

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

Interviewee: Cookie Joe

Interviewers: Victoria Chen (Junior), Stephanie Chou (Sophomore)

Date/Time of Interview: November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014, at 10:15AM

Transcribed by: Victoria Chen, Stephanie Chou

Audio Track Time: 01:15:14

### Background:

The interviewee's name is Cookie Joe. Born in Houston, TX in 1953 to a Chinese immigrant father and a mother of Irish descent, Cookie went to local public high schools while also attending dance and performance classes. After graduating high school at the age of sixteen, Cookie attended the University of Houston for two years to continue her dance studies.

While at University of Houston, Cookie participated in the Houston Miss Chinatown competition two times. Cookie won the local crown in 1972 and went on to participate in the National Miss Chinatown competition in San Francisco where she was crowned Second Princess. Cookie is still involved with the Miss Chinatown pageant in Houston, even chairing the event for many years.

After Cookie's crowning, she moved to New York City for a period of time to pursue dance professionally. In 1976, Cookie moved back to Texas to get married as well as open her own dance studio in Alief, TX. Through financial support from her father, Cookie was able to realize her true calling to teach; since 1976 she has opened two more dance studios.

Cookie is also an active community contributor. She has done notable service for the Star of Hope Mission for the Homeless, the Joy Ministry, the Hope for Three, and the local Alief school district. She has received numerous awards and nominations, including the George and Martha Bush Points of Light Award, Dance Teacher of the Year, and the Houston Texans Community Quarterback.

Currently, Cookie co-owns the Cookie Joe Dancin' School in Sugar Land, TX. She is still very active, dancing and teaching seven days a week.

### Setting:

The interview centers on her childhood, personal anecdotes, and experiences during the mid to late twentieth century. Much attention is given to her community service and volunteer work, as well as her experiences as Miss Chinatown.

The interview was conducted in Cookie Joe's Dancin' School in Sugar Land, TX. She recounted her experiences of being one of the few biracial Asian Americans growing up in Houston, her performance arts and dance teacher career, and her volunteer services as well as outlining her familial history.

Interviewers:

Victoria Chen is a junior at Rice University majoring in Asian studies and minoring in business. Originally from upstate NY, she now lives in Torrance, CA when she is not at school. As part of research for a course, she interviews for the Houston Asian American Archives.

Stephanie Chou is a sophomore at Rice University, majoring in Architecture. Prior to moving to Houston for school, she lived in Los Angeles, California. She completed this interview for the Houston Asian American Archive as a part of the Asian American Communities course she is enrolled in.

Interview Transcript:

**Key:**

VC	Victoria Chen
SC	Stephanie Chou
CJ	Cookie Joe
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

**VC:** So let's just start with um; state your name and um, where you're from.

**CJ:** When I was born, my name was Karen Elizabeth Joe and although we've never used that name, that was—well that's what's on my birth certificate. And I was born in 1953 in Houston, TX. And then when I was a month old, uh, just from, uh, a whole 'nother interesting scenario, my sister started calling me Cookie, and that was—it stuck. So I've never actually gone by the name Karen Elizabeth Joe. And so when I was eighteen, I changed it legally to Cookie... at the same time that my father changed his, uh, Chinese name to an English name. So he went from Beng Chong to Lawrence, so that was a period of time—that was when I was eighteen. So that's how I became Cookie. And I've always been Cookie to friends and family, and now, uh, once I open my school... well, actually once I started dancing professionally, uh, I was always known as Cookie Joe. And then I always had to say J-O-E. It's not a southern middle name [chuckle], it's an actual last name.

**VC:** Um, so where specifically in Houston did you grow up and did you move around at all? And what specific areas of Houston did you live in?

**CJ:** When I was born, uh, we lived on Kaplan Street, which was in the north side. And my father and his brother had a grocery store, so first we lived in a little white house that I've only seen pictures of but I, you know, don't have a real vivid memory of that, and then we moved next door to the grocery store. So my very earlier memories are,

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Daddy worked next door, and you know, we had to stack groceries, and you know, break up boxes and, you know, fix the coffee for the morning, so we did, uh, little chores. We learned, actually, how to count and spell at the kitchen... at the, uh, grocery counter. So my mom would use coins from the cash register to teach us math. And she would bend pieces of cardboard from the boxes to I had to learn how to spell 'Elizabeth' 'cause they wanted me to know how to spell my middle name, which took forever because it was such a long word. So, um, I remember her taking cardboard and, um, folding it in squares so that I would have the letters all in a row. So ah, the grocery store experience was a big, um, part of our growing up... and then we moved, when I was in third grade, to what would be considered the Lazybrook Oak Forest area which was, uh, right near the Heights and we moved to a school that was very interesting, that we were the only Chinese family there. There was one other Chinese family, the Ngs... there was one other gentleman there that was, um, my age, that, uh, was there and then my family was the only other, uh, Asians there. So that was an interesting— when we left um, the first neighborhood, most of the people we were in school with were either Hispanic or African American, so being in a school where *everybody* had blonde hair, you know, was a big cultural shock to us. And of course, it was probably a cultural shock for the rest of them to see us. So there—there was a definite, um...experience of... being different. And then we, uh, went—so we stayed in that area up until, um... I guess when I got married and graduated and moved away, that sort of thing. So but that was the area where I grew up.

**VC:** So what was it like living in your household? Did you have any siblings?

**CJ:** I have a sister. And my mother is, um, has uh—is of Irish descent. And she was born in Mississippi, and grew up in Louisiana. So I had the, you know, the southern belle...you know, cornbread, collard greens life, as well as the fish heads and pig's stomach and, you know, dim sum life.

So it was an interesting bicultural experience to have both. Um, my sister and I both were in theatre at a very young age. So I started dancing when I was 22 months old, my sister was three. And um, we just, that was something... I think my mother wanted to make sure that my sister and I had some sophistication that she didn't have growing up in Mississippi. So, um, she used dance as a—we had modeling lessons and dance lessons and diction lessons and all of the things that she just, really just wanted us to not sound like country hicks. And with a father with a thick accent, and with a mother with a real southern accent, you know, it was her determination that we would be, um, a little bit more balanced, I guess than... and particularly because we had chosen theatre, you know, it being important to us, you know, having diction and articulation, stuff like that was important.

So, um, we were dancing at about the age of nine, there was an ad in the paper they were looking for—and back in those day they called us 'Oriental,' that was the approved word, they were looking for an Oriental child, who could sing and dance. So we went to the audition, and that was my first professional role, and I started performing, uh, then, and so every summer instead of what most people do—vacations—we just ended up in a, either a

community theatre or a professional theatre event for the whole summer. I ended up going to summer school every year, because I wanted to get out of high school early so I could pursue my career. But I was really fortunate that I had really good training— all of my dance training and theatre training was, you know, very um, professional and all leading toward me becoming a dancer. So, that, you know, so that's how we got, how I got to where I am, as far as dancing professionally. Whenever I, um, was in New York for a while and I just kept wanting to come home and also feeling the need that I wanted to teach... so at the age of about 24, my father, um, invested in a rental, you know, a lease space and my sister was the general contractor and so she had it built out and my cousin Victor was the architect... so it was a family affair to build my first school. And that was in, y'know 38 years ago, and now you... this is the, you know, newer version of it now. I've moved... this is now my third location. And Sugar Land is great because it is a very high, uh number of young children, and young families, and the economy is great here. So it's a wonderful place for us to be.

