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Interview with Annette "China" Brooks

Annette "China" Brooks

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Interview Abstract

Name of Interviewee: Anette "China" Brooks
Date of Interview: October 24, 2013
Duration of Interview: 49:35
Interviewer: Raymond Costello
Subject Log Available: Yes Release on File: Yes

China is a black, bisexual, formerly homeless, recovering drug addict, and homeless relief worker at the @Risk café on Soledad street in Salinas, California. Her story takes her from growing up in nearby Seaside, coping with an absentee father and a drug addicted mother, to having her own children and dealing with her own addictions in Chinatown, and eventually to recovery. She comes from a large family, being a girl among thirteen brothers, she lived a tough life. Her mother's addictions had an influence on her and she became addicted to drugs and street life as a teenager. She eventually went to jail, and when she came out in the 1980s she discovered Salinas Chinatown.

She spent nearly 20 years living in the streets of Chinatown, and she describes her story in detail including, crime, prostitution, and violence. Her story is reflective and also encompasses a lot of the modern history of Soledad street. Her story is mirrored by many stories of drug addiction and crime in Chinatown. It captures some of the essence of the people living there now. She talks about community, drug use, and her eventual recovery.

Nearing the end of her story, she describes why after all this time she has elected to stay in Chinatown, and why she continues to do so now. It is her belief that it assists her recovery, and gives her a sense of fulfillment and belonging to continue to work in Chinatown.

Interviewing China

Narrator: China

Interviewer: Raymond Costello

**On: Thursday, October 24th, 2013
4:00PM**

**At: Soledad Street in the @Risk Café,
Salinas California**

Costello/China

00:01

Ray: My name is Ray Costello and I am with CSUMB and the oral history project. I am here with China at the @Risk Café on Soledad St in Chinatown in Salinas. Before we go further China, I just want to check again that we, I know I've said this a bunch of times, I just want to make sure once more that you're okay with us recording this.

China: Yes, definitely.

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Ray: Thank you so much. We really appreciate it. And the reason we appreciate it so much is that it's all about you. And that's what this project is for. So, since it's about you, I think I'd like to start with a little bit about your background. Where you came from, your parents, your family, and what it was like where you grew up.

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China: Ok, well, um, I grew up in Seaside, California, which is not far from here. Um, as far back as I can remember, uh, there was a lot of partying, and a lot of family get togethers and things of that sort. Um, so from a young age, the lifestyle of having a good time, and you know, uh, that was imbedded in me. Um, my grandparent. I didn't know my grandfather, but my grandmother was, like, the head of the household. Her and her twin sister. Um, and I grew up with thirteen boys, and I was the only girl for many years, so I kinda had to toughen up quickly. Um, my grandmother and aunt were really hard workers and, you know, they provided for the family, and things. And um, at a young age, uh, my mother got married and we moved into our own place with her husband. Me and my brother. I have a brother that's two years older than me. Um, and, as far back as I can remember, there was pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers, um, and things of that nature. You know, somewhere in the vicinity of where we grew up. My grandmother's house was more of a safe haven, you know, when the partying and things were going on at my house, we'd be at my grandmother's house, you know. She just didn't want us around that type of life. But then at her house too. They drank beer too, and you know, so. It's always been a big party as far back as I can remember. I went to school in seaside my whole life. I remember as a little girl I was a tough girl, like I said, growing up with thirteen boys, you had to toughen up quick. You sit down at the dinner table, and if you wasn't tough enough, they'd steal your food, you know, cause there was just enough to go around. I can remember coming home from school a couple times and I was crying cause I was being picked on and things of that nature. My uncles

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would tell me, you go back out there and beat her up and don't come home crying, so I'd begin to build this reputation for being the bad girl, you know, and all through elementary and junior high school, you know, no one messed with me.

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You know, I was like someone feared around my friends and my peers. And our family, the Brooks, we had a really notorious name around Seaside. We kind of just, we were the family not to mess with. We were a big family. And growing up, I can remember my uncles going in and out of jail, and things of that nature, I never thought it'd be me. But I admired the lifestyle that my mom lived. She was glamorous, she dressed nice, you know, drove nice cars, and you know,

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always seemed to have money and I just, as a young child, I always said I wanted to be just like her. And I turned out a whole lot like her. Um, and so, um, yeah, that was pretty much my growing up. Uh, I lived on so many different streets in Seaside, I couldn't name them all. The most notorious street that I can remember, you know, when the drug addiction and things of that nature started, um, we lived on Judson Street, um, in Seaside. And, uh, all my friends in that neighborhood, their parents partied, you know, so, we got along because we had a similar story. You know, what was going on at my household, was going on at their household,

