

Jack Mendez

HI244

Professor Kim Diederich

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Onstage Plays and Playing Offstage

Jack Mendez: My name is Jack Mendez. Today is October 21st, 2023, and I am interviewing Jason Park in person for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Jason Park: Yes.

JM: Can you introduce yourself, what you do, and where you're from?

JP: My name is Jason Park, I am a senior at Colby College and a Performance, Theatre, and Dance major, and I am from New Jersey.

JM: How are you feeling about this interview, any preliminary questions or anything you're still wondering?

JP: Not really, just here.

JM: For our first question, I'm just gonna ask: Tell me a little about your home life in Tenafly, New Jersey? Who did you live with, what sort of neighborhood did you grow up in?

JP: Tenafly is in northern New Jersey, and I grew up with my two parents, my mom and dad, and two older brothers. There's a very large Korean population from Tenafly. I grew up with a lot of Korean culture and Asian culture.

JM: Do you know when/why members of your family immigrated to the United States?

JP: I know my parents immigrated around thirty-two years ago. Why exactly, I don't know, but I do know that my parents were trying to find jobs here rather than Korea. They initially moved to California thirty-two years ago, and then thirty years ago they moved to Tenafly.

JM: How would you say your parents' story of immigration shaped your own experiences and identity?

JP: By the time I was born, my family had already moved to Tenafly and we had been in the same house since I was born. The whole immigration process was not very relevant to me as they already had two kids that were citizens of the United States and they were all very on their way to become citizens as well, therefore, it didn't affect me too much, but definitely I could tell that I'm Korean, so I'm not the majority here compared to if I were in Korea.

JM: Did you ever notice your parents encountering any sort of pushback for their status as immigrants to the United States from people that you know in your own life?

JP: I would not say so, again, because I come from a location in Jersey where not just the town I'm from, but the general county and area that I am from, there is a large Asian population, so you don't really see anything like that from where I am from.

JM: Would you say that that area that you live in has its own distinct variety of Korean identity?

JP: Yes, I would say so. Many people from that area call our county a bubble, as it is very different from the majority of many other [American] towns, counties, and areas. New Jersey is known, even in South Korea, as a large Korean population [center and] somewhere that most Korean people, if they do immigrate to America, end up going to.

JM: What kind of differences do you notice between your times in your life in New Jersey and what you've seen in South Korea?

JP: While the culture is relatively similar because, obviously, we're both Korean culture, the two areas, there is a lot of mixture with American culture in New Jersey obviously because it is in America, and I would say, maybe not as much today, but there was a sort of prejudice against Korean Americans in South Korea due to the fact that they are either born or living in South Korea.

JM: What do you know about your parents' lives before they immigrated? What aspects of their life in Korea do you remember?

JP: Well, I do know that my dad was a captain in the navy. He went to naval school once he graduated high school, and went there for four years, but soon after that he went to graduate school for, I don't remember the word, but to become a pastor, so he is now a pastor, that's what he does full-time now. My mom was actually a graduate student for music, she was a music major throughout both undergrad and grad school, so I do know that. That was what they came with to America, but obviously things have changed since then, since it has been over thirty years.

JM: Do you know what might have potentially influenced your dad to change career paths after being a captain?

JP: Honestly, I don't really know. I do know that his family, since he was young, was really religious, so I'm assuming that he has been a religious person since then. My best guess is that influenced him.

JM: Do you know what denomination of religion?

JP: Yes, he is Presbyterian.

JM: Do you know if he belongs to a Korean Presbyterian church or an American one?

JP: Currently he is under an American Presbyterian Church, but then under that American Presbyterian Church there is a whole Korean branch, and he is in that.

JM: Were you raised Presbyterian?

JP: Yes, I was.

JM: How would you say that influenced your life growing up?

JP: It definitely has influenced a lot, especially because my dad was the pastor of the church I went to. There were a lot of expectations of going to church, being religious, stuff like that, obviously. I wouldn't say that it has negatively affected me in any way. I made a lot of friends, met a lot of people, and I would like to say a kinder reputation towards other people.

JM: Do you still carry those beliefs with you to this day?

JP: Sort of, I wouldn't say that I'm as religious as I used to be, but that doesn't mean that I've just thrown everything away.

JM: Would you say there's any particular reason or influence on that?

JP: Not too much, but I will say as I came to Colby, I became a lot busier. I couldn't really spend as much time within the religion to become a religious person. I just kind of wanted to see more of the world, so I decided to kind of put a pause on it. I'm not saying I've completely thrown it away, but it's not my priority at the moment.

JM: You mentioned that your mom was a music major in her time in higher education. How would you say that that has impacted your life to this day?

JP: It impacted me a lot more when I was younger, as my mom pushed me a lot more towards the music direction. She wanted, maybe not necessarily to push me to pursue a career in music, but she wanted me to at least know, so I was forced to learn the piano, I took vocal lessons since I was young, I even learned the drums at one point, but once I became older, she didn't force me to do it as much, but I was already interested so I continued to do so.

JM: Would you say there's a direct continuity between that and your current status as a Performance, Theatre and Dance major?

JP: Oh definitely, yes. It wasn't the exact reason for me becoming a Performance, Theatre, and Dance major, but it definitely showed me what performance could be like.

JM: Tell me about your experience as a Korean American in American grade school.

JP: My experience was maybe a little bit different, because the area I'm from and grew up in, there was a large Korean population, and going to the public school system area we celebrated a lot of Korean holidays. We celebrated a lot of Asian holidays, actually. I was fully able to embrace my Korean heritage and my Korean culture. I kind of grew up taking that for granted as once I came to Colby, there's a lot of Korean people that had nothing like that as they went through grade school in the United States. I will say that has definitely strengthened my desire to really learn more about my heritage, more about my culture, and really more about Korea.

