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Mae: It's Tuesday, June 11th, 2024. This is Mae Lee and Karen Wang. I'm a faculty in Intercultural Studies, Ethnic Studies, and also Chair of Asian American and Asian Studies at De Anza. Karen Wang is a research intern with the Asian American Studies program here. Today, we are interviewing Connie Young Yu at De Anza College in Cupertino as part of the NEH grant on Asian American Storytelling in the Santa Clara Valley. And I just want to mention, we have a tech crew here of Jiwon Jung, Karen Wang, Lori Clinchard and Ed Breault. So with that, we'll start asking you the first question.

So, we listened to the life history that you interviewed with Yvonne and reviewed some of your work. And we know that a lot of your work is meant to tell the untold stories of the Chinese American experience. And it spans decades. Your work spans decades. And it's included writing, speaking, advising, advocacy, institution-building, and community-organizing. Can you tell us how your own consciousness as a Chinese American or an Asian American developed, how that consciousness developed, and how it has informed your work over all these decades?

Connie: Yes. Well, certainly. Lofty credits there.

You know, I was very fortunate. And I keep reflecting on this. When people ask who inspired you most? Who are your mentors? It was my parents, my father, who was born in 1912, in the Chinatown. That was called Heinlerville. And my mother, born in San Francisco in 1908, and she told me stories of her ancestors that I always knew. And I'm very fortunate in this way. I always knew that my great-grandfather worked on the Transcontinental Railroad because she was very proud of that. She always said, you're going to do something. Don't forget the pioneers. And do something for women. And it's interesting because, you think about Asian American parents as pushing their kids to be doctors and engineers or something. Accountants. But my sister, three years older than I, and my brother, five years younger, all three of us, were encouraged to do whatever we thought we could be, that we loved, and that we could follow our dream.

And my father was a Chinatown leader. He was a colonel in the U.S. reserves and Chinatown, San Francisco leader, community leader with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. And he spearheaded the move to create the war memorial at Saint Mary's Square to Chinese Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice in World War I and World War II. So I grew up seeing my father and my mother, and she was very active in collecting antiques and robes and documents and things that related to our history. She just did that. And people said, you know, your parents, you're a historian because your parents are pack rats. But the thing is, I grew up with that.

But when I went to Mills College, and this is true for going to other universities, and the first course you take is a Western Civ[ilization], it's a requirement. You can't graduate. Ours was Great Books. And of course, you know, it starts with Socrates. But I always knew I wanted to be a writer, but to succeed in college, with this culture, this Western culture, you have to go with it

and be excited about it. And I was. I loved the English literature, and I loved- What saved me was working on the school newspaper, journalism, and one of my first reports was on the House Un-American Activities demonstrations at City Hall in 1961. I'm sorry. It's 1960. Where students protested the House Un-American Activities. I was there reporting, and I saw one of my high school friends saying, "Oh, I'm so- Today, I'm ashamed to be an American." And it really kind of stunned me. It was a white guy, you know? And of course, I always identified with, I always had a strong feeling of being Chinese American, because our culture was Chinatown, San Francisco. We were so proud of it. With all the culture of our parades and the monuments and the festivities. Even Miss Chinatown USA gave us a sense of pride in my identity. So I was proud of that. But it's nothing that I could convey or have other people share.

When I went to college. There was [sic] very few people of color. There was [sic] no black people in my class. And only a couple of Asians, few Asians. So, anyway, I was an okay student. I excelled in writing poetry. I wanted to be a creative writer. And then in my senior year, where we had a senior seminar on Mark Twain, and my professor, Dr. Franklin Walker, was assigning topics. "Everybody, this is your senior thesis. You're going to write something relating to Mark Twain, some aspect of his work." And when I was the only person of color in the room and when it came to me, I said, "Well, I'd like to write about Mark Twain and the short story." And the teacher looked right at me and said, "How about writing about Mark Twain and the Chinese?" And I just sat back and I was kind of stunned. And one of my friends said, "Oh, I'm so surprised he said that to you." It's like I was being discriminated against that I could only-

But what he did was the biggest favor of my life. So I wrote my thesis on Mark Twain and the Chinese, and I did research on how Mark Twain was an advocate for the Chinese, how he was a Cub Reporter and writing about the brutality toward a Chinese. And the editor, you know, tossed his story, saying, "You're going to offend the Irish readers." And Mark Twain decided he would write about the Chinese, and satirical articles, and a wonderful story.

So, anyway, reading about him, and also about the Burlingame Treaty, and all the other anti-Chinese laws, and anti-Chinese movement, and the fact that Mark Twain wrote so much about the Chinese, it was. I got an A-minus. [laughs] But it suddenly connected me to the history that I always felt and knew about. And here it was. You know, I was in this college that was connected to a famous American writer, one of the greatest cultural, you know, icons of American literature. I wrote later on, I wrote an article for Chinatown. A Chinatown booklet. And it was Mark Twain in Chinatown. And then my parents were so proud, but I didn't associate at all with their experiences or their, uh, their parents' experiences.

What I did know about racism and discrimination was the fact that we moved out of Chinatown to the Richmond District, and it was a small, middle class neighborhood in an all white neighborhood. Because my father was able to have his army buddy, a fellow reserve officer of the same rank - Lieutenant Colonel - buy the house first, and then sell it to us, and we became the first Chinese. In that whole area of the Richmond district, three (inaudible) the avenues and we were blockbusters. And I had no idea that my neighbor, whom I loved - I won't say her name - Mrs. Dear One. She was a friendly neighbor to me. And until my mother told me years and

years later, the person who circulated a petition against the Chinese, against our moving in was, Mrs. Dear One. And I go, I can't believe it. And so it just. Showed me that the fears that people had about Chinese, that the stereotypes that they thought a Chinese family would move in and start a Tong War. But once they saw us, and then my father being a reserve officer and all that, and businessman, and respectable and the cute little kids, and we were the only- my sister, brother and I- were the only Chinese kids when we first moved in at Lafayette Grammar School.