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so we kinda cliqued up, and I had a lot of cousins and things of that nature, and we run around together. Uh, just basically doing what teenagers do, anything to not abide by the rules, but not get caught breaking the rules. So, um, we drank beer, we smoked weed, and I had a lady who kinda took to me, took me under her wing. Cause, you know, my mom was into drugs and doing her thing, and she became like a Godmother to me, and the first time that I could recall ever that, uh, smoking cocaine was in a joint. Um, and I didn't know that there was cocaine in it, but, uh, I used to go over to their house and she had this weed tray, and around the weed tray was little roaches, you know, that hadn't been finished. And I can recall taking a couple of them and going back to the house with my friends and saying hey I got some weed, and lighting it up. And it was, there was something different about it, it wasn't just regular weed. And the high was different, and and I believe that's where my addiction began with drugs. Um, I can recall, uh, seeing my mom and her friends around the table, and there would be this big bong in the middle of the table with all these different hoses coming out of it. And, uh, it fascinated me. I wanted to know what they were doing, you know. And I wanted to do that, you know, so eventually I, uh, got into cocaine, I found it. Uh, somebody had dropped a bag

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Costello/China

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of, uh, rocks. And, um, I found it walking over to my godmother's house, so I ran back home and I kinda kept it to myself, and I didn't even know how you were supposed to smoke it. I didn't have anything to smoke it with. But through reaching out to a couple of friends, and my cousin, we eventually figured it out, and that's where my addiction to crack cocaine began, and I believe I was at the age of sixteen, maybe fifteen, about to be sixteen. Um, there was an older guy who was my son's father, uh, and, I was the cute girl, you know, and everything, and he was attracted to me. And I was flattered that this older gentleman was attracted to me and,

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with my father being in and out of prison, my real father, uh, he just kinda like, made me feel, um, like I had some type of protection, some type of security, with having him in my life. So, um, I would sneak off with him, and we'd go, and I had sex with him, you know, and it happened a couple of times, and eventually I got pregnant. And I, uh, was pregnant with my son, my moms found out about it, lost it, and um, my uncles went to his job and they threatened his life, and they told him that he had twenty-four hours to leave town or they were gonna kill him. So, uh, he left town. So, here I am,

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sixteen years old, pregnant, about to deliver, um, my first child. My mom was still doing her thing and drugs, so I was, like, kinda left to my own devices on what was gonna happen, and how I was gonna have this baby and take care of it. Well, um, towards the end of my pregnancy, my mom kinda started coming around a little bit more and, uh, my grandmother and them was, uh, evicted from their place, so they came to live with us. And, uh, I kinda had that security with knowing that there would be an adult there once I delivered my son. Um, I had my son, and basically, life went on. Um, I still, I found a way to do drugs, and I actually started doing drugs with my mother. Um, which is something that deals with to this day.

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You know, um, the guilt and the things of that nature. Um, my grandmother and them basically raised my son for me because I was in the streets running around, uh, committing crimes, you know, any way that I could feed the addiction, and I would do it. You know, with the exception of selling my body, I hadn't got to that point, but I would take it, take whatever that I could, anything that I could sell to, you know, get the drugs and, uh, eventually I got into selling the drugs in order to keep my habit going. Um, I ended up pregnant with my second child. And I went to California Youth Authority for, um, basically stabbing someone. Um, the guy that I was with, I caught him cheating and ended up stabbing him, and I went to jail, went to Youth Authority, but I had my baby

