

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Albert Wei
Interviewer: Gordan Liu
Date of Interview: March 24th, 2020
Transcribed by: Gordan Liu
Edited by: Kelly Liao
Audio Track Time: 1:43:33

Background: Born in Taipei Taiwan, Albert Wei grew up in California as the youngest of three siblings. As an undergrad, he started at Reed College and transferred to Rice University, where he founded what would evolve into Rice's Caregiving Program, which aims to reduce harm related to alcohol consumption on college campuses. He has teaching experience all across the world, including Houston, Peru, and Taiwan, which has allowed him to gain a holistic understanding of education. He has also applied cultural nuances that he picked up while teaching in Taiwan, such as incorporating mediation periods to Sharpstown High School. While working under Teach for America, he received the 2013 High School Outstanding Beginning Teacher of the Year Award. He now works for ProUnitas, a non-profit that helps school districts and support systems maximize the internal and external services for students in Houston.

Setting: This interview was a remote video call through Zoom.

Key:

AW: Albert Wei

GL: Gordan Liu

—: speech stammers

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions - laughs, sighs, etc.

Interview transcript:

GL: Today is March 24th, 2020. My name is Gordan Liu and I am here with Albert Wei and I am on a video call to interview him for the Houston Asian American Archive. I'm going to start off by asking when and where—when and where were you born?

AW: Yeah, so I was born April 11th, 1990 in Taipei, Taiwan. Yeah, it was an interesting decision to be born in Taiwan for my mother. Yeah, I'm always interested in why that decision was made, but we'll maybe talk about that in a little bit. [laughs]

GL: Yeah because I saw you moved to the United States in the same year you were born. Did your family live in Taipei or did they live in the US and yeah, give birth in Taiwan?

AW: Yeah, so my family—my mother and my father grew up in Taiwan and they both went to college in Taiwan and then my dad got into grad school and so he moved to Case Western in Ohio and so he moved with my mother to Ohio and then eventually it was too cold and so my dad transferred to USC and that's where they kind of set up a shop and had two of my older sisters. But then for—for my mother, she wanted

to have me in Taiwan cuz that's where all of her family was. And so she ended up just kind of flying back by herself while my father stayed in California to raise my kid—my sisters and then she had me with all of her family taking care of her. And as with kind of Taiwanese tradition and in—in just East Asian tradition, right, there's a lot of kind of protocols that you follow after you give birth, right. The mother is not supposed to go outside, not supposed to get her hair wet, she's supposed to like cover her ears and drink like a soup and stuff. So she really wanted that kind of care for herself before she had me and after she had me. So that's why she decided to go back to Taiwan to have me.

GL: Oh, that's really cool. So it seems like from birth, you were really immersed in Taiwanese heritage and customs. Did you have a lot of that influence as you're growing up in America?

AW: Yeah, I think that that is actually contingent on like a kid's ability to be aware of what is like what is culture, right. I think for me, it just seemed like such a normal thing that my parents asked us to, you know, just take off your shoes when you enter the house—sort of just these very stereotypical like East Asian traditions, which I thought were just were very American growing up in in the US, right. It was like oh yeah, everyone does this. And so I didn't necessarily have kind of cultural awareness that I was living all that differently from my peers at school.

But I also grew up in a neighborhood that was like pretty diverse. My high school was majority Hispanic, but certainly, you have some self-selection, right, with like band and all these other extracurriculars and AP classes that put you in contact with other Asians and other white students and other Hispanic and black students. But majority of my my friend group I'd say was Asian and white and so it didn't necessarily seem strange that all of us kind of could talk about the same things, you know, things were eaten at the dinner table, things that you kind of—like more nuanced pieces of like how your mother talks to you and how your mother takes care—like shows you her love—all seemed very normal. So I didn't necessarily think I grew up Taiwanese and it wasn't until I got to Rice where I felt like wow, yeah, there is definitely a difference in how we were raised, so that cultural consciousness didn't come until later on in life. And to answer the question, though, I would say, yeah, I was pretty—I was raised pretty Western I'd say and it kind of reflects, you know, how I am now, right. Like the fact that I wear the clothes that I do or speak the way that I do or just carry about my household the way that I do and it's very indicative of a, of a western upbringing.

GL: Gotcha. And what city did you grow up in?

AW: I grew up in West Covina, California [**GL:** Got it, um...], a suburb of Los Angeles.

GL: Okay. What languages did you speak at home?

AW: So my father was pretty pretty heavily educated. He went to Tai Da¹ in Taipei. And he had all of the best schooling, so he focused a lot of his attention on like English tutoring as well. So he spoke English pretty fluently. And my mother though, was not very fluent in English, and she can communicate, but the issue here is that she's just not very confident in her own speaking even though I think she's like super good at speaking English. She just will not speak it cause she's so shy about it, even with her kids. So with my mother, I spoke Mandarin and with my father I spoke like a mixture of Mandarin and English and that's kind of where I think a lot of the cultural kind of differences happened, right. Like I didn't—I wasn't—I didn't feel like I was immersed in as much Taiwanese culture because of the language barrier. Like I was able to speak "Chinglish" and realized how little Mandarin I spoke after—right, like going and seeing relatives in Taiwan and realizing I couldn't understand like every other word but I could say like

¹ Editor's note: It refers to National Taiwan University

"Yeah, I got my homework done" and "Yeah, I'm really hungry" and "This dinner was good." Like all these basic things I could say thinking that I could speak, you know, Mandarin. But in fact, I really just knew the "*putonghua*,"² and so yeah. So it was a bilingual household, but it was certainly maybe more like seventy-thirty, seventy English, thirty, thirty percent Mandarin, yeah.

GL: Gotcha. What kind of values did your parents raise you with? What did they emphasize as like core values?

AW: Yeah, that's a great question. Um, yeah I spend a lot of time with my mother. I'm really close with my mother and she's the type of person to really think about principles and values over like actions—like, achievement, I suppose. My father was definitely more of a math-science person so he wasn't someone that I talked to a lot about these things. But implicitly they both were really united in making sure that we were good people. So part of that came in the form of "I don't care how hard you study. If you're not a good person, then what are you studying for?" And to them, a good person meant being patient, right, you know, having a good temperament, [laughs] really like seeking to understand other people before being understood, and they just impressed—maybe it's an Eastern thing—but really impressed the concept of humility a lot, right, that we are always here, that we have more to learn, that you know—my mother actually is really funny. She just—when she got mad at us, you know, she would say stuff that like really stuck out and she was say like, you know, like "Who do you think you are? Does your poop not stink?" you know? [laughs] And it's like kind of harsh: it's like, oh man, like Mom's right, like all of us all of us are in the same boat and we shouldn't have these huge humongous egos to think that we're better than anybody else. And so she really tried to impress that upon us. And she always to this day like focuses our attention on like what's important. Like what's important is that you have your health and you have your family and that you have people that love you.

And as as much as the Asian stereotype can be kind of played into, right, of of you know, "What kind of car do you drive?" Or whatever. Like, you know, or like "What kind of job do you have? How much money do you make?" My parents definitely de-emphasized that a lot. I think where those messages did come in, though, was just from the Asian community as a whole. So those values were taught by my parents but the values are still implicitly taught to you from your community, right. And so there still was a pressure to kind of go to a good school, like a prestigious school and to have a job that like paid you a certain amount of money that was respectable. So those values were still impressed upon me. It wasn't lost that I was in an Asian community and that that was kind of a like an implicit thing and an explicit thing, right, like you heard it from all the aunties, from your friends, right, your friends' parents being like "Oh well like, my child is going to UCLA," like "My child's going to UC Berkeley. Where's your child going to school?" And you know, "My daughter's a doctor," you know, "What does your child do?" [laughs] So there's a lot of, a lot of pressure I guess to kind of help your parents almost like save face, you know like oh, my my parents need to be proud of me, so that means I need to be a doctor and be making like a ton of money, going to Harvard or something. But that's the thing my parents never put that on their kids. They were never saying like "Harvard or bust," or you know, "You need to be this profession or nothing else." They really just make sure that we focused on the important things, made sure that we were happy, allowed us to make our own choices, and that was it, so.

GL: How do you feel about the implicit pressure to succeed in conventional ways?

