

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS LEE

An Oral History Conducted by Stefani Evans and Cecilia Winchell

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

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

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University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020

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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



Judicial photo in court, 2022

“I knew I wanted something more exciting in my life. I love this idea of righting wrongs and justice...” - Chief Judge Chris Lee

Chief Judge Chris Lee, North Las Vegas Municipal Court, Dept 1, was born in South Korea in 1974 and in 1977 immigrated as a toddler with his parents and older brother to Las Vegas. His mother, a pharmacist, and his father, an acupuncturist, intentionally chose Nevada because it was the first state to fully license acupuncturists. After working as casino dealers the senior Lees eventually passed their respective board exams and became licensed to practice their professions.

In this interview, Lee talks about how his childhood dream of doing justice and righting wrongs led to his interest in the Federal Bureau of Investigation, law school, his first legal position as a prosecutor with the Clark County District Attorney’s Office, and becoming Deputy Nevada Secretary of State for two years under Secretary of State Ross Miller. It also inspired his successful runs for election in 2008 and 2014 as Chief Judge for North Las Vegas Justice Court before he was appointed to his current position as Chief Judge of the North Las Vegas Municipal Court, Department 1. In addition, the impulse to do more and “prove [his] Americanness” also

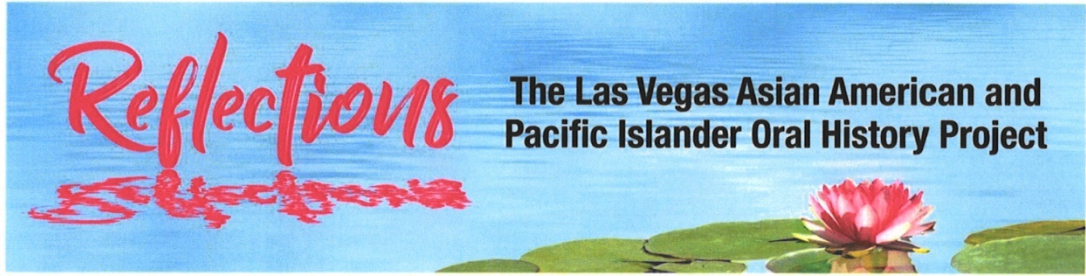
led Lee, in his mid-thirties, to join the U.S. Air Force, where Major Lee continues to practice law as an attorney in the Air Force Reserves with the [Judge Advocate Officer] JAG Corps.

Lee also reflects on his bond with his older brother, which grew through several housing moves and their joint experiences as the only Asians in their Las Vegas Catholic schools and the only Americans among their relatives when they spent summers in Korea. He also discusses his Asian identity and describes the ways his now multi-generational family, even after forty-five years in Southern Nevada, continues to honor Korean cultural traditions through food, celebrations, rituals, respect for elders, and child raising.

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Good morning. Today's date is December 14th, 2021. This is Cecilia Winchell. I am here with Stefani Evans and Judge Chris Lee.

May I ask you to please spell your name for the record?

Sure. First is C-H-R-I-S. Last is L-E-E.

Thank you. To start off, we would like to ask about your childhood; where you grew up; your parents; your grandparents.

I was born in South Korea in 1974. In April of 1977, my family—so my parents and my older brother, who is a couple of years older than me—immigrated to the United States, and we came straight from Korea to Las Vegas. It's kind of a unique set of circumstances. My father was a practicing acupuncturist in Korea, and Nevada was one of the first states in the country to license it as a profession, and so this is one of the reasons why we came here. My mom was a pharmacist in Korea. We came here straight to Las Vegas.

My childhood from what I remember was relatively normal. Having come at two and a half, I was obviously speaking only Korean at the time, but I was so young, I don't really remember the transition. English is all I knew to speak, and as I got older, I would try to reincorporate Korean language into my vocabulary. But as far as that language transition, I don't really remember it at all, but I don't think it's unique to me. My parents weren't great at English. Both of their board exams—so acupuncture for my father and medicine for my mother to continue as a pharmacist—obviously those board exams are all in English, and so they couldn't immediately take either of those exams. But I say that in the context of—because you're asking about my childhood, I guess, and not necessarily about my parents' experiences here—in that they weren't really able to teach my brother and I the English language either, so we just kind of picked it up being immersed here. TV, radio, music, and then eventually when we got into

school, obviously. That's my early childhood. I don't know how far in my age you wanted me to go.

It's okay. I will go back and ask more, and we do like to hear about your parents' experiences as well. I wanted to just really quickly ask about your grandparents and if you knew anything about them.

Yes. Not a whole lot, to be frank. By the time I was born, on my father's side, my grandfather had passed away, and my grandmother was still alive. When we immigrated here to the United States back in the late '70s, communicating internationally wasn't all that easy, and so I didn't really have a relationship with them growing up, necessarily. Now, later in my life towards elementary school, my parents sent me back for the summers, my brother and I, and I got to meet my grandmother and my relatives and cousins that I never knew existed. I remember it being kind of odd. They were familial to me, and I think a little bit of that is the Korean culture, like if you're family, you're family. But for me having grown up in America, not knowing who these people are and not really understanding everything that they're saying, I was like, well, okay, nice to meet you guys. That's my grandparents on my father's side.

On my mother's side, my grandfather on my mother's side had already passed before I was born, and it was just my mom's mother, but she passed away, I don't remember the exact year, but shortly after we immigrated to the United States. On my mother's side, I really didn't have a relationship with either of my grandparents on that side.

Where in Korea were you born?

I was born in the port city of Incheon, famous MacArthur landing area. That's where I was born.

Do you know the specific reason why your parents wanted to leave Korea?

