

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

MARY LUKE

Interviewed by

JUHEE KWON

July 22, 2013
Providence, Rhode Island

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Narrator

Mary Luke (b. 1943) was born in Providence, Rhode Island to one of the few Chinese families in the area. Her parents were immigrants from Canton, China, and her family ran a Chinese restaurant called Luke's in Providence. Luke received her B.A. and M.A. in Mental Health Nursing from Boston University, as well as another M.A. in Business Administration from Golden Gate University.

From 1990 to 1998, she held leadership positions at The Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) and as vice president for programs and director of the USAID-funded ACCESS Project. Ms. Luke was executive director of Planned Parenthood Alameda-San Francisco from 1980 to 1989. Luke has also served as Asia-Pacific regional director for Planned Parenthood Federation of America-International (formerly Family Planning International Assistance). Luke has served on the board of directors for Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington and the Global Health Council (formerly National Council on International Health) and was a founding member of Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice.

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. Two files: (a) 51 mins 7 secs, (b) 11 mins 17 secs.

Transcript

Transcribed and edited for clarity by Juhee Kwon. Reviewed and approved by Mary Luke.

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Transcript of interview conducted October 20, 2013 with:

MARY LUKE
Providence, Rhode Island

by: JUHEE KWON

KWON: This is Juhee Kwon. Today is October 20, 2013. I'm here with Ms. Mary Luke in Providence, Rhode Island, and this interview is for the Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project. I actually want this interview to be a little bit about your background, and more of a biography style rather than just factual events. So if we could start at the very beginning, where you were born, maybe a little bit about your family, and how you grew up.

LUKE: Great. Well, I'm Mary Luke, and I was born in Providence, Rhode Island exactly 70 years ago.

KWON: Is it your birthday today?

00:38

LUKE: Well, it will be in two weeks, and I was here because my family just had a big birthday party for me. So we were one of the very few Chinese families in Providence. So when we were growing up, we were pretty much just a few Chinese, and that was very interesting. I think when we were at home, we spoke Chinese, and when we went to school, we spoke English. That's how we learned. I went to Classical [High School], and we were again, really one of the very few [Asian] kids in the class, and then one of the few families that started sending their kids to college.

KWON: Was your family an immigrant family?

LUKE: Yes. My father and mother had come over from Canton, China, and they came over with their son. But my father was here before, went back, and got married to his picture bride. And then we had four daughters born here. My sister, Irene, myself, and two other daughters.

KWON: Could you tell me a little bit more about that time? That was before there was a large Asian American population, possibly before we even used the term Asian American—

1:48

LUKE: Oh, very much.

KWON: so what was that experience like?

LUKE: Very much. I think at that time certainly, we were Chinese American, and we ran one of the few Chinese restaurants in Providence, a very good business called Luke's and then Luke's Luau Hut. So a lot of people remember that time. I'd say that it was—in one sense, I think we knew that we were different. But I think that we had a very very close family and very strong family values, and so I think we were able to maneuver being both Chinese on the inside and at home and in the family—culturally, I think our food and just who we are kept us together, and we also had some aunties and uncles, all who worked together in the restaurant. The restaurant was really sort of a real center point. But we all did very well in school, and I think that we were able to manage very well, being of both cultures.

KWON: I don't know if there's an actual story behind this, but when I heard your name—Mary Luke—I noticed that it wasn't a [common] Asian last name. Is there a story behind that, or is that like a translation?

3:03

LUKE: No, I think that—Actually it's a real Chinese name.

KWON: Oh really? Okay.

LUKE: 姓陸 (“seng-luk”). So it actually hasn't been translated. Many of the Lukes actually landed in Seattle. In fact, that's where our family came in, because our clan essentially came through that port as opposed to San Francisco or New York, for instance. And so many of the family actually stayed in Seattle, and Gary Luk for instance, is probably a relative somewhere in there, because his name was translated from Luke to Luk. And some of the other [people] that have close names like that. But ours just stayed as Luke. And it's a small family. The Luke family, even in China, was a very small family.

KWON: Oh okay. So it's not very common.

LUKE: No, it's not very common at all.

KWON: Could you tell me a little bit more about your development of political consciousness? Did that come after you went to college? In high school? At what point did it occur?

4:14

LUKE: Oh I think very much after I went to college, and even went to San Francisco. So I think at college—I was at Boston University and decided to go into nursing because in those days, you were either a nurse or a

teacher. There weren't very many women who were doctors and lawyers, although I think that's what we probably would've wanted to have been if we had a little bit more opportunity. But I was the first person in my family to go to college, and so I was lucky to be able to go—very practically to go into a profession where we knew that you could always find a job. And after graduating from the Bachelor's program and working in New York for about a year, then I got a Master's degree in nursing. I actually taught nursing at Simmons College for a couple years before—then I got married, and we went to San Francisco where my ex-husband's family was. And so that's when I went out to San Francisco.

