

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN MUNSON

An Oral History Conducted by Vanessa Concepcion and Cecilia Winchell

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

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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University of Nevada Las Vegas

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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



“Using fear as a mechanism not to do something is a waste of your time because on the other side of that door is the inventor we all need. If you need a sign for permission, it’s now, and I’ll meet you on the other side.”

A story about using her own experiences to help lift other people up, Jean Munson has taken every hardship and encounter in stride, picking valuable lessons out of every moment of her life. Having grown up in Guam for the first eighteen years of her life, she recalls a deeply religious and compact island where everyone knew each other that has deeply informed the way she interacts with people to this day. Other formative experiences of the time included being senior class president and a fake theology teacher who inspired her activism.

After moving to Las Vegas in 2005 to study history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Munson would join the Filipino American Student Association where on top of her activism, she would coach the men’s basketball team. At UNLV, she would also meet her boyfriend-later-

husband, Coy Munson. Despite a tumultuous family situation, Munson worked a slew of minimum wages while working on her comic illustration career. She would go on to do everything from publish her first four-part comic series *Pushover*, start her own publishing company, found a podcast, among other things. Throughout the rest of the interview, Munson touches on everything from body dysphoria, kickboxing, AAPI hate, the model minority myth, and her own identity.

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November 30, 2021

in Las Vegas, Nevada

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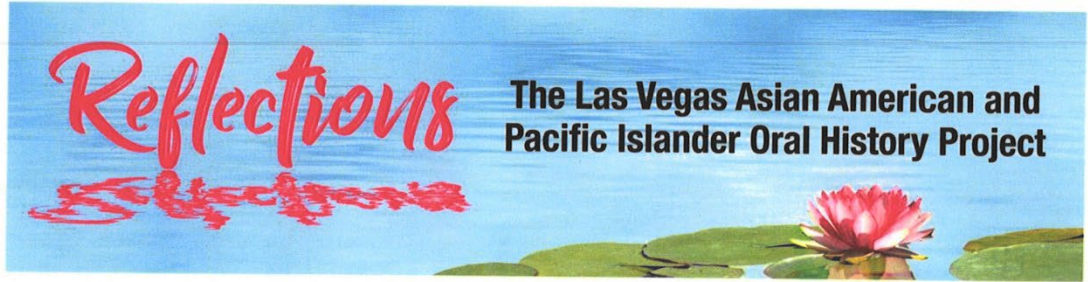
Munson begins with her life in Guam, how her parents immigrated there, and the history of her grandparents that have culminated in her. As nurses, her parents had long and rewarding careers that afforded Munson the opportunity to pursue history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Munson also delves into her Catholic side and her Jesus complex. She narrates her high school experience, her experience at UNLV, and being involved with the New Leadership Nevada program. After graduating in 2009, into a recession, Munson worked a slew of retail and food jobs, and how they made her see issues of accessibility.....1-8

Encountering many home difficulties throughout her four years at UNLV, Munson also talks about the moments of joy such as meeting her husband, Coy Munson. In her twenties, Munson committed to being a cartoonist and wrote her four-part series called *Pushover*, to surprising responses. She continued to explore this area, building a community out of the career she wanted, and remembers inviting herself into spaces where she wanted to be but did not welcome her. After quitting a bakery job due to a painful finger injury accident, Munson decided to finally start her comics company, Plot Twist Publishing, and was also hired by the Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, running their leadership program.....8-17

While auditing classes at UNLV and learning more about Asian history, Munson heard about the department’s “Neon Pacific” podcast and made friends with the people there. She would eventually go on to create her own podcast, “Bruha Baddies,” inspired by the reclaiming of negative terms, that became a listener-led project that even her mom listens to. Munson discusses some of her other activism and how she has moved through different spaces, advocating for certain people. She also goes into the other cool careers she has dabbled into such as Muay Thai kickboxing.....7-25

Diving into her life in Las Vegas, she talks about how it has changed, the different art communities she has seen, and describes what Guam is like for those unfamiliar. Munson discusses the Filipino culture, both positive and negative aspects, that are deeply ingrained in her, and also the food that she still cherishes. In terms of discrimination, she mentions experiencing more forms of discrimination from others in the Filipino community rather than outside communities, and describes how that has affected her.....25-33

Munson touches on a wide range of topics from what made her interested in cartooning to her activism, the most important issues to her, and how she sees her AAPI identity. Expounding on the model minority myth, she talks about how her own existence has been a radical call against it. She also describes her relationship with the Girl Scouts, teaching comics to young girls before the pandemic. While wrapping up, Munson touches on the Filipino American Student Association and her message to all the lonely people who may be unsure and struggling.....34-43



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Today is November 30, 2021. This is Vanessa Concepcion. I'm here with Cecilia Winchell and Stefani Evans and Jean Munson.

Jean, if you could please spell your first and last name for the record.

First name Jean, J-E-A-N. Last name Munson, M-U-N-S-O-N.

Thank you. We're just going to start off by talking about your childhood, as far back as you can go even if it's your grandparents and stuff like that.

I grew up in Guam, eighteen years of my life. I was in a northern part of Guam. The north of Guam is mostly Filipino, in the villages of Yigo and Dededo. My family—having moved from the Philippines in 1986, at the tail end of Marcos' reign—they moved to Guam to build a better life, but not quite the United States. There was a shortage of nurses and my dad was the first to go, who was on route for citizenship. He was there, and he was the first male nurse at the hospital there, and he faced a lot of discrimination as well. My mom followed suit afterwards in—he probably went there around 1983-84—so, around '86, probably, and they had me when they bought their house. So, yes, I spent my whole life there.

It's a Catholic country, Guam is. Everything of the norm is being Catholic. It's very, very conservative, very familial. I think I am who I am today because of that environment.

Coming to the United States, it had been different, not in a hard transition. We were exposed to a lot of American pop culture and dressing well and wearing western clothes or whatever. It was very, very Americanized. But the components of always including even new people in your life, like family, immediately, has been an advantage to living here in the United States. Because my culture makes me, in the presence of a room, very disarming, and I can credit that to having grown up in Guam. It's not guarded. With a lot of my colleagues here in the

United States, I would say, because of that little cultural value or cultural response, it has made me agitate a few encounters here in Las Vegas alone.



Jan Michael Pilario, brother, and Jean Munson on their front lawn

When I think about my family, particularly being nurses, that was a sense of liberation for them, and when I was an undergrad here, I was like, *Ah, everyone is going into that route; we don't have to live like our parents.* But I did not realize the amount of privilege I actually had in order to make a decision outside of the imposed narrative of being a nurse. So I had to check myself, which I did, at the New Leadership Nevada program in terms of conversations about privilege.

For my parents—in context of them having been both nurses—my dad's parents, to give more context to them, they were trying to clean up his life in trying to make him a nurse because he was into drugs. He was in gangs and stuff. I like to think—well, I don't like to think—but I think that a lot of his delinquency surrounded having lived under the Marcos era. How can you

have fun under a dictatorship? His context is his dad worked seven days a week for a dairy company.

Interesting story about my grandfather is that he actually aspired to be a lawyer. He stole away on a ship to be a house slave. He came from Cebu onto a ship in order to become a lawyer. He ended up getting a job as kind of a houseboy at a richer Filipino's house. He met my grandmother who was sewing. She was kind of a maid who sewed. He was significantly older than her, and she was probably married off at sixteen. Her first husband died, and then they got together, and they had four kids together and moved to Manila.

When I think in context of never having met my grandfather, I can see traits trickle in from both of them. My grandmother is very strong-willed. She worked on and off as an entrepreneur, which is something I do as an adult. My grandfather, who never became a lawyer, cared a lot about silent advocacy and intellectualism, which I care about as well. Even when my father's generation thinks they've let go of those certain values, I feel them permeate in my life.

Then on my mother's side, they lived in a province, and they were well taken care of because my grandfather. He is the namesake of a long line president Laurel out there, and he got a good job as, kind of like the chief of police. There is a different term for being the police of the *barangay*, which is the township there. He had been a long-term police. He took it very seriously. He was very much about justice. He dedicated his life to his job.

