

Interviewee: Erica Ayisi
Interviewers: Sharon Caulway and Diana Waterman
Interview Date: November 16, 2014



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Abstract: Erica Ayisi is currently a reporter for Worcester News Tonight. Although she was born in Marlboro, Erica spent a large portion of her childhood in Worcester, and taught at her own high school, Burncoat High School, for six years. Erica knew that she wanted to be a reporter and, having attained both a Bachelor's Degree and a Master's Degree from the New York Institute of Technology, she was confident that she could succeed. After an internship with New York One, Erica gained an international internship with eTV Ghana. This internship became a full-time position, and after working in Ghana, Erica returned to the U.S. to work on NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams before coming home to Worcester. In our interview, Erica expressed an endearing amount of humility and recognized that she was "very blessed." However, it was also clear from our interview that Erica's achievements would not have been possible without her own hard work and strength. Erica Ayisi knew when she needed to make changes in her life, and, even with obstacles like personal traumas or relocations, she did not hesitate to stand up for what she really wanted, making her a true inspiration.

Transcript:

DW: ...Just to make sure that we get everything...

EA: Is that an app on your phone or is that just the regular voice—

DW: App.

EA: It's an app-- what app is it?

SC: AudioMemos.

EA: AudioMemos...

DW: Yeah.

SC: So far it seems to be pretty good...

EA: Is it free?

SC: Mhm!

DW: There's a free version and there's a paid version.

SC: Yeah. Get the free one.

[laughter]

EA: And it's called Audio...

DW: AudioMemos. It's super easy. I was testing it out in my dorm earlier today.

EA: Good.

DW: Everything worked.

SC: I just turned the TV on and like left it next to it and I was like ah, it's working. Whatever.

[laughter]

DW: All right, great. So...

SC: There's this paragraph. I'm not sure if we have to read it, but I-why not, you know?

DW: Let's read it.

SC: And in case we didn't say before, you know I'm Sharon, Diana.

EA: Great.

DW: So we're completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester. We are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, politics, and community involvement. Today we want to focus on your experience in the work-field and thank you for your help on this important project! Now we'd just like to ask if we have your permission to record your oral history today, the oral history of Erica Ayisi on November 16, 2014.

EA: Yes.

DW: Great!

[laughter]

SC: There we go!

DW: All right, we can get started.

SC: So are you from Worcester, were you originally born here or were—like did you come to live here from somewhere else?

EA: I was born in Framingham ...

SC: Oh! Okay.

EA: ... lived in Marlboro until 1988 and then moved to Worcester. And I lived in Worcester from 1988 to '99-2000 when I moved for college.

SC: Oh, and where did you go to college?

EA: I did my bachelor's degree in New York, I went to New York Institute of Technology.

SC: Oh so you were interested in technology?

EA: I did—studied communications, so it had a strong communications department that was very technological. [laughs]

SC: That's perfect.

EA: Yeah. So and yes, I lived in New York until 2003 and came back to Worcester, then I moved again in 2009. [laughs] Moved all over the world—[laughs]—then came back and now I am, I'm back.

SC: That is so cool.

DW: I was gonna say, we're gonna have a lot to talk about today then.

[laughter]

DW: Do we want to start with growing up? Tell us about your family, where you lived, what that was like, your schooling...anything you'd like to say?

EA: Okay. Well when I was born I lived—was born in Framingham but we lived in Marlboro so I lived there until I was maybe about eight. Eight or—yeah, eight—years old. Then moved to Worcester, and I went to Wawecus Road School and I'm the youngest of three children. I have a sister who's about—I think she's about eighteen years older than me.

SC: Oh. Wow.

EA: I have a brother who's four or five years older than me—or four and a half—and then me so I'm last. My parents are African immigrants who migrated here in the seventies. My parents came from Ghana.

SC: Oh, that's so cool.

EA: Yeah, and came here in the mid—mid to late seventies. And they met in Boston and then, you know, had an apartment in Marlboro and had some kids and moved them to Worcester.

DW: That's very cool. So do you know a lot about your family's history from over in Ghana?

EA: I do, I do. My father is from Accra which is the capital of Ghana but specifically his village is called—he's Akiapim, that's his village, within the capital city it's like in the mountains. And then my mother is from Kumasi in Ghana, but her village is Fuimasa so it's like a, it's kind of like a city and then a town in the city. Like that.

SC: Yeah.

EA: So, that's specifically where my family is from in Ghana and my parents came here late in life. Thirties, mid to late thirties so they grew up in Ghana, were born in Ghana.

SC: Oh.

DW: That's very cool.

EA: Mhm.

DW: And so do you still have family living over there?

EA: I do, I do. I would say, I would say a lot of family if I would put a percentage on it. Maybe sixty percent? My mother was the oldest of eight children, and she was—I think she was the first to leave Ghana, and she came to Boston and she has a brother in London. I think everyone else stayed in Ghana one I think, left to maybe Nigeria years ago and he died and then her sisters, everyone stayed in Ghana so they're still—a few passed away but they're still in Ghana. So my—all my immediate first cousins on my mother's side are in Ghana, or London.

DW: Very cool.

[Laughter]

EA: Yeah.

DW: That's neat that you're such an international family.

EA: Yeah, I still talk to them, I still talk to them every day. And then on my father's side, he had—he had a lot of siblings around him, a lot. I'm not sure of his birth order, but he came here, he has one sister, a half-sister that came here maybe around the time or before he did in the seventies and she lives in New York, in the Bronx, and I think—I think all of his other siblings that I can think of are all in Ghana.

DW: Wow.

EA: 'Cause I didn't grow up with—I knew, I always knew that growing up that my immediate family was in Ghana and I grew up very Ghanaian, very African in America.

SC: Oh, that is so cool.

EA: Mhm.

SC: I know, I was gonna ask that, if you had like a strong—like you—if the culture of Ghana was still very much in your family growing up.