JM: Would you say that your experience going to school with a larger Korean class size made coming to college with a much different ethnic, racial, and national background made that easier or harder?

JP: I would definitely say that it made it harder for me when I first came to Colby because the demographic was nothing like what I was used to. Back then, there were even less Korean students than there are now. I had a hard time transitioning from high school to college, but I think because of having such a large Korean population and then transitioning to a majority white school, I think it did strengthen how much I really cared about who I am as a Korean.

JM: Did you ever experience any sorts of prejudice or discrimination once you got to college, noting that it is a much more white environment?

JP: I wouldn't say that there has been any sort of discrimination. I have experienced it elsewhere, not at Colby. For example, I've experienced it when I went to a national choir event, but that was many years ago.

JM: Was that associated with your high school?

JP: Not necessarily my high school, it was during high school. I went to a national choir event where I stayed overnight for many days, rehearsed there. I remember in the hotel, the person just assumed I couldn't speak English. My friends and I laughed about it, so it didn't affect me too badly.

JM: Was that national choir event an audition event or was it open?

JP: I had to audition for it, got accepted, and went there.

JM: You said it was around a week long, what kinds of people did you meet while you were there?

JP: While it was a national event, it was mainly people from the East Coast and eastern side of the United States. Therefore, I met a bunch of different people, people from down South, from New England, from the Great Lakes as well. I guess that was the first time where I was in an area where there wasn't a large Korean population or Korean demographic. That kind of like the first taste of a majority white group that I had to be part of.

JM: Would you say that adapting to that "outside of the bubble" situation was very difficult?

JP: I would say it was difficult, but not necessarily because of the demographic shift because back then I was a lot more introverted, I was a lot more shy, it was harder for me to go out and talk to people and make friends. I wasn't uncomfortable or thrown off by any of the racial differences.

JM: Just more of the new experience?

JP: Yes.

JM: What sorts of things do you do for fun? And I'll tangent off of that, what kinds of hobbies have you had over time and why have you chosen to keep up with the ones you still have?

JP: Well, one of them is, since I was young, I have always been a pretty athletic person. I enjoy sports. I initially started when I was younger with soccer, and then I moved to basketball.

Currently, over the past, maybe like eight years now, I [inaudible] volleyball. Volleyball is probably the biggest sport for me. I've been keeping up with it because it helps me reduce a lot of stress. It's the game I enjoy the most because it's a team sport, and it helps really get connected with a lot more people. Another hobby of mine would definitely be singing and performing. I love performing, as you would know, part of the Blue Lights a cappella group, best a cappella group on campus. I especially enjoy performing with other people. I just love the camaraderie and the times we have, not just during the performance but during the rehearsals and the bonds you make with people as you go through this process.

JM: What first inspired you to start playing volleyball?

JP: Volleyball is an interesting one, as I was always a basketball player throughout elementary and middle school. I started volleyball in my freshman year of high school when my friend invited me to go to his church where they were playing volleyball for fun. I guess I should have mentioned I also played tennis at one point. It was pretty similar, so I decided "You know what, why not?" and I was hooked since the moment I started and I tried all four years throughout high school to make a men's team for my high school.

JM: Did it not already have a men's team for volleyball?

JP: No, and it did not happen, even after I graduated. It didn't stop me from continuing playing volleyball. I played volleyball wherever I could. I went to different counties within New Jersey to go play volleyball and I continued to play here as well.

JM: Was the traveling around New Jersey a high school sanctioned thing or just your own initiative?

JP: For volleyball?

JM: To play volleyball, yes.

JP: Oh, that was just my own thing. I would have my parents drive me, if I didn't have my license at that time. I would drive almost an hour to play volleyball. Occasionally, I would go into New York City, which was around an hour commute to where I had to go to play volleyball. I would, because in northern Jersey, there isn't many places to play, I would really have to go search.

JM: What kinds of places would you be searching out for?

JP: Especially open gyms, where I can kind of show up, pay a small fee, and just play for the

whole day, because it would definitely be harder to play for a team for an entire season where I would constantly commute two hours a day just to get there and just to come back. I would just look up any open gyms, any places where I could just show up for a day, and I don't have to commit so much time consistently.

JM: Was that something you'd primarily be doing on the weekends and summer?

JP: To be honest, I didn't prioritize schooling as much, so I would try to find out any days I could go. There would be many times where I'd just go on a Tuesday night down south of Jersey and then I'd play for two hours and come back up.

JM: Do you think there was any specific reason you didn't focus on school as much?

JP: It might kind of sound conceited, but I found school really easy in high school. I didn't have to study, and I was still maintaining grades of some of the top students in our class. So, I decided "You know, what's the point of trying?" so there were many instances where I didn't do my work as often. I wouldn't really study for classes. Do I regret it? Not too much, because I did still end up at Colby. I just wasn't that motivated as a student.

JM: Would you say that considering the places that you did spend your time and energy, like playing volleyball and performance and choir, would you still make the same decision to prioritize those today?

JP: I think maybe not, because to be honest, I didn't spend much time doing anything. I believe I could have prioritized a lot more things together and actually done better in school while also keeping up with volleyball and performance, because there would be many days where I would just kind of not really do anything, just spend time with friends and not really do my work.

JM: You mentioned not "doing anything", what kinds of things would you be doing with your friends during that time?

