



Abby

Hamrah, together on a journey— The Hamrah Oral History Project is a series of interviews with immigrants, refugees, and asylees in Arizona, people who had to leave home due to oppression, war or violence, pursuing their future elsewhere. These are personal accounts of life between places and cultures, exploring how we arrived here and why we left home. Listen to stories of joy, dream and emotional pain that comes with the relocation and separation. Recorded at KXCI Community Radio's Historic Armory Park Studios in Tucson, Arizona.

Can you introduce yourself?

Yeah, my name is Abby Hungwe. I am from Zimbabwe. I come from a small mining town that's close to the southern border with South Africa.

What is the weather like in your city?

Oh, the cliché in Tucson is it's a dry heat, but it's really nice that it's a dry heat because I come from a very hot and humid climate. When you take a shower, you open the door to go out and it feels like you need another shower. So yeah, it's pretty humid, semi arid, so it tends to be a little dry. Water wise, we don't get that much water compared to the other parts of the country.

Can you tell me about your childhood?

I think I would describe my childhood as not so traditional, so I guess maybe progressive compared to other families in Zimbabwe. I grew up when Zimbabwe was still pretty much a middle class economy, and so my childhood compared to sort of my nephews and my nieces, I feel like I had a pretty good upbringing. A lot of the political strife that the country has now was not there.

Do you have any favorite memories from your childhood that you can share?

A lot of my favorite childhood memories center around farming. A lot of families farm in Zimbabwe. It's kind of a tradition. A lot of people, they don't even farm to sell. They just farm to enjoy with their family, and so we grew up spending a lot of time in the fields. We grew up

weeding, planting, doing a lot of the menial labor type stuff of farming, but we enjoyed it because that's what we knew. We started farming when we were very young.

What did you farm? What did you grow?

Mostly corn. Corn, peanuts. My mom has always made her own peanut butter since I was a little kid, and to this day, the only peanut butter I will eat is her peanut butter. And so when I visit home, I have to bring some peanut butter back with me, otherwise I don't have any peanut butter to eat.

And did everyone participate in farming from kids to grandparents?

Absolutely everybody. And the way we farm in Zimbabwe is once the land is prepped, when we're planting or we're weeding, everybody's on the land all day long. Even the cooking happens on the land, we eat on the land. If you need to take a nap, you are in the fields. We only leave the fields either once the work is done or once we don't have any more daylight. So it's pretty much a huge part of our culture, huge part of our traditions.

When did you leave Zimbabwe?

I left Zimbabwe in February of 2008, so I've been in Tucson 15 years now.

And why did you leave?

The main reason I left Zimbabwe was political violence, and so I experienced some of that violence as a student around 2006. So it actually took me a couple years before I was able to leave my country and I came to the US on an F1 visa, so a student visa, and then I became an asylum seeker.

Can you talk a little bit more about the political violence you experienced and how that affected your life back in Zimbabwe?

Yeah, absolutely. The political violence in Zimbabwe stemmed from the opposition. There was after about a decade and a half, almost two decades, they became an opposition to the ruling party. And so their strategy, the ruling party's strategy to deal with dissent was to wreak havoc. And that looked like beatings, killings, disappearances, that kind of thing. And when I was a student at a Polytechnical college, there were some changes in policy that were not good for us as students and we organized to sort of engage with the government and share our opinions and our points of view and request a change. And that was taken to be part of the opposition movement, which it wasn't. And so it was sort of bundled together with the political violence that was happening in the country. A lot of us experienced violence at the hands of the government, and so for me and a lot of people I went to school with, our option was to stay in Zimbabwe and risk losing our life or having our families be at risk or leave. I chose to leave.

Is college the first time that you realized that you have to leave or growing up in high school or middle school or as a younger age, you also thought about leaving Zimbabwe for your future?

So growing up in Zimbabwe, I did not have any aspirations to leave my country. The thought never crossed my mind. At the time that I grew up in Zimbabwe, we had access to all the resources that we needed. People had good jobs, they got paid well. They got a lot of benefits that came with being employed. Unemployment was really low, our currency was pretty strong, and so for me and a lot of people I grew up with, there was no reason to leave until the political strife began.

What happened to the rest of your family members, your siblings, your parents, and everyone else who didn't leave with you?

So the rest of my family members, my brother, my sister, my nieces, my nephews, my mother, stayed in Zimbabwe. There's been some travel across the South African border, so my sister currently lives in South Africa. My brother has lived in South Africa in the past, but that's about as far from home that they went. I'm the only one who came this far away from home. And so for them staying in the country and in the region, I would say we probably have faced different kinds of challenges because with my sister and my brother having lived in South Africa, there are some issues in South Africa as well. For Zimbabweans living in South Africa such as xenophobia, that's been something that they've had to deal with.

How was your transition to Tucson? How was it like when you first arrived here?

Yeah, Tucson. I would say America in general is so different. I think one of the biggest culture shocks for me was going to a grocery store. You walk in and there's hundreds of different types of breads and how do you choose, right? I came from a community where you either get the wheat loaf or the white loaf, those were your choices. And coming to this country and having, I would say it's almost like being overwhelmed with choice. Yes, it's a good thing, but for somebody new in the community it can be difficult to navigate. That was my biggest culture shock for sure.

Was Tucson or America any different than what you expected it to be?

I didn't have any expectations. I think having left during a time that was very much still traumatic for me, I was in survival mode. And so being here was a matter of safety for me. I guess in a way, I would say I expected to be safe and I was. So being in Tucson, being in the United States met that expectation.

What was the most difficult part of adapting to life in the US?

