

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

PEGGY SAIKA

Interviewed by

JUHEE KWON

August 8, 2013
San Francisco, California

This interview was made possible
with generous support from the Royce Fellowship

Narrator

Peggy Saika (b.1945) grew up in a Japanese American community in Sacramento. She earned her undergraduate degree at Sacramento State College and also earned a master's in social work. In 1978, Saika moved to New York City, where she became involved in the Organization of Asian Women (OAW), Third World Women's organizing, as well as the organizing committee of the New York Chol Soo Lee committee. She returned to the Bay Area in 1983 to serve as the executive director of the Asian Law Caucus. She was the co-founder of the Asian Women's Shelter, and also helped to organize Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice (APIC), which was founded in 1989. In 1993, Saika served as the founding executive director of Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN). She was one of the Founding Sisters that established the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF). She currently serves as the president and executive director of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP). Saika has also served on the board of numerous organizations including Equal Rights Advocates, Progressive Assets Management and the Alston/Bannerman National Fellowship Program.

Interviewer

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

Restrictions

Peggy Saika retains copyright to this interview during her lifetime.

Format

Interview recorded in MP3 file format using Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-702PC. Three files: (a) 1 hr 17 mins 37 secs, (b) 21 mins 26 secs, and (c) 8 mins 51 secs.

Transcript

Transcribed and edited for clarity by Juhee Kwon.

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

Transcript of interview conducted August 8, 2013, with:

PEGGY SAIKA
San Francisco, California

by: JUHEE KWON

KWON: This is Juhee Kwon. Today is August 8, 2013. I'm here with Ms. Peggy Saika at AAPIP [Asian American Pacific Islander in Philanthropy]. She's the Executive Director and President of AAPIP. [We're] here at the AAPIP office in San Francisco, California for the Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History project. Okay. So we can get started.

SAIKA: Thank you.

KWON: Let's start with—wherever you want to start, whether it be how you grew up, where you were born, but I really want to focus on how you developed your political consciousness.

SAIKA: I get asked that a lot, and I think that—so I normally respond by saying that I'm a 3rd generation Japanese American, and so because my grandparents and my parents, and my uncles and aunts—well, everybody that I certainly think of as my extended family—they were all interned during World War II. As I was growing up, my mother and father talked about it like camp, you know. I never realized it was a concentration camp. But I think in during high school, as you're really developing so much more consciousness about different things, it just became such a huge part of understanding my own genealogy and history and that what happened to Japanese Americans so easily could happen to other communities in times of crisis. And so I think that, as I got older, too, just understanding how that's kind of the thread in many ways for me about being active, to be able to not just find my voice but to know that if you really believe that it's still possible to have a multiracial multicultural democracy and that this is our country, that you have to be able to participate and make sure that we're fighting for that, protecting it, and making it a better society for all of us. So for me, that coupled with the consciousness around what it means to be an Asian American woman—a woman of color—over time has just been my deepest source of both personal growth and inspiration and just this incredible space for me to continue to try to be the best of who I can be, you know. It's evolved, and

I'm at this place in my life, where there's actually more looking backwards and saying, Wow, what's this one life been about? My sense of some core issues that reflect the most egregious parts of patriarchy but also what binds us together as women, but also really binds us together in many other ways everyday really resonates with me. So I think it's the source of great peace and revelation, but also fire in my belly.

KWON: What kind of community did you grow up in? Did you grow up in a largely Asian neighborhood?

4:02

SAIKA: I grew up in Sacramento, California, and I always say I didn't know it was a ghetto until [much] later, and then there was urban renewal and all that, that wiped all of it out. But I grew up in a Japanese American community, communities that were built post-WWII, where a lot of the communities that had left—so my grandparents, everybody that had been incarcerated—then they came back, and so that's where I grew up. But it was a community that even though very, at its core, Japanese American, it really included a lot of other communities, too. So I have a very strong sense of place and growing up in that way. I just think it has really informed—keeps informing why I think the way that I do, why I feel obligated and responsible in the ways that I do, but also a sense of groundedness and connection that's very deep for me.

KWON: When did you first get involved with [the] Asian American community as an organizer or some kind of advocacy leader?

5:31

SAIKA: As I was growing up, and then I had a really interesting collegiate experience, but anyway I—

KWON: No, no, no. Tell me, tell me about the collegiate experience.

SAIKA: No, it's almost like I'm part of that generation where you really kept asking yourself, What are we doing in college? We should really be—

KWON: Did you go to college in the 60s?

SAIKA: Yeah, in the 60s and 70s. Late 60s, early 70s. To me, it was a period, too, where you're really thinking about being engaged in a totally different way. I was in social work school at Sac[ramento] State, and it was at a time where they were really developing organizers and community consciousness [being] much more embedded in those kinds of programs, so you know, [University of Michigan at] Ann Arbor or Stony Brook [University]. There were a lot of different places across the country where there was just a lot of activism connected to certain kinds of programs on campus. It was also just at the time when Asian American Studies was really developing—late 60s, early 70s—and all that. I got involved in a

group that started the first Asian American organization there [in Sacramento], and then it became a larger group there. But it was a time where there wasn't [services and programs for communities of color]. There weren't senior programs for our [API] seniors, so there were Asian seniors that went to the city council and demanded programs be provided for them. So it was a time of incredible—especially during the early 70s—time of incredible creativity and activism. And so there I was as a community organizer in Sacramento.