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before that. So I left two kids, both of them under the age of two, uh, with my grandmother and, uh, I went away to do time. Um, once I got out of Youth Authority, they were like, I think five and seven, and I'm thinking okay I'm gonna go home and I'm gonna take care of my kids, I'm gonna do the right thing. And that didn't happen. Um, I got out and I started messing with my third child's father who, uh, was selling drugs and, one way or another, I just got back into that lifestyle. So now I have three kids, and I'm not taking care of any of them. Um, my aunt had stepped up to the plate and took my oldest two, and when I had my third child, her grandmother, my great grandmother, eventually took her, and was, like, okay I'm gonna take care of her because you're not able to. Um, didn't work out, kept doing crimes, kept using drugs, and eventually I went to prison for the first time. Um, while in prison, my grandmo-, my aunt lost my oldest two kids, they ended up in foster care. Um, and my third child was with my grandmother, she passed away, and she ended up in foster care. Um, during their time in foster care, with me in and out of prison, I went to prison thirteen times, three commitments and ten violations. Um, throughout that time, my kids were abused in foster care, they were, they were treated really really badly, um, I, I was so far gone in my addiction, that I didn't know how to get out of it and help my kids, but I didn't know that they were going through these things, and that something that I deal with to this day, because I thought they were in a better place. I thought that anywhere other than with me was a good place for them, um, and it wasn't so, and I later found out how they were being, you know, physically abused by this one lady who was supposed to be a church lady, and she knew my family and, you know, we're thinking they're in a good place. Well, um, she, uh, was beating my kids and the other kids that was in her care, and eventually my son got tired of it and she whooped him, or beat him, and he ran back to the school, and the school found out about it, and removed all the kids from foster care, and they ended up in a better place. Um, I ended up getting pregnant with my fourth child. After coming to Salinas, um, I got out of the Monterey County Jail and didn't have anywhere to go, and I had an aunt who lived out here and she told me I could come and live with her. That was my first time really coming into Salinas, that was in the 80s. Um, I came down here one time to Chinatown and I was just amazed at how many people were walking up and down the street and standing up at the bars and the barber shops and the clubs, and I was like, this is all actually happening on one street, you

Costello/China

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know. And, you know, it just kind of attracted me and, you know, my aunt was like, girl you don't need to go down there, you know, you should stay away from there. But here it is, again that addictive personality, I wanted to find out what it was all about, so um, I started running around and finding my way around Salinas and everything. And my fourth daughter, her dad, he's from Salinas, and uh, he just kept coming at me and coming at me and, you know, I really like you, and I'm thinking to myself like, this is not someone that I would normally be with, but he had a sack, he he he had dope. And to feed my addiction, I figure, okay, I'll just lead him on, and I'll get what I can from him, and I'll just move on. Um, backing up a little bit, while I was in prison, I started messing with women. I was there for such a long stent of time to where it just was the norm. It was what was going on in there, and eventually, I found myself attracted to women. Um, and that followed me out to the streets. And so when I did come home and and I came to Salinas, and I seen all the prostitution, you know, the the drug dealers, and people out here, I figured okay, I really didn't wanna be with a man, but like I said, my daughter's father had a sack, but I really was attracted to women. I didn't know if I wanted to come out with it and be like, oh I'm bisexual, or if I just wanted to keep it a secret, but it it eventually came out and my friends didn't have a problem with it. I found that there was a lot of women attracted to me as well, so that just kinda played to my favor, and I took advantage of that. Um, and, so through, uh, living with my daughter's father at his grandfather's house, and selling drugs, using drugs, I eventually, uh, set up a little stable. I had five hoes. And, um, they would prostitute and give me the money, and I would offer them protection. And so, um, I was known, you know, as the, uh, madam of Chinatown, you know, opposed to all of the pimps that were out here. I was, like, the only female out here that had prostitutes and a lot of the guys would come from out of town with their prostitutes and, you know, I'd find one way or another to get and steal a couple of their prostitutes and bring them into my, you know, stable. And, they'd always be like, you know, um, I don't know how she does it, but, you know, watch out for her, you know, cause she'll take your girl. And, you know, and eventually I'd get what I wanted from them, and I'd send them on their way, but I had those five main girls who worked for me. Um, my daughter's father seen the benefit of it, so he kinda went along with it, with the plan. So like I said, we became a form of protection for them and they were a form of finance for us. Um, I got pregnant with my

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fourth child and, um, I ended up going back to prison, and that's kinda how that situation broke up. Um, I had a lot of female relationships as far as, um, friends, but then I had, like, a girlfriend, I had two girls that I really, uh, I can say I love them, and was in a full-fledged relationship with them. Um, out here on the streets, that my family knew about them, I, you know, uh, friends knew about, you know, but I still had

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something that was missing, and that was my kids. There was a piece of me who was satisfied with the drug life that I was living, and it was nothing for me to go to prison, do a little time, and come home. Um, I'd be healthy again, I'd be more attractive and, you know, I'd look for my next victim. You know, um, and uh, it just, it was a vicious cycle that went on

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for many years. And in March 1st of 1998, I went and there was a guy named Lee Toller who went around trying to help people get into recovery, and he was from Monterey County, and he knew most of the people, most of us who were on drugs. He knew us as children and he would always tell us, you know, you need to get your life together, I can help you get into a program, I can help you, you know, get off

