

Interviewee: Hae Hun Matos

Interviewer: Gina Matos

Interview Date: August 2, 2021

Transcribed by: Gina Matos

Reviewed by: Karen Siu, Sonia He

Track Time: 1:26:25

Background:

Hae Hun Matos was born in Seoul, South Korea. She was born to deaf parents, who divorced when she was three or four. She moved frequently as a child. She first lived with her grandparents and aunt with her younger sister in Korea. At the age of seven, her mother took her and her youngest sister to live with her and her stepfather briefly, before moving to the States, where they lived in Victorville, California. Her third grade year, the family moved to Korea for one year, moved back to Victorville for middle school, and she finished out high school in Japan.

Following high school graduation, she took up different jobs in Florida and Las Vegas, taught English in Korea, before joining the U.S Army in 1998. She was stationed in Colorado and Germany before leaving the Army in 2002. In 2003, she moved with her husband to Houston and got her bachelor's degree, taking classes at HCC and the University of Houston-Downtown. She currently works as the Coordinator at the Department of Transnational Asian Studies and Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University. In this interview, Hae Hun Matos discusses deaf and Korean culture, her childhood, her experiences living in various places, her service in the U.S Army, and insights on being in an interracial relationship and raising a biracial daughter.

Setting:

This interview took place on July 31, 2021 over Zoom. Note: Interviewer Gina Matos is Hae Hun's daughter.

Key:

GM: Gina Matos

HM: Hae Hun Matos

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

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

Interview transcript:

**GM:** Today is July 31, 2021. My name is Gina Matos and I'm with the Houston Asian American Archive, interviewing my mother, Hae Hun Matos. Thank you so much for taking time out of today to have a quick chat with me about your life. Thank you so much.

**HHM:** You're welcome. Glad to be here.

**GM:** So we can just get started. If you could tell us when and where were you born, and if you can sort of describe the household you grew up in.

**HHM:** I was born in Seoul, Korea. Seoul's the capital of South Korea. And both of my parents are biologically deaf.<sup>1</sup> But they divorced when I was pretty young, probably three or four, something like that, and so I lived with my grandparents. I have two sisters and one brother. My brother didn't—wasn't born until much later. But the sister who's right next to me, she's two years younger. We lived together at my grandparents' house, and basically my aunt, who was in high school, raised us in Korea. So she had a pretty big job, as far as taking care of us. We lived with—what—as I said, with my grandparents and my aunt, and then there was another grandmother who used to help out with the cooking and the cleaning. And so I'm not sure where my father lived, but my mom lived away from—from my grandparents' house as well and she used to come and visit periodically. And, of course, I got very excited whenever she visited. I didn't see her very often, but I saw her time to time. And so that was my life in Korea.

But at the age of seven, she took me and my youngest sister to live with her very briefly. And—and my stepfather—so she had met my stepfather who was in the Air Force, and we were moving to the States. And so I lived with them for a brief period. I don't know, maybe like a month or something like that. And we moved to Victorville, California, where my stepdad was going to be stationed. So pretty early in my life, we moved around quite a bit, because in the military, there's a lot of moving every two, three years. And—and so-so we lived in Victorville for a couple of years. So I went to first grade and second grade. And that was kind of a crazy time because I didn't know how to communicate with my mom, who is deaf. I didn't grow up with her, so I didn't know any sign language. And then I didn't speak any English because we never learned English in school in Korea. And so—and then also I was dealing with the culture shock of living in America, suddenly. From living with my grandparents and my aunt and—and so it was—yeah, it was a pretty difficult time, I remember. I remember crying myself to sleep many nights because I missed my grandparents and my aunt. And then I wasn't used to eating cereal. I think that's what we ate mostly at that time. I was used to eating rice and soup, sitting with my grandparents and my aunt on the floor, and so this was a total new concept. Sleeping on a bed, that was also very new to me. And in fact, I think I fell a few times, 'cause I-'cause I wasn't used to sleeping on a bed. I was mainly sleeping on the floor in Korea.

So we lived in Victorville for a couple of years. And then we moved to Korea for one year, and that was supposed to be my third grade year. So we lived there, which was a good thing because I believe in the couple years that I was in Victorville, I had forgotten to speak Korean. Because at home, we—I communicated with my mom by speaking sign language and learning English. And my younger sister and I probably spoke some Korean. But since we were so young, and there was no one else besides just my sister and I, eventually, we switched over to English. So then when we went to Korea during my third grade year, and actually, for some reason, we didn't go to school for that whole year. I think that we were supposed to be homeschooled. And—and so-so when we were in Korea, I was able to pick up some Korean again. I got to interact with my cousins. I loved music, so I would listen to the radio or watch music shows. And in Korea, they have—back then, they had books that they would sell with the lyrics of the popular songs. And I liked to follow the music, so I remember doing that. And—and so-so I was able to relearn Korean again at that time. And then we moved back to the States, actually, you know, after—after one year to the same place, Victorville. And I went to fourth and fifth grade in Victorville. And because I was older than most of the kids at my grade level, my parents had me take a test, and I skipped over to seventh grade. And—and—and so we-we-we were-we were in Victorville until-until I entered high school. And then in the

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<sup>1</sup> Both of her biological parents are deaf, but they were not born deaf.

middle of the year, we moved to Japan, where my stepdad was stationed and I finished out my high school in Japan.

