Lily Trieu

October 13, 2022 46:05

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Activism, Asian Texans for Justice, Assimilation, Chinese-Americans, COVID-19, Culture, Diversity and inclusivity, Education, ESL (English as a Second Language), Family dynamics, First-generation Americans, Immigrant parents, Immigration, Language, Model minorities, Politics, Race, Racism, Refugees, The University of Texas at Austin, TX - Alief, TX - Houston, TX - Sugar Land, Vietnam

SPEAKERS

Lily Trieu, Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz

V **Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz** 00:04

It's October 13, 2022. My name is Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz, and I'm interviewing Lily Trieu in Austin, Texas for the Gone to Texas oral history Project. Lily, can you introduce yourself, share your pronouns, share where you're located today, specifically, and also the pronunciation of your last name. I want to make sure I'm saying it correctly.

L **Lily Trieu** 00:30

Yeah, absolutely. So my name is Lily Trieu. You nailed it. It's Lily Trieu, pretty straightforward. My pronouns are she/her. I live in Austin, Texas, in East Austin. And yeah, excited to be here.

V **Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz** 00:46

Wonderful. Could you share what your ethnic background is, please?

L **Lily Trieu** 00:50

Yeah, so my ethnic background is actually sometimes a little complicated to explain. So I identify as a Chinese-American. Culturally, linguistically, I embrace Chinese as my ethnic roots, but my parents were refugees from Vietnam. So my parents were both born and raised in Vietnam and moved to the US as refugees in early 80s. However, my grandparents, both sets, fled China and moved to Vietnam to avoid famine and poverty. So I always tell folks, I come from generations of trauma and of warfare, so there are elements of Vietnamese culture in our lives just by default of my parents growing up in Vietnam, but I identify as Chinese-American.

V **Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz** 01:48

What kind of work did your parents do in Vietnam, and then here as well?

L Lily Trieu 01:52

Yeah, so my parents, they both come from really large families. My dad is one of ten kids, and my mom is one of seven. So they grew up pretty impoverished, and they came to us when they were relatively young. I think my mom was only nineteen when she left Vietnam, and my dad would have been just a few years older. So he would have been in his early twenties. My dad actually left the household really, really young, when he was seven or eight, to basically be a house boy for a wealthier family. So he would basically work in a wealthier family's home, basically run errands for them, do little odds and ends for them. This is pretty common in Vietnam. When you have that many kids, you can't always feed all of them when you're low income, so you'll sometimes send your kids off to live with wealthier families, so that they have a place to sleep, they have food on the table, and they earn their keep by working for a wealthier family. So my dad did that when he was really young.

L Lily Trieu 02:50

And then another really common career in the 70s and 80s was, he would sell things to American soldiers. He'd sell cigarettes, he'd sell little knick-knacks to American soldiers. So he did that for a little bit. So odds and ends. Neither of them are very educated. My mom, however, my grandparents on my mom's side, were very strict, so she didn't really work outside the house. She was in school for as long as she could, and then when the war was over, and the communists took over the country, my grandparents did not want her to go to a communist-run school. So they actually pulled her out of school when she was in middle school. So she stopped receiving an education and just helped out at home. And my grandparents would sell foods in the morning during breakfast time, and she would just help out at home. So that was what their lives were before they came to the US.

L Lily Trieu 03:42

And then when they came to the US, their very first job in the US, they were a minimum wage factory worker at a manufacturing plant in Chicago, where they first settled. And then they did that for several years, before finally making the decision to move down to Texas, where they learned the convenience store trade and saved up money to be able to own their own convenience store, which is the industry that I grew up in, and they did that until they retired.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 04:14

Do you know what year your parents came to the US, and did they come to Texas directly, or did they make any stops?

L Lily Trieu 04:22

Yeah, so my parents both landed in the US, I think around 1980. It was a pretty long and harrowing journey for both of them. They were both boat people. My parents actually got

married in the US, so they weren't married in Vietnam. I'm not even sure that they knew each other in Vietnam, actually. So they came separately in different ways, but they're both boat people. My mom made it to the US by way of Malaysia and another country, I think. She had to make two stops, and she was in refugee camps for quite some time in those other countries. So it took her eighteen months from leaving Vietnam to making it to the US. My dad had a similar journey. I think his trip was by way of Indonesia. They had refugee camps there for the Vietnamese refugees.

