

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

Interviewee: Susan Kwok Annoura

Interviewers: Gabby Parker (Sophomore); Kristi Maulding (Freshman)

Date/ Time of Interview: December 1, 2014, at 3:00 PM

Transcribed by: Gabby Parker and Kristi Maulding

Edited by: Chris Johnson, Sara Davis (6/13/16), Patricia Wong

Audio Track time: 01:09:09

Background:

Susan Annoura was born in Silver Spring Maryland, but grew up in Clear Lake Houston. Her parents are of Chinese heritage, and both worked at Lockheed Martin, a subcontractor of NASA. Susan went to college at Baylor University, following in her older brother's footsteps. Wanting to escape from the restrictive atmosphere at Baylor, she applied for a study abroad program in Japan on a whim and was eventually accepted. She spent nine months in Japan on the program, learning the language, then decided to stay for the summer and teach English. That June, she met her future husband, Kou Annoura. They got engaged soon afterward. Susan finished her schooling at Baylor, married Kou, and moved to Japan to be with him. At first, it was difficult for Susan to adjust to the cultural differences in Japan. She had different expectations, and was unhappy for a while. Eventually she found work as a radio DJ for a station broadcasting in both Japanese and English. Being able to do something she enjoyed helped Susan, and she stayed in Japan until she was 35. At that time, she and Kou had their second child, which made living in Japan difficult.

The family moved to the United States, where Susan once again faced a difficult transition, taking on responsibilities in America that she had been unused to before. At a loss for what to do to support the family, and not wanting to pursue radio, Susan decided to put her skills at talking and speaking other languages to work. She studied and applied for a real estate license, and got sponsored by a broker. For a while, she was lost, not knowing what to do, and struggling to find any deals. After her first big break, however, she managed to find a niche in the market for Japanese immigrants coming in to America and needing more help than just finding a place to live. Her company evolved to fill that role, providing assistance to confused immigrants who struggled with many of the same issues that she herself once faced.

Setting:

The interview centers on Susan's experiences living in Japan and the progression of her career as an entrepreneurial real estate agent after she moved back to the United States. She speaks about her Chinese parents, successful brother, Japanese husband, and the children they are raising now. Her real estate agency serves a specific community of Japanese immigrants struggling with their adjustment to life in the United States.

The interview was conducted in a fourth floor study room at Rice University's Fondren Library. The interview took a little over an hour. She recounted many of her experience growing up, her reasons for moving to Japan, and the many cultural differences that she struggled with, particularly in relation to her husband. She told us about her time as a DJ in Japan and how she got into real estate and started her own company.

Interviewers:

Gabby Parker is a second year undergraduate student pursuing a major in East Asian Studies (spec. Mandarin Chinese) with a minor in Business.

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Kristi Maulding is a first year undergraduate student pursuing a major in Architecture with a minor in Poverty, Justice, and Human Capabilities.

Interview Transcript:

**Key:**

<b>SA</b>	Susan Annoura
<b>GP</b>	Gabby Parker
<b>KM</b>	Kristi Maulding
	Speech cuts off, abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off, pause
Brackets [ ]	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

**KM:** All right. So to start out, um what is your name and where were you born?

**SA:** My name is Susan Kwok Annoura now, but before I got married it was Susan Chuteng Kwok.

**GP:** Can you spell that?

**SA:** Yes

**GP:** I mean, I'm sure you can, but would you please spell it for us?

**SA:** Susan is regular Susan, right? And my Dad gave me that name because he wanted us to, you know, be able to fit in to the society here, but the middle name is Chinese so I've always been a little bit embarrassed about it, so as soon as I got married I dropped it.

**GP:** Aww.

**SA:** And I just took Kwok into the middle, and then put my husband's last name at the end. But now I can openly say that. So, the middle name is Chuteng, which is my Chinese name, so it's CHU hyphen TENG. And then Kwok is KWOK.

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**KM:** Okay.

**SA:** But now it's Annoura, so it's ANNOURA, it's Japanese.

**KM:** That's very pretty.

**SA:** Thank you.

**KM:** And so, where did you grow up?

**SA:** I grew up here, in Houston. Uh, South, in Clear Lake.

**GP:** Did you live here your whole life, or move around—?

**SA:** Uh, I lived here um. Well I was actually born in D.C., my parents went to the University of Maryland. Uh, that's where I was born, Silver Spring Maryland. Uh, my dad got a job with Lockheed Martin, a subcontractor of NASA, so we moved down to Clear Lake when I was two. I grew up in Clear Lake, from two to eighteen. I went to Clear Lake High School. Went to Baylor University in Waco. My third year, did an exchange program, took me over to Japan. Spent a year in Japan, came back to Baylor, graduated, got married and moved back to Japan, So spent my entire *adult* life from twentytwo to thirtyfive in Japan.

**GP:** Wow.

**SA:** And moved back to the Houston area in 2007.

**GP:** [overlapping] Do you speak Japanese?

**SA:** Mhmm. I speak

**GP:** Where—where did you learn?

**SA:** In Japan.

**GP:** Oh, okay. So you went there first, and then you learned.

**SA:** Well, yeah, I went there first, I did a year on the study abroad and then so I knew about a year's worth. And then, when I came back, uhh here, finished school, got married and moved over there. All I had was the year. So I—I took some private lessons and I, you know, when you're over there, and everyone's

**GP:** [overlapping] It helps, the immersion.

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**SA:** Yeah, everyone's spea—actually, no one speaks English there at all. At all. *At all.*

**KM:** Wow.

**SA:** So, it's not like, you know, China, or other Asian countries, India or whatever, where they can actually speak some English. They can't speak any at all. So if you don't figure out, you know, something, you're just not gonna survive. So yeah, I lied; I picked it up while I was over there.

**KM:** Was the language, like, the hardest thing about being in Japan? Or were there other cultural differences?

**SA:** No, there's definitely a lot of cultural differences. Yeah. So there's a lot, it's a whole—You wanna know about that, I mean, that's a lot. [laughs]

**KM:** I mean, could you just, like, tell us a little about, like, some of the cultural differences you experienced there.

**SA:** Uh, there's a lot, I mean that's a whole book in itself. Um...

**GP:** What's—what's one thing that stood out to you the most? As being the most different?

**SA:** [pause] Probably the husbandwife relationship?

**GP:** [overlapping] Oh, really?

**SA:** Yeah, that was uh, that was kinda weird to me, just the, you know, my—How I pictured it to be was how we [indicating around the table] picture it to be, I guess, right? Where you get married and, going forward, you do everything together and, you know, you, you know, whatever, go to parties together, you go to weddings together, you, you know, you hang out, and you sleep in the same bed, for example, you know, things like this. But, what I was seeing was, you know, we would get invited to a wedding, but only *he* would be invited to the wedding. And I would be like, "well I, you know, hey, I'm twentytwo, I just just moved over here for you and I'm like sitting in this house, like what am I gonna do?" [KM and GP laugh] "Like, just sit here?" like I was, it was weird, right? It made me really sad, it made me very, like, confused, and, you know, eventually later on, you know, as I got integrated into that society, I got invited to weddings and it was like "Well, I'm gonna go to my wedding."

**GP:** [Laughs] "Bye, now!"

**SA:** "Seeya!" You know? And I mean, it was just strange, and I felt bad not bringing him to the wedding, but I'm like, hey, well, now I got invited to the wedding, so... "Here I go to my wedding," you know?

**GP:** [Laughing] Uhhuh

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**SA:** So, yeah, it was different. Alright, have either of you stayed at like a really nice hotel? Like, a really nice hotel?

[KM and GP nod]

**SA:** The beds are always separate. So they wouldn't have, you know like if you wanted to go, you know, with your husband on a—you know, whatever, a trip, for whatever, you would think that you'd be staying in a king sized bed, right? But, there you'd be sleeping on two separate beds. It's always two separate beds.

[All laugh]

**SA:** I was like, what? So, yeah, I remember having to like, move that little nightstand out of the middle and push the two beds together so we could like, hang out, I mean, it's just strange, right?

**GP:** Uhhuh. Uh-huh.

**SA:** So, yeah, there's, there's there's a lot of that. Um...

**(5:00)**

**GP:** So your husband is Japanese?

**SA:** He is, he's fullon, he's fullon Japanese. So now he's here—he'd probably be a good one for you to interview. Yeah, so he's uh, we moved back here in Ohseven. So, he's been here about seven years. We've been back for about seven years, yeah.

**KM:** So you said you first went to Japan when you were studying abroad.

**SA:** [overlapping] Right.

**KM:** Why did you choose to go to Japan in the first place?

**SA:** That's a good question. Um Baylor had a uh, exchange program with a school in Fukuoka, Japan, which is down south on the island of Kishu. And I was taking Chinese—my background's Chinese, my dad's from Hong Kong, my mom's from Taiwan—and I was in the foreign language building—all the foreign languages were in the same building—and I remember going in there. I was like y'all's age, just a freshman in college, and, you know, once in a while they'll have postings of—yeah, you study abroad, this and that. I never thought about, you know, leaving Houston *ever*. Like I didn't, had never thought about. And we didn't even speak Japanese, we have no Japanese—I had never even eaten Japanese food, like my—my parents are like what are you thinking? Why would you wanna go *there*? Like, we have no connections over there. None.

