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Berkeley, California

Marion Kwan

Marion Kwan: Freedom Fighter for All

Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Amanda Tewes
in 2024

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It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Marion Kwan, "Marion Kwan: Freedom Fighter for All" conducted by Amanda Tewes in 2024, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2024.

Marion Kwan, c. 2019.

Abstract

Marion Kwan is an activist who was involved in the civil rights movement. Kwan was born in Chinatown in San Francisco, California, in 1942. She graduated from Hastings College in 1965 and later earned a master's degree from San Francisco State University. Kwan worked as a counselor at City College of San Francisco from 1975-2006. She joined the civil rights movement as a member of the Delta Ministry in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in the summers of 1965 and 1966. Kwan is also a member of the Bay Area Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. In this interview, Kwan discusses growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown, including connections to Cameron House; family's background and immigration histories; early education; education at City College of San Francisco, Hastings College, and San Francisco State University; personal politics; working with the Delta Ministry in Mississippi in 1965 and 1966, including: decision to join, the potential for violence, local activists like Bob and Alice Beech, grassroots organizing, observations of segregation, experience as an Asian American woman in the South, and the role of women in the movement; visit to the site of the murder of activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner; James Meredith and the March Against Fear in 1966; work history, including a Chinatown preschool, the International Rescue Committee in Hong Kong, San Francisco Chinatown YWCA, and City College of San Francisco; continued activism; reflections on the Delta Ministry and civil rights movement; work with the Bay Area Veterans for the Civil Rights Movement; her husband and children; and thoughts on her personal legacy.

Table of Contents

Interview 1: September 5, 2024

01-00:00:05
Tewes: This is a first interview with Marion Kwan for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on September 5, 2004. Ms. Kwan joins me in this remote interview from Alameda, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you so much, Marion, for joining me in these interviews.

01-00:00:29
Kwan: Well, thank you for having me.

01-00:00:32
Tewes: To start off with, can you tell me about when and where you were born?

01-00:00:38
Kwan: I was born in San Francisco's Chinatown at—and now, I guess, it's historic—it's just called simply the Chinese Hospital. And it still stands with the same name today, and it's right in Chinatown.

01-00:00:55
Tewes: And when were you born?

01-00:00:57
Kwan: Nineteen forty-two. I'm, I guess, first generation born in the United States, along with my other siblings. We became eight kids, but the first child, my oldest sister, was born in China.

01-00:01:25
Tewes: And what was it like growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown in the forties and the fifties and sixties?

01-00:01:32
Kwan: I always think about Chinatown as less than a square mile, and it became my living room, my playroom. There are very few playgrounds. There was a park that has nothing but nice, green lawns, but now it's disappeared, so I don't see a whole lot of trees. There are no trees in Chinatown, it's pretty bare, and still today, so it's always been enclosed. But it was home. I was very comfortable, I felt really accepted, I was just one of many families. And I lived all my life, which is unusual, in a four-level, huge building that is in the heart of Chinatown, right on Grant Ave. And I noticed that later on, there's a plaque—it still stands there day—a plaque right by the front door saying that this was the first settlement house ever in the Chinatown area, the first settlement. And I don't know what that meant. I'm sure it wasn't four stories when it was first built, it was probably a shack of some kind. But it was in the heart of Chinatown, obviously.

01-00:03:24
Kwan: What I remember most about growing up in Chinatown was walking the streets, being very comfortable. And there were small grocery stores, mom-and-pop stores everywhere. There was no glitter, no gift shops. I would be told by my mother to go down four flights of stairs, out the door, next door. Right next door was a grocery store, and I was told to buy two eggs, and so I would take the egg and bring it up four flights of stairs, and that's how we'd buy groceries. So, it was really, really home. It was very intimate, a small community, and everybody spoke the same dialect.

01-00:04:27
At that time, it was mostly immigrants who'd come from the southern part of China by the ocean, and that's where my father came [from]. He was one of many typical immigrants who needed to leave. And he was twenty-three when he boarded a ship, and it must have been really hard for him, not knowing that he could ever return home. It was an ordeal that he took many times. And so my father was a typical immigrant who ended up in Chinatown. And Chinatown, of course, has histories. One doesn't take a ship and go to a foreign country and stay just with people who look like you. In the beginning, I can understand that, but there's a history behind that before my father came, obviously. And Chinatowns were places of haven away from the discrimination with white Americans at that period, so there were Chinatowns everywhere.

01-00:06:07
But again, my life, like many children growing up, was really insular, but I didn't know it was insular. I didn't know it had to be because of my protection. I grew up being happy, knowing people. There's a culture there where when you walk down the street on a Sunday with my family, we would stop. Often, it would take us fifteen minutes to finish that block, because we would say hi to someone who's called auntie; I don't even know who she is, or uncle or grandpa, and I'm not related to any of them, but that's how we relate to each other. And so that was what life was like.

01-00:07:02
Tewes: You said a lot of great things here; I want to go back and pull the thread a bit. And so you were describing what Chinatown looked like. I'm curious: do you remember what the borders were, what the street boundaries were when you were growing up?

01-00:07:20
Kwan: There, for me, it was mostly Sacramento St. to the south, Broadway St. to the north, to the west up the hill Mason St., and towards the Financial District, not very far and not further than Kearny St. But it didn't matter to me; I just knew that that's where the boundaries were. And I wasn't a boy, and my brothers knew that if they crossed Broadway St.—Broadway on the north was a pretty wide street, and when you cross it to the other side, the northern side of Broadway, you're in white territory. And I remember if you're into gangs

with—of course, I was a girl and I wasn't into it, but my brothers knew that you got to be a little careful when you cross, because that's the white boys' territory. And whether you're part of a gang or not, you got to be careful, and that's North Beach. I love North Beach growing up later in my college years. I mean, that's where all the great coffeehouses were, why not go there? So it's another culture.

01-00:09:03

Tewes: But as a young child, you weren't crossing those boundaries very much?

01-00:09:07

Kwan: No, no. I was shocked when people asked me in my twenties about Sausalito, and I said, "Where is that? I have no idea." And I said, "Oh, it's that town that you cross the Golden Gate Bridge. And who has a car anyway to take me there?" Except my older brothers when I got to be in high school and into community college, where I know people who have cars and who can drive us around.

01-00:09:44

There was an interesting story I remember about walking out of Chinatown. Every year, there's a circus, and I don't know if it's Barnum & Bailey Circus or what circus it was, but it's always in Civic Center somewhere. And my father would be so afraid to take a bus, because he couldn't speak English, so every year, he would take us, any of the children—and I remember going very often when I was in grade school—venture away from Chinatown. My parents would put me in my best dress and a fancy coat, and we're just going to the circus. And it takes, for me, seemingly, oh, hours of walking, because my father would know exactly where to go, but if we'd take a bus, he wouldn't know where to go. And so he would take us and walk us to a place in Civic Center and tried to get us in free. And sometimes he gets in, sometimes he doesn't, but oftentimes they would let children in free. So we would stay by ourselves and watching the circus for maybe an hour. When it was over, we will come out, and my father would take us, walk us all the way back to Chinatown, and it's probably another hour-and-a-half or whatever it takes. And that was a big deal, that was a big deal.

01-00:11:40

We don't have picnics, we don't go outside, we don't travel with bicycles. To this day, I'm afraid of riding a bicycle, because it's so crowded. In Chinatown, who can afford a bicycle to begin with? And there's no need for that, and there are too many hills. And so a bicycle is not something I think about, and I always marvel looking on television and watching white society with their houses, the suburban houses, and their lawns and their bicycles and kids riding bikes to and from school, and I said, "What is that all about?" I know cable cars, I can get on the cable car when I got older, but I'd usually either walk to school or take a bus when I got older.

01-00:12:50
Kwan: For me, it's compact, my life was very compact. And I didn't realize what culture meant until I got to college and realized there's such a thing called culture. And I never saw Black faces. Once in a while, I would see a Black face, and I remember one Black kid who ended up in my public school, and she was sitting across the aisle from me, I remember her. But I know whites, because not having to leave Chinatown—worldwide, San Francisco Chinatown is and was a tourist spot for everyone, so people would come and look at me and stare at me whenever I open the door. When I go walk down four flights of stairs and I'd walk out the door to school or to play, whatever, I couldn't get off the step without whites stopping in front of me and looking at me and would say to their children, "Oh, look at that. That's a girl who lives there," and it's all these comments. I never got used to that, I just felt uncomfortable, felt a little awkward, but I just took it in stride. I always felt like there's an inner sanctum and there's an outer world.

01-00:14:54
Tewes: That's a good way to put it. We talked about what Chinatown looked like, but I'm curious about the other senses, too. What did it sound like, what did it smell like?

01-00:15:09
Kwan: Oh, I like the smell of sometimes you have in our stores hanging ducks and chicken, meats. My favorite smell was Chinese sausages; I could smell that. Of course, there's fish stores, so there are lots of stores like that. And the sounds are not so much, I don't think, about cars. There are cars that drive by, but it's very slow, because it's such a small—the scale of our streets were so tight that cars are bumper to bumper, but you go like fifteen miles an hour, so I don't think about cars that much or the noise of cars. I remember mostly the streets were always clean of debris, but it's also full of soot and soiled, and that cannot be cleaned away, cleansed away. You can only clean so much of a public street. But I remember grocery owners always make sure that their streets outside of their stores are always swept, and I don't remember debris in Chinatown. We have a lot of valleys, and we have a lot of underground stores, which is very unusual. And for some reason, that's what Chinatown is, there's a lot of underground stores or storage places.

01-00:17:22
And, oh, I remember walking down alleys, and then I would hear this loud clatter inside the building, and I know exactly what they are. They're mahjong, it's tiles, right, and they're made of either ivory or plastic. And it's like playing cards, what Americans might do playing cards, except that mahjong is very loud, and it's really a nice feel to it. My parents never got into that, we never got into it, but I know what it looks like. I know relatives in Hong Kong, which I later got to know, they play a lot of it to pass the time away. I didn't realize that play mahjong to some Chinese, they'll say, "Oh no, no, no, we don't play that." And I thought, Why are you so defensive? And then I remember that quite often, it was a vice, that you play for money. That's been,

I think, illegal for some period of time, I don't remember. But it wasn't part of my daily life, but I know that when my mother would take us to visit her friends, sometimes they would play that. And then there was just all this clatter, but it's really so nice to watch them building a little wall here, building a little wall here, and it was visually fun to watch instead of cards. Cards to me is boring, but tiles are fun.

01-00:19:20
Tewes: Yeah, the 3-D [nature].

01-00:19:21
Kwan: So I remember that sound, I remember that. Oh, I remember right across the street, I would jaywalk across the street, and jaywalking across the street. Even if I was a kid, my parents wouldn't mind, because it's like ten steps across the street, and when a slow car comes by, you know how to avoid it. But my favorite place was called the Fong Fong Ice Cream Parlor. The Fong Fong brothers apparently decided to go modern and had an ice cream store, and their ice cream was lychee ice cream or something with the Asian flavor to it. They learned how to do that. And besides vanilla and chocolate and strawberry, they added Chinese sweetness ingredients to their ice cream. And I remember going there and buying an ice cream for five cents, and I would come back home. And I remember, there was one time where my sisters and I went—my mother would give us exactly five cents, and one time she didn't have five cents, she had maybe twenty-five cents, and so she said, "Okay, give me back my change, don't forget." I remember this one time where I went and got an ice cream cone, came back and said to my mother, "I'm sorry, but I don't know what happened to the extra fifteen cents or twenty cents," and I knew that I had a bigger ice cream cone, and I was afraid to tell her that I spent it all. [laughs] And those are just fun memories of just being a bad kid, getting what I wanted.

01-00:21:36
Tewes: Yeah.

01-00:21:38
Kwan: So yeah. During Chinese New Year's, my mother would—going away from sight and sounds, I'm just going back to one of my experiences. My mother became a seamstress, but she refused to do what all the other Chinese women did: that if you're a seamstress, you go to a factory owned by or run by a Chinese merchant, and there might be, what, twenty or more women sewing for wholesale to other companies. And my mother refused to do that. There were eight of us, so she was smart enough to realize that she better think about making a living besides relying on our dad, so she ended up being a seamstress with what we call cheongsam. Cheongsam is a sexy, fitted, long gown with a Chinese collar and fittings, what we call frock. I don't know why it's called frock, but it's made out of a material where you put the buttons together somehow, but it's a very Chinese way of doing it. And it's laborious, it takes forever to do it. But she got into custom Chinese dress for women and

even some white outside women, one of them being an English teacher who taught me in grammar school. She found out that my mother was a seamstress, wanted a Chinese outfit, so she went to my apartment, went all the way up to the fourth floor. My mom took care of her for a few fittings, and she was happy, and she left. A fitting would probably take a woman maybe a month to have a fitting just for your body, and I remember that. And those were the moments where I felt like there's an outsider in our apartment.

01-00:24:24

Kwan: So there were memories like that where I see very few outsiders, that when I do, most of a time, they were in and out real fast. Usually when someone knocks on the door in my apartment, we would open it, and it's usually a white man in a suit and a hat, one of these 1950s, 1940s hat. And he would take off his hat, and he would say, "Hello, my name is Mr. Smith" or whatever. "Have you heard of this insurance? Would you like some insurance?" And she says, "No, thank you," and then we would just gently shut the door. And that's our exposure to outsiders, but that's about it outside of so many of them walking along the streets.

01-00:25:24

And pretty soon, by the time the fifties and sixties rolled around, grocery stores became gift stores and glitter. So it's changed where the apartment I was living in—it was and probably still is a living space where a lot of a lot of buildings are. It has been more and more gift stores on the streets and what we call Chinese associations, district clubs. You know, Oh yeah, you were from China in this area, we have a club here that caters towards your area from China, we can help you with all kinds of social services. So those social service kind of organizations cropped up way back in the forties out of survival and discrimination. So we would go to our association for guidance and for help whenever that's needed. That's how I think Chinatown took care of itself, which was quite amazing. Without that, I don't think we could've survived that well.

01-00:27:06

Tewes: Yeah, you described Chinatown as a haven for people.

01-00:27:09

Kwan: Yes, right.

01-00:27:12

Tewes: Which leads me into another question. You mentioned that there's a history and a context to why this place exists, and I want to talk about that. The Chinese Exclusion Act was in place between 1882 and 1943, so definitely fits your parents and their crossing. But what kind of impact did the Chinese Exclusion Act have on Chinatown as a whole, as the community?

01-00:27:43

Kwan: Oh gosh, okay, I need to just speak for myself, because it's important that it's just one perspective. It did not end; the Chinese Exclusion Act, every ten

years or so, politics rears its head again and saying, Oh, ten years is up and we're supposed to look at 1882, the Exclusion Act, and let's further it another ten years, let's further it another ten years. It didn't end in 1943, it kept going way until—without the civil rights movement and President Johnson at that time—it didn't really stop until possibly in 1965 when the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Bill got passed. A lot of things happened then, there was finally closure. But it took over eighty years, so 1882 to 1965 was at least eighty years. So if you can imagine the kind of impact politically that could have on any Chinatown. Let's not even talk about the fact that whatever happened to Native Americans 500 years prior; whatever happens to African American slaves over 400 years prior; and the third wave, huge wave was against the Chinese. And so I see that as a third wave personally, and that's just me.

01-00:29:44

Kwan: And people wonder why today Asian Americans or Chinese, for me, are afraid of politics. It's the way Asians were treated prior to 1882. The largest flux of Chinese who came was because of the Gold Rush. And so in 1848, gold was discovered, and it went all over the world. There were many, many international groups of populations that finally emerged and showed up in California, and China was one of the many. But because Chinese were—the culture is so Eastern, there was a lot of fear about why we worship pagans, and I don't think we worship pagans, but white Americans do. And so we speak different languages, we drink tea and not coffee, we don't put sugar in our teas. No, white people don't do that; well, Chinese do. So there are so many differences, and it gave an excuse for a lot of discrimination.

01-00:31:43

And also, of course, you've probably heard of Chinese women being used as prostitutes even from their own people. And there was a lot of human trafficking, a way lot of human trafficking, and it made Americans think that—here's another stereotype—all Chinese women must be prostitutes, and so they're treated as such. There are also laws, federal laws that voted against Chinese women from coming into the United States. The impact—you were wondering what the impact was—it prevented a certain group of women from entering the United States; therefore, the Chinese men became a bachelor society for a longest time. And the same later with the Filipinos that much later; it had happened to them. And there's another history about that too in Chinatown with a bachelor group of men from that country.

01-00:33:12

So there was enough impact where in the 1800s into the 1900s, there were at least 200 Chinatowns plundered and burned throughout California. And so any time a whole neighborhood gets plundered—and people were hung, Chinese were hung from lamppost—they would barge into your house and do whatever they want to your place. And sooner or later, those Chinese would look for another place to live, and then they would start another Chinatown or they would end up with a surviving nearby Chinatown, and so that's how

Chinatowns kept going. It either grew or it stayed where it was in isolated areas, but they were really, really protective of themselves and of each other. So that's how fear came and not feeling welcome came and the sense of them being—there's this term right now called "perpetual foreigners" comes from both sides. There's a lot of racism coming from white Americans and conservatives, which is a big part of it.

01-00:34:57
Kwan: But also first-generation Asian Americans, whether you're Japanese or Chinese, at that time, were very fearful of being where they are, and they have their own problems. They thought that they might get rich being in California or the United States, and there will be gold everywhere in the streets and so forth. And as soon as someone in your family came from China into being in the United States, they would assume that they would send money back as soon as possible, because there's so much gold everywhere, Americans are so rich. So many of the immigrants who ended up in the United States ended poor and discriminated against, and they couldn't explain it. They're afraid and they're ashamed that that they could not afford sending money home. So there's a lot of internal problems within the community. There's a high level of suicides mostly among men, so there's that problem. And there's reasons why I think the Chinese have a hard time getting into politics until maybe, I would say, the third, fourth, fifth generation, and that's happening, of course. We know that there's a lot of Asian politicians all over, and the generations are adapting slowly and becoming more American and less Chinese. And so there's this dance between the two cultures that are not especially helping our own cause.

01-00:37:16
Tewes: Thank you for sharing that.

01-00:37:17
Kwan: Yeah.

01-00:37:23
Tewes: I would love to hear more about your family. And you've mentioned your parents a bit, but I want to know more about who they are and more about their livelihoods and why they chose to come to the United States.

01-00:37:43
Kwan: I don't think my family's any different from any European, Latino families. To this day, it's no different. My father came because of years and years of famine and civil war, and the Irish came because of the potato famine and whatever else there are, poverty, famine, war that made up the United States. And I believe that we are the country with the most immigrants in this world now, and in about forty years from now, it will be nothing but a land of equal immigrants. There will be no majority, so whites will be equally divided among all the other racial groups. And there's a fear, I think, about that right now with a lot of white Americans, and we know that that's growing.

01-00:39:11

Kwan: Going back to my parents, I also fell into this stereotype. I thought, Oh yeah, we're all immigrants. And my father, I don't know how he survived. There must be a reason why he was able to get in and out of the country four times. How did he do that? He's a laborer, he's just a lowly guy who found a job, whatever, whether he's sweeping the streets or doing something. But then we start thinking, He didn't say a whole lot about his life. But I remember, he would go to work and come home, and on the weekends, he would pull out a notebook, and he would start writing with the traditional brush and ink. He would start writing, and I said, "Well, how does he know all that stuff? What is he doing?" And it turned out that he was a meticulous bookkeeper, and he likes to journal.

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And one day a few years ago, a sister-in-law said to me, who's from Hong Kong, she said, "Is this your father's picture?" And he was wearing a Chinese hat and a Chinese black jacket. She said to us, "Your father could not have borrowed those clothes, it's got to be his own. And this is the outfit an upper-class person, a scholar." And I said, "Are you sure?" She says, "Yeah, I'm positive." And so, we did some digging, and we found out that he was actually in and out of China as a merchant. And so the government, US governments had said the law is that if you're Chinese, you're not allowed in. But if you're a merchant and we need your money and you know how to do business, you can come in and out as much as you can, so he was able to do that. And we put two and two together and realized that he was sponsored by a company, an import-export company that was established—one of the first ones, I suppose—in Chinatown in San Francisco. And so he was able to board a ship at age twenty-three and landed in San Francisco, and was working there, and then he came back and forth for business. The last time he went, he brought back his wife, which was my mother, his third wife. So he's much older than my mother, and so his first wife died, the second wife ran away, and his third wife was my mother.

01-00:43:07

I learned that slowly. They don't talk a whole lot about it, about their past, and my father was a pretty quiet person. But we looked at some old pictures, and I didn't realize he was short, shorter than most of the other men; he must have been only 4'9" or 5'. We were looking at the pictures, and we realized he was always in a suit along with the other merchants. They have pictures sometimes in front of their building, and he's usually in the center. And I said, "Why was he placed in the center? He must be somebody important." And we started looking at his journaling, and we found out that each time he tried to leave the country roundtrip and went to return—the first time he did it, it took him eight months to have approval of a return permit. And to do that, you had to have a white lawyer, you had to have so many white witnesses and so many Chinese merchants who can vouch for you, that you are not a laborer, you are not a pimp, you are not whatever, you are a merchant. And he had to do that at least three to four times, and it took months and months to get that approved. And

when he returned, he probably had to stay in Angel Island again and go through some interrogation before he went back, was permitted back. So I looked at the time he went and the time he came back, and it was like every ten years. He was very meticulous about what he had to do, and it blew my mind.

01-00:45:35
Kwan: There were five girls and three boys, and I fall into the third oldest. My other younger sisters have since—gosh, I don't know, since the year 2000, my sisters have been meticulously looking at my father's history and documenting everything. It turned out that after being a merchant, import, export, he ended up joining or working for the oldest bakery in Chinatown that's still in existence today. It's called Eastern Bakery on Grant Ave. And he ended up being the most prized baker, because he had his own secret ingredient in how to make mooncakes. It's a yearly thing. And so the story goes that when the time comes for mooncakes to be made and sold, my father would—this comes from one of the coworkers who was very young then, he was in high school or college. He told us that he used to work with my dad, and when it came to prepare the ingredients, his coworkers and himself, this young man included who's working there, had to leave the premises so that my dad can put together his secret ingredients, and then they can come back. And so that's the history of my dad, okay, briefly. My mom's another question, but I don't know.

01-00:47:35
My fondest memories when I was a kid was waiting for my dad to come home in the evening at dinnertime. And we want to see if when he opens the door whether he has a bag of goodies for us, baked goods that is no longer used, can't sell anymore, it's after hours. And so he would bring these free baked goods back, and we would just clamor for them, and that was a good—I mean, a fond memory of my dad.

01-00:48:15
Tewes: Wow, thanks for sharing that.

01-00:48:17
Kwan: Yeah. I could go on to my mother if you want or—

01-00:48:22
Tewes: Well, I am curious about her, because one of the things you told me was that she came through Angel Island on her own, pregnant, with a young child. What do you know about her life?

01-00:48:35
Kwan: When she married and decided to marry my dad, I believe that she was—this is my imagination—she was in her early twenties or actually late teens, I don't remember. But I need to say that she was probably living in servant quarters in a home in China. I say that, because when she was little, during one of these famine and poverty years, the idea is that if you're too poor and you

have a daughter and a son, the daughter has to be sold. And so my mother was sold to a family, and she was raised well, I mean, she was taken care of. But she was sold, and she never, ever saw her family again. I remember when we were all grown up in San Francisco, and she took a trip, I remember, later to China to look for her mother. And she spent a lot of money doing that, trying to get a half-sister or somebody to find out where the gravesite was and where her parents were. She never found it, and she came home, I remember, she was very depressed, and she never did go back again.

