

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

INFORMANT: ELISE MARTIN

**INTERVIEWER: KALE CONNERTY
MEHMED ALI**

DATE: JUNE 24, 2016

E=ELISE

K=KALE

A=ALI

Mehmed Ali begins interview with introduction:

A: Okay, so this is interview with Elise Martin on June 24, 2016. Thanks, and Kale is going to take over.

K: So Elise when did you start working at the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation]?

E: I was looking through my memorabilia trying to remember exactly when. I believe it was in April of 1981. It was 1981.

K: Where had you previously been working?

E: Lowell Public Schools.

K: Okay, so how did you come to start working for the IRF?

E: It was I'm pretty sure that, remembering that this was a really long time ago, but I'm pretty sure that there was an ad in the Lowell Sun. I hadn't known Jackie until that job if I'm not mistaken, and I think that's how we became friendly and Carol Keirstead as well. So I wouldn't have gotten the information about the potential position from a personal relationship with Jackie. I think that happened afterwards. So it must have been in the paper. An ESL teacher, I was, you know, I was in education. So an ESL teacher, that's the role that I was hired for.

K: Did you then become the coordinator, or was your position title teacher?

E: No, Jackie was the Project Manager, or Project Director and I was the ESL teacher and kind of, I guess we'd now call it Workforce Development Person. We all and the roles were intermingled. I wouldn't say that anybody did just one thing, but I, our curriculum (--) You're going to take pictures of my water? [Mehmed Ali is taking photos] Do you want me to take that off the table? Do you care? You don't care? I don't care.

K: [Sounds like: Oh, let me slide, let me slide over]

E: Okay.

M: We're candid.

E: Where was I?

K: [Sounds like: We'll cut it out]

E: Okay. Where was I? So the intent was to provide skills to enable the new immigrant population to both survive and thrive here. And so that meant like essential English and we started with really like essential English skills. But then it also evolved into more contextually relevant language development for people who had mastered the basics of you know, help me I'm lost, or how do you get to, to job, job application. And some kind of like industrial manufacturing was still pretty big here. We were helping to place people in jobs. I wasn't doing job placement services. I was doing language development and interview techniques for, but we were placing people in companies like Raytheon, and so contextually relevant skills as well as language. It was fun.

K: So there were different types of classes that were offered we found in the archives and stuff for survival, (E: Right, that was our) pre-vocational life skills, literacy training, pre-employment orientation. (E: Umhm) So you just offered all of these different (--)

E: Yeah, we developed the, you know, we evolved as the population evolved in terms of their language competency and their like needs at the time.

K: Where were the classes held?

E: At the International Institute.

K: And was that still on, in 79 High Street?

E: On High Street, yah, umhm.

K: Okay. How long did you work for the IRF?

E: Probably two years. I can't remember an exact ending date. And I also can't remember why that would have been. So it's possible that the funding for that grant could have terminated at that point, or the funding for the position. Or it's possible, because that period of my life I remember around when I had babies. I was in the middle of having babies at that time.

K: Yes, Jackie mentioned that, that you two were pregnant at the same time.

E: So I was very pregnant. And I had thought about it this morning, I didn't have time to go through my attic, but I have some old photos. I don't know if you'd have any interest in them, [K: Definitely] but I have some old photos of some of the events we had there. So I don't (--) I may have been pregnant with my third child and that might have been what caused me to leave. In any case it would have been at least two years that I was there.

K: So what was a typical class like? Like how long, or like how many students were in each class? Things like that.

E: Maybe, first of all it would depend. We offered the classes every day. We (--) I worked thirty hours a week. I was hired to work thirty hours a week. And I think that for all of us whatever the minimum requirement was turned into something more than that because you were, you became very committed to the people you were working with, but. And so within that time frame we developed as the need arose and it hadn't been written into the grant necessarily. So we might have started off by every class was offered every day to begin with, and that was the survival skills. And then, and then we might offer, and then as the need arose and or like the different immigrant populations out of this, from the three primary countries from which the immigrants came, the Vietnamese, the Cambodian and the Laotian, they were different, slightly different needs based on the country of origin. So we offered, we never offered classes for a particular, for people of a particular country of origin, but we offered classes based on those kind of conglomerate needs. So then we started offering, we'd be up to maybe three or four classes a day.

