

AN INTERVIEW WITH SARA KALAORAM

An Oral History Conducted by Alexandra Arabshian

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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Oral History Project

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



“I’m speaking for how many people I’ve spoken about already in this interview and just how much they’ve touched me and how much I am a result of that.”

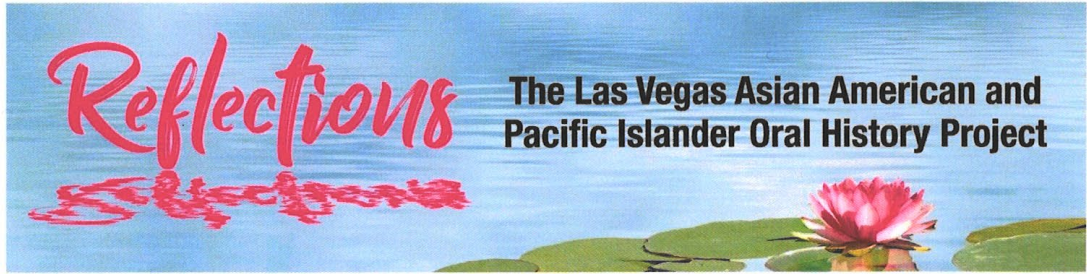
Born in Singapore of a Thai father and Singaporean mother, four-year-old Sara Kalaoram arrived in the U.S. with her parents in 2002 as a child with her parents. She speaks to her closeness with her culture and her grandmother, and she recalls her early impressions of Las Vegas, her schooling, and her higher education at Arizona State University, where she earned her degree in Communications. After graduation she returned to Las Vegas and became involved with Culinary Union Local 226 and state politics.

She currently works with Assemblyman Steve Yeager as his executive assistant, campaign manager, and district director. Here, she explains why her family left Singapore and Thailand and how the family has prospered in Las Vegas. She discusses differences in cultural traditions and offers stories about herself and her family and highlights what it means to be an Asian American immigrant in twenty-first century America.

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November 15, 2021
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Alexandra Arabsian

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My name is Alexandra Arabsian. I'm conducting an interview on November 15th, 2021, for the Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander Oral History Project.

And me, the interviewee. My name is Sara Kalaoram, and I'm very excited.

My first question is: Talk about your family and your childhood. This includes schooling, recreation, friends, family trips, vacation, relatives.

Background around my family, I am half-Thai, half-Singaporean, and I was born in Singapore. When my parents first got together, my dad actually was a fully practicing Buddhist monk. As we know, they are typically celibate for the rest of their lives, until he met my mother. They spent a few years traveling in the U.S. and decided that they would move here permanently before I was born. I was born in Singapore, and I spent my early years in Thailand with my dad's family while he was setting up a house and our situation in the States. I spent the first few years without him, just my mom, in Thailand.





Sara at her first Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS) conference, May 23-24, 2022, Washington, DC, wearing the same pleated wrap that she wore as a toddler (pictures above).

When the time came, we moved to Las Vegas. We moved here dirt poor, had two hundred bucks to our name, and it was me and my parents. My mom was a full stay-at-home mom while my dad worked odd jobs. It was like this for a couple of years. It was six years until my brother was born, so I was pretty much an only child for my first formative years.

I went through the typical public education system in Nevada. Low-income schools, in my neighborhood, anyway. I excelled in school only because my mother was very much a tiger mom, and school was twenty-four seven, out of school, at home. It was just constant. Achieving

the typical American dream, for sure that was her M.O., her agenda. I enjoyed it, but I definitely grew up in a more dangerous neighborhood, I would say, but it was nothing out of the ordinary to me growing up as a child.

But we definitely got a lucky break because when I was ten years old or so, still very much a child, with my four-year-old brother, she got her first job in the States, and she was one of the first people to work at the Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas. She was one of the first people when they first opened up, and I spent the next couple of years of my life seeing neither of my parents, honestly, kind of self-parenting and just doing me and going to school by myself. Pretty much, we went up in income, so we went up in housing. We bought our first home in the States a year later, pretty much, and that was the first time we actually had roots versus staying in an apartment. It was the first time we got the dog, got pretty much the white picket fence American dream story. That's how we lived, I say, my childhood.

Did you have any recreational things you liked to do, any sports, any music?

I was definitely a terrible child. I remember the early AOL days of the Internet, and we had those ancient white desktop computers that would boot up and light the whole household up because it was so loud, and the fan was going all night. You couldn't answer a phone call if the computer was on, I remember that. I fell in love with it. I was just enamored playing solitaire on the computer because that's all I knew how to do. I really fell into technology early on, and I was good at it, honestly. I was good at art, and honestly, one of those middle school things where it's like, what's your niche? Oh, it's drawing. I was one of those kids. I was really good at painting, drawing, and something artistic on top of tech.

For high school, I specifically chose a high school that focused on anything tech related, so I chose to go to Southwest so that I could do web design while I also did graphic design in my

free time. It was a fun way to make money. I don't know. I can say it's a hobby, but I made money off of it. That's definitely one thing I wanted to do from a really young age. I thought I would be one of those girl boss hackers when I was growing up, and that never panned out, but that was definitely something I really wanted to do growing up. But I can say that's a recreational activity.

How did you find making friends?

It was interesting only because I'd say the elementary school I went to was probably 70 percent Hispanic, 20 percent Black, and 10 percent everything else including the microscopic Asian population. I was probably, honestly, one of ten kids in the entire elementary school who was Asian. Being one of the largest Filipino immigrant communities, that was the majority of the other Asians, I'd say. At the same time, anybody else looking at any Brown, Asian child would assume they're Filipino, anyway. On top of just being scrutinized for being Asian, it was reduced down to not even respecting my nationality. That was something I dealt with growing up in the States. It got to the point where it was very normal for me to be the only Asian person and be asked typical insensitive questions from other minorities, not just White people, not just the typical racist people. It was other minorities who knew absolutely nothing about Asian people let alone going down to ethnicity and nationality.