AW: Um yeah, I think that there's utility I guess in that right? I think that there is a certain kind of drive that comes from the expectation of the traditionally high achieving, right. It's kind of that expectation that made me think about, well I should do well in school, right. Like this B is not acceptable [laughs] and I

² Editor's note: It means "Conversational Mandarin" in Mandarin

should review this math concept more and more so that I can get—get a better grade and—and do better in this class and understand the concepts better. Um, there is that expectation so that I think is what pushed me academically. I also feel though that it's up to, it's up to—it's up to myself as well as like my parents to really give me the tools to understand what was healthy and what was not healthy, right. Um, I think overall we never explicitly talk about this expectation of being traditionally successful of money and prestige, and reputation and stuff.

But certainly, it came in the form of the decision itself, right. Like when it came time for me to decide where to go to college, you know, my parents were very much like "Albert's this is your decision. Like what do you—what do you want?" You know. "What is—what is right for you?" Um, and again, focused on the values. It's like a thesis statement, like the values of being a good person. How do you want to contribute to society is what they essentially were implicitly saying, right. Like if what makes you happy is X, which decision will make you happy? And if making a difference specifically for me was to serve and to give back, right. Like I was really involved in community service in high school. If that was important to me then what choice or university is going to help me—help me do that. Um, and so without having said it, right, and just giving me the grace and the and the choice, they essentially taught me that like the implicit kind of pressures of Asian society can help you but it really is up to me to make those decisions as what I choose to take from my community and what I choose to kind of not—not accept, right. So, I think with that said, I think I have a very healthy relationship with—with the Asian expectations, and certainly there are some that are unhealthy that I think that maybe I bought into as a, as a kid. But, that's again having conversations like this help me reevaluate constantly whether it still serves, right. It serves me to be—better serve other people.

GL: Yeah, that's really awesome. So you talked about how your parents shaped you as you were growing up. Did you have any other mentors or important role models that shaped the person you are today?

AW: Yeah. Um, so my—While my mother and father were a big part of that, I have two older sisters. One sister is 8 years older, so I really never really saw her too much given age difference. Um, but my other sister—so my oldest sister's name is Doris and my middle sister's name is Audrey. And so Audrey was a year-and-a-half older, so we basically were like in the same things. Like you know my mother like enrolled us in all the same classes and same swim lessons and the same Taekwondo and the same piano and all this and that. And so I did everything with her and she—she really was someone that was just inherently very disciplined, and she was always very precise and very organized. Um, and I was like the opposite of that. I was like not organized, I was super spazzy, I was energetic and talkative, and wanted to just like run around rather than just sit on a piano bench and practice. And what Audrey did for me was that she really set that example of this is—like this is what it takes, right, to succeed in piano if you want to be good at piano, like you got to practice right. Like if you, if you want to be able to run the mile—my sister Audrey was very athletic you know—she would kind of give me that model for what it meant to physically be a strong person so she was a big part of it. Um, and then certainly in high school I had a couple of teachers. One in particular really that really stood out to me was my band director, and he—he really just kicked my butt a lot and, you know taught me like, hey like, "Shape up," like, "Practice the saxophone" and like, "Do better" like "for your for your team. And like marching band was like a hundred people, so it wasn't small. But he really believed in me and put a lot of faith in my ability to lead the band and so because of that faith over the four years of high school, I learned—And so much time that you spend practicing music in high school, I—I definitely see [Mr. Wooten] my band director as a huge huge influence in how I perceived leadership, how I perceived service, how I perceived my own discipline. So, so I've been I've been lucky, yeah, to have these folks.

GL: Cool. What was your first job?

AW: Yeah, so I was—in high school, right, like you you get these concepts in class and then other people's mothers noticed. [laughs] So, so I ended up being a tutor for like a certain amount of years. Um, I would kind of just come to people's houses and just tutor them in different areas. Which is so funny because I suck at math, like I hated math as a kid, right? It's like that—that story of like staring at a math book and then having your dad just like being very mad that you can't get this concept and you're just crying looking at this math book thinking why can't you get. That was me like all childhood. Um, and so I grew up hating math because it was like, I'm so bad at this like, why would I ever like this. And then once I hit high school, you know, just kind of developing your own habits and disciplines for studying. Um, so you find success and I just end up tutoring my friends and their parents would just give me cash under the table, you know. And then the more traditional job that I had was my freshman year. Um, I went to Reed College for a year in Portland, Oregon, and my first job was as an administrative assistant for the Multicultural Resource Center. And that entails basically kind of the logistics of running that center: making sure that it was open, making sure that you booked rooms properly, but also that you like to created programming for your peers. And so looking at you know, perhaps which—which speakers can come to campus and facilitate conversations around race and class and intersectionality of different identities and stuff and then facilitating discussions within the center. So you have your peers that would come to the Multicultural Resource Center to talk about certain issues and you would kind of be that person to help facilitate that conversation and make sure that it was respectful and that voices were heard. Um, and so that was a really interesting job and it put me in contact with a lot of staff members that—that helped shape my ideas around privilege and race and class and stuff like that. I was really lucky to have that as first experience.

GL: Yeah, for sure. Going back to tutoring, was that your first experience teaching?

AW: Um, I guess, I guess, I don't know. I mean you can be like super philosophical about that, that answer. Like the idea that like we're always teaching, right. Like no matter what, however way you model conflict resolution is teaching your friends how to like, you know, like resolve conflict healthily. But I'd say that yeah, there's always informal ways to teach my peers right? Um, I felt like my sister and I taught each other a lot just down to like the video game that we were playing. Um, I do feel like I was a natural like—I naturally wanted to teach. I naturally wanted to like share my knowledge and like things I was interested in and good at. And I would like reach out and say "Hey Audrey" like "We should play this video game" or like "Hey, this book is really interesting" like "Can we like read it and talk about it and stuff?" Just like being a little nerd and like talking about these things was—was I think my introduction to teaching.

Um, I remember as a kid being super interested in the Titanic. [laughs] And so I—I remember wanting to teach people about just how like fascinating that whole experience is. Like this—this hubris around this unsinkable ship and the fact that it sank on its maiden voyage is like so fascinating. So I actually wrote a book about—I wrote a book, right. Like I was in elementary school and I wrote this whole book on the Titanic and all of her sister ships. So like the Olympic, the Britannic, and then like other—other like big ships that had the four funnels and stuff. So like the Lusitania and yeah, it was—the Olympic, I think I mentioned. So all of these things I wanted to write this down so that I could share it with people, you know, and I think that that's always a form of teaching, which is a lot of fun and that's and then I—here I am working in education. So it seems like it was a good fit. [laughs]

GL: Yeah, for sure. So you talked about attending Reed College after high school. Um, how did you come to Rice University?

AW: Yeah, um so when I was applying to school as a senior in high school, I definitely—like one of the things that I really found important was not going against the grain just to go against it, but really thinking

critically about my experience in like the level of attention that I really wanted from my, from my education and from my professors and peers. So one of the criteria that—that I wanted for—for school was a small school. Um, I applied to Rice as well as Reed and then a bunch of the UCs in California. And so my choices were limited because Reed was a, was great. So I got into Reed. And then I got into all of my UCs. And then Rice waitlisted me. So I was like "Dang it" like "Rice is like such a—like that's the school I really want to go to." It's like perfectly small, you know, it's like—it provides all of these different wonderful like student life things. Um, but what ended up happening was that I never got off the waitlist and in my decision to like not go to UC Berkeley, right or like UCLA where my family and Taiwan was like, "Oh" like "You should go to Berkeley" like "Go to Berkeley. It's like a it's like such famous school." Um, going to Reed was the was a better choice for me because I knew that if I went to Berkeley that I would get maybe caught up in the swarm of like thousands of kids and that I wouldn't be able to make the like the bigger impact that I wanted having gone to a small school.

So Reed I also knew from the research that I did was academically super rigorous so they would kick my butt. And I like really really wanted that like I wanted a harder route. And in fact that was like a litmus test that I asked myself in high school was which is the harder route and you should go that route, you know. Um, which is, which is a great litmus test, especially as young budding like, you know, student and professional and stuff. So Reed was the harder route for sure. It was like not super, like super famous like Berkeley, you know, I had no friends that were going there, nobody knew what Reed was. But I knew it was going to kick my butt, it was going to teach me how to write, and it's exactly what it did. It like gave me that small school experience, it made me write write write write write a ton and read read read read read a ton. Um, and so then when I applied to Rice again as a transfer student, I loved Reed so much that I only applied to Rice as a backup. Like if I didn't get into Rice then I would be happy staying at Reed.

