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Spring 3-28-2017

Oral History Conversation with Charlene Espinoza (Bosh Bosh)

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Henry, Tatiana T.; Martin, Blake; Bernal, Jessica Hernandez; and Bridges, Chason S., "Oral History Conversation with Charlene Espinoza (Bosh Bosh)" (2017). *Philosophy: All Student Work*. 2.
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CHARLENE ESPINOZA (BOSH BOSH)

with Blake Martin, Chason Bridges, Jessica Bernal, and Tatiana Henry

Chason: Okay so, in our class we learned about the residues of experience that shape what we value or what is important to us. I read in an online article that you grew up in Mexico and did a lot of volunteer work down there. Could you tell us more about your childhood experiences? Or would you be able to trace what you're doing now to a specific experience you had growing up?

Charlene: Uh yes! So firstly, I was born in Santa Monica, LA. My parents are Mexican so they were both born there in Mexico. They were here for like a long time, I think since they were young. So, I was born in LA so I knew since I was very young how to speak Spanish and obviously English you know. I was going to school, but my parents really wanted me to immerse myself in Mexican culture. So, what happened is I grew up here in San Diego. So, I was only in LA until two or three years old and then San Diego until I was ten and then we moved down to Rosarito, Mexico. And honestly, that's were my whole experience with volunteering and just going to a different culture and country and traveling kind of was, I don't know something inside me woke me up about that experience and when we moved down there, that's when I really obviously learned how to write and read Spanish because I only knew how to speak Spanish so that's where I just got more connected with my own culture and language and lifestyle, and since I was really young my dad's a Rotarian. From the rotary club. So, it's an international club and they had the rotary in Rosarito and he always had me really involved in community service, for example painting schools on the weekend. I remember waking up at seven in the morning on a Saturday. I would just spend an entire day painting the school or, you know other community projects. So, since I was in high school I was really involved in that and I was like the first president for the Rotaract club, which is the same as rotary, just kind of for like high school students or younger for the youth. And again, I got to lead projects and initiate community service things, and then when I graduated high school I came to the states to study college. But I think that's where my curiosity of like, how other people live in different countries came about. And then when I came here I started traveling a lot and that also sparked a lot of interest of like international, I guess aid work and stuff like that. But I would have to say it really stemmed from my upbringing in Mexico and obviously seeing the contrast between both countries because, I mean Rosarito is not that far. It's only like, I would say from the boarder, it's only like 30 minutes, but from the boarder it can be it's like a totally different world down there. So, me coming from here, even though I was very young I could still see the differences between both countries. And I have to say that I am very fortunate that I grew up privileged in a way. Like we weren't, I never grew up hungry or anything like that but I did see that like around me when I was there in Mexico and I think that's what really pushed me to try to serve my community in a way.

Chason: And what were kind of like the big community projects that you led while in Mexico?

Charlene: So, we helped, we kind of like adopted one of the, like a kindergarten school. And then what we did is we got some funding so we could repaint it and then we did like a little garden for them. We painted the interior and exterior of the entire school. We would do like a lot of community clean ups or like on the beach as well. And I guess for like high school that's kind of big you know. When you're in high school, like 16 or 17 years old now it's kind of like a little bit like 'oh, that's nothing.' But I think, you know trying to sacrifice like your weekends and we would fundraise by like just selling, which is funny we'd just sell on like the stop-stop signs we would sell sodas or water. We would collect like \$100 or something like that, which was a big deal back then. And then we would obviously also get help from rotary, which was the bigger umbrella. But we still did a lot of fundraising ourselves. So, it was more school, like kind of working with the schools there in Rosarito.

Blake: Uh, so could you describe the journey that led to this idea of starting Bosh Bosh?

Charlene: Well first of all, it really stemmed from my Peace Corps experience. So, I decided to join peace corps. I think I was like 27 or so. So, I was a little bit older to the compared to like the other peace corps volunteers that are in it that are just graduating university and then they kind of go straight into it. I was already in my career because my career because my background is in interior design, so I worked at a design architecture firm here in San Diego. But because of my travels and my experience of being in Mexico I was still volunteering here in different organizations. I really wanted to take that next step and like get out of San Diego and move somewhere and immerse myself completely in a different country. So, I joined Peace Corps because I thought I was like the perfect combination. And that led me to Liberia. Which is in West Africa which I knew nothing about, so I really learned everything along the way.