When we talk about ACAB, a lot of my activist friends now, it's very hard for me to really express that because my grandfather was very much part of a justice system, and his neck was always on the line. His family never knew if he was going to come home, and he died when my mom was two years old in Guam. I feel like she's been trying to fulfill his legacy a long time in terms of helping people. His wife, who is my grandmother, was a pig farmer.

When I think about all four of these people who I've met, or not met, very briefly in my young life, I feel that their upbringing is still impacting me today. I mean, we could joke around, and perhaps it's past lives or whatnot, but I feel that I am a culmination of people who had big dreams, but because of a class struggle, they never got there. It's very open-ended for me because I get to do all four components: I'm an entrepreneur; I care about social justice and advocacy; I work a lot, like them.

But, yes, my parents felt that nursing would be an entrance to white-collar life, and it worked out for them. They've spent, each of them, probably a little under or over forty-plus years in nursing, and it's been very rewarding for them, taxing on their bodies, like a lot of people within that field. Yes, that's that on my background.

I do want to touch upon the Catholicism part. I've always had a Jesus complex. I am all about self-flagellation and humility, and it's only recently in the last two or three years, I was like, okay, give myself a break. I used to think a lot as a kid if I suffered, it must have meant that someone on the other side of the world is having a good day, and that is worth the expense of my suffering.

Here's an example of how deep the Jesus complex was for me. I would say it still informs my activism. There is an Honor Society in our all-girls' school that I went to, and everybody who was at the top of the class just cheated. I was your class clown. I was just like, whatever, I'm just getting by, trying to do an assignment. Homework was my thing. Testing was the worst. They were just getting a ton of accolades, and I just felt that disparity there. I hated it, but I was like, whatever, I'll be complicit, I won't say anything.

I met at the time, just really a great ring of educators at this high school who always pushed my existential button, and I was like, what if I did something about this? At some point I

served as intel to take down all those cheaters. When the National Honor Society walked around with their candles, and this slew of girls did not get in and were outraged and had their parents' intention their privilege to get seats in the National Honor Society, they didn't know how they were caught.

You know what? You can call me a nark, but I call it justice. I think their lives are better for it. They've gone on to do things that they actually wanted to do instead of being the good Catholic schoolgirl who gets the good grades without an aim or a goal or a redirection. I still credit myself for that, and I think that has paved the way for a lot of my gotcha moments that people don't always value, but I think maybe they'll figure it out in the end.

I came to Las Vegas, and I will tell you my first day on campus, coming to UNLV because my brother went to school here, and Filipinos are all about affordability, residency and so forth. I came to UNLV. The first day, when I was asking for directions where a classroom was, a faculty member called me stupid because the classroom was behind me. It was at the Architecture Building, I'll say that. What happened with that particular moment was like, if I am ever in a position of power, do I respond to somebody this way? I am thankful for that moment because these things stick to me. I don't operate much of my life without being intentional.

I'm going back to high school for a bit. Even when I was bullied as a freshman, when I became student class president, I made a speech in the auditorium that if any senior picked on you, come to me. Seniors were kind of mad because they were like, damn, that's part of the systemic hazing that we do; why did you offer that? I was like, some cycles are meant to be broken. It's funny to reflect about that now, but it's really who I am.



Senior year of high school, next to a prop for Songfest while serving as class president and burnt out

Going through undergrad, I wanted to be a history teacher. Then I realized I enrolled into the wrong department. I was supposed to enroll in the education department, but I was in the College of Liberal Arts, studying history. I tried to minor in secondary education; it didn't really work out because I was like, I'm doing teacher observations for free. As a student who held three jobs, it just didn't seem realistic for me. I just stuck to history, and I specialized in women's history. All my professors were mostly female and radicalized me.

When I was graduating, I was invited by Dr. Joanne Goodwin to apply for the New Leadership Nevada program. Now, I don't know what it was, but I loved her classes, and I was like, okay, I'll give it a shot. This was at the time during the recession when there were no jobs, and especially people really pooped on liberal arts majors, and so, safe to say, I was doomed. I went through this program, and I met, for a week, women who were on unconventional paths of

their careers. I was like, wait a minute, this is the best kept secret, because when you're going through your undergrad, if you're trying to smash that into four years, it's almost like there is this promise that your life will be perfect, and it's not true. Actually, there are a whole bunch of components that still need to factor into your adult life that teach you things that you don't expect. I said, okay.

I graduated in 2009. Recession. I went through this leadership program, and then I finally took the leap, because I gave myself permission to during this program, to be an artist. I worked a string of retail and food jobs, and I would never apologize for taking a day off as an artist to do murals, to do illustrations, to take classes, to even go to another state. Because I was a minimum-wage worker, I got a scholarship to go to a cartooning program for the summer in Vermont. I thought to myself, if I did not work this minimum-wage job, I wouldn't have gone here scotch free.

When people shit on minimum-wage jobs, there's still a lot of value you can gain from that. Things I learned on the job that informed my business and my activism now? One, I do not want to treat employees this way. Two, how do you train people to actually elevate their lives? Three, the power dynamic: Is this worth staying in, or worth changing, or worth quitting? I was able to assess those things. I was given that toolkit because of the leadership program intervention in my life. I felt like the possibilities were endless because I had a clear distinction between the career that I wanted and working these crappy jobs.

Even at those crappy jobs where I was bullied, I was bullied a lot in those jobs because they told me, "Why is a college graduate working these jobs?" That was important because in this entire decade of my twenties and working working-class jobs, I realized issues of accessibility. They don't know better in terms of responding people because they have not had

the tools to critically analyze this crappy environment, and so I didn't hold it against them. I responded, much of it, with humor and kindness. A lot of them are fans of my art today, funny that is, right? I was just like, maybe they were really mean to me to protect me in some form. But what a turnaround in terms of being fans.



Munson, pictured with other members of FASA while serving as historian and head coach of their intramural men's basketball team

Another component that is not talked about in my life story is that right before graduating, that chunk of four years was so difficult. I was actually kicked out of my house for interracial dating. I married the guy. Unfortunately, he is linked to me forever. I dated him when I was eighteen. His name is Coy Munson. Love him. I remember it like yesterday. I was so scared to go to the Filipino American Student Association because I just felt like, nobody knows where Guam is; nobody wants to hang out with me. My brother would always flake on me in going to these meetings. I went to a basketball game with his friend and former roommate, Coy,

and we got along really great. He helped me in math and stuff. I started identifying as a feminist, so I paid my own way on these dates. My parents found out I was dating him, and they were very frustrated that he was a White person, and they had a lot of hopes that I would end up with somebody who is Filipino.



Jean and Coy Munson on a date at Jimmy John's

The semester starts out...I was abused horrifically for dating him, and I was kicked out three times. The first time I stayed at a Motel 6, and I had enough savings from my bookstore job to try to spend a few nights there to survive because I was so Catholic, I was not going to cohabit with a man. That was the first time I got kicked out.

The second time I got kicked out, I had watched one Harry Potter movie. I don't know which number it was. They went through my mail, and they saw that I was also paying for dates. They dragged me and my hair down the hallway when I came home, saying that he was using me

for money. I was kicked out. I threw all my stuff in a trash bag, and I sat on the sidewalk until my friend picked me up. Even then I was like, I am too Catholic to go live with him. My friend was like, “Dude, you have nobody else.” I lived with him, and I found three jobs the next day to sustain myself through my undergrad.

I think in my junior year, I had a single-life female moment where my roommate who looked like me stole my rent money, and she just bounced, and so I had to move back home one more time. I thought to myself, well, I’m kind of living under this roof an honest life, or whatever. I realized my dad, who has a lot of unhealed parts, he continued to oppress me for just being a very liberated person. I come and go, as a Filipino woman, in and out of the house. The last time he tried to hit me, my brother intervened, and he kicked both of us out. Now my brother lived in his car at Sunset parking lot. He is three years older than me. He is on the opposite spectrum of persona from me. I am an extrovert and he is an introvert.

