

Transcript – Kathy Le, class of 1997

Narrator: Kathy Le

Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

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Amanda Knox: Good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. Today is Thursday, May 6, 2021. It is 10am. And I am here with another member of the Brown University community who would like to share her story with us today. Welcome.

Kathy Le: Thank you, Amanda. Hi, everyone. My name is Kathy Le and I am class of '97 from Brown. Go Brown and go, go Bruins. I am here today to talk a little bit about my experience at Brown and you know, to kind of place it within the larger context of my own personal narrative. And probably, you know, I am very motivated by some of the current events going on right now and would love to really connect some dots.

AK: Definitely, yes. Well, we have a lot of ground to cover. So, I think perhaps [1:00] the most useful place to start is your early childhood. Would you be open to sharing some background information about maybe your parents' educational backgrounds, where you grew up, some context like that?

KL: Sure. So, I'm from Vietnam, and my parents are both Vietnamese. They were born in the south of Vietnam. And they both, you know, were quite educated for the time and my mom actually went and spent some time in India and the US as a foreign student, learning demography at the time. Unfortunately, due to, you know, the kind of escalation of the war in the late '60s and early '70s, she was called home because her father was ill. And because of the war tensions, she was unable to resume her studies and never completed her studies. My father also did not manage to complete his studies because [2:00] of the war and ended up being conscripted into the South Vietnamese Army and fought in the army there against the, the northern, you know,

army and as a result, when the war was over, he was sent to a reeducation camp for I believe, four years at least, and was there for four years before he was released.

AK: Were you, were you, this is probably a stupid question. Were you alive while he was in that camp?

KL: Yes. So, I was born at the very end of the war, in Saigon, in mid-April, which is literally the final gasp of the war, if you will, when the fall of Saigon was happening. And because my, my mother actually worked for the South Vietnamese [3:00] government, and her father had been an Economic Minister for the South Vietnamese government. So we had those South Vietnamese government ties and we were given the opportunity to leave. You see the, you know, the helicopter air lifts and all of that. We were given the opportunity to leave when I was just a few days old. And she, she ended up refusing to go because my father refused to go. He had elderly parents, and he was the eldest son and his family, and he felt that he could not leave them. Because he wouldn't go, she didn't go. And then she didn't go and the rest of her family didn't go. So it was, you know, this whole chain effect. But you know, it, he, so, after the fall of Saigon, so after I was born, was when he was sent to the reeducation camps. So he missed my very early years.

AK: Do you have any memories of him – did you have contact with him while he was in the camp? [4:00]

KL: I mean, you know, this is, this is the thing about that time period, and the families that lived through it. Not a lot of people are willing to talk about it. So, my family never talked about it. And my father never left Vietnam. He, you know, was born and died there. And as a result, we didn't have much of a relationship after I came to the US. And we never really talked about it much. What I've heard, you know, stories here and there that are kind of whispered in the family, was that those who, those in the family, like my mother, who were not sent to the reeducation camps, would basically go from camp to camp, trying to find their relatives, and then offer food or bribes or whatever, to the guards to give them extra food and sustenance. My father actually came down with colon cancer during his early, his years and in the reeducation camp,

and we're talking you know, he's probably at that point in his, [5:00] you know, late 20s, early 30s. So he's not very old in terms of age, and he has this like really serious disease because of the lack of nutrition and hygiene and all that in the camps.

AK: Would you like to share your story of what you remember of coming to the United States?

KL: Yeah, so I actually, it's, you know, the mind is a weird thing, because I actually don't have a lot of real memories. I feel like I have like snapshots in my head of, but I can't tell if the snapshots are real, or if they're from the stories I've heard over time. And certainly, the story was one that I used in my Brown essay when I applied to Brown. So this is kind of kind of coming full circle in some way. But, you know, it was just one of these situations where many of the men in the south had been placed into these reeducation camps [6:00] and as a result, it was mostly women who were left in society. And my mother who had been educated abroad, really had a very difficult time, kind of, you know, reconciling her new reality with what she knew was out there, and the possibility that was out there. And for her, the fact that she even had a career at that, you know, at that time was very unique for a Vietnamese woman. So she noticed that, you know, several of her family members, her younger brothers and sisters had often tried to leave by boat, and it was often the men who did it, because it was always like, okay, the men can go forward, there was a lot of piracy at the time, there was a lot of rape going on if you were ever caught by pirates, etc, etc. So, they, you know, families would send the men or the boys thinking that they would be safer. And she realized that her brothers weren't making it through. She had 11 brothers and sisters, so she was the second eldest [7:00] in her family, so she felt a certain degree of responsibility for her family. And so she just decided, you know, what, maybe it's time for a woman to go.

AK: Good for her.

