

*The* INTERVIEW

THE HONORABLE  
**Cynthia L. Blandford**  
HONORARY CONSUL REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA-GEORGIA



*Memories:*

**“My Heart Beats for Africa -  
How a Love for the Motherland Lead me to a Life of Purpose”**

Interview by: Val Thompson

**First, tell us about yourself and provide us a sneak-peak into your memoirs “My Heart Beats for Africa - How a Love for the Motherland Lead me to a Life of Purpose” - How your story began and walk us through your background.**

A few years ago, I made a decision to write my memoirs and to share my unique journey as the first African-American women to serve as the Honorary Consul Republic of Liberia as the Republic celebrates 173 years as the first Independent Nation on the Continent of Africa. I am honored to be able to share some excerpts of my memoirs with iF Magazine and its reading audience and hope that you will enjoy my journey from Public Housing to Public Diplomacy.

“My Heart Beats for Africa - How a Love for the Motherland Lead me to a Life of Purpose”— tells a simple story about a little, brown-skinned girl, who was born in the Jones Court Housing projects in Elmira, New York and who grew up in small town Ithaca, New York. Born Cynthia Lynn Blandford, better known by her friends and family as Cindy, a curious, green-eyed, curly head girl, was raised by a single mom to be bold and courageous. She was encouraged, inspired, and prompted by her mother and the community to think big, give service and to make an impact on the world. Today, as a woman on the global stage where I am celebrating over 47 years of my life, love and learning the Continent of Africa, I felt compelled to share my own personal journey with others. My hope is that I could inspire other young girls and boys of color in particular, and young women all over the world, to consider becoming future Diplo-



omats, Ambassadors, Consul Generals, or Honorary Consuls or to pursue the field of diplomacy or international affairs in their college studies. My life as an Honorary Consul has been transformative and for those interested in this field of study, they should pursue it with vigor so that one day they might have a prominent seat at the global table to help shape the course of history, make an impact and to serve others.

As a young girl, I imagined a life



In front of our apartment at Jones Court Public Housing Project with my sister Ardy on the left, my brother Keith in the middle (deceased) and me on the right along with neighborhood kids.



where I would be on the international stage, enriched, enlightened, and exposed to a whole new world with Heads of State, Queen Mothers, commerce and trade, educational experiences, history, culture and incredible people and places that would shape my thinking for a lifetime. I hoped that my story could be a spark, an enlightenment, or an amazing journey for some little boy or girl – just like it was for me!

My story began in the Jones Court Public Housing projects, located in Elmira, New York. I was the daughter of a neighborhood Community Center Secretary and High-School basketball player, where my parents fell in love and married at a very early age. The young love only lasted a few years and my mom then moved to Ithaca, New York, with three small children to begin a new life. Ardella Eunice Blandford, my mom, smart, beautiful and with an infectious per-

sonality, who only had a High School diploma yet, moved up the career ladder at Cornell University where she worked as a Manager in the Personnel Department and then became the first African-American woman to serve on the Cornell University Board of Trustees. She then went on to work at IBM in North, Carolina, where she also left her footprint.

My Mom, Ms. Ardella, or mommy, as I sometimes affectionately called her, taught us to be fearless, courageous, and to respect one another. She instilled in us Christian morals and values telling us and showing us that we could be anything we wanted to be. She was a diplomat in her own right! For example, when neighborhood kids would call us the “N” word, she would call a meeting in our front yard on Judd Falls Road in Ithaca and ask all the little white kids to come around and sit with her. She would teach them why

it was wrong to call hurtful names. She was matter-of-fact in her speech, yet diplomatic with her words. She told these kids to stop being ugly to her children and then after hearing her speech, they all scattered, running back to their homes snickering along the way. Little did I know then that these types of experiences Mom facilitated and negotiated in small town USA and later as a role model in the greater Ithaca and Cornell community, would have such a deep and lasting impression on my life. In my view and as small as this might seem to some, I believe her spirit, unique skill and savoir faire was preparing me for a life of purpose with an aim towards a life of diplomacy and service!

So, as a young country girl growing up in Ithaca, I had the audacity to think I could change the world and that I could be anyone, anything, because Mommy, Ms. Ardella, said I



could. With love and the prayers of my ancestors, I was being armored with strength and confidence and a desire to do great things! There was no stopping me!

