

AN INTERVIEW WITH HELEN YU

An Oral History Conducted by Andrew Yu

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.

Claytee D. White
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PREFACE



“I will never be a true Korean because I had lived in the United States for so long, and I had assimilated, and I had developed my outlook on life, and the way I see things is so Americanized that I could never be truly just American or truly just Korean.”

Helen Yu was born in Seoul, South Korea, into a middle-class family. Her father was the principal of a private school, and her mother was a homemaker. Her grandfather, a longtime employee of the U.S. Embassy in Seoul, immigrated to the U.S. in about 1976-77 and eventually brought his entire family to Portland, Oregon. Helen and her parents followed in 1984. Helen tells of her maternal grandfather living in San Francisco as a pre-medical student before the Korean War and his return to Korea after war broke out. She talks of her father's family from North Korea becoming refugees in South Korea after the war began. Helen speaks of Korea's child mortality rate, of the family black sheep, arranged marriages, the Japanese occupation of Korea. She talks of an urban-to-suburban culture shock at age nine and moving from Seoul to suburban Hillsboro, near Portland; of obtaining her B.A. in Graphic Design at the University of Oregon, pursuing a graduate degree in art Ewha Woman's University, and earning a certificate in ceramics at Oregon College of Arts and Crafts; of forging a Korean American identity and an Asian American identity, and of marrying a Korean man in two wedding ceremonies. She describes arriving in Las Vegas in 2001 and finding work at the MGM, beginning at the front desk, eventually moving to event planning, and now working for Business 2 Business, a trade show organizer.

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in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Andrew Yu

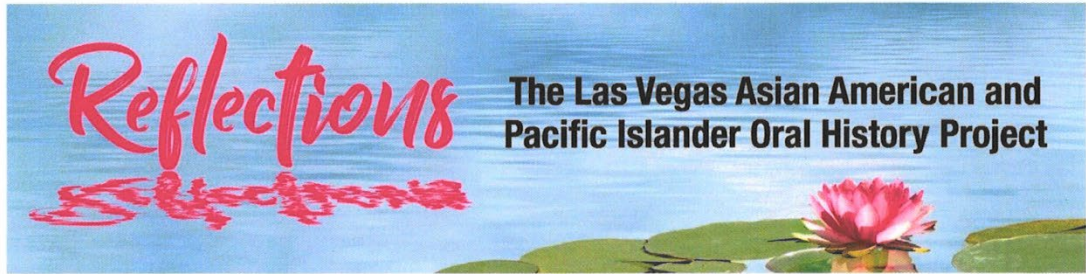
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Yu recounts her journey ever since settling down in Las Vegas, where she first started working at the MGM Grand at the front desk. Because she wanted to properly balance her parenting duties and her job, she made sure to find a job that specifically had a daycare. Yu details the many jobs she has had ever since, and ends with some reflections on her immigration journey and life in the U.S.....25-31



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Good afternoon. It is October 21st, 2021. This is Andrew Yu, and I'm here with Helen Yu.

May I ask you to please spell your first and last name?

Yes. My name is Helen, H-E-L-E-N. Last name is pronounced Yu and spelled Y-U.

Awesome. My first question that I'm going to ask you is, tell me where you were born.

I was born in in Seoul, Korea.

Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood in Korea?

Yes. I had a very steady, middle-class background. My father was a principal at a private high school nearby. My mother was a homemaker. I have one older brother, who is two years older than I. We had a very idyllic, pleasant life.

When you were growing up, who was the most influential person in your life?

When I lived in Korea, I lived there only until I was nine years old, and so the person who had the most influence was my mother.

When did you officially immigrate to America, and tell me a little bit about how that whole process worked for you?

My family immigrated to the United States in 1984. My mother's side of the family had immigrated back in the early '70s. When my grandfather—who had been a long-time employee of the U.S. Embassy in Seoul—when he was getting ready to retire, as part of his retirement they had an opportunity for him to immigrate to the United States. He moved his entire family to the United States. To Portland, Oregon. Once they were settled there and once my grandfather received his citizenship, he immediately applied for a green card for my parents as well. I guess the immigration laws at the time were such that you could invite your family, so that's what happened. Within two years after his applying, we received the green light to come to the United States, and so we started the process to move.

You say your grandfather was a part of the U.S. Embassy, and you all immigrated to Portland, Oregon. What year was that again?

My grandfather actually worked for the United States Embassy in Korea, so he was an employee of the state government, basically. That was in 1984 when my immediate family moved to the United States, but my grandfather, I believe, had moved to the United States in either 1976 or '77.

Why did you guys move to Portland, Oregon? Why wouldn't you live—

Somewhere else.

—anywhere else, San Francisco? I'm in a History of Asian American class, and we're learning all these Chinese immigrants, they all immigrated to California.

It's a very lengthy story. My grandfather actually lived in the United States prior to the Korean War. Between the World War II and the Korean War, there was a five-year gap, and at the time my grandfather, who was a devout Catholic, through the sponsorship of the Catholic Church, had come to San Francisco to study as a medical student. Then shortly after his arrival, within a few years, the Korean War broke out, so he had moved back to Korea to find his family and to make sure his family was all right, et cetera.

When the time came in the '70s to move his family back to the United States, he had obviously lived in San Francisco, which was a city he was very familiar with, but he remembered San Francisco being very cold. That's a really odd thing to say about San Francisco, which is always within a certain temperature range. I guess his experience in San Francisco in the '40s was of loneliness and just bitter coldness, so he didn't want to move the family to San Francisco.

