The Oral History of Kofi Fynn-Aikins, PhD

May 25, 2021

Phone Interview conducted by Libby Herland

Oral History Cover Sheet

Kofi Fynn-Aikins

Date of Interview: May 25, 2021

Location of Interview: via phone

Interviewer: Libby Herland

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 25 years; 1992 - 2017

Offices and Field Stations Worked and Positions Held: Research physiologist, Tunison Laboratory of Fish Nutrition in Cortland, New York; contaminants biologist, Vero Beach, Florida Ecological Services Field Office; deputy project leader, Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office; project leader, Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office

Most Important Projects: Researching fish nutrition specifically carbohydrate metabolism and potential diet changes for salmonids and trout; developing a methodology for studying contaminant uptake in fish; creating an outreach and education program for the Great Lakes Fisheries Resource Office; establishing the first non-refuge and non-hatchery Friends group in the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)

Colleagues and Mentors: Steve Hughes, Dieter Busch, Craig Johnson

Brief Summary of Interview: Kofi tells about growing up in Ghana and how his desire to become a medical doctor resulted in him taking a full scholarship to study fish biology at the University of Michigan. Eventually earning his PhD in fish nutrition, Kofi's post-doctoral studies introduced him to fisheries biologists from the FWS. His first permanent position with FWS was at the Tunison Laboratory of Fish Nutrition in Cortland, NY. The consolidation of research into the US Geological Survey caused Kofi to transfer for a 2-year stint in the Vero Beach, Florida Ecological Services Field Office. Wanting to get back to fisheries work, Kofi accepted a position as the deputy project leader of the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Office. He describes his work in this office. He served on several multi-agency government committees focused on Great Lakes restoration. One of the highlights of that work was reintroducing coregonid prey species back into the Great Lakes to help increase the native lake trout population. Kofi initiated a very successful outreach and education program at his office, which led in part to the establishment of the first Friends group for a fisheries resource office. Kofi was a Diversity Change Agent in Region 5 and played a national role and also a regional role on different issues – Friends groups, outreach education and diversity. At NCTC, he served as a volunteer coach, instructor and mentor. Kofi ends the interview talking about the tours he leads to Ghana that support his non-profit, Hope for Sisi's Kids.

THE INTERVIEW:

LIBBY HERLAND: Hi. This is Libby Herland. It's Tuesday, May 25, 2021. Today I am conducting a phone interview with Kofi Fynn-Aikins. We are going to get his career oral history. Kofi worked for the Fish and Wildlife Service for 25 years and is originally from Ghana. This will be a very interesting interview and different than one that I have ever done. I do want to say that this is being recorded over the phone. We are not meeting in person because we are still dealing with the after effects, I guess, of the COVID pandemic. We started doing these interviews by phone. I am in my home in western Massachusetts and Kofi is in his home in the Buffalo area. So, Kofi, thank you so much for being willing to share your life story with us. I'm sure it's going to be a fascinating interview. I'm really looking forward to hearing more about you.

KOFI FYNN AIKINS: Thank you, Libby and thanks for having me and thanks for selecting me for this interview. I really appreciate it. And talking with you, it's like talking to a friend, so it is all good.

LIBBY: That's right. We did know each other when we worked. We both worked in the northeast region of the Fish and Wildlife Service. At the time, it was Region 5, but we worked in different programs. We'd see each other at project leader meetings, but we didn't really interact that much personally. I feel like I'm talking to a friend but also somebody that I don't know that much about. It will be great to learn more.

I did mention that you are from Ghana and of course, everybody who knows you, knows that you are from Ghana. Tell us a little bit about that and growing up in Ghana and how it was you came to the United States.

KOFI: I was born in Ghana. I grew up there. Went to high school there. During high school, I wanted to become a medical doctor because I grew up with a mom who was a nurse. I spent some time going to the hospital to see her. I saw doctors looking really sharp and I'm like, "I want to be one of those guys!" I worked very hard and tried to go into medical school in Ghana, but at the time, there was only one medical school in the entire country. The university took only 60 students a year. So, think about thousands of students who are trying to get into this medical school and only 60 are able to get in. I wasn't smart enough to get that.

I ended up going to the University of Ghana where I was studying biochemistry and food science. I didn't really want to do that, but I didn't have too many options. I had to choose a subject area to study in the field of science. So, I was studying that. During my first year, I saw a magazine that advertised for a scholarship to study fisheries. I just laughed my head off because I thought *this is a joke*. *Who in their right mind would study fish?* I was sharing this story with a friend of mine. He said, "Kofi, this is a legitimate magazine. It's not a joke. If you want to leave the country to study medicine, maybe this is your ticket." So, I said ok. I looked into it, and I applied for it, and I ended up getting the scholarship. I ended up at the University of Michigan. That's how I got to this country in 1979.

LIBBY: I want to stop you right there. You were studying biochemistry in college because you thought that might help you get into medical school later.

KOFI: No. I was just studying that because I couldn't get into medical school. I had been accepted into the university to study there so if I can't do my first choice, I have to pick a second choice. So, my second

choice was biochemistry and food science. I was going to study that until I saw this ad for the scholarship, and I applied for it and ended up getting it.

LIBBY: Why were you interested in biochemistry?

KOFI: I wasn't interested! At the University of Ghana, you apply to a department. So, I applied to the Science Department. Once you get into the Science Department, then you have options. You have to choose, and its competitive. You can study zoology. You can study botany. You can study math. You can study chemistry. Most people would like to get into biochemistry and food science because there are more job opportunities there. If you study chemistry and zoology and botany, you are probably going to end up as a teacher in a high school. I didn't want to do that. I chose the more interesting and probably more lucrative option which is biochemistry and food science. But that isn't really what I wanted to do in my life. I wanted to go to medical school. But that was the best option that I had.

LIBBY: Can you just tell us a little bit, before we go to the United States, just tell us a little bit about what it was like where you grew up? Just a couple of minutes. Did you grow up in a city or were you in the country? Did you spend time outdoors?

KOFI: Yes. My mother was a nurse. As part of being a nurse, they get moved around the country quite a bit. I lived in the smaller cities for a while. Them, [when I was] in high school, she was transferred to Accra, Ghana. Accra is the capital town of Ghana. It's the most populous city. Growing up in Accra – that's where I am originally from. My whole family is in Accra. It was a very tight family. We have big families. In most parts of Africa, you have very, very big families – cousins, second cousins, third cousins. I don't even know for some of them how I am related to them, all I know is they are all my cousins. There was a big group of family that you could always count on. Then in high school, I went to a boarding school, so I grew up with a lot of very close friends. We are still close friends today. Last year, I went to my high school celebration. 50th year. We had about 50 students that showed up at the event. I'm still very close to my friends and family in Ghana.

LIBBY: That's great. I know that you go there frequently but we will talk about that at the end of the interview because you are still very involved with Ghana. We will hear a little bit more about that at the end. So, you got this scholarship. Do you remember who the scholarship was from? You saw it in a magazine, but do you remember who was offering the scholarship or what the program was?

KOFI: Well, actually it was offered through the government of Ghana. It was actually to study in the Polytechnic [university] in England. I came out second in the interview for the scholarship. In that part of the world [in Ghana], things are very, very shady. Even though I had the scholarship, I wasn't allowed – somebody took my spot and went to Plymouth Polytechnic in England. I got left behind. What happened is one day I went to check on the status of the scholarship and they told me, "Well, you got the scholarship, but they sent these people, and you aren't one of them." The guy I talked to was a messenger. You have to go through him to get to the director of the scholarship. He told me, he said "Look, Kofi. This is just the way things are here. But I tell you what. You got this scholarship. Nobody is going to be able to take it away from you. So here is what you need to do. Apply for a school anywhere in the world. Once you get accepted, they have to send you, because you got a letter that says you have a scholarship. So, look for a school." I said, "Forget England. I'm going to the United States." I applied to schools in the United States and University of Michigan was the first school to be accepted in. I said, "Michigan, here I come!" So, I ended up going to the University of Michigan.

LIBBY: That must have been a pretty tumultuous time in your life when you were trying to figure out where you were going to go to school. That's a lot of responsibility. You had to do it yourself, try to find a school in a foreign country.

KOFI: Oh, yeah, and back then there was no internet as you know, as we are about the same age. I went to the American consulate. They have a very good library there. I spent hours and days and weeks and months just going through university catalogs and brochures, trying to learn about which schools have good programs in fisheries, because the scholarship was going to pay for only a fisheries degree. I spent a lot of time. The other thing that made me very much interested in the University of Michigan was that I was in a boarding school, and there were several dorms in the boarding school, and one of them was called "Michigan." It was named after somebody, a Peace Corps volunteer who came from Michigan. I was really excited about knowing a state called Michigan that was named after one of the dorms in my high school and going to school there. That's why Michigan seemed so promising and familiar to me. So, I ended up going there.

LIBBY: That's really funny. That's funny. I love that story. In Ghana, is English your first language or is there a different language in Ghana? An African – Ghanaian – language?

KOFI: English is our official language, but in Ghana we have more than 30 different languages. I speak at least two languages – my father's language and my mother's language because both parents are from different tribes.

LIBBY: Coming to the United States, at least speaking English was not a cultural issue that you had to deal with.

KOFI: No, it was not because I started learning English back in kindergarten. All the textbooks are in English, and the medium of communication is in English. You learn English very, very early when you start school in Ghana.

LIBBY: Right. Okay. So, you are relatively young, and you are heading over to Michigan. Did you go to school in Ann Arbor?

KOFI: Yes.

LIBBY: And you are all by yourself. Tell us about the trip over - leaving Ghana and getting to Michigan and getting settled in and stuff like that.

