

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN CHUNG

An Oral History Conducted by Cecilia Winchell and Jerwin Tiu

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
Director, Oral History Research Center
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PREFACE



“You’ve got to constantly be a learner. If you stop learning, you stop growing. It doesn’t matter what age and what subject, if you find something you’re really passionate about—go for it, pass that passion to other people.”

Kevin Chung, born in Southern Vietnam, originally came to the United States after being forced out of Vietnam during the ethnic cleansing of Chinese minorities. With little to nothing to their name, Chung, alongside his parents and younger sister, escaped from Vietnam in a boat before eventually landing in Minnesota as a refugee. There, Chung attended school while simultaneously adjusting to American culture and learning the English language. His main form of learning English came from visual arts and cartoon media. Chung went on to attend college at the University of Minnesota where he met his wife and pursued his passion, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts.

After graduating college, Chung spent a year in Minnesota as a last-minute fill-in before moving to Las Vegas where there was a wealth of workplace opportunities. He would go on to form many connections with various teachers and administrators in the Clark County School District such as Shirley Barber and Wayne Tanaka. Teaching in Las Vegas during the school year while spending his summers in Minnesota, Chung obtained his Master of Education degree. While in Las Vegas, he spent his first two years at H. P. Fitzgerald Elementary School before moving on to the high school level, teaching at an array of schools before ending up at Advanced Technologies Academy, where he currently teaches.

Throughout the interview, Chung reflects on the rapid growth that he has been able to witness in Las Vegas. He hopes, through the avenue of teaching, to instill the spirit of lifelong learning and finds it most rewarding when former students reach back out and he can see the impact he has made. During his time teaching at A-TECH, he has worked relentlessly to promote art within STEAM, starting many programs to help his students learn across several subjects. Currently, Chung enjoys spending his time in Las Vegas with his parents, wife, and four daughters visiting various national parks and engaging in photography. He views himself as an individual who belongs to two cultures and whose role is to bridge any gaps in understanding.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Interview with Kevin Chung
December 18th, 2021
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Cecilia Winchell

Preface.....iv

Born in Ba Tri, Vietnam, Chung talks about spending the first nine years of his life there before being forced to leave the country for being ethnically Chinese. He describes the migration his grandparents first took to Vietnam as well as his own family’s journey out, eventually landing as refugees in Lake City, Minnesota. Unused to more than just the cold weather of Minnesota, Chung recounts having to learn English through television and sometimes communicating through pictures.....1-8

Citing his passion for the arts, Chung eventually pursued the subject during college and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts before finding his way into the education track. After spending a year in Minnesota as a last-minute fill-in, Chung found his way to Las Vegas, Nevada, where he first taught two years at Fitzgerald Elementary. After transitioning to the high school level, Chung taught everywhere from Clark High School to Silverado High School before finally ending up at Advanced Technologies Academy. He also recounts finishing his Master of Education degree in Minnesota over the summers, his first impressions of Las Vegas, how he met his wife, and how he has seen the city change in his time here. He reflects on what the most rewarding part of teaching and what he finds most important to impart onto students.....8-17

Chung discusses his appreciation for Las Vegas as a destination that makes many natural parks accessible. He also touches on a range of topics from his family in the US to cultural celebrations and especially how COVID has affected teaching. Although in person education has resumed, he is still very cautious about taking health precautions. Chung expands on some of the other effects of COVID, particularly on anti-Asian discrimination, but cites the diversity of Las Vegas as creating an overall tolerant community. He also talks about what he enjoys teaching as well as his hobbies.....17-24

Having been back to Vietnam twice, Chung talks about the differences he has noticed not only between the US and Vietnam but also between the modern country and the one that he remembers. He goes on to a variety of topics such as traditional food, his parents’ work in Minnesota, and the countless bugs that were there. Lastly, Chung wraps up with how he sees his Asian American identity as being a conglomerate of two cultures, how it affected him all throughout his life, and describes his hopes for where both the city and country should move towards.....24-32



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Kevin Chung 12/18/2021
Signature of Narrator Date

Cecilia Winshell 12/18/2021
Signature of Interviewer Date

Jerwin Tiu 12/18/21

Stephani Evans 12/18/2021

Good afternoon. Today's date is December 18th, 2021. This is Cecilia Winchell. I am here with Jerwin Tiu and Stefani Evans as well as Kevin Chung.

Could you please spell your name for the record?

