

**AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCIS OH
ALLEN-PALENSKE**

An Oral History Conducted by Stefani Evans

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 think this is part of the Asian American dream, too—to come here, work hard, be able to build things, and collect wealth, and pass that to the next generation, and have the next generation have it easier than the generation before. That is the American dream. I feel like Asian people embrace that as much as anybody else.”

Business owner and politician Francis Oh Allen-Palenske was born to a Korean mother and White father in her father's home state of Louisiana. Allen-Palenske reflects on her family's history and their journey from South Korea to America. With many trials, challenges, and a great expanse of opportunity, Allen-Palenske and her family have navigated through many hurdles on a multidimensional level.

After initially immigrating to the United States, when Louisiana did not recognize her mother's Korean pharmacy degree, Francis's mother bought a donut shop and three rental houses. The family moved to Reno, Nevada, in 1983, where her mother could practice as a pharmacist after

passing an exam. Francis entered fifth grade and completed her schooling in that city. In 1999, upon earning her B.A. in Political Science at the University of Nevada, Reno, she served as a Washington, DC, staffer for Rep. Jim Gibbons (R-NV), for eighteen months, before moving to Las Vegas.

In her interview, Francis emphasizes the stories of her Korean mother, maternal grandmother, and maternal aunts, who are all strong, smart, business-minded women. She goes on to discuss the Korean collective family bank account, Korean traditions, celebrations, clothing, foods, Korean cosmetics, and views about skin color. Allen-Palenske emphasizes the importance of her family as well as her family history and where it has brought her today, a story that includes her following the other businesswomen in her family by purchasing and operating a Capriotti's Sandwich Shop franchise.

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June 30, 2022

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Stefani Evans

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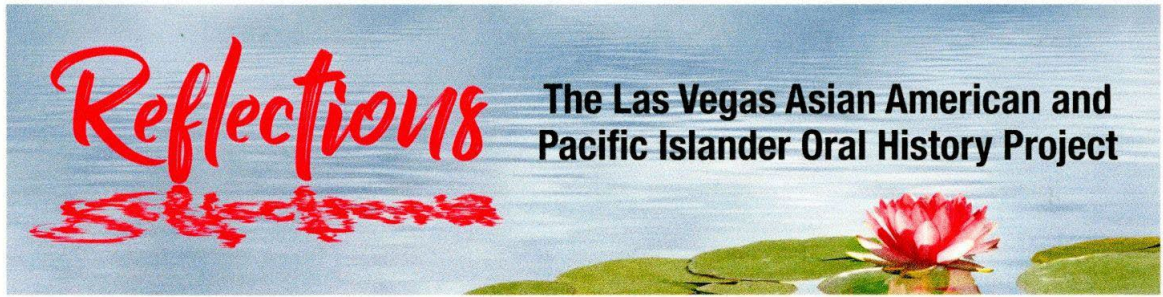
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Good morning. [Today is June 30, 2022.] This is Stefani Evans, and I am here with Francis Allen-Palenske.

Francis, may I ask you to spell your full and complete name the way you want it on your book?

Francis, F-R-A-N-C-I-S. Oh, O-H. And Allen, A-L-L-E-N, hyphen, Palenske, P, as in Paul, A-L-E-N-S-K-E.

Thank you so much. As mentioned, the first question I'm going to ask you is to tell us about your family and your childhood, your parents, what they did for a living, your siblings, just all of that.

I had a wonderful childhood growing up, very *Saturday Evening Post*. I am a product of a mixed marriage, my mother being a first-generation Korean and my father being Anglo-Saxon American. I have a younger brother, eighteen months younger. Together, we enjoyed a pretty idyllic childhood, two parents that loved us very much. Of course, in the beginning, there were less resources, as there normally is in life, and as your parents age and mature and income goes up, things were far more relaxed economically. My parents originally were married in Korea and soon after returned to my father's home state of Louisiana. This was probably circa 1975.



Parents' wedding in South Korea wearing traditionally Western wedding attire, circa 1975

Parents' wedding in South Korea wearing traditionally Eastern (specifically Korean) wedding attire, circa 1975



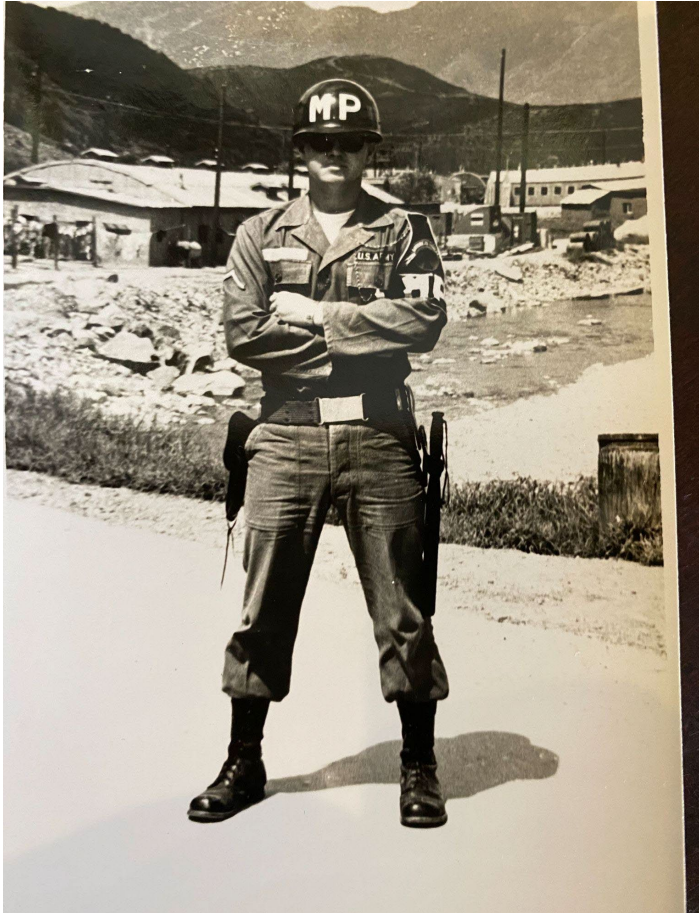
Just an interesting side note. My father came home from Korea and never informed his parents, my grandparents, that he was bringing a wife home. At the airport, my father introduces

my mother, his wife, to her in-laws, which she didn't know at the time and they didn't know at the time.

How did that work out?

Everybody loved one another very quickly, but that is the story as I've been told through family. My grandparents, of course—White, in Louisiana—were initially shocked, but my mother—very lovely person—they embraced her very shortly thereafter. They met in Korea. My father taught English at the university to my mother.

I guess, going back another layer, my father had served in the military and was sent to Korea as a military police officer and was stationed there for three years. He came back to the United States, got his degree with the GI Bill in California, the whole time saving his money. After he got his degree, he went back to Korea and lived for about five years. He loved Korea and was introduced to Korea through the military. He went back there and lived and worked and loved Korean culture and Korean food. He learned Korean fluently. He met my mom and then they came to the United States. I think I was born a year or two later in Louisiana.



