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

HELEN ZIA

Interviewed by

JUHEE KWON

August 15, 2013
Oakland, California

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Narrator

Helen Zia (b. 1952) was born in Newark, New Jersey to Chinese immigrant parents. Zia received her B.A. from Princeton University in 1973. She was a part of Princeton's first graduating class of women and involved in the establishment of the university's Third World Center for students of color. After graduation, she became heavily involved in the women's rights organizing in Boston. She briefly enrolled in the Tufts University School of Medicine before she moved to Detroit, Michigan to work as a large press operator at Eight Mile Stamping Plant at Chrysler Corporation. During this period, Zia began her career in journalism. Zia is one of the co-founders of the American Citizens for Justice (ACJ), which formed in response to the death of a Chinese autoworker named Vincent Chin. Zia has previously served as the executive director of *Ms.* Magazine and the president of the New York Chapter of the Asian American Journalist Association (AAJA). Zia is the autho or *Asian American Dreams: The Emergenc of an American People.*

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.

Restrictions

Format

Interview recorded in MP3 file format using Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-702PC. Originally recorded on SONY cassette-corder M560V. Three files: (a) 8 min 52 sec, (b) 59 min 9 sec, (c) 28 min 21 sec.

Transcript

Transcribed and edited for clarity by Juhee Kwon. Reviewed and approved by Helen Zia.

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Transcript of interview conducted August 15, 2013, with:

HELEN ZIA
Oakland, California

by: JUHEE KWON

KWON: This is Juhee Kwon. Today is August 15, 2013. I'm here with Ms. Helen Zia at her office—

ZIA: Yeah, my workspace.

KWON: In Oakland, California. This is part of the Sophia Smith Collection Oral History Project. Thank you so much for meeting with me on such a short notice. I was hoping that we could get started at the very beginning, maybe with your childhood, when you were born, where you were born, and how you grew up.

ZIA: I was born in Newark, New Jersey. My parents were immigrants from China. They met in New York City and moved to New Jersey shortly before I was born, and so I grew up in New Jersey. This is in the early 1950s.

KWON: Okay. Did you have any siblings? 00:49

ZIA: I had an older brother, and then not long after that, I had two more brothers. And then there was a little gap, and I had a brother and a sister —a sister and a brother. So there were six of us all together.

KWON: Wow.

ZIA: So yes, I had a bunch of siblings.

KWON: Could you tell me a little bit more about growing up in New Jersey? I'm personally not too familiar with New Jersey, but maybe you could talk a little bit about the racial dynamic? Is it more of a black, white dichotomy when you were growing up? 1:11

ZIA: I was born in 1952, and in the 1950s and the 1960s, throughout New Jersey and actually everywhere except for Hawai'i and California—well,

not California—except for Chinatowns, Koreatowns, Little Manilas, and Little Tokyos, except for ethnic enclaves like that, there were very very few Asians anywhere. New Jersey, at that time, was probably very—The census in the 1950s showed that there were 500,000 Asian Americans in all of the United States, including the territory of Hawai'i. And so in places like New Jersey—I mean, okay, if you went to New York Chinatown, you would find some Asians. But on the East Coast, except for Chinatowns—and there really weren't Koreatowns or Japantowns or places like that—there was really nobody. My generation of the 1950s was probably the beginning of a few souls moving into the suburbs, outside of the ethnic enclaves. My parents were part of their immigrant generation, and they moved here after World War II. They were a middle class of Chinese, and so they aspired not to live in a Chinatown (inaudible). So anyway, so that's how they ended up in the suburbs, how we ended up in an area that was like practically—well, majority White and some Black, and otherwise, as far as a—it's sort of a bipolar kind of black/white dichotomy. That was it. I would venture to say, even now, in places like New Jersey or Minnesota or Texas, even though they have a lot more Asians than they did then, the prevailing view of race is still very much black/white polarity, and maybe a little bit of brown, which they would consider to be Latino. Back then there was no Brown; it was just black and white, and that was it. Asians were very much not on the map. If you were Asian, you were considered to be foreign. There was no way you could be Asian American or Chinese American. They'd say, Oh, what country are you from? And that was the assumption.

KWON: We still get that now. Still. But I'm sure it was even worse back then. 4:13

ZIA: It was 100 percent, all the time. So I mean, that was the first question. Oh, where are you from? But not friendly like that. Sort of like, Where are *you* from? Accusatory. And it would have to be some other country, or they might rattle off the few Asian countries they can think of and mispronounce all of them, and you have to listen to that garbage, and then, you know. I mean that was the universal experience. Every Asian probably until the end of the last century went through that all the time.

KWON: And this is before 1965, the immigration changes and then also before the term Asian American even came around, right?

ZIA: That's right.

KWON: What was that like growing up?

ZIA: Well, with so few people of Asian ethnicities—And you have to sort of take into account the different immigration periods. So there were multi-generational Asian Americans, who lived in California and Hawai'i,

because there are some people whose ancestors actually made the migration in the late 1800s or the early 1900s. So by 1950, they might have been 3rd generation or even 4th generation. But not in the East Coast of anybody I knew. Everybody was a relatively recent immigrant. And so if you were a kid like me, who was born here, your parents were immigrants, and it still is a very much of an immigrant mentality. So the idea that you don't belong here is added onto the fact that, well, your parents really did come from somewhere else. The idea [was] that Asians were not real Americans.

Also there was no pan-Asian [mentality]. I mean, there was no Asian American or I'm Asian. It's like, I'm Chinese. Because with such recent immigrant past—The immigration generation doesn't refer to "Asia" as their home. They refer to—they might not even refer to China as their home or Korea as their home. They're going to refer to the town, or the city, or the linguistic group that they're part of. And so the biggest group that I identified with was Chinese, and I'm sure every other person who was from anywhere in Asia—And at that time, prior to the 1965 immigration changes, it was primarily Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino. Very small Korean population. So that was about it. And if you were in an area like New Jersey, it was just Chinese, and a handful of Japanese, who had come over as war brides after World War II. 6:21

Anyway—so my primary identity as a kid was being rejected by American society—because you're from another country, you can't possibly be American—and my parents' identity more as being Chinese, so I saw myself as Chinese. I mean, when people would say, Go back where you came from—I had that yelled at me many times—it would be almost like, Well, what do you mean? New Jersey? I'm in New Jersey. I'm back where I came from. But China is not like back where I was from; I'd never been in China. And in fact, because China had a communist government then, there was like no way I could be in China. 7:27

One of the great things about growing up when I did was—you know, I was a part of a baby boom post-World War II generation, and just like every other demographic group in the world, there were a lot more Asian American kids born of that time. We were also coming of age, and so when I went to college, it was right around the time that the Asian American movement was beginning. 1968, I was still in high school, but that was when the word Asian, American—those two words—came together for the first [time].

END FILE 1

FILE 2

KWON: Okay, should I record another intro?

ZIA: Yeah, you should probably say this is a pick up.

KWON: Okay, this is just the pick up off of the last file. I'm still interviewing Helen Zia, August 15, 2013. And we're going to continue on from your college time, and maybe you could talk a little bit more about your involvement with the Third World Center and the Third World movement.

ZIA: So where we left off, and may not have been captured by the other tape—

KWON: Oh yes.

