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Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Keiji Asakura

Interviewers: Valerie Diaz (Junior); Emerita Geraldine Franco (Sophomore)

Date/ Time of Interview: April 5, 2014, at 4:00PM

Transcribed by: Valerie Diaz, Emerita Geraldine Franco

Edited by: Chris Johnson, Sara Davis, and Patricia Wong (7/7/16)

Audio Track Time: 1:27:43

Background:

Keiji Asakura was born in Tokyo, Japan in 1953. In 1969, he moved to Santa Ana, California to live with his aunt. He got his bachelor's degree from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona in landscape architecture and was hired by the SWA Group. In 1982, he transferred to SWA Group's Houston branch. At the age of 30, Mr. Asakura started his own company. Throughout his professional career, he has been involved in various business associations such as the Japan America Society of Houston, Japanese American Citizens League, Houston Sister City Advisory, American Society of Landscape Architects, US Green Building Council, Keep Houston Beautiful, and Congress for the New Urbanism. Community organizations Mr. Asakura belongs to include the City of Houston Planning Commission, Houston Arts Alliance Civic Arts Committee, City of Houston Airport Commission, Blueprint Houston, Scenic Houston, and Botanic Garden Houston Advisory.

Setting:

The interview focuses on Asakura's early life, his experiences in the first few years upon moving to the U.S., and the role of landscape architecture as a shaping force aesthetically and socially for maintaining community history in a non-physical sense.

The interview was in one of the study rooms in Fondren Library at Rice University. The interview was roughly an hour and a half. Mr. Asakura talked about his inspiration for becoming a landscape architect. He also discussed crises that he believes are threatening the history of certain Houston communities, architectural projects he is most proud of, and his personal doctrine for meaningfully relating to others through "emotional intelligence" and tolerance.

Interviewers:

Valerie Diaz is an undergraduate student majoring in Cultural Anthropology at Rice University. She is originally from Long Beach, New York, but moved to Gilbert, Arizona at age 13. Areas of research interests include material culture, multi-species ethnography, and environmental ethics.

Geraldine Franco is an undergraduate student majoring in the Studio track of Visual And Dramatic Arts and Asian Studies with a focus on Japan. She was born and spent her early childhood in Long Beach, California before moving to San Antonio, Texas at age 10. Her art seeks to explore the dichotomy of humans while trying to integrate Japanese aesthetics.

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Interview Transcript:

Key:

KA	Keiji Asakura
GF	Geraldine Franco
VD	Valerie Diaz
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]	Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

GF: Okay. So to start off can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

KA: Uh, how do normally people talk about a little bit about yourself? What are you—

VD: [overlapping] So where were you born?

GF: [overlapping] Where were you born? Describing your hometown ...

KA: Yeah ask—ask those questions then I can [takes breath] Um, I was born in Tokyo, like millions of others, uh, in 1953. Uh ... and, uh, I came to the United States in 1969, when I was age 15. So I was—my mother, um, uh was a nurse; my father was a patient. That's how they met: at the hospital. Uh, and I, um—although my mother doesn't talk about it very much, but I think I was a little, uh love child because I think that I heard somewhere that they got married in April of 1953, and I was born in August of 193—1953. [VD laughs] It's understandable—it's uh—it was only—what, uh, 9 years after the war? Uh, still chaotic. My father, uh, um, uh, my—both my father and my mother are from the northern Japan. So, uh—but anyway my father was a prisoner of war until 1949 in Siberia. So, um, he, um—he survived in Siberian prison camp, came home, but had number of medical issues, in and out of the hospital. And that's where he met my mother.

Um ... so um I was the first born, uh, um, son, uh, and, um, I have a younger sister who is 9 years younger than me. Um, my father, uh, deceased in 19, um, uh, 67 when I was 13. Of heart attack. Uh, and, um, my mother was 33. And I came to the States largely because of my aunt, who is my father's older sister, who had this desire of taking care of her sibling's, uh, son. That's me. Uh, uh she was married to a—an American G.I. who lived in southern California, and that's where I came. And I went to high school in southern California in Orange Country. It's a town called Santa Ana. And then I went on and then graduated from University of California—I mean, uh—I'm sorry—California State University. Cal Poly, uh, uh, in Pomona and in—degree in landscape architecture.

GF: So, going back to your childhood—

KA: [overlapping] Yes?

GF: —can you describe your hometown? Like, what kind of activities did you do there—?

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[indistinguishable several words]

KA: [overlapping] My hometown. I mean, it's hardly a hometown because it is Tokyo. Tokyo's not what you call—consider—call it a “hometown.” And this is after the war where everything was fair—fairly chaotic. Japan—this was in the middle of Korean War. Things are quite different. Uh, so my—my—lot of the young people after the war was recruited to come to the urbanized area like Tokyo to—because they needed lot of labor forces. So my mother is no exception. She went to, um, uh, uh, nursing school and got a nursing degree, and then immediately was, uh, recruited into this environment. And so are the millions and millions of people, especially from the northern Japan.

I didn't—I don't remember when I was a child really growing up in Tokyo because, um, I was so little. And then—and then since my mother and father both worked and my—I was often shipped away to my grandparents in—in my mother's hometown. So, I remember that more. Or I was then shipped to my father's, uh, uh, uh, town also in northern Japan. Uh, I remember that a little bit on the countryside as a little boy. So those—that's the countryside. I do—I do not remember much of the Tokyo inner city. Uh ...

GF: What were those—what were those places like, where your grandparents were?

KA: They were rural towns. Uh, my—my—my mother's, uh, parents' town was a fairly rural area. The rice fields spreaded across from the—from the Japan Sea to—to the nearby mountains. Uh, uh, my father—my grand—grandfather worked at the post office. He was injured in the war and then he came back and then—then working for the post office ever since. Uh, my grandmother stayed home. I—uh, my—my mother has, uh, 7 sisters and 1 brothers. So there were always plenty of cousins to play with. Um, uh, it snows quite a bit there, uh, and then summer is pretty hot. I remember swimming in the rivers and drainage, uh—or the irrigation ditch going off to the mountains, and So there were plenty of nature around. I remember that.

[0:05:49]

Um, um, my—my father's town is in the middle of the mountains. It was a kind—um, um foot of a famous volcano there. But it was known for, um, hot springs. So the town was filled with hot spring resorts—or, uh, when I say resort, they're inns really. Uh, and my grandfather was a doctor in town. Uh, although, when I remember she—he—he really didn't practice. Uh, he was ill. Uh, I do remember his funeral very much. I was 3; so ... or 4. Uh, but uh, town was a—uh, uh, very small town, although it had its own castle. It was a feudal, uh, uh—a town at, uh—in—in—between I guess, uh, 17th century through 19th century.

GF: Which town was this?

KA: It was called, uh, Kaminoyama.

GF and VD: Oh.

KA: It's in the prefecture of Yamagata in the middle of a mountain. It does have a—a oceanfront to the west, but most of the town is in the middle of the mountains. The—the famous volcano I talked about it is called Mount Zhao. It's well known for its ski resort.

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VD: Oh. Hmm.