I ended up getting in as a transfer and was able to kind of just transition my sophomore year. Reed had set me up so well academically that I was like wow like the classes here at Rice are like not that difficult. Obviously like with a certain amount of humility right? Like oh man like Reed kicked my butt! Like introductory Humanities 110, like that was hard. You know, like intro biology that was really hard. And then getting to Rice, I was academically very challenged but I was set up for it, right. I was set up well for it because Reed—Reed did so well. So yeah, that's kind of how I found Rice. I applied as a senior and I knew that I wanted something a little bit more traditional. Um, Reed—Reed is certainly in Portland, Oregon, a very unorthodox school, right. There's so many things about it that make it special: no Latin honors, you don't get grades on your assignments, right, they want you to focus on the love of learning and the life of the mind as like a philosopher and as a thinker and—and not focus on like getting the A right. Like if you focus on the A, you miss out on the educational like experiences that are super valuable and I appreciated that academically, but socially I felt like Reed was something—was a place that just didn't fit what I, what I wanted. It didn't have the traditional amounts of school pride that I wanted. You know, like sports weren't like a huge thing. It was more so ultimate frisbee and rugby, whereas Rice had like a D1, you know athletic program and I kind of wanted to go to a sporting event and cheer on my—my school. And then just like the traditionality of student there. Um, Reed was just super super hippie, which is awesome, but I also kind of saw myself as a more traditional student myself. And so Rice, while quirky and weird as well, offered a little bit more of a traditional experience being a student so that was important. So I ended up transferring and still have a very warm place in my heart for Reed. In fact just yesterday, I was on a Zoom call with my best friend from Reed my freshman year and so it's nice to catch up with him. So still stay in touch.

GL: Yeah, I love that. What areas of study were you drawn to and how did that evolve throughout your undergrad experience?

AW: Yeah. Um, I I always liked areas of study that didn't have concrete answers. [**GL:** Okay.] So I didn't like math. [laughs] So I naturally gravitated towards like English and social sciences and Reed gave me a really good smattering my freshman year of different kind of disciplines, right? I took Spanish, I took Biology, I took Humanities, and a swath of different like P.E.s like sailing and juggling. Like I know how to juggle because of Reed. So the all of these different like modalities of learning I got exposed to, ended up realizing that lab work was not interesting to me. And so I ended up gravitating towards like sociology and political science side of things and I ended up doing that at Rice, so I majored in Poli Sci and had enough credits just naturally dipping into sociology to—to just kind of slipped slip in a sociology minor. Um, so I definitely gravitated towards that that that middle ground of it still being a science, like a really serious science and that while there are no right answers and that that right answers, you know, there are a lot of gray areas, you can apply it towards something that was was very tangible: action behind the research that you did, right. Um, and so I saw that in political science, I saw that in sociology. Um, so that's kind of where I gravitated towards and—and I see that today like I'm able to apply a lot of my degree towards towards fighting education inequity to kids. And that means something, right, for—for the future of our country and the future of our world. And that mattered. I wanted something that actually had pract—like, practicality to it, that's a little pragmatic. And so that's why social sciences I think fit me really really well.

GL: Awesome. Beyond the classroom, what were some of the most important extracurriculars you were involved in?

AW: Yeah, I think that the things that usually make an impact on your life are considered really really tough, that like kind of put you through some trials and tribulations and and like [ear ringing?] and like white hair growing. And I'd say that all the extracurriculars that I did at Rice, being an RHA a was huge. It provided me with a community of like-minded people that really cared about their peers, right. You like self-select, like RHA self-selects people that are like very caring, want to be a resource. But what RHA did for me was that it put me in front of my peers. It made me like sink and grip and sink my, sink my hands into the identity that I was a person of service. Um, people that I really cared about, right. Like you end up loving your—your—your college so much. And the fact that I could be a resource of emotional support, mental support, and physical support to my peers was really important to me, you know. Even down to like something as simple as providing condoms and lube outside my door. Like great, like do that, but that I could help you in some way, shape or form was important to me. Um, and so it allowed me to be in front of my peers and do it in a way that was humble, but also pushed me to be more extroverted I suppose. And that never was a problem but really making sure that the message was—was delivered in a way that was effective was a challenge that RHAs have, right? You have all of this training that you go through for classes and stuff. How does that translate into programming that your peers will actually respond to was a really fantastic challenge. And then that led me to being the Chief Justice of Will Rice and during my year as Chief Justice, you're not dealing with something that's super easy, right? You're dealing with really controversial issues of alcohol policy and Student Code of Conduct.

And that just so happened to be the year in which Rice decided to cut out like hard alcohol. We as Chief Justices were tasked with the responsibility of rewriting the alcohol policy for Rice. Um, and from my perspective of being an RHA where you're supposed to be an educator, right. Like you're—you're there to support your peers in educating them not from like a punitive standpoint of like "You need to like you need to do this in order to be a good 'Will Ricer'" or whatever. A lot of Chief Justices may come down that way as like the police but because of my RHA framing, it really allowed me to approach the Chief Justice position from an education standpoint as well of like student self-governance and really taking care of yourself and looking out for other people so that you know—one chief justice cannot do that for a college of 400 people, right. Like and you have associate justices and a court and everything, but the point is—is that we're not supposed to be monitoring your actions. You're all adults; you can make your own

decisions. Let's just make sure that we're doing it in a way that's proactive and ubiquitous. So that that was super important.

It actually led me—the combination of CJ and RHA led me to bring something that I learned from at Reed, which was Karma Patrol. So Karma Patrol at Will Rice is this program where you deliver bagels and water to partygoers. And so the idea was that we had a caregiving system, right, that that was set up to address alcohol kind of consumption, alcohol poisoning to be honest. It was such an issue at Rice that year and I don't know if it still is now but we had so many transports happening which was just really unfortunate. And while that is a [plight?] in Rice's history, I think Rice did really really try to curb the amount of out ambulances that needed to come right to Rice. And so they were trying to activate the student body in addressing this need. The response was very reactionary. It was: if the person is drunk like removing them from the party, making sure that caregivers were there to make sure that they didn't like, you know, they were taking care of while they were, they were drunk and recovering. But it was like, why are we addressing it from the back end; we should address it from the front end. So really making caring for other people fun and cool, right. Like if you join Karma Patrol, you get a cool T-shirt. It's really bright and like obnoxiously bright. It's like neon yellow-gr like green and it has like these cute little bagels on it and you get all these free bagels, right, that you take from the servery that the servery can't even give away anymore because they have leftover bagels right. And you just go to public parties and you wore glow sticks, and you have walkie-talkies, and you like saying "Hey, you know, we're Karma Patrol, like would you like a bagel?" and people are just like, "Yeah, I'll have a bagel" and they'll just munch on a bagel real quick. But that's a big part of it is that curbing alcohol does not—it's not just the science of having something starchy in your body so that your alcohol absorption is reduced, right, the rate of alcohol absorption into your bloodstream is reduced. People go to parties on an empty stomach; they get drunk super fast. You know that's that's bad news there, right, like that's—you're gonna get drunk and get in trouble. Not only is it like the science behind it, but it was also just the Culture of Care that Rice talks about a lot is like people are present like they're very visible, you know, teams of Karma Patrol are paired, they always go in twos—um, go out and they're like giving out these bagels. And it's awesome because you're able to see like your peers are here taking care of you and it's an almost an implicit reminder that I need to take care of myself. There are other people taking care of me; I need to take care of myself as well and remind myself to drink water, to you know, eat a bagel, whatever, and just have fun at this party and part of having fun is not going overboard with the alcohol part and connecting, right, with your friends and stuff. So um, so those are like the couple of extracurriculars that really made a difference in my experience and I was able to culminate in bringing a really cool, you know, program to— to Will Rice. And it's from my understanding, it's still there, which is really exciting and hopefully it just continues to serve—serve students.

GL: Yeah. I was just about to reiterate to anyone watching that the caregiver program is a university-wide program to this day and it's been a really huge impact and become a really important part of Rice for sure.

AW: Nice, good. Good to hear that.

GL: Um, in 2010, you spent two months in Peru for a fellowship program. Um, could you describe what that experience was like for you?

AW: Yeah, this was actually—so Rice Rice was so great about providing you with all these experiences. So in 2010, it was through the Lowenstein kind of application that they'd send you to another country and—the Loewenstern, I'm sorry the Loewenstern Fellowship and I chose Peru. Um, I really wanted to experience a country that was different, you know, obviously from the US and I wanted to work on my Spanish, but also focus on areas that were interesting to me. So I went there as an education intern and while I was in country, I lived with a host family that was super awesome and had a host brother, had a

host sister, host mom, host dad. And it was so cool to be able to navigate university—navigate a foreign country kind of on your own but with the support of Rice kind of implicitly in the back. Like you go to country by yourself; you fly to Peru by yourself and you figure it out with the program that you've signed up with. They obviously provide a lot of the safety and structure to make sure that you're okay, but it really kind of helped me with my sense of independence, of having to speak Spanish solely with a family that did not speak English very much and then to navigate your whole world around in Spanish.