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[KM and GP laugh]

**SA:** And I—my—my junior year, no my sophomore year, it was my second year. Be careful of this, you guys don't fall into this trap. I was in the foreign language building. They had a sign and it was posted and they were looking for applicants to go to Japan. Alright? And this was in 19...let's see...92. So it was a while back. And Baylor is a little different than Rice, right? We're in a small city. It was in Waco. And back in that day there's.... It was just very conservative. I mean, it still is probably pretty conservative, but there was like no drinking, dancing, smoking, no boys, no anything. It was very, very strict.

**GP:** Wow.

**SA:** You go to chapel, you—you know, there was nothing on campus. There's nowhere you can go. I mean, you were just kinda in the all girls dorm and you're just, kinda just stuck there. And—I had—I had never thought about, you know, going anywhere. And the people that go there are the same. They never think that they're gonna go anywhere either, I guess. Because *no one was applying for it*.

[KM and GP laugh]

**SA:** And so it was a free ride to Japan. It was a full on scholarship to go to Japan—

**GP and SA:** Wow.

**SA:** You know, you graduate on time. All your credits come back. You know, you don't graduate late. Everything's paid for. Everything's paid for.

**KM:** I'm jealous [laughs]

**SA:** And three people go over there, and three people from their school come to Baylor. Okay, so it was like, three and three exchange. And so, they were, yeah, I remember looking at the thing on the board, and they were looking for kids to go and it said that here are the criteria, you gotta, you know, you have to have a you know, whatever, a certain GPA, you gotta have two years Japanese, you gotta, you know, be open to other cultures. Alright, and I was like, you know, I don't have the two years of Japanese. I had never done any Japanese before. So I didn't er try to get into that program or go apply for that because I didn't qualify. And I got—I guess it got really near the deadline where they needed to turn in the names, and there was no one signing up for it, right? And so they—I remember going in there, and that one was scratched out. The must learn—get two years of Japanese was scratched out. All it said was "two years any foreign language," any foreign language two years.

**GP:** Oooh.

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**SA:** Umm, certain GPA, which I had, and then a willingness to, you know, learn other cultures. [KM laughs] And so, I had two years of Chinese, I had the second year, I was in my second year, so I was like, okay, well, that could be me. So I put in my applica—I didn't tell my parents. Put in—

**GP:** [overlapping] You didn't tell your parents?

**SA:** No, I didn't tell my parents. I put in the application, right, just to see if I could get it. I told my roommates. [KM laughs] I was like "I'm gonna try to go to Japan" and they're like, what? [all laugh] I wanted to see if I could do it 'cause they took off that prerequisite, so I wanted to see if I can get in there. And uh, I dunno know. I was, you know, when you're—well you might be going through—but when I was younger, I just, I didn't really like being at Baylor. It was kinda a little too strict.

And my parents were very religious, they, they wanted me to go there 'cause my brother went there, and, you know, they felt my big brother could look after me. But I just—I was—I wanted—you know—do other things, I don't know. So this is my way to get out of there, and I was like "I'm just gonna go to Japan!" [KM and GP laugh] And so I applied for it, right? And I didn't get it. I didn't get it. I didn't get it, and I remember thinking—I was like praying to God. "[sigh] Why didn't I get it? You must not want me to go to Japan." I was like all bummed. I was all sad, right? I was like gaaah stuck at Baylor again. And then... I went home for spring break, and we got a phone call. We were all eating dinner. And it was someone from Baylor and they said, "You know what? We're gonna do *four* people this year. And you're theyou're the fourth." Right?

**GP:** Oh my goodness!

**SA:** "So we're gonna try *four*, uh, this year. You're the fourth and, you know, you, uh...you're kinda just a test case, because you're the only one going that's never done Japanese. All the other three, they've all got two years, right? Except for *you*. You—you don't—you—you—you don't know anything. We're gonna send you over there and see how that goes."

[All laugh]

**SA:** Right? So, I—then I had to tell my parents, 'cause my parents are like, "Who's that?" I was like [KM and GP laugh] "Oh, it's Baylor, and you know, they—I actually got into this exchange program to Japan." And they were like "*Japan?* Why would you wanna go to *Japan?*" [hits mic] And I was—I explained it to 'em. So they were—they were very worried and very scared for me, but, yeah, they were *very* scared and uh.... I ended up going over there, and that's how I ended up over there.

**(10:06)**

**GP:** Wow.

**SA:** I know, right? [laughing]

**KM:** That's amazing.

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**SA:** Isn't that funny?

**GP:** How did you meet your husband?

**SA:** I... it was—it was a nine month exchange—so it goes from August to May— and at the end of May, you know, there—there are actually kids from everywhere, you know, some from Oklahoma, and some from...I think there're some from San Diego, and there're some from, like, New York. And so everyone started going home, because the program was over. And I...I thought, okay, well, I can actually go home and work at Landry's, at the Kemah boardwalk where I live. [laughs] Except the Kemah boardwalk wasn't there. Landry's was there. On the—on the water, and it's always been there. I could go home and wait tables. Or I could stay in Japan for the summer and teach English.

Cause I was teaching English and I was, like bartending a little bit, I was like nineteen, twenty or something [laughing], I don't know, like a drinking age or something, I don't know. Yeah, I was like bartending a little bit and I was teaching English to little kids and I was like "Or I could stay here." You know, and I was getting better at the Japanese...and I thought maybe I should just stay there. You know, just for the summer, and then of course go back and finish school. And so I—I told my parents, I think I'm gonna stay through the summer and you know, do— brush up on my Japanese, make a little bit more money and, you know, and then come back, and finish up school. And I met him during that summer, that last couple months that I was there—

**GP:** [overlapping] Aww.

**SA:** I met him June 11th. At the beach near my house. Um...he was a professional athlete, so he was...it was a Friday afternoon, and he was jogging on the beach, right? And he's like all buff, [laughter] you know, he didn't look like the typical Japanese, you know, man. [laughter] All skinny and white. He was like all, you know, buff, and he was like jogging on the beach. So maybe he's like— maybe he's like Ameri—me, like Ameri—Japane—uh Ameri—Asian American, you know? I thought. And so, yeah...we just kind of caught each other's eyes, we're kind of checking each other out, and, and then somehow we started talking and uh he uh I realized he was not American. [all laugh]

[laughing] He couldn't speak any English. Although his mom was an English teacher, that helped a little bit. Um, but he uh, he was like "Hey, you wanna go get—" This is all in Japanese, with my nine months of Japanese. "Would you like to go get an iced tea?" And so we went out and had a little iced tea, and we got to know each other that way. And...yeah, and then, you know, just two months later, he was like, "Hey, you know, we should get married." I mean, it was very fast.

**GP:** Two months?

**SA:** He proposed like that fall.

**GP:** Is that normal in Japan?

**SA:** No, no, yeah, no. No no no. Uh, he's five years older, so I was twentyone and he was twentysix. So, we ended up getting engage he came to America. He came to visit my family, and went to see Baylor \

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and he proposed that fall, and then we married right after I got out. So, I graduated in May and married him in June and moved over to Japan.

**GP:** Woow.

**SA:** Yeah, so...

**KM:** So when you were starting out, were like you, just speaking Japanese to him, or was he trying to learn a little bit of English too?

**SA:** [overlapping] We—we're both just trying to do whatever we could to communicate, but then y—you gotta understand this is before the Internet. I mean, I feel old saying that, it's crazy, but we—I remember my—my graduating year, they were like, "And this is your email address, it's dot baylor or whatever pcu," or whatever it was. [all laugh] We were all like—

**GP:** "I have an email?"

**SA:** I know, right? We were like, we didn't even know how to do that. So we, you know—there was no, you know, of course no iPhones, there's nothing. There was like literally *nothing*. There was no—once I went over there, I had zero connection to the real world. I was just dead. Like...lost. Because there's no Internet! And you're in a foreign country. What are you going to do? [KM laughs] You can't read anything. You can't understand—I mean, you know, you got, a—a year's worth of Japanese. But it was awful. It was *awful*.

**GP:** Wow.

**SA:** Yeah. It was very very hard. I fell into a very deep depression for like a year. Lost. Just like, "Oh, I think I messed up. [laughs] What am I doing here?" Right? I'm like, I'm not valedictorian, but I mean I was like top one percent of my class, so I was voted most likely to succeed, I mean, I'm supposed to like be a lawyer, do something, like, what am I doing here, right? And then all this weird cultural stuff where he was going to parties by himself and I was like well what am I doing here? This—What am I doing here? I—I got really lost, and I couldn't get a job because they didn't want to hire like—I don't know if they didn't want to hire *women*, or they didn't want to hire Englishspeaking, Englishspeaking people, or maybe they didn't want to hire people that weren't fluent perfect in Japanese.

So I couldn't find my niche. I was like so...disoriented. I was like...I didn't wanna do all those—I was like—I had to be a like a Japanese housewife? You know, where you gotta go grocery shopping and lug it home with your hands? Walking? Like, look, I drive a car, and I park in a parking lot, and I push my stuff in a cart! [GP laughs] Like, I don't wanna like, like handhold it all the way home, you know, I was like oh, this is just awful. It was terrible.

**(14:58)**

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And so, one day I was listening—we had—my only outlet to reality was a uh...was a radio station. And they had—the Kobe earthquake had just happened. And the government said, you know, uh, you know, there's not enough communication sources for foreigners living in Japan, so we should make a uh radio station that speaks English and Japanese, and like an international radio station. And we should have three of them, one on each island. So we're gonna do one in Tokyo, one in Osaka, and one in Fukuoka, which is where I was.

