

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Sonia Fujimoto Parker
Interviewers: Priscilla Li, Mary Claire Neal
Date/Time of interview: October 23, 2018, 4:15pm
Transcribed by: Priscilla Li, Mary Claire Neal (11/18/2018)
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Edited by: Steven Loyd (11/27/2018)

Background: Sonia Fujimoto Parker was born in Houston, Texas in 1964. After playing school sports and then working in retail sales in Houston, she joined her older sister at the the University of Texas at Austin to receive her Bachelor's degree in textiles. After college, she worked in the retail industry in Dallas and Houston, but then discovered she wanted to pursue sales instead. In 1996, she started her own chemical company, AmPac, which she continues to run. She considers starting her own business to be her greatest accomplishment. Her greatest joy comes from supporting and spending time with her family, including her parents, husband, three stepchildren, and two granddaughters.

Setting: This interview took place on October 23, 2018, in the Digital Media Commons of Fondren Library at Rice University.

Key:

SFP: Sonia Fujimoto Parker
PL: Priscilla Li
MN: Mary Claire Neal
--: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis
[?]: preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

Interview transcript:

PL: Today is Tuesday, October 22nd, 2018. We're here in Fondren Library interviewing Sonia Fujimoto Parker for the Houston Asian American Archive. My name is Priscilla Li.

MN: My name is Mary Claire Neal.

PL: Okay. And we'll start out with asking you where and when you were born.

SFP: October 18th, 1964 in Houston, and actually Heights Hospital here, so.

PL: Okay, great. And um, what was your childhood like?

SFP: Um, it was interesting, because being Asian, there wasn't that many. Especially like when you go to school, all of a sudden you just feel very out of place. I felt very—I wanted to, you know, become, um, actually my dream was, "I want to be blonde hair and blue eyes." [**MN**: Mhm.] Because you want to assimilate. You know, I stood out, and, you know, growing up, kids would make fun of you. Whereas

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

now I think that Houston is much more diversified and multicultural. So growing up was a little bit, a little rough. I mean, you know, you just didn't feel like you fit in well. But I had made some good friends, and, you know, luckily came from a big family, four siblings, so I had sisters that were like my best friends. So that helped a lot.

MN: Could you tell us more about your family or extended family and what they're like? And what your relationship was with them?

SFP: Well growing up, being the youngest, I was hated. [all laugh] 'Cause they all said, "You're spoiled and Dad and Mom, you know, spoil you 'cause you're the youngest." Well, that wasn't true. Uh, but, you know, very strict...Asian, you know, by the rules. I remember my mother teaching us with flash cards at a very young age. You know, how do we—match game, you know, studying, and it was never like instilled - it was instilled in us about studying and you're going to go to college. But they never said it. It was just kind of, [**MN:** Mhm.] you just knew. Like, you gotta go to school, you gotta make good grades. And then you gotta go to college. Um, and even though they never told us, all the girls, I mean, we all knew we had to do that. So my oldest, um, was born in Japan [**MN:** Mhm.] and then came over and then the rest of the children were all born here in the states. So she, from what my mother said, she had a hard time assimilating because she spoke Japanese. [**MN:** Mhm.] And then, so it took a while because she had to learn English. Um, so my mother thought, okay, well, my sister had such a hard time, we don't want you to learn to speak Japanese. You know, you don't want to have the accent. 'Cause, you know, you want to assimilate. And so growing up I didn't want to. Now of course I regret never learning the language. Um, but we grew up very close family, every night was, you know, you sit down and have dinner. [**MN:** Mhm.] Um, try to talk, my dad "shhhh," he's gonna watch the news. [laughs] Uh, but you know, a very supportive family, very loving. Like I said, my sisters, at first we weren't that close, but as we got older, we became very close. And even now my sisters are my best friends.

PL: So at home did you speak English?

SFP: English only. [**PL:** English only.] But my parents would speak Japanese, and although I couldn't speak it, I could understand a few words. [**MN:** Mhm] So I would say, "what are you talking about?" [**MN** laughs] and I would ask them the question, you know. And they would [grunts] and they'd get mad at me, so—but I, I, yeah it was only English is all I spoke, and that's all I can speak now. But I could understand a few words.

PL: Mhm, okay. Um, and so you had four sisters? Or...

SFP: I had three sisters and one brother. [**PL:** Three sisters...]

PL: One brother, okay. And you were the youngest?

SFP: I was the youngest.

PL: Okay. Um, so did you ever face any discrimination that you can remember?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SFP: I, I...from a—as I got older, um, trying to work, I saw people would make, you know, racial comments. Um, or just out in public. But growing up it was more like the young kids going “ching, chong, chong,” you know, [**PL:** Mhm.] making fun of you and, you know. I, I, I was like okay, whatever. But when I got older, I remember, um, one time I was um, actually in a casino, and this old man says to me, “go back to your country.” I’m like, “this is my country.” And I was just like wow. And another time I was at a golf course in North Carolina which was all white. And I was walking through the dining hall and this lady goes, “Is that a Chinese?” [**MN:** Oh my.] And I said, “No, I’m Japanese!” [laughs] So, and I’ve had people, you know, make other racial comments, and...one time I was coming back from a minority show, um, going through [inaudible]. And there was a black girl driving and I was in the passenger’s seat and a pick-up truck with these guys came over and they started yelling racial comments and started spitting on the car. And I told the girl, I said, “Just keep driving, just go the speed limit, just get us back to Houston.” And once we got away, you know—‘cause I just thought, Don’t do anything, don’t make eye contact. So yeah, a little bit, [**PL:** Mhm.] so I’ve had a few things. But as you know, now, as I’ve said, it’s, you see Asians everywhere, and especially, you know, in the news, I mean, actresses, you know, it’s just everybody, so now it’s very common and I think that’s a good thing. And Houston is great because I think that we’re so diversified, it makes everybody accept different cultures and different ethnicities. [**MN:** Mhm.]

