

Oral Histories of the Post-1965 Lives of Asian Americans in Idaho

The Reminiscences of
Brittany Monarvy Yann

Asian American Comparative Collection
University of Idaho
2020

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of recorded interviews with Brittany M. Yann conducted by Kathy M. Min on July 27, 2020, and August 11, 2020. This interview is part of the Oral Histories of the Post-1965 Lives of Asian Americans in Idaho project, conducted in partnership with the Asian American Comparative Collection.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

Transcriptionist	Kathy M. Min
Narrator	Brittany M. Yann
Interviewer	Kathy M. Min
Session Number	1
Location	Virtually through Zoom. Kathy Min called from Boise, Idaho. Brittany Yann called from Oakland, California.
Date	July 27, 2020

00:00:01

Q: So today is July 27, 2020. I'm Kathy Min, the interviewer, and I'm interviewing Brittany and. We're doing the call over Zoom. I'm calling from Boise, Idaho. Brittany's calling from California. And the proposed subject is an oral history of Brittany's life for the Asian American oral history project. So first question. What's your full name?

Yann: My full name is Brittany Monarvy Yann, Monarvy spelled M-O-N-A-R-V-Y. The R is silent. I'm not entirely sure why, but it is a Cambodian name.

00:00:42

Q: And when and where were you born?

Yann: I was born November 24, 1997, in Oakland, California. I was born in Oakland, lived there for 10 years, and then I moved to Idaho in 2008 at 10 years old.

00:01:00

Q: And what is your current occupational and/or educational background?

Yann: So I received my bachelor in communications at Boise State University. I also received certificates of public relations and nonprofit management. I currently work at a nonprofit called KQED. We are the NPR-PBS [National Public Radio-Public Broadcasting Service] affiliate here in the Bay Area.

00:01:31

Q: Cool. So that just means—like Boise has a local radio station [Boise State Public Radio], but also under NPR. So it's the Bay Area version?

Yann: Yeah, I actually used to work for that station [Boise State Public Radio] too. So basically it's the TV and radio combined into one. And I work in the fundraising department for that organization. So I just help with processing a lot of the gifts that come through, which range in a variety of different donations.

00:02:04

Q: Awesome. And I think we'll talk a little bit more about your work, probably later in the interview, but just some questions about your family.

[INTERRUPTION]

00:03:30

Q: And what do your parents do for a living? And what is their educational background?

Yann: My father has always had his own business. That's something that his father had before he passed. They owned a donut business. It's very common for Cambodians to have a donut shop.¹ And so they were making donuts all their lives. But my dad had dipped into a variety of different things like real estate. He was a car salesman, I think at some point. But now he is still making donuts, but looking to change his occupation—still looking for a small business—but just wanting to do something different.

00:04:28

Yann: And then my mother, I'm not able to say in full detail, but she does work for the state government in Idaho. And previously, she was a dental hygienist. She had done a variety of retail jobs. And she also previously worked as—I can't exactly explain it, but she was an administration assistant back in early 2000s up until 2008. She worked for those companies that would drive around those armored trucks filled with money and bring those to the bank and go to stores and whatnot. So she worked for that company.

00:05:18

Yann: And as for education, my mother, I know she received her associate's degree in dental hygiene from—I believe it was a community college. It doesn't exist anymore, but it was a community college called—I can't remember the name of it. But my father, I know that he went back to school to receive his bachelor's, I believe in business. But it took him a while to get back there. But my parents had met in high school, and I believe they graduated high school together.

¹ As of 2014, there are about 1,500 donut shops in California run by Cambodians. Ted Ngoy was the first Cambodian to open a donut shop, opening his first shop in 1977 in La Habra, California. From Greg Nichols, "Dunkin' and the Doughnut King," *California Sunday Magazine*, November 2, 2014, <https://story.californiasunday.com/ted-ngoy-california-doughnut-king>.

00:06:03

Q: Sorry, might be a little bit glitchy. It might just [not] be the best wifi. So I think we'll keep trying.

Yann: Okay, sorry. I'm not sure—I haven't seen any notifications on my end, but I will try to make sure.

Q: It might be me. No worries! But if it continues to be glitchy, I might have us turn our videos off, but I'll just try and keep going. And I'll let you know. But I think I got most of what you said.

Yann: Okay. Sounds good.

00:06:34

Q: And then, do you have any siblings?

Yann: I do. I have an older brother.

[INTERRUPTION]

00:06:43

Yann: He's named after my dad. He's seven years older. And then I have my two younger siblings. They're my half-siblings.

[INTERRUPTION]

00:07:06

Q: And are they all—your siblings and your parents—still in Idaho?

Yann: No. So my mother had my older brother and I together with my father. And then my parents split. And after a while, he met my stepmom and they had their two kids, and they currently live in Texas.

00:07:34

Q: Oh, okay. So is your mom the one that's working for the State Department of Idaho then?

Yann: Mhm.

00:07:42

Q: Okay, so she's still in Idaho and then everyone else's in Texas.

Yann: Mhm.

00:07:49

Q: Is your older brother also in Texas as well?

Yann: No. He's actually still in Idaho. He really likes Boise. And I think he's just really gotten into the groove of it. So, as of right now, he's still in Boise and still pretty close to my mom.

[INTERRUPTION]

00:08:25

Q: And then is your stepmom also from Cambodia?

Yann: Yes, she's also from Cambodia. I think she moved to America around 2006, 2007-ish. I think so. It's still very early. But yes, she's born and raised in Cambodia.

00:08:57

Q: And then how did your family—I guess we can start with California—how'd they get to California?

Yann: Both families had very different journeys with similar motives to why they immigrated. So basically during the '60, '70s, around the time of the Vietnam War, there was also the Khmer genocide, the Cambodian genocide. There was this guy; his name is Pol Pot. And he had this vision of this agricultural utopia. He believed in a very communist community and basically took over the government and completely changed the country. If you were a scholar, teacher, government worker, if you were involved in the arts, you were killed by this group of people. If you were poor, you were just forced to work in these fields and these farms until exhaustion.

00:10:11

Yann: And so, I'll begin with my mom's side of the story. So my grandmother, she and her husband, of course, living under these situations, were worked to exhaustion. And my grandfather had gotten sick with jungle fever [an extreme form of malaria] and unfortunately died. And so my grandmother being a single mother of three children—I think four at the time, but unfortunately lost the fourth child to illness—decided to escape this regime and ended up in Thailand.

00:11:00

Yann: Where they lived in Cambodia, it's in a city called Battambang and it's very close to the Thai border. And so they escaped to Thailand, and I believe this was late '70s, early '80s. They spent a few years there, just really trying to apply to live in any other country they could. They had met this woman and she had ended up going to America first. And she would send money over to my grandmother to help her pay for the funds to fill out the paperwork or to get over to America.

00:11:42

Yann: And finally, my grandmother, my mother, and my two uncles were sponsored by a pastor from New Jersey to come to America. I think they came in 1985. So they went over there [to New Jersey] and lived with them [the pastor's family] for a year. And they were still in contact with that woman they had known from the camp previously, and ended up moving to California because of that.

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Yann: Now my dad's story, it's a little splotchy because I didn't really get to know my dad until much recently. But very similarly, they escaped the regime and ended up in that same camp, but just at different points from my mother. Ironically, they lived in that same city 10 miles away and just didn't know each other. So they [Brittany's father's family] ended up with a camp and went through the same process of filling out all the paperwork, and I believe they lived in the Philippines for a bit. It was just my two grandparents, my dad's parents; my dad; and his younger sister. And eventually they ended up in California. And then my mom and dad both met here in the Bay Area, and they went to the same high school together. And the rest was history, and it just set up the rest of my life in a way.

00:13:16

Q: Yeah, I guess I have quite a few follow-ups. First, do you know the years that your parents were born?

Yann: Yes. So my mother was born in 1969 and my father was born in 1971.

00:13:38

Q: And then, do you know where in Cambodia they lived before all the upheaval?

Yann: From what I was told, they mainly resided in the villages surrounding that one city, Battambang. It's one of the smaller cities, but there are a lot of surrounding villages and so they lived—I can't remember the names or if they [the villages] really had names—but they [Brittany's parents] just lived really close to each other, but didn't know it.

00:14:12

Q: And do you know what your grandparents' occupations were before Pol Pot came to power?

Yann: Not really, no. From what my grandparents really told me, they don't really talk about their life as much before. I mean, my grandmother has told me stories of when she was a kid and how—just very grandparent-like things to say where they're like, “Yeah, I had a dog and then it ran away. I had a pet pig, and then my parents sold it to the market.” Or crazy things like “I lived in a jungle and I came across a snake and didn't die.” Those very outrageous things that your grandparents tell you. But they've never really talked about their occupation, just before the war.

00:15:07

Yann: And I don't know if it's because they just don't want to look back on it that much. From what I can tell, I think a lot of people in the village, they were just farm folk, just selling whatever their farm animals produced or selling farm animals for profit. But really, I learned more about their occupation once they came to America.

00:15:38

Q: And how old were your parents when they were in the camps then?

Yann: I believe my father was as young as seven, and my mother was around 13, because she ended up coming to America when she was about 15.

00:16:06

Q: Do you know—have they talked about to you what their life was like in the camps?

Yann: It's very typical answers, like, you know, “My life was hard. We didn't eat much.” You know, it's “You make do with so little.” Something I always remember that my mom told me is that once we—sorry. As a family, we'd go and get pho together, go out to eat, very normal. Very normal to get pho, especially in the Bay Area. I remember recently she told me that, “You know, I never really had my own bowl of pho until I met your dad and we would go out to eat pho. Basically, in the camp, we were just given one bowl. Not even a pho. It was just water and noodles, and we'd have to share that, just the four of us, and that was mainly it.”

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Yann: Just really crazy things or just stories of people that we know from the camp who—how their family became whole. And just really crazy things where they saw people would come to the camp and have children, and then just leave them there, and then leave. It was never a lot of details, and I can understand that, and I never wanted to push, but mainly just, you know, we were doing our best to try and get out of the situation we're in.

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Q: And again, if you don't know the answers for this, that's fine. And I know your parents were also really young at the time. But do you know what it was like for them to go to—the journey of going to the camps?

Yann: I know more of my mom's story than my dad's story, but my mom told me it was just a lot of walking and exhaustion. Just walking across the border to get to the refugee camp in Thailand, and how my uncle—my youngest uncle—was I think about six years old at the time. And so they would just walk and walk and walk—and I don't know if you've been to Vietnam or Cambodia or if you've seen this—but if you go towards countryside, or any sort of jungle area, there's still signs that say, “Beware of landmines.”

00:19:05

Yann: And at that time, my uncle had stepped on a landmine, and they had thought, “That's it. This is it.” And, the moment he stepped off that landmine, nothing happened. It just so happened to be a defective landmine, thank goodness. But it's just, I never tried to press for more details because I know it's very traumatic for them to talk about, but it's always—it's just the walking they remember and, of course, being exhausted and being thirsty and being hungry, but having to push through it so you can escape. Because it's either you keep walking or—of course, my grandma would say, “You keep walking or you die. What else can you do?” And you know, for her, it's like you just have to survive.

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Q: And then, would you remind me [of] your parents' places in the family? Were they the oldest, middle child?

