

Houston Asian American Archive, COVID-19 Special Collection
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Judy Jeng
Interviewer: Chelsey Wen
Date of Interview: September 11, 2020
Transcribed by: Chelsey Wen
Edited by: Sora Shimazu Kim
Audio Track Time: 45:27

Background:

The special oral history collection is created in response to COVID-19 that started in February 2020. Judy Jeng is a former president of JCCAA, Joint Chinese College Alumni Association. She organized significant fundraisers during the pandemic to donate to supplies and PPE to hospitals and food banks. She also supported the project “Asian Americans Salute to Frontline Heroes” which aims to combat Anti-Asian discrimination by honoring the contributions they have made to the community during the pandemic.

Setting: The interview was conducted over Zoom.

Key:

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis
(?): preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)
CW: Chelsey Wen
JJ: Judy Jeng

Interview transcript:

CW: Okay, so Today is September 11th, 2020. My name is Chelsey Wen, and I'm interviewing Judy Jeng for Houston Asian American Archive. So the first question is, have you engaged in any response to the outbreak?

JJ: Yes, I am, I was the president of the Joint College Alumni Association. And so as the media, we have established the COVID-19 Relief Fund. And we did quite a few projects to help the covid-19 the initiatives.

CW: Can you describe what it was like to fundraise and how you decided what to donate the money to?

JJ: Yeah, so, so around April, we already knew that, that this is—COVID-19 is unprecedented. pandemic, it's going to affect so many people in so many level. So and we all stay in home. And, you know, we have, like helpless, that looking at the pandemic becoming worse and worse, so finally we decided, as our organization, usually when there is a disaster, we would, that we will take initiative, to help the community. And so that's what we decided to do. On April the eighth, I called for a board meeting with senior board members and advisors. And we had a meeting, we decided to establish the COVID-19 Relief Fund. And then, and the next day, that I'm the president, and our chairman of the

board, asked for approval to for \$20,000 to match all the donations one to one. And our goal was to raise a total of \$50,000. And at the end, we get the total of \$75,000, in probably around two weeks of time.

CW: So how did you decide where to donate the money to?

JJ: So, so when when we do the fundraising, it's important to tell people what are we going to do so people, you know, will be on the same mission and willing to help you. So at the time, we saw the hospital, doctor and nurses, they are risking their life to save others, but they do not have the needed a PPE for their own safety. And, you know, it's, it's a really urgent situation. And we also saw that people lost their jobs, and they are lining up, you know, to— to get food from the food bank. So those are the two big things and it's the time we feel like it's the most important than that we have action. So in our fundraising lecture, we, we told everyone that we're going to raise money to purchase PPE for the first responders, you know, and we go into donate money for the food bank to help the poor that you know, the person, people that they lost their jobs.

CW: Can you talk about JCCAA's role and the article that was in the Houston Chronicle, the one, salute Asian Americans heroes?

JJ: Okay, so, JCCAA means, stand for joint college, Joint Chinese College Alumni Association. And so we do our own project with our \$75,000 raised but at the same time, the, the Asian American salute for front-liners, it they—they started the meeting and then they invited me to be on it as a committee member. So I was joined the meeting and help, you know, friend through the whole event. So, so we are one of the organizers, the main organization, and I was in the committee for the whole process, the UN, we also donated the money. So— so that's Yeah. So actually, our JCCAA project is going together at the same time as the Asian American salute, or front— frontline heroes, we kind of go side by side with the project working together at the same time.

CW: So what do you think about the anti Asian American sentiment that's been present in recent months, and what impact you think that has on the community?

JJ: So it's very unfortunate that— that the entire issue and the sentiment got worse, in the COVID-19. Part of it, due to the President Trump intentionally named the COVID-19, as the China, you know, virus. And so, for me to our fundraising will raise this point. And when we do, we— we actually it for projects throughout April and May, when we do the project, we, you know, we— we not just work with the— the— the organization, we are, so make sure, we make sure that all the the news media, the TV, that reporter, they are on site to recall what we did. And so people knows that Asian American in Houston, we are not the problem, we are the solution. In we are part of the solution, and we are dedicated to help our community. And the only way to get through this difficulty is for everybody get together in this. And that's— that overcome this difficult time.