So growing up, we moved around a lot. And the other piece that I want to mention is that my mom is deaf. I mean, I already said that she's deaf, but because she's deaf, and I'm the oldest, I was our interpreter wherever we went. The stores or talking to anyone, I mean, pretty much, I had to communicate for her even watching shows or if, you know, we're watching a movie, often I did a lot of translation for her. So yeah, I guess those are the highlights for—growing up with a deaf mom, moving around quite a bit, and—also, I had a pretty big birthmark on the left side of my face, which-which was really also hard. Moving around all the time and having to deal with—with people asking me if I was in a car accident or if I got beat up, that was just like a constant thing, so that was really difficult. But, you know, there were a lot of challenges my way, definitely growing up. But I have great memories also, getting to know my cousins and playing with them. And in retrospect, I realize that I've made some really good friends in various places and got to learn about other cultures and backgrounds and so—all in all, I-I-I had, I mean, like most people, good memories, bad memories, tough memories, but pretty interesting, I would say.

**GM:** Would you say—I mean, obviously, moving around so much can have a toll on you, especially when you're so young. I just was curious to ask, would you say that moving around so much—has it given you a certain set of life skills? Did it really teach you anything?

**HHM:** Yeah, moving around, you have to be quite—you learn to become resilient. And learning like the new culture, especially when we moved from the States, U.S. to—the States to Japan, so these are different cultures. And so-so that teaches you to be open minded. And you meet people from all kinds of backgrounds, so you learn about their cultures and their background. And so, I think that it helps you to-to become more understanding and more open and appreciative of-of-of everyone really. And so—and then also being able to sightsee in different places. Like-like in California, Victorville, there was nothing but desert. So that was a set of experiences, living in the middle of a desert, and then living in Seoul, which is a very busy city with lots of sounds and noise and people and traffic and all that, you know, it's so different, so that's also different, very different from the desert life. And then living in Japan, I thought that Korea and Japanese culture was going to be the same, because we-we look alike, right? But when we moved to Japan, I realized that it was actually pretty different from Korea, and even the culture was different from the Korean culture. So-so that was pretty interesting. And it's—it was a learning experience.

**GM:** So living in a Korean influenced or Korean household, whether it was in Korea or in the States or in Japan, were there any particular values or practices that your family engaged in, growing up?

**HHM:** So, yes. So my mom loves Korean food and she had me and my sisters help her out to make mandu. Mandu is like a dumplings. So we would make it from scratch—well, except the-the-the outside part of it—but the meat that goes inside, we would get together and she would make the meat and add the various ingredients. And we would help her make-make mandu or kimchi. We would help her to mix things up and, you know, help her clean up and—yeah, so I have memories of helping out with food. And-and also the Deaf culture was a big part of our life growing up. And, you know, for a while, I didn't understand why my mom was so blunt about some things. And I thought that it was just her personality. Like, she-she would just straight out and say things like, "Oh," you know, "You're getting fat" or "You're getting ugly," or "You're looking so old that—" and I

thought, "Wow, why—that's so rude. Like, why would she just say that, you know?" But I learned in Deaf culture—in my adult years, I took some classes at the community college here, and I learned about Deaf culture. And even here, in American Deaf culture, they said that that was just part of—just being straightforward and-and American deaf teachers said—they will say to each other, "Oh, you've gotten fat," or "Oh, you look so old," or "You look so tired" or, you know, just very blunt, straightforward. And so that gave me an insight of the Deaf culture.

But growing up, you know, like I said, being my mom's interpreter and then meeting her deaf friends and getting to know them, and just learning the different ways to communicate. For example, back then, they had this thing called a TDD. And it was—that—a device to help deaf people communicate. So it basically was like, kind of like a typewriter with a screen. And when—so when a deaf person would call, you put the phone in-in this device, and then they can type—we would communicate by typing. So it's kind of like instant message sort of, and I would help—I would communicate for my mom because she didn't read or write English. And so I would communicate with her friends. And then we learned a little bit of sign language, American Sign Language. We grew up learning Korean Sign Language, but then we learned American Sign Language through my mom's friends. And so, that—that was—that—we have some really good memories around her friends and the deaf people.

**GM:** That's really interesting that you're talking about Deaf culture, because I feel like today, people don't really think about the fact that deaf people—they're a community, and they're a culture. So I think that's really interesting that you talked about that. Were there any Korean cultural values that have been instilled in you growing up?

