

AN INTERVIEW WITH ASHOK “ASH” MIRCHANDANI

An Oral History Conducted by Kristel Peralta and Cecilia Winchell

Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

©Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander
Oral History Project

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020

Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries
Director: Claytee D. White
Project Manager: Stefani Evans
Transcriber: Kristin Hicks
Editors and Project Assistants: Vanessa Concepcion, Kristel Peralta, Jerwin Tiu, Cecilia
Winchell, Ayrton Yamaguchi

The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a grant from the City of Las Vegas Commission for the Las Vegas Centennial and funding from private individuals and foundations. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islanders Oral History Project.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

PREFACE



“I’ve always been a person that has ‘risen from the ashes’ kind of a deal; that’s why I like to call myself Ash.”

The City of Joy, more commonly known as Kolkata, India, is not only the birthplace of Ashok “Ash” Mirchandani but also reflects the attitude that he brings to both his ventures and his life. Always focused on putting in the hard work, Mirchandani not only received a gold medal from the Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh but would also become regional president of Spartek Tiles. Although he left a lot of things behind when he left India, Mirchandani has expressed nothing but pride and joy for all the things he has been able to accomplish in the US.

After moving to Las Vegas, Nevada, in 2002, Mirchandani began working for the state government due to his penchant for public service. While there, he started countless different initiatives such as the United Citizens Foundation and the Office of Small Business Advocacy, tackling a range of issues from mental health to mortgages to small business development. Even after exiting public service, Mirchandani has remained active within the community, having served in various roles ranging from President Biden’s AAPI Chairman to Nevada State College President’s Advisory Council.

Throughout the rest of the interview, Mirchandani touches on subjects ranging from the growth of Las Vegas to his hopes for the AAPI community. His story reflects a dedication to hard work and perseverance. Never afraid of setbacks, “Ash” reflects a quintessential American immigrant story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Interview with Ashok “Ash” Mirchandani
March 11, 2021
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Kristel Peralta and Cecilia Winchell

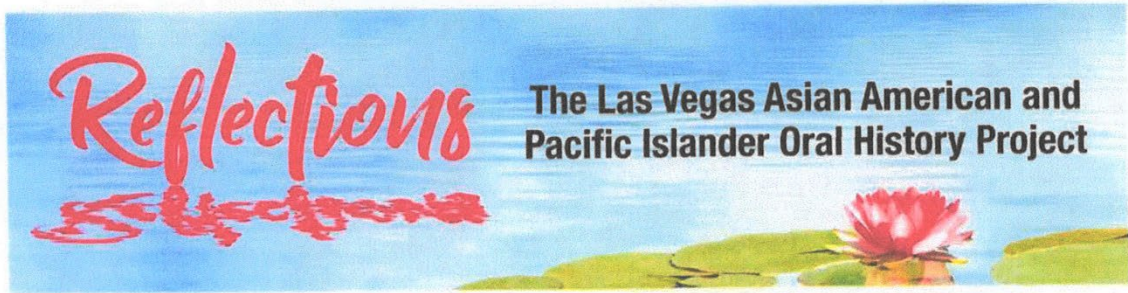
Preface.....iv

Mirchandani began his life in Kolkata, India, the City of Joy. He describes what it was like living near her ashram and seeing her all the time. He also talks about his school life, his parents, and his later experience at Calcutta University where he did his CFA and received a gold medal from the Indian Prime Minister at the time. Afterwards, he joined the workforce, putting in hard work and living a comfortable life before his green card was granted and he relocated to the US with only a hundred and eighty dollars. He first landed in San Francisco, California, before moving to Las Vegas, Nevada because of a lucrative job market and the warmer climate.....1-6

Mirchandani describes the exponential growth he has seen since coming to Las Vegas in 2002. He also expands on the things he left behind to come to the US, including his friends and his jobs, all the while painting a portrait of what his daily life would be like in India. Him and his family still celebrate festivals such as Diwali and Holi here in Las Vegas, while also embracing other Western traditions such as Christmas, New Years, and Thanksgiving. After moving here, Mirchandani found employment with the state government because of his previous interest in public service and cites a few reasons that led to his eventual leave. He also details his work with United Citizens Foundation, a mental health clinic with a focus on helping kids in school.....6-12

Mirchandani’s discusses his extensive involvement with politics stemming from a belief that everyone should use their voice and advocate for what they want. He criticizes the Asian community for typically not being active within the political arena, although he does see the landscape changing and cites the most recent election as an example. He sees the US as having provided great opportunities for him and looks forward to a future where the AAPI community is more empowered than ever. He also mentions his work creating the Office of Small Business Advocacy within the state government and all the small businesses he was able to help through that endeavor.....12-19

Closing off on a few final reflections, Mirchandani emphasizes his work on mental health for kids, the importance of perseverance, the palm trees he saw on his first day in Las Vegas, and his advocacy work within the AAPI community.....19-24



Use Agreement

Name of Narrator: Ashok (Ash) Mirchandani

Name of Interviewer: Kristel Peralta, Cecilia Winchell, Stephanie Evans, Vanessa Concepcion

We, the above named, give to the Oral History Research Center of UNLV, the recorded interview(s) initiated on 3/11/2021 as an unrestricted gift, to be used for such scholarly and educational purposes as shall be determined, and transfer to the University of Nevada Las Vegas, legal title and all literary property rights including copyright. This gift does not preclude the right of the interviewer, as a representative of UNLV, to use the recordings and related materials for scholarly pursuits. There will be no compensation for any interviews.