L Lily Trieu 05:03

And when they first came to us, both of them settled in Chicago first, and that's where they met and got married was in Chicago. So they were sponsored, actually, by I believe, a church or religious nonprofit organization that was helping to resettle Vietnamese refugees. So they were the ones that were able to help my parents get housing, get a job, settle into life in Chicago. As you might imagine, for two people who grew up in tropical climate Vietnam, living in Chicago was really hard, especially during the long winters. So it didn't take too long, I think they were only in Chicago for four or five years before they said, "Yeah, we can't take this," before moving down to Texas, I believe, in 1990. I think '90 or '91, they moved to Texas.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 05:50

Wonderful. Could you talk about your childhood?

L Lily Trieu 05:55

Yeah. So I have very, very vague memories of being a kid in Chicago. My parents both had many siblings, but the majority of them weren't in the US with them when I was a kid. My mom had a couple of sisters who were able to join her. My maternal grandmother was eventually able to come to the US and join us. But my dad only had one brother who made the journey with him to the US. So despite having a ton of aunts and uncles, [I] didn't really know many of them growing up, and there weren't other kids around. I didn't have cousins growing up.

L Lily Trieu 06:31

Both my parents don't speak English, so by association, I didn't speak English. So I remember being a kid and not watching the shows other kids watch. I didn't watch *Sesame Street* or *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* and just shows like that, because I didn't know English. And I remember just being a child that was always surrounded by adults when I was younger, and really, I think, not assimilated to American culture. So when we made the move from Chicago to Houston, all of a sudden things changed for me, because my mom did have a brother who was in Houston, who had, by then, three kids. So now I have three cousins that were just there all the time.

L Lily Trieu 07:21

But we had family friends. Houston was just a very different Asian American community. And Houston was also where I started school, really. I was starting first grade and really needing to

learn the language. And I just remember, honestly, struggling a bit as a kid with my Asian identity and learning what it means to be American, because the concept of assimilation didn't exist at home. I think one of the things that was the hardest, this is the story I would tell folks. At home, my parents called me by my Chinese name. So my Chinese name - so Lily's my English name. I have a whole different name, my different Chinese name. So no one called me Lily at home, because we all spoke Chinese at home.

L Lily Trieu 08:06

So I remember being in school, and I would cry whenever I had to go to school, because I couldn't understand anyone. I didn't know the language. I didn't understand the culture. And my teachers would call my name, and I wouldn't answer because I didn't know that was my name. So I just remember my early childhood, kindergarten, first grade, all the way through second grade, just really struggling in school, and really struggling linguistically, culturally. Assimilation was really hard for me in those early, early years.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 08:34

How did you overcome that? I have a daughter who's four, so sometimes she'll complain about going to school, but I'm just wondering, your experience is even different from my daughter's because you're having language barriers and cultural barriers. So how did you overcome that?

L Lily Trieu 08:52

I think I was lucky in a few senses. So I had my cousins, and I think my cousins, they were older than I was. So I think they did help me a bit with the assimilation pieces, just having other kids around me. I also felt lucky, because I grew up in southwest Houston. So my parents moved to Houston, we settled in southwest Houston, I lived in the Alief neighborhood. So anybody who's from Houston knows the Alief neighborhood. It's just this beautifully diverse community. It's just incredibly diverse. So one of the critiques I have about our public school systems in Texas now is that our ESL courses are really only catered towards Spanish speakers. And that was the case then too, and that continues to be the case. But I do feel like despite that, I did have a lot of support as an ESL student at my school, because I think Alief was the kind of school district that was equipped to deal with kids that came from a whole variety of countries and who speak a whole variety of languages, even if Spanish was their core competency.

L Lily Trieu 09:55

And the fact that there were lots of other Asian kids around me. So while it was difficult, and while it was scary, it wasn't necessarily lonely. I didn't necessarily always feel isolated. I had cousins, I had resources, I had, I think, a school system that genuinely worked to meet my needs. And there's also a cultural aspect that I'm the oldest in my family. I think being the eldest child, and having parents that don't speak the language, there was just this expectation of, "Well, that's my job. It's my job to learn the language, and it's my job to navigate this foreign country for them."

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 10:37

You talk about the different neighborhoods that you grew up in. How have you seen your community change over time? It could be geographic and also a neighborhood community in the sense of your Asian, Vietnamese community.