**HHM:** Oh, yeah. Okay, so my aunt, like I said, she raised me when I was young. And that same aunt actually moved to the States. And she and I have always been close, I guess, because we lived together. We were bonded from early on. But I would say that she was probably a bigger influence as far as Korean culture goes, because through my mom, it was more about the Deaf culture. And of course, some Korean culture, you know, like with the food and some mannerism and things, but it was mostly from my aunt. And-and so, you know, respecting your elders, that was a big one. Even if someone is like a year or two years older than-than you, in Korea, that's a big deal, even if you're like six months older. I don't know if they still do this now, but-but we—when you're-when you're ages apart like that, you refer to that person as "unni" if they're a female, or "oppa" if they're a male. So out of respect, you don't call them by their names, you know? And so, that's-that's very cultural. And, of course, always saying hello when you meet a Korean person or family, and just-just being very polite and respectful was a big thing. And another thing is if—when you're at a table with Koreans, you wait until like the eldest person starts eating, to start eating, and before you eat, you always say, you know, like, "Thank you for the meal" or "Mas-issge meokkessumnida" or "Jal meokkessumnida" which translates to "I will—" like "Thank you for the food," you know, I—so-so those things were taught by my aunt. I'm sure there are more things that-that she instilled in us that I can't remember on top of my head, but those-those are the things that comes to mind.

**GM:** And speaking of Korean culture, I just remembered that our family has been very involved in creating Korean culture and history, right? As one of our family members, our relatives, was in the Korean independence movement? [**HHM:** Right!] I thought it was really interesting that you brought that up to me. So if you just want to talk about that, I think that's super cool.

**HHM:** Yes, yes. So I really don't know much about my father's side of the family, because I grew up with my mom. But in our adult years, my sister and I got to—reconnected with my father and this was probably-probably like fifteen years ago? Thirteen-fifteen years ago. He actually came to the States and told us about our—his grandfather, which-which is my great grandfather. He was part of the independence movement. And in fact, he showed me a photo with-with our great grandfather sitting next to some really important figures in Korea, such as Kim Gu, and actually my great grandfather's sitting next to him. My great grandfather's name is Min Jungi(?). And that's him right there. And the **[GM: That's really cool.]** person that's sitting next to him is Kim Gu. And the family was recognized by the South Korean President for his contribution for the independence movement, so I was very happy and proud to find that out. I hope to have more information about my great grandfather when I visit Korea, and hopefully I can meet more members of my father's family and get more information but—yeah, very proud of that.

**GM:** That is super interesting to hear. Before moving on, I just wanted to ask if you have any early childhood memories that you would like to share? Yeah.

**HHM:** Okay. When I lived in Korea, early on, I went to first grade in Seoul. And I remember that in—that I did my nails. I colored my nails, painted my nails, and I went to school. And the teacher saw that I had painted my nails. And that's like a big no-no, especially back then. And she made me put my palms up like this and took a ruler and reprimanded me by slapping my hand, and I remember that was painful. I think I had to clean the bathroom or scrub the bathroom for that, too. That's what comes to mind. Other memories that I have is that the school that I went to, we had a big celebration, where there were dancing and sports activity, and waving the Korean flag, and very nationalistic activities. And so that—yeah, I have pictures of that time and I just remember it was an exciting time. So those are some things that come to mind. And, I guess—this—just moving around a lot and that being very difficult at times and not really being able to, you know, talk to my mom about that. And so there were some hard times, growing up with the language barriers and cultural differences and dealing with my birthmark and skip—you know, going to different schools and things like that. But-but my siblings and I are very close, and I feel very fortunate that I had sisters and my brother. Although we didn't really hang around doing things together, except when we did family things, I see in a lot of our photos that me and my sisters were together, and we're close now. So I think because we have the shared experiences of moving around and always being together, that we are close now. So those are-those are good memories.

**GM:** I remember you telling me that one specific memory of you driving at fourteen, fifteen around Las Vegas. **[HHM: Oh, yeah!]** That's such a great memory.

**HHM:** That's right. So my aunt, the one that raised me, she lived in Las Vegas at that time. And when I was just fourteen, she taught me how to drive in a movie theater parking lot. And then somehow, that led to me being actually on the road, driving all the way to the nearest bowling alley. So she would just instruct me, "Okay, put the brake on. Do this, do that." And I don't know how we got away with that, but I remember being scared and thinking that, "Oh, this," you know, "This is kind of crazy." But, I guess, I wanted to-to show my skills and talents and I wanted to, you know, a-a-accomplish the mission? So I did it. But-but yeah, that's the memory that I have in Las Vegas. Driving to the bowling alley with my family. Yeah. [laughs]

**GM:** So going back to the topic of moving to the U.S, I was just gonna ask if you—other than a culture shock, I know that you mentioned that it was hard, adjusting to sleeping in a bed and adjusting to just eating cereal a lot,

and a bunch of other things. But I was gonna ask if you have any specific instances of racism or xenophobia that you remember?

**HHM:** Yeah. So we were very fortunate that we lived on base, which means there were people from different countries and cultures. But initially when we moved to Victorville, I remember that there were other kids that made fun of us. And like in the playground, bullying us, making fun of me and laughing, and me not being able to speak English to fight back with them, you know, so—I think that I have even got into, like, a physical fight with a boy in the playground. But sure, yeah, back then, in that small, small city, when we would go off base, people would stare and the—they just weren't very many Asians. And also my-my grandmother from my stepdad, she lived in Kentucky, so we would visit her time to time. And that was another experience where—you know, actually, I mean—I guess from—you know, we got some looks and stares and things like that, but even at that time in Kentucky, we actually did-did pretty well, probably because we're with my grandmother and my stepdad. But we went to restaurants and we went to the swimming pool. And aside from the stares, we-we actually did okay. But in my earlier childhood, the kids, you know, being kids and making the-the gestures of, you know, like, you know, pushing their eyes back and making funny noises and things like that. So I did have my ways of-of that. Yeah, a-a-and then, I guess, even in my... adult, early adult years, when I lived in Tampa, I received some racism there actually, where people would, you know, just say-just say rude things. And-and I-I-I felt like it was probably because they looked down at-at us or at me. So yeah, I experienced some-some of that in Tampa as well and that was when we didn't live on base, so living off base, it was much harder.