I was like, “Huh.” So I listened to that, and once in a while the American DJ's would come on and they would start talking, right, in English and [joyful exclamation]. Some reality, right? So they're—they're starting to say something, and you're like getting, you know, some People magazine news or you're getting some, some NBA news, or just saying kinda anything, and that way it's like, you know, anything related to home. And one day they said they were looking for DJ's. And I was like, okay, maybe I could do that, right? I mean, I was teaching and doing some translating work. But they said, you know, they're looking for DJ's. And I was like, more like you guys, I was real studious, I mean, I wasn't like gobeADJ type, I mean I had zero training in that, I mean, you know, I was...a business major. [KM and GP laugh]

But I was stuck over there. My only skill was English. So I'm like, well maybe I can do that. So, I got on my bike and went down to the little, the little, wha—it was like a Radio Shack kind of thing, alright? And I bought this...I bought this microphone and I drove—rode my bike back to my apartment [laughing]—I didn't even drive my car, I was like driving uh riding on some bicycle—plug it into my little CD player. I put on Brookes and Dunn, “My Maria”—I don't know if you know that song—and I put the little microphone in, put the little cassette in, but the little DVD—uh, DVD?—uh CD in, and I'm like “Hey it's Susan, and I'm comin' at you live from Southern Florida [garbled]” And like being all like, gay, like stupid, right? Just acting like a DJ, like, I was like, “Aand the weather forecast calls for partly cloudy skies.” I was just like making up all kinds of stupid stuff to do my audition tape? ‘Cause they want an audition tape. So I made an audition tape, and then I like, wrote a little letter. “Hey, I'd like to be a DJ on your radio station.” And I sent that in and I got called in for a uh—for a—for an audition.

**GP:** Oooh.

**KM:** Wow.

**SA:** So there're like fifty...four people or something like that, sitting in a room, and they're filling two spots. One was a Monday through Friday. It was a uh...[sigh] It was uh twelve to two. No. It was three to five. My first show was three to five. And—and then a Sunday drive time. So it was like a Sunday afternoon, you know, one to five. And so, there was like all these foreigners in there, right—I'm—Australian, England, all these other countries, right, that speak English. And so—and a bunch of Americans. And so we went and did our audition, and they have you read the script and, you know, do these intros, and you know, introduce this song, and give—read this newscast, you know, read this weather forecast. And then they sit you down. They, like, kinda see who you are and how long you're gonna be here, if you're legal, you have a visa, you know, how you're gonna stay. And I passed. So I got the job. So it was my first job, I'm like, okay, I got a job! [all laugh]  
So now—

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**GP:** [overlapping] That's great!

**SA:** So now I was a radio DJ! So, like, okay! I don't know what I'm doing, but let's do this. 'Cause I mean I don't have anything else to do and I'm doing—stuck here anyways. So I—I started being a radio DJ. And my first gig was that three to five. It was called “The Sound Shack.” And, um, from there life was just like zooooop [makes fast shooting upward motion with hand].

[All laugh]

**SA:** 'Cause now you're like "I'm a DJ!" [laughing] It was fun, right? 'Cause every famous person that came to town, we got to interview, got to go to all their concerts, got all their DV—CDs—

**KM:** [overlapping] That's amazing.

**SA:** Right, all the—all the red carpet, movie premieres and, you know, interviewing the Foo Fighters in the middle of Tokyo [GP laughs]—

**KM:** [overlapping] Wow.

**SA:** And meeting Dido, and Belinda Carlisle, and Kool and the Gang. I'm like Kool and the Gang? I'm like, that's hilarious, that's like from the eighties. [singing] "Celebrate good times. Come on!" like you sang that? Like everyone was like old, like fifties. [GP laughs] It was okay. It was all right. It was fun. Christopher Cross...I have a long list, of like just people that I got to interview, and just—just cool stuff that I got to do that we would never ever be able to do? You know, like...in our lifetime? Like ever? Like, right now, when I'm like thinking about my life *now* and I think about *that* life then. And I'm like, man I got to live twice. [KM laughs] I totally think that that is... Did that happen to me? It's like—it's just it—it's crazy. Yeah.

**GP:** What did your husband think about [overlapping] being a DJ?

**SA:** [overlapping] About this? He thought it was good. I mean he thought it was good for me. You know? I mean, I got to not be so miserable at my house, right? So that's a good thing. And I got to be a little bit busier, you know? And uh, there's just a lot of perks that come with that job, so. He was happy. He was happy. [GP laughs] Yeah, and he was—he was travelling all over the Japan. So he was like in a different city like every weekend. You know, 'cause he was doing his sport, and you know...

**KM:** [overlapping] What sport did he do?

**GP:** [overlapping] What sport did he play?

**SA:** He did um...it's cycling, on the velodrome. It's called Keirin, KEIRIN. And it's uh, you know, it's like an oval track with the high walls and like six or nine of 'em go at a time? Yeah. As of the 2000 uh Sydney Olympics, it's actually an Olympic sport now.

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**GP:** Oh wow.

**(20:00)**

**SA:** So—but he raced—he raced bicycles for almost twenty years, and then he retired and we came over here.

**KM:** Wow.

**GP:** Why did you decide to come over here?

**SA:** [pause] At the time, we just had had our second child. Um, and raising kids over there is extremely hard. I—that—that's—a—absolutely the number one reason why I had to leave. I— because life was *so* awesome. And then we had a kid and it kind of cramped your style a little bit, and you hang in there. But you get a second kid? Nuhuh. [KM laughs] I couldn't hang out anymore. It was too hard. And it— everything just changed. You know? Just—you'll find out, it just—things change when you have kids. And it was just—it was time to go. It was time to go. So, my parents were still in Clear Lake. And we really could have picked any city, but we—the kids were three and one, and we kinda.... No one knew what to do for jobs, right?

I mean, what does a re—you, know, retired professional athlete. They always have trouble knowing what to do next, right? I mean, and, I mean, look at Michael Jordan. He went from this sport and that sport, went back out of retirement, and then back, right? [GP laughs] So, na—it's just it—and I think I underestimated how hard that was going to be for him. It was a very very hard tra—it was like the transition for me going over there, was like him transitioning over here. 'Cause he had no family, no friends, and then there was really nothing here for him to do, and so he was... yeah.

He would probably be a good interview for you. But it was very, very hard for him. And uh—and I didn't have a job either, right? And actually my only knowledge of living in the United States was up—you know up to now—what y'all have, like eighteen, nineteen years old, right? I mean that's all I ever had. I went to Baylor, right, a couple years over there, but that was it. And now *I* have to be the leader. So I was like, I was like thirty-five—I'm forty-three, I just turned forty-three—but I was thirty-five at the time. And I remember thinking, “Okay I got this. I can be the leader. You know, I—I—you know you've been the leader. I'll check the mail, and I'll pay the bills, and I'll figure out how to do all —” I've never done any of that. None! Right?

When would—when would we ever do that? I didn't even know how to do *any* of that. [GP and KM laugh] I'm like, how do you vote? Or how do you get the little sticker on your car, you know, the little whatever that thing is that you gotta do once a year? Pay your taxes, all that stuff, I never did any of that, right? I was exempt for like—I mean I followed the little thing that says, you know, you're a U.S. citizen filing your taxes, but [sighs] I didn't know what to do. I mean, it was very hard. And then, um.... And then again, something good happened, and then we just went psshhhh [repeats fast upward shooting motion], back up again. So I mean, it's just.... I think life is—life is interesting that way.

**GP:** Was it a specific good thing, or...?

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**SA:** [sighs] For me it was real estate. Um I came back, um, and I was thinking, “Okay, what are my skills? What can I do here?” You know, w—what—I have nothing. I have never worked here, ever, right? Landry's. I was a waitress for like three summers. [KM laughs] Two. [laughing] Two summers. That's it. So my working experience? None. And I don't want to get back into radio. I uh—so I was thinking okay I can—I can speak English, I can speak Japanese, and I know Houston. Okay, so what can you do with that? [all laugh] Real estate, right? I mean, you—as long as you can talk, right? ‘Cause I can talk. I'm—you know, ‘cause of the radio stuff, I—I can talk and I can speak a couple of languages, and I know the area. So for me it was a logical choice to go into real estate. So I went and got my real estate license. And in Texas you have to uh, back in the day, when I got my license, you had to work two years for—under a broker. And then you can test for your broker's license. Open your own company. So I did my two years to the day—

[GP laughs]

**KM:** Wow.

**SA:** Tested for my broker's license

**GP:** Under—under which broker?

**SA:** I was with RE/MAX United in, uh, in Chinatown. And that was also a—a crazy fluke. I was taking a class, not knowing what to do. You know when you get into the business, nobody trusts you yet. You know everybody—because you don't know what you're doing, which is fine. So I had zero clients. Didn't know what I was doing *at all*, and did zero deals. You know, I got into the business, did zero deals. And I was working for a small brokerage in Clear Lake with the lady who helped us buy *our* house in Clear Lake.

When I was doing my uh testing for my—my uh real estate license, you know, they said, “Well you gotta have a broker that will sponsor you.” And uh, I was like I don't know anybody.” I really—I didn't know anybody. I had been gone for fifteen years, and I didn't know—know any—I was back in my city, but I didn't know anybody. Everyone was gone/ And uh, the lady that helped us buy the house, her—Barbara Hutter, with Bridgepress Properties, a very nice lady. I said, “Hey, Barbara, can I—can I hang my license with you, and you know, could you sponsor me so I can do this?” And she's like, “yeah, it's fine.” So she had a real—you know, kind of a flexible pay plan thing and I was like, “Okay, that's fine.” I did that. I did *zero* deals. From September to December. I didn't know what I was doing! I had no idea what to do.

