

## **A TEI Project**

# **Interview of William Kil**

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## **1. Transcript**

### **1.1. Session 1 (March 18, 2008)**

Cline

Okay, here we go. Today is Tuesday, March 18th, 2008. This is Alex Cline interviewing William O. Kil at his offices in Los Angeles for our first session.

Cline

Good afternoon.

Kil

Good afternoon.

Cline

Thank you for taking some time to talk to us about your life story as part of this series. We always start at the beginning. It's a very obvious and simple way to get going. So the first question I'll ask you is, where exactly and when exactly were you born?

Kil

I was born on May 1st, 1960 in Seoul, Korea.

Cline

Okay. What I'll ask next, we'll start with your father. I wanted to ask you what you know about your father's family background. Sometimes people don't know very much, but what did he do, for example, and what part of Korea did he come from?

Kil

Yes, of course. My father was born in North Korea in the Northern Pyongyang Province called the Pyongyang-bukto. It means North Pyongyang Province. Until the Korean War he worked as a schoolteacher. In fact, he taught Korean and Chinese literature at a girls' high school in Pyongyang.

Cline

So clearly something happened once the [Korean] war started.

Kil

Yes, of course. It broke up many families, thousands of families, one of which was my father's. My father was from what we are told was the thirteenth generation first-born in his family, so he had a duty to carry out the family name, family line, traditions, and uphold family values. Like many families his family value was respect your parents and your ancestors. So we had this ancestor-worshipping rituals about four to six times a year until my father passed away. Also he always emphasized, like, love your siblings, brothers and sisters. But also he always emphasized to be a proud and productive and useful member of the society in your community. If you're not going to be useful it's not worth living. Don't waste the resources and hurting other people. So that was our family value and motto. So we've been very mindful of what we've been doing in terms of our work and whatnot.

Kil

But at any rate, my grandfather, his father, was sort of farmer/small landlord where he owned plots of lands and he had farmers to come into the farming, like sharecroppers, except that my grandfather committed suicide when my father was young, supposedly, because my grandfather had, I guess, because of some wealth he had he was caught assisting and aiding the Korean Independence Movement, and so he was arrested by Japanese police and tortured. So after the release he must have had a very terrible psychological

effect, and he killed himself shortly after. So my father grew up without his father. I suppose that happened when my father was young.

Kil

My grandmother sent my father to study in North China when he was like sixteen or seventeen. So he went to study in Harbin, which is northeastern city closer to Russia, as we know it currently. He studied in law school, from what we were told. Then when he was approximately twenty, nineteen or twenty, he was drafted into Japanese Army toward the end of the Second World War when the Japanese Imperial government was desperate enough to recruit and draft all able bodies in Korea, non-Japanese citizens. Oh, well, I guess Koreans were considered Japanese citizens at the time since Korea was annexed, it's that Koreans were second-class citizens for all practical purpose. He was sent to Burma and my father and his other buddy escaped just before the collapse of the Japanese Imperial Army, you know, traveled across China 3,000 miles and found his way back to his home in Pyongyang.

Cline

Wow.

Kil

Because he spoke fluent Chinese and that helped him to travel across China. But at that time, what we were told was that toward the last days of the Japanese War, World War II, all the Korean draftees were picked and shot before, yes, instead of allowing them to return, because they were afraid that the Koreans would turn against the Japanese masters, all the Japanese superiors using their arms and military training and whatnot. Supposedly there were like a couple hundred Korean draftees in his unit, his regiment, they were all killed except he and his friend.

Kil

So like many Koreans we never had--we grew up, like hearing all these horror stories and disliked Japanese as a result.

Cline

Yes, sure. Yes, right.

Kil

Then after he returned home after the war he continued to study. He continued on with his study in Chinese and Korean and he got a job as a high school teacher. Then he was, we were told that he was about to be drafted into North Korean Army, because he was supposedly, like, educated, they wanted to draft him for I'm sure some practical purpose. So he had to escape to South. It happened overnight and he was only able to flee North with his youngest brother. He was the oldest of the four children.

Cline

Yes, I was going to ask how many siblings.

Kil

He had two younger brothers and one younger sister, and apparently the younger sister had to remain home to take care of the mother and his other brother was away from home. So he had to escape with his youngest brother, who happened to be home at the time. His youngest brother was going to college at the time called Kim Il-Sun College. Supposedly it was the best college in Pyongyang or North Korea at the time.

Kil

Then he joined the Korean Paramilitary Force.

Cline

In South Korea?

Kil

In South Korea, because he felt that that was the only way to see his family and he believed that, or many Koreans believed that the North Koreans were going to be defeated and pushed out, along with Russians, back to China and Soviet Union. That didn't materialize. My father married my mother in 1953 in Pusan where all the Korean refugees were gathered when the North Koreans pushed Southern Korean forces and U.N. forces south of the 38th Parallel. He married my mother who was a local person in Pusan.

Kil

We later discovered, after my father's death, through our uncle, the youngest brother that fled to South with my father, at the time told us that actually he was married in North Korea prior to the [Korean] War and had two children. He also had to leave them behind. He kept that a secret from my mother and everyone, including my uncle. So it was sort of a conspiracy to deceive, but it turned out that there were many families like that who were married and had to leave because--leave their families behind because they were all under the impression that they were going to be returning home soon, that the war was going to be over, that North Koreans and Communists would be pushed out of the Korean Peninsula, but, of course, that never happened.

Kil

So that's so much I think, you know, my father--

Cline

That's a lot about your father.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

It sounds like he led a, certainly a difficult, but probably also fairly emotionally painful early life.

Cline

What do you know about your mother's family then?

Kil

My mother also had, like, two sisters and one older brother. My mother only had a high school degree, high school diploma, because many Korean women at the time either were not allowed to go into college or did not have the money to do so and there were very few colleges at the time in Korea. My grandparents were, I think, farmers in Pusan area, but my mother, after she got married ran a, from what my grandmother and my mother told me, ran a fabric store with my grandmother and ran a fabric store to help out the family. My mother was very, she was like the matriarch of the family. She took care of her siblings, like my father was to his siblings. My mother took care of her

siblings. Whenever I think about my mother I get really emotional because I was really attached to my mother and she died at fifty-three. So that's maybe another reason, but she represented--she was the embodiment of just like many mothers, but embodiment of sacrifice and love, and I can tell you that later.

Kil

My mother married my father, gave birth to four children, two older brothers [Gilbert Kil and George Kil], myself, and my younger sister [Elizabeth Kil]. Then my two brothers were born in Pusan and then my family moved to Seoul, at which time I was born in Seoul, Korea, but before my birth. My father started a small business because he thought that was the way to make money. So he got into import-export, and because he spoke Japanese and Chinese, so he traveled to Japan and Taiwan. Supposedly we had a grand-uncle who lived in Japan, who moved to Japan during the colonial period and married a Japanese woman, became a naturalized Japanese. So my father went to, I guess, look him up to see if he could get some help, but I guess that didn't really pan out. But anyway, so my father started doing import-export in the sixties.

Kil

When my mother moved to Seoul from Pusan, which is like, Pusan is the second biggest port city at the tip of the--southern tip of the Korean Peninsula and Seoul is, of course, centrally located, my mother brought her mother, her grandmother, because my grandfather, my mother's father, passed away early, too. He got into a car accident and he died early, so my grandmother became a widow when she was like late thirties or early forties. So my mother brought her mother, so my grandmother came and lived with us. They were very close. Even though she had a son, but she preferred to live with my mother for some reason.

Kil

Then my family in 1970 moved to Hong Kong.

Cline

Okay. Before we get there let me get some more detail about your life in Korea. First of all, going back to your father, you mentioned the sort of

essentially typical sort of Confucian ideals that he upheld, and I'll ask this about both his family and your mother's family. What was their religious background and did you have a religious life in your family as a youngster?

Kil

Yes, my father, I don't think he really had a religion, even though my father's side in North Korea were very strong and early Christians.

Cline

Oh, wow.

Kil

In fact, one of my father's uncles was the first ordained evangelical minister in Korea. It's in the history book, Korean history book. He's really highly respected. But my father never really went to church and he had this philosophy that because he went through so much suffering and he had to overcome all these ordeals and hardships on his own, he felt that he did it on his own without any intervention of holy intervention--

Cline

Yes, the divine.

Kil

--or divine. So he never really had religion, whereas many of the South Koreans were Buddhists. It was North Koreans that were more converted to Christianity because the missionaries came through North Korea by way of China. So my mother's side was all Buddhists and so my grandmother and my mother went to temple, Korean Buddhist Temple until we immigrated to the U.S. So we naturally went to Buddhist Temple with them. So I sort of grew up in the Buddhist Temple as a child. We'd go every Sunday and we would go through the Buddhist teachings and like Sunday school, similar to our Sunday school.

Cline

Right. Okay. You mentioned your siblings and how two of them were born in Pusan before you were born in Seoul.

Kil

My youngest sister was also born in Seoul, yes.

Cline

In Seoul, right.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

I wanted to ask you--just wait for you to dismantle the phone there. That's okay, don't worry about it.

Cline

What do you remember, particularly your earliest memories of your family life in Seoul? For example, can you describe the neighborhood that you grew up in?

Kil

Oh, yes, I lived in central Seoul, it's the heart of Seoul, and it's very close to one of the Asian palaces called Biwon, also known as Secret Garden. It was only like a couple blocks away, very convenient. My father bought this house, a traditional Korean house. At the time there were mostly British or Korean houses there, very few high-rises or apartment complexes back then. My father's business was, I guess, doing pretty well, so even though it wasn't a real plush life, but it was above average income, above average income family. So I had piano lessons, violin lessons. My sisters had violin lessons. We had private tutors. So, yes, we had an above-average household income I felt.

Kil

But there were--this is where my father's business didn't do well and then we weren't [unclear] well, by the same token, but overall it was a pretty decent life. So, yes, it was comfortable. Yes.

Cline

Were most of the people in your neighborhood about the same level of income?

Kil

Yes. Yes. In fact, I remember it was in 1964, '65, we were the first family to have a black-and-white TV in our section of the neighborhood. So whenever there was a big interesting show, especially I remember the wrestling was a big show at the time, a big event in Korea in the mid-sixties and, I guess, seventies. Whenever there was a big wrestling match we would have everyone from the neighbor--you know, all the neighbor--many neighbors would come to our house and they will sit in the front yard, because there wasn't enough room in the living area to watch the TV together. So that was interesting.

Kil

My family also had a telephone, which was a big deal at the time, in the mid-sixties. So yes, we had some amenities of the, yes, modern world at the time.

Cline

Also this is a number of years after the [Korean] war, but what do you remember about seeing non-Koreans, non-Asians, perhaps military, in your area?

Kil

Again, we were living in central Seoul, so there were very few non-Koreans, especially G.I.s, you know, military personnel. I would see them occasionally, but I have not encountered much. But I remember there was this vendor that would sell chocolates that she would get from the military bases through illicit means and they would sell it and my mother would buy them for us, like Hershey chocolates and so on. That was, of course, a wonderful gift. I remember, yes, we would get that only when we do well in school, like when we'd get an A she would give a piece of chocolate.

Cline

Interesting. What about on TV, was there any introduction of western programming or elements on TV?

Kil

Oh, absolutely. I grew up watching Combat. Occasionally when I'd turn the TV on I would see that and it brings me back the old memory, but Combat is something that I really enjoyed and I still remember. I certainly remember many of the episodes. Yes.

Cline

Yes, the late Vic Morrow.

Kil

Yes. Then, of course, Batman and Robin, that was another show, American show, that I remember.

Cline

What, if any, impressions did you develop of America and the Western culture from these sorts of things?

Cline

Well, again, I left Korea when I was ten, so until ten, I was fourth grade when I left, I thought it was just wonderful, you know, everything was all nicer, bigger, something that you would not normally see in Korea. I remember, in fact, I loved to be in cars, private passenger cars, because we didn't have a car, like many families did not have at the time. But I would occasionally get a chance to ride in a taxicab and it was so nice. My dream at the time was that I was going to grow up to be a taxicab driver, because I really loved to be in a car. Of course, those are all those--I mean, it was influenced by my watching American TV shows with the big cars.

Cline

Interesting. What other possible elements of Western culture do you remember? For example, what was happening on the radio? Did you listen to the radio at all when you were young, or hear it?

Kil

I think I was too young to really perceive what was happening, but I remember actually, I went to a kindergarten. It was run by a Christian, some Christian

organization. I think it was some church organization. I think it was part of a college, actually, and I remember the owner of the kindergarten or the owner of the organization that ran the kindergarten facility was American. The husband was Korean and he married a Caucasian American lady. So I had some American contact, actually, when I was in kindergarten. In fact, there was one girl who was half--also it was mixed, half Korean, half white, and she and I were particularly close, because she was the prettiest one and I was a pretty good-looking kid myself. Yes, so that was sort of an American contact I had.

Cline

Wow, that's pretty unusual.

Kil

Yes, it was. Yes. Her name was Linda, actually. I remember even, Linda, yes.

Cline

Wow. Interesting.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

Where did you wind up going to school when you began school?

Kil

That's another story to tell. Korean parents, when it comes to schooling Korean parents are really gung-ho about it.

Cline

Yes, very serious.

Kil

They really overzealous. My mother, like any other Korean mother, wanted us to be placed in the best possible school starting at elementary school level. So there were two private religious schools that were known for academic excellence. So I applied there to those two schools, but I did not get in

because rumor has it that even though I passed the academic test our parents weren't wealthy enough to meet the admission criteria, because all the rich and famous kids were going to school, all would be placed in that school. So I went to a public school not far from my house where my older brother [Gilbert] went, also. It was walking distance. So public school. That's where my youngest sister went, also.

Cline

What do you remember about the sorts of things that you were interested in as a child when you were in school?

Kil

Oh, I excelled in school, actually, academically, and also I was a good runner. So I entered the school tournaments and entered elementary school tournaments where I represented my school. I was a pretty fast runner from what I recall, yes. So I did some running.

Cline

Any particular subjects start to interest you as a child?

Kil

Oh, wow, yes. History was my primary interest, yes. I enjoyed reading history books and autobiographies of famous people and leaders, including Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, that I read in Korean.

Cline

Wow, interesting.

Kil

Social studies, actually, yes, were my primary interest at the time. It still is to some extent.

Cline

Wow. Well, that's also pretty unusual.

Kil

I hated math. I'm not a typical Korean or Asian for that matter. [laughs]

Cline

Yes, right. [laughs] Well, that makes two of us, although I'm not Asian.

Cline

What about friends? What do you remember about some friends from school?

Kil

Oh, I had lots of friends. I was, in fact, very socially active, and it is true to some extent to this date, but it was kind of very safe for kids to roam around even at late hours. There was very little crime and endangerment to kids. So I would always hang out at my friend's house, even at a kindergarten level, I would stay out late, come home at nine or ten, and my mother would be worried sick and she would scold me, but I was very socially active until I left Korea. I would visit friends' house. I even started going to movie theaters on my own at second grade.

Cline

Really?

Kil

Yes, and I don't know, it's amazing my mom would let me go, but I loved to see movies. So I would go to the movie theaters when I was like seven or eight on my own.

Cline

Amazing.

Kil

Yes. So I guess kids were a little bit more freer in that sense. There were less restrictions because maybe just our society at the time was less dangerous than it is now.

Cline

What did you go to see in the movies, what kind of movies?

Kil

War movies, you know, anything that played, actually. But Korean movies mostly, and then there were, I remember seeing, I believe, it was Peter Pan old-version Disney, I saw that as a child. Yes, some Disney movies.

Cline

Also I wondered in the sort of your family culture there were four children and two older brothers and a younger sister, what kind of household chores or what was expected of you as members of the family to help out, if anything, or how was that divided up?

Kil

Well, we were pretty young at the time, when we were living in Korea, and also we had, like, if you were lower income or above middle-income family you would have housekeeper, because back then the labor costs were pretty cheap, you know pretty low. So we had a housekeeper ever since I remember, ever since I was born. So we didn't do any house chores.

Cline

I see. Okay. Well, what about food now, did your mom do all the cooking?

Kil

She did some.

Cline

Or did the housekeeper cook a lot?

Kil

But had housekeeper to help out, but yes.

Cline

What were some your favorite foods growing up?

Kil

Yes, rice and kimchee , of course.

Cline

Well, besides that, anything else?

Kil

Well, of course, I remember, of course, again, it has to do with American influence, but sausage was--it was, again, because of the American influence and import, was my favorite dish. In fact, in some years you had to pack your own lunch, in some years school would provide lunch. Those years when we had to pack lunch my favorite, of course, Korean dish was--oh, we all had rice, rice and kimchee, like sausage, you know, as an additional delicacy. Yes.

Cline

Wow, that must have been a special deal. So I also was curious, when you mentioned your friends, what kind of backgrounds did your friends come from, was it pretty diverse?

Kil

I think so, yes. Well, the school that I went, again, was a public school, so as I mentioned earlier all the wealthy, some of the wealthiest kids from some of the most prestigious families would go to private schools, because they would use all means to get their kids in, and those who were not successful or who were not able to afford to go were placed in a public school. So it was really mixed, there were some rich kids, but mostly middle income, and there were some poor kids. But the kids that hang out with are about my level in terms of economics and social background and so on. So I don't think there was that much difference, yes, in terms of class.

Cline

Right. You had your grandmother living with you, as well, is that right? Or did she live near you?

Kil

When we were living in Seoul she would live partly at our house, but partly at my uncle's house, her oldest son, but she joined us when we moved to Hong Kong.

Cline

Oh, okay.

Kil

Yes, but she would go back and forth.

Cline

Okay. So when you were ten years old you moved to Hong Kong?

Kil

Right, but before I moved to Hong Kong I remember, again because I was the youngest of the three sons, and so because I was younger I'd spend a lot of time with my mother when my brothers were at school. So I'd spent a lot of time with my mother, I remember, even when I was like three or four that my mom would take me everywhere whenever she--you know, when she even went to meet her friends she would take me. So I was really physically spent a lot of time with my mother. I think she spent more time with me than even my younger sister. I think she really--I guess maybe I was one of--I guess I was her favorite, maybe. So I spent a lot of time with her.

Kil

Also my father, he was always busy trying to make a few bucks, so he would come home late. So we would only see him like on Sunday. So he would try to spend time with us on Sunday. So he loved to go hiking, so he would take us on a hike in the local mountains. So he loved outdoors. He was a really good athlete. He was a greater swimmer, he even skied, he even golfed back then. He was a great athlete. So he would try to spend time with us on Sundays, but that was the only time we were able to see him, other times we were constantly with my mother. So we would spend most of the time with my mother and so we really grew attached to her.

Cline

Right. How would you describe your relationship with your father then at that point?

Kil

My father was a very strict Confucius-principled person. We had to always use honorific form, unlike my mother. We called my mother "Mom," but to Father, we would call him "Father," not Dad, and always use honorific form. He was very strong in disciplining us. So whenever he was home we are dead silent, we don't talk. I mean, we don't even smile unless, you know--anyway,

yes, so whenever he leaves for work we'd say, "We are freed," like emancipated, you know, because he was very strict. [laughter] Whereas my mother was just full of love and understanding. So it was contrasting people.

Kil

So I kind of retained that, you know, characteristics and do that to my kids, even though I know sometimes it's wrong, especially this day and age and in this country, but my wife keeps telling me to go easy and just to relax a bit, you know?

Cline

Yes, right.

Kil

But it just comes out.

Cline

Wow. Yes.

Kil

But my father was very strict, very strict Confucius (means Confucian) person.

Cline

What was your sense of, because they were so different, what was your sense of the relationship between your mom and dad then?

Kil

I think it was very typical. My father had the final say. My mother was, I guess, either she was submissive or she was understanding, but she would listen to him most of the time.

Cline

Yes.

Kil

I know that my mother got hurt from time to time when my father had social-- you know, like problems, like many--Korean men at the time think that

drinking and having hostess, female hostess to serve is just a natural extension of drinking.

Cline

Yes, right.

Kil

And then, yes, that could lead to problems sometimes, you know.

Cline

Yes, for sure.

Kil

And my mother would discover that, so I know that she had some confrontations over my father's--after work. He was saying that he was an extension of work, but there are certain things that woman just can't accept, and I know that she had some conflict because of my father's extended business activities.

Cline

Right. Pretty typical, I guess. So I presume that because of your father's business situation you wound up relocating to Hong Kong.

Kil

Right.

Cline

How was this news communicated to you and what were your feelings about leaving your home city for a foreign place?

Kil

Actually I was real excited, because I would read about it, I would watch some TV and the movies about foreign countries, including Hong Kong. So it was more of excitement than a fear or sadness, yes. Also I figure, oh, I don't have to go to school anymore. I thought maybe school's--I don't know, but just to--not having to go to school, actually I took off from school for about two months to learn English. So I didn't go to school for like a couple of months

prior to our departure, prior to processing our passports and all that. So that was a good thing that I didn't have to go to school for a couple of months and also going to this exciting city. That's overwhelming me, so it was more of a joy and excitement than fear and sadness.

Cline

What was it like having to start learning English at that age?

Kil

You know, it was interesting. It wasn't easy, but it just happened. In Hong Kong there are like a lot of international students. I mean, it is an international city and there are a lot of non-native speakers, so you didn't feel out of place, because there are a lot of people like yourself who barely knew any English or they're in school to learn. So I didn't feel out of place. In fact, best time of my life was living in Hong Kong that four years. I experienced so much, learned so much. Also another reason is after we moved to Hong Kong, about a year later, my father started this assembly plant in Korea and needed my mother's service, because he had a joint venture with Japanese manufacturer where he would take parts and he would assemble it in South Korea. So since my mother also spoke very--my mother better Japanese than my father, so she had to be there for translation when training the workers. So she would spend half the time in Korea, half the time in Hong Kong, so I was on my own. That's when my grandmother came so that she could like take care of us. Also came our housekeeper. Yes, so my grandmother, my housekeeper, myself, and my youngest sister, four of us lived--and my brother and older brother, moved to Guam on their own.

Cline

Guam?

Kil

Yes, my father sent them to Guam. My oldest brother [Gilbert] was eighteen, my second older brother [George] was fifteen, and my father sent both of them to Guam to study English from Hong Kong, because they feel that--he felt that they weren't learning the proper--getting the proper education in Hong Kong. He wanted us to eventually locate to the U.S., but he felt that we

weren't ready, he wasn't ready because we didn't have any relatives in the U.S. and he has never been to the U.S., and he doesn't speak English and he wanted my brothers to learn English so that they could sort of pave the way and help us to transition in. So he discovered Guam on the map. Really, seriously, there was an American territory that they had American education, so my father gave my brothers money and go to Guam. So they went to Guam and on the plane they met this American person who was living in Guam, so helped them to find an apartment and found them--and sent them to school. This is amazing.

Cline

Nice. So where did you live in Hong Kong then, and what as your experience like getting there? I mean, you pull up your roots and relocated to a huge city.

Kil

Again, yes, my father spoke, because he studied in China, he spoke fluent Chinese, but he spoke Mandarin, not Cantonese.

Cline

I was going to say and you're in--right, you're in a Cantonese area.

Kil

Right, but there were many Cantonese that spoke Mandarin, so that was a good thing. I guess, from what I remember, many of the educated people spoke both Cantonese and Mandarin dialects. So first was my mother and my father that went to Hong Kong and found themselves an apartment. Then came my sister and myself and that was 1970. Then my father left my mother and two of us in Hong Kong and he went back to Korea to pursue his business. So three of us lived for a while, for a few months, four or five months, and my mother, again, did not speak a word of English or Chinese, only spoke Korean and Japanese, but that didn't get them far. But there were some Koreans there that helped us to place us in--there's a Korean federation or association, community association that my mother contacted and there was people that she became friends with and their son helped us to enroll in school.

Kil

No, actually, it was my mother's friend, yes, who helped us in going to school and that's when we adopted an American name. Yes.

Cline

Oh, okay.

Kil

Yes, because Okbin was just too hard. They placed us in a, supposedly a British school, but it wasn't very--it was more of a language school and they wanted us to have an American name or English name. So they named me Billy and my sister Betty, and I thought that was the real full name, but it turned out that it was a shortened version.

Cline

Wow, interesting.

Kil

So I started out as Billy Kil.

Cline

Right. Wow, that's got kind of a wild west like ring to it.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

They just named you? You didn't have any say in this?

Kil

I think that we somehow--I don't know whether we found a name in the book, but somehow we--yes. But it turned out to be a good name, you know, William and Elizabeth, you know, both were very nice names, so we're happy.

Cline

Yes. Good, I'm glad that worked out.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

So where did you live in your apartment in Hong Kong, what was your neighborhood like there?

Kil

Okay. Initially we lived in the Kowloon side, not the Hong Kong Island side, [unclear] side, because apartments there were a little cheaper. It was all Chinese. There were some Indians and very few Koreans, but all primarily Chinese. Our school was on the Hong Kong Island side, so we had to take a bus from our apartment to the ferry and then take a boat across the channel to Hong Kong Island and then take another bus to the school. So we had to ride three different means of transportation to get to school and back for about six months, and that was kind of hard, so we moved to Hong Kong side, and we moved to this apartment called Korea Center. It was developed by the Korean government, actually, so the Korean Council, the first, like, five floors were offices and stores. I believe it was a twenty-story building. Then from sixth floor to the twentieth, to the top, were apartment residential units. So we moved into that building and it was convenient because everyone was Korean and it was somewhat closer to school.

