

A TEI Project

Interview of Angela Oh

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session One (December 3, 2009)

CLINE

Today is December 3, 2009. This is Alex Cline interviewing Angela Oh at the Western Justice Center Foundation in Pasadena, California. This is our first session. Good morning.

OH

Good morning.

CLINE

Thanks for sitting down and talking. I know you're very busy. We always start at the beginning on these interviews, so, predictably, I'm going to ask you where and when were you born.

OH

I was born in Los Angeles, California, on Crenshaw Boulevard at Lincoln Hospital on September 8, 1955.

CLINE

Okay, and let's start talking about your parents, starting with your father. What was his name and what do you know about his family background? You can tell us what he did and that sort of thing.

OH

My father came to Los Angeles as a foreign exchange student in the early 1950s. He was studying at Pepperdine University. He was wanting to go to medical school. He had served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War as a very young man. He and his younger brother Peter [Oh] joined together, and Peter was killed. His father was a minister who had studied here in the United States. He was a Methodist minister and had gotten his degree at Cornell

[University] and was commuting sort of back and forth. The family on the Oh side is from the north, Pyongyang, and my great-grandfather was a landowner and had a big agricultural, you know, land. My grandmother was also from the north, and she was in Korea with my father's sister and youngest brother until my grandfather settled here. But that side of the family came at all different times, with my grandfather first and setting up a church here in the Los Angeles area, and then my grandmother following with the littler kids, and then my father coming a little bit later as an exchange student. My father's name was Samuel [Oh]. On my mother's side, her English name is Elizabeth [Lee Oh]. Her Korean name is Young Sook. My father's Korean name was Sam Yul, so it translated to Samuel. My mother was from Seoul. She was the youngest of three daughters. The eldest died when she was very young. My mother was eighteen years younger than her next older sibling. My grandfather on my mother's side was also a minister, a Methodist minister, and came to California on his own. My grandmother was married to my grandfather at the age of sixteen. She was the second daughter or third daughter of my great-grandparents, who were wealthy people, and they ended up arranging for her to be married to her teacher. That was my grandfather. Because he was studying the ministry, they thought that that would be a good life for her. He came to the U.S. ahead of her. I have a memory of living with my grandmother until I was the age of five, and my grandfather on my mother's side, which was the Lee side, never lived with my grandmother. He actually had an apartment around the corner from where my grandmother lived. My grandmother had an apartment near the USC [University of Southern California] campus at the time. My mother came over also as an exchange student. She came before my grandmother. In other words, she came here to study, met my father. They got married, and then when my mom became pregnant with me, my grandmother then immigrated, and then my aunt came afterwards with some cousins, who were younger at the time. So my parents both came as exchange students, thinking that they would go back to Korea, but at the time, my father had a professor who was offering to sponsor him to become a lawful permanent resident, and so my parents talked it over and decided they would do that, stay, and he would try to go to medical school here. But then I was born, and I'm the first of four kids, and my father never actually got to do the medical school thing. He had to start working. So my father worked for, I think, thirty-eight years for the County of Los Angeles as a med[ical] tech[nician], and my mother worked for about twenty-five years as a schoolteacher in the San Fernando Valley with the LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District]. She taught third grade.

CLINE

Oh. And what was your mother coming to study as an exchange student?

OH

Home economics.

CLINE

Really. And where was she studying?

OH

Also at Pepperdine.

CLINE

So that's where they met then.

OH

Yes.

CLINE

There can't have been too many Korean students there at that time.

OH

A handful, a very small--and it's funny to listen to my parents. They said they decided to get married because all their friends were marrying, so it's kind of funny. I guess that phenomenon actually holds true still to this day. You know, your friends start getting married, and you start looking around, thinking, "Oh, I'd better get married."

CLINE

You said your grandfather started a church here.

OH

Yes, it's the Los Angeles Korean United Methodist Church. It still operates in Los Angeles near the Los Angeles International Airport off of La Tijera [Boulevard] and Oso [Avenue]. It's a huge church.

CLINE

Yes, it's one of the biggies.

OH

And my parents still go to that church.

CLINE

Wow. And do you have any idea why Los Angeles was chosen as the place for your grandfather to settle?

OH

I don't know why he was sent to Los Angeles, but I do have this memory, as a very, very young child, of a lot of exchange students coming in and out of the house. So I think what happens, as a matter of just sort of migration patterns and social phenomenon, is you know somebody, who then like goes, and then they tell their family, and they go, and then they tell their family. You know, it's like that.

CLINE

Right, but way before there would have been any inkling that this would wind up being such a huge Korean community.

OH

Right.

CLINE

So you mentioned you had memories in your early life in this apartment with your grandparents. Where did you ultimately wind up growing up in the area?

OH

Well, my parents lived, you know, in what's known as South L.A. now, South Central L.A. My grandmother's house that she rented was on Exposition [Boulevard], and I remember that we moved to an apartment on Van Buren [Avenue] off of like Pico [Boulevard] or something like that. You know, it was in L.A. And then let's see. When I was in first or second grade, we moved to the San Fernando Valley, and I grew up in San Fernando. I went to San Fernando Elementary [School]. Then at some point my dad, who was working at Olive View Hospital in the San Fernando Valley, we ended up moving to Granada Hills, and I went to school at Rinaldo [Street School] and Paul Revere Junior High [School] and then Granada [Hills] High [School].

CLINE

Right, okay. What do you remember about your neighborhood before you moved to the San Fernando Valley?

OH

There were a lot of exchange students where my parents lived, the apartment on Van Burden. I remember there being an Indian family, a family that was half--the husband was Indian, the wife was Japanese American, I think. I remember another Japanese American family with three kids that we used to play a lot. There were a lot of Korean church people that were in the area. It was mostly an African American community that I grew up in, but there were a few students and then immigrant families in the area. And then, like I said, when I was in first or second grade, my dad got his job out in the Valley, and we moved to San Fernando, and it was mostly Mexican. Then we moved to Granada Hills when I was in like junior high or something like that. I don't remember. My memory's so bad.

CLINE

Well, growing up in San Fernando, yet another different cultural experience, do you remember at that point having any sense of or feelings about being ethnically and culturally different from most of the people around you, or what that meant?

OH

Well, I have a vivid memory of not speaking any English when I started school, and feeling kind of confused about why I was being dropped off in this place. There was a very nice teacher, Mrs. Rose. She's a tall--well, in my memory--tall African American teacher, who had sort of a space between her two front

teeth, and I remember feeling very nurtured by her, that, basically, she made sure that I was comfortable, right, in school, like she always made--I have this memory of her hand on my shoulder, you know, guiding me, because I think probably I didn't understand the directions, right? So she had to maneuver me or something. But she was always very nice, very gentle, soft-spoken, and that's what I remember about sort of starting school. Then in school I do remember like having the experience of a lot of kids always wanting to sit next to me at lunchtime, because I had a bent box that looked like a little book, and my mom used to pack rice and some side dishes, and kids wanted to see what was in the box, you know, because I think they had either cafeteria trays or bags. So, you know, it wasn't like a memory of being ostracized because I had food or packaging that was different. It was more like there was a curiosity about it, right? And so kids wanted to sort of see what I had and know what I was eating and taste it and things like that. so those are the memories I have. But I do read in the Asian American literature from AAA [Asian American Studies] programs that there are many kids who, I think later, when there were more of us, felt ostracized and they couldn't bring their favorite food to school because they were being taunted about it. I have nothing like that in my background.

CLINE

Interesting. When do your siblings enter the picture? What are the ages here?

OH

I have a younger sister who is about three and a half years younger Crystal, another one that's five years younger Karen, and a brother David who's thirteen years younger. So there are four of us altogether. And my parents say that they started having more kids because they felt sorry for me, because I used to stand at the window and watch our neighbors, who had three kids in each of their families, in the courtyard apartment that we lived, and it was like they were always having fun because there were several kids playing together. And I was just like watching from inside, so they felt sorry for me and decided they'd better have another kid so I could have someone to play with.

CLINE

Wow, interesting. You had quite a few people to play with then.

OH

Yes, right.

CLINE

So it sounds like that there was really no English being spoken at your home.

OH

No.

CLINE

How much did that change, if at all, as the years rolled by?

OH

I think when I started school, it changed, because my parents were concerned that I didn't speak any English, and they were afraid that it was going to be harmful academically, so they tried to speak more English at home. They spoke Japanese and Korean. You know, they grew up during the occupation, so their first formally trained language is actually Japanese, because they were of that era, right?

CLINE

Right. Right.

OH

And they shifted when I started going to school, because they wanted me to be able to be proficient in the language of, you know, America.

CLINE

Right. How much of a difference in that regard was there, perhaps, between you and your younger siblings?

OH

Well, you know, my younger sibling Crystal Lyon is three and a half years younger, so what happened was, she maybe as a baby remembers some Korean, but not much. Like none of my younger siblings can speak. I can speak. I don't read, but I can speak. I can hold a conversation. I know what people are saying, okay? But my sisters don't always even know what people are saying my brother definitely, because we were right in that generation before the next big wave significant enough to have language schools and things like that set up. And there was a period in which my parents didn't take us to church anymore. My dad was really working a lot, and four kids and being in the San Fernando Valley and driving the 405 [Freeway] up over the hill and all that, it was too much. So we didn't go to church for a period of time, and that's the other place where we would have encountered Korean language, but because we didn't go, we didn't encounter it much.

CLINE

Yes, okay. Well, you kind of walked into my next question, which was the religion question. Clearly, your grandfather was very focused on that, but what about your parents and your family? What was the religious atmosphere like in your house?

OH

Well, you know, my parents were raised as Christians, because that's who were saving lives in Korea, the missionaries, when they were having the war, right? So they were offering food and shelter and clothing, whereas the temples were asking for alms. So as a population under very intense siege conditions, most people are going to go where the food is, and starvation was an issue at the time. So they are Christian, but I wouldn't say that they're extreme, you know, or even heavily devout, although as they're getting older, they're becoming

more. It's an interesting phenomenon. As they get older, they're becoming more observant and more engaged in the scripture and studying what the Bible says about the afterlife and that whole thing. So they have never been evangelical fundamentalist-oriented people, ever, as far as I know. At least if they were, it didn't come across to us kids.

CLINE

You said that your father's family emanates from the north. What do you know, if anything, about family that may still be in the north or was left in the north or--

OH

Oh, I have a grand-uncle that's in the north. My great-great-grandfather, he made shoes, straw shoes, and my grand-uncle did the same. I mean, they were agricultural people, but they had like businesses and stuff, and so that craft was passed down to them. But I remember that--see, my father is very anti-Communist.

CLINE

Right. Naturally.

OH

I mean, there was that whole experience of that generation. And so he had lost touch with the family in the north, and they have something called the jokpo, which is the family book that tells your lineage and all of that, and that was all lost during the war, so our family doesn't have--has never recovered ours.

CLINE

Oh, interesting.

OH

And that grand-uncle made telephone contact once--only once that I know of--with my father, and asked for there to be some money sent to him. And we have a relative who travels regularly to the north as part of a sort of diplomatic and education tour, so I think arrangements were made for money to be delivered and an exchange of letters and things like that. But only once. My father is really not one of the people that believes there will ever be reconciliation between the North and the South on the [Korean] Peninsula. He believes that the societies are way too different and it's impossible. So I hope he's not correct in that regard, but--

CLINE

Yes, a lot of different points of view on that. Are there any sort of family stories then of basically escape from the North? That seems to be a common thread.

OH

Yes, my father's story, yes, because he was a young guy at the time. He was like in high school, he and his younger brother Peter, and they're the ones that

are at risk to be either killed or recruited. He wasn't going to be recruited or killed, so he fled. And my grandfather at the time was already traveling back and forth, and my grandmother, aunt, and my youngest uncle also fled on foot. That was a very common story, I think, you know, and met up with a lot of very hard circumstances. And the church apparently played a very significant role in helping them to survive the trauma of the time, and my father and his younger brother Peter actually, I think, you know, pushed the truth a bit, in other words, lied about their age to be able to join the military, and I think at the time the military was desperate for warm bodies of any age. If you were close enough, they'll take you. So that's how they survived that period, I think, being in the military. I remember--I haven't seen it in ages. I remember my dad was shot, and we used to play with the scar of the gunshot wound.

CLINE

Wow.

OH

It was like in his shoulder or something. And he was also captured at one point. He didn't know what was going to happen to him, but he was in this little--he tells this story about being in this little cage like, you know, and it was dark, and he saw a light along the ground, and he started digging at it, and that's how he and another guy escaped. They actually escaped after being captured. And he always felt like there was somebody guiding him, and that's why he's a religious guy. He felt like there was somebody guiding him to safety. I mean, karmically, when you think about it, it's interesting, because when you consider how immigration is being debated today and how strongly people feel, and just like when the openings were in terms of the law in 1965 and 1950.

CLINE

Right. Exactly.

OH

So for him, when he was here in '53, '54, you know, to have an American professor offer to sponsor you and then say, "Here, call this number, and here's the paperwork," he literally walked to the county building and walked his papers through and got his LPR [lawful permanent resident] status in the same day.

CLINE

Wow.

OH

That's unheard of.

CLINE

Yes, very uncommon, yes.

OH

That's unheard of, right?

CLINE

Right.

OH

I mean, so there's something about, you know, how things turn out. Timing. You can't plan everything, right?

CLINE

For sure.

OH

My parents, I look at them today. They're in their late seventies and both retired. I just remember so many years of them worrying about how they're going to take care of their four kids, and my dad working several different jobs. I mean, I used to say--I would just laugh when people would talk about how hard it is to work forty hours a week. My dad probably worked eighty hours a week. He worked a full job, he worked night jobs, he worked weekend jobs, whatever he could do, and as soon as my mother could, she got a teaching job. And it's sort of like now in their seventies they've given us yet another gift, meaning us children have received yet another gift from them, because, you know, they both have pensions and health insurance till they die, right, because they just kind of worked their jobs, slow and steady. I have many friends whose parents had businesses, and when they were working, they were very flush and did fancy trips and had fancy things and fancy cars and fancy homes, and now the parents have nothing, and the kids worry. They want to help their parents, but, you know, sometimes they're struggling to keep their own lives together, so it's this other burden. I don't have that with my parents. I still have to go to them sometimes for help because I'm in the nonprofit world now. I'm making far less than when I was a lawyer. So--

CLINE

Right. Yes. It sounds like then if your mother was teaching, her English skills had to be pretty good.

OH

Oh, yes. My youngest sister and she would practice grammar together. My youngest sister would correct my mother's papers sometimes. Yes, there was a whole--you know, you hear about that in immigrant families, right, where there's a role reversal. The kids become the parents, the parents become the kids. So there were some things, you know, that our parents could parent us, because they're our parents. But in terms of the cultural context, the social context, you know, they didn't know. They had no idea, you know. I'm basically the human guinea pig for the family, right, because everything they didn't know got cleared up through my experiences, and then the others didn't have to go through what I went through.

CLINE

Right. You mentioned the bent box, so it sounds like the food in your house, at least some of the time, was more Korean.

OH

Oh, always. Even when we had spaghetti, we had rice. [laughs]

CLINE

Oh, of course.

OH

Even when we had hot dogs, we had rice. No, yes, there's always rice and, you know, banchan, so that's not even, you know, side dishes, because my father had rice every night, no matter what. So we would have whatever we had and rice. Like my mother's form of spaghetti sauce--it just cracks me up, because I think about it now, and I think, "Wow, and we used to love it." She would take Campbell's mushroom soup and Campbell's tomato soup and put them together with a little bit of grilled onions and ground hamburger meat and a little, you know, whatever--sugar. That was our spaghetti sauce. Can you believe it? And we used to love it. It looked like the spaghetti that you saw on TV, right? [laughs]

CLINE

Yes. Where did she get ingredients for some of the side dishes and things to get them to--or did they taste authentic?

OH

Well, you know, they just went to the regular market. Spinach, mung beans, I don't know. I guess they had them, and romaine lettuce with--you know, there's kochujang, this red pepper paste, right, which is used--it's in the summertime. It's a nice--it's like a lettuce wrap--

CLINE

Right.

OH

--that you dip in that paste that's really good. And then she would do things like take canned tuna and grill onions and mix them together and sprinkle a little sugar in and soy sauce, and that would be sort of like one of the side dishes with the rice, and always kimchi, because they made kimchi by hand in those days. They didn't buy it at the market like you can now. We had, you know, an outside garage, so that smelly food would be outside, and the other food would be inside.

CLINE

She was able to get what they call here Napa cabbage for that?

OH

Yes. Yes. Yes.

CLINE

Okay. And you mentioned the schools you went to. What was the first school you attended?

OH

San Fernando Elementary.

CLINE

Okay. What, if anything, do you remember about the kinds of things that maybe during that time began to interest you particularly?

OH

Oh, god, I have no memories, other than, you know, starting school, doing, you know--I remember--you know, I have this thing about art. I'm a terrible artist, and it happens that one of my closest companions now is an artist, but, you know, I have this memory of Mrs. Norris, this silver-haired, really tall white woman, picking up my work and showing it to the whole class and saying, "This is not a prairie dog." [laughter] To this day I still remember, it was so traumatizing.

CLINE

Yes, humiliating.

OH

And then she picked up my friend Alex, who was a very good artist, and she said, "This is a prairie dog." We were drawing prairie dogs, and I actually thought I was doing a good job on mine. So it was kind of funny.

CLINE

Or something.

OH

I think at the time I was really mortified, obviously, but--

CLINE

Sure, yes. They're still doing that kind of thing in the schools. It's very distressing. Were there any other Asian students in this school?

OH

Yes. My best friend was Lorraine Nishi and her sister Kathy [Nishi], and then they had an older brother, Mark [Nishi], so we used to, you know, hang out a lot. And then I had other--you know, I had friends, Cynthia Villanueva I think was her name, Villanueva, Cynthia, and another friend, Silvia. I forget her last name. And there was a guy named Jesse. I think his last name was Jaro, but he was Mexican. He wasn't Japanese. I can't remember any others.

CLINE

How much fallout did you have to deal with, with your parents, for example, with the whole Japanese issue?

OH

You know, it's an interesting thing with my parents. They never communicated any hatred for Japanese, ever. And when I have asked my parents about that in

later years, you know, the answer that I got was that my mom actually loved her teachers, the Japanese teachers, because they were very disciplined but kind, she said. My dad doesn't really say that. He just, you know, says, "Well, they were occupying." He's a little bit older than my mom, just by a few years, but my mom said she cried when they announced that they had to leave after the war, because she didn't want her teachers to leave. She really loved them, and she has memories of sewing buttons onto Japanese uniforms. That was like what little girls had to do as part of their work, you know.

CLINE

That's interesting. Wow.

OH

But they were too young, I think, to understand what was really happening. They didn't see the horrors of the war. These were just teachers who were teaching them. They were, you know, very disciplined. I mean, you had to clean the floors of the school every morning. You had to do--you know, there was a certain ritual. You wore uniforms, you know, all that stuff. So I don't know. I guess they never really communicated anything.

OH

And then it was interesting, because I do remember my parents, when they would have people over for visiting, there would be these discussions about how minorities were treated, and they didn't have a concept that they were a minority, right? So these second-generation Koreans would come. I remember the Kims, Betty and Frank, and they would come over and have these big arguments about, you know, equal justice, basically, and the Nishis less so, because Mr. Nishi I think was a 442nd [Regimental Combat Team] guy, and he never talked. My memory of him is he was very stern, very quiet, and we were all a little bit afraid of him, because he was, you know, tough. I don't think he had good memories at all, in retrospect, of what was going on at the time with the internment and everything, as a JA [Japanese American]. His wife Frances, my friend's mother, was very kind and always very, you know--I have an image of her always baking things for the kids, right? So we always had cookies and we always had like brownies and things like that when we went to the house. And I liked it as a kid because my mom never did that kind of stuff. We didn't have desserts. Our desserts were like you could have apples or something, so it was a very different kind of thing. They were much more Americanized in a way, I think.

CLINE

Right. What about your relationship with your parents, in the sense of sort of culturally, was there kind of a confusion, hierarchical thing happening, or were you kind of already more westernized at that point?

OH

No, we were pretty disciplined. It was pretty strict at home, and at school it would be different, because, of course, you know, you don't talk back to the adults. The answer is always yes. Even if it's no, the answer is always yes, whereas you're taught in school to--quote--stand up for yourself and to speak up and to--you know. So in that way it was very schizophrenic, I think, and I think that creates a lot of confusion for kids, right, because in one context what you think is irrelevant doesn't matter. Kids should be seen and not heard, that sort of thing. And then you're put in this other environment where you actually get dinged if you don't express yourself. So where a kid picks up where they are naturally, and then where they need to be because that's what the context requires, I think is a hard road. I mean, I did criminal defense for a number of years, and I always, on my more serious cases, engaged a criminologist who would look at the sociocultural background of the kid, and inevitably, there was something very, very significant to be found there in terms of the dynamics of what would lead to criminal behavior.