JP: While they would be studying sometimes, I'd just be, for example, on my computer watching friends or listening to music and finding songs that I like. I wouldn't necessarily be spending any time being productive at either volleyball or academics. I would just be spending time with them, not really necessarily interacting with them the entire time but just being there.

JM: What kinds of music have you listened to over your life, and what are you most interested in now?

JP: I'm pretty open to all genres of music. I've listened to many things from pop, alternative rock, Korean music of all different types, like hip-hop, rap, R&B, even indie music. I've listened to a lot of different types of songs. Right now, I've been listening to a lot of Korean R&B and rap. That's probably what I've been listening to the most, especially because when I play volleyball, it helps hype me up and get me ready to play. Even for performances, it kind of gets me in a more energetic place where I can feel like I can really perform.

JM: Who do you think your favorite artist is right now, and how do you think you got to that position?

JP: That is really hard, because I listen to so many different artists. If I had to name one right now, it would be an Asian-Australian artist that goes by DPR Ian. I got to him because I used to listen to Korean R&B slash rap by an artist called DPR Live, as they're under the same company and same group. I actually ended up going to one of their concerts, which their entire group performed at, so not just those two but some other artists under that label. While everyone in the crowd was able to sing the DPR Live songs really well, not many people knew about DPR Ian, so I got pretty curious as well, as I didn't know many of his songs. I started listening to him after the concert, and I actually really liked his music. Unlike some of the other artists in that company, his music was all English.

JM: Where was this concert located?

JP: It is 2023 now... It was in October 2022 down at the Roadrunner in Boston. My friends invited me to go because I had friends that were attending school in Boston, so I went down, visited them, watched the show with them, and had a great time.

JM: Were these friends also Korean-American?

JP: Everyone I went with was Korean-American. Some of my other friends there that didn't go aren't Korean-American, but all of the friends I went with to the concert were Korean-American.

JM: All that in account, how would you say that the way you were raised shaped the person you are today?

JP: Well, from a young age, I was basically raised by my grandparents, as my parents were pretty busy. Once my grandfather passed away, my mom quit her job, became a stay-at-home mom. I think one of the things I prioritized ever since I was growing up was two things: honesty and being kind to other people. That was definitely the largest priority of my life. And I guess patience for other people. So that was a priority of my life, first getting to understand people, where they're coming from, and really trying to give them the benefit of the doubt and really

trying to make sure everyone's in a good place. Once again, my Korean heritage... bBecause I was from a large Korean population [I] learned a lot about Korea, a lot about the Korean language. When I was younger, I didn't want to learn Korean because I hated going to Korean school. I didn't want to spend time doing that. Eventually, over time, as I got through middle and high school I realized "Oh, I should learn the language, this is who I am," so over time I've been learning it.

JM: You learned Korean as a second language?

JP: Kind of. I apparently learned Korean - as many Korean families, you learn Korean as a baby. You learn Korean, and then you go through the American school system, where most Korean kids forget all of their Korean if they don't keep up with it.

JM: Did you independently, or did your parents kind of guide you towards eventually...

JP: They forced me to go to Korean school throughout elementary and middle school, which I didn't enjoy, but once I got into high school especially, I decided "You know what I should kind of learn Korean," so I can both talk to my parents, the rest of my family, and just other friends that I could, with Korean.

JM: Would you say that you are fully fluent in Korean?

JP: I wouldn't say I'm fluent. I'm definitely above an intermediate level. Grammatically-wise, I believe I know mostly everything, but it's mostly vocab, where I wouldn't know random words in Korean like "fire hydrant," I have no idea what that is. When I went to Korea, I was able to understand well, communicate well, but there would just be times where I wouldn't know what the word in Korean is.

JM: So you mentioned earlier that your grandparents were essentially raising you when you were younger. Did all of your grandparents, if they were alive, did they all immigrate with your parents?

JP: From what I know, my parents immigrated first. After I believe three or four years, once they actually moved to New Jersey, that's when my grandparents immigrated as well. Both grandparents from both my dad and mom's side did immigrate as well.

JM: How much do you know about the decision for your parents to immigrate from California to New Jersey?

JP: I don't really know much. They didn't stay there for very long. They stayed there for three years. My oldest brother was born in Korea, they moved with him to California. Right after my second brother was born, they moved from California to New Jersey. I don't really know much about it. I believe it's because he found a location in New Jersey where he could start his own church, so then he moved there because of that, but I'm not one-hundred percent sure.

JM: You said that you also learned Korean partially so you could speak with some of your friends. Do you know how often people in your community speak Korean to each other more prevalently than they speak with English?

JP: I think most of the time everyone spoke in English, but there were many immigrants that moved to New Jersey during their high school years. They would have come from Korea, most of them not really knowing much English. I was able to communicate with them somewhat, as I did know a little bit of Korean. Usually, they would just stick together. You didn't really see them speaking too much Korean in school.

JM: Did you notice any sort of language barrier between the variant of Korean that you were taught in the United States versus the sorts of Korean that you hear from people who had just immigrated or when you were in South Korea?

JP: Yes, I would say that there was. Just like if you were to learn English as a second language, there are little nuances and ways to speak that's not necessarily grammatically correct in the way you learn it if it was a second language, but that's just how we speak. That's the same with Korean. We'd be speaking very formally at times when people from Korea don't speak like that with each other, as it's a little too serious. They like to talk with their friends in a different tone and such.

JM: This is something we touched on a little bit earlier, but are there any other experiences of blatant racial or ethnic discrimination that you have faced because of your background, and if so, can you describe these experiences?

