

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
SOUTHEAST ASIAN DIGITAL ARCHIVE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, 2019-ONGOING
UML 17**

Maryellen Cuthbert, Oral History #19.01

CONTENT WARNING: **Mentions of weapons, abuse, assaults, and violent situations**

INFORMANT/NARRATOR: **MARYELLEN CUTHBERT (MC)**
INTERVIEWER: **SUE J. KIM (SK)**
DATE: **APRIL 15, 2019**

SPEAKER	DETAILS
SK	So, Okay. All right. Hmm. It sits up pretty well, but I'll put this here.
MC	Do you think it would be better to put it in here? In the middle.
SK	Okay. Great. Wonderful. Okay. I am Sue J. Kim, and I am the project director for the Southeast Asian Digital Archive, and the co-director for the Center for Asian American Studies. Today is Monday, April 15th, about 12:30 and I am with Maryellen Cuthbert. Am I saying that right? Cuth-
MC	Yes.
SK	In Chelmsford, Massachusetts at Maryellen's home office. Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to us today.
MC	I'm looking forward to it.
SK	Let's start a little bit about information about yourself. Sort of where were you born? Where did you grow up? How did you find your way to law school? I know that you went to Boston University. Things of that sort.
MC	I was born in California. Dad was part of defense industry, so we actually moved around a lot growing up, and we ended up in Bedford, Massachusetts, but I went to college in New York, Manhattanville College, undergrad. I then, as an international affairs, international law, and French major. Then, I decided to apply to law school. I took a year off and worked, and I actually started at Franklin Pierce Law Center, and I finished at Boston University School of Law in 1981. I had been working for an attorney out in Acton who had a small practice, but was involved

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in a special ed case, special education case out of Burlington. I did a lot of work and research for him. Then, I also worked for a firm downtown in Boston that did a lot of medical malpractice and civil work. I didn't like sitting in the closet answering interrogatories, but at BU I had done the student prosecutor program. The criminal law bug bit. I started while I was with the attorney in Acton doing some court appointed work in Concord District Court. Gradually moved over to where I was taking cases out of Lowell. Since the mid to late '80s.

SK: Okay, so that was about the mid to late '80s when you started working with cases in Lowell.

MC: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SK: Do you remember what those first cases, sort of what they were about?

MC: It was mostly at the district court level, and they were a variety of cases from drunk driving cases to possession of guns and things. But I was also at that time taking superior court cases, both in Lowell Superior and at that time Cambridge Superior Court. I remember at that time, we did do a lot of cases that involved gang involvement, both the Hispanic and the Asian gangs. I remember when I first started in that, we had Laotian. We had Vietnamese people, as well as Cambodians. There were a lot of Dominicans, and we also dealt with some of the Hispanic gangs. There were drug cases also.

SK: That was about the mid '80s when that started.

MC: Mid to late '80s.

SK: Mid to late '80s.

MC: And then went through the '90s.

SK: Do you remember some of your first, without getting too specific, some of the first cases where you were working with Asian and Asian American youth and gangs?

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- MC: I do, because there were the TRG, and the Grey Rags, and the Asian Boys.
- SK: The Tiny Rascal Gang.
- MC: [00:04:20] The Tiny Rascal Gang, and all of that. One of the things that was complicated, particularly because I was also doing juvenile work is that at that time a lot of the weapons that were used, they were not guns. They were machetes, and sticks, and things like that. The cases really involved a lot of kids who I felt had to join up in order to be safe in the schools. I remember feeling or trying to educate myself on the gang situation. I hadn't been involved in that. Then, finding out that there were a lot of wannabes, and people who they had to be associated in order to be safe, just to travel around Lowell, or even to be in the high school and some cases middle school.
- SK: I see. At this point, you were working as a private defense attorney?
- MC: I've always been a private defense attorney, but I've done a lot of court appointed work.
- SK: I see.
- MC: I also, I remember at that time, tipped into what is now UTEC, which was the street worker program, and became involved there. I remember, and why my connection with UTEC started was I had a young Asian male who was charged with armed robbery who told me, "No, I wasn't there. I was at the street worker program." That's how I became aware of that, because I went and checked it out, and he was absolutely in that, at that place when this supposedly robbery took place. But I remember I also at that time did care and protection cases, which are child welfare cases. Some of the cases that I remember being really upset about. They were upsetting to me. Were at that time it was DSS. It's now DCF. Had a lot of very young quote unquote social workers who were just out of college, and didn't have a lot of life experience.
- MC: I remember one case in particular where there was a gunshot that came through an apartment floor, and so the police investigated, and it had happened downstairs, but the shot came through the

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floor, and so the police went upstairs and investigated what was up there. There was a family with several children, actually probably a single woman, and they were sleeping on mats. DCF removed the children because they were sleeping on mats and not mattresses. I remember being very angry, because I felt this was cultural, and it was wrong. I remember I explained, "We need to go get mattresses." We went to a place where we could then get used mattresses. I said, "You don't have to use them. We'll just put them in." We put them in, took pictures, and got the kids back, but it was really traumatic.

SK: In those kinds of cases, would you be appointed by the court?

MC: I was appointed by the court to represent, in that case, the mother of the children.

SK: And how many... I know it's difficult to kind of quantify, but out of your caseload, can you give us a sense of what the scale was, or like the percentage? In the late '80s, would you say-

MC: Probably I was working probably at least 30 to 40% of my caseload involved Asians.

SK: Right. You were saying at the time in the mid to late '80s, Lowell is still, it was and still is largely Cambodian, but there were still Laotian and Vietnamese groups, and things like that.

MC: Right, that were there. But one of the striking things that I remembered, when I worked with some of the young people who are now in trouble, because there was a retaliation, or there was this or that that was going on between gangs was that when I represented them and they would come to my office, or I would meet with them, at that time, the parents, or even older brothers and sisters, had come via Thailand through Cali, and here. So I was hearing stories of parents and what they had done as teenagers escaping Cambodia to get to Thailand.

MC: I remember one family that was here, they were teachers. The father was a teacher, and other stories where they had watched a parent being shot, and then a group of as 14-year-olds making their way, hiding, to get to Thailand. It was just horrific. I would say, so then I would see that and juxtapose that against they came here for

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safety, and then realized that they weren't safe with what they'd done to protect their children, and then have cases like that. It made me angry.