CLINE

Yes, right. And how was your relationship with your younger siblings? How can you describe them?

OH

Well, I was the boss, so I was in charge with getting everything organized for cleaning every Saturday morning, and they were my cleaning crew. And I had to also be the one to make sure that they got their work done, that I cooked certain meals at a certain point in time. My father, when I was fifteen, decided to try and go back to medical school, and, you know, medical school, at a certain age they won't really seriously review an application in this country because it's so much investment in training a person to be a doctor. So he actually applied to schools outside the country, in Scotland and in Mexico, and he got accepted to both, and he ended up going to school in Mexico City for two and a half years. He studied Spanish to be able to go to medical school. So here's a guy who's speaking Japanese, Korean, English, reading Chinese characters, five hundred of them I think is what he said they taught when he was in school, and now he's, in Spanish, taking medical school classes in Mexico City.

OH

He went by himself and my mother had the four of us, so I became sort of like the surrogate mom, and so I had no illusions about what it is to be a mother, right? The cleaning, the cooking, the driving them here and there, the making sure that they're getting their chores done, the making sure that they're making their beds and cleaning up their mess, doing the laundry. So I kind of feel like I had that experience of what it is to be a parent, but my father ended up not being able to complete medical school, because the plan was for him to go get

started, get through his first year, make sure he wanted to do it, and then we would join him, and we would go to Mexico.

CLINE

Wow.

OH

But before we went, what happened was the Sylmar earthquake--

CLINE

Oh, yes, in '71.

OH

--and it freaked them out, right? So we had to sort of figure out whether it made sense to make a move when we couldn't sell the house and all that. Nobody was buying real estate in the San Fernando Valley.

CLINE

Right. Just like after the Northridge earthquake.

OH

Right. So my dad and mom decided that fate wasn't going to be in their favor as far as the medical school thing.

CLINE

Wow, interesting. That's tough. So you walked right into the household responsibilities question. I got a picture of that. What about what is being experienced in the home in terms of what we would refer to as popular culture, television, music, clearly not Korean, not even Asian, as a rule. What do you remember about the impact of some of that as you were growing up? What kind of things were you consuming, as it were?

OH

You know, it's so interesting, because I remember that every New Year's, that all of us girls had to dress in our hanbok and perform for my parents' friends. So we would have to play piano. We would have to sing. We'd have to play guitar. We'd have to do these, you know, performances at my parents' gatherings, like they would have every New Year. People would come over to the house. I do remember also, you know, sort of the stuff of that era, Donna Reed and, you know. I didn't watch that much television, I don't think, but anyway--and then I remember all of the music of Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra and Doris Day and Andy Williams. We used to love Andy Williams. As a kid I loved Andy Williams. Bing Crosby.

CLINE

Those Christmas specials.

OH

Bing Crosby, yes. And I remember at one point my parents took dance lessons in the house. So all of us kids, we'd sit like on the piano bench, and we'd watch them learn like the foxtrot or the tango or whatever.

CLINE

Wow.

OH

I mean, I just have a memory of that, watching them. That was our entertainment. This lady would come over and, you know, show them how to dance. And they're great dancers, my parents. They really are great dancers. Both of my parents are great dancers and singers. They have beautiful voices. My dad's a tenor, and my mom's a soprano. Now my mom is a second soprano, and my dad sings in the church choir. My mom has three choirs that she sings in. She sings in an alumnae choir, she sings in the Torrance Community Choir, and she sings in the church choir. She loves to sing. And actually, that was something she loved when she was younger, but then when she was raising a family and working, she'd kind of dropped out. And she used to have very bad asthma, I mean really bad asthma, but after she retired, she took singing lessons, and the asthma went away, and she now sings in three choirs in her seventies.

CLINE

Wow, that's great.

OH

It's a trip.

CLINE

Yes.

OH

They have very different orientations toward death, too, my parents. I just went with them to get their casket packages and see where their plots are. So my mother is, after retiring from teaching, you know, is getting into yoga, line dancing, singing, getting together with her girlfriends. My dad basically chauffeurs her around, and his orientation is, "We're old already. Why are you running around and doing all these things? We're going to die soon." So he spends a lot of time watching television and then kind of taking her around, and he's always grumbling, but I think he actually enjoys it, you know. Yes, their approach, I'm realizing, because I'm in my fifties now, they're so pragmatic, and they want to prepare everything properly. It's the way they've been trained, right? So when they moved to their current residence, which is a senior complex, condominium complex, they made very conscious decision. They had a huge twenty-seven-hundred-square-foot split-level home out in Porter Ranch, and once all of us left, you know, they kept the house for a number of years because it would be the family gathering spot. But then, you know, all of us got our own houses, and my sisters' homes are much bigger than even my parents had, so their homes now are the places we gather for family things. But they were very conscious of downsizing because they were going to die. That was

the next big event in life, was death. So they, you know, had their church friends come and just tag whatever they wanted, and they gave everything away. They asked us to come and get whatever it is that we wanted out of their house, and everything else they were going to leave to the new buyers if they wanted it, and the new buyers wanted everything that they left, so that they literally had very little to move. And they didn't buy new stuff to fit into their condo, so it's kind of funny, because you see this--my mother liked this French provincial stuff, you know, with the fancy--so they moved that stuff into the condo. And it's funny, when I think about their current place, they have that, a couch and a love seat and a chair of that style, and then they have this thing that you would pick up at Sears, a phony-wood-topped table with chairs that are the swivel chairs that are a la the fifties, right next to that furniture. And then they have stuck in the corner a little stand-up piano, because they gave their grand piano to my youngest sister, who is a pianist. So it's kind of a trip.

CLINE

It's eclectic.

OH

Yes, it's very eclectic. [laughter] And they still have their little kimchi refrigerator out on their balcony, right? So they maintain certain things. But this next phase of life will be their dying, and so they gathered all of us girls to go with them to Forest Lawn [Memorial Park and Mortuaries] last week, and we had to sit in the consulting room with the mortuary consultant so she could describe the menu of options, you know, the elegance, the heritage, the traditional. And then we walked up--it was surreal. We walked upstairs to pick what casket and what headstone and what--you know. It was just a trip.

CLINE

I used to have to deliver flowers up there, so I know exactly what you're talking about. I used to call it the Disneyland of death. We're getting close to the cut-off time. I wanted to just mention, now, you're growing up during the sixties. You're in the Valley. When exactly do you move to Granada Hills?

OH

I think I was in junior high school when we moved to Granada Hills.

CLINE

So were you there then when the Sylmar earthquake happened?

OH

Yes.

CLINE

Yes. So that was very close to Sylmar.

OH

Yes. Yes.

CLINE

Okay. Just to end for today, what do you remember about that move, what that meant for you in terms of your friends, sort of culturally, the contrast?

OH

I don't have much of a memory. It's really bad. There are some periods where I--I just remember we moved. You know, we had a house.

CLINE

A bigger house?

OH

Yes, oh, yes. This house--every time it was like--you know, it's like you're progressing, right? So they traded up, and we were on Lorillard Street. It was pretty much an all-white and Jewish neighborhood. I had other friends at that point. My dad picked a house that was on a hillside, so it had a beautiful view. That's what I remember of the house, that when you walk in, it was on a hillside, and you could see the 405 Freeway snake up the Mulholland Pass, you know, area. So at night we'd watch that silver S come down the freeway. That used to be an entertainment, and my bedroom window faced that. I always had my own room in that house. My younger sisters had to share, and then when my brother was born, he had his own room, and then my parents had their room. So there were four bedrooms in that house. When my brother was born--this is a gender thing, right? The San Fernando Valley is very, very hot in the summer. We used to die. We used to just beg to be able to go to the public pool or go see our aunt, what we called our "aunt," in quotes. She lived on Reseda Boulevard, and she was really a friend of my mother's. My mother befriended this Korean woman who was married to a Caucasian man. She wasn't accepted in the Korean community, but my parents befriended her. And she wasn't an educated person. She was a war bride, basically, but very sweet person, and she married this guy who was a very nice man, and they had a swimming pool and a very nice home. And we used to beg to go to their home to be able to swim in the pool in the summer. But when my brother was born, my father actually built a pool.

CLINE

Wow.

OH

I still remember having this conversation with my parents, "How come you didn't build a pool when we were growing up?"

OH

And they said, "Because your brother has to have a place where he can stretch his body." Like swimming would, you know, help him stretch, and indeed, he is over six feet. I don't know if that was going to be genetic or what, but--

CLINE

Yes, wow, but that's pretty unusual.

OH

Yes. He's a very tall guy. Yes. Yes.

CLINE

Okay. I think this is our moment.

OH

Yes, it's about eleven.

CLINE

So we'll pick up next time--

OH

Okay.

CLINE

--with the sixties. [laughter] Junior high.

OH

The wild sixties. Unfortunately, I was under a very tight, tight leash in those days, so I didn't have very many exciting things to talk about in those days.

CLINE

Well, thank you for today.

OH

You're welcome.[End of interview]

1.2. Session Two (January 27, 2010)

CLINE

Today is January 27, 2010. It's a new year, and this is Alex Cline interviewing Angela Oh in the executive conference room at the Young Research Library at UCLA. This is session number two. Good afternoon.

OH

Good afternoon.

CLINE

Thank you for taking some time to not only talk to me but to come here, all the way up to UCLA and navigate the parking and all that fun stuff. It was last year when we last talked. It's been over a month, actually. We left off last time talking about your family, and the status of your family when we last spoke was that your brother was born, the youngest of the children in your family, the first boy. Your family had moved to Granada Hills, which is in the San Fernando Valley. You were on a hill. You could see the 405 Freeway from the house. Your parents built a swimming pool to enable your now brand-new brother to stretch his body, I think you said. You described the neighborhood as being essentially white and American Jewish, I believe. I think what I'd like to ask you first of all is what year are we talking about now, when you moved to Granada Hills?

OH

Probably the early sixties we moved to Granada Hills. My dad was working for the L.A. County Hospital out in the San Fernando Valley at Olive View [Olive View Medical Center], and my mom was not yet working. She had the four of us. She didn't start working until my brother was about five.

CLINE

This then would be--for you, we're getting into the junior high period then.

OH

Right.

CLINE

What junior high did you attend?

OH

Robert Frost Junior High School.

CLINE

Was that a pretty new school at that time?

OH

Yes, yes. I initially was at Patrick Henry [Junior High School] and then went to Robert Frost.

CLINE

Okay. And then a new family dynamic. You have a baby brother.

OH

Yes.

CLINE

And you are heading into the teen years.

OH

Right.

CLINE

How could you describe the parental expectations on a Korean American young--at this point, young woman, almost, heading into a time not only of life that can be challenging, but also during a time and during a decade when things start to change pretty dramatically as we head toward the late sixties?

OH

Right. You know, I have a really poor memory, so some of the things that I remember are that my dad was starting to talk about going back to finish his medical school education.

CLINE

In Mexico, is that right?

OH

Yes. He had applied to Glasgow. He had applied to Mexico. And it was pretty clear in that generation that medical schools--and I think this is still so--they don't invest in older students, because it's such an expensive education, and the

expectation that you would be in the field for a while, you know, was there, was very strong. So it was kind of common knowledge that after a certain age you're not going to get into any of the medical schools here in the U.S., except under exceptional circumstances. And certainly an immigrant with four kids, you know, the chances are not going to be great. So he applied to schools outside of the U.S. I remember it was down to Glasgow and Mexico, and they just picked Mexico because of its geographic proximity and the idea that eventually we'll come back to California. So my dad, who, of course, is a native Korean speaker, and in the generation that he grew up, of course, learned the Chinese characters, right, through his education, formal education, and then a Japanese speaker because of the occupation while he was in school, and then English. So now he's going to take on Spanish before going to medical school, which he did. I remember really intense language study at home. There were a couple of other people that he knew from the community who were successful candidates in getting in at Mexico City, so the plan was that they would travel together, and the two families kind of were support for each other. My dad went to medical school for two years in Guadalajara, and all of us stayed in the Valley, in San Fernando Valley. But then the Sylmar earthquake hit.

CLINE

Right. Yes, I wanted to ask you about that.

OH

Yes, and at that point my parents really decided, you know, that it just wasn't meant to be, for him to go on to do his medical education, because after the earthquake, basically, you couldn't sell the house, and we were getting ready to do that, right, so that we would all join him in Mexico for a number of years, which would have been--I mean, in retrospect, it would have been an incredible experience to grow up in Mexico City for a few years, four or five years. But as it turns out, that wasn't to be, and so he gave up his place in medical school after his second year. And he was doing fine. I mean, basically, he was recording all of his lectures, and he was taking his exams in Spanish, and, you know--

CLINE

Wow.

OH

When I think about it now--of course, at the time I'm a kid, and I'm just thinking this is what parents do, you know. But what did I know? And I think about it now, it's just so extraordinary, you know, the things that my folks encountered and then just worked out in their lifetime.

CLINE

Yes, well, it's the immigrant story right there.

OH

Well, yes, of sorts, yes.

CLINE

Plus. Immigrant plus.

OH

Right.

CLINE

Now, the Sylmar quake, was that in '71, I believe, or--

OH

Yes, it was in the seventies, the early seventies, so--

CLINE

So before we get to '71, as we move toward the late sixties and as you start to hit your teen years more fully, as I alluded to a little while ago, there was a lot going on in the world, a lot going on in the country culturally, politically. What did you know about the political point of view of your parents when you were growing up? How much discussion or involvement was there on that end?

OH

During that period I really don't remember that they were engaged very much politically. They had some friends, Korean American friends, who were their age chronologically, but they were second-generation Korean Americans, and they would talk to my parents. I remember kind of listening in at social visits at our house. These friends, the Kims, would come over, and the Chungs, and they would be talking about politics, and they'd be talking about the Civil Rights Movement, and they'd be talking about, you know, what was happening in the country with the leadership and the change that had to happen. And, you know, my parents were children of the Korean War, and so the whole anti-Communism thing was really strong for them, and I think continues to be strong for them. That generation that came over after that war has very strong anti-Communist feelings, right? So they would have these big debates, I remember, and my parents would, afterwards--I remember this one time my mom says to my dad, "Do you think they're Communist?" It's funny that I remember that.

OH

But they weren't engaged politically. I mean, I see in my parents this phenomenon that I think is pretty common among first-generation immigrants who have left war-torn countries, that if they successfully have left, there isn't that high of an interest in being engaged politically. It's a life-or-death, you know, decision, to engage politically. So those who end up engaging politically here, who are first-generation, typically are people who were engaged politically in their native countries, right? So my parents, of course, weren't. They were young people. They were students. They came here as students. Yes, they knew about the history, but they did have a slant on it. My father's family

is from the north, Pyongyang. So for him, he just remembers the experience of the Communists coming into the villages and trying to recruit young teenage boys about his age and saying things that, in his mind, were just crazy about his own family, you know, because they were landowners, right? So I had a great-grandfather who had substantial landholdings, and of course, all of that was taken, and then there was the threat to the safety of male children of a certain age, and so he and his brothers were basically told to flee, which they did, meaning they left everything behind that would have been their inheritance, so to speak. And my father was the first son of three sons, so that was a big deal, right?

CLINE

Yes, very.

OH

So, you know, he and my mother were not engaged too much politically. Like I remember their idea of understanding U.S. politics after they became citizens in the mid-eighties was that one should register as a Republican and one should register as a Democrat so they could get all the information to try and educate themselves, because, you know, there weren't organizations that were teaching that sort of thing within our community, as there are today, and there certainly was no interest on the part of mainstream America to bring in immigrants from Korea at that time. You know, we were a non-issue.

CLINE

Yes. So I'm guessing that if they were asked to take a stance, they would have been in favor of the Vietnam War then, being a struggle they might perceive similarly to the Korean War.

OH

I think they didn't care. I mean, I don't think they would have--they would have said, "Well, it's whatever this government thinks is right. We have people that are leaders that are supposed to make those decisions. It's not for us to make." You know, they wouldn't express a point of view, I don't think, one way or the other.

CLINE

Oh, okay. So I don't know how involved they were to be particularly on top of this, but as things really start to change, you know, we see a lot of, to coin a phrase, revolutionary sort of activity going on. As the sixties progress there's a lot of big changes, not only in politics but in popular culture. I'm curious to know how much that touched you as a young teen going to school in the Valley, you know, things like not only the music, but drug culture and changes in attitudes toward sexual mores and things like that.

OH

I think my generation was still, and certainly my group of friends, we were not that into the drug scene. We knew people that--I knew people that were. They were just sort of acquaintances in my classes at the time. But the group that I was with were very--first of all, I was with a group of young people that didn't date. Basically, we hung out in a pack. There could be up to thirty of us.

CLINE

Wow.

OH

Yes. And there was a period in which, I remember, there were a couple of the guys--I mean, sometimes there was some dating that went on in between, you know, some of the--but my personal experience is, I wasn't allowed to and I didn't, and, you know, my social sort of engagement in high school was really with my group of friends. It was always a group of people that would be doing, you know, a swimming party, or a group of people that would go to the movies, or a group of people that would go to some activity related to school. But we did go through this period, I remember, where there was one guy--there were a few who had cars and, you know, other wheels to get around, and we would just arrange for everybody to have transportation to get to where we all wanted to be, whether it was somebody's house or some destination. But there was a period in which there were about four or five guys that really just liked to drink and get high, and we just always made sure that they got home safe and that somebody else was driving.

CLINE

Oh, that's mature.

OH

Yes, that was pretty--when I think about it, it's pretty amazing that we did that. And we had several of our friends who, you know, ended up just going on to college and doing, you know, regular things. I mean, one guy was an artist, and he ended up dying young of AIDS. Another guy became a pretty well known writer for The New Yorker magazine, and a critic in London. Another woman friend of ours became a stunt woman in Hollywood. I mean, we had a kind of a wild--not meaning crazy wild, but it's just kind of like all-over-the-place set of friends, and so--there was one African American guy, Ron [phonetic]. Me and Lorraine [phonetic] were Asian. Several of the kids were Jewish kids, and we had one friend who was Mexican American who was part of the crowd, Jaime, and that's about it. I mean, it was not very diverse. It was just a few of us that were not sort of from the mainstream culture. But we all hung out together, and we all ended up, you know, kind of getting through those years. But it's funny, I don't have contact with any friends from high school, really none, and I'm pretty geographically close. I have one friend, who now lives in Paso Robles, who is an oncology nurse that was really close to me. But other than Rhonda, I

don't really speak to anybody else. She's like a horsewoman out in the countryside in Paso Robles.

CLINE

Where did you go to high school then?

OH

Granada Hills [High School].

CLINE

Oh, yes. What--I mean, there's an impression, that is based in reality, that Korean parents are very into putting a lot of pressure on the academic performance of their children.

OH

Right.

CLINE

How was that for you by the time--

OH

Well, it's funny. You know, my parents are very unusual, now that I kind of step back and see. I mean, they grew up during the Japanese occupation. They never talked badly about the Japanese. They used Japanese in the house when they didn't want us to know what was being said, so we knew there was something private being communicated. I remember a lot of Japanese magazines, because my mom, frankly, was more comfortable reading Japanese magazines than even Korean ones, because that was her formal language training as a kid.

CLINE

Interesting.

OH

But they never talked negatively about the Japanese, right? Which is unusual for a Korean immigrant family of that era. The other thing is, they never really put that much pressure, I think, in part, because they thought we were above average, but they didn't think that we were anything spectacular, and they were realistic, I think, pretty pragmatic about, "God, could we even afford to send them if they got into some fancy school?" I don't know. They just wanted us to have some stability in our lives, but they never really pushed for any of us to do anything extraordinary. They just wanted us to do well. I mean, we would get in trouble if we didn't pull at least A's and B's. They didn't understand that. But I don't have a memory of them getting really upset if we would bring home B's, which I hear stories about that, you know, in my own community, about how parents would then make their kids stay up all night and study, you know, under these ridiculous conditions until they could bring home straight A's, because that was the expectation, parents who would send their kids to these supplemental, you know, tutoring things for hours on end so that the kids could

always be ahead of the group. It's sort of a carryover, I guess, you know, from Korea, where everything is on a competitive testing basis, and if you don't test into the top school, your life chances are not going to be very good. Whereas I think my parents really bought the whole thing of, in this country, about, you know, if you work hard and everybody has a fair chance and yada, yada. So I think they really believed that, and, you know, actually, today when I look at it and I look at what we've all done with our lives, in terms of the four siblings, we've done really well by anybody's standards, right?

CLINE

And what were their feelings, maybe if you knew them, about the fact that, unavoidably, because of your geography, you were hanging out with not only non-Koreans but non-Asians, for the most part, not dating, I guess, really, but I don't know if there was maybe no threat there, but--

OH

You know, they--again, in the years that I was growing up there wasn't much of a Korean community, so there wasn't much of an expectation that you're going to hang out with Koreans.