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But once we were there, it was just, I felt really. Very happy. You know, I didn't feel that discrimination. Except once in a while. You know, you always feel you're different. But in high school, I think I became. This is the first time- this is Washington High School. And there were a lot of, you know, Asians, African American kids. My friends were Jewish Americans, and they were very activists [sic]. And I learned from them about the Anti-Defamation League. And one of them, Alice Huberman, invited me to speak at her temple. It was B'nai B'rith, on prejudice. In those days they talked about prejudice, not racism. And so I spoke as a Chinese. And there was an African American woman who spoke, and then, I don't know, at that time if there was a Latino. But we all spoke about what it felt like to be what our civics teacher called us: "hyphenated Americans," because I remember when he used that term, I said, "What's a hyphenated?" And he looked at me and he goes, well, like a "Chinese-American."

And then I thought, that's kind of...you know. But anyway, I went to Mills College. You heard about my experience there. And then when I graduated, I got married right away to Dr. John Yu, who grew up in the Philippines, born in Shanghai. But went to Stanford Medical School, was very true humanitarian and was very interested in all of these things. So we had- when I was 27, I already had three children under five. I got married at 21. So anyway, and I was very, I think, by then, busy as I was with the family. And I loved being with- I love the family, love being the housewife, the mother, activist. Because I was so inspired by the civil rights movement and also extremely emotionally involved with the antiwar movement and seeing what was happening in Vietnam.

I mean, it was just, it's hard to imagine now, but every day you'd see the news of American soldiers fighting Vietnamese in the news. You know, during this, the late 60s and then 70s, Kent State, where students were shot, protesting. And, anyway. My son Martin was born in October of 1969, and I named him after Martin Luther King because that was the year the Tet Offensive, Martin Luther King was assassinated. Robert Kennedy was assassinated. It seemed like the war would not end. The war would not end. The lesson was just, you know, huge domestic unrest and protests and demonstrations. The people had to be the conscience of the country, like now. Like the students now with the genocide in Gaza.

So when we moved to Los Altos Hills in 1970, After I met some fellow peaceniks there, it's really interesting because the at that time it was very rural, and then the local peace center was in Palo Alto, and I worked with some friends and everybody was White at that time, you know, in the peace movement. I worked with them to form an organization called the Peace Union, which

met there. And we organized demonstrations. We supported the demonstrations at Stanford. And that's where I met Asian American radicals for the first time. And it was very, very exciting to see because what they were demonstrating was against the racism of the war, the imperialism of the war, making connections between the struggles at home and the struggles abroad. And I took up the chant, "One struggle, many fronts" and the Third World movement. What was it? "The people united will never be divided." I was out there and I was very good at writing leaflets, so I kind of started giving up on creative writing because it was just like, this is the need, this is what has to be done. And, I started writing, essays, and newsletters, and then that led to...

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Well, I also wrote an article on - this is getting back to - close to my parents' narrative. They were going to go to the 100th anniversary of the Golden Spike. This is the 100th anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad at Promontory Point. And my father was Vice President of the Chinese Historical Society of America. Phil Choi was the president. And Philip was invited to give a speech. And I knew all this was happening, and I thought, I'm going to write an article. And that's when I started doing research, deep research into the Transcontinental Railroad. And I found out all about the anti-Chinese movement and the struggle and the fact that the railroad workers, after they completed the job, tried to find work elsewhere, and they were driven out of town. There was a violence [sic] and, you know, finding that out. But what I wrote was the story, and it was on the incredible achievement of Chinese. And that has been ignored. And so it was called The Unsung Heroes of the Golden Spike. And I did a lot of my research at the graduate - I bought a special pass - at the graduate library at Stanford, and I was able to go through the stacks and read the newspapers of the time, and I really got excited about and shared that with my parents. My article is published May 10th, 1969. And I was at home with the kids and my parents were in Promontory. And at that moment, of the dedication of the Golden Spike and the meeting of the rails, the grand speech by the Secretary of Transportation, John Volpe. Phil Choi was supposed to go up and present a plaque. And it was to Chinese that, you know, in honoring Chinese railroad workers, it was presented by the Chinese Community of San Francisco. And the Chinese Historical Society. So he's there. And at the last minute, just when he was about to go up, the chairperson of the event, Mr. Goodfellow, of all things, came up and said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Choi, there's no time for you."

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And that snub. You know, created a movement, especially after John Volpe spoke, gave the speech saying, "Who but Americans could have tunneled through all the granite, through the Sierras? Who but Americans could have built ten miles of track one day?" That was the keynote. And so Phil Choi was just furious. And there were only five Chinese at that time, [of] about 20,000 people. My mother was the only descendant of a Chinese railroad worker there. And she just sat there. And my parents were very polite, you know. Phil was furious. He said he

wanted to go up and grab the microphone, but they pulled it off. But they they told me later what it was like and it took- let's say there was quite a movement in Chinatown. In those days, you know, there's no cell phones. The news didn't come for that until a couple days, when there was an article in the Chronicle called The Forgotten Men of the Golden Spike, and it told the story of how Phil Choi was totally ignored and could not give the commemorative speech to Chinese railroad workers, which he had been waiting so long to do, and for the Chinese Historical Society he felt he had failed our people!

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So many, many decades later. In 2019. May 10th, I was invited to give the commencement address. And, you know, I was wearing my mother's dress. Chinese dress. And up to the last minute, I was so anxious, maybe paranoid that somebody would come up and say, "Sorry, Ms. Yu. There's no time for you." But, I saw my name on the program. It was, you know, the great event poster. You know, I was right there. Connie Young Yu, Chinese Historical Society Commencement. And then there was a lion dance and then the Secretary of Transportation was Elaine Chao. Well, of course, she had a wonderful speech written for her, commemorating everybody. But I was able to give the speech about reclaiming history and also honoring all the immigrant workers, but particularly mentioning that the Chinese were excluded because of the Chinese Exclusion Law, the anti-Chinese movement, and written out of history. And this was a moment to reclaim it, but reclaim it for America, not just, you know, our group.