I've been able to use my professional world to, um, also become part of the community. I, um... for twenty years I've been in a contributor for the Star of Hope mission for the homeless. We have actually a room there named after us because we've donated so much money there. We're also a part of a group called the Exchange Club of Sugar Land which is a service organization that services children, particularly, uh, stopping child abuse, uh, and seniors, trying to take care of the needs of senior citizens that are neglected and um, military... retired military—patriotism, teaching the children about patriotism. We hand out American flags, you know, to children, every—every patriotic holiday. And it gives us a chance to use our, uh, exposure and our high profile performance world, to also bring awareness to children and organizations that need us.

**VC:** Okay, um, we'll definitely come back to that later, but we still wanted to go back and um talk more about your childhood, um, and we wanted to go back to, I guess, your parents, and how they came to come here to Houston, and how they met and....

**CJ:** My father came from uh, a village in China, he and his brother came alone. His sister was uh, disabled and apparently during that time, if there was a disability that, that would keep you from getting to come over to the States. And they came in the boat, and they came to California first, and uh, through the process of ending up in Houston, the first thing that happened is my father was put to work in a grocery store. The people that were gonna take care of him, they thought was going to send him to school... the people that um, took care of him actually... made him a babysitter and so by the time, when he was eight years old he was working in the grocery store, taking care of the family of the people that were taking, you know, that were letting him live there. And his older brother, um, took very good care of him, and you know, so... It's interesting because I'm the baby of the family and he's the baby of the family, so my father and I have a great, um, connection. And um, the... whole process of working in a grocery store his whole life, that's what he became so good at, so he became a very successful grocerman. Um, I'm not sure what year, but my father went to a restaurant because someone there owed him money and when he went in there, he met my mother. And my mother was the cashier. And he, I quote, was, 'she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen'. And it was a period of time when, uh, his older

brother had gone back to China and got, they called a picture bride or a catalogue bride and he, uh, paid a dowry and everything... so the family was saying it was time for my father to do the same thing. And he just um, was a little bit of a rebel, and you know, when he saw my mom, that was it. He decided that's who he was gonna marry. And he, against, um, the cultural thing, he also just wanted daughters. And he was very proud that he had two daughters. And uh, but growing up, it was, uh, interesting. We uh, my father worked all the time. And it was his job to, you know, support us. So it was my mom's job to, you know, raise us and she was... she was the original tiger mom, when she wasn't the Chinese one, you know. She was very di—she was very disciplined and very, um, demanding. But at the same time, she let me believe, follow my dream. She drove us to dance classes, I mean, she literally drove us constantly... wherever we needed to go to be, in a show... or on stage, or um, in a rehearsal, or in class. You know, there was nowhere she wouldn't go. I remember we were living in the north side and a lot of our, um, jobs were even all the way out here in Sugar Land, which seemed like it was another town at the time. And it's funny that I would end up living right where we did some of our first work... but uh, my sister and I did work in the grocery store uh, quite a bit. And it was um, you know, wasn't that much fun. It was— but there were some places that we used as playgrounds, like we would put all the boxes together and build forts. I think that's how my cousin ended up being an architect, is that we would build things. Uh, we always had, uh, pets that were actually—I didn't realize they were supposed to be watchdogs—to protect the um, area. And it turned out that it was... you know, those were, actually our, what we considered our pets. And, uh... just constantly being in class, either in school, in performing arts class, or working the grocery store. And uh, you know once we moved to the area, you know, that was in the Lazybrook area, forest area, um, things changed a bit.

We—we just never saw my dad. He was working all the time, seven days a week. And uh, so it got to where there would be kind of a disconnect between, uh, the family, only because we just never saw him. And now it's interesting, that as an adult and as being the director of the company, I really do encourage the families to keep that balance and have dinner with Daddy, and not let him feel left out. Uh, as we got older, my father and I reconnected to the point where, you know, we were just inseparable. So that—you know, it all came around, you know, in a full circle. But, uh, once we moved to the new neighborhood, uh, it was interesting because there was the first experiences of prejudice that I can remember.

And the first...and it wasn't really ugly, it was just the fact that we were just different. And how children react to things that they're not comfortable with, they're not sure about. And then, uh— really, my goal was to get out school as fast as I could so I could move and get to, get to New York and, you know, dance. So I did graduate from high school and the age of 16, went to U of H to um, *try* [chuckle] you know to be a college student, but my heart was just never there. I did do a lot of performances while I was at U of H but I didn't... you know, once I realized that um, I was going to school to be a performer and turning down jobs as a performer, I realized that it didn't make any sense so I, you know, I dropped out after two years and ended up dancing everywhere in New York. And then ending up teaching... uh, it was around that, about that time that I, uh, entered the Miss Chinatown pageant. And that was a big turning point because that opened up all kinds of opportunities and doors for me as a performer.

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**SC:** Did you feel the same prejudices from grade school when you started going to college? Like, did that prejudice transition?

**CJ:** No I, uh, actually felt that the most prejudice—and when I say prejudice, I say it wasn't mean-spirited, it was children making jokes, and so there was never any ugliness about it. I never felt, uh, the ugliness that you know I know some people probably did, but I just know that they didn't know what to make of us. One of the biggest questions, particularly I think, to be honest, I got just as much... um, I got some negative influence also from the Asian community not accepting the fact that we were half. So it came from both sides. Whenever you're bicultural, you know, you're—you don't really fit in. And you know, *now* of course, there are hundreds and thousands of people that look just like me. But growing up, people always were saying, 'What are you? Where you from?' you know? 'What are you?' And I do happen to speak Spanish so people, you know... you know, would think I was Hispanic, um, at the time we were growing up there weren't very many Filipinos that I knew. Uh, people, as I grew up, as an—as a young adult, I fit in more to the Filipino community because I'm very outgoing and very gregarious, which was more fitting into the, you know, more of a Filipino—I'm not reserved at all, and you know, a lot of the Ch—my peers who are Chinese were a lot more reserved than I am. And also I had a lot of, I had also prejudice from people who, um, did not necessarily approve of me being a performer. You know, because my generation, you went to school to be a doctor or a lawyer, pharmacist, you know, someone who was going to return the favor to their parents for all the work and all the grocery store work, and all the restaurant work that they did to put us through college. So, um, you know, I broke the form in that co—I put myself through college.

And um, my parents were very supportive, just you know, *whatever you want to do, just be happy*, and so I didn't have the kind of pressure that a lot of... I know the Asian children did. When I first started my school, um, it was hard to get, uh, children's parents to allow them to dance as many days of the week as the children wanted to because it interfered with their—their studies. But interestingly enough... but they would let them practice their piano for eight hours a day. So for some reason violin and piano was okay but... you know, wearing tights and being in a dance situation was not the same. So I—I just thought that was an interesting, uh, comparison. But, uh, I, like I said, none of it was mean—spirited as I was growing up. And as I got older, um... I was more about people and personality, so I didn't really feel the um, group mentality, of how does a group feel about me or how do I feel about a group. One thing about is, that I've noticed that I've—because of being bicultural, we're pretty colorblind. I mean, you know, we grew up going to Mississippi and, you know, in the South. People are always asking my mother, *were we adopted?* 'Cause my mother has green eyes and blonde hair and my father was busy at work... so it would just be my sister and I and my mother in Mississippi. And, 'You adopted some little girls', 'No those are mine,' you know because we looked nothing, at the time, we looked nothing like our mother. Now, when you look at my mother and I, you can see the family resemblance even though our coloring is very different. We have a lot... we do look a lot alike.

