

**Star City Treasures  
AmeriCorps Oral History Project  
Transcript**

**Interview with Martha Mawien  
Star City Treasures AmeriCorps Oral History Project  
“F” Street Community Center  
1225 F Street  
Lincoln, Nebraska 68508  
Interviewed by Terri Johnson, AmeriCorps Member**

The following interview was conducted with Martha Mawien for the Star City Treasures AmeriCorps Oral History Project. It took place on April 6, 2007 at the F Street Rec. Center. The interviewer is Terri Johnson.

**Terri:** Thank you for talking with me today, Martha.

**Martha:** Thank you.

**Terri:** I wanted to start by talking about your childhood. Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

**Martha:** Where I grew up or where I born?

**Terri:** Start with where you were born and then talk about where you grew up.

**Martha:** Actually I born in, in Wau, Sudan. Then when I was two years, uh, two months old we moved to Khartoum with my uncle, my mom brother. We, we lived there maybe two years or one year and a half. Then we come back to my dad. My dad was in Khartoum, in in Wau. Then I stayed there like two month or eight months then we went back to Khartoum. Then I stayed there.

**Terri:** Can you tell me about your family?

**Martha:** Oh, my my dad actually married two wives. My mom is the older wife. And the second-that's why. So me and my mom and that's our family, we live in Khartoum. But I have, I have three sister, no two sister, and three brothers. We are six. So two brothers was married and they had kids. They killed in South Sudan. But my mom took their kids with us to grow up in Khartoum. And two sister they are married. And one bother is here in United States and me.

**Terri:** So your two brothers in South Sudan...

**Martha:** They are killed, yeah.

**Terri:** Were they fighting?

**Martha:** But they have kids here, yeah.

**Terri:** OK. Were they fighting in the war in South Sudan?

**Martha:** Yeah, the Sudan war.

**Terri:** OK.

**Martha:** Yeah.

**Terri:** Can you tell me about some of your family traditions?

**Martha:** Actually we are in Dinka tribe. So when you are in Dinka tribe the, the first thing that they, the girl have choose for herself. 'Cause they're everything and we have to marry with cow. And the Dinka, they have when they marry with cow, they have to see the height of girl and the value family. If the girl is tall and the value of family is high, probably would pay 200 cows or 250. But one cow's cost \$200 dollar USA.

**Terri:** So when you said if the girl is tall...

**Martha:** Yeah like me, I'm 6'3"; I be expensive.

**Terri:** OK.

**Martha:** Uh huh...

**Terri:** Does it matter if the man is tall?

**Martha:** That's depend on girl. If you want a tall man or short man. But in my opinion, I can't marry the short man. I want him be tall.

**Terri:** (inaudible) Can you tell me about your education?

**Martha:** Oh, actually I went back to, I went, I went to school to Sudan. I start from kindergarten. I was living with my mom and my dad moved back. We was living together. But in '92 my mom pass away. I was in four grade. .She has asthma, you call the heart problem, and she pass away. And my mom, she signed a papers because I'm the youngest girl in the fam...I'm the youngest baby in the family. They sign paper - this my daughter they have to live with my brother. So, her brother, her brother took me to his house and I lived there. Then I finish my school until I went to - I finish high school 2001.

**Terri:** In Khartoum?

**Martha:** In Khartoum.

**Terri:** So your uncle lived in the same city as you?

**Martha:** Yeah.

**Terri:** OK

**Martha:** Yeah, he's in Khartoum.

**Terri:** What were some of your favorite classes in school?

**Martha:** Oh, I like chemistry. Especially I like math, mathematics. And I like physics. And I like too, but I don't like history and geography. I hate them.

**Terri:** History and geography?

**Martha:** I hate them. I don't like them. I was in science and so.

**Terri:** In your school did you have activities like sports or things...

**Martha:** Yeah.

**Terri:** ...to be involved in?

**Martha:** Yeah, I play basketball. But I play basketball but my, my, my uncle wife was mean to me. When I go play and spend time there, yeah, she think I'm -I don't go to school or go somewhere else and she punish me all the time. And she talk bad about me. Then I quit. Every time I come home -she's, she has good height and she is strong. She can play good but this lady, she was discriminate me. So that's why I didn't go.

