**Thomas Yi Interview Transcript**

Bryce Leos

All right. I believe we are live, as they say. Good evening. I know it's pretty late right now. Well... in the-

Thomas Yi

It is early for me in Los Angeles. Good evening, Bryce.

Bryce Leos

Right. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Thomas Yi

Sure. My name is Thomas Yi, and I'm a Korean-American, Korean, Vietnamese-American living in Koreatown in Los Angeles, California. And I would love to share what I can for the class and for anything beyond that, if it grows legs.

Bryce Leos

Right on, how are you doing? Just to start off.

Thomas Yi

I am doing good. Just working hard. I work at the Los Angeles International Airport, as the security officer. As you know, people have been cabin fever with COVID. And this year, we've been breaking all sorts of records of passenger transit through LAX. I believe July 4th was a

record, year-over-year, Labor Day was record, year-over-year, and we're expecting another record for Thanksgiving and the holidays post-COVID. Everybody wants to travel and Los Angeles is already a destination to study. And it seems like we're open for business. And, yeah, we've been pretty busy. But I'm glad to make the time for this opportunity to help a student as well as to tell my story.

Bryce Leos

And I thank you so much. I do truly appreciate it. I guess we're talking about a little bit already. How long have you been working in law enforcement?

Thomas Yi

Law enforcement since 2009. I worked for a previous agency—let's just keep it as generic as Homeland Security—but I left. I was there from [2009] to [2018]. And due to some political climate, some people don't like our agency and found out what I did. So I decided to tap out. My safety and my family safety was more important than a paycheck. So I went from the federal side to city and local side. And that's how I ended up at LAX and airport police. Now, I started there just before COVID, March, 2020. So I've been with the city or with airport. So three and a half years now.

Bryce Leos

Okay, would you like to get into what made you want to get into law enforcement?

Thomas Yi

Actually, it was my dad. My dad was Korean and he was born in Korea. And we came after in 1975, after the Vietnam Conflict concluded, he met my mom. During that time, he served two tours in the Korean Army in Vietnam, alongside American soldiers. I believe his years of active duty was 1966 to 1968. And after he served his tour with the Korean army, he found employment with an American defense contractor, and was able to stay in Vietnam because by that time, he had met my mom, and I was born in 1972. And so, he was able to stay in Vietnam, because he's working as a defense contractor with the US Department of Defense. Let's see. And then when Saigon fell in 1975, that's when my mom, my dad, and myself immigrated as refugees of the Vietnam Conflict. We went from Tanzania airport in Saigon to Guam. Sorry, I was just thinking back. [Thomas Yi apologizing for tearing up as he is preparing to tell a story] We went to Guam and then Camp Pendleton. And we stayed in Camp Pendleton for a little while. My mom tells the story that a guy was a sergeant or captain or just very official said, "You're next on the sponsorship list. Would you like to go to Pennsylvania or Northern California?" My mom did not know what the two was, and he said, "Pennsylvania snow and Northern California rain." So my mom's like, “Northern California.” She—you know, Vietnam is a tropical country—she said, "If I go snow, I die." And I like to tell that story because that tells how we landed in Northern California. We were sponsored by a Baptist church. For about two years, my dad was a janitor for that Baptist Church. And my dad and my mom were orchard workers. We picked apples in Northern California. And dad got tired of it really quick. I think after leaving Korea and going to Vietnam to fight a war in a foreign country, the world was a bigger place. And he just didn't want to go back to Korea. And Northern California agriculture really was too slow for him. He had a friend down in LA and he said, "Why don't you come down?"—one of his war buddies—"Why

don't you come down? I have a gas station with an auto repair shop [you] can work as an auto mechanic for me." So, my dad and my mom packed up everything. Oh, by the way, side note: we lived in Paradise, California from [1975] to [1977]. That was the town that burned down in a wildfire two years ago. The whole town got decimated. And it was sad to hear that we had roots there, I guess. Or that's the first place that we knew of America. But then we got to Los Angeles and we landed in Koreatown. We've been living on the same street, not the same building—apartment building—but the same street since 1977. So, we've seen LA grow, LA go through good times, LA during the riots. Some pretty dark days for Korean Americans. And yeah, so it's still here. Yeah. Sorry, I- [Thomas Yi is tearing up]

Bryce Leos

No, It's totally fine! Thank you. Thank you for sharing that.

Thomas Yi

So, what was the question again? So, a little bit about myself and what got me into law enforcement? Right? He [Yi's father] saw an ad one day for Homeland Security—well, I guess we're gonna get into it—ad for an immigration officer, so he said, "Why don't you apply to be an immigration officer?" Which at the time, I really didn't know. I was working more in an admin role over at a hospital, Cedar Sinai, and I was a management assistant, just booking patients scheduling for a doctor, and I wasn't happy. It was just a job. And my dad said, "Why don't you apply for this thing called ICE? Immigration, customs enforcement. And in [2009], well, probably [2008]. It takes about a year. I applied and got the call [2009] and became a sworn immigration enforcement officer. And I come to find out the journeyman status you start off as

