

Voices of MSU

Interviewee: Antonio James (AJ)

Interviewer: Liz Timbs (LT)

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LT: Let's start with a general introduction about who you are. . .

AJ: My name is Antonio James. I graduated from Michigan State in 2015. I got here in 2010. Since 2015, I have been a police officer here at the Michigan State University Police Department.

LT: Where are you from?

AJ: I am from Romulus, Michigan. So, home-grown, came to school up here. It has been smooth-sailing ever since [laughs].

LT: Can you tell me about your family?

AJ: I came from a really large family. We originally lived in Inkster and then we moved to Romulus. I have two brothers and three sisters. The oldest is about thirty-five this year and the second is thirty-four. Then, the other four, we share the same mother and father. My oldest brother is Antwon James; he has turned twenty-eight this year. My third oldest sister is Elisa; she turned twenty-seven this year. My youngest brother, who is only a year older than me, turns twenty-four in October.

LT: When did you become interested in athletics?

AJ: It started way way back when. Maybe like six grade, I can remember from those little placards that your mother had you take photos for the sport. I started with basketball; basketball grew into football when I started in seventh grade; then I started track and field in tenth grade—when my coach wanted me to try out, so I could stay in shape for the football season. It really grew on me and I stuck with it.

LT: Were your parents athletes as well?

AJ: My mother played volleyball and my father played basketball, neither, which played in college. My mother went here to MSU and my father went to University of Syracuse where he graduated with his degree in real estate.

LT: You went to school in Romulus?

AJ: Yep, I went to school in Romulus. My elementary school was Wick Elementary; it was a straightforward elementary school. My knowledge of elementary school is not all that great; I went there as a child; I lived under an umbrella; any school I went to was great. From Wick Elementary School, I moved on to Romulus Middle School; it was a straightforward middle school. Not real diverse, majority black I would say, 60:40, white to black. Then, I went to Romulus High School; I got really active in sports there. They gave me a really solid foundation sports wise and academic wise. Then, I moved on to East Lansing where I went to college.

LT: You said that Romulus Middle School was not very diverse, was Romulus High School diverse?

AJ: Well, Inkster was definitely predominantly black more so like 80:20. I stayed in Inkster until I was about eight years old; I was fairly young. Both of my parents were working class. We did not have much; we stayed in the house. Some nights, we would eat bread with hot sauce on it. That was our dinner and it was really rough. But, again, I was a child living under this umbrella, so things were not that bad for me.

We left Inkster and moved to Romulus. My dad landed this super awesome job and got out to Romulus. He started working in real estate with Reversed Mortgages and it took off from there. They moved up middle class earning great wages, great salary, and had a really nice house. Our house was like a miniature mansion; it had five bedrooms, three bathrooms, a Jacuzzi, four wheelers, go-cart, and five acres of land. We had anything we could ever ask for as children there. I moved out when I was about eight or ten and I went to Wick Elementary School.

At Wick, it changed a lot for me, the dynamic changed. It was more so 60:40, you know, 60 percent black and 40 percent white. It was a little bit of a cultural shock. But, I was still pretty spongy at that age, so it did not hit me all that hard. From Wick, I went to Romulus Middle School, which was about the same 60:40. Then to high school, at Romulus High School, it was consistent throughout elementary school, middle school, and high school.

LT: What were your interests in high school, in addition to athletics?

AJ: I was a hardcore gamer; I gamed hours on end, throughout the day. I was not as fit as I am now. I was a big kid; I had braces; I had glasses, as I do now; I was a bit overweight. I was a gamer. Another interest I had in high school was obviously athletics. I jumped into athletics right away. I had already jumped into football; basketball was my go-to when I was younger. Football had just started for me my freshman year of high school and it had grown on me really quickly.

My sophomore year in high school, I jumped right into track and field. Track and field really caught on because my head coach at the time—the assistant coach of the track team, who was

our throws coach—encouraged me to stick with track and field to stay fit for football season. I did not know it would have the effect on me it did then. My biggest interests in high school were sports, games, computer tech, and being a socializer. My mother was always on good terms with anybody she met. It kind of rubbed off on me and it really made my high school experience sail by.

LT: When you were coming to the end of your high school career. What was the process of choosing college?