Blake: Were you nervous about traveling that far?

Charlene: I'm sorry?

Blake: Were you nervous about traveling that far?

Charlene: No, because I was used to traveling.

Blake: Okay

Charlene: Like I went to India and all these different countries. So that was my first time in Africa, so I guess for me like I really wanted to go to Africa. You don't really, back then when I did the application you don't get to choose where to go. But I was crossing my fingers to go to Africa anywhere in Africa it was fine so when I got Liberia was like great it's Africa but I have no idea. I remember I Google searched it and the first thing that came out with like child soldiers in the war and like all these terrible things and I'm like oh my god, well that's Peace Corps you know. The American government is sending me, I think it's fine. I will just not show this to my mom, she'll freak out. But, so when I arrived to Liberia, Peace Corps does a great job of really kind of taking you by the hand and like, you know making you immerse yourself and integrating and all that. You do three months of training and during those three months of training and whatever specific job you're supposed to do. Like I was sent as a teacher. As an English teacher and I got teacher training during those three months because I'd never been a teacher before. And then I was living with a host family, so Liberian host family. And that's really when you actually get to learn from like how people lived because you're like living exactly in their culture

and you get to learn how to cook like they do, wash your clothes by hand and all that. So, yeah living with my host family that's when I really, when it really made me more aware of my surroundings and how females, like just the challenges females face on a daily basis. Like, a lot of my neighbors who were little girls were, I would say most of them weren't going to school. And I'm talking around like maybe eight, nine, ten years old and they're really the ones kind of expected to do all the cooking, washing, cleaning. Like all the daily chores. They are the ones taking care of all their like siblings. Like little girls as young as I remember seeing like a five year old carrying the baby on her back. Like you know how they wrap up the baby and she's like, like super good at it. She was like cleaning and washing them. So for me that's like oh my God that's a lot of responsibility for children specially.

Tatiana: Were their mothers educated at all?

Charlene: No. So that and that's the, that's where everything stems from. Like if you, I mean it's definitely more probable that if you are not educated as a mother then your children are not educated because you don't know their importance and value of education. So...

Tatiana: So how did a lot of them react to the program? Were the mothers excited that they were having this opportunity?

Charlene: Yes. I would say it was actually a very positive reaction from the community. When we, when I first arrived to Salala, which is a community where I got to spend my two years, my formal two years actually three years because I extended the year after. The community was very, you could tell that there was already like female authorities there. Like in my school there were, I would say a little bit less than half were female. So that already kind of gave me the impression that females weren't being suppressed. So, when we came up with that idea, which I didn't really come up with it. It was a local teacher at my school. She came up to me saying that she was really interested in working with me and to start a girls' club because she knew the challenges that the girls in her community faced and she knew the girls were getting pregnant very young and all that. So that, that there was like the perfect thing because I don't think you should as a foreigner, you know I'm not Liberia and I have no, this is like, I was like four months into it because the first initial three months and then right when I got to site. I don't really know anything about the culture yet, so her actually coming up to me and like asking for help and wanting me to help her that's, that's what you want to happen. You want the community to tell you what their needs are versus you coming up with your own ideas. So that way there's like a lot of buy in because it's kind of like, okay, well she feels this way then a lot of people feel this way as well. So, when we first started the girls club, a lot of girls like signed up. I think we had anywhere from almost like 50 girls. And I was a teacher back then, so a lot of them were my students too because they were like really excited. And the parents were super excited, the principal who was a male. Back then, he was also super excited. He was like, this is great a lot of our girls, you know are having trouble. They're getting pregnant very young and all these issues. So, this is a great project for you to encourage them. So, it was a very positive, warm reaction. There was a little bit of a pull back here and there once in a while when, obviously when we carried it on and then the boys were like well about me? You know, why it is just the girls? Like why are there scholarships for the girls and this and that. So, we always try to be, inclusive, like we would try to bring them into like our workshops that we would have and we would also have people like males, like good male role models within our organization and I mean we obviously taught them the importance of female education to the males as well because if you know if you only concentrate on females then there is no point. Like you have to empower the