ZIA: was pretty much, I went to Princeton [which was] close to our house, and the only one my father would allow me to go to. And even then, because his ideas of the proper place for a female child was me not to go to college and only to be under parental, you know, paternal control—That's how I ended up going to Princeton, and that was very liberating. When I got there, there were some Asian American students. The Asian American movement had just begun. We actually had student-initiated classes about Asian American history that were—I mean, there were no textbooks.

KWON: What do you mean by student-initiated? Did students run them? 1:36

ZIA: Yeah, basically in those days—and I think it's true of most schools now, too, probably even so at Brown—that [if] there was some course of study that you could find several students [to attend], and a faculty advisor to okay, and basically to have some sort of syllabus—and that can be on reproductive ethics today or something, reproductive technologies and their ethics—and nobody's teaching it, but if you could find a certain minimum of students and a professor to sponsor it, you could do it. I don't think it got the full course—It didn't get a grade. It would just be pass/fail, but it would count as a credit or something like that.

Anyways, so Princeton allowed for that in those days, and nobody was—there was nothing called Asian American history then. It was really all student-driven, and [we did] not even have some of the syllabi then. There were no copy machines. There were mimeograph machines, where people would have to type things on a special paper and then run it on a machine that would have this copy fluid. It was really a lot more steps. There was special machinery to even make these copies that other people could use and send them across the country from, I think it was UCLA maybe, where they had developed this.

So we followed their course outline, had a professor. We had definitely—there was a hunger. Students were gravitating towards this

thing called a movement of being among other like-minded students, who had a similar background and history—not real similar, but similar enough and different enough from the Euro master narrative and everything. The Atlantic story. Well, we have the Pacific story. We have the Asian story.

Simultaneous to that, the Latino students were also organizing, there were a lot of—especially in the East Coast, there was much more Puerto Rican movement as opposed to a Chicano movement. But so among the Puerto Ricans, who I knew, who was a part of that movement was Sonya Soto Mayor, who is now Supreme Court justice. She was a couple years younger than me, but we all hung out at the Third World Center, which came out of the student movement of Black, Asian, and Latino students who said, You know what? We need a place, too. All of the upper class White people, male—all the guys had their private clubs that they could go to, like fraternities, and there was no space for us. There were also no multicultural centers. There was a student center where you could go and buy snacks, but no real place. So we actually had a demonstration, and the Asian American students were part of that demonstration. I was part of that demonstration. We took over the Firestone Library one night, and nobody tried to kick us out. We just stayed there—it was after closing time, and we stayed there, and then we marched out in the morning and called it a victory. And so anyway, it was one of the gentlest struggles you could ever imagine.

5:29

But out of that protest, which was also tied into the anti-war protests, so it was against racism, against the war in Vietnam. We didn't end racism, and we didn't end the war, but we did get a Third World Center. That's what we called it, the Third World Center. It was at the end of what you might call fraternity row, but it was at the end of the eating houses, eating clubs. At the end of their street, Prospect Street, was this empty building, or this building that they made available to us students of color and minority students, and we hung out there. Michelle Obama also—I think she wrote her senior thesis about the Third World Center and African American students. I remember seeing something where she said that the Third World Center was instrumental. It was place—a safe place, and for us Asian American students it was, too. That's where we could be around other students of color. And so it has such an important place, not just in Princeton's history and the formation of our consciousness and awareness and our self-esteem for students of color there, but it was representative of what was going on in the country at the time and on a lot of college campuses. So it had a real big role to play. It was at a time when affirmative action was a program where you could point to and people could be proud of it, and not be dirty words that conservatives have turned it into.

7:11

KWON: What was the political climate in terms of campuses nationwide? Was there a lot of back-and-forth? You were talking about syllabi being

exchanged between colleges. Was the movement connected, even though it was on different coasts?

ZIA: The movement was connected mainly through people and people who traveled or knew of other people or had friends. I grew up in New Jersey, and I was going to college in New Jersey. I didn't really know anybody from other states. When I met my first friend, a Japanese American student from California, from L.A., Vickie Takeuchi. She said, Hi! And I thought, Why is she being so friendly to me? And really, she was being Californian to me, so—But there were students who knew other people and that's how—There was no Internet. Phone calls were incredibly expensive. Nobody had a cellphone. I mean, they hadn't been invented yet. If you wanted to make a phone call, you had to use a payphone, spend money, and that was hard. So a lot of it would be, I guess, people who went home in the summer, California, or they had an older brother or sister or a cousin who had this stuff, and they would mail the information across. It was really through those informal networks. But the networks really did exist, and people knew of each other.

So I knew of students at some of the other schools in the northeast, and we would have conferences—not a lot, but they might be some anti-war meeting or demonstration or something like that, and that's how we would get to know each other. I would go up to New York to Chinatown to volunteer. There was a Chinatown health clinic then, and I worked—I majored in public and international affairs and that was where my interest was, but not knowing what I might do in life, I also took the minimum of premed courses, and so I—There was this clinic, I went there and volunteered. I did stuff up in Chinatown, and that was also a central meeting site for a lot of students from all over, who would go to these Philadelphia Chinatown, New York Chinatown and then you would meet other people. So I met students from Boston, from Yale, from—I don't know if I met anybody from Brown. I'm sure I must have, but—Philadelphia, especially from that area, and New York. New York was sort of the mecca. A lot was happening there. We went to a lot of demonstrations in New York. But there was a lot of activity, and through those, we would meet and networks would form.

KWON: I'm also interested in the political nature of the Asian American students that you went to school with. Were they all politicized because they were Asian American? Because that's not really the case today, at least in college. That's not what I've seen.

10:07

ZIA: No. I mean students weren't all politically oriented. Clearly we were self-selected. Not everybody went to the Third World Center because they were students of color. In fact, my first year—I was in a quad dorm, and it's just part of the way they mix the students. They took two from the beginning of the alphabet and two at the end of the alphabet. I was a Z,

and the student who was right before was a W. Wong. So there were two Bs, Lisa Brothers, the daughter of Joyce Brothers, and another B, and then a W and a Z, and we were in the quad together. So one of my quadmates was Chinese American. She's also from New Jersey. She could not have been more uninterested, less interested in being a part of this, and I think there were plenty of other Asian students, including students who were international students who really just felt like, What is this? Why? I didn't come here to be with Asian students. They just wanted to be like everybody else. And so that might've been polarizing. I'm not sure. I didn't become very close to the students who weren't interested. The ones who hung out at the Third World Center became my good friends, I mean, friends for life. That's not to take away from the experience that the other people had. It just wasn't my interest. Maybe they were into field hockey, music or drama and something like that as their extracurricular sort of activities.

I did have a good friend, who is still my good friend, who at the time—was Chinese American, and she kind of hung out. But we would have these political meetings, political events, and I remember telling her, "Come on. We got to go. We're doing this thing," and she said to me, You know, Helen Z, this is your thing. This is not my thing. So okay, you do it, but I'm not interested in going to that thing. It was sort of like, Okay. Fine. I mean, you made it clear. But I have to say, maybe 10, 15 years ago, her son was in high school, and she contacted me and said, Do you have any books about being Chinese or Asian American that I can refer my teenage son to? Because I feel like he has an identity confusion. He doesn't know who he is as an Asian kid. He's going to a high school where it's all—with these White kids, and I'd like him to have a better sense of himself. And I didn't remind her then, Do you remember? Do you remember that time you told me basically it's not your thing? People come to consciousness—I mean my notion is people come to consciousness and awareness at their own time. You cannot force somebody to be into politics or into a certain political framework, if they're not ready, if they're not into it, if it's not their experience. On the other hand, the fact that you bring it to them, later they might become ready. And you—young activists, any activist—you've planted a seed. It's not like it just goes in one ear and out the other. Somewhere it lives. And my friend called *me* because she said I'd know, and I did. So I referred her to a bunch of things.