I worked at three different schools there, serving as you know, the actual like teacher's assistant to the main teacher. And all different subject areas: I taught math, I taught Spanish—so like little kids so nothing super advanced—I was like the PE teacher. And all these different schools have different levels of poverty. So I was in a school that was kind of middle range, I was in a school that was very low income and served a lot of really poor kiddos, and then I was in a private school with—like kids that had ambassadors as parents and whatever like, you know. So it was just such a perfect smattering of different like the diversity of education within Peru. And so being able to fit into those different schools having filled so many different roles was—was really really cool. And just obviously like the education side is also the culture piece of knowing what what is “cuy”, you know “cuy” is guinea pig and you eat guinea pig there, and you know, being able to find ground pork was hard because I wanted to—like my roommate, who's another American, I remember him Gordon, Gordon Lang and I wanted to make something for our host family and I was trying to make dumplings like like dumplings that my mother used to make for me and we have ground pork in it. [laughs] And I could not for the life of me find ground pork in Peru. It was like well, why is that? Like what is it about pork and ground pork specifically that like so unheard of here. Because those are interesting kind of pieces, you know. Dealing with pickpockets, you know, like it's not—we're we're very grateful, we're very lucky to have all of these things in the US where, sure, like poverty exists, crime exists, but for the most part, you know, you can go about your day and not have to worry about your like purse being stolen or your bag being stolen off your [person?], right, like as you're wearing it. And so just kind of experiencing that was really interesting so the education was tremendous and very—very grateful for that.

GL: Yeah, and what did you notice in how different kids related to education depending on their educational—or their socioeconomic status?

AW: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I mean it's the same here, right. Like you have so many implicit pieces of what—what does it mean growing up having the vocabulary to talk about college, right, and having the vocabulary to talk about doing well in school, and even having the luxury of caring about school because you don't have to worry about food and shelter and mental health and whatever. So it's the same everywhere. As humans we all kind of share the same burdens and the same trials and tribulations. And so Peru is the same. Like kids who were poor generally were not engaged. I dealt most of my time was like classroom management, right, like making sure that the kids weren't jumping off the walls and going crazy and like bullying each other; that was like most of my day in the poor schools. In the more, like the rich schools, right, like sat very nicely in nice rows, listen to you, and it was like, yeah, a lot of that has to do with the socioeconomic status of the family and what they're able to provide at home. So yeah, you see a lot of that in the US as well, so kind of what you can expect international.

GL: Interesting. Ok. Um, the following year in 2011, you spent four months with Sharpstown High School. What was that experience like for you as an undergrad?

AW: Yeah. Um, so this was an interesting kind of experience because it was part of Rice—Rice's summer mentorship experience through Leadership Rice under—under the direction of Judy Le and Dustin Peterson. Judy Le and Dustin were so instrumental in just making sure that we were set up for success. Um, a lot of that experience was not even at Sharpstown, right, it's not at your placement, but it was

through the training that you got directly from Judy and Dustin through Leadership Rice. Um, the placement was actually not supposed to be Sharpstown. So when you apply for SME you get placed in these—the placements around the world and they're already pre-set, right. And so I was actually placed in Washington DC with this organization called Ashoka. I ended up changing that placement to Charlestown High School. My partner at the time kind of told me like "Hey, I know of a principal who really really needs help in this school and you could make a huge difference there. Like it's amazing what you can do at this high school and this principal's amazing." And so I actually went to Judy and I was like "Hey Judy can I change my placement from DC to this—this High School here in Houston? I think that my impact would be larger." And Judy and Dustin did what they could to shift my placement over the Sharpstown for this internship, which was so so kind of them to make that adjustment for me.

And it ended up, like being amazing. Like Rob Gasparello was the principal at Sharpstown at the time. Um, he was extraordinary. He really pushed the school forward in so many ways. And I got to kind of dip into lots of different things. I served as—the SME program is where you're mentored by a leader of that organization. So you're not, you're not there to like get coffee or file papers or something. You're actually under the executive team or some executive person to be mentored specifically by a higher up. And so there's no higher up than the principal at the school. So I was a like a basically a principal mentor—a mentee. I followed the principal around everything like the guy was like freaking dynamic and he was such a badass like he was like, "Okay, you're coming to all these meetings" and it's like "Yeah, you're an intern but you're coming to this meeting with me." And I would just sit in these meetings with like really important people and I'm like, "I don't know what I'm doing" and he's like—I'm sitting right next to them and he'll be like "So what do you think Albert" and I'm like, "Uh...this is what I think like this—" If you're asking me this is what I think but I can't believe I'm being put in this like amazing like situation. He actually made me interview people for the school too and actually make choices on hiring as like just a just an additional voice. So he gave me a lot of responsibility of how to run a school and I actually got to help with the marching band as well. So really really fun in those—those couple of months over the summer while I was between my junior and senior year at Rice. And that is actually what got me my placement for Teach for America after graduating. The principal just really enjoyed having me there that once I graduated from Rice and I got into TFA, the principal requested that Teach for America placed me at Sharpstown because of my experience through SME. So it all, it all comes full circle and I'm just very grateful.

GL: Yeah, that's awesome. So during your graduation, you actually received Rice's Salman Khan Commencement Award for Entrepreneurial Community Leadership. Um, what did this award mean to you?

AW: Um [laughs] Yeah, it's—these kinds of accolades are so wonderful and they're really really nice. It's just it's, it's humbling. It's always humbling to be able to be recognized for it. But what it really meant to me is not the fact that I received it, but in order to receive the award, you needed to be nominated for it and the people that wrote the recommendation for that, for that award are people that I really looked up to. So Judy Judy Le being one of them at Leadership Rice, Mac Griswold who used to work at the what was then called the Community Involvement Center, the CIC, which is now I believe the—the CCL, the Center for Civic Leadership, right? [**GL:** Yeah] Um, so their—their mentorship and their kind of opinions and their—their you know them as people, I just looked up to them so much and I really really valued them as people. So for them to recognize this as something that I was deserving of was—was the kicker. That's what it meant to me: to like know that people I respected so much really respected me and what I had tried to do while I was at Rice. Um, the cherry on top certainly was kind of meeting Salman Khan who's been such a pioneer in education and could not be more relevant now in light of COVID-19 with distance learning and make sure that kids get high-quality instruction while they're not at school. Um, and so that that is just super cool like to be able to meet like a hero of yours because of all these other wonderful

opportunities that just Rice kind of put into your hands, you know, so yeah, I was super super floored by receiving that award and it still it still drives me today, right. Like I have it with me, you know, in my in my home here in Texas in Pearland. And you know when I, when I do get to look at it, it's like people believed in me, you know people believed in me to—to live up to this award and I should still be doing that every day. So that's what I do. I do as best [as I can?] [laughs]

GL: And you also received the Worden Endowed Award for your contributions to your Residential College, Will Rice. So congratulations.

AW: Aw, thank you, yeah. [laughs] I don't know all the research you've done, but [laughs] But yeah, no, I again like you—because of all that you're given, all the people that do look out for you and hold you up, right, there is a responsibility for us to give back. And for Will Rice it's just it's so easy in your residential college to do and to be of service. But when you get to be an RHA, which Gordan I know that your workers—working towards, right, like doing it wholeheartedly and doing it as unconditionally as you possibly can, these—these things are—are just amazing. Like that's the whole point of doing anything, right. It's like not looking for the recognition, but but knowing that when you do it and you really serving with your whole heart like, these things can happen and so being a part of the Will Rice community and being honored with the the award was was awesome because these are peers again that you look up to right and your mas—your magister is someone you really looked up to. So again, same answer there.

GL: Yeah, so you graduated with on a really positive note and chose to go to Teach for America. What drew you to this organization after you graduated?

AW: Could you repeat that last part of the question?

GL: What drew you to Teach for America after you graduated?