01-00:50:52

Kwan: I'm saying this, because this probably built up her character and it's in my imagination. But knowing her, I grew up figuring that my mother had to depend on herself. She was so much younger than my dad, and my dad was so busy trying to make a living for all eight children. Why he had eight, I have no idea. I think it's a male thing, Hey, I can make a lot of kids and I have enough money to take care of all of them, look what I can do or whatever. [laughs] That is also a way of not believing that your children will make it alive anyway, so the more children you have, the more you have them hopefully stay alive and not die out of starvation or whatever or war.

01-00:52:06

When my mother knew that she was going to leave China and Hong Kong, she packed her bags, took my older sister who was seven years old. She was about four months pregnant with my oldest brother, and she boarded the ship and ended up in San Francisco. Spent about a week-and-a-half maybe—I can't remember whether it was four days or more—detained in Angel Island before reuniting with my father. And during that time, she was also interrogated. My seven-year-old sister was probably interrogated. If I can try and imagine what that might be like for a seven-year-old, whether she was separated from her mother for a period of time or whether her mother was with her when she was interrogated, for the first time seeing white men speak different languages and look different and dress different, being in an island where it's cold and windy, being in a large room with so many beds, I wonder what she felt like. The reason why I'm saying this is—maybe later we could talk a little bit about her, but not too much—but she ended up the rest of her life in a mental institution. I spent a short time in Hong Kong talking to my relatives and asking them, "Do you remember my sister? Was she sane, was she normal, did she play with other kids, did she react?" And they all said, "She was fine." So to this day, I have no idea, but there's a lot of medical records that we were able to compile that talks about her life as a tragedy from the medical point of view. So anyway, it's something I don't have a whole lot of information on, but that's basically the background of what happened before I was born.

01-00:54:55

Both my parents went through, and my older sister went through, some scary, I think, moments. The interrogation, I can't remember, it was like under maybe 50 pages long, my father's interrogation was over 150 pages. So it was whether they were convinced that she was who she was, and so that's that

portion. When she ended up at a boat, a ship, and she ended up for weeks—I'm not sure how long it took for her to get to San Francisco. My vision was also very sketchy, but the sense I got from what she said a few times to me was that when she got off the boat, she was met by a missionary. And so this began my future life, because this missionary was a Chinese woman who could talk to her and said, "Do you need any help, do you need—" whatever. And that's how she met this missionary, who was a Presbyterian missionary. And that's a whole new story of how she ended up where she was in Chinatown, my father probably having a place already for her to live, and how she eventually became a Christian, because of the kind of services she received.

01-00:57:21

Tewes: I think that dovetails nicely, Marion, into my next set of questions, which are about the values you learned from your family. And maybe we'll start with religion and what role that played in your young life. What was important for your family to share with you, religion-wise?

01-00:57:40

Kwan: No, my family was not religious, my parents were never. Religion is different from, I think, the Western concept. Sometimes what I understood as religion was not—it's not religion, it's more a practice of Chinese customs. In my household, I never remembered a lot of incense. I remember pictures, but my family never really had a lot of pictures about their relatives in China. We have picture albums, but nothing on the wall or nothing on any mantel—there's no mantels in Chinatown, hardly, to put pictures, so they would be on walls—but I don't remember anything on the walls. I remember a lot of pictures and photo albums, and they're always obscure to me. It's like strangers from 4,000, 6,000 miles away, and I just couldn't relate to them, but I remember those pictures that were very important.

01-00:59:08

And once in a while, there will be incense, and I never know what it's for. I remember when a close relative of my mother passed away, she would cut out black material as armbands and put them on my right shoulder. A band about this wide [estimates with two fingers] and put it on my shoulder, on my upper arm, on my jacket, on my coat, and I would have to wear that for maybe a month. And that's what I understand about death of somebody far away, but that's about it.

01-00:59:57

We all love celebrating holidays, like any other family in the world. I don't call that religion, but I call that a real fun time. We would go to a lot of banquets, and they are Chinese association banquets. And my mother would be so proud, she would say, "Yeah, I got to go early, because I have to help out." And each time we go, it will be like an all-day event. My mother had sewed all the girls' Chinese outfits so that we can wear them for the banquet. And I remember every time before we leave the house, we will all make

comments to each other, parents to children and children to parents, "Oh, you look so beautiful. Oh yeah, and you're so—I mean, it's just so nice, you look so nice." It's almost like every Sunday when you go to church, but after a while, we don't tell each other how pretty we look, but we were decent and we were respectfully dressed. Those were the times I remember the most when it was so special.

01-01:01:28

Kwan: And I remember the banquets we have at these huge restaurants, but the speeches would go on forever and they're all in Chinese, and I got very bored, so I would—they would have these little, red seeds—no, no, I'm sorry, they're black seeds, and they're little seeds. Like you would crack nuts, and then you would eat it. So we would just spend our time cracking nuts and little seeds and taking them out, and they're about this big. [estimates size with two fingers] And eating until they finish their talk and then we could finally eat something, and that was a ritual.

01-01:02:15

So we have a lot of rituals, and that's why I think festivals are so important in China now to this day. It's our way of uniting with each other and with our culture. And they change all the time with generations, but it still goes on, and it's pretty strong even into the fourth, fifth generations. I think it's a way of bringing together our culture, and I'm impressed with how it kept going. And now, I think the New Year parade is the biggest outside of China.

01-01:03:11

Tewes: Do you go back for the Lunar New Year or other festivals?

01-01:03:17

Kwan: Pardon?

01-01:03:18

Tewes: Do you go back to Chinatown for Lunar New Year or other festivals?

01-01:03:20

Kwan: I used to, but Chinese New Year, yeah, I used to. I still do. We often go and meet with each other, all my family. My brothers and sisters are all still living in the Bay Area, we just have not left the Bay Area. We would leave for college or for whatever, but we always returned.

01-01:03:45

And I remember when I went to Chinese school—so when I was little in Chinatown—going back to celebrations, I'm getting to that. After American school—we call that American school—it ends maybe about two or three o'clock, I would walk maybe two or three blocks home, and I would have a snack. And then we will walk another five blocks to my Chinese school, and I would have two hours of Chinese school: reading, writing, speaking, whatever. And my favorite was calligraphy, I love calligraphy. I don't know what I'm writing, but I love what I'm doing. It's just the flow of the brush and

how you have to hold the brush. And my fingers, to this day—I mean, have not held a Chinese brush for ages, years, years and years, maybe twenty, thirty years. But when I hold the brush now, it became like I just did it yesterday, and my muscles are still easy, I just easily—I knew exactly how it goes. I need to go back into calligraphy, but anyway, that was my favorite.

01-01:05:20

Kwan: So one day, I was told by our school principal in Chinese school that our school is going to represent ourselves at the Chinese parade. So I rushed home and told my mom, I said, "Guess what, Mom, we're going to be in the parade." And overnight—she must have slaved for four nights, I swear—she made me the hottest pink, silk, two-piece outfit, there's a Chinese top and trousers. And she must have slaved over that for—I mean, slaved over the sewing machine for four days into midnight, I'm sure, to get me the hottest, brightest, sequined outfit in all of Chinatown, I swear. I mean, you could spot me a mile away, it was so bright. The sequins on the Chinese collar, it was shiny and silver, and then it comes up on the collar and down. She did it on her own in the last minute, probably designed a little—looked like a huge necklace, but it's all sewn in sequins. And I remember it was chartreuse pink, shiny, and I wore that in a float. My sisters and I were sitting on the float, and we were waving to everybody, and we had, I think, flowers that we're supposed to pass out to passersby. And in Chinatown, as I said before, the streets are so narrow that it's easy for the crowd to come up to you, and I would pass out the stems of flowers to all these passersby. And I remember that was why we were in the parade.

01-01:07:31

And then the *San Francisco Chronicle* or some early San Francisco newspaper spotted us another time. I was wearing the same outfit with my two sisters. And I have it, I still have it. It was in the papers, and it was the three of us kneeling and lighting a firecracker. Because it was so symbolic of Chinatown that this photographer and journalist decided to ask us if we could do that, so we said, "Okay." I think we still have it, and I show that once in a while to schools and to communities during my talk. I said, "This is what I was doing in Chinatown when I was living there."

01-01:08:27

And so I had a very rich experience growing up in Chinatown. And it was never a lecture, This is what is like to be Chinese, there was never a lecture. Sometimes somebody, maybe my uncle or—but my parents never did—they would not sit me down and say, "This is Confucianism, this is what we understand," they don't do that. It's like reading the Bible, I never read that. I read Confucianism probably in Chinese school, but I was never given anything to read as something that's serious. I think what they did was they just lived their life, and they showed me what it's like to live a respectful life and to live a philosopher's life. Because to me, growing up in Chinatown is like growing up in Confucianism. And Confucian is not a religion, he was a man. So was Buddha, Buddha was a human being; there were many Buddhas,

there's not just one Buddha. And so late in my life, even after Christianity, which was my mainstay, I've always felt like Buddhism, Confucianism, Presbyterianism, what it all means to me is community, that's what it means. It doesn't mean religion, it never did, and I couldn't get myself into the religion part. I could not figure out the God part, and so I kept all the other parts, but none of those. [laughs] So that's just a summary of where I am.

01-01:10:45
Tewes: Thank you for sharing that.

01-01:10:46
Kwan: I go off in tangents, sorry.

01-01:10:49
Tewes: No, that was all really informative about what structures were in place in your life and which tenets are guiding you. But I do want to get back to this idea that your mother became a Christian, and I know you spent some time with her in Cameron House in Chinatown. And for those who don't know what that is, would you mind explaining what Cameron House was?

01-01:11:12
Kwan: Oh gosh.

01-01:11:16
Tewes: Or at least how you understood it.

01-01:11:21
Kwan: When Chinese families started coming over in the beginning, in the mid-1800s, 1850 on, much later, the late 1850s, there were more and more women coming into Chinatown, having been married. But pretty soon, there was a growing number of prostitution in Chinatown. And so this is just a very general sweep of what I'm saying. And there were also a lot of girls who were forced, tricked into coming to the United States, saying that, "Yeah, someone's going to take care of you, this family's going to take of you, you're going to be so rich and so happy." And you may be ten years old, but you're going to be sent over or whatever age you are, and most of them end up in forced prostitution in Chinatown. It's a very deep and strong organization that developed, and there was a relationship between Chinatown organizations on this human trafficking with the police. The police know when to turn their head somewhere else and ignore it, and there were times when that happens.

01-01:13:18

At that time, slavery was considered illegal, but not prostitution necessarily. The police can look the other way quite often. So there was a very, very strong organization, underground organization that's been happening. There were many churches that also sprang up in Chinatown, and one of them was Presbyterian. And I don't remember the beginnings of it, but I know that it started with—one of the key people was a Scottish Presbyterian woman. And before her was another woman, but it's mostly—I remember Donaldina

Cameron was from Scotland, and she was also an immigrant. I think she was first-generation immigrant from Scotland. She ended up being told by the Presbyterian Church that there's going to be a place that she needs to work in. She was commissioned to go to San Francisco Chinatown and start a church service there.

01-01:14:56

Kwan: She ended up being the right person in the right place, where her character, she just knew that there was too much injustice happening to Chinese girls. She started harboring them against the wishes of Chinatown, the police. She said, "I'm going to do it, it's wrong, there's too much injustice." And things that happened were happening, because it's not just her, it was Chinese girls learning about a place, that there was a safe refuge that they can run away. If they were brave enough to run away, they would, and so they would end up there. And that's how I think Donaldina Cameron got to get more and more involved in harboring these girls. When you think about the history of Chinatown, she was the first outside civil rights woman suffrage worker for Chinatown, and it had to be an outside white woman to do this. And she spent about thirty-five years doing this work in Chinatown. While she was doing it, one of the runaways, I think she was like six, seven years old, a Chinese girl, she was one who was tricked into prostitution or maybe she wasn't. You're either prostitute or you're a servant girl, and I believe—I don't know what she was. I think she was more of a servant girl. But anyway, she was the one who ran away and ended up at Cameron House.

01-01:16:55

And Cameron House, if you look at it, it's a huge, brick building. [It was rebuilt after the 1906 earthquake.] But it's the same sense of this huge fortress can protect you, and it was amazing that this building was this big—and it does feel very protective when you walk in, it feels like a fortress. It wasn't just made out of wood and cardboard, it was really a strong foundation, and so it makes you feel like it's a big place, it's a big castle sort of in Chinatown up in the hill. Just not in the center of Chinatown, but about two blocks away, there's a steep hill, and you had to climb to get there.

01-01:18:03

For me, I remember two Chinese-speaking Chinese girls who were raised in Cameron House, who became part of a very courageous team of three women rescuing girls most of their career life. And once they're in the building, they also develop a relationship, a strong relationship with one or two police officers who were very sympathetic and who were also advocates for what they were doing. So there was a small team of what I call civil rights workers at that time, and my mother knew one of them. I'm sure one of them, one of these Chinese workers were probably at the shipping dock to meet my mother. I don't know who that was, but I'm sure it's one of those two Chinese women.

01-01:19:16

Kwan: And so out of relief and devotion and gratitude to these women, my mother became a Christian, I'm sure. And I knew nothing but going to that place. They have a separate building on Stockton St. two blocks from where I lived, and there was a church there that belonged to Cameron House. They call it the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown, that's what they call it. And it's been renovated now by an architect who was also raised there. The architect did a wonderful job on remodeling that church, and it still stands today. If you go into it, you'll be amazed how great it is.

01-01:20:35

So my life has been there, although I was never baptized. My father never stepped into the church, except maybe once or twice in his life, but my mother was very active. That church became a bilingual church, so there are many services. One would be a Chinese-only service, and the other one would be for the rest of us who are younger generation, so it's almost like a whole congregation of youth. There aren't that many adults there who could speak English. I was the first generation born there, and so my parents wouldn't want to attend service there, because she wouldn't have known English. So if you can imagine so many of us filling the pews up who are all the same age, teenagers in their twenties and thirties who are guiding us, and those who were just there when they were a little older with kids of their own. And so there were young parents, and then there's the rest of us, so we became a very strong congregation of the same age, young people.

01-01:22:04

And the program has a very amazing—it's probably so well-known that eventually city hall learned about us, that our youth program was so strong. It taught us how to be responsible for our community. We were taught leadership skills. We were taught arts and crafts and how to teach. So when I was in high school, I was a team leader for grammar school. I have a club; every Saturday I'm responsible as a high schooler for a club. And my club, maybe sixth graders, for example, and there maybe six of them or six to ten of them, and I'm responsible for them every Saturday morning. And I would be trained as a leader, a club leader. I had to be training along with my other friends my age how to be a team leader, how to sing songs. When you teach somebody how to sing a song, you go this way and you go down, and that's how you do your beat and so forth and so on, and it's just little things. When you get on the bus and you want to go to take your club kids to Golden Gate Park, how do you go and how do you keep them together and how do you keep them safe? And so these were things that we learned, how to be a leader. And I think that was my beginning of community consciousness and being a leader and being responsible. That taught me at an early age that I can make a difference, I'm important, I can be a leader inside of Chinatown—not outside, because outside, they don't really know and nor do teachers care. I never had a mentor teacher, so it's all coming from this church. [See also Julia Flynn Siler's *The White Devil's Daughter*, page 423.]

01-01:24:44

Tewes: Thank you. To what you just said about community consciousness, you had mentioned that you called these people at Cameron House civil rights workers, and I'm curious why you feel that fits for them for the work they were doing.

01-01:25:00

Kwan: Donaldina Cameron, she was there. When she left [or retired], I wasn't even born then. But when I look into the history, I'm thinking of these women—not so much contemporary people my age—but I was thinking of especially those women who rescued and who actually literally knew that they were in danger when they went to rescue these girls. And sometimes knowing that they were in danger, it really amazes me that they continued to do that stubbornly. And that took a lot of commitment and devotion to say that "This is going to be our task."

01-01:26:19

And I thought, That's the way I felt when I went down South, that I knew it was going to be dangerous. When I integrated a restaurant, the feeling I get was, It's my sixth sense now that I've learned how to know what's behind me, what's in front of me, what's beside me. If I hear something or feel something, I turn, because I know that I could be in danger, and how do you get that feeling, where did that come from? And that comes from doing something that you know is important and you're going to take a risk. And that is the kind of feeling I had. And I can't speak for other civil rights workers, but I feel like when we came out of that experience after years of being in the movement, we carry that feeling with us. And so when I meet with other civil rights workers, even to this day, who are veterans, we don't talk about it, but we understand each other. Yeah, it's not something you say, but I just felt like I had somebody on my back watching me, taking care of me all the time, and myself with another person, whether that person's Black or white. You've got to know what situation is dangerous and when it is not. But when you're in a car and you're integrated, you've got to be even more vigilant, because you have nowhere to escape. So it's little things like that that we understand. So when I talk about civil rights workers, I was thinking of those three, sorry.

01-01:28:19

Tewes: I appreciate that, and I appreciate the connections you're making to your later experiences in life, which we'll definitely be spending a lot of time discussing. One quick follow-up with Cameron House: you mentioned some services were in Chinese. Is that Cantonese or—

01-01:28:34

Kwan: Yes, yeah, thank you. Yeah, I mean, a lot has to do with—it's amazing how our world affects us and how differences affect us. Just the other day, three days ago, I was at a gym, and I left the gym, and there were a few Chinese. I'm pretty sure they were Chinese, but sometimes I don't know. We were all walking out together and we stopped outside and we chatted. But usually I say

to them, "Do you speak Chinese?" or, "Do you speak—" and even to this day, because nowadays, you just don't know. And the question you ask is very astute, because a lot of people don't know that times have changed.

01-01:29:36
Kwan: When I was growing up in Chinatown, everybody speaks Cantonese, and you don't even have to ask, "Do you speak Mandarin or Cantonese?" But I would ask when I was growing up, "Do you speak the third dialect or the fourth?" That's what I would say. "I knew it was Cantonese, but I speak the third dialect. Do you speak the third dialect? Oh, if you speak the fourth dialect, I'm going to tease you and you better not tease me back," and so we have this thing going. It doesn't happen now, because you may come across a Chinese who's Korean or who's Vietnamese or who's from Shanghai and not from Guangdong Province. And across the nation in the United States, the going foreign language is Mandarin. It's never Cantonese, because it's too local. But hopefully, they will not give that up, because in San Francisco Bay Area, it's still predominantly Cantonese. If I listen hard enough, I would understand some of the Mandarin, but mostly Cantonese. And I'm still not literate even in Cantonese. So I would try and practice my Cantonese, third dialect, if someone can speak that. So I would ask them, "What language are you in Chinese?" And you're right, I've got to ask, because I don't want to get lost if I put my effort into Cantonese and for five minutes they were saying, "What did you just say?" [laughs] Yeah, there are so many varieties now.

01-01:31:33
Tewes: Yeah, that's a great reminder.

01-01:31:35
Kwan: Yeah.

01-01:31:39
Tewes: Finally, in thinking about the values that you knew growing up, we were—I think this certainly showed up in thinking about the Cameron House and the leadership and the community service you learned there, but did your family ever discuss politics with you?

01-01:31:57
Kwan: Once in a while. I get mixed up with two characters who were very important during the Communist Revolution. Chiang Kai-shek was a soldier, Sun Yat-sen was a diplomat; they both were contending heroes in Chinatown. And I'm not going to go into it, because I don't know enough, but it doesn't matter. I remember my father was talking about it, but not enough where I understood Chinatown politics. And my mother knew nothing and did not—like so many immigrants who did not come into this country positively, with a positive welcome, so many immigrants who are Asians don't know how to fit in and so their life is one of survival like so many immigrants. They're afraid if they say anything for or against China, they would conjure up a lifetime, generations of past where they never experienced democracy. So it's not ever a democratic

question. You have to be careful about who you talk to, who asked you that question. There's going to be a lot of suspicions, there's going to be a lot of fear, and the McCarthy era was still alive and well. My father, being a merchant, was constantly harassed by the immigration authorities. And I don't know if they're FBI or who, but my father has written in his journal a lot of information about this.

01-01:34:46

Kwan: So to answer your question about political, they were more reacting to American politics more than the Chinese politics. My father was harassed, because he wants to come in and out of China so often. Why are you doing this? We're suspicious of you. Are you a communist undercover, or are you a Chinese communist, because we don't want people like you. I don't know if I want to get into this, but he wrote once of this agent coming in and kept questioning the other workers about my father, "Is he always dressed this nice, is he always in a suit?" "Yes, because he's a merchant, he's not a laborer." He says, "Why there are three floors to this store, and why is there a bell on the top floor ringing to the bottom floor, and your father always answers it, why? Is that a code?" This comes up again and again and again, and they're saying, "No, no, it's just that so we don't have to run up and down three flights. We just ring the bell to let the person know the supplies are not here yet or supplies are here," and my dad would ring up. They said, "It's not a code." [laughs] And this came up so often that it's in the journal. And so if you're talking about politics, it's not politics, it's just being harassed about being a communist.

01-01:36:55

But the only times I remember about that, once in a while my dad at home would make a comment about Sun Yat-sen or, yeah, he likes this guy, and he doesn't like so-and-so. And I don't remember who he likes or doesn't like anymore, but that's the extent of it. And he would read the newspaper once in a while, but he wouldn't make comments. It's all in Chinese, and I couldn't read Chinese, I never got to a point where I was literate enough. And my parents never discussed it, and so my exposure was nil practically. The nearest thing I could come to politics was mostly going to these big, beautiful banquets, association banquets, and they would talk in Chinese. And I'm sure it has to do with community needs and donations for the—oh, there was a war effort.

01-01:38:08

Oh, I remember this, the war effort. The war effort has to be World War II and asking for money. And I remember in the parades, in the Chinatown parades, it used to go through, right through Grant Ave., and there was this huge flag that is big. It's not meant to fly on a post, it's meant to spread out like a huge blanket. If you're talking about an extra-large, it's extra, extra, extra-large blanket, and it's a flag, a Chinese flag. And there will be, I don't know, ten people holding all sides of the flag. And what you're supposed to do is you're supposed to throw money onto this blanket from far away. If you're on the top

floor, you can still throw money down. Cash, mostly coins, because most of us can't afford paper money, so we throw down fifty-cent coins—there used to be fifty-cent coins—quarters, pennies. And it would fill up at the end of the parade, and they would collect that money for the war effort. And that's a connection, Chinatown throughout the United States. It used to be a very strong nationalistic feeling about China at that time, and the politics in China is such that with the United States, when China and the United States became allies through the war, that's when the laws against Chinese started softening and softening and eventually became much improved for the Chinese living here. That's politics, that's the only politics that's a strongest connection that all Chinatowns in the United States have with China and the United States. It's because of world politics, not because of Chinatown.

01-01:40:31
Tewes: That's a really interesting point, thank you for that. I'm curious: do you want to continue moving on, or would you like to wrap up for today?

01-01:40:42
Kwan: Yeah, let's wrap up.

01-01:40:46
Tewes: Okay.

01-01:40:46
Kwan: Or what—

01-01:40:47
Tewes: So, Marion, is—

01-01:40:48
Kwan: You could take a break or we can—it's up to you. I have time, but we can wait until Monday. It doesn't matter.

01-01:40:55
Tewes: That's fine. Is there anything you would like to say that I haven't asked you today that you think is really important to know about this portion of your life?

01-01:41:04
Kwan: Hmm, I don't know. It might pop up again. I—

01-01:41:10
Tewes: We have plenty of time, just—

01-01:41:11
Kwan: Yeah, I can talk just a little bit about my family, but that's in thinking of contemporary, not when there were children, I guess. So I can always put that in another time?

01-01:41:39
Tewes: Absolutely, we have plans to talk about that.

