

Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

CYNTHIA CHOI

Interviewed by

JUHEE KWON

July 22, 2013
San Francisco, California

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Narrator

Cynthia “Cyndi” Choi (b.1966) is a second-generation Korean American from Los Angeles Koreatown. She received her B.A. in Ethnic Studies from University of California, Berkeley. Choi was one of the founders of Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice (APIC), the first Asian American reproductive rights, or “choice,” organization. She continued to be involved with APIC, which was later known as Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health (APIRH). In 1993, she served as co-directors for the organization alongside Karen Chin and hosted the Opening Doors “unconference” in 1996. Choi was critical in the statewide expansion of APIRH via the establishment of the HOPE project in Long Beach. Following the discontinuation of the HOPE project in 2002, she also aided in the establishment of Khmer Girls in Action (KGA) and later, served as the interim Executive Director from 2004 to 2006.

Choi has been involved with Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP) since 2006 and currently serves as the Deputy Director. She has received fellowship awards from the following organizations and foundations: Asian Pacific American Women’s Leadership Institute, The California Wellness Foundation Violence Prevention Initiative, The Rockefeller Next Generation Leadership and The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation. Choi was also one of the Founding Sisters of National Asian Pacific Women’s Forum (NAPAWF).

Interviewer

Juhee Kwon (b. 1991) is an undergraduate at Brown University, studying Biology and Ethnic Studies.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded as MP3 file using Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-702PC. One file: 1 hour 45 mins 5 sec.

Transcript

Transcribed and edited for clarity by Juhee Kwon. Reviewed and approved by Cynthia Choi and Juhee Kwon.

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Transcript of interview conducted July 22, 2013, with:

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by: JUHEE KWON

KWON: Okay. This is Juhee Kwon. Today is July 22, 2013. I'm here with Cynthia Choi at AAPIP [Asian American/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy] office in San Francisco, California. And this is a part of the Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project.

Okay, so we can get started. And I was wondering if you could give a quick intro about the current work that you do and then also pinpoint a starting point to the development of your political consciousness and how you got involved with Asian American reproductive justice work.

CHOI: Okay. So my current position is—I'm the Deputy Director here at AAPIP, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy. The work that we do here, primarily as a national member-supported organization, is to really look at how we can organize our own communities and people in philanthropy to increase resources for our diverse communities. In particular, we're really interested in supporting efforts that really grow community infrastructure and our ability to make change in the communities. So that's in a nutshell what we do here at AAPIP. I won't go into all the different strategies, but we basically work within the field of philanthropy, and then we also work with the Asian American and Pacific Islander community, in trying to develop solutions around that. We know about the gap and the disparity in terms of the level of funding that goes to our community, and it's generally been less than 1% of foundation giving. And so AAPIP is all about working with our diverse community inside philanthropy [and] in the general API [Asian/Pacific Islander] community to really change that. So that's in a nutshell what we're about.

KWON: So you're like the middleman between the philanthropic organizations and then the people that actually need the funding?

2:00

CHOI: Yeah, we're basically—in the non-profit, philanthropy world, we're an intermediary. Because we're a member-supported organization connected to the council of foundations, we have access in a different way that

traditional non-profits do to philanthropy. So we're in the philanthropic sector, but I think how we stay true to our mission is that we very much work in the API community and really stay grounded in the API community through our chapters that are located across the country, where we have significant API populations. So I guess we could be considered the middle person or the middleman, but I guess what we're really focused on is both an inside and an outside strategy. Because we need people inside philanthropy that are about increasing resources to our communities, but then we also need to have the ability to advocate outside the philanthropic sector, because that's I think where we're going to see real change.

KWON: Wow.

CHOI: Yeah.

KWON: That's great. Yeah, I attended your symposium [on June 10, 2013], and I thought it was really great.

3:35

CHOI: Yeah. Oh, good.

KWON: Because I had been expecting one thing—because it was a philanthropy or foundation meeting, and I had been expecting a very different vibe to the symposium, but it was very grounded and a lot of really great things [were] happening with the panels, so I was really impressed.

CHOI: Oh, good. Yeah, I mean, I'll take that as a big compliment. Yeah, I think the Boys and Men of Color Symposium is one example where we felt like philanthropy was not including our communities in the conversation. And so, How do we, one, advance knowledge about our communities, and then secondly, [how] to really shift the frame a little bit? Because I think there's been a lot of attention—which I think is good—on boys and men of color, which is actually connected to my commitment to reproductive justice and gender justice. [How it's connected] is that the boys and men of color work is really looking at gender and looking at the manifestations of gender inequality. So it is a continuation, I think, of my life's commitment and work. But essentially what we're saying is, You can't just look at boys and men of color. You have to look at whole communities, whole families. What are the conditions that make the life chances of boys and men of color in our communities at peril? And we also said, Especially in California, you can't not include APIs. We make up 15% of the state (laughs). It would be a real derelict[ion] of your obligation, whether you're a funder or a policymaker, not to include our communities and to have knowledge about our communities.

So that's what the report was about, and I'm glad it shifted your impression of what it was going to be. Because I think what we're learning

is, it's about stories, but really backing that up with data and also what's promising in philanthropy. What we've found is, it's not enough to just talk about disparities and what's not happening in the funding world with regard to our community, but really highlighting what's working in our communities, and it's just not being funded at the level it should be, so. That's kind of what AAPIP does, across the communities that we work with and across the country and across issues—because we don't necessarily focus on a particular set of issues. We really are about uplifting issues that the community has defined, [that] are their priorities, so.

KWON: But I guess that the Young Men and Boys [of Color] Campaign seems like a continuation of your previous work—

6:44

CHOI: Yeah, yeah.

KWON: On women and girls.

CHOI: Yeah, I think—so I'll go try to answer your question about how I got involved. I guess I would say it's own family experience. My parents came here as immigrants, not having the language skills, coming here for more opportunity for themselves and eventually for their family. And just learning about my mother's own challenges of having access to reproductive health services and family planning services. So learning from my mother about the series of abortions that she had, because she just didn't have access to contraceptives or information around that, and then also knowing that they didn't have health insurance. So it's all interconnected, and I think that experience, but then also my own family's experience around domestic violence. Through my own coming of age, I learned first-hand what it meant for women to not have access to basic health services, and by extension, reproductive health services and preventative services. And then also issues around safety and the kind of choices that women make, or lack of choices or options that women have because of their circumstances. So in my mom's situation, you know, she really didn't have family or a supportive network around her, so she pretty much was on her own, raising three children, very young children, and having to make some difficult choices that put her own health and her own safety at risk.

KWON: When did your family emigrate over from . . . Korea?

8:55

CHOI: Yeah, they emigrated from Korea, and it was in the sixties, early sixties. So it was pre-the huge wave of Korean Americans that came, and my parents came and landed in Koreatown, LA.

KWON: LA?

