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Telling Our Own Untold Stories:
Civil Rights in the National Park Service Oral History Project

Enimini Ekong
July 10, 2020

Interview conducted by Lu Ann Jones and Cameron Nesmith
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen
508 compliant version by Lauren Pash

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The narrator has reviewed and corrected the transcript.

[START OF TRACK 1]

00:00

Enimini Ekong: Just for what it's worth, and I'm only saying this because I got interviewed by our new Reconstruction Park. Did you know that you can record on Teams?

Lu Ann Jones: I do. But the way I'm recording, I've actually got a little setup here with my audio recorder, because I don't think Teams records with what we would consider archival quality video. So, it has to be of a certain quality and bit rate and all this sort of stuff. Plus, my computer is running very hot these days. I'm trying to keep it alive until I can get a battery taken care of. I'm afraid it's going to explode before then, but—

Enimini Ekong: (laughs) I'm only laughing because my computer has had the same issue. And I feel like this is the new government world. Because everyone's computer is rebooting regularly, blacking out, a number of other things. So, I'm sorry for laughing.

Cameron Nesmith: No, that is a fact. That is a fact. That's why I don't have my camera up. Which is reason, living out in the country. The connectivity issues just come and go. Just come and go.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah, we've had issues with that. Anyway, we're working through. So, I don't want to tax this computer any more than I have to. (laughs) But I appreciate that. I saw the Reconstruction Park [video conversation]. Well, a lot of parks have been doing some great work during the pandemic. It's amazing. Yeah. So, thank you. Well, I'm going to get started first with a—I am getting some feedback here. I haven't figured out why that is exactly. Anyway, I start with just saying this is Lu Ann Jones. I am the historian with the Park History Program, National Park Service. Today is July the tenth, 2020. We are recording via Microsoft Teams and the recorder here. On the other side of the screen is Enimini. Could you introduce yourself?

Enimini Ekong: Absolutely. So, my name is Enimini Ekong. I serve as the outgoing superintendent to Nicodemus National Historic Site, as well as the program manager for interpretation, education, and cultural resources at Brown vs. Board of Education [National Historic Site]. I do say program manager to be respectful of our Indigenous brothers and sisters. But if you were to look on record, I'm chief of interpretation, but call myself a Project manager. Currently, I am occupying a role as program manager for workforce and inclusion, kind of helping us build more efficiencies for the agency at large, from HR down.

Lu Ann Jones: Great. And then Cameron, can you introduce yourself, please?

Cameron Nesmith: Of course. Greetings. My name is Cameron Nesmith. I'm a recent graduate of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. I'm currently serving as an oral history intern for the HBCUI program under the Greening Youth Foundation for Lu Ann Jones in the summer 2020.

Lu Ann Jones: Great. Thank you. And Enimini, do we have your permission to record the interview?

Enimini Ekong: Yes, ma'am.

Lu Ann Jones: All righty. Well, I'll turn it over to you, Cameron, because I know you've done your homework here and you have some questions. So, thank you.

Cameron Nesmith: Of course. I just want to start by saying thank you, Mr. Ekong, for joining us today. I just want to start by asking you, really could you describe what life was like growing up in Dallas, Texas. And describe really the things that you experienced in Texas as a child.

04:03

Enimini Ekong: For sure. So, I'm the youngest of three. My name hails from Nigeria. The name Enimini means "God sees everything." And last name, my family name, means "war." So, what it doesn't mean is that God sees everything through war. But that God did, in fact, see everything. I didn't get away with much growing up. So that kind of plays into my upbringing. But I'm the youngest of three. Because my parents immigrated from Nigeria--it wasn't until my father passed right around the time when I was fourteen that I found out that he fought in the Biafra war, which would have been equivalent to the Civil War, but in Nigeria. And as a means for him to pursue better and find some haven to pursue education and do well for the family, he was sent to America. Him and my mom crossed paths, and then three children later, I came into the picture.

Enimini Ekong: The reason why that is even necessary in the question that you asked is because for me growing up, I firmly state that I grew up in a dual culture. When I was at home, it was authentically and thoroughly Nigerian. There were culture practice, language, song that was taught and an expectation that was given in the household that whenever I left the house didn't necessarily marry with the American thought, values, traditions.

Enimini Ekong: That being said, growing up in Dallas, Texas, was very, very nuanced. Because everything that I was taught at home didn't translate well to the real world. Whenever the world saw me, they saw me as a black American. They treated me as such. And my parents couldn't speak to that experience very seamlessly. A lot of that colored how I've been kind of navigating my experience. Which was trying to make sense of names that were being called, that I became the subject of inquisition during roll call. So much so that I think going through my elementary

[experience], I found myself memorizing whose name I was behind, so that whenever the teacher got to my name, I would always say, “Last name, Ekong. I’m here.”

Enimini Ekong: But invariably I would have a very inquisitive educator who would say, “Where does your name come from?” And then the class would participate in kind of evaluating from my name to my ethnicity. Which came with unconventional thoughts about my relationship to Nigeria and what they knew of Nigeria per TV. And so, it was always a very unique experience.

Enimini Ekong: I think as I got older, I found myself doing a lot of assimilation to ease my experience of having to demonstrate my Americanism to Americans. It’s so funny now, because with all the conversations going on at a time where we have a global pandemic and people are really reevaluating their racial lens, I sat on a couple of panels. I think what I tell people is that my race conversation has always, since birth, been at the point by which I introduce myself to someone. Because at the point by which I say Enimini, their head cock to the side, people ask, “Say that again? Do you have a nickname?” And we begin kind of a racial trajectory of how they wish to experience me, and vice versa.

Enimini Ekong: So, by the time I left Dallas, I was known for a lot of things: the uniqueness of my name, athletics and being a little bit more driven than my peers, and for reasons that were kind of beget to me by way of growing up in a Nigerian household.

Cameron Nesmith: Could you just elaborate more, maybe, on the racial climate truly in Texas at the time that you were growing up? And other than like you assimilating to be more American, could you describe some of those difficulties maybe in that racial climate?

09:15

Enimini Ekong: Sure. So, Texas, I would say, Texas in general has the reputation for being a very prideful state. (laughter)

Cameron Nesmith: Right.

Enimini Ekong: It’s got some entrenched traditions. You know, the saying that everything is bigger in Texas, that goes with our ego as well. So, the experience was often--I can remember as early as second grade, things just kind of being racially charged. Racially charged in the community that I lived in, where there were a lot of kind of white and black competitions, fights, things of this sort. I do remember after we made a move to, would have been Garland, Texas—no, no, no, no, it was actually before we got to Garland, Texas. We were still kind of in the Irving area—no, no, no, I’m sorry. It was Garland, Texas. I vividly remember an instance of my middle oldest brother, so the brother closest to me, being chased by skinheads. We knew of things like Klan rallies going on in and around our state. I don't know

that I've never personally witnessed any. It wasn't an odd occurrence for you to see Confederate flags, although that's not our state flag or anything. But just, you know, that culture. The term, you know, derogatory terms were commonplace, whether they were about African Americans, whether they were around whites who were deemed not necessarily tanned, but red. There were terms for other minorities. I learned those long before I ever got out of the second grade. There was just a strong racial lens.

Enimini Ekong: It was very interesting, because growing up I knew the differences that each ethnic group had. While it was never spoken, I think the older I've gotten, if I were to coin it at anything, I think at the early outsets of my adolescence, I understood racial respectability without it ever being taught. I would say that some of my assimilation tactics were that because Enimini became such a problem for me, to not have a language bank in describing who I was to an American world, around the house, instead of calling me Enimini, those endeared to me would call me Enim for short, which would be E-n-i-m. So, after hearing that enough around the house, I felt like it was close enough to Adam that whenever I started signing my papers, turning in my work, and putting my name on roll call, I would have everyone call me Adam. So, the running joke now, up until I graduated undergrad, is that everyone who knows me from my undergraduate university still calls me Adam, which drives my wife crazy. And everybody who knows me from graduate school on knows me as Enimini.

Cameron Nesmith: Wow.

13:09

Enimini Ekong: Or affectionately Ranger E at this point. (laughter)

Cameron Nesmith: So, who inspired you growing up to be a dentist? And where does your love from science even come from?

Enimini Ekong: So, funny thing. When I was in my junior year in high school, I had a really solid mentor. He was a Harvard grad. He was a deacon at our church. He took to me, in part because by that time, I had lost my father. He provided a lot of just male wisdom. He would take me out. And at one point, I expressed that I wanted to go into dentistry. So, he had actually proposed to me that he knew of a program. I applied for it. And while he never said anything, I wouldn't doubt that in some shape, form, or fashion, he pulled some strings to get my application considered. Whenever I got into the summer program, I was smitten by all of the things that dentists did, while not knowing what it took to actually become one. That would have been good to know. (laughter) They didn't include that into the program.

Enimini Ekong: So, for me, I never knew exactly what I wanted to do outside of something with a competitive edge. I always found myself as an athlete. But being the youngest, you always kind of fight for what you need in this life. So, I learned that early,

that there was never a challenge too big. I liked the idea of making people smile for whatever profession that I did. And being a talker, and from an oral tradition, I figured well, certainly if you work with people's mouths, there's a lot of communication that goes there. (laughter) Once again, it would have been really nice for one of those lovely dentists to let me know that my client would have their mouth open 95 percent of the time and would not be talking back to me.

