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Alex Tom Oral History

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Interviewee: Alex Tom

Interviewer: Kyeling Ong

Transcribed and translated by: Kyeling Ong, Dephny Duan, Jake Noren

[Generating and Reclaiming our Wisdoms: A Collection of AAPI Stories at UCSD](#)

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Time	Transcription
0:00	Kyeling Ong: Hi, my name is Kyeling and today is May 21st, 2021. And I am interviewing Alex Tom through Zoom for the University of California, San Diego, Asian-American and Pacific Islander Studies Community Archival Project. Do you agree to grant the university permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?
0:32	Alex Tom: Yes.
0:34	K: So would you like to start off by introducing yourself, for example, where you grew up and what that was like as an area.
0:44	A: Yes. Thank you for doing this. My name is Alex Tom and I go by he/him pronouns. And I grew up in the Bay Area, starting off in San Francisco. My parents were from San Francisco, Chinatown, and they came before the 1965 Immigration Act, which is pretty rare. And growing up in San Francisco, we went from Chinatown to the Sunset District and then eventually to Fremont. And I feel very fortunate to have been able to make that journey in a lot of ways because many families don't get to quote unquote, "leave" Chinatown, and that's something that our family talks about a lot. And I would say that the biggest difference of San Francisco and Fremont, it was still very diverse. And, I would say that maybe the biggest difference was that in Fremont was a lot less diverse, at least at that time, it was in the eighties. So when we first moved out there, we moved into a neighborhood that was up and coming, a lot of Asians were moving into. But there are also a lot of white residents as well. And so I remember an experience of having KKK sprayed on our garage door, our car, and our sidewalk. And I didn't know what it was. And it got a lot of attention from the neighbors and that's how we were welcomed in. And I remember asking my parents, "who were the KKK?", and my parents were mostly monolingual Chinese immigrants. They also didn't know, but they--they just thought it was either the Italians from San Francisco or black people. And so there's a lot of already anti-blackness, that's like built into our narratives. And later on I did do a paper on this at UCSD around what happened, and like I did it for ethnic studies and it was good, I had to interview my, my mom about what happened and she sort of pretended it didn't happen and I was like, "Oh no, it happened. Really did happen."
3:13	K: Mhm. So yeah, besides that experience of being "welcomed" but not really welcomed into Fremont, what was your first experience with Asian American studies or social justice?

3:28	<p>A: I feel like I was very politicized by just growing up with my parents. And later on, I was part of a youth leadership camp. And what happened early on is that I was always told being the oldest Chinese son of this very large Chinese-Cantonese family that made it out of Chinatown. They were one of the top jewelers in San Francisco and also one of the, the first jewelers that came from China. And so my grandfather, for example, he trained all of the other jewelers in Chinatown. So, he's sort of a big name and me being the oldest son of that family meant a big deal for our family. And so I felt like I was very politicized to think about the role of leadership, and what am I supposed to be doing for the family, of course, it was all very Chinese patriarchal stuff. And also because they were so, because they had done so much work and they built up their, their business, they started actually doing some business with China, import-export. And if you can just think about that in the late 70s, early 80s, people really did not do that, and so the government actually followed our family and were suspicious that we were spies essentially. So, I grew up being very skeptical and suspicious of the government, the U.S. government, being very skeptical of white people who were racist and also distrustful of other Chinese people. [laughed] So I feel like I got very politicized in that kind of a way. And then later on in high school in Fremont, I got into this youth leadership camp called the Encampment for Citizenship. And it's still around today. It was a program that was started by Eleanor Roosevelt in the 1940s to combat fascism and anti-Semitism. And so I went to this program, it was six weeks long in the mountains of San Francisco with a lot of other people of color, queer folks, urban, rural. And it totally changed my life. It was the first time I'd met and had a roommate who was queer. And I was 14 years old, right? I was being exposed to classism, racism, heterosexism, and all of the oppression that we lived in, and it gave me an understanding of what I was going through, even though Fremont is a very nice white suburban area, right? And it helped me understand racism, internalized racism, and so I came into politics from our-- understanding our family's trajectory, but then also really understanding what are all the problems in society.</p>
6:39	<p>K: So besides Encampment for Citizenship, could you also add on a bit about how the views of your parents... [influenced you]? [Kyeling's internet connection cut out here.]</p>
6:48	<p>A: My parents, many of you could relate to this. They heavily influenced me. And my parents, you know, now I'm 45, so I've had to do a lot of deep thinking about this because all of our parents have a big impact on what we say and do. And I think I feel very fortunate now, a couple of things. My parents were not very, very like, they weren't able to speak English, right? So they spoke to us in Mandarin and Cantonese. My mom is from Taiwan and then my dad is from Southern China in the, in the Guangdong area, right? And so first, we always knew that we were</p>