KA: Um, so um, um And then house faced a little river. I remember I used to play in the little river. Although I was *not* to play around the river because it was dangerous. Um, um, and, uh, you know, it— when I look back, my father and my mother, I think they struggled a lot after the war. Things are a little bit chaotic. My father failed in the business. I th—remember when I was in, um, sixth grade and uh, we—that was in city of Osaka west of—of Tokyo. Uh, there were no, uh, bullet train then. Uh, I remember the trip always took long, long time. [sniffs] The bullet train didn't come until 1964 when the Olympic was held in Japan. Um, uh, and, um— anyway I feel like you know it was sort of the, um—the—the recover—recovery era for Japan after the war. Uh, uh, not everything is quite what it is today in Tokyo or in Japan. Um, uh, on the other hand I think my sister probably doesn't remember much of that because she was almost 10 years younger than me. Um ...

GF: Are your parents—or, is your mother still in Japan?

KA: My mother is still alive. She's 83. She just retired as a nurse.

VD: Wow.

KA: After I left Japan—she was only 33 when my father died, and, uh—or 34 - um—and then after I decided to come to the States, she went back to school, got his—her teaching degree. And she taught in uh, uh—a elementary school until her retirement at age 65, I think. And then, few years of retirement, she got bored of being retired. She—with her friend's suggestion, she went back to a—a nursing. And she's been working at a different nursing hospital—a hospital as a nurse, um, most currently as—in a psychiatric hospital, which has a much less demand. [sighs] So she just retired. She always have complain that the—how tired she gets. And, I said—she, uh, told me that, um, it's hard for her to get up in the morning to go to school—go to work. And I said she's not the only one that has that problem. [GF laughs] But nonetheless, she has retired. My sister also lives about, um—about half an hour away from my mother. My mother lives by herself. Um, um, my sister has, uh, one son who visited me last summer. He is 20 ... 23. Uh, he still goes to school at Waseda University. Um, um ... he visited me and spent the summer with me thinking that maybe she—he wanted to change her—his, uh, career to what I do, but I think he—he decided not to.

[0:10:31]

GF: Well —

KA: Um, what else should—?

GF: Let's see. Were you raised in a religious family? Was that a big thing in your family? Were there a lot of cultural events?

KA: Cultural event? Okay. So you're talking about when I came to the States? With my relative? Is that what you mean?

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GF: That as well. [softly] I think.

KA: Or, what was the original question? I guess ...

GF: I guess, growing up in Japan or growing up over here once you moved, if there were any ways that you participated in cultural events or celebrated your heritage?

KA: [sighs] When I was growing up, I mean, a cultural event wasn't anything. Um, I mean we celebrated. From New Year to, uh, summer festival—we call it Obon—that's kind of the religious, um, festivity where you, um, um Uh, it's sort of like a Memorial Day here. Um, eh, you know, to the point of having Christmas, I think is—is—it was something as a kid I remember it was something special. Although we don't—we certainly didn't do the kind of Christmas we know here.

Um ... uh, um, so bigger transition for me was coming to the—to the United States. Um, um ... you know, I think everybody outside the United States sort of have a different vision of America, and I certainly had my own vision of America at age 15. And, um, uh, I was not fluent in English at all. Um, I certainly took English at—at school, but uh, certainly not fluent [sniffs]—not to the point to be able to speak to other teenagers at age 15. I mean you're going through just a horrendous time of your life. But at the same time, trying to learn another language is something totally different. I did not enjoy that at all when I was in high school between 15 to, say, 17, 18, until I graduated. Going through college it was very different story. But at least in high school Um, and another thing in—and in 1969 you have—you—you—you know, it—you just have to remember in the 60s, the—the—the sort of the, uh, immigration idea that, uh, Asians can—can im—immigrate to America without a certain quota was fairly new. So there weren't many—many immigrants or anything like that. It was pretty—pretty what you saw in—on—on the television show in the 60s America was, you know, you drank Tang—and you probably don't know what that is. [laughs]

VD: No. [All laugh]

KA: Uh, an—an—an—and, you know, the kind of *Father Knows the Best* kind of show. It—it's—it's—it—it was the typical America even in southern California. You think southern California is a hot bed of immigrants? Well, not really. The high school that I went to I think, uh, there were 3 Asians. One was, uh—no I—actually there were 4 Asians of 700 or—it—it was a large school. It was. But uh, one was a Chinese, uh, uh, uh, girl who—whose parents had a Chinese grocery store. There was another girl who—Japanese-American girl; their family had a farm outside. And then there was a fourth, uh, uh, Asian kid who was a—uh, adopted by a American family from—from, uh, uh, Korea. After the war, he was adopted. [sniffs] So that was it. There were 4 Asian kids.

GF: So would you say the neighborhood was primarily white?

KA: Pri—primarily white. Yeah. Um, so ... um. Where was I? Uh ... and then this idea that—that I now—going back and think about it, American culture—the American culture is very much—immigration is very much part of the American psychic always. Whether you were, uh, Irish immigrants and turn of the century, or Polish immigrants, or they—they all created their own communities. And, uh, Japanese and Asian communities, uh, same. Um, uh, Asian

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communi— uh, the Japanese community in southern California was centered around the town called Gardena, and a lot of the Japanese ... people—men are sort of stereotypically gardeners. I remember that. That was really the case. So, cultural heritage? Um, no. My focus was assimilation, you know, as the Asian parents say. And—and—and—and certainly my aunt, uh, uh, uh, was part of that. Assimilate to the point you just don't do anything else but to speak English at home, English outside, uh, and then every now and then you might have some Japanese food. But, um, yeah. Assimilate—assimilate at all cost.

[0:16:13]

VD: Could you tell us more about your initial, uh, thoughts about what you thought the US would be like before you came?

KA: Oh, US—United States as a kid, it was a fairyland. You know, Disneyland and—and the land of Cadillacs. Um ... 'specially in the 60s. The music, um, um, you know, for my parents' generation, uh, my—my mother was younger. So, uh, uh unlike my father, who was a soldier, uh, during the war, my mother experienced as a teenager when occupied forces come. And it—America was about Hershey chocolate. The G.I.s give out Hershey chocolates. And I think that—that—that sort of the leftover of that I certainly felt that America represent, you know, a handful of Hershey chocolates, in a way. Um ... and then, of course, I realized that's not the case, fairly quickly. [laughs] That—looking back the sort of the severe cultural—and then y—it—it has changed a lot, uh, during the time of the 60s when turmoils of the 60s and Um ... uh, uh, the whole ... cultural shift that was going on in the 60s, you know, the, uh—we—we began to see different people in a different way. Certainly in California, maybe, you know, South much later. But uh, uh, uh, so um [pause]. Yeah.

Not being white is to take a second role. It was a pretty much given. Uh, and I heard about that a lot. I—I didn't understand it, of course. I did not understand it. I do come from a model culture. I do come from a—a culture—um, uh, uh, a society that there is 99% Japanese. There are—and then most of, uh—95% of the 99% Japanese felt that they were middle class. And that's the society we—you know, I grew up in—and to come to—to that kind of the diversity and then complex mix of the social structure was something that is much more than a young 15, 16 year old could comprehend.

VD: So, besides a language barrier—

KA: Yes?

VD: Um, I was wondering, did you have any struggles based on like discrimination at school in California at all?

