

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

Interviewee: Yani Rose Keo

Interviewers: Mijin Han (Junior); Chris Johnson (Sophomore)

Date/ Time of Interview: May 30, 2013, at 11:40AM

Transcribed by: Mijin Han and Chris Johnson

Edited by: Chris Johnson and Patricia Wong

Audio Track Time: 0:57:59

Background:

Yani Rose Keo was born in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on April 10, 1939. She and her husband, Saroth Keo, raised four children. However, in April 1975, when the Khmer Rouge continued their expansion across the country, she fled along with her children, eventually settling in Paris, France. Ms. Keo believed her husband dead, until learning of his presence in the United States, prompting her to move once again to Houston, Texas. After working as a writer and as an HISD teacher, Ms. Keo eventually co-founded the Alliance for Multicultural Community Services in July, 1985. She currently serves at the Executive Director of the organization.

Interviewers:

Mijin Han is currently a junior at Rice University, majoring in English. She is from Ulsan, Korea.

Chris Johnson is currently a sophomore at Rice University, majoring in Linguistics. He is from Houston, Texas.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

YK	Yani Keo
MH	Mijin Han
CJ	Chris Johnson
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]	Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

CJ: This is Chris Johnson.

MH: And this is Mijin Han.

CJ: We're here today on May 30th, 2013 in the Alliance for Multicultural Community Services office to interview Ms. Yani Keo for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history interview project. So, um, Ms. Keo, could you start off by telling us just a little bit about yourself, your background?

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YK: [YK and CJ laughs; recorder is moved; phone rings in background] My name is Yani Rose Keo. I'm original from Cambodia and born in the capital of Phnom Penh. And your question that you ask me, let me tell you how lucky I am. I'm the only one in my family that have a husband alive.

I left Cambodia and stay in Bangkok. I thought that I was there a couple days, and I couldn't return back to Cambodia. But since I left, I never seen my family again. [intercom in background] They kill everyone in my families. Zero lived in my part cause my father is a judge. My fa—my mother is a royal dancer you see. She dance for the king and queen. And I was a royal dancer, too.

When we left—we have four children. Three children we sent them to school in Paris, France, private school. Only one that twelve years old, my youngest son with me. And we left. We have a private plane. We left on April the 3rd, 1975. When I got to Bangkok, my husband said he can't—he's a director of railroad. He's civil engineer and architect from Paris, France. And he's director in railroad. And he said, 'You go and take care of the children. I go back to Cambodia.' I cannot leave this thousand of people under him. And Communists don't do nothing. He didn't do anything wrong. Why he left?

I said, okay, I left to Paris. And when I come to Paris, the plane that he supposed to be in, everybody got killed that was Cambodian. And I thought, 'He's in there.' I'm telling you how angry I am. I was so angry, hopeless. I said to God, 'God, why me? What did I do wrong?' I lost everything. And I don't have anything! I did not plan to leave the country. [Cries]

I'm sorry. Every time I, uh, talk I miss my parents. My family. That I cannot pay back what they give me life. And we don't know when they killed, how they killed, and where they killed. We do not know. Until today. I was so angry.

When I was in Cambodia, I'm a member we call VIAR, Volunteer International Aid for Refugees. I'm helping refugees with all the ambassador's wife. And I speak six languages. I do not need the job. I'm just volunteer, helping people. I never, ever dreamed I become homeless and refugee myself, in my life. In forty minutes, I become zero. Could fly from, uh, Phnom Penh to Bangkok just less than one hour. I become homeless. Nothing.

I'm lucky that I went to French school. I speak French. I went to Cambodian school and French school. Cause we are returning and came back well-educated. I have friends in Paris, the ambassador's friends. And they, uh, ran for me in the [inaudible]. And I have my oldest sisters with two children. My younger sister, they went to school in Paris. My oldest sister, her husband is the president of the bank, who was killed. She never remarried until today. And she has five children. And, my youngest sisters, you know, went to school. We have thirteen children that I had to raise: my four children, two nieces, and the rest of the children are my friend children, went to school with my children, their parents were killed.

[0:05:10]

I went through so much. I try ... to ... [loudly] very angry! But one night, I sit down and I watch the children sleep. They are so innocent. But when I told them to quit school, they, um—they are angry with me. 'Mom, auntie, why we leave—' I said, 'We don't have no money to pay! No money!' We cry—and I have a new one, my daughter, that's eighteen years old, the rest under eighteen. They cannot work. They can't do babysitter.