an immigration agent, but you reach the journeyman status, which is like a top step or, you know, it's a deportation officer so my primary role, law enforcement wise, was the apprehension, the processing, and deportation of illegal immigrants and or people that have been deemed unfit to stay in the United States by an immigration judge. So, we were armed, and we were also tasked to put people back on a plane or if they didn't want to go willingly, officers would escort them back to their country of origin. But I left there in 2018 because somebody my building found out what I did, and there was graffiti on my apartment door saying, "*Puto* ICE" [Note: *Puto* is the masculine form of a a Spanish profanity meaning "prostitute"] and my dad had passed away and my mom was home alone while I worked and it was a hard thing to do. And I walked away from a good job, nine years into a twenty-year pension. But, you know, I'd rather have my mom safe than anything. And at the time, as you can imagine, [in the] Los Angeles political climate, Immigration and ICE is not well liked or got a lot of cooperation, even from the locals, the sheriffs and the LAPD. At one time I'm when I started in [2009], we got a lot of cooperation. And that doesn't mean that they dimed people out, but we were given access to their facility to pick up somebody after their, whatever criminal arrest was processed then we would pick them up, and it would be custody-to-custody. But things have changed. By the time 2018 happened. And we weren't allowed. LAPD didn't give us any cooperation nor did they tell us when they had an illegal in their custody. So interesting, and ironically enough, that non-cooperation only increased the presence of ICE in neighborhoods. And before, we used to just go facility-to-facility, agency-to-agency, but without that cooperation, ICE is even more prevalent in the neighborhood because they have to go in and find people and do a knock-and-talk. And now we're more visible. But yes, I left there due to acts of vandalism on my car, on my apartment door. And it just wasn't good for my mom. So, I left there, started application process with the

city and was picked up by the airport police in 2020. I have been there for three and half months. It's less political, less controversial. We still have problems. But, as far as police work goes, it's not as full scope as the LAPD. We just deal with the airport. But yes, I'm glad I made the decision. And my mom's still with me, and we're both still healthy. And happy about that. Blessed.

Bryce Leos

God bless and thank you for sharing that. In my opinion, it takes a very strong man to walk away from something in order to protect his family and I greatly appreciate that quality in anybody. Yes, thank you for sharing that, sir. Alright. So, to go back to the airport security because you talked about the transition: How would you say being an airport security officer in Airport Police Department is different than the LAPD? Is there ways that the two departments intermix or can you talk about that?

Thomas Yi

Sure. So, at LAX, there is a sworn-side Police Department. LAX is a city-owned property of the city of Los Angeles and they do require a police force. The same officers that are airport police are the… they go through the same academy at the LAPD Elysian Park. They do their six months and they graduate. I would say it's not as full scope as LAPD because LAPD does different calls like domestic violence calls, which we do not do. We deal strictly with the City of Los Angeles and the airport facilities. There are traffic stops, if you can imagine, on the outside and the inside in the central terminal area. And so, the types of calls are a little different. Where they might overlap is if there was a homicide, or then you'd have to call the detectives of the LAPD. If there

was a bomb threat, something that were required, maybe a special weapons team [like] Swat. I believe when there was a shooting at TSA terminal two or terminal three. And a TSA officer got shot. The LAPD was right there standing side-by-side with the airport police. Now, I'm not sworn. I fall under the guise of airport police. But they have a sworn side for the police officers but they also have a security division side. So under federal regulations, every airport—and LAX is an international airport so they have federal officials, customs and border patrol, the people that see people that come through the airport, as opposed to a land crossing, as opposed to a sea port; they also have TSA, people getting on planes, so CBP, people coming on planes, TSA getting on planes; those are all federal agencies—but the physical security of an airport, not just LAX but across the nation, is mandated by federal regulations. And it's up to each city to provide security. People have to be ID checked and go through posts, as well. And we also do the traffic within the central terminal where you pick up [and] drop off, and other security posts that the ancillary support services, the catering people, the field trucks that have to get onto the tarmac and service the planes. So, I started off in 2020 in the security side, and as of July I'm now outside in the traffic side. And happy dealing with the public. Dealing with, you know, unattended bags, unattended cars, as you can imagine, whenever we come up to an unattended car. You never know, "Is it just a car that the guy ran into get his family, or is it a possible terrorist threat?" Where they park a car, and then they leave and bad things happen. So, we're very vigilant on seeing unattended bags, unattended cars, suspicious individuals that are taking pictures of law enforcement of security gates, things like that. I believe that we were once told that LAX is one of the higher-value targets on the West Coast. Lot of people transit through here. A lot from Asia, a lot from Latin America, not so much from Europe. But yes, it would be a big get for a terrorist cell, whether domestic or outside, to create terror at LAX, a lot of people come

through here. It's an easy target to create a lot of hurt, damage, and terror. For those that are bent on doing so.

Bryce Leos

Right. And obviously, it's going to be [especially] with a location as big as LAX, there's a lot at stake. Going back to going back to what you said about having to be extremely vigilant all the time. With bags and-

Thomas Yi

Yes, unattended vehicles. Yes.

Bryce Leos

Yes, and how often is the case that something where everybody's on high alert in case something like that could happen? Is it once a month, once a week, once a day?