No apologies. I think it’s so real to tell such a story because a lot of the time we shroud conflict resolution and discourse that could potentially happen and resort to violence a lot in our culture. I think that’s so important to why I do what I do because mental health is such a huge component for me and the missing puzzle piece in a lot of our families. I am thankful to have survived those moments, those physical moments, but I carry a lot of that baggage in apology even into the work that I do. Which is like, I’ll put on amazing events, put out great publications, and I’ll just be like, it was all for nothing. I may have seemed like I have my life together but, at the same time, I am still working on that piece in my cultural and in my response to these things.

I had a great time in my twenties in terms of doing art things. I will tell you as I fully committed to being a cartoonist, I wrote my first four-part series called *Pushover*, which is about being a student leader and sucking at it. Being at an all-girls school was fun, but also traumatic at

the same time because of the heavy gendered expectation on us to be perfect in every which way; spiritually, physically, the long list. I was senior class president, and it was the worst because I...they don't tell you about this when being a leader, when you promise idealistic things, people hold you accountable. People hold you accountable, and they held me accountable, and so it really tore me apart in the way that I was always trying to please.

I wrote that four-part series hoping that it would be kind of a manga because I was into that. That was my breakout series into comics. A lot of middle-aged men who read comics were the heavy demographic at the time, they wrote me letters of how it had helped them navigate suicidal ideations. I was not prepared for that response. I've done something that I did not set out to do.



Covers for Munson's four-part comic series, Pushover

I was like, okay, let me explore this. Let me continue to build community on the career that I want, and so I would invite—this is a pattern in my life. I invite myself into spaces, and so I would go to the comic shop, and I'd try to make friends there. Being a young Filipino woman, they sexualized me in their response to me. They're not like trying to touch me or anything. But in a way where it's like, "Oh, don't take her seriously" attitude.

Two encounters I will never forget, and I think they're important on mentioning. The first one is I wanted to go to a drawing meet-up to network. It was at night at this comic shop. I go in, and it's dead silence. I'm like, uh, I thought we were interacting here. They don't acknowledge me at all at this table. I was still in the vengeful state of mind, and I was like, you know what? I'm just going to draw, and I'm going to take all these guys down someday in my life. I was like, goal number one of my mid-twenties.

The second one was when I was trying to sell my comics because somebody said I could, I go to this comic shop, also, and they're like, "Oh, what are you, a high schooler trying to sell coloring books?" I was in my mid-twenties. I was like, gosh, I'm being discriminated against here; I'm going to put this in my back pocket to take them down, too. That's the Catholicism evolved, so it's been "Vegasfied."

Anyway, I continue to just hammer out really weekly comics, a bit on my blog and whatnot, and build a reputation. Every time people came to my comic convention table, I was like, how do we grow? How do we make this better? All this stuff was very, "Let's do this; let's take them down." I guess that was my illusion: Let's take them down.

One of my food jobs where I managed a bakery—I think this was towards my later twenties—I got a finger injury at the slicer. I still get PTSD when I'm in a sandwich shop. I'm like, oh, that sound. Two of my fingers on my left hand get chopped. It was the same day they

put their newly graduated high-school son as my manager. I'm like, I am such a self-motivated person, I could be paid nine dollars an hour, shitty hours, and I'd still find a reason to motivate myself to show up to work. I loved it. I ate for free. I got hurt, and it could have been patched up if somebody on the job knew first aid. I was the only one who knew first aid. Hands really bleed a lot, so I was bleeding everywhere in this management office. I was like, I'm so alone. It dawned on me how alone and how much I carried. My one...oh, I still feel so sorry for him. He just watched me, stunned. He had a learning...it was hard for him cognitively in learning, and he really attached himself to me, and he didn't know how to help me, and so I'm bleeding out.

Guess who shows up? My parents. My parents, who are nurses, show up, not even somebody on the job, not my store owners, and so we're at Concentra. My mom is like, "Now is the time to quit that job." I was like, "No, no, I'm in it for the team." I'm so head deep in team mentality, family business or whatever.

Two days after getting patched up and scolded by my parents for working this working-class job, they asked me to come back to work. I think about all my regulars, and I use that as a mechanism to convince myself to stay. But I thought, if they think that I'm going to come back after two days of not full recovery, then they're really not in it for me; they're not in my corner. Oh my god, I cry at every job I quit. I was like, "I'm quitting." It's funny because my regulars saw me, and they're like, "What the hell happened to your hand?" Safe to say, none of those people even go back there. I worked at that bakery, but I also was carrying a lot of emotional labor. People would come in, tell me their problems, feel better leaving with a cookie or whatnot. I loved it because I felt like a lot of stories came in. I was an artist, so I was just like, okay, let me use this as a comic story, and whatnot.

I was like, I'm unemployed; what am I going to do? I was like, okay, now is the time to start this comics company. When Facebook was hot, I was like, anybody who wants to start a comic book company meet me at Blueberry Hill on Flamingo and Pecos. Six other dudes who still are linked with me today showed up. I was like, wow, I had no plan, here we go. We came together. We were the first comics collective—well, not the first comics collective, but we were the first to put out yearly publications as an anthology and led by an Asian woman. Whenever people saw us, and even when they tried to test me at meetings, I felt so authentic. I was like, “No, you can't lie to my face; no, cut that shit.” I was like, wow, I'm finally the boss that I had dreamed of being for a long time.



Right: the founding of Plot Twist Publishing at Blueberry Hill Diner on Sandhill and Flamingo in 2016
Left: the Plot Twist team in 2017

I was doing that for a month and a half, and then I was hired by the Women's Research Institute of Nevada because Dr. Goodwin, since 2009, had been watching my whole life and career. I think she remembered this promise I made to her as I left on the last day of that leadership program. I was like, “Hey, if you ever need help, you can give me a call.” I realize, wow, she put out the bat signal, and I showed up. I did both; I worked as an artist, and I worked for campus running that leadership program.

In running that leadership program, I cried every time at the conference because I'm like, wow, I understand the trajectory that these students will have meeting all these people, humanizing the career experience, postgrad, college. It's not terrifying, but it's just nobody sharing stories about what happens next or what you can do or how it's okay to fail and reinvent something. I was like, wow, I'm really living the dream, making comics and doing a thing.

I really elevated in terms of people wanting to learn comics because not everyone can take time off or work a minimum-wage job to get that scholarship to Vermont. I did pop-up comic shops. The company, Plot Twist, started in 2016. I started doing pop-up comic shops in 2017 through the Girl Scouts circuit, and it just went viral. I was popping up everywhere, and people were like, "How does Jean have the time or energy?" I just loved what I did. I was helping Girl Scouts get badges in comics. Also, school Career Days started to invite me a lot. That's when I was like, wow, I don't actually have to be a teacher of CCSD [Clark County School District] to inform people on this.

At some point, I was like, I think I'm going to jump ship at WRIN [Women's Research Institute of Nevada]. We fell on tough times at WRIN for a bit, and I was like, oh, I've got to get out of here; it's getting rough. I applied for a fellowship at the art department. I didn't get that fellowship, but the chair at the time really liked my CV, and he really liked that I was a very grassroots instructor, and so he invited me to teach at the art department. I was like, "Can I teach comics?" And he was like, "I guess."

I have helped a number of students produce sequential work, and I still mentor them to this day to finish jobs. Something in our Asian culture in terms of talking about a career in the arts is that it's not sustainable. What they're not teaching on the other side of that coin, or component, is that it is actually sustainable if you practice advocacy for yourself. I've helped

students create contracts for jobs, ask for payment up front, which is very hard, and not a lot of art programs teach that, and that's why we became faculty. I'm just kidding.