EA: Absolutely, absolutely. I think because my parents came here older, they came as adults maybe it was different, if they came like younger, or as college students, but they came older and then for me growing up my parents were always older than my peers' [parents], so like my mom had me very late in life. So yeah, I always tell people my mother is the African Martha Stewart!

[laughter]

EA: And her name is Martha.

SC: Really?

EA: Yeah, her name is Martha and my father's name is Joshua, but she is the African Martha Stewart and she was—they came as immigrants and they had to have their culture and had to kind of assimilate in some ways so we had Saint Patrick's Day dinner with corn beef and potatoes and jilaf rice!

[laughter]

EA: So it was very African, my father did not eat really American food, ever, so my mother always had to make African food, 'cause my father didn't like American food. And then my brother did not like African food, so I had both. We would have spaghetti and subo—you know—or pasta and cow feet!

[laughter]

EA: So that was—it was very much a part of, and still is, my-of-of--of who I am.

DW: That's fantastic.

SC: That is so cool.

DW: So you grow up—so you grew up in a very...multi-cultural house, that's very cool.

EA: Absolutely, I like to tell people I grew up very African-American [laughs] true to the word. Very African, my parents spoke languages in the house. I can speak it a little bit and I think I'm probably losing it, what I could speak of it. But I can hear it, you know, people are speaking around me I can hear it. My parents did not speak the same language ...

DW: Okay.

EA: ... because they grew up in two different parts of the country, but my father could speak my mother's language—but my mother can't speak my father's language. So they spoke my mother's language mostly amongst each other, but a challenge was because they came in the seventies and my mother always said this and when I was born in the early eighties, was that they didn't have a lot of friends. They didn't know anybody here you know when they came, and they didn't come together, so my mother always put it on my brother and probably more-so me to—they spoke perfect English but to always reinforce English so that their English was—you know, was really good so they—my mother said she didn't speak it to me and my brother intentionally and when she was working and I had to go to daycare she didn't want me to be confused and not be able to understand the, the daycare workers. They couldn't, obviously couldn't speak our language so...

DW: Okay.

SC: Mhm, that is just so cool. I mean, my family always--is just so-we're just so homogenized American that like, I don't have that, that cool like culture that my family like is strong with as, it's so cool that you get to have that.

EA: Yeah, it's, it's very,—it is a strong culture from birth, from how we honor when a baby is born, to how we honor someone when somebody dies to the food that we eat to—it's just, I grew up, you know, a Ghana girl in Worcester.

[laughter]

DW: Wow, that's great.

SC: That is so cool.

DW: Let's see. So you said that you were, you said Communications...

EA: Mhm.

DW: ...for college, when did you decide that you wanted to get into that? What was your, I don't know your proceeding through education? How did you make your way into that?

EA: In some ways the way that I grew up and also with having parents that were older. I wasn't like a, I was a kid but I was a very, a very adult kid, where I thought kid things were childish, so to speak. I didn't watch cartoons, I watched Garfield, which was like the Seinfeld of cartoons [laughs], you know. I didn't like cartoons, I had some dolls. I was a very weird child and my father had a very global sense of things and was very, very, very, very smart. So I didn't really have books, not because I wasn't int—not like kid books, but I read *TIME Magazine*. I read *Newsweek* like at ten...watched Jeopardy, I still do, I was just weird in that way. I didn't like, I wasn't really into Barbies and things of that nature. But I read like teen books like Judy Blume and all that stuff so, I was always into the world, having a global sense of things and always wanted to be knowledgeable on things that I didn't know. And then in high school, I went to Burncoat High School here in Worcester. I did the morning announcements on the speaker my senior year, and they had a TV production—I'm not sure if they had it our senior year—we had a TV production show, and so I knew I wanted to be working in news and be a news reporter. And that's kind of what I set out to do, but what I think when I got to college I was a bit immature, and I was very shy, and very—and very reserved, and—in some regard I still am now, I just push myself to work through that. I don't think I took advantage of it the way that I, the way that I should've. I took some general TV classes and music classes and things like that, and when I graduated, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. And I was in New York City and I came home and I literally did not know what I wanted to do with my life and I, so I had a bachelor's degree in communications and I became a teacher.

SC: Wow.

EA: And I taught English for six years.

DW: Very nice.

EA: Yeah.

SC: So you must've liked it, you know enough to keep going for six years.

EA: Yeah, I did, I did. I mean it had its ups and downs and it had its challenges and I taught at Burncoat, I taught at the high school that I went to so that was interesting in itself. And then I taught there for four years and then I taught at Worcester Tech for two

years and it was good, it was good, bad, ugly, all the in-between you know of urban education, and I was very young, so at that time like at Burncoat if you were a senior and had stayed back, I went to high school with you, which was strange.

[laughter]

SC: Oh my God.

EA: Yeah. Very strange, but it was good to go where I went to high school because I knew the students, the demographic of the students and the immigrant population so I knew some of their struggles. I knew what it was like to have immigrant parents 'cause I had immigrant parents and no matter what country they come from, having immigrant parents when you're a first-generation is very difficult. Everything is a first. Everything. Going to the prom is a first, like you have to tell your parents why you need this money for this dress and why I want to go again and you have to—just how we're socialized here is not how immigrants are socialized around the world. So it was—it was good to be a Worcester Public School teacher and I did enjoy it up until year six! [laughs] Up until year six, and then I decided to...

DW: And then it was time to go?

EA: Oh it was time to go, you know, and I had great experiences and unfortunate experiences I had students die, I had students shot, I had students give birth [laughs], I had students get married, I—you know [laughs] it kind of seemed the gamut of again urban education and the American youth. So...

DW: And you had probably seen that too when you were a student there as well though, so...

EA: Yes, yes.

DW: Wow...

