

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

EVELINE SHEN

Interviewed by

JUHEE KWON

August 7, 2013
Oakland, California

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Narrator

Eveline Shen (b. 1968) was born in Fort Collins, Colorado to immigrant parents from mainland China. She received her undergraduate degree from University of California, Davis and was involved in the women's center there. She received her Masters in Public Health from UC Berkeley in Community Health Education. She became involved in Forward Together (formerly Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health) as an intern and eventually became the co-director. Shen serves on the board of the Movement Strategy Center and is a member of the Bay Area Social Justice Funders Network advisory committee. She has also served as Principal Investigator for two National Institutes of Health grants that explore the intersection between environmental justice and reproductive justice. Women's eNews named Eveline one of their 21 Leaders for the 21st Century.

Interviewer

Juhee Kwon (b. 1991) is an undergraduate at Brown University. She is set to graduate in 2014 with a B.A. in Biology and Ethnic Studies.

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Format

Interview recorded in MP3 file format using Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-702PC. One file: 1 hr 4 min 3 sec.

Transcript

Transcribed and edited for clarity by Juhee Kwon. Reviewed and approved by Eveline Shen.

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by: JUHEE KWON

KWON: This is Juhee Kwon. Today is August 7, 2013. I'm here with Eveline Shen, the Executive Director of Forward Together here at her office in Oakland, California. This interview is a part of the Asian American Reproductive Justice Oral History Project. So we can get started. If you want to start with—wherever you want to start, in terms of how you grew up, where you were born, and how you developed your political consciousness.

SHEN: Sure. I was born in 1968 in Fort Collins, Colorado. I'm the daughter of two. My parents immigrated from mainland China, and I would say that the town I grew up [in] was a combination of rural and small city kind of town, and it wasn't very diverse. So I think my political consciousness emerged fairly early on, in terms of thinking about, you know, especially around the race and gender lens. I think my parents were really good about—I have a brother, and we didn't have a lot of gender discrepancies in terms of how they raised us. I was always—I think I grew up with a very strong sense from my family about what's right, or how I was thinking about it at that time, but I feel like [it] transformed into [an idea about] a more just society where there's equitable distribution in power. I feel like growing up in Fort Collins, there was a lot of racism that I experienced, and I think that—

KWON: Could you talk about some of that? What kinds of experiences stand out to you, in terms of your childhood?

1:52

SHEN: Well, I think they're very, you know. So for example, I went to kindergarten. My first language is Mandarin, and when I went to kindergarten—I don't remember this, but my parents said that on the first day, I came back, and I said, "I'm not going to speak Mandarin anymore, because I got teased for it." And I think that they were doing the best that they could. And they said, Okay. We want you to be able to fit in, and I think they wanted—Anyway, that's what happened. And so I think that [incident], and I do have memories of catching the bus to school or leaving

school, actually, on the bus and just being teased with the traditional [jokes] around my eyes and typical, very blatant verbal expressions of how people make fun of folks who they think—around how Asian folks talk. And being the only or one of the few Asians in the school was really hard. It was very apparent that people didn't have a lot of experience.

It's just, you know, so when I came to the Bay Area, I was like, "If I raise kids here, I'm not going to hate it." And feeling like I didn't have a way to talk about this with my parents. When I would tell them in elementary school that people were making fun of me or teasing me, my parents, they didn't have the experience, because they grew up in China. And so they basically said, Well, tease them back. They knew it was wrong, but they were like, Say something back to them. And it's like, Well, it doesn't really work that way in terms of power.

3:29

I internalized, I felt, a lot of it. And I think the way that I dealt with it was I used my body. So I did a lot of sports. I played piano. I just focused on the things that allowed me to express myself and allowed me to be powerful in the way—or connect to my own power. I think that the flip side of that experience [was that] it helped me really understand why girls need to be connected to their bodies and why—So at the same time, I was wanting to disconnect from aspects of my body, there were parts of my body that I could use, that I felt strong, that I could do things with. So it was really good to be able to do that.

KWON: Did you stay in Colorado all throughout your high school years?

5:19

SHEN: Well, yes. So I went all the way through high school and then I graduated from high school, and then went to UC [University of California] Davis and felt a lot better (laughs). And then started doing organizing within the student body. I worked at the women's center there. I was an intern there and put on, I think it was the second UC conference for women hosted by UC Davis. I start taking feminist classes, women's studies classes, and started reading and learning from folks about the intersectionality of race, gender.