Cline

Oh, that sounds pretty good.

Kil

So from a Chinese neighborhood to a Korean neighborhood.

Cline

But you're now in a really, not only big international city, but a very high density, very busy, active sort of city.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

What was your impression of it? You said it was the greatest time of your life, but--

Kil

Yes. After a year or so I was able to speak the language a little bit, you know, to communicate and converse, and also knew my way around. Hong Kong, as you said, it's a very small, tight, high-density place, so it was easy to get to and it has a really superb public transit system. So I would go everywhere, anywhere, at any time, and I would come home really--and since my mother, at the time, when I was like sixth grade, wasn't living with us and she was going back and forth but primarily spent most of her time in Hong Kong, I was with my grandmother, who doesn't know from day and night. So I didn't really study that much, but I was really heading out a lot with my friends. I had Indian friends, Korean friends, Chinese friends, some British friends, but mostly Chinese friends. I had a lot of Chinese friends and Cambodian friends.

Cline

Oh, interesting.

Kil

After all, it was an international city, but there were a lot of Asians, as well.

Cline

Yes, right. Yes.

Kil

So I had a lot of non-Korean friends that I hung out with.

Cline

Were you speaking English as--

Kil

English and some Chinese at times, but mostly English, broken English.

Cline

Right. Right.

Kil

Yes, and we all spoke broken English.

Cline

Exactly. Interesting.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

Wow, it sounds--

Kil

With some British accents. [laughs]

Cline

Yes, I was going to ask you about learning English from a British colony and I don't hear any traces of the English accent in your English.

Kil

I've been here long enough now that I got acclimated, you know, but also my mom found me a tutor so that I could catch up, but it happened to be an Indian tutor.

Cline

Oh, interesting.

Kil

Yes. Boy, I remember the first day of school there were like school syllabus, but we didn't know what it said. You know, we didn't know what books to pack. And assignments, I wasn't able to do any, because I didn't know what it was talking about, and so my mom had to ask neighbors, sons, to help out, and then she eventually found a tutor. Yes, so the first few months we really struggled. It was like we had to--you know, it was like groping the dark, but it was my mom's patience and her, just her understanding and love that pulled us through. She would always pack lunch for us because we were still

accustomed to Korean food. So she would make Korean lunch. Every morning she would wake up early in the morning and then pack a Korean lunch. It's not sandwiches, it's like rice, which was a little time consuming to cook, and she wanted to make us fresh rice, so she would get up early in the morning, packed us rice, take us to school, and then she would come home and she would ride three different means of transportation and then pick us up the first couple of months until we got used to it.

Cline

You mentioned lunch, certainly I would imagine after you moved into this Korean complex you were able to get something familiar to what you were eating, but what was your food experience like once you got to Hong Kong, what were you eating?

Kil

She would still make us Korean food. She would buy the ingredients from the local market and she would cook Korean food for us with the Korean ingredients. There was a Korean market where we could buy Korean spices and other groceries. But she would make the food, you know, cook the meals for us every day, breakfast, lunch, dinner. Yes, so--

Cline

Right. Interesting. Before you left you were becoming a young man and what, at this point, started to become some of your interests?

Kil

You know, again, my mother wasn't around at the time and definitely my father wasn't around because--and so there was really nobody to really guide me or counsel me. The school that I went to wasn't really much of a school, it was more of a language--even though they called it school, we had very different subjects, but it wasn't a very academically oriented school, so I don't really learn much. I just spent a lot of time just hanging out with friends. I really, I don't think I really had, you know, I think--when I think about it I really didn't really have any interest in any particular subject, I was just too busy playing around.

Cline

Any encounters with like popular culture or anything that kind of grabbed you?

Kil

Oh, yes. Oh, a lot of music, you know, a lot of pop songs, you know, Beatles music. Even though I was like fourteen, fifteen--I was fourteen, yes, I went to lots of parties. Every weekend there were parties to go to. You know, and people drinking. Back then, too, in Asia, you know, you have a minimum drinking age. So that's why I say it was the best time of my life, I didn't have to study and nobody cared.

Kil

Then it wasn't until I moved to this last school before I came to the U.S., it was one of the best schools and I don't know how I got in, but somehow I got in, and that's when I realized how demanding the schoolwork was and how much I was behind. So I had to study hard to catch up and that's when I really progressed academically. So when I moved to the U.S. I did well that one year, one and a half year, that I went to this school called Island School on Hong Kong side. It's a real high-level, very strong academically very strong school. So that's when I not only learned a lot, but also gave me this motivation and drive to study hard to catch up, because I was really suffering and struggling.

Cline

Wow. Yes, you had the self-discipline to make that happen.

Kil

Yes, after two years of goofing around the one year real intense studying just woke me up a little bit.

Cline

Wow, there you go.

Kil

After I came here I maintained my pace.

Cline

How did your younger sister fair in this whole experience?

Kil

I guess, you know, she was younger--let's see, I think, you know, she settled down well, too. Yes, she really settled in and she and I were only two years apart, but we were only one grade apart for some reason. I don't think she was that smart. But anyway, so we went to school together. So I think she--it seems like she had, you know, a number of friends.

Cline

And she learned English pretty well?

Kil

Yes. Yes, in fact, she spoke better English than I did, yes, and real British accent, too. Yes. In fact, it was my youngest sister who got us the Visa, because we all went to the American Consulate in Hong Kong to get the U.S. Visa and all the boys were like--we were all bashful and it was my sister that translated for my dad and spoke to the American Consulate and got the Visa, because they found her to be so cute and so bright and so articulate, impressed by her, you know. That's what my father said, you know, that he's giving all the credit to her because--yes.

Cline

Interesting.

Kil

She's now a social worker in L.A. [Los Angeles] county.

Cline

Oh, okay.

Kil

And she went to UCLA, by the way, your alma mater.

Cline

Great. Excellent. So it sounds a little like your dad had kind of a master plan going here. I mean, he sent your brothers to Guam to learn English, he had you and your sister in Hong Kong, and your mother going back and forth, and

even though he's now, I guess, doing business with the Japanese, which I'm sure had to have some degree of agony for him, he sounded like he had a plan to get to the United States.

Kil

Absolutely, and we didn't know that until--I mean, well, we knew, and we knew that America was our ultimate destination, and we knew why he wanted us to move to the U.S., but we also wondered why he wanted to come to U.S. I mean, I understand that he wanted us to move to U.S. so that we can have American dream, you know, American education, American dream, and also to keep us away from the war and the agonies and pains that he suffered through. But we later learned that he wanted to get U.S. citizenship so that he could visit North Korea and with the Korean passport he was not allowed, he was prohibited. So he felt that--he even thought about moving to Canada and get a Canadian citizenship, but he thought that the U.S. was better for our future and he wanted to get a U.S. citizenship for that purpose.

Cline

Interesting.

Kil

But he never lived to see that day, because he passed away before his time in 1983.

Cline

Wow. Growing up as you did sort of in the shadow of this, you know, in a separated country and with all this hardship that your father endured, which I don't know how much he talked about it, but what do you remember just of sort of, if you have any memories of the general atmosphere when you were growing up in Korea? I mean, did you have to do things like military drills?

Kil

Well, in high schools all the military drills required starting at high school, from tenth grade. So my brother had to, of course, you know, go through a military drill and a military fatigue for a high school student. So you would see that. Then there's always this civil drill, military drill, you know, where there's sirens going off once a month.

Cline

Yes, air raid sirens.

Kil

And everyone has to stay home, you know, someplace outside the public areas, in the open areas. Then their issues of North Korean spies and commanders infiltrating and wreaking havoc, and also occasionally you would, when you'd go hike in the mountains, even in Seoul, you would see these little flyers, cut up flyers, promoting and advocating the Communism principle and the paradise that they're living in. Also my father was always under the fear that North Korea would attack again and that there would another war, and many North Koreans feared that and felt that that was going to happen.

Cline

Yes.

Kil

Then that's when many wanted to move on and move amicably from Korea. So many did to other countries, who couldn't come directly to U.S. went to South America, Brazil, and so on, and many to Canada, and to the U.S. So we're constantly under this fear. Just it was in our backburner that North Korea would attack us one day and we would all be caught in the crossfire. That's the reason, another reason my father wanted to move out of Korea.

Cline

How much, if at all, did that sort of affect you personally as a child, or maybe you were too young?

Kil

Well, to be candid, I was young, and also you kind of grew accustom to it, you know. You get immune, you know.

Cline

Yes, yes.

Kil

That was, again, because of my tender age, you know, it didn't really hit me like adults, but my father, who actually having lived through one and fled from the north and experienced atrocities and brutality of Communists, he just dreaded going through another one.

Cline

Wow. Did you notice the absence of that element when you left Korea and went to Hong Kong?

Kil

Yes, it's, of course, you know, it's like a complete--a place of complete secured from all hostile attacks, I felt. I felt so secure and also sense of freedom, but actually freedom from war, freedom from a force, you know, my parents [unclear] or so, but I think that concerns were more real for my brother, older brother. And my father had to actually spend a lot of money to get him out of Korea, because he was at that age where, you know, if you're of that age where you have to serve in the military you can't leave. So my father had to bribe the officials to get him the passport. We owned two homes and we sold one home, one house, actually.

Cline

Just to get your brother out?

Kil

Yes, to pay for his passport.

Cline

Wow. Man, amazing. So after this academically sort of accelerated year in school in Hong Kong there comes the time when you're going to move again.

Kil

That was the hard part, the U.S. even though I envied it, I dreamed out it, but because I--I guess when you are young you are less sensitive, including fear or anxiety, whereas, of course, I was excited to go to the U.S., but just [unclear] scared by then. I was fourteen and a half. Also, you know, I have to live with my brothers. It was just my two older brothers who came back to Hong Kong and then we came to U.S. together, and my two older brothers and myself,

three of us came first. And the fear of having to live with my brother, you know.

Cline

Whom you hadn't seen, you hadn't seen much of them for a while.

Kil

Right.

Cline

Wow, what was that going to be like?

Kil

And my older brother, the one right above me, was kind of a bully, too. So, you know, that was another hardship on top of the fact that you have to go to a strange country. So we came, I remember January 16th, I believe, we arrived in 1975 at LAX [Los Angeles International Airport].

Cline

In Los Angeles?

Kil

Yes, via--from Hong Kong to Seoul to Honolulu to L.A. There were no direct flights.

Cline

Right. Wow.

Kil

My brother's friend, whom he went to school, grade school together in Korea, I guess they stayed in touch. In fact, no, that guy used to live in Hong Kong or so, then his family moved to the U.S. a few years before we did. So my brother got a hold of them and he picked us up, picked us up at the LAX [Los Angeles International Airport].

Cline

Okay. Well, let me ask, first of all, you mentioned earlier that when this master plan was first being formulated you didn't--unlike so many Korean immigrants you didn't have any really--any family or friends here, but why Los Angeles?

Kil

Because it's closer to Korea and also my brother has this friend who could pick him up.

Cline

I see, this was the one friend, huh?

Kil

Yes, who they knew each other as child in grade school and then they met up again in Hong Kong and then this guy moved to U.S. before my brother did or before we did. So, yes, and my father knew of a few friends in the U.S. living in L.A., actually, that told us to look them up. Yes, which we did. Until then my father had never been to U.S.

Cline

Oh, wow. What, if any, awareness did your family have of what sort of Korean community there was in Los Angeles then?

Kil

You know, we knew there were Koreans living in Los Angeles, but we didn't know of the community, per se. Well, my brother actually, Gilbert, my oldest brother is Gilbert, who lived in Guam for a couple of years, he visited the U.S. prior to our coming, like several months before. So he checked out the community a little bit and, in fact, told us that there was a Korean community and a Korean grocery store on Olympic Boulevard.

Cline

Right. That must have been reassuring.

Kil

Yes. Oh, yes, must have kimchee. [laughter]

Cline

So his friend picked you up at LAX [Los Angeles International Airport], obviously after a rather brutal travel experience.

Kil

Yes. And he had a [Pontiac] Trans Am, I remember, or [Pontiac] Firebird, and there were four of us with our bags. Boy, it was really a tough ride back. [laughs]

Cline

Wow. What part of town did those people live in?

Kil

Glendale.

Cline

Oh, Glendale. Okay.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

What was your impression upon arriving here, looking around outside the windows of the Trans Am or Firebird?

Kil

Well, of course, I felt like I was living through the movie, like, wow, you know. When I was in Hong Kong I watched a lot of American movies, you know, all the James Bonds and Dirty Harry movies. Well, even though I think none of them took place in L.A., but the latest one, but I could visualize and I saw L.A. on TV and so on, so it was really exciting. It was really full of excitement and just hope and all the good things, but then, of course, the reality eventually sunk in, you know, having to cook and do the dishes. What happened was, my brother's friend--my father gave us, I remember, he gave us \$10,000 back then. It was a lot of money, you know. Told us, "This is the money that you have to live for one year."

Cline

Wow.

Kil

Two of us, and my brother had to go to--and my brother got admission to USC [University of Southern California]. He was transferring from University of Guam as a junior and my older was--I was ninth grade, he was eleventh grade. So the three of us arrived and then my brother's friend picked us up and then he found--in order to cheaper--inexpensive accommodation we checked into Glendale YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], and it was only like \$5 a day or \$3 a day per person. It was really inexpensive. So that's where we checked in for a week. We looked for an apartment and we didn't have a car, so my brother walked away, we all walked around the neighborhood and found an apartment, because I guess my brother's friend was kind of busy. He was also working, so he couldn't really take time off. So we found an apartment, one-bedroom apartment, and it was furnished. I think the rent was \$135 or \$125 and it was a nice apartment and not far from the school, from both high school and junior high school. So we checked in and so we moved in and that's--yes.

Cline

Where were you going to junior high then?

Kil

Wilson Junior High [School], yes.

Cline

Wilson, okay, right.

Kil

And my brother, Glendale High [School].

Cline

Wow.

Kil

In no time I met Korean friends there, Koreans. There were some Koreans. So then--

Cline

What was your oldest brother studying at USC?

Kil

Economics.

Cline

Oh, okay. It's so mind-boggling to me, all these adjustments, going from one place and one experience to another. None of you, evidently, had been raised to do things like cook and do housekeeping and stuff.

Kil

I didn't have to do it, but my two brothers had to do it when they were living in Guam on their own for two years.

Cline

Oh, yes.

Kil

So they kind of got accustomed to living on their own, whereas I wasn't, I was a novice and they were sort of a semi-pro, you know. [laughs]

Cline

Yes, it still sounds like quite the bachelor pad.

Kil

Yes. So my oldest brother was not quite twenty-one when we came and I was fourteen, seventeen, and then twenty, and there of us. So he couldn't even buy beer. [laughs]

Cline

Wow. Now, it's probably a pretty different experience since you had four years in Hong Kong, but since you had to buy food, you had to start taking care of yourself, what was your impression of, let's say, American retail venues? You know, where are you going to buy the stuff? Was it different for you?

What was the experience like? Now you had new money, you had--I presume your English was passable?

Kil

Yes. Yes, my English was good enough to communicate again and settle in at schools and do well, actually. I did quite well compared to other Korean kids who arrived straight from Korea. We had no problem. It was just a different experience. You had supermarkets. Alpha Beta was a big deal back then. I think they all closed, shut down now. But every Sunday we would go to the Korean grocery store and buy Korean groceries.

Cline

So how did you get there?

Kil

Oh, my brother. Within a month we bought a car, a used vehicle. Actually, I remember, Buick Apollo. [laughs] Yes. We bought a car and my brother had a license from Guam. So unlike other Koreans, you know, they were so accustomed in the culture and had the basic, you know, stuff to settle down. He got his California license immediately.

Cline

Okay, that's helpful. And you met Koreans at school?

Kil

Yes.

Cline

So you were able to start eating some familiar food?

Kil

Yes, and I really enjoyed--for the first time I had McDonald's, and I thought it was so heavenly. Also I had burrito at Taco Bell and I thought it was amazing. It's so good. [laughs] Right now, I wouldn't touch it now, but back then it was so good, like, McDonald's, but then because our father gave us money, but my brother was really budget-conscious, because he wanted to be very frugal just in case we needed money for an emergency. So he had a really tight budget

and so he wouldn't give me money to buy hamburgers, you know, we'd just buy stuff at the grocery store. So I didn't have enough money to buy what I wanted to eat, so that was sort of a downer, you know.

Cline

Yes. Not the most expensive food, either.

Kil

And you were fifteen, fourteen, fifteen, you know, that's when you have big appetite.

Cline

Right. Right.

Kil

Yes, so that was sort of discouraging.

Cline

Wow, interesting. So you met Korean friends. What was your social life turning out to be like once you moved here?

Kil

In Glendale there weren't very many Koreans. There were some. In junior high there were like six of us in my class, and they were like a few friends and we became really close. They had been living in L.A. longer, also. They knew their way around, so they would--we would go out, you know, on a bus to L.A., take me to movies, go see movies. Then six months later a friend of mine, who was a little older, got his driver's license, so we'd go around in his car. So that was kind of nice. So yes, there were things that--and as I said, I love to be in a private passenger car. So I really enjoyed that, being in a car. Yes, so I would always ask my brother to go on a drive, let's just go out, let's go to the beach. I was just nagging him, but he was busy studying, so he couldn't really take time off, but whenever he had time we would just go to the beach, the Santa Monica Beach, to Palm Springs. I just loved to be in a car, yes. Yes, just to be outdoors.

Cline

Well, you needed a convertible. What was your neighborhood like in Glendale? What kind of people were living around you in your apartment building?

Kil

They were all white neighbors. Back then Glendale was primarily all whites. There were some senior citizens in the apartment, but they were nice. Also like many Asian kids, you know, we learned to be polite and courteous, so other than the time when our brothers and stuff, fighting with each other, you know, we were pretty quiet. We weren't drinking or playing loud music. So they all received us well, except that in school there were very few Asians back then in Glendale and it was predominantly, again, whites and some Hispanics. So there were a lot of name-calling and stuff like that, you know, so that part I didn't enjoy.

Cline

Right. Like what?

Kil

You know, like Chinaman, Chinks, and things like that. I sensed the teachers were also somewhat biased. I remember once in junior high I was late and I received a corporal punishment for being late, being tardy. The teacher got out a paddle and whack me three times on my butt.

Cline

Wow. Well, you couldn't do that now.

Kil

I said, "Wow." So I said, "Oh, wow, this is like no better than Korea," I thought, you know. Jeez. I thought there was sort of a targeted, you know, that's my recollection, but--then in high school the counselors didn't really give any advice of college, provide any college guidance. So I do my own research and ask my own--you know, and friends and pull out all resources in our research together and so on. So I don't remember getting any help from high school counselors. But, again, I excelled in high school again, I did well.

Kil

But the thing is, in Glendale, again, there was sort of a segregation. You know, like white kids hang out with white kids, Korean kids hang out with Koreans. There were Iranian kids back there, not Armenian, but a lot of Iranians back then in the seventies. Iranian kids were on their own. So we didn't really mingle with one another, but I had two really close white friends, one of which I still maintain a relationship, and they were really smart kids, so I studied with them. One family particularly whose parents were both schoolteachers in the L.A. [Los Angeles Unified] School District, and they really helped me to get the culture of the U.S., you know, to the American culture. It's like they invited me to Thanksgiving dinner and I didn't know what Thanksgiving was until they invited me. I had never had turkey until--because my mom didn't know what turkey was.

Kil

Sure, right.

Kil

So they really, you know, were nice to me. They were quite well off, too. For schoolteachers they were really well off. I mean, they had other investment, real estate investment. Very smart. They had like vacation homes at Big Bear. So they would take me to ski. I never skied until they took me in high school. They owned a beach home in Laguna Beach, Laguna. Wow, so they'd take me to--you know, they would take me to restaurants, to movies. So they really were so kind. Yes, I still look them up once in a while, so even though my friend, who didn't turn out that well, even though he was valedictorian and went to Stanford [University], he became a bum. Very sad. But anyway, then another friend moved to Oregon. So those are two best American friends I had and we became very close friends. We went camping together. We went to a trip to Oregon, you know, after high school during summer. We went drinking together, you know. It was just wonderful, yes, my two best friends. In fact, those are two of my best friends. In fact, they were closer to me than my Korean friends back then.

Cline

Wow, that's pretty great. Both the, sort of the discrimination and probably some elements of the culture had to be pretty different from your Hong Kong experience.

Kil

Oh, yes.

Cline

How would you compare the two?

Kil

Well, in Hong Kong there was some discrimination by British, you know, Chinese or Asians, if you were Japanese you were like--because the Japanese economy was doing so well back then, you know, you were given, I think, a little bit more deference. But if you were from Korea, because Korea was still a struggling economy, you know, they didn't care much, and also Chinese for that matter. So I didn't have that many British friends. I had a few, but not very close. Mostly my friends were Chinese and then Asian, and Asian friends, primarily.

Cline

Right.

Kil

Then here, again, other than my two, you know, my white friends, mostly my friends were Koreans. It wasn't until I went to college that it was more open, more accepting, more--yes. But in high school, at least at Glendale High School where I went, it wasn't racially very well-balanced. There wasn't much integration, unfortunately.

Cline

Yes. Let's make sure we're doing okay. Yes, I think what I want to do is--

Kil

Wow, time flies, huh?

Cline

Doesn't it? I want to ask you this one last question and then I wanted to be able next time to talk more about your high school experience and moving into your college years. You're in the early seventies now and this is a time--

Kil

Mid-seventies, actually.

Cline

Mid-seventies. Okay. Right. This is a time following all the upheaval of the late sixties, and all of that that really defined a lot of what became popular culture in this country. What do you remember about where things were, as far as popular culture goes in this country, and what, if any, interest did you have in it? You know, music, clothes, you know, the whole style thing.

Kil

You know, that's a--see, in that regard I wasn't really--at least for the first year or so I wasn't really immersed into that culture, because I was always under the pressure, under this pressure that I had to just study, because that was my purpose of coming to the U.S. and that's what my parents told me to do and that's what they sent us and gave us money to do. So we were on a limited budget, you know, we were very frugal, so we didn't buy any music. I didn't go to see any--you know, we didn't buy any clothes, we just keep wearing what we had, what we brought. In that sense, I wasn't really assimilated in the local or the American culture at the time until--you know, not until the later years. So it was sort of a--that's why I said the best time in my life was in Hong Kong, the U.S. was more of a harsh reality. Not only do I have to study, which I wasn't pleased about, like everyone, a lot of people aren't, but also we didn't have my parents' guidance and also we didn't have that much money to do the things that I would normally want to do, hanging out with friends, going to McDonald's. It wasn't until my parents moved about ten months later and that we found a business.

Cline

Okay, because that is what I was wondering.

Kil

We found a business. They brought money and now we were located to the L.A., my mother and--both of my parents and my sister and my grandmother all came and my housekeeper even came together. I don't know how they got her visa, but anyway, so we all came and then we found a business, Alta Dena Dairy.

Cline

Oh, right, okay. We'll talk about that next time, but this is now to--the year they came is when now?

Kil

'76.

Cline

Okay. All right. So you don't have too long--

Kil

At least '75. We came in January of '75, they came in late '75, so about ten months later.

Cline

Right. So you don't have too long a period of just bachelor padding with your brothers.

Kil

But it was long enough for me where it was just horrible living with my brothers. Yes, because I had to do not only the cooking, but also, you know, again, my older brother back then was kind of was a bully, so, you know--yes, so it was just physically and emotionally I was under a lot of stress.

Cline

Right. So what was his name by the way?

Kil

George.

Cline

George. Okay. Gilbert George?

Kil

He's the nicest guy now, but back then, gosh, he was a bully from hell. [laughs]  
He beat me up, you know, for no reason.

Cline

Yes, interesting. Well, that happens.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

Next time I want to talk to you more about the Korean community, because you are aware of it, it sounds like you occasionally make the drive around Olympic Boulevard and get some--to the Korean market. Unlike many of the Korean immigrants that I know about, you weren't brought over here with any kind of connection with a Christian church, which often then becomes quite the social and cultural center of life, you're kind of on your own out there in Glendale. So I want to know more about that experience once your parents come and where things go from there when you start the family business.

Kil

Okay.

Cline

And you're a high school kid in Glendale.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

Thank you very much for today, it was great.

Kil

Oh, thank you. [End of March 18, 2008 interview]

## 1.2. Session 2 (March 26, 2008)

Cline

Today is Wednesday, March 26, 2008. This is Alex Cline interviewing William O. Kil at his office in Los Angeles for our second session.

Cline

Hello again.

Kil

Hi.

Cline

I'm really looking forward to continuing our conversation. Last week's was really, really satisfying. As we usually do when we start up another session, I have a few follow-up questions on some of the material that we covered last time that I'll run by you before we continue in our chronology. You told the rather dramatic story of your father's background and his escape from North Korea and eventually going all the way south to Pusan, where he met your mother. Do you know how your parents met?

Kil

Well, I don't know the gory little details, but typically, and also from what I recall, I think it was through a matchmaking process like many parents of my generation, including actually my mother even got married that way. But, yes.

Cline

Yes, we're going to get to that. So really a matchmaking thing. Wow. What were their relative ages to one another?

