

AN INTERVIEW WITH CYNTHIA MUN

An Oral History Conducted by Vanessa Concepcion and Stefani Evans

Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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Oral History Project

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020

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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islanders Oral History Project.

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PREFACE



“Somewhere along the way I’ve tipped over that I think I now have more positive experiences than the painful experiences, and just to get there to me is enough; I don’t need more. Whatever comes is extra gravy.”

Immigrant stories come in all shapes and sizes and Cynthia Mun’s own story is yet another one of those stories that contribute to a rich tapestry of resilience and perseverance. Born in 1967 in Seoul, South Korea, to a mother who had escaped down from North Korea and a father who had gone AWOL in the US, Mun’s complicated family background would continue to pervade her life for years to come. Like many other immigrants, she remembers the exact date in 1974 her family landed in the US to start their new lives.

Once they landed in Los Angeles, California, both of Mun’s parents found whatever work they could in labor-intensive industries. Being left alone most of the time, she encountered difficulties growing up, but also met many wonderful people who mentored and encouraged her to be a high-achieving student. After graduating from Westridge School in Pasadena, Mun attended Yale where she double majored in molecular biophysics and biochemistry as well as fine art and studio art. Briefly after graduating, Mun worked as a marketing assistant in San Francisco before moving to Las Vegas, Nevada to take care of her two younger siblings. After spending four years in Las Vegas, Mun got her mother a job at MGM and moved back to San Francisco, where she

spent her career working for companies such as Pandora.com and eBooks as well; this is also where she met her husband.

Two decades later, Mun moved back to Las Vegas for good. While being a full-time mom, she also writes children's books and is a leader of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She also founded the Yale Club of Nevada as a way of providing opportunities and resources for underserved students in Nevada. She discusses many other topics throughout the rest of the interview including her philosophy on helping others, how her son has inspired her, her experiences with discrimination, as well as the importance of individuals becoming leaders. Mun's experiences are not only a reflection of the resilience many immigrant individuals carry with them but also the hope that they bring when it comes to a new country and a new life.

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February 11, 2021

in Las Vegas, Nevada

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Mun begins with talking about the families of her mother and father. She describes her mother as being originally from North Korea while her father came from a family from masters until the Japanese occupation when it became increasingly dangerous to be educated. She recounts him joining the military by lying about his age so that he could survive and eventually served in the Korean Augmentation to the United States Army before going AWOL to avoid being sent into the Vietnam War. Mun also recalls their immigration process down to the date and the huge Asian peers her grandma brought to the airport. After landing in the US, her family moved in with her uncle in Los Angeles, California. Her mother found a job sewing clothes in a sweatshop while her father worked as a mechanic. Mun also talks about growing up as a latchkey child, the problems she dealt with, and the woman in her building who showed her kindness.....1-10

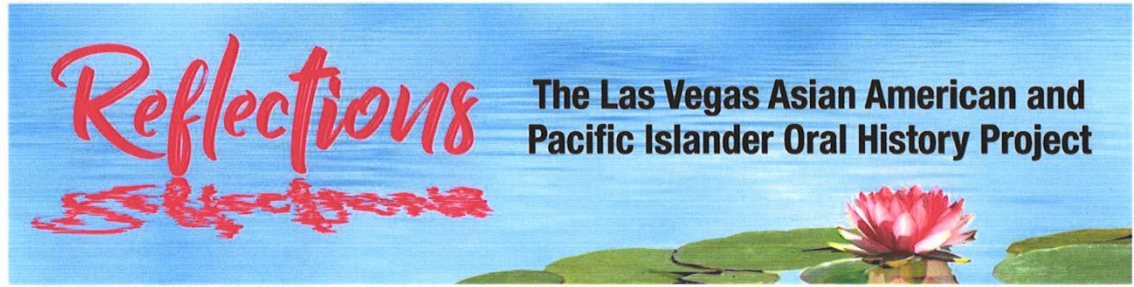
Mun recounts all the teachers and mentors she had throughout her early years that inspired and helped her. One of the most notable mentions she makes is a man named Adrian Stear whom she met through a program called ARCO JEP. She talks about him mentoring her in math but also showing her new aspects of the world. She calls out other notable mentors throughout her life such as Mrs. Sheryl Broyles, who helped her learn how to read and Mrs. Jan Sacks Shipley, her Latin teacher. Throughout elementary school, Mun remembers first asking about Harvard and being told to study hard, which she took seriously both at her gifted magnet junior high school as well as later at the Westridge School in Pasadena. Although it was a two hour commute in a very different community, Mun mentions making great friends and getting accepted into all the colleges she applied for.....11-18

After landing at Yale, Mun calls back to being in an accepting new environment where she was allowed to explore her interests and thrive. Despite being a double major in molecular biophysics and biochemistry as well as fine art studio art, she also kept two jobs to be able to afford her education. Once she graduated, Mun moved to San Francisco, California, and got her first post-grad job working at a Copymat so that she could use the computer for free. Soon after, she ended up finding another job at Calyx and Corolla as a marketing assistant, kickstarting her career. Throughout the rest of her career in San Francisco, she has done everything from launching Pandora.com to working for a software company that dealt with cardiac software for surgeons. Mun also divulges into how she met her husband as a result of an article in WIRED magazine.....18-27

Mun rewinds briefly to before her career in San Francisco to recall the first time she lived in Las Vegas, Nevada. Her parents had a home in Las Vegas already and asked her to take her brother and go to Las Vegas because he had gotten into trouble with a gang member. At age twenty-two, Mun ended up moving to Las Vegas with her younger brother and sister to take care of them for four years. While there, Mun got her mother at the MGM before moving back to San Francisco. Her second time around in Las Vegas, she chose to stay, and worked for MGM Mirage International for awhile before becoming a full-time mom to take care of her son. Nonetheless, Mun has chosen to engage in numerous other activities such as being a part of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators as well as starting the Yale Club of Nevada as a way to give back to the community and return some of the kindness she has been shown at many points in her life. After discussing her outlook on life and how her son has inspired her, she expands on how she got into writing children’s story books, as both a way of being creative again as well as promoting diversity in media.....27-37

Mun takes a deeper dive into what motivates her advocacy and drive to help the youth. She talks about the disparity she has seen in education between those with parents who went to college and those with parents who did not. She stresses the power of seeking help and mentorship as she once did. Mun also details some of her experiences with discrimination as well as the importance of recording history the right way.37-46

Finally, Mun expresses some of her frustrations with the rhetoric of the COVID-19 pandemic including how it has led to an uptick in violence against the AAPI community. She describes herself becoming more political and more vocal, recognizing that it is upon everyone to take it upon themselves to become a leader in some way. On a closing note, Mun touches on some family-related issues traced back to the time when she was taking care of her siblings in Las Vegas. Although there were not many activities to do, they would explore all areas of Nevada and enjoy the outdoors. She reflects on a few other topics ranging from assimilation to her half-sister and the differences between her and the typical Korean American immigrant.....46-56



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Signature of Narrator Date

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Hi. This is Vanessa Concepcion and I am here today with Stefani Evans and Cynthia Mun.

Cynthia, could you please spell out your name for the recording?

Yes. It's Cynthia Mun. It's C-Y-N-T-H-I-A. Last name is M, as in Mary, U-N, as in Nancy.

Thank you. First, thank you so much for joining us today to share your oral history. It's so great that we capture these stories in our community because oftentimes it's lost and not shared. We're going to start off today by talking about your family background as far back as you can, your grandparents if possible, and then we'll build into how you ended up in Vegas. When you're ready just tell us a bit about your family and how you got here.

Sure. I was born in Korea in 1967. My father is from southern Korea, which is Daegu, which is the third largest city in Korea. My mom is actually from North Korea. During the Korean War, her whole family moved down south to avoid being in the Communist-controlled area. Her father was a jeweler, a goldsmith, and her uncle was one of the mayors, an official up in the north.

When they all moved down from Keisung, unfortunately, many of them were executed during the Korean War. On my father's side, for generations before my great-grandfather, they were all masters, meaning they were scholars who taught the extended royal family; they were educated.

My grandfather, Jong-hui Mun, was the first who was not educated. His father, my great-grandfather, decided during the Japanese occupation, when all the educated people were being killed, they were being assassinated, so it was better for his children not to have an education.

I've heard stories from my father where their walls, when they were really poor, needed patching. They had all these books and these handwritten books were torn up and placed on the walls to cover up holes. I think of what was lost in that era. It's just tremendous. My grandfather, unfortunately, grew up not educated and poor and didn't know that all this land that they were

living on actually belonged to their family, but he didn't know that. The elders kind of got into drinking and gambling and they would just give away deeds.

My father was born in Japan, by the way. Somehow my father and his family unit went to Japan during occupation, and they were in Hiroshima-Nagasaki area. I can't remember if my dad said he was in Hiroshima, but he was born in Japan. He had a sibling who died of dysentery and his mother also died. Before he was age five, his mom had died, but he had his grandmother and his father there, so the three of them.

Then when they came back to Korea, they didn't have any jobs. They had a little bit of money, which back in those days people carried their money around. They didn't trust the banks. This is right as the war had ended and they came back and they had money. My grandfather owned a mill where they took grains and made flour, et cetera. There was a fire. During that fire they were trying to get the fire out and he grabbed the money and gave that bag of money to his friend who then went off and never was seen again. It's like better than fiction, right? Then my grandfather became an alcoholic, and my dad basically was a latchkey child roaming around the country. He was in a gang. He just basically did whatever he could to survive.

Then he lied about his age and joined the military. He wasn't old enough, but he was hungry. He was like, if I join the military, at least I'll get three meals a day. I think he was sixteen when he joined the military. During that time that's what helped him in terms of survival, in terms of understanding structure, getting some education; all of those things is when he was in the army.

I think he said when he was in the military, he got some letter that told him they had to reregister their land, and my dad was shocked because he had no idea. They were so dirt poor.

He had no idea. He didn't really have a good history of his family because his dad would say, "If you learn anything they'll kill you. It's better to be free."

But he learned a lot from his grandmother who was sort of like a shaman, medicine woman, and she would go from village to village helping people have babies, giving them opium to ease their pain. She'd smoke marijuana and make tobacco. She was also one who knew how to create looms, and it was a thing that a lot of people didn't know how to set up a loom, and she would do that. She is actually who raised my father, but my father was always just roaming around.

The great story he told me was one day when he got this letter saying he needed to reregister land, he was confused. He went down and found out that when he was a kid, there were these people who would...they wouldn't beat him, but they would try to scare him away for picking fruit. There was persimmon fruits all over where he grew up, and he was hungry and he wanted to eat some persimmons. They would come and they would kind of get mad and throw rocks at him and things like that. He said it turned out to be his fruit trees. That was on his property; those were his trees, and he didn't even know.