CLINE

I see. Okay.

OH

And they were pretty realistic about the choice that they made to end up in a community that's what it was. So they certainly didn't expect that I was going to be socially isolated. They wanted me to engage socially, and so there wasn't any message that I got that I shouldn't do that. I think, you know, I grew up in an interesting interval in time, in terms of historical moment for an ethnic Korean in L.A., because we didn't have much of a community at the time, and the church was sort of the community, and at least in the years that I was growing up, that would have been formative to my pre-adult life, you know, there wasn't a lot of involvement in our family's part with the church, so even that connection was pretty tenuous.

CLINE

That was my next question.

OH

Yes. I mean, there was a period in which--you know, my dad always worked two and three jobs, and so in that scenario we're not going to use Sunday to go to church, because every other weekend he's at work, right? So there wasn't going to be, I don't think, for a number of years--although now in their retirement, they're very devout, like my dad's an elder and my mom sings in the choir. I mean, they're very involved in the church, and I think that is a product of them, one, having the time, and two, being closer to death, and when people are closer to death, they suddenly become more spiritual.

CLINE

Right.

OH

You know, there's some question about, well, what's going to happen after this.

CLINE

Yes. Fear.

OH

Yes, I don't know if it's fear or if it's, you know, whatever--

CLINE

Yes, just something.

OH

--but they want to have some comfort that there's a community that, you know, talks about the spirit, I guess, in a direct way, and so where does that happen? It happens usually in churches or other religious settings. So, yes, when I think about the social expectations and all of that, I don't think it really came to much of a head. I mean, dating was just not something we were allowed to do in high school, so it's a non-issue. And then in college and dating, yes, then suddenly it becomes an issue, but there's not a whole lot you can do about it at that stage, right?

CLINE

Interesting. Pretty tolerant atmosphere then.

OH

Yes, yes. I mean, my mom had friends who disowned their children, and she would talk about, you know, how fortunate we were that they weren't of that mind, because she could recognize how it tore up families to do things like that, right? To disown your own child, it's pretty extreme.

CLINE

Very.

OH

Some people went so far as to have funeral services for their kids who would cross the racial or ethnic barriers, right? My parents would never do something like that. I mean, on that point they were very decent, you know, people, I have to say.

CLINE

Wow. So as you're going to school, now high school, what subjects or study areas are you particularly interested in, and were you, at that point, formulating some idea as to what you wanted to do in life or at least in college?

OH

No.

CLINE

Nothing.

OH

I don't have any memory at all. I know I must have taken classes that got me into UCLA, because that's where I ended up for college, but--I actually wanted to go to [California State University] Northridge, but I got into UCLA, and my parents said it was more important for me to have a university experience and live on campus. So, you know, I was sort of the reverse. I wanted to live at home and commute, and they decided that it would be better for me to live on campus.

CLINE

Wow, that's pretty unusual, too, I think.

OH

Yes, that's very unusual, too. I was willing to drive to Northridge every day and have a new car, but they wanted me to be on campus and have that experience, so that's what I did.

CLINE

Interesting.

OH

Yes.

CLINE

You don't remember what other schools you applied to or anything like that?

OH

I think I only applied to UCLA and Northridge. It's sort of like law school. I only applied to Davis and [University of the Pacific] McGeorge [School of Law]. If I didn't get in, my intent was not to try and get into law school. Yes.

CLINE

Interesting.

OH

By the time I was applying to law school, I had been very active, and I did not want to be in L.A. or the Bay Area, because I knew that people would view my being a student as being, "Oh, you've got free time." I didn't want that, right, because I really wanted to focus on law school, if I were going to go to law school, and I had a job at the capital. So I just decided it will be [University of the Pacific] McGeorge [School of Law] or [University of California] Davis [School of Law, King Hall], and if I don't get in, I don't become a lawyer.

CLINE

Okay. So you left high school, and you graduated now in what year?

OH

'73.

CLINE

Right. That's what I guessed. So you survived the Sylmar earthquake.

OH

Right. Right. My dad comes back from Mexico. He goes back to his job. They had held the job for him.

CLINE

Oh, wow.

OH

Yes. He had really extraordinary luck with his job, with immigration. I mean, he got his immigration papers literally within three days, right? So, really unbelievable. Maybe a week. I mean, it was crazy. It was crazy. When he tells the story of how he got his lawful permanent residency status, green card. But yes, so I went to UCLA. I don't even remember--I think I was a psych[ology] major. But I finished my major in three years, so for my fourth year I took--I didn't know what I wanted to do. I took these classes out of the Graduate School of Management, what you would call the [UCLA] Anderson School [of Management] now. I took a lot of marketing classes, I think, and market research classes. I don't know what I was doing, actually, but I just needed to get units to finish out my degree, because, like I said, I finished the psych major in three years. So my last year I did that, and then I got out of here in '77, I think. Then after a couple of years of just kind of doing, you know--I think I was doing some kind of management work or something in retail. I'm trying to think. There was this store chain called Bullocks [department store] at the time, and I was like a management-type person. Then I thought, "This is really dumb," and so I started looking for other things that I wanted to do, and I got involved with the women's health movement at the time, and, you know, the big sort of books and movement that were out at the time were, you know, women's self-help and self-health, "Our Bodies, Ourselves"--

CLINE

Yes, exactly.

OH

--the whole consciousness-raising thing, and I got really involved with that, and then ended up applying to the Public Health School here at UCLA, and I got into the doctoral program. I was going to do my doctorate in public health, behavioral sciences, and health ed[ucation]. But I ended up quitting after my master's degree because I realized that I didn't want to be an academic. You know, I wasn't a person that was cut out to be an academic. So I took a job with a labor organization and left here in like '79 or '80 and went up to Sacramento, and I worked for a couple of years with the labor organization, which was around their health and safety initiatives, in the state capital. And while I was there, decided to go to law school, and I got in in '82 or '83. And then I graduated in '86.

CLINE

Wow. So let's back up a bit. Graduating high school in '73, the sixties are already a thing of the past, but a lot of the changes in--

OH

Vietnam still.

CLINE

Yes. A lot of changes in consciousness have happened, and there's a lot in the aftermath, in the wake of that, right? The Vietnam War is not over by the early seventies. But there's also the beginnings of a lot of changes in terms of what we would call the women's movement, a lot of changes in perception about women and their role in society--

OH

Right.

CLINE

--and certainly a more heightened awareness of a lot of political and social issues coming in the wake of the sixties. What do you remember, if anything, about how some of that may have touched you during your college years, or even earlier?

OH

I remember in my college years there was also a period in which ethnic studies was starting to emerge strong--

CLINE

Exactly.

OH

--and so we were advocating for ethnic studies programs on this campus, UCLA, and I know Asian American studies, Korean American studies. I mean, and we wanted specifically Asian American, not East Asian studies. The universities were steeped and well-ensconced into the literature and the academic, scholarly kind of perspectives on East Asia, Buddhist philosophy, that sort of thing, big. I mean, I think this campus has one of the best library collections in Buddhist literature. But in terms of Asian American experience, there was a feeling that there was a story to be told and lots of things to be examined about that experience, and so I remember being part of the very first Korean American studies class, community studies class, here. I do remember taking some women's literature classes. These were all kind of like experimental, you know, to see what would come out of them. I wasn't particularly active in Third World student movement stuff, as it got to be called over time. But I would take classes, if they were offered, and I would show up to rallies and things like that, but I was never like a leader in any of the movement work at all. I don't think I got really into doing any kind of movement work until I was in public health, and there my orientation into movement work was because it was around class differences more than

anything, workers' rights, right? And my perspective as a person who is interested in education, health issues and education in the workplace, had to do with the fact that people were encountering really dangerous conditions on the job, and they didn't seem to have much choice if they wanted to have a paycheck. And it happened to be the case that when I was in grad school in public health, there was this whole movement and consciousness that was being raised around toxic substance exposures and what that could mean, because we were right in that moment, we were transitioning from people losing their limbs and fingers and things like that on machinery, to people having their health compromised, because they were being rendered sterile, or they were having job-related cancers or job-related chronic diseases that were irreversible, like respiratory diseases and things like that. And computers were just emerging, so there was this whole area of concern around exposure to CRTs, you know, the cathode ray tube exposure, and whether there was a health risk from sitting in front of a computer terminal for hours on end. And then ergonomics, right, that was starting to be talked about more. It's interesting, when I think of it. I sort of feel like--what's that movie, you know, where the person's in the moment every--the zeitgeist, you know?

CLINE

Oh, right, Zelig.

OH

Zelig, yes. All these things were happening right when I happened to be at that age, right? So I remember organizing the first toxic substances right-to-know conference here on the Westside with Tom Hayden, Rick Brown. I mean, there were a whole bunch of people that were--Mary Nichols at the time was a community activist. Now she's running the country's, you know, Environmental Protection Agency, I think, or something. But these were all people that were activists at the time, you know, Carol Browner was--you know. They were environmental activists here. And we organized this huge statewide conference, because the first Toxic Substances Control Act was being drafted and debated. I was a graduate student at the time, and we had like five hundred people come out to some elementary school for a day-long conference that was all about teaching people, you know, what some of the issues were, and what the analysis was, and what some of the resources were if you wanted to learn more, and how you could get engaged. So that's where I became really active, was with organized labor and the environmental movement. Yes, but with that particular sort of portal, with the portal being work-related, you know, environmental hazards.

CLINE

You mentioned ethnic studies, and here we are at UCLA all these years later. What was the student body like in terms of diversity when you were here?

OH

Oh, it was way more diverse than I see right now. Like I'm startled when I walk along this campus and I see who's here and who's not here. You know, it's a little startling. I mean, you had a very active Black Students Association here. You know, the La Raza was really strong. You know, the Chicano Movement was happening at the time, and Asian Americans were kind of emerging, like even the term Asian American was emerging at that moment. And women's organizing was strong at the time, and the campus was just way more diverse than what I see right now, a lot more of a vibe happening on this campus. Like right now I walk through here, and it feels very docile. And here we are in the middle of like forty wars right now globally. We have the worst economic challenge that we've faced since the Great Depression. You have a major, major question being raised for the American people around the future of healthcare, and you would think that students would be 100 percent engaged and then some, right? And an anti-war movement would be happening, and there would be some questions about what's happening with, you know, the prisoners that were held at Guantanamo [Bay] and our position on torture. It's the globalization of so much of our sort of economy and politics. But students are like walking around here with their cell phones and they're talking about, you know, meeting up for some drink at some wine bar. It boggles my mind.

CLINE

Yes, it's very different.

OH

It's a different--and I don't know. These are the kids of my generation, so I'm thinking, okay, so what happened? See, I don't have kids, so it's sort of like, what happened here? Like what did we produce in the next generation? Why aren't the kids demanding that there be no more hunger in this country? Why aren't kids demanding that we have healthcare for our parents and our grandparents, right? Right now we're being priced out. I mean, what is that about?

CLINE

Yes, well, it's their future, so you would think there would be some interest or investment there, wouldn't you?

OH

And you can't give them enough information about the fact that they're carrying the debt, you know, into their senior years, if things don't get reversed pretty quickly. But you don't see any like expression of real concern or consciousness that that's their reality. It's almost like this--

CLINE

Deep slumber.

OH

Well, it's kind of scary.

CLINE

Since the eighties. I think, really, things changed here a lot during the eighties, and they've never really kind of changed back.

OH

Really? What happened?

CLINE

[President Ronald W.] Reagan years, for one thing, you know. Very different. Very different. People thought a lot more about, you know, jobs and how much money they could make and not so much social or political awareness.

OH

Right. Right. So, you know, I'm not for people, you know, deconstructing their lives so that they have to live in squalor. I'm not advocating that at all. I'm just saying that, gee, you know, we're really smart. I do believe we are smarter, as a people, and we have so many more tools at our disposal to problem-solve. But it's sort of like the selfishness is so incredible, and it's disturbing. It's sort of like, you know, the more time you give people and the more convenience you allow them, the more time they will then spend with that free time figuring out how to annihilate themselves. I mean, you know, that is an ancient observation, which I happen to believe holds true even today, right? I mean, why do you need to live in a fifty-nine-hundred-square-foot home when you have a wife and two kids, you know? Why do you need to have, you know, a million dollars at your disposal? I don't know. It just sort of gets to me. So all I can do is say--well, thankfully--maybe this is a bad thing, I don't know. But, you know, I believe I get invited to speak--you know, part of my work is on the public lecture--I have this job at this organization [Western Justice Center Foundation], this nonprofit, but I continue to do public lectures, and I think the reason why I get invited by students is because they want to hear a different narrative that's real than what they're, you know, used to hearing. You know, even the university, when I was teaching here, students couldn't get that--I mean, it took them a few classes to believe that I did not want them to regurgitate the stuff that I was asking them to read. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in what you think and what your analysis is, so I want you to think. So you're not going to get extra brownie points for being able to memorize what this text or that text says, but to the extent that you can integrate what this text says and that text says into what you think the situation needs to be or what the problem--solutions that could be, I'm interested in that, so much so that you can bring everything into the room during the exam, right? I don't care. I just want to know what you think. And that was like a really big--

CLINE

Challenge?

OH

--challenge for them, because students are not comfortable thinking on their own, it seems to me. They care about the grade that they're going to get, and they care about what they need to do to get the A. So I don't know. It's sort of like, you don't care about learning anything?

CLINE

Well, it's interesting, because, of course, the Asian population here at UCLA now is vast. It's huge.

OH

Is it. I don't know what the number is.

CLINE

I don't remember what the number is, either, but it's very large. It's the same at UC [University of California] Berkeley, same thing, and that's obviously different as well. But, of course, in the post-affirmative action era things have changed a lot.

OH

Right. Yes, right.

CLINE

So, anyway, moving back in time into the time when now you're becoming more--

OH

Conscious.

CLINE

--socially and politically conscious, you know, during this period we go through Watergate, the end of the [Richard M.] Nixon regime, the coming in of Jimmy [James E.] Carter, you know, a Democratic president again. And the energy crisis, all these things are going on. I was wanting to know--you didn't mention this, so maybe there isn't, but was there a particular event or a book or an experience or something that started to really inspire you or move you into this direction?

OH

You know, what it was, it's a professor that I had here at UCLA. Rick Brown is a professor at the Center for Health Sciences Public Health School, and his wife Marianne, actually. She was a health educator. When I took their class on community organizing and health education, it like totally opened my eyes, totally opened my eyes. The seminars that we would have to look at, okay, what are we talking about here in terms of the epidemiological evidence and the options that are at our disposal to change the morbidity and the mortality rates that we're seeing. You know, and it became very clear that it was about money.

CLINE

Right, like so many things.

OH

And ever since then I realize it's always about money when we're talking about any institutional structure. And I've come, at this stage in my life, to see money as a very important source of energy, and that's it, you know. It is truly an amazing source of energy, and the more you have, the more you can do, just like any other energy force, right, energy source. But the unique thing about money is that because of the role that it plays in our lives, it literally can call life or death, right? So it just happened--I mean, and to me this is karma, that I would take--you know, my parents had always wanted me to be in the health professions field, but I never was particularly interested. I was always interested in what makes people tick, and, you know, if I was going to do anything academically, it probably would have been in sociology, because I'm interested in how human beings move with and around each other. So for me to end up in public health, it was sort of an interesting combination of those things that I was naturally interested in and it was kind of like, okay, I'm kind of in health, like what you would like. But, ironically, what it did was it really showed me sort of how unjust human society is, because we're willing to trade off lives for money, and we do it all the time. I mean, that's what all of the environmental disasters represent. We're willing to trade off the life of Mother Earth to extract the oil or other natural resource that will generate money for those companies that are in that business. We are willing to let people die even though we have treatments, because they don't have money to get the treatment. And even if they have money, if they don't have enough money, they won't get enough to take care of--I mean, because people all the time get cut off from their healthcare because the policy reaches its policy limits, right? People lose a life or a part of their body, and we actually have experts that come into the courtroom and tell us how much that life was worth, and we expect a jury of twelve people who have never met the person, have no idea what their life is like, to listen to what evidence is allowed into a process called a trial, and they get to decide how much money you get. Right? It's all about money.

CLINE

Right. Politics is all about money, right? Influence is all about money, right?

CLINE

Yes.

OH

So I've come to have fun with it. [Cline laughs] No, I have. It's sort of like, you know, people need money. Okay, let's figure out the different ways that we can get you money, okay, if I believe in what you're doing, and if I don't, I won't spend the effort, you know, my personal energy. But if I do believe in what you're doing, oh, I'm going to spend a lot of energy figuring out ways to get

you money or some equivalent thereof, right? So I'm, at this stage in my life, having a lot of fun with this, although I see the critical nature, the crisis that is right in front of us. And frankly, I don't think this crisis is any worse than any other generation. Every generation faces this kind of crisis. It's just that in each generation there are those whose consciousness is there, and what can they do about it, you know. What can they do about it? For me, you know, I happen to be a female ethnic minority in this country and happen to be Korean in L.A. That has some significance, given the events that have occurred here. That's all karmic to me, right? And it's karmic to me also that I would choose a spiritual path, which I have found to be much more powerful than any political endeavor that I've ever been in, and I've been in the highest levels of political engagement in this country, actually, in the world, because when you engage at the White House, it's in the world, right?

CLINE

Right. Yes, well, we're going to get into all that stuff as we go along here.

OH

What time is it?

CLINE

Oh, we still have time.

OH

Oh, good.

CLINE

It's only a little after two. So you wound up in Sacramento with this organization. What was the name of the organization?

OH

It was the Federated Firefighters of California, and it's full-time professional firefighters.

CLINE

And this ultimately got you interested in studying law.

OH

Yes.

CLINE

How did that happen?

OH

Well, the organization is a labor organization, but it's based in Sacramento because it was engaged in politics, right? So the full-time firefighters have a lot of interests, right? They have their statutory rights as being part of the emergency response apparatus. For me, my portfolio was around health-related issues, so, you know, because of my background I was able to get into the analysis around occupationally related cancer, and we ended up getting a federal grant, our organization did, to educate all of the firefighters in the state

of California about the exposures that they were going to have on the job if they didn't wear their SCBAs [self-contained breathing apparatus], their personal breathing apparatus. So we also initiated sort of this tracking system where we were asking the firefighters to, you know, take the time after the response to figure out what kinds of things they were exposed to, because they were highly trained in terms of the hazardous materials that they would encounter. I happened to be engaged in that work at the point in which firefighters were learning this stuff and realizing that they needed to have special units created that would respond, because a lot of the fires would burn, and the chemicals that would come off of that were very toxic, life-threatening. So they had special hazmat [hazardous materials] units, started creating special procedures for how to, you know, clean up after themselves, both personally and in the areas where the disasters or the emergencies would happen. And in that whole process, working in the capital, you know, you got to see that, oh, it would be really good to be trained in the law, you know, not just work the politics of it, but--and I thought I wanted to do union side labor law, so I ended up going to law school.

CLINE

Okay, and you chose Davis because it was--

OH

Right there.

CLINE

--not too far away.

OH

Twelve miles, yes. [unclear]

CLINE

Okay. And were you then working and going to school?

OH

Yes.

CLINE

Oh, okay. All right. And you said you didn't want any distractions, so, okay.

OH

So I was working and going to school. My parents, you know, at that point, my parents had sort of given up, because I wasn't doing anything that they thought I was going to be doing. They were more focused on my younger siblings. But they were happy that I was in law school, yes.

CLINE

And what were your younger siblings doing at that point?

OH

They were in high school and junior high and grade school.

CLINE

So your academic career goes through a lot of changes. It's pretty long. What were your feelings about getting back into going into another subject, getting another degree, continuing your education?

OH

I still think about, you know, going back and getting another degree, but my friends in academics say, "You're crazy. You could come and teach in these programs." So I thought about--I actually did think about going back and finishing my doctorate in public health and doing something that looked at the intersection between health and public policy. And then I just, you know, realized that I don't know what I keep continuing to go back to get education for. I mean, like, you know, the Zen master [Tenshin Tanouye] that I ultimately ended up meeting used to make fun of people that would go after degree after degree after degree. It's sort of like, you know, do you think graduating goes like this, you know? That's not what it is, you know. And he would talk about how the more formal education a person had, the harder it was to get them to the place they needed to be as human beings, you know, spiritually, because you've been given so much capacity to rationalize, and it's all about what you think, what you think, what you think, what you think, right?

CLINE

Yes. Views, yes.

OH

Right. Especially in the vein that I am studying, which is Zen, I mean, the bottom line is that, you know, you need to get out of the way, and the more educated you are, the more, you know, you are there, right?

CLINE

Interesting. So you're in law school. How did you like being a law student?

OH

I loved it.

CLINE

Yes?