L Lily Trieu 10:54

Yeah, so I grew up in Alief most of my early childhood, all the way up until about high school. And then high school, my parents made the decision to move to Sugar Land, which is just outside of Houston, still adjacent to the Alief neighborhood, so still very close. But at the time, this would have been in the late 90s, early 2000s, at the time, Sugar Land was the very coveted, desirable place to live, because it had better schools. The difference though, is Sugar Land at that time was still very affluent, very White, very conservative community. It was still, largely, a very small town, very small suburb of Houston.

L Lily Trieu 11:33

And since then 'til now, we're talking the course of decades, that community has completely changed. So Sugar Land is in Fort Bend County, and Fort Bend County is one of the, if not the most diverse, counties in the entire country. More languages are spoken in Fort Bend County than anywhere else in the country. So I think that's been incredible to watch and to see, because I remember when we first moved from Alief to Fort Bend or to Sugar Land, I was one of the few non-White kids in my school. And that was jarring and difficult as somebody who grew up in Alief where [almost] everybody identified as a person of color. There were very few people who weren't a Black or Brown student.

L Lily Trieu 12:15

And then I think that experience really defined how I took up space and how I approached things later on in life. I went on to University of Texas at Austin for my undergraduate degree, and UT Austin has a student population of over 50,000 students, incredibly diverse. There's just students upon students upon students, and you'll definitely find your tribe, and you'll definitely find diversity. So that felt very comforting for me. It reminded me a little bit of my years in Alief, but then in my adult life, my first job after college was in Wisconsin, and not even a city like Milwaukee or Madison. I was in a small town in Wisconsin. I mean, small town by Houston standards. It was a town of 50,000 people. So I used to always joke, "I could fit two of these towns in the UT football stadium."

L Lily Trieu 13:03

So I moved to Wisconsin right after college from my first job, and it was 95% Caucasian. I tell people all the time I studied abroad when I was in college, and moving to Wisconsin was more culture shock than the semester I spent in Hong Kong, as someone who grew up in Alief. So I

think just as a kid who experienced the depth of diversity, really sees the lack of it as they grow up and move into different spaces. You're really highly cognizant of spaces where there's a lack of diversity. And it's something that I think about now in my current life as an adult.

L Lily Trieu 13:46

I bought my first home two years ago. One of the things I looked at was how diverse was this neighborhood, because I don't want to live in a really homogenous neighborhood. I want to live in a neighborhood where people come from different places and have different lived experiences. So I do think that my parents' choice to live in southwest Houston very much shaped my worldview on diversity over time. Now, my viewpoints on being Asian American, and what that means, and the complexity of the Vietnamese culture and the Chinese culture, and coming from generations of trauma and warfare, that identity has been shaped by many more factors, and has been much more complicated over the years.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 14:28

Thank you so much for that really expansive answer, Lily. You're doing so wonderful. Can you share what a typical day was like whenever you were growing up?

L Lily Trieu 14:41

Yeah, so I'll talk about my primary years in middle school and high school. So we grew up relatively low income in my early, early childhood. My parents were still finding their way. They were new in this country. But by middle school and high school, my parents had established themselves as small business owners. Life was still really difficult. They weren't always able to hire help, so they had to work seven days a week, 365 days a year. But we did have enough financial security to where we didn't have to worry where our next meal came from, we didn't have to worry about having a roof over our heads, which was a bit of a difference in my teenage years as compared to my earlier years.

L Lily Trieu 15:23

So by the time I hit middle school and high school, I think assimilation was a big thing for my parents. They really cared that my sister and I - and it was just the two of us, and her and I are seven years apart. My parents really desired for my sister and I to have the opportunity - and every immigrant family says, right - they want their kids to have the opportunities, and they want them to have a thriving future that they themselves weren't able to have, because of whatever reasons. So what that looked like for me is incredibly high academic standards. I think this is a little stereotypical of Asian American families. My parents very much expected me to get As in every class. If I came home with a 98, they would say, "What happened to the other two points?" So I definitely felt academic pressure. I don't know - it wasn't a pain point for me, I don't think. It was frustrating to have high expectations, but for the most part, I think I did well, and I tolerated it well.

