

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

Interviewee: N. Eric Lindsay
Interviewers: Chelsea Li
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Transcribed by: Chelsea Li
Edited by: Katherine Wu, Karen Siu
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Background: Dr. N. Eric Lindsay was born in Houston in 1981 to a Japanese American mother and English, French, and Scottish father. He recalls his childhood memories of figuring out his racial identity in school and going to Japan when he grew older. Dr. N. Eric Lindsay majored in economics and managerial studies at Rice University and speaks of how he transitioned from pre-law to pre-med by the end of his college career. He then detailed his experience in medical school and residency while having children and finally talks about his current position at Blue Fish Pediatrics as a pediatrician. Dr. N. Eric Lindsay also talks about his family life and connection to church along and how that connects to his work as a pediatrician.

Setting: The interview was conducted by Chelsea Li over Rice University Zoom.

Key:

EL: Eric Lindsay

CL: Chelsea Li

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

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

Transcript

EL: Okay. Okay—

CL: Great. So today is June 29, 2021. My name is Chelsea Li and I'm here with Dr. N. Eric Lindsay, who is a pediatrician at Blue Fish Pediatrics and we will be conducting a full length interview. So, thank you so much for being here today and let's get started! Let's start with your early life. Where and when were you born and how would you describe the household that you grew up in?

EL: Sure. So, I was born in Houston at St. Luke's Hospital and I was born November 25, 1981. So my mom and dad—I'm an only child, so it's just me, my mom and dad. And my mom was Japanese American and she was born in South Texas, like in the Rio Grande Valley. And my father was actually born in Louisiana and his family's like, English, French, Scottish. But they've been in the U.S. for a long, long time. So yeah, and then had a wonderful childhood with my mom and dad. And my grandparents, my Japanese American grandparents living really close by, so kind of spent a lot of time at their house too.

CL: Can you also describe a bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in?

EL: Yeah. So I grew up in this neighborhood called like, Willow Meadows in the Meyer Park area, so not too far from Rice, but kind of near Southwest Houston. And I guess I would just describe it as like, a nice middle class neighborhood. It was—it's a one story house. And kinda like, I felt—I always felt pretty safe. Had a few friends,

other guys in the neighborhood growing up, but I think my parents didn't think the schools were—the public schools were as good. So I actually went to private school until high school. So I went to a really small private, kind of like a Montessori-style school until fourth grade, and then this private school called St. Mark's Episcopal, fifth grade to eighth grade. And then I went to public high school.

CL: Yeah. So what were your parents' occupation?

EL: So my dad worked for the Houston Independent School District for as—like most of his adult career, I think. He got a Master's in Journalism. And then he—I mean, like, as long as I can remember, he was working in the Curriculum Development Department for the school. So he wasn't—he was an administrator, not a teacher or anything. But I guess, like, trying to help in the centralized HISD administration building trying to help the schools and the local, like principals and teachers, figure out how to teach. One thing I know he worked on, but I think he didn't like it. I think he was frustrated was, over his career, there's a lot of transitioning to like standardized testing being the goal, like measuring performance at schools here by test scores and passing rates and everything. So I think he kind of experienced a lot of frustration with like, the loss of autonomy for the schools as everything moved more towards just like teaching to a test, I guess. My mom worked for Sue (?). I think the story was, she randomly like—she went to the University of Houston and majored in English. And then I think she randomly found a job as like secretarial kind of like typist work for this man who was going to be, I guess, starting his own company like working on petrochemicals. And so it was, I think it was just like, the founder of the company, his wife, and then my mom was like, their assistant. And then it turned into a pretty successful like, petrochemical company. And so she actually retired as like a Vice President of this, you know, medium-sized company, and then that couple, their last name is Glasscock, they like funded the School of Continuing Studies at Rice because they both went to Rice. So she just happened to get in on the ground floor, I guess, so that she worked really hard and did a good job for them and I think.

CL: What would you say were some of the values that your parents emphasized during your upbringing?

EL: Hmm. I think like, family togetherness was kind of a default value, because it was just the three of us. And I don't know, they didn't have a lot of—like, for example, my parents didn't grow up—or didn't raise me with any, like, religious tradition or anything. So, it was like pretty much just us and some other immediate family and stuff. But like a small circle of close family and friends, rather than a big group, I didn't have a lot of like people coming in and out. So I think like depth of family ties was emphasized by default. And then—yeah, I guess just more like encouragement. They were actually very low pressure parents, like not ever really pushing much to like, achieve academically or financially or anything. And so it's more of just like, vague, like, be a good person and treat each other well and that kind of thing. So yeah. And then I think my parents had a wonderful marriage. My mom passed away in 2003. But, yeah, I like always, I guess, now when I think about it, I always think like, “Oh, they were really good at kind of like, communicating with each other.” I didn't see fighting, you know, between them. And they seem to do a good job showing me that.

CL: Yeah. How would you define your racial identity? And how has it impacted you growing up?

EL: Hmm, yeah, it was- I guess that was one of the reasons I wanted to do this, right? I didn't want to do this as—I would be running away from stuff like this. I think it's hard if you're of mixed racial ancestry to feel—I never felt very comfortable. Because I guess for me, it was always like, “Oh, well, I'm not going to find a

community of people who look like me or have the same background as I do." Because it's so specific, I guess, like my Jap—on the Japanese side, like I'm fourth generation. So, most of my Japanese American relatives, like cousins, or second cousins, or whatever, are not, you know, pure Japanese ancestry. And then, but then at the same time, there's no like, there's no way to find like somebody who's the exact same level of Asian American identity or whatever. So, when I was growing up, like, I guess, because I went to this tiny school and I had a small family, I never thought about it very much, which I think was nice.

And I- I really think- like thinking back, for example, I had this friend named Stephen from elementary school, who, I guess now I'm like Facebook friends with, but I didn't keep in touch with this guy for many, many years. And then, I guess, through social media or something like, we reconnected a long time later. But basically, I was talking to my dad about it. And I, I guess my dad said something like, maybe I showed pictures. And Stephen is a Black American man married to a white American woman. But basically, what came up in this conversation was as a child, I didn't know he was Black, like I didn't- I didn't remember that about him. But I used to, like, go to his house and hang out with him. We would play together, whatever. So I guess I think, "Oh, well, that was cool." Like I was able to grow up without any major concept of—that people are different from each other.

So I think when I got to high school though, I really—because that's when it was like the big public—it's Bellaire High School here in town. It's like a pretty big public school. And I think that's when I saw like, all these different identities that people had. And I guess I ended up hanging out with—there are a lot of like, Jewish American people there and then a lot of like, Chinese or Taiwanese. And then, yeah, and then it's like—I think Bellaire's a pretty diverse school like there's like South Asian, East Asian, Black, Hispanic, Latino people and everything. So yeah, I guess I just felt like, "Oh, now I see. People kind of like segregating themselves or having this identity that's really important." And I didn't really think that was a big deal, but it kind of became a bigger deal and so yeah, so I started like, researching it more, I guess. I spent a long time, right? I think it was for a school project in eighth grade or ninth grade. I spent a long time like interviewing my Japanese American grandparents about their life and stuff and learned about a lot of the issues they went through in World War II. And I got more involved in Japanese American Citizens League, like the civic organization. Yeah, it was in high school because then I got a scholarship from them for college.

