

If you could just tell us a little bit about yourself, what you do?

Sure. Just in general? Alright, well, my name's Ashley Young, and I'm the Assistant City Manager for the city of Kirksville, and I came here in 2002 to attend Truman State University as an undergraduate, graduated in 2007 with degrees in Anthropology and History. And then just went to work right away in the community and eventually about three and a half years ago, in February of 2014, made my way to city hall and became Assistant City Manager. And, so, that's me in a nutshell, in terms of me as a professional.

So then, how do you interact with the Congolese community?

Well, you know, I'm trying to think back to my first real interactions. It probably would have been through Rebecca [REDACTED], who a lot of folks know who are familiar with this population in general, and she visited my office, we had a series of conversations, and you know, one things just leads to another. Part of what I do as Assistant City Manager, to kind of take a step back is economic and community development, and currently Parks and Recreation, even though that's going to change in a few weeks when we have our new Parks and Rec director on board, and public information as well, so as part of community development obviously working with immigrant populations, assisting their integration into the wider community is important, so it's always something I've been interested in, given my background in Anthropology as well. And so one thing led to another, and the meeting that we held the other night was really something that I wanted to do for months if not a few years and unfortunately it's just kind of been a backburner thing, you know that other emergent projects and emergencies, quite literally, you know, took precedent, but we finally got some traction, finally it moved forward with these meetings so I'm looking forward to that. But in any case, to answer your question, I think that Rebecca would have been my first interaction with anyone from that community, and it's just grown from there. So, and it's in many many different ways, whether it's you know, just discussing different community events, how to get more involved, or it's working with local electric utility, and when it comes to translation, and all sorts of different ways, because they *live here*. That's obvious, right? But sometimes I think it's worth stating that they live here. *This is their home now*. That means that everything they do is some opportunity I think for the community to not only interact with them, but learn from them. And it's also an opportunity for them to learn as well and through that process integrate with the entire community, so you know, there isn't just one area to which we interact with our recent immigrants, right? It's everything that makes up your life as a resident of Kirksville so it is a part of that interaction.

So, as a community leader, you...

I don't know if I'd go so far as to say a community leader [laughter] that sounds really important.

But your job actually entails, in essence, more interaction with that community. Do you think in general, with the general population of Kirksville, how often would

you say would they interact with the Congolese, I guess what is the extent of integration?

Well, it's hard to say because Kirksville is not really a homogenous community, even before, you know, we had a recent immigrant populations. And so I think one's interaction with folks from Central Africa really depends you know, on what kind of organizations you're involved in in the community, what is your profession, and really, how involved, and out-there you choose to be. It's pretty easy for folks, you know if they want to, they can just go to work, do their job, come back home, not really get involved in anything else, you know if there job doesn't have an opportunity, doesn't afford them to interact with these folks, they may never interact with them at all. They may see them at the grocery store, at the gas station or something, but other than that, that's about it. So really, it's highly variable, it depends on what they do, what they're involved in, so it's hard to say. I don't mean to be evasive, it's just hard to pin that down.

And especially you can't, you obviously haven't gone around and polled everyone to see how...

Well no. [laughter]

So yeah, I'm just kind of asking what you think.

That's another area where we, it would be very beneficial if we had real data, you know, polling data, on a whole range of topics or subjects. And maybe that's something that we could work better with Truman on in terms of utilizing student organizations and student groups and classes to get that kind of data that in the here and now, no, we don't have any kind of data on that. But if you know anybody, that'd be great.

Right [laughter] I guess, one of my questions, is well, like, why do you think, what are some pull-factors that bring people into Kirksville? And what are some factors that might push them away?

Well the number one pull is jobs, I mean, whether it's for Farmland, or now Kraft-Heinz, they need to work, and they *want* to work, and earn a living, and I think pursue their version of the American dream. And it's hard to do that without employment. And so we're fortunate here in Kirksville that we're growing, we're in the middle of kind of an economic boom, in an expansion of our industrial base and then obviously our retail site as well and so people are able to come here and take advantage of these opportunities... and so, I think it's really a pretty straightforward answer. There are a lot of other contributing factors, right. There are people that they have connected with in the community that have better enabled that transition and further integration and then you know once you have kind of a population set up they're also trying to help folks get over here as well from Central Africa as opposed to other communities in the United States and so once it gets started, it has the potential to grow, and obviously that is part

of it as well. But at the end of the day, they're here because they're trying to find work, and hopefully, create a better future for themselves.

So what do you think are the main obstacles that the Congolese community here faces? I know you mentioned in that town hall meeting, language barrier is a really big thing.

Right, I mean number one is the language barrier. Right, and really, that's the number one, most significant obstacle that exists. Beyond that, sure there's some cultural differences, but you know, there's cultural differences you know, within all kinds of populations within the United States, and so that's not really new. Really, the language barrier is the most significant challenge they face. That's why the ELL, the ESL classes are so important, that's why the city has partnered with different entities in town to Kirksville Economic Regional Development to K-Ready to make sure that the Kirksville Technical Center could continue to offer their ELL classes 9:35 which have a total of over 50 participants, not all at once, not in one class, but the overall program, so we believe in the importance of that not only so that we can have a strong workforce but so that they can better integrate into the communities and remove those obstacles. So yea, that's absolutely the biggest obstacle.

