



**Swen Harmon**  
**Zoewee's Restaurant**  
**Charlotte, North Carolina**

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Location: Zoewee's Restaurant, Charlotte, North Carolina  
Interviewer: Joseph Ewoodzie  
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Project: Charlotte's Central Avenue Corridor

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:00:06] Joseph Ewoodzie with the owner of Zoewee's. Today is March 10<sup>th</sup> [2017]. If you could just mention your name and where you are and you know, what you do here.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:00:25] I'm Swen Harmon, I am part owner of Zoewee's Restaurant. And we have been here about ten years. Coming to the States, I came to go to school. And after graduation because of the war conflict in Liberia I remained in the States. But after the war—prior to the war, we went back home, my wife and I opened a restaurant.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:00:56] Back home?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:00:57] But it's similar to Zoewee's Restaurant. And so, when the first, when the war broke out, our business was one of the first places that was vandalized.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:01:11] Wow.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:01:11] Destroyed the [inaudible], which of course set us back, because at that time our intention was to return home. And since then, went in different areas of working. And then, gradually we decided to start a Zoewee's Restaurant here. Actually, there was a Liberian gentleman by the name of Phillip Ketter. He opened the first Liberian restaurant in Charlotte. And he ran that for several years. And then after the business closed, we give it a thought to try to see if we can just do something on a small scale. And actually it was not our intention that we would have lasted this long, which is something that was supposed on a trial for a few years. And so that's where we are today.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:02:19] So the name actually came from the business we had in Liberia, Zoewee's Restaurant. And actually that's Zoewee's the name, it is names that were put together. The

thing is that we had a partner by the name of Margaret Pierce and she actually brought the name Zoewee's. What happened was, we had a Liberian that we brought into the business to be a part owner. At that time we had planned to be in and out of the United States. And so her name was Zoe. So then, and she exhibits so much interest in the business that we started. So we named the business Zoe, that's her first name, and the Wee's actually was me and my wife are part owner at the time. So that's what our name Zoewee's came from. And then, who was running the business, she was from the Vai tribe by the name of Zoe. And the W-E-E-S that follows, it's just us. My wife, myself, and our part owner is Margaret Pierce. So that's how Zoewees got the name.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:03:46] Wow. So let's sort of go back a little bit and try to get a sense of how your story begins if you could just say a little bit about you know, being born and raised in Liberia. I know I'm taking you back a little further. Being born and raised in Liberia and then you know, what life was like before the war, before any of that.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:04:09] Oh, life was—life was great. Things were booming. When I came to go to school it was not my intention to stay in the United States. I came, graduated, it was to go back home. And the only reason why I stayed in America and stayed here is because of the war. And the war lasted so long. Over ten, twelve, fifteen years before peace to Liberia.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:04:39] What was it—I mean where did you grow up in Liberia?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:04:41] Oh, I grew up in Montserrado County, Monrovia, Liberia. I actually grew up Monrovia and I went to the University of Liberia. I graduated from St. Patrick's, B.W. Harris High School, and I went to the University of Liberia before coming to the United States.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:04:58] What did your parents do and—

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:04:59] My father was a lawyer. And my mother she was a housewife.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:05:04] How many siblings did you grow up with?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:05:08] Two. But the family had many children. You know, at that time a lot of—the family was big. There were siblings, too, with a lot of children, about seven other children live in the house.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:05:21] So it's all you all growing up in a house together, just kind of enjoying—

