

Transcript

Sarah Kim: My name is Sarah Kim. Today is Sunday, March 26th 2023 and I am interviewing Michelle Rhee through Zoom for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Do you grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Michelle Rhee: I do, thank you.

SK: So, just to start off. When were you born and where did you grow up?

MR: I was born on December 5, 1966, and I was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan but grew up in Scottsdale, Arizona. We moved when I was three.

SK: What was it like growing up in Arizona?

MR: That would have been the early- to late-'70s when I was growing up there, and it was a very safe and affluent neighborhood that we lived in. Even though it was super-hot because it was Arizona, we were outside a lot, unsupervised in the neighborhood. You'd ride bikes and play outside. You never thought twice about it. My sister and I went to public school there. So, that was a very stereotypically suburban background, in terms of growing up.

SK: Did you ever feel like your parents raised you differently than your peers seemed to be raised?

MR: We were the only Korean... Well, no that's not true. There was another Korean family in the neighborhood. But it was a... The public school had, I don't know, 600 kids per class. It seemed large. And there were very, very few Asian students. There were very few students who were non-white of any kind. So, there were no Black students or Hispanic students either. It was a very predominantly white neighborhood. So, I did feel like there were times when I was eating a lot of foods that were completely different from my peers. I just remember bringing lunches to school and thinking my lunches looked very different from all the other kids'. But that was the only thing that really stuck out in terms of how all the kids were "raised." I think when I was very young, it didn't feel different. In high school, it felt different only because there seemed to be more of an emphasis on academics by my parents versus other kids. But I didn't really think much about that other than my parents just wanted me to do well in school.

SK: Speaking about food, what type of food did you grow up with?

MR: So, my mom made sure to have a hot meal for my dad ready every single day. It was always built around the same kinds of food. There was always rice. There was always some kind of cooked meat, usually beef. There was always soup and kimchi and some kind of vegetable inside

which wasn't a typical Korean vegetable. It was usually corn or broccoli or some other plain vegetable. But I remember those components very vividly, like that's what we had every dinner time.

SK: Are there any foods your parents made when you were young, that you still enjoy and make to this day?

MR: I cannot make the same things that my mother made that were delicious. I remember when I went off to college, that I would come home, and she would ask me what I wanted. She would think it might be a celebratory meal, and I always wanted what she made when we were growing up, which is braised chicken thighs, in a soy sauce of marinade, rice, and kimchi. I always said I wanted chicken, rice, and kimchi. That's what I wanted when I came home. My mom makes this really great version of *kimchi*. I think that she couldn't get some of the very common ingredients that you would have in Korea. So, for instance dried shrimp. She couldn't get dried shrimp, and she couldn't get a very specific kind of *gochugaru* (chili powder), so she would make it with the Napa cabbage and with a lot of garlic and chili paste. But it tasted... When I finally went to urban areas outside of Arizona where they had Korean restaurants, I would try the *kimchi* and I think, "This tastes so different." It's not what my mom made. So, I grew up with a type of *kimchi* that my mom made and adapted to where she could and I feel like that's the only authentic version, even though I know it's not. I can't replicate it. I tried making it myself a couple of times and it tastes a little bit different. And then my mom made this really great—I don't think it's a traditional Korean food—but she would make egg-battered fish and egg-battered zucchini. They were really delicious, better than I could ever make.

SK: When did your parents immigrate to Michigan?

MR: Well, they were both in the early-'60s. Exact dates, I'm not quite sure. My dad probably emigrated in '62 or '63, and my mother maybe a year after that, '64.

SK: Do you know why your parents ended up immigrating to the US?

MR: My dad had nothing to lose. He was the third of three brothers and grew up in Daegu and was going to inherit nothing. Family didn't have any money, but he was really smart. I don't really know the exact origin of this, but he was accepted into a graduate school program at the University of Michigan in engineering. To this day, I'm not sure how his tuition was paid because I don't imagine he could actually pay for it. Someone must have paid for it, and it might have been that he was on a scholarship. He was really, really quite smart. So, he came for education. Then my mother. It's a little murky on why she came to the United States. But by the time she came she was at least 25 which in Korean terms, at that stage of history and if you're a woman, she was an old maid. She wasn't married. She wasn't going to be able to find a job in

Korea. So, I think my dad decided to try her luck in coming to the United States and seeing if she could get a job. She had studied medicine in Korea, and when she came to the United States, she was trying to learn English so that she could take the medical exams in the US.

SK: Did your parents ever talk about their experiences in Korea?