Father serving in South Korea, undated

My mother, who had a degree in pharmacy from, I believe, the second-best pharmacy school in Korea, was always very proud of her college. When they relocated to the state of Louisiana, they learned that she would not be allowed to practice pharmacy because state law said that no pharmacist could be educated outside the United States. They didn't think it was equal, presumably. I can't speak for the state of Louisiana. As a side note, forty years later, that law has changed; and so it's not the case today, but it was the case in 1970-whatever.

My mother and father, who came from Korea with two or three or four pieces of luggage—that's all they had to their name—bought a home in Louisiana, again with GI benefits and a no-money-down loan, a very, very small house. My mother was not allowed to practice pharmacy, and so in a very traditional Korean way, she bought a business. It was a doughnut

shop. Even today, when you go to a doughnut shop or a dry cleaner, I think it's probably an 80-to-90 percent chance it's Korean-owned, and that's universal, all over the United States. A doughnut shop business is rigorous. You have to open at five or six in the morning, and so you get there at three in the morning. Most of my childhood, I remember being picked up out of a bed and moved to the back of a car, then moved to the back of a storage room in the back of the doughnut shop and sleeping on an industrial-size bag of flour until seven o'clock or whatnot. When we left school... It becomes your second home when you own a small business, and that's very Asian-style.

In addition to that, my mother, just good with money, was able to purchase multiple homes. I think in an eight-year time period, they owned three rental homes and a business.

Wow.

Yes. She came into America—she's passed, so the time is not as finite as it is if you could refer—around '75 to '82. Yes, very good, very good at business, very good.

Did anyone mentor her, do you know, or was she just instinctually business minded?

Instinctually business minded. You asked about my childhood, not hers, but she was one of five. She was the youngest. Her father died very young of colon cancer when she was nine. There were three girls and two boys. The top two siblings were daughters, and then there were two boys, and then herself. In Korean custom—you have to get outside of your mind the American way that everybody has a bank account and has their own livelihood—there is a collective “we” in Korea, and there isn't a personal bank account. There is a family bank account called a *gi*.



Francis's mother and her class in South Korean grade school, undated

How do you spell that?

I don't know. It's not something spelled in English. It's phonetic. However you want. It's interesting that you asked that, because, growing up, the Korean word for grandmother is *halmeoni*, and so we called my White grandmother *halmeoni*, and we called my Korean grandmother *halmeoni*. We referred to them as American *halmeoni* and Korean *halmeoni*. You say the words *hanguk halmeoni* or *mee-guk halmeoni*, same words, to indicate which one you're talking about. But I remember very clearly when I was about four years asking my parents, "How do you spell *halmeoni*?" Because I was going to write my grandmother. They said, "There's no American letters. However you want to spell it." I decided how it was spelled, and that's how. It's interesting, if you look at other Korean people, everybody spells the word *halmeoni* differently, and there's different regional areas in Korea where your accent sounds a

little bit different. You can almost sometimes say, “That person is from southern Korea,” or northern Korea, just like it’s regional in the United States.

Back to the *gi*. My grandfather died young, and there were assets in the family. He died of colon cancer. Instead of my grandmother taking over, the oldest daughter took over the family pot. She, too, was highly educated, a pharmacist by education, and she went to Seoul University, which is the best in Korea—it turns away more than Harvard—and she ran the family. She married a dentist, and they created relatively significant wealth. Of course, Korea was growing at this time in the ‘70s and ‘80s, and she was a pharmacist, and she had a pharmacy; and then she had multiple pharmacies, a little empire later, and the economy in Korea was also booming at the same time. It’s not just her creating wealth. It’s most of her contemporaries became very wealthy, because it’s postwar and there’s a technology boom. Having visited Korea for much of my childhood, maybe every year or every two years, I saw a dramatic change in the nation just by way of visiting my family over the years. Really, in the beginning, people remembered being hungry; and now, today, some people are actually overweight, which is truly the juxtaposition. And, within two generations, amazing.



Francis's maternal grandparents, undated

Did your grandparents ever talk about the Korean War?

Oh, my grandmother did. My grandmother lived until about '93. Of course, my grandfather died when my mother was nine, and she had very little memory. I have no memory. But my Korean grandmother—when my parents came to America, to Louisiana, and my mother became pregnant, and then I was born—my grandmother came from Korea and lived in our household the first five years. This is very common in Korean households. I often blame my cousin—I lost my Korean grandmother when I was five, because my uncle had children, and then my cousin was born, so my grandmother left us to go do the same thing. She said, “Okay, your kids are four and five. I’m going to go to (NAME)’s house and help,” with my two younger cousins, who are

about five and seven years younger. They got her, and then she went to another cousin. She consistently lived with some child her entire life.

And all of her children came to the U.S.?

No. The two oldest. All three females were pharmacists. Actually, in this ironic, non-Korean tradition, all three girls were very type-A, very successful on their own. My mother, of course, did it independently. The two boys were...I don't want to be harsh, particularly. One is still alive. But they were very...less successful in life, less driven, a little bit entitled.

Who were the ones that came to the States?

The two boys.

And your mom.

And my mom. My aunt, who served almost as an additional grandmother because she was so much older than my mom, she helped raise my mom. She put my mom through private school. She was the head of the family, in charge of the pocketbook. In traditional Korean style, she took care of the brothers through their entire lives, and the females were on their own, married into a different family. Both females were very successful.

My oldest aunt died of pancreatic cancer about fifteen years ago. She came from Korea. Of course, pancreatic cancer is generally considered a death sentence. They wouldn't treat her in Korea, because there is universal healthcare and she was dying. We brought her to the United States, and I took her to MD Anderson in Texas [The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston], where she got some treatment, but it didn't probably come early enough, and in the end pancreatic cancer is a killer, and so she passed before having a tremendous amount of treatment.

It's just interesting commentary. It's part of my psyche on how universal healthcare works, and sometimes it fails people. Having lived through it and taking my aunt, who doesn't speak any English, to the best cancer place in the world, which is MD Anderson in Houston, Texas, and translating for her and her son how... The son had some very good basic knowledge of English and also lives in America today. When you were talking about healthcare matters, it's the next level of understanding. I think I handheld them for about two weeks. We stayed in a motel. She eventually passed, of course. But it is an impressive facility, and I was happy to at least...I think she felt happy that she was getting treatment, even though she passed in the end. But she was happy that she was being cared for.

When I asked about mentors for your mother earlier, do you think—

Her sisters, the older sisters.

The pharmacist sisters and the one that ran the bank account?

Yes, yes, in charge of the family money and parlayed—I get the impression that they were small business owners. My mother took me to Pusan, Korea, which is on the southern tip, where my family is from for generations, and we stood in the middle of the city, and she said, “This is where my father's business was.” Of course, he died when she was nine, and she has very little memory of it, but she could take me there. That was good. At some point after my grandfather died, they closed the business in Pusan and took the family and all went to Seoul.

