

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHERINA KLEVEN

An Oral History Conducted by Cecilia Winchell

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

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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Oral History Project

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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
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PREFACE



"If I took a daytime job, I would miss going to school with [my kids] and learn about what they learn. If I take a nighttime job, I can go to school, but I won't be able to put them to bed and make sure they do their homework and all that stuff. Being a firefighter was the best job in the world."

"I did it for my kids; they're my inspiration."

When Assistant Fire Chief Cherina Kleven retired from the Las Vegas Fire Department in 2009, she retired as the highest-ranking Asian American female fire chief officer ever in the United States. The fifth child of seven and only daughter to reach adulthood was born in Taiwan of parents who spoke Taiwanese and Japanese. When she and her siblings began school, they received instruction only in Mandarin Chinese. The family left Taiwan for the U.S. in 1970; they came to Las Vegas because her father could repair air conditioners. In Las Vegas, Cherina and her siblings again found themselves expected to learn in a language they did not understand—

English. Kleven recalls with fondness the Roy W. Martin Junior High School teacher who tutored her in English on her own time after school. It was at this time that twelve-year-old Cherina assumed responsibility for her parents' legal and financial paperwork.

Kleven's route to firefighting is unusual. After exploring other work opportunities, she sought a career that would enable her to help her children with their schoolwork. Because she received her elementary education in another country, she did not know how to help her children with their lessons. She wanted a flexible schedule that would allow her to volunteer in the classroom so she could hear the lessons and then help with homework. Becoming a firefighter allowed her that opportunity.

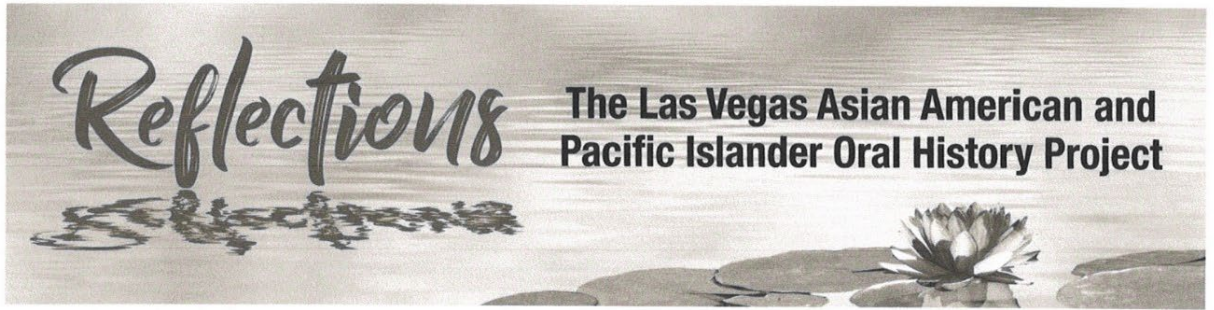
In this wide-ranging interview, Kleven talks about being one of the first six women to join the Las Vegas Fire Department and the adjustments the Department made while acknowledging the advantages of being the only Asian American woman and the "poster girl" for public relations and recruitment. She sketches the changing physical and cultural landscape of Las Vegas from the vantage point of a pre-teen Taiwanese immigrant to that of a successful retiree, wife, and mother of three. She discusses the difficulties of trying to learn in a language one does not understand, especially in the years before English as a Second Language programs were instituted.

Poignantly, in saying that it was her children who were the first to describe her as "smart," Kleven speaks to the pain that her father's traditional prejudices of a "woman's place" has long caused his only surviving daughter. She explains her reasons for running for elected office and describes the culture of the firehouse and bidding for promotions. She also discusses COVID-19, the rise in anti-Asian violence, and the divisiveness of the term, "Asian American."

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June 9, 2021
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Cecilia Winchell

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Good afternoon. Today's date is June ninth, 2021. I am Cecilia Winchell. I am joined here by...

Kristel Peralta.

And Stefani Evans.

As well as Cherina Kleven. Could you please spell your name for the record?

Yes. I's Cherina, C-H-E-R-I-N-A; Kleven, K-L-E-V, as in Victor, E-N.

Thank you. To start off, could you just tell us about your childhood; how you grew up; your parents; your family; all that?

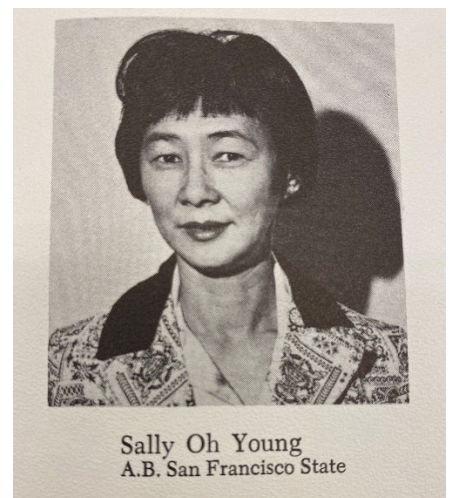
I was born in Taiwan in 1958, so I'm sixty-three years old. The family moved here in 1970. My father worked for the American embassy for nineteen and a half years, and we always had the Americans around us all the time. Having a candy bar was not a big deal, because we were used to having candy bars around. Many of them [embassy employees] recommended to my dad that we needed to move to the United States. Of course, most people really don't think about that if everything is going well; you have a good job and the family is established. My father was a businessman as well, besides working for the American embassy; he was in charge of the motor pool, by the way. So that's why we had a lot of contact with the Westerners, because when the delegates go to Taiwan, they need drivers, so the chauffeurs can take them around, and my father was the one that scheduled all that for them.

My father's business didn't go quite well, and he was tired of it, so one day, he told us kids, "Yes, I'm done with this." He applied and within a few hours was approved, because he had been working [at the U.S. embassy] for nineteen and a half years with the credentials and everything else, background check and so on—I'm sure they had already done all that. We

moved here. He came first. He moved here in June and got himself a place to live. We came in December.

Back in the '70s, there weren't that many Asians here; English as a Second Language (ESL) was not available at Clark County School District (CCSD). For me at the time, the pronunciation of the words isn't clear, because you say—for example, the American “sorry.” [In Taiwan] we say “sōri” with a long o and a softened “r,” almost like a “d” sound. So [the American] “sorry” really doesn't sound the same as the Taiwanese “sōri.” Also, “thank you”: Taiwanese don't use the “th” sound, so, “tank you.” At the time, the ESL programs were not established in one place to help non-English speaking students to excel. It was hard to go to school, because not all of the schools, at the time, had the programs in place to help students excel. I went to three different schools, and they turned us away. The only one—the one that actually accepted us—was Roy [W.] Martin Junior High School, so my heart belongs there. It wasn't because they had a teacher there that taught English as a second language. It was because of a teacher by the name of [Sally] Young. She was an English literature teacher, of Korean descent, and she spoke Japanese. Both my parents speak fluent Japanese as well, so they were able to converse.

Roy W. Martin Middle School no longer has its older yearbooks. Ms. Young is pictured here as “Sally Oh Young, Vocational Department,” in James Rice, ed., *Echo, Chapter Fifty: Class of 1964, Las Vegas High School, Las Vegas, Nevada*, yearbook, 43.



But I don't speak Japanese. I don't speak Korean. But she was teaching two Korean sisters English as well, so she took me and my brother in, and that's how we learned English. We started with, "This is a cat." We learned the phonics, the proper sound, pronunciation by starting with "This is a cat; Ted has a cat," and so on. Those were my first American books, and that's how we started it. And trying to pronounce it was hard. So what I would do was, I would write in Chinese to match the sound, and if the sound is more like Taiwanese. I would write an arrow and write the words, "Taiwanese dialect." I speak both Taiwanese and Mandarin. I would do that to help me pronounce the word correctly. Knowing other languages does help.

My childhood here was—I would consider myself— No, I won't, because that's all I know; I have nothing else to compare it with. But I can tell you that I never even learned how to wash dishes when I was in Taiwan. We had maids, and not because we were really well off; it's because my mother was very sick all the time, so we always had a maid to help out. When we moved here, I became the maid. You probably understand some of that, right? I'm not a firstborn. I'm actually a fifth child, but I'm the first girl, and so there it goes—it's the girl's job. I had to learn how to cook and [do] all the household stuff for the first time, and—for a person that didn't even know how to wash the chopsticks—I had to learn to do everything. I had a sister that was three years younger, but she is so tiny; I'm like a giant. I'm five foot seven inches and she's four foot ten inches. My father's philosophy was that if she cannot reach the sink, then she couldn't help, because at the time I was twelve years old when we moved here, and she was nine years old and still very tiny. Everything was on me, on my shoulders.

Since nobody really spoke English, my father went to work. People would knock on the doors or try to call us on the phone, but everybody [in the house] just stayed away from it

because we didn't know what to say or do. But it seems like it's always my job, so I would go answer the door. I would say, "Sorry, no English," and close the door. I would say the same thing on the phone, and I guess by doing so I had the task of taking care of the family. The first few words, even before I started going to Roy Martin, I had to learn how to write the numbers—O-N-E, T-W-O—because I had to start paying bills. I wrote the checks, and when I wrote the checks, I had to spell it out. I didn't know how to write at the time, English-wise, so I had to print it out on a piece of paper and then copy it when I was paying the bills. I started all that at age twelve, and it hasn't stopped.

My parents were very strict. We were not allowed any extracurricular at all. You're a child, and the only job you had was to go to school. Of course, besides that, for me-wise, there was housework. I had to get up before all my siblings. I got up forty-five minutes before everyone, because my mom was always ill, so I had to make breakfast for all my siblings and pack their lunches, and then I would wake them up so they could come and eat their breakfast. And then I would go get ready, so I didn't eat breakfast. I don't have the habit of eating breakfast, I never have, because by the time I'm getting ready, it's already time for me to go. If I don't go, then I'll miss the bus.

Since I went to a school that was so far away—it was not where we were zoned for—I had to walk. Our house was at the end of [East] Carey [Avenue] past Christy [Lane], almost to the end, where the trailer parks were. It's very close to where the airplane went down a couple of weeks ago, in that area. [*Ed. Note:* See "Military Aircraft Crashes Near Nellis Air Force Base," *KDWN 101.5 FM 720 AM*, 24 May 2021, <https://kdwn.com/2021/05/24/military-aircraft-crashes-near-nellis-air-force-base/>.] Anyway, I had to walk from there to Nellis [Boulevard] and Owens [Avenue] because that's the furthest away for the bus to pick up for Roy Martin. I would have to

walk over there to catch the bus. If I missed the bus, I had to walk all the way to school, which I did that a couple of times. Because it was so cold out there. We never experienced this cold in Taiwan. There was a gas station, and my brother and I would go to the gas station. He stays in the bathroom and I would stand outside and wait. Then when the bus comes, I would go knock on the door and say, "Hey, come on out." One time it was so cold I decided, "*Why don't I go to the bathroom? Because I'm cold, too.*" When I did that we missed the bus, so we walked all the way to Roy Martin. One good thing is, because we couldn't speak English all that well, I'm sure whatever they were telling us, it didn't mean anything to us. We just knew what time it was and we went to that classroom for that particular period. The teacher didn't say anything to us, like, why are you late? If they did, I don't remember. They just let us slide.

I had really good, fun memories of going to school over there, because I don't ever remember anything really negative. I remember, because there weren't a lot of Asians there, I would have girls come up to me and pull my hair, because it was really straight and long. They would pull it thinking it was fake, I don't know. But most of them were African American girls, because their hair is so curly and ours was so straight, totally opposite. I never thought anything of it. I was just like, *Okay, well, all right.* Later on people were saying, "They're picking on you." I said, "But I didn't take it that way." I always say that if the intended message is not received by the receiver, then it didn't happen; because the intended message for that particular person, that person didn't get it. It kind of messes up your hair, right? I went through that pretty much my whole life. Once I got into the fire department, I had to ask a few times, "What does that mean?" when they're talking about jokes and joking around, things like that. I didn't get it, so then the joke goes back to them, because I have no idea what they're talking about. I had a good time, I did.

When I was fifteen, I started working at a Chinese restaurant called Pagoda Inn. It was right there at Civic Center [Drive] and Lake Mead [Boulevard]. It was a bowling alley and they had a restaurant attached to it. That was my first job, working there as a waitress. I believe at the time I was getting paid like a dollar an hour, dollar ten an hour. I remember people would put a nickel down for a tip, a few pennies for tip. It made no difference. Back then money was worth a lot more than now. The nickel back then could be a dollar now.

Pagoda Restr 2525 E Lake Mead Blvd (NLV)

The Mullin-Kille Las Vegas Nevada ConSurvey City Directory Master Ed. 1972 (Chillicothe, Ohio: Mullin-Kille, 1972), 71, Restaurants

I've been working since I was fifteen. Then I retired, of course, a few years ago from Las Vegas Fire & Rescue. For most of my jobs, I would stay in one area for quite a long time. Before the fire service I had another job, and I was there for ten years. I'm not one to change jobs unless it interfered with school or whatever. But other than that, I don't know, what else do you want to know?

I would like to go back a bit and talk about what it was like growing up in Taiwan.

Oh, that part. Well, I can tell you what I remember the most was going to school. I went to school when it was dark some days, depending. In the winter, I went to school when it was dark, and when I got out of school, coming home, it was still dark. We'd go to school. It's our job to clean our classroom. Oh yes, when they say, "Wipe on and wipe off," you do that. You do the windows. You do everything. The fifth and sixth graders are the ones tasked with cleaning the bathrooms. They do not have anybody there working. They had a gardener who takes care of the garden, the flowerbed and all that, but everything else was done by the students. It is your school; you should take pride, and that's how they teach you. At the time, we didn't know the difference. We just did what we were told. As I have gotten older, I realized they were teaching

us discipline. We would clean in the morning, and then we go out there and do the “Pledge of Allegiance,” the same old thing; then everybody does exercise all together at the same time. Then we go back in the classroom. Everyone wore uniforms. One thing we had to do is every morning we had to put our hands out, and the teachers would come around and check and make sure your nails are clean, there is no dirt underneath them, and check behind your ear and make sure that you’re clean; that you did take your bath or clean up. We all took our lunches. Even though the elementary school I went to has an open lunch; in other words, you can go out the campus. Across the street are restaurants or stands back then. At the end of the day, when class ended, we had to clean the classroom again. We cleaned. Of course, again, you do what you’re supposed to do, don’t think about it. Then as I got older and got wiser, again, discipline. I’m thinking, *It doesn’t make sense. There are no night classes, so the classroom is still clean. Why is it that in the morning we had to clean again?* But that was ritual. Every morning you clean and then every afternoon when it’s time to go home, clean.

Summer vacation there is homework from every single class. They give—you probably know a lot about the same thing. Where are you from?

I’m from Beijing, China.

We’re very similar, I’m sure. We would have—no kidding—it’s like construction paper and each page for every single day, for every single class. We would all come home with one for each subject. At the end of your summer vacation, you need to return those, take them back to your school to your next class. If I was third grade going to fourth grade, I would turn in these packets to my fourth-grade teacher. If you don’t finish it—the teachers in Taiwan at that time, they were the gods. When they said *sit* and your mom said *stand up*, you sat. They are the gods, yes. With that, school was very, very strict. For the elementary school girls can have long hair, but once we

get to junior high school, everybody's hair is cut the same. I went to junior high there for a couple of months, two or three months. On Mondays and Fridays you wore shoes. On Tuesdays through Thursdays you wore tennis shoes. The deans and the teachers are standing right in front of the gate and watching what you wear. When they say, "It's time to put your coat on," you put your coat on. You could be freezing cold and [if] it's not time to switch to the winter uniform, you do not switch to winter uniform. That's pretty strict.