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**VC:** Um, so you went to college at U of H for a little bit of a while,

**CJ:** About two years, uh huh.

**VC:** For about two years. Um, what finally made you want to pursue your career, what was the final...point?

**CJ:** I think the Miss Chinatown pageant was... that was one thing. 'Cause uh, once I um, placed in the pageant, I got to go to the—go to a tour of the Orient. And I had to drop out of school to do that. So once I got out I just... didn't go back. So that was it. But um, that which left you time to study and have class and travel and I went to New York and did some more there. And uh, but I did have this constant nagging—calling— that I wanted to teach. And I think that was it. And I was fortunate because not many... not all dance teachers who own business... were professional dancers. And so I have that, um background, and that experience that made it possible for me to, um, create a high, very high level of performing arts school and not just a neighborhood dance school. So that was, that was my goal... is to have a school that, I always said, that all other school would measure, you know, we would be the standard that other school would be measured by. And that certainly was important to me and I think we achieved that.

**VC:** So to just like get the timeline all right, um, when did you first open your first dance studio and where?

**CJ:** In 1976, in, uh, Alief.

**VC:** In Alief... Alief, TX?

**CJ:** Uh—huh, right.

**VC:** And that was um, after your time that you spent living in New York, and then you came back.

**CJ:** Uh huh, oh yes, right.

**VC:** Um, there—so the reason you came back was...

**CJ:** I came back actually and got married. I actually was married at um, at the time that I opened my school... And, um, so I think that part of it, was I decided I wanted a normal life. And I, uh, was dancing but then when I opened my school and the thing that was interesting is that I followed in my father's—my father's footsteps. I was working seven days a week, I was never home... 'cause I, when you own your own business, it just... 'cause, you know, that how, that's what I, that's how I remember what you do... in other words, you know, it's almost like person that works the hardest wins. So, you know, working seven days a week was just... normal. And um, but uh, so I—that was my main thing is I was working as a performer in uh, one of the theaters here in Houston. And met my husband... former husband. Um, and uh, you know decided to settle down and you know at that point that was the idea was— well now it's time to open up a school. My parents divorced at that time and my father wanted to do something that would keep the family connected. So we started an investment company that involved my mother and my sister and I. And the first investment was to open, you know, underwrite my school. So that was a great gift, because it's... you know, that, well I think probably \$27,000 that he invested at that time, his, you

know, created a life time in a—of work that is more— way more— than just a job. But, uh, so that was in 1976 and I've been teaching ever since. And starting as a very small school and um, this is when being at the right place, at the right time, and the right nationality, uh, worked for my favor because at that time was whenever Mayor Lanier was in office. And the words 'cultural diversity' became the buzzwords. Every event, *everything* had to have an African—American, an Asian—American, a Hispano—American... I mean every event had to have some... what we used the word, 'token.' And I um, had resented it at first because it was like, I knew how good we were, and I resented that we got the job because of that. And then I changed my— well actually, my father changed my framing... reframed it as... you know, that being Asian, or being Chinese got the door open, but the quality of my work was what was gonna let us walk through the door. And I thought that was an important thing to think about and to tell my kids about. And when I say kids, I mean my students... so that they would know that, you know, never to *rely* on it, but also to never, uh, resent it, too.

**VC:** Okay, um... so you mentioned that you had... or I guess just going back to... what, um, made you want to take dance seriously, that transition from just taking dance classes?

**CJ:** It was probably that... the audition for the show. My teacher— no, the choreographer for the show that I auditioned for when I was nine years old, was Patsy Swayze. And Patsy Swayze had the kind of school that it was not— all of her dancers went on, or most of her dancers, went on to dance professionally. And because she was the choreographer of that show, she saw me and she said, 'You're very cute, you don't have very good technique.' So, uh, I quit dancing at the school where I was, and moved to her school. And interestingly enough, it was, um... I was a beginner, after seven years of training, I was a beginner. And I had to work very hard to come up... to rise up to the level of the other dancers that were my age. And I did that and that was an important thing. Um. But she was the one that provided, just by being associated with her school, it provided opportunities for us to become very, um, exposed to a lot of different performing opportunities. Whether it was doing an event for, uh, George Mitchell, you know, who was a big oil man here, or to do a performance... I was in the performance at the music hall when they tore it down. I was in the first performance of Jones Hall when they built it. I was in the very first performance of the Theatre Under the Stars. I was in the first performance for the Hobby Center. Um, and I was in the first performance of the Wortham.

So... basically my talent and my experience is all interwoven into the whole history of the theatre district in Houston. I went to, uh, acting classes at the Alley when it was called the Merry-Go-Round Theatre, when it really was *in an alley*. So... um, and so you know, that's— that's really why I'm so connected and so passionate about being in Houston and being part of this community. And we are part of the theatre community, we're part of the Asian community, we're part of the arts community. And, um, and also now I'm are part of the non-profit, uh, community service community. And that's exactly where, you know, I guess I dreamed where I'd be.

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**VC:** Great, do you want to talk a little bit more about your community involvement and um, how you initially got started with um, getting more involved in that?

**CJ:** Um, I was friends with a sculptor, and the sculptor was having a piece of work, um, unveiled at uh, his, where he had, who had commissioned him. And it was George and Barbara Bush had commissioned him to do a piece for the Star of Hope Mission for the Homeless— which I knew nothing about. And I showed up there, and um, as I was sitting in the audience watching it, they had a young lady read a poem. And she was one of the residents there. And it just made me realize I could teach here, 'cause it had a flat surface, it had children, and there was a need. So I, uh, volunteered my services to uh, start teaching classes there. And that was twenty years ago, and I'm still teaching classes there. And uh, then I found that I could do, um, performances and use the proceeds from the performance to help supplement and uh, donate to the Star of Hope. And I always make sure that it goes to children's services. And then they asked me, would I be interested in helping underwrite a room that they call the Intake Room. So when women and children are in crisis and they go to the homeless shelter, it takes hours to process them [clears throat]. And the room was um... like a grey cell— cinderblocks, and it was just not a very warm or welcoming place. So, uh, we underwrote uh, the refurbishing of that room. And so they named it after us. Well, our ballet company is named Ballet Grace. So we decided to name the room, a Place of Grace. And it was very interesting,

I've recently been nominated for the Houston Texans Community Quarterback Award. And they had to do research on my involvement and it turns out that um, this little dance school has donated over \$100,000 to the Star of Hope in the past twenty years. And I didn't even know that, and uh, what was very cool, because I'm a very smart Chinese businesswoman, is that I only gave them money during the months when they had matching grants, so my 100,000 is actually 200,000. So, you know, that's, at least I got credit for 200,000. So I thought that was uh, was great. But, uh, so we're doing all kinds of performances and work for them. Well when we moved out here to Sugar Land, um, I found that um, it was hard to get corporate funding, or corporate involvement with my non-profit here. And they finally said, 'Well because you're real well-known in Harris County, but you're not that well-known in Fort Bend County.' So that's why we joined the Exchange Club and became very involved with child advocates. Um, we do a career day out here. We do, uh, motivational speeches for elementary and middle schools about careers. This is— has a very high Asian community in Sugar Land. And so it's exciting for us to be a part of that, that we can encourage, you know, all the children, but particularly children who... and it's an interesting thing because we have children who are from overseas, we have first generation like we are, and then we have the ones that are Americanized, that have no real emotional connection to being Chinese except that they look like us. So it's an interesting thing that we want to um, uh, keep our children correc—connected to that culture. We have a company called the Asian-American Dance Company. And that was one of our first companies that um, is our non-profit. And the mission statement is that we're gonna build, uh, bridges between all the communities... uh, and the different cultural committees— communities, and bring awareness of the differences and the similarities between, you know, our cultures. You know, the, uh, strong family connection that we have that we are so involved with our families is very similar to

the Hispanic and the African American, I mean it's just, there is a definite, um... you know, the—the desire to, uh, strive for excellence. You know, that's something we demand of our kids, because we say it's your culture. And the biggest one is the respect. When we hear our children speak with disrespect to their parents, we call them on it... in front of them, you know, in front of the parents. You will not speak to your mother like that in front of Miss Cookie or Miss Tran. Uh, my business partner is Chinese and Vietnamese, and so we are very proud of the fact that we've kept our school, even though we accept students of all backgrounds, we are huge... we are a rainbow. And we are all colorblind, but we are very proud that a lot of our children come from Asian families, and they choose us because they want their children to stay connected to their culture.