KL: The guys aren't doing it. And when you were caught, you would be brought back and imprisoned for a certain period of time, as well. So, and she would be the ones to go and find her relatives in the prisons and like, try to get them out. So, she just said, you know, what, whatever, we're just going to do it. And at the time, she was nine months pregnant. And my father again,

said he couldn't go, that he couldn't leave his parents. And she said, "Okay, well, I'm leaving, and I'm taking, you know, our daughter with me." And I, you know, I have no recollection of this at all. And it is odd because a coup, a few years ago, we went back to Vietnam, and we went to visit a friend of mine who had moved there for work. And my mother told me that that's where the boat took off from the night that we left. That this was a newly built section of town, kind of like, you know, [8:00] the seaport in Boston or something that was land filled in and, but back in the day, this is where boats would take off. And you would always go on a moonless night because you don't want the moon to give you away and betray your presence. Because the, there are patrol boats. They, I mean, this was, this was very real, they knew it was happening. The government knew it was happening, they were trying to prevent it from happening. So you really were trying to escape, it wasn't just like, you know, trying to just survive the ocean and this trip, but trying to actually get past the patrol boats. So you weren't allowed to bring a whole lot with you. There wasn't that much room on the boats, you had to pay, like in gold, to get passage. And people had to borrow money to do this. And my mother got us passage on a boat that was probably very tiny, I would say like, 20 to 25 foot fishing boat. So you know, and not, not huge. And there were 100 people on it, including two pregnant women, one of which [9:00] was my mom. One, the other pregnant woman actually gave birth on the boat, and there was a doctor on the boat. They had no cutting implements to sever the umbilical cord so he had to use his teeth. He had to bite the cord to separate it. And then my mother was the only person on the on the boat who spoke any English. And at the time, there was a law where international ships could not pick up refugees, like that was just the law. And but that's what everyone hopes for. Right? And so, there was, there was a moment where several cargo ships would pass by is what I've been told. And they wouldn't stop. And then finally one stopped and they lowered down some provisions. And they, you know, they wished us luck. And my mother, you know, in her broken English got up and said, you know, "You leave us here we're going to die. Once these provisions run out, [10:00] what are we going to do?" You know, yes, we've managed to evade the patrol ships, but now we're just in open ocean. You know, and I think I had massive seasickness and was just, you know, just floored the whole time. But, she gave the speech, the captain felt bad, the captain said, "Okay, we'll take the women and children." Here she was, swollen belly and everything. And she just said, "You know, I don't, no. Then we'll just die together." Because she couldn't imagine leaving the few men behind. So, so then, and then,

because she's exhausted, malnourished, dehydrated, all these things, she just fainted. You know, this, this was her last burst of energy, she fainted away. And I think that really had an effect on the captain. He, he just had a change of heart. And he took us all aboard the boat. And he dropped, they dropped us off at a refugee camp in Singapore, where my brother was born a coup, like maybe a week later. [11:00] The one image I have in my mind, and again, I'm not sure if it's a real memory or not, is, you know, myself as a young girl, kind of running behind an ambulance as it took my mother off to the hospital for her deliver, to deliver my brother. So he was delivered there. And there were complications with the delivery so she was in the hospital, I was at the camp. I don't really have any recollections of the camp. And my brother was cared for by the nuns who ran the camp. And he, they put them a little drawer in their office and they named him Joseph. So that's his name, Joseph. But that's, that's where he spent the first few days of his life was in a refugee office, in a camp with a bunch of nuns. So and I was, you know, probably being cared for by other members from the boat or something like that. We're not even sure how that happened.

And then my mother, who, [12:00] you know, was probably in shock and despair, at the hospital, really was at the end of her rope. And then she remembered that her father had a kind of an acquaintance, a business acquaintance that she had met when she was really, really young, like a young child, and she just remembered his name. And she remembered that he had, at the time, lived in Singapore. So she had looked him up in the white pages at the hospital. And she just called him. And she said, "You might not remember me, you know, but I, you knew my father and I met you when I was a child. And this is my situation now, and I need help." It turns out that he was a wealthy businessman in Singapore. And he was really touched by her story and offered to help us. He basically took us out of the camp, out of the hospital, moved us into his villa, and took care, had his staff take care of all of our paperwork, [13:00] to emigrate to the US. My mother's eldest sister was already living in Seattle at the time, and she agreed to sponsor us and he took care of all the paperwork, we ended up being in Singapore for about three months, which is kind of unheard of. Most folks will tell you that they spent like years, up to like a decade in a refugee camp somewhere, trying to get passage to another country; Australia, Canada, the US were kind of the main ones that people wanted to get to. But he had, you know, through his contacts and his efforts, we were on our way in three months.

