

Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA)
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Bec Sokha Keo
Interviewer: Sonia He
Date of Interview: 9/29/2020
Transcribed by: Emily Ma
Edited by: Gordan Liu
Audio Track Time: 1:00:24

Background: Bec Sokha Keo is a Ph.D. candidate studying social work at the University of Houston. They work as a Public Impact Scholar in a capacity building center that partners with organizations led by and serving people living with HIV in the Deep South. Keo is a Houston native, but their family immigrated to the United States as refugees from Cambodia to escape the genocide carried out by the Khmer Rouge. Keo has been involved in many organizations that promote and advocate for the rights of those in the LGBTQ+ community, even helping co-found a local organization to bring together transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming people of all ages, their loved ones and providers. Even though there have been challenges of racism and elitism, Keo remains active and hopeful in making a change. Keo has also testified in the Texas state legislature in opposition to Senate Bill 6, a bill that was anti-trans and anti-gender non-conforming, as well as co-authoring multiple statements against discriminatory legislature. They give advice to those seeking to be active in policy and speak about the struggles of growing up in a community that both accepted them for their heritage yet hurt them for their gender expression and sexuality.

Setting: This interview took place over the video conferencing software Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key:

BSK: Bec Sokha Keo

SH: Sonia He

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

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

Interview transcript:

SH: All right. Hello, my name is Sonia He. Today is September 29, 2020. I'm here with Bec Sokha Keo, who is here interviewing with Houston Asian American Archive at Rice University. Thank you for being with us today. And just really quickly to begin, where and when were you born?

BSK: Yes, hi. I was born—my name is Bec Sokha and I use they/them pronouns. I was born in Houston, Texas, on September 29, 1987.

SH: Great, so you were born in Houston. How did your family end up coming to the United States?

BSK: Well, my family, they—my family members were displaced by—from Cambodia due to the genocide that was carried out by the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge took control of the country after Cambodia was destabilized by the United States' secret bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War, which led to the mass genocide of Khmer people. And so my family became refugees, and sought refuge at a Thai—at the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, and immigrated as refugees first to the Philippines. This is

my mom's side of the family, the Yim side. I was raised by, or I'm—yeah, I was raised by the Yim family. And they first immigrated to the Philippines, stayed there for a few months, then ended up in Denver, stayed there, I think winter came along, and they were like, nope, because it was way too cold, and the climate was very different from the climate that they were used to, and then ended up settling in Houston, in around 1980 and 1981, I think.

SH: Great. And so just quickly, which generation was that? Was that your parents or your grandparents?

BSK: Both my parents and their siblings and my grandparents were immigrants from, from Cambodia. **[SH:** All right. So then, you were—] And also to—note, it was—sorry, it was a forced migration, again, because of the, the genocide that happened, and to this day, no accountability for the folks who were involved in, in that harm that was done.

SH: Yeah. So you grew up in Houston, correct? **[BSK:** Yes.] What was your childhood like? How were you as a child, what'd you like to do, what was the neighborhood you grew up in?

BSK: I grew up—we lived with my grandparents, for a couple of years. And then my parents purchased a home near my grandparents in the same neighborhood, around Hobby Airport. And I liked to play outside a lot. There wasn't very much to do. I didn't have access to computer at that time, didn't have a phone, or a tablet. And so I spent a lot of time outside with my grandparents. My grandfather used to spend a lot of time in his garden, so I'd kind of follow him around. One of my closest family members, my cousin would visit from California every summer. And those were—those are some of my favorite memories as a child, was when my cousin Phil would visit and we'd play together, because I didn't grow up with siblings either. I'm about 12 and 13 years older than my sister and my brother.

SH: So what were some of the values you were taught as a child?