I understand that my interview will be made available to researchers and may be quoted from, published, distributed, placed on the Internet or broadcast in any medium that the Oral History Research Center and UNLV Libraries deem appropriate including future forms of electronic and digital media.

<u><i>Cecilia Winchell</i></u>	<u>3/11/2021</u>
<u><i>Stephanie Evans</i></u>	<u>March 11, 2021</u>
Signature of Narrator Interviewer	Date
<u><i>Vanessa Concepcion</i></u>	<u>3/11/2021</u>
<u><i>Ashok Mirchandani</i></u>	<u>March 8, 2021</u>
Signature of Interviewer Narrator	Date

Good afternoon. This is March 11, 2021. I am Stefani Evans, and I am here with Cecilia Winchell and Kristel Peralta, and we are with Ash Mirchandani.

Mr. Mirchandani, may I ask you to spell your first and last names for the recording, please?

Sure. My name is Ashok Mirchandani, which is A-S-H-O-K; it's Mirchandani, M-I-R-C-H-A-N-D-A-N-I. I also go by Ash, which is A-S-H, and that's a story for a different day as to why I go by Ash.

Kristel Peralta: To start off, please tell us about your family and your childhood, parents, siblings, schooling; all of it.

I was born and raised in a place called Kolkata. In India, it is known as the City of Joy. That's where Mother Teresa is from. I used to live about a thousand yards, four or five hundred yards from her ashram, and I would see her all the time. She would walk, she would cross my house walking to the ashram. I was very motivated for public service, seeing her, for social services.

I grew up in an area which was not a very affluent part of the city. We were five brothers and sisters. My dad was in business. My mother was a homemaker. We lived in a six-hundred-square-foot home, all of us—five brothers and sisters—dad and mom, and a dog. It had two rooms. We were on the first floor. Kolkata didn't have the best drainage in the world. It's one of the oldest cities in the world, by the way. It used to be the capital of India until it was moved to New Delhi.

I went to a school which was about a fifteen-, twenty-minute walk from my house, and did the elementary school in there. My mom had all her children in different schools. She would get up every morning. She would cook us breakfast, take us by bus, each one of us, to drop us in the school, do the grocery shopping, come back home, cook lunch, go back and bring us back

home, and then we used to do our homework. I was the youngest in the house. I have four elder sisters.

I was an average student growing up. Very, very average. Less than average. I failed as well in grade six. Then I got a double promotion in the eighth and I made it up because I had this thing about always fighting back. I've always been a person that has "risen from the ashes" kind of a deal; that's why I like to call myself Ash. No, that's not a fact.

Like I said, my dad was in business, so when business was good we had a great time and when it wasn't good we didn't. We just made do with what we had. Growing up I used to love to play cricket, which is a sport that is played in most commonwealth countries.

Then I graduated from Calcutta University. I went there to do my CFA. I had the honor of topping India, and I got a gold medal from the Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. From a person that failed a class to a person that topped India; that was something that helped me shape my entire outlook in life.

Then I went into the workforce. I have a speech impediment; I stutter but yet I joined sales. I was selling vacuum cleaners door to door; that was my first job. Then I was selling AquaGuard; that's the filtered water system. I sold that. In India where you have maids and manservants, why would anybody buy a vacuum cleaner? But I ended up becoming the highest salesperson for Forbes in India in those years; we're talking about 1991-92.

Then I joined a company called Spartek Tiles, which was in partnership with U.S. Ceramics. I joined as a junior accountant to become the regional president in a matter of six years. I just realized I was a self-starter and if anyone tried to discourage me, I would just go at it with all my might and in time, achieve that success.

My aunt was the first one to come into the U.S. In the 1950s, she used to work for KLM [Royal Dutch Airlines]. KLM was an airline in those days. She was transferred from India. She was one of those early Indian females in the corporate world. She was transferred to San Francisco, so her whole family started to migrate. My dad and my mom migrated in the late '90s, and they filed for my green card. While I was working my way up the corporate ladder and was a regional president, my green card came through. In those days, because of exchange restrictions, I could not bring in a lot of money here, because India didn't have a good foreign exchange reserves, so I came with whatever I could. I think I came in with a hundred and eighty dollars, me and my wife now. That's a different story.

I met my wife dancing when I was nineteen years old. They used to have interclubs. See, there's a county club culture back in Kolkata. It's very British. All the clubs would compete. She and I competed. She and I were on the same team dancing together, but we were competing amongst ourselves because I thought she wasn't a good dancer and she thought I wasn't a good dancer. Then that's how we met. We met when I was nineteen and she was nineteen. Now we're going to be fifty this year.

My green card came through. After the green card came through, I came here into the U.S. I came into the U.S. When I went for work interviews I showed the gold medal from the Indian Prime Minister and all the educational certificates and accolades from work. They said, "No, nothing matters. You've got to start from scratch." I started from scratch.