JP: I don't believe I've experienced anything such as blatant racism or discrimination. I know there are many people that do because they are Korean slash Asian. For example, in New York City, during COVID, there were a lot of attacks on Asian people because of Asian hate because of COVID. I never experienced it myself. I've only heard stories. Even though I didn't experience it myself, it didn't mean it wasn't on my mind because New York City is so close to where I'm from, and you just had to be careful during that time.

JM: How would you say that that mood of generalized Asian discrimination during the initial stages of the COVID pandemic affected you on a personal level?

JP: Well, obviously I did start to worry about my family and about my friends. Most of the hate crimes didn't really happen towards males, especially males around our age. It didn't really happen. People usually targeted either the elderly or women who weren't aware. For me, it wasn't as much of a personal thing. It was more of a worry towards other people. My brothers and I were worried for our mom, just in case. Even though she never went into the city, we were just like "Oh, be careful." I guess I also became a lot more wary of other people in my surroundings. As I would go anywhere, I would kind of just watch other people that were walking around me, making sure nothing's going on, seeing if anyone's running at me or something. I became a lot more - I guess paranoid is one way to put it? I wasn't like constantly looking out but I would be careful if someone were to walk too close to me or anything like that.

JM: Were there any other changes in your own behavior and people around you that you noticed at that time?

JP: I guess not because of the Asian hate, but more towards the actual pandemic. Obviously, many things changed. Many families were really forced to stay inside. For example, my brothers and I wouldn't really leave the house, and if we did, we would have masks and gloves on. We would sanitize anything we touched outside of the house. I guess, once again, because I'm from a large Asian population area, we weren't too worried about the hate crimes, so that didn't affect us incredibly, but it was still on our mind.

JM: Did you ever notice if there were people who would come into the bubble and disrupt your own image of it?

JP: I guess. The way I'll put it is a little weird, as I don't know exactly how to word it. Maybe not in Tenafly, but there is another town in my area where it was actually weird to see nearly any other race besides a Korean person or a Hispanic person. It was awkward when I met a white person in that town because of how heavily populated it was with Korean people. It was actually named the most densely Korean-populated town slash city in all of the United States.

JM: Can you describe the interaction with that white person?

JP: I've never actually walked up to them and said "Oh wow, it's a white person!" That's not what happened. I'd be walking around with friends, and you'd just see a bunch of Korean teenagers walking around the streets, doing their own thing, and you'd just see a white person across the street and say "Oh wow, I forget that there are other people in this town that aren't Korean." It wasn't anything racial necessarily, we're just too used to seeing Korean people in the streets that we don't see any other people here.

JM: How do you think other people's perceptions of you have shaped your own perception of your identity?

JP: I was initially pretty introverted, pretty shy in high school. Many people knew this, I wasn't one to go around, start conversations, talk to many people, or stay in a conversation and go out. I didn't really get judged for this, but it was something I did notice. As I grew up, got older, I decided "You know what? I do want to be able to just go out, talk to people, and I don't want this to be limiting me in any way." So, I really started to try going out more, speaking with new people, speaking with people that I'm not really comfortable with, and I would say there have been specific people throughout my life in both high school and Colby who helped me do that. I would say I'm relatively extroverted now. I enjoy talking to people and getting into conversation, talking about stuff. I still at times need my own time, and would like to just spend time alone. I think it has helped me in the way that I enjoy being onstage, I enjoy being in group settings where I don't want to go home the first chance I get. That's not the case anymore.

JM: Which people in your life have helped you change in that way?

JP: There have been two groups of people, one in high school and one in college. The first one in high school was my closest group of friends then. One of my friends, they were really extroverted. Because of them, I stayed out more, talked to more people, and I really forced myself out of my comfort zone of either going home or not doing much with other people. That really pushed my boundaries. Once I got to college—this was especially during the year that I took off from Colby—I met another group of friends during that time off and I got really close with them, and I would still consider them my best friends. They took me out everywhere. I kind of regret it, because I did end up spending a lot of money because of them because we constantly went out. They really pushed my boundaries and I really learned to enjoy spending time out, getting energy from other people and using that energy to enjoy myself during those times. I went to concerts because of them, I went to festivals. Where else did I go? I just went out a lot. I went to different people's houses. For example, my friend had a pool party at his house. I got to know a lot of people there, and if it were me from three years before, I would never have done that. They really got me out and really forced me to become more of an extroverted person.

JM: You mentioned that you left part-way through your sophomore year. What was going on in your life that influenced your decision to depart from college at the time?

JP: There were many things happening. The semester before I started my gap year was the first semester we came back after COVID hit, so that was the fall of 2020. It wasn't a terrible time. I wasn't struggling too much, but I realized that I didn't really know what I wanted to do in college. I wasn't really motivated still—just like high school—to do any work. That was the first computer science class I took - Intro to Computer Science. I could do it, but I wasn't really

interested in it. I was still influenced by brothers who both majored in computer science to continue on. I decided “You know what? I need to really figure out what I’m gonna do in life, what my path is gonna be,” so I took that year off, worked many different jobs, as well as studying on my own and figuring out what I wanted to do. One thing I did realize for sure was that I don’t want to teach, especially younger ages. That was the first hint of actually doing some sort of performing art as a career.

JM: What else would you say influenced your decision to swap from your computer science major to your performance, theatre, and dance major?