BSK: Oh, values. The two that stick out most to me were education and—valuing education, valuing knowledge. And one of the reasons why is my family doesn't take education for granted. They come from very education—educated backgrounds in Cambodia, but were also among some of the groups of people that were targeted and persecuted because of their education by the Khmer Rouge regime, and so they—sorry, my dogs barking, one second. Yeah, so—so education was a value, valuing knowledge. They grew up educated, my grandfathers, my—my dad's dad and my mom's dad were both principals of schools. And my dad's mom was a midwife, my mom's mom was a teacher. And so when the Khmer Rouge took over, they were targeted because they were educated, like many other people who were intellectuals, or asked questions. And...yeah, that was something that was highly valued here, and something that I was taught to not take for granted, especially because we had a different type of access to education here in America. Yeah, so my grandfathers were both principals of elementary schools in Cambodia, and my dad's mom was a midwife, my mom's mom was a teacher back in Cambodia, and as a side note, in preparing for this interview, I asked my grandma, my mom's mom, about, you know, her experience in the educational system, to just know more about the values that I was taught growing up, and how I got to where I am now in terms of education. And so I asked my grandma, you know, “What did you teach in Cambodia?” And her response was, “I taught gender roles. I taught girls how to be girls, and I taught boys how to be boys.” And in my mind, which is exploding, I'm thinking the irony of, of our life, and our journey has come full circle, and brought me joy in that moment. And to know that my grandma was a teacher of gender roles, and I am too a teacher of gender roles, but teach about gender in a very different way.

SH: That's amazing.

BSK: The other—sorry, the other value was service to community. So I also grew up in a small Cambodian Baptist Church. And as soon as I could learn to play the piano, and play musical instruments, my contribution to community at that time was to lead worship music with my dad, who also, or actually still, plays music in the band at the church. So education and contribution to community are the two main values that stick out to me.

SH: So, did the kind of religious background affect your values or experience in your childhood, or any experiences in your childhood?

BSK: Yeah, it's—it's—it's tricky. Yes, it influenced my values in strengthening the sense of the... in providing a space for Khmer people to come together, which is rare in this area. So it gave me a sense of community in that I was able to grow up with other Khmer folks, and learn the language. Khmer was my first language growing up, learn and be a part of the culture. So in terms of having—feeling like I belonged to a community because I'm Khmer, yes. That was very helpful. Kindness, right, we were taught that in church too. And the reason why I say it is complicated in terms of values is because you know, there were—there was some homophobia and transphobia within the church and expectations to conform to gender roles. And over time, I did find that to be stifling for me. And so I ended up trying to figure out, you know, a different space that—where I could exist, and that part of who I am could also exist and thrive. And so while the church community has been helpful in that it's provided a space for Khmer folks to get together and honor our culture, there's another side to it, where it has been hurtful to some people, because of parts of who we are.

SH: All right.

BSK: My family, they are survivors of so many things, and I'm so proud to be their grandchild, their child. When they first started their journey to America, I think their first encounter with white dominant culture was—were the white Christian missionaries at the refugee camps at Khao-I-Dang in Thailand. And from there, continued to encounter white supremacy, and white dominance, and racism, and classism in a lot of different ways, both interpersonally and socially, but also institutionally, in navigating all of the systems that they've had to navigate here in the States.

SH: So just kind of as a quick follow up, do you think that by establishing their own church and by founding their own Cambodian Baptist Church of Houston, that they have kind of shed that, or they've kind of overcome that white dominance and white supremacy?

BSK: I think it's hard for any Asian person, any person of color, to overcome white dominance when we are contextualized in a society that's built on white dominance and white supremacy. So, overcoming that, I think is—is going to be a challenge for all of that. Undoing that is something that will be a lifelong process and journey that we will be on if we want to be. But I do think that establishing the Cambodian Baptist Church of Houston, which my grandpa, Eap Yim, and my grandma Pen Kim Horn were a big part of helping to establish that church, helped the community to have a space that honors their culture, our culture, and helps the community honor the beliefs that they have, while—while honoring and making space for all of our culture at the same time. And my—I would imagine that before then, being a part of what was called the “mother church,” that was a historic white dominated Baptist church in Houston, there probably wasn't—that wasn't happening in the way that felt, that felt good for—for the folks involved, and so, so yeah, I do think that establish—establishing the church was helpful to community and is helpful to many folks who are searching for a Cambodian Baptist space to be a part of.

SH: Definitely, that's great. All right, so just kind of moving on into your education. Where did you go as an undergraduate, and what did you study, and what made you interested in that field?

BSK: I was I guess, kind of stereotypically on a medical path [laughs] for a really long time. I was—I had a great experience at DeBakey High School for Health Professions. And I was on a science medical track in undergrad, and originally was going to study biology, but recognized along the way that that wasn't the right path for me. I wasn't passionate about it. I was drawn to something—I knew I wasn't drawn to that. And I ended up switching to psychology, and so I got my Bachelor's of Science in psychology at the University of Houston in 2011.