01-01:41:42
Kwan: For my childhood, I think the only thing is we were left alone a lot of the times, because my father was working. My mother was also working, but also I think that because of her—this is just my sense of my mother—that she never had a close mother-father relationship herself. And I wonder whether that translated into her later life where she left us alone a lot. But that was okay, too, because we got used to the independence, and I think it enticed me or encouraged me. It did not discourage me, in other words, from being more open-minded, venturing outside of Chinatown, looking at, Why not me, I can do this.

01-01:43:13
Because there's a funny thing about—some time I can explore that with you—the idea of being a minority, both as a female and as a Chinese in America. There's a Chinese saying about, "When you're in crisis, you look at the opportunity, not the danger." Being ignored, I used that opportunity to gather a sense of who I like to be or what it's like outside of my parameter, that I can do that, just that possibility gave me that freedom to venture out. I wonder about that, how I was able to use that the same way my mother probably did when she first came to the United States, What can she do? As a mother of two kids and then eventually eight kids, What can I do to make life interesting for me, but also have meaning? But she didn't lecture and she didn't teach me. I found that out by watching or experiencing or experimenting what I like. And so she did the same, and I think I followed her footsteps. That's just my sense of what our family will be like. I'll talk to you some more about my family another time.

01-01:45:20
Tewes: I appreciate that, I think that's a good self-reflective moment, right?

01-01:45:24
Kwan: Yeah, I do that a lot.

01-01:45:27
Tewes: Well, that's what we're here for. Thank you so much your time today—

01-01:45:30
Kwan: All right.

01-01:45:30
Tewes: —I really appreciate it, Marion.

01-01:45:32
Kwan: Okay, what time—

Interview 2: September 9, 2024

02-00:00:04
Tewes: This is a second interview with Marion Kwan for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on September 9, 2004, and Ms. Kwan joins me in this remote interview from Alameda, California, and I'm in Walnut Creek, California. Thank you, Marion, for another session.

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Kwan: Well, thank you.

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Tewes: When we spoke last time, we really delved into your childhood in San Francisco's Chinatown. And as we move forward, I wanted today to start thinking about your education. Where were you going to school as a young child?

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Kwan: I went to a public school that is maybe three blocks away from home, up the hill. It's in Chinatown, but it's a public school. And it's predominantly, I would say, 99 percent Chinese students, and 100 percent white teachers and white administrators.

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Tewes: What did that feel like, having the teachers be white and the students—

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Kwan: I don't know, I've been there since prekindergarten, I guess they call it. I mean, I've been in the schools for so long that I got used to it and, yeah, I just got used to it. I'm not used to seeing any Asians in authority at all. It was just simply something that I just got used to. I don't remember the language. I'm sure that I started out with my Cantonese. My whole world was Chinese-speaking world, so when I walked into the school, I developed just an assumption that it's going to be a different language. And that's how I probably learned English, not from anyplace else, not from Chinatown.

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Tewes: Yes, I was just going to ask that. Considering you didn't see any Asian Americans in this position of authority, did you have any mentors when you were young?

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Kwan: For? I don't know what you mean by mentors.

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Tewes: I'm thinking: does anyone encourage you or take you under their way and help you move on with your life in other ways?

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Kwan: I've always felt like I was on my own. When I think about that, I think about my siblings, also. There were seven siblings, and I believe that we all just did everything from our own perspective. We just had to learn by ourselves; our parents weren't going to tell us where to go or what to do or how to say things. So no, I don't think there were anyone that stood out at all, not even teachers. I quite often hear about, "Well, my mentor was this teacher and that teacher in this school and that school." I don't believe I really had any.

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Tewes: Thank you for sharing that. Well, considering you didn't have a lot of direction on your next steps in your life, how did you decide that you were going to go to college? You attended City College of San Francisco in 1959 to 1961. Tell me about your decision to attend.

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Kwan: I don't know, this is very interesting, because I like to add in a little bit about how I remember my parents. When I graduated from high school, I remember my parents saying, "Okay, we're going to try and find you a job. Maybe you can work in the bank." I mean, that's really a status in Chinatown, too, they know someone who can get me into an entry position in a bank in Chinatown. Maybe I can do this, maybe I can do that. And I remember saying, "Can I go to college?" I don't know what made me want to say that, but it just felt like, I don't want to do that stuff. And so I just nudged them a little bit, and they're saying, "Well—" they weren't that strict, so they finally relented and said, "Okay, maybe a semester or a year, we'll see, a semester." And then I remember another part of my parents saying, "Maybe you should look into nursing." And while I was in college, they mentioned that, and I said to myself, Why nursing? So, I asked them, because hard sciences were definitely not something that I gravitate towards. I'm really not good at math. Sorry to just break the stereotype, but I am terrible in math, chemistry, I flunked chemistry. "Why do you want me to major a nursing?" And they would say, "You never know, you might bump into a doctor someday, and you're going to be rich and famous."

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And so they were there to protect me, to make sure that they don't have to worry about me when I get to be that age. And they want me married off and so that I'm in a safe position. They don't have to, again, worry about my livelihood, and that's the way they're thinking. I'm the third oldest of eight children, so they have this in mind of, How am I going to make it in this world, assuming that I should not have any goals or dreams, because I'm just a girl and I should be taken care of. And there's a part of me that's saying, "That doesn't fit my personality or my—" I'm sure that I was a very polite, respectful, dutiful, quiet [child], and I was. That's how I saw myself growing up. It was just the way my parents would like me to be. The image they wanted to project from me was what they got. But there was something in me just saying, "I need to get out and I want to learn more about the world."

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Kwan: And I had no idea when I went to college that I got to—my brother was older, and he had a car, and he started driving, once in a while, me around. And I said, "Wow, across the Golden Gate Bridge, there is a place called Sausalito. I never knew that. And it's so close by. It's just a neighborhood of San Francisco, and yet I've never been there, I never crossed the Golden Gate Bridge." And I said to myself, "This is a whole new world to me, and I've been harbored for so long in Chinatown," and I would venture. "I'm familiar with Downtown, Market St., because my mother needs to go down to buy materials for her seamstress work, and I've been around, but just the outskirts, and so it's very different for me." So I needed to explore, and it was just being a normal, young teenager, like anybody else, I just wanted to get out and learn more about the world.

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So I defied my parents, but I was very careful about what I said and [was] respectful. And I'm bringing this up, because later on when I was a counselor for City College and many of my students were Chinese American teenagers, female, I use a lot of my experience to talk to them about how you can still get what you want. "But remember, they're there because they care about you, not because they're forcing something on you for their own sake. They wanted to protect us given the culture we're in and being female." So I felt like I needed to give them wings like I did, gave myself wings.

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Tewes: Yeah, that's a wonderful full circle moment. And certainly, we'll talk more about your career at City College in coming interviews. But because of that, because you spent so much of your life back and forth at that place, I'm wondering: what was City College like in the late fifties and the early sixties?

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Kwan: The word "tutor" does not exist. Years later, I went back to my alma mater, City College of San Francisco, but at that time when I was a student, there was no [academic] counseling. I was there on my own. I was given some ideas of what courses to take, but none of the courses were for bilingual students or students of my background. I struggled throughout the entire student life. Even when I went to get my BA degree, I struggled in my English and could never catch up, because I wasn't taught the right way. And there was no such thing as bilingual education, bilingual or ESL, English as a second language. There was not much any of that I remember, so I was just struggling on my own. I remember trying to read a health book or read a history book or read something in chemistry, whatever it is. I ended up reading the same paragraph for five minutes, I just didn't know what I was reading, that was how difficult it was.

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My favorite course, though, was my first semester there. It was called "Vocabulary 101," and I loved that course. It opened my world to

understanding words and the concepts. because it is so much more complex when you look at a vocabulary that I've never seen. And I said, "I had no idea that that's what it means," and there was this reality out there. I remember one course, I don't know why I took it, but it was a course in philosophy. One summer course I took it, and there was this teacher from Stanford, who was a visiting teacher, and he taught philosophy. And I don't know what got me to taking that course. I took it. Somehow, I went through the semester, and I remember he said to the entire class that "There were two students in the classroom," he said, "who I couldn't decide whether to give one student A minus and the other student A, because I can only give one." And he mentioned my name, and I was so amazed at myself. I said, "I could understand philosophy, and I couldn't hardly open my mouth about English," and so I knew that I was on to something for myself.

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Kwan: But in other words, going back to your original question: who was your mentor? I really don't have any. I have to figure it out myself. And I'm not sure what else to say about my higher education. It's almost like I'm an explorer my whole life. Wherever I go, whether it's academics or life careers, it was just having to walk through barriers and walls to figure out, to peek out, to see what's out there, and what I can do, whether I'd like to do this or like to do that or I don't. And I always tend to gravitate towards majors that are not outlandish or self-expressive, like art or music. Drawing attention to myself, I've never felt like I wanted to do that, and I ended up doing, looking at things that I can study and observe, because that's the way I was raised.

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Tewes: That's a good description of your studies. So you're at City College for a few years. What were your plans for the future after that? What did you decide was going to be the next step?

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Kwan: I think being raised in Chinatown and being raised in the church-related social center that connected me with my community, it may be one of the reasons that I got interested in sociology. And then with my understanding, my interest, or my knack of wanting to learn about philosophers, I married the two concepts of social psychology. I thought it was sociology, because I thought maybe I wanted to be a social worker. And then I realized soon when I got into college that that was not what I really wanted, and so I got the two together. In graduate school, I realize that there is a major that's called social psychology at San Francisco State [University]. This was much later, maybe I'm skipping too far, but those two ideas merged for me, because I loved checking out—

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One of the things I remember when I was in high school, I was thinking to myself, What makes a country interested in war? Why are people so warlike, what makes us warlike? And I noticed that while I was studying this on my

own, there are timetables for when war happens. And one of the things I remember was when a country is doing well and it's getting bored and there's nothing to do, they would go into war. I said, "Whoa, that's kind of interesting concept. You're marrying your mental state to your political state and the feeling of power, the need to be in power." And then I got into white society, European society, Asian society, Black societies throughout the world, and I got to look at things globally. When I was being raised in Chinatown, I did not have a global idea until I walked outside the boundaries of Chinatown and saying, "There's a world out there, so there's got to be some connection between what I like to see the world." I see the world as a tree, myself as a tree as part of the forest, and I need to look at the forest. And I know that I'm part of the forest, but I was never permitted to leave my area of the tree around myself. But I knew there was a forest around me, and I need to explore that.

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Kwan: Being bilingual and bicultural, I've always felt like the two merged a lot for me when I was young, and I've always been interested in planting. It's like what my parents did: they had one foot in China and one foot in America, and I understood that, that there were always going to be a dichotomy in their lives. So I had to figure out where I am in my life. So I'm being very philosophical, because that's who I am.

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Tewes: Thank you. Well, it is interesting to hear about how what you were studying was mirroring what you were seeing in your own life and your personal journey. But how do we get you from San Francisco to Hastings College in Nebraska? You were there on and off between 1963 and 1965, I think. What drew you there?

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Kwan: In Chinatown, I mentioned Cameron House, and it's a United Presbyterian Church in the USA. So it has branches, and it has a headquarters under the National Council of Churches in New York City, so it's nationwide. Chinatown, San Francisco, is pretty well-known within this church, and so you have ongoing outside people coming in and helping out and working in Chinatown. One of them was a choir teacher who spent a number of years in Chinatown at Cameron House, and I was in the choir with her. She mentioned that she graduated from a school in Nebraska. And she was the outside world, she was one of my forest trees. And not knowing anybody else in the world, I said, "I'm going to go there, too." [laughs] And in a roundabout way, anything that has to do with the Presbyterian Church, my parents [were] saying, "Okay, I trust them." "You remember the missionary thing?" "Well, anything has to do [with that], okay." I would get myself in trouble if my parents knew exactly what I was doing. Given that if they had known what would happen to me in the Deep South, they would have said, "You're crazy, you're not going." But of course, going back to being new immigrants, I'm saying, "Yeah, that's part of the church," "Oh okay, you can go." So that's their window of letting

me out, and so that's how I ended up in a Presbyterian college in the middle of nowhere.

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Tewes: What was your first impression of the campus and of Nebraska?

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Kwan: When I was in high school in San Francisco, I can't remember, it was at least thousands of students at my high school in San Francisco. When I went to Hastings College in Nebraska, the entire student population was 500. And so Midwestern town, very conservative, there were probably not more than 5 minorities of the 500; I was one of them. There was one Japanese American; she was the most popular foreign student, so-called "foreign." We're not foreign, she's American-born and I was American-born, but we're foreign. And so she was the one who'd get straight A's, and I'm the one who barely graduated; I was a C student. And we became good friends, though. And there was one foreign student—oh, several—from Africa there for sports. But there was one who was not there for sports, and so I hit it off with him pretty well. We'd talk once in a while with each other, and that's about the extent of our relationship, which is kind of sad. Oh, there was one student from Hong Kong. So there's the three Asians and maybe three students from somewhere in Africa, and I don't remember which country.

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However because it's so that way, so much that way, there was another student that I got very close to, and she was a Fulbright student from Germany. And she and I hit it off pretty well, and we decided that—I mean, in fact, actually, the only thing I do not have in common with her was that she was a straight-A student, and I was not. So let's go back to that again. And so she whizzed by all her classes, and sometimes we would hang out and we'd get bored, and so we both decided to join a sorority, because there's nothing else to do in this Midwestern town. And it wasn't anything exciting about the sorority. To pass our first semester, we had to memorize the alphabet, the Greek alphabet, and that was my way of getting accepted into sorority. We chose the sorority, because it wasn't very serious; we just want to have fun doing something with them. Outside of that, it was pretty boring, and I felt, again, not fitting in, because I couldn't make the grades. I'm not sure if there's other things.

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Tewes: Were you living in the sorority, as well?

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Kwan: Pardon?

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Tewes: Did you live in the sorority?

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Kwan: No. I was a sophomore when I attended, because I went the first year or two at City College of San Francisco. So when I got there, I was not a freshman. And I was late in applying, so there was no room in the dorms, so I ended up in a really nice position, though. There was a professor and his family: his wife and two little boys, not older than eight years old. There's a top floor where they rented to three students, and I was one of them. So I got to live there for a year, and then the next year, I ended up at one of their dorms.

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Tewes: I'm curious: when you're in the dorms, did they have rules for women that were different from men? Curfews or not having other visitors?

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Kwan: I'm sure there were curfews, I just don't remember how strict it was. We were all in the all-girls dorm in those days, and they separated them and there's no such thing as coed dorms. [It was] not until after I left college that they started that. So, we were pretty protected from all kinds of other rules. It was really interesting that when I was back in the dorm the second year, that of all the people that I was put in—there was a foreign student, and she was actually a real foreign student from Cuba. And she and I roomed, and I thought to myself later, I said, "That's interesting that they would put two minorities together, instead of with a white student." Another semester, I was with other white female students, and I remember several times when—I had no idea I was doing this, of course. One of my white roommates would say to me, "You were talking in your sleep last night, and you were talking, I think, in Chinese." And I said, "Oh really?" And the way she told me that was she was sharing, which was really nice, but it was in a way that she said, it was really strange to her, and she wanted to tell me how strange I was. That's how I felt. It wasn't positive or negative, it was neutral, but it felt a little negative to me. And there were times like that that happened, but it wasn't that often. I think I felt okay there, but I didn't feel comfortable, yeah. And I'm sure that the other minority students felt the same way, but we never talked about it.

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Tewes: I know that you were on campus on and off for several years there. Was that part of it, not feeling totally comfortable?

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Kwan: No, it was just the culture, it was just different. I think I would have felt the same if I were not a student there. Yeah, most of the students were from Nebraska and the Midwest, yeah.

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Tewes: So it was more the Nebraskan culture rather than the campus culture?

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Kwan: Yes, that's how I felt.

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Tewes: Okay, and were you still studying sociology at Hastings?

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Kwan: Yeah, I majored in sociology. And one of my teachers finally looked at my transcript and said that "You know, you have enough credits to minor in psychology and philosophy," so I had two minors and a major, but it was all in social sciences. It's interesting. Yeah, it's funny, yeah. So, when I eventually later on in my life decided to go back and get my master's, it made sense to me. In fact, my master's was the most meaningful time for me, because I finally got to do what I liked. And I matured to that point where I knew that that's what my major was, which is a combination major, so yeah.

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Tewes: You said there wasn't a lot to do on campus. Were you involved in any extracurricular activities at the time?

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Kwan: Not really. I'm trying to think about that. There wasn't that much of interest to me. Yeah, I just don't remember a whole lot. I just hung out with my friend from Germany, and she and I just did things. We would walk into town or we would do things, but nothing that stands out. The funny thing about Hastings College is that boring as it may have been, I learned about the Midwest, and that was important to me. I felt like people there were not as progressive, not as up to date.

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There was a kid I encountered, a young—he must have been not more than ten years old or twelve in Nebraska when I was there in town—and he called me a Jap. And so as you know, during [World War II] or when Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and that's old news, right? So anyone Asian, he thinks is a Jap. It's not the best way to introduce yourself to an Asian person. It's like almost like an N-word for a Black person. So things like that. It was just a place for me to understand. And looking back, it was good for me to have had that experience. Because if I had not been in Nebraska, I would not have encountered a professor who talked about the Deep South. And that's how I connected in that class about current events and what's going on, because I was too busy dealing with school to know what was happening around me. And I knew things were happening about [civil rights]. I knew about the March on Washington, I knew about a lot of stuff, but it was all secondhand. It was all hearing somebody talk about it, but I was never there, right? So here was another talk from this professor who [convinced me to go to the South]. So I can get into that later if you want me to, but that's my connection with the South. So it's interesting that I went from Chinatown to Nebraska, and straight from there to Mississippi. That that was my route. But without Nebraska, I would not have gone.

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Tewes: Right, and what a journey. Yes, you brought up some great points that I want to follow up on. But before we move forward, you said you were aware of these larger events. Did you see any student activism happening on campus around civil rights or anything?

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Kwan: None, zero, nil, nothing, as if it never existed, or it didn't exist. And we don't have access to television. I do remember the biggest incident was when John F. Kennedy was shot in Texas. Classes were canceled, and I stayed in the building where the class was canceled, and I sat with many of the students in the lounge where we were glued to the television set. And I remember crying, because I knew enough about Kennedy. At that time, he was my hero, one of my heroes, and so I felt that it had an impact on so many of us. Because I remember sitting in that lounge and watching the television set along with many of the students, and that was my most vivid recollection of an event. But outside of that, there was really not a whole lot of politics happening. It was just a low-key, very academic institution and, yeah, there was nothing political. I was not at UC Berkeley, I was not at San Francisco State creating havoc. That was much later, of course, but no, I was part of the milieu of student life. It was just really very straightforward.

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Tewes: It's interesting to hear that there wasn't a lot of politics on campus, but I'm thinking about you personally. When did you start thinking about politics? You were twenty-one by the time you were there.

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Kwan: Yeah, yeah, right, right. I was twenty-one, actually, when I was in college. Politics is a name I never talked about, it's a word I never used. I don't even understand it in those days. In fact, when I decided to go down to Mississippi, that's my first inkling of, Hey, I'm part of this political upheaval here, nothing more, nothing less. I was not that conscious of it; I don't know what it means to be labeled anything. So it wasn't until I got to Hattiesburg that I knew that it's something bigger than myself. But no, my mind was never triggered that way. I was just doing ordinary, boring stuff like everybody else, and I was just growing up like anybody else, except that I find myself being a minority in whatever I do. I don't know how that happens, but it was subconsciously chosen by me. [laughs] You know, leaving my family. And I attribute that to being not important, being ignored, or being neglected. I found an opportunity to find a way to make life interesting, because I was not given any attention. And I'm sure that my parents were worried about me, because I wasn't married by then. When I came back from college—here's another tidbit. I guess when I went away to college and I came back, I told my parents that I'd like to move out and find my own apartment. They were shocked, "How could you do that?" And my parents really had a hard time. Outside of my sister, who got married already, she was out of the house, I was the second girl in our family

that moved out for no reason except to live by myself. And, "Why do you want to do that?" But anyway, yeah.

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Tewes: That's a good reminder of how different this experience was for you, and you were exploring in your own life, as well.

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Kwan: Yeah.

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Tewes: One last question about the politics of this all. Ninety sixty-four was a big election year. Do you remember if you voted? Were you thinking about party politics at that time?

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Kwan: Oh gosh, I don't know where I was. If I were home, I may have voted.

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Tewes: Well, I don't know, because you were on and off between Hastings and San Francisco.

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Kwan: Yeah, '64, I can't remember. I must have voted, but I don't remember, I'm pretty sure I did.

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Tewes: Were you interested in a particular political party at that point?

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Kwan: I was always, most of the time, Democratic, but sometimes I went Independent. And one time, I remember I turned Libertarian just to do it. I was experimenting with myself, and I did all that. I never went Republican, and I don't know why, but I never did. It wasn't until I went to Mississippi that I turned political. Like you mentioned earlier, that in between the two summers that I was in Mississippi, I also got involved in San Francisco politics, and I can talk about that later.

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Tewes: Yes, I'm very interested in that. But you've mentioned that this professor at Hastings College opened up your eyes about some of the civil rights work in the Deep South. What struck you about that? Why was that interesting for you to hear?

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Kwan: I knew about the Black struggle in the South. And I have always been interested in community and the right of an individual to be independent enough and have the equal opportunity to become whatever he or she wants to be, the freedom to choose, and justice and injustice. And there was something about being a minority myself that clicked about, What is it like being Black?

It must be similar, but probably worse. And later on, of course, I understood the history of—being in social psychology, I learned through my own way of thinking that 500 years ago or so, Native Americans were persecuted and driven away from their homes. And it's permanent, it's become permanent. Over 400 years ago, African Americans and Black Americans were continuously being persecuted for 400 years. A hundred and seventy-five years or so ago, Asian Americans, specifically Chinese Americans, were also persecuted. And I looked at the pattern, but I didn't know that then, when I was in college. I knew that something I felt was very familiar, and I wanted to know what that was about. And I wanted to help, but like many civil rights workers who went down South, I realized that when you go down to help other people, you learn more about yourself than you could give. I mean, it's amazing how much we all learned from that experience when we returned from the South.

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Kwan: I felt like I got attracted to it, because there was something about being American that I want to learn more about. It's the same feeling I had when I left Chinatown and City College, that I wanted to go to Nebraska to see what life is like. And so the same thing happened when this professor told me in class—us in class—he just came back from spring vacation, he wants to share what happened to him. And it was so vivid and so real that I want to be a part of it, because it was firsthand experience. It wasn't somebody who went to the March on Washington and came back as one of thousands of people. He had a personal experience for a whole week or two weeks, and he wanted to share that, and it was so real that I wanted to go. And so that's how it happened, where Karen [Goetsch], my German Fulbright scholar friend, [laughs] and I ended up going. I invited her to live with me for the summer in Chinatown. And we did that, but before we did that, we decided to go down to the South, and we spent the whole summer down there. And so we had a full summer in Hattiesburg and in Chinatown.

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Tewes: Wait, Karen went with you to—

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Kwan: Yes.

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Tewes: Wow, that's unique—

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Kwan: Yes, she and I went down together.

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Tewes: Okay, that just sparks a lot of questions for me. Okay, so you've mentioned the fact that this professor made it so real, and you were really drawn to the idea of helping out here. How did you get connected to the Delta Ministry? Because many people were going South through SNCC [Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee] or CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] or other civil rights organizations. Why this one?

