

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH STELLA KALAORAM**

An Oral History Conducted by Kristel Peralta and Cecilia Winchell

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

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

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Oral History Project

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020

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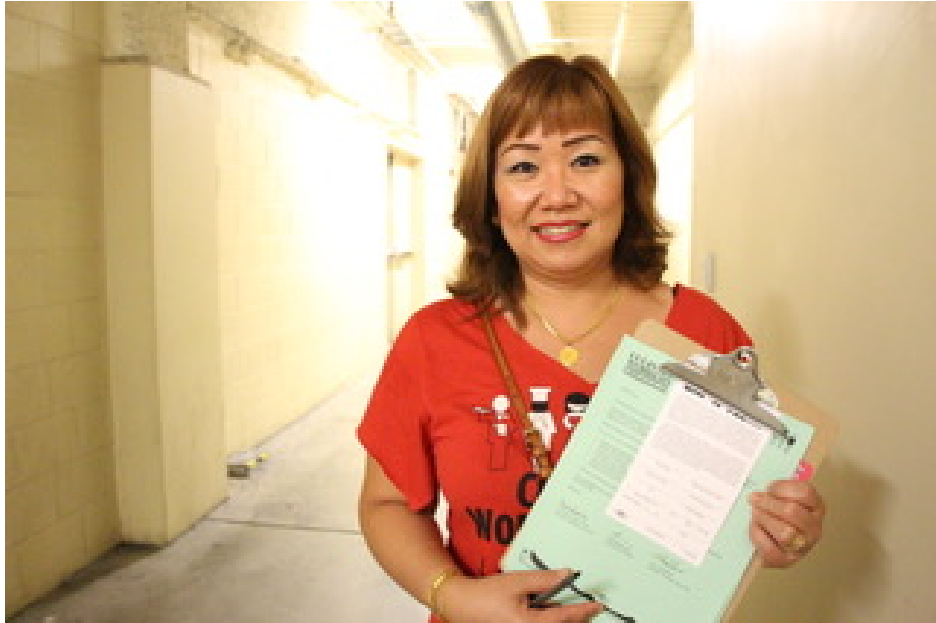
The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a grant from the City of Las Vegas Commission for the Las Vegas Centennial and funding from private individuals and foundations. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community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

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

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

Claytee D. White  
Director, Oral History Research Center  
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## PREFACE



“Every Monday I will be at the union, like right now, helping the grievance team. If you’re asking for memories, no. It’s memories every day for me.”

Hailing from the strongly multicultural Singapore, Stella Kalaoram has always been surrounded by diversity and acceptance, leading her to have a strong appreciation for all Las Vegas has to offer. Born in 1969 to a taxi driver and a cook, she spent the early years of her life learning the many language of Singapore and got her first job as a dental assistant in high school. After moving to San Bernardino, California in 1990, she continued her work in dentistry before moving back briefly to Singapore to have her daughter.

Kalaoram arrived in Las Vegas, Nevada in 2000 after her husband had found a job in the city and began working as a house cleaner. Later, prompted by a need for better health insurance, she found a job in The Cosmopolitan as a guest room attendant in 2011. This led to her membership with the Culinary Union and her continued strong involvement in the workers community. Her duties include helping the grievance team as well as translating for those with language barriers.

Among her many experiences, Kalaoram discusses what it was like being sick with COVID and the toll it took on her health and family. She also touches on traditional cultural celebrations, her Buddhist religion, the importance of family, her kitchen prowess, and what it means to her to be a part of the local AAPI community.

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August 2, 2021

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Cecilia Winchell

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Following her husband who worked at the Plaza hotel, Kalaoram arrived with her daughter in Las Vegas, Nevada in 2000. Her first job in town was working to clean a private house and worked for them for many years before deciding to look for a job with health insurance. After accepting a position as a guest room attendant at The Cosmopolitan in 2011, Kalaoram faced stressful working conditions before joining the Culinary Union and organizing where she still continues to be active in helping the grievance team. She voices her strong support and appreciation for the union. She also describes her experience with COVID last year and how bad her case was.....7-15

Kalaoram details some of the cultural celebrations that she partakes in including Chinese New Years. Although her family is a mix of Catholics and Buddhists, she practices Buddhism and possesses a family heirloom Buddha. She is also a good cook in mainly Nonya and Thai foods and discusses the importance of food in bringing together her family. Finally, she touches on what she enjoys the most about living in Las Vegas as well as what it means to her to see the local AAPI community grow so fast.....15-25



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**CECILIA: Good morning. Today's date is Monday, August 2nd, 2021. I am joined today by Kristel, as well as Stella Kalaoram.**

**Stella, please spell your name for the record.**

My name is Stella Kalaoram. It's S-T-E-L-L-A. Last name is Kalaoram, K-A-L-A-O-R-A-M.

