RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. NDIDI AMUTAH

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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William Buie: This begins an interview with William Buie and Ndidi Amutah in Montclair, New Jersey, on February 9, 2016. Thank you for having me. To begin, why don't you tell me when and where you were born?

Ndidi Amutah: I was born in Trenton, New Jersey, Mercer Hospital, in 1981 to Nigerian parents. I'm the oldest of four and the only girl.

WB: What are your parents' names?

NA: My mother's name is Abigail. My father's name is Solomon.

WB: Your siblings?

NA: I have three brothers, Azunah, Chimaobi, and David.

WB: What did your parents do for a living?

NA: My mother works for the State of New Jersey. She's a project manager who overseas federal grants related to land use and water quality. She has a Master of Science in Environmental Science and Policy from NJIT [New Jersey Institute of Technology]. My father has an MBA with a focus on Accounting and Finance from New York Institute of Technology and he's a retired high school teacher.

WB: Tell me what it was like growing up in Trenton.

NA: Growing up in Trenton was amazing. I don't think I really understood the implications of being from an urban community or being from a community that others would characterize as underserved, vulnerable, or at risk. To me, I had everything that I needed. I had a great social circle. I had a great family. We went to the Boys and Girls Club. We went to the pool. It wasn't until I got to college that I really started to understand differences in education, quality, access, and attainment in underperforming urban schools, and I think that was really the beginning of the realization that everyone in Trenton was not like my family, that we were really an anomaly in the City of Trenton in that I came from highly educated parents and all of me and my siblings have advanced degrees. That was the anomaly for Trenton, but in my worldview the world was like Trenton, so, I really didn't understand until I started to travel outside that other schools have better educational systems, more resources, higher trained faculty and students, and just more opportunities than we were afforded in Trenton public schools, but growing up it was beautiful. I had a great childhood there.

WB: Where did you go to elementary school?

NA: So, elementary school, it's interesting. I grew up in the southern ward of Trenton, South Trenton, but I was bussed to East Trenton because I was in gifted and talented. So, I went to Patton Joseph Hill, PJ Hill Elementary School on East Eighth Street, and all of my classes, K through 6, I was in gifted and talented. It was like a magnet school for gifted and talented people, so, I was bussed in.

WB: What was that like?

NA: It was great. I mean being a gifted and talented student we very quickly realized that we were treated differently than other students. We just got special perks for being smart which was great and our teachers were great, very dedicated, good principal, nice class size, and it was a great experience. I really enjoyed my elementary education.

WB: You were aware that you were being treated differently at the time.

NA: Yes. I mean it was like the resources that we had access to, the types of field trips we would do, the educational opportunities that were afforded us were different than my friends who were in regular classes and it felt like hierarchy, if you will.

WB: What kind of activities would you do?

NA: Debate, I was always on the debate team. We would have Black History Month plays and we would have guest speakers, and we would do educational field trips, and I think there were opportunities afforded to other students as well, but it just felt like we were treated more specially because we were gifted and talented. The curriculum, the most outstanding thing that I noticed was the difference in the rigor of the curriculum that we went through being gifted and talented. It was a more rigorous, more academically challenging curriculum.

WB: Did you always do well?

NA: Yes. [laughter] I mean being the oldest of four children, being Nigerian American, it was implicit that you're going to excel. You have no choice but to be great, and it was just something that was constantly reaffirmed, constantly supported. In the summertime, we'd read books; we'd be at the library; we'd have competitions on geography and math. Education was celebrated in my household. It was something to strive for. There was a friendly, competitive nature between me and my siblings and education was something that we really quickly understood was a catalyst to success in this country and it's something that could level the playing field and provide you with opportunities, and once we understood that, even as a child, it just changed and shaped the way that I carried myself.

WB: How so?

NA: Well, I just always took education very seriously. I always understood the value of a quality education. I pushed myself educationally, had some college classes when I was in high school. I always strove to be greater and to learn more, huge, I'm an avid reader, and have always had a quest for knowledge, and I understood that education is the gateway to success in this country.

WB: What year did you enter high school?

NA: I started high school in 1995.

WB: Where was that?

NA: Trenton Central High School, at the time we only had one high school which has now been fragmented into learning communities, but at the time my incoming class was about four thousand students. My graduating class was about 1,100 students. So, we started to see some shifts and we lost some students to moving and crime and juvenile detention, and a myriad of other things that were happening at Trenton at the time, but 1995 was when I started.

WB: What was high school like for you?

NA: High school was great. I've always been a very social person. So, I'm what you would call like a very social nerd. So, I've always been very smart, very book smart, loved learning, but also had like just a very cool personality, and so high school was great. I did nerdy things and I did fun things. I was captain of the debate team, but I was also on the basketball team. Yes, high school was great. I had a good circle of friends who I'm still friends with today, some of them, and I was also in AP classes, and always pushing myself to do more. I was the president of the Yearbook Club. I enjoyed high school. It was great.

WB: Did you have any trouble balancing all of the different activities you were involved in?