MR: My dad never did, but part of that was I never really asked. But he never really talked about it. My mother did, but only in terms of when she was very young, not a lot when she was getting older in terms of when she was in high school, and then when she was in college and med school and then right before she came to the United States. She very rarely talks about that. She talks a lot about her childhood and how much she misses that stage of being in Korea. It would have been right before things started to turn bad from the war.

SK: How do you think your upbringing impacted the way you raised your own children?

MR: There were a lot of things that I experienced in high school from my own parents which I attribute to them being immigrants—it doesn't necessarily mean being Korean, just immigrants—where they had a little bit of a reaction to what they perceived to be permissible in the Western culture. They kind of clamped down. They thought, “Well, I don't want my kids to be Western kids, I want my kids to be Korean kids,” or whatever country you're immigrating from. Because I think there's a little bit too much permission that's given to kids, that's what they perceived. The end result of that is I felt very alienated from my parents, I think, for a period of time right after when I went to college. I used to joke, but there was a bit of truth to it, that when people asked me why I picked the college I did, I said, “Because it was the farthest one away from home.” Because I did not want to be anywhere close to home. Not only did I not like Arizona by the time I was 18, I just felt like I could be free and actually discover who I was once I left home. When I became a parent, I did not want my kids to think that of me. I wanted them to feel supported in discovering who they could be as adults with me, with knowing that I would be supportive and that I would always want to be there to talk about it. Because I didn't feel like I could ever talk to my parents about what I really wanted to do. So, it wasn't so much that I modeled myself after what they did. It was more I thought about my own experience and decided I wanted it to be better for my kids.

SK: What was your experience like leaving Arizona after graduating high school, and then going to Smith College in Massachusetts?

MR: I was so happy to leave. Arizona is a beautiful, beautiful state, and it was a really great place to grow up. I didn't appreciate it until after I had experienced trying to find a safe place to raise my own kids. I didn't appreciate that it was safe and that that was a very important part of development. I didn't also appreciate that my parents sent us to a public school. Right now, it's so

apparent to me that public schools are not all created equal. I was grateful for my public school experience. I knew there was a broader world out there. This was before the Internet and so all I had was what was on 3 publicly available television channels and books. I read a lot when I was in high school. I knew from reading books that there was so much more than Arizona and I was ready to go see it. Coming to the East Coast and learning from people who had grown up in different kinds of households and backgrounds and experiences, it was all pretty amazing. Also, it was the first time that I had seen non-white people in any kind of material population, and it was really very eye opening.

SK: How do you think your perception of your racial and ethnic identity changed once you started college?

MR: I never experienced what I think people... you know, people like to slap the word racism on any kind of negative experience. I never had any negative experiences when I was growing up. There was one time that I can recall. One time when a little kid made some kind of rude facial gesture to me. They did the slanty eyed thing. That was it for 18 years. So, I didn't grow up with this idea that people would treat me differently just because I was Asian. Then I was put into these situations in college where I have a lot of other Asian people around and a lot of other people of different backgrounds. They talked about it a lot more, about their own negative experiences. So, it made me think OK, well first of all everyone's experience is different, number one. But number two, that maybe there is some truth to it because all these people are talking about an experience that they have that sound very common and similar across different backgrounds. So, I would say that it was more of a time when I became aware.

SK: Are you involved in any Asian associations now and what compelled you to join them?

MR: I'm a long-time member, even though I haven't been a board member. I was a board member for over 10 years with an Asian American Lawyers Association in Massachusetts. I was a member of that organization since going back to '97 and a board member twice over that period. And then only recently have I stopped being a board member there. It is such a wonderful community of people. I feel like the way in which we talk with each other when we're at social gatherings or board meetings or when we're planning events, I do feel as if... If you measured how free you are to talk to people, there's this gradient. If it went up to ten, in work I'm at about a five, maybe six. Then at home, of course I'm at ten. So, that gap between the five and the ten, you want to find people with whom you can ratchet up the gradient a little bit and with the Asian American Lawyers, I felt like I could be between a seven and eight. So, it felt increasingly comfortable to be more open about everything that I'm feeling and thinking with them versus just the normal work colleagues. I just needed, I think, to feel as if I could be comfortable with a group of people who were lawyers just like me.

SK: Over the course of American history, there's been a lot of different racial tensions going on. So, I wanted to ask if you remember the murder of Vincent Chen in 1982 or the LA riots in 1992 and what your reaction to those were.