And she was a working broker, and, there's—she's not like a Keller Williams or RE/MAX where they teach you what to do. They have a generous split, but you gotta know what you're doing. They're not gonna sit there and babysit you, okay? You go figure that out. So I was like, okay, well, I'll just take classes. I'm real good at classes. I—I—I mean everything I know, I—I just go to class. [GP and KM laugh]. Like, if I don't know what—go to class. Someone will teach me how to do it, or the people will be talking in the class and you can kinda listen to what they say and you can kinda pick it up. And so I went to this class, I went to my GRI class, and there was a man sitting next to me, and he worked for RE/MAX United, and he was talking about his broker.

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(25:02)

And he's like, "Yeah, I got a really great broker and he's so you know he's so awesome, and he's just the just kicks butt. He's just awesome," you know? "I want you to meet him. And then you should go over there and work, you know at RE/MAX United and it's in Chinatown." And I live in Clear Lake and Chinatown's Beltway 8 in Bellaire. It's like an hour from my house! And so I was like, "Okay, that's not a very—it's—it's—that—you know—I mean— Real estate is like you're an independent contractor. You're—you don't get paid a *penny*. You're 100% commission right? I don't know if you know how that work, but as you—every expense you incur you *just bleed*. You don't get reimbursed for any of that, okay?"

And I had no—I was afraid of expenses 'cause I wasn't making any money and so I was like —'kay, my—my phone was one of those phones that you are limited on your minutes you, know? So I was like always very conscious about how many minutes I was talking on my phone. And I didn't have, uh, one of those passes that you dr—put on your car to drive on the Beltway 8. The EZ Pass. I didn't have that because I didn't—didn't want to incur that expense of buying the sticker which isn't even that much! It was like fifteen bucks, but I didn't know! I didn't know how much it was! I just thought I don't want to incur any expenses so I had to take the take the roads that you know? [inaudible] It's right up the Beltway and I'm gonna go all the way through the whole town just to get there [GP and KM laugh] so I wouldn't have to get on the 8 the number 8 8 the bell. I was like anything I could do to *not* spend money right? 'Cause you're just bleeding every day.

And so I—I switched over January 1st, 2008. I switched over to RE/MAX United and I didn't know what I was doing but I was like, "Hey I gotta just go and see what other people are doing." If I don't go and see what other people are doing, I literally will not know what to do. Right? You're not gonna learn if you're just sitting at home. So I was like, "I'm going to suck it up and I'm going to go to that office and I'm going to see what everyone's doing." So I was like okay, I just—January 2<sup>nd</sup>—you know, January 1st was closed—drive over there, 'kay. And I'm like just—they said, "Okay you can be sitting over there. So I was just sitting over there and I have like *nothing*. I have no computer [laughs]. You know, and I've got (?) a phone that's like on limited minutes. I got no money.

I'm just like kinda sitting there like looking around seeing what other people are doing. And you know they're all busy. You know they're all like doing their contracts, you know, on the telephone. And they're like doing all their stuff, and like talking to vendors. And like company people come in. It was like "Hey how ya doing?" Like everyone knows everybody. And you're—you're just sitting like [KM laughs] you don't know anybody—you're like total—you—you just feel awful. And there was a boy that sat next to me. His name is Denny. He's from Vietnam. Um, or, uh, he's born in the States like me, but his parents are from Vietnam. And he had moved over here from California and he sat next to me and he was *so nice*! The nicest person ever! He's like, "Hey we're gonna go for lunch. You wanna go?" I was like "Wow that would be great. I would love to go!" Right? 'Cause you can just sit there and just—just sitting there listening to what people do and say and all the mistakes they make or the problems that they go through, it's very beneficial to you. 'Cause you can learn a lot just from listening to other people and all the things that they go through.

So, it was just a treat for me to just be in the presence of producing people—[GP and KM laugh]—the people that are making money and doing it. You know? They're doing it. They're property managing. They're selling, leasing. They're buying. I mean they're doing all this stuff right? And so he

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—he had a partner and they would always like powwow about their deals, right? And I would just sit there and listen. I'd go, "Man Denny's killing it." Right? He's doing so good. And his partner was Quinn and they were like It was like—I was trying to figure out how I'm gonna ever gonna be like Denny and Quinn. And they're like kickin' it, [GP laughs] right?

And so one day—and this is—this is just crazy how this happens. One day [pause] someone walked into the office and they wanted a lease. And no one—you know in my business no one wants leases 'cause it doesn't make money. It—it's—you make, you know, nothing compared to like a sale. And so no one wanted her. And I was like "Well, I'll take her!" Right? I mean, I got no—I mean, well, I got nothing to do; I got no clients; I've got nothing to do. I'll take her. I'll take her and I'll—I'll do whatever I can to make this deal, you know, the best deal ever." [GP laughs]

And you could tell that she was something, right? She was just something. She was Gucci, Prada, Louis Vuitton all the way up and down. I mean she looked like a million bucks! And I was like, "Okay. She's something right? I mean, what is she?" [laughs] Trying to figure out what she was. And she was—she goes—she was like, "This is what I want, this is my budget, and this is where I want to be, and these are the things I have to have." And I was like "Hey, I got it. Give me one second." I went back to my desk and was like, "Where do I bring her?" Like I didn't—I had no idea what to do, right? 'Cause she wanted gated, in town. And I mean she had a huge budget. And I was like, "That—we don't have anything like that." Like even West U is not gated, right? Memorial's not gated. We don't have all of River Oaks is not gated—it's like wide open. [KM laughs] I mean like our best places aren't gated. Right? I mean—it's not—Clear Lake's not Bay Oaks is not gated right? [laughing] Like everything I knew—I was like "Where do all the rich people live? They—at River Oaks, West U, and Bay Oaks." Like everything I could think of nothing was gated, right? I had no options.

So I was like, I'll ask Denny. I'm like, "Denny, hey, where do I bring her 'cause she wants to be gated, right?" And she's in the waiting room, but she's in the, uh, the—the conference room, right? And I'm like sneaking back to the back room going, "Where do I go?! Where do I go?!" [GP and KM laugh] Like totally freaking out. I didn't have a GPS. I had nothing. [GP gasps] I didn't even know where to bring her. And she said said, "Well I'll drive and you can, uh, you can ride with me." So I was like "Okay." Right? So, I'm in her car and I have to navigate but I don't even know where to go right? And I have no appointments like I— nothing—I have nothing. I don't even have my HAR app I've got nothing. I have no—don't know what to do. And I'm on—on limited phone, uh, limited minutes right? So I'm like calling Denny. "Denny, can you get on HAR and see where I can bring her 'cause I don't know where to go? Like what do I do? Can you make some, uh, appointments and tell me how to get into the house? Like I don't know how to get in—access, right?" So Denny is like my little back agent. [GP laughs] Like I don't know (?) he's got his little thing on, right? He's like "dadadadada." He's like all—funny... Okay. The first day I couldn't find her anything. Actually I couldn't—there—there was nothing. So I said to her, "Okay, ma'am, we're gonna have to go farther out, you know? We can't be in the town. We can't even be inside 8. I can't think of anything even in not only not only inside 610 but not—but even inside 8. We gotta go outside 8. The expensive 8."

**(30:49)**

Then, so Denny said, "Okay, here I put together this list. Bring her to all these places." So we started driving and she's in the car behind me right? And I show her everything I can show her and I'm out. I'm done. I had nothing else. She didn't like any of them. And I said, "Okay, I'm out. I'm out. I—I

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got nothing else." And so like he's like, "Okay, let me see what else I can find." So he's like [action noise] Booking it for me. He's like, "'Kay, get on, uh, get on Eldridge—you know Eldridge—and go North, and just keep going North." So I'm on Eldridge right? I have never been up I'm in Clear—I live in Clear Lake! Okay, Eldridge is the *other* end. [GP laughs]

I'm in the bottom right and now I'm in the top left, right? I'm up near Cypress, right? Never been there before ever. Never. I'm driving in Eldridge and I'm like, "'Kay, where am I? 'Kay, where am I?" The road is ending. It's becoming something else. It's not even Eldridge anymore it's now some other word. And oh my god, it's like forests. It's nothing. I—I—I'm lost. I see nothing. I see nothing. I see nothing! I'm like panicking and he's like, "Okay, do you see it?" And I'm like, "What am I looking for?" And he's like, "A gate. Do you see gates?" And I'm like, "I see like a... Yeah! I see a lake. I see a lake and I see gates!" He's like, "That's it! Go over there. That's Lizmore Lakes. That's what it is. And that—it's brand new." And she couldn't say no to that. And it was—it was brand new. You looked at the lake and it had a gate. And she took it.