NA: I think when you're a teenager in general you kind of want to do the fitting-in thing, but I've always been laser focused on the next level. So, even in high school I was already immensely preparing myself for college, and so I really didn't give myself the luxury of letting things slack. Everything had to get done. You're going to play basketball. Then, you're going to go home and do your homework, and you're going to study for this debate, and you're just managing your time really well, which helped me when I got to college.

WB: Is that something that your parents had to stay on you at all?

NA: Yes, my mother's persistence and consistent nature. My mother's like an octopus. There were four of us, but she just had her hands in so many different things. She was always abreast of what was going on, came to all our PTA meetings and our basketball games. She was always there. Yes, she definitely affirmed and supported us educationally, and always pushed us and always held us accountable. I think that's the word I would use, is that there's an accountability, there's an understanding that you're investing in your future. "This was not a future for me." She would say: "I've already done my high school. This is your future and if you do what you're supposed to do you're going to set your career and trajectory on a good path." So, there was always a level of accountability there.

WB: So, was there any question about whether you were going to college or not?

NA: No. By sophomore year of high school I was already on college tours. I got early acceptance to university by my junior year. College was something like you were definitely going; you're going to be successful; you're going to graduate in four years. It was very formulaic for me and I've always known that I wanted to be a doctor. I've always had that. I

mean, not all of the nuances worked out, but roughly I've known my career path from a very young age, and so it was just chipping away at that incrementally to get to that point.

WB: That is a fifty-fifty. Some people know very early on what they want to do and some do not figure it out until very late.

NA: Exactly.

WB: When did you first know that you wanted to be a doctor? Can you recall?

NA: Yes, I can. I was nine years old and I told my mother I wanted to be neonatologist, because I wanted to work with babies and help infants, and that was around the time I was reading Dr. Ben Carson's book *Gifted Hands*, and he talks about how he was the first--and he's an African American neurosurgeon who's currently running for President, but at the time he was an African American neurosurgeon from John Hopkins University who was the first neurosurgeon to successfully separate Siamese twins--and I just thought that was so amazing that this African American man at this prestigious university has done something that is historical, broken ground. So, I said, "Mom, I'm going to be a neonatologist." The funny thing is I didn't do medical school, but my PhD is in Maternal Child Health, and my dissertation research was on pregnancy and infant mortality, and so I still stayed in that kind of vein of mothers and children, but I was nine when I knew I wanted to be a doctor.

WB: Can you talk to me about some of your other influences?

NA: Yes. Other influences, just successful black women like the Oprahs of the world, like Mary McLeod Bethune, Sojourner Truth, Septima Clark, Coretta Scott King, Michelle Obama. I'm just drawn and influenced by successful black women who have persevered and stayed the course. So, these are the people I was learning about in high school and in college. The other influence is my family back home in Nigeria, just understanding at a very young age that I was afforded certain opportunities and experiences and luxuries that my cousins, who are my same age, same background, would not be afforded and so I did not want to squander that opportunity that I had been afforded. So, that was also a major influence of keeping me on track and for me to understand that I'm in a position of great privilege, and that you should understand that and hold that with a sense of gratitude.

WB: Did you ever visit?

NA: Yes. We'd go back and forth. We lived in Nigeria for about eight years and as I got older we'd go back and visit, back and forth, and so we go to Nigeria pretty frequently, probably like once a year or so, but it's nice because my cousins and I are in the same space of life. We're about the same age and to be able to celebrate life together and just appreciate each other's shared understanding at the family level, but different social, cultural influences has been really cool and keeps me grounded and humble and thankful, yes.

WB: In what year did you graduate high school?

NA: I graduated high school in 1999.

WB: And?

NA: And it was the end of a great era. It was the last of the decade and it was a significant time, and went straight into college in fall. I was eighteen. I just got my license. Life was great. Life was amazing at the time.

WB: You went to college. We're talking about Livingston.

NA: I went to Livingston.

WB: How did the decision to go to Livingston come about?

NA: You know, the funny thing about Livingston is that--so, I did early admission and acceptance for another university, and I was so pumped to go there. I mean I was so excited. I had all of my paraphernalia. I just knew what dorm I was going to live in, and they didn't give me any financial aid because I was out of state. So, my little crushed and devastated self--my mother said, "Well, there is Rutgers University." I'm like, "Oh." Because I don't think I understood what a world-class institution Rutgers University was being from New Jersey, born and raised in New Jersey. I don't think I really understood the magnitude that is Rutgers University, and the global reputation that Rutgers has. I don't think I understood that at like seventeen, eighteen. So, long story short, my mother made me apply and I was accepted, and we had to pick between one of three campuses, and I chose Livingston because of the political, racial, cultural implications that Livingston was founded from. It was birthed out of the Civil Rights Movement. I was like, oh, that's where I'm going. So, that's how I ended up at Livingston.

WB: So, did you do research on Livingston? Was that something that you knew before applying?