I do. It's always a mixed bag. The overreaching desire is to, of course, have a better life than what they had there and have more opportunities. I don't think it's all that unique for my parents to have established professions to where they were and still feel like America could provide more for them and their kids, obviously. They were in the pipeline and had applied for...back then, if memory serves me right, there were a limited number of immigrant visas given to certain professionals from certain countries around the world, and they had applied. Their immigration visa had actually been accepted, and they had turned it down two times. From the stories that my parents tell me, you only have three chances. By the third time, if you turn it down a third time, you are out of the pipeline, and you're foregoing the immigrant visa. On the third time, they finally decided, *Okay, let's do it*, and then we came here.

Obviously, you were young, but do you know what were the hardest things for your parents to leave behind?

This is like a therapy session. I like this. My father is the oldest son in his family. Oldest child, but oldest son in his family, so he had a tremendous sense of responsibility in leaving his family and coming to the United States, and so he left almost everything behind for them. My mother similarly felt like she was, I don't know, in some sense abandoning her family in coming here; she also did that. As the story goes, my folks even had to borrow money for the plane tickets to come to the United States. Of course, getting here and not knowing the language all that well, not being able to immediately roll into their professions, they took whatever job they could. That's one thing that I appreciate about this town, is that it provided a lot of opportunities for folks like my parents who didn't know the language or didn't really understand the culture to get a job. My parents worked every job that they could. My father was bussing tables. My mother was running

keno numbers at the local casinos. They eventually worked their way up to become dealers. It's just fortunate that you can do all those jobs, and all you need to know is how to count to twenty-one—I guess twenty-two sometimes—and you can make a decent living, and they did that for a while. But that was probably the most difficult thing for them: coming to a country, not knowing the language, having to do different types of jobs—jobs that, certainly, they were nowhere accustomed to doing—but doing it because they had no other choice. And they just had to learn, like everything, from how to get an apartment, how to get your driver's license, and how to get around, and things like that.

My brother was two years older, so he was five, and so he was already grade-school age. It took us a while to get settled down. I think in one year, I can't remember, when you look back at various school photos, within two years he had gone to four or five different schools just having us moved around temporarily from apartment to a fourplex to wherever. I remember our family being pretty excited about having gotten into government subsidized apartment complex for us at that time. That was a big upgrade from where we were living. Just encapsulating that whole transition for them, to answer your question, was probably the most difficult.

Then you obviously grew up in Vegas. How was that experience? What do you remember about that?

My brother having the brunt, having to move schools and learn the language. He's five, and so he's really only speaking in Korean, and he's having to legitimately learn a new language as opposed to me, two and a half, three, just kind of picking it up naturally. But shortly after, my folks were able to settle down. They were fortunate to have more established professions, although it was monumentally difficult to learn a language, take the board exams, and then pass and all that stuff. Once they were able to do that, my parents were able to give my brother and I a



Fig. 1: Color view of St. Anne Catholic Church located at 1901 South Maryland Parkway and East Saint Louis Avenue.
Citation: cwu0002. Culinary Workers Union Local 226 Las Vegas, Nevada Photographs, approximately 1950-2006. PH-00382. Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Las Vegas, Nevada.
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little bit more leeway as far as the grind of that first-generation immigrant experience. Like many immigrant families, their main focus was on education. For what little money they had in the beginning, they thought it was important to try to get us the best education that they could. I don't know what percentage of their income that it was, but I know it was a lot. They sent both my brother and I to Catholic school here in town. My brother and I both went to Saint Anne's Catholic School. For whatever folks want to read into it, there weren't a whole lot of Asians in general in the late

'70s in Vegas, but certainly going to a private Catholic school, there were even less—a lot of times just my brother and I. As Catholics, there

are some Filipino families, and that was kind of a familiar-ish face. In terms of growing up in Las Vegas, at least during the school years, it was my brother and I living the Asian American experience in Las Vegas together.

The other side note of that is obviously a lot of immigrant families find churches and religious organizations to find community and a sense of camaraderie and culture. But the other part of going to a private Catholic school, my parents were actually Catholic way before even coming to the United States; their families raised them Catholic. Even in Korea back then, the percentage of Korean Catholics is much smaller [compared] to Korean Protestants, and so the

other Protestant churches in town were places where Koreans can come and gather; but us being Catholics, we kind of missed out on that experience as well, so it was more so my brother and I.

Did you experience any kind of culture shock coming here?

I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing, but having been so young, I really don't remember that. Obviously, at some point in my life, I realized that I'm different ethnically than the people around me. I don't want to sound ungrateful about my experience, and maybe I'm going to sound overly grateful, is that having been at that small private Catholic school, I went to school with the same about thirty kids for those eight years of my life, and so I think in a lot of ways I was insulated to whatever culture shock there may have been. We all did the typical things that other first-generation immigrants do. When it came time for my parents to be able to apply for citizenship, I remember sitting down at the table, going over the "Pledge of Allegiance" with them and things like that. In that sense, I knew culturally we were different. But as far as a culture shock, I don't know if I necessarily experienced that, at least not that I can remember right now.

You mentioned that you and your brother went back to Korea over summers.

That's probably where I had more culture shock, yes.

I was going to ask; how did you experience that?

Yes, it was crazy. I think it was around fourth grade or so, they had saved enough money for us to go back to Korea for the summer. I remember thinking when I got there—this is going to be a crazy thought, and maybe I shouldn't share it, but I will—I remember thinking, *Wow, did I really come to a different country, or are my parents just tricking me by having their friends play different roles around me?* I couldn't comprehend having been now in a whole other country so far away and have so many people look like me and my parents. I was like, *This can't be real.*

That guy looks a lot like one of our parents' friends, so maybe they're just fooling around or something. I think that was one of the first things I had experienced getting there, and what I alluded to earlier about just meeting family for the first time. In the United States, for absolute immediate family, just my parents, my brother and I. All my parents' siblings were in Korea and stayed in Korea. They've never come. That was certainly different.

The food, the smells, my winter was summer, so the heat and the humidity, and riding the bus. I remember I got there, and riding the bus was a common thing. I got on the bus, and I had never felt that type of motion before, and so I got really motion sick, and I remember throwing up out the windows at the time.