JP: Well, ever since I was young, I was always performing, especially in music. I’ve been classically trained since I was in elementary school. I’ve been continuing since then. I always knew not necessarily that I was made for the stage, but that I had no qualms against being onstage. That was the first hint that I didn’t have any stage fright. While obviously anyone would get nervous while onstage, it didn’t stop me from performing at my best and showing what I could do. During that first semester I came back, before I officially changed my major, I realized that working a nine to five job, sitting at a desk all day was not something I could do, and it wasn’t something that I would enjoy whatsoever. I decided that I really wanted to make a change in my life and wanted to do something I really enjoy. I talked this out with my family, with some professors at Colby as well, and some friends, and I realized that I really enjoyed being onstage. Another reason why I was convinced was actually because of the Blue Lights. The semester that I joined them was that first semester back from COVID. That was probably my favorite performance in my life. It really changed what I thought about performing, and performing with groups, and that was one of the biggest reasons why I decided to switch. I realized how much I enjoyed performing, how much I enjoy performing with other people. It was a little unfortunate that the Performance, Theatre, and Dance department doesn’t really do any musicals, but I still wanted to challenge myself. I never really did any acting before in my life. I also knew that if I were to pursue a career in musical theatre, I would have to learn how to act. I also realized that this was a challenge that I was willing to take. I hadn’t been motivated to anything like this in my life, so I’m going to just go with how I’m feeling, and that’s why I decided to switch.

JM: To what degree did you notice any pushback or positive support from the people around you?

JP: Initially, I was expecting pushback from my family, as both of my brothers are in computer science, and my parents obviously expected a lot of me because I still did well in high school and I was doing well in college. Surprisingly, everyone in my family was really supportive. I guess my mom being a music major throughout her life did help as well. I got a lot of support from my family, which was the biggest thing. I could understand my friends being like “Oh, I don’t know how smart of an idea that is, it’s not that easy,” but being supported by your family is a huge

help. I got support from everyone. They supported my decision. If anything, they were like “Amazing!” “Wow I can’t believe you’re doing that!” “You’re so lucky!” I got a lot of support, and obviously I knew at the same time that this wasn’t going to be easy. Performing arts is not a place where you can guarantee yourself a job. You can’t guarantee how much money you’re going to make, but it was still something I wanted to do.

JM: Before you made the decision to switch [majors] and when you were thinking about your computer science major, did you feel any external pressure from your family due to the fact that your brothers were also computer science majors?

JP: I will say there was definitely a lot of pressure because of that. That affected me a lot mentally before my decision. I went through a lot during that semester, because I was also having a bit of a struggle with what I was learning in that computer science class. I guess that me realizing that this was not what I wanted to do overcame that pressure of really having to stay with computer science. That’s what kind of caused me to go over the fence and decide what I was going to do.

JM: What influences besides the Blue Lights—your a cappella group—would you say got you originally invested in the performing arts?

JP: I was classically trained, so I had the same vocal teacher throughout my life until I got to Colby, where obviously I had to switch because they’re not here in Maine. When I was younger, they forced me to go out to competitions, join different choirs, and at first, I didn’t really enjoy that. I thought to myself “Why do I have to do this?” but as I got up to a higher level, joined more prestigious choirs and competitions, I realized “Oh, this is a lot of fun, the music is sounding great, I love the music, I love how we sound,” and honestly the response you get after a successful performance, concert, anything like that. It was just a great feeling. Especially during my junior year, when I went to the all-eastern national choir event - even during the rehearsals - not just the concert, I realized [that] I’m having a lot of fun with this. I’m enjoying how great this sounds. I’m enjoying how seriously everyone’s taking this, because in my high school choir, not many people took it seriously. It wasn’t a huge thing. I was pretty offset by that, but once I got to higher levels of performance, that’s when I realized that this is something that I enjoy doing.

JM: Since you’ve gotten to college, you’ve had a lot more experience acting. Now that you’ve had that experience, what are your thoughts of the idea of playing another character, and how do you think that that relates to other elements of your identity and personal history?

JP: I would say it’s something I like to challenge myself to do, playing many different types of characters. First of all, like I said, I’m not too experienced with acting. It’s not something that I’ve been doing since I was young. I’ve only done singing. Therefore, I find it difficult, but at the

same time I find it fun because it finds ways for me to express things about myself that are normally hard to express and I can really get out different types of emotions that I'm not necessarily usually able to express. It is difficult, but I find a lot of joy in it, especially if I can figure out how to do it well. It helps me kind of realize more about myself during the process as well.

JM: Are there any specific characters that you've played that you have in mind that have brought out these sorts of experiences?

JP: I haven't acted too much yet, still. Let's see. Well, for example one, the Powder and Wig show *Mousetrap*. [Editor's Note: Powder and Wig is the student drama club at Colby College. *The Mousetrap* is a murder mystery play written by Agatha Christie, and was performed at Colby College in April 2023.] To me, the character I played was pretty mediocre in the sense that he's just a typical guy relative to the other characters. There weren't as many large character choices to make for my character. I think it was a good start for me, as I've never really acted before that.

JM: Do you have any thoughts on the fact that you were playing the straight man to a bunch of other very larger-than-life characters in that show?

JP: I didn't really have any opinion on that as much. I just accepted what role I got and realized that there are going to be times, if I am going to pursue this, that this happens where I'm given a role and not necessarily the role I want but it is a role that I'll have to take as its part of what I have to do for my career. I guess I found it kind of funny for me to be that specific character instead of anything else.

JM: Would you like to describe the character of Giles?

JP: I would describe him as an insecure man that's really just trying to live his life. Nothing too extravagant, just trying to live with his wife and have a happy family and just have a happy life. Obviously, that is all tested throughout the show, and you can see that he gets jealous, he doesn't trust people, and he is shot down for showing certain emotions that some people would be shot down for - especially men at the time. It was a very typical character of that time, I would say.