And then the classes were (--) There was a curriculum (--) If I'm not mistaken, when I took the job there was kind of a curriculum for basic survival skills, but quickly it became, I made it more current. So you know, what are the things? What are the (--) Bringing in the Lowell Sun and the job wanted ads and the language there. And asking people to bring in a rental, looking for apartments, you know, what are the kinds of words you need to be able to read, and what are the speaking skills involved. And it was emphasis on conversational English. And so you had to build trust with a group of people in order for them to feel comfortable trying to speak in a new language that was not even phonetically familiar. You know, like the whole conversion from their language to our language in order to be able to read was a huge (--) And many of the people that came from in particular the Vietnamese immigrants that we serviced during this two years that I was there in general may have had a higher educational level coming out of their country. The Cambodian and Laotian people had been the farmers. And because Pol Pot had gone through and massacred anyone that wore eye glasses for example, that was like they'd go through your house, or your hut and if you had glasses it was a sign that you needed

them to be able to read. So you were gone. So there was a different level of education coming from their own country and therefore different levels of job interest. So we tried to tailor it and build a level of security, and comfort and trust, and mutual support within the groups particularly for the conversational English. Imagine what it's like to try to like start to speak. I'm so monolingual. I mean I took four or five years of French and I'm still pretty monolingual, and that was a fairly familiar you know, comparable language, so. So that was really important establishing trust in a sense of confidence that we were there to help them, and that we were all in this together, and that they could help each other and themselves.

There's some great stories. I don't know if you're interested in any of the stories, but

K: Absolutely, yup.

E: As I speak I remember. So, and so I really would like to read the transcription of this, because I want to make sure that my words don't come out (--) You'll be able to understand the meaning, but I may speak in forked tongues to get there. So at the same time that this first wave of Southeast Asian immigrants were coming into Lowell, and I think that this first wave of immigration started somewhere like in the late 70s, maybe 1980, with church groups being the predominant sponsoring organizations that brought the first wave in. As that, actually I do remember because then my children were in school and the impact was clear in the public school system. But as the numbers of Southeast Asian people grew in the city so grew a sense of, I would like to say that it's like fear of the other or the unknown kind of thing. It wasn't a negative or a prejudicial sense. It was just, who are all these people, and what are they doing here in our city, and what's going on, and the resources? And so then out of that, not a whole lot different from, we're actually much more, much more civilized than some of what is happening in our country today. But out of that came a lot of urban myths and people wouldn't, I would be at like you know, parties or someone's house, or whatever, and here I am like white middle class girl in Lowell right, woman. And so people make assumptions sometimes about what they can say in front of certain groups of people based on how you look. So I would hear things like, "Do they really eat, you know, all kinds of animals?" And "Do they really keep this in their apartment?" "Do they really have twenty people living in one, you know, one-room apartment," and dadadadadada. And the code violations, and the this and the that, and the other thing. And it was really, actually it was a lot of fun. It was like I went to a costume party and I was, and so no one would know who I was, or you know, what I knew and what my experience was and then I would get to like break the urban myth. Because what I discovered, or what I learned about, first of all people would say to me, "Oh, and they get," you know, "Each person gets \$2,000 when they come here to Lowell," and you know, "We're giving them all this money for free and they're," you know, "eating our dogs" and all kinds of like really weird far out things. It would have been very easy to verify had anybody bothered to like take the time to get to know someone, but people sometimes prefer to spin the tail. So what I discovered was at the time that people, that the refugees were getting a \$200.00 stipend, or whatever, resettlement, which doesn't take one too far, right, in terms of coming here with absolutely nothing. Like no clothes, except what the sponsoring agency was able to offer you. No housing except if the church was able. Sometimes the church members would be able to