Thomas Yi

There's really no- I mean that we have, you know, year-over-year, like, “Hey, did we have more bomb threats or scares versus last year?” But I mean, if somebody could forecast how often or what the schedule is… You just never know. And what's really present right now is the international conflict. What's happening in Israel. We are on heightened alert, because we have two factions that are very enthusiastic about their position. A lot of people have been hurt on both sides over in Israel and Gaza, but a lot of people live in Los Angeles who have family, friends, roots in both Israel and Gaza, and they want to make a statement. And LAX is one of

those places to make a statement whether peacefully or as through an act of terrorism. The Israeli Air airline, El Al, flies out of LAX, and El Al is very, very emphatic about their security measures for anybody trying to get on an El Al plane because they see it as it's a possible target and they don't mess around. They don't mess around their security. It's sometimes a sight to see, and… Yeah, without giving away too much, each time in El Al airplane flies, there are a lot of eyes on it. [Inaudible] But yes, how often? I mean LAX is always the target and it doesn't even have to be about Israel or Palestine, it could be, you know, some faction of some small group that doesn't like [for example] Qantas Air quality. Qantas Air is Australian, like you can have some Aborigine indigenous group that wants to make a statement. Planes are filled with a full tank of gas either leaving LAX bound for Sydney, just as an example. You know, so you never know, there are a lot of smaller airlines, but there's people that want to make statements all over the world, all over the world. And you know, they want to be heard one way or the other. It's part of the job, though, just like any other sworn officer, or non-sworn, when you put on a uniform, [Phone ringing in the background starts] you know that you're asked to do a job, not only to attend, to protect and to serve, but also to be proactive, see something, say something, because we're in the public eye, and we are held to a higher standard. And that's what we have to do. It's just the reality of the world now. The world has become a smaller place with social network platforms. And so if you want something to go viral, have it done at LAX, people recognize the LAX and it goes viral. Real quick, real fast.

Bryce Leos

Of course, that makes total sense. It feels as if, depending on the climate of the world, for airport as compact and big as LAX that it obviously is going to be in line with a lot of possible tension. But going, going back to when you're first applying for a law enforcement job. Would you say that your father's military experience kind of pushed you into going into a more structured role like law enforcement?

Thomas Yi

Oddly enough, I had applied for the US military out of high school, and my dad was totally against that. He said, "I didn't bring you to another country. I was in the military." Of course, the Korean military – totally different experience than the US military. I've been told that it's a lot harsher. There's more hazing involved. And because Korea is very homogeneous, they didn't have other races or even other nationalities. So I guess, the types of hazing were more just in line of "Hey, this is your trial by fire," and didn't cross any kind of racial or other lines of inclusiveness, as well. It's just you know, it's a rite of passage. And he didn't have a good experience. The whole reason why he was in Vietnam is… So to tie it back to, I believe the title of the course was "Two Koreas, 1945 to present." My dad said that we were actually close to the DMZ. He his family was from a town called Hamhung. And it was actually in the north. In the 1950s, when the Korean Conflict happened, a lot of North Koreans migrated down to the south. For whatever reason, they didn't want to be part of the North. They migrated down or there was war, and the small farmers or villages or townships up and moved. My dad, he had a couple of [siblings], an older sister and older brother, him, and then a younger brother. So they were on the road, they left their town and move their way south [and] got separated so it was just my dad and his younger brother. They ended up in an orphanage in South Korea, and got separated from his

older sister and his older brother. Eventually, they got reunited. But that just goes to show that the conflict in Korea, not only was it communism versus democracy, but the US versus China, North Korea versus South Korea, you know, it really affected families and separated families. Until even to this day, there are families that are in North Korea, that haven't seen their relatives in South Korea because of the political climate. But so, my dad was high school age in the 1950s. Fast forward to the 1960s. As it was explained to me, through my dad and some of his friends, he said that the United States came and asked the South Korean government, “Since we help stave off the communists, we have this other involvement—entanglement, if you will—in Southeast Asia. It's called Vietnam. And since we helped you, it's time for a favor for a favor.” Some people call it payback, some people call it blood money. But they sent a lot of young Korean soldiers to Vietnam to fight in a country they had nothing to do with. But they fought alongside the US soldiers in the Vietnam conflict. And it's interesting, because somebody asked me, "Well, you weren't born in the United States?" I came with my parents, as refugees. And I naturalized or they naturalized, I was too young to take the test. But, man, I just think about my parents, who came to another country, learn the language, took a test. And I became a citizen, I didn't have to lift a finger, they did all the work. But, because of the US foreign policy involvement in Korea and in Vietnam, if it wasn't for that I wouldn't be alive, because my parents would have never met. And that to me is like, I'm as American as they come. Because without the US involvement, then yeah, they would have never met. So I feel I even though I was not born in the United States, America had a lot to do with me being alive. So yeah, it was my dad got sent over there as gratitude, some people would call it for South Korea having existed. And I'm sure there are many books and documentaries about the money that the South Korean government got [which] created what we now know as Korea, South Korea. Because up until

