

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

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Interviewee: Donna Fujimoto Cole

Interviewers: Maddy Bullard and Saima Toppa

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Transcribed by: Maddy Bullard and Saima Toppa

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Background:

Donna Fujimoto Cole was born in Colorado in 1952. She moved to Texas during her early childhood, and grew up in the towns of McAllen and Mission, Texas. She had two older brothers, one of whom decided to move to Houston. Attracted to the opportunities to interact with more people, and feeling increasingly crowded in her family's house, Donna decided to follow him there. While in Houston, she attended a technical school that trained her in computer programming. Also while in Houston, she married John Cole and had a daughter, Tammy. The couple divorced after four years. After completing her studies at the technical school, she briefly held a job with J.K. Lasser, a large accounting firm. However the work did not inspire her, so she soon left. She found a more rewarding occupation when she pursued a job opening at the very successful chemical company, Gold King Chemicals. After a unique job interview, she found her niche selling product to clients and studying up on the chemical industry. In the late 70s, Mrs. Cole served as the Vice President of Sales. She and the other executives at Gold King decided to pursue a packaging warehouse enterprise, partnering with a Japanese company. However, the partner company left her name off of the stock distribution page of the agreement, because she was 'not only a woman, but a Japanese woman.'

After several clients encouraged Mrs. Cole to start her own packaging warehouse, she decided to strike out on her own and do just that. She opened the doors of Cole Chemical on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1980. Cole Chemical is now a very successful company, and Mrs. Cole is a top businessperson in her field. She is still the sole owner of the company that she founded at 26 years old. Today Mrs. Cole is active in outreach to the Houston and Asian American communities, a trait that her mother instilled in her while she was growing up in the Rio Grande Valley. She recently won the Joseph Jaworski Leadership Award for Distinguished Public Service, a testament to her generosity and altruism.

Setting:

Chronologically organized, this interview works through Mrs. Cole's childhood to her time living in Houston. The questions mostly focus on topics of labor and capital, with an added focus on descriptions of ethnicity and community within Houston. Mrs. Cole was a thoughtful interviewee, and had no trouble bringing to mind the life experiences that were most significant to her.

This interview was conducted in a meeting room at Mrs. Cole's office at Cole Chemical. The interview lasted about an hour and twenty minutes. Mrs. Cole was a self-reflective speaker, and gave us pertinent information regarding her experiences as a young Japanese-American businesswoman, and also regarding Japanese culture and traditions from the point of view of someone who identifies first as American, and second as Japanese.

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Interview Transcript:

Key:

MB	Maddy Bullard
ST	Saima Toppa
DC	Donna Cole
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

**MB:** Okay. So if you could um just start by describing a little bit about yourself, a little bit about your background?

**DC:** Sure. You want my name first?

**MB:** Oh yeah. Sorry, I forgot I was supposed to do the introduction.

**ST:** Okay, well, I'm Saima Toppa.

**MB:** And I'm Maddy Bullard.

**ST:** And we're from Rice University with the Houston Asian American Archive Project and we're here with Donna Cole. Um, would you like to start off with telling a bit about yourself?

**DC:** Sure. I'll be sixty next week. So, uh, I'm celebrating the beginning of my new life, if, uh, you know anything about the Japanese uh traditions and culture you'll know that, um, through the Asian zodiac, uh, there's twelve, um, months, right, by every animal, and I happen to be born in the year of the golden dragon, and this is the year of the dragon. So it's a very special time. So that means that after sixty years you have actually gone through every cycle five times. So that would represent that you've been through water, fire, metal, earth, etcetera. So, um, so they say that, once you've done that, now you get to start all over in life, and you wear red, because red is the color for children, it's a primary color. So I'll be wearing red next Saturday.

**ST:** [Laughs]

**DC:** Uh, a little bit about myself, um, I was born in Denver, Colorado. When I was six months old, my family moved from Denver as farmers to South Texas. So my dad, at the time, thought that it would be better to be in the South, because you could have two growing seasons instead of one in Colorado because of the weather. So obviously, you know, you'd have a fifty percent chance of, of making a little bit more money for your family, right. Well unbeknownst to him, Mother Nature wasn't so kind, and there was a drought when they got there. And, uh, so, uh, my family actually moved from one place to another, we were, um, living in a project. Now that I'm older my mother actually said we lived in some projects down in the Valley, because when they first

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moved down there, um, they weren't successful. They went bankrupt, as farmers, and so they had to find work elsewhere. And so we moved from one town to another, from Edinburg, Mission, McAllen...and then, uh, I grew up actually in Mission, Texas and McAllen, Texas. So, predominantly Hispanic and White, uh, very few Asians, um, and very, very few, um, African-Americans. So, moving from Mission to McAllen I actually graduated from high school at McAllen High, went to Pan American College at the time, now, today, it's a part of the University of Texas, at Pan Am...and, um, I had a—I had a great life. Um, I had two older brothers, so I was the baby and the only girl, what a great position to be in, right, so I can remember standing next to my father as he was driving the car and, you know, the boys always had to sit down in the back, so I think that's the special part about being a, a young little girl, you know...

**ST:** Mm-hmm..

**DC:** ...and your dad's relationship. Of course, there was a point in time when I got my first spanking, and I used to run to the door, right, um, at five, six o'clock in the evening, waiting for him to, to come home. Well, of course, after I got my spanking I never came to the door again.

**MB & ST:** [laughs]

**DC:** Can you imagine? So, I never realized how stubborn I was, back then. And, um...I wasn't a great student, I was an average student. So I break the stereotypical Asian, uh, thought of being good at math, and whatnot. So, uh, my strengths, which I look back now and I know what they are, uh, back then, I did set goals at an early age. I wanted to be a twirler, because we used to watch TV and, uh, at halftime in particular, because I would love to see the twirlers, where they were throwing up their baton, and turning around, and, catching it behind their back, you know. And I said, 'Okay, that's what I want to be. I want to be a twirler.' So some way, somehow, my parents found a lady to give me a lesson once a week. And this lady, uh, what I learned from her was if you practiced, and practiced, and you got your exercise down right, she would reward you. And so, she had this huge bag of candy, and you got to pick out your favorite kind of candy. So, um, you know, time goes by, and I'm, I still want to be a twirler, I get to junior high school, and what do you know, they tell me if you want to be a twirler in high school, because in junior high we didn't have twirlers, we had a football team but we had no twirlers, right, that, um, you would have to be in the band. So for me, that was a barrier, right, and a challenge, and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, okay, how badly to I want to be a twirler?'

Bad enough that I would use my brother's hand-me-down clarinet and play in the band. So...then it was a matter of, well, I could just get by, and be in last chair, just so I'd make sure that I didn't flunk out in band. And so my eighth grade year, I was informed that the high school band director actually tells you, uh, who can be a twirler, or not. He's got a vote. And so I thought, well, all right, this guy is important, so I can't be last chair.

**ST:** Mm-hmm.

**DC:** Because then they'll know that I was just there to be a twirler, right, and not there because I liked band. And of course, he was a band director and not a twirling director. So I worked hard to get to first chair, second row. Got to high school, they didn't need any twirlers. They had plenty. And, um, it wasn't until my, I guess, uh, starting my junior year in high school, that, you know, the girls were graduating. And so, I had the opportunity to try out and be a twirler. And I was. I made it. Great. My senior year, so I did my junior year, and my senior year, um, coming off the field, this must have been about the first game of the season, I stepped in a hole, and fractured my ankle, and that was the end of my, my season.