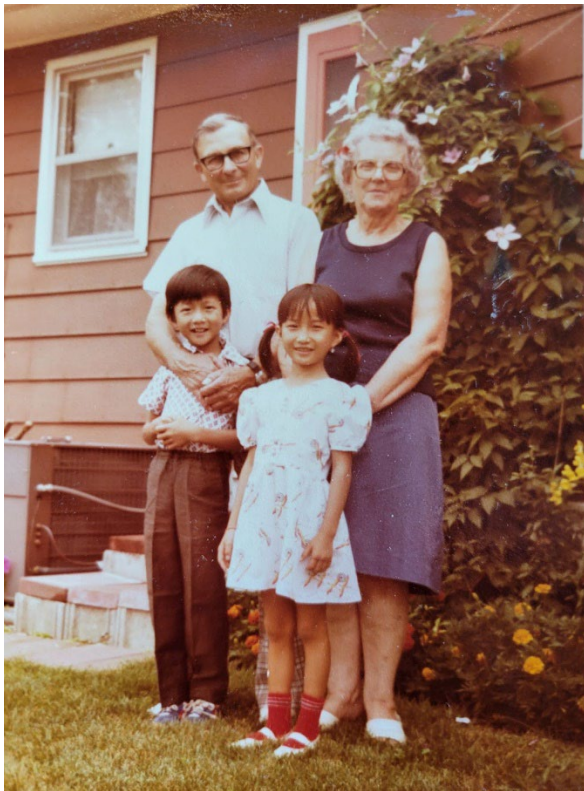
Kevin, K-E-V-I-N. C-H-U-N-G.

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



For the first nine years of my life, I grew up in Ba Tri, Vietnam. Right after the war, we were pretty much forced out of the country because we were ethnic Chinese. During 1979, China and Vietnam had a mini war at the border of northern Vietnam and China. We were victims of this war as the Vietnamese government wanted to remove as many ethnic Chinese people as possible to reduce the likelihood that we would cause problems for the newly formed government. When most people would risk their lives to sneak out of the country to establish a better life for their family, my family was forced to leave empty handed. I believe local government employees

visited our home in the middle of the night on more than one occasion and took valuables from my family to send a message that they wanted us to leave the country. I still remember my parents asking my little sister and I to pretend to sleep so they could hide a camera under our pillow. They said in Vietnamese, “These are unlawful times. We’re going to keep some of your valuable possessions for you.” Weeks later, we see our stuff on the black market. They visited our home a few times before somebody came to our house to offer us an opportunity to leave the country legally. They made us sign over the deed to our house and local shop and offered us spots on one of three wooden boats to leave the country. We left the country empty handed.



I spent nine months in the refugee camp located by Sabah within the nine dashed lines located between Vietnam and the Philippines. After that, I had an opportunity to immigrate to Minnesota. A group of Catholic Charities that sponsored Vietnamese refugees from Lake City, Minnesota, sponsored my family so we were relocated there. I lived in Minnesota until after

college. I graduated from the University of Minnesota and after graduating, I spent one year working in Minnesota before relocating to Las Vegas.

Thanks for the overview. I'm just going to go back and break it down a bit. You're ethnically Chinese. Do you know why your parents were in Vietnam?



Both my grandfathers were Chinese businessmen that migrated to Vietnam to do business. Both of my grandmothers were Vietnamese, so this is how I came to inherit my Chinese last name. That's how we came about.

Do you know what kind of business your grandparents did?

I think my grandpas were just in general business and they were middlemen facilitating transactions between China and Vietnam.

Do you have any memories from the nine years you were living in Vietnam? What was it like growing up there?

Growing up in Vietnam was tough. There was one year where we didn't have enough food to eat so we had to eat millet instead of rice. One of the earliest memories I can remember was during the Vietnam's War. I remember soldiers putting their guns in the corner of our front porch, using our house as a resting spot. But the war never affected us that far south. We were in the Mekong Delta, by the river and south of the Vietnamese capital of Saigon. These soldiers were from the

South Vietnamese Army, and my dad was once one of them, but he got discharged because he was injured in the fight. I still remember that after the fall of Saigon, my parents burned all the references to him being in the military. I think we only have one picture left right now of him in uniform. Other than that, there was not a lot of records of his involvement in the war. I have one picture of me as a little boy with a shirt that said, "I love you," on it. But other than that phrase, my first English words were *monkey* and *donkey* which I had learned in the refugee camp. I came here literally not knowing any English at all but those two words, and that's about it.



Do you know more about the process of coming to the United States? You mentioned it was Catholic.

I think we had the option between Australia, Canada, and the U.S. I think we got selected for the U.S. because my dad was in the army and fought with the U.S. military. I think that's why we got the option to come here instead of Canada. We left the refugee island for Lake City, Minnesota which was a really small town. At that time, the city had two thousand people. It's

also the birthplace of water ski. It's on Lake Pepin on the Mississippi River when it got a little bit larger, just south of Red Wing.



Chung by the mobile home he lived in for four months

What was it like growing up there?

It was cold, especially coming from the tropics. I still remember the first time we saw snow outside. We came here right around February, and there was still snow. We walked outside, and our feet were freezing. We lived in a trailer home for about three or four months, and then my parents decided to move to a bigger city, Apple Valley, in the south suburbs of the Twin Cities, MN. We moved there for better jobs because in a small city like Lake City, you can't do much. I think my dad's first job was working in a plant nursery, and my mom had some experience doing some assembly jobs. They were able to find better jobs in a bigger city.



Did you experience any form of culture shock when you first came here?

Well, eating the first Mexican pizza, “Mexican-style pizza” is what they call it. It was a combination of a taco and a little spicy. It wasn’t really the circular one. It was more like a hexagon shape, so that was kind of fun.