**SC:** Um, how did you start working with your business partner?

**CJ:** She was my student. She was a student from, uh, Elsik in the Alief School District and uh, she had come from Morgan City, uh, Louisiana. Her father is also— she was also in the grocery business. So she and I shared the fact that our parents both came from other countries and that we, um, had grown up in the grocery business. She was from Morgan City, Louisiana, my mother grew up in Louisiana, so we call ourselves the Asian Cajuns, and we eat boudin with chopsticks, so that's how we joke about that. But, um, I was in need of a person in my office to help with registration and things, and uh, I had unfortunately had been embezzled recently, so I was very emotional and very um, uh, felt very vulnerable. And uh, she was young and she, you know, had come to class, she was a beginner teen, you know in my class. So, you know that means that probably not a lot of future but just do it for fun, and she had been dancing somewhere else for a long time but her quality for training was not as good as it needed to be.

So uh... but one day she walked by and I said uh, 'Do you have a job?' And she goes, 'I'm the person that does surveys at the mall.' She goes, 'I would love a job.' And she was very tiny, so I thought she was really young but she actually was a high school senior. And uh, I said, 'Do you have a car?' And she goes, 'Yup.' And I said, 'Do you know how to use a computer?' Now this was back before, uh... whenever the computers were, like, huge and, you know, they were PCs and we could play Pong on it. Y'know, that was, it was a very um, old computer. But she actually brought me from that to where we are today.

She's brilliant... she speaks Mandarin and Vietnamese and Cantonese and English. She went to U of H and is a graduate. Um, but she's now, her father built this building, and that's what is so cool is that my father started us and her father kept us going. When my lease was up, I was already in my fifties. And uh, to take on a 30-year note would have made me in my 80s, still paying a note. And I just couldn't do it. And uh, sadly, um, my husband at the time left me after 25 years of marriage, so I was stuck. So she had— and her father built this building so I would have a place to teach. So she is my landlord, and I made her president of corporation, and we are 50/50 partners. And the cute thing is that, both our fathers said someone's gotta be 51%... well, I couldn't disrespect *my* father by being 49% and she couldn't disrespect her father by being 49 so we had to be 50/50. But I think the Asian part is that I'm the eldest. So if really had a disagreement, she would always defer to me, but, I

always don't argue with her because I figure when I'm dead, she's gonna change it anyway, so there's no point in arguing. And we really do, we—we've never had an argument. We've been together—I mean she's 32, so 16 years. And uh... it's great. I mean it's, she's young, and I know that whenever she's my age, she will have found someone to mentor and will continue it. That is the goal. She told me, 'I want to see your vision continue.' I was offered a lot of money for my school. Uh, someone wanted to buy it, but the quality of work and the, um, focus would've been more... cheerleading type, um, less than wholesome, you know, activities. And uh, but they would keep my name, because that's what they were buying. And I couldn't do it. So I gave up, I walked away from quite a big financial gain because I couldn't stand the idea of my, um... name being used on something that I didn't believe in. 'Cause my philosophy is about being wholesome—we are a faith based school. Uh, we pray before every show, um, we are, um... I always said if my father or the minister can't sit in the front row to watch our show, we don't do it. And that is the standard I've used. My father passed away three years ago and he still is the— there's not a day that goes by the kids don't hear, 'My father always said...' So that's something that has been really, um, important to us, that we keep his, uh, spirit alive. We started a— because he never got to go to school, we started a scholarship fund. It's the Lawrence Joe Memorial Scholarship Fund. And it is for people, like, who come out of the military or single wives, or single women, who are struggling, people who wouldn't get to go to college if they didn't have some help. Not necessarily the high school student, you know who has lots of other sources. This is for people who are trying to better themselves and have already gone through life, and are, you know, just trying to do better. So we started that and we give one of those, one to three of those out each year. So that's, and then we can always talk about my father every year at—at the performance.

**SC:** Should we start asking about this Chinatown?

**VC:** Sure! Um, why don't we just go back to your first experience as Miss Chinatown and how you heard about it and first got involved with it?

**CJ:** Well, the first time I heard about it... um, it used to be at Sylvan Beach, it used to be part of the, the CAC, Chinese American Citizen Alliance picnic, and it was at Sylvan Beach. And um... the uh, and it was really I think one of the first years. And um, I entered and I came in second... I didn't win. And it was loud picnic, you know... lots of food, it was crazy. And uh, but it was... it was an annual picnic. And I'd been going to the picnic for years but this was one whenever they first started having the pageant. So I didn't win... the young lady that whose name is Cheelan Bo-Lin, she was a concert violinist and she was wonderful. And I was dancing, and you know I was like, 'Oh, I didn't win...' So the next year when the pageant came up, everybody kept saying, 'You've gotta run, you've gotta run, you've gotta run again!' And I had thought about it... but uh, I had gotten the opportunity to go on a hiking tour of Colorado. So I had my stuff bought, I was ready to go... I was, you know, I wasn't just gonna let it slide, I wasn't gonna try out for the pageant again. And my mother *really* put her foot down, and she said, 'You need to do this.' And I was like, alright, so I did it, and I, uh, entered that year, and I won that year. And that was so funny because, um, it's very difficult to stay focused... on stage, whenever there's all the partying and picnicking and

children screaming and people speaking in Chinese, loud, and... probably some mahjong going on, I mean it was amazing... you know, the, the definite cacophony of noise in the background while you're trying to, you know, perform and stuff... but, you know, it was... we did it and I, you know, it was very fortunate I won there and then went to San Francisco... and I won Second Princess there, which is like, second runner-up. And uh... the experience was great... I had to go to Chinese school to learn to write my name in Chinese. And I don't speak Chinese so it was, you know, there was—always had to listen for my name because everything was done in Chinese so I had to make sure I heard my name and everything...said it... but, um, that was a wonderful experience, getting to ride in the national parade, and to eat all of that great food, and go to all the family associations were always eight floors up, so we did a lot of walking up and down the stairs and stuff. But that was a great experience.

But um, then coming home, I was fortunate, because of my high profile performing career, it kept me quite, um... visible. Whenever I was, during the time which I was Miss Chinatown, the uh, financial, um, entourage from Taiwan came to Houston, and I got to be the hostess, that would take them all over Houston, you know and I was just with my crown and my banner... well then whenever— a few years later, when I went to Taiwan, the man had given me his business card with a phone number on the back. So, um, it was, he gave me his personal phone, it turned out he was an international finance minister. Who knew? I didn't know. They picked us up in a—you know, and my mother was with me. And I said, and they said they wanted to take me to dinner. They showed up in a limo, with flags on it... took us to a dinner. It was just us, the whole restaurant was closed down and it was a big, round table, and they—you know, it was amazing. And it turned out he had a daughter the same age as I was... I think I was nineteen or twenty at the time. And she was in the States. And he says, 'I hope someone will take care of my daughter, so I want to do this for you, because... my daughter is there and I hope someone will, you know, wanna take care of her like I wanna take care of you.' And I thought that was so cool. So that was a great trip, 'course it, you know... then, um, I got to go to Japan, to Taiwan, and to Hong Kong, uh, whenever I was, uh, on the tour as Miss Chinatown, so that was, you know, a great experience.