provide people housing. And then what they were doing, and this was, I don't know if this was actually a particular, I was going to say this was particularly towards the Cambodian and Laotian men, but that may not be true. It may have been true of all three groups. Was that the men were, as quickly as they were able to, buying a car and a relatively new car. And that would be another thing I'd here. "Whoah, we're giving them \$2000.00 and they're going and buying new cars and they're driving around the city, and I'm driving this old crappy car," you know, dadada. And then what they would do is buy this new car and get (--) They would wait until they knew they had a job where they were all applying to the same company, and then they would buy this new car together, like four or five or six men. And they would live, they would squeeze themselves into the most affordable housing they could find and spend the money for the car, because their rationale was, if we can't get to work, if we buy six, or three or four junks and rent a bigger apartment we may not be able to count on getting to work if it's a place you know, we're not walking to work, they were traveling to Andover, whatever, and then we'll lose our jobs and we can't let that happen. So they did that. And that was like, so smart. And you know, no one I know ever like thought that intelligently about how to get by kind of collectively instead of the individualistic society that we have. Like each person gets their money and they buy the best thing they can with their money. And their society, or at least as a result of their experience, but probably their culture prior to coming here was more collectivist, and you know, we come together as a village to support each other. And so they mirrored that in their strategy for insuring that they had employment so that they were not looking for federal, or state, or city subsidies to get by.

K: That's great. So what was the most challenging part of your job, like difficulties? Were their difficulties getting like books or teaching materials, or anything like that?

E: No, there wasn't, because it was, it was easy enough to supply my own materials once I figured out what I was doing, and improvised to be relevant to the moment. And there was no, it wasn't like you know you're teaching in a high school, or a college program and you're teaching Bio I, and the students have to take Bio 2 next so you have a certain set. (K: Right) So it was what do we need for today? And as I became more comfortable, like anyone, as you become more comfortable in your role, less insecure in whether or not you're going to be able to do it I was able to ask them to help me to develop the curriculum going forward. You know, what do we (--) So what should be on the agenda for next month and how do we build these classes? What do you want to learn? What are some of your problems? How can we use language to help you adjust those problems? So I don't know. I can't imagine what the worst part of my job was. Every day was different and every day I felt like I was doing something that mattered and that means a lot. So I would say probably the struggle to (--) There were (--) As I mentioned, the levels of prior education where the discrepancies were significant. And so there are, and then there are also individual learning styles and speeds. And so there were (--) And then their age range, that was also fairly significant. The age range was relatively significant. We had, we had young, maybe late teenage young men coming here having lost their families in many cases. And then we had a lot of older people, well older, younger than I am now, but like probably people in their 40s coming, and 30s who had babies and somehow had escaped you know, with some part of their family, or not. And so the younger people

regardless of their level of education previously were, I don't know, is it that you're more flexible to learning new things when you're younger? And then there were some people, some men in particular, you know, some women who'd never even, it was enough that their husbands would learn the language. But there were many more men in my classes than women even though, and I don't think that that gender ratio was representative of the population that was here. I think that's also very cultural, you know, going to school, but there were men that were in their 40s who had, you know, who hadn't been able to read in their native language, or were necessarily particularly articulate in their (--) You know, they were farmers and they may never have even bumped into anybody else, and so for them, to try to help them to develop the communication skills to be successful. Sometimes you knew that this person was, was going to have a really hard time if at all able to be successful in communicating enough to get a job, which was what they all wanted to do. So that was, but that's the case no matter who you're teaching, where you're teaching.

K: Right.

A: So with the women learning was there family kind of, was family holding women back from coming to the IRF?

E: No, I would not say that, because the women were usually there with their husbands. I mean they stuck together. The husband/wife unit was pretty tight because you're strangers in a new place, right. So the women didn't speak. Most of the women, most of the Cambodian Laotian women did not speak any English. So to be left home while your husband is at the International Institute meant that you were like totally unable to communicate with anybody unless you happened to be in a building with people who spoke your language. So, but they, they didn't engage in the class to the same degree that the men did. Often they were taking care of the babies. Not taking care of, because seriously the babies went in the infancy that was usually like supplied by the church. And when I think about like I know how the daughter has a baby, and you know, the baby cries and everybody jumps. And this was like (--) It's like okay baby, lie there because we have something really important to do. So you're going to adapt to the family's needs right now. It's really good parenting. But I don't think they had a confidence in themselves. I think culturally that they weren't you know, called upon. They weren't like village elders that had been female. So I think it was really primarily cultural. And I think the Vietnamese (--) We had more female Vietnamese people in our classes than we had female Cambodian or Laotian. And again that's, that has to be a direct correlation with the level of education in their country, and even the infrastructure in Vietnam prior to the war. You know, there were cities and universities, and there was far less formal education available in Laos and Cambodia at the time.