AW: Well, I remember this actually in terms of the decision-making. Teach for America recruits pretty aggressively at Rice, first of all. [All: laughs] So the fact that you like don't run into a recruiter is pretty difficult. But I was doing a lot of reflecting and thinking about like what is the theme of my involvement at Rice and from all of the like, you know alternative spring breaks and you know, I joined a group called a mentorship project back then where you like go into inner city schools and mentor kids. It was like wow like and in ASB [Alternative Spring Break], my last two years, my Junior and Senior year ASBs were at the same site. I went to Jacksonville, Florida and worked at a kid's school [inaudible] staff and the students there. Um, and constantly education kept popping up, right, again as like this fundamental fix to society's issues. In Karma Patrol, it's like, why are we tackling this issue at the end; we can be tackling it from the front. Like why are we—if we teach kids properly, right, they're going to be able to advocate for themselves. Like why are we dealing with issues of homelessness now, it's because we aren't dealing with the mental health, we're not dealing with the educational equity pieces on the front, right. Reading levels are created—seats in beds, beds in prisons are allocated based around third-grade reading levels. Like, you know, it's ridiculous.

So in thinking about what are truly like the fundamental fixes to society, I truly believed that education was—was one of those levers and so again taking stock of all the educational education—educational experiences that I had working in education, it made sense that Teach for America was the next step. So Teach for America has multiple kind of application cycles, and so you can get in on to it like super early. And I believe I applied for the second cycle which then made sure—made it so that you got your—your response by the beginning of second semester. And so rather than kind of waiting a whole year and then people applying for like their consulting jobs and their engineering jobs and what-have-you towards the end, you get your, you get your result like super early. But the recruiter that reached out had me apply for

the second cycle, found out got in TFA and was like that that makes sense. You know taking stock of all the past and what—what means what it means for future, this was a natural next step.

GL: Yeah, that's awesome that you had such a strong sense of purpose coming out of college.

AW: Yeah, again, it has a lot to do with the people that provided those resources and experiences for me.

GL: Yeah. So what was your role coming back to Sharpstown High School through Teach for America?

AW: Yeah, so I was a—so in TFA you apply for different grade levels and then your different subject matter. So I was placed in secondary social studies given by major. So as a Sharpstown teacher I taught government economics to 12th grade seniors. And then I eventually taught this leadership class elective, which was super nebulous for juniors. I ended up modeling it after a lot of the service-learning that the Community Involvement Center at Rice provided for me. Um, so that was a lot of fun, right, giving kids the vehicle of leadership through service. That was I was one class and then government economics on level and AP.

GL: Yeah, what kind of growth did you see in your—the students you worked with?

AW: Yeah, I think the focus that I had as a teacher was content was important, like teaching students, you know, the ratification of the Constitution, like Federalist Papers, and average total cost, and deadweight loss, and economics, like that's important, you know, and it helps build like different skills, but I really kind of wanted to reflect a lot of what my mother taught me, right, what I said earlier, which was you know, you can do all the studying that you do and be a really great student, but if you're not a good person, why does it matter? So really kind of using frameworks around what it means to build character [inaudible] was a big emphasis of mine in my classroom. Um, one of the things is these kids, these kids that I taught were inner-city kids, right? Minority black and brown kids that don't have necessarily the same role models and experiences that you and I have had and so they don't actually know—like they don't have enough adults in their life that show them right what mutual respect looks like, you know, or what does it mean to control your temper. All of these basic things that we take for granted as like adults now, like they're not tools that my students had. They would blow up super quickly, they would not have conflict resolution skills, they would, you know, give up very quickly because that was what was modeled for them for forever. And so that's kind of where character comes first. Like we need to each character and then the study skills and the ability to remember all of these facts and figures in government and calculate—calculate like price and quantity and economics will come.

Um, and so I used KIPP, a KIPP framework, "Knowledge is Power Program" charter network framework around character in teaching like seven different character traits, you know, zest, social intelligence, curiosity, grit, self discipline. These are all like different components that are generally universally like valued, you know. And so as seniors in high school, right, having that as an embedded peace within your lessons, I thought was super important. After, I think the growth can come. I think that my students, a lot of them have sure had a couple of these components well, but but really to kind of come and bring it all together as like as like a very intentional approach to learning and knowing that school is not just about math, science, you know reading, writing, and social studies; it's being a good person. You know, what does it mean to be a good person for you? And and I saw definitely some growth in those areas for my students.

GL: Awesome. And after this year you received the 2013 HISD High School Outstanding—2013 High School Outstanding Beginning Teacher of the Year. What did this—how did that feel receiving that recognition?

AW: [laughs] Um, I think again, I think that awards are really nice. They are just a reflection of the people that have supported you. So I was supported by a principal like I said, that was so dynamic, was a fantastic mentor, and really kind of helped me make it through my first year of teaching with a little bit more, you know grace, you know, because because of his support and all the support of my colleagues and—across the school. Um, and and a lot of that was just reflected in this award, you know, like being an effective teacher is so subjective sometimes, right. We try to quantify everything in test scores, and you know, standardized testing, and grades, and stuff like that. And to be honored in that regard is—is really really cool, but also understanding that like there's so many other people that certainly deserve it at our unsung heroes in classrooms. And so really thinking about what does this mean for me moving forward? Like how do I highlight other teachers that are doing amazing work? How do I ensure that my life is committed to helping all teachers receive the same kind of support that I received so they can be effective, right.

And that's what I dedicate my life to do now, right. Like my current role plays a large part in making sure that teachers are able to be effective and [inaudible] leaders that they were hired to be. And so that's that's why. Like I was in a school—Sharpstown was one of the four lowest-performing high schools in Houston when I was there, but my the principle that was there and the team of teachers and support staff and you know nurses and counselors and all these things—the whole team and the community members around Sharpstown made it so that I could teach, right. Like it wasn't me, like I wasn't necessarily all that effective. I had the, I had the environment that was set up so that I could be successful. And so then the award essentially means that if this happened for me, how can I make this happen for more other—more people? So yeah. That's a huge driver for sure.

GL: Yeah, awesome. And how did you end up working as—your next position was a co-chair for the social studies department at Sharpstown, correct?

AW: Yeah [laughs] so that's that's another thing is that in inner-city schools where the schools that Teach for America generally places you, right, you you do have a lot of term turnover, so there's a lot of transience in the student population, but as well as the teacher population. It's hard to kind of feel like you can last in a school like that when so much is demanded of you. So taught us burn out really quickly. Um, but at the same time, you have a lot of injection of young like talent and young people that really have a lot of energy. So here comes Albert, right, like with all this energy and all this like idealism to make sure that kids can succeed. And so it was kind of a natural like "Oh like you could be department chair" and it's like "Nah, I'm still figuring it out. I don't know what I'm doing." But because of that, again the—the environment of like people not—like having so much to take care of that they couldn't think about being department chair and that I had so much energy and that I had a lot of ideas being a young new person into the team. You know, they're like—the principle's like I, "Again, I believe in you, I think that you can do it." So I was the department chair and then saying that "You know what, I don't want to do this by myself. I want I want a co-chair." And so one of my colleagues in the social studies department and I chaired the department together and it was such a fantastic team because he had so many skills that I didn't have and I had skills that complemented him. So that was I think such a dream team. Like we really tried to make the social studies department one of the best in the school and it was like a really exciting time to push all of the skills that we were trying to teach kids, right, like analyzing primary sources, reading text and pulling out main ideas, things like that. We were really aligning vertically with 9th through 12th grade, like all of these cool things were happening and that was a part of being the chair I suppose but obviously being supported by a group of really strong teachers and assistant principals.

GL: Yeah. How did you create like a positive work environment as co-chairs?

AW: Yeah, I think that creating a positive environment starts with like modeling it, right? Like again, you know back to our parents' parenting philosophies, right. Like kids see, adults also see, and they will model what is given to them. One of the things that I made sure to do was to build a level of transparency and a culture of feedback within the department. Like I'm a second—by the time I was a department chair, I was a second-year teacher like I did not know what I was doing. Like there are so many more seasoned people that should be the authority on so many other things with teaching pedagogy, classroom management, whatever. But what I could do was focus on the things that I thought I could well, which is establish culture, right. So the first thing that I did was like "Come come watch me teach" like "Come into my classroom." We just generally in education can be a really like tense thing because in like high—like in the world of high-stakes testing, right, like you sometimes come off with this like stereotype of a checklist. Like did the teacher do this and this and this and if they did these things they're an effective teacher and if they didn't do them, then they're a bad teacher. And so like going and observing a classroom was like a really tense thing it seemed like. So it was like, "Oh don't come into my classroom." Like, you know, "I don't want to be judged and I'm trying the best that I can but we're obviously swimming upstream here, so it's really hard. Don't come into my classroom."