**Thank you so much. To start off, we're just going to ask you to tell us about your childhood; how you grew up; where you grew up; your family; schooling; everything like that.**

I'm originally from Singapore. I was born and raised in Singapore. I went to school in Singapore entirely, and I grew up in Singapore. During my high school years, I was actually working part-time as a dental assistant, so that's how it got me into my career, into the United States as well.



I moved here in 1990, and I lived in San Bernardino when I first came to the United States. I got married in 1995, May fifth of 1995. I have two kids. My daughter is twenty-four, and my son is sixteen.

When I moved to the United States in 1990 with the skills I had learned as a dental assistant—and back then they didn't really have a lot of education, so the dentist is the one that shows you and teaches you how to do all the skills that you need to do. When I came over here, I realized that we needed a certificate just to do X-rays, so I went to school for it. I completed my dental—they called it X-ray back then. I studied hard for that, and that's how I got into dentistry. I worked as a dental assistant for pretty much eight years in California until I had kids, and there was nobody to take care of the kids, so I had to stay home.

I loved being a dental assistant because over here you have to take certain classes and all that for certain skills that you want to learn but everything that I needed to know I was actually taught by my dentist that I worked for back in Singapore. I had a pretty good life back in Singapore. It's not good over here because I had to start all over again.

**Thank you for sharing that. I'd like to go back to your life in Singapore. Could you tell us a little more about your grandparents, if you remember?**





My grandma is ninety-two years old. She is still alive. That is my mom's mom. She is still alive. My dad's parents passed away when I was little. We have extended family. We have a huge family. My dad's side, he has four or five other siblings, and a lot of cousins. We're Chinese, so we used to hang out together. We eat and New Year's—any kind of occasion—it's probably sixty of us. It's a huge family. My mom has a total of seven siblings, so it's another huge family.

My mom is half-Chinese. She was born and raised in Singapore as well, but she does not speak Chinese because her ancestors are from the Strait of Malacca, so they speak more Malay and English, also. In my family, I was born and raised to speak four different languages because my dad's Chinese, and my mom speaks mostly English and Malay. We grew up speaking three languages at home, not including the dialect that my dad had because his parents are from China, so they speak Teochew Chinese. It's a dialect that I was born and raised to speak, too.

The thing is, in Singapore, the main language is English, so it's our first language, and we have four different, we would say, national languages. I think it is the only country that has four national languages, which is English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil: Tamil meaning you're from India. We are multicultural. When we go to school, we will be sitting with everybody around all the time. When it's exam time, I remember they separated all of us by our language that we speak so we will not copy each other when we're doing our testing. Then the teachers sometimes forget that I speak Malay as well, so I do get friends asking me, "How do you answer this?"

But the Chinese part, I'm on the losing end because I'm not really good at Chinese. I speak fluent Chinese, but when it comes to writing, it's so hard because usually when I was in school, when we have to take a second language, I am pretty much going to fail it, most of the time, in Chinese because I hated it. There are so many characters. But Malay is easy because it's alphabetical order, so it's easier for me. I would tell my mom, "I hate taking Mandarin Chinese.

Can you switch me to Malay so I could do better?” She said, “No. You speak Malay at home, you know Malay very well, so you need to pick up Mandarin Chinese as your second language.” We all hated it. My brother, same thing, too. My sister is the same thing. We hated it so much because we don’t really speak it at home, and my dad and my mom speak English more than anything else. My mom interjects English and Malay at the same time, so we are perfect on that. Now I’m regretting it. I should have concentrated more on Mandarin Chinese. Although I can speak it fluently, I do translation here for anybody who needs it, but when it comes to reading in Chinese, oh my god, I can’t do it. Simple words, it’s okay. I can write little words, but anything further than elementary, forget it.

This is how life is in Singapore. I have a brother and two sisters, my brother and my sister are step-siblings as well. From my mom and my dad, there’s only me and my younger sister. We get along really well, fine. Now we’re all married. My sister is still back in Singapore. My brother moved to another country. We still keep in touch, but not as often because everybody has their own lives.

That’s pretty much how life is in Singapore: You grew up in a multicultural place. You don’t have an issue with anybody because that’s how we were brought up, that way. We celebrate US Christmas, Chinese New Year, Hari Raya, Deepavali. We all share the holidays, so we visit everybody’s home that we know of. It’s no difference for us. We go everywhere we want, and we have friends of all different cultures, too, so we got used to it. That’s pretty much how life is in Singapore.

It is a very strict country, very clean and super strict. That’s the reason why...My husband and I actually met in Singapore, but he actually lived here in the United States. He is originally from Thailand. That’s how I moved over here—with him, to the United States—

because Singapore is a strict country. It's not easy to get immigration there. That's kind of why we are here, too.