I used to work for the state. My first job was for the Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation (DETR). I was an auditor for them. Then I used to work for the Library District between six and nine at night. Then on the weekends I started to sell real estate. I did pretty good for myself and my family.

SE: Was that here in Las Vegas?

Yes.

SE: Why in Las Vegas?

Oh. I landed in San Francisco and that was right after 9/11. I came in April of 2002. There weren't very many jobs in California. My brother-in-law was working here. He said, "Why don't you come and try out your luck here?" That's how I landed in Vegas. I landed in Vegas, six months, didn't have a job, and then in one week I got three offers. One was in Vegas and the other two were in Reno and Carson area. I chose Vegas because it's a warmer climate and I wanted my parents to live with me and my wife. Unfortunately, the very next year I lost my dad to lung cancer, but my mom still lives with me. We take care of our parents, that's part of our culture.

I got a job at DETR, and then I transitioned in different roles. My last job with the state was as the deputy director for business and industry in Nevada. I created fifteen new programs in Nevada not using any taxpayer dollars. If you see that Spotlight, that is the Governor Brian Sandoval putting me on the Spotlight for Nevada, and for all the works I've done for him. I worked for three governors. I worked for Governor Guinn and worked for Governor Gibbons and then I worked for Governor Sandoval.

In 2015, I decided to launch myself into business, and I created seven startups, of which there is A-1 Fingerprinting that does background checks, FBI and state. We have a real estate brokerage. When I moved out of real estate about ten, twelve years ago, my wife jumped in and she took it over. We have a safety product business; we sell hardhats and safety vests, etc. I have a construction firm, where we insulate commercial buildings. We have eight mental health clinics that I founded, which do therapy for mental health for kids in the Clark County School

District. This is our fifth year and we have helped thousands of kids with mental health issues. We are on site in the schools. Then we have a business at the airport where we are in partnership. I have a restaurant in downtown Vegas, and then I have real estate investments in five states—Utah, Idaho Falls, Arizona, Nevada, and now in California. I got into business with fifty thousand dollars in 2015, and I created all of these things in the last six years. Three buildings, I own these buildings, and I have seven homes; out of those, I use three for myself, in different parts. All this I am saying with the hope that when kids read this, it helps inspire them. Don't let no one, not even your own mind trick you into believing that you can't do something. If you don't try, you've failed before you even started.

I was President Biden's AAPI chairman, chair for his AAPI outreach in Nevada. I was the first one to endorse President Biden, as you will see in that. He wrote me a very nice, nice letter after he won. I was also the vice chairman of UMC Hospital Board for three years. I am on the Nevada State College President's Advisory Council. I have done different boards and commissions.

That's the short part of my story, but there's more if you guys want more, but most of it is boring.

Cecilia Winchell: We don't think so. That was really great. If we could, I wanted to circle back to the beginning for a bit. If you could, talk more about your grandparents, and if you have any memorable stories that have been passed down through your family.

I never met my grandfather. My grandparents from my maternal side, I never met them. From my father's side, I met my grandmother briefly for a year or two before she came here. In the 1980s, late '70s, '80s, there wasn't phones; there wasn't internet; there wasn't anything, so you

had to make a trunk call; it was expensive and we didn't have the money, so I barely spoke to her until she passed away in the 1990s. I didn't have very many interactions with my grandparents.

KP: When you moved to Las Vegas, what were your first memories here, and how have you seen the city grow in comparison to when you moved here?

Anybody that has lived here for a very long time will tell you. When I came here in 2002, there was no freeway 215. It went up to Charleston and on the other side up to Rainbow and that was it, and everything else was dirt. It went to the airport through dirt roads and what have you.

There was no northwest. The northwest just came up after 2002; it was all desert. This town? It's been good to me. It's been very, very good to me. I have everything I've been able to achieve.

Some of it is hard work; you have to do that. Everybody works hard. But some of it is also luck.

Some of it is being at the right place at the right time. But you have to put in your effort, nothing is going to happen if you just stay home. I like living in Vegas. It has just exponentially grown. I think it's a great, great town. It's a great city.

CW: What were some of the hardest things, or people, to leave behind when you moved here?

Friends. Back in India right before I left for the USA—I'll tell you my life. Picture a day in my life. My struggling days were in my past and now I was in the corporate world. I was doing well. My day was, I would wake up around five o'clock in the morning. My friend would come. We would go to the park and we would jog, we would work out, and then I would come back home by about eight-thirty. I would shower and my shoes were polished every day for me, kept at the doorstep ready to go. I would walk in to the dining table and there would be four or five types of breakfast laid out, and I would choose what I want to eat. There would always be three or four options for breakfast. Then I would just wear my clothes that were always ironed that same

morning; I wanted it to be crispy. Then I would wear my shoes. My chauffer would come. I'd take my newspaper, take my briefcase, go to the car, and he would drive me to work. I would just be reading the newspaper and going to work. Then I would reach there around ten o'clock. Then around six o'clock, six-thirty, seven, I would leave work and I would come home. I would take my wife out for dinner to a five-star, nice place. It was all corporately paid because that was a part of your perks. That was my life that I had worked very hard for.