- SK: [00:10:21] Yeah. Can you remember sort of, tell us more about sort of the cases that you met? We can talk about, focus maybe on the juvenile cases first, and then we can talk more about some of the cases in the care and protection?
- MC: I remember another care and protection case that I had, where I represented a parent who had a young Asian teenage boy. What had happened is, of course, during the gang years the parents were struggling to keep their child off the streets, away from the gangs, and one of the things I had learned was that particularly women were not educated, and they tried very hard to communicate with you.
- MC: I remember getting phone calls, and I just could not understand what they were saying, but they were desperately trying to communicate with me over what was going on with the child. In this particular case, their child had been removed, because they were trying to keep them inside and make them do homework, that they because it was so precious to them because they could not read or write.
- SK: Right.
- MC: So they sometimes resorted to corporal punishment, which was a problem for DSS at that time, and if a kid reported that, the kid went out. I remember in that circumstances the child was removed to a foster home, where there was really no restrictions, and the child was not under any care, and the mother was seeing her child on the streets.
- SK: Oh my goodness.
- MC: And really upset, because now there wasn't any supervision going on, even though their child had been taken away because of the issue of some corporal punishment that had been used.
- SK: Do you remember the ethnicity of that family?

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- MC: That was Cambodian.
- SK: How did DSS find out about the corporal punishment?
- MC: I think the young man or the child had complained to someone, or if there was a mark on them or something they'd say, "How did you get that?" I had two cases like that. One, I remember there was like a ruler or something that was used, and I remember the other thing was a lamp cord. I had two cases like that, and I was really angry about that, because I felt that it was wrong to do that. I had been brought up with corporal punishment myself.
- SK: I know, me too.
- MC: And I turned out fine, I think. But it was... I also think that sometimes if it was done by a different culture family, a white family, the child might not have been removed.
- SK: Right. So you felt like there was bias, intentional or not, on the part of DSS officers. Especially, like you were saying, if they're young and inexperienced. I know from teaching contemporary literature that sometimes the younger students would be more judgmental than older students who understand that things happen in complicated ways later in life.
- MC: Right.
- SK: What about communication? You were saying that the parents of families would be trying to communicate with you sometimes. Did you-
- MC: That's why very often you saw the family group come. When we're talking family, we're not talking mom, and dad, and kid. Very often, we're seeing aunts and uncles, because somebody spoke better English. So they would come for the purposes of doing that. It was difficult to get an interpreter to do meetings and things like that, where you're trying to explain what was going on, and what the rights were, and that sort of thing. But I learned in the course of my stuff that there really wasn't a parallel system in Asia, and in fact in some of the Asian countries there's no jury trial, so trying to explain that in English, never mind have it interpreted or translated, was difficult for them to understand. But also, that in

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some Asian countries I learned that some people took their child to the government to be straightened out, and so on occasion the expectation was different.

SK: [00:15:09]

I see.

MC:

Versus what happened here.

SK:

I see, so the expectation that the authorities would help straighten the child out, and then be returned easily, as opposed to having custody taken away completely.

MC:

Right.

SK:

Wow. When there were these family groups, and you were trying to explain, I'm just trying to imagine. Was the person who spoke English, did it tend to be like the second generation, younger people, or just all over the place?

MC:

It was all over the place. What I find, like many cultures, that they would say, "I speak English," and they didn't speak English well. But, very often, also, I would find sometimes they didn't read or write, and they won't tell you that. I always had to kind of assume and maneuver around that.

SK:

I'm trying to imagine how you would explain a person's rights, and the jury trial, and the whole process was so complicated.

MC:

Right.

SK:

What was that like?

MC:

Well, trying to make it so that people understood what that right was, and very often sometimes you were using a young person because they spoke better English, but they weren't really that interested in making sure that all the intricacies were conveyed to a parent. I saw sometimes that was maybe a little bit of a problem, because you had a juvenile, or a young person who was maybe more in charge of the family, because they spoke English, and they went to all the appointments and places with the parent or the other people. I had those situations too, where it was a child literally you

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know taking the parent to appointments, and trying to interpret, and they may not have gotten it themselves.

SK: You took great pains to try to communicate with your clients. Did you get much support from the court systems in helping you managing-

MC: We had interpreters that were in the court system, and there were some very good interpreters, but there were other interpreters. I didn't know what they were saying, but I know that we were talking constantly, and the interpreter was saying a few words, stopping. You didn't know what really to do. I will say one time, I have always, like with my clients who speak Spanish, I speak a little Spanish. I could go down to the lockup. I could go there and say, "I am an attorney. I am here for you. I'm going to get an interpreter. I will be back with an interpreter," or the parents were there.

MC: At one point, I will say I contacted, and I set up a lunchtime training at the Lowell District Court with the Cambodian Mutual Assistance League, and I asked them to come and teach us some phrases. They were reticent to do so. In fact, they kind of kept telling us, "We are not to interpret or anything." I think I might not have even communicated that. Because it was like, "No, I'm not asking you to interpret in the court. We're asking you to give us some phrases," so we could go down and assure somebody that there was an attorney going to look out for them.

MC: We did learn a few phrases we forgot, but it was hard. I think it was really up to us to learn and ask about customs. Cato, who is an interpreter, I know once came and would explain some customs. Going into the houses. Because I, especially working with juveniles, you want to see the home and things. Taking off your shoes, and doing things like that.

SK: Did things change at all? Like sort of moving into the early, mid '90s?

MC: When it got later, I didn't have defendants or people who were born outside of the states. Some of them had been here for a long time. Many of them had come through not... Stockyard, California.

