

Interviewee: Glenda Joe

Interviewer: Amber Lu and Tian-Tian He

Date of interview: 2017-04017

Transcribed by: Tian-Tian He

Audio track time: 00:59:58

Background

Glenda Joe is a Chinese-Irish-Texan business owner, activist, and festival director. She was born in Houston in 1952, to a Texan mother and Chinese father. Glenda's father immigrated from Guangzhou in 1930, and opened a grocery store with his brothers. Glenda grew up working in the family store. Originally an anthropology major, Glenda was asked to direct the first Houston Asian-American Festival in 1980 at age 27, and eventually made it her career, along with work in local politics and cross-cultural advertising.

Today, she continues to run the Houston Asian American Festival under its new name Lunar New Year Houston. In addition to this interview, she has donated an extensive collection of photos and documents related to her work and Houston's Asian American community.

Setting

This interview centers on the history and evolution of the Houston Asian-American Festival, organized by Glenda Joe. Glenda recounts its origins, venue changes, obstacles, and successes over the years. She also touches on her mixed heritage, her views on discrimination and cross-cultural solidarity, and the unique nature of Houston's Asian-American community.

The interview was conducted at Glenda Joe's house on April 15, 2017. The hour-long interview was conducted in multiple parts, allowing Glenda to take a short break in between. She also granted us a tour of her house before the interview began. It contains several artifacts and cultural items from Asian and Asian-American history, including a lion head once used in lion dances.

Key:

GJ: Glenda Joe

TH: Tian-Tian He

AL: Amber Lu

— : abrupt stop

... : speech trails off,

pause *Italics*: emphasis

Brackets: actions (laughs, sighs, etc) or interview notes

[GJ taps the wind chime]

TH: Okay, um, hi, this is Tian-Tian He.

AL: And this is Amber Lu.

TH: We're here today on April 15, 2017 in Glenda Joe's house to interview her for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history project. [pauses] Okay. Um, so to start off with, just, like tell us about yourself. Just the basic biographical information.

GJ: I was born in Houston, Texas; I had a Chinese dad, an Irish mom... [laughter] I don't know what else to tell you. I mean, I'm native Houstonian. Uh, I did not, um, like being involved with the Chinese community, uh, because they were racist... against my mother, because we were half-breed children. And in the 1950's, it was illegal in 17 states for my father and mother to marry. Anti-miscegenation laws.

TH: Yeah. Was it in Texas?

GJ: Not that we found out. I think it was in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi—my momma's from Mississippi. But regardless, we're here to talk about the file of Houston Asian American Festival. Um, once upon a time, in Houston, Texas, a bunch of old Asian guys found out that then-president Jimmy Carter was going to, for the first time ever, proclaim Asian Pacific American Heritage Week. Not month, *week*.

TH: Wait, which old Asian guys?

GJ: We'll—I'll get to that.

TH: Okay, okay. [laughs]

GJ: I mean, this is a story—

TH: Okay, go on.

GJ: —Tian-Tian. All right. The old guys were Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Korean, Cambodian. I mean it was weird. I don't think they'd ever spoken to each other, even known each other before. I believe that... there—there's a Chinese man named William Der Bing, and his wife Eleanor. I believe y'all have him on your oral histories. Eleanor Der Bing.

TH: I've heard the name before.

GJ: I think—I think you've got her in the files. Anyway, they were a real social couple, very, um, uh... couple about town. And—and they brought in my uncle Bill Joe. And, uh, then my uncle Bill Joe knew other Asians because he had a commercial license brokerage. So, he would run into other Asians who happened to be in business, who referred him to other—I mean, the fact that they all got together in 1980 is remarkable. Uh, because you know how all the Asians hate each other. [laughter]

GJ: They do. They do! I mean, think about it. How do the Chinese look at the Japanese? They call 'em yellow monkeys, I mean, for goodness sakes. Right? They look at Korea like the slave class of Asians. You know? I mean, for Houston, who never had a pan-Asian identity, and barely had a Chinese-American identity... to bring these people together was nothing short of amazing. It was a miracle. So—

TH: Did you say what year that was?

GJ: 1980.

TH: Okay.

GJ: It was the year Jimmy Carter proclaimed the first Asian Pacific American Heritage Week—not month, week. [laughter]

AL: Can you tell us, uh, do you know which week it was?