KOFI: Michigan was actually very good at sending me enough information to prepare me for not only for my trip to the US but also how to live in Michigan. It was all good, but the one point that I really didn't understand and had no concept of was cold weather. The University of Michigan prepared me for what to bring. They said, bring your winter coat, bring your winter boots, and blah blah blah. Luckily for me, when I was at the University of Ghana, I had a friend who went to Russia to study the Russian language for a year. When he came back, he brought all these Russian clothes which you don't need in Ghana, but I guess he wanted to show them off, so he brought the clothes back to Ghana. When I was going to the US, I shared with him where I was going and he said, "Oh, you are going to need a winter jacket and guess what, I have one that I am not going to use in Ghana. You can have it." That was a lifesaver. You can't find a winter jacket in Ghana.

The other thing was looking for winter boots. I couldn't find winter boots, so I thought, okay, why don't I go to the neighboring country, which is called Togo? Togo is a former British (correction: French) colony. The French are known for their fashion, so I figured if I go to Togo, I may find some winter boots. So I went to Togo, found some boots, and then off to Michigan I went. I landed in Michigan – I was supposed to report to the student union – and I get to the student union in 1979 close to midnight, and the student union was closed. I couldn't get in. It was 25 degrees. I had just come from 85 degrees to 25 degrees, and I was cold. I didn't have any gloves on. I didn't know where to get gloves from. I had my Russian coat, which was very, very heavy. In fact, my shoulders hurt just by wearing that coat; it was that heavy. I didn't have any gloves, and I was wearing my boots, and I was freezing. I'd been there in front of the student union for about 10 minutes, and I was really getting cold. I thought, "My god. I don't know anybody. I don't know where else to go, what else to do." I started to think about my mom. Oh my god, my mom is going to get the news the following day that her son came to the United States and died. I was freezing! So, I'm standing there and its turned. It's January 1st, and people are driving down the street and screaming and waving. Nobody stopped to ask me how they could help, because they didn't know that I needed any help. So, I was standing there in front of the student union, contemplating death. This Japanese lady walked past me and as she walked past me, she stopped and then turned back. She looked at me and she said, "Are you okay?" Well, it turned out that what she saw, she thought it was a black man, but I looked like I was white because I was so cold; I was freezing to death. So, she said, "Are you okay?" I said, "No, I'm not okay." My lips were so frozen I couldn't even speak. She understood what I was going through and said "Okay. Come with me." I followed her to a dorm. She had just returned from a vacation, and she had a suitcase. I carried my suitcase with me and followed her to her dorm. She dropped off her suitcase and said, "Come with me. I will find someplace for you to spend the night." There was a motel right on campus and she helped check me in. She literally saved my life.

LIBBY: She did.

KOFI: I had no idea what I was going to do that evening. I didn't know anybody. I didn't have a cell phone. There were no cell phones back then. I didn't even know where to go to call or who to call. All I knew was that I was supposed to report to the student union, and it was closed, and I didn't know what to do. That lady really saved my life that night.

LIBBY: Did you stay in touch with her or was that just a …

KOFI: So, the following day she came by the motel and took me out and showed me around campus. I really appreciated that. Then, on the third day, the university opened so I was able to check in to the student union. They assigned me to a dorm, and everything was good. But I wanted to find out where this woman was, but I couldn't remember her dorm, I couldn't remember her name. All I remembered was that she was Asian. For months, when I would go to campus, every time I saw an Asian woman I would look them in the eyes, to try to see if they recognized me. That went on for almost three months. And then one day, I did the same thing, I ran into this woman, and she looked at me and said, "Kofi?" I said, "Yes!" I was so impressed she remembered my name. I couldn't remember her name. We became very, very good friends after that.

LIBBY: Wonderful.

KOFI: I called her my crazy Japanese friend.

LIBBY: Wonderful. That's a great story. Wow. Thank you to her. So now you are in school. What was that like, being in school in the United States?

KOFI: The time of the year that I came in was tough. It was during the winter, and I wasn't used to living in a winter region. I was cold all the time. I didn't know how to dress warm, so I was always cold. I was miserable. It took me two years before I learned how to actually dress warmly in the winter. I forgot to mention my winter boots. So, on my second day in Michigan, no – my third day - I decided to explore campus by myself. It was one of those days that was icy, a lot of snow, and windy. I was walking in one part of campus, and it was like a tunnel. The wind was blowing right through it. I couldn't move. I couldn't walk. Every time I took a step, I'd slip and fall. I realized how ridiculous it was for me to be trying to walk. The only way I could navigate was to get on my knees and crawl. So, I started crawling. Everybody who passed by looked at me like *what's with this guy?* I realized how ridiculous that was as well. So, finally, I crawled to a light post, hung on to the light post, and started to cry.

LIBBY: Ohhh.

KOFI: I said, "What am I doing here? Look at me. I wanted to come to America to study medicine, and here I am. I can't even walk." I started to cry, because I felt really miserable. As I was crying, people were walking by, staring at me. Nobody asked me *are you okay or can we help you?* I just looked ridiculous. Maybe they thought I was on drugs or something. But suddenly a light bulb came into my head and said, *look - everybody is walking, and you are crawling. There has to be a reason.* It finally dawned on me that the winter boots that I had bought in Togo were actually disco boots. They slide really well on the ice, but they don't help you navigate on the ice. (laughter) That's the story of my winter boots. I crawled into a shoe store nearby that I had seen the day before and bought myself some tennis shoes and now I was able to navigate around campus.

LIBBY: Not only do you have the challenges of being at a new college, but you are in a new country and a new climate. Right, disco boots are not going to work on ice. Wow.

KOFI: Some of the challenges I had too as a student in a different country was my accent. The way we pronounce things in Ghana is completely different from the way Americans pronounce certain words. For example, the butter that you spread on your bread. We call it "buttah." I would ask people, "Where can I find buttah?" They don't know what the heck I'm talking about. Peanut butter, we call it groundnut paste. So, I go to the grocery store. I'm looking for peanut butter. I ask, "Where can I find groundnut paste?" They say, "Huh?" So, I had problems communicating with people in so many different ways. I had to, over time – I still have an accent, I won't lose that – but it took me quite a while, years, to try to learn how to pronounce certain words in more of the American way instead of the British way or the Ghanaian way.

So that was one problem. The other problem was I really had no concept of racism in this country and so, it took me a while to understand certain things. For example, so when I was studying at the University of Ghana, one of the things, for some reason, I was very interested in learning a little bit about economics. I don't know how that came about. In Ghana, in the universities, you enroll, as I mentioned before, you enroll into a department. Once you enroll into that department, there are specific courses that you have to take. You can't go out of your way to take other courses. In the science department, you take only science courses. I always wanted to take economics, but I wasn't able to do that in Ghana. So, when I came to the University of Michigan and found out that there were elective

courses that you could take – I suddenly realized that I could take economics. I took economics in my first semester. It was so exciting to learn about economics. I wrote a paper and my TA asked me, “Who wrote it for you?” I said, “Well, I wrote it myself.” He said, “But who helped you?” I said, "Nobody." Basically, he was saying that I wasn’t good enough to write a paper that good.

I had some issues with my professors as well. One professor flunked me because I had a good friend who was helping me adjust to life in college, and she was a very busy woman, trying to work her way through college. So, she copied some of my – and this particular instructor, he liked to give, what do you call it, homework. Lots of homework. I would do the homework and my friend would say, “Look, Kofi, I’m so sorry. I haven’t had the time to do it, so can you help me out?” I would help her out and then she gets an A, and I get a B. Same information. I ended up with a D in that class which really ruined by GPA for my last two years in the US in Michigan. I had to work very hard to bring my grades up so I can be competitive to go to graduate school.

Another example was when I first came here, I wasn’t familiar with the ATM machines. My bank gave me an ATM card. I went to try to figure out how to get cash from the ATM machine, and lo and behold, I set out to do this. I had never used one before. And then a cop shows up. He asked me to spread my legs and put my hands on the car. He started searching me. I said, “What have I done?” I didn’t know what was going on. Luckily for me, the guy realized I had an accent. The University of Michigan is a big campus, about 30,000 students with lots of international students. So, he realized I had an accent and said, “I’m sorry. Somebody called and said somebody was breaking into the ATM machine.” That is why he showed up. He apologized to me and left. I was really shocked and embarrassed because a lot of people were looking at me. So, it wasn’t a good first impression of living in the United States my first few months at the University of Michigan.

LIBBY: Well, I don’t even know what to say. I can see all that happening. I can also see that you have such a wonderful personality that once people got to know you, even talking to the cop, I’m sure he realized very quickly that he could see the situation. But that still doesn't mean it didn’t have an impact on you.

KOFI: You are absolutely right. I’m a very friendly person. I try to stay positive all the time. So that has helped me throughout my career. I can tell you many, many stories about how people who originally didn’t like me ended up becoming my friends. I have so many stories like that.

LIBBY: Well, let’s pick up your school. You got your undergraduate degree in fisheries biology. Is that what is was? Then you went to grad school?