That's kind of my family in Korea. Then my parents really...My mom never graduated from elementary school; neither did my father. But when my father was in the military, then he had an opportunity to have some education. While he was in the military—my dad was very charming and he was a very fast learner and really, really smart. My dad was a really smart man. Basically, he did so well in the military, they put him into a unit called KATUSA, which is the Korean American team. It's the Korean American something U.S. Army [Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army]. They had a Korean force and an American force, and they put them together. My father was in this unit where he was exposed to all these American cultures, the food, and he

got up to the rank of master sergeant. Master sergeant back then was pretty high. The thing is he was in this unit where only the really rich kids can get in. If you're Korean and you had politician dads and stuff, they would want their kids to be in this unit. But my dad got there on his own because he doesn't have any backing. He did well enough that he was chosen three times to come to the U.S. He had to study and then he had to pass exams and all that. They chose three people in the entire country and he was one of those three. But more so, he came to the U.S. three times, provided by the government in Korea. He is the only person during that time who was able to go to the U.S. three times paid for by the Army. But the thing is, on the third time he didn't come back; he went AWOL. This was in the '70s. It's because he learned that if he were to go back...

They sent him here to learn helicopter technology because it was during the Vietnam War. During the Vietnam War, the Korean government had a deal where they would go and take all the salvage from the war, and then they would use that for whatever needs they had. They would try to fix up all of that. My dad was here in the U.S. He was in Monmouth, New Jersey. He was going to school. He was going to the academy there. He realized that when he went back he would be the one to go to Vietnam, so he went AWOL. He didn't come back to Korea until '73.

I was born in 1967 in Seoul, Korea—well, not quite Seoul, but northern Seoul area; it's Gangwon-do, but it's hard for me to tell you exactly where it is unless you knew the map. I was born in 1967 and my father was in the U.S. when I was born. My mom was pregnant when he left the first time. The third time he left was 1969, and he didn't come back until 1973, so I was much older when he came back.

But during that time my dad couldn't come back because when he came back he would go to prison because he went AWOL. He actually had to wait until he got a presidential pardon to be able to come back, and that's what he did. Then they put him in—what is that called, the military prison?—for a couple of weeks just to get processing, and then they let him out and they discharged him.

At the same time, my aunt, my mother's sister, her name is Daljia Ye (later Daljia Bowen). My father's name is Pok Nok Mun, so it's Mun Pok Nok, but that's how they spelled it, Pok Nok Mun, and my mother's name is Cylvia Yun Ja Mun. My mom's sister, older sister—she's one of ten; my mother is one of ten. Basically, the way we got to the U.S. back then is you needed a sponsor. In the '90s, lots of Koreans came with wealth. They came and brought money. They came here as students and stayed and all that, but back in the '70s when we came, you couldn't come to the U.S. unless you had a sponsor and a connection to a U.S. citizen. What happened is my mother's sister married an American GI. My father knew this man and he was stationed in Korea. Everyone is quite destitute during the times. The '60s and '70s in Korea; that's only ten, fifteen years after the war and there is not a lot. A lot of people hungry, no infrastructure; all of those things. The infrastructure was only starting in the mid-70s.

My dad convinced her, who was a Korean woman who was divorced—and during that time is not well looked upon at all. You are now a pariah of society; your family is disgraced; everything. There is just no place for you. It's terrible. My father convinced her that she should get married to this guy, and they met and they liked each other and they got married. They came to the U.S. and they had a child. They lived in Texas. Unfortunately, they both committed suicide.

The immigrant story is a very, very tough one for many people. In my family there have been three suicides and one murder in the United States. It's amazing—I am always so thankful that I am healthy and I am here and there is so much support and there are so many good people. But, at the same time, there is a lot of pain in arriving where we are today.

The reason for me being in the U.S. is because my aunt, Daljia Bowen, she was an American citizen and she invited my father. Did all the processing paperwork to get us here to the U.S. We came here April 28th, 1974. A lot of immigrants will know exactly what day they came to the U.S. It's the first time I remember being at the airport looking at an escalator, going, "Oh my god, this is so great," going up and down. I was six and a half years old. Seeing my grandma, my mother's mother, she brought these huge Asian pears to the airport, and we are all just sitting around waiting to leave because it's really the last time you see your family. My mom will never see her mother again. I think about that moment now and go, "Wow, how hard is that when you are going off to some other country to have a better life and all that, but you really are leaving people behind and know that you'll never see them again?"

We came here. My uncle, Sang Woo Yi, had come a year before us, the same process. My mother's younger brother came to the U.S. in '73 because he was in the army and there were some problems in the army at the time, and if he didn't leave, he was going to get killed. The family pooled all the money and sent him to New York first. He did not know a single person. We just put him on a plane and said, "Oh, they're going to kill you, so you've just got to go." He had a bag, a suitcase, no names, no nothing, not much money, and said, "Go figure it out," and he went. That's my uncle Sang Woo Yi. For three days he slept at the airport because he didn't know what to do. He said he just walked around, walked around trying to find what do you do and looking for Asian people, trying to find out who. I guess there was a missionary who took

him to a mission, and then from there they said, “Well, walk around New York and see if you can get a job in a kitchen somewhere,” and that’s what he did. He found a job washing dishes.

He made enough money in the whole year, and he didn’t like New York, and the people he met in New York said, “Go to California.” He saved enough, came to California, and that was a year or so before we were there. No, it must be a little bit over a year before we got there because right before we left to come to the U.S., his wife—he had a wife in Korea—his wife, Miran Yi, finally went and met him in Los Angeles. Then there were five of us: My parents, myself, my uncle and his wife. That’s how it started.

We land April 28th. We go to my uncle’s place. The next day my mom is at a sweatshop, so she got a job sewing clothes in the downtown garment industry, so she was sewing. My father, it took him a little bit longer. Oh, we came to the U.S. with five hundred dollars and three suitcases. Basically, my mom went to work the next day. My father, I think, got a job in that week as a janitor. He couldn’t get a job as an electrician yet. He spoke English well enough, but not so well. But he did have his military connections. At one point he was thinking about going back to the U.S. Army. He just wanted to be an American citizen and get benefits. He’s like, “Maybe I could just become a U.S. citizen first.” Then my dad got a job as a janitor and then an electrician. He worked as a mechanic. He was just very handy.

I was a latchkey child. After the first week or two, we found a place; it was just one room. It’s a studio apartment in Los Angeles. It’s currently in Koreatown. It’s like 7th Street and Ardmore, or something like that. I can’t remember exactly. I’ve been by a couple of times only because my memories of that place are very painful. My parents, when I first got to school—the first day of school was that week. Because my mom was going off to work so early, they had to tell me how to walk to school. We’d walk to school so I would know how to walk to school.

Remember I'm six and a half years old. My parents showed me how to walk to school, and then the next day she takes me to school, my mom gets on a bus to go, and I sit on the steps until they opened the school because the school is not open yet. You just have to...that's it.

As a latchkey child, lots of things happen to you when you're a latchkey child and you don't have siblings, you don't have guardians, et cetera. The building manager at that apartment was an older man and basically, he sexually abused me. There's nothing your parents could do to help you when they're not around. There's just nothing. And they don't have resources to figure out what to do to help you. But the good news is...I don't know what happened because it was a consistent thing. But there must have been someone from the building that might have noticed something because that man was removed. A lady and her family became the manager. I don't know what happened to him, but something happened that I don't know because he was gone. Then that family knew I was by myself because my parents left in the morning and they came back in the evening. They had a little boy who was maybe two or three years old. That woman would basically say, "Come and stay at my place."

I remember the first time she bought me a Wienerschnitzel hotdog and root beer. When she would take her kid and go to the store, I'd tag along, and then she'd say, "You can pick a toy, too." I remember it. I don't know exactly what her words were, but I know her kid was looking, and she would point and say, "You can have one, too." She would buy it for me. But that root beer was the most interesting taste I've ever had because we only ate Korean food. How those memories of people being kind offset the painful memories. Here is someone who just decided, okay, here is this kid, obviously the parents aren't around, let's just take her in with us and do the regular things, which is really kind.



Yes, I think my parents worked really hard. They never, ever spent money on anything except to save. But in three years my parents saved enough money to put a down payment on a house. It's such an interesting place because that street... In 1977, we moved because my mother was pregnant. My mom has had five miscarriages, and my father always wanted a son, and so I was a girl and he's like, I didn't count, because he's very traditional, a patriarch in that way. My mom was pregnant and they were really hoping it was a boy. It turned out it was a boy. In preparation for having this boy, because my dad was just so sure it was going to be a boy, he wanted to make sure his son was born in a house that he owned. They bought this house in Los Angeles, 1523 Cambria Street. Across the street is an adult education school, places where you go for ESL. Right next to our house is the Brothers of Charity soup kitchen. That street is just one block long. It's mostly a Hispanic community. When my brother was born, most of his friends spoke Spanish. I would say outside of Korean, he spoke Spanish, not English. It was

really interesting because we'd have all these homeless people lined up around the block every day for the soup kitchen. It's an incredible juxtaposition of saying, "Wow, we're in America."

I had never been anywhere, right? All I know is my neighborhood. I go to school. Teachers love me. I love my teachers. That's my saving grace in coming to America. Being at school was so much fun versus at home there wasn't anything. We had a thirteen-inch black and white TV. All I did was just watch whatever was on. At first, we didn't have a TV. It's when we got the TV, now I didn't have to go out anywhere; I could just stay home and watch TV. It probably helped my English. I saw America through the lens of television because where I lived you don't know any better. You don't know if you're poor if everybody around you is poor, as a kid. There were fires in our alley because the guys who hijacked cars would hijack them behind our alley and they would set it on fire. We'd have these police coming. There was so much activity in our neighborhood because it's not the best neighborhood. So much is going on, but you don't know that's not normal. As a child I didn't know that's not what happened everywhere else except on TV. You watch TV and there was this other world. I knew it was made up. In my head it's like, oh that's all made up. But then when my teacher said, "Oh no, some of that is real," you're like, ah, there is this other world that I don't know.

It was very eye-opening, but also grateful because I became very good street smarts. There are a lot of predators out there in the world. It's painful to learn, but once you learn it—you wish you don't have to learn it, but you learn and then it helps you in your life in being aware and knowing, and I think that was really helpful. I guess I never took my life as "woe is me." But it's also because I had really good friends. I had true friends.



I had teachers that really loved me and that I wish I could thank them. I wish I could remember exactly their names for all of them. Except there's one guy that I do remember and I actually went to visit him. When I was in elementary school at Tenth Street Elementary, they had a program called ARCO JEP; it's a joint education program. What they did was they took the executives from ARCO, which was downtown L.A. because my school is in downtown L.A., and they had them become tutors and volunteers. The year when I was in fourth grade, this man named Adrian Stear, a British guy, was an executive at ARCO and he volunteered to teach me algebra. I was in fourth grade. I had done all of math requirements. During the class what would happen is my teacher would give me sewing projects. She would give me embroidery to do. She would constantly bring me crafts because I was done with all the math, so there wasn't more math for me that I could do. The school, thank goodness for them, went out and said, "You

know, I think she could use a tutor.” I didn’t know that at the time. I’m thinking back at it. This is probably what happened, and so then Adrian Stear volunteered. For two years he came once a week and taught me algebra.

