

An Interview with
DeBorah Ahmed

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

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interviewed by Dr. Malaika Horne
transcribed by Valerie Leri and edited by
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Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri

Collection S1207 Women as Change Agents DVD 58

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PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS

WOMEN AS CHANGE AGENTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

29 DECEMBER 2014

DEBORAH AHMED INTERVIEWED BY DR. MALAIKA HORNE

DeBorah Ahmed: ...DeBorah Ahmed.

Malaika Horne: All right. So first we're going to ask you some questions about your background, and the first question is: talk about your family, your parents, siblings, your husband, your children, any other relatives.

DeBorah Ahmed: Okay.

Malaika Horne: Anything you'd like to say about them.

DeBorah Ahmed: Okay. I come from a wonderful two-parent household. Annie May Buchanan was my mother; [Gray?] Buchanan, Jr. [*spellings?*] was my daddy. I had one sister, Brenda Jean Buchanan. I am the last surviving member of my immediate family. My mother had one other child whom I never knew, that she miscarried, the baby. Born and raised in St. Louis. Daddy was a barber from Mississippi. He hopped on the train—this is the story he used to tell us, right? He hopped the train from Greenwood, Mississippi; came up here when he was under the age of 18; lied about his age to get into the military. Some point in there he met my mother at a party he went to. He was in the military, and they were both with other dates, and I guess, as they say, the rest is history. Two-and-a-half months later my mother and father got married, and my sister was born in San Diego, California. She was 12 years older than me. I was the youngest.

Malaika Horne: So what year did they get married?

DeBorah Ahmed: 1941. 1941, yeah, and my father lived to be 59; my sister lived to be—oh, DeBorah—I forgot, she was in her 60s. My mother lived to be 97, and she lived with us for the last five years of her life.

Malaika Horne: So talk about your youth.

DeBorah Ahmed: My youth. Oh, man, I loved it. I wouldn't trade anything about growing up. Grew up in North St. Louis and loved going outside to play, and I did it a lot. My mother taught me how to play jacks, so I thought I was a jack champion. Ha ha ha. [Till somebody was?] better than me. We did all the stuff that, at least when I was growing up, little girls did: Hoola Hoop, Double Dutch—I could jump some Double Dutch—jacks. Mama taught me how to play bid whist. I wanted [her] to teach [me] how to play poker, but she wouldn't. But she taught me how to play bid whist. My sister, because she was 12 years older than me, she was a great inspiration to me. She read to me a lot, and I think it was from her—fact, I know it was from her—that one, I got my love of reading and travel. She opened up the world to me. She was a Fulbright scholar when she graduated from college, and I remember when occasionally—this is so, so special—she would call home. Oh, my God, all of us would run to the phone, and that's when phone calls were super, super expensive, and they still had what was called "trunk lines" and it actually sounded like you were talking through a tube, right? So I could just imagine this tube running under the ocean, right? And my voice going through it. I mean, that's how my little head imagined it. And my voice going through it and hers going through it, and we could talk, and after about seven minutes, we had to get off the phone, because the phone bill was so high. But she really opened up the world.

Malaika Horne: Where did she go to college?

DeBorah Ahmed: Denver University in Denver. That's where she went to undergraduate school.

Malaika Horne: And what was her occupation?

DeBorah Ahmed: She was a mathematics person so she got into computers early and data analysis. I don't really know what she did after college other than going to graduate school. She got her Master's in Applied Math. She got undergrad in Physics. I used to tell everybody that side of my brain, my smarts went to her. I got the crazy side. She got all that other stuff. But she was into computer technology, when—that was her last position, with digital.

Malaika Horne: So what part of North St. Louis?

DeBorah Ahmed: Penrose. Penrose is where I actually—I say, grew up—but when I was first born, my parents lived on Fountain Avenue, and I lived there till I was five years old, and lived in a three-story house. My maternal grandparents lived in that house. My immediate family lived in the house, and my Aunt Bertha, my mother’s sister, lived in the house. So it was always busy; was always activity going on in the house, so I was never lonely.

Malaika Horne: So what elementary and high school did you go to?

DeBorah Ahmed: Elementary, I went to Scullin School on Kingshighway, and it was just a two-block walk, because we lived on Penrose. High school, went to U. City High School.

Malaika Horne: So why did you go to U. City if you lived in...

DeBorah Ahmed: In the city? We moved—it’s interesting—we moved out to University City the summer before I went to 8th grade, and because I had been at Scullin all my elementary school life, I wanted to graduate with my class. So I took the bus home from school every day, and my father took me to school every day because his barber shop was about three blocks from Scullin on Euclid. So he would drop me off at school. I graduated from Scullin, with my 8th grade class, and then I went to Brittany and then to U. City High School.

Malaika Horne: So when you were growing up, what did you want to be? Did you have any ideas in mind about that?