And my friend got the ambassador—French ambassador we organize group we call Franco-Camais. It's French Cambodian Association. In one week, I got the job as a pediatric

nurse. I'm working from 6AM to 2PM, and I ask my boss if anybody don't want to work, I take from 3 to 11PM. Two shift. My boss is so nice to me because he know my problem. He told me, 'I allow you to work only two shift. You need to sleep.'

But when I come home, I'm a seamstress. My grandmother [intercom in background] teach us how to sew, how to cook, how to clean. She taught us that, um, 'If you don't know, you have servant, how can you tell your servant how to do thing? If you are the boss, you know.' That skill helping me and my sisters to survive.

When I told all the children they had to quit school, they said that 'What can I do?' We have one room. All of us lived together. And my friend tried to find the job for the children. But twelve years old, you cannot, you know? And my oldest daughter go for babysit and they never work. Everybody tried to just go one day here, one day there, and they took two to babysit. Just two franc. Three franc. And my oldest, second son—I have four children, two boys and two girl. The girl eighteen; the boy sixteen. At night, he go and work under the table, clean up the grocery store. Through friends.

And the day I told the children, 'Quit school,' I keep in my heart: as long as I live, I will help children to have education. Cause I don't have anything to give them any. I can give education to help. They can live. Especially my friend's children, no parents! Their parents were killed! And you know what they are now? Doctor, pharmacist, engineer, in Paris.

One day when I sit, and I feel like, 'If I die, what are their children like?' I changed my mind from hate to peace. From hate to peace through love. I teach myself: 'If I get sick, who will take of me? And who will take care of the children? They depends on me! My life!' And I turn to my sister, her husband died. She falling apart. And I'm the only one, said to myself, 'Yani, wake up! These people need you!' Said to myself like a crazy woman, you know?

But I don't want to talk to men. My role become a breadwinner. And I said to myself, 'Okay. I share my love with these children. They're all my children.' And I told myself, 'Why you hate? Who do you hate?' I don't know. I hate Communists. To they took over my country; they kill my people. At that time, I don't know my whole family were killed. I didn't know.

[0:10:19]

[Walks to her desk, takes tissue.]

The wound that I have in my heart, I can change to love. But the love I miss from my family cannot heal. When I sit down, one come to me. I go to back to like—I've help people for a funeral. I said to myself, 'I can pay to my family, [phone rings] gave me life, what I do for somebody else.' That's why I'm still alive until today.

Make this story short, I work on weekend with the hospital. I have two days off, Tuesday and Wednesday. I work with a dentist—helper at the dentist to make money. At night, I make a coat that I get fifty Franc each coat. All my money go to food. The clothes—my friend gave the clothes. I have only my purse! And one clothe!

My husband want [inaudible 2 words]. I didn't hear from him. Seven months later, I'm at the hospital. My boss, Dr. Rochet told me 'Ms. Yani, *Mdme.* Yani, come here. *Venir ici.* Somebody from United States want to talk to you.' I told my boss, 'Dr. Rochet, I don't have nobody. Especially men! I don't want to talk to men! I don't have nobody in United States!' He told me, '*Venir ici.* Come here. If you want—don't want to hold it' A—at that time, you know, the telephone, the big telephone. [CJ laughs] And he said 'Just listen.' [Coughs]

When he put on my ear, one Cambodian voice said his name, the date married—we're married, and the name of the children, and it click in my mind. Who know my root? The last word he said: he missed the plane that he's supposed to be in.

And I'm angry! [laughs] Angry that we cannot talk. Is shock and angry for my side, and his shock—he's too happy! After we made that—that's what I—'I'm angry', he said. If he's alive, why he did not tell me. That's all at that time we can talk. My boss don't wanna exchange the address. With my sponsor's son, his name is Kevin, he speak French from University of St. Thomas. My husband don't speak English, only French. And my—Kevin talk to my husband, and that's all we talk the first time. And we try to exchange by mail. We cannot call because very expensive in 1975, you know? We cannot call my boss the one, and the ambassador's American—ambassadors come—wife come to see me.

That—how they locate me, I went to Geneva. I speak six language. I speak I, uh, took the train from Paris to Geneva. I went and—to talk to International Red Cross. Send families, look for families. That's how they find. It's from the sky. That's God, the one that save our lives. And I decided to come and join my husband.