SE: *Welcome to Korea?*

Yes, right, exactly. I'm like, *What is this?* My parents were really diligent about trying to instill a lot of the Korean culture in us at that point in our lives, and so we went back a handful of times. Each time there was a little bit of a theme. They'd have these established summer camps for Koreans living abroad, like us, or children of Koreans living abroad. They would come back and have cultural camps and language camps and things like that.

I remember one particular time. This particular summer program ended with—I think the YMCA might have put it on—it ended with each kid staying at least a night or two with a host family to get total immersion and stuff. This is my first time away from home in a strange country, not understanding what the heck people are saying, and it's just my brother and I. I was referring to it being my brother and I throughout our school experience and everything. I was adamant to the people, even at that young age, I was like, "Hey, sirs, ma'ams, I'm not staying anywhere without my brother." And they're like, "Okay, sure." I look back at it now, and they're totally being like, *Well, this is part of the learning process; we're going to tell them yes, but*

we're going to split them up later. Sure enough, they split me up later, and it was traumatic. My poor host family, they're like, *Oh, this kid is crying; he says he needs his brother.* Then the program made the mistake of getting my host family the contact information for my brother's host family, and they both started getting into it because neither of them wanted to give up. They're like, *Well, why don't you have him come over here if that's what he wants?* Then, "No." It was a whole thing. Anyway, those were some of my memories of culture shock during those summers in Korea.

How long did you go to Catholic school?

Then I went to Bishop Gorman, so from first through twelfth grade. I took a little break for four years for college. I went to non-Catholic school for college. I went to Occidental College in L.A. Oh, you're from southern California, certainly. Not by design. Then I went to law school at Santa Clara University, which is a Catholic Jesuit school.

What made you decide to pursue law?

I really wanted to be an FBI agent, is what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted something more exciting in my life. I love this idea of righting wrongs and justice, and this is me as a high schooler. That was my desire. But I wasn't the best student. I got good grades and stuff, but this brother that I refer to, he was absolutely brilliant at everything, even back then. He graduated in 1990, and I graduated in 1992, high school I mean. Back then, even from this small town of Las Vegas, he got accepted into Yale and Stanford and all these places, and he ended up going to Stanford. I guess that's my—this is like a therapy session—it's my way of saying at that point I didn't have so much direction in what I wanted to do. A good way of looking at it is that I was super open-minded. A bad way is I was just lost, and I had no idea what I wanted to do.

My second year at Occidental College, I took a public policy class, and the professor there really opened my eyes to not only public policy, like city planning, but also the intersection of government and politics and how things get done, and the class just interested me immensely. He was a great professor. Then he hooked me up with an internship over the summer at Asian Pacific American Legal Center, which was in Los Angeles, and that's when I really started thinking about law more; but even then, I still was thinking that the FBI was still something that I would like to do down the road. In fact, at graduation at law school, in the process I was in, I was done with Phase One testing with the FBI and was on my way to Phase Two.

I spent the summer between college and law school in Korea at a more formal Korean language program, and that was during the day. Then I took odd jobs. These college towns in Korea have all these shops and restaurants, and I picked up odd jobs. I worked at a pizza parlor in front of one of the Korean universities just to really get immersed in the language and learn and have a good experience. Then I knew after the summer I was going to go to law school, I really wanted to take a year off, but my parents were insistent. They were like, "If you take a year off, you may never go back." I just wanted to do everything I possibly could and cram into those summer months, and I think I did almost do everything.

But then when I came back to law school—and the reason I'm bringing it up at this point is that that language was a huge benefit for me in the application process with the FBI at the time, having a secondary language and then a law degree as well. I didn't realize it at the time, I think, but it just turns out that the FBI likes, desires these advanced degrees whether it's accounting or forensics or law; those seem to be the biggest feeders. That's how I fell into law.

Obviously, you're not in the FBI, at least not that I know of.

I can't tell you. No, I'm kidding.

What happened afterwards?

I grew up in Las Vegas, small town, not a whole lot of diversity or culture back then. Then I go to Los Angeles. Eagle Rock now is some sort of great hipster town, but back then it wasn't. It's still nestled in between Glendale and Pasadena. You hop on the Two [California State Route 2], and you're right down in the heart of Koreatown in downtown L.A. I loved that whole experience. I'm thinking, *Oh, my gosh, this is crazy; this is a whole new world.* Then I go to law school up in Santa Clara where there are pockets. I go to the mall there in Santa Clara—I can't remember what it's called right now [perhaps Westfield Valley Fair mall]—and almost everyone was Asian there. I'm like, *What the heck is going on here?* I was getting exposed to all this great diversity and culture, and I never thought I'd ever come back to Las Vegas because now I see what the world has to offer. But my parents were still living here, obviously, and they were still working.

The FBI was still something I wanted to pursue, but I also put applications here in town because I spent one summer externing for a local judge here, and so I still had some ties here. One of the applications I put in for was the District Attorney's Office here, because it's kind of in line with being an FBI agent and righting wrongs and the justice and all that stuff. Lo and behold, I got accepted.

I don't know if it was specifically my parents, but I know that there was some sort of analogy about a bird in a hand and not; and so, lo and behold, I'm back here, back home in Las Vegas, starting at the DA's Office. I was there for seven years and then two years at the Secretary of State's Office as the Deputy Secretary of State of Nevada, and then I got elected to a judicial seat and all that good stuff. That's why I'm still here. Then I met my wife here. We had kids. My parents are still here. There's no getting out now.

What was it like working at the DA's Office, and what did you do?

It was great. Oh, my goodness, it was some of the best times of my life, really. The way that office is structured, and it still is to some degree to this day, is that you start off as a law clerk while you're awaiting your bar passage results. We're all still young, we're still students. Not married, no kids, and so it was like being back with just a bunch of friends. I was fortunate enough to have some friends here who had graduated from Gorman, and we had that connection as well.

