

Ho_Bonnie

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Interviewer: Today is Friday, April 29th, 2022. My name is (Amanda Reichenbach) and I am the manager for the Tumultuous 2020 Oral History Project at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I'm currently at the Pui Tak Christian School in Chinatown, Chicago, Illinois with principal Bonnie Ho. We're going to be talking about her experiences coming to the United States, as well as her experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you so much, Mrs. Ho, for having me.

Bonnie Ho: Thank you for having me.

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Interviewer: Your office, I must say, is truly lovely to be in.

Bonnie Ho: It's small, but a lot of things, you know, on display, actually, a lot of them are very memorable to me, meaningful to me.

Interviewer: And we'll probably get to a point in the interview that maybe I'll point out a couple and you can tell me their stories if you're okay with that.

Bonnie Ho: Sure.

Interviewer: So the typical way that we like to start these interviews is the basics. Where and when were you born?

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Bonnie Ho: I was born in Hong Kong. And I came to the United States when I was a teenager in high school, sophomore year. And at that time, our family emigrated to the US. My parents came from a very - came from a family that at that time, they were not able to receive education because of during the wartime. But they were very open minded. They value education very much.

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And they know that our future relies on how much education we could have. But because we came from a very poor family, and there's no way - none of us, the four of us, none of us will be able to receive higher education if we do not leave Hong Kong. And that was the reason why they made such a big decision. To me I think it's a very - it's a sacrificial decision. For one, we had to borrow money to even buy the plane ticket.

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For two, they are saying goodbye to their language, to their culture, to their country, to this foreign land that they had no idea what it is, you know, in front

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of them, but just believing education could change our future. They were willing to pay the price. And for that, all four of us are very, very grateful for that.

Interviewer: They sound like truly wonderful parents.

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Bonnie Ho: They are.

Interviewer: And we will definitely talk a lot more about that. But I kind of wanted to paint a little bit of a picture of your life before you moved to Chicago. And one thing that I was curious about is if Bonnie is your given name or if it's a name that's been kind of Americanized.

Bonnie Ho: It's not my original given name. My original given name in Chinese is Ho. My last name is Ho, H O.

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So (Ja) meaning that the [unintelligible 0:03:07] in Mandarin shoe, meaning to describe something. And the last word, the last character, (son) or (chun) in Mandarin is precious. So when you put it together, it's like this person is very precious. So that was my - that's my original name. Bonnie Ho is a name that my oldest sister gave me.

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Because when we first came over the United States, she and my dad came first because her birthday is getting very close to 21 years old. And if she, you know, crossed that, she cannot come with the family. She's become an adult. She will be by herself. So then they hurry up and they came before the birthday. So then she was helping the rest of the family in locating school.

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And then she need to fill out a form and she was thinking, oh, the Chinese name is going to be very tough on American to recognize, so then she just went ahead and give all of us American name. So she gave me the name Bonnie.

Interviewer: Do you like it?

Bonnie Ho: I like it. I like the sound of it. Yeah.

Interviewer: Does your immediate family, do they still call you by your birth name? Or is Bonnie truly become like your identity now?

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Bonnie Ho: Bonnie is becoming my identity now or they call my nickname.

Interviewer: And may I ask what your nickname is?

Bonnie Ho: My nickname was Apple because I had round face and my mom usually like will do my hair with like poking up just like an apple.

Interviewer: That's sweet. And you started talking about your parents and their love of education. Can you tell me a bit more about them?

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Bonnie Ho: My dad, I always thought if they were to receive education, they could go very far. Because they are by nature, I think they are very innovative, very, very creative, except that they did not have formal education. I did not realize that I was interested in art because in Hong Kong, only wealthy people will go into art.

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You know, you don't have money to take classes. But I begin to make things, just use found objects, use rocks, and anything that I could find, and started making things. And then I realized that my dad was, you know, also making things. He actually built our own house. Not because he study architecture or construction. It's just out of necessity, but the house that he built, is - to me is beautiful.

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He just round up his friend. Just I don't know whether they had any background, but they actually like constructed a decent house. Use wood and metal sheet. We stay in that, in hut until we came to the US. And everybody came thinking that our house is good, you know, because the floor is using cement, but he polished it in such a way that is so smooth.

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To me it's like marble, but of course it's not. But we have tons of memory in that house. So then I think if they receive education, they will be very accomplished. Like my mom, she was very good with hands. And then in order to earn some money because we have four brothers and sister, so taking care of us, you know, she cannot go out and do a fulltime job. So she will take things home.

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Like he she will be putting - like putting decoration on sweater. And it's so beautiful. And she sew our clothing. And when we go to school, we were

required to wear uniform. We had no money to buy uniform. So she will buy the exact color cloth. And she will imitate and make the uniform for all of us to a point that the school will not recognize that it is not store bought.

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And you could see the stitches. Like she did it by hand. But they were so orderly that it looks like it was made by machine. So she had that. My mom is, you know, gone to heaven already. She had that skill and that determination.

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And I think both of them are very like inspiration to me and to four of us because of how they take life. You know, facing with adversity, facing with difficulties, they never give up, and they just - you know, it's amazing. I still remember those uniform. It's just like beautifully made. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you still have any of the clothing that she made?

Bonnie Ho: Unfortunately, no, because when we came, we could only take so much so.

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And at that time, I was at a young age. So my mom determined what to take, what not to take. And so therefore, no.

Interviewer: She probably didn't realize what an amazing seamstress she was.

Bonnie Ho: Mm-hm.

Interviewer: And did you mention during our pre-interview that they were born during World War Two?

Bonnie Ho: Yeah, they were born during World War Two. They were in China. And then they went to Hong Kong because of running away from the war, escape from the war. They've gone through a lot of hardship.

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And post war life is difficult in Hong Kong. My dad was only earning \$5 per day. That's why, you know, he had to make the house, you know, with his own hands. There's no way that we could buy a house. Even we were living in a village and everybody, you know, they come up with their own way to build their houses there. Yeah.

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Interviewer: Can you describe that home a bit more?

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Bonnie Ho: It's a very simple, just a house shape. There's one room for my dad and mom and then there's the living room. And then in the living room, there is a second level where we could use a ladder to climb up and then the second level is the - actually, when you climb up, that is the entire - like a second floor is the bed.

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So then we sleep on the second level. But we have tons of fun in there. You know, we had no toy, no money to buy toy, but we create. I think sometimes having less actually encourage creativity. And then on the like below that second level, there's another bunkbed, right? My dad made another bed there.

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So then it's very simple bed. And then you put this like wood piece like as the frame. I don't know if I could describe it like in a way that you can understand. So for example, this is the bed. So this is the frame. So then what he did is like he will cut three strips of wood, and then you put it on the frame. Then there the bed, right? So when mom and dad are not home, we're not supposed to get out the house, so we need to entertain ourselves.

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So then we want to play - like we know that in playground, they have slides going down. So we want to play that and how are we going to do that? Okay, we pick up those strip of wood and we just like put it this way. So and then it will be like sliding down. So then we put powder on it so that it will be very smooth. So then we take turn to climb on it and then go down, having fun.

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And then I remember one time when we were doing that, we were making fun and with my younger brother because there is three daughters and one brother. He was getting upset. And then he forgot that the wood has been taken out from the frame. And he was like, ah, going like that, and then he just sat on the bed very like forcefully, and he went all the way through to the bottom.

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And we were all laughing. And but you know, those are the moments. These are like several decades from now. All four of us, when we are reunion, we always talk about some of the experience we had. And I think like right now, family in America, we intentionally make memory. But for us, it's very natural

because it's a human contact. And then we together build that slide and we together, you know, thought of putting powder on it too.

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Because at first we want to slide down. It doesn't go well, and we say, "Oh, let's get some powder." And we did that. So there were a lot of moments like that, that we played together.

Interviewer: Were your parents upset when they saw the powder everywhere?

Bonnie Ho: They were fine. They were okay. Yeah.

Interviewer: That is a sweet memory, though. And were your parents and was your home life at that time religious?

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Bonnie Ho: No, not at all. I did not know my father was a Christian. My father came from a Christian family. My grandmother on my father's side was a very devoted Christian. When she was alive, she demand that everyone would go to church. But when it is required in such a way out of submission, everyone will go. But does that mean that they have a personal relationship with the Savior?

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Questionable. My father was one of them. From the outward, he is a devoted Christian because he is singing choir. He sings solo. He gets involved with this and that. But the day my grandmother passed away, none of the family member continued to go to church, including her husband. So in that way, you will say, wow, the way you evangelize the family is a complete total failure. Yes or no?

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From a human standpoint, looks like it is, but God never forsake those who call on him. She was in the sick bed for at least ten years because she suffer from cancer. So church member regularly come to worship with him, sing with him, sing with her. But then in her sick bed, she pray. That's all she could do. You know, she cannot go anywhere. I believe it is her prayer that brought us to where we are today.

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Her descendant might deviate from the path but God is going to pull us back, right? So I remember when I was in Hong Kong right before we came, not too long before we came. There were people knocking on our door and give us

gospel tracks. I never saw that that kind of writing. So I asked my dad and then what is this about? This is kind of like strange writing. My dad of course knew but he lived a life like non-Christian.

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I did not have any idea that, you know, he was like a churchgoer. Then he said, "Oh, these are teaching people to be good. So it's okay." So then that track actually invite us to go to church. So me and my best friends decided to go. So we were in this poor area. But then if we pass the train track, and climb the fence, and go to the other side, those are the very wealthy people.