The hardest part for me when it came to adapting to life in the US was not having my family with me. I come from a community that's very family oriented, and so being away from family

was the biggest adjustment I had to make. I've developed some really close connections here in Tucson. I have people I consider as family. My life is here, my home is here, my partner is here. And so over time, that sense of family is something that I was able to develop. But still, once in a while things happen in my life where I was trained to rely on my family for guidance. I was trained to rely on my family for support, and I find myself faced with challenges at times where I wish I had that.

What do you like most about Tucson?

The one thing I like the most about Tucson is the connectedness. Tucson is a very small world. I go to events and it's almost always guaranteed I'm going to see somebody at that event that I know, and it's never planned. And so it's easy to make connections. People are friendly, people are open for the most part. And also there's quite a bit of opportunities to experience culture, the arts, to experience community in Tucson that are accessible to everybody. Those are the things I love the most about Tucson.

Overall, how do you think your life has changed since you moved to the US?

I think my life has changed since my move here to Tucson in a number of ways. One of those ways is perhaps the trajectory of my professional career, my professional life. When I left Zimbabwe, I was involved in quantity surveying. The closest to that here in the US is maybe project management in construction. And when I got to this country, there wasn't what I would call an immediate fit that went along with the career I had in mind when I left home and I got involved in human services type of work. And so I ended up pursuing an academic career in sociology because of that. And now I'm a part of a community organization that does some really impactful work with refugees in the community. And I don't think I would've done that if I had still lived in Zimbabwe. I probably would've been working on some big construction projects at this point or something similar to that.

Do you ever dream of going back to Zimbabwe?

I used to dream of going back to Zimbabwe. This was especially my early years of being in Tucson. I think these were the years where I had not cultivated a strong sense of belonging in my community. And so I yearned, I yearned to be back home. I yearned to be back with my people. Now I feel like I have people here. I do go back. I go back to Zimbabwe periodically to visit my family, to spend time with them, and that's enough for me. I don't imagine that I would relocate permanently, but in the future, I do imagine that the frequency of my visits to Zimbabwe will increase.

What do you miss most about Zimbabwe and your culture?

My family. I miss my family the most about my life in Zimbabwe, but beyond my family, the food. I also miss having opportunities to interact with wildlife. Yes, there are opportunities here

in Tucson. If you go hiking on some of the trails, you might be lucky enough to have an encounter with wildlife. But where I come from, it was much more common and I miss that. I miss farming. I've tried to farm here in Tucson. I've tried to have a garden. It is very unforgiving. It's a harsh, harsh climate, much harsher than the semi arid environment that I come from. But yeah, family and farming for me is what I miss.

Can you talk about the role that language has played in your experience living in the US?

In my experience living in the US, language has not been that much of a factor because English is one of the languages that we learn in Zimbabwe. We're a former British colony, and so that means from my very first day in school I was being taught English and that was a benefit for me.

What would be something that you found in the US that you really liked that you didn't have back in Zimbabwe? You talked about career, like something like a lifestyle or food or something about daily life that was not accessible there.

One thing that I've really come to enjoy about living in the US that I did not have in my home country in Zimbabwe is hiking, being outdoors for fun. My experience of being outdoors or of walking in Zimbabwe out of necessity. And so even going to school, I didn't have a car, so I would walk everywhere. It's very normal to walk two miles, sometimes, maybe even three, to get to where you need to be. Now, just being out in nature for no reason than just to enjoy it is something that I've come to appreciate.

So how has your experience living Zimbabwe, coming to the US affected your identity and your sense of belonging?

Relocating to the US has impacted my identity in that I recognize how very removed I am from my community in Zimbabwe. I stay connected. I call as much as I can. I'm very up to date with what's going on, especially with my family. But because I'm not there, I also recognize that I've lost a bit of that connection. And so having grown up in a community that's very family oriented, not having biological family as part of my life in a big way, that's been a shift in my identity because I've had to get used to not having that.

Have you faced any discrimination or prejudice in the US? And if so, how have you dealt with it?

I have faced discrimination and prejudice in the US. I think for a lot of black people living in this country, we face it almost every day. My way of dealing with prejudice and discrimination, not taking it personally. I've realized that a lot of times people are not careful with their words and their engagement, but it's not intentional. Sometimes it just is how, for a variety of reasons, how people are trained to be in the world, right? That's not to make an excuse out of it, but it's just to say that I recognize that sometimes it's not an attack on me. Sometimes it's just

misinformation. Sometimes it's a misunderstanding of other cultures and other ethnic backgrounds. And so like I said, my way, the best way I found to live with that is to not take it personally. And when it is in my control to face it head on. So at my job, I address it directly. I make sure that when there's an incidence of discrimination or prejudice, I name it and say it for what it is.

What hopes do you have for your future and for Zimbabwe's future?

My biggest hope for Zimbabwe's future is unity. A lot of Zimbabweans are out of the country. A lot of Zimbabweans have had to leave the country and make a life outside of the country, but we all, for the most part, remain connected to Zimbabwe. I hope that all of us as Zimbabweans, those who continue to live in Zimbabwe and those who live outside of Zimbabwe, come together to work for the benefit of our country for the benefit of future generations in our country.

Lastly, what advice do you have for yourself when you had just arrived in the US?

To take it easy and to know that everything was going to be okay. I know it's more like cheerleading than advice, but I think a lot of things around my move were scary, and there was quite a bit of fear that I experienced with moving here and the reasons behind why I had to move here. And that caused a lot of uncertainty. And so what I would tell myself would be it was all going to be okay.