KWON: Did you refer her to your book? 14:14

ZIA: I hadn't written it yet. Had I written—well, she should read it probably anyway. (laughs) Yeah, but so—so yeah, there are things about politics—It's a big sorting out process, too. People are not going to agree 100% on everything, and so that's the positive and the negative of it. It's a great sharing of ideas. It's a way to learn how to disagree with people. I've had a lot of very close male friends in college, and we would have huge

debates about racism and sexism. I remember one of my very good friends, who was from Oakland, California, at Princeton, and we were talking about racism and sexism, and he said to me, you know what, when the revolution comes, we will deal with racism first. Sexism will come later. And I just looked at him and said, "Why? I mean, if it's a revolution, why do women have to wait?" But basically (inaudible) state? And I just totally disagreed with him then, and I'm sure if I were to talk to him now, even though (inaudible) well, that he would laugh, and I'd say, "Yeah, we had very much—we were very narrow minded with our agendas." There were a lot of groups that had their own ideas of how this revolution was going to take place. They disagreed with each other violently, I mean, really violently because they would—It was like having little gangs that would have fistfights with each other practically because my way is right, and what you're doing is going to take us to disaster. And that might've been including women and sexism at the start of the revolution. No, we shouldn't do that, and let alone lesbian gay stuff. Homosexuality was considered a White thing, and it was like totally wrong, and to a lot of the Third World Black, Latino, Asian American student movements—

KWON: Does that mean the White folks accepted homosexuality though? I don't think that was— 16:24

ZIA: No, no. Not to say that Whites accepted it, but that if you were a person of color, you got this disease from White people. Because God knows that Asia, Africa, and Latin America do not have any gay people. That was the theory behind it, and people actually said that. There are leaders today, Robert Mugabe in Africa: There are no gay people in Africa. Japan said that there were no gay people in Japan. A lot of people—I mean, you could walk through Asian communities, and they'll still say, Oh we don't have any gay people. It's just really shameful. And sort of like, Hello. 10% of China today would be like 100 million people. But that was the thinking then, unfortunately among some people, still the thinking. But among the Asian American student movement then to be gay or lesbian or what—we didn't call it queer then, would've been counterrevolutionary, negative—Anything that would divide the community would be considered bad. Whatever that is, and of course, it's up to the anointed ones to define what revolutionary is and to define what—to define (inaudible). So there were a lot of issues. People were not—the movement was not one homogenous kum-ba-yah with everybody agreeing with each other and holding hands. I mean, there was a lot of debate and a lot of differences and even a lot of splinters, where people who once were in agreement were now were hated enemies and stuff like that over their point of views on the movement. So a lot of that stuff went on, too.

KWON: Had you already developed your identity as a lesbian woman? Were you struggling with that or was that not really in your consciousness at that time? 18:22

ZIA: When I was in college, I think I was beginning to realize that I was mainly attracted to women. But at the time, because my closest friends and close associates were people who said, This is a terrible disease, and sort of a White (inaudible) thing. You're like those people. You're like the enemy. So that was a negative. And then growing up in a pretty insulated, Chinese American family and to extend that, and not even a Chinese community. I mean it was really a thing where I knew very clearly this would be a negative thing. So when I was in college, I was really not involved in anything remotely lesbian or gay, even though I was beginning to think, Oh, I could be a lesbian. But there was no—But the gay liberation movement was really just starting then, too. The Asian American movement and the Black Liberation, civil rights, anti-war movements were much more developed and acceptable than what was then the incipient gay liberation movement. Stonewall had happened around the same time as a lot of the Third World Strikes, but it hadn't yet reached Princeton to my knowledge.

So anyway, yeah, it was kind of interesting because there are students now who were part of our circle who are gay, who were gay then, but who we were like—

KWON: Oh, you didn't talk about it. 20:17

ZIA: No. These were things we didn't talk about at all. So everybody was closeted in their minds, except for the really brave and courageous ones who knew exactly where they were and stuff like that. But I wasn't one of those, so—And I don't even think there was any event that anybody ever said, Oh, you know what? We're having a gay movie night, or we're having a special little meeting. Do you want to come? There was really never anything like that when I was in college.

It wasn't until after college—so just to fast forward a little bit, so college was very exciting. We did a lot of growing and involvement in politics and some of the ideas (inaudible) as far as the world. But as far as myself and career-wise, I still didn't know. I mean, there was no training, there was no like, Oh, you could join a non-profit organization. I mean, no—If anybody could've advised me on that, I didn't know who they were. To me, as a daughter of immigrants, there was only the doctor, lawyer, teacher, business—I mean that was it. I really saw my path as four choices in life. Business was a small business like my father had. It wasn't like being an investment banker. I didn't know that such a thing existed. And there was no way I wanted to be in business like my father. I'd barely make a living. Being a teacher or a lawyer—I was still very shy then and

the idea of standing up in front of a group and having to make a an argument or something like that, that was like, Oh forget that. So that left doctor. I mean, I have to say, I took the very minimum number of premed course but I got into medical school. I got into Tufts Medical School and so that was up in Boston. And I was excited about that.

I was sort of interested in the public health world, health organizations, public health. I had done my senior thesis on the development of the public health system of China. So I had gone from the Republican period all the way through the Communist Revolution. And my senior thesis was about the public health systems in the People's Republic of China. So I had done a lot of original research. I actually went to China in 1972, when Chairman Mao was still alive and when the Cultural Revolution was still involved, only months after Richard Nixon had gone. I was among one of the first groups of Chinese Americans—of any Americans—to get into China, and I did some research then. This whole group of students, I was part of a student group, and they were all pretty much Chinese American radical students, mostly from the West coast, so I didn't actually know them. But we connected in china, went around, were given a lot of propaganda about how great the revolution is, had no idea that so many people—so many millions of people had starved to death, or that people were being persecuted right in front of us. I actually met a few relatives and family friends, and they were terrified. I mean I'm sure meeting me—an American relative or friend—was probably not good for them, especially in 1972. But I had no idea at the time.