The other thing was drinking milk. I wasn’t really used to drinking pasteurized milk. We were always used to drinking condensed milk. After trying out the milk they gave me, I had diarrhea for the next few hours.

I think the first form of communication for me was through visual language, being able to draw and illustrate to communicate. The TV was the window to the world for us. That is how I was able to learn English was through watching those cartoons and interactions, so it wasn't really a formal way. It wasn't until eighth grade when they exited me out of ESL.

Was there anything that you felt was hard to leave behind when your family left Vietnam?

The toughest part was for my parents. We had to take a bus from where we live, and then that bus route would drive past my grandparents on my mom's side of the family. We actually had to duck our heads down so there wouldn't be a chance of them seeing us because if they saw us going somewhere, they probably would have prevented us from leaving the country that day. We left all our connections, communications, and just took a chance. I think my uncle did the same thing, but he signed up for one of those steel boats, more solid, but they had some issues, and couldn't leave the country. Out of the three boats that left the harbor that night, one sank, and all the people died. One had engine problems and they turned around, and since they entered international waters already and came back, the government put all of the people on that boat in jail for illegal entry. We were the only ones that were fortunate enough to make it to safety.

Our trip was supposed to take us about three days, but it ended up taking us about a week because of rough waters. Fortunately for us, none of the pirates that patrol that region came out because it was too dangerous for them, so we didn't get harassed. We were running pretty short on water for that duration, and food, we probably had another day or two before our supplies ran out. The parents of young girls would disguise their daughters by cutting their hair short and thus making them look like boys so they would not get raped by pirates.

Once we found land, I remember the captain telling his crew member to drill holes in the bottom of the boat because if the boat sank, then they couldn't really send us back to sea again

with new supplies; they have to accept us as refugees. That's what they did; they sank the boat on purpose as soon as we found land.

How was schooling in Minnesota? How was the process of learning English?

Schooling was tough. Learning a new language and trying to learn the subjects at the same time was not easy. We did not have Google then and I had to translate everything via a little miniature dictionary. I had a pocket dictionary that I had to keep with me all the time to translate what's going on and sometimes I draw pictures and try to communicate that way. By middle school time, I was a lot more outgoing. I got involved in different activities. Communication with others was a little easier after that. The community was predominantly with Caucasian, with a very small number of Asians (less than 5%). In a class of about five hundred students, we might have maybe ten to twelve students that were Asian.

Did you hang out with the other Asian kids?

I hung out with some Asian kids. I hung out with the general population more. I got involved with the yearbook and with the newspaper as a photographer. This was how I was able to make friends and communicate with other people and make connections. I think even in middle school, I joined the track team, and I played soccer for a year, but I lost interest in that because I didn't want to take the chance of getting injured. I pulled my groin playing soccer. I said, "Forget this, I'm not taking any more chances. Let's do something a little safer," so yearbook and newspaper were the two extracurriculars I chose. That way, I still got the chance to interact with other people.

What did you end up studying in college?

My parents wanted me to go to engineering, so I started out as a pre-engineering student. I didn't really particularly care for that major very much. The class that got me discouraged was

“Fortran.” It’s a class where you learn to program and code. I thought it was a waste of my time. I’d be sitting on a Saturday afternoon, all day long, trying to find out, “where in the world did I forget to put a semicolon or a colon that prevented the program from running?” I wasn’t as meticulous as other people, so that got me discouraged. I changed my major to follow my passion for the arts. During my junior year of high school, I took an art class, and I was pretty decent. I got several awards for my talent. Once I graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, I got into the education track, and that’s how I became a teacher.



How did your parents feel about you pursuing a degree in arts?

I think my parents were having a hard time accepting it. They wanted me to become an engineer, but part of me wanted to follow my mom's footsteps as an educator.