MN: Um, which schools did you go to growing up? Like, can you take us through like middle, elementary...

SFP: Yeah so kindergarten, um, it was Thompson Elementary, then Stonewall and then Aldine, and then I went to the University of Texas, in Austin. [**MN:** Ok.]

PL: Uh, what were your—oh, sorry.

MN: Uh, did you have any favorite teachers and subjects? Or did those change?

SFP: Yeah, my favorite teacher, uh, was Mrs. Farley, she was my algebra and calculus teacher, and actually I had lunch with her—it’s been a while, but um, [**MN:** Mhm.] I touched base with her maybe eight years ago and had lunch with her, ‘cause she was such a wonderful—you can tell she loved the children, [**MN:** Mhm.] she loved teaching, she got excited, and so I went back to see her and she’s on Facebook, she’s like 82 maybe, she’s, you know, on Twitter, she’s on Instagram. And I’m like—she’s just, you know, unbelievable. [**MN:** laughs] So she was—got my interest in math. And so I’ve always had an affinity for math, even though I don’t—I’m not a math major, but I had a great interest in it because of her [**MN:** Mhm.] enthusiasm for the subject.

PL: Um...um, so what were your parents’ occupations?

SFP: My father worked for the Harris County mosquito control. Um, he started off as driving the trucks, and the fogging. And then eventually worked up to assistant director. And then my mother was just housewife, and to help earn extra money, she used to babysit children. So um, until I guess, until I got to maybe high school, then she stopped.

PL: And what kind of principles did they raise you on?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SFP: Um...honesty, saving money like crazy, [laughs] it's the Asian way. Making good grades, being respectful to your peers, um...being polite, which I think, maybe, we've lost some of that.

PL: Um, what kind of dishes did you have growing up?

MN: Yeah, at those family dinners? [laughs] [**PL:** Yeah.]

SFP: A lot—you know, a few times Japanese, but a lot of American dishes, you know, a lot of uh, a lot of fish, because we were somewhat of a lower middle class, so my father would go fishing at Galveston, so we would eat whatever he caught, so we would eat a lot of fishes. But a lot of American dishes, you know, ribs, hamburger, um, just chicken, always—my mother always made a little salad, so we always had a salad, and then the main dish with a few vegetables, um, some Swanson dinners. [all laugh] And then once in a while she would make some Japanese food. Uh, but not, not a lot. Not like what you would think. But now, you know, I love sushi, I eat it at least once or twice a week. And take them to go eat, you know, sushi as well, but growing up, just pretty much American food.

MN: Okay. Was your dad's fishing, like, something he liked to do for fun or just...

SFP: A little bit, but I think more to help subsidize, [**MN:** Oh.] you know, the, you know, the grocery bill basically, 'cause then it would help pay. [**MN:** Mhm.] You know, you'd go fishing and then feed your children fish. So growing up, I kinda got, "Not fish again." [**MN** laughs] 'Cause it was like fish, fish—now I love it, you know, but uh, so I think it was a little bit of enjoying it because my uncle loved to fish. But he didn't eat it, but, so that's what we would do almost every weekend it seemed like. We'd go to Galveston and go fishing, so.

MN: How much of your extended family was, I guess, in Houston with you or that you saw on a regular basis?

SFP: We used to go to my uncle's and aunt's almost every weekend. And my paternal grandparents lived with them, but we would get together, I mean, honestly it's almost every weekend we saw each other. And so my cousin also became one of my best friends.

PL: Okay. Um, did you practice a religion at home growing up?

SFP: No, but my mother was a Buddhist, and she had her little...it was like a, I guess it was like a little shrine, and she would burn the incense and would, [rubs hands together] you know, pray. Um, but we never...and I would say I was, I'm probably agnostic. I don't—I really didn't grow up with any religion in the house, except like I said my mom believed in Buddhism. But she never went to temple, she just had her own little shrine at the house.

PL: I see. Um, what were some like, hobbies and extracurriculars that you were involved in growing up?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SFP: Um I loved sports. So I ran track and played volleyball and did a little bit—I was an alternate on the tennis team, I wasn't very good. [laughs] But then by the time I turned 16, it was like, it was nothing, when you turn 16, you gotta go to work. And so I, pretty much after that I quit the sports and started working in the retail industry, Josky's, which became Foley's which became Macy's. But anyway, um, so at that age, every time, all the, all the kids, when you turn 16, you learn how to drive, you had to go to work, and you had to start saving up money for college. That was just kind of the, the rule of the house.

MN: I see. What was that like, um, getting your first job in he work environment?

SFP: Well, I actually lied. [MN laughs] Because you had to be 18 to work at Josky's. [MN: Uh huh, oh.] But I always loved retail, and going to the stores, go shopping, so I lied. My sister actually had to help me kinda get the job, 'cause some people from Josky's had come through. She said, "Oh, my sister wants to get a job there, oh, come see me." When I found out you had to be 18, I was like, "I'm 18." [PL and MN laugh] And I actually, I looked older at that time. So the whole time I had to lie, which was not a good thing, but I wanted to work at retail. I didn't want—all my sisters had worked at Randall's, and I was like, "I don't want to work in the grocery store, I want to work in the retail." So that's, that's it. The only thing I'm going to do is I have to lie and so.

MN: Was it any different from what you expected it to be, after...?

SFP: No, um, you know, I would work just in the, the junior department in the sales, you know, and rung up people and worked, usually like three days a week after school, you know, from 5 to 9 and then worked like Saturday. [MN: Mhm.] And I did that all through college as well, but no, I really liked it. I liked looking at the new clothes, and talking to people and greeting them and um, I enjoyed it.

PL: Um, so did you like, grow up in the same neighborhood, like, in Houston?