I came out at that time and felt that I learned a lot from the [people] like Audre Lorde and Cherríe Moraga, folks who were writing about not thinking about your oppression in a hierarchy, but how we simultaneously are impacted by many different kinds of issues and challenges and oppressions. And so I felt really "empowered," or whatever, at that time. And that time, there were also some challenges around the women's center, around addressing race issues—

KWON: Yeah, especially as a person with different identities, sometimes a lot of people have criticisms for the general mainstream women's movement. Did you have similar reservations?

7:08

SHEN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We actually did end up bringing Cherríe Moraga as the guest speaker for the conference, and I just remember feeling so relieved when she came to speak in a space where I feel like a lot of students of color, women of color, were struggling within the mainstream feminist community or whatever it was. I learned a lot about—I think that's what solidified my commitment to trying to build a world where people can be fully themselves and not have to leave aspects of who they are at the door, and that all of theirselves are honored. And I think, early on, just building a strong sense of commitment to social justice and social change. I think I carry that through up until now.

KWON: What made you get into community health and eventually get your MPH [Masters in Public Health]? Because that seems a little different than the women's studies stuff you were talking about.

8:21

SHEN: I got into public health because at the time, I graduated and then I worked at a home—I got the opportunity, this amazing opportunity, to start this community organizing team in one of the largest homeless service providers in the East Bay. What I loved about that was [that] before that I had a job where I was working with people who were victims of hate crimes, and I felt like that, you know, you talk about upstream, downstream. The challenges that I saw on the downstream part—so for example, these folks had already been victims. They were dealing with a criminal injustice system that was very structurally—there's a lot of structural racism. A lot of thing that are really difficult for people of color to navigate. And so I realized I felt really helpless. So when I moved to this organization that then gave me the opportunity to hire five staff members and to start this project, where we could start organizing and addressing the root causes before they happened, within the confines of a—I really love that combination of having already a base of folks, who are receiving services, but connecting them up with ways to actually change their lives in meaningful ways. And that's actually when I—

I was really, again, I think bringing in that wanting to create a place and a culture and a team, [where] people could be fully themselves. It was my first role as a supervisor, the first time I got to think through, How do you create a healthy working environment? Even at that time, when I was in my early twenties, I was thinking about, How do people think about work-life balance? I want people to be thriving in their work. I got to work with a great team, I got experience building a team, and I got introduced to popular education. And I don't know if you're familiar with it, but what really was inspiring to me was using education as a tool for social change. It just made a lot of sense to me, in terms of helping people develop their critical thinking skills, [which is] connected to being able to make change in their lives. And so I started integrating that, and I started connecting with other people who were doing popular education. A lot of

them happened to have their MPH, and so I was like, “Okay. That’s what I’m going to do.” (laughs)

KWON: It’s a big life decision.

11:42

SHEN: Yeah. Right (laughs). UC Berkeley actually had a community health education component, so that really resonated with me. And I was excited about thinking about public—So the thing about public health is [that] they do talk about upstream downstream. The first day, they were talking about [upstream downstream] in this general orientation. You see this river, and people are struggling and they’re drowning and their bodies are floating by, so where do you do the intervention? Do you do it when you see them drown? When they’re already dead? When you see them struggling? Or you figure out, Oh, the bridge is damaged here and that’s why people are falling in, and that’s why they’re dying, or whatever. That really appealed to me, still, about, How do we—It’s really about addressing root causes and trying to make structural change.

That’s how I ended up here, because [of] my internship. I had to do an internship, and I ended up doing two internships that year. This was one of them, and I came to what was then, APIRH [Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health], and Yin [Lin Leung] asked me to design a curriculum for middle school young women in Richmond Asian young women, and I got to design something. Again, I was really interested in popular education, and I got to design a curriculum from the ground up. And I got to put in all of the things that I would’ve wanted when I was growing up in Colorado.

12:41

We did things like Organizing 101 to media literacy. We looked at all of the most popular magazines, and they looked at what are the messages they’re getting about their bodies, and then we connected up with them doing their own body mapping and overlaying—like, Okay, how do you feel about your body? What’s the connection between how you feel about your body and the messages you’re getting from this magazines?—to give them a sense of how they might be influenced. We wrote op-eds around [inaudible 14:03] ways that they’d want to change the messages that these magazines were giving to empower Asian young women. We did stuff with our bodies, we did—Everyday, we did something, whether it was dance or yoga or martial arts or you know, so they got a chance to use their bodies physically. [We] brought in a panel of LGBT folks. It was the first time that people had ever experienced talking to someone that they knew was out, and I could see the transformation in that. We talked about a lot of—they did journal writing every day to help think process their thoughts and express themselves in different ways. It was probably one of the most fun summers I’ve had, and I loved it. It really lit up something in me about, How do we create a leadership development and training that can capture all of the different

ways in which our communities are not getting what they need, addressing that, and supporting people to be their full selves?