- CHOI: Yeah, so I could tell you all about that experience, but—so they came at a time when there was just an inkling or formation of a Koreatown, and again, with all the circumstances of coming to [America] as immigrants with not a lot of resources or transferrable skills at that time—because my father was a student, at that time, so.
- KWON: Are you 1.5 generation or—
- CHOI: No, so I was second [generation]. Yeah, so I was born in the States. I also learned that that's different for every culture, so—
- KWON: Oh,, what do you mean?
- CHOI: Yeah, so Latinos consider first generation being born in the States.
- KWON: Oh,.
- CHOI: I don't know if you knew that, but—
- KWON: No, I didn't.
- CHOI: So it's so funny when I talk with my Latino friends. They're like, No. You're actually first generation. But we consider first generation [as] the first generation to come to or to physically be in the United States. So they don't understand the 1.5 [generation] thing,
- KWON: Oh,. That doesn't make sense.
- CHOI: Yeah. They don't have that middle—so I think that's so Asian, maybe, to have that level of specificity. So for them it's like you're either first or second, right? There's no middle (laughs). But anyways, so I'm second generation. Yeah, yeah.
- KWON: And so you grew up in LA, and you were based in SoCal [Southern California] for a bit? But you went to [University of California,] Berkeley though, right?
- CHOI: Yeah, so I grew up in Southern California, and then came to Northern California to go to school. Yeah, that was a total awakening for me, because I hadn't had an opportunity to be around people that were politically conscious, I think. And before I moved to the Bay Area, I lived in Orange County for a little bit. Yeah, so I had a little bit of junior high and high school [in Orange County]. And I think that was a really challenging period, because, you know, it was sort of [a time of] coming into my own identity. And at that time, there weren't that many Asian

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Americans specifically in Irvine, which is crazy now, because they have a Korean mayor—

KWON: Oh,, yeah.

CHOI: of all things, and of course, there are lots of Asians now in Irvine, specifically, but all across Orange County. But at that time, we were, I think, one of the few Asians that moved into our street, and we had our own encounters, which we thought were racially motivated. We kind of knew that we weren't very welcome in that neighborhood. So that really shaped me, even though I don't think I had the ability to articulate fully what was really happening.

So coming to Northern California and Berkeley, in particular, it was sort of like, Wow. What are all these protests? What are these people talking about? Why is there a demonstration or, you know. So that exposure was really—I just really soaked it up, in terms of early on just questioning and asking—and having the ability to even question and ask out loud why things were the way they were, right? So that was a really positive experience, I think, for me.

KWON: What did you major in when you were at Berkeley?

13:30

CHOI: I majored in Ethnic Studies (laughs), and I didn't go into [college] knowing that that was what I was going to major in, but just because of where my interests took me, it just seemed like a natural fit. You know, I pretty much designed my own path, and so I ended up taking a lot of women's studies courses, too, so it was a really nice intersection for me. And I did take advantage of not just focusing on Asian American [Studies], but sort of broadly Ethnic Studies. So I had a lot of opportunity to take courses in Native American history, African American history, and Political Science, all that stuff, so.

KWON: Yeah, I'm an Ethnic Studies concentrator, too.

CHOI: Yeah. Yay! I know. When I found that out, I'm like, "Whoa. Another"—I'll talk to you later about how your parents feel about that, but (laughs).

KWON: No worries. I still have the Biology next to it, and so my parents are okay, until we drop that.

CHOI: Yeah, right.

KWON: What did you do after you graduated?

14:42

CHOI: My first job out of college was working at the Asian Law Caucus.

KWON: Oh,, that's perfect.

CHOI: Yeah, and I ended up—well, I first did an internship, and that's how I got exposed. Because I was thinking about law school, and what do you do with an Ethnic Studies major? (laughs) So I did an internship, and then I got offered a position to work there. That's where I got to know Peggy [Saika]. So that's my connection to Peggy, working there, starting in '89, working in the Asian Law Caucus. And that's actually how—It was really great, I think, working at the Asian Law Caucus because not only did I have an opportunity to be at a place where it was a very exciting time, because I got to work on an array of issues. At that time, gosh, we were still using the fax machine as a major form of communication, right?

But I just remember being there as a young person, as a recent grad, and having the ability to learn about and work on issues like hate crimes and employment labor issues like sweatshops, and at that time, it was the Jessica McClintock campaign—I don't even know if you're—that pretty much dates me, but—and then working on tenants' rights. So it was really where I cut my political teeth and got to understand the importance of working directly with the community, and organizing and listening to clients and their cases, but also seeing their connection to—which is the difference, I think, between a legal advocacy organization and one that does direct services is that you have to see the connection to those individual cases to larger patterns of discrimination. And so I think that's where I really saw the value of both, of using your connected-ness to the clients and the communities that you serve but then also saying, Wait a minute. There seems to be a pattern here of sweatshop manufacturers that are closing down and not paying their workers, and that these are actually subcontractors of major clothing manufacturers. And so to see cases and your legal strategy grow from a bunch of sweatshop workers, coming in saying, I haven't been paid by my employer, and they've locked the doors. What's the connection there? To working on cases—very sad tragic cases like victims of hate crimes, and seeing the value of having strong advocates to fight for harsher sentencing, when they can prove that there's been a hate crime versus treating it as a typical assault case or a murder case. Because you can really use that as an opportunity to educate your community but also hold people accountable for racially motivated crimes. So just being in that space, being in that organization, you really got to see the connection of community, policy, advocacy work, and the ongoing importance of making sure that community voices are always at the forefront and driving your work.

And then the final thing—I mean, there were so many things that I learned, but—and one of the things that I also learned directly about is the importance of having a class analysis and not being afraid to hold people within your own community accountable. So in a lot of the tenants' [rights] cases, the landlords were other Asian Americans.

19:25

KWON: Yeah. That's always tough.

CHOI: Yeah, and so it's important to make sure that we're consistent around our practice, around holding everyone accountable, regardless of whether it's other Asian Americans or other Asian Americans with political power and influence, that we have to be prepared to hold everyone accountable when there's an injustice. Going after government. A lot of the public housing cases had to do with public agencies, not treating Asian Americans—or not paying attention to the issues of Asian Americans. So yeah, at the Asian Law Caucus, we learned no one was immune (laughs).

KWON: Oh, my gosh.

CHOI: Everyone was going to be held accountable, no matter what your status or your influence. Because, you know, the landlords in Chinatown or other Asian American [communities], they also were very powerful. So everyone was game, and I still believe that to this day (laughs).

20:47

KWON: I feel like you would've made a great lawyer. Why did you not decide to go into law?

CHOI: I think I was more interested in working directly the community, whether it was organizing—and I was really interested in women's and girls' issues. And so I thought, Maybe my skill set or passion can be directed in other ways. So I just kind of took another path in that way. I love lawyers. I love working with them, but I think I wanted to kind of see different ways that I could work on these issues versus lawyering.

KWON: What did you do after you left the Asian Law Caucus?

22:08

CHOI: Yeah, so the crazy thing about leaving the Asian Law Caucus was it was right around the time of the civil unrest in LA—

KWON: The [1992 LA] Riots?

CHOI: Of the riots. Yeah, and so I made the crazy decision to say, "I want to move back.

(Both laugh)

KWON: Oh, my gosh.