GJ: It was in May. It was the worst week in the world for Houston. Because if we were gonna have a heritage week, month. It shouldn't be when—you know, you're gonna get encephalitis from mosquito bites. All right? I mean it shouldn't be so hot you can't be outside, or so humid. Or in hurricane season, [laughs] you know? Uh, but it worked in other parts of the country. But that's—that's when it was. [sighs] Bill Joe, Eleanor Der Bing, Bill Der Bing, Dulal Datta, the Indian guy, who—I wonder what happened him, he was such a fine gentleman. Um, uh... See Wai Kim, our Korean vote, uh, Dr. Daniel Watanabe—which is where I first met Dr. Watanabe—and his wife Aikiko. Um, there was a, there was a person I think from the refugee community, uh, I don't think it was Yani... Yani Rose Keo, who you also have done her

oral history, I believe. Cambodian leader. Uh, anyway, so they all got together and they had a meeting and they figured out that they didn't know what the hell they were doing. They wanted to do something. But none of them knew what to do or how to do it. They thought they should have an event. Well, they were not people who'd ever done an event. So, my uncle gives me a call, and he goes, 'I need you to come to this meeting.' And I go, 'I don't want to do this.' Because, I'm busy saving the world on women's issues over here, right? Um, that was during when the equal rights amendment was going on. And I was running an equal rights amendment campaign at U of H. So anyway, my uncle calls me, and I um... I go, and I sit, and I listen, and I watch, and, uh, it's clear that these people have the best intentions but they don't know what the hell they're doing, right? And my background was theater. And I had done events in my activism. Um...

TH: You majored in theater?

GJ: No. Who majors in theater?! [laughter]

TH: I don't know, there are people!

GJ: It's like someone who majors in art! Oh my god. They're good people, but they're not gonna end up in art. [laughter] They're gonna end up in communications or something. I majored in anthropology, so I understand the cultures, right? I started in, uh, psychology. But I found it too Western-based. You know, there's not a word for depression in Khmer. You're depressed? I mean, get over it. Right? I mean, that's—you only have the luxury of being depressed if you're an American. All right? Other people, they just—you know. Get over it!

TH: Yeah.

GJ: So, um, I go to these meetings and, uh, I say, 'okay, I wanna help you guys do this event.' This one event, right? It's a one-day deal. And I, uh, and they get a bunch of volunteers together 'cause Lord knows I don't know any of these people. I don't *wanna* be around these people, I have nothing in common with these people, and I just have very little... I don't have enough to do on the other side so I'm doing this. So, we do it at Westbury Square—now defunct, but it used to be a pretty hot place—you know, people would show up to buy scented candles and go to witchcraft stores, and, you know, uh, eat ice cream. I mean, it was—it was a neat place, back in the 70s. Uh, so—so we did it there, uh... Mel Chin—big artist, right—designed our first poster. It was the year of the tiger. He did—y'all's year. He did a tiger deal. If you go back, you should make, uh, copies of that tiger poster.

TH: Yeah.

GJ: Okay, and—and frame it and put it in your offices, okay? Because Mel Chin, his artistry is beautiful and it was—I think there's only one copy of it left in the archive. Okay?

TH: Oh, wow.

GJ: So it's the first one that you'll come across when it comes to the presentation. So he makes this great, uh, poster. And I have never worked with a group of people like that before. And I had never worked in a way that, uh, I had to ask people to do stuff for me. So, there was one guy, one Chinese guy, who was gonna put out the posters, right? And so he's, 'oh, he'll take care of it, he'll take care of it.' The day of the event, he's still got the posters in his trunk—lesson learned. *Don't trust anyone* to do what they're gonna say they're gonna do unless you follow up to make sure they did it. Rule number one. Uh, so I had the tables and chairs, all that kinda stuff delivered, little tents. All these Asian guys were standing around, and back then, you know, I was young and strong. And I had also worked construction, right? So, you know, upper body strength. And I was carrying around those tables by myself. And those Asian guys were just leaning against the wall, watching me, like I was some kinda Mexican maid. All right? Because, why? They did not think—they think they're above doing this work. Very Asian. Also—

TH: So they were all immigrants, like recently immigrated?

GJ: Yeah, oh yeah. I was the only American-born person there, right? I mean, my uncle couldn't get any of his kids to so he had to come to—to my dad's family and ask me to do it. So. That's how we did the first—that's how I met Yani Keo. Yani Rose Keo, the Mother Teresa of the, uh, refugee community in Houston, Texas for 20 years. Uh, and I met her by getting pissed off at her. Um, I asked—I saw—I thought they were taking—we had tickets for all the booths, you know, you gotta buy tickets to get stuff, you know. And I saw her doing something that made me question whether or not she was taking tickets. And so I jumped her. Which, at 27 years old, you know, why not? [laughs] Because you know everything at 27, right? I mean. And she responded to me in such a kind, patient, loving way. She was my first introduction to Buddhism. Right? Which is probably why I ended up, years later, becoming a Buddhist, right? [laughs] Uh, and that's how she became my friend. So we did the—the event, we had—we had a thousand people show up. Even when the asshole didn't put out the damn posters, right?