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:05:28] Yes, it's a very close, family-friendly. So we did it, we traveled, we did everything. My father was a family man so he always kept us together with some very strong discipline. But it was beautiful. They were all Christians, Methodists by faith and so that's how my background.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:05:49] So, and I won't remember that so I'll play this for my—I will ask my parents. My parents moved to Liberia before I was born, I told you I was born in Monrovia. I've no idea where I was born. And so just tell me exactly where in Monrovia you grew up and where you were born, and then I'll ask my parents if they know, because my dad is a Methodist preacher as well. And so he my dad actually moved to the U.S. from Monrovia.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:06:21] Which, you know, Monrovia was the capital of Liberia. And life at the time was almost like life here in Charlotte.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:06:34] Really?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:06:36] Things were booming, I mean, [inaudible], you could travel, government offices working, electricity twenty-four hours. I mean, international teams coming into the country, high schools. I attended two high schools, St. Patrick's. I went to the elementary school, I went to the high school but I left in my junior year when I got a scholarship to go to B.W. Harris school. I mean, life was at that time, everyone seems that they want to go back home. Even though at this age I still want to retire at home, but it was a beautiful life. I mean, at that time Liberia was considered, they used to call it Petite America, because I mean—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:07:22] Because they used the dollar. The flag looked like the American flag.  
[Laughs]

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:07:31] Everything was Americanized in the country. So coming and going, it was easy to come into the United States and go back. Scholarships were easy, government gives us scholarships all of that. So it was, it was booming. This was during the Tubman's administration. And then, the Tolbert came over, and it was at the time that transition when the military coup took over and all of that. But the country was great.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:08:00] What did you want to do growing up? Like what was your aspiration?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:08:04] Well you know, like all children with their parents and family, you tend to emulate someone in the family. And so my plans were to be a lawyer because my father was a lawyer, and we have a lot of lawyers in the family. There was a lot of politicians in the

family, so. When you grow up, that's what you see. That's the first impression and impact that started, "This is what I want to be," because that's what you see. That's the kind of impression because they will always traveling, like my little cousin was Emmett Harmon [SP?], he was a lawyer also, a very powerful politician in the country at the time. So people traveling in, traveling out, I mean everybody wanted to—you know, things were just so encouraging at the time.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:09:01] Coming to America was not—it was maybe something you did and come, but not—

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:09:05] Everybody. It was a dream because the American Colonization Society came into Liberia at the time and founded the country. So, and the American Liberians [inaudible] and came and stayed in Liberia. So we had the impact of America are so great because we were exposed to, for example, like the British. They went into [Sarilou] went to Ghana. So [Ewoodzie interjects The British] those that grew up at that time, those were the kids they wanted to go to Great Britain.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:09:42] Those from Ghana wanted to go those places just like—because the country was so dominated American, you had American teachers, the books, everything America, we'd drive American cars everything was just dominated American. So as a young man or young female growing up, your impact was America.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:10:04] America, yeah. So you go to high school you finish high school you want to go abroad to study.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:10:09] Yeah, I went to University of Liberia, I left in my junior year and I came to the States.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:10:15] What were you studying at the University of Liberia?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:10:16] I was studying the business at a time. My desire, I wanted to be an engineer because some of my relatives were engineers, architects and they were working at public works, and the impression came in when I got at the time to call later, cadet. Cadet means that you're a student, and you go in the school and you got a job to work within the government. So your classification was a cadet, that means that you're working with the government. During a couple hours after school somewhere to go. And the impression I worked in the engineering division for many years and then that impression came on, I came to the States.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:11:01] Where did you go?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:11:03] When I arrived to the United States of America my first state was in Philadelphia. I didn't like it.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:11:09] Why not?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:11:10] This—it was not just—I was disappointed [with how the place looked] physically for what I saw. In the area that I went in Philadelphia. I didn't like it. I didn't like the structure of the houses. So I moved down to Toledo, Ohio. That's where I went to school.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:11:30] Where did you go to school?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:11:30] I went to Owens Technical College [Owens Community College] where I graduated in civil technology. And I went to University of Toledo.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:11:40] Wow. And what, what degree did you get?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:11:42] I got, I did engineering. Yes.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:11:45] So you did that. That's what, maybe mid-twenties?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:11:50] Yeah.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:11:51] Okay. And then wanted to go back home?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:11:54] Oh, and it's still my desire to go back home. Liberia is a great place. But. That's home, that's what I know. I grew up over there as a young man, so I mean, like many of the Africans, foreigners here, with all the opportunities that is available here, some decide to stay, but others feel that after accomplishing whatever they wanted to do, want to return home.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:12:23] So you did go home the first time.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:12:25] Oh, I've been home around three, four different times. I mean before and after the war.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:12:30] So after your stay in Toledo you went home.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:12:33] Yes. I went out, I made two visits, short visits, that's all. Because then I was married. I'm married to an American so I had a family, so. And I had my parents living in home as well, family. So like, regularly you take a short trip ready to go home—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:12:50] Yeah, you go home and come back—