**Terri:** Can you tell me a little bit about your school in Khartoum?

**Martha:** Oh, actually I think my uncle, he put me in school because in Sudan if you don't have money you can't attend a school. So it's a public school but you have to pay money too. So, but I was in Arab school so all, all the womans we have to cover our head and we have to wear the long things. Everything is long. So I was happy because only some Sudan person there. But they discriminated me, but I don't care. Whatever I want I have to get it, that's right there.

**Terri:** So at school you said they discriminated against you?

**Martha:** Yeah, because I'm only dark black and they are brown/black.

**Terri:** How did that feel, going to that school?

**Martha:** I don't feel good but what should I do? I have to finish what I want.

**Terri:** OK. Do you have any teachers or classmates that you remember or have happy memories of?

**Martha:** Yeah, but they are all, they are all teachers from North but I don't get along with them. But just I get quiet and just study. Sometime when you bring like a A+ they give you B cause you're not in a mosque and you're not a Muslim too. 'cause I was Christian. When they teach the religion Christian at the school, then I come out come stay out so they discriminate me.

**Terri:** Oh, so when they taught about ...

**Martha:** Yeah, I come, I go out and stay out for one hour and a half. That was the subject, too.

**Terri:** OK. That was a requirement, that?

**Martha:** Uh huh.

**Terri:** OK. Tell me about how you came to America. How the decision was made and...

**Martha:** Oh, actually when I came to America we have, I have three brothers, two that are killed in the South Sudan. And when he came here in '95 because the people in South Sudan they make decision - this family, they finish and they all killed. Only this one. So we have to take this one to, to America to go there to go to school over there. Then he brought my brother over here and my brother, he find out her mom, his mom's die and family was hungry because we don't have enough food. Then he send a form to bring my dad over here and that was 2000. I didn't finish high school then. Then my uncle said, "No, let her finish her high school first. Then she will go. Then my my, my, my brother, my father and, and wife, they came here to United States. Then I left. After 200, I came to Egypt. Then my dad send me the affidavit, affidavit. Then I did my process to come here. Then I came here April 4, 2003 in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

**Terri:** So you stayed in Sudan to finish High School?

**Martha:** Yeah, to finish my High School.

**Terri:** Now, who did you stay...was that with your...?

**Martha:** Yes, uncle, yeah. Because my mom wrote a promise. Don't, don't give my child to that guy. Yeah.

**Terri:** But then once you finished High School...

**Martha:** Yeah. He talked to my brother. My brother, he said, "I left my, my sister when she was three years old so I wanna see her really bad." Then I came here. That's why I came.

**Terri:** And then...

**Martha:** And I'm not happy too when I was in his house because his wife is not good with me so.

**Terri:** Was that when you were in Sioux Falls?

**Martha:** No, when I was in Sudan.

**Terri:** OK

**Martha:** So I'm not happy at all.

**Terri:** So what did you think when you arrived in Sioux Falls? What did you think about?

**Martha:** Oh, actually I came to a new country I never see. I dream about it. Just I seen the TV. America, America, America when I arrive oh. I make decision to myself; I wanna do something else. And, to make myself better. And I can remember my mom. And I wanna stand with my feet. Then I went to school, but the program in South Dakota is not that good. So just you go to school. And I go to Southeast Community...Southeast in Sioux Falls. But they give you the books and you can stay in the table by yourself and study. If you have a question, then you have to ask the teacher. But I don't have enough English to study by myself and I don't have...I

don't know how to ask a teacher even, so. I been there like six month to eight months but I can...then I, I am looking for a job. Then I went to John Morrell. It's product...meat product. Then I work there about two years. Because the time my dad was very sick. And my and my brother kids were killed in Sudan was in house in the house. But the situation was not that good because we don't have food enough, a van, and this and this. And I went back to help them.

**Terri:** OK... a couple questions. So the classes that you took in Sioux Falls, were they, what types of classes were they?