AK: So I'm kind of going in a different direction here a little bit, you mentioned a couple of times, not knowing the difference between kind of like a memory that you actually have and kind of a memory somebody's given to you. What does that feel like that this is an incredibly formative [14:00] moment for your life. Do you have any feelings about, about how your memory is working with that time?

KL: You know, I think for most people who go through something like that, it's, it's so traumatic, and your self-preservation mechanisms kind of kick in, so that, you know, I there are things I wonder, like, what it was like, what did we do? What do we not do? Who took care of me? What did I eat? All these things. And, and then there's a part of me, it's like, well, if I don't know, it can't hurt me. You know, and, and so therefore, you know, it's okay. And what I got, for example, would I kind of go under hypnosis to remember things? I don't know. Because you know, in some ways, whether or not you actually remember something, or if you know if it's true memory that you experienced or if it's just an image that somehow got planted in your head, I think all [15:00] of this just leaves scars on your psyche, somehow, that really forms who you are, whether or not you're aware of it. So, in some ways, it doesn't matter so much. Whether or not you know if it's real, because you know that those scars are real.

AK: Do you know, was the United States always your mother's ultimate goal? Or did it occur to her, I, like did she did she pick the United States because her sister was there? Because she clearly had these other experiences. Kind of what was the impetus for the United States as the end point? If you know.

KL: I do know. I think she wanted to go to Canada first. She had a brother in Canada, too. He had gone abroad for college and then they told him not to come back when their father was dying, because they were afraid that he would get stuck like she got stuck. So they told him not to come [16:00] back. So he was in Canada, and she was actually trying to get to Canada. But it was actually for whatever reason, it was easier to get to the US at the time. So, so she kind of settled for that. I guess, yeah.

AK: If you're comfortable sharing, I know from reading one of your blog posts, there was a lot of push sort of, and I don't want to put words in your mouth, of kind of leaving the old life behind and just assimilating in order to have the most success. Do you have any snapshots of those kind of early years in the United States of trying to assimilate or trying, maybe living a double life or trying to figure out how you fit into this, this new life?

KL: Right. I think it's not uncommon. I you talked to any first-generation refugee, especially if they come here at a very young age, [17:00] we feel like we have a foot on either side of the fence, and that, but as a result, we're never on, completely on either side. I grew up speaking Vietnamese, Vietnamese was my first language. I learned English when I came here. I started kindergarten in the US. So I had the benefit of, you know, being here from a very young age. And a lot of people will say, "Well, you don't speak English with an accent, how could you be a refugee?" You know, things like that. But that's how and, and it's, it's never gone away. That feeling of straddling two different worlds. I think, I think if anything, when you're younger, you feel the push and pull more. And when you're older, you recognize the push and pull, and you try to find your own way. You find try to find the tension that works for you. Because I don't think the tension ever completely disappears. It's not suddenly like I've been able to, like, build a third fence and put myself in a different space or anything like that. I don't think that's true. [18:00] Some, for some people, it may be true. But for, for me, it's not. I always feel the tension of having a foot in both worlds. And it really manifests itself in so many different ways, you know? It's funny, because when I was really young, I started reading Jane Austen. I don't know why, I was probably 11 or so. And I started reading Jane Austen. And I just loved it. And everyone was like, why is this little Vietnamese girl reading Jane Austen? And why, what, what do you see in this? And I actually really understood the kind of oppression of women and the under appreciation of women because it was what I was living in my little Vietnamese family, extended family, because most of those brothers and sisters that my mom had came to, came to Southern California with us eventually. But I, you know, was told to help out in the kitchen all the time, whereas my brother could go play [19:00] as much as he wanted. I had to always have straight A's. I had to, you know, never talk back. I, you know, all these things that I felt like, you know, Elizabeth Bennett was going through I was going through in some way. And I didn't have a voice and I didn't have a say in some things. And you know, the joke at the time amongst kids

of my age was that you weren't allowed to date until you were married. So you could date your husband because, you know, that was, that was seen as a horrible thing for a young girl to be out with boys, you know. So it showed up in all these weird ways. And I don't think you can ever truly escape it because it just becomes a part of you. You know, there's, there's really no way that you can just shed it and leave and be the end. And I think I tried at times. I felt like if I didn't talk about it, if I didn't share it, then maybe it would be less [20:00] real. You know, and, and in some ways, probably going to Brown was part of that.

AK: So, tell me then, how, how did you hear about Brown and what appealed to you about Brown?

KL: Well, I applied to eight schools when I applied to college, and I got into six. And there were only two in California. And because I felt so oppressed in my family in the sense that I didn't feel like I was able to explore anything out, that I wanted to explore, it was always about what the family needed, what the family wanted. A lot of it was about saving face, and how we present to others. And I knew that my education was something that they wouldn't be able to poopoo, so to speak, and that if I got into [21:00] an Ivy League school, that it would make it easier for them to let me go, in some ways. So it was, it was, I hadn't visited Brown before I came so it was a bit of a culture shock. But you know, it was something where I felt like if I, if I could only get into the right school, my mom would have to let me go. She couldn't turn it, turn it down. And she, she, I got into Wellesley, and she had lobbied hard for Wellesley.