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- SK: [00:20:04] Stockton?
- MC: Stockton, California. There were others that had come through, and I had learned came through into the Midwest, and had worked for Blue Bunny Ice Cream. I heard those stories too, that they worked, and then they would end up coming to Lowell, because they had relatives, or friends, and there was a community here.
- SK: Right.
- MC: Now I started seeing people who had been here longer, and then some that had even been born here.
- SK: Did it change? I mean, so when you were describing sort of like the mid late '90s, the gangs, and then also the care and protection, did the nature of your work with community-
- MC: I think it did, and I always thought, one of the things that I thought about was in the gangs and stuff, being Irish, and I had learned about Irish gangs, which were horrific, which nobody talks about anymore. But I realized, when you learn the stories of them coming through Thailand. Many of them had been born either in Thailand, or they come through the Philippines, or whatever, that the gang thing was not just gangs to go out and do bad stuff. It's the way your family got fed in the camps. I learned that, and so I began to see kids who were older, but had remembered that kind of lifestyle.
- SK: You were hearing this from, I mean was it the younger kids telling you, or the parents telling you? It's interesting. How did the I guess genealogy of gangs-
- MC: The parents would be the ones who would tell you more of the stories. I think the younger people became like, the term we use was lace curtain Irish. We didn't want to say we were from the sod. We were there. They really wanted to appear more Americanized. One of the things that was interesting is we went from kind of the gang clashing to times where I remember lots of baby showers, and barbecues in the backyard, and the police were just showing up and hassling people, and we would end up with arrests.
- SK: Right, in Lowell.

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- MC: In Lowell.
- SK: Are you talking specifically about Lowell, but also in other places in Massachusetts?
- MC: No. Mostly Lowell. Mostly Lowell.
- SK: Was it, I guess, in terms of showing up at baby showers and hassling people, was it people who might have associated with gangs in the past. You know what I mean? Like wear the clothing, or have the tattoos and things like that, but be living sort of normal lives.
- MC: Right.
- SK: But that association was still there with the police.
- MC: Right. The association. Even two years ago, I had a case that involved, actually it was not an Asian gang, but there were some Asian members. A group called Young Gunners, in Lowell, and they were really kids who had grown up together. The police came in and did a hearing in juvenile court where they said, "These are gang members." There were a few people in the gang. They had a portfolio, and a file folder, and were deceased. I recognized kids that were no longer involved. It was when they were young. So it was like once a gang member, always a gang member. I still see that today.
- SK: Do you think that that is racialized at all? That there is a tendency more to see that particularly with ethnic minority groups?
- MC: Only because my experience in Lowell. The Young Gunners is not necessarily an Asian gang. It's more of a group of kids, and it was described on the witness stand as kids who had grown up together. And so with regards to the Hispanic gangs, which there isn't a lot in Lowell. We're not really seeing gangs in Lowell. But, the police will still say. I still see it in the police that they're a self-admitted gang member, way back when, when they were in school, when they were a young person. We don't see the gang activity. We don't see the arrests for that kind of thing now.
- SK: [00:25:00] Right.

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- MC: But, we still see that language and stuff put in a police report.
- SK: Right. What are some of the other stories that sort of stick out in your mind, particularly say working with the gang members, the youth, juvenile offenders?
- MC: I remember there were stories where the gangs would go after one another, and you don't understand why. They were just their territory, or that territory. Why? That always was like, why? People really hurt and stuff. But as things progressed, we had more guns involved. I do remember going and looking at bullet holes at a house next to the Pailin Palace.
- SK: There were just a couple shootings in 2018. You know.
- MC: Right. And that sort of thing. I had a juvenile who, it wasn't a juvenile. He was barely an adult. Who, they got a gun, and they went, and the gun went off, and somebody died, and it was a young Asian male. I remember dealing with someone who had shot someone, and it was almost unreal, surreal to them that that actually happened.
- [00:26:32] [phone begins ringing in background]
- SK: Right.
- MC: But, I think there was a lot of protection that needed to be ... Let me just shut that off.
- [00:26:49] [answering machine message comes on in background: Hello. This is Maryellen Cuthbert. I'm unable to take your call at the moment.]
- MC: [00:26:55] Sorry. So we didn't see the machetes and the sticks anymore. We were seeing guns.
- SK: Would you say that transition happened in the-
- MC: In the '90s.
- SK: '90s.
- MC: The late '90s. Yeah, mid to late '90s. All of a sudden it was guns.

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- SK: What was it like? Did you have kind of more kind of like personal level? When you were talking to a defender, or meeting with a defendant for the first time, what was your, I don't know how to put it, philosophy, or approach, especially given your experience working with the community members?
- MC: I first always tried to establish a relationship, and made sure they understood my role was to advocate for them or to defend them, no matter what. I always thought, and I understood that there really was a mistrust. They saw us as part of the system, and I could see that. So initially, you tried to listen, and understand, and that's where I got a lot of the stories, because I would ask for background, and how you got here, and things like that. Because there is a mistrust, and to really make them understand my role was to defend, no matter what, and they could tell me anything. I did go to homes to see, and particularly when I'm dealing with a juvenile, to see what they're dealing with.
- MC: Also my office is here in Chelmsford. They can't find Chelmsford. In many cases they don't drive. They work. Lowell, I think the Cambodian community has spread out in Lowell, but it was in the downtown area, where it was very compact. So, you went there. And so it's very different now, I think, in terms of being able to find Chelmsford. They're a little bit more worldly.
- SK: Right. People are moving out into the suburbs in the second to third generation.
- MC: Right.
- SK: Where your office is, where were you based? Were you always based here but then you moved around?
- MC: I've always been in Chelmsford. I had another office in Chelmsford, but I'm in court so much doing criminal defense work, this allows me to work early morning and late at night.
- SK: Did you work very much with adults in the early years, in the '80s and the '90s?
- MC: I did. I worked with adults also, and we've changed so that 17 year-olds who were considered adults are no longer adults.

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- SK: I see.
- MC: But, yes. There were young adults who were in the age group, too. I'd say it was probably 50-50 that were young adults, 17, 18, 19, 20, and then juveniles that were involved in the gangs, and things like that. For a long time, I hate to say it, when you thought Cambodian in Lowell or Asian, they must be in a gang.
- SK: [00:30:23] Right.
- MC: I remember learning about tattoos and things that would appear on the face. The tears and stuff.
- SK: Right.
- MC: The assumption was tattoos, they must have a gang. Until somebody explained to me when you ask what they are. They're for somebody who's deceased, or symbols for this or that. That was another way that sometimes it would be a response. At first I'd ask, "What does that mean? What does that ..."
- SK: So it was by talking to the clients and their families about what things mean, learning about their background. As opposed to, where were you hearing the other? Was it in the courts, or just social?
- MC: About?
- SK: About the perception of Cambodians, particularly, in Lowell.
- MC: Yeah, just around. I think that's the way it was. It was assumed they must be in a gang. The other thing that we saw in the '90s were the girls in the gangs that we did not see very early on, but then we saw the girls in the gangs.
- SK: What did you see? How did you come across them? How were they different? How were they similar?
- MC: The girls were generally associated with a gang member, but I learned about the gang rapes, and the jump-ins and the jump-outs. I actually was at a jump out once. Somebody alerted me to one. I went with a group to try to stop it.