And then I had a white American friend who just randomly started studying Mandarin in high school. And then he like, started teaching me some and so then I took Mandarin, Chinese, and then Japanese at Rice. So I guess, I think through all of that, like meeting a lot of different people, and then specifically meeting a lot of Asian immigrants, like first generation, or most of my friends who were born in the U.S., their parents were immigrants, they're second generation. It made me like, think a lot more about it like, "Okay, I'm not going to fit in with necessarily everybody else because I have a different story. But like, what is the story? Or what does it mean? Or?" So I guess it's—now I think I used to see it as like a—not a weakness, but something to overcome. And now it's like, pkey, I guess it should be a strength because at least, if I don't fit in the same box, then I get to talk about it and figure it out and help other people understand a-a broader concept than maybe whatever they've been exposed to so far.

CL: Yeah, for sure. Did you ever feel like you might have identified with like, one part more than the other? Or, like, you spoke about different groups at school? Like, did you think you fit in better with one group over another? Something like that?

EL: Yeah, I mean, I guess, essentially, what happened was I ended up, like, I started out thinking, well, there's no point in trying to like, fit in a certain group or whatever. But then, by the—say the end of high school for sure. Like, I think the majority of my friend group was comprised of Asian American people like, again, mostly like, probably mostly Taiwanese, second generation Taiwanese American people. So, I don't know that was kind of random like, it's just, you know, you meet one person, and then you get introduced to their friends, and then you start hanging out with them and stuff. And so yeah, it-it happened that way. And then I guess, maybe I did feel like, I think fitting in was easier with Asian American friends than like, other kinds of ethnic group friends. Yeah, for example, I remember very distinctly, like, I'd never—my mom didn't speak Japanese. Even my grandmother barely spoke Japanese. But like, when I got to college, I was like, "Okay, I really want to study Japanese." Like, because people always ask me, "What are you?" And I have to say, "I'm half Japanese and half white." And I have to be like, "No, you know, my great grandparents immigrated from Japan," but it's like, I don't know it—to me, it always felt kind of disappointing to tell somebody like, "Oh, no, I don't speak the language of my ancestry or whatever." And they say, "Oh, well did you grow up there? Do you speak the language?" or whatever. So, as a sophomore at Rice, I started taking Japanese.

And then, I was very into, like Japanese cars, like modified cars, you know? And I was reading a car magazine one day and sitting across from my parents at the dinner table. And I like found this ad and I showed it to my parents and it said, like, "Oh if, you know, I think for like \$1,400 you could spend a week in Japan with the car magazine, like the journalists at the Tokyo like Car Show." So I—it's kind of like half joking. Like, "Oh, I should do this." It's during my-my Christmas, like holiday break from Rice. And, and then yeah, to my surprise, my dad was like, "Okay, yeah, we'll pay for that if you want to go." So I guess that's when it got really real. Because I was like, "Okay, I should go to Japan. And then I guess I'll understand myself better." And I really do think I like, I don't know, like mentally understood the culture. Like it made intuitive sense to me somehow. Not like I can—not like I am a Japanese person, but I guess like, I think the way I think is very compatible with the way the average Japanese person in Japan thinks. And so I felt really comfortable, relatively comfortable more so than when I've traveled to other countries, I guess. And so that was the first time I went, so it's like 2001. And then, yeah, and then I just really fell in love with it. So I was like, "Okay, I gotta do more with this." So I continued studying language and studied abroad there and went back for a lot of trips to Japan and stuff. So I think, yeah like, I think I did resonate, some—to some extent with Asian Americans in the U.S. But then I also knew like, oh, when I went to Japan, I felt something like, there is this part of my identity that like, makes sense in this culture.

CL: Yeah. So I guess kind of moving back to like your parents and their backgrounds. Sorry, did you mention that your mother was a fourth generation?

EL: She is third, so I'm fourth.

CL: Okay, so how did your parents meet?

EL: Yeah, they—so they were both married before and then divorced and this was their second marriage to each other. My mom, so my mom and my aunt, like she was one of—she and her sister grew up, like, basically, my grandparents, the Japanese side, grandparents were farmers. And so they grew up like, in a predominantly, like Spanish speaking farming community in South Texas. And then I guess, when they grew up, I think, my grandparents instilled in them like this notion of like, "We're trying to create a better life for you. So we don't want

you to stay here and be farmers." And so like, I-I know, my aunt was the valedictorian of their high school. And I think my mom was like, you know, very—academically did well, too. So they came to Houston to the University of Houston to go to college here. So eventually after both my aunt and then my mom came to Houston for college and stayed here, then actually my grandparents sold their farm and stuff and then moved to follow.

So, my mom met and married this guy that I think she met in college, like she was pretty young, I think. And then I think she was—she already had gotten divorced, like-like by 24, or something? So she was pretty young, as far as, I mean, by my perspective now. And then my dad really does not like to talk about his first marriage, so I don't know much about that. But basically, I know that my parents met when—so I think he was—she was in her late 20s. He was in his early 30s. And they like had a mutual friend. There was this lady named Maddie because I know, we would go when I was a kid and watch movies with Maddie and her husband and stuff. And so it was this mutual friend. And later, I found out like, "Oh, that's actually the woman that introduced my parents to each other." But yeah, they just got set up, I guess, on a blind date by this, this woman. I don't know, I think she worked with my father in some capacity, but I don't know how she met my mom. So it was just a random friend group thing.

CL: Yeah. So did your mother's side of the family face any, like discrimination during World War II? And—

EL: Yeah, my—so my grandfather, his side of the family, he was born in California. So he and many of my grandfather's side of the family—he had like, a lot of siblings, I think, you know, like eight or something, were interned in internment camps in Arizona, I believe, which I-I found out about in high school or I found out more because I was doing that Japanese American Citizens League work. But I—what I remember actually from being younger, was, I think, in like the very end of the 80s or I think it was the early 90s because I think it was George H. Bush, President George H. Bush. They passed this like reparations bill and they sent a check for like, \$10,000 or something to people who had been interned and so my grandfather actually got it. But what I remembered as a kid was he put this check from the bank on the wall in a frame and so I-I guess he cashed it. And this was like a copy or something. I'm not sure. But, you know, as a kid, like, I just remember looking up and being like, "Why do you have like money on the wall? Like, why did you frame a check?" And they kind of explained like, something about the family or whatever.

So my grandmother's side of the family, like, I guess she was—yeah, she was born in 1920-26. So yeah, so I guess she was a teenager. So, she was in an internment camp too, I don't know where. But it was, I think for her, it was like a shorter time period, or whatever she didn't, she didn't talk about—my grandfather talked about, like, I think the hardships of that. My grandmother didn't, I think because she was younger, you know, at the time. But what she did talk about was basically like losing everything. I think that her father's my great grandfather had kind of like, built up, like, his own farm and property or whatever. And I think most of it was like, kind of seized and they had to restart life again after World War II ended. And then, yeah, when my grandmother, grandfather married, you know, I guess the decision was made that he would join her side of the family in Texas, rather than like, she go to California.

So yeah, they-they did. And I think maybe like, I mean, even my dad's side of the family, like the, the ones who are always in the U.S., like, they're kind of very stoic. And I think when you encounter like a World War II veteran person, they usually didn't talk much about the hardships, so I didn't grow up hearing much about it. But

yeah, now when I think about, like, what that would be like, or how difficult it would be for me to go through what they went through, then I admire them a lot for, you know, coming out of it, I guess, with still like a good attitude.