men as well. And fortunately, within our organization we have a lot of very great male role models like a lot of the husbands of our staff are very supportive so we always try to use them to be a part of our workshops to try to talk to other male peers within the community so they can tell them how important it is to have their wife or their girlfriend be a part of Bosh Bosh. So, kind of like between them they can kind of spread the word.

Tatiana: So where did, like when you went, did you or were you teaching there and then how did it stem to actually designing and then making the bags?

Charlene: Yes, so I was teaching, so I was teaching high school. And then when Sis Yamah, who was a teacher that came up to me asking me for help. It was probably within, I would say she came up to me like right when I got there. Like she really wanted to work with me. And I got really excited but something that Peace Corps always that teach you was like don't jump into things that really fast, like you, you need to kind of like settle in. Obviously, this was my first time teaching ever so. You know like when I first arrived to my community because it's in a rural area even though they speak English, they don't understand serious English. That's what they call it. It's a very like pigeon like English. So, I had to get use to everyone in my community to understand what I was saying. So that in itself like takes a couple months and my primary assignment was teaching, so I wanted to actually focus on that and then later on you know kind of, once I was like immersed enough and had people trust me then start something with Sis Yamah. And she totally understood. She was like oh yeah, that's great. As long as you're interested in working with me that's fine. So I really was it until that December when we had winter break, I went to Sierra Leone, which is the neighbor the neighboring, it's like the country next door. I went to Sierra Leone with my roommate and I remember coming across this beautiful handbag. It was very colorful and full of different textiles and all that. And it really like, and I guess as a designer like I'm like, oh my God, the fabrics here are so cool they're so beautiful and in Liberia they only use them for like formal wearing or like they only use it for clothing they didn't do anything else with the fabric. And you do so much with fabric right? So, I noticed in Liberia didn't do much with, it's called Lapa. The fabric, there wasn't a lot they were doing with their Lapa but in Sierra Leone they were doing a little bit more like because I saw this beautiful handbag and I would see like pretty cool things like that was happening with Sierra Leone. So, that's where actually the inspiration came from when I saw that bag. And I thought to myself, if I'm this excited about a bag, then I'm sure there's other people in Liberia. It's not so much the local people but people there's a lot of international aid work in Liberia so there's not, there's no tourism that's not set up for that very far behind so there's a lot of N.G.O.s there. So, I was thinking more of like that. That would be our target market you know all the ex-pat foreigners that were coming in because there weren't any souvenir or you couldn't buy anything cool in Liberia which was another thing. So, I was like, well, if we actually know to teach our girls, like teach our girls how to actually make these bags and teach them tailoring, which is another big trade in Liberia, I would say in Africa in general, but in Liberia specifically. And another interesting thing is they're all tailors in Liberia. They're all males. So, there is like no females. So, when you think of like sewing, you probably think of seamstresses, a female kind of trade, but in Liberia they're all males. So that was another like kind of inspiring thing for me. That oh, wow we can teach girls a trade that they see boys and men do. So, kind of like encouraging them and then teach them that was like sustainable. Like they can sustain themselves from this trade and produce a product that was cool enough that would attract like a foreign market and then get funding from that so we can give scholarships to girls. So that was kind of like the thread of ideas I had in my head. So, I bought the bag and brought it back to my community. And then I