K: How big were the classes? There were like how many people do you think?

E: Twenty. As I'm thinking back on this I'm thinking that like for the intro, the survival skills, there were always, it was a pretty consistent number. Because as some people became relatively, not fluent, but fluent enough to move on to another level, or gain employment, then

the ages of people attending got older. So some of the elders that came thought, well all right, now I'll go in and see, try my hand at it. There weren't many school aged children obviously, because once they were school aged they were in school.

Another thing that I really remember clearly from both my role in the public schools and my role at the International Institute and they kind of went back and forth and blurred, is that the Southeast Asian (--) This is a generalization, but as with every other ethnic, or language linguistically diverse group that comes to this city, students and their families are offered the opportunity for whatever it happens to be called at the time ELL, ESL, bilingual education, you know, it had different names. And most of the Southeast Asian people who talked to me about that in class, the parents, because they were, because I was the teacher and they were navigating the public school system at the same time, when they spoke about it said they didn't want their children in ELL bilingual education. They wanted them mainstreamed from the start to be, and they didn't use the word immersed in the language, but that's what they (--) Because (--) And I was reminded back to my undergraduate years at UMass, I went to UMass Boston for a year and studied urban sociology while I was there. And there was theory about immigrants resettling in an urban area and the idea of the political refugee as opposed to the non-political refugee, and the idea that if you can't go back to where you came from then your motivation to adopt the new, the cultural identity of the place that you've landed as quickly as possible, and master, you know, become whatever that place is, become one of them, is stronger than if you have the options of going back home should it not work out. So I think that the parents were, wanted their kids to learn English fast and there was not going to be any like you know.

K: In the archives we've seen lots of papers trying to distinguish between political refugees and economic migrants was the other term that they used for the opposite difficulty.

E: Oh nice, nice.

K: Were you the only ESL teacher while you were there, because we have some records like of other people teaching classes. I have names. Maybe you'll know.

E: Okay, try the names.

K: Gea Pho?

E: So that must be, is that (--) That's got to be Hai's relative right, Gea Pho?

K: I would think, yah.

M: Maybe that's (--) Didn't Jackie or Carol tell us about one of the Pho's, like the wife's father worked there?

K: Oh yah.

M: Maybe that's who it is?

E: Oh okay, maybe.

K: Yah, that could be, umhm.

M: You don't recognize that name right Elise?

E: No.

Mehmed: Okay.

E: No, not the first name at all. So my (--) So I'm thinking back to timing. This isn't about the question you just asked me, but when you asked me how long I was there I know I came in like the spring of '81. Jackie left sometime maybe in '82. And Carol came in to replace her as Project Director, and I was there for probably a year with Carol. So that's about what my time frame looked like.

K: And I think what ended up happening was that ESL got transferred over to other associations. Like there was the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association.

E: Yes, yah, yup, but I don't know if that happened. I can't remember the reason I left. I can't remember whether, you know, there are certain jobs that you remember it was time to get out. This wasn't one of them. The thirty hours a week worked beautifully with my schedule of three little kids, you know. So it was ideal. So I don't know whether that the funding for that piece of the program ran out, or if other, you know, they're probably, the funding probably came in in a block, and then Jackie as the Project Manager, or Carol had to redistribute it according to needs. And maybe as other community services became available for language development we had less need to put the hours into the ESL teaching or whatever it was, bilingual.

M: The CMAA (Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association) started in 1984. (E: Okay) So it would have been after you, a year or so after.