And I guess, you know, I- I have a lot of friends whose parents or grandparents were basically either interned or they were—or they decided to serve in the military to try to get out of the internment camp to like, be one of the Japanese American divisions of the army and stuff. And so I mean, there's a lot of really cool stories I've heard or like, stories of valor and bravery. And so I think it's cool that now I can come back and try to learn about that, but at the same time, like, you know, it's been a long time that now both of my grandparents are gone, so I can't like interview them, which would have been nice. But, but on the other hand, I don't know that my grandfather would have talked much about his real feelings. So yes, I know, they went through a lot. I didn't hear much about it. I just, they like, just like to keep their nose to the grindstone, I think.

CL: Yeah. So I guess, kind of moving on to your college experience. You attended Rice University and majored in Economics and Managerial Studies? What, like, attracted you to choose these majors specifically?

EL: Yeah, I guess that was random, too. So, I don't know I was a very, I think, because in contrast to a lot of my Asian American friends, my parents were very, like, laissez faire about everything, like just kind of like, do your best and work hard or whatever, but definitely not like a hardcore, tiger mom kind of experience. When I got into Rice, I was real happy, but I was pretty unfocused. So originally, I vaguely thought, "Okay, I think I should either try to work in like a business field, like, or finance or something."

I guess economics was my favorite class at the end of high school, you know, like when you take like, brief little bit of economics, so I thought, "Okay, well, that's cool. Like I can do that." But notably, I always worked much harder to do okay in math, I didn't like math. And the higher you go in econ, the more mathematical theory and you know, difficult math you encounter, I found out. And then the other side was, I guess my parents kind of jokingly always said I could be a lawyer because I like to argue. And then I was good at writing and like English and stuff. So I thought, "Okay, maybe I'll, I'll see what it's like to go to law school or what-what would, what would be entailed if I were pre-law?" And so, when I started, that was my thought. And I actually started out thinking I would do econ, and then political science. Because it seemed appropriate for a pre-law kind of career. And I did pretty well in the first few—the first couple years worth of economics classes. But the political science like pretty much as soon as I started in college and started taking some of those classes, I was like, "This is not for me," like, I don't, I don't love politics, or like, keeping up with it. And kind of arguing over minutiae and in the law, or whatever, like. So, I decided to jump ship. And then, I don't know, I took a bunch of random classes. I used this—the Rice like, you can take a pass/fail class, you know, and then like, decide to uncover it or keep it covered. I used it like every single semester, and then tried all kinds of (round?) an electrical engineering class, and all kinds of random stuff. And then I took the Chinese as a freshman on a whim. I would have taken Japanese as a freshman, but it conflicted with an econ required class and then I did really well on that. And so, yeah I was just kind of like, bumbling around trying stuff, I guess. And then, um, so when I studied abroad, I spent my junior year, you know, in Japan, and I actually took, I think I took one economics class in Japan that did actually count as a away econ class for my Rice major. But when I came back, and I-I guess I talked to my advisor or something, but they're like, "Oh, you got like 30 hours of classes from this one year, that would count for an Asian Studies major." And they said that and so I said, "Oh, yeah. Okay."

So as a senior, I took Asia, whatever it's called, like, 112, or something, which is like introduction to Asian Studies. And then continue taking both Chinese and Japanese languages and stuff. And then I thought I would also get an Asian Studies major, but then when I was graduating, they said, "Oh, yeah, you totally got all the requirements done, but not enough were done at Rice University. So you can't, like claim an Asian Studies major." So I-I like to point out, I should have an asterisk and say [CL: laughs], "I technically, I fulfilled the requirements for Asian studies as well." Because it was a big part of what I studied.

And then so by that time, like, when I was a senior, I was like, taking economics classes, but I wasn't loving them as much. And so I- I was kind of struggling with what to do. And I-I applied for, like, Teach for America because I thought, like teaching maybe that would be good. And then I applied for like, different kinds of jobs. And I was—I had made some contacts in Japan. And I thought, like, I'll reach out and see if anybody wants to hire me to like work, you know, as like, whatever intro-level kind of businessman analyst something consultant, but I wasn't having much luck, like I had some phone interviews and stuff. And I still like cars, so I thought it'd be really cool if, you know, I can work for one of the Japanese car companies here somewhere, which, yeah, anyway, so I put all these like feelers out.

And then I went on a—I went on a medical mission trip for spring break of my senior year, because I was interested in dating this girl who was going and I didn't have Spring Break plans. And so, she said they needed people who spoke Spanish to like go and translate. Because like, as you probably know, there's like, a million pre-med students at Rice. And so it's—it was easy to assemble this with like the McGovern, like UT Health med school. They would take a bunch of med students and then a bunch of Rice students who were like pre-med, I guess, and a few like, fully trained doctors to go do like free medical clinics and stuff.

And so I said, "Well, I studied Chi- Chinese and Japanese in college, but I did take like, through Spanish five in high school." So I just like furiously, crammed like a medical Spanish dictionary and then I went on this trip kind of on a whim. It was like a Rice Baptist Student Ministry trip. And, and then like, immediately I fell in love with that and I was like, "Oh man, I should totally go to med school because this work is so fulfilling." And- I don't know, just I think- I had kind of flirted with that idea like, "Oh, like, I could be a doctor," but then I-I just always didn't because of laziness. Like, I was like, "Ah, it just sound so hard. It's such a long road," and whatever. And again, my parents would never push me, right? They were just like, "Okay, yeah."

And so this trip was like, you know, let's say there were 10 med students. And like, nine of them were from the McGovern, UT Houston School, but one med student was from Baylor College of Medicine and he had gone to Rice and he had been an electrical engineer, uh maybe chemical engineer? He'd been an engineer, and he worked for two years. And then, he decided to go to med school. And he like, went back and had to take some prereqs and stuff at U of H. So basically, this guy told me, "Oh, if you're thinking about that, even though you're about to graduate from Rice, like it's not too late, and I can tell you exactly how I did it." So that was cool. I felt like that was like a sign or something. So basically, I did exactly what he told me to do, and then went to Baylor like he did and he was still there. So I still—I saw him there. And I was like, "Hey, thanks for the advice." So yeah, so I had a winding path through college, but-but I think, I really loved it, like I loved being at Rice and I made a lot of good, like, lifelong friends. And I think it just did a good job for me of expanding my horizons and kind of like, I think about oh, well, if I had entered college and been premed, I don't think I would have worked hard enough, like I-I wouldn't have understood the value. And it-it took me all that time and all that exploration of myself in the world

and stuff to get to a point where I felt like, "Okay, I know what I want to do with my life, and I'm willing to work hard to achieve that."

CL: So did you have to take some extra pre-reqs towards like the end of your college career for pre-med?

EL: Yeah, well, so basically, that medical mission trip happened spring break. So I had—I was already you know, like, one third of the way done with my second semesters of senior year. So I—for med school, like I had only completed like, a year of English, a year of calculus and a year of biology from AP tests in high school, like, essentially almost nothing I did in college was useful for medical school. So, as soon as I graduated, I started taking summer school classes, and I did all of the pre-reqs at U of H. Because the scheduling was like way more flexible, like essentially at Rice, if you want to be a pre-med. Obviously, it is a well worn path. And you have great teachers and everything, but like, it's kind of like there's one section of each thing you have to do, like a step-by-step process. So I realized, like, I just don't think like, it's just gonna take a lot longer. And it's like, also much more expensive and whatever. So—and what that med student from Baylor had taught me was like, "Oh, if you go to U of H, like, it's just a lot more flexible." So yeah, so I just started as soon as I graduated from Rice, like I think I graduated May 17th and summer school started May 31st with Chemistry 101 or whatever. And then, yeah, I took, so I took summer, fall, spring, summer, fall, and that was enough. But I had to take like, everything at the same time. And I had to take the MCAT before I had a chance to finish the science classes, so that was challenging, but it worked out fine, so.