Yann: My mother is the middle child. She is the second child. It goes, my uncle and then her and then my uncle. And I would have had two other uncles, but unfortunately they passed due to illnesses. And then I actually—I might have to check this again—but from the photos we have around the house, for my dad's side, it looked like it was just my grandparents, my dad, who is technically the oldest between his parents, and then his sister. But they have an older half brother that is from their dad and their step mom.

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Q: And so you were saying it was '85 that your mom got to the US?

Yann: Yeah, I believe, it was around '85, because we—this is very unrelated, but kind of related—we had talked about how long *Wheel of Fortune* has been on air, because that show has

been on air for so long. And we looked it up, and I think Google said 1983, and she goes, “Oh my goodness. And then I came to America two years later.” So *Wheel of Fortune* has been around longer than my mom has been in America.

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Q: And then, do you know what year your dad got to the US?

Yann: I'm not entirely sure. I feel like it might have been late '70s, because I think he got here before my mom and he immediately came to America. So it's around that time.

00:22:08

Q: And they both migrated with their entire families?

Yann: Yeah, for the most part, they came with their entire families.

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Q: So does that also mean that your grandparents are still in the US now?

Yann: Yes. Well, my dad's parents—my grandparents—they passed away. My grandmother passed away about six years ago. And then my grandfather passed away last year, and so I have one remaining grandparent, my mom's mom. And of course, her [Brittany's mother's] father had passed away before coming to America. And she [Brittany's grandmother] was actually part of the reason why I moved out of Boise, is because I wanted to be closer to her.

00:23:06

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about your different family members, what they're like, what their personalities are like?

Yann: Yeah. So I'll begin with my mom's side of the family. My mom's side of the family is the family I'm most familiar with. I spent a lot of time with them. And it's just, after my parents split up, I just spend more time with them. My uncles, they're both very much like my grandfather, their father, so I'm told by my grandmother. They both have very dedicated, loving personality traits. They're also very stubborn and hard-headed, which I know that has carried on to me. But my mom's side of the family, they're a lot older, I think, than some of my dad's siblings.

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Yann: But to me, they have always embodied this hard working, hard work ethic, basically. You know, my grandmother as a single mother, she works so hard just to keep them alive and works so hard just to get them to America. And I see a lot of that in them. They really all are dedicated

to their family, and is really hard-working, and would do anything to make sure that their family is safe, and that there's a roof over their head, and they have something to eat.

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Yann: As for my dad's side of the family, they are a bit younger than some of my mom's siblings, so their outlook in life is somewhat different. My dad's younger sister, she's younger by nine years. She's lived in the Bay Area, California, for almost all her life, and I think she has a lot of traits that reminds me of my grandmother and her mother. They're both very independent, very much—they don't show physical affection, like that typical Asian mom stereotype where they don't say “I love you,” but they'll kind of like slap you on the back and be like, “Yeah [mimics a slap].” So they're very, very similar. So when I started living with my aunt, it just felt like I was living with my grandmother in a way, just because they're so much alike.

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Yann: And then, my dad's other younger siblings, they were both actually born here in America. I can't remember the exact years, but they basically are millennials during this time. So they have a very different outlook on life compared to my dad. My dad is very traditional. He's very Cambodian. He's carried that mindset into his family, into the way he lives. We always have this joke, because I live in a very heavily populated Cambodian area and my dad knows every single one of them, it feels like. And it seems like we have to latch on to my dad to seem more Cambodian, so we can get invited to barbecues and parties, just to eat.

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Yann: But basically, they [Brittany's younger aunts and uncles] obviously grew up here in America. And like any first generation American to immigrant parents, they just have a very different mindset in how they view America, how they view political issues, social issues, of course compared to our parents. Because their parents, and of course my parents, feel grateful for the opportunity to live in America. They're very grateful to have escaped the horrors that they saw in Cambodia. And it almost feels like, because we had the privilege to be born here and grow up here that we see things differently that may be deemed as ungrateful.

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Yann: So, I think, to sum it up a bit, I guess I feel like I personally relate more to my dad's younger siblings, just because I'm somewhat closer in age to them, even though I didn't spend a lot of time with them in my childhood.

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Q: And then, we were talking about how it was your mom's side of the family that was sponsored by that pastor in New Jersey. And so they were in New Jersey for a little bit and then they went

to the Bay Area. And then that's where your mom and your dad met. And so I'm just wondering if you could walk me through a little bit of what life was like in America for them in those early years of getting here.

Yann: So, at least from—I'll speak for my mom's side first—just from what she told me, you come to America. You don't know anything about speaking English, so you already feel like an outcast. And of course, living in New Jersey, it's heavily populated with Caucasian people, so she just felt more out of place. But the family she lived with, at the time, I think they had about three or four children. So it was just a really, really packed house, but they [the pastor's family] were kind to them and they [Brittany's family] got by. But, of course, your whole life has changed. So you really don't know where to go which way, and you're just really trying to do your best.

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Yann: I remember my mom telling me that she decided to join track and field just to feel like she was part of something, which ended up being really great for. She would tell me, “I wouldn't win anything. But you know, I was just happy to do something and just be part of something.” And I really do appreciate that mindset that she has. Additionally, she just spoke a lot about how—I mean, if you were to meet my mother, you'd see this too—she really does keep to herself most of the time. She doesn't talk much to people, mainly because she doesn't want to. And she's always been more introverted. And even then, when my parents talk about each other, I mean, nothing has changed. They're both the same people as they describe each other from when they were—what 16, 17? So it's really interesting.

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Yann: As for my dad, I know that, of course, being a new student in any area or being different, you get picked on for that, bullied for that. And my dad isn't necessarily the person to back off from a fight. So he was often getting in trouble a lot with other kids, or just getting into trouble—still scared of my grandpa, but still doing it anyways. But, my dad, he luckily had a Cambodian community before he met my mom. And he felt like he was welcome. But still, of course, felt like an outcast, but didn't want to be labeled in the way. He didn't want to be labeled in a way that made him feel inferior to others. I think that's something that my dad was very passionate about, is that he didn't want to seem like he's beneath anyone. You know, he's just as much of a person as everyone else there, even though kids are just brutal in general.

00:31:44

Yann: I think for him, even though he was getting into lots of trouble, he's still very sociable. And as I said earlier, my dad is the person you want to go to parties with if you want to go anywhere because he's a person that everyone knows here. Even then—I recently moved back

and people will say, “Oh, are you [redacted]’s daughter?” It’s like, “I don’t know you, but I am.” So that’s a little bit of what they went through.

00:32:21

Q: How long was your mom’s family in New Jersey for again?

Yann: A year. Just a year.

00:32:28

Q: Did your mom and dad do both middle school and high school in the US?

Yann: So my mom just did high school. My dad came a lot earlier, because he went to middle school and he also went to a Catholic school. And I can’t remember if it was actually seventh through ninth grade, or sixth through eighth grade, but he was here in America during middle school years.

00:33:01

Q: And then, do you know what they did after graduating high school? Did they go straight into getting—like your mom, her associate’s, and you said your dad didn’t get his bachelor’s until later?

Yann: Yeah, so they both graduated high school, and as I mentioned earlier, my grandfather had run his own business. Cambodians are notoriously known for having a donut business. And my parents worked with him and then had their own shop, because, also, when my—my parents had gotten married really young and had my older brother really young, so they were having this family, having their business. And, traditionally, that’s what they thought that they were supposed to do. They thought that they were supposed to get married young and have a family very young, and you know, you have your own business, you feel like you’re set.

00:34:00

Yann: But my parents did not end up getting their degrees until much later in life. At least I know my dad, I think, received his education when my brother was preteen and I was barely four or five. And then my mom received her associate’s, I think, when I was eight or nine. And I’m not even exactly sure about what my dad studied; I feel bad saying this. We recently have just connected a lot. So I think there are just a lot of things where I’m like, “Oh, I think I know that.” And then it’s like, “I’m not sure if I really know that!”

00:34:54

Q: Do you know what it was like for them, running and owning the donut shop—either for your parents or for your grandpa?

Yann: I know that it was of course hard on them, because living in the Bay Area, living in Oakland, it was just a time where there was a lot of crime.² And although the Bay Area is so diverse in many different cultures and ethnicities, there's still a lot of discrimination, even today. So they faced a lot of discrimination, break-ins—anything that could go wrong, it felt like it went wrong. I know my parents had a lot of traumatic experiences being robbed at gunpoint—or just anything that could go bad, it went bad. But even then, they still needed to run a business and take care of their family and that's what mattered the most. So I definitely admire them for being able to persevere through that.

00:36:18

Yann: But it's a very interesting experience, because you have your own small business, and then you also have a lot of regular locals that will circle through that business. And so my parents, of course, became very familiar or became acquaintances with different people that came through the shop. One in particular, my mom says there's this man, he used to come in. I think his name was Robert. And he had seen my brother playing by himself and said, “He needs a sibling.” And my mom, of course, was like, “I don't want to have another kid. Having one kid is hard enough.” She always tells me that that man convinced her to have me, so that's part of their experience there.

00:37:16

Q: Were most of the patrons of the donut shop Asian or Cambodian, or was it more of a mix?

Yann: I think it was a mix, just a variety of people that came through. They had various Cambodian people who our family knew or friends of friends that would come through, or even help them out at the shop. So even if a lot of their customers weren't Cambodian, it's like they were very well known.

00:37:53

Q: Yeah. Was theirs the only donut shop in—I mean, Oakland's pretty big—but were there other businesses around that were also donut shops owned by other Cambodians?

² Gun violence and incarceration rates in the Bay Area were much higher in the 1990s compared to 2019. From Lois Beckett, Darwin BondGraham, Peter Andringa, and Abené Clayton, “Gun violence has sharply declined in California's Bay Area. What happened?”, *The Guardian*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/jun/03/gun-violence-bay-area-drop-30-percent-why-investigation>.

Yann: Oh, I'm totally sure of it. I don't know exactly. But I wouldn't be surprised, especially since there are so many people coming to America at that time and wanting to find a way to sustain themselves and achieve the American dream. They would see other Cambodians making donuts and they're like, "Okay, I guess I should start making donuts."

00:38:32

Q: Yeah, I think it's so interesting, because I remember I read about the Cambodian donut shops a few years ago and why there's no Dunkin' Donuts in California apparently. So that's interesting to hear.

Yann: Well, you know DK Donuts [in Boise]? So, they're also Cambodian-owned and—I don't know how—but they are also within the same circle that my dad runs in. They all know the same sort of people and it's like, it doesn't matter where you are. The joke is if you're a Cambodian and you own a donut shop, you have to know another person in Texas who is Cambodian and owns a donut shop.

00:39:17

Q: So the DK Donuts, is it a franchise or is it just in Boise?

Yann: I know they have a location in Meridian as well. I think they're both family-owned, just split between them.

00:39:30

Q: Oh interesting! Because I always thought we had Dunkin' Donuts in Boise, and then I, maybe a few years ago, learned that it was actually DK Donuts. That's so cool. I didn't know that it was Cambodian families who owned it. And then, tell me what were the events that led up to your family moving to Boise?

Yann: So my parents, they split in 2007. They officially split in 2007. And my mom met my stepdad through work, and his brother moved up to Boise, his mom moved up to Boise, and then, of course, he was going to move out to Boise. And then my mom, she was thinking, "You know, I'm really tired of living in the Bay Area. Idaho seems like a great fresh start."

