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Interview with Kathleen Wong Lau

Kathleen Wong Lau

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Interviewee: Kathleen Wong Lau

Interviewers: Heaven Razon, Katherine Colvin

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Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Kathleen Wong was raised in Oakland, California to a mother who worked as a mechanic and a father who worked as a butcher. After initially dropping out of obtaining an undergraduate degree in the sciences at UC Davis, she decided to go into equity work in community programs in San Francisco. Eventually she went back to college and obtained her PhD. She now works as a Chief Diversity Officer at San Jose State University. She identifies as Chinese American and a woman of color. She is also a partner and a mother. She believes that the Auntie Sewing Squad saved her soul at a time of social unrest and personal loss during COVID-19.

Thematic Outline: (00:00:00) Wong Lau discusses her unique background growing up in a diverse community in Oakland. (00:08:19) She shares that her grandmother taught her how to sew their own clothes in order to save money. (00:11:48) She then described her initial admiration of the Squad and how it helped to restore her faith in humanity. (00:19:47) She discusses her mask campaign for the Wood Street unhoused community. (00:24:50) Wong Lau recalls several moments in her life that made her decide to fight for racial equality, including experiencing racism and sexism on her college campus of University of California Davis in the late 1970s. (00:32:26) She discusses the transition to online and how it has impacted her racial equity work. (00:35:38) She explains why policing is not the solution to stopping AAPI hate crimes. (00:41:42) Wong Lau shares her earliest memory of John F. Kennedy's assassination and its impact on her immigrant parents.

Kathleen Wong Lau Oral History Transcript

00:00:05

Katherine Colvin (KC): So today, we will be interviewing Kathleen Wong for our oral history report. We have Katherine Colvin and Heaven Razon here as interviewers. The date is May 5th, 2021. And so Kathleen, would you like to give just a basic sort of introduction to yourself?

00:00:35

Kathleen Wong Lau (KWL): Sure. Yeah. So my name is Kathleen Wong Lau. I work as a Chief Diversity Officer at San Jose State University, sit on the cabinet with the other VPs and the president. What else can I say, I'm a second generation Chinese American, Asian American, see myself as also a woman of color. You know a lot of the context that I find myself in. My parents are immigrants from Hong Kong and China. I was born in California, native to California. I am a mother of two grown children. Twenty two and nineteen, one who is about to graduate from college this May, which I'm pretty excited about. I have a partner. We've been married for, oh my god, have to remember this, for thirty three years. And I've got four rescue dogs. And, you know, grew up working class and poor. Did not imagine I would be an academic with a Ph.D. someday. Spent a lot of years doing community work. Even spent a stint being a union butcher for about four years before I returned to college to finish my bachelor's degree. And then I was mentored and told I need to become an academic. And I kind of looked at them I said, I'm older, not going to do that. I'm just here to get my bachelor's so I could move up in nonprofit organizations. And they encouraged me luckily. So I went on to get my doctorate and then became a faculty and then I did a lot of equity work. I studied equity work. My dissertation was on diversity and equity work. And so that's why I ended up in this line of work in many ways. There's probably a lot more things I can say. That's kind of a very brief about my background and who I am. So yeah.

00:02:51

KC: So you said you grew up in California and were born in California, yes? What was life like for your family when you were young?

KWL: Oh gosh. So when I was young, I would say my parents moved from job to job, quite a bit, right. Both of them...I would say my father completed like a year of high school. My mother, I believe, finished middle school in Hong Kong, and so they didn't have higher education for sure here in the US. And so as immigrants back in, so I was born in the 1960s, so back in the 50s and 60s, it was difficult for them to find work. They're very fortunate. They both landed union jobs at some point. So my mother worked in a factory in Oakland at a cookie factory as a cookie packer. But then when civil rights legislation came along, she applied for men's jobs, being like a mechanic, where you got paid twice as much and you didn't have to move constantly. So she saw the job was easier than the women's jobs, but they paid twice as much. And so she and two other women, I think, picketed and demanded that the union advocate for them so they could take the math test to become a mechanic because they'd never given the math test to women before,