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- SK: This is for the record. Can you explain what a jump-out is?
- MC: If you want to leave a gang, and also that was one of the things that was interesting, particularly in the courts. Judge Blitzman made it a point to educate himself about things also. So, he began to spread the word. Where we learned that they'd say no gang involvement. People didn't understand that to just leave a gang and say, "I'm not involved with you," was a dangerous proposition for them. That the seniors had to mediate their way out, and that's a lot of times where UTEC has come in, the street workers and stuff, and we begin to explain to judges, because we learned that, so they'd say, "No gang activity" versus "no gang association."
- SK: Right.
- MC: I still think that's an issue.
- SK: Right.
- MC: I still think that's an issue.
- SK: Actually that brings up a good, interesting ... With the judges, you mentioned Judge Blitzman. What was his--
- MC: Jay Blitzman is a juvenile judge. He's the chief juvenile judge in Middlesex County. He sits primarily in Lowell. He became very aware, and made all kinds of attempts to be involved. He goes into the schools and stuff, and learn about the culture.
- SK: I would imagine a lot, but how influential was this position, or the understanding of judges in cases like this? How big of an impact do you think-
- MC: I'm going to be very blunt. I think he was the only judge that I'm aware of that made any attempt to understand the cultural and the norms of that. I know when I became aware of it, I started to explain to the judges, "Your Honor, we cannot say no gang association. That would be really dangerous for them to do, to just say, 'I can't talk to you,' or whatever anymore." So we began to try to adjust the language and the verbiage that got used in the court in order to do that. Then, also we did refer to UTEC. When we had a

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kid that wanted to get out, or we said can't get them to mediate their way.

SK: How receptive were judges and others in the court system to your attempts to kind of explain these things to them?

MC: [00:34:51] I will tell you that Judge Blitzman I thought was very receptive. A couple years ago, I had a case. It did not involve an Asian gang member, but it was a Caucasian kid. There was another judge involved, and he had grown up with a gang. They really weren't doing anything but hanging out together, but he had gotten caught doing something, and he was on probation. The term the judge had used was "no gang activity." He had done some time at DYS, and he had come out, but this was still his friends, and he was on house arrest. He was associated with UTEC and doing everything. I had to say, "You can't say no gang association, because he's doing very well at UTEC, and there are gang members there."

SK: Right.

MC: So you're trying to educate judges, and probation officers and things that you can't just do this. But in any case, what happened is there was another member of that gang that was on trial that I had, and there was some Facebook stuff that went back and forth, and gang sign that was shown on Facebook. The probation officer brought them in, and that juvenile was surrendered on a probation surrender. I appealed it, because I said, "This is not gang activity. This is association." I went to the appeals court. I don't know whether they laughed me out or not. I said, "You know what? I walk into my courthouse every day and I have to show a Bar card, that I'm associated with the Mass Bar Association, but I do not subscribe to everything that they do and say. It is the same way. This is the culture." I lost that one. The argument obviously didn't fly well, but people don't see it that way, that it was a matter of survival, and that it became a matter of association.

SK: And then leaving is not as simple as just turning around and walking away.

MC: Right.

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- SK: Right. Other than sort of, you know, we focus a lot on the gang related activity, and we've talked a little bit about the sort of care and protection, custody. Were there other sort of areas in which you had a lot of experience, you had experience with the Southeast Asian community?
- MC: Well, I used to go to the Cambodian Light of the Children, it was the reading cover-
- SK: Light of Cambodian Children. Right. Right.
- MC: I missed the, they used to have a big dinner. I enjoyed that. That was one of the ways where I think some of the population in Lowell that didn't know where we learned a lot about the dances, the stories, and food, and things like that.
- SK: You know Sayon Soeun, then? Who was the I think director of Light of Cambodian Children.
- MC: I don't know personally, but I think Cato was the interpreter made us aware of that. I went a few times to that. They don't have them anymore.
- SK: I know. Light of Cambodian Children unfortunately shut down a few years ago, but they did a lot of work in the '90s and the 2000s, helping bridge like the youth and the community.
- MC: The dances, and the other thing is the publicity about the Angkor Dance Troupe, which helped I think show that there is not this mindset of gang. That there's a whole 'nother group, and that there are customs to be preserved. There are memories, probably some bad memories, but there are also some customs that kind of did what they could to bring that out.
- SK: Did you have very much experience with ... From the academic perspective, when we talk about health disparities, or educational disparities, or even oral histories in the Southeast Asian community, you always have to deal with trauma, because there's no way to get around sort of like the trauma of the killing fields, or war, being a refugee, and things like that. I'm sure it was sort of imbued a lot of what your work with the community members, but

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did you ever come face-to-face with it in specific instances? Like, you know, from family members, or from your clients?

MC: [00:39:53] You know, what's really interesting, and I just printed off an article on trauma, because it is the in thing right now with juveniles, and I was reading an evaluation for a juvenile, and there were some articles and stuff, and I was just printing them off so I could read them and stuff. But, in the '80s and the '90s, we weren't talking about trauma, but we had to know that's there.

SK: Right.

MC: I remember there's a story that I heard, and it was a man who had come through such trauma. He had been in Cambodia, and this was an adult superior court client, and he had I believe his family was shot, and he left with some cousins, and he described to me hiding in the woods, traveling at night to get to Thailand, and they made it there. But in that timeframe, so the trauma I knew had to be really bad for him, but he was just kind of very accepting of things. So he got to Thailand, and he was there, and he had worked in construction in Thailand, and then gotten himself ... I think they joined, and as I understand, sometimes groups would join up and say, "We're a family," and that they could get here as a family, but it got people here.