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Yann: And that too, it's just—I think one thing about being in the Bay Area, being around a very Cambodian community, is that there's so much pressure to be traditionally Cambodian, or there's just so much pressure to have to be part of the social events, or just show up to anything. And I think my mom was kind of over it. So, she just really wanted a fresh start from everything, because at that point, she had spent at least 15 to 20 years here at some point. And so she wanted

to move on to the next chapter of her life. And my brother was going to go to college. And so she just looked at me, she goes, “We're moving to Idaho!”

00:41:25

Q: Wow. So is your stepdad also Cambodian?

Yann: No, my stepdad is actually Caucasian.

00:41:34

Q: And, if you don't mind, what are the dates for your parents' divorce and when did your mom meet your stepdad?

Yann: Honestly, I just know the year that they separated. They separated in 2007. And I think, about—well, I know they were separated the year before that, at least, but officially divorced in 2007. But even then, I think both of them met their respective partners within a year of the official divorce.

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Q: And also, again, you don't have to answer it, but what was the separation like for you?

Yann: For me, it was really a surprise, because I was oblivious to my parents being unhappy, or it just seemed like I didn't want to accept it. When I was a kid, I felt like I had a strong relationship with my dad, and so hearing that my parents were splitting up, it felt like my world was ending. And then, so at the moment, it was just like, “Why is my mom leaving my dad? How could she do this to me? And why is our family splitting up?” Of course, there were a lot of things happening that I just wasn't old enough to understand. So I didn't know about their marriage and just why it didn't work out until about—I think when I was about 13 or 14 is when I really began understanding why their marriage didn't work out.

00:43:31

Q: Yeah. Do you want to talk about it? Again, you don't have to.

Yann: I don't want to go into too much detail, but basically it's just like, you know, you're married out of high school, and then you feel pressure to have this family. You have this kid and you start having another kid. And I think they felt like so much was expected of them, but at the same time they were also—they were just kids. They were so young. And, I mean, you think about the age that we're in—I'm nearly 23—and it's like, by this time, my mom's already had a kid and she's already married, having her own business. And I do not feel like I'm emotionally ready to be in that stage of my life. And so just for them, I think they felt so much pressure from

Cambodian tradition to feel like they had to have this family right away. But just in all honesty, they weren't ready to have this family, and they weren't ready to be married to each other.

00:44:45

Q: And also, thank you for sharing. So you were about 10, you said, when you moved to Boise? What was the move like for you?

Yann: It was—oh gosh, it felt exciting, because my mom made it feel really exciting. But also, once we got there—well, actually, because I'd gone to Idaho to visit before, it seemed so fun. There's snow in the winter. It's completely different from California. And so I felt like, “This is really great.” My mom told me this was going to be great. And I was sad to leave my friends in California, of course, but I definitely felt like I was ready to move on for some reason. So it felt like a really good time to explore this new chapter in our life.

00:45:45

Yann: But once I got here, I think there were a lot of things I didn't realize about living in Boise—and living in Idaho in general—just about, things obviously aren't the same. For example, I grew up going to the Chinatown market. I grew up eating a lot of Asian food or having Asian food at my disposal. Especially my grandma loved to pick up a durian, and I'm a huge fan of durian. And so it felt like it took years to find an Asian market in general, and we've been going to that same Asian market since, the one on Fairview [Avenue].

00:46:33

Yann: And then on top of that, it was just wild, because I'd ask my mom, like, “Why don't we go get a durian or something. Or I don't know, that sounds fun.” And she goes, “You can't get that here, Brittany.” And I'm like, “Wait, why? What do you mean?” Or I'd suggest getting pho, and it felt like we couldn't find a place to get pho until three or five years later. So it was a very confusing time, because while it seemed like a good idea, I was realizing that Idaho in California are completely two different places.

00:47:11

Q: Also, I think my family's having a discussion. So I'm gonna mute myself and text them to take it somewhere else.

[INTERRUPTION]

00:48:03

Q: Sorry about that.

Yann: No worries, I totally understand.

00:48:11

Q: So I definitely have more questions about life in Idaho. But I want to get some more family questions. And also, as always, if you ever need to take a break, let me know.

Yann: Okay, sounds good.

00:48:25

Q: So—also, did your grandmother then move with you all to Boise during [unclear]?

Yann: No. So my two uncles, they live here [in California]. So for a while, I think for as long as my lifetime at least, my grandmother had lived with us. Even after my parents got divorced, my grandmother lived with my mom, my brother, and I. My youngest uncle, he had his two kids before we had moved and they were toddler age. They were just babies. And so at that point, my mom was like, “Okay, it's going to be tough, because you've been with me for so long.” But you know, I think, telling my grandmother this, like, “You know, I think my brother needs you and needs your help with taking care of his kids.” And of course, I think my mom and my grandma were all a little bit tired of each other, too. So my grandma moved in with my uncle to help them take care of his kids.

00:49:36

Yann: And I guess, to add on to that moving experience, I think one of the main hardest things was moving without my grandma. I spent so much time with my grandma growing up. We went everywhere together. There was a point where my mom was just working so much. And my grandma wasn't living with them [Brittany's parents] at the time, but I was just living with her for so long. Even when we moved into this huge house [in California], I had my own room, I refused to sleep in there. I slept with my grandma. Even to this day, when I go to visit her, I make her share a bed with me. And she's like, “Gosh, you are too old for this.” And I'll say, “No, I'm going to share this bed with you.” And my mom would get upset, because we'd all come down together, and she's like, “I want to sleep next to my mother.” And I'll say “No, I can't let go of that. I'm sorry, but, you know, my grandmother is my grandmother.”

00:50:41

Yann: And so just to hop back on that thought, one of the hardest things about living Idaho is just moving without her, because she was such a big part of my life. And it was just so weird, but again, throughout the time of growing up in Idaho without her, I think it just made me miss her more. And she's the reason why I moved back.

00:51:08

Q: On a different line of questioning, describe to me a typical family dinner. Did you typically eat together as a family. What were some favorite foods that you had?

Yann: Because my parents were always working when I was much younger, and after my parents split, my mom was always working, a lot of the family dinners I had were just with my grandma. Occasionally, my brother would join in if he felt like he liked the food, because my grandma always cooked traditional Cambodian food. And my brother at the time just wasn't a fan, because a lot of Southeast Asian foods are just really stinky, I guess. And so, as a teenager, he's like, "I don't eat that stinky fish or whatever." I just ate whatever my grandma put in front of me.

00:52:07

Yann: But as a kid, I just had a lot of traditional Cambodian dishes, whether it be some sort of soup, fried fish, porridge. There's this—it's one of my favorite dishes—there's a sort of dish. It's almost a poor man's dish. But basically it's plain porridge, like plain rice porridge, and you just put dried fish in it. But back in Cambodia, when it's just sweltering hot—it's very humid in Asia—they would make that same dish, but they would just be make it with cold water rice and fish. And it sounds so weird. But that's like one of my comfort foods, is that dried fish—so much that when I went to Cambodia, in the two times I've gone, I've brought it back with me, because I'd only want that fish.

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Yann: But I never had real—I'm sure I've had family dinners when I was younger than 10, but when I moved to Idaho is when I had more formal dinners with my family, with my stepdad's family. You know, like coming together, especially on the holidays, and we say grace before we eat dinner. And that was such a new thing to me. Or even Easter dinner, like I didn't know people really celebrated Easter that much beyond having an Easter basket until I moved to Idaho, just because I never really grew up around any sort of western culture, western religion until I moved to Idaho. So it varies.

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Yann: I would say, now I have—I mean, I just live with my aunt—but I feel like we do more family dinners and more family events. Outside of a pandemic, of course, we'd go out to eat at our favorite restaurants and it'd be more family-oriented towards more traditional Cambodian dishes or traditional Asian cuisine, versus what I grew up with in Idaho.

00:54:29

Q: Kind of on a related note, how are holidays celebrated in your family and did your family have any special traditions?

Yann: Before I moved to Idaho, we celebrated, you know, Christmas, Thanksgiving together. We all came together as a family. But when I moved to Idaho, I started spending those holidays with my stepdad's family. Came across more traditions like stockings on the fireplace or, again, saying grace at dinner, or having these huge, huge family get-togethers with cousins that I've never met, or they live really far away. And a lot of those traditions were just so new to me in a way, because I felt like I never had that—I guess, for lack of better words—that typical white family dinner that you see on TV. And so I felt like I was finally experiencing that. And that was kind of the tradition I had.

00:55:39

Yann: But now it's definitely somewhat different, because I live away from my parents and then, when I do see them, it's somewhat different. And I also previously spent the last Christmas in Cambodia, so it doesn't feel like that typical winter wonderland white Christmas when you're sweating in the taxi in Cambodia, so very different, But yeah, I basically mainly had those typical traditions when I lived in Idaho.

00:56:19

Q: You mentioned saying grace and it sounds like it started with your stepdad's family, so is religion an important part of you or your family's lifestyles?

Yann: You know, it's hard to say, because when my mom came to America and came to New Jersey, the pastor that they lived with, they went to church and they were raised with Christian values. And even then, my dad went to a Catholic school, and for a while, my family also went to a Catholic church. But when I grew up in California, I mainly grew up in a Buddhist culture. We went to temple for certain things. If someone passed away, things were done through the temple.

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Yann: And so moving to Idaho and spending more time with my stepdad's family—they weren't exactly religious, like we went to church every Sunday—but they did hold that faith with them, especially during larger family gatherings, and saying grace before dinner. There was actually one year where I attended a Christmas Eve service, because I had never gone to a church. I think I was 15 years old. And it was—not in a bad way—but it was just so strange for me, because, again, you only really, for me, I felt like I'd only seen this on TV. And I was experiencing all these things that I would see on TV, but of course I didn't grow up that way. So it felt just so different, you know.

00:58:10

Q: Yeah. Is your mom Christian-practicing now?

Yann: I wouldn't even say she really is. I think she holds on to that faith, because she was exposed to that and I think that's something she wants to follow. But I don't think—at least from what I know—I don't know if she's been attending any sort of church or church service. But it seems like those who were exposed to any sort of western religion, they have that in their life. They hold on to a bit of that faith, but they aren't solely dedicated to it as one would assume.

00:59:02

Q: And then you've also mentioned going back to Cambodia a few times. Tell me a little bit about those trips, like when you went, what they were like for you.

[INTERRUPTION]

00:59:31

Yann: So I went to Cambodia two different times. My first time in 2016 and then my second time recently this past December. The first time I went to Cambodia, it was a bigger deal than, “Oh my gosh, I'm finally going to see the country where my parents are from. I'm going to learn more about my culture and heritage. I'm going to see all the landmarks I've always wanted to see.”

01:00:03

Yann: And I definitely did those things. But on top of that, it was a really big trip with my dad, because we were starting to rekindle that relationship. And this was our first solo trip together in 10 years. 10 years. So it was a really big deal in that sense, and not only did I learn a lot about what it's like in Cambodia, the culture, I got to eat a lot of my favorite foods—I really got to know my dad more on that trip. So it felt like a really great trip, despite getting sick.

01:00:55

Yann: I had gotten heat exhaustion, I think, towards the middle of my trip. And I didn't get to go to certain places I wanted to go to, but—I've been saying this a lot—but it's like, the things that you definitely don't want to happen kind of happens. There's times where, like, oh my gosh, my dad and I almost got into a car accident because traffic is crazy in Asia, and they just do whatever they want. And then I am a clumsy person. So we were at Angkor Wat, we're crossing the moat, and I nearly trip and fall into the moat. And then I got heat exhausted, and then I went to the hospital.