AK: Really?

KL: She lobbied hard, because she knew I was going to go, and she thought, like, if I just went to an all-girls school, that would be great. You know, that way I could just date my husband, right, when the time came. And I wanted to go to Columbia, and I lobbied hard for Columbia. And she said absolutely not. I mean, she had all of the stereotypes of Harlem in her head, you know? And she said, "Absolutely not New York. No, no way." And Brown became [22:00] the compromise in some way. So, I hate to say it, but I kind of settled for Brown. I totally settled for Brown because it was my escape from Wellesley and I couldn't, she wouldn't let me go to Columbia. So



those, that's how I ended up at Brown, to be honest. And I have to tell you, coming from Southern California, and you know, LA to Providence, in the mid and early '90s was, was rough. That was really rough.

AK: Tell me about your transition to being so far away from your family in a completely different part of the country. What was that like for you? What were you noticing or experiencing?

KL: Yeah, so I think, you know, for a lot of people in my shoes who just are trying to get away, you don't know always what you're getting into. So as far as, you know, [23:00] I think I had suddenly that freedom that I was craving, but I didn't know what else came with it until I was in it. And for, for me to come, go from a really multicultural place like Los Angeles, even though I was mostly in my little family bubble. I had exposure to other, you know, communities in LA, to Providence that felt so small, like just even geographically square footage wise, it was tiny. You could walk. In LA, you don't walk anywhere. So it was, it was a big shift. And it was a big change. And no matter how well you think you're prepared for a moment like that in your life, as an 18-year-old, you're not. And you know, it was also tough because I was coming from a really, I think a childhood of poverty. I mean, [24:00] we were okay. But my mother used food pantries, my mother, when she, we were growing up, she, before she could find like stable work and all that. And we didn't always have a whole lot. And certainly, I only made it to Brown and through college and grad school on a whole lot of scholarships. So I, it was it was odd to be amongst, you know, those who have had such privilege and have never had to think about it and probably didn't know what a food pantry was. And so like that kind of culture clash was tough. It was really tough to even. I think, time and distance has helped me process it because certainly at the time, I just felt like okay, well, I'm just going to pretend like I know what everyone's talking about. And I'll just say the same things that everyone's saying. And in some ways maybe that'll, that'll be fine. Like I'm, it really is feeling like you're pretending [25:00] to be someone else.

AK: How – were you able to find or build a community where you felt like you could kind of be yourself while you were at Brown?

KL: Yes. So eventually, you know, I started hanging out with other Vietnamese American students. And even though there was, you know, a range of socio economic, you know, conditions amongst the group, we all kind of fundamentally understood where we were coming from. And we had, many of us had some of the same shared experiences growing up and who also had emigrated from a young age. So, we kind of had that language. And I think food always plays a big role, and that kind of community building as well. And all those years that I was forced to cook in the kitchen really became helpful later on in life, let me tell you. But we did, we did find a community there.

But even then, it was still a little tricky, [26:00] because for the most part, I would say, 90% of my Vietnamese American, you know, classmates were pre-med, or in the sciences, in the life sciences, in some way. And that's what my mother always wanted me to be was a doctor. And I think she's, I think she still thinks I can do it. Like, no, Mom, I'm not doing that. So, I think that is her one true regret on behalf of me, and I'm like, I don't need you to, I don't regret that so I don't know why you would regret that for me. And I had always felt that way from the beginning. Like, I did not come to college thinking I would be pre-med and then decided something else. I knew I wasn't pre-med even though that's what my family wanted, you know. I knew it had to be something else and I had no idea what, which I guess Brown can be a good place for and not so great place for. I'm sure goes both ways. When you kind of don't know what you want to do it could be great for exploring, but you can get lost in the exploration. [27:00] So, so there was a lot that was going on. But I think you know, that group of Vietnamese American friends really was helpful because we felt like it was a safe space to kind of say, you know, "Hey, I'm not going home for Thanksgiving. What are you doing?" Our – none of us were sitting there talking about ski trips or, you know, spring break in the Bahamas or something like that. That wasn't, we kind of understood each other at that other level.

AK: Were, what, what was it like not going home for holidays? What would – you stayed on campus I assume, often times?

KL: Yeah, yeah.

AK: What was that like for you?

KL: Well, it can feel isolating. It can feel, I think at the time again, that kind of self-preservation kicks in a little bit and you kind of give yourself reasons why this makes sense. I've got to work on some paper that I didn't do; I need to catch up for some class; [28:00] you can talk your way into anything just to make it feel more normal. You know, I just need some peace and quiet from everyone. This is great. I have the dining hall to myself.