DeBorah Ahmed: I think the first thing I wanted to be was a doctor, and then that went somewhere. I don’t know where that went. And it got replaced with—I think the next thing I wanted to be was an archeologist. I got fascinated with Egyptology, so I would go to the U. City Library and check out all these huge books—you know, the coffee table books—and I just got fascinated with it, and I just wanted to travel all over the black world. And another thing that happened to me was, I had a teacher in high school. She was my Black Studies teacher—or Black History teacher; I guess that’s what she was called back then—and she just opened up this world to me about me, about us. So I just wanted to know a lot about black people, and then for me that got transferred to: I want to study ancient black people. So get into archeology.

Malaika Horne: So where have you traveled?

- DeBorah Ahmed: Ooh. I said 'ooh' like I've traveled a whole bunch of places, okay. So let me say this.
- Malaika Horne: I'm sure you have.
- DeBorah Ahmed: I recently counted how many countries I've been to. I've been to 25 countries. I was impressed.
- Malaika Horne: That's a lot.
- DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah, that's what I said. Dang! In terms of Europe, I've been to—and I'm saying Europe first because I'm going to say the black world last. I'm going to save the best for me for last. I've been to France; I've been to Germany; I've been to Italy; I have been to Greece; I have been to Scotland; I have been through some of the Slavic—Yugoslavia. I think that's it. And Italy. I've been to China. South America, I've been to Peru, Bolivia, and stepped across the border into Argentina and came right back. Canada: Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec, Vancouver—is Vancouver a province, or is that the city? I get them mixed up.
- Malaika Horne: I think that's a city. Isn't it across from Seattle?
- DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah. So whatever province Vancouver's in. The black world, I've been to Jamaica; I've been to Mali, Cambia, Egypt, Morocco, Senegal, yeah. So I've done a lot of traveling. I've been blessed.
- Malaika Horne: And I got to ask you your sister's name, because she was one of the first influences about traveling. What's her name?
- DeBorah Ahmed: Brenda Jean Buchanan. Straight-up Southern name.
- Malaika Horne: Brenda Jean.
- DeBorah Ahmed: Brenda Jean.
- Malaika Horne: And Buchanan was your maiden name?
- DeBorah Ahmed: Mm-hmm.
- Malaika Horne: So when you were growing up, were you recognized as a leader?
- DeBorah Ahmed: Wow, Malaika, I think you're the first person to ask me that question. Yeah, actually, I was.

Malaika Horne: So what are some of the things that you did that gave you these early experiences?

DeBorah Ahmed: I always sat at the front of the class, always was one of the first to raise my hand when the teacher would ask a question. I liked volunteering to help. I liked—wow, I'm really going back—there was a time period when I was in grade school we would line up on the school yard, and I always liked to help line everybody up, make sure they were straight. That was a big thing. When I was in high school, I was in a lot of different clubs. I was the president of our dance club, Taberna.

Malaika Horne: What was the name of that?

DeBorah Ahmed: Taberna, T-A-B-E-R-N-A, Taberna. I have no idea what it means. I don't know if it had any kind of meaning. It could have been an acronym for something, I don't know, three people's first initials in their name or something, or syllables in their names. I liked taking responsibility. I liked taking on responsibility. It was okay for me. I liked people to feel that they could depend upon me. Yeah. It was okay. And I've been that way, I guess, since I was a little girl.

Malaika Horne: When I was asking you earlier about your family, I want to be sure to get in your husband, and I think you have one child.

DeBorah Ahmed: One child: one son.

Malaika Horne: And your husband is equally as well-known as you are. Many people may consider you a power couple. So talk about your husband and your child.

DeBorah Ahmed: Sure. I am married to Malik Ahmed. We met in New York when I moved there to dance. We met at a club called Leviticus, which is a black-owned club in New York, and it was during Harlem Week, which is still going on now. I was modeling for a girlfriend of mine. I was a fashion model, and I was dressed in a manner that I would not normally dress. I still have a lot of hair on my head, but my hair was even longer back then, and it was straightened. I [had?] this three-piece silk pants outfit, high heels. It was kind of fitting—not too tight—but, you know, short little shake, right? So he came up, and he asked me to dance, and I told him I didn't want to. I wasn't really into the type of music that was very popular back then, which was disco music. So we sat and we talked about 40 minutes or something like that. He asked me for my phone number. I gave it to him.

He wanted to come over and see me that night. I told him it was too late, but I let him come the next day *[laughter]*. So, 34 years later, we are still married, very happily married. He is the founder and CEO of Better Family Life, and he was inspired to create Better Family Life from the black activists, the Civil Rights movement of the '60s and '70s. His oldest brother, Omar, influenced him a whole lot to go in that direction, and he has always believed that black folks, African Americans, should strive to have a better family life.

Malaika Horne: And how old is Better Family Life?

DeBorah Ahmed: It will be 33 years old February the 6th, 2016.

Malaika Horne: So you're *[activists?]* married...*[unintelligible 0:13:13]*

DeBorah Ahmed: Yes, yes. Better Family Life was our first baby.

Malaika Horne: I see...

DeBorah Ahmed: Yes.

Malaika Horne: Now talk about your other...