AJ: It was a bit different for me. I did not want to stray too far from home because there were a lot of things going on at home around the time I was graduating college. Let's take a step back to 2006, a lot of different things happened, my father got arrested while I was in high school. Back in 2006, I was just getting into high school and my father got arrested, so our family was divided. It was a huge issue that happened at our residence in Romulus. Our house got raided; we got put on the wall in our own living room. We were searched; our whole house got searched. I was just fourteen at the time; I did not have any idea what was going on. I was terrified; it was the first time I had any encounter with the police before. Long story short, my father got arrested that day and taken away on a squad car. I did not see him again for at least another six months. We were homeless because the police said they would come back and seize whatever else was necessary. We could not keep up the payments on the house; I later found out that my parents were living check to check.

After everything happened, we had to adjust and adapt. So, we moved back to Inkster when I was fourteen and we lived in my uncle's house. My uncle sheltered us; he only asked that we keep the lawn nice and we pay utilities. He asked my mother; I did not want to burden my mother with all the struggles. So, I got my first job at Little Caesars my junior year of high school and it helped me to take care of my own personal needs, all the while, helping my mother with whatever we could scrap together. Then my brother started to get a job, my little brother, my older sister, and everything fell together to help feed off one another.

I did not mean to get side-tracked here. But, again, in high school, those were my big interests. Finding a college, per se, I did not want to stray far from home because I knew my family needed the resources. I could not leave . . . I had offers for football and track; they were great educational opportunities outside of the state, but I did not want to pay out-of-state tuition—a big thing that would hinder my family. We did not have money to pay for out-of-state tuition and having three other siblings made those decisions really difficult.

Track started to excel and I started to get scholarship offers. I got one from Central; I got one from Michigan State and smaller colleges in Louisiana. Not wanting to move, left me with two choices, Central Michigan or Michigan State University. I knew my mother went here and a lot of my family members went to Michigan State. They offered me thirty-three percent of a full

scholarship, so I thought, *Why not?* I signed up with Michigan State and got here in the fall of 2010 as a freshman.

LT: Going back to the struggles you were talking about—you were trying to help your family, and competing as a student athlete in high school—were those things stressful for you or did they motivate you?

AJ: Student athletics really motivated me; it kept me out of trouble; it kept me busy. It was something to keep my mind off of everything else that was going on around me; it was a huge stress reliever. When I was playing football or when I stepped onto of the track and the ring, all I thought about was how I could make myself better on that day. I like to live one day at a time. If things are outside of my control, I can't control or do anything about them. Sports were a big motivator for me.

LT: Had you been to Michigan State before you signed on?

AJ: Yes. Before I came to Michigan State, I met with Coach Newell who was the assistant throws coach at the time. He invited me on an unofficial visit on my own time with my mother. We walked around campus; we checked out the weight room; we saw Michigan State for what it was. I met so many athletes and watched them practice. It just grew on me right away; it was very different. I wasn't used to seeing such a big campus coming from Romulus. I did not think I was as prepared not only academically, but mentally for all the other challenges that came when I got here. I do not regret it at all, my decision to come here. I love Michigan State University; it has been nothing but good to me for the last seven years.

LT: What were your first impressions of Michigan State University?

AJ: When I initially came, it was during the summer, like it is now, so there was not a lot people to see and interact with. A whole different story my first day on campus during the school year. It was a huge culture shock, a lot of new faces, and a lot of different people I did not know on a large campus that I was not familiar with. Navigating was not easy; socializing was not easy. An hour away from home felt almost like four-hundred miles at times. I tried to make my world small, the smaller I made my world, the better. I got a roommate who was also African American, so it was easy for me to bridge that cultural gap. His name was Tori Brooks. We became really close friends; we were roommates for that first year and it made things way easier. We hung out all the time so I had someone to talk to and hang around.

Aside from that, other cultural shocks, it was the first time I was introduced to an international population. First time I saw an Asian or any kind of . . . I don't want to use bad terminology, but it was a cultural shock for me; more Hispanics than I had ever seen. Coming from a high school that was predominately black and white, you come to MSU and you have a gray area all the

sudden that you have to work out. Not necessarily, “work out” or “tolerate”, but grow familiar with. It was very different for me; I got over it within the first couple of months. It was not as much threatening as it was different.

LT: What were your plans for your degree?

AJ: I was a huge computer nerd. I was really into computers; I love to know how they work. When I was a kid, I got toys, video games; my mother got me my first Xbox. I just loved playing with it. I wanted to take it apart but I was fearful that I would not be able to put it back together. I thought I would just wait for school to teach me and I went to school for computer engineering my first year. It was very different; it was not something I was ready for right away. It was very challenging, but I was very invested in it. I felt like it was worth it my first year.