I have to say, when we came here it was a shock seeing what was going on in the class. I saw students putting their feet on the desks and talking to the teacher. I remember girls wore makeup and they're smoking in the bathroom. Tons of stuff that I had never seen or heard of before. That part was a culture shock. Food-wise, it wasn't. But as far as how the school system is, totally different. And in Taiwan, the teacher comes to your classroom; you don't go to theirs. You just stay in one classroom. Here in the States we go to the teacher's classroom instead.

I was always running because I was afraid that I was going to be late for my class. There were times that I needed to go use the restroom and I didn't, because I'm thinking I might be late, not knowing that actually I have plenty of time. You go to your locker, change your books, and people said, "Hi. How are you?" I'm thinking, *How did you guys do that? How can you guys stay here and chitchat and talk and get to your classroom on time?* In my first year, it was very, very stressful for me just because you can't speak English and don't really know what they're teaching you. The math part was good. So, that part was okay. I could kind of figure it out. But the other subjects, it was hard, because when you can't speak, you don't understand. Then, when I was sitting in the classroom, I would look at other people and see what they're doing. That's when I thought, *Wow, they curl their hair.* They had long hair and all this. It was quite different.

In Taiwan, pretty much all I remember was schooling. My parents didn't do a whole lot. On Saturdays my father worked half-day at the embassy. The embassy was open six days a week. When it closes—that's the only part that I really remember—my father would get home, and my mom with help would make a few items, and we would have a picnic. When my father got home, we would get in the car, and go to the beach. On Saturdays, many times we would go to the beach and have our picnic there and swim, even though none of us know how to swim except for my father. We would go to the beach and then go home. That part I remember quite well, and I have very fond memories of that.

Of course, with the school, one of the best parts is the fieldtrip. We always had a fieldtrip once a year. The fieldtrip was always fun, and we always would go to someplace new. One year, I believe it was in the sixth grade, we actually took a train and went south. I had never been on a train before, so that was fun. We went to this place by the ocean, and I don't remember the name or what the place is called, but we were told they're known for sharks. What do we know? I'm riding on the train and I remember looking for the shark, the fin that came up to the surface. I'm looking and I'm going, "There are sharks everywhere." Because you see the waves. When you're far [away] and you see the wave, the color is kind of dark, so I'm thinking, *There's a shark, there's a shark, there's a shark*. No wonder they call that location a shark infested beach. Nobody is allowed to go in there. I remember that part really well. And then it wasn't until later, "No, that's the wave." When I was older and went to the beach, "Oh, that's waves, not sharks." But I could swear there were sharks everywhere.

Those are my fond memories that I remember so well, because as kids we didn't really go many places. One of the reasons we didn't is because my mother ruled with an iron fist. We were not allowed to play outside, because kids do get into fights, and she says, "When the kids get into

fights, so do the adults,” and she doesn’t want to deal with that, so we were not allowed to go out. The boys, my older brothers, would always sneak out. My sister, my youngest brother, and I, we were like one team. They [our oldest brothers] didn’t want anything to do with my youngest brother because he is five years younger than me, which is seven years apart from my older brother. They wanted nothing to do with him, so I always had my sister and my little brother with me for that.

We don’t really go out, another reason, because the school—I don’t know, maybe we call it brainwashing—they want you to wear your uniforms when you go out, even after the class. If you go out to eat, wear your uniform. If you go to the movies, wear your uniform. You should be proud of your school, which we are, and so you wear your uniform, and we did that. But if somebody gets in trouble, people would call the school and give your student number. We all have our student numbers on our uniforms along with the name of the school. If you did something wrong, they’ll take your number down and then call your school. In the morning after cleaning and “Pledge of Allegiance” and all that stuff, they would call those kids up. They call those kids up, yes, and discipline them in front of everybody.

We didn’t like to go out and take chances, because if you happen or if somebody wants to be mean and make up some stories, how are you going to defend yourself? You know what I’m saying? My mom always said, “No, we don’t go anywhere; no, we don’t go anywhere.” We really didn’t go anywhere at all except going to school and looking forward to the fieldtrips. We had American friends coming over for dinner or we’d go to their house for dinner, but other than that, that’s pretty much it for my childhood in Taiwan that I remember.

You mentioned that both of your parents spoke Japanese. How did they come to learn?

Because we're Taiwanese. Generations on both sides of my family have been there for generations. I did find out through my cousin that my father's side of the family originated from Fujian [a southeastern Chinese province close to Taiwan]. He did a great job of research in all the histories and all that and genealogy and so on. He is my oldest uncle's oldest son. You know how that goes. Usually they're the keepers of the family history. He did his job really well and he found that out on that side.

Now, my mother's side, what we know, my mother's family has always been in Taiwan. They're part of the Indigenous people, is my understanding. Ancestors were there when the Spaniards were there. My mother remembers—and not just her, because I confirmed it with my aunts—they remember seeing an uncle that was blonde and blue-eyed. They probably were light, but I'm not so sure how blonde. I wasn't there. I checked with my uncles and aunts, and they said, yes, they had an uncle that had light hair and blue eyes. So, there was some hanky-panky going on back then.

That's the part I know about. My father's side is from Fujian province originally. My mother's side, the history we have, has always been in Taiwan. Since they were there before World War II, the Japanese were in control of Taiwan for fifty years. They [my parents] were born Taiwanese, speaking Taiwanese at home, and then when they went to school, they learned Japanese, so they speak and write Japanese. Then after World War II, when Chiang Kai-shek came in, when his regime took over, then they had to learn Chinese Mandarin.

At the time I was born in the late 1950s, there was still disparities going on between Chinese and the Taiwanese. If you look at the history, there was a time that when the Chinese went over there initially, there was a lot of unrest; I won't get into that, because you can read the history of that. A lot of unrest, so the Taiwanese and the Chinese didn't get along. Your

neighborhood, they didn't really want the Chinese people to live there. It's kind of like here a little bit, with segregation. But what the Taiwanese did, to me, we did ourselves a disservice by not teaching our kids Chinese Mandarin when we were at home. When we went to school, because I didn't speak Chinese Mandarin at home at all—none, zero—once you get to school, you are only allowed to speak Mandarin. Everything is in Mandarin. For Taiwanese kids like me, [who] didn't speak Mandarin until they went to school, what do we do?

Taiwanese kids fall behind academically, and the Chinese student will continue to excel, because that was the language that they spoke. I think the Taiwanese people finally figured it out that if you want your children to excel and compete, you need to let them start learning at home the Chinese Mandarin. That was after my generation many years, because during my time you don't speak Chinese Mandarin at home. Now, everybody speaks Chinese. Matter of fact, there's Taiwanese people [now] who do not know how to speak Taiwanese, because they're so embedded with speaking Chinese Mandarin at home. It's pretty interesting.

All the history they taught was Chinese, Chinese history in China. There was no history about Taiwan, zero. If you ask me where is Tainan and show me the map, I have no idea where that is, absolutely no idea. You tell me a town and I have no idea where it is. It's not just me. Even back then, you look at the map, if you show it to any of them, they don't know unless they're a scholar. You cannot look at a map and tell me where it is, because it was never taught. Everything we learned was about China because of the Chinese regime. It wasn't until, I believe, in the '80s, '90s, the Taiwanese were more vocal and they started protesting and then they started allowing and teaching Taiwanese in some of the schools, and now they can speak Taiwanese in school. The relationship is much better now than back then, much different and much better. That's what I remember.

Do you have any memories of your grandparents?

No, very, very little. Unfortunately both my grandmothers passed away when I was in first grade. I remember living with my mother's parents. My grandpa works for the railroad, and he was with the railroad before World War II. Matter of fact, after World War II, when Japanese were all sent back, left only with the clothes they had on. They were not allowed to take anything with them. His boss had told him, "Why don't you take my house?" It has the koi fish, it has this bridge and beautiful garden with bonsai trees. It was just really elaborate. It was given to my grandfather, and my grandfather said, "No." He said he knew if he took it he would not stay alive; the whole family, and that has happened; that did happen. He refused. Because once the Chinese from there took over, they were running away from Mao Zedong. A lot of them left with nothing, so how are they going to start a family and start over in Taiwan? Something had to happen. That's just the way it is. It doesn't make it right; it doesn't make it wrong; that is what it is; that's war. Everybody suffers. Everybody loses. There's no winners in that. That's what happened back then. My grandfather said, "No." He said, "If I did I wouldn't have anything. My family would be gone." The people who actually took it, that's what happened to them; yes, because they took over the houses and things like that. Not just the war, it is survival.

I don't know much about my father's mother. From my father's side, all the boys, when they got married, they had to bring their wives home and live in the same household. My father was the only son that moved away. After a while he moved out from the family home. I was too young to really know my grandmother. I remember her vaguely when she comes over for her son to give her money. I remember seeing her come to the house a few times for that. But we're not close to them because we moved out.

When we first moved out, we lived with my mother's side of the family. I know my grandmother on my mother's side a little bit more. I remember she would cook and stuff like that, very tiny lady. They both passed away when I was in the first grade. Then the grandfathers continued to live, but we moved to United States. When my grandfathers passed away, we weren't there. I only know them very little, not a whole lot of memories. I know my grandpa on my mother's side, he was tall. He was six foot tall, which is very tall. He was six foot tall. Oh, the mixed blood. No, I don't know much about my grandparents. I wish I did. I know my father's family, they own an ice cream manufacturing, so Popsicles and all that. I remember when we went there we would always get to pick a Popsicle we wanted, whatever. That part I know, but other than that I don't have a whole lot of memories of them, especially once my father moved the family out. I don't even know my cousins until I moved here and we reconnected; otherwise, I wouldn't know who they are.

I'd like to move on to when you landed here. When you first came to the United States, you ended up in Las Vegas immediately?

My father came in June [1970] and went to Lake Havasu in Arizona, because the people that he kept in contact with—they were Gerri and George Campbell—they were from Mississippi, I understand. They became very good friends. Matter of fact, they didn't have any kids, so when they were in Taiwan, they asked us to call them Mommy and Daddy. We've been calling them Mommy and Daddy while we were in Taiwan, and when we came to the United States, we still call them Mommy and Daddy. My father came and went to Lake Havasu and lived with them. My father by trade is an electrician, so he does air conditioning and heating. When he was in Arizona, in Lake Havasu, he needed to decide where he wanted to go with his family. Lake Havasu is very small. You couldn't really survive with a family there. I think he was the only

Asian in that community there. The choice was going to Phoenix or Las Vegas for air conditioning. He chose Las Vegas because it was a smaller town than Phoenix, and that's how we ended up here.

Another reason that we lived so far away—the house, I told you, was at the end of Carey [Avenue], past Christy [Lane]. If you go down there right now, it is still a dead-end. No one wanted to rent to Asians, I guess, so my father couldn't get an apartment anywhere. It's a trailer house. It's a mobile home. It was a single-wide mobile home with an addition; they added a built-in attached to it. Very small, very, very small. It was not just a single-wide, it was also very short. That's where we lived. That's why my dad decided to come to Vegas, because he does air conditioning.

You already talked about your schooling at Roy Martin. What did you end up doing for your later education?

After that I went to Las Vegas High School and I graduated there [in 1976].



Senior photo, Las Vegas High School, class of 1976

I attended UNLV. At the time when I was going to UNLV, first year or two was good, and then second year I met my husband at work because I was working and going to school. I worked at the Golden Nugget. I was a waitress at Golden Nugget, and my husband, he came a little bit later than me, but he came and he worked as a busboy. Busboy, waitress. I couldn't go for a maître d', right? I went for the busboy. That's life, right? We've been together forty-four years. We celebrate our forty-second anniversary coming up on the twenty-fourth of this month.

ALL: Congratulations.

We have three kids and two grandkids, wonderful kids. I worked, like I said, since I was fifteen. I worked at Sizzler's [Restaurant]. I don't know if you guys will know Sizzler's. When Sizzler's was in Vegas, I worked at Sizzler's. My first job was the Pagoda Chinese restaurant; I worked in Sizzler's, and I worked in another Chinese restaurant for a little while. Then I went to work at Golden Nugget, over there as a waitress, and that was the Culinary Union. Then from there I left and went to work for National Car Rental. I was with them for ten years, and that was Teamsters Union.

From there I took a year off to train, get myself ready to become a firefighter, and then went in the fire service [Las Vegas Fire & Rescue] and retired from the fire service a little over twenty years later. I started as a firefighter and went through the ranks. I retired as an assistant fire chief, and when I retired, I retired as the highest-ranking Asian American female fire chief officer in the nation. I was also told it's in the world, because Asian women just don't think about becoming firefighters. Most firefighters, if they hold the chief's position, it's most likely that they're doctors overseas, like EMS [Emergency Medical Services] sector. They already had a profession and they came in to oversee certain sectors of the fire department; they are not

working as a firefighter first and working their way up through the ranks to become an assistant fire chief. That's me.

Why did you choose to go into firefighting?

Oh my, gosh. I told you I had five brothers and a sister. None of my sisters-in-law work. My family do not let women in the workforce, so I was the only working female in the family. [They] do not believe in [it] at all, but I was okay working as long as I was not married. But once I got married, I was supposed to be staying home. But we didn't have kids for two years, so why would I sit at home? That's not me, anyway. I worked, and then, when I got pregnant, my father was very disappointed that I didn't take any time off. Of course, when I married my husband, my husband didn't have a job, so that didn't work, either. I married a White guy. I married a Caucasian instead of an Asian that had money or drove a Mercedes. I was very disappointing. I am the black sheep of the family, for sure, so I was disappointing to them pretty much my whole life. There's a whole bunch of expectations that I did not meet—I'm just not.

My nickname, I have quite a few, quite a few. Let's see, I was Dumb and Stupid, and my father always called me Mustang. I never understood why he called me Mustang. That's a wild horse. I was not allowed to leave the house, not allowed to have friends or go anywhere, so how I become a wild horse? I don't know, my father always called me that, a wild horse. Oh, my brothers, yes. I grew up believing I was Dumb and Stupid because that was my name. I very seldom was called my name. I didn't think anything. When you grow up in that environment and you don't have outside contact too much, you don't know the difference. I would go to school and I was not allowed to have any socializing with the students at all. My parents never told me I was smart or even [said] *good girl* or *beautiful*—nothing. The first time I heard the word *smart*, it actually came from my kids.

Why did I go in the fire service? It's because I was such a disappointment to my parents. I'm married and I have kids and I'm still working. I'm constantly getting ridiculed. It's just a culture thing. Being in the fire service is the only way out, because I only work ten days a month, every other day. I'm a housewife for twenty days a month. Ooh, my parents should be very happy because I'm more of a housewife now, and not a career woman.

When I heard that they were hiring females in the fire service, why not me? I'm tall. I'm like a giant. I have a build. I'm not skinny and tiny. I'm like, come on. In school, in grade school when I was in Taiwan, I was always sat in the back of the class because I'm too tall. Because the students can't see over your head, you sit in the back. But when we marched out of our classroom, I was always in the front, so then they can see me so they can follow me. I'm used to that. I just lost my train of thought.

With that being said, I think if I get in the fire service, I can satisfy that. Plus, I was really starting to get panicky, because my children started going to school. And since I didn't go to school here for grammar school, I don't know what to teach them when they get home. If they come home and they ask me a question, I have no answers for them. I couldn't live with that. If I took a daytime job, I would miss going to school with them and learn about what they learn. If I take a nighttime job, I can go to school, but I won't be able to put them to bed and make sure they do their homework and all that stuff. Being a firefighter was the best job in the world. It still is the best job in the world, it still is.