DeBorah Ahmed: ...the other baby *[laughter]* who is now 26 years old, Shabazz. He is a wonderful human being. Malik and I are very, very proud of him. We are the grandparents of three beautiful children. We have two granddaughters and one *[grand]*son. Shabazz says he's through; I said, "Well, okay, you're young, but okay *[laughter]*. Just keep working, sweetie." He is quite an accomplished musician. He loves community service work, and that's the type of work that he's doing now. When he was little, he used to tell us that he wanted to be a billionaire, because he wanted to get all homeless people off the street. He hated seeing homeless people, people in need, and any time we went by, walked by, drove by somebody who was homeless, he would always tell us that we didn't give them money. And we had to explain to him that sometimes it's not safe to do it at that given point in time, and I guess he eventually got it, but yeah. So that's our son. And he lives here in St. Louis, so we get a chance to see him and our grandchildren all the time.

Malaika Horne: And the grandchildren.

DeBorah Ahmed: Yes.

- Malaika Horne: So, do you consider yourself a dancer, because I know that's one of the big things you're involved in?
- DeBorah Ahmed: I do, definitely. I still dance. I still choreograph; I still perform. I still teach; I still lecture on dance; and I pray that I am able to keep dancing until I say I'm ready to stop, not my knees say, "You got to stop."
- Malaika Horne: Right, I know. It's like being an athlete in a way.
- DeBorah Ahmed: Ooh, yeah, it is. In fact, dancers really are athletes, you know? We are a different expression of athleticism, because of the type of training that we go through, and that we are artists in our athleticism, but definitely, we are. And I always tell younger dancers to really, really be aware that your body is the instrument of your expression, and you must, absolutely must take care of yourself on every level: physical, mental, spiritual, emotional. Got to.
- [0:15:26]
- Malaika Horne: That's very obvious that you are health-oriented...
- DeBorah Ahmed: Thank you.
- Malaika Horne: ...physically and in other ways as well.
- DeBorah Ahmed: Thank you.
- Malaika Horne: Who encouraged you inside the home and outside the home?
- DeBorah Ahmed: My mother, my father, and my sister. They...
- Malaika Horne: Those were your early influences?
- DeBorah Ahmed: Whew, yes, most definitely. They never told me that I was incapable of doing anything. They always pushed me. My mother, in particular, she pushed me. She was the youngest like I was. She was the youngest of three; I was the youngest of two. So I guess that somehow fit into her need to say to me, "You don't have to be like your older sister. You can be inspired by her, but you don't have to be like her. Be yourself and don't be afraid to step out there. Don't be afraid to say yes or no, and don't let the answer that you hear ever turn you around if it's not what you wanted to hear. Just keep moving forward if that's your desire, if that's your vision."

Malaika Horne: And what about in college: who influenced you in college? And where did you go to college?

DeBorah Ahmed: I went to Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa. My family was still a very big influence on me to stay in college. Interestingly enough, some of the people that I met in college, some professors, influenced me to stay focused because of their—I don't know, I'm only going to describe it the way I see it from my perspective—their lack of interest in supporting the African American students on campus and their focus and concentrated acts to get us kicked out of school. And I was determined, I'm not going to be one of the people you kick out. I'm going to make sure I go to class, because that's what I came up here to do. That's what my parents sacrificed for. I want to make sure I get my work done, make sure that I don't plagiarize my papers. Plagiarism at Grinnell is like a cardinal sin, and I saw a number of students get booted out of Grinnell because they plagiarized. So my fellow African American students, they were very supportive of me, and then some were very critical and mean, and I wouldn't let them destroy my spirit.

Malaika Horne: Did you have any leadership positions in college?

DeBorah Ahmed: Mm-hmm, I did. I was the secretary for CBS, which is the Concerned Black Students Association. I had a leadership position with the dance club group that was there. We didn't have, like, president or vice president, but after I'd been at the school for four years, I took on the role of being a choreographer in the group and handling some of the administrative responsibilities. I helped out with the choir, the gospel choir, the Young, Gifted, [and] Black Gospel choir that was there. I was active in some clubs, but I don't even remember which ones now.

Malaika Horne: And your major?

DeBorah Ahmed: Anthropology.

Malaika Horne: Anthropology, okay.

DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah, I went to Grinnell because...

Malaika Horne: I've heard of that school; it has a real good reputation.

DeBorah Ahmed: It does. Academically, it is a superb school. They market themselves, or they used to, as the Harvard of the Midwest. I don't know what Harvard

would say about that, but that's how they saw themselves, as the Harvard of the Midwest. And like I said, I wanted to be an archeologist, and Grinnell had, and still has, an excellent anthropology department, and something I was able to do while I was there, my junior year, first semester of my junior year, I was accepted in the Grinnell-in-London program. And we left in August of 1975, and we went to London. Our responsibility—there were 27 of us who went, students. We got to go there; we had to find our own places to live and everything, so it forced us to grow up a whole lot. So we all found our own apartments. There were four of us who shared a flat. We had a duplex. It was really, really nice. We had a duplex in London, in the city, and went there to study archeology. And after three months of being in London, seven or nine of us went to Greece for six weeks. It was amazing.