OH

Yes, I really enjoyed it. I saw an old--I mean, there was a friend of mine. I remember his name was Jeff Steinhart, and, you know, he was an activist in the Bay Area around farmworker health and safety, and so both of us had been told by a mutual friend to look for each other the first day of school, and we found each other right away, and we were very close all through law school. He ended up being Order of the Coif, which is the highest honor that you can get in law school. I recognized him because he was the only guy with a ponytail down the middle of his back and a big, full-on beard. And he recognized me because, you know, I'm Asian American. Actually, we had a lot of Asians in our class, but anyway--and, you know, he was just really brilliant. He was brilliant and ended

up working for Microsoft before it was a big deal, up in Washington. Now I think he's living in London. But his wife was an arts curator or something like that, and, you know, we had a lot of fun in law school. I had a lot of fun in law school. It was hard. I never looked at my grades. I got very involved in protests around the UCs' [Universities of California] investments in South Africa, so was prosecuted by the L.A. County DA's office. Didn't plead out, got convicted, had, you know, my dean threaten not to sign my certificate of moral suitability to be a member of the bar [California State Bar], because I wouldn't take a plea bargain. But got through all of the clearances, all the way up through the White House, with a conviction on my record.

CLINE

Wow.

OH

And that was a conviction--I remember that the lawyer who represented us was a guy named Luke Hiken, and he and his wife Marti [Hiken] were huge anti-war activists in the Vietnam era, and he was a National Lawyers Guild lawyer. He represented all five of us who refused to plead out, and he said to me, "Angela, I know it's really scary, and I know you're thinking that you should take a deal because, you know, you're in your last year or whatever, but believe me, someday you are going to wear this conviction as a badge of honor." And he was right. He was totally right. I listened to the advice of counsel.

CLINE

Wow. So you had said earlier, when you graduated from law school was in the early eighties?

OH

Yes, it was in the mid-eighties, and I thought I wanted to stay in northern California. At that point my family really wanted me to come back to southern California. I didn't apply to any law firm jobs or anything. I really knew I wanted to work with labor, so I had a job in southern California lined up after a campaign. I got involved with this political campaign. They had this initiative. What was it called? It was the English-only initiative, and I was assigned to organize in San Diego County, so I did, and it was a great experience. From graduation through election, which was only half a year, I did my organizing thing, and then I started the job with this labor-side firm. Then I ended up switching jobs probably three times. The firm that I first got the job with was in the middle of a partnership breakup, and then the second firm, which was also a union-side firm, public sector, was retained mostly by law enforcement, and I really didn't like the caseload, because those cases involved brutality or insubordination, and those were my clients. I didn't feel I could do my best work in that context. So I kept looking, and I found another job with a small

firm where I eventually became a partner. Mark Beck [phonetic] had been a former federal prosecutor and now was doing defense work.

CLINE

And where was that? Here?

OH

In downtown L.A., and it was probably in the--I don't know--'87 or '88, something like that.

CLINE

Before we get back to that, I wanted to ask you, so you were working in Sacramento for a while.

OH

Yes.

CLINE

Who was governor at that point?

OH

Oh, god. [Edmund G.] "Jerry" Brown?

CLINE

He was still governor then?

OH

I think it was Jerry. I think it was Jerry when I first got there, yes.

CLINE

And then it would have been [George] Deukmejian after that?

OH

Right, Deukmejian after that.

CLINE

What was your impression of--

OH

Sacramento?

CLINE

--the situation in Sacramento? Yes.

OH

Well, for me, you know, our president was a really well received guy, right? The firefighters. Don't forget, the firefighters, too, ironically, they're the ones from whom the best employment discrimination cases came, because they were being sued all the time for race and gender discrimination, and because of their bad behavior we got a lot of things opened up. So while I was with the firefighters, I worked a lot with the joint apprenticeship program, training and apprenticeship program, which was staffed heavily by African American folks who came in and made sure that black and Latino and Asian and women candidates got entry into these jobs that were usually generationally handed down from father to son to grandson kind of thing.

CLINE

Wow.

OH

And my impression at the time was that the union was really powerful. Organized labor was very powerful. And at the time that I was up there I was doing some community organizing within the API [Asian Pacific Islanders] community around anti-Asian violence, hate crimes, what they call hate crimes now. So I had a lot of contact with the Davis City Council, the county elects, and the state reps from our community, not so much the governor's house. That would have been the president of the union that had more contact with the governor and cabinet secretaries and stuff.

CLINE

So you come back down to Southern California, and you're in now a firm in downtown L.A.

OH

Yes.

CLINE

I'm thinking you had to come back once in a while anyway to see your folks, but I'm curious to know what your impression was about the growth of the Korean American community when you come back down here, by the later eighties, especially, things start to get pretty noticeable.

OH

Right. Yes, yes. We had a group that had been started by a guy named T. S. [Tong Soo] Chung, called the Korean American Coalition, so I got involved with that. You know, I think I was really seen even back then as being more radical than most at the time. I didn't think of myself as very radical, but I think for the Korean community that was here, I was viewed as kind of really radical. But they wanted me to be involved, so I stayed involved for a while. Then I got involved with the Korean women's community more, because I felt like there was more of a natural interest on my part. I found myself just really liking a lot of the women that I met and wanting to do stuff with them, so that's what I did. I got more involved with the Korean women's groups.

CLINE

Okay. Well, before you go into that, one of the things I was actually going to ask you immediately was how you perceived your acceptance or your amount of influence in the community, considering the fact that you were a woman, particularly, not just a so-called radical?

OH

Yes. No, because I knew T. S. and he knew me, and there were some others, like Charles Kim and Tony [Anthony] Kim, and I just knew these guys from before, so, on a personal level, I felt very accepted, right? Even if we had

different points of view, we were friends, and so we would, you know, do stuff together. After a while I didn't want to do sort of the voter registration and that kind of work. I didn't, at the time, believe in electoral politics so much as I did in issue politics. I was much more interested in issues than candidates, so--they were interested in candidates, I think because they were trying to get more involved in sort of the body politic, the formal body politic here, and I wasn't as interested in that. I was interested in issues.

CLINE

Right. I was thinking more just the community itself.

OH

Oh, socially.

CLINE

Yes, socially, not just the Korean American Coalition guys.

OH

Yes, yes. No, I don't think that I was viewed as anything, really. No, because I was a lawyer. It's like separate, you know, second-generation, don't get engaged with the church, not engaged with, really, anything that was immigrant first generation.

CLINE

Right. Well, all of these things, to me, I would have thought might have created some kind of a vibe, if you will. I mean, you don't--

OH

I'm too numb. I don't feel like that. [laughs]

CLINE

Okay. Because you don't fit sort of the mold very well, in almost any area.

OH

Right. Right.

CLINE

Since most of the guys you mention were so-called 1.5 generation, men, and as you said, more interested in maybe developing a voice in the mainstream political arena, locally or otherwise.

OH

Right.

CLINE

Maybe getting the community more aware of how to do that, the importance of doing that. So you decided to get involved more on the women's end of things. What form did that take?

OH

There was a group called the Women's Organization Reaching Koreans, and we were more involved with service and, you know, the community, I guess community needs, you know, like I remember for Children's Day we'd offer a

special program, and then we'd get the local police involved and do fingerprinting cards and explain to parents why this was important. We would host programs for women on different issues, like if there was a visitor coming over that would talk about family violence, we would, you know, host that kind of a program. Or we would do things that were trying to do cultural exchange, more cultural exchange kinds of things. So it was very much not political and much more about the people living here and what some of the more practical needs were on a day-to-day basis. That's how I met like the Korean Youth Center [now Koreatown Youth and Community Center] people. They were doing counseling for kids that were having trouble in school, having trouble with transitioning from one culture to integrate into another culture but maintain their heritage. Food, you know, like starting to look at cuisine, which has turned out to be a big link, right, big bridge-building device. So that's the sort of thing.

CLINE

Okay. And what was your feeling about Koreatown as it was starting to grow?

OH

I thought it was very cool that we had this whole center now, that it was more than the Olympic Market, which is all that we had when I was growing up, right? My grandmother's house, where a lot of students would come, exchange students would come, and she would cook meals for them, and we'd have like, you know, people always in the living room and dining room, talking and doing all kinds of interesting things. And then now we're starting to have more than one market, restaurants, you know, different businesses, dry good businesses, you know. It's all starting to sprout up.

CLINE

Yes, and what about the issue of the sort of positioning of the community in terms of the larger L.A. community, who it was serving, how much connection or interaction it had with the non-Korean community?

OH

Well, that's the interesting thing. I think with the Korean community it begins to blossom at a time when--I mean, you certainly had, you know, the pre-third wave kind of families, like, you know, the Ahn-Cuddy family, the Shan family, the Kims, you know. There were certain families that had been around a long time and always were being confused for being Chinese or Japanese, right? That's their experience. They weren't Chinese. They weren't Japanese. Even in my growing-up years, it was Chinese, Japanese. What's Korean, you know? But by the time my siblings are coming up, it's a non-issue, because there are Korean community camps for youth. They're starting to learn about their heritage, their culture. They're getting more engaged in sort of what is politics here, and it's not as big of a risk, and by the way, you almost have to do it.

Otherwise, you know, you could get squelched. But still the community was very insular. The churches were the main centers of activity and interaction, especially for newcomers. It continues to be the case today, and that makes all of the sense, right? Even though in Korea 50 percent of the population or more is Buddhist, here that's not the case.

CLINE

Not at all.

OH

A lot of Christians, you know, transplant themselves. I don't know what that is. You know, some scholar probably has studied this phenomenon, but, you know, here it's like 90 percent Christian, and not only that, evangelical Christian, the vast majority. You know, they're not satisfied with they found God. They want the rest of the world to find God.

CLINE

Right, including those poor Buddhist Koreans in their community, the few there are.

OH

Yes, right. So they're very, very focused still around the social interactions and, you know, survival, vis-à-vis the church. And I think that's okay. I mean, you know, this to me is not a surprise. I remember that, you know, after all of the burning in '92 here in L.A., I found myself going to the Unitarian Church, you know, on Eighth Street, and just sitting there for hours and hours and hours, and trying to figure out what is happening and what should be the next thing. So I naturally went to a church, you know.

CLINE

Right. Interesting. We'll get to that part, too, the '92 piece.

OH

But anyway, you know, at the time I really didn't have a sense of what anybody thought of me. I mean, I was nobody. I'd just come back, and practicing law in the Beck, De Corso firm [Beck, De Corso, Daly, Barrera, and Oh], and active in the community. After a few years of practice realizing that, you know, okay, time for me to get, you know, my volunteer energy going again, and so the natural place was, you know, places like the Asian Bar [Association] and the Korean American community.

CLINE

Right. And what about any rumblings or pressure coming from your parents regarding matrimony, especially that you're the oldest, right?

OH

Right, right, and, you know, of course, I really grew up during that period where why get married. And, actually, being divorced now, it feels like yes, why did I do that, except it was a good thing to do. It was a good thing to do, I

think, you know. My ex and I are certainly still very good friends, and we will be there for each other, I think, in times of crisis. But I feel like, when I think about that period, my parents were concerned, but I think because I had two younger sisters, who are three and five years younger, they were looking at those questions for them, too, and the likelihood of them getting married was clearly greater than me. So they didn't bother me too much about it. I mean, when I finally did decide to get married, they were, you know, genuinely happy for me, but it wasn't like they were worrying about it. But I did experience--you know, in speaking with a lot of Korean American women, this is an issue for them. It's a big issue.

CLINE

Oh, yes, not to mention all the matchmaking and all the heavy social and even economic side of it.

OH

That's right. I mean, but, you know, if you're going to have eHarmony do it, why not have people who really know you do it? Right?

CLINE

Right. [laughs]

OH

I mean, think about how many millions of people use eHarmony. Now, why would you entrust some computer program and, you know--and the only reason why it works, I think is because you have a global pool now, and people are that mobile and that open to it. But to me it always sounded odd that you would go to a dating service that's a commercial enterprise, if you had people who care about you and love you willing to do it without a charge. Right? I mean, who knows you better?

CLINE

Yes. Okay. So you're in a law firm in downtown L.A. We're now in the late eighties. One thing that, just for the record, we haven't mentioned yet is what it is that created this influx of immigration from Korea, which happened during the time you were living in the San Fernando Valley, which is the change in the federal immigration laws in '65. If you have any idea, what was your parents' sense of this, or the feeling about this sudden influx of Koreans? I mean, maybe not so much in the Valley at that point.

OH

I don't remember there being any sense of it. I do remember lots of trips to LAX [Los Angeles International Airport] to pick up a cousin, to pick up an auntie, to pick up another cousin, to pick up another cousin, to pick up another cousin--you know, there were a lot of people coming--and housing them for a little while. But in our family, every single one of them, it was just a matter of days before they were off doing their own thing. So, you know, many cousins

came through my parents, but it was sort of a non-issue. You just help your family if they want to come.

CLINE

Right. Were there more trips to Koreatown as it grew?

OH

I remember trips to LAX, but not so much to Koreatown.

CLINE

And your grandfather's church, I would have to think, is growing pretty--

OH

Oh, yes. I mean, my grandfather actually ended up leaving L.A. You know, it was sort of a big scandal, as I understand it, but he ended up divorcing my grandmother and moving to Maryland with his new wife. Then he came back much later, and he built the first senior housing for Koreans in L.A.

CLINE

So when would this have happened?

OH

That happened after I got back from law school, so it would have been in the late eighties, early nineties, yes. It's over near Langer's Delicatessen, right?

CLINE

Oh, yes, near MacArthur Park?

OH

Near there, yes. There's a--I think it's called Evergreen or Pine Gardens or something. You know, it's a senior housing. And when he came back from being in the East for so many years, he was known as the English-speaking grandfather in the Korean community. That's what the translation was of how they would identify him. He spoke English fluently, you know. He studied at Cornell [University] for his divinity degree, so he was very--he spoke Japanese, English, and Korean beautifully, all three languages. Yes.

CLINE

So we're just leading up to the milestone of the '92 riots, but I think we'll get into that next time.

OH

Okay.

CLINE

Because, obviously, that's a fairly large topic, and I don't want to have to cut it off. The only thing I wanted to try to finish with today is, during this time--I mentioned earlier, you know, kind of coming out of the sixties popular culture, changes and all of that, was there anything in particular that you remember that affected you sort of culturally in terms of like music or art or media or anything that stands out for you that's had a lasting impact on you?

OH

I think the music of the era, but I can't tell you exactly what. You know, I'm trying to think. I mean, I can't tell you what music exactly, but I know that for me the music of that era, it just sort of brings back a lot of recollection, you know, just sort of really visceral feelings about that time. I hear tinges of that kind of music today, but not too much, not too much. There really wasn't anything in particular that I can think of when you ask me that question sitting here today.

CLINE

It tends to come up, you know, I mean, in things like TV shows. You know, people remember things that really stand out. But it doesn't sound like you were much of a TV watcher.

OH

I wasn't. I wasn't. I think we had to practice piano a lot. No, I'm trying to think if there's anything, really, and there really wasn't.

CLINE

So I'll end by just asking where you were, what you remember about 1968, the assassinations of both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert [F.] Kennedy.

OH

Oh, yes. I just remember being sent home from school, and my mom really being broken up about the shooting of President [John F.] Kennedy, you know.

CLINE

Oh, earlier, of President Kennedy.

OH

Right. Right. And I didn't really understand what that was about. I really didn't understand it. The same with Dr. King's assassination. It's like, you know, oh, my god, this has happened, but I didn't really understand what that was about. It's so interesting to me, because, you know, I end up at a school that's named after him. I ended up getting into a big fight in law school with another faction of the law student body who wanted to put up a memorial for Challenger VII [space shuttle]. Remember when all of those people perished? And it was a horrible thing, but we hadn't put up anything for Dr. King, right? And so it spurred a movement among my class to commission a statue, a life-size statue, of Dr. King. I remember that being one of the first times where, for me as a student, this whole balancing about what the country stands for and what we should value and all of that stuff, happened in this little microcosm at the UC Davis law school, right? It was really interesting.

CLINE

Interesting.

OH

Yes.

CLINE

My last question, what do you remember about surviving the Sylmar earthquake then? Were you at home then?

OH

I was, and I just remember my mom kind of really panicking and trying to get down the hallway, because I came out of my room, which was right across from my brother's, and he was still in sort of, I think, a--not a--well, sort of a crib, and she was trying to get into his room. That's what I remember.

CLINE

I see. Wow.

OH

Thankfully, not a lot of damage sustained. Not a lot of damage, but I do remember the whole house was moving, you know.

CLINE

Right. Yes. For people who aren't familiar with the area, where you were in Granada Hills is really virtually next door to Sylmar.

OH

It is.

CLINE

It's right across the 405 Freeway.

OH

That's right. That's right. That's right.

CLINE

Okay. Because I remember it, too, but I wasn't living in Granada Hills.

OH

Oh. Where were you living?

CLINE

West L.A., yes.

OH

Oh. Did you feel it out there, most of it?

CLINE

Oh, yes, it was really intense.

OH

Oh, yes. Yes, we really felt it. We really felt it.

CLINE

Yes, and later, not much later, met a guy who actually played in a group that I was in at the time who lived in Granada Hills, and you didn't even mention the earthquake in his house.

OH

It was that traumatizing?

CLINE

Yes. It was referred to as "it," you know. It was one of those things.

OH

Oh, wow.

CLINE

They still had a huge crack going through their kitchen floor from the earthquake, and, you know.

OH

Yes, we were so fortunate. We had some things break, but no structural damage at all, and I remember us going to our friends, the Hos. They lived in this really nice house up on the hill farther north, and the staircase had come away from the wall.

CLINE

Right.

OH

So they were like trapped. The mother was trapped upstairs. I mean, it was pretty crazy. It was pretty crazy. But, you know--

CLINE

That's southern California for you.

OH

Yes. Yes.

CLINE

Okay, well, thanks for today. We'll talk about when the next session can be, and we'll move forward with the '92 riots.

OH

Okay. [End of interview]

1.3. Session Three (February 16, 2010)

CLINE

Okay, the machine is working. Today is February 16, 2010. We're in the conference room in the College Library here at UCLA. As Angela was saying, we're looking at beautiful trees, a westward view across the UCLA campus. We had just got through a weekend that was simultaneously Lunar New Year, Valentine's Day, President's Day, the beginning of the Winter Olympics, and today is Mardi Gras. Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday. It's a heavy week here on planet earth. Thank you for taking some time to talk some more, and we'll endeavor to get you out of here in a timely fashion. Last time we were talking about--well, we ended with your career in law, working for a law firm at that point in the late eighties here in Los Angeles. That also led us into a discussion of the growth of the Korean American community in L.A. around that time, the development of Koreatown, and this leads us right into what happened in 1992. But before we get to that, I wanted to ask you sort of your impression on the

Soon Ja Du case that happened just before that, which gets kind of overlooked, I think, in a lot of the discussion that some of the people that I've talked with have engaged in. People tend to forget about that particular incident. What was your sense of sort of the climate in the Korean American community in the early nineties or in the period leading up to 1992, particularly in relation to their involvement or lack thereof with the surrounding communities, communities that they lived next to and some of the people that oftentimes they hired to work in their businesses here in Los Angeles?