KWON: Was this the first explicitly Asian American organization that you had worked with?

15:21

SHEN: Yes.

KWON: You had done women's work before, like women's studies—

SHEN: So I was at the women's research and resource center in UC Davis, and then I went to Community United Against Violence, which deals with LGBT folks who are victims of hate crimes. Then I went to Berkeley - Oakland Support Services, which is now called Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency. They provide services to—it's multiracial. Then I worked at CopyMat in between, and then I came here—so yes.

KWON: What was different about your experience with an identity-based organization that explicitly dealt with an Asian American community?

16:05

SHEN: For me, working in those other places, Asian American issues didn't come [up]. I mean, I don't want to use the cliché of being invisible, but they weren't apparent or they weren't prioritized. And so I think coming here allowed me to bring my full self, and to also be able to really look at the diversity within Asian American communities, and be able to speak and prioritize and focus on that, in a way that I wasn't able to before.

KWON: What year did you first do your internship here?

SHEN: It was '98.

KWON: Okay. And you've been with the organization ever since then?

SHEN: Yeah, so I was asked to come in after my internship to be the Associate Director. Before I came in, there was like one or, I think, it was like two staff members total. And then it's grown since then.

KWON: So when you came in, was Yin the ED?

SHEN: Yin was the ED.

KWON: Okay. And then you transitioned into the ED position?

17:43

SHEN: Yin and I became co-directors, and then I transitioned. She left to go to India, and yeah.

KWON: What kind of programs have you initiated since you became ED? What kind of vision did you bring to the organization?

SHEN: The organization has grown pretty steadily ever since I've been here. And it grew before this, but I think what keeps me here is that it's constantly pushing the envelope. I need to personally be in a place where I'm continually growing and learning, and so I think, I mean, this place has definitely been the place for that.

When I started, we actually had two offices, one in Oakland and one in Long Beach. There was a young women's—the Long Beach already started with their [program], which would become KGA. But then we started a youth organizing program for young women in Oakland. One of the things that I realized is that this was local-based organizing and that a lot of the issues impacting our communities, especially young women, were affected by things that were happening at the state level. So that's when we began to do things like partner with the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] to help them do critical research, so that they could actually pass the comprehensive sex education law, which is now, I think, one of the model laws in the country. We started doing electoral organizing around helping to defeat parental notification. We did that three times. So we started working at the state level, and then we put out our paper—

KWON: The 2005 paper that you were talking about?

20:18

SHEN: Yes. That catapulted us into the national scene, where we then started getting a lot of requests around. We loved your paper. Can you talk about reproductive justice? It just gave us a lot more visibility. And so we did a strategic visioning process for like, Okay, we're really small. We want to have the best impact that we can make. What can we do?

Out of that came this model, EMERJ [ACRONYM], where it was really about, The reproductive justice movement is starting to grow. There is a lot of folks that are isolated or don't know about each other. And so what can we do to help bring folks together? And so that's what we ended up doing, and it involved a number of different factors. I actually was able to integrate a lot of the lessons learned around movement building and good coalition building. And from there, [we] really started to build a movement building project that would allow people to meet them where they're at. It's like organizing, you know, meet people where they're at, organizations, and bring them—when folks are ready to move, that we would help them be able to.

So for example, we brought groups together in various parts of the country or different states, who are working on sex education. They didn't know that the other folks were working on it. They come together over 18 months, and they would commit to staying together, building relationships, learn from each other, and do a collective action project.

Those projects turned out to have impacts that were greater than what they could've done on their own. So we did that in various ways with various groups. And then we started to connect with other organizations, who wanted to part of something bigger, and so they became leaders with us in moving EMERJ.

And then came Strong Families, which is the initiative that we're moving now. It is intentionally cross-sector, so reproductive justice is at the core. We started with ten organizations. We now have a hundred organizations that are a part of Strong Families that are working on behalf of families across the country, who come from different sectors. So it is reproductive justice, reproductive rights, but it's also ending gender-based violence, and it's LGBT, and it's immigrant rights, and so there's—progressive faith. The ways that our funding happens within a non-profit structure is that it's very siloed. And so we felt like it was really important for us to come together in some way and be more united, and we could be more powerful there.

Strong Families is a long-term initiative. It is designed to change the way everyone in this country sees and thinks and feels and acts on behalf of families. It's about taking back the terrain of families from the Right, which has used it to move their ideology. For us, a family is very expansive. It's about our family of origin, it can include that, or it can include your chosen family. A strong family is one in which each individual member in the family has the opportunity to thrive. And so that's, I think, the key [idea] that goes up against traditional, or the Right's way of the patriarchal nuclear family and what they think about the role of women, what they think about how families are structured, who's deserving and who's not. This all grew from the seeds that were planted back here (points to earlier part of timeline).