He was looking at different brochures and different information about each of the states, and he came across a book written by a Korean man living in Portland, Oregon. He had

apparently written such lyrical terms about Portland and how you had snow peaks on the mountains and wildflowers growing in the meadows. My grandfather, not knowing anything about Portland except for what was described, had decided to move the family to Portland. Now, he didn't know anyone in Portland other than the author who he hadn't met yet.

Through a broker—this is so funny because he had apparently purchased a house before moving the family to Portland. There's a long story about that house that they had purchased without seeing.

We've got time.

Apparently—this is from the family folklore—is that when they came upon the house that they had purchased through a broker, at that time, it was my grandparents, grandfather, grandmother, and their two youngest boys. They had four boys and a girl, my mother being the girl. They had the two younger boys who were still under eighteen. The four of them moved. The house was apparently very old, decrepit, and apparently there were ghosts.

You're saying there were ghosts in the house that you bought?

Yes, that they purchased, yes. Apparently, they had the coldest winter on record the year that they had moved to the United States. Back in the '70s and the '80s, it really didn't get that cold in Portland. Every year, maybe one or two snow days. But that particular year was the record-breaking cold year, and they had icicles forming from the roofs and from the shingles.

Apparently, one of the icicles that had formed had dropped on my grandmother's forehead, so she had to go to the emergency room and so forth.

I think what had happened is that they ended up suing the broker that bought the house for them, and so they were able to get out of that house and then move into a better home in the suburbs of Portland, which was Hillsboro. Hillsboro, Oregon is where they actually ended up

buying a house. By the time we came around in 1984, my grandparents had long been established in Hillsboro, Oregon, which is a suburb of Portland.

You're talking about all this cold that your grandfather suffered in San Francisco, but you really meant mentally coldness, not actual physical coldness.

No, I think physically cold. Oddly, I have always this nostalgia about San Francisco, or it's probably not nostalgia because I had never been to San Francisco up until that point. But I just always had this fantasy about San Francisco. Right out of college, I moved to San Francisco on my own and lived there for two years. I realized what my grandfather was referring to. It's not that it was colder than Portland because Portland can be colder. When it's that cold, you tend to bulk up in your clothes, and you get ready for the coldness and the snow and the rain, et cetera. But San Francisco is very windy and chilly. It's not necessarily as cold as Portland, necessarily, but there is a chill-to-the-bone kind of coldness that you wouldn't really experience in Portland.

You expect it to be hot because it's in California, but then—

No, no, no. San Francisco is always, even in the summer, it doesn't get really hotter than high eighties, and on a really hot day could get up to nineties, maybe. But it rarely, rarely gets very hot in San Francisco, but it can get pretty cold. It doesn't get cold enough where it actually snows in the city of San Francisco. Really, if it does snow, it will melt in a day. It's always between mid to upper thirties to at most eighties, maybe high eighties.

I see. You were talking about how your grandfather moved back to Korea to check on the family. Was it during that five-year break period between the Korean War, right?

Yes, between World War II, which ended in 1945, and 1950 when the Korean War started, my grandfather had started at University of San Francisco as a medical student. When the war broke out, he had his wife, my mother, who was maybe one or two at the time, and his mother and his

two sisters in the northern part of Korea. When the war broke out, he was very concerned because obviously the north was being pushed down by the communists.

The communist movement.

Right. When the Korean War, which was a civil war between communism and...one was sponsored by the Russians and Chinese, and the other was being supported by the United States and United Nations. He was very concerned about the welfare of his family, and so he decided to return to Korea. Unfortunately, at the time—this is of course days before airplanes were readily available—he needed to book a passage back to Korea, but he couldn't find any ship that was going to Korea for civilians because of the outbreak of the war. The only ships that he could get on were military ships. He somehow talked himself into getting on a U.S. battleship, and then he was signed on as a—

As a soldier?

Yes, as a naval officer who basically reported to a high official as a translator, interpreter. Because my grandfather was born in the 1920s when Korea was occupied by Japanese as Japan's annexed land or country, he grew in the school speaking Japanese. And then he was a Korean, and so he spoke Korean obviously. And then he went to United States for studies, and he spoke English. He had really three language skills that was actually necessary at the time.

And he also spoke Chinese as well?

No, not really. I think he did live very close to the northern border with China, but I don't think he spoke Chinese at all. I've never heard tales of him speaking Chinese. On the other hand, on my father's side, my father did spend some of his childhood in China. I think when he was a toddler or very young child, he did speak Chinese then.

You were saying that your father was a principal at a private high school in Korea. Is he a smart, then, because obviously when you're a principal of a high school, you have to have a lot of schooling?

A little bit about my father is that my father's family came from the north, and he was born in the north, Korea. He came from a very prominent middle-class family who didn't have a lot of education but had a substantial amount of money and influence. When they came down to the south during—actually, because the family was rich—

You said middle class. Are they rich?

They belong to a rich clan, but they themselves were...

The lower end of the clan.

The lower end of the rich clan.

But were still rich, okay.

Basically, my grandfather's side of the family, my great-great grandfather, upper cousin or whoever, actually owned a lot of the land in North Korea that was covered with mineral mines, like gold mines and iron mines and so forth. My father's father, my grandfather, was actually a foreman at one of the gold mines. Apparently, his father's side of the family didn't have a lot of education and didn't have a lot of prestige, but they had a lot of money and a lot of gold. The family does talk about how they had chests of gold pieces. When my grandmother married my grandfather—

Just loads of gold.

Yes. But when the war broke out and they had moved down to the south, they were refugees to the south, they lost most of it. They were robbed along the way. They lost a lot of things. Things were just fine in the south for a while, but my grandfather started getting ill, and then he passed

away. When my father was in fourth or fifth grade, his father passed away. Really, the rest of the family didn't know how to survive in that new environment.