It only became super difficult when it came down to...a memory in the fourth grade. This is literally the fourth grade, and so we're well beyond our early second grade social studies. Fourth grade, there was a question on this test or something in the social studies period of the day. It said, "Write the country and the city or town that you came from." A very typical "where are you from" question. I wrote, "Singapore, Singapore." The country of Singapore, the city of Singapore. The teacher said, "There's no such thing." I said, "Yes, there is. I was born there."

The teacher literally said, “You should ask your parents where you’re from.” I’m like, “I am from the city, state of Singapore.” A fourth-grade student arguing with her teacher about where she’s from off a basic geographical question. Stuff like that, very common, very frustrating, and it forces children to mature, honestly. You should not have to be answering these questions against fully grown adults, but that is what I experienced growing up until I went to a majority Asian high school at Southwest where I’d say half the population, if not more, were Asian students from every part of Asia.

There was a dramatic difference from then on, truly. There was no such thing as a group of you and five other Asian students banding together in class. There is no such thing anymore. Everyone else is Asian, and you can start to actually see people’s personalities aside from just being the token Asian child.

Tell us about your grandparents, some stories your grandparents might have told you about their lives.

I’m pretty close to my grandmother. I never really interacted with my grandfather or my dad’s side. They were just out of the picture. We barely speak the same language. My mom’s mother is really close, and she currently lives with us. She is the typical, “I was born in the wartime. I’ve experienced everything there is to experience.” Singapore being a really new country compared to the rest of the world, they were from just around wartime, and they’re relatively new. She was there in the earliest transformative years of Singapore, and the stories that she would tell, it’s typical. “I had to go through rain, sleet, and snow just to get to class.” But she comes with a boatload of culture that will never be formalized or put into texts in any what-so way. Ethnically, I am Singaporean, which is kind of rare because the country itself is, I think, more than 70 percent immigrant workers. There is maybe a 20 percent ethnically Singaporean population and

reduced down even further by pulling of immigration. I am one of the very few ethnically Singaporean people from the earliest days. My grandma made sure to drill that into me growing up and just how important it is and passing down food. I think the easiest way for her to bond with her American grandchildren, every time she came, when she would fly here for a month every couple of years, was to cook for us and tell us stories while she was cooking—AKA forced child labor while we did all the chopping and cutting and peeling—as she would tell us why it was important to know these things, like recipes that will never be written down, which we probably should do. But that was her love language, pretty much, is really cooking with us and teaching us about food, especially since I was one of her few grandchildren. There's only four of us now. She made sure that I knew what I had to before anything would happen to her. But that's what I remember of her.

A lot of preserving the culture.

Absolutely, and only through your own memory, right? You never write this stuff this down. There's no measurements. There is no writing anything down. It's just you watch it and then repeat.

A little shift in questions. What and where was your higher education?

After I graduated from high school in Vegas, I went to Arizona State University for their communications program, and I loved it. I completed my degree a year early. While I was there, I loved comm so much, I became a communications mentor at CommLabASU, which is the largest communication lab on the West Coast. I really stuck around for it, and I loved it. During that time, I got really involved in nonprofit work, I'd say, and I worked for Phoenix Sister Cities in my final semester. At that point, I was just really trying to jump into work because I really enjoyed the work that I was doing at Phoenix Sister Cities because it was just a multinational

organization where it's ten sister cities in Phoenix, and it was just culture, economics. It was just...I loved it. I loved working there.

I switched all my classes to online so that I could work while also going to school, and that's how I dished out. When I was home over the summer, I would do full-time summer school at CSN because it was a million times cheaper.

How do you identify ethnically?

Ethnically, I am Singaporean and Thai.

If you know much about it, tell about your family's migration story. What made your family members decide to come to the mainland U.S.? I know you said a few things earlier.

How and when did they leave, and who came with them?

It's pretty interesting. I touched a little bit about how I got here, but I can't give you exact dates on how they planned it. Singapore has extremely strict marriage and citizenship laws. My mother is a full Singaporean citizen, and my dad was a Thai immigrant, visa-holding immigrant since he was just with my mom. In Singapore, it's one of the few modern nations that does not allow dual citizenship. I happen to have both still, which U.S. citizenship is not allowed, but anyway.

In order for them to get married—they've been together since my mom was literally ten or eleven, her whole life. In order for them to get married, he legally could not marry my mother unless...the details. If you lived there for ten years, you cannot marry a Singaporean citizen. It's a very strict marriage law out there, so they did not want to get married out there, anyway, and on top of just being a really rigorous education system that they didn't want to put me through, they thought it was best if they could just move to the States instead, and they got married in the States and started their life here. That was the catalyst to why they would move in the first place.

They got married out in the U.S., and they just rode out their time in Singapore while they had it because he was on a temporary visa. I can't give you exact dates, but this all happened before I was born, already in the works if they did get married. That's what happened.

Who and what were the hardest people or things to leave behind?

That's interesting because I was really young, but I had a lot of memories growing up there. It was truly leaving absolutely everything; family, culture, the house, the people I knew, and this is as a child, and it's a drastically different environment than growing up in the States. On top of just culture shock, it's an environmental difference. It is a living difference. My dad wasn't even around, anyway, for my early years because he was already in the States, so all I knew was my grandmother and my mom at best, and I was leaving the other half of that. My mom came with me. On top of her just trying to adjust here, she always had to raise me, so she wasn't even emotionally all the way there because she was literally focusing on surviving out here. It was leaving behind absolutely everything at a really crucial time, pretty much.

How did you stay in touch with distant family members?

Ah, the good old AOL. Back in the day, what was it called? It was the instant messaging on something. It was on something. IMing back in the day, the time zone was so off that we could only talk to them for thirty minutes a day or something like that, just try and hang out with them every once in a while with very dodgy Internet.