AL: So were the people who showed up mostly Asian themselves?

GJ: *No*, no, no. It was a big mix of people. It was like a curiosity. A novelty. Right?

AL: Mhm.

GJ: So, um, they were pretty successful. And so the next year, the same group of guys got together. And they asked me to come back to help them do it. And I could sense what they were doing was they were trying to dump this crap in my lap, right? That, 'I mean, you're the only one who knows how to do this, we'll be here to help you, but you know how—' and that's how I became the producer of the event. So the next—the next year we did the event at, uh, Sharpstown Center. And we charged admission. [thumping table] We made fifteen thousand dollars at one dollar admission! We had *fifteen thousand* Asians show up at Sharpstown Center. That's how I started thinking, 'Well, hell.' You know? There really is an audience for this. I didn't know enough back then to understand that I was really gonna have to work at—at raising money to do the event. So, we did it there a second year, and it was—it was successful. The—the next year, we went to Fonde Recreational Center, which was closer to Downtown. And when we did Fonde Recreational Center, um, Jack Campbell, who the director of the Miller Theater at the time, approached me and asked us to bring our show, our Asian festival, to Miller Theater. And he said there would be a grant. I'm thinking, okay. [laughs] You know? Because raising the money to do this is really hard, and it's not something that I'd ever done before. Um, so, 2005 we moved to Miller Theater. 2005—I mean—1985 to 2006, we were the primary Asian, uh, pan-Asian cultural event there. And they changed leadership in, um, at Miller Theater, in about 2005, 2006. They brought in people from New York. And they were gay.

[laughter] Okay. Believe me, I, I don't think it has anything to do with them being gay, I think it's more that they were from New York. But I don't know. They tried—you'll have, you have an entire file on Miller Theater.

TH: Yes, we do.

GJ: Where they targeted the Asian Festival to do something different with us that they weren't doing with anyone else. Unequal treatment. Trying to take us out because they thought we were [tapping table] a bunch of dumb [expletive] Asians. Dumb Asians.

TH: And they said, like, it's not professional quality or something like that.

GJ: Well, it wasn't supposed to be. We had the entire day; in the daytime we did children's programming, and then at night we did professional programming. That was our—that had been our deal with them for 20 years. But, because the new people came in and they didn't know what they didn't know, and they had targeted—they figured—there was lots of other minority groups they wanted to push out. But they couldn't do it all at once. So, so what they did, they thought, 'Well, let's go after the Asians, it'll be the easy one first.' Right? And basically, you know, they—they pulled apart our people. Uh, they went to our evening professional program and tried to make separate deals. [pause] Uh, [taps table] the dance

company, you know, Asian dance company, uh, the taiko drum people. I mean they made individual deals where they ended up spending more money on their grants in order to show that ‘oh yeah, we can do Asian stuff’. The—the thing—and it was all in the newspapers. And it was hard because for someone in a position of power to say what we did was unprofessional and that I was not handling the budget correctly, that I was misusing the budget, was, you know, heartbreaking. And the one thing that—the, the reporters who reported on it didn’t believe their bullshit. From Miller. Brown Foundation and the Strake Foundation were pissed off that those people at Miller would do that to one of their grantees.

TH: It seems like so much effort for like...

GJ: Not much—

TH: Yeah. [laughs]

GJ: Well, but here—here’s the thing. Here’s the thing that’s weird about it. That’s just the internal part. Let’s look at the external part. In 1980, white folks, black folks, Latino folks, they didn’t know crap about Asians. You know, if they were black folks, and lived in, you know, one of the wards, they knew their Chinese grocer. That’s all they knew. We’re talking about 70s, in the 70s, right? Uh, and early 80s. And early—it’s between, you know, ’78 and on, we started getting this rush of Vietnamese. So, okay. Think about it. I’m an anthropologist, right? And I—and one of the reasons I took this on is because it became a sociology lab test for me. They were all my lab rats. The market, the communities, you know, the—the public officials; I’ve got this clean slate because if you look in California, in New York, in Washington State, all of those Asian communities had become entrenched. Chinatown’s Chinatown. Koreatown’s Koreatown. You got your Japan festival and you got your—your Chinese New Year. You got your Tet. I mean it was all segregated [taps table] by ethnicity. I had a chance, in 1980, to put in place a pan-Asian engine. And that is why we ended up not having the kind of stress between groups that you see in other place—that is why we have pan-Asian support for elected officials. That is why we have pan-Asian support when we go to the police to talk about what we need to do to help our community across that pan-Asian identity. That was me. That’s on me. That’s because I was a sociology-anthropology-freakout, you know, and I saw this as a great lab experiment. And it worked! It didn’t make me a lot of money, but it, you know, we kept people from getting killed, for goodness sakes. So. So we left the... we left Miller Theater. 2006. And we made a big, big, big-ass stink about it with the city. Right? And everybody knew that they gotta do something to keep Glenda Joe shut up. Give her something. Give her something. Okay, well, you have to wait for the next chapter ‘cause I’m gonna walk around.

