

An Interview with  
**Sheilah Clarke-Ekong**

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

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interviewed by Dr. Malaika Horne  
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**Oral History Program**

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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.

- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: My name is Sheilah Clarke-Ekong.
- Malaika Horne: Okay, and you know my name is Malaika Horne, and this is a project that seeks to interview women as change agents, and we want to have a conversation with you about your life, your career, and anything else you want to talk about.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Okay.
- Malaika Horne: First, I want to talk about your early years, your youth. So let's get started with elementary and secondary schools.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Okay. I grew up in South Philly. I'm the oldest of six. My mother's the oldest of ten. I went to elementary school; it was an all-black school, Webster Elementary, which was in North Philadelphia at the time. It's now closed. Then I went to Roosevelt Middle School. By that time, we had relocated to Columbus, Ohio, so I went to middle school and high school in Columbus, Ohio. So I went to Roosevelt, and then I went to South High.
- Malaika Horne: Okay. And your parents, their name, your siblings, their names?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Okay. My mom's name is Marcella Ann Gibbs. My father's name was Wardell DeShields, Jr. My parents were not married. They were both teenage parents, so I really grew up in the household of my grandmother, Lucille Clarke-Hudson. So by the time I was five, I came to live, really, with my mother and her new husband, who was Harold Gibbs. So I was her first child, and then she got married four years after I was born, and then she created a household and [inaudible 0:02:01].
- Malaika Horne: And your children?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: My children, I have three birth children: Jennifer Ubaat [spelling unknown] Ekong, Mfon Ekong, and Ime Marcella Ekong. And I have a goddaughter who has lived with me since high school, and her name is Jacinta Witherspoon.
- Malaika Horne: And what do they do?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Jennifer works for Wal-Mart and is an aspiring artist, and she's actually sold some art, so we're pretty pleased about that. She

won't starve. Mfon is a pediatrician and an administrator at the University of Houston Teaching Hospital. She's on her way to Harvard next year to do public health.

Malaika Horne: Congratulations.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Thank you. And Ime is a clinical psychologist. She did a Ph.D. in clinical psychology at Nova, and she's in Florida and works at the Metropolitan Psychiatric Hospital there. And I have a grandson, Franklin.

Malaika Horne: I know.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yes. [laughter]

Malaika Horne: How old is your grandson?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Franklin is four. He'll be five in September.

Malaika Horne: And your husband?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: My former husband...

Malaika Horne: Former husband.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I'm divorced. Victor Jonathan Udo Ekong, and he lives in Nigeria.

Malaika Horne: So you spent time in Nigeria?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: The better part of 12 years in the first round, and then I've gone back for various lengths of time, yeah. So I really became an adult in Nigeria, because I got married at 21 and by 22 I was living in Nigeria.

Malaika Horne: In what part?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Southwestern Nigeria. If you know Nigeria, basically I was three hours from Lagos, but in the heart of Yoruba land in Ilé-Ifè.

Malaika Horne: So what jumps out about Nigeria?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: The vibrancy, that it requires wit and stamina and forthrightness, and Nigeria has a lot of energy, and I was very young, so it taught me very early on to hone my wit and my survival skills and just getting things done because there are days when things just don't

work. And so I learned very early on how to get on with life and take care of myself, take care of my children, take care of my husband, do what I was expected to do, and I also then went to do a—I went with a Bachelor’s Degree when I went to Nigeria, and very short into that process—I was teaching in secondary school and I wasn’t getting promoted, and I saw my colleagues around me getting promoted, so I was advised to go and get “a Nigerian degree.” So I went back to school. And three years later, I was the equivalent of an assistant professor at one of the universities there. And then, as they say, the rest is history. I worked there for seven years, and then I came to UCLA to do my Ph.D.

Malaika Horne: So you taught at a university in Nigeria?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, I taught at the University of Ilé-Ife, and in fact there are still some tapes floating around, because I taught massively large classes, and they put them on tape, and so they showed them long after they should have been shown, but they have them in the archives.

Malaika Horne: What did you teach?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Social sciences for non-social science majors.

Malaika Horne: Any commonalities between Nigeria and African Americans or Americans in general?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I think, yes, in the sense that everybody has a sense of what they want to achieve. Perhaps in Nigeria it’s more defined of what people would like to achieve, but there are more obstacles to that achievement. Here, the counter would be we perhaps are less defined in what we want to achieve while there are more opportunities to achieve it. And so I think there lies the rub between sometimes what you find between—and this is just my opinion—of Continental Africans and African Americans, the sense of, why don’t you do whatever it is they think you should do, because, my goodness, you have all these opportunities.