What are your and your family's fondest memories of home, maybe ones that you talk about to this day, or something like that?

Food is a love language, and even if you could cook what you ate back home, you can't find the ingredients, and it just does not taste the same, kind of how Coke in Mexico tastes so much better than Coke in the U.S. because they're just made with different things. Even if you could replicate

it, it would never be the same as home cooking. That's the biggest thing that we all missed, for sure.

What was it like for you or your family members to go through U.S. Immigration? If you remember any of your own memories...?

I do. My dad was already a citizen; me and my mom were not. I became a U.S. citizen when I was nine or ten. The same teacher who told me Singapore was not a country, that was the same time I got my citizenship. My mom didn't give me all the details because she was already working in the background on getting me my citizenship, and it was a lot easier to get as a child, but she never told me how difficult it was to get. She just kind of did it for me behind the scenes. I literally remember giving them my fingerprints. I remember the memories. They give you a tiny, little U.S. Flag as a souvenir. I was pulled out of class that day, I remember. I was pulled out of class to go get my citizenship in the morning, and she sent me back to class after I was done with this process. They came back, and she told my teacher what happened. When I came back to class, all my other fourth-grade buddies were like, "How does it feel being a citizen now?" It was a very surreal, like, "I don't know." I signed my name very poorly on the paper. You don't quite understand the gravity of what you did when you hear...growing up now, you hear stories of people getting their citizenship and how emotional they get, older people. But as a kid, it was just like, I don't know; I have no idea what I just did. My mom got her citizenship years later, and I got to see that process more up close, pretty close, and going through the questions, changing all the legal paperwork. I got to see it through her, but I also going through it myself.

Why exactly did your family choose Las Vegas?

That's a good question. I honestly have no idea aside from just living costs because my dad lived in Hawaii when he first moved to the States, and he worked on the coffee farms in Kona while he was trying to get some money for us. I think we had connections in Las Vegas because Las Vegas has a really old, really important Thai Buddhist temple out here. It's the first. It's on Simmons, and it's a cultural icon. I think he had uncles who were monks at this temple. On top of Vegas having a really big Thai population, it was just easiest for him to assimilate and just get back on his feet out here.

What were your first memories of Las Vegas, and where did you live when you first arrived in Las Vegas?

I lived in these really tiny low-income apartments that I grew up in for the first ten years of my life. I'm talking when we first moved there, I had a mattress in the living room that my parents swear that never happened, but it did happen, in a one-bedroom apartment. Just high turnover, low income, and just everything...this apartment pretty much raised me. When my brother was born, we literally moved from the one-bedroom apartment to the two-bedroom apartment in the exact same complex, so I grew up in this apartment for the first ten years.

What were the most difficult things about those early days in Las Vegas, and then who did you find helpful?

We hardly had any money, and my dad worked all the time, and so it was just me and my mom at home. We had no car, no assistance, no family, and no money, so we would rely on neighbors, and my mom would just make friends with the creepy old neighbors just so we could get rides to and from. We lived down the street from Food4Less and the thrift store, and that's when she got her, I don't know, hustle on, I suppose. Almost everything I own is secondhand, for sure, or

inherited from her. We would literally just rely on who we could for assistance, especially transportation, and being pushed around in a cart.

You've lived in other cities because you went to ASU, so compare Las Vegas to other American cities that you have lived.

I grew up here my entire life, technically. I went through all three schools in Vegas, and I just knew I had to get out of this city for college because I just could not see myself going to my higher education in the city as well. Everyone very much opposed this. Everyone in my life opposed going out of state because, one, it costs too much; two...people come up with any excuse. I was just so determined. I just submitted my applications, anyway. I found out about WUE, or the Undergraduate Exchange Program, which reduces neighboring state's tuitions to near in-state prices. My parents just did not want me going too far because they were just typical possessive parents. I was like, "Phoenix is the closest city aside from California, and I can't afford California, so I'm going whether you like it or not." That's kind of why I chose it.

But as a city, I went from hot to hotter, and it's very similar to Vegas, in a lot of ways. In terms of environmental and just literal desert city living, but Arizona actually has multiple forms of income aside from just relying on tourism. While I was out there, aside from just living in a typical, similar environment, the city itself is drastically different because they don't have twenty-four-hour Walmarts; they don't have restaurants that go almost twenty-four hours. It sounds very, I don't know, privileged, but it was a very dramatic shift not being able to do what I normally do, especially growing up in Vegas. Typically, it would be, "Oh, me and my friends are going to the casino to watch a movie." Out there, you can't even find a casino unless you drive thirty minutes out, and even then, it's not a typical thing. Their bars close, at all, which is a shock to me. Aside from just living through my college experience, it was kind of living in a more

regular city life, realizing that Vegas itself is very, very different from other typical U.S. cities while Phoenix is more common. That's what I missed.

Tell me about your Las Vegas family composition.

What do you mean?

You said you have a brother? Just one brother?

Yes. My Vegas family composition is literally me, my two parents, my younger brother, and, more recently, my aunt and grandma from Singapore moved here a couple of years back. My grandma lives with us now. A grand total of six people in my entire family live out here now.

Tell me about your work in Las Vegas, all jobs. You can start from your first job to your current if you'd like. You can expand on one more than the other. Anything you have to say about them.

The high school I went to kind of set me up for everything web development and handling clients, and that was my first taste doing client work. I hated doing the work, but I loved working with the clients, and I realized that comms was the way to go. When I went out to college, I went for communications, and the very first public speaking class that I took talked about CommLabASU, which is the communication lab. What they do is, every time you have a public speech that you have to deliver, they send you to the comm lab, and you pretty much work one-on-one with the communication specialist for thirty minutes to an hour on your project. They give you tips on how to better your speaking ability and how to write better. Pretty much everything about it, I loved. Everyone else hated it. People despise public speaking. I love the anxiety, which is because I'm just strange. But I loved it. I was like, "Put me on this. I don't know how to do this, but I need to be there."