**GP:** [laughs] Finally the gates!

**SA:** She—she took it! And I was like, "Oh my god! My first deal ever!" And it was like—you know, it was a lot! It was like—I forgot what it was. It might have been like four grand. So I made like two grand off that. And so she said, "Okay, I take this one. You know, please do the paperwork." And she left. She's like, "I have to go take my dog, you know, to the, whatever, get a haircut." [all laugh] I don't know. I was like, "Oh, okay. That's fine. I'll take care of the paperwork." You know, you gotta pretend like you know what you're doing. "I got it all. Just send it over, uh you know, by email." [GP and KM laugh] Let her go right? And she's gone in her little, you know, Cadillac, and I'm in my little, you know, my car. And I'm like, "Hey." I did not even know how to get home. I didn't know where I was! Right? Because I'm nowhere! I'm like in the middle of nowhere with no GPS and nothing. Like that's like someone just dropping you in the middle of nowhere and going, "'Kay, go home!" [KM laughs]

I was like "What?" I didn't know how to get home. So I was like... And my phone was "dun dun dun" out of battery dying, dying, dying, dead. Right? So I'm like, "Oh my god." [laughs] I'm like driving to like uh, to uh, a cafeter—uh, uh, like a Starbucks, like a cafe. I plugged my phone in, waiting for it to charge up so I can kinda call for help. [SA and GP laugh] Give my address to somebody so they can—I didn't have a computer. Right? No—no nothing. So yeah I call up Denny and I was like "How do I get out of here? Like where am I?" Right? And so later on—like later on [laughing] I look at this map to see where I was (?). [whispering] I was so far. I was *ridiculously* far like *off the map* far! Like I was not even on the map of Houston anymore—like here's Houston, you know, like *all* of Houston. I was like way over there!

**GP:** Ooh.

**KM:** Aww.

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**SA:** And I was like "Oh my god, I hope she knows where she was." [GP laughs] She just took a house that's like suuuuper far. But she took it. And then two days later she said, "You know, my husband is the pastor of a big church..."

**GP:** [inaudible] That's lucky.

**SA:** Yeah, "My husband is the pastor of a big church and we're looking for some land and some commercial buildings in Houston. Do you do commercial?" Of course [whispers] I have never done a commercial deal ever in my life. I had just done my first residential and it was a *lease* for Christ sake! So I'm like "Yeah! Absolutely! Tell me what you are looking for?" [GP laughs] Right? So she's like telling me what she's looking for right? And I spent like the next, you know, couple months looking you know? They had my one and only client! I got nobody except for her, right? I'm looking like crazy, you know, over in Richmond. I'm over here, you know, I—you—I get to know Houston very well. They turn out to be my biggest clients. I mean—

**KM:** [overlapping] Wow.

**SA:** they bought building after building after building after building all over Texas.

**KM:** Wow.

**SA: KM:** Wow. All over Texas.

**GP:** Maaaaan.

**SA:** Yeah. All over Texas I mean we were we bought a building in *Laredo*, in *Fort Worth*, in *Katy*, a couple in *Houston*. I mean...

**GP:** What were their names?

**SA:** I can't tell you.

**GP:** Oh okay.

**(34:45)**

**SA:** [laughs] Yeah, I mean big tracts of land. I mean they just bought like crazy. So my first year in real estate...I made it out really good for my first year in real estate.

**KM:** [inaudible]

**SA:** And then uh—while that was happening we got a call from my first Japanese person. They said, "We're Japanese and you're Japanese, and you know, [KM laughs] you speak Japanese. So can you help

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us find a house?" And that was my first one and I was like—I take that back there was *one* Japanese realtor in Houston at the time. Now, there's three, or four. There's not that many. But there—at that time she had monopolized the whole Houston because she was the only one. And she said—you know—and she lives in Sugarland. And she said, you know, "I have, uh, a guy. And uh he works for a Japanese company down in Clear Lake and I don't really want to go to Clear Lake to go show it so do you want him?" I was like "Yeah, I'll take him!" Right? Because I had nobody. [laughs] And I live there so, "Sure!" Right?

Well, that was my very first Japanese...experience, you know? Here's my *first* Japanese client. [KM laughs] And so, [inaudible] but it's still okay. And so, you know, he said—you know, he wanted such and such so I got him that. And he referred someone, and they referred someone, and then *they* referred someone, and *then* they referred someone. [GP laughs] And so, we literally from that *one* guy took off! We took off from that one guy. Yeah. And I remember 'cause I had nothing else to do. And he was my only client. He said, "My mini blinds won't work. Can you come look at my mini blinds?" And this is after I closed him. That was like several weeks later. I'm done. Like my job is to find you a house, do the paperwork, negotiate, get you in there, get your deposits. Uh, "Sayonara I'm done!" Right? [KM and GP laugh] "Go enjoy your life in your new house!"

And he was like, "My mini blinds won't work." And I was being that's not my job. I'm not property managing this. Like go freaking figure out your own mini blinds, right? [GP laughs] But, I didn't have anything else to do. I was like, "Okay, well let me go take out your mini blinds." [KM and GP laugh] So I went over there, and I'm like, you know, trying to figure out—and they were all jacked up. I mean the mini blinds were totally jacked up. And I was like, "My cousin does mini blinds. Let me go call him, see if he can come over here and fix your mini blinds." Call him up, "Hey Jake, can you come over here and [whispers] can you fix this guys mini blinds? They like all jacked up like I can't—like the—[GP laughs] like the—the—the strings like no matter which way you do it they're like not turning any of the things!" I'm like—so he brought in an all new component, switched it out, and the Japanese guy is like suuuuper happy. Just that one thing. And from *that* we were like referred out like crazy. [GP laughs] Isn't that funny? Every little bit

**KM:** That's so great.

**SA:** Every little thing counts, right? And so now we've kind of built the business where [pause] we offer a lot of that after service 'cause what we find is—you know—when they're coming in from a different culture it's kinda the same as when I was in, you know, in Japan. They don't *know* how to prevent the water pipes from busting. They don't *know* how to water their grass, interestingly enough! Because they don't have any grass! Right? [GP laughs] They don't know how to do anything! And I'm like "Okay, this is—this is a dishwasher." They don't have a dishwasher! That's another thing. They don't have a dishwasher, right? So, they don't have central air and heat, right? So they're not used to keeping the whole house cool, right? So sometimes when they go on vacation they turn off...[GP laughs] You know, *completely* the whole system off. Like in the summertime for like two weeks! They come back and you know it's like really bad [laughing] for the house to do that, right?

**KM:** Yeah.

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**SA:** So the owners are like, “Please don't let them do that.” [SA laughs and then KM laughs. So just be that buffer between, you know, the American landlord and the Japanese tenant. We've kind of built a whole business on that as well.

**GP:** That's really interesting—

**SA:** [overlapping] Yeah, it's kind funny.

**GP:** —actually.

**SA:** Yeah. We've kind of brought the company a bunch of different directions right now. [pause] In a good way. But yeah...

**KM:** So what does your husband do now?

**SA:** Uh, good question. Uh, when he first came over he was kind of not knowing what to do, right? And so he—we got him a job at the bike barn 'cause we figured that might be comfortable for him. He knows bikes and, you know, he would be around cyclists. And that wasn't very good. That didn't work out too good.

**GP:** Aww.

**SA:** I mean, he liked it, but, you know, when you're making *that* much money and then you go to a \$10 an hour—whatever he was making—job I think that kind of affected his...I don't know...ego? I don't know if I should said that. But so he thought, "Well, you know, but I—surely I can do something better than this, you know, with my life." So he said, you know, he thought about it and he said, "Okay, I think I want to build custom bicycles."

**GP:** Ooh.

**SA:** And so he went to a class on how to do that in Colorado. A Japanese frame builder over there a real famous one he makes, uh, bicycles for the Olympic team in the United States.

**KM:** Wow.

**SA:** And so Kou went over there—his name is Kou, my husband. Uh, he took a class in that. And you know, 'cause he's always raced, um, you know, bicycles and all his bicycles were 100% custom made. They were all made to him—fit—made to fit. And so he *knows* about that but he's just never done it himself. He knows how to like, tell the builder how to do it, like the dimensions and everything else all the lug work, all that stuff He knows what he wants. So he knows the customer side of it, just not the builder side of it? So, he went to learn the builder side of it and he started his own company doing custom bikes. So he was doing that, uh, for a couple of years. He's still doing it. Once in a while, he'll

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make a bike or two a year, you know, if it's someone that uh really needs it. Like he built, um, a couple for Cirque du Soleil.

**KM:** Wow.

**(39:50)**

**SA:** Uh, the high—uh—high wire uh act there's

**GP:** Wow.

**SA:** —a couple bikes that ride up and down on the high wire.

**GP:** Woooow.

**SA:** So he Cirque du Soleil called and said, "Hey, you know, can you come and visit us and see what we need...and you know...and..."

**KM:** That's so cool.

**SA:** I thought that was really neat! Like that's super cool!

**GP:** [overlapping] That's amazing!

**SA:** [laughs] Right? So...last year um, well two years ago I had a baby. So I had another baby and we got suuuper busy you know, 'cause of the baby but also 'cause the company has just really grown and grown and grown. It's gotten kind of...super crazy out of control. And I said, "Kou, I think we could use another Japanese speaking person 'cause our—our company really...has be— has really dominated the market and we've really found our niche in serving the Japanese community and you speak Japanese so you'd be a perfect fit!" He goes "Me?!" [All laugh] Like, "Yes you, honey. Go get your real estate license." He's like "Me?!" He's not very academic. He's not like you guys going to Rice University. He did go to a good university but he just...the whole thing's in English! You know? And it's you know the proprietary rights and all this—you know all this ex—very difficult lingo to pass the test, you know? He's like, "I—I can't do it. You know, it's so hard." I was like, "You can do it honey! I mean, look at all the other foreigners! They have—they have their—their real estate license. How'd they do it right? [KM laughs] Go to a crash course—a champion's, you know, review class. You know, they—they'll teach you how to take the test. You know, you take your classes then you go learn how to take the test." And so, oh boy, he struggled like crazy but he finally got his license. So now he's in the company, right? And now he serves a giant purpose. I mean, he takes care of the whole property management side of things.