apparently, or something. So she was someone who was very, I would say, very much an advocate for herself and for other people in the ways that she could. In the workplace, a very controlled environment right where you clock in and clock out for lunch and everything, all your time is controlled and stuff. I knew that about her, she told stories about her efforts and stuff. My father was a worker in a butcher store in Oakland. And so he was on a very multiracial, I would say, staff of butchers, an old fashioned butcher shop. And in the 60s, he was, you know, I would say he knew some of the Black Panthers, knew different people in the community. I think their shop was located kind of like this interstitial place between Chinatown and the Black parts of Oakland. And so they had a pretty integrated customer base. And yeah he told stories of, like, helping Black Panthers hide in the walk-in refrigerator because police were coming through and stuff like that. So I feel like I had a pretty, fairly non typical upbringing for an Asian American woman at that time. All right. So we're talking about the 60s and 70s. When I compared myself to other Asian Americans, as I got older, I realized that I was very unique and I think I'm very grateful for the upbringing that I had because we were working class and we lived in Oakland and Hayward, I would say, fairly integrated neighborhoods, mostly with Black and African American and and some white people. But we were not Chinatowns or all Asian enclaves when I was growing up. So I'm grateful for that because I think it's really shaped my perspective quite a bit. But we also had Cantonese speaking friends, and so I was able to maintain my bilingual language through most of my life. So I still speak Cantonese. I learned both English and Cantonese at the same time. And so, you know, I'm able to speak English without an accent, which is possible when you grow up bilingually. But people, you know, often assume that I don't or they'll make the mistake of saying something about me in Cantonese or something. And I'll snap back, hey, I'll say in Cantonese I know what you're talking about right that sort of thing. So that's a little bit about my childhood. I went to school at a time when there were very few Asian Americans in the public school I went to, the school was mostly black and white. And so I was probably one of them. I would see eight Asian Americans at my high school. How many people in my high school? I think my graduating class had like 400 and something so, you know, about maybe like I don't know, two thousand, you know, students or something like that, so definitely in the extreme minority. But, you know, had yeah, I mean, I think that it forced me to think about myself along racial terms in terms of where I was socially located with others. I didn't have that language to understand that. But certainly it was an upbringing, I think, that raised my awareness about how I was treated differently. Other people were treated differently because of the context that I grew up in. Yeah.

KC: Thank you. Do you know any of your family history past your parents? Or do you know...

KWL: Yes, absolutely.

00:08:19

KC: That's wonderful. So who actually taught you to sew? And why did they teach you?

00:08:24

KWL: It was my grandmother actually on my father's side. So she lived here with us when I was growing up. And she taught me to crochet when I was like, I don't know, six or seven or eight years old. I started making, like, potholders and she would like to repurpose. She would like to tear apart broken coin purses and rip all the fabric out and teach me how to crochet, crochet a replacement like a coin purse thing, and then stitch it into the metal holes, right, that were left for stitching and stuff. So I think she taught it to me so that I could save money, be thrifty. You know, she grew up very poor. My family was very poor. And so it was this notion that it's just a survival skill or a sort of a way to not have to buy new things all the time. I also grew up at a time where, like, there was hardly any clothing that fit my family, right. At that time, there weren't any petites and, you know, pants that were short. And, you know, I mean, my entire family, everyone had to take everything up because we were all short, you know. And the world was not built for us. Clothing was not built for us. And so that changed, I think, somewhat in the 80s and 90s. But by then, I was in my 20s, right. So when I was young, we pretty much had to modify anything that we purchased. And if you didn't do a good job, it looked awful, right. So she taught me how to do things properly. So I do want to say she had worked as a garment worker in Hong Kong. So Hong Kong at that time had a huge textile industry as well as home piecework, where, you know, people would bring work home to their apartments. And so, you know, she sold beautiful gowns for, like, you know, dressmaker's in France or whatever. And she didn't care because she's just doing the piecework. But she used to talk about the beautiful things that she sewed. And then the tiny things she had to show that earned you more money, like children's clothes and things that were tiny, that were hard. So she wanted to pass those skills on to her grandchildren. So I learned to sew alongside her on a foot pedal sewing machine. So it was one of these that you had to push your feet and get it going, right and how to control it and stuff like that. So I learned on a very old fashioned human powered sewing machine that she had shipped over from Hong Kong to the United States because it was her beloved machine. And then she also had this what I thought was a dangerous, to me it was a speed racing car because it was the industrial sewing factory type machine that if you pushed on it, it just went zoom and I was never allowed to touch that one and I didn't want to because I was afraid of that machine so yeah. So a long answer but she's the one who taught me to sew and we didn't use patterns. You know we just looked at clothing, tried to figure out what the design was and then engineered it backwards in your head and cut out newspaper and do stuff and so that's what she taught me to do.