I moved to New York in 1978, but the year before that, I had gotten involved in the Free Chol Soo Lee movement. It was really through that that when I did move to New York, that I got involved in organizing the New York Chol Soo Lee committee. And then at the same time, I joined the Organization of Asian Women. I worked in a community health center, which was a small collective that doesn't exist anymore, but it was really great to be with other Asian American women that were very very active. In fact, I think we put together the first slide—slide, whatever you call it, show or production, and it was looking at the intersection of patriarchy and Confucianism and how it's impacted Asian American women. So it was really great. The years that we were there, the six years that we were there, it was really amazing time of being able to organize in the community but also be connected to new things that were emerging. There were things that—you know, unorganized workers were creating new entities there, and annually, there is the women's day. There would be a big march and all of these things that would happen associated with that day, but—We organized the first Third World Women to celebrate International Working Women's Day. It was just a really amazing time to be able to do things like that with women from Harlem and the Puerto Rican community. It's just a really amazing time of both growth and knowing that there was this continual thread that no matter—even if you didn't work explicitly for a women's organization or for an issue that's seen as a women's issue or whatever, like DV or whatever, that you would still—you would be motivated to get involved in a lot of different issues and ways in which you put together race and gender. So it was really great. Really wonderful time.

KWON: Had that been the first organization that you'd been involved with that was addressing an intersection of your identities?

11:29

SAIKA: Yes. Definitely. It was the combination, I think, of the Organization of Asian Women, and through that, the Third World Women's committee stuff, and then working in a community health center, the Chol Soo Lee committee, went to Cuba on a health study tour with Antonio Mella Bridgade, and so there's just a lot of things going on. I became a mom.

KWON: Oh wow.

SAIKA: I know.

KWON: That's a big deal.

SAIKA: That was a very big deal. I have a daughter. Yeah. It was an amazing, amazing time.

KWON: Was organizing in New York a little bit different than the West Coast? In terms of constituencies, it's definitely different.

12:20

SAIKA: When I first moved to New York, Asian American really meant Chinese in Chinatown, basically, and even though in Brooklyn and Queens, there were huge swaths, too, the community. And then it was gradually shifting. It was a timing thing, you know. But there was mainly because of demographics I would say and scale of communities, but that just quickly—was really changing, even the years that I was there.

KWON: Go ahead.

SAIKA: So then we moved back to California in 1983, and I went to work for the Asian Law Caucus.

KWON: Oh, yeah. You were Executive Director there.

SAIKA: Mhmm.

KWON: What made you work in the Asian Law Caucus? Do you have background in law?

13:06

SAIKA: No, I don't. Well, they had asked me if I was interested to come and work for the Asian Law Caucus, and I had been—I think they started in 1972, they were really doing cutting-edge work. They weren't just lawyers, but they were, as they said, facilitating organizing, so it was legal representation but also doing community education, and working on organizing tenants and workers, and working on issues around immigrant rights and all that. It was an amazing opportunity for me, so Art, my partner, went to work for Asian Health Services, and I went to work for the Asian Law Caucus.

KWON: How long did you stay there for?

SAIKA: Nine years.

KWON: What do you think you contributed to the organization, or what kind of vision did you bring, especially with you background in organizing in New York and things like that?

SAIKA:

I think I brought—I would say, being a woman was huge. That's such a big part of who I am. I think an understanding that issues around gender and sexuality really has to cut across any of the work that you're doing, any and all the work that you're doing. It shouldn't be ghettoized into a women's project, which was the norm at that point. It really was the norm.

14:29

I learned in the deepest way what shared leadership really meant, in that you could be an executive director but not be hierarchical. We had such content experts, you know, all of the attorneys and other folks that were there that that they were the ones that often times not just testified, but they were at press conferences. Everybody represented the organization. One person is now the mayor of San Francisco, Ed Lee. Day-to-day, I just learned what it really meant to have a title but not be bound by that title. That it was really for external purposes, and for lot of different reasons, that you might need it, but it didn't have to reflect a hierarchical or a way in which you build an organization that's done through the vision and the leadership of one person. It was just amazing.

While I was there, we recruited Doreena Wong, who became a Korematsu Fellow there. She's an incredible lesbian leader, but to have her was a game changer, to have the first queer person come on staff. That I was able to participate on the organizing board before the Asian Women's Shelter opened, but to be able to work on that for several years, to be able to contribute towards the Asian Women's Shelter becoming the shelter itself and all that. I just feel that I got to be who I am—imperfect and all of that—and learned a lot. Now when I look back, I think, Oh, I wish I knew that. I wish I knew that. I'd been a far more effective director, but I just really learned so much. It was an incredible time.

KWON:

I had actually interviewed Beckie Masaki, and she mentioned that you were a part of the organizing group [for Asian Women's Shelter]. What kind of experience did you bring onto the Asian Women's Shelter organizing committee?

