

Mahmud Johnson, Class of 2013  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World  
May 14, 2013

WOMICK: I'll get us started. My name is Cally Womick and I'm here in Rauner Library with Mahmud Johnson. It is Tuesday, May 14, 2013. So to get started, why don't you talk about where you grew up?

JOHNSON: I grew up in Monrovia, Liberia, a small country on the west coast of Africa. I went to high school there. My family is there. Yeah, and it was a pretty good childhood, I guess.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm. Ok. How'd you end up at Dartmouth?

JOHNSON: That's the question everybody asks. So I finished high school in 2008 and, I mean I had no idea that I was going to go to college in US. I finished high school. I thought I was going to go to college there in Liberia so I got an internship working at the President's Office – the Public Affairs Department. Actually I had two internships. I was working there, but then I was also working at a public health firm called Population Services International, and we did a radio show, you know, public health radio show, targeting young people, sexual reproductive health: How do you prevent unintended pregnancies? How do you test for HIV? How do you prevent HIV? All those things, peer-to-peer, in a radio show. And so I did that for one year.

And in the president's office, the lady I was interning with was a Liberian, but she had come to college here in the US. She went to Howard University in DC and then went off to Oxford for her master's. Pretty smart. And so she encouraged me just like, you know, "Why don't you look into applying to the colleges in the US?" Um, so, sure. And so you know I like did the Google search, and that was the first time that I saw what the College Board was, what the Common App was, what the SATs were. And I was fortunate enough to—I knew somebody here in the US who mailed me a copy of the SAT prep book, because you can't find those locally.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: And so I, I spent I think about... It was interesting because I was working at the time, and I was also like taking classes at one of the

local universities. And so had to go to work, and then go home, go to bed early, and then wake up around like 3 A.M. and like study until the morning for the SATs. So that was like my routine—

WOMICK: Woah.

JOHNSON: For I think two or three months. And did the SATs. And the lady who was my boss, Robtel Pailey, she was an English major in the local college. And so she was a really good writer. And so she would like help me. You know, sort of how do you structure an essay? What exactly do you want to say? And all those things. So I got a lot of help from her. And took the SATs. And eventually I applied to a number of schools, after I'd applied to, you know, most of the schools that I wanted to apply to. Uh, one issue for me was the application fees. So it's like, are there any colleges out there that have fee waivers or don't require application fees? And I did a Google search and then found that Dartmouth was one of them. So I was like, I might as well apply to this one and see what it is. At the time I didn't know what Ivy League was. I didn't know what Dartmouth was and all that stuff. And, you know, I applied. Um, after I had applied and was waiting to hear back, I was like, okay, you know what—I'm gonna do more research on these schools that I've applied to. [Laughter]

And, obviously it's counterintuitive. Most people do research before they apply; I did research after I applied. And so that was when I started emailing, and I saw, oh, wow! This is actually a really good school. So I really—to be honest I really didn't expect to get in. In fact, when I got in.... So you know, they send our acceptances.... By the time they send out acceptances on March—the last day in March—at 5 P.M. EST, which is like 9 P.M. in Liberia at the time. I did not have Internet at home. So I waited for the next day to check it, which is on April 1<sup>st</sup>. So when I checked it on April 1<sup>st</sup>, I thought it was like an April Fool's joke. [Laughter.] I was waiting for that email to say, okay, you know you've been tricked, but I didn't see it.

A couple of days later I got a letter in the mail. And one of the admissions officers here had actually been working a lot in Ghana, which is close to Liberia. And he was kind enough to write, to like send a handwritten note to say, you know, "Congratulations! I've done a lot of work in Ghana, and I'm really interested in hearing more about your story. Let me know if you have any questions. Here's the phone number." That was like what sold me on Dartmouth, of course, in addition to the financial aid.

WOMICK: That's really cool.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

WOMICK: So the first time you saw Dartmouth was when you came?

JOHNSON: That's when I came for DOC trips.

WOMICK: Uh-huh.

JOHNSON: Um, it was interesting because like back home, you know, American movies are huge in Liberia. So you watch the movies and see New York and San Francisco and the high-rise buildings and stuff. And, you know, you get to Hanover, and it's like, "Well, where are we?" Where are the buildings and stuff? So that was an interesting—but yeah, that was the first time.

I just remember people.... I remember very clearly the first day I arrived, um, people being very nice. I remember like somebody... I had two people literally walk me to my room holding my bags and taking me into my room and then taking me to get food and all that. And it was just a very, um, a very nice welcome, especially for somebody who had never been to the US before. I was—I didn't quite know what to expect. It was nice to see that people were very welcoming and, you know, very warm. Yeah.

WOMICK: So then, what was freshman fall like?