00:11:48

KC: That's wonderful. So in your short introduction paragraph that we read. It cited that the Auntie Sewing Squad saved your soul. So what has it been like to be a part of this Squad? And how is it helped through this pandemic?

KWL: You know I think that it has given me a sense of...you know I should share a link with you....I am going to do a little sidetrack here, I told a story about how sewing, how being a part

of the Auntie Sewing Squad helped me process losing my young brother to COVID, right, and so, you know I did it in a virtual storytelling event not knowing there was someone who organized national, international storytelling conference and invited me to share my story at the international storytelling conference. What I shared was I had spent so much of my time during the early days of COVID and after my brother's death, just really trying to manage the grief of my family and my parents, my elderly parents who are 88 and 86, they were 87 and 85 when my brother passed. And so my brother [was] 55 when he passed away. I'm 60. He was about to turn 55 later that year. But it was, you know, I didn't have time. It sounds really weird. I didn't have time to feel anger. I didn't have time to process grief myself because I was really trying to take care of my parents who were just struggling with daily activities. And I was worried about them becoming fragile, not eating, you know, all that sort of, all the things that you worry about that can happen in elderly when they have a life-changing event and their grief was just so deep, right. And then coupled with the fact that we, you know, I had to arrange his funeral, you know, I had to have it in two days in order to make the queue for cremation or we would have to wait like a month, which was unacceptable because everything was piling up. I mean, literally, he was out of state. [I] start crying when I recall this but I had to do all of the stuff that I just had to use everything, my good organizational skills, just to get my family over that hump to just then, you know, say this is what we do. And at same time, all things were happening in terms of, you know, the social unrest and demands on our campus about anti-racism and addressing antiblack racism and all these other things. I was working twelve-hour days at work. I had my family and my kids that I'm trying to support to take care of emotionally. You know, my partner was doing a lot of that, too. So all of this is going on. So I really did not have time to process. And I kind of thought I was doing okay. I knew I was barely functioning, but I knew that I wasn't in a mental crisis, like I was going to harm myself or anybody else, but that I was functioning at a level, and that's how I tended to react. When I'm really stressed out, I just kind of keep going, right. May not be the best coping mechanism, but it's worked so far. So a friend of mine invited me to join the Auntie Sewing Squad. And she's like, I feel so guilty because I don't have time to actually sew, but I think that, you know, I know that you're a sewist and I know that you're really crafty and you crochet and they're crocheting hats for, you know, people up in Native American areas and was like, OK, so I joined this Facebook group and then learned, I knew who Kristina Wong was, and I figured out there's a lot of Asian American academics involved right at the point that I joined. There were a lot of folks whose names I recognized or at least I knew departments, I just sort of knew some of the people but not well not enough for me not to be creepy if I contacted them on Facebook, right. At first I was like, oh my god this group is so amazing.

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KWL: But I was so swamped. I didn't join. And then they were sewing these beautiful masks, I mean, just beautiful masks. And at hundreds at a time, they're doing these requests and calls. And I just didn't have the time to do it. But just lurking made me realize that through the process of grieving, losing my brother, all the political crap that was going on in the country and all the stuff I was facing at work, I realized I had lost my faith in the ability of people to be good. And that was something I'd never felt in my entire life. I mean, I've had some pretty bad experiences with