**Martha:** Only ESL...just they give you the books and read it by yourself.

**Terri:** Um huh...so that wasn't...it wasn't a classroom. Just a...

**Martha:** No

**Terri:** Just a...

**Martha:** Then my brother wife, after that my, my, my dad was very sick because he has cancer in his brain and he pass away. Then my brother wife, he make decision, we have to move and you are still young and go to...we can go to Lincoln, Nebraska. And you can go to school to see your future. 'Cause you have your dreams.

**Terri:** So this is your brother's wife and how many of... how many children did she?

**Martha:** Six girls.

**Terri:** Six girls.

**Martha:** Uh huh.

**Terri:** Now, how did she decide to come, from Sioux Falls, how did she decide to come to Lincoln?

**Martha:** Ah, because I always talk...here school and I want school. And my and I don't feel good. And my anxiety is not good, and. So she said, "I'm going to lose you like this so we have to go somewhere else, any state." I said, "I hear about Lincoln because we talk to some people. I hear about Lincoln they have a good program. We can go there and stay. And the welfare will help you because you are a single mom, and this."

**Terri:** Well what...what do you think about Lincoln now?

**Martha:** Oh, now I get increase a little bit English because now I'm in Level 7. And maybe I got couples level because the eighth is the, the last level. After that I can go to advanced. Probably next year I'll be in college, yeah.

**Terri:** OK, now you came to Lincoln in March of 2006?

**Martha:** Um hum.

**Terri:** And what level of English were you when you came?

**Martha:** A four.

**Terri:** OK. So you have learned a lot and you said you want to go to college once you...

**Martha:** Um hum.

**Terri:** What do you want to study in college?

**Martha:** Actually when I was in Sudan they sent me in University of Juba. I supposed to go to medical doctor. But here in United States it's really hard. So now I wanna start with a nurse to go to RN program first. After that I can move on.

**Terri:** OK. Well what made you decide that you want to go into the medical ...

**Martha:** What?

**Terri:** ...profession? What made you decide you wanted to study the medical profession?

**Martha:** When, oh, because, like, when my mom pass away she have heart attack and heart problem and this. Because in Sudan we have a lot of war. If somebody's sick near to you, you can help, you know. If you have money too, you can help. But if you have not like about a human ...you can help so that's why I wanna finish my major here, educated here and go back help the rest of Sudanese in South Sudan.

**Terri:** OK, so you wanna go back to Sudan?

**Martha:** Yeah, after I finish I will go back.

**Terri:** Now and I've known you and seen you in different situations, and a lot of the things I hear you talk about are things that you wanna do to help your people. And I know you're involved in some organizations that help...

**Martha:** Yeah.

**Terri:** ...Sudanese people. Can you tell me a little bit about the organizations that you're involved with already?

**Martha:** Yeah, I'm in three or four organization. And the first organization they call Twicmayardit.

**Terri:** Can you spell that?

**Martha:** T-w-i-c-m-a-y-a-r-d-i-t dot com. This is twicmayardit.com.

**Terri:** OK

**Martha:** So that is, that is, that is, organization of our tribe in Dinka tribe. So because in Sudan we don't have like, we don't have schools, we don't have food, we don't have the clean water because a lot of people they die with diarrhea and a lot of things. So we have to, to contribute with money. And take the money over here and take them to South Sudan to, to buy them and the water and food and we have to build schools and hospitals and those things. Because this

problem, when you finish a school over here, you can go and help. You can volunteer and do anything in South Sudan.

**Terri:** So what are the specific things that you do as part of this organization?

**Martha:** What?

**Terri:** What do you do as part of this organization?

**Martha:** Oh, actually I'm, I'm the, how you call it - treasure?

**Terri:** Treasurer?

**Martha:** The, uh huh.

**Terri:** OK.

**Martha:** And so, I took the money from the people. Then we, they decided to come sit down. And we see in our account we have this and this so this month what we do? Then they will say, "OK, we'll go buy that. We can go buy the house, community center. Or we go build a school. Or we can do anything." If it's not enough we can talk to American friends and we can do fundraisings, and um.