LT: Is that the degree you graduated with?

AJ: No, I did not graduate with the degree in computer engineering. Things got really tough. My first year on campus; my grades were really poor. Granted, let’s jump back to the culture shock that came here. When I first stepped foot on campus, there were a whole lot of things being a student and a student athlete that you have to go through. You have to go through student orientation, you have to go through student athlete orientation, a whole bunch of things.

When I got here, I have a whole bunch things going on the first four and a half months of being here. I really had to cope with learning campus, getting familiar with classes. I was not used to these class sizes of three hundred and forty-five when you go to your TA. It was very different for me. I felt like I wasn’t getting the attention that I needed. At the same time, I wasn’t comfortable asking for it either.

My grades plummeted my first semester here; I was at 1.87. I had failed a math class that was five credits. I was taking twelve credits and my math class was five credits. It was an advanced math course that I had surprised myself by testing into. I got behind and I was fearful to ask questions in such a large lecture hall when everyone else seemed to be in cruise control. I fell behind; it was my fault. Dealing with mathematics, you fall behind one day and everything after stockpiles. At the end of the year, I was left with 0.0; I had literally flunked the class terribly. It took a toll on the rest of my GPA. I was ineligible my first semester and that really sucked.

I went to my advisor and I told him that computer engineering might not be for me. He told me that I seemed like a people-person. I figured on my own that I was ready to try something different. He said, “Why don’t you do ahead and drop into something like sociology?” I said, “What is sociology?” He said, “It is literally just the study of people”. So, I gave it a go to see if I would like it. I started taking two hundred level classes, three hundred level classes; I started

learning about different social norms, cultural expectations, norms, race, gender studies and all kind of different things. It really stuck with me and I ran with it.

LT: Do you think your experience going from a place that was not so diverse, like Romulus High School, to Michigan State, influenced your interest in sociology as a major?

AR: Yes, it really did. I have learned, through being a sociology major, that we see others through a mirror from which we see ourselves. I have taken so much away from that. Just being exposed to all these different cultures on campus, you see people adopt other cultures and they are becoming like a norm now. It is not so much a phenomenon, but an ongoing human evolution, not in a super dynamic sense, but you can see it happening right in front of you. I thought that was interesting to see. All these different people interacting with one another really got me engaged. That is why I really ran with the degree.

LT: You said your roommate helped you adapt to MSU, were there other student groups or organizations that you looked to fill those gaps?

AJ: When I got here, my GPA from high school was not that great. I graduated with a 2.9 in high school. I was not the biggest bookworm at all. When I got here, I was a part of a group for minority students who are floating on that bubble of being eligible to be admitted into MSU. Like, hey, you got in, but this is what you have to do to stay in. I was going to classes, but with student athletics, they require you to get eight hours of study hours a week. So, trying to juggle both those things were very stressful.

Time management became a big issue. But, having friends like Tori and my team really helped me pull through. Being an athlete, I did not have time for other outside groups to branch out to. I was with my team for four hours a day. If I look back at my college schedule, my day started from ten o'clock. I had class at 10:20-11:10AM, another from 11:40-12:40PM; I was going to Mount Hope from 1-2PM, late afternoon class from 3-4PM, and from 4:30-6PM we usually lift. That whole block of day is all cut away, all in one swoop. From 6-10PM, that time where you want to go to bed—that four-hour block that you are given—What do you want to do? Granted, from 10-6pm, you have to find some time to feed yourself. I really did not have time for any extracurricular activities or to see what resources MSU had to offer because my time felt so consumed and constricted every day.

LT: Can you explain what it was like being a Spartan on the track and field team?

AJ: It was amazing, no better experience. Another reason why I came to MSU is that I would enjoy going to a big school. I left Romulus or the metro Detroit area because I was tired of the same old thing. I wanted to see something new; I felt like my world was small. Being a Spartan, it just redefined who I was. It felt like I could reinvent myself. It meant I could be any Spartan I

wanted to be. Experiencing the campus for all its worth made me feel much better about my decision to go here. Because of the traditions on campus and the way they brand themselves really well, it is a great traditional school. You go down to Ann Arbor and the campus is like a city; everything is spread out and they have their own branding. But, being a Spartan is something truly special.

LT: I want to go through your athletic career at MSU. You started in 2010; did you compete that first year?