The office, back then especially—and I can't really speak so much to it right now, but back then—was just such a great learning ground, because in these other offices and bigger metropolitan areas, you won't see maybe the inside of a courtroom for a couple of years. Or if you do, you're stuck doing misdemeanors or traffic cases. But the DA's Office here at that time just exposed me and my other peers to so many great, big cases for us to be able to handle, like doing a jury trial within a year of being there, and being left alone in court, and making deals and negotiations, and them instilling that trust and confidence and faith in us.

Yes, some of the best friendships. I won't oversell it, because I'm pretty sure it happens to a lot of folks who go work in a big office setting, but that's exactly what it was. It's this big corporation law firm or whatever, and we were all in similar stages in our lives at the time, so it was really fun. I was still able to feed that craving that I had, that childhood dream of doing justice and righting wrongs and that kind of stuff.

Then you went to the Secretary of State afterwards?

Yes, I did. In 2006, I'm at the District Attorney's Office. A very good friend of mine, Ross Miller, was elected to Secretary of State. He and I worked at the DA's Office together, too. He had asked me if I would come over and be his Deputy Secretary of State for Southern Nevada. I

never thought I'd leave the DA's Office, really, but that same year was the first year that I ran for office. That is clearly something I never thought I would do, but there was a new justice of the peace, judge position opening up in North Las Vegas. I'm sorry, not new, but there was a position. It was an opportunity—this is kind of cliché, but there were some various organizations in town that thought I would be a good fit for it, encouraging me. I had no idea what I was doing, obviously, but I was young and brash and was like, okay, let's give this a go. Worst case scenario, I guess I still have a job.

I ended up losing that race by...I can't remember the exact number, but it was something small, like a little over two hundred, maybe two hundred, three hundred votes out of, I can't remember how many, thousands. It taught me a lot, and it taught me, at least at the time, a lot about what I didn't want to do, and that was campaign, be a politician, ask for money, any of that stuff.

Then I was just going to live my life out at the DA's Office doing what I like and enjoying the time. When Ross Miller got elected and he asked me, it didn't take me long, but I did have to think about what direction I wanted my career to go. I thought this is maybe going to be one of the few times where I can make that transition from criminal law to anything else, and I thought it was just a tremendous opportunity that was being presented to me. For what it's worth, especially at that age in my life, I was still in my...I'm forty-seven now. That was 2006, fifteen years ago. Forty-seven minus fifteen, thirty-two. Wow, that took a long time to get there. I jumped at the opportunity, and I did that for two years.

Then, even though I said I was never going to do anything close to campaigning, politicking or anything, that same seat that I lost, it became vacant. There was an empty seat. Everyone was like, "Well, you just only lost by two hundred votes. This is an empty seat. Why

not run again?" I was like, "Ugh, I don't know if I have it in me." But then I did and then I got elected. I did that for twelve years.

I think I might be going away from your original question. Is that okay? I did that for twelve years, and really it was great. The Supreme Court of Korea invited me over. I don't know the exact number, but I don't know if there were any other at least elected Korean American to the bench in the country. Partly because a lot of the judicial positions are appointed across the country, and probably, maybe the youngest at the time as well, definitely the first Asian American for the Justice Court bench to get elected that way. Definitely first Korean, obviously, with that, too. It was great for twelve years.

I got reelected once, and that's why I was there for twelve years. Last November, which would have been my third reelection, I ended up getting completely blown out in that race. It was an interesting experience. I had no controversy in my twelve-year career, no discipline, no anything, but I understand sometimes when it's left to elections, things happen. Politics is what it is. No amount of endorsements from...I even got endorsements from both newspapers, and I had all these other groups helping me out, but still it didn't work out.

I was like, okay, I'm going to go out in private practice. This is what I'm going to finally do. This is what I want to do. I'm going to go and pick my own cases. What I was considering doing was helping small business owners, kind of like my dad essentially where it was in his own practice. Having seen the struggles of having your own business, I was like, well, having a lawyer there could really help that.

But then by just chance, the City of North Las Vegas had created a new judicial position, and they appointed me to this, and so that's how I'm here back on the bench.

I don't think I answered your question. Did I?

You did, but I would like to go back a bit. What exactly is Justice of the Peace?

That's a good question. A lot of other jurisdictions around the country don't have all these layers of the judicial system. Here in Nevada, the cities, the municipalities have their Municipal Courts, and then the county boundaries, these townships, have Justices of the Peace, and then the state boundaries have District Court judges, and we're in the Eighth Judicial District Court area that incorporates Clark County. The cities handle all the misdemeanors and below, so any misdemeanor crime from battery to DUIs, domestic violence, all that stuff. But if you are arrested for a felony, that case will initially go to the county court, which is the Justice Court, the Justice of the Peace. Generally, that's what the Justice Court does. Then from there, if the felony case doesn't resolve, then it goes up to District Court, and that's where the jury trials happen and the sentencing to prison and all that stuff happens up at the District Court, so it's kind of that county demarcation.

What do you do in your current position?

That's a good question. I'm what I feel like towards the end of my judicial career. I feel like I've had a lot of good experiences, like the D.A.'s Office, Secretary of State's Office, and having been on the county bench. One of the things that frustrated me a lot at my job was not having necessarily the resources or the ability to stop what I saw every day as the revolving door, especially when it comes to drug and alcohol dependency issues, mental health issues. We weren't really able to—or at least I wasn't able to, I feel, accurately address those issues. Oftentimes, we were just kicking the can down the road, so to speak. We'd arrest the same individuals, say, for a felony drug possession charge. But obviously, there are way more violent cases that we're dealing, and so a standard offer oftentimes for a simple drug possession—obviously, we're not talking about the trafficking level amounts or anything like that or the

sale—is that you get credit for time served, or you end up being ordered to do an eight-hour drug class, and you can even do that online. None of that stuff was really addressing the underlying addiction issues.