Enimini Ekong: But yeah, so my passion really came from a mentor just really seeing an ambition that I was willing to take on, supporting that. For me, part of what kind of went into my decision to go to Baylor is because the summer program that I was in was the Baylor dentistry program. So, I figured I would up my opportunities to actually get into the dentistry school if I went to the parent school.

Cameron Nesmith: So, what was that experience like, I guess when you got to Baylor? In navigating through being a dentist and really navigating through those difficulties? I mean, realizing that that wasn't your, that wasn't your call.

16:24

Enimini Ekong: So, for all intents and purposes, my navigation to and through Baylor was thoroughly unconventional. So, at that time, Baylor hadn't become a public university. It was private. It's the largest Baptist university in the nation. It drives a Protestant faith--which was attractive to me because my minor is in religion, and I love talking about faith from all spectrums. It has actually served well in my career to have that, because I'm more apt to open the door of conversation on faith than to close it, in a way that is still areligious and apolitical. That when you're giving information through interpretation and you're helping people understand a faithful experience, be it whoever they serve, that it's good to have the context of that backdrop.

Enimini Ekong: At the time that I attended Baylor University, out of the, I want to say thirty thousand some odd students, there were about five hundred who were African American. It was funny. I was just on a panel, and I was sharing this that there were interesting occurrences that I had on campus. The most common FAQ for myself and other African Americans on campus was, when you would come in contact with students, and/or sometimes faculty, who were, because Baylor was a predominantly white university, they would ask, not necessarily where you're from or what your major is but for at least me and a couple of other African Americans that I know, the question would be, what sport do you play? Because the presumption was that with this private university, where it cost at least at that time thirty thousand a year, for me to have been admitted, it was highly likely that I did so with my athletic talent. Which, I don't know if I actually would have gone there for an athletic scholar, would have been offensive, but because I was academically admitted, it became a bit of an abrasion every time that was the first assumption, rather than, "Hey, what medical program are you in?" Or "What is your major?" Or "Where are you from?" So that became, I want to say, such a

common experience that African American students would, I mean, it was a running joke literally up until the time I graduated.

Enimini Ekong: And so, navigating that became very interesting. Because my high school was highly diverse in that it represented a lot more ethnic groups than whenever I got to Baylor University, I found myself in elevated courses where there wasn't as much diversity. Although I did find that in more of our medical programs, there was a large array of ethnicities. Just because Baylor was a great medical school. It was a great science school. And so, you had a lot of foreign-born students who you would find in your courses. It was highly competitive. I think that's why I liked Baylor is people weren't there necessarily to make friends. They were there because they had their sights set on becoming a doctor, becoming a lawyer, what have you.

Enimini Ekong: Whenever you entered into the social realms, a lot of their preconceived notions from a racial lens became very, very apparent. Either from their upbringing or what they had seen on TV. Because I mean, some of those same kinds of cultural implications came from people who were foreign-born. And unfortunately, their only exposure in a lot of cases to other ethnicities was from what American TV had. So those conversations became interesting.

Enimini Ekong: I found myself getting through my science courses—and I do mean getting through them, because I was not very excited about molecular structures or anything of the sort. And because I was once again into the people business, those in the sciences were less socially inclined. So, I found conversations to normally be awkward. That wasn't all, but just a good majority. (laughter)

Enimini Ekong: So, right around the time of my junior year, I found myself trying to see what I could do to heighten my GPA. Because it was in dire need of being more competitive as I was setting my sights on the, I think it was the MDAT? And I just knew that there was a history course, there was a Black history course. So, logical thinking, I'm Black, it's a Black history course, has to be an A.

Enimini Ekong: I get alongside one of my good buddies who I was a CL with, and a CL was a community leader, which most universities call them resident assistants. So, I want to say after my first, my freshman year, I was in the world of residence life. Which in and of itself had, I could tell you stories all day about racial occurrences. Because there was something about me being an African American male on a predominantly white campus and having the authority to move people in or kick people out because of their own behavior. Not necessarily because I had the authority to say, "You're kicked out of this room," but more so that if you were doing anything that was not permitted on the campus grounds, be it drinking, smoking, having a coed experience that wasn't in a coed dorm, that there were pretty stringent policies in place to say if you were a repeat offender and you didn't get the message, it's probably best that you live off campus.

Enimini Ekong: Some of the occurrences that I had even in dealing with students who didn't feel like I should have the authority to tell them what to do, in spite of, really it wasn't me telling them. It was just me reiterating the policy at the university. Those were interesting.

Enimini Ekong: But kind of back to my academic trajectory. My junior year, I got into this class aiming to upgrade my GPA. I walked into the classroom and Dr. James SoRelle was at the head of the classroom. I remember his name so keenly because I've told this story probably a thousand times, because I attribute much of my career trajectory to the experience he created in that class. Dr. James SoRelle is a white man. I don't know his further ethnicity, but he didn't look as if his ethnicity wasn't mixed with something, but he was a white man. So, in my mind, I just assumed that the only Black history course that was offered on campus would have a faculty professor that would reflect that.

Enimini Ekong: He started off the course by not going through the syllabi, not going through curriculum. But he just, there's about thirty-five students. He started with the first student who was in front of him, and he said, "I want you to tell me your name, where you're from, and how you wish to be identified." I think that course was anywhere from an hour thirty, maybe two hours. It took the entire course that day to get through how people describe themselves, how they wanted to be seen. So, you had people saying, "I'm an Italian American and I want to be seen as a woman." Like the foremost identity I want you to see as. This was provocative to me, because there was no other course that I had interfaced with that prompted me to even think about how I wished to be identified.

Enimini Ekong: I went on to answer whenever it got to me, and I was on the last row, closest to the door, that I wished to be identified as an African hyphen American. Because every time I introduce myself, I'm constantly reminded that people see me as an African before they ever see me as an American. Then I went on to say the rest of my litany. But that first day created the lab for figuring out how my life nestled into history. By the time I fought to get my B plus, which I was very perturbed about, I had gone to the dean of the history department and told him I wanted to change my major, but I was trying to figure out where the rest of the African American history courses were. Because in our curriculum book, there was an African American disciplinary program that was on the books, but I later found out, as I've already alluded to, that I took the only course that was available on campus.

Enimini Ekong: I kind of got a little taken aback by hearing that from the dean. And I said, "Why? Why? Why is this the only course being offered?" He simply said, "There's no student demand. And so, until there's a necessity to really build the program, it will remain that the only course that will be taught will be that Black history course."

Enimini Ekong: That kind of lit a fire. Because to me, while it wasn't the intention of the dean—what he was saying was very factual. It wasn't his opinion or anything. But it spurned me a little bit to say that even though there wasn't a demand, I believed that it should have been a requirement. Because of my experience there on campus. I would later on my junior year, I actually still have the newspaper. I was actually trying to look it up, but I haven't been able to shuffle through the boxes, that I'll never forget, there were nooses hung on campus. We ended up having like in our, whatever your student building is, the Student Union had like a big come to about why this was hung. The fraternities that were involved and what have you. It's so crazy that years later, you can see all around the country the same thing going on with fraternities, and just with people doing blackface and other things. But that continued to spur my experience.

Enimini Ekong: Fast forward. I was a part of a lot of leadership groups. One of the leadership groups I was in my junior year had us invite leaders to campus to give us their perspective on leadership, and then open up for Q&A. One of those opportunities was with the vice president provost. And gave his leadership spiel. He opened up for questions. My simple couple of questions were, what are you doing to increase the presence of minority faculty on campus, and what are you doing to expand the African American studies program, or interdisciplinary program on campus?

Enimini Ekong: He kind of backpedaled. And when I say backpedaled, I mean, it's not like he was stuttering or stammering. But I think he wasn't expecting the question. After trying to finesse his answer, he simply said, "What are you going to school for?" And I said, "I think I'm pursuing a doctorate in African American studies."

Enimini Ekong: And he said before my leadership group, and a couple of faculty sponsors, that, "If you go get your PhD, I'll give you the program." So literally, up until I was finishing my thesis at Morgan State, my master's program, that had been my goal. He promised to meet with me once a month up until I graduated and would keep in touch with me until I completed. And he held his word. My junior year, every month thereafter, he would sponsor a lunch, sit down with me, and talk me through what the plan was to revamp the African American studies program. Then as I was getting ready to leave my master's program, he was no longer the provost. I have held out hope that if I tell this story enough, I'm going to find my way back on Baylor's campus teaching at my alma mater.

Enimini Ekong: But that became the trajectory that led me to my master's program, which was at Morgan State University. Go Bears. It's there that I really gained a greater passion through learning how ignorant I was of the multifaceted aspects of chronological history that for some reason, the way I'd learned about it traditionally was like Civil War and then present-day. Like there was nothing in between. I never understood how cultural experiences got to where they were.