L Lily Trieu 16:23

But in addition to academics, it was made very clear very early, I was gonna go to college. So in middle school and in high school, extracurricular was important to me, because you hear the anecdotes that if you join clubs, if you take on leadership roles, it's gonna help you go to college. If you volunteer - everyone tells you this magic formula to get into college, so as a teenager, I tried to subscribe to that. In addition to that, my mom wanted me to assimilate in other ways, so one thing she did was she enrolled me in ballet classes. She thought ballet was just a very respectable, civilized, a very nice activity for a young lady to be involved in. And because of that, I developed a very deep love for dance as a young person. So I'd be in school Monday through Friday, I'd have homework, I'd have club meetings, I'd do a lot of things after school. And then, from Friday night until Sunday evening, I was in dance class. I would dance sometimes ten, fifteen hours over the course of a weekend in addition to homework and all of that.

L Lily Trieu 17:25

In addition to dance classes, my mom also felt really strongly that I maintain knowledge and understanding of my Asian heritage. So I had Chinese school Sunday morning, usually. I hated Chinese school, because that meant there was homework I'd have to do over the weekends to prepare for Sunday Chinese school. And then there was a period of time where math started to get hard. I think once we got into algebra and geometry, I was like, "Oh, math is starting to get hard for me." So my mom put me in math tutoring every Saturday morning. So effectively, I was in school Monday through Friday, math tutoring Saturday morning, Chinese school Sunday morning, and then dance all afternoon. And that was basically my life from middle school all the way through high school.

L Lily Trieu 18:06

And in high school, I got more complicated because I was in debate, so I had debate tournaments. I lived a very full and productive life. I didn't have much free time as a kid. So even during my summers, when I didn't have dance classes, or Chinese school, or whatever, I was expected to help out at the store, at the convenience store. So I would wake up every morning and go to work with my mom and help my dad out the store, and I did that all summer long. And those were my formative teenage years that I can remember.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 18:41

Wow, your schedule as a child sounds like my schedule now as an adult, just the Tetris of moving everything around.

L Lily Trieu 18:48

It was a little intense, yeah.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 18:52

What do you think about that? Looking back on that time, do you feel like it prepared you for being really organized in your adult life? Do you wish you had more time? Just what do you think about that?

L Lily Trieu 19:04

I think it's complicated, and I think most people think back to their childhood, and they're always like, "These are the things that made me better, or these are the things that maybe are the reason why I'm in therapy today." And I think that's how I feel. There are elements of my childhood that I do think make me someone who appreciates hard work, someone who has really good time management skill, someone who has no problem filling in my days. I am a person who is very rarely bored. I don't find myself bored very often. There's always something I can be doing or should be doing.

L Lily Trieu 19:39

But I also think the byproduct of that is I think sometimes I overemphasize productivity as a way to define my worth, which is not a super healthy way of thinking about yourself. I also think that I have an inability to relax sometimes. I do have a hard time of just clearing my day and taking a day to do nothing. Doing nothing is very difficult for me. I also think I did miss out on some elements of childhood. I don't have a lot of memories of just loitering around in the summertime, or chasing the ice cream truck, or just having fun with my peers. There just wasn't a ton of that. There was some, but that's not the core memory when I think back to my childhood.

L Lily Trieu 20:24

But I also think my experience and my sister's experience were very different, because we're seven years apart. And her life wasn't nearly as regimented as mine, and my parents didn't put nearly as much pressure on her as they did on me. My parents were much more assimilated with American culture by the time she came along. So her and I grew up very differently. So I do understand that a lot of my experiences are by circumstance. My parents didn't necessarily choose, or they didn't want to necessarily parent me a certain way. They were just responding to the reality that they were living in a foreign country in a culture that they really just didn't understand. And that must have been scary to raise a young girl in a culture you don't understand.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 21:10

Yeah, yeah, I can imagine so. So you mentioned that you went to UT Austin, can you talk about what you studied?

L Lily Trieu 21:18

Yeah, so I moved to Austin in 2004. And if you had asked me in that moment, I would have told you, "Yeah, I know exactly what I want to do." Looking back, I had no idea. I grew up with very stereotypical expectations of, "A successful career is to be a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer." And none of these career paths felt right for me and my skill sets. So as someone who struggled with trying to figure out what I could do, that I thought I'd be successful in, that would also meet the expectations of my family, and even the internal expectations I'm setting for myself, and in terms of my earning potential and all that, I struggled.