More than that, Adrian also invited me to his house to meet his wife, Pat Stear. He lived in this beautiful mini mansion in the Highland and Wilshire area in Los Angeles, which is not too far from Beverly Hills, all these great homes. You go there and he’s got a pool in his backyard. He had three lovely children: Kate, Guy, and Sebastian. The homes that you see in the rich and famous, like that. Then he fed me chutney, and I was like, oh, what is that? I mean, they had this lovely lunch. He just kind of showed me this world and embraced me, but it was also that he became a savior in that by then I was really worried about my weight and things of that nature, and I would say that during our one-on-one tutoring session, and he would say the nicest things, like, “You shouldn’t worry about that. It’s okay.” Or he gave me *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The thing is I couldn’t read it for the longest time. I spoke English, but my writing skills still weren’t there. But I didn’t want him to know that so I kept that for the longest time until I could read it. I still have it.

Then he went back to the UK and I lost touch. I just kind of grew up. But when I was in high school—no, college—no. That’s right. When I was in college—when was that? No. It was like ten years after. When I was in my thirties, ARCO had sent out letters to everyone regarding the JEP program. I was like, oh, I wonder where I could find Adrian? When I graduated from Yale in 1990, the first person I wanted to tell was Adrian Stear that it was all his doing. That if it hadn’t been for him giving this child love and this caring that I probably wouldn’t have made it here today. I was looking for him, and so I wrote letters to ARCO. I wrote letters to the Tenth Street Elementary School. I said, “I really want to find this man. Can you help me find him?”

Then when I was thirty ARCO sent out a package for me and said, “We’re going to profile you in the ARCO magazine because you are one of these past students who went through the tutoring program, so we’re going to profile you.” When I did that, I wrote this plea to find out where Adrian Stear was because he was no longer working for ARCO.

Then I found him and we talked. Then I wrote him letters and I wrote him the letter that I wanted him to see when I graduated. Then I went to visit him in England and saw him and met his family, all of that. He unfortunately passed away two years ago, but I went out to see him again before he was gone, just for the last time. Now I have kind of a friendship with his family, his children. Guy lives in France, and Kate and Sebastian live in England. But the Stear family, Adrian Stear and his wife is Pat, they really were the kindest people, made all the difference in my life, and I will always be thankful to them. His oldest daughter, Kate, is a musician. She plays the violin. But her favorite snack is Jolly Ranchers candy. When I was going out there, she said, “Oh, can you bring some Jolly Ranchers from the U.S.? Because in Britain they’re really, really expensive.” Now every Christmas I send her ten pounds of Jolly Ranchers.

I went through elementary school. I remember the first time in sixth grade asking, “How do you get to Harvard?” My parents, they haven’t had an education, but I’ve heard people talk about Harvard and how great a college it was. I’m like, “What is Harvard?” And they’re like, “What is college? What do you do there?” I didn’t understand. Then I asked the principal because the principal school is down at the playground. In elementary school the principal is out in the playground. I asked him, “How do you get to Harvard?” He laughed and he said, “Well, you just have to study hard.” That’s when I was like, okay, I’m just going to study hard.



Because I am the oldest, I have my brother who is ten years younger than I am and then I have my sister who is twelve years younger than I am. But once I started speaking English well enough, I was the translator for the family. I would help write my dad's resume. I would do all this. If there was any problem with utilities, I would be the one to go there, to get all of that done because my parents can't do it. If you need to phone someone and get anything, it's the person in the house who speaks English, basically. It's like, that's how it works.

I wanted to go to a gifted magnet junior high school, because my teachers had talked about it as well; it wasn't just my idea. At the time the magnet schools in Los Angeles were very good. My teacher said, "I think you can go to this gifted magnet school," because I was in the gifted program in elementary school. They told me I should get the brochure and apply for it. I looked at it, I applied and I got in. Then you are bussed there. That was the best place. I loved

my junior high school. John Burroughs Junior High School was the best, best place. I met my best friend, Judy Lin, there. I wish she would call me. [Laughing]

There was so much to offer. My Latin teacher, Jan Sacks Shipley, seventh grade—they had Latin back then; they don't anymore; I took Latin for a while back then—she had just graduated from Harvard not very long ago. Here is me, I wanted to know how to get into Harvard, and then I go to John Burroughs Junior High School, and there is a woman who graduated from Harvard telling me all about Harvard. How could it have been any better? And Mrs. Sheryl Broyles, my English teacher. That was Jan Sacks Shipley, my teacher for Latin, and she was the best. She was so kind. She took all her Latin students over to her house for pizza, and she lived in this beautiful place by the ocean. I mean, this is so different from where I come from. It's just so different from my environment. I had two Black teachers who were amazing: my English teacher, Ms. Sheryl Broyles—I think she became a principal at one of the high schools, and I think she's retired now. She was my English teacher. If it weren't for her, I probably would never have read anything. I didn't read a novel until I was in seventh grade. I didn't read. I just didn't read. We didn't have books. I did all the stuff at school, but I didn't have anything at home. The only thing I did do was go to the library, but I didn't read a novel because I would always go to the children's section.

I lived twelve blocks from the Los Angeles County Library. That library and the children's section is the best anywhere. If you don't have anything to do, you can always go to the library, and the librarian is reading, and all the picture books, and I loved looking at all the picture books. All the free time I had, I would go there because there was nowhere else to go in my neighborhood, so I would just walk down there.

But I didn't read a novel until I was in seventh grade, and it was because of Mrs. Sheryl Broyles. Again, another woman who was just special in guiding you, helping you, making you feel like you wanted to succeed, teachers who really cared. They weren't getting paid extra, I'm sure. It was just the kindness in these people. Those two people from junior high school, so impactful in my life, those two people. I found Ms. Broyles and I got to talk to her. I've been tracking down these people, by the way, but I haven't been able to find Mrs. Shipley, Jan Sax Shipley. Mrs. Broyles, I told her how much I appreciate her and everything. I wanted to be able to tell her in person, but I found her and I was able to talk to her by phone. She is no longer at that school, so I can't get in touch with her. I don't know where she is because I wanted to go visit her.

When I graduated from ninth grade from that school, I won the Glen Warner Award, which is the highest honor from John Burroughs Junior High School at the time. I also got a scholarship to go to a private girls' school in Pasadena. It's a program called A Better Chance, and it's a program out of the East Coast, but it's mostly for inner city kids. It would help them in terms of their academics and their success overall, so they choose kids. I was going to go to a school called Westridge School in Pasadena, and I did that. What a beautiful school Westridge is in Pasadena. It doesn't even look like a school. Amazing, amazing people there. I took the bus from downtown from L.A. It took two hours to get there, so I would have to get up before six to get down to the bus station, change buses three times, and then walk all the way to school just to make it in time. But it was okay because in the morning you sleep. On the way back you do your homework. It's just like that. But it also meant that you couldn't do after school sports. Most of your friends live in Pasadena, so there isn't a lot you could do. Just about everyone except for Pat

Flores, who was another student like me. She also took the bus. Later on, we would see each other and we would try to coordinate so we would be on the bus together.

It was the first time I felt I was poor, when I got to Westridge. The first time it occurred to me, wow, there are people here with unbelievable wealth. On the first day of school, everyone is either being dropped off or they're driving to school, and I'm walking there from the bus stop. You go through the parking lot and there are all these luxury cars parked there. I'm going, "Wow, the teachers get paid really well here." Then I find out, no, those are the students' cars. There is a DeLorean, a Porsche. Just the amount of wealth was so eye-popping and at first really difficult to adjust. That is the first time I cried because I felt like I didn't belong. But I guess it's because there were some students...most of them were incredibly kind and generous, great people, but then there are some kids who are not as kind and they want to let you know that you don't belong; that you are the scholarship kid and why don't you have these things? It was, I think that kind of discrimination, that made me feel like I would never do that. To make someone feel little is just so not worth...Why do you even go out of your way? I don't know why someone would do that. You have so much and, yet, you have to make someone else feel even smaller? It's just like...you don't get it. At that time, I didn't understand that and I didn't know what I know now, right? That in life it doesn't really matter what other people think, it really doesn't. But when you're a kid it does and it's very painful. I think that you're more sensitive of the other people around you. I think that's why I was head of community service when I was at Westridge. I wanted to go and volunteer and do the most I can for other people, and I think that was great.

But I also had some great friends. They were European, they were Armenian, French, they were Cubans, and they're funny and they're progressive. Just a very, very different group of

friends. We were all very unique. And my friends Jennifer Weber and Jennifer Shockro. We were the alternative kids. But when you think of a class of only fifty kids, it's sad that you would have any cliques.

I didn't get to go to the reunion, but I saw them after and they all turned out to be nice people, so there is hope. Just because you weren't kind in high school doesn't mean you can't grow up to be a kinder person. Life treats us all in the same way that we all learn and hopefully we get better.

When I graduated from Westridge, I went to Yale. I got into all the colleges I applied for. Of course, my dad was very against me going to college here. He said, "Why would you want to go to college? You can go to Korea and get married and have a good life." This is my dad. He doesn't understand why. He said, "You're pretty enough. You're smart enough. We can find you a husband in Korea." Now he's got some friends out there that are doing well. They own companies. They have lots of employees. "You can go there and you can marry one of those guys and then you could have a lifetime of being a housewife and you don't have to worry." How do you explain... There's nothing I could say for him to understand that's not what I wanted. For him it was like, "You don't have to work. You would just have a free life. Why is that such a bad thing?" He didn't understand that maybe I had different aspirations. He reluctantly let me go to Yale. My friend Heather Vandermoler, who was the valedictorian at my school, and I both got in, so we went to Yale together. I don't know. I guess a lot of parents take their kids to college, but when I went, I went by myself and so did Heather. We shipped all our boxes. We had duffle bags and then we got on the plane and said, "Bye," and left. That's when I got to Yale, and wow.

The most amazing thing about going to college is that nobody cared if you're poor or not. Nobody questioned where I came from and what clothes I'm wearing, well, at least not when I was at Yale. All they cared about was what I thought. If I was able to have a conversation, if I had thought, if I had opinions, and it didn't matter who I was talking to, either in a seminar, with my dean, with my friends, having a conversation. That was the most fun of being at a place like Yale is that you can have these conversations, theoretical, real, whatever it was, you can have it and to explore ideas like I've never been able to before. But to have so many people who are all so interested in speaking about subject matter. I had the most fun and the best people and the craziness.