JOHNSON: Freshman fall was interesting. Um, it was extremely intense. This was—so I mean I'd always done well in school. Academics wasn't really a problem for me. But coming here to Dartmouth was a whole different story. Man, it was like.... You know, back when I was studying I mean like a few hours a day. Here it's like.... I always—First of all, I had never done.... So freshman fall I was taking calculus class and my writing class. And then decided to take a computer science class when I'd never done computer science before. And I went to an open house and, they were like, "even if you don't have any programming experience, you can do this stuff." And this class literally had homework assignments due every day of class.

So in addition to like, you know, spending a lot of time on my writing class, I was like always in the computer lab. And then I had never

done calculus before. So, you know, I was like doing calculus. So it was just extremely crazy, you know, trying to get adjusted to, sort of... what—how do you take notes? Back home teachers would give you the notes. I'd never had to, you know, see teachers just like do dictation or whatever and then you have to like write your notes down.

So getting adjusted to that. Also, learning how to write in academic, you know, style. That is not something that I'd done a lot in high school. So, you know, getting used to that as well was a challenge. So academically...it did—I mean eventually it turned out great, but it took a while for me to get adjusted to what's expected of the students here. And how do you prepare for class?

Socially, one of the best experiences—It was probably one of the best classes I've taken here at Dartmouth was my writing class. It was Writing 2/3 with Professor Karen Gocsik...is this class with 16 international students. There's not a single American student in the class. Um, and I just remember that class as being one of the places that really challenged me to think in very different ways. The class—all writing classes have some theme to it. This class was sort of like borderline philosophy, religion, that kind of stuff. So we would read Milan Kundera. We would read Dostoevsky. We would read... what's his name? *The Antichrist* [Nietzsche]. What's the guy?

WOMICK: Oh! Yeah, I know what you're talking about.

JOHNSON: That one. So it was very controversial. It was one of those things where like I remember I would read it, I would go home and read this stuff and, you know, would have a certain interpretation to it. Then I would come to class, and almost everybody around the table would have a different interpretation. Like some people had grown up in countries where they hadn't even heard of Jesus Christ. So, you know, that's a whole different story right there. And one thing that.... I think something that I'd always known but not explicitly, was the fact that not everybody thinks the same way. And that may seem like a simple thought, but it really is profound, if you think about it.

Because if you could have 15 or 16 kids in this room and each and every person could have a different interpretation of this, all that tells me is that the way I interpret it might be a function of where I grew up, or you know, what I've experienced so far. That doesn't

necessarily mean that it's true, you know. There are also other people who have had different experiences and will see things in different ways. And so even though it's important for me to voice what I think, it's equally important for me to be able to listen to what other people think because that's how you learn, you know. So if—you have a picture of what the world is, if you understand how other people approach problems as well. And that's something I think I've tried to take with me as I've gone along, you know.

WOMICK: That's really great. How did the rest of freshman year go?

JOHNSON: The rest of freshman year was, um... academically it was good. I think one of the... One of the most tremendous experiences I've had here at Dartmouth in general was my freshman summer. So I mean I'd come in here and had access to all these resources. You know, you have teachers responding to you at 2 A.M. You have a library that has like millions of books. You have people incredibly devoted to, you know, your personal growth. And I just remember being incredibly privileged. It was like, you know, *why am I here? I mean I'm not the most talented Liberian. I'm not the smartest person. Why am I here?* And it just got me thinking about sort of how opportune I am, and how there are so many people back home who wouldn't even dream of this kind of opportunity. Um, so what I decided to do—and I mean looking at my own family background—education in my family, on my father's side, is just something that happened like one generation ago.

So my grandfather had never been to school before; my grandmother had never been to school before. And my father and his brother were the only two people in the family... I think that they had—I don't even remember how many uncles and aunts I have; probably over 20. But they are the only two who finished college. And my father did pretty well in his career, and my uncle also did pretty well. And now here I am. So at the time, combining this incredible privilege that I thought I had here at Dartmouth with sort of how I saw my family evolve, it occurred to me that, in my view, I think the best way that you can really lift somebody out of poverty or, you know—if you were to use the word empower—quote-unquote “empower” somebody, I think that would be through education.

So during my freshman year I worked with folks at the Dickey Center to design a proposal to address the problem of low school enrollment in the country; the fact that at the time I think it was

about 37 percent of kids who should have been in school were actually enrolled in school. We have a free compulsory primary education policy. But even those schools that are nominally tuition-free, the kids still have to buy books and shoes and all those things they couldn't afford. So I applied through the Dickey Center for the Davis Projects for Peace grant and got a \$10,000 grant to go back to Liberia where we started a mini-organization working in low-income communities with young men who had either dropped out of school or had never been to school before. So these were kids who were 12, 13, 14-years old who had never been to a classroom.

