

Stephanie Drenka

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36:17

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SPEAKERS

Stephanie Drenka, Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 00:04

Okay, today is August 19, 2022. My name is Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz. I am an oral history fellow with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life working on the Gone to Texas oral history project. I'm in Oak Cliff, Dallas, Texas, interviewing Stephanie Drenka. Stephanie, can you introduce yourself, share your pronouns, and share where you're located today?

S Stephanie Drenka 00:27

Yes, my name is Stephanie Drenka. My pronouns are she/her/hers, and I am in Dallas, Texas, in the northeast area.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 00:37

Wonderful. Stephanie, could you share where your biological parents were born, and share more about the work that they did?

S Stephanie Drenka 00:47

Yeah, I have a fairly limited knowledge of my biological family because I only found them back in 2013. So I know that my birth father had at one point been a photographer and owned a photography studio and store and had some financial difficulties and ended up towards the end of his life being a taxi driver. And then my birth mother worked in a mackerel factory. So that's a type of fish that that particular area of Korea, Andong, was known for. And so they worked in a factory, and she salted the fish to be shipped out to other countries.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 01:42

Thank you. Can you describe your childhood? What events or things do you remember about your home?

S

Stephanie Drenka 01:52

When I think about my childhood, sort of the years from two to age ten, I lived in Marietta, Georgia. And so I was with my adoptive family. And we lived in a subdivision that had a very engaged community. And so I played tennis, my younger brother who's a year younger than me, my parents' biological son, we did tennis, we did swimming, I was involved in dance and theater. And so a lot of my memories are of my house and of my neighborhood, going to the swimming pool. And I was really fortunate that both sets of my grandparents would come visit us in Georgia. So even though they lived in Chicago, we were able to see them a lot. My dad worked for the airlines, he worked for American Airlines. So we also traveled a lot. So that was some of my fond memories is traveling with my family. And then my mom was a librarian. And so I also remember visiting her at the library and spending a lot of time exploring the books and just being surrounded by that environment as well.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 03:03

That sounds like a lot of fun. Could you share the story of how you were brought to Texas?

S

Stephanie Drenka 03:10

Yeah, so because my dad worked for American Airlines, we frequently moved for his job. So they grew up in Chicago, Illinois, and he started working in the airlines loading food onto the planes, and worked his way up into a sales position. So then we moved to Georgia for his job. And then eventually, he had an offer in Dallas-Fort Worth, which is the headquarters for American Airlines. So he moved out here first to start working and start looking for a house. They ended up buying a house that was still being built. So my mom and my brother and I came later after the house was ready, and my parents selected Southlake, Texas. They had been doing some research with the realtor about which areas had the best schools and was near my dad's office where he'd be commuting to, and so a lot of the American Airlines employees recommended the Southlake-Grapevine area, and we we moved to a house there.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 04:18

Nice. Have your adoptive parents shared how long the process of migration took for you and your adoption process? Do you know if there were any challenges that came up?

S

Stephanie Drenka 04:32

I think the challenge was just that babies from Korea at that time were in sort of a high demand. I do know from - my parents shared the paperwork where they wrote their home study and wrote the letter talking about their journey with infertility, etc. And at first they had been on the waiting list to adopt domestically, and there was a limited number of infants, and so Korea was the next most popular destination to adopt babies from. And so I don't know that the

process was very long after they decided to adopt from Korea, and they finished all of the paperwork that the social workers needed. And it was just a matter of availability. And then I know that they received a photo of me, and my dad was planning a trip to Korea to go get me, and there was some sort of hiccup. I don't know if I had an ear infection, and I wasn't supposed to fly or something. And then all of a sudden, they got a notice that I was arriving at the airport, and they had to be ready to pick me up. So my dad's travel plan somehow got messed up. And they sent me alone - well, obviously with a supervisor. But it was a surprise to them that I came from Korea to Chicago without my dad going to get me.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 06:04

Wow, that's a big change to navigate.

S Stephanie Drenka 06:07

Yeah, but the one thing - I would say that the process didn't end when I arrived. And so they still had to go through the process of getting my naturalized citizenship. And so that didn't happen until after I was adopted, and they had to do the paperwork after that process.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 06:29

How were you greeted when you arrived, and with your chaperone, your guide, and where did you go after you arrived?