CHOI: I wanted to move back and work in the community. Of course, it was a really popular time to be a Korean American in LA (laughs). I say that facetiously. So I didn't really have a specific plan, but I knew it was kind of time to go back. I mean, I still considered LA my "home" home. My

family was still there. I had left LA at a particular stage in my life, where I didn't know what I was doing, and so [after] being in the Bay Area and having the opportunity to study, to work on community issues, to learn about different strategies, I wanted to go back and apply what I learned, the skills that I'd developed, and my own political consciousness, and to see if I could do something [to] give back. So that's what I did. I went back and worked on interethnic relations in LA, when I went back. That's a whole another paper, I think, but yeah, so that's what I ended up doing.

But going back to my connection to the reproductive justice work is—while I was at the Asian Law Caucus, I was really encouraged and supported to work on a broad array of issues, which is probably what kept me at the Asian Law Caucus—was I got involved in the Asian Women's Shelter—

KWON: Oh,, yeah.

24:33

CHOI: while I was there as a volunteer and as a board member. And then I also got to be involved in the founding of APIC. Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice. I would say I have to give a lot of credit to Peggy because [her and] Mary Luke—Does that name sound familiar?

KWON: Yeah, I'm interviewing [her] in October because she's flying out to Providence for something, so yeah.

CHOI: Oh,, that's great, that's great. I don't even know what she's doing.

KWON: She's in Virginia [correction: North Carolina], doing something health-related but out on the East Coast, or the South, I guess. Yeah.

CHOI: Oh,, okay, okay. I can't even believe that name just popped out of my head, but I remember her contacting Peggy specifically, and then I joined in on some of those conversations about the lack of visibility of Asian American women on the issue of choice. And at that time, that's kind of how it was framed, was reproductive choice. Reproductive rights, reproductive freedom—none of that stuff was part of our framing. It was really about our lack of visibility and activism or opportunities to be plugged in to the movement.

KWON: Was there something that specifically sparked the creation of it [APIC]?

26:02

CHOI: Yeah, you know, I wasn't in on the very very early conversation. It probably would be great to talk with Peggy and Mary Luke about that. I know that there were some other women who were a part of the California State Legislature. They were staff members. I think part of it could've been some pretty bad legislation that was coming down the pike. And in particular, I do remember being part of conversations where what was

most at risk was giving [reproductive service] access to low-income women, and there were some specific challenges around funding for abortion for low-income women. That's always been on the chopping block, federally, but I know at different times that's also been at the state level, reducing funding for that. So I know there were some things around that, and that's in part, I believe, why a lot of Asian women who were staffers of the [California] State Legislature were very active in those early days.

And then at that time, I think Mary Luke was part of Planned Parenthood. I don't remember what her official capacity was, but—you might know that history. Do you know any of that, whether she was formally affiliated? Or how did you know about Mary Luke?

KWON: I read it through—I brought the book with me, but it's *Undivided Rights*, and they mentioned that she was involved. And then couple of other people [mentioned her] through informal conversations.

28:01

CHOI: Oh,, interviews. Yeah.

KWON: But I think she was part of Planned Parenthood. I remember reading it in her bio. [Editor's note: Mary Luke was Executive Director of Planned Parenthood Alameda-San Francisco from 1980 to 1989]

CHOI: Okay, good.

KWON: I just don't know what capacity either.

CHOI: Yeah, yeah. I can't remember either. I know she was instrumental in the formation of APIC and being part of those early conversations. I just remember a lot of lunches and breakfasts and things on the weekends (laughs). wverything was always around food. But yeah, I felt very fortunate to be a part of some of those initial conversations, being pretty young myself.

KWON: Did you continue to be involved with the organization as it switched from [Asians and Pacific Islanders for] Choice to [Asians and Pacific Islanders for] Reproductive Health as well?

CHOI: Yeah, so my involvement with APIC and then APIRH [Asians Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health] and all of that, I had a steady involvement. And of course, when I moved to LA and so forth, that sort of limited my direct involvement, but I was co-chairing, at the time, APIRH with Karen Chin. Are you interviewing Karen as well?

KWON: No, I'm not.

CHOI: Okay.

KWON: Maybe I should get into contact with her.

29:35

CHOI: Yeah. She might have her own perspective on that, and we were involved with putting on Opening Doors [Conference] together, and so. I had been involved as staff and as a board member, and then just as a supporter through that period from APIC to APIRH. I mean, depending on what period you're most interested in learning about, but—yeah, I always made it—it was one of my key organizations that I was involved in and supporting, so.

We went through our own evolution and our own thinking about who we were as an organization, how we fit within the reproductive rights movement, who our target audience was—that was always on the table—what were we trying to do in terms of increased activism and movement, and what was sort of our unique perspective around this, what was the gap that we felt like we were filling that other reproductive or other choice organizations were not filling? So I think that was always at the crux of [the organization from] when it was APIC to APIRH—There have been so many name changes as you know (laughs).

KWON: Yeah, with that one organization.

31:23

CHOI: And each of it has its own story depending on who you talk to. So I think, in the early days, APIC was very focused on, How do we get API women at those marches, and how do we activate young women to know about this history, to be involved, and to care about this issue? That was pretty much our perspective. It was all about visibility, and I think we were trying to understand what were some of the barriers for Asian American women's involvement? Period. And so I think that was really our challenge.

I mean, I think we talked a lot about, What about Asian immigrant and refugee women? I think that was always kind of like our soft spot, because we weren't immigrant and refugee women, so I think that was this whole challenge of, Well, are we speaking on behalf of immigrant and refugee women? Who are we really speaking on behalf of? And I think that was really uncomfortable for us. If we were going to be an organization speaking on behalf of immigrant refugee women or limited English speaking or even youth, then we had to make sure that that's who made up this organization. And if you boil down the conflicts that have happened over the years—It's kind of boiled down to that, in terms of the vision for the organization and who we represent and what's the best strategy, moving forward. All really good intentions and—

KWON: Always.

33:39

CHOI: Some might argue that there were some leadership issues, but in my heart of hearts, I feel as though there's always been good intentions, but differences in terms of approach and focus and the path forward. So I think that's always been at the heart of it.

KWON: I know you said that you're not very good with dates, but do you remember approximately when you joined the organization? Was it at its founding you were there or—

CHOI: You mean APIC?

KWON: Yeah, APIC.

CHOI: Yeah, I was very much there at its founding, and I've definitely been involved as a supporter, as a board member, or as a staff at different times. The biggest vacuum now is—since the time that they decided to close down HOPE [Health, Opportunity, Problem Solving, Empowerment project] is probably when I—you know, whatever the term is—severed ties with—What was the name at that time?

KWON: ACRJ [Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice].

34:59

CHOI: (laughs) ACRJ. That's right. You're helping me. Yeah, because I was disappointed that HOPE was [shut down, and] they weren't going to continue the work in LA or in Southern California.

KWON: When did you co-chair with Karen Chin?

CHOI: So I'm trying to look at this period. I would probably say leading— (pointing to 1993 on the timeline) so during this period right here, leading up to the Beijing Conference and Opening Doors [Conference].