KWON: You said that ACRJ [Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice], at least, began to have a national presence. Were they also involved with SisterSong?

SHEN: Yes. ACRJ actually—or APIRH—was one of the original members of SisterSong.

KWON: Oh, okay. Can you tell me a little bit more about SisterSong? I don't really know very much about it.

SHEN: Sure, so SisterSong—I don't know exactly when it first started.

KWON: Yeah, I can look that up.

SHEN: But SisterSong really was the first—It started off [when] the Ford Foundation gave money to fund different—So we [Forward Together] first started in '89, in 1989. We started because there was a group of mostly

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East Asian women who wanted to have a voice in the pro-choice movement. Around that time, there were also folks who were starting up organizations for African-American communities, Latino women. And so there was, across the country, this growing—Native, Indigenous women—feeling like the reproductive rights movement was not being responsive to our needs. And there are a lot of needs that we have that we need to address that center on—We weren't even using reproductive justice at that time, but—addressing reproductive oppression.

I don't know when it [SisterSong] was formed, but basically Ford gave money to a set of groups in each racial community. Asian Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, Latinas. That was an initiative that got multiple years of funding, and then SisterSong was created from that. But then it actually spun off and became its own independent group. It was a multiracial collective of reproductive justice groups, even though that's not what we were calling it at the time. It was the first intentional space for us to be able to have for each other, to support each other, and to learn from each other, et cetera. It played a pivotal role in the reproductive justice movement, in terms of, you know, Loretta Ross is one of the pivotal leaders in terms of birthing the reproductive justice movement and starting up SisterSong and having the vision to do that.

KWON: Are you guys still involved or did it—so the collective stopped and then it became an independent organization?

SHEN: Yeah, it became an independent organization. It still describes itself as a collective. We were on the management team for a long time, and then we stepped off. But we're still members of SisterSong.

KWON: All right. Let's just rewind a little bit to when you started as ED. I'm also interested in the name transitions that went on. I'm wondering if the name changes also reflected internal changes in the organization, so if you wanted to talk a little bit about APIRH to ACRJ first?

27:45

SHEN: Yeah, so Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health [to ACRJ] happened before I came on. What I gleaned is that we started as APIC [Asian Pacific Islanders for Choice], and the folks here at that time realized that "choice" is not—it's too narrow in terms of abortion access. And so we changed it to APIRH with acknowledgement that was much broader. Reproductive health encompasses a lot more things, and also the people who were leading it had more of a research and health background.

We ended up changing it to ACRJ here [in 2005], because in between '92 and 2004, reproductive justice became coined and then we became identified as a movement. We felt that the justice piece and reproductive justice was a critical piece of who we are and what we stood for. We were also getting a lot of calls from folks who didn't know us,

asking us if we provided health services. And so we wanted to make it more accurately reflect who we were.

KWON: I'm also interested in how the transition between APIRH and dropped that Pacific Islander term. I was wondering if they had been servicing the [Pacific Islander] community before, or if it wasn't really reflective of what the name was.

29:24

SHEN: Yes. I think that around this time, API [Asian Pacific Islanders] was an accepted overarching umbrella of our communities. And I think that while there was a lot of concerted effort to include Pacific Islanders in this, it always felt like it didn't really—it was difficult. This was before I came on, but even afterwards, we tried in various ways, and we just felt like we weren't—There are a lot of needs that are very different. We felt like it was important to partner with Pacific Islander programs versus claiming that they—So I felt like here (pointing to APIRH) it was a thing of solidarity, and here (pointing to ACRJ) in this time, it was more of like, Well, we don't want to tokenize or claim things that we're not doing, and so we want to be true and authentic to that. Is that helpful?

KWON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just wanted to mark down the areas that you were pointing to. And so what about the recent name change to Forward Together from ACRJ?

30:44

SHEN: Okay, so we have been through a lot of name changes for an organization, and we really didn't want to keep changing it over and over (laughs). So a number of things. One, our local work is still very committed in the Asian community in Oakland. As we started EMERJ and we moved into Strong Families, our national work and our movement building work became much more multiracial, and so we wanted to reflect that and also the cross sector nature of what we're doing. So we changed it to Forward Together, because we didn't want it to be so tied to identity, where every five years things are changing, it doesn't reflect—We wanted a name that would actually reflect [our work] no matter what we're doing. Again, I think because we're constantly innovating and growing and changing, we wanted a name that would hold all those. Forward Together became something that would describe whatever. Whatever we're going to do, it's always going to be about bringing groups together or activists together or communities together and moving forward, you know, how we're describing forward.