AK: And how did you, did you go to Brown with a concentration in mind and if not, how did you kind of, how did you feel that out and what did you land on?

KL: So it's, it's funny, because I think I spent most of my teenage years and early years at Brown, feeling like I'm trying to push away my Vietnamese background, experience, heritage, all of that. And then what really integrated me into brown ended up being this project at the Watson Institute that I became a Research Assistant for. And this project was on the Vietnam War which, you know, so ironic. [29:00] What happened was that Robert McNamara was invited to come to Brown to speak. And the, his address, though, was by invitation only. And it was for a limited group of individuals at Brown. And I didn't think that was okay. And my, I had another friend at the time, Vietnamese American friend, and we went to figure out who brought this man to campus and decided that we couldn't hear him speak. He who had such a role in our lives. We felt like we deserved to at least hear what he had to say.

So, we went and complained to Professor James Blight, and we said, "What is, what is this? Like? It's not okay. You can't do this." And he's like, "Well, we can invite you." And I said, "Well, that's not the point. That's great, but there are other people who won't to get to hear him speak." And apparently, Jim, really liked our gumption. He's like, "That kind of impressed me." [30:00] And he ended up asking, he offered and I don't even know if we got, you know, eventually they opened it up or not, the session with McNamara, but he ended up offering us jobs. Like, what? That's not what we're here for. But he's like, "Well, will you consider it because we need someone to do this research work for us and it would be great if we had someone who was kind of a cultural guide for us as well." And so we thought about it and we finally said yes, and we, we both took this on together. Eventually, she only did it for one year, I stayed on for, oh, gosh, almost five or six years, eventually, over a span of time into grad school. But it was very weird. It felt like another an out of body experience. I did get to meet McNamara,

which also felt really strange, you know, he was at that age kind of this shriveled up, old man, not the kind of figure that you, you know, [31:00] you read about at the time and all that. So, so here he was. And they explained to us what the project was. And it was a critical oral history project about the missed opportunities to end the war earlier. Which again, was so ironic, because if the war ended earlier, if they didn't miss any of those opportunities, I wouldn't be there. And it was just this weird juxtapositioning of everything.

And then they decided that they were going to make this huge trip to Vietnam, and have this huge conference with the Vietnamese government, and you know, and start, and kick off this project. And they asked me to go, and they asked me to be an interpreter. And I said, "Oh, okay, sure, why not?" And then my mom said, "No." My mom said, "You can't go." And I said, "Why not?" She's like, "You don't have a passport. You're not a US citizen. They're going to keep you. They won't let you come back." And so, I went back to Professor Blight, and I said, "My mom's not letting me go." And he's like, "What? Why is she [32:00] not letting you go?" And I said, I gave him all the reasons. And she said, he said, "Okay, so if you're, if you have a passport she'll let you go?" I said, "Yes, but we're leaving in two weeks, you know? How are you going to make that work?" And he said, "Just, just give me some time."

The next day, I get a call. And I'm told that in two days' time I'm going to go take the US naturalization exam at Senator Chafee's office. This is Lincoln Chafee the senior, not, not the junior at the time. And so, so then, I went down to Senator Chafee's office after I crammed through colonial history, which I actually love. It was a very odd thing, but I crammed it all into my head. I showed up at Senator Chafee's office, and I go in and some secretary asked me to sit down, and they asked me essentially, "Okay, can you read the sentence?" And it's like "see Jane run." They asked me to write a sentence, "See Jack run." And, and then they asked me, who was the first President of the United States [33:00] was and I said, "George Washington." They said, "Congratulations. You're a US citizen." I'm like, wait, that's it? Like, I actually know the colonial history. You don't want to ask me? So that was it. And then, you know, two days later, I had my passport. And then we were off. And we went to Vietnam. And it was so bizarre. So, so bizarre and so utterly overwhelming that I just kind of blocked everything out.

On that first trip, also, Brown decided that they were going to milk this for all his worth. And you know, it wasn't enough that there was McNamara involved. They send the writer from the Brown Alumni Monthly with us. And I'm sure you can dig up this this this issue/ I'm on the

cover with my friend. They sent the writer with us to chronicle [34:00] our first time back in our homeland. And my father was coming up to see me for the first time since I left Vietnam. So, we were meeting in Hanoi at the Metropole, which is like this grand hotel, which is so bizarre to be in a developing country in this grand colonial hotel meeting your father for the first time in front of all these like journalists. It was strange.

AK: Did you feel like a spectacle?

KL: I'm sorry?