AJ: My grades sunk my first year, so I was ineligible to compete. It was very disheartening. That transition could have been a lot smoother, but there were some rough edges that I needed to work out before. I did not compete in 2010, my redshirt freshman year, where I sat out and trained on a consistent basis without traveling or competing in uniform.

LT: In your 2011-2012 year, what was your main focus in terms of athletics?

AJ: My main focus was making the podium, placing top three. From 2010-2011, things have gotten real repetitive. Your redshirt year gets really long because it was an endless cycle of going to school, training, going back to your dorm. It just got so repetitive for me. I had a competitive itch to get out there and prove my worth on the track team. School was already stressful and I felt like track could help me do better in school as well. It was a huge stress reliever, getting out, competing, going home feeling good about yourself, and doing it all over again next week.

My 2011-2012 year, when I first started competing, my redshirt year, I thought about making the podium. I grew up with guys who were much older than me when I first got here. I came in by myself for the throws team. There was no one else alongside me, whether it was male or female. I was on an island all on my own. I felt like I had to prove myself to the team. I am pretty introverted; I did not talk a whole lot first semester. Those were my goals: make the podium, perform well, and convince my coach that he had found himself a good athlete to invest in.

LT: What are your events in track and field?

AJ: My events are discus, shotput, weight throw, and hammer throw. All of which, I have broken university records in. Three of which I hold, one of my teammates, Vinny Gjakaj, who is two year younger than me, broke my record two years ago—which I was pretty upset about, but I could not be more proud of him. Those are my events. My primary event is the discus.

LT: How did you feel when you won the Track and Field Freshman of the year?

AJ: That takes me way way back. I was at our banquet; we have one every year; when I got called as the award recipient, I did not know how to feel. I was so focused. Our banquet is right before champion season starts, so my mind was in another place. When I got recognized for the award, it had felt really good. I felt like I had done everything that I had set out to do for that year and there was still more coming because championship season was just around the corner.

LT: You qualified for the NCAA East Preliminaries?

AJ: I believe they were down in Florida, I could be wrong. I did qualify for the East Preliminaries that year and it was so satisfying. Only the top twenty-eight in the region can go; I was right in the twenties, I was twenty- third or twenty- fourth, right around in the mix. So I had a shot at making nationals, but it was hit or miss.

LT: Based on that experienced, what were you hoping to accomplish?

AJ: It was pretty stacked that year, so I did not know what I was capable of doing. Lonnie [Pugh] was a huge mentor of mine and still is. He still coaches here; he is an assistant coach at Michigan State. He was my teammate; He was a junior when I was a freshman. He really got me on the way when we went to East Preliminaries. I was just going to throw my heart out and see if I could make nationals because that was the next step after regionals. I went in not knowing what I could do and ended up placing tenth in the region; the top twelve go to nationals. I was overwhelmed that day making it to nationals. At this time, school is done; my GPA is on the up again; I was at least back to a 2.2. It is really icing on the cake when you can make it to the national meet, the biggest stage of the NCAA. Everything was going good.

LT: How did you perform at the Nationals?

AJ: At nationals, very humbling experience my freshman year because I got demolished. I took like twenty-third and there was twenty-four competitors. So I think I took twenty-third, but the experience itself was phenomenal. After that meet, I told myself that I wanted to return every year following this year and that is what I did. It was phenomenal; you got to see elite athlete all across the country compete for national championship. It was something that I had never seen before. Coming from Romulus High School, we went to local meets. We never got to go out of state. The school did not have the money to ship me out of the country if I was a primetime athlete to compete nationally. It was just not something that I was given the luxury of doing. Being in college, having seen that for the first time, it was mind-blowing.

LT: It seems after that you took off. In 2012, you were All-American, NCAA Indoor Championship Qualifier, NCAA East Preliminary Round Qualifier, Nationals, and First-Team All-Big Ten.

AJ: Yep, I did not go home that summer. This was just a couple years after everything happened at home. I decided not to go home. I stopped going home during the summer because I figured I would stay out here to train and get better. That is what I did. I took summer classes and taking those summer classes had allowed me to stay and train. My coach was on and off because we had to strict NCAA rules that say when we can train and when we cannot. It has to be voluntary and I was more than willing to give up my time to get better. The weather was exceptionally nice during the summer too; I figured that I would take advantage of it. Calf lifting [unclear] would usually peak in May or June and I did not want to lose out on that strength and come back in the fall to feel sluggish. I used that summer and stayed away from all the madness going on at home. I stayed up here to train and I kept getting better. That was when everything took off and the next year, I won the championship.