KWON: So like '93 to '95?

CHOI: Yeah. I would say—

KWON: Oh,, so you were the co-chairs after Mary Chung had left?

CHOI: Gosh. When did Mary Chung leave?

KWON: Well, she founded NAWHO [National Asian Women's Health Organization] in '93.

CHOI: Yeah.

KWON: So I'm assuming she had left the organization.

CHOI: Yeah. Actually that's true that I—After I went back to LA, of course, that limited my ability to be really active, and I got involved again—so there was this crazy period (pointing at around 1992 on the timeline) where things weren't going too well (laughs).

KWON: Okay.

CHOI: And I can't say when it started to all deteriorate, but—so I got involved when APIRH's leadership came into question. I wasn't on the board or anything like that, and then I got re-involved when, of course, Mary had left. I'm not quite clear when I officially became the co-chair, but, you know, clearly there was a time when we needed to have leadership in place between Mary Chung and Yin [Ling Leung]. So some time in there, I'm not sure exactly the date, but I know I was very involved prior to Beijing and Opening Doors, so—and that all happened in the same year, but [I co-chaired] for at least a couple years, so yeah.

36:37

KWON: I actually haven't been able to find anyone who knows of or are willing to speak on the development of NAWHO or what NAWHO was or who was in it or where did it go?

CHOI: Oh,, you haven't been able to talk to anybody?

KWON: No.

CHOI: Oh,, okay.

KWON: So I was wondering if you could talk at least a little bit about it or the relationship between APIRH and NAWHO or what exactly it was. I just can't find any archival information on it. They don't even have a website, so.

CHOI: NAWHO doesn't any more?

KWON: No, they don't.

38:12

CHOI: Oh,.

KWON: And I know all their reports and things like that were online, and the website's not available, so—yeah, I just haven't been able to—

CHOI: Oh,, so it might not exist anymore?

KWON: I'm pretty sure it doesn't exist.

CHOI: Wow. See, I didn't even know that.

KWON: Oh,, yeah.

CHOI: Yeah, I can tell you a little bit about the history. So it sounds like you heard a lot about Mary Chung and then what happened. Essentially, the board made a decision that they didn't want Mary Chung to be the Executive Director—

KWON: Mhmm. Had she previously been Executive Director?

CHOI: I think she was—I don't know if it was Executive Director or Director of APIRH. She might've even been the coordinator. I'm not sure what the title was to be very honest. I told you. I warned you about that [my memory].

NAWHO was formed by Mary Chung, and it was pretty much in direct response to her wanting to continue the work that she was doing at APIRH. But of course, NAWHO wasn't just focused on reproductive justice, but it did have—there's no mistaking that it was in response to the fact that she couldn't continue her work as a staff person at APIRH.

KWON: And the reason she left the organization, was it personal reasons or the vision that she had formulated for APIRH didn't really correspond to what the board had wanted?

39:49

CHOI: I wasn't on the board at that time. I think there wasn't confidence in her leadership, and I believe it had to do with her approach, her priorities, perhaps lack of communication to the board, and not a sense of that she was on mission or in keeping with the mission of the organization. And I think they felt pretty strongly that it was not going in the direction that the board had understood it should be going, in keeping with the mission. And you know, I'll just say that it was a very messy situation where it wasn't her choice to leave; I think it was made for her. That's always an unfortunate situation when that happens, when there isn't a mutual agreement that it's in the best interest of the organization and the best interest with the parties involved that you should part ways. So it was a bad situation in that regard.

And so in many ways, NAWHO was in direct response to that experience of Mary Chung and her wanting to continue her work. It was definitely a challenge to APIRH. Because, on one hand, you have this very public situation where the Director—or whatever the position was—was pushed out of the organization, and I say pushed out meaning that, again, board didn't have confidence in her. And I think there was some really bad publicity around that, so much so that funders were contacted. So it was a direct challenge to APIRH, in terms of leadership, stability, and, of course, funders and the broader community asking, What's happened? So I think

that was a very difficult time for APIRH. A lot of former supporters and some of us were called and brought into the situation and asked to help, which I think included Doreena Wong, and others—Yin, other folks, myself.

So NAWHO was trying to position itself as a national women's organization. APIRH for a large part was very statewide. I mean, it was not doing national work. It was the only Asian American organization, at that time, working on reproductive justice issues, so by default, it was part of a national conversation. Because if you're part of the reproductive justice movement, and you want to make sure it's inclusive, APIRH was always called: We need an Asian face. Get somebody from APIRH. But our work was very grounded locally, and at that time, it was like we were very Bay Area but trying to say, Oh,, we should be broader. So that was always the tension. What's the scope? Where do we want to deeply be planted?

So in that regard, NAWHO positioned itself as a national organization, working on reproductive justice but also other women's health issues. And I think in that regard, Mary Chung really did well, because she had a national stage [and] could talk about a range of health issues, including reproductive justice. I do feel like it was a challenge to APIRH, and I think for the longest time, APIRH was at a disadvantage, because you are trying to repair damage that was done, whereas NAWHO had [a] very fresh start. It could have some baggage, if people knew what the history was, but it also was a brand new organization putting itself out [there], having a lot of control over its image and what it was about, which is a very different situation, if you're an organization that's been around and has this history. Yeah, and to be very honest, I think APIRH was always operating under that cloud, Well, what is our relationship to NAWHO? And all those existing funders—there's only a small number of reproductive justice funders, right? And so they're like, APIRH? NAWHO? Asian American organizations face that anyways, where they're like, Well, we already fund that one Asian organization, so. And if they're trying to fund the big organization that can help them meet all their quotas, so to speak, NAWHO looks really attractive. So I think it [APIRH] was always under that cloud and—Boy, I'm just airing all the dirty laundry. But I think that was real, and APIRH for the longest time was crawling out from under that perception of leadership vacuum, it seems to have this history of staffing issues and challenges around that, and funders know about it.

And then the other thing that was more damaging than funders—because funders come and go—is the community. So here's the API community, and they're like, What happened? And then whose side do you choose, or what's the real story? And for the most part, if I'm a community organization, I'd be like, Oh,, I don't want to get involved in that. So I think it created a challenge for APIRH, because I'm not necessarily—I don't know about NAWHO as well. [The challenge] was,

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Is APIRH about the future and progress? Or is it so mired in something that was not a good story that was out there? A lot of repair work and, I think, trying not to focus on the damage and really focusing on the future was going to be really critical. So I think that's the case, and I'm surprised that NAWHO might not exist anymore, at least their physical presence on the internet doesn't—

KWON: Yeah. I haven't been able to find anything. I know they were existing at least when the book was written for *Undivided Rights* because they had interviewed APIRH, NAWHO, and had done like a chapter on each of the sections. But I don't think it exists anymore. I haven't been able to contact anyone who was in the organization. Do you know if it was a very big organization considering that it was a national organization? Or was it just based in D.C., like a political center?