### **Tell us how Cornell University influenced your life on your journey toward your diplomatic post?**

In addition to the love and home values I received on the home front, and my conviction to help change the world, it was also my learning environment that would expose and shape me at a very early age. Issues like world hunger and poverty, intellectualism, African inventors, women leaders, political movements, and scholars and so much more influenced my way of thinking. In particular my experiences and exposure at Cornell's Africana Studies Center in Ithaca, the first center of its type in America - a think tank - a laboratory of ideas, where black thought leaders would debate and discuss for hours. This powerful and unique experience I found intriguing, which would ultimately change the course of my life forever.

As my mother worked at Cornell and we lived not too far from the campus, by the age of 14, I was influenced and inspired by Africans and Pan-Africanists studying and teaching at the Africana Studies Center where I heard Xhosa, Swahili, and other African languages. I experienced African food, culture, fashion, and art, read African history, and developed an appreciation and fascination for Africans and for the Continent of Africa as a whole.

I was an inquisitive young girl and found myself yearning to learn more about these intellectuals, sitting in classrooms, hanging around the Africana Studies Center's student lounge and wandering about the campus seeking something new and exciting. I knew I was a bit different, and I also knew that there had to be more to my brown skin and curly hair that was unique and special that the world did not want me to know. As I had only been taught about slavery in middle and high school and seen Tarzan & Jane movies, I was soon to discover that the African-American was so much more than our slavey history.

While I later learned that Thomas Blandford was the slave owner of the Blandford family, I realized that I was much more than my slave name. I wanted to know about my African roots, as it was clear by the lightness of my skin and my green eyes, I had white blood running through my veins. Yet, who was I as an African?

In my readings and listening to esteemed black scholars in lecture halls and small meetings in a Black dorm called Ujamaa on Cornell's campus, I was soon to learn that black people had a rich history. We were descendants of Queen Mothers, Zoes, Afri-

can Kings and Tribal Chiefs and even African Presidents. We were taught in public school that Africa was the dark Continent, when in fact it was the Continent of the future! The bright Continent of hope and possibilities.

Our ancestors were businessmen and women holding vast acres of land. They were involved in commerce and trade. African leaders and many others in society were educated and not ignorant monkeys with tails between their legs, as I had heard spoken about at the water fountain in middle school. I had once been confronted by a white boy in my classroom one day asking me where my tail was. How ironic that 35 years later that this same little white boy named Billy, who was now a grown man, came to me at a class reunion at Ithaca High School and apologized to me and said that he was ignorant for saying such hurtful words. As a father, he told me that he was raising his daughters to respect diversity and different races and colors. He sheepishly said that he was ashamed of how he treated me back in the day. He asked for my forgiveness, and I forgave him.

While I learned that Africa was rich in natural resources, gold, diamonds, rubber, fish, etc., there was a contradiction that I would soon have to face regarding the iniquities on the Continent. There was also poverty and despair, wars and civil conflict, and Africans guilty of selling their own men, women, and children into slavery, all for greed. With all that said, there was still a calling, a constant whisper in my ear. Yes, there was something else that I wanted to know and see, and God was leading me onward to the Motherland.

## How did the Ithaca Rotary Club impact your life choices?

By the time I was 16, I began to observe what these powerful African and Pan-African men and women at the Africana Studies Center had achieved through their leadership roles in places like the United Nations and the African Union, diplomatic posts at Embassies, various Commissions on Women and Youth, Fulbright Fellowships, and international exchanges, and I wanted to have this experience too. I had a deep desire to see the world and all that it had to offer. Yet, I was just a country girl from Ithaca, New York. A Project child from Elmira, New York, who would have the audacity to even have such a thought! Even with all of Africa's promise and contradictions, my heart was beating for Africa!

Little did I know at the time, God had already placed a passion for Africa in my life! So as my journey began and with the prayers of my ancestors, my Mom, and family, I was being prepared for a life of service, and global leadership in complex places and spaces.

At the age of 17, when the Rotary Club of Ithaca called for Youth Ambassador Scholars, I knew this was my one chance to see the world and to go in search of my African roots. So, in 1974, after I graduated from Ithaca High School, bags packed, Yellow Fever shot in my arm and Malaria pills prescribed and taken, my family drove me to Toronto, Canada where I hopped on a Pam Am flight and said good-bye to my family and headed to Liberia, West Africa to begin my one-year experience. To begin a journey of a lifetime.