NA: Yes, I did research. [laughter] Because I knew I didn't want to go to Douglass which was the all-women's campus and I felt like Rutgers College was the main campus. I wanted something that was a small school within a larger university and Livingston had a great reputation of being very inclusive, celebrating diversity, smaller class size, that's what I was looking for, to be in a smaller community within a larger university.

WB: Talk to me about your first year at Livingston.

NA: First year at Livingston, it was amazing. My roommate was my best friend from high school, from middle school, Jenna Kettenburg. We're still best friends today, twenty-plus years later. She was my roommate. I lived in House 34 in the Quads and it was great. The freedom and the autonomy that college affords you is second to none. I think everybody should live on campus because you just mature so much. You learn so much about yourself. The social portion of Livingston was great. The programs that they offered for us and it just opened my mind so

much to different cultures, different ethnicities, different backgrounds. It was great. I really, really had a great first year at Rutgers, Livingston.

WB: What classes were you taking? Do you remember?

NA: I remember I took "Expository Writing" which was like English 101 for freshman. I remember I took my first Africana studies class which I actually ended up double majoring, in public health and Africana studies. I took "Intro to Afro Studies" and my mind was blown about. I took that with Professor [Edward] Ramsamy and it was one of those life-altering classes, because it was like an overview of the African American experience in the United States, and it just changed my whole life. It just opened my mind up in so many different areas about what the African American experience has been like in the United States. I think it was even called something like "The African American Experience in the United States." It was a great class.

WB: Did you do any extracurricular activities your freshman year?

NA: Did I do any extracurricular activities my freshman year? No, I was pretty much being a freshman and hanging out and being very social. I don't think I really got involved in extracurricular activities until junior year; maybe like the end of sophomore year. When I did, I was a welcome ambassador for freshmen that were coming in. So, I don't think I did anything my freshman year. It was just like building up my circle of friends and I had a lot of eight o'clock classes. So, I don't think I did anything freshman year, but the end of sophomore year I was a welcome ambassador for new students, and then, from then I went on to do many different activities. I was on Livingston Program Board. I was on Livingston College Governing Association. I was in Rutgers Public Health Association. I was on Senior Class. Once I started activities I did a lot of them, but I don't think I did anything initially.

WB: Social life-wise, was that spent mostly on campus or were you venturing out into New Brunswick, Piscataway, Edison?

NA: Everywhere. We were everywhere. I was everywhere. I think the beauty of the field of Public Health is that it relies a lot on the applied experience at the community level. I did a lot of great internships like New Jersey Women and AIDS Network which was in New Brunswick, Central New Jersey Maternal-Child Health Consortium which was in Piscataway, Planned Parenthood which was in Plainfield. I ventured out a lot. Of course, socially we were hanging out in New York City on the weekends. I really got to know my area very well in the time that I was there.

WB: Talk to me a little bit about your sophomore year. This is when you start to branch out a little more.

NA: Yes, sophomore year I kind of solidified my circle of friends. Sophomore year I was still a biology major. I was still a bio, premed major. I didn't declare public health until the summer after sophomore year. So, I think I was still trying to find my major. I knew I wanted to be a doctor, but I don't think I was very sure on if I wanted to do biology or psychology. The nuances of me being a doctor I wasn't clear on, but then, over the summer, I took an "Introduction to

Public Health" class, which is, ironically, a class I teach now, and I was like this is my life. It was like "aha," flashing lights, lightbulb moment, and that's when I said, "This is what I'm going to do, public health."

WB: It was that class that started it.

NA: Yes. It was the professor. He was amazing. I wish I could remember his name. It was at the Bloustein School in downtown New Brunswick and the professor was amazing. He just had such a zest for the field of public health. He just made you fall in love with it, he knew his material, and that solidified my whole career, that one class.

WB: What was your circle of friends like?

NA: The same circle I have now. I think back on my circle and I'm like, "Wow." We immediately jelled. My best friend, Mighty, he's also in public health. My other best friend, Christian, she's in urban planning, regional planning. My other best friend, Jenna, the one I grew up with, she's in criminal justice. I had a really diverse group of friends: African American, African, Caribbean, Caucasian, Asian. I had a nice, diverse group of friends and we just loved each other. We just embraced each other. We supported each other and it was a really cool group of friends. I don't think we really appreciated it at the time. You're like nineteen, twenty, but, yes, it was a nice, cool group of people.

WB: Were they all similarly active as you were?

NA: There was a continuum of activity. I think I was at the very high end, and then, you had like various degrees of active. Mighty and Christian, they were also very active in Livingston Program Board. Mighty and I were both in leadership in the Public Health Association. Some of my other friends from college founded an organization called Sharing Our Light, SOL, which is for women of color to talk in a positive space, in a confidential space. So, yes, there was a continuum of activity.

WB: That was one of the things I wanted to ask you about. Can you tell me a little bit more about SOL?