So anyway, that was a great milestone. And also, I felt it was a mission accomplished, but of course, right afterwards, you know, the Chinese Descendants Association had a real big celebration, luncheon, and Judge Michael Kwan stood up, and he said, "I want to read something that I got off of Facebook, social media." And he goes, like, "You Chinese crybabies, what do you think, America owes you everything? Why don't you go back to where you came from?" That was it. And I just thought, oh my God, you know, this is a nativist country. It will always be a constant struggle, be a constant struggle to show that we're not perpetual aliens. It's so deeply entrenched.

Well, anyway. But in between the first, you know, the 100th year commemoration, the 150th, I did a lot of writing, and work and, the writing that I've done, it's not always- I wrote a couple of books and a lot of articles. I never was an academican, you know, so I was always, I call myself independent historian. But a real milestone for me was getting involved in the first Asian American Writers Conference, the first Asian American issue of Concerned Asian Scholars. And it's funny, my husband said, "Two out of three ain't bad. You're concerned, and you're Asian." But anyway, I was finally able to to connect, make the connections between the history that I was reading about - Mark Twain - and my own family history, and the cover of this is my father, my grandfather's - it's a certificate of residence that he was required to carry because of the Geary Act. And it's stamped "laborer." That's my grandfather.

This was a special issue. And the editors are Shawn Wong, who's now a professor. He was 23 years old at the time and a young writer. And me. So, it sort of established that with Asian

American studies, Asian American culture, it's the people's history. It's all oral history. It didn't come out of libraries, you know. We will put it in the libraries, but we're the ones who have to write it.

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Mae: Can I ask you some questions? About the many things that you've talked about. As you were saying, you were growing up, and your parents conveyed a lot of pride and kind of inculcated that in you, in Chinese American family and culture. And then you went to school at Mills and then you studied Mark Twain and his writings in support of Chinese Americans. And then later on, you did your own research on the Transcontinental Railroad and Chinese Americans, and started writing. I'm curious, when your parents were telling as you were growing up, did they share- was the emphasis on being Chinese American prideful? Was it linked to the stories about racism and discrimination or not? Later on, you kind of found the context of that.

Connie: Yes, yes. About how my parents would link that. Yeah. You know, the struggles with, you know, their experiences and their ancestors. Well, they didn't talk about it in the angry, bitter way, but they'd always say. And I always would hear this, that my grandfather came to San Jose at the age of 11 with his uncle. As an 11-year-old laborer in 1881, one year before the Chinese Exclusion law. And my father would say, you know, if he waited till he was 12, he wouldn't be able to come because the Exclusion law would have been passed and Chinese laborers would not become- He came- And because he came before, he was even able to get a reentry permit, if you go back to China. That's how he could bring over my grandmother after he became a merchant. But anyway, the key thing was my father talked about Chinese exclusion, and he would always say, talk about how the Chinese were treated. But he was never - he would say, "Jam Gung," you know, "It's so pathetic" and so - "Jam Gung" - so sorrowful to see what happened to some of these Chinese workers, you know, and what happened to your grandfather, for instance. When my grandfather was in the Market Street Chinatown, he was- he did a lot of things. He worked as an 11-year-old laborer. You worked in the store, you know, helping the family- the clan store. He was a houseboy. Later he worked with strawberry growers picking strawberries. He made bricks.

But whenever he would leave Chinatown, the perimeters of Chinatown, you know, he'd be really wary. And he told us one time, he said, "When I ran home, back from work one time, I was chased by a bunch of White kids, you know, ruffians." And he said. "And I ran so fast, I lost my hat." That's all he said. He didn't say. He wasn't like, oh, those horrible, you know, blank, blank blank. You know, he just said, "I lost my hat." And it seemed like it was part of being in America. And my father talked about, well, a lot of things, the fact that why he became a soy sauce manufacturer instead of an engineer. He was an engineer for a company - not naming - and they told him, you know, there's a glass ceiling here. You're not going to get very far. We don't hire Chinese permanently. And they just say Chinese because the Chinese Exclusion Law left such- and all the subsequent laws that left such a legalized mandate, you know. "Don't hire Chinese, don't include Chinese." You know, it- it became- even if they're citizens.

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So the next thing that I was very involved in after this and meeting the wonderful activists [shows copy of issue], Asian American activists, and this also was the first time I was involved with writing about Asian Americans, because we wrote about- Shawn Wong and I wrote about, the Japanese American concentration camp journal, *Trek* at Topaz. So we did an essay on Japanese Americans, you know, so that's when I. And I interviewed my friends who are Japanese Americans for this article. And then the poetry you have Sam Tagatac, Filipino American. Lawson Inada, Japanese. Shawn Wong, Wing Tek Lum, Chinese. Frank Chin. But their agenda and their anthology that they put together - the "Aiiieeeee!" boys - was Asian Americans. And so that's when I got into the whole sensibility and made connections.

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Mae: How would you say your sense of identity, if you were to compare its evolving nature, like before? You know, growing up and before you met these Asian-American activists through your- through Stanford and through kind of the peace organizing you would do. Well, how would you describe your sense of identity?

Connie: Well, I would feel that their history, other Asians' history is separate from ours. Um, you know, because I was so specialized, I didn't realize until working with them and the laws, the and the fact that my grandmother was excluded, uh, from immigration because and it was, you know, on Angel Island for 15 months. Initially because there was a law of 1924, there was really- to stop Japanese picture brides. And it said, you know, uh, no aliens ineligible for citizenship will be admitted, to the United States. And so I realized, you know, and also I was, uh, okay, I'm wearing this T-shirt [gestures at shirt]

I was on the this was something that I couldn't believe would happen to be in an organization, an activist organization that actually succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. So, uh, before that, to show you that I felt a lot of, uh, uh, a defeat. I was a McGovern delegate in 1972 because from the peace movement, you know, McGovern was a peace candidate. You know, the other candidate was Nixon, whom my father supported because he was a Republican. And he was my father was, uh, you know, when Nixon ran for senator, my father was the the Chinatown Republican Party chairperson. So anyway. But my father was see, my parents were- it's unconditional love. They were very proud of me being a delegate, national delegate.