Do you know what the business was?

When my mother passed in 2016—I don't know if you know the app KAKAO. It's web-based communications. Of course, there's not a lot of long distance anymore. I have an uncle that is still there. I called him, and I said, “Was he a pharmacist, too? Everybody is a pharmacist.” He

just told me, “No, he wasn’t a pharmacist.” But he couldn’t articulate. My mom was nine, and he was eleven. You just have parents at that age. You don’t know.

They go to work.

Yes, exactly.

Tell us about you now. Tell us about your childhood memories and your education.

Like I mentioned, very idyllic childhood. The first eight years were in Louisiana. Come 1984, or whatever year that is, the economy in Louisiana is tanking, and [with it] my parents’ own small businesses and rental properties. They would be on the tip of the spear for any economic downturn. They see the writing on the wall, and they sell their assets and decide to move to Nevada, where my mother can take a pharmacy test and be licensed and practice pharmacy. That is the driving factor of moving to Nevada, because it embraced immigrants early on.

Do you remember what year that was?

We moved to Northern Nevada in ‘83–84. I went to Katherine Dunn Elementary in the fifth grade. I was born in 1977, and so whatever math that is. It’s close to there, ‘84-ish.

And where in Nevada did you go?

Reno, Nevada, Northern Nevada. I remember the first year, we rented a home, because my parents weren’t sure about Nevada. After my fifth grade at Katherine Dunn Elementary—and I still know friends from Katherine Dunn Elementary—they decided, *Okay, we like it here, and we’re going to buy a house.* That is the house my father passed in and where I grew up. I went to elementary school, middle school, high school, and University of Nevada, Reno.

Which high school?

Galena High School, up on the mountain on the way to Lake Tahoe if you drive up.

And UNR?

And UNR.

What was your major?

Political science and business, so no shock, no shock. Actually, interestingly enough, I wanted to be in political science and history, and my father put his foot down, saying, “Are you kidding me? Do you want to be unemployed your entire life? I will not pay for those degrees. You put business in there, or you’re on your own, Toots.” It was actually probably very wise of him. I feel like the business background gave me a solid foundation to thrive in the future. But when you see all the antiques in the house, and I met my husband, I kind of embraced this very expensive side hobby. He was like, “You like it?” And I said, “Of course.” Because I, too, am in my mind, a historian.

For the benefit of the people who can’t see the surroundings we’re in, can you explain this expensive hobby of yours?

You’re in a fire museum right now, slash, antique store. He [my husband] has a collection of sought-after, historically significant fire antiques, specifically in the fire genre, and that goes a little bit into Americana and to art and to other smaller sectors, but everything fire-related. He is a twenty-four-year veteran of the Las Vegas Fire Department with the City and loves his occupation. He is second-generation; his grandfather was a firefighter, too. He died in the line before Steve ever met him, before he was born. Steve worked for about ten years to have him put on the Firefighters Memorial Wall in Colorado. That happened about five years ago, after ten years of work.

Wow. What was your first job with your business-oriented family?

I folded sweaters at Macy’s, a department store, and even then, it was a temp gig. I was young. After the holidays, they said, “Do you want to stay on?” It was at Meadowood Mall in Reno,

Nevada, if you're familiar with the area. We lived about five minutes away from it, and so it was just purely convenience. Of course, at least in my household, my parents said, "You save some money, and we'll save some money, and we'll split the cost of a car," when it came time to drive. That's what we did. It was a junker that had electrical problems. It was before cell phones. I found myself stranded on the side of the road quite frequently, which I say in total happiness, because I feel like everybody should live this life experience. As soon as you get the keys to a car, you realize this thing needs fuel, and nobody is giving you any money. They encouraged me, "Go get a job somewhere." The mall was the closest thing, and I knew it well, because at the time, malls were essential to all of our existence. I showed up and did an interview and needed money to put gas in the car. It was great. I worked part-time. I went to Galena High School. I played competitive soccer. I was president of my class. I did all the things, all the things.

Then you went to UNR.

I went to UNR. I graduated in four years. I loved the experience. The school was great. It was very reasonably priced in 1995 through '99. If I tell you what I paid per credit, I think it was eighty-nine dollars, and I paid less for a four-year degree than I did for a while—we had our daughter in private school here, locally—than for one year of private school for kindergarten. Times have changed, and there has been definite inflation in the cost of university, which constantly astounds me. When you start talking about how things cost more, you know you're getting older. It's tell-tale. Check the date of birth on your license. Yes, very, very happy childhood.

I'd like to go back to your mom just a little bit. What was the hardest thing for her to leave behind, do you think? Did she ever talk about that?

She always said...her family being from Pusan. Pusan, like I said, is the southernmost point of the Korean peninsula., very, very seafood-based, water on both sides. If you are familiar with Jeju and the story of the women in Jeju—if I have the book, I will give it to you—it was also turned into a storybook that became very popular for American female-reading books, something called *The Island of Sea Women*. Jeju is an island off Pusan, off the southern tip. My family has no affiliation there, other than it's a beautiful story, and I recommend everybody read the book about the sea women. In Jeju, females are the breadwinners, and women dive into the ocean, and they've been doing it for generations and have very large lung capacities. They dive without the help of regulators and air tanks. They hold their breath, and they can do it for eight, nine, ten, twelve minutes at a time. They go down and take sea urchin and crab and all the spoils from the sea and bring them up, and that is how they have sustained themselves for many generations. The Korean word is *haenyeo*. I think Americans would just refer to them as sea women. They provide for their family that way.

This area is very seafood rich, and my mother from Pusan constantly desired Korean-style sushi fish. It's not something you could replicate. Even in Seoul, you can't get it. It's unique to this small geographic area of Korea. She told me for the first ten years in America, it was very hard, because all she did was create the seafood of southern Korea.

Mother and grandmother together in South Korea, undated



Wow. And [in Louisiana,] she was in a seafood place.

Yes. it was different seafood. She loved crawfish and crab, Louisiana-style. I can even...in the back, somewhere in a box that says *family history*, I have when she became an American citizen. There was a little article in the paper in Louisiana, and she refers to loving crawfish and crab and the seafood because that was a good. And it's also why there is a very large Vietnamese population in Louisiana, because many of them were fishermen in Vietnam, and it was an easy transition into Louisiana.



Unknown newspaper: Francis's mother after her naturalization in Louisiana, 1981

[Ed. Note: Transcribed article]

“NEW CITIZEN – Francis Allen, her husband, Richard and their two children proudly display the American flag after Mrs. Allen became a naturalized American citizen Wednesday. A former citizen of Korea, Mrs. Allen said she likes the American people and has developed a taste for Louisiana crawfish. – Photo by Art Kleiner

By STEVEN WHEELER

‘You are all not citizens of the United States.’

These words from U.S. District Judge John Parker ended three years of waiting and 11 months of paperwork for Francis Allen, her husband Richard and their two children.