SH: So I saw on the timeline that you gave me that you came out to your parents when you were transitioning from undergraduate to graduate school. And was there anything that kind of prompted that or made you feel comfortable with that decision?

BSK: It wasn't the coming out as queer—which at the time, I didn't use the word queer, I said I was not heterosexual [laughs]. Because I—the—the labels in the—the—in the Western context, I—I'm not super comfortable with, because I don't feel like the, I guess, common labels that we use to describe someone's sexuality or someone's gender doesn't necessarily capture the full cultural experience that some people have. So at that time, I came out as “not heterosexual.” Right now, I do identify as queer in terms of my sexuality. And that is also a bit of a complicated story. I don't—I didn't necessarily come out completely by choice. I don't know how my parents figured out that I was queer at the time. But my mom approached me, and it was a struggle, but we set aside some time. And I ended up telling her about the people that I had dated, and about who I am in terms of my sexuality and my partner at the time. And they've come a long way. At the time, I prepared for the worst, in meaning rejection, and because I, you know, at that point, had volunteered and worked with so many folks who had been rejected by their families when they were coming out as LGB or Q. So I was very concerned about being rejected by my parents and my family. And so I prepared myself for that, and had a support system, also outside of my family, that offered their care and love and support during that process too, which was difficult for everyone involved. But they didn't reject me, and—which I'm, you know, I'm—I'm grateful for, and, you know, looking back, I—it's hard to believe that I ever thought that my parents would reject me for any reason, because I feel their love so much and so deeply as I reflect on my life. So yeah, they didn't reject me, they did say they didn't understand, but that they loved me. And they're open to trying to understand, which I think was the—the, you know, they did the best with what they could, and what they had at the time. And, to my knowledge, they've also had support from members of their church to, to know more about being a family member of someone who is queer. And I'm also grateful for the relationship that they have with some of the church members who have supported them through their evolution of understanding and openness.

SH: That's amazing to hear. You kind of briefly mentioned that you had worked with, or you were helping people who you mentioned were rejected by their family members for coming out, or—or being non gender-conforming, or just not heterosexual. I was just kind of wondering, how did you get into—like in what organizations were you involved in in undergraduate that might have led to that, or kind of what started your involvement with the community in this way?

BSK: Yeah, I volunteered for a while with a local organization that serves lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, gender nonconforming people. And as a part of an internship for grad school, I helped to co-create a support group for adult trans and gender nonconforming, nonbinary, genderqueer folks, gender expansive people. And before that, I was also volunteering as a co-facilitator for a youth trans and gender nonconforming support group as well. So that has been my involvement in terms of creating space with people, to, again, create community, which has been helpful for folks who experience—who often

feel rejection, from family, from friends, from community, because of their sexuality, or gender identity and expression.

SH: So you're currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Houston. But before now, you also pursued a masters, correct? [**BSK:** Yes.] Okay, so what, what made you interested in continuing with a masters and now continuing with a PhD? And kind of what degree did you get in the Masters? And what degree are you pursuing now as a PhD student?

BSK: I—they're both social work. So I finished up the Masters in social—I was in the dual program. And so, I finished up the masters program in about 2014, 2013, around there, and continued on with the PhD because I really enjoy research and find value in creating changes in society, through policy, through changes in organizations, changes in the way we do things. That's informed by research and data and that is the main reason why I went forward with the PhD, is because I really like research.

SH: So could you kind of describe one of the—what kind of research you're doing currently?

BSK: Sure. It's—most of my research is focused on—my dissertation is focused on genderqueer and nonbinary gender affirmation, or recognition, and the impact on genderqueer, and nonbinary community members' wellness, because we live in such a binary world when it comes to a lot of things because of colonization, and how colonization dichotomizes many categories and identities, including gender. So we live in such a binary world that oftentimes, although things are changing now pretty quickly, but still pretty often, socially and institutionally, genderqueer and nonbinary people are erased or ignored. And that's harmful to our wellness overall as genderqueer and nonbinary and gender nonconforming people, but also harmful to society overall too to have a part of our identity dishonored, just like any part of our identity, or dismissed. And so some of my research is looking at the mental health and wellness of folks as it relates to gender identity, and expression affirmation.