Kil

My father was born in 1924 and he married my mom in, I believe, 1953, towards the end of the Korean War. My mother was born in 1930-I'm sorry, '32. She was born in 1932. So they were like eight years apart. So my mother was like twenty and my dad was like twenty-eight or twenty-seven. So my mother was much younger and she was home only about a year after she

graduated from high school when she was introduced to my father and married him.

Cline

You mentioned that in order for your oldest brother to get out of Korea because of the situation with the military, that you had to sell both your homes.

Kil

Well, actually we owned two houses and my dad had to sell one of the two houses, and the other house, he had to sell it later to finance our trips abroad. But the other house was sold solely to pay for my brother's passport.

Cline

Where was the second house?

Kil

The second house was the one that actually we lived in until we left Korea. That was in the Central Seoul, not far from one of the Korean palaces, actually, which I frequently visited as a child.

Cline

Where was the other one, then? You had two houses.

Kil

The other house that we sold that my father invested in initially as an investment, it was in the suburb of Seoul also, which is highly developed today, but back then it was sort of a very sleepy suburb.

Cline

So that sounds like he was already kind of getting into some investing and some business-minded activity even back then.

Kil

Yes, he was always a businessman, so he was always looking for opportunities.

Cline

And you mentioned that you were trained on both the piano and the violin.

Kil

For a very short period of time. I guess I discovered quickly that I wasn't very musically talented, but it was every Korean mother's desire to have the best possible education for their children, and musical training was one of the educations that Korean parents sought even back then.

Cline

I was just curious to know where that went, but you kind of answered that, I guess.

Kil

It didn't go anywhere, actually. [laughs]

Cline

We're coming up to the time that we were talking about now where you left Seoul, you went to Hong Kong, you came to the United States, and now where we left off you were living in Glendale with your other two brothers [Gilbert and George Kil], the bachelor pad apartment for ten months before your parents arrived.

Kil

Right.

Cline

One of the things that I wanted to know about was you mentioned some cases of name-calling and discrimination in the mostly white schools that you went to. I was curious if you knew if your older brothers had had similar situations in their first days in Glendale, that they talked about.

Kil

Well, my oldest brother, as I said, yes, was transferred to USC [University of Southern California] as a junior, so I didn't think he encountered such a problem, but I'm pretty sure my other brother, my older brother immediately above me, he was eleventh grade when he transferred to high school from Guam, and I know that he encountered similar problems.

Cline

Wow. But you did go over the hill in the Buick occasionally. You said on Sunday you went to the Korean market to get ingredients for your familiar cuisine. What do you remember about not only the market, but what the area was like? You said it was on Olympic Boulevard.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

Where exactly was it?

Kil

The market I remember is no longer there, but it was on the southeast corner of Olympic and Harvard [Boulevard]. I think it was called Olympic Market, yes, but now I think the building was torn down and a shopping strip center with office buildings, like a grocery structure, was constructed on that lot. So we would, of course, buy kimchee, among others, and then there's this little Chinese restaurant next to the market, actually the street across, the same side of the street, and there's a famous Korean Chinese dish called black bean paste noodle, called jajangmyun in Korean. Even though the dish is Chinese, it was sort of modified or originated in Korea, actually, like some hundred years ago. In fact, you don't find such a dish in mainland China, only in Korea, but by Chinese Koreans. That is a very popular dish among Koreans, very tasty, and it was my favorite dish, like a lot of Koreans. That cost a dollar-fifty a bowl back then and that was my favorite dish, but because of our budget constraint, my brother [Gilbert] would not buy me that, you know, so we had little tensions. [laughs]

Cline

Wow. What do you remember about any other Korean businesses around that area at that time? This is, what, '75?

Kil

'75, January, is when we arrived in Glendale, so it was the beginning of '75. Well, because I was young and we didn't have very many friends or relatives,

and obviously we had no business [unclear] because of our age, so there were only a limited number of places that we would visit. Mostly it's market, restaurant, and then church. So we did not visit, really-I personally do not recall visiting any other businesses, Korean.

Cline

Do you remember seeing them around there?

Kil

Oh, yes. Oh, well, yes, there were Korean shops along, not as many as there are today, but I believe there was Korean gift shops and so on. But even back then, most of the Koreans were engaged in retail businesses, grocery stores, liquor stores, and so on. I've seen some along Olympic that were owned by Koreans, including gas stations, actually, but then again, there were only a limited number of places that we would visit, because we were living amongst ourselves and we had no business of visiting other business establishments other than a place that was essential to our daily survival.

Cline

Right. Plus you had to buy gas to get there, and we are talking about a period that is kind of around that time when you had the energy crisis here.

Kil

Actually it was over.

Cline

I was going to say, by the mid-seventies that's pretty much over, but I remember gas was quite the thing for a while there.

Kil

Right, the early seventies, yes. That happened right before we arrived.

Cline

Yes, you lucked out.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

So how did you stay in touch with your parents during those ten months?

Kil

We would make long-distance overseas calls, which was very expensive back then, so we would only call like maybe once a month or in case of emergency, again, to be frugal. Also we would write letters, which was still a practice then. So it was mostly phone calls, I believe.

Cline

Then your parents, after ten months, they arrived. Not just your parents.

Kil

They came in the fall. Yes, my parents and my younger sister [Elizabeth Kil], and then later we were joined by my grandmother and our housekeeper. So they all came.

Cline

So clearly now you're going to have to move out of your apartment.

Kil

Yes, so from one bedroom we moved to a two-bedroom apartment.

Cline

Oh, wow.

Kil

Big improvement, but still very crowded. In Glendale. Also my dad brought some money to buy a business, but he, again, being frugal, you know, we wanted to stay with the budget, so we were living in a two-bedroom apartment for like several months in Glendale. My parents and my older brother would vigorously look for business opportunities. Since my parents did not have driver's licenses back then, and as I said, neither spoke English, and my brother was the oldest and he was taking classes at such hours so that he could take my parents around to look for business opportunities. So he drove them around and we must have seen over a hundred different types of

businesses, from hamburger shops to grocery stores, to dry cleaning, to liquor stores, produce stores, even to a motel. I mean, we just did not limit to one type, but we were open to suggestions made by friends. Of course, we ultimately settled with Alta Dena drive-in dairy.

Cline

How did you find all these places to look at?

Kil

Through business brokers. Back then there were also Korean-speaking brokers, real estate agents. In fact, one of the oldest listed broker was a friend of my father back from North Korea, back in the North Korean days, and she is a well-known lady. Her name was Sonia Suk, and she was like the founding member of the Korean Federation. She came here as a student in the early sixties and she became a real estate broker. So my father got in touch with her and she also showed us and introduced us to some of the business opportunities. Also, I believe my brother or so looked up in the newspaper ads, L.A. Times, looked for other business opportunities. So we covered the entire L.A. County pretty much from Long Beach to South Central L.A.

Cline

How much time lapsed between when your parents came here and when your grandmother and the housekeeper came?

Kil

I think they came not long after, like maybe a few months, in a few months. Yes, they, I think, joined us by the end of '75.

Cline

So during that time then, what were your-I mean, I have to assume your mom was cooking and doing all the things that the housekeeper usually did, but-

Kil

Right, of course.

Cline

And your father was just involved in looking for businesses during that time?

Kil

Yes, and also he had some other business interests in Korea, so he would go back to Korea and left the business finding with my brother and my mother. So he would not stay here for a long duration of time, but he would go back and then come back and so on for the next few years.

Cline

How did life change when your parents came back and you all reunited and lived with them and your sister?

Kil

Oh, well, you know, I missed my mother especially, so I was elated, but at the same time when we bought the business and had to work, my hardship started, because we all had to chip in in terms of running and manning the store to save the labor costs. So all our family members worked. So I had to work at least three to four hours every day after school, including Saturdays. So it was a very tiring and also somewhat depressing, the fact that I can't really do things that, you know, that I wanted to do, like going out with friends. So that deprived my free time. So it was sort of depressing in a way. So that's why I decided to go to church, and even back then there were quite a few Korean churches. You know what they say, when three Chinese get together, they start a restaurant, when three Koreans get together, they start a church. [laughs]

Cline

I want to talk about that a little bit later, but first I wanted to ask, your parents came here, as you just said a little while ago, no English skills.

Kil

Whatsoever, not a word, which was really tough.

Cline

Yes, I'm trying to imagine what this had to have been like for them. So do you have a sense of what their feelings were arriving here, being in this new place, looking for a business, not knowing the language? What was the feeling like among your parents?

Kil

Well, when I look back, you know, of course I give them a lot of credit for their courage, but they remind me of American West pioneers, you know, they were here to seek and achieve their dream. So even though I'm sure they had fear and anxiety, at the same time I think they were very upbeat and optimistic because they'd heard a lot about this country, you know, country of opportunity where a dream can be achieved. And also they had this strong sense of duty to raise us and support us so that we can grow up to be decent people. So they didn't really express their anxiety or anything like that. They were very steadfast, very objective, very goal oriented, and also we were doing everything we can within our ability to assist them in finding the business. After we found the business, you know, help them run the store. It was my oldest brother who did most of the work, most amount of the work, actually, because of his age and his education and his language proficiency and so on. He was twenty, twenty-one, and so he sacrificed a lot and I still owe him a lot and thank him for his service.

Cline

Was he continuing his studies through this whole time?

Kil

Yes, yes, yes.

Cline

Wow.

Kil

So it was kind of tough, but he was a hard worker and he lived up to being the first-born.

Cline

Yes, right. Well, that's good. So your family settled on buying an Alta Dena drive-in dairy.

Kil

Right.

Cline

How did that choice get made, do you remember?

Kil

I don't know the exact process, but I'm sure they considered a lot of factors, including the purchase price and the sales volume, and most of all a business that my mom, with her very little English, if at all, could handle it, because while we were all in school, even though my brother would take afternoon classes so he could work in the morning hours, and then he would go to school when we were out from school, out of school, but sometimes it doesn't work that way. So there were times when my mother and my housekeeper would be left alone in the store, and neither spoke English, so they were focused on a business that required very little communication skills. But, of course, she still had to learn English, obviously. So had the know the product names, you know, like the milk, cheese, and we didn't know that there were that many variety of milk and cheese in this country. In fact, we rarely had dairy products until we came to the U.S.

Cline

Sure. That's pretty typical.

Kil

And even though Alta Dena Dairy, I mean it focused on dairy products, but we had other grocery items, as well, but we didn't know that they had that many different types of milk and dairy products, and it was just baffling for a while to learn all the product names. So initially we had problems, of course, you know. Even though I knew the English, I didn't know the names of the products when a customer would ask for it. You know, it's a drive-in where they would just place an order and we'd have to go and pick up the items and bag it and deliver it to the car. Sometimes initially we make mistakes and then some customer-but it was Rosemead, so it was Latino areas, so I guess they were a little bit more understanding because they were immigrants themselves like ourselves. So even though there were some, like, some questionable characters, you know, but, in fact, we were glad that we found a business in the immigrant community, because there was, I think, less-I would

say, well, maybe less discrimination or less difficulty we encountered in conducting the business.

Cline

Different expectations.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

I was about to ask you where it was, so, yes, Rosemead. So you had to also then commute from Glendale to Rosemead.

Kil

Right, we did, and then we subsequently moved to Rosemead because we wanted to be close to the business, but I was commuting to Glendale for my schooling.

Cline

Even after you moved to Rosemead?

Kil

Yes, right. Right.

Cline

Wow. But you were driving by then, I hope.

Kil

Right, right, right. I was commuting with my brother and sister, three of us, in high school together.

Kil

Then we bought another Alta Dena business in Van Nuys, so it's sort of on the opposite side of the-opposite end of the city or county. Then we eventually sold the Rosemead dairy and moved to Van Nuys, and that's when I transferred to schooling in Reseda. Well, actually we moved to Reseda and the business was in Van Nuys, city of Van Nuys, in Van Nuys.

Cline

So let me examine this a little bit. You were in Glendale for a while. When you moved to Rosemead, what kind of a place did you move into?

Kil

Again, it's a two-bedroom apartment.

Cline

With all those people here now, I guess.

Kil

Right, right. It's still all of us, like, what, seven, I think, not counting my dad, who was going back and forth still. So seven of us in a two-bedroom apartment, so it was still very crowded.

Cline

Wow, I guess.

Kil

And the apartment right was right next door to the store, and we deliberately chose that apartment so that it would be easier for us to take turns manning the store. So we did that for like several months and then, again, as I said, we bought a store in Van Nuys, at which time we moved to Reseda in my eleventh grade. So I finished my tenth grade at Glendale High, eleventh grade at Cleveland High School in Reseda.

Cline

And your brother had graduated by then?

Kil

From USC, and he continued to-and then we bought a grocery store and we sold the Rosemead.

Cline

Oh, wow.

Kil

Yes, so we would only, what, run each store for like a year or less maybe.

Cline

Oh, really.

Kil

Yes, because the business wasn't doing as well as we wanted to, so we were continuously looking for other business opportunities. So we bought a grocery store in Cypress Park.

Cline

Oh, gosh.

Kil

That's a pretty rough neighborhood.

Cline

Yes.

Kil

It's like Glassell Park, you know, Cypress.

Cline

Right, Cypress Park, yes.

Kil

Of course, for some reason we didn't have much luck in finding our money-making business. Again, it paid for the bills, but it didn't do well, and that's when we had a lot of problem with the local kids, some were in gangs, in terms of shopliftings, and so my brothers had physical altercations with them.

Cline

Oh, god.

Kil

But thank god that there was no serious incidents, but it was pretty rough. So my mom wanted to sell the business after discovering that the neighborhood

was so dangerous. Also there were like eight stores, grocery stores, within one mile, one square mile, and all owned by Koreans.

Cline

Really?

Kil

Yes. And one of the storeowners, a newlywed couple, the wife, during a holdup, was shot and got killed. So that's when my mom decided that we had to sell the store because the people that they knew, a young person and was killed and only a mile away from our store, so that's when we realized that we had to move on, so we put the store up for sale. That was when we moved back to Glendale.

Cline

So you were still living in Reseda when you had the store in Cypress Park?

Kil

Yes, and then we sold the business and we moved, yes. So we commuted for a little bit and then we moved to Glendale so that we could run the business, and also we wanted to go back to Glendale High School, where we had a lot of friends, and my mom felt that Glendale High School was a better school.

Cline

Yes, it's not LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District].

Kil

Right, exactly.

Cline

So let's talk about this a bit. This is your schooling, now you're in high school, this is a pretty pivotal time for a lot of people.

Kil

Right.

Cline

And you're relocated, not for very long it sounds like, from Glendale to Reseda, you're going to Cleveland High [School]. It's the San Fernando Valley.

Kil

Right.

Cline

What do you remember about what may have been different about that experience compared to Glendale?

Kil

Well, Cleveland there were even fewer Koreans and Asians, predominantly white, and it was pretty also very not well-integrated school at all, even though there was busing.

Cline

I was going to say but they did have busing then, yes.

Kil

It was definitely a segregated school, you know, like black kids would hang out on their own and then the whites and Asians were like in between. There were very few Koreans, like two or three other. So I became friends with all three of them, all two of them, so I hung out with them a lot, but I didn't really make that many non-Korean friends, no black friends, and mostly I'd hang out with these Korean kids. Again, I had to come home and help out, so I didn't have much of a school life, actually.

Cline

You had some close Caucasian friends at Glendale, but not in the Valley?

Kil

No. Then after I returned to Glendale, at which time I became closer with the friends that I knew early on. We studied together and that's when, you know, the other family, my friend's family took me around during my senior high school. That was a lot of fun. After I came to Glendale, and that was after we have settled in the U.S. for a few years and we kind of knew our way around and we were economically a little bit more secure, so I did not have to work as

much as first three years of my high school; I had a little bit more latitude. Also because my mother realized that I had to spend more time to prepare for college, especially the first semester, so she gave me a little bit more latitude and personal freedom. So I'd hang out with my friends more and enjoyed a little bit of what was left of my high school.

Cline

So would you then continue to commute with your sister. You were going to the same school?

Kil

Right, and then we moved back to Glendale after we bought the business, so I started my senior year at Glendale High School, and that's when my brother already have graduated, my older brother who was three years above me, and I was commuting with my younger sister, who was one year below me. By then there were like substantially-the Korean student body has grown substantially by then, by my senior year. There were like about forty kids in the high school. There was already existing a Korean Students Club. So I became the president in my senior year of Korean Student Club. So it was a lot of fun. We were organizing activities and events and so on.

Cline

So I know you're into cars, so what were you driving?

Kil

Oh, wow, again, what was I driving? I think I was driving a-oh, man, what was I driving? It was an old American car.

Cline

Not the Buick Apollo that your brother had?

Kil

No, no, no. I know that my father bought-that's when my father decided to settle in the U.S. more, or more on a permanent basis, more of a permanent basis. That's when my brother was graduating from-no, was it his senior year in college or was he graduating? I forgot, but my father bought him a [Chevrolet] Camaro, a brand-new Camaro, so I bought his car. Now when I

went on a date-so that was kind of fun, but I think I was driving an old car. I can't remember what it was.

Cline

So after your family sold the Cypress Park market, what did you buy next?

Kil

Oh, okay. So that was like toward the end of my high school in '78. So we went to find a business in Glendale, you know, someplace safer, you know. Boy, lo and behold, my brother found this Italian restaurant run by Italians. It's called Giuseppe's. It's still in existence to this day. It's on Verdugo and near Colorado Boulevard, Verdugo Avenue, right under the freeway pass, overpass. My brother enjoyed cooking for some reason, maybe because he was living by himself, you know, taking care of us, that he learned to cook. So he wanted to venture into the restaurant business, so he bought this Italian restaurant. It's actually a full-service Italian restaurant, not just pizzas, but other Italian dishes. Until then we never had pizza. We never had pizza, let alone other Italian pastas. Of course, Glendale, again, still prejudicial back then. The former patrons, when they realized it was run by a bunch of Koreans, you know, wasn't too crazy about it, so business taper off, so we sort of drove the business to ground then. But it was kind of fun. I enjoyed working at the restaurant then, at the market. First of all, I liked the food. We had still back then employed the Italian cook, which we let him go eventually, and that's when the quality deteriorated and business came to a grinding halt. But the food was good and it was fun working there, even though, again, we had our share of the discrimination. You know, some people would just walk in and then when they realized, when they see us, they'll walk out or when they know that we're Koreans, you know, make fun, make comments as to whether we serve kimchee pizza and things like that.

Cline

At least they knew what it was.

Kil

Yeah. [laughs] So we did that business for about three years, and also I enjoyed the business because we had draft beer, tap beer, so I would drink

that a lot, you know, while I was working, so that was a little bit of a pleasure that I derived. [laughs]

Cline

Wow. You had some happy employees over there.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

You said you, at least for a while, kept on the Italian chef. What did the employees, the non-Korean employees, think about their employers being Korean?

Kil

Actually, another reason we had to let go was that we weren't compatible, obviously our cultural difference and we had never worked with-we never had employees until this business. It was all family-run business until this restaurant business, and so we didn't know how to deal with them properly either. It had a lot to do with us not being accustomed to American way of working with employees. So eventually the cook quit and also he had problems, too, drinking problems and gambling. This guy had gambling problems and we felt that he was unreliable and not turning up at work when he was supposed to.

Cline

Yes, that's a problem.

Kil

So my brother had to learn to cook and then this guy quit.

Cline

How much did your father have a hand in running the businesses when he was here?

Kil

Oh, gosh. How did he work a day at the store? Because he was either-I don't know why, he had this excuse he had business interests in Korea that he had to tend to, but I think also he didn't want to work at stores. I think he was just-it doesn't suit him.

Cline

I see.

Kil

So it was in late-we sold the business, like, in '81. My brother ran the business until '81, but also we started another business in 1980, a department store that catered to local Koreans and to tourists, Korean tourists visiting Koreatown. It was miniature size, but we sold everything from handbags to ladies' clothing, to jewelries, to suitcases, to souvenirs. You name it, we had it. It was like general store, modern-day general store, that catered to Korean tourists, and my mom wanted that business because she was dealing with Koreans exclusively. My dad, again, because of language-I think that was another reason why he stayed away, because of the fact that he couldn't communicate and he didn't want his pride to be hurt in front of the kids when he wasn't able to deliver and carry out the business. So I think that's why he deliberately, intentionally went to Korea a lot. But when we started that Korean sort of tourist-catered store, we called it a department store or general merchandise store, my father had a hands-on approach to that one and he worked every day. He didn't want to go back to Korea.

Cline

How much did his running of the store resemble the way he ran the family?

Kil

Well, because he was a businessman, you know, he was very courteous, even though he wasn't into sales, actually, he was more into, like, stocking the goods and organizing, cleaning. He was more of a background person.

Cline

Interesting.

Kil

Yes. And also he would make his contacts to bring customers in. He was more of, like, outside rep. He was a representative of the store, but he wasn't into routine retail sales or efforts.

Cline

Not dealing with the public so much.

Kil

Right. Exactly.

Cline

Even though they're mostly Korean, I suppose.

Kil

Right. Right. He would help out, but it was my mom who was primarily in charge of sales, and also that's when we did not have to work as much, and after we sold that restaurant business my brother, older brother, got involved full-time with the store in terms of purchasing, because it was a big operation. So in terms of purchasing, going to trade shows to find the merchandise and other products for the store. So it required more of his knowledge and expertise in dealing with mainstream business.

Cline

What did your second-oldest brother [George] do at this point?

Kil

Well, he was going to college. He went to Cal[ifornia] State [University] Northridge. In '78 that's when I also started my college at Pomona College. So I was living in the dorm. So I would only help out on weekends, occasional weekends, when I'd come home, like a couple times a month. I had a car, so I would come home and help out and also do my laundry at home and bring Korean food back to the dorm.

Cline

So how did you select Pomona College?

Kil

Well, first of all, I did pretty well in high school. I was an honor student and so on. I wanted to go to a good school, except I didn't want to venture out of California. I wanted to stay in California close to my home and my family. So some of the choices were UCs and USCN, and my brother friend, one of my brother's friends, went to Pomona, so he recommended it and so I applied.

Cline

Yes, that's a prestigious place.

Kil

Also I wanted to be a lawyer, and so I was told that they had a good preparatory program for grad schools, so I applied.

Cline

That's good. So before we get into the full college thing, I wanted to ask you, since now, after all these businesses being bought and sold, the family has settled on this sort of general store in Koreatown, so you're now in the Korean community or dealing with the Korean immigrant community.

Kil

Exactly. A hundred percent.

Cline

When your parents first came here and you're in Glendale and then you were in Van Nuys and-

Kil

Rosemead and Glendale. Rosemead, Van Nuys, and back to Glendale.

Cline

How often did your family come over the hill or wherever they had to go to get to Koreatown, and what would bring them to Koreatown?

Kil

Again, it was primarily, I believe, for grocery shopping. So on the average was like once a week. That was the only reason, I think, we came to Koreatown, if at all. Then, of course, when we opened our store in Koreatown, I mean, that

was a daily trip, but until then it was-because we would go to a Korean church in Glendale.

Cline

I'm headed there, too. So let me go to that and then I'll come back to Koreatown. You mentioned that you started going to church, it sounded like initially perhaps for social reasons.

Kil

That was for the social-that was the only reason.

Cline

Talk about that a bit. Explain how that worked for you and when that started.

Kil

Again, it was in my tenth grade I ran into an old friend of mine from Hong Kong, a Korean friend who located to L.A., and we got in touch and he told me about this church, Oriental Mission Church on Western [Avenue] and Beverly [Boulevard], which is one of the oldest and biggest Korean churches. I guess John [S.C.] Lim's father [Dong Sun Lim] was the head pastor of the church. So I went there. He took me to the church and being a big church, there were a large number of Koreans my age, including girls, obviously, which was a magnet for, you know, getting me to go. Also, again, our business was, like, open seven days a week from eight to ten p.m., so we all had to work, especially weekends. So only way for me to get away from the store is to go to church on Sunday, and I was the only one who went to church. And my brothers hated me because, you know, I wasn't tending the store. [laughs] So that was my escape, yes, my only outlet, so to speak. Then especially when church had a retreat, overnight retreat, at some camp, it was my most memorable trip because I was not able to go on such a trip. It was after we sold the market, the grocery store, that my family went on a trip to, like, Yosemite for a few days. For the first two years, it was just grueling twelve-hour, fourteen-hour, 24/7, seven days a week, 365 days of work when we were running the dairy store and the grocery store. So it wasn't until after we started the pizza parlor that we had a little bit more free time to go on a little family vacation in the summer.

Cline

How many guys do you think were at church for roughly the same reasons you were?

Kil

Well, at least half of them were, because we all had common interests and hang out together.

Cline

A lot of similarities in your experience?

Kil

Yes. Most of them were going to schools in L.A., city of L.A. Then after church meetings, especially we had-also we had church meetings on Friday. No, actually that was during college. Yes, it was on Sunday. But, again, something I really looked forward to was church retreat. That was usually a one- or two-night retreat at San Bernardino Mountain in one of those camps. So that was really enjoyable.

Cline

You grew up, you said, mainly in a Buddhist-practicing family.

Kil

Right.

Cline

Along with the usual sort of Confucian ancestor worship sort of things.

Kil

Exactly.

Cline

What were your feelings about this religious experience, this context that you are now finding yourself in the midst of, since it was clearly different from what you grew up with?