And so traveling and getting a chance to really experience what the, you know, Eastern culture is, you know... and I actually worked at the Hyatt Regency here in Houston, so when I got to the Hong Kong Hyatt, they let me go in the back, in the kitchen— I mean, so they gave me a whole tour of the whole hotel from the backside and that was great... I was the first, um, official guest of the sh—of Taipei Hilton... so I cut the ribbon. And uh, what was funny was that the food—the room service and the hair salon weren't in business yet. So there was no food, but I had a room, and the elevators just started working the day before so... I was the actual *first* official guest to that hotel... and um, just getting a chance to— and then when I was in Japan, I got to... they gave me the traditional—wrapped me in a s—a kimono and had taught me how to serve tea... so it was a *great* experience. I had a wonderful time doing that. And then coming back, you know, to Houston... that... all that experience and all that being so visible, everything I did after that with the, you know, former Miss Chinatown, you know... so it definitely affected my um— it gave me a good kick start in my career here. Then, um, later on, Linda Wu's mother, Jane Gee, who had been real instrumental in the pageant when I was a contestant, asked me to help her in the production end because of my experience. So for about twenty years, I helped, um—you

know, fifteen, twenty years, I—you know, I don't remember exactly. Every year we would produce the pageant. And because I had a dance company, my dancers would perform, and I would teach the girls how to walk and you know, do everything, you know, that you need to do in a pageant. 'Cause at that time, the girls were not— they were students, they were not, you know, high, sophisticated, you know, they... most of them, whenever you read their, uh, bios, it was, you know, 'I'm doing international finance,' or 'I'm, you know, doing med—you know, radiation'... they just were brilliant women. There was nobody that said I'm a dancer or gonna be in theater.

And they were all about, you know, my size, you know... so it was all, you know... Miss Gee is 5'2' with brown hair and brown eyes... Miss Wong is 5'3'. I mean it—now the girls are like 5'9' and 5'7', I mean, where these tall women are coming from, I don't know. But whenever I was, uh, doing the pageant, everyone was, I guess, you know just the normal, petite... you know, little, um, Chinese girls. But you know, they've definitely become very sophisticated, lots of girls, you know, I guess from China, who are moving here now. Um, cause they all speak Chinese and everything. But um, but the cool thing is, one of my students, Tammy Gee, uh, entered and won with a tap dance that I taught her and it was very, very cool. And uh, then a few years later, *she* ended up producing, she's been doing it for many years now. So not only did I get to be the director of it, one of my students is now doing it and doing a great job and I'm so proud of her. And doing it like I did, you know, with that same professional quality that you know, I trained her in, so. And now, I'm teaching Tammy's daughter... so I have—so we've gotta get Skyler. We'll be now—you know, when she's old enough, she'll probably be doing it. But uh, but it was a great opportunity for uh, lots of time to serve my community, uh, in the way that I know best, which is, you know, performing and producing.

**SC:** So why do you think Miss Chinatown is important to the Asian community?

**CJ:** I think part of it is that—one of the things that we were... part of it, it was more about scholarship and community service. There was an awful lot of, uh, em—emphasis on um... the depth of the person. And I like that. Um, it also... it's pretty and shiny, and you know, I think the community loves that. And I'm very proud that now the number of young women that have gone on to win Miss Chinatown USA has brought a certain pride to the community that, you know, it makes it even more important because they see that they are sending beautiful, articulate, you know, young women there who have a lot to say, and are talented. But I think that it's a sense of pride. Uh, to this day, I will run into some old Chinese man who'll go, 'Oh, Miss Cookie Joe, you are Miss Chinatown!' And I'm thinking of *all* the accomplishments I've had since then, but that, you know, that is still something that people remember, which is, you know, it's great.

**(0:41:00).**

**VC:** Um, so I guess we want like a better sense of— I don't really know that much about the pageant. Um, so I guess, how does it work and what's like the vision?

**CJ:** The vision— well, first of all, there is a talent portion, there's a swimsuit portion... so it's a, it is a standard, uh, beauty pageant. They do ask you questions so you have to— and they will ask you questions in English and it's always cute for the ones who don't speak English very well. Um, they, uh, they get a whole, um, summer of poise and presentation and how to answer questions. I mean, so we give, uh, the girls an opportunity to, um... gain confidence

and get more of a sense of themselves and a sense of beauty and the feminine things... um, the opportunity to be on a stage, I mean, it's very confidence—it can be intimidating, and at the same time every girl gains so much more confidence from doing it. Um, it's very tasteful... it's never done in a, nothing is you know, uh— it's a very wholesome, very tasteful pageant, which I—is important to me.

Um, the people that put the pageant on are passionate about it. In other words, there's no—they're all volunteers. You know, nobody's making any money on the deal, this is strictly community service. The, uh, community has helped volun—um, donate to help sponsor the girls. The young man that I grew up with, actually took the picture that's on the wall there, he and I were teenagers... I was always dancing and he's always carrying a camera around. And his name is Alvin Gee. Well now, he does all the pictures. And has been doing the pictures for the girls for years. One of our other, um, friends was a hairdresser, Ronnie, and he's been doing the hair and makeup. In other words, so, we never—we've never separated. So the core group from when we were children, all the way to now... uh, Betty Gee and her husband, and I, um, and my—one of my boyfriends, double dated in high school. Uh, Linda Wu, her father was, uh, my father—one of my father's dearest friends. In fact, uh, her uncle was the one that told my father, 'Don't worry about it, go ahead and marry a Caucasian, it's okay.' He encouraged my father to, you know, follow his heart. So the, the tapestry of the connections of how we are, uh, the form of us and the foundation is *very* solid. And we've been together, you know, our whole lives. And to see ourselves as adults... and actually *senior adults*, which is freaking me out, because I don't feel like a senior citizen but apparently I'm getting very close, is that uh, we're all still doing it and we're all still loving it and that's what's, I think a great part of it, is that community service that we've done for providing this pageant. The ongoing success is a real important part of the community.

**SC:** So how has participating in Miss Chinatown influenced you personally? Like you mentioned how it was a confidence booster for most girls. Did it help you become more confident?

**(0:44:11).**

**CJ:** Yes... I think I became more confident, also becoming more aware of where we are in the world. Because when you go to another country, you see how blessed you are to live in Houston. Um, my father was one of the first Chinese in Houston and to see that we went from a very small, little group... to being a very major force, you know, in the city, to um... I think it gave—gives us that sense of um, empowerment that we are not just participants, you know, but we are really, um, a force. We actually move things, we're gonna make things happen. And I think that whenever you are standing in front of a lot of people and wanna—people wanna interview you and you have a crown on your head and people—children want your autograph and things, it gives you a sense of, um—relevant, you're real relevant, and you really feel like you can make people happy, you can make a difference. And then also the fact that you can use this... I was very fortunate that I grew up understanding the importance of media, and I understood the importance of being visible as a marketing tool. Now, what other people come away with from the experience, you know, is very personal. But for me, it was a great stepping stone for me to make sure I was professionally, as a performer, uh, more visible, uh, and had a lot more credibility, and it was—so it was a great—you know, that part, it was real important to me. That was a great part for me.