Francis Allen, formerly Sang Uk Allen, got a new country and a new name Wednesday as she and 24 other foreign residents were sworn in at the Federal Courthouse as naturalized U.S. citizens. During the ceremony, she legally changed her name.

‘In some ways I fee; sad and in some ways very happy,’ she said about becoming a U.S. citizen. ‘I lived in Seoul (Korea) for 25 years.’

‘I like the American people. They’re so kind,’ she said.

Francis and Richard met in Seoul, where she was a student in pharmacy school and he was a teacher at Central University. Francis is a registered pharmacist in Korea, but Louisiana law requires pharmacists to have credentials earned in the United States to practice here. Richard works for the Ethyl Corporation.

Francis said she did not have any trouble passing the required tests to become a citizen. The difficult part, she said, was all the paperwork, which took 11 months to complete.

Richard said an additional difficulty was encountered because the Immigration Office is located in New Orleans and the couple had to drive there numerous times during the naturalization process. To become a naturalized American citizen, a person must have lived in the United States as a permanent resident for five years (three years if married to an American citizen), demonstrate an ability to read, write and speak English, display a knowledge of the history and government of the United States and be of 'good moral character,' a spokesman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service said. 'The hardest part was (the decision) to become American or stay Korean,' Francis said. 'We want the kids to grow up in America,' her husband said. 'They'll be a lot better off.'

The parents plan to teach their two children, Francis Oh Allen, 3, and Harry Richard Allen, 1, to speak English and Korean. The Allens will maintain cultural ties with Korea as a result of the Korean-American Association of Baton Rouge, Richard said. The family also attends a Korean Presbyterian church, where services are spoken in the native language of the Asian country. Mrs. Dilly Allen, Richard's mother, said Francis has learned to cook American foods as well as Korean. She fell in love with gumbo and spaghetti, Mrs. Allen said, and joked 'She's a 'Coonie Korean.' Every American mother ought to have a Korean daughter-in-law,' she said. 'I do like crawfish,' Francis said.

Francis said the only disappointing thing was that she will not be able to vote in the November election due to the scheduling of the naturalization ceremony on Wednesday. She missed the deadline to register by about one week. Francis added with a smile, 'If I voted, I'd vote for Reagan.'

Francis will have lived here four years in December. When she came to America, she left behind a family in Korea with two brothers and two sisters. Her mother came to America for visits when each of the children were born.

In issuing the oath of allegiance to the 25 applicants for citizenship Wednesday, the judge said the group was assuming all the privileges of American citizens, but also the obligations. The rights guaranteed to the citizens by the Declaration of Independence are not just words, but guarantees, Parker said. He told the new citizens it would be part of their obligation to help ensure that America continues its tradition of freedom for all."

Wow. How was your mom's immigration process? Did she ever talk about that?

Not significantly, although I remember as a young, young child, my mother became an American citizen, I want to say, based on the pictures of me, maybe when I was four or five. I remember

we were in Baton Rouge, and we had to drive to New Orleans, which is about an hour away, to go to the embassy to file paperwork to go through this process that took about four years. It was lengthy. It is forty-plus years later, and I am campaigning for public office, and I want to show you...it's not going to be great for audio...I'm going to show you the video that we produced. Even to this day, it's a central part of who I am. This campaign video...[Playing video].

“Hi, I’m Francis. I’m running for Las Vegas City Council. I’m a two-term state assemblywoman. I won the Prestigious Outstanding Assemblywoman award. I was known to be an effective lawmaker because of my ability to work with all sides. I’m ready to bring back thoughtful and balanced decision-making to our city council. My mom was a Korean immigrant and became a U.S. citizen when I was a kid. I saw her struggle as a small business owner. She taught me to show up where decisions are being made. I will prioritize job creation and economic diversification for Las Vegas. I’ll support law enforcement to keep our amazing city safe. My husband, Steve, is a Las Vegas Fire captain. First responders are the backbone of Las Vegas, and I will continue to support these public servants. I’m Francis Allen-Palenske, and I’m running for City Council Ward 4 in 2022.”

Really, where we all come from is who we are, so...In the video, you see the picture of my mother’s naturalization ceremony, the little party, and there’s a chocolate cake with a bunch of American Flags in it.



Francis and her brother at their mother's naturalization party in her American grandparents' home, undated

We'd love to include those pictures and the article. We could put all that in the book.

I have the article about her naturalization, yes. Let's do it.

They came to Reno. How did they end up in Las Vegas?

They didn't. I did.

You did. They stayed in Reno?

Yes, yes. My father passed, actually. I was about twenty-five. Very early on, I thought that Reno was too small of a town. But I love Nevada, and everybody who knew me said, "We all knew you were destined for somewhere else." I love Nevada.

I didn't even mention... Graduate, political science, business. It was very common for your members of congress to go to your political science class and give a talk. I had Dr. Eric

Herzik for Political Science 101 my freshman year in college. Hi, Dr. Herzik. I think he's still at the university. He had Harry Reid come. It was one of those classes where there is two hundred kids and you're in a big auditorium. I think this is part of their campaigning for public office, because everybody at that point is a registered voter. You're college-age.

Harry Reid comes and people ask questions, and he doesn't really answer the question. He answers whatever he wants to answer. He doesn't answer the question. In the same semester, he has Richard Bryan come. Purely my impression as a seventeen-, eighteen-year-old sitting in this political science class, 101, Dr. Herzik, I'm like, "Oh, that guy was really nice, but he still didn't answer any question that was posed to him." Those were our two Nevada Senators at the time, so this must have been 1995. The third was a member of congress, Congressional District 2 out of Reno, newly elected Jim Gibbons, and he came. Probably because he had just been elected, he answered every question, and he was very frank and likeable. It turns out he actually lived about two miles away from the house that I grew up in, so almost neighbors.

Afterwards, a girlfriend and I that were in the class show up at his office and say, "Hey, how can we help?" I started there as an intern, and when I graduated I moved to Washington, D.C., to be a staff person for a while. That was the beginning of the road to politics, because Dr. Herzik brought these three fellows, and I thought, well, that guy sounds more of what I thought a congressman should sound like.

He really knew his district and was speaking...

And he was just elected. There was a little bit more fresh, green, "I'm going to advocate." That was my perspective as an eighteen-year-old.

Tell us what it was like coming from small-town Reno and then ending up as a staffer in D.C? Tell us about that.

It was better in my mind than it was in real life. The atmosphere on Capitol Hill at the time, and, I presume, even to this day, there is very dog-eat-dog, and maybe it's because a lot of East Coast kids go there. A lot of Ivy Leaguers end up doing this. Highly competitive people would do anything for promotion, and I'm this West Coast girl that just stumbled upon this, really not planning every move. My parents didn't get me an internship with their member of congress that they had contributed to for many years because that's often the path. I ended up there haphazardly, and it didn't speak to me long term.

How long were you there?