The story, when—the date that he supposed to be in the plane, he did not want to be left. He don't have no paper! The ambassador in Bangkok told my husband, 'Brother—we call 'brother ... —if you go to the airport, Thai police will not let you go in! You don't have no papers!' The time they discuss when they went to the airport, the plane left without him. That's how he survive. When the plane left, they took him to the refugee camp.

[0:15:14]

Because the country fell. They were the Cambodian, they sent him—them to the refugee camp. That's how they lost communication—I was angry with him! If he miss a plane why don't he contact me? He—how he contact—he didn't know that it's alive! They took him to the refugees camp.

That's—I come to Houston because I'm the lucky person that found my husband alive in Houston, Texas. Before I left Paris, I told all the children that I come here to work and send money to them. That's what I did to raise them. I had two jobs, and I saw in here [points to interview questionnaire], when I come to Houston, that's, uh—that's my four children. Sponsored through Ccharities. I told the case worker, I said, 'I'll do anything. Even clean up!'

I went to Houston Community College. I, um, did the test. I cannot be a student. I become a writer. The newspaper for refugee. [laugh] For North Houston and HCC because my English is good enough. And they send me to the job developer. And one doctor's office—I speak many languages—they call me, they said—you know how much he paid me? \$2.50 an hour, working as a receptionist at the doctor's office.

Two weeks only, HISD call me. Houston Independent School District call me, need me to teach at school. I taught, 1975, at the school. And I'm working in the morning at school. In the evening, volunteer teaching English. I teach at Poe Elementary School, on Hazard. And when I'm volunteer with Catholic Charities teaching English for all refugees, international. I took so many tests. I took a lot of courses. I got—when I volunteer, I feel like

When I come, I want to be a doctor. I apply at St. Joseph Hospital. I got the job as the, uh, person deliver medication. And the school call me—I love education. I choose working at school as a professional teacher aid. I speak Vietnamese. I speak Lao. I speak Thai. I speak—and, now my student a doctor, engineer, social worker like me! See, my students, yeah. '75.

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And, uh, wanna help people, I decided to just—want to help people to be a social worker, not a doctor. If I'm a doctor, I can treat only the patient come to me. If I'm social worker, I can do anything I want to do, helping everybody, not only Cambodian or Asian. My goal. God help me, I got my wish. I got my goal.

I do every year, scholarship for refugee students. That's what the scholarship that I did on Friday. We make good money, and when we give scholarship, I would like to invite you to come and see us. We give to 160 students almost \$200,000, in eighteen countries. I'm going to invite both of you to come when we give scholarship to students. It doesn't matter who you are: low income, no matter what, no father or no mother. But, we have a judging committee. It doesn't matter who you are. We give eighth grade. Before, we give second grade, fourth grade. But I saw that eighth grade, we prevent them to drop school. Cause they were in their country in the refugee camp. When they come here, sixteen, seventeen, they had to be at eighth grade and they never been to school. They cannot be in school.

[0:20:23]

We have after-school program. The alliance have after—you look at our website, you see how many—we have nineteen program that nobody do. We are the largest resettlement agency in the state of Texas, and the only one community-based organization founded by the refugees like me: Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Ethiopian. The founder of this place. [Pause]

How old I am. Guess how old I am? [CJ laughs] I can be your grandmother.

CJ: Uh, d—do you want me to guess, or ...?

YK: Yes, yes.

CJ: [laughs] Oh, goodness.

MH: A fine guess. [Turns to MH] You're Asian, you guess.

MH: Oh, oh. That's a lot of pressure. [CJ laughs]

YK: I'm married for 60 years in July. We celebrate our 60 years' anniversary. Guess.

MH: 70 ... [quietly] five-ish?

YK: [Walks to desk, retrieves wedding invitation] Because I told you already my age.

CJ: [quietly] 75.

YK: 74.

CJ: Close. [laughs]

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YK: [Points to wedding invitation] You see? [laughs] I'm young with my skin. Seventy-four. Here, when I was married. Fourteen years old. Arranged marriage. See? Our sixty years anniversary.

MH: [gasps] Wow.

CJ: That's incredible. Gosh. Well, that's an incredible life story that you have, my goodness. Um, could you tell us a little bit about, um—

YK: [inaudible]

CJ: [overlapping]—what your—what your—er, a little bit about—

YK: Ask.