And I think that's probably the time when any consciousness was—or I was very much—when I went to San Francisco, I was very much part of the Asian community there. Again, at that time, it was really Chinese American, and there was a group called Chinese Americans for Affirmative Action. You may have heard of them. That was really one of the first groups that was really pushing a political agenda and pushing for Chinese Americans to be a part of the justice system and to political life. In fact, many of the political leaders in San Francisco today were all part of that era, all part of deciding that they needed to become politically active in order to make a difference, in order to have impact. And so at that time, I think that the San Francisco Chinese community was fairly active but just kind of learning all about it, and I think in the generations that have—in the decades that have passed, people are really into it. They're very very good at it. And so when I was in San Francisco—Actually the mental health movement, which I was a part of—This was in the early 70s now.

KWON:

Was that when you first moved out to San Francisco?

6:47

LUKE:

Yes. I moved out to San Francisco at the very early 70s. So I worked in the mental health movement for about six or seven years, and that was the time when they were closing out the state hospitals for mental[ly] ill patients and opening up halfway houses, and so I became part of that movement. In fact, one of my first jobs in San Francisco was to open up halfway houses for Chinese American inmates, people who really had been locked up in state hospitals for decades and had no place to go and were pretty lonely, and if they had just been thrown out, they wouldn't have had any place to go. So the Chinese community decided to open up Chinese halfway houses, and that was really—it was a great project. Actually, that's when I really became very much—got into management, and that's pretty much what I've been doing ever since, essentially, is not in counseling or in any of that, but really transitioned into project management positions more and more. So that was probably my first experience in consciousness raising, being part of the Chinese community, being part of the political community, and then doing this mental health project. And then basically—Then I started working in family planning,

and that's how I sort of transitioned out of the mental health area, and the rest of my life has really been based in family planning, reproductive health, and reproductive rights. And that was basically in the late 70s, early 80s. That's when I started in that area.

KWON: Could I ask you a little bit more about the mental health work that you did?

LUKE: Mhmm

KWON: Was there something that catapulted you into that field? I don't know about your experiences, but at least within the Korean American community, there is a large stigma around mental health, so—

8:42

LUKE: Oh very much.

KWON: Yes, so I don't know how you were able to navigate that as well.

LUKE: Mhmm. Well, I think that there is a lot of stigma. Probably still is. But it was—for me, it was just professional at first. And because I had chosen to get a Master's degree in mental health as opposed to going any other direction. It was one way that I could use my educational experience, and mainly what I found was that it was a way for me to become an independent professional. I realized after working for six months in a hospital when I graduated from nursing school, I said, "I don't think I want to be a nurse."

KWON: (laughs) That's all it took?

LUKE: That's all it took. It actually took three months to find that out. And then I decided, Well, I better figure out what else I was going to do. So then I went into the mental health part of nursing, and that actually gave me the freedom to basically be myself and be much more independent and make my own decisions. And this project of working in mental health—So I think it also helped me understand what those issues were all about, the social stigma, the social challenges, and that you have to be aware of all those issues. It isn't just about taking care of somebody, and if you're going to really make a difference, you have to do other things that help people. Moving people into the community meant that you also had to deal with the community. You had to educate them, sensitize them, and it's actually quite interesting that what we do now, which is working on abortion and abortion rights, it's the same thing. There's also a huge amount of stigma in every country and every society. But when you start talking to people and helping them understand what women should be able to do, what choices they should be able to make, they begin to understand a little bit more. It doesn't help everybody overcome the barriers, but it

certainly helps a number of people understand that people lead their lives, and they have to be able to make their own choices about that, especially fundamental choices like having a child or not.

KWON: And then you said you moved into family planning?

11:14

LUKE: Yes. Then I moved into family planning, and basically it was just, at that point, a career change, a good—it was an interesting field. I had never done much in that field before, and it was just time for me to make a change. I had gotten divorced. It was just sort of the right moment to try to do something—I knew that I didn't want to continue to do the mental health work, because I had just spent at that point, probably eight or nine years in it, and I just needed to move on. I certainly didn't know when I went into my first family planning job, which was in a public health department—first time that I had worked with public health department—that it was going to be my career. But that's what it really ended up being. I was in Contra Costa. I don't know if you know the Bay Area very well.

KWON: That sounds familiar.

LUKE: Contra Costa is right outside of Oakland area. Basically I took a position as a family planning manager and started the teenage pregnancy programs and the adolescent family planning prevention programs, and then I probably got the big break. I got recruited to be a director of Planned Parenthood in Oakland, which was part of Planned Parenthood in San Francisco. It was really one of the biggest Planned Parenthoods in the country at that time. This is in the early 80s. That was really when I got into the whole reproductive health area. This Planned Parenthood was one of the largest. It had a full range of programs, both in teenage pregnancy but also in abortion services, and most importantly, because it was in San Francisco, it had a huge media presence. We were always being interviewed by the media, so that was really—so it helped me put together all of my background and all the work in the San Francisco community. That was how I got more catapulted into the limelight and [got] thinking a lot about the policy issues and the [reproductive] rights issues. We did a huge amount of communities in San Francisco, in Oakland, and Hayward areas.