told Sis Yamah. I was like Sis Yamah, like look at this bag! I'm so excited! It's like amazing! Like what if we teach our girls how to make this. We could sell it to like other volunteers and they'll like it! Trust me! And she like got really excited too. She was like yeah, we should do this! Like none of us, like neither of us knew how to sew. So, I was like I don't know what, I don't know how we're going to do this because no one in my community knew how to sew either. So were like we need someone to teach us. And the, I was only like 45 minutes away from my training site where I spent my three months initially, which is a bigger town. And my family had a tailor. Like, Liberian families always go to certain tailors because, you know they're use to them. So, the tailor that I was going to during my first three months was really nice and I remember like well maybe I can ask Francis and if he's interested in coming once a week to teach our girls you know how to sew because, no one knows in our community. So, I did that, he agreed and that's how we started, really. Like we just started with him coming once a week. And then, because we had no funding, like we didn't have any money to purchase fabrics, the tactile. So, what I asked him, was to bring, to bring all his leftover like pieces of fabric from the clothing he made. So, I remember he brought like two big trash bag full of scraps.

Tatiana: Like patches?

Charlene: Yeah. Like patches and stuff. And I was like great, we can use this. And he was like so confused. Like what are we going to do with these like scraps of fabrics. So, I was like we're going to make bags. And, mind you, I knew nothing about patterns. I've never sewed. Like not even hand sewn. So, I was like, and he's never made bags before. He only knew how to do clothing but between like both of us, we kind of worked together and we figured out a pattern for a very simple like kind of over the shoulder bag. And then we made it from the scraps of, of like the big trash bag that he had. And it just came out of the patch work design. So, when we had our girls together and teaching them, because we, we first taught them how to hand sew because we didn't have machines. So that was kind of like the first lesson, like obviously to cut straight, and this and that. And so, all our bags were coming in a multi-colored fabric. So, the local people started calling it 'Bash Bash. Oh, it's a Bash Bash' and I'm like, what does that mean? And they were like, you know when you put different fabrics in together. And I'm like oh, I realized that they were intending to say, 'Patch Patch' for patchwork design. But they were just saying 'Bash Bash, Bash Bash.' But they have like, a very, you'd have to hear Liberians speak. It's really cool. It's really funny. They have like a different way of speaking. So that's where the name Bash Bash comes from. I just gave it a marketable twist and called it Bash Bash from Patch Patch because we literally started from scraps and, and then it just grew from there. I mean, our girls were making the bags by hand and then little by little we purchased a sewing machine because the other volunteers saw our bags, the products we were making and they really liked it. They were like 'oh my God. Could we like buy a bag? Like I'm going back home and I want to like give something to my sister, my mom.' Because, like there's nothing to buy in Liberia back then. So, we're like, yeah and it was like perfect because the market was totally there and very open. So, from that money we were able to buy our own things. And then we we're obviously giving scholarships to our girls so they can go to school. So, this was like, like an afterschool thing. So, that was like right when we started, back in, it was February 2012. So, now with time, it obviously like structured and now it's a local N.G.O. Our girls who we like to call scholars are the ones that we're providing scholarship, so anything that pertains to school is like covered. For example, their tuition, their school uniforms, school supplies, anything, like any exams that the school comes up with. Like you always have to pay certain things, so, we're like responsible for their school. Then after, apart from that, they also get afterschool programs. So, we set up an

entire afterschool program. And this is all with time, it's not like we just started...we kind of grew into it. And that's why I extended a year. So, I could kind of more, set up an education program to it because at first it was just our girls, you know, learning how to sew, so we could sell the products. But then once we saw that there was a demand, as soon as we saw that there was a demand, we were like oh, ok, this is a little bit more serious and we can like actually make this into more of a business and also a way to profit from this. But the profit was obviously going back to them and then the organization itself. And then we added the whole education component which was an afterschool program. So, you know, they're getting their scholarships and then they would come to us and then they would learn how to use the computer, so computer literacy. We had a literacy program for them and we built like a little library in our space. And they had to put in a certain amount of hours per week and then they had to like write a book report. And then we had monthly workshops where we would teach about HIV awareness, family planning, which is a big one. You know, how to take care of your health and all this kind of stuff. And then they were learning the trade as well. So that was kind of like the scholar program. And then we formed, obviously like as soon as we got the demand, we're not going to have our girls like working for us. You know because they're underage and all this stuff so, we wanted them to concentrate on school and just kind of benefit from learning the trade itself. So that is when we started hiring people from the community. Mainly women who were illiterate. So that was kind of our target. You know, women who didn't have the opportunity to go to school, so they didn't know how to read or write because that's what we wanted to do apart from giving them employment and training them, we wanted to teach them as well. Well, it's kind of how we see Bosh Bosh. It's a, teaching them something, like a trade. Like a cool product that's also education. So, we kind of see business and education very intertwined. So then...