01:01:42

Yann: And my Cambodian is not good. It's only good enough to say “yes,” “no,” “hello,” and certain foods that I want. So, my dad's translating, and being in this hospital where I don't really understand what's going on, aside from the fact that I'm sick, and my dad might help this and there's two other people on each side of me. Very interesting experience. But they just hooked me up to an IV, propped me up on a stick, and then sent me home.

01:02:15

Yann: And I ended up getting better, but that's the main highlight of that trip, was just my first time going. And of course I was trying to be as safe as I can about it. I got all my travel shots. I had brought Dramamine, any sort of pills I needed—like the doctor prescribed me pills for in case I got malaria. I brought so many things I didn't need. So the second time around, I was like, “Okay, I'm just going to trust my dad and go with the flow. I'm obviously not going to drink out of a river, but I'm gonna be a little bit more lax.” And I didn't get sick.

01:02:59

Yann: So, and then the second trip, the recent trip, that was with my whole family and my aunt. Well, it was my dad, stepmom, and my two half-siblings, and then my aunt and I. Originally I wasn't supposed to go on this trip. It was supposed to be my brother, but then my brother couldn't go, and then I just kind of wanted to go, because it's like, you know, why not? My dad's gonna pay for a trip to Asia. Might as well go again.

01:03:30

Yann: It was a really interesting trip this time around, because I got to see more of what it's like to be with extended family in Cambodia, because I didn't really get to experience that the first trip. So I got to know more of my own extended family, like my stepmom's family. And then just see how people lived, really just because, even though my aunt and I, we stayed in the hotels, there were times where we would stay with my stepmom's sister. And it was a very interesting experience, because having a housemaid is very normal there.³ and like

01:04:19

Yann: And the housemaid would try to tend to me, and I just didn't really know how to react. And then I couldn't tell her how I was feeling, because I couldn't speak good Cambodian. So it was very interesting in that sense. But I definitely [felt] like that that trip was more family-oriented in a way, even though it was so crazy. And it's like anything that could be chaotic was chaotic. But I got to be with my younger siblings and that was really important for me.

³ There are about 240,000 domestic workers in Cambodia, most of whom are female. Cambodia's population is about 16.25 million people. From Kunthea Mom, “Ministry supports domestic workers,” *Khmer Times*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50614792/ministry-supports-domestic-workers/>.

01:04:47

Q: How would you describe your relationship with your dad and your little stepsisters [sic] and stepmom?

Yann: So I think my relationship with my dad has gone through waves, just because we were so close when I was a kid. And then once I got older and understood their marriage, I then became resentful of my dad because, you know, it's like, “Why weren't”—of course, I was thinking of it immaturely, like, “Why weren't you doing your best to save this marriage? My mom's awesome. What were you thinking?”

01:05:24

Yann: And then I saw him have this second family. And as a teenager, I think I felt like I was being replaced. So that was tough at first. Even though, my stepmom—she's very, very persistent. She's honestly the best step mom anyone could ask for, because there's a lot of stereotypes in the Cambodian community that stepmoms often are very horrible to their husband's older children, children that aren't theirs. And I'm really grateful for the fact that my stepmom is just so loving, so welcoming—and even though sometimes it's so overbearing—she really means well. So I like to say I have a good relationship with my stepmom.

01:06:19

Yann: She's really funny, because she's in that in-between stage where obviously she understands English. She's very educated. But at the same time, she doesn't understand certain cultural lingos that you can easily pick up on. So it's really funny just having to either explain that to her, or she said that she doesn't really get it. But she's really great.

01:06:49

Yann: And then my half-siblings, I think it took a long time for them to warm up to my brother and I, mainly because I don't think I really formally met them until my grandma passed away six years ago. It was a very strange experience for my brother and I, because, of course, we felt estranged to our dad, and then, now we had to come together for this funeral. We both didn't know how to feel about it. We have these siblings we'd never met. It was very, very weird. And of course, my dad's like, “This is your sister and brother,” to my younger siblings. And so it's too much for a young kid to understand.

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Yann: But I feel like in the past couple years, I've been able to grow really strong relationship with them. I mean, I'll admit, it's hard, having a relationship with any 12-year-old boy, because they're talking about things that just don't make sense. And then they're also like, “You don't

know anything.” And it's like, “Excuse me! I know a lot more than you do,” you know. And then it's really like having a little brother to bicker with.

01:08:11

Yann: And then my little sister, I feel like I put her on a pedestal. She's like everything I'd ever wanted. I would beg my mom for a little sibling, even though my mom's like, “Oh, gosh, no.” But she [Brittany's half-sister] is just—I admire her so much. She is so funny, and so smart, and I just—she cracks me up all the time, because she's really just such a quirky kid. And the same can be said about my little brother, like, “Ugh, of course, my annoying little brother.” But, again, he is so smart and so creative. Both of them are really smart in their own ways.

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Yann: And it's just, it's also funny because my dad had these children, where my brother and I are boy-girl, and then my younger siblings are boy-girl. And we see a lot of similarities in our younger counterparts in a way. So it's just really interesting seeing the different traits that we got from each of our parents and how that's carried over.

01:09:16

Q: Yeah, that is really interesting. When did your parents change from a Cambodian name to an English name, do you know?

Yann: I don't know exactly. It happened really early on. I don't know if it was maybe before I was born, or when I was really young. But for as long as I could remember, they had their Americanized names and then their Cambodian names were just presented as their middle names now. So I think they had just done that sooner rather than later, because they wanted to fit in, and not have this weird name that people couldn't say—which of course sucks, because everyone should just learn how to say other people's names. But of course, it's like they just—they wanted to fit in, they wanted to be a part of something, and just integrate into life easier, because they'd already gone through so much.

01:10:27

Q: And then I was wondering if you know if there's any meaning to either your last name or your first name, if you have a Cambodian name—yeah, if there's any kind of meanings to those names?

Yann: So, I've asked about my last name, and I feel like my parents are like, “It's just our last name. We've just had it.” And I've tried to look it up. I tried everything that could be like, “What does my name mean? What is my ancestry?” It was like, there's no trace it really. But, when I google my last name, it often pops up with a lot of French things, whether it be a French person,

French culture. So I just assume at this point that my last name comes from the French colonizing in Southeast Asia. And it just so happened that one of us ended up with that last name and hence, the family tree growing. But I feel like I never really received a lot of information about our last name, like, “It's just our last name, and that's it.” Asking your parents something and they're like, “Well, this is why. And that's it. And why are you asking so many questions?”

01:11:52

Q: Yeah, definitely. And then I think I'm moving to the “growing up/childhood” section of my questions. And we've talked about it a lot, too. And I think I'm probably more focused on the Boise side of things, but you can definitely talk about growing up in the Bay Area as well. But yeah, kind of a vague, generic first question, but how would you describe your experience growing up?

Yann: I mean, first and foremost, I want to say I am grateful to my mom raising me pretty much on her own at that point, and such a different area. But I think I struggled with my identity so much in Boise, just because I realized that there aren't a lot of people who look like me, or I just didn't really meet a lot of Cambodian people or Asian people. You know, I grew up in Meridian, and was probably one of five Asian people in my class. And even then, everyone came from such different cultures versus mine. So we have people, we had a few who are mixed with Korean, or they're mixed with Japanese, or some of them are Chinese, or they were from Uzbekistan. And it's like—and I could be messing that up—but it's very different Asian cultures versus my own culture.

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Yann: So I didn't meet someone who had a somewhat similar culture until high school. I'd known this person growing up in middle school, but I didn't realize she had a culture close to mine. She is a Thai and Laotian. So I was like, “Oh my goodness. That's pretty much the same region as Cambodia. Oh my gosh, we can talk about things like pho!” I don't know, just very similar cultures and language in a way. But even then I felt like because I grew up in the Bay Area and because I had that exposure to different cultures, food culture, and of course, different—alongside Cambodian culture, I experienced a lot of Vietnamese culture as well.

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Yann: But it just felt so different, because that friend had grown up in Idaho her entire life. And there were things that just weren't the same. It wasn't comparable, so I felt like I was just struggling with that so much, because it's like, “I have this person, I have this friend, who is somewhat similar to me, but not really. And that doesn't mean it's a bad thing, but at the same time, I still feel like I don't have anyone I really relate to.”

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Yann: And I didn't really meet more Asian-type people, like Southeast Asian-type people, until, really, my junior year of college. It was like, I met one Vietnamese person and I stumbled into every Vietnamese person. Because, I mean, as you might know, you meet one Asian person in Idaho, and you end up meeting their cousin and their aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews. And you start connecting all these dots. And while that was really great for me, at the same time, it's like I'm not exactly a part of this, because like I don't have the long-time ties that people have settled here.

01:16:00

Yann: I did, as I mentioned earlier, I learned that the family that runs DK Donuts is Cambodian. But even then I was still struggling with—they're Cambodian, like super Cambodian. But I am not as Cambodian compared to them. Of course I can say certain mannerisms, like I can say "thank you." I know how to address my elders in the correct formalities. But I don't know how to have full-on conversations.

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Yann: And so, I had gone to the donut shop and heard them speak Khmer. And they gave me my order, and I just said, "Arkoun," because it means "thank you." And all of a sudden it was like, "You know how to speak Cambodian?" And they're speaking to me in Cambodian, speaking to me really fast. And I was like, "I don't speak that good of Cambodian." And they're like, "You're speaking Cambodian right now."

01:17:00

Yann: This whole conversation is happening in full-fledged fluent Cambodian versus my half somewhat English-Cambodian mix. But I remember feeling so anxious, because I was like, "Oh my goodness, this is everything my mom didn't want to be a part of." And they were really nice, because they were like, "You should come spend time with our family. You can come eat with us." And I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is all happening so fast."

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Yann: And I didn't feel like I was Cambodian enough or Asian enough, because I didn't speak good Cambodian. I was like, "What if they cook something and I don't eat it?" I was so scared of that, that I was like, "I don't know, maybe." And then I didn't go there [DK Donuts] for a while because I was so scared that they would be like, "Where have you been? Didn't you want to come to this barbecue?" And I was so frightened!

01:17:55

Yann: Eventually towards the end of me living in Idaho, I just really stopped caring as much in a way, because I feel like I'm Asian enough to at least eat things. And that's what a lot of Asian people appreciate, is if you can eat, then, "Oh, this person is great! They can eat stuff. That's great!" And so, I started worrying less about that.

01:18:20

Yann: But just in general, it was so hard, struggling with who I am, because I didn't get into that Asian community until much later. And so, of course, I spent a lot of my childhood trying to fit in, try to be something I wasn't. Oh my gosh, like going through the scene, goth phase, shopping at Hot Topic. My mom was so confused about who I was as a kid. So it's very—it's hard finding yourself in general as a kid. And it was like, on top of that, it's like, "Am I Asian? But I feel like that token Asian friend, so am I just that whitewashed Asian?" And then it's like, "Oh my gosh, am I a Twinkie?"⁴ All those types of thoughts rolling through my head.

01:19:10

Q: Yeah definitely. So you were saying your mom moved to Boise to avoid being a part of these communities, so do you know if there is a strong Cambodian community in Boise?