Enimini Ekong: So, as I finished, I was writing my thesis and I had applied to a ton of different places. It was somewhere in or around 317 applications. Because over the course

of the year, I knew I wanted to get some more applied history experience. This was in part because I had always come across very profound professors who knew their subject matter, but they just couldn't connect with students. So, I always wanted to make whatever experience that I created in the classroom to be similar to what Dr. James SoRelle did and make it more tangible to the student.

Enimini Ekong: So, it wasn't until probably a week before I was going to get married, August, well--I actually started August 28, 2010, that I had gotten a call from the Park Service. Rather, HR in the Park Service, they said, "Hey, are you interested in this job?" I said, "Yes, I'd love to." They let me know that it was a, at the time, it was kind of like the Pathways of its day. It was a STEP program, so it was a Student Temporary Employment Program. I let them know that I was supposed to be getting married, and if I could push my start date back a week. They obliged.

Enimini Ekong: And I started. I'll never forget. Whenever I interviewed for the position, the interview was only supposed to go thirty minutes. And I had just a thoroughly good time with the outgoing supervisor, Mr. Robert Parker, that the interview went from thirty minutes to an hour and thirty minutes. He let me know that he was moving on to the Martin Luther King Historic Site and that he wasn't going to be my supervisor, but later hired me, at which point I began my Park Service career. The thing that really captured my attention within the first month was that unlike my campus experience, I didn't have to worry about anybody coming to class in their pajamas. Everybody who came to my class wanted to be there. They intentionally made plans, they set aside time and said, "Tell me everything about this site that I can know in this amount of time." And I found myself really feeling like educating people from zero to ninety-nine with some darn good benefits, if I must say so myself, was what sold me. So, my classroom became the park. The students were always willing and always ready. And their appetite for learning and being challenged by nothing but the truth that I could tell about the site became so contagious that I didn't want to give it up. I think every supervisor thereafter helped me continue on. Namely, my first supervisor, Dr. Joy Kinard.

Cameron Nesmith: Could you tell more about your first experience at being in a national park, especially at an African American heritage site?

00:33:34

Enimini Ekong: For sure. My first site was the Mary McLeod Bethune House. I tend to joke with people and say that Mary McLeod Bethune was like a surrogate mother, because I learned so much about Mary McLeod Bethune that I felt like I was related to her. I talked about her as if she was a relative because I was infuriated to learn about her history for the first time as I was completing my master's program. Not just because Mary McLeod Bethune was a great person, but because she aided and abetted a presidential administration. Something that, I mean, when you go to congressional libraries or anywhere where presidential history is told, you know all the significant parties that helped them maintain their administration. It

literally wasn't until I went to Mary McLeod Bethune's site that I actually learned that she existed, that she was best friends with Eleanor Roosevelt. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out why in all of my history programs I missed that.

Enimini Ekong: Through the guidance and mentorship of Dr. Kinard, I had the opportunity to get exposed to--so at that time the Mary McLeod Bethune House oversaw the Carter G. Woodson House--and I was able to speak to a shared history there. Both the tycoons that they were in their respective generation and what they gave the body of American knowledge. But I think more would be specific to the African American contributions. I had an opportunity to do a Carter G. Woodson oral history, which then led me to matriculate to the Frederick Douglass House, where I was able to kind of work with the site through getting its accreditation. Then I found myself, after working through that project, doing some work in training for the NPS and from the training office to the National Mall, phenomenal experience there. To the Little Rock Central High School, to Brown v. Board to Nicodemus to now my acting detail as a program manager. Or, project manager, rather.

36:06

Cameron Nesmith: Now I guess within interpreting the African American story, what are your true personal missions as an interpreter? And really, what foundations and goals do you create for yourself within telling the African American story?

Enimini Ekong: I would say frankly it's just truth telling. I found that when teaching at a university, there's a deadline and a body of knowledge that you have to kind of hasten through that gives for a lot of quantity, maybe not as much quality, because of all the other factors that take away students' attention. At a park site, you can go to the depth about with the visitor is willing to go. I found myself not only just wanting to tell the history, but to replicate the African American experience in present day. I've always said at least now coming into management, whenever I'm talking to my interpreters, you know that you're a good interpreter whenever you take the place-based history that a visitor is standing in, and you give them an obligation to walk away with. Because none of our history has ever been meant for you to simply know; it's for you to both know, take what's necessary and apply. Which is why the whole adage of, if you don't know your history, you'll replicate it. It's more so if you don't learn the relevancy of your history, you won't see the nuances and the repetition that it applies to in the present day amid the current time that we're living in.

Enimini Ekong: There used to be a time in our country where whenever an African American was wrongfully killed, a flag would be posted that a man was lynched today. To simply bring the level of awareness that somebody by way of injustice has been taken from us. And we found different mechanisms to serve as that flag. But this, by far, has been probably one of the more earthshattering experiences that I've had in my lifetime where I've seen people globally marching for something that didn't even happen in their country.

Enimini Ekong: And that being said, this truth telling of interpretation, of the African American experience, is one, not to shame, not to blame, but to really educate, inform, and obligate. My personal mission is that your observation is your obligation. So, a practical sense of that is if you see a homeless person and you wish for them not to be homeless, obligate yourself to help that individual get in the position that you would want for them to be in. Similarly, when you learn of history, it obligates you to reflect upon it and bring about some different principles that will not allow you to live the same. I can't learn about the Holocaust and say that it's a hoax. I can't learn about it and say that this is history that I've got to hurry up and watch a Pixar movie so that I can get it out of my mind. It's for me to learn from and say, there's something about the human condition that if I don't check certain things in my heart, the Holocaust will happen again.

Enimini Ekong: Similarly, whenever I'm talking through African American history, it's not just to say, "This is what made Mary McLeod Bethune so great," but more so for me to say, "Her greatness was born out of everything that's not communicated in history." She was an ebony-skinned black woman who looked and reflected that of what our country would have called a Mamie during that time. So, for her to be anywhere near the White House in the early 1940s and '50s is surely unheard of. The fact that she was putting together what has historically been known as the Black Cabinet to advise a president. So, a set of Black men to advise a president who was willing to go there—that in and of itself was, not to mention the fact that she had a college, she had an all-Black beach. The things that she was doing for the African American community is to communicate to a visitor that not only did she, for a Black person, break so many cultural norms for her generation, but the fact that she accomplished all that she did as an unwelcomed woman in our society during that time in history. And if you're thinking about the social strata in America, I mean, she's short of having a statue somewhere [in the White House].

Enimini Ekong: But yes. The aim is to tell that truth. And hopefully that during that interpretation it would beg the question, the same question I had, why didn't I learn about this before now? That's where I think the obligation comes from. It's not just learning from Mary McLeod Bethune or Frederick Douglass or Martin Luther King or anybody else, but that as you're learning of the history, there should be questions that you have to grapple with around, no different than what we're dealing with today [in the wake of George Floyd's murder], how were there so many people around watching for 8 minutes and 46 seconds [as a Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck]? Like someone has to take a responsibility to say that this is--Mary McLeod Bethune is my history. It's not African American history, it's not a hyphenated history. She is a part of the American fabric, so she deserves a place in our curriculum, you know, whatever the case may be.

Cameron Nesmith: And acknowledging Mary McLeod Bethune and her presence as an African American woman in the nation's history, how important is it for you on a day-to-

day basis to really reflect and think about the impact that the women in your life have had on you? The Black women in your life.

42:35

Enimini Ekong: I have often said, even when we're telling our history, and even now, working at the Brown v. Board site, when you think about Linda Brown, or just the Little Rock 9, none of these individuals ever signed up for any of this [knowing what it would cost them]. But I have often known that the women, particularly African American women, have been the heritage bearers of any culture. Like there is no presidential anything without the heritage of a woman. Thomas Jefferson was only as good as his mother, right? Like someone had to first teach him. I would venture to say all of our Founding Fathers got to the ascension in their career because there was a woman who sacrificed more than we'll ever know in history books, because that wasn't how we focused our history.

Cameron Nesmith: Right.

Enimini Ekong: So, I've often talked about women as being our heritage bearers, whether you're talking about the civil rights movement, whether you're talking about any successful presidential election from the, I would venture to say, the early 19th century of our country, it was on the backs of women. Not to mention the children who had to come along with the sacrifices that Mom was making. So, yeah, women have always been our heritage bearers and kind of making the [tide?] of Mary McLeod Bethune, more the reason why it's a shame for women to have done great things in history and still be considered uncivil when they actually make it to the history books, for whatever reason. You know, you see these bumper stickers where they say in order for a woman to make it into the history book, she has to be uncivil or bad behaving. And it's like, no, no, no. All she has to be is great, right? That's all they've ever been. Whether they've been out in the streets or they've been in the home. And I would venture to say that there's been more of a mantle on the woman who has been at home than the one out in the streets or at the voting polls.

Cameron Nesmith: And this is just my last question before I turn it over to Lu Ann shortly. You had mentioned, and I know you got your degree in religion from Baylor. Could you reflect on how much religion has played into your life and what really made you gravitate towards getting a degree in religion when you got to Baylor?