After 24-hours of traveling, on a



My mom, sister, brother, and grandmother giving me a send-off to the Motherland in 1974

balmy day in August 1974, towards the end of the rainy season in Liberia, the Pan Am plane landed at Roberts International Airport in Liberia. With excitement and awe, I deplaned and with tearful eyes, kissed the ground. Hello Mama Africa. Alas... ..I was home!

Over the next 12-months while in Liberia, I had the opportunity to teach elementary school at Area B School in Yekepa, Nimba County and attend the University of Liberia (UL) for two semesters. I made so many friends, met with Government Officials, University Presidents and God chartered my way forward. I quickly fell in love with the food, culture, and most of all, the Liberian people.

In my studies at UL, I would learn about the American Colonization Society (ACS) and their sponsorship of the return of between 10-15,000 freed black men and women from America to Liberia in 1820 on the ship known as the Elizabeth, which was called the Mayflower of Liberia. A fascinating and complex history about how freed black men and women from America left in search of a better life and how the ACS encouraged this idea to send black people back to Africa. When they arrived at Providence Island, in a strange new land, they fought the

indigenous people for land and the vast resources that Liberia was blessed with, and they also brought with them with a colonial style of rule from America. Over the years, these Americo-Liberians, as they were called, began to blend into Liberian culture and society and on July 26, 1847, established the first independent republic on the Continent of Africa with a red, white, and blue flag, and a lone star, modeled after the United States.

In 1848, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, born in Norfolk, Virginia, who also immigrated to Liberia, became the first African-American President of Liberia. And while we celebrate the presidency of Barack Obama, President Obama was in fact the 11th African-American President in the world. Joseph Jenkins Roberts was the first African-American President in the world and then there were nine more African-American Presidents after him and they all came from America to Liberia as freed black men. We need to know and celebrate this history of Liberia and the influence of African-Americans, both good and bad.

## How did you become an Honorary Consul?

I have to say that I believe that my appointment had divine intervention! I was told that I was destined to do great things for Africa by friends and family alike. As my heart was still beating for Africa, I found myself still yearning for my Rotarian host families, my University of Liberia friends, the food, the land, the culture, and I had to admit, I was homesick for Liberia. There was college, marriage, and career to think about. And, when I wanted to return, I couldn't go back to my second home at that time as Liberia was at war in 1989.

Yet, in 1998, 23-years after my Rotary exchange experience, I found myself back in Liberia to attend the Nation Rebuilding and Reconciliation Conference hosted by then President, Charles Taylor. My family thought I was crazy to go to Liberia under these circumstances. Perhaps I was, yet, I had to go. When I arrived, the country I loved so much, had been destroyed. I saw abject hunger, poverty, and destruction. It was a painful and difficult experience to witness the results of war staring you in the face. After being in Liberia for a week, with no running water, no electricity and illness, when I returned back to Atlanta, Georgia, where I eventually settled after college and marriage, I was broken and prayed to God to show me the way forward. How could one person help a war-stricken country? I felt powerless. Yet, I had hope!

When the Civil Conflict finally ended in 2003, in 2005, H.E. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, became the first female President of Liberia and the first on the Continent of Africa. As my career was moving forward, I joined the 100 Black Women of Metropolitan Atlanta and under my leadership, we hosted the first Head-of-State dinner for President Sirleaf in Atlanta with over 1,000 in attendance.



First Head-of-State Dinner hosted by the Metropolitan Atlanta Chapter of the 100 Black Women honoring President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Republic of Liberia with Cynthia Blandford, Event Co-Chair, President Virginia Harris, President 100 Black Women and Pastor Gerald Durlay in Atlanta, Georgia

As the Event Co-Chair, my work was quickly getting noticed. One day in my kitchen, on the south-side of Atlanta, as we were planning for this historic event, a dear Liberian friend of mine named Wilfred said, “you should be our Honorary Consul and represent us in Georgia.” I thought he was kidding, yet I was soon to know that he was dead serious. I wasn’t seeking any particular recognition or post to do the work I loved in support of the rebuilding of Liberia. It was just in my DNA. Soon thereafter, my friend and others in the Liberian community began to petition the Government of Liberia to appointment me as an Honorary Consul. I had no name recognition, no family influence, or millions of dollars in the bank. Yet, I had love for country and a passion to make a difference. I was soon to believe that this was the passion for my life.

That particular historic night at the Head-of-State dinner, my friend Bill from Delta Air Lines and I announced that one-day soon, Delta would fly direct to Liberia from Atlanta, Georgia and in 2009, they did. I was on this historic inaugural flight along with billionaire, Robert Johnson, Founder of BET, who had just made a major investment in Liberia with the new Kendeja Hotel. Liberia was on the move!