First thing was I would be able to help my kids. I became the room mother to all three kids' classes. When I come home from work, my house is just a house. One of our students' mothers once told me, "Why don't you come to the classroom and be more involved?" I said, "I will, but I've got kids and I still have a little one." I had three kids in three years. I was going for

that Olympic gold and I didn't get it. But I had all three of them. I have the little one, and when I went to the classroom to help out here and there, I wasn't consistent, because I still had the little one there. But as soon as she went to kindergarten, man, was I out there. She [the other mother] gave me very good advice. She said, "Your dishes and your sink will still be there a year from now; your children might not. They grow up." What good advice, huh? From that day forward, you can imagine what my house looked like. No, I'm just kidding. But all my spare time was with my kids. I went to school with them. When they learned, I learned with them. When I came home and they did their homework and they didn't know or couldn't quite understand, I got to help them.

They told me, "Mom, you're so smart." I go, "I'm not. I was in the classroom with you guys and that's how I know this." And they go, "Oh no, Mommy, no, no, Mommy, you're so smart." I didn't know how to take that, because nobody ever said that to me, ever. So first I did it for my kids; they're my inspiration.

Anyway, when I became a firefighter, I thought my father was going to be very happy, and he's not. He wasn't. He apparently called his family in Taiwan and told them all he had now were sons, no daughters. My only sister passed away when she was nineteen years old, and that's when my dad called his family at home in Taiwan to let them know that my sister passed away. Now, they know that he only has one daughter left, me. When I became a firefighter, then he called home and told them, "All I have are sons," and they thought I died. "All I have left now are sons," because I'm in a man's field. First of all, I'm not supposed to be working, but I am. I'm a female; I'm not supposed to be working, by my father's standard. Not only am I working, but I work in a man's field; so therefore, I'm a man; I'm not female. That's how he took it.

A couple of years later my auntie—his sister—came to visit, and they saw me and they thought they saw a ghost. She said, “I thought you died.” “What? No, no. Why would I be dead?” “Well, your dad called and told us a couple of years ago that all he had was sons, so we thought you died.” I had no idea until they told me that.

My father would always tell me when I’d come home—very ritual—knock on the door, and my mom would answer the door. My dad would say, “Who is it?” And my mom would say, “It’s your daughter.” “Oh, you mean my other son?” It just went on and went on.

One particular summer I came home, the same thing. I said hi, and they do that. Mind you, all this time I’m still writing the checks, I’m still paying all their bills, [doing] all their household stuff. I continued to do all that, everything, all the bills, papers. My father then owned a travel agency, and all this stuff needs to be read and all that; legal stuff, or whatever. I’m supposed to be the dumbest, right, in the family, but I’ve got to do everything, so I had a good opportunity. That’s how you look at it.

Then when I came home one day, my mother, the same thing: “It’s your daughter.” And my father walked up to see who it was. As my mom opened the door, she said, “Oh, it’s your daughter.” And he says, “Oh, my other son.” And so then I walk up to him—and I don’t know how I got the courage to do this—I went up to him, and I had a tee shirt on. I went like this [cups her breasts together with her hands and raises them] and I shove it into his face. Because he’s shorter than I am. I just walked up to him and said, “Oh yes? But none of your sons has this.” I went like this and I just shoved it into his face. I remember he was looking at me and my mom was looking at me like, anytime now it’s going to be like this [mimics a slap], across my face, right? I’m waiting, I’m waiting, and it didn’t come. Then finally my father’s lip just went up a

little bit, and he never called me that again after that. That's the first time I stood up to my parents.

He still doesn't talk about my career or anything at all. It's shameful that you've got your daughter working a man's job, I guess; man's world. We never talk about my work. All the promotions that I've had, no one from the family has come over for the badge-pinning ceremony. When I became assistant fire chief, I just went to my chief [David Washington, Las Vegas Fire Department Chief, who retired in 2001] and said, "Just give me the badge." That's good enough. There was no press release, even though I was the first Asian, first female, first female chief officer for the City of Las Vegas, for Southern Nevada. And no publicities.



Training officer pinning, 1997–98

I was the first Asian, and no publicities because I didn't want any of it. I'm not one to go, "Hey, hey, look at me," to begin with. I also didn't want to do that because I didn't want to

embarrass my parents; because then it would just be publicized, and my parents would probably have to go hide somewhere, dig a hole, I don't know. But it was something that I wouldn't do, so we never had anything like that. It's probably why a lot of people didn't know who I was and didn't know that there was [in Las Vegas] an Asian female in the fire service in the '80s, and that I was the first Asian female firefighter, professional firefighter.

What were some of the challenges that you faced while you were in the firefighting force?

Well, being naïve is really a blessing; it really is, at times. Back then, it was quite different. The hazing, it was normal, just the culture. Everything is wide open. The shower is wide open; there's no door, because female wasn't there before, so why should they have a door? The dormitory, the dorm room where you go to the bedroom, it's just one big room like this and a bed and a bed and a bed, and everybody slept together in the same room. When a call comes, when the alarm comes, we will just get up and go. So I get to sleep with all men, how about that? Everybody goes, "Oh, firefighters, the men, and you get to sleep in the room with them." Yes, but you know, they snore? You could get a recorder. It's a musical. You can listen to it all night long, all different sounds. It's true. I often say, "How glamorous can it be when you're doing CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation] on a person and everybody has bad breath going on in the middle of the night? We're just human. It's not that big of a deal. We're putting on a uniform; it's what we do." But you tend to have people, when they find out you're a firefighter, "How about it? Do you know any single firefighter guys?" They're all the same, no different than anyone else. Please.

They didn't have separate bathrooms, separate bedrooms, or even curtains to separate anything. Affirmative action was going on at that time, part of me being hired; four and a half years prior, they had hired three women. My class also had three women, me and a couple more

ladies. I was the oldest one in my class, married the longest, and had the most kids. The youngest one in the class is also a female. She was only twenty years old. I was thirty-one.

You just kind of go along with it. When you use the restroom, the way I look at it, when I go to use the restroom, I'm always in a stall, so I really don't care. Nobody gets to see me, anyway. It's the guys that have their privacy taken away. But at the time they looked at it differently. They think, well, women are coming in; we need to provide for them. They forget, they really do forget. That's how I look at it.

They put so much emphasis on how to treat the female in the fire service. They forget it's a man's world, and they did not prepare the men for that. They did not prepare them for that. The guys go to sleep with their underwear on. Heck, now they've got a lady sleeping in the same room. Do you sleep in underwear? You don't. They were taught all of a sudden that everybody wears gym shorts and a T-shirt going to bed. They sleep with no shirt on, just underwear. Well, you cannot do that anymore. They're telling them everybody has to change. This has been generations, generations for the fire service to be that.

They're not there for anything but just to serve the community. It's twenty-four hours, and on the downtime, they're sleeping. They need to be comfortable just like anything else. We have our bunker (turn-outs) next door, our bed at the time, and you just jump in your bunker and that's how it works. That's just my personal feeling. When the females came in, they did not educate the men. Also, they didn't take their feelings into consideration. It's like, *This is your house and I'm an invited guest to come to your house for dinner, and I'm telling you, 'I don't like what you're making me. I don't like this. I don't like that. I don't like the way you decorate your house. I don't like this. I don't like that.'* I don't think that's the right way of approaching anything that's new. I think you need to gradually go in there.

Later on, people would ask them, because they want to come in, the females in the fire service—and then they'd also think because you're a firefighter...all of us are mistaken for lesbians; we must be. I'm not. I'm at the heaviest I am right now. I was never this heavy. I'm the heaviest right now. When you look at me not being in a uniform, I probably don't look like a firefighter, but there's assumption what the firefighter should look like.

With that, when they did not prepare the guys, the first three women came, and they kind of shoved all these rules to them [the men], into their throats. It left a very bad taste in their mouth for the men. Then the three of us came, the second group that came in, and I think we were treated worse, because they [the men] didn't like the first three, what happened, and now you've got more [women]. Seriously. That's how they feel.

But I was very fortunate. I was very, very fortunate. In the fire service all I wanted to do was get in the fire service. I didn't even know how much I was getting paid. I never even checked. All I knew is I worked one day, one day off, one day [work], one day off. After the third shift, I had four days off and I could go to school with my kids. I never knew anything about benefits or how much I was getting paid. When I got my first paycheck, it was less than I was making at National Car Rental. I was taking a cut in pay, big cut in pay. When I left National in 1988—I got hired in 1978 and I left in 1988, National Car Rental—I was making almost twelve dollars an hour. That's real good money back then. We're talking about many years ago.

I got in fire service and I want to say I brought home probably, and maybe, 60 percent of what I had made. But my children don't have to go to childcare every single day, so I saved from there, because I'm home most of the time. Instead of the kids going to childcare five days a week, now the most they would go is eight days a month, because there will be days when I'm

home and some of the days would be weekends, and weekends my husband is off. And if I was having the four days off, if I get off Sunday, on Monday morning, then, the kids don't have to go anywhere except for one day; and some weeks they didn't have to go at all, because how our schedule rotates.

In the fire service with us, I was sleeping in the same room. Eventually they started to put locks in the bathroom so when you're there... But before they did that you always knocked. I think it's just common courtesy. You knock, and if a guy is in there, you just wait. But when the guys are knocking and I'm in the bathroom, I go, "I'm here," and they still come in, because guys just don't care. They're not modest; women are more so. We're in the bathroom, you do not want somebody else in there. Guys don't care. If they're going to pass gas, they'll run around. "Well, I have a big one coming. Oh, it's stinky, isn't it?" But we wouldn't even do that. Women hide in the bathroom, and [we] flush the toilet the whole time just hoping nobody hears that you're passing gas because you would hear it. This is life. Guys don't care. The louder, the better. It doesn't matter. There is a little life in the fire service. I often say, everything I learn I learn from my children, and then I learn from the fire service.

They eventually changed and they started building differently. They have partitions. The newer model fire stations will have actual—it's still a dormitory, but they are separated with the curtain, so everybody had their privacy. But I always thought that was quite weird, because one of the ladies that was in charge of affirmative action had called, because we had an incident in the fire service where a female was taking a shower and the male did not know and went in to take a shower. One was here and one was here, and they just kept taking a shower and went their separate ways. But that's a no-no. That's something you just don't do. She had called me. I was at Station 6. She called me and she just said, "How are you doing?" I said, "I'm fine." She goes,

“Do you have any issues?” “What do you mean?” “Do you have any issues?” “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” “Well, do you have any issues, like in the bathroom? You have your privacy?” Then it got into my nerve and that time I got more vocal. I remember saying to her, “I always have my privacy when I go to pee or shit. When I go number one or number two, I always have my privacy because I’m in stalls. When you talk about privacy, wouldn’t you think that perhaps you need to build another bathroom for the men? There are more men in a fire station. I’m just one person. If you’re thinking about building another bathroom, build for the men. I can go in a stall every time I’m in the bathroom. I’m in a stall. I have my privacy every time, every single time; the guys do not. Build another bathroom for them. After all, there’s more men in a fire station than women. I’m just by myself. I shouldn’t take the whole bathroom just because I’m there. Why should I use taxpayers’ money to build a bathroom just for me when I don’t have an issue and I can have my privacy all the time?” She never called me again. She never called me for any other issue to ask me, because she probably knew I wasn’t going to give a very good answer that she wanted to hear.

In the fire service, the sleeping arrangement, one of the things that people are always wondering: we were not welcome, because most of the guys’ wives or partners do not like the men sleeping with a woman in the same room. We definitely were not liked by the department, a lot of guys, and we were actually hated by a lot of wives, because we’re there working side by side, doing everything with their husbands.

People ask me, “Yes, you’re a firefighter. Well, what do you do?” “What do firefighters do?” Then they would look at me, and I go, “Yes, I’m a firefighter. I do everything they do except standing up peeing, because that’s by choice. I can, but I don’t want to.” That usually kind of shuts them up, because there is still that stigma that women—because I understand in the

military—I don't know if they still do that—when they have an academy, they would have the men and then have the women; they don't have them together. Rookie school, their academy for the cadets, are different for male and female.

Firefighters, we do the same thing; every single job we have, it's exactly the same. In the military, they might have nurses in the military, so training for the nurses is probably different. In the fire department, we all do the same, whether you're a captain, male or female; if you're an EMT, male and female; if you're a paramedic, male and female; everything. It doesn't matter. We all train together. Everything that is taught to men is taught to women, because we're in the exact same academy. We pass the exact same test. Everything is exactly the same. For a while when people asked me, it's an insult, like you're saying that we can't do the job. Then I started saying it like that: I do everything exactly the same except standing up to pee. It's different to say, I'm not familiar with what a firefighter does; can you enlighten me a little bit? There is a difference when you say, well, what do you do when you see a fire truck go by?

When we talk about women being in the fire service, at the beginning they weren't liked. They were not welcome. It had a lot to do with the strength. If I go down, can a woman pick me up and drag me out of here? But what they don't understand is when we're all faced with tragedy or anything that is so important to us, life and death situations, your endurance, everything just comes right up. You become a lot stronger. You can do so many things that you never think you could. That works in any job, any situation. It took a while, it took a long while, for them to go, okay, we're okay.

They stereotype that a certain person cannot do the work or will not do the job to their standard. But remember that a passing grade [on the exam] is seventy, for example. Regardless a one hundred or a seventy, you still pass. But they're looking at the person that scored one

hundred as better than the seventy. It might be incorrect that that's not necessarily so in terms of logic, in terms of experience, so that all comes in. In the fire service, education is great. Having a college degree, it is great. All my three kids had college degrees; it was not an option. That was not an option for them not to have it. But in my line of work as a firefighter, eventually you'll get to use skills that you learned from getting your Master's and your Bachelor's degrees, because there is a lot of the administration side that comes in place.

When you become a chief officer, a lot of that comes in place. But to be able to become a battalion chief or to even be an incident commander, you must know the fire behavior. For example, you need to have the experience of how to attack a fire during windy weather with a downwind, all that [is] taken into consideration. If you have a fire on the third floor or the basement, if your water is going up against gravity, you need to pump a lot more GPM [gallons per minute], higher GPM than you do going down in a basement because gravity; you would not need as much GPM to pump the water. All this takes place. Unless you are actually working as a firefighter and have those work and life experiences; the book cannot teach you that. You can't teach it—okay, I think I know—unless you apply it, you really don't know how it exactly happens. We do encourage all our firefighters to go to school and get their degrees and so on. I was encouraged throughout all my career to move on, to move up. If nobody told me that, I probably would have retired staying as a firefighter. There's nothing wrong with retiring as a firefighter. You're good at what you do. We need a few people that have a lot of experience to pass it on to the new people that are coming in, so they cannot all be officers.

When I was telling you that they didn't welcome my group of women, I was coming in a class of fifteen, and out of the fifteen, three of us were women. I was very apprehensive about it. I know my job and everything else, but I didn't know how I would fit in the fire service, because

I know how I fit in in my family. But unbeknownst to me, because of the way I was treated in my family, I actually fit in really nicely, because they could say anything to me and it would be just another day. They could say something mean to me and it was just another day, because I was used to that environment. Unbeknownst to me, it actually helped me. When people say stuff that is not very nice, it's just another day, and I don't say anything back and just let it go.

I had one particular engineer come to me when we were in the classroom doing an update for continuing education for our certifications. He came to me with a praying mantis, a humungous praying mantis in a clear Tupperware. We're in a class and he came to me and put it on my desk. He said, "Here, Cherina." I go, "Wow." I had never seen it before. It looks like a large grasshopper, except even bigger and a little uglier. I'm looking at it and I go, "Oh, okay." You never show your fear in the fire service. Once they know your hotspot or they know your fear, that's when they're going to have fun with you. I just looked at it and said, "Oh, okay. What is that?" They told me it was a praying mantis. I said, "Okay, thank you." I'm thinking he's showing it to me. Then he goes, "Eat it." I said, "I don't eat that and I don't know anybody that eats that." He said, "Yes, you do. Your people eat that." I'm like, "No, I don't know any of my people that eat that. I don't know anybody that eats that." That was the end of that conversation. When the class was over, his captain came up to me and apologized up and down. He said, "I am so sorry what happened in there." [I said,] "It just went over my head. I don't know what happened there. I didn't know what happened." He said, "He should never have brought that to you and told you to eat it and the things that he said." I remember telling him, "It's okay. It doesn't bother me. I don't eat it, so I don't care."