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They have mansions. So it's just one fence make a huge difference. So we used to cross the train track, climbing the fence, and then jump to the other side. The church was located on the wealthy side. So then we went. Up until now, I still remember what the pastor was talking about. You must be, "Wow, that's a long, long time ago." He was talking about the prodigal son who came back and the father welcomed the son with open hands.

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And so after the worship, so my friend and I were talking about it. Should we go next time? And then we observed during the service, they were passing a basket collecting offering. At that time, I had no idea what offering was all about. And I thought, oh, we did not have money to pay. So I kind of feel bad that, you know, everybody pay, you know, but we did not have any money.

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But we still - some things there is attracting us. So the next Sunday, we cross the train track, climb the fence, jump to the other side. We walk very close to the church. And then we said, hmm, it's embarrassing that everyone is paying, and then it's bad that we're not paying. And then we search our pocket. We only have one dime at that time. So what could we do with this one dime? Should we go and then put this in the basket?

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Eventually, we decided no, we're going to go buy popsicle. So we went buy popsicle and we share the popsicle. And we were playing in a park, like the swing, and the slide, and all that. That was almost like the end of my encounter of Christianity in Hong Kong. But when I came to the United States, we had - we knew nobody, except the person who sponsored us.

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So then my aunt introduced us to someone else who knows how to go to school because back then bilingual program is not common like right now. I remember we had to walk, take a bus, take a train, and walk about an hour and-a-half to go to Northside (San) High School to receive bilingual education. So on Friday the friend who took me to the school and say, "Bonnie, would you like to come with us to fellowship?"

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I had no idea what fellowship is all about. She said it in Chinese. Even in Chinese, I had no idea what that is. But I did not want to admit that I'm so ignorant because I'm already very ignorant. Everything is like she's leading leaving me going here and teaching me all that. So I just kept silent. And I thought, huh, fellowship, the word in Chinese sounded like something you could eat.

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Because what Chinese New Year at the end, that last day of Chinese New Year, we always sit, you know, with our family member by roundtable. We have a feast that is called (Twan Nin Faun). And fellowship in Chinese is (twan chi). So share the same word, (twan) meaning together, right? So oh, maybe she's taking me somewhere that we could have something to eat.

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And another reason I follow her is because if I don't follow her, I still did not know how to go home. And what am I going to do? So I just tagalong. And she took me here to this facility, this particular church to the basement. And then I saw a lot of young people, all of them are high school kids chatting, having fun. And then when the time is meeting, we were sitting in a big round circle, and they started singing songs that I'm not familiar with.

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And bit by bit, I learned more about Christianity. I was not a person ready to accept everything. I was quite argumentative according to them. So I always reason with them in Chinese, and out of respect, they tried to make conversation with me in Chinese. But these teenager people, students, they're not necessarily good in Chinese.

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Because they might be here a lot longer than me and it's just because they want me to feel welcome, and out of kindness, they speak with me. They spoke with me and Chinese. Of course, in that sense, every time when there's like debate, I won, and they feel very frustrated to a point that one

time they had an evangelistic meeting, a pastor came. And after that, one of the friend was very hopeful, and said, "What do you think, Bonnie?"

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Because from her standpoint, it was a great sermon, and said, "What do you think, Bonnie?" And I said, "Well, a, b, c, d, e, so I kind of knock it down one by one. And then we were walking home on (Wentworth). And then we were supposed to turn the corner, and we were standing there, and she said, "Bonnie, if you are so proud of yourself, don't come to our church anymore." Now we were teenager. I know that she didn't mean to, but she got very frustrated.

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And just out of her mouth, she said that, and I was very calm. I was looking at her, okay, then I won't come anymore. But actually, I was very sad. It's been a few months that I attended this group. And I sensed that the people there are very kind and I had a relationship with them. So I feel a bit lost. But I was - I think it was pride. I actually stopped going. I was like - the church is right here. My home was right down the street. I could hear the church bell on Sunday.

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And I know exactly what's happening. And I do want to go, but I did not go. She wrote me a long apology letter. And she called me and tried to talk with me. But I'm a person who know how to use my word to hurt people. And I was just being very cold to her. And at the end of the phone conversation, she said, "You know, Bonnie, I know I will never win you. Whenever we enter into a conversation, you know how hard it is for me.

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I actually write down everything I said before I call you because I know that I'm not good with word. And you still win me. I don't know what to do." And then we just end the conversation there. I know she was very sincere. So six months later, summertime, when they have a summer retreat, she invited me. And I thought, okay, not because of this God that I am going to seek, but because of the relationship, I'll go.

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But the minute I hopped onto the bus, I regret it because, you know, the friend that I know they were having fun time, and I was the only one miserable sitting there. And I feel awkward. Retrospectively, I learned that the

counselor, they were praying for me. I was blacklisted. Like this is a tough person. Everybody pray for this person.

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So the second day, the pastor was talking about sin. He wrote the word in Chinese on the board, sin, and then after that, he just put the round circle and go like this, and then boom, put a dot there. When he did that, I almost jumped. It's like a dot was like poking me. And it is not a foreign message. I heard about that before, but it never had that kind of effect.

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But on that evening, he just nonstop came and I realized that I am a sinner. I just did not want to admit it. And I believe the Holy Spirit was working in me. And everybody was so shocked, "What? This is only the second day. we thought we have a long battle." And I bet they were suspicious. Not quite sure. But I'm a person, if I make a decision, I'm all in. So on that night, I immediately opened my mouth and start praying.

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And they say, "Wow, a new believer praying." And then from that night on, I was so to the Word of God and really studying the Bible, becoming a mature Christian day-by-day.

Interviewer:

And it'll definitely be interesting to talk about how that journey led you to being the Pui Tak Christian school principal.

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But before we get there, I kind of wanted to ask a bit more about, you know, the journey to Chicago. And you had mentioned that it was kind of right before you left that you had begun to develop your artistic skill.

Bonnie Ho:

Yes. I discovered my artistic skill right before I came. Because in preparation to come we - because we did not know what to expect.

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And so then my sister was preparing herself, so that she will have some skill to earn a living. So then she learned how to make clothing, sewing. We later learned that she is not cut for that like my mom, but she went to classes and all that, so then she has this like big piece of like translucent paper for her to, you know, make the pattern out of it. And I got hold of, you know, those paper.

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And my parents were also trying to preserve the culture. So and then they - with the little money they have, they bought brushes, like Chinese calligraphy brush, and they bought some Chinese books that has Chinese painting, archive, like reproduction, things like that. So I was like flipping the book, looking at those Chinese painting. And then I started like reproducing it in a large scale.

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And I didn't realize that oh, the first time I did, I actually did quite a good job. And my mom's like, "Whoa, you make this like big painting." We actually take that with us. Now this is something. My mom did not take any of her own product. But she took my painting. It's not easy to take because they are like very fragile, right? She preserved it so well. Three big paintings, she preserved them well and brought it to the U.S.

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And I also develop, discover other interests of me - is for the first time my dad bought a recorder, a cassette recorder back then. And my sister, my older sister, a lot older than me, she likes reading novels, fiction. And I just - you know, the book that you got from the library. After she's done, I just pick it up. The way I read it is I actually read it out loud.

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And when there are like roles, like characters, when they talk to each other, I just imitate sort of like doing radio broadcasting. And I love listening to radio. So I started - I did not have any idea what it's going to turn into. I just liked to do it. And then since there's a recorder, I started recording and then listening to myself. And I was playing Dad and Mom, daughter, grandparents, a street person, just changing my voice, and then adding the emotion, the expression and I find it really fun.

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So then that was right about two months before we came to the US. And then after we came to the US, I was not able to comprehend in school right away because of the language barrier. But during art class, I loved doing art class, but I did not understand the assignment. When the teacher gave assignment, I cannot do the assignment. So the due date came, and I said, "Oh, since I don't have anything, I'll just pick one of the paintings that my mom bought and take it to school."

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The teacher looked at it, of course, as if we're judging from the assignment, I failed, but he got so impressive he was, "Whoa, you are an artist." And then he kind of like posted my painting on the hallway. So the director, the art director noticed that and came to the classroom, and said, "Who did that?" And he said, "Oh, she did that." So then because of that, it built my confidence. And then bit by bit, I brought all three of them.

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And they were very impressive. And then gradually I picked up the comprehension. Art is easier because I could look at other people and try to understand what he's trying to teach me. And then I'm able to do it. So by the time I graduated from (San) High School, the art director said, "Bonnie, you should go to the art school, the Art Institute of Chicago." And said, "Oh no."

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Because even by the time I graduated from high school, I wasn't totally proficient in English. And I know that with the art profession, I mean profession, you need to be able to interact and express yourself verbally also. And I kind of like shying away from it and did not think that I have what it takes. And besides, I do not think that we have the money to go to art school.

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So then I sat down with my parents to talk about what I should be doing. Like see, when I said that they are very open minded, with a lot of Asian parents, they will say go and do computer and do something like engineer, something that is really guaranteed that you could find a job. So but they, instead of telling me what to do, they asked me, "What would you like to do?" So then, of course by now, they know that I am very interested in art making.

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But during the conversation, the two things that stood out is one is art. The other one is education. I knew that if it is their choice, they would opt for education because the higher guarantee. Art, not so much, right? But so then although they did a very good job not to tell me what to do, but I could tell. So then in the end, I also wanted to please them.