**SC:** So how has Houston changed from when you were younger to now?

**CJ:** It used to be a really big hick town. Because most people—I, you know, I'm born and raised here. All of my friends were born and raised here. So whenever somebody came from another place, *that* was odd. *Now*, being a native-born Houstonian is odd because most people came from somewhere else because the economy here is so great and the—uh, the opportunities are so great that people keep coming here. And also how many foreign born—only foreign-born people I knew were my family. Now, you know, there's a lot of people from other countries coming here. The melting pot, you know, is Houston. Um, I feel like that, uh, the acceptance of different cultures... is, you know, unbelievable. I go to other places in the nation and there's still a lot of segregation, where there is a Italian community, there is a Greek community, there's a Asian community... and here, we have just melted and blended all together and I think that is what makes us so strong. I think, also, because I always research this, that um, this nation is driven by small business owners. And the Chinese believed that, in my father's generation, to be your own boss. Because you can hire family and nobody can tell you how many hours they can work and uh, and nobody's gonna—you can't trust anybody more than you trust family. And you know, we were working at very young ages to help, you know, support the family and make sure that the family business ran well. Well... not only is this nation run by small businesses, most of them are run by women. And most of those women are minorities. So to be part of that movement and be part of that, um, string is, I think... it makes me very proud.

**VC:** So what other community organizations are really important in your life right now? I guess something that you're involved with personally and also organizations, like you've talked about before that you're involved with through your dance company here?

**CJ:** Um, we—our passion is about children, we advocate for children, whatever their needs are. We teach children with special needs, there's an organization that used to be called The Joy Ministry that is just working with children with any kind of mental or physical disability. Uh, right now, we're part of Hope for Three, which is children with autism. Uh, each week, my partner and I go to... in the Alief School District and teach the children with autism dance classes. We still go once a week to Star of Hope to teach the homeless children there. We still, uh, underwrite or fund organizations here in Sugar Land or in the Fort Bend County area, to help support, um, homeless kids... whatever we can do... teens that are at risk, whatever we can do that will, um, help make the way and be an inspiration. So an encouragement, because when you're a child and you know nothing else, what you need is to have someone to say there's a way out and also to give them a hand up. Um, I've been very fortunate. I've been recognized as Dance Teacher of the Year by a national magazine... I was recognized by, uh, the Star of Hope, I received the George and Barbara Bush Points of Light Award for exemplary volunteer service. And as I've said, Houston Texans have nominated me for Community Quarterback, which I think is so funny because I don't watch football. And um... so it's, it's been... one of the things that I think has been able to use my talent and my time to benefit others and then to

be validated and recognized for that. And the only reason why those things are important is cause I don't think the recognition itself is important. I think the recognition gets you the platform so you can still bring awareness to those needs, which I think is the most important part of, you know, being awarded and honored, is that you get a voice and people listen. And I think that's really important.

**SC:** So back to your family, you mentioned how you had a Chinese father and a mother of, um, Irish descent. So, how were holidays traditionally celebrated in your family?

**CJ:** We did both. We, uh... Lunar New Year was big. You know, we always did the... went to the firecrackers and lion and dragon dances and that was always great. Um, we, um... did the traditional, you know, American holi—Christmas and Thanksgiving, all of those things. So we, we celebrated everything. I do remember when we'd go and visit, uh, relatives of my father's side that there was definitely the insistence on, you know, giving things with two hands, and accepting things with two hands... going to speak to the eldest, you know. And um, just, the... cultural respect and cultural traditions of treating your elders, and treating the family a certain way— that was ingrained in us. And then um... but as far as, um— other than Lunar New Year, I think that was pretty much the thing... but then, um, when I was Miss Chinatown, there was a family association dinner, like every week, so pretty much, you know, those— the city of Houston and the Chinese, uh, community were very, um, excited about, you know, having those dinners. And I mean there was—there used to be a place called the On Leong Family Association; it was over on, Chartres—uh—right by where George R. Brown is now. And we've been—went there a lot for different celebrations, that's—that's the street where the dragon and lion dances were. So that's where we spent—it was called Chinatown at the time, um, and I can still see... there's some of the buildings, you know, before they were being torn down, still have a bit of the Asian influence of the architecture.

**SC:** So... what kind of food traditions did your family have, like coming from two different backgrounds?

**CJ:** Um, we, uh... in the home was—except when my father cooked, my father would cook Chinese food and my mo—my father taught my mom how to cook Chinese food. But we ate *everything*. But uh, you know, we had a very eclectic— you know, corn bread, and you know, just, pig's feet, I mean just all those things. But also remember, we had a grocery store, and we also got the things that he couldn't sell. So... things that were past due or things that were the parts of the cow, 'cause my dad was the butcher... so things they didn't sell, we had to make food out of. So we would—you know 'cause nothing would go to waste. And um, but the experiences of our, uh, celebrations were, you know, the big Chinese banquets. And I remember loving pig's stomach, and I remember watching my dad suck the eyes out of a fish and trying to get him not to do it at restaurants when we go out, like, 'Take it home,' just because... you know, people would stare and stuff. But, um, my comfort foods and the things that make me feel comfortable are Asian food. You know, rice, and fish, and *jook*... I mean, when I'm sick, you know, all you want is *jook* and stuff like that, so. I remember being in the hospital at Methodist and it's a teaching hospital and I just

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wanted to go home. I just wanted to go home, but I wasn't eating and I said, 'I promise you, when I go home, my family will fix me *jook*.' And the doctor goes, 'What is that?' Well, all the med students were Chinese, and they all said, 'It's what we eat when we're sick!' So it was very cool because I had support from all these Chinese medical students that I was able to go home so I could get, you know, well in the comfort of my own home eating what was comfortable for me as opposed to hospital food. So I remember that that was like—um, glad there were so many Chinese medical students at that time.

**SC:** So you mentioned that you don't speak Chinese?

**CJ:** Right.

**SC:** Um, what languages do you speak? And do you speak a different language in different settings, such as family, and school...?

**CJ:** I speak Spanish. I lear—I studied Spanish starting second grade and I did it because I—apparently, have a good ear and a good, uh, good accent, so I just kept taking it all the way 'til college. And then, um, finding out that we have a lot of students here whose parents don't speak English, and then when I teach at Star of Hope, we have chil—children who don't speak English. So I started using my Spanish more and more. And of course the more you use it, the better you get at it. So... and one of my staff members is from Cuba, and so she speaks— her first language is Spanish, and uh, so I'm actually in the process now of taking Spanish lessons to get it even more fluent in it. But, uh, so in business, and in... I speak Spanish to some of my students and then English is, you know, all the time. My father came from a village that, um, was very small and his dialect would be what people would consider hillbilly type talk... uh, Toisan, uh, dialect. So it wasn't really Cantonese, but it was based on Cantonese. Well, everyone else had spoke Cantonese, don't... they did not really understand him well. So then, when the tide of Mandarin, you know, pretty much has, you know, surrounded us, nobody would've understood us anyway. So the only reason I'm not sad that my father did not insist that we speak Chinese is that no one else speaks his dialect that well either. When the man, um, who sponsored our trip around the Asian—around Asia, uh, spoke to my father, he was speaking in Cantonese, and my father was understanding in Toisan. My father gave me to this man for his daughter. When they were thinking— dad was thinking about cars... or he thought he was talking about a car, but somehow the mistake came up that this man thought he had arranged a marriage for me and his son. And there was a bit of a comedic, you know, few weeks while we... none of us realized—their family thought we were preparing for a marriage. Our family thought I was gonna get a car. So there was a bit of a... confusion going on there. So that's why I told my father, 'Stick with English.' And Daddy admitted that sometimes when he doesn't understand, he just would say, 'Yes,' because he figured, 'Yes,' was an okay answer. So he said yes a few times whenever he shouldn't have, but uh. And his big disappointment was he knew that uh, had he said, 'Yes,' he would have gotten all the Chinese dried peanuts that he wanted. And uh, now he wasn't getting those peanuts anymore because the man was

always sending Daddy peanuts. So in my mind, I keep thinking he almost traded me for peanuts, but... the man and I and his son stayed friends, once we figured it out. But it was just an interesting, uh, fiasco, for a while.