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:12:50] —instead of always talking on the phone sometimes you want physically do that, on one-on-one. So that's what I did.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:13:02] When was the last time when you went home, that was before the war, and transitioning into the war. Just talk about that a little bit.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:13:12] I been—I've been about nine, ten years now I haven't been back home. But it's my desire, I will be going this year.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:13:20] Wow.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:13:21] And, you know, I would have gone but it was just—I didn't have—I still don't see the political climate more stable. Especially now they are going, preparing for elections—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:13:37] —elections, that's right.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:13:38] Yeah, so you know. There's—but I really want to go back home. That's—there's other interests I have in Liberia, that I have to go and address. And that is family-related. Estate and all of that stuff that I have to go back home. So, you know.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:13:58] How did, you know a lot of people may not know the inner-workings of the war in Liberia. If you're willing, I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about it, especially—

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:14:10] No, what I would tell you is, I was not—I left '79 [1979]. And when I left, the same year that's when these things started to fall apart in Liberia. So honestly, I did not experience the war. We had, we opened a business. My wife went [went back home] working a business—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:14:33] So was your wife—was your wife—was back there.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:14:36] —back there and she was in and out. So we did not, because we were in and out of the place, so when the war started we never went back. We never, we had to stay out for that—it was too deadly. So we couldn't do anything. So we did not actually experience the war when the war was going on. It was after the war that we made short trips.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:15:02] How did the war impact your family even though you weren't there, you had family there.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:15:04] It's—a brutal—it was a brutal experience. And I mean, our—family members that came in from home to the States, and they explained the situations. And we did not experience that situation but we saw the deadly experiences on televisions that were playing daily in the United States. And that still have an impact now. Family members? Oh yes. There's a lot of them that died. Those who are caught up into the political conflicts and all of that. They lost their life. So it's not—it's a disappointing and very scary experience that went on. You know, but that's home.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:16:06] We—I mean, for me to say I will never go back—America's a very wonderful place, but that's home. And the opportunities it's still there. And I don't have no

interest in the political aspect of it. But other areas, yes.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:16:34] Tell me about the first Zoewee's in Liberia. What was the idea behind it and what were you all trying to accomplish with that?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:16:40] What actually—what we had in mind was to go back home. To go back home, like—and young, aspiring, depending on experiences in your country, they wanted to go back home. And so, one of the things that we had planned on going was to open a business, actually we wanted to go into a business atmosphere of the country. Because my grandparents left a lot of farmland. A lot of rubber trees and all of that. So, the thinking was to open a small restaurant. It was booming. It was doing great. Then our next venture, which we never did enter into, was the farming aspect of the land, which that's something I was going to run into. Yes, that's where my interest was heavily. But we didn't get to that because of the war.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:17:38] So—you went—sort of as a way to take yourself back home, you were, you know, planning your business and Zoewee's was a restaurant.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:17:46] Zoewee's was a restaurant on Gurley Street.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:17:47] How did—on which street?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:17:50] On Gurley Street.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:17:50] On Gurly Street, okay. How did food and restaurant world become part of—I mean—you were mentioning, it seemed like there were a bunch of other options of businesses to enter. The farming, the rubber, all these kinds of things. Why restaurants, and how did