EA: So to be on the flip side of it was, was very different and then by year—it was 2008 the first day of school the day before students come, teachers come first. And I remember getting my schedule in my hand and it had nothing to do with the schedule, but I remember just feeling like, "I'm gonna quit this year." That I knew that was gonna be my last year. And it was. [laughs]

SC: Was that—I know that you said you kind of just had that moment where you were like 'well, I'm gonna- this is the year that I quit'. Did-after that did you have any turmoil with that decision or were you kind of once you had had that realization that it was kind of over for you and that you really didn't want to be doing that anymore, was it just really

easy to quit or did you have a hard time like feeling like you-maybe you made a mistake or something like or were you just you know, sure of your decision?

EA: I was one hundred percent sure of my decision and it was the best decision I ever made.

DW: Oh, good for you.

EA: I was one hundred percent—I knew I was done. I—even at the time I was pursuing my Master’s of Education with a Concentration in English at Worcester State, I was paying cash for it and it was easy to pay for it and everything, but I didn’t want to be a teacher anymore. I absolutely did not want to be a teacher any more, I didn’t want this Master’s Degree in something that I didn’t want to work in. I didn’t want to be a principal or work in administration, I did not—I just didn’t want any facet of my life and—looking back on it, I think I was depressed. I—and I think I was depressed for a long time...for various reasons and I didn’t want any of my life. I did not want to live in Worcester, I didn’t want my friends, I had a boyfriend at the time I didn’t want my—I wanted nothing. I wanted like a whole new life, I wanted to be a whole new woman, I just wanted all things new. I wanted new hair, new weave, new shoe—I wanted everything...new! [laughs]

EA: And initially I didn’t know what I wanted to do next, I had an idea. I knew I wanted to kind of get back into news, ‘cause I never pursued it. And it was part of like when I was teaching and helped students with their college applications and—and recommendations and things like that and I would give them advice about college. I was starting to feel like, “Man, if I could go back to college I would’ve done it so differently...so differently.” And I said, “you know what, well, I’ll just go back!” [laughs]

DW: That’s awesome.

EA: You know, don’t make it more complicated than what it is and I would look at news jobs—news-reporting jobs and look at the job description and I would read the job description and not know what they were talking about. It looked like a foreign language to me. And then I said, “Okay, the only way I can get—understand this job description is if I get another degree that will teach me the skills that this job description is saying what I need to have.” And that’s what I did.

DW: So, you quit and then you went back to school?

EA: Mhm. I finished that year, so that was 2008 when I made that decision, and then it was a process, it was—like I’d go look at jobs I didn’t get it, then I read that I had to go to grad school, and then as time was moving on and I realized, you know Columbia—and I wanted, I was feeling I wanted to move back to New York too and I wanted to go to

Columbia, I missed the deadline by like a week, because all my decision-making was natural processing, and—and the deadlines are there, so I'm like, "What am I gonna do?" and I called this school that I went to, New York Institute of Technology and they had rolling admission. And they also had a campus in Long Island that had a TV station, news TV station attached to it so I wouldn't have to like, apply for an extra internship and maybe not get in, or whatever, I could start kind of practicing and learning how to be a reporter right away. I would just have to go to Long Island once a week, and they said, "Yeah we have rolling admission." I told myself, "You know what? If I can get a school loan it's official, it's meant to be, I'm outta here." And I applied and I got a school loan.

SC: Wow.

EA: And I didn't tell anyone because by that time, I knew I was leaving maybe by March.

SC: Mhm.

EA: And I was torn between quitting and just packing up and move to New York, or sticking it out 'til the last day of school. And if I stayed to the last day of school, I would still get my summer pay, 'cause it would still be in my contract. And it was hard because I had already checked out. I was done. [laughs]

SC: ... Yeah. [laughs]

EA: And I had to keep it to myself.

SC: Yeah.

EA: And I, I really didn't tell anybody. I didn't tell my parents for a while I didn't tell anybody.

SC: Mhm.

EA: And then I, I stuck it out and maybe two weeks before school ended in 2009 I went and told my principal that I was leaving.

SC: Wow.

EA: Well not returning, yeah. And then that summer, I—you know, got my money and packed and moved to New York City.

DW: And that was a good decision? It seems like-

EA: It was like—it was a fantastic decision.

DW: It seems like it's worked out well for you.

EA: It has, it has. It's...

DW: So how was that returning back to the college setting and...

EA: It was different because I was an adult, not that—I was probably too much of a serious adult even in undergrad [laughs], but, you know, I didn't stay in a dorm, I took the loan and got an apartment, so I had a cute little apartment in—uptown in Wood, New York. I lived on, at that time, 200 and—what'd I live on—two hundred and seventh street and Broadway way up like, literally across the street from the Bronx. 'Cause my girlfriend lived in the Bronx and I could walk to the Bronx. But I went to school in Midtown and it was great, it was just—I felt I got what I wanted. I wanted a whole new life—I wanted to be a different woman, I did not—I was unhappy with the level of routine and monotony in my life, in my job, and I think... Worcester life, and I wasn't fulfilled, and I—I really felt even out of place, even with a lot of my girlfriends, you know a lot of them had children, had kids young. I didn't, I was very free, I was very mobile, and I was just—I think just depressed and bored, and when I moved I felt fulfilled. I was learning something new... trying new things, I mean—I had my aunt in the Bronx and one or two girlfriends, but I didn't know a lot of people in New York. And that—that year that I moved that was the same year the Jay-Z and Alicia Keys song, the "New York" song came out, and I was like, "This is me, it's for me!" [laughs] "New York" and I felt like they made it for me. It's fantastic, and it was—it was good, it was... the school that I went to was not like an NYU or a UMass, you know, it didn't—especially when you go to school in New York City—they're not massive campuses, it's like they're office, almost like office buildings. So yeah, it was great. So I went to school, and then I would go to Long Island about once a week or so, and be a news reporter and I learned how to shoot write and edit, and I got to do that right away which was very important.