So this was revolutionary. The California delegation was composed of, uh. [pause] You know, people, uh, 18 years old, uh. You know, Asian-Americans there are only actually there are only six Asian Americans in a delegation of over 100. You know, and, uh, George Takei was one of them. And, uh, and so, you know, we just banded together and we were accepted in the Chicano delegation. So that's where I got the idea of, um, of the solidarity of people of color. And they even called it Third World people. They didn't know what to call us. But, um, so that's when I just saw that we needed a little political clout. Norman Mineta was walking around there. He was mayor of, uh, at that time. San Jose. Loved meeting Norman. And I met him. You know,

he was very inspiring. And I interviewed him about his experience in camp when he was mayor. So but just being involved with- what changed my whole perception of history. And also I was involved with, uh, a radio group, uh, KPFA. No. Yeah. Also KPFA, where, you know, we had programs on Asian American, uh, you know, activism. And, uh, another one started by Chinese for affirmative action, in which we formed, uh, a group called the DuPont Guy collective. You know, DuPont guy meaning Grant Avenue. And we had a weekly program in which I wrote a lot of the scripts, um, on Asian America. Um, so it was part of the movement to have community programs. And so there was a lot going on that was kind of a, um, you know, the beginning of organizations.

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Mae: And then did you feel like you were part of a movement?

Connie: Oh, totally we felt very empowered. We felt very powerful. I mean, uh, our group and Christopher Chow, the the first Asian American journalist on a broadcast, you know, in the Bay Area was, uh, was the person who contacted me and got me involved with, with this Angel Island movement. And this was what I wanted to talk about was.

I guess, working, you know, being a delegate and, um, showed me something about politics, you know, and, but I just felt that it was just such an uphill battle for Asians and, uh, the civil rights movement in this country. But this amazing thing happened. The discovery of the writing on the walls. [gestures at shirt] It was by a ranger named Alexander Weiss in 1970 who contacted, uh, George Araki, professor of biology at San Francisco State, who- who immediately said, "there's writing on the wall?" There's, you know, and Weiss didn't know if it was, um, it was Chinese or Japanese. And George Araki remembered his grandmother telling him his- her first steps on Angel Island. Uh, first steps in America were on Angel Island. And he- at that time, they thought that the, uh, the barracks were going to be demolished. And it was because Alexander Weiss was a newly assigned and he was told by his superiors, don't- forget about that. You know, that building is going to be demolished. You know, there's you know, we're ready to get rid of it. It's an old building. It was dilapidated. And, um, it's a site of the old immigration station, and there's no other- That old immigration station burned years ago, but that building stayed there with the writing, you know. But nobody looked at it until that- So, George Araki contacted his friend Matt Takahashi, who's a photographer, and George and his family, his wife and three kids and, uh, the photographer and taken to Angel island by, you know, a ferry to to look at the barracks guided by Alexander Weiss, who had permission to do this. And they photographed every inch with the children holding the cables. They photographed every inch of the barracks that had writing.

And so here you have photographs and you here you have a professor at San Francisco State. You have students, you have activists. The word spread. And Chris Chow was one of the activists. And he called me and he said, we've got to do something. And I think we have a plan. We have to form a committee. And so we got a historian, Mark Lee, Phil Choi, um, uh. I was the only woman on the committee, about ten of us. And then George Araki and then um, but it was

a it's an Asian American, you know, to stop the barracks- because Japanese and Chinese were detained in that building, but Japanese had gone through as well, and a lot of them were deported. Uh oh. And, um, but so how are we going to do this? And Chris Chow says we have to go through the system. We have to contact the assemblyman for our district, who is John Farren, to write a resolution to create our committee. And it was called first AIISHAC, the Asian American, no. Angel Island Immigration Station Citizens Advisory Committee to write a report to submit. But it stopped the demolition of the barracks. It passed. And when that happened, like I was just like, not only did it pass, I was involved with helping to write the report, which came out in 1976. And, uh, the recommendation to the state to, to to restore the building and to have it preserved as a, as a state monument and later a national monument. And if you see it now, there's another building, there's a hospital that is now a museum to immigration, all immigration, the history of immigration. And so and then there's, uh, it's just it's a it's a beautiful monument. And then people can go look at the barracks and look at the writing on the wall.

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And then in 1982, we had the- the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Law at Angel Island. And I was part of that. And so, uh, it was really- it was to me, um, the- it was the best use of my ability as a writer and I guess as a advocate-speaker-activist, I felt that this was my role, that this I could do. And the fact that- was to be part of a movement, part of this committee that actually saved this building with the writing on the wall by detainees. And they were activists in writing. They were- when you think about it, they were writing for for people to see their plight, they were writing, expressing the injustice of this and their um. So anyway, that's a very I would say that's the most exciting and probably the most successful advocacy movement, you know, I've ever been in.

Mae: Wow.

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Yeah. And it continues because I'm part of the foundation. I mean, I support it and love to continue telling the descendant stories, and then the descendant stories continue to be told [takes out a pamphlet]. So, um, this was the exhibit at the California History Center, and it's the story of my grandmother, Detained at Liberty's Door. And here I'm using both sides of my family. These stories- my mother told me about her mother being detained on Angel Island. So I was- it brought back her emotions and her feelings about- and the injustice of it all that she, being American born, could land, and- and her siblings. But her mother, who was born in China, had to stay on the island. And also the fact that there was a law saying a widow loses the status of her husband. Regard-, you know, not talk about the injustice of that. And this is part of the- and I wrote with Barry Fong a video called Detained at Liberty's Door. Um, so it's a story, it's on the video. So it's very, um, gratifying to be able to use my abilities as an activist and a writer, you know, to, to to recover this history and to make a difference, because we feel if people understand this history, if people grasp it and understand why there's anti-Asian hate, what?

You know, of course, this came out during the pandemic, how all- you see rallies, you know, with people holding signs saying, you know, uh, um, stop anti-Asian hate. And then somebody had a sign saying, uh, Executive Order 9066 Angel Island, just to show that these were- these were institutionalized, um, racist. Um. Episodes in American history that have- are embedded in our psyche. And. And so that's what I keep talking about. That's what um. Yeah, that's my narrative and. Yes.