Malaika Horne: I'll bet.

DeBorah Ahmed: It was absolutely amazing. We didn't have to find our own apartments there, though; we stayed at hotels. We traveled all around the country with a man who spoke Greek fluently. He was our professor. He was from Grinnell. He just took us everywhere. Love it.

Malaika Horne: So I'm going to ask you a question that I got from Blanche Touhill. She's interested in women that preceded us. So the question is, 50 years earlier, what do you think you would have been doing, and one way to look at it is maybe your grandmother, to think what you would have been doing, however you want to look at it. But 50 years earlier, what do you think you would've been doing?

DeBorah Ahmed: Wow. If God allowed me to be born 50 years before 1955: dancing. I'd be dancing. That's my passion.

Malaika Horne: There were many black women dancers.

DeBorah Ahmed: Yes, there were. There were, and I am distantly, distantly related to Josephine Baker.

Malaika Horne: You are?

DeBorah Ahmed: I am. I am, on my mother's side. And...

Malaika Horne: I can see the resemblance.

DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah? And I've been told by a few people that when they see me perform, I reminded them of Josephine. Now, I've always kept my clothes on, different from her, but just in terms of her energy on stage, her presence, her ability to draw the audience in to her: I took that as a high compliment. So I'd be dancing.

Malaika Horne: Absolutely.

DeBorah Ahmed: Because I love it. I love it.

Malaika Horne: I've seen you perform many times.

DeBorah Ahmed: Hope you enjoyed it.

Malaika Horne: Absolutely.

DeBorah Ahmed: Thank you.

Malaika Horne: Who influenced you throughout your career?

DeBorah Ahmed: Katherine Dunham; Pearl Primus. I was blessed to meet and interact with both of those incredible women, not at the same time. I met Dr. Primus first when I lived in New York.

Malaika Horne: Tell us about her.

DeBorah Ahmed: Dr. Primus was a secure woman. She stood firm in what she knew and what she believed, and it came through before she even opened her mouth. You felt her presence when you walked in a room with her. And when I would talk to her over the phone, I could feel her strength in her voice. I only got a chance to see her actually perform once. When I met Dr. Primus, she must have been—wow, she must've been in her 60s, I guess—because [we're] talking about 1980. I guess she was in her 60s at that point. And I got a chance to see her do Fanga¹, which is the dance that she became most famous for even though she did a lot of her own choreography, if not, most of it, but Fanga was a dance that she was introduced to when she went to Liberia the first time, and that's the dance that the people did for her when she got off the plane. She fell in love with the dance, so she brought it back to the United States. So for those of us who are in African dance who are of a certain generation, Fanga was African Dance 101. If you called yourself an African dancer,

¹ Also spelled "Funga".

you had to know Fanga, and you had to know the song, but when I saw her do it, it was so different. I saw the grace in Fanga that I had never seen before.

Malaika Horne: So that's your specialty, African dance?

DeBorah Ahmed: Mm-hmm.

Malaika Horne: Does she have a troupe or a dance school, or...?

DeBorah Ahmed: She did. I never went to it. I don't know the name of it, and probably during the course of my life, my career, I know I've met people who have been with her company. I just don't know who they were. Shame on me, but I don't. Miss Dunham, I met her, spent time with her when we moved to St. Louis back in '82, and I was an apprentice under her. I had to apply to be this apprentice under Miss Dunham, and when I auditioned, I went to her house in East St. Louis and auditioned for her in her bedroom while she was in her bed, and she had me do all these positions, and Theodore Jamison was there, and he helped me through it. He critiqued me. He would intervene between me and Miss Dunham. We weren't arguing or anything, just, like, if she would say she wanted something, because, at that point, she was physically challenged, incapacitated to demonstrate herself. So he would make sure that I understood what she was asking for. So I interned with her, but let me tell you what my internship was. I helped the children who were in the Dunham School which was at that time right behind the Dunham Museum in East St. Louis. And I would prepare them lunch; I would go shopping for lunch; I would prepare them lunch; I would clean up, and then I'd stay there. And I got a small stipend. So I didn't do a lot of dancing, but I was able to get to know the Dunham structure, which included the people that were part of her—I call them entourage. I became very familiar with the museum and the items, artifacts that were in the museum, and I was entrusted to do the things that they needed to have done. So that was an honor. It was an honor for me. I can always claim that.

Malaika Horne: Absolutely. And you work at Better Family Life.

DeBorah Ahmed: I do.

Malaika Horne: Is dance a part of what you do, or are there other things that you do, and what is your title?