SC: That's awesome.

EA: And I got to meet other people, other women in my field, and a lot—a *lot* of networking. I also interned for New York One, and because I was a teacher I interned under the education reporter. So that was good, 'cause I really got to be engulfed in the New York City education and work, you know, work with their Chancellor and do those type of stories so that was good. Where else did I intern? I, I went into the business, well changed businesses because I wanted to be an international journalist, so I called up some family in Ghana to see if anyone knew anyone at any of the local stations there and I had a cousin that did, so I interned for eTV Ghana for about a month and just packed up...

DW: Wow...

EA: ... and bought myself a ticket, and was an intern in Ghana and stayed with family.

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DW: Had you ever been to Ghana before that?

EA: I—once, at that point once before that.

SC: Wow

EA: Once before that.

DVSo you had visited once and then decided that...with this path you were just gonna move. That's crazy, that's great.

EA: Yeah, so it's—it was—so I was there for a month, and then on my last week or so the producer let me do—Like I did a lot of shadowing, you know intern-type stuff, but I told him, I can—I can do this reporter job. I can do more than watch you do it. I can do it myself. He said okay, and I—they let me do two news stories and then on my last day, the manager of the station offered me a job.

DW: No way!

EA: Yeah, he said, “We can hold this position for you,”—‘cause I had to finish my degree—“and if you finish your degree if you want to come back there's a job here and we can't pay you much, the pay is horrible [laughs], but if you want to—if you want to be a reporter here we can hold a position for you.” So I went back to New York and I was very close with my professors and I talked to them about it and said, “You know, I have this semester left, I have this job offer for no money—in *Africa*.”[laughs] And they were like, “Go!” They said go, if you don't like it, come back. You have nothing to lose. So I finished my degree and then right—I decided to go to Ghana!

DW: Great!

EA: And that December and I was very excited and, and packing and, and taking finals, and trying to imagine this life in another country and I was—I had a date when I was going to move and everything was going great and I remember, in my kitchen, just, you know, packing, chillin', living life, whatever, and I looked at the calendar and I walked back and I looked at it again and I was like, “Oh my God, I'm pregnant!” [laughs]

[gasps]

SC: Plot twist.

[laughter]

EA: Yeah, yeah...

DW: Oh my goodness.

EA: And I just—it was just the calendar something was like—I just start thinking about things. [laughs] Like how did—wait a minute! I don't think I've had my period in a while.

DW: Oh my God!

EA: Yeah, and I—and I certainly was pregnant!

DW: Wow, so you didn't end up going?

EA: I wasn't sure *what* I was going to do.

SC: Wow...

EA: I wasn't—and I wasn't happy about it, to tell you the truth, I was not happy about it at all, 'cause it wasn't part of the plan.

DW: Mhm.

EA: And I, I think I was in just the state of shock, for, for a while. And then I came home. My father was very sick—I forgot to mention all of that. He was very, very sick. And I remember coming home for a weekend for something—maybe my niece's birthday party—I came home for a weekend. And he—my father was tripping down the stairs and I went to help him up and I slipped and then I got into the shower and I had a miscarriage.

DW: Oh, my goodness.

EA: Mhm.

DW: I'm sorry.

EA: That was 2010. Mhm. And that was, that was in itself a traumatic, very traumatic, traumatic experience. The whole thing was just traumatic. I think I was just in a state of shock for a very long—like shocked that I was pregnant, shocked that I wasn't. Like it was just—it was a lot of—like it felt like I had no control over what was happening to my body. And then when that was, you know, that was a long, medical process that in itself, and then when that was done and I was healthy and well again, I—complicates 'cause I was living in New York, so I had to—and I wanted to leave from Worcester—'cause I had to move out of my apartment. It was a lot going on in like two months [laughs]. I packed and moved all of my stuff out of my apartment in New York, moved it all to my mother's house in Worcester, and then like a week later moved to Africa, and it was a blizzard outside, it was January and I had to find clothes to this a hundred degree weather ... [laughs]

DW: Yeah

EA: ...that I was gonna report in, and it was a lot. And then next day next thing I knew I was on a plane by myself. It wasn't an internship, it was a job and I was gonna be a full-time reporter in Ghana. And I got to Ghana and I was supposed to start working that Monday and I couldn't get out of bed. I think I was in—I called my doctor and she was like, "You're grieving." I never really grieved the miscarriage 'cause I was—my life was really busy, like I was ...

DW: Yeah, you didn't have a moment to stop and think.

EA: Yeah, I couldn't go to work for two weeks. I was just crying—I couldn't figure out why, Why am I crying?" I'm not much of a crier, I'm like. "Why am I crying all the time?" and she was like, "You just need to sit down [laughs] and ask them if you can start in a few weeks. You just need to—you were pregnant then you weren't, and your father's sick, and you moved to New York, and then you moved to Worcester, and then you moved to Ghana, and now you're in another country and now you have to"—she was like, "just sit still." [laughs]

SC: Yeah.

DW: And did your family know that you were pregnant?

EA: Nobody knew.

SC: Wow.

EA: I didn't even tell my mother, I didn't even tell her I was pregnant. I told her when I lost it—

SC: Yeah.

EA: After I—around that Christmastime I told her.

SC: Mhm.

SC: I'm sorry.

EA: Mhm.

DW: But you moved on—

EA: My cousin knew, actually because I shared a room with my cousin.

DW: Okay.

EA: She knew. Yeah, she knew. But I was just so emotional.

DW: Yeah, of course.

EA: I felt like it was for no reason, I didn't get why I was, why I was crying...and she was, we're very close, she was very sweet about it, and I just...stayed in the house and ate, just ate like a fat girl and watched TV [laughs, and then eventually I was like, "Okay I can start my job now." [laughs]

DW: And the job was very understanding?