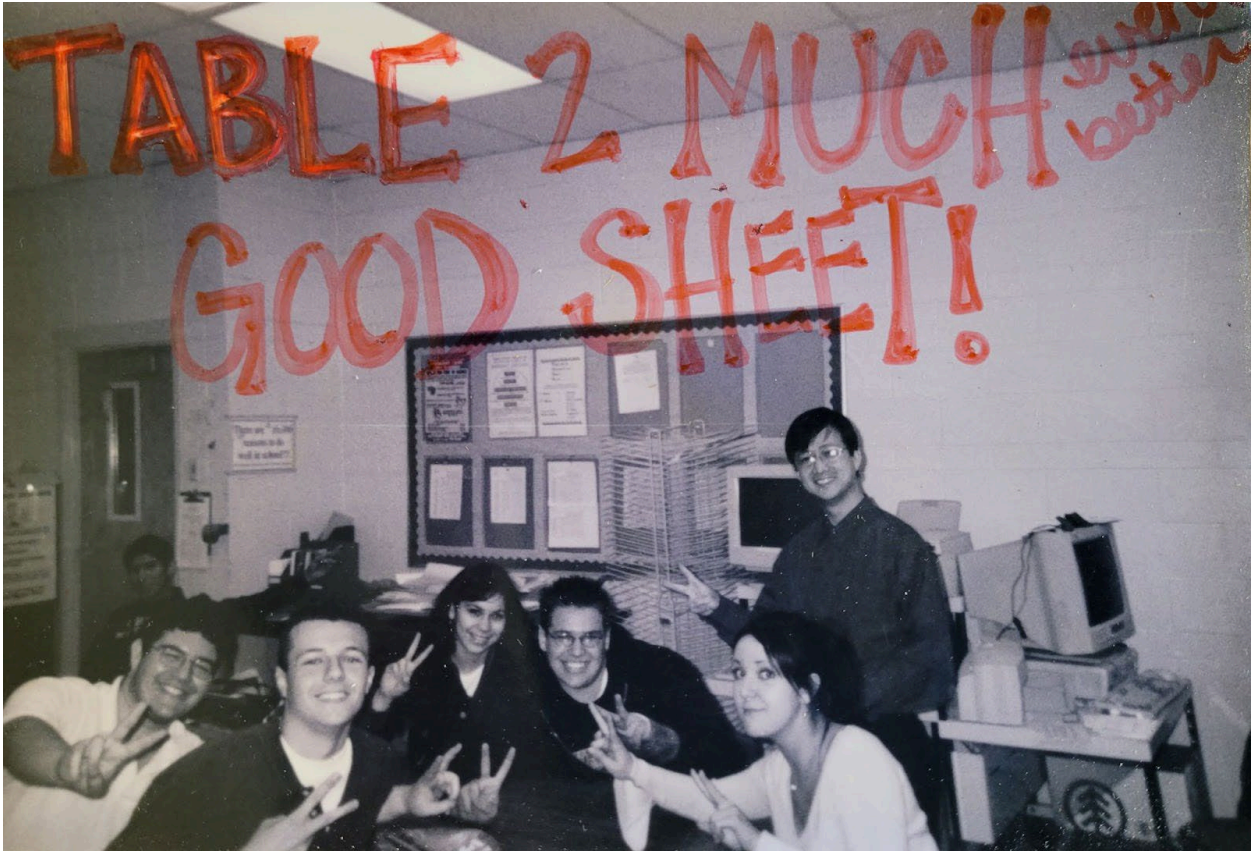
Chung's mother and her students in Vietnam

The same thing for my cousins, they think that there is no money in education. I liked the stability, and I liked the interaction with people and students. I think it's been a good choice for me for all these years. It's been a really good choice because over the last twenty-six years or so, it's been very, very enjoyable. The first year was rough. I taught my first year in Minnesota. I was a last-minute fill-in, and they had me teaching at four different schools on a rotating schedule. But when you're starting out, you don't have much of a choice. You've just got to take what you've got, until I came here.

The late Shirley Barber, who was the principal with the Clark County school district and later became school board member, was the one that gave me a chance. I spent two years at her school. After the second year, they had a new principal, and Mr. Tanaka had an opening at Clark High School, so he was the one that gave me the opportunity to teach at the high school level, and he's also the one that actually made the connection with me when I first came here to the district. He was on his way back from Central Office to his school when he found the district had just hired the first Vietnamese teacher. He turned around and he helped me find a place to stay because I didn't know anyone here in this city. I think I spent two nights downtown in a hotel, and then I met another teacher during the first year in service, and we made a connection with Michelle Kraft. She provided me with a place to stay until my apartment was ready.

Can you trace the rest of your education career here in Las Vegas?

I taught two years at Fitzgerald Elementary. Mr. Tanaka gave me a chance to transition to the high school level by allowing me to teach art in their auto shop. I was about to be surplus from Clark High School after my year at the high school level, before I interviewed for the art job at Silverado High School. I taught there for six years. When Del Sol High School was being built, I was offered the department coordinator position and was one of the first six teachers hired to start teaching at that school. I was there for two years, before I chose to be transferred to Basic High School. I was at Basic for nine years before I transferred to Advanced Technologies Academy.



I took some classes here at UNLV, but the majority of my education was from the University of Minnesota. After spending the first two years here, in the summertime I went back to Minnesota, and I finished up my master's degree over there. The program I was in was a Master of Education. It was a program where you finished your four-year degree, then you enrolled in the M.Ed program that would prepare you to get a masters. The idea behind it is most school districts didn't want to hire someone with a master's because they didn't want to pay them too much. The rationale is that you finish as much as you can to get your license, and then you come back to finishing your classes, and you'll be done with your Master of Education degree. Then they have to pay you a higher wage because they can't fire you because you're already in the system. There was a period of time where the district offered educators additional bonuses if you take this series of classes that will make you a better teacher. I spent a whole year

at Foothill High School on Saturdays just finishing up that program. But other than that, I got my master's degree and got the sixteen and then thirty-two credits above and then the other special program.

What were your first impressions when you arrived in Vegas, and why did you come here?