KOFI: Yes. When I got to Michigan, I realized that – like I said before – my whole plan for coming to Michigan was to finally make my way through medical school. When I got here, I realized that in most parts of the world, you go straight from high school to medical school, at least in the Europe and the British system. In Ghana, the same thing. You go straight from high school to medical school. When I got here and I realized that in the US you first have to study and get a bachelor’s degree before you can go to medical school, I’m like *okay, all right. I’m going to have to do this fisheries thing and then after that I will go to medical school.* That was the first strike. The second strike against me was that I realized that a good medical school is not cheap. It costs a lot of money, and I didn’t know how I was going to pay for it or if I was going to get another scholarship to do that. So, I hunkered down. Okay, *I’m going to study fisheries.*

In the process, I actually fell in love with fisheries. I thought, *wow, I'm studying this animal that typically you don't see.* You have to get out on the water and catch them or something before you can see them. You have to collect information from the water, try to figure out the quality of the water, and try to find a way to manage the fishery resources. I thought *that's a very interesting science.* I actually fell in love with fisheries. When I graduated from the University of Michigan, I decided *I'm going to stick with fisheries*.

I went to the University of Wisconsin, the LaCrosse campus. I did a master's degree in biology with a concentration in fisheries. When I was in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, I got student support to work at the LaCrosse Science Center. It has now become part of USGS (U.S. Geological Survey), but it was a Fish and Wildlife Research Center [then]. I got a grant to work there. I got to know the Fish and Wildlife Service employees. The director of the lab at that time, he taught fish disease at the university. He is one of the best instructors I ever had. He inspired me to want to be a fish pathologist.

I actually applied to the University of Idaho to study fish pathology. I got accepted to go there. I actually went there to visit with the professor who accepted me. Dr. Kluntz was his name. I was ready to go there the following year. Then in the middle of the summer, he sends me a letter. He said his position at the university had changed so he wasn't going to be available to mentor students anymore, so he is not taking any more students. I was left out in the cold. I had gotten accepted at the University of Tennessee and the University of Alabama, and I turned them all down. I said, "I'm going to this other school. I'm sorry I can't take the student assistance that you were going to provide me." I called them back and said, "Hey, I changed my mind. Can I come?" They said, "Sorry, we've given the position to somebody else. But if you are still interested, we'll save a spot for you the following year." I didn't want to wait around for another year, so I started to apply to schools all over again. I ended up being accepted at the University of California at Davis by a professor who, at the PhD level, you have to specialize. I wanted to work with Dr. Doroshov who was a Russian professor who specializes in fish physiology, working with the white sturgeon in California. He accepted me but he said, "Look. I'm sorry. I don't have any grants. You applied late. I don't have any grants left, so I won't be able to support you. You can come if you want but here is another deal for you. There's a new professor here. He's a fish nutritionist and he is looking for students. Do you mind if I send your application to him?" I said, "No, I don't mind." So, I got accepted into Professor Hung's lab to study fish nutrition. So, I went from going to study pathology because I really wanted to become a doctor but a fish doctor instead. I ended up in fish and nutrition and became a fish nutritionist. I was very opportunistic. I just went where the opportunities were and I have no regrets.

LIBBY: That's okay. That happens to a lot of people. That's the way a lot of life leads to opportunity. I have to say, I don't think I have ever known anybody who is a fish nutritionist, although I did know the folks at the Lamar – there is a fish lab in Lamar, Pennsylvania, right? They probably do work with nutrition.

KOFI: It's a very rare field. Very, very rare.

LIBBY: It is rare.

KOFI: It's so rare that that's how I actually ended up in the Fish and Wildlife Service. When I was in the University of California at the time, I worked with the white sturgeon. The US Fish and Wildlife Service folks on the east coast were also trying to figure out how to raise Atlantic sturgeon and shortnose

sturgeon that are found on the east coast because nobody had ever done that before. I learned that the Fish and Wildlife Service had sent people to Bishop (correction: Davis), California to learn how to study and grow sturgeon. I was there when some of them showed up there. When I finished my degree and was looking for post-doc opportunities, I hooked up with a Fish and Wildlife Service scientist who worked at the Tunison Laboratory of Fish Nutrition. He was very much interested in me working with him because they were also looking at growing sturgeon. They were looking for somebody with that expertise. Once I was in the post-doc, a position opened up at his home lab in Tunison. I was the only qualified person in the United States at the time who could take that job. That's how rare fish nutrition is. That's how rare sturgeon biologists were at the time. I happened to be at the right place at the right time.

LIBBY: That's amazing. So, you get your PhD. Now you are going to do your post-doc work at Tunison Laboratory of Fish Nutrition. That's in Cortland, New York?

KOFI: Yeah, that's in Cortland, but the Fish and Wildlife Service scientist I worked with was assigned to work at the Monell Chemical Senses Center, which is a research lab affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania. What they do there is they study taste and smell. This Fish and Wildlife Service employee, Dr. Steve Hughes, he was there to figure out how to – when you bring fish from the wild that are not farm fish and you try to raise them – most of them don't take the pelletized food very well. He was trying to figure out what to include in the fish diet that would make the fish feed. Sometimes the fish won't feed because they don't know what they are eating, and they don't know that it is actually food. They would rather starve. I went there to work with him to figure out what kind of feed attractants you can add to the feed to elicit a feeding response from the sturgeon. He was there at the time, and then when the position opened up at the Tunison lab, I ended up getting the job and I moved from Philadelphia to Cortland, New York.

LIBBY: Did you continue your relationship with him though? Was he still involved with you, or did you end up working with a whole bunch of new people when you went to Tunison?

KOFI: This gentleman never came back to Tunison lab. He actually ended up leaving the Fish and Wildlife Service. He was a mentor to meidn't because he was a black man as well. He was very excited to have another black man join the Fish and Wildlife Service because, as he put it, everywhere he went, conferences, he was the only black guy in fish nutrition, especially in the fish nutrition world. He said people didn't bother learning his name. They always said he was the "black guy", and everybody knew who he was. He said, with me being on board, now they will have to learn the names because there are two black men in the field. He became my mentor.

When I got to Tunison lab, the fact is that they were wonderful. I was the new kid on the block, and they were very, very helpful to me. They gave me the support that I needed and mentored me. I just loved it. It was my dream come true because at Tunison lab, it's the first fish nutrition lab in the world. The initial research work on fish nutrition came from that lab. When I was in college, I read about the fish nutrition research at the Tunison lab, so going to Tunison lab was like being at the top notch research center for fish nutrition. It was a like a dream come true. I loved my job, and I loved the opportunities it provided me. I worked not only with the Fish and Wildlife scientists at Lamar, but also scientists from universities. I ended up as an adjunct assistant professor at Cornell University working with folks there on different research subjects. It was an awesome, awesome job for me, and I really loved it there.

LIBBY: Was that a permanent Fish and Wildlife Service job or were you on a temporary [position?]

KOFI: It was a permanent job.

LIBBY: That was in 1992 or so, you start working there?

KOFI: That's correct.

LIBBY: Great. And you were an adjunct assistant professor at Cornell. How about that!

KOFI: It was a dream come true. I was trained as a research scientist, so I wanted to do research. Being close to Cornell gave me the opportunity to work with some top scientists at Cornell. I became part of the Cornell community. I served on committees and things like that which was very exciting. I got to interact with college students. It was a great job.

LIBBY: How long did you work at Tunison?

KOFI: Well, I was there from '92 to '95. Three years. That was a place I was going to stay for the rest of my life. I believed that was what I was going to do because it was a perfect environment for me. During [President] Clinton's administration, Al Gore, who was the vice-president at the time, wanted to create an environmental organization within the Fish and Wildlife Service. I'm sure you remember that. My lab was one of the labs that was moved into USGS at the time. They were trying to consolidate a lot of other Fish and Wildlife Service research labs. Some in Alabama and Mississippi had closed, and we were next on the list. I was terrified. I felt like I could lose my job, and I didn't know what I was going to do because if I lost my job, I don't have my family here in the US where I can go crash at my mom's home until I can find a job. My wife too is from Italy, and she doesn't also have family here. We felt really vulnerable. We just also had a daughter, and my wife was also in nursing school. I was really scared.

I applied for jobs literally all over the world because I thought the lab was going to close. The lab didn't close, but I moved on. I found a job with the ES (Ecological Services) office in Vero Beach, Florida. I moved there for two years. It wasn't where I wanted to go because ES, as you know, is not a research institution. So, when I got to ES, I had to figure out how I was going to survive. I knew I wasn't going to stay there long enough because it wasn't the environment I wanted to be in.

But I stayed there long enough, for two years, because when we moved, my wife had started nursing school. When we got to Florida, they wouldn't accept her credits from New York. She had to start all over again. My wife told me, "Kofi, please. Just give me two years to finish my associate's degree, and once I'm done, I'll go anywhere you want to go." I said, "That's fair." So, we waited for her to finish, and once she finished, we were out of there. During that time, the project leader at the Great Lakes Fisheries Resources Office, Dieter Busch – he had been trying to hire me when I was at Tunison lab. He had tried to bring me on board to help him run his station, but I wasn't really interested. At the time, when I feared I was losing my job and I moved to Florida, there wasn't a position. But after I moved to Florida, some positions opened up in his office. He tried to recruit me. I said, "Look, my wife just started nursing school. I made a commitment to her. I'm not going anywhere until she graduates." He said, "Fair enough." I thought that was the end of it, but he kept pursuing me and he kept the job open. I was very fortunate. My wife graduated and two weeks later we left Vero Beach and moved to western New York. I became his deputy at the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Office.

LIBBY: I do remember Dieter Busch. When you said his name, it was like, "oh my gosh, Dieter Busch."

KOFI: Yeah. Interesting guy.

LIBBY: Very interesting. Before we go – because I know you spent the rest of your career at that office – let's go back to Tunison and tell me a little bit more about some of your day-to-day work or some of the projects you worked on while you were at Tunison.