I think I did it for maybe a year and a half, something like that. I thought, *hmmm*. I did everything you could do in the surrounding area. After I saw every Smithsonian, I visited every presidential home, I did everything that I could on the weekends to soak up Washington, D.C. and our history. The historian in me loved it. Then I said, "I miss my family. I miss Nevada." I remember driving across country from Washington, D.C., to Las Vegas.

Why Las Vegas?

Because I wasn't going back to Reno. I had family here at the time. We had often visited Las Vegas for holidays and whatnot. I remember on that trip the first time I hit Nevada and I saw a pickup truck, and I thought, *That's what men should be driving: pickup trucks, not BMWs*. Every staff person on Capitol Hill, because the parking lots are very small, had a compact BMW. I thought, *I'm home*, with the truck.

I love it. When you got to Las Vegas, you had family here.

Oh, yes, my uncle, my aunt, my American side. It's a retiree haven, so most of them were retired and lived in the area.

And they had come from where?

Oh, all over. One from Louisiana. My uncle was retired military, so he had been stationed everywhere, but, most recently, California. He was part of the California exodus. He had two pensions, one from Lockheed Martin, one from the military, and so protecting his pension was forefront. It makes it inviting to Nevada for retirees.

Where in Las Vegas did you move when you first got here?

Northwest Las Vegas, not in this house. I had a group of girlfriends that also had moved directly from Reno, high school friends from Reno to Las Vegas. It was just a fish to water, and I've never thought about living anywhere else.

Nearest cross streets?

Rainbow and Vegas.

What did you do for work?

In the beginning, I worked copy for magazines. I did anything I needed to do. It was soon thereafter I bought the Capriotti's. I took about a year to research which business was best. I still own the same Capriotti's, for fifteen years now.

Which one?

At the corner of Eastern and Warm Springs is my franchise. I remember very, very early on about my parents having somewhat of an adversarial relationship with the doughnut shop, with their franchisor. Being a franchisee and a franchisor is so much of a marriage, husband and wife. It's mutually beneficial. If it's good, it's good, and if it's not, it's not. My parents, it was always adversarial, I remember. I can't even speak to why, because I was a child, but it was adversarial. I remember being twenty-something saying, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to purchase a small business." But I remember it's very important to choose the right franchise.

I did research. I looked into this, and looked into this, and looked into this. The Capriotti's I chose primarily because, at the time, Lois Margolet, who is the founder of Capriotti's, was the franchisor. I had a very positive relationship with her. You only had to meet her once to know that you shook her hand, and whatever she said was golden. Of course, about two years after I became a franchisee, she sold to a corporation.

Anyway, it's been a positive experience. I would say franchising is great, particularly for a young person. While I grew up in the business atmosphere, and I knew how to do inventory and things like that, I had never done it for myself independently. Being in that franchise situation at the age of twenty-five, twenty-eight—whatever age I was when I purchased—the statistic is staggering: otherwise, when opening a small business in America, like 80 percent fail. But with the help of a franchisor, and doing this, I've been very successful the entire time. I will say that in the beginning, in that first five years, I leaned hard on my franchisor for marketing purposes, for early accounting purposes, and now I do it as well as they do. It's a great way to be successful and to start a business.

As the franchisee, how much time did that take?

All my time. In the beginning, I went all the time, Korean-style, six, seven days a week. I managed independent of a manager. I did everything in the beginning, everything from making sandwiches to hiring staff, every single thing. I would say in the last eight years or so, I have a very, very capable manager that is task-oriented and can do it. I still go five days a week for lunch rush, because every small business runs much better when the owner is there. Even with the most capable manager, still, being present is important. Employee theft is a great risk and a threat to your profitability. I feel like me being as present as possible is good. It's good for my

employees to know who the owner is, and it's good for them to see me and for me to help move the ball forward and to be present.

And that they know that you know how to do what they're doing.

Oh, every single thing, better and faster, even though I'm middle-aged now and they're young.

"If you guys can keep up with me, you'll do just fine."

When you came to Las Vegas as a resident and you settled in the northwest part of the city, how have you seen this part of Las Vegas grow and change?

Tremendous growth, tremendous growth. This postage stamp part of the valley has grown with me, and growth has moved further north. There was no such thing as Providence and Skye Canyon, and now growth goes almost up to Kyle Canyon. None of that existed twenty years ago. As my own wealth and age increased, I moved further north and further north, and the community keeps moving further north. Interestingly enough, when I walk door to door, I hear the same story from many residents, too, that initially they lived in Desert Shores, and then kids grew up and mom could go back to work and they had two incomes; then they moved to a more expensive home up north, further north. It's a little bit the Las Vegas way of accumulating wealth. Really, the housing market generally always being up, people were able to sell and buy something larger, which is a great legacy for most Las Vegans. I would hate to see that being stifled.

What do you see as a check on that kind of growth, or as a threat to it?

We have to preserve our quality of life. I don't think that growth should stop. I think that if we're not growing, if the hammers aren't pounding, if you're not growing, you're dying. But doing it with a mindset of quality of life is the most important. We need homes. At least, in Las Vegas today, in 2022, there is a tremendous affordable housing shortage. I have staff people who would

love to buy a home. The pathway to home ownership right now is not laced in gold at all. It's difficult. It's difficult for anybody that doesn't have two incomes, anybody who is working class. I think that it should be our priority to try to ameliorate that and to ensure that what Las Vegas was always known for—people moving from California, moving from all over—is this idea that everybody can attain a single-family home. I treasure that, and I want us to do everything we can to ensure that that continues and thrives.

What kinds of things do you see as helping that?

Some of it is free market. But right now, you see the Fed is increasing interest rates, so that's going to stifle home purchasing. We'll see. I don't have a crystal ball any better than you or better than any other Realtor in the valley. Demand is still high, but interest rates go up. Home prices may go down. Like I said, your crystal ball is as good as mine. We, as government, need to ensure that the pathway to home ownership is still very clear and very attainable.

What traditions do you still enjoy? Your mom brought traditions with her. What traditions were you raised with of hers?

I see so much of my mother in myself, including the very diligent, hardworking portion, the grinder that can do six or seven days a week if necessary. In addition to that culture, at least in Korean culture, we are very food-oriented, and we in this household have Korean dinner probably once a week. My kids prefer it. At least one of them is crazy for Korean food. That's all she wants.

Tell us about the kinds of Korean foods that you like.

My family, of course, likes Korean barbeque. That is a great transfer to the American palate. Rice, you can see behind you the rice pot that is pretty consistently there. Anybody hungry, kids can be independent and get yourself a bowl of rice. *Ramyeon* is not healthy, but it's everybody's

favorite. It's more Asian style than the American packets that cost seventy-five cents at the store today. It's spicy. It's interesting. My seven-year-old son has a spice tolerance even higher than myself. I remember being pregnant and eating spicy foods. You've got to introduce them, and I guess it worked. I don't know that there is empirical evidence that that was the reason, but he has very high tolerance for spicy food, which is typical. I have memories of my aunts and uncles getting together and them eating peppers and rice and everything, but specifically sweating, physically sweating while eating this, and loving it, and this is just part of dinnertime. Oh, Korean *mandu*, dumplings. All of it. I find myself going to Greenland Supermarket probably once a month to stock up.