**GM:** Moving on into discussing your career and adult life, after graduating in Japan, what did you decide to pursue? Can you explain briefly your career trajectory from what brought you from your high school in Japan to here in Houston and working at Rice University?

**HHM:** Sure. So after I graduated from high school, we moved to Tampa, to Florida, and I didn't receive much guidance from my parents. My stepdad and my mom were having some issues at home. And so—and my mom was gone quite a bit, so she wasn't really around. And-and so, honestly, I-I—and I-I really wasn't focused in school so much at that time. And so there wasn't a whole lot of focus in college or, you know, careers. And so right after, when we moved to Florida, I had like, odd end jobs. Like I worked at-I worked at this credit company for-for a couple of years, and I tried to apply for this-this shoe store, I think it was Payless. And I remember at that time, they told me that they couldn't hire me because of my birthmark. That I would—I wouldn't be a good—like a salesperson for the customers, you know? And so, you know, I-I think with the different-different circumstances and reasons, I was not focused so much on my career or what to do next, you know. It was just kind of like trying to find something for the moment and dealing with what-what was in front of me. But I did manage to take some classes at the community college. But eventually, from there, I ended up moving to Las Vegas, and I lived with my aunt for a little while. And I worked-I worked there, and I was in the medical field, mostly working like as a receptionist or in the billing department. And—so I did that for a little while. And then I went to Korea and lived with my sister and I taught some English there for-for about seven months. And so after doing that, I realized that living in Korea, that I wanted to go back to Korea and live there longer. And I met some people in the military who told me that the-that the military is a great place to get an education and to travel and possibly to come back to Korea and so that's what I did when I came back to the States. I thought, "I'm gonna join the military."

And so I did, but it was at a much later age than an average person—usually high school kids or right after high school. These—they—so-so basically, when I joined the military, I was there with among like, you know, eighteen, nineteen year olds, and I was already twenty-seven at that time, so that was kind of a crazy experience. But I was in the military for-for several years. And in the military, I met your father, and it was kind of interesting because he was also a lot older, joining the military. And-and so we met at the first duty station, and got to live in Colorado and Germany, and then had you in Germany. And although your father and I are no longer together—we divorced, we're divorced now—it was him that brought me to Houston 'cause his grand—his parents live in Houston, so we decided to come to Houston to be closer to his parents. So that's what brought me to Houston. And I continued to take classes. I went to University of Houston Downtown and got my bachelor's degree and worked there for several years. And from there, I-I got a job. I transitioned to Rice-Rice University. And it-it—it's kind of interesting because living in Houston, we used to visit Rice University quite-quite often because it's such a beautiful campus, and there's the-the track outside, So I used to walk around and jog around that many times. But I never thought that I would have worked there until I applied for the position and then got it and so—so that—yeah, it almost felt like—like I was home since we were on campus quite a bit. And then now working there, I've-I've kind of, you know, grown in the last fifteen-eighteen years that we've been here on campus quite a bit.

**GM:** That is quite the career traje—excuse me, that's quite the career trajectory. That's quite the journey. Going back, I wanted to talk about your service in the U.S Army. I wanted to ask, why did you choose that branch of the service and more—I wanted to learn more about your job duties, and just in general, any experiences or insights to share about your time there?

**HHM:** Yeah, sure. So I joined the military. I—well actually, I wanted to join the Air Force, so I called the recruiter and told them that I was interested, and he was very excited until he asked me how old I was. And I told him that I was twenty-eight, and I was going to be 28 really soon. And he told me that the cutoff age was twenty-seven or twenty-eight in the Air Force. And so he was one that told me, "You may want to try the Army because they take you up to thirty-five." And so I thought "Okay," I thought, "You know, Army, Air Force, it's probably the same thing," didn't think too much of it, and joined-joined the Army. But after joining, I realized that it is very different. But it was, like I said, physically challenging for sure because I was not in shape. Like, you know, like a soldier would be. I mean, most-most of them aren't. Most of the people that joined, they're not fit like that, but you at least have to prepare to make sure you get through the basic training. But once I joined, I thought, "Oh my gosh, what did I do?" I-I was in shock. We were sleep deprived, we were yelled at all the time, everything was scheduled, very regimented. And then we were punished quite a bit, physically, meaning doing—we had to do push ups all the time. And, you know, anytime someone did something wrong, they would punish the whole group, so there was just a lot of physical—it-it was physically grueling for me. But-but I-I made it, I-I made it through basic training. I-I can't believe it either. I mean, looking back because it was really hard. You know, like, the qualifications that you have to do with the M-16, you have to make sure that you can shoot, you know. Also, we had to go through like a-like a gas chamber, where they had the smoke. We had the gas mask, and they had us lift the gas mask to get a feel for what-what that feels like, and that was horrible. You know, everyone was coughing, and, you know, there was stuff coming out of your nose, then you couldn't breathe, you know, those kind of things. And during the training, they're often—out of the blue, they would-they would throw the, you know, that-that-that stuff, and we would have to put our mask on quickly.