**Terri:** So, part...is part of your responsibility fund raising?

**Martha:** Uh huh, then we can, we can get some money.

**Terri:** Where do you go to raise funds for?

**Martha:** Any state. Then we can, we can show to the people our cultures. And we have dance And, and uncle Manute Bol, he will talk to a lot of people that know he's a famous guy, so.

**Terri:** Hey, can you talk to me a little about...so your uncle is Manute Bol...

**Martha:** Uh huh.

**Terri:** ..who was who was a basketball...

**Martha:** Basketball player.

**Terri:** And what does he spend his time, time doing now?

**Martha:** What?

**Terri:** What does he do now?

**Martha:** I think now he help a lot, he help South Sudan a lot, you know. Because he talk to their friend and enemy or anywhere in all over United States to help his people back home. So he sent a lot of money over there.

**Terri:** OK. Is this organization, is Manute Bol a part of this?

**Martha:** Yeah, he's there, yeah.

**Terri:** Did he...

**Martha:** Like, like last week we met in, in Chicago. He was there too. And we talk and sometime we, we read like, in the, how you call it? The, the people, like the executive people in the city or in the state - like senator or those we can meet and talk and show what we want then he, they help us.

**Terri:** OK. So part present things about your culture and maybe fund raise...

**Martha:** Um hum.

**Terri:** (inaudible)

**Martha:** And number two we have youth, Bharg Gurzlel Youth Association, this is for youth only.

**Terri:** For youth?

**Martha:** Ah ha. Bharg Garzel Youth.

**Terri:** Can you spell that?

**Martha:** B-a-r-...B-h-a-r..

**Terri:** Uh huh. B-h?

**Martha:** a-r. Garzel -g. No, that is separate...and G-a-r-z-l-e-l, E-l, I think, uh huh, e-l. Bharg Garzel. Then youth.

**Terri:** Y-o-u-t-h?

**Martha:** Ah huh.

**Terri:** OK

**Martha:** Association.

**Terri:** OK.

**Martha:** That's in South Dakota. Ah huh.

**Terri:** And what do you do with this organization?

**Martha:** General Secretary.

**Terri:** General Secretary?

**Martha:** Yeah, and the youth association. So we have to talk like the new generation. They



came here, they was young. They don't know our culture, what we are and what we doing. So we have to talk to them and do fund raising. And then when we get the money we take them home and help the people in back home.

**Terri:** In Sudan?

**Martha:** Yeah, in Sudan.

**Terri:** So it's to help people from Sudan who come to the United States?

**Martha:** Um hum.

**Terri:** But then you also help go back...?

**Martha:** Yeah, we help the, the, the, the younger generations to keep our culture.

**Terri:** And how did you get involved with this organization?

**Martha:** Oh, because, always, when I talk, I talk about how we help people and how we, we unite in United States to be together. And when they sit down and, when they have meeting, they said we have to choose Martha, she's good and to, to unite the people together because she's. How you call it? When you're social. So, you talk everything and you're wise in everything. And they said you have to put her in that position, that they choose me. They choose me I was at home, yeah.

**Terri:** Where were you?

**Martha:** I was at home. So...

**Terri:** OK

**Martha:** And they was in the meeting. They choose me and right away the people call me and they said, "Congratulations, you are now general secretary of Bharg Garzel." So I said, "OK. If you want me to do anything to help you guys, I can do it."

**Terri:** And this, this is based in Sioux Falls?

**Martha:** Ah ha, in Sioux Falls.

**Terri:** OK, so, one, two - there's one more organization too isn't there, that you're involved with?

**Martha:** Yeah I, we have church. We have church mission.

**Terri:** A church mission?

**Martha:** Ah ha.

**Terri:** OK

**Martha:** Yeah. That is church those, those church in United States they help Sudanese in back

home. Like they can go and build churches.

**Terri:** OK.

**Martha:** ...and schools. So I work, like to talk with Sudanese, what they need and what they want. And they ask us so we can talk to our government, our executives in Sudan. What you guys want and this. Then we write down and come talk to the, the American people. Tell them we need this and this and this. Like, like this, like this June they will take some people, Sudanese people, to go to Africa to be volunteer there like two months. And we can walk around and show them this is my country. That's the way we live and this, like that.