AK: Did you feel –

KL: It was very much a spectacle. However, so Professor Blight, Jim and Janet, Janet was his wife. She is also involved in the project planning and all that. They, they've become like family to me. They actually hosted my wedding and all that later on, but they were with me and a couple other professors, one from Vassar, Bob Brigham, another one from at the time, actually the Kennedy School at Harvard, David Welch, they had also, they kind of had become pretty protective of [35:00] me. They kind of understood what was happening. And they sat me down and they were like, "You're not 21 yet, but we're giving you a drink before you go meet your dad."

AK: Probably the best thing they ever did.

KL: Right. And so I can't, you know, and then when it happened is like, you know, there's like, everyone around me. I don't remember anything. I just remember hearing a lot of noise, white noise in my head. Right? All of this is happening. And then the story as it unfolds in the Brown Alumni Monthly, if you ever get a chance to read it, really pits, me and my friend against each other as two different ways of, two different Vietnamese American experiences. One, she was much more traditional. She liked Vietnamese poetry. You know, she, she was kind of this exoticized version of a Vietnamese American woman. Whereas I was Americanized, and, you

know, had, had opinions and all these things, which I thought, I always disliked the way that article came out.

But it was such a weird time. And it was such an out of [36:00] body experience, where I would work the conference during the day, interpret for McNamara at lunch. And I didn't have the vocabulary. And I froze on my first attempt and someone from the Vietnamese side stepped in and saved me. I mean, who talks about surface to air missiles at home at the dinner table? You know, like, we don't talk, we don't talk about the war and the terminology and the military. I don't know the difference between a platoon and a brigade in English, let alone in Vietnamese. Like how do you, like, it was, it was so odd. But you know, we acclimated ourselves, and we did fine. But you know, we were 19-year-olds trying to like, sitting at an international conference. And we were usually the only women at the table, which was also very odd. And, and in Vietnamese, when you talk to someone who's older than you, you don't call them by their name. You don't say, "Hi, Amanda." You kind of [37:00] gauge what generation they are from you. And you either call them uncle or like, grandpa. So there are these old North Vietnamese generals who my family hates, you know, because of their roles in the war. And I'm out there calling them uncle and grandpa. And it was like, so bizarre. It was so bizarre. And, and I'm supposed to be professional. So, like, you know, based on the family history, it was weird based on the professional setting it was odd. But you couldn't, it was super disrespectful if you didn't call them by those, you know, categories. And then even someone who was my contemporary but male, I had to call older brother. And so, like that was also just infuriating. So, it was just, there was so many layers of oddness and awkwardness, and so many things that I think I kind of just put in a box and I said, you know, "I'm going to [38:00] deal with this later. I don't even know how to deal with this. This is just going to have to sit here for a while." And now if you go to the Metropole, and I've been back a few times, in their hallway where they have photos of like the history of the hotel and everything, there's a picture of McNamara coming for this conference. And I'm always like, Oh, I was there for that. It was a very strange time. But that's, that's what it was.

But Jim and Janet, we, you know, kept me on for their product, this project for quite a while. And we ended up traveling the world for this work. Like the Rockefeller funded us and we ended up in Italy, in Bellagio, with like, you know, it's just, just the weirdest places I'm like, Okay, so the Vietnamese are going to come here, and we're going to come here and hang out in

Italy? Okay. We can do that. And another place was like the White Oak Plantation in Florida, which is like a privately owned nature preserve. I think it's owned by like a paper family, a paper making family. And it was weird. It's where like, the Clintons [39:00] will vacation. Where like, it's totally, you don't even, there's no signage, you just, there's just fencing. And once you pass into the fence, you're on this property where people just leave cars around and you just hop into them where you want to go somewhere in, on the property and the keys are just left in the car. Very strange.

AK: Before we move on, do you have any other snapshot memories of your time at Brown high points, low points, that you want to share?

KL: Yeah, so I mean, I met my husband at Brown. So, it would be really remiss not to mention that as a high point, you know, and in true Brown fashion, we are a very multicultural family. So, I'm Vietnamese and he's a Jewish Filipino. His, his father is Jewish from Baltimore, and joined the Peace Corps and met his mother in the Philippines. So, our kids are totally, totally mixed up as it [40:00] is, so I think that that's par for the course. I did Brown proud in that respect.