Without him.

Yes. The decline was very rapid. My father grew up in an environment of extreme poverty.

It was just a chain reaction of just really bad events that were occurring.

Yes. My father remembers as a child, especially because he was one of the nine children that my grandmother had given birth to—

That's a lot of kids.

A lot of kids. But of them, only maybe five of them survived to adulthood. Child mortality rate in those days in Korea—which was a Third World country at the time—child mortality rate was very high. But he was one of the surviving children, and he was one of the only boys. He remembers his childhood being lacking anything. It was a child who didn't really like anything in the north. But when he was maybe six or seven or eight, that's when they actually left the north to go to the south because of the outbreak of the war.

Because of the communists moving in.

Yes.

I'm your son, obviously. Your mom, my grandmother, keeps telling me I look like a family member.

Oh yes. There is a big black sheep in the family.

I look like the black sheep of the family.

Yes, yes. My grandparents, my father's parents, had nine children, and many of them passed away in their infancy or childhood. One of the children who grew to adulthood was my father's older brother, who is the second born in the family. Apparently, he was very smart. My father's

father's family was that middle class but had no education but had money versus my father's mother came from an impoverished nobility. They were super smart, had been an established family in that area for many, many generations, but they had no money.

No money, but super smart.

Exactly. Then she married a man who has a lot of money, but really no class or education.

She sounds like a really smart one, right? Very rich.

Yes. I'm sure it wasn't her choice. It was more of...in those days—

Forced marriage type stuff.

Yes, there were a lot of forced marriages, a lot of arranged marriages rather than forced.

Anyway, they didn't really have a choice. It wasn't forced because you didn't have a choice.

You do what you're told, basically. Anyway, my father's brother was born, and he was super smart. Obviously, he took on his mother's side of the family. He was so smart that they had sent him down to the south to go to what is now the Seoul National University. At the time, because we were under Japanese occupation, Seoul National University used to be called something else, like Gyeongseong National University of Japan.

Can you clarify to those people what is Seoul National University? Is it like UNLV, or is it like community college?

Seoul National University, since its establishment and to this day, is the most premier university of Korea.

It's like the Harvard.

It's like the Harvard, Yale, or Stanford. It's long established. Only the best of the best. Less than one percent gets in.

Most prestigious.

Yes. Anyway, at the time, back in the 1940s, his brother was bright enough to go to Seoul National University, and he had gone into a physics program. His major was physics. It's interesting to note that in those days, in the 1940s and '50s, in the brink of the Cold War, during World War II and aftermath of it, there was that brewing of divide between the West and the East. As it were the case in Cambridge in Oxford, so was the case in Korea, and then some other countries, too. A lot of intellectuals were very attracted to this idea of communism as a social guard, as everybody can benefit, as a social impact type of thing. The communism at its philosophical point, I think, is very beautiful. Unfortunately, the way we see communism manifested in these countries, in Russia and China and so forth, is more of a dictatorship and totalitarian government, which is not true communism. They call it communism, but it really isn't.

Anyway, I don't even remember what his name was. I think it was Tung Kun or Tong Kun or something. No. Terruen was my uncle's name. He was a very bright student, very active. The professor in the physics department apparently was a proponent of communism, and so he had a huge influence on his students. Apparently, most of that whole department ended up being supportive of communism. When the Russian forces and the Chinese forces were supporting this uprising of communism in northern Korea, he thought that he needed to be a part of that. Apparently, when the war is about to break out, there is months and years of signs and things happening, and he apparently chose to go to the north during the war while the family was moving down to the south to avoid communism.

He left his family.

He left his family to join the communist movement, and that was in the '40s, and they haven't heard from him since. It's very likely by now he's probably passed away. Also, back in the days,

a lot of people went missing, and so they could have died during the war, they could have survived and had a place in the government. Who knows?

Do you ever wonder if he's still alive, or what he's doing, or what he did?

Because my father's mother survived the war and lived through all of this and lived with our family until she passed away in 2002, I grew up with my grandmother who always wanted to see her son, who always had tears and hope that one day her son may contact her, or they may find him, or find out any news of him. Partly fear because she was afraid, what if he did survive, and what if he was a high-ranking official in the north?

As a physics major, yes.

Or a scientist or who knows? How do you deal with that? Then the hope was that because he was her son, she wanted just to get some news.

Because that's your child, yes.

You want to have closure, and you can't have closure if you have no news of him.

When the family used to see you in your hairstyle, "Oh, Andrew looks so much like the uncle, it's amazing." That comes out once in a while.

I see. Let's go back to your story and how you immigrated to America. When you did move to Hillsboro, Oregon, basically Portland. When you did move, who did you take with you, and who did you basically leave behind in Korea?

I was nine years old. I had just started third grade. I went to school for about three months.

Because I went to a private school that paid in quarters, I only went to the first quarter.

In Korea?

Yes. But I stayed home for a whole month or two. In the '80s, there were a lot of kidnappings of children, and so my parents were concerned that if people found out we were moving to

America, they would assume we had money. They didn't want to take chances, and so we were kept at home, my brother and I were kept at home for I think a month or maybe even two months. Rarely did we go out of the house. We could ride our bicycles around the neighborhood and then come right back. That was the extent of it. At that age that's very difficult to do.