OH

Before 1992, just before 1992, and when I say just before, I'm referencing a few years, we had a thriving ethnic community in Los Angeles, already a consciousness of its size and of its presence outside of Seoul, Korea, as being significant. And the Soon Ja Du case, which you just mentioned, was very much in my mind at that time, just when everything imploded in April of '92. In fact, it was immediately a part of my analysis of what led to the really extraordinary level of antipathy toward Korean immigrant families who owned businesses in a time when we were in recession, and really didn't have an awareness of, I think, the suffering that people were feeling in relation to not having jobs, having a desire to work, being willing to work. And then the justice system just didn't produce what a lot of people, not just, you know, ethnic Koreans, but a lot of people, thought would be justice in the case where Latasha Harlins perished. You know, it was always characterized as a teenager shot over a bottle of orange juice. That's sort of what the headline news was. And you see that sort of headline and that kind of analysis over and over again, and yes, you feel a lot of confusion at best, and enmity at worst, toward people you don't know, whose circumstances you have no idea about, you know. And there wasn't a cohesive sense of Korean American identity beyond small pockets. If you were active with the Korean Federation, of course you had a strong identity. If you were active with the church, of course you had a strong identity. If you were active with the chamber of commerce, of course you had a strong identity. But really, as a whole, across all of those sectors within the community, there was no sense of Korean Americanness. And what the implications might be of having an ethnic identity suddenly emerge, which is what happened in '92, in my opinion. A community consciousness, I used to call it. That term got coined a lot after those initial public statements, I think, that I would make about, you know, who we are in this society and how far your pride can take you, right? It's really not about ethnic pride, and you used to see a lot of young people put that kind of language across their backpacks or books or T-shirts. I mean, I guess that's one level of developing an identity. Of course you have to be secure in that identity. I'm not sure pride is the right word, especially given all we know today about what that means. So Soon Ja

Du's case was significant, because you had the ultimate division finally occur between two groups that had been, in the media, I think, very much played against each other, and so, of course, if that's what you see, that's what you pick up, and you don't have the ability to penetrate much deeper than that. Most people don't have time in their day, right, to go beyond what they read in the headlines. Those of us who have been the subject of headlines know that what you read in the paper sometimes scratches the surface and sometimes misses the mark altogether, right? So I'm always skeptical about, you know, what I read and hear in the--quote--"news," because, you know, I'm very aware of the fact that what I get is a piece of reality. That's all any of us can get, anyway, when we go through third parties. But in those days, for me, the Soon Ja Du case was very significant, in part because I was a criminal defense lawyer. I remember getting a call at my office, and it was probably late in the afternoon. People from the media wanted a reaction from me, and to be frank, I'm not sure how it was that people wanted a reaction from me. I'm trying to remember what I was doing. I was active in the community. I had done some work with the Langston Bar [Association]--John M. Langston is the African American bar Association--and the Korean American Bar [Association]. We had gotten together to try and do some public education around the justice system, rules of evidence, understanding, you know, the process, criminal procedure, and sort of educating within our own as much as we were educating the general public. We had forums downtown where we invited very, very significant people in the law who had, you know, written books about evidence and had written treatises about criminal procedure, and we'd co-hosted these public education efforts. So I received the call, and I heard that Judge [Joyce] Karlin had granted probation, which really surprised me. Now, you have to remember, at the time I was doing defense work in the criminal arena, so from that lens it was like, wow, what an enlightened judge. She actually followed the sentencing rules, because under the sentencing rules in the state of California, you're to take into consideration the characteristics of the offence and then you take into consideration the characteristics of the individual defendant, and you're supposed to come up with what we would call a just sentence permissible under the law. And she certainly, you know, rendered a sentence that was permissible under law. It was just extraordinary, because of all of the pressure that she was facing, I thought. I mean, I had handled voluntary manslaughter cases, at that point in my career, where I had been granted probation. So, to me, it was like it took a strong judge and a judge who really read the papers that you would submit in connection with sentencing, to do what I would consider the right thing, because a voluntary manslaughter is not premeditated. It's not heat of passion. It is a wrongful death of the human being, but it is not to the level of malice, right? But because of the way the public was primed to believe that there was malice,

and I know that the lawyer who handled the case, in her defense, his career was ruined as a consequence, Charles Lloyd, an African American lawyer who was retained by the family to defend her. He was very experienced in the criminal courts, and he presented her defense and got, you know, I think any defense lawyer's best possible result, other than a not guilty, at the end of that proceeding. But he had people literally spit on him for representing her, from his own community, and I know this from his own words. I mean, we met, and he would talk to me about how difficult it was on this case. But when you really went into the evidence, I think, you know, the jury came to the conclusion that, yes, under the law this is a voluntary manslaughter, and it was not a defendant who's going to repeat this conduct. There was a lot of evidence introduced about her emotional and psychological state that was very fragile. The family was not well off enough to be able to hire outside people, so the family had to work the business themselves. The economy was down. There were tensions, resentments, and she was facing it every single day. And then there's just sort of the general experience of being in a population that is disenfranchised and has lots of reasons to be unhappy about life, and anybody that is available to express that unhappiness toward is going to be the unfortunate person to receive a lot of negative, you know, interaction, and that was her experience. And it was also the case that, in the evidence--you see, I had seen a tape that was much longer than the tape that was shown on TV, and in the longer tape, if you go beyond thirty seconds--and, you know, the tape on TV always showed the shooting itself. But if you looked at the tape before--and this is why I think the jury must have come to the conclusion that it did--you saw an exchange of words. You saw some finger pointing. You saw the bottle of orange juice slam down on the counter, and then a fist go flying of the young person basically smashing Mrs. Du in the face several times, so much so that her body is thrown back against the wall. And if you'll recall, when they televised her arraignment, her face was all black and blue. That was from the punches she took into her face from Latasha Harlins moments before the shooting. And I guess at trial she testified that the words were that she was going to go back and get, you know, her friends, and they'd be back and she'd be sorry.

CLINE

Wow.

OH

So, I mean, it was just a very high intensity situation that, of course, the public didn't get to see, right, because there's always a spin that one side, another side, another side, another side, needs to give, so facing reality is often very difficult, as I've learned. But anyway, Soon Ja Du comes up with a voluntary manslaughter, a grant of probation, very surprising. I mean, I would have

guessed that she would have at least been sent away for what we used to call a ninety-day observation that's in custody, so that the image of the person as she is remanded. And then in ninety days she comes out, and typically a person like that will come out with a mental health report that would suggest that she's not going to re-offend and that this was a unique situation and so on and so forth. But she would be in custody for some period of time. That didn't happen. And I, you know, one step removed, wondered why the more experienced judges would not have been counseled. I guess it's not really proper. I guess it's not really proper, but you know what happens. As a practical matter, they do talk. And she was a new judge, and she was from the federal system, not the state system, so that it was sort of like the perfect storm of everything that could have inflamed a situation coming together. So her career was also ruined, I think, as a judge. Many careers were ruined behind that case. And then people sort of decided--you know, because we got calls. The bar associations at the time got calls, and we were calling for calm, as were many religious leaders in town, and people were saying, "We still have an important case that's winding its way through the courts. Let's see if justice will be served at the end of the day." And, of course, we all know what happened in April of '92 when the not-guilty verdicts were rendered.

CLINE

Right. Yes. And what, before April of '92, was known or being discussed in relation to the cultural understanding between these two ethnic groups at the time, the Koreans and the African Americans here, that you were aware of?

OH

There was a Black-Korean Alliance that focused on race relations, cultural understanding, helping to educate the public about customs and practices that were acceptable in Korea but were read very differently here. So there was a lot of effort to try and educate people doing business in Los Angeles about appropriate ways to behave, customer service, customer relations. At the same time there was a lot of education in the community about new immigrant population from Korea and a place like that, and what the customs and practices are there that you need to not read as issues around respect or disrespect, but issues of customs around how people do business and how customers and vendors relate to each other. But it turns out that it was the biggest news when the Black-Korean Alliance dissolved. They always had a problem getting media about the programs that were successful, about things that were seeming to work. You know, it's sort of the old story that good news is no news. So a lot of the businesses, I think, ended up losing confidence in this alliance. And then there were all these tensions that were starting to grow around the immigrant-owned businesses contributing to the decay of the community because it was liquor licenses that were being issued in this area,

and it was a public health concern. And so that put the community at odds, because you're talking about people's only source of livelihood, and then you're talking about, you know, concern over the health and well-being of a community, and there was no channel for communicating, a way to figure out how do we work on this together, right? So it was always a "us against them" that emerged as the analysis in order to get people on either side to come alive and become active, I think, and so that became an issue also at the time. But as the [Rodney] King case wended its way through the criminal justice system, you know, people decided they'd wait and see, so--

CLINE

Yes, and then the verdict was read, and then we-- Right.

CLINE

Everyone saw. Where were you at that moment?

OH

I was in Koreatown, and I was doing a dinner meeting with a group of young people who were in Koreatown to learn more about the Korean community. It was a leadership program called the New Leaders Program. And I remember being there and getting, you know, beeped or--I forget. I don't remember if I had a phone at the time. I don't think I did. But somehow I knew I was supposed to get myself over to the First AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Church that evening, because the verdicts had been read. Maybe it was after work. Somebody had said, "As soon as you do whatever it is you're doing with this program in K-town, you need to get over to the church." So I finished answering questions and engaging the participants in that program at a restaurant in Koreatown, and I was about to leave, and as I was leaving, I remember seeing the news being broadcast in the bar area, and there was a reporter basically saying, "Everybody needs to get off the streets. It's dangerous. Things are burning. We're revisiting Watts, '65. That's what's happening here. You need to not be out on the roads. People should stay in their homes." So I thought, "Well, okay, I'm not going to go down to the AME Church." I lived in Mount Washington at the time, so I went from K-town to Mount Washington, and sure enough, I saw a lot of fires, a lot of chaos on the street. Flipped on the television, watched the television that whole night. And people were saying things would be under control by the next morning. Of course, they weren't. Things continued for several days after that.

CLINE

Right. And the image of Reginald Denny being pulled out of his truck, and then we saw that over and over and over and over, yes.

OH

All of that was on the news over and over and over again, yes. And in the meantime, we didn't see the images of a couple of other people who were also

pulled out of their cars, Asian Americans who also were beaten and--you know. They were taken for Korean. They weren't Korean. You know, there were other events that just didn't capture the media's attention. I think the media itself actually didn't know where to go or what to do. There was a total lack of understanding about the community, right? They'd been so used to covering sort of the nice events in town that they actually didn't even have people that knew the community well enough to be able to go in and get real stories or connected to what was happening. It took them a little while.

CLINE

Yes, and I was going to ask you what you thought of the media coverage of it. What about the city's response?

OH

Well, I think they were trying to scramble. I remember at the time that [then Police Chief] Daryl Gates was over on the west side of town and wasn't going to come back for this emergency, because, you know, he felt his command staff can handle it, I guess, which, of course, they couldn't. And, you know, it wasn't until a day or so later that I think he realized, "Yeah, this really is a situation that is serious." I know people who have since retired from the department who are very frustrated internally, command staff, because they could see the chaos from the inside, and the fear from the inside on the part of the police department. They just were not ready for this. So, you know, when people sort of suggest that an immigrant community should have been prepared, they should have known, to me that's laughable. I mean, the emergency response teams weren't prepared or didn't know and didn't have a clue. The leader of the emergency response team here in this city couldn't even be bothered once the violence and disruption erupted, couldn't be bothered to come back to headquarters, right? So, you know, my view of the way the city responded was negative initially, very negative.

CLINE

And then the images of Korean business owners with firearms protecting their businesses.

OH

Right.

CLINE

What were your feelings about that and what kind of a message that was sending?

OH

Well, I know that there's sort of this intellectual analysis, that it's a stereotype and it's unfair somehow to depict people in this way, because, you know, everyone would be broad-brush-painted as, you know, vigilantes or whatever. But as a person who was just here, living, working in the justice system, active

in the community, it was sensible for them to protect their--I mean, it was a chaotic situation, and they happened to be, some of them, apparently, hunters and veterans. They knew how to handle their firearms, and they were going to protect their stores. I mean, nobody else was, right?

CLINE

Right.

OH

And the fact that those images ran over and over again, I mean, that's what the media does, right? So you have to work very hard to provide other stories, right, that balance that, which is what I spent most of my time trying to do, because I knew that stuff was going to just take off. And so I tried as much as I could to sort of bring some balance back into that picture at the time.

CLINE

And what led to you sort of becoming a spokesperson for the community in the wake of this incredible upheaval?

OH

Again, I think it was a bunch of things that I never could have even, you know, imagined, but in retrospect, okay? So this is not reality. This is just like a memory. But I happened to be a criminal defense lawyer, and I knew the courts. I happened to be the president-elect of the Korean American Bar Association. I happened to be the president of the Women's Organization Reaching Koreans. I happened to be not a research attorney, but a trial lawyer. So my skill, if I have one as a lawyer, is to be able to speak to strangers. I can do that comfortably. And it just happened that I was involved with a group of lawyers in those days that were very concerned about police misconduct, and they had a roundtable that I used to go to, and I'd listen to what was happening, because I had a very strong and high interest in civil rights. And so a couple of my friends, who, actually, their cases were about bringing actions against officers who were using excessive force or had wrongfully killed somebody, in their view, I was part of that network, right? So I knew what the on-the-ground view was of the police in the eyes of mostly communities of color in Los Angeles, and their stories were often hidden, because they couldn't talk about their case while the case was pending, and if the case resolved and money was paid, they usually had confidentiality clauses that they had to honor. So, you know, I just had this background, and so I could see what was happening, and I had a certain skill set. And it happened that I was Korean, you know, born and raised here in L.A. I mean, what were the chances of all of those things coming together in one person in April of '92? You know, it's just sort of--and then I found that what I said in the initial interviews actually was repeated over and over and over again by others in the Korean community. But maybe that's the primacy effect, meaning that because I was the first one to say it, people just

kept coming back to me, kept coming. I was not saying anything different. A week and ten days into it, I wasn't saying anything different than lots of other people in the Korean community whose job it was to go to meetings and be an advocate for the Korean community. That was not my job, and I kept trying to kind of withdraw, because I thought, "Well, you know, I'm a lawyer, and there are other people who are leaders in this community that need to step forward and be the voice," but I couldn't step back. I mean, the calls just kept coming. The calls just kept coming. For a while I tried to just be sort of the pass-through to put them through to somebody else, but there was no interest in that, you know. And then, you know, people would call me anyway, that I would call and say, "Okay, now how should I frame this or--." So it just became more efficient to just be the person. And I didn't give myself that label. It was a label that was created and caused me some grief personally, because I got a lot of criticism for being labeled that way, right? So, you know--but that again is also a very important lesson for me about human nature, you know, and an important lesson for me about my own nature. So all of it was, you know--at this point it's just a memory.

CLINE

Who were the people that you were hoping would step forward, who were essentially people in the community?

OH

In the community, Jerry Yu. He was the executive director of the Korean American Coalition. Leaders of the Korean Federation.

CLINE

And that would have been first-generation Koreans.

OH

Yes. Then, I don't know, you had Bong Hwan Kim, who did step up to some extent, was heard. There was a young woman named Marsha Chu, who worked with the Dispute Resolution Center at the Asian Pacific Legal Center. There were professors who had--you know, their role really was to study the dynamics and the impact, I think, on the community, but Dr. Eui-Young Yu was a longtime person in L.A. who probably should have stepped up. K. W. Lee is a news media person, you know, and he did step up and I think was sort of really viewed as an important voice around the media issues. But, you know, those kinds of folks.

CLINE

What about ultimately the state response?

OH

Oh, the National Guard, yes.

CLINE

With the National Guard, yes.

OH

That was very ridiculous, because, I mean, they came, and they staged, and I don't think they were able to deploy, because they--something about ammunition. They didn't have ammunition for a couple of days or something, so they didn't want to deploy the National Guard until--and, of course, in those couple of days things just by natural rhythm slowed down, right? Fire departments began to enter spaces. The police got itself together, you know.

CLINE

All of this led to kind of a watershed moment on national television, Ted Koppel.

OH

Right. Right.

CLINE

How did that happen?

OH

You know, again, I don't know. I mean, different people tell me different stories. I have one young woman saying to me all the time, "I was the reason you got onto--." I never even used to watch Ted Koppel. It's too late. I was an early riser. But this young woman would say to me, "I'm the reason why you got on Ted Koppel, because I was an associate producer." Okay, well--and another person would say to me, "Well, I'm the reason why you got on Ted Koppel, because I organized the big demonstration at ABC [American Broadcasting Corporation]," which forced them to do--okay. Another person would say, "Well, I'm the reason why you were on Ted Koppel, because--." It's like, who is this Ted Koppel? He's a news guy. I mean, he's a late-night news guy, okay, you know. I just went on and had a conversation with him about reality as I saw it at that moment, you know.

CLINE

Okay, because there are some stories that basically suggest that there was no original plan to have a Korean American story.

OH

I don't even know that. I have no idea.

CLINE

Okay. Someone told me that.

OH

I think that originally Diane Watson went on the air, or some African American elected official, and John Mack, maybe, who was the head of the Urban League at the time, and they said some things that were very, very negative about the Korean community, and I think people reacted to that and said, "You need to have somebody speak." But I don't know what all the machinations were around that.

CLINE

So now the event has happened. This is the event that--I may be paraphrasing you, but in your book ["Open: One Woman's Journey"] you suggested that it sort of was the birth of the Korean American community in this country, and it certainly changed the Korean American community in Los Angeles. I know this is a huge question, but how would you describe the way these events changed the Korean community here in Los Angeles?

OH

Oh, well, first, I think they became really self-conscious, that no matter what sector I'm in, I'm a Korean American, period. Not, you know, Korean American X, Y, or Z, but I'm a Korean American. So there's that. There was an understanding, too, that no matter whether your personal experience is that the whole world is Korean, it's not. And so you began to understand very clearly what minuscule percentage of the population you are, which is important, I think, to understand context always. And then there was just the opening up of, I think, a consciousness that said yeah, we should be historians. We should be artists. We should be storytellers. We should be, you know, all these things that weren't okay to be before. We should be engaged in politics. We should consider it important to give something back to not just our community--that goes without saying--but the broader communities in which we live, right? There was a realization that there are intergenerational differences in points of view that are deep, within our own community, that now are highlighted, you know. Lots of things written, films made, studies undertaken. A community that had been totally not, you know, paid attention to suddenly becomes a community that needs to be studied and studied and studied, right? Survey and survey and survey. In the meantime, there's a whole different level of organizing that's going on, and then in between all of that are individual stories of families who have to go through the crisis of losing everything and realizing that they have no coverage when they thought they'd been paying insurance premiums all along. Their kids have to be yanked out of school. Their families are in turmoil. There's all kinds of stuff going on that, you know, sometimes made the media and sometimes didn't.

CLINE

Right. Yes. How did it change the leadership in the Korean American community here?

OH

You know, in terms of the people who got involved, I think the same people who got involved earlier stayed involved, maybe more deeply and as more experienced players. New people came who had a newfound passion for civic engagement. Folks were inspired to run for office. We have several, especially in Orange County, who have run for office and have won their races, which is

great. There is sort of a, I think, more textured analysis in all quarters about, you know, what community is and how we function and all of that. So all of that is really, I think, a product of having gone through this experience. You know, understanding what it is to be a minority in America. I think a recognition of that, too, a recognition of what the Civil Rights Movement was about really, something that you kind of heard of that--because most of the migration happened after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act and all of that, I mean, people who came on a day-to-day basis thought it was always like this, right? That you could have relief if you wanted for discrimination. But it wasn't always like that, right? So--in my lifetime it wasn't like that. Right. And then what about the form that some of the changes took, increase in community organizations, nonprofits, people addressing issues within the community?

OH

Yes.

CLINE

Perhaps a continuation of that racial dialogue that you said kind of had deteriorated shortly before the riots. How did that start to happen?

OH

Well, I think in all of the existing organizations there were probably some changes in their agendas about how they were going to function and what their purpose was and all of that, what their programming would look like, I think in terms of building bridges across race and ethnic divides, especially through the churches. I think the churches took a big leadership role in this regard. The community-based organizations adopted leadership development programs and started educating the next generation of leaders about, you know, what it means to be a leader, first of all, and infused that with Korean American culture and history. So all of that, I think, emerged post '92.

CLINE

How would you describe the role that language plays in all this? Certainly this is a big divide generationally, and certainly in relation to non-Korean communities in the city. How do you see the younger generations handling all this at this point?

OH

Well, it's much easier, I think, to maintain language today, because of technology and access, really, to materials and to experiences and to the fact that there's an infrastructure now of Korean identity that's accessible right here. In the years that I was growing up there was none of that, none of that. I mean, you could have some language access through the churches, but, you know, if your parents are working a couple of jobs, you're not going to go to church on Sunday for a while, right? So there's, you know, I think, less of a divide in

today's younger generation than there was in my generation. There are very few second-generation Korean people in L.A. that are my age, very few. Most people my age are definitely first-generation immigrants. So I'm an unusual cat, right? There aren't too many of us. So I don't know. My perception is that the younger generation is much more rooted in the language and culture of Korea, and, you know, bring it back and forth, can do it back and forth. We have publications now that sort of highlight the intercontinental exchange. We have musicians and actors and, you know, all this stuff that, really, I think it's important, it's deep, in shaping a person's sense of self in this conventional world, and so I don't know. I just think that probably kids today who are ethnic Korean have a much--well, if they want--a much larger opportunity to stay connected, if that's the identity that they want to really cultivate, right?

CLINE

Right. Yes, and there's certainly a lot in this country to attract you away from that, too.

OH

Yes. Yes. That's true.

CLINE

How can you describe what this huge watermark event, the riots, how they affected you personally and how it changed your life?