A few things like that happened to me where people said things that were perhaps racist, but I didn't take it that way, because I had never been around racist people and I didn't know

those were racist comments. As [to] my career, I started climbing the ladder and I started realizing that, just because I didn't take it that way, it doesn't mean that's not going to be taken the same way for the other people. I should have said something. I should have said, "Hey, that wasn't cool. You shouldn't be saying that." But at the time, again, it's just not something that we talked about.

[In the past,] during the rookie class, if you got hurt you would never say a word because you're out of the academy; you're fired. Now, when you get hurt in the academy, you get to put on light duty and you carry on with light duty until the next academy, when you're all healed; then you go back to the academy and start another academy; they don't get fired. During my time they fire you, and every other word coming out of the officer's words is an F word, is a cuss word, all of it, all of it. I learned them all in the fire service. They say that when you learn another language, the first words that you learn is usually the bad words. No, I did not. I did not learn any of them, at all, because none of my family used those words and other people. And since we cannot have friends, I don't have any friends that use that language. When I started hearing them, and they would be *this* close to you—talk about COVID and spitting—it's right there in front of you, and it's yelling and screaming, every other word is an F word, and everything else; it's just kind of flying in your face. You just pretend that person is not there. You find your own comfort zone and you just kind of go there; otherwise, they break you.

That's how they try, they try to break you down; that's what it is. They try to make sure that you're able to handle the situation. When normal people are put in abnormal situations where we need to mitigate the incident and not become part of the problem, we have to be able to think quickly on our feet, because the decisions we make during an incident impact someone's life and death and their properties and everything. It's very precise that the decision that we

make is the right one, and so it's very crucial. I believe that's part of the training in the academy, how they're so tough on us in the words that they use and everything else to thicken your skin as well, because when you respond to an incident, it isn't always nice people that are in trouble or get hurt. We respond to anything from A to Z, and while you're helping people—for example, if they overdose—and you give them Narcan and try to get them out of their high, we always had to tie them down first. Because normally you give them Narcan and within seconds they wake up and they're going to fight you. They cuss you out because you just took them out of their high, because they don't remember that they overdosed and almost died and you just brought them back to life. They just know that you just took away their high that they spent money on and now it's all gone, so they just want to kill you. They're swinging at you, they cuss you, words that come out of their mouth that you never heard of; things like that.

That [rough treatment in the academy] is their way of preparing us for what we could be expecting, and it's not necessarily that they're doing it to just be mean to us, the way it is, and I didn't take it that way. It definitely helps us by giving us an opportunity on how to handle certain situations and how to continue to give the good, proper service. After all, we're taxpayers, everybody. Regardless, you have to give the same service whether you get up at three o'clock in the morning and somebody calls you that has had a headache for two days now, but they had to call you at three o'clock in the morning to come and help them. It happens. You have to give that person the same service you do for the person that calls you at nine o'clock in the morning. They are equal. They are taxpayers.

Experience in the fire service has been wonderful. I had a lot of great people that were planting seeds in my head without me knowing. The first one that did was my first evaluation when I had been on the floor, graduating from the academy and going on the floor at Station 1.

Station 1 is a large fire station, which is the one that has the most calls in the nation, most calls for Rescue One, so it's a very busy station. During my first evaluation, my captain sat me down and he looked at me and he said—he's a very good captain. He's looking at me and he says, "When we heard that three more women were coming in, we don't want you guys here." He was very, very straightforward. He said, "We didn't want the first three, and we definitely didn't want you guys." Of course, what do you do? You just sit there. You sit there and you go, okay, whatever; what else is coming now? He is looking at my straight in the eyes. He said, "When we heard that there were more women coming in, we do not want you guys. We don't like you guys. We don't want you guys here. But you know what?" I'm like, "No." And he went like this, real hard [pounding on table], and he goes, "You know what?" I go, "No." He said, "It's the best thing that ever happened to at this fire station," because I was there. I didn't know what to say. Like, oh okay, he's just playing. He goes, "Relax." He says, "You're doing fine. Your evaluation was real good." He said, blah blah blah. Then he goes, "Just very comfortable." I'm just straightforward, always *yes, sir* and *no, sir*. All the sudden he says, "So, where do we go from here?" I'm like, "What do you mean, where do we go from here?" "Well, what is your career move? What is your career path?" I said, "I just want to get off of probation." He goes, "You're not going to have any problem with that. What career path are you going to take?" "Firefighter, I'm a firefighter." He says, "Be a fire engineer."

At that time EMS [emergency medical services] was not embraced by the fire department. In the '80s, early '90s, we were one of very few classes that came in...during our academy, when I graduated I was an EMT [emergency medical technician], and most of the fire department were not EMTs. At that time EMTs had just been introduced into the fire service a couple of years before that, and so we still had paramedics and people who were EMT and EMT

intermediate. In my class during the recruitment academy, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were fire, and Tuesdays and Thursdays were EMS; so we become EMT certified when we got out of the academy. Most firefighters want to be a firefighter because they want to fight fire. It's fun. It's adrenaline. It is all this, yada yada yada. EMS, I don't want to do EMS.

He told me to go to the engineer route; he suggested that. He says, "You'll be a good engineer. Go the engineering route. Don't go the paramedic route." "Yes, sir. Yes, sir." Here I am, my next test was engineer. I drove the engine, the truck. I was the only female that drove an engine. One of the other ladies that was an engineer had retired, so by the time I became an engineer, she had already been gone. I think she had just left about that time, so I was the only female engineer in my department. I went on to become a fire training officer in charge of the driver operator program, which [meant] I'm in charge of everyone's recertification: of all the firefighters who drive the rescue and all the engineers who drive the engines and the ladder truck.

When a piece of new equipment comes in, a new apparatus, say if we got a new engine, I have to go through it, all of it, along with the mechanics. The mechanics go through it. I had to come up with what I call a cheat sheet, a troubleshooting sheet, so that when there are certain things not working, when the mechanic is not with you, they [the firefighters] are able to troubleshoot themselves. We have to go through all that, and that was my job. When they do recertification of driver's training, emergency vehicle operating procedure course, what they call EVOC, emergency vehicle operating course, the one they're still using in our department is the one I designed, and it's still in force right now. It's the obstacles that you have to go through, forward, reverse, not hitting the cones, and all that stuff; that was my job. As a training officer I would oversee all the engineers.



Recruitment photo (1992–1993) (L to R rear): Ellen Goldsmith, Cherina in yellow turnout gear, Abdus Salaam. (L to R front) George Goldbaum and Richard Garcia



Recruitment photo (1992–1993) (L to R) Abdus Salaam, Cherina in yellow turnout, Richard Garcia, Ellen Goldsmith, and George Goldbaum



Cherina with delegate from China in front of Engine 7 ca. 1990

I was the one that brought the written test and the practical back to our department, me writing test questions instead of hiring an outside company, [which they had done] for years. They hired an outside company to come in and conduct the tests for the promotional tests for engineers, for captains, for battalion chiefs, and so on. I brought that back to our department. I was the first one that wrote all the questions for the written test and then wrote all the scenarios for the practical. You have to pass the written test before you can do the practical, and it's all by a points system. I would go to HR to write the test and all that, because everything I wrote, I had to leave it with HR and they locked it up. It was only me that knew what was going on it and so on.

It was a great opportunity to learn, of course, and it gave me a window into how the testing process can be conducted in-house. Each time when I did something that's positive, it

built self-esteem, because I didn't have any. It helped me to go, *I can do this* or *I can do that*, so it was nice. It was nice. I did that for quite a few years.

I also had gotten hurt at work. I had torn off my hamstring. The choice was to have surgery done or let the scar tissue—because scar tissue would form eventually and reconnect it together, and so that was the one I chose, because if I had surgery I would be out of work. With the rehab and everything, it would probably be a good two or three months, *if I can come back*. I gave my word to HR; they wanted me to start another engineer's test and they wanted me to be able to come up with another engineer's test in six months for the next time. I said, "Sure, I can do that." We had just finished one [group] and certified, but they wanted another list, another test done. I said yes, and then I got hurt. If I were to take my time off work for that three months and all that, I wouldn't be able to accomplish that. I gave my word that I would go ahead and do it. I had to finish, so I chose not to have surgery.

I came to work. I drove with my left foot. I drove the engine. I pulled myself up with the crutches. All that time I drove the engine, I would pull myself up and then grab my crutches. I drove around and did all the tests and everything. I remember the risk management for the City [of Las Vegas] was standing there in the back of the training center and looking at me like this [demonstrating]. Because I wasn't the type of person that's going to file something [a claim], against the city, or I'm going to sue you guys later. I'm here to do my job, and hopefully I don't get hurt and go home in one piece and get to see my kids.

Every morning when I leave to go to work, I make sure I tell my kids how much I love them and I hug them, because it could be the last time they see me, so that was another thing. That was a little hard, and I think it touched my oldest daughter more because she was older. The two younger ones [are] very close in age; I think it affected this child a little bit more, because

she was always worried about, “Mommy, are you okay? Mommy, are you okay?” I always want them to know that if someday I don’t come home, I’m still here in spirit. It was very open for us to talk about that in my family, because that’s the fact. The more you prepare your children, your family for that, when time comes, it’s still going to hurt, but they don’t have any questions; they understand why. When you accepted that badge that [mortality] comes with the territory; that’s just the way it is, or just don’t take the badge, don’t accept the badge. But it’s communication that’s so important. My children had to know that there’s always that chance, and so there’s always hugs and kisses. It could be the last one for me and for them. But it’s always good, I always came home. I’m still here.

It’s just so important that when you give people your word and you tell them what you’re going to do, you do what you say you’re going to do. That’s why I did that [refuse the hamstring repair surgery]. I never had surgery, and I’m okay. I can still do all the stuff, and eventually it healed. Everything from then, became the training officer and then the opportunity came to be assistant fire chief. I had so many supporters from both management and from the union [tell me] that I should put in for it, and I did.

Being an assistant fire chief, it was challenging because there was not a book telling you what your job description is. They hadn’t had the assistant fire chief position for like fifteen years. The last one that had that, when that person retired, they never filled the position until like fifteen years later, so there is no job description for that. You just had on-the-job-training and go from there. Then first female chief officer, the highest-ranking, and then first Asian female, I had to make sure that the door remains open, so you do anything you can. Any job, sure I can do it. Anything, yes, sure. When stuff needs to be done, “Give it to Cherina, give it to Cherina.” At one time I was overseeing three different divisions because *no* is not in my vocabulary. I would be on

vacation and a phone call will come and especially [my daughter] Jennifer would say, “Please, Mommy, do not answer that phone. Do not answer that phone.” Because when I answer the phone, it’s three or four hours later. It’s always on vacation and they will call. They know I’m on vacation and they still call. “Oh, I didn’t know you were on vacation,” or, “I forgot you were on vacation.” “Yes, what do you need?” There’s always something I need to take care of.

But all that provided me an opportunity to learn. The more tasks that you have, the more opportunity for you to learn. When you look at it that way, they’re not bad, none of them are bad. It’s just sometimes you don’t want to spread yourself too thin, because when you spread yourself too thin, then you forget about yourself or you forget about your family, and the most important people to you is your family. At one particular time I did forget [that] I should not have answered the phone during a vacation time, and I took quite a bit of that time away from my kids.

Later on, I started cruising instead because on a cruise they cannot reach me. I am not going to pay the extras for the Wi-Fi and all that stuff. I started cruising. The first time I went on a cruise, no phone call. Wow, no phone call, no email. I was just so amazed. I fell in love with them. After that, when we went on vacation, always on cruise, because nobody can reach me and I don’t have to say *no* to anybody, so it was good.

In the fire service there are a lot of challenges, but all the challenges are there for you to learn from, and really depending on how you look at it. Being told you’re dumb and stupid and all that stuff, I didn’t really have a good role model that [I] can go and say, *Okay, how should I do this or who you could talk to*. It was good to be in the fire service where I actually got to know myself and know my own potentials, which I wouldn’t have otherwise.



Las Vegas Fire Department
[Station 5?] (L to R) Engineer Charles Smith and Firefighters Cherina Kleven, Tom Kozlowski, Anthony Burton, undated

Before, when I was still working at National Car Rental, I also went to real estate school. I figured if I became a Realtor, I can be home and my dad will be happy because I can only go to work when my husband's home. No, you can't do that, because when the client calls right now and wants to see the house, you've got to go. I didn't know that. Once I went to school and got all this and that and tested and all done and now I have to go test for my license, and once you get your license, you have to hang with a broker. You have to pay a fee. Back then it was five hundred dollars a year. You had to pay a fee, so I didn't go for my test for my license. I finished everything. I couldn't afford the five hundred dollars to just hang in there. Then, when I realized that I couldn't go work whenever I want to, then it wasn't for me. When you're a Realtor, you are on call. When your clients call, you've got to go, so that wasn't for me. I spent the money and time for that, nothing. But still, I got to learn quite a bit about the real estate.

And then when Jennifer was the baby, I went to manicuring school, so I was a licensed manicurist. Being a manicurist, same thing, I can make my own hours; no, you don't. You still go by your clients and so on. When I started going through back then, acrylics were so popular. Everybody had them. Knowing now what we had to do to make your nails look pretty, I couldn't do it. I couldn't do that. What they had to do is they had to file your nail bed down before they put acrylics on it, and your nails are just like tiles on your roof; they are like this [demonstrating]. Your nails actually grow on top of each other, like this, like a tile. When you're going like this, going back and forth, what are you doing to your tiles, like you do on your roof? You ruin so much of your nails in order to put that chemical on there. After I learned that in that classroom, I couldn't do it. I specialized in pedicures, because I don't have to do anything, no chemicals. Just make sure it's sanitized and clean them up; I specialized in that, because I couldn't. I went through the whole thing, but I just cannot see me doing that [acrylics] to someone's nails or make a living to ruin somebody's nails. I personally couldn't do it.

When I was in the classroom, people could go there [the school] and have their nails done at discounted prices, not like going to the salon. You can go to the school and get it a lot cheaper. All the pregnant ladies came to me because when you're doing the pedicure, you're also giving a little massage, and I can massage pretty good. When they came they would be swollen and so on, and by the time they leave their legs would be all pretty, the swelling went down and all that. I had to put in my five hundred hours to finish my course. I can take my time and really do what I'm supposed to do, and sometimes you only had one or two customers a night, and what you would do the rest of the time is practice on each other. I do not want to do nails on someone else, and I am not going to keep doing someone else's toes because we all had to practice. If I take my time with the customers, then it's less time I had to go and try to find somebody to do all over, or

what I usually do is on the model. We have just the hand, which you can practice. I would do [the manicure] on that instead of somebody else's nails. But everybody was okay with it. They would attach the nail and put the design on there and so on. I just couldn't do it.

That path didn't lead to anything, either. I got my license and I kept my license until just right before I retired. All those years and I just kept renewing, like every three years. And during those times going to school, during both times, it also helped me build confidence. Because I didn't think I was smart, but I did really good with my tests and everything with the real estate when I went to real estate school. I can read and comprehend really well. I thought, *Oh, maybe I'm not so dumb*, but I wasn't quite sure. Then when I went to manicuring school, I did the same thing; I missed one on the State written test, one question, and my practical went over a hundred points, so I knew I was good at what I do. Then I started building a little confidence, because it seemed like every time I did something it was good—it was good enough, even though it wasn't good enough for my family. My family was still constantly... That hasn't changed. Until now it hasn't changed. It still hasn't changed. I'm still the black sheep in the family, and that's okay. That's okay.

