

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINA SZUKALA

An Oral History Conducted by Bridgette Foote

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

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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Oral History Project

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

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PREFACE

“We would be the only Thai family in that whole, maybe, mile or square block or two-mile block. Now there is probably a multitude of different races and ethnicities in the community now.”

Born to her Thai mother Pin and her Caucasian father Lee, Christina Szukala, one of seven children, reflects on her childhood, the history of her parents, and how it all ties with her experience as an Asian American today. Native to Las Vegas since 1975, Szukala highlights her upbringing, how she navigated being Asian American, and where her opinions on contemporary race issues involving the Asian community. Moreover, Szukala also recalls some of her fondest memories growing up in Las Vegas. One being how her mother adapted to the United States by altering her Thai recipes to fit the tastes of her husband and adjusting the way she practices her religion.

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November 7, 2021
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Bridgette Foote

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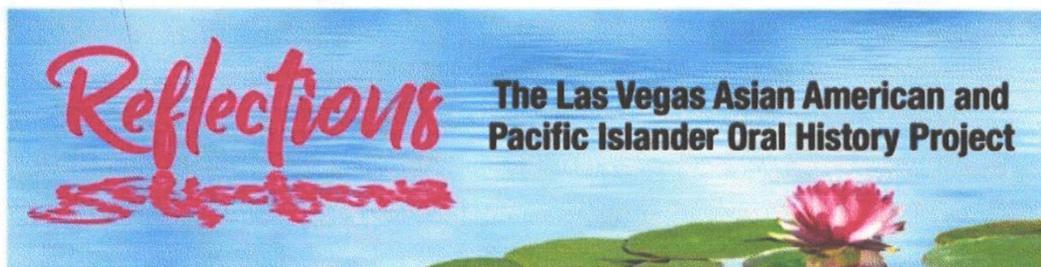
Christina Szukala outlines her early childhood life, detailing the specifics of her family, how her parents met, and their pathway from Thailand to the United States. Szukala mentions the adjustment period that her mother took in order to adjust and assimilate to an American lifestyle. Szukala also includes the importance of her mother’s cooking in her early childhood.1-2

Going further, Szukala elaborates on her Thai identity, mentioning the adjustments to her mother’s cooking, and how Szukala navigated with identifying as Thai in an area where there were not many Thai individuals. Despite having a different background, Szukala mentions that she was able to mesh and assimilate well within the community in Las Vegas.3-4

Szukala further notes her mother’s journey to the United States. Moreover, Szukala notes the struggles in finding a community that aligned with her own identity. Though, despite the struggles with her personal identity as an Asian American, Szukala also draws back to some of her fondest memories of growing up in Las Vegas.5-6

Growing up in Las Vegas, Szukala mentions some of her cultural traditions and foods that her family still partakes in. Szuakala mentions the influence that religion has had on her as well as her mother. Furthermore, Szukala elaborates on the racial issues that have been prevalent in recent media.7-9

Wrapping up, Szukala notes the importance of projects that offer an accurate depiction of lives, detailing the value of projects like “Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander Project.”10



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Can you please state your name and spell it for me?

Christina Szukala; C-H-R-I-S-T-I-N-A, S-Z-U-K-A-L-A.

Thank you. Can you tell me a little bit about your family and your childhood, so schooling, any kind of friends that you had, relatives that you lived with?

Well, we had a big family of three sisters and three brothers growing up. We lived there, pretty middle-class area, I guess you could say, and went to school with everyone that we pretty much lived around. It was quite a mix of different cultures and people, nationalities. Being that we had a big family, we kind of kept to ourselves, I guess, and didn't do too much outside of the family because we had so many brothers and sisters. We often cared for each other. Me being the second to youngest, I was watched over by my older siblings for the most part.

Do you feel like your experience being the youngest was different than some of your older siblings?

Oh yes, definitely. The older siblings had to take on more responsibilities than I did. They got the brunt of having to do a lot more, but it also trickled down to where I would have to take on responsibilities as the older siblings to make sure that we got our fair share of the chores in the household.

Can you tell me a little bit about your mom and what she was like and her nationality and where she was from?