Yann: I don't really know. I've really only met just a handful of people who own that donut shop—actually, yeah. So when I was in high school, I met a Cambodian kid. And I remember we were in gym class together, and he was watching Cambodian karaoke videos, and I made a comment. I said, "You watch that? My grandma watches that." And he's like, "Yeah, I love it." And I was like, "Oh my gosh, he's so much more Cambodian than I am. It's freaking me out." And so, there just really wasn't, at least that I know of. I know there are few families here and there—and they can all be part of the same family, and I don't even realize, because it seems like that's the theme. But there just wasn't a Cambodian community, for me at least, that I found at that time when I lived in Idaho.

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Yann: And I think for my mom, she missed Cambodian traditions, like going to the temple for the Cambodian New Year. And so our family would come to California to celebrate that, because we didn't have that same establishment in Idaho. So I guess, no, there really wasn't that much of a community there for us. And I think my mom was somewhat okay with it, but also somewhat not. You know, you miss certain things, but it's like, "Maybe I could live without that."

01:21:11

⁴ "Twinkie" means "yellow on the outside, white on the inside."

Q: And then, did you ever experience a particular moment where you “realized” that you were Asian?

Yann: Yeah. I feel like there are, of course, other examples of knowing you're different from people and being Asian, but not necessarily accepting your Asian culture. I guess I'll answer this in a series of events.

01:21:45

Yann: When I first started Middle School in Idaho, I realized that, of course, I stood out and, of course, I wanted to make friends—oh, something's happening [referring to sirens in background]. I wanted to make friends and there were things that I started to realize just about myself and the things that I said that were different from my friends' experiences, like, I said, “There's no Chinatown here? What? That's wild.” Or I'd say, “I'm craving Chinese food,” and Chinese food for me is gai lan or like deep fried prawns, or, you know, very traditional, actual Chinese dishes. And then, my friends would say, “Oh, yeah, I love Panda Express!” And I remembered, like, “Oh my gosh, that's not what I was talking about.” I like Panda Express. But that's not what I was talking about.

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Yann: And I struggled with that so much, where I didn't want to bring anything that would be out of the norm as my lunch to school. I think the only thing, I was like, “Sushi is acceptable to bring.” And it's not like my family even made sushi. I would just go buy it at Whole Foods or something. And I'd be like, “Sushi is acceptable.” But there was one day where—I think it was senior year of high school—I was really into bringing my own lunch, because I bought cool lunch boxes for myself. And I wanted to bring banh xeo. My mom made banh xeo, and it's like, there's nothing weird about this. I was like, “It's not like it's fishy”—I mean, if you use fish sauce, yeah. But it was like chicken, pork, lettuce, veggies, and stuff. And I put sweet and sour sauce on it, like sweet chili sauce. And I was like, “That's not weird at all. That's not anything that could potentially offend anyone.”

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Yann: So I feel like that was a really big point in my life, where I was accepting my Asian culture, like everything, at least, food-related, and just like going with it. But even then I remember microwaving it, and my teacher was like, “That smells weird.” And I said, “Well, it's really good.” So yeah. I just didn't care at that point. So yeah—I feel like, I think I kind of lost myself in the question there. But I think that's when I really kind of started accepting my own Asian identity at that point.

01:24:35

Q: Yeah, and it's totally fine if you veer off a question as well. Demographically, how would you describe—you mentioned your schools were not very Asian—so I was wondering for your friend groups, were you the only Asian in your friend groups, and was the rest white, or?

Yann: So, I have that one friend, my Laotian-Thai friend. She and I were the two Asian girls in our friend group, and the rest of them—you know, it's not like everyone was all-white. There were a mix of Caucasian and Mexican—even Caucasian being like Bosnian and Croatian friends. And it's not like our group wasn't diverse, but it wasn't Asian-diverse.

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Yann: And so in that friend group, it was just the two of us, who were the main “Asian girls” of a group. You know, the ones who went to the Asian market on Fairview and bought Pocky and bought Hello Panda, and we'd seem like the cool kids because we had cool, interesting snacks. And the other Asian kids, as I mentioned before, is literally just one Korean kid, one half-Korean kid, or one-half Filipina. Obviously, I don't know a lot about their culture and their upbringing, but in school, it felt like they were just being as—for lack of better words—as white as they can. And I felt like I needed to be as white as I had to be.

01:26:34

Yann: And, I think, looking back on it, there were some friendships I had—because I did, obviously, you have more than one friend group in school or whatever—but I felt like I was that Asian friend, like the Asian friend. There were weird things that I'm recalling now that I'm like, that was weird. I should have never let that slide, but of course, they were like, “Oh yeah, that's our little orange chicken. That's our little,” you know. And it's like, okay, that's a joke, they think—because in high school I was like 80 pounds—so they think I'm cute and small and they say that because I'm Asian.

01:27:16

Yann: And there was an incident where—this is really weird—but I was in theater, and we did *The Great Gatsby*, and there were scenes where we're dancing for 20 minutes straight in character shoes, which is completely uncomfortable. And someone smelled my shoe for some reason. I don't know what happened, but they smelled my shoe, and then said my shoe smelled like Panda Express and then, hence that was like a really big thing at the time. And looking back, it's like, that's really weird.

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Yann: But there were just things like that where it's like, of course at the time, you're like, “Oh, haha. It's funny, you know. My friends are joking.” And of course, I don't think these kids meant any harm at all, but because there weren't a lot of different cultures, like Asian cultures in Boise

and Idaho in general, they think saying those things is okay. And it's like, “Gosh, is everything you guys talk about Panda Express?” And also like, “Do you even know about different Asian countries, aside from China? And you're using this example of Chinese American food to compare me to you?” It's very strange to think about.

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01:28:32

Q: Yeah. Definitely “weird” is one way to put it. Also I’m looking at the time, and usually I’ve been able to finish my interviews in two hours. I think I just want to be conscientious of your time. I think the questions I have left, it might go to two and a half hours.

Yann: Okay, that’s fine. If that works for you, I can do that too. I’ve know I’ve been really lengthy in all of my questions.

Q: No, I appreciate it, I appreciate it! I think I'll try to be conscientious of the time as well. But maybe just to let you know, it might go a little long. And, you know, you can always cut me off too.

Yann: Sounds good.

01:29:14

Q: I think I want to back up before I go into all the school-related things, and just ask a little bit more about childhood. Did you have a favorite thing to do when you were growing up or when you were younger?

Yann: Yeah, I mentioned this earlier, but I went to Chinatown a lot with my grandma, and that was one of my favorite things. My mom would drop us off in downtown Oakland. My grandma and I would—I'd go to a doctor's appointment with her, and then we'd go to any one of the little hot bar cafes to pick up something. And we'd always pick up those—they would fry those fish meatballs. They'd fry them and just have them on a stick.

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Yann: And then there's this Chinese donut. It's this long donut, and I think it’s called [youtiao]. I'm not sure. I'm butchering it, because in Cambodian, it's called cha quai. And those are my two favorite things to buy, and then my grandmother would of course buy a durian. And those were the snacks that I'd have and we'd ride the bus home and we would have that. And we also ate a lot of MAMA Ramen noodles. It was MAMA Ramen noodles, these fish balls, and fried donut,

which isn't healthy, but that's something that we just ate all the time, on top of her amazing home cooking.

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Yann: So that, and then durian. Outside of this, if anyone were to ask you, “What is something about Brittany that’s interesting?” It's like, “She loves durian. A lot!” Durian is my favorite thing ever. I love durian smoothies. I have a durian AirPods case. It's just one of my favorite things, because growing up I ate a lot of durian, drank a lot of durian boba smoothies. And that was just the thing I did. That's my most notable thing for my childhood.

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Q: And then how would you describe your neighborhoods growing up? So you could do either in California and/or in Boise.

[INTERRUPTION]

01:32:03

Yann: So I'll begin just my observations from growing up in California, growing up in Boise. So, the majority of the time I grew up in California, I lived in very small quarters, merely an apartment complex, if anything. I only have one memory of growing up in a typical family home. So a lot of my childhood was spent growing up in apartments, two-bedroom apartments, tight spaces with way too many family members, but you know, you just have to make ends meet.

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Yann: I didn't live in that typical family home again until I lived in Idaho, having my own room. I'd always shared my room with my grandma, so it's like, “Wow, I have my own room? That’s wild.” My parents—my mom and my stepdad—they bought a foreclosed home and basically HGTV'd the entire thing. It looks a lot better than it did when we bought it—or when they bought it. I didn't do anything. When they bought it.

01:33:28

Yann: And I felt grateful, because I grew up in a home that was in a safe neighborhood. It was beautifully decorated by my parents. So I felt grateful that I could live—and I lived in a two-story home. So, even then I was like, “Wow, a two story home! My family looks well-off.” So for me, it felt like I was living in a stable home for the first time, because I moved all up and down the Bay Area, living in different apartments in Oakland, which, you know, my parents would just tell me—I wouldn't really notice—they're like, “Oh, it's not very safe.”

01:34:17

Yann: There's a while where my grandma, when she looked at her own, she lived in government housing. And of course, people's assumption of government housing is that ghetto people live there, or of course in Oakland, they're like, "It's mainly black people there." And when people make those negative assumptions, it would be really interesting to me, because it didn't feel any different for me, you know. Everyone was kind.

01:34:38

Yann: And so, it was really interesting living in Boise and having that living in a nice home, but I don't know. Maybe this was just my personal relationship, but I never felt too close with my neighbors. There was one boy I used to hang out with all the time, and then he moved, and I just never really wanted to talk to my neighbors that much. Even though it's like, "This is a safe neighborhood." You know, you could be walking around three in the morning and nothing will really happen to you because it's Boise, Idaho. So again, it's that very typical way you grow up in the suburbs, you know.

01:35:29

Q: Did you have any childhood heroes?

Yann: What was that?

01:35:33

Q: Did you have any childhood heroes?

Yann: Not any sort of star, hero, like how people are like, "I idolize Mulan or something." It's like, Mulan's cool. I don't have anything against Mulan. But I think I just—I really looked up to the women in my life, and I still do, because both my mother and my grandmother had to make ends meet as a single mother. Of course, my mother has been a mother for so long. She began very early in her life. And, you know, we all fight with our moms at some point in our lives—it's really hard not to—but I really admire just how much she did for my brother and I. She really just sacrificed so much, just to make sure my brother and I were well off,

01:36:44

Yann: And especially when I lived in Idaho, I really didn't think about this until I got older, that my mom moved away from her mom. And it's like, now I'm kind of starting to feel that, like I moved away from my mom and it's like, that's tough. So in general, just thinking about how much loss and pain and just how my mother and grandmother have pushed through it, that's what a hero is to me. It's not some superhero, like Superman where he's gonna go lift a car off of like a

school bus or whatever. Yeah, that's great. But does anyone have the strength to put other people before themselves? No, [but] any mother could. So yeah, that's my answer.

01:37:39

Q: And then, what schools did you attend for elementary, middle, and high school?

Yann: Let's see, let's go through the list. From kindergarten up, I attended, first in California, Vannoy Elementary School, and then Laurel Creek Elementary School, Stanton Elementary school, and then Castro Valley Elementary School. And then I moved to Idaho, where I went to Eagle Middle School, and then Meridian Middle School, and finally, just ended up going to Meridian High School. And then moved on to Boise State University.