Everything I learned what *not* to become, I learned from my family. Right? It's a good thing. You learn not to treat people the way you don't want to be treated. You give encouragements and you work on your weakness. You encourage the good thing they did. You continue to do that so they continue to excel. You work on not-so-good. You work alongside of them, not just let them do it themselves, because then you get to learn as well; they appreciate you being there, that you care enough to try to help them get at the next level. It's extremely important to do that.

You've obviously been living in Vegas for a long time. How have you seen the city change and grow?

Oh, lots, lots. We used to have to drive to California once in a while. My parents would drive to California once in a while to buy the goods from Chinatown because they didn't have it here, and the simple stuff. Gradually more came in. When we were here, there was a Japanese grocery store in Commercial Center, and everybody went there for what they would need, but it was Japanese and a lot of the stuff was Japanese, which was fine with us because my parents were raised in a Japanese culture to begin with, before World War II. We do eat a lot of Japanese food, anyway. Our diet is very consistent with that, so that was fine. That satisfied our needs. Then, every so often, my parents would drive to California to get the rest of the stuff. When there were more immigrants that came into here from all different countries, then there more other ethnic grocery stores, and so it made it easy for many of us and also made Vegas the way Vegas is, because then you had all different restaurants with different cuisines.

When I talk about going on a cruise, it's nice, but Las Vegans go on a cruise to visit the cities and to sightsee. Most people get on the cruise so they can eat all they want and they can watch casino shows every night and they can gamble. We have all that here. We have the best shows, so why would I care to see the shows on the cruise? We have the best casinos. Why would I want to gamble over there? And the food? We have abundance here. What they serve there is no big deal for us. We've become very spoiled. Las Vegans have become very spoiled because we have so much here. When you see other people so enjoying all the food and everything else, sometimes we become a little too critical, because we have better here.

Other changes? More Asians coming in, more Hispanics, some moving in. A lot of changes. I would say for the good, a lot of good. It also helped some of the casinos to unionize

their workers. Back then they didn't have minimum wage for them, because most of the income came from tokes, tips. I think a lot of them [employers] feel that tips are their workers' livelihood; that's their salary, so they don't need to pay them so much. I think if it wasn't for the unions in Vegas—not all unions work everywhere, but it works for Las Vegas—we wouldn't have the diversity that we have here; we wouldn't have the culture that we have here. Because all these people would work for nothing, and they wouldn't be able to survive if it wasn't for unions to come and push for some of the benefits that they have.

Yes, the city has seen a lot of changes, and I do believe the changes are for good. Now we have two and a half million people. I believe when we moved here, I was told about two hundred thousand, so quite small, very small. A lot of changes. When you have more population, you also experience more crime. Back then, kids would ride their bikes from point A to point B, no cell phone, no nothing. Parents never had to worry about it as long as you came home. When my kids were out there playing, I was outside with a lawn chair and watching them riding a bike. If a car comes too fast, "Slow down." That's what I did. When they're outside, I'm outside, because you're always worried about somebody coming and taking kids. When we first moved here in the '70s, no worries whatsoever. We walked. I walked almost three miles just to catch a school bus. You think anybody come and tried to snatch me? No. No. Nobody say anything to me. No, I walked through the desert. My parents never thought, *Oh, I wonder if she's going to make it home today. Is she going to come home today?* My parents never thought about that, didn't need to.

With more people, and I'm sure it was happening, but when you have less people, less crime, percentage-wise. Now you have two and a half million, you have more people, you have more crime, and that's just part of growth. In any metropolitan cities, you're going to have more.

That part also increased. But being in the fire service and I grew up here, I know all the streets. I know what areas to go to and what not to go to, because we're first responders. We respond to a lot of different areas. Don't go to Stratosphere. Do not go to the Stratosphere area, all in the back there; do not. I know a lot of places where to go and where not to go. I still feel very safe, but I fear for my kids because they're not. They grew up and were born here and all that, but they don't know as much as I do.

The other thing about going to school with them besides me learning so I can teach them—because by the time I realized that I was being teased, or when girls went around pulling my hair and all that, and some people explained, “No, that's people picking on you”—I started realizing that my kids look like me. One of the reasons being in the classroom, being in the school, is so I could keep my eyes on them and make sure nobody touched them, because they're Asian. They do look Asian. What I went through, I didn't want them to go through, and so it's a good way of keeping eyes on your kids and not having to worry about someone else hurting them. I was there all the time, so that they really thought I was one of the faculty over there. During Fire Prevention Week in October, I did all the fire demonstrations and all that, because I was like their resident firefighter. It was really good, yes, yes.

I would say that there's a lot of growth, all the casinos and everything else. It used to be a really, really good job on some of the tips—valet, for example, and bellmen back in the '70s and '80s. They were really good jobs because the money was so much. If you got a dollar for a tip or fifty cents for a tip, that was really good money; but now people still give a dollar for a tip. It's quite a bit different. When you talk to the people whose livelihood depended on tokes, when you talk to them, it was quite different than back then, because people could make so much more then than now, dollar per dollar. But other than that I think it's good.



Cherina Kleven in uniform with daughter Stephanie, undated.

We've got more hospitals here. UNLV. When I came to UNLV, it wasn't even on the map. It wasn't that big of a deal going to UNLV. It's a good school. We came a long ways. Our medical program is awesome; everything, so it is wonderful.

What traditionally Asian cultural celebrations do you still celebrate here?

I celebrate Chinese New Year whether with my parents or with our kids, we continue to do that. Matter of fact, even when I was in the fire service, Chinese New Year I would always bring food. I always cook and bring food. In fact, everybody loves my cooking, I think just because it's different. I'm the only chief officer that will still go to the fire station and cook for the crew. I'm retired and I still do that. I'm still on their peer support team, volunteer. I'm on their CISM [Critical Incident Stress Management]. You know what CISM is? Critical incident stress management team and peer support. I'm in charge of the retirees' peer support, which is more like a debriefing, active members, as well as retirees.




Joint dinner Clark County Fire & Rescue and Las Vegas Fire Department, approximately 1997



I'm still very active. I never left the fire department; I just don't get paid. But I do; I get paid right here [touching heart]. I get paid a lot right here, so it's all good. I ran for the office, is why I left. I didn't retire because it was time for me to go. I retired in 2009. I ran for office in 2010 for my assembly seat, District 15, and I lost, of course.

But during that time when I was running for my assembly [district], that was when the immigration was in chaos going on in Arizona about the undocumented [immigrants] and all that that they were profiling. It was also during the time that Clark County Fire Department had quite a few people who were making tons of money on overtime and a whole bunch of stuff. It was all over the news. Matter of fact, Governor Sisolak was the one who brought that to light during that time about the County firefighters were making way too much, blah blah blah, all that stuff. Cherina Kleven is just Cherina Kleven, but when you look at the picture, I'm Asian, and here, Arizona with the all the immigrations, and people were like, "What's going on?" All that. Here I am, I don't fit in. Then they're talking about the fire department and the County firefighters were doing this and blah blah blah. I'm with the City, but it doesn't matter. "You're a firefighter. You're a firefighter."

I'm in my uniform in my pictures, so, right there. I have people telling me, "Why would you run?" First of all, I ran because the housing market went down [during the Great Recession, beginning in December 2007]; all that stuff, everything at that time. When you don't like something and you complain about it and you have means to do something about it, why wouldn't you? Instead of complain about it and hear other people complain about it, if you think you can— I said, "Okay, I'll run. I'm going to make a difference on a larger scale."



Cherina Kleven... a remarkable American story.

Raising a strong family...

- Married for the past 31 years.
- Three children.
- All three children are college graduates.

Taking on challenges and succeeding...

- Became one of the first women firefighters.
- Demonstrated strong leadership skills.
- Rose through the ranks to the position of Assistant Chief.
- Achieved the highest rank as an Asian-American female fire chief officer in the United States.
- Retired as Assistant Chief in 2009.

Committed to helping others...

- An extraordinary list of civic and charitable work.
- A deep commitment to helping others.
- Continues her lifelong volunteer work today.

Deep roots in Las Vegas...

- Has lived in Southern Nevada since she was 12 years old.
- Graduate of Roy Martin Middle School (Junior High then).
- Graduate of Las Vegas High School.
- Active in a wide variety of school activities.
- Studied at CSN, UNLV and National Fire Academy.


Hard work and self-reliance...

- Worked as a waitress to pay for UNLV enrollment.
- Held full time employment from age 18 until her retirement.
- Recognized leader as a firefighter and fire chief.

A solid family life, professional excellence, and a deep commitment to community make Cherina Kleven a winner in every way.

Cherina Kleven...
a record of responsibility and dedication.

Paid for by the Committee to Elect Cherina Kleven.



Cherina Kleven... proof that the American Dream still comes true.

Cherina Kleven's life is a story of the American Dream coming true. Dedication to family, a strong work ethic, and the right priorities shaped her story of success.

Starting a new life...

Cherina's family came to America when she was just 12. By the time she graduated from Las Vegas High School, she was deeply involved in academics and school activities. She still remembers the thrill when, at age 18, she became a citizen.

Hard work and a strong family...

Cherina held a steady job from age 18 until her retirement. She and her husband David mark their 31st wedding anniversary this year, a celebration they share with their three children, all college graduates.

Taking on challenges and succeeding...

In 1989 Cherina passed the rigorous training to become a firefighter—at a time few women even attempted it. Hard work, technical training, and leadership skills helped Cherina earn career advancement, rising to the position of Assistant Chief. When she retired in 2009, she was the highest Asian-American female fire chief officer in the United States.



Committed to helping others...

Throughout her remarkable career, Cherina has an exemplary record of civic and charitable work, which she continues today.

A solid family life, professional excellence, and a deep commitment to community make Cherina Kleven a winner in every way.


Cherina Kleven... a record of responsibility and dedication.

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Selection from campaign flyers for Cherina Kleven's 2010 Assembly District 15 race

Cherina Kleven speaks out on education...




... as a product of local schools
... as a mother who saw her three children through our schools
... as an involved community activist


Cherina Kleven knows what we need to do.

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Cherina Kleven...
a record of responsibility and dedication.
Please deliver to current resident.



...as we grow older, our focus changes. Cherina Kleven understands.



Cherina understands...and can help.

You may be young and healthy, but what about your neighbors, your parents, or those you know who are aging?

As a community volunteer, often working with the most unfortunate, Cherina Kleven knows that the unexpected can happen. Accident, illness, unexpected financial problems can put people into uncertainty. And if it happens when they are older, there's less chance of a quick recovery.


Cherina Kleven understands... and she can help. Cherina's positions are formed from her extensive volunteer work, her 40 years of living and working in our community, and what she learned in 20 years of work as a first responder.

- **Protect in-home health care for seniors.** Here's an idea that makes even more sense today. Cherina Kleven knows that every dollar we pay to provide some in-home health care for seniors, we save \$10 or more over the cost of institutional care. It's more compassionate, and it saves tax dollars.
- **Expand the office of Advocates for Elders.** This office assists seniors in finding existing services and applying for them. Often there are private, non-profit groups able to help, but those needing the help just don't know about it. It makes sense to fully use what we already have.
- **Preserve Nevada's property tax rebate for the elderly.** This program assists those living on very limited incomes. With a large budget deficit looming in 2011, some are looking everywhere for new taxes. Cherina Kleven says the property tax rebate for poor senior renters and homeowners is off limits. We must protect this safety net.

Cherina Kleven has straight forward answers based on a lifetime of service in Southern Nevada. She's practical, hands on, and involved. Cherina Kleven is just what we need in the Nevada State Assembly.

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That's why I ran. I had friends that were telling me, "It's not a good time to run," because of the county and the firefighters and the immigration in Arizona. They were discouraging me to run and saying, "It's not a good time to run." And I would say, "When is a good time to run? You run when it's bad. You don't run when it's good. You run to make it better and you can make the most difference. When you run and it's no different, you're not really making a difference. You make the greatest difference when it's bad, so you can make changes for better." First of all, I ran because the housing market went down [during the Great Recession, beginning in December 2007]; all that stuff, everything at that time. When you don't like something and you complain about it and you have means to do something about it, why wouldn't you?

Instead of complain about it and hear other people complain about it, if you think you can— I said, "Okay, I'll run. I'm going to make a difference on a larger scale." That's why I ran. I had friends that were telling me, "It's not a good time to run," because of the county and the firefighters and the immigration in Arizona. They were discouraging me to run and saying, "It's not a good time to run." And I would say, "When is a good time to run? You run when it's bad. You don't run when it's good. You run to make it better and you can make the most difference. When you run and it's no different, you're not really making a difference. You make the greatest difference when it's bad, so you can make changes for better."

I knew I didn't have a real good chance because my area predominantly was 85 percent Caucasian and the average age was sixty-two, which means they all went through the Vietnam War. I'm Asian. They remember. Everything was against me. But I was told—because the economy was so bad, people wouldn't give you money—I was told for a first-time candidate, I raised the most money in that short time. From February to May, in that three months' time, I

raised fifty-six thousand dollars. I was told that I raised more than incumbents did, and all of it came from friends and families; it didn't come from lobbyists, which was good. I lost.

The thing is, in the fire service or any job, once you get elected, when you attend those legislature sessions, they [legally] cannot fill your spot. You don't lose your job. You still keep it. Somebody else will have to work for you, so they'll be acting. If I would be elected at that time, as assistant fire chief, there would be a domino effect. It would cost the taxpayers a lot of money, because they would have to have somebody in the battalion chief position to come and do my job and then they would have to have somebody in a captain or training officer position to backfill the battalion chief, and so on, and so on. It's just too costly. I was already at the age and I already had the time [in] that I could retire and start drawing. Firefighters and police officers can retire when [we] turn fifty [with] at least twenty years of service, because we don't live long after we retire.

It's a known fact that firefighters, we just don't, because the toxicity, the toxins that we breathe in during a fire and all that. It used to be three to five years after you retire; that's average lifespan. Then it moved to five to seven because we were eating better—because I was cooking [laughs]. No. Lots of vegetables. No more meat and potatoes and all that stuff. Then it moved to five to seven. By the time when I retired the average maximum is ten years. Well, I retired almost twelve years ago, so I'm on top of borrowed time, because the moment that we're born—you know that, right?—the moment we are born we are on borrowed time, we are. When you have been told that you'll be dead in ten years after you retire, and I'm already passed that, so I'm double borrowed time, so I'm very, very fortunate, very fortunate.

I don't know what else you want to know.

I have more questions. How have you felt about the recent rise in discrimination?

You're talking about the riots after George Floyd, or are you talking about the Asians because of this COVID and all that? It's horrible. It's horrible. I do believe that it was already going on. One thing about the Asians that I remember—and I hope when people read this they will reflect and they will probably agree—most Asians, when we are faced with uncertainty or tragedy, we don't go out there and broadcast. We stay within. We turn inwards to the families. If we need money we don't go and say, "I've got to go to welfare. I've got to try this." It's a no-no.

That's one thing my father told us when we moved here. "Do not ever get on welfare. Do not ever collect unemployment." That's what my father says, because if you're collecting unemployment that means you're not working. Why aren't you working? There are plenty of jobs. There's no excuse not working. There's plenty, it just might not be the job that you wanted. And do not ever get on welfare. If you get on welfare that means you're not working, period. That was two things that my dad told us when we moved here. "Do not get on welfare, and do not, do not collect unemployment." I have never collected unemployment. None of my kids ever collected unemployment. My husband collected unemployment. He's not my kid. I didn't give birth to you. I'm only married to him. It's with COVID, everybody got laid off. That's the first time he collected unemployment.