KA: I didn't really see it as a discrimination. I just didn't know any better. Um, because I never—I—there was no such thing in my own dictionary “discrimination.” Never heard—heard of anything like it. [takes breath] Um ... I was ... surprised that the most people didn't know about Japan too much. [laughs] You know, we Japanese know about America. Why didn't Americans know about Japanese? You know, after all we fought war, and then, you know what is it that But it's [laugh] you know, it's Um, this—I—the language problem, it was kind of funny. When I—when I—I never was good at math and science, but when I went to high

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school they thought I a was math and science wiz.

VD: Hmm. [KA laughs]

GF: Mmmm.

[0:20:00]

KA: Well, you know, I took this stuff 2 years ago. I mean, it did—seemed like I did the same thing 3 times: one in Japan when I was in junior high school, one—once—once again in high school, and once again in college as a basic education. You did the same thing 3 times. Um ... so um ... um ... well, you know the interesting cultural phenomenon I think that I've learned is when—when I was 16 and every kid has to get a part-time job, and then certainly that was something that I was also supposed to do. And then first thing I did, with advice of my friends was to apply at—to grocery store as a sack boy. And they turned me down! I was quite, uh, shocked at that because I—you know, [laughs] why? [laughs] But, um, I decided, um, my uncle thought it might be good idea to—for me to go down to this local nursery. Uh, it was called “Kyoto Nursery.” Uh, uh, owned by a Japanese-American family, and I went over there and asked for a job. And Mr.—his name was Richard Ochiai—um, who was part of, um, Japanese battalion that fought in—in—in Europe that famous 449.

GF: Oh.

KA: [takes breath] But anyway, uh, Richard gave me a job. I mean, he—it wasn't—it didn't take very long for him—him to decide. And said “OK, Keiji, you—you come and work.” I remember the first day I went. I rode my bike to the nursery, and then I had to unload this semi-trailer full of um, um, [breath] uh, cow manure essentially—fertilizer off the truck onto a pallet. It took me all day and I was totally exhausted. [laughs] And I thought, “Well if this is work, it's really, really is lot of work.” [laughs] This is a physical labor I thought. I actually, you know—it was a good environment. Certainly it was better than being the sack boy at the grocery store, I would say. Uh, um, I've learned a lot, um.

So that kind of gave me a basis to—to—one of the basis why I choose my profession as a landscape architect. Um, I was—I was interested in environmental movement. I remember the first Earth Day. I remember reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* about the danger of pesticide. I remember at the nursery where we sold pesticide—insecticides to customers to kill, you know, garden pests, reading about all these things, and then warning the customers the use of a pesticide. And then Richard, my boss, used to say, “Why you spend so much time with the customer talking about pesticide? You could have sold the whole gallon of it. You're only selling little tiny 8 ounce of it!” And I said, “Well Richard, you know, these shelf-lives on these things are only 6 months. You know, they have a time —” “Well, it doesn't matter! If you spend that much time, you should sell a gallon size!” [laughs]

Um, so, um, um, uh, I worked there until I went through college. So I worked there for about 7 years.

GF: Wow.

KA: And it was a good experience. Um, so ... cultural thing. Yeah there was—there was a New Year celebration. Since my family ... wasn't really, super religious, like most the Japanese—

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Jap—most Japanese are very secular. Um ... you know, the—the—the religion that the—that Japanese practice, which is Buddhism and, uh, Shintoism, it's a way of life, a way of—of how people live. So, unlike Western religion like the Christianity, Judaism, or—or, uh, Islam, it's not in your face kind of religion. It's really more subtle than that. Uh, that doesn't mean that you—that you—you—you don't pay the priest or you don't d—you—you do all of that. But it's not—certainly it's—it's, um—it's accepted as a cultural, um, a routine that—that you do. Um ... so, part of that, there were festivals and—and uh—and I—I think when I came to United States, we—we did very little of that 'cause, you know, there was no place really to do it.

VD: [overlapping] Yeah.

KA: There's no culture that pre-existed. [takes breath] Um ...

[0:25:00]

And—and, I remember th—th—th—that alone I felt when—when—when, uh, uh—later when—when I had my own children. Um, I wanted to make sure that the children had some spiritual, um, [pause] uh, uh, uh, un, upbringing. So, yeah, I welcomed and—and my wife, or, their mother was—was, um, um, uh, Episcopalian. So I, you know—I was quite fine that—that they go to church. I was not fine when they—their little Sunday school start teaching about Noah's Ark. And I said, "Well, what is that about?" And, they said "Well it's cu—cute." But it's—"Okay, well, being cute and being spiritual is 2 different things," I said. But anyway, one is vil—one—one—I had two daughters, one is very—fairly religious. Uh, the other one is not. [All laugh] So is that a, kinda, I don't know how much more cultural uh, things that I—

GF: [overlapping] No, that's fine. That's fine.

KA: [overlapping]—practice. I think it's much, much later in my—my life that I think I promoted—cert—[takes breath] certainly when you're in teenager or a young adult, you know, your life focus is not about really—at least certainly for *me*, it wasn't about practicing my cultural heritage. I think I just was way too busy for what I was doing. What I was focused on mostly was about other things. I think, uh, now I partake in different cultural activities, uh, to promote certain issues at the cities—at the local level, and that is about cultural diversity, uh, heritage, and, uh—and making sure that the people understands that kind of the diversity that makes our society interesting and—and—and that people are fulfilled in their lives and that I—I do care much more about that now than ever.

GF: Was there any one organization specifically that really jumped out to you, or that you really enjoy working with?

KA: Uh, for my own cultural, uh, uh, uh, heritage, I—I think that—that there's a organization called Japan American Society. That's' the one that I belong to since 1980s. Uh, later on, I was part of the Japan—uh, Japanese American Citizens League, JACL, which is more like a civil rights group. I participated in the Asia Society, member of Asian Chambers. Uh, so that's kind of a more Asian-oriented. Um, but, um, I volunteer all the time about, um, uh, um, uh, with organization like Keep America Beautiful, uh, which is Keep Houston Beautiful, Scenic—Scenic America, which is Scenic Houston. And my focus really is to look at, uh, underserved

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communities, whether it's, you—you—often times Hispanic communities or—or Black communities, and to ... um, as a—being a planner and landscape architect, you know, to—to provide my skill and—and, uh—and... give them a vision, self—um—self-identification or actualization for themselves. So that they can—they could build their communities. Those are the kind of things that—that I do help. Um, I am interested in that. Uh, I think I should have cultural anthropologist or at least a cultural geographer. [VD laughs] I think that those things really, uh, do interest me [takes breath] for—for—for really helping people to look at their past, present, and future and then self-defining their own communities. And the community themselves are very different these days that—the—what we used to know as a hometown—people was born; people got married; people got educated; and people died; and people were buried in the same town—that's the kind of the—the—the—the norm that our parents and then your grandparents kinda lived. Today, none of that happens. People are born somewhere; they move somewhere; they are educated somewhere else; and they certainly die who knows where.

GF: Mm-hmm.

KA: Uh, so in those kinds of things, what is the real definition of our heritage, our past, and our own culture? What is the shift? What do we see in the future is very different, and I'm very interested in that.