S Stephanie Drenka 06:38

I was greeted by my entire extended family. So it was a weekday, and my aunts and uncles pulled my cousins out of school to be at the airport. And so my parents were the only ones that went through and picked me up, because at that time, you could go up to the gate [laughs]. And so they picked me up at the gate, and then brought me out into the international terminal, the baggage claim area, and that's where both sets of my grandparents, all of my aunts and uncles, all of my cousins, they all lived in Chicago. Even my mom's cousins. So it was a really large gathering. I have a beautiful video of it. And so they all greeted me at the airport, and then we went back to my parents house to get settled in.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 07:29

If you're comfortable sharing Stephanie, could you talk about how your parents relayed your adoption to you as a child, how that was explained? If you're comfortable.

S Stephanie Drenka 07:42

Yeah, I can't remember a specific time where they explained it to me. It must have been from a point before I could remember. So I just grew up knowing that I was adopted. And the narrative

- they were honest about the fact that my mom had tried to get pregnant and had difficulties. Later, I found out more specific details. She had several miscarriages before me. And there was a lot of this sappy adoption language like, "You grew in our hearts, not in your mom's stomach." Like the kind of, "We were blessed. We chose you." I felt very loved and very special. Especially having that video to watch of my family, it was a really big deal not just for my parents, but for the entire Drenka family. My mom was an only child, so all the cousins were on my dad's side.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 08:54

Yeah, that's an important topic to address. And so thank you for for answering and sharing. Where did you go to school in your childhood, in middle school, high school?

S Stephanie Drenka 09:05

So I started in Georgia at Davis Elementary in Marietta, and I was there 'til fifth grade. And in the middle of fifth grade, I moved to Southlake, Texas. So I finished high school at Carroll Independent School District.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 09:24

What was that like, that transition from Chicago to Southlake?

S Stephanie Drenka 09:30

Again, because the community was so small in Georgia in my neighborhood, I left a lot of friends behind, left activities that I love doing, and when I moved to Texas, Southlake was an interesting area because there were a lot of transient - there were a lot of people that had moved from other places there. And people had already formed their groups of friends. And so it was hard for me to find my place in the middle of the school year. Really the next year, I think sixth grade, I joined a Girl Scout troop with some of my neighbors and developed some friendships in doing theater and choir and everything. But it was a difficult time to leave somewhere. And then it was an overwhelming transition just because Texas, Southlake in particular, was a very affluent community. And my parents didn't necessarily fit into that socio-economic bracket. We lived really, really frugally, and my mom went back to work so that we could afford to live in that area.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 10:52

Where did you go to college, and what did you study?

S Stephanie Drenka 10:56

For college, I went to DePaul University in Chicago, and it's actually where my dad graduated from, and my mom had gone there for a year. And my dad didn't have any sort of loyalty or

desire for me to go to his same school. There was actually a policy with my high school that if you took a tour of a college, you could get an excused absence from school. And we were going up to Chicago to visit family, so my dad was like, "Well, let's just stop by DePaul so that you can get excused from school." And I just fell in love with the campus, and being in the city. I knew I wanted to go to a big city, so I was looking at New York. But the thing I loved about Chicago was that I had both sets of my grandparents at the time. I had my mom's dad was still in Chicago, and then my dad's parents were there. So I felt like I could go to a big city and have that experience, be away from home, but if I need a home cooked meal, or if I miss my family, I can take the train down into my grandma's.

S

Stephanie Drenka 12:01

So that was the only school that I ended up applying to. I applied early admission and got in. And then when I got there, I had the intent of studying broadcast journalism. I had done theater, and I liked acting. And so I thought that was a good combination with my love of writing and reading. So I started out in communications, and then you pick a specialty. So I did some journalism classes. But around that time, I started taking Asian American Studies classes and Women's and Gender Studies. And my interests moved away from the traditional broadcast journalism and the objective journalist feel. And so then I switched to intercultural communication and graduated with a degree in communications, and then minors in Asian American Studies and Women's and Gender Studies.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 12:54

Wonderful, that's so interesting. And I love those topics as well. What historic events, if any, have had an impact on your life, Stephanie?