**Terri:** Are you going with the group to...?

**Martha:** Yeah, I will go.

**Terri:** So you're helping that group?

**Martha:** Yeah, but I'm volunteer in that. Um hum.

**Terri:** OK. And what are you...what other... you seem really ambitious and motivated. What are your other goals for your future?

**Martha:** Oh, for my future. And the first thing, I want my brother's family to achieve what they want because they don't have their dad. I want them to be happy in their life. I want them to feel like they have a good family to raise them up. And the second things, I want to achieve my, my goal. Because I suffered when I was in Sudan. Because I don't live with my mom when I was like six or seven years old. Then I grew up by myself. So I got a lot of, something they bury in me from future and this. So when I come in United States the first thing I wanna achieve my, my, my school to finish my education. Then I get a good job. After that I can marry to make a good family, after I finish my college. After I finish my college then I can go back home and help my people. Because they need me and they need everybody in United States to go back and help them. And they will be.

**Terri:** So your hope is to live in Sudan?

**Martha:** Yeah, I will go back. After I finish my school I will go back to Sudan, after I learn good English too.

**Terri:** Uh huh. And then living in the United States, what are some traditions or things that you remember from Sudan that you've maintained in the United States? Like certain ways you celebrate holidays or favorite foods or...

**Martha:** Actually in United State whatever you want like any food, Sudanese food, they have in the store. I can go and buy Sudanese food. But they have good food too in United States. Like American food. I like it too. So I like any food. So, but in traditional, in United States is different from country. My country, when you are in new place so old neighborhood and those, they come and talk to you and see where you come from. And they help you out like transportation and shopping and these. But in United States, nope, you can figure out by yourself. So, they can't help you. But here in United States they have a lot of freedom. Like the girl can leave in the house when she get 18 years old. She can go out and, and she be responsible by herself. But in our country, no. 'Till you marry. After you marry you can go out. But if you're not married,

until you're forty years old you can go out to live by yourself.

**Terri:** Until you're how old? Forty?

**Martha:** Maybe forty or fifty what...

**Terri:** Oh. OK.

**Martha:** As soon you married you can go out. But if you're not married you can stay living in the house. So the part of culture, too.

**Terri:** OK. Now, as you look back, what do you think about leaving the country where you were born and moving to the United States?

**Martha:** What?

**Terri:** What do you think about leaving Africa and coming to the United States? How has that impacted you?

**Martha:** No, actually I miss my country. But nothing to miss it a lot, because the first thing you have to live good and eat good food and clean water and this or whatever you want. So, now I'm full and I eat. But just I remember in my, in my country just my people because now no food, no nothing. But here I'm full, so this I remember. This I remember from Sudan.

**Terri:** What...do you have any recommendations for people who are doing the same thing you are - coming here as young adults and trying to find their way? Do you have any advice or recommendations for..?

**Martha:** Yeah, I will say when you get in United States, we have a lot of variety of opportunity. So here, when you achieve your goal, you have to, to go back and go back to your country and help other people. Because we want our country to involve, to be like United States. Because every country, they can suffer, but they can fix and solve their problem and build their countries. So when everybody wanna achieve their, their knowledge they have to go back and give to others - the rest of their family or rest of their people in back home.

**Terri:** We've talked about your childhood and your education and your goals. Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about or share that we haven't already talked about?

**Martha:** Actually, I don't have anything. But the first thing - like Lincoln. Because Lincoln a part of me English. And whatever I want I can get it. Like now I'm working in Lincoln Literacy. I don't have English enough, but they help me a lot, you know. They work with me and they show me and, you know. So I like it to be in Lincoln. So after I done, when I go home but I'm, I will miss America. But I come visit too. I come visit America and I. Because they show me and that is my vision, they show me the way to be success. So I like to be here too.

**Terri:** Thank you very much for being interviewed.

**Martha:** Yeah, you're welcome...yeah.