**ST:** Mm-hmm.

**DC:** So you know, if I look back now, and I think about setting goals at a young age, being determined, now that was a ten-year period, from the time I was six years old 'til I was actually a twirler, twirling at a football half game, right? Um, so that told me, today, a lot about myself back then, and that, you know, you have to stay positive, but you really do have to learn, in advance, and ask the right questions about, what is it going to take for me to get from here to here, and, I didn't know that, right. So as I was going along in life, I was finding out what I needed to do...

**ST:** Mm-hmm.

**DC:** ...to get to my goal, and that, um, sometimes it doesn't happen in your time frame, and, uh, you just have to stay positive. And look at the outcome. I had to keep my grades up to stay in band, and be a twirler, and then I had to do well in band, to be a twirler, so there was a lot of good things that came out of just that one goal, right? I was also in, um, Scouts. I loved Girl Scouts. I think everybody should go through Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts. Um, 'cause that's another opportunity to learn about those life skills. How to set goals...um, look at a badge, decide that's the badge you want, look at the criteria, plan, and get it done, right? Get your reward, your recognition at the end of the day. But more than that, it teaches you how to...play as a team member, and also it teaches you how to survive on your own. Um, so I just think that there's so many leadership skills involved in Scouting that people just miss out totally, uh, if they're not a part of Scouts. So, what I realized, is, when I got to high school, is I like people, I like to do things, so I was ADD, uh, electives. So, I was in the Future Homemakers of America, uh, I became president, I was in the Art Club, I was in the Latin Club, now, this is band and twirling, too, right? And then we also had a little town parade, so you know all the students getting together and making their class floats, of course you have to participate in that, and, um, I liked to roller skate. So by the time I got to high school too, we were living in the Rio Grande Valley.

**ST:** Mm-hmm.

**DC:** So Mexico was just ten miles away.

**ST:** Wow.

**DC:** So growing up then, you could go across the border on the weekends, and drink, dance, right, have a great time, and come back. So I'd like to say that I kinda grew up early. Instead of waiting till college to let your hair down, start drinking and all of that stuff, we did it actually in high school. So I'm really a lot older than I look. [laughs] But, uh, it was a great life. You know, the Rio Grande Valley was small, at the time, um, it was beautiful, lots of orchards, lots of palm trees. The beach was an hour's drive away, and South Padre Island is so beautiful. And then we had Mexico right across the border, so definitely, you know, a different culture right there. And, um...not the same today. It's changed a lot. But, um, that was a good time to grow up, you know. And I guess, as a child, I also realized that what other people did for a living didn't impress me, right.

So, I can talk to my girlfriends today and they'll say, Oh, well you know, so-and-so's parents, they own the shoe store, and they own this, or, you know, their parents work for this oil company. And I guess what I, I th- when I look back at my life, I think, jeez, 'that was never important to me, it was always the individuals, it was the people.'

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Were the people nice to me? You know, um...were they, uh, generous, and taking us places, and things like that? Not so much, uh, or inviting us over, to eat? Not so much what they did. So I, I realized, you know, as an adult, many people define themselves as what they do in their job, rather than themselves as a person, which is really a shame, but, um, that's the way life is. We, um, also, um, gave back to the community. My mom was really big about taking me around, at holiday time, taking canned goods to people...Even though, I realize now, we couldn't afford it ourselves, but, you know, that was just built in to my mom. And I do that today, you know? So that's a part of me. And, um, so I was also in Candy Strippers. So that's a hospital auxiliary, you know, where you, uh, volunteer to work the front desk at the hospital or you take up flowers to somebody or they get a card and you take it to them. Um, and then on I started working. Uh, my first job was actually my junior year in high school, and I worked at Texas Gold Stamps, and there's also a competing company called, um, S and H Green Stamps. So what you would do is you would go to the grocery store, you would buy your groceries, and for every, you know, ten dollars of groceries you'd get a stamp. And they had these books, and you would lick these stamps and put them in the book to fill the book. Once you filled the book, it took so many books to buy, um, glassware or a sweater, or a blanket. And, uh, I, I really loved that job. A friend of mine was nice enough, uh, a friend of the family, to say yeah, I could work there. So, um, I worked the counter. I also did some stocking. You know, you have to clean the shelves off and straighten up and display. But the really fun part was working upstairs. So upstairs you would hear the callout for a number. So it could be a six-digit, seven-digit number, right? And you'd have to memorize that number and then go run around the aisles and pick up these items, you know, a blanket here, some towels there, and then put them on this conveyor to ship it downstairs. Well, of course, once people looked at it sometimes they, they didn't like it, right? So the conveyor also went upwards instead of downwards. So you would have to, then, find it and put it back. But I remember going home at night, and, um, you know, having numbers written all over my hands. [laughs]

**ST and MB:** [laughs]

**DC:** Just because there were so many numbers, you couldn't remember them all. Um, my highest-paying job was actually on, um, summertime. So eventually, uh, my dad got out of farming, and worked at a bowling center. And, um, I was a pretty good bowler, so I was there a lot with my parents, and they bowled in leagues, and I was asked to teach some young students during the summertime. So I actually made two dollars an hour. And I thought that was a big deal! [laughs]...at the time. It was not enough hours, though. Right? So, um, then...Finished high school. I was an average student. And I started in the summertime going to college at Pan American, and, um, by the time the end of...let's see, so that was the summertime, then the first semester my dad had bought a bowling alley in Uvalde, Texas. My mom actually, uh, worked in a cafeteria. She started at the bottom, um, wiping floors, uh, cleaning dishes...and, uh, worked her way up to be the high school cafeteria manager. So by the time I got to high school, I have to tell you, I had many friends, especially guys, because they'd want to go through the line with me because they would get extra food on their trays, right? So, people may say that cafeteria food at their school was horrible, ours was fantastic. And they'd make these huge, huge, um, yeast rolls that were just so awesome. I can still smell them today. And, um, so my mom worked there, she also became a nutritionist while she worked there, because they were changing the, um, food, and what they were giving us in terms of so much starch, you know, getting away from that, a little more healthier in terms of meals.

So, um, at that point in time, my brother and his wife, from Hawaii, my brother was in the Navy, had come to live with us, so the house was getting a little tight for me. My dad had moved on to Uvalde to start this bowling alley, so I said to my mom, 'Look, okay, I'll go and help him and then you can come sooner.' So we did this in stages. My dad left, went to Uvalde, I went up there and we helped him. It was a bowling alley that was gutted, many, many years ago, so, um, it was fun just to see the inner workings of a bowling alley, because you never think about the lanes, um, because you just think that they lay them right on top of concrete, but there's, like,

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three feet to four feet down below...

**ST:** Wow.

**DC:** Right, because you think about the ball return, right? The ball has to come back, and I know today some ball returns you see the ball actually come back, but this was under, underneath. And, um, so that was kind of fun to see that, and build this bowling alley brand-new. Opening it up. And then my mom came. Um, and I stayed there for...Oh, not quite a year. I did go to South Texas Junior College there. I was very uncomfortable. Okay, so here I am, long hair down to my waist, I have a Mickey Mouse tee shirt on, I have moccasins, and bell bottom pants, and I walk into my first classroom and oh my gosh, these are all cowboys and cowgirls.