Simple. Everywhere else in the country, there was not a lot of openings. Vegas was one of the cities that was growing, and they needed teachers. It was the simple decision of either you work or you don't work. I chose to work, so I came here. I think the third year I was here, they offered me the credit retrieval school program at night. I actually took that job so my wife could be at home to raise the kids. I did that for about twenty years, and then I stopped teaching there. It gave me the opportunity to earn extra income to support my family.

Did you have any first impressions of Vegas?

It was nice going down the Strip and seeing all the wonderful architecture and neon lights. I was supposed to come the year before, but I canceled—I think my wife came down here with my parents a year ahead of time, and the year afterward I came down here with her just to see the city. But I was never really into the Strip as much. I never got into the gambling business or those fancy entertainment things. I'm more down-to-earth, and that's why we chose Henderson. We stayed in Henderson for the longest time, even right now.

How did you meet your wife?

Through college. We were in the same physics class at the University of Minnesota. It was a small community of Asian students. We also share some of the other classes. I guess things worked out.

Obviously, you've been in Vegas for a long time. How have you seen it change since you first came here?

Right now, the city is so big, so much bigger than when I first came here. I wish I would have invested in some of the properties and other things like that when we first came to town. It would have been nice, but I guess you can't be too greedy. The city has grown quite a bit. It gave me opportunity, but sometimes it can be rough, too. You see a lot of people coming in and out. Traffic is just horrible. It used to be easier to go from one place to another. Now all the highways are all packed up, so there's no way to get around it unless you leave really early in the morning or late at night. I think as teachers, the afternoon rush is not so bad. I also leave the house early in the morning when traffic is very light. I think everything has gotten much larger and denser.

Where else have you taught since coming here?

I have not taught anywhere else after coming to CCSD. I think the only place I taught before I came here was in Minnesota, as I alluded to earlier, in Robbinsdale School District. Then I came here to Vegas and spent the rest of my career here so far.

What schools in Vegas have you taught at?

First was H.P. Fitzgerald Elementary, and then I spent one year at Clark High School, six years at Silverado, and then two years at Del Sol, nine years at Basic, and then the last six years has been over at A-TECH. In between those times, I double dipped in the evening by teaching at Cowan or Sunset. There is a credit retrieval program for the students.

What have been some of your reflections on teaching in the CCSD school district?

The most rewarding part has been being able to connect with so many students. It's always such a pleasure to hear back from former students and check in to see what they are doing now. I think about a year or two years ago, I got an email from a student that is probably in his late thirties now. He thanked me for teaching him the drawing class because right after high school, he became a tanker, so someone that actually operated one of those military tanks in the military for

a while. He told me his drawing skills helped him develop his ability to be a cartographer now. He is now a map maker.

The other thing that's really nice is throughout the year, when I go to different places in town, there is always an opportunity to meet former students that have had me in the past. A lot of people have reached out to me, like you. They've reached back out and said, "Oh, Mr. Chung, I need to talk to you about something." That's the rewarding part of the education.

It's not necessarily so much the pay. The pay right now is not that great, considering all this inflation right now. Some of the teachers in the profession are not teaching because of their dreams of getting rich. I chose to be a teacher, because of the opportunity to give back to the community and personal enjoyment that I get to see other people grow. Those are nice things.

Over the last ten years, it's been nice to be able to take the students to different model bridge contests. Two students have actually won the international bridge contest. That's the rewarding part. It is nice knowing that you helped them to earn a half-ride scholarship that's worth over a hundred thousand dollars. Either they go there or they don't go there, but the memory that you build with the students gives me the greatest reward as a teacher. I still have a T-shirt that says, "Chilling with the Chung." I think that was the theme that students put together as a group to celebrate their time with me at A-TECH. Students did a door decoration and that theme stuck with that group of students for a long time.



A-TECH seniors 2022

What things do you find the most important to impart on your students?

I think it is the love of learning. You've got to constantly be a learner. If you stop learning, you stop growing. It doesn't matter what age and what subject, if you find something you're really passionate about—go for it, pass that passion to other people. I think it is important to pass your knowledge to other students. It doesn't matter what subject. In the art classroom over the last few years, I've been trying to make the connection with other subjects. It doesn't matter if you're an engineering student, architecture student, art student, or computer science student. I started programs at A-TECH for that purpose, to tie everything together in a STEM or a STEAM program. Now I'm starting to see the fruit of the investment. Some of my students are growing up to be writers, doctors, engineers. There's one student in medical school, there are a few in

engineering, and one that's going to ASU this year for grad school as a biomedical engineer in the biomed program.



Students preparing for the Science Olympiad Contest

What do you enjoy most about living here in Vegas?

That's a tough one because it's so hot in the summertime. I try to take a few weeks off here and there to get out of town a little bit. I love the fact that there are so many things to do around Las Vegas.

It's also a destination that allows you to go to the natural parks, like Zion, Bryce Canyon, Death Valley, Grand Canyon. Those things are within driving distance of Las Vegas. You can drive there and enjoy it and drive home on the same day. I think the weather is pretty good, but it is just too hot in the summertime. Throughout the year, it's not bad at all. I think the people, the

friends, the community are really nice to be with.