I left all that and I came here. The first day my sister said, "Pick up your dishes and go wash them." I never washed dishes in my life.

I tell you what. Even with being spoiled and having to come to the US and start all over, I do not regret it one bit. You can be in this country whatever you want to be. If you are willing to put in the effort, if you are willing to put in the time, you don't need a godfather, you don't need money to make money. In all those countries, if you're down there it's very difficult to come up. Here, if you're down here and you have the right idea and you can work hard, you can be anything you want to be. The opportunity this country presents, it's nowhere else in the world, nowhere else in the world, and we should be all thankful for that. I think this is the greatest country in every way. You have your freedoms. You can do anything you want. You can live your life the way you want to. You can speak up your mind. Those are great things.

KP: Could you tell me about some traditions and festivals that are important to you and your family?

I think we in the U.S., being Indians in the U.S., we celebrate festivals much better than Indians do in India, because somehow we think that we have to bring our roots to kids and we've got to make sure that they know what our roots are. We are extra, extra engaged, like Diwali, the Festival of Lights, that's big; Holi, the Festival of Colors, it's big; and so on and so forth. There

are so many different...I'm sure also in your culture...but those two are the biggest. We celebrate Christmas, we celebrate New Year's, we celebrate Thanksgiving, cook turkey, have loved one around us. We just look for a chance to celebrate and eat. We love food.

KP: Could you tell us more about how you celebrate those festivals?

For example, the festival of Diwali, we clean the house and we light *diyas*—or lights; *diya* is like a lamp—throughout the house. Everybody wears new clothes. We pray to the god. We have special food for the day. Then we take blessings from our elders and we pray to god. Then we go out and burn firecrackers; like the Fourth of July, we do that for the Festival of Lights. Then we eat a lot of sweets.

KP: Could you tell us more about the food in your culture and how it compares to here in Las Vegas versus back in India?

Food in my culture here versus back in India? Food in my culture...This is Indian food, right? You can have this [menu]. The food in India is always better because it's India. You have the best chefs that have been there for a thousand years. They know...You have the best spices. They know how to make it better. But comparative to here, with everything that we get here, it's not that bad. It's pretty good, but it's not the same as eating in India.

CW: What do you think has been your favorite thing about living in Vegas?

That there's not much traffic. It's a new city. It's very well landscaped, well planned. The roads are nice where the buildings are newer; they look sharper. And the weather. Except for those three months when it's very, very hot—June, July and August—it's beautiful. It's beautiful. We don't get hurricanes; we don't get tornadoes or earthquakes, so we are blessed. And then if you want to go to the beach, it's three hours there, depending on what kind of driver you are. You can go to the mountains. You've got Brian Head. It's just beautiful. Everything is so, so close by.

KP: How do you feel about the activity of gambling in Las Vegas, and the industry itself?

I never win. I lose all the time. I'm not too much of a fan for people losing money by gambling. I would rather eat. I would rather help somebody than use that money to gamble. It's not my style of using money.

CW: I wanted to circle back to your employment really quick. You mentioned you worked for the state government for several years. I'm curious more about why you chose to work for the state government, and what ultimately made you leave.

I chose to work for the state government for two reasons. One, that was the jobs that were there at that time. There was a lot of employment. I enjoy public service. I told you about Mother Teresa and how I would go and give my time to her. I'll tell you a story about her. Imagine you are in a place that is 90 percent humid, no air-conditioning, 105, 110 [degrees]. My parents would give things to go and donate, so I would take them. Summer afternoon, you see ceiling fans barely moving. Lepers lying on the floor, real lepers with skin rotting. I've seen Mother Teresa nursing them. I went in for five seconds; I was going to throw up because the stench was so overbearing. But her, she thought of service before self. She put herself out there where nobody else wanted to do it. Lepers? You didn't even want to come near them; you could become a leper through close contact. There was so much misinformation. She did that with no consideration whatsoever. That was her life, was to serve. I was very motivated by her, and so I enjoyed public service.

Why I left? I left because of three reasons. I had grown to the highest point that I could reach. Secondly, I had a little bit of...how should I put it? Difference of opinion and a little bit of a tiff with my boss. I decided that if I'm going to work this hard, I'm going to work for myself. That's why I left the state government.

Then I went into business because I always wanted to be in business. My family has been in business, so it came naturally to me.

KP: I was interested in the mental health clinics that you have established. Why did you first start in the school district, and how do you believe that the stigmas are changing towards the community that you serve?

Very nice question. I started UCF [United Citizens Foundation]. UCF is the one that does the mental health therapy. It's a nonprofit. I started it back in 2010 at the height of the recession. The idea was to help kids in schools that didn't have the basic needs, so kids that are in schools in at-risk areas or low-income areas. We used to put together backpacks with daily necessities and school supplies; that's how I started. My first day was on a park bench collecting food cans for the kids. That was in 2010.

The governor had put me on this Spotlight, and then the person in charge of HHS [Health and Human Services] called me and said, "I see you have a passion for kid to make the lives of children in the community better. Have you ever considered doing mental health therapy for kids because there's a huge need in that area?" I said, "I would like to know more."