Anyway, so with this idea, I went to medical school in Boston. Tufts Medical School was especially exciting because it was right in Chinatown, and the possibility of doing some community organizing work while I was in med school was great. The only problem was the minute I got there, I realized, Oh this is a terrible mistake. I don't think I like doctors. I don't think I like the medical complex. It was very research oriented; I was not. And there was a lot going on in Chinatown, and there was this huge women's movement in the Boston area just beginning. So I spent all my time that I could outside of class, running around going to meetings. The other thing was I had a full scholarship going to Princeton, so I left Princeton without even a loan. They did offer loans, but I didn't want to take the loan, and I worked all through college and stuff like that. Medical school, I did not get such a full package, so I had to get all these loans, and I had to work. So I was working like three jobs, going to school, having this loan thing happen, and then all of the excitement about being in Boston, and going to all these city-wide meetings. We'd have the Boston Women's Union, which I was a part of founding, would have a meeting, and we'd have 200 or 300 women show up from all over the city. I mean, it was fantastic, and having [a talk about] What can we do? What are the issues? What's our agenda? How can we change things? So it was pretty clear to me that med school was—just out of this whole array of

24:10

activities— was just like the last. And I knew when I got there, This is a mistake, Helen. What can we do? But the thing about it is when you get in, you're—then you're trapped. I'm in medical school. It's not like you can take these credits and transfer them to become a physician's assistant, to become a nursing student, to become anything. There was like nothing I could do with that. And the only good thing about having loans and working is that I didn't take any money from my parents. They still had no money.

But it took me two years—It took me two days, or two weeks to figure out this is the wrong thing. It took me two years before I could finally be like, I have to tell Mom and Dad. I can't do this. This is wrong. Because I thought, Well, okay, I'll get the degree. I'll graduate. Maybe I can do something with it, but after two years, I was just like, This is—I will get sick and be a miserable doctor. The world does not need an unhappy doctor. They're like, Oh, you want to shot? Here. So I told my parents I'm not going to go back after my second year, and what I'm going to do instead is I'm going to be a community organizer. I have a job as a construction worker. I'm going to work in construction, and of course, my parents, they were like incredibly not happy. That is putting it mildly. They thought I was completely crazy and gone off my rocker. 26:39

Simultaneous to this, I was really involve in this huge women's movement, and there were—if you had 300 people, there were maybe a tiny group of lesbians in there. But while I was involved in all these different movements in Boston, communities of color as well as the women's movement—and they were separate—I was called to this meeting that I now call my Lesbian Trial. I was invited by the head of the Asian American Collective and the head of the African American Collective to a meeting in a room that was maybe bigger than this, and—so I go to the meeting, and they say, Helen you sit here. And there was a semicircle around me of everybody, and they were like, Okay Helen, we've noticed that you're involved with a lot of lesbians. We want to know if you're a lesbian, because if you're a lesbian, we won't want to have anything to do with you. You really have no place in our community. You would turn community people away from us. And then the Black Collective leader, Tariq, says, That's right, and if you were a lesbian, our Black Collective wouldn't want to have anything to do with the Asian Collective either. I was like, "What? So if I'm a lesbian, they're all tainted, too?" So anyway, then at the end of the meeting, they say, So Helen, tell us. Are you a lesbian? 27:42

Now, I'm sitting there, listening to the charges being mounted towards me and I had gone to these [women's movement] meetings. I was on that Steering Committee, and the group's representing 300 some or more women and some of my friends were lesbians. And by then, I was thinking I might really be a lesbian. But I had never gone on a date. I didn't have a girlfriend. I didn't get any membership card saying that I was a lesbian. So they're like, Well, tell us. Are you a lesbian? And if you

are, you're excommunicated from all this, anything related to our community. And so I sat there thinking, Am I a lesbian? How do I answer this? And I said, "No. I'm not a lesbian." Because how do I know? With that it was like an out of body experience. I could see myself stepping into the closet and slamming the door shut, because I said, I am not a lesbian. And after that, I didn't go to the women's group meetings anymore, I almost excommunicated myself from all these women—really terrific amazing women friends, some of whom are amazing leaders today, and instead just sort of buried myself more in the work that I was doing in my construction trade because I was a construction laborer. And then once the Third World Asian American friends, colleagues, fellow community activists said, Well, if you really want to understand organizing in America and getting to know the heart, you should go to the heartland of America. So why don't you go to Detroit? Go to Detroit, Michigan, which is sort of like, to me—I'm from the East Coast, New Jersey, Boston, New York. And I thought, Detroit? Okay. So I did.

31:13

Partly I have to say, that was you know, sort of an internalized homophobia, too, I mean it's like, Yeah, I got to get away. It's really too uncomfortable. I've got my friends here in Boston. It's not such a huge area that if I go to a meeting and see these friends, I feel so conflicted. I'll just pick up and move to Detroit. I'll learn about heartland of America, and the plan was that I would apply for a job in the auto industry, which at the time was hiring. We're now talking about 1975, so—it was like a while ago. I had a little car, because working as a construction worker, I made ten times more money than I did as a medical school student. Minimum wage at the time was like a $1.30 an hour, and working in a lab, working all the jobs that I had, like as a special aid, working at all these things in the hospital, I got a $1.30 an hour. When I got the job as the construction laborer, I was making 10 dollars an hour. So that was a huge differential. I mean today, it would be like the difference between making 7 dollars an hour minimum wage to making 50-60 bucks an hour. I mean that's huge. So with my 10 dollars an hour, I was able to buy a little car, so I had this little junker. I put my life's stuff in it and drove off to Detroit.

I didn't have a place to live. Friends of a friend let me live on the floor of their spare room until I could get a job or figured out what I was going to do. So I applied right away for a job at Chrysler Corporation. I did not say—I didn't lie, but I did omit the fact that I had gone to Princeton or had gone to medical school, and got a job. I got a job as a large press operator at Eight Mile Stamping Plant at Chrysler Corporation. So for reference, you may have seen Eminem's movie *Eight Mile Road*. What he was doing was working at a stamping on Eight Mile Road. I worked at Eight Mile Road Stamping Plant for Chrysler. I also making about, what I was as a construction worker, so it was like—for me—a lot of money, 10 bucks an hour, all the health—full health benefits and insurance, which I had never had in my life. My father used to tell us, Don't get hit by a car because I can't afford to take you to the hospital.

And if you get hit by a car, make sure it's a Cadillac and not a Volkswagen.

34:04

KWON: Oh, my mom says that, too.

ZIA: Oh, she says that too? Because they can afford it. Yeah, Volkswagens can't afford to have you—

KWON: Yeah, Cadillac.

ZIA: Well, but you have to say, But Mom! Cadillac's bigger. I'll be dead. If I get hit with a Volkswagen, it's little. But anyway, same thing, right? So we had never had health insurance, like a lot of immigrant families. And so for the first time in my life, I could go to the dentist, I could go to the doctor and all that stuff.

And I learned a lot. I mean, if New Jersey had very few Asians, Detroit had even fewer. I mean it was miniscule. In fact, I almost never ran into anybody who was Asian American in Detroit, and especially going and working in a factory, with maybe 70% African American and other 25% was Southern White and the rest was Arab American actually, or Arab, Arab immigrant workers. Very homogenous. I did a lot of organizing, and there we did—apartheid in South Africa was really a huge issue then, there's a lot of divestiture going on, so we did a lot of organizing. I would stand at the factory gates, handing out flyers, going to trade union meetings, member of the UAW [United Automobile Workers], did a lot of stuff, but nothing had anything to do with Asian Americans. And I'm being paid more money than I had ever dreamed of making, probably making a lot more money than my father was at the time. And then after two years, there was a massive layoff. There was the collapse of the auto industry. This is like 1978, around then. The price of oil had gone up so high and the tensions with the Middle East, that there was an embargo, there was no oil, gas had gone from—I mean if minimum was a $1.30 an hour, gas was 19 cents a gallon.

KWON: No way.