45:14

Enimini Ekong: Absolutely. So, faith was a--I would say the primary pillar that led me to Baylor. As a faith-driven individual, it's nestled all my core values. It is the art behind how I approach all dialog. The way I think about how the gospel is relayed, it's through storytelling, it's through parables. So, the art of interpretation for me has always been from a, not necessarily a religious, but I would say almost from a

biblical standpoint that people don't learn lessons simply by you telling them, right? Sometimes you have to frame it in the right story, the right cautionary tale, for individuals to understand. While doing that, there are faithful principles in which you approach people that allow you to be the best deliverer. That every message can't be full of anger, but it definitely needs to be clothed in humility and grace. There's a vigilance by which you need to know your subject matter that you don't need to stretch. In fact, everything that comes out of your mouth needs to be as full of veracity and truthfulness, so that the truth by which is shared speaks more than how you're saying it, right? That faith has been, literally, my bedrock to everything that I've done.

Enimini Ekong: It was so important for me not only to know and be nestled in my faith, but to know other faiths. If nothing else, so that dialog wouldn't be cut off. When you know what anchors people, there's more to talk about than there isn't, right? But when you're too busy asking questions about things that naturally you should know, it oftentimes cuts off conversation before it has any headway. But if you're engaging someone and for whatever their practice, or whatever anchors their livelihood, you can identify a landmark of their faith or the core values that they live by, there's a connection there that allows them to be vulnerable with you in ways that otherwise wouldn't come about.

Enimini Ekong: I've found that just in my experience, particularly at the Vietnam Wall. Whenever I've worked at war memorials, there's a way that the questions of life and conversations come a lot freer than in other places. When I've had conversations with veterans who have been to the battlefield and who have come back to reflect on their experience, I have found myself almost being invisible. Almost serving like a priest or a confessional that many of, after coming to, completing their final sentence, have said, "I've never told my wife that. I've never told anyone." And so, I think faith, though oftentimes mishandled in our society, has a special place in how we can relate to one another in ways that we traditionally haven't. Because it's part of the taboo topics, right? Race, rather religion, politics, and sex, right? I have found that if you take those taboo topics and learn about them well, they open a lot more meaningful dialog than they would if you didn't.

Cameron Nesmith: No, and I appreciate that, and I appreciate you giving me the time to really ask these questions and allow yourself to open up. So, I appreciate it.

49:33

Enimini Ekong: My pleasure. My pleasure.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, thank you, Cameron. He's great. I do have some questions if you have a little more time, then.

Enimini Ekong: I got time.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I'm always interested in people's mentors. So, you are fortunate to land with Joy Kinard right off the bat. So, I was wondering if you could just talk about the role that various mentors have played in the unfolding of your career.

Enimini Ekong: For sure. I think if not for the advocacy of Dr. Kinard, I probably would have finished my master's and been at a university right now. Dr. Kinard led with passion. She knew her subject matter. But she was very savvy at trying to put me in positions where I would be stretched. I think she played on my ambition and my willingness to take on more work that the more she gave me, the more I desired. It allowed me visibility among my superiors in ways that I'm pretty sure if I would have just kind of stayed within the four walls of my park, my career would have been stifled. But she was definitely a supervisor who allowed me to spread my wings. I say that in a sense that the only way that I got to work with Frederick Douglass was by way of Dr. Kinard allowing me to leave the site. Not because I was taking a promotion or anything, but that I was being borrowed by another site to get more work done. She very well could have, as most supervisors can, say, "We're not going to release this employee."

Enimini Ekong: So, from there, I had an opportunity just to work with some great people. At that time, Julie Kutruff. I worked alongside of a good friend who still remains a good friend, Ka'mal McClarin. He was and still is the curator at Frederick Douglass. I came there to serve as the acting park curator, because he was finishing his doctorate degree. But I received a lot of great guidance from him, a lot of great coaching.

Enimini Ekong: From there, I developed a really great relationship with both Gopaul Noojibail and his wife Erin Noojibail. Whenever I went into training and Erin took to me. She gave me a lot of opportunities to really stretch myself, and to train. I think that's where a lot of my career exposure came from. Because for some of the trainings that I was providing, I was giving it to superintendents, I was giving it to the regional director. The head of HR.

Enimini Ekong: One of the challenges that we often had in our agency is that people get treated according to their grade, rather than their capabilities. So, in spite of the fact that during all of these stints that I was doing work I was a GS-5, it allowed me visibility for someone to say, we want to give this individual an opportunity because of the capabilities that they have, rather than the grade. After I left the training realm, I was interviewed and hired by William Cheek at the National Mall and developed a really good relationship with one of my great supervisors, Carolyn Richard, who retired. Once again, opportunities availed where there were projects that no one wanted to touch. I was afforded those. Carolyn Richard had a lot of in-office meetings just to make sure that I was successful in entering new terrain that had a lot of political implications. I got to work with the Eisenhower Commission, and they trusted me with being in the room with scholars and folks who were trying to establish that, I want to say national monument site. But I don't exactly know if it became a monument. Then I made my way to Little Rock

Central and I got to work for Robin White, who many know. If you've ever worked with, talked to, or had a conversation with Robin White, she is very passionate about social justice. So, I learned a lot. I would venture to say that much of [my] working with partners was probably the greatest skillset that I left her tutelage with.

Enimini Ekong: Then I made my way to Brown v. Board where my current superintendent, Sherda Williams, took to me and— (child talking to him) Sorry, that's the little historian in training [referring to his young son].

Lu Ann Jones: I like that.

55:02

Enimini Ekong: Sherda Williams, she allowed me to initially act as a superintendent of Nicodemus. Coached me as I took the position on fulltime. So, I found myself oftentimes in rooms where I was the only African American male, or I was the youngest manager in the room. If you follow the trajectory, all of my supervisors, by in large, have been women. Which, in an agency dominated by men, is not a conventional experience. And so, I have found right this kind of women being the heritage of our country, I have found so much of my career being enriched by the willingness of women who supervised me to tease out my skills, tease out my talent and how I could be best used in the park, and gave me room to excel.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, and I want to talk to all three of those women that you talked about for this project, too. So, fingers crossed I can get their attention. I don't know what kind of training that you were doing. Kind of to move back and kind of double back there, what kind of training were you doing in the National Capitol Region?

Enimini Ekong: It's so funny that you ask. The way I got into the training office is I was in National Capitol Parks East. We had some type of meeting to really address some of the competencies, the competency vacancies that were in and around the park. Whenever I found out that many of our facilities maintenance workers didn't have basic IDP training, or basic computer training, or they didn't know what to expect from their EPAPs, I talked to Gopaul, who was my supervisor at that time, and asked whether or not I could have permission to work in the training, which just happened to be headed out by his wife. So, it became a really great marriage, in a sense that while I was in the training office, I did a lot of IDP training. Because that's when it first hit our agency, so really equipping the workforce an idea of not buying into the retired-in-place. (laughs) And so there was that. There was basic customer service, how to use different platforms technologically, presentation skills, public speaking skills. So, I want to say my stint was for about six or seven months before I made my way to the National Mall. But those are probably the ones that come to mind.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, we talked as we did a pre-interview that yours and my path began to intersect some probably after you'd been in the Park Service maybe a couple of years or so. It's when Allies for Inclusion gets started. So, one, why were you attracted to Allies for Inclusion? And maybe just fill Cameron in on what that effort was.

Enimini Ekong: For sure. So, Allies for Inclusion started off in a room where people said, "You know, we've had a ton of affinity groups. The cultural climate group and what have you. So, there were a couple of people sitting in a room. They said, "We want to be able to create a space where we can have candid conversations about one, the stories that we tell. This was pre-Confederate flag and all the societal driving forces that had us rethinking things. But that we were trying to anticipate how we could create a better climate for our employees in the agency. This was right off the cusp of us being introduced to Mickey Fearn, who almost kind of formalized the Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion office. So, that kind of got established. It was just, hey, come and help us with the framework. Then it kind of further developed into, the idea of being a part of Allies for Inclusion was supposed to be a—

1:00:00

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Enimini Ekong: --hotbed for people to say, "I'm aligning with this forward mission of us making sure that not only the stories we tell are inclusive, but that our employees who, for a large part, feel that because of the history of our agency don't feel comfortable in our agency." Just a brief tidbit on that. Those who know the history of the National Park Service, it just ironically was established around the same time as the Klan. Most of our parks were established as a luxurious getaway, which during the time in the early 1900s was not accessible to people of color.

Enimini Ekong: So as the Park Service grew and matured, I would say, over the years, Robert Stanton, our first African American director, really led the charge in increasing many of the diverse sites that we have in and throughout the park system. When that occurred, I think there became a concern that individuals would feel like the only time that you could feel that inclusive history was being told in the Park Service was when you were at these sites. But that if you were at a Civil War Park, or if you were anywhere else, that you would find that the Indigenous peoples or the people who participated in the story would be found in the interpretation.

Enimini Ekong: So, Allies for Inclusion had kind of like a let's cast a broad net and figure out where our hand gets slapped approach. I think through the years, we found out that while there were challenges--I mean, for the most part, I wouldn't necessarily say that Allies for Inclusion has dissolved--but it's definitely not had as much momentum as it once did. There are a number of reasons for that, and changes in administration and leadership or what have you. But that it served as the ultimate impetus for us really looking at what would then become RDI, a full-on office where we're focused solely on making sure that we integrate inclusivity into every, I want to say facet of the work that we do as an agency.