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Karen: Oh, sorry. Yeah. I just wanted to build off of that, like. Talking about your narrative, um, uh, I guess, like, uh, we're, we're really curious about when you like, you know, as, like a writer, as someone who's literally been creating this narrative, like, for something that didn't exist before. Is there anything that you think about, um, when you, like, tell like a story, like there are things that you leave out or the things that you keep in when you're going through, like these historical archives, like, how do you go about crafting your narrative from like, these, you know, like, I guess, like historical artifacts?

Connie: I think that- that the narrative starts with the people. The people. And, um, so I have this is I forgot to mention, well, the biggest thing that this ongoing talk about, you know, the things that I'm *continually* doing is the story of San Jose's Chinatowns, because that- this is an incredible story that happened here, and it was completely- not even forgotten. It was just obliterated until the- the excavation for the building of the Fairmont Hotel, that is, um, urban renewal that has, uh, or, you know.

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Uh, what do you call it? Projects like building a hotel that- that, uh, take excavation and an EIR process. And so in the 1980s, um, you know, the, the archaeologist, the wonderful archaeologist uncovered. And that's because they had to, for the EIR process, a complete Chinatown that was burned to the ground. And on May 4th, 1887. And talking about connections, I grew up knowing about this because my grandfather told me about the, you know, how he'd run to the- Chinatown was home base, and his home base was burned when he was a teenager, and that's why he went to San Francisco to work until he was able to come back to a new Chinatown. But that whole story is a story of- that happened throughout California. However, it has a very dramatic ending or continuing- continuance. Um, Digging to Chinatown [holds DVD] talks about how, you know, the Market Street Chinatown, was one of- which is where the City Hall know, which is where the Fairmont Hotel was, uh, was burned by arson. And it's an arson fire. So that's part of the- the, uh, the story that I want to- to emphasize.

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So this leads to this, the apology, the apology by the city of San Jose. And this came about because of. The- the years of history, the years of the archaeology of the years of, uh, after the

Market Street Chinatown was, you know, the- the collection, the archaeological collection at Stanford University is being studied. So there's all these studies going on about the Chinatown. It's part of history now. And the excavation for this area called the Corpyard in Japantown, the Corpyard was the site of Heinleinville Chinatown. And the struggle to build that Chinatown is- is part of the story. It's the heart of the story that I want to tell. That this- and I'm going to mention this, not only mentioned it, but present it at the World Chinatown Conference -that, um, that- that this situation was very unusual, that-

And the story is from, from the people and also archival research. My father always talked about the Chinatown that he was born in, and he also, um, that had a fence around it. And he goes, "so nobody could get in and no one get out." And he, you know, we just knew why. Because it's a segregated community. John Heinlein, who within ten days of the fire, he was a friend to the Chinese. And my father on tape said Heinlein loved the Chinese. He leased land to the Chinese. And, uh, after the- the arson fire and the newspapers called it a mysterious fire. The Chinese said it was deliberately set to chase us out. They. I knew it because there was already an injunction for, um, that condemned Chinatown because they wanted to build the city hall there. So, um, John Heinlein signed a contract within ten days with the Chinese merchants, 11 Chinese merchants, to build a new Chinatown on his pasture land, uh, which is the site of the Japantown now. And this story [holds DVD] tells how the- struggle it took, because the city immediately would not give him a permit and had an injunction against him. There was a homeowners association. So, you know, that had a torchlight parade, you know, against John Heinlein to prevent him from, you know, "no Chinatown, no more Chinatowns in San Jose." But he stood his ground. He had, uh, fortunately had his son, Gerta (?) Heinlein, was a lawyer from San Francisco, came and went to court and, um, defended his father and the Chinese. And- and the thing is, what is important to note is the Chinese refused to be driven out. They said, we're going to fight this. We're not going to be driven out. And so this is a little bit different, not a little bit. But, uh, it's different from other Chinatowns where the violence just drove the Chinese out and they couldn't come back. And there wasn't any benevolent, uh, landowner who said, oh, you know, I'll lease land to you. Um, so I think that because of John Heinlein and because of the Chinese not- refusing to leave- San Jose stands as one of the communities, you know, that has a story of pride instead of, like, Tacoma, where it's just so shameful, so hideous, you know, um, that will never be forgotten. This is- so this community and my father talked about growing up in that wonderful community, going to a school that was integrated and how the- how John Heinlein leased land to the Japanese. And he had Japanese friends.

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And, um, and then because of the Chinese Exclusion Law. Chinatown is a home base for workers. And because of the Chinese Exclusion Law, and there are no more new workers coming in, the Chinatowns faded. Every store would represent a clan or, you know, um, they had no more. They didn't have business and they didn't have their, um, their associations. And so and then. They did have- were able to have, uh, symbiotic relations with the Japanese, who also would buy from their stores, and also they would print up the lottery tickets for their gambling, you know, the, um, but Chinatown faded. It was, uh, demolished in 1931. But the- the

few remaining Chinese, like my parents, like my grandparents and my father and his brother, they moved across the street into a street that had Japanese. And so there were several.

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So that became, to me, the first Asian American community in Santa Clara County. There were Asians- Filipino, Chinese, Japanese. And so, um, and that existed until- and predominantly Japanese until Executive Order 9066. And so that's another story.

Mae: How did you start documenting, uh, the Chinatowns and writing about Heinleinville? What- That was after the Angel Island work?

Connie: Yes, yes.

Mae: So probably just a few years after that or quite a few years.

Connie: It was like a decade. Oh, yeah, quite a few.

Mae: Oh, and you knew this was something historic.

Connie: Well, you know, I lived in the- I'm in Santa Clara County and I was involved with, uh, with Asian Americans for Community Involvement, AACI. I was one of the founders in 1973, I became less active, but I joined it because I was an activist at that time, and I was on the media committee and worked with textbooks. And I felt that my job with that organization was sort of done. I always supported it. It became community- wonderful, great big community service organization. Um, but it- it certainly had all the connections with, with, uh, Asian Americans, you know, um, and, and their needs. And so I always stayed involved and, um, in fact, uh, I was involved with the first, uh, was a survey research project when the, um, uh. You know, it was that led to, uh, was a mental health study. Asian American, Asian. Asian mental health studies. It was for Cambodians. Vietnamese. It was for the refugees. And this report came out in 1983, and I started working on it. Uh, but I was part of the survey. I was writing up the survey and managing the office, and it was my first- That was a very, very revealing, you know, um, kind of a...