And so that was pretty challenging, yeah. And then also being around seventeen-eighteen year olds, for-for that long. So basic training was eight weeks, and then I went to AIT, which—so that was for my job. So my job—my

official title was called, "Automated Logistical Specialist," that basically I was—it's basically related to supplies. I worked in a warehouse and in a motor pool. For my position, I had my own Humvee, my—a deuce and a half (?) and a five ton that I would drive out to the field, but the Humvee, I would drive daily to go pick up bat-batteries for our vehicles and starters and parts. And then at the warehouse, I was in charge of the inventory, and helping out with the customers with their parts and things like that. So—and then also in the Army, we had PT every morning. So we would meet at six o'clock, and then at—well actually at 6:15—and then at 6:30 to 7:30, we would have physical training. So we would run and then do some push ups, sit ups, and all kinds of different exercises. So in the beginning, it was really difficult. But at the end, actually, it—I became kind of fit, I guess, you know, after doing that for four years, so that was good.

But also, another thing that I'd like to mention is that September 11 happened when we were in Germany. And so that was kind of a scary time. That—we were living off base. And after that happened, they had the military—they told us not to wear uniforms off base, we had to be very aware of our surroundings because we didn't know what kind of threat we were under, you know, being a military personnel. I was on guard duty often, having to guard the gate inside of a tank, you know, with my M-16. And having to guard the-the entrance of the gates and—and then in Germany, there were boars out-out in the forest. So sometimes we would encounter boars, which is kind of scary, you know? But-but yeah, those were some of the experiences that I had in the Army, and it made me a tougher person.

**GM:** Right, you did serve during 9/11 because your service was from—was it [**HHM:** '98 to 2002] Oh, okay. Yeah, that must have been such a scary and high stress time, for sure.

**HHM:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, there were definitely—especially during that time, when we didn't know what was going on. And we just had-had to be on high alert. And so that was a very stressful time.

**GM:** Moving into discussing family, so you are Korean or Korean American? How do you choose to identify as?

**HHM:** Oh, Korean American.

**GM:** So you are Korean American, and my father is Puerto Rican. And I wanted to ask if the racial dynamics of your interracial marriage with my dad affect anything in particular? Do you have any insights on that?

**HHM:** First, I would like to say that Puerto Rican food is so good. So my, you know, ex-mother-in-law would make some really delicious meals. Arroz gandules is, you know, rice with pigeon peas, which I believe it's like one of the national dishes—dish in Puerto Rico. It's super good. The plantains—the fried plantains are really good. The fish—the bacalao. Really love it. And so the-the thing that your dad and I had in common is that we really love food, so he really embraced Korean food and I embraced Puerto Rican food. But culture wise, yes, I know that Puerto Ricans tend to be, you know, louder and very expressive, whereas—I mean, Koreans can get loud and expressive too, so, you know, I-I guess those things are similar, but yeah, but there are definitely some differences. You know, in-in Korea, we-we tend to, you know, try to-try to-try to think of the other person a lot and try to be respectful and, you know, we bow our head when we meet someone like, you know, "Hello." And—and in—I remember, your dad didn't really understand why we had to, you know, bow to people. And, you know, that's just different culture. But, you know, I-I-I think that it's—like I said, there are some similarities too with,



you know, Koreans, Puerto Ricans. I think we're both very emotional, emotional people and-and so I-I have enjoyed learning more about Puerto Rico, and especially the food part. Yeah.

**GM:** Did you face any discrimination as an interracial couple?

**HHM:** Well, we didn't—we didn't, but when I was in Korea, in my adult years, I was told by this man at a flower shop, it was—somehow we got to talking and he told me that, "As a Korean, you must marry a Korean." I remember him telling me that and I thought, "Wow, I mean, he doesn't even know me and why is he telling me that, you know?" And so, that was kind of weird, but I was very fortunate that my family and his family were pretty open to us—us being together, not having the same background. And so—I mean, obviously, even with my mom marrying someone outside of Korean, she was—she was open already, and so we're very fortunate with the family members. And also us being in the military, we—again, in the military, there are lots of interracial marriages, so there was no problem at all. And-and-and Houston, it's so diverse. We've never really encountered any problems that I can remember.

**GM:** That's very fortunate to hear that. [**HHN:** Yeah. Mhm.] And so moving into the next question, in raising a half-Puerto Rican and half-Korean daughter, do you have any interesting insights on raising a biracial person? Were there any struggles or any things you kept in mind, raising me?

