Background:
Martha Wong was born in Houston in 1939, after her parents moved from Mississippi so their children would have access to white schools during segregation. She attended the University of Texas at Austin, involved herself in several service organizations, and went into teaching after graduation. She took several years off from teaching as she and her husband started their family, and then quickly began rising in the Houston Independent School District, as she added more administrative responsibilities, facilitated by her Master’s degree and eventual PhD in education. Dr. Wong has been a major originator and leader of Asian American community organizations, and this served as her springboard to election to the Houston City Council and the Texas House of Representatives.

Setting:
The interview, like the entire project, focuses on the effects of labor and capital on the life decisions of immigrants to the United States. The interview covers the life of Dr. Wong throughout her childhood, college, and careers in education and elected office. The interview was conducted at the conference room/library of Dr. Wong’s apartment. Dr. Wong provides a particularly informative look at her family’s accumulation of and interaction with capital through her father’s grocery store, and describes her childhood as a combination of Chinese foundational values and priorities with a highly American social environment. Her Chinese identity plays an ambiguous role through the interview; she expresses little consciousness of being Chinese as a child, and recommends rapid Americanization of new immigrants, but is proud of her role as an inspirational figure to the Asian American community in Houston. Dr. Wong also repeatedly offers insights into the internal politics of her workplaces.

Interview Transcript:

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CB: Well. This is—May 31st, 2011, and we’re here with Dr. Martha Wong for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history project. This is Charlie Behr—
AR: —and Anthony Rogers.

MW: [pause] And Martha Wong. [all laugh briefly]

AR: So I guess we could start off by—could you tell us where your parents were from?

MW: Uh, my parents are from what is now called Guangdong but was originally called Canton before the Communists took over, and they’re from a village that’s, uh, near in, uh, near Hoi Ping [as pronounced, but evidently Kaiping in pinyin].

AR: And how long, um, what, what year did they come to Houston?

MW: Uh, they probably came to Houston in 1938.

CB: Was this their, the, their point of entry into the U.S., or was there a longer process involved?

MW: No, my, my father technically had come over as a little boy with his father, when he came to pan the gold in California, so my father was here as a young, young boy. He and his father came and then, uh, he grew up in California, and, uh, he was there when the, uh, uh, courthouse burned down in San Francisco, did you all have that in your history somewhere? And, uh, when the courthouse, uh, burned down, all of the records were destroyed, and so all of the Asians that—all of the Chinese that were there claimed they were U.S. citizens.

CB: Perfect.

MW: So that’s how my father became a U.S. citizen. Uh—and so he grew up, and then as he got older his, uh, father, um, he wasn’t speaking very much Chinese so his father wanted him to keep his Chinese so sent him back home, and uh—

CB: And he was about—how old at this time?

MW: He was, uh, I, uh, about late, uh, probably sixteen or seventeen? And then he married my mom, and they lived there for a little while, and then they came to the U.S. and they came in through San Francisco, and then they went up to Chicago for a little while as I understand, and then they went to Mississippi, where they opened a grocery store, and they—there were, and when he opened the grocery store there, and, uh, they were successful there in the city of Ruleville, it’s a very, very—small city. And, uh, my sister was born in Ruleville in, what, 19—she’s three years older than me, I was born in ’39, so she was, they must’ve been there in ’36. And so, um, later on she was going to go to school, and they saw, uh, during that time in the schools, they had segregated schools—

CB: Right.

MW: —they had segregated schools for blacks, and schools for whites. They didn’t have any schools for Asians, and Asians were not considered whites, so the Asians had to go to the school with the blacks, and my father saw that the school was not in good condition, so that’s why he came to Houston, so that he was, uh, he assumed that the schools would be better here, and that there wouldn’t be as much prejudice, even though the, um, Chinese children here could go to white schools when they, uh, became of age. When my father came, no one would rent him an apartment, because he had a child and because he was Chinese, and so they stayed with friends, and then finally they were able to rent a grocery store, and so they lived in the storeroom of the grocery store. For many years.

AR: And, and what, when, what year did they move to Houston?

MW: Uh, that, I, as I said, I think it was about ‘37—

AR: Okay.

MW: —because I was, or ’38, because I was born here in ’39.
AR: I see.

CB: This means I must’ve—slightly misunderstood some—biographical piece about you, because it—it sounded as if you had briefly moved to Mississippi when you were very young, two or three years old.

MW: No, no, my sister was—

CB: Okay.

MW: —that was my sister.

CB: Yeah. Could you give us the spelling of Ruleville, quickly?

MW: R-U-L-E-V-I-L-L-E?

CB: Oh, Ruleville—

MW: Uh-huh.

CB: —as in, like a law.

MW: What did I—[laughs] [AR laughs]

CB: Okay, excellent. I have it.

AR: And what about your mother? How did she, um, come to the United—were her parents here also?

MW: No, no. Uh, my father went back to China—

CB: And they were married there.

AR: Oh yes, I remember, I’m sorry.

MW: —and then he brought her over.

CB: And that was the process of—okay.

AR: Was she, um, in the same vill—uh, original village, or how did—what part of China did they go in?

MW: No, uh—you know, each village is made up of, uh, families—

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —so, he’s of course in the Gee family but she was in a village where the Zhous are, and it wasn’t that far, so they would usually do, uh, matched marriages—

AR: Oh, I see.

MW: —is what, that—would happen.

CB: And that was—the case for—your parents.

MW: Uh, yes. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.
CB: But, um, but—his father, your grandfather—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —was still in California at that time.

MW: Yes, but—his mother—was in China.

CB: Okay. Okay.

MW: His mother, my grandmother did not come to the States until—19—what was it, probably—1963? Mm-hmm.

CB: Okay.

MW: So she stayed in China all that time, but you know that they had the laws, also, where the women could not come.

AR: Mm-hmm.

CB: Yes—

MW: Only the men could come.

CB: —yes.

MW: And then they also put a quota on how many, uh, Chinese could come.

CB: You’ve mentioned your, uh, sister, but you have other siblings—

MW: I have a younger sister also, and I have an older brother, who is deceased now but he was, uh, he’s uh, my father’s child through another mother.

AR: [softly] Oh, I see.

CB: Now, on your, your survey that you did for, the, the sort of pre-survey for this interview, you—you give your first language as English, and you say that you—you spoke English at home, um—could you—talk about that, and how that came out of your—parents’ experiences?

MW: Well, uh—when the Chinese were in Houston, most of the Chinese ran grocery stores, and, uh—my father happened to rent a grocery store in what are called a blue-collar white neighborhood. Other Chinese opened grocery stores in black neighborhoods, because—in Mississippi, the bl—the Chinese were catering to the blacks, because the blacks after, um, the Emancipation Proclamation, even the white grocery stores would not service the blacks. So the Chinese found a little niche there, and serviced, uh, the blacks, so most of the Chinese were very used to dealing with black people, so most of them would open grocery stores in the black areas. My father happened to rent a grocery store in a white-collar neighborhood, and so, uh, and it wh—we had, uh, people that were mainly there—I’d say, uh, from Europe, uh, I guess probably second-generation, uh, a lot of Germans were in the area, and my father, they did not want my parents to speak Chinese in the grocery store. And so my mother had to learn English. My father already knew English because he grew up here—

CB: His time in California.

MW: —so he had to learn. My mother learned English and so because of the—neighborhood and the pressure to do business in English, then my parents did not force us into learning Chinese. [amused] My mother tried to teach us
Chinese, I remember her trying very diligently, and she had some little paperback books and, and we learned how to count, but I still don’t count very high—

[interviewers laugh]

MW: —and I—I cannot, uh—speak a whole sentence in Chinese. And so as an adult, I took Mandarin three times, and still cannot say more than xiexie and ni hao ma, so I’ve given up on it.

AR: So how did that affect your—how, how involved were your parents in the Chinese community in Houston?

MW: Uh, my father was very involved. He was, uh, they had at that time what they called the [clears throat] On Leong Merchants’ Association. And that was a group of Chinese merchants and they would, uh, have—they would help other merchants to, you know, get started in their business; my father was, uh, active in that. They also had what they call a Gee Family Association, my maiden name was Gee, and so my father was the president of both of those associations so he was active there, but he was also active in the Caucasian, uh, society, as his grocery store succeeded, uh, he became a part of what they call this, uh, what was that group? They—a bunch of independent grocers came together because at that time, Weingarten groceries was the big, uh, grocery chain, and it was owned by the Weingarten family; they moved from the Weingarten groceries into Weingarten real estate, okay? And so they had a group of grocer—-independent grocermen called, uh, Seven—Lucky Seven Grocery Stores. So, independent grocermen could become a part—of the Lucky Seven, uh, grocermen association, and buy their groceries a little bit cheaper, and get advertisements and things like that, so my father was active in that also. He also was an air raid warden [sic], I remember him being an air raid warden, and, uh—so he was active in the community.

They, uh, didn’t necessarily join the PTA as we were growing up, or the, they weren’t active there, but whenever the schools sent home a notice for, uh, help, they would always send money, and in those days that was right—during World War II, when I was born and when I went into school then there was also a shortage of sugar. But in those days when we had, um, uh, they call ‘em May Fetes, and in the month of May they would have all the children out there, each grade level would perform some kind of a little dance, and the fifth-graders got to wind the maypole, and so it was their carnival at that time and at that carnival time, they would make cotton candy and cotton candy, you know, is made from sugar, sugar was very expensive, and so my father would donate sugar from the grocery store to the school. I remember taking the sugar to school.

[00:11:00]

CB: Were there other ways that—you know, the World War II rationing process affected your, your—grocery business?

MW: Uh—I don’t know about that, because I didn’t work in the grocery store till I was about twelve years old—

CB: Yeah, of course, you—you would’ve been—considerably younger at the time and would’ve had to find out much later.

MW: —thirteen or so, so I wouldn’t’ve been, right, so I wouldn’t have known about that, but I’m sure that there was, but I do remember, uh—and I don’t know how old I was, maybe three or so, but, uh—my father was an air raid warden [sic] and they would ring these sirens, and when they would ring the sirens, we were supposed to go into the innermost part of your house, and we lived in the back of the grocery store so we lived in the storeroom, and there was a groc—there was a bathroom in there, but the bathroom had a window to the outside, and we had to have a black shade to pull down, so we could turn on the light when we were in the bathroom and they—would sound that siren and we would all go, [mischievously] and sit in the bathtub! [laughs] And pull the window shade down and have the light on! And then they’d blow, and my father would have to go outside, and look for airplanes. That was his job, was to go out and see if anything was coming and I guess, I don’t know what his—how he was gonna warn people or let people know, but I know that that’s what he went outside to do while we were huddled in the bathroom, and then they’d do this—second siren and everything was over. But I think—

CB: These were all—drills, correct?
MW: Yes, I think, yes, they were drills, but that was—what—was going on. I remember that happening, very distinctly.

CB: I have a—question to jump back to briefly before we—go any—further on here; you’ve—you’ve talked about how, um, how the, the, the, um, the—the white-black business relationship—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —was, you know, a much different situation for a Chinese grocery store in Mississippi than in Texas. Do you—have any concept of why it had turned out that way?

MW: Why—

CB: Why there was that difference in the way—things were, were conducted in Mississippi versus Texas?

MW: Well, I think it was, uh, basically in Texas too, I think that blacks did not go to white grocery stores.

CB: Well—yes, but you’ve—you’ve said that, um—you know, Chinese grocery store owners were—

MW: Right.

CB: —you know, more consciously—catering only to the—black population?

MW: I think—and they did that mainly as a means of survival.

CB: Yeah.

MW: And because the Chinese could also not shop in the sto—in the—white stores, so they found out that they could do—they could buy from the wholesalers [sic], and so when they opened they could—they—so then they had food to eat, it was a matter of survival more so than anything else, and they saw that—people weren’t—taking care, there was no place for the blacks to, to buy groceries from so they figured that that was, uh—it’s like finding your niche.

CB: Right.

MW: And that’s what they did, uh-huh.

CB: But then the Texas schools—were a different situation.

MW: Yes, they—

CB: Chinese students could attend white schools in Texas when they couldn’t in Mississippi.

MW: That’s true. Right. But. Because most of the Chinese that came from Mississippi because they had—serviced, or—had grocery stores in black neighborhoods, they also opened grocery stores in black neighborhoods, and my father was the only one that didn’t.

AR: Well, why did—you know why he decided to open it in a white neighborhood?

MW: I don’t—I don’t know; I think that, that he was, you know, that was the place that would rent to him.

AR: Oh, I see.

MW: [softly] Uh-huh. Mm-hmm.
AR: So, um—when you grew up, were most of your friends—well, since you went to a white school, were most of your friends white, or were there also Chinese students at your school that you—played with?

MW: We were the only Chinese at that school.

AR: Oh. So how was that, growing up?

MW: Fine, and, you know—I didn’t know any different!

AR: [thoughtfully] Hmm.

(0:15:00)

MW: Didn’t know any different. I, I didn’t see myself as Chinese but I knew that on the weekends we would go and visit other Chinese families—

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —so I knew that there were other Chinese, but I never—thought about that, you know, I—I grew up not thinking that people were prejudiced against Chinese. A lot of this I have found out—after I grew up—

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —okay, cause I wasn’t aware. We played with the Caucasians in the neighborhood, we went into their homes, they came into our little, uh, store, you know, and the—our bedroom and things there, so—I had no idea, I—I do not—I did not feel any discrimination as I was growing up. The first time that I felt discrimination or that I was aware that people might not want to interact with a Chinese was when I went away to college, and one of my girlfriends—my sister, and her girlfriend, were going out to California, so they drove me to Austin and dropped me off on their way, cause I went to the University of Texas, and my girl—my sister’s girlfriend told me, she said ‘Martha, I think maybe you should put up a picture of your, uh—Chinese boyfriend, so that—’ because my roommate wasn’t there when I checked in— ‘because she may not know that you’re Chinese, and—you don’t want it to be a shock when she sees you, and you’re Chinese.’ That was the first time I every thought—that somebody would not—accept me, is when my sister’s friend told me that. Never had—any—idea, cause when I was in high school, and in—junior high school, I think there was one other family in junior high school that was Chinese, and, uh—when, uh—I went, when I went to high school, and I would, uh—my friends would invite me to their homes, and I would invite them to my homes, and I went out with Caucasian boys, and I went out with Chinese boys. So—there was no—I didn’t feel any discrimination and I was, when we were in elementary school, um—we were elected to be the American Legion award winners and we were in plays on the stage and everything; I felt no discrimination and when I was in—junior high school I was in all the clubs and everything and in high school I was in speech tournaments and I won speech tournaments and I was on the [breathes] yearbook staff, and I was in the honor society and—so I felt totally integrated, and—

CB: Right.

MW: —never felt—that people didn’t accept me because—technically, I was ahead of most people. [Laughs]

CB: Well, you say you never thought of yourself as being Chinese per se—

MW: It never came to m—

CB: —were there other—I mean, did you ever think of yourself in terms of a label like that? Did you think of yourself—

MW: I did not.
CB: —as an American; did you even—meditate on that idea?

MW: I didn’t even think of it.

CB: Yeah.

MW: Uh-huh. I didn’t think of it. I knew that I was Chinese because when I saw the other Chinese, you know, and when we would visit with them, and I knew that my mother tried to sp—teach me Chinese, okay, but I never felt that anybody was discriminating against me.

AR: So, um—I know historically that education’s really important in Chinese society because of Confucianism and things like that; did you see that—would your parents, did they encourage you to—to do well in school, and they, did they encourage you to pursue—you know, uh—higher education?

MW: Uh—technically—my brother, who was away in the Navy when I was growing up, I think he went to the University of Houston, and my sister went to North Texas, so, um—my, they, it wasn’t so much of an encouragement as it was an expectation.

AR: Mm-hmm.

CB: Sure.

MW: We were just expected to make straight As, there was—you know, I’d bring home my report card and one time I made a, I think I made a D in spelling, and my mother just looked at me and she says [faintly ominous] ‘I think you can do better than that,’ you know, ‘you’ll make better next time,’ and—uh—so then, the—I brought it up, you know—and, so—we were just expect to ma—my sister made all As, I made all As except for that one early— [interviewers laugh]

MW: —I’ve been a terrible speller ever since they labeled me, you know, in my mind I could not spell—

CB: [jokingly] Stamped you with that curse?

MW: —I—it did! I can’t—and, uh, so, we’ve just always made straight As, you know, there’s never been a doubt, and it wasn’t so much, uh, you will go to college, it’s which college will you go to, it wasn’t, you know—do you wanna go to college, or do you wanna go to work, it—there wasn’t a choice, you know, it was just, oh—you decide which college you wanna go to and you can go there, so.

[0:20:23]

CB: Had your parents gone to college?

MW: No. My, my father I don’t think went any further than probably sixth or seventh grade, and my mother did not go to any American school, so. So she only learned to write, uh, English as an adult, and she did not write well, you know, and she could only write the bare things that she had to, because she had no education.

CB: Now—were you—had you been aware, when you were growing up, of how difficult it had been for your father to find a place to rent—this store?

MW: No. I didn’t know that till later. I didn’t know that till I was an adult, and, uh—we were recording my father’s history, and so—that’s when I, you know. Because they never talked—they never complained, they never said anything about that, I never knew about it, uh—I knew we lived in the back of the grocery store but I thought we did that for convenience— [AR laughs]

CB: Sure.
MW: —I mean, you know, it was easy, it was easy, you know, you’d get up from the bed and you’d go the work in the st—just take a few steps and you’re there. But, and the, we didn’t have furniture other than a bed. We had a table and one chair, and, uh—we didn’t have a refrigerator cause the store had refrigerators, we did have a stove and a sink in the, and the what we’d call the kitchen area of the storeroom. We sat on apple crates, I remember sitting on apple crates, and evidently we had a high chair cause there’s a picture of us, of my sister in a high chair. But, uh, I just remember sitting on apple crates and in those days, the fruit was sent to the grocery stores in wooden crates, and so the wooden crate was our chair. My father was the only one that was allowed to sit in the chair.

[AR laughs]

MW: The rest of us had to sit on the apple—crates. Then—then my father, uh— tried to buy a house for us to live in when I was in—first grade, so that was, I was what, probably six years old, so ’39, that would’ve been ’45? My father bought a house, but he could not buy the house, they still would not sell to Chinese, so he got one of his—good customers to buy a house and then the good customer sold it to him. So we—

AR: [surprised] Oh, that was nice.

MW: —so we got, we had a house directly across the street from where the store was.

AR: Do you, was that a common practice for—Chinese people to—

MW: I don’t know.

AR: —get houses?

MW: I don’t know. But I know that we were—other people had houses, but I know that, uh—and—as I recall, some of my, one of my cousins had a house in a, uh [pause] over on Rosedale, which is—it was where the Jewish people lived and I think the Jewish people were le—leaving that area, and the—uh—African-Americans were buying there, one of my cousins, uh, bought a house there, I remember that being, I thought that was a rich house. And then my—father, uh, bought a house and then later on he built a house, had a house built, and it was designed by the first Chinese architect that went to Rice University.

CB: I believe that was, uh, a classmate of—Dr. Chen.

MW: Well, that was him; it was Charlie Chen.

[AR laughs]

CB: Yeah, yeah—

MW: Charles Chen, uh-huh, he was the first architect. Mm-hmm.

CB: —we—

MW: —ran across him?