01:38:30

Q: And you've obviously talked a lot about school experiences already. But what was school like for you? Did you participate in any activities? Were there favorite or least favorite subjects? Things like that.

Yann: I felt like I like I didn't struggle too much in school. Of course, there was the pressure of any stereotypical Asian parent, where like, "You need to get good grades," and they're really hard on you about that. But I didn't feel like I totally struggled so much to where my grades were really low. But I remember I loved the idea of writing and being a writer or being a journalist. I totally romanticize the idea, and I still do to this day. I love the concept of writing in a journal, writing a letter to someone, or writing a thoughtful text. Any sort of writing, I loved as a kid, but I definitely struggled with that subject a bit more than math and science. And so, I think it's like, "I really want to be a writer, but I'm Asian, so I have to be good at math." So I would think that way.

01:40:01

Yann: But, as for school activities, I did one year of cheerleading in eighth grade. And because I was 80 pounds, I was like, "That's it. I want to be a flyer. This is gonna be great. I'm going to learn how to tumble." And then my mom was like, "Hell no. You're gonna break something. I'm not paying for any more hospital bills," because when I was six I broke my femur. So I think enough is enough at that point. And so I was like, "What do I want to do?"

01:40:32

Yann: And we all have to take required courses throughout school, so I took drama in eighth grade, and I was like, "Oh my gosh. I could be an actor." Along with romanticizing the idea of a writer, I did the same thing with being in theater, because it's like, "If I could act, oh my gosh, that's so cool." It's so goofy at the time. So I did theater all throughout high school, and that was

great. I played major roles to, you know, made number three, or whatever. And I really loved it and think that the arts are super important. And theater is so—it was so great for me to not only express myself in that way, but just meet so many different kids and so many talented kids.

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Yann: You know, there are stereotypes, like, “Theater kids and band kids are geeks,” whatever. And I’m sure that stereotype doesn’t stand now, because I think children nowadays are just a lot more accepting of others. But at the time it was like, “I wanted to do this. And this was cool. And some people might not think it was cool, but I’m going to do it.”

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Yann: I remember some of the kids I’d met in theater, that’s when we’re at an age where we’re starting to maybe think about our sexuality. And so I met kids who, you know, they’re starting to come out of the closet, and I’m starting to learn that there are kids with different sexualities. And I joined Diversity club, and I remember being overwhelmed, because I was like, “Oh my gosh, there’s so many things I don’t know about the LGBTQIA community that have I been offending people? This is scary.”

01:42:28

Yann: But I still tried to go because it felt like a learning experience. And so it was mainly just theater and diversity club and then yearbook, at some point, because I was like, “I have to make sure this looks good for my college applications. I have to look like I’m in multiple different extracurriculars,” and decided junior year to take AP [Advanced Placement] classes, mainly because I was tired of being in the general classes. Because, you know, there’s discourse about *Gatsby*. And they’re like, “What was the symbol of the green light?” And people were like, “It means go.” And you’re like, that’s [exasperated hand gestures]. So it’s wanting to be a part of something more intellectual, but also, again, the pressure to get into a good college.

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Q: I always get mixed up with my questions. Did you ever feel like you were represented—you or your histories were represented in school textbooks or in media?

Yann: No. No, not at all. Oh gosh, there was one incident where in the eighth grade—I think it’s a world geography class—we’re of course learning world geography and we’re focused in Asia, and we’re supposed to do projects about—we were each assigned like a country. And some kid got Cambodia, and I was super jealous. I was like, “I’m Cambodian. I know everything that I need to know.” And I watched that kid butcher his presentation, and I’m like, “Ugh. That’s it. That’s all people will get to know.”

01:44:18

Yann: And of course, throughout school, and of course, in general, growing up in Idaho, people didn't know about Cambodia, Laos. They kind of know about Thailand, but not. They kind of start learning about Vietnam, because I think Vietnamese foods are becoming more popular. So they're like, "Oh yeah, 'foe' [mispronunciation of pho]." And you're like, "No [shakes head]."

01:44:47

Yann: But, no, not really. There wasn't a lot about at least Cambodian or Southeast Asian culture in general. They talk about the Vietnam War in your junior history class, but it doesn't really go into depth about what were Vietnamese people experiencing, aside from America coming in and bombing the country. You know, how are other countries around them affected? And even then it's like, I felt like at that point I was learning more about Asian culture watching YouTube influencers and K-dramas that were on Netflix, rather than from school.

01:45:38

Q: I'm kind of segueing into more identity-based questions. But you mentioned, with your friends, you felt pressure to "act white." So I was wondering if you could elaborate on what that meant?

[INTERRUPTION]

01:46:12

Yann: But basically I just—I felt like I couldn't be totally Asian, you know—excuse me. But it's like, at home, I would ask my mom, "Why don't you speak more Khmer to me?" I'm so uncultured in my own culture. But then if people would ask me to speak like whatever I know, and I'm like, "I don't speak much Cambodian." They're like, "Just say what you know." I'm like, "No." It's like I felt too ashamed to mess up in front of them, even though I know that they're not going to know the difference. But I think it just felt more comfortable going like, "Oh, I'm Asian, but, I'm not *really* Asian."

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Yann: And I would see how some people would think, "K-dramas are weird," or, "Why do you listen to K-Pop? You don't even understand what they're saying." Or "Anime is for weirdos." And it's like, "What? I don't care." As a teenager, I feel like I'd have to say, "Yeah, I watch anime. That's weird." Or I wouldn't tell anyone that I started watching K-dramas on Netflix and then listening to K-Pop, because people made it seem weird that I wasn't listening to English music. So I felt like I just had to hide that part of myself. So I guess that's kind of what I mean by having to act white, like act like I don't acknowledge my Asian culture. Act like I'm not like aware of it, more just Americanized.

01:48:14

Q: And was there a difference in the way you interacted with friends who were people of color versus friends who were white, or not really a difference?

01:48:25

Yann: Yeah, definitely. So I didn't have these interactions much in high school, but in college. I have this one friend—he is Mexican—and we really bonded because we were the only two people of color in some of our classes. And so, even though we came from different cultures, I mean different races, we still felt like we bonded over—you know, there are so many cultural similarities between Latin American or Southern American families and Asian families. And we just connected over that. And, it's like we'd go to class, deal with class. Some people will be frustrated [at their parents] and walk to each other's car and go, “Oh my goodness. My mom would never let me do stuff like that,” or, “I can never get away with stuff like that.” And this is what it's like being brown.”

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Yann: And, nope, none of those other people understand that. So yeah, I really only had that type of connection with someone when I got to college. I think, because I was more comfortable talking about that, rather than in high school. In high school, I was just terrified of saying something wrong or being different. And at some point, it's just, you know, you grow out of it.

01:49:55

Q: And then, what would you say is the role of gender and/or sexuality in your life?

Yann: I think that my parents and a lot of people are similar to my parents, they don't see different sexualities or different genders how we recognize them now. We're starting to become more inclusive, we're starting to become more aware, and they think it's male, female, and you are either straight or you could be gay. And it also could be bad if you're gay.

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Yann: I would always ask my mom, I'd say, “What would you do if I was gay?” And she'd be like, “I don't know why. Why are you asking?” I'm really curious, because I wanted to know if that would be a horrible thing to my mom. So I feel like in my adolescence, especially, I just didn't totally grasp that there's more about gender that I don't know about. There's more about sexuality I don't know about. It's not some black and white issue. It's more in depth than I could think of.

01:51:38

Q: And then, as a woman / Asian American woman, do you feel like gender has played a role and do you feel any expectations with that?

Yann: Definitely. I feel like there are a lot of cultural expectations. The woman has to do everything she's told, or she has to do everything right, or she just has to listen and obey. And growing up, I just never liked that. I always wanted to rebel. I wanted to talk back, which wasn't exactly great, but I didn't like that I couldn't have my own voice. And then something in my family that like we joke about, is we say the Yann women, they figured out their shit within a reasonable time frame.

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Yann: And, looking back at it, I think now I'm starting to realize that even though my parents, my grandparents enforce these expectations on especially the women in our family, but also just these expectations in general that we had to have our life figured out by 18, and then go to college and get a job. But life's not like that. I noticed that I just felt like I was under so much pressure to make sure I met those “deadlines” or met those expectations. And even now, I did all those things. I graduated in four years. I moved out. I got my own job, because, you know, Asian parents are like, “You can just live with us for all of college.” Sometimes they feel that way. And you know, I think I did all those things I was supposed to do. And yet I still harbor some of those like expectations, where I'm like, “Oh my gosh, I'm not doing good enough for my parents. I'm not doing good enough.” And even now, my parents are like, “You've done everything right. So, you're off the hook.” So definitely still struggling with that concept.

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Q: I don't know if this is something from your parents' or maybe grandparents' generation, but do you ever feel pressure that you have to, for example, be in a relationship with someone who's Cambodian?

Yann: I think I kind of felt that pressure from my dad, because my dad's very traditional, but I think he's become more accepting and realizing that I can love whoever I want to love. I think his idea of that is, of course, for me to love a man. As for my mom, her reaction was, “I don't care who you date as long as they treat you right. I mean, of course, my luck in dating Cambodian men hasn't been good.” And of course, she'll talk about my dad, and then it gets weird. And she'll go, “I'm dating a white guy,” or “I'm with a white guy now and that's different. But as long as they treat you right and they're not in jail and they could support you.”

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Yann: And it's like, but I can support myself, because I'm an independent adult. So I don't need a man to support me, but I appreciate you saying that. So there's no real pressure to be with someone Cambodian. I think both my parents really had more of the mindset of, “You can't have a boyfriend until you're 35.” They kind of got over that.

01:55:42

Q: And then you've touched a lot on experiences with stereotypes being in Boise. I'm wondering if there's anything you want to add in terms of stereotypes or discrimination you've experienced in Idaho?

Yann: I think just like not only did I experience typical stereotypes in being Asian, like, “You're good at math,” or they say things like, “Your eyes”—comments I received is that “Your eyes aren't chinky.” And it's like, “That's offensive to say.” But a lot of people question me being Asian, because they had never seen a Cambodian person. So they obviously have this image of Asian people being similar to East Asian cultures, like Chinese people or Japanese people.

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Yann: And so many times, people would ask me, “What are you?” And I would say, “I'm Cambodian. I'm Asian.” And they're like, “No way, you look Mexican.” And it's like, “No, I'm not Mexican. I'm Cambodian.” And they're like, “But you have”—you know, they pick out my facial features. It's like “you have big eyes” or “you have really big lips,” and I'm like, yeah, that's a lot of features that my family members have, who are Cambodian. And it was just a lot of having to explain to people about Cambodia.

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Yann: And then, just always feeling like—of course in high school, we all have our insecurities about some random thing. I think for me, I felt like I just wasn't as pretty as a white girl, because, you know, we lived in Idaho. It's like the majority of the people are white. And I just felt like, the boys I liked, they were like, “I like so-and-so and so-and-so happens to be this, you know, beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl.” And of course, it's like I would struggle and think that meant I wasn't beautiful.