Malaika Horne: They think that about African Americans?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, they think that about African Americans. Mind you, they are not always aware of the inherent biases and constraints that African Americans face and have faced and continue to face. So what you see on the surface is not always what is, in fact, the reality. And I think that happens both ways. Honestly, I have dear friends from my experience in Africa. They are my life-long friends, and we keep up with each other and we keep up with each other's children, and so, in a way that I've not had the opportunity to have with many of my African American friends because when I was growing up, I wasn't here, and it did make me different. My family often reminds me that I am different.

Malaika Horne: So when you were growing up, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I remember—partly because I knew this was coming up, I was like, “What did I want to be?”—and I wanted to be a teacher or a nurse or a lawyer. And I remember sharing that with my mother, and she said, “But you also want to be a wife,” and I was like, “Okay.” And I didn't think much more about it except, “Okay.” And then I went to the Ohio State University at a time when—1970—where they were in this massive recruitment effort to bring in African Americans, into that class because of all the civil strife that had gone on, and I was part of that class and went at it with all—I thought I was really smart, they measured some of that for me because I suddenly found that I wasn't as competitive as I thought I would be because of the schooling that I had had up to that point in time. And so I went in thinking I was going to do law. I had no mentors or mindset of how that would get done, and I wasn't doing well. And I wasn't used to not doing well. So I used general education, and I stumbled upon sociology.

Malaika Horne: So you've got a Bachelor's in sociology, or a Master's?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Well, I have a Bachelor's in sociology and anthropology, and it's not that complicated. I started at Ohio State, changed to sociology, was doing really well; one of my professors wanted me to go to the Chicago school that was all the rage at that time, and then I met Victor Jonathan Ekong. And, after my junior year, I got married. And then I moved to Florida where he was, and I finished

out my Bachelor's Degree at Florida International University. I was in one of the first graduating classes of that new university. And they had anthropology in the department of sociology. Well, I had already taken more sociology than they had in their entire program, so my entire last year was devoted to anthropology, and then I found my passion. I liked and I embraced anthropology, and so then I go to Nigeria, and nobody knows what anthropology is, and they don't think sociology is very useful, but I have such an interesting transcript that they decide that I should teach literature. So for two years I taught A levels, which is a system inherited by the British. So I taught A-level literature and enjoyed it immensely. It was all very new: read the classic Nigerian novelists, and some of them were walking around, so I was actually getting to meet them as well, because in those days they were still in Nigeria.

Malaika Horne: And everything's in English.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: And everything was written in English, yes. And...

Malaika Horne: And taught in English?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: And we taught in English, in fact, the British English, as I say, not the lazy American English: proper British English.

Malaika Horne: Ah, I hear that British accent coming through.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, and when I came back to UCLA, and I wrote my dissertation, one of my professors went through, and he said, "You're no longer in Britain. Change the spellings."

Malaika Horne: That's right.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: So I did.

Malaika Horne: So you got your doctorate from UCLA.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, my doctorate's from UCLA.

Malaika Horne: In anthropology?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: In anthropology, and I also have a graduate certificate in applied anthropology.

Malaika Horne: I see. So were you recognized as a leader growing up or in college?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: As the first born, I think I was given a lot of responsibilities early on, because my parents were struggling—and I'm sure it's against the law now—but I do know that I was left to watch my siblings at probably an inappropriately young age, but we didn't burn down the house, and nothing happened. And then, in elementary school, I was given the assignment of collecting the lunch money, so I felt pretty pleased with that assignment. It was impressed upon me that I was considered responsible and always came to school, and I could count, so that was like the first big assignment for me outside of my home. And by the time I got to middle school—this was my first experience in a racially diverse school—I was attentive, I got very good grades, and so—but I don't think there was anything about leadership until I probably got to high school.

Malaika Horne: And what happened there?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: In high school, again, racially mixed school, ran for a couple of those 11th/12th-grade office kind of things. I also started winning awards, which made my parents immensely proud, but also gave the school some props, because they were also going through the transitions of having minority students in the schools. And I also confused a lot of people because I was doing honors courses—which they now call AP courses—I was doing honors courses, on the one hand, but I was also doing DECA and distributive education courses on the other hand. So by the time I was a senior, I had enough credits so I was out of school half the day doing distributive education courses and that kind of thing. So when it came time for my advisor to say, "Well, what are you going to do when you graduate?" it was like—because in those days they still tracked students, too, so there was the academic track, and then there was the vocational track, and then there was, like, "We're just trying to get you out of here" track. And so I was somewhere between those first two tracks, and they're like, "Well, you have done something that we don't often see. You've actually done both tracks successfully, so what do you want to

do?” And so we talked, and I had some really, really good and supportive high school advisors, and one just said, “Go to Ohio State.” I’m like, “Okay,” but mind you, she said it, and I embraced it, but that summer, I took the civil service test for the post office. Passed it very well. In fact, I got done and took a nap, and that sort of upset the person who was monitoring the exam. And then I worked a little bit in the summer doing catering work, and I worked for the Department of Recreation. But by the time the fall came, I was like, okay, I’m going to go to Ohio State, and this same advisor and a few other people had found some money for me. And so the three years at Ohio State, I didn’t pay. I didn’t pay anything. In fact, by the time I was in my second year, I bought a little car, and one of the neighbors who lived on the same street with us, she was high up in the AKA’s, and she had...