Anyway, when we came, obviously I was in third grade, and so I had friends there, childhood friends. Unfortunately, I haven't kept up with any of my childhood friends. Because my brother, Frank, who is two years older, had just graduated sixth grade, he had a significant amount of friends that he left behind. At elementary school age, you adapt so fast. You learn to adapt in environments pretty quickly. Thankfully, Frank and I were both very outgoing nature, so we didn't have any challenges meeting new friends, making new friends, getting settled in the life in Hillsboro, Oregon. Hillsboro, Oregon at the time was also a very—it still is, even—a very suburban, very farm-like country, part of Portland. I think people have this idea of Portland being very chic.

Not what it is today.

Yes, what it is today. But back in the day, Portland was a very sleepy town. Very quiet, beautiful, but a lot of farm country. There was a lot of land that wasn't developed yet. The Hillsboro that I came to was very sleepy, lots of grassy areas, lots of parks, lots of undeveloped land. I had an extended family in Hillsboro with my grandparents.

Everybody on your mother's side came with you.

Yes. They were already established, or they were certainly growing after—

Oh, you were the last group to come in, basically.

Basically, on my father's side of the family, we were the last ones to arrive. Because my grandfather had established that house in Hillsboro, he had moved with his wife and his two

youngest sons, but his older two sons had also gotten their own green cards and come to move to Portland, or Hillsboro. His elderly mother at the time, who he had to leave behind, also got her immigration status, and so she was able to get there. My grandfather's mother's sister's family also had either immigrated directly from Korea or moved from New York because there was another branch of the family there. At the time when I was growing up in Hillsboro, Oregon, there was a significant amount of extended family based out of Hillsboro. Our family in particular, my parents and Frank and I, we moved to Portland, but we were considered the Hillsboro family. Then my great-grandmother's sister's branch of the family established themselves in Beaverton, Oregon, which is another suburb of Portland. We always refer to ourselves as the Hillsboro side or the Beaverton side.

What was your first impression—you said it was a very sleepy kind of town, very country like. Did you enjoy it, or is it not really your style?

Because I grew up, up until that point, in Seoul, Korea, which was a very rapidly growing city, very metropolitan part of the country in the '80s, coming to the very sleepy part of the United States was a bit of an adjustment because I did not enjoy the countryside, and I did not appreciate the beauty and the bounty of Oregon. It took me many long years after I had learned to appreciate the beauty and the nature and all that Oregon had provided. But growing up in elementary and middle school, even up through high school, I didn't really appreciate being in Oregon. I thought we're in this backwards, small, little country out in nowhere where nobody wants to be. Who wants to be in Oregon? They want to be either in San Francisco, L.A.

“Full House” type stuff.

San Francisco, L.A. or New York, big cities. I always dreamed of going to big cities. However, when I was applying for universities, I didn't want to go to any of those big cities. I ended up

wanting to stay in Oregon or go to Hawaii. Really, I only applied to University of Hawaii and to University of Oregon.

Do you think you made the right decision?

I do. Actually, I had a wonderful group of college friends, and I truly, truly enjoyed that university experience.

But as far as growing up in Hillsboro, there were very few Koreans in Oregon at the time that I knew of, and certainly not at all comparable to L.A. or Chicago or New York where there are a lot of Koreans and Korean organizations and churches. When I was growing up, I specifically also lived in parts of town where majority of the student population were Caucasians. In Hillsboro, actually there were a few more Asians because in the mid '80s, there were a lot of refugees from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam that had settled in Hillsboro. There were a lot more Southeast Asian mixed in that area, but really there were very few Koreans. I think we had Japanese exchange students in my high school.

Just a handful of Asians.

Yes, only a handful. It was predominantly a White neighborhood that we ended up living in. I always felt—

Excluded from a lot of things?

No. Actually, I deluded myself when I was growing up. I truly thought that I was an American despite the fact that I had lived in Korea until I was nine years old. When I came to the United States and I had learned English right away and adapted to the American life, I think I had really removed myself from being Asian, and I truly believed myself to be completely American in middle school. It wasn't until junior year in high school that a Korean girl had transferred into

my high school that I was exposed to Korean anything. That's when I started watching Korean dramas. At the time, it was VHS-type tapes that you had to go and rent from video stores.

Blockbuster, the good old days.

It's a Korean version of Blockbuster. You can watch Korean dramas on videos. I started listening to Korean music.

K-Pop.

A little precursor to K-Pop. Really, that's when I started getting interested in Korean culture and so forth. Then I was so enamored with the thought of Korea. I went from "I'm so American" to "Oh, Americans will never accept me as an American because of the way I look." I could be a fresh-off-the-boat German immigrant, and I would assimilate right away because I'm white and I can be American. Nobody would question that you're American if they didn't have an accent versus I could be however you look at it, I could be a first-generation Korean American, or I could be a third-generation Korean American because of my grandparents, but I would never, even my children would never be fully American because of the way we look. I thought, well, I must be Korean, then.

Then I went on this personal quest to become Korean. I wanted to so desperately go out and visit Korea, but my father wouldn't let me go visit Korea. He said that I would be a burden to whoever was left in Korea to go and visit for a long time. When I was in college, my friends and I, we decided to do a year abroad in Korea, which a lot of kids did in my circle.

Were all your friends Korean, too?

Yes.

That's why they all decided.

When I was in middle school and high school, all my friends were White. When I went to college, I came across all these other Asian Americans that had the same exact stories and background as me, who have parents who are still so much Korean, but we lived in a very White society. We really gelled together. My friends and I, we became a very close-knit group of friends, about seven of us. Very rarely do you have a friend who has a car, never mind a minivan. We would just jampack into this minivan and just drive over anywhere and do our independent things.