then, it was literally a third world country, very [agricultural] had no industry whatsoever. But the money that flowed in after that time, helps build the Samsungs, helped build the LGs that we know of today. The owners, the originators of those companies, had large defense contracts or money that came through the government and started building the infrastructure for what we now know is South Korea. So what was the question? Oh yes, so Dad met my mom, and we came here. He didn't really want me to go into the army, or even law enforcement. Because yes, his experience was, you know, not really that good, even though his understanding was of what he knew of the Korean military, and the US military. And those guys, I hold a special place for them. Because if you wanted to better yourself, you could have opportunities, the VA loan for housing, for education, the GI Bill. Those were things that, you know, the Korean military didn't have. So it can really change one's trajectory in their life. He pointed out this thing called ICE because he knew I wasn't happy. We both did not appreciate that is the extent of the law enforcement involved. It did say on the application, "This is one you're going to carry a badge [and] gun, fly on a plane," but, you know, it was a job and it was exciting. I loved that job. I probably would not have left if it wasn't for officer safety or an officer's family safety issue. I thought that would have been my last job that I ever applied for. I was going to retire after that. But, you know, God had other plans. And so, you know, you just got to follow it and just say, you know, wherever he needs me, that wasn't meant to be and now I'm in another place and a lot safer. I don't have any regrets. [Said with laughter] Financially kind of hurt. I took several steps back, but I think I'm a better city officer for my experience that I bring over from the federal side. And I think my dad would have been proud. My dad passed away, Super Bowl Sunday, February 5, 2012. Stomach cancer. He had an initial diagnosis of stomach cancer in 1992. We suspect it had something to do with the deforesting agent, Agent Orange, that was sprayed in

Vietnam. He tried to get treatment here because he's a US citizen. But the VA said, "You weren't US military. You should go ask Korea." And then when we asked Korea they said, "You're not a Korean citizen. You're a US citizen. So we don't have anything for you," so he was kind of caught in limbo. And it was kind of sad. He had an operation to take out the cancer in the stomach back in [1992]. And he lived another nineteen years. And until there was a recurrence in 2011. We went to the hospital and in December 2011. And he didn't come home. He passed away Superbowl Sunday, like I said, February 5, 2012. And so now my mom lives with me. She's a widower [*sic*]. And yeah, but I think he would have been proud. He definitely was proud. See me as an ICE agent, do my thing. And he wouldn't say to me, but his army buddies said, "He's very proud of you."

Bryce Leos

Yes. You have the pictures on your phone you'd like you'd like to show?

Thomas Yi

They're kind of small. Yes, I think it's more just additional for you, if you if you'd like, I don't know if you have the wherewithal to print them out but if not, don't worry about it just delete them. Yes. it's kind of hard to see them. So yeah, but let me see if I could do the one with my dad and his platoon buddies. It's kind of hard to see. If you can see... No, there's a glare. Sorry.

Bryce Leos

You can see [it] a little bit.

Thomas Yi

My dad is the one with the helmet on.

Bryce Leos

On what part of the screen?

Thomas Yi

On the screen, he's the one on the end with the helmet.

Bryce Leos

Okay, on the left? Okay. That's awesome!

Thomas Yi

Yes. So, alright. Refresh my memory.

Bryce Leos

I think he was getting to that point [in the interview where] we talked about how your father kind of influenced you to not go to the army, but into law enforcement. And told you about his own experiences, which if you do not mind, I like to go back on what we've talked about a little bit already in this interview. But how exactly did your parents meet?

Thomas Yi

So, like I said, my dad was in the Korean army, he served two tours. But after meeting my mom—or maybe he was already outside of the Korean military—he wanted to stay in Vietnam so he got a good job with a defense contractor, the Department of Defense, and they were I guess helping build infrastructure for the US bases. And my mom was working at the commissary or what's known as the PX. And then so she was working on base PX. And my dad was on base as a worker for the defense contractor, and that's how they met. And I guess he courted her and then, I guess, they went out and they got together and then had me so I'm a bonafide war baby. And, yes, so but there is one story that I would like to recall. My dad had some family business to attend to. And he had left Vietnam and he went back to Korea. This was probably March of 1975. And he heard on the news that the Communists were marching on Saigon. They had already gained ground in the south. And they were on the outskirts of Saigon. I believe there was a maybe Ken Burns—I'm not sure if it's Ken Burns—but there's a documentary called *The Last Days of Saigon*. And there's a very famous picture. A US helicopter Huey on top of the US Embassy roof, and people are trying to scramble and get out. That was April 30, 1975. My dad came back from Korea. He told me that he was on a PanAm airline airliner and aside from the pilot, and the flight crew, there was only about seven other people; everybody's trying to get out of Vietnam. Him and seven other people are going back into Vietnam. And the reason why he came back was to ask my maternal grandfather. He said, "Look, you know, I'm married to your wife. I have a child with your eldest daughter, and if they don't get out of Vietnam, and the Communists come and they find out that not only did she marry a foreign fighter, but had a kid, life would be very, very bad if we had a life at all." And so, he asked my grandfather, please let me take your eldest daughter and my child out of the country. And my dad told me, [Yi's Grandfather/Mother's father] said, [Inaudible, but most likely: I need to calm down for this]. My

grandfather said, "You're gonna ask to take my eldest daughter away from her family, her friends, her city, everything that she knows, to go, possibly back to South Korea back to…" The next defense contract was out in Saudi Arabia, or Australia, or maybe the United States. "I understand your reasons why the Communists will make it very, very hard for them, so I will agree. As long as you promise to – wherever you go, good times, or bad. Even it gets hard. You're her only safety net, so you have to make that promise. You don't ever leave her." And my dad promised. And America was not easy for us. They went through some hard times. When I was college age, I asked my dad, "Dad, why don't you just… You know, I'm not a kid anymore. Why don't you and mom, just get a divorce if things are… You know, if you guys have fallen out of love?" and [Yi's father] was like, "You don't understand. I made a promise that he recounts the story to your grandfather, that I would never leave her." And my dad wasn't a perfect person. But he's like, "I made a promise." And he never left her. And so, when he passed away, when he was sick in the hospital, he reminded me of that. He said, "You got to keep that promise. Whatever happens, take care of your mom. I'm not here, but we made a promise. And this is what we do. As Yi men..." my last name is Yi. He's like, "...We keep our promise. And you got to do that." And so, to this day, whatever happens, I still carry that promise that my dad made to my grandfather.