KOFI: When I was at Tunison, I really had an interesting project developing diets for salmonid species like trout and salmon. I wanted to develop a diet because the most expensive part of raising fish is the diet. Fish food is very costly because we use fish meal to make fish feed. That's why it costs so much money. We've got to go catch the fish, ground the fish and use it in the diet. What I wanted to do at the time was I wanted to figure out how to reduce the fish meal in the fish feed and then increase the carbohydrate products. Add more carbohydrates to the fish meal because the more carbohydrates are ingredients, for example corn meal, they cost much less than fish meal. If we can reduce the fish meal in the diet and increase the carbohydrate content, we could cut down the cost of the feed. That was my charge at the research lab. It came about because that is what I did for my PhD. I did carbohydrate metabolism in fish. One of the things that we wanted to address was that, in my research, we found that they could do well on increased carbohydrates, but they ended up with fatty liver. When I came to the Tunison lab, I wanted to understand whether the fatty liver would actually affect them in the long run. You have to understand, when we do research on fish, and nutrition especially, we use smaller fish because they grow very fast, and you can get some results in a short period of time. I wanted to extend the research to bigger fish and to find out how the fatty liver would impact their ability and their health, especially. I used some human techniques to understand liver function. That was very, very exciting for me. We developed some unique diets to help us do that.

The other thing I did was, when I got (unintelligible) to Tunison, we found that some fish in the Great Lakes that were feeding on the alewives, which is a prey fish that salmonids and trout feed on, the fish ended up with vitamin B deficiencies.

LIBBY: Really!

KOFI: I wanted to replicate that study in the lab to figure out if, in fact, vitamin B deficiency was occurring in fish found in the wild. That was research I did with the research lab in Wellsborough, Pennsylvania, a Fish and Wildlife Service research lab. I coordinated it with them and Lamar as well as university folks - professors at Cornell University. It was very exciting work that we did.

LIBBY: Actually, I'm so glad you just mentioned that because I was going to ask you, you must have had some collaborators. This is very complicated stuff that you are working on.

KOFI: We didn't have enough resources for me to do it alone. I learned very quickly in my career that collaboration is the way to go. That stayed with me throughout my career whether I was doing research or whether I was working with community people [or] doing Friends initiatives. It's all about collaboration. I learned very early on that's how you get results quickly.

LIBBY: Some of these fish that you are dealing with, I don't honestly know how long [they live.] Well salmon obviously, they live a long time. They live several years, correct?

KOFI: That's correct.

LIBBY: And trout? How long do they normally live if they are not caught?

KOFI: They can live to about 12 years old. They can live that long.

LIBBY: So, I guess a fatty liver could be a problem in some of these fish then. That's a pretty long life.

KOFI: We noticed in some of the fish that they weren't reproducing. We suspect it's because [what we] call "early mortality syndrome". When they spawn, their eggs didn't have the vitamin B1 that would help the fish survive. What we were trying to do was trying to understand how that affected the offspring and to reproduce and do their thing. That was one of the things I studied. Two things. One was carbohydrate metabolism and two, looking at vitamin B deficiencies and how it affects production.

LIBBY: Were you able to get some definitive results in your three years, or at least you made progress on getting answers?

KOFI: Yes. We published some of our work. That syndrome was real. We could fix that in the lab but in the wild, there's not a whole lot you can do about vitamin B deficiency in the fish in the wild.

LIBBY: What was the name of that syndrome again?

KOFI: Early mortality syndrome.

LIBBY: Oh, early mortality syndrome. Okay. Well, for the Fish and Wildlife Service, at least being able to fix it in the lab which means then that you could fix it in the hatchery.

KOFI: That's correct.

LIBBY: That's very important information to have. That's basically your work.

KOFI: That was it. That is what I did.

LIBBY: That's awesome. That's amazing. That's great. What was the name of the lab? Did you say "Wellsborough" lab?

KOFI: Yeah. We had a research lab in Wellsborough, Pennsylvania. That also became part of USGS.

LIBBY: I never heard of that, either. I knew about some of the labs and fish hatcheries and some of the labs that ended up getting moved over to the National Biological Survey and then to USGS. But I never heard of that one. You left Tunison. You really didn't want to, but you felt like – I understand that you have to look out for yourself. I didn't know you were married so tell us a little bit about [that]. When did you get married and start having a family?

KOFI: When I was in grad school in California, I met my wife. She was a tourist visiting her mother's friend who was also Italian. This woman was married to an American. She was living in Davis. My wife at the time didn't know what she wanted to do with her life. Her mother said, "Why don't you go and live with Bruna and think about what you want to do with your life. Bruna had just had a baby, and you can help Bruna with her baby." She came to California. I met her because she was, in addition to when she wasn't taking care of the baby, she wanted to look for something else to do. She had studied dancing. She had a school in Italy before she came. She was looking for opportunities to do that. The University of California at the time had a program called "Experimental College." Basically, you could study things like dance, auto mechanics, things like that. More like hobby stuff, you know? Actually, when I was in grad school, I took an auto mechanics class so I could fix my old car myself. My wife took an African dance class and I'm a drummer in that class. That's how we met, through the drum and African dance class.

LIBBY: See, musicians always get the girl. (laughter)

KOFI: Well, actually, in that class, most of the drummers are guys and almost all the dancers are women. At the end of the class, we'll go out and have a drink and flirt and then everybody goes home. There was an unspoken rule in that class that when you come to the class, you don't bring your significant other with you. You come, have fun and go home. The first time she shows up in the class, she had him tag along with her. All the guys started to snub her because how dare she - the first time she comes to this class, she breaks the golden rule. Fast forward a couple of weeks later. We had a big festival on campus. It's called the Whole Earth Festival. It's a great festival. The fisheries students would man a booth where we sold seafood. I was manning the booth at the time, and I saw this woman walking past the booth. I noticed her. During that time of the year, during the festival, everybody is in a happy mood. I was in a happy mood. I was willing to forgive her. I said hi to her, and she said hi. I asked something and she kind of shrugged her shoulders and looked up in the sky. I realized quickly that she didn't speak English. So, off I go. Poor girl. This woman didn't speak any English, and we are all kind of mad at her because she broke the golden rule. I said to her, "Where are you from?" That she understood. She said, "Italy." I'm like *okay, alright, okay. What else do I say to this woman?* I don't speak Italian, so I looked up into the sky and I said, "Big guy, help me!" He said in a booming voice, "Try cappuccino." So, I looked at her and I said, I pointed my finger at her, "you and me, cappuccino, cappuccino, cappuccino." She laughed so hard. That was an invitation for a date. We ended up going for cappuccino and the rest is history.

LIBBY: My goodness, that's great. Now she speaks English.

KOFI: Oh now, I can't get her to shut up.

LIBBY: What is her first name?

KOFI: Stefania.

LIBBY: Stefania. Great. That's wonderful. You fell in love, got married, and by the time you go to – oh obviously she came to New York with you.

KOFI: Yes.

LIBBY: Did she go to Pennsylvania with you and then she went to New York with you?

KOFI: Yes. She went to Pennsylvania with me. We actually got married before we moved to Pennsylvania. From there we went to Cortland, and then to Florida, and back to New York.

LIBBY: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your time at Tunison?

KOFI: That's about it.

LIBBY: All right. I know you were only in Vero Beach for a couple of years, but that was obviously working in Ecological Services. They are doing permit reviews and endangered species. Maybe you worked on endangered species? I'm trying to figure out what you did there.

KOFI: I was hired as a contaminants specialist.

LIBBY: Oh, contaminants. Right.

KOFI: At that time, there was an ES field office in Cortland, New York. It was very close, less than two miles from the Tunison lab. My last year in Tunison lab, the contaminants staff were studying contaminants in fish in the Buffalo area. They wanted to find a way to measure contamination in fish. So, at the time, they came to our lab even though we're not contaminants specialists. Fish nutrition is just a branch of physiology. I measured enzymes in fish. Some of the things that they wanted to do was measure some enzymes in fish that respond to toxins. In other words, if a fish is contaminated, some enzyme levels will be elevated. They asked me if I could measure some of those enzymes for them. That was my claim to knowing something about contaminants.

I worked with the ES office my last year there, so when the position came up – remember, as I said before, when I felt that I was going to lose my job at Tunison, I applied for jobs literally all over the world. I found this job in ES in Cortland (correction: Vero Beach) and I said, "Hey, I've been doing contaminants work with the ES office here." They actually liked the fact that I had a little bit of knowledge in contaminants work. The reason I don't call myself a contaminants specialist, like I said before, studying contaminants is just a branch of physiology. Measuring systems in organisms is a branch of physiology. Nutrition is a branch of physiology. I was able to sell myself as a contaminants specialist and I got the job there. Of course, as I mentioned before, ES isn't really a research place for me to be. When I got there, I quickly looked for opportunities to continue some of my research. I found out that there was mercury in fish that was a concern. Not only in the fish, but mercury in the environment in south Florida. It affected several organisms within the food chain. I saw an opportunity there.

I said*, hey, I'm a fish nutritionist,* and the way they were studying contaminants in Florida at the time, was they were putting the fish in the mercury solution and then try to understand how it affected the fish. Well, that was the wrong model, because the way mercury, especially gets into fish, it's not through water. It's through the food chain. I said, "Look. I have a different model because I'm a fish nutritionist. We can put the mercury in the fish feed. Different levels of mercury and then be able to understand how it affects them and what level is toxic to the fish. Again, I partnered with the folks at the University of Florida in Gainesville and then a marine research lab near Vero Beach. I think it is Ft. Worth. Something like that. I can't remember exactly. Anyhow, we formed this research team, and we started studying mercury in fish. That kept my feet in the research field and that helped me survive in Vero Beach.