[laughter]

TH: All right.

GJ: It's a good place to stop.

AL: Very, very exciting. [laughs]

GJ: I know, I know, I know! It's like listening to the radio! Oh, goodness. I'm gonna go outside to smoke a cigarette.

TH: Okay.

AL: Do you wanna pause it for a second?

TH: Yeah.

[recording pauses]

GJ: [...] ranch. [Toto, Glenda's dog, walking around] And we'd go to the ranch, she'd [Toto] get to run in the pasture, she loves that. Chase cows and stuff. Toto, sit. So she'd—she'd go and wait by the door just because I'd said that. And, um, so I figured, I'm not gonna tell her anymore, you know. But if I just think it, she'll go sit by the door! [laughter] Okay, play later. Go away. Go away. Play later. Play later. Go away. Go away. [Toto walks away] That's a good dog. Go away. Go away. Okay, so, chapter 2. Um, [sighs] I think it was Mayor... it was the guy before Parker. Or is—in between—or maybe—

TH: Bill White?

GJ: Bill White—it was a—Bill White's administration was the one who okayed our slaughter at Miller Theater. I think, at that point... because I had filed for public information requests, and I had found damning emails from his staff, with the Miller Theater people, that showed collusion... of getting rid of Glenda Joe. Because they knew they'd [expletive] up. They knew it. And they were trying to figure out a way to avoid me maybe suing them? I mean, think about it. These poor little Asians, being run over by this machine of political... intrigue. So I went to, uh, special events in the mayor's office. And I said, 'y'all gotta figure something out'. And they said 'okay, we'll give you the City Hall. Okay, we're gonna give you City Hall. And we're gonna give you a grant, if you'd just shut up'. I said, okay, fine. So we did our—our, uh, show there, a couple years. 2007—2006, 2007. Because I was already thinking, this isn't gonna work. Because here's the problem: All of our, uh, Asian community—and this is the same problem we were beginning to see at Miller Theater. Even though, at Miller Theater, we—we brought in so many white people. Who were curious, about what is this all, this Asian thing. And part of our mission, and our non—

[recording is cut off by a phone call]

[recording begins]

TH: ... continuing on...

GJ: I—I appreciate not being a part of the technological [TH and AL laughs]... uh, I would have had a heart attack about that. Um, anyway [pause] part of our mission—all of our mission was preserve, protect, promote... authentic Asian art from the heart of the cultures, whether it's little kids doing farm dances, or taiko—big taiko drums. You know, it didn't matter, because it was giving every culture a chance to share their cultural arts heritage with their children to—to build, um, a remembrance of that culture because when... we came, when my family came, it was kind of like what I heard from you ladies, 'We want to be Americans', right? When my dad was growing up, and then the war came, we had to put signs outside our grocery store, saying 'We are not Japanese.' Okay?

TH: World War II?

GJ: Yeah. So, so the thing is, is that I didn't grow up with learning fan dances or any of that kind of stuff, uh, and I'm very Americanized, as you can tell. [laughs] Right? Um, but watching these cultures struggle to hold on to those things that made them unique spoke to my heart as an anthropologist, right? Um, and it's cultural anthropology, that's all it is. It's just plain and simple [pounds table] cultural anthropology.

TH: So, it wasn't so much of a personal thing, where you're like, 'Oh, I'm Chinese, so I want to help other Chinese people'.