	<p>different. And, and it was also really important to know that my parents had very different, different understandings of the worldview. I don't know if you're still here, but I will keep going or we can, I'll pause.</p>
7:59	<p>K: So, besides-- wait, sorry, go ahead.</p>
8:02	<p>A: I was gonna say, take two! [laughed]</p>
8:05	<p>K: Okay. [laughed] So besides Encampment for Citizenship, could you also add on about how the contrasting views of your parents influenced you?</p>
8:18	<p>A: I've had a lot of time to think about this because I'm 45 this year and I have my own child now who's six. And I'm sure many people can relate that your parents have a deep impact on your worldview. And I would say from my parents, the first thing is that they were not very literate in English. So we had a multilingual household that made a very big difference. My mom's from Taiwan and my dad is from Southern China. He's Cantonese and she's-- she spoke Mandarin. And my brother and I spoke English. And so early on I knew that we were different. And there were different cultural things too they would say that was like Taiwanese culture or Chinese culture from, from Taiwan and then Cantonese culture from China and Cant-- And, and so that was my first reflection. The second thing is because they both had two different ideological understandings, like my dad, he grew up pretty poor and impoverished, and his family always brought those stories to the forefront, so we really talked a lot about the working poor and how they had a really tough time. And for my mother, she grew up in a military family which was also not like rich, right? But they also-- they were stable and more well-off. And in fact, my mom was more explicit about her ideology and said that she was a capitalist, and told me I should be a capitalist, and I did not know what a capitalist was [laughed] until later on. But I do think that that allows me to have the ability to work with a lot of different people. And so, to be able to understand that Chinese people are very diverse, that other people of color, even more complex is that later on in life, my mom was never really able to start her own business like she wanted to. And ironically, my dad did, right? And so I had this awkward understanding of my mom wanting to aspire to become like a big boss, but she was always working in a factory, in a restaurant, or doing like really-- her self-employment of like childcare or selling meals. And so it helped me understand that just because of your class position [air quotes around class position] does not necessarily reflect your ideology. And so that carries with me throughout. I always believe those people who could be, let's say working class [air quotes around working class] and still be aspirational to become a capitalist or someone who is very rich. And there's other people who might think differently, right? So I feel like those are some things that really help ground me. And then, you know, I mentioned this earlier in the interview, is that just being part of a Chinese patriarchal family and being instilled</p>

	<p>that I'm like the oldest son and I need to take care of other people, there's a sense of responsibility. And yeah, some paternalism, I would say like some, some notions of like over nurturance where I'm like really trying to tend and care for others, but I actually think some of those are good qualities to have, and I think that has been how I've been politicized through their contrasting views.</p>
11:57	<p>K: Thank you for that. And how did this ideological background shape you as you transitioned into UCSD, and what is your relationship with UCSD?</p>
12:12	<p>A: I got politicized at such a young age when I was like 14. And, I feel like I went through all of the very challenging things most people go through in college. Like the callout culture or what do we call it now? The cancel culture, and we, we went through all that stuff in, in high school, you know, and, you know, selling out because of your values, thinking about how to live your values and live in contradiction, these are really hard things, obviously for someone in college, but I was grappling with that in high school. So for example, I, people still make fun of me about this, but I was, I was against sweatshops in high school and did not want anyone to wear Nike shoes. And I was against so many corporations [laughed] in high school. It was, I was probably unbearable. So I was the angry Asian man, very young, and people in high school were scared of me and they still remind me how much of a pain I was. And so, going to UCSD, my first reaction to this question is that it was-- it represented freedom and escape from my family. Like I literally did not apply to any other college except for in-state colleges because I felt like as the oldest son, I couldn't leave California. So I literally chose the campus that was on the border [chuckled], the furthest away. And I think that was needed. I needed to step away, find my own zone and my own, my own, my own kind of independence. And also because the Bay Area I grew up with so many Asians, mostly East Asians. And I had not been around as many people in-- at the time were called the Chicano community, now we say Latinx. And of course, the black community, Filipino community, African community, and San Diego is so diverse. And I had understood that it was in La Jolla, right? But everywhere outside, it was a very different city. And so I think I learned so much being humbled going to UCSD because I felt a lot of alienation being there because I was seen as that really weird Asian that was like so political. And I was part of APSA [Asian & Pacific-Islander Student Alliance], I was a part of a bunch of these organizations, and I remember just being told, you know, you're, you're, you're, you're a different kind of Asian. We don't know why you think the way you do. And I said, I don't know why I think the way I do either. And, and so I have fond memories of coming to age at UCSD. But yeah, but they were some challenging times too because it's a lot of rude awakening.</p>