CJ: —your first impression of Houston was when you first came here? What was your—?

YK: Uh, you know, when my husband told me that Houston, Texas, in my mind, cowboy, [CJ laughs] big hat, horses. When I come here, I'm so blessed about have the sponsor that working, he's the executive director at Catholic Charities. And we are well-educated. And I told my sponsor that my husband have two degree from Paris. They don't know. Because he did not tell. Our culture, we did not—we should not talk about your personal. This is culture. You know, before I never tell my story to the world. I ask a permission from my husband: 'Allow me to say the truth, what we went through. We are innocent, what the world destroy people life.

You heard The Grand Opera play my life story, last year, June the 16th. And they don't know me. I said, 'Sandy how—Cathy how do you know me?' She saw my name, my pictures here at United Nation. I don't know that United Nation got my pictures from where. I don't know.

Cause I just helping people. It doesn't matter you know me or you don't know me. I don't need nothing back from you. I adopt more than 100 orphans from the refugee camp. Their parents were killed. I don't know them. I don't have no families in the United States. Now I have a big families. I adopt—legally adopted. Cause they—their parents were killed. I don't know them.

And one special girl, she was fourteen when she come, a Cambodian girl. She escape and she lost her family, come with a Laotian family. And I oversee that, um, agency, that Carol Morey said 'Yani, I have this Cambodian girl by herself with the Lao.' I adopt, legally adopted, I bring her to my house, send her to school. Now she's a grandmother. I am a great-grandmother! My own four great-grandchildren, about twenty-five adopted children—great-grandchildren. Everywhere in United States, and in Paris.

[0:25:12]

This is my life. My job? Just helping people. It doesn't matter who you are, what religion, what color, what gender, it just doesn't matter. When you need help, come to me; I do my best. This agency rebuild people life. As you see, when people left, they are lucky to be alive. Only the back—the clothes on their back.

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When you have time I can—next time cause today, I don't have much time. Uh, we, um, going to show you the—some PowerPoint, invite some group of your team. Just need about one hour. I will tell the, uh, staff to tell you about my crazy job! [YK and CJ laugh]

They said, 'Look at Mrs. Yani! I don't want you to be alone!' I said, 'Yes, Yani cannot be alone.' We have a good team. Strong, committed staff. I told them when we interview to get the job, 'This place you have to do from your heart. Not the money.' But when you die, you don't take a thing with you! You do something that you're happy to do.

Like, ask me, my friend in DC with the state department, they said that I'm crazy. How can I survive? I don't die! I don't fall apart! And I become, you know, fresh, young. I said, 'I'm young in heart.' I don't believe a number, the age. I do my job from my heart. If you ask money, and Yani don't have money! [laughs] Yani give a lot of thing to people.

I do something that people don't do, like farming. The old people don't have a job. I teach them how to do the farming, how to grow their own vegetables. We got federal organic license. Took me 11 month. In 1985, I got the state organic license. But in 19—2011, I took—I took my—I got my master gardener in the eighty. In 2011, [intercom in background] I took another one, [laughing] another master gardener [laughs] courses. I want to upgrade my skill.

I want to teach people to eat healthy like me. I li—I eat more greens. And I don't eat a lot of meat. When I was in Paris, I eat a lot of steak, you know, French. I don't drink, uh, what you call, uh, Coke or Sprite. I drink water. But I drink wine and Champagne! [CJ and YK laugh]

It's cause I grow up in Paris. France, French people, they don't drink water. Water, like Vichy, Perrier, more expensive than wine! And I was a nurse. I deliver the baby. I love children. I can deliver the baby. I can take care of the baby born

When I come here, I organize a village for Cambodian. Now we give back to the owner and I rent—I lease the land from Commissioner of Land state of Texas, train Cambodian to grow Asian vegetables. Now almost 200 families grow, you know, *ong choys*? Water spinach? *Rau muong*? the big business in the United States until '88 at Rosharon (?).

I train another group, the Congolese, Bhutanese, Burmese, Somali to grow organic vegetables and to raise honeybees. [laughs] I'm crazy. [CJ laughs] Just try to create job for people. Look at the bees. Honey's very expensive and very healthy. We grow sugar cane. You know, sugar cane juice very healthy. We grow lemongrass. That's healthy.