GJ: No, because I have never felt *Chinese* in that milieu. I'm Chinese to myself, in my personal life, but because I was never accepted as Chinese growing up, I never saw myself as Chin—and here's the other thing. The fact that I didn't see myself as part of some tribe made me more accessible to people who said, 'We have this art form', and I'm thinking to myself, 'This is really weird, okay?' But, you know, I'm not looking down on it. If I was only thinking Chinese, I would think it was of no value. Because Chinese are big on other cultures having no value. [TH and AL laugh] I want to make a note here for the recording that my, my interviewers are nodding and grinning broadly. Okay, so you know the deal. And see, this is the thing the outsiders don't know. They don't know how ethnocentric we all are, all right? And it's not, you know, the ethnocentrism that Americans have is *nothing* compared to the Chinese, they go back for 5,000 years—I mean...

TH: They talk about that all the time, they're the oldest culture.

GJ: I mean, you know, [sarcastically] 'We're the longest existing culture and get over it, and we're gonna win eventually no matter what'. I mean, that's the Chinese way of looking at it. And the rest of you guys are a bunch of not as highly evolved people. So, you know, I discounted that view of the world early on which made the Vietnamese and—and the Chinese immigrants and the Filipinos and the Indians and the Cambodians and the Laotians and whoever else found me a welcoming person for their art. Because my background was art, for theater and music, and—and

dance, and um, visual arts. You know, I had that background, and... because of the basic arts background, I was able to be more open to other art forms. So one of the things when, um, Miller Theater was trashing our show, is we did an entire night of the finest martial arts groups in Texas. We called it, 'Awesome Martial Arts'. I love that... *Awesome* Martial Arts. Rolls off the tongue. And, the—the guy at, uh, he's not there now, I wonder why, their executive director at Miller Theater goes, um, 'Martial arts is not art.' [pauses] Duh! I mean, duh! I mean, look at how many billions of dollars they've made on Jackie Chan [laughs] you know, or all those enchanted Chinese mythology movies. I mean, where people are flying—I mean, excuse me? But when he said that, he showed that he was a New Yorker. He said it in the paper. Whooo... whooo... all the martial arts guys, whoooo, you know.

TH: But doesn't New York have like a bigger Chinese population than we do?

GJ: Not like us. You don't see the Chinese—you don't see a Chinese-American like me in New York, that pushes back. You know why? Because I'm not all Chinese. If I was *all* Chinese, maybe I wouldn't push back, right? Maybe being half and half gave me the perspective to think, I can push back. And that there's no one else pushing back, so maybe I need to be the one to push back. I mean, you didn't see Martha Wong pushing back on anything, right? You know [laughs] when you do the Martha Wong file, I'm gonna be happy to tell you more.

TH: Oh! I have—we finished like all—everything.

GJ: I can see we're going to be doing these interviews for probably the rest of the year.

TH: Well, it's only one, right?

GJ: Well, no, I'm only doing one file here. I'm only doing the Asian festival here.

TH: Oh. I think—well, we would want to hear about, like, your whole life—

GJ: No, I can't do that because it's too much. We would be here for twenty-four hours. [TH and AL laugh] And I can't stand having people in my house that long. I—I believe this, I believe that my life can—and it's not necessarily my life that's of interest, it is what I've accomplished. And in every box of what's been sent, there's another story. There's another once upon a time story. All you're getting here today, is Asian festival. Because it's hard for me to talk about this stuff. It wears me out. It's kind of like, people get married, and they want their wife or husband, 'How was your day, honey?' I don't want anyone to ask me how my day was. It was bad enough going through it, alright? So, doing what I'm doing with you here today is a real exhausting thing for me, and it's only on one box of stuff. There's—I mean—the time spent here just on Asian festival, you've been here for an hour—an hour and ten minutes, on it. There are twelve other boxes of stuff. So, you can't expect to grab it all at one time, and I couldn't do it. So, is that all right?

TH: Yeah, that makes sense.

GJ: Okay, you may be graduated and raising kids by the time we get finished with this. You know? Well, here's the deal, is that, you've got to be thinking also about handing this over, all right? Orienting the next year's students, because I don't think there's any way that y'all are gonna grab everything that um, aligns with information for all of those archives. Am I wrong?

TH: You mean like, within four years of us working there?

GJ: Are you gonna be there for four years?

TH: I don't know—yeah. Hopefully, as long as I can.

GJ: So, are y'all freshmen?