48:18

CHOI: Yeah. I think at different times, they had fairly ample staff, depending on funding. I definitely know that Mary Chung was always the face of the organization, was always the spokesperson, but I couldn't tell you the number of staff. And I'm trying to even think of people that were involved. I mean, I think Mary was very effective in getting funders and other national women of color reproductive rights groups to be on her advisory board and so forth. But I'm not sure even who her staff was, you know, to even refer you to. Yeah. She did have one funder [champion]—Jael Silliman.

KWON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. She's the one that—

50:08

CHOI: Does that name sound familiar?

KWON: Yeah, well, she's the one that wrote the book.

CHOI: Oh, yeah. That's right. Of course (laughs). So yeah, she's going to definitely have a perspective. I think she was on the board of NAWHO. I don't know if that was disclosed, but definitely, she was a big supporter of NAWHO, so.

KWON: Yeah, I just also wanted to do a quick time check.

CHOI: Yeah.

KWON: I was wondering when you were available till?

CHOI: Oh,. I'm available till 5 or whenever. Do you have to run off?

KWON: No, no, no.

CHOI: Okay.

KWON: I just wanted to finish things before you probably had meetings and things like that.

CHOI: I don't have any other meetings scheduled.

KWON: Oh,, okay.

CHOI: Yeah

KWON: Let's see, and you were also talking about the Open—

50:56

CHOI: Opening Doors?

KWON: Opening Doors Conference. So were you in charge of organizing that?

CHOI: Yeah, I was one of the folks in charge of that. Yeah.

KWON: I was actually at the API Women's Summit—I don't know if you know Amy Lam (inaudible)—

CHOI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

KWON: And at the beginning she was saying, This is the first coming together of all API community members since the Opening Doors Conference 20 years ago. So was that also based in the community and focused on bringing community members together?

CHOI: Yeah, you know, at the BMOC [Boys and Men of Color] Symposium, I actually told a story of Opening Doors, but I think you had come in later, so you missed it. As I shared at the BMOC symposium, my thinking around gender equity and stuff dates back to Opening Doors, and it really started at a time when APIRH was asking itself the question, What kind of organization are we, and who are we really serving? And that's when the framing went from choice to expanding—and we had been evolving our framing around our work for quite some time, but we really wanted to challenge ourselves to say, Well, if we're really about reproductive health—and I think at that time [the framework] was reproductive rights—we really need to understand what the issues are for immigrant and refugee women, and in particular, the most vulnerable parts of our communities, so low-income, limited English speaking women.

And so this idea of Opening Doors came about. We had zero money for it, just this big idea of, What if we did a gathering? We decided to do it in Sacramento. And that's where the Asian Women's Shelter got involved and other women, mostly in the Bay Area, and we said, What do

you think about this idea of gathering women to talk about health, and to talk about health and well-being and really have an expansive definition of what that means? And we got a lot of traction. We had Asian Health Services, Asian Women's Shelter, Asian Community Mental Health Services, so all these organizations, which is the only way that we could pull this off, because it really took a lot to get women to come to this gathering. Because we didn't just want advocates to be there. We really wanted the clients and the women who are most impacted to come, we really wanted young people to be there, so we had to think outside the box. And so we gathered busloads of women, and it took all these [organizations]—Asian Health Services, Asian Women's Shelter—to get them to convince their clients and the people that use their services and the people that they worked with to come to an all-day thing, get in a bus, go to Sacramento. We had to get multilingual headsets, we had to get interpreters. It was a big deal. And again, no money (laughs).

The idea was to do an “unconference,” and it was like, no panels, no speeches, just creating talking circles and creating a space for women to talk, and no agenda other than that. So actually this idea of HOPE and KGA [Khmer Girls in Action] goes all the way back to that space, which was—I ended up sitting in one of the talk circles, and it was with Laotian women. They were talking about, What are the issues that are really important to you? And through an interpreter, I listened to the Laotian women talk about, Well, what I'm really concerned about are opportunities for my daughters, lack of opportunities. And what are the resources for my daughters? And that's where this idea came about. Well, what are the programs we have in our community that specifically serve young women and girls?

So that seed was planted, and at that time—and this is how I connected to the Boys and Men of Color work was—my political framing was always, we looked at gender, but we only looked at it from the perspective of women and girls. And from my perspective, at that time, we looked at men in particular—not so much boys—as the barriers to the advancement of women and girls. Because some of the issues that we were dealing with were, How do we get the women to be able to participate in a daylong activity? Well, they have to get permission from their husbands, we have to make sure that there's childcare because we can't leave the kids their husbands because they don't want to take care of the kids. So it was always like, Okay. The men are the obstacles. How do we overcome them? And I think, obviously, in hindsight, that was the incorrect way of looking at it, because unless we look at whole communities and whole families and what's happening with men and their challenges, it's going to be very hard to uplift whole families and communities. At the same time, there's this whole international discussion about, If you want to change communities, you need to invest in women and girls. Because we know that when you invest in women, they take care of other people in their family. Say you invest in their education,

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they'll use their education to invest in the family. When they're educated about health and nutrition, it benefits the whole family. So we were operating at this level of international development, and that continues to this day, but we also have to take into consideration the challenges of boys and men.

And I'll link back to that with KGA, too, because, again, that—there were so many things that came out of Opening Doors, but one of the key things that stays with me today has been about the opportunities and how do you deal with things—what's our vision for the future versus just focusing on the disparities and what's not working? So I think that's been key, and the importance of community voice and having the community be always at the center of everything that we do.

So I think, from that point on, that really changed the DNA of APIRH, and what influenced the formation of this ACRJ was that, Okay. We were very clear that, yes, we wanted young women who were in college to be a part of what we do, but we also wanted to work directly with young women who were not college-bound, who had different life chances. And I think we became more and more clear about who we were working with and what would be important to focus [on]. So that's why I think Amy [Lam] was very much involved in the reaching college-aged women and their strategies of engaging young women on that level. and some of the early thinking around why HOPE was formed and those early days of meeting the young girls, starting those conversations in the malls and a lot of that; and why I continued to be involved with HOPE and KGA, and then during the interim [serving as executive director]. Yeah.

KWON: So what was exactly your role with KGA then? You were executive director, but when was KGA officially founded?

CHOI: (Looking at timeline) Thank you for this chart because it's really helping me. It seems like I always get involved when things—

1:01:21

KWON: fall apart?

CHOI: implode.

(Both laugh)

which—I don't know what that's saying about me but that seems to be a pattern. I helped to get HOPE started, meaning once there was a decision that we were going to go statewide—and this is pre-Eveline [Shen] and during Yin's time—I had started the conversations in LA and in Orange County and eventually in Long Beach. I helped to facilitate some of the conversations about, you know, "APIRH's thinking about expanding, and we were wanting to learn more about the needs and issues of young women and girls." That introduced me to Mary Anne [Foo] in OCAPICA

[Orange County Asian Pacific Islanders Community Alliance], and I got to know Que Dang at APAIT [Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team], the AIDS intervention organization. Basically, I talked with every Asian American woman that was working on health issues. Thai Health and Information Referral, OCAPICA, that's how I got in contact with Sora [Park Tanjasiri], that's how I got in contact with Asian Pacific Health Care Venture. So I just talked with everybody (laughs). And it was through that process that [I] came to the conclusion that if we were going to be place-based or work in any community, that Long Beach made a lot of sense. And so I talked with a lot of folks in the Long Beach area [such as] St. Mary's [Medical Center], because they were working very closely with the Southeast Asian community there. All roads kind of led to Long Beach and working in the Cambodian community.