But, you know, I think just getting to know, finding, finding a place where I felt comfortable and felt like I was contributing to the community and wasn't there because I was a charity project, was really, really important to me. And I mean, the first year was rough. I was on Pembroke campus in Chandler Hall and it was probably one of the most decrepit dorms at the time on campus. And it was horrible. It felt more like a jail really, like it was just kind of ugly and odd. And tiling was weird. And the shower sometimes didn't work. And but, and it was, it was strange to be thrown into that kind of environment with I think, where the majority of the folks in my, my residency hall were from such affluence. Even though we were all living in the same [41:00] decrepit hall, you know, you think that that would be a leveling of some kind of the playing field, but it wasn't, you know, it was still very odd. And I didn't venture out much, I would say that it took me to my junior year to really feel like I could really use the resources of Brown. I always felt like I didn't know enough how to access certain things, certain services, certain opportunities. I mean, it took me complaining about not seeing McNamara to actually make some headway. And then once I was part of that project, I felt like a lot more doors opened

up. And suddenly, you know, people cared about what I was doing, which I think is very different than the first year. Yeah.

AK: So, we're kind of running up on time. So, I'm going to jump ahead quite a bit here. And let's bring us to present day. [42:00] Part of why, so the Pembroke Center, we put a call out to collect oral histories from the AAPI community about experiences as a whole, but particularly during current events. You can, I would like for you to start your story wherever you would like because this may very well start with two presidential elections ago, it may start at the beginning of the pandemic, so would you just kind of like to share a little bit about current events, your, your experiences today as a Vietnamese American – presumably still in the United States, right?

KL: Yea. Yes.

AK: Yes. OK.

KL: So I think I have always felt like, in some ways, being the model minority was a nice cloak of invisibility. And it kind of felt [43:00] like, I know that my family has never had a conversation about race and where Vietnamese Americans, Asian Americans, fit into the landscape. If anything, given my family's history with politics, and you know, war and upheaval, they shied away from all of that. And we were taught to shy away from all of that. So, I never, I don't have the language to talk about a lot of that. And I certainly don't have it in Vietnamese, I could never have this conversation with any of my relatives in Vietnamese. And that's a real, that's a real problem. But because of that, I've always felt like I didn't have to stand up and say thing. I didn't also feel like, as Asian Americans, we had the same kinds of what is the term, I would say systemic oppression that Black Americans have felt. And I, my, my [44:00] moment of political awakening was apartheid and Nelson Mandela. And in like, seventh grade. So, like, that was my moment of political, you know, awakening. So for me, it was more a black and white issue than it was a spectrum. And I also felt like, you know, yeah, lots of things suck. There's lots of microaggressions. People keep complimenting on my no accent English and mispronouncing my name, my last name, but you know, that's okay. At least, you know, we weren't enslaved. You know, there was this like, weird, we didn't have it as bad is what it felt



like. And so in some ways, I always felt like a supporting cast to the racial conversations, and understood that we had a role but our role was a supporting role and we would support the Black Lives Movement. And when all of that came to be, you know, of course, we would be behind that. We would, you know, speak up for that. But [45:00] I didn't necessarily felt like I was speaking up for myself, or my Asian American community. I felt like, you know, if we spoke up for the Black Lives Matter that would somehow trickle down and would help all of us, and that'd be great. But then I wasn't really speaking about myself and my experience. I was just supporting someone else's story. And so, it really took, you know, the last, I would say, a couple of years actually, to bring that home and to really make it feel like I don't have a choice anymore, to say that I can only be in a supporting role, and I just, I don't have that choice. And, and in some ways, when I kept making that choice, before, I was exacerbating the problem. You know, I felt like I was doing the right thing by supporting the Black Lives Matter Movement, and, you know, making contributions and doing whatever it was. But in some ways, because I wasn't speaking for myself, I was just part of that [46:00] problem, I was part of that systemic problem. And because we'd all drank the Kool Aid, drank the water, it's, we are all drinking the same water. And today, I will tell you that I am quite envious of the Black community in some ways, because they have the language and they have that more common understanding of what they're fighting, what they're fighting for. For me, you know, the last few months have been a bit strange, because I still don't feel super connected to all the different Asian American communities, because there are multiple layers upon layers and it is very tough to find common language. And to find common language that is purposeful and actionable. I even don't like the "Stop Asian Hate" hashtag, because I feel like in some ways, it's very passive. It's [47:00] telling someone else to stop something. It's not saying we're going to go do something, or proclaiming a worth or an action, it is asking someone else to stop something else that they're doing. And I struggle with that, because I don't know what I would replace it with. And I think that that is part of this journey for my generation, is to figure out how to A) make peace with how we were raised. B) I think, accept the discomfort that we've asked our white allies to accept when we talk about white privilege, we need to accept that we're not comfortable being seen, that we're not comfortable being heard, and that we need to figure out how to do it anyhow. I think that that's really where I'm at at the moment, and kind of one of the reasons why I'm doing this, and putting the stories out there and putting the essay out there, and all that is part of that

effort. Because I can write and I do write, and there's probably you know, half a dozen essays that I wouldn't share with anyone, [48:00] but I think it's time to kind of stick our necks out a bit.