Anyway, the friends and I, we went to Korea for a year. That experience really opened up my eyes to understanding that I was not a Korean. I will never be a true Korean because I had lived in the United States for so long, and I had assimilated, and I had developed my outlook on life, and the way I see things is so Americanized that I could never be truly just American or truly just Korean. I am truly an Asian American, a Korean American in particular, but as a whole we're Asian Americans. I realized I needed to find my own identity as an Asian American, no longer just a Korean, or no longer just an American, but as an Asian American in American society. That's a progression, evolution of my thoughts on identity. In particular, as you know, my little cousins are now at the age of married or starting to get married.

And having kids.

And having kids. As you know, my cousin Danielle married a Caucasian man, and my cousin Marian did marry a Korean American, but for a while she was dating other Asian Americans, like a Chinese American or a Vietnamese American. My uncle, even though he had lived in the United States for over forty years, he was very much still against—not against necessarily, but very resistant to the idea of—

Very traditional.

Yes. He wanted a Korean American. He wanted somebody who had—

Or just Korean-Korean.

Right. I think he realized he couldn't expect his daughter to marry a Korean-Korean, but at least a Korean American, somebody who would have as much in common with her background so that they would all understand, not just as a couple but as a family unit. In the end, she did marry a Korean American, which turned out really great for her. But I had to constantly convince my uncle that my little cousins had more in common with, say, a Vietnamese American or Laos American, other Asian Americans than she would have with a Korean-Korean. She would have so much more in common with an Asian American than a Korean-Korean. It kind of took me aback that after forty something years in the United States that he had still that resistance within himself to accept a non-Korean son-in-law. That was sort of eye-opening.

Now that my son—you're nineteen, and you're not quite there yet, but if you were of the mind to find a life partner, I'd be totally okay with whoever you find because I truly believe in that melting pot of the United States is what makes America great and what makes America a special nation of immigrants and melting pot of different cultures. I hate the fact that "America is great" is somehow associated with President Trump, who is so... Let's not get into that. That's a whole other conversation.

I was going to say that's a whole other conversation.

That's a whole other conversation, yes.

We'll redact that information.

You went to University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon. You realized, hey, I actually enjoy being in Oregon. It's not that bad of a place.

Yes, yes.

Then in college, you studied abroad in Korea with your college friends. Took it as a decision to let's explore Korea. Let's get our own experience of Korea without our parents rather than what they're telling us or dealing with the Korean War.

Right. I just needed to know more about the country that I left behind. You have to remember I left when I had just started third grade. I hadn't even completed third grade. I had maybe three months of third grade before I came to the United States. I didn't know the geography. I didn't know the culture. The only thing I was exposed to was Korean food because I have an extended family, and we had a lot of family holidays together. But really, I didn't know enough about my background, my cultural history.

Your cultural background.

Yes.

You went to these things. What did you study?

It's funny because my junior year in college, I was an art major. There was one particular university in Korea called Yonsei that was the epicenter of all exchange programs. All the students from all over the world had an exchange program with Yonsei, and all the students went there. But when we went to orientation in Eugene in preparation for the year abroad, the department heads or the officials that were running the exchange program were saying, "Oh, I guess another year where nobody is going to go to Ewha," which was another university in Korea, in Seoul. "Everybody just wants to go to Yonsei."

Why is that?

Because Yonsei had the largest program. Everybody from all over the world who was in an exchange program went to Yonsei, and I know this because Frank, who was two years older, had already gone through it two years prior. People didn't necessarily go to Ewha because Ewha was

a woman's university. But for the exchange program, they did accept boys and men, but most people didn't know that, and people just wanted to go to a bigger university because it had a bigger program. But I spoke enough Korean where I knew I could go to Ewha, and Ewha had an art department versus Yonsei didn't. I thought I would do other courses at Yonsei to make up for it because of the credit transfer, but when they said that, when I heard them say, "Oh, no one is going to Ewha again this year; it's so unfortunate because it's such a great program," because the exchange was such that if you sent one student, another student would come, and all universities wanted to do that, they were disappointed that yet again no one was going to Ewha even though there were seven or eight of us going that year to Yonsei, I thought, oh, is it too late to change? I'd be open to going to Ewha.

Going to a new adventure and giving that chance for another student at Ewha to—

Exactly. I wasn't really thinking of the other student from Ewha coming, but it was more of even though I love my friends and I love being that close-knit, I also have always had this independent spirit. If everybody is going to one university, maybe I'll go to the other one.

You wanted to be different.

Yes. I don't want to be that different, but I kind of thought, well, Ewha has an arts program; maybe I'll go.

It just made more sense.

Yes. Up until that point, I had never considered going to an all-girls school. In fact, I had a debate in one of my university English classes about merits of a gender specific schools, like all-boys school versus all-girls school, and I fought very much against it. Then here I was, okay, I'm going to try out Ewha. I went to Ewha, and that was the best decision of my life. I still had friends at Yonsei at the same time, and so I would visit the other campus, which they're actually

right next to each other, so it was very convenient. There were a few things that because it's a much smaller school, it had a few different rules. But really at the end of the day, there were so many things that I was exposed to by being part of Ewha rather than Yonsei that I truly value those experiences and who I've become since.

What were those experiences? Can you clarify just a little bit?

Yonsei had a dormitory for those international exchange students that housed maybe hundreds of kids, maybe even four or five hundred kids, double-room dormitory. Their curfew was midnight. Ewha, at the time when I was in the exchange program, their dormitory was actually the original dormitory when the university was built in eighteen something. It was a very old building built by missionaries in Korea Methodist Missionaries in Korea, and so it was very well built, brick and timber dormitory. It was two stories. It had maybe seventy rooms altogether. In that dormitory were not just the exchange students but actually Koreans. They actually had grad students and undergrad students who wanted double rooms versus the quads that were in regular student dormitories. Because I spoke fluent Korean, I was able to get to know those girls in the dormitory really well. I got to meet the native Koreans really well. It was just such a great experience being in an all-girls environment that all those arguments that I had proposed during one of the discussions about gender-based schools, it just opened my eyes.