**I'd love to go back one more time and ask you about what your parents did for a living.**

My dad has been a taxi driver all his life. My mom is a cook so she used to run her own business, a restaurant of her own. She works with somebody, but eventually before she retired, she actually owned her own restaurant. Because of construction and how Singapore is developing every day, if you go back there, every two years it's different; you can't recognize it. She actually has restaurants inside the construction areas where the buildings are being built. She provides the meals to the workers that work in the construction area. She's a great cook because of her background. She cooks mostly spicy food, curry and all that, and then authentic...In Singapore, there's a cultural group called—I don't know if you've heard of Nonya and Babas. This group of people are actually from the Strait of Malacca. They're Chinese, but they're actually from the Strait of Malacca, which is where I believe back then Europe and Malaysia and Chinese interact. This is the only group that is Chinese, but they speak English and Malay only, and they don't speak Chinese. If you research it, you would know that they don't at all. They are more fluent in English, and Malay is a small second language, but they are Chinese. Their background is that they are very good at cooking authentic Nonya food. That's how my mom used her skills to make a living out of it, as a cook, cooking those foods.

**What led you to become a dental assistant?**

During high school it was just a part-time job. We have a long break not usually in the summer, but towards Christmastime because the breaks in Singapore are not in the summer; it's mostly in the wintertime. I signed up to be a part-time dental assistant, and that's how I got in, because I wanted to do the extra job instead of staying at home for the three months—actually it's about

two months. That's when I took an extra job. You were allowed to back then, and the dentist would teach you everything from how to repair a denture to fixing a crown and all that. I can do all that. Then when I came over here, I realized that not all dental assistants can do that; they have to go to school for it. But I got the opportunity; I learned it directly from the dentist. I love being a dental assistant. I started when I was seventeen. I was barely going into high school when I got the part-time job as a dental assistant.

**You touched on coming to the U.S. with your husband and landing in California. Could you tell us more about what the process was like getting here?**

The process is not easy. I would say it's difficult as well because back then, twenty, thirty years ago, it was a lot easier to come here especially with a visa. They call it the B-1/B-2 visa where you just have to prove that you're going back where you come from. They will approve you a B-1/B-2 visa. My husband was already here, so I visited in 1987 for a month, and I went back home until I finished school and all that. I came back, I think, in 1990. I can't remember the year. I got another visa and came back. Actually, the visa back then was good for ten years, so I still had a valid visa to come back, in and out anytime. It wasn't that difficult.

I stayed and got a job as a dental assistant again, back then. I remember that back in the days it was a lot easier to get a Social Security card because if you need a bank account, they just give it to you and there will be no questions asked. It's totally different from now. I think it's a big difference, actually.

I lived in California with my husband for about eight years, nine years, in California, yes.

**Was there a reason you chose California specifically?**

Back in the days, I guess California was the prettiest and most famous place to live in, and a lot of Asians are there. For comfort reasons that's why we chose California because I think it's safer

because we always heard that there are a lot of Asians there. That's why we decided, let's go to California. More of a comfort zone, I think. I loved it in California.

**What was the process of ending up in Vegas, and what were some of your first memories and impressions?**

The reason why we ended up in Vegas is because after September 11<sup>th</sup> there were no jobs. I actually went back home to Singapore for a little bit because I wanted to have my daughter in Singapore. That's why I had my daughter over there in Singapore. She was born in 1998. After September 11<sup>th</sup> hit, there were really no jobs. My husband moved to Vegas himself first to get established again, and that's how we ended up in Vegas because he was working back then at the Plaza hotel as a busser. That was the only job back then that was available. It was hard after September 11<sup>th</sup>.

**When you left Singapore and that big family, what were some of the hardest things to leave behind when you decided to move to the United States?**

Not really, though, because when I was younger we traveled a lot, me and my parents. We've always been very independent, and that's how it didn't really affect me a lot, because I know that my parents will come and visit me no matter what, and I didn't really care. We've always been very close, and I know that they will come, and they did. They were busy coming every other month when they could afford it, but, yes, they do come. It's not really just because they're far away that I am sad, but I know they will come. Back then we had Skype, too, so we Skype a lot.

**When you first got to the United States, did you experience any form of culture shock?**

In San Bernardino, it's a small town, and my husband was already here, so he had a lot of friends in the Asian community. The culture shock to me, it's not much, because remember, back in Singapore, we were born and raised with four different cultures, or more, so we are used to it. It

doesn't really affect me. Thinking in terms of color and race and all that, no, it does not affect me. I could tell you that anybody that comes from Singapore, it doesn't really affect them because we are so used to having different cultures with us every single day.