For good or for bad, that's where the name "HOPE" came from. I was writing a proposal, and I needed something really catchy—and I don't think you should ever title a program like that, but we had to do this; I had to get this grant in. And that's when HOPE was formed, and I was involved in getting it off the ground, in that level. And then, let's see (looking at timeline). When I got involved again—so I was involved at the establishment, and I actually somehow convinced Que to be the director (laughs), and you know from her—did you actually interview her?

KWON:

No. I've just heard about her through Sophya [Chum].

1:04:52

CHOI:

Okay. So Que was there, and she was really critical in the development of HOPE and the focus at that time around youth development, I would say. I think it was youth development and some organizing, because they were starting to look at—I think they identified sexual harassment as one of their campaigns (inaudible) and sexual harassment. I think that's when they got involved in the issue of deportation. So I really credit Que and Diep [Tran] and the folks during that time of working on curriculum and securing funding—multi-year funding—and support, and just the intense intense work of working with young people. Because, of course, you're not just dealing with one part of their life. You're dealing with a whole array of issues from mental health to academic to family issues. That's where we learned a lot about the generational effects of PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] and violence in its many forms. So I really really credit them a lot.

And then I got involved—and they were doing just really really well, and then of course, there was that decision to discontinue HOPE. I think you might've gathered that there was a difference of opinion about how this work should be led and how it should be driven. It'd be good for you to hear Eveline's perspective on it and others who are familiar with that period, too. I think you talked about interviewing Lisa Ikemoto? She was there during that time and others. Very painful time. I wasn't involved on the board or with HOPE on a staff level or board level, so I have a little

bit of distance from it. But I was definitely brought in after the fact and in some of the conversations about, Do we want to continue the work that HOPE built and perhaps in a different form? And that's when KGA came about. But I think that was a really painful time—of course, because of the whole history with NAWHO, it was sort of like, Oh, no. Not again! It's like, Oh, my gosh. Can an organization survive that kind of damage and pain? And I think this was on a different order. It was much more painful because there were the girls that were involved—the HOPE girls and the work that was happening in Richmond. There were young women involved. During the NAWHO/APIRH state, it was, you know, everyone was adults. I wouldn't say it was less ugly, but when you involve young people, it just takes it up to a whole other level of just—I don't know how to explain it, but it just does. On that level, I think it was—that's probably why passions were so high, too, and the inability to find common ground, because I think when you feel so passionate and that you feel like you're speaking on behalf of and in the best interest of the young women that were involved, there was just no common ground because each side felt like, I'm speaking on behalf of the young women who are going to be impacted by this issue. So that I think took it to a whole other—like epic proportions (laughs).

And then I would say moving forward, channeling that anger and disappointment and heartbreak—I think, is a good term—to starting KGA. And then I got involved again, and mostly, I have to say I got involved again because I wanted to just connect with the girls. We didn't have a meeting place, so we met at some of the members' homes and we met at the mall, like in a corner of a mall. And we just began starting those conversations again, and then I had the great fortune of—I can't remember the exact timing, but I received a violence prevention award, through the California Wellness Foundation, and part of that was I got project money, and I used it to support our meetings and get food and do little things like that and to start the project. I think actually that award happened once we formed KGA, so scratch that. We actually formed KGA with sheer will and no resources, and then the project money came in later, that I can talk about later, but. So that was my involvement between HOPE and KGA and that formation, and then of course, I wasn't the—so, of course, Que continued as the executive director and then I came as the interim, when she decided it was time for her to transition.

1:10:09

KWON: Oh, wow.

1:12:22

CHOI: Yeah, I know. I'm like, "Wow. It's like a soap opera or a drama series." Yeah, there was a lot, there was a lot. And to this day, you know, you probably have gotten—There's a lot of pain. A lot of people having very very strong feelings about it, but hopefully are in a different place. Time gives you a different perspective, you know?

KWON: Yeah, yeah.

CHOI: Yeah.

KWON: I actually read your article. I don't know what it was called. It was like "Public Struggles, Private something"—it was like part of a book? ["Public Agendas and Private Struggles" in *Embodying Asian/Asian American Sexualities*]

CHOI: Oh, gosh.

KWON: that you wrote with—

CHOI: with Sora? (laughs)

KWON: Yeah, with all these people. It was an article that I read for my Asian American Activist class.

CHOI: Oh, my gosh.

KWON: Yeah, it was really interesting. I had talked about it with other people, like with Amy [Lam], and she had been like, Oh,, I hadn't even known that that had happened. And I told Sophya, and she's like, Well, I knew that happened, but I never read the article, and so yeah. It's good that you guys documented the history.

1:13:19

CHOI: Yeah, you know, that was Sora. That was really—I owe that to Sora. Yeah, there was a lot of details about [how] when KGA formed, it really tried to challenge ACRJ. Because there was funding involved, there was perceptions and credit, and because ACRJ had done some research reports, and that's what that article was challenging—that whole school of thought around community-based research. And what's a good way to do it? What's a bad way to do it? There was a lot of energy to try to hold ACRJ accountable, and I get why people wanted to do that, but then I also wondered, Was that a good way to channel how you challenge? Because it got pretty public, like I think there was an incident—I wasn't involved in it—where Eveline and the co-author Ann something [Ann Cheatham] were presenting their findings to a graduate class or something like that, and some of the KGA members showed up and—yeah, it was kind of like a public shaming.

KWON: Right.

CHOI: Yeah. Yeah, I mean that's one way to do it, one way to approach it. And people felt very strongly that they wanted to do that.

1:15:30

KWON: I'm sorry you have to cover all this like sad stuff.

CHOI: Yeah, but you know what? I learned so much. Yeah, and I actually reconnected with Eveline. I think that was really great, and it seems like ACRJ is in a really great place. KGA is in a great place.

KWON: Yeah, [ACRJ] renamed to Forward Together though.

CHOI: Yeah, yeah, yeah. They renamed themselves Forward Together. I was like, "Oh, my god."

KWON: Again?

CHOI: "You changed your name again?" So that's good. I mean, it's all about growth and learning, and I think the saddest part about all these different periods of conflict has been all the energy into—these distractions took away from our ability to have an impact in the field. But it's what happens, if you're not paying very close attention to, Are we staying on mission? Who are we serving? And being very clear about that at every juncture and making sure that who you're working with, who you're serving, who the leadership [is] all reflects that, and that's vital. I carry those lessons with me, wherever I go. Believe me.

KWON: We covered a little bit about APIRH and NAWHO, but I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about NAPAWF [National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum] as well, to the extent that you were involved with it.