DeBorah Ahmed: I work at Better Family Life. Dance is not “a part” of what I do in that job title, which is Executive Director of the Better Family Life Cultural, Educational and Business Center. And I do a lot. I’m in charge of the Cultural Arts Department of Better Family Life, so those activities, those programs, those services that would be and are reflective of the cultures of people of Africa/African diaspora, they come out of my department. In terms of the institution, which is like an extension of the department—but it’s like this huge extension; sometimes it just goes in other directions—I’m responsible for the day-to-day operations of it, overseeing of staff who service the building itself, making sure that we have programs that are connected to the institution—not Better Family Life, but the institution—that are reflective of those same cultural principles, practices, values and traditions that are of Africa and African diaspora. So we have a film series; we do lectures; we have our mural that’s being painted, the Art and Empowerment mural; we have a monthly marketplace; Black Dance USA is held there every year; the Kwanzaa Holiday Expo. The mural that we’re having painted is going to have a curriculum—a five-part curriculum done on it. And In fact, one of your co-workers—colleagues, I should say colleagues, Dr. Jackie Lewis-Harris, she is actually writing the curriculum, and that will help us to get people to come in who are tourists, and we’ll be able to provide them with information, we’ll be able to provide guided tours. So the mural’s going to be a huge way in which we can teach, educate on the history and the cultural traditions of people of Africa, Caribbean, the Americas. I can’t wait.

Malaika Horne: What a unique contribution.

DeBorah Ahmed: It is.

Malaika Horne: And another one that has been going on for a while now is Kwanzaa. You mentioned that, so you’re over that event every year.

DeBorah Ahmed: I am.

Malaika Horne: Just say a little about Kwanzaa. What is that?

DeBorah Ahmed: Sure. Better Family Life, we do the Kwanzaa Holiday Expo every year, but that expo came out of the Kwanzaa celebrations that we started out doing, and Kwanzaa is the foundation of Better Family Life, and the foundation of principles of Kwanzaa is the bedrock of the organization

itself. So every year in December, somewhere around the second or third weekend of December, we do an event called the Kwanzaa Holiday Expo which is in honor of that fourth principle of Kwanzaa, which is Ujamaa, cooperative economics, so when Dr. Karenga wrote the explanation for Ujamaa, he said that the way we must share in our own—support our own store shops and other businesses and profit from them together. And a friend of mine added, “And we must learn to spend our money more wisely.” So the focal point of the expo is to get businesses, mostly small- to mid-sized businesses, to come in and sell their products and sell their services to the general public. And our job is to get the public in there and encourage them to support those businesses, and we also have performers that are there: film series; lectures; salon and spa; natural hair salon and spa. So we do a lot of things, so the whole building becomes the expo; becomes a celebration of Kwanzaa. And then we also have something called the Kwanzaa House, and many of the people who were the founders of the Progressive Emporium Bookstore, they come together, and they actually create an environment, and people can learn about Kwanzaa. So they actually go into a space that they call “the Kwanzaa House,” and people learn how to celebrate Kwanzaa and what Kwanzaa is and how you can make it something that is real to you, not just a holiday.

[0:31:13]

Malaika Horne: And you mentioned Dr. Karenga?

DeBorah Ahmed: Mm-hmm.

Malaika Horne: He established Kwanzaa?

DeBorah Ahmed: Yes, he did. Dr. Maulana Karenga; yes; he created Kwanzaa. Brilliant man.

Malaika Horne: Yes, I agree. And you mentioned the building, and that is really a masterful renovation of that school.

DeBorah Ahmed: Thank you.

Malaika Horne: Could you tell us a little about that because, of course, it's been all kinds of attention?

DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah, 60,000 square feet of space; first piece of property that Better Family Life has ever owned. I felt a little prepared to be the project

director from the Better Family Life side, because Malik and I had done some renovations of houses. So I knew what studs look like; I knew what drywall was; I knew the difference between a rough carpenter and a finish carpenter, right? But going into 60,000 square feet was something totally different. Whew. It was like taking that little bit of information I knew and multiplying it by about a thousand. And fortunately the project manager on the architect side—Kennedy & Associates was the architect—the project manager on their side, Josh Smith, was absolutely wonderful to work with, and I learned a lot from him. He was very patient with me, and I learned how to read architectural plans, drafts, electrical plans, mechanical, plumbing. I mean, I could talk to the tradesmen about what they were doing to some degree of knowledge. And before we actually started on the renovation of the building, I studied buildings for about three or four years. Every building I went, I just looked at it. Sometimes I would just sit in a chair in a lobby, and I would look at how the walls met the ceiling. I would look at how colors harmonized with each other. I would go in the bathrooms, and I would see, like, the placement of toilet tissue dispenser: did it make sense in relationship to the toilet? I would look at the lighting fixtures and how the lights came on and went back off. I got down into minutiae. Sometimes [unintelligible 0:33:16] something like, “Ooh, DeBorah, you’re getting on your own nerves.” You know, I would look at door handles and how they worked, how they felt. I would sit in chairs to see if they were comfortable and what it might feel like to sit in a chair for four hours. Would they be comfortable? I mean, just little things. So I feel very proud. I’m not saying that in a boastful way, but I just feel very proud that the mind that I have developed was able to help create an institution that looks the way it does today, and Better Family Life has a lot to be proud of.

Malaika Horne: Absolutely.

DeBorah Ahmed: You know, and for generations to come, that institution’s going to be there to service a whole, whole, whole, whole lot of people. So I’m glad that I played a little part.

Malaika Horne: Well, you rescued that building and brought it back to its former glory, probably beyond that. What was the name of that school?