That was also the time when the Planned Parenthoods were being threatened by the Right to Life. That was the time when the crazies were bombing clinics and killing—

KWON: Oh, yes. It was very violent.

LUKE: Yes, and killing doctors and sort of targeting them. So it was a threatening time. The more threatening it became, the more visible the issues became,

and the more we were on television and the news and everything. We had picketers at the clinics, the whole time.

KWON: Right, we still do.

LUKE: We still do, which is pretty scary that it's lasted that long, and this all happened because of *Roe v. Wade*. When *Roe v. Wade* was passed in the early 70s, it took basically about ten years for the anti-choice to get really organized, because they were really thrown off-guard. And in that period of time, it got more and more violent because people really wanted to overturn *Roe*. So we as managers of clinics were caught up in all of that. But I do think that it made a huge difference obviously in the visibility of the issues, but it was also clearly a very divisive issue, as it is today. I mean there is just no question that abortion in the United States is probably more divided today than it ever has been. But in those days, it was really winning *Roe* [that] enabled the clinics to be able to provide the services that were needed, but it also became the target for the anti-choice. We had to have clinic security guards, as I'm afraid there still are today, and we had certainly some problems in our San Francisco clinic and our Oakland clinic. Fortunately, at least in our clinics, we didn't have people were threatened and physically targeted, but I think we were just lucky in that regard. We had our colleagues—We were part of the Planned Parenthood movement all over the country, and certainly we had (inaudible) the poor doctor and nurse who were killed in Massachusetts for instance. So there was certainly a number of Planned Parenthoods that had suffered considerable losses, also physical losses, because of all of this. It was very much a time in the 80s when people were just beginning to take those sides in a much more visible and active way.

14:26

And that was really why this March for Abortion Rights, which happened—I think it was 1988, was critically important. That was the first abortion march of any real consequence, I think, in the U.S. I mean, probably in the 60s and 70s, there was some action, but that was a moment when there was so much—really, the issue was highlighted in public consciousness. That was the time that we decided that to go to this march was critical and it was critical that all groups show their strengths and their commitments to this issue, and that was really the history of Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Choice, was that—I don't know if you know Congressman Norman Mineta. He was Congressman at that time from San Jose. Of course, he became the Secretary of Commerce under President Clinton. He was a senior Congressman and always very much a supporter, certainly of Asian issues, and so he became sort of like a sponsor of this. In fact, we have some pictures of him with all of us in the march. In fact, I have a great picture of us in the march with a big sign, I don't know if you've seen a picture of that.

KWON: With Asian American—?

LUKE: Yes.

KWON: Yes. I think I've seen it in one of my books that I've looked up somewhere.

LUKE: But that was really how it was formed. It was for the purpose of showing our commitment as Asian Americans to this issue, which really had not been at all on the consciousness of Asian Americans. It was something that—again, for Asian Americans, just like in our own family, you don't talk about these issues. These are personal issues that don't—you just don't talk about. People have their own personal beliefs, and there were Asians who were pro-choice and obviously Asians who were anti-choice, but it's not a table talk discussion. But we felt that coming from the San Francisco Bay Area, where I think that there was certainly a lot more political activism—perhaps New York also, but not in these smaller communities—we just felt that it was really important to make a statement. And so we formed this group so that we could actually go to the march and really be seen, and then I think did some real work in the campuses around what it meant, and just like you're doing now, to keep the conversation going and to sensitize the next generation. So that's really—that's how it happened.

18:21

I think it was the right moment when—It was clear, and unfortunately it's clear today that the choice, the reproductive choice, and the reproductive justice movement is very much a White women's movement. There are many many attempts now to try to have it be much more diverse, both from the point of view of ethnic groups. I know that recently the African American groups have gotten much more involved, there are Hispanic groups for choice, I mean there are many other groups now, at least trying, certainly not in a big way, but I think that the efforts have been made to try to really be diverse, and certainly to also involve many more men in the movement. So important, because obviously men make a big difference. They're very important decision makers, in fact.