**ST:** [laughs]

**DC:** They're, they're in tight jeans with big belts and big buckles, and boots, and they have the pointy collared shirts, and, you know, the snap buttons, and I'm thinking, Oh, Donna, did you make a mistake? Right, so it was a psychology class. I wa—so that was kind of funny, because I, obviously, had different views than they had. [laughs]

**ST and MB:** [laughs]

**DC:** And, uh, so that was my first computer science class that I took there. And I really liked it. So, um, after that, I ended up leaving, uh, Uvalde...It was too small for me. And I told you that I realized later that I like people. So I moved to Houston. My brother, my oldest brother was living here, in Houston, and that was in 19, uh, 71. And I lived with him for a little while. And, um, went to, uh, let me see if I can think of the name of the place. Um...the International School...uh, it was a, um, technical school.

**ST:** Mm-hmm.

**DC:** So, they taught you how to, uh, program, uh, also to operate a computer system, and also help you find a job. So I finished there, in the meantime I found uh, a young man, who I dearly fell in love with. And because he could read one sentence, and expound on it, like he knew it like the back of the ha—his hand, and did research on it for years...it was just amazing. So he and I married, that was John Cole, and we stayed married for four years, had my daughter Tammy, and then divorced four years later. But, um, so when I started out in Houston, um, they found a job for me at J.K. Lasser. So J.K. Lasser was a large accounting firm.

**ST:** Can you spell J.K. Lasser?

**DC:** J as in, uh, Jennifer, K as in, uh, Katie, uh, L-A-S-S-E-R. Right, so they are an accounting firm, and, uh, we worked in the Lacks building, so there was a Lacks warehouse store, so there was a furniture store, and we were upstairs— [**MB:** Is that L-A-C-K-S?]

**DC:** Right.

**MB:** Okay.

**DC:** And, uh, so I was the computer operator and programmer. It was cold, those are those big computers with

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the raised floors and you freeze to death in there.

**ST:** [laughs]

**DC:** And, um, so we had key punch cards, and we had these huge reports that we would bring out, and when I would bring out a report to the key, key punch girls, they knew it was rework. Because there was something wrong. And, uh, so they weren't nice to me. And, you know, I was pretty much alone. So I lasted for three months, and I said okay, I can't do this. This, this is not the job for me. So I was pounding the pavement, looking for a job. And in high school, my dad said, take typing, take shorthand, so you'll be a good secretary. I also took business math. I did not take shorthand, but I did take typing. So it came in handy, I'll have to say.

Um, because at the time I said to him, 'Well, you know, I don't want to sit on my butt all day long, and be a secretary.' Well, you know, I'm not too far off, I sit in my office quite a bit! [laughs] But, uh, so I pounded the pavement looking for a job, and I found a job at Lone Star Gas Company. And, uh, it was a great company to work for. It was the, uh, gas purchases and sales department, and, uh, I was the receptionist, then I was the secretary to the, um, director, and I also did a little bit of lease agreements, some contracts, some letters of intent, and, um, really enjoyed that job. And then I had Tammy. So...

**ST:** What year was this all in?

**DC:** Mmm. All right, so now I need to back up. So I told you about J.K. Lasser. So I had...also I worked at a jewelry store.

**ST:** Mm-hmm.

**DC:** While I was going to school. So I worked at JC Penney's, in their fine jewelry department. Now, JC Penney's didn't own it. It was subcontracted, their jewelry department. Um, and I was the best salesman. Rings, watches, I could sell anybody. So that was fun. Uh, but then I needed a real job that had lots of benefits, because they had no benefits, you know, you just worked a few hours every night, and Saturdays and Sundays, so you really didn't have much of a life if you're in that kind of retail business. But it was nice to, to have that job to get by while I was going to school. Um, so this, so this was nineteen seventy...two, or three, when I started at Lone Star Gas Company. And then, um, I left to have my daughter, and, uh, when I wanted to come back to work there was not a position for me, so I needed to look for another job. And it just so happens that, uh, we moved back, actually to Uvalde for a little while, after Tammy was born.

**MB:** And when was she born?

**DC:** She was born in 1975. And the reason we went back to Uvalde is because my parents were there, my brother and his family were there, and I thought it'd be nice to raise a child in a small town. Well, as things turned out my dad and my husband didn't get along, so I had a choice to make. You know, was it my family, or my new family? So the decision was to move back to Houston. So that's when I was looking for another job, and, um, there was an ad in the paper for Gold King Chemicals, Gold King Refining, Gold Rush Drilling, and Hill Petroleum, and they were the fastest-growing company in Houston. They were owned by a couple of wildcatters, and they had less than one percent turnover per year. And it was the hardest job that I ever—I ever tried for. And, um, they made you take a lot of tests: aptitude tests, uh, Birkman personality tests, and it took a month. So finally, after interviewing with HR, you got to interview with the person you were going to work for.

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So I walk in this office, and, um, it's just the president and his assistant, and she's already gone. So it was just him. So he invited me into his office, so I'm sitting there at his desk, and the phone's ringing. So he's answering the phone, writing down, answering the phone, writing notes, calling people, and just as we get ready to talk, the phone rings again. So he's on the phone, so I just jump up, I go in the other room, and I start answering the phone, taking messages. [coughs] And I come back, we're getting ready to talk and it happens again. And as he's going to pick up the phone, I just put my hand on his hand and I said, 'Look, if you hire me, I know I can save five years off your life.'

**ST:** [laughs]

**DC:** So he hired me. And, um, it was a great opportunity to learn as much as I could about the chemical industry. He was willing to teach me what he knew, he was willing to refer me to people who knew more than he did, um, I also had lots of reference books. I had the Chemical Dictionary, I had a...Chemical Flowchart from raw materials, from oil and natural gas, I also had a Synonyms Book, I had the Producer's Guide, uh, who manufactures what, where, in the whole world, and I also had another book on, um...the Texas manufacturers. Um...so.

We sold products like methanol, ethylene glycol, glycol ethers, so these were products going into windshield washer, brake fluid, um, antifreeze coolants. And the company was set up to sell BTX, which is benzene, toluene, and xylene, because they were in the drilling, production and refinery business, right? So they made gasoline and fuels. But on those times when, um, the fuel business was down, right, and they had extra, uh, BTX aromatics, they let us sell it for them. So, we didn't always have product to sell. So we had to actually find other products, so that's why we sold glycol, methanol. And, um...I looked it up in the Chemical Dictionary, to see what it is, what the in-use applications are, what are the physical properties, how's it shipped, how's it packaged, um, and then I looked in the Texas Manufacturers book to see who was making those products. Who was making, um, strippers? Who was making windshield washer? And they would tell you the president's name, the owner, the VP, purchasing person, where they were located. So I would call, because it was the Texas—University of Texas Manufacturer's Directory. They actually did the research, made sure all the information was correct, right? So they used students. So I would call and say, hello, I'm Donna Cole, calling from the University of Texas Manufacturer's Book, right? Just want to verify this, this information is correct, da-da-da-da-da. Two weeks later, I would call back because the guy would say, yes, we still make these products, and yes, we still buy methanol, you know, da-da-da. So then when I would call back, I would introduce myself as Donna Cole with Gold King Chemicals, you know, I'd like to, uh, talk to you about selling you some methanol.

