

[00:00:02.450] - Natasha

Great It's recording so, my name is Natasha, and it is Saturday, February the 25th, 2023, and I'm here with Lala. Yeah. So let's start. Would you like to introduce yourself and maybe tell us how you made your way to Sewanee? How did you make your way to Sewanee?

[00:00:31.270] - Lala

I see. Thank you so much for this opportunity to speak with you all today. My name is Lala Fuzi. I'm class of 2021 at Sewanee. I majored in International Global Studies and minored in Women and Gender Studies. And what got me to Sewanee is my family, South Sudanese. So we are Anglican Christians. And so I grew up very involved in the Episcopal Church, especially in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I grew up, and in East Tennessee more generally, would go to not only youth group, but also just, like, regional and even international school youth events. So this church is just something that's very special and sacred to me. And so, of course, most Episcopalians know about Sewanee, and I have the privilege of living about two and a half hours away from Sewanee, from Knoxville. So that's what originally piqued my interest and then got a really good scholarship to come here. So I was just like, I have to come.

[00:01:42.450] - Lala

Great. Let's see. Sorry, I just so I'm curious. You said you were from South Sudan. How did you make your way first to Knoxville? Are your parents, like, first generation? And how was your experience at Sewanee as an immigrant?

[00:02:17.450] - Natasha

Thank you. That's a really great question. So my family is from South Sudan, but I was born in Sudan and Hartome. And a lot of there are, like, political distinctions between two countries, at least now. But we came as refugees flying from the second Sudanese Civil war. We fled to Lebanon to get refugee, and then we were granted refugee status, and we settled here to the United States. They settled us to Cleveland, Tennessee, so, like, right outside of Chattanooga. So that's where I lived for the first seven years of my life. And so even though I was born there, I did grow up in the United States. So very culturally American and things of that nature. But growing up, my mom just speaks English, even to this day, although my dad really wanted us to speak English in some light, so he taught us. He only spoke to us in English. Then we moved to Knoxville. Then that's where I grew up until graduating from high school. How those experiences have influenced my time here at Sewanee. I think the experiences of black Africans very much do differ from the experiences of African Americans, which is something that I oftentimes reminded my peers, both African and African American alike, in terms of just like, how we navigates the world, including reconciling this institution and this nation's like history. That is not something that I will claim to claim as mine, because it's not my history or I'm East African. However, being here at Sewanee did kind of pique my interest in wanting to learn more about myself, my family's history, why they're two Sudans of the distinction. Why do we come as refugees, why are we Arabic? Speaking of a Christian? And so I was able to really do that through coursework. I took my first Arabic class sophomore year. Then I won a scholarship in the US government, fully funded to study Arabic for the summer, Morocco. Then I studied abroad in Jordan. In the Middle East. And through all these experiences, I learned Arabic. So that I'm fluent now and that just opened up a world of opportunity. So much so that I'm now here. I'm a graduate student at Georgetown getting my degree in Arab Studies, and I got a fully full tuition scholarship. And in my work, I look at the history of slavery in the Arab world, in particular in formations of anti-blackness. And so through that, I'm able to learn more about East African history, enslavement of my people to the Arab world, their experiences to this day as refugees, black refugees, offender, anti blackness that they experience. I'm very outspoken and I write a lot about this, and that's where my research focus. But then here at Sewanee, I was also involved when it was then called the Sewanee Project on Slavery, race and Reconciliation and stuff like that. So all these experiences were really formative until the first time today.

[00:05:20.390] - Natasha

Wow, that is incredible. Your journey and just everything you've done and accomplished together. Yeah. And congratulations on your scholarships and on where you are right now.

[00:05:36.170] - Lala
Thank you.

[00:05:36.920] - Natasha

It's definitely an incredible story and one that I can relate to in some ways. And my interest in I'm an International Studies major as well, and my interest was also because I came here, Sewanee, and as a black student and an African student, I was curious about how all of that connects. But one thing that I have struggled with is sometimes how all of this gets sometimes can get really heavy. Learning about all the history. Did you ever feel that at Sewanee or I guess even right now, was there any support systems that you leaned on? How did you kind of navigate that?