MR: I did not learn about the murder of Vincent Chen until much later. So, in '82 definitely, I was not aware. The LA riots, painfully aware. In fact, that came right during when my now husband, Mark, and I were coming back from Europe. We were there for an extended period, and we had made this decision we were going to move to the West Coast. But we weren't sure if we were going to live in the Bay Area up north or LA. Then the Rodney King riots, and everything happened in '92 and we said, "We're not living in LA." It seemed like the wrong time to go and be there. So, we ended up in the Bay Area and lived there for five years. I don't have any explanation for why I felt that way other than it felt like a helpless situation. The problems were so deep, that to throw yourself in there, at that time, would just feel unsettling personally. I didn't want to add that to our lives at the time. Vincent Chen, I found out about later through I think a documentary about his murder. It went out on an informal circuit among Asian American organizations. It was... There's times when you think it's not really surprising, but it was still surprising that it happened.

SK: About those two instances or other instances of racial tension, did you ever speak to your peers or people around you and what were their responses like?

MR: There was also a shooting of a gentleman who rang the wrong doorbell at Halloween. I can't remember exactly what his name was, but I remember when that happened. Asian colleagues, we were all horrified by it. The things that we talk about, especially in the Asian American Lawyers group are not so much high profile, obviously unjust issues like that. But things that are a little bit more low profile I think that we still get surprised about. This controversy right now at Harvard, where they seem to be employing different standards for Asian American students than any other students holding us to a different and higher standard. That seems more unjust in a lot of ways because it applies to whole demographic of students and people and affects their lives, versus albeit tragic one person. One person in something that seems like an exogenous event, it seems like it's rooted in lots of different issues related to economic depression and racial hostility. But those are sort of things that could happen and pop up in one spot, but the Harvard thing seems systemic and that's a huge problem. So, that's the kind of thing that we spend a lot more time talking about.

SK: For the Asian American Lawyers Association, what do you do in that association other than I'm aware that you meet up every so often to talk?

MR: I think that what we also do is provide support for each other in careers. Just yesterday actually, there were six women Asian attorneys who came over to my house. We just had brunch

together. There were two of them in that group. It's not like I'm mentoring them, but we had very formative conversations years ago. This woman named Jen, she was one of three women who are over 20 years younger than I am. I took all three of them out for dinner one night, and I asked them very point blank, "What do you want to do?" They were all at a certain point in their law firm careers, where you have to use the adage. You have to fish your cut bait. You have to decide, do you want to become a partner? And if so, here are the things you need to do. Or you decide, I don't want to be a partner, and then you've got to start networking and figuring out what your next stage was. Jen was one of those three I had that conversation with that night, and she said, "I want to make partner," and I said, "OK well, here are the things that you have to do." Here she is, she's a partner. It was not just coming together to have fun. It's to pass on, for me, my own advice and wisdom. She can take it and do whatever she wants with it. But I'm hoping that that conversation sparked for her, the realization that she just can't expect to be rewarded for doing hard work. It's a very Asian thing to think, 'if I just sit quiet and do what I'm told and do hard work then I can get it done.' But I feel like part of our role in this lawyer's society is to tell people it's a relationship business. You have to get out there and curry favor and make it and have people in situations in a law firm, like an organization, hold the strings, pull for you. You can't do that just by going in and showing you can do an A paper every day. It's about actually cultivating those relationships and having that conversation; I think at that stage in her career was really important.

SK: How do you think your race or gender affects your life at work?

MR: I don't think my race affects my life at work at all, to be honest with you. I have never in my entire career in financial services, ever felt like I was treated differently in any way because I'm Asian. Maybe I have been, and I just didn't know it, or maybe I was in some manner of omission. That's where it could happen, and I really wouldn't know it. But what I mean by omission is, maybe people have said, "She would not be appropriate for this role because X," and the X could be a trait stereotypically attributable to Asians. I would never know that. So, maybe it's happened. But the female thing. Man! I feel like I'm a woman every single day! Most of that is because I'm a boss, and a woman boss is such a difficult, difficult job. I was just talking about this with someone where I felt like people don't expect men to care. If you have a male boss, they don't expect you to care at all and when they don't—nobody cares. They expect women bosses to care, and it's not like they expect you to be nice all the time. But they expect you to not make them feel bad. But I have to make a few people feel bad sometimes, because if you're doing a bad job, you shouldn't feel good about doing a bad job. I feel like people don't want that to come from a woman, for whatever reason. That is the biggest thing that happens with me. It's not because I'm a woman and an individual contributor. It's because I'm a woman and a boss. That... That it is hard.