KWON: How did the name come about? I know you also have a program called Forward Stance with your—

SHEN: Yeah. Mind, body, practice?

KWON: Yeah, so is it like a theme in your organization?

SHEN: Yeah, it was really interesting. We went through a process where we brought together—we worked with an organization that helps people do name changes for an organization. We brought together 25 stakeholders, board members, funders, community folks to help us think about what our name could be. We went through two sessions, and that's what came out of it. (laughs)

Yeah, I mean Forward Stance, we had developed—(points to the timeline) Somewhere around here, we started developing. So I'm sure it's not a coincidence that there's both Forwards in the name. In both names.

KWON: I was wondering if you could also highlight some of the successes that you feel like the organization has achieved while you've been here as Executive Director. Just some successes and things like that.

33:10

SHEN: Yeah. (pauses) Okay. I think that there's a number of success. It's so funny, because I feel like the cultural aspect of—Whatever. The humbleness. I don't think about the—so let me just.

KWON: There's so many? (laughs)

SHEN: No. I mean, it's just more like the humility in doing this work, and you know. You're just learning and—

KWON: Oh, yeah. That's why I ask though, because a lot of people don't really have even the time to reflect upon what they've already done. So I really want to have that moment to highlight it.

SHEN: Yeah. That's good. Okay. I'm really proud about the fact that APIC started as a volunteer-run organization and when I came in, again, I think it was 150[,000] to 200[,000]—the budget was less than 200[,000]. It was about 150,000. We were three people. And then I feel really excited about the fact that we've been able to continue to grow. We are now going to be 17 people by the end of this year. We're going to have four offices: one in Portland, one in Oakland, one in New Mexico, and one in New York. We're just opening up our New York office.

I feel like one of our biggest contributions was providing leadership in the reproductive justice movement as Asian American women, at that time, to say, Here's a definition of reproductive justice in terms of what's worked for us. Here's how we're thinking about it. And that it was really welcomed by not just Asian American reproductive justice groups—of which there wasn't very many—but by a set of women of color who were doing reproductive justice work, that they felt like they could build off of it. They felt like it was helpful. I think that it helped grow the movement. I feel really good about that. I feel excited about the

35:12

relationships that we're continuing to build with organizations across sectors, that right now, there's not a lot of efforts that are really explicitly multi-sector. It gives us the opportunity to work hand-in-hand with people that we normally wouldn't work with, but that we're able to be stronger because we can utilize each other's strengths. I think our movement building model is something that is really—It's been working well, and we've been able to have a lot more impact than we could on our own, in terms of one organization by itself. I think Forward Stance is a mind-body practice that—I'm really happy that we've been able to grow and to use it to help strengthen—

KWON: Do you do it in the office?

37:05

SHEN: Yeah.

KWON: I see that huge open space and a bunch of yoga mats.

SHEN: Yeah, so we do it in the office. We also have that space for our youth, but yeah, we do it on a weekly basis with all of our staff. We Skype it so that staff from all different—Yeah, we've learned to develop our capacity with that. We actually do it in our movement building work. It helps to build trust and a collective language and be able to do our work much more effectively together than if we didn't do it.

KWON: Yeah. How did that come about?

SHEN: That came about because there was—Let's see, dates. Forward Stance came about when, in our organization, there was some tension that happened. Within our organization, it came to the point where folks were not able to talk to each other or were having a lot of tension, and we were trying to figure out how to strengthen the organization. We did a lot of things, including talking with other Asian American organizations that worked with young people, in terms of how you deal with conflict, and then also I interviewed a bunch of organizations that have women of color leaders.

What I found out is that people in general have—that non-profit—So when you're doing organizing, a lot of things that happen in your training of youth and in thinking about organizing is that things become very polarized. So it's like us against them. We're the victims, they're the oppressor. We're right, they're wrong. There's a lot of very polarizing ways we think about stuff that's very black and white and oppositional. That's fine if you're organizing, but if you are trying to deal with conflict among your group or within a certain community, that doesn't work. What the staff and I were trying to do is figure out different models of, How do you deal with disagreements and conflicts so that you can actually use it as a tool to have better understanding of each other, to ask questions of each

other, to embrace it, as we come from diverse communities and experiences, so this is natural? And how do we use it to come out in a ways that's more united and strong?

So one of the interventions that we did was we worked with this woman, Norma Wong, who is actually a political strategist in Hawai'i, and she also is a Zen priest. She comes from a dojo that uses martial arts, and so she helped us connect to our breath and to be able to think about, How can you be in tense situations and still be relaxed and still be able to think clearly and strategically? And that helped us a lot. And so we worked with her to develop over time what is now Forward Stance, which is a mind-body practice that we utilize in movement building work. (stands up) So if you stand up, I'll take you through it.