02:25

Lu Ann Jones: Well, even as that is the case, what do you see as the main impediments to diversifying the workforce? And what do you see as some places of optimism in terms of diversifying the workforce?

Enimini Ekong: I think we've made pretty decent efforts at diversifying our agency. I think we've found that those efforts are hard to sustain. Much of our internship hiring, highly diverse. Those interns find themselves seeing their future in the Arrowhead or the uniform. I think there are, on a couple of fronts, the federal hiring process in and of itself is a barrier. But I think we've made mechanisms to diversify our workforce through many of our hiring programs for interns and young adults or seasoned adults. But the rate at which we've actually utilized those has been challenged by a lack of awareness by hiring managers, a lack of desire by hiring managers, complications with HR, even when efforts are made to hire those individuals. And I want to say a larger part of our challenge is we've never had a problem getting diverse candidates into the—well, let me not say "never." That's a heavy statement. We've had challenges. I think amid some of the successes that we've had getting diverse candidates into our agency, I think one of the upward hill battles has been the environment of the parks that we put these diverse candidates in. So, you'll find that yes, we can get a Latino heritage or a Mosaic intern or an HBCUI intern. But when they find themselves either in a community or in a park where they're not welcome, I think just like any other business, be it private or federal, people find that one, if you don't like who you work for, it doesn't matter how well you're getting paid. You might count the cost, stay there for a year, but you'll move on. But that also, if the community that you live in reminds you that you're not welcome, you'll make second thoughts about the quality-of-life decision that you're making to either stay in a location or with an agency that doesn't respect you bringing your whole self to work.

Enimini Ekong: And so, yeah, I know and have heard stories. I have fought for a number of diverse candidates by way of challenges to our policy, by way of mistakes by HR, which are just a product of being human. I don't think HR is solely to blame. Then successfully getting a diverse candidate in the park and finding out that actions speak louder than words, and the park has done, whether intentionally or

unintentionally, has created a number of barriers to encourage those diverse candidates to find a different path.

06:13

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I mean, I would say three people I have talked to for this project have talked about, two of them receiving death threats. I mean, these are older folks. You know, a lot of verbal abuse. Do you still hear stories today as opposed to 1980? I mean, is it still that raw?

Enimini Ekong: So, I've had conversations where I've heard my African American colleagues have experienced death threats. My mentor, Kevin Cheri, at the time before he retired, the others shall remain nameless because I know they're still in the agency, and I'll let that be their story. But the individuals that I've worked with or worked for have been very candid about how they were, not just like, "Hey, I don't want you in my office cubicle," but, "As long as you're here, your days are numbered." I mean, it's hard to fathom. For me, I have found that there is a, there can be a climate at a park that just lets you know that you can tell an inclusive history, but that inclusive fabric doesn't have to reside at the park. Because people have a job to do, and they're very savvy at disconnecting themselves from the story that they tell.

Enimini Ekong: As an example, I remember being in a park that shall remain nameless, and I was carrying out a station duty with one of my colleagues. Just to give the demographic features of this colleague, she was a white woman, mid to late fifties, PhD educated and was seasoned in the park history, which was a diverse history. Being from Texas, I'm a Cowboy fan. More specifically, Dallas, Texas, right? Go Cowboys. And being in the Washington, DC, area, there's a lot of Redskin fans. It's almost comparable to Covid-19, the virus that's going around here. (laughter)

Enimini Ekong: And so, I saw a gentleman who was wearing a Redskins shirt. Being a Baylor grad, around that time, Robert Griffin III had just graduated and was the Redskins quarterback. I was just kind of joking with the gentleman about how we had given them a reason to actually win, because they took one of our alumni.

Enimini Ekong: The gentleman walks off and my colleague who, you know, was kind of being a spectator to the conversation, then decides to engage me in conversation and says, "Yeah, I don't exactly know why people continue to complain and whine about Redskins being a derogatory name. I'm certain that if they had an NFL team named N-I-G-G-E-R-S, you would get behind it, right?"

Enimini Ekong: I was kind of, usually, there's a lot of people who talk about what happens whenever somebody says a derogatory statement to you and how would you respond. I was not prepared for that, one, that line of thinking, because it seemed illogical. So, I was trying to really digest—what's the connection there? But then,

she repeated. And was like, “No, seriously, if there were a team named N-I-G-G-E-R-S, certainly you would get in the stands and cheer.” I think when I finally came to, my response was, “I would recommend that you don’t share that with anyone. I’m more tame than others who would receive that response.”

Enimini Ekong: But I think the most telling thing was after I recommended that she not repeat that to anyone else as an endearing statement, her response was, “Now you know if you ever told anybody, they wouldn’t believe you. It would be my word against yours.” It went from me understanding that perhaps there’s some level of ignorance. She’s attempting to try and identify in a way that she’s unfamiliar doesn’t have a lot of people of color in her circle and so she’s just trying to grapple for that. And that happens, right? But for the level of awareness for her to know that what she was saying could have some damage to follow, and she was saying in case there is any damage, I want you to know my privilege allows me to be protected from anything, that I was like, wow. I started my career in 2010. So, we’re not in the early ‘90s, you know what I’m saying? And I gave her demographics because I would almost presume, because the misnomer in our country is the more educated you are, the more culturally competent you are, which is a falsity on every level. That your education is never equivalent to the application in your life. Which is more the reason why I love place-based history because it makes what we learn come alive, so that you have to grapple with not what you know but how you live. Which for me is the game changer.

Enimini Ekong: That’s probably one of many an instance where I’ve found myself giving pause, knowing that what people would expect my response to be would never be appropriate, professionally, or personally. Even if I met her outside of uniform, any other response than what I gave, I don't know would be appropriate. Just because I know our history. (laughs)

12:47

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. My jaw continues to drop as I do these interviews.

Enimini Ekong: I’ll kind of support that by saying there’s a reality both in our society, and I would venture to say it’s matriculated to some aspects of our agency, where people understand, no different than I did growing up in Dallas, that there is a sense of racial respectability. There are certain things in your career that cause you to count the cost, and you are fully encouraged in and throughout our agency to stand up for yourself, as long as you’re willing to take the cost that comes with that. Some are willing to pay that cost. Some are not. Some successfully navigate it for the entirety of their career. Knowing what’s going on, dealing with what’s going on, and successfully completing [your career] while being able to live to tell about it. I don't think—it’s really a life skill, right? I learned it in college. Like you learn the life skill that people’s ignorance should never be attached to your anger, right? You educate. And when you find out that people are educated and they’re intentionally trying to either get a rise or degrade you. You’ve got a

couple of healthy choices to make. None of them that end with any form of physicality or you bringing yourself to that level. Not to at all dismiss that in order to do that one, you have to be aware, and you have to be beyond emotionally intelligent; you've got to be emotionally resilient. I think through the hundreds of slave narratives that I read throughout my African American history program for my thesis that I wrote on slavery, and the number of oral history interviews where I've heard people from the civil rights movement talk about one of the most precarious things that they see about our generation today is the absence of resilience. That what they saw in a country where there were signs telling you where you were and were not accepted, that some of what we experience, we should be able to bear and make through. The only reason why they know to tell us that is because there's no anticipation that things will change.

Enimini Ekong: In fact, one of the key pieces of advice I got from a lady who I was giving a tour to at Little Rock Central, she grew up in Georgia. Macon, Georgia, I believe it was. She was telling me about whenever she had a cross burned in her yard. She was no one [of notoriety], no civil rights worker, no nothing. But the neighborhood just knew that she was an African American resident-owner. She was pregnant. And she said, "I knew then that the child that I had in my womb, I couldn't protect her from the world that I was bringing her in, but I could prepare her." I'll give kind of the imagery of me having that conversation and then years later sitting in the living room with my wife eight months pregnant with my first son as I watched the Michael Brown case. Understanding that I can prepare my son for the world that he's going into, but I can't protect him.

Enimini Ekong: The agency, no different than any other organization, it is made up of people. I would say that I have come across some of the best people in this agency, and they have encouraged my professional endeavors. They've helped me become a better person, a better leader, a better supervisor. I appreciate the more abrasive employees. Because unlike many others, I value the experience that causes me to grow. I've never found any of my pleasant experiences in life serving as growth opportunities, unfortunately. (laughs) I wish that were the case that whenever I went to Six Flags, I found myself being challenged beyond my mental faculties. But that I've found by standing in the hospital, looking at my unresponsive father, I've found that being in racial conversations where people are affirming that they don't feel that my skin or my life has any value, beyond any movement, but just me, personally. That individuals question my capabilities not because of my merit, as the federal government tends to be a very merit-driven entity. That my merit means nothing as long as they know what I look like. That those things have helped give me a level of stability that I don't think the absence of those things ever would. So, I value them as much as I do my great experiences. But as hypocritical as it sounds, don't wish it on my children. Of which I have three.