JM: Would you say you relate to Giles to the extent that you can relate to that sort of character?

JP: I can't say I really relate to Giles. Obviously, our situations are very different, but I can understand him. I can understand where he's coming from - the jealousy, and all these things. I wouldn't go to the extent that he has in the show, but I can understand why he feels the way he felt.

JM: Would you like to explain the context of what Giles goes through over the course of the play *Mousetrap*?

JP: Giles, with his wife, Mollie, was starting to run a guest house. They just got the house, and they were just trying to make a living and just trying to really enjoy their lives. Being a mystery slash... I believe it was a thriller at the same time at some points - there was death, there was distrust, there was a lot of chaos happening in that house. There would be many times where he doesn't trust the other people in the house. He doesn't like some of the guests he had to take in. At a certain point, Giles became jealous and also wary of another guest that had entered the house and believed that his wife was in an adulterous relationship with that person [inaudible] as a guest. He truly believes so throughout the entire show until the twist at the end where they find out who the actual murderer is, and realize that everything they went through and why everyone went through everything they went through. In the end, there was a sort of "Oh happily ever after" sort of moment, but obviously there are a lot more underlying issues that, if this play were to continue as someone's actual life, you would see there would be more issues to happen. So there was a lot of mistrust, or distrust, and hatred throughout the show until the end. It was Disney-like in the sense that [it's a] happily ever after "oh everything's fine now."

JM: Would you say that the experience of playing those other characters would help you understand other people to a greater degree?

JP: I would say yes, but in a different sense that in order to play that character, you first have to understand these other people that are similar to that character. You have to do your research of where this character would come from, what time, what area, what their life was like before you start playing that character. Because of that, then you kind of start to understand other people who are in similar situations. I wouldn't say necessarily playing the character, but becoming that character, playing the role, and that entire process of playing that character is what really helps understanding other people.

JM: Alright, we're going to take a bit of a turn in questions. Can you tell me about the various times you have visited Korea?

JP: So, I've actually only visited Korea one time in my life, but I was there for an extended period of time, where I was there for over ten weeks. Because that was the first time I went to Korea, I didn't know what was happening. I got adjusted relatively quickly. I understood where to go, how to work the public transportation. At first, I was nervous to talk in Korean because I knew [that] these are native Korean speakers, this is what they have been speaking in since they were born, so I was nervous, but I realized as time went by that I didn't really have to be nervous. I was good enough at Korean to survive in Korea. Honestly, Korea became a place where I really felt comfortable. I made a lot of friends there, made a lot of connections there, and

to be honest, I would go back any time that I could. I actually didn't want to leave. At the moment, I am hoping for a time in my life where I could find a job there or find a time where I could do a performance in Korea.

JM: What initially inspired you to go on that trip? I remember that that was over the summer.

JP: Yes. Since I was younger, I always did want to go to Korea, but every single year, something happened where I couldn't go. This specific year, it initially started with a church program, actually, where my dad said, "Oh, this is the last year you can go on this specific program, why don't you go with a friend, like invite someone that you can go with." So, I invited one of my childhood friends and we both went together. The program was only around three weeks—it might have been a little less than that—a little less than three weeks. We got to Korea a week and a half before the actual program, spent time in Korea, really getting to know it first. Initially, I was only supposed to stay there for four weeks, but I decided that maybe I'll try to figure out some more things about Korea, try to see if I can find an internship or something that I could do relating to theatre in Korea, so I extended my stay to over ten weeks. I didn't end up getting an internship, but I did get to come in contact with one of the larger theatre companies in Korea. As they felt bad for not actually being able to give me any work, they gave me free access to watching musicals that were under their company, so I ended up watching *Chicago* five times. It was funny, because I was in Korea watching an American cast performing *Chicago*.

JM: Were they performing in English?

JP: They were performing in English.

JM: In English, okay.

JP: In Korea, and it was an all-American cast. It was very interesting.

JM: How did you get into contact with that theatre company?

JP: So, my vocal teacher - her teacher is actually a famous singer in Korea. That famous singer was able to get me a connection to that theatre company. Initially, they did offer me an internship, but being a theatre company, unless you're working at the desk, there's much to do for the actual show. Because the show was already in showing, and the next show [that] they were doing was just at the table reading, they decided that they didn't really have anything to give me. I couldn't help on set, I couldn't really do anything like that, so they decided, "Sorry, we can't give you anything, but we will allow you to go watch at any time you want."

JM: Do you think that if you eventually return to South Korea to pursue that, would you try to get in contact with the same company again?

JP: I definitely would, as I would also have to get better at Korean before I go to Korea. I would hope to obviously get better at Korean and actually be able to work with that company without any troubles of not really knowing what they're saying. So, definitely yes, I would love to, and if that didn't work, obviously I would try to find other places to go to try to find work.

JM: Where in South Korea were you mostly during that time?

JP: I was mostly in the capital, Seoul. There's a lot of different districts and areas within there, but I went around a lot within Seoul. Took the subways and such. Really got around. I went to everywhere within Seoul.

JM: Were you renting a hotel with your friend for the time you were there?

JP: For the first month and a half, I stayed with my friend's grandmother, who lives in Seoul. We stayed with her for the first month and a half, but once he left, because he was only staying for that first five-six weeks, I was staying at a... I guess it's similar to a guest house actually. It's called a homestay in Korea. You're just given a room - it's kind of like having a college dorm. I was just given a room, there's a communal bathroom, communal laundry, and everything like that. They even feed you at times. But yeah, I stayed there for the next five-six weeks. During that time, I really just explored. Went around. Explored around a lot about the specific town I was in. Visited some other family that I had in Korea. I even played a bunch of volleyball while I was in Korea too.