But, yes, it's been a wild ride. One of my favorite things that has happened for me was building the *Queens Comic Anthology*—two things, *Queens Comic Anthology*, which was during 2018 when we did the Women's March, and I remember distinctly drawing the design for that. I wasn't chosen yet, but I was drawing it on January first. I was like, "I'm going to try and get my design to be the thing that they choose. The guys always joke around, and I realize, well, maybe masculine spaces aren't always a space for me because at some point a girl's got to be tired in terms of trying to get through the type of art I want to make, and so they're like, well, whatever, whatever. I actually won in the *Rolling Stone* cover date, and I was just like, wow, if I had listened to those fools during our drawing meet-up, which is something I had just tolerated, I was like, then I wouldn't get to half of where I am. That was huge for me. We put out a comic anthology, too, that collected stories on feminist fiction or non-fiction at the time, and it was just great.

At the time I was spinning out of control. I was like, oh my gosh, too many people want me to do these things, and I have not yet put out another concentrated series like *Pushover*, and so that's where I am. I am creating *Stretchmarks*, which talks a lot about body discourse especially in this Filipina's life. My mom, who is kind of a fan of my work, is like, "Come on, I can wait to see it." I'm like, "I don't know if you want to see this." It's kind of rough.

Speaking of body discourse, I was also auditing classes around 2018-2019 in the Asian American Studies Department at UNLV. I'll tell you this: I had no desire to get a higher degree. I was like, I'm good; I want to prove that you can do something with your bachelor's. I even remember being in the elevator with the deans when WRIN was still housed at Class and

Building Complex. They were like, “What are you...are you trying to get a master’s or a PhD?” I was like, “No, not for me.” And they just looked surprised. I was like, wow, when you work so long in working-class environments, you don’t really care about the class dynamic of a certain space, and so I was like, whatever.

I would hang out there. I would audit classes. I made friends with Dr. Constancio Arnaldo, Dr. Mark Padoongpatt, and they would let me sit in these classes, and I would always disappear during midterms and finals, and they would be like, “Where the hell is that lady?” I was like, “I don’t go to school here.” I learned a lot. I got to deepen a history arm that I’ve always been curious about because when I was specializing in women’s history, they were not texts that I was exposed to.

Then they were talking about building “Neon Pacific,” which is the podcast that’s supposed to come out of that department, and so I had further reasons to hang out. Thanks, WRIN, for the flexibility. I made friends with the people there, and we built—well, we didn’t build. I would hang out with Rose, Rosalina Trinidad, longer than anybody after we would have meetings. She would come back to my office at WRIN, and we would have a lot of these conversations. I realized she is one of many Filipino students who find my office on the fifth floor who just dispense a ton of emotion, a ton of frustration, and start crying.

I have never felt qualified enough to be handling these things, and so I thought, well, it would be really cool if we designed kind of a heart-to-heart candid conversation. We are both high-energy people, so we built “Bruha Baddies.” We didn’t have a name for it at the time, but I was like, I want it to be kind of like “Vagina Monologues” where we claim a negative term that is gendered. My mom called me “bruha” a lot because of never combing my hair. We built it, and it got viral for its beauty series.



Cofounder Rosalina Trinidad (left) and guest Nicola Espinosa (middle) who replaced Rosalina as a regular cohost

At the time, too, when we think about Filipino movements, we think that they're naturally led by the state of California, or New York and whatnot. When "Bruha Baddies" continued to rise in popularity as a Vegas-based podcast, people were trying to compete a little bit, and we're like, we're not in competition; we're just two girls trying to be funny.

It was a great experience because we are also a listener-led podcast, so people who listen to...can we talk about this? Can we talk about my cousin's suicide? Can we talk about my nontraditional path? Usually, we're okay with it. In season two, we invited more of a queer voice and lens, and so we write that into the cast.

It's been really great. Sometimes I can't believe that I still have this podcast because podcasts are a lot of work, if anyone knows. It's tracking guests, making the thing, slicing it and whatnot. It's kind of an ordeal. I taught everything to myself, and I promised myself I would do it all for free. I was like, I'm going to use my iPhone 6 Plus that's so old. I am going to find free programs on the Internet to slice and cut this. I used a song from my friend's metal band. It's amazing, the letters that come in, in terms of feeling like these are things they want to talk about, or it gave people space to also talk about those things. I am very grateful. It just blows my mind because I do a lot of things. I don't know how I also fit in that podcast. It's just wild. It's just really wild. I think the most wild part is that my mom listens to it. These are not conversations...my mom will probably cut me off if I really stretch these conversations, but because it is preserved in time on an episode airing, she is able to fully immerse herself and grow from it. She does catch herself calling a cousin "fat" or something, but, at the same time, we can talk about it without it taking a harmful route or being immediately offensive.

I wish I really knew the trajectory of "Bruha Baddies." I take note of the downloads or whatnot. But, at the same time, I'm just kind of like, wow, it lives.

Right now, I literally think I am living the dream. I'm not a millionaire. I remember once I went into a classroom, and they were like, "Are you Snoop Dog rich? Do you have a limousine?" I was like, "How do we know that Snoop Dog doesn't want what I have, the kind of richness that I have in my life?" That kid was stunned. I was like, okay, if you can always beat a punchline ahead of a kid, then you'll make it in life. That's what I told myself, like, ah, I got him.

But, yes, sometimes I can't believe; I can't believe I am this Asian woman who has led a comics' movement. I wanted to expand that literary part of me, and so I helped cofound—I love bringing in other people—I helped cofound the Comics and Zine Festival that we held at the

center in 2019, and it's a continuing meet-up to build zines, which is publications for the people and by the people. It's wild to think that my name, too, is... Oh, if Jean's name is attached to it, it's going to get done.

I'm trying to use that type of energy to funnel into my work, and I'm confident I will. I'm trying to get out of this Filipino mindset of self-deprecation, not owning my narrative. I think those are dangerous. It's ways of self-destructing. Even my own wellness, I'm big on blood pressure because they don't tell you that all that sodium and stress in combination is sent to self-destruct us, and so I like to have conversations about that, too. I'll tell you that even if I say I'm living the dream, there will always be a time when people try to censure me. I have been in spaces, especially Filipino spaces, where people have censured me, three that really stick out in my life.

I remember, one, I went to a town hall. It was a wellness Filipino town hall. They were like, "Oh, we need to do this, and it's the young people who don't really know how to take care of themselves." I was sitting back there, knowing I wasn't invited, I raised my hand, and I was like, "Can we also talk about mental health? Can we also talk about ways of alternatively building cultural dishes using healthy ingredients?" They're like, "That's too much work." *Blah, blah.* "Who is that kid over there?" I was like, oh, they found me out, but I'm sticking it. I networked. People don't follow through with these phone calls. But I also saw other young activists, and I was like, "Hey, just so you know, they might bring you out. You never heard it from me." But I continued to be a person that they decompressed with, and they're doing phenomenal. Anyway, that's number one.

Number two. At the time, FASA [Filipino American Student Association] was no longer a thing on campus when I first came back to work here, and so I was reached out by a high

school student who was trying to build a FASA equivalent at his high school. I was like, wow, I don't know how you got my contact information. Sure, let's talk about it. Then they linked up with a national organization that continued to use teen labor for their events. I was like, oh no, here we go again, using young people to chew up, spit out for causes that we think is a collective good, but really is a mechanism for exploitation. I showed up to this meeting, actually boba across the street, and there's already tension because the students wanted to do something, but everything that they wanted to do for each other, there was another layer of labor that this national organization kept putting on. I sat there and I was like, "Let's just hear from everybody." You could already tell the national organization was contentious with me, like, who is this woman? I was like, "Honestly, I'm just a community member. I'm not affiliated with anybody. I'm a non-danger." You could tell it got real tense, and I was able to mediate. I was like, all right, let's do this again, this is fun.

We were going to build another town hall because they actually like that discourse. Because I did not join that national organization, they put in a group chat that I was a danger to the youth. It was really... They had publicly ostracized the one kid who advocated for me. I feel so bad for him. He is probably never, ever going to join another Filipino movement, and I feel terrible for him. I was like, "Look, at this point, you can walk away. You don't have to die on the cross for me." He is just like, "But you're a good person, and people need to know." I was like, "You know what? People always come back around. People always don't claim me, but when it's election season, they're like, where is that people-power Jean? I'll be fine." They continued to demonize me, and then they invited me into spaces, and then they continued to demonize me...and I get it because they can't hold me. Guilt is a culturally practiced mechanism for us to do things, so I get it. I get why it happened.