Bryce Leos

Thank you for sharing that. That is amazing.

Thomas Yi

What was the question? [Both chuckle slightly]

Bryce Leos

No, no, the question was- And you answered it. How did your parents meet?

Thomas Yi

How did my parents meet, right? So yes. And they got away. They got out of Vietnam. Several other people from Vietnam. Several other people from Korea have since emigrated. But there's a small veteran's group that my dad used to be a part of, and a lot of Korean soldiers. I mean, you know, if I was a filmmaker, my two subject matters would be finding the flight manifest to that PanAm flight that my dad was on with seven people – I mean, who knows what the Communists did, and PanAm doesn't even exist anymore the way it existed before. But that would be like a research project or something. Maybe your instructor or somebody says, "You know, that's a good story." Yes, that, but there are many other stories of Korean soldiers taking Vietnamese wives. We've heard of American soldiers with Vietnamese wives. The whole story in the United States about Amerasian children that got left behind whose fathers are GIs. In Vietnam, there's a word called, you know, the there's a word called like dust, the dust that you see on, you know, a shelf, or something that hasn't been cleaned. So, the Amerasian children of foreign soldiers, they would call them dust. [To] the Communists, they were pariahs. Nobody would really give them a chance. And you could tell half-white, half-black Vietnamese kid, and they, you know, they never got opportunities of education or anything. They were literally called the dust of life. You know, they were castaways [Note: Yi is referring to the so-called "Amerasian" children born as a result of American military deployments in Asia, a designation formalized into law with the passage of the "Amerasian Immigration Act" in 1982 and the "Amerasian Homecoming Act" in 1987]. Yeah, many stories of American soldiers but there might be something there of Korean

soldiers, Vietnamese wives and a lot of the soldiers… Well, some of them went back to Korea but a large number of them, once they saw the world open up with Vietnam, they said, "I'm not going back to Korea." Korea had wars in the ‘50s. Vietnam had wars in the ‘60s, you know what? They took their Vietnamese wives and they came to the United States. And more and more I hear these stories. And it's a little-told story, you know, because now you're dealing with not only a new country of the United States, but you're also dealing with, well, the Koreans, the Korean families, and my dad's family didn't like the fact that my dad married a Vietnamese wife, and then the people of that generation of Vietnam, they didn't particularly like Korean soldiers, because Korean soldiers, more often than not, were put at the point in front of the US soldiers, thinking that Asians could tell the difference between Asians. But in practice, what had happened was, I think a lot of the Korean soldiers were kind of dressed up in all black, which is what the northern Vietnamese Army, the Viet Cong, was dressed [in], and thinking that, you know, a Vietnamese can tell the Korean a mile away. Unfortunately, the guys in the planes with the guns couldn't tell the Korean soldiers from the Vietnam soldiers. So there you go. And so the Korean soldiers, especially the ROK greens had a particularly bad reputation for shooting at everything and everyone. But they had no choice. If you wanted to stay alive, you shot at anything and everything. And you were at the point, a lot of stories that I hear about American soldiers in the bush in the jungle, well, you know, Korean soldiers were right there next to them. And sometimes they were the lead the canary in the coal mine. Like you go first, and then we follow you. I remember when platoon came out in the 1980s. And I would ask my dad, "Well, tell me about Vietnam." You know, just being curious and dumb. And my dad would never talk about it. And one of his army buddies, pulled me to the side, "Look, a lot of bad things happened to Vietnam. A lot of good things, you know, your dad found your mom, but in particular and that

was okay. You can ask your dad about the stuff as when he was a defense contractor. But the stuff when he was a Korean soldier in the Korean military, if he wants to talk about it, he'll talk about it. [Coughing from his mother in the background] Otherwise, forget about what you see in the movies. A lot of shit went down. A lot of stuff that they want to forget. And so don't ask your dad anymore." And after that, I didn't. He never opened up. Never opened up. But yes, unfortunately with Korean veterans, there is no VA; there is no mental health. There's no PTSD there. You know, you just… It's like, "What's wrong with you?" You just suck it up. But they… A lot of them lead to drinking and substance abuse and suicide. Because in Asian culture, there is no mental health follow up for the stuff that they had to do, stuff that they saw [and] what they endured. So, I learned… You know, my dad was very soft spoken when he got mad. You knew he was mad. He never hit my mom, but you could tell when he was upset. And he will get real quiet. He might break some things, but never a violent finger at my mom. And I think that's because he saw what human beings can do to each other. He would never do that.

Bryce Leos

Yes, and it seems like the war really did shape… Well, obviously it did shape how your family came together. And [how it] helped mold him and you mentioned you mentioned earlier right now that he had a hard time talking about the war, and Vietnam War, and stuff like that. Was there ever a time where he opened up about it or is it?