The more I learned, I saw it as a major issue because...how should I put this? We grew up under a lot of stress, feast or famine. It was trying to hustle, trying to just make life happen, the basics in life happen. Everything was a struggle, but we fought through everything. I don't know if my kids could fight through that. I hope they can, but they haven't seen anything that I have seen in my life. I always feel that...And we don't want that on them. We want them to have a great life. We never want them to face those things, and so we want to protect them. We want to give them our best. But in that process, somehow, somewhere, the kids feel incomplete; they don't feel challenged. For one reason or the other, whether it's parenting, whether it's your genes

or your friends or your teachers, you develop feelings of inadequacy. Our goal in UCF is to sit down with you, listen to you, give positive reinforcement, and try to get kids back on track where they can move forward in your life with a lot of confidence. You feel good about yourself and about who you are and what you want to do; that's our goal.

Our first school when we started doing mental health, it was at the Boys and Girls Club. The Boys and Girls Club was a failure because the Boys and Girls Club didn't push it; we barely saw any kids, two or three maybe. I had moved out of UCF. I wanted to do other things. I went on to serve on the UMC board and all that. I was busy there. Then the person in charge of UFC, they kind of decided that it wasn't really working out, so they were going to shut it down. I said, "No. I founded UCF. I want to make it thrive."

I went back to the state. I negotiated a grant. We opened our first clinic in Valley High School, and Valley High School was a resounding success. But the first year was tough because parents would not want to talk about mental health for their kids. There was a huge stigma attached to mental health in those days. It was a great challenge to break through those stigma and barriers. We now feel very proud of how far we have come.

The first year was tough because we didn't get many students. But, boy, it's taken off now. It's taken off. I think the acceptance level has gone up. I think amongst the minorities the acceptance level has gone up a lot. I think as a society the acceptance level is going up. As the acceptance level is going up we see a steep rise in the amount of cases we are getting, we have a wait list all the time. All the time.

I think it's a good thing to talk to a good therapist and get your mind straightened out rather than harbor it within and not discuss it with anybody and let it blow up.

KP: Yes, that is a really great thing.

Yes.

CW: I noticed that you are quite involved in political work. I was curious what that's motivated by and what issues you care about the most.

I think everybody should be engaged in politics, especially younger kids. You know why? Politics affects our life every day. Policymaking comes from politicians. If you don't engage... You know what I'm saying? If you're not at the table, then you are on the menu. It's something like that. If you're not going to come to the table and share your concerns and your opinions and be engaged, then there will be decisions that you don't like and that will affect your life negatively. We have to be proactive. We have to hold our politicians accountable, but before we do that we've got to work to make sure that we have people in politics that bring value to the system that are not just career politicians that just want a paycheck or who like the fame and have no policymaking capacity.

That is my biggest gripe with Asians. I have been saying that for years. I don't understand Asians. I don't understand them because we have the lowest social cost. You'll see Asians not on unemployment in homes. You will not see them on food stamps. You'll not see them having drugs. You will not see them in crime. I'm saying as a percentage. You will not see them creating a lot of broken families. You see Asians educated; education is number one. You see Asians in business. You'll see Asians as professionals. You'll see Asians as hardworking. You'll see Asians as paying more taxes. You'll see Asians having great family values. You'll see Asians as doing super; they come with nothing, like me. I'm just an average story. But they come with nothing and then make it happen here. They have language barriers, but they still make it happen here. If they can do so much good for themselves, why can't that extend into public service? Why do Asians feel that they don't have to engage in public service? Either they are

timid or they are intimidated or they think this country is great to make money. But I will talk about politics in India or Japan or Korea or China rather than politics here. Sooner or later, politics is going to affect every part of our life; it always does; it does daily. Think about your ride home. Think about the gas price. Politics has a part to play with it. Why not engage? You youngsters need to change that because the youth amongst the Asians have the capacity to change that. You can be engaged; you can run for office; you can be involved in mission. That's my goal; my goal is to help the youth. I want to see Asians everywhere. We are ten percent of the population and not even point-one percent of the public servants, not even point-one percent. I can count on my fingers.

I'm sorry. I'm being very blunt and direct. You won't find from me answers that are flowery.

KP: No, this is great. Yes, yes. How do you think the model minority myth has affected you personally?

The model?

KP: The model minority myth.

What's that?

KP: It's the idea—well, what you were touching on before, how Asians are just the quiet, don't really go into anyone else's bubbles, they don't really interact with things that don't have to do with them; that type of idea; that type of myth. How has that affected you personally?

I feel disappointed. I would like to see them engaged and be engaged. I think it's a two-way train. The politicians need to make an effort to engage us, and we need to make an effort to be engaged. We need to vote. First and foremost, we need to vote. Ten percent is the swing vote.