restaurants become a part of some of your aspirations?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:18:08] It was my wife's desire. She loves to cook. A very good cook. And that's how we in this restaurant for ten years, because she's the backbone behind the cooking. This is something that she really loves. And that was an interest obviously. We had a little—I didn't think at that time I was looking at real estate. She said, the food. That was something she loved, that she wanted to do and still doing today. So we decided well, if you want to do it, let's give it a start. And it was promising. Business was good. We invested a lot, and just how we invested a lot, we lost a lot when the war came in. But that's her interest, she's a very good cook. She's a very good cook. That's what she loves to do, and that's how we ended up with this Zoewee's Restaurant.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:19:08] And you said it was one of the places it was vandalized—people tell you stories about—

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:19:15] Oh, I mean we had pictures that we had. It looked like, it seems like it was targeted one day. The military government, when they took over. Like, you follow all the news and then when there's a change in government, people took the streets and vandalized places. And actually we had this, but we had modernized the place comparable to some of the restaurants here, because we had things shipped. From here, there. The tables, the chairs, the equipment. All those things, they were shipped over. And so we opened—obviously you have a decent place, that's where people want to be. That's where people come. And so—so that was the reason for—it was just a very nice place and—government officials, students. Everybody was dining in. At night, having a party, a good time. So all those things—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:20:22] And you feel like it was targeted?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:20:29] Oh it was targeted, yeah. Not only the restaurant, but several businesses, American businesses. Everything was vandalized. Oh yes. The destruction was unbelievable. But that's what happens when you are caught up in war. When you have those kind of infrastructure. For example, like you're finally here in United States of America when people are demonstrating in front of the vandalized businesses. That's almost about the same thing that went on. In Liberia.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:21:05] What did you think of your country as you are watching it on TV?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:21:13] Sad. Disgusting. Discouraging. They—when it came to the killing of people. People lost their lives. The property, people became homeless. People had to walk hundreds of miles for safety. [Emotional] It was a sad experience. Very, very sad experience.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:21:46] You know, wars are never worth it. Wars always destructive. And I think it sort of gets us to do the worst things that humanity can do, but some people think that there's sort of good explanations as to why some wars have to happen. Was there one for—?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:22:13] I don't—I won't agree to that statement. I mean, there's always a compromise. There's always another way. But war is brutal. War is destructive. I mean, it's—war brings lifetime bad memories. So it's—nobody won the war. It's—people are doing almost every impossible thing to avoid war. What—you know—[inaudible] our country you go to war, you got another—fifty years of recovery, even modernizing and improving it. I'll tell you one more thing. They—during the war. They destroyed the hydro plant. That's the plant when I was born, that one I knew that provide electricity all over the country. When they destroyed that hydro plant, Liberia went into darkness. For years and years and years. The only people that could afford, who have the availability of money, was to get you a generator. And a generator was not something that was the

convenience of a twenty-four hours electricity that we have here. So. War is just—that bad memories. Something, for your lifetime you never forget.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:23:56] And it seems like even though you aren't physically there, you're part of the generation of people that carry that memory of that war.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:24:09] Yes. So many people came away as refugees. Some of the stories until today. I still carry that story. And especially so those physical, those pictures that were displays so readily on television. See people that you know walking hundreds of miles, see people. It was so bad. Dead bodies, all over the place, all in the streets. Those are memories. I mean, I can tell you that when I get a call, it seems like I'm right in the situation. Because I could relate. I could physically see home and see what was happening.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:25:03] When that was happening, you were in the U.S. Did you feel like, "Okay. I have to find a way to make America my home because I can't go back home?"