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And the interesting this about the movement now is that it's stalled, and it's such a shame to see that it's such a divisive now, still, probably more so than it ever has been, and yet we're making huge movements internationally. I've been in international family planning, reproductive health and rights now for 22 years. So when I left Planned Parenthood, I got into international [family planning] to try to do some of the same things. And it's really wonderful to see that in Africa and Asia, especially, there's huge movements and countries and laws that are being changed, policies that are being changed, because countries understand that the old English-based laws for punishing women are really outmoded, and now there is awareness and there's community movements that recognize that these laws should change. And so we're seeing a lot more movement internationally than we are now in the U.S. So we've just come

full circle. Obviously, you know that in China, it's never been an issue, because obviously China's had the exact opposite issues in terms of taking away choice to a large extent. But we have—for instance in Nepal, for the first time ten years ago, abortion was legalized. Women had been actually put into jail. It was one of the few countries women were actually jailed for having an abortion, and they were in jail for years, just by making that decision to have an abortion. Now it's freely available, and it saved a lot of lives because what we know about abortion is that it saves women's lives. It's one of the highest causes of maternal mortality in developing countries, and it's one that whether a woman has a legal right to abortion or not, she's going to have an abortion if she cannot—if she does not want to have another child. And there are many many circumstances under which a woman doesn't want to have another child. So it's really interesting to see that in so many countries now, we're beginning to see progress, and yet back home in the U.S., we're really stalled.

KWON:

I think we've covered a lot. Actually I want to rewind a little bit to talk more about your Planned Parenthood work. You mentioned briefly that abortion rights has historically been a largely White women's movement, and I was wondering if that was true in your experiences working at Planned Parenthood.

23:06

LUKE:

Oh absolutely. In Planned Parenthood, I was out of one hundred and—I think at that time—185 affiliates, I was I think the only Asian director, and there may have been one Asian on the board of that whole Planned Parenthood movement, and there were probably a few—at that point, they were Blacks, they were not African Americans. Maybe one or two Hispanics. So very very much a White movement, and to a fault and to the extent where we actually formed a gender equality group, essentially a group to try to break these this situation where—I think the strategy was, We have to have more leadership because if you have more leadership, then you can start bringing in people at the lower ranks. And so there was a specific effort.

Ken Edelin, for instance, who was one of the foremost doctors in the movement, he was an African American doctor, was very much a leader in this, trying to bring a group of African American doctors and nurses on-board into the movement. I was there to try to bring more Asians into the movement, and so that's the—in the 80s, there was a concerted effort to try to diversify, at least the top ranks of the boards and the directors, because that's where the authority is, that's where the power is. So that then, in the clinics and people serving the public, that we would be able to have a more diverse workforce. I think some progress has been made. I think there's no question that in San Jose, San Francisco, there are many more Asians now in the workforce and who are serving the communities that they're working in. So I think there's been some progress, but it's still pretty much—it's certainly a predominantly a White

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movement. That's why the efforts of the Asian American groups, the Black American groups, to bring more people into the movement has been a specific targeted—and it's got to be through groups like Planned Parenthood, because those are the groups that really are more out there, advocating, it's not the government, it's not some of the other local groups. So our job was to work with some of the local groups, like the Asians for Health and other Asian groups, and that's how we formed Asian Pacific [Islanders for Choice], was to really work with the other Asian groups who were interested in health and bring them into the movement, so they would be more aware of what it meant, although they weren't particularly politically active at that time.

KWON: What about the communities that you were serving? You were naming Oakland, Hayward. Were those largely communities of color?

26:36

LUKE: Yes. Very much so. Certainly Oakland was at least very very diverse in terms of who we were serving, and of course, Oakland was also very close to the Berkeley campus. So there were many many students from Berkeley.

KWON: Oh yes. That's what I heard.

LUKE: Yes, yes. And many teenagers. Of course, in Berkeley area, there were lots and lots of teenagers who were sexually active and needing to have access to private confidential services. So we served a very diverse group, which was really good, and then by having a staff which was more diverse—that was much more helpful. In San Francisco, we were close to the—essentially close to the south of Market [Street], north of Market [Street], there was a community that were a lot of Cambodians. So after a while when we moved into that area, we started serving a lot more Asians as well and that was really good.

KWON: Let's see. What I'm really interested in is—You said before that the Asian American Pacific Islanders for Choice grew out of the March for Abortion Rights? Were you involved in the march other than being a participant or were you able to see the planning process? Do you know who put it on? Just things like that, details you remember. What year it was?

27:45

LUKE: It was—I think it was '88.

KWON: '88? Okay.

LUKE: And it was really a very very critical time to actually have a march. Planned Parenthood was certainly very very much involved in organizing the march. But I was—at that point, was just about on the brink of leaving or maybe had just left, so I wasn't very much involved in the organization

of it. But if you talk to—The Planned Parenthood movement was very much part of it. And I don't know if you were part of the march, I think it was, four or five years ago. 2004.

KWON: The March for Women's Lives?

LUKE: March for Women's Lives.

KWON: No, I wasn't. I was 12.

LUKE: Oh you were 12. Wow.

KWON: So I didn't really know what was going on.

LUKE: That's a generation gap. Well, that march was very interesting, because after that first march in '88, I think this was the next big march. And that march was—we were very much involved in that. I was at Ipas at the time. And in that one, of course, Planned Parenthood again was one of the main organizers, but we made a very specific commitment to have it also be an international march. So our role there—and Planned Parenthood's and others' as well—was to bring people from other countries.