EA: Yeah, I just, yeah I said, "Oh, I'm still unpacking." Ghana is—Africa's another world, that's like a whole separate thing but Africa like "eh." Africa's very laid-back. [laughs] Yeah, yeah they were fine.

DW: Alright. So you did eventually start the job...

EA: I did eventually start the job.

DW: And were you happy once you started it?

EA: Yes.

DW: Great.

EA: And it was good, it was bad, it was ugly, it was challenging. My first day, my first, news assignment was interviewing Bob Marley's wife...

DW: Wow.

EA: ...Rita Marley. I didn't know that at the time but she lived in Ghana, and she was throwing a birthday party in Bob Marley's memory, and so that was my first day.

DW: Big first day!

SC: Yeah!

EA: Big first day, meeting Rita Marley, but then I covered a lot of sad stories on malaria, cholera. There was a cholera outbreak there at the time. A lot of health and sanitation stories with the filth—the city was-is filthy. It's very filthy and overpopulated and dirty and I covered everything, health and fitness to politics—from what I could understand of America in their politics but...I covered everything.

DW: Yeah.

EA: I covered—I saw the most extreme level of poverty.

SC: Mhm.

EA: I saw extreme wealth, like my uncle, the one that was in London, has a mansion in Ghana in the midst of extreme poverty. It looks like it doesn't even belong. [laughs] It, it was another world. I, I didn't think I would have the challenges that I had with having African parents, but I realized I grew up African here and, and there's very different how women are, how women are socialized. I was kicked out of a bar because they thought I was a prostitute.

DW: Oh my goodness.

[Laughter]

EA: Yeah

SC: Just because you were alone?

EA: Just because I was alone.

SC: Wow.

DW: And so did you face any problems as a woman reporter?

EA: Yes. I had a man snatch a pen out of my hand. Just took it right out of my hand. And I said, "What are you doing?" and he said, "I took your pen," and I said, "Well I'm taking it back" and I snatched it right back. Just a disrespect.

DW: Did men not take you seriously?

EA: Men didn't take me seriously and I often was assumed to be an intern. I still am assumed to be an intern! Even at my job in Marlboro people think I'm an intern. But I was assumed to be an intern so that my interview wasn't that serious, or it didn't really have to come on TV at a certain time. No, it has to come on TV at a certain time. This is my job, I'm not an intern. So it was how women are socialized in America we are socialized after college you get a job, get good money, you get an apartment. Here in Ghana and probably Africa, there's no—well, I'll speak for Ghana, there's no sense of independence, or of like, oh, I have a good job, I went to school, I'm going to live on my own or with girlfriends. They don't do that. You don't leave your house unless you're married.

DW: Mhm

EA: There's no period of I'm doing my own thing with my own money and that was different.

DW: So that was probably very confusing to a lot of people as to where's your husband.

EA: They would be like, "Where is your husband?" A big thing was, did I marry into it. Did—people didn't—I sound very American at the same time, but because of my last name they would assume oh she just married into it, or, and I would often times have to be like, "No, both of my parents are Ghanaian." They are very into knowing who you are and where you come from. You know? Like I told you, I know the village my parents came from, I've been there before, I mean, I could always vouch and speak to that. But it was very challenging.

DW: And so a question I had thought of earlier, but I just forgot to ask, were you reporting in English?

EA: Mhm. Yep.

DW: Okay, so is there a large English speaking population there?

EA: The official language is English.

DW: Oh, okay, then they have, I know you said your parents speak individual languages within their villages.

Erica: Right. Because, because there are so many different languages, there are 56 different languages and dialects, so not everybody speaks everything. There are some languages, like my mother's language is more common I would say within Ghana, but the official language is English. So everyone if you are able to go to school, you are taught English because there is so many different languages. So all of the news is in English. There is maybe one channel that will speak in a local dialect, but for the most part all of the news is in English.

DW: Okay.

SC: So you kind of had the added burdens of like not only were you a solitary woman working, but you also were like really American with your voice.

EA: Yeah

SC: So you had the like double kind of challenge that you had to face there.

EA: Yeah.

DW: Because I know that some countries are thrilled to have Americans there, other countries kind of frown upon it, what was your experience with that?

EA: I got a little of both. I was very different because I, I think they are thrilled to have white Americans there.

DW: Mhm

EA: I think they have very poor opinions on black Americans.

DW: Hmm, interesting.

EA: Because of the media. And their only perception of black America is the media. Like, they don't have friends here, you know, why would they? And they don't—so and because of how black, blacks are portrayed in the media is generally poor between the crap reality TV which wasn't even as extreme now as it was then when I was there. But because of reality TV and rap videos, and women being over sexualized, and men being hyper sexualized, and the excessive drug use, and gang life, and gang violence, that's what, that's their depiction of black. There's black, and then there's Obama. [Laughs] That's what they know of black. And I had a lot of conversations with people about this. They love President Obama and then there's everything else underneath that is considered in their eyes black trash.

DW: Wow.

EA: And they think that black Americans have no respect for Africa or for where they come from. And I had conversations, and would have to explain how they're taught about slavery, and what how we're taught slavery here is very different. And it's the same history because that's where it came from, especially Ghana. There's one of the largest slave castles in the world was in Ghana and I reported on that. I was very fortunate to have to go there because it's far. But I was fortunate enough to go to the slave castle and report that, and they're taught it. It's in their history books and they're taught that okay it's happened, they look at it as it's such a long time ago. But they don't understand the psychological effects of slavery, and that the blacks here are descendants of slaves. That there's a gap, that they don't—because they don't experience racism, they're all black.

SC: That makes sense, yeah.

DW: Yeah that's so interesting, that there would be a difference that we never think about here

EA: Right, they have classism and sexism and other issues, but they don't experience, "You can't get this job because you're black," or "We are whipping you because you're

black,” or there’s white people, you know, trying to hang you in the KKK because you’re black. That’s not in their history books.