TH and AL: Yeah. [laughs]

GJ: Oh God. Okay, then. We're going to be very close friends by the end of this. Okay, so we're back to doing the show at, uh, City Hall. And, uh, what we learned is something that was beginning to happen already at Miller, was that our Asian community had pushed so far out the Southwest that they, um, they were—they were kind of—they were kind of like in their own little... nest, you know? Uh, and they didn't have to venture out of this safe zone in the Southwest, where they could buy their groceries, go to their temple, go to their church, uh, talk to their CPA, their immigration—I mean, it was all right there in the Southwest. A little nest. And, I would venture to say, eighty-five percent of all the Asians who live in Southwest have never even seen downtown Houston. [pause] I wouldn't go if I didn't have to, alright? But the idea that they will come, drive all the way downtown, figure out where to park, pay for parking—not good, Asians don't like to pay for parking, okay—then have Grandma in tow and have to walk and find where you're going, and with the kids going nuts—no. No. So, it was in this timeframe—uh, 2007, 2008—that I'm thinking, I've got to, I've got to re-conceptualize this event. We gotta—we gotta take the mountain to Mohammad, right? Um, we got to take our event to where our community is. I mean, we did our bit in terms of our mission: informing... appreciation of Asian culture to the white community, basically, general market. Now, we've got to preserve those art forms, alright? And how better to preserve it than to take it back to our neighborhoods? So, I drove around Southwest Houston and I looked around and I looked around, and I found, uh, Viet Hoa center. Um, and I looked at it and there was a lot of open space in it that wasn't rented out, and, you know, they had a lot of parking lot and, you know, it's fairly easy to get to. And so, I made a cold call to [sp] Vican Sun Tan. Vican Sun Tan is the oldest son of, uh, the Sun family that came here in... I think, '82, with—they started a little store, around Milam. And they moved that little store to a bigger store on Beechnut. And they parlayed that into knowing the right bankers to build a mammoth, uh, freeway block-big retail center.

TH: And that's Viet Hoa?

GJ: Yeah.

TH: Oh my God. That's so cool.

GJ: I know, I know.

TH: [to AL] Have you been there?

AL: No.

GJ: I mean, you gotta go. Okay, we'll meet there someday. And we'll—you gotta go. I mean, they've got—they're so smart, they're so smart. They're Chinese-ethnic Vietnamese, right. You know how, we're Chinese-ethnic Vietnamese, we're Vietnamese-Vietnamese [imitates fighting noises] you know. So, uh... they have their grocery store, which is mammoth. You can find anything there. Then down here, they have their wholesale store, right? That all of the international, uh, food people, the restaurants, go to to get their stuff. Ethiopians, Nigerians, Guatemalans, I don't care. I mean, you go in there and there's a lot of tubby little women, you cannot understand a word they're saying. And they're wearing weird stuff, you know? Okay? But, they got their wholesale place, their retail place, then they got their restaurants. So, this is how it works. This is how smart it is. You buy the wholesale—they're, they, they have a refrigeration unit, just refrigeration—bigger than my house. Their half of it—actually, there's a refrigeration unit as big as my house and another refri—freezer unit as big as my house. In this wholesale place! Right? It is *freaky*! All right, so they buy wholesale, and then give it to their grocery store, which sells retail. Then, the stuff that goes kind of out of date goes to the restaurant so they can sell it right away, right? Cook it right away. Brilliant. I don't know if you're a merchant mind or not, I was brought up as a merchant. I see that and I think [clicks tongue] uh-uh, Einstein.

So anyway, they have opened another Viet Hoa on 1960, just as big! Why? Because there's so many straggling Asian operations out there that are restaurants and food stores, and they're, they're serving those Asians and those restaurants. Yesterday, I, I went to... to go to Sun's, the wholesale place, to buy some stuff. And I just thought I'll just—here's the other deal, they started a cash-only little restaurant, um, with their family's recipes for soup, for pho, right? Uh, for breakfast. It's cash-only, that's where they go have lunch. They don't care if anybody else goes there. People go there, but their whole family goes there, they eat their pho or whatever they're gonna eat, and they go back to work! It's perfect. And it's their momma's recipes, right, so it works. I went in yesterday, and the Papa was there who started the whole thing. I call him Baba. And, uh, he's 90. And I—you know, he loves to see me, because I make a big deal out of him, and he likes my jade. He goes [plays with her jade bracelet] We cannot understand each other at all, and we're always—I'm always having somebody translate, but you know, I just get there to go say hi to him and his wife, and, you know, make, uh, and make nice with old people. Right? To make them feel big face. You know, big and strong. Um, but, uh, it's the same story, that's the same story. It comes out to a very big ending but it's the same story as my dad, your dads, who came here to try and build something, something so his children will have better life. Right? It's all our stories So, I make a cold call to Vican. I didn't know who the hell he was. I said, 'I want to meet you'. So, I met him at Kim Son downtown, and I proposed to him—he didn't know who the hell I was—we talked grocery store for a little while, so he could see I was a grocery store girl, right? Um, he's uh, born in the Year of the Rabbit, I think, or the Pig. One—one of the two. They like nice things, you know, they like stuff to be nice and comfortable. Um, and so I talked him into letting me do a New Year event at Viet Hoa. That was in the Year of the Rat, was the first year, first year of the cycle, the Chinese cycle, the rat is the first

animal. You know the story about the rat being the first animal? Because he tricked the... I don't know, some animal's gonna take him across the river to Buddha?