Even when I left National to train to become a firefighter, I took a whole year off and I did not collect unemployment. But I also go to unemployment to ask them if I can, and they said to me—because people said, "You're paying into unemployment, so you're not really asking for a handout because you pay into it. You should try to go get it and see, because you're quitting your job to better yourself to go back to school to become a firefighter, so you should be able to collect unemployment. I went to the unemployment office. The lady looked at me and she says, "Do you own a car?" Yes. "Do you own your house?" Yes. "You don't qualify." That was it.

That was it. “Okay, I’m sorry.” I left. That was it. Then I come to find out that’s not true, but that’s what she told me. Yes, that’s what she told me, so I didn’t collect, ever. The two questions she asked: Do you have a car, your own transportation? Yes, I do. We have two cars. My husband has one and I have one. Do you own your house? Yes. Well, you don’t qualify. That was it.

I believe discrimination was already there all those years. It’s just more visible and become more publicized now because of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter. I think because of that more people pay more attention to it now, and everybody’s got a cell phone; everybody’s got a camera. Then they started recording a little bit more, [because] people who didn’t see it before didn’t know. All the sudden now they’re seeing it on YouTube, they see it on the television and the media and all that, but now all of a sudden it becomes—wow—it’s happening now. No, I believe it has always been happening, it’s just now more so. It did add to it because—I don’t want to get into politics—it’s because of what was insinuated about this COVID, where it came from, how it started and everything. And when you’re Asian you all look the same, so they put all of us together and don’t care which one it is, and that’s the stigma in a lot of people’s minds. I think that contributed to what’s going on. Also, there are a lot of people that are opportunists. They’re a troublemaker; they don’t care. This is opportunity. Yes, let’s get them. For fun, for whatever it is—pranks, gang initiations, we don’t know. But I do believe that what was said in the public and the media by our previous president, it infuriated a lot of people, ignited a lot of embers that were just waiting, and it just went off. I truly believe that had a lot to do with it. Asians, when it happens to you, nobody talks about it. You’re embarrassed and don’t want to tell anybody. If you got beat up, you don’t want to tell. You just stay home for a few days because you don’t want people to see you. Don’t tell anyone.

American culture, you make a report. You make a report, go to the police station, you make a report that you just got assaulted and all that. Most Asians that got beat up, nobody said anything. They just come back and take care of it and then it goes away. They don't file a report. When you look at it statistics-wise, they're not going to have a lot. But now they do, because now more of us feel that we would like to be here—we're here, we're Americans. I'm more American than other people. I'm more patriotic than a lot of people. I wasn't even born here. So, don't tell me that I'm not. I do have an issue—this is just a personal feeling—that all of us, we shouldn't be called Asian Americans. We should be called American Asians, if that's what you want. We are all Americans. We're American first. I'll die for America. I'll fight for America. I won't fight for Taiwan; I'll fight for America. But when they say 'Asian American,' it puts us in a different class. It puts us in a different class that we're Asians first. We're not Asians. We're American first. The Asian just tells what our ethnicity is, it does not dictate who we are. They should change that. If they ever want unity for United States, for all countries, they should never separate all that. I can understand it for census-wise and all that stuff. But in a workplace, in our country? There's no room for that. Don't separate us anymore. *Well, they look different.* I have friends that have been here four generations. They're Japanese. They went to a concentration camp and the parents get sent over there and all that. They're Americans. I cannot watch this. I cannot change the way I look, but I'm American, so don't treat me any different.

One thing different between us is when people come to you and they ask, "Where you from?" First thing they do, "Where are you from?" What difference does it make where I'm from? You don't hear them go to somebody else and ask the African American or the Caucasian, "Where you from?" They don't. But when they come across an Asian and start talking, "Where you from?" You don't want me to tell you what I told them or I would have said one time. I told

them something I probably shouldn't say. I just could not. The thing is, you like the person who they are, and once you get to know them and you become friends, you want to know a little bit about each other, and that's different. But some people ask just because they're vicious, and you can tell just by a certain way they're asking someone.

But, yes, I don't think I will see in my lifetime here that will change. Unfortunately, I don't see that. But by having that ["Asian"] in front, it separates us, it will always separate us. You don't say French American, German American, or European American, right? But they will say Hispanic, African American, Asian American. I don't say European American. I don't say Mediterranean American, whatever. I don't. Why separate us? When they talk about unity, you can never have unity if you always have that stigma there. Black Lives Matter has been fighting for how many years now? It's a hundred years now since they burned down their Wall Street. It's been a hundred years now, June the first. [*Ed. Note:* Kleven is referring to the Tulsa Race Massacre of June 1, 1921, when White residents of Tulsa, Oklahoma, burned the affluent Greenwood area known as Black Wall Street.]

Is it going to take that long for Asians, for us to come out and to say, *No, the yellow lives matter?* I don't know. I hope not. I hope not. I think we're a little more vocal now. We're a little more vocal and we also have more educated people that understand and are willing to learn. Some of the history has been hidden. People, their knowledge and what they know, if it is never taught to them, how will they know? Some of the history was hidden and people didn't know. But once they heard the history of it, they had compassion. I think there's more people coming on. But that's now our side, meaning [we] have better understanding and [are] able to treat people more fairly, I think the more education that we have.

But I also feel that when they keep showing all these negativities, the negativities that I'm there, it works both ways. It helps people like me going, "Oh my god, that's going on. We need to do something about it," and so on. Then you have the people who are not so stable that go, "Oh good, now I can do that." It works both ways. Just like a movie, you go see this, how many things they teach you how to open the door, unlock the door, how to break in. I don't know. It's a scary world that we live in. If we don't speak up, it's going to get worse, I do believe in that. It's going to get worse. With YouTube and everything, you can learn how to make anything you want. Anything you want you can learn from the internet. It should make all of us even more afraid of what the future holds for us, really. We have to be more diligent, more aware of our surroundings, where we go, and we should be doing that more, anyway. We should be doing it, unfortunately, right? But we should all be more careful of our surroundings and know where you shouldn't go, or go in groups with people.

But, yes, it is very sad to see the elderly folks get pushed and get beat up, when you see them on the TV and the YouTube and all that stuff, for no reason, for no reason. Would you do that to your own mother? This is somebody else's mother, somebody else's father. How dare you? How dare you? It is happening. I think the more we talk about it, the more activists go out there and talk to the lawmakers and let them know that we're aware. What are you going to do about it? Let's not wait another hundred years for them to burn down Chinatown, before something like that happens, just like what happened a hundred years ago. But I think a hundred years ago, they [African Americans] were more suppressed, so they weren't as vocal and they didn't have this technology where they can just tell the internet and everybody knows. They didn't have that. We have those tools now. We should be able to mobilize a little bit more in a

nonviolent way of doing things to bring attention to what's happening and what shouldn't be happening. That's what I think.

Before I wrap up with one more question, I'd like to pass it on to Kristel and Stefani.

KP: *I had questions, but you answered them all, so I don't have any follow-ups.*

SE: *I have a couple of short-answer follow-ups. You mentioned mentors along the way, and specifically the captain of the first station that encouraged you to go into engineering. Can you talk a little bit more about some of the mentors that have helped you along the way?*

Oh yes. Yes.

Can you mention their names?

Yes. Because I lacked confidence I don't think I can do anything, and I'm also very obedient because of the way I was brought up. When the officers tell me, "I want you to do this," I can't say *no*. We do have a choice; you don't have to say *yes*, but I didn't feel like I had that choice because of the way I was brought up. When he told me to go the engineering route, "Okay, okay," everything is okay, but I've still got to get out of the probation first. When I got out of probation, I also had a battalion chief. Back then we had two battalions, Battalion One and Battalion Four. I was doing probationary at Battalion One area. Battalion Four had been telling me that when I get off probation, he wants me over at his battalion to work for him. Of course, I said yes. Whatever it is, yes, yes.

When I got off probation, I went to a fire station where somebody was on vacation for a whole month, so I would stay there for the whole month to replace that person. When I was there another person that was eligible to take the engineer's test was practicing, what you call catching a hydrant. In other words, you drive the engine to a certain area after you pass the actual hydrant. You had to make sure of the distance between the intake where you're going to catch the hydrant

water, [because] you need to be a smooth S. The hose that you hook onto it, it's a five-inch [hose]. You need to make sure that—because it's so heavy and it's thick, thick rubber—you don't have any kinks. When you have a kink, the water doesn't flow in. You have to make sure it's a very nice S. That's what they call catching a hydrant. Those are all being graded when you take your test: How far, how many kinks you have.

He [the other person who was eligible to take the engineer's test] was practicing. Well, my captain, who was a paramedic, was at Valley Hospital doing his recertification. They have recertifications all the time. There's always updates to do. While we wait for him, he is practicing; Cal Henrie was practicing catching a hydrant. I'm the newbie, so I'm helping out with the hose each time. I reach out and catch it, helping him. The engineer asked me, "You want to drive? You want to try?" What do I say? *No* is not in my vocabulary. "Sure." I just got off probation. I know nothing. But I will drive the engine. Do you really want me to drive the engine? Okay, I drove the engine.

At National Car Rental I was what they called an unrestricted rental agent. Unrestricted rental agent, it's not supervisory, which is out of the union, but I'm a step above a rental agent. It's unrestricted, meaning you do everything. You clean the car. If somebody has a roadside issue with a flat tire, you go change tires. You drive the shuttle bus. Go to the airport. Go to the hotel to pick up customers and bring them back. You wash the car. Do everything. That's unrestricted. Driving the shuttle bus, because it's a lot smaller than a fire engine, I drove them. When he said, "You want to...?" I can't say no, so I did. The captain there—well, when we respond, the engineer will drive there, even middle of the night when it's freezing cold out there. Back then, it was an open cab and we sit outside facing backwards. The captain would volunteer himself to

put on his turnout coat to sit in the back, my seat, and have me drive back from the scene. The engineer sits in the captain seat. I was being trained. They did that for me.

And you didn't know.

I didn't know. They were doing that. Most captains are like, "I'm not going to sit back there in the freezing cold, two o'clock, three o'clock in the morning, really cold. When we're coming back from a cold, we're like this when we're sitting in the back in the wintertime. In the summertime it was hot. Everything you touch is hot. It's all metal. In the wintertime it was freezing cold because everything was cold and you have your turnout on. That's when I got on the fire service; it was open cab. He would sit in the back just so I could drive and the engineer sits next to me. That was first. Along the way I really had a lot of good people watch out for me.



Station 2
Engineer,
1994

I went to Station 2 and the same thing, somebody on vacation because I was roving. Station 2, I went over there and did the same thing. And the engineer there [said], “Let’s go drive. Let’s go do this.” So, okay, let’s go do it. They asked me to bid for the station, and I said, “No,” because I don’t feel like I earned it. Everything is a bid. I’m a newbie and I don’t think I earned it. The battalion chief puts my name in for me to bid for the station. Of course, I got the station. I ended up staying there for a couple of years. While I was there I trained to be an engineer and that’s where I took the test and I came out number four. On the list of thirtysomething people, I was number four.

Then I became an engineer. I got promoted from engineer. I went to Station 8 and had a lot of fire calls, absolute fire calls. The way that the fire service works is that when there is a fire, there’s always two engines, so your two engines would have to come from two different fire stations. Station 4, which is on Charleston and Fifteenth, and Station 8 is right across from Freedom Park on Mojave and Bonanza—that’s where I was stationed—we would respond to the same call, this fire call. At that time, again, they asked me to put in for that position, and I wouldn’t. Again, I didn’t think I was deserving. But the battalion chief at that time, a different one now, because the other one retired, he put it in for me. Then they asked me stay. Now he put it in for me and they all asked me to stay.

This is the difference between a female and a male. Male will go to any station; they don’t think about it. Being female, I want to make sure that I’m welcome. I don’t want to just go, *Oh, I’m going to bid that station because I want it.* What about if they don’t care for you? Now they’re going to make it harder for you, and you might not work well with them. For me, it was best to be invited because when I’m being invited, I know my presence is wanted; so therefore, I don’t have any issues with the station. You should not have any issues at a station because you

work together for the twenty-four hours. You eat, sleep, everything together for so long, you had better get along. You better get along because when you're fighting a fire, you're not going to fight the fire by yourself, so it's extremely important to me.

That's how my career went at every station I went. When I was at Station 2 when I was ready to be promoted to engineer, a spot was open at the Station 1, which is the busiest station. I bid for it. That's the only time I bid. All my counterparts called me and said, "Do not bid because you'll go there. Why are you bidding over there?" Because at Station 1 they had piers. They had three or four different apparatus. They had a ladder truck there with a basket. They had two different types of engineers. They have air resources, which goes to all the fire calls, the air tank where they can fill your air bottle. You've got four different types of apparatus that are all engineer positions. If I stay at Station 2, I will only have one type of engine that I would be familiar with. A good engineer wants to be able to operate all of them. I wanted to go there and learn, and I had the opportunity. So, when these people are on vacation, if they take a few hours off because they're going to go watch their son's game, I can jump in. It was an opportunity for me, so I bid that. Everybody tells me, "If you bid there, they're going to put you on rescue." I have seniority. I don't need to be on the rescue.

Well, they were right. When I went to Station 1, I was rescue. I was not at the bottom on seniority, but because I'm deprived because I'm female and I don't say anything, the captain would come to me—and he is such a...he was a bodybuilder and not very tall, about my height. He comes to me and he would say, "I'm sorry, Cherina, would you mind riding rescue?" I feel so bad, because he had to ask me to ride again. He knows, they all know, that I have more seniority than some of the newbies, but they would always ask me to ride rescue, and I would never say no. I rode rescue, but I still had an opportunity to act on those, and it was okay. I get paid twenty-

four hours either way, so why not just do more, and I can still have the opportunity to learn from the others? I went there, and that's when I got promoted. When I got promoted I was at Station 1. But you make the life that you want. Every station that I went to, I always had....

At Station 8, the captain there would ask me to do all the reports. It's his job to do reports, but I don't say no. "Cherina, would you mind doing that report?" "Sure." I could and I'll do the report. It was a fun, fun station. The firefighters would say, "Oh, we had a fire call. Oh, Captain C. Mommy to the scene." Because it was like a family. The kids sit in the back. Everybody is making fun. The firefighters sit in the back. There is another captain seat. They would say, "Mom is driving us to the fire scene." It was just always fun and they would say stuff like that.

Because I did a lot of reports, that's the captain's job. Battalion chief came and asked me, "Why don't you take the captain's test?" "I'm not ready." "Yes, you are. You graduated." I was doing everything for him. "Yes, but I'm not ready." "Yes, you are. Here's our books." I'm going on vacation to the Bahamas with my husband just for a few days, and I brought all the books with me. I studied the whole time. My husband went to play golf, a few rounds. I studied the whole time, hardly ever left the room.

I come back and I took the test, and I didn't do well. I felt so bad I didn't do well because I feel like I let them down. The officers that wanted me to take it, I feel like I let them down. You know what they said to me? It was so nice. "You know, Cherina, the first time I took the test, this was my number." It was way lower than mine. He goes, "It had nothing to do with that." At the time when they came to me to ask me to take it, I only had a month to take the test, to study. Usually in the fire service, all the tests for captain, I will study the year before because there is so much to study. I would study a year before and then take the test and hope I passed at certain

levels, certain points before I could go on to the next. In the fire service, it's 90 percent. Everything you do is 90 percent. If you don't score 90 and above, start studying for next year. You're not even going to get looked at. Everything is 90 and above. They have a very high standard. I didn't get 90. I think I got 78 or something like that, which wasn't enough to do anything, and I felt like I let the officers and my boss down. Then he would tell me, "Don't worry about it. It's your first time. You get the experience of how to take a test, and then you can do it again."