racism, with sexism, I've been sexually assaulted. I mean, there's all these... I have never in all of that time, and even in taking, like, horrible things that happen to other people and addressing it, I have never lost my faith that people are inherently good. You know, that if you give people a chance, you know that if you provide social support, if you provide scaffolding for people to understand their circumstances, their impact on other people, that there's a good chance you might, that over time, you know, where that person might turn. Now, sometimes they don't. And I could accept it, but I still basically thought people were good. But I realized that I actually stopped believing that somewhere along last year, that I started really thinking that if we don't have guardrails, if we don't have rules and regulations, that those people are inherently bad. And it was such a revelation and disturbing to me when I figured that out about myself, because I was wondering why I keep trying to seek closure. I kept thinking, why do I want to seek closure when I know closure is not possible? So trying to, like, process grief intellectually, which of course, is not the best thing to do. But then I realized that the reason why I was seeking closure is because I was really just really feeling pretty sad about how screwed up the world was and people were. And that's what was bothering me, because most of the time even when horrible things have happened, I've never actually sought closure. I've decided I don't need closure because I know that things are what they are, you try your best. You give people a chance. You do all the things that you can do that are within your capacity and then you move on because at some point, maybe they will have an epiphany or something like that. But I stopped believing that. And it took me being in the Auntie Sewing Squad and just like breaking down when I saw something beautiful when they posted, they said something and I was just, oh my god, I want to be where this person is and how they are feeling because I am totally not there. And I was intimidated by the level of sewing, I mean I am a pretty good sewist, but the beautiful masks people were producing and stuff, I was like oh my gosh, I don't know if I can ever sew something as beautiful and I don't know how active I am going to be in this group. So I started by just supporting people and you know, bringing stuff to people, or doing stuff through the mail and stuff like and not really sewing. And then when I started, I did my first request, it kind of changed everything when I really started sewing or answering a request, so I committed to 25 masks, and sewing those masks just felt so cathartic, it was like meditation. I just really felt like every time I sewed, it changed the way I felt about the world and the potential for good and change, you know I always believed those things but I stopped feeling it. And so when I say that sewing, being a part of this group, and contributing to this group saved my soul, it helped me remember that there's good in the world and that through small acts, you can make a difference. I've lost that. So, yeah. So I regained it because of this group.

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KC: That's really great. That's a super powerful message. So when you first joined the Auntie Sewing Squad, did you think it would still be at the magnitude it is a year into the pandemic?

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KWL: No, I kind of thought that things would be, you know, I don't know what I thought. So the

further back I thought that, yeah, we'd be done. The more we got into it, I was like, oh, my gosh, are things ever gonna be where we don't need masks? I think all at some point, some of us joke saying we better sew as much as we can because there were jokes about how, you know, we're not going to be needed anymore, we're going to feel useless or some jokes about that. And later, so yeah these jokes, they are not going to be true, our services are still needed. I think at some point I thought, yeah that we might not have requests come in anymore. But we're still getting huge requests. There is still a lot of need out there. I'm helping an ask right now that's almost finished. Almost all the masks are in. It's for the Wood Street unhoused community, about 200 people that live under this overpass in West Oakland. I was at an Earth Day event run by the Sunrise Movement. My son who is 19 is part of the leadership of the Sunrise Movement cause it's a youth one, I think if you're over 35 you're not allowed to organize or something, but most of the people are teenagers all the way up to mid-20s tops. One of the people they invited to speak was someone who was a member of the unhoused community on Wood Street. She was talking about the struggles and difficulty and how important it is to think about sustainability even for them. It was just really moving, right, a young Black woman, single mom with a teenage daughter. She was talking about some of her experiences being invisible with people not giving her dignity, how hard it is to hold your head up when you're unhoused and everything. And so after she spoke and a little bit later on, I just walked up to her and I sat next to her and said, I am part of the Auntie Sewing Squad and I was just wondering if you all are good on masks because I know that it must be hard to keep. Maybe you get donations, they did say a lot of people were donating, Sunrise donated a lot of supplies to them. She says, well you know I am wearing this really thin one that's jersey material single layer, which we know is not safe, and not adjustable loops and she was constantly pulling up on it. She said we have the disposable blue ones but they are really gross after a few days and nobody wants to wear them again and then they just end up all over the place and in the trash and we get those. So I said, would you like a couple of cloth masks for each person? And I said we try to make them with dignity so they are attractive, well made, and designed to be safe, they are double-layered at the very least, and there are adjustable loops and all this stuff. She said, my gosh, that would be so wonderful, there's 200 of us, thirty percent of us are women, and there are a dozen teenagers there, right. She asked me about the one I was wearing and I wish I had a spare one in my purse but I had given it away the week before and I didn't refill it so it was my fault. But she asked if the one I had was like the ones. And I said yeah, I made this. She said, oh my gosh it would be so wonderful to have a nice mask. And I asked about hats and scarves. She says, yeah because even in the East Bay it gets cold in the summer, cold in the evening, so yes we would love to have knit hats and stuff like that. So that's when I put up the post on the Auntie Sewing Squad for this. Because I run long days at work, I put up the post at 10:30 at night, and by the next morning when I woke up at 6am, the 400 adult masks, 30 teen masks, and hats and stuff was done. There were already messages saying, I think you have it fulfilled but if you need extra ones. They were like 25, 30 at a time, it wasn't like I am going to commit 100 masks and it was four people, but it really restores your faith in people. A lot of these people are just like me, they are really busy, right, they are like I will sew this in between this and this, I will knock out five tonight. It's very affirming.