NA: Yes, SOL was an amazing organization. It was really founded out of a paucity of experiences or a paucity of organizations for women of color on a PWI [Predominately White Institution] campus. Not a sorority, not a club, but where is a social space that women can come together and dialogue and debate and really support each other, and it was beautiful. It was a beautiful energy. It's still going on now. I mean we founded SOL 2002, 2001. So, it's at least fourteen, fifteen years old, and it filled a nice and necessary void for safe and confidential space for women of color.

WB: What were some of the other organizations that you were involved in? Talk to me about some of the activities that you did.

NA: So, I was on the Livingston College, LCGA, Livingston College Governing Association, where I represented my class and we voted on funding. We voted on student programming. I was also on Livingston Program Board. We put on educational events. We put on fashion shows, parties, trips, comedy shows. I was an RA. I was an RA, which I loved. Shout out to retired Dean Haynes who hand selected me to be an RA and I managed a floor of about forty residents. I was a senior class officer which is how we planned our senior class trip, our senior activities. I was an officer in a public health association. We did health fairs and HIV testing events on campus. Yes, those were the ones that I probably was most active in.

WB: You were a member of the Minority Mentor Program?

NA: Yes. That program was essentially focused on pairing minorities with other students and faculty of color to kind of get to graduation. It was a program for recruitment and retention of minority students.

WB: For how many years were you involved with that?

NA: I think I was in that for about three years, probably like sophomore through senior.

WB: You mentioned the orientation.

NA: Yes, orientation leader, yes.

WB: That is basically working with incoming freshman?

NA: Incoming freshman, make them comfortable, answer any questions, be their point of contact, welcome them to the university, help them figure out. Rutgers is a huge organization. It's a huge school. So, where do you get your parking? How do you get an email address? Where's the dining hall? Like those type of things that are really anxiety producing as a freshman. Just kind of taking the anxiety out of that, welcoming them, being a big sister, shoulder to cry on, you're leaving home for the first time. So, it was great. I had a great experience with that.

WB: So, let's walk forward to your junior year.

NA: Yes. To me, junior year was the hardest of the four years, because that's when I realized that I wanted to go directly into grad school for public health. That's also when I made the decision to double major in BA in African studies and BS in public health. So, I was taking a course load of like eighteen to twenty credits, studying for the GREs, starting to put together my grad school list. Junior year was probably my most serious, academically rigorous year, because you don't have the luxury of being a new student, and senior year you're kind of just coasting on your way out. So, for me junior year was like the most serious year for me. Yes, junior year was tough. I took the hardest classes. I took healthcare economics with Dr. Wolfe. That's the hardest class I have ever taken in my life, junior year. Yes, it was a very serious year.

WB: You maintained your clubs and different activities?

NA: Yes, it was stressful. [laughter]

WB: I mean how did you do that?

NA: I mean time management, working. So, I had a schedule. I was also--how could I forget this. I was a student safety officer which was like a student version of keeping the campus safe. We would like sign people into the dorms. We worked on the weekends. So, I had such a tight schedule where I'd work student safety, I'd go to RA meetings, and I had a huge calendar that was color coded of where I was supposed to be, and, yes, it was stressful, but it also prepared me for life, because that's the same way I manage my life now, and that's how I'm able to differentiate the things that are important, things that I can put off, and I learned that definitely junior year.

WB: So, senior year?

NA: Yes, senior year was bittersweet, because now the rubber meets the road, and people are graduating, people are going to grad school. Fall semester of my senior year was when I took the GREs for the first time for real, and started to really craft my personal statement, start to go look at the schools I was applying to. Senior year was very mechanical in that I knew I wanted to transition immediately to grad school. So, it was knocking down the things on my to do list in a way that was systematic, that was going to ensure my success, and by February of my senior year, I already knew I was going to grad school, I had already solidified my housing contract. I'm still an undergrad and I already know my next steps. So, senior, it was a lot of work, but it was also great. That was our senior class trip. We went to Jamaica. Ten of us went to Jamaica for a week. It was wonderful. We had a senior week, just a week of festivities celebrating the end of college. I mean, senior year was great. I had a great collegiate experience.

WB: Did you live on campus all four years?

NA: Yes, I lived on campus all four years. So, I was in the Quads. I think Quad 34 and I was in Quad 3 House 34, and Quad 3 House 32 freshman and sophomore year. Then, junior year I moved to South Tower, and then, senior year I was an RA in North Tower, yes.

WB: Would you go home often? How often would you go home?

NA: Honestly, not that much. So, Trenton and New Brunswick are like thirty minutes apart from each other, so I would go home for like major holidays, wash my clothes, but I loved being on campus. I loved my crew. I loved the collegiate lifestyle. I loved the flexibility. So, I didn't go home that much.

WB: Would your parents come and visit you?

NA: Yes, thank you for that. So, my mother, my parents, and my siblings would come for--we used have this thing called family night in Tillett Dining Hall, and they would come and it was like lobster night, and the parents would come, they would eat dinner with us, so they always

came for that. They would come for little things I would do on campus. I was a Paul Robeson Scholar and they came to my thesis defense. Yes, they were very familiar with the campus. They would definitely come up there and support me.