What other family do you have here in the city?

Four years ago, I moved my parents down here. They came down here for the wintertime, and then I showed them around. My mom was getting ready to retire. My dad was retired already. I took them to a model home, and they said, “I like that one,” so we made an arrangement to buy it. They moved down here in August when the house was ready to move in. In terms of relatives, I have one nephew that’s here with us. My sister is in San Francisco with her son, so they come down here a few times a year. Other than that, most of my relatives are still back in Minnesota. I have a nephew that’s in Houston, and one extended cousin that’s in Austin.

Does your family still participate in any cultural celebrations?

Yes. I think my parents are into that a lot more. I just don't have as much time. I know there are so many things going on. With school right now, we're on winter break here, and I'm going to have to probably cut my winter break short by two days because two weeks after we get back, we have some competition, so my students have to get ready. I do not celebrate as many cultural events as I should. It is just that we are so busy with my job at school and trying to raise my four daughters.

What do you parents celebrate?

My parents tried very hard to keep some of the traditional celebrations alive. We celebrate the Autumn Moon Festival, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chinese New Years, and birthdays.



They celebrate a lot of the Buddhist holidays. Twice a month for them, they try to be vegetarian for two days in a month. I think the biggest celebration is going to be the Chinese New Year for us. For them, they just try to enjoy the rest of their lives as much as possible. COVID has thrown a wrench into things. I was hoping that I could travel to Hawaii or something, but it looks like it will not happen anytime soon.



How has COVID affected teaching?

It was tough going to distance learning last year. It was hard to know how many students were really engaged. You can check in with them, and you know that most of them are off-line doing something else. I think one student of mine, I'm 95 percent sure that he logged into his phone and was working to help their parents financially. Going from in person to distant and back to in

person again in a hybrid mode was really tough for me. We have a short period of maybe two weeks' worth of training, and we have to make everything happen on Canvas for the next six months or so, and then they switched back to the in-person model. But those six months, everything felt like year one of teaching again because all the stuff that I normally teach and developed over the last twentysomething years is out the window. You have to find a new way of teaching students. I think I spent about four or five thousand dollars just updating computers and monitors and setup at home so that I can actually effectively teach online. But some of the students were not as engaged with us they may not have had the technology at home. I was thankful that I'm at A-TECH where more kids are more engaged in education. I couldn't imagine what other teachers have gone through during that time. I would hate to be at some other schools where the parents are not as involved or the students don't have as much discipline. I think their failure rate is much higher than what I had.

Now that we are back to in person education, I am still very cautious. I find that I'm not as interactive with the students because I'm trying to stay six feet. I am concerned about potential exposure to COVID-19. But if the kids come to me and ask me questions and they can leave in a few minutes, then the exposure will not count towards whether I must be quarantined. But if they're next to you for an extended period of time, or you're next to them for an extended period of time, that can be problematic because I would be required to quarantine for five to ten days. I got a scare about two or three weeks ago. I guess I must have eaten something. I had diarrhea, was throwing up a little bit. I was cold and picked up a fever. The next day I got tested, and it was negative. But those type of situations, it's a big concern. If I'm out, then it's going to affect the students. It's going to affect the family dynamic. It's been tough. It's been really, really tough for the teachers this year and the last two and a half.

I'm just trying to get through this year without having to call in sick. I probably have a few more years, and I'll probably call it done. If the district called me back, there's a chance I might come back. I know a lot of teachers at A-TECH that are going to be leaving the education profession at the end of this year. We have one teacher that passed away last year. A lot of turnovers and a lot of people questioning their commitment to education right now. I worry about how the district is going to be able to fill all the openings in the next few years with teachers that are dedicated to the students and not just somebody who just wants a paycheck? If you can't find quality teachers then the system is going to break down. If the district is not willing to give adequate pay, or the state doesn't allocate the money, the funding for it, then it's going to be tough in the future. Things are not looking very bright. I'm really concerned about our future.

On the same topic of COVID, there's been a recent rise in anti-Asian sentiment. Have you seen that affect your life in any way? Has it impacted you at all?

To me, it has not affected me that much. I am thankful for having the opportunity to live in Vegas. I am proud that our city is very diverse, tolerant, and respects people with different backgrounds. I took one student to Chicago one year, and he pointed out how people were staring at him because he dyed his hair different colors. We went to Chicago, and he was saying, "I don't feel comfortable here." I said, "Well, it isn't Vegas."

I'm going to pass it over to Jerwin now.

JT: I wanted to know what courses you teach at A-TECH.

Right now, the class I teach is Art One, AP Art, and Advanced Study. Because of all the engineering classes I took in college, I'm one of the few certified teachers that can actually teach both math and art. In the past, I've taught a math credit retrieval at Cowan/Sunset High School. I'm lucky enough to be able to teach Art One and drawing classes all these years. I am proud of

my students for passing the AP Studio Art exams with high marks. I am also glad that some of them get a chance to have their artwork on display and published. Out of the last six years, I've gotten three students that have their work on display in Washington, D.C., for being congressional winners.

SE: In your own life, for relaxation do you draw?