LT: How did your mom feel about the gains you were making?

AJ: My mom loved it. She wanted me to follow my dreams. She knew because she went here and that this was my home away from home. She was like, "Honey, whatever you have to do just go ahead and strive for it." Another thing she told me was that, "Honey I love you, but I can't feed you no more." That was a big reason I stuck around during the summer [laughs]. She was overly excited with me in regards to track and field and all the progress I was making. She was the one who pushed me and I appreciate her for that. She told me, "Hey, you are not done yet, you got to keep on going." So, I did not lift my foot off the gas.

LT: Tell me about your junior year.

AJ: That is when things started coming around full circle. The year following my first championship, I stayed at home for the summer. At this point, I really did not have a home. My mother had moved back to Tennessee; my father was scheduled to get out of prison in 2012. My mom moved down to Tennessee with her husband, Larry. I had no place to go; campus was my home that year from 2012-2013. Campus was truly my home. I did not have a choice to go back to Romulus; there was nothing there; nothing in Inkster. I stayed up here and kept grinding and working. My brother found an engineering job in Wisconsin and he moved out there to go work. My sister accepted a trucking management job in Romulus where she stayed and she had a daughter.

LT: Did you feel isolated or supported?

AJ: I felt supported from a distance. Everyone was doing their own thing. There was really no way we could support each other financially. I mean, we could, but we rather not ask. Each of us knew what we were going through financially at the time. I did have support, personally, but it was my own will to move forward. My family, our connection, started to branch out a bit. We are not in communication like we once were. We were close-knit when we all lived under the

same roof, but now that we have branched out, we only talk maybe once or twice every several months.

LT: You won your first championship in 2013?

AJ: That was 2012, outdoor was the big ten championship and that was Ohio State with the discus.

LT: You said that indoor was more of a challenge?

AJ: Indoor was so much more of a challenge. A lot more athletes started blowing up. There was Lonnie Pugh, my own teammate that I am going back and forth with; there was Darrell Hill, Chuck Enekeuchi from Purdue, Danny Block from Wisconsin, Chad Wright from Nebraska. All these guys are big named guys. Me, being a young cub, I was not expected to win my first national championship. I was an underdog that came out of nowhere. I was expected to take sixth place and ended up winning. So, next year, they were like, Man, we will see how this young guy performs next year. I take it indoor; my season is going fairly well.

Then, come the Big Ten, I am up against this big guy from Wisconsin, Danny Block. Somehow, by the grace of god, I inched my way pass Danny in the second or third round and I held onto it from there. That is how I went on to win my second championship. Very overwhelmed with joy, it was my first title in the shotput. It was very satisfying knowing that I topped one guy that I had looked up to for a very long time.

LT: Was that a Big Ten Title or NCAA?

AJ: That was the Big Ten Title, indoor, shotput title. That was also at Ohio State at the SPIRE.

LT: In 2014-2015, your last year at MSU, were there things you wanted to accomplish before you left?

AJ: Yes, there are several things I wanted to accomplish. Going into 2015, I set the bar high; I wanted to be a national champion; I wanted to reclaim my discus title; I wanted to return to the national championship; I wanted to finish with all the university records I could take. That was my selfish year. I started knocking out one at a time. The records that I had already had: the discus record, the shotput record that I had just broken last year indoor, the hammer record that was coming down this year unfortunately, and the weight throw record that I extended that year too.

LT: You hit all those in that year?

AJ: I hit the shotput one in 2014, the discus came down, the weight throw came down, and the hammer came down by not me, but my teammate. For the most part, all of which, I set out to do came from wishing. As far as the other things go, make it back to the national championship, I accomplished; become a big ten champion, accomplished; all-American again, accomplished. The national championship would always lose me, but in light of all the things that I accomplished, I did not hold any grudges against myself. I had a phenomenal year.

LT: Outside of athletics, as you were ending your time at MSU, what were your plans?

AJ: Really, with athletics, I got a sense of tunnel vision; I got so caught up with sports. I did not take a lot of time out of my day to realize what was next. A lot of the college experience, I think most athletes and even students get caught up in the struggle to finish college and the next step kind of hits you all at once. Like, what's next? When people do not know, it is a huge issue. That is some of the things that I talked to the advisors and Student Athletes Support Services (SASS) here about because when I was done with athletics in June, almost a month after. I am sitting here like, *Man what am I going to do?* I have had things on the table that I had been considering at that point, so it is not like I did not have any options. It is just that I was indecisive.