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:25:16] That's the reason why I'm here today. Yes, because [where was I going] I could look homes that we had, family homes that we had. I could see the structure when CNN shows the very views of the country and some of the views what places I lived, places I go to school—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:25:39] —and you recognize it.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:25:42] I recognize it. That's bad memories. You know, but. That's all you— sometimes—you can't give up life. You can give a life. Those are some of the experiences, but it also just—that's another side of it. It gives you a motivation to move on. That is not—that is

not end of life. You know, and well, they destroyed this. When things got very peaceful, I was able to—from the States, renovated my mother's house that was destroyed. The good thing is that it destroyed everything. And the sad thing about it, they took everything was movable out of the house. The only thing that was the skeleton, the structure of the building. Because our house is the way they are built is not like here in United States of America. They use blocks.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:26:51] Concrete.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:26:51] Concrete blocks. So you tear a whole house down, you take everything out, that's just the structure [laughs]. Standing. And so gradually I got things. Put resources together. Renovated place. And people live there now. One of my trips home, I was able to live into my mother's house instead of going to the hotel. I mean, I grew up there, I know the lifestyles there is not much of a difference.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:27:27] So you were in the East Coast for a little bit, the Northeast—

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:27:32] Yeah, I was in Philadelphia shortly. I didn't like it, and I went to Toledo. I was in Toledo about five years. And I stayed in Toledo, and I moved to New Jersey. I was there for a few years. And then when I came for a funeral of a friend that passed away in Charlotte. And for some reason, I just took a like to it.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:27:56] To Charlotte.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:27:57] To Charlotte. For whatever reason. After the funeral, I stayed a week. Then I stayed another week. I just went back to Jersey and just decided to move to Charlotte.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:28:03] Just like that.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:28:10] Just like that [laughs].

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:28:10] When was this?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:28:12] It was—this is, let me see now, I've been here about ten years. 2000, 2001.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:28:29] 2001. So just try to make sense of why Charlotte—why? What did you like about it?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:28:35] You know, first of all—I don't know. I just moved into Charlotte. I came on a visit. And for some reason I just liked—I mean, maybe, probably this slow pace at the time of Charlotte. Which is, that of home. And, Charlotte at the time, there was no crime. Crime rate, you could turn your television—it was so peaceful. And for some reason, I don't know. It's just I just took likeness to a continent, probably like if you run into a beautiful woman, just see a woman for whatever reason. I just liked it.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:29:24] That's great.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:29:24] It—Charlotte was not as developed as it is developed now. So you could even say it was because of the infrastructure. Charlotte didn't have the kind of infrastructure that they have now. But for some reason, I just—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:29:42] —liked it.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:29:43] I don't know.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:29:44] So you moved here. You, your wife, any children or just you?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:29:47] No. I moved here. My wife came here first. Then I stayed in Jersey after awhile, then I joined and came back.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:29:59] When you all came here, what—like at that point what are you doing sort of professionally?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:30:05] Oh no. When I got it—I got a job with—when I graduated in Toledo, Ohio, I came down to went to New Jersey. I was in New Jersey. There was a roofing company that actually I applied for a job. I was in Toledo. And they accepted me, so I came on as the supervisor for the roofing company. Very good company. I did very well with that company, I really set my base. And all they did was, they did government contracts. And one thing they did was flood roof, high rises, they had a lot of military contracts. And they had a lot of contracts and New York. The high rises, that's what we did.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:30:53] You know, we did rubber roofing. And I was one of the supervisors there. And then when I came to Charlotte, then I started working, I became a supervisor for a factory. They produce our traffic cones. And the offer was very good. And I worked there until the business shut down. Then I came here and started thinking about opening up a restaurant.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:31:21] How many years did you do that for?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:31:23] Here—I was down in [*inaudible*] for about five or six years or so.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:31:27] But no restaurant business in New Jersey?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:31:28] No, no. No no no. That was a whole different—things were, they were good, I was busy, I would go home after twelve hours a day. So no—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:31:42] So when did the restaurant idea come back?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:31:45] You know, she always brought that up. And said, "We need to have our own, our own, our own." I said, "This is America, this is not Liberia. When you invest into a business it takes a lot of time to do." So she whined about that a lot then we started looking at different places, looking at different places. And then one day we came by this place. Actually, this is not one structure. These are two different stores.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:32:17] Oh, that's right. Because there're two different entrances.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:32:20] Two different entrances. And so we came in and we looked at the place. Then I came in, spoke with the owner. And he said that—he give me the price of the place. So then when I walked in, you know, sometimes things happen by instinct. I walk in then I started designing this place if I had it what I would do with it. I looked at one spot. One store be too small. And I looked at it. Made a couple of trips. Then I start sketching because I have a background of something. "If I drew this, and drew this, and drew this." Then my interest started. I lay out this entire place if we got the two places. And then the interest started. But then I had to follow up with the city code, see what else, because I have not actually been a restaurant, I didn't