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Kwan: Yeah, I found out that the more I learned—and I met a lot of SNCC and CORE and SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] and COFO [Council of Federated Organizations], all these groups there—I realized that the Delta Ministry—when I joined the Delta Ministry, nobody knew who that was and only a few people [were involved]. And it's because it's the only church-related [group], which included the Presbyterian congregation. And so there are many Christian churches that was under the National Council of Churches that was headquartered in New York City. It started in the 1960s with, I think it's called the Council of Religion and Race, CORR. It's a committee, a very strong committee that was started under the National Council of Churches, where they were so impressed with the letter that Martin Luther King had addressed the churches, being minister himself. And when he was in prison in Birmingham jail, there was letters from Birmingham jail, and it went viral in that time. I guess we don't call it viral, and we're talking about twenty-first century. But at that time, it did go out to the churches, and they were so impressed and felt the message was so urgent. And then the March on Washington. Everything that happened in the early 1960s that they formed this group really quickly and wanted to do something.

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So, the reason why it was not well known was because they can only afford to pay for one site or actually two other sites, but they were smaller sites for me, but they were all in Mississippi together. And so they named it the Delta Ministry, and I was able to go, because, like I said, my parents said, "Oh, it's church-related, it should be all right. Why don't you guys go?" I said, "Mom, it might be a little—it's all Black people and helping Black people. It may be a little dangerous, but I'll be under the church," "Oh okay." So not knowing English, not knowing the culture, and not having anything on Chinese television, they said, "Just go." And so that's how I ended up there.

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And I could have gone without my roommate, my classmate, but she and I had so much fun, we're saying, "Hey, we don't have an agenda, we're free, we just graduated. Let's celebrate, let's go and get ourselves killed." [laughs] Oh, that's a terrible way of saying it, but, "Let's have an adventure." And it's interesting how I look at everybody who's twenty-three years old now—and my children are way beyond that, of course—but I think it's so important for me to talk to young people about your early twenties. It's the time to just walk out of there and know if you're going to be safe or not, relatively, but just live. Live what you believe in and do something for others and make a difference in this world. I didn't know it then. I didn't know that what I was getting myself into, and in my retirement age, I would be talking about this, but it's that important. Because I followed my heart, and I knew what I did was something important for me. I wasn't thinking I was part of history; that wasn't important. I wasn't

thinking of myself as being political, I wasn't thinking about myself as being liberal; I just wanted to be in that, part of the action. And I wanted to know what it was all about, and that's what happened.

02-00:56:32

Tewes: I want to keep talking more about that. I'm also curious about how you think the Delta Ministry compared to these other civil rights groups and the work that they were doing in the South. How did Delta Ministry stand out to you?

02-00:56:50

Kwan: It was different only in that it was a very firm, stable, small, visionary group that did not deter from its purpose. The Delta Ministry was in the heart of, in the center of town; so were all the other important civil rights groups. So next door, across the street, whatever, there's this organization and there's SNCC and there's COFO and SCLC. Everybody was around. I never felt like we were different, but I knew that we were very stable. And the difference was the director that they chose to be director in Hattiesburg—and there were two other directors close by in other towns. The director became a grounded force of civil rights, because he didn't leave Hattiesburg. He was there for five years. He was originally from Minnesota. He had a family: he had a wife who was pregnant and three young sons, not even school age yet. He took them lock, stock, and barrel from Minnesota, found a house in Hattiesburg, and lived there four or five years, about five years.

02-00:59:23

And so he was there to stay, and he was in the community, in the Black community, of course. Of course, he had to venture into the white community in order to know what was going on, and he became a real part of both communities. And he has this knack of not offending a lot of people, even his white enemies. He had a knack of being respected by both communities, and that was his reputation. That doesn't mean that he didn't achieve his goals of standing up for civil rights, and he did a lot of stuff, and he did it with his way, and he was able to do it. When we had meetings at his house, there were threatening calls. His house had been firebombed several times with his kids in it. His oldest son—no, his second son, who went to kindergarten, and was kicked out of kindergarten when they found out his father was a civil rights worker. So he has this badge of honor saying that he was kicked out of kindergarten, and he was homeschooled by his mother. And pretty soon, his youngest brother was born in Hattiesburg. That was the kind of man that this director was. And everybody I met in and out of the Delta Ministry, working with so many other people, I got to still be friends with them to this day. And so, we connect with each other, and we have our meetings, night meetings, and group meeting, community meetings, we're with the other civil rights workers and other organizations, so we worked pretty close together.

02-01:01:45

Tewes: For the record, what was this pastor's name?

02-01:01:47
Kwan: Bob Beech.

02-01:01:49
Tewes: Bob Beech.

02-01:01:50
Kwan: Yeah, B-e-e-c-h.

02-01:01:52
Tewes: Got it.

02-01:01:56
Kwan: Really, I just want to say that when he left, when he and his family left Hattiesburg, when he felt like his services were not as needed there, then he started to move around and ended up back in Minnesota. I was very close to his family and his wife, and we kept communication until many, many years later when he passed away, and I'm still in touch with his family. And so that's the kind of relationship [we had], what he was like.

02-01:02:38
Tewes: Thank you for sharing that.

02-01:02:39
Kwan: Yeah, yeah.

02-01:02:44
Tewes: I'm also curious about this idea that was important to the Delta Ministry: self-determination. Can you explain what that means in context of the civil rights work and why it was important to the Delta Ministry?

02-01:02:59
Kwan: One of the mottos, m-o-t-t-o, that I am currently with the Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, and what we talk about was self-determination. Meaning that when we work together in civil rights, we work from the bottom-up and from the inside-out, not from the top-down, not from the outside-in. So outside-in meaning Northerners like me who goes down South, we don't tell people what to do. They are the experts, we find out what they want, and we learn from them, and we share information. We guide them about what's possible, what our experience is, but they end up making the decision, and that's what I think the importance of democratic rule. If you consider yourself [that] the image you have is you're a second-class citizen or if you're a female and if you are a person of color, you have to fend for yourself choices as much without realizing that you can learn so much from their point of view. What do they want? How do you know that they want trees in their neighborhood? Did you ever ask them? It's just a manner of considering everybody as equals, not exactly the same, but still as equals. We're equal under this flag that we call the US of A. And especially when your freedom was taken away from you for 400 years, you don't keep telling them what to do. So before you express yourself, you figure out what they're all about and what they would

like, and you share information. So that's self-determination, and that's how Bob Beech with the Delta Ministry did it.

02-01:06:09

Kwan: What was very impressive about what I learned about the Delta Ministry and how it came about was that the National Council of Churches and people from there did a lot of homework. They went to these towns in Hattiesburg and elsewhere, McComb, and I don't know if it's Laurel, some other places. They did their homework by—I guess, grassroots organizing is another way. When I say grassroots organizing and self-determination is basically the same. You go in and you investigate and you see what is needed in that community, and you talk to the local leaders and local store owners, what makes them tick. The next step might be going to the key leaders of other civil rights movement people: SCLC, COFO, SNCC. You ask these leaders, "What do you think if the Delta Ministry is part of you guys in Hattiesburg? What does that feel like, what do you think?" And so they did their homework before they decided to situate themselves in certain places, and that's how the Delta Ministry came to be. That is respecting the environment, respecting the climate, respecting the people who are already there, and see whether they think that Delta Ministry is needed or not. That's just one definition that I think is—that's what I learned from watching Bob Beech and watching how meetings are conducted.

02-01:08:31

And when the period came when it was time for Black Power to emerge, I thought that that was a big controversy. It was a big learning curve for the civil rights movement and for the activists there. It was a really important learning curve for all of us. It's like a child growing up, all of us growing up together in this movement, and, Are we ready to stand up and walk instead of crawl? And what does self-determination mean? Well, sometimes we have to stand up and crawl at our own pace, [laughs] and it's just time ready, and so it's up to them.

02-01:09:22

Tewes: I definitely want to talk to you about that shift in the movement towards Black Power. But as we're thinking about this moment, this summer of 1965 was your first summer in Hattiesburg. Did you have any training when you went to Hattiesburg? How did you know what to do?

02-01:09:44

Kwan: Ironically, the National Council of Churches did a lot of early training with freedom workers. I wasn't there. See, I'm a year late, and so I was too busy trying to graduate and trying to get out of the school system, and that was when everything was happening. The National Council of Churches participated in the Freedom Summer and the training in Ohio. I think I heard that they were like 330 men and seminary students who were involved in the training. I missed all that. All I did was a simple thing, I wrote a letter to the Delta Ministry to Bob Beech and said, "Is it possible for us to come? There's two of us. Can we come, and can we spend a summer with you guys and help

out?" And you have to remember that the law was passed already, the Civil Rights Bill was passed the year before, so everything happened the year before, about that time that I went in the latter part of May of '65. So, the law was there, but it has to be challenged. And so that's what happened to me at that time. So in '65 and '66, summers were very meaningful. And of course, early that year of—what was it where the civil rights workers were killed?

02-01:11:47
Tewes: Oh yes, that was—

02-01:11:49
Kwan: Sixty-six? No, '65.

02-01:11:52
Tewes: That was June of 1964.

02-01:11:54
Kwan: Sixty-four, that's right, I missed it by a year. And I'd like to talk about that, also, later. So yeah, I remember I missed it by a year. But it's amazing. I visited the site, and it was just like it just happened. What was the question on? I forgot, what—

02-01:12:23
Tewes: I was curious about training. And you didn't come—

02-01:12:26
Kwan: Oh.

02-01:12:26
Tewes: —you just showed up?

02-01:12:28
Kwan: No training. I integrated by the seat of my pants, it was just crazy. I felt like if I did something unusually crazy, the director would have stopped me. But we did everything, he just let us just do what we wanted, but he knew what we were doing, and we had to tell him everything that we did, and so, yeah.

02-01:13:07
Tewes: Yeah. I'm also curious about travel. What was the experience like traveling from Nebraska to Mississippi?

02-01:13:22
Kwan: You mean the first time?

02-01:13:25
Tewes: Yes.

02-01:13:29
Kwan: So in the last minute, Karen and I, my classmate and I packed our bags, whatever we have, what very little we have, and got on the bus after getting permission to join the Delta Ministry for that summer. I remember vividly one

of the many stops, when we finally crossed the line into the State of Mississippi, we stopped for dinner. And when we got off, I remember walking into this big restaurant, and I noticed immediately that there's a window, a long line of windows cutting the entire restaurant in half, and the other side were Black customers. And where we got in, our bus was full of passengers, so I was one of them. And Karen and I, we entered one entrance, and we stayed on that, our side of the restaurant. And I noticed that for the first time I was in a segregated restaurant, this is what it means. I thought to myself for the first time, Where do I belong? But I had no choice, we were all cornered into this area. So I sat down and Karen and I looked at each other and said, "Wow, [laughs] this is something."

02-01:15:29

Kwan: I just don't remember what I ate, but I remember going to the restroom. And there were two restrooms: one for colored women and one for whites. It says "white" and "colored," that's what it meant—for women, and the same for men. And I noticed that the water fountains, they had to have two of everything. It's like everything in the Deep South were all twin of everything. So they had to have two restrooms for men, two separate restrooms for women, two separate water fountains: one for colored and one for white. And so it would say "white" and it would say "colored." And sometimes, I would play with myself, and I would go to the "white" fountain, and I wasn't thirsty, but I just wanted to drink from the "white" fountain. And then I decided, I'm going to go to the "colored" fountain, and I'll drink there, just to make a statement.

02-01:16:36

I remember the times when we were—when later, we had to take a bus, another bus after—this is another time where I wanted to test waters, talking about integration. And when we were in Hattiesburg, Karen and I would get on the bus to go somewhere, we knew where we were going. As we entered the bus, we had to decide, Do we want to sit in the front or in the back? And that period, it was really, really important what I do. I really feel like I had to make a statement, and so I always go to the back to support the movement, and so Karen and I would always go to the back. If there's no room and there's room in the front, we would still stand in the back. That was our mission. And so it's a way of thinking differently when you're in the South.

02-01:17:45

But the first time, going back to that restaurant, I walked into the "coloreds." And Karen and I, she's white, of course, she looks white, and she and I would go into the "colored," and we were not harassed in any way. Nobody made a fuss about us. It was the time of real true testing. And most of the time, the testing we did, we were left alone, but it was still dangerous, because the idea of Jim Crow continued. And throughout our experiences in Hattiesburg and elsewhere, the establishment did not want to change, they don't want us in there. But we went in, and they gave us hell most of the time, but we were never in enough danger where we had to be carted off to jail. It was pretty

intense, but they try not to break the law. So that was what I experienced for '65 and '66.

02-01:19:07
Tewes: I understand you actually wrote about that experience of integrating that restaurant. Is there anything more you want to say? Do you want to read that that short clip?

02-01:19:17
Kwan: Remember, that was not in the beginning.

02-01:19:22
Tewes: Oh okay.

02-01:19:24
Kwan: So do you want me to just talk about the integration?

02-01:19:27
Tewes: Okay. While we're on the subject of it, it feels like a good spot.

02-01:19:31
Kwan: Okay, I have this—let's see if I can find it. It's called "My Integration Incidences," and one of them was the restaurant called The Inn, and this happened in Laurel, Mississippi. [reads] And so, "Jim [French], Adrienne [Fong], Mr. Jefferson, Bob, Willie [James], Stella, and I went into the restaurant. As suspected, we were stared at. The waitresses were both angry and scared. The one who served us was shaking, her hands were shaking when she was ordering, giving us our drinks. She also gave us the wrong orders on our drinks; she was so nervous. Meanwhile, we were calm and polite. Stella, who was with us, did not even touch her coffee, she also was scared. And I remember being watched, being watchful of everything and ready for anything to happen. I realized my senses were up, and I learned how to become that way everywhere I go." That was just one incident.

02-01:21:02
Before we entered the restaurant, I just want to say that both Jim and I, my other friend, had called the police. We called the police and the FBI for protection in case anything happens, because again, this is a year after the Civil Rights Bill was passed, so it's illegal for them to do anything to us, but we needed their protection anyway. But they came in only five minutes before we left the restaurant, so we were actually never protected, and that's the way they operate. So I hear that another group tested the same place a week ago, and they did okay, and we felt like so did we. So that's just one sense of what it's like to integrate.

02-01:22:01
Tewes: Thank you for sharing that. It gives a good sense of what it felt like being in that moment and testing [the limits of segregation].

02-01:22:10
Kwan: Yeah, I thought reading was more—if I were making into a story, I have too many stories. This one needs to be like, it makes—it's more vivid that way, I hope.

02-01:22:25
Tewes: It's all connected.

02-01:22:26
Kwan: Okay.

02-01:22:27
Tewes: Okay. Well, I'm sorry, I didn't realize that was out of order, but that's fine. I want to back up again. So you've traveled across the country, you're experiencing segregation and asking yourself where you fit in. I'm curious: what were your first impressions of Mississippi?

02-01:22:49
Kwan: Riding into Mississippi, there's a huge sign, and everybody knows it. It is so big, it's right in your face as you go along the highway, and it says, "Welcome to the Magnolia State, Welcome to Mississippi." And it was a bright, colorful, beautiful, gigantic bulletin board. And I thought, How ironic. If this board could talk to me, I would say to this board, "You don't know what you're getting into, because I'm coming for you guys." It was such a different image of what my experience has been. That I find that the entire idea of being a civil rights worker is so tragic to me that I have to be a part of this. And that Magnolia State is for a privileged group of people with a rich history. And there are rich histories for other people, as well, but that's been ignored. And so I felt like I was living in two worlds again. Much as I am a bicultural person, I felt like going through there, it was being bicultural all over again.

02-01:24:42
I was impressed with the locals. And so again, being part of the Delta Ministry was maybe a little different from being with—I don't know, my sense is it's different from being under the direction of other civil rights groups. I was entrenched in the community that might be a little different. When I get up in the morning, if I walk the streets, everybody knows me and I know them, because they see me every day, I have a routine. I would go to their local church, and I would go with Mrs. Sims, whom I lived with. She's an elderly woman, active in her choir. In the summer, it's every day, church is every day. And she loved it, because it's her safe haven. It's like I don't have to introduce myself really, because everybody knows what I do. It's a tight-knit community, and I felt like they were watching my back all the time, because they knew who I was and why I was there.

02-01:26:18
Again, to reciprocate, I was impressed with the fact that I was a stranger, an outsider who looked different. And knowing that they are harboring me meant that their lives are in danger, imminent danger, no fuss about that. I mean, it's

just—and they would still take me in. And I thought, Wow, how could they do that?

02-01:26:58

Kwan: And there was one story I like to tell about I was with Mrs. Sims in her home, and there was a period—maybe it would have been a weekend, because we had time to just sit and chat. One story she said to me was, it's usually so hot in the summer that around 11:00 at night and midnight was the only time she could walk out of her front porch and sit quietly in her comfortable chair on the porch and just enjoy the breeze. And it may have been eighty degrees at midnight at that time. And so one of those nights, she said she was sitting very comfortably and quietly, just enjoying the solitude, and then she heard a car drive by about midnight. And it was the sound of four wheels on gravel driving by really slow, and she started holding her breath, scared to death. She says she was really quiet, she was still as a mouse, because if her chair squeaks, she could be shot at. And she knew immediately it was the Ku Klux Klan driving through. And as the car passed her house and down, she could still hear it going past other houses down to the church, down about a block away. And then before she knew what was happening, there was a cross burning by the church. And so she waited until she could safely get out of her chair and lock her door when she went back to her house. So these were the kind of stories she tells me.

02-01:29:32

During the day, I would walk. I remember one Saturday morning, I was walking somewhere to somebody's house, and there's two elderly men outside of their home sitting. And they were saying, "Hey, hi, Marion," whatever. It was just the drawl, the way they greet me. I just assumed that they're greeting me, because I couldn't understand their accents, it was very hard. And they probably wonder whether my accent was strange, too. So they were greeting me, and finally, I got to figuring on what he was talking about. He says, "Marion, I want you to know that it's nice to see you out here." And then they made an extra comment, a neighborly comment conversation saying if I were to walk into town, I couldn't get in the front door. I had to go to the back to get anything I want, I had to go walk through the back door, and he just wanted to share that with me. And it's just a neighborly kind of community talk, and he says—I sat for a while and says—oh, I know why I went there and sat with them. It was because I was so thirsty, and they have this case of cold drinks. I said, "I'd like to buy one from you," and so we were chatting and having a drink, so that's what happened.

02-01:31:11

But when I went to church with Mrs. Sims, I was with the congregation. And it was always hot and humid, and so they have these [cardboard] fans, these wonderful fans, and it's plentiful in every pew. And so I would fan myself and said, "Oh God, when am I going to cool myself down?" You never do cool yourself down, but you feel better for an instant, right. And I love the way everybody just moves with the music. And the minister would start in a low

tone talking about how great the day is and how we are going to be saved. And then his voice would get louder and louder, and then the congregation would support him by being louder and louder. And this is so unlike Chinatown, right? So if I go to a church in Chinatown, if I say, "Yes, amen, amen, yeah, yeah, yeah, I agree with you," they would look at me and say, "Marion, will you shut up?" But this church, they don't want me to shut up, they want me to yell and scream. And I start yelling, screaming, and I just had so much fun.

02-01:32:52

Kwan: My favorite time was singing the gospel. For some reason, I knew most of the hymns. I don't know why, but I knew most of the hymns, I would sing along. I remember there were maybe a few—I can't remember whether they were freedom songs or not, but many of them were incorporated. Freedom songs have a lot of Negro spirituals in them, and so I went, Oh, I know this one. Oh, I know that one, oh yeah. So I would get into it. Unlike a white congregation, for some reason, I don't know why, but I never felt like the Black churches regarded me as strange. I never felt different from them, I don't know why. It's very interesting that even from the children, there was no regarding me as strange. I felt that from the white community all the time. Not strange in a bad way or a good way, just strange, and that was interesting. And other people commented to me, civil rights workers, they asked me, they said, "You mentioned that they always call you by your first name without a salutation, they never call you Miss Marion or Miss Kwan." And I said, "That's right, I never thought of that." They just say, "Hi, Marion," instead of saying, "Hi, Miss Marion." They never did that, and I never thought it was unusual.

02-01:35:17

Tewes: What do you think about that now?

02-01:35:20

Kwan: Amazing, I find that amazing. And when you asked me what it was like in the Black community, I think I often like to talk to groups about the word "familiar." Being enclosed, being raised in Chinatown with boundaries—and they were mental but also realistic boundaries; otherwise I would be in danger. But they were socially confined, understood boundaries of where Chinatown ends and begins. When you go into the Black district in Hattiesburg, the pavement ends and the dirt road begins. And if I were blind, I'd know exactly how that would feel under my feet. There are boundaries. When I was in the Black community, I felt really safe, like I would feel very safe in Chinatown. I know Uncle So-and-So or Mr. So-and-So, and they would look out for me in Chinatown. The same feeling I got in Mississippi with the Black community. I was part of them, and they would look out for me. And so I was familiar with all that.

02-01:37:29

I was also familiar with the poverty. But Chinatown streets, like I said before, were always tidy, there was no garbage. But it was dirty, because the city and

county didn't bother cleaning our streets. So even though we sweep this, the store owners sweep the front of their streets and it's always tidy, but you can only get so much of the grime out of the alleys and the walls. So, it becomes, after a while, pretty dirty looking, and you see old grime that's been there for maybe 100 years. But it was clean as far as I know. But I remember living there, and I remember rats in and out of my apartment. I remember a lot of stuff that people call poverty and living in low-income housing, but I didn't know that. I knew that I was happy where I was, and I felt protected, and that was home, home was home.

02-01:38:50

Kwan: And so I slipped from one Chinatown to another Chinatown. That's how I feel, that I was familiar with the poverty, I was familiar with the grime, I was familiar with the dirt. I was familiar with people greeting each other and looking after one another. I was familiar with the gossips, "Oh yeah, I remember this woman. Yeah, she was this way and that way. I better not say anything, because I'm not supposed to know that." And so it was kind of like home. Of course, it wasn't home, but I understood when I was with the young girls—and I can talk about that later. Karen and I had this group, and I understood their needing to be free and wanting to know what's out there. They are as intelligent as any human being on the face of this earth, and they have a right to be curious, but they had no right to find out what's out there. So I was able to do that. So that was a difference.

02-01:40:12

Tewes: Thank you. In the time we have left today—this is a great conversation and we're going to continue it over the course of our meetings—but you mentioned the fear of violence. And Mrs. Sims was an example of that, knowing what could happen being so a part of this integrated group. How did you think about the specter of violence and death as you came to work in Mississippi? Were you concerned at all?

02-01:40:52

Kwan: Of course. But there was a sense that I was always going to be okay, because of other civil rights workers with me. If I were to get myself hauled into jail, hopefully I wouldn't be by myself. There's only so much that I can worry about. I was so engaged, actively engaged. There's so much to do that I realized that I started losing weight, I had no time to eat, and I was getting sick a lot. Not so much there, but when I went back home, my body just relaxed and I started getting sick. But I didn't realize how involved we were with so many things, that we had no time to get scared. But of course, we did. We were on our toes all the time.

02-01:42:13

And there were moments when I remember—well, two brief moments. Do you want me to give examples? One was: at nighttime, if you were in an integrated car, no matter what time of day or night it is, you're always vigilant about who's going to be behind you and on the side of you. So one time, we

were driving back from a meeting, and we had to stop right before the railroad tracks, because the train was passing. And as the train was passing, about the same moment, almost the same second, two cars came up beside us. So there were three cars waiting to cross the tracks. And immediately, all of us, without saying anything in my car, realized this could be a trap, and it was terrifying. There's no way we could get out of there being trapped from all sides, and it was brief, it was very brief.

02-01:43:40

Kwan: There was another time when, again, at the end of a meeting, it was—sometimes I don't get home until like 11:00 at night, sometimes later. One of these late meetings, before the meeting was up, there was a phone call, and I was away from—I can't remember where I was, at a small meeting place. And there was a phone call just for me, and Bob Beech, the director, wanted to talk to me in person. So I answered the phone in the middle of this meeting and said, "What's so important that you had to call me?" And he said, "Watch out when you get home, just be careful." And I said, "Thanks a lot, Bob." And I thought to myself, Oh, I got more nervous, I've never been this nervous before, I'm scared. And he said, "Just watch out, just be aware of your surroundings when you get home." And I said, "Okay, is that it?" He said, "Yeah." And he wouldn't have called me unless he knew it was serious.