AL: The ox.

GJ: The ox. Tricked *me*, the ox, you know, my companion animal, uh, to get him to Buddha first so he was the first animal, the rat. So, it turns out the first year we're at, uh, Viet Hoa is the Year of the Rat. Um, and we had—I only had six weeks to put it together, and I didn't know anything about lion dance. I really was stupid, okay? I didn't know that the firecrackers had to be red, okay? I mean, who tells you that stuff, right? Duh! Or that you have to have firecrackers, or it's not New Year's. So, here's the other thing—firecrackers are illegal. So, I have to get over this issue of how to—how to manipulate my city contacts to make this work. So, we had six weeks to do the first one, no money, no money. Uh, did a one-day deal, short program... Basically, without any, without any, uh, advertisement, ten thousand people showed up. So, we went, hmm... This means something.

TH: How did that happen?

GJ: Duh! Word-of-mouth. I mean, we don't do advertising now, and we have sixty thousand people show up. Right? I mean, advertising is *way* overrated. Word-of-mouth for this kind of event—because this is the kind of event that has historical value in um, uh... resonance for all the Chinese, all the Vietnamese. Uh, because it's at a place, it's a kind of Vietnamese place, you know, that the Vietnamese—and of course, the Vietnamese, they're the largest population—they're the bulk of our audience. But as soon as I saw that we had ten thousand people show up with no advertising, I thought, okay, this is where we need to be.

And I started, at the same time, the only other—the only other place that was doing real lion dance with firecrackers was Tan Tan. Tan Tan Restaurant. And, I was friends with Janet Chu, who's the daughter who runs the restaurants, and—and it was her dad, he's very superstitious. He would take ten percent of what they made all year, you know, if they made \$800,000, he put \$80,000 into lion dance! I mean, he was crazy! You know, and—and Janet was going, 'Oh man! Why is he putting...' And so, she tried to keep it up, but she couldn't keep it up because it was just, they had a teeny parking lot, she was having so much trouble with the fire department with the firecrackers, and controlling their lion dancers not to do stuff that was gonna cause them to be cited, you know, for what they're doing. So, so anyways, I said, 'Okay, I'm gonna try to preserve this art form in a place where it's safer and where more people can see it', and that's how we started at Viet Hoa. So, we've been there now, ten years. And uh, we've become part of the fixtures. We have uh, this last year we had event on two days. It was Super Bowl Weekend. Super Bowl in Houston. Don't ever do that again. Um, we had twelve lion dances, we had firecrackers all over the place, um, and I think we had about fifty thousand people show up over those two days. Now, the inside story, when we first started this, about the firecrackers. Um, you know, firecrackers have been banned for New Year's celebrations in Beijing, and Shanghai, and uh, Hunan, uh, Taipei, Singapore, Hong Kong, because of two reasons: The air pollution; and the fact that their, their parades were getting too rowdy, alright? That their, uh, martial arts groups would like, get in conflagrations with each other, and they became violent, and—

TH: Doesn't sound good.

GJ: Yeah. So basically, the Chinese said, 'Forget that, no more firecrackers.' So then, in California, no firecrackers. New York, no firecrackers. Houston's the only place we still have firecrackers, right? So, the first year we did this. Well, actually, it was the second year we did it, because nobody knew what we were doing the first year, it was kinda quiet. The second year, you know, we really built it up. And we had uh, Steve Radack, who is Commissioner. Steve Radack for the Southwest, uh, is, uh, was our Grand Marshal, light the first firecracker. Another funny story, he was always anti-firecracker, right? He is a hard-nose Republican. No to firecrackers. And he didn't really understand that when he was in front of five thousand people, and I was gonna let him light the first firecrackers. Then, all of sudden, he's a fan of firecrackers for *our event*, you know. [laughter] But, the thing that was weird was that the City of Houston, uh, sent a Fire Marshal out that didn't... he was African-American, he was kind of a small guy, um, and there's, you know, there's—there's stuff that goes around with you know, small guy issues, but he comes around and uh, my—for firecrackers, you have to have a pyrotechnic who's a licensed firecracker guy. He's got to be paid and on-site. You gotta have Fire Marshals, paid and on-site. You gotta have uh, fireworks, uh, insurance, all paid for, all expensive, all set. So, this uh, this guy from the Fire Marshal's office comes up and starts complaining to my pyrotechnic. Pyrotechnic calls me and says, 'This guy wants to shut us down.' And, I say, 'For why?' and he says, 'Cause he's an [expletive].' And I go, 'Okay.' So, I go grab Steve Radack, okay. Steve Radack is about eight feet tall, okay? I mean, he is a tall guy. Now, I'm short, y'know, I'm five-four. I say, 'Commissioner, there's a city person.' —This is where you play the county off the city, cause they hate each other, right? Okay. —'I need you to come and just listen to witness what's gonna happen with this guy.' Because I knew that this Fire Marshal guy was not gonna take well to some loud-mouthed colored girl—especially Asian—mouthing off to him.