00:24:50

KC: So another thing you wrote about in your brief. You are currently on your campus fighting a lot for racial equality. Are there any, like, moments in your life that made you decide that that was something you really wanted to advocate for and fight for?

KWL: Wow. That's probably when I was in high school, I would say. I was an activist. I went off to college and I went to UC Davis in 1978, so I am old. Back when I was pre-med like most Asian Americans, I was a science stem major and I was a biochem major. I do well on the SATS and I do like math and science. It was at a time when people on campus, which is still laughable today, were freaking out because there were so many Asians on campus and I was one of them, I suppose. But we were like two percent of the entire campus. The campus was mostly white with like two percent Asian Americans. And I think like less than one percent Black students and Latinx students, right. And there was so much verbal assaulting of Asian people. Graffiti on the science library saying that Asians, you know, "gooks" are driving up the curve. I mean, slurs almost like on several times a week. It got to the point where the university had to hire or pay police and security guards to guard the building to stop it from being vandalized. There was a Vietnamese American student who was 18 years old who was stabbed to death at Davis High School not far from campus. All that stuff and being working class and being first generation college student, being pre-med and competing with all of these, you know, mostly almost all white students who were clearly second generation college students, at least, if not third. Right. So they were the children of engineers and doctors and lawyers and stuff. I remember thinking to myself I have to leave this university before I kill somebody because I can't take it anymore because it was really bad. I remember in one lab there were only three of us who were Asian American. Sorry this is a long story.

00:27:15

KWL: It was an organic chem lab where your whole grade depended on you being given this unknown substance with the code on it so that the TA knows what you got as your original thing. And you have to devise a plan with re-agents and things or whatever you have to do so you can figure out at the end of this term what you actually had at the start. So you have to carefully make sure you don't use too much in the test so that you have enough to do your last test. You have to keep this one clean and pure so that you can keep running tests and eliminate what you think it might be and devise another strategy. Everyone is totally stressed out. UCs are highly competitive. So we're doing this and I remember in this one lab, I did this one test, and there is no way this is possible because I already eliminated this possibility, this type of reaction way back two weeks ago. Maybe someone contaminated this. The T.A. who was white yelled at me and said, well, maybe you just didn't keep good notes. And I was really upset. I said, no, no, I am damn sure that, you know, someone must be contaminated. Well, he said that's absurd. Well, within the hour, another Asian student walked up with the same problem and said something happened to my thing. And then the third Asian student walked up. And for me, automatically it clicked because of all the things I've been experiencing that this is what happened. By then, I'd been there, this was my second year. So I knew and I said that, you know, I think someone contaminated all of our stuff and the TA refused to believe it. I went to the professor who

oversaw the course and I said, I bet you're gonna get complaints in other sections. Somebody is tampering with the samples and we get the samples directly from the lab room. We have to check it out all the time. We've got to show our I.D. card, give our student I.D. number. And they have it locked up because they do want to make sure, because your whole grade depends on it, that is secure. Well, it turns out I was right that this had been done systematically to all of the people with Asian surnames in these two sections of labs. And I remember thinking to myself, Jesus, what the f*ck is going on here? You know, I just thought, wow, I've experienced racism before. But this is a level that's just totally ridiculous. And the remedy they gave us was they opened the lab for two nights so that we could run our entire nine weeks of tests in two nights. And that was the compensation we got in order because we still were going to get our grade based on whatever. And I remember being in that lab with all of these Asian faces and just going in at a place where there are hardly any Asian faces. And you see everybody in there. That was one of those moments where I was like, I don't want to be a doctor and a colleague of these assholes. This is what it means to be educated. I'm out of here. That's how I felt. You know, additionally, it was a time when white men, they still do, exoticized Asian American women and there wasn't Title IX the way there is now. And so I remember being hit on constantly, grabbed, groped. I remember thinking I was going to kill somebody. I remember I said this to one of my fellow students, I said, I am going to end up in the news one day because I'm going to f*cking deck somebody the next time this happens because I've had it. I remember losing it at this one party where I started yelling at this one guy, I started shoving him and I clocked him. These days I would get charged with assault. Back then there was a lot of stuff that happened with impunity and so I remember thinking to myself, college is not for me. That was my only experience of college was that environment at that time in the late 1970s. At the same time, I fortunately found that job with Upward Bound because I was trying to earn my way. With Upward Bound, we went out to lower socioeconomic high schools and worked with high school students. I got to work with Vietnamese students who were at the time refugees from the Vietnam War resettling with a lot of trauma, a lot of issues, a lot of economic issues. The other school I went to was mostly Black with a few Latinx people. I found my comfort zone working in Upward Bound. After I dropped out of college I went straight to San Francisco and ended up working as a bilingual counselor for a TRIO program, Upward Bound is a TRIO program, but for a community TRIO program in San Francisco. I worked there with Southeast Asian refugees and trying to help their families resettle, trying to help students get into community college, get financial aid and help their parents with disability support if their parents were disabled from the war. That sort of thing. So, yeah. So that's how I found my way into equity work was really by dropping out of college initially. I know it's a long story. None of them were things that I planned. But at the same time, they have made me who I am today. They've given me a level of empathy and understanding about how systems fail people, entire communities.