Malaika Horne: [0:15:58] Alpha Kappa Alpha?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, she had helped me get...

Malaika Horne: A black woman’s...

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: A black woman’s sorority. She had helped me get a scholarship, and I was like, I have to go and tell Miss Johnson that I still need the money even though I bought this little car. And so I went down, and she said, “Well, I was finally waiting for you to come down and ask me did I need a ride,” and we laughed, and I expressed my anxiety, and she said, “No, you do your grades. You come to the two events we invite you to. You’ll be fine.”

Malaika Horne: So you’re an AKA?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I’m not, because that, too, wasn’t conditional, and there’s a reason why I didn’t pledge, and I just saw some things that I was like, I’m not having that, because—no, no, if you put your hands on me, there’s a problem, so let me not do that.

Malaika Horne: Right, I didn’t do that either, though my older sister was an AKA.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: [laughter] Yeah.

Malaika Horne: So who influenced you inside the home, outside the home growing up?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: My grandmother was my rock. She might have been five feet tall, but I doubt it. She was a no-nonsense person. She worked hard; she had 10 children, all live births: seven girls, three boys. My mother is her oldest child. We spent weekends at her house. My generation, we all called her “Mommy,” and there isn’t much irony in that in the sense that my grandmother, my mother, and two of my aunts were all having children at a certain point in time. So I have two aunts and an uncle who are younger than I am. Okay, and so we were all there: cousins, brothers, sisters, friends. We had one young man who stayed—we thought he was a cousin. He wasn’t related to us at all. He just didn’t go back home. So South Philly, we didn’t lock the doors. We weren’t allowed to be rude. You came downstairs, you said “Good morning” or you went back upstairs, and then you came back down because you had found your sense, and that’s how it went. So she just—The first early memory—and perhaps that would be indicative of where I would end up—was her defending me against one of my aunts. And I had picked up a book, and I don’t honestly know if I was reading it intellectually or if I was just playing with the book, but my aunt was furious and began to berate me about why was I holding the book and give her the book, and it just—and my grandmother came from somewhere, as older people do; they just sort of seem to show up—and she said, “There’ll be no shouting. It’s a book.” I don’t know why I remember this. “It’s a book. If she can read it, let her read it.”

Malaika Horne: How old were you?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I wasn’t in school yet. I wasn’t in real school. I had gone to nursery school, so I might have been—because of when my birthday falls, I didn’t go to kindergarten. I went straight to 1st grade. So I might’ve been five. I might’ve been five.

Malaika Horne: So what did you get out of that exchange between your grandmother and your aunt about...

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: That I would be safe as long as I was doing something good. As long as I wasn’t doing anything wrong, I was safe, and my grandmother was going to make sure of it. And I don’t think I translated it farther than that. As I got older, I sort of got teased

about always reading. I remember that, and I don't even think I thought of it as bullying. I just thought of it as being teased, and it didn't bother me. I was like, "So what? That's what I do. You do what you do." I couldn't care less.

Malaika Horne: So this next question is sort of related to your grandmother because we ask this question of all the interviewees: 50 years earlier, what do you think you would've been doing? And I usually say, for example, what did your grandmother do? Maybe that's an indication of 50 years earlier, what do you think you would have been doing. So either way you want to answer it or both.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah. My grandmother was a maid. She did hotel work as a cleaner in a hotel, but she also worked for some very wealthy people who owned businesses in Philadelphia. And in those days your maids became part of the family. And so it wasn't unusual for her to take me to their house when she did her work, and their children also called her "Mommy" or "Mama," and so we could be, all of us there together, calling her the same thing. She would sit us somewhere, give us something to do, and she would do her work. And we got to know that family because then subsequently some of my aunts worked for the family as well. So I come from a working-class background, and presumably that is also what I would have done. I can't imagine that I would have thought, "Oh, yes, I'm going to the university." Now, having said that, people say, "Well, you grew up in an odd situation. Nobody ever sent you down South," and I didn't understand that until much later. I was like, "Down South to where?" My grandmother's from Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

Malaika Horne: Oh, W. B. Du Bois's home.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: We are related to them.

Malaika Horne: Oh, my God.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, so she knew him as a child.

Malaika Horne: She knew W. B. Du...?

- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, she knew him and his brother, Uncle Bob, because my grandmother, when her mother died on the operating table, her father, who worked on the train as a porter, he panicked and disappeared. So now they have this young child, this little girl, so what to do with her? So they sent her to Philadelphia to live with her Uncle Bob, and he raises her. And she doesn't continue school, and she goes to work, and there you are. But she reads. If there could be a woman Pope, she would've been it. She had no problems reading, so she had learned to read early, but she actually, I don't think, went to school after she was about 13 or 14 years old.
- Malaika Horne: So your grandparents and great-grandparents, they weren't from the South?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: No, they weren't from the South.
- Malaika Horne: You're Northerners from the very beginning.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, and my grandfather on my mother's side was from the Maryland area, so there was no "down South" for them to send us to. We went to South Philly.
- Malaika Horne: Yeah.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: [laughter] Yeah.
- Malaika Horne: I never went down South, but a lot of African American families do go down South for the summer because they still have relatives there.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Right, yeah.
- Malaika Horne: So who influenced you throughout your career, anybody in particular?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Lots of people on the way. Lots of people: men, women, whites, blacks, all faiths. Maybe because I did read a lot, I saw the world differently, I imagined the world differently, even though I didn't live it differently. When we moved to North Philadelphia, when I, in fact, came to live with my mother and her husband, we moved to North Philadelphia. We lived in the Projects. They call it public

housing. We lived in the Projects. They were the new Projects, and we walked to school, and there was an older woman, she was a grandmother who lived in the house with one of the kids on the block, and she walked to school with us, and she came back at the end of the day and walked us back, and I only remember having one fight throughout my youth.

Malaika Horne: That's pretty good.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: One, and it was because, at that time, again, there was that tracking system. So I guess I had shown some intellect at elementary school, because they had 3B and 4A, so classes were 3A, 3B, 4A, et cetera. So if you were really bright, you went to 3B and then you were also in class with the people who were in 4A. That's how they put us together. And there was a girl in 4A who was just taunting me. We're eight, nine years old. What do you have—I don't remember, but I remember on more than one occasion being so unhappy that I was crying when they came to get us to walk us home, and finally this grandmom said, "Today you are going to fight her." Well, we weren't allowed to fight at home either so maybe that, too—my mother was like, "No, the world is too hard. You will not fight each other." So we didn't fight at home. So the lady came for us at the normal time when we got out of school, we walked down, and she said, "Put your hat on and fight her," because in those days we all had those odd braids, and you didn't want people to pull your hair when they fight. She said, "Put your hat on and fight her, and we're going to end this today." I put my hat on, I fight her, I beat her, don't have any more problems.

Malaika Horne: Made your reputation.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah. So I think people tell you now I fight with words, but I don't put my hands on people.

Malaika Horne: Well, that's the way they used to do it. So can you think of a person—you said "whites, blacks, men, and women" who influenced you throughout your career—Is there any one person or more than one person that stood out?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong:

Okay, maybe sequentially. When I was in the 6th grade, my teacher's name was Miss Smith. She was the most attractive, sophisticated black woman I had ever known. She dressed up, she wore heels, she wore makeup, her hair was always done, and I was like, "This is what you can do." And so I always remembered her throughout growing up. I always remembered Miss Smith. By the time I got to high school, there was a history teacher. He taught honors history, and he made me believe that the way I looked at things was okay, because I apparently would give responses that my contemporaries were not giving, and he reassured me that he valued the way I understood whatever the assignment was. He also was death on people who were lazy, and he had had—he shared with us some of his trials and tribulations as a white man. So I remember him. By the time I went to Ohio State, there were two professors: one was a black man, and one was a white priest who taught in sociology. The black man was the one who wanted me to go to the Chicago School. The priest was the one who helped me understand perhaps some of the things that you sacrifice in your life, because he was a priest but he had no gentleness when it came to grades and getting your work done. He was so—but he was soft in his correction. He was disciplined in his corrections for us. He was intolerant of absence. You didn't not come to his class. By the time I moved to Nigeria, some days I was so unhappy I didn't know how to express it.

Malaika Horne:

[0:30:08] Why were you unhappy?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong:

I had left home. This was learning a whole new culture. I had a husband who was trying to reach his career goals, but there were a core of expatriate black women who had also married Nigerians, and in each of our comings to that place, they embraced us. They told us what to do, what not to do, what people thought we would do, how to answer: basically how to navigate a very different cultural, social, economic space, because now, for the first time ever in my life, I'm perceived as part of this intellectual elite. I have people working in my house for me. Family members are being sent to us to do things that—sweep my floor or wash my dishes, wash the car, take care of the babies. There's no

babies yet, but, you know. So all this is all sort of overwhelming at times.