Lu Ann Jones: Oh, wow. It's a lot to absorb. I've got some other questions. But what are you doing specifically in this year that you're there with the RDI office? Do you have a particular task that you've been assigned for the year?

19:16

Enimini Ekong: So, it's funny. RDI is more of a tertiary engagement that I'm having. Most of my work is directly with the associate director and helping him lead this workforce and inclusion, which includes employee relations, labor relations, the human resource information systems, what is it, Corps Plus, and other things. So, building the efficiencies doesn't have me being so definitely engaged with one of the entities under the umbrella, because there are thirteen functional areas. But I think much of my work is aiding our directorate meet milestones that make us a better agency. But while I am doing that, I am having an opportunity to give recommendations with training background, field experience and an African American lens that actually might help some of the things that we implement be more inclusive.

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Interesting.

Enimini Ekong: Which goes to remind me that at all levels of the agency, diversity is needed. Because I don't think that there's any one place that a person of color or a diverse community is needed. But that yeah, when you have them at all facets of the agency, they can actually help you serve not only your internal constituents, but your external constituents pretty well. That literally, diversity is a business case and inclusion is the work that we need to do to make sure that diversity continues to be a part of the NPS fabric.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you know, it occurs to me that really with allies, and then Arc to Equality, I mean, it was in those conversations that people began to say that if we're going to really serve the public well, we've got to heal ourselves. I mean, we've got to do our internal work. And I don't know if that had really been part of the conversation, or if that was kind of an evolution of conversations that have been going on in one way or another for a long time about diversity and the Park Service. But beginning to see the connection between those two things seemed important to me. I'll put it that way.

Enimini Ekong: Yeah. And I would say it's quite the challenge. Because in order for individuals to adopt what Arc to Equality and Allies for Inclusion are asking of them, you have to do some personal work. So, it's a very rare feat that in order to take on a professional occupation, you have to evaluate your personal life. I mean, there are a few positions like pastors or other positions that are high in morality that call you to kind of elevate your personal life so that you can be a better professional. And I think that's inevitably been the challenge, is that people know that if I don't want to change personally, but you hired me to fulfill my PD, I can apply. Which has been part of the challenge. Because people, it becomes very evident in a park setting where you're living amongst others or that you're spending more time that you do with professionals than you would with family members but yet, they're not willing to learn of you in a way that would enhance the professional culture.

23:11

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Well, there's kind of one kind of topic that I'd like to talk about. I know you've got children there that want your attention and deserve your attention.

Enimini Ekong: No, they're actually making their way outside, so they have to pass me to get outside. So, we're good.

Lu Ann Jones: But at the time that you arrived in interpretation and education, things were beginning to change in the Park Service. Being a more dialogic if not ACE was the audience-centered education or interpretation, but at least much more dialogic. So how have you seen, just in really a relatively, a decade or so, how have you seen interpretation change? And how does that affect the way you have gone about your work and encouraging your staff to do the work of interpretation?

Enimini Ekong: That's a great question. I have seen it change. It has made interpretation more risky. It has made interpretation, whether in your PD [Position Description] or not, require more qualifications that can actually be implemented on paper. Like I mean, if we could measure emotional intelligence, I would think that it's an excellent metric whenever we're hiring interpretive rangers which has changed the way I interview. Particularly at civil rights parks. I've been at civil rights parks where my white rangers are asked why are you here and why are you telling this history? If you're not capable of roughly 360 days a year, 52 weeks out of the year, being able to handle that, and take care of self through that process, it can be challenging. Traditionally people have signed up to be the sage on the stage. That they had all the information, and you were coming to learn. Whereas now that we've made things more dialogical, you're not the expert. So, you've got to have some level of humility, some self-awareness, and the ability to accept that you don't have all the answers. Which in our culture, just in general, there's a social hierarchy that says if you know, then you should be able to say so. And everyone else doesn't.

Enimini Ekong: I think it has definitely spurned a lot of challenge for individuals who have grown up, particularly in an educational system that says there is a right and wrong. Whereas now history has a lot of nuances. Climate has a lot of nuances. You go even further; these same subject matters have a political edge. So, for an apolitical agency that is literally in a train wreck with society and how it looks at certain topics, like our natural environment and how it's telling us to look at topics, there's inevitable dialogical conversations that become contentious. Because you find that both sides of the aisle, or both sides of the subject, are in your tour. So, if you're not a great facilitator, if you don't know how to deescalate, you run the risk of having a very challenging job. Or trying to find a park that doesn't deal with those matters.

Enimini Ekong: But I think personally, I enjoy it. (laughs) Like I wouldn't, I've oftentimes said whenever I've introduced myself at a new park that I'm a confrontational person. And I don't say that in I like fights. But kind of similar to what I said earlier, I like the idea of being challenged to change. Being challenged to change. And whenever you get into dialogical conversations, I've had a conversation, you know, I had a race conversation with a young lady [who happened to be white] who was in oil. Her and her husband. They had come from Texas, and so there's a commonality there. We got into a conversation, and I was telling her about Brown v. Board of Education. Her pigment began to change. And she said, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" Which for me is like the million-dollar question. Because I know everyone who comes to a park knows that rangers are there to answer a question. However, when you get to that question, you know that you're going from substance to depth, right?

Enimini Ekong: So, I was like, "Of course." Her question to me was, what do you do with well-meaning white people? So, we went from talking about the history of 1954 and Linda Brown, this little girl who's going to school, to her immediately going to application. Which for me is like that's why I live to do this, right? We talked a little bit about the essence of the question. Because she talked about the diverse friends that she surrounds herself with. She's finding that there's like a clanging cymbal every time she tries to get to these conversations that she's welcome to, but she doesn't know how to breach. We talked for about an hour. To encapsulate the conversation, I basically, because I started off by saying the way, what I do with well-meaning white people, I think the better answer is more so that people are like smiles. I told her, you know an authentic smile from a fake one. When people know that you're authentic, you never have to say so. They'll talk about you long after you're gone. In some cases, they may affirm you to your face. But that when you're authentic, you never have to posture yourself in a way where you're saying, "I have these friends (of color)," or, "This is what I do with this community." Because they know it's who you are, and not necessarily a banner. So, she got that--almost to the point of tears, right? Because for her, it was a personal endeavor to make sure that those who she engaged with that didn't look like her knew that she was for their best interests. I think through that conversation I was able to, at least by her own admission, to affirm that there's nothing to prove. No different than the friends that you have that are homogeneous to you and that you know that you can identify with. You never look for affirmation in whether or not you're treating them right. They just know it. They feel it. I think that's where we've lost it, societally.

Enimini Ekong: I love having those dialogical conversations because they get us to a place where we talk about the things that matter, not the things that we want to know. When I was at Little Rock Central, after the whole Confederate flag expose in our country, I ordered a 54-by-54 Confederate flag. I put it in our [ranger] meeting room on the conference table, and whenever our rangers came in, you know, definitely like, what's going on? I challenged them, because someone had written, when I was at Little Rock Central, someone had written [in our visitor logbook]

that the history that we told there at Little Rock Central wasn't inclusive. He was a self-segregationist [wearing a Confederate hat and blatantly refusing to engage or speak to anyone of color at the site], and he was identifying all the things in our exhibits that really just revered those who were fighting for civil rights.

Enimini Ekong: I said, "That's valid. Like that is a valid perspective that needs to be brought to the table. So, I think we should start doing facilitated dialogs around the Confederate flag. And both of its meaning."

Enimini Ekong: Not a one of my rangers for an entire year took me up on the offer. I ended up getting myself and Kimble Talley to do a facilitated dialog with my staff attending where we would just literally pull people who were about to go onto a tour into a room and have a conversation about the Confederate flag. You had people on all sides of the aisle. But our rangers were able to see how valuable it is to use emblematic things to have a conversation where we're all kind of after the same thing. We're after preserving our history, the things that we've been taught by the people that we love. Part of the way we breached it is we had a conversation about what does freedom mean? That people never looked at the Confederate flag as a statement of freedom, and other people never saw the Confederate flag as a statement of anti-freedom. We were able to meet there and talk about that. It was real fruitful, and people saw that. So, I love that we have dialogical conversations, but I also know that it requires a greater skill set and it is challenging. Because it requires us to talk, and not teach.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Yeah. Wow. I was thinking as I was reading a little background on you, I was going to ask the question are you a teacher or a preacher?

33:13

Enimini Ekong: (laughs) I would say if you teach well, you can find yourself preaching. (laughs) And not so much vice versa. Because people don't like to be preached to. But I have found even more so in my kind of religious studies that everybody's after truth. If you teach well, people, they just gravitate to knowing the truth, and they learn from it. I think that's, particularly in our political sphere, if we would just tell people what things really are, they would make more informed decisions. But I think part of what's kind of challenged a lot of our democracy is us feeling that the best way that we could gain the alliance and the advocacy of people is to tell them stuff that they should believe even if it's not true. So, all that being said, I think there's great value in teaching, whether you're coming out of scripture or if you're coming out of the history book.

Lu Ann Jones: I didn't necessarily mean oh, even a Christian preacher. But just preaching as a calling, advocacy or whatever. But yeah, it just struck me that there was some of that in your philosophy there.