AK: Perhaps a more practical question. So, for the listener who's listening in 50 years from now, who might not have the context that we have, we are living through a pandemic, through a virus that seems to have originated out of China, during a time in the United States when we had a president who just used his platform to create division and hate and more racism. And as a result, we are seeing an increased rise in violence against the AAPI community. How do you feel when you see these [49:00] videos that they keep posting on the news of, of this violence? And does it concern you, do you start to make your own plans for your own safety when you step outside of your house to do your day-to-day life?

KL: So yes and no. I feel very fortunate to live in a lovely blue bubble where certainly there are, I haven't experienced and within my community of where I live, any outright racism. I have heard stories of other Asian Americans being told to go home at the local Walgreens or wherever. So, I'm not saying that it doesn't exist in my community. I have not had that experience and I have not, it has certainly not gone past words in my immediate community. And in some ways the pandemic has helped that. I'm not venturing off into New York City or wherever [50:00] else.

And I think it might be different if I was. But in my day-to-day life, the only time I've had a conversation about safety and awareness is actually with my teenage son. Because, you know, he's in a high school, it's public high school – or it doesn't matter if it's public or private, quite honestly – where kids make questionable decisions on a daily basis, probably like on a minute-by-minute basis. And even if they're just, you know, halfheartedly saying something, or just saying something, because they think it's funny, or whatever else, like I needed to make him understand that he needed to be aware, not just for his own safety, but for the safety of others. You know, like, he has a great group of friends, and they've known each other forever. I can't imagine any of them doing or saying something, and it is a diverse group of friends. But there, there are plenty of others and seeing what I see on some of the community [51:00] Facebook boards, not everyone is as fluent in this language, this new language, as we are. And so, it can

manifest in different ways, even with people with the best of intentions, it can come out weird. So, you know, so that's the only time I've actually really had to hit the nail on the head for him was say, "I need you to be aware. I need you to know that there are people out there who don't think like us, even though they live here with us. And, and, and it trickles down to the kids." Until the kids have their own ability to think critically, some of this trickles down. I do see great hope for the, with the next generation. I do. I think their acceptance and sensitive inclusiveness is just leaps and bounds beyond anything from our generation and before. So, I'm super hopeful about that.

But I am, I'm fortunate, you know. [52:00] I don't worry about being attacked out there. And it's interesting because I used to work in global health. And when I traveled abroad, I would go to some of the weirdest places. I would go to Azerbaijan, I would go to Bangladesh, I would go to India. And everyone would think I was Japanese and I could get away with anything because they thought, they didn't see me as a threat. You know, I wasn't blond haired, blue eyed. They didn't, they didn't come harass me the same way they would an American lady, trying to sell me things. It was actually a good invisibility cloak. Like, you know, like, I could just go about my business and no one would care. I would dress like the locals and I could do anything. And no one batted an eyelash at me. Whereas my, you know, blond haired, blue eyed counterparts would have more issues. So I, in some ways that's changed now, which is, I would say, at first really saddening and then just also really infuriating. [53:00] But it hasn't really changed, I guess. I go back and forth about this. I'm like, yes, it's changed, but no, it really hasn't, you know, it's always been there. This didn't come up out of nowhere. As much as I'd like to blame our previous president, and I'm sure he, I give him a whole lot of responsibility for all this. He did not create this. He enabled it, but it was always there.

AK: So finally, as we come up on our time, I know there's chunks of your life that we left out, and maybe parts of your life that we did talk about that you want to elaborate on. But is there anything else that you would like to get into this historical record that maybe I didn't ask you about or you just would like to reiterate before we close today?

KL: I think I didn't talk about my kids except for my son. So, I have two kids, I have a 16 year old boy who got his first vaccination shot yesterday when he turned 16. And a [54:00] 10-year-

old daughter. And I am so amazed at how they absorb everything and how things that make us think twice they don't even think about. And I think that that's just such a reassuring feeling knowing that I have to send them out into this world that they're not ready for and they can then can never possibly be ready for, even though I perhaps I'm in a better position to prepare them than my parents were. But that their openness to people and experiences I think it's so, so important to see and to value and to nourish and encourage. Because I think that's where we're all headed. And the forces that are I guess the loudest right now against all of that, realize that that's where we're heading and that's what frightens them. [55:00] So, you know, I think, I think it's, it's, it's a good thing and, and I'm going to be rooting for them.

AK: That's wonderful. We're rooting for them also. Maybe they'll come visit us at Brown.

KL: If I can just convince them. That would be great.

AK: Or maybe Columbia.

KL: Right, maybe Wellesley. We'll see.

AK: Who knows.

KL: Who knows.

AK: Well, I thank you so, so much for your time today and for sharing this really fantastic personal story, stories. It's just been outstanding to meet you and to talk with you today. Thank you so much.

KL: Thank you, Amanda, for the opportunity.

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