L Lily Trieu 22:00

So when I went to UT, I ended up being a business major. I end up studying marketing. And I really picked marketing for, now I think back, very superficial reasons. I originally thought I wanted to go into public relations, because I was a very chatty, extroverted, outgoing person. So I thought, "Public relations sounds great for me." I didn't really understand public relations. But then when I started to research UT, everyone was like, "Oh, they have a great business school." So I thought, "Oh okay, well maybe I'll try to get into the business school." So I looked at what was offered in the business school, and I was like, "Yeah, definitely not finance, definitely not accounting." And I was able to process of elimination, narrow down some of these majors. And marketing felt closest to public relations. So I thought, "Okay, great. I'm just gonna double major in marketing and public relations. That's what I'll do."

L Lily Trieu 22:51

So then I joined UT, and I decided marketing was the thing I wanted to do. And I went to an information session for this company within my first couple of months on campus, and it was Procter and Gamble. So they're this big, giant consumer goods conglomerate. And I remember sitting in that presentation. They pulled up a slide, and there were a hundred brands on the slide, just all the brands they have across the world. And I remember being eighteen and just completely floored, like, "Oh my god, this one company owns all of these brands?" And I didn't put two and two together at the time, but now I think back, and I'm like, "Of course brands was something that I was gonna resonate with, because I grew up in a convenience store." That's what I did all day was I helped my mom, stock the shelves. My parents were not Americanized, they didn't understand American culture, but they understood brands, because they had to. They had to know what brands to carry in the store, because they had to know what would sell. So of course, now I look back, and I'm like, "It all makes sense."

L Lily Trieu 23:48

But basically, that moment, my first semester in college, after attending that presentation, I decided, "This is what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna work in the consumer goods industry." And now I look back, and it's not because I did a lot of self-discovery. It's not because I did a lot of reflection and thinking. It's because it's what I knew. It was by circumstance. I grew up in the convenience store business, so what my family was exposed to were big American brands. I chose these majors arbitrarily without really having an understanding of what these careers meant, and then I picked the first thing that felt familiar to me and decided that was my career. So that was what my college experience and picking a major really felt like.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 24:31

And since your graduation, can you talk about like what your career pathway has looked like and what work you're doing now?

L Lily Trieu 24:40

Yeah, so I did pursue that path for almost a decade. I worked in the consumer goods industry, and it's amazing that I did it for as long as I did. So I graduated from college in 2008 and moved to Wisconsin to work for Kimberly-Clark, which is another big consumer brands company. They make Kleenex and Huggies and just these really big brands that Americans and people all around the world know. And I work there and in a couple of other places for, I think, nine years, almost ten. And I worked in a variety of functions. I did supply chain work and data analytics. And then ultimately, in the last several years, I worked in sales and account management, which still felt very aligned to my personality, working in sales and being really extroverted, working with people.

L Lily Trieu 25:29

But in the last few years of my stint in this industry, I really started to feel restless. I started to think to myself, "Is this what I'm gonna do for the rest of my career?" I think I was right around thirty, and I thought, "I've got at least another thirty, thirty-five years of working, maybe more. Is this what I want to do for the rest of my life?" And I knew clearly the answer was no. It was fun, I was successful, I was making pretty good money for someone at my age. And I probably could have stayed in the industry for the rest of my career if I wanted to, but I just knew inside me that this was not what I wanted. This was not the legacy I wanted to leave behind.

L Lily Trieu 26:12

So it wasn't until my late twenties, early thirties, that I really had to do that really tough work of reflection and asking questions of, "What do I want to do? What do I care about? What do I want to do with my time and my energy and my talents?" And that was, I think, the first time in my entire life, I gave myself space to do that, and to answer that question just for myself, and not in the back of my head thinking, "How do I pick things that will meet the needs of my parents and meet their expectations and all of that." And it was during that time that I really started to think about race, and diversity, and equity. And I was able to pinpoint so many points in my career where the lack of diversity made me feel like I didn't belong, or that gave me very low job satisfaction, or that I thought was a really bad corporate culture.

L Lily Trieu 27:09

And so initially, I thought, "Okay, well maybe I want to do work in that. Maybe I want to stay in the corporate space, but I want to do work around diversity, equity, and inclusion." And even then I didn't really know what that meant. I just knew it was something that I was interested in. So I decided, "What I'm gonna do is I'm gonna go to grad school, and take some time for me, really spend a couple of years in grad school and work on my professional pivot." So I applied

to get an MBA, and I wanted to go back to UT. My partner was living in Austin. I wanted to be in the same city as him. I wanted to stay in Texas. So I thought, "Okay, I'm gonna go back to UT." By then I was living back in Houston. I'd moved around a little bit. I was back in Houston at the time, and I thought, "Okay, I'm gonna applay UT Austin, I'm going to apply to the MBA program with this thought of, 'I'm gonna be a human capital consultant. I'm gonna help people figure out organizational strategy, and diversity and equity programs.'"