E: Yah, yah, because I don't remember. If they were, although some of the, I do remember that some of the Cambodian men in particular, because it seemed that the Laotian, much of our Laotian population, many of the people that first were there when I was first there, seemed to have moved on to California within like a year. There was, and they probably went to, well I don't know if they went to Long Beach or not actually, because that's the first largest Cambodian, but they went to another place where there were more Laotian people. And that might have been because there were more Cambodian people coming into this city and there was this tension between the three groups. And Vietnamese people in many cases started to move out into the suburbs and/or into the suburban Lowell neighborhoods more quickly because they were employed at a higher level probably because of their educational experience.

K: Right.

M: Did you experience, was there any kind of minor conflicts between the groups?

E: So with the, you know, so you have a group of young guys in there. There were, there was a little bit of, there was no over conflict, there was no physical conflict that ever like happened, or that we were even aware of. And we got like the stories of what was going on in the community, but there was a little bit of the snipping behind the back, you know, people's back about, you know, this group or that group from another group, from the men. The woman couldn't speak enough English to be able to say that necessarily.

M: And when you were doing ESL classes were all three groups in at the same classroom?

E: Umhm, yeah.

M: You didn't have a Lao class and a Cambodian.

E: No, no, no. No, no, no.

M: Okay.

E: But then as we offered different levels of language development services, self-selection would cause the groups to be a little bit more dominated by one ethnic, one ethnicity or another.

M: Were there any problems getting enough like money for getting books or anything like that over the budget?

E: You know I don't, it didn't, I don't remember it being a problem. It may have been that we didn't have money for books, but it wasn't anything I was looking for anyway. I felt like the best teaching materials were the materials that were (--) I wasn't teaching like a, I wasn't teaching the equivalent of like French I, or English I, (K: Right) or anything like that. I was teaching how to get yourself going here in this community. So there are probably some text books, but they would not have been contextualized to Lowell, or the Merrimack Valley in the same way that I could do it with the resources I had.

M: So did you create your own handouts?

E: Yeah, yeah, umhm.

M: Do you remember specific stuff that you might have created for the curriculum?

E: I just, I remember using want ads, job ads, and rental ads, having to read the language of those ads in order. And then we would role play like what's the response to this? What's the written response? What's the interviewing with the perspective landlord? Because, because I think that people came in with (--) Many of the refugees came in with their rent, their rental situation or the living situation already established, whether it was through the support of the church group, or whatever the resettlement agency was. But they were not, I don't recall, they were looking to become quickly independent, which meant having to navigate like the market rental, the market rate rental market. So it was that kind. It was just in time language skills.

K: Yah. Did people have to repeat classes ever if they were (--)

E: You got to (--) You just stayed in a level. A lot of the times people would go to like multiple levels. They would just, I think they felt like if I just, even if I can't. So like the levels were the survival, and they were the like there was the general readiness for job application process, and then there was the more specific language development for people that were going to work. And so let's say there were three levels of language class, three different topics as oppose to levels. It was never called that, but. Then somebody who really was at the survival language level might still sit in the other classes figuring I'm bound to pick up something, you know. The people that came to class were hungry to learn.

K: What was the most enjoyable part of your job?

E: The getting to, getting beyond the (--) They put (--) Teachers were on a pedestal. In at least, perhaps in all three of those countries, but definitely in Cambodia and Laos, because there was so little education available, the teacher, whether it was back in their village, or their town, or their city, or and then here was the, like up there with the Monk. So you know, clearly coming out of having taught at the Lowell Public, in the Lowell Public Schools, or you know, here at Middlesex that's not the same. We don't elevate our teachers to such worship status. And so having to (--) So at first it was kind of like, whoah, but you can't, you can't really help people until you can help them to become self-sufficient and engage with them to the level that they'll share what they need. So that you can help them until there's this trust, and there can't be trust between like a God and a person. So once we got passed that, to like I would have people to my house. I brought my kids to the, to the International Institute as did Jackie. So we kind of (--) And we had like little social events and stuff, and we would bring our families. And so that kind of put everybody on the same footing you know. And then, and then the people that we were working with would share with us like what was going on in their life, what their life had been like. Very, I heard very few people got into (--) First of all they may not have had the English language capability, but second of all they may not have wanted to go too deep into the horrors that they had lived through. They would talk about being (--) Many, actually the filter, or the funnel through which at least the Cambodian and the Laotian people came was Thailand. So they had spent time in the camps in Thailand waiting to be resettled in another country. And so they would talk about that. And they would talk a little bit about like getting to Thailand and having to escape, but they didn't get into the deep pain that they had experienced in their lives too much. So, but as they talked about their lives and what they hoped for, and who they

were and stuff, and how they felt about this new place, that was the most fun. And it was also really fun when somebody came back and said, "I got a job," you know, and you think I had something to do with you getting that job. So.