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addiction, you just gotta be willing. And one day I was, like, okay. You know, I was tired. You know, I was tired of going to jail, tired of not having that piece of me that was missing, which was my kids in my life. Um, and so I went to a program called Day Top up in East Palo Alto. Um, there they do therapeutic, uh, treatment. And they really get into your

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mind. And it's attack therapy, you know, um, I wasn't used to that. I wasn't used to being attacked and not being able to attack back. Um, so, there was many times when I said I'm leaving, I'm not dealing with this, you know, you're not gonna talk to me that way, and then I'd have someone sit me down, talk to me, and be like, you have so much going for you, you need to really just, you know, just sit on your, hold, close your mouth, sit on your hands, and just internalize it. It'll be over and you'll move on. Tomorrow's another day.

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And eventually, I ended up doing, uh, sixteen months there and, um, it felt good that, you know, I started having visits with my kids, my oldest three kids, they would come to the program, they would see me, and the relationship started to grow. And, it was something that I really wanted, um, and I felt good about it, um, and I came back to Salinas and I

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messed up. And I ended up going back to jail. And, um, going back to jail, you know, after being in recovery, it just kind of like, it really, it bugged me that I was back in that situation after all the treatment. And I knew better, I knew all the tools to use, and I just didn't use them when it came to my

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addiction. And, um, I got out of jail and I went to the halfway house, um, over on East San Luis Street here in Salinas, and there my baby told me her father would bring her to see me, and I'd get weekend passes, I'd get to go, you know, see her on the weekends, and my other kids started coming around more and, uh, I knew that I couldn't get clean and stay clean here in Salinas. I just wasn't that strong when it came to my addiction and, um, so I went to East Palo Alto again, well, Menlo Park, and I ended up getting into a program there. It's called Hope House, and at Hope House, I was able to address some intimate things about my past, like whether I had been molested, you know, uh, as a child, and, um, whether I had been abused as a child, and as far as I can remember back, you don't tell family secrets. You hold on to things like that. Whatever happened, you sweep it under the rug and you move on with your life. And they were really, like, trying to get into my head and find out if there was some underlying issues that I hadn't dealt with when I was in the other program, and I can't remember if anything like that ever happened, um, so to this day, I can't really say that it did or it didn't happen. I know that there are some issues that, and some reasons that, I was out there looking for a father figure, that I was out there looking for a mother who was, uh, this movie star type person, who the drugs was more important than her kids as well, and the cycle just branched over to me, and my brother growing up. Um, but, after leaving Hope House, I became a staff member there. And, um, I went into transitional housing, and I found that, you know, that was something I really wanted to do, and that's what kept me clean. I went to school, um, I got certified, and I worked as a drug counselor there for, um, six years. And, I started slowly coming back out here, visiting my kids, you know, checking up on my family, you know, and it felt really good for everyone to tell me how proud they were of me and, you know, how amazing I looked, and how different I was. And, you know, I told them it wasn't me, it was recovery. You know, I didn't do any of it myself. My higher power, which I choose to call God, um, is the reason for me being clean. This past March, I have fifteen years clean and sober. Um, and, I just, you know, I really take it to heart when it comes to trying to be there for someone who is still on drugs. There's a lot of people still out here on the street that I ran with when I got out here, when I got high. There's a couple girls that used to prostitute for me that are still out here and, you know, and I, there's a lot of, uh, guys out here that, you know, was really scared of me cause I was vicious back then, you know, I, I

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didn't have a problem with fighting a man or a woman. It didn't matter. I'd pick up something if it was a man and for a woman, I'd just, you know, I didn't have a problem with fighting them. Um, I was embraced by the streets when I was in my addiction and selling drugs and living that lifestyle, and then once I came back, and I was clean and sober, I was also embraced. And, I'm looked up to by a lot of people who are still out here, um, battling their addiction. Um, I can say that, um, you know, my mom, she has nine years clean and sober.