L Lily Trieu 28:00

So I applied to UT Austin's MBA program, and they're a great program. And I applied, and I got wait-listed. And I thought, "Okay, well dang it. Now I might not get in, so now what am I gonna do?" And right around that time, this was 2015 when I was applying, and we were gearing up for the 2016 presidential election. And up until this point, I'd always been opinionated. If you had asked me what political party I was affiliated with, or my position on policy positions, I would tell you directly what I felt. I definitely had a position. But I wasn't a regular voter. I wasn't a reliable voter. I didn't participate civically in a consistent way. But it was 2015, we were leading up to the primaries in 2016, and I thought, "You know what? I think I'm gonna volunteer." I thought, "How cool would it be to be a part of the movement that elected our first female president?" I just thought it'd be a cool thing to do, as I'm in this process of self-discovery. Silly me, I thought this was gonna be a fun experience.

L Lily Trieu 29:06

So all throughout 2016, I'm still trying to figure out what I'm gonna do. I got waitlisted, so I don't know about this whole grad school thing anymore. I'm like, "Now maybe law school." I didn't know. I knew I was gonna pivot, I didn't know pivot to what, so in the meantime, I was gonna volunteer for the Hillary Clinton campaign. So I did that for all of 2016. I just phone banked every weekend, I just helped them with whatever I could in Houston. And then in the summer of 2016, I got off the waitlist. So UT called and said, "We'd like to invite you to enroll. You've been accepted off the waitlist," which I didn't see coming. So now I'm like, "Crap, I don't know what to do."

L Lily Trieu 29:44

So long story longer, I decided to defer admission. I basically said, "You know what? I still want to do this, but I don't think I'm ready to do it now."So I deferred admission for a year, and I continued to work on the Hillary campaign. And I still thought I wanted to do human capital consulting, diversity, equity inclusion stuff. I thought I was just gonna do it a year later. So I thought, "I'm just gonna do this Hillary campaign thing, she's gonna get elected, things are gonna be great, I'm gonna go back to being who I was." And then she obviously didn't win, and I was completely floored. I could not fathom a world in which she would not win. I just did not see that as a possibility. And that really shook my entire understanding of the world and of our country. And it truly was life altering for me, and I did sink into a state of depression for several weeks, maybe a couple months after the election.

L Lily Trieu 30:48

And then January of 2017, after the election, by then I knew I was going to enroll in grad school eight months later. The Texas legislature was convening for their regular session, and I had never really engaged in policy. 2016 was the first time I had engaged in electoral politics. 2017, the legislature was meeting, there was policymaking happening. And I thought to myself, "Okay, well Hillary lost, so I can't just go away, I have to keep fighting. I have to keep making sure that we're creating a just and equitable world for everyone." So I learned how that worked, how advocacy worked. So I was making the drive from Houston to Austin every now and again to go and testify at the Capitol, which I'd never done before. Didn't even know that was the thing. Didn't even know you could. Didn't know what a committee hearing was. I knew nothing. And I just was like, "I'm gonna do this, because the world is burning. I feel like we all have to do this."

L Lily Trieu 31:45

So I'm making these strides, and by the time it was time for me to move to Austin to start grad school, I had no idea what I wanted to do in life. I went from thinking I wanted to do diversity, equity, inclusion work within a corporate company, to now having dedicated now over a year of my time to electoral politics and to policy advocacy. So when I started grad school, I was pretty confused. So by that I knew I wanted to do something related to policy. I just couldn't see my life without it at that point.

L Lily Trieu 32:20

I had to go back and do a lot of self reflection and digging and thinking, and I asked myself the question of, "What set me apart from my peers?" Cause I had a lot of friends who I grew up with who ended up not going to college, not becoming very financially independent, didn't have a lot of stability in their lives. And for all accounts, we were the same. They were just as intelligent, they came from similar backgrounds, we had very similar experiences growing up, but yet I was able to break the cycle of poverty, and a lot of them weren't. And for me, I pinpointed education as really the thing. I just really felt like I was lucky in that I did receive a quality education. So I decided, "What I'm gonna do is I'm gonna focus on education policy."