Tatiana: And enjoyment.

Charlene: Exactly!

Tatiana: I think it would be fun!

Charlene: Oh no! It's completely fun. For them and for a lot of these women it's like the first time they have ever had, like a job technically. The first time they even are having a salary. So, I mean it's been, it's been amazing. And personally, because I lived there for three years. So, for me it's no like, oh it's this little town, far away village in Africa. This is like where I lived for three and a half years of my life, so I'm very connected to everyone. I know everyone very closely so I've seen their progression. For example, we have Bendusay who actually made this bag and she was the first one who started with us. Because one of the other scholars brought her during one of her classes. She was like, 'Oh, Ms. Goma,' Goma is my African name. So, no one knew me as Charlene. So that was another thing. So, I was 'Ms. Goma' because I was a teacher back then. So, our scholar, Vivian brought Bendu and she was like, 'can we have Bendu join us in some way? I know that she's not a student, but at least can she just hang out and kind of watch us or can she be like behind the sewing machine?' And I'm like yeah, of course. And I remember meeting Bendu. She was very like, very quiet, very shy. I would ask her her name and you could barely hear her, but I noticed that she was very, like she wanted to learn how to sew. And so, none of our girls were at that stage yet. We were all still hand sewing, so I could see that she was like very quick to learn on the machine. So, she started with us since the beginning. And we weren't even paying her, she just had nothing to do at home, she had two little, small children and her kids would come in and they were like dressed in rags, they weren't going to school, and they

were probably like, at the time, four and six, or like seven, so they were a little bit older. And I would ask them if they were going to school and she was like no, I don't have money to take them to school. And like her boyfriend at the, or the father of her kids, like they weren't doing too well. He was an abusive husband. The typical story, you know? So, I was like okay, at least she's doing something because at her house she was literally doing nothing. I mean she didn't have a job or anything. So, with us she was at least, you know, kind of getting out of her routine. And when the time came to actually producing a lot of the bags, when we saw the demand, we started a production team. So that's when we started employing women in the community and she was obviously the first, she was already in basically. So, we were able to offer her a position and like a salary and all of that. And, because I saw that it was a common thread that all these women, obviously they all had children, I mean, everybody has kids in Liberia and all these kids were basically not going to school so we incorporated like an added bonus I guess to work with Bosh Bosh is that you also get scholarships for your own kids so then like Bendou's 2 kids were able to go to school through us. So then with time you can see like now Bendou she is amazing. She is very outspoken. She knows more than the head tailor, the first person who came to teach us because he was the one training everyone. She kinda like almost knows more than him. He'll get a little bit upset sometimes like I'm the head tailor. How does she know more than I do? But she is a very fast learner. She like thinks of her own designs. She always, you know, is expressing her own opinions. Her little kids are now going to school so you see them in their uniforms. She is not in the abusive relationship anymore. She like left him. So, it's just be a complete transformation and that comes from when you have that confidence when you know how to make something and you are earning your own money and you don't have to depend on anyone and I think for females, especially for mothers, once you start earning an income your money is automatically invested in your own family and also in your community. And I've seen that a lot like the differences between the male and females. The males would spend it a little bit on their families but then they kind of indulge on other things. Versus females are very like my family comes first, and then like my neighbors need help or this and that. So, it's been very interesting working abroad. And then I also see it with the education part of it like when we also offer classes for all our staff and so they have night classes with us and we are teaching them how to read, how to write, how to use the computers as well so and then like small finance classes because this is their first time earning an income. We want to make sure they are actually using their money correctly. So, we teach them how to save, how to budget, and things like that. I mean very minimal things but things at least to make them realize the importance and value of money and how they can use it. And it's just been great. It's been great. All our staff is for those who were illiterate when they first came in and now like know how to read and how to write. Those women are also teaching like their neighbors and stuff so like I could literally see the like the ripple effect of how it just trickles down to not just one person and their family, it's more of like, like...