SH: That's great. So what are some of the struggles you kind of encountered as a researcher? Mostly because again, like you said, like we live in a society that's so binary. And then being a person who wants to break those boundaries and break that kind of idea imposed by society, what are the struggles you've encountered, as a person who's a part of a community that's kind of ignored by society, and as a researcher who's kind of involved in kind of trying to make things different?

BSK: Yeah, in research, research is also pretty—still pretty binary in practice. When it comes to gender, like people are still limiting gender options to “woman” and “man.” And oftentimes, if trans or gender nonconforming folks are included, there's this “other” category, which is also exclusionary and pathologizing and othering. In HIV research and data collection, oftentimes, trans women are still included with—in—within the category of men who have sex with men, which is super problematic and erases the experiences of trans women. And trans men are included in—again, these binaries, right, included in a different category. And yeah, just gender, right? It's—there's a long way to go in terms of research and expanding our options and how to figure out how to honor the data and honor the folks who share their lives in data and in research so we can better serve community, and include community in the work.

SH: So just—this is kind of maybe thinking to the future, but what do you hope to do with your research experience, with your degree? And what do you hope to do in the future in order to change kind of the society that we're in?

BSK: The question is, what do I hope to do with the research, to change...

SH: What do you hope—well, kind of just like, what do you hope to do with your research? I mean, what do you hope to just kind of do in the future in general? Just—I don't know, I guess this also—this probably is also a very kind of like, strict guideline question, but like, just what do you want to do in the future, kind of?

BSK: [laughs] Well, with research, I hope to share what I find, and what other people find, to help to generate and share more knowledge that challenges our assumptions, and the way that we think and the way that we work together, about a lot of things: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, you name it, I hope that we can honor the experiences of queer and trans people of color who are researchers and who are working to honor the stories of the participants in the research studies too, to—to transform the community and enhance systems to better serve groups that are—that disproportionately face a host of adversities because of racism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, classism, all of the “isms” and systems of oppression. That's what I hope that research will help us do.

SH: Great. So kind of moving on into—we briefly mentioned this beforehand, but your kind of community involvement. You have been, like a very vocal member of the community, testifying in front the Senate, and founded or helped found many organizations that help support people who identify as transgen—transgender or nonconforming. Could you kind of talk about some of the involvements that you're most proud of, or most dedicated to? Or just some kind of memories that you would like to share?

BSK: Yeah, I—I've found community in terms of uplifting and honoring my gender and my sexuality. There's—there are really great communities in—locally in Houston, outside of Houston. And so it's been nice to be a part of groups that knows what it feels like to be queer and gender nonconforming or genderqueer, nonbinary. So yes, I—it's...I've found community, I'm honored to be a part of the community. I will say though, that oftentimes the queer and nonbinary and trans communities are white dominated. And so there are some challenges there in terms of who is leading movements, and who is making decisions in terms of LGBTQ movements locally, and also nationally, are often led by predominantly white folks, which further excludes Black, indigenous people of color who are also queer and trans. So that's been my experience so far in community.

SH: So, you've been involved in policy and you want to—you've worked with people involved in policy. So I was just wondering how—how would you suggest others get involved, like you have, in terms of—because sometimes it seems so hard, that as like a college student, or as an undergrad, or maybe even graduate school, it's so hard to reach people who are making the decisions, beyond petitioning, voting, maybe going to protests. But like, how would you recommend that people get involved? And what—what are the first steps that someone can take in order to be more closely related or more closely involved in policy making?

BSK: That's a great question. I would recommend reaching out to people, meeting people, sharing your experience, sharing your opinions and your thoughts about policies and how they might impact you and your community. Yeah, that—that's where I would start, is meeting people and talking to people about it. Talking to family about policy too is also, for me has been a challenge, about politics, policies. But it's also very—a very important conversation to have within our families, including outside of our families.

SH: So could you just quickly describe the kind of the policy that you were involved in, in pushing?

BSK: Sure, I—one of, or a couple of the contributions that I'm proud of, are my involvement with policy that's informed by research. I was involved in co-authoring a statement on Senate Bill 6, which was an

anti-trans and gender nonconforming legislation in Texas. And so I co-authored that with some folks involved with the National Association of Social Work, Texas chapter. And I also testified in opposition to Senate Bill 6 in 2017. And then I also helped to inform local policymakers about trans and gender nonconforming inclusive healthcare for city employees.