Kil

Well, because I was young when I was going to Buddhist temple, so I really didn't think much about it. It was just more automatic, routine activity. Also I don't think I was religious; I think I went to church at the temple because my parents were going to church-to the temple. And I didn't really have any appreciation for religion back then. So it wasn't until I started going to church that I started thinking about faith and about salvation and about religious principles. I guess I was too young to think about the religious aspects when I was going to temple. But my father was very traditional and we had this ritual ancestral worshipping rituals about four to six times a year to memorialize our grandparents' anniversaries, memorial service, actually, Korean memorial service, where we would actually prepare food and then we'll do bowing and then certain, like, praying, we would do that for both grandparents and great-grandparents, actually, my father's parents and his grandparents. Then the new year, Chinese New Year, and Korean Thanksgiving, the Harvest Moon Festival. So we had like four to six of those annual ancestral worship rituals even while going to church, because my father thought-he was of the belief that that was his duty to do that as first-born. We stopped doing that after my father passed away, because-well, I don't know whether this is right or wrong, but we were told that the ancestral worship, that's [unclear] ancestral worship, and as Christians we should abandon that practice. So we abandoned that to be a good Christian, and also I think my mom was a little tired of all that cooking and preparation. [mutual laughter] Special dishes that we had to prepare.

Cline

Offerings.

Kil

Within this guideline of certain dishes that you had to prepare, so it was a lot of work, too.

Cline

Yes, absolutely. How typical do you think that was among some of your Korean associates, that that was still going on in the household?

Kil

I think that was very common, especially if they had, you know, like grandparents living with them, because they insist in old ways. My father certainly was very insistent and very traditional, and if my friends had parents of that age or even grandparents, they definitely practiced that custom.

Kil

And these rituals were done late at night, like close to midnight. That's when they believe that the spirits will come back to the family. But I enjoyed that ritual because it always involved Korean wine, Korean sake, and that's when we get to taste. My father would-that's the only day that when are officially allowed to have a cup. Of course, we end up drinking more than a cup.  
[laughs]

Cline

There you go. So you graduated high school; you're at Pomona College; your family business is in Koreatown with this department store.

Kil

Also my brother was still running, for a year, actually, so we had two businesses running. My mom started-my brother was actually manning two businesses almost a year, and so he had to sell-and the restaurant business wasn't doing well, so he sold it.

Cline

So there was an overlap of those two.

Kil

Overlap, yes, for almost a year.

Cline

Wow. What now are you seeing in terms of how the Koreatown area is starting to change or develop since you've got business there, you're coming and going? I presume that when your parents have this business that you're spending a lot more time in that community. By now we're about up to 1980,almost?

Kil

Right, '79, '80.

Cline

Well, first off, where exactly was this store?

Kil

The first store was on Western and Eighth Street, the corner of Western and Eighth, and it was sort of a cultural center of Koreatown even back then.

Cline

Yes, absolutely.

Kil

Of course, more Korean business had cropped up, more restaurants, more of everything, literally, markets, bigger markets, but, again, the only types of business that I frequented were, other than my mom's store, my parents' store, were restaurants and occasional drinking places, which there were quite a few back then, too.

Cline

I was going to say, those are starting to come up then, too.

Kil

Exactly.

Cline

So this must have enhanced your parents' comfort level quite a bit.

Kil

Oh, absolutely. We felt we were, like, middle income for the first time where we bought a house, actually in Glendale, in '77, as we moved back to Glendale from Reseda. We bought a four-bedroom house in a nice neighborhood, because even though we didn't make tons of money, we made some money. Also my father brought some more money, he sold out some business interests in Korea, so he brought more money, so we were able to buy a house, a very nice house even by today's standard. The house is still there. I lived in the house even for ten years after I got married. It's a very nice,

comfortable house built in the late sixties, early seventies, in a nice quiet neighborhood behind Verdugo Park near Glendale College. So we thought, wow, this is-when we bought the house, we thought we achieved American Dream, even though my parents have to still work long hours, but, nevertheless, when we come home, we were able to really rest in comfort and in peace.

Kil

So what happened was, there was this little backyard and it had no fences, it was an open backyard, so we actually, my father and us actually went out to the hardware store, bought the wooden fences and we erected the wooden fences [unclear] in two days. It was, you know, a pretty good-sized lot, and with our hammers and nails. My father was not very-I don't think he was a very handy carpenter, but he was a very hardworking person and he wanted to do things with his own hands. So he made us do it, and we were hammering all weekend, day and night, all five of us, all six of us. Even my grandmother helped. So we wanted to get it over with, so in forty-eight hours we erected the fences around the backyard. That was something that we felt really good about it.

Cline

What was Pomona College like for you as an experience?

Kil

Oh, wow. That was a totally different world, jumping-you know, it was a big leap for me. First of all, living in a dorm. I had freedom, also came the responsibility, responsibility meaning academic responsibility. It was a very demanding school, very tough school. Professor-student ratio was very small, very low, and academically it was very demanding, and so I had tough time from public high school to a highly selective small college, and I learned a lot also at the same time and made friends. Of course, it was more integrated, unlike high school.

Cline

That's what I was wondering, yes.

Kil

There was more social interactions and integration. I had a lot of non-Korean friends. In fact, I had more non-Korean friends. First of all, there weren't that many Koreans in Pomona College back then. There were a few, actually. There were several in my classes, like five or six. But it was fun, and the parties were fun.

Cline

All those other colleges around you, too.

Kil

Right, exactly. So it was really an awakening, an eye-opening experience both academically, both socially, culturally, and parties, of course, there were parties that you could go to. So it was a wonderful experience, eye-opening experience, and I really got to learn more about this country in college, while in college. It was a wonderful experience. The professors were wonderful, very thoughtful, considerate, and caring, because I still had problems with my English. Obviously I wasn't a native speaker, native-born speaker, and so I'd have to put extra effort, but the college helped me a lot, tremendously, both preparing me for grad school and also socially and culturally, more culture like a way of life.

Cline

How were you able to afford Pomona College?

Kil

Well, my parents, of course. You know, business was doing pretty good, I guess. They were able to pay for my room and board. I remember the tuition cost about six thousand a year back then in '78, '79, and room and board was about six thousand. It was about ten to twelve thousand a year, and my parents paid fully for me. Also they were proud that I was going to Pomona College and also they had a lot of hope riding on me.

Cline

What were your feelings about that? Did you feel pressure?

Kil

I felt obligated, so I felt that I shouldn't-even though I did-whenever I partied, I felt this guilt trip, you know, my parents are suffering for my welfare and for my benefit, and yet I'm-so I had this guilt trip, but then, you know, I enjoyed my college life. But the thing is whenever-well, even in my high school, you know, there were like problematic, troubled kids, but I stayed away from them because I always thought of my parents, you know, and their sacrifice, because I know that is not what they would want me to do. So they were always back in my mind, you know, whenever I would stray, their presence would sort of put me back into place. It's not god or my religion, but it was my parents, especially my mom's sacrifice, that always reminded me to stay on track.

Cline

Wow. At some point you decided that you were going to go on to graduate school. What choice did you make and why?

Kil

Well, you know, I wish I had done better in college, but for various reasons I didn't do as well as I did in high school, obviously, and so I had a limited number of choice of law schools. I applied to University of Colorado, among other places, because my father happened to have friends from North Korea who settled down in Denver. Actually, three or four good friends. In fact, he worked together as schoolteachers back in North Korea. So they go like way back.

Cline

It's amazing how these people even stay in contact.

Kil

Right. Exactly. I don't know how they do it. By pigeons? I don't know. [laughs]

Cline

I don't know, but it's amazing, yes.

Kil

So my father visited Denver a few times and he, in fact, ran into a friend's friend who had a daughter of marriageable age, so he decided to arrange

matchmaking with my second brother, second older brother. So they got married. Or they got engaged, actually, in my senior year of college. Then they got married around-actually, they got married around my graduation from college. Then my dad told me to apply to school in Colorado because we may be relocating, moving to Denver, Colorado. In fact, my father, as a result, many of his friends in Denver were engaged in motel business, so actually he entered into a purchase agreement to buy a motel in the fall, late fall of-no, actually summer or late fall-no, I'm sorry, fall of '82. So I applied to the University of Colorado and I got accepted, so I went there. Then my father passed away shortly after, so the deal fell through and my family decided not to relocate to Denver and I get stuck there.

Cline

You're no longer near your family.

Kil

No.

Cline

I want to go back a little bit, because you mentioned the matchmaking thing a couple of times now. [Kil laughs.] This is one of the things I ask all my interviewees about, and almost none of them really had any experience having to go through the whole matchmaking tradition, but it sounds like that was kind of alive and well in your family.

Kil

Oh yes. That's how my oldest brother got married, through matchmaking, and my second older brother. I met with several ladies through matchmaking. Thank god-well, I don't know, but I ended up not marrying any one of them, but, yes, and it's still taking place to this day.

Cline

Were these people generally from the area or did they come from all over the country?

Kil

No, all in locality, yes.

Cline

Because I've heard stories of people flying long distance to meet people.

Kil

Oh yes. My brother did for Denver, my second older brother, but, yes, my oldest brother married locally. In fact, he married my second older brother's college friend, who was older, but, yes. It wasn't matchmaking, but it was my second older brother that introduced someone in his school, in his college [unclear], but she was older, as old as my brother. She was a couple of years above him, and fixed him up and then the family met. So it was sort of a matchmaking. But my second brother definitely went through a traditional matchmaking. The parents set them up.

Cline

How old was he when he got married? Was there starting to be panic setting in, he was getting older?

Kil

No, he was-let's see. He got married when he was twenty-five.

Cline

Oh, my. Wow. Heavy. With your experience now, when you would go through these matchmaking, I won't say ordeals, but experiences-

Kil

It's fun, actually.

Cline

-experience, dates, it was fun for you?

Kil

Yes, because the woman was brought to me, you know, without my effort. [laughs] If you're lazy, it's fun. [mutual laughter]

Cline

But you're also really meeting the family, not just the woman, right?

Kil

Right, right. So it was a little-actually, it was somewhat burdensome and, yes, heavy-handed, you know, like a little pressure, too. Like you're not at ease, because if you kind of liked the girl that you meet on your own, but at the initial meeting typically it's like both mothers and both kids. Yes, it was a little old-fashioned, and I thought it was a little out of time, but also you went along just to keep your parents happy that you were a good son.

Cline

Naturally. So you wound up in Colorado in a place where you're far away from home now, you're at a high altitude, there are a lot of-it's a different culture from L.A. What was that like for you?

Kil

Oh, wow, it was really bad. First of all, there are very few Asians in law school, if any. No Korean, of course.

Cline

Yes, I wondered.

Kil

Well, there were some in the undergrad, undergraduate section, but in law school there wasn't any. They were all mostly white. Law school, obviously, was very tough, and I was away from-I was homesick and my father was physically ill and then he passed away in my first semester, the Christmas of my first semester. So second semester was really dreadful. I was depressed and I missed my family. It was really tough for me to focus, and you know how the first year is, typically the toughest year for law school students, and I really struggled the first year. I just was so hurt, that I couldn't really concentrate and I just wanted to drop school and just come home and start all over, reapply, but because of my mom's wish, I had to stick it out.

Cline

What happened to your father?

Kil

Well, he was a heavy drinker. He's not a drunkard, you know, but he enjoyed drinking a lot, so he died of liver disease, and it was a very sudden, unexpected death. He died when he was fifty-nine, and he was very healthy until he collapsed and then he died like within two weeks. So it came as a shock and we, of course, were all very saddened by it. But that's when my mother, after he passed away-but the thing is, we weren't in any way economically in difficult situation, because my father, again, played a very limited role in running the business, it was primarily my mom and my brother that manned the store and kept the business alive and going, and business actually became prosperous, too, because we were one of the first Korean stores to cater to Korean tourists and so on. So economically we did not suffer, but, of course, emotionally the fact that such a huge figure in my life is no longer there, I'm sure-I know I loved him, but also he was just a revered figure. I mean, like, he was really strong-minded, very disciplined, you know, he disciplined us very strictly, you know, including corporal punishment. So he was always a very fearful figure, too. We loved him and yet we were sort of afraid of him. We were frightened by his presence. Very Confucius (means Confucian), authoritarian style, and the fact that he was gone really created this big like feeling of emptiness, obviously, like anyone else.

Kil

But after that, my mom started getting sick. She would cry every day and then she was diagnosed with lung cancer when she hasn't smoked a cigarette in her life, and my father did not smoke. So it was out of, I guess, her depression. Then it spread into bones, so she died four years later, and that came as a big shock and a pain. Very hard to recover.

Cline

Were those four years really difficult physically for her? Was it a slow decline?

Kil

It was a slow decline, and during the last year she was so bedridden because the cancer had spread into her bones so she could not move.

Kil

By then, all my siblings got married, including my younger sister. She got married when she was, like, twenty-two, to her college sweetheart, who was twenty-three.

Cline

So it wasn't a matchmaking thing.

Kil

No, no, they did a typical, you know, like modern way.

Cline

American.

Kil

You know, marrying her boyfriend.

Cline

Where did she go to college?

Kil

She went to UCLA, under and master's. She's a social worker now for L.A. County. So I was the only single, and it was 1986. After I graduated law school in '85, took the Colorado [state] bar [exam], and came back to L.A., took the California [state] bar [exam], ready for my result. My mother was sick, so the thing is, I was, of course, living at home at the time while studying for the bar exam. My mother was bedridden, we had a hospital bed, because it was not really curable. Then whenever I would go to the library to study, she would always, you know, even though she couldn't physically pack my lunch, she used to make sure that I had my lunch and make sure-of course, I would always greet her, and then whenever I'd come home, she would hug me in her bed and she would ask me how things were going and so on. Then, like, in the fall she had to be hospitalized because she couldn't breathe and she needed hospital care. Even though she was conscious, she was physically deteriorating very rapidly. So she was really concerned about my welfare. I mean, even though she loved all her children, she loved me the most for some reason, because I was the youngest son and I was always a good son and I always tried to carry out her wish, the best of my ability. She and I spent a lot of time as a

child in Korea, and also I remember when we were running the grocery store, we sold fresh produce and we had to go to the produce market in downtown. You have to go there, like, before six in the morning to buy the good produce. I was in high school and my oldest brother was going to college back then at USC and he was working hard for the store, and she did not want to bother him to drive her to the produce market to do the daily shopping for the store. My second older brother, he-well, because like all of us, but he did not want to wake up. He is not good at getting up early in the morning. So she would call me, she would wake me up, and for some reason I tend to get up quite easily early in the morning. So I would drive her often to the produce market, she and I, and then we would go out and buy the crates of produce and then load up in our van. So I'd spend a lot of time with her early in the morning. We'd go there like a Saturday morning.

Kil

Also when we lived in Hong Kong, even though she would go back and forth, but whenever she would visit Hong Kong and stay for a period of time, we would do a lot of things together. We'd go shopping together and so on. When I was young, I know she took me to her meetings, too. When she went on a social meeting, she would take me. So I spent a lot of time with her, more than I think any other child, for some reason.

Kil

So she was always concerned about my welfare, the fact that she'd think I'd be orphaned when she passes away. So she wanted me to get married, but after going through over fifty times of matchmaking, I couldn't find anyone that I liked.

Cline

Wow.

Kil

And Mom was too sick to now participate in any of the matchmaking, so she was worried. And after my father passed away, she became a really strong Christian.

Cline

I was headed to that question.

Kil

That's when she decided that she would only find solace and comfort in Christ, so that's when we started going to church religiously, actually, literally, every Sunday, and she got really involved in church activities and church services. She would visit families in dire need, buy them food. She got involved with a lot of charitable work. She felt that maybe that was her way of making up for not going to church in the past when she was a Buddhist. In Buddhism you have to do a lot of good deeds to get sent to heaven and get your reward, and I guess to some extent maybe that's the same for the Christian faith, but because she was disciplined and trained in Buddhist faith, so it was easy for her to get involved in the Christian faith, like my grandmother was. Well, my grandmother ended up going to church until my mother passed away; her mother, that is.

Kil

So she was concerned. Right before her death, she, of course, left two messages for us. One is to get along with one another, siblings, and also to take care of my grandmother. My mother and my grandmother were really close, obviously, because they lived their entire life, and my grandmother was a real devout Buddhist. All her life, like, when my mother died, she was like in her seventies and she did not know how to read, but my mother told my grandmother that, "If you want to see me again, if you want to be reunited, you have to believe in Christ." So the very next day she dropped her religion and went to church with us and she thought that, you know, all the pastors, you know, when they come and pray for my mom, they would tell my grandmother, "If you want to see your daughter live, you have to pray to Christian God." So that's what she did.

Kil

Then, after she passed away, my grandmother stayed on, stayed with the Christian faith, and not only she would go to church on Sundays, but she would go to church on non-like on Saturdays as well, and she would ask us to take her there so she could pray.

Cline

Interesting.

Kil

Then she would go in and do the cooking for the church members. So one thing that I realized, if you're a really strong religious person, any new religion that you may adopt, I think that person can really get immersed right into it and really carry out their faith.

Cline

Because they know how to give, yes.

Kil

Yes, because I guess the basic foundation is very much the same pretty much in all religion. So that's what happened to her.

Cline

What about your brothers? Did they start going to church and everything?

Kil

Oh yes, because we all wanted my mom to live, so we all went to pray, but the thing is, because we weren't really trained religiously like my grandmother was, so it's really hard to just [snaps fingers] switch over and become a really devout person. But we did what we can. So that's how we started to become real Christians, because of my mother's dying wish.

Cline

Then what about the other wish, that you get married? What happened?

Kil

Well, Mom wanted me to get married. I was dating someone at the time, but my mom thought she wasn't the right person, and I was really scared, really, of my mom's death, because I didn't know how to live by myself. I was always under someone's care. When I was young my parents, my brothers, and then they're all married and independent, so who am I supposed to live with? I really thank my mom and my sister, I guess, and god, for bringing my wife [Caroline Kil] together. Well, you wouldn't believe what happened. It was like sometime in late October, early November, maybe. I know it was before

Thanksgiving. Yes, it was November. I'm sorry, November, a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving in '86. My mom was really suffering and her health was declining and she was going in and out. She lost her consciousness sometimes and it sometimes comes back.

Kil

So we thought this one night we thought she wasn't going to make it, and my younger sister was, of course, you know, like all of us, were in pain. So she called her best friend, who's my wife. She lived in Gardena at the time. My mother was hospitalized at Glendale Memorial Hospital, Glendale Seventh Day Adventist Memorial Hospital. So my wife came over to pay last respects, because she would visit my house, and I knew her. I took her out a couple of times in the past. I dated all my sister's friends. There were six of them.

Cline

[laughs] Wow.

Kil

My wife happened to be my sister's closest friend at the time, so she called my wife, whose name is Caroline, telling her that, "My mom's not going to make it. Can you come and pay her the last respect? She loved you." My mom always-well, would occasionally mention that to me to date her, so I did it a couple times, but there was no chemistry, so I stopped going out with her. My mom was always fond of her. So was my grandmother. Everyone loved her in my family, except me, I guess. I mean, I liked her, but I wasn't in love.

Kil

So my wife came over, it was about nine o'clock, pretty late at night, and she said she was hesitant to come, it was late, it was far, and she thought it was inappropriate. You know, she felt out of place. It's not like she was one of the family members. At the time, all my family members were there, all my brothers were there, including my relatives. So she was the only non-relative person, so she felt out of place and she was also a little bashful, but thank god she came. So when she walked in, my mom all of a sudden woke up when she saw her face in a bright, you know, lighten up, and grabbed her hand and thanked her for coming, and right there and then asked her to marry my son. I

thought she was delusional, really, because she was under the medication. We were all taken aback, you know, including-I was startled. I thought, you know, "Are you crazy? What are you doing?" My wife was also shocked, you know, like, oh, wow, but she was so kind. She said, "I'll have to ask my parents." That's the Korean way, you know, for a nice Korean woman, instead of saying, "I have to think about it." "I have to ask my parents."

Kil

My mom said, "Okay, please do."

Kil

Then my mom also grabbed my hand and said, "Son, if you love me, you have to marry her." Wow. Who's going to say no, right? I mean, that's a tough-you know, she really put me in a spot. And of course I said, "Of course I'll marry her, Mom." I have to say whatever she wants to hear.

Cline

Wow.

Kil

I was willing to do anything for her, even if I would end up, you know, not marrying my wife.

Kil

Then the next day I was really worried, now what if she said no? And I thought she was going to say no, because why would she marry me, you know? She is really Americanized. She came here when she was six, you know, and so she started her grade school in the U.S. and her Korean wasn't that great. Her family came to U.S., to L.A., in 1967, so when there were fewer Koreans. So she had hardly any Korean friends until she went to college at UCLA. That's when she met my sister and all her friends. So I was worried, actually. Actually, I was worried either way. If she said yes, I was worried, if she said no, I was worried, because of my mother's sake. If she said yes, I was worried for my sake. But deep in my heart I still wanted to say yes, for my mom's sake, because I wanted to make her happy. And also, looking back, I think I needed someone to hold onto for selfish reason, you know, until I would overcome this, you know, my grief. So I met with her the next day at lunch at Du-Par's

restaurant, which is on Wilshire [Boulevard] and New Hampshire [Avenue], there's a [unclear] Du-Par, because I worked in that building at the time. So it was the restaurant downstairs. I met her and I prayed that she would say yes. So I was waiting for her to walk into the restaurant, I saw her, I went up to her, said, "Hi, Caroline. Well?" [laughs]

Kil

Then she looked at me and smiled and grabbed my hand. That was her way of saying yes. Then she said, "My parents approved of our marriage."

Cline

Wow.

Kil

I was so shocked, because I didn't think she would have gone for it, because even though she's a Korean woman, you know, she was raised in this country in a modern way, the American way, and this is not a very common way of getting married. So I was so grateful. I said, "Thank you so much." Then we got engaged in my mother's hospital room two weeks later. Then my mom said-it was a few days before Thanksgiving that we got engaged, and my mom said, "You have to get married before I die." So we had to look for a place to get married, but it was Christmas season, holiday season, it was really hard to find a place, a wedding hall. So I got married on Tuesday instead of the weekend. December 27th we got married, and Mom wanted to see a videotape of our wedding to make sure that we got married. She thought there was a chance that maybe we would deceive her, you know, we would fool her, just to make her happy. So she wanted to see our wedding videotape. So we had to play that in her room, and then about a week later, she fell into coma and then she passed away three weeks later or four weeks later.

Cline

Wow.

Kil

So it was sort of a dramatic moment in my life, and I couldn't be happier with my wife. And I thank my mother again, and also my sister, because it's her

friend, and I thank god, because if it weren't for, I think for holy, really, divine intervention I don't think we would have got married.

Cline

Wow. That's a very amazing story.

Kil

I see many of my friends who married their high school or college sweetheart and they're divorcing from each other, but we're happily married, three wonderful children [Allison, Melissa, and Alex Kil]. First one at USC, she's in the medical program, M.D. program. My second daughter just got an appointment to [United States Military Academy at] West Point. My son is at magnet school. So we are happy and everyone's healthy, so I have to thank my mother, really, that my wife is her last gift to me.

Cline

Wow. Amazing. Wow. I was going to ask you more about the law aspect of your life's direction, but I think we can pick that up next time. This seems like a really good place to stop for today. Does that work for you?

Kil

I think so, yes.

Cline

I think you don't have much left in you, especially at the end of the day. Thank you for telling us all that. That was great.

Kil

Thank you for listening to me.[End of March 26th, 2008 interview]

### **1.3. Session 3 (April 3, 2008)**

Cline

Today is April 3, 2008. This is Alex Cline, once again interviewing William O. Kil in his office in Los Angeles. This is our third session. Good afternoon again.

Kil

Hi.

Cline

As always, we start with follow-up questions. We ended off last time with a rather remarkable and fairly dramatic story of how you wound up marrying your wife, Carolyn, and we'll start with the follow-up questions, and then I want to get into talking a bit more about your law studies and then practice.

Cline

First off, we didn't get the name of the department store that your family opened in Koreatown. What was that?

Kil

It's called Dae Ruk Department Store. Dae Ruk in Korean means continent. So continental department store. I don't know how they chose that name, but--

Cline

What's the Romanized spelling of that?

Kil

D-a-e, Dae; Ruk, R-u-k. Dae Ruk Department Store.

Cline

The other thing that I wanted to ask you is, when you were talking about going to school, high school, in both Glendale and in the San Fernando Valley in Reseda, I wondered what, if any, sense you had of your peers' in schools awareness of what being Korean was or where Korea was, especially considering some of the names you sounded like you were getting called. I'm sorry to mention that, but what was your awareness, if any? Did you think they had any sense of what being Korean was or where Korea was?

Kil

I think most of my peers who were non-Koreans were actually very ignorant of cultures other than that of American, and also I don't think they were really interested in getting to know foreign cultures. Also there was this sense of their being superior over other cultures. Also, obviously, we were originally from a country that had not been economically prosperous, unlike today.

Korea was a very poor country even back in the seventies, where I think our GNP [gross national product] in the sixties was only about \$100 per person in the mid-sixties. So we had sort of an inferior complex, as well, when dealing with Caucasians, even though we had our pride in certain ways.