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And I also think that maybe this is more practical. So I went to Northeastern for one semester only. It was tough. Because the English is hard. It's very hard. And I cannot freely express myself. The only subject that I score A+ was art. All the others, like either barely pass or fail. Particularly I fail miserably with math. I made a decision, wanted to be a good student.

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And I wholeheartedly wanted to do that. So then I said, okay, this big lecture hall with about over at least 100 students, if I go to the front, sit on the front, then I would pay very good attention. I did that. But it was hard. I was not able to focus. Math is not my cup of tea. And I had very bad experience when I was in Hong Kong.

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I just not suitable for the style or the educational approach in Hong Kong. So then I thought, oh, that's no good. Because I've been dozing off and then I'm sitting in the front. It's not respectful to the teacher. So I said okay, maybe I move to the middle. When so many people around me, there's energy. So then maybe then I will be, you know, good. I try that. Did not work. And I feel that, well, if I falling to sleep, I have to make my way out, disrupting other people. No way. So then I moved to the back.

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Still not working. So I said, okay, then I'll go outside. Because I'm a good student. You know, I think the family also taught us, you know, we don't misbehave ourself. So I don't skip class. I don't cut class. But I just feel very miserable listening in long lecture in math. You will say that "Well, this part should you share it? You are principal." But it was true.

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So then I say, okay, I will sit outside. I'm not cutting class. But I just cannot stand the inside environment. So I set through. Of course I fail. At the end of the schoolyear, at the first semester, I went back to (San) High School to talk to the art director and tell her my experience. She said, "See. What did I tell you? You belong to the art school." And at that time, I'm ready for anything.

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And she was so excited. She rolled up her sleeve. She typed up the entire application form. She helped me with the portfolio. I did not have a camera. She has a camera. She pulled out my work and snap, snap, snap. And then she pulled out one of my sculpture, and said, "This sculpture, we need to go to the beach." She took me, take the train. Using the beach as the background took that, you know, picture.

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She put together the portfolio. She actually took me to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, made an appointment to meet with the director in person. And then she sat down, and she talked to the director, and say, you

need to take this student. And that's how I got in. And we got scholarship. Out of six years, I only pay one semester. That was the semester that I was doing internship in New York and missed the deadline.

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So other than that, I did not pay anything, but still very hard for us because the material, the art material. Later on I got into filmmaking. I mean, that is expensive. I mean, if you make a mistake, that roll of film is expensive, and then the processing fee. So I had to work several jobs to support myself, even without needing to pay tuition.

Interviewer: Do you still own those paintings that you did in Hong Kong?

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Bonnie Ho: I need to look for it. It's been so long. I might have slides of some of those. Also need to look for that.

Interviewer: Though I'm sure since then you've done a lot of art, it sounds like, going through six years of art school.

Bonnie Ho: Yeah, my later part of creation was hard to put on the wall because I got into video, sound, filmmaking, and performing arts.

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So then those are the moment you're on stage. When it is done, it is gone. We tried to take like slide. Back then we use slide and then try to film it. But video filming is too expensive back then for me. So we tried to collect some of those.

Interviewer: And, you know, I started by asking, you know, kind of how you developed your artistic skill.

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And I think, you know, before we get to talking more in depth about your life in Chicago, can you tell me a little bit about like what year was it that your family decided to move to Chicago?

Bonnie Ho: We came to the United States in 1974.

Interviewer: And did that mean that you - did you guys fly or did you take-

Bonnie Ho: Yeah. We took a plane. Yeah, first time in our lives.

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Interviewer: Was that kind of scary as a, you know, 16-year-old?

Bonnie Ho: It wasn't scary. I did not feel - I think there's definitely anxiety, but not to a point that is scary. Yeah.

Interviewer: And did you want to move? Do you remember?

Bonnie Ho: I think I'm okay with moving because I was not satisfied with my - because we were young.

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And then education, schooling is a major part of my life. And I was not a happy learner. I was miserable. I tried very hard to understand, to a point that - when a lie is being told ten times, you believe in it. The educator in Hong Kong, at least in my school, when students did not do well, they were punished in front of the entire class.

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The reason why I'm so afraid of math is because this math teacher, 60 point is passing point. If you're not passing, every five point you got a spank. I score really bad because I got really frightened. You know, I got like ten points. Sometimes this is the maximum. Then they will say, come out, you know, so and so come out, and then you got ten points, stick out your hands.

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And they literally mean it. It's not just touching you. It actually spank on you. They will say 15, 20, 23, boom, 25, 30, all the way to 60. Then you're done. You go back. And he will say - he said things like, "I never seen someone so dumb like you. I never seen someone so lazy like you. Being a girl, why are you so lazy?" So those are the exact word. So it stuck in my mind.

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When it's told again and again, I believe in it. I know that I'm not lazy because I know how hard I work. But I'd be, well, now if I'm not lazy, I'm working, and I'm still not getting it, I must be dumb. He must be right. I'm a dumb person. Once you believe that you are dumb, you're not going to be able to learn. Right? So I know that if I go on like that, my life is ruined. And I'm ready for a change.

[0:38:30]

The unknown is one thing. But this is the known that I know that is not working. So now that I've become a principal, I think my experience actually

helped me a lot to understand my students. Students do not want to be, you know, failing or misbehaving themselves. They do not. There's a reason.

[0:38:59]

Interviewer: Wow. That's a really intense experience.

Bonnie Ho: Because the entire - at least back then, the education, I think even now to some point, particularly China. Hong Kong is considered a westernized, you know, place, but still we carry the tradition. Everything is top down. If I'm a teacher, I possess all the knowledge you as a student needs, so I'm going to give it to you.

[0:39:31]

Your job is to take it and memorize it. My system, I think God wired me in a very different way. If you keep asking me to memorize things, it won't work for me. I have to understand it. For example, they will ask us to memorize formula. I cannot memorize formulas. If I understand how this formula came about, then I don't have to memorize it, and I will know how to do it.

[0:39:58]

I found that out when I'm in the US. It's kind of like the sky is open all of a sudden. Hey, I could understand things. Because they would teach a way, giving us the space, and stimulating us, and then helping us to think, allowing us the thinking space, and like knowledge begin to formulate. And it's my knowledge now because I discovered myself. Instead of someone else, hey, this is my knowledge. I'm giving it to you, and you need to remember it, I don't. I cannot do that.

[0:40:30]

And it's always teacher-led, teacher-centered, always depositing things in our brain. And our job is memorizing it. I cannot do that.

Interviewer: Yeah, no, that's not a very conducive way to make sure everyone learns. And you mentioned that you guys had a family that - or a person sponsoring you.

Bonnie Ho: Yeah, my aunt.

Interviewer: So what was that process?

[0:40:58]

Bonnie Ho: The process is like my aunt is my mother's sister. In order for us to migrate to the US, someone need to sponsor us like a relative. There are different type of combination. It happened to be if a sister sponsoring another sister, then

we could come. So then they are the one, that family, they are the ones to sponsor us to come over.

Interviewer: And what were your first impressions of Chicago?

[0:41:30]

Bonnie Ho: Quiet, very little people on the street. Because Hong Kong is very, very crowded and congested everywhere. People are everywhere. Noise level, so I said, "Wow, this is really quiet." Walk down the street, you know, like a lot of space. That's my first impression. And also the color gray.

[0:41:58]

I think we came - I don't know if we came during the wintertime. I believe shortly after we came to United States, I went to downtown with seeing all the like tall building, but grayish color, grayish cement. No sunlight because maybe it was just happened to be a gloomy day and quiet. That was my impression.

[0:42:30]

Not bright, full of energy. Now if you ask me today, then I say, "Oh, bright and full of energy." Of course after so many decades, Chicago changed too.

Interviewer: I was going to ask, did you guys come to Chinatown specifically?

Bonnie Ho: Come to Chinatown. I think a lot of new immigrant will - the first stop is come to Chinatown. Because it's easier for them to adapt to the culture and the environment and they could get help from the local people.

[0:42:59]

Interviewer: And has Chinatown changed much?

Bonnie Ho: A lot. I think back then, Chinatown is very conservative with a lot of Taishanese, to a point that if you don't speak this dialect, you're not Chinese. So then they were that proud of themselves and of course, our family did not speak Taishanese - is the dialect and we speak Cantonese. Later on, I pick up Mandarin.

[0:43:27]

But back then, I tried to learn. Language interests me a lot. So then I tried to pick up Taishanese. I was able to understand some. I was able to speak some but not very much. Very rigid. They believe that Chinese should go into restaurant, should do restaurant or laundry mat. Because this is how their ancestor passing down, you know, the living tools for them.

Ho_Bonnie

[0:43:58]

Very, very narrow minded. But now Chinatown is very innovative. We see a new generation come in and then you see a lot of different stores, different ideas. Back then, it was strictly restaurant or laundromat, and then if you don't speak Cantonese, and if you don't work in restaurant or laundry mat, you're out of it. So kind of like, oh, second class, but now it has changed tremendously.

[0:44:28]

And I believe Chicago is one of the few or maybe the only Chinatown that is growing instead of going downhill. And I'm seeing the momentum, you know, keep going and a lot of new construction like the new library. There's a lot of nonprofit organization in Chinatown working together for the betterment of the community and I believe that is the reason why Chinatown is still growing.

Interviewer: That's wonderful.

[0:45:00]

Bonnie Ho: Yeah.

Interviewer: And what was your first home in Chicago like?

Bonnie Ho: My first home is on (Wentworth) down the street. We only lived there for several months. It was very simple. We only have one table. Everything will be you eat your lunch, your dinner, or you do your homework, very minimal.