I was a double major, and I regret that now. I wish I had just majored in one thing because I didn't have any time for anything. Not only that, it was molecular biophysicist and biochemistry and fine art studio art, so I'm a sculptor and painter, but I was always good in the sciences. My parents said, "Well, if you go to Yale, then you have to be a doctor." I'm like, "Okay." Dad said, "You do one with science, so you should be a doctor." But I hate blood. I used to volunteer at the hospital, and I didn't like needles and I didn't like blood, and I knew that. But my parents were like, "Well, now you're going to Yale, so you should be XYZ." I was like, "Ah, this is going to be hard." But I really loved the arts. I loved sculptures and drawing and painting and all of those things.

Then I also had two jobs because unlike now, today if your family makes sixty thousand dollars or less—or maybe it was seventy-five thousand or less—it's a full ride; you don't pay anything to go to Yale. Back when I was going, we weren't making much, but my parents still had to pay. It was a huge debate at my house because my dad is like, "Go to Korea." They were like, "Look at how much money we have to pay." So then I had two jobs. I had two majors, two

jobs. I worked at a lab pouring gels, and I also worked for the Yale Alumni Association working on reunions. In the summer I worked at Cal Tech pouring gels and working on science projects there, and I cleaned houses.

Working isn't such a big deal because when my mother—going back a little bit, back in time, when I was in elementary school, my mom, after having two more kids, couldn't go work in the sweatshop. Instead, they brought the work to our house, so we had a sewing machine at our house and my mom would sew at home. Then she taught me to sew so that I could sew so that when she was busy, I would be sewing. I was the other laborer in the house. But I didn't mind because you know what? The alternative was boring. It's like, what else are you going to do late at night? TV is not so great. The later the TV is on in the night, there aren't as many programs for kids, so it's really boring. I watched "Casablanca" probably many times without knowing it was "Casablanca." Seriously. When I found out, "Oh my gosh, I've seen that movie so many times." Now I know it was "Casablanca." Yes, I watched a lot of movies; I didn't know what they were and then later found out they were these famous movies. I'm like, "I guess I knew what they were."

When I got to college, I loved it. I would go back in a heartbeat. I volunteered a lot of my time because I was first-generation college. I didn't have any complaints, but I think it's because I didn't know how to complain. I think many students now, life is better and they have something to compare to. But because my life was so barren in so many ways, everything I did, even if for others it wasn't so great, in comparison to what I had before, it was just phenomenal. Like, the food, the dining food, how could I complain about the dining food? It was like having a full restaurant every single day. I grew up mostly eating Korean food, and here I am; it's like this huge area with wall-to-wall food and drinks and breads and soups and salads and entrees, and

you can go eat as much as you want. No wonder I gained ten pounds, right? It's one of those things. Like, hello. I'm going, "You're complaining about this? How could you complain? The food is really good." Things like that.

The only thing is I grew up eating Korean food, and there aren't very many Korean restaurants in New Haven, Connecticut, and in order for me to get my kimchi fix at all, it was like once a year and I would go all the way to New York to go to Koreatown in New York. That's when I got a little bit older in college.

But I treasured my experience there and loved making my friends, who are still my friends today. Very close friends, and we get together. Yes, it was fun.

Then after graduating I didn't want to go back to Los Angeles. My parents didn't come to my graduation, so I left early, so I didn't actually walk down. It was too expensive for my parents. I had a boyfriend in my junior year who graduated and I saw everything that happened in graduation and realized how expensive it was to graduate because they have all these activities. You go and you have to get a room. Then there are these restaurants and dinners and people getting together and events and clothes. I'm starting to do the math and going, "My parents can't just quit their jobs. They can't just say, 'I'm going to go to my daughter's graduation,' get on a plane and get there." And the events are all weekend long. It's not like one day. It starts on a Friday and then it just goes on. I'm going, "Wow, this is going to put my parents back." I told my father, "Don't worry. I've got my diploma. They'll send it in the mail. I'm going to go get a job."

Before graduation I packed up everything, sent everything to San Francisco because I didn't want to go to L.A. because that's where my parents are. I just wanted to live somewhere else. I was like, I've always loved San Francisco; I want to go there. I just picked it.

Coincidentally, a friend who graduated a year ahead was there, so I asked if I could live with her until I found a place and got a job, et cetera. I went to San Francisco, no job, knew one person. But then my uncle came to America and he didn't know anybody. At least I knew one person and I have a darn degree from Yale. What could go bad? If he can make something out of nothing...All these people made something out of nothing. My parents had five hundred dollars and no education. That means me, I have a great education, a notable education; I should be able to make something out of nothing. That was my premise, and I went to San Francisco. This was 1990.

In 1986 or so, the Macintosh came out. When I went to college, I took a typewriter. In 1986, when I graduated from high school, it was like, oh, I have to take a typewriter to school. How am I going to write the essays? That was my dad's present to me, was a typewriter, an electric typewriter. I was actually typing on a Smith Corona that Dad had bought at a used shop. We still own it because now it's an antique. He had bought this really old, clunky Smith Corona, and that's what I used to do all my papers in high school. For college, he was like, "We need to buy you a typewriter," and he bought me a Brother typewriter, so that's what I took to college. But then when I graduated I realized I needed something better, and we were using computers at school now because they were available for students to use. I needed to redo my resume. Once you start using the computer, it's really hard looking at the typewriter. Oh my gosh, I have to retype the whole thing?

I went to a shop. It's like a Kinko's. It was called Copymat in San Francisco. I went to go use the computer, and they were like, "It's twenty-five dollars an hour." I was like, "What?" This is 1990. Twenty-five dollars an hour to use the computer. But then there was a sign on the door that said they needed help, and I asked, "What would that person be doing?" They said, "Oh,

making copies, Xeroxes, et cetera.” I said, “Well, if you work there can you use the computer?” And he said, “Fine.” That would be okay. I took that job. I was the person who was doing... I learned all about the copy machines, and it became useful, too, because whenever I worked at an office and the paper jammed on the Xerox machine, I could fix it. It’s always been helpful, but that job allowed me to use the computer, get paid, and do my resumes.

Nine months later—it took nine months because in 1990 there was a recession—for me to find my first job. During that time, I had this job and then I did the census job. I went and did all odds and ends jobs, you name it. I did whatever to be able to pay my rent, but I also made my roommates from college come out. I was like, “I can’t pay my rent. You guys need to come out.” They were all going to graduate school, et cetera. I’m like, “You guys are paying rent somewhere else, so you should pay rent with me and stay with me for two months before.” Thank goodness they came. They stayed with me for that summer. I worked at Macy’s doing sales. I just took whatever job. There are folks I know who think, well, I went to Yale; I should get XYZ job. I’m like, why does that matter? I just need the money. I just need to go and make an honest living until I get that job, but I’m not going to wait around because I don’t have that luxury. I don’t have parents who say, “Well okay, why don’t you hang out at home and keep writing resumes.” No, I have to actually go and make money.

Then I met these wonderful people, Pamela Krasney and Marty Krasney. My roommate from college, it’s her godparents. They lived in Sausalito on the other side of the bridge in San Francisco. They just kind of adopted me. Marty went to Princeton and Harvard and had a network of business friends. These people just come out of nowhere. They just come out of nowhere and then they just help you. Marty started writing letters to his Harvard friends to help

me find a job, and then that's how I got my first job at Calyx and Corolla as a marketing assistant.

When I didn't want to go to med school, my parents were really upset. I wanted to be an artist in New York, and I had opportunities to go out to New York and become an artist and have a studio to work for another artist, room and board kind of situation. My dad was like, "We just sent you to Yale. That's not why we sent you to Yale." I decided, you know what? He's right. Sometimes you forget when you're hanging out with all these other kids who can go off to Europe for spring break and go off to XYZ for other things and they're into art and they don't ever have to worry about where to get supplies whereas I'm here writing requests for grants to get money to buy supplies and things of that nature that my life is actually not the same. You sometimes forget because in that world you don't think of money. But then once you graduate you go, no, you can go to grad school; I can't go to grad school because I already have loans, and I didn't want to get more loans.

My parents were expecting me to make money so I could help them. It's a different world, but one that I'm thankful because I got to do so much more. I learned so much, so many jobs. You learn so much about people when you do a lot of jobs, and when you clean houses you learn a lot about other people when you clean their homes. Also, odds and ends jobs, babysitting, whatever came up, it was for me—and I learned this not too long ago—it's not that I liked the specific job, I just liked to learn. In my career in the past twenty, thirty years, I've been vice president of a couple of companies, I've had every single marketing job you could possibly have, and I jumped around a lot because that was the only way for me to get a raise. It's interesting that you're doing really well and somebody new gets hired and they get paid more and you've been there. I'm like, why are they getting paid more? But I would find out that they were getting

more, and I'm like, that's bogus because I'm doing a better job, but for whatever reason. Then I'd change jobs. Back then you had to write how much you made before, and I'm like, why would I tell them how much I made before? It didn't make any sense to me. I'm like, what are they going to do, call up my boss and say, "How much did she make?" Fine, go ahead, but then I'm not going to come work for you for less. This is what I want to get paid. I would always lie about how much I was getting paid because it's like, why would you even ask? You're the one hiring me. I'm going to go work for you. I give so much. When I'm at a job, I'm there a thousand percent. That's the only way I was able to make more than a hundred thousand dollars a year by the time I was thirty years old, and I didn't go to business school. It's crazy that they make you tell. It's like, I'm worth more than my previous job. Why would I leave if I'm going to be paid the same or if I'm going to get paid a little bit more than whatever you're going to think I'm worth because that's what I was paid? It's a horrible system. They should pay me what the job is worth, not what I got paid before.

Anyway, in San Francisco, I lived there for almost twenty years. I was really fortunate to get on the bandwagon during the Internet boom. I had several jobs, but I launched Pandora.com, which is a music software company. It was called Savage Beast. I was also in charge of product management and product development for eBooks, which is a precursor to the Kindle. I did this crazy thing with phone cards where we worked with the mayor's office. It had all these machines throughout San Francisco selling phone cards. I worked for a software company that dealt with cardiac software for surgeons. I just had so many different jobs, but I did everything in every one of those jobs and never felt like it was a job. But every time I took a job, it was something completely new. Nobody ever had to teach me. If I had gone to a larger company—because all these companies are startups—if I had gone to a larger company, then I probably would have had

a different path. You would have had mentorship. You would have gone through a path, blah blah blah, but I didn't have that. All I had was my wits in terms of, okay, here's a company; they need workers. They needed people to solve problems and I was really good at solving problems because when you spend your entire childhood solving problems that's no big deal because you have to think out of the box all the time. There's nothing prescribed when you don't have parents who can help you, and you just have to figure it out by yourself. When you go to a job and they're like, "This isn't being done," it never occurred to me that I shouldn't do it. It never occurred to me that it's not your job, so you should not do it and let somebody else do it. No. There's something going on here that no one is fixing and it's so easy, why can't we just fix it? I was very opinionated, but then I wouldn't get it all done and I didn't mind. I learned that as soon as I opened my mouth, then it becomes my job. It's one of those things that if you want to do less, you better speak less; otherwise, they just pile it on you. But when you're young, it didn't matter. I was like, oh, I can do this and I can do that. You just gain a lot of skills and that's what I enjoyed, so that's why they weren't ever jobs. It's not until I became a VP for a couple of companies and I was like, oh, this is really boring, because it's no longer about the job and it's all about the politics. It's just not fun. I'm not into politics. People want whatever their kingdom might be, and I didn't care for that. I was like, oh, that's too boring for me.