DeBorah Ahmed: The Ralph Waldo Emerson Elementary School.

Malaika Horne: Elementary school. And the designer, I think he was, what, a famous designer?

DeBorah Ahmed: He was, William B. Ittner.

Malaika Horne: Right.

DeBorah Ahmed: He was an internationally-known architect.

Malaika Horne: He designed a lot of schools.

DeBorah Ahmed: Yes, he did. He did, and he was the head of the architectural division for the St. Louis Public School System. Like I said, he became internationally renowned, and, in his own words, he said that the Ralph Waldo Emerson Elementary School was his jewel of designs. And when you're in that building, you can see that man put his blood, sweat, and tears into it. And it is, it's a gorgeous building. So what we were left with was a lot to start with, and I think that, like you said, I think we took it beyond its original glory. I think we've taken it to a place where if Ittner were to come in right now, he would be really proud.

Malaika Horne: He may be somewhere smiling right now.

DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah, I hope he is. *[laughter]*

Malaika Horne: I want to talk about work/life balance.

DeBorah Ahmed: Sure.

Malaika Horne: Between work and home and family, how do you balance that?

DeBorah Ahmed: Ooh. How do I balance that? Very carefully. Being married to Malik, who is a CEO, our work comes home with us. Sometimes it's okay; sometimes it's not. Fortunately, our home is very peaceful, and he and I do not like drama, and our lives being balanced and being at peace within ourselves: it's very, very precious to us. We hold it very dear. And our home, I believe, is reflective of that in terms of the artwork, the colors, the warmth of the lights, the placement of our furniture, the comfort when you sit down in the furniture. We enjoy being at home. There have been times when it's been really, really stressful, because we both work for Better Family Life, and when stuff's not right, it affects both of us. And it's not like one person working for somebody else, and you can provide some balance and support. That is not the case. There have been times...

Malaika Horne: You've done so much, both of you.

DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah. Yeah, we do.

Malaika Horne: Your recent—was it a banquet? What do you call it?

DeBorah Ahmed: The Unity Ball?

Malaika Horne: The Unity Ball was sold out.

DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah!

Malaika Horne: How many people were there?

DeBorah Ahmed: Oh, there were probably about 900 people. In fact, when I was reading the St. Louis American last week, we put an ad in there, and the banner on it said, "Sold Out," and it was interesting, when I opened the paper, and I saw that ribbon that said, "Sold Out," I had a big visceral reaction, like, "Whoa! [*laughter*] That's great!"

Malaika Horne: That's what happened. You're getting lots of support from city government to corporations, banks, so...

DeBorah Ahmed: Yes. Many individuals. Yeah, we're blessed. And as a non-profit—I don't know, do non-profits ever get enough support? I don't know, probably not, because there's always a need.

Malaika Horne: Non-profits are hard.

DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah. There's always a need.

Malaika Horne: I know. Non-profits are hard. Tell me this: What have been some of your leadership lessons? What have you learned about this kind of hard-to-grasp concept, leadership?

DeBorah Ahmed: Listening is something that you should always value as being extremely important. I have learned by putting my foot in my mouth too many times that you don't always need to speak. You don't always have to be heard. You need to quiet your spirit and check out what's going on around you. And I've learned it in some hard ways, too. You have to allow people around you to shine. You have to. You got to know when you got to sit down, take the back seat, and in many ways, being a performer has helped me, because there are times when the soloist has to go out there.

There's times when you have the ensemble; there's times when you have the duet; there's times when the ensemble has to let the soloists be out there, and you back them up; you cheer them on; you support them. They fall down, you help them get back up. So a lot of those principles I have applied in my leadership positions. I have also learned that you can't be afraid to be the leader, to be in front, and sometimes you just got to pull people, because, you know, it's like, "You don't want to come, but you got to come. I'm not giving you any choice. You don't have a choice," and even I know in life we always have choices, but sometimes you've got to take that bull by the reins, and say, "Yo, you got to do this." And sometimes you got to get behind people and push them out there, because it's like they don't believe it they[?] themselves they have the capacity to do it, and you know they do. "Okay, well, you don't believe this? Watch this. I'm going to push you. I'm going to do you just like people did with me and learning how to swim. I'm pushing you into that pool, and you're either going to sink or swim, but I'm not going to let you sink. I'm going to be that fence around you to help pull you back up."

Malaika Horne: That kind of reminds me of the phrase I learned a long time ago about leadership, is that people want to be led.

DeBorah Ahmed: Mm-hmm, yes.

Malaika Horne: They may not say that...

DeBorah Ahmed: Yes, yup. Yes.

Malaika Horne: Do you have a particular leadership style? Is it the one you just mentioned about listening, let people shine, pushing them when they need to be pushed—is that your style?

DeBorah Ahmed: Yeah, I think it is. I think it is. And within all that, I like who I am. I feel good about me, and I'm going to always be a work in progress, always. So there will be times that I'll be an example to others and there are going to be times that others are going to be, and still are, examples to me. I watched my little grandchildren. Right now they are six, four, and two, and sometimes they just make me see things in ways that I've never even thought about. I'm like, okay, you little four-year-old, you're teaching me. It's all good. So let me just learn. Let me just chill out and learn from you.