KWON: Oh, okay. Awesome.

40:45

SHEN: So if you stand up, and you face me and stand with 50% of your body weight forwards and backwards. This is what we call the neutral stance. Stance is how we navigate through the world. You can have a walking stance, a standing stance, a sitting stance. this is a standing stance. So now, lean back so that 60% of your body weight is on your heels. Just notice how that feels. And now try to take a step forward with your left foot.

(Both take steps forward)

Okay. You can come back. Now come back to your neutral stance, and then come back to this [60% weight on heels position]. Lean back. So this is what we call a defensive or a 40/60 stance. Notice how I appear, how you feel. Sometimes people feel more comfortable going like this [crosses arms] to balance it. And then it's like, What's the energy that you're getting me and from you, if we're both facing each other in this stance?

So then we go back to neutral stance. And then now lean 60% of your body weight forward on the balls of your feet. Start to look at me, but have your awareness out, so that you can see 180 degrees. You're starting to be aware of what's going on in your environment. We work a lot with breaths, so to bring our breath kind of low, slow our rate of breathing, bring it lower into our bodies. Now take a step with your left foot and come back. Do you see a difference between the two?

KWON: Yeah.

SHEN: Yeah. What do you feel when you—?

42:17

KWON: Well, I think when you called it a defensive stance, I was like, "Oh I wonder why, because I didn't feel anything different." And then you crossed your arms, and I felt that tension between the people. And then

when you lean forward, it's like as if you're interested, and you're connected, and I definitely felt something like that.

SHEN:

Yeah, exactly. So we can sit down. In a movement-building lens, a lot of our organizations in the Asian American movement, the social justice movement, we're in a defensive stance. Because we're having to counter these attacks that are coming at us, we're trying to protect our communities, we're trying to address the multiple needs and we don't have enough resources, so we're constantly in this defensive mode. What that means then is that we're not able to—Being in this [defensive] mode means that all you're seeing is stuff coming at you.

What we want to do is get people in the forward stance position where they have a vision of where they're going, they are aware of what's happening not just in front of them or in their computer screen or in their office, but they have a broader awareness of what's going on in the political environment, in their communities, and that they are in a state of relaxed readiness to move. When you're like this [in the defensive position], you're not ready to move. You're there to stand your ground, you're there to fight against, you know. The only way to do that, in terms of getting organizations more in a forward stance, is to do it—to make sure that the staff and the individual people who are a part of the organizations are able to do that.

We use that as a general practice for us all to be able to embody the aspects of social change that we are trying to get expressed through our work. We are finding that if you connect up the two, your mind and your body, that you are able to really capture the power that you have in your body and use that through your work. A lot of times, especially in the reproductive justice movement, physically what we're talking about is the impact of reproductive oppression or injustice that is a lot of times [about us] being separated from our bodies. Just like the racism that I experienced, the way that I dealt with it internally was a lot of separating. When I got teased, I would separate myself. I would be trying to protect myself and not embrace all of who I was but be distant from it, right? So that kind of thing happens to so many of us, in so many ways, and if we're not connecting up our bodies and we're not really living in our bodies, then we're not being as powerful as we can be, individually. And then how do you as a group—If you're doing the same practice together, you're moving together, you're aligning your breath, it transfers directly into your work, together. So that we can work with people in New York, or in Georgia, or in Portland much more effectively after we've been in the same room doing this together.

KWON:

This is really powerful. This is really great.

45:46

SHEN:

Good. I'm really glad.

KWON: It's genius whoever came up with this.

SHEN: Yeah, so I think that when we talk about successes, it's all about really what we've learned putting into practice, testing it out, coming back, evaluating it, Did it work? What didn't? So I feel like, I've been really fortunate that this has been a place [in] which we can continually do that, and we're still doing that. We're still testing things out, trying new things, and seeing what sticks.

KWON: You said that Forward Stance program grew out of some of the tensions and the challenges that the organization's went through. I was wondering if you could talk about some of those, and maybe how the organization grew out of them.

46:26

SHEN: Yeah, so a number of things. We actually grew a lot between 1995 and 2001, in those five years. That was also the dotcom boom.

KWON: What is that?

SHEN: Okay. That was when the Silicon Valley got a lot of money, and also the general economy was doing really well. When the economy's doing well, because companies contribute to foundations, they're connected to foundations, they *are* the foundation, the foundations then have more money to give. And so we were able to move from a very informal one person, two staff to—we grew really quickly from three to, I don't know, 10 or whatever, in a span of years. We also had the two offices, and so we had board members who were in different places.