I grow—I have small back yard. I grow all. I love hot pepper. When I want to eat, I go and pick it. Grow papaya. When I want to eat good green papaya and go and.... Mint, I love mints, you know, peppermint, basil, and That—that's how I eat. What else do you want to know? [CJ and MH laugh]

My crazy job. I do everything you can think of. Teach refugee. I welcome them from the airport. Because we sponsor them, I welcome them. For example, the Burmese, the person speak Burmese go with me to welcome them. When they get out from the gate, that person welcome them with their own language, bring them to the apartment they eat their own food. All nationalities, we cook their own food. Because we have the refugee came before and prepare. We connect them with the community.

We help them to organize the association. 501(c)(3) like the Somali Bantu. It's different from the Somali lost boy. Okay? We help them organize the association. We give them free room, and we own this burden. [Laughs] Isn't Yani crazy? [Laughs]

And now you will see, yeah, I'm planning to grow around the corridor the mints because we have two acres of land. It's small, too small. We plan to go to twenty acres of land to be partner with the former refugee Vietnamese.

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I'm just working for the people lost from their country, rebuild them by helping them to [indistinguishable] because I'm lucky enough; I have my education and I can work. Number one, I'm healthy. Number two, my family support me what I like to do. Without my husband and my children's support, I cannot do this job. I stay at the office at least 10 hours a day. Almost seven days a week. [YK and CJ laugh]

Every time they need me, I'm there for them. You know, human need never end, but we take turn. My staff takes turn. It doesn't matter you speak the language or not. I understand almost 20 languages. Just deal with them.

Anything else you'd like to know? [all laugh] Don't just look at me smiling. [all laugh]

CJ: Let's see. So, um, let's see. So, as far as refugees, is there any one part of the world that most of them are coming from?

YK: Right now?

CJ: Mm-hmm.

YK: We have from Burma, from Bhutan, from Iraqi now, and we have from Congo, and, uh, Somalia. Five countries right now. [clears throat] We have all kinds of—when you see the wall, the agency rooms, uh We work with the Homeland Security and the State Department. You know, the high command, UNHCR. You can look at, you know, uh, high commissioner ... refugees in UNHCR, [taps desk] That's the world. That's how they, um ...

CJ: Um ... so how long have you been working with the Alliance?

YK: I'm the co-founder of the Alliance.

CJ: So ...

YK: Twenty-eight years. [Laughs]

CJ: Twenty-eight years, okay. [MH clears throat]

YK: I'm working as a board member—as a co-founder and board member. I just start with the alliance in 1991. I work—I—since I come to United State working at HISD for five months, and working with Catholic Charities for fifteen years. And working here for twenty-three years. [Laughs] Non—nonstop.

[0:34:50]

CJ: Wow.

YK: When I was with Catholic Charities, I know what we need. I'm a refugee myself. I'm a woman. And I talked to other group like Vietnamese, Cambodian, and, uh, Ethiopian, and Laotian. You know, in 1975, [clears throat] they call Indo-Chinese, the French, *les indochinoise*

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okay? That's Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese. I'm the oldest Cambodian come to Houston, Texas, and I'm still alive working. [Laughs] 38 years.

The time I work with Catholic Charity, we found this agency. We call Refugee Services Allian—Alliance. And we got the grant 168. We found this agency in July 1985. I remember all that because I'm the founder, one of the founder. And we got the grant from, uh, federal to help the woman tha, uh, we call suspe ... helping them to, uh, make them feel better at home. 168,000 in January 1986. Right now our budget is 5.6 million. [Laughs]

CJ: Wow. [YK laughs] Gosh.

YK: We have forty-two full staff. We have eighteen part time teachers. We have English as Second Language three times a day here, fifth floor, more than 200 students a day. And we have after school program at the apartment. We work with the apartment. We send the teacher over there. All our teacher are certified Texas—certified, all are certified. We have the, uh—we call Asset Building.

We have IDA program. We loan the money. We have a SPAA program; the on—only one refugee office. I just think, what we can do to help them, the community? They don't have no credit. We build the credit. We call bu—a credit builder. The agency put 300, the refugee put \$30 a month. 10 months that credit score go to 700. We open an account for them. We take them to audit (?), Bank of Texas, Chase Bank, and audit, uh, cre—uh, US Credit Union. We work with our neighbors, neighborhood centers. [Laughs]

CJ: Mm.