The third thing is I was trying to get on the Asian American and Pacific Islander County Commission. I did not get in. I got an indirect rejection letter saying that my application was “cute.” I wish I would have brought my cover letter of why I wanted to join. I get why I didn’t get on it because at the end radical Jean says, “I just want to be part of this commission to minimize or reduce or eliminate harm between communities in collective help.” I know that’s where it was because the layer is accountability. I ended up getting kicked out. I didn’t get in.

That could have been a moment of like, well, that was it; screw this community; screw this Asian community. No, it wasn’t for me. I love and continue to love my community. I was like, I’ll show up to open forum. I remember going in. Everyone is well dressed. I know that when I was a student activist, I was just as loud as I am. I used to do history presentations. One of the people there who is deemed highly and well known, she comes up to me, she kind of senses who I am, and she comes in to hug me, but she kind of chokeholds me a little bit. I’m like, okay, so I tear off of her.

Anyway, I sit in open forum, and I’m sitting and taking furious notes. I was like, I’ve been in enough organizations, I’ve been a leader a long time to assess when really we’re not talking about anything going to get done, we’re just talking to talk, we’re just taking up space. They were talking about designing a survey and creating research around the Nevada Asian community and Pacific Islander community. I was like, is anybody a researcher here? I’m not. I’m an artist, but I work at a research institute, so...I still have a value of that being distinguished.

Anyway, I’d go in. I’d use some of the findings I would find at WRIN about disparities happening to Asian women and poor communities. I’m like, “Well, are these components you plan to include in that survey?” Everyone is shocked. But here is a strategy of how to win people

over. You compliment first before you critique. I was like, “Wow, congratulations, everyone. For a commission this size, you should congratulate yourself on the representation of the amount of women leaders here.” They’re like, well, okay, this lady, we’re going to like this lady in open forum. Then I was like, “Speaking of that, let’s talk about the minorities within the minorities.” It was a one-two punch. They were like, okay. Everyone gives me their business cards, but, again, nobody ever has follow-through.

I go to the next meeting, and I’m omitted from the minutes. The co-chair commissioner, who is Margie Gonzales, notices, and she includes me. But I was like, ah, this is the theme of my life. That’s why I’m thankful that I get to sit here and tell that story because people need to know the ins and the outs and the unconventional path to get to the life you want and to provide the life for others who deserve the life that they need. It just makes me laugh now. I was angry. The Catholic in me was trying to find retribution. I’ve always been kind of a fighter, physically fighting. In my twenties, with the time that I had in stretching a twenty-four day, I also learned Muay Thai kickboxing. I taught kickboxing as well. I’m all about shouting motivational things and getting through a mindset.



Munson’s first kickboxing class in 2016 at Revolution Fitness Evolved

I've gotten to dabble in a lot of cool careers. I've also had parents not want their kids to talk to me because I'm an artist. It's really strange because if this narrative proves anything, I am a very welcoming person, but my transparency, the candidness is disarming, which is, again, that culture value I was talking about, but also people hold onto never giving themselves the permission to really change the landscape of our Vegas Valley area, the state alone, when you talk about Filipinos being the largest Asian community here, minority here. What we're not talking about is if you actually mobilize that power, what would that look like?

Again, talking about follow-through, that commission was having a tough time getting it off the ground, and so guess who gives me a phone call to come do it? I worked with Octavio Posada, good friend, great guy, not of our community; he is Latino. He did a lot of the legwork and analysis. I helped piece together some of the histories to consolidate it in that area borrowing from other resources, and we created the first commission report. They were like, "It's too expensive to print." I was like, "Come on, you need a physical copy." For Christmas last year, I printed me and Octavio a copy of what we've done, and I said, "Hey, it may be a PDF file lost in the ether, but at least you and I who put time labor even while having COVID in 2020, it exists; it's real; and this will be a piece for the next gen and so forth."

Just coming full circle, I just feel like the possibilities are endless for me because I can see the good and the bad, and I've experienced the bad and the good. But I'm still standing now and able to laugh and mourn and own this story.

Thank you. I want to talk more about Vegas since we're on the topic of Vegas. Can you speak on how you feel about Vegas and how you've watched it change in the time you've been here?

Vegas is—and you’ll hear this a lot—it’s a rapidly changing community. They always say, “Well, they don’t have this and they don’t have that, and they don’t do this and they don’t do that.” When you hear that—I think it was Roberta Sabbath who was in the English department. She’s like, “When you hear that it is a call to pioneer, to invent, to innovate.” I was like, oh my god, you’re right. They always talk about this being a young city and whatnot. We literally have more power here because people come and go in this twenty-four-hour city and think the conveniences don’t make me want to do more, and that is a narrative worth changing because this city is so moldable. Something else can be built in its place. I’ve seen tons of people build an art community here outside of comics, and they’re not credited because either they’re not sitting down to reflect, celebrate or make known, or that other outside entities outside the state of Nevada want this culture, these movements not to be known because this state, this city have immense power in my experience, and it’s easy to meet people of immense power, and it’s easy to keep in touch with those people.

In your arts’ journey, could you speak a little more on the community that you keep referencing, and how you’ve built that community over the years?

Before I came onboard, I was experiencing different factions. There was the anime and manga community, which were people who were in high school trying to dabble in, but either outgrew the movement or only operated in their small circles. In the comics community, there were mostly middle-aged White men who built it and protected it, and so coming in as a bridge for both entities, it was very hard because no one would really take me seriously. Even when I was like, “No, we’re really going to do this,” they were like, “No.” Now all those people who discounted the fact that I envisioned that are the people who want to work with me most or the people that were able to create accessible resources through Plot Twist Publishing, my company,

in order to lift their work and to amplify their work. Plot Twist Publishing isn't just a print company. It has been a space for me to also mentor, to build collaborations, to give people their first art jobs in order to build their own careers. There was another print company, and he was a gatekeeper. He would change prices on other creatives depending on whether he liked you. He would delay their jobs for the convention, so then people were out of their livelihoods. A promise that we do at Plot Twist is fast turnaround and to really care for it because I, at the driver's wheel, have experienced these unaccountable business practices.

I think we've really changed the landscape of it. Sometimes it's so big where I'm like, I can't even wield it. I just want to go back to being that solo artist of just me, just me and my cause. But when you've built a large movement, it will continue to move even without you, and so we have to be okay with that.

I also wanted to go back to...you were in Guam for eighteen years. Could you describe what Guam was like for people that don't know?

Yes. Guam is kind of like a more rural Hawaii. Everything is thirty minutes away. The fastest speed limit you can drive is thirty-five. When I was on the freeway, I was sweating bullets. I don't know how to get through this. Then I'm there speeding through.

It's very Catholic. It comprises of... Chamorro is very native there. They are from Chuuk. Chuukese who are there who face a lot of discrimination not just for the color of their skin but, also, for their migration, from moving to Hawaii, Palau, and Rota. There is Filipinos there who filled a lot of job shortages at the time. Sometimes there's rivalry. In the south is where a lot of Chamorros live; in the north, a lot of Filipinos reside there; and in the middle Tumon area is a hodgepodge mix of Koreans, Chinese, every Asian imaginable found in Guam, and they frequent there because it is much cheaper to experience American goods and

experiences or travel or tourism in Guam without having to compromise a dish. You're not going to always eat all-American food. You can dabble in something that is from your culture back to the CPK that's there.

There are only two malls. There is one road that takes you from the start of the island to the end, which is called Marine Drive. You can't go to church or the mall without seeing someone you know, and that used to annoy me. I'm like, dammit, you're going to have to go say hi to them.

If I had a million dollars, I would still go back there because it's amazing. It taught me Catholicism. It taught me the important of service. We had a number of service hours to fulfill. I was part of the church choir. I was a program manager before I even had this career. We didn't have a recreational system or a nice sidewalk, so I used to create a lot of little clubs in my neighborhood. We knew every neighbor. We talked with every neighbor. When there were power outages that would last months at a time, at the longest three or four months, we'd potluck every night, we sang in the dark, it didn't bother us much.