**ST:** [laughs]

**DC:** You know, he would forget that he told me all that information before. So I would always throw a, a price out there that would get their attention. And, um, then it was a matter of, jeez, I wasn't getting orders. How come? Because I knew that was a good price.

**MB:** So what kind of price was it?

**DC:** A lower price than what I thought he was paying.

**MB:** Okay.



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**DC:** Right? So...and you could hear papers rattling or a desk opening, so you knew he was checking to see, oh, is that a good price, or not? Right, so I knew they were taking my price and using it with their current suppliers to get the price down. Because they didn't know me from Adam, right? So, then I realized I had to ask more questions, like, do you have a contract for your methanol? ...And, if you don't, are you willing to buy from me, if I give you a competitive price? So then the answer would be yes, or no, I have a 'me too' clause, so a make competition clause. So, some contracts have a, a me too clause, and it's so if you give me a price, I have five days to go see if my current supplier would meet that price, or I could buy from you. So over time, you learn all these clauses in contracts. And, um, so that's how I was able to build a business. The other thing is, to, to tell them, look, you know, if you ever...um, need product, if your current supplier isn't able to supply you, please call me. So, what I realized was, I could turn on a dime. I could find product for people right away, especially when there was a shortage, and supply them with product. Um, and also, you know, people want to help other people, naturally. So if I were to call somebody and say, jeez, you know, I heard you were the methanol expert, what can you tell me about the industry and what's going on today? Oh my gosh, I got a huge education on methanol, right? And then you would do it to somebody else, just to verify if the information was pretty much the same, right? And somebody wasn't pulling your leg. So that's really how I got started into the chemical business, because I don't have a, a chemistry degree or a chemical background. So it was just an opportunity at the time, when there was a lot of, um, drinking going on, in companies, um, uh, with sales, a lot of golf games, uh, uh, a lot of people taking time away from the business to actually try to develop a relationship with somebody, right? But while they were doing that I used to say to my colleagues, they were out there golfing with one person for four hours and I could go see four people in those four hours. Um, so that's how I started in the chemical industry. Then, um, we wanted to start a warehousing packaging business. And there was already one with, um, Japanese company in terms of um, a terminal.

[phone starts ringing]

**DC:** Need me to stop? [laughs] And so, um, in this terminal, we went to those owners to [phone stops ringing] say, look, we're ready to also have a warehouse, blending, packaging business that would add nicely to this terminal that you have.

**MB:** So, did you have a partner at this point? You were saying 'we'.

**DC:** At this point, they actually, uh, let me buy stock in the company—

**MB:** In the company that you were working for?

**DC:** Right.

**MB:** Mm-hmm.

**DC:** Uh, because we started another division. So we had Gold King Chemicals and...um...we had...we didn't start that, I'm sorry, we didn't start that other company yet. So we had Gold King Chemicals, and, uh, they allowed me to buy stock. So I bought three percent in stock. And then, uh, we, we decided we wanted to be a minority-owned company, to take advantage of some of the opportunities to do business with large government contractors. So let's say Exxon, Shell, uh, Proctor and Gamble, they had large contracts, over five hundred thousand dollar contracts, with the federal government. So the government said, instead of the big guys getting bigger, how can we increase this economic, um, development pool? So what we'll do is, if you have a large contract with me, you should have a subcontracting plan to do business with small businesses, to do business

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with minorities, women, now Vietnam vets and veterans, so that it would be more inclusive, so we can see that economic cycle grow. So we said, well, let's take advantage of that. So then, uh, we had gone to this company to ask them about being a partner with us, to start this warehousing and packaging business. So instead of just being a company who's buying and selling product as a trading company, we would now hold inventory, drum it, blend it, package it, and ship it to customers. And, um, everything was fine, we got to the meeting, had the agreement, and the last page was the stock distribution page. And they left my name off of it. Okay. This is 1979, and I said 'Excuse me, but I don't see my name as an owner.' And they go, 'Oh, we're so sorry...but you're a woman, and what's even worse is you're a Japanese American woman, and we're a Japanese company, we cannot let you own stock.' So I said *really?* And I said well, okay, as far as I'm concerned this meeting's over. And I looked at my two partners and I said 'well, see ya.' And they got up and walked out with me as well. That was the end of the, the meeting, and going forward with the warehousing, distribution and... And for years I used to say, jeez, weren't they great, they supported me, and walked out with me. And then somebody said to me later, 'Well, you know, Donna, you were the one who was doing the buying, the selling of product, you were managing the transportation and the tank car fleet, you were doing the invoicing, you were doing collections, you were doing the financial statements...you know, so, without you, what were they gonna do?' Right, and I never thought about that. I never thought about, Huh! That was the reason why they walked out.

**MB:** What had been your official position with the company at that point?

**DC:** At that, at that time I was Vice President of Sales.

**MB:** And what was the name of the company that you were meeting with?

**DC:** Um...I don't think we should say.

**MB:** Okay. That's fine, that's fine.

**DC:** [laughs] Um, and yeah, you know, in hindsight, I probably could have sued him one, but in reality, would that have been good for my career? Because I was just starting out in the chemical industry, right? And, um, so I was 26 years old at that time. And we had customers, DuPont, Shell, um, Arco...uh, Carbide, all wanting us to have a warehouse packaging facility. Because they could count those minority dollars. So I was telling our customers, in six months we'll have a warehouse. Well, six months would go by and we wouldn't have a warehouse. So, it was [knocks on table four times] 'Donna? You know, where is this warehouse,' and I went, 'Well, my two partners are at an, at an age where they have kids, starting college or in college, and they have a house, and, you know, they don't have all that extra cash...and I don't.' You know, I just got married, I have a new baby, um, now four years old. And they said, 'Look, if you will start your own business, we will support you, and help you get started.' I went, wow. Hm. So I thought about it, and so I asked a mentor, and I said, 'Well, what do you think?'

He said, 'Well, you've been doing all the work, the only thing you haven't done is started a business. And that's really easy. All you have to do is, you know, contact the state, pick out a name, send your three hundred dollars in, you know, incorporate, and go down the road.' I said, oh! Hm, all right. So what about a name? So all night long I'm trying to think of all these names, right? And um, so my manager says, well, how about Fuji Chemical or Fujimoto Chemical, and I went...no. Because at that time, there was Japan-bashing going on, in the automotive industry. And I figured that, you know, that's the last thing that I would want to do is, is put out a name that people would be offended because it was a Japanese name. So, no. So I picked Cole, and another reason why I picked Cole is because, you know, I had Tammy, I was divorced now, and I didn't want to change

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my name back to my maiden name. I think, some people do that, and what happens is, children don't understand why parents are splitting up, much less why would they change their name, and not even have the same last name as them, right? So I think there's some dislocations there going on, and I didn't want to do that to her. So I, I kept the name Cole, she's got the name Cole, because I didn't want to have to have her explain to teachers or friends why her name and my name were different. And, um, it was a good move, for us. Started Cole Chemical, um, worked out of a friend's real estate office, so I naturally automa—automatically had a desk, a copy machine, a fax machine, and started buying and selling. So that was in January of 1980, so I actually opened my doors, uh, February first. So two months went by, did really well, buying and selling product, and all of the sudden, Shell, and some other companies that I was buying product from, said, okay, you've maxed out on your line of credit with us on your good name. We can't sell you any more product. I'm like, oh my gosh. Okay. What am I going to do? Well, if you want another load, a truckload of product, you gotta pay for the first one. So right away, I fell into a cash flow situation. Learned about cash flow really quick. Um, so sometimes sales aren't as great as you think, if you're not getting paid for it, right? So I realized that the sale's not done until you collect the money.