WB: How did they feel about the campus? Did they like it? Did they not like it?

NA: Oh, they loved it. They loved it. What is there not to love? You are on a huge campus. Livingston is small college within a larger university, so you have all the benefits of both worlds. You have that small intimacy where you know everybody on Livingston, but if you want to be within the larger Rutgers system you can go to Douglass and Busch and College Ave and Cook. It was great. I really liked that model of having both options.

WB: One of the things that people talk about with regard to Livingston is because of what you just described you may have a personal relationship with your teachers. Is that something that you felt?

NA: Yes, I had great faculty in Africana studies. So, Africana studies was housed in Beck Hall and I was a work study student in the department, so I got to know my professors really well like Professor Leonard Bethel who was actually my fraternity brother and was the chair of the department at the time. World renowned scholar Ivan Van Sertima, who wrote the book about Columbus. [Editor's Note: Ivan Van Sertima taught Africana Studies at Rutgers Livingston and was author of *They Came Before Columbus*, for which he won the Clarence L. Holte Prize.] We just had so many prolific scholars in Africana studies and I just loved listening to their conversations and sitting in on the faculty meetings. It was just amazing. Then, for public health my classes met at the Bloustein School and we had some really good professors that helped me to kind of understand how public health affects all of us on a daily basis at the population level. So, yes, I had great professors in both majors. I really enjoyed it.

WB: Were you politically active at all either locally or state or nationally?

NA: Yes. I've always been an activist. The thing that was big at the time that I was in college was Amadou Diallo, the unarmed African immigrant that was shot in New York forty-one times for no justification. They thought he was reaching for a gun; he was reaching for his wallet to show it was his house. So, we took to the streets for that, very politically active with that, protested for that. The other thing that was big during my time was there was like a campus-wide newspaper, a satire type of newspaper, but it was very racially charged. I can't remember the name of it now. Not *The Daily Targum*. It was like a spinoff of *The Daily Targum*.

WB: *The Medium*?

NA: *The Medium*. It was a very racially charged newspaper and we used to be up in arms about that. So, we'd go to our BSU, Black Student Union meetings, and we banded with our Latina brothers and sisters and we protested. So, those were just some things I was involved in that had political implications.

WB: Not to take anything for granted, do you remember what conversations you had around Diallo at the time?

NA: Same conversations we're having in 2016. Just about how police and the police system needs to be held accountable for their actions, and how the first course of action should not be deadly force, and how there's very little accountability or retribution for murderers who are clothed as police officers.

WB: When it came to *The Medium,* you said it was racially charged. Can you give me some examples?

NA: Yes, they would just have these offensive cartoons, offensive jokes, and it was all under the guise of satire and comedy, but it was very offensive, just making assumptions and just saying negative and derogatory things about African Americans, about the hair and the facial features and intelligence, and just all these derogatory comments. I'm like, that's not satire. That's offensive, and so we were protesting.

WB: Do you know whether there were any people of color working at *The Medium*?

NA: Oh, that's a good question. I want to say there was like one or two. I do remember that we got the editor-in-chief fired as a result of our protest, but there were very few African Americans or people of color on staff at *The Medium* at that time, yes.

WB: Do you remember faculty commenting on that at all?

NA: I don't remember if faculty really got involved. I don't know. I'm not sure.

WB: Do you remember other big events on campus whether you were directly involved with them or just observing?

NA: Oh, yes, we used to have Rutgers Fest which was like a big concert. We used to have March Madness, which is when the deans and the faculty would come make breakfast for us. Rutgers was a huge sporting school so the football games and the basketball games. Yes, it was great. It was a good time.

WB: Nationally, I guess September 11th happens, that would be your sophomore year?

NA: Sophomore year, fall of my sophomore year.

WB: What were your memories of that?

NA: Pure horror. I remember looking out of my dorm room and seeing the smoke from New York and just feeling sick to my stomach and it was terrible, it was horrible. I remember my best friend called me and she said, "The Twin Towers got bombed." It was like eight o'clock in the morning, because I think the first plane hit at like eight, and I was like, "What?" I'm like half asleep, and she called me and I turned on the TV and it was just pure horror. People were

crying. It was terrible. I will never forget that feeling, I will never forget that day, I will never forget looking out my window seeing the smoke billowing from New York. It was terrible.

WB: Do you remember when classes started to get rolling after that?

NA: It took a little while. I mean, nobody expected it. It was like nobody thinks about New York City or the United States being under attack. So, I think we, as a campus community, just had to support each other. People had family members that worked there and a lot of people were from New York, and I just remember there being a lot of tears, a lot of love, and it took a while for things to kind of get back to a sense of normalcy, if they ever would have been normal again.

WB: So, a couple of things. One, I guess in 2003 there is some talk of cutting state funds and possibly raising tuition which would involve Livingston. Do you remember that?