**Going back to when you first moved to Las Vegas, what were your initial impressions of the city?**

Oh, wow. It's like, wow. It reminds me of Singapore with tall buildings. That's how Singapore is, too, the tall buildings. It's like a city. The only thing that I was surprised by was that I could see a lot of mountains, like surrounding the city. That's the only thing that kept the cities separated. Okay, this is not Singapore, this is Las Vegas, because you still see the mountains. Although they have the lights and everything, it's the same thing. The only thing I like about it is actually the mountains surrounding the city itself because in Singapore you don't see that; it's all water. We are actually an island sitting on the water in Singapore, so it's a lot of difference.

**Could you tell us about all the jobs you have had since living in Vegas?**

When I came to Vegas, I already had my daughter. We came back when she was three. My husband was doing electrical work. There was a time when one of the houses in the rich area, they needed somebody who could clean. My husband said he didn't know, "But my wife can clean the house." He asked me if I was willing to do it. I said, "Yes, but if I can bring my daughter with me to clean homes." They said, "Yes, you can bring her, and you can still take care of the house," so I did. I ended up as a housekeeper in one of the houses, not knowing that he's one of the rich and famous here in town. I worked for them for many years. I was able to bring my daughter with me to work. I ended up being a housekeeper. Instead of cleaning teeth, I was cleaning a home now.

After working for them for—I would say—a full six years, they decided to move back to California. They asked me where I'm going to go. I said, "Well, I'm going to see." But when they sold the house that they were in, the second owner that bought it asked me if I could continue, so I did continue cleaning the same home for a little bit.

By then my daughter was old enough, already in school, so I was thinking it's time to actually get a real job with health insurance and everything. Even though my husband has it, his insurance is just way too expensive because it's a small company. The insurance is maybe three to five hundred dollars a month for him. I applied as a—they call it room service. It's actually a GRA, guest room attendant, at the Cosmopolitan.

The first time when I turned in the application, I was waiting maybe two months for a reply. One day I sit down looking through my spam, they actually sent me an invite for an interview, and I missed it. You know what I did? I sent them a letter, a certified letter, to give me another chance, and they did. When I did the interview, it was actually not an interview; they call it audition. There were like twenty people in the room where you have to audition for the same position. I've never done an interview like that before. It's like, oh my god, I was so nervous. But you know what? I aced it. After the interview they held me back and said, "Wait here." I said, "Okay." I was the only one there. He's like, "We would like to give you a second interview tomorrow, but this time with the director of housekeeping." I said, "Okay."

I got the job. With my experience cleaning private homes, yes, I got the job. When I got in there, it was in 2011. I worked at the Cosmopolitan. It was a pretty new hotel because they opened up in November of 2010, and that's why I wanted to be the first group, but I missed it, spam mail. I joined February 24<sup>th</sup> of 2011.

I know when I first joined, they had company insurance and all that. It was a pretty good insurance, but the workload is hard. It's really hard because we had to clean sometimes up to sixteen rooms a day, which is really hard. One of my coworkers was telling me, "Hey, they are trying to sign people up to get the hotel unionized." I was like, "What is that?" Then I remembered my dad was a taxi driver, and they are unionized back in Singapore, too. I know about the union because I remember my dad going for, I would say, grievances because whenever he has a car accident, he has to go through all that, and I remember that he can actually fight it. I was like, "Oh okay, that's good."

One of my colleagues approached me, "Hey, do you want to know more about the union and all that?" I was like, "Okay, tell me more about it." But I was scared at the same time, too, because the company was telling like, "If you talk to the union, you get fired," and all that. I was like, "Okay, not if we talk to them on the site." I had visitors come to my home, and that's where I got to know more about the union and especially the Culinary Union because there are so many of them. My husband is an electrician. He also wanted to sign up for the electrical union, and I kind of know a little bit about it.

When I got the job at the Cosmopolitan, I was really happy. Like I said, insurance and everything. But I realized that the workload was really hard. I lost twenty pounds in six months just doing housekeeping. It's bad. It's almost sixteen rooms a day. I don't know if you have cleaned some. Those carts that you push? It's exactly the same, and it's covered with metal. It's not even stainless steel; it's metal. The cart maybe weighs thirty pounds. Remember, we haven't loaded the linen yet. Imagine loading the linen, how heavy that would be. I was thinking, okay, if all this changes, if the union is at the Cosmopolitan, it would be really good for us. We finally did after six years. Now we have motorized carts. We don't have to push that damn cart with



loads of linen to clean sixteen rooms a day. I still remember that. It's emotional. It's hard being a housekeeper, but it got a lot easier. It is hard, but it got a lot easier because after working for six months, they moved me up to the penthouses because of the cleaning skills that I have—I guess from being a dental assistance—so I deep cleaned, and they moved me up to the penthouses. From there we've been negotiating to get the union inside to help us. Six years later we have it. Things have changed a lot from—I would say—sixteen rooms. You know how many rooms we clean now? Nine doors. It was sixteen doors.