Alan Haller—who worked at the department for fourteen, seventeen years, also a student athlete that played football, went to the NFL for a few years, and became an officer, now working at the Varsity S Club—approached me and said, “AJ, what are you doing after school?” I was getting some emails from real estate companies for interviews and some local places around East Lansing. But, it was not my niche. Selling homes is not me. Alan goes, “What if I make you a recommendary recruit for the MSU Police Department?” In light of what was going on during that time period, two years ago, I thought I could really be an asset to that department. I do not want to be a guy looking outside-in; I want to be looking inside-out; I learn a lot more that way. I took him up on his offer. After I graduated in May, got done with my collegiate career in June, I went off to the academy in August 2015. I was there for eighteen weeks and I graduated from the Police Academy in December.

LT: When you say there was a lot going on, were you referring to the racial tension in the United States?

AJ: Yes, a lot of racial tension going on in 2015. It is kind of thrown in your face. Being here at college, you learn about it, much less exposed to it. After I graduated, I really had to go out into the real world. In college, you are under this huge umbrella that you really do not know because you are under it learning. Everything outside is different when you are in the rain with an umbrella than being out in the rain without one. That is what I felt like I was stepping into. I said “Hey, Alan.”—who was offering me this job at the PD— “You know I can go ahead and make a difference. I can go ahead and seal this job and make sure it is not going to someone

who is less qualified than me.” Huge responsibility, by the way, I am not sure I am up for it. This job makes you mature faster than most. Being at a young age, these past few years, I have matured fast as an officer. I took on the challenge. I have been loving it every day. You get home and it makes for great table talk with the family [laughs].

LT: Do you think that being an alumnus of MSU helps you fulfill your duties as a MSU Police officer?

AJ: Definitely, I love my department. We handle things exceptionally well when it comes to serving our community, employing new officers. One thing MSU does really well is require its officers to have four years of college experience. Obviously, I graduated from MSU, so geography wasn't a huge problem for me because I have been up and down this campus for the past five years before I was hired. I knew the campus really well and had connections at the Student Athletic Department. I have got some really strong bonds here. Everything just clicked right away for me and everything after that was pretty smooth sailing. Being a part of the department and getting employed here was a very smooth transition. A lot of legal stuff I have to learn, not being a criminal justice major, but the academy taught me all that I need to know.

LT: Do you work with Sgt. McGlothian-Taylor?

AJ: Yes, that is my sergeant. She gets me involved in interactive community-based thing like this. She really puts her foot in every door that opens up to her in terms of branching out to the community. I just really took advantage of it as soon as she opened the door. She is a great sergeant, all for reaching out to the community and community policing. I love it. I am right on board with her.

LT: What is the name of the unit?

AJ: It is Inclusion and Anti-Bias Unit and she has been working with that unit for several years now I believe. It is a fairly new unit that she has headed herself and she has taken me under her wing. I have gotten to see another dimension of campus. I had spoken about my cultural shock when I first came to campus, and now, I see this totally different world as far as all the different events they offer people of specific nationalities, from different languages, from different cultures. All these different things that I did not know about before, Sergeant Taylor was exposing me to these different things. It was great; it was an eye-opener. It gave me an opportunity to really widen that cultural lens that I have, nothing but knowledge.

LT: What has been your best experience as a MSU police officer?

AJ: I have to say, it has its ups and downs. My best experience, I would say is a collection of things. My best experience on a day-to-day basis is having the freedom—granted, we have

twelve-hour work shifts a day—it gives me. We do not have any quotas or anything. We're just asked to serve and protect. Obviously, we have policy and procedure that goes along with that, but it does not hinder our freedom across campus—across this seven block paradise, I would call it. That is my greatest thing about being an officer so far. I am not confined to a desk. I am not going to buy into a desk, buy into an office, anything like that. I can go out; this campus is my office; I can hop in my car and drive around for twenty minutes to see what is going on. I can hop out, walk around the buildings, walk around a place I am not familiar with to get familiar with the area I am policing. There is no better feeling. I get to go home at the end of the day and do it all again the next.

LT: You said there have been ups and downs. What are some of the downs?

