

1 Ghebre Mehreteab, interviewed by Carol Quirke at Planting Fields, Oyster Bay, New York
2 on May 28, 2011. Additional Questions by Gilda Zwerman.

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4 Carol Quirke: Can you tell us your name and how it is that you came to Old Westbury, where
5 you came from, how you got recruited to Old Westbury?

6 Ghebre S. Mehreteab: My name is Ghebre Selassie Mehreteab. My nickname is Ghebre. I
7 came to Old Westbury in 1968 as one of the first eighty-three or eighty-four students. I
8 believe I was the first African student and I heard about Old Westbury through Harris
9 Wofford who was the president of the college at that time but prior to that he was head of
10 the Peace Corps in my country.

11 Quirke: He recruited you to Old Westbury; Harris Wofford recruited you to Old Westbury?

12 Mehreteab: Yes, I had applied to a number of schools in the United States, and then Harris
13 Wofford suggested that this college would be much better for me than other traditional
14 colleges so I decided to come here.

15 Quirke: Can you tell me what were the selling points that he used for Old Westbury at that
16 point in time? What did you think that you might be getting out of it?

17 Mehreteab: Well, the two schools I was looking were all male schools and this was co-ed.
18 So one of the selling points for me, a young man at the age of eighteen was the fact that this
19 was co-ed. The second selling point was this school was very small, and having come from
20 an African country I was rather afraid or intimidated to be in a large university so I liked
21 the student and faculty ratio. That is what were the selling points.

22 Carol: So I'm going to jump to a different question than we have here, there has been so
23 much discussion about the kind of conflict that took place at Old Westbury and I wonder if
24 you could describe from your perception what took place and why did you choose to leave
25 Old Westbury?

26 Ghebre: [02:08] I think as I have explained, I came here hoping to get a traditional
27 education. When I came here I knew very little about the United States of America, but
28 when I met students they seemed to have lots of questions about themselves, about their
29 families, about the society, about the school, so there were a number of meetings and
30 conflicts that I didn't expect. I was quite concerned about whether I was going to get a
31 traditional education or just simply be on my own. I didn't feel I had the discipline to be on
32 my own.

33 One of the reasons I decided to transfer to Haverford College is I wanted to be in a
34 place where it was always structured for me as opposed to Old Westbury, at that time, was
35 encouraging self discipline and independent study. I felt I didn't have the capacity to do so.

36 Carol: Can you tell me about any of the faculty, any of the courses, any of the events that
37 really stand out to you from your time at Old Westbury?

38 Ghebre: [03:14] Obviously we got to know the faculty members quite well. I had a hard
39 time addressing the faculty members by their first name. Which was unusual for me having
40 come from a very formal society so there were a number of professors like Alan Wolfe,
41 Donald Bluestone, Count Taylor, Arthur Adlerstein, Carlos Russell, Philip Ressnick, Charles
42 Pressler—people who are very, very famous, and people who have gone to the best schools
43 in the country.

44 The opportunity to be exposed to such faculty members was very rewarding but on
45 the other hand I was always rather uncomfortable having to address them by their first
46 names, yet at Old Westbury that was encouraged. Harris was called Harris instead of Mr.
47 Wofford, Carlos, as you saw today, was called Carlos instead of Professor Russell.

48 Carol: Can you tell me what it was like to be an African student at Old Westbury given all of
49 the issues around both racism, doing work in American cities, and I'm assuming the issue of
50 colonization came up a lot, do you mind speaking to that at all?

51 Mehreteab [4:23]: I think my biggest conflict was having to come to the United States and
52 having been questioned about my blackness. There were some black students and some
53 Puerto Ricans, and as I have mentioned a couple of times I came to Old Westbury with
54 hand-tailored suits made in Africa—Italian suits—had nice shoes, crew cut, because, after
55 all, I was coming to the United States to study.

56 When the black students saw me they said, "No, you should dress like an African." I
57 said, "There is no such code in African dress because Africa had fifty-four countries, four
58 hundred tribes, and eight hundred languages, and even in my own country, in Eritrea, there
59 are eight tribes." So they told me that there is something called dashiki, so they took me to
60 the Bronx and we bought a couple of dashikis. I looked at the dashiki and the dashiki was
61 made in Taiwan. So I had to get rid of my African-made suits for dashikis so I can become a
62 black American. I had to grow my hair. I was smiling a lot, and a couple of black students
63 told me that black people are very angry therefore I should not be smiling. I remember
64 every morning having to practice how to look angry.

65 One of my memorable experiences was one of the black students asking me how to
66 say, “Black is beautiful” in my language, and I told him there is no such thing called that. He
67 said, “Why?” I said, “Is there such thing called white is beautiful?” He said, “Well everybody
68 knows white is beautiful.” I told him, “In my country everybody knows black is beautiful
69 therefore we don’t have that term.” After a while I got used to it, I am now a full-fledged
70 African American in the last sense.

71 Carol: You’ve referenced some of the political volatility that shaped both the educational
72 experience and Old Westbury itself, is there anything more about that that you would like
73 to share?

74 Mehreteab [6:27]: I think that the students that were admitted here—eighty-three
75 students came with eighty-three ideas of what school should be all about. There were a lot
76 of things that were in common. Number one, as you can see today, they were all very, very
77 bright students. It is no accident that they all have done well afterwards. But I think it was
78 the times much more than anything else. If Old Westbury was opened today I don’t think it
79 would attract this kind of students. It was not Old Westbury I think that defined us, I think
80 it was much more the time—1968, 1969 were very hard times for the country—so it was
81 the period that defined it much more than the school.