DW: Yeah

EA: They don’t experience it because they are all black. So then I had a lot of conversations around, around that so like when you ask how do they—how was I perceived or how do they perceive Americans, I think they love Americans, I think they love white people. I have even said to people, “I think you love white people more than us blacks in America love white people.” I’ve had that conversation with them because they don’t experience, they don’t. Their black and our black is very different.

DW: Yeah

EA: Um, so that, that, was interesting.

DW: And do you feel like you got through to people as far as?

EA: I do

DW: Differences

EA: I do, I think I’ve brought them ideas and notions and perceptions that they didn’t, that they weren’t aware of and I said, “We’re not all—I don’t live my life like a rap video.”

[Laughter]

EA: I don’t do that!

SC: And you probably wouldn’t have to point that out in America, you know? That’s so different! Like, because yeah, we don’t really think about that difference in like here America. I never would have thought about how you know Africans view African Americans as so, like you said, there’s Obama and there’s everybody else, like, I never would have thought of that. So interesting that there’s that difference.

EA: Right.

DW: And so how long were you there for?

EA: About a year, maybe just under a year.

DW: Okay, and then leaving that job, why was that?

EA: Oh, that was a, like I said, that job was a—the content of what I did as a journalist was good, but working with my management and working with an African company was very, was tough, they never paid me on time.

DW: Mhm

EA: Always giving, it was almost like I always had to go to my manager's office and explain to him why I needed to be paid.

DW: Yeah

EA: You know, he was a real asshole

[Laughter]

DW: And do you think that was, do you think because you were a female journalist from America, or was that just how they treated everyone, or?

EA: I think to, to some extent, how they treated everyone. And people, you don't challenge administration there, you don't challenge your government, you don't challenge your boss, it's not like here where you know we, if we have a problem we respectfully will say it to your face. Your boss, you make an appointment with, something's wrong you have a professional email exchange or something. They don't do that there. They don't question authority. And I'm American, I just came from living in New York at the time, I was ready to kick somebody's ass if he didn't have my money right.

[Laughter]

EA: You know? Because, so it, it was—and I used to tell my colleagues these things, “You know it's not normal to not be paid, you understand that right?”

[Laughter]

DW: Wow

EA: It's not normal. And because it wasn't just me, it wasn't like withholding Erica's check, they would not pay the whole company.

DW: Wow

EA: And they would say, “Oh our advertisers didn't pay us” and I would tell my boss, “That's not my problem.”

DW: Yeah, because you need to get paid for the work you're doing.

EA: Yeah

DW: And you can only, you can only go without pay for so long, you know?

EA: Right, right!

DW: So a year at that job

EA: Yeah, it was, it was, tough. They never paid on time. In Ghana you either get paid twice a month or once a month and we got paid once a month, and that was, that almost never happened. But my—the final straw was two things. My father was here and he was very sick, and then secondly my—what was it? My last day working was, we had a new news director, he came over from the radio department, and he said, we were having our new, a morning news meeting and I was about five minutes late and I went to the other office and grabbed a chair and sat down and he's like, what did he say to me? "Erica why are you late?" He said, "Erica you're late so stand up." I said, "Excuse me?" He said, "You're late, stand up, that's your punishment for being late," and I said, "No, no, I don't have punishments."

[Laughter]

DW: Yeah you're an adult

EA: Yeah and that was my last day.

DW: Had you already given your notice?

EA: Oh no

DW: Or?

EA: No, they wanted me to stay to the end of the month to pay me. [laughs] I remember the human resource manager emailed me, she's like, "Why don't you stay until the end of the month for your pay," and I was like, "Are you serious?" And I said no, I'm not coming back. And I, I wasn't, I didn't know what I was going to do in life. [Laughs] You know? I was really hurt, it wasn't part of the plan. I felt very embarrassed, probably one of the most embarrassing moments of my life, for someone to tell me to stand as a punishment because I'm late. And I didn't know what I was going to do for work, trying to get a job at another station. Many people that report overseas, they report overseas for a company here. You know? So they report overseas for CNN or for whoever, Al Jazeera, whatever. I reported for an African station in Africa which is very different, and I didn't go—like, when I tell people I lived in Africa they think like, oh, you went with the Peace Corps. I didn't go with anybody, I didn't go in a group, or for a program. I went because in my head I thought it would be a cool experience. And so I wasn't sure what I was going to do and I had a mentor, she worked for NBC news and I was letting

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her know what was going on and she was, I'm a member of the National Association of Black Journalists, and it was their annual convention was coming up. And she was like, "Just come home and go to the convention." She's like, "There could be jobs there, you know, just come home and see what's there." So I said okay and I wasn't sure if I should like, if I should pack all of my things with me because my whole life was at that point was in Africa and a year's worth. Should I pack half of it and leave half? I, I mean I felt like for a few years I was just living out of suitcases [laughs] as a nomad. And I packed and I came home.

Sharon: Wow. So when you were there did you get to see a lot of family there? Did you get to see them a lot for that year while you were working?

EA: I did, I did. Sadly, my great grandmother passed away at 110, so.

DW: Wow.

EA: She was incredibly old.

DW: That's incredible.

EA: So I was able to go to her funeral. And the whole family came. My family from London came, so I was able to see cousins that I haven't seen, and some that I didn't even know, a few that I had never met. So that, that was good, I saw a lot of family. And they were happy to, especially the ones in Ghana, to see me on the news.

[Laughter]

DW: I'm sure!

EA: Yeah, yeah.

DW: So, so that job was finished, you were back here for the convention, and then where did work go for you from there?