AJ: This job makes you mature really quickly. I had an incident a couple years ago where a student died. He died and I did not take it really well. We could not save him. I think that is what hurt me most. Some of our older officers—I am just a young cub, but these guys are lionesses— have seen things before. It was something new to me, seeing someone die after performing CPR for five or ten minutes. Five or ten minutes does not seem like a long time, but it turns into what feels like hours. Then when you know they are going, it hits home really hard. I had to bite the bullet. What was done was done and we did what we could. I had to go home at the end of the day because I still have to be back tomorrow. I would not call it a burden, just some of the sorrows and the pleasures that come with the job.

LT: Was part of the appeal of being a police that it is an athletic occupation?

AJ: One thing that I love about being an officer is that they ask that you be fit. With the pros and cons of having a twelve hours shift, I get to go home after working maybe three or four days in a row. I will have maybe four or five or three days off in a stretch. During that time, I can go to the weight room, I can lift, I can keep my fitness, maintain my fitness. It is something that I plan to do; it goes hand in hand with track and field. It is how I compete to this day. One just really benefits the other. It is a huge stress reliever. It keeps my uniform from being too tight. You know what I mean, I love it. We used to have a weight room and I wish we still had it.

LT: Do you still have athletic goals for yourself?

AJ: It is very early to hang up the athletic card right now. When you cease to be an athlete, they start to call you a NARP. A NARP is a Non-Athletic Regular Person. A NARP is what we call our regular students here on campus and I am not ready to be a NARP yet [laughs]. Ultimately, get to the Olympic Games in Tokyo that is long-term; short-term, get back in the saddle on my own. Get ready to compete in the spring and summer of 2018 where I can really put my foot to the gas and show people that I am ready to compete and willing to work. Those are my immediate athletic goals to get back on the map. I was there in 2015; I need to reestablish myself for 2018.

LT: You haven't competed since 2015?

AJ: No, I have not competed since 2015. That is going to be the biggest obstacle, getting back in that competitive mode without really having competitors along beside me, teammates, and coaches pushing me along the way. It is going to be the biggest hassle.

LT: Do you know some of the athletes you'll be competing against for that spot in the Olympics?

AJ: I do, I am pretty sure I do. I know some of the athletes who are going to be returning and training consistently. You got Sam Adams who graduated from Penn State, you got Rodney Brown who graduated from LSU, you got Andrew Evans who is at the training center, along with Rodney in Chula Vista, California, who are both probably training their a** off getting ready for the games in Toyko. You have a few others. I need to be ready. I know that they have the resources. It is really about me putting that extra effort with the resources or not.

LT: How did your family and friends take your new occupation?

AJ: As a law enforcement officer, my father was not up and arms about it. He wasn't hip hip hooray, he knew that it would be different for me being an officer. He was already concerned about me being an African American male in just everyday life, but he thought it was more so of a double whammy being an officer and then, an African American male outside of uniform. It is two worlds that I have to live in and kinda cope with. My mother was more so indifferent she supports me in everything that I do. She trusts me in what I do. So when I became an officer, she supported me; she had my back. It is not that my dad didn't have my back. He was just really concerned and had my back. My older brother said "AJ, run with it you are going to do what you love to do." At this time, my little brother is in prison. So this is more reason to get involved because you got people on two ends of the spectrum.

My little brother, back in 2013 or 2012, decided to rob a liquor store. He was living down in Tennessee with my mother. When my mother moved down to Tennessee, my younger brother went with her. Throughout this whole time 2006-2012, my little brother is not taking the situation as well as me, my oldest brother, and my third oldest sister. It is hitting him really hard and he does not know how to mitigate his pain. He goes to Tennessee with my mother and their financial situation is not that great. My brother tries to find a way to get money.

He goes to the liquor store that he works at. He works at this liquor store. He locks the door behind him and he knows the girl that works behind the cash register. And he goes "Hey, I do not have a lot of money; I need to pay bills; I need you to give me all the money out of the cash register." The woman obviously says no. They go on and he leaves without a fuss. Police show up at the door sometime later; he is arrested for armed robbery; he winds up in prison. Back to

the topic of how they feel about it, my youngest brother is not fond at all of me being an officer. He knows about all the ongoing issues in law enforcement and minorities in this country. It is hard for him, being where he is at, to differentiate between the two. At times, I feel like I could not differentiate the two. I had to look inside-out. I had to go inside. I had to figure out what made a law enforcement officer tick. I put in those eighteen weeks and I figured out and I invested and here I am.

LT: Beyond athletics, do you have goals for yourself?