**SC:** So growing up in a mostly white community, did you have any, like, Asian friends? Did you meet Asian friends through Miss Chinatown?

**CJ:** Uh, because of the Chinese American Citizen Alliance, it was almost like I lived in two worlds. In my school world, I was like a wallflower, very—well, in my perspective. I was apparently more visible than I thought I was, cause in—in hindsight, people have told me, ‘Oh, you weren’t a wallflower,’ but I *felt* very insecure. I did not feel part of the popular group but yet in the Chinese community, I was very active and very popular. So it’s like I lived a dual life... and um, my first boyfriends... were Chi—you know, were Chinese. So my social life was go to school, do my dance classes. And the best part about that was, we all couldn’t go out ‘til after the grocery stores and the restaurants closed because you had to finish up your work. So we didn’t start entertaining ourselves until ten o’clock at night. Well I didn’t finish dancing until nine... so it worked out perfectly, that, you know, we would go bowling, or go to people’s houses and have dances or parties. So the—my peer group was the Chinese community. So my social life was all the Chinese kids. And that means a lot to me, ‘cause they’re still friends to this day... whereas my kids—my friends in my, in school, I didn’t socialize with them, that wasn’t my social group. My social group was my dance friends and my Chinese friends.

**SC:** So how did you find your first job, like outside of the grocery store?

**CJ:** Well my first job, I worked at sixteen years old, um, at a place called TGNV, which was, um, like a little ten—five and ten store. And I worked there, and you know... sales and stock, I mean basically the same thing I did for my dad, except they paid me minimum wage for that. And then later on, I ended up being, uh, making hamburgers at McDonald’s. But uh, my first real job was, um, I started working for the Hyatt Regency and I was really close to deciding to make that my career ‘cause I was very good at it. And I was very social, and, you know, I was in the entertain—in the hospitality industry, I’m very hospitable so it was great. But I was still performing and dancing all that time... and all of a sudden, it just—something came to me, is that if you’re gonna be a dancer, you need to be a dancer. And that was about the time whenever my father said, ‘You know, let’s build you a dance school.’ So... we were building the school as I was working so I finished working at the Hyatt I immediately, I was owning my own business.

**VC:** So how was, um, owning your own business at first? Did you have any challenges...?

**CJ:** I actually—owning it at first was the easy part, because my overhead was so low and I had no employees. So I had no idea that I was making *a lot* of money because I was not smart enough to know—I was using the same checkbook to pay for my groceries that I was to pay for my electric bill at the school. I didn’t have any real professional background, or understanding, about business ownership. So everything I learned as I went... and then the

school started growing and I had to start hiring people. And then I ended up getting a, uh, some consulting, you know, getting people in that would explain to me, you know, what, like, a CPA and you know those kinds of things. I started learning what you really needed to do. But uh, I um... was very, very fortunate. My business has always been successful. Now during the 80's, during the um—when there was an oil crisis and um everybody was struggling and people were foreclosing on houses and Mission Bend became almost like a ghost town. I ended up having about thirty percent of my students were not paying, because they've been with me for ten years or twelve years, and their daddies were in the oil business and they suddenly were unemployed, I couldn't just say, 'Well, too bad.' So we maintained quite a few scholarship students during that time because, um, I just couldn't—they were beautiful dancers and they were beautiful children and I couldn't possibly... because of something that wasn't their fault, say that they couldn't dance anymore. And I think God blessed me for that because then as the economy came back, you know my business, you know, thrived.

And moving to Sugar Land has been amazing, because the overhead here is incredibly high. And yet, we've been able to make it. And you know, when you own a business that is—targets children, you can only start when they're out of school. So the first half of each day, we're closed. So we don't really get to open until three. And... but we work all day, you know, we work everyday, and then we work all day on Saturdays, so. And I actually work on Sundays, I'm the choreographer for the Houston's Children's Chorus. So I actually work on Sundays, but my father worked on Sundays every year, so... it, you know, it just seems—it doesn't seem unusual to work seven days.

**VC:** You've been teaching for a really long time now, yeah?

**CJ:** I am, I started my school when I was twenty-four but I started teaching for someone else a few years before that... I was very young. And I didn't, I didn't— but you know, when you're that age, you don't think you're young. You think you've got it together, but now as I look back and think of what I accomplished at twenty-four, and I know other twenty-four year olds, and it amazes me.

**VC:** Um, so, what do you think you've grown... after teaching for so long, what do you think you've learned, I guess?

**CJ:** Oh, it's all about life's lessons. Um, the biggest thing I've learned is you do *not* insist that a child achieve excellence. You choose—you try to inspire them to want to *choose* to pursue excellence. So once that became clear to me, I—my teacher was very tough and demanding, so I was a very tough, demanding teacher at the beginning of my teaching career. And now, I am much more interested in developing the child's dignity and confidence and using dance to do it and um, and being able to teach them to use *their* talents for those less fortunate.

**VC:** Have you noticed any changes with your students over the years?

**CJ:** Yes, I think that they're all *very* busy. I think that *everybody* is in *everything* and I'm very, um, I wanna encourage parents to make sure they try to keep balance in their lives and um, the other thing is, is that... we have about—75% of our kids when they start when they're two years old are still with me when they go to college. I have sixty kids right now that are the children of my children, so just like Skyler, uh, Su, her mother was my student when she was three and now, she started with me when she was three. So I have, uh, many second---generation kids and I have one third-generation, where I taught the mother, the grandmother, and now the child, and so. And *that* I think—the sense of family and community, is here. These kids will come back and see me after many years. I get Facebook emails and, you know, cards all the time. You know, 'I just had my third child,' or 'I'm getting ready to travel the world, you know, on a lecture, and I wouldn't have that confidence if it weren't for my lessons with you,' so there's an awful lot of, um, validation that comes whenever you've taught this many kids.

**SC:** So... why are you passionate about teaching? Like... why did you start teaching?

**CJ:** I think, to be honest, because my teacher was so tough, and my teacher was a negative motivator... and it did affect my self-esteem, and it did affect my confidence, and it did affect my joy. So I think that my goal was to be a positive motivator. And even though when you start doing anything, you do what you know, so my—my early years of teaching, I reflected my teacher *way* too much. And as I got more mature and more aware of children's feelings and—and more compassionate, you know, more empathetic, I uh—my teaching skills and my teaching approach has changed. And um, it is the best job ever. I believe if you wake up everyday and can't wait to get to work, that is a joy, and particularly as how many hours I spend. I just had both my hips replaced... I had my hips replaced, uh, one of them eight months ago, one of them six months ago and I was back to work two weeks after surgery. And I've worked very, very hard to get through physical therapy and rehab so I can be back a hundred percent. But I uh, I feel like that I have served a purpose. And my father's been such a big influence on me and he says, 'You know, you'll be a rich man if you do for money what you would have done for nothing anyway. And if you look in the mirror before you go to bed each night and go, 'Did I make a difference?' and 'Did I do no harm?' and if you say those same things, then you can sleep peacefully.' So those are kind of the things I base my life on and my, uh, choices.

**(1:05:02).**

**VC:** Well, you also mentioned that um, your company—or your dance studio here is very faith-based. Um, how has religion played a part in your life?