KWON: To the march?

LUKE: To the march. We had a contingent of maybe 50 people from—internationally. We had flags from every country, so there was a visible international component. It was really interesting, because as I said, working internationally, we saw that frankly there was a lot of interest and in some cases more progress than was made in the United States, to the extent where we felt that we're always trying to import, or export, I should say, to other countries, what we've learned, we're so smart, we have it all figured out. But in this case, we really wanted to be able to say that other countries are actually doing better. From our own teams, we had people from all over Africa, we had some Asians, they were from Asia. So it was really nice to see that and for them to just be part of this and begin to understand, Well, what are the issues here?

And the other thing about the march in 2004 was that it was much more diverse. Compared to that first march, where it was a sea of White faces except for a few little groups, this march explicitly was much more diverse. I mean a huge amount of effort [was made] to bring in many many many different groups. There were Students for Choice as well from all over, so it was really—you could tell that there had been a great deal of progress in this area, a great deal of campus organizing on diverse campuses, which is so critical to all of these movements, just like there are today. I think just bringing in—and then I think to not only—The march is not only about the march, it's really about visit to the hill, etc., so this

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march in 2004, I think, was very very successful. I think the press played it down, but when we saw the—I don't know if you've seen the pictures from it—

KWON: Yes.

LUKE: But the whole Capitol Hill, Congress—the whole area was covered with people, and we figured it was about a million people.

KWON: Oh wow

LUKE: Yes, yes.

KWON: That's amazing.

LUKE: It was quite incredible organizing. And that's where I think that not— There has been a bit of a distance between the Planned Parenthood choice movement and some of the other women's movement groups, although women's groups have always been quote “pro-choice.” There hasn't been that kind of organization of the groups coming together. I think that was one of the differences that—NARAL [National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League], for instance, there are a number of groups, but also the other general women's groups decided everybody would come together and made a huge difference in the attendance and the participation and the diversity, and that's I think that's really a very important lesson about success is that you have to reach out to other groups, to be able to be successful in having an impact.

KWON: Was there a motivating factor for the 2004 march? Was there an incident or an event that sparked the march? An anniversary of some kind?

33:13

LUKE: Well, I'm sure that there was—I'd have to think back on it. I'm sure there was some particular moment. I can't remember right now. But I'm sure we could figure that out because there's always got to be the right political moment.

KWON: Right. To gather people together. I know '88 was longer ago, but do you remember if there was a similar motivating factor for the '88 march?

LUKE: I'm sure there was. Yes, yes. It's either—it's obviously political, and we'd have to think about—I think 2004 was—obviously Clinton was in office. I'm sure it had something to do with the right political moment to make a statement to overturn some laws, change helms. I mean there was something there, which I could look up easily.

KWON: Could you talk a little bit more about the cohort of Asian American folks that went to the '88 march with the banner and everything? Do you remember how many people attended or maybe who was there and how APIC grew out of that small march?

34:19

LUKE: Well, as I said, I was there to sort of start it [APIC] and then I left. Actually, I left San Francisco right after that. I was on my way to Washington. So unfortunately, when I left, we had just started this—and have you—I assume you've talked to Peggy Saika?

KWON: Mhmm.

LUKE: Well, she was the other key person who was very very involved, and she was with the Oakland community. The Asian Health [Services] people were there, Chinese Americans for Affirmative Action were there, so we were able to round up the San Francisco group of activists to be part of it. But Peggy would be really the key resource person who kept it going. And we hooked up with some other organizers. I think there were some from New York, because there were just pockets of Asians that were active in health areas. It was a long time ago, and again, because I just wasn't that involved afterwards, I have to go back and try to find some of the names, which you have probably already—

KWON: For the people that were involved? I think Peggy Saika was the only one and then Cynthia Choi was also there, she said. No one else has commented on the beginnings of the organization. Were you not able to keep in touch with the organization as it grew and changed?

LUKE: No. See, I had gone to Washington to work for an organization called CEDPA [The Centre for Development and Population Activities]. It's an organization that is about women's empowerment and worked completely overseas. My first role was to open offices in Africa and Asia, and to really introduce family planning programs into those countries and into those projects. So at that point—

KWON: How did you switch over to global health? Was that a very different context to work in?

36:49

LUKE: Oh it's very different. I think I was very lucky, because not very many people are able to do that, although a lot of people want to do it. Yes.

KWON: Yes, it's very popular and trendy right now.