And that was like the thing that we needed to change, right. We needed to make sure that there was feedback given freely and honestly and that you could receive it knowing that you weren't going to be punished for not being the perfect teacher all the time. So "Come on in, come watch me teach, you know, and then let's set that time up" and really being humble in the approach to say "We don't have the answers, we're all trying to help each other out, and so let's do that. Let's openly and honestly, like open the doors of our classroom and give each other the support that we [inaudible]." So I think that's how I established more of a culture of mutual respect knowing that I opened up my vulnerabilities as a teacher to my team so that they could help me with it. Like "Albert, you could really tighten up the lesson here" or like "This concept was unclear. Could you make sure that you review it with your students" or whatever and being like "Yes," like "That is such good feedback. Thank you so much" rather than being defensive and being like "Oh, how dare you?" like "This is—how rude of you to give me this feedback." But like no, like we need to change the idea of what feedback means in education because there's so much tied to it. I can see why people would be so nervous about receiving feedback, right, because it's tied to like your—your pay, it's tied to like, you know, all these other things that are high stakes. So changing that in and of itself, I think changes the culture.

GL: Yeah, that's really awesome. Next could you talk about your experience with the Fulbright program in Taiwan?

AW: Yeah, yeah. So um, again kind of following the aim of education, one of the strengths that I felt like I had was—was kind of bridging people and connecting people, right. Um, and so with Fulbright, the mission of Fulbright is to provide a little more knowledge and a little less conflict, right. So like when you have—as a "Fulbrighter," you are a—like you're a cultural ambassador of the US to your home your—the country that you're going to. And so in selecting the country, I chose to go to Taiwan for many reasons: one being that I wanted to connect with my roots, right. Having been born there like I had so little connection to it and while I had my parents and like I said grew up very Western with a lot of Taiwanese flavor, I truly didn't know what it meant to be Taiwanese and to have my aunts and my uncles and my cousin's all be there and interact with them as an adult. I like interacted with them as kids but like not not as an adult. And so finally going and not just like visiting for like three days or a week, you know, but like living there like you have to live there—I thought was a fantastic experience. The second component was certainly the East and the West. Like I really wanted to choose an Eastern country that was far different from the West. So you can go to Germany, you can go to you know, Spain you can go to you know, Finland, Denmark, all these places that have great education systems, but I wanted to see what the East could offer in terms of their wisdom for how Wes—the West can apply education systems and

build culture within schools. With those two reasons I chose Taiwan and I got, I got a lot of what I wanted to learn. So um, while I was there, I got to interact with my family a lot. I have an aunt and an uncle that are actually really famous in Taiwan. They—they are singers. So my my uncle is—when my—my dad and my mom were in high school, my aunt and her husband, my uncle, were singing like songs and going and creating albums. And so they were big when my parents were in high school, which is so wild and they are known for like the oldies, like they're the oldies music in Taiwan. And so if you mentioned my uncle's name, like any Taiwanese like true Taiwanese person will know who this guy is, which is like so wild to me. I'm like, "Wow. I'm like, I'm like related to a celebrity." And I knew that as a kid, but I didn't know like the level of celebrity that you buzz until I went to the country and learned like "Wow like you you have like paparazzi and like people pay attention to your kids and what they do and and stuff like that." So that was really interesting and then certainly from from learning more about that side, because that's my mom's side...

GL: What is your famous family members' name if people want to look it up?

AW: Yeah, yeah, so so my uncle's name is 余天. Um, you can spell it using pinyin Y-U and then "space" T-I-A-N. Um and then my mom's older sister is his wife 李亞萍. Um L-I Y-A P-I-N-G. And so yeah, you can like search them on YouTube and you'll hear them like singing and stuff like that which is super cool. And you know, they can be a little polarizing because you know a lot of times when you're in celebrity, you you have the ability to go into politics and politics can be very polarizing and so my aunt and my uncle are wrapped up in the throes of Taiwan politics and my uncle is—has successfully run for office and is in like the legislature and stuff for Taiwan as well. So, you know, it's it's always a really difficult thing to talk about my association with them because depending on what side of the aisle you sit on you're like "Oh, wow, you're you're like 余天's nephew" and it's like "Cool" or it's like "Oo, you're 余天's nephew" like "Boo." [laughs] So like I'm always a little wary about sharing that news, but it again, it is what it is, right. But that's super cool. It's super cool to be able to interact with Taiwan in that way given, given the level access that they have. Um, my grandmother passed away on my mother's side. I went to her funeral and I was like, I was like—my head was like in the back of a picture on the Taiwan like national newspaper. Because it was like, you know, like 李亞萍's mother, this is her funeral and they're like taking pictures and Taiwan's a small country so like things make headlines very quickly. And so I was like in national Taiwan news just being a part of that funeral. Um, I was like, "Oh my gosh, like these people are like really famous." Um, so yeah, [laughs] so that's like my mom's side.

And then my dad's side just meeting my aunts and my uncles and my cousins on that side was—was super awesome. And you know, everyone's doing such cool stuff and really interacting with them as an adult and talking to them about my experiences growing up in America, was a really cool cultural exchange, which is what Fulbright wants, right. And then as far as like the actual work itself outside of this getting to know my family and my own roots, I was able to teach in multiple schools again within Taiwan. I lived in Yilan which is a more rural town southeast of Taipei an hour bus drive southeast of Taipei. And there, I really think thought I got a good feel for Taiwan. I was originally placed in Taipei, but I wanted some place that was less international. Um, I wanted a more rural experience and Yilan is like rice patties and like the tallest building is like the the department store which is like maybe six floors or something. So yeah, it was definitely a small small city and I loved it. It was so much fun. The local teachers there and the local folks are just amazing and so kind and so open to sharing themselves and their homes and their families and their culture with you. Um, what was, what was interesting is is certainly like the work itself and knowing that when you're there, you're serving Taiwanese children and knowing how they behave and what are the levers to make sure that Taiwanese children listen, right, and learn—so different from the West obviously and so different—I taught in elementary school so very different from my teaching seniors in high school. So it was a huge adjustment and then the subject matter was largely English and so really learning a little bit about what—what—what do I need to do to get the pedagogy right so that kids can

learn at like kindergarten to fifth, sixth grade. And then just doing the research, doing the research to know that like what was it that made kids learn that the community mattered first, you know. What was it culturally that school did to make sure that kids weren't so selfish, you know. Things like serving other kids for lunch was—was a norm. Knowing that—you took turns in washing your own like bowl and your cutlery after lunch. Um, the things that like—you had to clean your own classroom, like the teacher did not clean it, like this is your classroom so you clean it. And this is like first graders like cleaning their own classroom with little brooms and little dustpans and stuff. It's like it starts really really young enculturating them into knowing that they are stewards of their own space. And they have passing periods. They have like periods that they go to. So during passing periods when they're transitioning from class to class, the bell is a meditation exercise. So it's like kids—kids are thinking about like centering themselves and breathing deeply and like and like in Mandarin they're like, you know, "Think about your heart," you know, and it's like how do you talk about thinking about your heart to like a first-grader, you know? Um, but that's stuff that like they hear all the time. So it becomes a fabric of their of their life.

And in fact what we did was we ended up incorporating meditation into Sharpstown. [GL: Wow] So I'm getting ahead but afterward—after Fulbright, I ended up going back to Sharpstown as a college counselor, and we ended up doing what was called "10 at 10" which was 10 minutes at 10 o'clock of meditation. The entire school would shut down and over the loudspeaker, they would just run us through a meditation exercise and the kids like at first were like "What the heck is this? Like I don't want to do this." But meditation, there's no wrong or right way to do meditation, right. Like as long as you—there's no wrong way to do meditation. So as long as you are taking deep breaths, you know, finding your own way to center—does it mean that you put your head down, does it mean that you just sit up straight, does it mean you keep your eyes open or eyes closed? It doesn't matter. The point is that you're taking a moment to just take stock of your feelings and be aware. And that was awesome. Like kids ended up, like kids that were like too cool for school, you know, were like, "Yeah, like this is super helpful. Like I need at that 10 minutes to just calm down." You know, "Life at home is really crazy, abusive parents," you know, like all this and that. And the ten—"10 at 10" was like a huge exercise for us at Sharpstown.