**CJ:** I've always—it's interesting, I'm not an Evangelist. I do not preach, I do not, um, I do not think there is—we do not preach at all. We have children here that are Buddhist and Jewish and Hindu and stuff, and we believe that they are still—it's *their* faith. So we are very big on um, being grateful and having attitude of uh, 'we are not in charge.' Uh, we surrender our fate and our will to our God and uh, so but I've always felt taken care of, even going

through the hard times... even during times whenever I was the most, um, vulnerable and the saddest, I always felt that God had me in his arms. And I did not have a lot of rel—I had no religious training as a child. We were members of the Chinese, uh, Baptist Church and... but I couldn't understand the pastor because he had such a thick accent. So I don't really feel—I got a lot out of the, um, Sunday school, but I didn't get a lot out of the actual service.

I will never forget, one of the Sunday school teachers' name was Sue... her name now is Sue Yee, I don't know what her last—what her maiden name was. But uh, she probably was sixteen years old and I was probably ten. You know, it was something where, the difference in our ages at that time was huge, and now, but she ended up bringing her children—her daughter—for dance classes and I see her all the time. And I will always remind her—remember her as my Sunday school teacher. So she made a big impact on me. Um, as we got to my father, remember we both started working on Sundays. Then they would send me to church with the neighbors, so I was any religion that the next-door neighbor was. So I've been Methodist, and Catholic, and Baptist, and Lutheran. Um, now as an adult though, I have gone back to my Baptist roots. And the reason for that is, um, they hired my ballet company as uh, the resident ballet company for the church and it's the Shoreline Baptist Church. And um, then the um, for a long time I worked with churches that had services for, uh, special needs, because that was my ministry. So I did a lot. So it used to be depending on who hired us that weekend is what religion we were, 'cause we were dancing at different churches all the time. But my home church and my family—church family is the Baptist church. But um, we wanted there to be no question that this church—this school was going to be, um, one of wholesome, conservative, um, respectful... basically based on the Ten Commandments. I mean, that's basically would be the, what we would say to be our core values. We pray before each performance, the entire school and the parents. But we always say, you know... our prayers are very open, so that they may pray in their way, but it's uh, important to us that they know we are not here for the applause. We're not here for—we don't do trophies, we're not about competition... we're here—what can we do to use our talents for others? And we do an event called God Bless Texas to celebrate Texas Independence Day. Um, besides being a proud American and a proud Chinese, I am a real proud Texan. And uh, so we do an event to raise money for the nonprofits that we sponsor, uh, by doing an event out here in our parking lot, which is like a carnival with a big performance stage. And we made sure that we called it 'God Bless Texas,' so that if anybody didn't know that we're a faith-based school, they would know by that event. And it's blessed us, I mean, I feel like that if a parent says, 'I don't wanna go to that school because it's faith based,' they wouldn't be happy here anyway.

**(1:09:06).**

**VC:** Okay, um, so you brought a couple of things. Do you want to go over that while we're recording as well?

**CJ:** Sure. [footsteps] This is my father and his brother. Uh, this is later in their life. He died very soon after this.

**SC:** Your father's on the left?

**CJ:** This is my father, this is my uncle. They were the only... they're—they came over to this country together.

**SC:** What's their age difference?

**CJ:** Uh, two years. My father, uh, died at 89. And was, uh, he was two years older. The difference between their ages was exactly the same as my sister and I.

**SC:** And how old were they when they came to the U.S.?

**CJ:** My father was about seven. [pages flipping]

**CJ:** This is the actual crowning whenever I was Miss Chinatown. This is the performance in San Francisco while I was singing and dancing for the national pageant.

**VC:** Do you remember the song and dance that you did?

**CJ:** Uh, I did something from 'Flower Drum Song'. There's some, uh, 'Something About This Place' was the name of the song... This is uh—the reason I brought this, Alvin Gee is the photographer. He also did the picture of a clown in there. And he and I worked together a lot. And um, but he was the teenager that carried the camera around his neck for every, you know, event. And how he's ending up, he's just a famous, nationally recognized photographer... and a good friend. Um, this was the man who sponsored my tour, um, to the Orient when I was Miss Chinatown... his name was Mr. Tom. These are, uh, articles about, um, my dance company. I started my dance company in uh—we became very well known because of our Asian company. So this is... [footsteps] This is about the Miss Chinatown pageant. Um, he's a great artist, um, here in Houston.

**VC:** Wait, who is that?

**CJ:** His name is Willy Wong, Willy Wong was a um, he's a watercolorist, he's very famous.

**VC:** And he was presenting the award? Hosting it?

**CJ:** Yes, he was one of the judges. He was one of the judges while I was producing the pageant. So anyway, so that's—What I love about this— this is, um... Betty Gee was one of the models in the pageant and this is me, and my dancers. And she's now... uh, her daughter's Tammy, who's doing the production now. And so this is how far back we—and she looks *exactly* the same. I don't know if you've seen Betty Gee, but if you look at her now, she looks—she hasn't changed a bit. So that's the cool thing about, um, of being Chinese... we don't age. We don't age fast. [laughs] But uh, anyway, so there you go, so that's our stuff.

**VC:** Great! Um, do you have any more questions?

**SC:** So just out of curiosity, do you have any children?

**CJ:** I don't have any children, but I do have this connection with all of the ones that have gone through my school and who I've taught and I am passionate about their well being and their concern—and concern for them, for their future. And I think that's part of, uh, why I'm so good with my kids... it's because of not having to divide my heart and my love for my own children has made a big difference that I've been able to completely give myself to my kids. I am very connected and very close to my um, my cousin Victor, uh, whose father's in this picture, and his children are very important to me. And so, knowing that the Joe family will continue because we have, you know, another generation, uh, means a lot to me.

**VC:** So where do you—where do you see yourself in the future? Do you, um, plan on always staying in Texas, in this area?

**CJ:** Oh, yes. This is—this is my life and what I love about it is that I have no desire to retire. Um, I turned 61, uh, just a couple weeks ago and I'm still dancing seven days a week and still... and recovering to where I, you know, I will... the ex—expectation is that I'll be 100% you know by January or February, which is great because, um, once you're a dancer, you know, it's hard to hold back and so that's important to me. Um, I said back when I started that I hoped that I would have a school that other schools would be measured by. I hoped that I'd have a lot of students. And I hoped that I would be a matriarch of the arts... and I didn't really know what that meant but I know that there were other women that I looked up to who were, you know, very well respected in their fields of the arts. Well I never once said I wanted to be rich, or have a lot of money. And it's interesting because everything worked out exactly as I, you know... We are one of the most reputable and most, um, classically, uh, acknowledged schools in the area. We have an awful lot of kids and have had many years of a lot of kids. And, uh, 'matriarch of the arts' means you get invited to an awful lot of events, or get to do things like this. And um, but I think the thing that has really happened that I love even more is that I am a matriarch of the community servants and the uh, non-profits to where I've actually been recognized more for my contributions in those areas than I've ever been as a performer and a dancer. And I guess really when you look at it, that's actually more important.

**VC:** Okay, so I guess we'll just wrap it up with our last question.

**SC:** To wrap it up, what words do you have for the next generation?

**CJ:** Use everything about you to your benefit. In other words, whether it be your past, your Asian culture, your, uh, family... uh, find your passion, so that like my daddy says, 'What you can do for nothing—do for money what you would have done for nothing anyway.' Uh, don't take anything for granted, and uh, you know, look in the mirror before you go to bed, and 'Have a made a difference in the world and done no harm?' And I think that's a really great way to live your life.

**SC:** Well, thank you.

**VC:** Thank you.

**CJ:** You're welcome!