15:26	K: So I know you mentioned APSA earlier, which is the Asian and Pacific Islander Student Alliance. Besides APSA, what other organizations did you work with while part of UCSD?
15:40	A: Well. So when I started at UCSD has very political like I did a lot of political politics. And I actually wanted to be a congressman because I thought the way to change the world is to become a congressman. So I had interned with Norman Minneta while I was working at a restaurant, and Pete Stark, both are retired now. And so when I got to UCSD, I got involved and rebooted the college Democrats club. And that is when I did a lot of work to counter Prop 187, that was 1994. And then Kathleen Brown was running for governor. She was running against Pete Wilson. And so I, I basically, I mean Pete Wilson was a totally evil guy, like worse than Trump many would say. Kathleen Brown was not the greatest candidate. She's Jerry Brown's sister, right? Not the best track record. So early on I just kinda knew that we just needed to fight these bad things. And so my orientation has always been like that. So it wasn't until someone, one of my mentors who now I work with very closely. She's Asian American and she's like, you know, you're just working with a bunch of white people. And I was like, I looked around, I was like, "oh, it's totally true" [laughed]. And they were white, well-intentioned progressive people. And I said basically that, well, the Asians won't accept me. And she basically said like, "Well, you got to organize your own people". And so I basically, that's when I started getting involved in SAAC (Student Affirmative Action Committee), the APSA. I became honorary member to like many of the SAAC organizations. And I was part of Oasis, I did Summer Bridge, I did – Later on, I helped to start the Academic Success Program, which is now SPACES. And sorry, I got a phone call, but yeah, so I got involved a lot of the people of color organizations. And so I was able to really, in some ways challenge my own insecurities because at that time, it was when they had proposed to eliminate affirmative action. And affirmative action was a very hot button issue. And most Asians, East Asians were against affirmative action. And so I, I really didn't know where I should be and where I should stand. But I really followed my intuition to understand that we need to be standing together with other communities of color. And so that leads me to the other thing I was a part of when I, when I got to UCSD, I applied to become a freshman senator. So as part of the AS Senate and and I remember the turning point for me was they had a resolution to support affirmative action and I had to vote. And I really didn't understand affirmative action. And I even had like these progressive white people who I was involved with, the college Democrats. They were, they were basically saying that. They, they were basically saying like, well, actually, affirmative action by class seems, it does seem okay. Isn't that more fair? And, and, and I just I just intuitively I was like, I don't know why you're saying that to me. And I really just basically made the call to support affirmative action. And that was like the turning point because I was

	<p>on record. And then I started to get a lot of criticism from other Asians and then other white people, who we eventually won over. Because I think the, the confusing thing with affirmative action was that it basically was led by Ward Connorly, who was a black man who was able to get to, to get affirmative action to start his own business, for example. Right? And he was the UC Regent, that was like leading the charge against it.</p>
<p>20:13</p>	<p>K: So, for your stance on affirmative action, how do you felt that affected relations with the rest of the Asian community?</p>
<p>20:25</p>	<p>A: I got a lot of interesting feedback from my, from my position. Number 1, I'm a very cis, cis man presenting a East Asian middle-class. And so I'm like the prototypical anti-affirmative action person. And, and later on I just realized that I needed to learn how to use my power and my privilege to support other people. That would not be in this position, right? And so in the beginning I remember this SAC and APSA presentation where I did a workshop on affirmative action. And I just got so much shade of people just feeling like, and it was weird, it was like the shade I got was like, 'Oh, this uppity East Asian is trying to tell us to support affirmative action'. And, and, and I was like, it was like the weirdest kind of criticism because I was like, 'But why wouldn't you use support if it does actually support Southeast Asians, Filipinos', right? It doesn't, at the time, at least recruitment retention was, there was not recruitment retention for Chinese-Americans or Koreans or East Asians. And, and I just remember that that was the moment where I said that's why I need to be an APSA. That's why I need to be in SAAC. I need to be able to, to share, share this voice, right? But I also needed to learn not to be so self-righteous. Cause I think because I got politicized at such a young age, I probably came off as a know it all, like as an activist that was like just trying to, you know, get snaps. We didn't do snaps back then. You know, it's like I probably was not really organizing, I was just probably talking at people. So early on, I learned that we need to find ways to, to talk with each other and for me to listen to people's concerns. But, you know, that was my first year in college and I definitely had a very self-righteous, activist, Angry Asian Man kind of thing going on with me. So yeah.</p>
<p>22:46</p>	<p>K: Do you want to talk a little bit more about what you did specifically in APSA and SAAC or maybe about the political coordinator position?</p>
<p>22:57</p>	<p>A: Yeah. So like I said, I was a very persistent and kind of noisy Asian activist. And there was an incident that happened at APSA that probably people don't totally remember, but I remember it was a speaker that, that apps invited to to have talk to the general membership and he was saying some homophobic remarks. And I had another one of my friends at the time who was very angry and wrote, wrote a, wrote a letter to APSA, an open letter to apps about inviting someone who's</p>