CL: Yeah. So you mentioned that you enjoyed your experience at Rice, what would you say were your most favorite or least favorite parts of your experience?

EL: Hmm, yeah, I think-I think what I liked was the ability to, like, meet a lot of people and hang out. I still like to hang out with a lot of different people like variety wise or like, put like, if I know these two people from one way and then it's like, oh, I was going to eat dinner with this guy and they don't know each other. I like to put them together like trying to make that happen. And I felt like that's extremely easy in college because you can, you know, you have like a serverly where you're eating together or you can do like athletic things together or—I don't know, I spent a lot of time playing ping pong and pool and video games with people in their rooms or in the commons or whatever. But like, I guess I like the volume of meeting people. And it's, you know, it's all kind of like everybody's figuring themselves out. Everybody's similar, you know, like, for the most part, so none of it felt weird or forced or anything. And then yeah, I guess, I think it was really nice that Rice had things like the, like the pass/fail option, or, yeah, just the ability to take all these random classes that I did to figure out what it was I wanted to do.

I think, for example, one of my good friends is a—she, she went to UT Austin, but she married one of my—the guy that became like, my best friend from Rice, when they met later. And she's also a physician now. But she talked about how like, from day one in college, she had to like, think about like, "Okay, I want to go to medical school, I have to take these classes and those classes and I have to talk to this, like advising group and I have to whatever." And-and she just felt like more of a cog in a wheel, like a big system. And it's just a really big school and it's a great school, but it's just different. Versus when I went back, like, I remember being kind of like, nervous, or like, kind of ashamed of myself to go back to my parents and say, like, "Hey, you know how I'm graduating from college in like, two months? But I actually decided, I'd like to go to med school, so that would kind of extend that by like, a couple years, plus four years of med school and whatever, right?" But of course, my

parents were like, "Oh, no, we would be so proud of you, we support you, it's fine." And I felt the same way a little, like, awkward about Rice's—because I had to go like, do the academic advising, like pre-med people, [CL: Mhm.] as a graduated, you know, alumnus, so I was like, "Ah, I wonder what they're gonna think of me."

Because I'm gonna be like, "Hey, I totally wasn't thinking about this at all. And now I really want to do it. And I know you have a bunch of other pre-meds in here who've been like gung ho from the beginning and got their stuff way more organized than I do." But again, like they were very supportive. And it just so happened that one of the professors who was in that department like academic advising for the pre-med people and stuff, she was my accounting professor. And-and I happen to still like, make an A in that class out of my econ classes when I started like, not caring as much. So I was like, "Oh, thank the Lord. Like, this is the one lady that did like me as a, as an econ major." But yeah, but again, I felt completely, like supported and stuff by the Rice people. So I think it just helped that it was small and they could kind of take time to individually hear my story and like say, "Okay, yeah yeah that makes sense. Like, you had to find your path. And we're gonna help you on the rest of your journey." So yeah, so I guess I just felt- like, in general, a lot of support. And, you know, there were hard times where people, I think people get too serious and work really, really hard or get too anxious. But, at the same time, like, most of my Rice friends were happy and having fun through the process and turned out to be amazing adults.

CL: Yeah. You also spent a year studying abroad in Japan. How was this experience like for you?

EL: Yeah, that was, like I guess, pretty awesome. And very formative, I think, because I guess having grown up in Houston, and never left, I think it was pretty critical that I did something else that I had to do like, you know, striking out on my own. And I guess that was another thing, I'm very thankful that Rice even had this whole thing, like they had a really good relationship with that university, Kyushu University. So it was like an—it was a true exchange program, like there were four of us Rice students who went and there were, I think, three or four students from Kyushu University who came back to Rice. And so actually, I didn't have to pay tuition that whole year because that's how the exchange works, I guess. And yeah, what I learned—because there were a lot of students, I think it was about 25 maybe total students in this program. Maybe 10 of them were, let's say 12 of them probably were from the US. So like, maybe half was American students, but from different parts of the U.S. And then the other half, they were people from all over the world, like some other Asian universities, and a lot of European, like a few British universities and a few French universities and a German girl and a few guys from Belgium.

So like you had to do all these classes in English, that was the requirement, but you could come from anywhere you wanted as long as you could take college classes in English. And then if you could speak Japanese, you could, of course, take anything on their college campus that they offered in Japanese. So it was a really cool setup and I think that it was nice that I got to like, learn about Japan and live in Japan, but I also ended up learning a lot from those other international people. And I was there from 2001 to 2002.

And so actually, I-I went to start that program right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks here. And so I think it was a good time to, kind of be expanding my world horizons and having some perspective on kind of what was going on, like when I came back, like, the U.S. decided to, like invade Iraq, and like, you know, just I think it just, there's some-some bad things that came out of that. There's some good things that came out of that. But, it was good that I had just spent all this time learning about like, "oh, well here's what these like, Belgian people think about my country or-or think about the Middle East." And, obviously, I wanted the Japanese perspective on that

and I got that, but it was nice to get the perspective of other people too. And then I had to, like I had like a stipend, and my parents gave me money. So they—they would let you live in this, like international housing kind of apartment, which was the single, like by yourself. And then like, I went to this International Church there, which is like also, there were a lot of like Filipino people actually.

But it was a lot like people from all over the place. And yeah, I had to like, I tried to cook a little bit. I'm much better at cooking now, I think. But yeah, just that was when I had to be really independent because it wasn't a dorm with a meal plan and I-I really only knew one of the Rice—like a girl who was at Rice. I had at least met her before, but like I didn't know anybody else. So I had to like I had a host family that I got to know really well. And yeah, I think it just, it helped me become a lot more mature and flexible and broaden my horizons about a lot of things. So yeah, I think it was a pretty critical time in my life.

CL: Yeah. So yeah, kind of, I guess going back to your process of applying to medical school and stuff like that. You—you were a medical assistant to Dr. Jung and Dr. Pielop [**EL:** Exactly.] When Blue Fish was founded in like, 2005. What was this kind of, like I guess?

EL: Yeah- yeah, so, um, so the church I was going to here was like, was predominantly Korean American people. And so Dr. Jung is, he is the son of a pediatrician and he went there and so his father started this practice. And then he like, finished his training and then joined his father. So I guess as far—and he's just a very open, nice, like, great person. So as far as like when I—in 2003, when I started thinking like, "Okay, I'm trying to apply to med school." Whatever, like I knew, I should really like get some experience like shadowing some clinic or something. Because, again, I knew that when I applied to med school, I was going to get some questions about like, "How did you- how did you get here? How do you know that this is what you want to do when you've done all this other stuff before that's not what you want to do apparently?"