After negotiation and everything, the best part of it is I have free health insurance. It's tough paying three hundred and ninety-six dollars a month for health insurance. I had my son, also, and we pay nothing right now. It is the best insurance I have. The most important thing is that the workload is different, totally different.

**KP: I'm glad to hear that things got so much better for your job and everyone working at the Cosmopolitan. What is one of your fondest memories of being an activist in the union?**

Those aren't memories for me. Every day is a memory. I am still here. I volunteer my time. I'm an active shop steward and right now we call it a VO. Really, it's a volunteer organizer, which I organized at the Cosmopolitan, so I oversee all the shop stewards at the Cosmopolitan. Saying memories, every day is a memory; there is something new every day. I enjoy it. Speaking to you right now, every Monday I am in the office. Every Monday I will be at the union, like right now, helping the grievance team. If you're asking for memories, no. It's memories every day for me. It's part of my life now. If anybody needs—like I told you, I'm vetting, writing, mentoring, but I speak perfectly. I still volunteer my time in any casino that needs me for translation, a coworker, they could call me. Everybody has my number at the union. I do volunteer and translate.

**Along that same line, why is being a Culinary Union member important to you?**

Like I said, it's important not just to me, it's important to everybody that actually works for the Culinary Union. Number one is that we have the health care benefits, the greatest in the whole country. It's free. We don't have to pay anything out of our pocket. We have our own health center that we can go to. Because of the pandemic, the urgent care is closed. It's a great insurance.

The most important thing is we are unionized as a whole. Even now in my job that I was explaining, even the job, the work environment is different if you have union protection. It's a place to fall on if something happened. We get a second chance. Let's fight this and see—not really fighting—but let's take a step back and have the union decide because if I'm wrong, let me know if I'm wrong. But at least we could go and turn around and say, "Okay, we can revisit it and go through it." Right now, with the experience I have through the grievance team, I actually do help a lot of coworkers through the issues that they have at work every single day, to sit down with the company and actually have justice to make sure we are on the right track. I will say not given a second chance by the company to sit down and not thinking they are wrong, and a lot of times they are. We have to actually sit back. I'm so proud that we actually have a union to back us up.

**What are your biggest hopes for the union considering how much progress has been made since you joined?**

In terms of the Cosmopolitan? Well, since the pandemic happened, there's a lot of people that actually joined or applied for jobs here and there especially at the Cosmopolitan. We are the busiest hotel right now. Keep in mind that because of the pandemic, a lot of people have never done housekeeping before, and they lost their jobs, and they actually joined the Cosmopolitan not knowing anything about the union. My goal is to make sure they know now what

Cosmopolitan is, but the most important thing is what the union can do for them and what the union is all about. Remember, I was the same thing, too. I'm confident to say that they are in the same shoes as me right now.

**I wanted to switch topics a little bit. What do you think of the way casinos and the state are now handling COVID?**

Last year today I was recovering from COVID. I almost died. I will say back in July when mask mandate was for everybody, I probably would not be in the hospital. During the closure back in April, we close, and then three weeks into opening, I got COVID through work, and I brought it home to my family, my husband, my two kids, and my daughter's best friend. I think even my dog, too, because he was really sick, too. He was throwing up and everything. They say that dogs don't get it. I don't believe it. When I first heard a couple of weeks ago that all workers should have their masks on, I was thinking, why only the workers? Everybody should have their masks on. It doesn't matter whether you're a worker or you're a guest, every single person should have their mask on. Now that they've changed it, since Friday, I was happy about that, but it has to be properly worn, too.

I was recovering from COVID last year today. I contracted COVID July second. I ended up in the hospital on July tenth for two weeks. I had double pneumonia. I think nobody should ever go through it like me. Back in February of this year when they were getting vaccines to people the age over sixty-five, my mom is seventy-four years old. She lives with me. She's the only one who didn't get COVID because I kind of separated; told her not to eat with us, and when I come home from work, to stay away from me. December of last year, of 2019, that was three months before everything, when we heard about COVID back then, I guess that's how she was protected because she stays in her room most all the time. Until today she never got COVID

because I told mom, “When I come home, I try not to eat dinner,” because we eat dinner every night. I told her, “Because of COVID, you should just stay away from us because we go out to work, and the kids are out, too,” to protect her because she has a severe medical condition. She was the only one that stayed in her room most of the time. She would eat before we come home. I think distancing is very important as well because she is the only one who never got it, till this day.