Malaika Horne: Because you were part of the middle class or upper class?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, in Nigeria, in those days, very distant from what I had been. So, yeah, and I married into a family that are known as the Ekongs who are in higher ed.

Malaika Horne: I see.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: My father-in-law got an honorary doctorate in the 1930s from the Missouri Synod. So we were a name to be reckoned with. So that, too, added another level of how one was supposed to behave.

Malaika Horne: So what did your husband do?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: He is a professor in computer science and numerical analysis.

Malaika Horne: In Nigeria?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Mm-hmm, but he graduated from Ohio State.

Malaika Horne: So, I know that now you're now here at University of Missouri-St. Louis. I believe you're a professor in anthropology.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yes.

Malaika Horne: You're getting ready to retire.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yes.

Malaika Horne: So, from UCLA to here, could you just brief us on your career, your life, and anybody who influenced you along the way.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Okay. So UCLA to here: First of all, I was recruited to come in the sense that when Marguerite Ross Barnett was chancellor, it's my understanding—because I never had an opportunity to meet her—but it was my understanding that she went to the state and said, "We must have resources to enhance and build our faculty," and that that money was actually allocated. And when she made it available to the campus, it was basically—this is what I was told—on a first-come, first-served: find good recruits. We have to make the campus more diverse. Here's the opportunity to do so.

There were already two people from the UC system in the Department of Anthropology when that award came out. So they contacted their own networks. I was on the radar at that time because I was in a dissertation writing stage. Someone got in touch with me and said, "Oh, you know, we'd like you to come and look at us, and we'd like to look at you," and da da da da. And I didn't know who they were. I thought it was Wash. U., because I was coming to Wash. U. the next fall to give a paper at the ASA meetings—the African Studies Association meetings were held there that year as well as, I was going to run a teachers' workshop for them. So I'm thinking I'm talking to Wash. U., and I say something, and Van Reidhead says, "No, we're the other school," and I was like, "Well, what other school, and why are you calling?" And so we start building a conversation from there. But it was my professors who—my key professors at UCLA, none of them were terribly excited about me coming here.

Malaika Horne:

Why?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong:

They thought I could do better. And they said so. Then I went to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan who was then one of the few, if not the first, African American woman who was in the graduate school, the provost of Graduate Studies at UCLA at the time. But I had had her in class because she is an anthropologist, and she had moved into higher administration. So I went to her, and I said, "This is what..." and she said—and I had always considered her a role model to me. She was straight, she was smart, she was sophisticated: all those things. In fact, in some ways, she was Miss Smith that many years later. She said to me, "What do you want to do?" and I told her, "I want to grow this career. I've got three children to take care of, and I need to be able to take care of me," and she said, "Well, you could stay here." She said, "The UCLA community is incredibly pleased with you. They've already started sending you to development programs and you're in administration..."—because at that time I was the associate director of the James Coleman African Studies Center. I ran the center. She said, "So they want you," she said, "but you did your Ph.D. here, and there are those of us..."—and she said "us"—she said, "There are those of us who would never let you stop being

our student if you stay.” She said, “So if you get an opportunity to go, go; knock it out wherever you go. Five years, come back. We’ll respect you differently.” So I presented again what the actual opportunity was. She said, “Wow...” She’s from the south side of Chicago, so she knows the whole Midwest thing. She said, “You can stay here and be a small fish in a very big pond, or you can go to St. Louis and be a big fish in a very small pond.” She said, “Go.”

Malaika Horne: And you became a big fish.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Basically, but with a lot of help, with people believing in me who really didn’t have any reason to except they didn’t have any reason not to. So I come, and I get through the tenure thing. That very fall I become the department chair.

Malaika Horne: What year was that when you came here?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I came here in August 1992, so I do the normal track for tenure. I become the department chair which is bigger than I think it is until people start making noise about it, partly because there’s only been two chairs for the department through its entirety because [a] white man had been there for a very long time, and I then realized I was the first African American woman to be the chair of a department in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Malaika Horne: Is that a fact?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah. I had very mixed emotions about that, because I was like, “Why?” I mean, 40 years, really? Should we be applauding ourselves? And then someone pointed out that, no, that wasn’t exactly true because Professor Williams—Lorna—had been chair of Languages, but then someone said, “No, it is true because she’s Caribbean.” I said, “Okay, so now we’re really picking straws, but okay, fine.” And so from there, things just—I had a deficit to get rid of in the department. I got rid of it, and Dean Everette Nance, he became a quiet advisor. He would just call me aside and say things.

Malaika Horne: And he was dean of the Evening...

- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: He was Dean of the Evening College, and he would just call me aside, say something, and keep on walking. So from a distance you might just think he just said, "Hello, how you doing? How the kids?"
- Malaika Horne: I remember him.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: But he would drop these things, and then one day he said more than a few words. I was like, "Oh, this is big," and he said, "We are paying attention, and we like what we're seeing. If you have problems, come to us. We'll let you..." He said, "But don't whine; handle it. Take care of your budget, and remember that we're here for students." He would then die, and I saw him that day. I saw him that night.
- Malaika Horne: Really? What year was that?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Oh, gosh, that would've been...
- Malaika Horne: 2002?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: 2002, yeah, 2002/2003. It couldn't have been more than that. We were at a holiday party from one of the other deans. I saw him; he wasn't feeling well. He left, said he was leaving—because there were only three black people at the party, so I remember who we were; we were there. When the notice came out, I couldn't process it, that he had died. But he did, and then...
- Malaika Horne: Did he have a heart attack?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: He had bad asthma. I understand he had an asthma attack.
- Malaika Horne: Okay.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah. So life would go on. And then I would get—the next year, a year after he passed, I would get a call from the chancellor's office that she wanted to see me, when could I come, and I said, "When the chancellor tells me to come." I'm still that kind of person. So I met with Chancellor Touhill, and she said, "This is what I would like you to consider, and you have to apply, and it has to be approved, and it'll be an interim position, but I want you to go over to the Evening College." And I asked her, "Why me?" and she

said, "I'm giving you an opportunity to actually run the Evening College, and you're asking why you and why—things about your department." She said, "Perhaps that's why it's you." She said, "People have recommended you. You care about students, and you can do a lot more for your department from the college position than you can being department chair." So I made the application; it went through. Mind you, by the time it went through, I had already had my teaching load assigned. So for that first semester, doing my teaching load plus doing the Evening College, I was on campus 16/17/18 hours a day.

Malaika Horne: So you were teaching plus being Dean of the Evening College?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, because it was too late to change my teaching load...

Malaika Horne: Wow.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: ...and I got ill by about November, and it was my financial officer at the time who, one day she just said, "Don't come back in here until you go and see about that cough," and I went, and she said, "Well, you're actually clinically exhausted," she said, "so you just can't do it." And at the time when it was raised, it was like, "Well, how are you going to do the evening college and do your classes?" and said, "Well, you'll be in the evening college," but all the deans' meetings are in the day. [laughter]

Malaika Horne: Right, and then eventually the Evening College got dismantled?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: It got dismantled and absorbed when the current chancellor and his administration came. They decided that the respective colleges would, in fact, handle their evening courses.

Malaika Horne: Okay. So, you talked about having three children to raise and then coming here and being a professor and then interim dean. I want to talk about work-life balance. How did you manage all of that? You said you got sick, so I understand the strain of trying to do two full-time jobs, but what about home and family and children?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah. My daughters have done phenomenally well, and people often ask me, "How did you do it?" and I said, "I did part, and they did part, and we met at the middle, and it worked out." My

daughters will tell you we used to have meetings about the opportunities that would come and how we were going to—so, for example, when it was time for them—they went to Parkway South High School. We lived in Ballwin in West County. So when it was time for somebody to do something that was going to attach resources, we would sit down and talk about it. So, Mfon is going to Paris, for France and to do her language immersion, so this is going to happen; this is not going to happen, and so forth and so on. They are very supportive of each other. They are very supportive of me. And it troubled me at one point. I think they don't think there's anything I can't do. [laughter]

Malaika Horne: [0:45:04] Anything you can't do, right.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: And so we did—and people would rally round, and my mother and my aunts and my sisters—my youngest daughter stayed with the Philadelphia aunts for two years so she could go to Montessori school. They said it was the first time they had to be up at five o'clock in the morning to talk to somebody who wanted to eat something that they didn't want to prepare. But so there were people, like I say, all along the way who said, "I got this," or "I'll do that," yeah.

Malaika Horne: You had a support group.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Always. Always.

Malaika Horne: So getting back to your career, any leadership lessons? What'd you learn about leadership?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Perhaps most strikingly is that if you are honest, not only in your aspirations, but in your limitations, people will help you. There's never a time when I have not consulted with people. And I had that colleague tell me one time wasn't going to walk along campus with me because it takes me too long to get across campus, because I do: I stop and I talk to people. Some days, that mere exchange of "How are you?" "How's this?" I have an extraordinary memory of the inconsequential. If you don't have children but you have cats, I'll probably remember to ask you about it.