SH: That's amazing, that's great. All right. So, in 2018, you left one of the organizations you co-founded, you kind of talked about this previously, about the elitism, or classism, racism, being—even in a minority community or in communities that are marginalized, that is—there's still this structure of—there's still kind of this hierarchy. Can you kind of elaborate a little bit more on how you came to—the decision of leaving, and just kind of more in general as to what you hope to see in the future?

BSK: Yeah, the—that—co-founding that organization is something that I am proud of. It is helpful to a lot of people, and I think it still is, and has a place in community, and is organized by community members. So I will say that I am proud of that contribution to our community, to the trans and gender nonconforming community and family members, and to Houston... How I got to the decision of parting ways with that organization was that I got to my threshold of feeling hurt by the intersecting oppressions that I experienced as a genderqueer person of color, descendant of immigrants, that was in a space that was dominated, again, by predominantly white folks with certain degrees, that—that had certain values as-associated with those professional degrees, and had some expectations around how people performed, even though we were all volunteers, and people generously donated their time, physical labor, intellectual labor, emotional labor, in making the organization what it was behind the scenes. But in terms of with leadership, I experienced a lot of things that people of color experience in spaces that are, that are led by predominantly white folks who also are well-meaning and don't quite...some just aren't as reflective as others. And that comes out in harmful ways to people of color.

SH: So what do you think is the most important way to get members of the kind of—just specifically, maybe the Asian LGBTQ+ community, but also in general, just the Black, indigenous people of color community as well?

BSK: Yeah, happy to—respond to that question, but I just wanted to go back a little bit to some of the challenges [**SH:** Mhm.] that I wanted to talk about, and not just in this organization specifically that I co-founded, but also in movement generally across LGBTQ communities, locally and nationally. But my experience in this organization is that, you know, with this value of individualism, and its intersection with white supremacy, and perhaps some intersection with egoic personalities, and elitism and classism, like they all intersect in really complicated ways. And one way that that shows up is that one person or certain people drive decision makings and initiatives and goals of the organization, without really taking time to fully understand and collaborate with members of the entire group, and specifically listen to and trust the experiences of people of color in the group, without tokenizing, right, the people of color, because I also, I—I think, was a token person of color in the organization, so—so yeah, that was my experience, and it was very difficult, and I think it's difficult for a lot of people. And I want to lift that up in this interview, to—to acknowledge that that is something that I face too, today, and recently, and is a common experience, including the exploitation of people who are in less powerful positions, like students or people of color in organizations. And then, oftentimes, the white-washing of narratives and the shifting of narratives that often benefit, more often than not, the people in power, and minimizing, or leading to the minimizing or erasure of the involvement and contributions of people of color from—from that organization. So, so yeah, those are, those are the—the experiences I've had that—that led up to my decision to part ways.

SH: Thank you for sharing. Yeah, we really appreciate your perspective on that, and just the insight that you can bring to kind of being in positions where, yeah... So just kind of, what do you think is the most important way to give a voice to the people who are continually marginalized, even in such a community?

BSK: Yeah, I mean for Asian folks, find each other. Talk to each other. Share about your experiences with each other. Build community, and collectivize, and also find other Black indigenous people of color, and tell your stories, and talk about it, and share, if you feel safe and comfortable doing that. Accountability is always—has always been important, but at this moment in time is very important, and holding people accountable to—community, holding people accountable for the harm that they have been a part of, or contributed to. And that takes talking about it, with people who feel safe, first, and then coming together to bring that to the folks that have done harm, if that's the way that you want to go about it. But definitely finding each other and talking about it is what I would recommend, and doing something about it too, whether it—that—that depends on the actions that you're comfortable participating in. So, sharing your story, and then doing something about it together, and knowing that you're not alone.

SH: So now we're going to move into some questions about your identity in general. So just how would you describe what it means to be nonbinary or non-gender conforming?

BSK: It depends on who you ask, which is, I think the beauty of being nonbinary, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, is that it—everyone gets to share about what that means to them. And that should be honored. For me, what that means is my gender doesn't, my gender doesn't fit into the limited categories that are offered. I've always felt that way and never had the language to describe that—what that meant for me, both in Khmer and kind of in English, too. But...but there's some language that can describe what that experience is for me, and so in terms of my gender, what that means is it doesn't fit into the, right now, dichotomous category system that we have, which is typically “woman/man.” And sometimes it means that it's a blend of genders too, so.