	<p>homophobic and how that's really bad and everything. And I just remember at that point, ended up becoming very close friends. Unfortunately, he had passed, he passed away a couple years ago. And so the reason why I share this story is because sometimes like the squeaky wheel, like the people who seem like you're not being heard, people, are listening, right? And so I think people really understood what was not great about what happened. And, and that was an opportunity for us to ask for APSA to change and do more political education. And so we formed the political coordinator position and APSA, which, you know, it's a ex officio non-voting member. I don't even think we had a budget or anything, but at least it gave us a seat at the table to talk about education that we need to do within the Asian American community. And so it was, it was important and I'm glad to hear that it's still exists, that position. And we did a lot of education around affirmative action, but also even other issues that people wanted to hear more about.</p>
24:54	<p>K: So coming back to affirmative action, how did you grapple with that sort of conflict within the community? And then did you ever feel like the risk of supporting it wasn't worth it and it would be better to conform to others expectations instead?</p>
25:12	<p>A: So maybe this one is harder to answer because I took some risks without knowing they were risks. So I basically already put myself out there within my first year of college and I still actually today, I still have the, the, the, UC whatever it's called, The Guardian newspaper. The Guardian newspaper. And I still have like the article where I spoke out in favor of affirmative action. And I would not have known that, you know. And I think I just learned that once you speak out and no matter, no matter who you are, right, once you speak up, people are listening. And, and for me as an Asian American, what I learned was that it was not just because I was Asian, but it's because - number 1, I was East Asian and I represented the perfect person to be against affirmative action. But I was actually on the forefront of supporting affirmative action, which threw off white supremacy it threw off internalized racism. It threw off all of these conceptions. And, and I just don't remember, people are like, 'wait, aren't you?'. You know, and and I was like standing with black and brown folks, right? And Southeast Asian, Filipino folks like all the SAC orgs. And I think I was banned from a lot of the Chinese organizations for RACSA, CSA, HKSA. Um, I don't even know if they're still around, but I remembered that I had already chosen aside - without actually knowing. [laughed] Cause I was like, I speak Mandarin and Cantonese so i was like, 'Why don't you all accept me', right? And they're just like, 'Yeah, you're just kind of different' and, and I had not, and not to say they're all from Southern California, but a lot of them were. And I had just not ever met Southern Californian Chinese suburban people from, I don't know, SGB, you know. I'm from Fremont.[laughed] It's a different suburb. I don't know. But so I think that I yeah. I think once I realized that because</p>

	<p>it was they, they really expected in Asian to be quiet and to just kind of go with it. It just made me think like, oh wow, my voice is very important. And actually it's like flipping the paradigm. So it made - I've always - this always has stuck with me. Asians and Chinese Americans, we can be the bridge or we could be the wedge. And that's really what it is, right? Like we often are used by white people to be the wedge. And we're not always used as the bridge by other people of color. But I think that's why Asian folks need a step into that themselves. And so around all the complex, I, again, I think because I started at a very young age, I grew up in conflict, political conflict. And also because I was the oldest son I had a deal with a lot of inter-family kinda conflict. And so I already had that muscle memory to take, to take on conflict. And in some ways I just always enjoyed that because like I could kinda hold a lot of tension, right? And understand contradictions and not be, and not take things so personally. But I feel like those are some of the reasons why I yeah, I could handle all that.</p>
28:56	<p>K: You also want to talk a bit about people's reactions and maybe that voice message recording that you received and how that continues to fuel your activist work?</p>
29:10	<p>A: Right, I got a hate crimes message after my first rally that I spoke at to support affirmative action. And I remember it, 1996. And it was actually right when Prop 209 got onto the ballot. And to be honest, I was not even the most eloquent or longest. I didn't even, my speech was so short. It's very unmemorable, I would say. But I would get a call on my voicemail. And you know like an answering machine [laughed] in my dorm. I'm sure people don't have that anymore, but and it was recorded. So this white guy that called basically the gist of his story or his message was like, 'you're a dumb ass chink, Jap, and gook. And you are basically dumb because you're supporting dumb n-word', calling out Latinos, Pacific Islanders. 'You're just dumb, you should know, this is not helping you'. And so it was sort of became the whole narrative of like a white person telling me, as the wedge, that I should know better. Right? And I remember that point because I was already so agitated. I didn't actually feel bad. Like I wasn't worried about my security. I should've been. What I did was I used it as a campaign. I played it, cause it was on the tape - and people still talk about it. I had my, my little tape recorder and I would go to class, play it everywhere, APSA meeting, I'd play it. Like BSU meeting. I played it to all the administrators and the administrators were scared and they hired, I mean, they basically gave me some security detail to make sure that I would not be attacked. But it really again reinforced in a way that gave me a mission that Asian people are very important in the movement because they expect us to be silent, right? And if you have an opinion that is the, that is different than the conforming white supremecist kind of thing, then you're rocking the boat. And so, so in some ways it kind of catapult me to always be that Asian.</p>