- Malaika Horne: I know they affectionately call you “Dr. E.”
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yes, they do.
- Malaika Horne: Dr. E.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: But students gave me that.
- Malaika Horne: Okay. How did that...
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: When I...
- Malaika Horne: Because [unclear 0:47:07]? I always thought it was because of the performance, [unclear 0:47:09].
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: No, it’s from taking students to Ghana and being the faculty advisor for them. And as I immersed myself with my students, other students started coming, so sometimes there’d be this whole group of people following me around, like, what, what’re you...? So there’s a cultural sensibility of how you address your elders, unlike in some other places in the world, and so there was a student who was trying to get my attention from a distance, and I saw them but I was not going to acknowledge them. They needed to learn this lesson because they had been told, and so finally, breathlessly, they caught up with me, and they were like, “Dr. E...Dr. E...” and I was like, “Yes?” and they were like, “Can I call you ‘Dr. E.’?” and I was like, “Yes,” and I was like, “Who are you?” Well, they were from a different school program that didn’t send a faculty advisor, and within a week or so, I was ‘Dr. E.’
- Malaika Horne: I see.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: And it came back; I was like—because “Clarke-Ekong” is not that difficult in the whole scheme of continental African names, but it stuck, and it was good, and it lessens confusion, because I don’t allow my students to call me “Sheilah.”
- Malaika Horne: I don’t, either.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: So once they know that, we are clear. Every once in a while they forget. I don’t answer, then we’re back on track, and it’s all good.
- Malaika Horne: So you took students to Ghana. How many times did you do that?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I built the Ghana Study Abroad program, so it's my program. So I was going to Ghana; that was my research site at the time; I knew the important people that one needed to know to make the Memorandum of Understanding, and so I took the second group of students. A colleague who's no longer here, but she was in communications at the time, she took the first group of students, and then I took the second group.

Malaika Horne: And you did research in Ghana. What was your research?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, the research has to do with the iconic representations of women and women's power, yeah, and how oftentimes those icons get appropriated by government.

Malaika Horne: And what did you find, briefly?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: They will keep riding women's backs until women push them off, and women are getting strong, and they're saying, "No, this is not going to happen this time. If you want our vote, this is what it's going to take to get our vote. Our vote is not cheap," yeah.

Malaika Horne: So, regarding leadership lessons, did anything impede your progress along the way, anything that jumps out at you?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: There are times when, in retrospect, I find that people make decisions just because they don't know and they don't want to ask. There is no harm in asking. I don't want to be surrounded by people who know what I know. That's not helpful. I had a financial officer once—and he always calls me "Doc"—in one of the administrative positions I've held on campus—always called me "Doc"—so one day I get this memo from another colleague asking for something that I think he can't really be asking me this. He can't really be asking me for this. So I walk around—I like to walk around and think. So people say, "You're always walking around." I'm thinking. I'm counting my steps, but I'm thinking; I'm trying to clear my head. So I come back and I ask my financial officer; I said, "Look at this. What do you think?" and he says, "Do you really want to know what I think?" I said, "That's why I asked you!" And he said, "Use the Golden Rule," and I said, "What is the Golden Rule?" He said, "The person who has the gold makes the rules. Tell him no." I was like, "Thank you!"

Malaika Horne: That's right.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: So things that disappoint me for no reason, then I tend to step back a little bit because I can work long, hard hours. I sleep very well, but if you do things that just don't make sense, I'm not going to give you all those hours. I'm not that good a person. I'm not going to do it.

Malaika Horne: Any challenges or failures?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Life is. Every day I wake up, it's like, that's the challenge: to be measured, to meet people where they are, to give people—sometimes one has to realize that they're going to give up some of their political capital. So if I want to help a person who's having a difficult tenure case, for example, that may cost me, and I have to measure that cost and decide that this person is worth that cost. I don't write letters that I cannot support. I don't; I just don't. So disappointments, it's so big right now. I mean, I saw what my grandparents did, what I thought we had done. I couldn't be prouder of where my daughters are, but some of the national narrative right now, I am so disappointed because the fact that it's going on shows what each of us has not done.

Malaika Horne: It's hard.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Okay. And I include me in that, what we have not done that we are still having these conversations.

Malaika Horne: Yeah, I agree. Your leadership style, I've kind of picked up on it, but if you could just articulate it in a sentence or two: what is your leadership style?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: And I'm not sure I would have ever just said "This is my leadership style," I like getting things done. To-do lists don't impress me. I'm more likely to say, "Where's the 'done' list?" I am very comfortable delegating things and then encouraging people to get it done. But this comes from knowing that I like being around people who know stuff that I don't know. Even now that I'm on the cusp of retirement, there's some university software packages coming online. Well, they change them every two/three years, and so they're saying, "Well, that thing's coming. Learn..." I'm not

learning it! “You got job security. Teach me how to do it right now, and when they change it, I’ll come back for the next lesson. Or just do it for me and show me how you did it so that if it crashes, I can fix it.” But otherwise—you know, there’s so much talent, and if we get to be in charge of talent, it is such a phenomenal responsibility.

Malaika Horne: Absolutely.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: It is just—some days, if I don’t sleep well, it’s because—any day that [I’ve?] not slept well is because I’m just concerned about the responsibility I have been given.