I got married in 2002 to my husband, Montgomery Simus, whom I dated for five years, across the country, across countries. He was a Yale graduate. I was the marketing chair of the Yale Club of San Francisco at the time as a volunteer for the organization. My husband is Canadian, Caucasian. He had just moved from Hong Kong. He was in banking. He wanted to get involved with the Yale Club because he was involved with the Yale Club in Hong Kong. He thought, oh, just a way to meet new people, and he wanted to get involved with the Yale Club.

Then he called me at work because I'm listed, and I said, "Oh great, I'll invite you to this event that we're having for planning." And then I forgot, so I didn't invite him. I forgot because I was really busy. I was at a new job. I was working on eBooks.

Then our company, NuvoMedia, which became Gemstar-TV Guide International, which I believe the patents are the precursor for the Kindle, was in WIRED magazine. They had twelve pages about us in the WIRED magazine at the time, and as part of that we were doing this beta testing for our product, and I was in charge of that testing. Well, my husband read that article and he was like, "Cynthia Mun. I wonder if that's the same Cynthia Mun who is at the Yale Club?" Then he applies for the beta program and I select him, but I forgot that's the same guy. Then he calls and says, "I think you're the same person. I've been selected for the beta program, but are you the same person?" I was like, ah, I forgot. I felt so bad that I had to invite him to lunch.

We went out to lunch and that was it. We started dating. Then he left and he went to Kazakhstan. He's lived all over the place. He was a Yale undergrad and then he went to Harvard Kennedy School, so he was in public policy. He worked for the UN and did lots of great things in Africa and China and all over the place. Then we got married in 2002, and our son was born in 2004, September fifteenth. We got married October 20th, 2002, and then my son was born September 15th, 2004, and then we moved because it was too hard to live in San Francisco with a baby, and so we moved to New Jersey for a year, where I worked for Dun & Bradstreet. That was as long as I could take New Jersey. Then we came to Las Vegas.

The only thing that I missed here because I didn't talk about it in terms of coming back... When I came to San Francisco the first time, I got my first job and was there for one year and then I had to quit and leave. Two things happened. One, I was assaulted at a bus stop by a group of teenagers at knifepoint. The second thing that happened is my brother got into trouble at

John Burroughs Junior High School where I went because he got into a fight. My brother was suspended from school. It turns out that he got into a fight with some gang member, and then his life was being threatened and my mom was very worried. What my parents asked is if I would take my brother and go to Las Vegas. Here are my parents, they hardly have any money, but my dad, the year before I graduated, bought a home in Las Vegas, all cash, because he was afraid there would be an earthquake in Los Angeles and that they would have no place to go. He found a cheap house in Las Vegas because at the time there were just pretty much inexpensive homes in Las Vegas and said, "If anything goes wrong in L.A., et cetera, we need to just go to Las Vegas." It was close enough, but there were no earthquakes there. They had this home, and so my parents proposed that I take my brother and go to Las Vegas; otherwise, he was going to die. I thought about that for a bit, and how do you say no? They're going to kill my brother.

I quit my job. By this time, I had bought a used car from Pamela and Marty. They gave me a Honda Civic for fifteen hundred dollars. They made me do payments because I couldn't afford fifteen hundred dollars all at once, so they let me stretch it out in payments. Oh, they were so generous. It was a great car. I had that car forever. I drive down to L.A., pick up my brother, and then my sister says, "What about me?" My brother is in junior high school, eighth grade, and my sister is in sixth grade. My parents are like, "Maybe you could take them both." I'm only twenty-two years old. But I'm like, "Okay, I'll take them both." We pack everything in the car and we drive to Las Vegas. I became their guardian and raised them for four years.

My brother, Wynne Mun, went to Yale. Then I got my mom a job. After four years you're like, I really want to leave Las Vegas. I worked at MGM. I got a job at MGM, the new one. They were just building it. I was part of their launch team. But after four years I really wanted to leave Las Vegas, so I got my mom a job at MGM so that I could leave. Then that's

when my mom was able to come. My dad still had to live in Los Angeles because his job was there. They commuted until my dad retired and then he came to Las Vegas as well. Then my sister, Cecilea Mun, went to UNLV and got her PhD at Arizona in philosophy. My brother graduated undergrad Yale as an architect and then went to Harvard Design School and had two degrees from Harvard, one in urban design and one in architecture, so design. He lives in Boston with three kids and a wonderful wife. My sister is currently divorced, no kids, and she's currently with my mom who lives in Las Vegas. She recently took a position at Louisville University.

That brings me here. I've just been working hard in terms of giving back to the community. When I moved to Las Vegas the second time around—I stayed. When I went back to San Francisco, I caught the wave of the whole Internet thing, met my husband, got married and had a kid. Then my husband wanted to leave San Francisco and we went to New Jersey. I hated it, but it was really tough to go back to San Francisco. Once you leave San Francisco during a boom, it's really hard to go back, so we came to Las Vegas. I had a condo here. The four years I lived in Las Vegas with my siblings, I was working at MGM and I was saving money. I put a down payment on a condo and I had it rented out, so it was a rental income. It was just being rented out to people, so that's what I had. What we did when we came here, I told my husband, "I don't want to be in New Jersey anymore." I wanted to go out to better weather. "We have this condo. Let's just go live in our condo." We moved to our condo and I've been here ever since. That was in 2005 I got here.

It turns out all the people I knew in the '90s were now VPs of casino departments. When I got here the second time in 2005, I'm like, wait, all my friends are presidents of this property and vice president of that property, wow, that's cool. When I told them I was here, they were

like, “You should come work for us.” I got a job right away and I worked for MGM Mirage International, the whole place. They let me start a new department called Consumer Strategies and Insights. That was kind of fun. It wasn’t until I had a new boss who was different and one of the few times where I thought, wow, women don’t really help other women, in terms of the corporate structure. I’ve worked for smaller companies and I didn’t understand politics. It wasn’t what I expected to have a woman boss because I’ve had a lot of male bosses and they were really great, not everyone. There are some interesting people out there.

When I went to an interview at Levi Strauss, the guy actually kissed me. Strange things happen. This was in the 1990s. He was an alum and I had written hundreds of letters. Then I get this interview and I go. On the way out he kisses me. I didn’t even know what to do. I just kept on walking out. It’s only later you go, why didn’t I speak up? Why didn’t I say something to the secretary? I’m going, if this is what he does...I’m sure he’s dead now because he was older back then. I’m going, ugh.

Anyway, when my son was five, he had a medical episode for the first time at school. I was still working. I was devastated because we didn’t understand. My husband at the time, well, until recently was traveling all the time. He was always out of the country, not at home, et cetera. I was devastated when my son was sick. Thank goodness he’s fine. He was on medication for a couple of years, and now he’s supposedly fine. But that really impacted how I saw the world. It was no longer about me. It was all about my son. I decided that I didn’t want to go back to the industry, so I stopped and became a full-time mom, but very active in terms of being on boards and helping marketing organizations, et cetera, wherever I can to volunteer.



I started the Yale Club of Nevada to help students of Nevada have better access to Yale because when I first got here, I was just astounded that Yale only accepted one or two students out of the entire state of Nevada. To me that seemed ridiculous. It's like, I'm sure we have more students than that who are capable and qualified, et cetera. But Nevada State was misunderstood; not a lot of people knew. No one was advocating for them because we didn't have anyone telling you, "Hey, we've got great students. You guys should take a better look." Our teachers at the time didn't really understand how recommendation letters should be written and how the whole process worked. I was like, how are these kids...? Las Vegas, we're like a pyramid; the bottom layer is all service people. We're all blue collars on the bottom and the pinnacle at the very top is where all the executives are. I'm like, all their kids are here. How do we give them better access if we don't advocate for them? That's what we've done. Especially since I'm first-generation college and an immigrant, and the people who actually need help are kids like me who didn't have anyone at the house and maybe the parents only spoke Spanish. Here in Las Vegas, there is

more of a Hispanic community than an Asian community. I'm going, how do we give them access?

There were all these people in my life who made a difference in making a change so I'm here. My life is like...If I dropped dead tomorrow, there's nothing I could ask for. There is no bucket list. Every day is a bucket list. It's just like every day I am in this world, but it's also probably because I grew up suicidal. Life was painful and as a kid when there's a lot of pain, all you think is, I can just die. And I've made it here. When you try to die and you don't die, you get disappointed. But then on the other hand, you're like, okay, I guess you just have to keep going. I feel like today every day really you...Unless the person has gone through that exercise of knowing what living is, it just doesn't come through of how grateful you are that you're seeing another day. It's just like, here I am. I don't have to do anything, but the fact is that I'm here. I don't have to be somebody. There's just no expectations but that I'm here. It's incredible comfort in that the sky is still blue. When I die I'd like to remember the best sunset. When I die, whenever that happens, I want to remember the first time my husband kissed me or the first time my son made a sound, all the little things. It's not going to be about how much money did I make? What title did I have? I might still feel a lot of the pain of my history, but that there is enough now. I've tipped over. Somewhere along the way I've tipped over that I think I now have more positive experiences than the painful experiences, and just to get there to me is enough; I don't need more. Whatever comes is extra gravy. Just every day is like an extra day.

I do have a lot of empathy for others, because some things, it's so clear to me how to fix it when I see it. I also know change is different for people and difficult, like right now...Last year there was a trial for the Moderna vaccine, and I was like, "We need to sign up for that because if we don't sign up for that we're not going to get the vaccine." I was trying to get other

people to sign up for it, and they were like, “No. It’s dangerous.” They don’t want to do it. I’m like, “But someone has to volunteer,” because they were having a hard time getting volunteers to get the trial. It was like, “If we don’t volunteer, it’s going to take even longer.” I started sending out emails to my Yale colleagues. Thankfully we volunteered. Who knew? My husband was actually vaccinated in August last year. Some of us got the placebo; others got the vaccine. I had the placebo, so then they had to vaccinate me in February. But things like that where I think if more people thought greater.

I want to be able to say I made a positive contribution to society in some way and that my son will see that; that he’ll say, “Mom was a good person.” I hope he also says, “Mom is a funny person.” But I just want him to know that, not to say that but to know that; that mom tried hard to be a good person and that he saved me. My son really did save me because once he was born I didn’t want to die because the thought of leaving my son behind was too much.