A semester later, I interviewed with them, and I joined the comm lab, and that's pretty much my first job, I'd say, because it's pretty much working full time, but it's also part of the college. While I was a communication mentor, I loved what I was doing, but we also would help outside clients. For example, external organizations and companies who needed help, or if people thought their work environment needed a little boost in terms of how to communicate with each other. We would help outside clients, or, for example, the Boys and Girls Club would come, and we would help them. I loved working with this community outreach aspect of the comm lab. By my first year, when I felt like my time was coming to an end just being a mentor, they opened up the idea that they would put me on professional development and community outreach instead. They kept me on for another semester pretty much doing all of that and helping external clients and helping bring clients in and just working with them. I loved it. I loved the community outreach aspect of it. I fell in love with nonprofit work, and I ran with it.

By the end of that, I worked on a TEDx project for ASU West. While I was working the TED project, I was like, "Yes, this is what I want to do." That's when I started working with Phoenix Sister Cities. When I worked at Phoenix Sister Cities, I was the assistant to the youth and development—a super long title—long title. I worked with the youth in Phoenix. While I was there, the program itself was pretty much working with schools and students who were part of Phoenix Sister Cities. This student exchange program is pretty much the youth would go to our sister cities and spend a summer out there with their host family and their host program, pretty much serving the city that they are staying in. A lot of that work is volunteer based as well. It is torture to work with volunteers. Volunteers are the hardest people to get involved and get engaged and get interested in things that you do because they have no obligation to help you, but yet, they do. I loved it. I love the difficulty of it. I love motivating volunteers and just that

aspect of working with volunteer-based people. I loved it. I liked that part of nonprofit work, too, and I dug into deeper into that.

Then when college was over, I came home. I moved my whole life back to Vegas, back into my parents' house, and I did not know what to do with myself because I lost all my freedoms. I lost what I was really excited about doing. I had this grand scheme that I would just work for the UN someday or something like that, and then that was the year that Trump got elected, and I was like, "Yeah, I'm not putting an ounce of my energy towards this organization."

I switched gears and looked locally. Instead of trying to save the world outside of Las Vegas, I looked inside, and that's when I got involved at the Culinary Union, the biggest union in Nevada, the biggest hospitality union in the country. I was like, why am the hell am I looking to do anything outside of Vegas when the problem is here? I begged and pleaded the research director at Culinary to give me a shot because I just wanted to be a part of that. They took me on. It was the most transformative crash course I've ever experienced because at this time my mom was a huge union organizer. She is a volunteer organizer. She was coming home with stories every single day about the union, and I was like, yeah, shut up, whatever, who cares? Around college is when I started tuning into what she was saying. This is the time where hospitality in Las Vegas is dramatically better than other hospitality industries across the country because of unions and unions alone. The biggest union strikes happened in Vegas, and this didn't happen a million years ago. This happened recently, in our lifetime. It's crazy to actually be part of an organization that is still fighting the good fight.

I started off with research. I went into politics then, and then I went to the comm side. I touched a little bit...I even did extra organization out in the satellite station. I touched everything while I was there. I ran one of the largest phone banks during early vote for the Culinary Union,

and that's when I fell into politics. I was like, well, voluntary based communication work with people, and then threw politics into it because we were in charge of our biggest phone banking and early vote stations at the time, and I loved that, too. I did all of that and worked crazy hours, and we fell right into COVID.

I worked all the way through the start of COVID until they just couldn't keep me on anymore. It was a very quiet couple of months in quarantine. I was kind of regaining my sanity from working the way that I worked and just kind of getting my head in the game. I just literally packed a bag and got in the car and just bought a National Park pass and traveled all throughout Utah and the southern Southwest United States and just did the whole hippie wanderlust thing and just tried to get in touch with myself again because I was just working so much at that point that I started to lose just me. There was no other time to do it, anyway, because when would you ever have the time?

This is all important. I did everything and then nothing for quarantine. In December of the pandemic, last year, Culinary reached out to me and asked if I'd be interested in running for the seat of Assembly District 42. They wanted me to run for office on top of just having done all that, months later, after doing absolutely nothing for a couple of months, and I said, "What the heck?" They asked me to run for office at the tender age of twenty-two. This would have meant that I'd be the youngest ever politician in Nevada. I was like, "Sure, I guess." I knew nothing about politics. I knew nothing aside from just the typical engaged Gen Z-Millennial cusp. I was really passionate about politics. I just never thought of running myself. They were like, "Yes, we'll deal; we'll coach you through it." It was the most intense three-week process of my entire life because it was a big deal.

Pretty much, instead of running for a seat, this was an appointment, and on top of cleaning up my life and just learning about what the position was and starting to get into the mix and how official this was, I was deathly terrified, for sure. I knew it was something I wanted to do. It was just something I wasn't super confident yet in.

But it all worked out for the better because I went through the interview process. What you do in the interview process and the appointment is you interview with caucus leadership. They were looking to fill the seat for Assembly District 42, and there were other candidates, of course, five other candidates, and they interview with you. Apparently, I did okay because a week later they came out and said, "We are not going with you, but we're bringing you up regardless for something." I was like, "Okay, for something."

The very next day, the caucus director called me personally, and she said, "I want you for our top spot because you have the background for it. We want you. Session in Nevada is only six months every two years, and session starts the first week of February." I went out the week after. The second week of February, I went up, so I already went up late to session. Everyone has already been there for months getting prepped for the session to come. I went up late, newcomer into the game of politics. Threw me into the mix.

Up there, I was the communications manager of the Assembly Democratic Caucus, meaning running their comms for them on top of literally getting to know these people, all at the same time. While I was up there last minute, my roommate is Assemblywoman Tracy Brown-May, who won the position for AD 42, so we already had that going. She came up late with me, and I had my representative. On top of being the comms person for her, it was crazy. It's crazy.