K: Do you have any more stories that you want to share, or were there any interesting people that you can remember that really stuck out?

E: Well I remember, I was thinking about this working earlier today. I can remember the, whether they were informal or formal, community leaders for the Cambodian and Laotian community at the time. I can picture the woman, and so right there is a difference. There was a Vietnamese woman, young woman, well I don't know. So I was, you know, twenty-eight. So, but she was not forty-five, who was the, with Hai [Ba] Pho and Lan Pho as the like penultimate leaders of that community, there was a woman there and actually that could have been their daughter. I'm wondering if (--)

M: Oh they have a daughter. Yah, I don't know.

E: I think they had a daughter. Well it could have been (--). It wasn't a man. There was a woman. It could have been their like somebody they just was close, they were close to, whatever, but she was kind of the representative of the community for us there. But I can't remember her name and I racked my brain this morning. I'll see if she's in any of my pictures and I'll email you the pictures. I'll snap them in. But (--)

M: Elise, if we could borrow the photos we can scan at a high resolution.

E: The actual one? Okay, sure.

M: And we'll get them right back to you in two weeks or something?

E: Happy to. Umhm. They'll all be (--). I have everything in photograph albums chronologically from those years. And so I just, I'll only need to pull out like three albums and I can go through those and I'll find those pictures.

M: Okay, wonderful.

E: But Khamson Silavong was the Laotian community representative leader. Like everything went through him. And he lived not too far from me in the Highlands. He had two sons and one of them developed leukemia while he was here, but he was treated and survived it then. And because we lived in the highlands I would bump into him on an ongoing basis. And then the Cambodian leader was Socheat Uch, and he also lived here. He was, well he might have been older, or he might have just lived a harder life and looked older, you know, but he, I still would see him. And I probably haven't seen, I haven't seen Khamson in fifteen years anyway, and I probably haven't seen Socheat in that long, but I would bump into them all the time downtown at like Folk Festival or whatever. And they, like they were the leaders in their

community. And both of those men had been farmers in their country. So they were, but they had like survived and gotten jobs and had families. And their children went to school and were thriving. And so it was all real good.

K: Could you spell those names or [unclear]?

E: Yah, I think I can. So Khamson was K H A M S O N E, Silavong S I L A V O N G.

K: What was it? S I L V.

E: S I L, Sila.

M: A

E: A

M: V O N G

K: A V O N G, okay.

E: And Socheat was S O C H, so I'm pronouncing it phonetically. It probably sounded nothing like that. S O C H E A T, and then his last name was U C H if I'm not mistaken. And I was really pleased with myself when I pulled those names out of my head today. So those two men were a part of my life. I have pictures of I think both of them in my albums, but (M: Okay) definitely I have a picture of Socheat. So you'll get those.

M: Great.

K: So is there anyone that you've kept in touch with from working there?

E: Um, no, not (--) I mean from the student population no, but again living in the Highlands my kids went to school at the Daley. A significant (--) My kids' friends, like so my kids new their kids kind of thing. So I would like bump into the parents at school functions and stuff like that. And then like all other associations after a while they kind of fade away. Well not all other, but except for your closest people. So no, I haven't stayed in touch with them.

K: Did you see the services that the IRF offered change at all while you were there?

E: No, not during. You know, we adapted to the needs of the population, but I don't recall being impacted by, but again I could have left that job because the funds were, you know, cut back so that my hours were going to be too small, and I can't remember that. But while we were there, I mean I'm sure that, and I didn't worry about the budgets first of all. Okay, I got the fun job of working with the people. I think we had a job counselor too. I think we had somebody who was like directly involved in making the connections between the companies

and the, our students. And I don't remember who that was, but I'm pretty sure that, I'm positive that position existed because I didn't do that, but that person and I communicated. And it's too bad that they're not even coming to mind. It wasn't Maria Cunha either. Jackie or Carol didn't mention anybody in a position like that?