And we ran a seven-week summer camp. Basically give them a sense of, one, what does it mean to be a student? But then also what do you do with an education? So like the first part of it was like, you know, coming to school on time. I mean we had classes, and you had to like come at a certain time, you know. But then we also had what we called a speakers' series, which I thought was one of the parts that the kids really appreciated and learned a lot from. We had an opportunity to invite these really influential people who you would normally hear on the radio reading newspapers, we were able to get them to come in, you know, take some time off work to come in and just hang out with these young men, and say—you know, talk to them: You know here's my story, here's how I grew up, here are my challenges and failures. Here's what I do now. To get a sense of, you know, what education does—to put a picture on what education means. And the fact that there's not a single path. They can do so many different things with an education. That was part of it.

The other part, as I said earlier, was more personal growth and development. So we had like an arts program, we had like a sports program, we had a sort of so-called... a life skills program—personal hygiene and reproductive health and all those things. And after a seven-week period, we asked each and every one of them: Do you want to go to school? And they all said yes, for very different reasons. One of the kids in the program said, "You know I want to be a soccer player. And when I get to that stage I want to be able to the read contracts before I sign my name on them." So they were all very different. Somebody else wants to be a president and all those things. So it was very nice to see these kids who were coming in with very little idea about it, you know, what it means to be educated. And also very little faith in themselves because that way they could aspire to be something they hadn't seen anybody in the community become. So we had that program and then basically

we provided scholarships for them all to go to school, full tuition paid. So that was, I think, one of the highlights of my freshman year...of my four years at Dartmouth in general, I think. Yeah.

WOMICK: Wow. That's so cool!

JOHNSON: Thank you.

WOMICK: And then you came back your sophomore year?

JOHNSON: Then I came for sophomore year. Sophomore year I decided to.... Because I mean freshman year I'd done a lot of traveling as well. Um, I decided just, to, you know, to take a break, I think. So to some degree when I was coming to college, I had forgotten, sort of the advice that my former boss gave me. It was like, Mahmud, you've done a lot here in Liberia. You've been involved in a lot of stuff. When you go to college, just be a student. And I think to some degree, you know, that sort of got lost on me my freshman year when I was involved in way too much stuff.

And so my sophomore year I decided to take a break and just, like, cultivate a normal life, you know. Be like a normal student, if you will, and not be involved in everything. So sophomore year was just, you know, sort of mellowing down and building relationships with friends, hanging out. And, you know, and finding out more about myself as a person. Because I think what happened was that to some degree I think this identity formed around me where it's like, "oh, he does this, and he does that." And it wasn't about who I am. It was about what I did.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: And I didn't really like that, because I'm a very spontaneous person naturally. I'm just the kind of person who likes to hang out and like, laugh, and you know, be goofy. And it was very easy for me to do that at home because, I don't know why, but like, you know, what I did outside of the home was not... like didn't transfer to how people perceived me in my home. So it was very natural. So I thought that thing would happen here, but it didn't. Um, where like it was very awkward to have conversations with people because people saw me as being a certain person, which I wasn't. So I decided like, you know, sort of, yes, remove myself from that image, if you will. And just have the courage or create the space around me that would allow me to just, you know, be myself.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm. So who did you hang out with and where did you meet the people who became your friends?

JOHNSON: My freshman writing class was one of the places. I mean it was one of those classes where we all suffered through the class together. We would like pull all-nighters two or three times a week. Because we were all international students, most of the students in the class—it was their first time writing in English. They hadn't written English in high school. Maybe only for SATs. So like writing was a challenge to most people—so we suffered through the class. I think that was the only class—well, one of two classes I've taken here at Dartmouth—that really cultivated an environment of like family and friendship, you know. We all became really good friends, and we had dinner together all the time. So that was one of the places where some of my friends came from. Also my freshman floor was very diverse. There were a lot of American students, but also a lot of international students.

And so it became interesting because we all depended on each other. Like for example, seeing snow for the first time, I mean, oh! Like what do I do with this? [Laughter] I remember when it snowed the first time, freshman year; we were all very excited. I think for most of us it was the first time seeing snow. So we went out sledding and doing all that. So I think, you know.... I think if I got um... There were international students who were there who didn't know a lot about American culture and American students who were very interested in learning about other people's cultures. This created a.... Plus, you know, we had a really awesome UGA. This created this mix where we really like, you know, clicked, bonded with each other. And we did a lot of things together. So those were the people that became my closest friends. Um, yeah.

WOMICK: Wonderful! Junior year?