So I had to take on some working partners, now my mentor at the time, I would've naturally gone to him, right? Except when we were having this conversation about a warehouse and packaging, he said, oh, he didn't want to own inventory, or, he didn't want to warehouse, that was just too much work. So I never went to him. So I found two other people in the industry, two companies, who said, yeah! We'd be interested in investing in your company; we'll be partners. So there were four partners, and they didn't trust me, so they gave me a working partner. So here's this electrical engineer, answering the phones for Cole Chemical, out in a trailer, on the east side of town, in a warehouse. So my, my first employee was, uh, this electrical engineer, then we hired a receptionist, then we had to rent forklifts, then we had to hire some people to run the forklifts, and be operations out in the warehouse. So, um, they gave me a 125,000 dollar line of credit. It doesn't sound like a lot today. Back then, it was a lot of money, and I needed that for about four months. By the time the summer came, June, July, they needed that money, so they took that money and I didn't have a line anymore, and I operated the rest of the year. And towards the end of the year, I said, Ooh, I don't need them anymore. So I just needed them to get me over that one hump, right? So in November of the first year, 1980, I bought them all out. And I actually borrowed money from my mentor, to buy them out, because then he found out, he was like, extremely upset that I didn't come to him.

**ST:** [laughs]

**DC:** But that's okay. So over time, I would buy product from him, and pay him a little bit more. So let's say the price was, um, a dollar a pound. So I would pay him a dollar-five per pound, so that five cents extra he would apply towards that twelve thousand dollars that I borrowed from him to, to pay off my working partners, and my other partners.

So... ever since then, I've been alone. I, I don't have any other partners, so we've done a lot of things since 1980, um...so we had a 120,000 square foot warehouse facility, off the old Beaumont highway that we leased, so we were doing drumming and packaging, and this was, um, now 1984, 86, the bottom fell out of the oil industry. And uh we had a customer where we were... Aramco Productions, North American Central Warehouse location for the whole U.S., Canada, and Mexico so we had a lot of product coming through our facility. They had decided to buy their own place and they gave me a year's notice and they moved down. So you know, we had to shrink down. Gone from 120,000 square feet to 30,000 square feet. We also had other opportunities to start a plant in, uh, Corpus Christi for DuPont with some initial field and some barge material. You know, they actually helped us doing some bagging and dry product. I was trying to push it from a rail car inside the

building to a hopper into bags further than the blowers and pneumatic systems could do. Because I'm not an engineer, so they gave me some engineers and helped me out so it was a great time where people would actually just give us net 15-day returns to pay me. So, if I had to pay a supplier in 30 days, my customer would pay it in 15 so that was helping me with my cash flow. So there was a lot of things that we could do then. There was other vendors that would give you a discount if you paid early. So I worked both sides, which was great to grow. And then, uh...in 19...86, was my first time I went to Tuck School of Business. And they have a minority business program. It was great. I learned so much about business that I didn't know. And I went back six more times and also encouraged them to do something with our management team because I would go to Tuck, learn all of this new stuff that I should implement, come back home, and people thought I was crazy, in my business, and were like, 'What is she doing? Don't let her go again!' Right? You know you would set a new strategy, you would do a SWOT analysis and you would be changing all kinds of stuff. So, um, so I realized that and I was like, 'You know it would be great, Tuck, if you were to allow us to bring our management team so that I didn't have come up here, come back here and try and regurgitate what I learned from the last week and trying to get people on-board. If they could hear you, we could stay two or three days longer and have our own SWAT analysis as a whole team.

**MB:** Is that S-W-A-T?

**DC:** Yeah, S-W-O-T. So, that's reviewing your Strengths, your Weaknesses, your Opportunities, and Threats in business. And then, if you look around at your environment and you can visualize what's happening, then you can start to put a plan together, implement it, and by the time you needed it to be in place, it will be in place. Somewhere along the line...um...through my next uh ten years going to Tuck, those, six, six times, one of the professors asked if they could do a case study on Cole Chemical. So, there is a case study out there at Tuck on Cole Chemical. It was great because it gave me a really good chance to look at the company – who are we, what do we do, what's our culture, what's my sacred cows. I have a sacred cow and after all these years, it's the one thing I haven't given up on. It's when you call here, you will get a live person answering the phone. And I can tell you, that there's people here who don't like that. They would rather someone just go into voicemail and pick it up when they want to pick it up. Okay. Um, one of the other sacred cows when I started was that the corporations asked me to put um iron on the ground, have a commitment to grow, hire minorities and women, and give back to the community. And after about four years, I also realized that it was important for me to not only hire minorities and women, but to do business with minorities and women. And to help that economic cycle.

So, our first large order was actually a quirk of faith. I mean, we had a global contract we were quoting on in 1986 and at that point in time, it was for 14,000 drums of methanol to go to from the United States or anywhere in the world, to Cairo, Egypt to the Gulf of Suez. And at that point in time, um there was a shortage of methanol. So, even if you were a current supplier of the same product but that wasn't the issue of your plant being down, you were short because everybody was coming to buy from you. So, now that created a whole shortage in the U.S. product and globally. So, the only thing I did different was ask a question. And the question was – because everyone else said they couldn't do it, because it was in short supply, uh there was force majeure – uh situations where you have an Act of God, that under a contract but you can't supply product then I can't sell it to a new customer. I can only sell it to the customers I've been doing business with, that have a contract and if you have a contract then you do it on an allocation basis. So, one-twelfth of what you bought last year, you get this year, but every month. So that it's fair.

**ST:** What's that called? Forced?

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**DC:** Force majeure.