[0:29:48]

GF: So, how did you get into architecture, though, like architect landscapes?

KA: Landscape architecture. Um. So, I told you that I was, uh, working at a local nursery, and I was heavily influenced about the 1970s, uh, environmental, uh—environmental movements. The Earth Day was, uh, first, I think, was in 1972. Um, you know, EPA was created under Nixon administration. So, there—there was this huge ... kind of the social—society—the cultural movement about protecting the Earth at the time and then I was certainly influenced by that. Um, um ... and uh, working for nursery, working with plants really gave me lot of enjoyment. Um, and I wasn't—I was um, I told you that people thought I was a math and—and—and science wiz and I was encouraged to—to take electronics. And my first major in college was in electronics, and I wanted to study computer science. If I had stayed with the computer science—this was before PCs—so I would probably be retired by now and have millions and millions of dollars. [VD and GF] But, that wasn't the path I took. I—I was bored with it. I didn't like the people that carried little—little calculators and carried these punch cards, the programming cards, [laughs] and I thought that was really silly. So I quit school and worked for 6 month and then, um, I decided to go back and study ornamental horticulture because I was the nurse—I was at the nursery. And then when I started ornamental horticult—horticulture at Cal Poly—because that's where [deep breath] that horticulture science was well known for—um, uh, one of the teachers suggest that I should study landscape architecture. So I did. I thought—and I enjoyed it. [takes breath]

And then later on one of the teachers in landsc—in—in Environmental, uh, Design school thought I should be an architect. And, you know, I tried that for a while, but then I decided to go back to landscape architecture. What [deep breath]—I discovered myself was that I was really interested in art. And ever since I was little, I was really, really, really good at social studies. I never had to study for it, but I always get a good grade. I loved to draw in little maps. Geography

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and history is something that I didn't have to study, read up. Everything just sort of, kind of streamed in and stayed in my head, where I had to study for—for math or science or in—in languages or that. So, when I started doing that, it—it became very natural for me and, uh, uh, so You know, that's what I do, color—just color beautiful little maps is my life. Um, and uh, and I enjoy it.

And—and I think that later, I discovered these ideas about involve myself in the communities. Um, really, uh, this whole notion of cultural anthropologist talk about, those ideas that cultural geographer—those are the kind of things that really interest me quite a bit. As well as sort of, uh, looking for these sustainable future and how we can live in—in—in a society. What is the environment? Built environment versus natural environment, how we relate to that and ... so there's lot of—more challenge—lot more knowledge that I need to acquire. Uh, so, I'm challenged by it, and I enjoy it every day.

GF: What do you think you would be if you weren't a landscape architect?

KA: [laughs] You know, I remember after, I think 2 years or a year after I graduated from college, you know, this—everybody go through this—or—you go through this, you know ... how many of years of schooling and all of a sudden you're in s—in—in—in, um—in a professional world. And it's—doesn't quite work like school and—and you don't know quite how to do things because, you know, all these years, people told you you were a good little student and all of a sudden you're not student anymore. And, I was disillusioned by it. Uh, and then I went to a—uh, a medical school, um, since my mother was a nurse and my grandfather was a doctor, and I thought I could have a medical career. I went to medical school and talked to the advisor. [takes breath] And they promptly told me that I have to redo my undergraduate work to go to medical school and that'll take me another whatever many years. [takes breath] And then—and he, uh, this advisor start asking me what I do and I start telling him what I do. He said: "Damn. That sounds like really interesting. I wish I could do that." So, yeah, it is kind of interesting. [takes breath] And, um, what do I do? So, I can't think of anything, uh, what I would like to do other than what I do today. [laughs]

[0:34:50]

VD: Great. So, did you come to Houston uh, for employment with the SWA Group?

KA: Yeah. I guess I did write that. I worked for that group uh, in California, in northern California and southern California. [takes deep breath] In the 1980 there was this thing called recession and, uh, uh, things got a little slow. And then—but then Houston was still busy because of the energy, uh, sector and they asked me to, um, consider moving to Houston. And, um, you know, I lived in Laguna Beach. Uh, uh, 2 blocks away from Main Beach, 2 blocks from my work. I walked to work. I walked to the beach, and, um life was good. I was 29. [takes breath] And then came to Houston.

[KA laughs] So—and I came to Houston, and then I worked for the—for—for that company for a year. And then people in that office, we start scheming and we decided to start our own office, uh, in a year later and—and—and, uh [takes breath] So that's what I did. At age 30, I had a company.

VD: Wow.

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KA: Um. [pause] And um—and the recession came in 1984—85. I went back to southern California, started a branch office there. And then, after that, um, I went to Tokyo, regrouped with, uh, old friends, started the Tokyo office. We're the first, um, uh, landscape architectural office to open a—a Japanese office as an American company. We did lot of work in Japan and, um—and Asia. So, those are lot of travelling years. I got married ... in 1990? So, and then the kids came soon after that. And, um, uh, travelling became ... much more difficult.

Um, 1995, I was in Kobe, Japan where the earthquake happened. I was in the earthquake, and I realized that I really shouldn't be doing much of the traveling when I had 2 young children at home. So, I curtailed my activities. And then my business went kind of sour ... with my partner. [laughs] And then 2003, I left the company. Um, and then year or so later, I started another company.

GF: Huh.

VD: So, before you left the SWA group—

KA: [overlapping] Yes?

VD: Do you remember what the working conditions were like? Like, your relationship with co-workers or your boss ...?

KA: Oh, I enjoyed it very much. Um. They were—they were very nice. I mean there are some certainly frustrating times, but [sniffs] we worked very hard. You know, I used to do all-nighters all the time. I remember working—these are pre-computer days, you know, you have to work everything out on a piece of paper. I enjoyed it. I—you know I was young, 20-something. Um, so, that's what I did. Um, uh, I think relationship was—was good. I—I think I've learned a lot. It certainly have shaped me quite a bit in—in those early years to—to be among the very best—best in our field. Um, and um, so, that was really good. Um, I don't have any, uh You know, it was definitely in the professional world. So ... unlike the 60s and the 70s those cultural stigmas and all of that was totally gone by then. Um, [quietly] there was nothing like that.

I think I—I rediscovered this—sort of the ... cultural stigma when I came to Houston in 1982. I remember in 1982 when things were really busy—I know that's probably before your time—but, um, I stayed up all night to finish this project for this client who li—who is one of the well-known names in River Oaks, and, uh, we got it done. And the client, uh, was—was very uh, uh, impressed and happy and they—he, uh, took us to a dinner, uh, uh, at Bayou Club or [with a drawl] “Bao” Club. That's—you know that is on the backside of Memorial Park. That's where they play polo. So that's one of the establishments kind of thing. And I remember coming, driving up there and then there was this antebellum, sort of the Southern style house. And—and you pull up and then there are these Black men dressed in white then came down and opened the door for you. And, uh, um [All laugh] Gosh! I've never seen anything like it except in the movies. You know, *Gone With the Wind*.

