



# Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

## Official Transcript: Ololade Benson (Part 7 of 9)



<b>Role:</b>	Translator
<b>Country of Origin:</b>	Nigeria
<b>Interview Date:</b>	23 October 2008
<b>Location:</b>	Arusha, Tanzania
<b>Interviewers:</b>	Donald J Horowitz Robert Utter
<b>Videographer:</b>	Nell Carden Grey
<b>Interpreter:</b>	None

### Interview Summary

Ololade Benson speaks about her role as a translator and the challenges of communicating sensitive material such as witness statements concerning rapes and killings. She discusses her personal engagement with an international non-profit organization that she founded in 1998 to help single mothers, widows and children in Rwanda. She emphasizes the importance of transparency and accountability for charitable organizations operating in post-conflict settings. Benson draws attention to the targeting and suffering of women in Rwanda during and after the genocide.

*The transcript of Part 7 begins on the following page.*

## Part 7

- 00:00** Robert Utter: Let me introduce myself. I'm Robert Utter, U-T-T-E-R. I'm here with the project that Judge Horowitz is with as well and my background is somewhat similar to my friend Judge Horowitz. I was an attorney, a law clerk, law graduate from the University of Washington and a prosecuting attorney, and then became a judge quite young at age 28.
- 00:26 Wow, wow.
- 00:26** RU: And began working with children for five years at a (\_\_\_\_) court and which is part of our (\_\_\_\_) court in Seattle. After that I was a trial court judge for five years, and Court of Appeals for two years, and then on the Supreme Court of our state for 24 . . .
- 00:45 Wow.
- 00:45** RU: . . . where I'd served as Chief Justice for a while. I think most importantly, I was involved in a great deal of work with children with the YMCA, with starting a program called The Big Brother Program in Seattle with friends of mine, where men work with fatherless boys.
- 01:05 Okay. Yeah, that's nice, good. Okay.
- 01:05** RU: It provided identification for them and I'm pretty much available for any good cause that comes along. I think that . . .
- 01:14 That's good to know.
- 01:15** RU: . . . word is out. I, I admire you so much and listening to what you've done . . .
- 01:20 Thank you so much.
- 01:19** RU: . . . that I want to ask first of all about your family. You have two boys. How old are they?
- 01:23 Yeah, I have two boys. The first one is 23 and the second one is 20. (\_\_\_\_) . . .
- 01:29** RU: What are they doing now?
- 01:30 The first one is, he's studying media and advertising and the younger one is in law school.
- 01:39** RU: But they were still in their teens when you took your job post, weren't they?
- 01:42 Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 01:44** RU: And where did you find the energy to do that and take care of teenage boys? That's not an easy job.

- 01:49 You know when you have a passion for something you always find time.
- 01:52 RU: Yes.**
- 01:53 Yeah. You always find time.
- 01:54 RU: You apparently did a good job in the parenthood part, looking at what they're doing now.**
- 01:58 Yeah, thank you.
- 02:00 RU: Tell me about your faith. Has that been part of your concern for others?**
- 02:06 I think so, and also partly because of the way I was brought up. I was brought up to sh-, if you have, you have to learn to give. That's the way I was brought up. And it's also the, the issue of the faith, as well. I believe in sharing whatever I have.
- 02:20 RU: And did that come from your parents, (\_\_\_\_\_)?**
- 02:22 Yeah, from my parents, from my mother in particular. She's from a – I'm from a very, very strong Christian background as well. I remember my mother used to drop us off at Sunday school as far back as I'm, as far back as when I was maybe four, five years old. We'd just go out there and sing and I realized that some of those things they're just etched in the, in, in my memory.
- 02:43 They're things I don't, I've never forgotten.
- 02:45 RU: Yes.**
- 02:46 And sometimes when I do, like the new-, the current newsletter now I have songs which I learned when I was in primary school and the guy who proofread the letter was like, "I cannot believe you remember these songs." I said, "I do, they're there."
- 02:58 RU: Well, you and my wife are very similar. My background was somewhat similar as was Judge Horowitz. We all are people who've had faith that has been . . .**
- 03:07 Yeah. Okay, yeah.
- 03:08 RU: . . . shown us by our parents. (\_\_\_\_) very fortunate. What do you find is the most satisfying part of your work?**
- 03:17 Just when I see the smile on people's faces just gives me a lot of joy and I reali-, I, it makes me feel that I'm, I'm doing something good, you know.
- 03:30 RU: In listening to your discussion with Judge Horowitz, I heard you mentioned following up.**

03:36 Yeah.

**03:36 RU: Do you have a regular process for that?**

03:37 Yeah. Yeah, I get, (\_\_\_), one of, that's one of the reasons why I do the month, monthly newsletter, for me follow up – first of all, when I start something I have to follow through. I don't like to start – like in, in Rwanda for example, you can't put a child in school. The child is in maybe second or third grade and then you abandon the child, so for me you have to follow through.

03:58 And that's one of the reasons why I don't bite off more than I can chew. I could have 50, 40, 80 families but I won't do that. I just stick to the number of people I think I can cater for properly. And I'm able to follow up. It's ver-, for me, it's very, very important.

**04:15 RU: I'm glad to hear that. One of my great concerns in being involved in social work with children and families is that you should not give the anticipation that you will do more than you actually can.**

04:26 Yeah, no, no.