[0:45:35]

Not a very comfortable place. And then we move to the side street, 24th Street. We stay there for quite a number of years. That was a much better apartment. We stayed there until we bought our first house on 35th Street.

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I don't even know what area. It's not Bridgeport. It's not Chinatown. It's in between. So we bought our first house several years later and we stay there until we are done with college. And then, you know, we are all over the place now. My mom is not with us anymore. My dad is at a very old age. So my dad has a condo in South Loop. So we are all in South Loop.

[0:46:30]

My sister and myself are in South Loop, so then it's easier for us to take care of our dad.

Ho_Bonnie

Interviewer: Wow. And how wonderful to go from - to be able to be a homeowner, and to own a condo, and all of that.

Bonnie Ho: My dad and mom worked very hard. And none of us just go to school. All of us will have part-time job, except my brother. My brother was too young. I remember the first week when we came.

[0:47:00]

My oldest sister, she came two months earlier. She was already in college. And she already had a part-time job. There was a bookstore across our school. That bookstore is no longer there. She worked there as a cashier. And then my second sister and I had no job, and my father and mother did not have job. So and then what are we going to do? You know, my father actually was introduced to out of town.

[0:47:31]

I think is Iowa somewhere. You know, he needed to take a train. My aunt made a referral. So then he was there as a cook. It was so miserable for him. He's never cut for a cook. But then, you know, everybody told us that you need to be a cook. Because everyone, you know, when they come, they you know. Cook is a good business. And so then he actually learned how to be a cook. But he had a tough time.

[0:48:00]

So he's not always home. He comes home like two times a month because the train ticket is expensive. So then left the four kids, and Mom, and my oldest sister had a part-time job, and that's it. And then he only earned very, very little money. So the first week, I remember taking my mother and my older sister, Flora. We were walking down Chinatown asking for job.

[0:48:28]

So the first store that we asked was down the street. And we walked in there and my sister was so afraid. You know, none of us like - you know, don't know how to ask, right? So I just said, okay, you know, you guys are silent. So I just talked to the owner and said, "Do you have any opening?" And she said, "Well, you're too young." I said, "Well, my mom is not too young. My older sisters, so can you hire them?" And said, "What can they do?" I said, "What do you have?" And she said, "Oh, we have cashier openings."

[0:48:59]

"Oh, you could train my sister. Train my sister." And then I said, "What else do you have?" And she's like, "Well, we need people to make egg rolls." Because they have a factory. They make eggrolls. They package it, and then

put in boxes, and then wholesale it. And said, "Well, my mom could do it. I could do it too." And she was looking at me, and said, "Wow, this little kid." So anyway, actually, that was the first store we stopped at. They hired all three of us.

[0:49:29]

My sister became the cashier. They trained her and then said, Okay, on Saturday, come here. We will drive you to the factory." So we came. They pay us \$1 an hour. Okay, then usually new immigrant, they don't - you know, it's cheap labor. But we are already grateful. Whatever you give us. At least we would earn some money. So we came on Saturday and then they took us to the factory.

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The owner taught us from scratch from how to cut the vegetable, how to put the meat, how to make the seasoning, how to, you know, wrap the eggroll, how to fry, and how to weigh [unintelligible 0:50:12], package it in plastic bag, and in boxes. And then, "Do you know how to do it?" We say, "Okay, we will try." He said, "I'll pick you up at 5:00." So at 5:00 when the owner came, the wall were like - we had boxes all the way up, filling up the whole wall.

[0:50:28]

And they said, "Are you kidding me? You two made all that." We said, "Yeah, we did all that stuff." "Wait a minute. Let me check the quality." So he cut open several boxes. He said, "Wow, this like made by machines. Like you don't see regulars, like exact length and the shape." And said, "Okay, it looks okay. Let me taste it." He tastes it, "Oh, it's good." And said, "Okay, I'm going to increase your salary. I'm going to add a quarter to it." Now a quarter is not a lot. But it's 1/4 of the original pay.

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That to me is a great accomplishment day one. So we stay with this company for several years. We only work on Saturday. And then later on, my mom was being hired by the same company to make noodles. And then because my mom is so diligent and myself also, so then they believe our family, this family is different. And then started asking about our dad.

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And then my dad never gone through proper education. But he has an engineering mind. He was working in the phone company when he was in Hong Kong. And then his supervisor wanted to promote him. But then he had no education so he forever stay in that level. But then he knows a lot. So then

after interviewing my dad, he said, "Well, I have a job for you. Can you make like noodle making machine for us, make all kinds of machine?"

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The owner himself is an engineer. So then he make drawing. My dad will put things together. And he is so good with his hand. If there's no material, he will make it. He saved that company a lot of money because he's making it and he's taking care of all the machinery. So then quite a number of us were hired by that company for many years until my mom move on to work in hotel.

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And then we got other jobs. Yeah.

Interviewer: So when you started going to school, you would go to school during the days, and would you work in the evenings? Or would you work only Saturdays did you say?

Bonnie Ho: Only on Saturday until I think, second year, until I'm a little bit more adapt to the situation. Then I got a job in a broadcasting company back then.

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That company does not exist anymore. So I work nightshift. Because something that I like so I work nightshift being the broadcaster, flying record at that time. And the third job, I no longer do eggroll. I was doing broadcasting. And then at the same time I had a part-time job at the dental office. The dental office is still right there, Dr. (Juan). I was with him for several years.

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I was his chairside assistant. I never learned how to do that. He interviewed me, and after asking all these question, and say, "Are you afraid of blood?" So I do not know. I never had experience. And I said, "Why did you ask?" And he said, "Because the person before you, when we started doing surgery, when the blood came out, she fainted." She literally fainted. So then the dentist, "So am I going to take care of this patient? This person fainted."

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So he wants to make sure, "Are you afraid of this?" I don't think so. But I'm not sure. So the first surgery came. I realized I'm not afraid of blood and he taught me a lot, to point that said, "Why don't you major in dentistry? You're doing good." And said, "No, I'm not interested in dentistry. I'm interested in art." So he was very, very kind to me. Even when I have dental issue, he will take care of me knowing that I don't have money to pay.

Ho_Bonnie

[0:54:32]

And he will say, "When you grow up, you pay me. Okay? You know, your health is the top priority. I want you to be healthy. Don't worry about the money. And you could pay me when you grow up and when you earn money." And with such kindness. So there was one time that because I stay with them for, I think senior year, and then college.

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And when I went to art school, there's a lot of project, a lot of overnight project. So I begin to take a toll because working two jobs, fulltime school. So then one day when I was at the broadcasting station because my hours until midnight, so it was close to midnight, half hour to midnight. I was like playing song. And then in between song I will say something. It was a night program. But I said, okay.

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And then there is a short skit. It's about 15 minutes. I'm so tired. So I just played a skit, the drama, and then I just rested my head and said, I will wake up in 15 minutes. I did not wake up. But one thing I learned people actually listened because the phone rang. The phone rang and said, "How come there's no sound? Can you fix it?" They thought that there is a technical issue. So the minute the phone rang, I already alert, and I was talking, and then I was like flying my record.

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Then the song came on and said, "Oh, thank you for fixing it." So I hung up. I feel guilty. I should not sleep on my job. I was a Christian by that time. Then I realized I have to cut one job. Because it's an integrity issue. My boss might not notice but I do. So I cut down to one job and finish up my school.

Interviewer: Which job did you leave?

[0:56:28]

Bonnie Ho: Unfortunately, I left the dental office. Because the radio is closer to my interest. The dentist said that if I double your salary, will you stay? I said no. But the relationship, like Dr. (Juan) and, you know, I keep the relationship with him.

Interviewer: And I would like to talk a little bit more about school when you first came, and you know, you were getting your feet under you.

[0:57:02]

Ho_Bonnie

What was that like? What was the bilingual program like at that time?

Bonnie Ho: The bilingual program, I remember two teachers. One is the English one. The English teacher actually speaks in English. She's American, but she's trained to teach students who are ESL students. I remember all of us are Asian, sitting in this class learning English.

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And there was one point that we were reading newspaper, and we're supposed to study the newspaper, and we're supposed to summarize, and then make a presentation. People were so timid, feeling embarrassed. I guess I'm thick skin. So then when it is my turn, even though I had broken English, pronunciation is not well, I just go ahead and do it.

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And then I realized, once you did it, you're okay. You could move on and do it. And I learned a lot from that American teacher. And then there's a Chinese teacher. I think she was teaching social study. She was trying to use Chinese to teach. Actually, I prefer the teacher who use English to teach. Of course, all of the teachers are very nice, particularly the Chinese, helping us a lot.

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I also noticed that because it's bilingual, the students who stick together, they continue to speak Chinese, and that's the reason why they learned slower. Those who are willing to start speaking in English, they are able to pick up the language a lot faster.

Interviewer: How was it demographically? Was it a majority of Chinese students or what kind of-?

[0:59:00]

Bonnie Ho: The demographic actually, the Chinese population compared to the total population is not high. But because we had no bilingual programming at the school, so even though we don't recite in that area, everywhere when you have immigrant, you go to that school, so then you become - you have a big class. I remember our Chinese class is at least like 40 students. I'm sure that there's more than 40 students within the entire school.

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So because of the volume of it and the teacher also teach culture, Chinese culture, so now I remember doing like Chinese dance. When there is like festival, the Chinese will perform and I was one of those. So a lot of fun. Yeah.