In a long winded way, I feel like I've accumulated some amount of experience in the court system—and then combining with that frustration that I've always felt—come here and really gone deep into trying to develop a specialty treatment corps to address those types of issues. The city has been really great in being a tremendous partner in that. I know this is going to sound kind of silly, but they're taking all politics away from it, like everyone is genuinely trying to row in the same direction and get to where we want to be with this treatment corps, and so that's what I'm doing here. We have case managers. We have individuals, for example, if someone comes in listed as a transient, in the past, the court system might have just said, "Okay, you got cited for trespass." How much are you going to sentence somebody on a trespass? They're probably out with it in a day or two, maybe back in front of the same storefront, back in front of the same neighborhood, back in front of the same...and never addressing the issues. Now, just within the handful of months that we've been here, we've been able to create a process to where we tie in homeless services. If need be, we look beyond just the homelessness issue and do an assessment to see if part of the reason they're homeless is because of addiction issues, and if that's the case, we'll release only to a treatment facility. Also, if the issue is mental health, then we refer them for a mental health evaluation. We're trying to really work the process to hopefully get them to the point where they don't re-offend, and then they can live the best versions of their lives. So that's what I do here, in addition to our regular criminal, normal stuff.

I want to touch on something more general, and it's related to a theme that's been popping up. What is your philosophy on law and justice and the judicial system, and how you see yourself fitting into that?

That's a great question. As far as law in general, like I said before, I'm also part of the military justice system, and I've been able to participate in court martials and general law on that side, too. I am an adjunct instructor from time to time over at the College of Southern Nevada teaching criminal law and evidence over there. I feel like having dabbled in different areas of the justice system, like I tell my students, when I go through, like, the Bill of Rights, sure, it has a lot of flaws. Our system does, but it's amazing the amount of rights that we have, and we make sure that people are able to exercise them. I still feel like it's the best justice system in the world that we have, but that's not to say that we can't make improvements to it and make changes to it.

When we go through the Miranda case, where now police officers are required to give the Miranda instructions, and delve deeper into who Miranda was and how that case came about and then having the students realize that that's not the case in every other country. It's the Miranda rights because it's unique to our Supreme Court case of *Miranda*. When I go through that process, I think it gives me a clearer view, or reminds me, of the beauty of our justice system and how good it is. And, maybe on some level, adds to why immigrants from other countries still want to come here.

Thank you for that. Could you also tell us about your involvement with the military justice system?

Like I said, I had this part of me that was thinking about going into the FBI, and I was like, *Well, shoot*. I got on the bench still fairly early. I can't remember what the math was; it was two years after that, so thirty-fourish, thirty-five, whatever. I missed the practice of law and being involved

in what I was doing, and by that point I was getting older in my life, and I was like, *Well, I really want to do more*. Sometimes, especially at the county or the municipal level, sometimes what we do in there can get redundant after a while. I was getting close to the age limit of being able to join the military.

I hope this comes across the [right] way. I think for me and for many immigrants, we don't feel completely American, and sometimes we feel like we need to prove how American we are. If we were sitting around and a Bruce Springsteen song, "Born in the USA," came on, we feel internal pride of being an American, but on some level, I think, it's still...maybe it's more the way that we internalize it, or I internalize it. I still feel like I need to do more to prove my Americanness; and that, combined with my desire to get back into practicing law, it was just a perfect fit. So I was able to join the Air Force and join their [Judge Advocate Officer] JAG [Attorney] Corps and do a lot of cool stuff.



Posing with parents, United States Air Force Commission Officer Training graduation, 2012

This question is actually related to the issue of identity. How strongly connected do you feel to your AAPI identity, and how have you navigated your understanding of it?

I think it's changed a lot maybe within the last ten years or so, and I think some of it has to do with the fact that I had kids of my own. My wife and I met here in 2000, and she was studying abroad, from Korea, at UNLV, and I had just started at the D.A.'s Office. We had met then. But I tell that part of the story to say that my wife is way more Korean than I am. Her entire family and friends are there. She grew up there all the way up until her college years. Then having kids, I think, for better or for worse, it forced us to really start thinking about our culture in the sense of, how do we want to raise our kids in light of our culture and our experiences in life? Having looked through my Asianness, through the lens of how I want my kids' experience to be, or what I'd like them to be, has made me way more acutely aware of it. Growing up, like I said, my brother and I were kind of insulated, having a good time here in Vegas. He is a superstar in everything, not to say...I'm sure he had some hard times. And me being able to ride in the wake of his greatness, it was nice. As an adult and having kids and talking about everything from, *Okay, well, when do we want to introduce them to the Korean language? If we do, how much do we want to push it?*

There are some really great changes. I remember when I went to school, if I had rice wrapped in seaweed, my friends would freak out. They'd go, "What the hell is that? You're eating seaweed." But now my kids take little sushi rolls to school, and they're the most popular kids around. I think there's been a tremendous progression in that sense of my kids' experience here in Las Vegas as an Asian American. Maybe it's a little bit more different for them because they literally were born here as opposed to me.

Then I think on a bigger scale, like many parents in general, when you think about how to make your community better for yourself, but now you're thinking, *How do I make it better for my kids, and thereby making it better for other kids?* I think that's when, as an immigrant or an Asian American, then you are confronted with, *How does my Asianness affect my view of my community in going forward?*

But the fact that there is all that stuff on Spring Mountain [Road, or Chinatown]. Growing up late '70s, early '80s, I wouldn't even think of that. There might have been one or two small, little mom-and-pop stores that sold Asian food. Maybe you could find a jar of kimchi somewhere. I remember you would literally go and rent VHS tapes of news programs in Korea, and they were so completely outdated, but that's how they kept up. Now you can stream it. My kids are growing up in the age of BTS. I don't understand how this is possible. Growing up for me, there would be no way. They've got their non-Asian friends mouthing the Korean words to these songs. I'm like, *How is this possible? Why wasn't it like this when I was a kid?*

I think there is some level of pride in Korean dramas and *Squid Game* and the phone, Samsung, LG, the cars, all coming from this little, tiny nation. If you're just talking about South Korea, it's half the size of California. Producing this kind of whateverness. There are more tools to work with, but definitely promoting their Asianness has certainly become an important aspect, in my view, of our community, but by virtue of raising our kids.