L Lily Trieu 33:03

So for the course of my two years in grad school, although I was in an MBA business program, I spent the entirety of those two years really going deep into education policy. And then I graduated from grad school in 2019 and started a career in education policy and have been doing that for several years. So that was a very long story of how I went from corporate America to engaging in policy and advocacy work.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 33:35

Wow, that was very captivating for me and amazing, the impact that that election had on your own trajectory, really amazing. So one of my questions was actually, what historic events have had an impact on your life and how? I feel like that election probably is an example of that, but are there any other examples that you'd like to share?

Lily Trieu 34:03

Yeah, so I talked about my understanding and my thought process on race and what it means to be Asian American. I would say COVID-19 was an impactful time. I don't think it's as cut and dry, it's as simple as that. I graduated from the MBA program in 2019. I started to do this education work. So my full time job was to advocate for equity and resources for low income students, to basically say that every single student in this country deserves a quality education, regardless of race, socio-economic background, zip code, etc. And I found myself focusing all of my time on Black and Hispanic kids, and that was the whole rhetoric. The whole rhetoric was that White students had more opportunities for going, usually, into schools that were better resourced, that had better buildings, that had more experienced teachers, and Black and Hispanic students tend to not have those same opportunities.

Lily Trieu 35:10

And I remember as an Asian American woman, thinking, "Why are Asian American students never a part of the narrative?" Especially as an Asian American woman that grew up in a low income environment. I very much went to an under-resourced school. I went to Title One schools almost my whole life. So I started to ask that question of like, "I'm constantly walking around the halls of the Capitol. I'm constantly talking to elected officials. I'm constantly talking to policymakers about inequities on the basis of race. And I'm not even thinking about my own community. I'm not even considering where my community fits in this societal structure."

Lily Trieu 35:50

So I had to start really thinking. Really the first question I asked was, "What does racism against Asian Americans look like?" And up until that moment, I never really explored that idea. I remember being a junior in college. And I remember talking to a company, and at the time it was 2006 or something. And they were talking about multicultural advertising, and they were showing us an ad that's targeting Black consumers, and then an ad that was targeting Hispanic consumers, or whatever, and they were playing to certain tropes. And I remember raising my hand and going, "Well, what do you guys do to appeal to the Asian American consumer?" And I remember at the time, they said to me, "Oh, well Asian American consumers have income and educational levels that are very similar to the White consumer, so they basically act and behave like White consumers, so we don't need to have a separate advertising program for them."

Lily Trieu 36:45

At the time, I remember just accepting that as fact, and I was like, "Oh okay, Asian Americans are just like White people. We don't need to do anything different with them," which to me now blows my mind, because I do not have the same experiences and preferences and behaviors as a White American. So to be completely written off like that blows my mind. So I really spent some time and thought about that, and these memories and these moments popped up for me. And this was the first time, and by now I'm in my [mid] thirties. So now I'm thinking like, "What does

racism look like in an Asian American community?" And I started to think about the model minority myth and what it means. I started to think about the perpetual foreigner myth. I really started to dig into it in a more academic way.

L Lily Trieu 37:32

And I started to learn about Asian American history, which I had never learned in my entire life, and I didn't even know existed. So I had to dig into it and say, "What is the history of Asian Americans? What are the contributions we had to this country?" And all of this happened in 2019 into 2020. So of course, 2020, COVID happens. And by the end of 2020, we're hearing about this rise of anti-Asian hate. We're hearing about the rhetoric that's being used amongst lawmakers and amongst leaders across the country. And you're seeing horrible news stories of Asian American elders being physically harmed, sometimes killed in the name of some type of anti-Asian racism.

L Lily Trieu 38:13

So all of this is happening at once. Me having a racial awakening, at the same time, there's this resurgence of anti-Asian hate crimes. That was very impactful and meaningful to me as well. It really made me think, "If I'm gonna spend all this time doing work around diversity and equity, I'm gonna do all this work and really advocating for BIPOC people, I need to also make sure I'm serving my own community, and I should not play a part in ignoring people like me and my parents and my family."

L Lily Trieu 38:45

So in 2021, myself and a group of my friends, other organizers in Austin, we planned a Stop Asian Hate rally in Austin, and hosted that at the Huston-Tillotson campus. It happened in April 2021. It was amazing. We had over 1,000 people show up. We had local and state policymakers come and speak. We had great organizers and activists, and it was just a powerful moment. And we were able to raise $50,000 from this rally. So then that led to, "What are we going to do with this money?" And we have to start thinking about, "What are the unmet needs?" And then honestly, the list goes on and on when we talk about unmet needs.