So, I believe in recognition and the support of the Liberian community and the work in helping to bring Delta Air Lines direct flights to Liberia, on March 27, 2009, H.E. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, with the confirmation of the Liberian Senate, “reposing special trust and confidence in the integrity and ability of Cynthia Blandford to discharge truly and faithfully the duties of Honorary Consul of the of the Republic of Liberia in Atlanta, Georgia,”..... appointed me as the first African-

American female Honorary Consul. On August 31, 2009, I was commissioned by Ambassador Nathaniel Barnes in Atlanta, Georgia, in a public ceremony attended by friends and family alike at the World Trade Center Atlanta.

Over the years, I had the opportunity to host over 50 trade, investment, medical and cultural and educational exchange programs bringing hundreds of people to Liberia. I was also honored to meet the then U.S. Ambassador to Liberia, Honorable Linda Thomas-Greenfield, now U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, who has also served as a mentor and role-model to me.



Honorable Linda Thomas-Greenfield, former U.S. Ambassador to Liberia with Christopher Naylor and Honorary Consul Blandford

As of today, 173 years later, I still hold the title as the first and only African-American woman in Liberia’s history to serve in this diplomatic post. An unlikely diplomat, a project child - a little country girl from upstate New York, yet I had courage and the audacity to say I have the right to be here. Service, hard work, and leadership. Prayers of my ancestors. My destiny, to take on this new leadership role. I was honored and humbled and ready to do the work! My love for the Motherland lead me to a life of purpose.

In 2018, H.E. Dr. George Manneh Weah became President of Liberia where Liberia experienced the first

democratic exchange of power in over 70-years. I was honored to be there to witness this peaceful transfer of power and also have the pleasure of serving in this new government.

While there is more to tell you about my memoirs, please stay tuned and learn more about my life's story "My Heart Beats for Africa - How a Love for the Motherland Lead me to a Life of Purpose." There is so much more to tell you about including my first time eating Fufu and Soup, Bug-a-Bugs, my spiritual awakening, and falling in love. I also want to say a special thanks to my sister and Coach Ardella Y. Blandford, better known as Ardy, Founder of "Ardy's School of Greatness", for encouraging me to write my memoirs and for believing in me. I dedicate my memoirs to my Mom, Sister, son Omari and my three grandsons Omari Jr., Javaris, and Hassan and one grand-daughter, Sevyn, to believe in who they are as black people, descendants of African Kings, Queen Mothers, and great Tribal Warriors. I encourage them to take a leap of faith and to let God help chart their journey towards greatness - to find the passion of their life! This too will be my legacy!

### **What does an Honorary Consul in your capacity do and what services do you provide?**

The Liberian Consulate provides visa and consular services to the community. We have over 25,000 Liberians in the State of Georgia and strong partners and a vibrant business community who support our work including the City of Atlanta, the Georgia Department of Economic Development, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, and others. The Liberian Consulate covers the State of Georgia and the south-

eastern United States. We can serve clients from all over the world and coordinate our efforts with the Liberian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Under my leadership, we signed a Sister Airport Agreement between Hartsfield-Jackson International Atlanta (HJIA) and the Liberian Airport Authority (LAA) where we are focused on expanding trade between Georgia and Liberia. This includes collaborations with Global Logistics Systems (GLS), a Liberian Concession, who will be building an Air cargo Village, among other projects. I had the pleasure of hosting a delegation from HJIA to Liberia in 2019 to further these discussions and are excited about the possibilities to hopefully have fresh fish and lobster flown from Liberia to Atlanta one day. We are also facilitating discussions to help strengthen e-commerce and mail handling services for the Government and people of Liberia.



Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport delegation with the Liberian Airport Authority (LAA) at RIA in Liberia concluding the Sister Airport training and deliberations.

The Liberian Consulate signed the first ever Agreement with Brussels Airlines to provide discount tickets, upgrades, Business Lounge Access, and Business Class perks for customers flying from North America to Liberia to help boost travel, trade, and tourism. The program was very successful!

In 2008, I also established my own company as President and CEO of



Global Logistic Systems (GLS) Peter and Paul King site-visit to the United Parcel Services (UPS) Corporate Office in Atlanta discussing mail and logistic services with Honorary Consul Blandford and Philippe Grosbois, UPS.