JOHNSON: Junior year—um, what did I do my junior year? Things have gone by so fast. Junior year I was on campus, you know. In terms of stuff I did on campus it was more within the African community. So initially I was vice president for Students for Africa, and then I became co-president. And we really focused on, um, I guess, informing Dartmouth students about what's happening in Africa now. Because I think for most of the classes I've taken in government and in other departments, there tends to be this emphasis on Africa in the 1970's and Africa in the 1980's, when it

was just the immediate post-independence period for most countries, and the economies weren't that great and there were a lot of civil wars. And so that image is something that people always go back to, and people talk about all the time. But Africa and what's happening now, you know, there are so many great things.

I think like seven out of the ten fastest growing economies are in Africa now. And you'll find that most countries have regular elections. Most countries are, um, making...most countries are, you know, investing substantially in education, in healthcare, and all that. There tends to be less of a focus on what's happened—the positive things that are happening now, and people tend to be stuck in the negative images of Africa or Africa as being this sort of continent with animals and all that stuff. And so, you know, so what we decided to do as an organization was to put up a set of events that really gave people a comprehensive picture of Africa. Because, yeah, you know, there are diseases in most African countries. And there are civil wars, maybe in a few countries. Those are realities, but those aren't the only realities.

So we wanted to give a clearer picture of what's happening. So we put up a convention called Mbele Africa Convention, where we had students from about 18 different universities in the US come to Dartmouth for one weekend. And we were fortunate enough to have the deputy director for the IMF, Africa Department. And also President [Ellen Johnson] Sirleaf from Liberia. She didn't come, but she sent us a video message to, you know... The theme for the convention was: What role can young people play in moving Africa forward? And there was a really good discussion.

But the entire thing was focused on what young people are already doing in their own communities while being students here in the US. What they're doing back home or here to contribute somehow. And so we had interactive sessions where people were talking about their stuff. People talking about, like, "Oh I had this project where I built libraries in my country." Or, you know, "I have this project where I work with women to build farms for themselves and generate income for themselves." So all these things where people were, you know, essentially inspiring other people. But they also like, you know, sort of like a how-to. Look, you know, here's how I did it. Here's what I learned from this experience. That sort of interaction I think is very valuable in terms of helping people to build a network. But also in the terms of like giving people a perspective on what's possible and how most people went about doing it.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: So that was one thing that we did. And we also did Africa Week which was a whole week of activities about African students and contemporary African issues and culture and so we had, you know.... Like what we're discussing now, you know, you're asking about my story. This is something that... I think a lot of people have real interesting stories, but there is not—there aren't a lot of spaces where people can communicate their stories to a larger audience.

So what we decided to do was to put up an event where we had a few students on the panel who talked about how they came to Dartmouth and what their experience here has been. Um, we also—there was also like, you know, talking about political and economic stuff.

So we had the guy who's the chief economist for USAID. And he also served as an economic advisor to President Sirleaf in Liberia. So he knows a lot about what's happening. Now he's even written a book called *Emerging Africa*. Um, his name is Steve Radelet. And he came to the campus, and he gave a really good talk, I think—a lot of people really appreciated the talk—on *how do you think about African countries now?* With Africa being a continent of 53 countries. Um, it's not okay to think of Africa as one monolith. And how do you sort of look at what's happening in Nigeria in comparison to South Africa, in comparison to Chad, and all that stuff? And how do you, uh, have a broader picture of sort of the complexities and variations in terms of what's happening across the continent.

So I thought it was pretty good. Um, there were a lot of cultural events as well, you know, potluck and dances and all that stuff. So, yeah, in terms of like me being active, I think those are the two things that I did. And other than that I tried to just relax and, you know, to take time for myself and you know sleep and hang out with my friends.

WOMICK: And then senior year.

JOHNSON: And then senior year. Um, senior year, I resigned from everything on campus. So I wasn't involved in anything. I was um—I was part of the Rockefeller Leadership Program, but otherwise I wasn't actively involved in anything on campus. I think, yeah. Aside from

the uAcademy trip that we did in December. Do you want me to talk about that?

WOMICK: Yeah, you can talk about that.

JOHNSON: So, okay. So junior year for my summer... Junior summer I worked at the business school for the Paganucci Fellows Program where we worked with Global Grassroots, which is an international nonprofit organization that... Basically their mission... Well, they've been working in Rwanda for six years providing personal leadership, and they have this curriculum called, you know, the Academy for Conscious Social Change, where it's actually based on understanding yourself as an individual as a basis to create positive change in the world. And so there's a lot of, um, emphasis on meditation and sort of Yoga, uh, to really understand, you know, who you are as an individual, how do you maintain balance in your life; before branching out into the world to do anything.