My mom is from Thailand. She was born there. She met my father there. He was in the Air Force. They married, had children in Thailand, had two children in Thailand. Being that he was in the military, they married and came to the States with their two firstborn children, and I believe they settled in Las Vegas. My mom was the homemaker, stay-at-home mom while we were all before school age, and then once we became school age, it became clear that she would

want to take on a role, well, she wanted to become employed and, also, be able to bring income into the family. She went to school to be better in English because English was a second language to her, and so she had to learn it. She started taking classes. She also wanted to become a United States citizen, not only through marriage, so she got her citizenship. She went and took the citizenship test and became a citizen. Then she became employed at the Golden Nugget where she had to learn money and money handling in order to receive the position she did as a change person, I believe is what it was called, where they handed out change in the casino. Her first job was at the Golden Nugget. I believe it was her first job, her first and only—well, not only job. I'm sorry. Her first job here in Vegas that I'm aware of.

Did she cook Thai food for you, or did she change once she moved here, or did she continue to cook those foods for you guys?

She did both. I guess she did an Americanized version of the Thai food because a lot of her foods would be so spicy or have a little bit too much flavor. She kind of watered-down versions of fried rice or noodles or certain things, but she also learned to cook very American foods because my dad was not big on Thai food. She would learn to cook American food, or he would teach her different foods that he enjoyed, or he would cook. But she did her cooking, and when she would do her cooking, it would be us kids that would go, "Okay, we want to try, we want to try." We were like little birds coming to mom to try and see what she had cooked. What she had cooked was, "Oh, it's too spicy. You can't eat this." Sometimes we would still try it. Some of the times she would let us have the watered-down version, I guess you could say.

What was your favorite thing that she cooked?

I guess her eggrolls are probably one of the best things early on for me when I was child, and then growing up, almost everything that she cooked I liked.

For you, is there anything that you really wanted to learn how to cook that you ended up bringing into your family?

I guess I do some of the things that she cooks. She grew up pretty poor, and so she would throw together meals that were whatever we had on hand, and so I do that a lot. I think I get that from her. Being that I was younger, I don't know, I guess I didn't learn a lot of her cooking, and I didn't try to learn a lot of her cooking. She would just cook, and I would just eat it. That was easy for me to do, and so I didn't take on too many. I did do the eggrolls, not that often. My kids definitely request Thai food as well.

You said that she moved here with her husband. Do you know when exactly that was that she moved from Thailand to the States?

It probably would have been somewhere around 1970, sometime after 1970 because my sister was born in 1969 in Thailand. I believe it wasn't long after she was born that they came here.

Did she ever talk about what the hardest thing about leaving Thailand was? Did she ever talk about if it was hard to leave Thailand to come here, if there was anyone she left behind?

Yes, I think so because her family, she knew she wouldn't be able to see them, more than likely, again unless she went to Thailand. I think it was hard for her. Later on in life, her sister tried to apply for a visa to come to the United States to see my mom, which was her sister, and she was denied multiple times. I don't believe she was ever granted a visa and a trip to the United States to see my mom. But my mom did end up going back and forth to Thailand. She did end up getting to visit, but, yes, I think it was difficult for her to leave Thailand.

What were some of your fondest memories of growing up in Las Vegas? What are some memories that stick out for you? It could be anything, friends, family, just some of your memories of growing up in Vegas.

Probably friends and family and get-togethers, just barbeques and hanging out on the weekends and a lot of everyday life.

Was there anything that was difficult about living in Las Vegas in the early days, especially Thai immigrants didn't really start coming to Vegas until the 1960s? Was there anything extremely difficult growing up being Thai, growing up in Vegas?

I guess we didn't get out into the community. There weren't a lot of community events. It was growing up based around family and friends mostly. My mom had only a couple of particular friends that she would visit with that were Thai.

There wasn't a lot of people of your ethnic Thai background.

Right. Yes, there wasn't a ton of people, no.

Did it feel like it was a struggle not to have someone to relate to, or did you feel like you fit in with your friends?

We just kind of meshed into the community in general, I feel like. My mom enjoyed being in the United States. She wasn't indifferent about it. She enjoyed the community that we were in. There was no ostracizing because my mom was from a different country. I felt like the community was pretty welcoming back then.

Looking back at the neighborhood now, do you feel like it has changed at all from when you grew up? If you look at your neighborhood that you grew up in, do you think it's changed in any way from what it was like when you grew up?

I think it's probably becoming even more so...I'm trying to think of the terminology...mixed with different cultures than it was when I was growing up. We would be the only Thai family in that whole, maybe, mile or square block or two-mile block. Now there is probably a multitude of different races and ethnicities in the community now.

When you look at Spring Mountain and all the different restaurants they have, including Thai, do you feel that there is a lot more access to Thai food from back when you were younger?

Oh yes, definitely. Yes, definitely.

Are there any traditions that you had that were more Thai related than American or the United States that came from Thailand? Any family traditions that your mom came with that you guys did growing up?