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It really shook me up. You know, to- to actually hear the interviews of Cambodian refugees, Vietnamese, um, and through translators and, um, and what they call the ethnic Chinese, the boat people. So that- that research led to a grant that later became administered by AACI and that's, you know, so but, um, it was- had- it was Santa Clara County's mental health study, and the chief investigator was Dr, uh, Kenneth Meinheart. So. And, uh, I was just- I worked with the Asian American translators. Well, they were immigrants, you know, because and, um, and then they would, you know, tell me the stories in the survey, and then we- just writing up the report

and seeing. There was a- another wave, um, of Asians coming in with incredible needs, who had suffered so much during the war and, and, uh, they were truly refugees. And, um, it was just. So it's just realizing that it continues, you know, our, our immigration story continues. And, and having Asian Americans, you know, in positions where they can, uh, you know, help, uh, or, and be, um, you know, make a difference in a big way, like, you know, AACI and, uh, you know, the administrators and the psychologists and the social workers, and, but they had to be Asian Americans. It was really, you know, uh.

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Mae: So how did you- so how did you start writing or doing research on the Chinatowns and how was it received initially?

Connie: Oh, initially it was, uh, it was the writing about the Chinatown. As soon as the book came out. Um, it was very, very well received. It was welcomed because it documented- and that at that time this organization started, the CHCP, the Chinese Historical and Cultural Project. And that was a very major, uh, history park. I mean, where you're actually going to have a museum devoted to this story of the Chinatowns in Santa Clara County. And so the- first it was called the Ng Shing Gung, the Temple of Five Gods. And it's a replica building in History Park. And, um, it has exhibits and it has a video called Chinatown as Home Base, which tells the story. It was done by Jessica Yu, my daughter, filmmaker, and she- she did it in 1990, when she was still able to interview people who had lived and who grew up in Heinlenville. And wonderful stories. Uh, my father had passed on then, but we found his- located several of his friends who gave interviews, who grew up with him. So, um, so very short film, but it tells- it tells about- it begins with the burning of the Chinatown Market Street and the story of John Heinlen and and she did a lot of research. Jessica and I, we were actually researching from the same archives that- at that time, the history of San Jose. It was called the San Jose Historical Museum, and the archives were actually there. And so it was just amazing that when I talked to, I needed documentation, I needed, um, you know, "I'd love to see a certificate of residence from San Jose." This is my grandfather when he was living in San Francisco. Leslie Montenegro (?) opened a file and she had a stack of these. And she- certificates of residence of Chinese that were forced to have a photo ID because they were Chinese. And she just said, okay, take your pick for your book. And I, I was just like in awe. And then I also found a receipt. Uh, and my mother was alive at that time. She could help me. She could read Chinese. The receipt was in a file, and it was a \$1 donation to the Chinese six companies to fight the Geary Act, because this shows resistance. And- and this is what I do want to talk about at this conference, is that the Chinese did not take this the violence and the- the repression, you know, um. You know, without protest. That, um. So the Chinese did not register until 19- until 1894. All the- the certificates are 1894. Because the six companies took the case to the Supreme Court Fong Yu Ting versus U.S. and they lost, they were challenging the constitutionality of the- the Chinese Exclusion Law. So from my father's- my mother's giving me this document, I was able to make connection- because I looked at the document, I didn't know about the resistance movement and everything. I just said, you know, and then I was able to- to understand it and- and attach a real feeling to this, and then to see so many other certificates that even have children, native born children had

to register.

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And so, as I said, you know, when I did the research, I had always connected to people. And the one thing about Asian exclusion, there's a paper trail, you can go to Nara (?) and you could see a file on your ancestor who was detained on Angel Island, or her- whose ancestor was, um, questioned the- it's all there. Um, and then, uh, the paper trail of these documents, that's the only benefit of all this horrific, you know, uh, uh, legislation and, uh, anti-Asian, um, sensibility, you know?

Karen: So what do you think is the significance of finding this, like, historical resistance? Like, what do you think the consequences of that are. Like, um, why is that important?

Connie: The importance of- of finding the, you know, incidents of resistance and documentation of resistance is incredibly important because it gives humanity to the people, it gives them dignity and their their, um, uh, it tells a story of their character, the Chinese. And this is from fairly recent research, you know, um, the Stanford Chinese Railroad Workers Project, uh, started by Gordon Chang and Shirley Fishkin. They- they documented incidents of, uh, many incidents on the railroad. But of the strike, the Chinese struck for better wages, better conditions, eight hours a day. They lost, but they did it and they took risks to do it. And it's just incredibly- I mean, I just said how brave. And they also felt they had a chance. And they- they did win some concessions later. But the fact that they struck, you know, and also was- that their dignity, and they also showed some unity. There was a lot of solidarity with this movement. I mean, how can you get people, thousands of people, not to register and risk jail, but say "we will take it to court," you know, and then- and then when they failed that there was such a rush to register. But- in 1894. So. Yeah. And I wanted to hear- from my father, I wanted to hear how my grandfather was a community leader. He was a, um, you know, every store was, you know, headquarters for a clan. That's where the workers from that district would come and get their mail. And so, um, my grandfather was, uh, he was the leader of the, you know, the, the group, but also he was a follower of Sun Yat Sen, the revolutionary leader. And that I wanted to tell that story because it shows that the Chinese had political leanings. And they they did they did believe in, um, and the principles of democracy and, um, the three principles, uh, of the people, for the people, by the people. That was, uh, the slogan of Sun Yat Sen too. And he succeeded- his revolution succeeded. And he was in Denver raising funds in 1911 when, um, the war there.

But, you know, my grandfather had, uh, kept a lot of records and some of them, his papers, my, my father donated to the Hoover Institute. My father graduated from Stanford. He was always very, very proud of defending Stanford for hiring the- so many Chinese because he said "he gave them jobs," you know, and...true, and a foothold in America. So, um, it was just, uh. In fact, that's probably the most exciting thing when I found there were strikes in the wine country. Of Chinese workers, they were united. They just. And most of the time they failed. But they made a stand and it- for the big four when the Chinese struck. And what was it. You know, after

they got through the Sierras, it struck fear in their hearts because they didn't want to lose their labor force. And Truck Crocker just said, well, I'll handle them and I'll stop the, the butchers from butchering meat and they'll will starve them out. And so they had to- but, he was shaken up and they did make some concessions later, according to the studies, you know, that, um, they didn't want to admit it, but, um.