That's why when COVID happened, I was like, oh, it's just another power outage. It didn't bother me so much when it started because I was like, oh, it's just another blip in time of having to regroup and recenter.

Guam was the best thing that's ever happened to me and that experience. What a landscape. In the north where I lived, in that neighborhood, right behind us was this golf course, and we'd never go there. I feel like my family never felt like they could afford it. In 2018, I had gone back. I was like, I'm going to teach all the comic workshops, and I was going to also share my comic book there. I was like, the one place I want to go is that golf course. I've never been there, and it is a movie-rich, lavish golf course. I even saw my house as I was passing by it. It

was built specifically for Japanese businessmen, even the architecture. I was like, wow, what a class distinction here. We're on lower land in this neighborhood versus this golf course. It's just a beautiful place. It is highly occupied now by the military. Best kept secret, right? Now people know how great it is to live in Guam. It used to be so wonderful to never pay tax. I could buy a fifty-cent snack and not pay tax. I remember when I had visited in 2018, I was like, wow, I forgot this feeling, this convenience. That's Guam in essence.

Could you tell us about any Filipino or Guam traditions that you may practice currently or that you have practiced?

Going back to that Guam component, when I was in my elementary school stages, they taught Chamorro in the classroom, which is the native language as well as the name of the culture. They didn't have funding at the time, so there was this chunk of time in middle school where we did not learn Chamorro. That's kind of a lost language, and then it's picked back up and being taught in schools.

Something that is still Filipino in terms of taking off my slippers at the door. That's a tough question because I feel like "Bruha Baddies" has really designed me to deconstruct and to throw away. Holidays still matter to me a great deal. When my parents divorced, going to mandatory church on Sundays became no longer of importance, and that is still something I have upheld. What else do I also do that's insanely Filipino? I still engage in gossip and *tsismis*, and when I catch myself talking too much smack, I'm like, wait a minute, we don't like this. But I feel like that is culturally embedded because we have not learned how to celebrate each other. It's much easier to critique and drive attention away. Those are main things that are still with me culturally.

I think that something that is not talked about in our culture, too, is leading into being a matriarch. If you meet Filipino women, they're usually driving the family, but don't ever really explicitly say they are. As my mom who is retiring and leaving, she is saying to me, "I'm going to sign up for a Costco card so you can take care of the men in our family." I was like, "No, I'm trying to sign up." But I get the dynamic. I still do that. Food is such a huge, huge part of it. Paying for outside family's food. I could be broke that week, but I still do it as a courtesy, as being hospitable. It's so important to me that everyone is fed. We just recently had an event, and I was like, "Did everyone eat?" Someone was like, "Quit being the Filipino aunt out here." I was like, "I just want to be sure everyone is eating." I think that deep inclusion of others being fed and cared for is something I still do, culturally, that's Filipino.

On that topic of food, are there specific foods that you still eat that are either Guamanian or Filipino?

Yes. On a good day when I can't get to the—I can't cook Chamorro food because, of course, that's not really my ethnicity—I opt for Hawaii food because I need rice. I will say if it's takeout, I'm usually eating either Filipino food, Chamorro, or Hawaiian food during the week. It's part of who I am. Something I love because it was so taboo, and fat shaming is a lot of part of getting to eat what you eat, but I love *turon*. I love probably all Filipino sweets, and halo-halo and just mashing that up, if we're going overboard, if my mom is like, "Hey..." There's a lot of dishes that I didn't like growing up, and I'm glad my parents force me to eat them. I think about *dinugan* and knowing what it means in English, which is goat's blood or whatever, you're like, ooh. But when you actually taste it, you'll be like, this is amazing; this is good. Kare-kare, this oxtail is too hard to maneuver. I was actually like, wow. It's actually a delicacy. You can't just get this anywhere. I remember I asked my mom to make kare-kare, and she's like, "It took

seventy dollars to make this.” I was like, “I am so sorry.” I also know the dangers of eating this food. As much as I love it, as much as it is comfort food, the amount of sodium and salt to preserve this so it lasts a week to eat is going to kill me. I’m like, all right, just eat all of it today and not save it for tomorrow. I still love and engage with Filipino food. It’s hard sometimes to go get food because I always find myself in an encounter where a Filipino is either discriminating against me for not pronouncing it right or whatnot. You’re just like, look, I was just trying to eat here. It’s the only thing that really brings me home in terms of eating and engaging. I also judge friends when they don’t eat it. When I have friends that snub these Asian dishes, I’m like, no, we’re really not friends. If you think this is trash, we’ll be acquaintances.

Throughout your story you’ve mentioned discrimination in different ways. Could you tell us a story if you’ve ever been discriminated for being Filipino, or if your family has been affected especially with the rise of anti-Asian violence in recent years.

Right. I’ll say this. I think because I have proposed a strong brand, people really don’t mess with me, which is interesting. I joke and I’m like, white supremacy, I really can’t remember a time when my husband’s relatives have come for me. I was just like, for real. I think it’s really my demeanor. When I started out living here in the first five or ten years and interracial dating, it was difficult because people, before I even spoke, thought, oh, they’re together because he’s White. Then they’d hear me speak, and they’re like, shit, she sounds far more intellectual than him. I’ve been to a dinner party, and they were making jokes about eating dog and stuff. If I heard that prior to, I’d be really shrouded, but I was just like, what? Come for me.

I think geographically Vegas has given me room to be a very liberated person because my liberation looks far more conservative than someone on the Strip in terms of sexuality or even volume or gesture and stuff. They seem far more...I’m always at a conservative standpoint

against somebody who really frequents the Strip. That was difficult because that brought conversations. I would talk to my boyfriend, now husband, “Yo, if you’re not going to do something about it, I can hightail out of here.” Asian fetishization has been just something I have always lived with. Being a bigger Filipino, it doesn’t happen as frequently probably for other people.

But when we were living in Guam, the naval ships came, and a lot of my peers in high school, all-girls school, would go to the malls and try to flirt or fawn with these guys, and some of them took some of my classmates and just...it really fucked them up. They would come back to school, and you could tell something was off. I was just like, this is some fucked up stuff, so I don’t want any part of this. But I get it. You see a Catholic schoolgirl, Asian at the mall. Even if you were walking in that uniform at the mall without a naval ship, you would get catcalled, and you’d worry about if you’d make it to your car. That was very hard. I guess I used religion as a layer of, no, I’m not a sexualized being; get away from me. It was really great.

My husband was very engaged with FASA. He went to the meetings with me. We coached the men’s basketball team in FASA together. He is fully immersed and engaged. Sometimes I’m like, “You’re probably more Filipino than me at this point.” With these moments, it helps when people who see these kinds of discriminations are willing to team up with you. I guess that’s a tough question, too, because I’ve always been a person to lead out of the charge, and I forget how heavy that can be. Sometimes I’m always in that fight mindset of aggressive responses that I’m like, oh man, it’s been a while.

To me, in this state, I’ve probably received more discrimination from other Filipinos than I have from other White folks, which is unfortunate, because other Filipinos are always trying to regulate my ass. That goes for my mom or even people that I meet here at the university or even

at the dog park. They're like, "Are you Filipino? Well, you don't speak it. You're a disgrace to your parents." This is just on the job, and I'd just be crying. I'm just like, wow, that was heavy; wow, I'm really just...I've even made a little zine about all the times somebody has discounted me. Even in those times, I still really love being Filipino because I recheck in with myself. I'm like, that doesn't define me, and there's probably more people like me than they want me to realize. Unfortunately, that inner self-hate exists, and I feel like other folks outside of our culture catch wind or see that perpetuation and amplify it because it's already a bruised spot that we just keep peeling back as an open wound and whatnot. That's the toughest part is to be hanged out to dry by other Filipino folks. I'm like, but we're in this together. No? Okay.