We did an evaluation, and what the evaluator found was that the growth happened really quickly. There were a lot of things we were trying to [do]. We were also trying to move from a health to organizing [focus], that whole thing. So it's like, we're trying to move from health to organizing, we grew, we had a lot of new staff, we were trying to figure out, How do we do our work in two different areas? So all of that. And our board was split up, so that people had different relationships, we were trying to figure out different strategies, we were growing. So there's a lot of things that happened all at once, and we didn't have a container to hold everything and ground it.

I was the new ED at that time. There are a lot of things I learned from that. And so I think that it was ripe for all these tensions, in different ways, for it to unravel. One of the things I think that I, again, I carry strongly is [that] when you're trying new things and when you're doing things, bumps are going to happen along the road, and the most important thing is your ability to recover from them and to learn from them. So I think that there's no doubt in my mind that we came of this stronger. We were transformed in terms of how we think about things.

So it's interesting because for a long time, we were one office, and I did not want to have offices in two different locations. But now, I'm in a position where we have four. But I've really tried to integrate what we've learned, so that we won't repeat what happened. We'll see, but I feel much better about where we're at than back here (points to 2001), because I could feel the ground starting to—it wasn't so stable as I feel like it is now. But check back in two years, three years. I'll let you know how it goes.

KWON: Yeah. Do you still maintain a relationship with KGA [Khmer Girls in Action] and things like that?

50:04

SHEN: Yeah. I mean, as part of that conflict, KGA spun off, which I think was really great. Because I think part of what is really difficult is to have a locally based program that is—So the headquarter's in Oakland, and we're locally based. Our only youth program at that time was KGA, and—I mean, was the . . .

KWON: The HOPE Project?

SHEN: Yeah, and so there was a dynamic—so it's hard because folks in Oakland are—the management is here, and how do we navigate providing support? But also we don't know exactly what's going on, so there's just going to be tensions that arise.

So in terms of support, I support them. I feel like it was a great move to have the separation. They play a critical role and they've done such great work in terms of making sure that in the Cambodian community, that these young women have what they need. And they are leaders within the LA community in social justice, around parental [notifications]. We work together specifically around the parental notification stuff, when we were part of a larger reproductive justice network that was formed to make sure that we were all on the same page in terms of our organizing and stuff.

KWON: What was the motivation for discontinuing the [Long Beach] branch? Was it just because it was so separate from the Oakland one?

51:43

SHEN: Yeah. I think that it just felt like folks locally wanted to have local ownership of it.

KWON: Mm. And be more grounded in local [organizing]?

SHEN: Yeah, which I totally support.

KWON: You said that you have more national presence, and you have those local branches. How are you able to navigate that now? Being based here, but

then also having all those different branches—also, all the way on the East Coast. That’s really hard.

SHEN: Yes. So I’ll give you an example. I think the most developed example is New Mexico. [In] New Mexico, we have two staff members now. We have a Field Director and we have a Program Associate. So basically, they work in partnership—Strong Families has 100 organizations, but then we also have 30% of those organizations, [which] are helping to lead Strong Families work. As part of the leadership, we have a leadership team that launched Strong Families and also provides the overall strategic direction for it. Young Women United is an organization based in New Mexico that is a key leader in the leadership team. Young Women United, and then we have a staff person, Adriann Barboa, and then we have our staff here, and then we have a circle of organizations, who are a part of the Strong Families network. They together move a Strong Families agenda forward in New Mexico.

So your question was how do we navigate—I’m not really sure —

KWON: The national and also the local.

53:26

SHEN: So they are moving a set of policies and doing policy work at the state level, and at the local, at the school board level, the county level, the state level. But then they are also part of the national Strong Families network. So what they learn in New Mexico, they’re bringing to the Strong Families work, I mean, the national work. And they also take what we talk about nationally and what we’re learning nationally into the local work. So there’s a lot of informing and also engaging across that I think is—and I think that what is really great is that our staff there, she is 3rd generation New Mexican.

KWON: Oh, so she’s really local.

SHEN: Yeah, she’s really rooted there, and I think that makes a huge difference for not parachuting in and trying to start things up.

KWON: What was the motivation to move onto New York?

54:23

SHEN: So there’s a couple of motivations. One is that as we began to have a national presence, we were wanting—there’s just a lot of need for us be in New York or D.C., because that’s where a lot of the work happens, the national policy work. So we knew at some point we needed to have some kind of presence there. Well, that’s the main thing.