CB: —through the archive, we’ve met someone who was a classmate of his.

MW: Oh! Really?

AR: Dr. Ed Chen? Do you—know—

MW: No, Dr. Ed Chen, that is his—
AR: No, that’s who we met.

CB: That’s who we—

MW: Yes, that’s his nephew.

AR: Oh! Okay. [laughs]

MW: That’s not his classmate.

CB: That was—our mistake, then, to—represent it in that fashion—

MW: Yeah, no. Did he represent him as what? His—his mother was a Chen. No, his father was, his father taught at Rice—

AR: Mm-hmm. I remember that.

MW: Ed’s father taught at Rice. And Charles Chen went to Rice—

CB: Yes.

MW: —and was the first architect, Chinese architect, to graduate from Rice. So they may have been relatives—I guess they were, they probably were brothers. Charlie was probably Ed’s father’s brother. That’s probably how he got in to Rice. [AR laughs]

MW: Come to think of it! [all laugh]

CB: He didn’t represent it that way to us!

MW: Aaah! What did he say?

CB: I—

MW: He couldn’t say, he couldn’t say he was the brother.

CB: No, he didn’t say that.

MW: [quietly] Surely he’s not, surely he’s not the brother.

[0:25:00]

CB: I—

MW: He is the son of the professor. That was a professor, at Rice.

CB: I—I did have one more question, about the grocery store, um—you’ve said in your, um, one of your old campaign websites that you worked there for years without pay.

MW: I did, I never got paid. [MW and AR laugh] I never got paid!

CB: Well, what was that like, what did you—think about it?

MW: It w—you weren’t expected—you, you didn’t th—you didn’t think of it as—

CB: Yeah.
MW: —you didn’t, you never—asked—

CB: It wasn’t like it was a job—

MW: It was a job!

CB: —it was just what you did.

MW: Every day, after school, well—since junior high school! In junior high school was when we started work, and every day after we came home from school, we would, uh, put our books down, and we would go work in the grocery store until 7:00. So that would be what, about three, four hours of work every day. And, we would, uh, I’ve done everything from cashiering to sweep—and we would, when the store was ready to close, we would help close the store, we’d sweep the store, they used to put—they had cement stores at those times, cement floors, and, you know, they didn’t have air conditioning, so to keep the dust down, they’d put this—kind of a red mixture, I don’t know what it was and it was kind of a little oily, and they’d scatter that on the floor so that when you’d sweep it up it would keep the dust from flying up on the shelves.

CB: Hmm.

MW: So when I used to sweep the floors and I used to stock the shelves, I whenever there was things to put up on the shelves, I even learned how to slice lunch meat but I never cut up chickens and I never cut up a cow, and I learned how to weigh the vegetables to put like—in those days, they didn’t have pre-packaged food, so—we would have brown bags, and we would, uh, have a scale and we’d, uh, weigh potatoes, and put five pounds of potatoes into a brown bag and staple it our self, so—I did those kinds of things too. And I’ve—finally got to be the cashier, so I learned how to give change, I can give change better than anybody in the world—

[AR laughs]

MW: —kids today don’t know how to give change—

CB: [ruefully] That’s true.

MW: —they don’t know how to make money, you know, I—

CB: —wait for the machine to tell them what coins to give them.

MW: —the cash registers now tell them, tell them how much to give—some of them just, you punch it in and—

CB: —it dispenses it, exactly.

MW: —it comes out, yeah.

CB: Do you think that your—your experience with your father’s grocery store affected your later politics at all?

MW: Mmm—not that I know of, I just remember one time when I was a little girl and, this was, my father had a grocery store on north Main, then he bought the house on Studewood, then he built the—two-story house over on Nineteenth, and after he built that house, then he moved the house, um, uh, Studewood, to a lot. So things were quite different then, cause he could do this all on his own. And then he built his own grocery store, and so when he built his own grocery store, I must’ve been in second or third grade, and—my mother and father ran the grocery store, basically, my mother would be the cashier and my father would be the butcher. And I remember one time, uh—that my father, it was time to vote, and my father took me with him to vote, and my—older sister and my younger sister stayed with my mother, my older sister was probably helping my mother in the store by that time. And—I guess she couldn’t manage all three of us, so my father would take off from the store to go and vote and it was in those days where they had those curtains and you’d pull the curtains and then you’d pull the lever.
CB: Okay.

MW: And my father took me to vote, and I remember, I—somehow, that—I think that made an impression upon me, because I know he never left the store for any reason. [AR laughs]

MW: You know, so I figured—okay, if he’s leaving the store to go and vote, that must be important, you know? So because everything else was delivered to the store. You know, the milk was delivered to the store, the meat was delivered—so they never left the store, because only two of them were there. Now, and then we did hire young—young boys later on to come and deliver groceries and help as the—business grew, but—my father was always at the store so somehow, I think that made an impression upon me that voting was very important and I’ve never missed a vote.

AR: So—you seemed to be—pretty successful in high school and, and in middle school, so—how did you choose to—how did you choose your co—what—university you’d like to go to?

[0:30:00]

MW: Um—and—I went to the University of Texas in 1957, and, um—all of my friends were choosing smaller universities to go to, and at that time I was—I don’t know whether I was head of the honor society or not, but I was an officer in a—yearbook officer, and I—I wasn’t in the drill corps, they had the Reagan Redcoats, I didn’t join that, because I thought it cost money, and it would have, so I wouldn’t ask my parents for money, and—uh—we never asked our parents for money when we were wor—we never even thought of asking—when we needed something, we would say, you know, we were going to the movies and it cost this much money, so my parents would give us that. When we’d go shopping, my father would give us money so we could go shopping. And we would ride the bus to Foley’s downtown and shop on our own, my sisters, the three of us girls would go down it. Sometimes—my mom would go. But, um—what was your question, that I—

AR: It was…how did you choose UT? Choose UT Austin?

MW: Okay, everybody else that I was going, that I grew up with in, in—in high school—they were all going to small colleges—

CB: Right.

MW: —and I decided, I remember saying this, I don’t know why it stuck with me, ‘I don’t want to be—a big fish in a little school, I want to be a big fish in a big school.’

[interviewers laugh]

MW: And that’s why I chose UT.

AR: So how did that—were you—

MW: It worked out fine! Yeah! I—I, right away my first year I was, uh, tapped to go into Mort—uh, into Spooks and Spooks is an honorary service organization, and one of the girls in my dormitory, you know, we—you know, you take your yearbook with you to college and they’re looking through my yearbook and they see all these things I’ve done in, in high school, so—Spooks is made up of, I think they had four girls from each of the—sororities, and then they had four independent girls, girls who—had no affiliation with sororities. So, it just so happened that one of the girls in the dormitory had seen my yearbook, and recommended that Spooks tap me, and, so, uh, tapping, what they do is, uh, they wear their little black uniforms and a little black armband with a spoo—with a skull and crossbones on the side, you need to go look it up in the yearbook, and they come into the lunchroom and they form this chain and they put their hands on the shoulders of the person—and they sing this little song, ‘We are the Spooks, the Spooky Spook Spooks, and we’re here to tap you,’ so it was a real cute little thing—
MW: —so you’re, you’re sitting there in the lunchroom, and they come around, and they tap you on your shoulder and so you’re tapped, which means you’re, you get to join the association. So I—did that in my freshman year, and then after that I was, uh, in Orange Jackets which is a junior and senior, um—a junior service organization, and my sophomore year I was president of Spooks, and the—they have a girl that’s the spirit so I was the president, and the girl that was the spirit is Carole Keeton McClellan, who was my classmate at UT, and her father was dean of the law school, and—she married Scott McClellan and then she later became the Mayor of, uh—of, um—Austin, and—well, she was head of the school board then she became the mayor then she ran for comptroller, so if you—know that name, Carole McKee— ‘she’s one tough grandma,’ y’all remember that campaign?

[AR laughs quietly]

MW: No? You probably don’t, ‘s before your time! Wasn’t too long ago, she ran against Rick Perry.

AR: [quietly] Oh, okay.

CB: [amused] Well, not growing up in Texas, I—

AR: [knowingly] Yeah—

CB: —have a limited memory of recent political candidates in Texas.

MW: Okay, all right. So anyway, she was my—my spirit, I was the president, and we—did that, and then I went on to Mortar Board and I was a—counselor in the dormitory, and—I finished in three years, three summers, and one correspondence course.

CB: Now—you’ve mentioned that—it was—it was on the trip to UT that you sort of—first conceived of the idea of—actual discrimination against you as an Asian American.

MW: Yes, when I got to my dormitory and my, my friend told me that.

CB: How—how do you think that your experiences in general being Chinese differed from what you had known in Houston and what you had known in high school?

MW: See, even though my friend said that, I didn’t still feel discrimination at UT. But there weren’t a lot of Asians there.

[0:35:02]

CB: Yeah.

MW: The—and one of the girls that was there at UT was a cheerleader, and she was a Japanese, and you know, I didn’t think anything, and then the dorm, everything was fine, I—didn’t—and then when I got tapped, I didn’t see any discrimination, and then when I became the president, I didn’t see any discrimination, and I became the president in 1950—9, I guess, or 1958, and that was right before the civil rights movement, and I wanted to invite—see, the black sororities were not a part of Spooks, and I suggested as the president that we invite the black sororities. That was my suggestion. They voted it down.

[MW laughs confidently, AR laughs less confidently]

MW: So—in 1960s, after the civil rights movement, they changed. [MW still laughing]

AR: Did you, did you have an I-told-you-so moment after that? [laughs again]
MW: No, I was like, you know, I was already gone by then, but—you know, I just, I—I just thought, well, that’s the thing to do, they’re all—they’re all girls too. But there weren’t very many, I think one or two, uh, African-American sororities. Mm-hmm.

AR: So, um—how did you choose education to be your—main focus—for your education?

[CB makes amused noise]

MW: Okay, education—in those days, women mainly went into teaching or they went into nursing, or, and—I didn’t care for nursing, I didn’t want to see blood, didn’t like blood, so I decided I’d be an educator, and then—what they did is they said, so if you chose education you went to this big room, I don’t even remember, but I—very distinctly remember that they say ‘Okay, everyone that’s gonna be in higher education, come with me,’ so they every—people get up and leave and they’d take ‘em out to another room, to—get the higher—higher—senior high school teachers at one r—and then, ‘Okay, everybody that wants to be a middle school teacher, stand up and follow me.’

CB: And it was something that they were—the choice was as casual as that? It was—here, let me walk into this room?

AR: [laughing] Oh, I see.

MW: Yeah! Well, every—everybody else knew what they wanted to do, I mean, it didn’t matter to me, I just, you know, I just couldn’t make up my mind so I just sat there and then I became an elementary teacher.

CB: So it sounds like—you’d—were not envisioning how deeply you went into administration later on.

[AR laughs]

MW: —[amused] I was just sitting there, and I became an elementary teacher, was my—default, I just didn’t get up and leave.

AR: So you had—this choice between nursing, education—so you chose education, then—

MW: I—

AR: —okay. [laughs]

MW: —by default, I chose elementary!

AR: But you seemed to like it enough to get a—PhD in education administration, though, so how—

MW: Well, the PhD was a way to get to the top, okay?

AR: [laughing] Oh, I see.

MW: So I figured, I’m not gonna be at the lower end of the totem pole, I wanna be on top. And so I, as soon as I finished college and got married, I got married a week after I finished college, I started at the University of Houston the same year as I started teaching, and enrolled in a, a Master’s program.

AR: Oh, I see.

CB: Right, yeah, we have that.
AR: So, um, how did you meet your husband?

MW: Uh—I met my husband at my church, at Chinese Baptist Church, and, uh—he was dating another woman, a
girl in high school, all through high school, and I was dating his best friend—

[AR laughs mischievously]

MW: —and then when we went to college, uh—uh, I had quit dating his friend, and then he started dating me and so
we dated through college.

AR: I see. So—what did your husband do?

MW: He was a pharmacist.

AR: Okay.

CB: Now, your, uh—um—your first job, out of college was—

MW: Teacher.

CB: —Durkee Elementary.

MW: Right, mm-hmm.

CB: How did you find that particular school? Were there other, other offers that you considered, or—

MW: Well, when I, uh, when I finished the University of Texas that, uh, HISD—I knew I was coming back to
Houston, okay, because I was gonna live with my parents, so I knew that—for a while, and then I got married, so I
got married a week after I finished college, so my husband was here in Houston, so I knew I was gonna—teach in
Houston, so when—HISD came to UT to interview us, I interviewed with HISD and they offered me a job. Then
when I interviewed with Spring Branch, Spring Branch also wanted me to come to Houston and to interview with
Houston, so when I—now—this is the first time I really had any idea of prejudice. When I went to the Spring
Branch school district and I visited with the person, the man that I visited with said ‘I want you to go across the hall
and go into the teachers’ lounge, and then I want you to come back and tell me what happened.’ So I went into the
teachers’ lounge, there were no teachers in there [faintly chuckling], I walked around and used the restroom and
came back out and came back to across the hall and I told him, I says, ‘Well, no one was in there,’ and he says
‘Okay,’ so they didn’t hire me b—and what he was trying to do, I later figured out, was he wanted to see what the
reaction of the teachers were gonna be to me.

[0:40:19]

AR: Hmm.

CB: Yeah.

MW: And that’s the first time—but HISD offered me a job right off, and they—assigned me, you know, they just
assigned you to schools—

CB: Okay.

MW: —and the school that I taught at was out in northeast Hou—north, yeah, northeast Houston, and there was one
Chinese family that attended the school.

CB: How big of a—out of how big of a school?
MW: It was about 600 kids.

CB: Okay.

MW: Mm-hmm.

AR: I mean, if the school—was the principal right at the Spring Br—Spring Branch district; whenever you went to another one, did the, did your colleagues have any sort of reaction at all, or was it, was he just—

MW: What do you mean, I didn’t go to ano—I, I just went into the lounge there at that school, I didn’t go to another school in Spring Branch.

AR: Oh, no, to another, when you went to the other district, di—

MW: Oh, when I went to HISD?

CB: Durkee, uh-huh.

AR: Yeah, did your colleagues have any reactions?

MW: Mm-mm. Mm-mm.

AR: Okay.

MW: There had already been a couple of Chinese teachers—

AR: Oh, I see.

MW: —in HISD at that time.

AR: Mm-hmm.

CB: Now, you taught first grade there—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —was that your decision or the school’s, or—how was that—

MW: Uh—you know, when you, uh—when you prepare for, uh—teaching, you also do student teaching and I taught at first grade—I did my student teaching in first grade—

CB: Okay.

MW: —and so that’s why I selected first grade because I thought I had the best experience there.

CB: Yeah.

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: Do you—do you think that UT and that experience—interning prepared you well for —for what you ended up doing?

MW: Ye—I think the student teaching prepares you well more so than—

CB: [amused] Yeah, more so than the classroom, probably.
MW: —the classes— the classes, I had very few methodology classes. I think they probably have more methodology classes now, but, you know, just take a general thing because elementary school is—pretty—you know, simple things, and, uh—I think they have—much better curriculum for—teachers now than they did then. And it’s the student teaching that really helps you, and I had a very good student teacher who helped me a great deal.

CB: Okay.

AR: So how much did, um—back to UT, actually, sorry to backtrack, how much— about how much was the tuition?

MW: Oh, it was really funny, a thousand dollars a year.

AR: Wow! [laughs]

CB: Gotta love that.

MW: I finished. I could finish on about four thousand dollars. Then my daughter went to UT, how many years later, and it cost her four thousand dollars a year. So it went from one thousand to four thousand in like twenty years—

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —fifteen, sixteen, eighteen—yeah, about twenty years, mm-hmm.

AR: And did you work at all during college, or were you focused on—

MW: No, I didn’t.

AR: —okay, so you—I bet that was nice from—having to work in the grocery store every afternoon.

MW: Right, right. Uh-huh.

CB: That would’ve been something, yeah.

MW: [laughs] When I was in high school, I, I, uh—I did speech class a lot, and I, uh, they had speech tournaments, and—we would go to other—high schools in Houston and—to do speech tournaments and we’d also go out of town to do speech tournaments, and I was working in my dad’s store and Saturday’s the busiest day in the grocery store, so—and we would go out of town Saturday, so I was so worried that when I went out of town, and I’d ask my father can I go to this speech tournament and be gone on Saturdays and he always let me go and I’ve—I was w—how are they gonna run that grocery store without me?

AR: Ohhh! [laughs]

[CB laughs]

AR: Um, how long did their store end up—staying open? I’ve—

MW: Uh—my father kept the grocery store until—probably 19-what, ‘62? [inaudible] was born in ’66, ‘67— probably till 1968, uh-huh. And then he, uh, turned it over to my brother, who ran it for a few more years.

AR: Oh, I see.

CB: Now, you—you write that you made $4000 a year when you first started at Durkee—
MW: Yes! My husband made 4000 and I made 4000 and we thought we were rich.

[AR laughs]

CB: [amused] Yeah, yeah, I mean, was—was that the kind of pay you would’ve expected, did you think that was—appropriate to what you’d be doing?

MW: That was—who knows? I mean, I don’t know, you just—in those days, you just—I don’t think you had the choice to ask for more, because teachers are on contract. And as a beginning t—and even today, they don’t have a choice to ask for more. You know, if you’re gonna go in that profession, different school districts may pay differently.

[0:45:07]

CB: Mm-hmm.

MW: Mm-hmm. But we thought we were rich. [laughs]

AR: And you lived with your parents—

MW: We lived with his parents—

AR: Oh, his parents.

MW: —with his parents, in their house. We lived there for—uh—four—four, four ye—five years—

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: Mm-hmm.

AR: And—was his family the similar with—as yours, wh—they didn’t speak Chinese in the home? Or—

MW: Uh—yes, th—they—uh—they spoke Chin—the mother and father spoke Chinese but they’d speak English to us, [laughs] uh-huh.

AR: Oh, I see.

MW: Mm-hmm.

AR: And did your husband speak Chinese?

MW: Uh, he probab—he spoke more than I did—

AR: Oh, I see.

MW: —mm-hmm, cause he would speak to his parents in Chinese.

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: My parents didn’t demand that I speak Chinese to them, but his parents—did, think, so he would, mm-hmm.

CB: They were—first-generation to this country as well, right?

MW: Right, uh-huh, yes, uh-huh.
CB: Now—your resume left some degree of ambiguity about where you were next after Durkee. You were there—I believe—

MW: I was there for just two years.

CB: — ’60 to ’62, yeah.

MW: I was just there for two years—

CB: And then you were still living with your, your—

MW: In-laws, yes, uh-huh.

CB: —husband’s family at that—

MW: And I had my first child, and then—I thought I could go back to work and I couldn’t, couldn’t get up! [laughs]

AR: Oh.

MW: And so I had my second child, two years later, and then I had my third child, and we just decided that you know after I couldn’t—I couldn’t really manage to have the child, and get up, and get organized, and go to work, cause my first child did not sleep well, [laughs slightly] and so I had a hard time getting—you know, getting up, and so we just decided I wouldn’t go back to work so I didn’t go back to work for ten years.

CB: Yeah.

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: Yeah.

MW: I didn’t go back to work until the children were ah, in my—youngest son was ready to go to kindergarten.

CB: Yeah.

AR: So did you ha—I know your parents had high expectations for—

MW: Mm-hmm.

AR: —you and your siblings; did you also have high—what were your expectations for your children, how did you— [inaudible] about that?