SH: Mm hm. And you, you said that you kind of always known that you definitely did not fit into the binary system of gender that society has. But how would you come—how would you say that you came to the—I—I wouldn't want to say awareness, but kind of just how—how did you learn to put it in words, or how did you come to the point of where you could describe it in a way that some people may understand, or how would you describe it to somebody who speaks the same language as you, but maybe doesn't quite get the idea initially?

BSK: How I found the language was meeting people who share similar experiences, and figuring out what—which—how to, like, basically how to—what works for me in terms of how to describe my internal sense of who I know that, who I know myself to be in terms of my gender. So meeting other people, reading, searching the web, and then how to explain that to people who may not share the same language is to try to meet the person where they're at, in terms of the language that they do have access to, and utilizing that language to try to, to try to share about the experience.

SH: So [**BSK:** Wh-sorry, but also, sorry—] yeah, go ahead, go ahead.

BSK: Yeah, so—so meeting the person where they're at with their language, but also introducing some new ideas and new concepts that they may not have been introduced to before, or are aware of, to try to, you know, to collectively share...that information with each other.

SH: Mm hm, just taking that first step with them, yeah. So how would you describe your Asian American identity? I know a lot of—I don't know, in society, or I feel like at least in America, when people say

Asian American, the first couple people that come into mind are Chinese American, Indian American, maybe not even that sometimes, depending on their understanding, and then definitely as, as an immigrant or as a descendant from people who fled—or from people who were refugees from Cambodia, how does that interplay with how you see yourself and how you identify yourself?

BSK: I'm still trying to figure that out, and what that means to me, what that means to me deeply. For me what it means to be Cambodian American is, again, my—honoring the story of my family, and the fact that they are descendants, or—I'm sorry, I'm a descendant of survivors of the genocide that comes from a culture and community that has music and art that we identify with. There are songs that I hear that my dad used to sing growing up, that are Khmer songs by well-known artists that produced their music before the genocide. We have a certain type of food, food is a really big part of culture. There's not a—to my knowledge, there aren't any Cambodian restaurants in Houston. So my access to food is with family. And my access to—and involvement in the culture is with my family, and sometimes with the church that I grew up in. But, yeah, I'm still trying to figure out what it means to be Cambodian American in Houston, Texas. And I think I still have a long way to go, to, to, to know more about the culture, and to do better at honoring the community and our families' legacies.

SH: Did you have any—did you ever have any, like difficulty accepting or maybe reconciling with your Cambodian American identity?

BSK: Sure. Maybe not like in a direct way. I mean, we—I, you know, I have to endure...racism, white supremacy too, and in many ways, I've learned how to act, and be, and think like the oppressor, and enforce white supremacy values on people of color, and I have to unlearn that. And that's a journey for me, just like I think it's a journey for many other Black, indigenous—and people of color and Asian folks, is that we somehow internalize the values and the beliefs and the thoughts of the oppressor, and we kind of put that out and oppress each other. And that's a part of reconciling my identity as a Cambodian American too, is learning how I'm doing that, recognizing and reflecting on how to change that and do differently. [**SH:** Yeah, definitely.] That will be for—a forever, forever process because of the context that we're in, especially being in the South, [**SH:** Mhm.] where racism, white supremacy, elitism, ableism, all of the “isms” are institutionalized in the South, meaning they're embedded in our policies and procedures, and the way that we think about things, or that we're taught about things, that influences the way that we treat other people and how we interact with other people. And so it's time for us to—to reflect on that, and figure out how to change, change that and dismantle how they show up in the way that we work together in community.

SH: I'm curious, because you did—you do say that definitely, Houston is in Texas, and Texas is known as the South and the South is definitely known as a place where a lot of institutionalized classism, racism, elitism, ableism is integrated into society, so—almost seamlessly, like kind of, if you don't think about it, it's almost impossible to discern. So how would you—since Houston is known as the—the moniker of the most diverse city in the United States, or one of the most diverse cities in the United States, how would you refute that, or how would you—how would you more better qualify that?

BSK: I wouldn't refute that Houston is one of the most diverse cities in the US. I think we are. And—and that's true.