Kil

Nevertheless, because of our economic conditions of country where we came from and also because of our language handicap, we felt that we had to just study and try to master the language and get acculturated. So that's what we were focusing on primarily, and also trying to make a living, you know, helping our family business, whereas with respect to my friends whose families did not have their own business, they would get part-time jobs, even in high school; have to work, work in gas stations, primarily, pumping gas.

Kil

But, again, my peers, mostly non-Koreans, did not really care about where I came from or where Korea was, and they all sort of generalized or stereotyped us as Chinese, and that's why I was known as "Chinaman" at times.

Cline

Right. Yes. Well, how did it feel for you, coming into a situation where, aside from the dominant culture being, you know, the Caucasian Americans, the presence of other Asian cultures here, those being that of nations who at one time had, in fact, dominated Korea historically.

Kil

Like China and Japan, yes.

Cline

Yes, exactly. How did that feel to you? Did you think about that at all?

Kil

Well, given what little knowledge and educational background I had, especially the history, well, I had a strong sentiment against Japanese because I grew up hearing about Japanese atrocities perpetrated against Koreans, both in school and at home. So I had a strong resentment toward Japanese. But in Glendale

High School or even at the school that I went to in the Valley, there were hardly any Japanese or even Japanese Americans. So we did not have a whole lot of confrontations, but if and when we--well, I remember, see, we hated Japanese so much at some point that whenever we would do something bad before, like, you know, non-Koreans, like Caucasians, would say we were Japanese, just to make Japanese look bad. [Laughs] Anyway, it was kind of a joke, but it was not a good joke.

Kil

But anyway, I had very strong negative feelings towards Japanese when I was a child, but, of course, as I grew up, it was the Japanese Imperial government that was responsible for various heinous acts, and not the people, and people are the same everywhere. Also I did run into a lot of role model, like Japanese folks, even though some were still, you know, had prejudice towards Koreans. But nevertheless I met and ran into a lot of wonderful Japanese Americans. Americans, especially Japanese Americans, are very open-minded, so my negative feelings toward Japanese have gradually changed, actually, in that respect during my life in the U.S.

Cline

Your father was doing business with the Japanese, is that right?

Kil

Right, and even though I'm sure he had a lot of resentment, nevertheless economics dictated his life, and he had to, I guess, support his family. So I guess he had to just bear with, you know, whatever his inner feelings were, just suppress it and work with them. Besides, Japan at the time was, after the U.S., was the biggest--well, the country that offered the most aid, economic aid, to Korea in its economic revitalization, and also getting some technology transfers. So, you know, I guess Koreans had to work with Japanese, both at a governmental level as well as a personal, individual level.

Cline

How do you describe the point of view in your family, for lack of a better word, politically, and how did that influence your feelings and opinions about that sort of thing?

Kil

Well, again, when my parents came over, they were so immersed into actually running the business and making a living. Again, my mother worked like twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, for many years. So we really didn't have the time to really talk about things other than the bare essentials like, you know, how to run business efficiently, how to get better grades. So we really haven't had a chance to share ideas or thoughts about politics, in general. We just focused on more necessities of life, and that was more in our backburner.

Cline

When did you become an American citizen?

Kil

It was in the mid-eighties. 1990, actually; 1990, I became a naturalized citizen.

Cline

When you were in high school, what did you have to learn about American history and American government, and how did that sit with you? Did it interest you at all?

Kil

Oh, yes, history was one of my favorite subjects, even in college as well, and I did study American history both in high school and college. I thought it was just amazing, you know, people of high spirits, really, you know, that came to this virgin territory and established this--created this democratic nation that, you know, that history has ever known. Also people with just great minds and people with the visions. And the fact that the principle of government was based on the principles from the scripture, that men are the most sacred creatures, and that they should be valued and treated as such, even though the politics did not exactly reflect their basic spirit and the principles they had in mind. But I thought it was just amazing that everyone is treated equal and that everyone is given, at least theoretically, at least, I guess, starting with Caucasians, you know, that--

Cline

Yes, right, men.

Kil

And men in general--that equality and freedom of expression and assembly and all that, which are not found in other countries, especially Asian countries, where basic strict Confucian values and teachings, where the individual has to sacrifice, make sacrifice for the goodness of the larger group and for the country, and where children have to be submissive and be subjects of their parents, and also where wives have to be submissive to their husbands. There's a strict hierarchy at every level of the society.

Kil

So in that respect it was different, and also even in our language we have this honorific forms that we have to resort to when addressing people who are of higher status or older than you are. Even if you are older by one year, even if you're older by one class in school, you have to pay deference and respect, and address that person in a certain honorific way. Otherwise you will be rebuked, criticized, and punished. So everything is based in hierarchy, whereas in this country, in the U.S., with these democratic values and equality, and also the culture is such that everyone is treated equally in many ways, so that was, of course, one of the drastic differences.

Cline

What presidential election do you remember being able to vote in for the first time?

Kil

The '92, and in fact, I even went to the Republican [National] Convention in Houston--

Cline

Oh, really.

Kil

--because that was right after, well, a few months after the L.A. [Los Angeles] riot that ravished Koreatown. I don't know if you want to get into that now.

Cline

Yes, we'll get into it later, I think.

Kil

Yes. But it's the '92 election, yes. That's when my eyes opened up about the importance of political empowerment, and so I chose the Republican Party.

Cline

I wondered also what your sense was of what other immigrants from Korea were experiencing, how much like your family's experience their experience was? For example, some of the people at your church. I know that your parents tragically both died at rather young ages, and that's fairly unique, but how similar or not similar would you say your experience was with many of the other Korean immigrants coming to the States around that time?

Kil

I think there are a lot of similar aspects, in that many--well, there are some that came without much money, actually, and they had to get odd jobs, and because of their language handicaps they could only get menial jobs, you know, laborers' jobs. They had to save their money to start their own business. More often than not, many actually saved money to start their own business, whereas thanks to my father, you know, he had some capital that we could invest and start our own business right away. So we had a little head start in that sense.

Kil

Of course, there are some that came with lots of money and ventured into more successful and prosperous business, such as motel, hotel business back then, even in the seventies, gas stations, and so on. Also those who came to this country to study, to pursue a higher degree, of course, they have gotten professional jobs, and so their life was, of course, a lot easier than folks like us where we had to start getting into small business and trying to sometimes build the business. Because of the limited capital, we would only be able to afford a business that's not doing that well or a business that has a very small sales volume.

Kil

So we had to work hard to build a business, to increase the profit and all that. But many friends' families that I knew at the time did engage in like groceries and liquor stores, dry cleanings, you know, very small scale, primarily run by the family members. So, again, most of my friends, including myself, would not have time to actually play around after school, because they all either had to work on their part-time jobs or help out with the family business. So a lot of us actually would meet at church on Sunday, and that's the one way to, you know, get together and hang out.

Cline

Network.

Kil

So it was kind of a little miserable. That's why I couldn't really engage in any extracurricular activities in high school. It's not that I was a great athlete, but even if I wanted to I just did not have time in high school. So college was, of course, an escape for me to pursue things that I wasn't able to do in high school.

Cline

Yes. What was the name of your church in Glendale, and when did you start going there as opposed to the one, the Oriental Mission Church?

Kil

Actually, the one--oh, gosh, it was the Korean Glendale Presbyterian Church, and we rented an American Presbyterian Church, and we had our service in the afternoon after their morning services had taken place. My parents and I went there briefly, but, of course, they just didn't have time to go because someone had to cover them in the store. So they did not really actually go to church until my parents started the department store in the late seventies, whereas I went to church on Sunday during my high school period, and I chose to go to the Oriental Mission Church, because they had a large high school student body there. And one of my best friends was also going to that church and invited me there, so I chose that church. Of course, there were girls, too, so that was an incentive to go and meet them. [Laughs]

Cline

Yes, indeed. What was your sense of the church's role at that point in providing assistance for immigrants coming in from Korea?

Kil

Well, because my parents did not go to that church, so I don't know what kind of service actually they offered to adults. But from what I understand, they would assist families in finding apartments and housings and also jobs at times. But again, with my family situation, because of my brother, who kind of knew his way around a little bit, and also he was somewhat proficient in the English language, so we didn't have to go through the church, had to receive church assistance. But I know there were other families did receive a lot of church help, especially when enrolling their children in school. Whereas my brother [Gilbert Kil] enrolled me at Glendale High School.

Cline

When did you start, if at all, having any awareness of community support organizations for the Korean community starting to become organized and established in order to provide assistance for immigrants coming?

Kil

Well, I believe I did experience the Korean community organization in my high school time, Korean Federation, which is like the big umbrella organization that embodies smaller organizations and also serves as a sort of a spokesperson kind of role when dealing with outside the Korean community, like dealing with mainstream community, because they've held a Korean parade every fall since the early seventies. I have participated in that parade one year when I was in eleventh grade. I volunteered as a worker in organizing and cleaning up. They were recruiting high school students, so I did volunteer one year with my friend when I was in eleventh grade.

Kil

So I knew there was an organization that represented the interests of Koreans in Los Angeles. But again, I don't think my parents have engaged them in terms of services or anything like that, and because also, I guess, we were living in Glendale and had a business outside Koreatown, so we had not had opportunities to tap on their resources. Again, because of the fact that we had

some command of the English language, so we didn't have to go to them for any translations or other needs. We were kind of self-sufficient in a way, unlike other families who have recently arrived from Korea.

Cline

Who was essentially--who or what was sort of the leadership profile of the people in the Korean Federation? Who were the prominent people in the community, or did you have any sense of that at the time?

Kil

Well, again, in high school I really didn't know and didn't care, because, you know, I had no interest. But I have heard of a few individuals that my parents mentioned, one of which was, again, one of the first Korean American real estate broker, who was a friend of my father from North Korea, that came to the U.S. in the fifties and studied, and then she became one of the first Korean brokers and also president of the Korean Federation in the early seventies. So I knew of her, and in fact, she took our family out for dinner soon after my parents came. So I remembered her. Other than that, again, because I didn't have any interest in community leaders at the time because I was kind of young, so I really don't remember much until I became an adult.

Cline

Right. Your father is, at least for a while, initially going back and forth.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

What was your sense of how much your family, or maybe just your father--I know you were busy--kept up with affairs in South Korea? Certainly there's been a parade of regime changes and things over the years. How much was that being followed? How carefully was that being followed?

Kil

Not until actually I was in college, where I became more aware of matters other than the academic subjects. That was when Korea was going through turmoil politically, demanding more freedom and democracy, and students

were staging protests, several protests and so on, where many of them were prosecuted for voicing their individual opinions and seeking freedom and democracy. So that kind of caught on in L.A., too, among Korean American student bodies, and I kind of got involved. I was the president of the Claremont Korean Students Association, so I was the president of the Korean High School Student Association at Glendale High as well, so I was always, well, socially involved, if not politically.

Kil

But as far as the political changes and political issues in Korea was concerned, I grew and found interest in those issues when I got involved in the Korean Student Associations in L.A. When there were protests that took place in Korea, the Korean Student Association officers felt that we should at least be supportive, if not financially, at least spiritually and morally. So we would also do like a little march in front of the Korean Consul General, protesting against the suppression and oppression of Korean students, where we felt that was unjustly prosecuted and suppressed.

Kil

Then I remember--was it either my sophomore or junior year?--when President Park [Chung-hee] was assassinated. That also came as a big shock, because, you know, I grew up in Korea until my fourth grade, and President Park was like the icon. He was like a monarchy, you know. I mean, ever since I became aware of my surroundings, his name would always be in my mind, because I would always hear about him, see his pictures, and read about him in Korean textbooks and everywhere. So he was kind of like not only a leader, but also a spiritual leader for many Koreans who grew up during his presidency. So when he died, it came as a shock, even though by then I had lived in the U.S. and overseas for a number of years. That, I guess, his just presence in my life was so great, yes, so that came as a shock. But, of course, it also brought some reforms and changes, gradually.

Cline

Where did people like you get information about what was going on in Korea?

Kil

Primarily for me it was--I didn't read Korean newspapers at the time, even though I know there were Korean newspapers, but we would watch Korean-- there was a Korean news that was broadcasted at this Channel 18 [KSCI TV] for like a couple of hours every day. So that's where we would catch on. That was the primary source of news and information, Korean TV. Then also I would read from the American periodicals, like Newsweeks and whatnot.

Cline

Now, I wanted to ask you, before we get into this next kind of big phase of your life, what really inspired you to go into law?

Kil

Well, my father, again, studied law in China. Also, law or the legal profession is highly regarded in Korea, even to this day. Maybe not as much as it used to be, but legal profession was like the highest echelon in the Korean society for generations, and it was always revered and respected and feared, actually, [unclear] they had lots of power in determining a person's life. So anyone who is interested in academics would actually consider law first before anything else, then would consider medicine, and then other professions. So it was always in our mind and desire; it was the desire of our parents.

Kil

Also, as we were running businesses, small family businesses in the U.S., there were instances where we felt that we were unjustly treated, and especially because of the language handicap, you know, where we weren't familiar with certain legal terminologies and so on. I don't think my family personally suffered any financial loss as a result, but I know of friends who have sustained losses economically because of their ignorance in the law and the language and so on. Also, there was a dire need for Korean-speaking attorneys in the seventies. There were only a very few. Even when I became an attorney in '86, there were like less than like thirty lawyers practicing in Koreatown at the time.

Kil

Also, I figure that this was a good profession to be financially successful. That was another incentive. Also, I felt that it was a noble profession. Now I have

some second thoughts, mixed feelings about that, because, I guess, there are just so many lawyers, and with the large number come certain problems in the profession among certain unscrupulous professionals. Yes, so that was the primary reason. Also, like any parent, they want their kids to be successful and so they could brag about it and show off. Also, they felt that having a lawyer in the family, you know, it would be nice in dealing with certain problems or issues that come along the way.

Cline

So you graduated with a degree from the University of Colorado.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

Was there a particular area of law that you felt motivated to study and to potentially go into practice in?

Kil

Well, you know, to be candid, law was a very difficult subject for me, I found out, and I had to struggle. I struggled in my first year.

Cline

Yes, well, that's natural.

Kil

You know, I wish I had worked in the private sector or I wish I had gotten some work experience before I went on to law school, so that I could better understand and apply the law to actually a real business situation. But because I went straight to law school from college, so the legal principles were just abstract concepts instead of something that really I could apply. I thought it was just a pure concept and principles, you know, that had very little practical value, because I just could not connect the dots from case studies to actual problems. Even though the case study is about the actual problems. I just couldn't connect to.

Kil

So the first year I struggled, so during my summer I interned at legal clinics and small law offices, to see how I could apply the legal principles to actual situations. So it got better after a while, after my first year. Then after my second year I worked at the legal clinic that specialized in immigrants, immigrants' rights clinics in L.A. That's where I was able to actually apply the law to actual problem cases that came before me, that was assigned to me, mostly amnesty cases, actually.

Kil

So I thought I was going to go into immigration and international law, because given my background, I thought that would be a natural transition. So I did that, actually. Well, I did everything. I worked in a small office, where it was a general practice firm like the one I have now [Law Offices of Kil and Sinkov], where they represented everything, really, from immigration and personal injury to small businesses, transaction to litigation. So it didn't really matter what I wanted to specialize in. It was the job that I took on that shaped and molded my interests and my way of thinking. It was pretty much a community-oriented practice, because you had to really learn and try to represent to the best of your ability when a client brings in that certain case, because you didn't want to lose that client. So you forced to just get yourself involved in sometimes an area that you weren't accustomed to.

Cline

How much more did the beginnings of your law practice sort of plug you into what was happening at the time in the Korean community here, especially?

Kil

Well, again, the Korean community was still at what I call the growing stage or infant stage. You know, the Korean community was established pretty much in the seventies in Los Angeles, so in the mid-eighties was still growing and expanding. Again, a lot of Koreans, when they come to the U.S., you know, as soon as they have some money, they would start a small business, and that required attorneys sometimes to review the documents, and also come disputes that require, of course, an attorney's attention.

Kil

So it was fun, actually, in the beginning, that I was actually able to apply what I learned to solve clients' problems, and also you get paid. Also back then, because of the shortage of Korean-speaking attorneys, the work volume was growing, and so it was fun for the first ten years. But then, of course, came competition, like any other professional communities, where Korean parents, again, want their kids to be successful, and they think that being attorneys or doctors represents the American dream.

Kil

So there was a surge in the number of Korean lawyers that's coming out every year. It's like 300, on the average, a year in California. So now there are practically thousands, so the market is really saturated, and so it's not as fun as before. You have to work harder to earn the same dollar.

Cline

Right. You have to promote yourself, I guess, pretty heavily.

Kil

Yes. But then, in a way, because of my interest in civic and city activities and political activities, that actually kept me busy; that even though I am working less than what I used to, but I'm still keeping myself busy in my civic activities, and I find a lot of joy and pleasure in doing that. It's not that I have amassed enough fortune that I don't need to make any more. It's just that I feel that, you know, I am making a living, and also my wife is working, so, you know, we are financially stable. I am finding a lot of pleasure and joy in community affairs and volunteer work. Also comes a certain recognition and honor, which I feel is a greater reward than the financial return.

Kil

So now, because of my interest in the community work, and it brings me a lot of pleasure, and my wife endorses it--I don't know whether she endorses it wholeheartedly, but at least she says she doesn't mind. So, you know, even though I'm working less, I am actually happier than before.

Cline

Okay. Well, a little later we'll talk about the form that your community work takes. But speaking of your wife, I wanted to ask you, it seemed like a really

major transition at the point we left off last time when I was talking to you, where your mother is near death, and you and your wife decide that, based on one of her last wishes, that you get married. You get married. You were concerned about where you were going to sort of wind up without both your parents, your brothers with their own families and being independent and busy, and now you have a wife. A couple of things I wanted to ask you that are kind of basic about that. First off, you mentioned that when you dated her before, you felt you didn't really have any chemistry.

Kil

Right, there was no sparks flying. [Laughs]

Kil

Did that change, or what changed?

Kil

Well, again, I married her because, first of all, my mom wanted me to marry her, and I wanted to fulfill her wish. Also, I needed someone to replace my mom. I needed someone to hold onto. I don't think I would have made it without my wife. I was in such a despair that she was like--served as a place of refuge, really. So for me, she was both my wife and my mom for many years, and that's why my wife got very disappointed that I was treating her like my mother, like guardian-type, than as a wife-slash-lover.

Kil

I realized that that was wrong, so I tried to change it, but I know that she was upset. But she is also a very patient woman, thank God, so she, you know, had to bear all that for a while. But about ten years later she aired and expressed her disappointment, you know. One day she came and told me, saying that she's not my mom, but a wife, a woman that needs, you know, romance and love and all that. So it struck me, and so, yes, there was some period of tension and turmoil because of my perception of her, which was wrong. But, yes, so I had some problems initially.

Cline

Yes. But you said that you're very happy now.

Kil

Oh yes, because, you know, I'm no expert on love or romance, but, you know, everyone dated, and, you know, at some point in time in your life, and you have this--when you're in love, you know, of course, you can't sleep or eat. You do nothing but constantly think of that person, day in and day out. But, you know, that feeling doesn't last forever.

Cline

That's true.

Kil

After a while it subsides and dissipates, and sometimes you don't even think about that person ever again. Whereas my wife, it's like our relationship--I mean, it never started hot, you know; it wasn't boiling. It was like simmering, you know, and it created a very secure foundation that our feeling for each other is not over romance, not over this burning desire or passion, but it's like a strong bond of trust and just feeling good about being with each other; feeling secure, comfortable, relaxed, like Siamese twins, you know. I mean, it's not like I'm thinking of her constantly, but definitely she has become a inseparable part of myself now, like such a strong, unbreakable bond, like the bond that I had for my parents and my siblings.

Kil

Even if I encounter some real gorgeous woman, of course, one would have certain thoughts about that person, but nevertheless, I know that no one can replace my wife. That thought may be just merely a fleeting fad, you know, a fleeting thought. But the fact that she is there, it's just a great comfort and it brings me great peace of mind. Also, of course, she is an integral part of my family that connects our kids, you know, and bonds all of us. If she drops out, then the family bond would, I think, just break apart, fall apart. So she is like the cement that glues all of us together.

Cline

Where did you wind up living after you got married?

Kil

Oh, so after we got wed, we lived with my mother--well, my mother's house, where my brother was living, my oldest brother, with his family. He had one son at the time. And my grandmother and our housekeeper. My mother was in a hospital bed, in hospital, you know, so I lived with them for a few months. After my mother's passing, we moved out.

Kil

Interestingly, my father is very, you know, even though he wasn't the kindest father, but he was the most responsible parent, in that not only did he make sure that we got educated, but he wanted to make sure that each one of us had a home, a house to live in; not a rental property, but a house of our own. So he bought a duplex in La Cañada. He couldn't buy individual homes, but he found a duplex that could have, you know, two families live in it. So my second brother was living in one of the units, and the other was being rented out, and I moved into that rental unit, because that half was supposedly mine.

Kil

So we moved to La Cañada, which is a nicer neighborhood. So, yes, when we started our marriage, you know, we were pretty much provided with all our basic needs, including a roof over our head. It was a two-bedroom, two-bath duplex unit, and quiet. It was nice. So we started off pretty nicely, yes.

Cline

Yes. Where were you working then?

Kil

I was working at a small law office in Koreatown, a two-man firm.

Cline

What was the name of it?

Kil

Called [Law Offices of] Rhee and Deering, and then the former is gone now.

Cline

Your wife was one of your sister's [Elizabeth Kil] close friends.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

I know that sometimes when the dynamic shifts that much, where now she's not just the friend anymore, she's family.

Kil

The quote "notorious sister-in-law," unquote. [Laughs]

Cline

[Laughs] Whoa. How did that go down? How did their relationship change or not change?

Kil

Well, you know, my sister also married her college sweetheart, who is also a mutual friend of my wife, because they all went to college that same year at UCLA, so they all knew one another. So it was interesting. It was like a little reunion for them, college reunion, and yet because of this now new relationship, you know, having married and being in-laws, you know, they had certain expectations, I guess, different expectations of each other. So, you know, I don't know what that expectation was really, but it wasn't being friends anymore. They weren't being friends. Like they were in a different relationship now, different category, you know, with certain different expectations from each other.

Kil

No one really spelled out, you know, what they wanted from each other, and yet they wanted something different. So I think that created some tension. Like they wouldn't call each other freely anymore or go out. During holiday seasons for family get-together, everyone had a different role to play, especially in the Korean family. It's typically the wives that do most of the cooking. The husband's sibling, the sister, typically and traditionally, you know, they are treated as a guest, and they don't really engage in cooking or dinner preparation.

Kil

So, you know, things like that. "Why is she being treated differently? She's a woman, she's a friend, and yet she's not sharing the work that everyone is chipping in." Things like that, and then my sister's expectation was that, "Because I'm a sister-in-law, I expect certain gifts," which is another sort of a, I think, Korean tradition; I don't know what it is. And my wife, because she thinks that, "A friend, I mean, why bother with gifts? We're friends, you know, first."

Cline

Right. Your wife was a little more Americanized, too, right?

Kil

Absolutely. That too, yes. So I guess she was expecting certain gifts and other treatment, but she wasn't getting it. [Laughter] Things like that, but I think they're over it now. Everyone's old, and that was more of a childish thing, maybe. But little things like that, yes.

Cline

That could be a major adjustment, I would think, a very different sort of dynamic. So when did you start to build your family then?

Kil

Oh, so I got married in '87, and then we had our first child in '88, and then another one in '89, and then another one in '92, so one after the other. So soon after, yes, we got married. Then my wife was working as an accountant at a major CPA firm, and after she was pregnant with the second child, she felt that she had to quit her work, because the first child was really demanding. We had a maid, a babysitter, but we felt--my wife felt that she wasn't being properly reared. So she had to quit her job when she was pregnant with the second child.

Cline

Who is the first child?

Kil

My daughter. Her name is Allison [Kil]. She's a sophomore at USC [University of Southern California] now. A bright girl. She's in an eight-year medical

program, so she really excelled in school. But also a very demanding girl, even as a baby, so my wife felt that it would be better that she stay at home and be a full-time homemaker and raise the child. So that's when we decided to have more children. Might as well get the most out of her service, you know.

[Laughs]

Cline

Right. So who was the second child then?

Kil

Oh, Melissa [Kil]. Oh, she received all of her appointments to three service academies just a few weeks ago, so I think she's going to choose one of the three. Then the third is Alex [Kil], is in ninth grade.

Cline

Where is she going to school?

Kil

Which one?

Cline

The one in the ninth grade.

Kil

Oh, Alex. He's a boy, and he goes to--

Cline

Oh, he. Sorry.

Kil

Yes, I have two girls and a boy. Alex goes to Bravo Medical Magnet School--

Cline

Wow.

Kil

--in L.A., next to the USC, actually, medical campus, where my wife works. So they go to work together. [Laughs]

Cline

Interesting.

Kil

She drops him off, and he walks over and then--

Cline

Okay. Somehow I had remembered wrong, that you had three daughters, so sorry about that.

Kil

That's all right. Two girls and a boy.

Cline

Alex could a girl.

Kil

You know, a funny thing--I don't know whether this may be of any interest, but I really wanted a son. I don't know about you, but I really wanted a son. So the first child, of course, was a daughter, you know, and after she went through labor--and she knew I wanted a son--she said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Bill, that it was a girl."