MW: Uh—well, uh—we tr—yes, we set high expectations, we expected them to do well, and they did well. My middle child did not do as well, but we, you know, we didn’t put a lot of pressure on him. I think I probably understood that more having taken some courses in education and psychology and that. But we did expect them to perform at a high level, As and Bs at least.

CB: Do you think that—did you have hopes for how they would grow up that would be different from your own childhood?

MW: Well, I knew that as they were growing up, we needed to choose between, um, I remember us tr—talking about, uh—what did we want to emphasize in their growing up, did we want to emphasize the Chinese ways or did we want to emphasize the American way of life, and so we decided, well, we’ll choose the best, we’ll take the best of the American way and the best of the Chinese ways, so, you know, we would try to teach them obedience, and manners, and—and—uh, certain disciplines, within the Chinese way, that you would always address your elders,
you would always, you know, take care of the elders, you would always respect your parents, and those kinds of things, um—the same thing, um—like—we never, as I was growing up, uh—my father would come home late but we never ate dinner till my father came home, so—he wouldn’t get home sometimes till eight, eight-thirty, so we would always wait till he came home, and then, when we were living in the two-story house I remember my father would go upstairs, we would get his house slippers ready for him, when he came back downstairs to put on, and then when he put on his house slippers he would go sit at the table and then the rest of us could go to the table. Okay. So, so we tried to, I tried to do that kind of thing to make sure that, uh—we would, uh—uh—my husband was a pharmacist, so he didn’t always—he wasn’t always home when—because they had weird hours, you know, uh—in fact, when we first got married, he was working—at night, and I was working in the day so we were kind of just [humorously now] passing each other, uh—

[AR laughs]

MW: —and as the children came, then, uh—when he was home we made sure that, you know, that they showed him the proper respect, and that when he came home that they always would run to greet him, and, uh—do the same kind of things that I was taught to do for my father.

AR: Mm-hmm.

CB: Uh-huh. [pause] How do you think the experience of growing up Chinese had changed by the time your children were growing up?

[0:50:00]

MW: Uh—uh, the city was much bigger, there were more Chinese in, uh, in Houston than there were when I was growing up. And, um. [pause] We lived in Meyerland, which is a very, um—um, white neighborhood, there were a couple [inaudible 2 words] elementary school they went to, there were probably about two or three other families, but they were raised very Americanized, they, uh, they were in Little League and they were in Boy Scouts and they were in, uh, Camp Fire Girls, and all of that good stuff, and—I was a Camp Fire Girl leader and my husband was a Boy Scout leader—

CB: Yeah, I’d seen that.

MW: —and, they did, they did Indian Guides and, and they did—uh, he was the coach, and I was a team mother, so—my parents didn’t do that for us, but because we, uh—had jobs that would allow us to have time with our children’s activities, then we did it.

CB: Yeah. [pause] What do you think that their Chinese heritage has meant to your children?

MW: What do I think their heritage has meant to them?

CB: Yeah.

MW: Well, as I see them now, I think that, um—uh—I see them emphasizing some of the same things that I emphasized, uh—

CB: —to their children.

MW: —yes, uh-huh, uh-huh, I see them doing that, uh—I have one son that’s not married, uh—and, uh—I think that he—uh—my son goes to a Chinese church, and my son here goes to the same Chinese church that he grew up in. My daughter in California is in a very small town, so—they were going, they had started a Chinese church but they didn’t like the direction of it, so they’re now at a Caucasian church, so their children are totally Americanized, and my granddaughter does not feel comfortable with Chinese. So that’s—completely different. [interviewers hum assent]
MW: Whereas my—my children, I think, felt comfortable with Chinese and felt comfortable with Caucasians both, because when I was at city council one day I was having lunch with some, uh—young professionals, and, um, we were talking about how are they gonna get ahead in their company and what are they doing to get ahead and I was trying to mentor them and give them some ideas, and they told me that they didn’t feel comfortable, uh—going with their Caucasian, uh—co-workers after work to happy hour, or—going to lunch with them, even, and I says ‘Well, you have to, you have to do that, that’s the only way you’re gonna get ahead, you’ve got to learn—to mix,’ and they says ‘Well, I feel more comfortable, you know, with my Chinese friends,’ and I, and I says ‘Well, you need to learn to feel comfortable,’ so that kinda struck me and I asked my own children, I said ‘Are you guys comfortable with Chinese and Caucasians both?’ and they told me yes, they did, because even though we lived in a white neighborhood we always went to a Chinese church. So they always had Chinese friends, and, uh, Caucasian friends, so they, you know, then and as they grew up, it was that way too.

AR: I’ve read articles about how, um—Asian churches in the United States have u—used it as an outreach for new immigrants coming into the cities; did—

MW: Mm-hmm.

AR: —your church do the same thing?

MW: Uh—it didn’t until more recently, after 1960 when more immigrants were able to come, mm-hmm.

CB: Yeah, there was the—major change to the—immigration laws at that time.

MW: Mm-hmm, in 1960, yeah, uh-huh. That’s when the Exclusion Act was—

AR: Yeah.

MW: —’58, I think it was done, and then, so—in, in 1960, and then they—the—the Exclusion Act was finished but then they increased the quotas—

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —so more, uh, Chinese could come. Mm-hmm. And I think a lot of Chinese also, uh, gravitate to find other Chinese, so I think that they will be going to places where they know that there will be Chinese, more so than—I think that, uh—cause I have a friend here that’s Chinese, and she went to Second Baptist Church, and she told me she went to Second Baptist Church because they had classes for the Chinese to learn English.

AR: Yeah, so—I know wh—I know a lot of churches—here, they’ll try to do that—

MW: Whereas our Chinese church doesn’t do that.

AR: Oh, I see.

[0:55:00]

MW: [laughs] We don’t—we have—we do now, but we did—did not do it for years, mm-hmm. Because they catered—our Chinese church catered to the American-born Chinese.

AR: Oh, okay.

CB: Yeah, that’s noteworthy. Huh.

AR: So, how did you—you said you didn’t work for ten years; how did you jump back in—back on to the boat, back to teaching?
MW: When I stayed home with the kids I did everything. I, you know, I was Miss Suzy Homemaker, I ironed the sh—[louder now, hits table in rhythm with verbs] I ironed, I ironed sheets, I ironed pillowcases, I made all of my children’s clothing, I made my boys’ suits, I made my clothing, I made my daughter’s clothing, I made my own napkins, I did everything! [laughs]

AR: Oh! [laughs hesitatingly]

MW: So—uh, so—I was busy. And then I was very active in my church at that time, and then I tried to find—I had friends and we would have play dates with the kids, and things like that, and then I made sure that we went to the library to do the, the story hour for the kids and then—we got into other activities in the neighborhood, uh—so that kept me very busy. And then when my, uh—we decided I would go back to work when our youngest child was ready to go to kindergarten, so when Troy was, uh, five years old, then my mother and father had retired, and we lived on one side of the school, we lived on this side of—the school was here and my parents lived on this side of the school, so—when, uh, he, we put him into a day school that was just [taps table] around the corner, over here, so when he went to the day school and, uh, was gonna, we’d try him out there for a year before he went to kindergarten, then we decided, after the day school, that he could go to kindergarten so he’d be in school with his brother [taps table] and his sister [taps table], and they could just walk to my mother’s—uh, after school. So it’s on the other side of, you know, they could either come home this way or go that way to my mo—so that’s when we decided that I could go back to work and at that time, it was very hard to get a job in HISD, uh—so what we tr—what we, the only places they were hiring was in special education, and there had been a new, um—

CB: I was going to—ask about how you’d gotten more specifically into that, yeah.

MW: They had a new federal law, 94142, 941—federal law 9414—where they said that, uh—all special children should be integrated into the regular classroom as much as possible, so they closed a lot of the state schools where some of the children who had mental retardation were housed, and the public schools were to take care of those kids, so the best way to get back into education was to become a special education teacher. So I interviewed for a special education teacher, which meant I had to go back to school, and take courses to become a special education teacher so, uh, I got the job and I took a course, a semester, and then I went in the summer, and I think it just took four courses beyond the regular curriculum, and I became a special education teacher.

CB: Now—which was the school you were at first, Cunningham or Herod?

MW: Cunningham. Cunningham.

CB: Yeah.

MW: Well, I did my—oh, I, I started doing, um—substitute teaching, at Herod, which is wh—

CB: Concurrently—?

MW: Huh?

CB: At the same time?

MW: Wh—no, I—before I—went to school full-time, I mean before I went back to work full-time—

CB: Okay.

MW: —we decided that I should try to see how the children would adapt—if I were working.

CB: Yeah.

AR: Hmmm.
MW: And so I would do substitute teaching and—the principal at the school, because the children went there, I knew her and I let her know that I was interested in substitute teaching, and so she says ‘Well, come on over and try,’ so would call me, and then I would become the substitute teacher for Herod, so any time a teacher was absent then I—

CB: Yeah.

MW: —I was the one that they would call to do it. And so. It wasn’t—bad, because the kids knew, you know—where to go after school.

AR: Mm-hmm.

CB: Right.

MW: So it worked out good, and then when they got used to that, then that’s when I decided to go back to work.

CB: Okay. [pause] What were the—what were the new responsibilities like, in special ed?

MW: In special ed, I can became what they call an educational diagnostician, which was a, uh, the person who tested children. I, I wasn’t a psychologist, but they had what we call preliminary tests, and whenever a teacher would think that a child had a learning disability, they would refer, uh, the child to me, and then, and then there were two of us in the resource room, and I was the educational diagnostician, who would then run these series of tests to determine whether the children had a disability. If it looked there was a disability we would refer them to the psychologists who would do more in-depth, uh, testing, to qualify them for the program. So I did some of what we call screening. And I’d also do some teaching, but mainly my job was to screen the children.

[1:00:35]

CB: Now, your resume also says that you were eventually part-time principal at Cunningham. How quickly did that come about?

MW: I taught in the—resource room for three years with a co-worker, and, uh, was finishing up my master’s degree at the same time, and, um—so, uh, when I was getting close to finishing the master’s and getting the certification for the principalship, I, I let my, uh, principal know, and—so she said that I could be the assistant principal. But you couldn’t do it if you were a special education teacher. Some way the laws were funny. So I had to go into a regular classroom to be the assistant principal, so—that year, they hatch a, a class, I think they made the classes smaller—they put together a fifth/sixth grade class—

CB: Hmm.

MW: —so I had half fifth-graders and half sixth-graders, and that was the class I had to teach. So I taught that, and I was the assistant principal, at the same time.

CB: The—the principal—certification was linked to the master’s degree, then?

MW: Uh—if you took your courses right, you could finish them at the same time.

CB: Okay.

MW: Mm-hmm. It could be within that master’s degree. My Master’s degree was in Supervision and Administration, so if you took the right courses, you could also get your certification.

CB: But a Master’s degree per se was not—required, it was just that the, the principalship had its own requirements, right?
MW: Uh—for certification, it does.

CB: Yeah.

MW: But you have to have a Master’s to—you have to have a Master’s and you have to have the certification.

CB: Okay. Okay.

MW: Some people will have a Master’s, maybe, in curriculum, but they won’t have the supervision and administration courses.

CB: Okay.

MW: So because I was, I was majoring in Administration and supervision, my courses were—nearly the same.

AR: Mm-hmm.

CB: Yeah.

AR: So, um, how did your—um, how did being a teacher, how did that influence the way you raised your kids for your education? Did you—that give you—did you think—give you more insight as to how, how to teach your kids, or how—what classes they should take?

MW: Uh—I think it, uh—I think, you know, we’d already established discipline before I went back to teaching—[laughs slightly]

AR: Oh, okay.

MW: —being a first-grade teacher, I probably understood more about—uh—how you could train a child to do what you needed ’em to do—

AR: [laughing] Oh, okay!

MW: —than the average mother. A lot of mothers don’t understand that kids don’t even know, uh—what is top, and what is bottom, what is in, and what is out, and you have to teach those things to children, and so, uh—I, I think that helped me to help the children to understand what they needed to do and to—teach them to be self-sufficient, because once I went back to teaching, the kids, we had always disciplined the children so that they always had a job, in the evening, they either washed the dishes, or dried the dishes, or set the table, or took out the trash, so that was something that was their responsibility.

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: And then they would help clean the house, and then they also would make their own lunches, so they, you know. They had to do—take care of those things, so—it taught them to learn how to take care of themselves.

AR: So, um, it says that you made a leap to becoming principal at Kolter Elementary in 1978—

MW: Mm-hmm.

AR: so how did you, how did you make that jump?

MW: Uh, my assis—my principal when I was at Cunningham, uh, really liked me, and, and she knew that I wanted to be a principal and, uh, the principal at Kolter had been there for seventeen years and she was a friend of, of my principal and Kolter at that time had nine special education classes, and probably had the most classes of—any
elementary school, because the school—is in a predominantly white Jewish neighborhood. And what had happened
at that time is the school was dwindling in enrollment because the Jewish families wanted their children to go to the
Jewish schools, and it became very popular when the synagogues started opening Jewish schools, so all the children
were not going to Kolter anymore if they were Jewish and they’d go to the synagogue schools. So the school was
dwindling and because it was dwindling, then—there were empty classrooms so they started putting special
education children there, because they had the empty classrooms to keep the school open, and because it had so
many special education, uh—children, there, because I had the special education certification, my principal thought
that that [taps table] was the school for me, so she let the boss know! [laughs] And so, you know, I applied for it and
I got it. Cause not very many principals had special ed certification, cause you really couldn’t do—for some reason,
the monies that came in from the federal government would not allow a special education person to be an assistant
principal, and a special education teacher, that’s why I—I went over to the reg—

[1:06:18]

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —so, I was probably the only person that had special ed certification and a principalship certification [almost
laughs], so it was a perfect match. So I think that God played many—roles in my life! [laughs slightly]

AR: So did you—when you were there, did you—create any new programs for special education, or did you—
modify any of them that were th—that were there already?

MW: No, I didn’t really change special education so much, uh—I was there because I had an expertise in how to,
how to conduct what we called the, uh, ARD committees, that’s the—Assessment, Review and Decision committee,
and—a lot of the principals were very afraid of that because people were getting sued because, you know, the
schools weren’t taking care of the children, and because I had that background, and knew how to conduct those
meetings, and made sure everything was correct when we assigned a child to special education and that the numbers
were there, and they were in the right classroom, uh, is what I did, but! The charge to me at that time was to—also to
increase the regular enrollment, and so they said ‘Martha, this school is gonna die if you don’t, uh, increase the
enrollment,’ so they said, ‘Your charge is to make this school bigger,’ and so, uh—uh, what I did to make it bigger
is I got the PTA together, and I told them, I said, you know, if we don’t do something about the enrollment, and get
children to come back into our school, then they’re gonna close our schools, so, we put on our thinking caps and we
decided that we would do some special after-school programs. So we’d, uh—started, uh—the PTA sponsored a, um,
Spanish after-school program, and we sponsored a computer program, and then we sponsored a special math
program, so I developed all of these special programs, and we hired other teachers to come in and teach these things
after school, and we charged the children just a little bit of money and the PTA was the one that collected the money
and kinda ran the programs, the financial part of it, and I would select the teachers. And then my supervisor, the, uh,
associate superintendent came by one day, and I says ‘Oh, you got to see all my wonderful programs, come late in
the day so you can see the children, after school,’ she says—‘WHAT programs?’ and I says ‘Oh, we started this, this,
uh, math program, we started a computer program’—we were the first elementary school with a computer—

AR: Oh, wow.

MW: —one computer! [laughs]

[AR laughs]

CB: The first in Houston?

MW: Uh-huh! Yeah—because they were brand-new at that time, and—

CB: [ruefully] Yeah, yeah.

MW: —we taught the children keyboarding with keyboards, you know, they just had these little—cardboard
keyboards and we’d teach them keyboarding with, you know, on that, and she said, uh—uh— ‘What programs are
you talking about?’ and I t—she says, ‘Martha, you can’t do those. I have to approve them before you do them.’ I
said ‘You didn’t tell me that! You told me to get the enrollment up, and so I’m trying to do programs that will bring children back to this school, and—so we would advertise these programs and we had little coffees in the neighborhood, and I would tell the—parents what we were doing at the school to make their children come back to our school, and so we, uh, the mothers would invite people whose children weren’t in our school to the coffees, and I would go over there and, and have coffee with them and tell ‘em about ‘em, and we’d have open houses so the parents could come and see what we were doing, and that’s how we built the school so I was—and they were starting the—magnet programs then, so—my goal was to turn Kolter into a magnet program—

[1:10:05]

CB: Okay.

MW: —by doing these special programs, well, it eventually became a—language magnet program. [inaudible 3 words]

CB: Was this while you were still—involved?

MW: No, no—no—uh, my third year, that I was there at Kolter my husband died, and so—after he died, I had to finish up my doctorate, because you only have seven years to finish your doctorate and I was going to school one course at a time [nearly laughs], and so my, uh, I only had like a, a year and a half left, to finish my doctorate after he died, and so, and you also had to take what you call a residency so you had to— work—you had to go to school full-time, for residency, so I had to quit my job, to go to school full-time and take a full course rather than, you know, just one course at a time, so—I took a leave of absent [sic] and went to school, full-time, a semester, and then two summers, and that was my three full-time semesters to get my doctorate.

CB: Now, this was the—the same time that your children were in college, too, yes?—

MW: Well, yes, when—the year that my husband passed away, my daughter started the University of Texas, and then my—the next year my son started Sam Hous—uh—I’m sorry—he went to—Stephen F. Austin, and then, after that, uh, it was two more years later then my third son, my third child went to UT. My third child was at home when I finished my doctorate; the other two were in college.

AR: So you were all students. [laughs]

MW: Yep!

CB: Yeah—all at the same time.

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: You are—recorded as being the first Asian American school—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —principal in Texas. Were you aware of that when you first got the job?

MW: Nope.

[all laugh]

MW: I just did things, you know, I did, I didn’t, I don’t do things to be the first, I mean, that’s not my goal—but you know, I knew that I wanted to be a principal because I knew I could make more money and I knew that I wanted to be in charge of a school because I felt like—and technically, the principal is the leader of a school, and if you have a good principal you have a good school. If you have a terrible principal, you have a terrible school. It’s not just the teachers, it’s the principal—the tea—the principal, like a CEO, sets the tone of the school, sets the goals of a school—and I knew that I wanted to be able to do that. So that’s why I became a principal. [laughs]
AR: So what was the salary of a principal and a—compared to a tea—just a regular teacher?

MW: Well, I think my first principalship I got $37,000, [laughing] which wasn’t too much either but—it was big money then!

CB: Yeah, I mean, there’s, there’s been—

AR: [laughing] Bigger than 4000! As, as are—just a teacher!

MW: [laughing] Yeah! But that’s quite a few number of years later—

AR: Yeah, that’s true.

CB: Yeah, there’s been some, some inflation going on, for this whole process.

MW: Yeah.

CB: Yeah—after your doctorate you came to work for the overall—Houston school district.

MW: I got my doctorate, and, um—uh—when I—left my principalship, they told me they would save that for me and I could go back to that school when I—

CB: Oh! Hmm.

MW: —I couldn’t, they didn’t, they hired someone else of course, so, um—I, um—

CB: Well, does that mean that you were looking for a new position—largely because your old one had now been filled, or—

MW: [somewhat indignantly] Right! Right!