S

Stephanie Drenka 13:05

One of the earlier historic events that I remember is, in Georgia, I remember when the Olympics were in Atlanta, and specifically when there was a bombing in the park that was built as a celebratory area for the Olympics, Centennial Park. And I also, in college, something that was a historic event. It was an event that had happened in the past. So the event was that we were working on a house resolution that would address the historic event. The historic event was the Japanese military sexual slavery issue known as "comfort women." And so it was during World War II and Japan's colonization of Korea and other areas that the government created "comfort stations." And so that was a place where Japanese soldiers would go to relieve themselves and to have entertainment. But the issue was that they kidnapped and coerced more than 200,000 women and girls and put them in really abusive and violent situations. And so in 2007, I joined a steering committee for an organization that was advocating for a house resolution to be passed that would call on the government of Japan to make a formal apology and acknowledgment for what they did and to give survivors some peace and reparations. And that was what actually led me to being invited to Korea for the first time and set into motion a lot of the things in my personal life in terms of looking for and finding my birth family.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 15:01

Wow. So that had a really big impact, all those reverberations. What kind of traditions and practices do you keep from your biological family, if any? And if you have those, why do you keep them?

S

Stephanie Drenka 15:23

I don't have any directly from my biological family. I've spent short amounts of time with them. So I was with them for about a week after I first found them. And then one of my sisters brought her immediate family to visit me, and then I've been back one more time. So I'd say some of the traditions that I did pick up from them was some of the cooking that they do. My sister taught me some recipes that are common Korean dishes, and I do try to recreate those now and again, but unfortunately, I haven't experienced holidays with them, or really shared any religious traditions. What I do try to keep is just Korean culture in general, so not - outside of my family, I will acknowledge and celebrate things like the Korean Lunar New Year, Chuseok, and follow some of those customs. And it's really on my own, because my adoptive family was never interested in my Korean identity and culture.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 16:47

Thank you. If you're comfortable sharing, could you share about a moment in which you felt discriminated against based on your Korean identity? And if so, could you also share about how it impacted you or your family or any of the actions that you took against it?

S

Stephanie Drenka 17:12

One of the clearest experiences that I remember is when I was in Southlake in middle school, and it was Diversity Week in school. And so they were showing videos just highlighting diversity. And the typical, "Don't be discriminatory, don't be racist," type things. And for some reason, I became a target after those videos by a classmate, a young boy who asked me, "Oh, what would you do if I called you a chink?" Because I think we were watching videos on what not to say to people. And I was pretty shy in school in general. And I had had very little interaction with this student, he was in the popular crowd. So when he asked me what I would do, I didn't respond. I just pretended like I didn't hear him. We were in the computer lab. So I was just staring straight, and he leaned over to get my attention and said, "Chink," and then I didn't respond, and he kept escalating and repeating it. And I actually just didn't do anything. He eventually lost interest because I was ignoring him. I didn't tell a teacher, I didn't tell my parents, I really just internalized it and carried that with me throughout high school, trying to stay under the radar so that I wouldn't have experiences like that again. And I was in classes with him. It didn't happen again. But I always was very wary of interacting with him.

S

Stephanie Drenka 18:56

And then the action, I would say, came years later. I wrote about that experience in a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. And it was after I had graduated from college, I was on my own, but I was drawn into news about Southlake because they were in the media, because Obama was giving an address to students as the president, and they were not allowing

teachers to show his address in the classrooms. Parents would have to take their students out of school if they wanted to watch it live. And I wrote a piece talking about the experience that I had, and what it would have meant for me to see a president of color addressing students, and that maybe it would have helped open the minds of some of my classmates to the point where they wouldn't have said things like that or called me names like that. And so that was the first time that I took any kind of public action about it.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 20:00

Thank you for sharing that. That is exactly why this work is so necessary. Goodness. Have your views about living in the United States changed over time?