Another thing I did was, I worked on refuges. I helped the refuge folks with some of the contamination on refuge sites. I did a little bit of work there on refuges and also with ES endangered species folks. But mostly I concentrated on my fish nutrition work and fish contaminants work with the partnership that I formed once I was down there.

LIBBY: Tell me about the people coming in to work on contaminants at that time because I'm thinking we didn't really understand toxicology that well [at that time.] That's basically what you are doing. You are studying basically toxicology. All of contaminants, all we care about is the toxicology aspect of it. How is it affecting fish and wildlife? I worked on Superfund sites for a year, and I wasn't a contaminants person, but I worked in Ecological Services too, so I know there was a time when contaminants staffing - it was being staffed up. Of course, now it's been staffed down a lot in the past few years. Were you the first contaminants biologist in that office?

KOFI: I'm not really sure. Two of us were hired at the same time. I was the lead biologist. He was also a PhD, but I was the lead contaminants specialist, and he was my assistant. We both really didn't know

what we were doing in the beginning. I found a niche in research to look at contaminants in bass. That was very comfortable for me to do because I've done that kind of research in the past where it wasn't specifically contaminants – it was mostly nutrition – but the model that we were using to study contaminants in fish was feeding them. That was like a nutrition study for me as well. That's what I spent most of my time doing. I accompanied ES endangered species biologists to meetings and when toxicology questions came up, I tried to address as many of them as possible.

But it was not a comfortable position for me. I think I would have done ok with time, but I knew I wasn't going to stay there for long, so I found something that would keep me going and keep me more interested. I didn't want to get bored. I didn't want to hate my job. The research component really kept me going. But it was a bit lonely because I didn't have anybody to talk to as far as the research work that I was trying to do. Nobody really understood it. I was kind of out on my own.

I didn't really have a great experience in ES. I respected what they do, and I know it's a tough job for them, because in South Florida, they were being sued left and right by developers. It was a tough place to be. It was a very stressful environment. I had to find something that I was more comfortable with that would keep me going, because I didn't want a situation where I get up every morning to go to work and I dread going to work. The research component really kept me going. I made good friends with the faculty at the University of Florida and the USGS lab in Gainesville.

LIBBY: Who was the project leader at that time? Do you remember?

KOFI: Craig Johnson.

LIBBY: Craig Johnson. Hmmm. I think I might know Craig Johnson but I'm not sure it's the same person.

KOFI: He was a black guy.

LIBBY: Yeah, right. He worked in the Partners program, too, for a while in Washington, DC.

KOFI: Yeah, that's him.

LIBBY: I haven't heard his name either in a long time. I remember Craig. He was a big thinker. I think he was probably the best person you could work for, because the research work you were doing is not typical for what someone would be doing in an ES field office. Even though it wasn't a comfortable fit for you, you made the best of it. But you had somebody who was supportive.

KOFI: He actually wasn't my immediate supervisor. I can't remember my immediate supervisor's name right now. Gosh. But he supervised the contaminants program. Craig was actually a GS-14. I was supervised by his assistant, the two of them. I'm so sorry I can't remember his name. I can find out later. I'm so sorry. But he was very supportive. My immediate supervisor was very supportive. Craig was busy dealing with more of the Everglades issues. That was a hot potato for the Fish and Wildlife Service. He spent most of his time doing that, working with the partnerships.

LIBBY: I understand those issues too because I went to grad school in Florida and I worked for the governor of Florida for several years, so I was involved with some of the Everglades stuff. I know Florida was like. It was crazy back then. Probably still is. That marine lab was in Ft. Pierce, I think. Right?

KOFI: That's correct. Ft. Pierce.

LIBBY: That's a city closer to Vero Beach. All right. So, your wife gets her degree, and you are free to move.

KOFI: Two weeks after she got her degree, we were on the road to New York.

LIBBY: Dieter has never forgotten you, so now you go up to – where was that office located, the Great Lakes office?

KOFI: It was located in Amherst, New York which is just a suburb of Buffalo.

LIBBY: Even though that's in really western New York and Cortland is a little bit more of what I consider eastern or at least east-central New York, did you feel like you were going "home" when you went back to New York? How did that feel to be going back to New York?

KOFI: You know, it did feel like going home. Something I noticed in the south; people were very laid back. People took [their] time to call or answer emails or phone calls or things like that. I was kind of frustrated. I saw that even among university professors, which I hadn't noticed before I moved from New York. It felt good coming back home to something more familiar, with people that I felt were more responsive. Yeah, it felt like coming back home.

LIBBY: I do want to interrupt the chain here and say, by this time, are you an American citizen now?

KOFI: Yes.

LIBBY: When did you get your citizenship?

KOFI: I got my citizenship, in fact, when I was in Pennsylvania.

LIBBY: You must have. You wouldn't have been able to be an employee of the Fish and Wildlife Service without being a citizen. What was that decision like, to become a United States citizen? Are you still considered a citizen of Ghana also? Do you have dual citizenship?

KOFI: It was a very tough decision for me, because coming to America, I had seen a lot of American movies, and I wanted to become so much an American, especially a black American. And then, when I got here, I felt like I didn't fit into the black world or the white world. I felt a bit lost. I started asking myself *who am I?* I realized I am Ghanaian, I am African, and that's who I should be. I shouldn't try to become an African American, because it's a different experience. What African Americans are going through, I haven't been going through that. It's a different experience growing up in Ghana. It's different. I have to be myself. In the quest to find out who I am and become myself, I realized that my full name, when I left Ghana on my passport, my full name was Franklin Kofi Nana Egyiri Fynn-Aikins. I had a very long name.

LIBBY: You are going to have to [spell that for me.]

KOFI: My first name was Franklin. I realized that when someone hears my name, Franklin Fynn-Aikins someone will not think I'm Ghanaian. My Ghanaian name is Kofi. So, I decided when I became a citizen, I have to drop my first name, Franklin, so Kofi became my first name. When someone hears Kofi, they know I'm Ghanaian, because that name is a name that you find only in west Africa. Mostly in Ghana, Ivory Coast and Togo.

LIBBY: I wouldn't know that you were Ghanaian, but I would know that you were probably African by that name. Then if I saw you, I would probably really think that, because I would see that you are black. Of course, once I hear you speak, I would know that you were from Africa. But I still wouldn't know where. Most Americans are completely oblivious to the countries in Africa and their cultures and everything. We don't even know where they are located. Right? If I didn't know you personally, and we've talked about me going to Ghana and visiting Ghana through you at some point maybe in the future, I would never have any interest in going to Ghana, because it just isn't part of my world.

KOFI: Most of my friends who have gone to Ghana with me say the same thing. If it wasn't for you, Kofi, we wouldn't even think about going to Africa.

LIBBY: I think taking the name Kofi as your legal first name here was brilliant.

KOFI: Yes, but I have come full circle. I left Ghana when I was 24 years old. I've been in this country for 42 years. So, when I give talks, I introduce myself as "My name is Kofi Fynn-Aikins. My name is very diverse. Kofi is from Ghana. Fynn is Irish. Aikins is British. I am one-third Ghanaian, one-third Irish, one-third British, and 100 per cent all American." (laughter) I feel so proud of being an American. This is where I grew up. This is where I found a niche. This is where I came full circle. I'm very, very comfortable being American. I'm not moving back to Ghana. My wife feels the same way. She is not moving back to Italy. This is home. This is home.

LIBBY: That's wonderful. That's great. Well, we are thrilled that you are here. All right. Let's move to your time in the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Office. That was the name of the office at the time?

KOFI: Yes. The Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife – no! The Great Lakes Fisheries Resources Office.

LIBBY: Fisheries Resources Office. You went in as a deputy project leader.

KOFI: That's correct.

LIBBY: When you retired, you were the project leader.

KOFI: Yes. I came in as the deputy project leader. Dieter was there as the project leader. Then 9 months later, Dieter retires and leaves the Service. It was a very interesting time because Dieter built that office. He started the office. He brought on students, first out of the Buffalo State College, which is a good college. They have a very good fisheries program. He started in the office by recruiting students who had just graduated from that college. These employees, this was their dream job. They owed everything to Dieter, so Dieter was the father figure to them as well as their supervisor. They really respected him a lot. When he left, they felt a little bit anxious because they didn't know who was going to come in.

I was put into an acting position. You know, being a project leader, to be a project leader, especially when you've been through Washington, it's very easy to get a project leaders position when you've done that. I hadn't been to Washington. I hadn't been to work in the Regional Office. The cards were stacked a little bit against me. I applied but I don't know all the details. But apparently, they were trying to fill that position with someone from the Washington Office. At the same time, just like you mentioned at the beginning before we started the recording, that as a woman you faced certain challenges being in a project leader position. I had the same challenges. I was able to get this job because the diversity office in the Regional Office said, "Why didn't you guys select Kofi for this

position? He's right there. He's very qualified. He has a PhD. Why is he being overlooked when we know that we are trying very hard as an agency to diversify the agency." Again, I wasn't told all the details, but I ended up getting the job.

LIBBY: Oh good!

KOFI: When I got the job, my supervisor at the time, I said to him, "I'll make you a promise. You will never regret putting me in this position and I will make you proud." I said [to myself] *oh my god. Okay. Now I've made a promise. I have to fulfill that promise now.* That was a motivator for me to really show that maybe I got the job because of diversity but I knew I can do this job and I'm going to do it better than anybody else. I believe I did, because we created some very interesting programs in the office. I won many awards in the office. I won a national award from the Washington Office. I won several regional awards. I even got an award from the Niagara County Federation of Sportsmen's Club which basically blew me away. But the award that I am the most proud of was – do you remember the Gallup Organization came into Region 5 and they did a survey of all field stations to come up with an engagement score to figure out which offices were the best offices to work in? My office became one of the best offices to work in in Region 5. It's something that I'm very, very proud of because it's where the staff voted. You know how the survey runs. They interview every employee, and they come up with a score for the field station. My office was one of the highest rated. I know I fulfilled the promise, and I worked very hard to fulfill it. I'm very proud of what me and my staff achieved at that office.