So yeah, Fulbright Fulbright was really great. Um, I thought it was super helpful. I think definitely, you know, would recommend it. I definitely also would say that part of Fulbright is your responsibility to serve your country. It is not necessarily a time for you to go vacationing and play around, which I think sometimes that happens, right. Like people sign up for these things and just go gallivanting around the country. And as far as what Fulbright Taiwan is supposed to do to facilitate that experience for us, I felt was very unstructured. So that's where I think my feedback would be for Fulbright Taiwan when I was in it there. There was not a lot of guided direction around how we might be helping each other process this experience. And so for me as a Taiwanese American, a lot of these components I still grew up with. But a lot of people was their first time out of country and they didn't necessarily have a structured way of processing their experience. And a lot of times the reflection is a negative, right like, "Oh my God, this night market is horrible" like "I can't believe they eat that food" or "It smells" or "It's really hot" or you know "The driving [inaudible] is not like safe here" like "They don't stop for pedestrians. How rude." And it's like yeah, it's different, but it's Taiwan like this is what we have to like learn and be humble about. And some of these mindsets maintained from beginning all the way to the end and I thought that Fulbright could have done more to help facilitate this learning which I don't think they did very well. So coming back to country, your ambassadorship doesn't end, right. You're, you're forever an ambassador of Taiwan back to the US. And so I really wanted to make sure that—that folks had that mindset coming home. Um, and sometimes you just can't control for those things so you do what you can.

GL: That's really awesome to hear that you were able to take something you saw valuable from Taiwan back to the US. I'm curious to know how did the Taiwanese students view you as someone who's Taiwanese, but from America? How did they interpret you as a Taiwanese-American?

AW: Yeah. It was interesting because there are so many hints that tell the people there that you're not Taiwanese—like that you're not truly Taiwanese if that makes any sense. So um, I would—like kids can tell and adults can tell. So kids can tell more than anything like and kids will be super honest with you, right. But like for example, I would walk up to like a street–street vendor and they will automatically be like "You're not from here. Like where are you from?" like "What are you talking about? Like I'm Taiwanese! Like like I was birthed by two Taiwanese parents. Like how do you–can you tell?" And it's like all these little nuances of like how you walk, you know, how you wear your hair, you know, the clothes that you wear. And I didn't say anything. I was like you can't even hear like an accent or anything. And I could get away with like speaking fluently for the very very beginning until you get like more advanced vocabulary, but they always knew something with up.

And so kids were like curious, very very curious. They were like, "Oh wow," like like what like, "why do you, why do you, why do you speak so differently?" or like–like–like, "Why do you wear—why do you wear that? or like "What is this lanyard?" you know, like like "that you're wearing?" I was like I had a Rice lanyard that I always had. So they would ask like really cute like kid questions even with like–like the Americans though that that would be here that would that are—that are white, that are a lot hairier than I am, you know, you would get really innocent questions like "Teacher, why are you so furry?" You know, like it's like kids aren't used to seeing hair that was like as hairy with like chest hair, like arm hair. And kids just aren't shy at all; they'll like touch you and like ask all these questions. And so, for the most part, I think that kids responded positively to the fact that I still had some sort of connection to them on the Taiwanese side and that I could still speak to them in Mandarin, but that here was a curiosity as to like understanding that Taiwan–Taiwan's presence is everywhere. You know, and helping them see a more worldly view that Americans can be Taiwanese. Um so those were the majority of the questions that I like "What is it like in America?" "What is—why do you talk this way?" or "What is different about—" you know they would ask questions that you're asking too like "What is different about" like "What cultural norms do you have at home?" And "Do you also use chopsticks?" you know "Do you also like have to take off your shoes?" "Does your mom also worried about your feet being cold?" You know like stuff like that, which is really cute which I would get a lot of.

GL: Yeah. And what company do you currently work for?

AW: So I currently work for a non-profit here in Houston called ProUnitas. Um, and we are a education nonprofit that really helps school districts and support systems really maximize the internal and external services that serve kids.

GL: Yeah, and what were—what has been your roles throughout working with ProUnitas?

AW: Yeah, so—so ProUnitas was—was started by my—one of my best friends in Teach for America. Um and so while I was in Taiwan, he was starting ProUnitas and it was always really awesome hearing him with his ideas over the phone. I would talk to him while I was in Taiwan between classes hearing about how he's formulating this company. And so I was basically there at the beginning. Um I didn't join officially until about three years ago and ProUnitas is about almost five years old. And my roles have shifted a lot. It being a start-up, right, three years ago, you wear like all the hats, right. Like you don't have this gigantic team, you know where you have HR departments and like the product departments and you know developing—the like developers, stuff like that. So we kind of did everything you could. My titles have changed a lot. I was—I started off as a Director of Special Projects and Partnerships, which doesn't mean anything, right, like titles don't mean anything. Like "Special Projects" just means like anything that doesn't fit in a nice category goes to Albert. [laughs] Um and partnerships, like working with service providers and nonprofits around city. I switched over to a chief kind of role and so Chief of

Innovation, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Program Officer, and now I'm a Chief Strategy and Growth Officer.

So it's like—and I'm still doing a lot of the things that I did, you know when I first joined so it just it—a lot of it is kind of changing those titles to really reflect the changing nature of our work. But and also just like understanding that sometimes the work just needs to get done and you're going to be the person that has to do it. So my current role really revolves around managing our product. So that's the software that we use to help empower and build support staff in schools to better connect kids using the data platform. So I managed that platform and then the development within it. And then I also kind of support the individual giving portfolio. So that's making sure that we have funding so that we can pay our individuals, keep the lights on, and all these things, that's how nonprofits are funded by the kindness of other people and donating money. And so I write grants to apply for money and I also work with individuals who believe in our mission and our vision and work with them to say "Hey could I—could I count on you on donating to ProUnitas this year because we're making a big difference for kids." So I manage the funding stuff and then I also manage the internal and external communications for the company. So really thinking about my proclivity to talk as you can see and putting that to good use by making sure that there's some sort of presence for ProUnitas out in the world and an internal with our teams.

GL: Yeah. How do you guys form relationships with schools? And how do you guys reach out?

AW: Yeah, our approach is not a traditional approach of like selling a product, right. Like in general, if you have a really cool water bottle and you want to fill this water bottle, you know, you say "Hey, look at this water bottle and how wonderful it is" like "You should buy it." Um, the way ProUnitas approaches it, it's not like "Come everybody, look at our work" and—and then "Buy—buy what we have." or or you know, or like "Believe in us and try our product." Uh, we actually go a little bit of a back-and-forth. So how we work with school districts is we look at which school districts are prepared to answer the questions that we really want them to answer, right. So is the school district ready to take on the whole child, right? We know that kids come in with all these different needs. You and I needed so much to be where we are at Rice and so on and so forth. That's basic needs like nutrition, housing, mental health, mentoring, good role models, of all this and that, and not just like individually but like all concurrently happening at the same time. Um, is the school district asking those questions? And if they're asking those questions of how do I serve the whole child and do I have the general kind of pieces in place, while they're uncoordinated, like those pieces are generally in place and I can figure out how to connect them now, we'll work with those school districts. And that's a part of my job as well, is to figure out our strategy for which partners that we can work with. And it's not to say that school districts who aren't ready are doing a bad job; it's just a certain level of maturity within that district that we're looking for in order for this model to be effective, right. We don't want to be kind of working with a school that's just starting up and they don't have any systems in place, they don't have their own staff in place, they don't have an idea of what kind of supports are their priorities. So we'll say "Hey," you know, kind of "Figure out and work those kinks out and then we'll come work with you." Um, so we—we work with school districts that generally have a little bit more of that maturity and mindset. But we also work with school districts that are 65% or more free reduced lunch, which means that the school district is largely a disadvantaged school with a lot of low socioeconomic status families and students attending those schools. So we want to make sure that we're serving a population that needs us and certainly every—every student deserves services, right, every student no matter rich or poor. But like—like we've—but like we've talked about, some students don't have any option but to receive no services. Whereas, you know, we can always do a better job of providing services for students who live in rich neighborhoods, but we, for the most part, know that they have other things to lean on, right, like parents and you know, social capital and financial capital. So a lot of the schools that we serve just, you know, [don't have kids?] with anything. We want to focus on that.

GL: Awesome. So are you guys mainly located in Houston or are you guys thinking about expanding to cover a nationwide scope?Are you guys—did you hear my last question?

AW: Yeah, um you just said are we located in a.....? Sorry

GL: [inaudible] schools in Houston or are you guys looking to expand to schools nationwide?