02-01:44:48

So after the meeting, when I got back, I found myself knocking on the wooden part of the door, the outside door. There are two doors to Mrs. Sims's house, and the front door was over the deck, the front deck, the front porch. It was locked, so I was knocking frantically, more loudly and faster than I find myself doing. And I said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Sims, that I have to wake you up. Can you get here as soon as you can?" So there were times when I felt very vulnerable.

02-01:45:37

There was one unusual, very unusual, brief moment, also, that happened at Bob Beech's living room. We were having a meeting, and in the middle of the meeting, a phone rings, and the phone was in the living room, and so Bob went to answer it. So we had to stop our conversation so that he could answer the phone, and obviously, we were all quiet when he was talking. He didn't say anything. He said, "Hello? Yes, this is Bob," and then for maybe twenty seconds or so, it was all quiet. And then he said, "I doubt it," and then he hung up. And so obviously, we asked him what happened. He said it was a threatening call that his house is going to be firebombed, and he knew that voice. He probably put two and two together, and he was curt, and he was quick, and he just hung up. He wasn't going to let the caller take the best of him, and he knew that it was probably not a big threat. I trusted his instincts. He said, "Oh, it was a bomb threat, it was okay, we're fine," and then we just continued a meeting. I thought, Holy shit, okay.

02-01:47:30
Kwan: Quickly, just if you don't mind. One of those meetings before we went into his house, we also had another—I didn't realize how many of these incidences [there were], but this was really also very different. We were approaching Bob Beech's home one night, and we were at the front lawn or front steps, and a group of people blocked us. They were apparently following us in their car and got to us at the front of the house, and they were about to have a fight with us. And there were maybe five of us, four or five of us, and as many of them. I can't remember whether one had a baseball bat with him or not, I can't remember. But it wasn't enough where I was super scared, but we were not expecting this.

02-01:48:52
And what was again fascinating about what happened after that was one guy in our group stepped forward immediately, put his hand out, and said, "Hi, I'm James. What's your name?" "Well, uh, uh, uh—" "Yes, and I'm James. What's your name? It's nice to meet you." And what pursued from there was we invited them into the living room, and we had a long meeting together. And that's what nonviolence was about, how I was part of that. That sometimes you just don't know until you're confronted that your training and his training, this guy's training—his name was probably not James. [laughs] I can't remember his name. I should have wrote that down on my journal. But that's what we were trained to do, supposedly, to be ready for stuff like that to happen. And of course, I was scared, but I wasn't panicking, because I was with a group of people.

02-01:50:21
Tewes: Wow, Marion, that's really powerful to hear. Oh gosh. Well, we have plenty more to discuss. I want to speak next time about some of the work you were actually doing and how you were organizing folks in the community. But is there anything else you'd like to say before we close out for today?

02-01:50:41
Kwan: No.

02-01:50:42
Tewes: Okay, we covered a lot—

02-01:50:44
Kwan: It's a lot, it's a lot.

02-01:50:44
Tewes: —we covered a lot. Well, thank you so much for your time today, I appreciate it.

02-01:50:48
Kwan: All right, thank you.

Interview 3: September 16, 2024

03-00:00:04
Tewes: This is a third interview with Marion Kwan for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on September 16, 2024. Ms. Kwan joins me in this remote interview from Alameda, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you, Marion, very much for joining again today.

03-00:00:30
Kwan: Thank you, it's nice to be here.

03-00:00:33
Tewes: I want to pick up with our discussions last time. We were speaking about your first summer with the Delta Ministry in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and that was the summer of 1965. And I want to ask you about something that happened very soon after you arrived in Hattiesburg, and that involves a county courthouse incident. Can you tell me more about what that was in May of 1965?

03-00:01:03
Kwan: Actually, it was my very first day on my job—actually, the second day there. But the first day, I walked into the Delta Ministry, and they said that—actually, maybe I should backtrack half a step. I was stopped before I entered the Delta Ministry office. I was outside, and I was warned by the director—that's how he greeted me—he said, "Before you step in here, you need to be aware that you're going to be on the FBI list as soon as you walk in." I hesitated, because that was my introduction to the director, and I said, "Oh my goodness." I thought to myself, Oh. And so I hesitated, and then I just stepped right in, and that was how I was introduced into the movement.

03-00:02:12
They told me when I was there, when I walked in, that one of our people, one of our civil rights workers, freedom fighters, he was arrested while he was walking by himself down a highway. He should not have done that, that's what I was told. You don't do that, because they know immediately who he was, that he was an agitator, an outside Northerner and a troublemaker, and so they put him immediately into jail. And so the point was that the very next day, we need to get him out as soon as possible; otherwise, it would have been very dangerous for him to stay there. So that was my introduction, again, to some of the things that I had to do in the last minute.

03-00:03:09
So, the very next day, there are a number of cars. We tried to get as many of us as possible into the courtroom. My guess is that there must have been about ten of us. We all strode into the courthouse. I saw a long bench, and we all sat at the nearest entry, because it's more convenient, there are so many of us, and we just sat down. And there were other people there, of course, and we were

waiting for the trial to begin. There was a deputy sheriff, who, just before the trial was to start, he came—and apparently, we were sitting in the white section, and so there were Blacks and there were whites, and then there was me. I was towards the end of the row. The deputy sheriff approached each colored—each Black person—at that time, they were called Negroes—and approached each one of them, a Black person, and said, "You have to move." And every one of them said, "No, we're not moving. Why should I? There's a seat here. Why can't I just sit wherever I want to sit?" And so they politely said, "No, I'm not moving." "No, I'm not moving." The next one says, "No, I'm not moving."

03-00:04:53

Kwan: And so by the time he got to me, he froze. And he had this official hat on, and he took it off his forehead, and he started scratching his temple and staring at me, and then he started looking to the back of the courtroom. Apparently, the judge was waiting for the trial to proceed, and he didn't know what to do. He looked back at the judge, and he looked at me, and he looked back at the judge. And he finally walked back to the back of the courtroom, whispered with the judge for maybe half a minute—it seemed like at least half a minute—and then he walked back to the front of the courtroom and announced to the entire courtroom that this case is dismissed. All of us were a little surprised, we did not expect that to happen. So we all politely filed out, waiting for a fellow civil rights worker to emerge from jail. And we were all kind of like, What just happened, what just happened? So that became a very symbolic moment for me, that I did not know that just being there made a difference.

03-00:06:18

I later tried to figure out what happened, and the irony of racism is so unreal that they didn't even know what to do with me, because I just confused everybody. And I thought, Gee, if I could do this in every trial, I could dismiss all these cases. Gee, that's what I should be doing. [laughs] I was just laughing at myself. And we were all mystified; we just didn't expect that to happen. But that was very significant for me, because it taught me that there's a lot of things that we each could do without realizing that we can make a difference. We don't have to make a huge speech to make a difference, that there are many other ways that we can integrate and still come out peacefully.

03-00:07:18

Tewes: Thank you, yeah. I think that's a really interesting story in thinking about: where does an Asian American fit in the Black/white dichotomy of Jim Crow? But I'm also curious: what did that teach you about what you were going to encounter in Mississippi just in your work outside of this?

03-00:07:38

Kwan: I don't think about it. I'm aware, everybody's aware that I look different. People are aware that there's a female and there's a male, we're aware, but we don't make a big thing out of it. We're all in the thick of it together, and we all

do things together equally. We don't have the luxury to think about stuff like that. We know that it can make a difference. One of the things I did not realize, for example, that the Black community I was living in addressed me differently from the whites and Blacks. They addressed me like they would each other. They never used the salutation of "miss" for me or "missus" or whatever. And I wasn't even aware of that, and they probably weren't aware of it. It's really interesting.

03-00:08:43
Tewes: What do you think that meant?

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Kwan: It meant that they saw me as colored, and that was it. I was an outsider; I was a Northerner. I kept asking them, "Can you please repeat what you just said, because I couldn't figure out what you're saying. Your Southern slur is just too much." Because my upbringing speaking Cantonese or the Chinese language, there are really no syllables. It's very short and curt, each word is one syllable or the last word. There's no syllables, really. So if you slur your words and your syllables have three syllables to one word, I will have to say, "Can you please repeat that again and again and again, so I get what you mean or write it out?" We were accepting the differences. They thought it was interesting. I mean, it's not a big deal for us. So there were little differences, but we don't pay that much attention to it.

03-00:10:17
Tewes: Got it. In our last session, we spoke about how you felt about the specter of violence and the potential for violence on this work. But the summer before you came in June 1964, we mentioned the murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. But you actually visited the site of their death. Can you tell me about that?

03-00:10:50
Kwan: So the tragic incident happened a year before. I wasn't there, I was busy trying to graduate or surviving. But when I got there, we took a trip, and I was really surprised. I remember still to this day that I could smell the ashes. Maybe it's because the weather was so hot. They did not change a lot of the scenery, there was no car, I just remember piles and piles of ashes. I remember walking through the rubble. And can I show something? [holds up a box] This is what I got from it. This is an old container that I found, and I put this together. This was a long time ago; I was there a year later [in 1965], as I mentioned. And I tend to show this in classrooms. This is the glass probably from the car and this is the ash. This is a nail, a burnt nail. This is a very famous button of SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] that I decided to put in here to remind myself that this came from SNCC. It's interesting that this is the only relic that I ever had. I decided in the spur of the moment to pick something up and put it in my pocket. And when I was walking through there—in those days, I had contact lenses on, and one fell out, and I couldn't

find it. And I said, "Okay, I'm contributing my contact lens to this rubble, I'm, in turn going to take some souvenirs from it," and that's what happened.

03-00:13:18

Kwan: A lot of my other civil rights workers, who I did not meet until much later—well this happened right after Freedom Summer and after the training that many of the civil rights workers, freedom fighters had training; I did not, I was one of them that did not. But my colleagues, to this day, this is more vivid to them than it might have been for me, because they went through the training, and they heard about their three cohorts that were murdered. And soon after that, they had to go out into the field right after, the same day, they see bodies, they remembered that. I wasn't privy to that. I was privy to a lot of other scary stuff and dangerous stuff, but this was very real for many of us. It just took a lot for the other civil rights workers to carry on their work. They're brand new, just out of training, out of an orientation, and they were spread out throughout Mississippi, so that took a lot of courage for them, and I felt that.

03-00:15:02

Tewes: I appreciate hearing about how that might have impacted civil rights workers in the summer of '64. But what did it mean for you being there at the site of their murder in 1965?

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Kwan: It was as if it happened the other day, I mean, a day before, just everything is so vivid. As I mentioned earlier, I remember smelling the ashes, I remember the heat of the day that I was visiting. It was during the day, and I was with a few of us who were there and walking around the rubble and there's nobody there to stop us. We did what we wanted. We just went, and there was no barriers. We just walked right in and checked the place out, and it was just the feeling of that place that was so memorable. You just can't forget stuff like that.

03-00:16:20

Tewes: Well, thank you for sharing that. I think that's really powerful to hear about. I want to pivot to the work you were actually doing as part of the Delta Ministry, which was community voter registration work. Can you tell me about what that actually entailed? How did you reach the community, how did you get this done?

03-00:16:47

Kwan: The Delta Ministry that I was under gave us a lot of freedom to be creative, but the aim was always grassroots organizing. And that involves voter registration, it involves integrating, testing the waters. This was no longer 1963 or '64; this was 1965. When the Civil Rights Bill passed, it did not mean that all is well. It's like the Revolutionary War: one side won, so everybody should just accept that. Of course, it didn't happen. Slavery continued. To this day, over [400] years of continued [discrimination] against African Americans, so it doesn't stop.

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Kwan: So what we're doing in '65, a year later after the bill was passed, there were a lot of testing the waters, that's what happened to us. We were granted permission—I was granted permission along with my classmate who came with me—Karen's her name—Karen and I canvassed the area and asking if any young girl—we wanted to start a girl's club, a girl's civil rights club. And so we gathered about six, with permission from their families, and we would gather daily and do some activities either in the community or outside, and we did test the waters. We did a lot of voter registration, and we showed the girls, "This is how you do it, and this is the form, this is what it looks like, and they have to sign if they're interested." But we're there just to let them know that that's possible and to leave the forms with them if they are not sure of whether they want to do it or not, and so that's what we did.

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We did a lot of doorknocking, and the girls knew everybody in the neighborhood. We knew those who were not registered, which was a lot. So we had a list, and we went door-to-door. And so it was always the girls and us doing this as a group. And it was in the hot, sweltering sun all the time. It's always hot, we're always sweating. Sometimes, we'll be offered a glass of water from the homes. And once in a while, there would be a signature, but most of the time, we just leave them a piece of paper for them to look at. It's pretty intimidating to many of them, but knowing that we were knocking on the doors, they knew who we were before they went to the door to open it for us, so we were neighbors helping each other.

03-00:20:58

And by that time, the people in the community knew where we lived—it's a tight-knit community, obviously—and so when we were doing it, we were in safe territory. Once in a while, we would venture away to another neighborhood, but we were only going to Black homes, make sure that we were safe in those Black neighborhoods. And then there were other times when we would be doing other things. So after a while, after doing an hour or so of voter registration, we would try and say, "Okay, what are we going to do now? Well, I think we should try and integrate the YWCA, or we should try to integrate blah, blah, blah," or something. And so we will have these planned activities sort of, mostly planned, but they were all having to do with challenging the establishment.

03-00:22:23

Tewes: Marion, I think it's so interesting that part of your work was bringing young women into the movement. Did you see yourself as a mentor?

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Kwan: I saw myself as: this is simple. I think the neighborhood would accept me including girls' activities. It was so much easier to be accepted that way, and I thought it was a much easier way of gathering them together. And I wasn't that conscious of the fact that it was empowering. I knew it was empowering,

but I knew that that was an easier way to accept it. And the danger, I don't know why, but I felt like we could do more if it was all women. And looking back, it was the right decision.

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Kwan: I'd like to address something about that, now that you mentioned the girls thing. Although, I felt like it doesn't matter whether it's boys or girls—I mean, if you're a person of color, you're being treated like a person of color, which is you're not human, you're half human, you don't have the same rights that everybody else does. Given that, what I came away with from that experience much later was how I could identify with them when they were that age, when I was that age. I have a list of their names. Their names: there's Savannah, there's Maddy, there's Alice—oh, I don't know what other names—but Cornelia. Fascinating, interesting, fun names.

03-00:24:58

And when they first met me, probably within the first five minutes—I remember this happened very often, but especially the first time. When we all gathered together, they came up to me and said, "Can you say something in Chinese?" And when I said something in Chinese, they doubled over, and they were laughing so hard. "Say some more," and then I will say some more, and they would laugh some more. And it was at that moment that I realized how sheltered they were, and they were so curious about life outside their world that they were deprived of, that they had no rights, and they were stuck. It's almost like I was in Chinatown; I couldn't get out. However, I could get out, but they couldn't. They would be in imminent danger, for sure, and I would not be that stupid to do that, to cross the line for them. And they were laughing, because they were so curious and they were so happy to hear this sound that's different, and that was so powerful for me.

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Somebody took a picture of me much later in the reunion. We had a reunion [in 1993], and somebody took a photo of me and of a little girl. It's just like thirty years later, there's a reunion, and she must have been not more than ten years old, and she was hugging me. That picture was I was hugging her back, because she didn't know I was leaving, and she didn't want me to leave, because I represent the outside world, and she wanted to be so much a part of it. And she didn't realize I was leaving, and she started crying. Just like being in prison, there's no walls, there's no cells, but there might as well have been; that's how they saw themselves being in Hattiesburg. So I learned a lot from them, and that symbol of being trapped was very real for me.

03-00:28:18

Tewes: Marion, is there something you want to read about—

03-00:28:20

Kwan: Oh.

03-00:28:21
Tewes: —this group?

03-00:28:23
Kwan: Yes, I asked the girls—this is July 20, 1966. I typed this up as verbatim from the girls. I said, "What would be your wish list?" and I'll list a few. "Can there be a typing class? I want to learn how to type." Their schools don't have typewriters, and in those days, it's like today, Can I have a computer, can you teach me how to use the computer? "What part can the youth club play in the movement? Can there be a children's project in Newsom Quarters?" That's where they lived. "Can the youth club go on historic trips around Mississippi and other Southern states?" "Can we help our community by getting petitions signed for paved streets and improvements on digs and upgrading of the low-lying areas such as the flats?" They're talking about their neighborhood. "Can we get more people to integrate more places like the church and the white community center?" because they wanted to play there. "Can we get transportation for places to go?" "Can these questions be enforced?" [laughs]

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That's list that they have. So you get a feeling of the mindset that they're in, that they are enclosed. They just wanted to leave like I wanted to leave Chinatown, but I had to find the right people to get me there. I had to take a bus, and when I leave the confines of Chinatown, I feel safe but unsafe. If I were lost, I wouldn't know how to ask a white person, so it will be really awkward and feeling uneasy for me. For a Black child in her environment, she would have been in grave danger, she may not even return home. I think the young people was what stuck with me, the idea of also being girls stuck with me.

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Tewes: Thank you for sharing that, Marion, that was really powerful.

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Kwan: Yeah.

03-00:31:49
Tewes: As we wrap up our discussion of that first summer in 1965, how would you rate the success of your work that first summer?

03-00:32:09
Kwan: I don't know if I call it success—they're all success for me. There was one Black freedom fighter that once said—he said he's glad that he went back home to the North, that he was still alive, and that was his success, the fact that he came back alive. The experiences that we all have—I think I can speak for a lot of civil rights workers who went down there—that we got more than we asked for. We learned more than we ever gave. I didn't know that at my age as a senior citizen, I would be speaking like this. That when I was there in my twenties, early twenties, I had no idea that this is what I would be doing,

because I learned so much more about freedom, about what the United States is all about.

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Kwan: We claim to be a free and independent democracy, and yet we cannot do what we're supposed to be doing, and giving justice to everyone, and using slavery and using Native Americans in bondage up to this day. And the history of what we have done, we could do better, and so it doesn't end. And what I'm learning from young people is that we need to keep fighting at every generation. Mrs. Coretta Scott King said that "In every generation, we have to find our own way of fighting for it." It's not going to end at the end of a generation, it doesn't work that way.

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And one of the students in sixth grade, I remember her, because she asked a question and she's Asian American, a sixth grader. She raised her hand in one of the classrooms and said, "What are you doing here? Because you're a civil rights worker, but that's in the past. I thought that we already won." A very astute question from a grammar school student. And so it's something that we all need to realize. Even today with the elections happening, I couldn't believe that what transpires is the kind of thinking that we still have in this country that is so undemocratic. How can we slip that through and still be voting? Well, what are we voting for? It was so obvious what we should be voting against. So it amazes me that we need to keep teaching one another and learning about our history and not let that slip by, because it will repeat itself again and again unless we keep working on it. And so I think the future involves more than just the Black and white issue, and it's not just a male issue, it's a woman's issue, and it's not just a straight issue, it's the LGBTQ issue. It's learning to involve how many people there is on this earth. And what I'd like to impart, and the reason why I'm still working hard in my senior years, and my challenge is to say that, to be able to say that. And to be sure that my children and nieces and nephews and grandkids are aware of what the fight is all about. And we have work to do.

03-00:37:08

Tewes: Thank you, Marion. So after your first summer in Hattiesburg in 1965, you returned home to San Francisco. And I'm curious about the work you were doing there that year, before eventually, you returned in the summer of 1966 to Mississippi. How did you feel, I should first ask, when you returned to San Francisco? Where were you at?

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Kwan: Yeah, I don't know what the word for that might be. I felt like I need to tell the world what I experienced as an Asian American, and I didn't know how to do that, except through the church I was in, in Chinatown, Cameron House Presbyterian Church. Of course, they knew that I was down there, and so they asked what happened. And so my friend and I—I mentioned earlier Karen—she and I came to San Francisco. She stayed with me in my home for a while

before she—she's a foreign student from Germany, so she stayed with me in Chinatown for a while, and so we both talked a lot. I was able to give some talks at the church about our experience, and that was helpful for me, because I didn't know how to express my anger. Being Asian American, you don't talk in anger. You don't say, "I just came back from this state in the United States, and I got angry." [laughs] And they say, "What are you angry about? You're supposed to be visiting, you're supposed to be a tourist, you're supposed to—you don't come back angry. What are you doing, what are you talking about?" And so it was very hard for me to talk about what I experienced, so I tried.

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Kwan: And another thing that got me going was I decided I wasn't going to just talk in Chinatown, I needed to express it outside. So not knowing where to go, I ended up being befriended by another [Christian] church near San Francisco State, a Methodist church that was interested and had time to work with me. And so I ended up learning how to organize with other churches. One of the programs that we did with the help of, like I said, with other churches, we were able to set up an event at GLIDE Memorial Church, which is a pretty well-known civil rights church in San Francisco. Did that, did a few things. And among the many things that I've done was I was able to put together a civil rights information [conference] about the Delta Ministry in the City of San Francisco. And [George] Moscone was not a mayor then, he was a congressman. I was really surprised when he showed up at my conference. And also, the director [of the National Council of Churches]. New York City has a National Council of Churches, head of the National Council of Churches, and he also came, he flew over.

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And I was twenty-four, twenty-five then, and I was doing all this out of just sheer interest, I just couldn't stop. I was profoundly changed. I was always—and I still see myself as a very quiet, respectable, Asian girl. What was I doing? What was I doing this for? And I realized that I just needed to tell people about what's been happening down there and what it meant for us as responsible church people. How can we be more involved in the world? And I don't know, I didn't go any further than that, I just wanted outside people to come and talk about what's happening down there officially. They're not going to listen to me. So that's what I did, learning how to galvanize certain officials that will listen to what's happening in those years. There was very little mention of the Delta Ministry and the role of that in the South. The other organizations were also more active, but I just wanted to express or to share what I've learned from my perspective, which is a little different from the other organizations.

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Tewes: And what was the reception to what you were sharing, how did people react?

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Kwan: Well, it got in the papers. The crowd wasn't great, but the conference went by, and it was on television, it was in the news, got into the news. I felt like it was fine, it was what I expected. I didn't expect a huge, huge crowd, but it got into the papers and into the network. And if Congressman George Moscone attended, he must have heard about it, and that was quite an impressive show. I still have somewhere—I couldn't find it right now, but I had a record of all those who attended, and he wrote his name down. So I said, "Oh, I've got to keep that one." As you know, Moscone and Harvey Milk were killed also when they were in city hall, so it was quite an event. All those experiences were all clamped together for me.

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Tewes: That's understandable.

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Kwan: Yeah.

03-00:45:45
Tewes: I'm also curious, Marion, what it was like for you to return to Chinatown after you'd had this experience in a whole different area—

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Kwan: It was—

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Tewes: —and culture.

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Kwan: —blank. I mean, I have a blank slate, because like so many, I'm not the only one. When we returned home in the North, there was hardly anybody we can talk to about it. I think even though they were huge events, it wasn't enough for communities and neighbors to understand. They're not going to come knocking your door, "Tell us some more about what happened," it doesn't work that way. It was very hard to talk about it, because nobody knew how to talk about it on both sides. If you're a veteran of war, World War II or the Korean War or the Vietnam War, and you come in uniform, they're going to ask you, "Wow, what happened?" We don't have those kinds of symbols. We just came home, and we had—I'm sure that we all went through some kind of trauma, but there was no word for it then, so we just kept it quiet. And I did not know until a generation later, that I remember when they asked about the reunion and about my experience, I realized I could talk about it as if it happened yesterday, and so it was traumatic. It must have been traumatic, because I remember stuff. And it's like what you're saying, Amanda, it's like you could still smell it, you could still feel it, you could still remember how it's been done and what that meant for me. I could feel it, I may not articulate it as well, but it's right there in front of us.