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And also, you know, showing that the Chinese kept their customs and the temple meant so much to them. And, um, they would have their parades and they'd just be out there and there's a picture of the parade, the famous parade of, uh, Da Jiu, the feast of the Hungry Ghost. The Chinese are marching outside the fence. You know, there's showing the community, you know, this is our solemn festival. They were getting respect. And actually, when Sun Yat sen succeeded in establishing the Republic, the Republic of China in 1911, the US government was a lot more respectful of the Chinese and, um, that did come down locally to, um, and the Chinatown in San Jose was considered, uh, a place that people can go and look at festivities. They didn't go to shop, but they go, uh, "the Chinese are having the Chinese festival." And the cover of my book shows, uh, is from a newspaper article of my grandmother and my father as a little boy with, uh, the Chinese flag and my uncle with the American flag. So. And every parade had a Chinese, uh, the flag of the temple. But in front was the American flag. So there was that that sense of.

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Of really trying to establish we are an American community that's Chinese. So and the legacy that I'll be talking about and working with the JAMS Japanese-American Museum in San Jose is, is tours and exhibits to to show what, uh, this community of Japantown, which is called Japantown. It really is. What it stands for, and the history behind it, and how it has become this community for for all peoples. But, the roots are an Asian American community that came out of struggle, out of prejudice. I mean, the when I interviewed Ishikawa, he was, uh, one of the oldest residents of Japantown, um, born in the- in one of the buildings, um, that's, uh, Nissei, you know, uh, community center, though. No, it's Issei. Anyway, um, on fifth Street. So I talked to him about, you know, growing up in Chinatown- in Japantown. And he said, you know, we came here, the Japanese came here because the Chinese were here. And he was saying, there's no where else that would take us in. We- there's nowhere else to go. We came here and we we were able to to have a community and we were able to live together. And he said there was a mailman named Frank Brown. And my father talked about him a lot. Um, he would- he was a mailman for the two communities. He would go from Chinatown to Japantown. And and my father said he spoke a few words of, of Chinese and, and, um, he was very, very nice to, uh, to all of the residents. And Doctor Ichikawa said that, oh, we really missed him. And when he retired and, and my mother would always give him gifts because he would be the one of the two white witnesses that was required to testify, you know, for for the residency, or the citizenship, or the birth certificate for, for the residents of Japantown in Chinatown. And I always wonder

how he got the mail delivered on time, because, you know, it's so busy. So, um, Doctor Ishikawa said that, um, there were no, he didn't have a birth certificate. And so the mailman testified, you know, that, uh, that he he always saw the family here and, you know, that kind of thing. So. And I have, uh, and going to the archives, there are a lot of merchant documents. And my grandfather was able to become a merchant and a change of status. And they would- two white witnesses. One was Frank Brown, you know, is he really a merchant? Is he always at the store and, you know. Have you ever seen him working in the fields? And then the other one was Charlie Senkle (?), who was the night watchman for High Level. The Chinese had to hire a night watchman.

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And then my father said the gates were never closed in his lifetime. So, um, they were locked in the beginning. Um, you know, when Heinlen, um, you know, built it because he was afraid that while he was building it, having it built, he was afraid that the people and he had barbed wire on the that this is according to the newspapers, uh, on top of the the fence because he was afraid that people would come over, burn down this Chinatown because there were so many threats. He was threatened. You know, the Chinese were threatened while- during building. So it took a lot of courage and a lot of faith to, to to stay. And then over the years, they overcame, they were accepted. And the the Japantown was accepted also until Executive Order 906.

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Mae: To what extent do you feel like these stories have reached even the area of people here, either children in schools around here, or residents? Who knows how widespread, who knows that?

Connie: Well, I think that everybody well, nationally, uh, San Jose, at that time the 10th largest city in the United States, officially apologized for injustices to Chinese, you know, historic injustices. And, um, so, uh, Jerry Wong and I were called to, uh, Raul paralysis, uh, office to discuss having an apology and an event and, um, being a historian.

You know, they talked about. How are we going to write the resolution? You know, I ended up writing the like, oh, there are 12 whereas clauses. Oh, there are so many, whereas clauses. And it starts with, you know, the early anti-Chinese movement and the fact that an anti-Chinese convention was held in San Jose and then, uh, the burning of the Chinatown and then continue ordinances against it, just go on and on and on and on and on. And then, uh, and then the the struggle to build the Chinatown and, and then, um, so the resolution ends with: be it therefore resolved that we move forward for justice for all. So but, um, it was exciting to be part of that. And that was part of my- again, one of the things that I- very, very excited to be able to do that would make a difference, I think, because, um, the resolution was passed by the council. It was, uh, September 2021. And, um, and then the next day we had a big ceremony, uh, right at the- near the market Street. It's right in front of the museum with the- in front of the palms, you know,

beautiful area. And, um, there's, uh, lion dance and big audience canopy. And it was just a very, uh, joyful, uh, to me, it was the- it was like an act of grace to, to have a resolution and everybody, um. Great publicity. It was on CNN. They did several reports on it, local news, but nationally. And, um, so I felt that, you know, it's very hard to have any lasting impact, but we felt that, uh, locally, you know, for, for our city, we felt we did it, we did it. It's done. We established this, and and then I gave, you know, there were several speakers. Jerry spoke, uh, um, um, Evan Low, um, uh, you know.

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Otto Lee and then I spoke also and I gave the story. So mine was the history of why this, you know, starting with Market Street Chinatown, my whole family and why it's important. But I also announced that there will be there will be a park, um, at the site of the Chinatown and it would be called Heinlerville Park, you know. So. And and in the park. So here's, here's what I feel. I don't feel really done. But this is as much as I can do on the [laughs] at the site, you know, Tomiko Ross, incredible graphic designer and historian, activist, historian and, and, um, she did the design for the history wall in the medallions, and I did the text, and the text is written in stone, the history of this site, beginning with the land acknowledgement. And then Chinese workers in the fields, then goes on and on and on and covers the Filipino, um, community. And then, uh, the Japanese coming back to rebuild and then, um, ending with the apology. So.