We can decide any office, who gets it. Most of the campaigns and elections are won by less than a ten percent margin, so we can be the deciding vote; we can be the swing board. We can have a lot of say, but we don't. We don't engage. We don't partake in political matters because in our countries—also, there's one more point I missed. In our countries, politics is seen as dirty. It's seen as you will get killed; you will get murdered; you will get this; you will get that. That's the conception that a lot of the older generation has, and then they don't want to engage. Their attitude is, I want to be out of it; I don't want to ruffle any feathers; I don't want to rock any boat. That's not true. This is different. The more voice you have, the stronger the community becomes.

KP: Do you think that it's changing the more as time goes on?

It is changing. I'll tell you, this time I was very happy to see in the presidential race that a lot of Asians got involved, and I was very, very happy. I think more and more Asians should get involved. And not only Asians, I think everybody should get involved. I think people that don't get involved and the reasons why these politicians that don't deserve to be in office get into office is because most of the folks are not informed, so they don't care. They just go and choose. "Okay, this guy, I saw his ad; okay, now I know this guy, *boom*." But what does this guy stand for? What has he done? What is he saying he's going to do? How are you making an educated choice? I think the more people—I say Asians because Asians have the least amount of engagement amongst any community.

CW: Have you ever experienced any racially discriminatory acts towards you or people close to you?

Listen, I came to this country with practically nothing. I've done great for myself. How can I say this country is racist? I can't. It's given me everything I've worked for. I can't say it is racist. I don't want to use racism as a crutch. A lot of minorities—many of them use that as a crutch, and

I don't like it. Have people made racist comments on me? Yes, they have. I was told once by a lady in Costco—I didn't see she was standing behind me and I was looking at this thing for a minute; I wanted to read what it was. She says, "Will you get out of my way? Why don't you go back to your country?" But that's one person. If I go to India, I'll find an Indian being mad at me, too, and making something of a racial joke, too. That doesn't make the country racist. This country is the best country in the world, and I think at times we give too much attention and importance to race because it's comforting in some sense. Listen, this is a world that you'll find all kinds of persons, but you cannot generalize and say that this country is racist or this is racist. It's not racist to me. If it was racist, I would not have gotten this far. There are people that are racist. There are folks that want to use race as a platform for personal gains. There will always be that. You can't change it.

KP: How might the Black Lives Matter movement affect Asian American or Pacific Islanders?

In my personal opinion, African Americans—listen, my mentor in life is an African American. He is the nicest person I've met. He is the smartest person I've met. I've learned a lot from him and I continue to learn a lot from him on a daily basis. I don't know...See, the African Americans have a history in this country. For the longest they were not treated right; they were treated as slaves. I don't know what they went through. Everything I've read, they went through a lot and it was really, really bad. I just hope in this day and age, for your guys' sake, you guys don't look at skin color and talk about race or talk about white, non-white, Brown, yellow, green, purple, no. We all have the same color blood. We are all humans and have got to be seen as one. I think the less we talk about color, the faster we heal. The more we dwell into color and color matters, the longer it will take; it will never heal.

What happened last year with Black Lives Matter...My kids were never exposed to race. They never thought about race. They were like, "Is it true? Is this how things happened?" I don't know. There will always be people that are flamethrowers and there will be always folks...But at the present time in our country, we are all mature enough to look over all this. This country is great because it's a melting pot. Every culture brings their own value. This is what makes this country. I understand an incident there and an incident there should not happen. I think African Americans amongst all the minority groups, they have faced the most in this country, but I think we should walk past it at the time and try to let it heal, try to not talk about it, try to not do things, try to make a conscious effort that that doesn't matter to us, and if we do that long enough, we will see that all these things will start to matter less and less, and that's my hope.

I don't know if I answered your question. I don't think...Like I said, Asians, we are very content and we live in our own island. We do what we have to do to make a living and family and this and that. Asians like to show off to an Asian. Asians do not like to show off to anybody else. It's like competing amongst themselves. Do you guys get that sense?

CW: Yes. The Asian American Pacific Islander community is the fastest-growing community in Nevada. What does that mean to you? How do you feel about that?

Las Vegas has been the fastest-growing. In the country, it will be the fastest-growing. I think it's good. I think they bring a lot of value. I think if you look at it—I saw some data about ten years ago—we contribute about two billion [dollars] in economic activity in Nevada, but that was ten years ago. It must have doubled and I think that's good. That's good for our state and that's good for our country and it's good for local jurisdictions. What does this country stand for? This country stands for family values, hard work, entrepreneurship, health care and Asians bring all that. Those are the four things that I think are critical for any economy to do well.

KP: I was going to circle back to your public service work. What are some of the most rewarding aspects about public service and also the service that you've done here for mental health?

During 2010, I created the Office of Small Business Advocacy within state government. State government is very complex. There are many small businesses. They don't know how to do a business license application. Where is this? Where is that? How can they get a tax number? We used to help them. I never hired any staff. I didn't have money to hire any staff. I would sit down with them. I used to help them navigate the entire state government. I used to help them get loans. I used to help them with their regulatory issues. I used to help them with the licensing issues. I used to help them with their business plans. The feeling when I would help them and they would thank me; that was worth everything.