CB: —because you were actively already looking for something else?

MW: No! Because they filled my job!

[AR laughs]

MW: And I went up to the superintendent, I made an appointment with him and I said, ‘You promised me you were gonna give me my job and you hired someo—he says, ‘Martha, we’re [sic] gonna leave that job open,’ and I says, ‘Well, you need to find me another job,’ he says, ‘I will, I will,’ there were no principalships available, he says, ‘Well, you just come work for me.’ So I s—I s—he had hired a, a, one of the professors from the university to come in and do staff development, and so he says ‘You just come and you work over here with Ron McIntire, and he’s gonna—he’ll help you, but—that was after I finished, um—my three semesters, but I was writing my dissertation, at the s—

AR: Oh, I see.

MW: —when I went back to work.

CB: Yeah. Yeah.

MW: Okay, so when I went back to work—

CB: That is the timeline that I remember, actually, yeah.
MW: —I was working in central office, and in central office, I was working under Dr. Ron McIntire who was in charge of staff development, so I would work all day and then I would go home—[taps on table as if typing]—and type my dissertation, and there was a woman at the, at the HISD, that would—do it on the computer. So I—[1:15:00]

CB: [as if knowing, but of course he does not] Typing out dissertations, a much—riskier process on a typewriter.

AR: Yeah! [laughs]

MW: Absolutely! Oh, it’s pitiful! It’s pitiful! I mean, what I would do is—I would write it out longhand, and then I would—copy it from longhand onto the typewriter, and then I would take it to this woman at the HISD, who would do it on computer, and then—she would do it, and she would leave it for me the next day and I’d have to read it to make sure it was right. And so every day, we would do that, every night I’d go home and—convert it, and, oh, it was maddening. Now you—it’s so easy.

AR: Mm-hmm.

CB: Yeah—so—the employee—

MW: So I worked in central office.

CB: —yeah, the employee development department, right?

MW: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

CB: Um—and this was just where—the easiest—

MW: It was in the central office!

CB: —opportunity was for you to be slotted in, or—

MW: Yeah! That was the only place—

CB: —was there—

MW: —he could find a job for me, because the man needed help and he had nobody under him, so he just gave me to this new man to—do it, and the, and the man was a—crazy man.

[AR laughs]

CB: Well—talk about that!

MW: I mean, he was, he, he, he was a very creative man, very creative, and he had this way of evaluating teachers, and that’s what he was known for, that was his specialty, and when he was at the University of Houston, that’s what he taught. So—also, the crazy thing that happened to me when I was working on my doctorate, is my—uh, dissertation, my—advisor, who was gonna be my dissertation chair—retired.

CB: Hmm.

MW: Then I had to go find someone else to do it so I found a man that I’d taken a course f—with, and that I was developing a pers—a—principal assessment center with him, and he said he would do it. Then two of his students got in trouble, so he dropped me—and so I had no one to do my dissertation—

[CB laughs]
MW: —so, here I am in the elevator, nearly about ready to cry and this other man who’s there, that was, I took one course from him, I says, [feigns crying] ‘Will you be my dissertation chair?’ He says ‘What happened to you?’ And I told him, and he says, ‘Oh, I’ve got so many students, I don’t know that I can.’ He says, ‘Well, I’ll tell you what, [taps table in rhythm with verbs] since you’re working with Ron, let Ron help you with the dissertation and I’ll take care of the paperwork.’ So I had two dissertation chairs, is what I h—co –chairs, because they were all so busy, so Ron McIntire who was my—supervisor at the school district, was the one who supervised my writing of the dissertation and then—the other fella took care of the paperwork at the Univ—and then the one man, who turn— whose students got in trouble, when he—when I visited with him, he says, ‘Martha, I don’t know why you want to finish this doctorate,’ he says, ‘my wife doesn’t have a doctorate and she’s completely happy.’

AR: Whoa.

MW: And I s—[sputtering] I said, ‘I have come this far? And you’re asking me why?’ I says, ‘I can’t believe this,’ and to this day, I don’t know whether he told me that to—encour—to make me—defy him—

AR: Hmm.

MW: —and finish it, or whether he was really trying to tell me— ‘Just forget it,’ you know. But, I said ‘There’s no way I’ll stop now, no way.’

CB: Now, working at the—the central office was—a different situation from what you had been in—previously—

MW: Oh, yes, very different.

CB: —how well do you think it made use of the skills that you had acquired so far in your career?

MW: Well—I had to be very organized because as I said, my boss wasn’t organized—

CB: Yeah. [laughs briefly]

MW: —so I was basically running him. And he was, he was in charge of staff development and he, he knew how to put on, how to train teachers to, uh, or train principals to evaluate teachers, so at the same time, while he was doing that, we would visit, and he was re—responsible for developing all of the, uh, assessment programs for the teachers, so I basically wrote the manual for him, so—I wrote the manuals, he told me how to do it so we wrote the manuals together, and then I’d get—what I’d do is I’d bring in teachers, and we’d do, uh, some im—we’d do some round-robin, uh—thinking, and saying what was the most important things and that’s what we would assess on. So then after we were so wonderful with the teacher assessment, then, they wanted me to do the principals and I did the principals and the assistant principals and, the t—the custodians, and we did everything from custodians to the superintendent, so I developed a manual to assess everybody.

[1:20:00]

MW: In the whole—school district! [laughs]

CB: [faintly mischievous] Was this the—Quality Assurance Program?

MW: Yes! [bursts into laughter]

CB: What was the Career Ladder? That was—something else you’d been linked to.

MW: The Career Ladder was something that started in Austin at the same time that this was going on and the Career Ladder was—what the, the state wanted us to do to—uh, have teachers move up to become better teachers, so if they did certain things they could move up the ladder and they could get more pay by moving up the ladder, so we developed that program too.
CB: Yeah. How—how far out were you envisioning your career at this phase? Like—

MW: I thought I would be a superintendent. I really thought I was gonna end up being a superintendent, and then, um, what happened is after I developed those programs then I also, uh, developed the, uh, Alternative Certification program, and Ron McIntire had left, okay, he left to be a superintendent somewhere else, so Billy Reagan gave me all that responsibility, so I—

CB: Was this when you—became associate superintendent?

MW: He says, ‘I’m—I’ll have to get this done by the school board,’ I says, ‘I know you do, but you need to get it done!’ I says, ‘If you want me to do this work—!’ Do you know all know, have y’all ever heard of Billy Reagan?

AR: No, no.

CB: No.

MW: He was the Superintendent in Houston for many, many, years and he’s the one that developed the magnet programs, and the purpose of the original magnet programs was to—have children come across the city to go to a specialized program, and that was our form of integration.

AR: Oh—I see.

MW: So it was—magnet schools are no longer needed anymore because the schools are completely integrated. So there’s really not a reason for them, but they became so popular that they’ve kept them but they’re closing some of them now. But that was—HISD’s way of integrating the public schools.

CB: Hmm.

MW: And we were probably one of the few big cities that did not have riots—about, uh—

CB: —school integration?

MW: —school integration, mm-hmm.

AR: Why do you think that—why do you think that was?

MW: Well, it was because we had the magnet program.

AR: Oh, the magnet programs. Hmm.

MW: We found a way to—have children bussed, to a—a white school, and white kids bussed to a black school, because we offered those programs at those schools.

AR: How did—did par—di—did you have any negative reactions from parents, who were—against, uh, integration of—school integration?

[1:25:06]

MW: Oh, I’m sure, that’s—yeah, well, there was a white flight away from the public schools, mm-hmm.

AR: Oh, I see.

CB: Hmm. [pause] Now—it was, I believe, 1986 that you—moved to Waco, temporarily.

MW: Right, mm-hmm.

CB: And this was returning to teaching, but in a—but in a very different context from before.

MW: Right. What had happened was, um, after, uh, I was in staff development and became an associate superintendent, Billy Reagan left, uh—retired.

CB: Right, okay.
MW: And when he left, they brought in another woman called Joan Raymond who was the superintendent, and Joan Raymond did not trust any of the people that worked under Billy Reagan. So she sent all of us—out somewhere.

AR: Oh. [laughs nervously]

MW: So I was sent out to an elementary school, I was sent out to Cornelius Elementary School. And she had the principal at Cornelius come in and do staff development, and I was to go and be the principal, so—she called me into the office, and she told me, she says, uh, ‘Dr. Wong, we’re going to send you to Cornelius Elementary School.’ And I says, ‘Okay, I, you know, if that’s what you—if that’s what you think is best for this district and best for the children, I will go there.’ And she says, ‘I’m very surprised that you’re not yelling and screaming at me like everybody else,’ I says, ‘Well, I’m a professional, and you’re—the boss; I’ll do what you think is best.’ So I went out there, and—when I was in staff development, um—I went across this, uh, many—I made many speeches across the state of Texas and I worked with TEA because of my—work in HISD—

CB: Mm-hmm.

MW: —and, um—I’d met many professionals from across the state through the principals’ association and superintendents’ association, and one of my friends told me about the job at Baylor because she was going to Baylor, and—she was getting her doctorate and she says, ‘They’re looking for someone with experience to come in and teach there—’

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —and she said, ‘Dr. Estes is here and he was the head of the—Department of, uh—School Administration, he said you wanna go talk to him.’ And so I visited with him at the convention, and he asked me to come to Bay—he said ‘Would you come and interview?’ So I went to Waco to interview and I got the job there so that’s how I—ended up being a professor at Baylor. And that’s what the doctor allowed me to do—

CB: Right. Exactly.

MW: —and then, when I was in, when I was working under Billy Reagan, directly under him and reporting to him, I mean—we were at that building till ten, ten o’clock at night, you know, and—and, it was just, it was just hard work and when I saw the work that he was doing, and the stress that he had, I decided that I didn’t want to be a superintendent.

[AR laughs briefly]

CB: [surprised] Hmm. That is interesting.

MW: So that’s when I decided I would go ahead and then, you know, when—when I, I knew with the doctorate I could either be a superintendent, it’d be easier for me to be a superintendent, or to teach at a university. So that’s when I decided to teach at the, at Baylor.

AR: How did—what was that like? Like, what was that like—compared to teaching children, did you, like, get better teaching?

MW: Oh, it’s easy, it’s very easy—

AR: Easy? [interviewers laugh]

MW: —oh, college teaching is so easy, yeah, yeah.

AR: Well, what did you teach?

MW: I taught, uh, the History of Education—
AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —I also taught, um, Organizational Development, which teaches you how to look at an organization and determine, uh, how to make it better—

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —I also taught a course in, uh, I taught graduate students that—

AR: Okay.

MW: —so we, uh, had graduate students that, uh, and I was also in charge of—because of my background in, um—staff development, they had, they developed a—a, um—a principals’ center at Waco and I was in charge of the principals’ center, so at the principals’ center what we would do is we would offer short courses on the weekend to teach principals different skills, and so I was in charge of that also. So it was a fun time.

CB: What it was like to—redesign curricula? I know you were—involved with that, at Baylor.

MW: Well, uh—what happened was, you know, they wanted someone, uh, to come in because, uh, all of the—professors that they had had only been professors. They had never taught in the public schools.

CB: [as if arching an eyebrow] Hmm. [MW laughs]

AR: Hmm.

MW: So that’s why they wanted me, because I had taught in public schools and also because I had—trained teachers, so they wanted me to change the curriculum to make it more revelant [sic] to today’s—teaching, and what was going on in the world, because I had the experience. So that’s why I got to say, ‘Well, yeah, I think we need to develop a course that would do this for teachers, teach them how to’—because a...l—see, teachers don’t have background in special ed, and—teachers in special ed really have more knowledge about how kids learn than the regular teacher.

[1:30:23]

AR: Hmm. That makes sense.

CB: Because they’re—forced to actually—think about the process, yeah—huh.

MW: Right—right. And so, I—that was one of the things that I insisted that we have a course in, in the methodology of, of, of how kids learn, so if you know how kids learn, then you can teach them in that method. Most teachers will just use, say—what I call a lecture type, you know—type course, rather than, uh—you know, experimental, and so—some kids can only learn by doing, and some kids can learn by hearing, some kids learn by seeing, and some kids I—have to actually touch it to do it, so that’s what I learned in special ed so I wanted all teachers to be aware that not every kid learns the same way, and that you had to—teach that child in the method that was their strength, and yet build up the methods that were not their strengths, so that they could use all of their sensory ways of learning.

AR: So was this directly related to Wa—how you consulted with the public schools in Waco?

MW: Right, uh-huh, mm-hmm, and then I also changed the curriculum—

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —in, at, to teach teachers at, at Baylor.
CB: Well—now of course, when you had become a teacher, when you had first gone into education as an 
undergrad—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —it was almost by default.

MW: [as if encouraging despite the implausibility of the situation] Mm-hmm.

CB: Was this—was this something that you were still seeing with people who were becoming teachers then, or—

MW: No, I, I really didn’t look at that, I was looking more so at—what, what we were teaching teachers cause I 
knew that I myself did not have that many courses in methodology—

CB: Right.

MW: —and from the time when I had classes until the time when I was a professor, a lot of things had changed in 
education, we had learned a lot about how children learn, we learned a lot about discipline, discipline had changed, 
and—those kinds of things, so that’s why, uh—we were trying to make the curriculum so that when teachers got into 
the classroom, they were better prepared.

CB: Yeah. [pause] This is also the period where your resume is indicating that you— first became involved in a 
major way with organizations in the Chinese community. Is that fair to say?

MW: Yeah, well—really, I was at Waco, so I couldn’t do that too well!

[MW laughs, but AR laughs louder]

CB: [struggling to cut through a joke he was not expecting] Yeah, I mean, I—I mean,  what I—

MW: [laughing] There were always seven Chinese students in Waco, did you know that?

AR: [sarcastically, and still laughing] Wow!

MW: [finally stops laughing] And there was one other Chinese professor that was a doctor, and I, and I only met 
him, you know. The faculty in the School of Education was very close, the dean was wonderful, the associate dean 
was wonderful, they had me to their house all the time, and I had a girlfriend from Houston who taught at U of H 
and she had transferred over to Baylor, so we were close so it was f—it was a fun time, and I knew one of the kids, 
the Chinese kids at Baylor, and I asked him, I says, ‘Do y’all ever get together? The other Chinese s—’, he says, 
‘No,’ I says, ‘Well, I’ll have y’all over to my house for dinner so if you, if you know them,’ he says, ‘Well, I 
don’t know ‘em,’ I says, ‘Well, if you see ‘em on campus, just invite them!’ [MW and AR laugh loudly]

MW: ‘Invite them over to my house!’ So I got the Chinese kids at Baylor together, 
and then when I moved back I, I became more active.

CB: Yeah.

MW: But when I was in Waco what had happened is one of my—I had gone through Leadership Houston, and one 
of my friend in Leadership Houston was running for city council, and so I told him I would help him to run for City 
Council. Well, I really couldn’t block walk cause I was living in Waco, so what I did is I took my, uh, my directory, 
my Chinese church directory, I was always involved with the Chinese community through my church. Okay? So I 
took my Chinese directory and everybody that was in his zip codes, I sent them a note, and told ‘em to vote for him, 
so he won.

CB: Hmm.
MW: [laughs] But I mean, I dunno how many voted for him but he did win. And then when I came back to Houston is when I got politically active in trying to get other— once you help someone win an election, everybody wants you to help them.

CB: You were invited to the board of the Institute of Chinese Culture—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —at this time? Is that right?

MW: Uh—I was invited to that board a long time ago, probably when I came back. Mm-hmm.

CB: Huh.

MW: And that, that started out at Rice University, the Institute of Chinese Culture, we held our, we taught Chinese classes there. Uh-huh.

[1:35:09]

AR: Oh, Ed Chen told us about that, actually. [laughs]

MW: Uh-huh. Mm-hmm.

AR: And what was the course you taught, the course at NASA you taught on assertive—assertiveness as a minority, wh—how did you—as your personal experience, how did you draw that and how did you incorporate that into your course?

MW: Well, what ha—um—the EEOC asked me to come out there and to teach a course on that so I did so what I tried to do was, uh, I dunno if you—the Asian culture teaches you, you know, to respect your elders and, uh, to be polite to others so—you really don’t—you aren’t supposed to be assertive.

AR: [quickly] Mm-hmm.

MW: And so—most Asians aren’t very assertive. And—through my life experiences [laughing slightly now] I found out that you have to be a little bit assertive to, to get ahead, and so, uh, I, uh, told them ways that they could do that, how they can do it without being offensive, and how your culture was preventing you from doing that, and if you didn’t take steps to do that, then don’t expect—don’t expect things to drop in your lap, they’re not gonna drop in your lap, you have to go out and go for them so that’s what I tried to teach them.

AR: So—you—like, teach a balance between—

MW: Mm-hmm.

AR: —traditional culture with trying—

MW: Mm-hmm.

AR: —to further your career? That’s interesting.

MW: Mm-hmm. But it was even simple things like going to lunch with your colleagues, and I remember—

CB: Something you had—already been mentioning to—

MW: I had done, but they didn’t do it, uh-huh. These were—
CB: —you’d been mentioning this same topic to your co-workers at—

MW: —that’s later, though—

CB: —the Central Office, for instance.

MW: Uh-huh, oh, well, yeah, uh-huh. But I—see—I think because at that time, a number of Chinese had come into the U.S., this is after 1960, and they were not Americanized. The public schools Americanized the kids—

CB: Yeah—

MW: —and that was—

CB: —rather effectively.

MW: —but did you know that’s the purpose of the public schools? When they first started out? What happened that the public what [sic] happened was before public schools existed, they had church schools, okay? Then the, when the colonies were there and they decided that what was happening when the people came over from, uh, Germany, and they were speaking German, and the English colonies wanted them to learn [angrily] English, and so they says ‘We’re gonna have to teach them the American way’ so that’s when they started t—having the public schools, so that they could Americanize the Germans, and the Dutch, is what that was happening, and that’s why we have the public schools, because previous to that, all of the schools were religious schools, and it was the, the, the, Church of England that was teaching them, you know, to read from the Bible, and then we moved to that, to teach them English, and to teach them the American—so that’s, that’s the original purpose of the public schools, and I think we’ve forgotten some of that. [laughs] [pause] And I learned that through my, teaching my history course. [laughs more loudly]

AR: So how did you when you came back to Houston in 1988, how did you get into the community college system?

MW: Well, I learned the good old boys’ club, okay, I, I—

CB: Hmm.

MW: —I understand that and, uh, and one of my interesting courses that I studied was organization development, and so in that you also learn how an organization develops, and I have, uh, I had developed a lot of friends over the years and one of the ladies that was—when I was working in central office, one of the ladies on the school board, her name was Bobbie Pipher, and her good friend was Blue Alexander, and, uh, those were two PTA ladies who had become very active on the school board, and Bobbie Pipher’s next-door neighbor was the—next-door neighbor to the pastor at my church, for a long time, it wasn’t at that particular time, so I also knew Bobbie Pipher through my pastor’s wife, okay, so, uh—when my husband passed away, shortly after my—no, before my husband passed away, my pastor’s wife’s—my pastor passed away, and we had visited with, uh, her. Then, after my husband passed away, Bobbie’s husband passed away, so the two neighbors, pastor’s wife, [begins tapping table in rhythm with phrases] our pastor died, school board’s president’s husband, uh, had died, and then my husband had died so we became kinda close friends, because our husbands had all pa—so, uh, and when my husband died I called up Bobbie because she was president, she was also on the HISD board and at that time, the Houston Community College board was the same—

[1:40:20]

CB: [surprised] Really?