Where is Greenland?

Rainbow and Spring Mountain. It's the shopping center owned by the Lees. Unfortunately, Mr. Lee has passed, but his family now owns that shopping center, wife and kids. I think they call it Korean Town Plaza, and there is a Korean market there. It's the closest one to my home, and so that's where I often frequent.

As far as celebrations go, when my son was born, we had a hundred-day celebration, if you're familiar. It's called *baek-il*; *baek*, the word for hundred, and *il* for day. In Korea, there is not such thing—I don't want to say modern; modern Korea is very different than past Korea—but in older Korean tradition, a pregnant woman would never have a baby shower, like American-style baby shower, absolutely not. Number one, Korean people are very superstitious, and I sign myself up for that, too. You never have a baby shower, because you're concerned about infant mortality. There was very high infant mortality in Korea prior to the war, and that mindset is absorbed into the culture. Never any western idea of a shower before the baby was born: no celebrating, no nothing, because infant mortality is very high. You don't actually

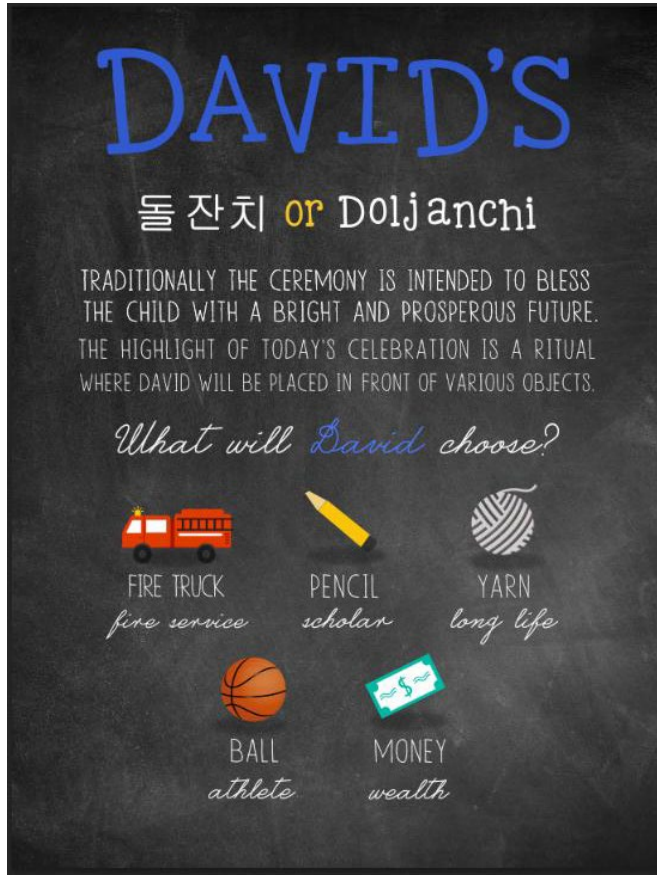
acknowledge the birth of the child until a hundred days after, because, I guess, in Korean minds, statistically, if a baby can survive infancy to a hundred days, they're very, very likely to survive long term, and so that baby is not even celebrated until then.



Allen's son's "baek-il" invitation for 100 days after his birthday, May 30, 2017

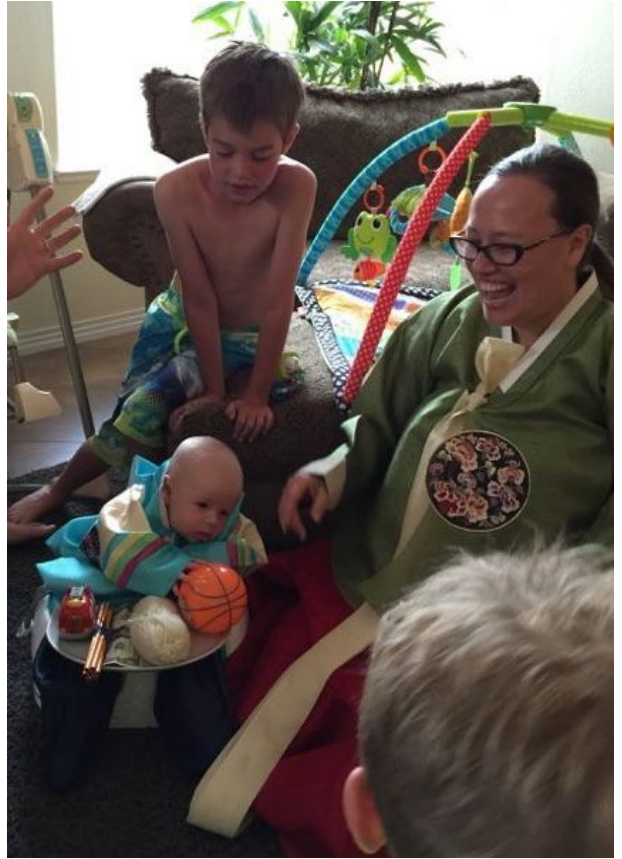
David had a hundred-day party. As a part of it, you have this process where you put items in front of the child, and the child picks the item. We did that, and my son picked a basketball indicating his future would be in sports. He loves sports to this day, although right now for him it's baseball. But, nevertheless, the basketball doesn't indicate the sport, per se, but just his field of where he will excel. Generally, you put a dollar in front of him, a piece of cash, and that

indicates wealth. You put yarn, and the yarn indicates longevity, meaning the child will have a very long life. In Korea, they often put pencils, and the pencils meaning the person would be a scholar. We put a little fire engine for him to be a firefighter and then a basketball. These customs become Americanized, and we individualize them. If the Korean family had a doctor in the family, there was probably a stethoscope. We had a fire engine and a basketball. My son chose a basketball, and to this day when he sees the pictures, he says, “That’s when I decided to be an athlete.”



A part of the “baek-il” celebration, the “Doljanchi” ceremony predicts the trajectory of a child’s life at 100 days old, this is an adjusted/modernized version for Francis and her son

David (Francis's son) selecting the basketball at his "Doljanchi" ceremony suggesting an athletic future, 2017



Wow, a hundred-day celebration. And what else?

I guess clothes. We have traditional *hanbok*; *han* being the word for Korean, and *bok* meaning clothes or outfit. At a hundred days, myself, daughter, and son were all in traditional Korean clothes. It's part of the celebration. You wear the traditional Korean clothes. Throughout my childhood, birthdays, whatnot, my mother dressed us in these clothes, and so I'm very familiar with it. I have a closet full of them. While I don't wear them often today, it was definitely a part of my childhood. My thirteen-year-old daughter wore one for the *baek-il*, and she called it her Korean princess dress.



