The following is a keynote address by Johann “Ace” Francis, a U.S. citizen wrongfully deported for ten years to Jamaica, delivered at the “Citizenship-in-Question” symposium, Boston College Law School, April 19, 2012. Explanatory remarks in square brackets were inserted from Skype interviews with Mr. Francis by Jacqueline Stevens on December 21, 2009.

Just being here, in something like this, is huge. I wrote a speech, but it’s hard to capture ten years of one’s life. You might be asking yourself, how could someone get in a situation like this? I was born in Jamaica, but I grew up in Washington State. My stepfather was in the military so I was in a military family. And we moved all over the country. I moved there [to Washington] when I was seven. When you grow up and you think of yourself as an American, you really don’t think otherwise, or to go to immigration when you are fourteen years old [the year his mother naturalized, thus automatically conferring on Ace his U.S. citizenship]. I bought a car when I was sixteen. And then when I was eighteen, I got in trouble. It was spring break and we went to Oregon.

I was in high school, ready to graduate, and my mother moved to Georgia. I said, okay, I’ll move down with her when I graduate. But, I lost her phone number. We didn’t have cell phones then. And I lost my pager. I was on a trip to Oregon, [to] a town called Seaside. A lot of people [were there] on spring break. Two girls in a convertible (two white females) were in this parking lot. My friends started talking to them. Their boyfriends were pulling in. They were drinking on the back of a pick-up and came up hostile. Everybody got in the fight. The police came up and everyone was trying to leave. When they came around, there were four of them on top of me in the corner.

I’m in an area where the police know the families of the kids. They [the district attorney] came to me and said, “Thirty-six months. This is the best
we can do.” I have no family. Hey, thirty-six months, are you crazy? This was a fight, but “if you go to trial and you lose you’re going to get five to seven years,” they told me. I served time in a boot camp program. I was proud that I graduated. On graduation day, I was told that I couldn’t leave because I have this INS hold. I said, “I thought I was a U.S. citizen.” They said, “Can you prove it?” To tell you honestly, I didn’t know if I was a U.S. citizen. I told them how I came [to the United States], with my mother. But when they said, “When did she get her U.S. citizenship?” I couldn’t answer. They shipped me to Arizona. To Eloy. They flew me to Las Vegas and from there drove me to Eloy [Detention Center].

So my mother’s looking for me in Washington State. By the time she found out that I was in jail, I’m in [an immigration jail in] Arizona. She was looking for me in Oregon, but by the time she found out I was in Arizona, I’m already in Jamaica.

**At Eloy Detention Center**

I didn’t know I was supposed to see a judge. I waited three months. I never actually saw the judge until I was deported. To tell you the truth, when I went in front of the judge he didn’t ask me any questions. When I spoke with the judge, as a matter of fact, there was no question and answer, so I didn’t talk to the judge. “You’re deported forever,” he said. That was really tragic. I talked to the guy there who handed me the papers and I spoke with the guards on numerous occasions and tried to get in contact with my mother. And the system is kinda set up to the fact that you don’t really get to explain things. I’m eighteen and I work at Taco Bell. You have no money for a lawyer. I was waiting to try to prove I was a U.S. citizen and I was waiting to get in touch with my family. There were people waiting there [at Eloy] two years. I decided I was going to go along with it. What they do is if you can’t prove you’re right [that you are a citizen], you’re deported. The demand is on you to prove your current situation. And really at that point in time, I was just a scared child who really didn’t know where to go or where to turn.

[Seeing the judge] was like an aftermath thing. I [had] already signed everything. It was more [like] him telling me what I did, and [then] based on what you did, you are deportable and you know that. It wasn’t an investigative conversation to understand who is in front of him. More of a telling you that, “Okay, we know what you did, and you did wrong, and you’re not a U.S. citizen, and you’re going to be deported, and you signed this sheet of paper [agreeing to deportation].”

So I got to Jamaica [redacted], 1999. On my birthday. That was so bittersweet. I’m released there. I slept on the bench at Kingston International Airport. They had a little police department, and I went there and said I got deported and they said, “What?!” Really, what they did was kicked me out the door. I spent that
night on the bench, with the mosquitoes biting me. I was happy that I was out of the facility [Eloy].

My mother didn’t know I was in Jamaica. I spent one year [in Jamaica] when I was fifteen and my mother brought me to my father [who never had custody and is not listed on Ace’s birth certificate], and that’s how I knew how to get in contact with him. My father has thirteen kids, and I’m the only one that is in the U.S. That was so lucky. My father got in contact with my mother. “Wow, we’ve been looking for you!” It was a sigh of relief that I wasn’t dead or hurt somewhere. That’s the first time hearing my mother’s voice again. . . . It was almost painful. I didn’t cry but I was alone. I’m from Jamaica but there are no Jamaicans in Washington State. I didn’t have any family, no auntie or uncle. All I knew were my mother and sister, and moving to Jamaica, there wasn’t even that.