YK: Before they—they build—they loan, uh—they rent our building. Open an account here, only \$10 for refugees. We build their credit. We helping them to buy a car. We train them to get their driver license. We have two cars. We are the only one. Because look at Houston: if you don't have driver license, you don't have a car, you cannot get the job. It's no way you ride the bus or carpool. We work with Metro, Metro Star helping refugees work with the employer, like Igloo, Two shift. The driver of the car work \$14 an hour. All of the one can speak English, can be a leader that's a refugee.

Yani do anything [CJ laughs] to promote the refugee's life. You don't know how [indistinguishable] you work. They don't mind to work long hour and on the weekend. That's what we have conflicts with other group. They don't like to work on the weekend; they don't like to work long hours, and they don't like us. And I did the speech. I said, 'You know what my friend? You said we took your job, it's not true. The job you to don't want do. We have more refugee work at the company because they are willing to work, any times, any days. You know very well.'

But we do ongoing orientation. The day we pick them up from the airport, within 90 days, they will have a job. If they don't have English, they have to attend—they *must* attend ESL. If they are sick, we take—we have a case management. When they come, we do the assessment. Who's sick? Take care of their illness. Who can work? 30 days, 40 days, work. We have two program we call Matching Grant. We look at, like, the young, the family. Family of five. Employer both three we put them on Matching Grant. It's mean, if we get the job for them, in 30 days they still have a job, we still pay that rent for three months. We let them save the money. After three month they bought the car. [MH gasps] We helping them to buy a car.

[0:40:41]

You know easy to buy a car right now. We know a lot of dealer. In transportation, give me only six months. [YK and CJ laugh] My people can buy a car. [YK and CJ laugh] We have downstairs, job, uh coach, coaching. Prepare them by doing own (?), train them how to do interview. We invite employer to do interview right here [taps desk] in our boardroom. We have job fair. We train them. We find the cloth for them to wear. We have a tailoring here. We make the cloth for them to go for job interview. We train refugee! [Laughs]

CJ: Incredible. [Laughs] Let's see. Um, so you mentioned that you were the first Cambodian in Houston.

YK: Yes!

CJ: So, um, what was the first neighborhood that you lived in in Houston?

YK: Uh, near Galleria.

CJ: Oh, really?

YK: Very rich. My sponsor rent a home on Sage and Westheimer. You know that right now they just, uh, the, uh—the trees that my house you know. They rent one home, three bedroom. ... Near Galleria. In one year, we save money to buy a home. The home—[taps desk]—house—my house right now. I live on, uh, uh, what? Westheimer Road and 45 North until today. My mortgage \$500 a month. In 1976 we bought the—we moved in in July 1977.

All the children—my youngest son when he come here 13 years old. My neighbor construction. He speak with my neighbor and my neighbor took him to work on the weekend. And I said, 'Against the law, so zip your month.' [YK and CJ laugh] They never tell me.

I have a good neighbor, white, uh, high class, you know. That's Sage Galleria. And my children are spoiled; come from Paris and live in Galleria. [CJ laughs] Cause my sponsor very rich. His house near Bush, President Bush house. Yeah. Yeah. He has nine children. Their children. My sponsor, when my husband come to Houston, they keep him at the hotel, and my husband not the talking person. Sit, and my sponsor Mr. Joseph, 'I will take this man to my house.' They build the garage for him to live. Almost a year then until I come.

Because he try to commit suicide. He's a big boss. You know what the job they—clean up at the office. Because they—he did not speak English. One day, Jerome drove him near Galleria, and he saw the building. Speak French, said, 'I design like this.' Said, 'What did you say?' The translator in the camp said my husband is a chauffeur! Do you know? Interpretation?

You know what? The alliance have almost a hundred languages. Translation is life and death. If you don't know how to translate, you kill people. Start from my husband. He get \$2.50 an hour. He cried, but he never say anything to my sponsor. But the boss saw him. The, uh—the engineering, they got the—they, uh—from the city of Houston, the contract from the city. And my husband said, 'I can do that. *Je peux faire ça*'. [Taps desk]

CJ: Mm-hmm.