MW: —because Houston Community College was—became, uh, a separate entity later on but the boards were the same, so—I called Bobbie when my husband passed away, to see what to do about my son because he was not gonna get any Social Security because he was in high school, and it was only kids in college who would get
the Social Security, so Bobbie told me to enroll my son in one course in the community college so he could be a college student, and get his Social Security from his father’s death, through college, so that’s what we did, so that’s how I knew Bobbie Pipher, so—anyway, when I came back to Houston I called Bobbie and I told her, I says, ‘Bobbie, I think I wanna work at the community college now,’ because I think the superintendent was still the same superintendent and I knew she wasn’t gonna hire me.

CB: There was no way [MW laughs, in response to what she had said] to—move up under that regime?

MW: Well, you know, she had her agenda and I just didn’t wanna mess with it, I didn’t wanna fight with it. So Bobbie says, ‘Well, Martha, um’—she says, ‘I don’t know if there’s any jobs but here’s what I recommend that you do, I recommend that you call up J.B. Wiley, who is the president of the community college, and take him to lunch.’ I says, ‘Okay,’ so I called him up and set a lunch date. I took him to lunch, and I told him, I says, ‘J.B., I wanna come back to Houston and I need a job and I want to work at the community college can you help me find a job there,’ he says ‘Martha, I think we have a—’ I said ‘I want an administrative job, I don’t wanna teach,’ I says ‘I want an administrative job,’ cause I knew that paid more. [MW and AR laugh] And I had, you know, kids in college and I had to support myself now. So he said, uh— ‘Why don’t you go visit at, uh, I think we have one job at staff development,’ so, you know, I’d done staff development at HISD, and—I took my resume, he says, ‘Why don’t you go and see, uh, Dr. Harding and, uh, see what Dr. Harding says,’ and I interviewed with Dr. Harding. So of course I call up Dr. Harding, I get an in—I tell him that ‘The president of the college had call—uh, I had lunch with him, and he told me to call you, and—school b—and uh—community college president b—of the board told me to have lunch with J.B. and I’ve done all that now I’m supposed to visit with you, so I wanna come and see you,’ and so he said fine, so I’m—made sure that he knew that the chairman of the board, and the president of the college, had sent me, to talk to him. [MW laughs] And—so when I showed him my resume and told him what I wanted to and he says, ‘Well, we may have some more applicants,’ I says, ‘That’s fine, you know you—’ I said ‘I think I’m gonna be the most qualified,’ so before we finished and he was a he’s a ver—he was an elderly, African-American man, and, uh, I just, you know, played to him and says ‘I know I can do this job and I’ll be honored to work under you,’ you know, ‘and I’ll,’ so he, before I left he gave me the job.

[MW and AR laugh]

CB: [possibly amused] Of course.

MW: But I reminded him who sent me.

CB: Well, your—your responsibilities at the HCC eventually—grew to include all the public relations—

MW: Well, what happened is we got a new—

CB: —also, right?

MW: —uh, a new chancellor, and the new chancellor divided up the, the, the community college system into, uh, five college, so, uh—staff development, when I was with staff development, there was another woman that was I really reported to, not Mr., uh, not Mr. Harding, and that woman never even interviewed me, he hired me without me interviewing with her! [MW laughs, then AR laughs] I don’t think she was too happy. But, anyway, you know, I got to know her and she liked what I did and I didn’t require a lot of supervision, you know, and—so then when it ca—they divided up the college she became a president of one of the colleges, and so when she became the president she says, ‘Martha, I want you to come with me to this college, and I want you to be in charge of the community, uh, relations in the college.’ So I went with her to do that.

AR: And—around the same time you al—you took part in the founding of the Asian American Coalition and APAHA—

MW: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

AR: —how did you—what inspired you to do that?
MW: That, well, the Asian American Coalition was a result of my involvement in politics.

AR: [quickly] Mm-hmm.

MW: And when I helped my friend to win and what happened was, uh, there were other Asians who were supporting other people to run for public office, and, um, everyone I supported always won, [as if smirking now] for some reason, you know, and so some of them approached me and they said, ‘Martha, uh, we need to get together and the Asians need to support the same person,’ they says, ‘cause you’re supporting one person and we’re suppor—and your people are winning [AR laughs] so let’s get together [CB laughs] and let’s see if we can support the same people, and that way we’ll be stronger,’ [inaudible 4 words under AR coughing] ‘fine,’ so we started, uh, meeting and we invited other people to come and so, uh, we decided—why we were gonna meet and we were gonna meet to, uh, review candidates and to let candidates know about the concerns of the Asian American community, so we did that and that’s how we started the Asian American coalition. And so. And then, uh—I started the Asian American Heritage Association, I started that as a result of another friendship that I had through Leadership Houston again, so—that was a good organization for me, cause I got into politics through that. My other friend at the, uh, Leadership Houston, um—I don’t even remember where we were but he says, ‘Martha, uh—we, uh’—he represented AT&T at that time, he says ‘I have $15,000 to give to some organization and I want to give it to an Asian organization.’ He says, ‘Do you know an Asian organization that I can give this money to?’ [AR begins laughing]

CB: [as if with a knowing grin] Oh ho.

[1:46:31]

MW: And I said, ‘Well, you know, Hank,’ I said, ‘Hank, uh, you know,’ and this was right after President [George H.W.] Bush had declared Asian American Heritage Month to be a whole month versus just one—week, so I says, ‘You know, uh, we used to celebrate Asian American Heritage Day in May, and the woman who was doing that moved everything from May to October, because it was too hot in May—

[AR laughs but MW does not sound amused]

MW: —so she didn’t wanna do it in May so she had all these festivals in October when it was cooler, and I said ‘We really need to celebrate it in May because that’s the national recognition,’ so I said, uh, ‘If you will give me this money then I will start an organization and we will recognize Asian American Heritage Month,’ so that’s what we did with the money, we started that organization, we had our first reception at the Museum of Fine Arts, and see, I had also, uh—was I working at the community college or was I already—

AR: It says you were—

MW: —already an elected official?

AR: —it says it coincides. Oh you weren’t, I don’t think you were an elected official yet.

CB: Yeah, the—

MW: Okay.

CB: —District C seat—

MW: Okay.

CB: —that wasn’t—

MW: Okay.
CB: —till, I believe, '92.

MW: So anyway, we got in touch with the Museum of Fine Arts and they were more than happy to let us host it there, and we spent all of our money on food, [laughs] and invitations!

AR: So why did you—

MW: So that was the start of it.

AR: Why did you end up spending more time with APAHA than the—than the Coalition?

MW: Uh, I spent probably equal time—

AR: Equal? Okay.

CB: Really?

MW: —but there were other people who were willing to do the political stuff that were already kinda involved—

AR: [quickly] Oh, I see.

MW: —so that’s why I didn’t have to sp—but there were, there was no one else that really had the same idea that I had that wanted to celebrate May, so I had to build that, so that’s why it took more time.

CB: Did the Association stay, like, very focused on that month in the early years, then?

MW: Yes, yes, uh-huh.

AR: Oh, I saw, I saw the adv—the promotions for this year’s, actually, for the ramen—competition. [AR laughs loudly]

MW: That’s my idea!

AR: Oh really?

MW: How come y’all didn’t come and eat ramen noodles?

AR: I didn—I missed it actually. I saw I saw it [sic] and I was very disappointed that I missed it!

MW: It was bad, it was bad timing cause I think it was the week of finals, it started the week of finals, so—

CB: That would’ve been—loathsome timing.

MW: —we’ll, we’ll have to move it.

AR: If you, if—I think if they promoted that during th—there would be a lot of people at Rice that would’ve gone. [laughs]

CB: That’s actually a fair point, honestly, that, that is a fair point.

MW: Uh—we did have a, we did have a [sic] couple of kids from Rice, we d—we did have a couple of kids from Rice that came, uh-huh. But the person that won ate four—four bowls of noodles. In five minutes.

AR: [shocked] Oh my gosh! [laughs loudly]
MW: And the person th—the team, we had teams of three, they ate thirteen bowls among three people in fifteen minutes.

AR: Wow.

MW: And I think they were about ready to upchuck [inaudible 1 word under AR laughing] [MW laughs] But it was fun, we’ll do it next year, we’ll do it next year.

CB: That’s a—battle.

AR: Maybe I should start training. [laughs loudly]

MW: Yes, you should.

AR: So, um, you were also founder of the Greater Houston Women’s Foundation, what did—what inspired you to do that?

MW: Well, actually, my friends that I had met [MW laughs and then AR laughs immediately in response] through, uh, the American Leadership—I also became a member of the American Leadership Forum, so Leadership Houston led into the American Leadership Forum, and some of the women that I met in the American Leadership Forum wanted to start the Women’s Foundation, and I was probably the only Asian at that time that was in those organizations, and so they just, they wanted to make it, uh, ethnically correct so they invited me.

AR: Oh, I see. [laughs loudly]

[1:50:13]

MW: So I was happy to do it. I was invited to be the start of a lot of things because I was probably the only Asian that was a part of the American Leadership Forum and the, uh, Leadership Houston, and then what I did in those two organizations, I, um, served on their boards and made sure that other Asians were always invited to attend.

CB: I see you got their—Fabulous Femme award very quickly in 1994. [AR laughs]

MW: Well, that was after I ran for public office and could raise money, people didn’t—when you raise money that’s quite a skill and—that’s what they recognize is people who can raise money.

CB: Well, this has been already a relatively long interview—

AR: Yep.

CB: —but I think that we’re—possibly moving into a phase that may have a little momentum here at the end, with your political career—

[AR laughs]

MW: Okay! [laughs]

CB: —if you—if you think we should, then we may be able to just—finish off our questions today, I think, and, and just, you know, launch through all of it.

MW: That’s fine with me. Mm-hmm. Okay.

CB: All right. When do you think you first had the goal of elected office?
MW: I really didn’t think I was ever gonna r—I mean, that wasn’t my goal, to run, my goal was to make sure Asians had a voice at the table, not necessarily me, it’s just like I said, I never wanted to be the first, things just happened that I ended up being the first, things just happened that, that, uh, I got involved in polic—we started the Asian American Coalition, what happened is, uh, the year that Kathy Whitmire was challenged by Fred Hofheinz was our big year and when we had a thousand people at a church to get involved in politics and that was—

CB: What—year would this have been?

MW: That—I don’t even remember the year, it was it must have been sixty—what, uh, no, it was in the 70s, probably, seventy—maybe seventy—I ran in what?

CB: ’92.

MW: Ninety—no, it was the 80s. Must’ve been in the 80s, because—we let two years go by, so I ran in ’93 so ninety, uh, one, and then in—seventy, uh, ’89, must’ve been about 1989, 1988, uh—when we had the big brouhaha with Kathy Whitmire and Fred Hofheinz and we got them to come and speak to a Thousand Nations, so we thought oh, we’re doing wonderful. Well, we endorsed Fred Hofheinz and he lost. [MW laughs, AR quickly responds by laughing]

CB: [ruefully] Broke your winning streak.

MW: It did, it did! But it wasn’t by my choice alone, what we did is we did a straw vote and we—

CB: Hmm.

MW: —decided that, um—uh, we let everybody that was present vote, and we had voting machines and we let everybody vote on them so we could teach them also how to vote. So what happened is when Fred Hofheinz, uh—lost, well, Kathy [inaudible] Whitmire invited us to breakfast and was real nice to us. So anyway, uh—we decided that we shouldn’t just endorse people, we should run someone, so we decided we—uh—the—the group of us, there was a small group of us, we decided that Harry Gee, who is an attorney, and owns a law firm, should run for public office, that he would be the perfect candidate, so we got him ready, we sent him over to a consultant, he got his hair cut right, he got his picture taken and all this good stuff, so he’s gonna run for at-large [sic] position. Well, what happens is this Chinese woman decides that she will run, her name is Cookie Joe and she’s always been involved in politi—so she decides to run and she runs and declares for the same position that Harry was gonna run for, and she wasn’t a part of our coalition. So—she, uh, runs so Harry says ‘I don’t wanna run against an Asian,’ so he doesn’t run. So two years pass so then we just said ‘Okay, this time, we’re gonna, we’re gonna ru—’ there was you know it was term limits, so people could not run again, so another at-large, so we just said, ‘Okay, Harry’s gonna run at-large this time, and then we’re gonna run, uh, someone in District F where mostly Asian live out—in Bellaire Chinatown. So the guy that’s gonna run in Bellaire Chinatown is an engineer and he has to consult with his firm and he says that, you know, he thinks he can run and Harry thinks he can, well the woman files again for the same seat—

[AR laughs]

CB: [amused] Oh, no.

MW: —so he decides not to run. And then the guy that was gonna run out in F decides that he can’t run cause his company isn’t gonna support him [interviewers make noises of exasperation] and let him take time off work, so nobody can run, so— here it is, Saturday morning and we were gonna have a press conference announce [sic] these two Asian candidates, and so they call me up and tell me they ha—they can’t run, can’t call off the press conference, I says ‘Okay, well then we need to regroup, and decide [AR laughs] what we’re gonna do,’ so we regrouped Sa—Sunday night at my house. My district also was an open seat, so the person that I had helped get elected was not gonna run anymore, so we look at all the empty seats and it’s easier to win an empty seat than it is, uh, challenging an incumbent.

CB:—an incumbent, right.
MW: So we can’t get anybody in these other places, and—the woman had done that, so my—my district seat is o—
they said ‘Martha, then you have to run,’ [AR starts laughing] I says ‘Euh! Okay! All right!’ [CB laughing by now]
So I, uh—I call up my bo—at that time I was working at the community college, and I told her—we were getting
ready to do a bond election, and I was supposed to be the community relations person to get people to you know
vote for the bonds and all that, so I call up the lady and ask her, I says, ‘Are you gonna get me heavily involved in
the bond election?’ Cause if I’m gonna get heavily involved in the bond election, then I don’t wanna run for public
office, cause you can’t do both, you know, you have to really get out there and do—she says, ‘No, Martha, uh—I’m
gonna handle all of it from the central office, you aren’t—the community relations people out in the community
don’t have to do anything.’ I said, ‘Oh—okay,’ so that allowed me to run for public— so that’s why I ran. Well, we
lost the bond election. She should’ve let us help. [interviewers chuckle under their breath] Because, you know, you
don’t run it—you have to get down to the grass roots to pass bonds, so that’s when I ran and—I—I—this was like
the last day to run, you know, I think the last day to file is like a September twenty day, and they had already had
people running since January—

CB: [highly surprised] Oh, wow.

MW: —this one guy, Mark Stelter had been running since January, and he, he had already all the the, the, uh,
people who normally give money supporting him, and— so it was really, you know, and when we found a
consultant we went to this lady that we knew was a good consultant and I told her, she says, ‘Martha, it’s too late,
you shouldn’t—you should’ve declared a long time ago, it’s too late to declare,’ and she says, uh, ‘I won’t even take
you as a candidate unless you can raise $30,000,’ she says, ‘in a—come back to me next week if you can raise
$30,000 in a week I’ll take you.’ So I got $30,000, I got five thousand from my sister, got three thousand from the
second sister, another five thousand from my mother, [interviewers are laughing by now] and at that time my three
children I had my name on all their checking accounts—

CB: Isn’t that delightful.

MW: —and I called them and I says, ‘Honey, uh—mom’s been supporting you all these years and I’m gonna write a
check out of your account for my campaign.’ They didn’t—you know, so that’s how I got my first $30,000. And so I
went back to her and she was so shocked, that I could get $30,000 in—I didn’t even ask anybody but my family, and
so she says, ‘Okay, then we’ll take you,’ so we really worked hard and very fast.

CB: How—

MW: Called, called in every chip that I had! [laughs]

CB: How difficult was it, then, to, to get out your message against your opponents when you had that much shorter
timeframe?

MW: Well—technically he was block walking and he had all the money so I had my major problem was to raise
money so my friend Harry Gee, who is also my cousin, distant cousin, uh, he’s a very well-known attorney and he
went to law school with a lot of the law school with a lot of the people who were in charge of the monies at the law
firms, so he introduced me to all of his buddies that were in the law firms that had money, and, uh, he would set up
lunch meetings for us to meet and ask them to support me, well, they were already supporting the other fellow so
none of them would, would give me, he was friends with people at Fulbright, he was friends with people at, um—oh,
what’s the other big law firm here, uh, that is a—uh, Vinson Elkins [sic], he knew all those people and s—the funny
thing is, uh, Joe B. Allen, who, who was then at Vinson Elkins, you know, he says, ‘Martha, we’re always
supporting someone,’ so—but he was his [begins tapping table for emphasis] roommate when he went to law school,
Harry’s roommate when he went to law school at UT was Harry Ransom, who was the—managing partner, so he
took me to lunch with Harry Ransom, Harry took me to lunch with Harry, [AR laughs] and those old roommates and
so by the time we finished, Harry Ransom said he would support me and his wife would support me, we all went to
lunch, and when we were getting ready to get in the car, I says, ‘Harry, Joe B. Allen will not give me any money
from your law firm, could you get him to give me a little bit of money?’ So I got my car and I drove back to my
campaign headquarters by the time I got—to the campaign headquarters they told me that Joe B. Allen had called, so I called him back he says, ‘Martha, I have a check for you.’

[2:00:28]

CB: Excellent. [AR and then MW laugh]

CB: Look at that.

MW: So you see how—how relationships are so important, in everything that you do, in my jobs that I got, in, in you know, politics and getting money, and then I got into the r—so what happened was—we were all very nice to each other on the campaign trail and, um—the funny thing is that the, the one kid that was ahead, he thought, he didn’t think that I had a chance to win, but he made so many mistakes and, uh, he thought that the other woman that was running was going to win and this was a woman who was an aide to a former council member and we thought, well, she knows what’s going on down at City Hall so she should—but she wasn’t a good candidate, and so—uh—she—[begins tapping table with every word] he ran his last, uh—mail piece against her, thinking she was gonna win, and it was saying, you know, bad things about her, so it made her very angry, so everybody else except Orland Sanchez endorsed me, except—Orlando endorsed Mark Stelter because they had become close—

CB: You’re talking about the—runoff, now.

MW: The runoff, uh-huh.

CB: Yeah.

MW: And then, uh, the woman wasn’t gonna endorse anybody, and she says, ‘Well, you know, I’m just gonna stay out of the race,’ I says, ‘Did you see the mail piece he sent out on you?’ and she says, ‘Yes,’ I says, ‘Doesn’t that make you angry? I didn’t send anything out on you.’ [CB laughs slightly] ‘I think that you oughta help me as another woman, because he was against you.’ And so she decided to endorse me. So. And then one of the law firms, [resumes tapping table with every word] Fulbright, I went back and I asked all the law firms for money now, and Fulbright, the one person at Fulbright said, even though I was second—no, I came—did I come out ahead in that race? I think I did come out ahead—I came out ahead, and they thought that the guy would come out ahead and so the one fella who thought that—I could win that race was from Fulbright, and I’ve always thanked them for having the faith in me that I would pull o—cause runoffs are so different from the regular election.