00:32:39

KC: Very interesting. How is your sort of fight for racial equality translated to online during this pandemic?

KWL: It has been difficult. I think initially when we started, this is a great question, when we first started, we took a lot of our curriculum and simply tried to do it online. It was like we're doing the same thing but now we are doing it in front of the computer. It didn't work, of course, you know, I mean, people were generous and they said, you know, I learned a lot in everything. But, you know, part of it was this news fest because, you know, we're tired of sitting in front of our laptops. So it made us, I think, be a lot more innovative, I think, in using things like jam boards, breakout rooms more frequently than we might normally do. Maybe dropping in videos that we prerecorded for some real quick things that are visual, you know, giving people readings ahead of time, doing like polls right in the middle of something. I mean, those kinds of things so that we can check in because you can't get the same level of visual check-in with other people. I think for the good. We also had higher attendance, particularly from faculty, because faculty are also so stretched in terms of their time constraints that we often average about, which is good. Thirty people is great for a workshop because you want to have interaction. But in our online training, we average upwards of 60 and 80 and we have to close it sometimes. It's because it's convenient for people. They can be with their family. They can be doing something off the commute and they just kind of log in and they're there. So it has actually increased our engagement which is not what we expected actually. And then it has helped us utilize online teaching platforms like Canvas so that people actually have an archive of resources once they are enrolled in the Canvas while we are doing our presentation we make references to documents and slide decks that they can go back to later and videos that are archived there. So we do a walk through of the Canvas resources and then they are able to, people like that because they said I can remember what you said, I can look at my notes, I can go into Canvas and open it up and read more deeply. It has made us better and more thoughtful about post-workshop activities for people and self-based learning. Long answer, but it has been a gift, although at first it was really hard trying to figure out how to build these things.

00:35:38

KC: It is wonderful to have access to those resources more readily because of the transition to online. Right now in the news and all around the country there has been a lot of hate and API hate crimes, how do you feel the United States government and just the United States in general have been treating and dealing with this API hate right now?

00:36:14

KWL: So I think at a governance level, I think the Biden administration has issued some executive orders that are meaningful. I also think that Congress has done some things with hate crimes bills and stuff that are meaningful. I think where the shortfall is, I think, is looking at policing as a solution to reducing hate crimes, right. So I would say I'm guessing just in the last two weeks, 70 percent of the eight or nine things that I've seen that are fairly violent attacks on APIDA folks either here in the Bay Area or in New York. I think there's one in Baltimore involving someone hitting someone in the head with two women and head with cinder block and stabbing his arms. All these sorts of things have happened. All of them happened in broad