17:48

SAIKA:

That's such a good question. What did I bring? I'm not sure that I could be that concrete, except that I brought my head and my heart. It was just really—I felt so passionate about it. I understood that, in one way, you could think about a women's shelter as just a service that you provide. But when you know that when you create shelters, it literally saves lives, that when women and children are abused, it's the most egregious form of violence, and that there's no excuse for it ever, and a shelter really represents a space that we take action but we're able to be who we should all be—kind and generous and loving and nurturing and generous. To me, I think I gained so much than what I think I've given, really and truly. I think the question is more what did I gain from that, really. And to this day, [it's] far far more than I feel I've ever given. But it's just this amazing experience, where you get to not just talk about something but

really work on it, and not just wonder, not just—There's nothing abstract about it, right? So what an honor for me.

KWON: Was it one of the first organizations that you found[ed]? Because I know you had a string of organizations that you are a founder of, too.

20:10

SAIKA: (laughs) Yeah, I don't even remember. Well, at the Caucus, it was Mary Luke [with] Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice, and I don't remember that—You know, I don't think about it like that, because you just like working with people or whatever.

KWON: Do you want to talk a little bit about the founding of APIC [Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice] and how that came about as well?

SAIKA: Mary Luke call[ed] me, and—

KWON: How did you know Mary Luke from before?

SAIKA: I'm trying to think. You know, we all kind of [knew] each other. And it's, I think, because we are very blessed to be a part of both a generation but a network of women and men that have really—our values have shaped and created connections and whatever. So I can't even remember how Mary and I knew each [other]. Maybe she'll tell you how. But I knew that we did, and when she called, I [thought] What an incredible incredible opportunity to create an explicit API [Asian Pacific Islander] voice in the whole movement.

(Referring to the mainstream choice movement) Because there's one way you can look at it, and you could critique that it's a narrow issue, and choice, really for a lot of the women's formations—They're just so single issue, and it's dominant. It's just been a policy, legislative kind of issue and so very divisive. Sort of the most stringent voices are a part of that. So I could understand that, I could join that—that chorus. The other side of it for me is—but I also look at it as, Thank God women stood up and created that voice and the architecture and perspective of building power, owning an issue in that way. It's like, I look at it, and the way that it was framed and organized and established, [you] have to put it into its historical context of when that was. Of course, we can reflect—hindsight 20/20 vision—we could look and say, Why did people do that? But I feel blessed that it [the choice movement] was done, and I think we're living with both sides of the legacy of that. But then I think as activists always becomes, Okay, so what do we do about this now? So Mary—I just feel really lucky that she called and got me engaged.

21:43

The interesting thing though, one of the factoids at the time was that—which really resonated with me—that Asian American women at Berkeley were the highest—or statistically had the most abortions.

KWON: In the country?

SAIKA: No, on the campus there.

KWON: Oh okay.

SAIKA: At UC Berkeley.

KWON: Asian—

SAIKA: No, of everybody. Of all women there.

KWON: Women, yeah. But the Asian Americans ones.

SAIKA: Not the Asian American ones.

KWON: Not the Asian American ones?

SAIKA: No, overall they're the high—they were getting abortions—The greatest number of abortions were Asian American women at UC Berkeley [Clarification by Narrator: Asian American women had the greatest number of abortions at UC Berkeley.]

KWON: Wow.

SAIKA: That's what I said. Wow.

KWON: Huh. That's really weird.

SAIKA: But I could understand it. If you were in denial about being sexually active, and you were using abortion as whatever—

KWON: Oh, a contraceptive.

SAIKA: That's one thing. So I could see that, and I could see on the other side, if you did get pregnant, even if you're not in denial, but being that you just didn't want to deal with it, with your parents and all of that. That was deep though. So I just said, "Wow. We've got to do something and organize ourselves."

KWON: I heard that it started out from breakfast meetings, little small get togethers—how did it eventually become the founding of an organization and the official title?

SAIKA: I think what happened is that you do have these smaller huddles. It's very reflective of our leadership. Nothing would have happened if she [Mary Luke] didn't initiate it and push it [an idea]. But that being set aside, when

it did become something, it's because we like to do that, where we're working together on something [building and making it happen]. And it has nothing to do with being passive or any of that. I think it's reflective of both a style and a way of operating that is comfortable. So for us, it's great. You and I get together, and let's do it, right? But there's so few times—and often times we do this, where we sit by ourselves and go, I think I'm going to do that. But starting organizations, that's really different. I think that we see it now more and more with individuals, but by and large I would say it's a more normative state of how things evolve [for organizations], and so it was [formed] from these smaller huddles.

KWON: How long did you stay involved with the organization? Are you still involved with Forward Together, it is now?

26:33

SAIKA: I was a part of Asian Pacific Islanders—well, APIC, and then it became APIRH [Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health]. I was really—Yin [Ling Leung], too, all of us—and Cyndi [Choi]—we were all involved in APIRH for the longest time, and then it became. . .

KWON: ACRJ [Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice].

SAIKA: ACRJ. I wasn't involved in—I know Eveline Shen. It's really interesting, because I haven't been that involved with the latest iteration of it. A lot of us got much more involved with NAPAWF [National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum], and choice was one of the issues, but it's a multi-issue [organization]. NAPAWF became a much more, I would say, for us—for me—I'll just speak for myself—for me, a relevant vehicle because it was multi-issue, national. How do you look at tracing the context of a broader set of issues that impact us? I would say that was a part of it.