CB: Yeah. Yeah. [pause] You continued the, the theme of professional development to some degree in your—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —in your—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —work on the Council, with—you worked with training operations for the police—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —and—public works and human resources. Talk about that, talk about how—work that you had done in education administration was now, to some degree, being carried into new departments and new areas.

MW: Well, uh, at that time the police did have an academy, a police academy and, and, so I looked into how they were training the police then and made some suggestions there on some things that they could do to help the policemen better—one of the things that they weren’t doing really well, I didn’t think, were—teaching the, the policemen about the different ethnic groups and the customs and how, uh, you know, new immigrants would act
different from a, an American who’s—been born here, so we started incorporating some of that into the training of all the employees, helping them to understand the different ethnic groups.

CB: Yeah?

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: And—economic development was another defining—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —theme, you know, in your resume from this time.

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: That does seem like different work to some degree from what you had done before; what experiences were you drawing on—when you—

MW: Well, in economic development, the thing is, you know, that we’d come through that low spot [in the early 1980s, presumably] where people weren’t employed and so one of the things that I thought was very important was to, uh, bring more companies into the city of Houston, and at that time, what happened is the city of Houston would give $70,000 to the Greater Houston Partnership to have them do economic development, and so the woman who was in charge of that at the Partnership was a Filipino [sic] woman, and so I became friends with her, and I helped her in, in bringing companies into, um, Houston and helping the companies grow. Once I understood what her program was, then I, I understood it and, um, there were some Asian companies that wanted to expand their businesses but didn’t know how to expand, and so I would introduce them to her [resumes tapping on table] and she would help them figure out how to expand and how to get some extra help and get some tax abatements for their companies so they could expand, so that’s how I got involved in that is helping companies to, uh, to bring companies in and the woman was very good, anytime a company would come and wanted to, uh, be in my district, if they were—looking at land in my district or they were gonna open up something in my district, then she would always bring them to my office and I would meet them. And so that’s when, like, um—uh—was it S—it was Kelsey Seybold, was going to expand their offices and offer a clinic and some, uh, offices there on Holcombe Boulevard, and so when they wanted to build those there and I says, ‘Okay, I think it’s ver—it’s great that you’re going to build there, but there’s a neighborhood right there, you know, you’re building right up to the neighborhood, [tapping has continued] so what I want you to do, if you’re gonna build there, is also to of—make it pretty so the neighborhood looks pretty, rather than just building i—you know, and I said, ‘Also I want you to build a park there so the people can come and play on your park grounds where the people are,’ and they did that.

[2:06:25]

AR: Hmm.

MW: So you know when you’re working with business, if the business is considerate of the neighborhood, then the neighborhood will like the business. Many time—businesses would go into neighborhoods and they weren’t considerate of the neighbor—so what I would do is, if a business was going to a neighborhood, I would make sure that the, the homeowner groups would meet with the business to make sure that that business was, you know, something that the neighborhood wanted. Now you know I also had to go against some businesses, in southwest Houston there was an Asian man who opened up a, a chicken-processing company right in their neighborhood, [AR laughs quietly] and the neighbors didn’t like that and I had to talk to him and tell him, ‘You can’t do this,’ you know, and—I says, ‘The neighbors are complaining, and the smell, and dah dah dah dah, and you have to do this,’ so he started you know doing everything they wanted him to do to clean it up, but eventually he just decided not to—have it there and he closed it down. But it was a, it was a very difficult thing to do.

CB: What do you think that the—zoning laws in Houston are—[AR laughs]
MW: There aren’t any zoning laws! [laughing]

CB: [trying to maintain focus] Exactly, that’s—that’s—

MW: Well, there’s only—

CB: —that’s sort of my point here—

MW: There’s only one area in Hous—

CB: —how do you think that’s affected this kind of work for you, I mean—do you, do you think the laws are—as you would like them to be?

MW: Well—there’s two sides to zoning, the, the only thing that protects the neighborhood right now are [sic] deed restrictions—

CB: Right, yeah.

MW: —and if the neighborhood pays attention to their deed restrictions, they can keep it, uh—the homeowners—

CB: Right, they have a—considerable amount of ability if they’re conscious of it.

MW: —right, right, yes. If they don’t and they let those lapse then people can come in and change those deed restrictions so that’s the bad thing so—one of my big things to do was to make sure that all of my neighborhoods in District C had deed restrictions, so I got the city legal department to—develop a manual to show neighborhoods how to develop their [resumes tapping table] deed restrictions and to make sure that they were there, so while I wanted to make sure I helped the neighborhoods, and I wanted to help the businesses, I wanted the neighborhoods to learn to protect themselves, uh—the year, was it the year I ran, or the year before I ran, uh—I think it was the year I ran—they had, uh, they had, uh, zoning on the, on the ballot, and it lost, and the people that def—

CB: As like a referendum?

MW: Yes, and the people that defeated it were the builders.

CB: Of course.

MW: The developers.

CB: Yeah.

MW: And what they did was they scared the African-Americans and got the African-American ministers to tell the people to vote against it because they said they’ll come in, the business will come and take your properties, so they scared the African-Americans, and the African-Americans voted against it.

AR: Hmm.

MW: They said they were gonna ‘change the zones,’ that’s what zoning was gonna do to the—they were gonna change the—African-American neighborhoods into commercial, and that’s how they defeated it.

AR&CB: Hmm.

AR: So your work on the Council got you appointed—you got appo—appo—uh! Appointed to a position appointed by the governor, Governor Bush—

MW: Mm-hmm.
AR: —so how did, how did that come about?

MW: That’s, that was, I tell you, God just places wonders in your life, one time I was at the airport, what was I—I was probably going to a conference, and I saw one of my friends who had supported me, Charlie Miller, who’s a big friend of President Bush, then Governor Bush, and he asked me, he says, ‘Martha, how are you doing?’ I says, ‘I’m doing fine,’ he says, ‘Well, um—your term’s gonna be up pretty soon, do you wanna—do you wanna stay involved?’ I say, ‘Yes, I do wanna stay involved,’ he says, ‘Well, would you like an appointment from Pre—from the governor?’ I said, ‘Yes, I’d love an appointment from the governor,’ he says, ‘Well, I’ll put a good word in for you.’

[2:10:30]

CB: [impressed] Oh.

AR: Wow.

MW: So he put a good word in for me, and the governor’s office calls me up, and, uh, I go to Austin to interview, and, uh, uh, the man in charge of the governor’s appointments, uh, is one of the g—uh, uh, George Bush’s best good friends and he went with him to Washington, D.C., they live in—in, uh, Aus—in Dallas, and his name is, um, uh—what is his name—it’s a great guy, he’s—he’s the guy that started Horchow, are you familiar with what Horchow is—a—uh—a catalog that sells high-end furniture, and accessories, and bedding, and stuff—and they sold it all to Nieman’s but they are a catalog company that sells high-end furniture and things. He started that business, and so he’s a very wealthy man and then he sold the catalog thing to Nieman’s but they still call it Horchow and Nieman’s has their own catalog too. But when I went to visit with him he says, ‘Well, Martha, uh—the governor’s picked out, uh, I’m gonna recommend to the governor that you serve on the Economic Development Board,’ and I says, ‘Oh, that’s fine,’ I says, ‘that’ll be fine, I, I enjoy economic development,’ and he says, ‘Well, there’s a little problem,’ he says, ‘the agency, uh—is in trouble, and they’re not doing well, and—’ he says, ‘so do you still want to do it?’ I said, ‘Well, that’s, that’s even better,’ I says, ‘We’re gonna go in there and clean it up and it’s gonna look so good that we’re gonna be heroes.’ Well, little did I know how bad it was, it was—bad, so, uh—I set on that board and we fire the—executive director, we search for a new guy and we hire him, we fire him, [AR laughs briefly] we finally settle on a guy that was the county judge up in Denton, we brought him in and then he bro—and so—uh, and we find out that the people on the board did not understand anything [AR laughs] and so, you know, and they weren’t used to asking questions but having set on City Council, I would always ask the staff questions, I knew that you have to ask, so I would ask questions and the staff really got pretty nervous and they never could answer my questions, because I wanted to know, you know, well, so finally when we, uh, hired Jeff they—he went in and he looked at everything and, and money was mismanaged and what had happened was, the state had set aside money to give to encourage companies to come to Texas, and what would happen is the state representatives of the senators would want that money to go to their district, and so they would give it to companies in their district, and those companies were supposed to pay it back but they never paid any of it back so we were in big debt with that program, so we finally figured out how much money companies owed us, we tried to get back all the money we could, and then we—we fired a lot of people, and we hired a lot of new people, and then if you can—you probably don’t remember this either, this was when Michigan, uh, Tom Ri—uh, Tom R—what’s his name?

CB: Tom Ridge?

MW: Ridge was, uh, governor there, and he was doing economic development and he was saying, ‘Come to Michigan,’ and we just said, ‘Well, that’s—the governor should be saying this to people in other states, come to Texas,’ so we started working on that and so we decided that what we should do is we should not have economic development as an agency but it should be an arm of the governor’s office.

CB: Hmm.

MW: So we moved it over into the governor’s office, and it became, uh, an office under the governor’s office and the money that was put it in there, then the governor could use to bring other people and the governor got on to that,
uh—it wasn’t when Bush was there, we moved it when Perry was there, when Perry w—when Bush, until, and Perry’s done a great job with it.

CB: Do you think that your, your work—at the state level—at all influenced your decision to run for the House?

MW: [pause] My work where? Oh, on economic development?

CB: Yeah. [AR is making sounds of agreement]

MW: Uh—what happened with that is, again, a lot of it was plain old timing, you know, but it’s also, I think that opened my eyes to government and what—that government wasn’t always doing things right, you know? [laughs]

[2:15:12]

CB: Sure.

MW: So, uh—what happened was they had also just had redistricting, and so in redistricting, um, they had redrawn the district that I lived in and so and this is the district, so—when that happened, they made it so that the woman that was gonna run in the district was like a 20-year incumbent—

CB: Yeah, I’ve—I’ve seen this—Debra Danburg.

MW: —and so, uh, some of my friends encouraged me to run because they saw that it was an empty seat and that—the thing is, about—close to a third of the district was already in my—council district, so—uh—that kinda, people would already know me—

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: —so I had an advantage the—she did not have that part of the district, because it was a new district for her—

CB: Right.

MW: —and she did n—they did not know her in that—

CB: Didn’t have the—

MW: —so I had that one-third that she didn’t know—

CB: —the actual incumbent background.

MW: —and then the part that she had were people who didn’t vote. [pause] [laughs]

CB: Hmmm. [not amused]

AR: Well, that’s—[laughs]

MW: So it was kind of an—it was a new district for her, and so they really didn’t know her, so we were, I’d say, nearly on equal footing, cause people didn’t know her because it was new for her, and the area that she had, that she had represented, the people weren’t big voters, and in my district, the council district, my council district was probably one of the—it was one of the highest-income, and also the highest-voting, one of the highest-voting districts—

CB: Hmmm.
MW: [resumes tapping table]—so I knew the people, the people knew me, and they always voted. So that was my advantage.

CB: Well, I—I wanna—double back to that briefly, actually; your—your reelection victories for the council are—very impressive, you know, [MW laughs] including the unopposed run, and all of that, and—

MW: Well, that happens now, the third time you run nobody runs against you because of term limits! They, they don’t have a chance, hardly, really, uh-huh.

CB: You—also—apparently ran for tax—

MW: I did. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

CB: —assessor-collector in 1996, though, and you were defeated in the primary?

MW: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

CB: Talk about that experience.

MW: Well, uh, what had happened is some of my Republican friends wanted, uh, the—the county was turning Republican, and so they wanted someone to run against the tax assessor who was a very very old man that had been there for—50 years, and he was ill, and so some of the insiders knew he was ill, so they thought that I should run against him, uh—I think because City Council is on TV so much, and because I would always speak up at council, I became—everybody knew who I was, across the city, so they thought I could win that election. Well, what happened was this man who—uh, in the primaries it’s quite different, I hired this consultant who was a Republican consultant and also a consultant for Dr. Hotze who runs this little—[sighs] game, and he puts out this little—bulletin that says—Republican—I don’t even what it [sic] but it looks like it’s from the Republican Party but it’s not. And he lists the people to run for them, and—if you will give him—five hundred—if you will give him [resumes tapping table] $5000, he will support you, because $5000, he says, is used to print the ballot out, and so he puts everybody’s name on the ballot, and if he likes you, then he’ll tell people to vote for you, and people go into the voting booths with that ballot.

CB: Could you—spell that name, please?

MW: H-O-T-Z-E, Hotze, Steve Hotze, Dr. Steve Hotze, you can look him up. Anyway, the guy that—that was running my campaign, I did not use his wife as a fundraiser, so I think he was mad at me, [AR laughs] I told him to check my record to make sure he knew that I was Republican to make sure I had voted Republican in the p—Republican primary, and then—he had Dr. Hotze said [sic] that I was a Democrat, on his—prim— on that little primary ballot that he sent out, and told everybody to vote for this other guy, so—by the time, and this is in the primary, okay—

CB: Yeah.

MW: —so when I saw, when I saw what he had done, I called up my consultant and I said, ‘You know that I’m a Republican, and you had this printed up for him, and you should not have done that,’ I said, ‘I’m gonna sue Dr. Hotze,’ I said, ‘I want an apology from him, and I want it printed in the paper,’ and I said, ‘You better call him because I’m getting ready to call the—the paper and I’m gonna let the paper know this whole—crappy business,’ so [contemptuously] Dr. Hotze got on the line and told me he was sorry and—he’ll put a retraction—it was in the paper and it was about this big. [gestures for small size, laughs good-naturedly. AR laughs in response] So—that’s what can happen in a primary.

[2:20:35]

AR&CB: Hmm.
AR: So on a more positive note, [MW laughs] what were uh—what was your, what was your most proud—what was your proudest moment on—when you served on council?

MW: [pause] Uh—let’s see—I’m trying to think what we did there, we—I don’t know that was any one thing, uh—that I can recall that was the proudest moment but I know that I trained many—of the people in the district to be activists, and to this day, many of them are still my friends and when they have a problem they call me and ask me how to get it sol—but what I taught them to do was that if you want something done at City Hall, if you will tell me what you want, then I will teach you how to organize your neighborhood so that we can get it for your neighborhood, I said, ‘I can ask for it, but until your neighborhood organizes, and lets the mayor know and the whole council know that you need this in your neighborhood, then we’re not gonna get it.’ I said, ‘I can ask for it, and it’ll be much stronger if you come up and ask for the same thing.’ So I organized them and taught them how to do that and when we wanted to rebuild the streets, I taught them how to go out and get the signatures to—on the petition to get the streets done, taught them how to get speed humps and to get those kinda thin—so today, to this day I have activist friends that still, uh, I’m still friends with that are from my City Council days, and I think that that’s—that was the biggest gift that I could give, uh, the district was to teach people how to access government.

AR: Hmm. Okay.

CB: Yeah. Yeah.

MW: Cause a lot of people don’t know how to do it. [laughs briefly]

CB: How do you compare the—the more executive work of what you had done in education to the more and more legislative work that you found yourself in as you moved into government?

MW: Well, it’s a lot easier in [laughingly] government because you have staff that can you help you more I had ver—I had very little staff when I was in, uh, that actually did the executive work for me when I was a principal I, you know, I had a s—I had a secretary that could hel [sic]—but when it came to what I learned how to do through my studies and, and working on the dissertation was to delegate, and so I learned how to delegate to the teachers to give them more, when I worked in central office I developed friends that I could delegate stuff to, and then when I became an elected official I learned to delegate to my staff to have them get a lot of the work done, and I think that—learning to delegate and the, the tricky thing about delegation is following up. You can tell ‘em to do something but if you never follow up and see if they’ve done it, then you never close that loop so you never know, and there were people who—tell people to run out and do this and—staff will never do it and they don’t all why [sic]—they don’t understand why, so you have to set timelines and know when you’re gonna say, you know, I’m— wanna see the progress, let me know how far you’ve got, have you run into any roadblocks, I need to undo that roadblock for you, so they can move forward.

CB: Yeah.

AR: So what about your achievements as—representative? What—do you have a defining moment there that you were a part of?

MW: Well, I’ve—I think some of the best legislation that I help—I’m very proud of helping MD Anderson to get four buildings—

AR: Hmm.

MW: —and I think that’s quite an accomplishment, and then I also felt really good about some legislation I had two different friends that needed help with, uh, one man was in the oil business and—for some reason, I don’t even understand what happened but there was a law that was passed that had something to do with red kerosene, and the red kerosene that he used, it wasn’t included for his company, the kind of kerosene, so I just needed to change the law a little bit to make sure that his business was also included, so that’s, that was just a real easy thing to do, and then I also had a man who lived in the district who had problems, he, he auctioned off cars, and for some reason, he—could not auction cars on Sundays. [laughs] So we had to—change the law to allow him to have the auctions on
Sundays, it was just a really minor kinda thing, and then, uh, the thing I really am—very proud about is that, um—you probably, y’all probably weren’t here when this happened a lot of women who go to—uh, nail salons, they got infected fingers or infected toenails because they weren’t cleaning the instruments, and the bacteria got and one woman would have a streak up her arm, um—so that was on television, it was an exposé, so—I got with the, um—the department that, uh, manages the, uh, hair salons, and visited with them and told them that you know we really need to make sure that all the instruments are sanitized, so I passed a law to help s—make sure that every instrument now is sanitized like in the dental office, you know, your dental mis—dentist will sanitize, we use the same process to sanitize the instruments for manicures now.

[2:26:06]

AR: Hmm. Surprised they didn’t have that, wow! [laughs loudly, MW laughs]

MW: Well, they used to just dip ’em in this little solution and—

AR: [quickly] Oh, I see.

MW: —you know that doesn’t necessarily and then sometimes the way that they have the foot, uh—they run water through a little foot sh—massager, and that doesn’t, they don’t necessar—you know the water gets caught in those tubes, and so that’s not always cleaned out, you have to run some more water and then run the sanitizer with it to really clean it out well. I never let ’em, I never put my foot in a tub [inaudible 3 words] [laughs]

AR: So what were your—biggest frustrations, then, when you were—in office?

MW: I think the biggest frustration and what I’m surprised about and you’ll probably hear reading about it now is, uh, how mean [laughs] some legislators can be! Downright mean.

AR: Hmm.

MW: Uh—

AR: Could you talk about some of that?

MW: —well, I think that, you know, like, if they don’t want—if they don’t want a law to pass, as they did in edu—in the last session that it just ended yesterday, um—they can, uh, you know they find teeny tiny little things that are mistakes, and they’ll bring that up, and that, but that’s the rules, you know, that’s the rules and you have to follow the rules, but, uh—if you know the rules, not only do they know how to stop something from occurring, they also know how to get around the rules so that they can get their bills passed, and then how they will hold something against you because you don’t agree with them, I’m real surprised that—some of them hold grudges in that way. But then on the whole there’s—and it’s nearly partisan, you know, it’s nearly partisan, but I’m also surprised at, um—how good some of the people are so I was surprised at how mean some people are and how good other people are, and I was really surprised that—how religious some of the legislators are, and how, you know, there are prayer sessions and Bible studies that we go to, so that was very enlightening to me, the other part that was enlightening to me was how wealthy the majority of the legislators are.

AR&CB: Hmm.

MW: Uh—and they got their wealth before they got there.

AR: Mm-hmm.

CB: Right.