And that was another thing I kind of noticed around the town hall meeting was the importance of those classes, even just as like, it seemed to tie everything together, like as a vehicle for like, not only just as a way to kind of transmit these new cultural norms, but just kind of, even simple things like driving signs and that stuff, so?

Right, right. Yeah, I think just through that meeting we realized that as you said, we realized that they could be the vehicle through which we not only have the opportunity to teach them English, but also to teach them some sorts of rules and laws and cultural norms, and you know all sorts of things. It's all part of that process of [indistinguishable].

So do you have hopes for the Congolese community? How can these communities work together?

Well, I think our hopes for the Congolese community are the hopes we have for the entire community. We want them to continue to grow, to be successful, and to have a better quality of life for all of our residents, and that entails a whole lot of things, right, from great recreation and public spaces to thriving businesses to job opportunities to an excellent education system K through 12 through college through graduate school through AT Still University and Missouri School of Oral and Dental Health, so Kirksville's one of those places where you can start from Pre-K through you know you're doctorate and never leave town. That doesn't happen a lot, but there are people who have done that. And that's pretty incredible. And so our hopes and dreams for the Congolese are the same that we have for every resident in Kirksville. So as we discussed,

they have more challenges to overcome I think in achieving those goals and reaching those dreams and so we want to try and aid that process and help them do that.

Well, is there any? I don't have any more questions, do you have anymore questions? / I guess, when it comes to, you know negotiating these two very different cultures, have you seen a noticeable impact, like you know, Congolese on Kirksville, or Kirksville on Congolese?

Oh, absolutely. Obviously, before we had a population from Central Africa, we didn't have two African food businesses, or African businesses in the downtown, right, I mean we're talking about potentially next year having some kind of African cultural festival that you know they're putting together as well. Obviously, that didn't exist you know before that. Even in our parades, in our 4th of July parade and other parades that we hold, different groups, I think it was actually both of the churches added floats in the parade, obviously that's never, something that we never had before, and so it's exciting. It adds real diversity and excitement and you know, it just adds something more to the Kirksville community as we continue to grow and evolve, I think it's fascinating and it's wonderful and I think it makes Kirksville more interesting and more attractive place, I really do. Because especially as we, that's important to the city. Right, you know, we're talking about economic and community development. You want to grow, you want to attract new people to Kirksville. That's not only immigrants, right, but it's folks who live in the United States, who were born in the United States, you know already as well. And the more vibrant of a downtown you have, the more cultural amenities that you have the more entertainment you have, you know, all that sort of thing, you know the more attractive we are to our generations, the Millennials, the more successful you're going to be in the future. You know, in 10 years, our generation's going to make up more than 75% of the workforce, so we better be attractive to people like us in terms of as a city, or else we won't have anyone here. And that would be a problem, obviously. [laughter]

I'd say so.

For the continued growth and success of the city. I think it's all part of it. And that's great.

I wish, cause, obviously I'm only here for part of the year, and I was talking to someone else in one of the other interviews and they were saying how Truman in a way is kind of like its own entity.

It is, unfortunately. I experienced that as a student as well. Absolutely.

And so I'm glad we're able to talk to people like you who have had, obviously I've never been here for the 4th of July.

Oh sure, absolutely. You know, that's a constantly challenge. The whole town versus the college dynamic. And you know, we're not unique in that respect, we're not the only town in the United

States that grapples with this, but it's perhaps more pronounced here than in other college towns, and you know, it's something that we continue to work to overcome. And it's a challenge, but we can.

I don't think I have anymore questions. Do you have anything that you want to add on?

Oh, did you have another question?

That was my question.

Okay, not that I can think of, but I do appreciate what you're doing. I appreciate your project, I appreciate getting involved in getting folks together and connected and further integrated with each other so that we can assist the integration of the Central African community here in Kirksville as well. It's really important. I'm glad it's finally taking off. I'm glad that we're finally getting all of these people together, and I have a meeting just this Friday with Megan [REDACTED] from United Speakers so we can continue working to, you're invited to come to the meeting on Friday as well. What we'll be doing is we'll be putting together an agenda, a tentative agenda for the next meeting, which is tentatively scheduled for the evening of Thursday, November 30, so hopefully, obviously you're invited to that along with a whole group of other people, more than what we just had, you know at the last meeting, and hopefully we can continue moving forward and making big progress in the coming months.

I think that's really just this goal with this project, is kind of like not only trying to integrate from the inside but we call it like "outward facing research" is like the buzzword of the semester [laughter] but um just kind of getting it out there on our website on our blog not only for present time but so that people in the future can use that as a resource to see what was going on. Thank you so much!