36:24

ZIA: Yeah, so it didn't matter that your tanks that you drove needed a fill up every ten miles. It's 19 cents a gallon. Well, when the embargo hit, and the crux that oil prices hit, it went from 19 cents a gallon to two or three dollars a gallon, so it would be—so people really couldn't afford to drive anymore. And there was no gas anyway. There were huge lines at the gas station, and people were mad as hell. And so nobody was buying cars that got ten miles a gallon anymore. The only cars that really had good gas mileage were Japanese cars and Volkswagens. And so who did they begin to hate? It was Japan, and anybody and anything that looked Japanese. And what it meant in a city like Detroit was that all of these factories—

and it's a one-industry town. Detroit was the auto industry. Millions of people got laid off. And then the Midwest. All those industries that support the auto that—they make tires, or they make spark plugs, or they do all this stuff. They also had—so the entire Midwest was like a sea of unemployed people who had been working all their lives and now thought that they would never work again. These were people who not only had a house. They had second houses, they had two or three cars, they had RVs, and suddenly they had nothing. Because in order for them to collect welfare or anything like that, they had to give it all up. And so people were so incredibly full of hate. You couldn't believe it. I mean, sort of like, You destroyed my life. You. You Asian-looking person. You Japanese, and of course, they didn't just say Japanese. They used every slur they could. There were bumper stickers all over the place saying, Honda Toyota Pearl Harbor, We should—there were senators, congressmen, like Senator John Dingle who is still there, would say—Congressman John Dingle would say, Let's send the Enola Gay to Japan, which is the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Japan. And all of this stuff, that was—to put it into modern day context would be like, right after 9/11. If you look Muslim or Middle Eastern, whatever that is, people were ready to kill you. So people for years—I mean this depression was a huge depression went on for years, and the hatred only built up and built up and built up. And if you looked Asian, or if you drove a Japanese car, you could be shot at any moment. So people who drove Japanese model cars, it didn't matter if you were Asian. People would shoot at you on the freeway and destroy your car while you were parked or something like that. So it was a highly inflammatory situation.

I got laid off. I didn't have seniority. I got laid off with everybody else, and then I was on the unemployment line with millions of people. I mean this would be in the dead of winter. You would be at the unemployment office, where you'd get you $100 check or whatever, and the line would be snaked around the block many times. And you would just trudge there and wait, you know, slowly go through the line, and it was everybody. It was everybody, and so the misery was—And there were other Asian American employees of these companies who were also out of work, too, but—So anyway, in that, it was time for me to think of what it led to. Okay, how I—Time. Okay, I spent two years as an auto worker. That future is a little dim. I need to think about what you're really going to do in life. That's when I realized what I wanted to do was write. It wasn't, Oh I'll be a writer. It was that I was watching the news day after day and the way that the collapse of the auto industry was being covered—and I just felt that it was so wrong, the way they were—they were saying, Oh it was because workers are lazy. It's because workers can't make a good car in America. That's why. And I was like, "That's not why. That really isn't why. It's because these companies have been so greedy." And I knew, because I had worked inside these companies. So one day, I was watching the news and I was so mad, I turned the TV off, and I just said, "This

sucks. This is shit. I could do better than this shit." And then I realized that I could do better than this shit. There's nobody else to do it. I could do better than that shit.

41:14

So that was a low enough bar that it didn't deter me that I had no contacts in journalism, I mean, I didn't know anybody in journalism. I never had an internship. I hadn't even taken an English course when I was in college because I had placed out of first year English. Anyway, so I thought, well, I always liked to write. I want to write this story. I want to be the one to tell it. So from nothing, so I began to do—No, I began to look up rules. How do you (inaudible)? How do you get a job? How do I do this? And slowly began to start out as doing certain—I wrote a million letters, and in those days, there were no word processor. So on typewriter, I would type out each letter. I'd type out, I have this idea. I would love to write this story about the changing auto industry, the changing labor movement, the changing society. Then I'd pull it off, mail it off. And so I wrote hundreds of those letters, and probably 99%, I get no response at all. Right into the garbage can. You have no experience, why should we hire you for that? But I did get—I got one response from the Village Voice saying we don't use freelancers, which I knew was a lie, but—

42:38

And then one call from an editor of one of the, what they call independent alternative weeklies, which are really progressive. Every town has one, and Detroit has the Metro—The Detroit Metro Times was the newspaper. And he said, You know what? I like your letter. We'll give you a chance. That means we won't pay you anything, but we have a special supplement that we're doing about winter interiors, and (referring to interviewer) you're from Minnesota, you know, winter season. So winter interior design, and we want to have a story on winter indoor flowering plants. So I'm like, "Oh sure! I could write that. How exciting!" and I'm like, "Okay. I won't tell him that I killed every plant that I ever had." But anyway that was my first story, and so I wrote my heart out on that and wrote a little 500-word piece about begonias and things like that that I'd never knew existed before, and didn't get paid for it. And he says, You know, we loved that story, and I'll give you another chance. We have a story about cloning and like the—and I said, "Oh cloning." Now that I leave medical school—Even though back then, the technology was still fascinating in a lot—and I said, "There's a lot of really interesting issues, a lot of ethical questions about cloning, and I'd really love to do this." And he said, No, not cloning. Clowning. The Russian clown troupe is coming to Detroit. We'd like you to write a story about clowning. And I'm like, "Oh okay. Well that's really a fascinating story, too. I'd love to do that." So anyway, I knew enough to think that I've got to (inaudible), and they were, I was a (inaudible) and everything. I knew that I had to [take] whatever opportunity I could. So I was eager to do it, I learned a lot about different clowning traditions. There really are a lot, and in a matter of time—I mean, I did a lot of stories like that. I ended up doing business stories, cultural stories, and in time, they said, You really are interested in

politics, so I began to do more political stories about what was going on, and I really—that's what I want to do. So I then had some office job that paid my rent, and then at night, I would—and on weekends, I would do my writing. So it was like having two jobs.

KWON: Were you being paid for your writing job? 45:34

ZIA: Well, by then I was getting paid maybe 10 dollars an article, so I was getting paid like almost nothing. But I knew enough that I needed to build up the portfolio, so that I could do this. Then one day, I did this article about a magazine, that they had split off. It was a monthly magazine. They had one in Boston then it moves to Detroit. They had a group of editors that split off, they had a management disagreement, and I wrote their story. And they said, Actually you did a pretty good job. We'd like to hire you at the new start up magazine that we're doing. So I was like, "Wow. I had a real magazine job," and just beginning.

(Referring to interview tape recorder) And so the thing about the analog is that you have to watch that the tape doesn't run out.

KWON: Will it click when it runs out?

ZIA: Yeah, but you might not hear it click.

KWON: Okay, I'll keep an eye on it.

ZIA: I just got my first journalism job right around the time when a young Chinese American man named Vincent Chin was killed, and—Check the time, too. So I'm going to talk a little bit about this, and then I'm going to have to get going. So I was at work. I was doing this—No, it was a weekend. It was on the Sunday paper in June of 1982, there was a front page story in the *Detroit Free Press* about—Tragedy, Tragic Story Chinese American Man is Killed One Week Before His Wedding. And it's this story about this man named Vincent Chin. He was going to get married the next week. He was at a bachelor's party and then gets beaten to death by basically a baseball bat, and all his 400 wedding guests instead went to his funeral. It was a really sad story—a picture of him, his fiancé, his mother, his father. Looking at this picture, I knew right away. I had already lived through five years of this depression and people hating anybody who looked Asian, and I saw this article, and I said, "There is a lot more to this story than we know." I clipped it out, I cut it out and said, "I want to know more about this." And then I just put it away. I didn't do anything with it. I didn't know what to do because I wasn't really connected to any Asian community.