MW: Mm-hmm. So that’s what I was real surprised about, I—many of them are millionaires, and one of the guys that came in with me, I—I didn—you know, they don’t act like it though, they don’t—act like I—you know, these—
guys that own—a thousand acres, two or three hundred thousand acres of ranches, just—downright nice! Downright nice, you know, just the nicest person and will do [resumes tapping table] anything for you and his wife would do anything for you, and then this other man that came in with me, who had developed this was right at the beginning of these—you know, these games that you play, uh—and he had developed a game, and—he owned a computer you know one of those little hand-held thing [sic]? He had developed one and sold it and become a millionaire.

AR: Wow. [laughs]

MW: I mean, you know? And he was so nice and I mean you know he’s just the nicest person I mean, and, you know, not—smart-aleck, we never knew that he was a millionaire, until you know you start visiting with ‘em and then you find out ‘Well what do you do?’ ‘[mock sheepishness] Well, I have this little company, you know...’ [laughs loudly] [nearly yelling] I just said—it’s just real funny how they, you know—how they c—and then some of the people, some of the attorneys, were in these big lawsuits and won big lawsuits and became millionaires a lot of the attorneys from the Valley, became very very wealthy, through lawsuits, you know, and they don’t act wealthy, you know, so, I mean, they’re just nice.

[2:30:09]

CB: How did you relate your role—as a representative of Houston and of, like, your district to—your role as a legislator for the whole state?

MW: Well, what I tried to do, I—what I see there not some is just to, to—and—is to understand the whole state, because I’ve lived my whole life in Houston and Waco and Austin, so, you know, those are towns, Waco’s a tiny town, so I understand—that size town, I understand Austin, I understand Houston, but—the majority of the legislators are from teeny tiny towns of two hundred—

AR: [genuine surprise] Wow.

MW: —five hundred, seven hundred, you know, that’s their town. But they represent massi—we all represent about 180,000 people, so their land mass that they represent is huge, so for them to campaign, they don’t just go—campaign in one city, they have to go from city to—you know from town to town to town, so just understanding what those guys have to stand for versus what I have to stand for and what the needs of my constituents are versus of their—const—it’s quite different, and that’s why sometimes there’s a—a roadblock there, and it’s because what they need in the country isn’t what we need in the city and what we need in the city isn’t what the country and that’s why, uh, technically, uh, cellphone, i—that’s why we had the biggest problem with trying to get—you cannot use your cellphone while you’re driving. We tried to pass that when I was there, one of my friends from San Antonio tried to pass that and I supported him on that, but the people in west Texas, they can drive a hundred miles and never see another person— [MW laughs]

AR: That’s true.

MW: —[shouts abruptly] ‘And so why can’t I have on my cellphone,’ you know, ‘Why can’t I be,’ and that’s, you know, so you understand that, after you listen to their si—so you have to explain that back to the people in Houston so you, there is a way to get around that to say that cities that have, uh, a population of more than a million, that this rule would apply, so that’s how you get around that, but that’s why we never could get the property taxes lower, uh—I’ve tried, I tried that every which way I knew how to do it, and I could not do it because the people out in the country, they get tax abatements through the cattle, you know, if you have, uh, if you have more than 50 acres, you can have 10 cows on it, and you pay very few taxes for it. So—but in Houston, you h—pay very high property taxes so I was trying to get them to lower it from ten percent to five percent, and the people out there were afraid that if I messed with that then they were gonna mess with their—

CB: Abatements.
MW: —their, their cattle—tax—abatement. So, you know, and I didn’t know all of that until you—you try to do something and listen to their side of the story so one of the things that I tried to do was to understand ranching, cause I’ve never—so this, my good friend, Warren Chisholm, who has, is from Pampa, Texas, has—he’s from the Chisholm family, the Chisholm Trail, he owns—hundreds of thousands of acres, his family does, and every year, he has a roundup, so I’d have said ‘Okay, I’m gonna go to— Chisholm’s roundup,’ and he actually has you round up his cattle—[interviewers laugh] and take ‘em from [hits table hard] one pasture to [hits table hard] another pasture, now—I’ve ridden horses, but I’ve never done a roundup, and I invited my sister and brother-in-law to come and they loved it, so we fly out there and here I am and I haven’t ridden a horse in so long, and it’s not just one hour, it’s like three hours, on a horse, and I’m not, you know, I’ve taken a ride through Hermann Park on a horse, for thirty minutes, and I am on this horse for three hours and I’m the last one there because everybody else can gallop their horses and I want mine to walk so I, so, anyway I do that and then the next day I cannot walk.

CB: Of course.

MW: But I, but here I am, I’m trying to prove to my colleagues who—are ranchers that, you know, I’m gonna be a big-city girl goin’ to the ranch and learn what you guys do, and so that’s, so that’s what I did, to try to do that, so. But it’s, it’s important to know, to understand the whole state, and then to come back to Houston and explain to your constituents the concerns, you’re not just, when you’re voting, yes, I’m voting the way you want, but why other people don’t vote to support what we want. You have to explain that to your people. So I think that’s a big communication that if you have never lived on a ranch or never lived out in the country then it’s hard to understand.

[2:35:11]

CB: Yeah. Yeah. Would you—take a minute to discuss the 2006 election?

MW: [brisk] Okay.

CB: Uh—were you satisfied with what your campaign had done to, to work towards the election, even though you were defeated?

MW: Well, I think we could done things differently, but what had happened, uh, and it was a perfect storm for me, what had happened was, we had passed tort reform when I was in the legislature, that year, the year before, uh, in that last legislative session, and, um, I voted for tort reform, I vote e—in fact, we—we had the bill, we were about ready to pass it and they found something wrong with our procedures, and my friend Joe Nixon was the person carrying the bill and he’d been on the floor already probably ten hours we were debating the bill for ten—they found something wrong with it, so it had to go back through the whole process again and then we debated again for another ten hours and you know, you sit there for twenty hours over one topic, and I voted for it, and of course the trial attorneys were mad as hell, and so—what the trial attorneys did was they—cause cutting into their money!

CB: [had not expressed surprise] Of course, yeah.

MW: The trial attorneys looked at the state of Texas and said ‘Who’s the most vulnerable? [resumes tapping table] What district can we change?’ And mine was the district, cause it’s an iffy—you know it’s—barely Republican, and it’s Republican because they counted the years when George Bush ran, and George Bush was, you know, the favorite son, so—they used those numbers saying it was 54% Republican, and that—because people voted for George Bush so thought it was a Republican district. Well, the independents voted for George and some of the independents voted for George but it’s—wasn’t that mu—it’s really about a third Republican, a third Democrat, and a third independent, is what I have come to find, you know, as I look at it, that’s how I see it. So—what happened is the tort um—uh, the trial attorneys, um, and I don’t even know his name, I should learn it, they set up a group called the First Tuesdays and they raised money for Ellen [Cohen], and they gave her big bucks, they gave her all the money she needed, and then, uh, Ellen being in charge of the Women’s Center also had learned to be in charge of some of the very wealthy women in Houston, and she worked with Maconda O’Connell who’s a multimillionaire and a philanthropist who gave her a million dollars right out.

AR: Wow.
MW: So she had tons of money so it’s hard to b—even though, I raised a lot of money she had even more money than I had, and it’s hard to beat that kind of money. And so I voted against tort reform, I mean I voted for tort reform—West U is full of lawyers, and [laughing] most of those are trial lawyers!

CB: Well, I have to believe that there’s—there’s trial lawyers out there that are Republicans also.

MW: There are. Very few. Very few that earn their living that way.

CB: It seem just so, you know, so—

MW: Well, okay—

CB: —directly quid pro quo—

MW: —okay, [slightly condescending] I haven’t finished—

CB: —for them to take revenge on you.

MW: —oh yeah! Well, because I’m the easy pickings. [resumes tapping table] My district is the one—everyone else is much more Republican, they’re like—57, 60% Republican. You can’t beat that.

CB: Yeah.

MW: You can’t beat that. But if you look at the district and if you study the numbers, you can beat in, in this district. So the other thing that I did was I also offended the gay and lesbian community because—[faintly sarcastic] our wonderful conservative friends in the House wanted to pass, um—the law that, [resumes tapping table] uh, to recognize marriage as only between a man and a woman. I got assigned to State Affairs, and State Affairs is the committee that hears that law, so it came before me and we were up— we met at 3:00, we didn’t finish until 6:00 in the morning.

AR: Wow.

MW: That’s how long we listened to testimony and what they were doing is the Democrats were bringin’ in, uh, all the kids from UT and telling ‘em what to say and they’d come in in little groups of five or six and they were students and they’d come in and testify and tell us to pass the law. Well—I decided, being on the committee, [resumes tapping table] that I should not decide how that law should be, I should let the whole House decide, that it’s not my decision to make alone, you know, that—we should pass it out of committee, so the whole House can make a decision on whether we should you know put it up to—[resumes tapping table] but it had to go to a vote of the people. So I decided ‘Okay, it’s not—I should not be the person to hold up the whole House from debating this bill,’ so I voted it out of committee, and then it went to the whole House. When it came up for [resumes tapping table] a vote at the whole House, I di—I abstained, I did not vote for the bill. [slightly exasperated] And they got mad at me. So the [starting to sound amused] gay and lesbian community got mad at me so I had the gay and lesbian community mad at me, which is in this district big time with Montrose, [louder] and the trial lawyers in West U were mad at me, so I have two major voting groups mad at me, and there was nothing I could do to change their mind.

[2:40:42]

MW: So wh—I didn’t even walk Montrose, I have walked Montrose before, you know, and they, they were sending out—really ugly stuff about me, really ugly stuff, you kn—and one of my friends—and I have hired gay people on my [laughing] staff when I was at City Hall two of my members were gay, two of my staff members were gay! And, and, when we had at a vote at the House there was one time when we voted on—unions, there was a, there was a, um, an [resumes tapping table] amendment to allow gay unions and I voted for that! And one of my—one of the g—my friends, uh, I was at his house for a party and he called me up afterwards he says, ‘Martha, you really did
treat us bad,’ I said, ‘I did what I thought I could do for you,’ he—I said, ‘Did you know that I voted for gay unions?’ He says, [mock brusque tone] ‘Well, nobody said anything about that for, for you, why didn’t you publicize that?’ I says, [almost incredulous] ‘If I publicize that then all the Republicans will vote against me,’ you know? [laughs]

AR: [laughing] Yeah, you were caught in a tight spot.

MW: So you’re caught between the devil and the deep blue sea there, you know, how can I send out a flyer tell— [bemused exasperation] and I don’t know who’s gay, you— I can’t send it out just to the gay community, to say I did this and they wouldn’t talk to me after the vote, so how do I get my message out to them? And so I had a very difficult time. And that’s what happened.

CB: Yeah.

AR: [pause] So—

MW: [bemused exasperation] I even went to their ball, the gay ball, you know, [laughing] I mean, you know, I did everything I knew how to do!

CB: Was there anything you felt like you had left—undone, as you, as you left the house?

MW: Well, I still think that we need to do property taxes, we need to lower the, the percentage that it can increase, I do. And I did a bill where you try to say, it depends the county can vote on it, it can only be by county, and that couldn’t pass, I says, uh, we can say that, uh, I mean, I developed a bill every which way to see if I could get it passed and I couldn’t get it passed. And they’ve done some things since then but they still haven’t lowered the property taxes.

CB: Hmm.

MW: [quickly] They haven’t lowered the percentage, technically you can—over a three-year period they can raise your taxes ten percent. Without any cause. So it can be [taps table urgently with each syllable] three percent every year, three, four percent every year. The value, that’s it, the value of your property.

CB: Yeah.

AR: So—let’s move to more—for the, for the last part, for more holistic questions about Houston?

MW: Mm-hmm.

AR: So how would you s—how would you think the, the, uh, the Chinese community has changed in Houston from when you were a little girl to—how it is now, like—

MW: Well, it’s drastically changed—

AR: —well, yes! [laughs]

MW: —it’s—quite changed, um—when I was a little girl there were prob—I knew probably every Chinese family in Houston cause there were so few, and I remember when we used to go downtown, if we saw another Chinese family we knew them. Or if I went anywhere, I knew the Chinese family. [hits table] Now—I don’t know, I mean, I, I pa—I have Chinese living in this building that I don’t know.

AR: Yeah.

MW: You know. Uh—the Asian community has exploded with the Vietnamese coming here so that’s a huge community, and it’s larger than the Chinese community now, the Indian community is now also very big in Houston and very, um—you know, everybody’s just doing wonderful things, I went to a Turkish—building that’s called the
Turquoise Center, they have built this gorgeous building, and center for their people, the Korean community has come along, they now have a community center, the Chinese has [sic] a Chinese community center, a second [AR laughs] Chinese community center, they have a Taiwanese community center, and—you know, the Chinese community is just divided up into a lot of little different groups, Taiwanese and mainland Chinese and then the American-born so it’s really—quite a diverse community within the Chinese community, then within the Asian community, uh, it’s also diverse with all the different ethnic groups, but within the Asian community as a whole, you also have those who came very long ago, and who grew up in America, then you have the wave that came in 60s [sic] and mainly that was, um, that was college students, people who came for graduate work and then they came and they stayed and they lived here, and now their children are here, and then comes [sic] the Vietnamese, and then come, uh, a whole different wave through refugee, refugee programs, which is quite different, and, um, they learn how to, um, to take advantage of the social networks, social services, but they also are very smart and—many of them have done very well, uh, I think that—[surprised] many times I see the Vietnamese as more ambitious than the Chinese, in that many of their kids become doctors, you know, and have—they have grown very qui—and they also take more risks than the Chinese took, you know they will open up huge stores and, and huge build—huge shopping centers, [amused] whereas my father built one little store and these—people come now and they’ll build a whole shopping center with a whole block so I mean, the whole mentality is completely different, they’ll go into debt, my father wouldn’t go into debt, so that’s quite different, the mentality is different, and I think what I’ve found about the Indian community what the Indian community has done quite well is they have found that middleman category, and many of them are, are what I call the middleman in business, you know, they—a lot of them, of the Indians are also, uh, in the retail, the grocery stores, the small grocery stores but a lot of them are also middlemen, in other words the, uh, they’ve learned how to become, uh, the middleman in the gas industry, where they buy them—the stuff from—the refineries and then sell it to the gasoline stations, and that usually was white man’s territory only so they, they’ve entered into that, um, uh, number of people have gone into banking, there’s a l—there’s probably what, fifteen Chinese Asian banks? I mean, you know. So—they’re very entrepreneurial, very, very different, many of them are professionals, uh, you see very few, uh, going into teaching, there are very few Asian teachers now, if they teach they’re usually teaching, uh, at the university level, now, so—I think the whole standard of living for Asians has risen but yet there’s still—many of the refugees that come, uh, still have a very difficult time, uh, many of them still do not speak English well, uh, many of them are still afraid of government so when they get robbed they don’t report what’s happened to them, uh—so—it’s just completely different from when I grew up.

[2:47:57]

AR: So with the large wave of Vietnamese refugees, how—as an educator how did you—how do you think that—how the education system should—accommodate—refugees who don’t have—who are dropped into a culture they’ve never—experienced before?

MW: Well, I think that that’s where you don’t so much cater to—I think that you have to Americanize them as quickly as you can, um—when I was in my fifth/sixth grade class over at Cunningham Elementary School, I had a Vietnamese girl in my class, and—she came over through Catholic Charities and Catholic she told me that every night, after dinner, someone from Catholic Charities came to their house, and taught them English.

AR: Wow.

MW: After dinner, so she was d—and I noticed that whenever I was teaching, she had a little, um—hand, uh—dictionary that would translate the—English into Vietnamese so she could understand the w—and when I saw her doing that, then I realized that—she needed the spelling of the word, so I started writing the words on the chalkboard so she could look ‘em up quicker, and so, you know, I would do that to help her, to learn the new words, and so she learned and so I saw her probably, what, oh, ten years later, I we were both doing a walk where there was, uh, I dunno whether it’s a hurricane something happened, or there was a disaster—must’ve been in Vietnam [pronounces with æ vowel, rather than appropriate v vowel], or, or in— the Philippines, I thought it was, but we were both doing a walk to help to raise money, for this disaster, and there she was, she was married to one of the kids that grew up in my neighborhood, I knew her—his mother and father, and he had gone to school with my son, and [bragging a little] she was now a medical doctor.

AR: Wow.
CB: Look at that.

MW: Can you believe it? And here was this little girl having a hard time with her dictionary, so. They, they have come a long long way, very quick, v—and what I say, and then when I hear Chinese who tell me they’re discriminated against and I—it’s probably cause I haven’t felt that much discrimination. And also because I was born here, and, um—probably assimilate easier than they do, and when they tell me they’re being discriminated aga—at work, I say, ‘You don’t understand what discrimination really is.’ I said, ‘Do you know that at one time, that at—Chinese could not even go to school. With a white. At one time, and do you know that as late as 1974, Chinese could not buy a home in River Oaks.’ Did you know that?

[2:50:43]

AR: [genuine surprise] No, I did not know that, that’s interesting. [laughs loudly]

MW: Well, what is interesting is—

CB: That’s a later date than I would’ve imagined.

MW: —I know, well, it was in their deed restrictions.

CB: [stunned] Really?

MW: Jewish—Jewish—

CB: That was in a legal document?

MW: Right, they had to change it, but it was late as 1974. Jewish could not buy there, Asians could not only white—Anglos could buy there. And then I—and then I represented them.

AR: Wow.

MW: [gleeful] In 19—93. [laughs]

CB: Wow.

MW: I mean, in 2003. So you can see that we’ve come a long way.

AR: Mm-hmm.

MW: And I tell that story to the Chinese so they understand, it has taken time for us to assimilate and to become a part of this country, and because you [resumes tapping table] are here, and because the country has been good to you, then you need to give back to the country. So that’s what I try to preach to everyone, you need to give back.

CB: Hmm. In what area do you think you personally have had the most impact on the lives of—Asian Americans?

MW: I really think, uh, serving on the City Council was probably the biggest impact. Um—first of all because it was the first, and I mean Houston was already a hundred years and had not had an Asian American on the council.

CB: Right.