[0:44:59]

YK: He write in French and took it to St. Thomas University. ‘How do you know?’ And he write in French. And I call. Um, [taps desk] he’s engineer, architect! [CJ coughs] Civil engineer! You know what? When I come here, I send him to school, HCC. To get his piping degree. [Laughs] And my community laughs at me. Said, ‘For us, when you’re 20, 22 years old, you are old. You don’t go back to school.’ And my husband 45, 50 years old. They talk about Ms. Yani send old husband to back to school. I went back to school myself. And they laugh at me. Five years later, my husband become partner with the employer [Taps desk] [CJ gasps] until he retire.

CJ: Wow.

YK: You see? You show what can you do. The culture, we don’t talk much. I’m a person talkative now. My community said, ‘Ms. Yani not Cambodian any more.’ [CJ laughs] I said, ‘I’m in United States. I have to learn their system, but I will not get—get—forget my culture, my root. I told people, ‘Do not forget your root. Learn something good from other culture.’ That’s what I train all the staff, all the refugees.

Keep your dance. I love dancing. Art. I was a dancer, royal dancer when I was four years old. Dance like this. [Points at photos on wall] Look at Different kind of dance. My role like that. But they destroy all the pictures. My mom go like this. They destroy all. We don’t have no picture. I got these pictures when I was in Paris. Le Louvre. They actually from Paris. I’m crazy. I go everywhere. I love history. I love arts. I love culture. I love ...

CJ: Let's see. Uh, so you mentioned Paris just then. Could you tell us a little bit about the neighborhood that you lived in when you were in Paris?

YK: I grow up in Paris. My father took us to Paris when we were young. He was educated French. My father was a judge. That’s why they kill everyone in my—our families. Because we’re well educated, my mother from the royal family. And I don’t want people to know. We are normal. Because they kill all the royal people, the. If you are related to king, they kill you. That’s what I said. *All* the leaders don’t know how much innocent people suffer when they are ruled. Why don’t you just talk?

[intercom announcement in background] Kill—who they kill. Innocent people was killed! Children! And I sponsor large family because I want to save children life. The children come to alliance. We pick a large family. They said, ‘Yani crazy.’ I said, ‘It’s okay.’ I accept it. [CJ laughs] It’s hard for me to find the apartment. [CJ and YK laugh] They don’t allow us, but we now own the apartment. I told the parent, ‘You have to speak English. If you don’t go to school, don’t come to Yani. I will not help you because you don’t help yourself.’

Sh—you should be independent. It doesn’t matter how old you are. I have seventy five years old come and learn English here. I said, ‘You go to the doctor number one, you can express how you feel yourself. If you ask somebody, they cannot translate the way you feel.’ And I never let the children—the children don’t know their own language. How can you translate for the families? And I’m the fighter. I’m with the human right. The national—I got the, uh, [Taps the desk] award. [Laughs]

[0:49:45]

I learned from fire department, police department. When the mayor invite me to be on the board with the police department, I said, 'I don't know.' I took course. [taps desk] with the fire department, I took courses. On their board, I want to learn because my people die. When they call they don't understand their—their house on fire. I train the police. I train the fire department. I'm with them. I cr—I climb the—[taps desk] up there. [Motions the height with her hand, laughing] I got my license, on the uh, alumni with the police and the fire department. I just remembers uh, I wanted to let them know the culture is different. Don't assume.

Like, you know, when I call the, uh, vote. I said, 'My name's so-and-so I'm with—I need to know where I can vote because [indistinguishable].' They, uh, said, 'Are you Asian?' I said, 'Yes, I'm Cambodian.' 'Oh, we translate in Vietnamese.' I said, 'I cannot read Vietnamese.' I told mayor. I told judge. [Laughs] Judge Ed Colin, Judge Emmett. I said 'Judge, happened to me.' And I told my staff to do training, train my staff to the We helping them to get their permanent resident because they come they'll start as a refugee. 12 month they qualify to be a permanent resident. We help them—five years—we help them to get the citizenship.

Legal, everything I went through. I took a lot of courses. Just want to know. I don't need that job, but I need to know. This position as a executive director, I *have* to know if I want to help people. Before I become ED, I do public relation. Free. [Laughs]

Counseling free. Crisis, after working hours, because confidential. That's why I have the room like this. [Taps desk] We cry together. We went through crisis together. Like the family that I'm dealing with now. The wife want to commit suicide. And they have a social worker. We just hired one because I'm alone. I cannot do everything.