Malaika Horne: So stay open?

- DeBorah Ahmed: Always, you got to always stay open, because the minute your mind closes, you stop growing.
- Malaika Horne: That's right. Do you think there's a difference between how women lead and how men lead?
- DeBorah Ahmed: Mm-hmm.
- Malaika Horne: What do you think might be some of the differences?
- DeBorah Ahmed: This has been my experience: Women tend to be a little more tentative in our expressions of leadership. I'm going to stay away from being uncertain, because I don't mean that, but I think we tend to tread more carefully, more methodically in the expressions of our leadership. Men tend to be more, "I'm out here, heads-on. I'm the bull in the crystal shop. I'm moving [?]." And it's interesting because—again, I'm going to refer back to my grandchildren—I see these qualities in my granddaughters and in my grandson right now, that our grandson is very, "I'm here! I am in this moment!" and "Feel me! See me!" My granddaughters, one of them is more, "I'm here, you know; I don't know if I want to be, but I'm here," and then the other one is like, "Come here, right now," and "I'm going to sit down right now." So, I see these qualities start very early, and I don't know if it's socialization or not. Some things—I don't know; I don't want to say ingrained, but there may be some—could just be the difference in our make-up as males and females, because we are different. And when we come together, I believe we make a balanced whole, which means that there has to be differences on both sides so that that whole has complementary aspects to it, some of which are the same and some of which are different. And I think that women can, within themselves, find their own expressions of leadership and be very strong and very powerful. I believe that men can help women in that expression, and I believe that women can help men. And you just got to find a balance.
- Malaika Horne: You talked earlier about some hard lessons, and I want to go back to this because this is a question here—but if you think you've answered it, let me know—about these hard lessons. Did anything impede your progress, any challenges that you had to really overcome in your career, or...?
- DeBorah Ahmed: Mm-hmm. My own fear of failure.

Malaika Horne: That's the next question, "Any big failure?" So how did you overcome your fear of failure?

DeBorah Ahmed: By doing the things that I was afraid to do, telling myself that I can and not believing that I can't, which is interesting, because, like I said earlier, that's not something I grew up with. And I guess a part of it is also sometimes you get too comfortable in who you are, which makes you lazy. And I think that's been a part of my failure, getting lazy, because I've gotten, in some aspects, too comfortable with who I am and where I am.

[0:45:16]

Malaika Horne: Nobody would call you lazy. Nobody.

[laughter]

Malaika Horne: Nobody. I'm shocked.

DeBorah Ahmed: That's me talking about me.

Malaika Horne: Yeah, I understand that. So is that the lesson that you learned about overcoming failure, is just to stay on top of your game and not slide backwards, or...? Is that what you're saying?

DeBorah Ahmed: Mm-hmm, yeah, and nowhere in what I've said have I mentioned a higher power than myself, and I do believe in God; I believe in Allah. And that energy carries me and motivates me.

Malaika Horne: So your religion is Islam?

DeBorah Ahmed: Mm-hmm.

Malaika Horne: Did that come from your trips to West Africa, or...?

DeBorah Ahmed: Malik.

Malaika Horne: Malik.

DeBorah Ahmed: He introduced me to it, and when we met, I was in search, born and raised a Baptist. I was exploring. When I got introduced to different African cultures, I wasn't sure if Christianity—being a Christian was what I wanted to call myself, and as I began to learn more about black history and what people who called themselves Christians did to us, I didn't feel any pride in calling myself a Christian. So I was exploring. I didn't know if I

wanted to go into a traditional African belief system, into Islam, I wasn't sure. And when Malik and I met, he was a Muslim—practicing Muslim—and he introduced me to it. “All right. Okay, I think this might work.” And it has worked. It has worked. So my religion has helped to empower me when I have fallen off of where I think I should be. My faith has helped me pick myself back up, and it has picked me back up many, many times.

Malaika Horne: So are there any big opportunities on the horizon? You've accomplished so much, but usually people who are high achievers are always wanting to do more.

DeBorah Ahmed: I want to go back to school, and I want to get my doctorate, like you.

Malaika Horne: Oh, okay.

DeBorah Ahmed: And I have wanted to get my doctorate since I was 35 years old.

Malaika Horne: In what?

DeBorah Ahmed: I don't know. That's what I'm struggling with. I got my undergraduate degree in anthropology; I have my Master's in policy analysis; I've thought about art history; I've thought about anthropology again with a specific area on studying the impact that cultural traditions have on social change, social movements—wow; maybe I just said it—social changes, social movements. I've thought about getting my doctorate in some area of dance, dance ethnology. I'm not sure. I got to hurry up and figure this out, for me. I'm saying I got to hurry up, because I put myself on a time clock: I wanted to get my doctorate by the time I was 50. I'm 60 now, and I still don't have it. So, for me, that's a bit of a failure, because I have not achieved the goal that I set for myself at a timeline that I set for myself.