LUKE: It's very popular. Well everybody wants to do international something right now, right? Unfortunately, the time when I was able to get in was a time when—of course, every young person wants to do it, but usually,

because—The Peace Corps. Many many young people who have an interest in international work go into the Peace Corp, and then that's their so-called ticket into—If they want to stay in international health, then they start looking for different positions or maybe get professional degrees like a Master's in Public Health, for instance. And then they're able to get into some projects. But I was very lucky because I hadn't had international experience, and I don't have the foreign language. I don't speak French, for instance, or Spanish, which is also usually quite a requirement. But I had my ten years of experience running Planned Parenthoods, running family planning clinics. I was very lucky because I was just frankly—I think I was in the right place at the right time. An organization that was very important, because it's a women's organization, that was working not only on family planning but on women's education, literacy, and food training programs, and it was just the right time, because they really needed somebody who had a real background in family planning. It was a USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development]-funded project. I was able to get authorized, and it was the perfect time. It started my international career, which has gone up since.

KWON: And you also did work in Asia as well in some of the countries?

LUKE: Yes. At that time, my first job was to start up the family planning program in Egypt, so I spent a lot of time in Egypt doing that. Then in Africa, I opened up the programs in Kenya and Uganda and Nigeria. Then in Asia, we opened the first program in India and Nepal. So I was able to—those first couple years, I just traveled the whole time to open up these projects—all family planning projects with women's organizations who didn't have any particular expertise in family planning, but who were doing maybe community development or health or education and who really wanted to do something specific and intentional. Because I think many many organizations understand after you talk to them, having access to family planning is actually a very very important basic ingredient. Because if a woman really wants to control her life, she has to have some ability to control her reproduction, and so that's how I began my career in reproductive health overseas.

KWON: What were some of the biggest challenges that you faced doing international health work with reproductive rights but in a very very different social context?

40:11

LUKE: Well, I think a lot of it is probably the fact that rights are not a given in many countries. I think it's—Actually in those days, you could talk about family planning and reproductive health, but rights was not very much part of that. It's not until this decade, frankly after Beijing, that rights has become a much much more important part of the—it's become really more part of the movement. So in those days, starting to provide health

services was very much a public health issue, and that's the way that—introducing it as a public health issue, not as a choice issues necessarily, because people didn't really understand or wouldn't have accepted it as a choice issue. I think you have to work with communities where they are. That's on of the challenges. It's not to impose what you believe in. It's to really understand where communities are coming from and then working with them, sensitizing them, educating them to see if eventually they may believe in the same thing.

I think that's where the Cairo conference and then ultimately the Beijing Conference made a huge difference in the social consciousness of what reproductive rights is all about. I think for the first time, family planning issues, including the right to have—it's called post-abortion care. That is if a woman chooses to try to terminate her own pregnancy and then needs help afterwards, because she's bleeding or whatever, that became a part of the Cairo agenda. That really opened up the whole door to talking about women's lives and women's choices. And then through Beijing, especially, that got reinforced, so that over these ten years, twenty years now practically since Cairo and Beijing, the whole issue of rights has become part of the language, part of the concepts. And it's because in those conferences and with Hilary's speech, especially, on women's rights are human rights and reproductive rights, that all got introduced into the language, internationally, domestically. But I really believe that it probably had even more weight internationally. So that now all of a sudden, we have the concept of reproductive health, reproductive choice, and reproductive rights. And that really became part of the political landscape, in a way that it never ever was before. So now when we talk about abortion in particular, both here as well as internationally, we talk about it—It's a public health issue. It's also a human rights issue. So those two are joined together in a way that it never was joined together before.

And it's the first time—You, in your generation, think, Wow. Sure this is easy. It's about reproductive choice, justice. But it's not at all. It never used to be about reproductive justice. It was a gradual process of education and awareness to recognize that actually it's really the right positioning, the right ways of thinking about it. That it's both about individual choice, it's about individual women's health, and it's about their rights. So I think it's really evolved to probably the place where it should be.

KWON: Could you tell me more about your experiences with the Cairo and the Beijing Conference? Were they in '94 and '95, respectively?

LUKE: Yes. '94 and '95. Well, Cairo was great, because it was the very very first of these UN [United Nations] conferences where NGOs [non-governmental organizations] were allowed. NGOs have never been part of these conferences. They're all government conferences. Governments—you have to be on the government delegation to take any part of the

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decision making, and the significance of Cairo was that NGOs, because of the advocacy that we had done, were very much—not at the table in terms of making the decisions, but there was an NGO conference which was like next door to the government sessions. Certain NGOs had passes into the government sessions. We had passes, so we could go in and advocate and influence the official delegations. The official delegation had—some official delegations had government and a few non-government people in them, but we—See, there are many many meetings that link to the actually conference. So for instance, I was at one of the earlier meetings for Cairo that was two years before Cairo. That was the technical meeting in Bangalore, India. And then that meeting—you see, the agenda gets set very early, so that was the technical meeting for family planning. At that meeting, for the first time, in any of those conferences, abortion became part of their language. We put it there, we put it on the agenda, as both a health issue and as a rights issue, and that got carried all the way into all the other conferences. There were regional conferences, one in each—in Asia, South Asia, East Asia, Africa. So there were many many—they're called prep coms. So the advocacy is that you have to get the same language into all of these in order for the official delegation when it comes to a vote, because they are voting for their countries, so you have to actually be able to influence all the country delegations. We were very lucky that—we, I was with CEDPA at the time, the women's NGO that was one of the key NGOs organizing the NGO forum. And at the same time, I had been in Egypt working for—at that time, probably four years, because I started working in Egypt in '90 and the conference was in '94—so I was really one of the key people who knew the Egyptian minister and all their—people who were working on the conference, because they were the host country. And so knowing the host country people is the right thing to do. We were able to host an official luncheon, and the one official luncheon that was sanctioned by the minister, who was the key person organizing the conference from the Egyptian side. And we were able to get Mrs. Mubarak, Hosni Mubarak's wife. You know?