82 Carol: You left the school as you said because you wanted something more traditional, but
83 you also left it at the point at which the mission was being redefined. Can you talk a little bit
84 more about that, in your sense of what was going on, both for you personally but for the
85 college as a whole?

86 Ghebre: I think personally I had no idea what was going on. I was a foreign student and I
87 doubt many students also knew what was going on. I felt though that the school was falling
88 apart. The president had decided to resign. I felt that the state university system was
89 evaluating the place. Somehow I felt it was time for me to do something else.

90 Again the students that you see today were all very bright, they came from great
91 high schools. They were all children of professionals, and I felt this was just sort of a period
92 in their life. Sooner or later this would be defined as an “experience;” that is why there was
93 a conflict between the black students and the white students. The black students said, “We
94 really want a BA degree because once we leave this campus people will ask us, “Well you
95 were here with the G.G. groovin’ on the grass.” I shared the black students’ views —it was
96 very important for me to obtain my education, which I did, which obviously helped me to
97 have some success in life.

98 Not surprisingly, having met many of the students now, I see sure they all lived this
99 life for two or three years and we can all talk about it but at the end of the day what made a
100 big difference in their life I don’t think it was the two years what they have learned here, it
101 was what they did afterwards. Maybe Old Westbury had taught them, “Hey you are better
102 off going to a traditional school, or you are better off being a doctor or a lawyer, whatever
103 you have become.”

104 Carol: You’ve told us that you stayed for two years; can you tell us for the camera or to me,
105 so that we can record it, what you went on to do after leaving Old Westbury?

106 Ghebre: After I left Old Westbury I did go to Haverford College. I graduated in 1972. I was
107 honors and in fact in 2007 the college awarded me an LL.D. Honorary degree. During that

108 time I worked for the grant making foundation, as I mentioned to you I spent many years
109 working at the Ford Foundation.

110 After that I started an organization called NHP, National Housing Partnership, which
111 built, developed, affordable housing for low and moderate-income families. We did that in
112 47 states, totaling 10,000 units. A year and a half ago I decided to retire, but then I am
113 again working as an advisor for the Ford Foundation. I also served on a number of
114 corporate boards and there are also other things like that.

115 Carol: Can you tell me the National Housing Partnership is that a CDC [community
116 development corporation], does it support CDC's or is it distinct from CDC's?

117 Ghebre: I'm glad you know about Community Development Corporations because when I
118 was at Ford Foundation I was supporting CDC's. It is a national nonprofit housing
119 organizations but in this case it owns, but does not manage, multi-family affordable
120 housing. The company that started it was chartered by Congress, and then we developed
121 out of that and I was the first president of the company.

122 Carol: Is there anything else you want to tell us about Old Westbury or your understanding
123 of Old Westbury, or how Old Westbury infused your understanding of the world?

124 Ghebre [11:10]: I think how we felt about it then and how we think about it now are two
125 different things. Listening to my fellow students, reading their emails, they seem to have a
126 nostalgia about the place. I think it is much more flowery the way they remember it as
127 opposed to the way they were behaving. I remember—I always like my father and my
128 mother, for example—I remember meeting lots of students who hated their father, or hated

129 their mother, and now to see them—“I have a lovely wife or I have a lovely husband, I have
130 lovely children”—those were not the words.

131 I can see forty years later, history could be rewritten. If we had this interview forty
132 years most of the discussion would be how bad the place is and how it has failed us. Now
133 everybody is saying the experiment has been very successful. Time has a way of healing, so
134 I think they have healed. But this is much more an expression of where they were—I was
135 an accident. I don't think I am like the rest of the students in that sense I sort of came over
136 here on TWA 945. This was my Ellis Island, I had no idea, I was a foreign student.

137 Most of the students some of them transferred from Brown, some of them
138 transferred from New Paltz, some of them transferred from Boston University and some of
139 them were freshmen. They were seeking something, so Old Westbury was a period in their
140 life where they do not know what they want to do.

141 Gilda Zwerman: Just one follow up question on the Non-White Caucus, and your
142 relationship to them as an African. Did you feel that since you came to them in '69?

143 Ghebre: '68.

144 Gilda: '68, so the Black Power movement here was in full force, because the turning point
145 here was '66, '67. Did you find that the African Americans here understood the issue of
146 colonialism and the independence movements in Africa? Was there any attempt to tie the
147 liberation movements, then about ten years old in Africa, with American Black Power?

148 Ghebre: Very little, in fact it was more incumbent on me to me to understand black America
149 as opposed to black America understanding Africa. I felt the black students knew a bit

150 about Africa it was mostly through reading, like Frantz Fanon books [anti-colonialist author
151 of *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*.]

152 It was very hard for the black students here or somewhere else in that country at
153 that time to realize that we Africans, even among ourselves, we have countries, nations,
154 because they want to make sure we are just one country and we are not one country—we
155 are not one people. So I tried to explain to the black students there is no such thing called
156 an Africa. There is an Eritrea, an Ethiopia, a Liberia or whatever country and even with
157 that you belong to a separate tribe a separate religion. Even in my own place, Eritrea,
158 where there are only four million people, 50% are Christians 50% are Muslims—we have
159 nine distinct tribes. So there is no such thing called African dress for example. So it was a
160 little bit difficult for me when people said I am not dressing like an African or I don't have
161 an African name.

162 Carol: Thank you