[0:40:15]

And, so I remember opening my big mouth at—during the—at dinner time to my client and said, “Well, you know, this is really, really, really nice.” Oh! It was the first time I ever had mint julep. I think that's the last time I had a mint julep, too. Mint julep is one of those Southern

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drink. [VD laughs] With the Bourbon and—and yes. Um. So it was the quintessential Southern experience, right? With the Black waiters in white. So I said, to—to him, I said, “Well, this is really nice. Now, if I come back next time, do I come through the front door, or the kitchen door?” [laughs]

GF: So, I had a couple questions —

KA: [overlapping] Yes.

GF: —back about your children. Um...

KA: [overlapping] My children. Yes?

GF: [overlapping] Yes, they're both daughters, correct?

KA: 2—2 girls.

GF: Where are they right now or what are they up to?

KA: [laughs] Good question! I wish I know. [laugh] Uh, the older one who's a—um, uh, 22. She'll be 22 in May. She will be also graduating. She's at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. It's a liberal arts—a little school. I think was—it was well known for the fact it was voted the most beautiful campus. Has a view of Mount Hood. The—uh—the well-known graduate is—is Monica Lewinsky. Do you know who that is? [laughs]

GF: Mm-hmm.

KA: Yes? Uh, um, so she studies, uh, biology and international affair. Dual major. She will be graduating this—this spring. And, uh, I, um, [sighs]—I don't know whether I should have done it or not. But I—I—um, she—she will be going back to graduate school. Uh, don't know exactly what or where or when, but I gave her a 2 year limit. And, uh, she will be working for our office in Austin, Texas. So that's what she'll be doing. [takes breath] She's rather independent. She's like her mother in many ways. Um, I think she—she—although she likes biology, but I—I—I believe her—her heart really is about learning about foreign culture and—you know, international affairs. [pause] She thinks she's doing bioterrorism studies because that's kind of biology and—and foreign affair—affairs put together.

My—my younger one, uh, she is uh—she'll be 21. She's 20 now. She is in Poughkeepsie, New York. She goes to Vassar. She studies art history. And, uh, they're 2 different personalities altogether. Um, but, um—but, um—but at the same time, um, they—they—they get along really well. Um ... so, uh, they're beautiful daughters. Um, uh, I—the younger one I don't know what she's going to do. Um, uh, just like me, they have no inkling of making money. That's not their—their interest. I think their interest is really doing what they want to do, what they like to do. 'Course that's what I've been saying to them all along. So that's exactly what they do. [GF laughs] I've never pressured them for making money. But they—you know, I mean, they—they work part time doing this or that to make the ends meet. So those are my daughters.

GF: And you said something that you were trying to raise them with the culture in mind or

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something? Did you—

KA: [overlapping] You know ...

GF: [overlapping]—also speak Japanese and English with them or ...?

KA: [sighs, pause] It's um ... I think, you know—this is not a cop-out, but maybe it is. Uh, when—when the—when the kids grow up with 3 languages, it's always nice if the mother speaks the language to them because in—traditionally the mothers are more available than f—dads. Uh, and I married—uh, their mother is a, uh, um, American girl from Kansas. So she—she, um—she's a typical sort of Caucasian American. Um, so—although, well, she's a Rice grad. She—she—her, uh—her degree is—she has a, uh, PhD in Linguistics. So she—she does speak many languages, uh, including Japanese. Um, but—but, um, uh, yeah. Uh ... my girls do not speak Japanese. The—they—they have spent plenty of time, uh, uh, uh, summers in Japan. But, uh, they only know kind of the playground Japanese.

[0:45:28]

GF: Mm—hmm.

KA: Uh, culturally [sighs] I mean I ... I don't know how much they know. It's, uh—or, I think they're interested in it, but I'm not really sure. They'll just have to discover that themselves in some way. Gave them plenty of opportunities. So, I was hoping that the older one would apply for the—the, uh, JET program which is the, um, Japanese Do you know about that where you teach one year in Japan in English and, um—you teach English and they pay for everything for you out there? But, uh, she didn't—she didn't do it. So I—I don't know.

GF: So you still keep in contact with them fairly often?

KA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I talk to them in weekly basis, and, you know, I—I still have to write checks and stuff. And so, you know, they have to be nice to me. [laughs]

[pause]

What, um—you haven't really asked tough questions but um ...

GF: Trying to see ... let's see then.

VD: Can you tell us more about the neighborhood where you first moved, um, to Houston? Like demographics or, um, like price of rent or price of apartments?

KA: Um, so I'm not one of those typical kind of a people that I—okay first place I moved into, I found a roommate. Um, and I had a house on Gr—uh—Groundstock (?) which is just not too far from Rice campus. Was very nice neighborhood. Um, and, um, yeah. Uh, my roommate was a finan—fin—worked for a bank. Texas Commerce Bank, that was called. Um ... so I—I, you know—my—my thing wasn't move into apartment complex or anything. I never had desire of doing that kind of a things. Um, my first house I—and then I lived in a townhouse, um, but was

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kind of in a—in a west side of town. I guess it's a white neighborhood. And then I bought my house in Houston in the area called Garden Oaks, which is north of Heights. Also white neighborhood, but borders this area of town called Independence Heights, which is African American community. It was the first African American community to be incorporated as a separate city and—and—but in 19—in 1916 I think by—it lasted for about 15 years, and then it was absorbed into city of Houston. Uh, so I—I remember—I remember that, uh, talking to those people and today as a professional, I work with the people in Independence Heights trying to find a way to preserve their history. [smiles]

VD: How exactly do you go about preserving their history?

KA: That's a good question because, um, you know, unlike older culture where you have these buildings that's been around for—for ages and ages, you know, Houston's history is relatively young. You know?

GF: Mm—hmm.

KA: 1920s, I mean less than hundred years. How do you preserve the history? It's largely about memory of history rather than the physicality of the history. Um, so how do you keep the memory of the history? How do you keep that community intact? Interestingly enough, the community is still intact. But community is again—is not about the place, but it exists in a much wider way. There are churches that people come back to together, but they don't really linger. They just go out again. So, uh, before segregation um, segregation of late 60s here, uh, people—you know, uh, African American had to stay together. After the segregation, those who are able to, they moved away. Uh, so you see, uh, black people live in Missouri City, Sugarland, places like that, you know, where it's more integrated in—in many ways. So, they're left with vestiges of past in Independence Heights, old churches, and—but then on the weekends, these parishioners come back from outside.

Uh, finally, there are younger people, ex—you know, the—these, um, millennial and younger people who are educated outside will come back and say, “Well, you know, this is where my great grandfather used to live.” They have some interest in doing that and I think they want to be thinking that they would like to move back *if* the right housing types are available, *if* the education for their childrens are available. So those are fundamental. *If* he grocery stores are nearby, *if* all the urban, uh, um—modern living conveniences are nearby, *if* all of that is satisfied, yes, this is So—so when it comes down to preservation of history is just really adaption of history and how do you—how do you pr—provide those kinds of, uh—how do you translate those historical facts into modern—modern times?

[0:51:15]

GF: Mm—hmm.

KA: I think what's dangerous in—in city like Houston where we have a very little regulation and very little public policies of the public, um, um, process is practiced. Those kinds of historic relevances is not something that people talk about. In other words, people will be just as happy to shop at a shopping center, uh, and, uh, see the movie that are just—you can see it anywhere. You know, when you got to a mall you have the same thing: Ann Taylor, Ross and Victoria's Secrets

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everywhere. It has nothing to really do with that place or that culture, so it's kinda nowhere-ville everywhere.