Enimini Ekong: Yeah, no. And to that, I would say, more of my stylistic approach is definitely teaching. Because I think teaching affords an opportunity for fact giving, and then for you to prompt the student to prove that what you're teaching is actually being interpreted accurately, right? So that whenever I'm talking about Brown v. Board, or the meaningfulness of the case, and I say, you know, if you've ever gone to any grocery store and saw a handicapped parking space, do you know that that's the product of Brown v. Board? For most people, they don't associate the two. And so, once I do that, then the question becomes, what else do you think in your common day experience you miss, is related to this court case? Then once you see the impact of all the things that you find out that all these things are a product of the case, the question then becomes, well why didn't I learn this in school, right? That, for me, is like that's the real learning experience because then you make people hungry, not for knowledge, but for true education. True learning, in that, it's not just about, give me facts and figures, it's about teach me what I don't know so I can live better.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Yeah. Well maybe we should just say explicitly that we have been doing this interview in the time of George Floyd, and in the time of tremendous protest and truth telling. I mean, without trying to, I don't want to like make you hurt or whatever, but what's it like to kind of talk about these things in this moment, versus if we had even been talking about them six months ago, for example? Does it make a difference as we're talking in this particular atmosphere?

36:50

Enimini Ekong: I would say for others, yes. Not so much for myself. Similar to when my wife was pregnant with my son and the befuddlement that I had with the Trayvon Martin. You know, every atrocity that has occurred, for me I see now as probably, I wouldn't necessarily say the apex of opportunity, but one where similar to my transition into the Park Service, that you went from being in a college classroom and just really hoping people are coming there to learn, to people flooding your classrooms, trying to figure out how they can learn about Mary McLeod Bethune, Frederick Douglass, you name it. So once again that imagery for me is now about as prime a time for true education to occur so that people seize this moment. Because I think, particularly in all the civil rights sites that I've worked at, the common denominator is the human condition. That at some point, we have to evaluate what we're capable of as humans and put up the necessary markers to prevent ourselves from being as marred as the histories that we've created in this country.

Enimini Ekong: So that George Floyd, by all intents and purposes, rocked people for a number of different reasons. But I think it was the closest thing that we in our generation could come to in watching a public execution. Whenever you can't really verify that this person is not a Timothy McVeigh [Oklahoma City bomber]. It's not something that we can say, "Oh, he did this and therefore he deserved that." But in our country where we understand that everybody is innocent until proven

guilty, that it means that everybody deserves their day in court. Timothy McVeigh got his day in court. You know, the number of individuals that you go down. Even if George Floyd had committed a bunch of crimes, if he had killed somebody prior to that incident, I think the question still remains, given our constitutional structure, he was innocent until he had an opportunity to be proven guilty.

Enimini Ekong: I think, yeah, it's such a valuable time in our country where for me, I'm more bent towards the confrontation. And having an opportunity to get people in a room who are salivating saying, what can I learn and how quick can I learn it? How can I reflect on my personal experience and see it in a way that allows me to know whether or not I've aided and abetted what I saw on that screen, or whether or not I'm actually much further along than I thought I was? I think, you know, part of that challenge is a lot of what we've seen has exasperated a population in our country who, through anger and fear, is just saying, "Not again. I don't know how, I don't even know what the cause is, I just want this all to end."

Enimini Ekong: I think there's value in our history from the civil rights movement that any purpose worth being angry about needs to have an objective at the end of it. I think our civil rights workers taught us that, that movements without objectives and goals are fruitless; and that if not honed necessarily, three to six months from now, it can be a reference point, but people won't be talking about it the same. That's not to make any remarks of what people are trying to achieve. I think there are a lot of young people who are trying to find their voice. There are a lot of communities who are saying enough is enough. But I think after our anger dissolves, after our frustration with our justice system, we all still have to sit down and talk. We all still got to figure out a way to have our children play together and figure out how we can literally dismantle the things that have allowed the continual injustices to pervade our country.

Lu Ann Jones: Cameron, do you have any questions at this point?

41:53

Cameron Nesmith: One final question, really. Do you think the National Park Service has done its justice now, like present day on addressing these broader issues of race and reconciliation in our country? Or do you still think the Park Service is maybe a few years, a few steps behind maybe the program?

Enimini Ekong: Great question. I'm never, I've never seen that there is a completion or an achievement of particularly that topic. And trust, I'm not going the diplomatic route here. (laughs) But I mean, just as I contextualize my answer, I don't feel like anybody can ever be culturally competent, right? There's a spectrum and you become more culturally competent up until the day that you die. But the aim is that you find yourself being more thoughtful of others. At least how I'm raising my kids, we call it being others-centered, right? Because everything in our society tells you, you've got to get yours and I've got to get mine. And worry about you,

and pull yourself up by your bootstraps, when part of what made our patriotism, when you look at World War Two, part of what made us coalesce as a nation was that someone attacked America and we all needed to do something about it. So, when our Americans went overseas, we were fighting to protect home. And home stood up whenever those soldiers were gone. Now, the unfortunate thing about all that is when the African American soldiers who fought for that same cause come back home, only to figure out that their sacrifice wasn't held to the same standard, right?

Enimini Ekong: As it relates to the National Park Service, I've always said, our bureau has the ability to change the world. In part because we tell how this country got established. We tell the good, challenging and indifference of what has developed our democracy. And if told right, we will serve as the accountability for the heart of our nation. Simply by telling the history. I'm not saying we've got to do anything savvy. No presentations. We don't have to get Hollywood in here. I'm just saying if we simply told what we've done as a country, we would shudder. We would shudder and feel obligated to make it right, and make sure that the next monuments that we have are simply the ones of us saying, we've done it right. Like there's a monument being created because we are the social, rather we're the equity example for the rest of the globe. Not simply because our Constitution talks about freedom and equality, but that we're the standard of what it looks like.

Enimini Ekong: Some would actually argue that today. Some would argue that we are the standard. But because of how our democracy is, that nothing will ever be perfect. And I hear that side as well. But I think the Park Service, its nuanced challenge is because it is a bureau that reports to the executive office, will always feel to some level somewhat hamstrung in what it can say or do as long as it doesn't disrupt the amenableness of the executive branch that it reports to. But within that, right, like our Constitution has put in place that when you have an enabling legislation, it gives you, by law, the liberty for you to tell the truth about the story and the place that has been preserved. I still think that amid that, some people still feel hamstrung. And so, can there be tremendous growth? Yes. And the telling the story, that's the external face.

Enimini Ekong: Internally, our learning, research and development budget has been limited as a federal agency. Because I think for the work that we do, sometimes we ill-equip our workforce for what we're demanding of them, or what society is demanding of them. Part of our centennial in 2016, we were clearly made aware that in order for us to thrive as an agency, we needed to better reflect the stories that we tell. That didn't come from internal. I think it was driven by Director Jarvis at that time, for sure, and he had led that charge. But I think a lot of it came from us really understanding that in 2016, we had to do better for the constituents that were flooding our parks. So, I think the challenge has always been, and this has been similar with civil rights, whenever I'm in my park at Brown v. Board, I've always said that our children have always been the reason for us to change laws. In the civil rights movement, that was true. When we think about it, I mean, any

time you look at a speed limit sign [in a school zone], our children have taught us, in this area you should not drive over 15 miles per hour. My hope is that our society would not continue to tell the Park Service where it needs to be, given the heritage that we know and tell every day. That we should, because of the stories that we tell, be anticipating and doing a much better job in teaching the rest of the world and the country one, how invaluable we are, that the Park Service will never become obsolete, no matter how much AI [artificial intelligence] there is being created. But that even more so, there's a story that we can tell that causes us to reflect and feel obligated to live, act, and operate very differently in our democracy. As long as people are going into parks and not just looking for a job but really marrying themselves to the mission of this agency, I think this agency has the potential to literally change the world. Whether or not we do it, it has a lot to do with leadership and those who make up our workforce.

48:54

Cameron Nesmith: And even with dialog, why is it with this continuous, continuous dialog, why is it still so difficult for people to just see the truth? [Pause] Because for me it's more of a rational thing. Like I'm a very rational person, so it's like why can't you blatantly see that your people are trying to subject us to being second-class citizens if it's through conversation, if it's through education, through using your privilege. It's like, how can you not see that you have privilege, and we don't?

49:45

Enimini Ekong: This might be a book someday, but I think truth is a little bit more irrational. I think, you know, it's kind of like all of us know what we need to do to be better people. But in spite of knowing that, we still haven't done it. Truth is irrational because it's so immeasurable, it's so hard to achieve that knowing it is never enough. Like, because of truth, whenever it's really taken root, it lives in you, right? Like you can actually live it out. And I think one of the greatest challenges whenever you tell people truth is they first have to filter it with the truth that they've first been given. If they can't reconcile that, feelings show up. So, it's not a completely rational process in accepting truth. It's intertwined with emotions. Even now, you know, the dichotomy in our society is both fact and feeling. There's a group of individuals who keep trying to spit out facts and disregard the feelings, and then there are some people who are leading fully with their feelings and disregarding any facts. While dismissing the reality that it is more an art than it is a science that we have to hold them in a proper balance and say there are just as much facts that matter as much as feelings. And any imbalance will off put anybody.