SFP: Yes. Um, we, I, we moved when I was maybe six years old from more of the inner city to Imperial Valley, [?] Greenspoint, which is you know, further—at that time wasn't anything out there. But all through, from basically kindergarten all through high school, in the same household. And it was a three-bedroom house, two bath. [PL: Mmm.] So my brother got the only room by himself. Four girls were in one bedroom. [MN: That's kind of like my house.] Two double beds, two double beds and they were against the wall, each two on the side, and you had just one thing so you could walk in. And then the shower, we put a rod [MN Laughs] to put our clothes in. But four girls, it's like unheard of nowadays, but... [laughs] So there's no secrets in the house. [all laugh]

MN: Um, growing up, when you started getting ready to go to college, how did you make the decision where to go, and what, I guess, um...how did you make those decisions and what drew you towards certain areas?

SFP: Well, all my sisters went to University of Texas. [laughs] [MN: Wow.] So I just was naturally drawn to kinda follow them. And at that time my sister was two years older than me. We became very very close. So I wanted to be with her, so that was the decision. I was like, you know what, I want to be with my sister, I, I love her, we're best friends. So she was already in an apartment, and so I said, you

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

know what, I'm just gonna go live with her. And so that was just the natural. And because I was in retail, I loved it. I started out with textiles and clothing, 'cause I thought I wanted to pursue that as my career, but I ended up changing, so.

PL: What did you change to?

SFP: I, well I graduated with, in textiles and clothing [**PL:** Oh okay.] and I worked in the retail industry for a few years, and then I just, I didn't like it anymore. [**MN:** Mhm.] And I was like, I don't want to work every holiday, and um, then also what happened was uh, I worked for Foley's and it got bought out by Macy's, so all the direction was coming out of New York. And I'm thinking, well, you don't really need somebody who's thinking, you're just telling me what to buy, because I was in the buying indus—buying end of it. So that's when I said, you know what, I don't think I wanna do that, I think I want to get to sales. So I thought I wanted to get into pharmaceutical sales or retail sales or something like that. But it was so hard because nobody wanted to take on somebody who didn't have any experience. [**MN:** Mhm.] So I got lucky and got on with the chemical company. And then I stayed, worked for five years and left and started my own company.

PL: Okay. Um, how was your college experience, like what kind of clubs were you in?

SFP: I wasn't, I was terrible! [**PL:** Oh no.] [**MN** laughs] I didn't get involved in anything, I was awful. All I did was work and I wanted to get out of co—'cause I grew up poor. So all I wanted to do was like, get me out of school as soon as possible 'cause I wanna make money. I grew up poor. You know, and so I thought, I just want to make my own money. I never went to a UT football game, basketball. I didn't do anything, all I did was work. [**MN:** Did you work—] And now I regret it, believe me, I real—I tell everybody, I said, "Your first year, live in a dorm, make friends," you know. I couldn't live with my sister after, you know, first, but I just wanted to live with her a bit. Now I tell everybody, freshman year, live in a dorm, make friends, get, you know, go to the games, get involved, because I do regret it, that's one thing I missed out on.

MN: How long did you live with your sister in college?

SFP: Um, for two years. [**MN:** Okay.] And then I lived by myself in the apartment and never, you know, like I said, I didn't do anything.

PL: Um, so were your parents supportive in you, like, throughout your college experience and like, majoring in textiles, and...?

SFP: Yes. Actually it's a funny story. So on my SAT scores, I did real well on the math part and science, so I could've gone to Boston College. And my mom's like—'cause I probably could've gotten a scholarship being a minority. But, I was like, that's too far away. And it's cold, I don't want to go to Boston. [**PL:** Mhm, mhm.] So my mom really wanted me to go. And I was like, I don't want to go, my dad goes, "Go wherever you want." So he supported me, he said, "Do what you want to do." So he was great. Um, and my mom goes, "Well, you could be an engineer and make a lot of money." I was like, that doesn't sound interesting to me at all. I said the retail sounds much more interesting. So my parents, you

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

know, my mom wanted me to do something else, but my father was very supportive. He said, “You want to go to UT, go to UT, major in—you know, just, just get a degree.” Didn’t matter, just get a degree. [PL: Mhm.] So yeah, they were actually—and once I went up there, my mom was like, “Okay, that’s, you know, you’re happy, so that’s what matters.”

MN: That’s great. Um, so how did you end up coming back to Houston?

SFP: So when I—part of the internship was to go to Dallas, so I did my internship for the retail industry in Dallas. And I got a job with uh, Dillard’s at that time, and...but I didn’t want to stay in the retail as far as the store, working in the store. And that’s where they wanted me to be. I wanted to be in the buying end. So I said, you know, “I’m gonna go apply at Foley’s,” at the time. And they accepted me into the buying program, so that’s why I moved back to Houston and um, stayed.

MN: Cool. Um, where are your siblings living now and how often do you get to see them?

SFP: So um, the oldest one lives in Austin. The next one lives in Houston, my brother lives in Houston, and my sister lives in Chattanooga, and I was just up in Chattanooga this past weekend. She’s the one who’s two years older than me. So the one in Houston, I see her, um...maybe every other month, something like that. Or except for, you know, birthdays, or holidays, then we definitely see each other. Not, not as much as we probably should, just because we’re both always—seem to be very busy. [MN: Mhm.] But stay together as far as internet, or texting. You know, [MN: Mhm] about what’s going on, which has been very helpful as far as staying in touch with my siblings.

PL: Okay. Can you describe the process of you going on your own to start your own company?