MW: And I think because it was televised, and there was an Asian on television, that they had never seen before you know the only person they saw before was— [derisively] Connie Chung, you know, so—so that was something that they were very proud of. I did not realize—until fairly recently, what an impact that had on the Asian community, and I’ll tell you what happens, I went to a luncheon when the— ambassador from Singapore was in Houston, at the
Greater Houston Partnership and I was sitting a table and—um—uh—one of my, my friend who works at the bank had invited me and she’s an Asian, another Asian, no, her boss and me, there was a guy sitting across from me that looked Asian but he wasn’t—a hundred percent Asian, I think his father is Caucasian his mother is—Korean, and so, you know, I get up and I introduce myself to everyone like this so we’re talking and the guy says, ‘You know, Martha, I’ve always wanted to meet you,’ I says, ‘Well, it’s very nice to meet you too,’ and he says, uh, ‘You know, my mother loves you.’ I said, ‘Have I ever met your mother? Who, you know, tell me a little bit but’—he says, ‘When you were on council, and my mother who is Korean, whenever you would get up and talk she just loved it, she says she was so proud of you for being an Asian on council, and that you had this Southern accent and it was just so cute, with this Chinese with a Southern accent, but she was so proud of you, and my mother always talks about you.’ I do not know that woman, [AR laughs] I did not know this young man, he’s an attorney, and he’s a gay attorney, you know, and I invited to serve on a c—on the APAHA committee, with me, and he admitted at the committee that he was gay, didn’t matter to me, you know, uh—but, and so—when [resumes tapping table] he told me that, and—that his mother that I have never met—had never met him—at how proud she was—then that makes me understand what serving on council did to Asian Americans and how proud it made them. I’ll tell you—that I can go in—people will recognize me from being on council more than anything else and I know it’s because of television. I can go into Target, and I can check out at Target, and if it’s an African-American checking out, they’ll say, ‘Oh, you were on City Council, weren’t you?’ They keep up with who is on council. And they know who their—who is on council and i—I’m just amazed. I went to Costco, which is just across the street, and there’s a little Vietnamese guy checking you know when you go out and they check your—grocery, make sure that you have the ri—and he says, ‘You’re Martha Wong, aren’t you?’ I said, [AR laughs] cause you know your name is on the checko—I said, ‘Yes, I am,’ he says, ‘You were on council, weren’t you’ I said ‘Yes sir,’ and he says, so you know it’s, you know, just little things like that that now come back to me that make me realize that—my visibility on council, uh—gave a lot of people a lot of pride for being Asian American. And I didn’t know this, Hubert Vo who is a state representative, I interviewed him for a radio show that I did last year, and I said, ‘Hubert, how did you get interested in politics?’ He said, ‘Well, Martha, when you were on council, and you represented the Asian American community, [soft, with gravity] I decided that I wanted to do what you were doing.’ And I didn’t know Hubert Vo from the man in the moon, I didn’t even know him when he ran for state rep, you know, so I—that, that’s why I think that’s probably my biggest contribution, because it made Asians aware that they could run for public office and win, and it made them aware that Asians were at the table, um—and we have Asians running all over now, I mean, so I’m very proud of that, and—uh, I have a friend in Dallas, Angie Chen Button who’s run for state rep and I help her to, uh, to fashion her campaign and told her what to do, and she said she learned about me, she had invited me to Dallas a number of times to be the spokes—uh, speaker at their Chamber up there in Dallas, and I says, ‘Angie, how did you learn about me?’ She says ‘Well, you were always in the Chinese newspaper and I read the Chinese newspaper and you were there so I decided I wanted to meet you so I called you up!’ You know, and so—you know, it’s, it’s things like that, uh, that make me realize and when I was on council I mean, there was an Asian police officer—police chief in San Francisco, Fred Lau, and I’d—get the Asian weekly—news from San Francisco and I saw, ‘That’s the first Asian police chief I’ve seen,’ so, I called him up, you know, and I invited him to Houston, and I wanted him to visit with the Asian policemen cause the Asian policemen weren’t very aggressive about getting promotions, so I had him come and talk to them to say ‘You can become the chief,’ so now we have an assistant chief, you know, I—I put a lot of pressure on ‘em but they, we’ve done that, so, I think that, uh, visibility and the ability to maneuver in that way, and—that it gave, uh, the community, I think that’s probably my biggest contribution, is because, uh, the newspapers, the Asian newspapers covered it very well, I was in the Houston newspapers cause sometimes that’s a little controversial, [laughs] and I got in trouble, and you know, that hit the fan all the time so, uh—I think that that was probably the thing that has made the Asian community aware that they can be a part of the community.

[2:58:24]

AR: So what advice would you give—to a—uh, to, let’s say if I wanted to run for—I’m half Asian, so let’s say if I wanted to run for—run for public office, what—what advice would you give me?

MW: Well, I’d t—I’d tell you right now, if you were gonna run is, that you get involved in your neighborhood association, and you become the president or the treasurer of any organization you are a part of, the [hits table] president gets to call the shot and the [hits table] treasurers have the money, so those are the only two offices you wanna hold. And that you become active in that, I—while you’re in college I would tell you now to become active
in your college, uh—politics, I think y’all have a student body [sic]. I would run for student body officer, you know, and, uh, do that, and become the president of your student body, and, uh, if you, when you go out to work, you become the team leader, volunteer to be the team leader, when you finish your work, go and ask somebody else if they need help, and help them, what you want to do is you want to build a support system, a network, that will support when you when you run, okay? When I ran for Houston City Council, I had already been the PTA president at my children’s neighborhood school, okay? I had been the Girl Scout the—Camp Fire leader. I had been—so I had all the little Girl Scouts, the little—my husband had been with Indian Guides, we had a tight group of—friends, I’d been the team mother for the l—two little boys playing Little League, so the Little League people knew me, then I was the principal in that area, so everyb—all the children and the parents at that school knew me, so I had a network that already knew me, and trusted me, and had confidence in me so, what you have to do is to build a network that will have confidence in you and trust you, and you have to show that you’re a leader that cares about people, and if you care about people, I think you can probably see that very early on like when I was the president of Spooks that I wanted to include the African-Americans, you want to be inclusive, a lot of people like to make it so—uh, exclusive, and make them the most important person, but you’ll find out, the more that you include people, the bigger your network becomes, and then they will introduce you to somebody else, and then you’ve got another whole new network, so the thing to do is to, to be very inclusive, to become the leader in whatever organization you become an organization is [sic], to be a good leader, and—then when you get ready to run you’re [resumes tapping table] gonna have all these people to call upon to help you run.

[3:01:22]

CB: The, the thing that I find, you know, telling about this is advice is this is advice for—for anyone who—

MW: Absolutely.

CB: —would be going into politics, this is not—something that an Asian—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —American specifically is—is, gonna be taking into, um—

MW: But I would also tell you take advantage of being Asian because there’s many Asian organizations that are very supportive of Asian Americans running. And Asians have money. [AR laughs] They do have money. But they have to be your friend to give it to you, they don’t just give to anybody. Now—who’s, who is Asian in your family, your mother?

AR: Uh, yes, my mother is half Filipina and half Chinese, and—

MW: Okay.

AR: —my grandfather’s in the oil industry, so they—he w—he was working my—my, he was working this in Singapore, and my mother was working there also, and then he brought my dad over, and they met each other and that’s, and they came to Houston afterwards.

MW: Your grandfather brought your dad from the U.S. over to Singapore?

AR: They, they, the whole family would move—

MW: Oh.

AR: —they’ve lived, they’ve lived all over, so they were just happened to be in Singapore at the time. Then they had to call Al Gore to let my mom come to the States when she was pregnant with me, [AR and MW laugh] cause she didn’t have a visa, so!

MW: So she, she got in, and you were born here.
AR: She got in, they wanted me to be born here for—

MW: Yeah, yeah.

CB: Was he—what, Senator?

MW: [loudly] You’re an anchor baby!

AR: Yeah, he was Senator of Tennessee, yeah, of Tennessee, I’m from Tennessee.

MW: You’re an, you’re an anchor baby.

AR: Oh no ma’am, he, I—I guess maybe. [laughs]

MW: [almost growling] Yes, you are! [laughs loudly]

AR: But he—you know, since I’m from Tennessee Al Gore was our, was our senator, so that’s how we, we got that out. Yeah. [laughs slightly]

MW: Well, that’s very interesting, I have a an adopted grandson from the Philippines.

AR: Oh, okay.

MW: Uh-huh, and my daughter, uh, and her, and her husband is a dentist and they had gone to the Philippines to do, uh, dental work in the summer for, uh, the underprivileged and so when they were there, they saw how many orphans there were in the Philippines, some of the very poor people give up their children very young and so, they decided that they would [resumes tapping table] adopt a child and then they got she got pregnant so they couldn’t adopt the child so then they applied after the baby was born and so they got, uh, a young man from the Philippines and we’ve been back to the Philippines, we took him back when he was about—ten years old, he’s sixteen now, so. Have you ever been there?

AR: Uh, never, I was a baby, so. [laughs]

MW: Oh, it’s a beautiful country.

AR: There were—there were gr—my mom’s from a really really poor area, so it’s so whenever we g—if they ever go back, family members try to come—back with her, [laughs] so it’s—

MW: Of course. Of course. Mm-hmm.

CB: Hmm.

MW: Are you a member of the Filipino group, did they have here?

AR: They don’t—no, they don’t ha—it’s not very prominent at Rice, like there’s no Filipino student association at Rice, cause they’re—they’re like—

MW: Well, it’s huge at the University of Houston.

AR: —oh it is, there are about, there are I only know a few of us and most of us are part Chinese too, so it’s—I’m not affiliated with any of the Chinese organizations cause I don’t know—cause they’re very specific, at Rice, and so I don’t know which exactly which one to go to, so. [laughs]

MW: Just go to any of ‘em. Just go to any of ‘em. But some, the Taiwanese will exclude you.
AR: Oh, yeah. [laughs]

MW: [inaudible 3 words], the Taiwanese, they’re very prejudiced. [laughs] [seems to be an ironic formulation, as an exclusionary Taiwanese-specific group makes some intuitive sense, but did not sound ironic at the time]

AR: I was going to join the Hong Kong Student Association—

MW: Yeah, that’s the most open one, that’s the most—

AR: —my, my suitemate was president of that, so—

MW: Well, you should go there! That’s a good group.

AR: [pause] My sister was similar to you though, she’s—she’s not half Asian, she’s full, but she’s—she has a Southern accent and so they all, they think it’s super cute but she has a, a—Angliciz—her name’s br—has the last name Rogers also, so—people are—very surprised [laughing] when they, when they see her!

MW: One time when I was on City Council I, I was talkin’ to this man and he says, [mock ignorant voice] ‘Mrs. Wong. Did you marry an Asian?’ I said [condescending] ‘Yes sir, I did, that’s why my name is Wong.’ [AR laughing loudly] And he says, ‘Are you Asian too?’ And I said ‘Yes sir, I am,’ he says, [even more cartoonish than before] ‘Well, well you don’t sound like an Asian!’ I says, ‘Well, I am, sir. Would you like to make an appointment so you can see me?’, you know, because—just on the phone, you know, he just said ‘You musta married an Asian!’ I said ‘Yes sir, I did.’ And then I went to California, my daughter—married a guy from California, and her father-in-law was having a birthday party so we’re goin’ and so it was last-minute and I—didn’t ta—so sh—I says, ‘Well, lemme go buy a gift, let’s go to a—department store,’ so I go to this tie department, and—uh, [taps table urgently] there’s a Japanese fella working there. [louder, directed only at AR] Can you tell the difference in, in Asians?

[3:05:54]

AR: Oh, I, I, I work at a—I work at Berrippop, not this one but I mean—I play the game where I—if they have a credit card I—look at the last name and I’m—99% of the time I’m right, so. [laughs]

MW: [jokingly scolding] You can’t tell by looking?

AR: No, I can tell by looking, I verify by the last name.

CB: I was gonna say, that was the—that was the whole—

MW: You work at Berrippop?

AR: Not this one, but the one in the Rice Village.

MW: Oh I didn—where’s the one in the Rice Village?

AR: It’s, it’s in a really horrible location so no one actually knows where it is. It’s near Bistro des Amis? The...yeah.

MW: [quietly] Oh, yeah. That’s right.

CB: It’s a—pretty invisible spot, though—

AR: It’s a, it’s rel—it’s a bad looking sh—

MW: Are they busy or not? He oughta move it. I know the guy that owns it, that started it, David?
AR: Uh—this one is owned by, uh, Bill Parrish, so it’s not—

MW: Oh, that’s the—

AR: —yeah.

MW: —the franchise, he needs to move it. But I went to this tie counter and it was a Japanese fella working there, and I said, ‘Show me your most expensive tie,’ so—he looks at me, he says, ‘What’d you say?’ [AR laughs loudly] I said, ‘Show me your most expensive tie, I need to buy a tie for my—daughter’s father-in-law.’ He says, ‘What are you?’ And I says, [indignant] ‘What do you mean?’ I says, ‘You don’t mean what am I, you wanna know where I’m from.’ And he says ‘Yes,’ he says ‘You aren’t Chinese, are you?’ I says, ‘Yes I am,’ he says, ‘But you have that accent!’ I said ‘I know, I’m a Chinese [under breath] from Texas!’ [MW and AR laugh] But he didn’t, he didn’t e—he wanted to know what am I, he didn’t—with the Texas accent.

CB: Yeah.

MW: So it’s. And I don’t even know—and my, my younger sister has it but my older sister doesn’t.

AR: Oh, you see, it’s interesting, I don’t—I dunno why I never—I never had an accent but my sister has—a—

MW: Was she raised here?

AR: Uh—she—we were both raised in Tennessee, and—it was just—I don’t understand why—I don’t have one but she does, [laughs] my grandparents have it, I don’t—I really don’t know. [laughs]

CB: Strange thing to try to explain.

MW: It is.

CB: Yeah.

MW: It is.

CB: I think this takes us to the end of the—specific questions that we have laid out; um—if you have—

AR: —anything else you wanna add?

CB: Any other remarks that—we haven’t gotten down?

MW: Mmm—[amused] no, I think you kinda covered everything. [interviewers laugh]

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: Possibly. Yeah.

MW: Probably more than you needed.

AR: Oh, I don’t think so, they want to know—they’ll probably want to know more! [laughs]

CB: Yeah—hmm.

MW: [quickly] But tell me what kinda documents you would like.

AR: Um—
CB: We don’t really have a very specific—goal, I guess, um—

AR: Well we’re focused—the project’s focused on labor and capital, so if you have anything that has to do with—that, I dunno, that’s kind of private so [laughs loudly] I don’t know!

MW: Labor and capital?

CB: I mean, things to—things to do with how you, how you got certain jobs, what your responsibilities were, um—

AR: Or even parts, if you have anything from your, um, dad’s store, it would be—

CB: That would be especially interesting, honestly, I think.

AR: —they would be really interested in that.

MW: I’ll, I, I don’t think we have anything from the store that I can recall, I may have some pictures that I can give you that I can—do that, and then, um—probably I can give you documents from my campaigns cause I really didn’t save a lot you know before, I can give you my teacher’s certifications and copies of those things—

AR: That would be really helpful.

CB: Those would be very interesting, yeah.

MW: —and then I can probably give you copies of, uh—uh, my, when my mother came over some—folks, copies of, uh, the ship that she came in and stuff like that.

AR: Wow, that would be really—would be really nice too.

CB: That’d be excellent.

MW: And so those are the kinds of things I have, I have some newspaper articles I can give you copies of those of those things that happened, um—

CB: If you had some—proceedings or something like that from the, the—um—well, I mean, I guess from the, uh, the Asian American Coalition, anything like that—

MW: Uh—I’ll look and see if I have any documents from that, uh-huh—

CB: —that would be especially interesting because—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —you know, that—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —being the—sort of the, the immediate—

[3:10:02]

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —political springboard for you.
MW: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I’ll look and see. I may have given all those to—other people that—followed up after me, and then it’s dead right now, so now we have a Republican group and a Democrat group, we don’t do that as-

CB: Although, I suppose that’s a—you know, a testament to—

AR: How it’s—the community—

CB: —the ongoing—

AR: —has grown—

CB: —Americanization process—

MW: Oh, they’ve become more u—a little bit more sophisticated, uh-huh, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

AR: —yeah, that they can split into two, ah! That’s interesting. [laughs slightly]

MW: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mmkay.

CB: I guess you can—be in touch with us by—email, about, about those.

MW: Okay.

AR: And I, I could come pick it up actually, since I, I live right down the street. [laughs] So I could—

MW: Well, where do you live?

AR: I live at, um—I use to live at the—uh, luxury apartments over th—on—the—it—what’s it called—the Village at West University?

MW: Oh, uh-huh.

AR: I used to live right over there but I, I lived with my grandfather but then he moved back to Tennessee because his—his—he’s a contractor, so his—it ended with—his contract ended with the, um, Chevron, and so he moved back to Tennessee and so I, he didn’t wanna pa—he’s like, [mock scowling] ‘I’m not paying for that if you’re just gonna live there!’ And so I live ov—I live at [inaudible 1 word] Greenway Houston, right, right over there, on between Edloe and—it’s on Edloe but between West Alabama and Richmond—

MW: Oh, uh-huh, mm-hmm. Those are fairly new apartments, aren’t they, uh-huh.

AR: It’s—it’s okay. [laughs] I like, I miss my old apartment actually. [laughs]

MW: Well how come you aren’t living on campus?

AR: Uh—it’s ch—it ended up being cheaper because he’s o—well Chevron paid for my grandfather to live here for the like re—part of the relocation agreement, so he they paid him I mean he got to live there for free so it was just—‘Well, we’re not paying for room and board if you can—live here for free, so—

MW: That’s the Asian in your family! [MW and AR laugh]

AR: So that’s the, that’s what happened.

MW: And where do you live?

CB: Well, I mean, I, I live on campus, um—
MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —but I’m originally from Minnesota, actually, so I’m—rather far out of my—

MW: Oh, okay. Cold, cold country. [MW and AR laugh]

CB: —depth, you know—

MW: Oh, so why did you choose Rice?

CB: Well—because of the architecture program, actually—

MW: Okay.

CB: —um, I was—I was drawn to that.

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: Um—it’s always interesting to talk to people who—you know people in the South—

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —who tell me that, you know, they would, you know they would always refuse to even apply to anywhere where it was going to be cold, and—

MW: Yeah.

CB: —[louder] this always amazed me because I was thinking, you know that—you know, with the kinda caliber of schools that—you guys are aiming at at Rice, you’re, you’re—cutting out a huge swath of possible options, [MW and AR laugh] I mean, you’re forcing yourself to have to like get it right or not in a smaller pool.

MW: Well—well—

CB: I wasn’t about to—cut off Houston just because the humidity [AR laughs] is so catastrophic, you know?

MW: But see if you live here long enough you get used to it so it doesn’t bother you. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

CB: [not convinced] See, that’s the thing, right. Yeah.

MW: But there’s a lot of people that move down South after they finish their work because they don’t want to shovel that snow.

AR: I know a lot of people—move to Tennessee from Michigan for some reas—I don’t understand, Tennessee of all places they’ll move, [laughing] people from Michigan’ll move to my town.

CB: Arizona seems like it’s where people go from Minnesota.

MW: Uh—a lot of them go there, uh-huh, mm-hmm. They probably go there in the winter too, I—mm-hmm.

CB: Well, occasionally, yeah.

MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: I mean certainly after they retire—
MW: Mm-hmm.

CB: —the, the odds of that go up.

MW: Mm-hmm. I don’t think they retire here, I think they—either retire usually in Arizona, I had a friend whose parents—were, uh, from the North and they mo—uh, lived in Sun City, in Arizona, and then—a lot of the move to—

CB: Incredibly literal name.

AR: I was just gonna [laughs]

MW: Well they had a good life there, those, those oil companies took good care of the people and the automobile companies took good care of the people a long time ago, really, they had good retirements, they lived in a home, played golf every day, you know, almost—hermits. [laughs] So it’s not bad! Not bad. Mm-hmm. Okay.

AR: Thank you very much for having us [laughs]—

MW: Well, you’re welcome.

AR: —and for being interviewed.

MW: I hope it, uh, helps. Are y’all gonna—type it up or what do y’all do?

AR: Yes, we are.

CB: [beleaguered] Yes.

AR: We have until—next Saturday, so we’re, we were lucky that your interview was earlier in the week so we have long—we have a longer time to type up, to transcribe—

MW: Oh, okay.

AR: —but since there are two of us, it’ll take half the time.

CB: That’s true.

AR: I had to do, I—

[3:14:25]

[recording ends]