That was my position up there, and I successfully survived session, I suppose that's what they would say. It was especially rough this year because it was a pandemic year, and we weren't

allowed to have lobbyists in the building. On top of not knowing as many people as I probably needed to know, I could not yet match faces to emails, to names. The last two weeks of session is when lobbyists were allowed to be in the building. I was like, oh crap, I don't even know these people. Anyway, I survived it.

In that month of June, getting prepped to come back down to Vegas again, Assemblyman Steve Yeager reached out to me saying, "Hey, loved you up in session. Loved your personality. Be my person." I'm currently his executive assistant, slash, campaign manager, slash, district director, and I'm in it for the long run with him. I am pretty much his right-hand woman in all things, and the best relationship that I've had yet, the most stable one yet. It's just him and I pretty much going at what the state of politics is in Nevada right now on top of just the changing tide of politics and coming from this supermajority to who knows what in the next coming years, but we'll see. That's where I'm currently at and loving it.



Assemblyman and Speaker Pro Tempore Steve Yeager and Sara on candidate filing day 2022

That was awesome. Getting back to a little bit more of Las Vegas, where in Las Vegas have you lived? In these neighborhoods, were there other people of your ethnic background?

The apartment I grew up is quite literally right off the Strip, and absolutely not, no other Asians, none, no one. When I moved to the house, we still don't really interact with the neighbors.

We've been living there for...until I moved recently. We are typically the only Asian people wherever we go regardless, so we'd have to look outside to even be with our community.

Have you noticed these neighborhoods change at all?

When I say I lived on Decatur, we didn't have any neighbors or people close to us who were Asians, but we lived right by Chinatown, and I watched Chinatown bloom from the orange-top old Chinatown to touching our current house, which is all the way by Rainbow, touching Jones.

Over the last ten years or so, the transformation, I've seen the actual section of Chinatown bloom into what it is today, which is rapidly growing, and the population to reflect so. More working-class Asian Americans are living in central Vegas and Assembly District 42 than ever. I saw that happen in real time.

That's awesome. Tell me about traditions and festivals that are important to your family?

Are there festivals that you would like to reinstitute?

It's interesting. Since my dad practiced for so long as a monk, it was really important that we would go to the temple all throughout my childhood, and especially the really old Thai Buddhist temple on Simmons. We had a really good connection with the chief monk there, the previous chief monk who passed recently, and he was technically my godfather in that way. We were very, very close. We would go for every major festival as it is because Thai people love to eat, and our festivals, like New Year's, it was important that we were there for these festivals because I think that was the last piece to maintaining culture because my mom is Singaporean, but she's

completely fluent in Thai, and she grew up in Thailand, pretty much. She spent a lot of her life there as well. It was important for her as well to have her American children attend these Thai traditions even if we didn't understand what was happening.

How did your celebrations and festivals change after you moved to Las Vegas, if you remember them from being young?

I remember just how important it was for both countries, in Thailand and Singapore itself, because Singapore being a melt pot, they celebrate every holiday of every culture because they have to, and in Thailand, religion is extremely engrained in their culture, and the whole country celebrates. It's not just a one-off thing, not just sectional. In Las Vegas, even in the earliest days I remember, it was never really a big deal to celebrate other culture's holidays and traditions while in today's time, I can very easily...Diwali, for example, it's, I guess, quote, cool to celebrate other culture's holidays now, and there are festivals for all to enjoy here versus what it was twenty years ago where you would never really hear about it unless you go to the place of such. It's a lot easier now, but definitely it's still only celebrated intensely amongst cultures and groups and communities.

What are a few of the most significant events in the history of your family and community?

Significant events in my family...that's a hard one, I think.

You've told me your family's immigration story. Are there any other significant events that happened to your family, or even just you, your community?

I think personally for my family, every few years has been an adjustment period, I'd say. Immigrating here and spending a couple of years just getting adjusted to what we were living with, and then moving again and getting adjusted with that. But I think the biggest change in my family structure was when my grandma and my aunt immigrated here because they would be

hearing from us the ways of the American people, I'd say, and so it was their time to immigrate here, too. My grandma is a true Singaporean in the kind where she has no interest in getting adjusted whatsoever and just sticking to what she knows while my aunt, she worked an upper-level management position in Singapore for hospitality, anyway, and so the shift to Vegas wasn't too different since it's technically hospitality as well.



Sara with grandmother, Lily Teo, after Lily received her citizenship



But she was very eager to jump into what we say is our lifestyle. Then coming here and living with us for a couple of years while they both got used to what the new reality was, was big for the entire family because it was just us getting more in touch with Singaporean culture and just family for the first time in our entire lives to them also getting adjusted. I think that was a really significant moment for us. **What are the greatest differences that you find between Las Vegas and other places that you've lived? We talked a little bit about cultural, but what about language or politics?**

The biggest difference is that Vegas is extremely blessed to have such a large immigrant population and, honestly, quite celebrated compared to other cities. Vegas itself heavily relies on hospitality, and hospitality heavily relies on immigrant communities. It shows in our work. It shows in our, I'd say, not acceptance, but just the norm of how we are. Of course, there are still pockets of racism. There is still the typical political clashes. There are still community clashes. But Vegas is definitely more a melting pot than it is the latter.

Moving to Phoenix, I'd say not even just culturally, but racially, I was one of the few Asian people as well on my campus, and Arizona and, specifically, Phoenix and its metropolitan area is a more...I'd say they have a long way to go in terms of acceptance and just what their norm is, and they are much more White than we are. I remember me and my Black roommate would sit for every sports game at Arizona State, and this is the last couple of years. We sat in the student section of the basketball game, literally, and we always sat during "The Pledge," and we always...that's what we would do. These old White men came all the way down to the student section, far from where they were sitting, and they came all the way down during the middle of "The Pledge" to come and cuss at us and shout at us, saying, "If you don't like this country, get the hell out." We looked at them, and everyone else looks at them, security looks at

them and does absolutely nothing. You can hop on Twitter or social media and see everyone sitting in the stands at a Las Vegas game, and no one says anything. Stuff like that doesn't exactly happen as often, anyway, in Vegas compared to four hours south, and that seems to be very much accepted.