KWON: Yes, yes.

LUKE: Of course, in those times they were very popular. Not like today. But they were very very popular. So Mrs. Mubarak was the chief guest of honor, and so—and that was my luncheon actually. I organized the whole luncheon. Some of the fun stories that were part of that—So I had to be with the Secret Service of the Egyptian government at the hotel with their—I guess, their guard dogs who had to sniff out all of the places in the hotel to make sure there weren't any bombs and that kind of thing. Also we had to organize the luncheon, like every single minute, because it was away from the official delegation and the delegate's meeting, their voting. So they could only be gone for so long, and this is a luncheon of 500 people—which I had to keep to 500 people, because when people realize

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that Mrs. Mubarak was coming, there could've been a luncheon for 1,000 people. Because it was away from the delegation, we had to organize buses for the delegates to come. The timing was really incredible because usually for a meeting like that, you have to have people go through metal detectors. Because you have to, obviously. There were many many fights about having metal detectors and the time and this and that, and the program could only be 25 minutes because if it was longer, they wouldn't get back and all these kinds of things. And so it was my job to do all of that.

But actually the funniest part of that luncheon was that—John Kerry and the person who was the head of the U.S. delegation, I can't remember his name right now, another Senator—they were the chief negotiators of the conference. So we were watching, everybody's coming in, the buses are all coming in, and we're watching our watches, because we knew that Mrs. Mubarak was on the way. Just like in any country, like in here, when the President or his wife is essentially on the way, they have to close the roads. So when they close the roads, nobody can move until she passes, and yet we had all of these delegates coming to the conference. So we're just like all anxious to—because she can't walk into an empty room. You have to be all ready.

KWON: This is just stressful listening to it.

50:48

LUKE: This is really stressful. She has to be there. Everybody has to be there waiting, standing up greeting her—

KWON: Let me just check on this real quick. Okay.

END OF FILE 1

FILE 2

KWON: All right. So this is part two. You were talking about the delegations coming in and the roads being blocked off.

LUKE: (laughs) And so finally everybody's in and they say, Mrs. Mubarak is almost here. Of course, the two people who were not in were John Kerry and I still can't remember his name who was the official negotiator. Finally they said, the Secret Service said, No way. This is it. And of course, they had the two spaces at the head table. Well, so my job was to go fill the head table, because you can't have a head table with two empty spots in it.

KWON: So you sat there?

LUKE: No, I had to fill the regular table with the two proper people who could go there. And thank goodness, Ambassador Robin Duke. You've heard of her?

KWON: Yes.

LUKE: Well, she was at the second head table, she and her husband, so I said, "Okay, They go to the head table." And then Mrs. Mubarak came in properly. Everybody stood up, did all the right things, she got to the head table, and then John Kerry comes running in. And I said, "Wait!" And there they are, the two of them, they're six feet tall. And I said, "You can't go." And he said, What do you mean I can't go? (laughs) I said, "I'm sorry. It's too late. You can't go to the head table." They said, What?! And I said, "Sorry." And then I had the Secret Service help to escort them to the second head table. This is all protocol. You do not do anything against protocol. So after they get seated at the second head table, they went over to the head table. I was ready to kill them, because had—the Secret Service are watching me because I'm organizing the meeting. They said, You can't do that. And I said, "I'm sorry. I can't do anything." (laughs) So that was the best story of the whole thing. It's like, my telling John Kerry, "You can't go to the head table to see Mrs. Mubarak and to be part of the head table!" I'm sure he probably won't remember that, but now it's very funny to think of the position that he's in. It's really funny.

1:02

KWON: He's a big deal.

LUKE: It was a big deal. So that was Cairo. We made so many advances at Cairo. And a lot of it is because the women's groups learned to advocate. We actually had advocacy sessions with about—we had a core group of about 30 women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, who we trained on advocacy, so they could go back to their own countries, work with their

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delegations on the platforms, come back and prepare them for various votes. The big votes that were taken in Cairo were about abortion. All of it. The reason why the Cairo agenda was hung up and had to take many many votes was [that it was] about abortion and putting in abortion language, not putting in abortion language. Finally, they reached a good compromise. And then that carried forward to Beijing.