know anything about the city code and all that's something new there. I took about another six months trying to get all—and all the time this business was empty for six months.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:33:30] So when I came back again this place was still empty. But I had done a sketch and otherwise if I had found a place similar to this with such a layout, this is possibly what I could do. And then when I came back, this place still empty. Well, maybe this place is better for me. That's how it all started.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:33:52] And y'all's objective was to provide Charlotte with whatever version of Liberian food—

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:33:58] Yes. You know, because that's what she was very good in, Liberian food. And there was not another African restaurant providing African/West African food. So then, and that's what we still do we—some of the Liberian food cuisine, not all of it. And well, it was a trial. And actually, the Americans took to the food. And that's the reason actually for the duration of time I've been in the business, because this support we have gotten from Americans. This business here, 95 percent of the business has been patronized by Americans. If we did not have that kind of support, the business would have been closed. Africans don't support these on their own anyway. And for this kind of business to run, African feels that they are the very best cook, they can cook, they can do this. But Americans it's something strange. Something that—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:35:20] —they can't do.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:35:20] I have customers that come here six days a week. They will eat the same thing from the time that they start coming to this restaurant.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:35:24] Wow. Really?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:35:26] And one of my most—the most popular menu I have here is potato greens. Potato greens. You know the sweet potato? And the leaves on a sweet potato? If I don't have anything in this restaurant, if I had only that particular—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:35:43] —the greens on the sweet potatoes?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:35:46] Yes. That's—my business can run only on that particular meal. But because of a variety of items, the menu changes from day to day. And as they taste they get used to that, they get used to that. But my number one meal here is potato greens. The next one is cassava leaf. And the most popular now is palava sauce. So any one of those, if you come for one I don't have it you know.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:36:22] Without giving away your recipe, how do you—how does that happen. How do you make these potato greens and palava sauce? And what's the base of it? And just generally, just describe what—if somebody's never had Liberian cuisine, how would you describe it?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:36:39] Well you know, it's Liberian. They are very good cook, and know very well how to season. And the most popular, the potato greens, very simple, it's the potato greens, we have two types: one is same potato grains. We cook it with pan oil. Red oil.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:37:02] Red oil.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:37:02] And the same potato greens, we cook it with vegetable oil.

Okay. And when they come in, they say they want the red oil, or they want the white oil. But difference, the same greens but because of the oil, it gives a different taste. Now, the secret to this is that if you know how to season. If you know how to season food and season the grill, the food comes out. It's the seasoning part. And everybody can just cook in oil [inaudible] and just know how to season [inaudible]. That's it.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:37:38] What do people eat with the potato greens?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:37:40] Oh, the interesting thing. When I was in Liberia, they eat potato greens with only rice. But now, the Americans have changed the menu here. We can eat potato greens with fufu. We can eat the potato greens with seasoned rice. Corned—beef rice. They have changed it. In Liberia when I grew up, only thing I eat fufu with was pepper soup. But now, they are eating potato greens with fufu. They eat cassava leaves with they— it's just amazing.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:38:21] So there are different kinds of West African cuisine. I'm from Ghana, we have, we do—there are a lot of similarities but there are certain things different. Nigerians do things a bit differently as well. What are some of the unique attributes of Liberian cuisine? And yeah, let's start with that—