It went out the door.

Yes, it went out the door. The women and girls, in particular, at that young age, between sixteen to twenty something, at that particular university, which Ewha is one of those universities with a long history and very definite culture of women's achievements and so forth, they were able to really hone in on their opinions and their thinking skills, their independence, and all of that was at the destruction of male counterparts of how we will look, how we will be perceived by the

male counterparts. They were free of that to develop on their own. Even when they went into society, they would overcome all those clashes. Korean society, despite all the advancements and a lot of the changes in social aspects, is still very much a patriarchal society, male dominance. I think it's changing, and it's amazingly how rapidly things change in that culture, but at the underlying core of it is this still patriarchy. Women who have gone through schooling at Ewha are so confident in who they are because they never had to be weary of how they will be perceived by their male counterparts. They never had to fight against it. They just had to be their best without that factor. They have a very strong foundation that enables them to fight further and harder and longer against their male counterparts in a mixed society.

After your college experience, basically you went back to America, obviously, because it was a foreign exchange program, and you took those experiences with you, and it was now, what, your senior year of college?

Yes.

What were you thinking about doing after college?

When I was in Korea doing the exchange program, I had taken, obviously because I was an art major, I took art classes at Ewha. I took regular university classes instead of just the classes that were offered through the exchange program, which was conducted in English. Because I took regular classes, I met a lot of Koreans. In particular, I took a ceramics class for the first time in Korea. It was a hand-building traditional pottery class where you remake the traditional Korean pottery that you find in museums and then learn the shapes and how to build and so forth. I met a university professor there who was very renowned in her field.

When I went back to the United States, because I was a graphic design major, I couldn't get any ceramic classes because the ceramic classes are so popular at Oregon that you had to

have experience to get into those classes, or you had to be that major. It was impossible, so I gave up.

But after college, because of my experience doing ceramics in Korea, I wanted to pursue that a little bit further. As you know, a few years after graduation, I went back to school in Korea as a grad student studying ceramics.

You have a master's in ceramics from Korea?

Yes. I actually completed the master's coursework, but I didn't actually get—you have a certification of completion for coursework, but I didn't actually complete the master's final project, so I don't actually have the master's-master's degree. I have the completion of coursework for master's.

Why didn't you finish the final project?

I was married, I was pregnant, and I had to come back home for certain purposes.

You're saying I am the reason you didn't get your master's.

Right, right, that's exactly what I'm saying.

[Laughing] This whole time I thought you had a master's in ceramics, and I'm realizing I am the reason you do not have a master's in ceramics.

But it's interesting because Korean society—well, that's not part of American experience.

Anyway, I came back home, and I completed my university. I wanted to move away from my hometown. I wanted to grow. There is a saying in Korean that says when you're young, you pay to suffer, as in you should be willing to pay to learn the experience of suffering because you learn and develop through the suffering. It's worth paying money for, is what it's saying basically. I wanted to spread my wings and try my independence out, and so I moved to San Francisco.

After graduation.

After graduating from college. I started working first at a PR firm in San Francisco and then for an advertising company for a year. Then I realized I just couldn't sustain that lifestyle in San Francisco without support because I think my rent was a thousand dollars for a studio apartment about an hour bus ride away from where I worked. I was probably making maybe fifteen hundred dollars a month. Paying a thousand dollars in rent, and then you have food bills, and then you had nothing else.

Travel, transportation bills.

Thankfully San Francisco was one of those very progressive cities where I worked also for very progressive companies that actually subsidized your transportation costs. They would give you a certain amount for your parking fees, which covered maybe ten percent of their parking fees because it was so expensive, or they will buy you your monthly transportation card, and I had one of those, both companies that I worked for. Because I worked for a PR company that supported tech companies, they were very progressive, and then the advertising company, obviously. It wasn't so much the transportation. In San Francisco, you could live without having a car. In fact, it was probably cheaper without a car because land is just at such a premium.

After San Francisco, did you move back home to Oregon?

Yes, I moved back home for a year. I saved up money, paid off all the debts that I had accumulated by living in San Francisco for two years. I started taking ceramic classes at Oregon Arts and Crafts College, or Oregon...

A specialty school.

It was Oregon College of Arts and Crafts. It was such a charming little school, but it has since been closed. It was such a great environment to learn things. I had built up a portfolio, applied

for a graduate program at Ewha for ceramics. After a year, I moved back to Korea for two years doing the coursework. There was a lot of ups and downs, as in any experience, but overall, looking back now, I had such a great experience. I came back.

To Oregon after Korea.

No, no. While I was in Korea doing the graduate work, I met your father. We dated for about eight months and then got married. Your father was starting at UNLV, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He was starting at the university here, and I had gone back to Korea to finish the coursework. After I got back to Korea, I realized I was pregnant, so I finished the term and moved to Las Vegas to be with your father and to have you.

You met my dad in Korea and got married in Korea.

Yes, we had a wedding ceremony in Korea. We didn't actually do the paperwork. Then we came back to the United States, to Portland, and did actual paperwork and had a very small private ceremony at your grandparents' house. Then your dad went onto his university studies, and I went back to Korea to finish my schooling.

Was he already an official citizen of America, or did he just have a green card?