**HHM:** Yeah, I wanted to—I wanted to introduce you to Korean culture. And so early on in your life, we went to Korean church. Even though they spoke mostly English at the church, the people there were mostly Korean. And so that was—that was really important. And had a huge influence, you know, for you, just being around the language and mannerisms and the food and that culture of interdependence and helping each other out and, you know, getting together for special occasions and having the big celebration with the food and—with—like, the talent shows that we had during Christmas and Thanksgiving where—that's kind of a-kind of a traditional thing to—in Korea. Koreans love, like, performances, singing, you know, karaoke or playing instruments or, you know, piano, violin, things like that. And so, I am very glad that you grew up—that you were exposed to the Korean culture that way and then obviously me loving Korean food. I've made plenty of Korean food for you and watched some Korean dramas together, where you've picked up of—a lot of words and sayings and mannerisms. So that was—that—yeah, that was really important for me, that you had that call—that exposure. I had to—right, so, yes, I have—I had to keep in mind that, you know, you're not like fully Korean, you're born—I mean, you were born in Germany, but you moved here to Texas when you're young, so you grew up here pretty much. And so, trying to remember that, you know, you're-you're not Korean. But you know, also even for me, I consider myself Korean American. Even though I feel like I have a lot of Korean in me, I also have a lot of American culture too. So I-I-I think that you kind of had the best of both worlds, being raised in that Korean community and then having the influence, you know, from-from me and then also from my aunt, who is very Korean, and my sisters are, you know, Korean American, but they're—I think I'm probably the most, you know, Korean out of my siblings. But—but still, you know, we have many Korean things that we'd like to do. Like we—again, I mean, we love the food, we love, you know, certain shows and-and hoping to visit Korea again, but we did that back in 2015. And so, I don't think I had to, like, think too much about you being biracial. Although I'm sure you have your own set of experiences and, you know, thoughts about it. I-I tried to raise you just as naturally as possible without think—without boxing you in, you know, one or the other, or-or both or—yeah.

**GM:** So in raising me, did you have any particular Korean cultural values that you considered important to keep? And—or were there cultural practices or values that you didn't agree with and you wanted to make sure that you were implementing in raising me?

**HHM:** Yeah. The—I guess, some of the values are—I kind of passed on to you. Like, before we eat sometimes you'll say, you know, "Jal meokkessumnida" or "Mas-issge meokkessumnida," you know, saying those things. And then also, the-the interdependence, you know, helping each other out and being-being a good host for your guest or, you know, always greeting, you know, bow and say hello and goodbye before you leave, you know, those kind of things that I tried to pass on to you. So, I-I-I guess, you know, maybe—

**GM:** I would say that you raised me pretty Westernized in the sense also that you didn't—not only did you not box me in, I think, in my identity, and how you raised me, I think you let me explore my interests as well. You kind of left me on my own to discover my passions as well.

**HHM:** That's true. That's true. Right. Right. 'Cause in-in some-in some families, they are very strong of choosing the pathways, right, for the kid. And I was very mindful not to-not to force you to go a certain way, but rather kind of see where-where your interest lied and to support you that way. So-so in that way, yeah, some-some-some Asian families could be very strict in-in what they expect the kids to do, you know? Or forcing them like one-one path that the parent expects. So I really made a conscious effort not to do that to you, but to rather let you just naturally blossom into the interest that you had and to try to foster that growth, you know, from within, so, yes, that was done very intentionally. So thanks for pointing that out. And then also, I wanted to make sure that you-you had a voice. I felt like, growing up, sometimes I didn't have a voice where, oh, you know, because I'm older, you can't say anything or you can't talk back. And so I-I-I felt like that part was not a good part of-of the culture. And I wanted to let you know that, you know, you have a voice too and you have a mind and I wanted to give you the space to express those things, that I think is pretty important, yeah.

**GM:** Very interesting. Moving on to the next question, I have observed that amongst your siblings, your two sisters and your brother, that even though you all grew up in the same household, that you are most involved in Korean culture, I would say. And so I just wanted to ask you why you think that is? And what was key to keeping that Korean culture alive in your life and continuing to be heavily involved in it? Just wanted your insights on that.

**HHM:** Yeah. So knowing the language is a big part of it. And I was very lucky that early on, after we moved to California, that these Korean church ladies would recruit me to church, and my mom didn't go, my sisters didn't go, no—nobody in my family went except for me. And that was-that was crucial in me practicing my Korean and-and being able to speak it and-and so, when you know the language and you communicate with other Koreans, it-it gives you, like, a stronger-stronger identification of that culture. And so I felt—I feel like because of that, I have a lot of Korean in me. You know, language shapes the way we think and who we are in many ways. And also, you know, with my aunt's influence and me being the-the oldest, I've kind of held on to that Korean culture. And plus, when we were in Korea for that year, and then also when we lived in Japan, because it's so close to Korea, we flew out to Japan, I mean, to Korea, once a year, interacted with our family members, like with the grandparents or with my aunt and my uncle. And so being able to talk to them and interact with them have also strengthened, you know, my Korean culture aspects of-of myself. And-and then here, moving into Houston, and meeting some Koreans at the Korean church has really continued that Korea exposure and identification. So, I don't think my

sisters had much of that exposure. And then-and then, you know, our—and may-may-maybe interest as well, you know, different interests. And so, although my youngest—younger sister loves Korean dramas, and she also taught in Korea for a couple of years, so she was able to connect with that part of herself that I think brought us closer in that way and to connect at that level, so-so yeah.

**GM:** I wanted to—outside of your family, I just wanted to talk more about your involvement in the Korean community. Whether it was in Houston or—and, or in other parts of the U.S., I just wanted to talk more about that? If you could provide insights on what the Korean community is like or what you've observed about it in the U.S or in other—yeah.