SFP: Um, yeah, so the company I was working for was a small company and very fortunate, because I learned how to do the buying, the transportation, invoicing. Basically everything. Taking the order, placing it into invoicing. So when I left the company, it was actually a very easy transition for me. The hardest part was trying to get a bank to give you collateral, a commercial line of credit so you can buy the goods. So basically the only way I was going to be able to do is to give all my stocks up. So I gave all my stocks up. So it really didn’t have any risk per se. But I needed to establish that so I can be considered, you know, real in the industry. Instead of saying, “Oh, I can’t pay you until my customers pay you.” Then you get to pay your, your suppliers on time, otherwise they’re not gonna sell to you, and you gotta have a source of supply. So it wasn’t that hard as far as making that transition, because I was already used to doing everything. The hardest part was trying to get the commercial line of credit. And once I did that—and at the beginning, everybody was saying, “Well, you gotta pay me up front,” so that’s why I had to have so I could write the checks ahead of time before I ever got the goods. And then once after I was in business long enough, I said “Look, give me a line of credit,” you know, the, the vendors. And they were able to do it based on the fact that I was paying everybody on time.

MN: Um, what is your, like, day-to-day work like?

SFP: Um, usually answering emails, and trying to um, maybe solicit business or completing bids, [MN: Mhm.] following up on bids I’ve made, following up on emails with customers saying, “Do you want this

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

product,” you know, “What price do I need to be at?” Um, then I also will call to get freight rates. And then try to do quotes, and invoicing, [MN: Mhm.] going to the bank, post office. And then sometimes driving out of town to see customers and visiting with them and asking them, “How are you doing, what else can we do?” I was just up at um, the university in their anatomy department, cadavers. [laughs]. So he was showing me, “Okay, this is some body parts, and so did you want to look at a dead body?” I go, “Hmm, I’ll look at the bones.” [laughs] So that’s part of it, going to visit them and trying to make sure they’re happy and see what else I could sell them.

PL: Okay. Can you describe your company? It’s, it’s called AmPac?

SFP: AmPac chemical. So, it’s a distribution company, so what I basically do is buy from a manufacturer from another reseller, and sell it usually to an in-user who’s going to make something or use it in a process. Um, so what basically I do is I buy it, set the transportation, and then have it delivered to them and then invoice it.

MN: Ok. Is it like, internationally or nationally or [inaudible]?

SFP: Some. I mean, I import a little bit, but not that much unless there’s what we call a shortage of—if chemicals are getting short, I need to source it from overseas. Um, then I might do that, and import. But most of it’s all domestic.

MN: Okay.

PL: Um, what was the jump like, I guess, you may have already answered this, but what was the jump of like creating your own business instead of like, finding like, a job or something, like?

SFP: Well, ‘cause I worked for somebody, I just said, “You know what, I could just do this myself.” [PL: Oh, yeah.] And I just thought, I can be my own boss, I thought, What’s the worst that could happen? If I fail, I’ll go work for somebody, but I really don’t want to work for anybody. [PL and MN: Mhm.] I really want to be my own boss, call my own shots, be independent, and...it worked. But that was—and I tell my friends, like, I’ve encouraged other friends, start your own business. I said, What’s the worst? You have to go work for somebody. I said ‘cause there’ll never be anything better than working for yourself. Because you can—the sky’s the limit how much money you want to make, and your flexibility. Like my parents are elderly, so I can go help them. [PL: Mhm.] Like today I had to take my doc—dad to the doctor, and I was there four hours. Well, if you work for somebody, it’s hard to do that. [PL: Mhm.] You know, but you can still—you can make your own hours, and I mean there’s many times, I’ll be up at two o’clock in the morning, and I’ll be sending out emails or invoicing or working. Um, so that’s the thing, is you don’t have a steady paycheck, but you have the independence and flexibility. So, telling you right now, if you get up and start your own business, it’s the best thing you’ll ever do for yourself. You’ll make more money than you could working for somebody, if you’re, if you’re hard and diligent—diligent and work hard, it’s, I suggest to anybody and everybody to be your own boss.

MN: Was there a specific point where you realized that’s what you want to do, or like an experience you had where you just changed your mind or saw the light?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SFP: Well, who I was working for decided to cut commissions and that's when I said, "Well, I have to work that much harder to make that much money?" And that's when I thought, Well, I'm splitting my commissions, I could just make all of it myself. And that's when—I mean, I thought, I'll just make it all myself, I'll just go out and—and the first year it was hard, because a lot of customers were like, "Well, I'm not sure how long you'll be in business." They didn't want to buy from me. So it took the first year before people said, "Okay, you're, you know, you're still in business and you always gave me great service, always followed up, returned phone calls." Um, so then that's how I got a lot of my customers back.

MN: Wow.

PL: Did you have any mentors in the beginning?

SFP: Not really. [**PL:** No? [laughs]] No, I really didn't. I just kinda just took the leap of faith and jumped and said, you know, let me just go and do it. Yeah.

PL: Um, did you face any challenges? I think you mentioned this a little bit.

SFP: Yeah, the financial challenge was probably the hardest, trying to get the line of credit was probably the hardest. And the first year of customers not wanting to buy because they weren't sure that you were gonna be in business. Um, but after that, when they realized, "Okay, you've proven yourself, we're gonna start buying from you." And so it would, you know, it would start off a little bit, and then they said, "Yeah, the customer service that you always provided was so great." Some people came over sooner, just because they realized they weren't gonna get that hands-on and, um, special attention. And even now-a-days, some of my customers go, "You're the only person that called me back, who follows up on emails." They said other people won't even return a phone call, won't even return a quote. I'm like, "Really?" they're like, "Yeah," cause they're spread so thin or...because it may be a little bu—piece of business, so maybe these big companies, they don't want a little order. I'll take anything, 'cause you know what, it all adds up and you don't know where it's gonna go. Where a lot of these big companies, they're like, if it's not over, you know, X amount, we're just, they don't care. So I'll pick up all those crumbs, and, you know, it all adds up.

MN: Um, so you were in Austin, but then um, and then Houston—or have you lived in any other cities or have you ever [inaudible]?