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Kwan: So when we have our civil rights reunions, we understood each other, the feeling was there. And when I was down there, I've always felt like someone that was always looking after me, taking care of me. And that's what the community was like in the Black community. They were taking care of me, I didn't have to feel afraid. They knew what they were doing, and they knew where I was. And there was no announcement, there was no internet, nobody had to tell us. I showed up in their church, because that was their livelihood, that was their culture. And as soon as I showed up with Mrs. Sims, who I lived with, they knew all about it. They don't have to ask, and I didn't have to say anything, it's just people understood. And that's how I felt about, when I came back North, that the only group that I felt who could understand me and I could understand them was the civil rights groups. So that's how I felt like, but it's very few and far between.

03-00:49:57

I think what we did for ourselves, which I did for myself, as well, most of us entered up in careers—so you realize that when we went back home or we would either go back home or we would go back to our universities and colleges. So we were still in our twenties, so we still had a choice of careers. I went back, and my careers have always been community oriented. I mean, I had a choice, but I wasn't thinking, Definitely I'm going to go into this, this, or that. No, I just felt drawn towards the social sciences and people oriented. And I was fortunate enough to finally end up with my longest career, which was serving underprivileged, low-income students. And I realized that was what it was all about. It's not the race, it's not working with Blacks, it's not working with Asians, it's not working with Muslims, it's not working with the LGBTQI people, it's not that. It's working for young people who never had the chance for an equal education and for quality education—and neither did I, I was struggling. But I ended up with a job, because of my background, serving low-income students regardless of their race. And I felt like, Wow, what a rewarding experience that I could do that the rest of my life, my career, being able to do that. And so that's what happened, and I felt really lucky.

03-00:52:23

Tewes: I definitely want to talk about your career with City College of San Francisco next time.

03-00:52:27

Kwan: Oh yes. [laughs]

03-00:52:29

Tewes: No, I think that was a wonderful segue thinking about the impact of this first summer even, and I was really struck by you saying, "I was profoundly changed." At what point did you decide you wanted to go back for a second summer?

03-00:52:50

Kwan: [clears throat] Excuse me. The first summer, I was just getting my toes wet, and I was still free, I was still single. I said, "I need to go back, there's something missing, I didn't have enough." I needed to learn more about America, I needed to go back and revisit so that I myself—when I spoke about self-determination, learning about me making my own decisions, being independent, and that's what the civil rights movement taught me; not only for Blacks, but for me, as well.

03-00:53:52

The second summer, there's two words. The first summer for me is of "self-determination." The second time I went back, I think it has something to do with "self-actualization." That it's time for me to go deeper into what freedom means, what being a woman means, what being Asian means, what fighting for somebody means. It means I'm fighting for myself, as well, and I have to learn that, and what better way than to go back? "Mrs. Sims, I'm back again. Guess what, I'm here."

03-00:54:43

And what did it mean for Mrs. Sims to go to church? I've always felt like for me growing up in church was not so much spiritual as it was for me humanity experiencing, working together, being in good relations with each other. I wasn't into the God thing. And so when I went with Mrs. Sims to church, it wasn't the same for her. For her, it was more urgent. I didn't have to survive the way she did, the same way. She needed it desperately, and I learned to respect that the second summer I went back. I saw church differently, I saw it through Mrs. Sim's eyes, and it was different, but it was the same. It was still needing the spiritual enrichment that would feed you every day. And she had to go every day, because that's what her life depends on. And I had the greatest respect for that, finally, understood that her way of survival is her way of surviving. So it's a deeper meaning for me the second time.

03-00:57:04

The way the Delta Ministry conducted itself and the way it taught about self-determination, and other people have a right to do it their way, it doesn't have to be my way, and they have to find their own way. And so I knew that in 1966, the process had to change for it to grow, and so there was a tension about Black Power. So it took for me a second summer for me to realize how important it is to go from being in the South to forgetting about the South, forget about the lines, the Mason-Dixon line, forget about that, because all of America needs to change.

03-00:58:15

And so from Black Power, we benefitted. I benefitted by having Yellow Power, Red Power, although it's all a kind of mix and match of words. But I felt like we were going to the self-actualization model for me to go deeper, that we need to find our own identity. And after that for me, personally for me, it's time also now to take another step and to be more inclusive. We call it

allyship, we call it being inclusive instead of exclusive. We don't have to lose our identity when we include other people into our work, because, in fact, it speeds up the work. It speeds up being inclusive, multicultural. It doesn't mean that we're going to lose ourselves and disappear. In fact, we're enriching ourselves even more by including other people. And we all know what blended families are like, interracial marriages, integrating schools, we all know that. That we can be stronger, because we don't need to look backwards, that we can blend everything together, and it's okay, we're still going to be okay. And I'm just hoping that that's the next step.

03-01:00:14

Kwan: So that's what I'm learning the second year. That's why I went back. And then when I came back home after the second year, I felt like—and people were leaving, civil rights groups were leaving, the Delta Ministry left Hattiesburg and disbanded. And it was supposed to disband, we're not supposed to be there forever. I'm not supposed to be back the third year. I think that my steps of my own processing was—I tend to see this as the years go by—I realized that when I first went to Hattiesburg, it was because of race. And then I realized the second year, I said, "No, it has nothing to do with race, but it has to do with race. But let me include class, classism, the economy, War on Poverty programs, Head Start, Freedom Schools, it's equal opportunity." So I realized I learned about class the second year. And then when I went back home, I realized I stood up. I was standing up for my moral code that I believed that what I did was right, and I'm learning right from wrong, justice and injustice, discrimination, justice for all. I learned about the Constitution.

03-01:02:00

And so now my fourth word that I'm beginning to develop for myself—I'm growing, too—is "responsibility," that I have to be involved. My responsibility is to talk about the movement. That it's still alive, and it's changing, but it's still alive, and I feel responsible. I'm not going to sit on a rocking chair and say, "I'm a grandma now. No, I can't do that anymore." I can't do that. I have a lot of things to do, and I think we all do regardless. And so I don't know what my next word is going to be, but at least I found four words that meant something to me.

03-01:02:53

Tewes: Thank you, I really appreciate hearing you make meaning about those summers and the work you're doing today. I do want to mention, though, for your second summer in Hattiesburg, you actually recruited people from Cameron House to come with you. Can you tell me what that looked like? Who came with you, and why they were interested?

03-01:03:16

Kwan: Well, going back to what I was saying when I came back the first summer, I spoke a lot about my experience, and I told people that "I'm going back. Anyone want to join me, and we'll see if they still want us?" because that was a time when they weren't sure they wanted [outside volunteers]. That was one

of those growing pains that the South was going through, and they weren't sure whether they wanted, first of all, me and two other people. What am I doing? And I have a feeling they decided to push for me, the director, because I was Asian. I have a feeling that that was the reason. And I'm glad he offered again to take me back.

03-01:04:09
Kwan: So there was another Chinese American person from the church, Adrienne Fong is her name, and then there's another white guy who was part of our church, Jim French. So Jim and Adrienne decided they want to join me, and so I said, "Okay, let me find out what's going to happen, whether the three of us can go." And it ended up that they were going to keep me in Hattiesburg the second summer, and put Adrienne and Jim into a nearby town where they also have offices, so that they can do their work there, and I'll do my work here. So it turned out okay. The entire [Chinatown] church, they started donating clothes. And it was really funny, because I was saying, "Okay, how about a box, one box, two boxes? Okay, there's three of us going, but how are we're going to do it? We can't—" we were going to go by bus, and then it turned out that there are so many boxes that we had to take a train. [laughs] So we took a train trip. And the train, in order to get down South—it was really funny. I remember I looked at the itinerary, and I said, "Oh, I got to go all the way up to Utah and down before we go down." I said, "Oh my gosh, this is going to be a long trip." And it was a long trip in order to carry out that load of clothes down there. And so that's what happened. [Jim and Adrienne also] did community work, and we would meet up for meetings, and we would meet up for that long, famous march: March Against Fear, James Meredith March. And so yeah, it turned out okay, but that was part of that second-year experience.

03-01:06:47
Tewes: You mentioned the March Against Fear. What do you remember about that particular event?

03-01:06:53
Kwan: Jeez, do I have notes on that?

03-01:06:58
Tewes: It's okay if you don't remember.

03-01:06:59
Kwan: It was very unusual. I don't know if you know the history, just a brief history: James Meredith was a very serious student who—to me, I don't know him personally, I never met him, but from what I read that he was a very strong activist, but he worked alone. And he was wanting to integrate the University of Mississippi; wasn't able to. I believe it was U of M. And he said he's going to do it alone, but if other people want to join him, he just wanted it to be Black males. I mean, he was very specific, and he said he's going to do it, and he's very adamant about doing it. He's a very serious student who wants to

believe that he can integrate, he has the right to integrate, and he did amazing stuff.

03-01:08:20

Kwan: But for that March, he was shot three times, and it galvanized the rest of us. That's where the Deacons of Defense [and Justice] cropped up from the churches, and other civil rights groups started trying to support him, and he was hospitalized. When he started the march by himself—I'm just doing it in a very skeleton way, I don't remember all the details. He was hospitalized for the longest time, but the march was so long, so he ended up being able to get out eventually from weeks in the hospital, and he was able to join finally. Dr. King was in the march. Towards the end, James Meredith joined him.

03-01:09:37

I mean, it was amazing. That march, to me, was more important than the March on Washington [for Jobs and Freedom], frankly, because of the history. It was probably the biggest Southern Black-participated march in history, I think. And to me, it's personally the most important, because I could identify—it's more identity with that march. The March on Washington, to me, is worldwide. It's Washington, DC, it's involving everybody in the world to congregate. This one is more specific, and so I felt like it's more personal for me.

03-01:10:40

So I remember little experiences, it was the little things. The little things meaning that I ended up—at the beginning of one of these marches, I was in the middle of—the march was so long. It started from Memphis, Tennessee, ended up in Jackson, Mississippi, so it's hundreds and hundreds of miles. So during that part where I was able to get in—before then, I was waiting for a Black church group to help them get ready. I remember waiting in their area, and it was a housing community where there's nothing but dirt and broken glass. This woman showed up for the march, and she had her Sunday best on. She had her heels, and she was going to march in the hot sun on the highway for I don't know how long, and so I politely asked her, "Do you happen to have some sneakers just in case?" And I realized also that this was so important to her that she would put on her Sunday best for this march. That was how important it was for a local Black person, and that's one I remember.

03-01:12:27

And another thing I remember was I was walking and walking in the hot sun, and I was saying to myself—once in a while I said, "Oh, I just need a drink of water." And then there would be a brave family with a table, [a white family with] a small table in front of them, a fold-up table probably, I think it's like a card table, and they would have cups of water. And that was very brave, very brave for them to do that. We take it for granted nowadays, we have bottled water and we just pass it on to each other. If you were to do that and have a station there, a table, you're a freedom fighter. You're a family and you're a freedom fighter. You better watch out, you're going to be in danger during or

after, get shot. And so I remember that, and I remember not getting a cup of water, and I said, "Why am I doing that?" Because I was trying to be brave, and I said, "I can do it, I can do it, I don't need the water, I don't need the water," and I didn't drink. I wish I did, but I didn't. It's one of the few things that I remember.

03-01:14:10

Kwan: Those are the two things that I remember the most about—oh no, no, there's a third thing. During the march, I would hear a Black person pointing at me. We were all walking, and a Black person was—a few times this happened. This one Black person was pointing with his arms straight out and pointing at me. He was very excited, he said, "A Chinese, that's a Chinese." And I thought, How does he know I'm Chinese? I could be Korean or Japanese or something. I realized much later that the Chinese did settle and are still settled in the South. The plantation owners and workers knew that when the emancipation came and a lot of African American slaves left the plantation, they needed someone to replace them. And they found that the Chinese were used to the hot, humid weather and working out in the fields, in the rice fields and so forth in China, and they were acclimated to that kind of weather, and so they were willing to work. So that's what happened. That's some of the history. The Black marchers could only say, "Chinese, this must be Chinese." So I thought that was interesting. They all took pictures of me. And then the unions were in the march, and they started taking pictures of me. And so I remember that part, that was interesting.

03-01:16:21

Tewes: How did that make you feel to be the—

03-01:16:24

Kwan: Strange, strange. I mean, I said, "Oh." I felt a little surprised, but I felt like these are marchers, we're all together, so I shouldn't feel awkward. So this is good, I said, "Okay, this is all good. I'm with people of the same mind, so it's okay." Yeah, but that was a surprise, yeah. And I'm glad, I'm glad that they saw me, that that was the feeling. It's like being at the courthouse. I was surprised, but I was glad that I could make a difference just by doing nothing. That's pretty good.

03-01:17:20

Tewes: Your presence was important.

03-01:17:21

Kwan: Yeah, right.

03-01:17:25

Tewes: Just wrapping up the Delta Ministry, I want to reflect on your time with the organization. And one question I have for you is: did you feel like you had any mentors in the Delta Ministry? And if so, who?

03-01:17:49
Kwan: It was the director and his family, the director and his wife.

03-01:17:55
Tewes: Bob Beech.

03-01:17:55
Kwan: Bob Beech and Alice Beech, they impressed me so much. Their house has been firebombed. But when I was at the first summer, their youngest child was born in Hattiesburg amid all of this. They were living in a home that they rented, I'm sure. So they were four boys, and we had meetings at their house quite often, so I got to meet the family and the kids. There were times when Bob Beech and Alice had to leave for whatever reason for a few days and they were looking for babysitters, and then sometimes I'm one of them. So that was the kind of relationship I had with them and they with us.

03-01:19:33
I was able to observe the things that they do and how they approach the community people, how they run meetings. Mostly how they regarded me as one of the civil rights workers, and trusted me and Karen in what we want to do. And that was his way of showing self-determination: what do you want to do, what do you do best, what are you most comfortable [doing], and so forth. If he approved, that meant that he knew that we could do it. If we want to integrate a swimming pool, he was not there on our planning, but he knew what we were going to do. Finally, he came in and said, "What are you guys going to do, how are you going to do it, and where are you going to do it and when?" And then he left us alone. It wasn't until we integrated the pool and afterwards that we were safe, we didn't know that he was in the audience, he was in the [crowd]. He was sitting there in case anything happens, but he didn't tell us that. I kept hearing it from a lot of people, that the reputation of the Delta Ministry, because of the director, has been that even the white segregationists respected him. That meant a lot that he was respected on both sides. The Blacks and the white community respected him, and I think it's the way he carries himself, I think it's the way—and I don't know if I said this, mentioned this, that one of the meetings in his house—did I tell you about that? That there was a meeting, and there was a phone call in the middle of the meeting?

03-01:22:05
Tewes: Yes, and—

03-01:22:06
Kwan: Okay—

03-01:22:06
Tewes: —he was—

03-01:22:07
Kwan: Yeah, it's the way he handled it that shocked me. There was no emotion or fear when he answered the phone. He didn't say a whole lot, he just listened,

and then he said, "I doubt it," and then he hung up. And I thought, What the heck? And then when he explained to us after when we were asking him, "What happened, what was that all about?" he was very straightforward, and he wasn't upset. I'm sure that he's very cognizant of what he did, and he wasn't upset, and he knew the territory he was in, he knew what was happening. He had the sixth sense of how to handle stuff. Knowing that his house was firebombed a few times when his infant son was just born, and they had to leave the house for a few days.

03-01:23:12

Kwan: And I'm still in touch with one of his sons. Bob Beech has since passed on, but one of his sons is still in touch with me. I said, "What was your life like there?" And he did write me, and he did say that he remembered he was kicked out of kindergarten. And I said, "Oh boy, you were a bad boy." And he said, "Yeah," because when they found out that his father was a civil rights director of the Delta Ministry, he got kicked out. They got kicked out of churches, so they had no church to go to except Black churches. And of course, they would go there once in a while. He himself was a minister, and so he could do a lot of things but it wasn't his thing at that time. So he was a lot of things to a lot of people, and I was watching how he survived. How could he do that, bring his whole family in jeopardy? But he did it, and his son did say to me that he remembered those days as amazing, how many kinds of diverse people in his life that he grew up with. All these people coming in and out of this house and his life, and he said it was a rich experience for him. I know I just couldn't do it. I don't know of people doing that, an outsider doing that, a white person doing that.

03-01:25:35

Tewes: Well, it sounds like it was very impactful for you.

03-01:25:37

Kwan: Yes, yes, I really felt like he did it in a quiet way. And I happen to be a quiet person, I always see myself as a quiet persona, so it makes me think about, I can be a leader in different ways. And I can never feel comfortable being in front of an audience; and now I am, but I still prefer one-on-one. So he showed me that you can do that. I'm sure that he was able to do a lot of things.

03-01:26:34

We went back on the thirtieth anniversary—I mentioned that earlier—and he organized that. I talked to him about it, and I said, "I would go at this time if you do it this way and do it that time, because I want to bring my own family with me to this reunion." And my kids were in grammar school, they were in grade school, and I said, "I'm going to see if I can get permission to take them out of school for two weeks." The principal told me that so long as I was able to get them to do their homework while we were traveling, and they submit their homework at the end of two weeks, it's okay, so we did that. And so they had the experience of being at the reunion, my husband and my two kids. So

we drove all the way to Mississippi from the East Bay. I wanted them to have that experience.

03-01:27:55
Tewes: What was that like for you, Marion?

03-01:27:57
Kwan: Yeah, that was part of it.

03-01:27:58
Tewes: Yeah, as a mother—

03-01:28:03
Kwan: I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you, I think you're breaking up. Somehow, we're breaking up.

03-01:28:10
Tewes: Okay, thank you.

03-01:28:14
Kwan: Ah, okay.

03-01:28:17
Tewes: [break in recording] Okay, we are back from a break, sorry about that, Marion. Thank you so much for sharing about taking your kids to the thirtieth anniversary, and that sounds like it was a really important thing for you to do. I have a few more questions about wrapping up Delta Ministry. One is: we spoke about what it was like for you being a Chinese American person doing this civil rights work in the South. I'm curious what you saw for the role of women in the civil rights movement while you were doing this work.

03-01:28:55
Kwan: I'm not aware of that, so it's very hard for me to say, per se, exactly. I'm not sure how to respond to that. I don't recall anything specific. I only remember that I was there, because there's so much to learn and to process. I also remember that I had a lot of choices to what I can do, and I think it's the leadership of Bob Beech that permitted that to happen. I don't think he would have said, "You're a woman and you can only do this or do that," or, "Why don't you do that?" He didn't do that. He said, "What do you want to do? The sky's the limit."

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Although I did feel that in his household, Alice Beech did the mother thing, and she made sure that there are meals, and she's the one who cooks, and I'm the one who helps in the kitchen. I remember those roles, that we had our roles. And I'm sure that that's true at that time, too. The feminist idea did not really surface for a while, if you remember. So again, giving credit to the civil rights movement, without the civil rights movement, the Black Power thing and the women's suffrage did not resurface again until then. The feminist

movement was really important when it came out the same time or soon after the civil rights movement, so I think it helped.

03-01:31:49

Kwan: But at that time, I do remember we were into the role of typing a lot, office work, making meals, stuff like that. Although women were driving, we were driving cars—and I wasn't driving, but I remember women were driving as much as men were—I also hear many stories from women civil rights workers about being subjected to women's roles, mostly office work. I didn't have any of that. We didn't have a big office, and I didn't have to do any of that stuff. So I wasn't relegated to anything that I remember that was specifically geared for women. In fact, I did the opposite. I started a girl's club, and so I was given that opportunity, and it wasn't any male persons. "Yeah, you guys, you girls do a girls group." No, I wasn't told to do that, and so, in a way, it was good that the girls had that experience meeting me and meeting Karen and having that experience for themselves, more the idea of wanting—

03-01:33:46

Reading off their wish list is very revealing for me, because they were saying, "How can we do more civil rights work, how can we be more involved in the movement?" If nothing else, I thought that we did a good job with them, saying that they can do that. And, oh, I remember, there was one. I don't know why it's not on this list, but I remember one of the list or questions they wanted to asked Bob Beech was something about, "Is it okay for a fourteen-year-old to have a boyfriend," stuff like that. That was so beautiful. I mean, it was like, Wow, they were really out there, just being who they are, being normal kids, asking such personal questions that I knew that we were really giving each other—I was giving them, they were giving me—normal human interactions. That would not have happened if we didn't have that group together. So their first exposure to a real human interaction that they could get to a point that they can ask that question. So I thought that it's the human experience that we are craving for.

03-01:35:46

Tewes: Marion, something we talked about when we were planning these interviews was the fact that not many people know about the Delta Ministry. It's not the most famous of the civil rights workers' groups that went to Mississippi. And I'm curious how you felt about that when you returned home, and also now that this is not a well-known organization.

03-01:36:10

Kwan: It's not important. I could have been with SNCC, and I could still say the same thing, or CORE or COFO. Our offices were in the same building or they're right next door or ten feet away across the street. We were all so much a part of this whole movement that I don't remember an incident where we were that opposed to each other's philosophy that we couldn't work together, so I wasn't aware of it so much. When I talk about it, I was—

03-01:36:59

Kwan: I don't know, I don't know if this is the right time to say. I forgot to say that one of the struggles of the Delta Ministry was—the only worry that I caught from Bob Beech was when he's busy doing something, he's always writing or typing a letter about getting more funds. He was dirt poor, the organization was probably back to zero all the time, and I'm not sure how he survived outside of just keep asking for donations. And one of the histories, also, of the Delta Ministry—it's a new organization, obviously, so you have to write a lot of introductory letters. And also, the tenor of that time was the white churches were not ready for the Delta Ministry in Hattiesburg. They did not want the Delta Ministry there. The white churches didn't want to get involved in civil rights. They were saying that they were willing to get into charity work, they were willing to donate clothes, they were willing to feed the poor, if possible, if that comes to what they need to do, but they would not do civil rights work. And so because of the lack of support—monetary support, as well—the Delta Ministry had to rely on something else.

03-01:38:56

So it was initially—and it was still—under the auspices of the National Council of Churches headquarters in New York City. But they still could not raise enough funds for especially the latter part of the survival of the Delta Ministry. The funds were dwindling so fast that finally, from what I read, the bulk of the funds had to come from the World Council of Churches, not the national. The World Council of Churches reached out to all the Third World countries in the world. They finally had to reverse one important project, which was the Delta Ministry in Mississippi, USA. They turned themselves around and funded something in the United States instead of the world, and how ironic that the United States have to help each other out. There's a foreign country in the United States called Mississippi, a town called Hattiesburg that is needing desperately to stay afloat, to keep its work going, and they have to fund them. And so that's where, at the end, the bulk of the funding came from. So that's part of the struggle of the Delta Ministry.

03-01:40:46

But philosophically, I heard that it was one of the strongest. In the end, it became one of the strongest, highest consistent workers in that organization compared to other organizations. For a short period of time while it was active, I heard that the organization was really well-run and operated. And it was the only one. I mean, they can't afford any more, it was just one. That's why people don't hear about it, it's just one little group with one director, no other staff there that I can see. He runs an office, and in that big office, there are some beds there for civil rights workers, and mostly males who needed a place to stay. And the female like me and Karen, we were farmed out to people's homes, so that's how they operated it.

03-01:42:06

Tewes: That makes a whole lot of sense.

03-01:42:08
Kwan: Yeah, yeah, I'm not sure what the number is. I think from when I was there, there were more male workers, volunteers than female.

03-01:42:24
Tewes: Oh.