Your dad was a Korean. Your dad was born and raised in Korea, went to university in Korea, and then instead of doing just the two years of compulsory military service, he decided to go on the OCT, officer candidate program, which required four years of service. He went to Korean Navy and entered as an officer, and he worked four years in the Korean Navy. As he was getting ready to come out of the Korean Navy, he decided that he wanted to further his studies in English, and so he wanted to go to UNLV. He was already in that process when we met. He was still part of the navy, but he was in the process of getting his applications in and getting prepared

to go to UNLV. When we met, he had his sights on the United States, and I had sights in just finishing up school as soon as I could. But we met and we decided to get married.

We decided not to do the paperwork because we didn't want his visa to get complicated with marriage. Since he had already been approved for his student visa, we just let him start his university, and he came into the United States on a student visa. When I came in with him in August of '21 (sic), we had actually officiated the wedding in Portland, Oregon.

He was an international student for a while, and then when his green card came out, he became a Nevada citizen, so then he became a domestic student at UNLV, a resident student. You know your dad. He's such an incredible person because he came to the United States when he was twenty-eight, almost thirty. He really still to this day has a very heavy accent. He was going to the university, and he had a perfect GPA. I don't think he's ever gotten a B for the four years that he went to UNLV. He was also working a full-time job at the MGM Grand as a pit clerk. After he graduated, he started more to get his accounting degree and his accounting CPA. He had his hands full, too.

One of his dreams was to actually join the U.S. Navy. At the time, he didn't want to join it as an enlistment, a regular soldier. He wanted to join as an officer because he had already been an officer.

High goals.

Yes, he had impossible goals, and I don't know how he didn't do it. He was already over the age limit to apply as an officer, but it was soon after 9/11, so there were a lot of wars. We were having a war in Iraq and in Afghanistan. They had extended the age limit for officers joining the military. When he applied and had gotten accepted, which took almost a year to process, he had just made it. I think he had gotten his approval in November of whatever year, and the cutoff was

January, his birthday. He had just barely made it within the cutoff, and then he became the U.S. military officer. As you know, he just got out after being a lieutenant in the Navy for ten years, I think.

Probably actually a little over ten years now. What about you? This is your story, obviously. His story is amazing as well, but this is your story. You came to Vegas. I know from your standing that you did nothing related to ceramics at all for your coursework.

When we first got settled in Las Vegas after having you—I had you in Portland because, one, I wanted to be near my mother and near my comfortable surroundings rather than have you in Las Vegas. The other thing was I didn't want that stigma of being Las Vegas-born for you. You were going to be raised in Las Vegas no matter what, but I wanted you to have an Oregon birth certificate. I don't know why, but I think it's that love of Oregon, maybe, or maybe because that's where I think my hometown is. But I went back to Portland, moved in with your grandparents, and had you there. Then I moved back out to Vegas when you were a baby.

I started working at the MGM Grand at the front desk, and I had a baby at home. Really, it was just too crazy to do anything else because of working full-time and taking care of a baby and making a living was very tough. But whenever I had time, I used to try to take a ceramic class to use their facility and their studio, really. But I found it to be extremely hard because I couldn't go there more than maybe once a week, and even once a week was a very difficult thing to arrange because you were still a baby, and even if I put you in daycare, I felt guilty.

You wanted to be a good mom.

Yes. Even if I could go to the studio, the studio was pretty far, and the air quality was different. It's a lot drier here than it is in Oregon, or Korea for that matter. When you throw a pot on a wheel, in Oregon it could take a day. You could wrap it up, and it would be fine for days, and

you could come back and trim it. But in Las Vegas, this air was so dry the pot that you threw would be dry enough to trim within an hour, and I couldn't get back fast enough to do that. I knew it was a little bit too early to do it. Then I would wait a few more years until you were a little older. I would try it again. It still wasn't working out. Every few years I tried, but it really didn't work out.

Why did you start working at MGM? Why not any of the other hotels?

When we moved to Las Vegas, I had you and I realized I needed a very steady job that offered insurance and daycare. Daycare was of primary importance because I needed a clean, safe environment that was reliable. A lot of daycares in the city actually only accepted kids that were potty trained, and you were a newborn. I think you were exactly three months when we moved back to Vegas. I looked at all the casinos that had any kind of daycare system, and MGM at the time had just opened, like the previous year or not very long before that, and they had an onsite daycare that was twenty-four hours seven days a week. The only other hotel on the Strip that offered that was the Venetian who had a daycare on site, but they were closed from midnight to six a.m. Now, when you started off at a front desk in Las Vegas hotel, you don't just go into a shift. You got into what's called flex full-time. You get your forty hours a week, but you don't know your schedule. Your schedule could change from day to day, and you don't know your schedule until the week prior. If I was working at Venetian and I had a graveyard shift, what would I do with you? I couldn't take that chance, so I chose MGM Grand, which worked out really great because MGM Grand owned five or six properties on the Strip at the time, and so there was always that growth potential and upper mobility potential versus the Venetian was an independent hotel that didn't have any sister properties.

Tell me your story. You started at front desk. What else did you do from there?

In October 2002, I entered the front desk arena, which was very difficult, but you learn a lot. Soon thereafter, I had an opportunity to do part-time in the VIP lounge. Soon after, an actual shift opened up in the VIP lounge, and so I worked there and at the penthouse concierge desk there. Then I used to see these people come in and hold a meetup point. It was a VIP lounge that was a meetup point for these executives. I was curious as to what they were doing, and they were actually convention sales managers meeting up with clients to do sights of the conference center facility. I thought, oh, that's a very interesting job career. Maybe I could get into that. How do I get into that? What kind of background would I need? Then I was curious to find out.