	<p>[laughed] Always rock the boat. Right? And always really try to make sure that your voice is heard. And I'm generally a pretty introverted person. I'm not even like that, like I'm pretty tame person. But I, you know, at that time I really changed my image. I got long hair like all the way to my butt. And I just started to like, basically grow into my role as an activist and an organizer.</p>
32:10	<p>K: So I know another thing you've mentioned before, is that in addition to like just rocking the boat and criticizing things, you also - part of your experience at UCSD - was to learn how to construct and build things. So how did you balance activism with school and connect it to building long-term social change?</p>
32:33	<p>A: I'm glad you asked that because I almost forgot about [laughed] talking about it. So I was a super-senior. I spent five years there and I spent my first three years basically on the streets. And that's sort of like I was proud that I was learning from activism. And I was also just getting very angry and burnt out. So not taking care of myself. So, for example, for one of our delegations to shut down the school for affirmative action. I was delegating one of the deans, at right now, it's called Eleanor Roosevelt college, right? Fifth college before and I remember I was like delegating him. And then, and then I passed out [laughed] because I had not drank water and had not eaten. And, and I think that was the first sign of like, oh wow, you really are going really far. And so this happened over and over again. And it was sort of the culture and the nature, I would say, of this kind of activism. And it's something that we perceive, is how it's supposed to be, right? Because like every time we think about history, it's like you see these big rallies and marches. You don't really talk about like a long strategic conversations people have had, long relationships that people had, that people took turns in the movement. So you just feel like you're doing it all. And so I did that for like three years. And some of the ethnic studies professors made an intervention on me and just said, you know, 'Alex, you're very smart but really you don't look good on paper. You do not. Your grades are pretty bad. We know you can do better'. I'd be that person who always ask for extensions on papers over and over again. And you know, and these professors in ethnic studies they're, they're obviously progressive and they, they care, but they also want to make sure you're learning. So I remember, basically they're like, 'Look, you just need to you need to like get it together', you know. And that also happened at the same time where we had lost prop 209. We had lost everything: 187, 209. And there's like three strikes we lost. Then later on, there's bilingual education we lost - so many things. And I just crashed and burned. And luckily, I had ran for president too. I was already the external Vice President. I ran for President and I lost. And I, and I lost for a lot of reasons. One, I don't think I really had the heart to do it, but I was also just so angry. And, and so I had a coming to Jesus type of a moment where I was like, Okay, I need to take a break and think about what are we building? And, and that</p>

	<p>sounds like the thing that's so hard because like an ethnic studies classes, and all of these, everything we've learned just makes you more angry, right? And so I just felt like I needed to think about how can I, how can I build something? And, and so I really wanted to try to start something that would, that would help the university help students of color after I left. And so Academic Success Program, which was just a very neutral sounding, boring program that was providing books to people, providing exams like past exams. And, and then we wanted to raise money for retention services. But we knew we couldn't say retention because affirmative action got cut. So we had to kind of play with the language, we passed two referendums. And we basically to increase fees on students. And administration never approved it until I left. And what was important about that, it wasn't just me doing it. What I did was I basically went to all of the SAC orgs. And I just said, Give me one person per SAC organization to just take this on, you know, just and then I will just work with them, you know. So, so it's like I remember is that Chris Murphy? I don't know if you know Chris Murphy, but he's like going to the APSA alumni. Irene. Janae from BSU. But it basically was my little cohort of people I work with and we visited other retention programs across the state. But more importantly, I was like we're building a core of leaders, right? And the core of those leaders where basically to build up ASP. So when I left, they handled it. And Chris ended up writing it. Like he graduated from, from college and I don't know. I think he went into student, student affairs. Anyways, I'm not sure what his relationship to it is now, but, but yeah, that was one of my things I wanted to do because we, we are taught to break down, criticize, and deconstruct things. But we don't always have a good muscle on how to build something. It's like what do we want for society moving forward? And it's hard sometimes people are like We just don't want capitalism. We don't want imperialism. We don't want sexism, heteropatriarchy. And then it's like, Okay, so what do you want? Right? And so I think that's, that's a muscle that, to push our, our radical imagination sometimes. And it's harder than it seems, right? Because we could, we could pontificate and describe it. But we also will say, Oh that'll never happen for like a 100 years. So how do we build the next thing, next five years, next ten years?</p>
38:33	K: Thank you. On a related note to balancing activism with school, like what led to you deciding to double major?
38:46	A: I had a lot of interests. I think as you can tell. I just I came in as a psychology major because I was very interested in what I thought was psychology. Then I later realized it was very science-based and i was like oh, I'm not really into science. And then I was definitely into political science. And political science just seemed so white. And so then I was like, okay, I want to be ethnic studies. And so I, so I did a political education, political, political science and ethics studies double-major. And then I was like, well, ethnic studies is great, but I just get so angry [laughed].