So they have been doing that in Rwanda for six years. And they've gotten a lot of requests from people all over the world; saying, oh, you know, we really like your curriculum, it's cool; can you expand it to our countries? And they didn't have the resources to expand to 70 countries. So they figured out how they could do this in a resource-efficient manner to meet all these demands, was to create an online platform, um, where... it's like an e-learning tool. You log in, you complete all these modules. You, um, you fill out the homework assignments and in the end, what you've come up with is a social venture plan of, you know, what the need is. How do you identify stakeholders to help you solve this problem? What's your approach to solving the problem? What resources would you need? How do you sustain the project? All those things. To challenge people to think about those.

So they created this, and our job as Paganucci Fellows was to figure out, how do you market this kind of stuff? How do you market this project to people in...because they're targeting post-conflict developing countries. How do you market this product? How do you, um, get people to use this product? And also how do you build an infrastructure of support around this so that you ensure that you address barriers to access—the fact that the internet is not widespread in most countries. How do you get people who are going to benefit most from this product to use it? Um, so, yeah. That's pretty much what the internship was about. We ended up doing a research trip to Liberia in June—no, in July of 2012. And we

also did the uAcademy trip in December as a follow-up to that, to really solidify most of the discussions that we've had.

And to think about, is there a way that we could combine, um, Dartmouth... So there are lots of students here at Dartmouth who are interested in international development and service and social change. And there are also a lot of young people in Liberia who are also interested in the same things. So how can you combine both groups so that you design some sort of engagement that serves both groups equally? Um, so that's what we did in December... of 2012. That was also in my senior year anyway. But, yeah.

So junior summer was Paganucci Fellows. And then senior year I did the uAcademy trip. And...yeah. Now here I am; still haven't gotten over the fact that I'm going to be out of here soon. I mean I'm extremely excited to be out just because I feel I'm going to go back home. There's a lot going on in Liberia now and I want to be a part of all the cool stuff that is happening. But then I've been here for four years, and I have some pretty good friends here. And I'm going to be thousands of miles away. I can't get on a plane and go to New York to visit my friends. So that makes me sad.

WOMICK: Yeah. After graduation, how do you see yourself staying involved with the College—if at all?

JOHNSON: Oh, in a lot of ways. In a lot of ways. I think—I consider myself, and other people consider me, a connector. As in, like—it's very likely that if I work with somebody once and I meet somebody else who has the same interests as that person, I want to connect both of them. And I think that there are lots of skills and resources that Dartmouth students have access to, that the College has in general. And I think that there's a lot of learning opportunities that Dartmouth students can have in my country. So my goal is to leverage my connection or my affiliation with communities to really create change.

So, um... and this is something that I, you know, I see happening, regardless of what I do. I mean, I don't want to go into the details of what I'm going to do. But say for instance we're thinking of, I don't know, like some sort of.... Maybe if I decide I want to set up some sort of organization to address some need that has maybe like an engineering component to it, it's very easy for me to come back here and tap into the resources at the Thayer School to bring Dartmouth students into that look to sort of think about, you know,

like what sort of engineering design can we bring in here? Which is—they're going to be contributing their technical expertise, but they're going to be working to solve a problem they haven't encountered before. So in a sense, it's like, it's a learning opportunity for them.

But then, they're also solving a problem that is going to benefit the people there, you know. So how can you bring both groups together to work together in a way that is mutually beneficial? I think it's very similar to the uAcademy model. But I think it can be applied in so many ways. So definitely I think what I plan to do is to continue to leverage my connection with Dartmouth, as well as me being a Liberian, um, to solve problems in our community. However vague that may—I mean trust me, I have all kinds of ideas in my mind, but I don't want to say them now.

WOMICK: No. That's good. That's good. So I guess big picture-wise, would you say there is such a thing as the Dartmouth community? And if so, who's a part of it?

JOHNSON: I would say that there are communities at Dartmouth. Well, yeah. I think that term, we say it a lot. But, yes, it's not useful to think that there is a Dartmouth community. I think there are pockets of communities here at Dartmouth that people fit into. And I think that the term "Dartmouth community" is just an idea, and I don't think it's actually real. Because community for me is something that... something that everybody buys into, and everybody feels connected to, not necessarily for the same reasons.

But the common denominator among those people is this idea that, you know, we're in this together. And I think, um, that for several reasons, it's not the case for most people. I mean I've had a very different experience here at Dartmouth, um, from most people. And oftentimes when I'm listening to...like, maybe for example, people talk about sexual assault or something like that. That is not something that has happened to me before. But that doesn't mean that somebody who has had that experience...that doesn't invalidate anybody else's experience. You know what I'm saying?