**HHM:** Okay. Yeah. So, the pla—all the places—I lived in Germany, [coughs] excuse me, in Germany, in Japan, in Houston, in California, I attended to the Korean church service, and that's where I was— I'm sorry, what was your question again? [**GM:** I just wanted to just talk—] You were asking about the Korean community, right? [**GM:** Yeah.] Yes, yes. That y—that the community is-is—was very supportive, you know, very supportive. And if someone got sick, you know, you help each other out. They make—when they make kimchi, they'll share it with, you know, everyone. When-when I had you in Germany, different members from church came and gave me a whole bunch of seaweed soup cause at that time, I wasn't near my aunt or my sisters, it was just me, but they all made seaweed soup and side dishes for me. So they treat you—they treated me like family, you know. And that's what I observed. I observed that Koreans will very often, you know, help each other out. And they're—yeah. You know, maybe it's cultural from Korea, struggling, you know, for so many years and having a difficult history that there's also like a very strong community base line, where they help each other out and support each other. And so I've observed that kind of positive community from almost all the places that I lived. So mainly affiliated with Korean church ladies, church family members just being super supportive and being like family with each other.

**GM:** And, you know, speaking of Korean community, or the Asian American community, I just wanted to ask, with the rise of hate crimes against Asians during the COVID pandemic, I just wanted to ask, how have you felt during this time? And your thoughts and feelings on the matter?

**HHM:** Yeah. Living in Houston, I would say that I feel safer here, because it's so diverse here. But it did definitely arai—raise my awareness to my surroundings and-and actually, I was running or actually walking around the Rice track. And, I guess, I was too close to the left side, where this tall, Caucasian, older gentleman was jogging. And he kind of ran into me and said, "Get to the right." And this-and this was, you know, after the movement started. So I don't know if that was part of like the racial thing. It-it could have been, but I-I definitely felt more alert and more aware of-of people around me and—yeah, made me more hypervigilant. And so, it's—yeah, it's-it's really heartbreaking to see how these elderly Asian people were targeted. And then even here in Houston, like I think it was in the Woodlands or close to their north side, where this Korean family stone—store owner was targeted. And, you know, these people came in and was very hostile toward her. And so definitely observing what was going on in the news and with that incident, I have been more hypervigilant about— like I said, about—just about, you know, my surroundings and—maybe I wasn't so afraid of getting gas before, like, by myself, or even, you know, when it—when it was getting dark. But for a while, I felt that it was best to just stay home when it got dark and—and so, it-it has definitely influenced my—that just free living to-to-to be safe.

**GM:** Moving into my next question, ironically, you know, on the other side of hate, Korean culture is exploding in popularity nowadays. It's becoming—the culture is becoming very appreciated and very much loved by people

all over the world, and so I just wanted to ask why you think that is? And would you like to share any thoughts on this new Hallyu wave?

**HHM:** Yeah, right? Everybody knows BTS now. I-I haven't seen the new video or anything, but I know that they're—that they've been breaking, like, number one record, you know, for years now, I-I believe. And there on all kinds of shows here, you know, like Jimmy Fallon and other various shows, you know, I think they were even on Ellen. And the dramas, it's really gained a lot of attention to young people, older people. I mean, Netflix is exploding with all these Korean dramas. And even music, a lot of—a lot of kids and a lot of people in general are into K-pop, you know, a lot of high school kids and college kids. And so, I think that there's a lot of talent there. And Korean business people are really smart with their mark-marketing, you know, strategy. By the things that they're able to cater, you know, internationally, you know, for example, like, a lot of the actors or the singers speak often another language like Japanese or Chinese, and they'll even make the music in the other language. And of course, that would really easily be embraced, you know, by that country. And so—and then also, due to the-the history, you know, a painful history in Korea, they just work extremely, extremely hard to be successful. I mean like really hard. And then being-being—having those experiences, I believe, make them more emotional and have insight to pain. And so they're able to use that-use that experience to create, you know, these beautiful stories. And they're so good with the music coming on at the right time, and, you know, these different family—stories about family and their everyday problems and how they resolve it. And, you know, it's, there's definitely a lot of stories that people can relate to, you know, that-that makes it very much marketable.

But, yeah, so I would say, you know, lots of talent, work very hard, very smart in their strategic—in their marketing, and they know how to get it out there. And so, you know, I remember when Psy hit that billion views, and that "Gangnam Style" was so catchy. I mean, everybody was listening to, you know, "Gangnam Style" and, you know, they—I remember I was in aerobics one time, and they actually had a "Gangnam Style" with aerobics and I was-I was so surprised. Like, wow, it's really exploded. It's just everywhere. You know, from little kids to older people, we're all doing the "Gangnam Style." And so I think it started from there. And from—well all the dramas actually before that, the dramas were pretty popular. When-when I was attending to University of Houston Downtown, I remember some of the classmates—she was from India—and she—as soon as they find out you're Korean, they'll say, "Oh my god, I love this drama" and then she would start saying things in Korean, you know, which is so funny. But—but yeah, it's been popular for quite some time now.