CW: So do you think that that has helped, helped improve the situation?

JJ: It's hard to tell, because we don't, in our, in our daily life, we some people encounter people like really mean to them or even hurt, you know, some of the Asian Americans, but we don't actually experience in our daily life, but that I'm imagining, I'm sure that putting the whole community see, well, we dedicated our time and effort to help the COVID-19 relief, I think, you know, people will come to

realize that this, you know, prejudice to Asian American, it's not the right thing to do. You know? It just doesn't make sense.

CW: Yeah. How do you think Asian Americans can engage with public policy to protect ourselves from anti Asian American discrimination?

JJ: I know we have many different organizations in Houston, and some of them like 80-20. And then some back at UCA and some other organization, their whole purpose is try to make awareness of the Chinese American in Houston to get involved in the volunteer in speaking out in involved in— in the activity politically, because Chinese people tend to kind of shy away from involving in political events. So just by getting involved in and be part of the solution. It's very important like I— I am-- my friend and I we, we volunteer for the because we are a Democrat, so we volunteer for democrat party to knock on the doors during last election, knock on the door of 50 different families in our neighborhood and urge them to come out and vote. I think since that there and then make your opinion known to your Senator and your Congress, men and woman, it's very also very important.

CW: Um, do you think that JCCAA could be a way to organize efforts to increase voting?

JJ: Organize what?

CW: Organize like an event to encourage Asian Americans to vote more or like voter awareness.

JJ: Yes, yes, I think we— we have 2000 members. So if we can encourage every one of our member to take action, and at the same time, encourage their friends and families to take action, we are very powerful tools. I'm not the president anymore. I stepped down—my term has finished at the end of the June. So we have a new Preston in place. So still, we have the same mission. And I think we can continue to work on— on those initiatives.

CW: And so why do you think that voter turnout for Asian Americans is lower than expected?

JJ: I think Asian, my nature doesn't speak out at their mind, and they [inaudible] and they just not. I know, I'm not speaking for everyone. But I know many of them, they just don't take the effort to said, you know, to get involved in politics that some of us— some of us might have a wrong view, concerning politics that it's dirty business now, like if people are, you know, though they those party politicians they— they doing since you know, they're not, you know, sometimes they're corrupt, and they don't have trust with the political system. I think that's part of it. And another part of it, because we just don't realize that, as a Chinese American community, we have to work together to make our voice heard. And this is the only way to, you know, for our own benefit. And to be able to have our own voice heard. It's uh, this is one of the most important things in it, because we even we have so many people and stay in the US, and we don't vote and we don't voice our voice, we, you know, we becomes the silence group and nobody will pay attention to you. And we— are we are such, a how you say like, the whole population are so well educated, high income, have the best of everything. But if our benefit and our voice are not heard, in the United States, it's very unfortunate. And I guess a lot of people doesn't realize how important it is, you know, to make our voice heard, to vote in order to have this is force that to influence the politics.

CW: So do you think if more Asian Americans understood that they would be more motivated to vote?

JJ: Yes. I hope so. And I hope that that younger Americans, you know, yeah, then they would have more understanding of how important to get involved to understand the political system. And to— to— to work on that, to make our—the Asian American heard in this, in the United States.

CW: So, how much of your work has been transitioned to zoom or FaceTime during the pandemic?

JJ: So when— when I'm— when we are doing the COVID-19 project, we pretty much communicate use email, and when we do the fundraising, and we just use email and— and for when we reporting all the projects that we did. You know, we— we send out the pictures, you know, and the news reporting the television reporting to our members, so they all in sync with fully aware of what has been done with the \$75,000 that we raised and—so it was a very, uh, just by using emails to communicate at a time, it's very beneficial. But then after the June, after we finished our initiative, we started to realize that this COVID-19 is not going away anytime soon. So all of our programs are regular. We have a leisure learning. It's called LLC leisure lending programs, and we have retirement committee programs, we have— we have the young professional programs and— and the mentoring program, and we have outreach program.