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: Um, and so I've realized that —what do I want to say? Basically I've realized that different people have had very different experiences here. And I think it's basic that we can say that, and that it's

probably not possible to say that everybody, you know, sort of has the same feelings towards Dartmouth, and everybody thinks the same way about Dartmouth. So yeah, I don't think the idea of the Dartmouth community where, like, everybody's in this like bubble and everybody's like, you know, sort of camaraderie where everybody's together and happy... I don't think that exists. I think there are smaller communities here at Dartmouth where people feel more connected and more fulfilled in those communities.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm. Have there been any times where you felt like you didn't fit in here?

JOHNSON: Yeah. I don't—you see me, you know, at a party maybe at a frat or something, but I don't really feel like I fit into that community, the Greek culture. I don't know. I had grown up very independent; I've led a very independent lifestyle. For example, when I was applying to colleges, my parents didn't even know that I was applying to colleges here in the US—

WOMICK: [Chuckles.]

JOHNSON: Um, until I got in. So I've always been the kind of person who's always wanted to do things on my own. I'm not sure why. But like, for me I think the worst thing that...one of the things I hate most is to feel like I'm being controlled. I don't like that. [Chuckles.] So sometimes it gets hilarious because even if I decide I want to do something and I feel like somebody's trying to push me in that direction, I'm going to like try to push back against it. That is why...I'm a very independent person. And I feel like, you know, there are several communities, like, not to blanket...or to make a blanket statement, but I think to some degree there's a lot of pressure in the Greek system to fit in, and to do certain things, perform certain rituals, that I wouldn't feel comfortable with. It just doesn't fit in my personality of me doing whatever I want to do whenever I want to do it.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm. And so you didn't join a Greek house.

JOHNSON: I didn't, no.

WOMICK: Was that ever something that you considered?

JOHNSON: I thought about it. I even went to one of their discussions, to one of the—how do you call it? Where you wear a suit and you go and talk to the guys.

WOMICK: Oh, the rush?

JOHNSON: Yeah, the rush. I went the first night. I just kept hearing this—me saying to myself, *why am I doing this? Why am I doing this?* There's a lot of.... First of all, the place is very noisy, and I can barely hear what this person is saying. I'm half interested in what they're saying, [both laugh] you know. So like why am I trying to force myself into this? It just felt extremely uncomfortable. I got invited to go back the next day, but I decided not to go because I think...then I spent the night thinking about how can I justify this to myself? And I couldn't come up with an answer that satisfied me. So I was like, I'm just not going to do it.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

WOMICK: What about times that you felt like you did fit in?

JOHNSON: Um, there are lots of times when I feel like that—that I do fit in. And I think...I've been part of certain programs here at Dartmouth where I may be the only international student or may be the only African student, and I think—I've noticed that people listen when I speak. People value what I have to say. People value that I have a different perspective on things. And that has happened a lot. Sometimes in my classes, sometimes outside classes, like in some programs I've been a part of. Um, also I think, you know, within my community of friends, my circle of friends, or within the organizations that I'm part of, I feel very, um, very connected to those communities. And that's probably because those organizations have ideals or values that I care about. And so it's very easy to fit in—in those cases.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm. Do you think that there is a certain type of person who has an easier time fitting in at Dartmouth overall?

JOHNSON: Yeah. I think overall somebody who's very outgoing, somebody who's, um... yeah, very extroverted, you know, like somebody who's always on twenty. You know what I'm saying? And, yeah. So somebody who has a lot of energy and can always like go out to the

parties or can always, you know, like start a conversation. And, you know, like...yeah. Somebody who's the center of attention sort of thing. Those people, it's very easy to fit in. Um, that's because I think here there's a lot of emphasis, I guess, on.... Like social interactions here are very based on sort of like how things appear. So like, you know, like I don't know... I'm mumbling. But basically I think, you know, people who are always...have a lot of energy and can always like, you know, be out all the time and carry the conversation. Those people are the ones who...it's pretty easy to fit in, you know?

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: That's because I think the dominant social scene here is the Greek scene. And so in a sense, you know, I mean those are characteristics that are valued in those spaces.

WOMICK: Yeah. So looking back over your time here, how you would say that Dartmouth has changed?

JOHNSON: How would I say Dartmouth has changed?

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: I don't know. Um, that's an interesting question. I don't know if Dartmouth has changed or if—it's hard to tell if Dartmouth has changed or if my perspective on things has changed.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: Um...Yeah. I don't know, I mean like of course there are social changes like the presidents coming and going out. And the changes to the dining halls and stuff. Um, I think.... Well, from sort of, I guess, high-level perspective... Um, and again, it's one of those things where it is difficult to know if Dartmouth has changed or if it's just my perspective. Because, for example, with the recent protests on campus, I think, um, there are lots of people who for the first time got to hear several things like, "Ooh, I didn't know this existed." So in a sense, for those people, it may be a change for them. But that doesn't necessarily mean that Dartmouth is changing. These things have always been happening. But people are just starting to realize those.