**GM:** Yeah, for sure. Coming to the end of this interview, I just wanted to ask some light-hearted, so to say fun questions. I wanted to ask if you have any favorite hobbies at the moment, or if you've had a continuing hobby throughout your life that you've indulged in?

**HHM:** Yeah. So my hobbies are doing things outdoors, whether it's taking a walk or going—taking a trip to Galveston or to-to the parks, I just love—my hobbies are to be outdoors and to be active. And, you know, recently, we were in California, and I actually rode an E-scooter for-for almost a mile and that was pretty exciting. It's kind of crazy, but I-I-I love, you know, trying different things and doing things outdoors. I hope to continue to be able to travel. I know right now, it's such a hard time with COVID. And just when we think that things are getting better now with the Delta variant I don't know how it's gonna look, but coming, you know, this fall, but I'm hoping that it can be under control, and that I can continue to do things outdoors and to be able to travel. So when I'm not doing those things, I like to-I like to watch Korean variety shows and Korean music shows. Like I

said, I love Korean music and—and so, watching, keeping up with, you know, Korean music. I like a lot of the traditional music too. I mean, traditional meaning just popular singers from like the 80s and 90s.

**GM:** Do you have any recommendations for specific music artists or dramas?

**HHM:** So yes. So I love Lee Sun Hee. She has such a powerful, beautiful voice. She's this petite lady, but she's been around since the 70s until now, she's a phenomenal singer and so I love her. But she's probably more popular with the—with, like, my generation. I really like her. I-I also like, "Master in the House," that show where they—they invite various masters, whether they're teachers or actors or singers, and the cast spends like a day or two with them, learning about their life and how they got there and just, you know, it's very entertaining and just learning about them. I like that show a lot too. I-I love reading memoirs, just learning about people's history and how they got to where they are—I don't know, how they overcame, what was it like growing up and so—just find it interesting, so I like reading those types of books.

**GM:** I was also going to ask, What is your favorite Korean dish to make and what is your favorite to eat?

**HHM:** So my favorite Korean dish—it—this is my go-to, it's the doenjang soup, which is the soy bean—fermented soy bean soup. It's so delicious and nutritious because I think that fermentation—foods that are fermented are good for you, and it has a lot of vegetables in it. You could add all kinds of vegetables and my favorite vegetables to add are like spinach and potatoes and tofu and red bell pepper, lots of garlic, so that's super delicious with always eggs. I-I like the eggs where you put the green—you add a green onion, chopped green onion, and you can either try it or add some water to it and microwave it. Like the gyeranjjim, that is super good. Those are—those are my go-to, but I also love bibimbap—anything with lots of vegetables. I-I love—I'm trying to stay healthy and, you know, get my nutrients from other vegetables. So I love that. And of course, I love kimchi and I prefer to make my own kimchi, but it's a lot of work. And so now we're lucky because back in the day, it was hard to find kimchi at the grocery stores. But now you can find gochujang, kimchi at H-E-B, at Kroger's, health—Whole Foods, you know, now—I mean, everybody knows kimchi now. So that's pretty neat. I mean, along with K-pop movies, now it's like kimchi, and there's like different kinds of kimchi. They offer like two-three-four different kinds sometimes. And so, those are—so we're living, you know, at a good time, in terms of having access to all that.

**GM:** Thank you. We're coming to our concluding questions now. I wanted to ask, what do you consider the most significant accomplishment of your life thus far?

**HHM:** I would say the most significant accomplishment is raising a beautiful and thoughtful daughter, such as yourself. I really, you know, made-made an effort, conscious effort to-to be there for you and guide you to-to give you opportunities and support. And so I do have to say that I'm proud for being able to do that. And then I'm also, you know, very proud-of-proud of you too. Hopefully, you can say the same thing. You know, hopefully we're in agreement, but not that you're like a project or anything like that. But I-I am very proud of the way I raised you. Yeah.

**GM:** Thank you. That's really heartwarming to hear. And I agree, I most definitely agree. I think that that is a very big accomplishment of yours, being a hardworking, kind, perfect mother, really. You know, you've been through so much, moving around so much and being in the Army and having to deal with a lot of things. So I

definitely do think that you should be very proud of yourself, and that you should give yourself a pat on the back. [HHM: Aw, thank you.] Of course. And my final question, I just wanted to ask if you just have any final words or pieces of advice for your daughter, future generations? Like we like to say, if there is an alien that came to earth and found a little time capsule of yours that had a message in it, what would you want that to be?

**HHM:** I would say do something for others regularly. Whether it's your neighbor or your friend or family member, I think it's super important to, you know, stay connected, and also, to be of service, you know, in a way. If you know that your neighbor is sick, you know, make some soup for them, or ask them if there's something that they need. I believe that, you know, we really need each other to survive and thrive. And so, I-I would give you that-that advice, and I try to do those things regularly because, after all, you know, I've received a lot of help and I want to give help too. And so it's-it's simple, but I think it's super important to let people that you—let people know that you care and to be helpful.

**GM:** Thank you for your message, and thank you so much for your time with me today. Thank you so much for answering the questions with such detail and such care. I really appreciate it and I really enjoyed this. Thank you so much.

**HHM:** You're welcome.

[Interview concludes.]