So all of those program used to take place in you know, in the—in the—in the facility, now we all have this project change to be zoom we use zoom meeting and actually in October, we're going to have three weeks, three weeks of career conference for the young professionals, we invite speakers on those three Sundays, and then the whole thing is going to be a tech press in zoom. And then our—in—in September and August every week we have different programs, like Monday, we have exercise, line dance zumba program, and then Tuesday, we have a cooking class, you know, gardening, how to take photographer— photograph program. And then another time we'll have like Friday we will have, you know, lectures, you know that it's exchange people will be— we will have a specific topic that we will be discussing, so the program goes on and all the activity goes on, as usual. But it's just in the format of zoom, the virtual—all go through the virtual meeting.

CW: So do you think that doing it virtually makes it harder to communicate? Or do you think it makes it more accessible and makes it more easier for people to come?

JJ: Depending on what kind of activity like right? Like if we are going like, a monthly status report meeting or just keeping track of things and that we do in the planning, you know, after all those activities, the zoom seems to be very easy and very accessible because you don't have to set aside time and travel to place and then— and then when we have meeting we have to used to have to cook and serve the dinner because most people come after they finished their working and they come to the— to our meetings that we have to you know feed everybody. This kind of stuff took a lot of time and effort. And and some people couldn't make it you know, because they're farther away so with zoom meeting everything seems to be so much easier. Yeah, it's— we save a lot of time. But the downside is we don't see person to person. So you know, some— some of the event is for building the friendship, communicating face to face. And we have performers and--

Oh actually that in June, the end of the June we supposed to have our annual meeting within the scholarship night. It's the biggest event of our organization, because we have turnover officer, we have a

turnover meeting take place at the same time we give out, uh this year, we give our \$84,000 of scholarship to about 40 students. And that usually takes place in person, you know, we would like the recipient to come. And we will, you know, present the scholarship to them. And then we have performance—performances. Everybody will be getting together have nice dinner and enjoy the good times. And due to COVID-19, we can't do that anymore. So we have a turnover meeting, zoom turnover meeting. Every—everybody logged into Zoom —Excuse me. And we still give out the \$84,000 of scholarship. But we just don't, we cannot have the big event. 3 to 4 hundred people coming in the room together to celebrate this event. So we hopefully next year, you know gradually everything will get back to normal and then yeah, maybe people will suggest some of the meetings we use zoom, if we—you know.

CW: So what do you think your favorite event from the past couple months has been?

JJ: Oh, you mean out of JCCAA event?

CW: Yeah.

JJ: During COVID-19?

CW: Yeah.

JJ: So I pretty much, we, we have meetings regularly for the mentorship program and for the young professional program. I think that the most exciting thing is those—those two program we started planning in June, July, and it all come into organized very, very nicely. So our young professional program, we're going to have career conference in October. And we already finished inviting all the speakers. And uh, and we have the brochure and the program and the flyer ready. And it—since it happens in October, so this event going to be part of a double 10 celebration initiated by the Chinese—Chinese community center. Yeah. And— and so that's very exciting. And so our mentoring program also kick off, and we have about 12—12 or 13 mentors from different fields. And we are already sent out an email, and through Facebook and email and all the different advertisement to get the mentee to sign up for this mentor program. So it's also progressed pretty nicely. So I think it's very exciting. So yeah, those are the two biggest program in JCCA we have so far.

CW: So how has the pandemic changed your perspective about the future?

JJ: Oh, the pandemic it's, it kind of when it happened, this is almost like a— it's a once in 100 years event right? We never have anything happen in such a big magnitude that effect the whole world, all the country at the same time. Every—every city they have to go to the lockup and the many business is affected. So many people lost jobs, and so many people die because of it. So I'm thinking because of this event, the big talk of this pandemic and people will be realized more that we are all connected with each other. We are—anything happened in one part of world is going to influence another part of this—

[Zoom cuts out]

CW: Sorry you cut out for a little bit.

JJ: Yeah.

CW: It's okay. So do you feel optimistic about the future?

JJ: It's hard to say, right? Because with this very toxic political environment. And I'm not supposed to be—I guess I don't want it to be very uh, how do you say, negative, but with the-the, we have our—our president that's downplaying the COVID-19 and doesn't have a full nationwide plan on how to—to, for everybody to take care of each other, wear mask and practice social distance. And with the way that since he, you know, he—he-he do so many—how you can imagine that all the cheating and lying and everything happened in the—in this country, it's really harmful to all the regular citizen, so it's harmful to the American standing in the whole world. So I'm not very optimistic if we don't elect a new president. But I hope we will turn the page, I hope the worst is over, because I cannot imagine another four years in this chaotic darkness— environment, toxic environment. So I'm— I'm kind of optimistic that we will overcome-- we will that the next four years, we— we will doing better, we will have a new leadership in the— in the Washington DC.

CW: What do you think the pandemic has revealed about structural inequalities in our society?

JJ: And so, we—we—we see report after reporting that the black and Hispanic seems to be affected so much percentage wise, so much more than the white, and— and then after they're affected, they got sick, their recovery rate are a lot lower than the Caucasian. So-so you can see that there's a inequality and difference, even in this pandemic. People-- the poor people don't get the same quality—quality treatment as the white people. It's the only—the only explanation I can come back and listen to the older commentaries. They just don't—the poor people just don't get the care they needed to be over to recover from this sickness compared to the white people.

CW: Does JCCAA ever work with other cultural organizations?

JJ: Hmm. You mean other ethnicity?

CW: Yes.

JJ: So, so we have the outreach program in JCCAA Outreach Committee, we raise money every year. And so right now, it has been established for two years. So it's relatively new because our organization is already established more than 30—30 some years. So, with the outreach program, we work with Alief ISD. And in— in Thanksgiving, we have Thanksgiving food drive. And we work together to provide last year about 300 family with all kinds of food, turkey, canned food, frozen meat and vegetable, all kinds of food they need for their Thanksgiving. And then also in the— in around Superbowl time, Alief ISD has an event called Soup-er—Soup-er Bowl, that soup, you know, like soup and bowl. They put those two things together as a Soup-er Bowl. But what I do is they have a soup competition, you know that many restaurants or school students, they would volunteer and come out to cook all different kinds of delicious soup. And then we'll

[Zoom cuts out]

CW: Hi.

JJ: I don't know when—is that record—that recording, do they—they're still recorded the voice or when the connection is bad does it just stop? The recording?

CW: I don't know. But would you mind starting from talking about the Super Bowl the competition? Because [**JJ:** Yeah, yeah.] I think that's where—

JJ: Okay, so—so usually it's the Friday before the Super Bowl. And— and so we would have many organizations would donate money. And so many organizations like a lot of restaurants, hotel, or school. They are the best chef will come out and they will cook a very, very delicious soup for everybody. So on Friday, we will have booths and we raise money to build awareness of this fundraising event. We raised a scholarship for Alief ISD students. We especially for the family that has single parent, the family that, how you say, that never have any kids that attending college, and for the homeless kids. And it's a very, very, very good event. Very good cause. And we also join in the Houston rodeo parade. Every year, we have a coach and we, the night before we decorated a very beautifully with the flag of Republic of China. And—and the flag of USA. And we have almost like 17 people will be ride in the coach and go through the parade. And— and it was usually very well received, and very well reported. And it's a very meaningful event that we do every year.

CW: Do you think there are lessons that we can learn from this time in the pandemic that we can use in the future?