SFP: No, just Austin for school and then Dallas for my internship [**MN:** Okay.] and worked there for a year with Dillard's and then back to Houston. No, I haven't lived anywhere else.

MN: Okay. Do you like Houston?

SFP: I love Houston. [**MN:** Great!] I don't like the weather, it's hot [**MN:** Mhm.] and it's humid, my husband hates it but, I, I love it. Like I said, I love the diversity, and I love that you can go eat all this great food everywhere, [**MN:** Mhm.] and I said the cost of living is very cheap, and—but you're in the

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

middle of the country so you can fly to the east coast, west coast, South America, [MN: Mhm.] Mexico, I mean anywhere. And I said, it's really, I said it's a great place to make money, and the cost of living's not high, so you can have a great life. I mean my husband just...he says he hates the heat and humidity, but I said it's only, you know, maybe four or five months out of the year [MN: Right.] that it's really bad...and I said the people are really nice [MN laughs] and I said the food is great, you know, so he was like...[shrugs]

MN: [laughs] Could you tell us more about your husband and how you guys met, and, uh...

SFP: He's also in the chemical industry. Um, he is originally from New York, and then moved here when he was 11, but he still has a little bit of a New York, [MN laughs] certain words. But he's also in the industry and that's how we met. Um, so we dated for a long time before we got married. But uh, he's got three children from a previous marriage, [MN: Mhm.] and they're all older, 35, 33, maybe 27. And so I'm a grandmother by, by their children. [MN: Mhm] So, it's, so I go by "Gigi," I have two granddaughters and it's fun. [SFP and MN laugh]

MN: What kind of things do you like to do with them?

SFP: Play-Doh. [MN laughs] Anything crafty, Play-Doh, I made some Silly Putty, um, cutting out things, anything that's creative I like to do with her. Uh, going take her to the park. [MN: Mhm.] Hopefully, eventually the younger one who's still only seven months old but she's real active [MN: Mhm.] and ready to run and crawl, and I said she's gonna be—I like to, I'm not a runner like you but I like to run. Not fast, but I said she's gonna be my runner, [MN laughs] I'm gonna do a 5k with her when, one of these days. [laughs] Take her to the, you know, Children's Museum [MN: Mhm.] any time to a park, um, but anything creative I try to want them to use their hands and—paint, [MN: Mhm.] chalk, anything like that.

MN: Um, do you have any, like, hobbies yourself, or do you like to read and what do you like to read? What are you interested in?

SFP: I don't really get a chance to read, um, I did read *Crazy R—Crazy Rich Asians*? [MN: Uh huh. [laughs]] [PL: Yeah.] I love that book. I wanna see the movie, I haven't seen it yet. So I get to read every once in a while, but more I end up listening to podcasts a lot, [MN: Oh, yeah.] NPR podcasts, [MN: I love NPR podcasts.] I love listening to those. So I listen to that all the time at night, [MN: Wow.] and that's kind of the way I kind of try to decompress and relax. Um, I like to work out, run, um...eat, obviously. [laughs] And try to travel [MN: Mhm.] a little bit. Don't get to go overseas very often just because of my business. Since I'm the only one, I have to ans—I have to do everything. So even though, like, I have some people who say, "Well, you need to go to Japan," [MN: Mhm.] or "You need to go to," you know, "Hong Kong." I'm like, if I'm gonna go, I need to take two weeks, and I can't do it because of my business [MN: Mhm.] unfortunately. So if I ever go anywhere, it's...it may be a long weekend or maybe a week at the longest, and so I haven't really been able to travel overseas as much so I—so I'm thinking when I retire, that's when I'll be able to do more traveling.

MN: Where do you like to travel right now? And what do you like to do?

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SFP: I like to go to the beach a lot [MN: Mhm.] so Cabo, Grand Cayman are my favorite places. And then my stepdaughter lives up in Boston so we go to Boston, and then stepson lives in Denver, so we go to Denver. And, go to Carmel, you know, [MN: Mhm.] we like to go to the west coast or east coast. Um, but usually anything that's beachy. I'm not, I'm really not a cold person, I don't like, like to—I've gone skiing once and... [MN laughs] I'm like, you put on all that gear, go up, come down, and I'm like, I gotta do this again? [MN laughs] I'm like, forget it, I'm gonna go to the hot tub. [all laugh] So the beach is much, much more relaxing to me. It's pretty to see the snow, but that's, those are the places I usually like to travel to.

MN: And then you mentioned, well, not going back to Japan, but have you been to Japan, I guess since your childhood and, um, do you have any like, desire to go back because of, because you're from Japan, or is it just another place?

SFP: I would, I would like to go, um, my mom says, "They're not gonna, like you, because they can tell you're a banana, you're yellow on the outs—" She says they will tell you—can tell you're American. Plus I don't speak Japanese. [MN: Mhm.] She goes, "They will not like you," so I'm like... [MN laughs] maybe I don't wanna go. But no, I would like to. I've never been. My mom has never been back. [MN: Wow.] And now she's too old. She was gonna go in the '90s, but she ended up getting colon cancer. And she went through all the chemo and all that and she just decided she didn't, you know, she said, "No, I'm not gonna go." So she doesn't have any, um, she lost her mo—she lost her father and her brother during the war, and then her mother and her sister, so she doesn't have anybody. [MN: Mhm.] She may have some real, real distant relatives in Japan, but nobody she ever communicates with. But I wanna go back, j—not go back, I wanna go, just 'cause I think it would be beautiful and be interesting. [MN: Mhm.] The thing is is since I don't speak the language, I don't know, maybe she's right, somebody won't...like me, but I, I think I could get a—I mean, I'll figure it out. [laughs] And my husband really wants to go. So that's what we said, when we'll retire, we'll go, and we'll spend like two weeks, [MN: Mhm.] or something like that there.

MN: I had something and I forgot what I was going to say...

PL: What area is your mother from?

SFP: Osaka.