Thomas Yi

No, not really? Yeah, he kept that to himself or when he would meet up with his army buddies. But again, even then, when we would go over to somebody's house that was hosting dinner or

something, or at a restaurant, they would talk about just happy times, they would talk about happy times about their families about, it's about escaping Korea, because they, they knew Korea was still in transition. And in the 1980s—in the ‘70s and the ‘80s—it was still more rural than not. I think where Korea made that big jump from third world to second world was the 1988 Seoul Olympics, you know, that was where they could present everything that they had had accomplished. And from 1988 going forward, that's when Korea started. Say, look, they took the example of the Japanese auto industry, they said, “How do the Japanese—the Toyotas, the Nissans,” you know, Koreans, if anything, are very good at taking existing technology and making it more efficient. So, they took the Japanese auto model, and they started the beginning the infancy of Hyundais and later on now the Kias, but it all started with the 1980's Olympics. That's when I can remember my dad going back [to Korea] and he was so proud. And he said, "Yes, Korea is, is coming into its own," from 1988. But yes, up until then, his buddies, you know, they all talked about. Yes, to go back and visit they had family, but none of them wanted to come back and it's kind of easy, because America is a great country – the best country on the face of God's earth. And we have so much freedom here. We have so much opportunity here. It is a rat race. It's hard, but they always had preferred not going back to Korea. And they never looked back. And again, though the war in the 1950s, having been sent to Vietnam, and… Again, my dad and the Korean veterans of the Vietnam War, they're a small sub-demographic of Korea as a whole. The whole north and south. Yes, there's still that partition, but the soldiers have kind of moved on – they left Korea behind. You know, they left Korea behind. They still have ties, they have contacts, but for the most part, they became Americans. And it was nice to go back and visit. But they didn't want anything to do with… Well, I shouldn't say that. But they saw their future outside of South Korea, and in large part that that has something to do with the psyche of

all South Koreans. I don't know about North Koreans but South Koreans – they know there is a north, there is a… South Vietnam went another way of… [In] Vietnam, the North won and Vietnam became one country, whereas Korea remains north and south and to this day, with the DMZ. It's still an active zone, and that's why we have the US military there. But I guess because of that all Koreans—even though I can't speak Korean, I visited—I get a sense that the Koreans are still in large part divided. And the people, they want reunification, almost like how you had Berlin, East Berlin and West Berlin. They really longed for that reunification. But the North is so entrenched in their ideology, as well as the South. And you can see night and day, the two ideologies and how they compare. But the sub-segment of Korean veterans, they kind of put that past on they said they were not living in Korea, looking North or the North looking down South. They put that in the rearview and they said, "That's not [us], our future is outside." So but hey, you know, we're here now and we start[ed] a new chapter.

Bryce Leos

Right. Yeah- this interview is definitely opening my mind to just the different perspectives of Koreans and Koreans of the times and how much a war can affect lives. And that's really what I'm seeing right now.

Thomas Yi

It's happening right now as we speak. You know? There's other wars, I mean, Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine. But those are the ones that are greatly publicized. But there's gonna be a whole other generation of people that are, you know, on both sides. And while it's depressing, this is… Humanity has free will, you know? we just got to find a way to figure these

things out, I guess, but who knows? That's, that's getting more into theology. And I believe this is history, right? Or the Korean American experience?

Bryce Leos

Yeah, we can get into theology some other time. When we're off the record, per se. But I want to get into it, the immigration into the United States that we touched upon earlier. Also, I want to look into life in Koreatown. I know, if I'm not mistaken, you live in Koreatown as of right now. And you're telling me that you've been on the [same] street, right? Correct?

Thomas Yi

On the same street since 1977, not the same apartment building but on the same street. So, you know, I went to school in LA and in Koreatown [for] elementary school. Middle school was kind of on the outskirts of Hollywood, definitely. To a high school. That was in Koreatown. I graduated, while I went to high school in the late ‘80s. Class of 1990. There was about a third black, a third Latino, a third Asian [and] a lot of those Asians were the Korean or Vietnamese. Latinos were predominantly—it wasn't like East LA Mexican Americans—they were more Salvadorians – definitely there was 18th street [inaudible] gang members. There was a lot of black African American. But yes, as Asians, we weren't as vocal, so it seemed like we were smaller population. But if you look at the yearbook, I was flipping through it and we were well represented. We just weren't as vocal. But I had a good experience. I played JV. We didn't have enough for a varsity JV or a B team. So you were either varsity or B's. Yes, growing up in the late ‘80s. You know, there was Depeche Mode, Michael Jackson, Madonna. And there was the emergence in the New Wave, synth scene. Not yet grunge, but the beginnings of what we know

is hip hop. Or the late beginnings of hip hop, you had like big vote, and I was taking it all in, even though as an Asian, I had African American friends, Latino friends, and had a very rich and very fond memories of my high school days. And then—like I said, it was a class of 1990—and then when Rodney King hit and there was the civil unrest, it was really hard for Korean Americans as well as just any business owner. You didn't have to be Korean. But a business owner during the LA riots, a lot of businesses, a lot of families, and hopes and dreams were dashed because it was just a bad situation. All around – from the videotape beating, from the jury decision, from the police being there not being there. And I remember, I was working at Cedars Sinai [Hospital in Los Angeles] as temp and they said, "Anybody that can stay over and work at the hospital." We were on 24-hour shifts. And because other people couldn't make it in so… I remember my brother, he was in high school and none of the Metro buses would stop because they were afraid that, you know, riders would get on the buses. So that day when it popped off, he probably walked [or] ran home from high school along Wilshire Boulevard, about eight miles. He's like "Nobody, no buses would stop. I had to get home." And I remember that, and but my family was okay. My dad was… At that time was right around the time of his first cancer so he wasn't working at the gas station, which, by the way, was in South Central not far from Florence and Normandie which was where Reginald Denny got attacked [Note: Reginald Denny was a construction truck driver beaten during the LA riots by four black men in what was described as a retaliatory attack for the LAPD assault on Rodney King]. And yes, so it was a tough time and Koreatown had a hard time. Regaining like I said, a lot of businesses were lost. A lot of dreams were burned. And it was hard. But now, present day – you know, Koreatown is at the center of every of freeways. It's a foodie destination. People are into Korean barbecue. That's been a thing for a while. And Koreantown's nightlife has always been a thing that has never left since the