03-01:42:24
Kwan: But I may be wrong.

03-01:42:26
Tewes: Okay. No, that's just interesting to remember. Well, Marion, as we come to the end of our time today and our end of our discussion about Delta Ministry, I'm curious: is there anything else you'd like to say about this particular moment in your life?

03-01:42:46
Kwan: No, I guess we're due for another one? I guess.

03-01:42:50
Tewes: Yeah, we could talk about that in a moment.

03-01:42:52
Kwan: Thank you.

03-01:42:53
Tewes: Thank you, I think this was a great conversation about this topic.

03-01:42:56
Kwan: Yeah.

Interview 4: September 23, 2024

04-00:00:04
Tewes: This is a fourth interview with Marion Kwan for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on September 23, 2024. Ms. Kwan joins me in this remote interview from Alameda, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you, Marion, for joining for a final session.

04-00:00:30
Kwan: You're welcome.

04-00:00:32
Tewes: When we left off last time, we were speaking about returning from your final year with the Delta Ministry in the summer of 1966 and returning back to San Francisco. And from there, you went on to have a really interesting work history that I wanted to just note a little bit for us here. One is that you were a preschool teacher with the San Francisco Unified School District from 1966 to 1989 in Chinatown. Is there anything you want to say about the work that you did those few years?

04-00:01:06
Kwan: I was offered that job, and I grabbed it. It was really important that I started, for some reason—I was glad that I started with it soon after my civil rights experience, because in a way, it's a gradual, natural way of getting to the rest of the country that was interested. And it came out of—I think the idea was Freedom Schools in the South, and then it spread to a wonderful idea of Head Start Program, antipoverty programs throughout the country. And that's how I got back into Chinatown and doing that kind of work. It was very gratifying being able to work with immigrant children and their families. And so yeah, it was a prekindergarten program, three- and four-year-olds, and they're from Chinatown, they're all immigrants basically. I learned about child development, I learned about the development of young people especially, specifically in Chinatown. I really gained a lot of experience with that. Because I grew up there, of course, I went to the same school, and I returned to my roots, and that was really significant for me.

04-00:02:56
Tewes: These students, you said they were immigrants. Were they speaking Cantonese, as well, or are they starting to come—

04-00:03:03
Kwan: Yeah, they're all basically Cantonese speaking.

04-00:03:10
Tewes: And then you took up an interesting position with the International Rescue Committee in Hong Kong, 1969 to 1970.

04-00:03:19
Kwan: Mm-hmm.

04-00:03:19
Tewes: Can you tell me about that experience or that decision, even, of moving to Hong Kong?

04-00:03:25
Kwan: I can't even remember the organization. But a friend of mine from San Francisco—from Cameron House, actually—she and I joined a study group of some kind, and that's how we got in. It was more of a structured, organized summer program for, I think, college agers or graduates. And so we just joined them to learn more about what is the culture there. So it was, again, a nice switch for me that's all related to culture and race, and I felt like I'm drawn to that kind of experience. So that was a summer program. It was really more of a touristy study kind of program, but then, of course, I've got relatives there. My idea was once the program has ended, I was going to stay behind, and everybody I knew from that project left, and I stayed. I got in touch with relatives of mine, cousins and aunties, and I stayed with them. I lived with them in Hong Kong and got to know the inner culture of families some more.

04-00:05:18
And meanwhile, I also found myself a job with the International Rescue Committee. And the reason why that was also significant was I didn't think that they were going to hire me, because obviously, my Cantonese was very limited. Even though that was my first language, I was born in the United States, so gradually my Chinese got diminished and my English got elevated. So, it became a really bilingual environment that I started growing up in, and so by the time I went to Hong Kong, my Chinese was really not that good. But I made it, I made the interview.

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And I think, again, it was an International Rescue Committee, which meant that it was American sponsored, American based, which got me in, because the director of that program in Hong Kong was American, and so he thought that I might make an interesting difference on the staff. I had no idea how long I was going to stay; I ended up staying about six months. Again, I was able to go into people's homes, refugees, families of refugees, the poorest of the poor. It made me think of housing projects in Chinatown, it made me think of housing projects throughout the country in the United States, but it's maybe a bit worse.

04-00:07:20
When I visit the homes, I was accompanied with another social worker who's American, and she was very much older. And she was a world traveler, and she was working there, as well, and taught me a lot of things about what it's like to be a world traveler. It was just amazing how she adapts so easily, although it was very difficult, I'm sure, for her. So she and I would go, walk up, visit homes that could be ten floors up to these high-rise housing projects.

And all I remember was holding my breath and trying to—or my nose, because it stank so heavily of urine everywhere I go. I just remember going to the homes, and all they could offer us was a glass of water, which we gratefully accept.

04-00:08:30

Kwan: We visited, asked questions whether their family was eligible for free childcare and school, actually—I guess it's more childcare—that they could leave their home and have their child be in the care of the IRC, International Rescue Committee. And so we did that about eligibility, whether they could be part of the program. Sometimes, I would spend the days and weeks with a childcare center operated by this group. And again, it wasn't that hard, because, as we just mentioned, I was with the prekindergarten program in San Francisco's Chinatown with young kids, so I was very aware of that. And then they told me that I need to help the daycare programs with their budgeting, and they don't have any register or anything that I can use. There's no accounting method outside the abacus, and so I learned to use the abacus, and I said, "Gee, I'm not good at math. How do I use the abacus?" But I did, I made it.

04-00:10:15

And so there were a lot of big bags of rice that would come in or big bags of something else for the childcare center to cook for the kitchen. I remember helping open some of them, and sometimes there would be maggots in there. And, "We can't use this, we can't use that. We've got to throw this away, we've got to throw that away." And so that's the kind of experience I had just trying to be part of the staff.

04-00:10:52

Tewes: That's quite an experience, Marion. I'm curious: you said these were refugees. Where were they coming from?

04-00:11:02

Kwan: Oh, from China.

04-00:11:04

Tewes: Mainland?

04-00:11:04

Kwan: Yes, yeah, escaped from China. And of course, I don't know much about why that is. I wasn't privy to get into their casework.

04-00:11:17

Tewes: Yeah, wow. Okay, so you returned to San Francisco at some point—

04-00:11:25

Kwan: Oh, wait. Well, there's one thing I realized. I almost got my family, my relatives—I was really worried. I got involved, also, in an anti-Vietnam War group while I was there. Prior to going to Hong Kong, I was also involved in marches against the war in Vietnam, and for some reason, I just felt like it was

an easy step, being so aware of world politics and being so aware of the Deep South politics and how the government is involved. And being an Asian country invading another Asian country, I was getting more sensitive to what's happening. And so there was a group in Hong Kong that was a group of Americans and Europeans and some other Asian, Hong Kong people that was involved. It's a multicultural mix of antiwar people, and I got involved in that and got into the papers. I stayed overnight with a bunch of us in front of the US Embassy in Hong Kong, and they told me that they want me to be the spokesperson the next morning. I was so tired, and I said, "What am I supposed to say?" I got in their front page, and I really realized that I had put my relatives in jeopardy, because they could find out where I lived. And I didn't know what the Hong Kong government at that time—well, at that time it was under British rule still—didn't know how far they would do anything about. I almost got fired from my job at the International Rescue Committee because of that. And I talked myself out of it, the injustice of racism to my boss who was going to fire me. Somehow, he just changed mind after talking to me, and I stayed on. So that was also an experience that I did not expect that got me almost in trouble with family.

04-00:14:06
Tewes: Right, but this is a continuation of your interest in civil rights and social justice.

04-00:14:12
Kwan: Yes, exactly.

04-00:14:14
Tewes: That's interesting that—I didn't realize you started—well, you began that before you left, but that you were so involved at this point in Hong Kong.

04-00:14:21
Kwan: Yeah, yeah.

04-00:14:23
Tewes: Wow, thank you for sharing that. So then you come back to Chinatown in San Francisco, and you're working as a young adult program coordinator for the Chinatown YWCA from around 1971 to 1974. You're working with children again, but a different age. What did this job look like?

04-00:14:48
Kwan: It's so funny, I skipped from three- and four-year-olds to nineteen-, twenty-year-olds. I was so into my experiences with social justice, I guess, in different parts of the world that I liked what I was getting into in Chinatown YWCA. Because the director happened to be also really very liberal, Americanized Chinese woman, and it was just perfect for me to have that role model. And the other people I worked with were all Chinese Americans, mostly women, and we got to learn from one another, our different levels of expertise and so forth in working together. That was really fun, and it was

liberating for me to be able to continue after Hong Kong being with Americanized Asians like myself, Chinese like myself getting into the—

04-00:16:22

Kwan: I think for me, we were left to our own devices. I was being entrusted with developing my own program. That happened also when I was with the Delta Ministry in Mississippi; I also had my own program. As I said before, I was there for a while with the Delta Ministry, and then we developed a group of young girls, this classmate and I, and she came with me. She's a Fulbright foreign student from Germany, actually. And the same time that the [Berlin] Wall was built in West Germany, I talked to her about that, and she felt really sad about it, and she was in the United States when that happened. So we were able to do a lot of sharing, cross-referencing about what's happening to the rest of the world.

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So going back to Chinatown YWCA, I also had the fortunate idea from my director that I could develop a program any way I liked, so I decided to go liberal. I started exposing young people from City College—I'm trying to get them—and I'm not sure how I did it, probably advertised at City College—programs in Chinatown, YWCA. And men and women could join, it doesn't matter. So I had, after a short while, a group of devoted, committed college agers who spoke mostly Cantonese, but versed in both languages. And I knew, while I was in Hong Kong, the kind of news bulletins, the kind of magazines that young people gravitated towards about being open about the Vietnam War, being open about how to think for yourself, more liberal kinds of magazines. So I started buying some of that from Chinatown and putting it in the office in the YWCA, and we started learning about stuff that they might not otherwise get from City College. I did various other things.

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One of the things people tend to remember me doing was opening up a coffeehouse in one of the rooms in the building of the YWCA to try and get people into a building instead of going out and doing gang element kind of things. And so Friday nights, I would have them over, open the place up for free coffee and tea. Those were the times when the hippie movement was also very active, and so I had these big pillows made, so they can sit on pillows. It's so funny. And the ceilings, I would have these tie-dye sheets on the ceilings and to make it kind of like you're not in Chinatown, yes, you are in Chinatown, but we're doing something different and so forth. So it was funny. But things like that, just introducing Chinese Americans into the problems of our community and how we can get involved in helping out. So those were some of the things that I did.

04-00:21:03

Tewes: Wow. What was the response, what did these young people think about this program you were running?

04-00:21:12
Kwan: They liked it. We went camping, we did things that they never would have done. I guess the one way to answer that might be something that happened to me just a few years ago indirectly through my sister, who's also—I have sisters who are active in their own right in their own identity in being Asian American. And one of them was doing history in Chinatown, and she met somebody who was a highly regarded Chinese interpreter. A Chinese interpreter that's needed quite often in Chinatown, because some of us couldn't interpret things, and we were in position of leadership and needed a professional Chinese interpreter who can read and write and understand Chinese and Cantonese. And it was through my sister that she said, "Do you know this guy?" And I said, "No, I don't remember his name is." She says he's been searching for me for years, and, "He was in your group, he was one of the college agers in your group years and years ago," maybe it was twenty years ago. He's been looking for me, didn't know where I was. And finally I met him at a meeting at my house. He came in, and my sister, of course, was there, too. And so I said, "To be honest, I don't remember you, but I'm glad you remembered me. How are things going?" And he said he was looking for me, because I was one of his role models, that I was one of the few outspoken, well-spoken protesters or activists, I guess. We didn't have a name for us. Now, they call us activists, I suppose. So he said it was important, because that was what he was doing, and he learned that from me. I was very impressed with what he said about himself and was grateful. He and I are still in touch. He lives in the Bay Area, and we continue to, once in a while—he says, "Oh, I—" we were bumping into each other in events, right, because it's the same kind of events, liberal events. So yeah, that's a story, and I felt good about it.

04-00:24:20
Tewes: That's a great example. Thank you, Marion.

04-00:24:22
Kwan: Yeah, welcome.

04-00:24:26
Tewes: Well, you just mentioned, again, the influence that the anti-Vietnam War movement had on you and your thinking about social justice. I might also ask about another movement that was happening around this time in the late sixties, early seventies, and that was the women's liberation movement. Can you tell me how aware you were of this and what your thoughts were about this movement?

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Kwan: Not a whole lot, but I do remember very vividly that I felt really good about it. Somehow I would support it, but I've got so many activities going on that I realized as a minority, I could not privy myself to do only one cause. I cannot just separate my cause from the women's cause, I cannot separate my cause from the Black cause or from the poor white cause. And I realized I'm doing

what I could do, and I'm doing it effectively, and if I were to cross over, I would get so involved in the women's cause that I won't have time for anything else. There are so many capable women out there, especially white women, and I said, "It's a white movement, they're going to have to deal with it. But I need to learn from them, and they need to learn from me, and there are means to do that," but I felt like I don't have the luxury. To me, for some reason, I felt like, I don't have the time or the wherewithal to spend my time with it, but I am very supportive. It's like I'm not a veteran of wars, but I'm a veteran of local peace, making peace and justice, and I have a lot of work in here in this country, so I'm sticking with what I do well.

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Kwan: I am so glad that knowing my history—and I think it's so important for me to learn about histories—that the women's movement came as a result—indirect result, but a very impressive result of the civil rights movement. It sort of revived itself. So the civil rights movement was not born in 1964, it was in the 1800s at first, and that's how the Reconstruction and the Civil War came about. So there was a period of emancipation with the Blacks that was the first civil rights movement, and now we're at the second cusp. And because of the second part, the revival of it, out came the women's movement. So I'm very glad that I was part of it, that I became part of that wave that happened. So we're all connected, and I hope that we continue to think about that as a growing spurt for Americans to say, "How are we connected?" We've got to have a connection, and we're not separate from each other. I think I'd like to see that as part of the future ownership of what civil rights means. That it's encompassing everybody, and we need to learn how to mentally pull that together. I think that's a challenge for the next generation.

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Tewes: I would say that sounds about right. It's interesting to hear you think of yourself as part of this longer lineage of civil rights work in the United States. I do want to mention, because it affects your future career, that you went back to school in the seventies. So the same time you're doing this work with the YWCA, you yourself returned to school at San Francisco State University to get an MA in social psychology, I believe. And then later on, you got a certificate for California Community College Teaching credentials for a lot of the same work there at San Francisco State. Is there anything you'd like to say about your decision to return to school at that point and where you thought you were headed?

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Kwan: No, I think except just to say that I've always been interested in the psychology of communities, the psychology of movements, what makes a country the way it is, what makes a community what it is. I started out, I thought I might be a social worker, but I thought, I don't know if I have the knack for that, and so I started thinking more wide, broadly, not knowing where it's going to take me. All I know is that the traveling throughout the world broadened my horizons a little bit and got me thinking about what more

can I learn. And so from there, it's because of that, going back and getting my master's, that I was able to have an entry into jobs that I thought I might be more interested in. So that's how I ended up at City College. I wasn't sure for a while that was where I wanted to be or whether I want to go to a four-year college and work there or something. And I realized I am more interested in community work; I want to stick with the community somehow. And so there was that marriage between education and community, so I ended up at a community college, so it was a perfect fit for me.

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Tewes: Well, let's talk about that position at City College of San Francisco, 1975 to 2006. You were there for a good long time.

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Kwan: Thirty years.

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Tewes: And you were a counselor there. What was the job that you were doing at City College?

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Kwan: So again, I was fortunate to find this job. Looking back, it was, again, a perfect fit for me, because it had to do with community and lower income. I was drawn to that, because I was also low income. I was also from the same community that I could return and serve in a different capacity. And it doesn't have to be in the geography of Chinatown, it can be in San Francisco. I ended up being able to serve poor people of all colors and races and religious creeds and so forth and so on. And I felt like that was what the civil rights movement was actually all about. It's not about race, it doesn't matter what color you are; if you're low income and you lacked the opportunity, like I did, you had more opportunities than I had when I was thinking of the students. I was there, I know what it was like, I want to show you what else you can do now, because here's the opportunity for you that I never had. And so I was able to do that, and I felt really empowered again, given another chance to work for my community.

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And when I say that, I also mean that when I worked with people of different races and backgrounds, I had an affinity to that, because of my history of civil rights in the South. And so, I felt like my encounter with poor students that you have to—in order to get into our program—it's called the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services. It's a citywide and a statewide mandate for community colleges to serve in this program only students who are poor and also designated as being first-generation college students, so their parents could not have any college degree. And so those were the two main stipulations that get you into our program.

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Kwan: And so we were able to devise new classes, new curriculum specifically geared towards our population that wants to come in. And we give them free tuition, we give them free books, but they have to be full time. They have to have twelve units. And we will work with them on whatever dreams they have. If they want to graduate from our college, which is a two-year program, but because of your limited English—you know, you can be African American, born and raised, that doesn't mean that you have straight A's in English, it doesn't mean that you can make it in math, it doesn't mean that you can do this or that. It means that we have to work with you from where you are, and we have to see what classes were appropriate for you, we don't want you to drop out.

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So we have students who were first generation in the United States, some who've been here for a long time, but dropped out of high school. We've had ex-offenders who were in trouble, had been in jail before but came out, and they're the ones who decided to apply to City College. That means that they're ready for us, and we're ready for them. And so I, among other counselors, was able to have free rein. We could develop our own curriculum and have the school approve it, and once it's approved, we could teach it. And so we were very specific, we knew the population. There was one course that's like an orientation to the college, and that was a one-unit course, nontransferable, but they have to take it. It covers race, it covers possible discrimination in the educational setting and what you do about it, it covers probably teachers who may be very biased and how to see that. If you're hungry and you have a child you have to take care of, you can't get to school, what do you do about that? If you're always late, why are you taking an eight o'clock in the morning class, how are you going to do that, how are you going to get to school, and so forth? I mean, it's just survival, basic survival skills. How to ask for help, where to go for financial aid, what's out there, and so forth. So they're courses like that that is not privy—you know, if you're an ex-offender and you're used to being told how to behave for years behind jail, how do you speak up for yourself when you're out in a classroom, what does that feel like? And so there are sensitive areas that a lot of counselors may not know about. So because I don't have that background, for example, in ex-offender program, my program would hire X, Y, and Z to cover that.

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We are so mixed. I mean we're white, we're Asian, we're Black, we're Latino, Chicano, and we work very closely together. It's a small program, but a very vibrant one. We're the one who introduced to the rest of the college a women's program, a women's center. We introduced a tutorial center. And so we became the prototype for the rest of the campus. We had at one point—I don't know if it still is—80 percent graduation rate, and they all went on. Most of them went on to a four-year college, which they did not expect. But we said, "If that's what you want, we're going to get you there," and so that's what we did.

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Kwan: Besides counselors, the entire staff was maybe fifteen or less, and so out of all these years being there, when I retired, there was one that retired before. She was head of the ex-offender program, African American. So she left, a year later I left, and a few years later a feisty—I mean, I knew her longer than the others. And she was hired because of her Chicana background, and she and I were the closest, I mean, we worked together the longest. She left. And then there's another Chinese American who left last; she was the youngest. And the four of us ended up years later, to this day—I think we've been together, what, thirty years—we're still friend, because we've got so much in common, we can talk about almost everything. And unfortunately, the oldest just passed away earlier this year, but we're in touch with her family, and they became part of us now. And so we would travel mostly to the southwest. We have this plan, we do this a lot. And whenever we travel, sometimes people were interested in staring at us when we go places. And one time, we were having drinks in this hotel in New Mexico, and so I casually asked the waiter who was serving us drinks, I said, "What do you think we are?" Because he kept coming back to us, and he kept wanting to know what we're all about. And he said, "Well shoot. Are you guys part of the United Nations group? Are here in this hotel for some kind of a conference?" And then we started laughing. I said, "No, no, no, we're just friends."

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I'm actually so fortunate to have the careers that I had, because they all pointed to what I loved and what I had a passion for, and I learned so much from it, and I'm still learning. I had no idea that over sixty years ago, I would be sitting here having an interview for something that I really still have a passion for. I had no idea that all the careers that I had since being in the Deep South have energized me into opening up a whole world of, I can do it, I can do it. And I'm part of being an American, and I have a responsibility, and I felt like that is like my calling. And whatever it is for young people, I want to let them know that the way we find passion comes in many ways. I have to find my own way and so can they, and I can step out of the stereotype and so can they. So yeah.

04-00:45:01
Tewes: Thank you, Marion. I loved hearing about that, that you're still thinking about your calling. It's just evolving.

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Kwan: Yeah, I know, I know.

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Tewes: One thing I said I would mention and give you the opportunity to speak about was the fact that you were a volunteer and trainer for the San Francisco Community Boards Inc. in the seventies and eighties. Is there anything you could tell me about what this program was?

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Kwan: It's for anybody who walks into the Community Boards Incorporated—I think it's still ongoing, I'm not sure—and be trained as a volunteer neighbor who's interested. If you're interested in helping neighbors resolve problems or conflicts with one another, this is the place to go. I tend to gravitate towards things that are too overwhelming for me as a challenge, so I'm saying, "I'm not a lawyer, what am I doing here?" But it's a challenge, and I decided to go into it. When I moved to a part of San Francisco, the Outer Mission, Bernal Heights District, there were flyers or there was invitation volunteering for Community Boards, and I read the description. And my friend and I—yeah, she's a long friend of mine—she and I thought, Okay, let's try and figure out what this is all about. So we went to an orientation meeting, and they talked about how people can resolve conflicts, and I thought, Wow, that's civil rights to me, it sounds like the same to me.

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And you meet all kinds of people of all incomes and neighborhoods in the city, but usually in our neighborhood only. And what it is we're taught—first of all, there needs to be a complaint. So a complaint, instead of complaining and calling the police, they will call Community Boards and, "I have this problem. This neighbor is having noise throughout the day and night, and I'm a nurse, and I have to sleep during certain hours, otherwise I couldn't get to work, I'll be so groggy. I told them to shut up, and they wouldn't shut up, and this has been going on for two months," blah, blah, blah. And so let's say that one neighbor doesn't speak English that well or one neighbor is Black or they're the same race, but they have this problem regardless. We were trained on the procedure, how do you do it. And so, let's say the two opposing parties would get together, and the first one who made the complaint—okay, so the two parties have to agree to meet. If one could not meet, it doesn't work. So when they agreed to meet, and we would hold this meeting. Hopefully, it takes one, maybe two meetings to help resolve the issue. So there's a process. The first one who made the complaint would talk about this problem, and the other person cannot interrupt. No matter how wrong that person is, you can't interrupt. And then the second person's turn, and he or she will say whatever. And so that's how the process is, and we were able to negotiate without them having to lodge a complaint with the police department. So that was what this was about. And sometimes it's cultural, sometimes it's not, sometimes it's racial, sometimes it's income, sometimes it's lifestyle, and just learning how to talk to each other.

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And come to think of it, we're having our problems today with opposing political parties and the election's coming up. It's amazing how we don't know how to do that yet. It's part of the whole process of life. So I learned from that. Again, it's something that gravitates—it's just the same idea of: how can we make peace with one another without resorting to stereotypes, because that makes it worse, and that's how it grows. Now we need to learn how to stop it as soon as we can. I wish it was that easy.

04-00:50:39

Tewes: Yes, yes, but I do appreciate hearing about this as a throughline of your work, that it's just another way in which you're thinking about civil rights in everyday life. Marion, I know that you have been married for quite a while now, and since 1975. Is there anything you'd like to say about your family, your husband and children, before we move on?