This is coming from my own personal experience already, but on a grander scale, there was literally student protests, like Republican versus Democrat protests, on the Tempe Campus all the time, and it got so much worse during the election year. I went to college during the Trump election year, which extremely aggravated whatever political tension there already was. And leaving right before the next election, I saw both ends of that mix and just how intense things could get out there, which doesn't exactly happen, I'd say. Maybe it's the school, maybe it's UNLV versus Arizona State and just how big the population is out there, but it's a lot more aggravated in general, I feel like, in, I'd say, Phoenix, but I can't speak for other cities versus what I know in Las Vegas.

Maybe less diverse places...

Maybe less diverse places. But I can't even imagine how much harder it is for communities of color to even demonstrate these things let alone, say, a political protest versus just being able to celebrate a holiday in their culture and still being in fear of these situations happening because it seems much more normalized out there, and this is coming from a rather blue and progressive, I'd say, quote, progressive city like Phoenix.

Religious and spirituality, have you seen a large difference between Las Vegas and...it can be Phoenix, it can be wherever.

I've spent a lot of time in other states as well growing up. I spent a lot of summers in other states. It is truly based on the local immigrant populations. For example, you can go to Irvine,

California, and it would be the most-celebrated Asian American community that you would ever expect. Everyone out there is Asian. All the holidays are celebrated. But you could go to Washington, and the same thing, they have huge Asian population, and they will show it. Compared to Las Vegas, I don't know, it's a difficult... What was the question one more time?

The differences between religion in places that you've lived. For example, you've mentioned a few times that your dad was a monk. Just from your lifestyle growing up to now, what differences do you see back home versus here in Las Vegas?

It's just so difficult. I think temples and monuments only appear where there is a strong community to back it. For example, out here, the oldest Buddhist temple in Nevada is also the most underfunded temple in Nevada, and I think that reflects in population as well and just how much communities can stand behind such. For example, this oldest temple as well was the subject of an arson, like an arson attack the last couple of years. That pretty much went under the radar, for what's it worth, and it's a cultural monument for Nevada. There are plenty of other cities across the U.S. who would literally stand in outrage at such an event, but it's not as reflected here as well. Religion, honestly, you only feel involved in it if you really have to go and seek out communities that really, really care about it aside from just practicing in your own home. Versus, like I said before, back home, anywhere else, religion is heavily engrained in the culture, and it's easier for you to be involved because everyone is in on it, if that makes sense. But here, again, I think it's a very household thing.

Yes, that's perfect. As far as transportation goes, do you see a large difference there, too? Even just in the last couple of years here in Vegas, we've seen a little bit more traffic and whatnot. How was transportation back home versus here in Vegas?

Transportation back homes means there actually is such a thing as public transportation, which I feel like America—and this is just me generally speaking—America absolutely fails at. We could have very well had a fantastic railroad system if we had not relied so much on private cars. Meanwhile, Singapore, almost nobody has a car or a license. It's also a pro and con situation. It costs thousands of dollars to get a license in Singapore. You have to pay an import fee on any car you get, which is astronomical compared to American import prices. On top of paying thousands for registration instead of hundreds like us, thousands for your registration, thousands for your license, thousands for import, and in Singapore you have to have a new car every ten years. There is no car on the road older than ten years old. It doesn't even make sense. But the pro of it is they have an incredible public transportation system. They have their own technically metro railroad station, and it goes all throughout the city. Here, we can't even build a proper freeway. There are the pros and cons.

Family back home is just enamored with the fact that we can just pick up cars like this. People get cars when they're sixteen versus a whole family will get a car, and it will be a huge moment out there. Just the pros and cons of transportation. I can use the BART in San Francisco, for example. That is such a thing, but also outdated, just not what it should be, and it's rare. I think that public transport versus New York and California, everywhere else across the country, why are we not focusing on accessibility? Private cars.

What should people who have never traveled outside of Las Vegas know about your country's culture and history? Maybe something that you find extremely important.

I think America is extremely nationalist, and they are very proud to be nationalist, but they only understand nationalism when it comes to American values and not every other country, and it reflects in just the way that we view other countries. I'm just talking from a general standpoint.

There are people who go to Southeast Asian countries and come back feeling completely enlightened by their experience because they just feel like, oh, they're so much more free; it's so different; it's so A, B and C, without paying respect to just why that is.

I'd say for anyone going to visit for the first time or just leave Las Vegas and just see another culture for the first time, just stop trying to compare what you know to what it is. The comparison...there is none, honestly. You just have to go and realize that you are simply an observer to what is a way of life. I think a lot of tourism turns what is culture and what is a lifestyle for millions of people, and turns it into a commodity, if that makes sense. Go and observe and experience, but don't try and bring what you know to the table, if that makes sense.

Go in with an open mind.

Right. It sounds simpler than it is because people go and it's more—again, it's not a theme park. You're not visiting Disneyland where things only exist in this bubble. You're going to someone else's way of life, not something for your entertainment, and that is the major difference, I think, in American tourism and foreign tourism.

Beautifully said. What do you like most about living in Las Vegas when it comes to entertainment, if church is a thing, family events, employment?