AW: Yeah, we are, we're focused and committed to Houston. We have gotten a lot of requests and and let me know if I am cutting out. Sometimes the internet is a little spotty. Um but but yeah, we—we have gotten requests to go into the Bay Area, to Denver, to Los Angeles, but we know that there's a lifetime opportunity here in Houston. And we are committed to Houston. Um, one of the things that we really believe is that technology should not be implemented as just a tool. You know, it's like here—here's—here's a here's an innovative solution, go and do with it what you want. That happens in education all the time and it's not an effective means of implementing any real change, right. Like what we're, what we're talking about is people changing their behaviors and really changing their whole process or on how they connect kids services. And if you're just going to say "Here's a here's a data platform, go do it," right, people are going to not invest in it, they're not going to like truly implement it, and it'll just be another tool that they have for a year. Um, and so we want to make sure that we walk with the district, we walk with our clients so to speak in making sure that they are implementing it with fidelity, but we're also here just to constantly work with troubleshooting any issues with personnel and training and the technology and the glitches that come up with that naturally do. So, we know Houston and in order to have an effective implementation, you need to know the communities that you serve. And so we don't know anything about San Francisco, we don't know anything about Los Angeles, you know or New York, we don't have any business being there right now. Um, Greater Houston has over a million kids so there's more than enough work to do here for a lifetime.

GL: Gotcha.

AW: [inaudible]

GL: Oh the last sentence cut off.

AW: So yeah, so we're definitely committed to Houston for now. There is opportunity to expand eventually but we want to do Houston correctly.

GL: Okay, got it. And how has ProUnitas been received by schools and students so far and what impact have you seen so far?

AW: Yeah, I think that, you know, we've been received pretty—pretty positively. Certainly there are a lot of hiccups; we're not a perfect company and we don't execute with utmost grace and imperfection. But we have fantastic partners—partner districts that give us a lot of grace and a lot of patience to—to make mistakes and to fall forward. Um, so insofar as the four districts that were in, right, we'r, we work with Houston Independent School District, YES Prep Public Schools, Harmony Public Schools, and Aldine ISD. Um, we—we have seen a lot of really good response. Folks are grateful, right, for the opportunity to have clarity in their process, they know which students to serve, they know where to connect them, and then our platform also allows us to see the impact of the connection on their academic outcomes. Um, and so all of these things combined really make it a useful tool. But more than ever, we're really able to answer a lot of questions for school districts, say "What is important to you?" We need to know what the district has and what is the demand of those services, right. And a lot of times it's difficult for a school district to know exactly all of the resources they have, so the supply, and then what are the requests for

the supplies. So like can you pinpoint exactly where or which campus is requesting how many mental health resources, or how many bags of food, or how many things of school supplies, or or mentoring groups, right? Can you, can you, you know, without a shadow of a doubt give me a number for that demand? And then can you without a shadow of a doubt tell me what your supply is? And can that intersection happen?

So right now what we're seeing is that school districts are doing the best that they can. There's a lot of great programming out there. There's just so little infrastructure to manage all those programs, right. So how do we coordinate that? And so because of that, I think school districts are very excited about this work and they're getting good data, right. They're getting to be able to see "Oh, wow, this is what we have," "Oh, wow. This is actually the need," "Oh, wow. I'm actually doing something tangible tangible about it and I'm seeing results." So, you know, the thing that—that we're excited about is just the clarity of process in knowing that kids are getting what they need. At the end of the day, we know that when we coordinate these services and empower the school districts to do that, kids will get what they need. And regardless of the outcome, right, if a student gets the vaccination and a student gets the mentoring but they don't see an improvement in their behavior or their—their grades, does that mean we take away the vaccination or we take away the mentoring group? Like no, we make sure that the continued coordination still happens. And that's the utmost important. Now what comes as a side effect of this coordination of services is an improvement in attendance, right, in a drop in behavior infractions, and an increase in grades, hopefully.

So what we've seen preliminary, right, is again, and we—this is a preliminary data point, right, and we want to continue it and make sure that it's not a fluke is that in that first year of implementation across Houston Independent School District, we are seeing an increase in attendance, a 1% increase in attendance. Given the size of HISD though of all the schools that we support, within the schools that we support, there's a 1% increase. That actually is a huge—a big deal for a district like HISD where schools are funded by student attendance. If students come to school, schools get get paid for—get paid by the number of students that are actually showing up, right. And so if a 1% increase results in like 24 million dollars after the district, imagine like all that good that can come from that, right. Um and so ProUnitas is a part of that solution; we're not the reason why it's happening. It encompasses great teachers and great principals and great service providers and leaders within the district. It's just a matter of showing them the data and showing them the process and making sure that the coordination is happening. Because the work is already being done. And so with that said we're seeing really promising numbers right now, and so we're, we're excited to continue this work and hopefully continue the school districts feeling like we're adding value to them and their students.

GL: Yeah, that's amazing. [**AW:** Thank you.] We're nearing the end of the interview, so I wanted to zoom out a little bit and ask: where do you see yourself in the next five to ten years?

AW: [laughs] Oh, that's such a, that's such a scary question, Gordan, I don't know. [laughs] Um, it's interesting. You like can never plan for these things. If I—if you asked me in high school if I would be a teacher, I actually remember in my senior year English AP English class saying like "I am never going to be a teacher like this is so horrible" like "I would never be a teacher XYZ—for XYZ reasons." And then, you know, five years later I'm a teacher. [laughs] So it's like I never plan for these things; it's so hard to say. I'm pretty happy with where I am at ProUnitas. It's again so much work that—that can persist; there's so much that we can do with it in the next, you know, five to ten years. Um, I don't know. It'd be really cool, you know to say that "Oh one day I would love to be, you know, Secretary of Education and provide education policy across the country." But I honestly, I don't know. I think that ProUnitas does afford me a lot of exposure to different avenues that I might entertained—that I may entertain. But as of right now I

actually haven't thought about that too much, which I think is a good sign. It's a good sign that like I am very focused on what I'm doing and I'm making sure that—that I continue to make a difference while being very fulfilled and happy in this work. So why look elsewhere if you have that? And in light of all this COVID-19 stuff, you know, like we have a unique opportunity here to help support kids in times of crisis. But in addition to that, just really seeing how other nonprofits are really needing support too. And my work really allows me to dip into all these other nonprofits and kind of see "Hey, how can we support?" So it provides me a good vantage point so I'm constantly kind of looking and seeing how I can help. So maybe I'll have a better answer for you in the next couple of months as we, as we work through this COVID stuff.

GL: Okay. And I want to end on another big question and you can interpret it however you would like. How would you like to be remembered?

AW: Wow that's a really great question. Um, I—I think about this from like a Maya Angelou quote and it's really how I kind of process my relationships with people in general. It's like not about what you say, or not about what you did; it's about how you made people feel. And I want to be remembered as someone who made—made you feel—individually feel like seen and cared for, right. As much as—as much as my job allows me the privilege of looking at systemic issues and creating systemic solutions for large systems, like large—large swaths of institutions, I think the power really belongs in the people and how we treat each other every day. And so that never goes away, right. Like no matter what I do, we will always need strong teachers and strong principals to build great relationships with kids, counselors and social workers to build good relationships with kids. And so that's my responsibility too. Like, how do I continue serving in a fashion that's—that's humble and kind so that people around me are feeling that kind of love but take that and use it to spread it to other people as well, right. Like the good version of spreading, you know, and infecting people with good love and good happiness, good energy, right so that they continue to [keep?] persisting in the difficult work.

But regardless of what—what one ends up doing, and Gordan wherever you end up after graduating, right, it's like whether it's for-profit, nonprofit, engineering, medicine, you know business, law, like all of us are dealing with difficult work and difficult times. How do we find kind of solace and strength in each other so that we can continue to persisting doing the work that we've dedicated our lives to do? Regardless of what it is, do it well. And the way we do it well is by holding each other up like there's no way we can do this our own. And how do we—how do we do that? How do we make each other feel every day that we can persist and how you feel better be something positive, right. Like I hope it's positive. I hope you're smiling. I hope you're, you're walking away feeling empowered and ready to take on like the world and stuff. So and it's again, it's not something you do once and it's like "Oh I did it, check!" You know, like it's something that's a lifelong thing with the same person over and over again of like "Yeah, you had a great day and then you fell back down. Let's go ahead and pick you back up again." And so that can only result in more—more energy like that. I need, I need that too, right. I need people around me to hold me up to help me persist in this very difficult work. And so as I expect, you know, hopefully have other people provide that for me, I need, I need to provide that for other people.

GL: Yeah, it's really beautiful. [**AW:** Thank you] I can definitely say that I will be walking away from this interview feeling very energized and inspired. [**AW:** Good!] So on behalf of the Houston Asian American Archive, I'd like to thank you for your time and for sharing your story today.

AW: I appreciate it Gordan. I had a great time chatting with you and thank you so much to the Houston Asian American Archive for doing this project. I think it's incredible to be able to document these stories and I'm very humbled to be included in—in this in this project, so thank you.