But if you were talking about what has been missing with the protests on campus, I think there's a lot of discomfort in this country in general with talking about race and talking about socioeconomic status and privilege and all that. And what this protest did was to sort of shock the system; wherein there was no alternative but to have a campus-wide conversation about what's happening and why these things are happening. And also to challenge people about their own complicity, you know.

I remember having several conversations with friends before where like, "Oh did you read this article? This person had this experience." "Well, I haven't had that experience before, so..." In a sense it's like, you know, the idea that if I haven't had this experience, then it's probably not valid. Which I think is a very wrong and damaging idea. And so even for me it was, you know, a chance to sort of I guess reflect on my own privilege: the fact that I'm male, I'm African. What does that mean? What privileges do I have that other people don't have? And how does that affect my perspective and how I engage with the bigger issues on campus?

And I think the past few weeks was very integral in giving us all a wake-up call to see these things. Here are some things that aren't that great about this school. And how can we, as a community, you know, try to address this problem? Because the fact that it doesn't affect you doesn't mean that it doesn't affect somebody else. And even talking about notions of how these things affect you, some things might not affect you physically, but it might affect you psychologically, you know; it might affect how you approach the world, in a way that might not necessarily be the best.

So taking a step back to think about all these things, I think if you talk about change, I think having...going from that state where a lot of people are sort of hush-hush and people want to be tactful about everything, moving from that place where you get to the point where you actually have to think about these difficult issues and try to address them. I think that in itself was some change. Yeah.

WOMICK: What about you? How do you think you've changed during your time here?

JOHNSON: I think I've grown—[laughs] "*growned*..." I think I've grown tremendously. I just had a conversation with somebody about this recently. I've always been somebody who has had a lot to say, in the sense that I'm a very observant person. So that, you know, it

was like whenever I'd go anywhere, I'd always observe people. I remember when I was little, I would go to places, and I wouldn't say anything. But I would observe; I would like remember people's accents, people's mannerisms, the words that they mispronounced and all those things. Um, so in that sense like I've always been—of course I have a lot of opinions of my own. However, in terms of expressing them, I was a very shy person when I was growing up. I don't know why. Naturally I was a shy person and still to some degree I am a shy person. And there wasn't a lot of conversation in my family, you know, to talk about all these things. And so, coming here.... I remember freshman year it was very difficult for me to speak out in class just because that was not something that I was used to doing.

And so in that sense, in terms of like building confidence and seeing that, you know, it is possible for me to contribute something that is unique. I think just boosting the confidence a lot over the four years that I've been here. I think also in terms of I guess putting life into perspective. Like, you know, what's important? What matters? I mean when I was growing up in high school, academics was the main thing. You know you had to do well in school and achieve all these things. And I realized that.... So, yeah. I had always been an ambitious person going after all these things. I mean being part of this one, being part of that club and all this and all that. But I realized that those things don't bring fulfillment at all. Um, like, you say, "Oh, wouldn't it be cool if I became president of this thing? And wouldn't it be cool if I got an internship?" You like work your butt off doing a lot of ridiculous things to get there. And realize that, you know, when I get there, next I'm thinking of, how do you get to the next stage? So there's constantly this race to be at the next place. It's almost like you're running after something, but you don't know what it is you're running after.

And I think, um, being here and seeing how intensely competitive this place is just made me, uh, think about what our values are. What does success mean to me? Um, what do I really want to do, and how can I go about doing that despite the fact that I may not be what is cool to do? I think being here has helped me put all those things in perspective because like, I don't have to be the first person in the class. You know I don't have to have the highest grade in the class. That's not what matters. What matters is the kinds of relationships I build with people. What matters is how can I be true to myself and do things that really interest me. So really, you know, taking a step out to really figure out like why is it that

after achieving all these things, I still wasn't very happy, you know? Again, I went through this long phase in fact. Now when I look back, I realize that I was depressed, but at the time I didn't realize I was depressed. It was like at this point in my life, I just didn't feel motivated to do anything, you know. It was a really low point. And um, looking back now, I think, having gone through all that, what I got from that was that what matters is having a group of friends that support you.

Also what matters is doing things that matter to you. Once I started doing those things, my life changed so much. And I'm not sure if I would have had this wake-up call had I not been in this very competitive environment, where I didn't get some of the things I wanted to get.

WOMICK: Wonderful. Um, is there anything else you'd like to talk about before I turn these things off?

JOHNSON: This is cool. Really cool. It reminds me of being on the radio back home—

WOMICK: [Laughs.]

JOHNSON: The radio show.

WOMICK: Yeah, you've got the voice.