**GP:** Wow.

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**SA:** Right? 'Cause all of our tenants are Japanese and when they have an issue they just call Kou, right? And they can, you know, chit chat in Japanese. [GP and KM laugh] And he's really handy too! He can go over there and fix anything. You know he—[GP laughs] change out [inaudible] air conditioning filter, and teach them how to wrap their pipes, or he can go over there and trip their little GC—GFCI breakers or you know. Just little things that they don't know that they need to know. So...and it frees me up, you know? 'Cause usually that's me running over there and I can't be running over there anymore 'cause now I got other—you know, other things going on. So, you know, it's good to have an extra guy that can do, you know, take the load of me so... He—he now works for the company and he's—he's doing very well! He's—he's actually out writing a contract at uh one of the apartment complexes right now.

**KM:** Wow, that's great!

**SA:** I know, I'm very proud of him! I was like, [KM laughs] "He's Japanese. He's yours, honey!" You know, and I hand him over. Alright? So yeah, he—and—and people like him you know 'cause he's very gentle, and he's very... He—because he hasn't been here very long he can understand what they're worried about. You know, so when they're—when they're feeling a little uneasy or they're worried he can explain.

**KM:** He can relate really well.

**SA:** He can relate very well. Yeah, and so he knows how to, you know, make them feel better or fix all their problems. We send them—we send them all coupons, you know. [GP laughs] Free Starbucks this week! You know [GP and KM laugh] A [inaudible] coupon, you know. They just moved in, like, "Here's a Bed, Bath, and Beyond coupon." [KM still laughing] You know, whatever we can do to help people out, right? I mean...

**KM:** Yeah, anything helps.

**SA:** Right? So yeah, we—we tried to not only do the business but also be helpful, you know? And you know we kinda got back into church. So we've been going to church and you know really absorbing that in and really...really feeling...how all this is fitting together, you know? I mean, I don't think this by luck. I don't. I think there's some divine intervention. I think God has really given me...the right tools to do what I'm doing and the right time. Right? Had I not gone to Japan I wouldn't speak Japanese, right? Had I not done radio I wouldn't be able to talk, right? Had I not lived in Houston I wouldn't have learned the area. So all of that—If I didn't get a car I probably couldn't get, you know, make the company go as big as it is. So...I think everything is just kinda. You know—

**KM:** [overlapping] It all fits.

**SA:** And when you're little you don't see it. You never see it. Like, why did I have to go to Baylor for, right? [GP laughs] I don't wanna go to Baylor. But that's all part of it, too, right? I mean, that's how I ended up in Japan so even that was part of it. So...you'll see how that fits together later. And I never

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saw—I never saw until—I guess very recently, it's probably the last five years I'm seeing that. "Oh God, it's all fitting together" You know? Now I kinda see where I'm supposed to be—what I'm supposed to be doing and, you know, how that all works together. So...

**KM:** That's amazing.

**SA:** It's neat. Isn't it? It's neat.

**GP:** So you have three kids?

**SA:** I do. I have three kids. Um, two were born in Japan and one was born in the States. Uh, they're half Japanese and half Chinese by blood. And we have them struggling like crazy like I did in language school. Um, they go to Chinese school, uh, every Sunday afternoon hate it, just like I did, [GP laughs] I hated it. But now I can speak it so, hey, you gotta do it. [KM laughs] And we send them to Japan every summer.

**(45:03)**

**GP:** Woah.

**SA:** So they go to—they spend their summers in Japan with their grandparents in Japan. They go to Japanese school over there and they are completely and utterly immersed in that culture. They knew all the festivals; they do—they eat all the food that they eat; [KM laughs] they do everything that they do. They live like they—they sleep on the floor; they bathe like they—everything they do, they do exactly how they do there.

**KM:** Wow.

**GP:** That's amazing!

**SA:** Yes.

**GP:** How old are they now?

**SA:** Um, the big one's now ten? And—and the middle one's eight.

**GP:** Okay.

**SA:** Right. So, it's just as much as we can—you know, when they're little I really want them to have that other culture exposed to them. I feel like as a parent that's my job. As long as I can afford to send them over there and let them experience all that, [pause] I want them to do that at this early age 'cause you learn faster, right? You learn faster when you're little. So they're, you know, they're able to do it I

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mean they're—they're speaking Japanese. They understand Japanese. Um, they're working on the Chinese. Not—now, not perfect, but very good. I'm very pleased with their—with their progress in Chinese. Yeah. I—I test them all the time. [KM laughs] My husband tests them in Chi—Japanese. I'll say, "Well how do you say 'turn right right here'" and they'll say "What language?" [GP laughs] I mean, I'm like, "Alright, you do Japanese and you do Chinese" right? So, you know, just trying to make them do it right? Yeah.

**KM:** What language do y'all speak at home?

**SA:** It's all mixed. It's it's mostly English because they come home and they speak English, but my husband speaks all Japanese to them. Except for recently, he's kind of shifting into English I see. But a lot [KM laughs] It's half English, half Japanese. And then—and then testing a little bit in Chinese every once in a while.

**GP:** Is your Chinese still really good after...?

**SA:** My Chinese is interestingly...not bad. Uh, conversationalwise. Like I couldn't read—write it and I couldn't read it, but I can understand it and I can speak it. So yeah. My Japanese is a lot better. Yeah. Except for my writing, it's not that good. [GP laughs] I can understand it, I can speak it, I can *read* it, but I just can't write it very good. [KM laughs] I mean, I can—if I used a word processor or like gmail it auto-populates it all. [GP laughs] Right, so, you're like [speaking Japanese] You just write that in English, all the words come up in Japanese—like, perfect, send! [All laugh] So you don't really have to write it with your hand. So yeah, that's good.

**GP:** Yeah. I'm—I'm taking Chinese right now so...

**SA:** Are you really? Alright say something.

**GP:** "Wo hen xihuan xue zhongwen." [I like to study Chinese.]

**SA:** Wow. Say it again?

**GP:** "Wo hen xihuan xue zhongwen."

**SA:** Something about [inaudible], right?

**KM:** I actually understood that!

**GP:** Really?

**KM:** Yeah.

**SA:** What—what did she say?

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**KM:** You said, um...I want...or I like to study Chinese.

**GP:** Mhmhmm.

**SA:** So did she say, "wo xihuan xue zhongwen"?

**KM:** Yes.

**SA:** Oh okay. Can you say it?

**KM:** Uh...

**SA:** [laughs]

**KM:** I speak Cantonese.

**SA:** Oh really? So how do you say that?

**KM:** Um [speaks Cantonese]. Oh shoot.

**SA:** [laughs]

**GP:** This is going to be so fun to transcribe later. [All laugh]

**KM:** I can't—for some reason I'm just blanking out.

**SA:** The only thing I know is [Cantonese: "I don't know how to speak Cantonese."] You know that one?

**KM:** Yes, of course!

**GP:** You're transcribing this part. [All laugh]

**KM:** I got it. Yeah. I actually, I was raised by my grandparents who only spoke Cantonese.

**SA:** Nice!

**KM:** But then I moved to New Jersey when I was five and then that's where I learned English and then now I don't really I've kind of lost like a lot of the Cantonese.

**SA:** But you know what it's in there it's in there somewhere.

**KM:** I understand it fluently like no problem just like English. But like speaking it, it's like the words don't come out right.

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**SA:** That's like my Taiwanese.

**KM:** Oh okay.

**SA:** That's like my Taiwanese. Yeah, same thing. It's in there and if I hear it I understand it, but it tickles me to try to get it out. Like I die laughing (?) I'm like [imitates laughing. GP laughs] I think it goes like this you know. I kinda I hear I kind of imagine what it sounded like and then I try to say it and it doesn't quite come out right. But...that's like my Taiwanese.

**KM:** I took Mandarin for a year last year and then my Mandarin I just think of it in Cantonese and try to say it in a Mandarin accent.

**SA:** [laughs] They're like so different! You can't cheat like that. They're very different.

**KM:** Sometimes it does. Most of the time it doesn't. But you mentioned you went to Chinese school. How long did you go to Chinese school for?

**SA:** I went for at least until I was in middle school I would think. It was through my parents' church and it's amazing that I can still remember the words I learned that little. Right when you're it was like 30 years ago I can still write all those words that I learned back then. That's crazy right? That's why I'm thinking if I force all that into my kids now [GP laughs] it'll stick with them later, you know? Even if it isn't right now it'll be in there later when they need to regurgitate it in the future. Right so... I mean, and that second language or the third, it really opens up doors. Even if you don't do the whole deal in that language. If you can just spit out a few sentences, it really—it really makes people feel a connection. So, um, I—I—I highly encourage it.

They—my—my brother is different than me. He doesn't force his kids to learn it. So they only speak English, right? And we're from the same family, right. And he speaks it just like I do. Chinese, we both speak it about the same level—he thinks he speaks it better but [GP and KM laugh]—and his wife is Miss Chinatown! She's gorgeous!

**GP:** Wow.

**SA:** Right?

**KM:** Wow.

**SA:** You should probably interview her. She's awesome. But they don't speak—she speaks zero Chinese and my brother Rob he doesn't speak Chinese to the kids and they don't know any—none, none, zero. Right? So we just have different schools of thought on that. I—I think it's 'cause I—I lived abroad and I see the value in it and I actually use it in my everyday life. I mean it is the crux of how I'm successful in my business. He—he's an attorney and doesn't need it, right? So he's like, "I don't need it." Well, alright. So.