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My dad, he has six years clean and sober. And, uh, my family is complete, you know, my kids are back in my life, um, I have eight grandkids who I'm actively a part their life, um, with the sports and the schools and the school programs, you know, things of that nature. And it's just, you know, amazing to look back on the life that I lived growing up, opposed to where I am today. And, you know, um, I'm just grateful that I

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was, like, able to get it together before it was too late, you know, because I have friends that didn't make it, you know, who are dead. You know, or who are in prison for the rest of their lives, you know, and some of the stuff that I did, I could've went away for the rest of my life if I had been caught, or um, God wasn't looking out for me. You know, so, uh, coming back here to Chinatown, that's, uh, a, a story in itself. I would come down here when I first got back to Salinas, the reason I came back from the Bay area was because my third child was still in the system. And they told me that in order, because she was placed in the system in Monterey County, in order for me to get her back, I had to kinda be supervised by Monterey County. So I moved back to Salinas. And, I would commute back and forth to work up in the Bay Area, and it just eventually got too much for me, so I had to find a job out here. And, you know, comply with the courts and eventually I got her back out of the system. Oh she's a handful! But, uh, it was worth it. And, um, I started coming down here and I would go to Dorothy's place and donate clothes and things of that nature and eventually, uh, I just felt like I needed to be doing something more. I needed to be of service. And, in recovery they say the only way you can keep it, is to give it back. So, I truly intend on keeping my recovery, so my everyday down here on Soledad street, is to find somebody, somehow, someway, to reach out and give them either encouragement or, whether it be a cup of coffee, or whether it be a hotdog because they're hungry, or, you know, just, some encouraging words, you know, to let them know that, you know, don't give up on yourself, because, you know, eventually you'll get it if you really want it. Um, So I,

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we started a program down here called the Surviving Sisters of Salinas. Um, and we use this building here as our, like, meeting place, we would come in and it was just basically, somewhere for the women to come off the streets once Dorothy's closed, and um, when it was cold they'd have somewhere to stay warm, and we were serving just coffee, um, and, we'd watch a movie or something like that. And it was just, kinda like, something for uh, the women. And then the men started saying, well what about us? You know, we're cold, we want coffee, you know, and I would, you know, try to sneak them out a cup of coffee and, you know, cause the other girls was like, no it's just for the women. And, you know, I kinda felt bad and uh, so we started talking about opening it up to the men and women, um, but before we could do that, um, there was an, a situation, I wasn't here, but there was a situation where it kinda became dangerous. And, somebody pulled a knife on someone and eventually that project got shut down. So we had an empty building. Cement floor, four walls, just sitting here. And, there was another young lady named Stephanie, and me and Stephanie, Jill Allen over from Dorothy's Place was like, well what can we do with that building? That, would benefit Soledad Street? And, the homeless, and, the people here, and the you know, close knit community. Um, and we put our heads together, and you know, we were like, what if we just opened up like a, coffee shop, you know, and sell coffee for 25 cent, and you know, um, we wanted to cater to the people who don't really have money, you know, there's a lot of people out here on the street that do what they do. Whether it be selling drugs, whether it be using drugs, you know, some people get a social security check, or a disability check, and they still choose to stay here. And not, uh, go get their own place or whatever. And whether that be because they want to use all their money to use drugs or whether it be because this is a place where they feel safe, they stay here. And so, we felt like, okay we need to, figure something out. So we came up with the idea of, why don't take the art, well, we'll ask people if they know how to draw or paint or, you know, whatever, and we'll make the front part of it a gallery to display their art and then we'll take the back part and we'll sell coffee. And, we'll sell coffee for 25 cent, and the proceeds from that we'll just keep buying coffee and just, you know, then eventually we started doing tea and hot chocolate. And, uh, we started getting more and more art, and we've been open for a year and a half now. And uh, we kinda expanded and I started doing like the hotdogs for a dollar, and chips for fifty cent, and, you know,

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anything that's under what they sell in the store, if I have it, I try to beat that price. So, I, try to, you know, keep it where, if, somebody wants a bottle of water, I have a bottle of water. Somebody wants some hot chocolate, I have that for them. And um, I have a church. Um, Emanuel church of god and Christ in Seaside, California. I have a friend, who, again is from my addiction, who got her life together, her name is Cathy. Cathy Clay. And, she was like, you know what? This is a really nice space, it's amazing what you're doing here.