Francis with her son and daughter in traditional *hanbok* clothing, 2017

I love that. What did she choose?

She is my stepdaughter and was not around then. But she is my daughter, bonus kid. She embraces Koreanness as much as any of them.

You've lived in D.C.; you've lived in Reno, and you've lived in Las Vegas. What would you say might be similar threads running through all three of those places, and then what might be the biggest differences?

The most significant difference geographically is the East Coast/West Coast mentality. It's very different. I always like to say, *West Coast is the best coast*. We're more relaxed. I think the East Coasters think that we are not driven enough, while they're wound tight, and they believe that that's the way people are and that we are lackadaisical. But my biggest memory of Washington, D.C., is very much a personality difference between those that were from the region and area. Maybe this is because I worked in an office of a West Coast member of Congress, and it was essentially a little West Coast embassy. Each member's office looked very much like where they came from, and it was then a melting pot of America, those congressional offices.

What office building was he in?

Longworth.

Is there a hierarchy of buildings and a hierarchy of where the offices are?

Yes, of course, there is a hierarchy.

Tell us about that.

Of course, I worked for a member of the House of Representatives. That's the lower house. There is a lot more of them. Literally, the office was the size of a closet, almost. There were four staff people. Mr. Gibbons had an office, and then the rest of the area was broken down into two areas. There were four and six staff people in these small rooms. I'm confident that's the way it is today, whether you're Dina Titus or Mark Amodei or Susie Lee. The quarters are very, very small, and everybody is working on top of one another. Of course, then you take the underground tram to the Senate side, and they're not drinking beer; they're drinking cognac, and their offices are far more palatial. I remember Senator Harry Reid was majority leader at the time. Of course, everybody is friends with everybody, and this staffer is like, "Come see." I'm like, "Ah, even the air smells better over here." Senator Reid's office—of course he was

Majority Leader—it was palatial, and he had a view of the Capitol, and the grounds were amazing. I thought, *This is the same guy that came to my class all those years ago.*

And didn't answer the questions.

Yes, and didn't answer the questions, and he's done well for himself. I saw his office, too, and he would keep a badge. While he went to law school, he was a policeman. I think his wife had his badge framed, and it was in his office as a constant reminder of how far he came. He was essentially patrolling the Capitol and then running the Capitol. It's great history for Nevada regardless of partisanship. He was a good man.

Let's get back to the Longworth Building. As a newly elected—

I just remember the humidity being so stifling. You had to leave the building in the summertime to grab lunch somewhere; it was one of the options. I remember once walking down and all the way back with my lunch and thinking, *How do people do this?* Because you have to dress to be a congressional staffer, and so I'm in navy blue, and the sun is stifling and the humidity. I remember thinking, *This is taking it out of me.* It's just a different environment.

His office as a new representative, so, no seniority, and as a representative from a sparsely populated state—

Bottom of the barrel.

—who were his office neighbors?

I don't even remember. The hallways were always sparse. It was like everybody was in their own...

Cocoon?

Yes. We served at the same time as Shelley Berkley, so there was some congeniality there with staff, but she was not in our building. I think there are three, at least three humongous ones. They didn't put Nevada together, no.

What would you like people who have never been to Nevada to know about our state?

A lot of people have been to Nevada because of Las Vegas. I think really the best part of Las Vegas is not the Las Vegas Strip. People come here because it's a destination for gaming and entertainment. While that's great, and I love having it at my fingertips, too—my husband and I are concert goers and love country music, and we find ourselves down there with some frequency—there is so much more to Nevada. We take our kids generally on spring break to Ichthyosaur National Park and Great Basin National Park to go see Nevada. There is so much to see, so much to do, I think, that's undervalued; and, perhaps, that's my Northern Nevada legacy popping out, but I love Nevada. We love Lake Tahoe. We love Northern Nevada. We love Central Nevada. We love Basque food. We will travel Nevada looking for Basque restaurants.

Did you ever attend the Route 91 Festival?

My son at the time [of the 1 October tragedy] was an infant. My husband and I would have been there had I not just—he was born in February, so he was six months at the time. The night it happened, I thought, *Oh, we would have been there if I had not had a newborn child*, undoubtedly, because that was right up our alley. We've seen Jason Aldean many times. Steve was actually on duty as a firefighter that night. He wasn't called in, but he was on the outskirts, and he was brought down to backfill fire stations for guys on duty there. He is right over there if you want to ask him about that, too. He's got some Las Vegas history in him as well.

I may take you up on that later. When you were in Reno, were there other Asian families in your school or in your neighborhood?

My brother and I were primarily the only Asian kids. As you get to high school, it becomes a little more diverse. But, definitely, my memory in elementary school was being the only person that looked different. I was fortunate enough that I always felt embraced, but there was always the initial, “Why do you look different?” “Well, because I’m Korean, Korean American.” “Oh, okay. Let’s go play.” But there wasn’t a lot of diversity in 1980-something in Reno, Nevada. But even Reno has grown, and it has become a more diverse population. I think that’s one of the reasons why Las Vegas gravitated towards me, because of its awesome diversity.

Have you ever experienced any discrimination racially?

Perhaps this is just me personally. I wouldn’t like to acknowledge too much. I have vague memories, and I don’t think about it much. Maybe in college, because in Northern Nevada, in Reno, you get this conglomeration of rural kids that come to UNR and Northern Californians and Reno types. I remember some folks probably from rural Nevada referred to me as a “Pacific Rim girl.” I think it was more of a statement of fact for them, and it didn’t hurt me to my core or anything. I don’t think it was said in a positive light. But when I think of people having systemic racism over their lifetimes, I can’t consider myself one, because one or two instances is not comparable to what someone else has lived. I don’t focus on it. Hey, I think being female is probably harder to overcome than being Asian, honestly. Maybe that gives me a double whammy, or maybe that just gives me the drive to work harder than everybody else. But it’s funny that you ask, and it’s funny that I remember “Pacific Rim girl.” Like, “I don’t know where you’re from, but you’re a foreigner.” I’m like, “No, I grew up here. I’m not a foreigner.”

The AAPI population is the fastest growing population in Southern Nevada. It’s also one of the fastest growing AAPI populations in the country. What does that mean to you?

It's also part of a great melting pot. Many Americans think of AAPI as Asians being consolidated. Asians are not consolidated. Asians are uniquely different. There is nothing binding a Japanese person and a Singaporean and Hong Kong and Korean. They're different cultures. They're different foods. They're different languages. When we come to America, America collectively sees us as "they," as one people. We are as different as they come, [like] the difference between a Spaniard and a Frenchman, no similarity. But through White eyes or American eyes, "Oh, those are either the model minority, or they are 'they,'" a collective they. When you sit as an Asian person, there is no collective they. There is me and my Korean ethnicity and that person with their Japanese ethnicity, and it's very, very distinct and different.