OH

Well, let's see. It took a lot of time. It probably derailed my practice. I had many opportunities to move into politics, and I never really had an interest. I mean, I had elected officials sit me down and say to me, "You need to run because--." But I am not a politician, really. I mean, I would be terrible at it, and I'm not inclined to put myself in the position of constantly having to ask for money, which I understood. Even at that early part in my career, I knew what politics was. It was about money. It's about money, and it's about votes, money and votes, money and votes. And more and more, it's about money. I mean, as you see, in the Supreme Court recently, you know. Corporations can do endless contributions. They have free-speech rights, you know. And it's an oddity, because they, of course, only exist because we allow them to exist under law. They have rights and responsibilities under the law, because they are the ultimate fiction in terms of, you know, a person, right? You know, corporations are persons under the law. So the analysis that would say yes--I mean, I haven't read the Supreme Court decision, but it didn't surprise or shock me at all when I heard. I mean, it was disappointing, very disappointing because of what the implications are. But, see, I understood that about politics very early on. It's about money, and it's about power, and two things that I think bring out the worst in human beings, power and money. Why would I want to go there? And I couldn't say it so directly at the time to people that were pushing me, because

they, of course, wrapped themselves in the belief that you're serving the public and you're, you know, sacrificing so much. Yes, you do sacrifice a lot in terms of your privacy, but, you know, if you're very skilled at it and you succeed, you get extraordinary benefits. If you succeed in politics, you get the best health insurance available. You get a terrific retirement plan. You build a network of people who will make sure--if you play politics right, who will make sure that you, and not just you, but people close to you, will do well. And all of that, to me, is of no interest. I don't know why, but I was very clear even in those days that the purpose of my life is something very different from that. And I feel I do help people, and I do serve society, and I do serve the community in very important ways by simply being who I am, right, which is not a politician.

CLINE

Yes, although for a while there you certainly were on the public stage, as it were, and certainly coming under scrutiny by your own community.

OH

Oh, yes.

CLINE

Here you are, a second-generation Korean American woman, seemingly voicing a particular point of view that, obviously, not everyone is going to agree with. There was at the time, I think, based on what we were just talking about, a decidedly first-generation presence in terms of the leadership in the community, linguistically Korean, and suddenly all that changed, and, in a way, you kind of personified that change. What kind of impact did that have on you in terms of your role in the community or the view of you in the community?

OH

Well, I didn't feel like I was a leader in the Korean community. That's the thing. It's like everyone else kept calling me that, but I kept thinking, "I'm not a leader in the Korean community." I might be a leader in the Asian American Bar. I might be a leader in the Korean women's community, with second-generation women, mostly. But I was definitely not a leader of the Korean community, and if people sort of had that impression, it certainly wasn't one that I was pursuing. I was very aware that, and I used to say it, I think, publicly, that I am not a reflection of the majority of Koreans living in L.A. today. I am not, right? I understand the issues, because I grew up with a lot of them, and I understand the concern for taking care of first-generation immigrants because of the struggles they face. But I had no illusion that I was a leader in the Korean community. But, you know, again, there are some things that are just beyond your control. Certainly that was one of the things that was beyond my control, and yet, you know, I felt like it was important for there to be a progressive Korean American voice, because I don't think that--in fact, now that you're asking me the question, I'm thinking maybe that's why I became so visible,

because my message, you know the packaging doesn't--there's a cognitive dissonance between the package, what I'm supposed to be, given what you see, and then what I'm saying and where I'm coming from. Maybe that's the piece that caused people to keep coming back, because, you know--let me also go back to this question of politicians. I have to say that I would have to honor the choice that a person makes to be a politician, because they must know the things that I just said about the difficulty of the work, and yet they go forward. And what their drive is to do that may truly be they want to serve the public. But I have to hand it to anybody that can make that a career, because at the end of the day you are making decisions, I think, that are very, very difficult and not, you know, the ideal that people hold out.

CLINE

Right. Huge compromises.

OH

We're seeing this right now with the president [Barack H. Obama], right? It's a very difficult position for him, because he's not in control. The process is in control. The individuals, yes, they contribute to the process, but there are so many layers that you have to negotiate and navigate. That's why huge dollars get paid to lobbyists and strategists who can navigate those waters. And in the end, you know, the good guys, I can't say, standing where I do today in history, that the good guys have won, really, on any front, on any front, you know. The condition of people's lives here and around the globe, tough, very tough. So when I think about, you know, the impact and my own sort of visibility as this spokesperson, you know, I come to this. I am Korean. I did grow up as an early pioneer family in L.A. when there were no Koreans to speak of here. So in that regard, I cut ground for people. I'm probably one of the earliest women to study law and to actually become a trial lawyer, you know. Research lawyer, one thing. Transactional lawyer, another thing. Corporate lawyer, another thing. To be a criminal defense lawyer, I think that I was pretty much a pioneer in that arena, and to do it as a private practitioner, not as a government lawyer, pretty unusual. You see, I'm looking at all of this, thinking, "So in a way, I am a part of the Korean community." I'm just a very unusual part, right? And I am very clear that my experiences are valuable for people beyond the Korean community to know, right, because I'm just dumb enough to go ahead and do things that continue to cut a way, cut a path. I just know that, and I know now it's not courage. It's I'm just dumb enough to do it, because I don't know any better, and I follow my instincts, which I hope are mostly good. Like I keep thinking, "Well, this will help people if I do this," or, "This will open a door if I do this." And sometimes that proves to be correct, and sometimes it proves to be not correct. But in terms of the impact of all of that on me, it pretty much, you know, sidetracked my career as a lawyer. In some ways I couldn't continue

to practice law. People thought I could perform miracles because of the fables that grew up around. You know, I would get calls from out of state to represent people in a different state around personal injury, which I had no interest in. "But you're Angela Oh. You can do this." Right? "No, I can't. You need to hire a lawyer that's--." You know, it's like an individual education process. But one thing I can say is, I feel like I see things very clearly, very clearly. So these days when people ask me questions about their life or whatever, what I see, I always ask first, "Do you really want to know what I see? Because if you don't have the ability to hear it--." And sometimes I assess for myself, "This person can't hear the truth," so I just keep my mouth shut.

CLINE

Right. It did open a particular door for you that put you in a presidential appointment.

OH

Yes, it did, because I was so visible. I think so. I think so.

CLINE

Describe how that came about and what your feelings were about it. Clearly, something you accepted at the time.

OH

Yes, it was in the area of race relations, and I was very interested in that. And as I understand it--you never really know how these things come about. Again, I didn't pursue it. I was contacted by two different people at the White House, and one didn't know the other had contacted me. Apparently, the president [William J. Clinton] was trying to get input from several sources about who from the Asian American community should come. And then I heard the story when I got there that he had seen me speak, and he really wanted me to be engaged with this initiative, because he could hear from my analysis that I understood the civil rights history of this country and the primacy of the African American experience in this country. That was my analysis. I wasn't out there saying Korean Americans need justice because, you know, we got hit in 1992. My analysis went way back, you know. So I think he said, "She gets it. Talk to her. Find out more about her." I think that's what happened. I don't know, you know. All I know is I got calls from two different people, both of whom said, "Please do not tell anybody that you've received this call. It's just exploratory. But the president has a huge initiative [President's Initiative on Race]. You are in his sights. Would you accept and could you accept if he were to appoint you?" And actually, at the time my senior partner had said to me, "Don't waste your time." Because, you know, it wasn't going to generate business, right? It's not the sort of appointment that generates business. So anybody that thinks that, you know, I made money off of this is crazy. I mean, that's just nuts, right? So anyway, so I went, and I did the initiative. It was an

extraordinary experience, and then it ended. It wasn't a particularly successful initiative, because of [Monica] Lewinsky and a lot of other things that were happening with the presidency at the time. So, you know, it was extraordinary in terms of just having the ability to engage the nation around a discussion around race relations, for sure, and I felt that that was a huge, huge privilege to be able to be a part of something like that on behalf of the American people. Whether you believe in the subject matter or not, I mean, it's proven today to be a huge issue.

CLINE

Yes, absolutely.

OH

It continues to be, you know.

CLINE

Yes, I was going to mention that, in fact. Race still being, despite a particularly memorable speech by our current president before he was actually elected, it's almost a taboo subject to really discuss in depth, I think, still to this day. It's so charged, and there's so much confusion around it. Now, just jumping forward a little bit, you know, we have an African American president at the moment. Looking back on your experience as part of that initiative, where would you think, if anywhere, we have come since the riots and since your experience with that initiative and since electing an African American president, in terms of this country's perception surrounding issues of race?

OH

Well, you know, I'm one who believes we've made some progress, but not much, you know. And yet I still hold out hope that we can continue, because there's no place else in the world where it could happen, in terms of racial identity, ethnic identity, coming together, trying to build a single society. And at least we have the words in place that we, you know, are a nation of immigrants and that, you know, we're a multicultural, multiracial society, and we have some infrastructure that supports that. Certainly the leadership is very diverse. Now, you can always complain that the inner circle is still way, way, way too Eurocentric. You know, but I see leadership that's very diverse right now in the country, and that is a reflection, I think, of the consciousness and experience of the individual who occupies the executive office at the moment. So that's heartening. I think there's no other way but to continue to educate and to continue to have ways to penetrate people's consciousness and experience, not necessarily through didactic exchange. I don't know that that really helps. I think you really have to have experiences with people. You have to sit down and have meals. You have to work with people. You have to negotiate, you know, things that you want and things that you don't want, and, you know, families have to adjust, because, you know, younger generation people believe

some of this stuff that we tell them about you should judge people by who they are, not what they have or what their skin looks like or anything else. So I think that those kinds--but, you know, it doesn't escape me that we continue to have hate crimes, and we continue to have prejudices and bigots that, you know, function at pretty high levels and can make lives miserable. Such personalities occupy all sorts of places of authority and power. I mean, it's just going to be.

CLINE

Especially in the media right now.

OH

Yes. Yes, the media is scary right now. And it's worldwide, right? I mean, the fascist tendencies worldwide are starting to emerge. It's scary, because if the Internet does shut down and people do have less of an ability to have honest and real exchange--and now I'm starting to wonder how much of even that is infiltrated by people who just want to sort of, you know, create this atmosphere that's very distrusting. You know, I hope to never lose that quality in myself. I'm not a cynic, you know, and I should be, because I've seen so much. You know, in the natural course of things, I should be much more cynical than I am. I'm just not. I'm not constructed that way. I believe that there is goodness in most people, and that most people want to do what's right. They just aren't sure, or they're afraid, you know. So have I done things right always? No, I've done some very terrible things, you know. I forgive myself, and I try not to repeat those things, right? But I don't dwell on them. And, you know, there aren't enough hours in the day. Even in the life that I lead now, there aren't enough hours in the day to be with people who want to sit and just, you know, talk story about, okay, what's the next step. You know, it's often easier to go and talk with someone else about what your next step should be. They can see more clearly than you can, right? So I happen to be one of these people that has a lot of those requests that come my way, and I try my best to be available to people, on an individual level and an organizational level, even at a political level. You know, I was asked to come to the White House again recently, and I would have loved to have been there, but for weather, you know, and looking forward to talking to people that are running big things in this country right now, right? So now I have to try and reset all those meetings. Hopefully they'll say yes again, and the calendar will be right. But so many things are really not in our control, you know? Even the fact of me sitting here talking about whatever my experiences have been, it's sort of like inconsequential. It doesn't matter, in a way. I mean, some curious scholar someday might look back and say, "Well, who is this personality? Let's see." But, you know, I don't have a goal of being in the middle of the literature about what happened anymore, if ever. I don't think I ever had that. I mean, it happens that I love coming here. You're a nice person. You asked me to do this. You were bugging me, bugging me, bugging

me, so I finally said, "Okay, I'd better just do this, and then it will be done," you know, "and then it will contribute to something." I don't know what, but obviously, you know, the universe wants me to sit down and talk to a tape recorder, so I'm doing that.

CLINE

Well, I appreciate it. What about the Korean American community after the riots, and how did Koreatown itself change in the wake of all the destruction and the loss?

OH

Many people left who could. Some people lost everything, but you see it's been rebuilt. It's even expanded. You see residential properties going up. You know, the economy is now a world economy, so who's buying property? Korean immigrants. You know, you have forty-unit condos in the middle of squalor, and they're selling at half a million, seven hundred and fifty thousand. You know, it's shocking to me, you know. The plazas have gone back up, you know. They're suffering like everybody else in terms of the economy, but pretty much they're still there. They're not shutting down. You look at this campus [UCLA], you know. A good number of the students here are Asian, and a good number of those Asians are Korean. You know, what can I say? I mean, you know, the community continues to thrive in some way. And this isn't to say that there isn't the other side of it, too, where more and more kids are caught up in gangs, and they're going to prison, because these kids, at least my experience of Korean boys is that they don't mess up too often, but when they do, it's a big one, and they're looking at the rest of their lives behind bars, you know. For me, it's too late. That's one of the reasons why I left the law practice. It's like I was a person who was trained in the law, and I happened to become a criminal defense lawyer, and that's not a business that I want to be in in my old age, you know. It's too late at that point when I enter a person's life. It's too late. So now I'm trying to be at the other end of it, and I don't know if it will help, but it feels better to be at the other end of it, not too late, you know, trying to bring the right resources to the right things and to support things that will help kids and adults, really, avoid ever encountering the criminal justice system, right? Could I have done another area of law? Yes, it's not like my brain couldn't have wrapped around another area of law, but why? I mean, I entered the law wanting to deal with people, not paper, right, not documents. So as it turns out, even though it's a very difficult area emotionally and psychically, it was the perfect area of practice, right, for a Korean American, too, because Koreans needed lawyers, and there weren't that many of us at the time. It was perfect, because I really got to study, and I mean deeply study, human beings. Like how does a person do this? How does a person who's so intelligent do that? How does a person who is really not a violent person end up taking a human life?

You know, what happened here? That was my job most of the time that I was doing criminal defense work. It's not guilty or innocent, you know. It was really telling the story of how did this person end up here, and that was an extraordinary opportunity, actually, in retrospect. The community itself, it's gotten bigger, you know. It's very, very mobile, right? It's a different kind of population than when my parents were migrating. It's more business oriented, pursuing more economic opportunity and not so much pursuing, you know, skill sets to bring back home, which was the mindset of my parents. And, you know, in some funny way, the newer immigrants have been affected by Western ideology and thinking and value sets, right? You see it very vividly. The materialism is really strong, and the letting go of what I consider to be like cultural treasures, the easy letting go of it because it doesn't fit into whatever the modern, you know, way is now in Korea. Whatever my parents have, in their sort of frame of seeing life, is frozen from the fifties of Korea, because the people that are coming now from Korea are so different, so different, you know, and I'm not even that ensconced. I have a lot of contact, because, you know, a lot of my friends are Korean Americans, and they choose to stay in that space. But, yes, I can see it. I can see it.

CLINE

From your experience legally, what, if there are any, are some particular areas of challenge that may be unique to the Korean American community here?

OH

Well, for businesses, they don't understand civil rights still. They're learning, but sexual harassment laws and civil rights anti-discrimination laws, it's still something that's hard for them, right? And it's easy enough, actually, under the law, for an employer to discriminate if they want to, you know. It's a waiting game. Employees are always at a distinct disadvantage on an individual case. If you're part of a class, you might have a better chance, but those are hard cases to come by. But, yes, I think that that's an area where they don't really get it. And they also don't get it that young people who do bad things, really serious bad things, can end up, you know, losing their entire life to the prison. They don't understand that very well, either. It's like beyond their imagination. "What do you mean? This is just a child." "Yes, we know, but you know what? In America it doesn't work that way." It's different on the criminal side. And then just culturally, you know, this understanding that this is a pluralistic society, and people have a lot of different ways that they can participate. It's still not something that's embraced. Participation is you go to church. You do the fellowship. You support your church. That's your network. It's sort of the good first screen of people that you would want to associate with, right? So I think that has become even stronger, actually, you know. Before it was more--in a funny way, even though it was church, it felt more secular, because people

were looking for fellowship. I mean, there was really nothing. But today there's so much out there, and church itself has become an industry in a way, where you have the mega-churches, right, and people think it's a good thing to have thousands of people. You just experience what it's like to have thousands of human beings. You know, it's hard to move into a spiritual space when you're in that kind of energy. So then it becomes a business, because in order to serve thousands of people, you have to have a lot of money coming in the door, resources to build the pews and the structures and the daycare centers and the refreshment halls and all that stuff. It becomes a business now, you see?

CLINE

Not to mention kind of a show, you know.

OH

Yes. Right. Right.

CLINE

Theater. What about gender issues in the community?

OH

Oh, it's still very, very male oriented. It's still the experience that most young men who go to Korea love the experience, and most young women hate it, on exchange programs. They don't enjoy it as much. I just went to a panel a week ago at a UC campus, a U.S.-Korea law forum. There wasn't a single female, not one, not even to introduce anybody, in the entire program. Now, to me, that's pretty shocking. It's a legal forum. It's about doing business across the ocean and, you know, issues, legal issues. I mean, there's not one Korean American woman, or Korean woman, who knows about electronic discovery or how the courts work in Korea and the U.S. around intellectual property protections or-- there wasn't one. Right? So gender is still a huge issue.

CLINE

While the '92 riots did open some of these doors for you, in order to, for example, be part of this Initiative on Race and to be able to come onto things like college campuses and speak and really talk about these issues that mean a lot to you, you said you ultimately decided to give up practicing law. What did you decide to do instead?

OH

For about eight or ten years I lectured. That's all I did. I lectured. Whether it was, you know, somewhere across the country or it was in a teaching capacity here or there. I taught here at UCLA and 'SC [University of Southern California] and [University of California] Irvine. Enjoyed the students very much. Enjoyed the experience. I did not like grading people, that whole process. I also developed, I think, a really strong interest in my own spiritual training and pursued that seriously, and continue to do that. I'm now working in a nonprofit organization [Western Justice Center Foundation]. The mission is to

build peace, and it's through education and it's through community engagement and through research, and to show that this is worth doing, developing these skill sets. So that's sort of what I've decided to do, and what I'll do next, I don't know. I mean, I'm a person who believes that most people should have five- and ten-year plans, but I'm not a person who does that. I've never done that, and I don't anticipate that I will before I die.

CLINE

Okay. All right. I actually have some more things I'd like to ask you about bringing us more into the present day that I want to get into in more detail, but I don't want to push you into the time that you need to leave. So I think this would be a good place to stop for today, if that's okay with you.

OH

Yes.

CLINE

And we can schedule one more session and finish up--

OH

Great.

CLINE

--talking about some kind of larger issues and some things relating more to the present day--

OH

Okay.

CLINE

--that we were just touching on now. Does that work for you?

OH

Oh. All right.

CLINE

Okay?

OH

All right. Sure.

CLINE

Okay. Thank you.

OH

Thank you. [End of interview]

1.4. Session Four (April 30, 2010)

CLINE

This is Alex Cline once again interviewing Angela Oh. This is our fourth and final session. We're here at the Western Justice Center Foundation, the same

place where we started the interview. We've come full circle. It's taken a few months, but here we are, and today is April 30, 2010. Good morning.

OH

Good morning.

CLINE

Thanks for meeting with me one more time.

OH

Of course.

CLINE

We finished last time talking about the Korean American community after the '92 riots and also your decision to move away from the practice of criminal law. You mentioned toward the end of the session the [President's] Initiative on Race under President [William J.] Clinton that you were involved in, and there are a couple of things I wanted to ask specifically about before we wrap this interview up. One of them is, I wanted to ask you, you in an earlier session mentioned sort of your perspective, to use an incredibly tired word in now Western marketing circles, a Zen perspective. And in the last session you mentioned that you had a spiritual direction that you began to pursue in the wake of all of this career activity that--it seems like there was a lot of change for you after the abandoning of the law practice and your beginning to work for, for example, this nonprofit, after doing a lot of lecturing and teaching, and I wanted to ask you, particularly since in your family, typical of so many, if not the vast majority, of Korean Americans, you come from what could be called a Christian lineage--

OH

Yes, that's true.

CLINE

I gathered that your parents were, unusually perhaps, kind of tolerant and not particularly religious in your growing up, not holding a lot of animosity towards the Japanese, who once occupied Korea, but are now, according to your description, more religiously Christian in their old age. And because, particularly, it seems that you didn't grow up in any particular strong religious practice, I wondered what the spiritual direction that you mentioned specifically is and how you came to it and to your teacher, before I kind of ask you, which I'm sure you'll get into naturally, how this has affected your life in this more recent time of your life.

OH

Okay. Well, I don't know if I mentioned this, but both of my grandfathers, on my mother's and father's side, were ministers. So I think, in retrospect and after going to school and learning about the dynamics of religion and culture and, you know, relations globally, at that time in history Korea was postwar.