JM: What kinds of foods were you eating while you were in Korea, and how would you say that compared to any Korean food you had at home?

JP: So, the traditional Korean food, I would say, was relatively similar. It was better in Korea for multiple reasons. I believe the ingredients were better in Korea. Also, being in Korea, everything was much cheaper for us, because Korea's economy is in a worse state than America is. The dollar is a lot stronger, so I was able to get more food than I would in America for the same price. For example, one thing I had a lot of, which I wasn't expecting, was fast food in Korea. They had some brands that we have, such as McDonald's, Burger King, Subway, and some pizza places. Surprisingly, they were a lot better, in my opinion, than American fast food, even though they were the same company. It was pretty surprising, as it was cheaper and better food. The one example I love to give is that Burger King in America is relatively dying out, but in Korea, it's a premium burger place. It is looked at as like "Oh, this is a premium burger, this is where you go if you're feeling good about yourself, and don't just want a cheap meal, this is a good place to

go.” For example, it would compare to what Shake Shack is in New York. It’s quality, and it was very surprising for me, but it was also very good so I ate a little bit too much fast food while I was in Korea.

JM: Would you say that you ate more traditional Korean food or more western food while you were there?

JP: It was a pretty good mix, because, as I said, I ate a lot of fast food there. There were also Korean fast food chains that I enjoyed more than the American fast food chains, so there was that. For example, there was a place called Lotteria, and a place called Mom’s Touch, which I really enjoyed, all of which are Korean brands. I don’t know if this is a Western food necessarily, or even a Korean food, but Korean fried chicken - I had a lot of that while I was in Korea as well, it’s really good. I also ate a lot of traditional Korean food there as well. I ate a good mix, I ate a lot of everything.

JM: How much English do you think you spoke while you were in South Korea?

JP: I barely spoke any English. To be honest, I think I got worse at English when I came back. There would be many instances where I would have no idea what to say in English, and I actually ended up speaking Korean instead. I did meet some people, especially at volleyball, who were international, so they were from other places but spoke English, so I occasionally spoke English with them, maybe like once or twice a week. I also had a friend who was from New Jersey who moved to South Korea that attends Korean college now, so I talked with her a little bit in English, but besides that, not really much.

JM: Did you also play volleyball while you were in Korea?

JP: Maybe not for the first four or five weeks, but after that I played at least twice a week.

JM: Was this the same kind of open gym situation that you were looking for?

JP: Yes. I found open gyms. I honestly thought that they were better than the ones in America, because they were a lot more organized rather than people just showing up.

JM: So you mentioned that you went with a friend through your local church program [to Korea]. What were you doing in the church program in South Korea?

JP: At first, I thought it would be relatively religious, but it wasn’t too much of a religious trip. They focused on the history of Korea. There were a lot of things about Korean history, and the trip was to make the students that went more appreciative and more knowledgeable about Korean

culture, where we came from, where the language came from, and the history of Korea. I actually really enjoyed the trip. I learned a lot more about the actual history of Korea, and came to appreciate more about who I am as a Korean.

JM: Were there any connections you made between the additional knowledge you gained about Korean history and your own family history?

JP: It was interesting to see, because when I learned about modern Korean history, such as the Japanese invasion, Syngman Rhee, and the beginning of Korean politics, that wasn't that long ago. My grandparents lived through that, and that was very surprising to realize. My grandparents lived through the Japanese invasion, they lived through the whole Cold War. It was very surprising. It definitely shined a new light on my grandparents.

JM: Did you notice if there were any connections between that and the way your parents lived as well?

JP: My parents are on the older side as well, so they also did feel the effects of many of these things. Especially my dad and his family. He is the youngest of seven siblings. He didn't really experience as much, but my grandmother actually had to, before it was officially North and South Korea, escape from North Korea into South Korea with my oldest uncles and aunts.

JM: Did your paternal grandfather's side also come from North Korea?

JP: Yes, from that general area. My grandparents from my paternal side, they initially resided in North Korea. Obviously, with everything that happened, they had to leave, because they didn't want to be trapped there. Eventually, they fled and got to South Korea. I believe they moved more down south [in] Korea, as Seoul is within the northern area of South Korea. They moved down towards Busan and more of that southeastern side of Korea and then stayed there.

JM: What sort of situation was your mom's side of the family in?

JP: I believe that they've always been in South Korea. From what I know, they didn't have to flee from North Korea. I think they were around Seoul for basically the entire time that I know [of].

JM: Do you know your father's parents' reasons for fleeing from North Korea?

JP: Not necessarily. I do assume that they knew that that wasn't the best place to be. I haven't asked. My dad wasn't even alive yet when they moved, because he's the youngest. Some of his older siblings would know, but at the moment, no. I don't exactly know why.

JM: What years were your parents born in?

JP: Both of my parents were born in 1959.

JM: Do you know anything about how they would have lived under the administration of presidents like Park Chung Hee and figures like that?

JP: I can't say I do. They don't really talk about much regarding when they were younger. They don't talk too much about South Korea. They have nothing against South Korea, they just make sure that they're living their lives here. They don't really get themselves involved too much with Korean politics either.

JM: Back to your visit to South Korea over the summer, did you ever leave Seoul and explore other areas of the country?

JP: I did. I went to an area called Incheon, where the international airport is, that's where all of the international flights come through. During the trip that I went on with that group for the church program thing, we actually went around all of [South] Korea. We went all the way down south, we went to Busan, all of the southeast. We even took a flight to Jeju, spent a bit of time there. I got to explore a lot of Korea and really learn more about it.