Enimini Ekong: So, when you tell someone for the first time that Abraham Lincoln did not have a sole goal of freeing African Americans, that his sole goal was preserving the union, that rocks people. People will write their senator. You could potentially

lose your job for telling a truth that hasn't always been universally known. And unless they say, "What are you footnoting? Give me your facts."

Enimini Ekong: Then you can say, "Yeah, in the 1956 [1856] Stephen Douglas debate, he clearly said that if he could preserve the union and keep African Americans where they were, that he would do that. You could actually go read that."

Enimini Ekong: That gives people a different [perspective], going from head to heart experience where they're saying, "Oh, wow. There's truth to this that I have to consider. And now that I consider it, I can either allow it or not allow it to change my view of Abraham Lincoln." Was he inherently a bad person? Nope. He was a person of his generation. Much as whatever generation will think about us saying, what was with all these people and smartphones, right? Like, we're people of our generation. So, for you to be countercultural requires a whole lot. So, I think that's why history isn't about right or wrong; it's about facts, right? So, when we hold the facts properly in context to our humanity, I think we give people more grace to be human.

Cameron Nesmith: Right.

Lu Ann Jones: Can I ask one—where do you see your career going? (laughter)

Enimini Ekong: After this interview? Down the drain, I think! (laughter) You know, I actually get that question a lot more these days. No different than whenever I came into the agency, thinking that after, because I guess I missed this part of the story. Whenever I was pursuing my degree in African American studies, I then kind of morphed the idea of my career goal to be a college president, particularly of a historically black college. I think whenever I got into the National Park Service, I was thinking that it was going to simply help me meet that goal. But now that I'm in, I never sought out to become a chief, never sought out to be a superintendent. Because I've always been inundated with impact, not a title. So, my desire is to impact as many people before I leave this earth. Whatever position I can do that in, I'm happy to do that. But I've never said, oh, man, I'm aspiring to this because, at least how I was raised, success was never measured in your occupation. It was measured in who you were, inside and outside of work. So, my hope is that my legacy in the Park Service is as, if not more so in my personal life, reflective of my desire to be others centered.

54:43

Lu Ann Jones: Well, do you see, are there particular positions that you see in the Park Service that have more potential than others to move the needle? I mean, like as a superintendent, for example. Or is it a regional director? And I'm not saying that that's where you want to go, but where do you see as the points that can be the fulcrums in the Park Service?

Enimini Ekong: Similar to our democracy, I think it has to do with our field. Like I think the field has always caused us to mature as an agency at a rate that we were either willing to grow or not. I think those in senior leadership play a vital role in either hindering or establishing framework for that feedback or that maturity to materialize. I think whenever I was in the field, I thought I had the most impact because I came in contact with people. When I was on the Mall and I saw thirty million people a year, like you talk about having an impact. I legitimately thought that through the stories I was telling, like I was part of changing the world. Then I became a superintendent and the intimacy that you get to develop people and encourage people's careers, and encourage the work that they're doing, it's almost like that of a parent. Like if I raise my child well, they'll impact a lot more than I ever could. So, when you invest in your kids well, they'll impact the world. And I think, not to call employees "kids," that's probably bad imagery there. But that when you invest in your team and the folks that work in and around your site, so much more of your impact can reverberate with the people that they come in contact with, both personally and professionally. So, I've found that my greatest impact is the perspective that I currently have at that point. So, it's like, I felt like when I was in the field, I had the greatest impact. And then whenever I became a superintendent, I felt like I had the greatest impact because of the tables that I got to sit at and the communications and the infrastructure I got to put in place. So, I think as long as I'm in the agency, I'll feel like wherever I'm at, that's where the greatest impact is. (laughter)

57:20

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you know, even as I asked that question, I thought if we take our responsibilities seriously, right, all of us have the potential for that impact. Even though I think there's certain levers and things, people who can make things move. And right, and the grassroots has a lot of potential power, too. So, it's just sort of interesting to think about how do you move things forward? Yeah. Yeah. Well, are there things that you'd like to say in closing, that we haven't talked about?

Enimini Ekong: Clearly, I'm never without words. I think I would say, particularly for anybody who would hear this, I believe that my life is more than being a ranger. My responses and my thoughts are not held in context to whether or not I feel like this will cause me to get fired or, you know, I firmly believe that good work, good work speaks for itself. And so, when I think about the hope for either this oral history or any of the other ones that you all are curating, I know it doesn't come without context of the time and how someone is thinking about what went on during the country at that time. My approach to life has always been that in many cases, nothing's new under the sun. I think my goal has always been to add value wherever I'm at. At the point by which I don't feel like I can add value, then I need to move on. That I will never (laughs) mark my words, I will never be retired in position, because I don't feel like any of us have any time to waste. So yeah, I really do hope that as people reflect through these oral histories and the

tireless work that you all are doing, hours of listening and coming up with questions, that my story would nestle—

1:00:00

[END OF TRACK 2]

[START OF TRACK 3]

Enimini Ekong: --in the mosaic of rangers and other professionals throughout our agency who have tried to figure out not only just how to be good public servants, but to be great people. And that the two are inextricable, right? That if you're a good person, you're an even better public servant in or out of uniform. I think where the agency can make that more profitable, my hope is that it would continue the work of not only telling the stories but having the lessons learned from our history be reflected internally in our agency.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, that was a beautiful closing statement. That was wonderful! (laughs) Well, I think this has been a great way to end the week. Thank you so much.

Enimini Ekong: (laughs) Thank you.

Lu Ann Jones: It's been very instructive. And fun, too. So, thank you so much.

Enimini Ekong: For sure. For sure. Yeah, if you all go over anything and you think of any questions, please don't hesitate.

Lu Ann Jones: Will do.

Enimini Ekong: I could do this all night.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes.

Cameron Nesmith: One last question, Mr. Ekong. What would you say for someone like me who's, I don't know, I'm just trying to figure this career stuff out. And not try to feel like oh, I'm under pressure of having to do it tomorrow and figure out getting a job tomorrow or getting in grad school tomorrow. What kind of advice would you have?

Enimini Ekong: One, don't be defined by what you do. Be it pursuing degrees or pursuing a career. Know that that doesn't define you. That is simply a chapter in the story that you'll define. Definitely add value wherever you go. Don't compromise who you are for who or where you need to work. Know that you're best when you're present where you are. The future will take care of itself. Tomorrow will come whether you like it or not. And yesterday is gone, whether or not you bemoan

what you didn't get to do. So be great where you are. And I think the rest will take care of itself.

Cameron Nesmith: Absolutely. And I really appreciate that. No doubt. No doubt.

02:40

Enimini Ekong: And know that these experiences don't come without a relationship. I'm only where I am because of all the supervisors that I've listed, along with, of course, work. But as you go through this process, know that the relationships you're cultivating through these oral histories, they can be considered lifelong. So don't hesitate to utilize them as you wish.

Cameron Nesmith: Absolutely.

Lu Ann Jones: Thank you so much. That was great. Again, I think that it's really wonderful to see these interviews as a mentoring opportunity. And I feel like I'm being mentored, too. It's always, it's not just old to young, mentoring happens in all sorts of different ways, I think. So really appreciate that. Yeah.

Cameron Nesmith: Absolutely.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I'm going to--go ahead.

Enimini Ekong: I was going to say, this has been an absolute pleasure. It's funny, while we were talking, the reason why my little guy was hanging around is because with all these Zoom calls, there's been a lot of eavesdropping, right? So, they tend to learn a lot more of what Dad does from nine to five. So, they get to learn a little bit about our experience, or my experience. And being able to watch what's on TV, hear the name George Floyd a number of times, whether they like it or not, they're getting a world class education. So, I appreciate you all humbly considering me as a part of this project.

Lu Ann Jones: Absolutely.

Enimini Ekong: And value that this was a way I could conclude my week. So, I appreciate it.

Lu Ann Jones: And I'm going to be sending you a transcript once it gets transcribed. And I'll also share copies of the audio. Because I assume people might like to have them for their personal files and for their kids. If not today, in the future. You know that these, I try to think of these as helping people preserve really kind of a family document, in addition to a professional document. So, I'll be sharing those with you, too.

Enimini Ekong: Very, very thoughtful. Thank you for that.

Lu Ann Jones: You're welcome. Yeah. Well, I hope you have a good weekend. Don't spend all of it catching up with chores. (laughs)

Enimini Ekong: Okay. You all take care. Have a phenomenal weekend. Bye.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. I'm going to ask Cameron, Cameron can you hang on for a minute, because we haven't had a chance to talk in a couple of days.

Cameron Nesmith: For sure.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay. Thanks so much.

Enimini Ekong: All right, you all take care.

Lu Ann Jones: Bye.

Cameron Nesmith: Be blessed.

Lu Ann Jones: Hey there, Cameron.

Cameron Nesmith: Hey, hey, hey. Is everything okay?

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. What did you think about that?

5:27

[END OF TRACK 3]

[END OF INTERVIEW]