I'm just going to turn it to Cecilia and Stefani if they have any follow-up questions for you.

CW: I have a couple. What made you interested in cartooning?

Okay, favorite question ever. I am interested in cartooning. My parents worked a lot, both forty hours. My dad, graveyard; my mom in the daytime. My favorite parent was the television. Sometimes when they yanked me off the television, I read a lot. I read a lot of Archie comics. I engaged in a lot of Sailor Moon. Even though you look at those things as though they're going to rot my mind, they taught me a lot about friendship and value and imagined worlds. I thought, wow, these really became a safe space for me to become a human being without limits. At the time I created *Pushover*, I was diagnosed with textbook depression, and I was like, I just don't know how...that was before processing and self-care was a trend. I was like, I guess I'll draw on paper. At that time, I really felt like I failed people. Even when it was hard to be an undergrad, I would frequent comic bookshop across the street, and I constantly was like, this is a safe place every time. I really wanted to engage in creating that exact same safe place, and that's why I really immersed myself in comics.

I remember being in those history classes, and I'm like, I can't memorize all these dates, these names; I'm not going to make it as a history major. I remember buying a laptop and not remembering anything for a semester. Then I would draw during lectures, and I started to ace my papers and tests. I was like, oh, this is how I cognitively learn; I have to be drawing. I can look at a drawing and be like, oh okay, this happened; that movement happened. Drawing is embedded into my life, and that's why I have dedicated so much of it.

CW: Could you also tell us a bit about your activism?

Okay, my activism. I found activism in my junior year of high school. Our theology teacher, Mr. Michael Campos, who is actually a philosophy professor, priest dropout—he was trying to be a monk or a priest—he taught at our all-girls school, and he would always let us do these existential papers. One time he told us to go watch the “Vagina Monologues,” which is so taboo. I don't think it was covered by administration. We go to the university to watch it, and I'm watching all these narratives of women oppressed who are outside of my reality. I thought, holy crap, I am not only privileged, but, at the same time, there is a huge need. I started identifying as a feminist. I frequented the class in terms of conversations, like, how do we change this? I remember being at the mall, and my friends are like, “Take a chill pill, man. Stop trying to talk about social justice. Shut up already, Jean.” I'm like, “No, guys, we really have to do something.” Even in FASA at the time, I would go to these meetings, and they didn't even like being Filipino. They were there to either date or smoke or drink. I was like, what? How can you guys not enjoy being Filipino?

I was a history major, and then I started to build historical presentations to do in those things, and people were like, “Shut up already, Jean.” It was always, “Shut up already, Jean.” I remember being at a party. Of course, there was underage drinking. We were probably all in our

twenties. We are in this hotel, and they put all these underage people in this closet, and we're like all scrunched up. Somebody turned to me—also, I was like, I don't even like hanging out with these people; I don't know why I'm here. This person turns to me. She's like, "Hey, I remember you're the one who does the presentations. I've really learned a lot from you." And I was like, wow, this is all not for nothing; I'm going to continue being an activist; this is worth it. Then we were out of that hotel party.

I credit a lot of my activism to very engaging teachers who I still keep in touch with to this day. It's funny, too, because they'll be like, "Man, you were the kid who never wanted to do anything, and now you're living a hybrid of all of us in your life." Yes, that's really where it stems from was Michael Campos, my fake theology teacher.

CW: What are some of the most important issues to you?

Well, some of the most important issues to me is body dysphoria. I'm really tired of people telling other Filipinos, or any Asian, I guess, that they're fat when clearly, they aren't. I hate that as a point of conversation, but I think it's more than just the layer of, "You're fat." That's a projection, or there's something deeply there worth investigating. That's number one is the sense of body dysphoria and how that can also lead to self-harm; that's huge for me, huge.

The second thing that's super important to me is a celebration of identity. I think it's very hard, especially talking about AAPI hate, I feel that people come in and out of it because they're like, yes, and no because of the danger. I'll tell you about in the podcast world, when the incident happened in Georgia, for two months there was a huge podcast campaign to amplify, to talk about it, to have discourse, to have these panels, and then the months following it fizzled out. I was like, wow, we didn't create sustainability to care for ourselves. Again, it goes back to, in the

celebration of identity, how do we stay in long term? I think activists today, even myself, find it very hard to keep going if we don't also interject joy.

I don't like to list a lot, but my last and third one is art representation in comic literacy, or just literacy around that. Comic literacy—for people who can't read large volumes or probably have undiagnosed neuro diversions—comics help bridge that with the visual, the speed, and the dialogue. There are a lot of working parts there that intersect that I try to do in my own work.

Those are the top three. I don't like to take a lot of crusades just because I've led a lot of crusades where I'm like, whoa, how did I get here? I helped found a girls' reaching radical levels of success, and at first I was like, I just want to build a nerdy little girl conference with middle schoolers. I was like, great, great, this is how it's going to be. Then it spun into this huge summer conference. Then they wanted to build it into a nonprofit or an LLC. I was like, whoa, how did we get here? Then they were kicking off members. I was not, this is not what is supposed to happen. I try to be very...consolidate my interests just so they receive a hundred percent love rather than just...I really hate performance in half-ass activism because it's actually more harmful, and you lose more membership that way. Just my two cents on that.

CW: Connected to your second point, how do you view your AAPI identity?

Oh man. If there was a number past a hundred percent, a million percent, that I connect with my AAPI identity, but I also realize and have to check myself that not everyone is where I am, and that's not a point of class, it's just a point of logic. I started the show with Rosalina Trinidad, but I realized it was probably dangerous for her to be on the show because I was open, plus, I'm probably five or ten years older than her. I was like, yeah man, I'm past this stuff; let's talk about it. For her, I think subconsciously she was probably worried that this could get back to her family. That's where sometimes I have to always check the gauge of my identity in terms of the

way that I relay or even expect people...I remember in FASA and being like, "Quit being nurses. Live your life. Live your dream." It's just like, that was their dream. Who was I to impose? I just wanted people to live like me because I was on a different spectrum of liberation. That's why I'm always cautious of the way that I communicate, like radicalism. I really, really try to practice calling it in than calling it out because 2018, even when I did that design, I was militant to a point where it was counterproductive. No one even cared about the women's movement at the end of 2018 because I was just too militant, and I probably wanted to get into fistfights with my male colleagues, and really, they were trying to help me. But I was so deep into Internet rhetoric and activism that I no longer could see the ally ship was being served on a platter for me, and that was dangerous. I try to minimize my Internet exposure, as they say.

SE: One of the questions we usually ask is about the model minority myth. Can you talk about how, perhaps, that has applied to you?

Yes. Oh boy, here we go, let me just show you my bank statement. I think this model minority myth is just a reality in terms of you'll have very successful Asians who've had unconventional paths like myself. They're like, "I didn't do it." Or their parents won't acknowledge, or their parents still talk crap about them. That is me. For a long time, people are like, "Oh, Jean Munson, oh, she was in this play, great," or, "She did this thing." My parents would be always aloof to it because I was never going to be a nurse. I was never going to be on the track for six figures or wearing scrubs or being on the timeline that they have created for me. But I didn't get the memo. I constantly live with that dissatisfaction of being a model minority myth, and it's not just about income, it's just the sense of falling in line, being silent, being grateful, being complicit. You can still be all those things, but you can always keep an eye out for a potential microaggression, or even when you engage in a microaggression, too. As another Filipino, am I

also discriminating against other Filipinos? Even if you could demonize the other side, other party, other entity, at some point you, too, can adopt really oppressive ways of relating. Sometimes when I'm almost complicit into model minority in the sense of like, well, this is my CV and these are the things I do, then that kind of creates a barrier in you relating with somebody who needs help in terms of an immigration resource. Even when I was doing the research for the commission, I was realizing, even though, hey, cool, Filipinos get three pages or something, I was realizing having lived on Guam that Pacific Islanders were not getting much of an investigative part on the survey.