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:38:45] Liberian is just, for us—let me say this: what makes it different food? It tastes different it's—because is how it is prepared. And what you put into the food. You can eat my potato greens from a Liberian restaurant. But if you go to Ghanaian restaurant, the same potato greens, it tastes completely different. Because of what they put the ingredients, they put into the pot to have the food prepared. So it makes it different from one country to another.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:39:22] So I think in, you know, the Ghanaian restaurants there's a lot of

tomato base stuff. We use a lot of salted fish. What's the difference?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:39:33] We are—here for this restaurant, we use less tomatoes. And when we use—in our potato greens, we don't put tomatoes in our potato greens. Now, mostly onions and pepper. And then seasoning.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:39:53] And that's it.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:39:53] That's it.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:39:53] I don't think Ghanaians can imagine making something like that without the tomato base [laughs].

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:39:59] Well you, no no. African food. I mean, Liberian food is less tomatoes. Only time you have more tomatoes in a Liberian meal, a dish, except if it's gravy or for jollof rice. Yes. But the rest of that is less—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:40:19] —but you make jollof rice too?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:40:21] Well yes, we do. Yes we do. It's quite different from Ghanaian, Nigerian—

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:40:30] [Laughs] —there's always competition whose jollof rice tastes better. Do you think the Liberian-American connection historically makes Liberian cuisine more easy to eat for the American audience than say Ghanaian or Nigerian food?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:40:52] Well I would say yes because you know what? There's a lot of Americans that come here, parents or grandparents or relatives live in Liberia once. There are teachers, doctors, missionaries that they have been exposed to some of the food. Some of them learn how to prepare the food, they have been exposed. And some of them lost the touch of the food, and when they find a Liberian restaurant, they were able to get that taste back and they started coming. So that connection is because of past history. With some of them and then there are others by word of mouth tell of the food and how it is, and they come in and they like the food.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:41:43] So remind me again how long has this been here?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:41:47] The restaurant here?

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:41:47] Yes.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:41:48] About nine, ten, about ten years now.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:41:50] Wow.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:41:51] It was never our plan to that we've been here this long.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:41:55] You have been around twice as long as what the average restaurant is supposed to last, for five years [Harmon laughs] or so and then that's it.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:42:02] It's too much, too much work, and too much—it's just too much, but you know, when you get into something you have to have the interest.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:42:10] And you do.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:42:12] Yes. And if you don't have the interest, even when when you get into something interest, it's not that but over a period of time you can develop an interest.

Something that you might not like. After a while, a period of time you find yourself liking it. It's just like if you married a lady. Actually you might like her you might just want her for a date or so, and afterwards you find yourself, oh this is what—to be a partner for my life. Something I didn't like—it's what—it's like getting involved into things that you develop interest in.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:42:41] So ten years, are we looking for another ten years? [Laughs]

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:42:47] No. [Laughs] I won't—actually, I want to go back home.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:42:51] So, let's talk about that. You've mentioned that throughout: you want to go back home.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:42:55] I want to retire at home. But I don't want to retire at home when I physically weak. I don't want to do it. I want to retire at home when I still have strength and energy. And can do something. I don't want—I want to be mobile. Establish things, get things done. That's what I want, I want to do. And I still have the desire, the desire to go back home. That's home. When I retire from here, I don't think when I retire I'd be able to live very comfortably with what I would be receiving. But, what I will be receiving I established a base at home would put me in a better position. I could always come back for medical checkups and all that. But during the final years of my life I want to retire, on a slow base.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:43:59] How—maybe it is for us younger folks, but how do you, you