GF: [whispers] Yeah.

KA: And so how br—bring back sort of the cultural relevance back to a community because, you know, when you think of all the places in the world, when you think about those places that we consider hometown, there are cultural and historical relevance. So—and then—certainly even—even in a city like Houston in these little neighborhood, there is cultural and historic relevance. So how do we authenticate that? How do we preserve that? How do you really modernize those things so that today's culture is reflected on it and then that tomorrow's culture will be reflected on it? So that's really the challenge, right?

GF: [whispers] Yeah.

KA: But, often times, the investment world, the money that's necessary do to all of those things ... they don't really see it with that filter. They see it just with just a plain, you know, investment, dollars, returns. And, uh, so how do you create those? It's always a challenge. There are a lot of grants and there are a lot of other things that are available. So, what I usually talk about was to create enough capacity—community capacity within. So it's not about the global economy, but it's a localized—very localized economy. How do you—how do you tap into its own sort of the capacity within. 'Cause when you think about all those people—however small that community is—there are teachers; there are lawyers there are scientists; there are educators. And—and then if you put that together somehow, and there are economic, uh, um, uh, uh, abilities then if there are—somehow be able to pull with the political will—they can begin to do—however small, incrementally—build those things which then brings back that relevancy of culture. Um, so that's kind of what we talk ab It is—it's not something [snaps] overnight.

GF: [laughs]

KA: It is something that takes long time, but if people are focused on it, the people care about it enough—not just the tombstone that's out there—but if the people care about I often talk about, uh, what is the relevant culture? We talk about food a lot. It's the—just think about food. You know, you eat at Chick-fil-A or do you remember the kind of food that your grandmother use to cook?

GF: [whispers] Yeah.

[pause]

[0:54:40]

KA: So just imagine having a restaurant that talks about your grandmother's cooking more than Chick-fil-A. I—I'm not picking on Chick-fil-A, but... [VD laughs] There is—there is—there is a relevancy. And then—and then you may find out that other people might like it, too. By having that, then you tell other people the relevancy of your own culture. And that's how, you know, you go to—you go to the South Asian section of—of—of—of Houston and you have Indian food,

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um, and then you go to the—the new Chinatown and you have Chinese food, and you—you know, you go to Long Point and you have Korean food. You can certainly have different kind of a food of—uh, food that would talk about, you know, culture. [sniffs] Anyway the—that's kind of the example of it, but then there are others: music.

VD: [whispers] Yeah.

KA: Um, uh, and other crafts that people bring that sort of forgotten kind of like, uh ... oh, in—in the South their quilt culture is—is actually very well thrive. Um, people in the South used to make—the Black people used to make quilts because that's the only thing they can afford was the remnants. And some the quilt they have a certain styles and ideas. Uh, it's kind of a hidden in—in—in the culture. Same with the music. There's so much pop culture. There's this music is all about this—out in the—in the—in the—in the internet, but still these kind of a localized culture still persists. And how do you—how—how do you put a focus on something like that in today's, you know, internet and web—

GF: [overlapping] Yeah.

KA: —culture so those are the something that—that you fo—focus on. You use the media today to actually amplify those localized cultures.

GF: Do you ever feel odd going back to the Japanese culture being—

KA: [overlapping] Yes.

GF: —in America for so long.

KA: Yes. I do. I feel like I'm stuck in the middle of the Pacific [inhales] because I know that I am an American. But I know that I'm not. I don't—I don't relate to—to everybody in America, and same way with Japan. I know I'm Japanese, but I'm *not* Japanese. So yeah, I feel awkward. I feel different. I think I felt much more awkward before. Now, I sort of begin to understand, you know? Whether I am Japanese or American, what's most important is that I am who I am. And then that I bring certain amount of knowledge and skill to any situations and the people are going to s—look at it differently and they will find value, and I will try to create value for them. So, I feel more comfortable with it now, but that's a recent thing. When I was younger, I was—I—I had difficulty. I mean—I mean ... so different. I—I—I didn't quite know how to fit in or ...

GF: Mm-hmm.

KA: ... frustrated about that ...

VD: So how did you initially get involved in, um, all these community efforts like joining different business associations or, uh, just volunteer groups? Did you just decide, like, "I'm gonna go volunteer!" Or ...?

KA: Yeah just that!

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VD: Oh, cool! [laughs]

KA: Um, yeah. And—and then once you do that, I guess people find you. “Oh yeah, he's good” or “he's—you know he—he does it for this or that” Um ... it's um I enjoy, um, talking to people and listening to people. [sniffs] And these—sort of this—this social and cultural web, um, I find it very interesting. Um, and then I also see it in—in a environmental side of it. Built culture, built—built environment, uh, natural environment. I see all that. A web of composition and—and, um, I—I get really [snaps] into understanding all of that and that's really, really interesting to me.

[0:59:40]

GF: Regarding your job, I was kind of wondering what was your first project? And amongst the projects, like what was your favorite or stand out ones? Anything that really just kind of sticks in your mind?

KA: Um ... you know I used to say to people who didn't know anything about me, I said, “Well, you know, my well—most—most well-known project is the Moody Gardens down in Galveston.” I don't know that you know that one of not. It's there with the pyramids and stuff like that.

GF: Oh, yeah.

KA: Uh, but [sighs] I don't know what my favorite project is. Um ... it's—it just—I did—nothing really stand—I mean everything is kind of ... important and satisfying at the same time and then frustrating. I just was spending this morning, in fact, finishing a little bit of a work that I've done about 2 weekends ago. Uh, we created this huge volunteer effort with, um, Keep America Beautiful, Keep Houston Beautiful. Dow Chemical sent 2—over 200 volunteers. The mayor came out. It was a school in Gulfton area, the southwest Houston. [deep breath] There for—HISD [Houston Independent School District] for four year old. Uh, so it's just four year old—for mostly in the Gulfton area for the recent immigrants. So this is the first school for their first socialization or first entry into the school system. So these kids come from Latin America; they're from parts of Asia; they're from parts of Africa, some even from Europe. And, uh, this is a interesting thing that the—that the principal somehow found out about me and called me and wanted to create nature-based playground.

So, in the nature-based play ground is that—you know, playground, you know, most people think it's just about plastic and metal, color—brightly colored. [inhales] Well, there is the movement. Uh, it says that we have a nature deficit disorder among children, that children don't know how to play in nature. In—in evolution of pe—man, nature played a big part in socialization, cognitive development, not just the physical development because we are *of* the nature. We're not segregated from nature, but we have segregated ourselves from nature. Therefore there's a deficit. A deficit that manifest into ADA—ADD, to, you know, A—Attention Deficit Disorders to—to, um—to, um—well, lack of activity, the—you know, obesities and other things like that. So ... we just sterilized our environment. We—we just sort of fast food culture. Everything was just prepared, processed. Here it is; eat it. We—there—no inventiveness in those kinds of a situation. There are no sociali—socialization requirements. There are no risk, uh, uh, uh, uh, management among themselves. There are no recognition of any of that because we

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just sterilized ev—everything. So what happens when they get to the real world? The real world is not as sterilized as those playgrounds.