Soon there was a position that opened within the hotel operations where you managed rooms, so you're an inventory controller, and the inventory being the room. In a major hotel, you have any number of suites and room types and so forth, and you have blocks for tour groups, you have blocks for casino guests, you have blocks for entertainment guests, you have blocks for convention guests, and so forth. I started controlling rooms. I used to be behind the office, kind of a controller. Then a group reservations specialist position became available. That's dealing with room reservations for conventions and different room blocks for weddings, et cetera. I did that.

Then a position opened up in the conference center for a service manager for smaller meetings. It was called the Executive Meetings Services Manager. Honestly, at that time, I didn't think I had enough background to apply, but I just wanted to learn more about it. When one of the Executive Meeting Services Manager was leaving, I had emailed her boss and said, "Hey, I would really love to learn more about this position. I'd like to get myself prepared for that role for the next opportunity that comes up." I went and met with her, and she says, "Why wait? I think you're ready. Why don't you go ahead and apply?"

I applied, I got the position, and I cried for the first three months because it was so hard. I am pretty quick about learning things. I'm very adaptable, but that was probably the hardest adjustment I have ever gone through. After six months, I got comfortable. After a year, I felt like I had mastered it somewhat. But it was long hours and lots of details and lots of stress. You were starting kindergarten at that time, so you spent a lot of your weekends and your evenings there with me while I was working.

Then another opportunity came up. When MGM Resorts bought Mandalay Group, there was an opportunity for me to become a convention services manager for larger programs at Mandalay Bay. I applied. It was just perfect timing. I applied, and so I was able to transfer there. I did that for about four years. Then I took sort of a pseudo sales role in the sales department for Mandalay Bay as a site inspection site manager—that was real interesting—for about two years.

Then I thought it was time for me to explore other options outside the casinos and the convention centers. I hopped around for a little bit, and a couple years back I started working for event organizers.

That's what you do now. You're working for...because you have a new job now.

Yes. I start a new job next week, but it's basically in a similar industry. It's B2B, Business to Business, trade show organizer.

Are you happy with what you're doing now?

Yes.

Are you excited?

Yes. I tried a few different things prior to doing this, and I've realized those years of hard training at MGM and Mandalay Bay has really brought me valuable skills that I could apply to this new job, and it's something I'm really good at. It wasn't necessarily the kind of thing that I

would have looked forward to when I was young, or even dreamed about, but now that I have the skills and the know-how and the mastery of it, I feel it fits my personality now more than ever.

Actually, I think my personality has adapted to become a better person for the job.

This is an overall question. If you could change one thing about your whole immigration experience or anything, really, in between, or even if you wouldn't want to change anything, what would it be?

I have to, first of all, say this disclaimer that I didn't have the struggles that most people would have only because, one, I was from a country that had a very good immigration policy in place already. I'm not coming from—

No Chinese Exclusion Act or anything like that.

No, no Chinese Exclusion Act, and it was a different time. I'm not coming in from South America where there is economic or societal hardship that forces me to come out. It was a choice that my parents had made. My parents were of middle class, were intellectuals, and I had grandparents who had established American life. Compared to any number of people that I could meet, I really did have it very easy. I wouldn't even want to change anything from the way I experienced it because everything was such a smooth sailing for me. Not to say I don't pay attention to what's going on now, not just with the Asians, but also all across the world with these migrations of people who are seeking better lives for themselves and their children.

Because I'm an immigrant, even though I had a very smooth experience, I am very interested in what's going on in the world and how the world is treating these migratory refugees and people who are seeking better life.

Seeking asylum, they say.

Seeking asylum, seeking not only asylum, but just a better life for their children.

Now knowing all these things about other countries in the world, if you ever got the chance, now that you're an adult, would you immigrate anywhere else in the world, or would you still immigrate to America?

I would love to experience living in other countries, and despite America having so many challenges and so many troubles, it is still in my mind and in my thoughts the best country to live. Again, I would love to live elsewhere for the experience of it, but America is home.

America is the best country in the world. Who knows in fifty years where it will be because I think there's a lot of things that need to be improved and worked on, but right now, America is the best country. I couldn't think of another country that truly embraces diversity like the United States. Yes, there are European countries that seem like they're doing that, and America has its own share of diversity problems and racial tensions and all of that, but despite that all, in comparison America is the best.

Have you ever considered leaving America and just permanently living in Korea again?

My parents think about that a lot, and they fantasize about going back to Korea and buying a small country house, blah, blah, blah. It's a fantasy. I don't think they really realize the realities of it. My parents are in their seventies and eighties, and they feel like that they're more Korean because of the language barrier, but actually it's not true. They lived overseas for over forty years, and they don't know Korea like they think they do, and I don't know that they would adapt to living in Korea the way they think that they will. I certainly don't have any plans to live in Korea full time for any number of years. I think it can be done for maybe two years at a time or short for missions and projects or whatever, but I don't plan to live in Korea for an indeterminate number of years in Korea. No, I don't. Again, I would love for everyone to

experience living abroad and just trying something that's different from your norm, but I don't have any plans to live in Korea full time.

Awesome. That's all the questions I have. Is there any last few words or a piece of advice you would like to say at all?

Yes. We go through different evolutions. We're everchanging, ever-developing, wisening up, learning to think and look at things differently. Don't confine yourself. You are who you are today, but that doesn't mean that's who you're going to be and remain that tomorrow. Always explore and always be willing and ready to accept new opportunities that come your way, and America is the best place to do it. It offers the most variety, the best of a lot of things in life for you to learn and develop into being the best you that you can be.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

[End of recorded interview]