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Um, what do you think about doing, like, a prayer brunch? So, we did a prayer brunch for the women. And we brought, got clothes, donations, and things from some of the women in the church. And, we cooked a big ol' meal and we brought the ladies in, and, we uh, we gave them a little show, you know, praise, dancing, and we fed them, and we did their makeup. And, you know, we let them pick clothes out of the clothes closet. And, we made sure that, they felt, totally different then when they walked in. When they walked out, they felt like somebody really cared. Um, we gave them gift bags, and and things of that nature. So, the men were like,

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what about us? So, we were back at that point. Where ok, we gotta do something for the men. So, we got some men from the church, and we cooked up a big meal, and came in and we had some guys who used to run these streets and sell drugs and stuff out here on the streets, come in and tell their story, of how they got saved and how, you know, their life had changed. And, we fed the men, and we let them go back, and we got donated clothes, and we let them, you know, change clothes and leave out feeling different then when they came in. And um, it was a really big hit, so, what were planning to do now is, have a co-ed, uh, dinner. Which is going to be like a pre-thanksgiving dinner. And, were gonna cook up a big Thanksgiving meal and were gonna have the men and women come in and, we're gonna clothes them, and, you know, give them gift bags, blankets, gloves, jackets, and scarves, you know, cause it's getting cold. And, So, that's our next goal.

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And, it's just amazing how, you know, just the smallest piece of kindness could turn somebody's day around. And that's my goal when I come down here every day is to just, smile, and, and let everybody know that, you know, that I might not be where I want to be, but I'm not where I was. And, I'm grateful for that today, and, you know, you can do it too.

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And, you know, I make it a point to, you know, treat people as I want to be treated. And, I never thought that way before. Until, I got into recovery. You know, um, it's important, you know, for some people who, don't have the option of bathing,

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or they just don't get up and bathe, that doesn't mean I'm not going to open up the door and let them in. Doesn't mean they can't come in and have a cup of coffee. I have people who are dressed to the nines. And, you know, they come in for a 25 cent cup of coffee, when they could go down the street to Starbucks. And and, they can afford it, but they'd rather come here because they feel welcomed. And, I don't judge them. Um, and I think that that's what's most important, is that people don't feel judged here. Um, as I was telling you before, you know, people come to Chinatown, and they stay here because they feel a sense of security. Whether it be because they've been here a few weeks and now, they're a part of the Chinatown family, we're not gonna let nothing happen to that person. And, can't no outsider or anyone,

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come in here, and, do something to this community because we care about them. And, I'm not saying there's no violence, because there is. Um, but I'm always in the midst of it trying to, you know, trying to bring it down to the low. And I'm like, you know, we don't have to do it that way. We can do it like this, or let me talk to her, you know, if she's being disrespectful. You don't have to fight, you know. And I have my days, believe me, I'm tested, you know, uh, I have my days where, you know, some days I just wanna wrap my hands around somebody and shake 'em. You know, and I just have to stop for a minute and think and pray about it. Before I allow myself to, uh, act out on it. But um, I'm grateful to be here. A lot of people's like, why you pick Chinatown? Well, I was in the trenches in Chinatown. That's where I did all my dirt, you know, so why not come back here and help clean it up. So um, it's like I, I'm fulfilled with the smallest act, and, you know, it makes me feel good when I go to sleep at night to know that I was able to just, a small, piece to something so big, you know, and this place is kinda just really like rise, you know, from the ashes and and when it does I want to be a part of that. I wanna, I want to be a part of that history. Um,

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when they talk about Chinatown years from now, I wanna be a part of that, you know, so, this is where I'm supposed to be, you know. I don't get paid, for what I do, I do it because it's in my heart to do so. Um, and, I have one girl, her name is Courtney Jimenez, she comes in, and, you know, she's a, she's a young girl, she could be doing anything, you know but, it gives her a sense of security, and it helps her stay out of trouble by being able to come in here from school and work behind the bar, and serve coffee, and, you know, we try to give her a little stipend, to, you know, keep her motivated, and things of that nature. But, but, um, since Stephanie

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passed away last year, um, it's just basically been me, Courtney, and Jill, and um, we've been keeping it going and that's basically my story and why I'm here.

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Ray: Wow, a remarkable story too. Um, I, I, I'm hoping that our project will allow for you to keep giving, so you can enjoy that recovery for some time. And even after, long after we're gone, this Chinatown will still be here, hopefully your story will continue to give and continue to do that. Um, it sounds like when you were younger, um, you were surrounded by a lot of addiction and people with stresses and dramas, and then as you changed, people around you changed as well. So that's quite a contrast, it wasn't only you, things changed everywhere. And so, with that in mind, I'm sure you saw a lot, a lot, in the community here that changed, so like, in the 80s and 90s the community was probably very different, but there was probably also some things that stayed the same.