So it was really great working for him and briefly, I worked for his father before, his father retired too, like they were together. And then he knew Dr. Pielop from his residency training and they decided to start the practice for Blue Fish they started-started together. So yeah, it was kind of, again, I guess I think about it like my mom's story, like, I started out just asking him like, "Hey, can I come when I don't have classes at U of H or whatever. And like, you know, shadow you and see what you do." And then—but I tried to be very helpful and try to like I was all gung ho interested and enthusiastic, right? So, then he said, "Oh, well, I'll just, you know, put you on the payroll, if you want to work whenever you can, like part time." So I really appreciated that. And then it just so happened that I was there for 2003 to 2005 when he decided to start a new practice with a new partner. And so I think again, that was really cool for me to see because, like a lot of medical students or whatever, you're not going to have an experience seeing how a practice gets built, you know, like, they had to, like I, they took me along. I remember, like, architecture meeting to like, talk about planning the office, like, how many rooms are we going to have, and where are we going to put the refrigerator and whatever. So I got to see stuff like that. And then, when I got into med school, they were obviously very happy for me. So I said, "Bye." And—but I did jokingly say, like, "Maybe I'll see you in eight years." And then, I guess I kept in touch—because I would still see Dr. Jung from church and stuff. And then I got married and had children and went to him as a pediatrician while I was still in training. And so I guess when I finished residency, I was like, "Okay, actually, like, would you guys want me to work with you?"

And they said, "No, we don't have a spot for you. Sorry, we're like—we're too full." So I was kind of, like, sad, but, I mean, I didn't really think that was gonna work out. So I worked for Texas Children's Pediatrics for a year and a half or two years or so. And then Dr. Jung called me and said, "Oh, this other guy's moving to Dallas. Like, if you can take his spot, then we'd love to have you work here." So yeah, like I kind of couldn't believe that worked out. But I think the thing that made me think like, "This is where I'm supposed to be" is that, his father, who's a—who was a Korean immigrant doctor. had a lot of Korean speaking patients, of course, but then like, randomly hired for his like secretarial work and stuff like front office needs, hired a Japanese woman. And so she, I guess, and then there was a Korean ob-gyn, who grew up in the Occupation Era of Korea when Koreans were forced to learn Japanese, so that doctor spoke Japanese very fluently. I think he went to, like university and medical school in Japan actually. So he spoke Korean and Japanese fluently. And he would deliver babies until his Korean buddy, Dr- Sr Dr. Jung, like, "Oh, you should if you had a Japanese speaking like staff member, then you could take care of all these Japanese babies that I deliver to Japanese like expats living in Houston." So he did. And then, that woman, Miss Masako. She worked there when I worked there the first time, and she actually didn't retire 'til I came back as a doctor because she worked for like 30 years for them.

And so, now I actually do use Japanese like every day that I'm at work and take care of like, I guess, from what other Japanese doctors in Houston have told me. There's no other Japanese speaking pediatrician in Houston. So, I guess I was able to fill this niche of work even, and then I guess it just made me feel thankful because it's like, you know, I always struggled a little bit at the end of college. I was like, "Ah, am I throwing away all that language study I did and Asian Studies and stuff?" Like, was it all for naught I mean, it's fine, right, like, but I think I am very thankful to have found a way to use that even as a doctor nowadays.

CL: Yeah. Wow. So you-you attended Baylor College of Medicine and you also did your residency training at Baylor as well. Can you take me through like your experiences?

EL: Yeah, I guess, I don't know. Medical school is like, people joke that it's like high school. It's more like high school than college because the—you know, my class was like 150-ish students or something and like a lot of med schools around there 150 to 200. So it's not as big as a college, you know, class by any means. But more importantly, you go like, it's four years of this smaller group of people doing the exact same thing. So again, in college, you meet, you sit down for lunch, and you're like, "Oh, what's your major? What's your major? And where'd you grow up? Where do you come from?" Whatever. And you could have this engineer with the pre-med with the literature, history person, and like, all kind of doing whatever the athlete, you know, scholarship basketball player right there. Med school was like, literally everybody's there for the same exact thing and taking the same exact class together every day, right? And so, I guess I found it kind of funny, like, interesting, but I think it helped me again to be a couple of years older because I didn't come right out of college. And I hadn't, I hadn't really worked like in the sense of like, I wasn't on my own having to sustain myself, but I had worked at the pediatric office like, and then I did a lot of like tutoring and stuff, like just trying to make extra money.

So I guess I felt like, again, that the original mentor guy who had been an engineer for a couple years, he told me, like, "I think it's good when you go out in the world, and then you come back and you say, okay, I want to go to medical school. Because if all you've ever done is go to school, then you will have the perspective of like, this is a continuation of school." But he said, For him, it was like he got there. And he said, "I already know what it's like to be done with school and work. And I'm comfortable treating school, like I did my work where I showed up, and I worked from, you know, 8:30am to 5:00pm. And put in hard work every day." And so it wasn't like, I guess, you

can like party for a while and then cram for a test and then come back and like skip this class, but attend that class or whatever. He-he was really dedicated. And so I think that stuck with me too. And I, I just do better. Like, slowly but surely chipping away at things and like not procrastinating. So for me, it was, I think, I tried to do a good job of like keeping up with the academic learning and not like getting overwhelmed, like not cramming or not, not being too anxious about like, "Can I really learn all this?" But I definitely had those feelings sometimes.

And I think also, I had a good perspective about—just kind of like we're all in the same boat if—hopefully, they won't give me an impossible task, because everybody else has to do this too or everybody who's done it before already went through this, even though it seems somewhat sometimes, like overwhelming. So yeah, I again, I really liked Baylor, I think Baylor as a med school, like they're kind of really good about prioritizing the education part without like, forcing unnecessary suffering for the sake of just yeah, like some—I think medicine has a hierarchical like, kind of, maybe like the military, like philosophy of like, if you're on the bottom, you need to get hazed a little bit. And then when you make it to this level that we're at, then you'll get to be, you'll get to open up a little bit and have a little more freedom. But I think that's like a very old school thinking and it's not actually very educational, it's just punitive. So I think Baylor was pretty good about already being on the forefront of being more—just nice, you know, like, "Hey, you're- we're all here to teach you and you're here to learn, so as long as you do your part, then we're not going to put you through unnecessary roughness." And then yeah, like pediatrics is obviously a more happy, nice place to be than some fields of medicine anyway, so yeah, I just, I loved being at like Texas Children's Hospital and being a part of that.

And I- I just, I think for medicine, it's kind of one of those things where you should find the people that are like you like, and so if you look at this type of doctor, you know, you have to think like, "Okay, wh- would I like to do that job every day? Does it academically interest me? Do I take care of those patients?" But also you should look at the doctors you would be working with or for and think like, "Are these people I could see myself aligning with and stuff." Because both of those things are hard. Like, you can't have a job where you're like, "Oh, well I love who I work with, but I can't stand what I do every day." And you can't have a job where even if you're like, "Oh, this is really cool. Like, I do this awesome thing, like I do this procedure every day, whatever, but you're miserable with all your colleagues or, or you're so different from all of them that it's gonna, like, grate." You're gonna always be swimming upstream. So I felt like that's how it was for me with pediatrics. Like, I wasn't really planning on that. Like again, I randomly asked Dr. Jung to shadow, right? But having seen that, having worked there, and then going back through the whole process and seeing all these other fields of medicine or whatever, I was like, "Okay, well, I actually think that is my home. You know, like, that's where I was comfortable. And where I felt like I could contribute and where I was, where I belonged, you know?"

CL: Yeah. So I guess what was it kind of like to work for Texas Children's? And like working with children and like, what type of patients would you like receive, I guess?

EL: Yeah, it's—TCH is a huge children's hospital. Like it—I guess in many measures, it is the largest children's hospital in the U.S. and one in the world. So, the benefit of that is that you receive patients from all over the world, but certainly like the region for very difficult medical cases. So, like extreme premature patients or very complicated, inborn errors of metabolism, like genetic mutations or heart malformations and stuff where like there are only a few, maybe surgeons who can correct this particular thing, or there's only a few like, PhD-MD combo experts who can treat this very difficult disorder or something. So, I really liked having the opportunity to learn

from those researchers and, you know, physician scientists and stuff. I think at the same time, like the downside of that is, at Texas Children's, in residency, I didn't see as many of the, like normal children's problems or, or even like healthy children because it's like a place where you go when you're in a really bad spot, and then they make you better, but it's not the place you necessarily need to go for like, a regular old broken bone kind of thing.