I think that there were differences—just individuals and personalities that—I wasn't involved with ACRJ, so by the time it morphed from APIRH to ACRJ, I was really consumed with the Asian Pacific Environmental Network also. We had our own Laotian Organizing Project and the girls and young women with AYA [Asian Youth Advocates] and all that, so we had a full plate. So I wasn't that—and like I said, there were things going on with individuals and just difference in how people lead and all that. But that's very common, and you get over those things, I think. But a lot of it to me has to do with what keeps you connected, because organizations stay relevant on the ground, in terms of being able to be a vehicle that more of us have traction with versus less. And so I think that that's—When I look back, that's more the evolution of it. And I always feel like how do we not get stuck, but move on? And sometimes you just have to really let things go and let people lead in the way that they see fit in and their vision and all that, and that we can't be involved in every organization or every vehicle that's created. But then we

have to make choices ourselves around where we think we could contribute and take responsibility and all that so.

KWON: Yeah I know that APIRH—yeah, I think it was called APIRH, had that tension with NAWHO [National Asian Women’s Health Organization] and the founding of NAWHO. Can you talk a little bit more about that, and perhaps APIRH’s relationship with NAWHO? I just haven’t found anybody that I can really speak to NAWHO, because no one really knows about it.

SAIKA: Yeah. I know. They’re gone now, I heard. I just heard that. It’s really interesting because NAWHO was primarily created when Mary Chung left APIRH, so it really revolves around an individual leader. You could get really subjective about it and have an opinion about this or that, but I do think that if you just fast forward and look at where things are at now, Eveline Shen and her folks are really leading Forward Together, and NAWHO is no longer. So in some ways, we just have to think about where it belongs for the historical records, but not get too bogged down in what caused that or whatever, because—Even though it’s kind of fun, if you go out to dinner and talk about it, right?

30:09

But in terms of when I think about lessons for the future, I always think it’s about accountability and individual leadership, and what we all need to do to learn from experiences when things don’t go as well as they could have, so what’s the key lesson so we don’t repeat that? And how important it is for each of us to be able to speak out—not to be divisive, but when it’s issues around integrity and respect and the values that we want engrained in whatever we’re trying to build, and when those are absent, then how do we organize ourselves in a way that really reaches—where we’re problem solving together and that we resolve problems, not get stuck or create new ones. I just feel that it’s something to learn from, and I think it would be interesting if there was any ability for people to—if that was a specific, like something [that] somebody wanted to write about, like what happened between—not what happened in like getting into the whatever, the muck about APIRH, but organizationally what happened, and what are some lessons would be incredible. And I think those to me are—that would be a great thing, with some degree of distance and objectivity. Then it contributes to discourse about our collective history. Did you ever talk to Helen Zia?

KWON: No, I didn’t get to. She never emailed me back.

SAIKA: Oh that’s too bad. Because she was on the NAWHO board.

33:15

KWON: She was? Oh okay.

SAIKA: Yes.

KWON: Because I was debating whether or not to contact her again. Because I didn't really have a good reason to contact for Asian American Reproductive Justice. I just wanted to meet her, right? And so I was like, Maybe she didn't think it was relevant, and so she didn't email me back. But maybe I'll reach out to her again and see if she wants to talk about it.

SAIKA: Yeah. That would be really important. Tell her that her name's come up, and you talked to these people in particular. Say you talked to me, and I was mentioning Helen because she's an important voice.

KWON: Yeah, definitely. NAWHO was a national organization or is the National Asian Women's Health Organization, NAPAWF also positioned itself as a national organization. What kind of were the differences in types of leadership or organizationally between the two organizations?

SAIKA: Well, the one thing is that NAPAWF is an explicitly a membership organization, and it actually has a lot of—I mean they're not this super multi-million dollar organization, so it depends on volunteers that just get really super excited and even if it's for a few years at a time, make a contribution, and all that—learn and grow and then other people step in. So to me that grounding has been incredibly important, and that they're multi issue. They are still—They were the first and still the only multi-issue national women's organization, not just in the Asian community.

34:17

KWON: Women's organizations? Wow.

SAIKA: I could be wrong now, but they were for the longest time.

KWON: The founding of NAPAWF was actually spurred by the Beijing Conference, right? Could you talk a little bit about that and also how you secured funding from the Ms. Foundation?

SAIKA: Well, it's really interesting because the International Women's Conference before Beijing was actually in Africa—Nairobi. I had never gone to an International Women's Conference, but I remembered when they were organizing for Nairobi, there were just a tremendous amount of organizing around supporting African American women going to Nairobi. So the year or two before Beijing, there was just nothing about supporting [Asian American women].

35:20

KWON: Were you expecting something?

SAIKA: I just felt like, Wow. I talked to folks at—Tani Takagi was at the Ms. Foundation. She was the VP [Vice President] of Programs there or the Director of Programs, and we talked about—They actually had their own

delegation of 100 and something women that they were supporting to go to Beijing, so they asked me if I would lead the API women. There were like six or something. I'm like, "Yes." And then at the same time, Yin and I were working at APEN [Asian Pacific Environmental Network], and so we really thought that this was going to be so important had deep connections to environmental justice and the work that we were doing with women and girls, and so it was great.