L Lily Trieu 39:22

And what we really landed on was there's no statewide organization in Texas that represents the Asian American Pacific Islander community. And this is 2021, the same year that was when the Texas Legislature passed very restrictive voting rights legislation. They passed the fetal heartbeat bill. They passed the anti-CRT bill. They just passed a lot of legislation that we felt was going to do harm to the Asian American and Pacific Islander community, and there was no statewide organization to respond to it or to challenge it or to give an AAPI lens on how this policy would affect our community. So we decided to use that $50,000 to start a brand new statewide nonprofit called Asian Texans for Justice, which I am now the Interim Executive

Director of, and that's the need and the gap and the role we're trying to fill. So I don't want to attribute all of this to COVID, but I do think COVID was very much a factor in how we got to where we are today.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 40:26

Wonderful, that's amazing. I'm gonna ask one last question before asking the final question, Lily. So earlier, I know that you said that your parents were sponsored through a church in order to come here as refugees. What does your religious life look like? Do you prescribe to any faith practice?

L Lily Trieu 40:54

So I myself do not. If you listen to my story, I was a brainy kid. I spent a lot of time as a kid questioning, "Do I believe in God? What is my religious affiliation?" Even now as an adult, I spend a lot of time thinking about religion and the role it plays. My religious journey over the course of my life has always teetered between being an atheist, to being agnostic, to being spiritual. Now I'm somewhere in between those three, but I do not participate in any form of organized religion. Now, my parents also are not very religious, but they do practice what I consider more cultural norms. They do things because it's culturally relevant. So they practice ancestor worship. They might go to the Buddhist temple and offer, they'll burn incense on certain Asian holidays, Chinese holidays, they will practice some sort of cultural celebration. But if you were to ask them if they really believe in it, they're like, "Oh, I don't know, this is just what we do. This is how we've been doing it for generations." And I participate in it really just to partake in it with them. But do I subscribe to it? Not personally.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 42:20

Thank you. So this interview will be a reference for future learners, people seeking knowledge about your community and the state of Texas. Is there anything that you'd like to be remembered by, that you'd like to share now?

L Lily Trieu 42:41

I spend a lot of time thinking about legacy, personal legacy. And I think that's been a huge motivator for me in terms of how I invest my time. So I really try to put my time and my effort and energy into things that I think will create lasting impact for as many people as possible, which is why I want to do things like volunteer for Hillary or advocate for policy, or even now the work I do with Asian Texans for Justice, etc. I think it wasn't until I really paused to say, "Okay, look outside of myself. I know what I desire. Clearly, I desire some type of legacy pursuit." But it wasn't until I paused to learn about the history of people like me, of other Asian Americans. It wasn't until I paused and learned about, not even decades, the centuries worth of history, that I think I started to get just a tiny bit of understanding of how we came to be today.

L Lily Trieu 43:50

I think I'm still on the tip of the iceberg of trying to understand, "What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to be Texan? Who are our actual founding fathers and forefathers?" And that answer doesn't have to be the same for everyone. It wasn't until very recently that I really started to start to wonder, "What does it mean when we talk about indigenous people? Who are indigenous people? Who are they when we think about it in stereotypical terms, and we look at how they're portrayed on TV versus who they actually are today, where they live, how they live." And I say all this to say, I think to truly understand who you are, or the legacy you want to live, or how you want to be remembered, you yourself need to understand everyone who came before you, and you have to have an understanding of what made your life possible.

L Lily Trieu 44:51

So this is not a very pretty answer, but just having an understanding of who came before us gives us the context to be able to live meaningfully now. And anything I might be able to accomplish in my lifetime is because of the people who came before me. So they are not individual stories. My story is not siloed. It's not a standalone story. My story is on the backs of those before me. So I do hope that my legacy and my work is remembered and understood and told as one part of a broader story of how immigrants and change makers and advocates and people who challenge the system helped to make the system better. And I think that's how I would want to be remembered.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 45:46

Gosh, you're just brilliant. Thank you so much. Lily, thank you so much, truly, for your time today. I will go ahead and stop the recording if that's okay by you.

L Lily Trieu 45:58

Of course.