SK: What are your opinions on the Model Minority Myth?

MR: I think that's a very complex question, and a lot goes in it. I think that Asians, at least in the narrow field that I'm in, we don't do ourselves a favor when we just talk about advancing other Asians. I've tried very hard, I'm not trying to compel other peer Asians to do this, but I try to model the behavior that I think that we should see. If I look at my so-called roster of mentees internally, they're not all Asian. In fact, more often they're black. I do think that by showing that, if we want to be accepted as part of a potentially sidelined set of minorities, then we have to work with other minority groups. We can't just try to stand on our own. I know that doesn't really answer your question. But I do feel like when people say there's a model minority, there's a sense of... Not jealousy but resentment. That there are certain positive traits that are given to or ascribed to Asians that give us this title of model minority, meaning that we're somewhat accepted in some sense by the majority population. I think that creates resentment. I think that's not helpful to us, as a population, and not helpful to the entire group of populations that deserve better equity in the workplace.

SK: Thinking back to COVID-19 that happened quite recently and along with that was a lot of Asian hate, during the time what were your personal feelings about?

MR: I was about to take a job in New York at that time, and there were an inordinate number of random attacks on women, including Asian women of all things. In two cities it seems to me, San Francisco, and New York. My personal reaction that was man, I guess I could walk around with a football helmet all day because I'm going to get hit in my head, just by being! I think I'm old enough now where I realize that those kinds of events happen a great deal because there is some underlying psychological issue by the person who's perpetrating the attack. I tend to segment things. So, when I was hearing about the New York attacks and realizing I'm a population that seems inordinately victimized for whatever reason, the first thing I think of is, 'OK how do I make sure that I'm safe when I go.' So, I literally made a choice about where I was going to live in New York, that didn't require me to be in places where I would feel vulnerable, meaning that I wouldn't have to rely on public transportation. I just picked a place where I would live where I could walk to work, and that has helped me a great deal in managing stress about unknown variables that I don't feel like I could control in that kind of situation. And then after that, it's sort of a more diffused Zen kind of acceptance that you can only control what you can control. I wasn't going to let the perception that it was unsafe in New York to be an Asian woman to stop me from doing my job, or enjoying my job, or enjoying time out. It's not that I'm not careful when I'm there, it's that I try really hard to just concentrate on things that are positive about being there versus the things that are random and negative.

SK: About being an Asian, there's a lot of negativity that's rooted within racism. Have you ever had any conversations with your children about that?

MR: I was riding the subway one time with my daughter Olivia, and she showed her school pass. It was on a line that we barely ever take, and she never rides with me anyway. It just happened to be one time, and the conductor literally yelled at us for 30 seconds, "I've told you before that you should do blah blah blah and you can't show this pass and expect to get this refund blah blah blah blah." After he left, I turned to Olivia and I said, "Yeah, you know I've never seen that guy before." He got me mistaken with another woman, who was probably Chinese and not Korean. You know, just some other random Asian woman. I didn't dwell in the hatred behind it. What I just said was, "That happens you know and what are you going to do?" Then I try to turn those situations into ones where you feel blessed. I said, "I cannot be angry with that guy because he's a conductor on a train." I have this fantastic life that I've been really blessed with. We have a standard of living that's probably much higher than that person. If you constantly let other people control your emotions, and you don't get to fall back on your safety net of the things that you're happy about. That's what I tried to impart from Olivia in that particular conversation. When Jack was very, very young. He was five, I think, and he was just starting to take the school bus. He came home one day, and he was upset about something. He said that someone had called him a name and my heart just dropped. I thought 'Oh my God,' he got called some kind of racial slur. I waited till we had a quiet moment and then I asked him, "What did you get called." He said, "Well, it wasn't really a name." He said that there was an older kid, for whatever reason, the older kid said, "Hey kid, your butts on fire." It was something really stupid, and obviously not racially motivated. I was so elated. I didn't choose that moment, because he was only five or six, to really talk about... race. But I did think that where I had intuitively gone, I should always think much more positively. It was just some senior kid saying something and Jack, he's a lovely child; he's a little sensitive. So, that comment really upset him for some reason, which being an adult, couldn't think why. Then over the years, what we've talked about is his affinity for other people who are Asian, and his friends tend to be Asian. So, we don't really talk about the negative aspects because there haven't been any. We talk about the positive aspects.

SK: You've mentioned within the interview that you've lived in various different places in the US. So, what compelled you to live in Massachusetts and raise your children there?