Because of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there was a tremendous depression in Japan, which I'm sure had its impact on Korea, which is just right there. I think then the war in Korea and then the consequences of war, always the ravaging of the people and the land and the culture and the politics and economy, all of it. So in that context the country, now divided, which had been, I think, historically more shamanistic and Buddhist, became a place where missionaries went. And, as you know, in the Buddhist tradition, the temples seek alms. That's how the monks survive. They beg. And in the Christian missionary movement, even to this day, you know, there is offering of food, clothing, "education"--in quotes--all with good intention, and that is to sort of help a society that's been ruined by war. My grandfathers both came to this country through the missionary operation. My mother's side grandfather came directly and did ministry, and my father's side grandfather came to study, I think at Cornell [University], you know, divinity. So they both left their families in Korea. And then my parents actually met here in Los Angeles. They didn't meet in Korea, marry, and then come together, as many do. They were exchange students, so they came separately, under separate, you know, circumstances, and they met here, and there was a very tiny Korean community in South Los Angeles. They met, and lots of people were getting married at the time, and to this day that same group of friends remains very close, you know. They're spread all over, but they remain very close. So in the case of my family, when I hit about junior high school, and I'm the eldest of four children, and then my youngest sibling is thirteen years younger than I, I think--twelve years younger than I. I have two younger sisters that are three and five years younger, respectively. So that, you know, when I was in about junior high or just the end of grade school, we stopped going to church. My dad was working three jobs. My mom was studying to become a teacher, and, you know, it was just not going to happen that we were going to then schlep over the hill to the one Korean church. And, of course, today it's so amazing, because, you know, the churches are everywhere. Everybody's a pastor's kid. Everybody's a pastor's grandkid. Everybody's, you know, involved with churches here. And the demographic, as I understand it, from the State Department, the last numbers I looked at suggest that 75 percent or more of Korean Americans identify with a Christian tradition of one sort or another, Protestant, Methodist, Baptist, Catholic. In Korea it's more like fifty/fifty, you know. Half are Buddhists. Half are Christian. So when I went to Korea as a Zen Buddhist, I was very pleased to see all these temples everywhere, and people can just go in, and they can sit, and they can do chanting, and they can, you know, pay respects to their ancestry and things like that. So not too many Zen Buddhists, but a lot of Buddhists. I mean, the Zen actually, you know, makes my practice even more different, more marginal in some ways than the traditional Buddhist practice.

So my trajectory in terms of becoming so focused on this path for my own spiritual growth is based in, interestingly, the politics of '92, I realize. You know, we're here at April 30 of 2010, eighteen years later, and this past week, and it happens every year, some years more intensely than this one, I am called upon to make a comment about where are we now. So this has been going on for almost two decades. At the time that it happened in '92, for me it was simply the right thing to do, and it was the right thing to do because L.A. is my home. Ethnic Korean, I mean, the community, these are my peeps. I mean, I'm not--you know, I'm not in the community geographically or religiously, but, you know, I'm Korean, and my family had the same experience that many families had of that era, of that generation. I just did what made sense to me, given who I am, at the time. And I truly thought at the time that I would do my piece, and that there were plenty of other people in the community whose job it was to be the voice and to advocate and all of that. It was not my job to go to a zillion meetings, you know. My job was as a lawyer, and I was trying to get back to that, but I knew I couldn't do it right away. I mean, in my mind I was thinking, in a year or so I'll get back to the normalcy of my own career choice that I had made to be a lawyer. But that really never happened again. I tried. I even opened my own office at one point with my old partner, Teresa Abrera [*sp? – QUERY]. We used to call it the girl power shop. It was all women lawyers and a small boutique practice. We always made money. I never went into debt. But it was just too hard to do the business development, do the cases, to manage and administer what is essentially a business. You don't get to practice law when you have a private office. I mean, half of your time is spent billing and worrying about insurance and taking care of a lot of administrative things. So I decided that was not a good idea, after about three years. Teresa now works for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, and I'm here at a nonprofit. And the other lawyers, one went and had three children. Another became the director of litigation for a women's law center. A third is working with an investment banking firm, doing transactions with Asia. And a fourth just finished her law degree. She wasn't sure she wanted to be a lawyer. She's a UCLA grad, and I've just placed her in what I hope to be her first job, in a market that is very, very down, and she has unique skills because she's bilingual and understands Korean culture very well. So her career goal is to be international between the U.S. and Korea. So, you know, all of the women that I worked with, you know, we all kind of did what we were meant to do, I think. But, in any case, I moved away from the criminal defense and civil rights work, and became more engaged around my own spiritual questions after I did work with the President's Initiative on Race under the Clinton administration. That whole effort was about opening dialogue with the country around race relations. People didn't understand it to be that. I think the public understood it

to be like President Clinton was going to somehow resolve our racism in the country with these policy proposals. It was kind of silly to have that sort of view on it, but, you know, it's a subject that continues to dog the country, and communities are not able to work all these things out. You have some what I would call veteran people in the field who have been trying to build a measure of dignity and respect for minority people in this country, people of color, for their lifetime, and they've chosen an advocacy route. You've got others who have chosen to teach. You have others who have chosen to organize in the community, artists, I mean, there are all kinds. My particular endeavor is around, you know, because I'm trained as a lawyer and because I believe it's a system--as badly dysfunctional as it is, I think it's the system we've chosen to maintain a civil society, and having been a criminal lawyer, I really feel proud that our presumption is innocence until proven guilty. I just read in the paper recently, this week, that they executed a guy in China for a terrible thing that he did. He shot a number of children at a school. But that execution took place within a month. I mean, that's unheard of here. We don't get death that quickly here. I mean, the fact that we even have death, in my view, is wrong, but--in any case, after the Clinton experience, I chose not to go back to the law practice again. That's the point at which I completely stepped away from the law practice to take some time out to consider what now, because--and that appointment happened, really, because I was a lawyer, and I was visible and active and engaged and had a lot of political experience and relationships, and that's how you get appointments like that. It's not a secret, you know. And then it's just sort of a luck of the draw and timing and whether or not you're, these days, the right demographic to be picked to do something like that. All of those things were in alignment for me. I realize that now. So I engaged in dialogue all across the country and realized I'm not done talking, and a lot of people in this country aren't done talking, and there aren't enough safe spaces for this kind of conversation to happen, and there are even fewer spaces where the conversation might happen with a person like me, who is not black and who is not white and who is female, and whose family actually had an immigrant experience, and who grew up in a bicultural situation, and who chose in her life to engage politically and civically. So there aren't too many people that are available to have real conversations about race, that don't represent a point of view. And when I go in, I definitely have a point of view, but that is that we need to hear and understand each other. It's not that you need to get me as a Korean, or you need to get me as a woman, or you need to get me as a Korean American woman. You know, it's not about that. So I did five conversations under the administration with the President's Initiative on Race, but one of the conversations I wanted to do was with nonwhite people, and I knew that Hawaii, as part of the U.S., was the most accessible nonwhite majority society

that I could get to that's still part of America. So I made a request, and the White House was willing to send me, but they didn't want the whole seven-member advisory panel to go, because it would look too much like a junket. That is the problem with Hawaii. It's definitely a lopsided flow in terms of communication and access, because, I mean, the fact that our current president [Barack H. Obama] was born and raised there, and he maybe doesn't feel the distance that people who are born on the continent feel, it's still an eleven-hour trek from [Washington] D.C. So I always used to kid that I live in the middle of America, five miles from Honolulu and five miles from New York--I mean, five hours from Honolulu and five hours from New York. So I was given permission to go, and I had a friend who had served previously in the State House as a representative, and she arranged for me to have some really interesting conversations with different groups in Hawaii, everything from sovereignty movement to interfaith leaders to journalists. One of the conversations she arranged for me was at a Zen temple in Kalihi. So I went to meet with the Zen master there, and what was supposed to be a thirty-minute or so, you know, interview ended up being like four hours. I found him to be just extraordinary, and that's my temple right there [points to framed photographs on the wall of her office]. It's in Hawaii.

CLINE

What was his name?

OH

His name was Tenshin Tanouye, and this is the name of the temple, [Daihonzan] Chozen-ji. These are his hands. So anyway, Tanouye sort of talked to me about politics. He was very intensely interested in politics at a global level and was very, very astute. There are stories about people from the Pacific theater going in to him, admirals, four-star generals, governors, senators, I mean, they all went up there to the temple to talk story with the roshi. People even went to him before they made decisions about running for political office, and so then the rumors started that there was this cult up in the Kalihi Valley, and there was nothing. It was just people came. It's a monastery, so any conversations are privileged, right? Nothing goes out. And you can't help people's perceptions when they know that somebody went to a place, right? But you don't find out what happened or what was said, so then any kind of rumors can start. So that's what happened there. But as it turns out, that was the right match for me, because in our lineage, the people that are the--we have a ninety-two generation lineage that we chant every morning, the names of each and every person who transmitted the teachings from our particular line, and they happen to be a part of the Rinzai sect that was engaged politically in whatever their lifetime situation was. And so it is a place where people who understand politics, if not are actively involved, but at least understand, will go for advice

and counsel, and sometimes just to rest, because the energy there is--you know, they say in Hawaii there are five or seven sort of sacred spaces. This definitely is one. This definitely is one. You can feel the air is different there. People sometimes come--if you see in the photograph, I don't know if you can tell, but behind that tall Buddha image there's a hill, and in the back of the hill there's an insignia and some words from the founder inscribed on a piece of granite. People will make appointments and come there and just go sit at the hill, and they feel the healing energy, and they get better and they leave. So, you know, for me, I saw this and experienced it the first time and just thought, "Well, that was a very interesting conversation," and left. But the peculiar thing was that for at least a year and a half after that first meeting, I had reason to go back to Honolulu over and over and over again for other things I was doing with women's leadership and, you know, that sort of thing. So between '98 and 2000 I actually went back probably three times a year, and I had no interest in Hawaii, none. It's just that my work brought me there, so I went for meetings and planning these sessions for this big convocation of women leaders that was supposed to happen at the turn of the century. So every time I would get picked up by my friend, and we would go stop and have tea with the roshi. And our conversations got deeper, and I would ask him about certain political things. And I was lecturing at the time, and there were questions I had about issues that people would ask during the lectures that I would present, and so it was always so much of a gift, I feel, to have his lens on what was happening. You know, he has in his kitchen a whiteboard up all the time, a big six-foot whiteboard, and it's very common for him to have someone get up and stand at the whiteboard and draw things, and when you finish drawing, you see what he's talking about, you know. "Put this over here. Put that over there. Now draw this line here." You know, it's very interesting. So the man was seventh and eighth don martial artist in about five different arts, and who came to him were martial artists, martial artists who wanted to understand why, even though they were at the very--you had to be at least a black belt to go and train at that dojo. That is considered only you're at the beginning. In this society people think it's a big deal to get a black belt. Over there it's like, you know, "Oh, you got a black belt? Okay, maybe now we'll teach you something," you know. And so these were people that would go who knew there was something beyond their body, and they were now questioning what is that, right? That's where the Zen comes in. The analogy is, as to every other field, politics is much like the budo of martial arts, you know. It's very, very difficult, right? It's life and death, as is business. So you had martial artists, politicians, and many significant businesspeople who used to go there to train in Zen. And when the roshi would see that the person is here for the wrong reason, meaning they're coming here to get better at the martial arts, or the martial arts interest is eclipsing the spiritual

discipline, he would ask them not to return, because that's not the point, right? So for me it was politics and it was advocacy--quote--"social justice," which I find now kind of humorous, you know, that I was so wedded to this notion of social justice, because it's simply a matter of recognizing the oneness of all humanity. And that sounds so trite, but it is so hard for people to get it, and they can't do it, let alone get it. They can't even conceive of it, because we've been so conditioned to believe that it's not about the oneness. It's about my piece of it or my people's piece of it or my community's piece of it, whatever that is, and, you know, it's arbitrary how you define that, right? So I learned very many things, and then my teacher died about seven years ago, but I return every year, twice a year, for my own training as a priest and for my own training just as a human being who's committed to making sure that the gates of Chozen-ji remain open for whoever the next teacher will be who will transmit the lessons, the seventh patriarch, you know. But we are as a group not very tight. I mean, we have teachers, professors, businesspeople, artists, you know, instructors in martial arts, bodyworkers, searchers. All kind of people train at Chozen-ji, but if you take the vows, then you are there very seriously, and no matter what, to keep those gates open, whatever it takes, whatever it takes. See, that's the quality. It's like great doubt, great faith, and great determination, you know. It's easy to be for something when it's easy to be for something, by definition. Only when it's really hard does the determination come through, and it's physical, emotional, psychic, you know, spiritual, the hardship. But do you stay there? Are you centered and set? Which does not mean that I am always centered and set. I just came through a two-month--three-month period of severe depression, a lot triggered by being in this nonprofit, because this is a nonprofit that has an extraordinary mission. It doesn't get more aligned with where I'm at personally than to advance the cause of peace building in the world through education and engagement, right? But this is still an entity that is a fiction under the law but treated as a person, and it has thirty-seven leaders, many of whom are powerful people. There are lifetime appointees to the federal bench, powerful people who are senior partners, managing partners of some of the most significant firms in the world. And so you begin to imagine what it's like to be answerable to such people and to work with on a day-to-day basis the kinds of motivations that people have, and try to still meet your mission. So it was for me very important to try and stay grounded. The reason why I have these images here [points to the pictures around her office]--usually I like to have blank--two reasons. One, because I wanted to be able to be reminded why I'm really here, which is not the paycheck, which is not any prestige, which is not any particular agenda, like people always ask me, "Well, what is your vision that you want to realize while you're the executive director?" That's not the point. My vision is irrelevant. I'm here to serve the mission. That mission is vast. It

will be whatever it is, and it's going to be a product of the humanity that comes into this space and makes decisions, and I'm very well aware of that. So these images are up here to remind me, you know, that we're all connected, right? So the reality is we have to pay rent. I have to pay a staff. I have to pay bills. I have health insurance coverage we provide and I have to meet those obligations. And so it's very stressful, and I hate asking for money. I really hate asking for money. I've never been very good about it, but I realize that even then, that my training as a young lawyer--see, when I left law school, everybody in my class thought I was going to be a public defender because of my orientation or with the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] or something like that. I mean, I was the president of my law school class. I led a major demonstration during the time that [Nelson] Mandela was in prison, before he was released, around divestment, and I was arrested and prosecuted fully by the Yolo County DA [district attorney]. I got a "not guilty," right? So the view was that I was going to go into, you know, some--I ended up in private practice, and I have never--this is the first time I have worked in the nonprofit sector. So, you know, and I used to kind of have some internal conflicts about it, like how can I be getting paid three hundred and twenty-five, four hundred and fifty, five hundred dollars an hour just to sit and talk to somebody or review documents, or whatever. I mean, it was just ridiculous. But I think that that experience was meant to be, because I needed to understand something about the power of money in this three-dimensional world, right, because I'm not inclined to do it, and I'm a very stubborn person. My qualities do not include forbearance, you know.

CLINE

Interesting.

OH

So I think--I had tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, and at least I was smart enough to realize I couldn't meet those obligations, nor could I look to my parents, who had three other kids to put through college, to take care of that for me, so I needed to find a job that was going to pay me something. And I was fortunate, because I found a boutique firm that did the work that, you know, I thought I could do, and I did it for thirteen years. I am still actually of counsel to a firm in Century City. That's where I was yesterday, you know, penthouse level on Century Park East. And when I want to go west and do my thing on that side of town and meet with lawyers or potential donors, I have them come to the Bird, Marella, Boxer, Wolpert, you know, firm, and they're very impressed, right? And then they write their checks. Because they understand that I'm serious. I'm not, you know, begging you. I'm telling you, you have an obligation, and you want to do it anyway, and I'm just showing you you can do it and still live well. That's people's fear, right, that they're

afraid that they're not going to live well, because they see how poverty today is so violent. So for me it's not a question about like what my purpose is anymore. It's not a question for me what my gift is. I know it very, very well. It is a question for me if I can continue to give my gift to the world, because sometimes, you know, you feel put down, and you feel exhausted, and you feel poor, you know. I mean, I'm making less than half today than what I made fifteen years ago, dollar-wise, but I feel I live a much, much more abundant life. I do things that I love to do every day. This whole week I haven't gone to bed before one-thirty in the morning, and I get up at five-thirty. Tuesday night I didn't go to bed till two-thirty, and I got up at four, and I functioned just fine during the day. That's what the Zen training does for you. It gives you a way to tap into your reserves of energy. At least that is what I have found. And I need to be able to do that on a consistent basis, given the state of nonprofits in the world today. NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and nonprofits, I believe are a growth industry, but it doesn't look like it on the surface right now. Why I say that is because governments aren't going to step up. Governments are too controlled by politics, and politics are too controlled by egos, and egos are too controlled by greed and fear and doubt and suspicion, and that's a very unhealthy place. So NGOs are going to be a growth business, because systems are going to collapse, as we're seeing now. The court systems are collapsing. The financial system's already collapsed, and we tried to shore them up with all the people's dollars. People aren't going to stand for it at a certain point when they understand that, you know, this is just wrong, and there's not an excuse for it, other than your greed and selfishness.

CLINE

Yes, which there's an abundance of.

OH

Yes. So I will be in this job for as long as it takes for the organization to realize another level of development or contribution to the world, because it has a huge vision and a huge mission, and right now it's doing most of its work in this local community of Pasadena. Valuable work, I mean, teaching kids about how to have alternatives to violence, working with former gang members or at-risk [unclear] to teach them about conflict resolution and mediation, working with teachers to show them how to do these kinds of programs in their class or in their school. We've worked with police departments to show them, you know, how you can take advantage of the dialogic process, train them on conflict resolution techniques you can use on the school yard with kids that are, you know, going through all kinds of things in their lives in the public schools these days. All of that is very valuable. I'm not diminishing the value of it at all. But this organization needs to move globally. I have just created proposals that will take us into the prison systems in California, Hawaii, and Oregon, to reduce the

level of violence in those institutions and to give people some, you know, skill sets, just as we do the little children, about how they can choose something other than violence when they get out. And then I have another piece that's going to take the whole conflict resolution tool kit and all of its processes to the global climate change challenges, because governments are going to have to deal at a certain level, but they won't be able to touch real people's lives on a grassroots level. They will deal with policy, and they will deal with the economics, and they will deal with, you know, some high-level cultural impacts. But when it gets down to it, and there's going to be a placement of a nuclear waste site in your village, people are going to get upset when they realize that there's no, you know, end to the potential in terms of the half-lives of these substances that are going to be placed in your community, and the impact on seven generations out could be huge. And even though they are-- quote-- "uneducated" in some parts of the world, they have vision to see many generations ahead. They will know that there's a problem, even without knowing the information, and so there will be reaction, some of it violent. And the State Department can't deal at that level, right? Just like federally we have something called the Community Relations Service. Right now you have this thing going on in Arizona with the anti-immigrant activity. Department of Justice can't dispatch lawyers out there. Nobody's going to listen to lawyers and judges. They have to have the Community Relations Service on the ground, building the relationships, talking to the leaders in those communities, figuring out where the best meeting place is. Is it in Mrs. Rodriguez's garage, or is it at city hall? Probably Mrs. Rodriguez's garage, because that's who's going to take the signs and the bats and the this and that to the counterdemonstration, right? So that's the sort of thing I'm talking about, that we will move conflict resolution to the climate change at a global level issue. I need to take on at a policy level the notion that, you know, work, like hours, has to be evidence-based. To me, that's ludicrous. We, if we succeed, have peace. You know, how do I fit that into your evidence-based paradigm that wants numbers of how many people didn't get killed last week because you existed?

CLINE

Yes, exactly.

OH

That's stupid. And yet people go along and get along with these RFPs that come out, you know, wanting and insisting upon it, and there's no place in the process to write in why, perhaps, this is not applicable to your proposal. So now what I have to do is I have to go directly to the attorney general for the United States of America or some senate office, which I know how to do, right? Because this kind of work, you know, what kind of evidence are we talking about, your academic evidence, or shall we talk about, if you have to have evidence,

practitioner-based evidence? The evidence of the gang member that's out there doing it and is telling you, "This is what's going down." Where does that legitimate piece of data fit into your paradigm that wants evidence-based rationale for your project? And nobody's having that dialogue right now, because people are scrambling to just save lives and get those proposals in. I'm going to have those dialogues, because this organization has the capacity to demand that kind of dialogue to happen. So that's how I've shifted. I use my law. I use my politics. I use my organizing background. I use my femaleness. I use my ethnicity. I use my immigrant background. My whole being is being put to use right now, my spiritual practice, and so that's where it's at.

CLINE

Wow. What do your parents think of where you're at right now?

