good role model in their life. I've been fortunate to have had some tremendous good role models in my life who shaped me to be the man today and the way to give back once again to my community is to go out there. I've gone down to Haiti and working with Father Rick's organization and trying to help him. I have the life I have now, it's time for me to go try and see what you can do for the Haitian people and see what you can do for kids.

L - I know you were in Haiti this last month and again a year ago.

La - Yep, I was in Haiti in March which was very ironically. I left Haiti in March of 1996 and went back to Haiti of 2012 which was my first time going back to Haiti.

L - What was it like?

La - That in itself was very interesting. Emotional, happy but emotional because I left the place knowing that... they said, "You coming on a six month visa." I knew in my mind that I was going

to go back after that but I never knew six months would end up being 16 years. So I went back seeing the place again, touching Haitian soil again was amazing. In January, I decided to take my mom because she had never been to Haiti before and after the Opus event, we've been really wanting to see what can we do as St. Catherine institution, what can we do to help Haiti. We have a good connection now can we build more into it. So I took my mom down to Haiti to see Father Rick's work, to see the orphanages, the hospitals, the schools and the program that he is doing. We got back and now we are in the process of trying to find a way of St. Kate's having a long term relationship with his hospital, St. Luke's Hospital.

L - So, when you would ask why me when you were younger, do you feel like you in some ways have gotten that answer?

La - No.

L - To me it seems that because you're the right person who has that capacity to connect these worlds.

La - That's what a lot of people have been telling me. I still ask myself this question of 'why me?' And I'm starting to realize it just a little bit why, why I'm in this position. Went down to Haiti in March and I never knew I would ever go back to Haiti. I always wanted to go back but I never knew it would have been that quick and I never... when we were having the Opus event I told my mom it would be kind of nice to see if we can have someone from the Caribbean represented in this program but what I never knew was it would be a Haitian organization and

now to have this Haitian organization I've had people say.. I think now those pieces of the puzzle are starting to connect properly for you.

L - It looks that way just from the outside. I really want your story in your terms so I try not to impose.

La - It's great. And going back in January also... because I've always, always wanted to find out what happened to my birth family that was also part of our trip down to Haiti. I was very successfully... it's still in detail process and this is one thing I've decided to take it very slow. We went down to Haiti and fortunately, from the stories that I've heard of while we're down there, that my birth mother is still alive. My father is dead. My birth mother is still alive; I do have siblings. I'm one of five kids. There were four girls in the family and I'm the only boy. Those are stories that we heard while I was down there and I want to continue prove those stories to really see if they are true. The thing is, now I live in the United States, people in Haiti see me as someone who could help them. [To be] their ticket out and the money, but at the same time, if I'm...

L - If, in this world, there are four sisters...

La - Four sisters and not blood sisters. Apparently I only have one full-blood sister. And this woman is supposedly claiming to be my birth mother had an older kid and when she met my father. My father had two kids with her, a sister and me. And then she had another kid with another man and another kid with another man.

L - Complicated.

La - Very complicated. So when we were down there, that was also part of it for me. I want to bring my mom down, if I'm really going to go into this journey I want to make sure that I have someone very close to me to help, to be by me if something should happen. We are still in the process and eventually I tell her the best way to find out is we will get a DNA test done.

L - Right, in this day and age it's very... It can be resolved.

La - If it's true the pieces of the puzzle is to find a way to help those people who are down there.

L - Well, there is so much that I would love to keep asking you but I feel like we have covered so much ground and I'm grateful that you would take the time and care to share. It's incredible.

La - No problem. If you need anything else, you know where to find me.

L - Thank you.