Ho_Bonnie

Interviewer: And I mean, with the students that weren't Chinese, were they welcoming to you guys?

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Bonnie Ho: I didn't sense that we were actually cross. Kind of like they are there. We are here. We're this like special group. But I guess, special group or not, we survived, and we - bit by bit we adapt in certain way. It's not like that we detach from the American classes. There were classes that we absolutely only - you know, they only conducted in English. And but with the Chinese teacher, if we don't understand certain things, we could always go to the Chinese teacher. The Chinese teacher could use Chinese to explain to us and that helped.

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Interviewer: And you mentioned that by the end of high school, you were proficient in English, but you didn't feel quite confident.

Bonnie Ho: Correct. Yeah. Not yet. Even in first year in college, I would not volunteer to say like in public in English a lot. It was only when I need to that I would say something.

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I think it was until maybe second or third year in college, I feel more comfortable and be able to blend in with the other students. And I think more so is when I got into performing arts because performing artists is like you need to collaborate. You cannot perform by yourself, even if there's a solo piece. But what about backstage? What about lighting? What about sound, right? So and then there's the postproduction is always a team. Filmmaking is always a team.

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So I feel like at that point, I feel more comfortable blending in.

Interviewer: And what was the culture like at the Art Institute? Was it very welcoming? Or I know sometimes the art culture can be kind of a clique. You know, what was that like for you?

Bonnie Ho: Very welcoming. I don't think the student there like see color, like oh, you're Asian, or you're black, or you're, you know, whatever. I think it's more embracing, more open minded. It is truly a place for creativity. Our school actually is a wonderful place, at least from my standpoint, my experience in SAIC. I remember going through - like first year you will take the requirement, like painting, drawing, sculpting, photography.

Ho_Bonnie

[1:02:32]

But then as you move forward, you will get to choose your major, like major focus. I was taking photography the first year. I just absolutely like enjoy it. Because the teacher, the first assignment, they took us outside of SAIC. There's like park area, wooded area, like trees, and grass.

Interviewer: (Forbury) Gardens, is that what it is?

Bonnie Ho: It's just right across the street.

[1:02:59]

There's a lot of like areas like that by SAIC. We brought our camera, and then when we get there, he just use rope to connect the tree. So then there's the inside area. So then we were in the inside area, and then at that time, he said, okay, load your film. The film was already loaded. Okay. And they - actually, the way they did it was - yeah, so our film was loaded, and then said, "Okay, blindfold yourself."

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So we need to blindfold ourselves. He said, "Don't worry, there's rope there. You know, you're not going to get into danger, you know, wander around outside. Then we are going to take our picture without looking at the viewfinder." To me that is innovative. That is like do away with all your presupposition, you're thinking about what photography should be like. Everyone is equal. You cannot see.

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That means you could try like whatever you want to try. You could be lying down. You could be rolling. You could be doing - you are not seeing anything, right? So I think it's so fantastic. So we finished up the entire roll of film, and then when we took the film out, we gave it to the teacher, and the teacher had the marking, and he mix up the roll.

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So then you don't know which one is yours, except her, except the teacher. I think is it was him. Okay. Then after the mixing up, then he will, okay, here, process this one. So he will distribute the roll, process, and when we process the film, and then when we printed the images, we post them, and then we walk around and said, "Which one do you think is yours?" Nobody get the right answer.

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Because you might say, okay, I lied down so my shot would be a lot of the sky, or a lot of this, or that. But so did the other person. You know, you did not know how many people lying down to take the picture. I think one simple assignment says a lot about the philosophy of SAIC and how they approach art making. I always say that SAIC does not necessarily teach me how to paint, how to draw, how to sculpt, how to film.

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But teach me how to be creative which could be applied to anything in teaching, in being an administrator, in being a principal, looking at things without a frame, and not to limit things with within a frame, and say that this is - it has to be this way. It doesn't need to be this way. So I totally enjoyed my six years' experience in SAIC.

[1:06:04]

Interviewer: And what did your parents think of it?

Bonnie Ho: My parents, actually, they did not understand to a point that when I was performing, I invited my parent and my church people to go. They were all excited and they come. But after that, they were silent. Because they did not know how to respond because I was not into - the kind of performance that I was, you know, was avant-garde.

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So it's a little bit harder to comprehend, you know, if you are not in that art area. So later on, my mom said that that's okay, they don't need to go because they don't speak the language, and it's kind of hard. And then before, even for church people, I learned not to invite them anymore because I don't want to put them on the spot. It's kind of like should they say something, or should they not say something?

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And they're afraid to say something that is ridiculous. Actually, there was no such thing as ridiculous, but then, you know, with Asian culture. So then, I think I was kind of odd because all my other friends at church, they go to UIC, UC, you know, university like that, and they have common ground. And they have exam time. They talk about their subject.

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And then when it come to me, I talk about things and then nobody responds. And then I learned not to say it. So I learned to - when they talk about theirs, I just listen. So I know that I'm a little different because of the profession that I was getting into.

Ho_Bonnie

Interviewer: That sounds a little bit lonely.

Bonnie Ho: In some sense, but I was okay because I was totally enjoying it. I have people at school that, you know, speak the same language.

[1:08:02]

I love school to a point that when there's legal holiday, I feel very bad that I cannot go back to school.

Interviewer: When did you decide to pursue your Master of Arts?

Bonnie Ho: It was in my fourth year. I think in my fourth year of college, I went to New York, worked with Ping Chong and (Martha Monk). And if you Google them, (Monk) is still very, very famous in avant-garde.

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She's like number one. Back then I think she still ranked really high. To me, it was a blessing because they never - (Monk) never take student. It's not her habit of taking intern. It's just because (Monk) is a good friend of my professor, and my professors that, you know, take her and she took me under her wing. So I learned under her for about five months in New York.

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The performance that that she put up at that time was called (Total Dream). I was doing the post-performance piece. And then I had a little part in the actual performance (Total Dream). But learning from these artists is like whoa, another level because they are professionally performing. These are musicians, but I like music, but I never had a chance.

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We had no money to go to music school or music lesson. I sing. I enjoy singing. I know zero instrument because you really need to take classes and we did not have money. So I love music, but not to a point that I'm knowledgeable enough to make music. So I remember the first day I reported to work, I see all these artists. They were just talking, and then started making a song, and then, hey, let's put it down, and then they make music. I said, whoa.

[1:10:00]

And then they pick up something, and boom, boom, boom, and they make music. They make song. I said, "Wow, I feel so small." I said, "Oh, how can I, you know, live up to that?" And (Monk's) voice is beautiful. She's sung really, really well. So I think I was really - there was a huge gap between me and

then the entire performing group there. I really appreciate that they embraced me and allowed me to tagalong and just learn from them.

[1:10:34]

(Monk) tried to be because she's not like teaching students. So she's not used to, but I know that she tried to pull me along. So that was my first experience performing off Broadway. Life is very different because we're performing art. Our nighttime is our daytime. Every time after performance, we'll be going home around 2:00 a.m.

[1:11:02]

The next day, you don't get up early and then you come back 2:00 p.m. And then you start preparing for the next performance. I'm okay with that. But I know that in any traditional family, it's quite an adjustment. My parents are totally receptive, accepting who I am. And they got all excited when I have to put up my own performance in Chicago, and said that I need to make this, can you help me, and he will go all out.

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And my dad, my mom will go walk me to alley to pick up material. And I think in one performance, I need safety glass. Like the car window, if they're broken, those are the safety glass. Actually to me they are diamond, like really beautiful. And we need to pick those and we cannot like break people's glass. We just can walk and see if there's broken one and then we will pick them up. And I collect broken glasses.

[1:12:00]

And then with theatrical light, there is a big like oval, half shape, round, like glass prism in there. But when it is broken, I collect them because it's very beautiful. So there's one performance I utilize broken glasses, broken mirrors, and safety glasses. So then my mom and my dad will carry a broom and a dust collector.

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And go like alley by alley to collect clean ones, not the dirty one, and then come back. And there was one performance I need a coffin, a bow size coffin. And my dad built that for me using found wood, and then plexiglass, so the entire coffin were transparent, except the frame.

[1:12:59]

And he build that. It's not a square one, but it' kind of like with a shape. And he built that coffin for me. There's a lot of my props, my dad, and my mom

together, and they don't even ask what is it for. They don't ask, you know, what's the meaning behind. There's total trust, total support. Whatever I need, they will come up with it. And to me, this is very precious, even with parents who are educated might not be able to do that.

[1:13:33]

And for them, they find joy, and they know my deadlines, and they really work hard. And the relationship, I cannot explain it but it's really sweet. And I felt love. I felt total acceptance and trust even though art is not their first choice for their daughter to major in, but they believe in me.

[1:13:58]

Interviewer: That's precious. And did you feel at that time ever like a tension between your desire to pursue art and performing and filmmaking with your desire to be a Christian and serve God? Did you feel like you were able to do both, that they were connected? Or did you ever feel like it was hard to do both?

Bonnie Ho: There were moments that I had doubt because I became a Christian 16.

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And then 16 or 17 years old and then at 19 I dedicated myself for fulltime ministry. I think one of the meeting I raised my hand and I said I will dedicate myself for fulltime ministry. Then my other sister Flora also dedicated herself.

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Now the history is I was the first one who became Christian when I was in the United States because of the fellowship. And then I remember after that retreat, we just got off the bus right in front of this building. The bookstore was across the street back then. I got so excited. I ran over there and I said, "Hey Jessica, I have something to tell you." And then she had a long line trying to buy books. And then she felt very embarrassed. I keep talking and said, "Bonnie, I promise you, I will listen to you. Please leave. I'm working."