So idea is to insert nature back into the playground, slowly but surely. So that's—that's kind of what we been saying. It's certainly not perfect, but that's kinda what we did. Mayor Parker came out and we did a huge thing. It—it was actually the mayor's initiative, uh, the—the mayor's conference funding that came through with this cow (?) fertilizer (?) that made it a, uh—able to do this thing, uh. So that's what I did. Uh, totally volunteer, um, worked on it and, um You know, when you see kids You know, in—in HISD school—school like this they don't have a sandbox. [laughing] So we put the sandbox in. That's the—one of the most popular things the kids did. The water, the hills, the—the—the—the trees, uh, all of that, it's—it's something that, uh—that I certainly grew up with that. And—and—and—and then certainly, I value those days when I was a little kid, um, catching bugs and But, you know, these kids, four year old come from different culture, but mostly they live in apartments in southwest Houston. They have no nature whatsoever. There's just the parking lots and streets. No place to play. In fact some apartments will say no playground. No kids allowed with a playground. They don't like to take so-called liability. They don't think—kids are problematic and they don't want to bother with it. So, I mean that's the environment kids have to live in. It's awful!

[1:05:01]

And, um—and they're deprived of those early childhood cognitive development and physical development and socialization skill development. And—and then, you know, how—how do you expect these kids to grow up and thinking the world is like ...? And, uh—and—and, you know, who's responsibility is that? And, you know, whatever you can do, my motto is to do the small thing. The small thing always adds up to bigger things, but do the small thing. The small thing—do—doing the small thing is important than doing big things. So, uh, that's—that's—that's something that's on the recent project list that I think I feel pretty good about. Um, you know, creating butterfly gardens and, you know, just—just to see the kids just go through this wonderment of seeing this little butterflies and little—little pupa that's growing and breaking and turning into butterflies, and butterflies eating little butterfly milkweeds and, you know, simple things like that.

Uh, you know, I had an experience. I did—I work on—I worked on a one nature play thing, I put a lot of trees and a lot of nature things—things. This was a preschool. And, uh—and, uh, teachers came back and said, “Well we got a problem.” So, “What problem is that?” They said, “Well birds are here.” “Well good!” “No! We're scared of birds,” and this the ...[whispers] “Okay. You're scared of birds. [VD laughs] Just make a lot of noise they'll go away.” [laughs]

VD: So do you see landscape architecture as an art and something that is productive? Or can be used to, I guess, um, maybe—like you were talking about trying to encourage children to be more desensitized for lack of a better term?

KA: Yeah, um, uh, uh, I believe so. I—I—I believe that. I say that to my staff and my people about that. Um ...

GF: So it's less of an art but more like a social science almost? [overlapping] Or more of like an attraction?

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KA: [overlapping] Well it's—it's an art. An art in that sense that it is art is to be able to somehow interpret our own culture today and to be able to kinda draw upon its past and then somehow draw the future. If the art can be defined as that, then we certainly are artful profession, uh, because we're not just replicating the past. We need to interpret what—what we see. And, uh—and, yeah, that's the—I think the—preli—pr—primary role of what we do, or what I do. You know, I have to think about [deep breath] So if—if I have a client says, “You know, I want you to do this.” You know, it's about recreating the past. Oh, I remember in—in those times when things gets really overheated and like I was working in Japan and people say, “Well here's the picture. And the picture of—of, uh, some Mediterranean houses. And, I want you to create a village just like this, but in the mountains.” I said, “But this is—this is in south of France.” [VD laughs] Y—y—y—“No. Not doing that. Ask somebody else.” Um, so, um, yeah we have some responsibilities, but that—I mean, you know Um and then we have egos, our own is—we like to think that someday that people will think that what we did was relevant. [laughs]

[pause]

GF: So do you think that Asian Americans in your field are discriminated against here in America or is it just ...? Is there such a big impact or not really?

KA: Not enough. I think we could do—as a Asian American, we could do a lot more. I think we're only limited by—we are—discrimination is a little—strong word, but we've been stereotyped. And I think—and I—I—and I don't think it's fair to be stereotyped. But, at the same time, I see the stereotype all the time through my own eyes. Wh—so, okay [laughs] I grew up ... being told on a daily basis about assimilating, [scoffs] right?

GF: Mm-hmm.

KA: Assimilation at all costs. Speak English. Speak clearly. [laughs] Um ... do what Americans do. So ... and so, I'm—I'm—I'm—I'm sort of discounting what I have to say by saying that. Um ... but ...

[1:10:42]

In—in a multi-cultural society like ours, understanding others, to be a better listener, to have more of emotional intelligence, to connect to others, I think it's really, really important and necessary. When I see the worst part of the Asian stereotype is when people have no skill in displaying that kind of emotional intelligence. They're still stuck in the old paradigm and can't get out of it. And, well I say, “Open your eyes. Touch the others. See other people. And look at yourself. And, you know, [smiles] listen to what others say. Be emotionally connected.” Yes, we all come from variety of dysfunctions [smiles; laughs] No matter what culture it is; we bring that dysfunction—is—even within our own families. We have this blinders on all the time, with the dysfunctions walking around, not seeing at all. Well, you see that in a larger way. And that's when ... it gets interpreted in the wrong way and hence sort of the stereotype. Um, okay so more—more milder stereotype of how Asian kids do best in school. Well they do. Well largely because the parents are very involved in it. They insist. And in a—in a way that we come with this—sort of the need to please our parents. We are brought up with that stronger DNA than American kids. Um, because, you know, I go back [rumbling sound] with papers. Say,

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“Look! I got 96!” And they said, “What happened to 4 points?” [laughs] Where most American families, “Oh, you got a 96!? That's A! That's *great!* Let's go have lunch!” It's you know—in, you know, our cultures is—it is, “What happened to the 4 points? Well, you better do better next time.” [whispers] “Gu—oh, yes.”

Um so that—that—but—but, uh—but—okay so that's the funny side of the stereotype that people makes fun of. But the real thing is that—that there is this desire for the parents to—to make sure the kids have better lives than—than theirs. And those are the kind of things I think that—that—that in America we call that love for our children. The love is inter—love is one of those words that could be interpreted in very different ways and by—by different culture. And I think it's—it's that the love is so simp—simplified. And then maybe it is—it should be simplified, but it's very complex in a family, and it is very dysfunctional. Yes, very dysfunctional, you know? [low] “You have never told me that you love me 'cause, well, you know becau—well, you should know that I love you.” “Well, you didn't ever told me.” Stuff like that. Um ... and I—I—I don 't know which is right or wrong, but I think that [sniffs] uh—what was I say? Okay, okay, okay, so the—the dysfunctions, the—the stereotype. The way it happens.