NA: I don't. I graduated in May and I think by that time I was probably already checked out to be honest with you, but I'm not surprised. I do remember that there was always talks of needing more resources, needing more faculty, needing more money for EOF [Educational Opportunity Fund], needing more money for student activities. So, I think being at a state university you're kind of beholden to the money you receive from the federal government, from the state, and so, yes, there are always going to be restrictions and complications when it comes to the allocation of resources. So, I'm not surprised to hear that.

WB: Not too long after you graduate obviously Livingston is officially consolidated under Rutgers. Were you aware that that was a possibility when you were going there?

NA: Yes, but I think we were all in denial. [laughter] Nobody wanted to address it. We just wanted to remember Livingston as we knew it, as a standalone campus within a larger community, but we didn't really want to acknowledge it, but we had heard about it. We knew it was coming.

WB: Did you just talk about it amongst yourselves? Did you talk about it with faculty?

NA: Just me and my friends would say how we didn't want that to happen. I think we kind of knew we didn't have any control over it happening, but, yes, we didn't want it to happen. We just loved Livingston being the distinct, unique entity that it was and we just wanted to hold on to that and maintain that memory, so yes.

WB: How do you feel about it now?

NA: Mixed reactions. I mean I understand the need for it from a higher education perspective and consolidation of resources and reallocation of resources. I understand it cognitively, but emotionally it makes me sad, because Livingston was such a beautiful, unique campus. It attracted such a diverse and beautiful student body and I think the type of person that goes to Livingston is somewhat different than the type of person that goes to Rutgers University. Livingston just attracted a different kind of person and I think that special sauce for Livingston

will be lost now that it's kind of been folded into the larger Rutgers University. So, that makes me sad.

WB: Well, a different kind of person. Can you explain that a little bit?

NA: Yes. Livingston was founded out of a need for more diversity, racially and culturally, within the larger Rutgers University system. So, to me, I don't know the exact numbers, but it just felt like Livingston was extremely diverse in terms of racial, socioeconomic status, cultural, sexual orientation. It just seemed very diverse and welcoming and I don't know if that was the case in other spaces across campus.

WB: Do you have a sense of, for the people in your circle, that you knew, whether their reasons for choosing Livingston similar or dissimilar from yours?

NA: I think they were similar. I think we were all attracted to the fact that Livingston was born out of a system of resistance to what was happening within the United States at the time. It was founded during the '60s as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, of a need for more diversity, and I think that was attractive to all of us. We all had a little bit of activism in us, and so you want to go to a place where that's going to be celebrated and embraced and nurtured, and I think that was a thread through my circle of friends. That's why we chose Livingston.

WB: Did Livingston change at all during your four years there?

NA: Not much. You still had Tillett, you still had the dorms. Nothing major changed. Nothing happened.

WB: Okay. So, what year do you graduate?

NA: 2003.

WB: And what's next?

NA: What's next is going to graduate school--Graduating in May, moving to Washington, D.C., to start my master's in Public Health at George Washington University.

WB: How did you come to choose George Washington?

NA: I knew I wanted to be in a different place. I was either going to stay at Rutgers and do like a BS/MPH. I wanted a different experience, or I was going to another school which also had a master's in maternal child health, but the trifecta for me for why I chose GW is because it was located in was nation's capital, chocolate city, it is a world renowned institution, with a concentration in maternal child health. There's very few schools of public health that have a concentration of maternal child health. I knew that D.C. was close so I could get home if I needed to. I really liked that it was a young person city, overwhelmingly African American at the time. I was like, "Yes, I could do D.C." So, that's why I chose GW.

WB: How did your mom feel about you being a little further away from home?

NA: Devastated. [laughter] She was devastated. She didn't want me to move. She didn't want me to go, but she knows her daughter is in a league of her own, so she supported me. They moved me in. I was crying, they were crying. I mean, I'd never been outside of New Jersey. I'm a Jersey girl, but it was great. It's the best thing I could have done for myself. I tell all of my students now. If you can go somewhere else for your Master's get out, go away. It forces you to mature and be independent and just focus on yourself. Just go, do it. It was great. Initially she was devastated, but now she'll tell people, "My daughter went to GW." She's proud now, but at the time she was sad. [laughter]

WB: After GW?

NA: So, after I did my MPH at GW I did a two year fellowship with the federal government, Department of Health and Human Services. Then, I started my PhD in 2007 at University of Maryland, College Park.

WB: It might be hard to capture the whole PhD experience, but just tell me a little about what that was like.

NA: So, my PhD is in maternal child health and again looking for a very specific type of program or research area. University of Maryland was a new school of public health at the time. I was in the first cohort for their PhD program in maternal child health, great experience, small class size, good faculty. I mean a PhD is a terminal research degree. It was the most stressful and rewarding thing I've ever done in my life. It was great, but it was also stressful. It forces you, it trains you how to think in a research critical thinking, analytical way and for that I appreciated the degree. Yes, it was hard. It was a lot of work.

WB: Can I just back up a little bit. One of the things I am curious about is how did you maintain your friendships with your folks from Livingston through the moving, the course work, the research?