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I said, "Okay. Tonight you have to listen to me." So I was that excited. And then go home and tell everybody that I became a Christian. My dad and mom allowed us to come to church. They would not reject it, rejecting that idea. And then my mom and dad listened to me. And then my dad was silent. And my mom later on talked one-on-one and said, "Bonnie, do you know what? Your dad was a Christian." I said, "What? My dad was a Christian."

[1:15:58]

And then she told me the story about the grandmother, you know, requiring them to go to church. And she said that you know what, I think the reason why your dad is not a Christian, maybe there's a reason because of me, because of her because my grandmother tried to take my mother to church when she was alive. My mom went several times. But every time she slept through the whole thing, to a point that my grandmother said that maybe you could stay home because it was kind of embarrassing. You sleep through the whole thing.

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And now my grandmother left and my father did not go to church. And my mom felt that she was responsible, thinking that, you know, he's not going because of me, right, but because of her. So then she talked to me and said, "Bonnie, I felt guilty. I don't believe in God. But I think the church, you know, is a good thing. And I do want your father to go back if possible." And I said, "How are we going to do that?"

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And I said, "Mom, we could do that only if you help me." And said, "How can I help you?" And said, "You know that listens to you. Dad loves you very much that if you ask, Dad will go." And then it was like, "Okay, but Bonnie, I said it now. I'm going because I want your dad to go back to God. The day he goes back to God, then that's the time that I will stop going to church." I said, "That's fine. That's fine." So and then so we together, we partner. And then of course, I will, you know, supportively saying things, and then my dad eventually, you know, agree in coming to church.

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I remember he came but then the first time we had communion, I think he was convicted. He cannot stand it anymore. He just rushed out. Because he maybe like flashback what had happened the time that he was away from God. And he felt that he's not worthy of taking the cup and the bread. But then after that, you know, the church pastor and everyone talked to him, and then he became okay. And then he came back to church.

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And then my mom said, "Okay, your dad is back to God. And now my job is done." "Okay," I said, "Mom, thank you." Then I went to Dad, and I said, "You know what, Dad?" Do you know why Mom was going to church is because of you. And I think we need to bring mom to God," and said, "Wow are we going to do that?" I said, "Well Mom listens to you. Mom loves you. If you ask, she will go." And my dad try. Eventually, my mom became a very devoted Christian.

Ho_Bonnie

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And then out of the four of us, I tried to evangelize my oldest sister. It was not Jessica, the oldest sister who responded first. It's the second one, Flora, and my younger brother. So at that time - I think we need to close the door.

Interviewer: Yeah. And so it sounds like, you know, with your family, you had a lot of support with both being an artist and a Christian.

[1:19:03]

So how did you merge those two together?

Bonnie Ho: When I was in art school, probably junior year, I was given a position as a teacher assistant which was not heard of because they only hire graduate students. So they're making an exception for this Chinese.

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Actually, within three years, I think my English level definitely improved. But compared to native speaker, I'm not still there. But the fact that they wanted me to be the TA, they probably saw something in me. So I was given an office and there were time that because we are into performing art, the hours is really like everywhere.

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But then I was wondering. I asked one question because my other sister, my second sister, Flora, already became a Christian. And she also dedicated herself for fulltime ministry. And I did that when I was 19. She was at studying at (Moody Bible Institute).

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Now, traditionally, when you dedicate yourself for fulltime ministry, you will pursue a seminary, Bible school institution like that. Not the art of - not the Art Institute of Chicago, right? So then already there's a question there. Although I was fully enjoying what I'm doing, but I questioned, am I not listening to God? Am I not, you know, preparing myself for fulltime ministry?

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I was puzzling to a point that one day I call my sister. She was at (Moody). And I share with her my doubt. And she asked me - of course, it was a lengthy conversation. But one of the questions she asked me is, "Bonnie, what is your role right now?" I said, "My role is a student." And said, "If God placed you in a role or in a position as student, then do your best as a Christian student wherever you are.

Ho_Bonnie

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We do not know what the future, you know, would be like, but don't think too much. Just do your best as a student." And that was the end of the conversation. That helped me a lot. Because I became a TA and I had an office. Then I realized that people come to me during office hours or not office hours.

[1:22:02]

Because like besides home, the school is my other home. I spend a lot of time there. These people come to me not because we need to put a performance together. Sometimes it is. Sometimes it's not. But when they have life issues they come to me. And I began to have like lengthy, in-depth conversation with them to a point that after a while, I said, "Wow, this is like a counseling center. Why do they come to me with that?"

[1:22:29]

Now artists, we are very sensitive. We sense the depth of life and we sense the gray area. We sense the agony because we are very sensitive, but not necessarily all artists will have the answer. And that's why artists, a lot of artists suffer. I remember one sculptor. Her major was sculpting. But she talked to my professor and she said that she really had this urge to do a performance. And then the professor brought her to me.

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So asked me to help her out. So I sat down with her and then kind of interviewed her what exactly do you want to do. And then she begin to open up, you know, the dark sides, the things that she was going through. And she said that there's something, some energy that burst out. She needed to express it. So she was 24 years old but she looked like she was 48 years old.

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Very dark, very gray, very like depressed and I could see it from her eyes. And the story was she had a boyfriend who raped her and then she was pregnant. And he made her abort the baby. And she did it for the first time.

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And then she was separated. And then they were back together. She got pregnant again. And he tried to make her abort the second time and she did it. And the guilt by that time is like too heavy in her. She cannot stand it anymore. So then they now again separated but recently, the time that when she talked with me, she told me that she's frightened because this man has come back to Chicago, wanted to get back with her.

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And then one day he called, and said I want to talk with you, and she went out, and she was beaten up by a group of his friends, and she was hospitalized, and she was not - she was afraid to tell her parents because she came from a Catholic family.

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No abortion, no sex before marriage. Like she has violated everything. So she has a sister. The sister already married. So she called the sister. The sister got her to the hospital and they both kept it a secret from the parents. But she could not - she does not know - she said that "I have no future. I'm so sinful." She's used that word, so sinful.

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So then I listened. And I said, "What would you like to do?" And then so we together actually created kind of like composed a performance piece. So every week, she will come and we will work on it a little bit. And then we set a date, okay, that is the day that you're going to perform, and it's going to be a private performance. That means no audience. It is a therapy for her, I believe. It's just for her to get it out of her system. So then we decided that no one will be watching except me because I need to do all the lighting and things like that.

[1:26:03]

And then so I remember in the performance space, there were other setup, but then we made to frame, a big frame, big enough that someone could crawl through that. It was hung from the ceiling. One is black. The other one is white. And then the night before the performance, we worked until 2:00 a.m. and we were very tired.

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And then we just sat there on the floor looking at the frame and looking at the lighting and looking at the set. And after a while she looked up, and she said, "Bonnie, have you noticed that you sound like an angel?" And I said, "Do I?" And she said, "Yes, you've been saying what you just told me." Because I just told her the story about the woman who were caught with, you know, adultery, that Jesus did not condemn her.

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You know, Jesus asked the people, you know, who hasn't sinned, you pick up the stone and stone this woman because in their culture, this woman is deserving stoning to death, right? And Jesus asked, and no one pick up the

stone because everyone know that I am a sinner, right? So one by one, they left. And Jesus said that I too am not going to condemn you.

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You are forgiven. So just because she was so down and she said - and I said to her like, "During the performing, you still have a choice. If you enter the black frame, you're entering into the darkness. There's no return. But if you decided to enter the white frame, there is hope. There's a future. You have to make up your mind." See, as we composed the performance it's not like a done deal, the script is done.

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I'm trying to help her to find a way out. So we were sitting on the floor, talking about those frame, and then I share with her about that Bible story. And then she looked up, and she said, "Bonnie, you just sound like an angel." I know that I'm not an angel. I know why she said that I sound like an angel because those are the Word of God. That's why I'm just an ambassador, a channel, right, delivering that message.

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And that's how powerful God's Spirit and word is. And then after that, she decided, "Okay, in the performance, I'm going to choose the white fame. I'm going to go through that. And Bonnie, can you take me to your church?" And I said, "Well, you have a church." Said, "I don't want to go to my church. I want to go to your church." I said my church - at that time, I was still attending Chinese congregation. I said, "My church speaks in Chinese."

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And said, "Okay if you come, I'll take you to the English congregation. We could together attend English congregation." She said, "I want your God. I want your church. I want to go to your church." And after that, she just collapsed. Kind of like the energy drained out and she just collapsed. And her head was on my lap, and she slept through, and I was sitting there okay, you're sleeping. I let her sleep through until the morning. And she woke up, and I said, "Okay. You ready for the performance?" She said, "I don't need the performance anymore.

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I'm okay, I'm done." So that that was like one of the experience, encounter I had as an art student in SAIC. And then I had grandmother-aged student coming. I think she asked me to come in on Saturday to help her out with something so I was there. Saturday was a little bit quieter but the door was

open and I heard somebody singing like down the hallway, and then closer and closer, and it was her.

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And she came in. And she said that, "I want to let you know that I had a very lifechanging experience over the weekend because of you." I said, "Huh? What did I do?" And she said that, "Because of, you know, our conversation, and I decided to go to this retreat, and I had this experience. And I want you to know that you are the reason why I go to this retreat." And I don't even remember what I said, honestly.