	<p>And I just wanted like channel, that somehow. So then I minored in education because I always thought I'd be a teacher. And so that's sort of like how I came. And, and honestly just being able to think about college is a privilege. I mean, it should be a right, but it's like you, you have such an opportunity to like access all of this information and learn how to organize, learn how to build relationships with other people. And so yeah, so that extended my time to like five years, which I'm fortunate that we could afford that. But, but that's sort of how I arrived to the double major and minor.</p>
40:13	<p>K: So now to transition to your time beyond UCSD. To what extent did your education and experiences at UCSD inspire you to pursue activist work after college?</p>
40:28	<p>A: Have to say, I met an amazing number of people. And I think about the camp I went to in high school and all the queer women of color that I met that time. And also in the 90s, like they totally changed my life. And some of them are still like my closest friends. And that's when I met Alicia Garza. So I've known her for 25 years. Ingrid Benedict had known her for 25 years. Janae Darden, bunch of UCSD bad asses. And it's really important because sometimes we forget that the people are really important because they know a version of you that many people don't know [laughed]. Like if you have your friends from high school, right? I think that's really important because it's a mirroring of your own evolution, right? And the, the really difficult journey of growing up together. And I would say obviously ethnic studies, the professors that I met through that, a lot of the other organizers, and it just makes me just very grateful for the experience. And so being able to, for example, being able to organize a shut down of the campus. Then realizing we did not tell the police that we're going to do that. So then they all got arrested. It wasn't like a book and release thing. And so, you know, and later on in San Diego, I started doing work with labor unions and I didn't realize that they stage the whole thing. They just tell the cops that they're gonna do it. The cops will say don't do it. And the cops can't stop you because you have like hundreds of people, right? Because I used to be like, Well, why would you tell the cops? And it's like, well, if you have so many people, they won't be able to stop you. And, and I feel like that rally, I think we had 5-600 people. We turned out all of the SAC organizations and a lot of white allies, the Ethnic Studies professors came out. It felt like a movement, right? And, and I think, and not to romance it, be romantic about it because there's a lot of problems. But it just felt like a lot of people who really were committed to a cause, right? And I remember because after Prop 209 lost, I was so, I treated prop 209, like ending 209 as like the revolution. And then it just dawned on me that, hh, even if we won, we still wouldn't have like we just would have preserved like the status quo. And so it just yeah, so I, I feel like I got very lucky around what I</p>

	<p>studied, the people I met and the actual collective experience of learning how to work together.</p>
43:36	<p>K: Do you wanna elaborate on some of the things you've been involved with after college like Students for Economic Justice, Black Futures Lab, Center for Empowered Politics?</p>
43:48	<p>A: Yeah. So I was thinking that I would go into grad school and, or be a lawyer. And, and I definitely had tried, or a teacher. So I had tried all these things like they took the GRE, I took a faculty mentorship program. I did. I tried all those things out. And after college I wanted to stay in San Diego. And I told my parents I was like, look, I'm going to just stay for a little bit. I'll be back and I can take on my duties as like the oldest son, right? And so I gave myself some time just to just to work and I ended up staying in San Diego for close to a decade. And so I started working at the Center on Policy Initiatives, which is around today. And they, let me start this organization called Students for Economic Justice, which was basically like, like, it's almost like a United Students Against Sweatshops kind of program that I was able to design. And again, I use the same model I did with ASP. I went to all the SAC organizations and I said, look, I'm starting this organization and I want you all to own it. Because once we open it, it'll be a lot of like entitled white progressives and leftist that would join. And so it was weird in the beginning was a closed membership. I, I literally wanted it to be started by people of color to create the culture of it. So that it wasn't like, oh, we're in solidarity with working people. But it's like I had to convince machistas and people and KP. And like some of the other organizations that these workers on campus are our family members. The people who clean your dorm rooms. Those are not just like some random person, but that's someone in your own community. I think that was a turning point because we challenged lot of internalized racism. And, and maybe it sounds like such an obvious connection. But a lot of the economic justice work for workers is dominated by young white people. And I always just thought that was so weird [laughed]. I was like, but these people are not directly connected, right? And so Students for Economic Justice, I was still at UCSD basically for another three years. So the administration saw me for like eight years. And I was also at SDSU. I was at Southwestern College down south. I was at City College. I basically, we had like almost members across all of San Diego. And, and so I learned how to organize in a place like San Diego that's very sprawled out, very diverse but very racially segregated, and also had very little infrastructure. A lot of people don't treat San Diego as like, like a progressive area. And after LA, basically people just forget about what happens in San Diego. But it's like the second largest city in the state. And it is very diverse. And it's totally has turned progressive over the last 10, 15 years. And so it's just important to see that because what I did in San Diego was like learn to work with a lot of different people, right? And then when I came</p>