Chason: Just the whole transformation.

Charlene: Yeah, the whole transformation. So umm those are employees that get scholarships for their children. They get night classes and then we have an education team so we have, that means we have two pretty much two trained teachers working with us and then like three teacher assistants. And Sydney, she is our peace corps volunteer. So, Peace Corps gave us basically a Peace Corps volunteer. When I left, they assigned a Peace Corps volunteer to kind of replace me and have that volunteer continue working with Bosh Bosh. So, then Sydney is our education specialist and her responsibility is to train the teachers that we have, so those

teachers can educate, you know, our staff, our scholars, and stuff like that. And we also opened up a market woman program, so the market woman program is made out of the woman who umm there is around 18 women who are in the market ground. So, you know how you go to the grocery store here, over there in a small town, you would go to like an open market and directly purchase your produce from a particular lady. So, the problem in Liberia is so a lot of them, I would say like 95% of them are illiterate. It's the same story. You know they didn't go to school, and now they are a market woman and they are tied up to their stand so they can't go to school. So, what we did is we kind of brought the school to them. We made like a little class like a classroom within their open market and then we are also teaching them how to read and how to write. So, we're... yeah, we are doing a lot. It's kind of in a nutshell. We are very multifaceted organization so it's hard sometimes.

Jessica: So, you have added a lot of different components over the years it looks like, is there anything that you see improving or expanding?

Charlene: I mean definitely the education has been great. I mean our girls have been learning a lot, our market woman as well. We just started with them September last year so they already have learned so much. I mean we started with them in step 0 like how to hold a pencil you know and like do like how to write your name and this is like you know nothing and now a lot of them most of them already know how to write their name. They know the sounds and stuff like that. So, for us, those are huge improvements. So, I would say like the education for all of them like all our scholars, all our staff, have learned a lot so that's been great. Our products, we also opened 2015. Was it 2015? No 2016, February. So, last year we opened our first store in the capital. We call it the Bosh Bosh boutique. Umm because there was a demand for our products we wanted to kind of have our own space in the capital, cause the capital which is Monrovia where we sell the most and we are only like two hours away or so. So, then we bring in all of our products. We supply our boutique and then we have two people working in the boutique. One of them, our sales associate, was one of our scholars that graduated last year. So, she wanted to live in Monrovia so we offered her a position. And that's what we have been doing. We offer them positions within like whether it's with the production team or management team or education team because we are not at the point in which we can give them scholarships to go to universities because that's pretty expensive. We at least figure out like if your plan is to go to a university then this is what we can do for now. So that has been going well. We are trying to export our products to here to the US because they sell like much more over here than there. Some products are like very different here you know. It's like they are all very colorful and stuff like that. So that's been challenging though because Liberia especially is not set up for exporting. Nothing is really being made, so that's been our biggest challenge at the moment; trying to get the products out in a sustainable way and priced correctly.

Tatiana: How often do you go back?

Charlene: Umm every four to six months and I'm there for about 6 weeks at a time so like a month and a half on the ground at a time. So, I left... so we all go evacuated during Ebola so in 2014. And I only had a week left. I was basically done with my service but they all evacuated us so there was like a year basically where I did not go back because we couldn't or I wasn't going to go back because it was pretty dangerous so umm they kept it up on their own which was good. And then once that year was kind of over and I knew it was safe to go back there and umm we hired like a program manager like a volunteer program manager to work with them so I went

there to go train her, obviously introduce her to the community and all that and then Peace Corps also helped us with a volunteer so then every six months, 4 to six months I have been going back. And that's another thing, you need to be there. Like I feel like I get a lot of people asking me, people wanting to do like social enterprises or like work abroad, start something abroad specifically with like training women and how to make products and I always ask, "are you planning to go live there or like what's your plan?" and I would say like maybe half of them would say like, "yeah I totally want to live there" and then half of them are like, "No I just kind of want to do it from here" and I'm like very honest. I think that the reason we have been successful as far as because I lived there for three and a half years. I had a lot of community buy-in like people knew me. I knew them you know. I know like the people who are there now running it are very trustworthy. It's very hard and it's very challenging to do it from like if I am from here and I want to start something in Liberia when like I don't even know what the culture is like or anything like that. It just takes a long time to start something. It's still... I mean, I'm not even saying we are there at all. I mean there are always challenges everyday but it just takes a long time like many, many years.