And then the impetus, the reason it came at that time, was because Amanda, one of our youth organizing folks who worked up here locally, she wanted to actually move out there, and so it was a great opportunity. She’s out there now. She just moved out there. She’s starting up the youth

arm of the Strong Families movement. And we just hired two new people, one person who's going to be our Communications Director in D.C. and then our Movement Building Director, [Miriam] Perez, will be in New York.

KWON: Wow. That's really big. And it's a really different social context out on the East Coast, because I've never—I've only visited California, and I've never been to the Bay Area. And so coming in was a very different social and political context. So it's really difficult to navigate.

SHEN: It is. I'm really grateful. Maria Elena has worked and lived in New York for a number of years, and Miriam [Perez], our Communications person, has been in D.C. She was in New York two years ago. One of the lessons learned is that we really need to—it is really helpful to have people who are already rooted there.

55:52

KWON: Forward Together is becoming this multiracial, really large national presence. I was wondering how you still envision the role of Forward Together within the Asian American Reproductive Justice movement.

SHEN: NAPAWF [National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum] is part of Strong Families, and we're also part of their We Belong Together campaign. And so I think that we work in partnership with them, and we fully support the work that NAPAWF is doing within the Asian American community. We feel like our work is still connected. We are part of the Asian American reproductive justice community, even though we don't solely focus on—I mean, we are broader.

We decided very explicitly to keep our local work, because we want to be able to continue to be part of building a strong Asian American community, and we've had this for the flagship program—it's been the heart of what we've done all the way from the beginning. So we feel like it's critical to continue to develop young Asian American youth to be reproductive justice advocates. I think that it was really powerful for us when we integrated young men to have them be out there talking about issues that you don't see young men talking about, like about contraception, about sex ed, homophobia, masculinity. There are a lot of things, I think, that just adds a new dimension, when you integrate the full community in different ways. I think that we're still very part of it and bring the support that we can outside of the work that we do, outside of the Asian American community to the work. So it's that mutually reinforcing or supportive work.

KWON: I think I just have maybe one more question.

58:42

SHEN: Sure.

KWON: What kind of work still needs to be done, do you think, especially in the Asian American reproductive justice field, because that's what the oral history is about, but also just in the broader reproductive justice movement?

SHEN: Okay. I still think that our issues still need to be more visible. We had a lot of internal discussions about what does it mean for Asian leadership in a multiracial effort, and that there's not a lot of times you see that. So how do we kind of step into that? [Looking at] the nexus of gender, race, and sexuality when you look in the Asian American community, there is still a lot to be done around lifting up each of those pieces, but also simultaneously. And I think also providing Asian American leadership within a larger [movement], even if it's within a larger reproductive justice movement or the social justice movement. I feel like, How do we make visible, bring our communities along, so that there really is a place and that the voices and the diversity of voices are heard, and that there is intersectionality? So it's not just Asian men in the forefront, it's not just folks who are citizens, it's [not] folks are straight. It's really about mobilizing our communities so that we can address a multitude of issues that affect us, and I think reaching some of the folks that would like to be more political but aren't or who aren't engaged. Trying to figure out how to bring them into social justice, I think, is critical.

KWON: Do you see the movement intersecting with other movements such as the environmental justice movement, disability rights? Do you still think that there is still a lot of work to be done there as well?

1:01:28

SHEN: Yeah. I mean, I look at groups like APEN [Asian Pacific Environmental Network], who play a leading role in that. And disability rights I feel like is something that we all [see as] a huge gap in terms of us intersecting with folks with different abilities. I think there is a lot of opportunity and a lot of need to be able to reach out to groups like that.

And then environmental—I mean, when you think about [it], there is the environmental justice groups, and then there's environmental health, and then there's like climate change and climate justice. In general, the environmental movement is very White, so I think that there is a lot of room—I've seen studies which show that Asian Americans are concerned about it, but I don't know how much people are tapping into that other than APEN.

KWON: Did you have anything else you wanted to add to the oral history record that I didn't mention?

SHEN: No. I mean—Is this the first of its kind? Have you seen anything like this?

KWON: Of what?

SHEN: Of an Asian American reproductive justice.

KWON: Well, the reason I started it was because—

SHEN: There's nothing on it.

KWON: I couldn't find anything.

SHEN: So this is a great example of—So one, I want to thank you for having the foresight and also actually doing this, because we just don't have a lot of stuff like this in terms of documentation. Making the invisible visible is—which is so cliché, I feel like I want to move beyond that, but—

KWON: But it's so true.

SHEN: Because we were struggling now like during the 80s and still the same thing. But thank you. I want to thank you for doing this. I appreciate your earnestness, and I think you probably had a very positive effect on every person that you've interviewed, just to create that space and to give people the opportunity to talk about it. Thank you for your leadership on this.

KWON: Thanks so much.

END OF INTERVIEW