JJ: Yeah, I think that from we see across the world, right? So many countries that have the same problem, but you—you—you learn that some countries are doing better than others, right? And like Taiwan, and Singapore, and it's Australia. And so, yeah, for example. They, especially like Taiwan, right? It's right next to the China when the is pandemic—where the pandemic have started, and has so much—so many connections, thousands of people in and out China and Taiwan every day. But when you are able to know how serious the situation is, and you take control and you have a planning out, you have a good—good tracing. What is it called? Yeah, you trace anyone that has the symptom and you isolate them, isolate those people. And if you wear a mask and practice social distance, the—the mortality rate is really low. And very, very, in a very early— early stage they got the whole pandemic under control.

Versus the US. We at the beginning, we downplay it and we think it's nothing, it's not going to affect us, it's going to go away. And we don't have a good policy in place. And we don't take it seriously. We use it as a political, how you say, political thing to against each other. Like okay, if you wear mask it means you don't support me, that—that's what President Trump say, has—and a lot of people they say, Hey, you know, I, my personal rights is important and I don't need to, even on the good of the whole community, they do not care. They don't— they don't want to practice the social distance and mask with this kind of men— this kind of mentality, you see how different the result is, you know, compared to the other country that manage this pandemic properly, we have so many deaths, so many sickness in the USA, and it affects everyone, our family, the business, you know, socially, economically, that the lost it's really just, unbelievable. So, how you handle the pandemic, how everyone can walk together, everyone contributing their own effort, not just the first line responders. Everybody you know, wear mask, wash your hands and do your social distancing that it will make such a big difference. And it also make you

realize it as such—if such a pandemic like COVID-19, it needs a top down, a good policy to take place for—for the thing to be effective. Have been having a good planning.

CW: Yeah. So I think that might be all my questions. Do you have anything else you want to talk about?

JJ: Now, I say—so our COVID-19 project I, we have four different projects. I email you all the dates and what we did. It's—do you want to be part of this recording? And if you already got it you can put it together or it's not?

CW: Would you like to talk about it? And like, explain it?

JJ: Yeah. Okay. So once we raise the, the— the money, I guess we started raising money on April the four—April the 10th, and then in one day really fast, we already raised \$30,000 because a lot of our board member, they just donate \$1,000 apiece. So very fast we on April the 10th, we almost raised \$30,000, of course, including the matching fund. And so we right away on April the 16th, we work together with our greens Fort Bend county PPE drive. And we donated \$3,000 of PPE like hand sanitizer, mask, alcohol and goggles, and you know, all kinds of PPE to Fort Bend PPE drive. And then a week after April the 23rd, we donated \$30,000 to Memorial Hermann Southwest hospital, which included tens of thousands of masks and protective gowns, you know, for the— for the nurses and doctors, which about— cost about \$22,000. And so we dedicated around \$8,000 to buy meals from the Chinatown area, we especially pick Chinese restaurants, because they are influenced by the business or influenced by the pandemic, and we wanted to help them to build their business back. So we all just seven, almost 7 to 8 thousand dollars on meals to deliver to the Memorial Hermann hospital during the week, I think sometimes in May. The second week in May is the National Nurses day. So we deliver those lunches to them. And it's very, very well received. Everybody really appreciate it because we order the— order food that we order is very nutritious and very delicious. Yeah. And so after that, on May the 16th we donated \$40,000 to the Houston Food Bank, we pretty much follow our pledge in our email. So I want— we want our donor to know that we are working very hard to achieve our goals.

And then on May the 23rd, we have \$3,000 left from our funding. So we decided to donate to the Asian American Salute Frontline Heroes. So we—we are part of committee and we also donated money as— as part of this initiative. So—so all that even really well reported by of course all the Chinese newspapers and the TV. It also was reported by Houston Chronicle, and channel 2 and channel 11 they all come to record this event and my friend, I think on the day the May 16th we were still there doing the presentation and we watched the people line up to receive the food, and then around— we still there around 12 o'clock but the channel 2 already put our—our that event in the— in the noon and the lunch news reporting. So my friend took a shot of the TV and send it to me. Yeah, so—so I also send you some pictures I think is that enough, or you want a more like a newspaper clips of whatever I send you, was it enough?

CW: I think it was enough but if you want to send me more, I will take it.

[Interview ends.]