back to, to the Bay Area, it was because I was like that random Asian guy with long hair that did spoken word and all of these things like all into hip hop, right? And I remember one of the young people that we're working with, I did a lot of youth organizing as well around ethnic studies into schools and fighting Prop 21, Prop 22. So a lot of that was part of my work too. And I remember some of the young people were like, oh gosh, I don't even know what you are. Are you? Because basically they're like, you're not Chinese because I kept talking about going to China to study. But you can't be Chinese. You're too down to be Chinese. You know, you must be like Filipino. You must be Native American or something like there's no, like Chinese people are not so down like you. And I was like, wow, I've never really shared because they were, they were like, why it's so random. You want to go to China. But why do you want to go to China? I was like, because I'm from China and I want to learn the language. And people are like, oh, but, but it's, I felt very alienated in a black and brown space. So of course I did the extreme where I wanted to like live in China. And, and so I ended up living in China for a year and studied Chinese, Mandarin and Cantonese and became pretty fluent. And that was a year of sars, 2003. And I won't go down that bunny hole, But that was like a very challenging year. But it really pushed me to identify my priorities, which was like prioritizing myself because I had burnt-out, right. That whole period of the nineties is the rise of the prison industrial complex. Like Critical Resistance with starting at that time. So we just did so much work that made me feel like we're part of something bigger. But it was also very much burning me out, right. So when I went to China, it was like my break from everything and I was like solitude because you didn't know what to trust because the government wasn't telling the truth. And the US media was not telling the truth either because they were bombing Iraq at that time. And so I just, I always didn't know if it was a US propaganda or China propaganda. And so I was always very confused. But after that, came back. I started working at the Chinese Progressive Association because I really wanted to come back to my community because I could speak the language I wanted to contribute. And that's actually one of the hardest things like organizing in another community that's not yours, you get a lot of props. But when you're in your own community, all the judgment comes in. And you're not Chinese enough, you're not Asian enough. You're oh, you've gotten really fat. I mean, all of these things. I was like, wow, and I knew that was my role, right. That's my contribution. And so I ended up staying at CPA for about 15 years and built out a bunch of really exciting projects like Seeding Change, which is a national training program fellowship for Asian Americans interested in community organizing. And we started a bunch of political organizations. We call them C4, 51 C4s and packs and, and to be able to build powerful working people. And so that's sort of where I'm at now. I started the Center for Empowered Politics, which is, in some ways, it's like a, it's like a training hub for a lot of the projects that I helped to start at CPA. And that's where I'm doing work with Alicia Garza and supporting her project, the

	<p>Black Futures Lab. And so really just if you'd look at the arc of all those relationships for all the people who are watching and part of activism now, just think, in 20, 25 years, the people that you're building with now are going to be future leaders with you. And it's gonna be hard to believe, right? Because you're like, oh, that person's not going to be down enough to do XYZ and all. I'm not going to be part of the movement, but we all have roles. We all have roles, whatever major that you have and you have important contributions to make. And you never know who is going to be with you after a couple of decades.</p>
52:06	<p>K: Another thing you did in your time after college was back around February 2015, you started a blog called <i>Diary of a Baba</i>. So why did you decide to start blogging?</p>
52:22	<p>A: Yeah. I, I went through a journey of more burnout [laughed] at CPA and 15 years long time. And I think for me, the blog has represented my - a space for me to share my own voice, right? Because once you're at an organization for so long, you feel like the organization identity is your identity, right? Or other people feel like you are that organization. Like if you're, if you're doing anything for 15 years, people are going to do that, right? So in two thousand, two thousand fifteen, my son got diagnosed with autism. Actually it's 2016, I'm sorry. So, and that's also the year that Donald Trump won, right? And so he, it, it really pushed me a, push me a bunch because I was like, oh my gosh, I need to leave the movement to take care of my son. You know, or I'm like, I need to like be on the frontlines of fighting Trump, you know? So I had all of these kinds of black and white kind of like things in my head. And, and it's not about that, right? And so I wanted to have a space to, to talk about what is the, what is the connection with your politics and parenting, right? And it's also because not a lot of parents, especially cis men, like fathers, talked about their experiences being a father and being in the movement, right? Because sometimes people say, oh, I gotta start a family, peace out to the movement, right? But we need parents in the movement. They're just different roles, right? So I had to grapple with a lot of those things. Like I just couldn't go to all the rallies. I couldn't go to all the late meetings. I couldn't like, basically got all the social events because you've got a kid now. And especially with the child who's on the spectrum and he's like calm and awesome autistic. It's like we had to do a lot of education to people in the movement about disability, about ableism. And I was in this situation where some my closest friends were like, oh, don't worry, he's going to be fine. And he's going to grow out of it or and I was like, I know he's going to be fine. It's, it's it's like you have to change. It's like he doesn't have to change, right? And so I started the blog to give myself my own voice to talk about these, these different dynamics around disability, justice, around politics, around parenting, burn out, and how we need people to, to sustain themselves long-term.</p>