A few months later, the thing goes to court. The killers had killed Vincent Chin in front of about 70 eyewitnesses, so there was no question 48:24

that they didn't kill him. They said, No contest, and they were sentenced to probation. I remember reading that, and I was shocked. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. I just thought, How could this be? How could this be that you could kill somebody, kill a Chinese American—There was no news about Asian Americans in Detroit. We were non-existent. So to see one make it in the news and you know, I mean, just had a gut feeling there was something connected here. And then to find out, Oh, so it's okay to kill anybody who looks Japanese? It's okay? And so I immediately—I was a reporter then—I immediately contacted the reporter who wrote the article, and I said, "Can you tell me who"—because one of them quoted a Chinese American community person. "Can you tell me who these spokespeople are? I want to reach them." And so she gave me a name and a number, and I called them and I said, "I'd really like to do something about this." He said, Sure, let's have a meeting. So he said, Meet me at this restaurant. So I met him. His name's Henry Yee. He was the restaurant owner. He was called the unofficial mayor of Chinatown, businessman. With him was Kim Yee, not related. But Kin Yee who was the head of the Detroit Chinese Welfare Association, who was also quoted in that story. And this young Chinese American lawyer named Liza Chan. So the four of us got down and talked about—She's a lawyer. We're like, What can we do? What is there? What's the next step? So after this small meeting, it was just we decided we need to a bigger meeting. We need to have more community people there. We need to have the mother of Vincent Chin there. So we had the next meeting at the restaurant where Vincent Chin had worked, and it was [in] the small private room they had. Vincent's mother Lily Chin was there. She was sobbing the whole—[during the] whole thing.

(phone rings) Let's put this on pause for a minute.

[BREAK]

ZIA: Okay, looks like we're on. Okay. We can finish this up and then finish that side, and— 50:59

KWON: Okay.

ZIA: So anyway, we had that meeting, and there were—almost all of the Asian American lawyers in Michigan were there. There were ten, about ten in the entire state. So there were like a half dozen or so, and the rest were community people, OCA, Organization of Chinese Americans, and just interested community people. People from the Chinese church were there. Anyway, I didn't know any of them, except I had met Liza Chan, and I had met those two guys. Kim Yee and Henry Yee. One by one, the lawyers said, There's nothing we can do. There's nothing we can do. Once a sentence is rendered, legally, you—a judge will never change his

sentence. They're like egomaniacs. That would admitting they were wrong. There's no real legal options. You could feel the air being sucked out of the room. People are like they—we all came there to do something, and they're like we can't do anything.

And at first, my little (inaudible) journalist, and I was sitting there thinking, Wow. This could be the story that I always wanted to write. But I couldn't believe that nothing was going to happen. I did know enough that, as a reporter, you're really not supposed to get involved, but I thought, Well, I got to say something. So I raised my hand, and I said, "We can't do nothing. Even if we can't change the sentence, we have to let the world know that this is not okay. We have to let the world know that we do not agree that you can kill an Asian American, you can kill a Chinese American, and go off scot-free. That was my little contribution. Because at that moment, you could actually—The energy changed, the energy shifted. People began to talk about what we can do. Mrs. Chin who had been—her heart was broke. She said, Yes, we have to show that this is wrong.

Then from there, we began to form an organization. We had other meetings. The next meeting, then—We had twenty at this day. The next meeting, we had 50. The next we had 100, and the next day we had 200. We had a meeting at Ford World Headquarters, and 300 people—I mean, it just kept growing. People all over the country—As the news got out, and there's still no internet and telephones, no cell phones, but people were calling to other—I would spent time just on the phone, calling everybody I could think of to tell them in California, in New York, and everywhere. This is happening. What can you do? Do you know anybody who can help us? We need more legal expertise. Any Asian Americans who do civil rights work? Which at the time were like one or two in the whole country, and so it was just (inaudible).

54:32

There was a long time where I always felt a little bit like not telling that story, because I felt like, I'm saying like look what I did. I raised my hand, and it changed things. And I just want to be clear that I don't tell this story to say—to pat myself on the back. I tell it because for anybody who feels like something wrong has happened, whether you're sitting in the meeting and you hear something and it's like, That's not okay with me. You can say something. Even if it's not well formed, and even if we don't really know how to say it perfectly, it's better to say something than to let it pass. You never know what you might say could really make a difference, and that's the thing about it. So when I think about me sitting there, I also think that could be anyone of us, sitting there who is sort of like, Okay, is this right? Because it doesn't feel right to me. Should I say something? Yes, I should say something.

And as it turns out, I did not lose my journalism job. I did not lose my journalism career. In fact, later I got to know other reporters and talked to them about it, and they were like, No. You showed that in the conduct of—Then later I became press secretary at first. I wrote all the press

releases, managed all the press conferences, did all that stuff because I could. Because I had the knowledge of how to do that as a reporter. They said, You maintained—You didn't lie, you didn't make stuff up, you keep people informed, you ran things with integrity, and that's speaks well for you. And what I didn't realize at the time is a lot of journalists—Think of Bill Moyers. Hey, he was press secretary for a Democratic president. There are a lot of people—Diane Sawyer. She was I think a press co-writer for Nixon. So there are many journalists who set—take a step back and do something that has an opinion. At that point, I did not know, but so it did advantage me.

57:02

A lot of Asian American parents are sort of like, Oh, Why'd you stick your neck out? You're really going to get—you'll be the nail that sticks out, then you'll get hammered down. You'll bring trouble to yourself and to your family. And you know, that's not really the way it works. It's really the more you speak up, the more possibility [you have] for making a difference, for making a change, instead of suffering in silence. It's the only way—especially in a democracy—it's the only way to improve conditions in your community, to make it better. Because if you're silent, people take that as a—It's just like it's in the Vincent Chin case. If we were silent, people would assume that it's because we had no problem with it. If you're silent, it's like the campaign in the beginning against homophobia with HIV and AIDS. Silence equals death. Silence equals death in the LGBT movement, but it also means death to our communities. If we're silent, it's okay for people to kills us. If we're silent, it's okay for kids to get bullied in school, Asian kids, because they're—or Asian American women to be targets of sexual harassment or sexual violence, because we're perceived as being passive and not fighting back. I mean, all of those things are—We have to speak up. Nothing gets done unless you speak up, whether it's in America or anywhere else. So anyway, to me, that's the lesson I learned there that I think is important for especially for young activists.

We would probably turn this over because I know—

END FILE 2

FILE 3

ZIA: All right. So now we're on side B.

KWON: Okay. So I mean, learning about the Asian American movement, the Vincent Chin case, and also the '92 LA Riots, I think—for at least my generation—those are the few key moments where Asian Americans have really spoken up about the injustices and things like that. I was really wondering why the Vincent Chin case, in particular, brought the Asian American communities together. Because it wasn't just Chinese Americans, right?