We did not do a lot of different traditions. The only thing would be the eating and the cooking, Thai food, the eating of different foods from the Thai culture that we never experienced until my mom exposed us to them.

I know in Thailand the biggest religion is Buddhist. Was your mom part of that religion? Did she go to Buddhist temples or anything?

I don't think she was strong in religion, but she only knew of Buddha and Buddhism as religion for her in Thailand. Coming to the United States, maybe that's something else that wasn't very familiar with the community in Las Vegas, is Buddhism. My father was a Christian, and he was not interested in teaching any of the children Buddhism. He also was not interested in my mom practicing it. He probably didn't know very much about it, and so he just didn't want to have anything to do with it being that he was a Christian. My mom would do little things on her own in her own space that had to do with Buddhism, but she didn't bring it upon us too much as her

children. I think she might have showed us a little bit about it, and I know I've been to a Buddhist temple, but I don't recall if it was with my mom or not.

I'm going to focus on your opinions and the way you see things. How do you feel about Las Vegas culture with gambling and the gaming industry? I know your mom worked for the casino. How do you feel about the gaming industry?

I think it's what Las Vegas was built on, so it's just customary. It comes with the territory. I think it brings opportunity as well. It brought opportunity for my mom to be employed at the casino, and I think they do a lot of opportunities for different cultures as well. They need different cultures because we get visitors from around the world. It's a good thing that they have people of different nationalities working in the casinos.

Have you ever heard of the model minority myth? Have you ever heard this phrase?

I'm not sure.

It's this myth that Asian Americans in school are treated—it's believed that Asian Americans are smarter, and so they tend to be treated in education like they should be held at a higher standard. It's the model minority, and so they should have a higher standard of how they are treated in education because they are capable of achieving better grades, and you'll have teachers that say to Asian American students, "You can do better than this. You get A's." Does that make sense?

You get A's." Does that make sense?

It makes sense, but I don't know if I've been...

If it's ever affected you, or it's something that's never really affected you in your life.

No. No, I don't think that's ever been nothing that I've grown up with.

Have you ever experienced any kind of racially discriminatory practices against yourself or other Asian Americans in Las Vegas, or have you ever witnessed any discrimination in Las Vegas against yourself or your family?

No. I'm trying to think back into my memories. Not that I can recall. I recall my sister referring to a time that my mom had a hard time with English and a person that she was dealing with in business in the community somewhere, giving her a hard time about not comprehending something and not being very considerate of her, and that really offended my sister at the time, but I think I was probably too young to recognize that. But I do recall my sister saying that growing up; that she was so angry that they treated my mom terrible because my mom didn't understand English.

Do you feel, because of the pandemic, that Asian Americans have had more discrimination in the past couple of years, or do you feel like it hasn't really affected the Asian American experience?

What I can see on the TV, what the news tries to put out there about certain incidents of Asians being discriminated or things being done to them, I have seen that on the news. As for in the community, I don't think I get out as much being that there was the pandemic and whatnot, so I couldn't even say whether I see it in the community or not. But my experience in my life, I don't see any extra.

Did you feel anything when you heard U.S. officials calling COVID-19 "China virus, Kung flu?" I know you're Thai, but did you have any feelings towards those references?

No, because I know that they've called other viruses by the names from where they came from. I'm not sure if it was Ebola. There are certain viruses that came from certain countries or originated in certain countries. For them to do that, it could be a touchy subject, but as well as if

it came from Thailand and they called it the Thai virus. That's where it came from. I'm not offended by it if that were the case.

Moving away from politics, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are one of the fastest-growing populations in Southern Nevada. Does that mean anything to you? What do you think when you hear this?

I like diversity in things. If it's heading towards Asian and I'm Asian, I guess I would think of it as a good thing because I think Asians are good. I think everyone is good, but I'm just saying. I guess it's a good thing.

This is the last question. Why do you think it's valuable for universities like UNLV to collect interviews from you and other Asian Americans in Southern Nevada?

Honestly, I think it's good that you guys can get data from real people and can put it out there as facts because it's real people giving their personal stories. I obviously would hope that people wouldn't give stories that were not of truth. I would hope they would be pretty honest with their stories being it's their personal stories, and you could gather the facts and put together data, research and whatnot to show how the community is doing in regards to different ethnicities and nationalities, whatever the study may be on, compared to getting sometimes fake news stories. You can actually put a little bit of fact-gathering and truth to what you're saying.

Thank you so much.

[End of recorded interview]