EA: I had no clue what I was going to do. I remember I came back and I was on my flight back and I got some wine and my card was cancelled, and they were like, "You owe us \$7.00." I didn't even have \$7.00, I had no money, I had no clue what I was going to do. And my father was getting sicker and sicker and I just came home and I just kind of sat there and didn't know what I wanted to do. And I went to the convention and just kind of dropped my resume in everyone's box and really had no clue what was next. I had wanted to report, I was torn if I should just kind of give it up. I'm like, "I lived in New York, I worked in Ghana, maybe, maybe I'm done. Maybe I should just go back to teaching. I did everything I wanted to do." And I started to feel like depressed again because I just was like, nothing was really happening for me. And then I got a call from

NBC asking if I could, if I was interested in the page program. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the page program. Have you heard of the show '30 Rock'?

DW: Yes

EA: Yes and Kenneth, the page?

[Laughter]

DW: Yes, I've seen him.

EA: So that was me. I, that's what they wanted me to do. NBC page program, wear the gray suit and give tours. In addition to doing the tours, you have rotations in different departments of NBC, MSNBC, CNBC and all of Oxygen and the other everything.

DW: Yeah?

EA: Almost everything in TV. And, you know, do that program and I went down to New York for the interview. The next day they said I got, it was a panel interview, it was a very intense interview. You have to give a two-minute presentation with props in front of people and other people get to watch it. And at this point I had only been in America like, I think for like a week! [laughs] It was quick! Like I came back from Ghana like on a Sunday, the convention was on—was in Philly on a Tuesday. I was there and then I came back to Worcester, and then I got a call from NBC the next week. Again, it was a lot of moving around, traveling, and all that. And, I got accepted into the page program, and they're like, "Oh it's a very prestigious program, Regis Philbin did it, a lot of people have done the program," but they couldn't confirm a start date. And then, at that point, August, September, and they said, "You're in it but we just don't know when you're going to start." And I was like, they were like "check in every two weeks" And I said "okay" but I wasn't really interested in the program. It's for entry-level new graduates. Essentially I was still a new grad, but I wanted to report right away. I knew what I wanted to do, I didn't want to, it's kind of for people that want to work in communications and don't know what area yet. I knew exactly what I wanted to do, so I wasn't thrilled about the program. But, so, my mentor was like, "At least it will get you in NBC, in the building." And I still applied for other jobs. I was like, "Should I teach, should I?" I didn't know what I was going to do, I started substitute teaching here in Worcester on the side again. I had no money because Ghana didn't pay me on time. And I just kind of waited it out, and then five months later I got a call saying, "Can you be here in two weeks?" So here I was again in Worcester packed up and moved back to New York.

DW: Wow.

EA: Yeah.

SC: That's a lot of moving.

EA: That's a lot of moving. It's a lot of moving. And I packed up to New York and I had a friend, one of my girlfriends, her aunt has a huge apartment in Harlem, and she rents out a room and she was kind enough to let me rent a room.

DW: Excellent.

EA: Mhm, and that was good. So I moved to New York.

DW: And so how was the page program? Did you like it?

EA: The page program, it's a good program, it's not a bad program, but I was, I had just came back from Africa and all these kids were—after you live in a place like Africa you see how much we are spoiled Americans.

DW: Yes. Yeah I can see that.

EA: And, and, and here are these, most of the kids, I hate to call them kids but they were young, young adults, because they were fresh out of college, you know? Twenty, twenty-one, and I was like, I think I was thirty. Yeah I think I was thirty at the time. So worlds apart, and they were annoying. I felt like I was with my like study hall class. It was stupid. They would get on my nerves. So I did tours and I used to feel like, why am I doing this? Thirty years old giving tours of an NBC building. But I was humble, I never ever complained, I absolutely never complained, and I applied for rotations, and I wouldn't get them. Like I applied for a rotation maybe with a show with MSNBC and I didn't get it. And then, but we would also get the first waves of jobs, full time jobs, within the building. So a full time job came up with Nightly News with Brian Williams for an editorial assistant. Basically, an assistant producer, and the page program is a one-year program, and they want you to stay in it for a year. But I saw this job, applied, and I got it, and I did the page program for two months.

DW: That's fantastic! Because of course if the program for you was to get your foot in the door it sounds like you got what you wanted.

EA: It worked and I didn't have to stay in it and work in that uniform for very long.

[Laughter]

EA: Yeah and I got hired to work for Brian Williams.

DW: Oh my gosh you must have been so proud.

EA: Yeah I was very proud, like, it all worked out!

DW: Yeah really, that sounds fantastic!

EA: Yeah, I wasn't reporting, but I—you can't say no to something like that. You're going to learn, learn with the best of the best that do it.

DW: Yeah, especially. Awesome!

EA: Yeah, so.

DW: I'm so glad, this is like, I love this! This is like reading your story, and we might as well be reading a story, and then when something good comes up in the story you're like, yes!

[Laughter]

EA: So yeah that was the next phase.

DW: Great and so what year was that?

EA: 2012

DW: Okay, so we are getting pretty close to current times. So how are we doing on time? Are we doing okay for you?

EA: Yeah I have to be out of here in maybe the next ten minutes or so.

SC: We have about ten minutes, we are at like fifty minutes right now. It went by so fast!

[Laughter]

EA: Yeah, I'll get to 2014. So, my official title was an editorial assistant for Nightly News with Brian Williams which is basically like an assistant producer, a producer's assistant. So I did everything from even answering Brian's phone to finding stories, finding people to interview, pre-interviewing people, going out on shoots, doing stuff for the website, writing stuff for the website, just the whole entire gamut of news, other than being the face of the story. I kind of did all the work behind the scenes for the story. I got to meet a lot of great people, got to work with Brian Williams every day, and see people from the Today Show every day, walk on the Today Show set all the time, plus, being a page, I knew the building because I gave the tours. So that was a great experience, that was a one-year contract. I knew going in again that I wanted to be on air, so I wasn't going to stay after my one year experience, I knew they weren't going to put me on air. So I worked with them to try to find an NBC affiliate smaller station to report for. And after my year was up I did again have a job but about 6 or 7 months into the job my father died.

DW: Oh, I'm sorry to hear.