I love to take pictures and capture the beauty of mother nature. I do draw, but not as much as I should. Currently, I've been making lots of model bridges to analyze the function and efficiency of structures. Each year the International Model Bridge committee releases new regulations. It is my responsibility to research and provide appropriate information for my students to be successful.

SE: Do you teach that kind of technical thing?

Yes, we do. There is a club, and there are a few students that take advanced study. Under the advanced study, our program, the curriculum is more flexible for students to design their own study. Those students that want to study STEM topics, they do research for the Science Olympiad, or create bridges to be more competitive.



SE: What is your favorite class to teach?

I do not have any favorite class. I do enjoy working with the Science Olympiad and Model Bridge Club. Different classes have different personalities. The group of freshmen this year is very special, it's nice to see them coming back with a different level of energy that I didn't get a chance to see from the sophomore class because they were in COVID protocol. We have one freshman that is competing against UNLV students for a mural project at the Cosmopolitan. UNLV is offering the winner an opportunity to get a full-ride scholarship for four years. She was one of the finalists for that competition. The Silver State Credit Schools Credit Union award presentation thanked me for giving my students opportunities to showcase their talent.

SE: Oh, that's exciting. Have you been back to Vietnam since you left?

Yes, I went back there twice. Different culture, different time. I'm a different person, and some of the things I see, I don't necessarily agree with them, but I just have to bite my tongue because

we have different philosophies. I think what was strange to me was the inequality situation; here, I think we have a lot more equality. It made me very uncomfortable when the men would eat first, and then the ladies would eat second.

SE: Did you go back to your hometown?

Yes.

SE: How did it look physically from what you remembered?

Things changed a lot. After being here so long and leaving Vietnam at such a young, I have only bits and pieces of my young life. I visited my former house that I grew up in as a kid in 1976, and it looks a lot smaller than I thought it was at that time. Nearly two years ago, my parents and some of my cousins went back to Vietnam, and they took pictures showing my house no longer existed. From my mom's side of the family, they were able to rebuild some of my grandfather's house and make it a little taller. From what I heard, the town that I grew up in, it's really, really different now; it's a lot more modernized, but I haven't had a chance to go back there for the last twenty years.

Do you still have family there?

Yes, I still have. The majority of my mom's side of the family; all my cousins are back there. A few of their sons and daughters have gone abroad to Japan to work. My aunt from my dad's side is still alive. My dad's brothers' sons and daughters are still alive. His four older brothers have passed. From my dad's generation, he and his sister are the only two left. My mom's brothers and sisters are still alive. Her mom and dad have passed since we left Vietnam.

SE: Still in Vietnam?

Yes.

SE: Cecilia asked about traditions, and I'd like to touch on that with food. What are some of the foods that you remember as a child and with fondness that maybe you still eat?

Some of the food, like the pork stew with eggs, or the salty pork with black peppers, and sour soup with shrimp.

SE: You said your parents moved here right after they retired?

Yes.

SE: What kind of work did they do in Minnesota?

My dad was a machinist, so he made parts. If someone needed parts to be made, then they would design it, and the company would actually fabricate those parts for them. He operated mostly CNC machines or the lathe. I think once I actually worked with him for a month and a half to two months as an intern to see what's going on.

My mom worked at Control Data, a company that created needles for computer hard drives. This company was later bought out by Seagate. One of the parts that she made were the heads for the computer disk; the sensor to read the data.

SE: I may have missed it, but do you have brothers and sisters?

I have one sister that's in California.

SE: Is she older than you?

Younger, one year younger.

SE: When you first arrived in Las Vegas, you lived in Henderson?

Yes.

SE: What did you think of the weather when you first got here?

I think it is much hotter than what I was used to in Minnesota. I came here in August, so it was very hot. I got a one-bedroom apartment. I stayed here by myself for nine months, and then I

moved back to Minnesota for a few months in the summertime. The second summer, my wife and I rented an apartment for nine months again, and then we bought a house. We moved back to Minnesota for two months until we got the keys to our new house in Henderson.

SE: Would you have been able to buy a house, do you think, in Minnesota?

I think so. If I was still in Minnesota, I think I would have been a realtor or the construction or the real estate business. In college, I drew up a blueprint on a simple nine-inch classic MAC, and then I gave the blueprint to the builder, and the builder built the house that my parents lived in for the longest time. When I got a chance to do that STEM program, everything came together again. A lot of the architecture students who are taking Mr. Knoepfel's class are in my art class, and they get a chance to be a little bit more creative with their designs.

SE: Minnesota has a lot of bugs, so was that a hard transition to go back to Minnesota for the summer after being in Las Vegas?

No. They call it the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes. We also like to call the mosquito the unofficial bird of Minnesota. They've done a really good job of mitigating the mosquito population, by preventing mosquito larvae from developing into mosquitoes. They use a chemical near lakes and swampy areas to reduce the mosquitoes. We have to be careful when we engage in activities before dark. If we go out, we just have to use bug spray. "No, I prefer not to donate any of my blood to you."