You've clearly been in Vegas for a long time. How have you seen it change and grow since when you were a child?

Those things that I was touching on, the things down on Spring Mountain, for us, I remember as a kid, if we made a trip to L.A., our very last stop before getting on the road would be going to one of their Korean markets, and my mom and dad would buy a whole carload of stuff. I never

really put two and two together. It's like, *Oh, because we don't have any of that stuff where we are because there's no market for it, there's no demand for it, and these are all the things that they miss and desire.* Using that as an example or a pivot point, having all of that there now, the Korean supermarket, that whole area, and then not to mention all the other stores now, but even at your local Smith's you can find kimchi. This is craziness. How does this happen within—this is going to sound super old of me—but within even my lifetime, how does that happen? In that way, I think the whole of society in general has changed a lot, and it's definitely trickled down to our community.

I think growing up, Chinese New Year would kind of be a thing, but it would only mostly be for casinos and marketing and stuff. Now it's a thing all over the community, and it's something that people really identify with—and maybe more than identify with—they feel a level of pride in some of these things as opposed to that more traditional Asian feeling of not wanting to stick out and not wanting to—what is the [saying], the tallest reed gets chopped off; that whole mentality. But now we have a lot more pride in these things. I think part of it is because society, on some level, allows us to because of some of the successes that other people have had.

What cultural celebrations does your family still participate in?

Birthdays. We still have this thing called *miyeok guk*, which is a seaweed soup that is traditional for people on their birthdays. New Year's, my mom will still have us come over for *tteokguk*, rice cake soups.

My wife's father passed away about six years ago, and so on the anniversary of his death, we still gather. There is this tradition where you set out a table of various foods that the person liked, fruits and things. There is a little ceremony where you bow to the picture of him and things

like that. We've kept some of those cultural practices. But also, I think aside from those specific types of cultural practices, I think the aspect of our culture that really shows a lot of deference, if not reverence, towards our parents and our elders, we've tried to practice that as well. I think that's one of the more difficult cultural things to practice. Kids in general are tough at times, and I'm not saying it's just a Korean thing or an Asian thing, but those parents tend to raise their kids very hard; but still, raising them hard is not about loving less or more, but just their philosophy of raising their families; I think that's definitely a cultural practice. Balancing that with this newer, more recent culture of not being so hard and being more understanding and listening and things like that is interesting and somewhat difficult to manage sometimes.

Do you still practice Catholicism?

Oh boy, wow, I think I should be paying her for this therapy session. I'm going to get super lawyerly on you, and it's because of my Catholic guilt, but it depends on what you mean by "practice." I certainly pray. I certainly had both my kids baptized. They went through their First Communion sacraments. My son is a freshman at Bishop Gorman, which is also a weird thing that somehow I'm at the age where my son is going to the same high school that I went to. I appreciate all the tenants of Catholicism and the spirituality that it provides. There is a streak in me about justice and righting wrongs that I've mentioned a few times that cause issues with me with the church, not necessarily their beliefs—but then, some of their beliefs I then have a hard time swallowing. I've had this discussion with my kids and my wife lots of times. It's like, *Well, you don't have to believe everything that that particular organized religion espouses*. But then, how much can you really pick and choose? Once you've gone down that road, are you still a practicing Catholic at that point? [Laughing]

I'll ask a lighter question.

Yes, okay.

Food...Do you cook?

I do. I do like cooking. Imagining me in the context of Asian food?

I mean Asian food, but in general, too.

In general? Oh yes. Even yesterday I figured out how to Instant Pot a pulled pork, this pork shoulder. I put it in there and put in all the onions and chicken stock and stuff. I do Korean food, too. I think, and my kids also say that I make a mean kimchi soup. There's a lot of Korean food around our house. My wife does a lot of cooking, too, and she's good at it, but I enjoy...I don't like her spaghetti, so I usually make the spaghetti and a meat sauce. When she does it, the noodles don't get the redness in them. I like putting them in the pot and mixing stuff. Anyway, yes, I try to enjoy cooking. Especially if there is fire involved, grilling or anything, I know that's very typical, but I do like being around the grill and doing all that kind of stuff.

I just have one more question before I turn to Stefani. Discrimination...Have you ever experienced any form of discrimination?

The short answer is yes. Discrimination, I think, is such a big word in that there are so many different ways that it can be used whether it's growing up, and people assuming that you know karate or that I speak Chinese, that's a level of discrimination, even though I do know karate; that's the problem, so that kind of is. But then there's the level of discrimination of, was I looked over for a job or a position or a project? None of that stuff necessarily sticks out in my personal experiences. I try to—and maybe this is another Asian thing—I really try to distinguish in certain instances, *Well, is that person treating me that way or doing something to me because of my Asianness?* I think it's hard—it's not hard; it's easy or hard—but sometimes we might find it

easier to go down that road to blame it on that, so I try to have internal mental checks on that. Certainly, especially within the last, maybe, handful of years, there is this understanding of maybe Asians not being the right minority at certain times, and I think there's a level of discrimination in that sense. Whether you're getting picked for this appointment or for something on the military or on the academic side or whatever, are there too many Asians in this particular area? Am I not the right minority in this particular instance? I hate to answer in such generalities, but certainly, of course, I've faced discrimination in my life, but it's so hard to determine on what level and how much it has actually affected me in my life.

I'm going to jump off of Cecilia's question and ask if you've seen an uptick, not necessarily directed at you, but at other Asians in the last few years?

Absolutely. I want to preface it by saying that I think there is tons more awareness, and maybe that is also helping—or sometimes hurting—the push of what's now referred to as Asian hate and that category. I think it's undeniable that in general, and maybe specifically exacerbated by COVID and the origins of COVID, that animosity towards Asians and Asian Americans or Asians anywhere around the world has certainly increased. Combined with this hyper-extremist culture that sometimes we find ourselves in, I think lends a little bit more to that being possible. But, yes, to answer your question, yes.