MC: So he got here with someone who they called a family, and when they got here, the woman died. But there were some children there, but he connected with another woman that he had known in Thailand. Unfortunately, she had a terrible alcohol problem, so he was kind of raising her now teenage kids. So, the girl, and the girl, his would have been a step daughter was, as he put it, running the streets in Lowell, and she was connected with someone who was an older gang member, and he was trying to keep her home. He actually went out with her brother, and went to the home, and tried to pull her back and stuff, and then got her home.

MC: He put a trash bag over her, because she was acting like trash. I think he used a broom handle. He was trying to discipline her. This was a case that I had done. The police became aware of it or something. She complained. Then, she claimed rape on his part. I thought about, "How much more trauma can this person take?" She claimed rape, but she miscarried, or the baby died. She had said

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that all along, that it was his baby. It must have happened because of that. He was, "No, no, no." We insisted on DNA. Sure enough, was not his. It was not his.

MC: He just was like calm. I thought, "How does he deal with this?" Then, so we went to trial. In fact, the DA's office fought me on trying to get this information in, that she had made this false claim, etc, etc. The problem is she had had some bruises, and he had also spoken with the police, with a Cambodian speaking interpreter police officer, and made some statements about hitting her, and why. We went to trial in Lowell Superior Court.

SK: Was that for assault?

MC: Initially it was on the rape, and all that stuff, and everything. The jury found him not guilty of everything, with the exception of assault and battery.

SK: Right.

MC: And I was appalled. They gave him six months. I thought that six months committed for doing that. He was taking care of someone else's kids. I was appalled, and I remember we went to the jail. At this point, he had connected with another young woman wanting a family. Who wouldn't? He took care of her, because she was pregnant. She had come through the Midwest somewhere, and she was pregnant. It wasn't his. She was much younger than he was, but he was taking care of her.

MC: I went to the home, and it was neat as a pin, and stuff, and he had brought a TV that the picture was half gone. He was proudly showing me how he fixed the vacuum cleaner and stuff. He was taking care of a family again. I said, "How do you do this and just keep going?" I did see an obituary a few years ago for him. He probably died in his 50s, or whatever. Those things, you just, you think about the trauma and everything, but I think we don't think about that or attach that label to adults as much as we are with the children.

SK: [00:46:02] I think, especially in Southeast Asian American studies, with adults, it's usually associated with not communicating. So the second generation or the younger kids might act out in a variety of

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ways, whereas the first generation, a lot of it is very repressed, or manifests as health problems, and things like that.

MC: Right.

SK: There were two things that came up. Did you see or did you have much experience with domestic violence, or domestic abuse within the community?

MC: I'll say that we heard situations, but I would suggest in my experience across the board, no more than ...

SK: Right.

MC: And I didn't hear about it in any other extraordinary way.

SK: Right. You didn't come across many cases related to that, or probably for a variety of reasons.

MC: No. And when you talk about domestic abuse, it may be like mom hitting the kid to get him to do the homework. But very often, I will say despite the fact that we did see Cambodian males hookup and make these families, I will say very often it was a woman alone raising the family, without being able to speak or read English.

SK: Where were the fathers, or the men?

MC: I think many times they were widowed, or they may have connected with someone to come through. I heard those stories. But then, they would leave the family, or the man wasn't, you know... And so they were on their own raising the kids.

[00:47:44] [phone begins ringing in background]

SK: What about substance abuse? How common was that as an issue? Sorry.

[00:47:49] [button pressing in background]

MC: Sorry. I'm trying to turn this just off.

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- SK: I don't think I even know how to use regular phones anymore.
- MC: I know. So anyways, I think that alcohol did play a part. But again, in every culture we saw that. The thing we might have seen different a little bit, and I remember I handled a case once, was gambling, which was, there were the corner stores and the gambling, which was more prevalent for the Southeast Asian community.
- SK: What kind of gambling?
- MC: I'm not sure, but there was some kind of number games, or it was gambling. In fact, I had home invasion cases where they knew that there would be money, because people were gambling. I don't know if they were dice games or whatever. I know I had two or three of those cases where they went in with masks, because they knew it was an Asian. They were gambling, and there would be money.
- SK: Right. The perpetrators, the defenders were also Cambodian. They knew in the community who was-
- MC: Right.
- SK: You mentioned several times working with UTEC, and I'm a huge fan. When did you start working with them? What was the nature of your collaborations with them?
- MC: [00:49:36] Well, I started back when it was a street worker program, and that's because I had a client who said, "I couldn't have been there. I was here." So then I began working with United Teen Equities Center, as I found out that they had resources. They would sometimes go find a kid, that I needed in court, who I couldn't locate. They weren't showing up for court dates, or they would enable me to meet with them and the family. Actually sometimes their street workers would bring a parent and a child, and they would help interpret for me at the UTEC building. First when it was over behind the high school there, and then once it became where it is now. Then there were times when we had a client who had done something who was on the run and needed to turn themselves in, and I would assist with that. Sometimes I couldn't do much, but I could walk through the process with them.

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- SK: Right. That was starting in the '90s, late '90s, early 2000s?
- MC: I'm trying to think. Probably in the '90s, when I knew it as the street worker program, and when they were over at the church. It was at St Anne's there. St Anne's.
- SK: Yes.
- MC: I was going over there to ... They could frequently meet a kid, or because the high school was there I could meet a kid there. I could get them to go there after high school. Either that, or when Burger King was downtown, particularly with the boys. I'd have my coupons, and we would eat. Sometimes it would be them and their friends. We were sitting at another table. But I knew as long as we could have food on the table, I could get them to work with me a little bit.
- SK: You also mentioned the Boys & Girls Club, and the YMCA. I mean what was-
- MC: And Girls Inc. There are other. Those are organizations that also, that helped like if we needed community service, or try to get a program and stuff.
- SK: I see. Right.
- MC: One of the things that I think was very different, and was a struggle was out here in the suburbs and stuff, the parents signed their kid up for soccer. There's a sign. Soccer sign ups, T-ball sign up, and that sort of stuff.
- SK: Yeah. My cousin has my niece's summer all planned out.
- MC: Yeah. They know to do that. As much as I sometimes felt that the Asian population, they wanted to become, they weren't those athletes, that kind of stuff. So sometimes, I hate to say this, but with the Hispanic kids, or for the Brazilian kids, or whatever, I could go get a soccer sign-up sheet, and fill it out, and say, "Sign here" and stuff, and get that. Versus I wasn't able to do that so much. There wasn't an interest.
- SK: Right.