**ST:** Can you spell it?

**DC:** F-o-r-c-e- m-a-j-e-a-u-r-e. And so, um the only one question that I asked was, ‘Well, when do you need it?’ And they didn’t need it right then. They needed it almost sixty days later. So, that meant I had...uh...fifteen days max to bring in the product and drum it and get it to the dock and then another um four weeks to six weeks to get it over to Egypt. So, if you back out the time on that, you know. When did you actually need the product? It was not today. I had at least uh a ten-day swing. So, when I asked our supplier, you know, ‘Could they supply?’ And that was Borden Chemical at the time, they said, ‘Yeah, we don’t have product now. But in ten days, we’ll be able to produce enough that yeah, you can buy and bargain half the product.’ So, bargaining half the product...we brought in trucks. You know, we drummed it, we palletized it, we capped it, band it, sent it to the docks. Now it’s a flammable product so it’s not like most products where you can just package it and ship it. You had to wait until the ship came in. And you only had the last three days before the ship was gonna leave to load flammables. So, all of that was backed out. And so, I told my employees because this was a big job for us. The largest job we had ever had in the history of the company. Is that, ‘If you work hard and I’ll be right there with you, that we’ll pay bonuses.’ Because we have to finish by X date to make this ship. So, that was eleven days of work and it was almost um two full shifts. Every day, even Saturdays and Sundays. So, I had even hired um friends of employees, children of employees who were like in high school – seniors, you know they were old enough to work in a chemical facility to do packaging. And um, one man had...um...twins. A boy and a girl. So, they were both working. And I was out there working too. So, you know we’re suited out, we have gloves on, we’re filling drums, we’re pushing them down the line, we’re putting them on pallets, cutting out plywood, putting on the top, banding the product, loading it on trucks. And uh, so you can imagine, even labeling. So, you would see people peel off the back of the label and just throw it on the floor instead of having something on them and just putting them on the apron and then walking over later and putting it in the trash. Because it just meant, clean-up for somebody else, right? Or you can slip and fall on that slip of paper. Um, and so, the girl—I actually paid her a \$500 bonus and I gave her brother a \$250. So, afterwards, he was really upset with me. ‘Mrs. Cole, why did my sister get more money than I did?’ I said, ‘Cause I told you when you started that I would be there working with you guys and watching you. And we would pay bonus based on performance.’ And I said, ‘She worked harder than you did.’ You know, I saw him some twenty years later, and he was so grateful for that. That you know I actually told him why, that there was a difference in how much harder he’s working today than he had ever worked because of that.

So, when I talked about this minority and women program and how it’s part of an economic cycle, that was my first time I realized what the economic cycle was. Because remember, I started out as 27. This is 1986. I wasn’t that old. 31. And I realized that this one job—we bought paper cups, we bought napkins, we bought paper towels, we bought Cokes. So that was part of that economic cycle, right. Not only that, the vendors that we were doing business with on the commercial side. The trucking company? There was 150 truckloads of product. You know, in and out. So, that helped them and their drivers. The other thing was my employees got to make extra money and bonuses so one of them was getting married. He paid for his wedding. Another man at the age of 45 didn’t own a house. That money we gave him allowed him to put a down-payment to own, to own his first home. It was a very small home. But you know, that, that’s what economic development is all about. And so, that was my first real revelation of what it could do.

**ST:** Can you talk about what sorts of community outreach your business does? And in particular, if it outreaches to the Asian American community?

**DC:** That’s very broad. So, what is my outreach in the community? So, um, obviously, since I’m in the chemical industry, we do some things for teachers. Uh to get them out to the chemical plants.

So, they'll learn what is happening actually in the real world in terms of making chemicals and then how they're used. So that when they go back into the classroom, they can be better teachers. Uh and they can also tell their students you know if you decide to um pick a career in this area, here are the job opportunities for you. So we do that. Uh so we support the chemical industry also through uh political action committees. Doing some lobbying. We also support...um...children and youth so we started a 'Pipeline for the Sciences' in underprivileged areas. 'Cause usually they take the high school – I mean, not the high school, but the junior high coach and they want him to teach chemistry. And so, it's really hard for kids to get a grasp of it. So, what we do is on a Saturday, they uh do a Round Robin, eight hands-on experiments for fourth through eighth grade. Which is fabulous. And then we take high school chemistry students to actually uh help the students and then we're just in the background to assist. We have a little chemical show so you can see what happens with nitrogen with a banana. And once you put nitrogen on a banana, then it's hard. And then when you can throw it, and it cracks and shatters into all kinds of pieces. We also let them um watch a video on the chemical industry because a lot of people say, 'Oh, we don't like chemicals.' But what they don't realize is water is a chemical. So, as basic as that, and then we bring it forward to medicine, hair care, all kinds of things. How you use chemical in your everyday life, even building a car and the fuel, so that people are more aware of what they're about. So, also minorities and women in business. So, I mentor a lot of people in business. And um, with the community, so I'm on the Women's Home Board. They actually...um...bring in women who've lost everything at this point. Whether it's an addiction to drugs or uh they're battered or whatever it might be. And they have an eighty-six percentile success rate if the woman stays there for at least six months. So, it's only for an individual who's had some issues so they get them off the drugs. They give them health care—mental health care, they also teach 'em um skills: typing, computers. They have a retail shop so they can actually learn how to sell, set up the display, do the inventory, and so I just think it's a really well-run program. They also have built a uh apartment complex to get these women going. So some of these women are nurses and once you're a nurse and um you've started taking drugs and they find that you've done this, um you can never go back and be a nurse again. And many of them do it because they want more money for their families. They want their kids involved in this uh organization or that organization. This sport. Playing piano. And before you know it, they're working two shifts.

You know, they've worked two shifts. They have to take uppers and then they have to take downers. And it just becomes a vicious cycle until they lose it all. So, um, now they have a place to stay uh at uh their home. At the women's home that they've built. And they give them a job. Because what happens...is once you've, you're at a point where you lose everything and you know, just getting started...it's hard to have um enough money to survive for food and you have a car, insurance for that car, the fuel, a place to live. You know, so things start billing up. So, even if they have a minimum wage, they can't make it alone. They still need help. So, that's probably one of the areas I think there could be a lot more capacity built for them. I do a lot of speaking.

Yesterday, I just spoke to an eighth grade graduation class. It was really fun. Um, in the Asian community, so, I'm a member of the Japanese American Citizens League and also um...the...I think it's the...the Asian Pacific Heritage Society. I donate to all kinds of Chinese community center events to, um to um Chinese Citizens League, the Miss Chinatown Pageant, Dance for Asia. Also I'm involved in the Museum for Fine Arts Houston. They just built an Asian Gallery so they have a Japan gallery that we've donated there. There's the Asia House. I don't know if you've been there yet, but it's fabulous. And um so, Asia House has just been built and it's down in Museum District and it's for all the Asian communities in terms of education, culture, business, politics for that U.S.-Asia relations so people who don't know enough about Asia, they can go there and learn a lot about Asia. So, they have lectures and they have an auditorium, they also have an exhibit from the Rockefeller Collection. Um, I'm helping with the Veterans. The Japanese American veterans in World War II. Many people don't know there were Japanese American veterans in the U.S. Army and my dad happened to be in the 442. So, um it was tough growing up in a small town. Got teased a lot for being uh Japanese. And I always hated it when

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December 7<sup>th</sup> rolled around. 'Cause the bombing of Pearl Harbor. And kids can be mean to other kids...in a way...I just didn't want to go to school that day. But you go to school and um I always thought, geez, when the time comes for Show and Tell, I used to take my dad's 442 Bill to show that my dad was in the U.S. Army and you know um. Now today, it gives me great pleasure that I worked on getting him the Congressional Gold Medal. So that's the highest ranking Congressional Medal you can get in the United States. And they were just recognized this last November in Washington D.C. So, the next piece is that there's going to be a traveling exhibit through the United States and we're gonna have an interactive iPad/iPhone exhibit for them. So people know about the Japanese American plight in the United States. The discrimination that they fought but at the same time the loyalty and the courage they showed. And uh what citizenship meant to them.

**ST:** Can we speak more about uh like your ancestral heritage and perhaps like the [DC: Sure.] the story of your family's migration from Japan?