Vegas has tremendous potential, which a lot of people here don't quite realize, especially I feel the people I grew up with who lived here their entire lives, the same way that I did, and did not have a culture to reference from, and I only know this from literally being born in another country and a family who really emphasizes the importance of knowing your culture where I know a lot of other Asian American friends who have no connection with their culture whatsoever, and the only life they know is the American culture. Growing up in Vegas, though, I feel like it's so much easier to get in touch with other cultures, and, on top of that, we are an

extremely tourist town, once again. Even as a kid, it's not easy for you to enjoy Vegas the way that most adults probably enjoy Vegas, but again, the simple things that we've become accustomed to—twenty-four-hour Walmarts; you can go to a buffet, an actual good buffet—just little bits and pieces of Vegas that is meant to accommodate people. Everything about Vegas is meant to accommodate the tourists, accommodate visitors, and be enticing. I can finally enjoy that as an adult, and that's something that a lot of people who visit, you show them the stops of what Vegas is, and we're different, and people who grew up here just don't realize it until you are forced to not experience that, the luxuries of just growing up in Vegas. But Vegas is different, and I love it.

How do you feel about the activity of gambling and the gaming industry?

The gaming industry in Nevada has been crucial to even just why Nevada is on the map in the first place. Anyone who counts against that or who tries to take credit away from the gaming industry just doesn't quite understand we are literally built on top of that. Its influence today still goes so far, social-working politics and knowing how far of a reach gaming has on everything in Nevada. Everything in Nevada is heavily reliant on such and the Gaming Control Board. But compared to other states where the only places you can game are on, for example, tribal land, here we have multiple offerings and foreign investors and foreign casinos, and this is what other's view as advice, just another form of entertainment for us. Again, it's just like a necessary evil in a lot of people's eyes, and that's kind of how I view it, and to each their own.

What foods remind you of your ancestors, and can we get these foods in Las Vegas, or at least the ingredients to make them?

Ah, I did speak on this. That's funny. Again, food back home tastes dramatically different, not because the recipe is different, not because anything is different. Literally, the hands that cook

them and accessibility to ingredients and the market for it. Here, ten, fifteen years ago, you could only find maybe one of three Asian markets across town, and any other states, you find the one Asian market that only specializes in a certain ethnic group.

Now it is, again, like I say, popular for people to get involved. I think with the popularity of food culture on social media, that has opened a lot of eyes to foreign food, I'd say. But a lot of people want to try stuff that they see online and that looks really good, and thus, the demand takes over, and Vegas specifically is really fantastic at that. We love all kinds of food in Vegas, and it's not rare, nor is it looked down upon, to be a family-owned ethnic restaurant. We're very much celebrated, actually, for having such. Food for me personally, there is not a huge Singaporean population, and Singaporean food is a melting pot of food, so you go to Singapore, and it's like, "Here is our Chinese food. Here is our Malay food." Everything in the market is just difficult out there because there are so few people who are looking for that compared to Thai food, for example. I can pop on Grubhub right now and look up the first fifty Thai restaurants in Vegas. The demand is there for Thai food because of its popularity and, like I said, tourism, huge. People go there, love it, come back, look for the same food. Not many people are out here visiting Singapore for the intention of looking for food because a lot of people visiting Singapore, I feel like, are going for the luxuries and the views and the buildings, not the food. There is a difference there.

In my household, for a specific dish that's so Singaporean to me that my grandma makes, it's called *bak chang*, and it's like an Asian dumpling, or an Asian tamale, pretty much, wrapped in a banana leaf. We only make it at a certain time of year, and there is a whole story behind it, like I said. She would run her mouth all night telling us the story of why it's important, every year. That is something that "only your grandma makes" type situation. You'll never find it in

store. It's always a struggle to find the ingredients. It's one of those impossible foods to get unless you literally pull someone's grandma, like mine, from Singapore and have her make it.



Grandmother Lily Teo

Great. Do you have any home-crafted items that remind you of your ancestors or older relatives, and if so, could you buy them or make them here?

Truly, it's easier to find Thai costumes, and I say costumes in the most respectful way. Thai regalia and just Thai attire here, because a lot of seamstresses here would know, and the material itself is easily imported. Like I said, there is a high demand for Thai goods to be brought here compared to a Singaporean could buy this, for example, which is already rare to find in Singapore. It's only like an heirloom item in families out here. You don't really find it out here, and it could just be because the population, a couple of million people in Thailand compared to

the very few million people in Singapore, which is why it's difficult to find. But from my personal experience, it's like an heirloom item compared to being fitted for a Thai skirt out here.

How has the model minority myth affected you?

The model minority myth of Asian Americans compared to other minority communities and ethnic groups has just divided and set us back in so many ways and, honestly, distracts from the major point of how important and essential it is that we celebrate all minority communities.

Personally affected? It's difficult to explain because as an Asian American, our experiences will never compare to the injustices compared to Black and Brown communities across the country, and it's difficult to explain to both sides that we are still a minority and very much lacking the accessibility that most White communities and the White population has over us regardless when other minority groups. Some don't even see us as suffering in the same way, if that makes sense. But regardless, it comes down to a lot of infighting and a lot of unnecessary—it detracts from the overall purpose and goal of what we're actually fighting, which is white supremacy that has been long engrained in our very racist and systemic society that we can't fight until we actually start to take a step back and look at minorities as just literally a minority population compared to what the bigger fight has been. But the model minority myth of being an Asian American is just...I can't even get started on just how devastating it is to actually fight the good fight, like I said, while you're fighting amongst yourselves, but that's my opinion.

We're going to dive into discrimination, pretty much, here. Have you ever experienced racial discrimination practices against yourself or other Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders? If so, can you describe these incidents, and have you witnessed this in Vegas?

I think discrimination comes in all forms from all sides, not just what we typically view as racist people, but just racist actions, and micro aggressions against Asian Americans happen every

single day, yet to really be looked at...And I can speak from Stop Asian Hate, for example, a movement from the pandemic that for the first time in my life, anyway, all twenty-three years of it that I've seen actual national coverage on racism against Asian Americans, and specifically due to comments made about the pandemic and the source of the pandemic. This highlighted not just racism against Asian Americans, but how many people didn't even believe Asian Americans deserved help because we're not dealing with the same issues as Black and Brown communities, for example? It's kind of jarring in that aspect. I sit here and I remember all the times I grew up, and I was literally jeered at by, again, not just White people, but Black and Brown people as well for just being a smaller minority than they were, not specifically about my race, but just because I was different from the majority.