1:17:03

CHOI: Yeah. I was definitely there in the beginning. I guess they call me one of the Founding Mothers or whatever. I think it's just because I'm old (laughs). Of course, you know the history of—the idea was spurred by the fact that all these amazing Asian American women connect in Beijing at the tent, and they did a call for Asian Americans and other women from around the [world]. And it was this question of, Why does it take a UN [United Nations] conference on women for us to connect and to be aware of each other's work, and to even collaborate or to have some kind of a shared vision or agenda? So someone asked the question. That was a really good question, and I think those set of conversations came about in Beijing in those tents, in those wet, muddy tents, from what I heard reports from.

And from there—and I think, as you know, the Beijing Conference, the way that those UN conferences work is there's all this pre-work that happens prior to the gathering. And so there was all this momentum and excitement in the fact that it was happening in an Asian country, which is why I think the Ms. Foundation and others found the resources to support grassroots Asian American women's organizations to

be there. It just became this really incredible moment to say, as Asian American women, who were in diverse fields—there were labor activists, there were women working on reproductive justice issues, community economic development. We were all part of this ecology, this movement, but felt like there was this lack of a space where women could be our full selves and to be able to look at a myriad of issues and how they intersect. And also Asian American women, who were forced to leave their identity as women. So there was this hunger for a space to look at, What are the opportunities to work intersectionally and to bring together incredible women activists and people, who were working in the community on a range of issues, to come together? So that's this idea of a formation.

I think the folks loathed the idea of forming another organization or creating—nobody wanted to create more work for themselves. So it really had to build on what people were doing, but do it in a way that was coordinated and built their agenda and their work based on what was happening locally and regionally. So they didn't want a D.C. formation that assumed what the interests of Asian American women were nationally. From the very beginning, it was very much from the ground up. NAPAWF needed to be diverse, it needed to be regionally/ethnically [diverse]. It was impossible to work on every single issue, but could we come up with a platform? Economic development, Health and Well-being, Human Rights. Could we come up with a shared sense of what was important for progressive [women]? And we were very clear. It was progressive API women. We weren't trying to be everything to everyone. So from the very beginning, that was part of the DNA, which is why it's chapter-based or structured, so I think that's good. And from the very beginning, there were challenges to NAPAWF, like was it a welcoming space for lesbian, queer, and transgender people? There were challenges to whether young women had a place. So from the very beginning, you get women—progressive women—together, we're going to want, from the very beginning, a clear sense that it was going to be inclusive, it was going to build on great work that was happening, and you'll probably hear from others its evolution from that time, so yeah.

KWON: Have you kept in touch with NAPAWF or kept tabs on it?

CHOI: Yeah, yeah. Definitely. Definitely. Under Kiran [Ahuja] and under Miriam [Yeung], I think it's taken on different approaches, and I think they've done an incredible job of keeping the work connected to what's happening on the ground, but also doing work that regional work can't do, which is keeping their focus on federal policy and national policy and raising the visibility of API issues. Yeah.

1:22:58

KWON: Yeah, I actually went to their summit in the spring, and I met Miriam. [The summit] was for the chapters, but I just went because I wanted to meet people. They also recently sued the state of Arizona, which is

ridiculous. So it's like it's a huge organization that has a lot of power. I think it's really great.

CHOI: I think they've really grown it, so—yeah, I just think it's—and then to have Kiran running the White House Initiative. It's like, Wow.

KWON: Yeah, that's insane.

CHOI: Yeah, I know, right?

KWON: Yeah.

CHOI: Yeah.

KWON: I was wondering if you wanted to take a look [at the timeline] and see if you wanted to add anything, maybe? Also with the events, I know the Opening Doors, you talked about, and the Beijing Conference, but do you also know anything about the relationship with SisterSong for various organizations or the March for Women's Lives, which used to be March for Choice?

1:24:09

CHOI: Yeah, I have to say, I wasn't as involved with these events. Like I had mentioned in the very beginning, before APIRH, there were no Asian American organizations as part of the landscape. We were the Asian face to the issue, so I think other women of color organizations tried to include us, and we also asserted ourselves in those spaces. Through NAPAWF and through ACRJ, we've definitely had a presence and have been a part of those efforts. I really can't say, with any great depth, [anything about] those specific events.

KWON: Yeah, then let me ask you the last follow-up/wrap-up question.

CHOI: Yeah, sure.

KWON: I was also personally interested in your choice to become involved with AAPIP after your various different roles in different organizations. And then also what you envision for the future. What issues still need to be addressed—

1:25:44

CHOI: Wow.

KWON: for Asian American women, and if maybe that ties into your choice to take on this role in AAPIP and doing philanthropy work.

CHOI: Yeah. Oh, my goodness. Let's see. Well, what's interesting is I was just leaving Khmer Girls in Action, because we had found an Executive

Director. And I get a call from Peggy, and she says, Hey, what are you doing? And I said, “Oh,, we just found Suely [Ngouy]. I’m so excited.” And then she talked to me about this idea, which was to work on this campaign called the National Gender and Equity Campaign. It’s actually connected to NAPAWF and philanthropy, in the sense that prior to the National Gender and Equity Campaign, AAPIP and NAPAWF and a whole host of other activist women, including Lora Jo Foo and Beckie Masaki and all those others, had been meeting with Ford [Foundation]. Are you aware of the *Asian American [Women]*? There’s a book that Lora Jo Foo wrote.

KWON: (nods)

CHOI: Okay. You’re familiar?

KWON: Yeah.

1:27:39

CHOI: Okay. Perfect. And that was a 5-year campaign to get Ford to support [or] to even have in any interest in Asian American women’s issues, because—I think you know the history that the program officer, Barbara Phillips, at that time, inherited their women’s rights portfolio. She looked at it, and she was like, Where are the women of color? And then specifically, there were no Asian American women’s organizations that were being supported. So that’s kind of the genesis of that conversation that led to the book [*Asian American Women* by Lora Jo Foo], which is all what philanthropy’s about. We need to familiarize philanthropy with the issues and data, and that’s part of the equation, I think, of working in philanthropy, as I’ve learned.

So I was asked to join and help to co-lead that with Bo Thao-Urabe. I had no idea that I was going be working at AAPIP or any desire [to]; it wasn’t part of my plan or anything. I wasn’t like, “Oh,, you know, had that on my personal chart.”

But I forgot to mention that I worked at a foundation, for about three to four years. I kind of joke, because I feel like all of my experiences led me to be able to have the perspective that I do, to be able to do my job at AAPIP. Meaning that, I’ve worked my entire adult life in the non-profit sector, working on a range of issues—so working at the very very grassroots level, where I’m cleaning the toilets to working with national organizations like on environmental justice issues or what have you, and working on direct services level to trying to impact policy and funding.

So I had that experience, and then I also had the experience of working or being on the board of a national foundation. And that was a great experience because this was a foundation that was very committed to building the social justice infrastructure, which I have to say there are not a lot of those foundations. So I actually had the positive experience of being in a foundation that really valued supporting that work, and I

1:30:11

learned a lot about that. And then working inside a foundation and learning about what it means to philanthropy professional, and what the opportunities are and what the limitations are of working in a foundation. If you want to be about rapid change and about the revolution, you're not going to work in philanthropy. So I think having that perspective is really important.