Then I created this Small Business Roundtable in Nevada where I brought in small business agencies, like SCORE, SBA, SBDCs, small business development corporations, banks, so many different organizations to come and meet every quarter and talk about issues. Talk about what are the bottlenecks, logjams within the state, within the county that we can remove, the lending programs. Often it's just sharing information. "Okay, I have this." "Oh, I didn't know that you have this. I have clients that have been looking for this." That was the other thing I did.

Another thing I did is I created, during the housing crisis, the program called Homes Means Nevada that brings certain mortgages to current market value and current interest rate without using any taxpayer dollars. When Nevada entered into a settlement with the banks, Nevada got 49 million dollars in attorney general settlement, for the national settlement. Then the question was, what do we do with the money? I came up with the idea, why don't we take the

money and we go back to HUD or to Fannie [Mae] and Freddie [Mac] and we buy the loans from them?

Let's say a person owes four hundred thousand on the house, and they were going to do a default because the four hundred thousand they owe on the house is now only worth two hundred thousand. They don't want to keep this asset or have lost income when they cannot afford it. Some resorted to strategic default, which is not paying on the mortgage, so their credit would go bad for six years or seven years, and then it will bounce back.

What I did is I got these notes at the current market rate, so now to a bank on the other side, they're looking at the value of the note and the book market value is only two hundred [thousand] dollars instead of four hundred [thousand] dollars market value. Then if they go to sell it, they're going to lose another thirty [thousand] dollars because they have to pay Realtor fees, marketing fees, X, Y, Z, and so now the value is a hundred and seventy. Thousand dollars, we picked up these notes at a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. I find a bank, a local bank that will lend on a hundred and fifty thousand at current interest rates, and the twenty thousand I will hold in the fund. If ever the homeowner defaults, it's like a hundred and fifty thousands. The bank does not lose any money because this twenty thousands pays for the loss first. The bank is secured. They cannot lose money on the amount they lend. Banks don't make money by keeping it in the lockers; they have to lend. What I did is I reset the margins of the current market value, current interest rate, and that program was a success. In fact, the White House administration applauded the program.

The problem that happened with this idea is by the time the legislation was passed it was 2016. The problem, for the most part, had taken care of itself. Nonetheless, we helped a lot of folks.

Besides that, I implemented the new market tax credit program, where we used tax credits to fund economic activities in low-income areas. I created the charter school bonds, where we give funding to create charter schools. Then I created several other programs: The Consumer Affairs Division, the Minority Affairs Commission in Nevada.

CW: You have clearly held a lot of different jobs and positions throughout your time in Nevada. I'm curious, what has been the most impactful on you?

Mental health for kids, I think that's big for me. It's very close to my heart because I want to help as many kids as I can, because the more kids I can help, the stronger of a society we have. That's the most gratifying.

KP: Why is it valuable for the university to collect interviews such as yours?

I don't know. I hope I can inspire a few to do better in life and to never give up and to keep fighting, keep running the race until they get to the finish. If they can take that from my story, then it's worth it; otherwise, it's just cutting more trees. Right?

SE: Yes. I have a couple of questions that I'd like to ask. When you first arrived in Las Vegas...by plane or by car?

By plane.

What did you think that day?

I loved the big palm trees. I saw the palm trees. My goodness, they looked so beautiful. Then I saw all...this is how a desert looks? I grew up in a coastal place. Everything was green, muggy, and wet. Then all of a sudden I come into a place that is desert. I had never seen desert in my life. I'm like, "This is a desert? This is what they call a desert?" I was coming from McCarran. We were coming around 215. It was all desert on both sides. I looked at it, I saw it. We landed in

the late afternoon, so the sun was very bright. It was really, really bright and hot. Those kinds of things. It looked as if I'm come into a different planet.

Where did you stay that first night?

I stayed at my sister's house.

What part of town was that?

It was in Summerlin on Town Center and Charleston.

You took a cab or she picked you up and you drove straight to her house?

My brother-in-law picked us up, and then we drove to the house. As I came close to her house, I saw big palm trees on both sides. I thought, wow that's nice. I had never seen a palm tree.

SE: I'd like to go back to some of the businesses that you helped, the small businesses. Are some of those still here? Do you patronize some of those businesses?

I don't know. I helped hundreds of them. I don't know if they are there or not. Tamales. I helped a lady that made tamales. But it's been six, seven years now. I created that unit within the state government; it was called Small Business Advocacy.

SE: What did you do with the Clark County Library District?

I was an assistant librarian, but I used to put books on the shelf because they realized that this guy doesn't know much about library work, so they had me put some books on the shelf.

SE: Which library was that; which branch?

It was in the Clark County Library District in Summerlin.

SE: Have you done some advocacy work with the Asian American Pacific Islander community here in town?

Oh yes. Oh yes. We've done outreach for years, for years. In fact, the present governor, his campaign office for the primaries was in this building, and we had Asian phone banking for him.

Yes, we did phone banking for him. For the past ten years we have been engaging Asians to come and do phone banking, to do events. We do events. Now, last year nothing could be done. When we did events we used to have a thousand Asians show up. We used to do it at the Orleans Casino, and you would have a thousand Asians open, beautiful. I have pictures, a lot of pictures of those events. It was big, really, really big.

SE: So, your passion for Asians in politics goes way back.