PL: Osaka, okay. [SFP: Uh huh.] And then is your father also from Japan, or?

SFP: He's from, um, Colorado. [PL: Okay.] He was born in Longmont, Colorado. He's Japanese. But he was stationed in the army [PL: Mhm.] in Japan, that's how he met my mother. [PL: Okay.] And um, lied to her a little bit and said, "I'm a rich farmer, [MN laughs] you need to come back to America." Of course she didn't want to, she didn't have a—she didn't speak English, she didn't really want—so I think he said he had to propose to her three times [MN: Wow.] and convinced her to come. And I mean, that's why I said, she has a very interesting—I can't imagine not speaking a language, and going to a foreign country and not knowing anybody. So that took a huge leap of faith for her to do that with my father. Um, but, so he wasn't a rich farmer, he was just a farmer. [all laugh]

MN: Did she tell you any other stories that really resonate with you about her, her life?

SFP: Well so, my mom is kind of a hoarder, so it's like, when the whole new millennium was gonna happen and, [MN: Mhm.] you know, they said everything was gonna crash, I said, "I'm gonna come to your house, 'cause you have enough to last ten years." [PL and MN laugh] 'Cause she like has, like, three refrigerators, two freezers, I mean...our pantry's, you know, packed. And uh, she said, "Well, you know, you gotta think, growing up during the war, it didn't matter about money, [MN: Mhm.] or it—it was all about food." So that's why she has an obsession about always making sure you had food. She goes it didn't—you needed to eat and drink. So she said, "That's why I have so much food." Because for her, that's her fear, of not having enough food. So when I understood that, I go, "Okay, I can—I understand." But I said, but this is expired ten years ago, you can throw this away. [all laugh] But she has a hard time. And so I said I, I, you know, my dad says "You gotta understand!" I said, "No, I understand," but she won't, um, nothing is wasted. [MN: Mhm.] You know, I mean, she'll use Saran Wrap and clean it off, she'll keep using that foil. Um, she keeps using every container. Just because her mind is, "Don't waste, don't waste." [MN: Mhm.] If you grew up during the depression, you could understand that. Us, we, we waste everything, so there's something to be said then. So she was recycling before recycling was cool. [all laugh]

PL: Um, going back to your business, what are some like, key lessons that you've learned along the way?

SFP: Um, like I said, always pay your suppliers off on time, [PL: Mhm.] so they'll continue selling to you. Follow up with your customers, even if you don't have an answer, tell them I'm working on it. And try to—I'm, I'm working on it, I'll try to get you the answers, and, get, try to get them the answers. Um, showing them customer service when they ask a question, like I said, follow up. Give them the information they need. Um...and that, you have to make sure they pay you. 'Cause a sell isn't any good unless you get paid. So it's, you know, follow up and saying, where's my in—where's my payment? And just keep bugging them until they pay you. Um, I guess that's really it.

PL: In the chemical industry, are there other Asian Americans that you've interacted with, or...?

SFP: Um... not very many. Now my cousin owns her own business, that's who I worked for, Donna Cole, she, she started her own business as well. And I worked for her for those five years before I left. But there's not...like, any Asians you see in the chemical industry, they usually work for the multinational companies, like the Sumitomos or the Mitsubishis, the big companies like that, so I...I don't.

PL: Did you ever find that hard to, like, be in the industry, like, not seeing yourself represented, or like, your racial identity?

SFP: Actually I, I thought that was an advantage, 'cause I thought I stood out. [MN: Oh.] 'Cause I thought, You know what? There's not that many, so when they see an Asian, they would remember Sonia Fujimoto. I was, [MN: Mhm.] I—'cause a lot of people would remember me more than I remembered them because there wasn't any—very many Asians. [MN: Mhm.] So like I said, to me I said, I'm gonna use this as an advantage instead of using it as an obstacle.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

MN: You mentioned how hard it was as a young kid growing up with no, no one understanding you or accepting you, but um, how did you make that transition to becoming just more comfortable and confident?

SFP: Sports, I think. [**MN:** Okay.] I really think sports gave me like, you know, something that I could do and I could do it well. Not great, but well. And people saw me differently I think, and that's what made me I think assimilate better, versus just kinda going in my own corner. I think that, you know, I became part of a team. [**MN:** Mhm.] And uh, we'd travel on, you know, to different events. And I really think that's what gave me more confidence. [**MN:** Mhm.] And, and that—I, I as—I think that was a huge thing for myself, and I think any, any student should try to get involved, like I said, in any type. It doesn't have to be sports, but anything! So then you can get friends and get confidence in something that you're good at [**MN:** Mhm.] and excel. And you'll, you'll, you'll have that voice, I think.

MN: Did you realize that as you were going through it, or was it later when you looked back you realized?

SFP: I think as I was going through it, I realized it. [**MN:** Okay.] That's when I said, You know what? I, you know, people can make fun of me, but I'm gonna show them. [laughs]

MN: Do you have any specific memories of feeling, like, a victory, either in the sport, but how it translated to your own emotional life?

SFP: [sighs] I don't know, I'm trying to think, um... Of course, you know, if you won at any, any uh, tournament, [**MN:** Mhm.] you always felt really good about yourself, so that's why I think for myself, that competitiveness came through as far as owning my own business. Like, trying to get a piece of business [**MN:** Mhm.] was the competitive part of me. And I remember when I worked at the other company, we had to fill out some kind of forms and I said "Well, I'm not competitive," and everybody goes, [**MN:** laughs] "You are not—you are so competitive!" And I never saw myself as being...that competitive. They go, "Yes you are!" Because if I want something, I'm gonna go after it, and I'm gonna try really hard, and I'm gonna follow up and say, "Where am I? What's my price? [**MN:** Mhm.] Who got the business?" And I say, "Okay, well give me another chance." So I never would give up. So I think that's, that's the, the, the part of that, yeah.