We actually—Yin and I submitted an application to the UN [United Nations] office, the NGO office in Washington D.C. to see if we could create—she probably told you this story—to have a space in Beijing, because we had no idea who would be—how many API women were going to even be there, who would be there. So I thought why don't we just have—It was just like to gather API women and to—what are our goals there, and what we're doing, all of that. We submitted an application, and then we got a response that it was denied. (chuckles) The application was denied. We said, Oh. And then about a month before Beijing, we get a postcard that says, Here's your room number for your workshop on API—Asian American and Pacific Islander women in Beijing. And we're like, Oh! So Yin and I are like, Wow. This is happening. And they said, Oh, it's listed already in the booklet. Yeah, the booklet was this thick (holds up fingers to show 2-3 inches) and all that—and so that's what happened. Isn't that crazy?

I had received—from the Gerbode Foundation, a Gerbode Fellowship and that just means they just give you \$5,000 to do some like individual leadership development. I just called them and I said, "You know, it'd be really great if I could divide this up. There are five Asian American women, Yin and myself and three board members of APEN. We could all go." So they said, Well, it's up to you. We don't encourage it because it's really meant for you, but you can do whatever you want with it. So it paid for most of our—It was very cheap to go. Obviously, you could tell. And so we all went. It was great. And when we came back—Oh, so when we got together, there were I think 75 Asian American, API women that came together, and we decided we'd get together again, and there were like, I don't know, over 100 or something. And then when we came back, we decided we should keep trying to gathering or meeting, and the goal was how to bring Beijing home. And a year later, we founded NAPAWF in Los Angeles with 120 or [1]25 women.

38:25

KWON: There was a conference that launched that right?

SAIKA: It was—Well, we put it together. It was in order to launch—yeah, yeah. Isn't that great? So great. We're so lucky. Yeah, and I always think, Well the rest is history, because they just went off and did—and (points to NAPAWF sticker on Kwon's laptop) I see—It's so great.

KWON: Yeah.

SAIKA: Do we have a chapter at Brown, is that why [you have the sticker]?

KWON: No.

SAIKA: At Yale, I think they have a chapter.

KWON: Yeah. Yale, they have one. That's how I found out about everything is NAPAWF. I didn't know what I was doing at school. I was wandering, and I felt like school wasn't doing anything for me. So I booked a flight to D.C. because they were having a summit conference, and I was like, "You know what, I care about this, and no one is teaching me anything relevant to this. I want to go learn it." So I just booked a flight for the next day and went to D.C. by myself to go to the summit and stayed at a hostel.

SAIKA: They have to interview you. You have to get recorded for their website in their newsletter.

40:35

KWON: (laughs)

SAIKA: That is so great. Oh my gosh. What a great story, right?

KWON: It was really great, because I went to the conference and it was youth and different chapters. They had chapter leaders and that was the purpose of the gathering. There I was, independent, just kind of wandering. I got to see Ai-jen Poo, Mee Moua. Mee Moua's a Brown grad, and so—

SAIKA: Oh my god.

KWON: She sponsored a Brown delegation --

SAIKA: She is a Brown [grad]. Yeah, that's right!

KWON: Yeah, and she's from Minnesota, and so she was like, Oh my goodness. She sponsored a trip down to D.C. for an immigration rally, so she paid for everything. I got together a group of 15 kids from Brown. We went down there for the rally. And for some of them, they had never gone a rally before or anything like that, so it was good.

SAIKA: What year was that?

KWON: It was just this past spring.

SAIKA: Are you serious?

KWON: Yeah.

SAIKA: Oh my gosh.

KWON: I didn't even know about the Asian American women's movement before that.

SAIKA: Oh my god.

KWON: Yeah, that's why I have this sticker on there because it actually means something.

SAIKA: Oh, you know what, as soon as I saw that when I walked in, I said, Okay. Really a sense of your politics. Liberty in North Korea. So you support reunification?

KWON: Uh-huh.

SAIKA: What are your parents—? Oh, we should turn this off, because it makes you want to talk—

END OF FILE 1

FILE 2

KWON: Okay, so let's talk a little bit about AAPIP, because we skipped over that when we talked about NAPAWF.

SAIKA: Mhmm

KWON: You founded it in '93.

SAIKA: Yes. When I was leaving the Asian Law Caucus in—let's see—January of 1992, but the year before that, there was a national environmental justice—the very first convening of folks for a national environmental justice summit. It was convened by the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ, and Ben Chavis was the director of that commission at the time. They had already been doing environmental justice work, and so I got to know or I got involved in—before I left the—the last year I was at the Asian Law Caucus, I got involved in some of the local organizing for the EJ [environmental justice] summit, and then I was able to go in October of 1991 to the summit. It was, I would say—not to be overly dramatic, because there are many life changing moments or experiences, but I would say when I look back, I think about that summit, and it was, for me, a game changer—just in my own consciousness and the opportunity and the way in which you can experience a moment like that where you could feel it, that it's a historic moment, and to be with 800 other people from across country, across a lot of different ethnic communities, just a lot of different ways in which we would maybe self-identify.