Yes, yes, my passion is, and that passion came from... When I was in state government, I was the highest-ranking Asian, and I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. I'm just average. I was like, why don't Asians get engaged? Every time I talked to an Asian, they're like, "Oh, I don't want to be in politics." Why? You have to. It controls your life. Come on, for god's sake.

SE: I think a lot of people don't see that. They don't see the connection.

Yes. It is huge. Everything, everything in your life. Your taxes, your income, your gas, everything is controlled by policymaking, and by politicians therefore.

SE: What haven't we asked that you would like to talk about?

I don't know. I think we've covered a lot of ground. I'm sure there are so many things I can tell you. I could spend an entire day telling you different stories of my life that I have experienced. But there is one thing I can tell you about life: If you want anything bad enough, you will get it. You just have to work for it. There's no replacement for hard work. Nothing can be achieved without working for it. There are no shortcuts. Except if you can win a lottery. But there are more chances of you being struck by lightning than winning a jackpot, so if you're that lucky, go for it. But hard work pays off. This country? We are blessed to be in this country. It is incumbent upon all of us, but especially the youth, to make sure we leave this world better for our kids and our grandparents so that they can enjoy it the same way that we have.

SE: You mentioned Diwali, the Festival of Lights, and you mentioned also a Festival of Colors; is that right?

Holi. It's called Holi, H-O-L-I.

SE: Can you tell us about that one?

Holi is a festival after colors; it's in the spring. People like to play with colors and just celebrate the advent of becoming spring. People spray colors on each other and then they eat, they sing, they dance. These are all the older traditions coming from the farmers. Those are two fun ones. Then there are five hundred others. In India, you could have a festival every day. You would never go to work.

SE: What are the traditional foods that you would eat at these festivals?

Diwali, it's more *puri*; it's like bread, which is fried and fluffed. Mostly non-meat stuff. We don't eat meats. We eat a lot of vegetarian food. Then sweets, different kinds of sweets. Sweets are big. I don't know if you guys are into Indian food or not, but if you are it's (*sundesh*); it's *gulab jamun*; it's a lot of Indian bread; it's a lot of Indian curry and those kinds of things; and dried fruit as well.

SE: And the same foods at Holi?

Food is more or less the same, yes. But what you do is different. In Holi, you won't wear the best and nicest of clothes because you don't want it to be ruined.

Because you're getting sprayed with color?

Yes. But in Diwali, you wear the best of the best. You wear new clothes. You will wear the best ones, so it's different. Then one is lights and one is color. The story behind the Festival of Lights is there is an Indian mythology; it's called Ramayana. There is Rama; there is Sita; there's Ravana, and there's Lakshmana. So, Rama, his wife is Sita. His brother is Lakshmana. The

evil guy is Ravana. Rama and Sita and Lakshmana are sent to exile for fourteen years by their evil step mom. When they are in the jungle, Ravana sees Sita. He kidnaps Sita. There is a long fight. Then Hanuman, the monkey god, he gets into the picture, and then he fights. When they're coming back after defeating Ravana, that's when their hometown is so happy they're coming back from exile. They come back from exile because Rama's stepmother wanted her own son to become the king. She asked for a wish, and the wish was that Rama should be sent to exile. When Rama is coming back, the entire city is lighted up. That's why they call it the Festival of Lights. It's victory over darkness and victory of good over evil.

SE: Thank you. And the colors?

The colors is the farmers and the season. It's harvesting season. They like to have fun. They like to play. They like to sing. They like to dance. It's a festival which marks coming together of all, after forgetting their differences.

Is it the end of the harvest, then?

Around March. It's the advent of spring.

Any other questions? Go ahead.

CW: I'm curious if you could talk more about religion and how that figures into your life.

I think the biggest religion is your karma, is what you do in this lifetime. If you're going to pray to god and go out and do evil...that's not right. I think all religions preach the same thing: They hold our feet to the fire; they want us to be good citizens; want us to do the right thing; and those are the ones that show the path to having a peaceful life. I think all of them in their own way, in their own examples, in their own testimonies and their own thing lead you to having a pious life, like a good person doing the right thing. It's the mortals like us that interpret it wrong and take wrong meanings out of it for our personal advantage and use it against each other. I think that's

where it goes wrong. To me, I believe there is a supernatural power. I believe no matter how you transpose that, who you worship, it's only telling you good things. It gives you peace of mind. When I pray it gives me peace of mind. But end of the day, I think the key thing is to have good karma while you're here. As long as you're doing good, good comes back to you. If you're doing bad, it will bite you in this lifetime. I don't believe it will wait that long. It's coming back. If you talk negative, negative will happen, and if you talk positive, positive will happen. That's a fact of life. Whatever we do good or bad, whatever goes around comes around. That's my belief. I can go to a church—I've gone to a church many times and prayed. I can go to a mosque and pray. I can go to a temple and pray. I don't see a difference between any of them. They are all places where you get peace and where you're taught to be a good person. But ultimately what matters is not what you hear, it's what you do.

SE: Thank you so much.

I hope I was able to answer your questions.

SE: You have been very helpful and we appreciate it so much.

Thank you.

KP and CW: Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]