Kil

Of course, you know, I mean, how can she be sorry? "You did a great job. I'm happy." You know, "Don't worry about it."

Kil

Then the second daughter, it was a girl, too, and she said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Bill. It was a girl again."

Kil

I said, "Be careful." That's what I said. [Laughs] And the third was the charm, of course. We had a son.

Cline

Wow. That's a pretty typical scenario, though, you know; keep trying until you get a boy.

Kil

You know, wasn't that sort of foolish for me to say, "Be careful next time"? [Laughs] Yes, right, as if it was her fault, right?

Cline

Right. I'll make sure my order that I put in is clear next time. Okay, so you're really pretty firmly established now. You've got your family started. Where did you live at that point when you had the three children?

Kil

Well, then I moved back to Glendale, where my parents originally lived. In fact, I ended up there in that house. It was a nice five-bedroom, three-bath house nestled behind Verdugo Park. We lived there for a few years, and then when my oldest was about to enter the elementary school, we moved back to La Cañada, because La Cañada supposedly had some of the finest schools. So we went back to La Cañada and lived there for several years, until my first child finished her elementary. Then we moved back to L.A. for other reasons, but yes. So we lived in the La Cañada-Glendale area for like ten years or so, ten, twelve years--no, more than twelve years maybe, like more like fifteen years.

Cline

How many more Koreans did you start to see settling in the Glendale-La Cañada area?

Kil

Well, a lot over time. In fact, a lot of Koreans moved into Glendale initially in the eighties, early eighties. There were hardly any Koreans--well, there weren't that many Koreans, actually, I should say, in the La Crescenta-La Cañada area until the eighties. Again, La Cañada-La Crescenta was, I guess, more predominantly a white neighborhood and more conservative, and so Asians, I guess, felt a little uncomfortable, and even at times intimidated, living in those two areas.

Kil

But Glendale schools, from what I gathered at the time, the quality started to drop for some reason in the Glendale Unified School District, unlike when I started in the seventies, and people realized that La Crescenta-La Cañada had better schools. So more Koreans started to move into those areas. So a number of Koreans would start out in L.A. when they first arrived, and then they would, of course, spread out to the suburbs that have, you know, better school districts. Some Koreans moved up to Glendale, and then from there they moved up further to, you know, even physically in a higher altitude, to La Crescenta and eventually La Cañada.

Kil

Now supposedly La Crescenta High School has like almost 40 percent Koreans.

Cline

Yes, that's what I hear.

Kil

And La Cañada has like 25 percent. So that's a huge surge in Korean population.

Cline

Absolutely. What were some of the other areas that you were aware of that Koreans were settling once they'd move out to the suburbs?

Kil

Since that's where I live, so I was, of course, more knowledgeable of those areas. Then other areas back then in the eighties were like Torrance. Torrance, I have friends in Torrance, like Palos Verdes areas and South Bay areas. I guess those are two, yes, major areas. Now the recent phenomenon is Irvine and Fullerton, and that took place like within the last ten years. But through the eighties and nineties, I think, predominantly Koreans would choose La Crescenta-La Cañada and then South Bay areas.

Cline

So we're heading chronologically into sort of the unavoidable kind of monument, which is 1992--

Kil

Oh yes.

Cline

--the year that the Korean American community became--well, was brought into the living rooms of most of America probably for the first time. Quite a landmark in Korean American history, the Los Angeles riots. I guess we'll just head right into that. This will probably, I imagine, take up a little while, so this might be our last topic for today. But first of all, where exactly were you working and living in 1992, and what were you doing?

Kil

I remember exactly where I was living and working. I lived in La Cañada at the time. In fact, early nineties, that was about six years into my private practice, and so my office was somewhat established, and I was doing relatively well financially. So I was able to buy a nice house in La Cañada at the time, you know, 3,400 square feet with a half-acre lot. I shouldn't have sold that, but anyway. [Laughter]

Kil

My brother just moved his store, the department store, to a new location, which is the current location on Wilshire Boulevard near St. Andrews [Place]. At that time Wilshire Boulevard, especially West to Western [Avenue], did not have that many Korean businesses. Again, Korean businesses were clustered around Olympic [Boulevard] and Eighth Street and Western, and some on Vermont [Avenue], like Vermont, Western, Eighth, and Olympic, that little square block. Not many had ventured into Wilshire Boulevard, let alone West or Western Wilshire Boulevard.

Kil

So he moved into that new location, and when he moved in, he was the only tenant. He master-leased the entire two-lot buildings. There were two separate buildings with stores next to him and office spaces above his store, and they were all vacant. His business was the only business that occupied

that building of 20,000 square feet. He took up about 8,000. So it was sort of a very ghostly kind of like building at the time.

Kil

I was working in my office on April 29, I remember.

Cline

Where was that?

Kil

3255 Wilshire Boulevard. I turned on the radio, and they were airing this Rodney King, you know, was beaten up by police officers, and it's stirring up the neighborhood. Then, you know, I turned on the TV in my office and saw a gas station in flame, engulfed in flame, in South Central L.A. Reporters were reporting that rioters were looting, breaking in and looting the stores and businesses, and people are just shutting businesses, closing their business early and evacuating pretty much, you know. That's what L.A.P.D. [Los Angeles Police Department] was also saying, to just lock up your business and just go home, and also that these rioters are moving north.

Kil

So that's when I realized that there was something very unusual and serious. So I called my brother, because this brother, again, you know, had expensive items like jewelries and other products that cater to tourists. So I told him that there may be a riot occurring, and it may hit Koreatown, and the L.A. police was even telling everyone to just lock up the store and leave. So I asked my brother, "What are you going to do?"

Kil

He says, "Maybe we should do the same."

Kil

But then I said, "You know, from what I've heard and seen, they are actually breaking into stores, you know, stores that are locked up, actually they are breaking in, if not with crowbars, actually using trucks and cars to just smash in to open up the doors. So maybe it's not a good idea, you know. You have your entire fortune in that store, and this was a store that was started by our

parents. Maybe we should just stick it out and guard the store. I will come down, you know, if you want me to."

Kil

So I went down, and my other brother--there were three siblings, you know, three brothers. My other brother, George [Kil], who actually was working with my brother, said he wanted to also stick it out and guard the store, just in case the looters would make any attempts to loot our stores. So I went down to his store. He let his employees go home, because he didn't want anyone to get hurt, and Koreans were divided as to whether they should stay and guard their stores or just lock up and leave. Some just left, but others stayed.

Kil

My brother, George, the second brother, that is--my oldest brother's name, by the way, is Gilbert; my second older brother is George. One of his hobbies is collecting guns. We were always criticizing him for doing something so stupid, like, you know, "Why would you collect firearms? It's a waste of money; it's dangerous." But he likes to go shooting on weekends and so on, so he had like thirty or forty rifles and sidearms, and even a couple of machine guns, you know, automatic rifles like Uzi and so on.

Kil

So he said, "I'll go home and pick up my firearms and come back," and he brought about a dozen guns. So there were three of us, and so we felt that--and as we were listening to the news reports, things are really getting serious now. We see stores burning down, even in Koreatown. So my brother had some close friends, former like ex-marines, so a couple of guys came over, actually, and helped guard the store. Also, I called one of my best friends, and he came and helped. So there were six of us now guarding the store.

Cline

Are you all Korean, by the way?

Kil

We are all Koreans. So what we did was we would create a blockade by placing our car in front of our gate, because we heard that they were using pickup trucks to smash through the front gates, you know, to loot. So we

would park our cars in the front of the buildings, both front and back, as a barricade. Then my brothers would, there were a few would actually remain in his store, physically inside, and there were three of us that were actually guarding upstairs in the window, you know. So should anyone attempt to break in, we can, you know, shoot at them from upstairs.

Kil

So it's like a sort of a--it's like a civil war, literally. I had two sidearms, one .38 [caliber] revolver and one .45 [caliber revolver].

Cline

Wow.

Kil

I insisted I needed two guns, just in case, you know. [Laughs]

Cline

And you had plenty, I guess.

Kil

Yes, and we had an ammo box, and oh. But it was the scariest moment in my life, because, first of all, I mean, none of us had any training in firearms. Unlike other Koreans who immigrated from Korea, we didn't serve in the Korean army, military, so we didn't have any military training. Also, by then I had two kids, yes, two. The third one was unborn; he wasn't born until September, right. Anyway, so I have two kids and a young wife, and I think, "What if I get shot, or even get killed? I mean, gosh, you know. I'm trying to guard my brother's property, and is this worth risking my life to guard my brother's property?"

Kil

I mean, you know, all kinds of thoughts went through my mind, because, especially, I heard gunshots in the neighborhood, coming out of the neighborhood, and a building, a shopping center only two blocks away, completely engulfed in flame. It was burned to the ground. I saw that from the window, and I really got scared the first night. We slept in the building, of course. We had little cots and--you know. So I was scared for the first time.

Kil

Then, secondly, what am I doing here, and also what am I doing in this country? I thought this is a country of law, not only democracy and freedom, but a country of law, and yet you let this kind of civil disorder occur. L.A.P.D., for one reason or another, for technical or whatever reasons, they deliberately abandoned Koreatown, you know, and left us to be besieged by mobs.

Kil

So first of all, I was scared for my life. Secondly, I was disillusioned about L.A. city and this country in general. I felt like the government abandoned us. I felt like we were like practically second-class citizens; that even though we paid our taxes, when it came to the protections that we deserved, we weren't provided with. Then I was telling myself, "Wow, after this is over, what am I going to do? This is not my country anymore. I don't belong here. I don't think they want us. So where can I go and live? Korea? But it's even a more foreign country to me."

Kil

So I had this conflict and identity crisis about my identity, about whether I'm Korean or whether I'm American, and where I could live now, you know, in this country or Korea. I felt like I couldn't live in either places, because here I felt like a stranger now all of a sudden. In Korea I felt like even more a stranger.

Kil

Anyway, so I had a lot of conflicts, and so I stayed in my brother's building for three days, two nights and three days. On the third day, you know, the state guard moved into Koreatown.

Cline

Oh, the National Guard, yes. Right.

Kil

The National Guards moved in, and also L.A.P.D. now started to patrol the streets, and they think that everything was under control. So that's when I went home and, of course, hugged my wife and kids, you know. Also, see,

that's something neat about my wife. She's not only patient, but so understanding. I said, "You know, I'm scared, but I want to help my brother. You know, this is something that I felt my parents built, and I can't let this just go down, you know in flame."

Kil

She said, "Oh yeah, you should stay. Don't worry about me." Of course, La Cañada was very safe at the time. So, you know, she was really full of understanding. That's why I feel so grateful. I mean, there are a lot of instances where I'm so appreciative of her understanding and her patience, but that was also one of the instances where she said, "Oh, of course, Bill. You should stay there and help protect your family's business." It's not like I have any economic interest in the business, but nevertheless I had this moral obligation to help out.

Kil

So then I went home, and, of course, you know, I felt like I had just returned from a battle or something; I told my wife and kids that [unclear]. [Laughs]

Cline

Wow.

Kil

That's when I decided that I have to make this city, this country, my home, when I saw my family. I mean, if I were single, of course, I could live anywhere, but this is the only home that they know and the only country that they know. So I have to make this place a better place not only for me, but for my family and for my kids, you know, so that they will not face another disaster [unclear] that one that I experienced. So that's when I started to get engaged politically, for political empowerment.

Kil

But, yes, it was scary, and also I was really appreciative of my friend, who actually came and helped out, even though he had his family. I said, "Hey, you know, I really--," and he is a close friend of the family, too. He knew my brothers. We went to high school together, and so he's still my best friend.

Cline

What's his name?

Kil

His name is John Choi. Also, he and I were about to start a business together at the time, so I guess he felt that he had to help me out, you know, in order to get my assistance. Maybe--I don't know--that's why. Maybe I shouldn't say that, but he helped me. Because he didn't have to. He didn't have to do that, but he did.

Cline

So it sounded like you were getting prepared pretty far in advance. Were you hearing reports that Korean-owned businesses were being targeted?

Kil

Absolutely, including my uncle. My mother's brother owned a grocery store in East L.A. [Los Angeles], actually, and it was looted and burned down, and he had no insurance.

Cline

Wow.

Kil

So he had to file bankruptcy. So, you know, so even one of my close relatives suffered tremendously. So what I did was, okay, after the riot a lot of Koreans sustained economic damages, and there were various community organizations and churches that were asking professionals to volunteer their time and service to help counsel those who are in need of legal assistance. So I volunteered myself and helped a few families when dealing with their landlords. You know, their stores were looted, and they couldn't pay the rent. So I engaged in negotiation to, you know, relax their rental obligations, and also terminate the lease, for they were not able to sustain the business anymore. Their property was all gone, and they had no money to reinvest.

Kil

Also decided that I want to get involved politically. Until then, I never voted. I never got involved in any political activities. So that's when we decided that we were going to get together and start a political organization. So I and a few friends started the Korean American Republican Association in '92; then got ourselves together, our members together, to attend the Houston convention, Republican [National] Convention, to find out how American politics worked and try to meet some politicians so that we can tap on their resources to develop our political structures.

Kil

So that's what got me started, and I got involved in civic activities ever since. It was a rude awakening.

Cline

Yes, I would say it was a wakeup call for a lot of people in the Korean community.

Kil

Many Koreans, including people of my age, you know. We're called--the so-called 1.5 generation was born in Korea and raised in this country, that because of our bilingual abilities and our training and education, that we could better offer services that are badly needed in the Korean community when voicing our concerns and our needs.

Cline

So, following what you just said, how much of a generational sort of disconnect do you think there was after the riots, in terms of the direction that people thought the Korean community ought go and what ought to be done so that you got better representation and had more of a voice?

Kil

Well, see, until then Korean community organizations and Korean community politics were run by first generation, predominantly Korean-speaking, Korean-educated folks that had very nominal, if any, contacts or interaction with the mainstream community, especially with the local governments. Obviously, we were a voiceless minority, silent minority, because there was no spokesperson that could advocate for our rights and relay our problems. There was hardly

any younger-generation Koreans, bilingual Koreans, that were involved in community affairs that I was aware of, even though the Korean American Coalition was in existence.

Kil

But their role, they played a very limited role, because, first of all, they couldn't get any support or assistance from mainstream Korean community and from mainstream community. It was run by young Korean professionals and volunteers on a part-time basis, and they couldn't play any significant role, because the Korean community will not recognize them. They think that they were just young and rude, rude Koreans, because then when they talked, when they addressed you in English, there was no honorific form. So they think that when you say "you," they think that's really rude, when you get addressed "you," you know, "by you."

Cline

Wow. Yes.

Kil

Anyway, so there was a cultural gap, and so we were sort of like an island of our own in this greater city of Los Angeles. So that's when they realized that they needed an organization like Korean American Coalition, where the workers and people working there are [unclear] bilinguals. They had access to the mainstream community, and they were better able to advocate the rights of Korean Americans. So now the Korean community decided to be more embracing or more willing to work with younger Koreans when it comes to community issues that needs to be addressed in our local government.

Kil

That's why I got involved and went to fundraisers of politicians, involved in election campaigns, and also as a result sought political appointments, serving as commissioners and board members and so on, to not only voice ourselves, but just having a presence, you know, in the mainstream community that shows that they will become aware of who we are, that we exist. Then over time, of course, we can gradually build up our coalition and our voice.

Cline

A couple of things. Were you working through the Korean American Bar Association at that time--

Kil

Yes, yes.

Cline

--doing pro bono work for them?

Kil

Yes, Korean Bar Association. I was kind of active until then, but I sort of fizzled out after the mid-nineties, but until mid-nineties, especially during the L.A. riot, because I had friends who were also active in the Korean American Bar Association, and they pulled the resources and they got volunteers together to provide legal services to Korean victims.

Cline

What was your impression of the media coverage of the riots and how the Korean American community was portrayed?

Kil

Because we did not have the voice, we did not have the presence, we didn't have the political power, I think the coverage was limited and biased. In fact, they portrayed Korean Americans as the instigators, responsible for instigating the riot; that we provided the reason. We gave them the motive, for African Americans to start this riot and inflict these damages. At the time, a large number of Democratic [party] leaders in L.A. were African Americans, and of course, they were advocating for the interests and rights of African Americans, and they were also being very defensive, that s\_\_\_\_\_ looters looted Korean-owned stores because Korean business owners were rude to them, and that they did not reinvest their profits and earnings back into the community, as if they were just, you know, in taking the property by force.

Kil

To me, they were just thugs and criminals. That's when I decided to become a Republican; that I realized that there was no room for Korean Americans in the Democratic Party in Los Angeles, because they were dominated by African

American leaders, and they sided with African American looters and portrayed Koreans as instigators. So that's when I became Republican, and ever since, you know, engaged in Republican politics.

Cline

Yes, we had a Republican governor then, Pete Wilson.

Kil

Right.

Cline

How did you feel about his response?

Kil

Well, again, even, you know, the sending the National Guard was just belated.

Cline

Very late, yes.

Kil

It's like, you know, like sending a fireman after the fire was, you know, quashed. Of course, he's still a mainstream leader that we had no interactions, so instead of blaming him or the mainstream party, a lot of us blamed ourselves for not preparing for such disaster by being more interactive, by being more supportive, by being more engaging. So, again, in that sense, we were, of course, disappointed at his solution, but that's not productive, and that's not going to get us anywhere. We've got to realize what our mistakes were, and we've got to correct them. So even though, of course, we weren't appreciative of the belated measures that were taken by the governor, but, you know, we felt that that's the price that we, as a silent minority, had to pay. We paid it because we are a minority, and we paid it because we are not involved.

Kil

So ever since then, we decided we weren't going to be a silent minority, but we were going to be a vociferous minority speaking of our rights, and we felt that we've got to be also more supportive and also more giving. We can't just ask when we are not giving anything in return. That's why we organized these

political organizations, so that we can get involved in fundraising efforts for the candidates that are supportive of Korean causes and also, you know, help elect those candidates that are supportive of community interests.

Cline

Shortly after the riots, there was a new mayor of Los Angeles elected, who was also a Republican.

Kil

[Richard J.] Riordan, right.

Cline

Richard Riordan.

Kil

That's when I really got involved with the campaign. We lost the '92 Republican [presidential] election. We didn't know what we were doing. But the '93 mayoral election, Mayor Riordan came to Koreatown, met with the Korean community leaders, including myself, and we decided to endorse him. Even though he was a Republican, he was pro-business, and he wanted to rebuild L.A. He was, at least in his speech, very empathetic for Koreans and Koreans' grief and our suffering. So a lot of Koreans decided to endorse him and campaign for him and raise money. That year, after he got elected, he appointed me to one of the city commissions, so that's when I got my foot in the door and got involved in the local politics.

Cline

How effective do you think he eventually was in recognizing the causes of the Korean American community?

Kil

You know, I don't have any empirical data to support it, but for one thing, he appointed, symbolically, of course, I believe, six Korean Americans to city commissions. That was the most that any mayor had ever appointed Koreans, so that was a good start. You know, I think he really helped to ease some of the regulations, you know, concerning small businesses. I think he really tried

to rebuild business sectors in L.A., and I think that was in sync, you know, with the Korean community's revitalization effort.

Kil

So I could only speak generally, because it's been a while, but I think he had an overall positive impact, especially in the Korean community, in terms of rebuilding, even though we hardly got any, you know, federal or even state or local assistance. We had to take out loans from our banking institutions to rebuild our businesses and buildings.

Kil

But I guess even the L.A.P.D. felt that they have really neglected the safety and security of Koreatown. It didn't mean the crime rate has gone down, but I think that it wasn't just sympathy, but the fact that a lot of Koreans, both at a personal level and at a community level, decided to become more coalesced and decided to become more engaged, that got their attention.

Cline

Other than becoming more politically active and engaged, what were some of the changes that you saw in the Korean American community after the riots?

Kil

Well, then also came a sort of economic slowdown. Maybe it was a recession, but there was a housing crisis. The property value dropped drastically, and then the [1994] Northridge earthquake that ensued the following year.

Cline

Yes, two years later.

Kil

Yes. Oh, was it two years later? And then the economic slump in the mid-nineties, you know, that lasted all the way through late nineties. So it was hard on everyone, but also at the same time we had a steady flow of Korean immigrants that came with capital and invested money in Koreatown. So that helped. So even though there was economic slowdown, it was somewhat offset by infusion of capital brought in by Korean immigrants from Korea. Of

course, you know, the U.S. is the first choice of destination for Korean families, Koreans immigrants, for obvious reasons.

Kil

Also I realize that before the riot, it was just individuals with just a limited amount of capital that came, but after the riot, after the nineties, we see a large chunk of monies even by individuals, buying up big properties. So that was a change. Also, they got engaged in more prosperous and bigger businesses, such as car dealerships, huge supermarkets, hotels and motels, that required a large amount of investment. So I think those were some of the notable changes, from buying up small grocery stores and liquor stores and dry cleanings, to a bigger scale business.

Cline

Yes. Well, and probably they were more affordable then, too.

Kil

That too, but also they had more money to invest. Also, of course, the number of Koreans; the population, the size of the population grew.

Cline

What about in terms of the Korean community's relationship with other communities outside their own? How did change after the riots?

Kil

Oh, good point. Again, after the riot, we realized that we had problems with African American communities, you know. We had so many Koreans, small business owners, doing business in those areas, and yet there was hardly any relationship going, any dialogue, any exchange of friendship. So that's when we realized that we've got to start this dialogue and build this relationship, and we've also got to invest in their community to change our image, you know, build a positive image.

Kil

So a lot of Korean community organizations started coming out with these scholarships designed and targeted, designed for African American students who are college bound. In fact, I was involved. In fact, '93, the Korean

government sent several million dollars to L.A. to help out Korean victims, and \$1 million was earmarked for scholarships to improve community relations with the African American community, and I was involved in that fund management.

Kil

So I set up a nonprofit organization [Edward Lee Scholarship Fund]. I became general counsel and a secretary. So we managed the scholarship fund of a million dollars. I was on that board for several years, through the nineties. We would seek nominations from various African American leaders, most community leaders, especially from churches, to submit the names of qualified high school students bound for college, and we would provide a scholarship of \$1,000 per student. Also, many other Korean community organizations followed that footpath, and gave money and funds, you know, and formed scholarships.

Kil

Also the Korean government also, through Korean organizations, invited African American leaders to Korea to learn about our culture and try to build some understanding, you know, that we weren't just money-grubbing, heartless people, but that we were people of a long culture and history and compassionate. It's just that because of our language and cultural barriers, and also Korea is an isolated country for centuries.

Kil

We weren't accustomed to dealing with foreigners. Also, because Korea was constantly being invaded by foreigners, that we had a certain fear about dealing with foreigners for centuries. So, you know, we were a sort of insular minority. We sort of insulated ourselves from other communities, even in the U.S., because of that mindset that we carried here from Korea.

Kil

So we tried to explain that, you know, why we were what we were, but that we're going to change, of course, but we want to try to incite their understanding of us, so there is more even cultural exchange and visits,

actually, funded by the Korean government, to bring African American leaders to Korea.

Cline

Wow. What were some of the other organizations that you remember being involved in this sort of thing. I'm specifically going toward--you mentioned that at the time of the riots there weren't any real spokespeople for the community. Did they emerge, and if so--

Kil

Yes.

Cline

--if so, who were these people? I'm assuming, based on what you said before, that they are of a younger generation than those who were established before the riots. How did the leadership profile in the Korean community change? Who sort of emerged?

Kil

Well, one of the most notable persons is Angela [E.] Oh. I don't think she really was active in the Korean community affairs until the riot. You know, she came forward and stepped up to the plate, because she was knowledgeable, she was smart, and she was articulate. So she sort of served as a spokesperson and a voice for the Korean community when it came to dealing with the mainstream community and the media.

Kil

There were others, like Charles Kim, who was the executive director of the Korean American Coalition for many years. Also, there was Michelle Park Steel. Her husband [Shawn Steel] was a very active Republican in the state of California, so she came forward. There were a lot of others, other ones that I could recall, yes.

Kil

Then there were people like Richard Choi, who has been the president of the Korean Democratic Club for many years. I did some speaking myself, to some limited extent. Yes, there were several of us. In fact, I was interviewed by one

of the radio stations, and one of the questions was [laughs] "Would you have,"--I was explaining to them about guarding my brother's store with the firearms. One of the questions was, "Would you have shot the looter?"

Kil

I said, "Yes, without any hesitation." I said, "I'd rather be tried by twelve than [unclear] by six, because they weren't there just to steal, you know, our livelihood, but they were also, you know, willing, able, and ready to take our lives, and so I felt that we had every right to protect our life and our belongings."

Cline

I think what we're going to take up next time is where the Korean community basically wound up after the riots, and after all that they decided that they needed to learn from that experience, and talk about your activities. You mentioned a lot of the community work that you've been doing, so we want to talk specifically about that, what form that takes, and where you think the Korean American community in Los Angeles is right now and where it seems to be headed.

Kil

Okay.

Cline

Does that work for you?

Kil

Yes.

Cline

Okay.

Kil

Hopefully, that will be the last of the sessions, huh?