There are a lot of things that came out of that experience and a kind of a mandate was, from the summit—one of these mandates was create an API voice within the environmental justice movement, and so we really—I think, from the Bay Area—Those of us from the Bay Area who had gone to the summit came back and took that to heart and started organizing so that we—There were just so many different people who were really instrumental. All of 1992, the summit was October '91, I left the Asian Law Caucus the end of 1991, January '92, around that time. And then so all of 1992, we were organizing, and then in the summer of 1993, we decided to start APEN. It was interesting for me because even though that was the summer of '93, I always think of—really when we were up and running, it was more '94, but anyway it was at that time. But what an amazing birth to be able—I always say we're born out of the environmental justice movement, which is so deep and profound to be born out of a part of the social justice movement, right? And so that and then to really try to be able to develop the consciousness and the understanding of what environmental justice meant in our community, the ways in which we look at health in the environment, then that really—I truly had an opportunity to look at that issue and its impact on women and

2:17

exposure to dioxycin and all of that. I just really learned and grew so much. I was there from 1993 until 2001, so it was just about eight and a half years, and it was great.

KWON: Was environmental issues a big social issue during the 90s? Because I perceive environmental things to be a more recent climax, but I'm sure the need was still there, right?

4:45

SAIKA: Well, the justice side had been never dealt with. The justice side of environmental issues—you know, the whole notion of you know people are endangered species, too, and all that and to move beyond the narrowness of the traditional environmental movement, which is important, protection of land and all of that, endangered species, all the ways in which I think environmentalism is both framed and articulated and all of that, and built the environmental movement. It really reflects—It's not about the justice side of those issues, so if you—Concrete examples would be that we could become—everybody wants, needs, and should have access to clean water. But there's a particularity, if you have subsistence fishing people, fishing not really from a recreational perspective but it's about income and so you're feeding your families. But that you're actually fishing in polluted waters, so the exposure to yourself and your families is as—the exposure around eating contaminated seafood is just as critical for you as dirty water, right? So how do you—that if you want to organize around an environmental issue, but it's going to displace thousands of workers, until you can replace their employment, it's too narrow to just look at those issues in that way.

So how do you bridge—totally divisive, talking about the women's movement and choice are totally divisive. So I think the environmental justice movement really is about asking the questions around who decides. Who decides about what are the policy issues and how are those policy issues defined or described? Who decides where resources are invested and how? And so the environmental justice movement is around building the voice of impacted communities and saying they all have to be first and foremost. So if you're an organizer that really speaks to base building work and building, with greater intentionality, the voices of impacted communities. For me, what a tremendous opportunity, because I'm somebody that—you know, I'm a generalist. What am I really an expert in? Not very much. But what I've learned is through the opportunities that I've been given—so I worked for a direct service clinic health center in New York City, came back and worked for a policy advocacy organization, and then APEN was really about—because we don't have enough base building organizations within our community. There aren't enough direct organizing vehicles that see base building—because we can talk about community organizing, but there's methodologies. You go to school and you get trained to learn how to do it. To me, base building is really connected to building the voices of empowered communities—or

impacted communities, so they are more empowered. So all of that, to me, was really rolled up in both the birthing and then all the years [that] I was greatly privileged to be at APEN. What a journey, right?

KWON: Are you still involved?

9:28

SAIKA: Yeah, you know, it's so funny. They're having their 20th anniversary in October. I'm so sad you're not going to be here. So I am involved in their event, and yeah, I'm just—I've been a happy kind of cheerleader on the side. I don't believe in people who have been EDs [Executive Directors] or whatever, to leave and then still try to control things or be in there. You need to step aside. How do you create new leadership if you don't step aside? How do you get experience if people don't give you a shot? I always say this. We should not institutionalize people. You build institutions. So I'm just really—so that really, to me, there's just so much about APEN. One quick one about this is, of course, I got to work with Yin. I'm a great fan and admirer of Yin, and of course, Cyndi and I worked together. She did some work with APIRH, and APIRH, for awhile, we were in the same office. Yeah, in Oakland. Yeah, we're very close. We kind of work together, live together, you know, whatever. So it was really really great.

KWON: And then you also made the transition over to AAPIP. Is that right after APEN or did you take some time off?

SAIKA: When I left the Caucus, so that was '92 to '93, so about a year—I left the APEN in the latter part of 2001. . .? Is that right or was it 2000? Maybe 2000. Wait, no. Was it 2000 or 2001? 2000. Yes. Latter part of 2000. It doesn't matter whether it was 2000 or 2001, but I'm just trying to get this straight because I'm thinking—Don't obsess about it though, because it's not a big deal. During 2001, I was talking to people who were on the board of AAPIP, and they were people I knew, and they were recruiting—they were looking for a new ED. And so I was suggesting people to them and talking about who different people were. I love to do that. I still like to do it. That's why I'm asking what you want to do because I want to be—Make sure I have your resume and everything. So anyways, I'm doing that—I like to do that with jobs and relationships. So the chair of the board calls me and is like, Peggy, What about you? And I'm like, "No. I don't want to be an ED again, and I don't want to work for another Asian American organization. Please. I don't want to do it." And then, Are you sure? And I'm like, "Yeah. But I'm really into trying help you find somebody really good." And then they asked me again. I was thinking, Hmm, This is really interesting because I've never worked for national membership organization. Worked for it. I was part of NAPAWF. Never worked in philanthropy, even though we're not a foundation, but never worked for any philanthropy-related—and then I thought, When I huddle