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- MC: On the part of the Asian students in doing that. They weren't aware of that.
- SK: Right.
- MC: I know that I asked my ... My long-term partner is from Taiwan. We've traveled back there and stuff, and I'd say, "So, what did you do for sports? You don't have that." Because I said, "Well, they're always at the World Series of baseball, so it must be a big sport. Is it organized?" He said in the Asian countries, and he spent some time in China and stuff, is that they're just not as organized. He said like track and field, running. That they did that, but there wasn't that kind of organized sports. That was another way for kids to become involved. So we could try to do that, and they would involve them in other activities, because they weren't so involved in the sports.
- SK: Right. But what were some of those other activities?
- MC: I know Girls Inc. had the activities for girls. I know they did different things.
- SK: You mean like crafts and things?
- MC: Crafts. They did some of the swimming lessons at the Y, but they had just kind of hangout kind of stuff, programs.
- SK: This was even for youth, because this is for a lot of nonprofits. They do these kinds of things, because in the grant applications they say this is to sort of prevent, to give you something to do to prevent sort of like getting into crime and things like that. But these were also things that you could find for clients like after, like for community service.
- MC: [00:54:57] You were looking for that, and for after school, because parents were working, and they're working third shift. That was another thing that I saw. I don't hear it so much anymore, but was it MACOM that was up there. One parent was working one shift, and another parent was working the other shift, and that wasn't uncommon.
- SK: Right.

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- MC: That wasn't uncommon.
- SK: I think the second and third generations are transitioning more into normal nine to five jobs, and professions, and things like that.
- MC: Right.
- SK: Yeah.
- MC: Right. So, it was, so you were looking for ways to keep kids occupied, but I also knew they were kind of, as I spoke, distrustful, and I don't blame them. But also, within their community.
- SK: Right.
- MC: Taking care of each other within the family oriented.
- SK: Did you have very much experience with or interaction with immigration? Just because I know that the whole issue of Southeast Asian deportees now depends on two things, like the repatriation agreements between the U.S. and like Cambodia and Vietnam, but then also usually the record of felony or misdemeanor convictions, and things like that.
- MC: I don't do that kind of work, but at first it really wasn't much of an issue, and Cambodia didn't take, so it wasn't an issue so much, so we weren't working that out. So, I became aware in the last year or so, and I'm not going to say too much of somebody who's working, or a couple people who have had convictions for serious crimes, but are now working in the community, raising families, and stuff like that. They are available to be deported.
- SK: Right.
- MC: I have a brother who's with the Jesuit Volunteer Program, and my sister-in-law was with the Maryknolls, and they met at BC. They did that together, and then they went to Bolivia, and were there. So, when I became aware of this, and that they're kind of living on the edge, wondering if they're going to get picked up, I contacted my brother and I found out that there is these Maryknolls who have in Cambodia a group there, and the Jesuits were there, but I'm not sure, but they're there. Because, my understanding is that for these

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people who have never been there, or lived there, or whatever, and they go back, that they're just dropped off with nothing, and they don't know the language.

SK: Right. They don't know anything about the country.

MC: Don't know nothing about the country. Don't have any contacts there. They end up being like street people and everything. So we handed the name out to a couple and say, "You need to make sure you keep this name on you if something happens, and you get yourself to ..." Because, they do use some of the people that they can to help with others that are coming back. They start work projects, and things like that. When somebody came to me and told me that, I was like horrified, because it's a friend.

SK: Right. So it's only recently that this has come to your attention? Because I know before 2002, when Cambodia and U.S. signed a repatriation, it just they didn't accept deportees at all. Then even after 2002, they did, but it wasn't ... It wasn't really on your radar until recently, right?

MC: Yeah. It wasn't. Not for Cambodia. No.

SK: Right. I see.

MC: And it just, that just like horrifies me to think about that.

SK: Especially people, like you were saying, people who have been through so much in their early years, and it could be 20 years ago that they were convicted.

MC: One of the things that I think is really modern, and I've also become a little bit aware of, and concerns me a little bit. It's a hot issue right now. Is trafficking. I know that the legal community is a little bit concerned because of all of the nail salons.

SK: [01:00:00] Right. I see.

MC: And young women that are here. Many of them don't speak English, and they're here for a short amount of time, and they're working long hours and stuff. That, people are wondering about that issue for the Asians. Then of course with the whole Kraft

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thing, like all of a sudden people questioning what's going on in our nail salons, and our salons here.

SK: Right.

MC: If trafficking has become an issue with Asian women.

SK: I see. Yeah, there's a couple people. Actually, Sheldon Zhang at UMass Lowell. He's the chair of the School of Criminology and Justice Studies. He works in trafficking in Asia. There's I think a couple other faculty there.

MC: I've had a couple over adult female from China that they said, women who were I think being trafficked.

SK: I see. It was an issue of concern, or like ...

MC: I think it's something, now there's a little bit of issue of concern about the young women that are here, and clearly recently here, and whether they're protected.

SK: I see. Sort of moving towards the end, I want to definitely give you a chance to talk about any other stories that you want to talk about.

MC: I hope I'm giving you the information.

SK: This is great. But I'm wondering, since you started working particularly with the Southeast Asian community since the '80s, what would you say are some of the biggest changes? The other question is what are some of the things that surprisingly have not changed? In terms of working with, your experiences with the Southeast Asian community. What's changed?

MC: Have not changed, I'm going to say dealing with the police community is like ... They're a self-admitted gang member. When we really don't have ... I'm not seeing it in stuff, a huge gang issue.

SK: I see.

MC: In Lowell, like we were. But, just being able to grow up and move away from that, and also not seeing it, looking back with some

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perspective and saying, "This is what happened, and why that was there. That was happening."

SK: That's what has? Sorry.

MC: That has not changed. I think law enforcement's perspective.

SK: I see.

MC: On-

SK: Has not changed.

MC: "You're a gang member-"

SK: That perspective of, "Once a gang member, always a gang member."

MC: Right.

SK: That perspective has not changed.

MC: Right.