Chason: And living in Liberia, how did you transform as a person like living there? Are there any like specific things you noticed?

Charlene: Yeah, definitely. Umm I learned how to be more patient. Patience is the first thing that you learn like while living abroad and in a developing country, especially in a country like Liberia because everything just takes longer. It's a completely different world I would say like things run accordingly here like we have electricity. We have running water. We have all these amenities. You don't have anything over there so like if you wanted to go to the bank and withdraw money like we didn't even have a bank there first of all. I had to travel 45 minutes to the town that I was training in before and go to the bank. That was like an all day adventure because like from getting there to running in the bank and sometimes you would have to wait in line for like an hour and a half and the teller would be like, "Sorry, we just ran out of money" and you have to go back. Or "Sorry, the system is down" so you always have a plan and it just never works out so you just have to... I've learned to just think out of the box and to just kind of work with what you have. You really do have to work with what you have because again you can have a plan and then it just kind of doesn't work out so you have to be like, "okay". And you have to be positive too. That goes back to being patient. It's just the way it is and you just have to kind of accept it and be like, "well okay this is just another way I can do this" or you know I can do this other thing and not get upset. Not take things to heart.

Chason: Yeah

Charlene: Because you wouldn't be able to make it, I would say, in a place like that. And then also like I have... I think I came out of there just being more appreciative towards just life in general I think. Liberia has a very interesting history but I mean you only see the war, the 16-year civil war that basically destroyed everything, their entire infrastructure, and like everyone has a story. Like very heavy stories where I'm like, "I can't believe you are actually sitting here in front of me and like smiling and being so nice and welcoming." They live through things we couldn't even imagine. I remember that our head tailor was born in Semeron, and kind of grew up in Liberia, which he experienced both wars, which is like double tragic. But he would say that he would get kidnapped from his village and he was recruited from the army there and he managed to escape somehow and he said he saw some terrible things. It was very common for the rebels

where if they saw a pregnant woman they would make bets and they would grab her and slice her belly open and see if it's a boy or a girl. Like I win. Very intense things like that where it's like what we can do things like that as human beings. You kind of see that in the movies.

Tatiana: But you can't even fathom.

Charlene: And to have someone tell you the stories, you live through that its very intense. And they're very positive people so I think that kind of puts things into perspective where problems that would have here where I hate doing this. Where small problems don't compare at all to their problems. So, it always puts things into perspective. So, if I'm having a challenging day here well there's been worst days for other people, around the world, not just Liberia. So, I think I've learned to be very appreciative for the simple things like electricity or water. I mean that's a huge thing. And I learned to live without electricity and water for three and a half years. And I think the most interesting part of it is that you learn to adapt to it very fast. Sometime I would forget that's something I even had back home. And it was nice in a way because you kind of unplug from everything that's going on. I didn't have a smart phone over there anyways, here you you get in a habit of checking your phone and like you're so connected to the point where you forget everything that's going on around you. And over there you're are connected to everything around you because you don't anything that's distracting. So that to me was really cool. So, every time I got there I try to disconnect. Cause I will bring my smart phone cause I still have to be connected but I do let it go because it is nice to let go and live the simple life. Yeah.

Tatiana: So, you were invited to the white house last year for the Let Girls Learn initiative?

Charlene: So, it was 2015.

Tatiana: Ok yes so what was that like?