She got vaccinated in February when there was an opening. I was trying to get her vaccinated for the longest time, and there was none available. One day a friend of mine called and said, “The Walgreens down the street has extras; they want to take your mom.” I was like, “Yes.” I took her; I flew. If I could fly, I flew down there. The pharmacist asked me, “Is this for your mom?” I said, “Yes.” Then she asked me, “Do you have any questions for me?” I said, “Yes, I do. Do you have extras?” And then she’s like, “Yes, I do.” I was like, “Can I have it?” Yes, she gave me the vaccine, also, even though it has to be sixty-five and older. She didn’t want to waste it. I took the first available that I could. I was calling them every single day to ask if they had a vaccine for my mom, but now she is fully vaccinated. I am as well. I was one of the first few to get vaccinated below the age of sixty-five. I might have cheated, but I don’t care. I didn’t want to waste it.

**Thank you so much for sharing the story. I think it’s very powerful that you’re able to talk about it and share it. I’m so happy that you’re here sharing it with us today. I’d like to talk about COVID-19 in terms of the rise in AAPI hate and discrimination. Was that ever a problem that you encountered anytime during—even now—during the work periods and for the Culinary Union?**

You mean discrimination between the races? Is that what you meant?

**Yes. Did you experience any discrimination towards you because of the COVID-19 virus or any of that in the workplace?**

I would say not really, though. I think more of people are afraid of each other than anything because they're talking about it; people with relatives that are not getting vaccinated, and those people kind of shy away from them, but that's not true. It's not true. A lot of them are fully vaccinated, too, and the concept behind their mind is different. Working at the Cosmopolitan is totally different because I think the concept—it's a different vibe in Cosmo because pretty much everyone gets along well with each other. You're talking about race and all that. Personally, I don't have an issue with that. Especially with the Asian community, I think we are pretty powerful Asians especially in Las Vegas. I have encountered people who are timid, do not speak up because of language barrier. That's the reason why I wanted to do translation, because a lot of Asians, they can't fight back. It's just because of the language barrier that they can't fight, and then they feel discouraged. In my position, I don't think so because I have translated for a lot of people, and they can talk, they really can. It's just they can't say it out in English. But I have never...so far I have never encountered any racial issue with myself.

During the pandemic last year, before I got COVID, during the closure, I was actually volunteering my time at the Convention Center with the testing. I was really upset with myself, too, because the whole time that I was at the Convention Center, for two weeks, volunteering to get people tested for COVID, I've never got COVID there. But going back to work, within three weeks I got COVID through work. I was really upset. If anything could be upsetting me, racial problem with myself. I've never encountered anything like that.

**Switching to a lighter topic now, what cultural celebrations do you still participate in?**

You're probably going to laugh. My mom's a Catholic. My dad's a Buddhist. I was raised being both. Believe it or not, I took catechism as one of my topics at high school because back in Singapore you could choose religion as one of your subjects, and I aced that, too. But I'm a Buddhist myself. I go to church. I go to temple with my dad, and my dad goes. My mom goes to the temple with my dad as well. We have a cultural belief—we still do to today—every New Year's, I know Chinese, it's our cultural thing that we have to offer food for our ancestors and all that. My mom is getting along in age and all that, so we don't do it anymore. We stopped maybe



a couple of years ago when she got sick, but we used to do that full force. I still continue with that because my sister and I talked about it. My brother, who was an altar boy when he was in elementary school, for some reason, in his teenage years he decides to be a Buddhist. He even has a tattoo of Buddha on his chest. Then when he got married, guess what? He's a Muslim. Yes, he is a full Muslim right now. That's what I was saying that Singapore has so many cultural religions and races, so you don't care; everything is good. It's just weird. For me and my sister,

we were talking. My older brother and sister have their own lives, so it's only me and my sister. Because both of us our from our parents, this marriage, my sister was like, "Okay, I'm going to be a Catholic just in case something happens to mom," so somebody could follow the rites or whatever. I said, "Okay. I'm going to be a Buddhist," because my dad's a Buddhist. That's how we end up: She's a Catholic and I'm a Buddhist, just because of parents' purposes. Deep down in our hearts, we respect all religions. She was like, "I'm going for a job interview. Can you go pray Buddha for me?" Because Buddha is in my house. She has an altar in her home. To me, it's funny, but we enjoy it because there's no difference. It's just how you carry yourself every day. Religion is just something that gives us a focus, but it doesn't matter if at the end of the line, is it Jesus or Mary, or is it Buddha? It's the same thing.

The cultural thing is that every New Year's, I still do that: I will buy flowers and fruits with nine different fruits that we are supposed to have. We place it at the door at midnight before



Chinese New Year. I will look at the direction of where the Goddess of Wealth is coming. It will tell you every year from what direction, so that's where we will place the offerings, in the direction. I still do it every year. If I could send you a picture, I would because I take pictures of it every year. It's very colorful. It's still here. I still bring those...we call it gold paper. I still have that, and I still have the beam, the mantle beam in front of my door. Those still stay with me.