Model minority myth is an enticing piece of candy because it would be like, wow, y'all really made it, but we did not all make it. Actually, our complicitness in this is disappearing, the other factions that will never, ever get a spotlight, or will never, ever get spoken of or engaged. When I was talking about Hmong on the panel that I was on for the library, I met a Hmong faculty, miraculously enough, right? I wouldn't even know about Hmong if not for this Asian literature class that made me read a novel. That in itself, that's the trajectory from 2009 to making a friend in 2021 who is Hmong. When I think about model minority myth, I always think of it as a piece of candy, the cure all, end all, be all. At the same time, there is still work to be done every time, but not work to radically, violently hurt your peers. I'm just not a component of sustaining oppressive systems that way, but I will say this for the record that I've definitely dabbled in that as somebody who actually physically fights.

I'll just tell you this joke. I always tell my husband, "They are so lucky that I wasn't born a man because I would be swinging out here." And he's like, "I think you will still be swinging out here."

SE: You talked about the Girl Scouts. Please elaborate on your relationship with the Girl Scouts and how long that's lasted.

How the Girl Scouts' thing started... In 2017, I was part of a nerdy girl—not comic group, but they were just a nerdy girl cosplay group. They were called VAGINA, Very Awesome Girls into Nerdy Activities. Sometimes at the end of the meeting, they would be like, “Hey, someone want to volunteer for this?” Someone was like, “Hey, anyone teach art lessons?” I was like, “I don't teach art lessons. I teach comics.” They're like, “Sure, you can do that.”

I go to this school on the southwest side, and I crush it; I crush teaching. Other parents were like, “We've got to tell other parents.” I wasn't officially part of the Girl Scouts corporate, their home office. I was driving every which way to do that. No matter how small or large the class was, I was showing up. I would always tell these girls, “When is the next time you're going to see yourself on a book?” And they were just like, *boom*, tell me more, lady. I was like, okay. “Draw us as we look right now.” That was revolutionary in itself.

Then home office wanted to do it at comic shops. Then the comic shop contacted me to link up with them. For probably all of 2018, I was cut a fat check every time to teach them, and I would give them *Queens*, too. These poor parents, I was radicalizing their kids, too. I was like, “Here's some radical comics that are subtly feminist.”

It was such a fun thing, too. I remember my last class there was a student who was like, “I know you.” And I was like, “Do I know you?” She was like, “You also teach that kickboxing class at the gym. What is it you don't do?” And I was like, “What is it you can't do?” Sometimes I would even have a co-teacher that was a guy. The guys would always be like, “I know comics.” I let them teach first, and you can see the girls just bored out of their minds. Then I would come in. I love making it stand-up comedy hour and just really asking them to draw without inhibition

because something that has happened in this time I'm teaching, mental health has been such a blockage. From this indispensable piece of paper, they can pour their life into it. It's a lot of, also, positive affirmations and coaching to get them to do it. It's been really great. I've had the pleasure of getting mail from people in Girl Scouts and whatnot.

The two coordinators who were getting overwhelmed, I think they found new jobs outside of Girl Scouts. The last class I taught for Girl Scouts was at the start of the pandemic. I didn't think any Girl Scouts would show up to that online class, but it was probably the first of its time over Zoom, and we ran it. My mom recorded me. She actually got to watch me teach a class and whatnot. That was the last of that. But sometimes they hold Girls Scouts meetings inside the charter schools, and those teachers are still in touch with me to invite me again. But in terms of Girls Scouts in the home office, I would say that tie is severed for now.

SE: Can you tell us about FASA?

The Filipino American Student Association, which has resurged, in the last one or two years, it was the student organization. It was very strong in the '90s here at UNLV. In the early '90s, they had always over a hundred members. It was funny, too, because regionally it made me realize that Filipinos are very different. The Chicago Filipinos are very different from California Filipinos. The two Guam Filipinos, we tried to relate with others. How they engaged in hypey music and hookah, all this stuff, before social media. I think social media was really introduced in 2006 to our crowd. They would do things. They would stay together. They would hone in on the study groups and all study Bio 189 and hope they don't fail and stuff. I would just be like, "Anybody want to read this textbook with me?" I was the only history major.

It was a good time. Something that kept the group together was our out-of-state trips. We used to do Friendship Games, and we would practice those ridiculous things and try to be

champions of it. Then there were Sports Fests, which is a number of different sports that we were self-coached on to achieve. I remember I went to join the basketball team in FASA, and it was mostly males, and they were like, no, you're a dumb bitch; you're not going to be...but I was also an officer at the time. I think I was historian or secretary. I leveraged my way onto the basketball team as their coach. They would be so mean to me at the MPE here. They just wouldn't listen to me. I challenged one of them to a one-on-one, and I beat one of them. They're like, okay, I guess this lady can teach us, but she still doesn't know basketball.

I remember I borrowed a bunch of books to study the plays. I studied in my car before I got into the MPE. I was trying not to cry into these playbooks. I was like, "They fucking hate me. I hate being here." But when I was in there, the kind of other team captain, he's just like, "You've got to be a bitch, Jean. You've got to do it. You've got to be mean. That's the only way they'll respect you." I had to be mean. But I think at the time I was dating Coy, my old boyfriend, he is just like, "Do you need help?" And I was like, "I do. I fricking hate them." He was the good cop, and I was the bad cop. We actually were the first to take them to the playoffs for the first time for UNLV. To this day, those guys still call me and Coy coach. It was a phenomenal experience.

Man, I remember the second year we did it, we brought...his name is Brendon, and he is a tall White guy who doesn't really play basketball well. They disqualified him, saying that he was too tall, and he's like, "I don't even play basketball well." He came all that way, and he was still there for his team and whatnot. I remember we'd do huddles and stuff, and it was just an amazing dynamic, and it was just such an evolution from being called a bitch to coach.

SE: If there is one thing that you would like for people to know about Guam, what would it be?

I would say Guam will continue to be a secret historical spot. It's twofold in terms of it being secret. It's a secret because the people who are indigenous want to preserve just how beautiful and wonderful that place is, but it's not a secret to the larger U.S., I mean in terms of pop culture, but because it is like a landing spot for so much of foreign relations to happen. There was even a scare that Guam would get bombed, but it's just like so much of other Asian countries are invested in Guam as a geographic location. I remember when they were saying North Korea was going to bomb, and I was worried about my friends. They were like, "That's something that the U.S. is trying to scare you guys on because there is so many South Koreans who frequent here as a brethren. What's going on in the U.S.?" I was like, you know what? God, the way this news is even served in Guam is very different. Probably it lacks bias versus American news media, which is very interesting. I'm like, who is lying to me now? That's the last say I'll say about Guam is that it is more important than people realize.

SE: During the Afghanistan pullout, there was talk about putting refugees in Guam.

Yes, yes.

SE: How often does that happen?

I don't think that happens often. Because there is a larger military presence since I lived there, and even now the existing locations of the military presence there now, they have the best parts of the land. They have the best beaches, just everything. It makes sense why they would have a dominant decision in terms of that particular move and whatnot. But, again, like any indigenous land, how will they navigate the allocation of resources, is an issue. A really good friend who does great coverage on this; it's called "Master Random" podcast, is Boo Ada. He is, I think, also an engineer on a military base, and he is Chamorro. He really tries to preserve and continue discourse on that, but I don't think enough people are talking about it.

SE: Thank you.

No. Thank you.

SE: Is there anything you wanted to talk about that we didn't ask you?

My last super-duper message is that I'm Jean Munson. I'm a living artist who is Asian, probably Filipino. It can be done. Using fear as a mechanism not to do something is a waste of your time because on the other side of that door is the inventor we all need. If you need a sign for permission, it's now, and I'll meet you on the other side.

VC: Lastly, why is it important to collect stories such as yours?

I think that the world can be incredibly lonely. I think that there are many people in this world who will find ways to create puppets out of each other, and so when somebody speaks candidly, owns their narrative, even the painful moments without censorship, it is important to see that your pain also brings value and a sense of redirection that you need. I would say that we're all tied together in this large, large fabric, and there's no time to build holes, only sew us together.

All: Thank you.

Yea, we did it.

[End of recorded interview]