NA: Yes, I think just being very intentional and making time for each other, and it didn't hurt that my two best friends also ended up in the D.C. area. So, my best friend Christian, after Rutgers, went to grad school in Baltimore at Morgan State and our other best friend went to Yale for grad school and then moved to DC afterwards. So, I had my larger circle of friends and I had like my immediate best friends. So, my immediate best friends, all three of us went to grad school at the same time. So, Mighty went to Yale School of Public Health. I went to GW School of Public Health. Christian went to Morgan State School of Planning and Policy. So, we would just visit each other at different schools… He'd come down to D.C., and then, after we all graduated together in '05, Christian lived in Prince Georges County. I lived in D.C. Mighty moved from Yale to D.C. So, we were all within twenty minutes of each other. So, we never really left each other, except now I moved back to Jersey, they're still in D.C, but I think just being very intentional and keeping the friendship a priority.

WB: Once you received your doctorate?

NA: Yes, once I received my doctorate that was 2010. So, it took me three years to do my PhD. Once I received my doctorate in 2010, I immediately started a postdoctoral fellowship which I did for two years--The Kellogg Community of Health Scholars, which was funded by the Kellogg Foundation, aimed at increasing the number of scholars of color entering academic positions. So, it was a two year fellowship, completely and generously funded by Kellogg Foundation to further train researchers of color in community based research, health disparities, advanced statistical training, it was great. I was one of eight fellows in my cohort. Highly competitive, highly selective program, and so I did that for two years. I was a Kellogg postdoc for two years.

WB: Then, after that?

NA: Then, after that I started here at Montclair State University, where I'm in my fourth year as an assistant professor. So, I finished Kellogg in June 2012. I started at Montclair August 2012. So, one more semester before I put in my materials for my tenure binder, and then, at that point I will begin the process of becoming a tenured associate professor, yes. [Editor's Note: As of July 1, 2017, Dr. Amutah is now a professor at Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston, MA.]

WB: Let's back up one more time. You mentioned a list of internships that you had done starting at Rutgers. Can you walk me through those one more time?

NA: Sure. So, I had the privilege of working at the New Jersey Woman and AIDS Network which is now folded into another organization. They're now merged with Hyacinth Foundation.

WB: What years were you working there?

NA: I worked at NJWON maybe like 2001, 2002. I also worked at the Central New Jersey Maternal Child Health Consortium part of 2002, 2003. I worked at Planned Parenthood of Plainfield about that same time, 2002. Then, in my master's program, I worked at the Women's Collective in Washington D.C., which is the only service provider for women of color infected or affected by HIV in the entire D.C. area. I worked there. Then, I did my fellowship with the federal government. I worked in the Baltimore City Health Department as an epidemiology intern. I worked in the Office of Women's Health at the federal level. A lot of really great public health experience.

WB: Those internships, did you find them on your own? Did the schools help out?

NA: Both. I've always been very aggressive and ambitious, and sometimes it's as simple as a phone call. "Hi, I'm a student. I would love to work with your organization. I don't need to get paid. Can you hire me?" So, I think it was a little bit of both--a lot of being proactive, knowing where I wanted to work. So, all my experiences, all my internships were under the umbrella of maternal child health, because that's my passion, that's my field. So, I was very strategic and selective about where I wanted to work, the types of projects I wanted to work. I mean sometimes you don't have that luxury, you're an intern, but yes, for the most part I was able to shape those experiences.

WB: Do you think that if you hadn't decided what you wanted to do so early that your educational experience would have been adversely affected?

NA: I think it would've been adversely affected because the beauty of having a plan and sticking to it for the most part is you're able to quickly discern what is in alignment with your plan. So, if you know where you want to go, you know you want to do a PhD in maternal child health, you know you want these very specific types of public health experiences then your radar is laser focused, right. So, I was able to just kind of be more selective and strategic about what I wanted to do. Now the other side of that argument is that you can still end up in that space anyway, but allowing yourself a little bit more freedom and innovation and creativity. Both schools of thought are fine, but for me and the way that I wanted to be, I knew that by thirty I wanted to have accomplished X, Y, Z, and so I'm just working backwards from that timeline. Everybody is not as disciplined and not as strategic and not as linear, and I think that's okay. I think there's beauty in the experience as well, but for me, yes, I think it definitely helped me out that I was so focused, because I knew, "Okay, this was going to help me further my underlying mission, and this is going to be maybe a distraction to that mission."

WB: You can correct me if I am wrong, but I have thought that I saw you have done a lot of research with HIV?

NA: Yes.

WB: How did that become such a big focus?