S

Stephanie Drenka 20:16

My views about living in the United States have definitely changed. I grew up with the narrative that I was saved, essentially, by being adopted and being adopted specifically by an American family, and that I was given a better life and that I had more opportunities. Very much the American dream. And what was difficult was that when I started seeing things that didn't go along with that narrative, I didn't have anyone close to me in my life that I could express those to, because as an adoptee, we're also expected to be really grateful for our circumstances. And that if I were to express any kind of discontent, over my experience or my views of living in the US, that it might hurt my parents' feelings, and they had done so much for me. And so it wasn't until I really started going to therapy for one, learning more about the adoption system as a whole, and especially learning more about America's involvement and militarization and imperialism as it impacted Korea, that I really understood that my adoption was only made possible because of a lot of really egregious acts on America's part. So it's a very interesting space to sit in.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 21:54

What do you see as your identity? And that could be whenever - if you're not being pressed, because I know as someone who operates with an intersectionality as well, sometimes I say different things - but if you were just talking about yourself for you, how do you identify?

S

Stephanie Drenka 22:14

Yeah, I always identify as a transracial Korean-American adoptee because I've never felt like I don't fit in with the typical White American community that my parents are part of. But also my experience with even fellow Korean-Americans is very different. And given that I don't speak the language very well, I didn't grow up with the culture, I've found it challenging to be in community with Korean-Americans as well. And so my core identity and community is with other adoptees, other adoptees that were raised outside of their race, and most specifically with Koreans just because there was such a large wave of Korean adoptees that are my age. So I feel like it was a natural commonality that we share because we were a part of that historic wave of adoption.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 23:21

Were there any structures for Koreans in your hometown of Southlake to have community, or were you able to connect - since you've identified as being an adoptee as a large part of your identity - were there any communities for adoptees in Southlake that you were able to connect to as well?

S Stephanie Drenka 23:39

There were none. I was in a graduating class of over 400 students, and there was about four other East Asian students in my graduating class. One was actually a Korean adoptee, but in Southlake, it is a culture where it actually didn't really matter that I was Korean. It was more that I was a theater and choir geek. And so the other Korean adoptee was a cheerleader and really popular so we did not have any sense of community together. And so I found my adopted community online. I started sharing videos on YouTube very early on in YouTube's history and talked about my experiences looking for my adoptive family, going to Korea, and was able to connect with people globally through the internet.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 24:42

Are there any organizers or historic figures that you look up to?

S Stephanie Drenka 24:50

The organizer that inspired me to switch my minor from political science to Asian American Studies was Helen Zia. So I learned about Vincent Chin's murder during my freshman year of college. And what I loved about Helen Zia is that she started as a journalist and was one of the few people that reported from the Asian American community on Vincent Chin's murder and named racism and oppression as the reasons that he was murdered. And then his murderers were given very lenient sentences. And then she became an organizer through her work. So she realized that it wasn't enough just to write the story. She also had to mobilize the community and advocate for retrial, for a civil suit, for action. And so I admired her trajectory of starting as the objective journalist writing, trying to increase representation of her community, and realizing there's something powerful about sharing the story, but also being ingrained in the deeper work.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 26:06

Thank you. Could you share about the nonprofit organization that you have co-founded?

S Stephanie Drenka 26:13

Yes. So in March of this year, 2022, my best friend Denise Johnson, who is a Filipina immigrant, and I decided to start the Dallas Asian American Historical Society. And it was largely a result of the highlighted cases of anti-Asian racism that happened in the past two years or so, especially

following the rise and COVID cases. And then most specifically, the shootings in the Atlanta area where women of Korean descent, specifically, were murdered in a mass shooting. I was working with Dallas Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation [TRHT] at the time as their communications director, and so researching history of Dallas, etc, and realizing how little history I knew about my own community. And just the time it took to dig up one particular story, I realized I couldn't do that in the capacity that I was at, at TRHT, and that it really deserved - our community deserved - an organization dedicated to preserving their stories, and then sharing them and connecting them with other organizations that were doing similar work.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 27:42

Wonderful, I am so excited for you all and are amazed by everything that you've been able to get done just in your short existence. Stephanie, could you tell us a day in the life breakdown, what a day looks like for you considering all the different hats that that you wear?