**04:28 RU: The greatest harm you can do is get into someone's life . . .**

04:30 Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's, yeah . . .

**04:31 RU: . . . and then step out when they're depending on you. But that puts a great deal of burden on you to organize . . .**

04:37 It does.

**04:38 RU: . . . not just properly but to find others to help. Because another concern of mine is for your health. And when you're driven by this concern for others and, and a passion for it which I sense on your part, how do you take care of yourself?**

04:54 I think I try to, I think I try to strike a balance. I get people – I'm able to mobilize people. Like when I was in, when I did the course in June, one – the, (\_\_\_), they, people were, people came from different parts of Africa and they were here for a month. And I was able to mobilize the entire classroom on one of our food distribution days. And I have that in the newsletter.

05:16 It was that newsletter that somebody read and just came and gave me a hundred dollars, you know. I found out because there was a doctor, there were nurses and I took them all to the, on food distribution day and they were able to – the nurse was able to talk to the nursing mothers. The doctor was able to talk to the (\_\_\_). I'll send you a copy of the newsletter.

- 05:32 So I'm able to do that. I'm able to mobilize people. I use my guard as well. He buys the foodstuff. I'm able to delegate, you know.
- 05:39 RU: You use your what? I'm sorry, I didn't . . .**
- 05:41 I'm able to delegate assignments, you know. I know that I cannot do everything so if I feel that you are good in an area, in an area, I help, I make you do, I make you do something for me.
- 05:50 RU: You appear to be in good physical health.**
- 05:52 Yeah.
- 05:53 RU: But how do you maintain that with all the schedule of yours?**
- 05:56 I, I, I exercise, I'm a very, very energetic person. I'm a – people call me hyper; very restless. I can't sit. I cannot sit and not do anything. If I have to go to the salon, I have to have something I'm reading. I'm, I'm, I'm either drafting a newsletter or proofreading something.
- 06:12 I mean that's the way I was brought up. My mother says, "Time never comes back. Time waits for no man." So if you have time, make sure you make good use of it. Once it's gone, it's gone.
- 06:22 RU: There's a marvelous line from Shakespeare, "I wasted time and now time wastes me."**
- 06:27 Wow, that I didn't know. Okay.
- 06:29 RU: He's saying the same thing you did.**
- 06:30 Yeah, time it's – once it goes, it goes. And I'm also very, very – I'm a stickler for time. I'm known for that as well, you know. I tell the people you come at nine. So by ten, ten thirty, eleven if we're not having a meeting I've done the distribution and I'm, I'm, I'm on my way back home, you know.
- 06:47 RU: What's the most difficult part of your ministry?**
- 06:50 It's the inability to communicate with the people. That breaks my heart because I have to work through an interpreter, most times. Most of them – here it's Swahili. They don't speak English. In Rwanda it was Kinyarwanda. Sometimes you want to speak like – the lady I bought the cow for, she was raped and she really wanted to share what she was going through with me.

- 07:12 And she was raped and I think two or three of her children were killed. Her husband too was killed and you know, there's a lot of suspicion. Somebody wants to interpret and she wants to know if that person is a Hutu or that person is a Tutsi. She doesn't know if the, the message is being conveyed properly. So, you know I'm not, I'm, I'm not able to communicate with them and that's a problem.
- 07:33 I have a, my, the newest patient I have here, I think she's Somalian. She's in her late 50s and she finds it difficult to communicate with me because she doesn't want anybody, you know. When you're talking about HIV, AIDS and sex, it's very, very private and very, very personal. People don't want somebody – they don't want to discuss what is happening in their lives.
- 07:52 They don't want to go through an interpreter. And I would really love to touch their feelings and I'm unable to do that because I cannot speak directly with them. That's one of the things that really hurts me. I'm unable to talk to them.
- 08:06 RU: Are you studying some of these other languages?**
- 08:08 I'm, I, in Kinyarwanda, not really. I, I, I, when I came here I didn't realize that I was going to be here for this long. The first time I came they gave me a one-year contract and I got a tiny bit like this. And I've been here since '96. And then I keep telling myself "I'm going next year." I want to go and work with women and children on a permanent basis.
- 08:27 Then when I look at the stability, I have to think about my children as well, you know. There's some sta-, duties, places you work for in the UN that the families are not allowed to go visit you. And when I first got to Rwanda, for example, it wasn't a family duty station. A family wasn't allowed to visit you. So I think about all of that.
- 08:43 But I'm almost there. Once they finish school now, then I'll be able to move around as much as I want.
- 08:48 RU: You mentioned finishing school. What . . . ?**
- 08:50 University.
- 08:51 RU: Oh, and you're doing that as well as your current job?**
- 08:55 Sorry, I didn't get you.
- 08:55 RU: You're attending the university as well as your current job?**
- 08:58 No, my children. I mean when my children finish school then I'll have more leeway to move around but right now, that's one of the reasons. The job security for me is very important because of the children, you know, so . . .

**09:09**      **RU: And you anticipate this will end the end of this year?**

09:13      This year, next year, especially if the first one graduates then I'll be fine. He'll be able to take care of his younger brother as well. Then I'll be able to move around, yeah.