Malaika Horne: So do you think there’s a difference between men and women in their leadership styles?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yes, but to the same extent that their leadership style is different amongst women. I think it depends on where it’s rooted at; how you value it; what your own personal temperament is. I know there’ve been two occasions where, in a professional situation, I have visibly and vocally lost my temper, and I have regretted it both times. I shouldn’t let anybody do that.

Malaika Horne: So somebody was provoking you?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah. Yeah.

Malaika Horne: Okay, we’re going to stop.

Malaika Horne: We’re talking about, is there a difference—and you said yes—but you said there are differences in women’s leadership styles and differences, I would imagine, in men’s leadership styles.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah.

Malaika Horne: But overall, is there a difference?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I think, in many cases, our society situates us to believe that men believe that what they say is the penultimate, and it’s going to carry the day. I grew up as the first child. The next one is four years after me, and my brother used to say, “You’re the only person who can cuss somebody out and not use a cuss word.” So, I think it is circumstantial; it’s situational; it is class; it is race; it is

ethnicity; it is religious affiliations: all of those things because I've found men who are so genuinely concerned that, did you not see that it is a man, you would have said, "That's a woman doing that." Does he have daughters? Is that impacting the way in which he leads, or does he have daughters and then you can't imagine that he would lead like this and he has daughters. So there are all those complexities. I think, as an anthropologist, especially a cultural anthropologist, it does inform how I see the world. So I'm incapable of saying, "Oh, there's this male style, and there's this woman's style," because I've seen them conflate where there are women who do things, and I'll be like, "You are never coming into the sisterhood; okay, this is just unacceptable, because you're a brute."

Malaika Horne: Yes, I got you.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yes.

Malaika Horne: I know you're moving to Florida.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah.

Malaika Horne: Congratulations!

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Thank you.

Malaika Horne: Buying a house.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah.

Malaika Horne: Anything else you're going to do there, on the horizon? Anything big...?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I am really concerned about the interface and the intersectionality of black children and the court systems. So I've been reading some books; I'm going to take some online courses. I'm going to see if there's a role for me in the court systems to advocate for young children of color, black and brown children who get into the system far too often, far too early, and are underserved.

Malaika Horne: No question.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: And I can do it for free, so...

- Malaika Horne: Oh, wow.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, I think they'll accept me. They don't have to pay me. It'd be nice, but they don't have to.
- Malaika Horne: What a service.
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah.
- Malaika Horne: In looking at young people, when you're seeing leadership potential, what do you look for—or anybody, but usually young people?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: [1:00:00] Honesty and empathy. In my mind, you have to be honest. You have to be honest with yourself, and you have to be honest with others. But that honesty must also be couched in empathy. Life is hard, and we never know what anyone is going through. Sometimes we don't even know what we are going through. And so to have that empathy and honesty, the rest of it you can learn. I can help you with it. But if you come with me, and you're not honest, and you can't empathize with others, I can't help you. I don't think you should be a leader. I don't think you are capable of it.
- Malaika Horne: Well, this next question—you might answer [?] this—but what is the best advice you can give people who want to make a difference? Is it the same thing, honesty, empathy? Is there anything else?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Be prepared to be disappointed. People will disappoint you, okay, but don't give up on them, okay, because tomorrow might be a better day. At least you got another shot at it.
- Malaika Horne: Yeah, I guess some people are fickle, aren't they?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Yeah, so don't give up on the short run. This is the marathon.
- Malaika Horne: That's right. Do you have a hero or a mentor or anybody? You are one, but do you have one?
- Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: I have a friend of 45 years. She lives in North Carolina. I go and see her at least once a year, and we have a kitchen summit. We sit and we talk. She has three children; I have three children. She

helped me through some very difficult things when I was leaving Nigeria. My marriage was failing. She has continued to be solid. She doesn't have a Ph.D.; she doesn't need one, and when she tells you something, pay attention. You may not like it, but pay attention.

Malaika Horne: Any awards or recognitions?

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: Over the years, lots of them, lots of them, but I think those that mean the most, especially what I chose to do with my life, are those that were given to me by students, by their nominations. I got one recently...

Malaika Horne: Yeah, I know, I remember that.

Sheilah Clarke-Ekong: ...from the Black Faculty Staff Association, which belies that you can keep a secret on this campus, because when they asked me what I had to say, I did not have anything to say. And I thought, "Wow." And I don't know if that part got scripted, either, because up to that point in time, all the graduates come up, and they say a few words, and my name had been mentioned a couple of times over the students coming through, and when they said, "Well, you've already been hearing her name," and then the student who followed me, I think—my heart felt so big because he said, "Yeah, she should have got this award because she [pumped?] me."