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Karen: Um, I'm curious why you think or you said that this might not have a lasting impact or is such a struggle to have a lasting impact? Like, what do you mean by that?

Connie: Well, I mean, look at the politics in our country. I feel that there's a. Cause the lasting impact has to be national. You know. California's. Well, I would say our area is pretty liberated and liberal, you know, and and, uh, understands it because of our population. Look at our demographics. But you go to another area. Say, you know in the Arkansas, or some, you know. Where, I know some people, recently, Asians have been told to go back to where they came from. So I feel that the understand- and also the resistance of the Republicans and the, the far-right- the white supremacy movement, which is always there, it's always there. It's always there, you know. Um, the attack on the Capitol and, and the fact that it could happen again and the fact that we have ?? that Trump's not never going to, uh, back down on and in fact, continuing just as, you know, a convicted felon. And the fact that he's embraced by the Republican Party, embracing the racism, the the the, uh, pushback of Wade versus Roe, and any changes in the curriculum of schools. Remember, they said we don't want- we want the real history of America to be taught, the real history of- the white history. So, um, I just feel we're on the cusp of something, you know, it's very scary. It's a very scary time

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Mae: For all the work that you've done in kind of promoting people understanding, you know, these counter narratives of historical counter narratives that you're, you've done, um, what do you think happens when people don't know this history, you know, the history of what you're talking about in terms of Chinese exclusion, Chinese immigration, um, pan-Asian solidarity, um, Asian American movement, you know, incarceration during World War two. What do you think happens when people don't know this history.

Connie: When people do not know the history of the the struggles and the of Asian Americans, I feel.

It's the end of democracy. I think that it's the end of democracy because you- it's rejecting of people. It's rejecting, um, any, um, any progress that we've made. It's it's the ignorance would be, well, you know, again, it goes back to institutionalizing racism. I think that we're we're rolling back. You know, I mean, look at the legis-. Like, you know what somebody said, uh, legislator, if you can take away Roe versus Wade, you can take away anything. Anything. You know, anything. All of it. I mean Brown versus education. You know. Not- Okay. It's mainly. In establishing our narrative that's accepted. You know that's why stories are so important.

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You know what is so amazing is only a few years ago was it known to the public about the Tulsa massacre, where a whole, large, African-American community was devastated, eradicated, bombed upon in Tulsa, Oklahoma. And that, they start interviewing the very, very elderly few survivors. And they said, you know, we tried to tell our stories that, you know, we must tell our stories. And how long has it taken? So anyway, I think that, uh, we keep doing it, we keep doing it, and we're hoping for the best. Election will make a difference. It will make a difference if it goes. If if Biden wins.

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Mae: Mhm. I have a question. Kind of a last question. Do you have anything else or um,

Karen: I guess I kind of have a question that maybe I can just like say which was um, and maybe this is like actually in conversation with our last interview, um, Tom Izu and Susan Hayase, one of their narratives that they, um, kind of push was to, quote unquote, prevent the Japanese American community from shifting to the right. And, uh, you mentioned also that there's a sense of, um, like, you know, like, uh, like, you know, maybe like Republicans pushing a certain narrative that, like, goes against what you're trying to. Um, show. So my question is, you also mentioned that your father was a Republican. I was wondering, like, how do you reconcile all these contradictions?

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Connie: He was a different Republican. And when it came to voting for Reagan, he couldn't do it. He voted for Anderson. He couldn't do it. So he voted for independent. In other words, the Republicans of the past were different. And the reason why a lot of them- people in the old days became Republicans. It was a party of Lincoln. And they felt my father always felt they were better, nicer toward Chinese, you know, uh, their, uh, because of the Democrats at that time, you know, the people's, you know, sort of the, the populists. You know, so, no, I can reconcile that. Uh, I think that it'd be just incredible for- if there was a contingent of Republicans that are Asian, you know, advocating for Trump. I mean, I'd be, uh, yeah, I don't, I don't I think they have to be very quiet, you know, just like I think that they've. I think that we have, being here, we have a responsibility being in Santa Clara County, being, you know, having the opportunity to do what you're doing. You know, it's a huge responsibility. And we have to work really hard. We have to take it seriously. Uh, you do, of course. And, um, I think that we have to just go to the max on this, you know, no holds barred, tell the story.

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Mae: Maybe just a close. Uh, a question for you, which is, you know, looking back at all the effort you've been involved with and all the historical moments and, um, I guess a lot of strategizing, too, and a lot of energy put in. What are some of the major lessons that you have learned as an activist and as an activist?

Connie: Get as many allies as you can, and you have to, have to. This is what- the hard- well, it's been very good. And because I think, you know, we're having Asian Americans in office, I think AACI started to try to get people on boards to try to, you know, to change things. So I think that the lessons learned were- you have to- you have to be part of the political system. You have to be part of the community. You cannot be outside without following through. And the only way to follow through, is through, you know, participation through legislation, you know. So, um, and I- like they say, the voting, the voting, the ballot box did not stop the Vietnam War, but the demonstrations did. So you still have to have the activism, the activism that is so- And the sacrifice of people like, um, the- the Vietnamese American writer, uh, Viet Thanh Nguyen, you know, he's standing shoulder to shoulder with students. He's a faculty member, you know, and he demonstrated when he was a student at UC Berkeley. And here he is as a professor at USC, standing with students who might very well get arrested and he with them. But I just think, you know, it's a it's a real.

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That was very inspiring to me. And it's unfortunate you have to do that. You know, you have to take risks. So you have to have everything. Everything. Because people I mean, if it weren't for, you'd think there'd be a cease fire agreement even if the students protest, uh, and the community- communities everywhere did not protest, you know. So anyway, everyone. Fight. Fight on solidarity forever, you know.

Mae and Karen: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you so much. Yeah. Thanks. That's great. Great.