JOHNSON: [Chuckles.] Thanks. Um, but, yeah. Overall I think... one thing I've learned, looking back...you asked me a question like, you know, how did I come to Dartmouth? I'll give you the short answer. That is very short, you know; you can answer that question on so many different levels. When I look back on my life, there's this thread I see where like you have to leave some room for serendipity. You can't plan everything. Um, so, for example, with me like.... So I had gone to high school. I remember elementary school being very easy for me. It was very easy if you had the capacity to do exams and like do very well. And so I'd flown through. I was like, there's this thing—mid-year promotions; I'm not sure they have them here.

But they have like mid-year promotions in Liberia. So that like at mid-year, kindergarten is moved to first grade. And when I was in fifth grade, I completed fifth grade, and I really wanted to go to a different school. So my parents—I like harassed my parents to send me to this other school. However, this was so difficult to get

into because everyone wanted to go to that school. And it wasn't about academic performance. It was more about... Um, it was a Catholic school. I think Catholics were given preference in this school. So it was more about what connections do you have in there. So I didn't get into that school, and I had to go back to my old school.

And I remember I went to my old school, and I went to sixth grade, and the teacher said, "Your name is not on this list," you know. "Are you registered for this class?" So I went to the registrar's office and they were like, "Oh, we gave you a double promotion last year to seventh grade." And so I spent less time in high school than most people. The reason I say this is because when I got out of high school, I didn't realize...like looking back, it all fits together, but I didn't realize this at the time. When I got out of high school, I got an internship working in the president's office, um, where um.... Actually, no—before that, when I was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade in high school, I took part in this radio broadcast thing that is called International Children's Day of Broadcasting, where for one week kids take over the airwaves. We like run the radio shows, read the news, host like...do everything, essentially. Um, and I remember at the time we were writing exams in my high school.

So when you're writing exams like they have um, the elementary school kids go in the morning, and then the senior high kids go in the afternoon. So they selected 15 kids for this—selected 15 of us for this broadcast program. They were like, "Who—which of you can come to the radio station early in the morning?" And I was the only person who could do that because I was doing exams, which meant I had to go to school in the afternoon, and I was free in the mornings. So I did all the morning programs.

What happened is that...does this really— So you're talking about some sort of Oprah Winfrey Show. Like what everybody listens to. This is really popular, but it's a political show. A popular show that everybody listens to, including the president. In fact there was a segment on the program that was like, "Message to the President," where people would call in and send direct messages to the president. Like "Oh, you're doing this great" or, "I don't like what you're doing in this regard." So everybody listens to that program. And that's the only program that there were like no kids who hosted that program, because nobody could do that. So it was the actual host of the program. But there was a new segment on that show,

and I would go in like 6:30 in the morning, 7:30, 8:30, 9:30, to read the news.

What happened is that the president heard me read a program, and she heard me on it. And eventually after the program she invited me to attend—to travel along with her and attend an international conference. So that was how I met the president for the first time. And when I graduated from high school, I managed to get an internship working there. And then through that internship I was able to get here. So like the thread that—and this may be like, me probably trying to be like... forcing my own ideas on it. But the thread I see there is like if I'd gone to that other school in fifth grade, I wouldn't have known that I was promoted because they didn't tell me beforehand. And so I would have finished high school a year later, and this internship probably wouldn't have happened. And I wouldn't have been here now. So it's like everything fit together.

Also when I was doing this internship, there was a scholarship to go to university in Namibia. Um, and I applied for a scholarship. I got it, uh, processed my papers and all that. I think it was only one or two weeks before I was scheduled to leave—for which I had to buy the plane tickets—and then there's... I think some email from the Liberian contact person in Namibia. It was like, "Oh, this scholarship—this university—is known for engineering. So we'd recommend that you send students that are interested in doing engineering through this thing..." And I was like, I'm not interested in doing engineering! So, well, they'll have to find somebody else to go to this school. And my boss at the time, she was like "You know what, Mahmud? Don't worry about it." She had a saying that, you know, "What will be, will be." So I was like, "Okay, sure." Then a few months later I got accepted to Dartmouth. So it's interesting—it's not as if to say Dartmouth is some sort of heaven or something like that, but it's interesting to see how everything sort of fit very nicely together.

I guess what I've learned from that is that the only thing I can do is to do the best I can do in this moment and not to think about, you know, *oh, I'm doing this because I want to get this tomorrow*. Because it's very difficult—most of the conscious decisions that I've made didn't lead to the outcomes that I'd had in mind. They led to even better outcomes than what was sort of in front of me at the time. So I guess what... yeah—what I've learned there is just, whatever situation I'm in at whatever moment in time, just do the

best I can do. Show up, be the best I can be in that moment, and just leave the rest, you know, to, I guess, the universe, you know.

WOMICK: Mm-hmm. Thank you so much.

JOHNSON: Thank you for inviting me.

**[End of Interview]**