K: I'm trying to think.

M: I'm not sure. We might have it in the archives, you know, so.

E: Okay, yah.

K: Yah, [unclear].

E: I forget why I went down that road of that question about the job counselor. You had asked me something that made me (--)

K: Oh, different services that were offered?

E: Yeah, so those, so those were the basic services that we (--). Oh, and so Jackie and Carol as the Project Directors, or Project Managers, whatever their titles were had to worry about the funding and like how to balance the funding among the services that needed to be offered. We also did like language around the hospital, like medical situations, and also around, we did kind of informal child rearing. How to translate your child bearing practices to this new. So they just, you know, they said to me you have this much time to, we can pay you for this much. And then I kind of got to go with what I felt like the community needed in that. You know, what a great job!

K: [Unclear]

M: Did the community suffer and racism that they brought to your attention when they first showed up?

E: They were not able (--). I'm sure Hai and Lan would have been able to articulate that and there's probably some of the, some, many of the Vietnamese people, but they stopped coming to the English language classes when they didn't need those services. So the people I was working with, and for the most part the people who are using the services of the refugees, the International Institute were people who were in need still, hadn't made the launch into employment and stable housing. So that would have precluded them from, now that doesn't mean they wouldn't have articulated if it had been rampant. I never mentioned to them what I would hear from white people in the city, but they never said anything about that to me. And I don't think there would have been, there wouldn't have been in a conversation where that would have been you know, spoken, allowed. And I don't think they would have necessarily been familiar enough with our, with our cultural cues to read people's expressions or, and plus

they were coming out of such difficult circumstances that probably as long as you weren't like being overtly aggressive towards them it was fine.

M: Yah.

K: Did working for the IRF change your perspective on anything, such as working with [word unclear]?

E: Oh yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah, are you kidding? It has contributed to why I went back to teaching in Lowell. In '88 I went back to teaching in Lowell. So I did some like other stuff that had nothing to do with anything except making a little part-time money, real estate and stuff like that for a few years when my, when I had three kids in daycare that was just very difficult to afford on the salaries of those kinds of jobs that I'm talking about right now, but then I went back to teaching and I stayed in Lowell. And then when I left the Lowell Public Schools I did some consulting for a year, but I wanted to come back to the urban environment where the work that you do empowers the next, you know, the people who need the empowerment and they're most often the most recent refugees here, the cultures, the incoming countries have changed, but the need hasn't changed. So that's why I came back here. So I guess, yah, it did.

K: So what did you teach when you were teaching at the schools?

E: I was, actually I was a computer teacher.

K: Oh! Is that what you do now?

E: No, now I'm an administrator, but I (--) Then I started teaching psychology here, but I actually (--) It was a very fun time to be a computer teacher as the beginning of the like the infusion of computers into schools in the late 80s. And so I got a job and (--) I got a job, my first job at St. Margaret's and they were paying six thousand dollars a year. So that was 1988. And so someone said to me, "You should apply for that." And I said, "I don't know anything about computers. I've never used a computer." They said, "Yah, but they're paying six thousand dollars. Who are they going to get that knows anything about a computer for six thousand dollars?" So I went in and I got the job, and I like self-taught, you know, figured it out. So then the Lowell Public Schools got a lot of money to build, to outfit their schools with technology. And I applied there and got a job there because I had this experience. And what I remember doing with that, that I think is directly related to my work at the International Institute, I was at the Wang School for a while and my computer classroom lab was right next to one of the bilingual, it was the seventh grade bilingual classroom. And the Wang was a Hispanic Magnet School. So you were either a Cambodian or a Hispanic Magnet School at that time. And so if you needed bilingual services you went to the schools that provided those kinds of services in your language.

M: And where was the Cambodian Magnet School?