SH: So, do you—would—would you say that there are things that Houston needs to work on, in terms of, like, setting—setting—or becoming like a leader in the South, to become a more open and accepting city and community for people of all different backgrounds?

BSK: Sure. Yeah. I mean, I think, of course, yes, we have a long way to go as a city to better involve different communities in decision making, in policies, in institutions that are often, more often than not, are—are not a part of decision-making structures or don't access and can't access certain institutions in a way that are—in ways that are empowering and influential. And yeah, I mean, yes, we have a lot—a long way to go in terms of redistributing power in the city, destabilizing and dismantling white supremacy, and—and white dominance in organizing, in education, in policymaking. And when I say white supremacy and white dominance, I don't just mean white people, I mean values that come from, that come from white supremacy that are also upheld by people of color too. And so, so we—we have work to do, for sure, in undoing a lot of that ourselves.

SH: Definitely. So now kind of just to wrap up a little bit, we're going to be ending with questions about COVID-19, the pandemic, and the current situation going on in the United States with the disease. So, I know COVID-19 has impacted you and your family very personally. Can you kind of tell me about what has happened?

BSK: Yeah. Like many—like everyone else, we are social distancing. And so we don't get to celebrate or grieve or get together in community in ways that we typically would, outside of the context of the pandemic. And that's been really difficult. There have been multiple sig-significant changes in my and my family's life, that normally we would get together and be together in community and in—in—in our family, and we haven't been able to, being—a few being graduations in the family, and not being able to get together to celebrate. My grandfather also passed in April, I believe it was April 9th. And while we, at that point, were able to be together as family, and he passed in his home so we were able to be there with him, we as a community didn't get to memorialize him the way that we normally would as community. And that still is hard. Especially because my grandpa is a pretty significant figure in the Khmer Baptist community in Houston. Yeah, so, yeah, I wish—actually wish he was alive and could see this interview.

SH: Thank you for sharing. So what is—in what ways has the pandemic affected your kind of interpersonal relationships? You mentioned this kind of briefly that you can't really get together with communities specifically, in order to grieve, and even to celebrate sometimes, so how has the pandemic inter—affected your interpersonal relationships between friends and family?

BSK: I am an introvert, so I am not very active interpersonally. Like, I don't get together very often with big groups of people. So that hasn't changed much. But—and I can't imagine what it's like for people who, you know, who thrive and enjoy, and—not that I don't enjoy, I do—but like who—who like to often be around large groups of people, right? So I can—I would imagine that that is difficult for folks. Technology has been helpful in maintaining connection with people. While we didn't have a traditional memorial for my grandpa, and for other people who have passed in community, there have been virtual services, which is not the same. However, for—I remember that there was a church service that I participated in with the church community that I grew up in, and a part of that service honored my grandpa, and there were people from Cambodia who were able to join, and I don't think that that would have happened otherwise. So technology can be helpful, or it has been helpful in—in this circumstance. But it's also not the same, it's not, you know, in-person gatherings where we can share a meal in person, or sit together, and be still, and be quiet, but be in the presence of someone else. Those are things that I miss.

SH: So what's one message you would like to tell people about COVID-19 and its severity, and like kind of just a message that you would like to get out there about your own experience with COVID-19?

BSK: Hang in there. Hang in there. Trust science and data and facts, take care of yourself, and care for other people. And we're all in this together, and it's time to work together, to—to get through this.

SH: That was very powerful. All right, so that concludes all my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add, that you want—that I didn't ask specifically in the interview, or you just want to get out there, or you would like to touch upon before we conclude?

BSK: Yeah, I wanted to—to honor some people and express my gratitude to them for helping to shape my life, and to shape who I am and where I'm going. So I wanted to—to...to say that I am the—the grandchild of Sokun Chea, Heng Keo, Pen Kim Horn, and Eap Yim. And I'm the child of Vandy and Tony Keo, and the sibling of Victoria and Zachary Keo. And I am honored to be a descendant of my family, who are survivors of the Cambodian genocide, who are survivors of forced migration, survivors even to this day of racism, classism, elitism, white supremacy, the model minority myth, just to name a few of their struggles, and I thank them for—and my—I like to call them “counsel of sages,” who include mentors, and family, and friends, for creating a way for me to contribute to our communities. And I hope that I continue to, to—to do that, to make change with community.

SH: Thank you so much. I'm going to stop the recording now.

[Interview ends.]