So I think, you know, there was a Rice engineer who told me this story too. That was—his philosophy was if I do this very difficult engineering program at Rice, he was an elec major. They're pushing me really hard to, like, do these theoretical experiments and like, things that are so far out of like, what I would actually do as a day to day engineer. But he said, "I realized the point is, if I prove I can do this, then I could do anything. And if I go work for a company, and they say, 'Oh, you like were pushed through to the limit and then beyond, and actually all we really needed was to know you could be comfortable here, then I'd be like a great person to hire.'" And so I felt like that's kind of how I wanted to be as a doctor was like, I could, I-I felt very stretched, I guess, in-in the ER or in the intensive care unit, like taking care of super ill children, like taking care of children with cancer or who've been like having a—had a bone marrow transplant. Like, sometimes it's-it's very crushing because, unlike adult medicine, the children almost never brought this on themselves. Like they were—they didn't do anything wrong and they randomly were born with this difference and this mutation in their genes or this accident happened to them or whatever, or their parents, you know, well meaning or not harmed them or something, like there's a lot of sad cases.

But again, on the flip side of that, I always felt like motivated because I think, since the default for children is to adapt well and like be happy and, you know, seek a good life for themselves. I felt like okay, well, at least no matter what happened to bring somebody to this point, if I can inflect their life in a better direction, then they have many years to go forward and be healthy or, you know, make a great life for themselves. Versus when I did like, rotations at St. Luke's Hospital or Methodist Hospital or something, it was like, a lot of it was like, "Okay, look, you're 85 years old, we want your remaining time here to be comfortable. And—" but it was just like twiddling a little bit like, or it was really challenging, because there's so many things to balance, like if somebody—if an adult gets to an old age, they tend to have ten old medical problems that you have to take into consideration when you're trying to fix their one new medical problem. And so it can be really challenging. And some, I think a lot of doctors sometimes think like, "I don't really know if I did any good here, like, you know, we're just kind of trying to keep the ship afloat when there's new holes popping up in it." But children usually don't give that vibe. It's much more hopeful like, "Hey, we have a problem here. And we're gonna fix it." Sometimes it's really hard to do so, but that's always kind of the main goal. And, but yeah, so a huge variety of patients, I guess.

And, again, I'm thankful that I had the opportunity to work at TCH, and I did when I interviewed for residency, like when I finished med school, I thought I would want to stay at Baylor for residency, but I did interview and apply to other places and like kind of research a lot and my interviews were in Los Angeles, like a few hospitals in the Southern California area and it was so different, like, I loved visiting LA and stuff, but the children's hospitals were much smaller and they're still awesome. But, I was like, "Ooh, I think I'm just too used to being at the big show at TCH." And like, yeah, that's I don't want to- I'm not saying you can't learn well, that way. I'm just saying for me, I think it was, you know, a good fit and I was very proud to be affiliated with them and stuff.

CL: Yeah. You also then became a clinical assistant professor at Baylor. I guess, what was your favorite part of teaching and like mentoring medical students?

EL: Yeah, I don't know. I think I always liked teaching. I always wanted to be a father. And I always liked I don't know, feeling like I was contributing to the next generation or something. So yeah, when I, when I, when you're a pediatric resident, or any medicine resident, I guess you have to have a continuity clinic because so much of your residency is spent in the hospital with the really, really sick cases. But part of learning to be like an internal medicine physician or pediatrician is learning to take care of like, regular day to day stuff in the clinic not just critically ill patients in the hospital. So once a week, you have a continuity clinic. And so mine was at Texas Children's. And so, I guess it just so happens that when you do that, you get to know the professors who are like, you know, in the general pediatrics, division or whatever. And so when I was graduating, they kind of like grabbed each of us before we're like, finishing residency, like, "Hey, where are you going to work? And please, will you take a medical students to, you know, rotate through your clinic and stuff?" Because I guess they're always seeking more spots and more opportunities where they can send students to learn. But for me, it was pretty easy to say yes, because A, I felt like I bumbled through college never knowing that I wanted to be a doctor anyway, and then I'm only where I'm at today because like Dr. Jung let me come and follow him. And then B, I always feel like I owe it to Baylor and Texas Children's and stuff to like, try to help their medical students. Because again, it's like well, I wouldn't be where I am today without that school letting me in and you know, giving me all the opportunities they gave me so I think I always—I don't know, I think that is a Japanese thing too honestly is like, I have a lot of sense of like duty, like I have to pay back this debt I owed. And I'm always like thinking about like, okay, so and so did this for me or that I have to do this for them or somebody gave me a gift that I could think about like, "Oh, I should make sure I show them how I appreciate that gift or something." So, probably through that or something, I immediately said, "Sure, sure, I'll try to have med students wherever I go."

And so at the first clinic I worked at, like that Texas Children's Pediatrics Clinic. I had med students come and like one of the most gratifying things was I had, I remember I—it was a guy, because pediatrics is 75-80% female and so it's unusual to have male pediatricians. And so I had a male med student come to rotate at my clinic, and he—I said, "Oh, well, what do you think you want to go into, what specialty?" And he was like, "I really don't know. I haven't decided." I said, "Okay, well, that's cool, like, keep an open mind or whatever." And then, like two years later, or I guess it was one year later or something, he emailed me and said he actually had decided to go into pediatrics. And he, I think he wanted me to write a letter. He just wanted to let me know. And then he ended up staying and doing his residency at Baylor and TCH. You know, as I had, like, I saw his name on the roster or something the following year. So I guess I felt like, "Oh, man," like, I don't, again, I don't think I'm solely responsible for that guy's career or whatever, but it was really cool to be a part of it. And then to think like, yeah, I want to be a good example. And I, I already feel like I owe it to these people to give something back. And if you get the feedback from the students that like, "Oh, this was a great place to go and learn or, or that I did a good job teaching them or whatever," then I think it keeps me going like, yeah, yeah I would want to continue doing this. So yeah, it's been nice. And I recently had a Rice student she like, I guess she's just super motivated, but she randomly started emailing clinics and asking for a place to rotate for a couple of weeks or something.

And- so yeah, so I'm very thankful that—because Baylor wanted me to teach their med students, like I have that academic affiliation. So I guess I've also had like, nurse practitioner students and med students from other schools in Texas that need a spot to rotate and stuff like that. So yeah, so that's very gratifying to teach. And then I think ultimately, the best feeling is when you feel like you showed somebody like a whole career opportunity or yeah, open somebody's eyes to an opportunity that they may not have known about or considered.

CL: So I guess, moving on to general life questions. How—well—when did, when and where did you like get married and how did you meet your partner?