LIBBY: I do remember at one of those project leader meetings at the beginning when we were all together because collectively the Regional Office wanted to increase the scores. I remember hearing that your scores were so good. I hate to say it, but mine were not as good, let's just put it that way. I do remember that. But you know what, I do believe that we had these challenges of being a woman selected to work on a refuge who had never worked on a refuge before, and here you hadn't come up through the traditional ranks to become a project leader at a fisheries office. You were selected, in part, but again as I said you had the expertise, and you had a lot of experience anyway that you cannot deny. But there was always a challenge there. I think you would have worked as hard as you worked, I would have worked as hard as I worked, because it's our personality. We are always going to do a really good job. We are going to do the very best job that we can. I think that's just part of who you were. So, you were a good fit for that office.

KOFI: That's true. But it was also a motivator for me, because I didn't want people to say *we told you so.* It was a motivator. I wasn't going to fail. There was no way I was going to fail. I was going to look for opportunities to grow the office. I became, basically, I feel like I became an entrepreneur in the Fish and Wildlife Service.

LIBBY: I was going to ask you – did you have a mentor, somebody who would help you as you transitioned into the role of being the project leader?

KOFI: No. That's one of the only things for me that I regret in the Service. I never had a mentor. But I did was I looked for, whenever I went to a meeting, I would look for leaders that I thought could help me out. I'd come to them with different questions or problems and ask them how to deal with it. One of the things I did when I became a project leader, I called it my "road trip." I had met some of the project leaders in the Great Lakes basin, Region 5 and Region 3 – mostly Region 3. I took a road trip. I went to the field stations, and I said, "Listen. I'm the new kid on the block. I've come to the wise man. Wise man,

teach me." I just sat there and took the advice from different project leaders. I did, from fisheries folks, from ES folks, from refuge folks. Then I took all that information, and I went to work. That's what I did. I just looked for people who I thought could help me grow. But I never had a mentor who helped me throughout my career. I never had that. I regret not having that because that is a close relationship you develop with someone in the agency that can help your career grow much quicker. I didn't have that.

LIBBY: Tell me then about some of the projects. I kind of cut you off before. You were saying that you were sort of like an entrepreneur and actually by doing your road trip and talking to all these "wise men", that's part of what any entrepreneur does. So, tell me about being the entrepreneur project leader at the Great Lakes.

KOFI: The one thing that we did we started an outreach and education program in my office. Outreach and education is typically what you find on refuges and hatcheries. In the first year of my career as a project leader, one day I woke up and said to my staff, "Here we are. We are doing some great work in this office, and nobody knows about us. Our office is in an office park and the office next door to us is a company that sells building supplies. They didn't even know what we were doing. They'd see our office staff come out. Sometimes we would bring our boats to the office before we leave to go into the field and do some work. One day, this guy comes and says, "Fish and Wildlife Service. Who are you? What do you guys do?" I was shocked, because here I am. I thought we are a Federal agency. We are doing all this great work, and nobody knew about us. Even the folks next door.

At one staff meeting, I told the staff that we need to start an outreach program, because we are proud of what we do but nobody knows, and nobody cares. We need to change that. They said to me, "How do we do that?" I said, "I have no clue. We have to figure this out ourselves. We have to figure this out. We are doing some great stuff, and we need to share it with the American people, because our mission says *working with our partners to conserve, protect and enhance fish and wildlife for the continuing benefit of the American people.* The American people in our neighborhood don't know anything about what we do. We need to change that. Secondly, there's a lot of government bashing going on. Government employees are being bashed all over the place. We are living off the taxpayer. We know that's not true. We are doing some great work. We need to let the public know about that." After the staff meeting, one of my staff came to me and said, "Kofi, that sounds kind of interesting. I want you to put me in charge of leading our outreach and education program." I'm like, "Wow, that's great. Go for it."

To make a long story short, we started this outreach and education program. We wanted to introduce the community to who we are and what we do. Our first outreach event, we called it an open house. We advertised [that] we will open our office. There's not a whole lot to see because we are an office. We are not a refuge where you can go and walk around. It's an office. So, we opened the office doors. We invited people in. We had some displays and posters and things like that. It was lie] going to a conference. From an outreach and education standpoint, it was pathetic. (laughter) We didn't know what we were doing. But at the end of the day, some people came to us and said, "Thank you for doing this. We didn't know that you guys were here." That was the motivator that we needed. We felt so proud that people thanked us. We even got a letter from one of the people who showed up, thanking us for doing this. We were fired up because we knew we had done the right thing, and we were on the right path.

Next year, one of my staff said to me, "We are Fish and Wildlife Service. We shouldn't be doing this in an office. We should be out there doing this somewhere." We are *okay, where* because we are in an office

park. So, the second year, we did it in the parking lot of our office and brought all our stuff outside. We had some interactive displays and things like that. The third year, somebody said, the office space is not big enough. So, we did it at a supermarket parking lot. We actually parked near the supermarket. They gave us water and publicity and everything. They became a partner. The following year, some guy came to us and said we should be doing this in a park. We ended up going to Niagara Falls. They have a park there. We did it in the park and we partnered with the city. The city liked it so much that they put a line item in their budget to host the event. The mayor said to me, "Kofi, we need something like this. We don't have a big event. This is the biggest event we have had in this city. What can I do to bring you guys back?" I said, "Mayor, show me the money. It costs a lot of money to put this event together. We could use some help." He delivered. We started also looking for funding from corporations.

At the same time that we started the outreach program, I also had learned a little bit about Friends groups and how the Friends groups have been very supportive of the refuge system. I actually went to NCTC (National Conservation Training Center) and took the Friends course – there's a proper course for Friends groups. I took that, and I'm like, *wow! How can I develop a Friends group?* It seemed really difficult to do because people go to [refuge] Friends groups, they love their refuge, because they spend time on the refuge enjoying the wildlife there. We don't have the wildlife. We don't have a space where people can go and enjoy it. We have office space. We don't have anything to show to folks. Nobody comes to visit us except for other scientists and biologists that work for the state and USGS and universities and things like that. Nobody comes for a tour in our office except the scientists. So, how do you create a Friends group like that? It was very difficult. But again, I went on a road trip. Every time I would go to a meeting, I talk to people about who we are and what we are trying to accomplish. I was able to put a Friends group together. It was the first non-refuge, non-hatchery Friends group in the Fish and Wildlife Service.

LIBBY: Good for you.

KOFI: Still not too many out there, but we were the first to do so. The advantage we had for doing that was we could use the Friends group to look for money.

LIBBY: Right.

KOFI: We joked about it. I called it "my money laundering operation" because when I go to talk to corporations about working together – I give a lot of talks to community folks, public officials, to corporations – I would tell them that conserving and protecting fish and wildlife is not only a job for the government. It's for everybody. We are all in this together. Then I give them my speech about how I don't have the resources to do all that I need to do within my community. We need to all work together. I use the Friends groups, and when I give a speech, I bring my Friends group members with me. They are the ones who do the ask. I preach the gospel, and the money goes to our Friends group. We use the funding to support our outreach and education programs.

To make a long story short, our programs got bigger and bigger and bigger. In Buffalo, there is a quasi-governmental agency that is trying to develop the Buffalo waterfront and get more people to come to the waterfront. I went to them and said, "Listen, we know how to do events. If you want to bring people to the waterfront, we can help." I gave them a video of one of our events that we had done in Niagara Falls, and I said, "Take a look at it. Let me know if you are interested. We can bring a big event to the Buffalo waterfront." So, they looked at it. The following morning, they called me up and said, "Kofi, we

need to talk. If we give you $20,000, can you host this event in Buffalo?" My jaw dropped because we had been scraping by with about $10,000, to raise $10,000 to do our events, and someone is going to double that on the Buffalo waterfront, which is a tourist destination? I was floored. But I said, "Yeah, we can do this." We hosted our biggest event. I invited Wendi Weber, our Regional Director, to come and see. We had been doing this for years, for about three or four years, but I wanted her to see what this really looked like. She came and was very, very impressed. We hosted it, and there were over 4,000 people there.

We got so good that my staff developed interactive displays. We go there to educate people about who we are and what we do but first we entertain them and the second we educate them. The way I got my staff to dig into creating very creative and fun displays, I thought I would give out awards for the best display. People took it very seriously. It was more bragging rights than anything else. *Oh, I won the best display for this year.* The staff became so good. By the time I left, everybody on the staff had become an expert on outreach and education. Without any training in outreach and education, we all became outreach specialists.

We developed so many different programs. One of our famous programs was called SNAP - Students, Nature and Photography – where we take students out to a state park, or a refuge and we give them cameras and we set them loose. They take photos of the environment or animals or whatever, and when they're done, we come to the office. We ask each kid to tell us which is their best photograph and why it is their best photograph. You can't believe the kind of information these kids share with us. The program got so good that several schools wanted us to do this program with them. Of course, we are a small office, and we couldn't do it for everyone, but it became one of the popular programs in our office. We were making a difference in our community, and we raised a ton of money. By the time I left, we had raised over $120,000 through our Friends group to run our outreach and education programs. That is something that I was very, very proud of.