	<p>And I'm surprised because a lot of young people I've been reading it, especially queer folks who have never heard from an old person like myself, who was over 40. And some people are like, yeah, I've never heard of a like a cis man like share their feelings and emotions and their politics. Just being very vulnerable about like all of the challenges, right? And again, it's like I'm able to use this platform because I'm a I'm a cis man and I could, I could I could use my privilege in some ways to vocalize issues that usually I think probably most women go through more than men, right?</p>
56:04	<p>K: In your blog you included an article about a time when you returned to UCSD much later on and sort of included your reflections on that. So did you want to talk about that and what it felt like to return to UCSD after such a long time?</p>
56:22	<p>A: Yeah. I'm trying to remember. I, I remember it was hard returning and I was very reflective of just my time at UCSD. And I was, in some ways, I feel like I might have been embarrassed about some of the things I had done at UCSD and like the mistakes I made. And I think going back was really helpful just to see everyone and again, it's like, what's the mirroring of your own evolution and how do you transform? How do you, as a person, how do you uphold your values and hold your boundaries and take care yourself and all of those things. like, I think a lot of young people are grappling with contradictions. Like how do you, how do you live in a capitalist society? It's like everything you do is pretty much oppressive in somehow, because you're in a, you're not just in a capitalist society you're in the United States is just like the belly of the beast of imperialism, right? So navigating contradictions towards purpose. I think I just, I sort of like reconnect with my younger self, of like the angry self. The one that was trying to prove myself to many other people. Like prove myself to you that the Chinese people prove myself to other people of color. Trying to be like, hella down, you know, with my long hair [laughed] and just have more compassion. Like how do you have more compassion for yourself? So, so yeah, even though I was uncomfortable, it was grounding for me coming back.</p>
58:07	<p>K: And related to that, what advice would you want to share with future student activists, especially about burnout since I know we've talked about that a lot?</p>
58:15	<p>A: Yeah, burnout, burnout and this healing journey, it does not end. I have had some young people asked me like when, when do you fully heal? Like yo, none of us can fully heal because we're constantly in this system. Until we can actually have a system where we're very interdependent, right? And even when that happens, it won't change for generations, of like the pain, right? And, and so for me, I always like to visiblize how many times I've burnt out, like last 25 years and I've indexed it like, oh, every year, maybe it was like four times in the beginning. And then now it's like maybe only once a year or once every other year, right? And</p>

	<p>so over time you learn how to take care of yourself and your body can handle it. You can handle it. And your your community is there to support you, right? So, so I think it's like built, so when I think about burnout, It's about how do you find your squad. And it could just be a couple of people that you just talk to more regularly. And how do you, how do you stay intentional in connection with them for, for a long time and be there for them and have them be there for you. And yeah, I just feel like that's so important. Find your squad.</p>
59:58	<p>K: Alright, to end with one last lighter question. What is your favorite food spot in San Diego?</p>
	<p>A: There's a spot by Camino del Rey, oh where is it? It's a place called Culty Han. They had the best pollo asado burritos. I actually don't know if they're still around, but I used to get them all the time. And, and I'll be honest, like the, the Mexican food outside of San Diego is so different. And yeah, it's just like I totally miss all of that in San Diego and you know, I had a lot of burritos. Lot, a lot of like pollo asado burritos, lot of breakfast burritos, fish tacos. [laughed] Yeah.</p>
1:00:55	<p>K: Alright, so thank you so much, Alex, for sharing all of your experiences for all of your time today. This concludes our interview.</p>
1:01:05	<p>A: Alright, thank you so much.</p>