E: The Daley. So this was a Middle School. So the Daley, and the Sullivan, and the Wang were, and I believe the Robinson were Hispanic Magnets. The Daley, and the Butler, and the Bartlett maybe were the Cambodian. So anyway, so there's this classroom of seventh grade Hispanic bilingual, needing bilingual services students, and they were predominantly male students at that point. And seventh grade is a very like ugly time in a kid's life and they were, many of them were a lot older than like the typical, or the traditional U.S. seventh grader. They had either left school, or come in from another country late. So this was like a group of fifteen year old testosterone ridden young men who were not turned on to school at all, or they wouldn't necessarily be in bilingual like not mainstreamed. (K: Right) So my computer lab was right next door to them. And so, so the bilingual classes came in separately one at a time for computer classes. And there were some of these young men who like really took to the technology. Well back in the 80s it seemed like the boys took to the technology. I don't know why that is, because I'm like a wicked feminist, but it seemed like I don't know, girls didn't have the confidence to approach it and troubleshoot, and be willing to risk making a mistake and the boys did. Anyway, so these young men, a lot of them got really engaged in it, and like even though they didn't have mastery of the language they could master the technology, then networking and that kind of stuff. And I would get all these calls all day long from the teachers who would be like, you know, people like me, middle aged at the time, or whatever, somewhere, white women, and they would say, "Oh, I can't, I need help with my computer." And my job was to teach students, not to teach them. And so I developed a technology what do you call them? It was like my tech team, and they were the seventh grade bilingual students who were always in trouble right. So they were always in the principal's office. But then all of a sudden they (--). So when a teacher call and needed help I would ask the teacher of this bilingual class next door if I could have a student to serve as a tech team person to go out and help the instructor, the teacher. And so he loved the idea. I mean he and I kind of collaborated on this idea. And all of a sudden (--). So he started keeping attendance records for the rest of the year, and he said, "My students had perfect attendance for the rest of the year", because they were always hoping that they were going to be the ones that were going down. Because like what a difference in the power shift of being the person who's showing your teacher who usually thinks you're an idiot, like you know, "What's the matter with you, you're always goofing off," and you're showing them how to use a computer is like so cool. So I would say that that like whole idea of empowering people to, that the language limitation isn't like, you have something to offer. That came out of my work at the International Institute, or maybe it was there and the International Institute fed it, and then.

K: That's great.

M: Great story.

K: Do you have any more questions?

M: No.

K: I think I'm all set.

E: Okay.

M: Oh I got one more question. So was there a sense of community at the Indochinese Refugee Foundation.

E: Yeah.

M: How? Describe it for us.

E: Amongst the staff and the people that we served there was a sense of (--) We were friends, like the people who worked. You can't work in environments like that, and you're not sitting behind a desk and being autocratic, bureaucratic. You're like all pitching in. And so we all like, I don't mean we were friends like we didn't necessarily, well sometimes we did actually hang out together, but we were just like all collaborative and collegial, and bringing families in. And so then the, the refugee population, the immigrant population were like got really (--) They loved when we would bring our kids in, and our kids and their kids would like hang out together and stuff. And so you ended up caring about each other in ways beyond any kind of like a service provider organization. Like in ways beyond what happens in a classroom, in a school. Not that the teacher doesn't care about the people, but this was much more holistic. Like you're working with the whole person, you're not just teaching them some subject for six hours a day. This is their family. This is what's going on in their life. And our services allowed them to talk about that and then address all the things that were their issues. So yah, so community evolves out of that I think.

M: Um. Elise, any final thoughts about your time with IRF?

E: No, but if I think of any when I send you the pictures I'll jot down anything else I can think of.

M: Yah, if you can connect with Kale and maybe bring the photos?

E: Yah, I have her email. I'll do that.

M: She can pick them up, we'll scan them.

K: Sure!

E: Okay. Okay, I can do, yah, okay. Sure.

M: We'll give them back to you. That will be great.

E: Looking at the pictures might remind me of some stories.

K: Yah.

M: Okay. Good. Well thanks very much for your time.

K: Well thank you.

E: Okay, my pleasure. It was fun. It was fun to relive that.

Interview ends
jw