Cline

Yes, I think that will do it, yes. Yes, I think that's about all I have for today. I know I'll have more questions after I listen to this back, but thank you for talking to me today. Once again, another really enlightening interview. Thank you. [End of interview]

#### **1.4. Session 4 (April 17, 2008)**

Cline

Today is April 17, 2008. This is Alex Cline once again, here in the office of William O. Kil, interviewing Mr. Kil in our fourth and last interview session.

Cline

Good afternoon.

Kil

Hi.

Cline

It's the home stretch. [Kil laughs.] Big sigh. We ended our session last time talking about the 1992 riots in Los Angeles following the verdict on the Rodney King beating and its impact on the Korean American community here, the loss of business venues, property, inventory of so many Korean business owners, and the impact that the riots had on that community particularly in the way it changed the course of the awareness level, the consciousness level, and the leadership within the Korean American community in Los Angeles itself.

Cline

This appeared to be somewhat of a milestone for you as well. You described it as sort of the galvanizing influence that got you to become more involved at a political level and at a community level. You mentioned going to the Republican National Convention. You mentioned being on some city commissions under Mayor Richard [J.] Riordan. I wanted to start out specifically by talking about those commissions. I see that you were on the Police Permit Review Panel [of the City of Los Angeles] for the City of L.A. as well as the Productivity Commission [of the City of Los Angeles] for the City of Los Angeles. Describe, if you will, and assess your experience working as a city

commissioner, and in doing so, providing a certain amount of representation for your community.

Kil

Again, if I could just briefly go over the background that led me to my getting involved and getting appointed to various city and state and federal-level appointments. As I stated at our last interview, L.A. riot was definitely, you know, a rude awakening experience for all Koreans living in Los Angeles, including myself. At that time I was only involved in raising my young family and trying to secure economically, and just minding my own business and just focusing on my practice. Then I realized that when we felt that we were abandoned by the politicians, by the L.A.P.D. [Los Angeles Police Department], that's when we realized that it was due to our lack of political empowerment that led to such a disaster.

Kil

There were many people who felt the way I did, in that instead of feeling resentful or bitter toward the establishment and mainstream politicians, we felt that since this is our home, we have to make the most out of it, and one way to do so is to get engaged, getting involved with our civic and community affairs, not within our community, Koreatown, you know, trying to insulate ourselves, but actually open up and reach out to the mainstream. So a lot of us, including myself, have either joined existing community organizations or started our own, one of which was we started a Korean American Republican Association.

Kil

Again, we felt that it was Republicans who were more receptive to our values, and also sort of welcomed us, unlike some of the Democratic organizations, which were dominated by African American politicians at the time, and there were some tensions between the African American community and the Korean community. So we felt more comfortable working with the Republican Party.

Kil

So I got involved and started the Korean American Republican Association with about fifteen, twenty young generation, 1.5, 2.0 generation, people who were either born here or grew up and educated in the U.S. Most of us are bilingual, and we wanted to be a conduit liaison between the Korean community and the mainstream in voicing our concerns and also garnering our strength and power so that we can have a more effective voice when relaying our concerns or interests.

Kil

Also we've joined the California Republican Party and also at the national level, where some of us actually went to the Houston [Republican National] Convention in '92. We wanted to know how the mainstream Republican Party operates, and also we wanted to make some personal connections, get to know the people who are in the powerful positions, higher up in the political structure.

Kil

We've realized that at the time of the riot, we thought we knew a lot of politicians, but we did not, because they did not come to our aid or spoken out on our behalf. We realized that it was a very superficial relationship, and we wanted to find out how we can build even personal relationships between individuals as a community representative. So it was a learning experience, a high learning curve, but [unclear] we launched that effort. So we did that.

Kil

Then we realized that one way to get to know a politician is to get involved in that person's campaign, election campaign. So one of the first campaigns, after the President [George H. W.] Bush campaign failed in his re-election bid, we got involved in the local election, which was the '93 L.A. mayoral race. Mayor Riordan actually came to Koreatown, and there were representatives, including myself, that met with him. We talked about the L.A. riot and what his visions toward Korean Americans are. We thought it was on a very positive note, so we decided to get involved, and I campaigned for him, and our Republication Association, and we raised money.

Kil

As a result, I got appointed to the Quality and Productivity Commission. That was the first time that I got involved at the s\_\_\_\_\_ politics, you know, got to know the people who were influential. I wanted to let them know--it's not that I was able to exert any influence, but I wanted to let them know that we Korean Americans actually exist and that we are a very viable entity, economically and politically, to be dealt with, and we want to be recognized. Also through the process, we wanted to become closer so that if and when there is such a need for their help, that we could always talk about it, and we have established a channel of communications. So that was how I got started.

Kil

Then, again, one of the meaningful organizations that I got involved with was the Edward Lee Scholarship Foundation, named after a young man named Edward Lee. He was twenty-three at the time, and on his way to help out these people who were seeking help--they were supposedly besieged by criminals trying to break into the building, so he heeded to their call, and then when he got there, he was shot and killed.

Kil

So his parents started this scholarship foundation in his memory, and then the Korean government eventually sent a million dollars to L.A. to help rebuild the community, and they felt that the money would be better used if it can be somehow used to improve community relations with other communities around us, especially with the African American community.

Kil

So they established a scholarship foundation. So with the million dollars from the Korean government, we established a scholarship funds where we would give out scholarships from the interest that would be earned from the \$1 million; that that principal would not be spent, but only the interest earned from that million-dollar fund.

Kil

So I was the secretary and a board member, so for five or six years I was involved in giving out scholarships to mostly African American students, again for the community relations, and also to the children of the law enforcement

officers; again, to build relations with the law enforcement agency, because we felt that we were abandoned by them, and we thought that one way to get their support, and even though they're supposed to protect the community and the citizens, but instead of, again, blaming them, we wanted to strengthen the relationship so in the event of such crisis, that they will be more readily available to help out the community. So we focused on giving scholarships to the children of the law enforcement, and mostly L.A.P.D., children, L.A.P.D. officers' children and the African American community students as well, for college.

Cline

Wow.

Kil

Then one thing led to another, and you know, I got involved in Lions Club for a while in Koreatown.

Cline

Oh, really.

Kil

Again, they were doing a lot of community services. Also I joined the Korean [American] Chamber of Commerce board, because in order to have--I mean, safety and economic development, I feel, go hand in hand. One thing can reinforce the other and so on. I've been on the board ever since '93.

Kil

Then I got involved in the, again, national-level politics, so I was fortunate to have been appointed as delegate to the 2000 Republican Convention and 2004 New York convention as well. Then eventually I got appointed by President George W. Bush to serve on his president's [White House] Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders from 2004 to 2007, in which President Bush appointed fourteen Asians and Pacific Islanders from across the country, representing some dozen Asian communities across the country. It was, you know, a very honorable appointment.

Kil

As far as I was concerned, I got to meet community representative leaders from across the country in some eight different cities, and I got to find out that even though we are all called Asians, we are quite different from one another, in terms of language, in terms of culture, in terms of our way of life. Unlike other ethnic communities, like Latino or even African American communities, which, I think, are more homogeneous, compared to Asian communities, we are so fragmented.

Kil

So, you know, that's where I stand. Also, I got to think as to why we were abandoned, why we were disliked, Koreans were disliked. Of course, we have our own faults, you know, that we weren't very engaging or participating in our community affairs. We sort of insulated ourselves, and we weren't very giving to the communities.

Kil

So that's what I wanted to break away from, as an individual, and that's what the community should have done to be more engaging. So I've been trying to instill that kind of philosophy in my children, so I wanted Korean Americans to grow up and settle in this country as a respected member and a citizen of this community; that we are loyal, that we are patriots; and that we are very productive and law-abiding citizens.

Kil

So I encourage my kids to be as such, and so both my daughters, the older one [Allison Kil], who is a sophomore at USC [University of Southern California], but she applied and got an appointment to the [United States Military Academy at] West Point. But she chose not to go. But my other daughter [Melissa Kil] that also got an offer of an appointment to West Point and the [United States] Naval Academy, so she chose to go to Naval Academy, because I, again, I felt that, you know, joining the armed services, military services, is one way to show our loyalty and show that we are just as loyal as anyone else, and we could possibly earn some respect. So I want my kids to live up to that image so that they can make all Koreans proud.

Kil

Recently I got involved in Korean Parents West Point Graduate Club, and we are trying to steer and promote more Asians, and Koreans specifically, to apply and get admitted to the military academy so they could really serve their country and become role model citizens.

Kil

So I've been working, hopefully, to improve the image of Koreans, yes, to the mainstream community, so they will be not only accepted but in the time of need and crisis, that they'll be more willing to come to our aid should there be such need. I hope not.

Cline

How would you assess involvement in things like city commissions, for example, for furthering that goal or that ideal? Did you feel that having finally a Korean American or maybe more than one in city government was a real asset to the city government and a boost to the Korean American community's visibility? I mean, was it helpful? How would you assess it?

Kil

No question about it. I felt that I am doing, you know, my service to the city, and in return I want the proper deference and recognition for my contribution. I know that there are other Korean Americans who are doing even better jobs at more important jobs. In fact, there are a couple of deputy mayors. One was Deputy for Homeland Security during the first year of their administration; now he went back to his private practice as a lawyer, but he was with the U.S. Attorney's Office. Also another deputy mayor for finance and economics is Korean American, named Sally Choi. She's a very valued staff of the mayor.

Kil

So Koreans are getting more recognized now for our contribution, whereas before we were mostly engaged in our private business or professions instead of in the civic area as a civil servant and as a mayor's appointee at the high level, senior level, within the city's government. Yes, so again, there are a lot of Koreans out there, including myself, that want to show the mainstream that we are involved, that we are engaged, and we want to be part of this

community and this city and this country, and that we're hoping that we'll be treated as such.

Cline

Right. When you were on the advisory council, or the President's Advisory Commission, that is, on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, how would you describe your function, what you were able to do as part of that commission?

Kil

Well, again, there are a lot of advisory commissions. We don't have the--what is it?--you know, it's not like we could regulate or enact policies or rules and regulations.

Cline

Right. You don't have that kind of authority.

Kil

No, we don't. We could only do some fact gathering, fact findings, and put together a report for the president. Hopefully, the president had reviewed it and take some of our recommendations into consideration when enacting policies, and also have various cabinet-level folks to study it and take it into consideration when enacting policies and rules within their departments.

Cline

I see.

Kil

So we felt that our work, and my contribution, is something that will not see an immediate result, but hopefully over time it will be reflected in future policies and rules and regulations that would affect the API [Asian Pacific Islander] communities. In fact, I will e-mail you our report for your p\_\_\_\_. As if you do not have enough to read. [Laughter]

Cline

Were there any other Koreans on the commission?

Kil

Among fourteen of us there were two Koreans, including myself. The other Korean is a guy named John Kim. He's American born; doesn't speak much Korean. I don't think he really has a command of the English language--I mean, of the Korean language. But both his parents came from Korea, and he's an executive at Yahoo, so he's a pretty smart guy, very successful executive.

Cline

Was this the same commission that Michelle Park Steel was on earlier?

Kil

Under the first administration, yes. Yes, I succeeded her position.

Cline

You covered a lot of things that I was going to ask about already, but you kind of walked into a lot of the questions that I want to ask today, and I'll walk you through this one. Particularly since now you were describing being on an advisory commission with a lot of other Asian people from different nations, different cultures, a couple of things. First off, looking at the Korean American community, particularly in Los Angeles, what if anything would you say would be described as the concerns and urgent issues facing that community that may be different from the issues that face different Asian communities? Or are they pretty much the same?

Cline

Well, yes and no, in that as far as the Korean community is concerned and Koreatown, as you can observe when you look around, Koreatown is developing physically and economically. We have high-rises going up everywhere. More money is being poured into Koreatown and Koreatown's economy. Well, everyone's sort of suffering from this recession, but Koreatown is still relatively doing quite well.

Kil

But I think the biggest concern still today, as it had been even prior to and after the riot, is the safety issue. Koreans still feel that the L.A.P.D. has not been placing adequate resources in policing the Korean community and Koreatown, because we hear reports of Koreans getting mugged, you know, robbed, and their homes burglarized, almost on a daily basis.

Kil

Of course, there's a reason for that. Koreans tend to carry and keep large amounts of cash relative to non-Koreans, and also they tend to wear expensive jewelries on their body when going out, so they're often the targets. Also, for language and cultural reasons, a lot of victims do not make reports, crime reports, to the police divisions. So, you know, that is sort of a--I won't say incentive, but that sort of encourages these criminals to prey upon Koreans more so, because a lot of crimes go unreported, and they are easy prey and targets.

Kil

But hopefully that will change with the new Koreatown police station that's going to open in January on Vermont [Avenue] and Eleventh Street. So safety issue is still the primary concern. Of course, I mean, you know, it was the lack of safety that devastated Koreatown in the riot with the lack of police force present. So safety is a primary concern right now.

Kil

Then, of course, we have other social ills, but that's something that affects and plagues all communities, actually. The use of drugs is going up among youngsters, and other crimes; the vandalism and gang violence, which, of course, is lesser in degrees compared to, I guess, Hispanic or African Americans. But still, you know, our younger children are getting into trouble with the law. As the Korean population increases, you know, there are, I guess, more questionable people that raises concern.

Cline

So in terms of addressing these concerns, and you mentioned safety as a primary concern, and you as being someone who is involved in a lot of civic activities and community work over the last few years, what do you think the best, most effective way to represent the Koreans' interests and get them addressed by the authorities, say, the mainstream city government and sort of the dominant culture, is at this point? What are the best ways, do you think, to get things happening?

Kil

As I have mentioned, I guess, at the city political level again, you have to be more engaged, in terms of fundraising efforts, if there's such. You have to show up, because, I guess, there's no free lunch. You have to give first to ask something in return. That's one way to get to know the politicians, like [unclear] city council members and mayor and so on. As far as L.A.P.D. is concerned, again, I think more Koreans should volunteer their service, helping out. You know, become partner with L.A.P.D. when it comes to enforcing safety.

Kil

Also, I think a lot of times the problems arise between Koreans and police officers is either lack of understanding or ignorance toward that person or that person's culture. Obviously, it takes two to tango, and so, you know, we have to get more engaging. We have to be more participating in the policing efforts, by serving as volunteers or helping out in whatever areas that there's need for.

Kil

Also, recently we have conducted and finished what's called a Community Police Academy in which L.A.P.D. runs this eleven-week course, three hours per week, in which they go over what L.A.P.D. does, you know, what kind of functions, what kind of departments it has, you know, educating. It's like a summarized, mini-L.A.P.D. cadet course for civilians. They had Korean interpreters, and we had some sixty-five Koreans participating and graduating. It took place only a couple of weeks ago.

Kil

That kind of program brings community and L.A.P.D. closer in getting to know each other's functions. So I guess promoting understanding and education, I think, is one of the keys in promoting safety, and also curtailing any possible abuses by the law enforcement folks.

Cline

Yes, I was going to, in fact, ask you if you were aware of many Koreans who actually became L.A.P.D. officers after the riots.

Kil

From what I heard, there's a little fewer than 200 Korean Americans in L.A.P.D. of almost like 9,000, 10,000. It's just a small number compared to the number of Koreans living in L.A. But I think it has not necessarily to do with the riot, but just over time that more Koreans, younger Koreans, are finding about either the benefits that the law enforcement agency provides, and I don't think it has to do with the L.A. riot.

Cline

Also related to this, what is your assessment on the potential for the changing number of Korean American immigrants or Korean Americans who may wind up in public office, here in the city and elsewhere?

Kil

You know, it's interesting. I guess it's harder for Koreans, Asians and Koreans, at a large city, a metropolitan city like L.A., to really run for and get elected into a higher office like city council, because we have so many communities that's competing for the same office. And as you know better, a lot of times minorities are so ethnocentric, I think, compared to like, say, Caucasians. When a candidate from that community--the minority community--runs, I think more often than not, that community tends to, you know, get together and support that member of that community, as opposed to the member from a different ethnic community.

Kil

Like, for instance, if a Latino runs, I think Latinos will often tend to support that, as opposed to a non-Latino. The problem with Koreans is that, even though there are quite a few Koreans, but we are still smaller in number when compared to Latinos and other minority communities, and we are so scattered around instead of concentrated in a small geographical area that we don't have enough votes to get elected, unless we get non-Korean voters. Again, we're living in this city where the minority is the majority in number, and because of the competing interests, it seems like it's really hard for a Korean to get elected into a L.A. city office.

Kil

I think we may have a better chance running for office in a smaller city in the outlying areas. As a result, you know, we have two city council members of Korean descent elected into Irvine City Council, you know, and so on. In fact, some sociologist says Asians have a better chance of getting elected in a white community or heavily white voter community than a community that's more populated by minority members. Yes, so the future I see, it is pretty bleak.

Cline

Interesting. What is your sense of how many Korean Americans actually vote?

Kil

Of course, you know, the information that I get is from Korean newspapers. I don't know how accurate they are, and are they trying to do their own research and calculation to see how many actually turned up or what percentage. But usually Korean vote turnout is really low compared to other ethnicities. I know it's below 40 percent, generally; sometimes as low as 20, 25 percent. So we have fewer voters to start with, and then we have a smaller percentage of those eligible voters that turn out to vote.

Cline

Why do you think that is?

Kil

Again, even though I know that voter turnout has increased over time, and especially after the L.A. riot. But still it's not as much as we hoped to be, because, again, they're just so preoccupied with their business, and their interest is not in politics, for some reason. Even the voting is not really politics, but it's just expressing their rights. But they just distance themselves. In fact, there are more Koreans interested in Korean politics in Korea. In fact, they get so galvanized when they see someone that they like, you know, they get more excited, as opposed to the American politics.

Kil

I think it also has to do partly with language and partly with culture. They just feel that they're still closer to Korean politics because many of them have grown up in Korea and got used to Korean way of life.

Cline

Yes, that's what they know.

Kil

Also, when they come to L.A., again, they're surrounded by Koreans. In fact, if you live in L.A., you don't have to speak a word of English to get around, you know. It's like a small town in Korea has been transplanted over to California. So they still think, a lot of older Koreans and first-generation Koreans, feel comfortable, and they enjoy thinking and practicing Korean way of life. So they've sort of insulated themselves psychologically, for some reason, and they feel uncomfortable associating with non-Koreans.

Cline

Sure. How much of the Korea that they've brought here with them do you feel is also not exactly the Korea that's currently existing? I mean, is it frozen in time, or how much do you think people keep up with the changes in South Korea, once they come over here?

Kil

Okay, first of all, you know, it depends on when they got here. If they got here early, like in the sixties and early seventies, I think their time is more frozen. But folks who came after the eighties, you know, after the Koreatown was more developed, and also with the advancement of technology, like, you know--well, with Internet, definitely, but, I mean, there are more flights now. There are like five flights, five or six flights, servicing L.A. and Korea every day. Fare actually, plane fare, has gotten cheaper now than thirty years ago when there were fewer flights servicing.

Kil

also, we have twenty-four-hour Korean TV, cable TVs. I mean, you get all the channels in Korea in L.A., with satellites and all that. So, you know, it's those people who came here later. In fact, I think they are living as an extension of Korea in L.A., and that's in every aspect, you know. They shop in Korean store. They have Korean neighbors. They work in Koreatown with Korean bosses or Korean employees. So, in fact, some people have told me that they spoke less

English here in L.A. than when they were living in Korea. [Laughter] That's, you know, an irony, but there's some truth to it.

Cline

Yes, yes. Interesting.

Kil

Yes, so they haven't really--so it's those who came late, have remained, and staying abreast with what's happening in Korea, as opposed to those who came earlier.

Cline

I see. What about you? Do you get back to South Korea very often?

Kil

Yes. In my case, because of my business I've been going back to Korea like two or three times a year for the last fifteen years, and I subscribe to four Korean newspapers. In fact, I only read the Sunday edition of the L.A. Times. When I go home, I actually turn on the Korean news, Korean channel. so I feel like I'm drawn into Korean, you know, things more.

Cline

Wow. Interesting.

Kil

In fact, I used to watch a lot of non-Korean TV, you know, shows and soap operas and so on. But now I hardly watch non-Korean shows. I watch like constantly like Korean TV programs.

Cline

Yes, well, it's more accessible now than it was before.

Kil

Accessible, and I find it more interesting and, you know, I relate better for some reason, even though I enjoy American shows. But as I get older, I'm drawn to more Korean programs.

Cline

Interesting. What is your feeling about the changes in South Korea you've seen over the years and what it's like today, compared to when you left?

Kil

Well, you know, when I left Korea and for many years after that, of course, the Koreans did not have individual freedom, because of the people took the power in such a way that did not really recognize the democracy. So that has evolved for the better, where democracy has now firmly established itself, and individual freedom is more recognized now than before.

Kil

But it's not the individual freedom or democracy that is the issue anymore. For the last ten years it was more whether they were pro-U.S. or anti-U.S. was the issue now, for the last ten years, during the last two administrations, where we felt that Korea was becoming more leftist and supports the left idealism, especially with North Korea and China. So for Korea Americans living in the U.S., that was a great concern, because if the tensions developed between South Korea and the U.S. as a result of, you know, the political differences, it could somehow backfire and hurt Korean Americans living in the U.S., if Korea doesn't support or is against U.S. policies. You know, it could hurt Korean Americans' interests and rights in the U.S. So that was of concern for many Koreans, including myself.

Kil

But now, with the new president [Lee Myung-bak] elected to office who is pro-U.S.--in fact, he is currently in Washington, D.C., as we speak now, and he has advocated the closer relations and remedy, and repair any damages that had been done by the previous administration. So that's definitely upbeat for us, because if U.S.-Korea relations improve, at least psychologically, you know, it makes us feel better, at ease, that we'll be more recognized and accepted.

Cline

I notice, for example, on your CV [curriculum vitae] that you're a member of the Advisory Council on the Democratic and Peaceful Unification of Korea, L.A. chapter.

Kil

Right.

Cline

Certainly this is a huge, ongoing issue; it's very complex. There's certainly a lot of news relating to North Korea in the last couple of years, things they've been doing to call attention to themselves. I'm not asking for any crystal-ball prognostications here, but what are your feelings about where things are going, you know, vis-à-vis the reunification of North and South Korea, particularly since you have North Korean ancestors?

Kil

Exactly, yes, and I believe I do have my uncle and aunt still living in North Korea, whom I have not heard or seen. But again, you know, I'm a strong anti-Communist and strong believer of democracy and individual freedom, and also I wholeheartedly support President Bush' policy. I feel that the two Koreas could have unified sooner had it not been for this--quote--"sunshine policy" advocated by the two previous administrations, where they have provided just huge amounts of economic aid to North Korea, which ended up just helping North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il to sustain his power at the expense of his people, North Koreans, who have suffered tremendously.

Kil

But the thing is, from what little I know, you know, based on what I hear and read about North Korea and so on, I think North Korea--you know, its time has come; I don't think it can sustain much longer, because of the dire economic conditions, where if it weren't for the aid of China and South Korea, you know, its government would have collapsed a long time ago. With this new president, who will hopefully be more realistic and have a tougher stance against North Korea and not bowing to its threats and unreasonable demands, I think that the unification will come sooner now. Even though it could have come sooner, had it not been for previous administration's [unclear] policy, because, you know, people are dying by the thousands, from what I hear from these missionaries and also international aid workers who came back from North Korea.

Kil

So North Korea is sustaining its power, you know, just basically because of the military support. But when military itself, when the soldiers themselves are going hungry, I think, you know, they'll have [unclear] years. So hopefully the government will be either overthrown or the dictator will be ousted, and a more reasonable Communist leader will take place, and engage in more dialogues and ease the international relations, especially with the U.S., you know, after he gets rid of, of course, the nuclear arsenals so they could get more economic aid and also open up trade.

Cline

Right. Yes.

Kil

And, of course, South Korean president hopefully will play along and go along with U.S.' policy, so that two countries exerting pressure, I think, will work better.

Cline

Right. And, of course, we have our own presidential election coming up.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

There's another x factor in this equation.

Kil

Absolutely.

Cline

Yes. Also related to this, you know, the economic growth of South Korea and the impact that's had on the growth of Koreatown here and the impact on the Korean American Community. What are your feelings right now about where South Korea stands, not economically, but particularly in relation to the

Korean American community here and the money that's being invested in the community here?

Kil

You know, of course, it's always good to have capital, infusion of capital, in any community, any society, including Koreatown. But also it has its side effects. With more money come people who would do things that would--well, for instance, like, you know, they would drive expensive cars. They would buy luxurious items, like showing off, and that would tend to have this "have not" sort of effect on Koreans who have lived for years, who have made money through hard work and saved their money to secure their lifestyle.

Kil

But these Koreans with this huge [unclear] money, you know, throwing money all over, you know, driving luxurious cars and buying expensive items, that sort of depresses other Koreans; you know, that they came here, worked their butt off, so to speak, and they could barely afford an average car and a house. And yet these Koreans, you know, who made a lot of money from Korea, spending and showing off, you know. So that's creating some tensions.

Kil

Especially the Korean foreign students studying here, you know, from [unclear] to the family, going to colleges nearby in L.A. There are some finer schools, like UCLA, USC [University of Southern California], and other schools. They tend to drive like nice sports cars, you know. A lot of kids, Koreans, because they grew up here, you know, who are not accustomed to such lifestyle, you know, become envious of them, and it causes tensions. I don't think they get along that well, as a result, not only because of the cultural and language differences, but also the lifestyle is so different that they act like they're real elite, upper-class, socially, economically, and sort of look down upon American-born Korean students. So there is, because of the economic disparity, again, tensions.