**DC:** Okay, so uh my grandparents came to the United States. So, my grandfather on my dad's side actually was a stowaway on a ship. And so, he was 10 to 12 years old is all we can figure. And somebody said to him—he said, 'Well, I want to go to the United States because you know America—that's the place you can go and things will be better than Japan.' And you know, at that time, it was really hard for a lot of countries in terms of depression and people starving. So, one of his uncles said, 'Well, if you want to go, go!' So, here, this kid runs and gets on a boat. And he's uh, close to the United States. And it was almost in Mexican territory. Um, and they found him. So, he was running for his life, they shot at him, he jumped ship and swam ashore. And that happened to be uh Baja California, so down at the tip of Mexico. A family took him in and he was actually a house-boy and he did chores around their ranch. When he got to be fifteen or sixteen, the family thought he, he was such a good worker and a nice guy...and he learned Spanish...um, that maybe he should marry one of their daughters.

Well, he decided that he was too young to be married. So, he left. And he came to the United States, across the border, into California. And then wrote for my grandmother to come. So, she came. They had my dad. And then, they moved to Colorado. So, that's my dad side. On my mom's side, um, my mom's father is an only son. And in Japan, the only – the oldest son gets the burden of the family and the parents. But him being an only son, they didn't want him to go into the military because he would've been – uh they were landowners—he would've uh been in the Kamikaze pilot land area. Flying. So, as you know, kamikaze pilots, they teach you how to fly it but they don't teach you how to land it. They only teach you how to crash it. And they just couldn't see that for their son. And so, they uh they said that they wanted him to leave. Well, he married my grandmother and they had a daughter. So he said, 'Okay,' he would leave. And this daughter was actually ten years old when he decided to come to the United States. So, my grandfather actually came earlier through Hawaii, working on the plantations. And then uh came through California to Nebraska and worked on the railroads. And then, he went back to get his wife and his daughter. And she was ten. And imagine that they would give you a choice to stay in Japan or come with them to United States. And at the time, they said, 'If you come with us, you have to work hard...you know it's not gonna be easy...or you can stay here with Grandmother.' And so, she stayed with Grandmother. They came to um Colorado and they had the rest of their family. So they had my mother and three boys. And my family...it's very interesting in Japan...so when we do the family tree, it looks like cousins are marrying into cousins. But they really weren't.

So if you would go back to my great grandparents on my dad's side, they actually were divorced. So—but they had one child and then when they had divorced, they married two different people. And then their children. So, nine to eleven kids. So, they always had a lot of kids so you can work that farm or whatever you were doing. Business. And then those children met each other and married. So, they were- they weren't really from the same family. So it just looked that way on paper. In Japan, if you don't have a son to carry on your name, you can ask someone who has more boys and ask for that son to become your family. So all ties are broken off. So if the son says yes and the parents say yes, then that son will come to my family and take on the Cole name. So that

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happened in my mother's family. So, when I went to Japan a couple years ago, I tried to look up some family members. And this lady was not very nice to me. She said, 'Well, you know, you're not really part of our family. He was but now he's, you know...my husband's not and he's dead now. So I really don't have any connection with your family.' Okay, fine. [laughs] So, uh she put me in touch with another aunt. 'But this other aunt, she's your real aunt. And she would like to see you.' So, I thought that was kind of interesting. So, in terms of being in Colorado, Governor Carr was the governor at the time after World War II and the internment of the Japanese. So, he actually invited Japanese to come to Colorado instead of going into the camps. Because he wanted his uh...he wanted people there...he wanted people to farm the land and to grow the state, so there's a huge population of Japanese in the Denver area. Now, mind you, when he was up for re-election, he did not get re-elected. It happens to so many people. That you do what you think is morally correct and the right thing to do, but other people have different ideas because of discrimination.

**ST:** So, uh, can you say this again? He offered Japanese Americans to go to Colorado instead of being interned  
**[DC:** Interned. Mm-hm.] ...and that was a possibility for your family?

**DC:** Yes, yeah, so there was a lot of people who moved from California to Colorado.

**ST:** Wow. Is it—was your family interned?

**DC:** No...my family...thank Goodness no, because we were in Colorado. [**ST:** Okay.] But even, being in Colorado, as a Japanese American, you couldn't go more than two miles from your house without FBI approval. Okay. So, you never got to know your neighbors. And if you needed bread or sugar or things like that, you know, you would ask them to buy for you. And there was a lot of bartering going on in those days. Right. So, my dad's family had cattle and grew crops. And my mom's uh family did not have animals, livestock. So, um, you know, you would swap products with each other to be able to provide.

**ST:** What approximate time period did your grandparents migrate?...What, what range?

**DC:** 19...I think it was 1902 [**ST:** Okay.] is uh when my mother's side came through. And of course, my other grandfather he was here much earlier than that.

**ST:** Wow.

**DC:** You know, he, he probably came in the late uh 1800s.

**ST:** Wow.

**MB:** So, um did you speak Japanese at home or did you learn Japanese when you were a kid?

**DC:** I wish. Okay, so, yes, they sent me to Japanese school on Saturday. But that was the last place I wanted to be. So, but I did like the arts and crafts and the dancing and the food. But um, so I wasn't that great of a student. But if you can imagine my grandparents, when they came here, um they were very young so that – so the language has changed a lot. It's evolved. So, if someone were to hear some of the words I speak...so I tell people that I'm from the Meiji period as a three-year old. I can't put sentences together yet. But I can, I can tell you what an object is in Japanese. Um and I'm sure with my Texas accent, it doesn't sound right anyway. [laughs] But um, they spoke Japanese...my grandparents. And then, of course, my grandfather could speak Spanish too. But their English wasn't very good; they mostly spoke Japanese. So, my parents can speak Japanese and can still write in Japanese, but um when the war broke out and Pearl Harbor happened and the internment happened...so you imagine that um you can't speak Japanese in public because you would be sent to an internment camp, right. Or at least investigated. So, when that happened, they took everything and burned it. So, any pictures of Japan, any writing, any pictures of the Emperor or the Empress, um books, all of that was uh



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burned. I have one thing from my grandmother and that's a instrument. And she hid that under her bed—under the loose floor.

So, when the soldiers and the FBI came to through for many of these Japanese they—some of them saved their family uh sabers—the Samurai swords. But they were all confiscated and never returned. So, oftentimes, I go to someone's house and I see these Samurai swords and I'm always wondering, 'Ah, is that mine? Should that be at my house? And not theirs?' But um, they, they uh didn't speak Japanese to us. It was important for them to have us uh be totally entrenched in the American lifestyle and not to speak Japanese. So, um unfortunately for many of the Japanese, they don't speak um their mother tongue.

**ST:** For self-preservation.

**DC:** Yeah.

**MB:** Um, how do you self-identify culturally? Like as Japanese American? Or just as American?

**DC:** All right, first, I, I'd have to say American, then Japanese. Okay, so woman, [**MC and ST:** [laughs]] American, Japanese-American. Yeah, and Asian. So, yeah all of those in there. And then minority, just because uh from a female standpoint and from my ethnicity standpoint also.

**MB:** Um, do you feel like your status as a minority businesswoman has affected your trajectory or path in the business world?