with other people who are working for non-profits, we always talk about fundraising and development work because everyone's struggling, right? I thought, Wow. This could be good. So then I thought, I should just talk to them and see. So when they asked me again and then asked me if I'd come in to just interview with them and talk to them, it was just really exciting. So then it's been amazing place for us to—It was just myself and Rita [Merzoian], who's a membership person. So that was in—I started in January of 2002, and at the same time, Lora [Jo Foo] was already working on the book, around 2002 or so—she was already working in 2001, because I remember talking to her about it. So when I came to work for AAPIP, they were like, Oh yeah. Because Ford was moving forward, her think piece that turned into a white paper, became a book that Ford published, and I came to work for AAPIP and they're like, Wow. Why don't you take it on a book tour—a listening tour? So Lora and I are going, Yeah. And we had all these chapters, right? At the time, I think we had five. Now we have ten, four or five then. So it was great. We ended up like going through eight states, talking to over 1200 people—she probably told you. Unbelievable what we learned. Do you have a copy of the book?

KWON: Yeah. I got it signed from her. (laughs) I'm a huge fan.

14:40

SAIKA: So anyway, we did that and then came back and put together an action plan, took several months and then that became the National Gender and Equity Campaign that Ford invested like 11.2 million dollars into.

KWON: Oh, that was the National Gender and Equity [Campaign]? Every organization that I have talked to talks about that campaign, because every organization is like, Oh we got funding from the National Gender and Equity Campaign.

SAIKA: Ohh. Yeah, and you know, it was really an effort to try to build a consciousness about gender in some of our community organizations, but just to keep up that drumbeat, to not privilege race, and to really talk about race and class but gender really as a central focus. And it was just really amazing. We just took that action plan back to Ford, they funded it, and then it really became a seminal effort for AAPIP, because we really grew and then it spawned other things, the Queer Justice fund that we have. It spawned a way that we look at—even with the AMENSA, Arab Middle Eastern South Asian, work that we do, all the communities impacted by 9/11, our young men and boys of color, all of that work has really been informed by having a gender lens—much deeper intentionality about gender. I think more than anything what it did was it created an experience and a practice over sex or seven years, where now we have a track record talking about building social justice infrastructure but led through a gender lens. How beautiful is that, right? How beautiful is that?!

KWON: Yeah, yeah.

SAIKA: I know, and it's kind of like, Oh my god. We got to keep doing it. One of the things that really emerged out of it, too, was this real yearning for a National Gender Summit, so we haven't given up on it. Maybe when you—maybe that's what you could work on if we ever get it together. Wouldn't that be beautiful? Wouldn't that be exciting?

KWON: It would bring together—

17:33

SAIKA: Everybody. Just bring everybody. Because everybody needs to talk about gender. But really talking about it though in a way that—the way that we talk about it now, which is gender democracy—how we need to do the cultural change work in our community just as deeply and ambitiously as we need to do the societal change work around how we're perceived. So it's all of that, and our leadership is, I think, needed and critical to be able to do it. That yearning has never gone away. I think it's still there. And now I'm talking to you about it and getting all fired up about it again, and thinking, That might be a good job for you when you (inaudible)? Wouldn't that be a—actually wouldn't that be a great fellowship idea?

KWON: Yeah, that would be.

SAIKA: Because it would—

KWON: It would get money for it.

SAIKA: Yeah, right?

KWON: I'll look into it. That would be great. That would be huge, if you brought together all of those organizations that you've funded through the campaign, the membership organizations.

SAIKA: I think we could do it with the—When I think about who would be the core groups, it would be like, NAPAWF, but the National Institute on Domestic Violence, the equality groups here in California—a there's so many, the Shelter, you know, right?

KWON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh I'm so excited.

SAIKA: I'm getting kind of excited again, too, because it's been dormant but not for long. There's really going to be—I have to say, too, that there will be jobs by next summer. I know this. When do you graduate?

KWON: Next summer. Perfect.

19:30

SAIKA: You need to get to know Kyung [Yoon]. If you can, you should get to know Pat Eng. She's a co-chair of our New York chapter. She's a founder of the Asian Women's Center in New York. She worked for the Ms. Foundation, and now she's working for this group called Bolder Giving. She's the co-chair of our chapter. The chapter has meetings there [at Bolder]. (whispers) That's a great place to meet people. Seriously.

KWON: You are all about networking.

SAIKA: No, it'd be so great for you to—because the more you meet people, the more these new opportunities and—and you'll be in the mix. The most important thing is to be in the mix. Off campus, right?

KWON: Yeah. Maybe I'll take a trip down to New York.

SAIKA: Leverage the hell out of being at Brown and graduating from Brown and then be in the community.

KWON: That would be perfect.

SAIKA: Yeah. So it's like—It would really be great. And our community needs it. We need you to work on these things, and I think it'll be very exciting. I feel very confident that there's going to be jobs by next summer, next fall. So don't worry. And then you're from—So the main thing is we should stay in contact, but also if you have ideas about things, too, just throw it out to me, and then let's just brainstorm a little bit.