SK: I see.

MC: From that standpoint. I still do think that there is, for the minorities in Lowell, still a different treatment by law enforcement than someone who is Caucasian. I still think that in the schools, that rather than see that there's a kid who was brought up by a mother who did not speak English, or read or write in any language, so they didn't get a start, and also dealing with the trauma issues in terms of helping to catch up kind of thing. The other issue is because so many people have records, that they're hung around the neck. We're trying to get to them, and see what we can do to undo CORIs, and things like that. From that standpoint, growing in terms of certain aspects of the population.

SK: What do you mean undoing CORIs.

MC: Undoing CORI. In other words, trying to seal records, and things like that, for job opportunities.

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- SK: I see.
- MC: And that sort of thing. And, when you look at it from the standpoint, also, from ICE standpoint. When you have someone that 20 years ago, because they were part of a gang, and got involved in some melee or something, and is now married, and has children, and working, and stuff, that they cannot get away from that. That there's kind of the law enforcement government pegging them, and not being able to move away from that. From the standpoint of change that we're seeing Asians in the DA's office. There are a few Asian police officers. We're seeing among our ranks and attorneys, as well as in other professions that they are moving beyond Queen Street, and those areas.
- SK: [01:05:40] Right.
- MC: In Lowell. Moving out, and doing those things.
- SK: Are you seeing very many probation officers of Asian descent, or other corrections officers?
- MC: We have a few within the Lowell community that are Asian and stuff. But, I still think that there's more diversity. They're aiming for diversity in the ranks of law enforcement, which I clump as the police, as well as DAs, probation, courts, things like that.
- SK: So it's gotten better, but it could be more better.
- MC: Right. One of the things, and I'm really happy about this, and I hope that is there could be really more education put out there for us. As I said, I try to do that too, communicate to us what the culture of differences are, how to handle cases and deal with people so that we are doing it effectively, and being able to work, and also just being seen as trusted, as part of their team.
- SK: In addition to sort of more people, more cultural diversity, have you seen any improvements? Like the kinds of work that you were trying to do by yourself, explaining cultural differences to a judge or to a probation officer, have there been any kind of efforts to do that maybe more systemically, or more broadly?

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- MC: Well, a little bit. I'll never forget, we had a kid at the Angkor Dance Troupe come in, brought a few of his friends. He's doing a dance on the New Year, with an ankle bracelet, a GPS bracelet because he was on probation.
- SK: Oh my goodness.
- MC: And stuff. So, I know in our juvenile court, we try to. That there's been some attempts to make people aware that there's a couple festivals, and things like that. But, there's always arrests at those and sometimes people go, "I'm not going in there for that."
- SK: Right. I see. I see.
- MC: It isn't as widely spread as the folk festival, for instance, as publicized and stuff. I saw this year, like for instance, that is the Cambodian New Year the same as Chinese New Year?
- SK: The Cambodian New Year is in April.
- MC: That's what I was thinking, that it's different. Versus, there's some functions and different things that go on for Chinese New Year. In fact, we go down to Boston.
- SK: Right, in February.
- MC: There's the dragon, the lion dance and stuff down at one of the restaurants down here. And Westford Academy, for instance, has a large number of Chinese students, or Taiwanese-Chinese, and so they had a whole thing in the school. I had never seen that at the Cambodian New Years celebration. Maybe, but I'm not aware of it up there, which would make us ... Those kinds of cultural events, really publicizing them, and making us aware that there's those holidays too.
- SK: Right.
- MC: Which I would really like to become more aware of.
- SK: But it's not sort of saying the training for police officers, or for district attorneys. I don't know. Things like, I mean the broad term

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is cultural sensitivity training, or those kinds of things. That hasn't maybe increased since the '80s.

MC: I don't think that it has. I don't think that it has. I think Vanna Howard. Do you know Vanna?

SK: [01:10:01] Yes. She's fantastic.

MC: Well, I know her through her husband, Greg. In fact, I was at her wedding. Has done quite a bit to try to do, but she can't do everything.

SK: Right.

MC: I think she's on the same list with you, isn't she? For being honored.

SK: I think that the same things, that there's a lot of parallels between sort of like the law enforcement, and education, and healthcare. That there have been improvements since the '80s and the '90s, but we could still have further to go.

MC: One of the things that I also became aware of, if you go into healthcare, into one of the big Boston hospitals, our interpreters that we use in the courts are also medical interpreters, and they're being called in there to interpret, and the insurance has to pay for that and everything. Versus you go to Lowell Community Health Center, there's no official interpreter there for people who are going. It's really interesting to me that there's such a disparity in healthcare making sure that people understand. We now have a language line that we can use, so that when I'm with someone I can do that. But I'm also, I'll ask, "Is this your dialect?" They'll say, "Yes," and sometimes I wonder whether they are understanding everything.

SK: Right. The way to check is to ask. But then if you're not understanding the language, then-

MC: Yeah, if the interpreter's saying, "Do you understand everything I'm saying," and everything, and then I try to get them to repeat it back.

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- SK: Yeah.
- MC: But it's this kind of thing that I'm really excited about, because I think that will help them more. Like that event that was held by the Cambodian Children of the Light.
- SK: Yeah, Light of Cambodian Children.
- MC: Yeah, because a lot of attorneys and stuff went, and there were politicians, and things like that. It was an event to show up at in Lowell.
- SK: I see.
- MC: And so there became an awareness.
- SK: It was an annual, it was a dinner?
- MC: It was an annual dinner. Yeah.
- SK: I see. They invited like the city council, and just some attorneys, and then like-
- MC: Yeah, there was a lot of local politicians there, and stuff.
- SK: I see.
- MC: That's one of the things that I think that we had a little more trouble getting that, versus Spanish, there was always a Spanish interpreter in the court. For the Asians, it was sort of classified. The Hispanics did the drugs, the Dominicans, and we had the gangs and stuff.
- SK: Right. I see.
- MC: But it was somewhat of an issue, because one day they were a victim, particularly in the young kids, and one day they were a defendant. I remember sitting at a table once with a group of attorneys, trying to figure out who didn't have a conflict with this one, because we had represented this one before because they were a victim this time because of the clashes.