EL: Yeah, so I actually—we also went to that Korean American Church. And then, very tragically though, like, we actually got divorced in 2019. So, Gina and I got married in 2006, so I was in between the first and second year of med school. And then she was a teacher. And then we had our children in 2009, 2012, and then 2016. So my two daughters were born while I was in residency, which was very challenging, I think, because residency is, it's tough, like there's the 80 hour work week, and then, yeah—just a lot of like, it's every month is different, like you rotate to a different part of the hospital. So I think that did, like that added a lot of stress to life. But yeah, I mean, there are a lot of difficult marriage structural issues that we didn't address very well, I think. So, that's been challenging, since 2019, or 2018, I guess. But she's wonderful, she's a great mother. And I think our daughters are doing pretty well. The oldest one is in, is going to start seventh grade, and then fourth grade and then the youngest one's starting kindergarten. So yeah, I guess I'm just saying for like, well, even though things were hard. Like, I guess my main priority, I feel like should be that my children do well and feel supported and loved from both parents and stuff like that. So I think they feel that way right now.

But yeah, so I don't know, I think a lot of my identity, I guess I started going to that church in college. And then I felt like a lot of my identity, and just a lot of my day to day life like revolved around that world. And when the marriage started crumbling, like it really rocked my whole world because it was kind of tied in to all these other aspects of my social life. So yeah, so then now, I guess for two years, two and a half years or so, it's been like different—kind of rebuilding without that, but it's been good. And I've—I'm also thankful in that regard. I think that I didn't leave Houston because I still have like, high school friends here. And like, one of my best friends now is a guy from the Japanese American Citizens League days that like I didn't—I always felt kind of bad, like, I don't have enough time to devote to these causes, or hang out with this guy back then, but then now, I have more time. And so I'm very thankful that I still have that connection, I guess. And geographically that I'm still here where these people from my life at different points I can still reconnect with and stuff.

CL: I guess, what is your favorite part of having children?

EL: I think you—I guess I don't think, I don't want to say something inflammatory. I feel like it's a natural desire in most human beings to pass on your wisdom, your life experiences, or whatever, and invest in people who come after you. And like, of course, you can do that anyway, like teaching the med students and whatever, like mentoring people in other ways can be very rewarding too, but like, to me, personally, there hasn't been anything quite on the level of having your own child to have to take care of like to be completely dependent and then watch them grow up and stuff. So I think it-it challenges me to be the best man I can be. And like, I guess I-I think it's something that, whereas in other areas of life, like I might work really hard at something and then feel exhausted. And-and question, if-if it's really okay, if this is right, or should I quit, like, with children, like, you can, you would never think about quitting on them. So it's like, yeah, this is painful, this is awful. Like, but it's worth it. Like, there's no question that it's the right thing to do or that—if they need more like, yeah, I should give them more. So yeah, so I think it's nice to have something so challenging, but so, you know, amazing and beautiful to see as, like your children growing up and achieving things, making you proud.

CL: Has the experience of raising your own children given you further insight into being a pediatrician?

EL: Yeah, for sure. I think what we generally say at work is there's a lot of things that are true in theory that we could dispense as advice to parents, but until you try to put that theory in practice and do it, you—you don't understand, I guess the challenge of like balancing everything else. So, for example, it's easy to like have a-a perfect idea of like, what-what food should you feed to children for health or like choking hazard safety. What car seat usage you would suggest to ideally protect all the occupants of your car at their ages and all kinds of collisions. What sleep schedule would be ideal for like a family or children to babies as they grow and then adults in the house. But like, even though there is kind of an answer for these things, until you've lived it, I guess like, you tried to pack the car up for a vacation with the car seats involved or until you've tried to like, feed three daughters at the same time, and make sure they're eating their veggies or make sure everybody's needs are taken care of. You know, until you've like, juggled all that, I don't think it's as easy to say like, "Oh, yeah, you should do this. And I know you can do this." And so I think it makes us kind of back off more and understand, like, "Hey, here's a recommendation, here is generally some good ideas, but like, you know, you, the parent, are gonna have to find the best balance for you and your family and your child." And then like, it's more of like, "I'm supporting you, I'm gonna make suggestions, but I would never judge you." I mean, short of some horrible thing. But like, because-because now I know how hard it can be, you know?

And I think unfortunately, even like, if my marriage didn't work out, like, that also has been kind of helpful, I guess, in making me more compassionate or less proud, because, yeah, I think there's kind of a stigma with that too, right? And I have a lot of patients who, whose parents aren't together one way or another. And so, again, that-that makes everything much harder. Like, if you have a single parent, trying to do all this stuff to take care of, take care of their children. I guess I think of it as like, well, not that I understand exactly, but like maybe what some people feel about race or about sexual orientation or something like, there might be like, bias, you know, like, oh, like, for example, you should brush teeth for your children while your partner draws the bath and then you can have one person, like, do the bath and hand the child to the other person and whatever, like, there might be a lot of things that we kind of have on autopilot, or whatever is like, "Hey, here's how this could work or whatever." And then it turns out like, "Oh, yeah, sorry, that's not going to work for you. Is it because you are a single parent? So sorry, I said all that, you know?" So I think it kind of helps me now also commiserate or empathize better.

CL: Yeah. I guess what is the most difficult part of having three daught-daughters?

EL: I guess. I can't, I know, I can't make everybody happy. At the same—so like, there's really not much I can do. I will never make like one meal for them, or have one type of vacation for them, or one schedule for them that they're all going to equally love. Or even like if-if we're trying to watch a—something like *Raya and The Last Dragon* recently, the movie, like two of them were okay with it, one of them wasn't, you know, like. So, yeah, I think it's just hard to deal with the fact that like, "Okay, I have to make a decision that not everybody's going to be happy with. And then I just have to try to be fair, or rotate or whatever." But I think, yeah, on the flip side, like that's how life is, right? Like, if you were the President of the United States, like this is why we have a democratic system. Like you can't make everybody happy, everybody has different needs or wants. And so you have to make the best decision you can and then kind of trust the process and over time, earn people's trust, I guess.

CL: I guess, changing to the topic of church. So, you're active in various church ministries, can you describe your experiences in these ministries?

EL: Yeah, I think the thing honestly that I love the most would be going on international medical mission trips probably because of where it all started for me back in 2003. So from like, 2013 to 18, I went to this village in Mexico, like Southeast Mexico, like six times, I think. So yeah, pretty much every year except for the 2016 because my daughter, Livi, was born that year. And it was like, really awesome, like it was a mission base where they have a bunch of facilities and like schools and-and clinic and projects and stuff. But then if you come with an international team of people, then they will use the resources you bring to go to like a really remote, usually a mountain top village where there's like, no access to medical care, pretty much and, and then you can like, help in whatever way you can, you know. But the nice thing is, unlike some of my other like, honestly, the experience in 2003 was much more like jump in and jump out. Because this is affiliated with a mission base, it was, you know, like, it was- there's much more continuity, like, yeah, we're here for a week helping out and doing whatever we can do. But like the people who are driving up this mountain with us are native people who live here, who, who are going to reconnect with this community or who like planted a church nearby. And said they're going to have like, ongoing contact with the people that we're helping. Or if-if I had a patient who needed like, really needed surgery or something, or it's like, "Okay, well, I'm not going to be able to do that today." At least we had a follow up plan, we can connect you with somebody, you know? So, yeah, I guess I really thought they had a nice, well thought out, well-organized structure.

And then, yeah, that New Life Fellowship Church, like their main thing is like these house churches that meet on Friday, and so I did a lot of that, where you just meet with a small group on Friday and try to reach out to people and invite them. And then I did work on the drama team, or I would do dramas and like, silly—mostly like humorous videos and stuff like that. And then the—yeah, and then that was with like multimedia, where you're like, projecting like lyrics for the songs and stuff like that. So, yeah I did a lot of different things.