Kil

But what concerns me is this visa waiver program that will go into effect, either at the end of this year or early next year, where Korean nationals now

will be able to enter the U.S. without visa for ninety days. As you know, L.A. is the gateway, you know, to Korea, and vice versa, gateway to the U.S. from Korea. From what I read, annually there are about 900,000 visitors to the U.S., you know, with the visa requirement. But once this visa requirement is waived, they anticipate double or triple the number of Korean visitors visiting the U.S., and most of them will go through, if not visit, L.A. So it will have an economic booster, as well as social problems, you know, as more people gather here. There will be problems, you know, socially.

Cline

Interesting.

Kil

Also, Korea has developed so much, so rapidly, and also at a social cost. What I mean by that is, you know, you've read it before, but whenever there is a prostitution ring bust, more often than not, Korean women are involved. So we feel that that will increase, prostitutions from Korea. Young women without visa will enter and will try to carry on their profession in L.A. So that's something that concerns many Korean leaders, and also possibly, you know, Korean gangs from Korea would come and also take advantage of the Korean community as well.

Kil

So, in fact, we feel it's very opportune to have this new Koreatown police station that's going to open up, so they can cope and deal hopefully better with this influx of a large number of Koreans next year.

Cline

Wow. Interesting. What are some other characteristics that more recent Korean immigrants to L.A. have in common, or in contrast to, say, your generation or previous generations of immigrants, and are their concerns really--have they stayed the same, or are they different?

Kil

Well, even though there is a steady flow of immigrants from Korea coming here, coming to the U.S. and L.A. on immigrant visas, there has been a large increase of Koreans just entering the U.S. and settling in L.A. on temporary

visa or on a visitor's visa or business visa, or they call it investor's visa, where they can stay in this country as long as they operate their business. So in other words, in the past we had more Koreans coming here as immigrants after getting their green cards through, you know, U.S. consulates in Korea. But now we have more Koreans coming here on a temporary visa and other form of visas. It's not quite green card, where it doesn't guarantee a indefinite stay in the U.S.

Kil

So more Koreans are now becoming "out of status," because once their visa runs out, instead of returning to Korea, they'll just remain in this country as--quote--"illegal alien"--unquote. So that's causing a problem right now. In the past we did not have that many Koreans who were out of status, because, again, many that came, came as a immigrant through immigration procedure. All came as visitors, but still a limited number. But now that it's easier for Koreans to obtain a visitor's visa, because Korea economically has prospered, and so that there will be less defaulting visitors in violating their visa status. So as a result, more Koreans were able to get visas, unlike in the past, so more Koreans would come. And mostly because of economic reasons, they would stay in this country instead of returning before their visa expires.

Kil

So we have a substantial increase in numbers of out-of-status Koreans in L.A. In fact, they say as many as 20 percent of Koreans in L.A. are out of status, and that's causing, again, social problems. Many out-of-status Koreans, like Latinos, because they are afraid of getting deported, even though they are engaged in employments, they can't get all the benefits that are available to them, in terms of like minimum wage and overtime and so on. So quite a few are abused.

Kil

Also, there are a lot of kids that came along with their family, you know, like in school, public schools. L.A. [Los Angeles] Unified School [District], they don't ask for the status, visa status. But when they're about to enter college, they have to show the status, and so there are many Korean kids right now, like I think to thousands, that can't go to college because of their status, after

graduating from high school. So that's causing a lot of tensions amongst families here who are out of status. I have consulted, you know, a few, and unless U.S. Congress passes a new law that allows some sort of permanent residency or some sort of long-term stay for those college-bound kids, you know, they'd be excluded from school. Of course, they will get some kind of employment, but it will be in a very menial, unmeaningful employment. And that could cause, again, social problems. So that's of concern.

Cline

Right. How, if at all, have the reasons for immigrating to the U.S. changed for Koreans?

Kil

You know, funny. When we immigrated, it was mostly for economic reasons, that Korea wasn't, you know, well-to-do back then. Also, we felt that American education is the way to go to be successful. But that hasn't changed. Even though Korea has prospered economically, but maybe at the same time the Korean population has increased incommensurate to the economic prosperity. So there are still have-nots, you know, people who are not well-to-do, and still thinking the American dream.

Kil

So we still have, again, a lot of Koreans who want to immigrate, but they have no legal means to do so. But again, they could still get the visitor's visa, so they'll come and then become unlawful residents. So as far as their motive or their intention is concerned, it hasn't changed; for economic reasons.

Cline

I see.

Kil

And, of course, at the same time there are people who have brought a lot of money and, you know, are buying up properties and businesses, too. But I think we have more not-so-rich, you know, very average, if at all, people, who are either laid off, or who have failed--you know, whose businesses have failed--wanting to start a new life in the U.S. At the same time, they wanted to have their kids to get an American education. But they don't have the

economic means or resources. So they'll come with what little money or savings they have, without securing a permanent residency, so that they will soon become out of status, and it's causing tension within the family. The kids will complain--I mean, find out later that they can't go to college, so many are despaired, you know, and causing problems and so on.

Cline

Yes, resort to other things.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

Wow. You mentioned that L.A. is the gateway for the Korean community to come to the U.S., and of course, Koreatown is oftentimes the gateway for the Koreans, the ones that are in L.A. Yet most of the population living in the Koreatown area is still largely not Korean, very large numbers of Spanish-speaking people living in the community, even with all this sort of amazing continuing development, fueled very much by Korean enterprise. Where do you see Koreatown headed, not only in terms of economic growth and development, but in terms of the population that lives in the area, and the relationship between those who own businesses in the area and those who live in the area?

Kil

You know, in the past even though Koreans would own and run and and work in Koreatown, they would tend to live in the outskirts and suburbs, where, you know, the quality of living is better, education is better. A lot of Koreans still tend to follow that path, but as the Korean community is growing older and immigration history is getting longer, many Koreans families whose kids have left the nest, so to speak, and the parents are in their fifties or close to retirement age, are actually moving back to Koreatown, because they still linger and miss the Korean way of life, that is, Korean food, Korean restaurants, you know, socializing with Koreans.

Kil

Also there are a lot of Korean churches in L.A., even though there are a lot of churches all over. Also, they like to go to various meetings. Especially Koreans are really big in the school meetings, alumnae meetings, school like reunions, whether it's college or high school, middle school, even elementary school. That's a big thing, where they bring old friends together, and they can reminisce and so on. And all the weddings, all the birthdays, you know, take place in and around Koreatown restaurants and hotels. So as they get older, they miss those meetings and get-togethers, and those meetings and events often taking place in Koreatown.

Kil

So they find it convenient living in Koreatown. So that's why there are all these condominiums, new condominiums. There are like a thousand condo units are being developed or under construction, if not opened up. So not only that, from Koreans living in suburbs being drawn back to Koreatown, but folks living in out of state, like Midwest and East Coast, they find L.A. If those Koreans can't go back to Korea, they'd rather live in L.A., because it's closest to Korea. Yes, and because of the mild climate, among other reasons.

Kil

So even it draws Koreans from out of state to L.A. So I think over time, a lot of people are projecting that actually Koreans living in Koreatown is going to grow as they would buy up all the properties and both develop into high-rises and condominiums, you know, fetching like hundreds of thousand dollars in price. I think they think that, and with the new police station, because, again, safety is another issue, and many Koreans were apprehensive in moving back to Koreatown for safety and education. But the education issue is now taken care of, since their kids are all grown up. then once the Koreatown station is built and opened up--it's pretty much finished in construction--it will keep the crime down, crime rates down. So more senior citizen and older Koreans would feel safer moving back to Koreatown.

Cline

Yes, yes. What about the boundaries of Koreatown, just in terms of its growth? Do you think they'll continue to expand?

Kil

You know, I think it's going to be really tough, because of the Latino population, that large number of Latinos living in Koreatown, especially from downtown to like the eastern part of Koreatown. So if it's going to grow, I think it's going to have to grow west, and it has to grow north, instead of south and east. So that's my thinking, and that's what, you know, some of the developers are projecting as well.

Cline

I see. Okay. And how is, at this point, do you think, the relationship between the Koreans and the Latino population that is in the area?

Kil

You know, as you know, I mean, many African Americans have left the adjoining areas to the Koreatown, and they are being replaced by Latinos. Also, more Korean businesses now employ Latino employees than any other ethnic numbers. I know that we have our own share of problems in terms of employer-employee relations, labor relations, and also the crimes being perpetrated against Koreans by Latinos and other ethnic members.

Kil

But Korean community leaders are always conscientious about the L.A. riot. It was this lack of dialogue and this misunderstanding that sort of triggered, partly, to this riot, and they know that unless we improve our relations, the same things can happen again with the Latino community. So Koreans are constantly in the papers and other--you know, through public messages and community education, always emphasizing the importance of race relations, improving the community relations between Koreans and Latinos.

Kil

So there is more outreach now. There is more scholarships that are provided for Latino students. Also, at the business level the business associations are more engaged in dialogues and building relations between Latino counterparts to promote understanding and friendship, to avoid any unpleasant confrontations.

Cline

You mentioned a little while ago the number of churches in the area, and I wanted to ask you, with the church being so often the social and cultural center of the Korean American community, where do you see things headed, in terms of the strength of the church as the center of the Korean community, as the generations progress?

Kil

You know, for the older and the first generations, again, church has been sort of a magnet for all social and spiritual needs. But for various reasons, churches have insulated themselves when it came to political needs. I guess they were only interested in entering heaven and not making this world where we live presently something closer to heaven.

Cline

Interesting.

Kil

Unlike African American communities, where church has been the leader, and that has been the institution that really advocated and fought for the civil rights, and the Civil Rights Movement was actually started by churches and church leaders. But Korean churches have sort of insulated themselves and tried not to get involved with the politics.

Kil

But I think that's gradually changing. Again, after the L.A. riot, they realized that the church had to play a role in a dialogue and community relations, since they have such a huge followers and make a huge impact on their followers and the members of the church congregation; that they are now more opening up and providing scholarships to outside community children. Also inviting politicians to come and speak to their congregation, and also making their church facilities for the use of the community and to the politicians for whatever good causes.

Kil

So church is opening up, and also, again, younger generations who are going to church are again advocating that need, and also working as a liaison and conduit between church representatives and the community at large. So, I

mean, it's changing slowly; I mean, not as rapidly as I would want it to, but slowly and surely, yes.

Kil

In fact, this church that I go to, Young Nak Presbyterian Church, located north of Chinatown on Broadway and Pasadena Avenue, it has like a 5,000-member congregation. They have budgeted \$300,000 every year to give it out to community foundations and organizations, not necessarily Korean community nonprofit organizations, but also mainstream, mostly Latino and African American communities, giving out between a thousand and ten thousand dollars per organization, again, you know, as an outreach effort and also to improve community relations. So I think that's definitely an improvement for the better.

Cline

How would you assess its continued vitality as serving the spiritual needs of the Korean American communities as they get younger and more Americanized?

Kil

Well, I don't know if I'm the authority to talk about that or make comments, but one thing I've noticed is that, many churches, the congregation is getting older, you know, in terms of age. In fact, younger children, including my kids, I don't know why, but unlike maybe Chinese, Koreans tend to less emphasize the need to educate their children in the Korean language. They feel that you have to master the English language first to be successful in this country.

Cline

Right. Well, that's pretty typical.

Kil

The Korean language comes, you know, secondary. By the time they get old, it may be a little late for them to pick up the Korean language. So that's the case with many younger kids, second generation, including my kids. We're so immersed into raising them in American ways, getting an American education, you know, to compete successfully with others, that they have to have solid foundation in the English language and other curriculums. So we sort of

neglected the Korean language education, which many parents are regretting now, and so I'm forcing my kids to go to Saturday schools all of a sudden, against their will.

Kil

But because of that, and many Korean churches' primary language is Korean, so kids can't understand. So they're trying to recruit bilingual, if not English-speaking, pastors, and there aren't that many qualified ones, because not too many younger kids are going to seminary, as opposed to older generations. So many Korean kids either are not going to church, or if they do, they're going to multi-ethnic church; yes, not necessarily Korean church.

Cline

Interesting.

Kil

So the English congregation is much smaller compared to the Korean congregation, even at my church. Maybe like they're only 10 percent the size of the, yes, the Korean congregation.

Cline

Interesting. Yes, the language issue is an ongoing one for all the different communities, not just the Korean. You know, whether or not to force the language on kids at any age. Sometimes there's a resentment there, and they don't know what the point is till it's pretty late in the game. You kind of walked right into one of my questions, which is relating to the issues of being Korean and American--Korean American, if you will--how have you raised your own children with regard to these two cultures, which you have one foot in each of? You mentioned, yourself, after the riots you went through a bit of a crisis, not feeling particularly at home in either--

Kil

Country, yes.

Cline

--where you lived, yes. You weren't comfortable here; you weren't comfortable there. You kind of resolved it because you knew you had to raise

your family here. This is where you were. But how have you elected to raise your children with regard to their national and racial identity here?

Kil

Again, you know, my children's home is this country, and this is the only home that they know. So I had to raise them the best I can to make sure that they're adjusted and so that they could succeed. So I wanted to, first of all, provide them with the best possible education, so I chose this particular neighborhood, called La Cañada for many years. Then I had them enrolled at private schools, again, to better prepare them for college, which would eventually prepare them for, you know, their careers. So that's what I chose to do.

Kil

But as far as their identity is concerned, I wanted them to be, again, a role model citizen, first, and then Korean American, the second. So not only have I emphasized the importance of their education, but also the importance of community service. So I had my kids to get involved with Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, so all my kids, my both daughters, got gold awards, so that I wanted them to learn civic responsibility and the importance of community service and volunteerism.

Kil

Also at the same time I wanted to instill in them the Korean values. So, you know, I did take them to Korea once; not maybe as often as I should have, because all my relatives are no longer in Korea, so I have no one to send them to. But I made them to go to Korean church so they can mingle and associate with children at their level, you know, cultural and language levels. I did send them to Saturday schools, too, for a number of years, until they said they don't want to go. But they did go through the grade school level, so they do read Korean and understand some, even though they don't speak fluently. My other daughter, I had her spend about two months in Korea last summer after eleventh grade.

Kil

Then thirdly, I had them take tae kwan do class for like seven or eight years, so they all got black belts. The reason is, not only it does teach them physical and mental discipline, but also it helps them to learn about Korean values. You know, you have to bow to the masters and also to Korean flags. Also, it teaches civility and manners, to respect elders and to be kind to your peers. Also, they made you speak certain Korean words and phrases when practicing. It also imparts Korean values about the importance of Korean culture and history and so on.

Kil

So that's what I did to sort of balance it, but then, because they were going to private school, which was very demanding academically, so, you know, they couldn't spend as much time as they could have. But I did what I can, given my limited resources. Yes.

Cline

And you have a couple of daughters that are getting to be marriable age pretty soon.

Kil

Yes. Well, they're twenty and eighteen.

Cline

Yes. Yes, getting there. Do you think about, now that they're Americans and living in a multicultural, multi-ethnic city, what direction that might go and what your feelings about that might be?

Kil

Well, I did talk about it a couple of times. First of all, I'm sure that they'll marry someone that they love, anyway, regardless, so I'll tell them, you know, that that's what they should do. But preferably I'd rather that they marry Korean, because of our cultural values and so on, and customs. But if not, preferably Asians. [Laughter] You know, but that was my recommendation, because I know that it's no longer true, but when I was growing up, you know, those kids from mixed races, at least in Korean culture, were looked down upon and harassed. So that's still ingrained in my mind.

Kil

But I don't think that's the case anymore in this country, but nevertheless, you know.

Cline

Yes, that's what you know.

Kil

Yes.

Cline

So relating to this, back to this issue, here it is years later after your sort of identity crisis during and after the '92 riots. You described how you'd like to have your children essentially, ideally, think of themselves. How do you think of yourself by way of defining yourself as a Korean American? Korean American, American, human, how do you think of yourself? How do you relate to your own identity?

Kil

Well, again, after the riot I was really bitter about my surroundings, about the systems in this country and the people, you know, in power. But then of course I grew out of that. I realized that this is a wonderful country still, where anyone, including people of color, can still succeed, based on your hard work and your ability. I mean, look at the presidential race. We have not only a female presidential candidate [Hillary Rodham Clinton], but African American candidate [Barack H. Obama]; that the sky is the limit.

Kil

Also, by my engaging in community service and somewhat limited public service, I got to meet wonderful people of such a high value and esteem, and who are so--you know, people of just great value. I've realized that these are the people that are the foundation and the cornerstone of this country, and I shouldn't just think about the thugs and criminals and those responsible politicians, but just the wonderful people who really care for others and really value the democracy and individual freedom. And I felt that I was so privileged to be living in such a wonderful country. Even though I'm kind of getting old,

you know, I feel that my kids definitely have better shots to become someone that could really earn respect and also have a wonderful life and be part of the mainstream, and at the same time be a proud Korean American.

Kil

I feel that I have inherited sort of some fine values from my own culture, where we emphasize the value of the strong family and respect for elders and for the law, and also hard work and a quality education. At the same time, you know, you get to appreciate this value of democracy and individual freedom, which did not have a high place in Confucian society, where I came from.

Kil

So I feel that I have the best of both worlds, and I feel that my kids, if I could instill some of that value in my kids, so that, in turn, they could contribute that to this country. I think it will be a win-win situation for everyone. So I feel that I'm very honored and privileged to have a certain appreciation for both cultures.

Cline

Relating to what you just said about contributing to this country, certainly contributing to this city, Los Angeles, with its huge Korean population, how would you describe the Korean American contribution to this city historically and in terms of where you see it headed as the population grows, as Koreatown develops, as the generations change and evolve?

Kil

To be candid with you, I don't think Koreans have contributed that much in the past, again because of fewer in number, and also because of short immigration history, and also because of the cultural and language barrier; that we could only do so much in the beginning. But I think that we are beginning to make contributions now that we have more able bodies who have overcome language and cultural barriers now, and who are also economically and financially successful, and engaged in more civic and public services.

Kil

Also, I think the biggest contribution is turning the Koreatown around from what was once a slum to one of the most developed and highest land price-- now we're fetching the highest land price in the entire city of L.A. Now the raw land is going for \$400 per square foot and higher. We're catching up with Beverly Hills. So we have turned around the Koreatown to such a vibrant community, where our tax revenues that are collected out of--especially the property tax has increased, they say, 500 percent.

Cline

Wow.

Kil

That's all going to the city coffer and to our education fund for public schools. So in aggregate, I think we are making quite a bit of contributions because of our economic success. Individually, I think we are beginning to make an impact slowly, again because of our short immigration history and because of the language and cultural barrier. But now with the advent of the younger generation, who are educated here, are now more oriented toward public service and community service. So I think we will be making more contribution in the future than we have in the past.

Cline

What, if anything, takes you into Koreatown these days? Do you go there much, and if so, what do you go to Koreatown for now?

Kil

Well, first of all, I work in Koreatown.

Cline

Yes, but I mean besides work.

Kil

Again, as you noticed from my CV [curriculum vitae], many of my community services involve Koreatown organizations, so all our meetings take place at Korean establishments, Korean restaurants or hotels. Also, again, my root is based in Koreatown, and I'm always concerned about the Koreatown issues,

since it affects so many Koreans. Also, my brother [Gilbert Kil]'s business [Dae Ruk Department Store] is still in Koreatown, which I frequent to this day.

Cline

Yes, right near here.

Kil

Yes, only a mile from here. In fact, I have lunch there quite often. My church is not in Koreatown, but many Koreans come to Korean churches actually that are physically located in Koreatown as well. Also, Korean grocery shopping; there are like six supermarkets here that we come to, if not on a weekly basis, at least once or twice a month. And then restaurants. And, of course, like other Koreans, you know, other social events that take place in Koreatown.

Cline

What do you think the chances are of some of those functions and that concentrated sort of cultural activity being kind of outsourced to some of these newer communities where Koreans are more populated, places like Irvine and Fullerton?

Kil

Now because of the increasing Korean population, you know, Koreans have expanded to other parts of L.A. County or Southern California. They are gravitating towards areas that have quality educations, like Irvine, Fullerton. In the past it was Torrance and the Valley, San Fernando Valley. But now it's gravitating toward Orange County areas. So now we have pockets of areas that are highly concentrated in Korean businesses and population.

Kil

But the thing is, still compared to L.A. Koreatown, those outlying Koreatowns are much smaller in size and scale, and so they tend to come to us. All the major meetings and big events are taking place in Koreatown, and also because the Korean Consul General is physically located in Koreatown, as well as the Korean Education Center, at which we are having the interview. The Korean Cultural Center is in L.A. And because Koreans are so tied to their home country, homeland, that the physical location of the Korean Consulate is, again, another magnet to draw Koreans to L.A. Koreatown.

Kil

So I rarely go down there unless there's some political event, supporting the particular candidate out of that area that requires support from Koreans all over. Then I would go down there. But rarely do I go down there. It's more often that they come up here.

Cline

So you think Koreatown will only continue to flourish as the hub of the Korean community then?

Kil

Absolutely.

Cline

You mentioned that as you get older, you're becoming, in a sense, more Korean. You're watching more Korean programs, reading more Korean newspapers. Why do you think that is?

Kil

I guess as people get older, they become more melancholy and reminisce in the past. I don't know. [Laughs] Maybe I'm aged before my time.

Kil

Also, Korea has culturally progressed so much, in terms of pop culture, in terms of--of course, no one can compete with Hollywood in terms of movies, but still it has advanced a lot in terms of entertainment. In fact, Korean entertainment is now recognized in Asia as the pioneer and the forerunner. In fact, Korean entertainers have a lot of fans outside of Korea now, like Japan, China, and other South Asian countries. It's really fun and appealing. In fact, it's more appealing to me than western pop music. So even my kids, who are American born, raised in American culture, are also enjoying Korean pop culture just as much now. In fact, they know more Korean artists--young artists, of course--than I do. Amazing. I don't know how they find out or where they get their information. Maybe mostly, actually, online, Internet.

Kil

But it's such a commonplace now, even for younger kids. In fact, I heard of quite a few friends whose kids want to be Korean pop artists. They are American born, and they learn Korean songs and Korean dance moves. In fact, they're going back to Korea to try out, you know. So it's not just people who are getting older, like myself, but even younger kids are really drawn to Korean pop culture, because it has progressed so much. In some ways, it's more advanced than that of American counterparts.

Cline

Interesting.

Kil

When it comes to appealing, yes.

Cline

Right. And yet I know there's a Korean hip-hop culture right here in L.A.

Kil

Yes, and Korean soap opera is really entertaining. It's mesmerizing. [Cline laughs.] It's like drugs. You get glued onto the TV, to that show. I mean, on a side note, you know, there are a lot of Korean video stores that are actually renting the videotaped Korean soap operas; not movies, but soap operas that runs into series. Some runs into years. Some, you know, like in a few months, into a few months. But they are doing such a thriving business, because when Koreans get hooked onto a single show, they'll have to see it to the end. So they'll spend hundreds of dollars to borrow like two months' worth of videotapes. Yes.

Cline

Wow. So now you mentioned in an earlier session how the kids you went to high school with, for example, when they would learn that you were Korean, that you didn't really have a sense that they even knew what that was or where Korea was or what that meant. What do you think people think of now here in L.A. when they encounter someone from Korea? What do you think that means?

Kil

I think they look at it differently now, you know, in terms of, again, the rise of Korea as a nation in the international arena. Of course, everyone has heard of North Korea, so they get to hear about South Korea as a result. [Laughs] But also economically and also because of a lot of consumer products now that are doing quite well in the U.S. markets, electronics and, to some extent, automobiles. So I think Korea is now well recognized. Maybe not as much as Japan or China, but certainly, you know, compared to other Asian countries, they've heard a lot about Korea, especially after the '88 Olympics, I guess. That was another booster that elevated its status.

Cline

Right. So is there anything you want to add to the record here before we bring this to a conclusion?

Kil

If I remember, can I call you later? [Laughs] No, well, I think you've covered a lot. But again, I think--I may have touched upon this once before, and I think you did ask, but definitely there's a shift in the now power in the Korean community, from older generation to younger, you know, the so-called 1.5 generation, 2.0 generations, where we have become more recognized and appreciated because of our ability and our service to the community and our ability to work as a conduit and liaison, and also more Koreans, younger Koreans, are now working as aides to various politicians in various different offices, from local level all the way to the federal level. So whenever there's a need, the older guards will tap on their resources to get their message out or get whatever information.

Kil

So I think that eventually the power is shifting to the younger generations, so now hopefully we'll have our place more securely, and take over--well, I won't say take over, but will gradually become the new face of the community.

Cline

Right. Then you have to hope that your successors maybe at least learn the language so they can continue in the same way.

Kil

I hope so. Yes, that's the big task.

Cline

Well, I wanted to say thank you so much for these four sessions, which I thoroughly enjoyed, myself.

Kil

Oh, well, I'm glad you felt that way.

Cline

On behalf of UCLA and the Center for Oral History Research, thank you for your time and your contribution.

Kil

I hope it will be of some help to whoever may listen to it one day.

Cline

Yes. Well, I think so.

Kil

Thank you.

Cline

Thank you very much.

Kil

Thank you. [End of interview]

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