The next opportunity that came, it was a training officer's position. That came along because—this is the part with the family. When I became a firefighter, the only ones that supported me was my kids, to be a firefighter. My parents didn't support me. My husband didn't care. He didn't want me... whatever. "You must have hit your head or something. You want to be a firefighter?" No support. My children were the only three. "Yea, Mommy is going to be a firefighter." I had no support from anybody, only my three kids.

When I became a firefighter, my husband never asked, "What is that station like?" Usually, you would think that when your wife works in a station for twenty-four [hours] and being with all men, you would want to know what's going on. My husband was so naïve, he didn't even think about that. We've been together so many years. He was still in high school. We kind of grew up together and learned from each other and don't know any better. He never asked any questions of what's it like.

Earlier, our son was having a softball game at Freedom Park, across from Station 8. They're going to come over. I said, "Yes, come over on the way home just so I can see the kids." They came. They were standing by the door. I didn't know they were standing by the door. I'm cooking with my crew and we're cutting up and all that. We're laughing and we're joking around

and they're helping me, know exactly what to do, and so on. Then all a sudden, one of the guys turned around and goes, "Oh, your husband is here. Oh, hi." Him and the kids were standing there watching the whole time, I don't know, maybe five minutes.

Next day when I went home my husband says, "You can't be a firefighter anymore." He didn't like what he saw. He said, "I feel like I was walking into your family last night." Because I was so close with the people. We were cooking and joking and doing all these things together. He says, "I feel like I was walking into your family last night." He has an issue. He doesn't know how he's going to handle that now that he knows how close we are. I'm twenty-four hours with them and all that. All the sudden he's jealous for the first time. By that time we were together...Oh, we've been together since '79, and that happened around '96, so eighteen years. He finally realized this job. He asked me, "Can we solve this? How are we going to solve this? I don't want you to be at a station and spending twenty-four hours at this fire station." Henderson had a spot open for a training officer. My neighbor across the street is a firefighter with Henderson, a captain there. He came and told me, "We have a spot open in Henderson for a training officer. I think you should apply. We'd love to have you."

You see, when you're Asian and you're female, it makes the department look real good. Do you understand what I'm saying? It will make the department look real good that they hire Asian female firefighters, somebody. They would like me to go work for them. I feel I don't want to betray my department, so I went to my training officer, the training battalion chief, to tell him what's going on, what happened with my husband that day, and that Henderson has a spot open that I'm thinking applying for. I don't want the department to think that I'm not loyal to our department, but my family does come first. I have to go where it's best for my family, and I don't want to leave my department.

After I talked to him, not too long after that, the person that was in my spot, the training officer, got promoted to captain. That spot became open, and they told me to test for it. A few of us tested for it, and I got the job and I became a training officer. I can't say nobody else was helping me there, right? Somebody was watching. You really don't know, when you're in the water, what's around you; but people standing outside can really see what's around you. It's the same thing. If you go in the food shelf, you can see; eventually you will know. But somebody out here can see. The same thing in my situation, they could see what's going on, but I did not know what was going on. They know what my potentials are, and I did not know I had any potentials at all. But by telling me to do this, they know I can't say no. Then I just go along with it. Okay, okay, okay. That's how I ended up to be where I am.

Looking back, all those were all my mentors. They were opening the door for me, pointing out things I didn't know. They actually helped me blossom that I didn't know. I guess you can say I was a little flower bud, just waiting to open, and I did not know. By them giving me the right nutrients and all that, I began to open a little bit and a little bit and realized, *Oh, I can do this*. That's what that is.

Thank you for that. I just wanted to ask two other quick questions. You mentioned a Japanese market in Commercial Center. Do you remember the name of that?

I think it was called Tokyo. I think that's what it was called. It was facing east. I know exactly where it was located.

Was it on the outside part or on the inside part?

The inside. It's in the inside part; that's the furthest building, the building that's closest to the east. You've got Commercial Center like this, and there's a street coming in. I think there is a Korean market, and then there is the Strip. There is one strip mall here.

Right up the middle?

Right in the middle. It's on the east side. I would say third store from that corner, from the southeast corner of that building.

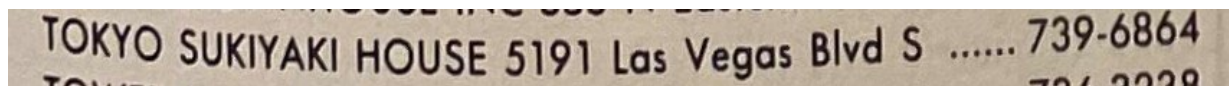
Some of the other people have mentioned it, but not a name.

I want to say it's Tokyo.

[***Ed. Note:*** *The Las Vegas city directory for 1975 reveals no Asian market called Tokyo, but it does list a Japanese restaurant called Tokyo Sukiyaki House at 5191 Las Vegas Blvd. Businesses in Commercial Center (then also known as Vegas Village) were then and are now listed at 953 E. Sahara Ave. The directory for 1975 shows a market at that address named Oriental Foods of Las Vegas. If the year is appropriate, this may be the market that Kleven remembers.*]



The Mullin-Kille Las Vegas Nevada ConSurvey City Directory Supplement Ed.1975 (Chillicothe, Ohio: Mullin-Kille, 1975), 44, Groceries and Meats.



The Mullin-Kille Las Vegas Nevada ConSurvey City Directory Supplement Ed. 1975 (Chillicothe, Ohio: Mullin-Kille, 1975), 73, Restaurants.

The last question. You mentioned the food that you cook. What are some of the traditional foods that you enjoy cooking and that your family enjoys?

I cook them all, and I cook them from scratch. I make really good Italian pasta and sauce, spaghetti sauce, but they call it gravy. I make them from scratch. My husband's good friend's stepmother was Italian, and so when she cooked she would use a garlic and then onion and the meat, the pork, and all that. They actually make their own sauce in there. I was over there for dinner one time and I watched her. I'm one of those people—you know how everything is made

in Taiwan? They say, “Well, if you like this,” and you take it to Taiwan, they’ll copy it and go ahead and make it. Well, here I’m Taiwan. My husband will take me to dinner, for example, and we like, we come home, and I make it better. One of the issues we had in our younger days is he doesn’t take me out, and his reasoning is, “Why should I, when you make it better than the restaurant?” He says, “Every time I take you somewhere and you come home, you make better, so why should I take you?” I cook just about everything. I’m not traditional Asian cooking. I’m more like a fusion, because of being Americanized a little bit more. I make great Mexican food, and I do all that from scratch. I have a talent in cooking; that’s just it. When I eat I can taste what’s in it and then I come home and duplicate it and I do make it better, so I make anything. I cook for the fire stations even now, and they will request. They’ll call and say, “Okay, Chief Kleven.” They call me Chief Kleven, very respectful. “Would you mind coming to cook for us this, this, this?” “Okay, sure.” I’ll go down there and they don’t care what I make. Any request, they don’t care, because whatever I make is always going to come out with they like it.

They’re going to like it.

Yes. I think maybe just because someone else is cooking it. I cook everything fresh. I don’t use anything canned, canned vegetables at all. I did not grow up eating canned vegetables at all. I didn’t even grow up eating frozen vegetables. It was always fresh. Even when we came here, it was always fresh. I had to learn to substitute frozen vegetables if I need to, and that’s okay. I would say that most of them are hoping that I make Asian food, because they can make a steak or barbeque what they want, but they usually would prefer that. They say, “Anything you want to make. Everything is good.” But if I press what it is, they would say Asian food, any Asian, Chinese, mostly Chinese. I’ll make Korean food and I make Japanese food because that’s what I kind of...

What's your family's favorite?

Sushi. Japanese. I would say all my kids, if there's a choice between all that, Japanese. They like Korean hibachi, Korean barbeque, but they also love Vietnamese soup. I would say for my children, for my family, if you gave them a choice, they would pick more Asian than the Italian spaghetti or the Mexican food. If they had a choice, it would be Asian food, I'm sure, but they love everything. They love everything, all the sandwiches and all. But if you ask them, whatever comes out of their mouth would be Asian food first.

Are your parents still here in Las Vegas?

Yes. Both my parents are still alive, yes. All my siblings live here. I have one brother, my oldest brother lives in California. My second brother passed away. Of course, my sister passed away. The rest of my brothers are all here. We're all here, yes.

Thank you so much.

Oh, you're welcome.

Yes, thank you.

Is there anything you wish we had asked you that we didn't?

I don't know. I think I talk too much.

Not at all. Thank you so much.

Oh no, thank you for your time.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]

APPENDIX

December 22, 1999 – Several department awards are issued by Fire Chief Mario H. Trevino including:
Captain Jay Acebo – Firefighter of the Year
Firefighter/Paramedic Mike Myers – Paramedic of the Year
Sharon Menno – Fire & Rescue Employee of the Year
FTO Cherina Kleven and Captain Garland Davis – Fire Chief's Award of Distinction

Page 43: Fire Chief's Award of Distinction

February 18, 2005 – The Asian Chamber of Commerce presented Assistant Chief Cherina M. Kleven with the 2005 ACC Government Employee of the Year Award.

Page 55: Asian Chamber of Commerce award for Government Employee of the Year

October 5, 2001 – Eugene Campbell and Cherina Kleven are appointed Assistant Fire Chiefs of the department. These are the first assistant chief positions in the department for several years.

Page 46: Appointment to Assistant Fire Chief

September 1, 2005 – Three LVFR chief officers were appointed to various boards and committees. Fire Chief David Washington was elected president of the Southern Nevada Fire Chief's Association, Deputy Chief Ken Riddle to the Board of Directors Emergency Medical Services section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs and Assistant Chief Cherina Kleven to the Human Relations Committee of the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

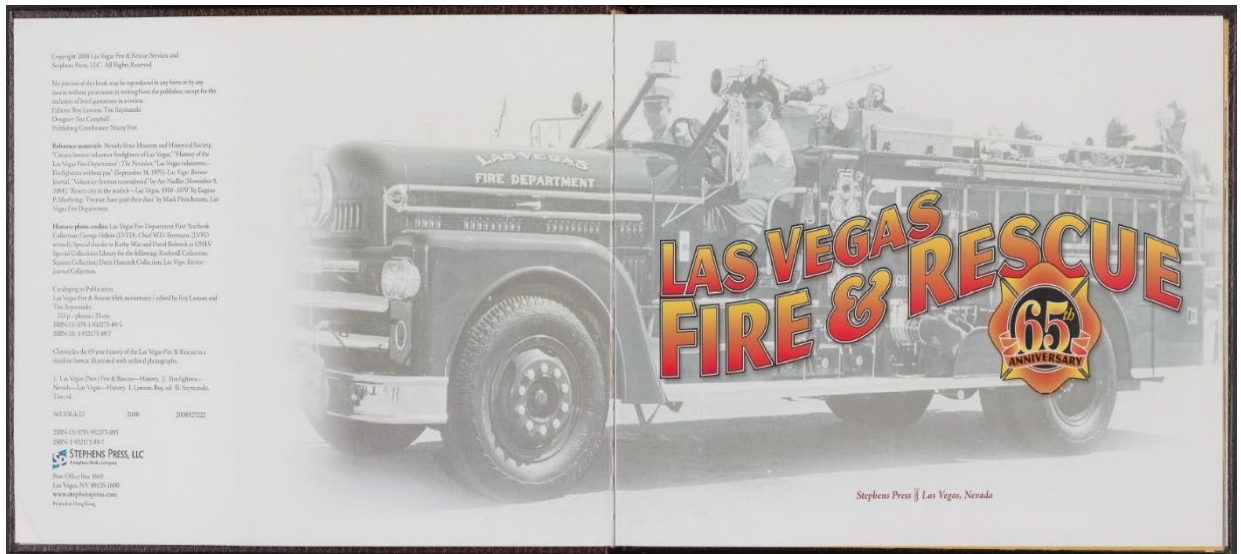
Page 56: Appointment to Human Relations Committee, International Association of Fire Chiefs



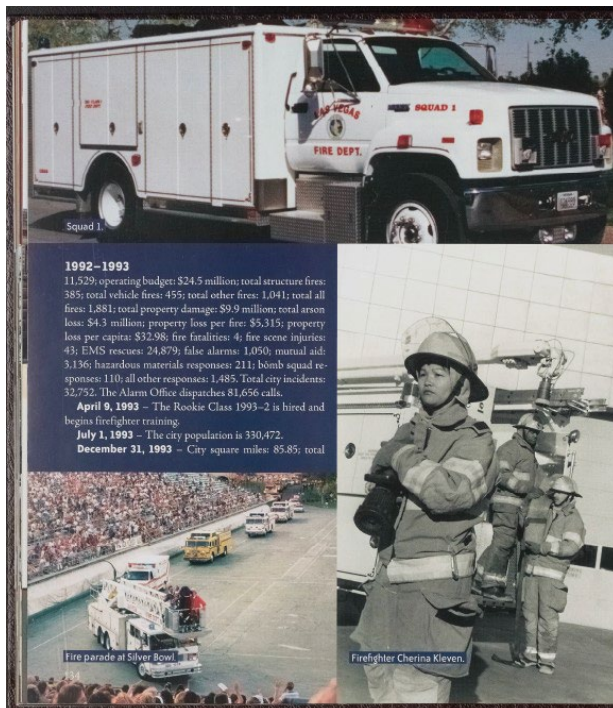
Cherina Kleven
Assistant Fire Chief

Page 70: Staff photo

ITEMS FROM *LAS VEGAS FIRE & RESCUE 65TH ANNIVERSARY*
(LAS VEGAS, NEV.: STEPHENS PRESS, 2008).



Title Page



p. 134, Recruitment photo, "Firefighter Cherina Kleven"



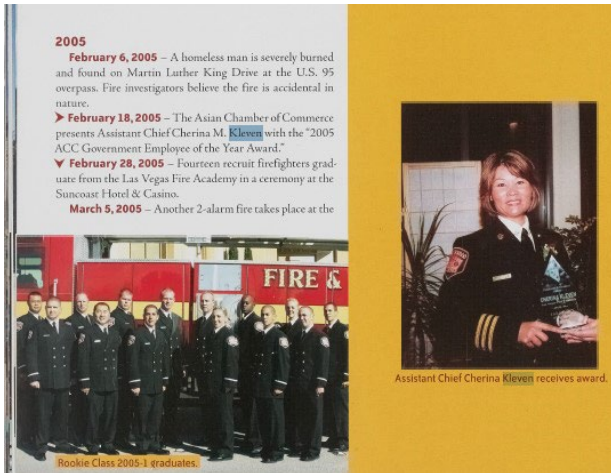
p. 135, Recruitment photo (L to R): Abdus Salaam, Cherina Kleven, Richard Garcia, Ellen Goldsmith, and George Goldbaum.



p. 153, Cherina Kleven promotion [1997–98]

December 22, 1999 – Several department awards are issued by Fire Chief Mario H. Trevino including: Firefighter of the Year: Captain Jay Acebo. Paramedic of the Year: Firefighter/Paramedic Mike Myers. Fire & Rescue Employee of the Year: Sharon Menno. Fire Chief's Award of Distinction: FTO Cherina Kleven and Captain Garland Davis.

p. 162, Fire Chief's Award of Distinction: FTO Cherina Kleven, 22 December 1999,



p. 198, Cherina Kleven awarded Asian Chamber of Commerce the 2005 ACC Government Employee of the Year, 18 February 2005

September 1, 2005 – Three LVFR chief officers are elected to various boards and committees. Fire Chief David Washington is elected President of the Southern Nevada Fire Chiefs Association; Deputy Chief Ken Riddle is elected to the Board of Directors Emergency Medical Services section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs; and Assistant Chief Cherina Kleven is elected to the Human Relations Committee of the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

p. 201, Cherina Kleven elected to Human Relations Committee of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, 1 September 2005

SELECTED AWARDS

Cherina M. Kleven

From: Tim Szymanski
Sent: Friday, February 18, 2005 2:11 PM
Subject: LVFR MEDIA RELEASE

LAS VEGAS FIRE & RESCUE MEDIA RELEASE

LAS VEGAS FIRE & RESCUE
DATE/TIME: 021805/1400PST
RELEASE: 05-016

LAS VEGAS FIRE & RESCUE ASSISTANT CHIEF TO RECEIVE AWARD FROM ASIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE TONIGHT

The Asian Chamber of Commerce has selected an Assistant Chief of Las Vegas Fire & Rescue to receive the 2005 ACC Government Employee of the Year Award. The chief will receive the award tonight at the Chamber's annual awards banquet at the Anthem Caterers & Trumpets Restaurant.