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But then I realized that I should not limit God. I think I learned from the past, you know, in the Asian community, if you are dedicating fulltime you go for seminary, and then you become a minister, a pastor, or a missionary. Those are the fields, right? But God is unlimited. We could serve him in any way, anywhere we can.

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And besides the artist circle needed someone who has faith because I too can sense the agony of life. But the difference is, I have hope I have gotten in my life. And that makes a big difference. So in that sense, no conflict.

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But really appreciating how to utilize the gift that God has given me.

Interviewer: And as you were nearing graduation, what were you planning on doing with your degrees?

Bonnie Ho: By the time I was about to graduate from undergrad, I just was not ready to leave SAIC.

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I want to go for graduate school. Both of my professor talked to me. And I was going to continue to do what I was doing. I was not into performing art yet. I was into multimedia. I loved filmmaking, video, sound making, lighting, all that kind of thing. So making like panoramic multi-slideshow. Back then we don't have high tech, right?

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I remember the professor built this control like a piano key. It's not like - right now it's computerized, right? Back then you actually have to move it up and down to fade in and fade out. It was fun combining film, and slide, and things

like that. So I was thinking that I will continue with that. But both my professors said, "You have applied every media. You have applied every media in your art.

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Why don't you apply yourself?" "What do you mean?" "Your physical body." I said, "What do you mean?" Performing arts. I said, "No way. Chinese, Asian, you know, we're too shy to perform on stage." And then he looked at me and says, "Well, why not? You know, give it a try." So then I kept saying no, but then I was thinking that, yeah, why not? If I don't like it, I could always change. So I took one class.

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Tom (Torumba) was the teacher. And I was amazed how he could make each one of us go on stage, perform without feeling uneasy. I fell in love with it the first class. And so my graduate years were like combined with my rich background with multimedia.

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And then with staging and then performance. I love it. I love it. And then by the time I was to graduate, we had traveling artists coming. Like those are the top famous artists back then, (Ellen Fisher). I remember a few of their names. They come and do workshop and sometimes do a week of intensive training or teaching.

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I totally enjoyed that and then, you know, going to New York and learning. So by the time I was about to graduate, I had to make a decision. Am I going to continue with, you know, becoming a performer? I know that life is very different because like I said, nighttime is daytime. Daytime is nighttime. I will be going to different places, traveling, just making art.

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Most likely I will depart from all my Christian friends because actually in SAIC, I did find not even one Christian at that time. All of them are non-believers. Lifestyle was very different. The way that they deal with life difficulties is very different. I remember when we were doing performance. You know, sometimes between episodes, you come back, and you have to change, right?

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Everybody just changed right there. You know, what's the matter, right? But I don't change in front of other people and they respect that. And then at the end of the performance, people will go crazy and drink and we were poor. We would go buy things and come back to school. And then they will say, "What do you need? What do you need?" And then when they come to me, oh, milk or orange juice. And they did it without like mocking. They did it with a lot of respect.

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And I don't feel ashamed not to go along with them and just trying to blend in. Because for one, my body would not take alcohol anyway. It just makes me feel very not comfortable. So all my teammates accepted me very much and gave me a lot of respect.

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So of course, for enjoyment, I would go along with it. And I know I could make it because my professors, they were saying that, you know, this is, you know, the Morningstar. You know, they feel that they have nurtured, you know, going to be successful because they like I said, you know, people who go for intern, I was the only one, right? People who got a TA job during undergrad, I was the first one. So there's got to be something that they saw in me.

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But on the other part of my life, that is completely different than SAIC life. It's my faith-based life, my church connection. I was also very involved with serving in church and serving with mission team, going from place to place, using my art as much as I can to serve. So I met my husband at Sunday school.

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He was my Sunday school teacher. My sister, Flora was teaching that class. But then (Moody's) requirement is you cannot teach the same class. Throughout the year, you have to switch to a different place. So she got switched out to another church. So this is a college group. It's very hard to find people to teach college groups. And then he was invited to teach our class. So I met him there.

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He's only three years older than me, but he's already our Sunday school teacher. So then fast forward, starting the dating relationship with him. And at the same time when I was in New York, someone also approached me. I remember when I was younger. My counselor asked me, "Bonnie, one day

when you need to choose your mate, you know, what is your like expectation? Do you expect that person is Chinese, and Christian, and artist?"

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And I said, "Are you kidding me? This combination is almost non-existing." Because Chinese, if they are male, they will not major in art. The family would not allow you, at least back then. And now I'm seeing a little bit more but back then it's just almost unheard of. Okay, even if you are an artist, you will not be a Christian, and you will not be a Chinese.

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So I said, "You know, are we asking too much with these three combination?" And, oh, there one more combination, Chinese Christian artist, and leader because they're thinking that because you are leader, and then your husband must be a leader. I said, "Wow, you're asking too much." And I said - so then fast forward to now. I happened to meet this person in New York are four of these.

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Male, Chinese, Christian, artist, and a leader. I started the relationship with my Sunday school teacher first. Then I went to New York and met this person. So kind of like in between, so I had to make a decision. With my husband, he is very gentle. He's not the aggressive type, like grab on, grab hold of me. On the other end, a little bit more assertive, approaching.

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Honestly, I enjoy being with the person in New York because we speak the same language. We could go see art, exhibition or performance and you know, there's a lot of commonality. But with my Sunday school teacher, he's a physician. He's on the science track and I'm on the art track. So very different.

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But during that struggling time, it might appear to be a small thing but it says a lot. I remember one time when I was in Chicago, the church needed - like there's a mission conference and we need to put up this like big display or something like that. So we need to go find spray paint. One of the friend who lives in New York happened to be here. We are best friend.

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So then we together go and look for the right color. And you know, when you see those spray paint, the color dot up there, when you spray it, actually it doesn't really match. So then we are thinking, okay, how can I tell? For me, you know, the exact color is very important. So kind of like determining is it this one or that one, even though it shows like here, but I know that it's a little bit different. So this friend of mine quickly unpacked the top and spray it, and says, "See Bonnie, this is the color."

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And when she did that one image flashback. Also when she did that, you know, Dominic, my now husband was also there, and he stopped her. He said, "No, you don't do that." And he said, "What's wrong?" When you open it, people cannot buy it. This is not the right thing to do. Now being a Sunday school teacher, of course, it was integrity. Okay, honesty.

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So my friend looked at him, and you know, okay. But that flashback another episode, same thing, we were looking for spray praying, the same friend, girlfriend, and the friend, the artist friend, all three of us go into the store. He was the one who opened the cap and sprayed and find the exact color. And I think my girlfriend did that is because she saw him doing that.

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But that is a little thing but I can tell the difference. Like if I go with the New York friend, what would my life be? I believe then I will continue to be an artist and with no problem. But if I go with the friend here, I know my spiritual life will be developed. I will become a better person.

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With the other side I will become a better or more outstanding artist because of the support because of the understanding. So which side do I pick? If it is for desire, I want to pick the art side because I love it. Totally loving it. But on the other side, I also love God. So of course there are many other issues, many other factor. At the end, I marry Dominic, my Sunday school teacher.

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And I believe right now I'm not traveling, putting up performances or making film. But my years in SAIC was not wasted at all. I remember when I was with Fareast Broadcasting company, a company who broadcast gospel radio into China. I was with the China division but FEBC actually broadcast 154 languages per day.

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It's a huge ministry. I was with FEBC. Then with (Truda) Ministry and now with the school. And I believe my husband has, you know, played a big part in helping me to be who I am in each one of those ministry.

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Now, a big circle around. You know, at age 19, I dedicated myself for fulltime ministry. In that sense that is the right choice because I'm not here to serve my own desire. I'm here to serve God. Not everyone is. I'm not saying that everyone has to do it like that. But for me who dedicated myself then that should be the way.

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And I don't feel lacking. I feel fulfilled. Because like I said, our school did not teach me how to do things but teach me how to be creative. I am totally satisfied. And from time to time, I get to make a little filmmaking, you know, video, sound, or something like that. And then I work with my student. Yeah.

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Interviewer: Yeah. So I think that brings us to a good point to talk about life post-graduation and what it looked like, you know, when - you and Dominic got married right after you graduated, right?

Bonnie Ho: That's right.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Bonnie Ho: It was 1984. 1984, he graduated with a PhD degree in pharmacology. And right before he graduated, one month before he graduated, he sat down with me outside our house, my mom's house.

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And he said that, "I have something to share with you. And what do you think about changing careers?" I said, "Huh?" You spend all this time earning your PhD degree and then what are you talking about? And he said that, "I don't want you to marry me and then find out that I have this thought of changing career." And said, "Tell me more about it." And he said that because his work is involved with lab work, right, doing research, like cancer medication.

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And in his lab, there's only this number of people and then everyone not talking. They just do their research. And he said that if we want to spread the gospel, we need contact. And I said, "What do you have in mind?" I think closest to his profession is to go into medication, become a physician. And I

said, "If you want to study to be a doctor, it takes years. Are you willing to invest in that?"

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And he said that he's ready, but he wanted to talk with me, make sure that I'm okay with it. And he said that you still have time to back out. The wedding is not until next month, and I said, well let me think about it. Because I wasn't sure. It's not that I'm opposed to it. But it was like definitely never think that he will come up with this idea right after he got his PhD.

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And he said, I'm going to change profession. So then the following Saturday, I don't normally watch TV. But for some reason, it's a divine appointment. I just like TV was on. I was watching. These people, they were helping the third world with medication and there were a doctor there. And they were also like movie star. They're helping those people in the third world.