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**KM:** Yeah, so, besides like the language, do you still do like any of the like Chinese or Japanese traditions? Like holidays?

**(50:51)**

**SA:** Not here.

**KM:** Not here?

**SA:** Not here. Uhuh. Well we never really *did* growing up. My mom would...on a rare occasion bring over mooncakes when it's...time for that. And I'm not even really crazy about those mooncakes. [GP laughs] The egg in the middle, you know?

**KM:** I am not a fan of the egg.

**SA:** I'm not—I'm not—it's just creepy right? [GP laughs] And it doesn't taste good! It's not—it's just—I'm not a real "beany" person. So I'm not really fall into that thing. But she'll bring that over, you know, when it's time for that. And she does hong bao—which is the, you know, the pockets of red money for Chinese New Year. And that's pretty much the extent of it. But I don't even find *myself* giving the hong bao. I don't—I don't do that...which, you know, it would be fun for the kids if I did it, but I don't. I don't do that. So we have zero Chinese traditions. Um, Japanese traditions...we kind of stopped doing them, honestly. When we lived in Japan we did them all the time. You know, all of them. They have a lot of them. [KM laughs] They have a ton of them! Like uh, "What are we doing now?" [laughing] It's like once a month. Like, [GP and KM laugh]—like what is this one? It's like Green Day? What do we do on *that* day? What are we celebrating? You know, it's like, "Oh, just nature." Like, and how do we celebrate nature? And now what is it? "Oh, it's Sea Day." I'm like, the sea? Like the ocean? How do you celebrate the ocean? Okay, we'll take a day off for that. You know, it's like okay, now it's like the Star Day. I'm like, the star? Like, the sky? Okay, I'll take the day off. Um...

**GP:** That's really interesting though.

**SA:** I know right?

**GP:** It—it seems like a cultural difference. We have a lot of holidays for people, like Washington—

**SA:** Right.

**GP:** And Martin Luther King Day. It's like, the sea, the stars...

**SA:** I know right? And they celebrate ours. They celebrate *Christmas*. I'm like why are you celebrating Christmas? None of you are—are even Christian. [GP laughs] None of y'all. And they make it a big production. It's huge! Wow, okay. So they do Christmas, they do Valentines Day. They don't do St. Patrick's Day. They didn't understand that one I was trying to explain it. "St. Patrick's Day! Green! Pinch!" [GP and KM laugh] They don't do Halloween, but I hear they're starting to do Halloween.

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**KM:** Oh really?

**SA:** They're starting to do Halloween, um, and they actually like it a lot. It's not a national holiday but it—you know, they celebrate it like we do. No Easter, of course. No Thanksgiving. I remember like, you know, 'cause when you're over there you feel like you want to celebrate your holidays but none of them are doing it, right? [KM laughs] So, like *Thanksgiving!* [KM laughs] And they're like, "No." I'm like, "Pilgrims?" "No." Oh that's right, they discovered America. Yeah, you probably wouldn't know that one. [GP laughs] You know, and you're like, "Why don't you guys know this one?" Like, "Oh yeah, you wouldn't know that one, sorry." But then you go to like a foreign bar, you know, like a—like a—like an American owned establishment over there and *they'll* do like a Thanksgiving. So like all the foreigners are there [laughs] like celebrating Thanksgiving in Japan, right? So...

**GP:** Do you and your husband have any special traditions or...?

**SA:** [sighs] Not really, no. We, uh, just follow the American really. Um, we just did, er, had, our twentieth anniversary and we always go online to see what the—you know each year has a—an anni—like a present that you give, right, for that year. So, I mean it falls (?) in the American right? [GP and KM laugh] It's just totally Americanized, yeah. But nothing special. Other than that no.

**KM:** How about in terms of like food? Do y'all cook like Japanese or Chinese food? Or [overlapping inaudible]

**SA:** That's a good question. My husband *longs* for Japanese food. He *longs* for it! Um, but I'm not a big cook because I am extremely busy. Like I'm never home. So I—I enjoy cooking and we do cook a lot, but I find that we're cooking a lot of like easy food. So it's like spaghetti whipped together, or Hamburger Helper, and then it's like macaroni and cheese 'cause we have kids!

**GP:** Right.

**KM:** [overlapping] Yeah. Right.

**(54:42)**

**SA:** Right, but I have a lot of clients that are Japanese and when they go to Japan they come back with *omiyage*, which is like gifts from Japan. And so they know we're from Fukuoka, which is a big food town. It's like a big—like it has really good food there. It's like famous for the food, like all different kinds of food: pickles and, whatever, fish, and all this stuff. And so they'll bring it back, right? And I'll go like, "Oh cool I got some seaweed or whatever [KM laughs] from [some Japanese words] or whatever. And he'll go "Seaweed?!" [GP laughs] And you know, he'll make himself some rice and put his little seaweed on top and will go, "Oh so good!" And he's like so excited, right. So...

**GP:** Aww.

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**SA:** Yeah. And there's *one* Japanese grocery store. It's called Daido. It's off of Westheimer and Wilcrest. And sometimes when I'm on the west side of town, I'll stop in there and go, "Hey I'm at Daido. You want me to get you anything?" He's like, "Oh yeah. Get me, um, this, and this, and this, [GP and KM laugh] and this, and this dressing, and this sauce, and this, you know, this pickle, and that." I'm like "Ohh." So you know I can tell that he—he longs for it. So in Clear Lake they just opened a *ramen* restaurant...

**KM:** Ooh.

**SA:**—and it was the happiest day of his life. October 1<sup>st</sup> was the grand opening. I've never seen a man that happy ever. [GP laughs] He was soooo excited, like crazy. For his birthday, which was like two weeks ago, November 24th, we took him there—[laughing] to the ramen restaurant! He was like "Awww, it's the best day ever!" [KM laughs] He was super happy.

So—whenever we get a chance and we have a little bit of time, and, you know, we're not in a mad rush, we'll make like a Japanese, you know, meal if we can. But it's hard to find the ingredients. Like you have to find a fish—I'm like where's a—who sells the fish that he wants, right? Like a mackerel—what is—if you go to a regular market they don't sell that, right? I mean it's you know, salmon, basically, tilapia, catfish. Right? So, gotta go to Daido to get that stuff. I don't have time. I don't have time to just run over there to just buy stuff to make. So it's usually by chance.

**KM:** Right, yeah.

**GP:** Is there anything you feel like we've left out?

**SA:** I don't know. What are you trying to accomplish?

**GP:** I guess...we just want to hear your story! It's—it's really important to us!

**KM:** Is there anything else that you think is important that you'd like to share?

**SA:** Hmm. [pause] I don't know. [pause] I just think life is a journey. Life is a *short* journey and it's over before you know it. So it's—it's important to find...a balance between...you know, family... 'cause my kids are small and I always feel like I'm not doing enough for them because I'm working so hard on the business end of things. So, just—just find that balance, you know, and then.... I don't know you never really—you never really hit on, like, my parents and their influence and all that. I mean does that...?

**GP:** Yeah.

**KM:** [overlapping inaudible] Yeah, you can tell us about that.

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**SA:** I mean it's—it's a lot different I think. I mean, I remember when I was, like, in middle school one time actually actively saying this sentence to some of my friends. I'm like, "I am exactly like you. It's not my fault my parents are from a different country!" [laughs] That's what I said. Right so, I—I think that—you know, I—I guess maybe 'cause I have kids that now I'm seeing how parents have a big...influence on their kids. Right? 'Cause you—you aim to please, you want to be—you know, you want them to be proud of you, right? So—you know they—and they—they *struggled*. I mean, they struggled. They came over as nothing. You know, my dad came over when he was seventeen from Hong Kong. He had nothing. Nothing. My mom came over on a scholarship. She's like super smart, right? He's like handsome playboy [KM laughs] and she's like supersmarty scholarship, you know [GP laughs] glasses like, "Leave me alone." And she's like the only Chinese girl on the whole campus and there's like fifteen Jap—uh, Chinese men. They're all like eyeing my mom. [KM and GP laugh] "I'm studying. I'm studying." Right? And so my mom ended up going with him. And so they're an interesting match. I mean, it's been—our whole lives have been like that. She's always like, "I want you to study. I want you to get good grades. I want you to be good." You know, very conservative. Very, you know, cautious, very considerate, very kind. She's still the Mother Theresa of Clear Lake.

I mean, seriously. If any new Chinese person comes to Clear Lake, she's the first to pick 'em up from the airport, you know, teach 'em English, get 'em their driver's license. You know, [laughs] bring 'em to church, tell 'em about Jesus. I mean she's like all about, you know, helping. On her one day off she'll cook a giant thing of stew and like divvy it up and drive it to all the old people all over Clear Lake City. Like,

**KM:** Aww.

**GP:** "A little ration for you. A ration for you. A ration for you."

**KM:** Aww.

**(0:59:25)**

**SA:** I mean, she's like super nice! Like, craaazy, super nice. Right? And then my dad on the other side, he's like, "Yeah I want you to integrate into, you know, America. Um, I'mma name my son Robert. I'mma name my daughter Susan. You know, so no one gets picked on." You know "I want you guys to be well balanced. I want you to play sports." My brother played football. I played, you know, volleyball and I played golf. You know, all through our whole lives it's always been, you know, "Let's go to the amusement park. And now let's go, you know, to the...whatever...let's go camping. Let's go to these state parks." We would load up the station wagon [KM laughs] and stop by Stop & Go and buy a bunch of candy and sit in the back [GP laughs] with no seatbelts, like sit back there and chew gum. You know, it's like—you know it's like—it was just so crazy growing up and I just *know* that we had no money. We had no money. It was crazy. I mean my mom always says to us now, she's like, "You would not believe how we didn't have money. I mean we were like *barely* making it." Barely, but you just don't know that when you're growing up.