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China: Yeah, um, when I think back to, you know, um, when I first came down here, like I said, you know, all these places, these businesses, were open. We had the Green Gold Inn, we had, uh, you know, we had the barber shop around the corner, we had, like, all these little places, uh, Frank's business was open and running, you know. Now it's, it's, you know, it's not, he just lives there. Um, this was a restaurant, you know, and um, it was a thriving street. Like, you know, it, it, these condemned buildings that are here now weren't like that when I first came. Everything was up and running. The street was so alive with, with, uh, hope and money and, you know, there was a lot of drug dealing, and a lot of prostitution up and down the street and things like that. But it was also a place where, you know, the military would come, you know, and they'd go in, and they'd drink and, you know, they'd be a lot fighting, hell raising, and everything, but at the end of the day, it was where everybody came. Because when you come to Salinas, you think of two things, you know. You think of either, you're coming out here to go to the meat market because they had the bulk meat where you can, you know, or you came to Salinas for Chinatown. That was all I knew it for. Um, I didn't know anything else about Salinas. Um, and to look at it today, to see all the buildings shut down, to see that, you know, the only thing still really going on is the Mission, Dorothy's Place, here at the gallery, the computer learning center, like, we're the only thing, you know, we have our church across the street, but we're really the only things

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keeping the street alive with the exception of the homelessness. Um, [coughs], excuse me. And, so I look at it as if some things change, which is the homelessness, it wasn't like this, that there was no homelessness here. Um, if it was, it was in the shelter down the street. Um, nobody slept in the cubby holes, nobody slept in the fields, in the tents, and things like that. You know, um, there was just too much going on for that to be happening. You know, um, but once the businesses started shutting down and, you know, and people started moving away and, you know, they just kinda looked at Chinatown as a lost cause, you know. Uh, a street of

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hopelessness, and it's not. It's a street of hope, because people who are from out of town, um, hitchhikers, you know, truck drivers, and things like that, when they come to Salinas, they look for Chinatown. Do you know how to get to Chinatown? I've had a few people ask me that at the gas station, you know, uh, or at a store, do you know where Chinatown is?

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And I can be right there at Chin Brothers, you know, and that store has been there for forever. And, um, I'm like, you're basically in Chinatown, it's right around the corner, you know. And they're like, yeah, I just came from, uh, L.A. or, you know, uh, I'm from San Diego or, you know, and they said that there's a shelter there, you know, and I'm, I give them directions on how to get down here. Um, do I hope that they come down here and become part of the homeless population? No. Do I...thrive on the fact that if they do come down here, and they do have nowhere to go, that they're gonna be okay? Yeah. I do. Because no matter what, whether

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right or wrong, nobody wants to see anybody get hurt down here. When someone ODs, this community comes together. I see people running to get ice, I see people doing mouth to mouth resuscitation, I see people getting coats and putting them under them underneath the person's head, I see someone on the phone dialing 9-1-1, and everybody kicks into gear. You know, when there's a fight, everybody kicks into gear, everybody wants to see it. When there's, um, a life-

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threatening situation, I see a lot of people come together and try to stop that situation. Whether it be because someone used too many drugs, or they didn't take their medication, or whether it be somebody got stabbed, or somebody got beat up real bad, um, I've seen it all down here. Um, but the main thing that I see is a community, the main thing I see is a lot of people who, um, feel this place is home. I have aunts that could come to my house and live, but they choose to be here because they know I don't do drugs, I don't drink, I don't, you know, so, they wanna do those things, so they

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prefer to just keep it down here than to bring it to the house. And that's okay. I come down everyday and check on them. I make sure they get to their doctor's appointments. I, uh, you know, I try to do as much as I can to give service without putting myself, or my family, in harm's way. Um, and, and, that's the beauty of it. It's that there's a lot of good people here, uh, a lot of good people here. Um, and the good outweighs the bad down here. And so, I think that once people start coming in and reinvesting in Chinatown, and Soledad Street, and everything, it'll give the homeless more motivation to wanna do something different, because they won't fit in with the regular community. So, if they start seeing more of the regular community coming in, and, and take the time out to care, you know, it might motivate them to want to do something different. Then maybe they'll move the tents around the corner and find somewhere else, because they know that that's not a comfortable sight for people outside of Chinatown's community to see. And, you know, they say, oh, drug addicts don't have morals, don't have values, and that's not true, you know. Um, they used to call me the best-dressed smoker out here. You know, I used to smoke crack cocaine, but, uh, I loved to dress, and, uh, people have morals, and people have values. You know, sometimes they get lost, sometimes you, you, you know, you get so far down to your bottom, to where you feel like you can't climb out. But, as long as you got one or two people that just tells you everything is gonna be okay, just don't give up, you know, you gotta keep fighting. Um, eventually they'll get it, you know. Eventually they'll get it.