The micro aggressions of just, again, the foreignness of being Asian American stemming back to, say, "yellow peril," for example, and just trying to alienate Asian American communities even more because of the communities that refuse to assimilate, that spreads itself deep in terms of, "Where did you actually come from? Is that your real name? You don't look like so-and-so, or you remind me of so-and-so," who is a different ethnicity than me. It presents itself as well in what is so-called progressive entertainment where, "Let's do a specifically Asian show about Asian issues but use all the typical Asian jokes because that's all we know how to write." Stuff like that is not helping our community whatsoever. It's an issue that really needs to be looked at, and we're still in the early stages of tackling the root.

You've discussed on this a little bit. Have you seen a change in discriminatory rhetoric or practices against Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders since the pandemic began?

Yes. I was on both sides of this especially since I was working in Carson City doing comms while the peak of anti-Asian hate movement took off. Waking up and seeing the numbers of

racially motivated attacks against Asian Americans while also writing speeches on this for elected officials and, also, being an Asian American woman, all sides of the issue hit me all at once, and it was a really, really difficult time for me because it's difficult to shy away from since this is the first time, like I said, that I've even seen in my lifetime that we are in national media, we are in the spotlight for our issues. I really don't think we were quite sure what to do with all this spotlight because we have the numbers of racially motivated attacks, we had the stories to tell, but who's really listening aside from just reading a sensationalized article? The rhetoric, I feel like, a lot of the hidden and unspoken racism from everybody, came out during this time as well, and it was extremely disappointing to see what a typical leader is trying to distract from Asian American issues because there were larger issues at play, for example, when we are very much in need of help and recognition for our issues as well, and we should not have to all be fighting for the same national media spotlight when it should be an all-around, why is this happening in the first place? Like I said, the pandemic did not spark any new ideas. It simply gave voice to what was already being thought by a lot of racist folk, I suppose.

How did you feel when high-ranking U.S. officials called COVID-19 the “China virus” or the “Kung flu?”

I wrote a really detailed op-ed on this as well that was published that kind of touches on the parallels between many, many years ago, just how much we repeat in history in terms of alienating whole cultures to put the blame for very real issues that have nothing to do with that. Like I said, a lot of anti-communist and anti-Chinese immigrant rhetoric that we've written during wartimes and immigration just repeated itself and manifested itself in a different form this time around. We have not changed much at all in terms of disgust and the fear of the unknown, I'd say, and how quick we are to blame what we do not know or are familiar with; AKA, China,

and just how many communities, who aren't even Chinese, had to suffer because of what a few elected officials said and the army that stands behind these elected officials. If their leader gives them voice, it makes it okay. Again, calling it the "China virus" affected everybody. Of course, like I said, they're quick to blame what they don't know.

How do you feel about in what ways does, or does not, the Black Lives Matter movement affect Asian or Pacific Islander Americans?

Black Lives Matter, singlehandedly, they have done so much groundwork and so much of the necessary actions it honestly takes to be in national media and the spotlight that they're not just fighting specifically for Black lives, it is an all-encompassing issue of systemic racism and how it presents itself in, what I say, daily microaggressions to literal violence against people of color. Black Lives Matter is not just the inspiration. We can only come out with what we have, and we can only speak on Asian American issues because of the work that Black Lives Matter has done for everybody. Honestly, like I said, in their footsteps. It's literally given voice to the importance of that; that everyone has a voice in that way. On top of just supporting Black Lives, anyone is capable of going against the grain and going against the system. As much as Black Lives Matter has been vilified for what people want to call aggressive actions, it's more aggressive actions against people of color that is the overlying problem. Again, spearheaded what, honestly, I feel like every community should be doing for themselves.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are the fastest-growing population group in Southern Nevada. What does that mean to you?

It shows in population, for sure. Again, in population, it shows in community and just in celebration of culture. Like I said, like I watched Chinatown grow from one plaza to multiple blocks of not just Chinese for Chinatown, it's every Asian group popping up with their own

restaurant and so and such. When you walk into these doors, it's not just Asian people sitting down. It is everybody enjoying what they love, is Asian food. That alone is just so impressive to me compared to a lot of other cities where they just corner their Asian American communities into little pockets, but here it's widely accepted, and I think it's only because Asian Americans have infiltrated—I say infiltrated in the most respectful way—every facet of our industry. For example, health care is one of the largest Filipino populations. Just every facet of Las Vegas life, I suppose, you will find an Asian American at all levels of society. I just think that us being here and showing up and working puts us on the map just via face-to-face interaction.

Why is it valuable for the university to collect interviews such as yours?

Because when I sit here and am interviewed about my history and my life, all twenty-three years of it, and I speak on my grandmother, for example, her story will never be recorded on paper, and has not, but I'm just going off of what I know from her story, and I'm the result of generations' worth of knowledge and culture and just who I am as a person who will never be documented, and this is the very first time that I'm doing it for just my family. I'm speaking for how many people I've spoken about already in this interview and just how much they've touched me and how much I am a result of that, and I speak for all of them when I say this, just by documenting my words, it makes their stories and their history real. Everyone should be doing this, honestly.

Thank you so much for letting me interview you.

Thank you.

[End of recorded interview]

APPENDIX



Sara in traditional Thai dress in front of Wat Phra Ram, Thailand



Sara at the Lucy Rocket Launch, invited by NASA to witness, Oct 16, 2021, Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, Space Commerce Way, Merritt Island, FL



On the floor the Assembly chamber of the Nevada State Legislature during the 81st Legislative Session, 2021