**GP:** Mhmm.

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**KM:** What were your parent's jobs?

**SA:** My dad...uh, initially worked for Lockheed. And then he went over to Singer Link flight simulations, which is another subcontractor of, uh, NASA. It's always been NASA. And everyone in Clear Lake is NASA related. My mom, she stayed home with the kids until she—until I, was— I'm the little one—until I was ten. And she was like, just master degree after master degree. I think she ended up with three or four master degrees.

**KM:** Wow.

**SA:** I mean, she was, she was like a librarian, and she's like, you know, just a little...little study girl. [KM and SA laugh] And then she, uh, went and got her computer science degree, and then she went and worked for USAA, which is also a subcontractor of NASA. And she was—or they both like, you know, nine to five NASA people. You know, probably making, I don't know, whatever. What do they make? I don't know, I'm not in NASA. But, you know, it's public worker, right? I mean, I guess...it's not like me, entrepreneur, or my brother—we both ended up being entrepreneurs.

Because I'm—I think after I lived in Japan for so long, they're—they're a very fair—they want everyone to be fair. They don't like anyone to exceed. They—everyone has to be the same. So, they don't like anyone to be better or different, or—they don't encourage, you know, entrepreneurship. They don't—they want you to be a team. Everyone suffers the same. Everyone uh, you know, is victorious the same. Everyone is the same. Be the same! [all laugh] Yeah. Don't be different! You know, they—they frown on difference. And so, after—you know and we didn't grow up that way, right? We've always grown up, you know, “Be very competitive. You know, you know, just whatever you can do to—to stick out a little bit more than the competitors, right, yeah, you—you know, you gotta be a little bit better than everybody else.” But they're not like that. And so after a while, I started getting discouraged, right? ‘Cause, if you can't excel and be rewarded for that, you know, you—you—you have to be bad on purpose? It's just strange. It's—it goes against my grain. I'm like, “I don't want to be bad on purpose.” You know?

**GP:** Everybody else can toe the line! [all laugh]

**SA:** “Catch up!” So when I came back—and my brother was doing fantastic. I mean, when I was—while I was away he had, um, he started—he's a lawyer—he started working for a firm. And he did a couple years with the firm, then he busted out. He was like, “I'm gonna do, uh, on my own.” So he opened his own, and he's start growing it and growing, and he just grew it. He's exploding out of this universe. [GP laughs] I mean, he's—came back, I'm like “What?!” He's like driving, you know, all these cool cars, and living in this super nice house. I mean, he was living la vida loca.

He wasn't married yet, now he's married, but I was like, “God, how'd you do this?” Right? I mean, I was like a *DJ*. I'm like nothing, compared to *you* are kicking it. Couldn't figure out how to do this, right? So, it's not working nine to five at NASA. [KM laughs] I mean, that's not gonna do it, so I'm like. Okay, I gotta.... Real estate is—is good that way. I mean, it's—whatever effort you put into it is what you're—is the benefit you're gonna reap. I mean if you put all in? If you're *all in*, you're full time,

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and you're, you know, you have a plan and you do it well and you do it right, and you, you know, don't mess up, [laughs] you can do very well. You can do very well in this job. So, um...

**GP:** Would you say your brother was a big influence, on that? In that you came back, you saw he was an entrepreneur and he built his own business. Did you...?

**SA:** I... As a second child, you always look to the big one, right? I mean, you always look up to your bro—my—I've always looked up to him. Like, god, you know? Like, you—I—I was a tomboy, I wanted to just—whatever he was doing, I wanted to do. Wherever you go, I wanna go. I mean it was always been like that.

**GP:** Mhmm.

**SA:** But then, I think when I went to Japan, we drifted a little bit, 'cause I was so far away and we didn't have internet. I mean, we had nothing. We were disconnected a little bit. But uh...yeah, I mean, you know, you see your brother doing that, well, you wanna kinda do good too, right? I mean, it's impossible for me to ever be in his realm. I mean, he's like in the realm of...the heavenly realms.

[All laugh]

**SA:** Okay, but I mean if I could just get—you know, have some of the fun toys that he has. It's—it's fun. We're—we're a far cry away from him, but we are living a very good life. Yeah.

**KM:** Yeah, I want to go back a little bit and ask you like, when you were growing up, like, were you one like the only like Asian families in the town? Or like were there others?

**SA:** There—in my high school graduating class, there were 815 people.

**KM:** Okay.

**SA:** And, uh, I could probably count on one hand the number of Asian people. Probably five.

**KM:** Wow.

**GP:** Asian Americans, or?

**SA:** Asian American. Yeah, there was—that would be all I knew. All right. So it would be, literally—one went to Rice. It was me, Leo, Carl, Nina, Anita.

**GP:** How did that—how did that affect—

**(1:05:00)**

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**SA:**[overlapping] Julian Han, maybe. He's from Singapore.

[All laugh]

**SA:** Yeah, I mean it was six. Out of 810, or 815.

**GP:** Wow.

**SA:** That's not very many, yeah.

**GP:** How did that affect your school life, or growing up? Did you—

**KM:** Did you, like, hang out with the Asians, or were you... Did you guys like stay separate?

**SA:** I stayed separate. I stayed separate. I played ball. So I was mostly with the white American people that played ball. And the *Asian* Asians, they all studied like crazy. And they all went to Stanford and Harvard. Seriously. Like, one went to Rice, one went to Stanford, one went to Harvard. [GP laughs] One went to the University of Illinois, and then *I* went to Baylor.

[All laugh]

**SA:** So it was like, everyone else was like, Ivy leagues, right? And then I ended up going to Baylor. You know? Which, I guess, it's all part of the plan, right?

**KM:** Were there a lot of like Asians at Baylor?

**SA:** Let's see. I knew one that was two years older than I was. Uh, one Korean guy, who actually like works for like the...I don't know, like the...he was like the ambassador of Korea's right hand man now, and he's...

**GP:** Wow.

**SA:** I look at him on Facebook. I'm like, "Oh my god."

[All laugh]

**SA:** Tai cook chou. I'm like... he's like, "This is me and the prime minister of, uh, you know, South Korea." I'm like "What?!" I'm like, he's like right next to the secret dude—he's like secret service for the—

**GP:** [overlapping] He put that on Facebook?

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**SA:** He—he did. He, yeah—he's on my Facebook. Um...no, there were very few at Baylor. Remember I told you no one wanted—wanted to even apply for that program? There was *one* guy named Jeremy, and he was from Iowa. He was two years older than I am. Like I can't even think of one person in my own class that was Asian...that I hung out with and knew.

**GP:** Wow.

**SA:** I know. Isn't that weird?

**KM:** When you were younger, did people ever like treat you different because you were Asian or was it just, you know, everyone's... all the same?

**SA:** I don't remember anything bad happening, or anyone being...anything negative, no. I don't know about the other Asian people. But I think, when you play ball, there's a certain, respect, I guess. Right? 'Cause, you know, you were representing your school team, right? So, I didn't really feel anything, no.

**GP:** Was there anything on the flip side? Like, 'cause you're Asian, "Oh, you didn't ace that test?"

**SA:** [laughs] No, actually, I did. I aced all my tests.

**GP:** Oh...

[All laugh]

**SA:** No, I was uh—I was, I mean—in my whole graduating class, there was nine people that tied for first. And I was tenth.

[commiserating gasps]

**SA:** I know.

**GP:** So close

**SA:** I know. I know. I got a B in chemistry. It was my only—one and only B from my entire high school career was why I had one...I couldn't figure it out, I—'til this day, it was like my worst subject. Chemistry, I just—I don't get it. I'm like, how? That's like so...like you can't touch it or feel it. It's like just numbers and letters and just so, out there. Like it's just so, not tangible. Like I can't—can't relate to it at all. So, that was my one and only B. And then, yeah. All—all the other nine people got perfect four point oh's or whatever it was.

**GP:** Wow.

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**SA:** Isn't that crazy? [SA laughs] Yeah. But I mean, at our—at our graduating ceremony, uh, when we graduated from high school, they give an award—the George B. Carlisle award. And they give it to one boy and one girl for the whole graduating class. And, uh, you gotta be kinda wellrounded. It has to—you have to, you know, be good at school, but be good at other things, you know, be social, all of that. My best friend Marshall York—we grew up together, my best friend since kindergarten—he got it for the boy, and I got it for the girl.

[All laugh]

**KM:** Very nice.

**GP:** That's so cool!

**SA:** Isn't that funny?

**KM:** [overlapping] That's so great!

**SA:** So he's an actor in New York now.

**GP:** Wow.

**KM:** Man.

**SA:** So...crazy. [pause] Anything else?

**KM:** Well, is there anything else you want to share? I think we're done with our questions.

**SA:** I'm good.

**KM:** All right. Well thank you so much.

**GP:** This was really fun. I really enjoyed it.

**SA:** Oh yeah?

**KM:** Yeah.

**SA:** Thank you for having me.

**(1:09:00)**

**[Recorder is turned off; the interview ends]**