ZIA: Right, right. No, no. Vincent Chin case was—it was pan-Asian, so every Asian ethnicity that was around got involved. And by then, during the 1980s—It began as Chinese American, and very soon it was Japanese American, too, because the JACL [Japanese American Citizens League], they were organized, and Vincent Chin was attacked because he looked Japanese. There was a Korean community. The Korean community became involved. Filipino group. There were a number of Vietnamese refugees who were also being targeted with hate crimes and things, and so—The South Asian community also began to get connected. So really, it became pan-Asian pretty quickly. And it could've stayed Chinese, if we had stayed insular that way, but I also think it was partly because a number of us activists or, I guess, the people really active in that campaign were younger, who had gone through the Asian American movement, too. There were people from the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, as well as from student organizing from Asian countries, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, who had been active or politicized when they were in college, who all sort of came together. There were also a Chinese Christian church leaders, who had a tradition of justice. And we were in Detroit, which is a community being very socially aware of racial injustice. So there were African American groups that joined in, the Anti-Defamation League. There was an Arab anti-discrimination organization, too, because the Detroit area has the largest Arab population outside of the Middle East. It quickly became very pan-Asian, multiracial, multicultural. 00:30

Within the pan-Asian, there was also a very multi-class movement, too. I mean, Vincent's mother and father were restaurant workers and laundry workers. He didn't come from a high-income kind of background at all. He was going to night school while he was a waiter. And so when we had demonstrations, we had the engineers and the PhDs and the scientists, who were part of the GM [General Motors] technical lab and Ford technical, who mostly spoke Mandarin. They would be coming in from the suburbs, and then the Chinese restaurant owners and laundry owners. They would close down for a day. They would close and let their chefs, let the waiters, let everybody in the restaurant, their grandchildren, their grandparent and their grandchildren go and be part of this 2:56

demonstration. For a small immigrant business to shut down for a day, so they could be part of the protest, that was huge. So we had waiters and we had PhDs and we had lawyers, I mean it was incredibly multi-ethnic, pan-Asian, and multi-class. I mean it was amazing.

4:23

And the reason was because everybody—well, everybody just from a human point of view could see the injustice of beating somebody to death and get probation, that was just plain wrong. But for Asian Americans, everybody felt like what happened to Vincent Chin could've happened to them. The hatred was so—and the rhetoric, innuendos, from Washington D.C. to across the nation, was so intense that it was clear in our minds. There was a climate of hate, and in that climate, Vincent Chin was killed. And the climate hadn't disappeared, and if we didn't take a stance to show that it's not okay with us and that we were not going to put up with this, that we were basically saying, It's okay. You can do it to my brother, to my son, to my father, to my sister. And so I think that's why people stood up. And the more people could see other people standing up and bringing attention to this, the more—you know, it's like the water's safe. You can go in, right? So I think it really did bring people together in that way.

5:44

There had never been a pan-Asian mass movement before, to that degree. The newspapers covered it, the *New York Times* covered it, it was on television, and so I think it meant a lot to people [that] we could finally have—it wasn't just that we were some exotics creatures from another planet being shown or Fu Manchu from another planet, it was that these are real issues that we have and there are real Asian Americans talking about it. So it became a magnet for a lot of things and a lot of organizations formed out of it. After five or six years of the core, and maybe it was about 20 or so people who really met every week—maybe several times a week depending on—we all had jobs, we all had lives, people had families. This was like a second job and a second family that we had because we all felt—we wanted to make a difference. We would meet at Mrs. Chin's house.

The other thing that was really important about this is that Mrs. Chin was willing to stand up and to be seen with this, and it was heartbreaking. Anybody who sees the documentary, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* I mean you see it tears her apart every time she has to speak about this. I remember some people within our community, people who are being critical or whatever would say, Well, of course. Of course she's going to speak up. It's her son. And it's like, No, you know what? Actually when you're in so much pain, the easiest thing would be to dig a hole and bury yourself in it and never go out and never have to open your pain up every time you talk about it. She was incredibly courageous to do that, and so she became kind of a spiritual leader for us. She was a lot, I think, like Rosa Parks in our Asian American community because she was—in her grief, in her agony, she could still stand up and speak. And she would say, Our skin might be different, but our blood is red. It's the

same. And she would say, I don't want any other mother to ever have this happen to their child. So anyway, Mrs. Chin was really our touchstone on that, and because she was willing to speak—Because otherwise, people say, Well if the family's not going to speak, who are we to get involved? And then we look like we're usurping the family or whatever. So she was our moral (inaudible), our moral beacon, and she was part of everything. I mean, there was no decision that was ever made that Mrs. Chin wasn't in the room, knowing what it was. When you watch *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* the impression might be that Mrs. Chin's English wasn't so good. Actually, Mrs. Chin read two English language newspapers a day. She read *The Free Press*, and she read the—and she—When she got up and spoke in so much pain, of course, she was going to speak in Chinese most of the time. Many of the situations were to a Chinese audience anyways, so she's speaking Chinese. But she knew what was going on. We would say, Mrs. Chin— She says, I know. I know what you're talking about. So anyways she really did guide us.

9:39

And the hardest thing was when it went all the way to several courts and then it was appealed and the killers got off. They got off scot-free. That was the saddest and the hardest day. Mrs. Chin, who I got to be very close to, and she called me her goddaughter and I called her my godmother and she turned to me, and she said, Helen. Is this true? Is there anything else we can do? And I was the one who first said, "We have to let people know it's not okay." I had to say, "Mrs. Chin, there's nothing more we can do now. It's over. We can file a liability, civil suit against them," which she did, against Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, the killers, and she won. "We can pursue different things, but the big thing about putting him in jail, making them go to jail, there's nothing more we can do." And I think it broke her heart, truly broke her heart. And shortly after that, she moved to China to live out her days. It was too painful being here, but I mean that's where—I have to say as far as the role of women, there were—it was also multi-gendered in terms of the participation and the leadership. There were a lot of women, Mrs. Chin was our leader, there was a very good mix of men and women who worked very well together, and a lot of women leaders who were part of that effort.

11:31

And for purposes of this, we're running short on time, and I just want to say one other thing. I know you have a question, but—Out of the five or six years of working on this Vincent Chin case, we also were building a movement, an Anti-Asian violence movement, and organizations sprang up elsewhere in New York, in Boston. There's a national group in Washington, L.A., San Francisco, and Washington—state of Washington. So there were all these different advocacy groups—Texas—where people —Ohio—they were just groups that wanted to do something, and we began tracking. So we began tracking incidents of Anti-Asian violence and so things would come up, and they were various cases that were reported. Terrible cases of teenagers who were stabbed to death, five second graders in Stockton, California who were gunned down

in their school playground by a white supremacist, cases that would come up all that time. And we started tracking them because there was no—there was nobody else doing it, so we started doing it. I got to the point where I probably had a list of fifty or a hundred, and it spanned every ethnicity; nobody was free of the violence. So this was the 80s, in the 1980s there were—I could recite them by [heart]. I mean, I would talk about them. I knew every word of them. And at a certain point, where I would talk about them—