PL: Um, so how do you balance—I think you mentioned this before, but how do you balance work and personal life?

SFP: I don't, [**PL:** Oh.] it's really hard. I mean, it's um...it's very difficult because my, I feel like my hands are full. And I, I have really bad insomnia. And my dad was like, "Why do you have insomnia?" I said, "My mind is always going!" I said, "Because I'm always thinking, what do I need to do for work, and then I need to take care of you guys, or, you know, trying to be Gigi, and, you know, [**MN:** Mhm.] I like to cook and, you know, I, so it, it is very hard to juggle all that. But I have to say, with technology, it helps tremendously. So I'll have my to-do list all the time on my phone, and I'll...go through it and the calendar, putting on the calendars app what I need to do, that helps keep it balanced. But it's, it's very

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

difficult. I think that um, people my age now, we're like, sandwiched because we have our parents on one side, our personal life, and then maybe grandkids, [MN: Mhm.] that you're, you're, you're having a really hard time doing e—and I think that's what creates the insomnia. But, anyway, it's life, it's...[laughs]

MN: So that hasn't been during your whole life that you've had insomnia, it's...

SFP: No, [MN: Mhm.] I think—I was trying to figure out when it started, I think it started in 2000. [MN: Mhm.] Um...it just...juggling all the, all everything.

PL: Was it in the beginning of your company? Or was it...

MN: No, I started my company in 1996, [PL: 1996.] so it was afterwards. Um, it's actually I think when I was getting my divorce [MN: Mhm.] that it kinda started, the whole anxiety and [MN: Mhm.] um, trying to do...then, then it was like, okay, I have my, you know, I'm a single woman again, I gotta, you know, pay for mortgage and take care of myself and all that. So I think that's when the insomnia—and then it only progressively got worse as I got older because of more responsibilities. [MN: Mhm.] So I'm trying to work on that.

PL: Mhm. So do you have any time for side hobbies, I guess, that includes like, spending time with your grandchildren and...

SFP: Yeah, I think you just have to carve out that time, so, um, you know, I have another sister who doesn't make exercise a priority. So I try to make it a priority, I try to go to the gym. And luckily my husband, he's, he's also really into working out. And I've tried to get him to run, so that's how we've balanced it. So we try to say, You know what, we gotta go to the gym, and we gotta run, to stay healthy. And that way we'll, we'll take care of my parents, and take care of the grandchildren. But you have to carve it out. You have to say this is my priority. I'm gonna dedicate three days, four days a week, it's gonna be an hour and a half, in the morning, and I'm gonna do it, you know.

MN: So um, your husband was also in a previous marriage and you were too, is that kind of, part of what helped you guys understand each other, or?

SFP: Yeah! Yeah, yeah. [MN: Okay.] I always said, I had my practice husband, he had his practice wife, and... [MN and PL laugh] Now, you know, a very blended family. Um, but it's, his kids are wonderful. They're great to me, and we get along great. And his mother is nice, you know, so sweet, so it's real—We have our Thanksgiving and Christmases all together, both the families. So it's really nice. So we don't have to go, gotta—and we always host it. So it's nice, so everybody comes to our house, and we have his side of the family and my side of the family. Um, so it's really, I, I feel so fortunate that it's worked out that way.

PL: And what, what is his ethnicity?

SFP: He's Caucasian. [PL: Caucasian, okay.] Yeah.

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

PL: So do you like, introduce, do you like...

SFP: He *loves* sushi. [**PL:** Yeah. [laughs]] He eats sushi more than I do. Him and his business partners go eat sushi minimum once a week if not twice. And then we go at least once a week to go eat sushi. But he loves, yeah, he, he loves sushi. So I was very fortunate because I don't know what I'd do if—I guess [**MN:** laughs] I could, if... it's like, you know, you go eat the teriyaki or something, [**PL:** Mhm.] but um, no, he loves sushi.

PL: Mhm. Um, how would you identify yourself? Like as in, if you're Japanese, Japanese American, or something...?

SFP: Um, probably American first, [**PL:** Mhm.] and then Japanese. [**MN:** Mhm.] Just because...growing up in Houston, you know, I didn't have any exposure to any of the Japanese except my immediate family and my cousins. I think if I grew up—now this is interesting, if I grew up on the west coast, I think I would be more, consider myself Japanese American. [**MN:** Mhm.] Whenever we had a reunion there, my cousin and I, we went to a night club. And it was all Asians. And let me tell you, I felt weird. [**MN** and **PL** laugh]. I, my hu—cousin, I go, “I feel so weird! There's all these Asians!” Because we'd always seen all Caucasian. [**MN:** Mhm.] So it felt really odd to me. So I think for me I identify more American and then Japanese. But as I get older, you know, I definitely am more interested in the Japanese culture and what happened and that's why I said I do want to go to Japan one day.

MN: Mhm. Um, so what are, I guess, your hopes for the future, and your...what do you look forward to?

SFP: Um, my hope is to one day retire. Travel. I wanna be the best Gigi ever. [**MN:** Mhm.] I want my granddaughters, and they do, she calls me, you know, “Gigi!” Um, but I wanna be there for them. ‘Cause I wasn't close to either grandparent, so to me it's really important [**MN:** Mhm.] for them to always feel like they can come to me, for me to support them. Um, and they, if they ever, are ever in trouble, I want them to always say, “I can go to Gigi. She may not approve of what I did, [**MN:** Mhm.] but I can talk to her and she'll help guide me.” Um, that's really important to me.