Beijing wasn't nearly as interesting because it was just so big, and they had consciously separated the official meeting, which of course was in the Beijing conference center, from the NGO center which was in Huairou. They made a specific point of not putting the NGOs together, so that the NGOs had to run back and forth—those who had official passes, which were not very many, so it was a very different scene than Egypt. But Hilary making her speech at the NGO conference was the big highlight, and that made a huge difference to the conference itself and to women's rights. But it just wasn't nearly as fun. Because it was also much much larger. I mean there were hundreds of thousands of people there, and frankly only the Chinese could've organized it in a way. They had buses going back and forth to Huairou the whole time, and it was very very well organized. But it was intentionally to keep them away from the official delegation, whereas Egypt was really designed to actually do the thing.

And the other part of Egypt that was so much fun was that—and this is how the government works. They basically desperately needed a women's and girl's project in Egypt. Because after all, how could they be the U.S. delegation advocating for women's and girls' rights, if they didn't have a project in Egypt? So that was my job to come up with a project in Egypt. And usually when you're designing a project, it takes months, years, going through the channels to get everything approved. Well, my project got approved in two months and then it was going to be signed at the Cairo conference by the Vice President, because they needed to have the star project on girls and women, and it was a very interesting project. So I lived in Cairo for literally two months to write the project, get it all approved. The Vice President was going to sign the project, and of course, that was the conference that he missed, because he broke his ankle. So then it was signed by the USAID administrator. I can't remember his name right now. I have a picture of him. Brian Atwood. He was the substitute for the Vice President, so that was a little disappointing. But that project was a great project, and it still continues today. It was really one of the best projects that USAID has ever funded, because it was really about—it wasn't just about family planning. You know what it is—to have successful family planning projects, you have to have young girls and young women who are educated. So it was really—it was in upper Egypt, which is of course one of the most poverty-stricken areas. It was about literacy for girls, so that they could really learn the basics, not only about reading and writing, but how to take care of their families, a lot of practical skills. So that became one of the best projects for—the best ways

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of preparing young women and girls to then become mothers. And it was really very successful. That's all the things I've ever done.

KWON:

Okay. Perfect. Well, let's bring it to today. At the beginning of the interview, you mentioned that the abortion rights rhetoric right now today is possibly more divisive than you've ever seen. Could you give me some reasons for why you think that or just in your experience of having seen the ebbs and flows of the movement?

6:51

LUKE:

Well, unfortunately, it mainly is because it's been a completely politicized issue now. If it hadn't been, I think that people—if it had been a quieter issue, people would've been able to make their choices in the comforts of their own home and with their own doctors, and it wouldn't have been a highly visible political issue. But because it has become [one], people have had to take public stands on—Which side are you on? And I think that's just brought out a lot more discussion, controversy, and I think there are many many people in the middle. Many people who would make decisions about—If they had their own daughters or their own—who would make a decision one way, who may do that secretly anyhow. Probably the worst politicians are the ones who, if their daughters perhaps were raped or victims of incest or need an abortion, they probably would do it. But from a political standpoint, they can't, because their voters would not, you know. So I think that's really one of the big problems, is the fact that it has become such a central political issue that campaigns are won or lost on the basis of their views. And in that sense, that if—We need to overcome it politically and use all the mechanisms politically, but also people need to be able to articulate and be able to still make their own choices now. So it's really hard at this point to think about what's the right answer to depoliticize or make more progress on this issue.

Of course, if Congress can't decide to reduce the debt spending or to come to such a standstill over the budget, what can they do? I mean Congress obviously can't make any decisions at this point, so to have this decision in their hands is sort of a no-winner at this point. So I think we're at a very strange time in our history. Who knows what will happen and what's the best way? But I think the only way that we can make progress on this issue is for families themselves to be able to speak and to speak, if they have to speak to their Congress people, but certainly take matters into their own hands and be able to—

The biggest threat of course, is with the anti-choice who really wants to take away *Roe*, which we don't think will happen, but on a state level, to take away the—to put in place all the restrictions. And that's got to be fought on a state-by-state basis. I think we're lucky, I guess, in Rhode Island that there haven't been major restrictions, but in North Carolina right now, there are huge restrictions to women, young women. Having access to any kind of service is hard, including family planning, never mind abortion services. So it's got to be done, it's got to be fought

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on a statewide basis, and it's got to be fought with young people who are sensitized and understand what the meaning of this is, and that it isn't a right that will always be there. Young people really have to understand, just like we understood in our generation, that if we didn't do something about it, we wouldn't be able to make the decisions that—So we can't take it—young people, we can not—nobody can take it for granted at this point because there are many many forces that would take away this right. So I think that the key message is you got to get out and continue to fight for it. Get your friends, male and female, and families to understand what this really means.

KWON: Well, that's all the questions I have. Did you have anything else you wanted to add to the oral history?

11:09

LUKE: (shakes head)

KWON: All right. Well, thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW

