

**Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies**

Interviewee: Dona Murphey

Interviewer: Chelsea Li

Date of Interview: 6/10/2020

Transcribed by: Chelsea Li

Edited by: AnhThu Dang, Ann Shi

Audio Track Time: 1:28:10

Background: Dr. Dona Kim Murphey is a doctor with an MD PhD from Baylor for Neuroscience, who now is the director of scientific affairs at an EEG diagnostics company. In this interview Dr. Murphey shares her experiences through her vigorous education and research from an undergrad at Harvard University, to a medical student and researcher at Baylor. Dr. Murphey also details the tougher experiences she faced throughout her career while she has been running for school board, and how she is still focused on social justice issues. She also dives into her take on the current pandemic and different facets of the issue.

Setting: The interview was conducted on Zoom. The interview has certain sections of silence due to connection issues with the internet.

Key:

CL: Chelsea Li

CM: Dona Murphey

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview Transcript:

CL: Alright okay, so today is August 10th, 2020. My name is Chelsea Li, I am here with Dr. Dona Murphey and we will be conducting a full-length interview. Um so let's get started. Um so where and when were you born?

DM: I was born in Houston in 1979.

CL: Um who did you live with throughout your childhood?

DM: Um with my parents and my sister and my brother that are younger than me.

CL: Um so yeah you mentioned you had two siblings? How did that shape you experience living with a younger sister and brother?

DM: Um... good question. Um I mean I feel like it um— it motivated me to um— share my experiences with them I guess and it brought my experiences through school and my experiences with parents so um— being in an immigrant household um— yea. I mean I guess maybe that was the biggest— the biggest way I was influenced by being an older sibling.

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CL: Um can you describe a bit about the like neighborhood and community that you grew up in?

DM: yeah sure so we moved a couple of times. We started off in Northwest Houston in the Cy-Fair area and I would say that there— that area was not as diverse as the area that we moved to when I was in junior high, but it was much more diverse than the area that I ultimately ended up in for high school which was in Spring Branch. But yeah we-we moved within the Syfair community. This was at the time, maybe for sometime thereafter, one of the most graphically growing public school districts in the country and it was becoming more and more diverse. Whereas in elementary school I was in an area where there were not from my recollection, a large number of like um— non-white students in middle school or junior high there were, I mean my perception was that there was a majority of “minority students”. Um so yeah in high school I moved to Spring Branch and the demographics there were much different than in junior high more— the greatest diversity in my early childhood years. Um high school began as predominantly white and then there it was also pretty a bunch of-- wealthy students.

CL: Could you go on a bit of your parents’ occupations and maybe any expectations they had for you guys as you were growing up?

DM: Sure, my father was or is still an accountant and has an accounting business. And my mother basically did you know everything he did so... [laughs] but does not have those sorts of expectation so she worked with him to- to run his business. So the second part of that question was what?

CL: Oh sorry did they have any expectations for you growing up?

DM: Um I think for me it was primarily expectations I set for myself. They did, I recall, suggest very early I think when I first suggested it when I first suggested that I wanted to be a doctor when I was like five right. They certainly did pretty quickly support that and-and I was very self-critical of that and I mean it was something I blurted out as a five year old it isn’t necessarily that I want to stick with through my you know older childhood years, adolescence years or young adult years necessarily; but my parents became sort of attached to that idea. So I guess it became their expectation, but it was something that I originally threw out there and that is very similar to other things that I did in my life either as a function of my personality or as a function of my birth order. I was very motivated, you know, I took a lot of initiative so I kind of created the expectations for my siblings as a function of who I was and how I was. But they did not have necessarily an idea in their heads prior to me of what their child should be like.

CL: I see. So since you kind of created this kind of expectation of your parents for your siblings, did they follow in similar footsteps to you?

DM: Could you say that again Chelsea I didn’t quite catch that?

CL: I’m sorry, can you hear me now? Oh I think you are muted. I think your audio is a bit— is muted. yeah there you go. Sorry. Can you hear me now though?

DM: Now I can hear you, yes.

CL: Okay great okay I can hear you as well oh I think you were— I think you just muted again...

DM: Are you able to hear me now?

CL: Yes- yes this is good.

DM: I'm sorry. I just froze... Sorry what was your question after my parent's expectations?

CL: You are all good. Since you said you kind of influenced your parent's expectations of your siblings, did they follow similar footsteps to you?

DM: Um my sister did, but on a completely different timescale; and my brother did not at all. And I think that because my sister did but not until some time had passed. They... I think both of them felt a bit challenged by my parent's expectations of them as a function of who I had been; and I don't know the bar that I had set. And I don't want to say bar, like its higher or lower than something, but it is something. Right? It is some kind of standard.

CL: For sure yeah. What would you say that your experiences were like in the education system growing up before college?

DM: Oh gosh... it's such a broad question.

CL: I know.

DM: Um I mean what part of that question would you like me to tackle? Like whether I had challenges? What kind of challenges did I face like what aspect of the question?

CL: Right like any challenges you faced... That would be great.

DM: Um, hm. There are so many things I can talk about here. I— I mean there are some things that I have always considered as kind of trivial, and in retrospect I think that I ought to probably not erase those experiences in the way I did growing up. I mean I guess I could talk about that I mean I have a number of accounts I can recall being discriminated against as a kid, which I just honestly felt was a part of life. I just was like oh that's just how things go and I didn't let it really bother me very much at the time. I didn't reflect on it heavily at the time growing up. But I think more and more as I have understood like racial injustice and anti-immigrant attitudes in the United States. I have looked back in a more critical lens on that and also in thinking about how I raise my own children in the face of that kind of discrimination— what people will call often microaggressions, which does a disservice to those people that have those experiences because it is a kind of erasure. It is to say that they really aren't that significant, those are microaggressions. Right? I think it is unfair because those experiences can be traumatizing and certainly some communities, I think, face that in a much deeper way and a historic and intergenerational way that I had. I mean my parents newly immigrated here in the 1970s and you know just even the history of immigration of Korean Americans in this country is relatively newer and there are historic injustices against like indigenous people here and people who were enslaved here, and that is near the descendants of those who were brought here enslaved that's a very very different I think in many ways. I think we all tend to get erased that our experiences tend to get ignored or minimized. That is, I think is a similar experience.

So, so yeah. I guess those were some challenges that I faced and at the time which like I said again at the time I didn't think of them as challenges. I didn't actually think of them as distinct like if someone said something demeaning of my appearance or something like that that has nothing to do with my race like "oh one arm is fatter than another" or something right or whatever comment someone would make. At the time I never considered that it would be different. Like at the end of the day they are saying something offensive to me. I don't know why I would take it any differently if it was my immigration status or my

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physical appearance like it's all mean. Like I thought a lot more about it as an adult like is it all the same though? And if it's not then why is it now? Particularly as we become more aware of our intersecting identities.

CL: Okay I will now move on to kind of questions about your college experience now. I see that you majored in the History of Science while kind of on the premed track which is very impressive. What made you interested in this major?

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I can't really hear you?

DM: —like humanities, social sciences and the sciences. I actually had a lot of difficulty in choosing between all of those things. And so I saw an opportunity in history of science which is a very distinct kind of major it's not offered at most universities. I saw an opportunity to not have to choose basically. But you know after I had chosen that path, I very much have come to appreciate the fact that it taught me in a way, that was um— what's the word for it— interdisciplinary. It has actually in very profound ways influenced my world view in a kind of meta way, right? So it's like in general I value more than many might the kind of polymath or renaissance person. Having multiple lenses on issues in society and my life I think it was really really helpful to understand myself in the world.

CL: Kind of going back, you said there were a multitude of majors you were interested in. And so what were other subjects you were interested in studying along with the major you ended up choosing?

DM: Oh gosh, at one time considered Spanish Language and Literature. I love literature, I love reading. I love writing. I speak Spanish better than I do Korean because I was raised in large part by a large number of Central American nannies when my parents were both working when I was younger— [audio cuts off]. And I actually did get a certificate— so that was one of the things I was considering. I also considered social studies, which I think there is a lot of overlap between social studies. And the path that I chose I think that in many ways it was interdisciplinary. I think the disciplines that I looked at in the most part, Although I have never explicitly articulated this really, they were a way to look at what I had learned in the past and I think how most people understand the world around them with a really critical lens. Had I chosen a major like Biochemistry or Physics— I mean these things were never in my decision calculus. I was never considering doing a major in Biochemistry or Physics, although I liked not necessarily biochemistry. I liked Chemistry and I loved biology and physics as well. 'Cause I did not think that they would help cultivate a more profound understanding of the world for me, right? I thought of those disciplines as more challenging of course like the content is challenging to learn. I mean I wasn't seeking to be challenged in that way. I think I was seeking to really understand the world from multiple perspectives. So it wasn't those disciplines that appealed to me. The other part of taking history of science that it allowed me to knock out my pre-med requirements so that's the other practical reality so what should I take as a major where I don't have to take a bunch of other electives, where I can get my premed requirements knocked out?

CL: That's great. Um what were some defining moments that you had in college? Sorry that is a bit general as well but...

DM: That's a good question. I think the realization that people... I think that for this I have always been grateful to Harvard for this and I am sure a number of other schools have commitments similarly. But I was grateful to have a really diverse set of classmates. I think I seek that out so it is not even necessarily Harvard per se. Like I think it weren't me, it may have been a student who elected to spend their time with a more homogeneous group. But I am always seeking. Again, like I mean, I think of people in my

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life whether it be friendships or professional networks I tend to develop. To me they are a gift because they allow me to live almost multiple lives through other people's experiences.

So being in college, where I ended up hanging out with a Korean American who was from Chicago—and actually was born on the same exact date as me in 1979. He was like a world travelled concert pianist, performed with the Chicago Symphony when he was 13. I mean he was just brilliant. But he was very humble, he was hilarious he was a second generation immigrant whose parents never really learned to speak English. So he was negotiating like you know the purchase of their house, when he was like you know in middle school. I mean just some extraordinary people.

Another friend of mine was a first generation immigrant who came to the United States when he was eight. They escaped from Cuba on a boat and ended up in Florida. His parents both worked in a factory in California and he was at Harvard. Another friend of mine his parents did not complete college degrees, but his father ended up being actually one of the executives at a big oil and gas company. And he ended up actually, my friend actually ended up at Harvard. Another friend of mine is Argentinian and she spent the summer at a presidential prize at Argentina because she won a prize at a program or whatever. yeah so these people who had done some extraordinary things, but did not come from privileged backgrounds per say yeah I mean most of them didn't. I mean I didn't really spend time with the fourteenth generation Harvard student um I knew some of them but those weren't the people that I sought to cultivate relationships with. So I think that was the most impactful thing, just the relationships I had and that I cultivated with my peers there.

CL: yeah um yeah so moving onto your kind of medical school and PhD experience, I see you received your MD and PhD in neuroscience from Baylor College of Medicine. So what was this kind of experience of medical school like?

DM: Um medical school. So I did two years of medical school before taking a year off; or what I thought one year off to do research. The first two years of medical school I think I was a decent student like I was what medical students call a gunner [laughs]. I was just rabidly competitive, right? And I wasn't that way in like, I wasn't like sabotaging people, but I was often trying to put on display my knowledge, right? Um I definitely was doing that and I was doing that to help other students as well. So I started a website where I would drop all of my notes, and I also collected notes from other students who also wanted to share the materials they had created for people to study from. So I would put it to service for other people.

But at the end of the day I felt it was very ego-driven right? Like look what I have done and I am so smart. There was just a bit of immaturity about me and maybe that was because I felt— maybe it was driven by insecurity, I don't know. I mean I was not one of those hard science majors so I felt I was a little bit at a disadvantage when I started medical school. So I don't know if my showboatness— I don't know what to call it— my being a showboat had to do with insecurity. That certainly was how I was in the first couple of years and I took a year off in order to do research in a neuroscience lab and really discovered that I love research; and I didn't have a chance to figure that out as an undergrad. I did a little research as an undergrad, but it wasn't in the right environment. And it wasn't with the right mentorship and they weren't asking the right research questions for me to be interested in research at the time. But the lab where I ended up after two years of medical school, I was so captivated by the work they were doing and also by the community of scientists that were gathered in the particular lab.

So I was really just impressed and questioning whether I really wanted to be in medicine honestly. So what I ended up doing was negotiating to take more time off to join the MD PhD program. So I was the first student they actually had that transitioned from the one year research program into the MD PhD

program, they had students before that had wanted to do it; but they didn't allow it until I asked. I was probably the third person who asked to do it and so they let me transition into the program and I ended up completing a PhD in the work I started in the first year.

So coming back into medical school after that experience I was obviously much older. And by that time I had two children. So I did not have the same attitude that I needed to show the world how knowledgeable I was. I mean I knew how knowledgeable I was, which and also at that point I understood how knowledgeable I wasn't and that is what you do start to understand pretty explicitly if you do grad school right is that the more you know, the more you realize you don't know. And that kind of humility was really helpful. Going back into medical school, I did have some trouble readjusting I think because I was so comfortable was, with the— what I feel was the culture of science. I don't know if this is true or if it was the product of the laboratory I was in. Because I don't think this is necessarily true talking to colleagues of mine who ended up in other labs or other institutions. It's not universally true that they have this wonderful experience and they think that the community is so rich and supportive and thought provoking; and people did not uniformly have that experience in science, but I did. So I had this idea that research was like this idyllic place and medicine was this hyper hierarchical, all about memorization and regurgitation of information and no critical thought. Just very toxic in a lot of ways and that's kind of the perspective the kind of lens I had on medicine going back to medical school, and starting residency I tried to quit residency twice. Because I just felt like I didn't belong after having done grad school and having had such a different experience that I just wanted to go back. I was just like I wanted to go back to science. I really detest this. I don't want to practice medicine, I don't want to be around these people. But you know I stuck with it. Many people told me I should stick with it mostly for practical reasons. They were like, "you don't want to have put in all this effort and have this path to economic security, at least that, you are just gonna throw away if you don't complete the training." And so I listened to them for better or for worse. I think that I would have done fine to not listen to them but I chose to listen to those voices and I am happy with where I ended up but anyways that was kind of my experience with medical school and the remainder of my medical training.

CL: So yeah now we are going to kinda transition into like how did you decide to pursue your current career? Um and please take us through the progression of your career if you transitioned through different positions?

DM: Sure um — so currently I am the director of scientific affairs at the EEG diagnostics company. EEG is a series of brainwave studies that are done principally for people where there is some suspicion that they may have epilepsy or seizures. We do them for a lot of other reasons as well and namely right now there's been in the last decade or so an incredible interest in critically ill patients who are obtunded, or otherwise their consciousness is impaired or altered. Um we do you know, we measure their brain waves basically to see what is happening in the brain; and we found when we've done this on a scale that, there are a lot of people that have seizures when they are critically ill, even if they don't have brain illness as their reason for being critically ill. They may be there because they have kidney failure or something else. But a large number of them actually are having seizures that are undetected unless you are measuring it.

Since they have discovered it, it has become a whole industry, right? So now there are companies that are trying to offer to measure, to read and interpret the studies and so I joined this company in 2015 as a medical advisor and at that time I was finishing up my training in fellowship in epilepsy and EEG and then I thought that I was going to stay in academic medicine. I had really an unfortunate negotiation or lack thereof with the man who would have been my chairman where I would have ended up as a professor.

I guess I don't go into the details of that right now. But it opened my eyes to the uphill battle for women and people of color in academia. And I was really blind to it. I remember actually really explicitly thinking that, you know, at some level, yes we need programs to support students from communities of color and otherwise very disadvantaged students, and I was very active actually on that front. I was often participating in mentorship programs and outreach programs and things like this in science in grad school. I think part of me also thought, at some point, you have to be good enough and you have to work hard enough and there shouldn't be any barriers. But when I attempted to negotiate this position with my chairman where I came in a very favorable position, where I had multiple first author publications. I had an MD PhD, I had independent funding for multiple years. I mean I had so many things and objectively you could look at that resume and say this person is going to be very successful in academic medicine. I was just—I mean I felt like I was taken like a joke what I was offered, how I was treated, and realized finally in that moment I mean I should have realized far before then. No it really doesn't go away this misogyny of racism. These attitudes—they are at the very top of the food chain.

So I left academic medicine and at the time I was in touch with this company and I was a medical advisor at the time and I asked them if they could create a position for me basically. And they said yes. They created a position and I came on as director of medical and scientific affairs at the time because they were small enough, and they couldn't afford to have two different people at those position at the same time. They didn't have the work for it, they didn't have the money to support it. So I filled those two roles for three years and in 2019, last year, I transitioned out of the director of medicine role and someone else transitioned into that role, a colleague of mine, and now I exclusively focus on scientific work for the company. So I do a lot of clinical trials work, and wearing my science hat, and I also do a lot of clinical readings still. And because I've been there for so many years and since the early days I'm also just kind of—I wear multiple hats in the company and I'm engaged with the executives in the company because I've been there for a long time.

CL: Um so that is disheartening to hear your experiences in the industry, but were there any mentors that helped you along the way?

DM: That's a good question. I have always sought mentorship, and I've never thought that that would come from a single person. I think that my world view is that the more information that you have and the more opportunity you have to decide what path is right for you. Every person is so unique and we are all so dynamic as human beings. So what may have been good at one point in my life may not be good for me now. And so I think it's important to have many many mentors. So I can't point to a single person who gave me advice. There were a number of people that I went to- to get different perspectives on what action I should take when I faced some of these challenges.

It was pretty traumatic for me because for a decade I thought I would be a physician scientist in academia. Then to get such a ridiculous offer, and really no firm commitment to support my development as a physician scientist. And you absolutely need that to be successful. I am not going to throw away five years of my life in attempting to move from instructor to assistant professor to associate professor, when I know you aren't going to give me the time or resources, devote to that path to do it successfully. So I was just like I'm not going to do that. To walk away from yes at one level I was like "yea power" I am walking away from the situation they're really trying to pull one over on me. But on the other hand it was a real shock. It was really unsettling to who I thought I was. I really had to kind of understand who I was— my identity aside from being a physician scientist in academia; because that is how I saw myself for so long.

You know, but I think it was good for me. I mean it allowed me to learn how to pivot it allowed me to expand my networks beyond academia. It allowed me to become very comfortable with being in different environments. That has served me well in the work I do now for Corticare at the EEG diagnostic company. Or even as importantly the work I do outside my paid labor which is my labors of love in community organizing and advocacy in our communities.

CL: As you mentioned some of the barriers that you faced. Why do you think they still exist today?

DM: yeah this is a good question. There's a fantastic book that I started reading by a scholar named— I don't know how you pronounce— Ibrim X. Kendi. He writes often for the Atlantic and is a professor of Africana studies. The book I'm reading now is called stamped from the beginning. It talks about racism in America but it actually starts with the beginnings of Western intellectual thought and how a lot of these problems we see with racism, and in many ways this is also true for sexism, and other isms like cissexism or heterosexism or bigotry against people that are disabled whatever it is right? Any deviation from what people establish as the norm. I think these ideas are very problematic. For a long time, I thought we could educate ourselves out of those ideas or we could cultivate compassion in people. I mean at some level you are born with these things and you are more compassionate than the person sitting next to you, but I did have this hope that some of it was teachable and this book— [audio cuts off]... ideas and actually kind of what's the word for it like reframing those ideas or repackaging these ideas over time to maintain power. And it's true, if you look back at it, it's a really compelling argument that you know he— there's another author named Michelle Alexander who wrote the new Jim Crow that got turned into the documentary 13th right? And she talks about how like slavery has really just um what's the word? Oh my gosh, the word is escaping me— what is this word, I can't believe I'm forgetting this— um I don't know if she uses this particular word— reincarnation right — this is my word I don't know that she's ever used it in this way, but the idea is the same. But it's reinvented right? From slavery to Jim Crow to incarceration, right? And this kind of thing it started happening before slavery is the argument Kendi makes, and I buy it right. There is something very seductive about power and once people have it, they make up ways to manipulate people through institutions that allow them to hang on to it. And so yea— I mean I don't— now I forget your original question.

CL: It was just about the barriers and why they still exist, but I think that was very... I think it addresses my original question.

DM: Yeah.

CL: I hear that you have two daughters. Was it difficult to kind of balance um the work and life balance with like children?

DM: Um I— I wish I could say that it was difficult because I think that is the circumstance for most people. I was very fortunate because I live, where my parents are and where my husband's parents are and my husband is also enormously supportive. So and he had the flexibility to do a lot of the childcare when I was going through especially my medical school and residency years. During grad school I- I think I did a lot of it because I had the time and flexibility and I wanted to. I mean I think I always want to, but during med school and residency it was hard to be the primary caretaker so it— that fell to my husband. But I understand that many people are not in that circumstance. I was actually really kind of irritated when I was interviewing for residency programs, I was at the Harvard mass pioneer infirmary or mass— yea. It's one of their— their principle hospital for ophthalmology residency training. So before I went to neurology, I thought I wanted to be an ophthalmologist and actually applied in ophthalmology. And then

my husband didn't want us to leave Houston, and I wanted to go to a specific program that was very research oriented anyways. And so I didn't actually following through on applying in ophthalmology.

But I was interviewing at this program at Harvard and there was this resident there. When I asked her how difficult residency was with her children, because she had children too and she said it was not too hard because my mom moved here. And I was like, "okay my mom is not going to move to Boston," and she's working. She loves me but she's not moving to Boston to raise my children and that's basically what this woman told me and I was like that's really unhelpful. So the relevant questions here is not, was it difficult for you? Because it wasn't, it wasn't but that's not most people's circumstance, right? And I think the relevant advice then to the majority of the world that struggles with this— women especially because child rearing is still highly gendered. I think the relevant advice is don't ever be unhappy with a B+, like you are going to be juggling many things and don't try to be that person that has an A in everything. Be happy to have the privilege to not only pursue your career but to have a family, right? To make a family and be okay with the fact that you're gonna get B's sometimes. That's okay.

CL: Yeah so how do you juggle your busy schedule?

DM: Uh gosh. I guess this is more relevant now because after I got COVID, I have had to really slow down. Physically, I am requiring a lot more sleep than I usually do. Normally, I actually only need 3-5 hours of sleep a night. I actually sleep very very little, but after getting COVID in March, I've required so much more sleep that I've had to figure out what to do with less time. yeah so I think what is important is to be very intentional with your time. I think it is especially important now when we are working from home where the boundaries aren't as discrete. When you used to *go* to school or *go* to work, and when we came home, we can disconnect from that a little bit, now it's harder for some people. Now I work from home, so I've had this issue for many years. For many people, they're kind of struggling to figure out how do you create those boundaries to make sure you can be attentive to all of the things you value right? Because otherwise, you can let certain activities bleed into the other activities that you also value. And you want to give sufficient time to everything. Time is— [audio cutting off]

DM: Sorry where did I cut off?

CL: Um when you started talking about time and focusing your time.

DM: Yeah so the advice I wanted to give there was that it is important to be intentional about your time. To set boundaries around it and to realize your time is valued right? So I have the problem of saying yes to everything— [audio cutting off]

CL: I'm sorry... I'm sorry can you hear me? Oh.

DM: Some time of collective effort and someone says, It would be really great if we could do this. And nobody volunteers themselves, I cannot handle that silence, I will volunteer myself. And it's awful because I end up doing things where my skill set, and my resources are not best utilized. But because I can't handle there being silence, I put myself into things or put myself into things where I shouldn't. And that's another way to protect your time is to be cognizant of that kind of compulsion.

CL: yeah so what are some values you consider important that you will instill in your children that may not have been communicated to you by your parents?

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DM: Gosh that's hard because I feel like the most important value that I've learned in my life came from my parents and I think it really fundamentally informed how I raised my children and how I think about the world. Something that did not come from my parents is really hard. I'm actually gonna still stick with something— the thing that came from them because in some ways it is actually— it is actually one of these meta observations, or like a meta piece of advice it is actually creates this space that have not come from them.

So what they told me I remember very distinctly. I was 16 I think. We had this conversation where they said that there are things — ideas that they have and customs that they have that they brought from Korea which is where they come from. While some of those things may be relevant to me and how I live my life, some of those things will not be relevant. And um the corollary to that is that things that I learn here— customs, practices, attitudes, values that I learn here in this country may be more relevant to my life here in this country. And so I have to figure out what things to keep and what things to discard. And that's the advice they gave me, which is not the advice most people give. Most people give this very discrete advice and they have this ego that is attached— [audio cut off]

CL: I'm sorry. I think you froze again.

DM: Am I back?

CL: You are good. It cut off— I think you were talking about— Sorry I don't...

DM: I was in general talking about the advice that my parents gave me. I was trying to say that it was not directional. It was more like you're gonna have to figure it out yourself, but it's not that open— it's not that open-ended that's not advice really. It was to say that there are somethings that you inherit that are valuable. And you have to figure out what those things are. And there are some things that you inherit that are not relevant for the context you are in and you have to figure out what those things are. They didn't tell me what those things are. Because that's a judgement that I have to make for myself. That was very empowering to me. It was remarkably empowering to me and I think has shaped my life and how I raised my children, how I think about society and how... I mean I'm very anti-paternalism because of it because my parents did not raise me like that, which is unusual. I mean in some ways they did— I can definitely give you anecdotes, where I'm like, "oh my god, that was so paternalistic and they were all over me for this or that."

But I think at the end of the day the overarching theme was like you are gonna have to figure this out right and just understand that not everything that comes from your parents and not everything that you historically inherent from society. Not everything is bad. Not everything is relevant anymore. So you have to figure it out and that was just like—

CL: Can you hear me?

DM: Yes I can now.

CL: So I see that from your website, that you are running for the PISD board of trustees and it shows that you have a deep interest in equal opportunity of education for people of color and immigrants. What drove you towards running for this position?

DM: So I—

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CL: Sorry, I'm sorry, I think I can't—I can't hear— umm... I think you are back.

DM: Are you on a call right now? Can you not be streaming something. This is super unstable and they are recording something right now. Sorry what was the questions?

CL: So I see that you are running for the PISD board of trustees and your website shows that you have deep interest in equal opportunity of education for people of color and immigrants. What kind of drove you towards running for this position?

DM: Right so what I was— [audio cut off] Is it back?

So this year I ran last year. It was how I got interested in running for school board right? So in 2015-2017 I had become very active in immigration advocacy and um had been doing a lot of work around know your rights training, which is basically training immigrant family and immigrant youth, how to keep themselves safe in encounters with law enforcement. And that just is acknowledging the reality that we have a lot of anti-immigrant policy and anti-immigrant attitudes even that we have to protect ourselves from. And so I wanted to be a part of educating people on how to do that, and at the same time I was doing a lot of advocacy in parallel around changing the system that produces those kind of attitudes or rewards those kinds of attitudes and to dismantle those kinds of laws.

But anyways, I went to the school board because I know that our school district has a lot of immigrant families here and we had just passed legislation in 2016- 2017 called SP4 it's like an anti-sanctuary state law which allows local law enforcement to engage with immigration and customs enforcement federally and it ends up that local law enforcement will racially profile people who they believe might be immigrants and they can pull them over, they can question them about their immigration status. And so I wanted to make sure that the families in Pearland where my children are, that they would be safe. Because I was doing this work all over greater Houston and in fact had gotten involved with work across state and nationally. So I was like well, you know I should be active in my own community. I am not doing anything in Pearland where I live. So I went before the school board at that time to suggest that we provide know your rights training to families and I provided rationale for why that was the moment to do it— to start doing it. And it just fell on deaf ears and I could t— it was all I mean um there was one African American man on the board at the time. It was otherwise an all white board. I was just like they don't have a lived experience being an immigrant in this country especially in this particular moment.

And so I need to— I need to maybe address that at some point. So by 2019 I decided after in addition to having that experience, having personal experiences with my children, and the children of my friends having various kind of issues with this districts. I was like we need better leadership in this district and if nobody is going to step up to run against these incumbents, and I think a time there were, I think, three seats that were going to go unchallenged. I just think it is bad for democracy to have unchallenged incumbents like that. At least someone should throw their hat- maiden hat- I mean even if you don't campaign at all. So I decided I was going to run and usually when I decide on something, it wasn't like I was super excited about it. I never really thought— I never really cared for trying.... [audio cuts off]... it doesn't work that way.

It is that there's an environment externally that is forcing that organization to evolve and so it's like I don't want to be on the inside because the people on the inside they are not actual change agents, but then I was like, "I don't want these seats on the inside to go unchallenged and certainly do need people on the inside to be receptive to pressure from outside so I decided to run." Like I said, I wasn't super thrilled to be doing it, but when I commit to something. I mean this is how I end up doing so much of what I do in

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my life, like I said I feel like I can't just let it go unoccupied. So I usually will volunteer for things, but I find that once I do it, because of who I am. I am all in. So I raised \$30,000. To be competitive in Texas on average you need to raise \$20,000. So I raised like \$30,000. We touched like— we either canvassed or called at their doors 20,000 people— an enormous amount of people. I hired a campaign manager, I had a campaign staff, I lived my values and paid those people \$15 an hour because that is what I believe people should be paid at least right now. And yeah and after all of that, the incumbent and the political machine here that really owns local government. They are all connected through business through their faith community and they own local government. Those folks put out I mean just a horrifying, super unprofessional, entirely unethical campaign of disinformation. I had people calling me “Dr. Wonton”, I had— we had emails that went out in mass with our faces on the email and an ISIS flag in the background, trying to tie us to terrorism. I mean at first I thought it was a joke, you know— but then I was deeply offended for our Muslim community here. It is so intolerant of religious minority communities. This is horrifying, I can't even believe, that I mean I run this very professional campaign. I put out videos daily so that people can try to connect to who I am and don't misunderstand me because they have no substrate right. I mean so they have nothing to go off of. So I was like I will have videos, I am gonna engage frequently I am going to offer to meet people in person whenever there is any you know what appears to be misunderstanding. I mean I was very forthcoming, I was I think very professional, very kind, very compassionate and that is what they did.

I mean they- they said they put messaging out there that I wanted to fire all white teacher and I don't care white kids getting killed— I mean so many absurd and just terrible terrible things because I think they were scared. Again, it was about doing whatever you have to do to hold onto power. And I think that's what it was. They saw here someone that could unseat the people they had put into place. That went however it went, but what I was very proud of was we put in a really genuine effort to build our community, to change the narrative around a lot of the injustices that we see in our community— that we continue to see in our community. We learned how to engage with the press very effectively to where we were able to change things even without us even being on the school board because we learned how to publicly engage to where there was political pressure on the school board members to change certain policies. So I mean that is what I wanted at the end of the day. I am not seeking fame or glory because I have my name on some plaque or something as a school board member. I mean I could care less. Most of what I do in my life I feel like that I feel is important I do without acknowledgement. I don't talk about it necessarily except for with a small number of people. And that is not what I am seeking to do. I am seeking for change to happen for people to be empowered to be a part of that change-making. I am not seeking credit.

CL: That's really scary to hear what people are willing to keep their power or when they feel like threatened. yeah um, so your website also talks about your interest in mental health. What is your perspective on Asian Americans as this kind of model minority and therefore kind of they are told to shun away from seeking mental health support, even when there might be a need?

DM: Oh my gosh I missed most of that can you hear me right now?

CL: Yes I can. I'm sorry I can repeat that.

DM: Yeah you said the website talked about mental health.

CL: So yes, I saw on your website that you have an interest in mental health. So I was wondering what your thoughts were about Asian Americans as this kind of model minority therefore, we shun away from seeking mental health support even when there may be a need for it?

DM: yeah I really appreciate that you framed it in that way because I don't normally think about it like that, but I certainly think that it is a disservice to all people in our community that we inherit this myth, right? And I mean to be fair, there are many people in our community that perpetuate the myth. So they do play an active role in that. But yeah, it is a disservice to us as whole human beings because it suggests that we are like superhuman right? But that we're— we work harder than others, that we are smarter than others, whatever the case may be. And I think it's really unfortunate and that it really will take work from within our communities to address that and dismantle that. But it will also take work between our communities and other minority communities to, to help dismantle that myth. Because some of the toxicity comes from ideas that are also perpetuated by people outside of our communities. Not people who invented the myth necessarily, but by people who have adopted it and they believe it. For better or worse, they may have a positive impression of you because of that myth, or they may have a negative one because of that. I think myths are bad in that way because it denies your individuality and your humanity in a lot of ways; and it just kind of marks you as kind of as a type, right? And yeah and mental illness is like it's a real thing that people are just now beginning to take seriously you know with parity in terms of how they regard mental health versus physical health. Are you still with me here?

CL: Can you still hear me?

DM: Where did I blank out?

CL: You didn't blank out. Your voice was there, but your video froze, but I think that's okay.

DM: Okay got it. yeah I mean so when I ran for school board, I realized that. I mean I was very pleased to realize this. Because I actually had this idea in my head that it did not come from— where I discovered it when I was running, I discovered that the CDC at the time. They had this whole— I don't know what it was called at the time. It wasn't a campaign, but it was like a framework for thinking about how we educate our children and that it should be holistic and so that's how I ran my campaign actually. Like I am a candidate who will push for policies that will push for this idea for whole child health. The way we educate children should not be exclusively about cognitive development or academic achievement, but it should very much integrate how much we value or should value the social and emotional development in children which includes their mental health and well-being.

We had a large problem in our district because we had a number of suicides. Our suicide rate was like several fold higher than the average for the country so yeah that was a big deal. We do have a large Asian American community. I don't actually know the racial or ethnic identity of the kids who committed society. One of them was— there was an attempt where the child was biracial and half-Asian. So it is a big problem in our communities. I think there is also a lot of silence and shame about these kinds of issues. And that's independent of the model minority myth that even if you go to East Asian or South East Asian countries, there will be a lot of those cultural attitudes. So we are facing a lot of intersecting challenges in terms of how we deal with mental health in our communities.

CL: Right so I am going to shift to the COVID questions. So you mentioned that you had contracted COVID, what has that experience been like for you?

DM: Um it's been really frustrating because— thank god I am a physician. And I have confidence in my ability to assess my symptoms. I started exhibiting symptoms when they were not testing widely. I had been in a community where I was exposed to someone who had been exposed to a person under

investigation. Ultimately when they realized, “oh this might be the woman who works at a hotel desk where they have a lot of international travelers.” And so they are like this might be this— this disease that everybody’s talking about everywhere. They were just, it was just coming into their consciousness that this could be a problem in their community and so it never occurred to anyone to test me. At that time when I came back to Houston, they were not testing anyone who did not travel internationally, right, or had very specific symptoms. I was like I don’t really get this because when I read the literature from Wuhan, it was tens of thousands of people who had described such a multitude of symptoms, just a syndrome across many different organ systems including... [audio cut off]

CL: Sorry can you hear me?

DM: Yeah I can.

CL: You froze when you were talking about the organs being targeted by COVID throughout the body.

DM: Right so the screenings they were doing early on was very focused on the most common symptoms. I mean I understand why you would want to start with the most common symptoms at the top of your list because it is a list right? I mean like 3 out of the 20, you should list them all and ask people, “do they have any of these?” Because they would manifest in so many people in China and also in Italy. We have so many examples internationally of what is happening to people with this disease. Why are we like creating like all of this anew?

And like I was really frustrated and I didn’t actually get a diagnosis of this from PCR testing because I didn’t test until well into my symptoms and from what limited literature exists on this. The longer you wait, the less likely you will have a positive test. I had all these symptoms, but I never had a PCR confirmed diagnosis. So I was like in the middle of having this illness. And in fact I mean I knew about this illness in January because I had friends who were freaked out about their families in Wuhan. And so I was hearing a lot about it and I was like, “oh my gosh it is coming over here, like there was a case in Washington. We have to be prepared for it.” So I held the first— to my knowledge, the first COVID community forum in Pearland in greater Houston. So I held that on March 5th and so in the midst of doing all this education and organizing and advocacy around COVID, I get COVID which was frustrating and ironic and like I can’t even get a diagnosis for it right? So it’s like do people even believe me that I have this illness? I mean I was like sleeping like much more than I normally do, and I had like this constellation of symptoms. It wasn’t the normal stuff at all and I continued to have it. I had to go to— in May, I had to go to the ER two days in a row; they almost hospitalized me. I had gotten two different brain and head scans. On Monday of this past week I had to get another brain vessel study, because I had another sudden onset neurological symptom. I am somebody who is a prolific writer and I have had difficulty writing, I have noticed, I have made a lot of mistakes. In the beginning I was like, substituting words, so like I would choose like before instead of between, which just doesn’t make sense in the context right? And now I am just making what maybe some people think are— are typos— typographical errors. That would be generous because I don’t think they’re typos— I think there’s something that is not right about the way I am thinking that doesn’t allow me to express myself as readily as I was able to before. I still write quite a bit, but I find myself making a lot more mistakes. I have to check my writing much more, yeah. I mean I’ve had a lot of neurological symptoms.

I have actually had a history of a brain infection so there might be something about my brain that is just more vulnerable somehow? At the time they thought it was a cold virus that had gone to my brain like maybe through my nose or something like that. But I had encephalitis(?) I was out for a week like I don’t remember that week of my life. Um so-so I think that whatever is happening with COVID now with the

way that it manifested in me. I think it might be particular for me although the literature does show pretty pervasive reports of neurological symptoms up to like 30% of people have some kind of neurological symptoms they are showing. And if you count something like fatigue, which you know I don't know if I would count that as neurological, but it is much more. Fatigue is one of the most common symptoms in um COVID especially post-COVID.

CL: So on the same kind of idea. What do you think about the whole thing like the way that, in which the government has chosen to handle this situation?

DM: yeah I mean I think so much in the crisis in the many levels of government that I see, is the inability to admit error. It's a reluctance to characterize in terms of nuanced realities as if those two absolutes. People tend to lead in absolutes. They tend to message in absolutes, and I think it is galvanizing of voters often, right? Like if you say, Well, I don't take this position exactly on this binary right? I'm not exactly there, I'm somewhere in the middle for these reasons. That is not as compelling as I am here! I am here for this reason I mean that, that is what you traditionally think in terms of leadership. Like somebody who is very— someone who has strong convictions they have... values that cannot be undermined! This is what most people have thought of in terms of leadership. These things are very problematic. When you have a pandemic that you don't understand, right? And you are constantly having to re-evaluate and pivot, you cannot be operating in absolutes. You have to be able to say, "I was wrong there." The reason we are changing course there is because I was wrong. Because science is always evolving right? Sometimes it's because you're an evil person and you made a calculated evil error, but you know I try to be generous and mostly it's not that. At the highest levels, I think it is some of that it is political posturing, political calculation um. And I think that is very unfortunate, but I think the majority of Americans, that is not why they are behaving in the way they are behaving its— [audio cut off]

Are you there?

CL: Yes sorry you paused at why certain people are behaving the way they are behaving?

DM: Um yeah... I don't remember what I said there, but what I was trying to say was that it is really being a lack of humility in leadership. And, and I think it is, I mean it is unfortunately systems that we've created or attitudes that we've created over time where people do not feel empowered to change the lack of leadership right? They— they don't feel empowered in that, they don't know that there is any avenue for change. They don't know how to engage the systems around them. They don't know how power masks in their communities. Who do you go to when you have a problem? People don't know these things and it's been very intentional by the people who hold the power in the past several decades, they have very intentionally disinvested in educating the population for citizen literacy. And that's a real problem because when you are in a crisis, and you have poor leadership. How do you get yourself out of the crisis? But for the populace to understand how to come together and act collectively to basically rescue the situation. That can only happen when there are enough people that are literate who can organize their communities to take collective action.