My mom always wanted to commit suicide. The drill that we went through before my brother was born is that she needed to kill me first and then she would die. She was depressed and in so much pain because my dad had a lot of mistresses because I was a girl and he wanted a son. I didn't get it at the time obviously because I was young. But after becoming a mother, to think of killing your child because you were going to commit suicide yourself and knowing how precious my son is to me and to have to go through that exercise of thinking about killing your child is so hard. It's twisted. But, at the same time, it wasn't because she hated me. It's because she loved me and she didn't want to leave me in a world that she didn't know. It was that. I realize all of that was because she loved me so much and not that she wanted to get rid of me. When my son was born, my mind just went click and I was like, there is nothing I would do to make his life painful. If I could be here as much as I can for my son and to live this life then I would. That's why for me my son saved me in that way, just like I think my brother did for my mother. It's a wicked cycle. I'm fortunate. I think some cultures, well, in my family that they didn't value girls. If my son had been a girl, I would have still felt the same because to me a human life is a human life; it's not a boy or a girl.

That's my family. My son is in boarding school and he wanted to go there. I miss him so much because he just went back to school. He's sixteen years old and he's a good young man. He's kind. He's funny. I really miss him. That's my story.

Thank you so much. You covered so many questions that we didn't even have to ask. We greatly appreciate it. But there's still a bit more time and we have other questions if that's okay.

Okay. Yes.

I want to ask, because you didn't mention it, about the Society of Children's Book Writers.

Can you talk about that?

Children's Book Writers, yes, yes, yes. When I decided not to work anymore and I was reading all these stories to my son—my son is half-Korean and half-Caucasian—I'm like, why are there no characters like him? Where are the Asian characters? That was like twelve years ago. There are more now and there's such a drive right now to get more diversity into publishing. I was like, I can write a story. I wanted to go back to doing art, but it's really hard when you have family and I didn't have a studio. It's just different because I'm the housekeeper, the caretaker, the child giver, the whole bit. All of the sudden you're a full-time mom. It's actually a lot of work. I needed quiet time and it's not possible with young children. And because my son is an only child, he always had a lot of friends over, so I was being mom to lots of kids. I thought, I can write a story and bring in the Asian characters or kids like Zephyr, my son, and try that. Then I realized how hard it was to write a story. You have communications department—when you're in marketing, you do advertising, communications, you do all sorts of things in writing and product design, all that. Then you write a story and I'm like, oh my gosh, it's not the same. It's like, oh, story, the structure, the plot, the arc of a character and the five senses. I was like, oh my gosh, I've got to now learn this, too. I've been learning and I've been studying. I actually have an agent, but I haven't been able to give the revision back. It took me eight years to get an agent, of me writing, et cetera.

Then I realized there's this great organization called Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators [SCBWI]. The way I found them is...Here I am trying to write. I'm like, I should go to a conference. I look it up and there was one in the Bay Area. I flew out there and I was at Mills College. I'm sitting in an auditorium, just completely packed. There must have been two

hundred women, mostly women, seriously 99 percent women, and they all had grayish hair. The age group I was in, they were probably fifteen years older than I am. They were mostly teachers and librarians, but the nicest people ever. We're sitting there and I'm going, oh my gosh, we're having these conversations and these are my people. They know exactly what I'm feeling in wanting to write and talking about stories and books, but not just any, it's for children. I had the most fun in that conference.

Then I wanted to volunteer. Thank goodness—I don't know if you guys know Ellen Hopkins, but she is a thirteen or fourteen New York Times Bestseller and she lives in Nevada up in the Reno area. She is a YA; she writes young adult. She has written some adult books as well. But she was at the time in charge of Society of Children's Books, SCBWI, in Nevada. She did a workshop in Las Vegas, and we had this conversation.

At the time my husband was not very supportive of me becoming a writer. He's like, "Well, if you really want to do something, then you should just go back to doing marketing." Especially because I made a lot of money then. He's like, "Our son is getting better, and if you're really interested, you should go back to doing marketing." I'm like, "No, I don't want to. I want to be a writer." I would write and he would read it and go, "Oh, this is terrible." He said, "You'd never..." He was so mean when I think about it. He's not like that now, but at the time he was like, "Oh, you're not going to get published. This is not going to work."

When I met Ellen Hopkins, I had said that. I said, "I'm not getting very much support." And she said, "My husband said the same thing and look what I did. I showed him." She kind of took me under her wings and said, "Here's all the stuff you need to do. Here's what you need to read. Here's what you should read and join the organization." Then she made me an assistant for the southern region, and after five years I became the regional advisor for Nevada. I help all

these other authors and illustrators go through what I went through, understanding all the different processes. Because you don't just write a book and say, "Oh, it's going to get published." Sure, there are people who self-publish. But if you want out in huge distribution, then there is a lot of different steps. I'm actually quite proud because while I've been the regional advisor, we've had so many more books published from Nevada than before with agented writers and illustrators. It's a great group of people who want to create great stories for kids. I'm very proud of the region, yes.

You talked a lot about representation and mentorship and how important those things are. Do you have any advice for the younger generation, specifically Asian American students, even like me?

The Nevada Yale students know me as Yale Mom. Through the advocacy of helping them, I always tell them if they ever need to have questions answered that they can text me and I will give them advice. Because when I was at college, I didn't have that. I couldn't ask my mom. I couldn't say, "Hey, Mom, which course should I take, this one or that one?" Whereas I had friends who had parents read their essays. But my parents have never, ever read anything I've written, ever, because they couldn't. I was like, wow, there is this disparity.

For first-gen kids, you have to be active in asking for help. Generally, help will not come to you. You have to go and seek the help that you need. You have to tap people because you might find that people are more generous than you might think and they're there, different people for different things. For me, I try to make sure for the Yale Club that the new students who get in, they know each other so that they can answer questions amongst themselves because community is great.

There is a book called *The Wisdom of Crowds*. I don't know if you've ever read that. Basically, it says expert knowledge in a group will always come up with the best answer. One person who is an expert will give you one answer. But if you had all the experts come together and give you an average answer of the experts, you will have the best answer. If that's the case—when they play “How to Be a Millionaire,” the question that they give to the audience is the consumer question, like which movie had this person? And everybody will know versus one person coming up with one answer.

I always say get your group of people who know and have them be part of your network. But it shouldn't always be a one-way thing because at some point people get tired if you're always asking about how to do something for you. It's nice to just say, “Hey, how are you doing?” I think the mentorship comes in, one, find out if you guys have things in common.

One of the things I did for another student is—she's a Latina and she also identifies as lesbian. Basically, she wants to go to law school. She's also first in her family to go to college. She wanted to intern somewhere. I knew someone who was a lawyer, is really known for First Amendment. It was something constitutional. I'm not a lawyer, so I don't know all the details. But I connected them together. She might go and do an internship there. It's trying to use resources. If I knew and there was a good match and that person wanted to do it, it's easier. But it's up to the student. It's hard for a person like me to push unless there is a pull. I'll give you a great example of another student that I mentor.

All these kids are like my kids. I keep thinking they're like my kids. I'm being Mr. Stear basically. I'm being all these other teachers who have helped me because without them I would not be here. I genuinely believe I would not be here if there wasn't that kindness in the world.

There is this student, her mother is undocumented, but she graduated from Yale. Then she lost her job during the pandemic, this amazing woman. She is now the breadwinner for her family of five, no father. She is the breadwinner for her family, but she lost her job. What does she do? She is so dogged she schedules a total of a hundred and forty-five interviews to talk to people to learn more about the jobs that are available because she wants to get a job. She has a finite amount of time before she has to get a job. She has no other opportunity. For her it was a full-time job for her to reach out to the network to do all those things. The discipline that's required to do that is where grit comes from. It's when you say, "This is life or death." I think many young people don't see it that way because they have a lot of cushion. It's like, well, if I don't get it, then something else will come along. Maybe there is some of that. Serendipity is a great thing. I see people who really, really do amazing things.

There was a student who I interviewed once. Her father was in the hospital at the time that the interview time was. He had just been taken to the ambulance. I was like, "Why are you answering this call?" It's like, "Your father is in the hospital." But she knew. She's like, "Because I really need to get in." I was like, "It's okay. You can have it on a different day. You don't have to have this call today." You don't want that but you see the choices people are making and sometimes it is sacrificing. You don't want it to be sacrifice all the time, but sometimes you don't get to do all the pretty things all the time. In everyday life not everything is perfect, and to be able to accept that is a good thing. I'm not sure where young people are because to me right now young people want to do a lot of things, but I just don't know if they all want to do the hard work. I don't know. I think that's not true for everybody. From the noise that comes up that I hear when I'm on social media where they're asking questions, I'm like, well,

it's not just a given. They have to work towards it. To them it looks easy because they don't know my story, because they only see this person, like, oh, she's a commissioner.

I'm commissioner of Nevada Tourism, which is a lot of fun, and I've had that position for the past two years. I was appointed by Governor Sandoval. Then I was made chair of the commission by Lieutenant Governor Marshall earlier this year. It's a fun commission to try to help Nevada. Tourism is really big and, of course, we're in a pandemic.

But when young people see me, they're like, "Oh, she went to Yale and she's probably rich and she's on the commission." It's like, you don't understand. These things didn't come—the expectation, oh, she's Asian, so she probably has parents that supported her. I'm like, "None of that." I didn't have those expectations; I still don't. I don't have expectations that somebody will help me. But I do help other people because I think that's what humans do. We're in a society and I really feel that if you came to me and said, "Hey, I want to do an internship," I'd ask you, "Why? What drives you? Why do you want to do it? How much are you willing to work for it?" Because it's available. If my friend can get a hundred and forty interviews...Right? She's going from a job that's nonrelated and all she did was go and doggedly call. To get those hundred and forty, imagine how many she had to call. She landed a great job. She loves her job now. But what I'm saying is we don't know what we're capable of when you think of all the people who went through the Holocaust or all the people who went through wars. I didn't live any of that. But you talk to these people and you go, wow, they lived through all that and they smile and they have this view of life that's still positive. I think it's what you compare your present being to how you compare. Then there's happiness.

There's a great, free course at Yale called The Science of Happiness. It's free on Coursera by Dr. Laurie Santos. It's called The Science of Happiness, and it's the number-one

course at Yale. It had so many students take it. Basically, she boiled down this thing as to how to be happier. People think, oh, money and this and that. No. Actually she boiled it down to a couple of things, and these things where you can actually make yourself happier by some of these ongoing exercises. I had my whole family take it. I had my son and my husband. We're like, we're all going to do this. It's really great. But it's like happiness is something that can be learned. It's not just something that you are, but it's a frame of mind.

For you in terms of mentorship, I would say if you know specifically what it is you need, then go ahead and reach out. You can reach out to me. I'd be happy to help.