**DC:** Hmm, double-edged sword. Yes, you know we have um...started our business because of it, probably still in business because of it, um and it really is a foot in the door. So, to open that door wide open, you really have to show that you're honest, hard-working and that you're gonna deliver and be responsible. So I feel like that we've done that. Is there a lot more business that we can have access to that I think some people pigeon-hole us in? Yeah, I think so. But that's just – that's the life I've chosen.

**MB:** Um, I have one question. Um if I'm not mistaken, you recently received the Joseph Jaworski Leadership Award for Distinguished Public Service. Um, could you describe a little bit about that award and what it means to you?

**DC:** Hmm, that is a very significant award. Because in thirty years, I'm the first Asian, and the first female Asian to receive this award. Now in terms of how many women have gotten it in the past, it's very small. Um there's been one Hispanic woman who's received it in the past. But usually it's been a white couple so to say the Joseph Jaworski award is all about community, about leadership, and um not just what I do in my company, but what I do personally and with others, I think it just speaks volumes, for this award. I was very touched. So, at first when they announced it, I had that Asian instinct to say, 'No, there's someone else out there who's better or is – or should deserve to get it. Not me.' But then there was this little voice in the back of my head...that two months earlier, someone had sent me an article about why Asians don't uh excel as fast or as well as they should.

**ST:** In terms of 'glass ceiling?'

**DC:** In terms of the glass ceiling, yes. It was because they're modest and you know...they're not out there showing themselves. And they would like to see other people be raised up and get that award rather than themselves because that was the culture that we were brought up in is of the culture of respect, you don't speak out. You're as quiet as a mouse. You're seen but not heard. And you don't brag. So, it's really hard, I think, for Asians to recognize that and to change. I think they do try to change but sometimes it comes off as not real and uh so I think we just have to work on that a lot more.

**MB:** Do you think that those instincts have um hindered you in your business ventures?

**DC:** You know, I'd have to say yes. But you can't redo history. So all I can do now is I can recognize when I should've spoken up and I didn't. Today, I'm a much different person. You know, I think it's also a matter of maturing and your comfort level with yourself and who you are. Um to be able to say, 'Oh, geez, is that really right? Was that the right thing to do? Or, is there a better way? Better words? Better thoughts we could use? And um how can we change?'

**ST:** Compared to when you were a kid, are you um a lot more comfortable with identifying yourself...with uh, your Japanese heritage now? Or as an Asian American?

**DC:** Yeah, absolutely. Oh, I used to be ashamed of who I was. Or what I looked like. Not who I was, but what I looked like. So, now yes, I've embraced it. It took me awhile and it took me going to an Asian Women's Pacific Leadership Institute. I never thought I needed it and then Judge Diana Chow said, 'You need this class!' So, I said, 'Okay.' So, it was a full year of four weeks of training, right. And in that training, they actually take you all the way back to your first memories of those tough times and trying to help you get through them and what do you need to address, and what do you need to go back and address to somebody else? Right of how you felt? How you were treated? Etcetera. In your family. And then, moving forward. Um so, it's about now instead of assimilating, it's how do I integrate myself into society, into business, in, into work, and at home, and yet still maintain who I am at the core so that I don't have to leave anything at the door. That I could bring my whole self into this room and have a great conversation with you and not feel bad about any part of me.

**MB:** Um, I actually just have one last question. Um I was wondering, um what areas of Houston have you lived in, since you moved here, and could you describe a little bit about maybe the differences in those areas that you've lived in?

**DC:** Sure, so when I first moved down here, I lived off of Rittenhouse, on 45. Uh, predominantly low to middle income area. And um I lived there for probably a year with my brother. And then I got married and we moved over to Gessner and I-10. Which was all brand new. Uh new apartments. It was a Harold-Farb Apartment. So it was an upscale area for me. Then, I realized my husband had uh debt from his previous wife that we couldn't pay all the bills. So, you paid someone this month, then doubled up on someone the next month, and I realized that between what he made and what I made, there was no way we could make these monthly payments where we were and stay at these new Harold-Farb Apartments.

**MB:** Could you spell that last name?

**DC:** Farb. F-A-R-B.

**MB:** Okay, thank you.

**DC:** And we moved to right off of downtown. At Memorial and um what was that—I guess it's now that vibrant area of town. Oh what is that?

**ST:** Montrose?

**DC:** No, not Montrose. It's a little bit—Heights. [**ST:** Heights!] Right in that area, so, we were off of um Memorial and Woodway at Washington. So it was a \$80/month house. And so, I packed everything, put into boxes. And who knew they had termites? Right, so I said, 'For six months, we're gonna live here so we can save money and pay these bills off and then we'll move.' Well you know, he—what I didn't realize was that he was a big spender. So, he was buying custom knives and pipes and motorcycles and a, and a dog. He paid \$400 for a Saint Bernard. Who in their right mind has a Saint Bernard in Houston, Texas? Right? So, the Saint

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Bernard, we had him tied up. Outside of the garage. So we just went four blocks down the street to this little bird stall, grocery store and came back. And the dog was gone. So we decided to go around looking, for this dog. So, one block beside me, it was row houses. So I was so surprised. So you know a lot of African Americans there. And you could see inside the house. They had no air conditioning. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, we were living right on the edge.' And it took me back to South Texas days. You know, going to where my mother had me deliver canned goods, where we were going around donating money and canned goods to people. And I just thought, 'Wow, I had no idea that was the area of town we were living in.' So we ended up about twelve months later moving from there. They had termites. So, they were eating through my boxes and eating my books. You would open – literally open up a book and the pages would just fall out in dust. It was unbelievable. And we ended up moving to the Bellaire. Because he grew up in Bellaire. And many people don't know, but that Bellaire area, when it was just being built, they had a lot of coarse sand...so quicksand. And then they just kept putting dirt on there. So, that's why that whole area is kind of funky. Uh anyway, we moved to the Bellaire area. And that was a high income area. Kind of nice. Little restaurants – A&W root beers, some pizza joints and some hamburger joints. So, that was fun. I rode a motorcycle at the time. So I'm in the Women's Museum in Dallas. There's a row of us and there's the Houston skyline above us and we're all in BMW motorcycles. All women. But um where else I did live after that? Oh, well then, when you get married, right, um you need a house.

So, we moved to Katy. Because Katy, you could buy a big house at a decent price, with lower taxes, good school districts for babies, we were planning to have a family. So we moved out to Katy so that was really different. Moving into a new house with no grass. You know, no trees. And then um, so after that, in 2, 2000, I moved back here in Houston. So right off of Eldridge and Memorial. That was a very nice neighborhood. Gated community now. Very different.

**MB:** So, is the neighborhood you live in now...what's the diversity like?

**DC:** Oooh, it's very diverse. You know um, so, our neighborhood, we have African Americans, we have Asians. We have people from Great Britain, people from uh Venezuela. Gosh, yeah, the neighborhood is just really dynamic. Lots of fun. And the neighborhood here, you have all kinds of different food. You know from Vietnamese to Japanese to Thai. We have Mexican, we have Italian, we have um the Venezuelan restaurant now. So it's pretty cool—Indian!

**ST:** Well thank you for your time, Donna Cole.

**DC:** You're welcome.

**MB:** Yeah, thank you very much. It was a great interview. We really appreciate it.

**DC:** You learned a lot about me.

**MC:** Yeah!

**DC:** There's so much more you didn't ask about the business!

**[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]**