I went around the region preaching why everybody should be doing outreach and education. What I heard from a lot of stations, like ES offices, was *well, we don't have anybody who is an outreach and education specialist.* We didn't have one either, but everyone in our office now is an outreach and education specialist. We learned how to do it, and it took us time, but in the end, we got so good at doing it and folks really enjoyed doing it. That's what I remember very fondly of the Service. We created something that wasn't there before and we did it very, very well.

LIBBY: I find this fascinating. I'd like to know more about what the purpose of the Great Lakes Fisheries Resource Office was and the projects you were working on. What was the subjects of your interactive displays? What exactly was it you were teaching people about that tied into the purpose of the office?

KOFI: The purpose of the office is to educate people about the Fish and Wildlife Service in general but also what the office does. I'll give you an example of an interactive display which is my all-time favorite. One of my staff designed a butterfly tent. He did all the initial work. He bought this kit from this lab. On the day of the event, we released butterflies into the tent. People walk into the tent with the butterflies flying around, landing on them, and they just loved it.

Another one was about fish passage – a model that shows how fish can go extinct because they can't go up the dam. Kids can actually pour water on this model and [see] how the water flows down. It was all interactive and it shows about fish habitats, it shows the different types of fishes and why some fish live

in different habitats. We came up with different models that showed the work that we do, which is basically restoring fish in their environments. It was how people develop or create different models that told the story of what we do in our office as fish biologists.

Then we also bring our boats. We have some pretty fancy boats that we use when we are out in the field. People can go into the boat. We talk about electrofishing which is pretty cool. We give a demonstration of electrofishing. That didn't go to well in some cases because some people felt like it was cruel, so we had to regroup quickly and tell them that there are two different ways of catching fish. One is by electrofishing, and one is using hooks, which is very bloody. We had to convince them that the electrofishing is safer for one and is easier for the fish to deal with than, for example, hooking them on a fish line. We had to figure out a way to do some public relations work there. We developed so many different models. When I think back to those days, I was very, very proud of my staff because they got really creative.

LIBBY: What were some of the fish and wildlife resource issues that you had to deal with, outside of the outreach and education?

KOFI: In the Great Lakes, fish don't know any boundaries, so we work with 8 states and 2 provinces in Canada and the Canadian government. We meet on a regular basis to talk about how we are going to conserve and protect fish and wildlife. Each jurisdiction has its own agenda. It was a humbling experience for me because we are a "fed" and I always thought the "fed" has all these powers. I realized quickly that the state has most of the power, as far as conservation is concerned because we are working within the state. We have to respect the state's rights, and we are there as guests of the state, and we have to work with them and be a support organization for them. When I got there, Dieter was for lack of a better word, more of a "federalist." He came into the job with a federal approach. We are the feds, and you listen to us, and we will work with you, but we are the feds. That created some animosity between the different jurisdictions. It was the legacy that I inherited. It took me a long time for some of the stakeholders to accept me for who I am. I had two strikes against me. One was being a former deputy of Dieter's because I went with him to these meetings and some of them were contentious. By default, it rubbed off on me. Another part was being black in a field where it is almost all white and all males. It took me a long time. When I left the Service, I felt there were still folks within the Great Lakes Basin, and folks in the states especially, that never really accepted me as an equal within the Great Lakes.

LIBBY: Really?

KOFI: Yeah.

LIBBY: That's too bad.

KOFI: Yeah. When we go to meetings, the states basically run it, and I provide information when I have to. I sit in the back. I felt like I was never really accepted within the Great Lakes Basin by the agencies. I'm not sure if it was mostly because of the race issue, because of my accent. I don't know. I just never felt like I was part of the crowd.

LIBBY: But within the Fish and Wildlife Service, you certainly felt, I think, accepted?

KOFI: Oh yeah. Fish and Wildlife Service is a great agency. I loved it. I'm still supporting the Fish and Wildlife Service as far as Friends are concerned. I'm still a mentor for Friends groups. I'm working with

NCTC to mentor Friends organizations as we speak. You can't take the Fish and Wildlife Service out of me. I had such a great experience. I met great people. I love the Fish and Wildlife Service.

LIBBY: I think, and obviously I don't have any answers for why you felt that way about the states, but I had a similar experience on refuges where the states really were – we should complement each other. Our missions complement each other so well, but there was always tension between the Fish and Wildlife Service and the state fish and game, fish and wildlife agencies. Both the states I worked in had very powerful directors. There was always a push and pull. The state listed species that maybe we didn't care about as much because they were common otherwise. I understand some of that tension. A lot of that could have been just where you were and the people that were there. I do understand. It's kind of sad in a way. You were there for a long time. When did you become the project leader? In 1998?

KOFI: In 2000.

LIBBY: Yeah, and you retired in 2017. You were there a long time, and you are all about partnerships and cooperation. Well, I am sure you still made a lot of progress.

KOFI: Some came around especially during the time when we had a great infusion in funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. The Obama administration gave a ton of money to the Great Lakes region, and we started dispersing some to the states. We had funding to do some of the things that the states wanted us to do. They started paying more attention. It was almost at the end that I felt like some of them were coming around. I left feeling I never really got the respect that I needed, that I deserved, from the states.

LIBBY: Tell me about the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and some of the things that you were trying to deal with. Was it contaminants issues or invasive fish issues or fisheries?

KOFI: It was everything. It was everything. Basically, it filled a void for us because we didn't have a lot of resources to do our jobs. The Great Lakes initiative brought funding that allowed us not only to give us resources to recruit people, buy equipment and also give money to our partners to fund some of their projects. A university project that we couldn't do or had no interest in doing, we could fund some of those projects. We actually became very popular because we had the funding to do a lot of things. The states came to us. *We know you have this money. We need help with this. We need help with that.* We were able to do some of that for them. The Great Lakes Initiative basically gave us the resources we needed to actually do a very good job. Funding went not only to states but also went to NGOs and USGS. But I think Fish and Wildlife Service, we got a big chunk of the money.

LIBBY: What were some of the things that you worked on or some of the issues?

KOFI: Lake trout restoration is what we did. At the end, we were doing some really interesting job because as you are probably aware of, some of the prey fishes in the Great Lakes went extinct. The coregonids. They went extinct. So, as we are restoring lake trout, we started thinking about – we need to bring back their favorite prey food. So, we partnered with the USGS, and the state and we actually learned how to raise those fish at the Tunison lab. Then we did some research work with the states and the Canadians. By the time I left, we actually had developed a, how do you call it, a process for lack of a better word to grow these fish and then stock them in the Great Lakes. To see them survive in the Lakes the following year was very, very exciting. That was something. I didn't quite play a direct role except for

the funding aspect of it, but to see the partners become successful and see the fish survive in the wild was very, very exciting for me.

LIBBY: Was that the lake trout? That's not the prey fish though, is it? You were talking about prey fish.

KOFI: For the lake trout, we were raising the coregonids. They are called coregonids, a group of fishes including the bloaters. It's a group of species called the coregonids. We were restoring the coregonids into the Great Lakes. The lake trout will benefit from that because that was their favorite prey food.

LIBBY: Okay. I get it.

KOFI: It was part of the Great Lake restoration efforts, bringing back their prey species.

LIBBY: I understand that now. If you want to have more lake trout, you've got to have more of the prey food, the fish that the lake trout eat. Was the lake trout fishery, in addition to just having them be part of the natural ecosystem, was that more of a recreational fishery thing or was it a commercial fishery? Was that a motivator?

KOFI: There is no commercial fishery in the Great Lakes. Mostly recreational although in Canada they have some commercial fishery. The lake trout used to be the top predator fish in the lakes, and then they almost went extinct, so the Fish and Wildlife Service started a restoration program in all the Great Lakes. Before I left, it was only Lake Superior where they were stocking fish in that lake because we now have self-reproducing fish in the [other] lakes. So, we stopped. About ten years ago, we started seeing a similar thing in Lake Ontario. We didn't see it in Lake Erie, but in Lake Ontario, we started seeing naturally reproduced fish in the lake. So, we know the original effort is working. One of the reasons why we wanted to bring back this *Coregonus* into the prey species because, I mentioned the early mortality syndrome. Well, the early mortality syndrome came about because fish were eating alewives. The lake trout were eating the alewife which was not their normal prey. The alewife in an invasive species that contains this enzyme that breaks down the vitamin B in the fish. So, when the fish lays the eggs, they don't have enough vitamin B in them. It was impacting their ability to reproduce through the eggs that hatched. The fish fry will die because they didn't have enough vitamins in their egg yolks.

LIBBY: Kind of like [how] DDT thinned the eggshells of bald eagles. Even though it was a different mechanism, something was present versus something was absent. It still ended up having an impact. Did you say that alewife were an invasive species?

KOFI: Yeah.

LIBBY: But alewives – we do a lot of work to restore alewives in other parts of the [country.]

KOFI: In the Great Lakes, they were.

LIBBY: Really! That's interesting. You didn't want alewives in the Great Lakes then.

KOFI: We want them someplace else. That's the story about invasive species. There are some places where - like when I was in China – blue gills are invasive species there but then we get the Asian carp which is an invasive species here. It depends on where the species are. If they are not endemic to that area, they become an invasive species.

LIBBY: That's right. I get that completely. That's really interesting. I understand, Kofi, that you were the project leader. You did a lot of budget work. You did a lot of goal setting. You did a lot of personnel

issues. But in terms of the projects that you helped support and facilitate and in your meetings with people and help direct resources to, were you involved with things like zebra mussels in the Great Lakes?