And I'm hoping that there are currently enough of us that have learned enough especially over the last four years when there's been like a very strong anti-Trump action. That there is a way out of this. That a lot of these problems are actually long-standing problems. And yeah, that we can organize ourselves out of this problem and hopefully stay committed to it. Because organizing ourselves out of the pandemic out of the Trump presidency. This is all very— we have to understand that this is a long-term investment in shaping the culture of civic consciousness.

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CL: That was very well put, but do you think there has been enough Asian Americans participating in recent events protesting against racial injustice such as Black Lives Matter and COVID, and the racism against Asian Americans, and the administration's handling of international students? Sorry that was a long question.

DM: No-no-no. There's a lot going on. I always wish for more. I mean I think this is a function of being progressively minded. It's like we can always do better. That is true invariably including for Asian Americans. So yeah, there are things that are disappointing for me about our communities, and that we are not as politically engaged as others are. But at the same time, we haven't been here as long as some of the other communities have been here right? Latinos have been here since before the country was founded right? In Texas, we have people that have been here since the land was owned by Mexico or Spain right? And, and you know people who are Black in America other than Black immigrants, new Black immigrants are, you know, descendants of slaves, they have been here for 400 years right?

So it is unfair to say that I expect us to be in the same place in terms of our political consciousness as Asian Americans. That being said, I feel like we have the opportunity to learn from our brothers and sisters in other communities, right? Um to hopefully accelerate our consciousness, right? Um and for us to become more aware and involved in our communities. It's also difficult for us because um and this was actually in some parts driven by us, or in large parts driven by us, there was a decision just like for Latinos to collectively identify as Hispanic right? Or, or as Latino. It gives you political power. We have done that as Asian Americans I mean there are various acronyms that are used to describe us, the one I use most commonly is AAPI or Asian American Pacific Islander, but people use a number of other ones to be more inclusive typically, and to be more nuanced.

And I- I think it's more difficult because they're very heterogeneous because not only do we come from different countries, but like Latinos do, we speak many different languages. Yeah, there are some things that unify us across cultures, but I think we also have very distinct cultures too. Um just depending on which communities you are comparing under the AAPI umbrella, so this makes it a lot more challenging for us to act collectively right? But all of that being said, I think that diversity is strength, just like in biology were, you know, genetically the most robust organisms are the ones that are the most genetically diverse kind of, in an empowering way, in a cooperative way with other communities. To be heard, to be represented right? I think that overcoming those challenges will make us stronger, it will make us very strong, because there are many challenges to overcome. So it is both a blessing and a curse.

CL: So what do you think will motivate the Asian American community to show more support for kind of these causes politically?

DM: You know I think that I have come to a place that not just for Asian Americans— [audio cut off]

CL: Sorry you are back—

DM: Where did I leave off?

CL: Oh you left off at one sentence in.

DM: What I was going to say was that, not just for Asian Americans but for human beings in general is that, crisis is often necessary for change to happen; so that means that moment that we are in right now that is a very difficult one. Um also I think that it creates the opportunity for very transformational change in our society and that includes with Asian Americans who are affected in very particular ways by this

pandemic and also with all the discussions centered around race right? Very heavily I think with good reason focused around Black Americans, but more inclusive than just Black Americans, right? It's about a lot of different groups and about basically anyone who is non-white in our country. I think it does take crisis for things to change in our country.

The only exception to this is, and that is why I ran for school board and continue and maintain that if I were to run for something else it would have to be influence education substantially. The other thing is that you can change the way that people are educated. And this is not kind of in a pedantic way. Back to the advice my parents gave me, it's not giving them a directive in the way that you educate them. It's not telling them *what* to think about the world, but *how* to think about the world how to interpret the data that they collect. These kinds of thing, you know, educating people in the manner of thinking, right? Um I think it's really critical, whether we are talking about scientific literacy, which is important in this moment with all the misinformation on the pandemic; or whether it is civic literacy. I think people need to think— people need to learn how to think critically. That I think may change. That may change for us a lot of the injustices that we see it may resolve those injustices in very substantial ways, um when people realize that this is like I told you. And I have come to believe that this is about manipulating ideas for power and it is not about the intrinsic inferiority of a group right? It's not about the choices or cultural practices of a group even, I mean we are all different in different ways right and none of those ways are less or more than the others. And anybody who has those kinds of ideas whether they think it is by nature or by nurture that any particular group is more or less than any other. This is— that's a racist idea and I think that there are ways to unteach that and it's not just in saying, "don't be racist— that does not work" I think it is in teaching people how to think critically about themselves and about the world around them. That I think will undo racism, and that is an educational endeavor, but I think that if people committed to those things both in leveraging the moment that we are in, right? To create some transformational change and also committing to a longer-term vision of educating people in such a way that they have the kind of tools to interrogate this type of manipulation that we are subject to. Then I think we are going to solve a lot of problems.

CL: Yeah well we've covered all my questions, but do you have any closing remarks or any hopes for the future generations?

DM: Um I mean, I just want to say that I really appreciate the opportunity to be able to speak with you guys as part of this archival project. I had recently been asked by two or three people. I think this week I am knocking them all out, and these podcasts or interviews. I always feel really weird about that because I don't... Again I am not someone who tries to center themselves. I am against celebrity culture and I think this causes civic issues because people externalize the responsibility to take action. They say, "That person is amazing and that person can do things," and will clap for them and I don't have to do anything. I think this is problematic and was my first impression to do all these interviews. I don't like to contribute to that, but I will say selfishly that it really helps me to think about what I am doing in my own life to have the opportunity to speak to you and other people to speak about how I view the world. So selfishly, I feel really grateful and hope this is helpful for other people. I don't know in what way precisely it will help other people, but I hope that it does. I imagine that you all think that it will. That's why you're taking the task. And so... [audio cut off]

Am I back?

[Interview ends.]