I'm just going to jump around.

Yes, sure, and that's the way my brain works, so it's perfect.

Back to traditions, did you and your brother—you wouldn't remember it—on your first birthday, did your parents do that tradition ...?

I want to say yes. I do remember, well, because there are photos. There are naked photos of us sitting there. No, maybe that's for the hundred days, is the naked photo. But the one-year

birthday, I know they did for my brother because there are a ton of pictures of him. But for the second child, I don't remember seeing a whole lot of those pictures. Wow, we're getting deep into therapy now. You're really getting down deep into the second child being...No. having said that though, we have definitely—thank you for reminding me—have done that for our kids. There's a hundred day, and then there's the one-year thing, and we've done that for both of our kids.



Three-generation family photo, 2010

Can you explain the hundred-day celebration?

Sure. I think a lot of it is somewhat outdated, but more just based on tradition in that child mortality rates were historically very high, and so to make it a hundred days was a pretty big deal, so to have a ceremony marking that, and I think by extension the one-year birthday.

The one-year celebration, does that have a name?

Yes. It's *Dohl*, D-O-H-L, I think would be the best spelling of it. That's more elaborate where you set out all these items on the floor, and the kid walks around and grabs...of course, it's going to be a stethoscope or a gavel. No one is going to put a shovel. They should, they should put a

shovel out there. It's a fine profession, but I don't know why parents won't put it out there. Yes, we do that. It's a pretty elaborate gathering, the cake, lots of food, lots of kids, lots of presents, the whole deal. But so many other things in life, the kid doesn't remember it. It's not for the kid. I tell my kids growing up that it took me a while to learn that these big moments in our life are not really for us; they're for your parents or your family. Graduation, even your wedding and all that stuff, it's for others.

Do you remember being told what you picked?

I feel like they might have told me at one point, but I don't really remember, and I don't think I put a whole lot of stock into it, because I was like, *Eh, I don't think you guys really made a big deal out of my birthday.*

For whatever it's worth, my name in Korean, my parents told me early on—and I think this might be the fourth or fifth time I'm mentioning it now—is based on the Chinese symbol for justice and things like that. My grandfather apparently named me. As far as what I would have grabbed or what they thought I would become, maybe a little bit of that.

I'd like to actually go back to your parents. You said that twice they declined their visas, and then they finally...the third time they had to accept or...

Poop or get-off-the-pot moment, yes.

Right. They came here. They gave up their professions for a while. How long did it take them before they could take their boards and actually practice their professions?

That's a good question. It took, if memory serves me right, at least four to five years for that to happen, and even then I think there was a little bit of hesitation because, even back then—or maybe especially back then—as a casino dealer in this town, you could make a good living, a really good living, and so they had gotten to that point where they were both casino dealers.

Back then you could keep all your tips. No one questioned it. It was good. I think there was a little bit of, *Oh, my goodness, this is going to take so much work.*

My father went first. I want to say within five to six years he was able to take his board exams. But getting back to one of the reasons we came to Las Vegas is because they made it a state board official position, so they had all these requirements. You had to prove a two-year internship here underneath another acupuncturist, even though he had had his own practice in Korea, and so it took him maneuvering that.

I remember my mother, after my father had passed his board exams and opened his own practice, my mother said, "I can't study English and this board exam while working full time." I think that's where that tension was. *Maybe I should keep on doing this. We get good benefits. All that stuff. It's decent money.* But she did finally decide to stop working so she could study full-time for it, and then passed, and started as an assistant pharmacist at UMC [University Medical Center, formerly Southern Nevada Memorial Hospital]. Back then AARP had a distribution center here, and then she worked at AARP for a while. I can't remember the specific number of years, but at least five to six to really get going.

Who is the acupuncturist that your dad interned with, do you remember? Was that Peter Lok?

Yes. I don't know if he specifically interned under Peter or Peter's dad, but there is one other individual; his last name is R-H-E-E, Hak Rhee. His first name is H-A-K. I can't remember if it was under him, because he had already been here for a few years before my dad got here.

Eventually, he and Peter did collaborate on a lot of things together.

Your dad and Peter?

Right.

How long did he practice, or is he still practicing?

No. He practiced for almost thirty years. He is seventy-four. He's been retired for maybe two, three years, maybe three, four years. Time is...that COVID year, also, is a gap year in my brain. Over thirty years. He was eventually appointed by then-Governor Bob Miller to be on the board of Oriental Medicine in Nevada, and he and Peter developed a lot of the more modern statutory rules and regulations for the practice of that profession and tried to keep it safe and secure for the people who were going to get that type of treatment here in town. It varies widely from state to state based on the governing boards, but they really wanted to make sure that it was a clean and highly sought-after profession here.

How many acupuncturists do we have here, do you know?

I've been disconnected with that ever since my dad retired, and even towards the end of my dad's practice. Back when he started, I would guess less than ten, maybe closer to five than ten, but now there are a lot more, because there are a lot more schools in the country that those types of students can come out of. I don't know if it's still here, but there was one here in town, too, Wengu University [of Oriental Medicine] that had an acupuncture program that was producing students. I know the number is a lot higher. You start seeing a lot more cross-professionals, like chiropractors who also do acupuncture, and, in the rare instance, MDs will also do it, so just a lot more. I think the timing was almost perfect for my dad, in that back then he didn't need a whole lot of advertising. There weren't that many of them around. Even throughout his whole career, he never really advertised, but he just had regular customers show up at his office, so it worked out. I imagine starting a practice these days would be infinitely more difficult.

Where did you live when you first arrived—you said you moved around a lot. Do you remember what parts of town you lived in?