So, um, I got my crew behind me too, and um, I go up to the guy, I say, you know, 'What's—what's the problem?' He goes, 'Well, you're not following regulations.' I said, 'Show me in the regulations where we're not following regulations.' He goes, 'I don't have to.' And I said, 'Oh yes you do. Because I read the regulations. And what you're saying is not in the regulations.' He says, 'Well, I can make the regulations here.' I said, 'No, you cannot do that. You're on my dime, and we're going by what the law says, and you cannot do that.' He says [pounds table] 'I have the right and authority to make decisions on-site.' And I say, 'Call your supervisor.' And, and, I look at Radack and he goes, 'Right on.' [TH and AL laugh] So, this little skinny black guy calls up his supervisor, who turns out to be a kinda chubby Mexican guy, right? And, uh, he's backing up the little black guy. And the guy said, 'Well maybe we can't shut you down this time, but we'll sure make sure you don't get a permit next year.' And I said, 'Is that a threat? [pause] Did y'all hear this? Did everybody hear this? I think he just made a threat.' These guys did not know what to do with me. The show went on. After the show, I mean, uh, Al Hoang was, uh,

Council Member. And I called him up... on a Saturday, going ‘[imitates angry noises] your people, your people!’ So, he was freaked out, cause it was his first year, and he wanted to make sure [pounds table] you know, not to mess with our people. So then, after it’s all over, I file formal complaints with the Inspector General’s Office of the Fire Department on both these guys and have them dragged in. [pauses] Okay? The next year, our Grand Marshal to light the first firecrackers was the Fire Chief. [pauses] Ta-da! [laughter] Yeah, so—but, see, that’s the thing, you’re never gonna find someone like me in New York or California. I doubt it. Because everybody in New York or California is gonna be taking care of their own tribe. Right? They’re not gonna go out on a limb for Vietnamese if you’re Chinese, why? Korean’s not gonna limb for Chinese, why? Right?

TH: Cause they already have their own little segregated groups...

GJ: That's right. And they don't see it as an amorphous, sociological, anthropological lab experiment. Okay, so that's the story of the Asian Festival and Lunar New Year. Okay.

TH: See how long...

[recording ends]

[recording begins]

TH: Okay, here we go.

GJ: The reason why we have to do all of the archives in a kind of compartmentalized way is that my work and life has been in pods. And sometimes those little pods interconnect, but in large part, they have been separate battles. Separate... separate issues. They overlap in a lot of ways, but there's nobody that I know who's had as many lives as me in one life. I start out as a kid in theater, at eight years old I'm a professional actor. Doing the 'Keen Eye', and 'South Pacific', and, um, 'Stop the World I Wanna Get Off'. I mean, I am in professional theater until I'm fifteen. At the same time, I am working in a grocery store since I was eight, and learning how to cut meat and getting hijacked and guns put up to my head. At the same time, I am involved with civil rights and working that direction, anti-war movement, women's rights. At the same time, I'm starting construction firm. I'm the first woman to start a construction firm in the state of Texas, alright? So, so, these are all things going on at the same time, and the only way I can—I decided I can talk about them and share them, is just take them one pod at a time. Because—it's just, most people have not had—I mean, you don't even know about my horse-riding career, wrangling horses and racing horses.

TH: I had no idea about the drama, that's—

GJ: Well, duh. I mean—I mean the Core Club, that's—that's the, uh, first dinner theater I worked in. I got paid like, \$120 a month at eight years old. Weird, right? I'm eight years old. It was 1960. That's before your parents were born! Oh man... [TH and AL laugh] So, so, it's better just, piece by piece, the patchwork quilt.

AL: Mhm.

TH: Okay, do you want to end?

[recording ends]