I was living in the house where my father grew up, a rural area near the airport. It’s really the woods, where people still have outside bathrooms. For breakfast I’d get up and go in the bush and drink coconuts. It’s so amazing what you can do with a coconut. You can make oil, there’s fresh meat, milk. You drink two, you’ll be filled up. Before it’s a coconut it’s called jelly. It’s actually soft in the middle. I lived off of jelly coconuts. The land also had sugarcane. That’s not really a well-balanced diet. The house had holes in the floor and ceiling. When it rained too much you’ve got to set up buckets. It’s the most primitive living you can think about.

In high school I had a personality. I was the [TV] anchor. I was the guy who ran for president. Moving [with my mother to Georgia] was not an option for me. I was very popular. I had that spark, always trying to make something out of nothing. I’m five foot seven and played basketball. I started my own basketball clinic in the local area. I don’t have any work so I would go to whatever shops and ask them to sponsor my team, and really that was mostly for uniforms and the rest of the money was for dinner.

The worst thing about it [being in Jamaica] was I couldn’t say my name is Johann and I’ve been deported from the U.S. and I’m a citizen. Those people who are deported, [they] are outcasts. They are looked down upon. You had your chance and you blew it. Why should I help you now? The first couple of years were really hard because I still had an American accent. I had to come up with a story about how I went to school there but I’m back here. I’m still going with that story up to this day.

That was a mental drain. Those first four years were very difficult for me because I had an accent and I was unable to speak Jamaican without the accent. I’ve been constantly somebody else. I think three people knew my true story. I don’t know if you know psychology, but when you hear a foreign person that
speaks another language and when they get upset they start speaking that language; it’s an expression of themselves and who they are, and they relate better speaking the language they know, and feel frustrated speaking a language they don’t know. That’s me for ten years. In the seventh or eighth year I started associating myself with other deportees for the sake of being home in America. That was so weird. I could relate to them whether I was a citizen or not. I could relate to them. I told one or two of them the truth because you wanted to talk to somebody. You want to tell your story.

I figured it out about my seventh or eighth year. My mother told me. She was under the assumption that I was unnaturalized and then deported. Up to last night I had to explain it to her. No, I didn’t get unnaturalized. They made a huge mistake. She was under the impression that there was nothing that could be done. And I didn’t know. I only listened to what the judge told me. And the judge told me never to return.

I didn’t know or understand the whole law. I knew they weren’t supposed to, but they did. I signed the papers. It’s my fault and the judge said never to return [Ace starts crying]. I have nightmares. I could have stayed in there.

The system down there [in Jamaica] is so bad. They’re just putting medical and birth certificates on computer records. Everything before was manual. They’re checking records thirty years back. I filed on three different occasions to get [my birth certificate, the first document in the U.S. government file for Ace from when he entered as a child]. I needed a birth certificate number. [In 2009 the Jamaican government] started an online program where they’ll look for your number for you, and somebody called me and provided a number. I was so happy. I really didn’t have any identification. I had to be very creative just getting a tax number so I can work [in Jamaica]. All my IDs are from my work IDs.

[Until obtaining the birth certificate] I was unable to prove who I was. I could prove who my mother was, but I couldn’t prove who I was. This was the first valid identification I’ve had in ten years. When I got it, I told myself, this is the prettiest piece of paper I’ve seen.

**Back in the United States**

[After I arrived at the Miami airport, on December 24, 2009], Homeland Security stopped me. You go through the checkpoint, and they asked me how I am, and I said I was good and gave them my passport. He was looking at the computer, staring with a confused look, like he didn’t know what to think or do. “What kind of trouble have you been in?” I said, “I got something better for you.” I pulled out the papers [the consular officer in Jamaica gave him in a
sealed envelope, in case there was a problem]. I said, “They deported a citizen.” He said, “They can’t do that.”

I’m scared, really. I’m keeping notes, and I kid you not, the simplest thing stirs so much emotion. You hear the buzz from the hot water, coming back home, my first hot shower. The water smells different. I’ve been away for so long. It’s like if you haven’t eaten salt for ten years and someone gives you, like, a chimichanga.

Mr. Francis lived in the Atlanta area and worked at Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson Airport as a manager for a company that sells credit cards on behalf of an airline. He was heartbroken about the ten years he felt he lost, from nineteen to twenty-nine, especially for the missed educational opportunities: “maybe not a Boston College education, but an education somewhere,” he told the audience. Mr. Francis died of cancer in early 2013.