I think that ... we could do better. I mean I—now I'm being—sound like a very typical Asian. Say, “Well, yes. We can do better.” [laughs] In—in—in and in really kind of e—educating and framing that so it's not about assimilating to the pre - existing culture of so-called America, but it's really interpreting our old culture. Like—like—like I was saying about the community, you know? How do we now re-interpret that to today and how to we really translate that to tomorrow? And I think that it's—it's—it's sort of the responsibility of all of us, uh, parents *and* kids, to know where we're going. Of course, greater responsibility falls on the parents. I see so many first generation parents just behaving and then carries that dysfunction from the old world, not being happy or recognizing what this thing is all about. And, you know, what is this thing is all about? I know it's very difficult, and it's—yes, it's full of contradictories out there. [laughs] But, uh—but nonetheless, I think you should—that all of us should have a certain set of compass that points us to the right direction. If you have that, then there shouldn't be any stereotypes or any misunderstanding. Um, and, um—but that—that goes all—you know, not just the Asian culture—

GF: [overlapping] Yeah.

KA: [overlapping] That's true with the—with the hillbillies, and—and—as—the Black culture and—and Latino culture. I mean we all have that. Well, maybe that's what makes this society kind of interesting. But I think the little bit of empathy goes long way.

[1:16:45]

GF: [whispers] Yeah.

VD: [whispers] Definitely. [pause]

KA: Does it sound like a cultural anthro [VD laughs] lecture or something? [laughs]

VD: Yeah. [KA laughs]

GF: You'd be a good professor.

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VD: [laughs] Okay, anyways, um ...

GF: I think we can wrap it up then. Thank you so much for everything and ...

VD: [overlapping] Yeah, definitely.

KA: [overlapping] Okay.

GF: I think really it's just an interesting story. We thank you a lot for this.

KA: You haven't really asked those questions like, you know, "How is your marriage?" And "How was the relationship like?" "How's the cultural relationship is like?" Those are the harder ones.

GF: If you'd like to answer ... [KA laughs]

VD: Feel free, I mean ... [laughs]

KA: [laughs] Well, I could talk to—'bout it little bit. Um, so I told you that my kids—my—my wife, uh, is a, um—a Caucasian American from Okla—uh, not Oklahoma—Kansas, southern Kansas. Her, um, mother, uh, is half-Nordic and half-Irish. Her father's side is ... Scottish, English, and some German, and then who knows? There might be some Indians in it, too. So it's typical of Midwest American. Grew up in farming town, and opportunity brought them to Houston. That's where her father, um, a sail (?) maker, had a business down in Clearlake. And that's where she grew up in Clearlake and went to Rice University. Smart kid right? Just like you guys. [smiles] Um, so our marriage So I think what attracted me to her was ... well I—there was a phase; I was really interested in linguistics, you know? I—I kinda, you know, because it's geography and culture.

GF: Yeah.

KA: You know, where do people come from? Why do we speak different languages? And how does that really historically overlaid with—with the cultural transformations? The—the—uh, the agriculture, war, all that sort of thing. So, uh, that's how I got to know her. Um, ac—but actually her mother was the, uh, office manager at SWA group that I worked in. That's how I got to know her. For her part, I think attraction is that—that she was al—also interested in different culture and I, you know So, um ... so, uh, we dated for 8 years before we got married. It's like ... why did I wait 8 years to get married?

[1:20:00]

Um so—so there was a sign of issues there that I don't think we resolved very well before we got married. I think we—we had this—this innate, um, um, biological desire to have family or something that—that overshadowed our concerns about our own relationship. So I don't know. Maybe that was it. But I think the biggest—I still—and I t—tell my children this, that I felt—I'm—I'm—sti—I sti—I feel that it's one of the biggest failures in my life not to make that

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marriage work. And I think it's—it's back to the what talked about empathy and—and sort of over [sigh] Um, uh, go—going beyond sort the cultural paradigm or this We all come from this—this unspoken base of—of culture that we inherited and we grew up with from my parents. You know, this is ... we—we have this innate vision of what your fath—you know, father is supposed to be; my mother is supposed to be; my—my grandpare—you know, the behavior and how you reinforce, and therefore you have this family. However dysfunctional that might have been, that's kinda what I knew as a family structure. Therefore, no matter how much you recognize that is dysfunction that most the time, in automatic response, you replicate this—this total dysfunctional mess. And I think that's what I did. [laughs] That's what I did. Um ... and, um—and then I think in—in—there is dysfunction from her family. So you overlap with that and—and the communication style, stylistic dis—difference between 2 of us, and—and—and that it just wasn't a good match.

So I—you know that's what I tell my children about that. Um ... it's not something that we couldn't work it out. I think we could still work it out if you wanted to. But, you know, most people don't really try that hard. It's just sometime, in conscious mind, yes, we can deal with it. But, you know, 80% of the time, it's unconscious response that, you know, me (?) When you're getting home and go through all that and put your feet up on the sofa, and then you—you're consciously thinking about the relationship? Or you just So it's, you know, how to make that into unconscious response, those—those emotional kind of a—a—a—a—a engagement? It's really tough.

Uh, I wish I'd learned that earlier in my life so that I have better practice. And, uh, something that we don't really actively tell—certainly I didn't act—I mean I do now; but when they were younger, I did not actively tell my children. Um, because then ... then you also repeat those sort of that, uh, unrehearsed, uh, uh, uh, you know, this—this, uh, automatic response to things that—that may or may not be the right thing. Even how mu—even how much you care about the other person, how much love that you have for them, uh, it—it reverts back to something that, you know....

No, there were no anger issues. There are no, you know, abuse issue or anything like that. But, I mean those are more—much more—yeah, more ... significantly worse kind of a dysfunction. But—but even in a—in a small gesture, the small things that you say, those—those meant to be a joke, but it's a ha—very often, um, harmful comments. All of that. We just seem to build that kind of wall around us, you know? We just keep building these wall behind—in—in—in ourselves and not recognizing that those wall been built. Um ... so how do we tear down that wall right? “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall.” We all do. Um, in—in—individual way, in—in—in a community way, in—in our own culture, we all kind of do, you know? Just a misunderstanding of these things, and of course—

[1:25:24]

GF: [overlapping] Mm-hmm.

KA: —if you can tear that wall down, then we wouldn't have this certain—certainly conflicts and wars and all the other things. Uh, these terrible things that we do as a human, and then we seem to reinforce that on everyday basis. It's written in Bible. It's written everywhere else that, you know, they said, “Love your neighbors, but at the same time hate your neighbors and kill each other.” You know, that's kind of what it says. It's awful. [laughs] But we do it in a small way, too.

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Uh ... so, um, as a landscape architect or as a—as a parent, as a father, you know, I try to do the small things, I think, just to see how—how it could be different. I try to help people in my own office. They also bring dysfunction of their own. I just see them building their own walls. They're building their own limitations. There's—if you somehow could see past that. You're only limiting yourself, you—you know? And—and—and why do you do that? Uh, of course that happens in totally unconscious area, you know? And—so I do admire people who have—able to take away that wall and to be able to go the extra miles and—and—and towards fulfillment of—for others, and um, uh ... that's—that's the stuff. [laughs]

VD: Do you still keep in contact with your ex-wife?

KA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I do. I talk to them—talk to her all the time.

VD: Okay. All right, well then.

KA: Thank you.

VD: Thank you for your time.

KA: [overlapping] Yes, thank you.

KA: You're welcome.

VD: You seem pretty busy with all your projects. [laughs]

KA: I am.

VD: But yeah, thanks again for coming and ...

KA: Well, so, this is kind of interesting. Um, well good luck with your study.

[1:27:43]

End interview