Charlene: Oh, that was definitely the most surreal day of my life. I would have to say. So i got invited by the white house through the peace core. And the reason I was recommended by peace core was because Obamas initiative let girls learn was focused on obviously girls' education and empowering girls in developing countries. So, they wanted to have a former peace core volunteer to kick off the launch and representing the cause and introducing the Obamas, one because they were working with peace core, and two because it was with someone that was actually doing it. So again peace core has been very supportive and I've had a really good connection with peace core. Even after being a volunteer and doing my time as a volunteer. Like a lot of people at headquarters knew about Bosh Bosh, because I don't know it just got very popular and the director at the time she went and visited my site when I first started so me and director have a very close relationship. So, she's always been in tune of how Bosh Bosh has grown and they have written articles and stuff like that. So, they knew that Bosh Bosh was doing well and I was working with them even after the peace core. They just thought Charlene could be the one representing them. So, I remember they called me on a Wednesday, the event was Tuesday, so they called me on a Wednesday and said hey Charlene we were wondering if you could come in on Tuesday and introduce the president for one of the launches they had. And I'm like yeah I can clear my schedule for that. Obviously so they literally flew me down that Friday because I was going to San Francisco that weekend. And they're like no we can fly you in from San Francisco. And I'm like ok great. It was really fast, I had to write a speech and work with a speech writer. Had to approved by the white house and all these formalities. So, like me and thinking I had to

introduce him didn't really hit till the night before because everything was moving really fast. And then I rehearsed my speech I don't know how many times. I was able to bring my mom, so she was the one listening to my speech over and over. So, I don't think I slept the night before because I couldn't believe this was about to happen. So, excited. And then when it happened I was just really happy to be there and honored obviously because I was representing peace core, Liberia, Bosh Bosh. And it was during a time when Liberia was view very negatively because of Ebola so that was an added component so it was nice to add some positive light on Liberia and talk about something good that's happening. So yeah it was an amazing experience. I got to talk with Barrack and Michelle before, was hanging out with them before, they are like totally cool. Very easy to talk to. Barrack was cracking jokes. Oh, my god I couldn't believe it was happening. They're so easy to talk to, they're so nice. And I remember the lady that was running the show, it was the president, first lady, her, and myself, in the green room or the red room, I can't remember the rooms. But she was like ok you know when you go out to give your speech there's a podium just remember to kick the step back in for the president because he's coming after you. So, she's like but I know you got a lot of things in your head right now so don't worry about it. I just kind of wanted to let you know. Barrack Obamas like she's got it she's got it she's totally fine she can remember. And I was going like this, I totally got it and I just left like that and I'm like wait did I just say that to the president of the united states. And I remember like giving my speech, and then finally finishing, and I kicked the little step back in, and he saw that and he's like wow good job. He hugged me and I'm melting. And like oh my god and can't believe this is happening. It was an amazing experience overall.

Blake: That's really cool.

Charlene: Yeah it was really cool. And I do remember and this has always stuck with me, again before giving the speech like there was a group of us getting ready to take the group photo, like the formal picture with the president and the first lady, all the partners that were partnering with the initiative, and there was this producer of Girl Rising, it's like a big film, and she came up to and she's like uh kind of out there. And randomly popped up and came up to me while I was waiting in line and she's like you know what the best thing about this is that your purpose wasn't to be here at the white house to introduce the president, your purpose was to give those girls back in Liberia a voice and that it that's your purpose. Like the beginning and part of the journey that you have. And that kind of like, it was awesome cause it was so true. I mean my purpose wasn't to be at the white house and it was a great added bonus to the journey I guess but it puts things into perspective in a way where you always have to be grounded of what your mission, of what you're really doing. Like there's a lot of days that are really challenging, that's really hard. Like why didn't I go to a career that creative or lucrative or that makes money, it's easier. I kind of go back to that moment where I'm like well you know Bendou is no longer in an abusive relationship, she's knows how to read and write, her kids are going to school. I have a thousand, a ton of stories from all my members that have affective positively and it kind of gives me a sense of purpose. That's totally worth all the challenges that I face here which is nothing in the broader picture. So, it's just really cool to be able to do your part and give them a voice.

Blake: I actually think were a little passed time right now, thank you for sharing your experiences and your journey with us I mean it sounds incredible.

Charlene: Thank you