know— it's no secret that there's luxuries to life that America provides you that you can't get when you live in a West African country. And for some of us younger folks we don't recognize the importance of home. How have you—I mean a country that you know, you've loved your whole life but it's been really difficult, and some of things that you really enjoyed and some of the people that you love has been—the politics of the country has destroyed it. How did sort of the—that love of wanting to sort of remain and go back home, like how did you sustain that over all of these years?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:44:56] It is—you know first of all, you—I never lost touch with my relatives and friends and those who are back home. I never did. I've been always in touch. And during the developing period of my years, there was a lot of things I was involved in in Liberia. Even the—while I was away, I still got myself involved in those several other things, business things. But that's what I know as home. That's where I was born. That's where I grew up. And it just like, if you're born in the United States, you grew up here, you went to school all your young days. There is—the memory yet is by far stronger than where your parents came from, because this is what you know, it's what you saw. That's where your association has been here. Now for me, I have to have an original place where I lived and the number of decades, years I have lived here, I can still make that comparison. But there's a drive within me, that my final days, the retirement, should be at home. Like I said, this country has given me an opportunity by which I can come in, I can go. There'll be no problem. We don't have that type of medical facility the United States of America have. But I'm quite sure at that time, if it's necessary for me to get better medical here, I can get on a plane and come to the United States, get my treatment, take some vacation and return home.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:46:52] Do you have any children?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:46:58] Oh yes. I have three, actually five children. I have a son, and two daughters here in the United States. I have a daughter just graduated last year from UNCC

[University of North Carolina at Charlotte]. I have another daughter in the air force. And my son, he's in San Antonio, Texas. That's where he lived. And I have two children back home.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:47:27] Do they—what's their relationship like with Liberia? The ones that are here?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:47:32] Well, the one—two of them were born here so they don't know nothing about Liberia, but have the desire wanting to go. And that desire is on when daddy retires.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:47:46] [*Laughs*] Because you got to go see daddy some time.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:47:47] But they have that desire wanting to go to see the place, even though they would say, they are afraid that they don't know what will happen. They still have some of the primitive thinking of their country.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:48:08] It's not like that, no. And I'll—just a couple of more questions. Tell me about the Liberian community. Again, I—and maybe this is naive on my part. I don't think I've ever been in a city where I've come across as many Liberians as I do here.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:48:29] The Liberian population is small compared to other states. And Philadelphia, Minnesota. Man, they got thousands, over ten, twenty thousand of Liberians. Charlotte kind of average, of maybe three, four thousand of Liberians that live here. So, this—probably, I don't how much of travel you have traveled, yeah but Philadelphia, Maryland, Virginia, Liberians are huge. Liberians, yeah.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:49:07] But is there—do the Liberians around here know each other? Do

they associate with each other? Do they spend time together?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:49:18] It's not a—there's a Liberian association here. But not all Liberians are part of the association. But they do meet, and on occasion they have activities where they come together and join in the celebration. Also, there's a—they have several Liberian churches here. And they're—that's where Liberians tend to congregate. For example, you have an African ministry at Hickory Grove United Methodist Church. And the pastor there, Pastor Don, he's the pastor of that church.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:50:06] Boss man! We're just gonna finish up real quick. [*Inaudible*]. Okay, I'm just talking about the volume.

**Unidentified Speaker:** [00:50:27] Oh, okay. CNN?

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:50:27] Yeah, one second.

**Unidentified Speaker:** [00:50:27] All right.

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:50:27] Yeah, so that's where they congregate. And when they're having tournaments—that's where you see a whole—especially soccer.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:50:32] Oh really? That happens?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:50:36] And you have seen a whole lot of Liberians congregate and come together to watch the games. Because that was the main sport in Liberia, soccer. So they have a soccer tournament and see a lot of—drove of Liberians travel from other cities that come in to

watch the games.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:50:53] Wow. That's great. Well, I don't—this has been wonderful. I don't know, anything else you want to add to this story?

**Swen Ernest Harmon:** [00:51:01] Other than, thank you for the interview. You give me the opportunity to give you where Zoewee's Restaurant started. Where it came from and where it is today. It was a pleasure that I had the time to sit and talk with you.

**Joseph Ewoodzie:** [00:51:18] Thank you so much and I appreciate it.