04-00:51:16

Kwan: It's interesting about relationships where when you start, you have your passion already of being an activist. I never felt like I had to compromise who I was before, since, and now. It's a growing process, and what I liked about it is that not only was I given the liberty and the assurance that what I do is wonderful and keep it up. And sorry, if you can't make a meal, but I can make a meal if you're too busy, if you're away doing this and that. So I did not let what I love interfere even with my marriage, and now, my husband's grown so much with me that he's like a second helper sometimes. I'm saying, "Hey, my English here, is this the right sentence, did that do the right thing?" And he was a perfect person for me to marry, because he knows how to correct. [laughs] I'm just teasing. And it's just one of many ways that he was able to be supportive of me in what all that I've been doing.

04-00:52:53

Well, before the year 2000, when my kids were in school, the director of the Delta Ministry called me one day and said, "Hey, what do you think about having a reunion in Hattiesburg?" It was like the thirty-second year, and I said, "Yeah, why not?" So what happened was that I was able to involve my husband and involve my two kids. In grammar school, I told the school that "I'd like to go on this two-week trip and take my kids with me away from school. Is that possible? And this is what it's about, it's about living history. I want my children to know what it was like for me during the civil rights period in the Deep South, and we want to travel to Mississippi. Is that possible? And they would be doing X, Y, and Z, they would be part of—there will be other kids there, but they're mostly visiting and joining us at meetings." And so, they were saying as long as my husband and I keep up with the homework that the teachers give them for two weeks, if we could catch up with that, we could do that. And so that's what happened.

04-00:54:44

So my family became part of what I do. They don't know what I'm doing, but they were involved. When I went away to a talk, my husband and my friends went with me when I did a keynote speaker for a Chinese American organization in New Mexico. My son, who was in his late thirties, he asked to attend some of my lectures, my presentations, which showed that he was interested in what I was doing. I don't talk to him about it, I don't talk at home about it, and so he wanted to know what it was about. And so I said, "Each of my presentations are very different depending on where it is, the age of the kids, or whether it's a school or a community." And so I said, "It's going to be very different." And so he came to maybe three of them.

04-00:56:22
Kwan: And my daughter has friends—she was so comfortable with her friends that they come in different sizes and colors and sexual orientations. My son, for a while, was teasing and saying very stereotypical things about gay people. And then I said to him, "What about So-and-So and So-and-So that you grew up with?" "Oh, I forgot about them. Oh, that's right, they're gay, aren't they? Oh, my mistake." And so my daughter, one day, one year, we went out for dinner for Chinese New Year's, so we each talked about what it's like to be Chinese. And my daughter, the first thing that came out of her mouth was, "I'm sure glad I'm not Black." And I said, "Oh." So we had a long conversation, because she was so insightful about the Black culture coming through osmosis through my, whatever I am, [laughs] my exposure to Blacks, and she probably picked it up in school. She was very sensitive, and she knew what how fortunate she was having a legacy and having a history. And she knew she was adopted, and she realized that—and my son also was adopted. They're not from the same family; adopted separately, but they were both adopted. And we want to make sure that they know who they were and are, and continue to be, and they are free to be who they are. That's the first thing that popped into her head, and I thought, Wow, I'm learning from them. So yeah, my kids were involved. In a way, they were, and they're still really comfortable and have a lot of questions, and they're not shy about relating to people, different kinds of people.

04-00:59:10
Tewes: Was that something that was important for you to share with them?

04-00:59:14
Kwan: Yes, the thing is I don't sit down and talk to them about it, they just picked it up. It wasn't anything I planned on, but they were just exposed so much. The first friend my son had when he—it wasn't kindergarten. Was it kindergarten or first grade? It must have been first grade. I noticed in the classroom—they went to a grammar school that was so equally divided: Blacks, whites, Asians. It's also a bilingual program that offers Spanish and Chinese, and so it was pretty mixed. So in his first grade, I noticed that my son and this other kid were doing a lot more things together. So halfway through the semester, I asked the grandfather of this child, "Can Jason come to our house and can we play out in the playground more, or can I take him to a program, after-school program, because my son is in it, and they're together a lot?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "I'll take him back home to you." This kid doesn't have any parents, and he lived in a poor, Black neighborhood, and so we would take him quite often back and forth to programs. And so that's the kind of exposure my children had. People are always confused about when I go out with my son and Jason, and sometimes Jason would bring along another Black friend, and we would go to the pool, swimming pool. And it's funny, people would think that I'm some kind of a youth director of a program, because I have these kids with me. And so it's a world that my children grew up with that it was very normal for them, and I don't make a big deal out of it.

04-01:01:58
Tewes: I appreciate you sharing that.

04-01:01:59
Kwan: Yes, you're welcome, good questions.

04-01:02:09
Tewes: I want to look towards some reflections on the conversations we've been having the last few sessions about the legacy of the civil rights movement. And you'd mentioned already that you'd become involved with the Bay Area Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. Is there anything you'd like to say more about that organization or why you've become involved?

04-01:02:43
Kwan: The importance of the organization is that we have a place. Those of us who've been in the South for a good period of time—not for one day, not for one weekend, but for a long period of time—have a place to just vent or have a place to talk without explaining anything, and so it's a good support group for us. And it's sad, also, because it's an older group, of course, and we're all dwindling, and people are passing on. But I got to meet some famous people who knew Stokely Carmichael, who did this, who's the lawyer for this and the lawyer for that, and I felt very privileged to be a part of that.

04-01:03:41
What I also like about it is it has probably the best archive materials anywhere in the world, and it's centered right in the San Francisco Bay Area. It's really well documented; it's very down to earth. We want to make it so that it's accessible, people can relate to it very well. None of us are professional talkers or writers, we just tell it like it is, and that's very rare to have a collection of that very, very detailed stuff. It reveals for me how important it is for us to speak truth to power and just to be ourselves. And we're not neutral, we have very passionate feelings about civil rights, and we're not going to apologize for what we have to do and what we have to, say, continue to do. And I think that's important, to represent ourselves and not other ways of thinking. What else? Can you rephrase that or I'm not sure where I want to go with it?

04-01:05:36
Tewes: Sure, a question I could follow up with is that you've written quite a bit over the years about your experiences in the movement and long-term impacts of injustices. And a lot of that writing is documented on the website for the Bay Area Veterans [of the Civil Rights Movement]. But I guess I would ask: why is it important for you to write that down and to share your stories that way?

04-01:06:07
Kwan: There's nobody else so far who was able to express, from my point of view, the injustice that is cross-cultural. I'm also concerned that races, different groups of people have been neglected and ignored, and I need to speak up for these groups, for myself, not for anybody else. I felt like it's important,

because we are here and we are a land of immigrants and we need to be recognized that way, and that's important to me. That's one of the things that I think I'd like to point out to young people. as well: that the future is here already, and we need to be cognizant of what's happening in this world, in news and networks that are one-sided, and a lot of disinformation, a lot of misinformation, a lot of mostly limited information that are biased. So I think I need it. I feel like it's a strange environment I find myself in that I have to find my own words. There's no cliches for it, there's no rhetoric for it, and I'm glad there isn't, because it has to come from the grassroots, which is it has to come from my own experience. There aren't that many of us, and I feel like I wish that I was not alone that way, and I'd like more people to speak up, more Asians, also, to speak up.

04-01:08:41

Tewes: Well, that leads into a question I have about: when you're speaking to younger Asian Americans about your civil rights work and your interest in social justice, what are you telling them?

04-01:08:59

Kwan: For everyone, I think, but especially young people, regardless of what the schools have not been able to teach you: I didn't have the history of Asian Americans, I never had the history of how my parents, who ended up in the Angel Island. That was an important part of history. I never was taught that, and it was just a couple of miles from my school. No one talks about that. Why did I have to wait until I'm a senior citizen to learn about that?

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So I'm speaking to a lot of people like myself, as well, that we all have a history. And history doesn't mean that it's a bad history or a good history, it's just history, and it enriches us when we get into it. There's no shame in our history, it's just the way our society influenced us, and it's not our fault. Whether we're superior or inferior or whatever it is, it's really people's ideas. Without learning our history, we cannot move on. Look at how brave my parents were having to sacrifice what they had to sacrifice so that I can have what I had growing up, and it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy for your parents. So look at the history, all of us to look at our history, that there's a difference in the way we came here.

04-01:11:09

Our forefathers—think about how your grandparents and your parents got here. Did they come as slaves where they were wiped out, their history was wiped out, they had to speak English. Think about Native Americans, the Indigenous people; they were the first. What was their history thousands and thousands—13,000, 14,000 years ago? What was it like to be an Indigenous person here? And telling us all the time that we have no boundaries, there's no territorial rights, we're here. There were so many nations that used to be here, hundreds and hundreds of different nations of Indigenous people, and that's the history that we came on, and we keep forgetting that. But if you were not a

slave and you were not forced into reservations, if you were not forced on to cotton fields and being sharecroppers. If having a book in your hand means that you're going to die, because you were caught with a book in your hand. You're not supposed to be smart enough to read, we don't want you to be smart, and you're going to be whipped fifty times, and you may die overnight, but that's what happens. But maybe you came here as a visitor, you came here as a tourist, and that's very different, because you packed your bags and you had a sense of who you were when your forefathers came. But they all came maybe because of famine, maybe they escaped because of war. Thousands of people in your country have died, you needed to escape, and it's mostly poverty, looking for a better life. So you were not a tourist, you were a visitor, you were a refugee. Whatever your reason, you came with a history or lack thereof, and you had to start from scratch. And so that's really important, to know our history and know each other's history and how we were all alike and how we're all different.

04-01:13:55

Kwan: The thing that impressed me is that when I speak to students, I see a rainbow of colors. When I was growing up, there weren't a rainbow of colors, it was either all white or all something. So in eighteen years from now, in 2042 supposedly—and the statistics maybe wrong by the time we get to be eighteen years from now—but apparently in 2042, this country, supposedly, the trend is that it will no longer be majority white, there's no majority. So how are we going to live with each other? There's no majority white men. The majority might actually be Asian Americans. In California, in about five years, the majority will be Spanish speakers. How are we going to accept that? So we're dealing with a country that right now young people are in, who you're already bilingual, most of you. Be proud of being bilingual. Some of you are even trilingual. I'm impressed with people who could do that, I can hardly deal with my own struggle to be bilingual. So those who are trilingual and triple, triple lingual, you're really lucky, because you can get jobs easily; I can't. Some of you who already are in blended families, celebrate that, celebrate the differences in how you look in your family.

04-01:16:26

It's looking at our collective histories and our collective experiences that's going to make us grow, because how we—there's a new term that's coming up that—before to me, it was "multiculturalism," now it's "inclusiveness." Instead of excluding, it's including each other. And there's another word that I'm learning that's called "allyship," right? Who are your allies, how can we go from Black Power, White Power, Yellow Power, Red Power, Brown Power, how can we—which is important. When I was in the Deep South, that was really crucial to have self-determination, to learn who you are and what your identity is all about. And from there, you needed to stand up for who you are, to learn about yourself. So it's the power that's important to have. To me, it's identity. What is my identity and what has been my history? And I am going to reshape that now, because I'm an American. What about other Americans?

Well, we're all Americans and American lives matter, Black lives matter; we all matter differently, but we matter together. I hope that that's the trend.

04-01:18:23

Kwan: Let me give you a very interesting example. I remember during the Vietnam War, I attended a lot of the marches, and they were mostly white males. And then it started having a lot of white females, and then there were more and more Asians, but it's basically very limited. And then fast forward to 2017, the year that Donald Trump was inaugurated, the day after he was inaugurated as our President of the United States, there was the largest mass march in the history of the United States called the Million Women's March. And I was not in Washington, DC, but I was in Oakland, California. In that march, I saw not a million women, but just as many. But along with the women were their men who came with them: boyfriends, husbands, uncles, fathers. There was one that stood out for me. There was a young, Asian American father who must be in his twenties. He was with his infant child, and I was so surprised and so delighted, I just ran up to him. [laughs] And I said, "I'm so glad to see you here." I said, "You know, when I was your age, I had my baby, but I felt like I was the only one with my baby and my husband, and we were in this march. And I couldn't be more delighted to see you today. Thanks for coming." And he thought I was crazy, but I was so delighted. And it's the changing of the times, that we are multicultural, we are inclusive, we can make a difference.

04-01:20:51

When I was sitting in a courthouse in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, being the only Asian American, I didn't have to do anything but show up. Sometimes it's that simple; sometimes it's something else. It doesn't have to be political, it can be anything; just be a part of it, not be afraid of that. Because I think that the thing that took me a while to figure out was the idea of belonging. That for years, Chinese Americans had never felt like they belonged. I was looking at my father's records, the timetable. And I did not realize that it took him about fifty years of being in the United States before he realized that he can now finally walk in and be a naturalized citizen, because that's what he wanted. Why did it take him fifty years? It was because he never felt welcomed. He was interrogated at least three or four times in Angel Island. When he was in Chinatown as a merchant working legally, he was interrogated every few weeks by the immigration authorities, because he wanted to go back and forth to China and come back again. And I had stories about that. There was written pages about his interrogation, and we were able to gather that information. And I knew that was real; it wasn't a story, it was real. And so I felt like he never felt accepted. That's why he never felt like he could leave Chinatown and feel comfortable. And I remember these tears I had whenever I left Chinatown, and I knew what my father was talking about.

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And so that's the past. We don't need that past to ghost us into the present. We don't need that kind of legacy anymore. We can talk about that as history, but we don't have to accept that as today. So I'm just saying that we belong to a

world community now. And Native Americans are teaching me that we don't have to have boundaries, that we need to be treated equally, and that's what democracy is supposed to be about.

04-01:23:54

Kwan: Our forefathers who wrote the Constitution, if you look at it carefully, you need to go beyond the Constitution and figure out where we got that idea of democracy. It came from Native Americans. The Iroquois Confederacy read about that, because that is the beginning of our democracy. The Iroquois Confederacy wrote part of the Constitution that the founders of the Constitution adopted it from, they got it from the Native Americans. So it behooves us to think that we have nothing to stand on. We have a rich legacy to stand on, and I just hope that—I think young people are already there. The classrooms are already mixed, it just takes a personal touch. Somebody's got to start the conversation. Somebody's got to reach out your hand and say, "Hey, I'm So-and-So. What's your name?" Because I think when, let's say, the Chinese American community hurts, other people are affected; if we benefit, other people benefit. We benefitted from the African American movement. And I don't think we can do without each other, because I think all of us together, working together is not what other governments want us to do. They want us to fail so that we do not become a democracy.

04-01:26:13

I hope some of you think about the elections, because you can make history. If you're eligible to vote, you're going to make history, because this election talks just about that exactly, about the democracy. It's very simple: it's in jeopardy, it's never been that clear before. It's scary. And I hope that we're sensitive to keeping our freedom and keep fighting for it.

04-01:26:55

Tewes: Thank you for sharing that, Marion.

04-01:26:58

Kwan: You're welcome.

04-01:27:03

Tewes: On the personal side, I did want to ask you about something we discussed a while back, which is about you feeling bicultural and being able to cross between different worlds. How do you think about being bicultural, and what that has meant in your life in your work, the entirety of it?

04-01:27:30

Kwan: It makes me a whole person. Activism to me doesn't mean much, but I think about how it started for me. I may have mentioned this before, but it started by not being told what to do, because I'm Chinese. It's being told not what to do and what to do, because I am a girl, being told what I can do and cannot do, because I'm poor. And I thought, It doesn't make sense. So I learned that being bicultural and being multicultural is being exposed and accepting the complexity of us as human beings. And I feel more whole when I can be a

little of whatever I want to be at a certain, given moment, not to be restricted. And being bicultural is normal to me. Being monocultural is being just one flat, simple, Black and white person. It's not human. It's being constricted to a role, one way of behaving, and that's not normal. If a child cries, because he or she is hungry, it's normal. We can laugh and we can cry, and it's the complexity of being human that we're afraid of. I think as humans, we all want to feel safe and we all need to have a protection around us, anything that's different. And then we tend to also want power, we also tend to be greedy, and we like to see things in a certain way and then we start excluding other people who think differently.

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Kwan: And so what I've learned through the struggle is that it's not the color of your skin that's important. And then I think I mentioned this before, but the reason I went back to Mississippi the second time—I had to go to school and I had to work, so I don't want to give that up, but I gave up my summers, because that's free, so I went back to second summer. And I realized from also working at City College that the criteria for opportunities, if you want to learn more, is not the color of your skin, but it's the lack of opportunity, and that comes with poverty. So it's income, that I've been working with students with low income, and it's the right course for me to take, and that's what taught me that this has nothing to do with race. And so I learned the second part, and then I realized I kept learning about it. I realized that it's not just class. Why am I there, why am I there? It's because it's the right thing to do. That I felt like it was wrong to be treated differently than everybody else, that I wasn't being treated equally as a girl and as a minority, it's not right. And so I did it, because I felt like Martin Luther King said something about bending the arc [of the moral universe] towards justice. It's a long arc, but it still bends. And [Coretta] Scott King also said every generation has to struggle for that, every generation, it doesn't stop. And I believe that, that it doesn't. It's not so much whether you're going to win or lose; you try your best, and you don't quit. I don't know if that answers your question.

04-01:33:08

Tewes: I think that gives a good insight into how you think about identity as an important part of the work and integral to how you're able to do it. And the fact that you've been moving through different communities your whole life speaks to that practice.

04-01:33:26

Kwan: I don't know.

04-01:33:27

Tewes: No, that works, thank you.

04-01:33:30

Kwan: Yeah, I don't know. Also being bicultural, I realized something somebody said one time. There was a young man who wasn't that young, he's maybe in his

forties or fifties—forties. At the end of a discussion, a presentation I made—I'm pretty sure he was Chinese American—he raised his hand, and he said, "I really want to be 100 percent American, I need to be accepted." And that was an amazing comment. I answered that by listening to my own identity. My response to him was, "How about being 100 percent American and 100 percent Chinese? Why can't you be 200 percent?" Because that's what I am. That I belong. I belong here, I'm not a visitor, I'm not a tourist, I'm not what people call Asians: perpetual foreigners. That's how we're treated, and that's why it took my father this long to want to be an American citizen. He wasn't Chinese. He stayed all his life in Chinatown, but he knew that Chinatown belonged to America, and he had to be a part of it, but it took him that long to decide. It's so telling to me how it's affected so many people. So I said, "We're getting into this twenty-first century already. I think we need to make a statement."

04-01:36:08

Tewes: You'd also mentioned that you wanted to talk about your siblings' support for civil rights work.

04-01:36:16

Kwan: Yeah, very much like my own family, it's amazing. When I was in this, we were all doing separate things when we were on our twenties, right, most of us, and thirties. And after marriage, we still went our separate ways, and so did I. And so I wasn't aware or interested in my other siblings' lives; we're all so independent. And then I realized that during my retirement, my siblings were onboard with what I was doing, and they were curious, and I said, "Wow, that's different. What happened?"

04-01:37:22

And then I didn't know that until I looked at who they are. My sisters have been, for many years now, putting together our family history. And so one of my sisters wrote up something about all of this, and I said, "Hey, I didn't realize you did A, B, and C. How come you guys are doing this and I didn't know about it?" I have four sisters, three brothers; I'm the third oldest. So I'm in touch with all my sisters and one brother, in particular. My youngest sister also now retired, so we're all retirement age. She was the second Asian American who was ever appointed to the police force in San Francisco due to affirmative action. [Later in her career,] the Commission on the Status of Women gave her a recognition. And then my next younger sister worked at the police—no, no, I'm sorry. [Another sister] was with the Parks and Rec Department of San Francisco, and when she retired, the Board of Supervisors gave her Esther Kwan Day award. And I said, "She got to have her name and a day dedicated to her by the Board of Supervisors, and she's what?" And then my next older sister was a PE teacher, physical education teacher, and she wrote a curriculum for the entire City of San Francisco for middle schools, and she was recognized for that. I think in one of the schools, she made [all-city championships] for gymnastics team [and a Teacher of the Year award], and I said, "How did that happen?" And I thought, I'm glad I don't have a title,

because I can't take the pressure of the title. I said, "Oh my gosh, all my sisters are famous, I didn't know that." [My sisters always send me civil rights articles and events. Identities, justices—not just Asian—have become our renewed sisterhood, at our senior ages!] And then my brother, he's recognized for being one of the best auto mechanics working—he goes from one major automobile garage to another to another. And he was sought after, because he does what he does so well. He loves everything on wheels, anything on wheels. And my other brothers were good in what they do, too. It was like, we're all really into our passions, and I didn't realize that. And then I thought, What did my mother do, what did my father do that got us into all this good trouble? And I think it's the perseverance and resilience of my family that taught us how to find opportunities whenever they come.

04-01:41:39

Kwan: And my daughter was right. If we were Black, I think we would have taken a longer time; but we also suffered, I realize that. Just one thought about long-term racism with the Chinese. So, in 1882 when the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted, the attempt was very obvious, but it wasn't obvious for me until much later. That I didn't realize that it was a law restricting one race only, and that was the Chinese. It's the first time in history that ever happened in the United States, forbidding Chinese as a race from entering the United States. And I realize how that relates to today's elections, how important it is to vote. If you cannot come to the United States, you cannot have families. And women were forbidden also from entering the United States—Chinese women, sorry. That prevented Chinese from being interested even at all, because they had no rights to vote. And so we were deprived of our opportunities to have a better life for generations, because of that one act that it kept being extended. The Exclusion Act kept being extended for many, many, many years.

04-01:43:48

So I think that it's important that now that we have the right to vote. And the voting rights were also a life-threatening experience that I had in the Deep South. If you vote, you're going to be killed, you're going to be murdered, your job will be taken away from you, your house will be burned. And it did happen, it did happen to a lot of Blacks. And so to me, it's such a privilege and an honor to be able to vote, because we're voting for each other and for each other's livelihood. For one another, we're helping one another, finally. You can do it for any race just by sending that application in, that registration in. And so it affected the Chinese Americans for generations. So I just wanted to use that platform, for sure.

04-01:45:01

Tewes: I appreciate the connection you've made between your voting rights work and elections today. Marion, I would just like to ask: how would you like to be remembered?

04-01:45:14
Kwan: Oh my gosh, that's a strange thing to say. Oh, the lessons, I can learn about lessons every day. [In a short version I would say: as a freedom fighter or civil rights worker, as an American, I am not a tourist nor a visitor. I bear witness as a citizen, and I did not turn away from fighting for freedom and justice for all. In a long version I would say:] and no matter what I look like, no matter my age, no matter my ethnicity, that I finally realized that every human being has a right to equal opportunities. And it's not fighting for one specific group or one specific cause. Every human being has a right to equal justice under the law. That we have a right to an education, we have a right to a roof over our heads, to have something to eat at a mealtime, to be regarded as equals, to respect each other as equals. And that we need not be afraid of anything that's strange. We need to just be curious and to be open to each other and to learn and to be with the right people, with good people and make good trouble, and to keep fighting for that. And hopefully, to teach our own children, teach each other that we don't always have to be afraid of being who we are, and to learn from that. Because even though I'm quiet, there's a lot of force behind that quietness, and we're going to be okay.

04-01:47:40
Tewes: I love that.

04-01:47:41
Kwan: All right.

04-01:47:42
Tewes: Well, Marion, that's all the questions I have for you, at long last. Is there anything you'd like to add before we close out our final session?

04-01:47:49
Kwan: No, and to thank you for forcing me to look at myself. I appreciate your project a lot.

04-01:48:02
Tewes: Thank—

04-01:48:02
Kwan: It's been hard on me, it's been a struggle, but it's been really immensely rewarding.

04-01:48:08
Tewes: Oh.

04-01:48:08
Kwan: Thank you.

04-01:48:10
Tewes: I thank you so much for your participation.

04-01:48:12
Kwan: Oh, thank you.

04-01:48:13
Tewes: I'll close us out now.

[End of Interview]