MR: Arizona was never going to be a place where I raised kids. It wasn't because I didn't have a good childhood there. It was because—it's very similar to my sister raising her kids in Florida. There is always the chance that your child never leaves. She has a son, who probably will not be going out of state for school in Florida. I didn't want my kids, if they didn't feel ambitious about college, to never leave Arizona. If they were going to be in a state where they were never going to leave, I wanted it to be on the higher end in terms of education and income. Massachusetts is it, really. I mean, it is on par with, I don't know what your mean would be, but I think by any measure on the mean whether it's income or population or whatever it is. Massachusetts has the highest educated population in the United States. It's also not as expensive to live here as it is the Bay Area or New York. In terms of the ability to experience a diverse population you kind of

want it to be in some of these major metro areas and on these different measures... I felt like Massachusetts was a really great place to live. It's safe in the suburbs, kids get a great education in the public school system here. But it feels like a thriving metro area where you again, have a diversity of not only the people but art and entertainment, food. Finally, the business here is thriving. The ability to get a job here and be able to stay for a career, just felt stronger here than in other parts of the country.

SK: Going a little bit into your children's education, is there a reason why you chose to enroll them into public school compared to other schooling options?

MR: My husband and I are notoriously stingy. So, we weren't going to pay for private school unless the kids needed it. There are lots of reasons why kids go to private school, and I tend to think that a lot of them have to do with individualized needs for education. Public school is great if your kids are of a particular type. But then when you get out of the type in which you can attend public school, you kind of need help. I didn't send my kids to private school because they didn't need help. Now, we also chose a suburb where we knew the public school was good. Meaning that the tax base of the town was high enough that they would pay for not only a safe school but a school that is geared towards achievement in core academic disciplines. Specifically, what I wanted was not a mismatch between focus on just the humanities but also on the technical pieces, math, and science. Massachusetts suburban schools tend to be very good on both counts.

SK: One last question referring to food. Did you introduce your children to Korean food as they were growing up?

MR: I was not the best cook when they were very, very young. My husband is not Korean, so we didn't eat Korean food very often. I would say that the times they might have eaten Korean food growing up, they wouldn't feel like it was notable in a lot of ways. I wouldn't call it out as Korean. The things that I would make would be so routine. I would make a Korean marinated short rib, or a Korean marinated beef strip. It would be alongside rice, but it wouldn't have kimchi or the other things that you can flash 'This is a Korean meal.' It would be more like one dish that's sort of added into your monthly mix. When they got older, I wouldn't cook it, but we would go out. I would say this is a Korean meal. I think they appreciate it, and they can distinguish it but it's not something that they grew up with.

SK: My understanding of your Korean language abilities is that they're not very advanced. Is that correct?

MR: That is absolutely correct. Not very advanced? It's more like, I can't speak it, Sarah! I don't think I could even read it. The only thing I can do is literally write my last name. That's it.

SK: What do you think contributed to that?

MR: There were two big contributions, and you can trace everything back when you were a young child, which is the most fertile time to learn a different language. When you're a young child who are the people that contribute most to that? Your mother and your father. My father never said this outright, but I truly believe that he wanted my sister and me to learn English without an accent because I think he thought, he would have been given more opportunities in work if he spoke English without an accent. I firmly believe that, number 1. Number 2: my mother. I love her. She's a little lazy and so, she just never spoke Korean to us ever. Part of that was because I think she was so deferential to my father. If my father had said that we should learn Korean or we should speak Korean at home, she would absolutely have done it. But I think that's what makes me think he must have told her, "Don't speak Korean to them. Let them speak English and speak it fluently because they need that to be able to survive." Then they never made any attempt to have us learn Korean when we were older, which I again don't know those specific reasons why other than they thought that it wasn't going to be particularly helpful for us as adults.

SK: As a parent, did you feel compelled to send your children to *Hangeul* (Korean alphabet) school where they can learn Korean?

MR: No. It's not that it's a love or antipathy of my Korean heritage. It's more... I feel like kids can figure it out when they're older if it's particularly something that they're curious about or interested in. Maybe I biased the kids because I haven't shown any interest in it. I think of Korean now in the same way that I think of French. When I retire, I would love to learn it. It's just this idle thought. It's not compelling to me to actually push it to completion or to carve out time in my day to do it. I'm 100% Korean but my kids are not, and so it remains to be seen if it's something that they feel compelled to pursue in the future.

SK: Well, that concludes our interview. Thank you so much for your time, and I really appreciate everything you shared with me.

MR: Of course, Sarah. It was my pleasure. That was a lot of fun.