Yes, I remember. One of our first places, if not the first, one of the places was a fourplex off Flamingo and Paradise, which is probably no longer there. I've looked, so I know for sure it's no longer there, I'm sorry. But I know that there are other types of fourplexes down back towards that area. Then we moved into what I think was the government-subsidized housing over on Bonanza and Eastern. Our first house—they were so excited—was off Charleston and Sandhill on the street called Olive, and that was the first house. By the time I went to high school, we moved over to Tropicana and Pecos, which was right when Green Valley was developing, so we were right at the bottom of the hill of Green Valley.

Then, when I went for school, my parents got some crazy idea, and they moved to this place called Summerlin. I was like, *Where are you going? You're going out there to this desert.* Then they moved out to Summerlin. Just a testament to my parents, and I don't know how appropriate this is giving you some of their private identifying information, but I am extremely in awe of the fact that in their generation they went from this fourplex and government subsidized housing, and now they live up at The Ridges, and they're comfortable. This is definitely a therapy session. It's like, I need to do a lot more with my life in the few numbers of years that I have to come close to what they've accomplished.

Are they still close with their siblings in Korea?

My mother is more so than my father. I think with technology it's become a lot easier. They've gone back a few more times since then, and I think that's helped. But, yes, they definitely try.

Were they both from Incheon?

My father, yes. My mother is from the southern part of South Korea in an area called Busan. You might have seen the movie “Train to Busan.” She is from that area. They met while they were both in college. They didn’t go to the same school, but they both met when they were in college. I think it’s a little bit unusual for Koreans of that generation. They’re both the same age, and so that’s how they met.

My mother has an amazing story. She was born in 1947. If we do the math, World War II just ended. The Korean War is about to start in 1950. She is born right in that pocket, which is a terrible time to be born. She is maybe two and a half, three years old. North Korea and China invade South Korea. At that point, they’re living closer to that Seoul area of South Korea. Their family picks up everything and goes south, and that’s how they end up in Busan, in the southern part of South Korea. But my mother is the fifth daughter of six children, and the sixth child is a boy. If you’re looking at it traditionally, they’re trying, trying, trying, and then they had a boy, but she is the runt. They all pick up. They get her little brother. They leave her with a neighbor because they can’t take her as well.

I can’t remember if it’s a full year, but many months pass by, and now the push is back. The Allies, the UN [United Nations] forces and American forces push the Chinese and the North Koreans back. My mom’s family comes back, absolutely knowing that she is probably dead and hasn’t survived, and she happens to still be there in their neighborhood. They’re like, *Hey, sorry about that*. Then they were back together, and then they live and move together all that time. But during that time, she still says to this day that she’s got a lot of dental problems. She’s got a lot of crowns and caps and stuff, and it’s because during that time there was no one looking out for

her. She didn't have the luxury of brushing her teeth and all that stuff. That's what happened with my mother.

How old was she when they were reunited?

I don't remember the exact math of it. I'm going to see them this weekend, and I can get way more details, assuming that she remembers. She was born in '47. War breaks out in '50. I just don't know when they came back. I might have to pair it up with historical notes of when that push back up north happened. I'm not sure. But she was just a child still, really young.

Now I'm going to jump back to the Air Force. Tell us how you joined and how that happened.

I had gotten elected to the Justice Court bench, and I think it was one of the first times in my life where I felt like I could have a little bit more, I guess, freedom to pursue something like that. Because working at the D.A.'s Office, the runup to becoming a JAG officer—well, first you've got to go to officer training school, and then you've got to go to JAG school, and so those are chunks of time away from your civilian job. Not that my employers ever made me feel like I couldn't, because that would be illegal—but me, internally, I felt like, *Oh, I can't leave my job for four weeks to go train or something like that.* But once I got on the bench, I felt like I could control my calendar, my schedule, a little bit easier so that it's less burdensome on the people around me. And, because it was something that I always wanted to do, and I was getting to that age-cap limit of joining, and getting back to having a sense of proving my Americanness, and it being in the legal field that I had, it seemed like a whole bunch of stars had to line up.

I was talking to my wife about it at the time. My wife is amazing. She's a saint. I remember I asked her, "Hey, about this?" She says yes first, and then a few days later, she's like, "Are you sure about that?" I'm like, "Oh, I think I'm going to run for this office." "Are you sure?" I'm like, "I think I'm going to go join the military." She's like, "What?" But she said yes

to it, and this is even after... I commissioned in November of 2011. My son was born in December of 2006, and my daughter was born in 2010. She has these two little kids, and I'm going to go away for a few weeks for training, two separate times, one for Officer Training School, and then I waited a year because I didn't want to burden the courthouse and staff, and then I went to JAG school. That was how it happened and why it happened at the time it did.

And you're still involved with that?

I am. I'm a Reservist. By some stroke of miracle, I've reached the rank of Major in the Air Force in the JAG Corps. I was first assigned to—I'm sorry, I'm pointing to Nellis Air Force Base—I was first assigned to Nellis Air Force Base. Then I did four to five years at a base down in Tucson, Arizona, called Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, and I'm currently attached to Hill Air Force Base, which is outside of Salt Lake City. I'm able to coordinate getting on orders, my Reserve time, when I need to. Ironically, this last year and a half with COVID, we've all been doing it remotely, so it's made it even easier to fulfill my military obligations.

How many years do you have left with the Reserves?

I think I'm going to do it as long as they'll have me. I could leave at any time because I've fulfilled my initial commitment. But I think I'd like to do at least twenty, so probably another...nine more? See, I'm terrible at math. It's such an Asian thing about, *Well, you must be good at math*. I'm terrible at math, so this is why I end up doing what I'm doing.

That's it for me.

Really? I wish I had more eloquent stories. I think I went on some weird, crazy tangents, so I imagine...

But tangents are great.

Typing this up and editing this might be a nightmare for you folks, but I appreciate your thoughtfulness and your questions and listening.

Thank you so much.

Is there anything we haven't asked you that you would like to mention or talk about?

No, I think we might have covered it all. No, I think I'm good.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]