1980s. From above-ground nightclubs—dance clubs—to below-ground sort of like Koreatown "speakeasies," you know, after hours and things like that. But it seems like Koreans are very social and they love that socialization from young people to older people. And it centers around food and drink and just experiencing life. And Koreatown is part of that and I'm very proud of being from Koreatown, growing up in Koreatown. But the city as a whole—the city of Los Angeles—it has a lot of growing pains right now. The homeless population is out of control. And I am… I'm struggling, I'm single with no kids, but I'm trying to get my mom out of Koreatown. Because while I'm at work at the airport, you know, there's stuff happening in broad daylight in the middle of the day just walking to Ralph's grocery store. And there's transients that—and I understand it's a housing problem, but to put my law enforcement two cents in it—when the state of California decided to not house or lessen the incarcerated population, and now people are not incarcerated. Well, what does that do? Now instead of having them be incarcerated, getting some sort of treatment, now they're on the streets, not getting no treatment. And there are pop-ups to house the homeless, the criminal, homeless, as I call it, the criminal homeless. There's a housing problem, but whether you're incarcerated or [in] these new housing settlements, it's just a different form, if you can kind of wrap your mind around that. Yeah, criminal homeless, now they're building homes to put them in they are not behind bars. And that kind of blew my mind [inaudible]. And with the advent of, right now, the BLM Movement and "Defund the police," there are longer wait times, though. I mean, you can have your opinion of the LAPD but they're losing people. And they're down in numbers. They're short-staffed. "Well, what to short-staffed mean?" That means it takes longer for the police to come to respond to you being assaulted by a criminal, homeless, or transient who is very sick, who's ill [and] it's not their fault, but at the same time while you're waiting people are breaking into businesses and doing

smash and grabs not only at the high end Beverly Hills but at "Mom and Pop" taquerias [Taco restaurants in Southern California] at Korean restaurants or Guatemalan Oaxaca Salvadorian restaurants. They come in, they break after hours for the registers or even during business hours, and they rob the patrons of that restaurant. That's happening. And the police are stretched thin and so they don't have the resources or the numbers to get to those calls. And then when they get to those calls, they don't have the investigative resources to immediately follow up. There's a police report number and then it gets to the detective's desk and they try and follow up. So, what the citizens are left with in Koreatown right now is that they're left to kind of defend themselves or fend for themselves as best they can. And those that have the wherewithal—and I'm blessed—people that have that wherewithal are making exit strategies. We are leaving. I am taking my mom out of Koreatown. And it pains me to say that because it takes her from her beauty salon or grocery stores, we have three Korean markets to American markets in Koreatown, and there's just a wealth of, you know, community, but it's being marred by just the social pressures of the day. And, yeah, it's not a place where I would suggest raising a family, it's not a place where I would suggest keeping your elderly parent in. It's not safe. And it's pretty sad. You know, for the record, I'm looking at Texas. We have family in Texas, and I'm just trying to reunite my mom to her younger sister. And I think that's a better way. And even though Texas is closer to the border, Houston is still the fourth largest city in the US. And I think they have a good mix of Vietnamese as well as whites, blacks, and they [are] very proactive of anybody causing trouble. And again, it is a criticism, but—you can criticize all you want—but at the end of the day you have to do what's right for your family. Just like how my dad did what was right for my mom and me to come back and get me. I'm doing right by her by getting her out of the situation. Because, yeah, it's changed a lot. And it hasn't changed for the for the better. Not for

kids, not for families, not for elderly. Maybe if you're young, and you're studying and want to local schools, come in, have a night out in Koreatown. Great, but other than that, yes, the community is being torn apart.

Bryce Leos

Right. Yeah and-

Thomas Yi

We talked a lot about a lot of things in this interview of the Korean American experience. I believe it's still going on – the story doesn't end. But I think there are better stories – more success [stories], more good stories, outside of Koreatown, [whereas] it used to be a lot of rags-to-riches stories from Koreatown. It's not that case anymore. You know, it's more sad stories than good stories.

Bryce Leos

That and that's disheartening to hear and I'm sure that you feel disheartened by everything with the growing pains you referred to in LA. Is the Texas move looking like it's or at least the guess [for when] the Texas move [will take place]? Does that look like it's gonna be a sooner-rather-than-later thing, or…?

Thomas Yi

Oh yes, within the next year. Texas home prices are more reasonable, although they're going up everywhere, but it's more reasonable than LA. Definitely on a single income I can afford a home for my mom and my brother. However, [the] plan is I'm gonna buy a starter home in Texas, move my mom and my brother up there. But the city is paying too good at the airport so until the 2028 Olympics… The thing is, the city wants to have a good showing. The city of LA has a unique opportunity to become the first city to have three Olympics – 1932, 1984, and now 2028. [The last one was] 1984? So, it's almost 40 years since the last Olympics. And part of welcoming the world to LA is giving LAX a facelift, and so there's lots of opportunities for work at the airport. So, I'll still be here. Staying in the sameKoreatown apartment up until 2020. And I'm just trying to relocate my mom and my brother out so that they can look after my retirement home.