KOFI: Yes. In fact, we had an invasive species program in our office that we actually elevated – Dieter started this before me – but we were able to elevate the invasive species coordinator position to a regional position. In other words, the GS-13 person wasn't in the Regional Office. She was in our office and was running the regional invasive species program.

LIBBY: Who was that person? Do you remember?

KOFI: Sandy Keppner was her name.

LIBBY: Yeah. That's right.

KOFI: We were able to engineer that. That's something that I am very proud of because we had to fight a battle to get that position. We do invasive species work with zebra mussels. But most of the work we do with invasive species is mainly through outreach and education. Because invasive species, once they get into the system, there's not a whole lot you can do about it. We also did some work in eradicating chestnut…

LIBBY: Oh, water chestnut?

KOFI: Water chestnut, which is one of the things I am very proud of, because water chestnut had invaded one creek near our office. Boaters couldn't get in that creek anymore. We took that opportunity to create an outreach around it. We brought some volunteers and community folks, and we partnered with the city public officials. We were able to remove water chestnut from the entire area. We basically eradicated water chestnut from there, and people saw it. People could go through again and fish in that creek. Again, it showed how the government and government employees help their communities by creating all these recreational opportunities for them. That is something that we did with our invasive species program that I am also very, very proud of.

LIBBY: Well, you should be proud of that because you got on it early and you recognized that it was a threat, and you did something. You were able to get something done about it. We battled water chestnut my entire time at Eastern Mass [NWR Complex] and they're still battling it. It's a huge problem in the eastern part of Massachusetts. It's a problem in a lot of places now, obviously. But that's a tough plant, so it's good that you were able to get rid of it from that watershed.

KOFI: It took us three years, going back and forth to do it. But we did it. It hasn't come back since. Something that we are very proud of. Again, as far as the outreach goes, we got a lot of praise out of that because the public saw what the government did for them. It's something that we are very, very proud of.

LIBBY: You should be proud. Any other big projects or anything else you want to share from your time in the Great Lakes office or any particular challenges or other successes that you want to share?

KOFI: I talked about how I loved the Fish and Wildlife Service. I spent a lot of time at NCTC. I went through leadership training, just like you probably did as well. I learned a lot about myself. Introspection became something that was very important to me. I learned about myself. Like everybody else, when we go through leadership training, we want to become better leaders. That's first and foremost in our

minds. But I came out of that training a better father and a better husband. I get emotional when I talk about it because I never had a father in my life. My father was never there for me. I always wondered what life would be like with a father. But I also remember early on in my life, I made a vow to myself that if I became a father, I would be the best father ever. I didn't feel comfortable being a father, because I didn't have a role model. There was never a father figure in my life, so I didn't know how to act like a father. I always doubted myself as a father. I shared this with my wife many times. She always tells me, "Kofi, you are a good father. Stop beating yourself up." But I never felt comfortable until I went to ALDP (Advanced Leadership Development Program).

LIBBY: That's amazing. That's wonderful.

KOFI: It just changed my life forever, and I felt comfortable being a dad. That is something that stayed with me the rest of my life. I wanted to give back. So, I spend a lot of time at NCTC, being involved with different programs. I became a Friends mentor. I go there to give talks about how to create Friends groups, how to manage Friends groups, how to create an outreach program like we did from scratch. I also serve as a Diversity Change Agent. I did some training. I was trained by the Gallup Organization Level 1 and Level 2. I became an advocate for diversity in the Fish and Wildlife Service. I don't know if you recall one time, I gave a presentation at a regional director's meeting that was broadcast to the rest of Region 5. I gave a presentation on diversity and its advantages and disadvantages and why we as an agency should become diversified, making a case for that. I spent a lot of time at NCTC, and I actually love going to NCTC. Sometimes when I get a little bit antsy, my wife will say to me, "Why don't you just find a way to go to NCTC?" (laughter) And I always did. One day she came to NCTC to spend some time with me. It was on a weekend. She realized how powerful that place is. When you leave that place, you feel energized. I feel like a new person when I go to NCTC. I spent a lot of time there, learning. That is one thing I will miss from the Fish and Wildlife Service is my role at NCTC and the different roles that I played there and the support that I got from Fish and Wildlife Service folks and the partnerships and the friendships that I formed at NCTC. That is something I will cherish for the rest of my life.

LIBBY: That's one of the reasons why I think that I am still involved with the Fish and Wildlife Service through the Heritage [now History] Committee and the oral histories. It keeps me connected to an agency that I really respect and admire the mission, and I feel very close to. Although, that is starting to fade. It's been three and a half years since I retired; almost four years. Time ends up weakening that bond a little bit. That was really powerful what you just said. I remember you being a diversity change agent. I also got some training but for me, what I think about when I hear you, even though you were a project leader, you still were all in and you really carried through with this more than I did. I had the interest, I had the zeal, the openness, but I always found my workload was so tough, it was so pressing that it was hard for me to put the energy and time into the diversity and being a change agent as much as I wanted to. I just couldn't do it quite as much as I wanted to because I was just buried with work.

KOFI: You are absolutely right. I was lucky in the sense that I was in that office for a long time. We grew together and I put people in charge of things. I felt comfortable that the office was running on autopilot, and they didn't need me, so I started playing more of a national and regional role.

One of the things that I did not mention was that I also started, when I went through leadership training, I did all my details in Washington, in the Washington, DC office. I could have gone anywhere in the country, but I wanted to work with the fisheries leadership in Washington, DC so we could start a national fisheries Friends group. It didn't exist. It was only the refuge system that had a national Friends

group, and I wanted to do the same thing for fisheries because I knew what the Friends had done for the refuge system with budgets and everything. I figured *hey, we don't have to reinvent the wheel.* Every program in the Fish and Wildlife Service should be doing what the refuge system has done. That's how you get resources into your program. So, I started a national Friends initiative. I co-started it with a lady, Amy Gaskill, from the Pacific Region. I was very fortunate at the time because when we started it, I didn't get a whole lot of support. But then Mamie [Parker] came from the region [Region 5] to become the Assistant Director for Fisheries. She embraced it. I spent a whole month in Washington, DC working with lawyers to create a national Friends group. I spent a lot of time talking to fisheries offices about Friends groups and building Friends organizations and things like that.

I played a national role and also a regional role on different issues – Friends groups, outreach education and diversity and then also at NCTC, as a volunteer coach, instructor and mentor. I ended up playing more of a regional and national role and at the end of my career, I actually wanted to do more of that. You should remember there was this program when we retired, I forget the name of that program, but it was to encourage people like you and I to stay on and mentor up and coming leaders and work half-time. I wanted to do that but my Assistant Regional Director at the time felt that my position was too important for me to go part-time. I felt like I had reached the peak of my career. There was not a whole lot more I could do in the office because my staff were running the office without me and doing very well, so I felt that I needed to do something different. I didn't want to move. I could have moved to the regional office or the Washington office. I didn't want to move. We decided to stay here in Buffalo. So, I decided to retire and pursue other interests. For me, life is all about growth. If I wasn't growing in my office, I've got to find something else in my life that would help me grow.

I focused my energies now on my non-profit organization, Hope for Sisi's Kids, and also my volunteer activities with my Rotary Club. I just started a tour business to raise money for my non-profit work. For me, life is all about growth. I left the Service not because I was unhappy, but because I didn't want to move, it was time for me to pursue something different.

LIBBY: And you have. I know your tour business goes to Ghana. I don't know if you go anyplace else.

KOFI: No, just to Ghana, because I want to take people to the school that we support. What has happened in the past is I have taken friends. You know Dave Tilton?

LIBBY: Yes.

KOFI: He went to Ghana with me a couple of years ago. Everybody who has been to Ghana with me, loved it. They went to the school, and they fell in love with the kids. You have to understand, these kids are in a rural community, and they are very poor, and their school is falling apart. We came in to fix the school. So, every year we go there with a team. We partner with the University of Buffalo. We bring a medical team. We bring students, we bring faculty and then I bring my friends. We descend on the campus for a day or two of volunteer work. The kids are so happy to see us because we are giving them hope. Somebody across the ocean cares for them. They exude this happiness, and you can't help but fall in love with these kids. Everybody who has come back from that trip has become one of our donors to help us support these kids.

Secondly, because I took my friends with me, they get to meet my family in Ghana and spend a lot of time with my friends. They get invited to parties and dinners and things like that. And those two things I just described are the best experiences they have. I figured if I could open this up to the rest of the

world and still give them the same treatment, the “friends and family” treatment, who knows? I might run into somebody with deep pockets who can say, “Kofi, how can I help you?” I will say, “Well, we want to build new classrooms. We want to equip all these kids with laptops. That’s the way you can help.” I started this tour not to make money but to network with all these strangers who I believed would come to support what we are trying to accomplish at the school. I believe that is one thing I have learned. I believe in my networking skills, forming partnerships to help me accomplish my mission. So that’s why I started the tour. I’m going to do just two tours a year. One in January and one in February because in between, I want to see the rest of the world myself.

LIBBY: Covid put a damper on that but now I think it’s really made people realize how much many people want to get out and live and see the world and see other people and be more engaged. Well, that sounds great.

Kofi, it’s about time to wrap up. I want to thank you for this interview. I don’t want to cut you off if there is anything else you want to share, but I think it’s been a really informative interview. I’m really thrilled with all the information that you provided to us today.

KOFI: Thank you. It was a long career. I have no regrets. I enjoyed every minute of it. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story.

LIBBY: Just hang on. I’m going to turn off the recorder. Just hang on the line for a minute. Okay?

KOFI: Okay.

End of Interview

Key words: contaminants, diversity, education, fisheries, fisheries management, invasive species, lakes, leadership, outreach, partnerships, research