CW: I just have a couple more to wrap up. What do you see your Asian American identity as?

I'm a person of two cultures. There are some days where I feel like I'm a parent to my kids and I'm a parent to my parents because they can't be on their own; it's hard for them to function in this country, because they don't understand the culture and language. So they rely a lot on me. I

guess right now, my family comes over to their house on the weekend, usually Friday night to just have dinner with them. From their house to my house is about a mile and a half or so away. I guess all of us are so busy, and they recognize that, too.

For my in-laws it's a little harder. It's tougher for them because my father-in-law is going through some tough times; he is having hallucinations and medical issues. They are introverted and don't really interact as much with others. They also don't know how to solve some of their issues, like medical issues, they still rely on us even though we're thousands of miles away. With my two brother-in-law over there, they try to take care of them.

At the age of fifteen, I was going over paperwork for my parents to help them buy their house. I had to help them negotiate for cars. I researched how to buy cars and those vehicles instead of having the dealer rip them off. I learned how to negotiate. You can save lots of money when you are more knowledgeable and not have other people take advantage of you. There are people that would pay for what the dealer demands. I don't play that game. Last fall my mom wanted the Toyota Highlander. The sticker price was thirty-nine thousand five hundred. I finally got the dealer to accept my offer of thirty-seven thousand six hundred dollars. That's including tax and registration fee for that first year.

CW: My final question: Is there anything else you would like to talk about that you feel like we didn't ask you?

I'd like to see all people be able to live in peace, regardless of our skin color, sexuality, and religious belief. I am very concerned about how Asian Americans have been the target of hate crimes over the last few years. It used to be that bias toward Asians was hidden, and it is sad to see how people are emboldened to act out their beliefs. Asian, Hispanic, and African Americans cannot change their looks to blend in with the majority European people. The White supremacy

issue that has surfaced lately is a big concern for me. I have always had concern about hate and discrimination in the last three decades, and now a small portion of the US population are willing to act upon their belief is very concerning for me.

SE: Has your family experienced any prejudice in these last couple of years?

Not lately, and I think that's part of living in this city. People are a lot more accepting of people from different backgrounds. If I were to live in other cities, I think I would experience a lot more prejudice. Las Vegas can have people come from all over. I think if I were living in the middle of Montana, when people are so rooted, I think it's more pervasive, and people can see it more.

SE: Do you think the diversity here is due partly to the hospitality industry and the more transient nature of Las Vegas?

I think so. I think that's the one positive thing that we have going for us in this city is that people from all over the place choose to come here. Not many people are native born. When they come from somewhere else, and they choose to start your life over in this city, then you can't really have the old school mentality as much. Everyone is kind of new here, so they start off fresh, and I think that's something that's good for all of us here.

I'd like to see a lot more diversity in the education system. It is hard to believe when Mr. Wayne Tanaka informed me that I was the first Vietnamese teacher in the district, and I might be the first one in the state. I'd like to see a lot more diversity because it would benefit all of us to see that people from various cultures do not conform to the stereotyping that we were exposed to. H.P. Fitzgerald, the first elementary I taught at in this city, I would say 80 percent African American at that time, and I still remember kids trying to touch my straight hair. After the first year, they stopped doing that. Even at A-TECH, we have a lot of Asians, but very few Asian teachers. For me, I'd like to try to break stereotypes...most people say, "Oh, Mr. Chung, you

must be teaching math or science.” No, I’m an art teacher. I’d like to see more people get involved in the school and the school district and get more diversity.

SE: Are you familiar with the model minority myth and can you discuss that and how it applies to you or your students?

To me, I am expected to be successful. But success partly has to do with your luck, your timing, and your opportunity. In my case, I guess I was fortunate to be here at the right time. I was fortunate enough to be able to work with some of the right people. I am also thankful for the opportunity to serve the community and to be rewarded with the Heart of Education Award.

But I think a lot of the model Asian minority myth is that you are expected to be successful. You’re expected to follow the rules and regulations and to quietly go about doing your daily business without creating issues for everyone else. You’re expected to be successful in math and science and engineering. Yes, most Asians follow the traditional expectations, but we are also very creative individuals too.

For my kids, I do not expect them to earn 4.0 GPAs. I do expect them to try their best. My beliefs are not necessarily the same kind of attitude that other Asians in this community expect. For my oldest who just graduated, she was too assimilated into the culture, and sometimes she lost her heritage a little bit.

It’s a myth, and I think sometimes we need to think about each person as individual. Each culture has its own unique identity, and to classify it as a singular entity, I don’t necessarily agree with that. I went into education for that purpose of showing to others that not all Asians are doctors, lawyers, scientists, and engineers; I want to be able to know and understand that we are all individuals to share ideas and other cultures with. Yes, there are other people out there that are not going to fit your typical ideal of what it is like to be Asian American. We are individuals

with different personalities. As with all four of my kids, I see four different personalities in them. To classify them as one is not going to really work for me. Hopefully, I've done my part to break the illusion over these last twentysomething years.

SE: Thank you.

CW: Thank you.

JT: Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]