I love the fact that Las Vegas becomes more and more diverse every year. It's wonderful, and Asian people are moving here, because it's so welcoming, and there are many, many jobs. That is historically why people come to Las Vegas: that growth, that economic engine that moves people here. Asian people want that, too. Unlike many other minority groups, Asian people, I guess, maybe they're just more accustomed to becoming mainstream. They don't live in one geographic area. Asian people are spread out throughout the valley. Even though you have the Spring Mountain area and the collective Asian restaurants down there, the people who go there... I leave northwest Las Vegas to go there once or twice a week. We love it there. The food is great. We love exploring and finding new things and all that there is to offer. But we come back to our home in northwest Las Vegas, and they go back to their homes in Summerlin. Asians want to live where everybody else wants to live, not in subcultures with one another.

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

I don't know that mine is important at all. I'm just barely a footnote in Nevada history. Some of the folks, like you mentioned Cherina [Kleven] and the gentleman who built the first Chinatown

Plaza [Henry Hwang], have been part of Las Vegas history for a long time, and it's important to preserve that.

Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you wanted to?

You know more about me now than most people. No. America and Las Vegas and Nevada has afforded myself and my family with a great opportunity to thrive and to excel and to work hard and achieve, and I think this is part of the Asian American dream, too—to come here, work hard, be able to build things, and collect wealth, and pass that to the next generation, and have the next generation have it easier than the generation before. That is the American dream. I feel like Asian people embrace that as much as anybody else.

One thing that we forgot to talk about, and we both wanted to get into, in the oral history is color and shades of White. Can you talk about that?

Or pigment.

Let's talk about pigment.

Yes. I grew up with a Korean mother constantly telling me, "Don't go outside without a hat on." Don't let your skin turn brown, essentially. A different perspective, different history and culture. In Korea, if your skin was born, it was because you were overexposed to the sun. If you had a sunburn, it was because you labored outside, which means you had a physical job and not a mental job. People who were smart worked indoors and weren't overexposed to the sun; therefore, darker skin is not prized.

Fast forward to the United States in 2022. When you come back from your trip to Hawaii, or Cabo, or wherever you took your vacation because you have those resources, you come back almost proud, "Look at my sunburn." That is embraced. This maybe has changed even in America over time, but I would say today people embrace brown, and that's not the case—I can't

say about all Asians; I can only speak to Korean people. It was, “Do you have sunscreen on? Put your hat on. You don’t want to look like you worked in the rice paddies.”

Do you think people shun darker skin?

I think lighter skin in Korean culture is prized. That’s just through how things have evolved for Korean people. Like I indicated, if you had a sunburn, it’s because you labored outside, and that was the connection; therefore, you weren’t smart enough to work indoors.

Do you think that this is just confined to Korea?

I can’t speak with authority on anything else. That is how I was raised. My mother, on my thirtieth birthday, gave me a very expensive eye cream. “Happy thirtieth birthday. Now, don’t get any wrinkles.” Hey.

Did it work?

Korean skincare is a humungous thing now. Fast forward. That was fifteen years ago when she did that. My mother is passed now, but I still hear her in my head, “No wrinkles, no wrinkles, Francis.” You’ve got to do your regimen and have all the products.

When you say “Korean skincare,” is that different from...?

Oh, yes.

Tell us about it.

It’s usually referred to now as K-beauty just like K-pop. But K-beauty has taken over the world in a large way. You have many, many American women ordering Korean cosmetics online being sent to the home. It’s a humongous industry.

How much time does it take?

Probably a true K-beauty routine might have twelve products to use night and day, of course. I don’t know how much time that equates to, maybe thirty minutes on the easy end, which is not

conducive to my lifestyle, but I do have K-beauty products that I even ship in. I like it. It's fun. It's trying something new. It's almost my mother. I have memories of her and all the products in the bottles. They were all glass and shiny and sparkled in the light. It has become a worldwide phenomenon just like K-pop. The Korean culture is being embraced now like never before across the world. I keep thinking, *I wish being Korean was cool when I was young like it is today*. Now everybody wants to ask me about Korean dramas, particularly Hispanic people who love—they have their *novellas*—they love Korean dramas, which is Korean soap operas, a very large portion of Netflix. If you've never explored, go on your Netflix, and you'll find Korean dramas that are great that have taken over the world. I can recommend a few later if you like.

What's your favorite?

There has been several. I really liked *Itaewon Class*. Itaewon is a section of Seoul that is more international. It's the story of a Korean boy that struggles in life and loses his father early and builds a restaurant empire, and he does it with this ragtag team of other Korean kids, including one who is African American but ethnically very Korean. His father was Korean, and his mother was African American. He only speaks Korean. At one point, they say, "Speak English to the customer." He's like, "I don't speak English." He looks 100 percent African American. They embrace him. It's a great story. It's fun. It's pure entertainment. You're not going to get any smarter watching it. It's one of my favs. It's available on Netflix.

Your second favorite?

Korean people love the romance ones, and there are lots and lots of romance ones. They're not 100 percent my favorite, but it's a big genre. I'll get you a list. [*Ed. Note*: Her favorite Korean dramas include: *Crash Landing on You*, *Squid Game*, *Itaewon Class*, *It's Okay Not to be Okay*, *The Moon that Embraces the Sun*, and *Pinocchio*]

Can we add it to the oral history?

Oh. If you want, sure. It seems very...it's pop culture-y and not as significant. But in some places, it is part of what is berthed as important to Korean culture in the world. This is Korea's interface. People's interface with Korea has become these beauty products that have become sought after, K-pop music, the boy bands that have taken over. What's the name of the one that my daughter likes so much?

BTS?

Yes, yes, yes. Even my son, seven years old, knows. They've taken over music.

What about toys?

Like Hello Kitty or something like that?

No. There's something called *Bakugan*. How old is your—

He's seven. I may have missed that. I know I have all the Korean lunchboxes that have the rice and compartmentalized *banchan*. But I don't know. Is it something yellow? Describe it to me.

No. They're balls that you manipulate, and then they become figures.

I don't even think my nieces and nephews... I'll have to catch up. I'm not great on even American kids' toys.

It does seem like—

Being Korean is way more cool than it used to be, and the world is interested in Korea like it never had been before.

You mentioned earlier Korean food.

Yes. Even Korean food has had an explosion in ten years. I remember as a child bringing lunch to school, and they were like, "Ugh." Like the smell of garlic was overwhelming, and *kimchi* doesn't smell the best, even I'll acknowledge it; but I love it. I would bring my lunch. When I

talk to my Korean cousins, we have this similar American childhood. They are a hundred percent, and my brother and I are fifty-fifty. But we all have the same familiar childhood where you open your lunch, and they're like, "What are you eating, seaweed?" Now it's one of Costco's biggest sellers, called *gim*. Every kid that comes to my house wants to raid my stash of seaweed. It's universal. Back then, it was very foreign, very, very foreign.

Thank you. I'm glad that we...

Added on to popular culture.

...added on to popular culture. Thank you so much.

[End of recorded interview]