OH

They think I'm crazy, because of the four children I'm the one that's divorced. I don't have children. I'm fifty-something years old and I'm working in a nonprofit, which they don't even understand what this is. My companion is a person that they have no regard for because he is an artist, and, you know, so we have to navigate those waters delicately. Thankfully, he is a person who is also [unclear]. You know, somebody just asked me this week what my goal is in life, you know, which is really funny at this age. I get this question, though, very regularly, and, you know, my goal is to be a better human being, and I say that with all seriousness. That is my goal, to be as good of a human being as I can possibly be before I die, right? As my teacher used to say, he'd say to me, "Angela, my job is to help you walk as straight a path as possible down a very crooked road called life." [laughs] So my companion is a person who is similarly oriented, also previously married, also childless, also a person who really is very disciplined and dedicated to his mission, which is to bring his gift of art to the world, right? So he's not interested in putting up shows and becoming famous and that sort of thing. He knows when he's finished with this next set of works that he's been producing for five, six years now, that when it shows, it's going to have a tremendous impact, and we already have an inkling of that from places that we've shown the work to. So by 2012, which will be the year of the dragon, it's an auspicious time, we'll probably put up a show. I will probably be finished with this job, I would imagine. That's two years out from now. I will probably be finished, and we will just be as monks are, you know. We have to ask for our support from places where we will have the ability to do so, I think, for different reasons, I mean, you know. But my family is quite confused. They don't get it. They have the conventional worries, you know. What about healthcare? And, you know, I've always had health insurance. It's a non-issue. You make these things issues because you obsess over things that are not a problem. I have healthcare. I've always had healthcare, right? I used to

feel like I didn't have healthcare, because I had to pay so much, and I never used it, right? But yes, they worry. But, you know, I have no worries at this moment. I feel that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. I falter. You know, I'm not a nice person. I fired somebody last December. This bothers me. It still stays with me. I fired somebody last December just before Christmas, because I knew that this person was going to be wasting her time with us here. It wasn't a job she enjoyed, and she was making my job miserable. The sad thing was, she was a friend, who is no longer a friend, so to speak. I think we will reconnect, but I remember saying to her, "You don't even like this job." You have to understand, my orientation in this space, it is a privilege to be doing mission-driven work in this economy at this stage of our lives. It's a privilege to not have to work for a paycheck. I don't see myself having to work for a paycheck. I see myself as having the privilege of working in a mission-driven environment. People who come and stay are really--I have an extraordinary staff here. I mean, this one [pointing out the door], my CFO [chief financial officer], she doesn't let a single scrap of food go to waste. She brings it to the homeless shelter after every event if there's anything left, you know. My staff that create and execute on programs are pretty much vegetarian, conscious of, you know, the fact that we're connected, you know. They are all true believers in we can bridge these differences among ourselves, and we're going to help other people do the same thing. You know, it's like we have job descriptions, but you know what, if I need to mop the floor, I will mop the floor. If somebody else needs to help with copying--it's not their job, because they have a master's degree in whatever it is that they have their master's--or Ph.D. I had a Ph.D. here, right? But, you know, Abbey needs help setting up the coffee. We go down there and we all set it up, right? It's not that kind of an environment. You know, so the one that I had to let go, her mode was just a little bit different. She sort of made this vibe that, oh, this is sort of the second-tier choice, because she was trained at Yale [University] and [University of California] Berkeley, and couldn't find a job for a long time, which is why I brought her. But it just wasn't a fit, and I just said, "Well, it's Christmas, but, you know, it's also the end of the year, and I need to start fresh in January." So I just gave her notice. So I'm not a nice person, so to speak. You know what I mean? If I have to do stuff, I will do it. That's what Tanoi saw in me, you know. I'm not a person who is a traditional martial artist, but my orientation, I make cuts when I have to. I will hit when I have to. But I don't do it without understanding all the consequences. We are all capable of murder. This is something that I learned being a criminal defense lawyer. I saw it. People that you would never think could take another human life. We're capable of it, so we all have to not pretend, "I'm good, and you're bad."

CLINE

Right. Yes. Well, you walked into one of my questions, which is, where do you see if there's any sort of a line that can be detected between the person who you inherently are, sort of the authentic Angela Oh self, and that which has been gone through, you know, training and perhaps some transformation in your practice. I guess what I'm seeing is, from what I can see of who you are, the practice and who you are, I think one can't be distinguished from the other, and where one began and the other kind of ended can't be detected, either.

OH

No, it can't.

CLINE

You were already the person who came to it--

OH

That's right.

CLINE

--and the practice has, if anything, made you more authentically who you are. But given that, how would you say that this has affected--I won't even say changed, but affected your perception of who you are and what you do, really tangibly? And I also want to know, related to this, you know, it's kind of a trivial question, but as you've described your parents' current perspective, what are their feelings about, along with everything else that you just mentioned, their daughter being essentially a priest in a Japanese Zen Buddhist tradition?

OH

Well, you know, first, there isn't a line that I can--just to answer you that question. You know, it's--yes, no, there's not a line. It's just who I am. As far as my parents, it's an interesting thing, you know. I know that they're displeased about the fact that I'm not a Christian. It rarely comes up that I am doing the Japanese thing. It rarely comes up. It actually was more of an issue for me as an individual. When I first saw the robes, I said to Tanoi, I said, "I can't do this. This is like way too Japanese." And he laughed at me. You know, he showed me pictures. "It's not Japanese," you know. But anyway, but all the words, you know. My mother once made a comment about "How can you use all the Japanese words?" for, you know, sitting zazen, seiza, ocha, you know, for tea. But it was just in passing. It wasn't like an argument or anything like that. I said, "Well, no Korean ever showed it to me. It was a Japanese that appeared." I'm about the most visible Korean in the country, and there's been not one Korean spiritual teacher that has come to me. Haven't encountered it.

CLINE

Okay. Well, you just answered my next question.

OH

I mean, to me what that says is, it's an affirmation of what I have come to believe, and that is that we are all one, and it doesn't matter, but people make it

matter. You see, my perception is irrelevant. My perception is just my ego, you know, trying to work it out cognitively. It's irrelevant. I am who I am. And I think I carry that energy. Like I use the word kiai a lot. It's the energy, the life force. So my kiai is what it is, and I have actually noticed that I can move people out of my way with just my energy, right? And I can also draw people to me with just my energy. I've noticed this, right? It's not like magic or anything. We all do it. I'm just conscious of it now. That's what the training has done for me. It has made me see more clearly. That's all. And everybody has the capacity to do that if they want to train. It served me well as a lawyer. There is no way that I should have gotten some of the results that I got in the cases that I had. I wasn't one of these lawyers who was in the PD's [public defender's] office doing a hundred trials back to back during the course of my one year in the office, you know. I had a handful of cases that I have tried, more serious, more complex, more impossible facts than people who I know that have been in the public defender's office for twenty-five years and haven't touched a murder case by themselves, let alone a double murder of a mother and sibling. Matricide is a highly unusual crime when it comes to homicides. People shoot each other and stab each other all the time, but they're usually not your mother and little sister, at the age of sixteen with no mental disorder that anyone's ever been able to detect. That's a complicated story to tell the jury, and to win the trial, right? So I know now, when I think about the cases, and the funny thing is that because I'm a public lecturer, I have to revisit those experiences, and so I remember. But then I remember in the context of now having gone through my training and continuing to train, and I see that, "Oh, my god, it was my kiai. My kiai created this result." I mean, my intellect, too. I'm not saying it was all just Oh. Angela Oh walks in the room and--no, no. I had to prep, I had to do all the things. But there was something about--and I remember one of my young associates who second-chaired a case with me saying to me that, "Angela, can you tell that every time you walk into this courtroom everything shifts?" And at the time I hadn't been training. I just said, "Yeah, right." I thought it was just the eyes of an adoring young associate, you know. [laughs] But now I think back to that, and I think, "Wow, I think that was the kiai." There was something about I was ready to do business. I was serious. Doesn't mean I'm not a nice person, and yes, I'm the defense lawyer. I'm not the prosecutor. I was often mistaken for the prosecutor, right?

CLINE

Interesting. Yes, so given all this, then, if you do at all, how do you view yourself now, being a Korean American, particularly a Korean American woman at this particular time? I mean, how do you even define--do you define yourself? What is your sense of your identity, or do you have one? Does it matter?

OH

It seems to matter more to other people than to me. It doesn't matter to me, you know. I guess right now at this age chronologically I have this appreciation for how short our life is. I have friends who have cancer and friends who are dying and friends who are having babies and baby showers, and friends who are getting married. So I'm seeing the whole range happening right now, you know. I don't have a sense--I mean, my companion and I went to a couple of weddings back to back last month and then a baby's first celebration. A Korean family, you know, they have this thing called Tol, which is the first year of life they do a big celebration. The weddings were very interesting. One was Korean, and it was at the Fairmont in Newport Beach, and it was really a high-end, you know, fancy. Then the other one was Taiwanese, Chinese, and very Christian. Both of them were very Christian. They read from scriptures. One of the weddings, the officiate even went so far as to talk to the young woman, who is a professional woman, but in his remarks at the ceremony he was saying, "And as God willed it, you will submit to your husband," and all this stuff. And I'm looking at--you know, thinking, "What am I doing here?" But that was the tradition. And then I thought, "Well, but this is so lovely. Everybody is so happy. So great, let them live their lives, you know. It's not going to be me submitting to that guy." I see I still have that, so the ego, I know I have a lot of work, right? I had a reaction to it. What do I care? It's not my wedding vow, you know. But I still have--but then I said, "Well, but I made a lot of progress," I say to myself, because for many years I refused to go to weddings, precisely because I knew I could probably encounter this, and I didn't believe in marriage. You know, it's so easy to get in and so hard to get out, right, as I have experienced now, even without children, even with good relations, even with no fight over anything really, you know. But it's a big rigamarole, you know, to separate. So easy to go one direction, so difficult--that's another lesson for me, right, is that understand that when you don't make the right decision, you create a lot of mess. You're going to have to clean it up or somebody else is going to have to clean it up, and is that the kind of person you want to be? I don't want to be that kind of person. So I'm much more thoughtful now, you know, than I used to be. But that's sort of, you know, where I'm at in terms of--I know that there's an Angela Oh sort of--how did I put it? I have a funder who I am very fond of, and I said to John, "You know, there's this Angela Oh avatar out there." [laughter] I think I'm going to use her now and then to get what I need to get. But it's been almost twenty years, and I haven't been speaking lately because I just haven't had the time and the energy to do it. But I recently got a request that I accepted, and I went out to Harvey Mudd [College] with this Asian American Heritage Month thing, and I agreed to speak. And, you know, the young, I had forgotten, because it's been about--I don't know. I don't think I gave a public lecture like

that since maybe last summer. But, you know, I had forgotten how wonderful it is to be around that sort of young adult radical API [Asian Pacific Islander] woman energy, you know, that wants to change the world, and they love their sisters, and they just, you know, are just so committed to giving their lives to making the world right, you know. I don't know how many of them will end up actually being able to fulfill that, but to be around a room full of people that that's their orientation, and I'm supposed to be there to help them be inspired to, yes, go ahead and do it, right? So I'm listening to them introduce me, and it was almost like they're introducing a stranger. I just didn't relate, all the things--and then I thought, "But yeah, I did that. Oh, yeah, I did that. Oh, yeah, I did that. Oh, yeah, I said that." You know what I mean? So then in the engagement with them it was so fantastic, because basically what I do now is I give very short remarks, and then I just open it, because it's a much more interesting lecture when you just let people ask.

CLINE

And what is your sense of where sort of the young adults, the youth of this country, are at right now, and maybe giving particular emphasis to the Asian communities?

OH

I think we're experiencing a generation that wants to give back and is less materialistic than the generation I saw maybe ten years ago. They're willing to take less money to have more time in their lives to do things that are really things that give back to community. You know, you still have, I think, a good number that want to just make money because they believe that if they make money, they'll eventually get to a place that, you know, allows them to give back in a significant way. And then you have those who are, you know, going to definitely stay in the movement, work their entire lives. They will always be counter to the culture. Yes. I asked myself this question, actually, recently, and I realize actually that it's not much different from every other generation. I know that there are social observers that like to sort of say, "Well, there's the Gen X that has this quality." I do feel that there was a period in our recent past where the dominant theme that got heard and said in this society was materialistic. But there was always that. I always knew people that wanted to be engaged in the community and that understood that it was about more than themselves and that, you know, cared about their parents. When I was teaching at UCLA, I remember reading papers from some of my students that were just so touching, about their experiences with their bathing their grandmother and understanding that someday they were going to do this for their mother, and, I mean, you know, it was just like--so I'm always a little bit skeptical when I see these Rockefeller reports or out of these big-time universities, making commentary about what this generation is about. You know, that's a certain

segment of the youth generation. But there's always been, in my life experience, I've always known and been connected to, in some way, people who are completely dedicated to trying to make life better for people that were on the margins.

CLINE

And what about the Korean American community, now they've been here a while? Where do you see it headed?

OH

Well, for me it's a different time than when I was growing up. I'm really aware of it, that the options are very different, and the orientation. You know, Korea is a much more cosmopolitan country than this one. I mean, they are so far advanced technologically, and I even think artistically, because of the thousands of years of history and culture and experience, collectively, of the people. But there's a certain element that wants to immigrate to another society, and that element, I think, is less--I don't know. I think they're just less inclined to think of the whole and more inclined to think of self. That's why they come, right? Like that's my parents, you know. They came for their education, and the intent was to go back, but it didn't work out that way. I think karmically they weren't supposed to go back. They were supposed to have their kids here. And, you know, race relations are not much better. I just was asked to do an interview with one of the largest Korean papers in language papers in the country, and, you know, I got a call from the guy who's the chairman of the Korean Federation. You have to understand, the Federation is sort of like the steppingstone to politics in Korea. It's all of the immigrants, you know. You know, it's for those who are interested in social issues and politics back home, and people who tend to rise in leadership there end up running for office in Korea and entering the parliament. But he has a business. He's engaged. He's on every kind of advisory board as the Korean representative, and so he calls me up and says, you know, "Can you come and do this interview? We need to have a black, a Latino, and a Korean, and I'll be there, and we'll talk about race relations and all that." I said, "Sure." And then he calls me and he goes, "Do you know any black people that could come who would be people that were there in '92?" I gave him like six or seven names. I said, "Look, these people are not only here, but they would be highly motivated, I would think, to talk to the media. Mark Ridley-Thomas is sitting on the [Los Angeles] County Board of Supervisors. Herb Wesson is on the [Los Angeles] City Council. You've got Cecil Williams still here. You've still got Jan Perry sitting on the City Council. You've got Joe Hicks that's running around giving talks and lecturing. He's sort of a neo-con[servative] now, but that would be a very interesting one to pick up. Herman Maddox, a political consultant, is here. Reverend Madison Shockley, here. Go get them." The day of the interview he calls me two hours

before the interview to say, "Oh, you know, I think maybe we shouldn't do the interview. I couldn't get one black person. Oh, and do you know any Latinos?" I said, "I know a perfect one. I made a film about her when the riots happened, Bea Stotzer. She's president and CEO [chief executive officer] of the New Economics for Women, the Latina economic development corporation, very engaged here in L.A., very engaged back then." So I called Bea, and she said, "Sure, I'll come. We'll just make it a date." So we went, and I was so angry. I said to this man, I said, "You are not going to undo this appointment. I'm going to talk to the reporter, and he's going to write a story, and it's going to be about Korean-Latino relations. The fact that you couldn't get a black person says that our relations aren't too good, are they? And it's not my job to get these people. I'm giving you the names." It's not my request, right? I'm just another one of the interviewees. So Stotzer and I went, and we had a nice interview, and I think it's going to be a story about sort of the common immigrant experience, though there are tensions, because a lot of the racial tensions right now for the Korean immigrants living in L.A. who have small businesses are with Latinos and then the Bangladeshis, frankly.

CLINE

Oh, interesting. All the people living in Koreatown, basically.

OH

Exactly.

CLINE

So where do you see Koreatown itself? I noticed that in my travels recently, for example, L.A. officially is no longer the only city with a Koreatown.

OH

That's right. They're everywhere. We're everywhere.

CLINE

They're popping up all over.

OH

That's right. Atlanta, Houston--

CLINE

Chicago, New York.

OH

Chicago. Big-time, Chicago and New York, New Jersey. So in terms of that phenomenon, that is just so in every state, just about. Here locally it's shared space, you know, Latinos of all backgrounds, from Central America, South America, the Bangladeshis, South Asian. Even in J-town here, Little Tokyo. A lot of the shops are owned by Koreans. In fact, the architect and developer is Korean, David Hyun. He's ninety-some years old, but he's the one that created that tower and that plaza and everything.

CLINE

Do you have any sense of where--I mean, Koreatown here is huge, and what's your sense of where it's headed? I mean, it's changed a lot.

OH

We have three Koreatowns, you know, here in L.A. County.

CLINE

Okay, right. Right. I'm talking about the main one.

OH

The main one in downtown L.A. that kind of is--see, I can't even give you the streets anymore that are for real, because it's way over toward Crenshaw [Boulevard] and then comes east to maybe--I don't know, almost to the Harbor Freeway, and then you go south to Pico [Boulevard], maybe.

CLINE

Yes, Pico, yes.

OH

And then you go north to--past Beverly [Boulevard], for sure. So it's huge, you know. It just keeps growing and growing and growing and growing, and, you know--I don't know, but there's no council district that would encompass something called Koreatown, and there's no Asian even on our city council of fifteen. That to me is terrible. That to me is terrible, that there's not a single Asian, not on the county board of supervisors, not on the city council, with all the activism. And I think there will be candidates that will run, but the thing is, for Koreans there's no concentration of vote.

CLINE

But a lot of economic development in that part of the city, a lot of big new buildings.

OH

Right. Oh, yes, they're trying to mirror what's happening in Seoul with all those electric billboards and glass and--you know. I love shopping there. That's where I go shopping for food, unless I'm just buying like carrots or something. But for my condiments, for my pastries, for my drinks, for--I mean, snacks, I stop in K-town.

CLINE

How would you, from your point of view, define the Korean American community's contribution to Los Angeles' historical and cultural identity at this point?

OH

Well, I think historically it was very significant because of the '92 implosion. I mean, it is a collective experience. At the time it was not about--at least I tried to say, "This is not about Koreans and blacks. This is about our entire community. We need to go deep and think about what the hell just happened here, as we're fixing everything." But in terms of, you know, contributions in a

traditional sense to the culture and all that, I think, you know, Koreans are marking out an identity in the areas of music and film in ways that are, I think, not yet fully recognized, but I'm aware of them because my colleague at Bird/Marella represents a lot of that kind of talent, and music. Also, just because we are L.A., there's this, you know, appetite for understanding dance and history at a global level, and, you know, interest in food. It becomes more and more sophisticated. Interest in just, you know, day-to-day sort of habits, like here public baths are not that--you know. But for women--you know, in Korea, people don't use their showers in bathrooms. It's very common that they're almost brand-new, because everybody goes to the public bath, where they get to do sauna and hot and cold dips and scrubs. It's almost like uncivilized to take a bath without getting scrubbed down first. I mean, it's considered really like why would you sit in that dirty water? You know, when my mother first came to this country, she talked about how she walked into the bathroom, and there was just this tub, and she was expected to bathe in it. There was no place to clean herself before soaking. People are just now getting that, you know. Now it's a very popular thing with these--mostly women go first. They go to these spas, the Beverly Hot Springs or the Olympic Spa or the this or that, and they pay a lot of money. I think in Korea you don't do that. It's like it's a very regular thing. You go to the bathhouse to bathe, and you come home clean, and then you do your stuff at home, right?

CLINE

Right. It's the same as the Japanese thing, yes.

OH

Yes. So that sort of thing. And, you know, it's interesting, because I've just been asked to be on this inaugural advisory board, which I've accepted as a Zen Buddhist priest and a former criminal defense lawyer, that's going to start moving an agenda in San Gabriel Valley around restorative justice, which is very much in alignment with, you know, where I'm at, and that is, you know, when people of, I think, interfaith basis come together, it's not just about a result. It's about the process of healing. So it's going to be good. It's victim-offender, but I think it's about more than what should an appropriate punishment and apology be, but it will be more about "I need to sit with you and whoever else needs to be here who was hurt by what I did, and you need to understand why and from where this action came on my part." You know, it's a much deeper thing than "I need to know what my loved one said before they died." You know, it's a different notion. So that's exciting to me. You know, I'm a lecturer, so I can speak forever, but--

CLINE

Yes. And you've already said a lot about what you're doing here and sort of where you see things going. You did say that you expect maybe in a couple of years you won't be here. Where might you be?

OH

Probably back at Chozen-ji, or traveling. I see myself traveling the world and lecturing, my companion doing his artwork, and we can live modestly that way, too, as long as our bodies hold up and we're not, you know, sick or something.

CLINE

Right. Well, okay, it sounds like right livelihood to me. [laughter] You don't need much. I basically don't have any more questions.

OH

Oh, okay.

CLINE

Does that work for you?

OH

Yes, that's good. I just have some--

CLINE

Yes, I see a note came under the door.

OH

That's perfect timing.

CLINE

That was pretty amazing. You covered a lot of what I wanted to ask without me having to ask, so it was very easy and enjoyable for me, so thank you very much. I know you're an incredibly busy person, and you have a lot on your plate, but on behalf of the UCLA Center for Oral History Research, and speaking for myself, thank you very much.

OH

You're welcome. [End of interview]

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