Cherina M. Kleven is an assistant chief in the Operations Division of LVFR and oversees the Training Division and Special Operations. She has been with the department for the past 16 years serving as a firefighter, driver/engineer, training officer before she was appointed as the first female chief officer of the department and the first Asian-American to hold a chief officer position.

She has received numerous awards and commendations during her career with the department including the Fire Chief's Award of Distinction and a finalist for the Employee of the Year and Firefighter of the Year. In the community she is involved in a number of charities and community projects including the Clark County School District's Payback program, St. Jude's Ranch and working with local senior citizens program. She has been involved with the department's Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team for the past 14 years and was the team's Coordinator for nearly two years.

She is married and has three children.

For more information contact the Asian Chamber of Commerce at 737-4300.

END ## LVFR/PIO-TRS


TIMOTHY R. SZYMANSKI
FIRE-PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER
LAS VEGAS FIRE & RESCUE / PIO1
500 N. Casino Center Blvd / Las Vegas, NV 89101
Office: 702-229-0145 / Fax: 702-229-0152 / cell-pager: 702-303-2993
tszymanski@LasVegasNevada.Gov / www.lasvegasfire.org

Press Release announcing Assistant Chief of Las Vegas Fire & Rescue, Cherina Kleven, as the recipient of the 2005 Asian Chamber of Commerce Government Employee of the Year Award, 18 February 2005




FTO [Field Training Officer] Cherina M. Kleven, Las Vegas Fire & Rescue Fire Chief's Award of Distinction, [22 December] 1999

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PROCESS

- Written Examination
- Physical Ability Examination
- Oral Interview
- Background Check
- Suitability Assessment
- Medical Examination

2009 Community Information Seminars

WEDNESDAY

May 27, 6 pm – 8 pm
Las Vegas Fire Training Center
633 North Mojave Road, 89101

SATURDAY

June 20, 12 Noon – 2 pm
City Hall Council Chambers
400 Stewart Avenue, 89101

THURSDAY

July 23, 6 pm – 8 pm
Sahara West Library
9600 West Sahara Avenue, 89117

WEDNESDAY

August 19, 6 pm – 8 pm
West Charleston Library
6301 West Charleston Boulevard, 89146



FOR EMT-B CERTIFICATION INFORMATION CONTACT THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS:

American Medical Response
(888)609-6284 or
visit online at www.ncti-online.com

College of Southern Nevada
(702)651-5690 or
visit online at www.csn.edu/pages/770.asp

EMS Training Center of Southern Nevada
(702)651-9111 or
visit online at www.emstrainingcenter.com



MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS

Date of Application

- High School Diploma or GED
- Valid Driver's License
- Must be 18 years old

Date of Conditional Job Offer

- EMT-Basic certification
- Meet current physical condition requirements

IMPORTANT DATES

Opening Date for Applications
8:00 a.m. September 28, 2009

Filing Deadline for Applications
4:30 p.m. October 16, 2009

Written Examination
January 12, 2010

Physical Ability - CPAT Examination
Spring 2010



GA 36834

SEPTEMBER 11 TEE-SHIRT FUNDRAISER FOR 9/11 VICTIMS RAISED MORE THAN \$200,000



Shirt design by Cherina Kleven, who sought and was granted permission by the local firefighter union and Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department to join forces in this tee-shirt fundraiser to support the 9/11 victims and their families.

SEPT. 11 FUND-RAISER



CHRISTINE H. WETZEL/REVIEW-JOURNAL

Cherina Kleven, an assistant fire chief with the Las Vegas Fire Department, shows a T-shirt on Friday that she helped design to raise money for the families of rescue workers killed in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

T-shirt drive a success

LV Fire Department design raises more than \$200,000

By FRANK GEARY

REVIEW-JOURNAL

The Las Vegas Fire Department still is receiving requests for a popular T-shirt that has helped raise more than \$200,000 for people affected by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Fire Department employees designed the shirt to help families of public-safety personnel lost in the attack on the World Trade Center.

The shirts were expected to be sold to families of local firefighters and police officers, but the public ended up buying more than 15,000 of them, said Cherina Kleven, an assistant fire chief.

The shirts include an American flag and a logo for the local firefighter union on one sleeve and a Metropolitan Police Department logo on the other.

"We didn't know it was going to make so much. Our

“
People were calling from Arizona and as far away as Kansas City.”

CHERINA KLEVEN
ASSISTANT FIRE CHIEF

expectation was we would make about \$50,000, but when the public found about them, we were taking orders for 50 at a time," said Kleven, who was one of three people who designed the \$20 shirt. "People were calling from Arizona and as far away as Kansas City."

Families of police and fire personnel lost in the World Trade Center received \$200,000, and local families shared the rest of the money.

Here in Las Vegas, 4,000 pounds of turkey was purchased or donated for families

of laid-off workers on Thanksgiving, and fruit baskets were purchased for 80 low-income seniors at the Monsignor Shallow Apartments.

Underprivileged students at Taylor Elementary School in Henderson received winter coats, and 185 disadvantaged children, ages 2 to 5 years old, received holiday gifts, Kleven said.

Although demand for the shirts has subsided, about five shirts still are being sold each day. People interested in buying a shirt can call the Las Vegas Fire and Rescue's Fire Training Center at 229-0470.

"It has slowed down a bit because our shirts have saturated the valley," she said.

In unrelated fund-raising drives, the Southern Nevada Fire Chiefs Association raised \$100,000, and local firefighters raised another \$100,000 through a boot drive. They collected the money in firefighter boots on street corners and at intersections.

SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHS



Cherina (front, left) with crew L-R (rear): Frank Sams, Tom DeLamonte, Ian Adams (partially hidden), Captain Ken Brewster. L-R (front): Kleven, Erik Saxon (first personal rookie, Station 8), undated



Cherina (left), colleagues, and Jackie Chan (center) during filming of *Rush Hour 2* (2001), 3 July 2001



Plaque presented by crew upon Kleven's 10 August 2009 retirement



Detail: Three crossed bugles signifying rank near head of axe, on which is engraved the following:

(Replica of badge: Assistant Chief Las Vegas Fire & Rescue [number])

Asst. Chief
Cherina M. Kleven
Dedicated Service
07/17/89 - 08/10/09

(Replica seal of Las Vegas Fire & Rescue)



Assistant Fire Chief Kleven driving engine back to station after fighting the fire at the historic Moulin Rouge Hotel and Casino, on Bonanza Road, 29 May 2003. Photograph taken, framed, and presented to Cherina by her colleague Robert Pitts, then Training Battalion Chief.



Cherina Kleven at the podium at College of Southern Nevada (CSN) giving the opening remarks for a rally to promote early voting ahead of President Barak Obama's re-election, 27 October 2012.

VOG: Please welcome former Assistant Fire Chief at Las Vegas Fire and Rescue, and owner of Marley Cafe, Cherina Kleven

- Good Morning, Las Vegas.
- What a great morning here at the College of Southern Nevada and what a great crowd we have today.

- My name is Cherina Kleven. I am a local small business owner and spent 20+ years in the fire service and 9 years as the Assistant Fire Chief at Las Vegas Fire and Rescue.
- When President Obama was sworn into office, we were facing one of the worst financial crises since the Great Depression. The economy was in free-fall and Americans were losing 750,000 jobs a month.
- But now we are seeing the economy of Las Vegas march towards recovery as our taxes have been cut and our families have access to the care they need.
- When my daughter turned twenty-four years old, she was dropped from our medical insurance even though she was a student at CSN at that time.
- While shopping for an insurance policy she got sick and we took her to UMC emergency room. For that particular visit, just the hospital portion was \$7,000, not counting the physicians' fees.
- I'm so thankful for the President Obama's healthcare reform that will cover children until they're twenty six so that other parents don't have to go through what we went through.
- With just one day left to Vote Early, we need to bring our family, friends and neighbors to the polls. We need to cast our vote to protect Obamacare, to protect our small businesses and to improve our schools.
- Everyone here has a reason for supporting President Obama. So when you cast your vote, stand up for your story. And stand by President Obama.
- Thank you!



Kleven pictured with Earvin "Magic" Johnson at "AAPI Pride: We Decide" Luncheon with Hon. Mike Honda and Magic Johnson, Harbor Palace Seafood Restaurant at Chinatown Plaza, 27 October 2012

"AAPI PRIDE - WE DECIDE!"

Please Join
AAPI FOR LAS VEGAS HOSTS:

Rozita Lee	Duy Nguyen	Mike Viswani
Evan Louie	Cherina Kleven	Stan Fuke
Hugo Stanley	Sanje Sedera	Bonnie Chu
Benson Lee	Vida Lin	Caroline Fan
	Henry Kang	

(HOST COMMITTEE STILL IN FORMATION)

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RSVP REQUIRED
Space is Limited

CONTACT:
Sanje Sedera
sedera@aol.com
702.461.8655

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AAPI PRIDE: WE DECIDE

3-time NBA MVP Earvin "Magic" Johnson to join Las Vegas Asian American & Pacific Islander Community Leaders for rally, luncheon in support of early voting for President Barack Obama and Democratic candidates

October 12, 2012 – Las Vegas, NV – **Asian American Pacific Islanders of Nevada** invite early voters to celebrate their support for **President Barack Obama** and other Democratic candidates by joining us on **Saturday, October 27** for a special luncheon with **Hon. Mike Honda** and **Earvin "Magic" Johnson** at **Harbor Palace Seafood Restaurant**.

Hosted by a committee of local AAPI community leaders including **Rozita Lee, Sanje Sedera, Mike Vaswani, Duy Nguyen**, the luncheon is open to the public. However, due to space constraints, reservations are required and must be confirmed.

"At its core, this is a celebration of inclusion," says Aapi Group founder, **Henry Kang**. "As Asian American and Pacific Islanders, our vote is our voice. It's imperative that we turn out the vote in the next 16 days, just as it's imperative that we continue the work of connecting our communities long after the November 6th election. We couldn't be more pleased to have Magic's support in these efforts."

Lunch will begin at approximately 12pm, immediately following the OFA-sponsored rally on **Chinatown Mall**. Complete schedule of events and/or full list of Host Committee members available upon request.

"AAPI Pride: We Decide" Luncheon with Hon. Mike Honda & Magic Johnson

Date & Time: Saturday, October 27th at 12pm
Location: Harbor Palace Seafood Restaurant at Chinatown Mall
4275 Spring Mountain Road, Las Vegas 89102

###

Invitation and Press Release for "AAPI Pride – We Decide" luncheon at Harbor Palace Seafood Restaurant, Chinatown Plaza, 27 October 2012. The event, hosted by Asian American Pacific Islanders for Las Vegas featuring Hon. Mike Honda and Earvin "Magic" Johnson was held in support of early voting for President Barak Obama and Democratic candidates.

CHERINA KLEVEN, "[OPINION] AS IMMIGRANTS, TRUMP REPRESENTS THE OPPOSITE OF AMERICAN VALUES," *ASIAN JOURNAL*, OCTOBER 23, 2020, [HTTPS://WWW.ASIANJOURNAL.COM/FEATURES/OPINION-EDITORIAL-COLUMNISTS/AS-IMMIGRANTS-TRUMP-REPRESENTS-THE-OPPOSITE-OF-AMERICAN-VALUES/](https://www.asianjournal.com/features/opinion-editorial-columnists/as-immigrants-trump-represents-the-opposite-of-american-values/)

As Immigrants, Trump Represents the Opposite of American Values

By Cherina Kleven

Cherina Kleven is a Taiwanese immigrant, mother, and the former assistant fire chief of Las Vegas Fire and Rescue. Cherina is the first female Assistant Fire Chief and the first Asian-American Assistant Fire Chief in the state of Nevada, and one of the highest-ranked Asian firefighters nationwide.

I was 12 years old in 1970, when I first came to the United States from Taiwan. Like many, my family came to America seeking a better life, with the promise that if we worked hard enough and kept our heads down, we too could have our own American Dream.

And we did just that. Our family quickly became enamored with Las Vegas: we loved many things about the city, but the bright lights, the never ending sense of opportunity, and the culture made the city home. As a child, I modeled the spirit I saw in my parents. I quickly learned that with determination and hard work, our American journey provided the opportunity for me to aspire to my childhood dream – becoming a firefighter.

I faced many challenges as a woman and an immigrant in a traditionally male-dominated line of work throughout my career. It was easy for others to look down on me and treat me differently. But I never lost sight of those immigrant values I learned from my parents. And through my efforts, I rose through the ranks of the Las Vegas Fire and Rescue department, to become its first Asian-American assistant fire chief. It was an honor to work in a profession that gave me the opportunity to help others in the city that helped my family find their home.

Unfortunately, the spirit that once welcomed and praised the hard work of immigrants who built this country is gone. Immigrants, especially those coming from Asia like myself, now face more discrimination and xenophobia, fueled by the fear-tweeting from the White House and President Trump. For me, I have feared sending my children off to school, wondering if they will be bullied for how they look. People often ask, "Where are you from?" without realizing that my family has called Las Vegas home their whole life. As parents, we hope to raise our children to not belittle others, especially those of different backgrounds. But Trump's behavior is rippling through our society.

In fact, Trump's decorum is the opposite of what we teach our children, and the behaviors we work to exemplify. He continually lies, bullies, and manipulates those around him to get his way, and when he doesn't, he throws a Twitter tantrum. He repeatedly attacks those of unprotected and lesser status, and encourages his followers to attack them as well. We saw it in the first debate: he can't even bring himself to denounce violent white supremacists. His behavior is dangerous and its consequences are felt deep in the immigrant community. What would we tell our children if they acted like this? I know my parents surely would not stand for anything remotely close to these obscene behaviors.

As immigrants, we are often reminded that someone migrated to this country before us to make it better for us. We are often challenged to pay it forward and make it better for the next

generation who seeks American prosperity, and we are constantly reminded to break down barriers and pay it forward. Donald Trump has never had to work hard for anything in his life. He was handed millions of dollars by his father, waltzed into the finest schools, and is privileged to treat or degrade others however he so pleases. He has never felt the fear of tying your family's livelihood to a small business or missing work to care for sick family members. He has not paid it forward. His story is not our story.

On the contrary, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris understand our communities. Harris, the daughter of immigrants herself, understands our fight, and they both know the value of honest work, what it is like to be poor, looked down upon, and the spirit it takes to make it in America. Together, the two of them have passed laws to make our lives easier and ensure a brighter future for our families. As President and Vice President, we know our fight as immigrants will be their fight too. They will stand up for the values we hold dear, and ensure America is once again a welcoming beacon of hope for those looking to make a better life. It is time we as immigrants vote to elevate those in power who share our story and our determination, not just in the fight for bettering our own families, but all families. Together, we'll secure a better future that brings all of us together and advances our shared values by electing Joe Biden and Kamala Harris.