NA: You know, I fell in love with the field of HIV through my internship at the New Jersey's Women and AIDS Network, because HIV is one of the leading causes of death for African American women and once I found out that statistic it was so jarring to me, because I wanted to know why. Why is this particular demographic being disproportionately affected? Why are we seeing this as leading cause of death mostly for African American women? HIV has a lot of moral implications and sexual implications, the ways that it's transmitted, but the reality of it is it is devastating urban communities across this country, and as a citizen of the world, as a human, you want to try to, and as a public health professional, my goal is to try to reduce mortality, reduce morbidity, educate people, promote health. So, HIV has and will continue to be at the top of my list, because HIV in the communities I work with which are primarily African American women, teenagers, women from underserved communities, at risk, vulnerable populations, their voices are not often heard in conversations about their health and I am all about empowering women, having women's voices be recognized, being an advocate for women, teaching women to advocate for themselves, whether it's in the delivery of healthcare services, whether it's through their partner negotiations, sexual negotiations for condom usage, but just really understanding the role of the woman and how I can be a resource to her in this prevention conversation. So, HIV is one of those things that I've always been curious and passionate about, because the rates do not have to be what they are. They don't have to be that high.

WB: Are there any differences that you notice in your field between men and women researchers?

NA: You know, I think that a lot of the men, my male colleagues who focus on HIV, the other group that is disproportionately affected is young African American men who have sex with men. They are the highest rates of HIV infection. So, a lot of my male colleagues focus on that demographic and lesser so on women. So, that will probably be the only difference that I see, is that the group that they're focusing on is different, but the underlying sentiment is the same in the prevention and getting people into care, and treatment, medication adherence, that's the same.

WB: Your students here, are they interested in working with people of color, people with HIV? Is that a research focus that you see continuing to percolate?

NA: Absolutely. I have a research team. So, I had a grant. About two years ago I did a visiting professorship at Yale School of Public Health and through that fellowship--it was called the REIDS program, Research Education Institute for Diverse Scholars--and so they gave me some pilot funding to conduct a study around HIV of my choosing. So, I collected data from mothers and daughters in Essex County. So, I looked at Newark, Irvington, East Orange, those were my three big cities. The title of the project is called Project DASH, Divas Against the Spread of HIV/AIDS. So, within that Project DASH research I had a team of students, undergrad, master's, PhD students working to help me collect the data. Over the course of about three to four months we interviewed about fifty mothers with HIV and about twenty-five of their daughters who were HIV negative, to look at the mother-daughter relationship around communication, around HIV prevention. Do the daughter's know their mother's status? Do they know how the mother manages her medication? Really tried to disentangle what are the elements of this mother-daughter relationship that can aid in the prevention of HIV in the daughter. So, the mother's positive, the daughters are negative, my entire sample is African American, and it was just really interesting to look at the context of that relationship, and how can we train these mother's to be ambassadors in their daughter's health, and also give them empowerment, because there's a lot of stigma around HIV and the shame and the guilt and the embarrassment, which is so crazy that we as a society still stigmatize people for something that is now a chronic disease. So, it was a great study. I had a team of about ten research students. I had a research team of ten students and we collected the data. We presented the data at the HIV prevention conference, at the American Public Health Association Conference, and at Yale, I went back and did a talk there. The data is actually under review now for a federal grant to do this on a larger scale, because this conversation happened in Essex County, but could easily have been Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Atlanta, any other urban community. So, how do we replicate this? How do we use best practices from this study to train and empower other mothers who are positive in the prevention of HIV in their daughters? So, this is like a pilot study, it's a small sample, but hoping to replicate it on a larger scale, and also, of course, publishing in scientific journals. So, yes, I do have a lot of students that are interested in working with me and currently now I have a team of about five students.

WB: Well, is there anything you would like to share about your Livingston experience or post Livingston experience that I have not asked you about?

NA: Livingston was such a catalyst for me in my development and now that I'm an adult and I look back on my collegiate time, Livingston was extremely instrumental in solidifying the

woman I am today. I think it was like a perfect storm of being in a space of growth as a young woman, having a great circle of friends, having great advisors, great professors, and being in just like a safe and supportive environment. Tillett Dining Hall was like a meeting place, a counseling session, all in one. We did everything in the dining hall. We'd sit up there for hours and we talked and we'd fellowship and we'd bond and we'd hang out. You know, it was a great time in my development and I'm so thankful that I had that space and it does make me a little sad that there's no "Livingston" again. There was just a beauty and uniqueness about Livingston that was so germane to that campus that I really appreciated it. It was a great time and I appreciated my time there. I think my collegiate career was extremely influential in me choosing to go into higher education as a career, me choosing to be a professor now, because of the experiences I had at the undergraduate level. I also want to thank the Livingston Alumni Association for giving me a distinguished alumni award two years ago. I think that was probably one of the best awards I've ever received, because it was like you guys are giving me an award for being a distinguished alumni, like I would do this for free. I loved Livingston. I loved college, you know. So that was very meaningful and touching and I thank the Livingston Alumni Association for that award. I brought my family. They put together a really nice video montage and it was great. It was like the culmination of this beautiful Livingston journey from freshman to distinguished alumni. It was beautiful. So yes, it was great.

WB: That is a really good way to end.

NA: Thank you.

WB: Thank you, Ndidi, for letting me visit with you.

NA: Thank you.

----------End of Interview----------

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