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Yann: And it just took me a long time to realize that people have either never seen someone of my ethnicity, but also they have—their ideal of beautiful isn't going to define me. That isn't the sole definition of beauty, and beauty is more than that. So in general, I feel like a lot of the discrimination I faced was just “you're just Asian” or “you're just short” or weird specific situations like being told that my shoes smell like Panda Express, or being called “orange chicken” or “egg roll.” It's not like—I had more incidences where people would say these things

and they don't mean harm, but of course you look back on it, and you're like, “Wow, that was not cool.”

01:59:15

Q: Yeah, and always, thanks so much for sharing. I think a lot of it definitely resonates as well, and with a lot of other people I've interviewed too. You've also touched on how there's this erasure a lot of times of Southeast Asian culture when people talk about Asians. So I'm wondering, do you see yourself as Asian American, or Cambodian American, Cambodian, et cetera.

Yann: I think I started to become more accepting of my Asian American culture. I feel, as of recently, I'm more involved in my Cambodian culture specifically, because I'm around more Cambodian people. I eat more Cambodian food, because my mom would make it once in a while, but sometimes that's a little weird to have fried fish patties with really, really green herbs. I don't know. Some people make a big deal out of it.

02:00:33

Yann: But yeah, I just feel like I started accepting being Asian American more, really at the beginning of college, and then getting more into my Cambodian heritage and identifying as Khmer American, really just within the last four to five years, because when you meet Cambodian people, they'll say, “I'm Cambodian.” But they'll say, “I'm Khmer. I'm Khmer.” That's how Cambodian people refer to themselves. We speak Khmer. And that's our culture, and I think I'm just starting to become more accepting of that as I grow up.

02:01:23

Q: You know, this question might not apply, but if you were to have children, would there be any kinds of traditions or beliefs you'd want to pass down?

Yann: I want my—if I were to have children, if and whenever the time comes—I'd want them to have that sort of open childhood that I had. Even though I mainly grew up with Buddhism for all my life, I want to have those traditions, because I loved those traditions growing up, but I wouldn't hold them to that standard. If they wanted to explore something that, of course, was not radical and harming to anyone, I would be fine with that.

02:02:14

Yann: I think—not that my parents forced religion on me—but I feel like when I see the way some others have religion, for some especially, I would want that for my child. I want them to have the freedom I have of learning different things, because Cambodian Buddhism is really heavily influenced in Cambodian culture. So that's why I went to Temple, or why I pray with

monks or something like that, or donate to the temple—that's really important to me. And that's because I had that upbringing. But, you know, again, I just want my child to be able to experience it, but decide on their own. And as long as that doesn't hurt anyone, that's okay with me.

02:03:12

Q: And then I'm getting into, I guess it would be “college and onwards,” “looking forward” type questions. That’s the last section. So it sounds like college was a really important space of growth and learning for you. I know it's probably gonna be difficult to condense four years into a few sentences, but if you want to give me a quick summary of what college was like for you?

Yann: I went to college with my high school boyfriend. He decided he wanted to go into the Navy. So I spent pretty much two and a half years of college in a relationship, barely meeting people. There was a lot of just toxic energy in that relationship of not having trust, and on top of that, we were both 19. Some people find their soulmate. Some people really don't. And I really didn't. So I felt like I just complied with whatever he believed in, and then realized that I'm an individual who can have my own opinions. And if we have different opinions that should be okay, but also I shouldn't be afraid to have a different opinion against my boyfriend. As long as it's not hurting anyone, it shouldn't be such a big deal.

02:04:54

Yann: After we broke up, I really found myself, making friends, just really standing on my own, being my own person. And then, of course, somehow falling into the Asian community in Boise. So it was just a lot of—it's like I resented being sheltered by my parents, but I ended up voluntarily putting myself in that situation in a relationship—until finally getting out of that relationship, not only did I just grow more in my academic studies, I really started to explore more, learn more on top of that. I expanded the different friendships I had with people. I met so many different great people.

02:05:45

Yann: That is like such a big part—of course college in general is such a big part in framing who I was, because I started to become more accepting and loving as a person for myself and towards other people. And just really getting back into interacting with a lot of people in general because I kept myself from that for so long.

02:06:15

Q: Is there a particular reason that you chose to go to BSU?

Yann: I wanted to go to BSU, because at the time, it seemed like a really good school. And I don't regret that decision. Things happen for a reason. I'm grateful for the way life played out. I applied to U of I and I applied to UC Davis in California. But I think I was still so scared of being independent from my mom. I had a bit of help from FAFSA, because, technically, even though I have a step dad, they're not technically together, so not technically married. So my mom under the eyes of FAFSA is technically a single household, and I got Pell Grants, a little bit of loans. I got scholarships here and there.

02:07:29

Yann: But I was just so afraid of being financially independent and it was part of the reason I didn't move out until I was 21, almost 22, mainly because I couldn't afford to go anywhere else but Boise State. That's all my financial aid could afford for me. And then on top of that, I really didn't want to be away from my mom. I didn't want to be away from my boyfriend at the time, which, oh my goodness. I wish I could slap 17-year-old me and be like, “Girl. Just go wherever you want to go.” But, yeah I feel like financially, that's the reason why I wanted to go to Boise State, because it was affordable. But in the end, that's the path I was meant to take, and I'm grateful for that. And I had a good experience in college.

02:08:36

Q: Tell me a little bit about what it's been moving out for the first time and also how it is being in the Bay Area, after so many years in Boise.

Yann: Moving out was a big thing. I moved in with my aunt, because she had so many rooms in this house. And it just felt nice to reconnect with my dad's side of the family. But in general, moving out on my own was just—it felt more freeing, even though I lived at home. I think I was a lot more independent and followed my own free will than a lot of my friends who lived at home. Often, my mom would say, “You need to be home by midnight,” and I'd say, “Good night! I'll come home whenever.” I understood it isn't totally the greatest thing to do to your parents, but of course, I still thought, “I'm 18, over 18. Even though I live at home, I'm still an adult. I pay for a lot of my own things. I pay for the rent to live at home to help out and I'm going to have a little bit of independence.”

02:09:49

Yann: But moving out, especially, I was so overwhelmed that I didn't have someone calling me, asking where I was. I didn't have the fear of my mom coming, driving up and grabbing me or something—that sounds dramatic. There were instances—before the pandemic, I rode the BART which is the train system in the Bay Area. And it's an interesting experience because you're either packed like sardines—which is totally terrifying to think about now—but also, there are a lot of buskers or homeless people who are on the train, who ride from end to end, really just asking for

money. And of course, my mom understands what it's like living in the Bay Area, and I'd be on the phone with her on the train on the way home, and she would hear so much [background noise] and go, “What is that? What are you doing?” It's like, “I'm riding the train home. No biggie.” And she's like, “I can't believe you're on BART. You know how dangerous it is.” And it's like, “Everything could be dangerous at this point.”

02:11:14

Yann: And it was a lot of knowing that my mom didn't approve of a lot of things I was doing. Even if it was like I went to the gym after work, she's like, “Why would you stay out so late, and then get home so late?” But I didn't have my mom, I guess, harping on me that much—which is like, she means well, but I finally had my independence to come and go as I please without hearing my mom in the back of my head, and it felt like I had a lot of separation from that.

02:11:52

Yann: And then on top of that, moving back to the Bay Area in general, it's almost like I'm seeing the Bay Area for the first time, because people would ask me about, “Have you gone to the Golden Gate Park?” I'm like, “Yeah, I've gone a few times.” Or they're like, “Where do you work in San Francisco?” And I'll say, “Oh, I get off at the Montgomery stop,” or “I get off at the Embarcadero.” And they're like, “So is that FiDi, East Cut, SoMa?” and I'm like, “I don't know what any of this means.”

02:12:35

Yann: I didn't know a lot about the Bay Area. But I'd lived here. Even though, back when I lived in Idaho, someone told me, “They're from Palo Alto.” And I was like, “I don't know what that is.” And they're like, “It's in the Bay Area.” And I'm like, “I don't know what that is.” And now I realized, Palo Alto is where Stanford is. And of course, I wouldn't know what that is. I lived in Oakland. My family was making ends meet, but we weren't living in Palo Alto. So it's very different.

02:13:08

Yann: But I feel like, again, it's that—even then, I still say I'm struggling with my Asian identity, because now I've lived in Idaho for so long, and I'm not as Asian as the people around me. There's that Facebook page, Subtle Asian Traits. And people were like, “Oh my gosh, there's the

Kevin Ngyuens.⁵ And there's all the ABG's."⁶ And there's just so many different facades of Asian culture that blew me away, because then it's like, on top of food culture in the Bay Area, there's the dating scene in the Bay Area. It's like, "You don't want to date that guy. He's just a Kevin Nguyen that works in tech. He just works for a startup." And it's like, "I don't even know what that means? What does that even—does that matter?"

02:14:00

Yann: It was just really interesting because, again, I'm Asian enough to where I can eat like I'm totally Asian, but when it comes to culture, I still don't speak good Cambodian. I try to; it sucks. I definitely had a moment where I was like, "I don't understand anything about Asian culture in the Bay Area." So it was definitely a really weird experience for me coming back. But again, I was just like, you know, that doesn't make me any less of an Asian person. I'm still Asian. I'm not like denying myself of who I am. And that's what I have to think of it, rather than "am I Asian enough?" Comparing the Bay Area to Idaho in general, that's just like a whole other type of research project, I'm sure.

02:14:59

Q: Yeah, definitely. And then, so I'm calling you at a very interesting time in history. So I'm just wondering, has COVID-19 affected you or your family in any way?

Yann: For me personally, I am privileged enough to be able to work from home. I even changed jobs in between, throughout all of this. And again, I still have the privilege to work from home. My work is definitely more accepting of making sure we stay home and stay safe, where some of my other family members, they are essential workers. So they're at risk for exposures. And, of course, we're starting to learn that certain government facilities, like where my mother works, she's at risk for exposure. My dad—

[INTERRUPTION]

02:16:18

Yann: So my dad, he lives in Texas, but he lives in a very rural part of Texas. And there's not a lot of Asian people there in general, and there was a time where we saw so much hate crimes against Asian people. And that made my family afraid.

⁵ A stereotype for an Asian male who likes to rave, among other things. From Bettina Makalintal, "Kevin Nguyen Is the Party Boy of the Asian Meme Internet," *Vice*, September 19, 2019,

https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/evjppm/kevin-nguyen-is-the-party-boy-of-the-asian-meme-internet.

⁶ ABG is short for Asian Baby Girl/Gangster, a stereotype for Asian women associated with fake eyelashes, boba tea, raves, tattoos, and more. From Leanna Chan, "15 Things ABGs Know All Too Well," *NextShark*, December 5, 2018, <https://nextshark.com/abg-asian-baby-girl/>.

02:16:43

Yann: And then the family I have here, some of them are essential workers, where they have to go to work every day regularly. We had a scare, where my uncle's coworkers tested positive, and they [Brittany's uncle's family] were quarantining just in their bedroom, but my grandma's just downstairs. And for a while, we were just worried, like, "What if it comes down to that?" Even then, luckily they tested negative, but they still have to go back to work.

02:17:23

Yann: At least in the Bay Area, right now the county that we live in and the county that they work in, Alameda County, it's on the governor's watchlist for high COVID results, because there are still people who aren't understanding the concept of social distancing.

[INTERRUPTION]

02:18:03

Yann: So right now, the pandemic has affected all of my family in so many different ways. And luckily, a lot of us are able to work from home, but some of us don't have that luxury and they do have to be in situations that are higher risk. You know, I'm just grateful that I do have family that are taking the precautions to be safe, but at the same time, again, it's worrisome that people just can't seem to want to take care of each other.