AJ: Yes, I do have goals. I really want to get back into coaching. I am an assistant coach at DeWitt High School. I recently started in March. I am just volunteering my time. I go out and coach those guys up, the throwers; I coach those guys, volunteer my time. I was recently out there because some of the guys wanted to throw during the summer. So, I got those guys presents. I got them wrist wraps for their wrists for shotput, just to update their knowledge of the events. I see myself five, ten years from now, getting back in the saddle as an athlete and coach. When I wind down and settle into being a more mature AJ, I definitely want to be established as an officer. I love doing this job and it helps me mature faster. Coming from this big headed athletic student in college, it really humbles you going into law enforcement and dealing with people's everyday lives. You realize your world is not so big in regards to everyone else's. But, that is where I want to be: coaching.

LT: Are you interested in coaching high school level or college level?

AJ: I am not sure yet. I am fairly new to coaching; I just started coaching at DeWitt and it is my first coaching job. High school is very different than college. In college, the students, the athletes are not as spongy; they are not as receptive. Because I know when I was in college and my teammates in college; college kids are busy. It is hard for them to be fully invested in the sport. There are pros and cons to both. High school, they have tons of time to put an hour or two to throw in. They have a whole summer where they do not have commitments. They do not have to worry about bills coming home and having to find work to get those bills paid for. I am leaning towards high school; it is much more flexible. The whole recruitment aspect is taken out of it, what you see is what you get from the school. You can recruit in school. Definitely leaning towards high school.

LT: What are some of your best memories from your time at MSU?

AJ: Some of my best memories would be my family, as in my athletic family. That group of guys whether it be Lonnie, Brad, Bella, Shatora, Zach, Kat, Ashley, list goes on and on, great family. We would always hang out, whenever we had meets, whenever we did not have meets. We were always really close to one another. Those men and women became my brothers and sisters while on campus. They are still close to me now. It is funny because now we are all

getting invited to all their weddings and stuff. I have three wedding this year already and two more coming up towards the end of the year. It is something to look forward to, watching us all grow up. So, seeing us grow together is probably my favorite memory I had at MSU. Just seeing the connections that I had gained and the friendships that have grown.

LT: Can you tell me about your experience when the Batman vs. Superman movie was filmed here?

AJ: Oh, boy. Ok, the Batman and Superman movie is filming on campus. I am oblivious to what was going on. I did not think they were lifting and duffing. We lift at 4:30 every day; I like to show up early. I was the captain that year. I usually show up early. It was around 4:15, we put our stuff in the cubbies in the back of the weight room. I try to pry this door open and it is locked. I am like, *What is going on?* I look through the glass. There are several athletic trainers walking around. There is this guy in a blue shirt rowing dumbbells. I am like, *Who is this guy?* He knows you cannot wear blue in here. You cannot wear anything but green, white, black, or grey in the weight room. So, I am like this guy is definitely not supposed to be in here, but we cannot make out who it is.

I walk around to these other doors and it is none other than Ben Affleck working out in preparation for the movie. Everyone was looking out through the glass and were like, "Oh my god, it's Ben Affleck!" After he is done with the workout, he walks over to the door and he greets everybody. He is like, "Hey guys, sorry to hold you up, I just had to get a quick lift in." We took pictures right where we were sitting. I got an individual picture with him. He was kinda rushing out because he had places to be, obviously, they were filming on campus. It was a great experience, one that I will never forget.

LT: How do you define diversity?

AJ: Diversity is a very complex word nowadays. It spans more along lines than just race, from just learning what I have for the past several years, it spans across language barriers, race, culture. You can throw so many things into the world "culture." Diversity for me is seeing everything, knowing that it is different . . . not accepting it, but realizing it and trying to understand it. It is such a broad spectrum and so many different variables what diversity means. In our time, we focus on one or two variables when there is a dozens that truly define diversity.

LT: Do you believe MSU to be a diverse space?

AJ: MSU is more like a toss salad. It has its pockets here and there of diversity; it depends on what you define as diverse. You have different niches. Would I consider them diverse as a

whole? Yes. Inter-collectively? Nah, not so much. Getting there? Probably, in time, yes, I think so.

LT: Is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you would like to add?

AJ: Not really. For anyone who is watching, shoot, take away from this what you will. I do not know how many years down the line that you might be watching this. There is something to learn every year. You guys might look back at this and say, Man, that guy is the most ignorant guy in the world, why is he talking like that? There is always something new to learn. Just keep your ears open.

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: *Mileena McDonald, 1/29/18*