S

Stephanie Drenka 28:01

Yeah, so my days vary. But I would say that because I do so many different things, I have to be intentional about bucketing time for each thing. So typically, when I wake up, that is my time that I dedicate to my online magazine *VISIBLE*. And so I'll receive submissions throughout the week, and then if I get a submission, I'll wake up the next morning and edit it and publish it while I'm having my morning coffee. And then I do have a lot of - I work remotely for both my job and my contract work. So I'll have a lot of Zoom check ins and meetings. And then in between the meetings, I'm doing my to-dos and my tasks. And then on days that are less meeting heavy, and I'm able to schedule interviews or work for the Historical Society, I'll schedule those as well. And in the evenings, I don't really stop working, I would say. In the evenings, I usually spend that time going down rabbit holes, looking for information about Asian Americans in Dallas, and tweeting and using social media to amplify any of the work or the interesting stories that I've found. And I also have a personal blog, so sometimes I write when I feel inspired, and I spend some time working on that as well.

V

Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 29:38

You're completely multitalented. Does religion or spirituality guide any aspect of the work that you do? And if it does, how does it guide your sense of ethics or social justice?

S

Stephanie Drenka 29:57

I was raised Catholic. Both sides of my adoptive family were pretty devout Catholics, my grandmothers especially. I grew up - my parents weren't very heavy-handed with Catholicism. We went to CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine] as children, but I think it was mostly so that we would be occupied while my parents were at mass. And I do remember I went through my first communion. But I remember in high school when it was time for confirmation, my parents gave my brother and I the choice of whether we wanted to be confirmed. I chose

confirmation because I had been singing in the choir at my church, Good Shepherd Catholic Community in Colleyville, Texas, since eighth grade. And so I was a cantor, I sang at every mass every week, and it just felt like I was part of a community at the time.

S Stephanie Drenka 30:55

And then in college, I missed singing, I missed my community, I never really found a church to belong to in Chicago. And so my religious practices faded away. I think what I took from being raised Catholic was just an innate sense of treating people how you want to be treated, modeling after a lot of the Catholic saints and the figures that we learn about. But what was interesting was when I went back as an adult to church and listened to one of the homilies, in particular around birth control and IVF, and the very clear line that they drew that birth control was not approved of in the Catholic religion, neither was IVF [in vitro fertilization]. And I started to question some of the things that I had learned when I was growing up. I never listened to the homilies, I was always focused on like, "Okay, what song am I singing next." And so it was very interesting then, just being in the congregation. So I realized that I wasn't aligned with a lot of the social choices that the Catholic Church has made, and I haven't been in a Catholic church since my wedding with my ex-husband over seven years ago.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 32:42

Thank you for sharing. Stephanie, what goals do you have for yourself?

S Stephanie Drenka 32:49

My goals are to do as much as I can in the time that I have here. And so that's why I do a lot of multitasking. I want to preserve as many stories as I can, so that it's easier for the future generations who are curious about learning what their community contributed to Dallas. And then another personal mission is to share my story widely, specifically about being reunited with my birth family, and a lot of the reflections that I've done being in reunion with my birth family. So I have started writing a memoir that just sits on my computer that someday I'll start pitching to literary agents, so that's a huge personal goal of mine. And then continuing to find new innovative ways for other people to share their stories as well. So whether it's through *VISIBLE* or whatever social media platform or technology comes next, just making sure that I'm at the forefront of it so that we can hold space for people to have their voice heard.

V Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 34:12

Thank you. This is the final question. Considering that this will be a resource for people down the road. Is there anything that you'd like to share with those listening in the future?

S Stephanie Drenka 34:27

Yeah, for people listening in the future, I hope that you look at history as a treasure chest and think about all of the things that we've done and learn from so that you don't make our same

mistakes. And more specifically, look at the history of our communities that have worked together and how we have overlapped and intersected. Because that's one of the most powerful things that I've found looking at Asian American history, is the allyship that we've had with other communities, like I talked about with Vincent Chin's case. A lot of the civil rights leaders at the time who were from the Black and Brown communities showed up and helped march for Vincent Chin. And we've seen that time and time again, but those narratives are really lost, because White supremacy benefits when we're separate. And so I hope that you look into history and with a critical eye that the things that we were taught weren't necessarily all that was happening. And there were some really, really beautiful movements and examples that could transform the future that you're living in.

 Victoria Ferrell-Ortiz 35:53

That's so important. Thank you so much, Stephanie. Thank you so much for participating. I think that your contribution is extremely pivotal to this collection, so we really do appreciate your time. If you don't have anything else to add, I'll go ahead and stop the recording now.

 Stephanie Drenka 36:10

Sure, thank you.