KWON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That'd be great.

21:15

SAIKA: Like in the circles that you're going to be moving.

KWON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll let you know what's going on on the East Coast.

SAIKA: Yeah.

END OF FILE 2

FILE 3

SAIKA: Did you learn a lot through this?

KWON: Yeah, I did, I did. I haven't asked you the final two questions yet. I still have to ask you questions.

SAIKA: Oh, sorry. I know. I could totally spend all night with you.

KWON: I wanted to ask you if you wanted to highlight some of the biggest success or achievements that you've had. Because when I do these oral history interviews with people, people are humble or they've been engaged in the work for a really long time, and so they never have a point to stop and reflect on what they've done. But if you could highlight—you know, you've done so much, but if you could highlight some of the successes that you think were particularly impactful.

00:11

SAIKA: That's so hard.

KWON: I know.

SAIKA: Because there wasn't anything that was just me. I don't think. I feel I just get a lot of like, Whatever, and I'm thinking, Actually, that wasn't just me. So I don't want to be like—I'm not like—It's not about [being] super humble or anything like that. I'm trying to think.

Well, I feel that the gift of my life has been the tremendous opportunities that I've been given to keep deepening my understanding of gender and race. Of course, economics has a huge—but so many issues around gender transcend class. I do believe that—It's been not just this enormous opportunity, but I also feel that every opportunity I've had, the call is really to do something with it, that it wasn't—Nothing I've ever been able to do was because I was supposed to just do it for myself. The opportunities where I feel like—where it—to exert leadership, it's because it's circular. That in order to exert leadership, you need to learn and contribute and be always in that circular motion, that you're leadership is totally because you're a part of a bigger movement, an incredible organization, but it's coupled with something else. It's not just about you. But what is just about you is how do you respond, how do you look in the mirror and say, What can I do about this? So I feel like that the opportunities I've been given has truly been about then putting practice into action. That it's not—so—

I don't know, when you think about successes—Success is just—it's a word that if you turn it upside down, it's the other part of it, right? But I feel that the biggest accomplishment or success is the gift of being able to continue to find my voice and that it's really supposed to be a voice for change, and that we're—we can't—we don't have the—I think

3:28

it's really up to us to change that which we critique or criticize. It's really been over and over and over again that I learn these many lessons.

So I don't look at—I guess it's really hard for me, that question, because—and like I said, it's not just about being humble, but it's about me feeling both ways about words like success or accomplishments. Because I could also look at it and say, “Why the hell didn't I know that?” or—but you don't know what you don't know until you go through it. So many times, looking back and thinking, If I knew then, what I know now, I could have done such a better job. I could've been more much more effective. And I still feel like that, that everyday I learn so much in order to help me do a better job and be who I want to be in the world. I live a life of abundance in that way, thinking about how to grow things and all that.

I don't know if that gets categorized in some way as being successful or having accomplished things. I do think that it's just a real privilege to lead the life that I lead. Not a day goes by that I don't think about that. Like today, look at after all this time, I finally get to meet you! And some day we're probably going to be working together. So damn lucky. And so anyway—Because I mean, it could've gone even worse. That's what I have to remind myself. It could've been like after August 16th [when Kwon leaves]. Oh my god, I need to go to—and I would've said, “I'm going to come to Brown! Can we meet there?” Yeah. I would've taken that one-hour train from New York to go there, but yeah. So, I don't know, it's not a good answer to your question. I have problems with those kinds of questions. I don't know, what do you think about questions like that?

KWON: I think it's always helpful to deconstruct the question itself, which is what I think you did. It gives more insight to the person that's actually answering the question than me that's asking it. So I think it was really insightful. Yeah. No, I think it was good.

SAIKA: Thank you. I was think—I always have like a cartoon thing with the cloud, because you know how you go (makes talking motion) and you go (motions to words in word cloud). Then these days, I'm like, “Hey, that's not going on—You're going to put that on your Facebook are you? You're not going to—That photo, you're not going to—Hey, wait, you're not tweeting this are you?” I'm getting all paranoid about it. But anyway yeah, so I'm like—yeah, so I'm just wondering how you think about questions like that, too. This is good for me. Yeah. So was there another question?

7:10

KWON: No, that's it. That's all I got.

SAIKA: Wow.

KWON: Did you have anything else that you wanted to add to the oral history?

7:48

SAIKA: Thank you. I always feel like these kinds of things, it's like—I wish at some point if we do ever work together it'd be kind of fun—all the people that you've—Are most of the people you interviewed in the Bay Area?

KWON: Mhmm

SAIKA: Mhmm. God, wouldn't it be great to get us all together?

KWON: That's exactly what Yin said when I first met her. That was her first idea. But it would've been a nightmare, because everyone was so busy. I barely met Eveline, because she had like 45 minutes in three months to spare, and so—but yeah, I mean, since I've already got the interviews, if people wanted to come back and talk, that would be great.

SAIKA: Yeah, that'd be fun. That'd be really fun. I bumped into her at a community event, something, just for a hot minute, but I just saw her for a minute. Eveline. Yeah, yeah, yeah. We're all connected one way or another. Yeah.

KWON: Well, thank you so much.

SAIKA: No, thank you, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