And every one of these were men. We have 50 or 100 names of incidents we're tracking. What did that mean? Why are they all men? Why are they all male—except for the five children. I think there were some girls in there. But ones where they were specifically targeted to be bludgeoned to death or something. Most of the cases were men, and we knew their names. And so out of that there were other women, especially here in San Francisco, who was doing work around violence against women. And we asked, Why is it that the hate crimes are towards men? And actually after some digging, we found two Asian names, Asian women, Asian girls. A girl who was found hanging from a tree. She was eight years old or quite young, found raped hanging from a tree, right after *Penthouse Magazine* had this thing about exotic pornography about Asian women, including a picture of one hanging from a tree. They were all photos of being dead. So who knows about the connection? There was a Japanese American woman who was shot in her kitchen from outside on December 7, Pearl Harbor Day. There were women who were targeted, sexually assaulted, and so we had to prove that it's not that there weren't hate crimes against Asian women, they just weren't called hate crimes. The violence was also mixed with gender violence, and because of that, they were shunted off to a sex crimes unit. We all know that women and crimes against women are secondary crimes, they're not really taken seriously anyway, and so they disappeared. So these Asian American women victims of real serial rapists, who specifically targeted Asian women, serial killers—

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So anyway, so that was where we got together, we had a little study group, and we wrote the paper for *Making Waves*, "Where are the Asian women?" So the thing about, How do we consciously bring gender into it and to ask, Where are the women? It's not like all these activists, all over the country didn't know this list. We had all known this list, but it really took some Asian American women, Asian American feminists, to say, Well, wait a minute. Look at the pattern here. Where are the women? And no one thought to ask where are the women? How does this—It's not like racism first and sexism later. It's like we have to actively, consciously, always look for the Asian women. Just like we need to look for the Asian Americans. If we don't look for them, we'll be disappeared too. But also within our Asian American stuff, we have to look and say, Where are the Asian American women? And then right after that, we have to look at sexual orientation, disability, class, and linguistic ability and all

of the various things that get marginalized. Because we will also marginalize within our own subset, that there's still within that. So we have to say, Who's privileged? Who's disempowered? And so anyway, I did want to make that point about the violence. There's this whole other topic that we don't have time for—to look into work around domestic violence, work around gender violence, but we're getting there.

KWON: Yeah, so as the quick last wrap-up question. I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the future, maybe? So you've been involved with the movement for a really long time, and I was thinking maybe you could pinpoint a couple of issues that you think are pertinent now and maybe in the future, kind of the work that we still have to do. 17:20

ZIA: Well, when I started, it was in the mid-1960s, 1970s, in the last century. Now we're well marching into this new century and new millennium, but some of the issues really haven't changed a whole lot. They've changed in different ways. I mean when I started out, Asian Americans were 1%, maybe? Less than 1% of the U.S. population. Now we're—overall we're, what, 6% something like that that, but in states like California, we're much more than that. Every state in the union and every community, we're not invisible anymore. There's 19 million of us and counting. So that's a huge difference. And because of that, you could say that we have more visibility.

But in terms of visibility in people's consciousness, in terms of, What is race in America? We still talk about White, Black, maybe brown, you know? I mean Asians are, as far as I'm concerned, still pretty much off the map. We're off the radar screen. For any issues that come up like immigration, for example, this is like a huge issue right now for the country. For Asian Americans, it's maybe one of the number one issues, because more than any other community, there are—Higher proportion of our community is immigrant than any other group. Latinos—The vast majority of Latinos are born in America. For the Asian Americans, the vast majority of Asian Americans are born outside. And so immigration is our issue, but if you take a look at any of the news correspondence or anything about immigration, there's nothing about Asian Americans.

KWON: It's a "Latino issue."

ZIA: Right, it's pegged as a Latino issue, and I don't think Latinos feel that that's right either. It's like, That's not our only issue. Not every Latino is a quote "illegal" undocumented person. It's in fact—it's not true. That is not the case, but they're stereotyped in that way, and we are invisible. For Asian Americans, the issue isn't simple either. Not that it's simple for anybody, but we have multiple languages and religions, and we're hugely un-homogeneous compared to any other group, too. So dealing with immigration for Asian Americans has a lot of layers to it. So I think this is

big, and as far as the visibility, what it means is, for Asian Americans, we have to make sure we're seen. We have to make sure we're heard. We have to talk about it. We have to talk about what it means for Asian American women and bring gender into this, too, because this last wave of migration, worldwide migration of people who have been displaced, was largely a female migration. Women who were dispossessed. And that brings a whole other layer of vulnerability that women have to violence, to less power, to sexual violence, to the need to care for children and parents and because women as caregivers in society, too. So anyway, I would say that that is for now, a huge one.

And the visibility question, I don't see that as going away. I think as still an activist at heart, I think we have a way to go to be the visible national force that we need. I mean, there still is no national organization for Asian Americans like there is a National Organization for Women. There's no NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] for Asian Americans. There's no La Raza or Anti-Defamation League that we can refer to. And we need that. I mean we totally need that, and the national advocacy. I'm hoping it will happen in my lifetime, though I'm not really sure. I think if it does, it'll be your generation to make it happen. We're getting there. There is a challenge though. As our numbers grow—and now we're at 19 million—it's easier to, say, keep an issue like the Vincent Chin case, to keep it as a Chinese issue because the Chinese community is now quite large. We might claim that as "our" issue. When the L.A. Riots happened, or L.A. Civil Unrest—however that, the terminology for it—I think a lot of the non-Korean community, the Asian American communities sat on the sidelines because they said, Well, that's a Korean issue, and we shouldn't step in. And my perspective, coming especially from the Vincent Chin case and the East Coast is, "No, this is a community issue. I mean when people are being attacked, they don't know if someone was Korean or what kind of Asian."

KWON: They don't stop and ask you.

ZIA: And so I think that by 1992, there was already some—I guess I would say—disaggregation of the Asians, less cohesion of the Asian American community, especially in California because the numbers are so large. If the Vincent Chin case had happened in California, I question whether it could've been a pan-Asian [movement] as well. In Michigan, there was no question. There were so few Chinese and so few Asian Americans that to do anything, we knew we had to stick together. Not only that, we knew we had to reach out and join in coalition with other groups, because we were—even as a pan-Asian group—we were too small. In a state like California, where you could say, Well, there's a really large Korean community. Maybe the Koreans don't want us Chinese to be involved. Then you go through, Do they? Do they not? As a spokesperson, how do

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you manage that communication? It does become more difficult and more challenging, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't do it.

And so I think that's a challenge for our Asian American activist in activism, that because it's not an automatic thing, especially since we're largely immigrants still—the immigrants, like my parents, who still think of their sending country as their identities, not pan-Asian. So it's not to them, the immigrants, a natural thing to reach out. To the 1.5-, 2.0-generations and beyond, it's much more like, Oh yeah. Of course. Pan-Asian. Well yeah, sure. No big deal. I don't hate. I'm Chinese American, but I'll speak to Japanese Americans and all of that stuff. In fact, my wife is Japanese. So I say that's why I think that ahead, it will be your generation who picks this up, the younger generation picks it up, and you would create that pan-Asian movement, national organization, or several organizations. It doesn't have to be one. We can have more, but I think we do need to have that, where we can have a national voice and the national show of support. We're getting there, but we're not there yet. So I think to the future, I fully expect that to happen, but it won't happen by itself. It'll only happen if somebody does that.

KWON: Well, thank you so much for the interview.

ZIA: Sorry about all of these technical issues.

END OF INTERVIEW