02:18:37

Yann: Additionally, in just how this has affected me personally, my boyfriend's Chinese. He came to America when he was 15 and when the President continuously insists on calling this the Chinese virus, it's so hateful for not only my boyfriend and his family, it's hateful for anyone who's ignorant to clump all Asians into one category on top of that. It just feels so hateful in general. It's unfortunate that this happened. It's unfortunate that it came from China, but we shouldn't focus on resenting people or a country for this and being so hateful. Why don't we just try to move forward and work towards being healthy and getting better, rather than being hateful and also being ignorant to social distancing and stuff like that? Yeah, that's a little spiel.

02:19:52

Q: One other kind of more current events-related question is [unclear] we've seen a lot of protests from Black Lives Matter. And so I was wondering if that's something that's caused reflection for you, conversations with friends or family. Anything like that.

Yann: As the Black Lives Matter movement resurfaced—I mean, I think everyone's doing this too, with all the time that we have—I really took time to look into my privilege and my culture

and how my culture has affected our Black community members in America. It pains me to say that my family and other Asian families have like benefited from the discrimination of black people. And it's a hard pill to swallow, because it's accepting that my community members are hurting other community members.

02:21:07

Yann: And then moving forward, how do I get my family members to understand that? Some of my family members are more open minded than others, but a lot of personal family members for me are not understanding this movement. They're not understanding why it's important. They'll spew “all lives matter” and they have really racist mindsets. And, you know, for those who have been in the Bay Area, they've had their fair share of experiences with the Black community. I can't say all of them are positive, and some of them have been very traumatic, but it doesn't justify what's going on.

02:22:02

Yann: I think what we need to do and what needs to be done is Asian Americans need to let go of that resentment and that racist ideology that's ingrained into them. Even though it's very difficult to do that, especially for them, as a first generation American—again it's back to that privilege. I'm privileged to grow up here and recognize the social issues in this country and I don't exactly feel grateful for this country because of the fact that we're denying human rights to our community members. We're denying so many things that are so wrong here. And for me, I want to be a part of a change for the better.

02:22:56

Yann: If I do choose to have children, I want to create a safe world for them. And I also want to create a safe world for their friends, my future friends, anyone. No one deserves to feel like they are unsafe in the eyes of people that are supposed to protect us. It's been really difficult to kind of communicate that to some of my family members, and I understand where they're coming from. I just think you're set in your way for so long, that your parents don't want to get out of that.

02:23:39

Yann: It's the choice of—we get told that we need to have these hard conversations, but then you have these hard conversations and it goes nowhere. So do you accept it and then just move on and try to just do all this on your own, or do you feel like you failed in a way?

[INTERRUPTION]

02:24:09

Yann: Basically, that was my mindset at first. It's just recognizing and then trying to address it, but it hasn't been totally successful. So moving forward, it's just re-educating myself in Black history and learning how I can be more supportive to my Black community members. And it also made me think back to experiences I've had with police. Luckily it's not as traumatic, but, I mean, I've never felt like, “Oh my gosh, I'm totally safe. There are police here.” If anything, it's like “ugh, something could happen and it's going to get worse” or “it's just incredibly an inconvenience to me.”

02:24:59

Yann: There was an incident where I was coming home, and there's a [marijuana] dispensary right in the corner by my house. People like to park in front of my driveway and my gate, and I have to honk obnoxiously to get them to move. And I was doing that, and a cop pulled up. And he said, “Why are you honking?” And I said, “I live here. I want to go home.” I'm not doing anything wrong. I literally just want to go home. You [the police officer] sat there and you watched this person park in my driveway, with a sign that says “your vehicle will be towed.” And you're coming at me, because I want this person to move, so I can go home, so I'm not sitting in the intersection?

02:25:51

Yann: I'm just starting to realize that, there are so many things that—even then, that's not even that big of an issue—but if police are going to inconvenience me about honking so I can go home, there have been so many incidences where like, what if a Black individual did that? Would they be targeted as being aggressive or being crazy? And I think I'm just starting to really understand this movement a lot more and open my eyes up to it more. And it is unfortunate that I'm recognizing this now. Obviously beforehand, I'd say, “Black lives do matter. And this is wrong.” But I think it's just delving deeper into it and seeing how my culture is just as responsible for the oppression of Black people and how can I be a better person? How can I be a better community member? So I think it's unfortunate that this is such a long-haul movement, but I think it's bringing communities together for the better. That was such a big spiel!

02:27:09

Q: No, I definitely appreciate. I think you have so many great insights as well. I'm just looking at the time and I know I have a few more questions, but I think—

Yann: Yes, I know, I'm so sorry. I feel like I've been talking so much.

Q: That's exactly what the point of this is. I think so if—I'm just going to pause the recording real quick.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriptionist	Kathy M. Min
Narrator	Brittany M. Yann
Interviewer	Kathy M. Min
Session Number	2
Location	Virtually through Zoom. Kathy Min called from Boise, Idaho. Brittany Yann called from Oakland, California.
Date	August 11, 2020

00:00:01

Q: So today is August 10, 2020. And I'm Kathy, the interviewer, and I'm doing a follow-up interview with Brittany. And we're both calling, again, over Zoom from Boise and from California. And so the first question is, do you know where in Thailand your family lived when they were living in the camps?

00:00:25

Yann: I don't know the exact location. But from where they were in Cambodia in Battambang, they just headed towards the Thai border. I'm not really sure the exact location. I just know it was just miles and miles away from Battambang, but they were close enough to be able to get there.

00:00:48

Q: And then you mentioned that your parents had incidentally lived very close to one another. And I was wondering, was that both in Battambang and in the refugee camps?

Yann: Just in Battambang, for all I know. Apparently they had gone back to Cambodia in 2000 and realized that their villages within Battambang were about 10 miles apart.

00:01:22

Q: I'm mostly in the conclusion questions that I meant to ask in the last interview so it will feel pretty conclusive with these questions. COVID aside, how is the world today different from what it was like when you were a child?

Yann: I feel like I am just a lot more open to understanding a lot of things. I feel like as a kid I grew up really sheltered, and it comes from a place where my mom just wanted to protect me

from anything in the world. But now that I'm an adult, I feel like I'm eager to learn more. I'm eager to just explore all parts of life, and I just have a more open mindset as an adult.

00:02:16

Q: What accomplishments are you most proud of thus far?

Yann: I am really proud of graduating college in four years. I feel like there—not so much within my family—where people went to college and they didn't finish it in four years, or they didn't want to go back. And I felt really proud of myself for graduating in four years and then just being able to just go anywhere I can with my achievements. I mean, all the hard work I've done has brought me back to the Bay Area, and I was really proud of that move because I was scared that I couldn't move on my own. But I did it.

00:03:14

Yann: And even then, I'm proud of myself just in general for being able to recognize that in any situation if I'm not happy, I can change that for myself. I think I've grown a lot, at least in my mental health. And I think that's something really important for everyone to do. But that's what I'm really most proud of.

00:03:40

Q: What is one thing you most want people to remember about you?

Yann: Something I want people to most remember about me is that I'm constantly learning and I'm constantly growing and changing. I'm not the same person I was a year ago, two years ago. And, you know, if we didn't get along back then, maybe we'll get along now. I don't know. But I guess I'm constantly evolving; I'm sure they are too. And that's what I want people to know.

00:04:25

Q: What would you consider the most important and meaningful event or experience of your life? And also what was the happiest moment in your life so far?

Yann: The most important moment in my life—let me think. I would say there's not anything that is very notable. It's not some big event that was the most important moment of my life. But I think the most important moment of my life is just me learning how to better manage my emotions, or the process of learning that. Learning how to take care of my mental health. I feel like a lot of people who grew up similar like me or just have Asian parents, they understand the amount of anxiety and pressure that we put on ourselves. And I think being able to slowly relieve that off ourselves, just moving out—I think that's something that's really important to me .

00:05:33

Yann: And the happiest thing to happen in my life, I think—this moment reoccurs, because I feel like the happiest thing that happened in my life always follows a tragedy, strangely enough. Something bad could happen, but I think something good usually comes out of it. Recently I lost my grandfather, but I feel like since then. My family has just become so much closer and we talk all the time, every single day. And I think that's one of the happiest things for me, is that I have my family with me.

00:06:16

Q: Are you planning to stay in the Bay Area long-term, and if not, are you considering ever moving back to Idaho?

Yann: You know, I am not sure how long the Bay Area will have me, considering how much it costs to rent around here. But I want to be able to try and live here for as long as I'm meant to live here. Maybe I'll move somewhere else.

00:06:44

Yann: I have thought about going back to Boise and I'm honestly just not sure where I'm going to end up in the future. I mean, two years ago I didn't think I'd move to California. I was very against it, and here I am. So it definitely crosses my mind to move back, because I do love Boise. I love how beautiful it is. And of course, I miss my family and friends there, but it's just up in the air.

00:07:16

Q: How would you characterize your experience of being Asian American in Idaho?

Yann: I think being Asian American in Idaho—looking back on it, it made me realize that I wanted to fit in so bad. And I didn't really need to do that. I could just be myself, and if people accept me, they accept me. If not, then that's their loss, honestly. So I think growing up in Idaho, I wish I could just tell my younger self that “everything you are is okay. You don't have to change for anyone. You're not hurting anyone by being who you are. You are just beautiful, who you are.”

00:08:12

Q: And then, what are your dreams and visions for your future?

Yann: I dream to just be happy in life. You know, I feel like there's so much pressure to have a good job and have a big house or have a family. And as you grow older, a lot of the stuff doesn't really—you don't have to have stuff to have happiness. As long as you're happy with yourself, if

you're happy with where you are in life, I think that's the most important dream to have. Obviously, at some point in my life, I want to have a family, but there's no rush to have that. I have, my siblings, my mom, my dad, my aunts, uncles. I have everyone in my life. That is my family right now. And that's all I can be grateful for. And that's the dream.

00:09:10

Q: Mm hmm. And then, anyways, I'm coming up to the last question. I know that the last time we spoke was a while ago, and so if you don't remember the conversation that's fine. But is there anything you feel—if you can remember—that you felt like we haven't covered sufficiently and there's something you want to bring into this interview? Otherwise, if you want to have final words to leave for your interview. But that's all the questions.

Yann: I think something—I feel like I may have mentioned this at some point—but I think something that's so important that I want people to know is to look at a map and be open to the different people that you're going to meet in life. Growing up in Idaho, I think it was hard for me because a lot of people didn't really know about Cambodia or Southeast Asia in general. And I kind of just felt like I was being grouped into a culture that I obviously had no idea of how, because people would assume, “Oh, you're Chinese or something.” No, I'm not. But I can understand that's a very large country, very well known. But I just hope people can open their minds to the different experiences they can have when they meet people from many different cultures. It'd probably be really great for other people.

00:10:46

Yann: And then, to girls who have similar upbringings like I did, or just Asian American teenagers right now in Idaho, don't ever feel ashamed of your Asian culture. Don't ever feel ashamed of who you are. You're not some punk girl with the blue or red streak, whatever, how the [entertainment] media portrays Asian girls. Whatever you are, that's fine. And however you choose to be, that's who you are, and that's all anyone could ever ask for. I think that's about it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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