daylight where there were people around within like 20 feet or there's just people walking down the sidewalk. And so, you know, first of all, police can't be everywhere. Second of all, we don't want police everywhere because they often escalate things. And, you know, people don't trust the police necessarily all the time. And so it's really about addressing the systemic failures that we've had, I think, in recognizing the invisibility of APIDA issues. So when people started saying things, when Trump, when politicians started using Wu-Han virus and they were told that, you know, this is going to affect how people view us and everything. Course, now they believe that, right. Well, now we see that, you know, there is evidence, right. It's been consistently used by a lot of people. And it's being mimicked and graffitied and the things that people shout at people. You know, so I would say that the problem we have is one that's cultural, but it's also because we have systemic inequities that also continue. Right now of the seven or eight things that come across my feed either through NextDoor or the Patch which is a local weird news thing, an app where people upload things I have no idea how it works, sometimes journalism is not that great, but people upload videos from local things that happen and stuff. Almost all of them with the exception of two, so out of the eight, six of them were committed by either people who appear to be Black or Latinx against someone who is Asian. For me, part of my concern is that people are seeing this as other people preying on other people of color. But for me, it's the failure to recognize white supremacy as the driving mechanism for most of this, right. So white supremacy overdetermines the narrative about what Asians mean right in our society, about being forever foreign, about being carriers of disease, about, you know, our close proximity to whiteness, which, you know, for most Asian people is like, there is no way how can you look at me and say that I'm white? I mean, look at all these things that are going on, right. So there's a sense that we're the model minority, that we are somehow more privileged. And so there you know, that resentment that might drive some of it is misplaced, right. But it's driven by a white supremacy narrative. And I think that what's important is for us as a society to recognize that and continually say that it interrupts that narrative. And even though communication doesn't sound like a good strategy, it is a very effective strategy, right. And calling out structural behaviors in the ways in which we treat hate incidents. So there are a lot of things that happened that don't meet the level of a hate crime. So that's why the STOP AAPI HATE website is such a valuable website because it documents everything, behaviors that may not constitute technically a violation that is a felony or misdemeanor assault but they certainly are problematic and some of them are actually misdemeanor assault. So I serve on the hate crimes advisory to task force on hate crimes, Santa Clara county, there was a presentation where one of the co-founders of the STOP AAPI HATE said that they had to create a new category of hate incidents for recording the three thousand 800 hate incidents that occurred last year those are just the ones that are reported. But there was a significant number in this category called coughing and spitting on Asian people to scare them in terms of COVID, purposely coughing on them or their children. Police can't stop people for doing that, so policing is not going to address that. Yeah, I'll give you sort of a convoluted answer. But, you know, it's troubling. But I do think the solutions are not just education, but also accountability and really giving people an equity framework to understand what's actually going on, what the dynamics really mean about our society. It's not the ones that are the easy answers, right?

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KC: So as we're coming to a close on our interview. Is there anything or any story that you have that you would really like remembered in your life? This interview will be going to a whole archive of oral histories.

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KWL: It's probably because I just shared this story with my children not long ago. There's nothing particularly life-changing about it but I will share it. My earliest memory ever was when I was three years old, and I know it's because of what I saw, that I was three years old, so I remember being in the backseat of a car with my mom, and I still have images of it. And I remember looking out the window and seeing a lot of black bunting, a lot of black fabric I didn't know was one thing. It was just tons of black fabric. And I remember asking my mother, why is there, what is that? Why is that there? And my mother said in Cantonese only spoke Cantonese at that time, I think. But this part's important. She said to me that, oh, someone important died, I think. And I didn't know what death was. But I asked her. I said, who? Or something like that. What? Or who, whatever. And she said, this person that was elected to be a leader was killed, right. Must have been Kennedy right at that time. And I remember it because the word for elected in Cantonese sounds a lot like the word for when you sucker licked like a popsicle or something like that. I said well, that's weird how I thought to myself, that's really weird. Like someone that is like a popsicle was licked or something was killed. I remember my mother who had been crying, laughed when she was telling me. She was crying and so I knew something important was happening. But she laughed and said, no, no, no, silly. You'll know when you're older. But I remember when I was like in first grade, I recall this memory. And I said to my mother, I said I remember just by recounting, oh, yeah, she's said that we were driving downtown and there was bunting to mourn the death of John F. Kennedy and I think for me, so it is a meaningful story. His death really affected my parents like it affected most Americans. But something that my mother said when I was older when Robert Kennedy was assassinated, she said that people are killing people they care about people who aren't white, people are killing them or their leadership. And this was disturbing to her but she was also worried about me growing up in a country where this happened. I don't know if it's epiphanies or whatever to recognize that as my first memory is really the assassination of Kennedy and the aftermath of it and its impact on my parents. Yeah, that would be my most memorable moment. I was only three. I also recounted it with my mom and certainly we spoke about it again when Robert Kennedy was killed, I was eight when that happened I remember it very vividly.

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KC: That's a very interesting story and a very powerful message that comes from it. Thank you so much for coming and sharing your story with us. I hope you had a good time, I had a wonderful time listening to you.

00:46: 14

KWL: Very meaningful to share, to share and recount this and make sense of it. You know, at the age of 60, thank you for the gift of you know, I'm so busy I don't take time to reflect on some of these things. So this is a gift for me to appreciate sharing with both of you and appreciate this will be archived. So thank you for the gift.