Now, fast forward, working at AAPIP. I got to work on the National Gender & Equity Campaign, which was working at AAPIP but working with organizations directly, and actually funding and looking at how you can support their capacity to be effective in the field. So it was a little bit removed from what I'm doing now. I was very focused on this project of working directly with Asian American organizations in California and in Minnesota, because that was kind of our scope, and [it was] basically a pilot project. If a foundation was interested in supporting Asian Americans, what could that look like? And what kind of investments do Asian American organizations need to be effective? I think that's been a great opportunity to really learn from that, and I think you know that AAPIP had the privilege of getting a significant grant from Ford to be able to do a lot of experimentation and learning from that.

And so what I do now at AAPIP is primarily—so my position has shifted a lot over the years, but primarily I feel like AAPIP is in a great position right now, because we are a member-supported organization [with] people who work in philanthropy and people who lead Asian American organizations. So we're definitely, squarely in the philanthropic sector. And what we're trying to do is, if you will, we're trying to organize our people in philanthropy. How do we equip them to be the best advocates and to be a part of a broader effort to hold philanthropy more accountable in the field? What do we do with a situation where since the founding of AAPIP, none of the regions or nationally has foundation giving been adequate, especially if you look at the growth of our communities. So what can we do to address that?

1:32:34

We're in a great position to be able to support at the local level, as well as the national level, strategies that are all about—whether you're in Philadelphia or in New York, where they have tons of national foundations, but actually very little of it goes locally. Most of the money goes out nationally or internationally. Or if you're in Philadelphia, where there's very little foundations. No matter where you are in the philanthropic sector, if you want to get involved in increasing resources for the API community, join the AAPIP chapter and be a part of that conversation.

To be very specific, there was a conversation in Philadelphia where they got together—Asian Americans who are actually trustees of foundations. So they're actually on the board. Twenty years ago, you could count them all in one hand, but now there are quite a number of them. They had this initial conversation. It was just five Asian Americans who are trustees, and they had the conversation about, What can we do to

raise the profile of Asian American communities? And what could we do to inform the philanthropic sector? So right now, there's a conversation of, What kind of research would be of value? What would be of interest to philanthropy in that region? And part of it is that they don't know enough about the Asian American community. They don't understand the diversity. Philadelphia, for the longest time, has been under a black and white paradigm, and of course, that's changing in Philly, and that's changing across the country. With this latest census report, we can actually point to the data and say, What more do we want to learn about that?

AAPIP is also part of a national movement to support giving circles, which is building on our own assets, because one of the things that we shouldn't fall in the trap of is like this "race to the bottom." So we don't want to say, Well, we're poor, too! And we're the least educated, too! And we have crime, too! I mean, that's definitely one path that we could take. What we want to make sure is that we're not missing from the conversation, and that in fact, by including us [and] by including our communities, we can be part of identifying what the problems are, but we also could be a part of identifying what the solutions are. Because in fact, our communities—despite the fact that there's not been enough funding—has been pushing forward and having an impact. And the other part of that is we want to build on the fact that there are parts of our communities that are doing well. So how do we harness that as well? How do we harness the fact that people do want to give back? And so the giving circle's become a great vehicle for not just the billionaires and the millionaires, but everyday people like you and me. And one of the things that we've learned is that people want to do that in community, they want to do that learning together, and giving circle has become a really great vehicle to do that. Because one of the other perceptions that Asian American face—misperceptions—is that we're not philanthropic. So we want to really counter that.

1:36:16

So how this all connects to my life's work and kind of what I've seen over the years is that I am concerned by the fact that there's not enough resources to support the work that our communities are involved in. One of the reasons why I've been so passionate about our Boys and Men of Color work is that it's a continuation of what I saw at KGA, which was—even when I was working with the girls there, and we were working on reproductive justice issues, that's where I learned about deportation, that's where I learned about the fact that you can't just deal with reproductive prevention issues with girls and not deal with their partners, that's where I learned first-hand about that, Oh, yeah, they are concerned about reproductive health issues, but one of the things that they're worried about is walking home from school and not getting shot in a drive-by. And the Trayvon Martin case, you know, I think it elevates the issue that certain parts of our communities are at peril and are at high risk for not making it, are at high risk of being lost in the system, are at high risk of

being torn apart from families. And if we don't look at these issues more holistically, I think we're going to lose a generation. We're going to risk, I think—there's a generational impact, if we don't pay attention to these issues.

So take one issue that's very topical, which is mass incarceration. One of the things that we know is that there are certain segments of the API population that are in the system more than others, like Southeast Asian and Pacific Islanders. They're categorized as "Others" in our prison system. And I think you've been following the hunger strike that's happening in our California system right now. The conditions there are horrible to begin with, and Asian Americans get lost in that—in a whole host of issues that affect that population generally. And one of the largest segments of the whole prison-industrial complex is immigration-related detention, and of course, that affects Arab, Middle Eastern Muslims, that affects AAPIs. And so that's a real opportunity for us to work with other communities of color to reverse some of the bad policies, both at the federal and at the state level.

So I think that, for me, it takes resources to be able to—resources aren't the only thing, but it takes some resources, and what I get excited about is AAPIP's all about leadership. So we want to support the leaders in the community, who are leading this very important work and driving this important work, and those are the people who are most impacted. You know, I get really passionate about Eddie Zhang and Harrison Seuga, who are leading the efforts to support formerly incarcerated and people who are still in the [prison] system. I get excited about Charles Sanchez, who's our DREAM intern, and Catherine Eusebio, who's now on staff as our fellow, because of the opportunities to support undocumented youth and their ability to lead and be a part of the movement.

So I get excited over the fact that as AAPIP, we can bring a little bit of resources, we can kind of convene people and—it's all about organizing people. Whether you're in philanthropy or outside of philanthropy, it's all about organizing and advocating for what's just and fair, and that includes just and fair, equitable resources. So that's part of the equation. Foundations are not the answer, but they need to be held accountable. Government is not the answer, but they still need to be held accountable. So it's working all those sides, and I think AAPIP has a role in that. I mean, do I get excited about how slow philanthropy is and how resistant to change [it is]? No, but this work is about finding opportunity, and it's always about using opportunity, leveraging timeliness of issue—so a lot of what we do, too, is like, Okay. What's happening broadly that we can capitalize on? Affordable Health Care Act. Immigration. What's happening in the prison system? I mean, talk about a platform for all the things that we're working on. So I think it's all about finding those silver linings and with matching up the resources and the opportunities, I think.

1:43:04

KWON:

Yeah, well, we're over time. I'm sorry.

CHOI: Oh, yeah. Oh, god.

KWON: I didn't want to cut you off.

CHOI: No, no, no. That's okay.

KWON: But I just wanted to thank you for not only the interview, but also the work that you do here, so—yeah.

CHOI: Great.

KWON: Oh, my gosh. That's great. Let me just—let's see—just turn this off.

END OF INTERVIEW