Global Strategies for Good, LLC (GSG), which focuses on international conferences, travel, and tourism, trade, education, and medical missions, B2B, G2G and B2G matchmaking. For more information on GSG, please go to [www.global-strategiesforgood.com](http://www.global-strategiesforgood.com). We have also facilitated over 50 education, medical, investment and trade missions to Liberia and continue to work with the government to strengthen diplomatic ties between the United States and Liberia, to name a few. One of our most successful Business and Education trips to Liberia was with the National Black MBA Association in 2019.



Former U.S. Ambassador to the Liberia, Honorable Christine Elder joins former President of the NBM-BAA Jesse Tyson at a reception hosted by Cynthia Blandford at the Kendeja Hotel in Liberia.

In 2009, we launched the University Consortium for Liberia (UCL) non-profit organization and today have

established partnerships with nineteen educational institutions, providing scholarships for Liberian students to study in the U.S., conducting student and faculty exchange programs, study abroad and service learning. I have the pleasure of serving as the President and Board Chair of the UCL. For more information, please visit our website at [www.UCLiberia.com](http://www.UCLiberia.com).

### **What are some past, present, and future goals for Liberia's relationship with the U.S.?**

H.E. President Dr. George Manneh Weah's Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development 2018 to 2023 (PADA) is the second in the series of 5-year National Development Plans (NDP) anticipated under the Liberia vision 2030 framework. The four pillars are 1. Power to the People—to empower Liberians with the tools to gain control of their lives thru more equitable provision of opportunities in education, health, youth development, and social protection 2. The Economy and Jobs—economic stability and job creation through effective resource mobilization and prudent management of economic inclusion 3. Sustaining the Peace—promoting a cohesive society for sustainable development and 4. Governance and Transparency—an inclusive and accountable public sector for shared prosperity and sustainable development.

In support of the President's efforts, in collaboration with the Liberian Embassy in Washington, D.C., the Liberian Consulates in New York, Georgia and Minnesota, hosted the Second Annual Liberian Business and Investment Forum virtually on June 30, 2021. The focus was on Agriculture, Tourism and Healthcare. We are also working closely with Prosper

Africa and USAID to identify deals that can be vetted and put into the Virtual Deal Room at the event. It is free and open to the public.

### **How will the Liberian business community position itself to help?**

The Liberian Diaspora plays a very important role in nation building. We are seeing an uptick of Liberians traveling back home to invest, develop new schools, and build homes. Liberia is calling on doctors, nurses, educators, businessmen and women to come back to Liberia to help make a difference and to help build the middle-class.

### **How can Americans who are interested in doing business in Liberia participate?**

Liberia is "Open for Business." Americans who are interested in doing business in Liberia can consider investment opportunities in Agriculture, Infrastructure, Education, Energy, Hydrocarbon, Tourism, Waste Management, Health, Manufacturing and Mining. Please visit the National Investment Commission website at [www.Investliberia.gov.lr](http://www.Investliberia.gov.lr) to learn more.

### **Is there anything we have not discussed that you would like to mention?**

We are pleased to announce that Liberia is celebrating their Bi-Centennial, and we welcome the world to visit Liberia for "The Year of the Diaspora" 2021-2022. There will be a reunion and celebration of the return of freed black men and women to Liberia, Business Forums, a Youth Conference, Fashion Shows, Music Festival, and fun on the beach with great food! Tours of Providence Is-

land, the National Museum of Liberia, and other historic sites will also be available. Liberia is the "Land of Return", and we welcome you home! Please also visit our website at [www.libyearofthediapora.org](http://www.libyearofthediapora.org) for more information.

I am also excited to announce that we will be working with the National Port Authority of Liberia to help strengthen trade between Georgia and Liberia and will also be launching a virtual job fair with APM Terminals in 2022. Details will be announced soon.

Finally, in collaboration with Mr. Val Thompson, a good friend and colleague, we are launching a new international consulting firm in 2022 called "Blandford Thompson International Consulting LLC." Our Mission Statement: "With over 80-years of combined international relations experience, Blandford Thompson International Consulting is committed to providing solutions for Small and Medium business clients seeking or advancing business opportunities in Africa, the Caribbean and South and Central America." Be on the lookout for more information soon!

**"Under my leadership, we signed a Sister Airport Agreement between Hartsfield-Jackson International Atlanta (HJIA) and the Liberian Airport Authority (LAA) where we are focused on expanding trade between Georgia and Liberia."**