Malaika Horne: Well, maybe you could do like I did.

DeBorah Ahmed: Tell me.

Malaika Horne: A friend of mine said just take one course just to get you started. Just take one course.

DeBorah Ahmed: Okay.

Malaika Horne: And then once—because I'd been out of school a long time—and then once I took that one course, I said, I got to, and I just kept on, because I

knew I wanted to major in public policy, but you can usually transfer those courses. So that's one approach.

DeBorah Ahmed: Okay, I like that approach.

Malaika Horne: So I want to ask you a question about seeing leadership potential in other people. What do you look for? What do you see in other people when they have these characteristics?

DeBorah Ahmed: They are confident about speaking a truth, an opinion, a thought. They're confident, and it exudes from them. I can see their aura. I actually kind of literally can see their aura, and I see this energy of, "I be; I am, and I love me." Sometimes I know when I see it, they don't see it, but, yeah, it's real simple.

Malaika Horne: Do you mentor others?

DeBorah Ahmed: I do. I have two young ladies—well, no, not two, actually I have about four that I'm mentoring right now; two live out of the state and two live in the state, in the city.

Malaika Horne: Well, let me ask you a two-prong question. The first one is: What's the best advice someone has ever given you? That's the first part.

DeBorah Ahmed: Wow. Whoever you say you are, be that, unequivocally.

Malaika Horne: And what advice to your protégés—your mentees, as they call them—what kind of good advice do you give them?

DeBorah Ahmed: Oh, you qualify things, what kind of good advice. That's assuming I give them good advice. I hope I do. *[laughter]*

Malaika Horne: I'm sure you do.

DeBorah Ahmed: Oh, my God! Some of the same things I said earlier about leadership. Sometimes you got to learn to keep your mouth shut and just listen. You need to quiet your spirit sometimes and just take in your environment so you can be observant of what is going on with you and around you. Allow others to lead you, and don't be afraid to lead other people. Know when you need to stop, slow down, and refuel, because you are going to run out of energy, and you're no good to yourself or to others if you're not at your optimum or somewhere close to it. Some things are real specific to what's going on with the people. Also, I do a lot of instruction because

the people I mentor are African American females, so I do a lot of instruction with—I'm saying "instruction" like I'm a teacher. I provide a lot of information about our history and using our history as a people as a point of sharing wisdom and sharing knowledge. And we don't have to ever go far to find our reference point on where we should be and what we should be doing. To use us as our reference point. So when—and this is very specific now, because I've used this example with them many times—when you talk about the highest forms of music, don't use European classical music as your reference point. Use jazz; use African music. When you talk about great writers, you don't have to use Thoreau. You can use James Baldwin, because when you start thinking as if you have created great things in this world, it helps you to see that you are great because you're connected to that greatness, and that does not disavow anybody else's tradition or their history, but what it says to you is that, "I come from something, and I value it, and if I value it, then hopefully I can share that with others, because I will own that; I will own that value, and that'll help me feel even better about who I am," and that's what that mural is also all about, that we have been painting at the cultural center right now, is that when people see it, they will see—you know, African Americans, when they see that mural, they will know immediately that they come from something, that they come from a great tradition, and that they're connected to this. And if they're connected to it, then as these folks have gone through all of these periods of prosperity and challenge and decline and movements, that it's no different from what we're going through now. And they survived, and they grew, and they thrived, and you can survive; you can grow; you can thrive; you can pass on something to the next generation. And you got to see that you are worthy; you're worthy; you are worthy.

Malaika Horne: So we got five minutes left, maybe four... Awards, recognitions, anything that you'd like to tell us about?

DeBorah Ahmed: Wow. I think the ones that I'm most proud of are the ones that I've received as a dancer, as someone who has helped to promote the black dance tradition. I got an award from the Griot Museum. I was inducted into the Griot Society.

Malaika Horne: Where is that?

DeBorah Ahmed: On St. Louis Avenue. [Inaudible 0:56:23].

Malaika Horne: Okay, yes. I [inaudible 0:56:24].

DeBorah Ahmed: Yup. I was in that first group of people. I felt so honored. I'm always honored when people—like with this interview—I'm always honored when people want to give me an award or they see something of noteworthiness in me.

Malaika Horne: Absolutely.

DeBorah Ahmed: I'm humbled.

Malaika Horne: Anything we missed?

DeBorah Ahmed: Ooh, boy. Oh, boy. I love using my creative energy in everything that I do. I enjoy thinking out of the box. It has led me into some very, very good places, and I have loved every year of my 60 years on this planet. I hope I am blessed with at least 60 more times two, at least. My mother and my father were my living examples of the best of who I can be. They pushed me and my sister to always be out there, be out front. Don't be afraid of hard work. Honor the fact that work is something that's a good thing to do. I'm glad that I met the man that I did and I married him. I'm glad that my parents were a living example to me of what you have to do to maintain a good marriage. Marriage is a working process as we are, as individuals, works in process and in progress, and I look forward to spending the rest of my life with Malik. So, thank you.

Malaika Horne: It's a natural place to end.