Thank you for answering that and covering just what it means to be a hard worker who has grit and seeking out what you want. You kind of mentioned how good people that you mentored would have these—not even people that you mentored, but people have generalizations about you sometimes because they don't know your story. I wanted to ask if you have ever experienced that throughout your life, just when it comes to Asian discrimination and the model minority myth. (Indiscernible)

And it's kind of sad because it happened more in Nevada than elsewhere. My sister and I both have had people tell us to go back to where we came from, and my sister was born here. It's things like that or they make fun of you. When I was growing up in L.A., there weren't a lot of Korean people there because this was 1974. There was one grocery store that was Korean. My Korean name is actually Jeong and you would spell it J-E-O-N-G, like that's how it would sound. But when I was going through immigration, they spelled it Chong, C-H-O-N-G. "Ching chong, ching chong," is something that I just grew up kids calling me all the time and making fun of me. Then they thought I was Japanese.

But this is what I feel. It hurts at the time when you're being attacked. It only makes you angry. But people have done that sometimes because I'm a woman, sometimes because I'm Korean. There is a lot of sexualization in terms of being Asian, which is stupid. For me it's the stupidity of people, but then I take that back and it's because people are not well informed. They haven't lived with enough diversity in their lives to be able to say everyone is human.

Recently there's been a lot of talk about Asians and Blacks. In the community I grew up with back in the '70s, '80s, there was racism against Blacks. But after the riots—my dad had a small building that burned down and it wasn't insured. The FEMA person was this Black man. That was the first time my dad recognized that he was a kind man, this man who was Black. Prior to that my dad never talked about folks being Black, et cetera. He just knew he didn't like them. My dad was racist. But he had this relationship with this man who was this FEMA person who helped him, and that completely changed his mind. But, on the other hand, he's never had an experience before.

When I've been on the receiving end of racism, and it happens more often—it just happened recently when I was in Florida at a condo. It's a new condo, so it's a new place for us. A number of times they think I'm the service person. Most people, the residents will say hi to each other in the elevator. Nobody says hi. They completely ignore me. Then other times they think I'm a housekeeper for one of the residents. I'm going, this is amazing. That is more socioeconomic. But just the fact that I look a certain way, they already assume I'm one thing. Then in the Asian community, because they know I've gone to Yale, they come up with a completely different idea. They think I should be making a lot of money, so I should be giving my money to a lot of people. You get them on both ends.

The racism thing, just like I said when I went to an interview and a guy kissed me, I didn't know what to do. There was no language. I didn't learn. When racism happens my reaction time is slow. All the things I start thinking about what I could have said is hours later because when it happens, I'm stunned. I don't know what to do. Then I go home and I get really angry and I say, "Why didn't I say this and that and that? I should have stood up for myself and all that." But it doesn't come to me. It's not natural. But I think more people should. I don't like violence, but that grandma who beat the guy up? It was in the news early this year. It's like, yes, grandma, don't take it. I don't know what happened. But there is a part of me that says, don't be silent. Unless we let people know, how do you know?

Did you know that Bing cherries are named after a Chinese man? His last name was Bing. I didn't know that. Things like that I'm learning and it's really great. We love cherries. I just bring this up because about things we don't know. On my Facebook post I've been posting a lot about African Americans in past history that we've never talked about, women who we've never talked about that you don't learn in history, and one of these things was this guy Bing who came to the U.S. and was a gardener for this orchard and he actually created the Bing cherry. The family of orchards love this and basically they did the right thing and said, "Let's just call it Bing," because he cultivated that cherry. Then he was forced to go back to China because of immigration laws, but the cherry is still Bing cherry. I thought it was Bing Cosby. I thought it was an American word. I thought it was a European word. But I found out, no, it's by a Chinese man who cultivated the cherry.

I think the more history we know of all the great people who have come before us, then we are more appreciative of everybody else. There are so many great African Americans that they never taught us about. The fake information that they've perpetrated over the years has

really, really damaged society and how we see people. The fact that they used to cut off the heads of aborigines and they still exist in a museum; that's so gruesome. They have live heads with tattoos that these people have collected. It just boggles my mind. But then I guess we have mummies, so who knows? Dead embodiments of us somewhere. I'm just saying the more positive sources of history, I think would lift all of us in good ways that we know that everyone from all sorts of races have done great things, and it was not just one culture. It's not the European culture that's done everything, or now I guess it's China and Europe. There are lots of people in between. Just the historical record, archeological record, we're missing a lot of it, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen.

I hope that was a good answer for you.

No, that was great. We're kind of cutting it close. If Stefani has a question she wants to ask, you could go ahead right now. You could also speak on, why do you think it's valuable for UNLV to collect interviews such as yours? Is there anything else that you want to talk about that you feel like you didn't touch on?

No. I was so grateful to have this opportunity to say something because it never occurred to me, but then I started thinking about it and I'm like, you're right; how are these kids going to know unless somebody says it? I took a drive across the country with my father and recorded him. I did. I put it all on tape because it took us four days to get to the East Coast to drive my brothers to him, and in that time, I used it to record about his life, because I was curious. I want to know what happened when he was living in America when I was born, and I wanted to know all the things he had done, the good and the bad. That's why I know the history of my family, because I had asked. If I hadn't and my father had died a couple of years ago, I wouldn't know. I would like other people to know that people like me who are immigrants succeeded and we came from

nothing. But you can still be kind to other people along the way and people matter. We all matter. It doesn't have to be someone from my race. All the teachers really matter. I just thought, wow, they should know how we existed, what we did.

SE: First of all, thank you for being so at times brutally honest. Your story is amazing and it's one of resilience and light and inspiration. I'd like to ask—this is such a nerdy question—I want to ask about the sewing. Was your mother paid by the piece?

Yes. That was illegal, actually. Yes, that's correct. She was by the piece. Basically, she did belt buckles. They would do pocket areas. You know the jeans, all those little tags that had to be made? That's what you would do; you would just sew those. You'd cut it and flip it over and do a stitch on the outside. Now I sew really well.

I bet you do. You were contributing to the family income by doing that sewing.

Yes.

How old were you when you did that?

When I was seven, when I used to go to the factory with my mother—a little after kindergarten. It was too much in terms of not having a lot to do. I think because we had now moved to a new place, my parents said I could come to work with her. It was probably when I was seven and a half.

You were operating a sewing machine at that point?

No, no. I was the trimmer. You have to also have a trimmer. Then when I was ten and a half is when—after my mom had my brother, then my dad bought a sewing machine for our house. That's when I started sewing because my mom said, "It's not so hard." When you have a kid and you have this machine, it looks fun. Again, it's not because I thought of it as a job. For me, I learned something and that changed that perspective. So, yes, I would be doing exactly that. But

I never sewed my finger like my mom has. My mom has sewn her fingers many times because she would stay up really, really late.

To get the work done.

Yes, to get the work done, yes.

Then I'd also like to ask you, given the history of prejudice in this country, what did you think last year when the leader of the free world started pointing the finger at China for the pandemic?

Well, to be honest that leader was so despicable to me in every way, just in every way. I could just go on. I was ready to leave. If he were to have been voted again, elected again, I told my husband that we are leaving America because this is not the country anymore. If that many people felt like him...I felt like he was like Hitler; that we were going in the road of how Hitler rose. People lying, the propaganda, people pointing fingers. If we don't stop that the same thing will happen, which is why, at the same time, it's really hard for me to forgive people who are supporting him. I'm really trying because there are people that I know who support him, and they think they're philanthropic and...But I'm going, "Yes, but at the grassroots of it you don't understand humanity here. Think of what he's saying." And it made it worse because there was more violence. More people were willing to curse people out, say things. There was no more norm. There was no courtesy. People were now saying things and it was okay, and it could be terrible things and society was willing to accept it. How did we get there? Sure, people think thoughts, but to say it out loud in a way that is saying it's okay for other people to do it? It's like stoning someone and going, "Oh yes, let me throw another stone at you. It's okay. They deserve it." People don't deserve that. No one deserves to be treated inhumanely. Having a leader exemplify the worst in the human being that we are and advocating for that so that he can

become richer? It's just so punishing for the rest of us. I felt like he was just egging everyone on to create the drama. Of course, there's still violence and there's still lots of things going on, but just the silence and the quiet of not having his ongoing propaganda is so refreshing. It's so relieving because every day I was on edge. Every day it was like, what is he going to do today? What are people going to say now? Then it incites all the drama in other people doing crazy things like going to the Capitol and trying to pull down government. Just, ugh, it is so mind-boggling that it happened in the U.S. All the things we say that happened in other countries was happening in the U.S. and we couldn't really do anything about it, but we did. Thank goodness we did.

Do you see the violence against Asians and Asian Americans that's happening right now, do you see that as an outgrowth of—

Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. And the fact the media—it's not the media. It's the mindset. The murders in Georgia, the spas that were targeted, and six of the eight who died, I believe, I think there was eight, were Asian, and the sheriff who was at the podium had to gall to say, "The guy had a bad day and it wasn't a racially motivated incident." I mean, here's a public figure who says that and doesn't recognize that this is damaging. That makes it really difficult for people like me. Then I'm going, "He had a bad day? We just had eight people die." The choice in words, it's because they haven't had the sensitivity to recognize what they say. I think it's just our lack of education in accepting diversity.

When you go to Korea, they are all very homogenized. They have the same language. They eat mostly similar foods, et cetera. I get it in the U.S. We're a huge smorgasbord, but that in itself is the beauty of who we are. Nobody wants to still have only Puritans here, right? And first nation's people, Native Americans were here before. We could all learn to eat hamburgers

and like it. It doesn't only have to be just one type of people. I'm okay saying the American food might be steak and potatoes. But guess what? There's a lot of other flavors and it's nice to have variety. During the pandemic it's really hard if you've only had one type of food the entire time.

I do feel that leadership is important, and I feel the new leader is trying to do that, but I think we could all be leaders and sometimes we're not as much in standing up for somebody else because just recently a woman was attacked in New York and there were bystanders that did nothing. A security guard actually closed the door and went inside as this woman is being beaten by a guy. If I had been there, I wouldn't have done that. If I had been there, I would have advocated for help. Just a simple phone call to 911 would have been easy to do, but you see that people are just walking by. Thank goodness somebody did film it, but was there someone else calling? Somebody's misery should not just be your social media unless you're there to help, and I see a lot of that. Oh, it's great to have it recorded. But someone needed help. People are...

See, we lost my sister-in-law to cancer last year during the pandemic. My husband's aunt died of COVID. You don't expect these things to happen, and when they do you go, "Wow, what is life about?" Unexpected things happen. In life all these people are being attacked and nobody blinks an eye and I worry. I worry. I'm going, where are all these people who say to be good, all the believers who think you should be this kind of good person, et cetera? What are they doing? Why aren't they voicing their voices together? Why aren't the voices raised loud so that they know this isn't the kind of life? To be a good person you don't have to be in any religion. There is nothing that says you have to belong to some sect of something to be a good person. That's just a known thing because we're all humans.