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- SK: I see. Because of the interconnectedness of the community.
- MC: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But we see a lot more businesses. Not just the smaller... Like there was one small grocery store, and that was it.
- SK: Right.
- MC: Now there's-
- SK: There's Cambodia Town, and restaurants everywhere. Right.
- MC: Right, so that's really nice.
- SK: Yeah.
- MC: Was this the kind of stuff you were looking for?
- SK: Yeah. This was fantastic. This was great. We wanted to get the perspective of someone who had worked with the community, particularly with the youth.
- MC: It was a struggle, because of the language, and the cultural differences, and the mistrust, and you're dealing with the trauma that they all went through in terms of government authorities, whereas other groups didn't go through that trauma to get there. Then being pegged.
- SK: For those issues, like the mistrust, and the kind of dealing with the second generation trauma, do you see... Or, let me put it this way. Would you say that your Southeast Asian clients now are about the same number, or fewer?
- MC: [01:15:04] Fewer.
- SK: Fewer.
- MC: Fewer.
- SK: The kinds of issues that you're seeing versus particularly the '80s and '90s-

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MC: The kind of issues we're seeing now are the same kind of issues we're seeing across the board with depressed teenagers not feeling like they fit in their school, or not going to school, disrespecting parents, that kind of stuff. Being on the run, not coming home, getting into fights.

SK: Right. In some ways, there are those issues of sort of being a second generation refugee, and being an ethnic minority. But in some ways maybe seeing them more becoming like normal American juveniles of various ethnic backgrounds.

MC: They are, but then I still think they're ... What's interesting is these kids, I don't ask so much, "Where were you born?" Because that's my nice question not to say to an immigrant, "Where were you born?" I say, "I want to start from the beginning." They're, "Okay. I don't have an immigration issue." But I'm not sure they know the stories.

SK: Right.

MC: That they really know all the stories.

SK: Yes, actually when we met, first found this archive, it was the older generation saying that they were worried that the younger generations didn't know about the culture, but also didn't know about the stories of being a refugee, the refugee camps, but then also early resettlement, and the struggles of those times, because people don't want to talk about it.

MC: Right. That's why we call it Irish lace curtain. It's like, okay I'm done with that.

SK: Yes.

MC: To some degree, I get that. But, also, to not forget, somebody did a film that was on PBS. I saw it. Who had gone back, that was just, brought it home. Brought it home.

SK: Was it Lost Child?

MC: Was it? The name of it. It was... I'm trying to think. I think UMass Lowell was part of the project. I can't remember what the name of

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it, but it went through kind of history of Pol Pot, the history of Cambodia, and went to numbers of the temples. Are you familiar with that film?

SK: There's a couple of films it could be, so I'm not sure. It could be Monkey Dance or Lost Child.

MC: Monkey Dance maybe sounds like ... Sounds either that or because I've seen the Monkey Dance and that is so fascinating. Fascinating.

SK: Is there anything else that we haven't had a chance to talk about or cover? Anything that sticks out in your mind?

MC: One of the things, this is really kind of funny. But when I went to the home, as much as I thought there was some distress. But when I got to the end of a family or working with a family, very often I was invited for a meal.

SK: Yeah.

MC: "I want to cook for you," whatever. So I had curry. I remember sitting on the floor in one apartment, and it was like a plastic tablecloth, and she was like macheteing the chicken, and we did the curry. I was like, "I'm going to be here all night doing curry from start to finish."

SK: Wow.

MC: But she wanted to teach me how to make curry. But it wasn't unusual that when I went, versus most other places I'll say, "Okay, I'll bring a pizza." You know, when I'm going to see with a kid I told you food with teenage boys. I try to do that, "Okay, I'll bring a pizza," or something. That's kind of a modernization now that they do that, but they're like, "Oh, I want to cook for you. That was always something that was very interesting to me.

SK: Right.

MC: Just as a comparison, I grew up Catholic and I often though, "Okay, stand up. Sit down. Say this prayer," whatever, and everything. That was it. I didn't agree with everything they did. But, in going to Taiwan with my boyfriend and the temples, and

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seeing how they were much part of the life. You stopped in, and you could be blessed by it. Then you had an issue, you went to this temple. You prayed to that. You just threw it down. You brought fruit. It wasn't money. Things like that. Then, his family even had a temple. There are sayings about how to live your life. Not, "You've got to honor God. You've got to honor God." It's, "This is how a good man or woman lives."

SK: [01:20:06]

Right.

MC:

So, I was looking for that. I started looking for that in Cambodian religion and stuff, and I didn't trip into it until I recently had a client that had a lot of tattoos. They were prayer, and they were sayings on him, because I bring makeup, because people still don't understand to cover tattoos when I'm trying cases.

SK:

Right.

MC:

But, they don't talk about religion.

SK:

Right.

MC:

At all.

SK:

Right. The temples are such a big part of life for most Cambodians and Southeast Asians. I was raised Presbyterian. If you don't know about the Buddhist temples, and how much of a part of everyday life they are, you don't, until someone starts telling you.

MC:

I understood they were a big part of their life, but I wasn't seeing them like you've seen some of the other Asian homes will have something, and I didn't know whether sometimes when you're oppressed, and you've fallen away, or whatever. That was one aspect that I hadn't tripped into versus other Asian homes.

SK:

Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Having the kind of like shrines and things like that. It was less visible in the houses you visited.

MC:

Very often in the Cambodian homes, you see the big colorful picture of I think the matriarch or whatever dressed, and they look so regal or whatever. You'd see those on the wall.

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- SK: Right.
- MC: That was interesting to me.
- SK: Even though that there was an initial mistrust, or maybe it was difficult to communicate, but that there was a sense, especially for people wanting to cook for you, that there was a sense that people were very welcoming, and they wanted to sort of show gratitude for your attempts to help them.
- MC: And then more so than any other. I'm telling, you had mothers who couldn't speak English, who would get on that phone, and try to make an appointment, and you're like, "Oh my God."
- SK: Right.
- MC: That was the group that did that, despite the fact there was that initial mistrust.
- SK: Right.
- MC: Anyways, I can't wait to see this, because it is fascinating. It starts horrific, but it's moving towards a different.
- SK: Great. Thank you so much.
- MC: All right.
- SK: Let me see. I want to make sure I do this right.

Interview ends