Um, also being...there for my parents. I thought my parents were really good to me, [**MN:** Mhm.] supported me. So, my goal is always to help them. And what happened was in 2013 they lived in Spring, and I lived right here in West University. And I said, “Mom, Dad, you guys are getting older. I'm getting older too. You really need to move closer to me.” And they were having a lot of health problems at the time. And so I said “Mom,” I said, “Don't you want to live closer to me?” “Of course I wanna live closer to you!” But my father was like, “No...” Because he w—he thought he was gonna lose his [makes air quotes] independence. And I said, “I'm not gonna put you in a home. [**MN:** Mhm.] I just want you closer to me, s—and I wanna downsize you.” ‘Cause they lived in a big two-story house. Ten-thousand square-foot, uh, lot. And big, you know, I mean, it was a huge house! I said, “What are you...? It's just you and Mom! You don't even go upstairs anymore!” I said, “You have all these health problems. I can't be driving back at midnight or one o'clock from Spring, home.” I said, “If you lived closer, I could help take care of you.” It took six or eight months to finally convince my dad, [**MN:** Mhm] “Okay.”

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

And so we moved them three miles away from us. And uh, I said, “I’m gonna move you to a house. It’s not—it’s one story, so you don’t have to go up and down stairs. But you can still have your garden.” You know, and I s—“You can still have your yard.” Um, and it was the best decision they ever made. My dad said, “It was, it was.” [MN and PL laugh] And they said, “After we moved back over here by you,” they go, “We got healthy!” I said, “Yeah you got healthy!” Then they kinda went down. But I said, “Look at this,” when my mom broke her hip in 2015. I was able to help take care of her and go back and forth through the hospital. And then my dad broke his neck in 2016, and we were always going back and forth. And I said, “Can you imagine?” I said, “I couldn’t... I could. But I wouldn’t even talk about (?) killing yourself.” I said, to drive up to Spring every day, I said, here I was driving my mom to the hospital every day, or driving my dad to PT. I said, “If you lived up in Spring,” I, it would’ve been just almost, you know, it would’ve really, I think, hurt my health as well. [MN: Mhm.] Because I think the strain of going back and forth from Spring. But now they live three miles away, it’s been the best thing ever. So that’s another thing that’s always important to me is to help take care of my parents. So family obviously is really, really important [MN: Mhm.] to me. I think that, you know, when you think about, you know, what gives you joy. It’s, you know, I mean to me it, it’s helping my parents, helping the grandchildren. That’s what I get a lot of joy from.

PL: Um, what would you consider your greatest accomplishment so far in life?

SFP: Um, actually my business. Yeah, I think, um, that has like I said given that, because I’m able to have my own business, that has given me the freedom to help my parents and be flexible. [MN: Mhm.] So to me that was my greatest accomplishment. Um, and it, like I said, it provided me a nice income. [PL: Mhm.] So if anything ever happens I, I’ve got that. And I was able to save a lot of money, and um, my stepdaughter had brain surgery in May, so again, I was able to help her out and help take care of the grandchildren. If I had a job, I couldn’t do that. [MN: Mhm.] So I, to me that is the best accomplishment. [PL: Mhm.]

PL: Um, how have you seen, like, the Houston community change?

SFP: I’ve seen it go from a redneck community, to like I said, a very diverse community. And, and I see people of all races together. I see all these different restaurants, so people are eating Indian food, Chinese food, you know, Japanese, Tex-Mex. And I think um, it, with—I think people are so much more accepting of different ethnic... versus when I grew up, it—I was the only Asian. And they, “Chng-chng-chng.” You don’t see that, I think everybody’s used to seeing different colors of skin and different, and hearing different languages, that they’re so much more accepting. That’s why I think Houston has now become a great place. Whereas growing up, it was rough. But now I think Houston’s really a great place to live.

PL: Um, do you interact with like, the Japanese American community here, or, um...?

SFP: No, I don’t, I really don’t.

PL: Um, let’s see. [pause] What would be, um, do you have any, like, advice for young Asian Americans in today’s society?

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

MN: Or even just Americans, like you said, because you [**SFP:** I say...] feel American?

SFP: ...you have a dream, follow it. Don't let anybody say you can't. Push yourself to do the most. If you, if you push yourself always to do the most, you'll never have a regret. Um, and like I said, if you can, try to have your own business. [laughs] [**MN** laughs] That's my, that's my—and like I said, if you can't, if you fail, you could always go work for somebody. But you have to always, obv—obviously I think you have to when you get out of college, go work for somebody. Learn a business, [**MN:** Mhm.] learn a trade that you like. But then if you can, try to do it on yourself.

MN: Are there any other, anything else you wanna talk about, stories you wanna tell?

SFP: No, I mean...no.

PL: Um, I think I had another question, I'm trying to remember... [long pause]

SFP: Oh, and save money. [**PL:** Save money.] [all laugh] Save money like crazy because you never know when you...[laughs]

MN: So you took that, I remember you said that was one of the values your parents taught you and you kept it.

SFP: Yeah, yeah. [**MN:** Is there any...] Okay, my mom could stretch a dollar like nobody else, so, um, yeah, and it's, so, like I said, when you're 16, you need to start working and start saving up for college. Because they didn't have the money to pay for five kids to go to college so you knew, [**MN:** Mhm.] you have to save money. And then when you go to college, you're gonna have to work part-time to help pay for college. So work has always been, you know, part of who I am. And um, that's why I said, the regret is I didn't partake in college activities. [**MN:** Mhm.] You know, 'cause everything was about making money. So uh, but yeah, I think that everybody should, you know, save though. Some—so many kids don't, not kids, a lot of people don't know how to save and they really need to save money. So, you know, something happens, you've got a fallback.

PL: Is that what you're gonna instill, like, you're instilling in your grandchildren?

SFP: Oh yeah, for sure. [**PL** laughs] And working hard and giving your best, give 110%, leave it out there, you know. [laughs]

PL: Mhm. Okay, so is there, do you have any more questions to ask, [**MN:** No.] and do you have any more, other things...?

SFP: No, no, no. Thank you guys so much!

MN and PL: Yeah, thank you so much!

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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

SFP: Appreciate it!