I think for the first time I realize. I've never been political before, but I was very political this past election year. Never in my life have I been so vocal. It was because of that, because I

felt like it's me. Instead of telling somebody else, I needed to be vocal. I'm the one who needed to say it because I haven't been saying anything. If I don't, someone like that guy who is no longer with us would have continued his terrible rampage. There should be more people like me who stand up and say it because I haven't done that much in terms of calling people out. I've been too busy, right? I didn't think about politics and didn't really understand how it affected me, but it affected all of us, and so I had to raise my hand and say...I was really busy doing the Twitter feeds, we did the call banks, and they did the text banks. I was on it for days and days and days, in three states. I was doing Nevada, Florida and Texas. Just that was the first time. But it's too bad that it took him, the ex-president, to incite that because he was so poor. He was such not a leader.

Thank you so much. You did a great job, Nessa. And, Cynthia, I can't thank you enough.

Oh, thank you to both. It was great meeting you. Really, Nessa, you should contact me. You have my contact information. We can talk about it and figure it out, okay?

VC: Thank you so much for sharing with us.

Actually, I really enjoyed it. Thank you so much for listen. I know you must listen to a lot of stories, so I really appreciate it.

Yours was so easy to listen to.

SE: Cynthia, I wanted to ask you about the time you were in Las Vegas with your brother and sister. Can you tell us about that time? Where did they go to school? Where were you living? What was it like as a twenty-two-year-old mother?

When we got to Las Vegas, my dad had bought this house in the west, Rainbow and Lake Mead. There was nothing there. The Lake Mead exit was the last exit off of 95. It was all desert, just

desert everywhere, and there was so much dust that if you opened the window, you'd have a roomful of dust in your house, so you can't even open the window.

My brother was zoned for Western High School, and he went there. My sister was zoned for Bilbray Middle School, I think that's what it's called. But amazingly so, we get here, and kids can't go on the Strip. They can't be anywhere in the casino. I'm just only twenty-two. There's nothing for them to do. They go to school. We only have one car. Then I got a job. But I went to one of those parent conferences with my brother. When I get there, they tell—I quickly understand the level of the quality of education might not be the same as in California because the counselor that I was dealing with my brother said to retake Spanish even though he had gotten an A in the class. He would have to start over because he was at a junior high school that ended in ninth grade. In California, junior high school ended in ninth grade. In Nevada, high school started at ninth grade. I was saying, “Yes, he got into a fight, but he was a good student. Why would he repeat a year of a class?” They were like, “No. That's the way it is. They don't take...” I was like, “Okay, fine.”

He starts school and they're talking about college counseling. I'm going, it's hard for me to believe this woman knows anything about college counseling considering she can't give me a complete sentence. I didn't say where I went to school. I was just being a parent. But she just pegged me as, oh okay, you guys don't have parents and your older sister is the guardian. But basically, the way she treated us was such that you're going to do what I tell you and this is how it is and you don't know anything. I'm going, well, no. I do know more and this is not the way you deal with students who are high achieving. It's like, yes, he was suspended for three days because he was in a fight, but that doesn't mean he's not a good student and he did it in self-defense. After a week of this, I had to phone home and say, “Okay, I'm going to get a job and

then we're going to put him into a private school," because there is no other option. You've got to go to the high school you're zoned for and there was no other option.

But, at the same time, I was interviewing students for Yale. I was the alumni interviewer who interviews for high school students to get into Yale, and I kept on interviewing these kids from Bishop Gorman. This was at a time when Bishop Gorman was way on the other side of town. I kept on meeting these really great students. I'm like, they're all coming from Bishop Gorman. Nowadays, in today's time, we have lots of great high schools in Nevada, just to make that clear, but back then it was very difficult.

I called my mom and said, "I think we're going to have to see..." We grew up Catholic. At some point we left the church. I said, "My brother really needs to go to that school because this is not the right school." We put him into that school and he thrived and he was valedictorian. The school made a huge difference. Then my sister went there.

It was a time where we had to be creative because there weren't any things for kids. We learned how to become rock climbers. I would take them to Red Rock. We bought shoes, but we didn't have any other gear. But the rock climbers, that community is so generous they let kids—we would switch off using their gear back and forth. They were so interested in having more people come, and that was really great. We would drive all throughout Nevada on weekends. We would just drive to the desert. We'd go see Death Valley. We'd go to Nelson. We just went exploring mines because there wasn't anything else to do.

Then when my brother was playing football, I went to every one of his games. My brother was small, short, but he was super smart and he played varsity football with all the guys who were at Gorman at the time. They called him the Rocket Scientist because he had figured

out the signs from the other team, and he would go and tell the coach what their plays were going to be. It was fun.

It was not easy because I was young and I was a mom and then I had a job, so my life was this constant thing that I forgot that I was young. But look what four years did for my family. It was a hardship for my parents for the four years I went to college. For me to be able to give back those four years to raise my brother and sister, for our family it's a no-brainer. It's a no-brainer. I told my son, "Zephyr, did you know when I was twenty-two I raised your uncle and aunt?" He's like, "Twenty-two...What? You were just a kid." I'm like, "Exactly. And look at you." You're sixteen and you're going to be twenty-two in a couple of years. You should have those responsibilities.

Again, it's the same thing; if your family asks, what do you say? How do you say no to your family when they need you the most? It's because I did that that my brother has also become successful and has a place in the world, and my sister. If something terrible did happen to my brother because the gangs were calling and harassing my mom trying to find out where he was, things would have gone badly. We look back to when I was in high school, there were kids who we knew in elementary school who are now dead. I went to Tenth Street Elementary School. They were all in gangs. I went to a primarily Hispanic school. I went to Hobart Elementary School and then I went to Tenth Street Elementary School. In that community most of those kids were in the gangs. My brother and I talk about this. "Remember that kid?" Then my brother said, "Yes, I heard he was in jail." These are real people that we grew up with. We go, "Gosh, we were on such a fine line falling on the other side or not." We were just there and anything could have happened that would have put us on the other end.

When people are poor they don't choose to be poor. Things happen consecutively that's really bad and they can't recover. That's the thing I think of my parents. One, even though my mom hated her marriage so much because my dad cheated on her, she stayed with him because she was afraid if she did not, her children would not be successful. That's huge. I'm married now. It's a huge sacrifice people are going through. No one says it, but it's those little things that meant I had two parents working who made the rent, who paid the mortgage so that we, the children, could go and do something. If I hadn't given those four years to my brother and sister, lots of things could have gone wrong, which is true for some of my cousins who are in the U.S. Lots of things have gone wrong.

I also do not represent a typical Korean American immigrant in that I came early in the '70s. There are lots of Korean immigrants who came later with completely different backgrounds. They had more. They had to have money to come, et cetera. They came to give their kids an education, and you see that in the communities and churches. I purposely did not go to the community church. I did not because that community to me was hypocritical. For me, what I saw, what they did and how they treated people with money versus not money felt disingenuous. Instead of being part of that society, I kept myself away from that society. As an adult, I wish I hadn't. I look back now and go, "I wish I had closer community roots in L.A."

But I was also giving my half-sister room to breathe. My father and his mistress had a child. She's younger than I am. They are very much connected into the Los Angeles church community. But in Korean society, to be this child of a mistress is not well looked upon. If I had been in the same community, then she would have been compared, and it would have been hard for her to get recognition. People say mean things. Because my high school was in Pasadena, I didn't need to be in that community. It was somewhat self-imposed because I didn't want to run

into her because then she'd have to... There was one situation where it could have happened and it would have made her look bad. My mom, on the other hand, is sometimes not kind. If she had run into us with my mom, my mom would have made a scene. I just didn't like drama. It was easier for me to take myself out of that situation.

For us to go to Las Vegas—because I didn't want to go to L.A. That's why I never wanted to go to L.A., because I didn't want to be part of that conversation. Those were things my parents did, and I didn't want to affect any of the children in that way. When we came to Las Vegas, we had our own world. I raised my brother and sister as if they were Americans. I took them out to dinner at a restaurant in a non-Korean environment. I taught my brother and sister how to use utensils because we always had chopsticks. It's like learning how to cut while holding your fork. All of those things are traits and manners that if you grow up in a completely Asian society you don't understand and sometimes assimilation is not necessary, but makes you understand how to work within society in an American way. I read the manners book, *Miss Manners*, twice, before I went to college because I was like, I better know what Americans are going to be like. It's just that kind of thinking which makes you have greater perspective. To be a Korean American, I'm Korean, but I'm also American. I have to know what the other populations think of certain things. I like pop music. I like Korean music. I also listen to Spanish music and Japanese music. But the thing is I want to be relatable. I want them to see my uniqueness, but I want to also be saying, "I'm like you." But I don't want to be talked about. "Oh, those Asian eyes." That I don't appreciate. When people call me Oriental, I'm like, that's such an archaic word. Where did that come from? Things like that.

I raised them for four years, and then as soon as my brother got into Yale, then I was like, oh, I did my job. Your precious son is going to Yale. Now I was trying to figure out how to

leave. I was like, my mom sews. I was like, MGM has a uniform department. They have all these people that sew. But my mom has never worked for a company because she's always been a seamstress at a sweatshop. She didn't speak English enough, but, oh my gosh, Jackie Murphy at the MGM uniform, he was amazing. He was the director at the time. I explained the situation. I said, "My mom can sew like the best. She's been doing it forever. But she can't speak English." And Jackie said, "She doesn't need to. We can talk by showing each other." I said, "Okay." He was looking for employees, so I said, "I will go to the interview with her and become a translator." You know what? The interview, we laughed the entire time because my mom sort of understood some things, but then he would show her and they got it. She worked there for twenty years. She retired from the MGM.

SE: With benefits.

Yes. Yes, she was part of the Culinary Union. She has a little pension. She really enjoyed that job. It was tough for her sometimes because there was a bit of racism against her there by the other employees when she first got there, but we all learn. It's like anything else. I think it's because when you think someone is getting somebody else's share.

I think racism would go away if all Americans were doing well. I think if everyone had what they needed to survive without the stress that there won't be any racism because they're good. When I see racism it's because they're hurting. Those people who are following Trump, in their lives something is not right. They are financially strapped. They're not feeling confident. They're down in the dumps, which is why they need to attack and feel like things are being taken away. That's why I think we need help across the board. The number of people who make a lot of money are very small. I don't see why we can't give more to the bottom of that pyramid. I'm willing to give more. I don't understand why everyone has to have so much if the people at the

bottom don't have enough. But I really do think the people who are angry are angry because they're not doing well.

SE: Thank you for that. I'm glad that we were able to do this second little bit here. Thank you.

You're welcome. It was great. I really enjoyed it. I guess I've never talked to anybody about my life in that stretch.

[End of recorded interview]