[00:06:28.640] - Natasha

Wow, you really great with these questions. The fact that you're not going on script, I think I completely relate to the happiness part. It is because my focus also is like refugees and humanitarian emergencies in this regional world, right. East Africa, middle east. And it's a lot of heavy stuff. It's not always like happy and stuff in terms of histories of slavery, enslavement, anti-blackness, things of that nature. It's especially hard, as I said, a Christian where Anachronism came about as a result of British colonialism. Right. Whatever my family was before, I have and I'm not necessarily resentful of that fact, but it really just put it into perspective when the robes that we use in church very much reflect that of England and the Church of England. So the Queen's funeral looks like a Sunday church service, right? It goes to show, like, it's just a visual reminder that you recognize. Additionally, All Saints also proves obviously I love all Saints is a very beautiful place It gives me a lot of solace and stuff, but it also has a lot of racist history to it. And I remember just once, Sunday service, like I said, sacred. All four years would be here, especially at every major event. And one Sunday, just friendly Sunday, I was, like, sitting in Lady Lazani. Just looked up, and I see a stained glass depiction of a white man leading black children or three or black children, because they're, like, significantly shorter than a man, and they're, like, three in a row, and they chained all of them, right? And the middle of, like, singing a hymn I was like, Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. So that's all I would say that being in Sewanee is a constant reminder of this history being episcopalian is a constant reminder of this history. And then to the extent to which it impacts my mental health, I don't know. People's work resilient, right? Unfortunately, this is a sad reality. I think for any outside person looking in, they would be like, oh, my God. Why? And how did you manage four years here? But you live and you learn, right? I was here for my studies, first and foremost, and things of that nature. Hopefully that answers your question.

[00:09:02.420] - Natasha

Yeah, that does. Yeah. I'm always curious about that because a lot of people handle it in very different ways in terms of when things get really personal. I feel like for some people in class, they're just learning about a history. But as for us, it's, like, very connected.

[00:09:26.930] - Natasha

Sorry, I forgot to answer that point of your question about community and support network. Maybe I didn't answer for a reason, because I can't. I mean, right, I was a soccer team with a group of others, and they're incredibly influential and definitely there for me, but I never went out to seek help because of this history. I think it was more so the times I did seek help or needed a community, it was like, in times of when something outwardly, like, racist was, like, happening. Like, for example, my freshman year, I went to a party at a fraternity house on campus, and they were playing some music, and I just asked this random white boy, can we play rap music? He just looks at me, and he's like, we don't play Nicker music to my face unapologetically. That my freshman year. And I just felt red. I was absolutely livid. How dare you speak to me like this? How? Why? There's a lot of commotion about it. People thought I was supposed to be upset. A lot of people came to my side there, and honestly, that experience, like, had made the rest of my time here very hard. I oftentimes want to leave but when you have a scholarship of the kind that I did it wasn't so easy. But from that experience a lot of people from my year remember that event and the people who were here at Sewanee also do. I don't know, we could talk about it sometimes. Yeah. That's a sad day.

[00:11:45.370] - Lala

Yeah. I don't even know what to say. I'm sorry. It's not even enough.

[00:11:59.470] - Natasha

I guess my point and also bringing up the story is to show how there's a little institutional support for students of color especially who experience I consider that an act of racial terror and school and couldn't do anything about it because something about he's technically protected freedom of speech and freedom of expression. I got my reconciliation with him some other way actually using the previous chaplain for all saints previously who set us down to speak about everything but yeah in terms of like institution where there's no support for black students to get justice when we are wrong like that and I just feel it needs to change.

[00:12:58.030] - Natasha

Yeah there is there is definitely a lack of institutional repercussions or acting on such incidents including even the one that happened at the lacrosse game. A lot of these incidents keep happening, and I don't think they realize how personal it is to students because I feel like to them it's just another incident happening.

[00:13:38.440] - Lala

But I don't know, I just feel like too, we focus so much on the black experience and making sure that black students or whatever, but white people need to be educated, too on this campus. White people need to be held accountable. I think there's like the fear of ruining their reputation and crying. I do think that people come live and learn from their mistakes but at the same time that doesn't mean that you are exalt from any sort of accountability or repercussions or punishment but not punishment and that kind of sense of word for lack of a better word. So I don't know, I just feel like it's very much a one way street. Especially in conversations about blackness. Right. Because with anti-blackness there's always whiteness. Anti blackness does not operate without there being whiteness involved, whatever that whiteness can look different in different contexts and stuff like that. So I don't know just about these conversations a bit too I think would help a lot.

[00:14:49.020] - Natasha

Well I really appreciate you sharing that and I'm hoping we'd be able to maybe follow and continue this interview at a later time of course, but yeah I really appreciate you and your time today.

[00:15:07.780] - Lala

Thank you so much for your time and for your interviewing students and hopefully it's not too much on you. Make sure you step back.

[00:15:19.480] - Natasha

Yeah I have learned to take breaks or I'm still learning I guess to want to step back..

[00:15:28.990] - Natasha

Sewanee can be intense but Remember we're students too. We're Human.

[00:15:32.080] - Lala

Yeah. It is important for us to get this stories even. Yeah to get this history and these stories so that at least Sewanee knows its history and can work on that accountability. But thank you so much. I'm going to stop this recording.