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Ray: Wow, um, I'm really glad there's someone like you down here to be a, uh, good person, and help other people. So, as someone that's, since you've been part of the community, and lived in it, and you still have family here, you almost say everyone's family down here.

China: Yeah. Yeah.

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Ray: Um, and since you mentioned the outside community of Salinas, and now you yourself, you're kind of in between, I think you've been on both sides of the fence.

China: Right, I have.

Ray: So how is it you think that the rest of the community, maybe in Salinas, and really anywhere, how do they misunderstand Chinatown?

44:31 China: Well they, you know, we're prejudged before a person can really come in and see what this place is about. You know, um, the stories, you know, the news, the newspapers, you know, um, it's always something negative. Never the positive. You know, um, and I just think that you doing this sheds a different light on what's really going on down here. Um, I believe that it's a preconceived, you know, assumption that it's all bad down here, it's only drug dealers, drug users, only, uh, gang bangers, and only homeless people and things like that. Well, you have Dorothy's Place, who is a community of the Franciscan workers, who, they don't use drugs. They're here giving back. They're here, you know, trying to make a difference in a place where people have given up on, you know, um, you have volunteers that come in from CSUMB and, you know, the neighboring schools, and things like that. Uh, Santa Cruz, City College, and things like that, that come in. And, um, they see that it's not the story that was told, you know, it's not what they heard about on the news. There's actually intelligent people here, actually people who really have, you know, skills, and, and, you know, uh, drive to want to do something different, but just don't know how. You know, so when, you know, the outside community thinks of Chinatown, they just kinda, ehh, I don't want no part of that. When really, if you would just take time to come and talk to two or three people, you would see that, you know, if that person had the opportunity to fill out a job application, and actually land that job, that they would do something different with their life. You know, but, you know, there's really nothing out there for them, you know, um, every time something's given to them, something's taken away. Um, they start in a program down here called The Flush Program, which was, uh, they put outhouses out for the homeless to be able to use, and things like that. And they started a program where you sign up and you get a flush card, and you became a part of a group who agreed to, uh, keep the outhouses clean, make sure there's no illegal activity going on in the outhouses, and things like that. And I think the program lasted maybe two weeks, and they took it from them and gated up the, you know, uh, properties and things. You know, the police come through, and I know they have to do their job by coming through and doing the sweeps and, you know, making everybody move and things of that nature, but it's like,

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they're just gonna be right back here. You know, this is where they feel the most comfortable, and I just think that if they had something to call their own, they would be able to appreciate something. Right now they don't have anything, so the little cubby hole, you know, they stake claims. This is my cubby hole. That's not something to be proud of that, you know, someone outside of this community would say, oh, I have a cubby hole. But to these people down here, that's their space that belongs to them. And so they take ownership of that, and given, given the opportunity, I believe that a lot of the people out here would do something different with their life. You know, it's just a matter of, you know, someone taking the time out to say, okay, what can you do. You know, so I, I tend to try to help out. You know, if I have garbage or something in front of the gallery, you know, I'll ask one of the guys to sweep it up and I'll give them a couple dollars. And, you know, whether they go buy beer, whether they go buy drugs, whatever it is, it still gives them a sense that they earned something, and it's theirs, and they worked for it. So, um, you know, I'll have somebody wipe my car down, you know, if it's dirty. Wanna earn five dollars, you know, wipe my car down. Um, I could take it to the gas station and have them clean it, but this person right here might be hungry, so I'll let him do it, and let him earn it. You know, and, so that's what I do, you know.

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Ray: Well, I know you have a business to take care of here. I sure appreciate everything you've shared with me from the moment Jeff introduced me to you, I knew you were going to be able to contribute greatly to this project, and you certainly have. Once again, I really appreciate it. Thank you, China.

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China: It's my, it's my honor to be a part of something, and I look forward to seeing it. And, um, being able to say, look guys, this is what I did, you know, and hopefully, like you said, years to come, you know, this'll be a part of something even bigger and, you know, people will be able to look back at my story, and be able to learn from it, and gather some hope, and know that, you know, eventually you can, you can do something different with your life, because I did. You know, and if no one else believes in them, I do, so it's important.

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Ray: Thank you.