Bryce Leos

That's awesome. Yes, so I guess if you'd like to talk about this. I have one more question real quick. If you don't want to answer any more, unless there's a time restraint.

Thomas Yi

No, not a problem. Go for it.

Bryce Leos

Being Korean and Vietnamese, American is there a side you probably—how do I word this—a side you probably align with more, if that makes sense?

Thomas Yi

Well, my first name is Vietnamese – it's actually Minh. My American name, which I adopted, was Thomas. But my last name is Yi, and that's Korean. So, I guess it just depends on the situation. I mean, my face, my build is definitely more Korean. I'm a lot more stocky than [most] Vietnamese, and so I get mistaken by Vietnamese [people] as Korean [and] I get mistaken by Koreans as [being full] Korean. So physically, appearance-wise or first appearances, I guess I look Korean – Korean American. And when I go into a Korean restaurant, they start talking Korean to me, even though [my language proficiency goes in the order of] English, Vietnamese, Spanish, then Korean. But yeah, so physically, I identify more as Korean. But language-wise, my dad, because he had stayed in the country for about six years—in Vietnam; he learned the language, he courted my mom in Vietnamese—so at home, you speak the language of your mother while dad's at work and mom's taking care of the kids. So we spoke a combination of English and Vietnamese, and my dad was bilingual, English and/or trilingual. But he never really spoke Korean to us, even though we live in Koreatown. And so as far as food-wise, my mom learned to cook Korean. So physically, food-wise, cuisine-wise, we were Korean, but our language was more Vietnamese. And again, I believe it depends on the situation. I draw on my Korean side, at times I draw my Vietnamese side. At times, from even at the airport to this day, if I see somebody that's Vietnamese I'll draw on my Vietnamese language [and] if I see somebody that's Korean, I know at least how to say hello, bow, or give the handshake with touching the elbow, as shown in respect. You know, when you shake hands, Koreans that show respect, they take their off hand, the one that's not being shaken, they touch that to their elbow of the shaking hand. And that's a form of respect kind of like this [Motioning to Bryce Leos on the Zoom meeting]. So, when you're shaking somebody's hand, but you touch this hand over here, and that's like respect. So, I draw on both. And if there was a box – when, you know, when I fill out

government applications, I do “Other Asian” and I checked both boxes. I checked Vietnamese and Korean. But it just depends on the situation. And, you know, sometimes both.

Bryce Leos

Yes, and we're back. This interview has probably gone a little bit longer than what was estimated with the source material when the project was even given. But I personally am so glad for it. This has been a phenomenal interview. And I've learned so much about you [and] Korean history. I know we talked about before going into this interview you were a little, "Do I need to brush up on stuff?" But I feel like you've informed me more than what I was expecting to in the sense that I learned so much about Korean affairs during Vietnam, Korean life in LA, and just all around a lot law enforcement. Just interesting, you have such an interesting history. And I'm so thankful that you went over it with us today for this interview.

Thomas Yi

My pleasure.

Bryce Leos

And I just want to give you the floor to see if you have any final remarks, if not totally good. I just want to say again. Thank you. And on behalf of the Colby Oral History Project, I just want to say thank you again. This has been a phenomenal interview.

Thomas Yi

Well, you're welcome. It's my pleasure. I'm always supportive of students going after their dreams, and also, you know, studying about things that are in the world. And also, I'm actually glad that I took this on. Again, I didn't know exactly where it was gonna go. But I'm so happy. And I'm so grateful that I had the opportunity, when you said, to tell my story. I never thought of it exactly that way and much less have it recorded. To me, that's a big bonus. You know, hopefully I could get some sort of transcript or copy of it, I'm going to show my kids because sometimes having it all compiled into one place in an interview style like this. You know, at first, I was a little hesitant, but as you can see, I warmed up really quick. And it was stuff that I believe also that I had still kind of stuck within me and it just needed to get out. And what better way to let it out and have it memorialized? And because yes, unless we're in Koreatown, having a drink you know, that might have been when it came out. But I like this format better.

We could definitely… And please, I would like to say if you needed to do a follow up or something. If your instructor needed to get some clarification or edit or anything, the door is always open. You are always welcome to connect with me again if you have follow-up questions or about my story or whatever you need. If I can be of service, I definitely will make myself available.

Bryce Leos

Thank you, Mr. Yi. This interview has been greatly appreciated. Just yes, just want to say from bottom my heart and the people here at Colby, we're so thankful you opened up and told us your story. You do not need to worry, because you will get a transcript and a full recording of this whole process. And I will make sure to get it back to you as soon as this whole process is done.

But I just want to say again, thank you so much for this interview. It means a lot to me that you did it. And I'm so happy that your story is going to be out there. So I just want to say thank you again.

Thomas Yi

You're welcome. All right. God Bless.

Bryce Leos

All right. Thank you. So that kind of brings this interview to an end. God bless again. And thank you.

Thomas Yi

Stop the recording. Okay I got a question for you.

Bryce Leos

Hold on one second stopping it right- [End of interview]