But yeah, I think the thing that I really resonated with the most was the going overseas, I went to—I've been to several other countries, like some of the like, closed Asian countries where you're not supposed to be a Christian missionary. And then Japan once as a church project. And yeah, so I think, again, just being able to see the world and kind of like see how other people live is super important for us, especially in the U.S. And then yeah, to me, it was important to do it in a Christian Church context because I wanted to help people in that way.

CL: Did you start going to church, with your family since you were a child? Or were you inspired to start going later on in life?

EL: Oh, yeah, I actually didn't go until the white man who was studying Chinese. My friend Jonathan invited me to his Chinese church. I think it was my junior year of high school or something, or after. Yeah, I think the summer after junior year of high school. So I was kind of like, I guess, the seeds were planted or whatever, but that's why when I got to college, I was very interested in exploring that more. And I started going to church with that good friend from Rice who was Korean and so he went to the New Life the Korean Church.

CL: How do you think?

EL: Oh, I can't hear you.

CL: Sorry, how do you—okay, how do you think your religion? I—kind of like ties into your choice to become a physician or like your occupation?

EL: Um, yeah, I mean, I guess I saw it as a lot of like, if there's a purpose for my life, like, so if like, God made me for a reason, then I should have like a calling, right? Like, there's kind of like, not like one right answer or whatever, but it should be kind of obvious that like, "Oh, yeah, I'm where I'm supposed to be, or I'm doing what I'm supposed to do." And so I think when I went on that original medical mission trip, that's something that jumped out at me, like, I guess in contrast to- okay, well, if I get a job where I work for a company, and I do like financial analysis, like I could try to do a really good job and maximize the profit for that company. But then it's like—and that could be fine. But is it what I'm supposed to be doing? Like, am I gonna go to work every day thinking like, "Yes, I like did something that made me feel of value to this world." And so I think having the religious beliefs that, "Okay, I gotta find my purpose," made it jump out at me when that opportunity to do like, "Oh, if you're a physician, you could do this work like where you go out to people who need a lot of help and really have nothing. And you can offer them something wonderful."

And then yeah, like, I think, again, going through the process, it was like looking at different kinds of specialties and stuff. But I think I just really liked pediatrics, because it- it's pretty easy to say like, "Hey, like, if God made all of us and these children that you have here are part of that, then help me work with you to make their life as great as possible." Like, it's, it's a natural flow, I think, to be kind of a religious person and a pediatrician. And you, you know, you can be a Christian and be all kinds of jobs. But for me, it seemed to be like, the right fit. And it made sense too to me to be like, "Oh, maybe this was the plan all along, like I had to, like, do all that like crazy, pseudo Asian study stuff and study abroad or whatever." If I had been pre med, I probably would have been like, "Oh, no, I don't have time for that. I have to be more goal driven. And that would be a detour." But like, because it happened the way it happened. Now I have a job where I use that language skill that I learned and worked hard at for something that I had never I wouldn't have been able to imagine. So I was like, okay, maybe that was the plan all along, you know?

CL: Yeah. So, do people make assumptions about you as a doctor, based on your racial identity? Or?

EL: Um, yeah, I mean, I don't, I haven't gotten a lot of like, negative experiences that I can remember. But I think it's more just amusing because I'm like more ambiguous, like they don't know what my background is. And so I have—for example, like, I speak some Korean and some Mandarin. So when I have patients who speak those languages and I use those languages, I think they tend to assume like, "Oh, you must you look, maybe half-whatever we are and [CL: laughs] half a white person." And then, yeah, I've even had Japanese families where they didn't know I was half. And so they think, "Wow, this is just an American man who grew up here and randomly learned Japanese, like, that's amazing." But then if they do learn, I'm half—my mom was Japanese American, but they assumed my mom, like spoke Japanese and taught me Japanese. So actually, like, "Oh, no, I just learned, like in college." But then also when I speak Spanish, I think a lot of people think I'm from a South American country or some part of Mexico or something. And so yeah, I guess I like that I think it's hard to pigeonhole me in one, one way. So, and Houston being so diverse, like something I very much enjoy having, like a schedule of patients all day and then thinking like, "Oh, wow, like, there's just all kinds of people on this roster." And, you know, I try to treat everybody the same. And everybody's living in harmony, for the most part here.

Like, I think it's a nice-nice microcosm, you know, for what the world can be or should be, or what this country should be.

CL: So, the Asian American community kind of has a stigma against mental health issues. What do you think should be done for, like Asian Americans to kind of pay more attention to mental health or is it kind of harder to treat Asian Americans with mental health issues compared to like—

EL: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, I think I'm doing this interview because of all because of the rabbit hole that started when I was forwarded this email asking about mental health resources for Asian American pediatric patients in Houston. So yeah, I think the hard part is finding providers who are, who look like the patients is harder. One of my friends from Rice or I guess, there was a girl that I was friends with in my class from Rice, who was always pre-med and her older brother also went to Rice and was pre-med and he became a child adolescent psychiatrist. And so he's like a great resource, but he's in a Clear Lake area. So like, not close to my part of Houston, just as an example, but like, he's pretty rare, right? Like, he's an English speaking Vietnamese American doctor in the mental health field. So yeah, I think part of the problem is finding more providers who look like the community that they, you know, came from, can serve or be like, kind of a, like a normalizing force. The same thing happens with like other persons of color, like it's really hard to find Black physicians in certain specialties and stuff. And for the most part, patients are more comfortable with somebody who kind of looks like them, or culturally gets their background. But I think there's a real stigma, there's a real problem with like, for Asian, for Asians in Asia. And then I guess when they immigrate, especially like, the first generation to second generation, I think it is not very common place to seek mental health services like therapy and stuff. I guess it's seen as weakness or something.

So yeah, I think the best way is just to get more stories out there, like normalize it and have, have—then you have a better opportunity that like, say, a struggling, tween or teenager who's Asian American, would say, "Oh, well like, there's—I saw a YouTube video or on social media, like, I saw somebody that comes from a background like mine, that looks like me. And they had a successful, you know, history with going to a psychiatrist or getting therapy after something bad happened to them or whatever, like, oh, it's okay." Because I don't really think we can easily convince the immigrant parents. I think that's much more difficult. Not to say we shouldn't try, but it's, you know, it's kind of like teaching an old dog new tricks, I guess. But I think having like, Asian American college students speak up and say like, "Oh, hey, I was going through this and that, and I found help. And it was really beneficial. And I'm not ashamed of it. And I would recommend it would help other people who are more like wavering think, okay, yeah, there's nothing wrong with this. This is good. This is not bad." Like, yeah, some more examples, I guess.

CL: Yeah. I guess finally, do you have a vision of how you want to lead ma—well, maybe not the rest of your life. But where do you want to be in the next few years and in the future?

EL: Hmm. Ah, you know, honestly. I guess right now, because my life has changed a lot in the past few years. I don't think I would want to change like my profession, my workplace or anything, because I love Blue Fish Pediatrics and the people I work with, and I love teaching med students, so I think that has kept me going. I think regardless, what happens to me in my life—yeah, like, work going well, taking good care of my patients, and then my daughter's thriving are the priorities. But yeah, I guess if I were to, you know, get remarried and restart in life

in that way like with a, with a new partner, like, that would be great. Yeah, but I think priority wise, it would be like my children, since I feel like very responsible to make sure they have the best life they can have. And then work, I probably wouldn't change. And then I will-I will hope that the rest falls into place nicely, too.

CL: Yeah. So that's all the questions from my end. Do you—is there anything I might have missed or anything you'd like to add?

EL: No, I think that's pretty good.