EA: Thank you. So he passed away 2012 and, you know, to get, you know, dealing with that I took some time off of work, took about five weeks off work, came back to Worcester to be with my mother. And that was a very traumatic experience in itself. I know we knew he was going to die, I guess we all are going to die, but I was working when my mother called that he's going to die soon so come home so that's, that's what I did. At least I was able to be home in Worcester, in the house really.

DW: Yeah?

EA: He died at home, when he died. So, so that was very sad, you know, it was very, very difficult to deal with. And then I just, was just, grieving, and held the element of grief for a very long time, and I lost motivation to kind of do anything, I just wanted to do nothing for a while and nobody understood it. My mother didn't get it, you know. People were trying to like, help me find jobs, which was good, I literally wanted to do nothing. I had five years of quitting teaching and moving to New York and Africa and moving everywhere, and being pregnant and not being pregnant and not being sick and my father dying, I wanted to do nothing for a while. So I came back to Worcester and I did nothing for a year. For one year I did nothing.

DW: And was that a good rest for you?

EA: It was a good rest

DW: I was going to say, you had a busy few years before that!

EA: Yeah, yeah I did nothing. I traveled a lot, I actually went back to Ghana which was nice, it was nice to go to Ghana and not have to work

DW: I bet!

EA: Yeah, and to see my friends, because I had made so many friends. And go to the beach, and I went with my mother which was really sweet.

DW: Nice!

EA: Yes, and it was nice to show her her country because I took her to places she never even knew existed because I knew the country very well from being a journalist. So that was great. That was just an invaluable experience, and we just did nothing together. [laughs] and, and I went to Ghana, I went to London, I went to Paris, I went to Disney World, and California, I went wherever I wanted to go until I had no more money and then I said, "Okay, I need a job!" [laughs]

DW: Oh wow, well that's great that you got to see so much of the world, you're very well traveled.

EA: Yeah, and then that brings me to here.

DW: Alright so then the job to replenish the travel funds, what did you end up doing?

EA: I got hired in in Worcester for Channel 3 in Worcester, Worcester News Tonight, and that's what I do now. I'm a reporter, I like to say journalist, but it's the same thing, for Channel 3 in Worcester.

DW: And are you on air?

EA: I am on air five days a week.

DW: That's awesome! So we can see you if we turn it on!

EA: Yes!

DW: I was going to say, we are going to have to turn it on, give a little plug in our interview for you

EA: Yes, yes please do!

DW: That's great! And you're happy doing that?

EA: I am I am, it's, it's, it's something that I knew what it was, and it's something that it feels good to know that I just—I, not that I taught myself this, but I'm trained in this, I know how to do this job. I don't have a camera man, I don't have an editor, I don't have a driver, I don't have an assignment editor. When in Ghana I had those things so I could just be a reporter, but here it's—I'm really a one-woman band. I drive, I write, I shoot, I edit, I carry my own equipment, I don't have a camera man, I do my own lighting, I do my own sound, I interview people, I come back and piece it all together and make it look pretty for 90 seconds on TV. But it's a good job. It's, I don't plan to stay forever or very long, I don't plan to stay very long, but I'm happy with my job.

DW: That's great!

EA: So it's kind of like full circle, I never thought I would be living in Worcester coming back, never in a million years did I ever think that. I never even wanted to work in local news!

DW: Yeah?

EA: I knew really I wanted to do international news, but the opportunity was here and I have a place to live and I think after you have all kinds of experiences at least with the ones I've had you, you learn what's important to you and what's not and I think it's individual for everybody. But yeah, it's, it's—here I am.

DW: Well and I'm sure you will be going a bunch of places after this.

EA: Yes, yes.

DW: This is, this is incredible, I am so glad that we got this opportunity.

EA: So that's my life!

[Laughter]

DW: And it sounds like it has been amazing so far.

EA: Yeah

DW: With many great things to come. Do we have any final questions to wrap up? Any last words you would like to leave us with?

EA: I don't think so.

SC: What I just want to point out is that I think it's so impressive, how like, strong you are for, you keep mentioning things like you weren't getting treated well and you stand up and you say I am not happy with this. Like when you weren't getting your money on time, like and like when he told you to stand up, like, you do, you stand up for these things. There are so many people who are in jobs and things that they are not happy with and you make those changes and it's so cool that you actually are making the changes like standing up for "I want this," "I deserve this"

DW: It's really wonderful

EA: And it's hard, but if you have reached a point where you are that unhappy—and you only have one life to live. We are, we are all here one time, and to wake up every day is a blessing. Some people don't wake up. Some people wake up and they don't have legs so they can't go anywhere, or their legs don't work. Or they wake up and they don't have heat. I mean, I don't know, maybe it's from living in Ghana with no lights and no running water, and some things become important to you, like I said, versus other things. So, I'm very grateful. I'm very, very blessed. I have worked very hard. I have two very expensive degrees [laughs] that need to be paid for so it, it's all in sacrifice, but I'm so—like when I said at the beginning that it's the best decision I ever made to leave. Because I remember I wasn't, I didn't, I absolutely didn't want to teach anymore, teach high school at least. I'm not going to wake up every day and go to a job I don't want to do.

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Because I just feel like why do I have to do that? God did not put me on this Earth to do that. You go through it for a little bit, everybody does, and then you make, you decide what you want to do. I'm not going to wake up every day and go to a job I don't want to go to I would rather leave so some other person, you know, that does want to teach these knucklehead kids [laughs]—no I do love them, I still talk to several students all the time! So, I saw some students in Ghana leaving at the airport!

DW: No kidding?

EA: Yeah, saw a student in Ghana at the airport! She was on my flight.

DW: That's incredible!

EA: On my flight, Worcester Tech.

DW: Small world sometimes

EA: Small world. So it's blessed.

DW: This was just wonderful so thank you so much, I think I am going to end the recording now.