My mom is a Catholic. She was raised the same thing, too. She has a godmother that raised her because back then my grandma had seven to nine kids, so they had to go live with their aunts and uncles. Apparently, my mom landed with my grandpa's sister who is a Buddhist, and she worships the Goddess of Mercy since she was sixteen years old. When my mom moved to the United States, she brought it here with me, and it's sitting in my living room right now.



My mom's auntie is long gone, so imagine how old that Goddess of Mercy is that she has, and it's now mine. It's probably over two hundred years old. It's sitting in my living room.



My dad has a Buddha. When my mom and my sister migrated here, they brought the Buddha along, too, obviously for me. It's sitting in my living room, too. I don't know, maybe we all worship it even though my sister is Catholic. If she needs some encouragement, she will just go sit and meditate a little bit, and she feels a lot better after that.

Talking about cultural things, yes, it's still here. It's not going away. We'll see who is going to take over, my daughter or my son, but I'm sure they'll want to keep it because those are things that you cannot find. They are both over a hundred years old.

**Thank you so much for sharing that. If you have any pictures, the Oral History Research Center does collect them, and we can add them to your interview at the end, so please send us pictures.**

I will. I will. Yes, I will. You'll see I have an extended altar, huge one.

**Following up with culture and how it relates to your life, food is also an important part of that culture. What are some foods that remind you of home or that you've passed on to your children in that respect, with traditions?**

Because my mom is a cook, and I do cook really well, and my husband is from Thailand—I lived in Thailand with him for about two years—so I picked up a lot of culture and a lot of food and everything. I cook mostly food that my mom cooks. She is like a teacher. Mostly we cook Nonya food, and I cook a lot of Thai food as well—and dessert—traditional desserts from where my mom's area is. Yes, we make them, too, and I do that, too. I would say my daughter is a good cook as well, and my son who is sixteen, same thing, too. I think food brings us together. I was just telling my husband the other day that we eat out a lot because everywhere in Vegas that has a new opening, we've tried them all. Food brings us together, especially the family. Until today we still have dinner with my son and my daughter, my mom, and my sister.

My sister lives maybe a block down; she won't go anywhere further. My mom is back and forth right now, my mom's room, because she's with my sister taking turns, her house, my house. Every night, like last night, I was over at my sister's house, too. We have to have dinner together, my sister and my mom, even though we have two houses, but either her house or my house.

**On that same line, what do you enjoy most about living in Vegas?**

Vegas reminds me of Singapore because it's a city. The people here, it's pretty much almost the same. The area, I'm in the mid-west, near Chinatown area, so I think it's comfortable even though the other end of town is also good to be in. We travel a lot, my husband and my two kids. We take some vacation in the winter. We will go on short trips. We like to explore. Nothing is the same like Vegas, here. It's just comfortable. If you're asking me if I want to move...I go to

Seattle a lot, and my daughter was like, “Let’s move to Seattle.” Everybody wants to go to Seattle. I was like, “No, I don’t think so.” Vegas is our home here. No, I don’t think so. I’m not going anywhere.

**Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are one of the fastest-growing populations in Southern Nevada. What does that mean to you?**

I’m proud because where I’m living right now, I can see Chinatown moving up my area. Yes, I’m proud that Asians are making themselves known, more popular now. Whenever I go to a restaurant, especially Chinese restaurant, you don’t just see Asians in the restaurant. You see people of different races and colors sitting with the Asian people, and I feel happy that we are able to do that. Back in our days, even though in San Bernardino where I was, we had quite a bit of Asians because it’s near L.A., we don’t really get to see a lot of mix like we do right now, like thirty years ago, because we would stick together in our own color, but now it’s diversified. I feel great that we are able to interact with other races as well because thirty years it was not the same, especially if you don’t speak English, it’s even worse. I’m just fortunate because English is the first language in Singapore, so that has helped me in that aspect, too. When people ask me, where are you from, I say, “Oh, I’m from Singapore.” Then they’re like, “Oh yes, I’ve been to China, too.” Singapore is not in China. It’s not in China. They’re like, “Oh, then where is it?” It’s Southeast Asian. They’re mistaken. Just because I said I’m Chinese, it doesn’t mean I’m from China.

**What have been some of the most important values you’ve instilled into your children growing up?**

My daughter is twenty-three. She came here when she was three years old. She has never slept overnight—they call it a sleepover—at anybody’s house, never. I will not allow that. Now, if

they want to come over because their parents are more lenient, I would okay it, but I would rather not. The first night that she had to sleep alone on her own is when she went to college out of state. I was thinking to myself, you'll be all alone. We drove her to Arizona State. On the way back I was telling my husband, "Did we do it right? This is the first night she is going to sleep by herself in another room?" It turned out great even though I mention that. People ask, "Where does your daughter go?" I go, "Arizona State." People say, "Oh, it's a party university." Everybody knows it's known for that. I was like, "Okay, but no, she didn't turn out like that. She is not a party person." That really helped a lot.