Anything else? We have interpreter. [Goes through papers] We have, um ... I just want to give you this something special, that nobody do it. Here, you can have it. [Passes papers to CJ and MH] Micro loan. We do farming, and let me like ... [Passes more papers] This is alliance program. Because I talk a lot, I don't know that you can remember. This is how you can help us. This is the students that we help. [Passes brochure to CJ and MH] We have another one. Last week.

[pause as YK retrieves document from desk] We threw last week. See? This is the last year, this is the last week. This is this year.

MH: Oh. [CJ coughs]

YK: Replicate you the final version. [pause as YK retrieves flyers from desk] License. This is the tailoring. [YK and CJ laugh] You can have it!

CJ: Would it be okay if we took pictures of these whenever, or just to ...?

MH: Or—

CJ: Or—

MH: Can we take the original documents?

YK: Sure.

CJ: It's a ... okay cool. [MH gasps]

YK: You can have it. Oh no. That's ...

CJ: Oh, cool.

YK: You can take it with you.

MH: Yeah.

CJ: And this part, can we get a picture of this as well? Would that be okay? If you're, uh ...

MH: Like, in between ...

YK: No, you can have it.

CJ: Are you sure? [MH gasps] Oh, wow thank you.

MH: Wow. That'll be like—

CJ: That's great. [YK laughs]

MH: —a great addition to the archive. Thank you. [CJ laughs]

YK: Here's one. [Picking up the wedding anniversary invitation] And this is my son design it. My youngest son design it himself. See the Cambodian word?

CJ: Mm-hmm.

YK: Yeah, completely different.

CJ: Wow, it's great.

YK: You can have all of this.

CJ: Thank you.

MH: Thank you.

CJ: I know you mentioned that you have a time constraint at 11:40. Do you, um So how are we doing on time? Are you ... uh ... like it's uh—it's up to you. Do you want to like keep going or, I know you mentioned that you're—

YK: Oh, I have to leave now.

CJ: Okay, okay.

YK: But you can come back.

CJ: Okay.

YK: Welcome back.

CJ: It sounds wonderful. Yeah.

MH: Mm-hmm.

[0:55:01]

YK: I told you. I told—what's her name? Quraishi, Karachi?

CJ: Mm-hmm.

MH: Yes.

YK: And I said that my time is so tight. [CJ laughs] That I don't mind to do it, you know. I want you to know refugee life. I'm a real refugee. My real life, I went through so much. I walk bleeding my toes, crying my tear become eyes, bleeding I never wash, bleeding. I went through. But I'm the luckiest one. I found my husband alive. The rest was killed. The wound I have, my love for my parent, my brother, and sister, never heal. But I change to help this kind of funeral. [Points at a bundle of paper] See? I have to find man to do the funeral. I don't know them. They need help.

CJ: Thank you—

YK: I need you to send me, a, um—I'm going to send you the invitation when I give scholarship. I want you to see how crazy I am. [CJ and YK laugh]

CJ: Yeah, that'll be wonderful. I'd love to come see it.

MH: Yeah.

YK: [Laughs] Yeah.

MH: It's awesome.

YK: You can give them the scholarship. We give 1,000 for twelfth grade. They—when they go to college. A lot of U of H, HCC, and Texas TSU. And, uh, when they bring me the GV—GPA three point up we give you four more years.

CJ: That's great. [Laughs]

MH: It's—wow.

CJ: Yeah.

YK: Crazy. [CJ laughs] Cause I love children. I don't have anything to give them. I can give some small part of education, and they can have forever. If you can hear the success story from the student, you cry. I have one family. They kill the husband. They rape her. They rape her daughter. She have three daughter, one son. Come here, get lost. Took them to my home. Now, three of them graduated from college. They bought two houses. The son went to Marine, come back. Now we have to work with the son. He's not normal. That's my story. Okay?

CJ: Thank you so much for your time.

MH: Yeah, thank you so much.

CJ: Yeah.

YK: Yes, and email me, okay?

CJ: Absolutely.

MH: Yes.

YK: Let me give you my ... [Walks to her desk]

CJ: Oh, and can we get a picture of you before we, uh, have to head off?

YK: [Laughs] It's okay. But, uh ...

MH: Shall I stop it?

CJ: Uh...

YK: My business card.

CJ: Yeah, I guess so.

[0:57:59]

End interview