JM: What would you say was your favorite place that you visited?

JP: In Korea? It is hard, because one of my favorite places to visit was in Jeju, but during my entire time there, it was monsoon season, so it was always cloudy, most of the time it was raining, so it wasn't as beautiful as it could have been, but I really did enjoy it. I went to multiple gardens in Jeju. Besides that, I would say being in Seoul, being with friends there, and spending time there was really good.

JM: So you had those networks there and you weren't in South Korea alone, but did you ever feel like you were an outsider while you were visiting there?

JP: There was one time where I went to a bar with friends that were Korean citizens and actually lived there. Because I didn't have my passport on me - I only had my driver's license on me, which is obviously United States identification, so they wouldn't let me in. That was the one time where I was like "Oh yeah, I'm not really from here," but everywhere else, I was able to go in and it was a fine time. It was just that one moment where I was like "Oh dang, because I'm not from here I can't enter." It didn't really affect me too much, because I knew from the start that I'm not from this country necessarily, but I am still Korean.

JM: Were there any times when people from South Korea picked up on how much you know the Korean language?

JP: Yes, because they have really low expectations of Korean-Americans, especially in terms of actually knowing Korean. There's a lot of times when people visit, and there are foreigners who don't know how to speak Korean. There were a lot of instances where I would talk to someone and they would know I'm from America, and go "Oh wow, you're actually pretty good at Korean, like you can actually speak it and know what we're saying." There were those instances, but weirdly, they can just tell that you're not from Korea. They just know like "Oh, you're from America, aren't you?" And I haven't said a word. And I'm like "Oh yeah." It was very weird, but they just kind of know.

JM: Did that have any impact on you in the moment or after?

JP: Not really. It didn't affect me too much. There's no actual racism towards me because I'm Korean-American. I just went "Oh. Oh well." It didn't really affect me at all, because I was still able to communicate, get what I needed, talk with friends, stuff like that. It didn't really affect me negatively.

JM: Did you ever notice that stigma with your parents who immigrated from Korea?

JP: Yes, because my dad is pretty good at English, but my mom isn't. I'd have to go and help her a lot with that. There'd be times where my mom can't really express what she's feeling or trying to get. For example, when we were trying to change our car tires, I wasn't available at the time, so my mom went alone, but she had no idea what was going on. Eventually, while I was doing something, they had to call me, and I had to explain everything over the phone to both her and the mechanic about what we wanted to do. Stuff like that happened because she can't speak English, but from what I know people are pretty nice about it.

JM: Did you speak Korean at home?

JP: Yes. There was a time when I didn't, because I didn't really learn Korean until a bit later in my life. Nowadays, I speak as much Korean as I can because I want to get better at it as well, but also because my parents aren't fluent in English. Occasionally, I speak what we call "Konglish," which is a mix of Korean and English. They're good enough at English to understand what I'm saying, but I try to do my best to speak in Korean.

JM: Do you ever speak Korean with your friends from your hometown?

JP: Yes, I definitely do now, as the ones that don't really speak Korean - I don't talk with them as much as I used to. That's just how it happened. There will be times where it'd be me and my Korean friends and some other people who are not Korean obviously, and we end up speaking Korean at times. To me, sometimes it's more comfortable to speak in Korean, because the way that I can express exactly how I'm feeling is a little different. There might be terms in English that there might not be in Korean, and there are terms in Korean that aren't in English that express certain emotions. Sometimes I prefer to speak in Korean.

JM: Do you find that Korean is a more versatile language than English for your own purposes?

JP: I can't say yes, necessarily, because I'm not fluent in Korean. There are many times where Korean comes out much more naturally. I also just enjoy speaking in Korean.

JM: If you had the opportunity to act in a Korean play right now, would you take that opportunity?

JP: If I was still at the same level of speaking Korean, maybe not. I don't think I'm good enough yet to actually be in a full-scale production of a Korean show. If I were given time to really study Korean and actually go through the entire process, after learning Korean, then I would love to do it.

JM: This is a bit of a wrapping-up sort of question - all of these things considered, how would you describe the relationship between your racial, cultural, and national identity?

JP: So, I am Korean-American, but I also consider myself Korean. At first, when I was younger, I didn't really think much of it, because I saw a bunch of other people who looked just like me so I didn't think anything of it. I came to appreciate it more once I got to Colby. It wasn't seeing faces I would see every day as I would in high school. I really learned to embrace it - the fact that I'm Korean. For example, the shirt that I'm wearing right now has my Korean name [Hyung] on it. I've put this on a lot of things that I can, such as my volleyball sweater, and I try to put this wherever I can. I really came to appreciate Korean culture, who I am, and also I really wanted to share it and show other people that I'm not necessarily afraid, but not ashamed to show that I'm Korean.

JM: Was there a process of becoming comfortable with that?

JP: I wouldn't say I was necessarily uncomfortable before, it's just not something I was doing. There was a time during freshman year of college at Colby where I got really into Korean music, Korean shows, and because of that, I guess I became more comfortable. There were a few upperclassmen that were Korean that I became comfortable with talking to, and with them I was

able to really talk more about Korean music, Korean shows, and talk freely about it without any other people saying “What is that?” That made me comfortable. That’s why I’m kind of more open to it. I just want to share with people that yes, I’m Korean, that’s who I am.

JM: I think that that will probably be it, unless there’s anything else you would like to share?

JP: No, that’s pretty much it.

JM: Thank you for your time.

JP: Thank you.