Now my son is sixteen years old, and he's like, "Mommy, can I go over to Kevin's place overnight?" Then my daughter looked at him and then she looked at me waiting for the answer. I looked at her and I was like, "Tell your brother how was your experience; what's your answer here." She said, "If I never slept overnight in anybody's house when I was a teenager, so you can't either."

You have to be strict at a certain point, also. Now she is twenty-three and she did really well. When she was in college, it's a four-year course that you're there. She finished it in three years because she wanted to come home. I think that's part of it, too, because she's so used to home. She told me, "Mommy, I'm trying to finish it in three years," and she did. She graduated in three years just so she could come home, and she is still here. I think I instilled something in here that home is where the comfort zone is. Yes, she is still here. I hope that eventually she will transfer it to her kids if she has any in the future.

Family is very important, I would say that. Even the cultural thing, too, or a religious thing, too, we were always standing at the door waiting to put the chopstick in the cup on New

Year's Day. I'm pretty sure one of them will do it. They've seen mommy and grandma do it, so I'm pretty sure they will take over from there.

**Before we close, is there anything that you feel like we haven't asked about or talked about enough?**

I think we've pointed on a lot of it, but I will want to say...going back to COVID, being where I come from and landed in the hospital, I think that we should work more on giving the right information to the people who are not vaccinated in terms of what are the side effects that's going to happen, because people have a different side. There's a lot of workers at work that was afraid in the beginning to have the vaccine, and I can tell you that I convinced a lot of them to go get vaccinated. I actually walked them to the vaccine room to get vaccinated. They got sick the next day, but after that it was okay, and they actually came back and thanked me. Some departments, they are not in my area, too. We met in the elevator. They actually asked me because Cosmopolitan, when they first implemented the vaccine at work, saying if you want to get vaccinated, go ahead and do that, they actually approached me and said, "Stella, would you mind doing a photoshoot of a vaccine so we can post it on the wall that you got vaccinated and encouraged people?" I said, "Yes. Why not?" I was one of the first few who got vaccinated in Cosmo, and they actually put my face on a wall, pretty much everywhere in Cosmo. People actually approached me in the elevator and said, "Oh, you are famous now because your picture is on the wall." I say, "Yes." Then she was like, "I am afraid to get vaccinated." I told them, "Look. Look at me. I am still standing here. Having been through COVID and ending up in the hospital with double pneumonia, and then I got the vaccine, look, I'm alive. If you don't have the vaccine, imagine what's going to happen. Are you waiting to get COVID, to die, or would you

rather take the vaccine and then get slight symptoms?” These are the things that we have to tell people: Go get the vaccine so that you protect yourself and your family.

I wish two years ago, back in December when I quarantined my mom back in 2019, there was a vaccine, or else none of us would get it. But I did have social distancing with us. That’s why she was protected. Social distancing is very important, too. She and my sister were protected because I told my sister not to come over, either, and she works from home. I told her, “There is no reason for you to come over here.” Me and my husband, we go out to work and we come back, so we might bring something back, and unfortunately, I did. I think they should be working on the vaccine, also.

**Thank you so much for sharing.**

Thank you. You’re welcome. Thank you for having me.

**Our final question is: Why is it valuable for the university to collect interviews such as yours?**

I think it’s important to collect stories like me is because I’m reality, and I’m pretty sure there are people my age that migrated here facing the similar situation, but the thing is that not everybody could end up like me. There are a lot of them that are still struggling, and I know they are because I was helping some of them to go through it. I believe, number one, there’s a language barrier. The cultural is not really that much anymore. The most important thing, I think it’s more of a language barrier than anything else because I know Asians are not afraid of anything. They can talk, it’s just that they can’t translate it in English. It doesn’t matter what languages they are, especially dialect, it’s not that they could speak a little—even Mandarin, you can understand them. They are trying to fight really hard, it’s just nobody gets it. I think people can take from that how I move up from there to be where I am today because I am confident to

say that I am very successful right now. It's just how I help others to be successful like me is another way of getting to them.

**Thank you so much for sharing that.**

No problem.

**I want to thank the Culinary Union for letting this interview happen, and, Stella, for taking the time out of your day to come and share this wonderful story with us.**

I know, I want to thank the Culinary, too, because without the Culinary, there is no me.

**Yes. Thank you so much.**

Work is great because I love working at the Cosmopolitan because it's different from how I started. Without the Culinary, there is no me. That's why I'm so involved in the Culinary, because there are people out there who are in the same shoes like me that doesn't know what the union is all about, and I'm sure to get to them.

**Thank you so much.**

Thank you.

**[End of recorded interview]**