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And I'm seeing those kids without shoes, without clothing, having a big belly, a lot of lacking. And then I'm seeing this movie star and I know that they know how to act, you know, but I think I believe that they were not faking it. I see them with sincerity and they were crying for those who are lacking. And I begin to see how this whole team helping the third world. Then I begin to understand what Dominic was talking about.

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So I call him and I said, "Dominic, I think I know what you're talking about. You're talking about people care, right? Go for it. I'll support you." So that's how we decided. So right after we got married, we moved to Michigan. He was hired by Michigan State University to do a postdoc. Even though he wanted to go into medical school, we need to prepare ourselves. You need to apply for the school. And then where's the funding coming from? We are both very poor.

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So we spent two years at Michigan State. He was doing postdoc and I was teaching performing arts in the community school, community college. During those two years, he was applying for medical school. I think he applied for seven medical schools. And I think he got on to waiting lists, two of them.

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And then this third one is Miami. University of Miami actually gave us an interview. They interviewed him first and then they asked to interview both of us. Now this is a very interesting university because they are providing people with a medical degree in two years. But they only accept people who already has a PhD degree. So if you have a PhD degree, then you're eligible to apply for it.

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Like 3,000 some applicants and then they take like a very small amount. So for us it's like, wow, it's like quite impossible. But he applied for it. And he got two interviews. The second one, they interviewed me also. They actually came to Michigan to interview us. I forgot all the questions that they asked, and then at the end, the interviewer asked, "Do you know why we interviewed you as his wife?" And I said, "I honestly do not know."

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And they began to say, "I want you to know that if you are being accepted, you have to prepare yourself because this is a very, very intense program. There is no life because, you know, people spend many more years to get this medical degree, and you are spending two years. So that means it's very intense. Don't think that you could, you know, go shopping, do this, and that. You as a wife, you have to understand your husband, and you have to be totally 100% in support of him before he will be successful."

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And then they share with us a story. You know, before you guys there were a Japanese couple also accepted. But then in the middle of the program, the wife just shot the husband because she cannot stand - you know, cannot - you know, you leave me alone, I'm lonely, you know, all that kind of thing. There might be more issues, okay, and because we are Asian, they want to make sure that nothing like that happened again.

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So we got into the program. To me this is a godsend. This is a miracle. We got into the program. We went to Miami. We got in touch with a church and the church was very happy to see us. And then but then at the end when we say goodbye, and they said that we won't see you for a while. I said, "What do you mean? Aren't we coming next week?" And they said, "Well, in the past, you know, there were - many years there like Asian being accepted Christian and then come to our church.

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But once school started, they disappear because it's just so intense. And we expect - we don't expect you guys to have time to come to church." But to their surprise, we never missed one Sunday or never missed church. And he continued to teach Sunday school. And I worked with children, and you know, make a lot of relationship in that church.

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So then one time, the pastor asked him, "How can you make time to come? I thought you guys didn't even have enough time to sleep." And said it's true and we don't have enough time to sleep. But he said, "To me, getting a B is good enough for me. I don't need an A. If getting a B will allow me to serve in church, that's A-okay." So that is our attitude. So we finished up there and was ready to decide where to go.

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Dominant rated Chicago the lower because you have to go through matching, right? Because he, by nature does not like big city. I as a wife, I just go along. But at that time, Fareast Broadcasting Company started a studio in Chicago, and the pastor called me and asked if I am interested in joining FEBC. The reason why he called me is because I had experience in broadcasting.

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When I was in high school and college, right, I was involved with a church sponsored gospel radio using UIC's studio. Every Saturday, we would go live using UC, UIC's studio to broadcast. So I was learning on the job. So then people know me. And he said, "We need broadcaster. Would you be interested?" And of course I'm interested. I've been eyeing on FEBC ever since I became a Christian receiving the newsletter from Hong Kong.

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But never think, never dreamed that I can go back to Hong Kong. And never think, - of course, never think that they will come to Chicago but they did come to Chicago. So then I was all excited and told Dominic, and said, look, and you know, the lightbulb came on. You know, maybe now is a time for me to really go fulltime, and said, "Come down and if it is for us, then you know God will give us the opportunity."

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So then he immediately put Chicago back on number one. So I really appreciate him. You know, city wise he did not like Chicago, but because of that, he put Chicago back. Even if we put it back, it doesn't mean that we will match but we match. He matched with Loyola and the studio was in Oak

Park. Loyola is in Maywood. Maywood and Oak Park is just right next to each other and we found a small apartment in Forest Park, also like right next to each other.

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So it just worked out perfect. And we came back to Chicago and joined FEBC.

Interviewer: And did you have your son during that time?

Bonnie Ho: No. We did not have our son until much, much later. So he is the miracle son, a miracle child. And I think when we came back to Chicago, I contacted the pastor and said, hey, I'm back.

[1:55:32]

And then okay, come back, come in, and do an interview. And interview took me one time and two times. Did not say he's going to hire me or not. And then I call him for a third interview. Before that interview, I was alone at home. Dominic was at work. I just pray one prayer. I don't know why I repeated myself almost ten minutes, "Lord, please use me greatly. Please use me greatly."

[1:56:00]

You have to be careful if you are ask that. He will actually do it. So after that I set out, and I, you know, talked with the pastor, and then at the end, he still did not say whether he's going to hire me or not. And I said, "Pastor, are you going to hire me or not?" And he said, "Well, Bonnie, you have experience and you're a good fit. But right now, our organization, you know, does not have the need.

[1:56:30]

And you see, when I call you, we actually needed people right away, but you did not come back. Now this is six months later. We weren't able to wait for you. So the funding was already used. And so at this time, our organization has no need." And I said, "Pastor, can you tell me how many people are there in China?" And I said, "Pastor, are you saying - can you tell me? Is everyone in China Christian?"

[1:57:00]

And had said, "Of course not. There's like a fraction of it." Like, you know, the percentage was very low. Back then it was 1.1 billion. But percentage was very low. And then I said, "Pastor, how dare you tell me that your organization has no need. Your organization has a huge need until all are heard." His face

ran red. "You see, we are Asian and you're supposed to be really respectful to elderly."

[1:57:31]

This is a pastor. You don't talk to the pastor that way. I don't know why I did that. I just said it. And then he was speechless and his face turned red. And I said, "Pastor, would that be because you lack funding?" And he said, "Yeah, we don't have funding." I said, "Then there's no issue." And he said, "Are you saying that you're coming to be our volunteer?"

[1:57:57]

I said, "No, my commitment and my conviction is, I'm here to be fulltime. If you want me, you need to hire me officially as a fulltime." And he said, "Then how this is going to work?" And I said, "Well, I'll be self-support." He said, "What do you mean?" Back then self-support is not a popular term. I literally did not know where that term coming from. I believe all the good idea is coming from above. And he said, "What does that mean?" I said, "I will fundraise to support myself." And he said, "We've never done that before." So you never done that before doesn't mean that you cannot do it now.

[1:58:34]

And he said, "I'm not sure about it. Let me talk to talk to the boss in Hong Kong." So he talked to our executive director, Reverend (Kenneth Lowe) in Hong Kong. So Reverend (Kenneth Lowe) came from Hong Kong and asked to interview me and my husband. He asked tons of questions. He asked me to write my testimony in Chinese.

[1:58:58]

And he looked at my writing and he said, "Bonnie, your Chinese is so, so." And I said, "To be honest, the copy that you're reading actually, somebody already edited it. Because when I first wrote it, there's holes because I forgot how to write those characters. I haven't been using Chinese to write for ages. But give me some time. I will improve my Chinese." And then he said, "Well, there must be something with you." And then he asked another question.

[1:59:27]

And then I remember one question he asked both of us is okay, now your fired up. You don't care. You just want to serve the Lord. Okay, first month you fundraise. \$50 came in. Second month, \$5 come in. How would you feel? And I said - actually I did not come up with a good answer because I did not think about it. I said, "I guess I will be okay." And then Dominic said that we

will praise God for that \$5 and because we set out with no expectation but we just believe that this is something we need to do.

[2:00:02]

Because he asked me, "Why would you fundraise for yourself instead of being a volunteer?" And I told him that because God's servants should be supported by God's people. And we need to educate God's people to support those who are working fulltime. And that's why I want to be supported. And but in actuality, we expect to get nothing. And Dominic said that if \$5 come in, that is extra \$5. And we will praise God for that \$5.

[2:00:31]

And out of that, the whole conversation at the end, he said that, "Bonnie," he repeated that line, "There must be something with you, I will hire you. And we will see." So then retrospectively, I learned from the program director who first interviewed me that they decided to - actually, they paid me \$1,000 per month before tax.

[2:01:03]

But that was 1984. Okay, the dollar value is a little bit different, but still very low. But keep in mind, every dollar from Hong Kong, every \$7 from Hong Kong will turn into one US dollar. So it's very hard for them. It's 7,000 for them. It's 1,000 for us. And at that time they already have three staff, and including me, four.

[2:01:29]

But all of the funding coming from Hong Kong. It's very heavy loaded, right? The whole reason why we had a studio in here is because in 1997 China was going to take back Hong Kong. That is in preparation in case we lose the freedom to broadcast from the headquarter in Hong Kong. So they decentralize. And that's why they have to invest in us. So that I never looked at pay rate to accept my employment.

[2:02:03]

I gladly accept my employment. So then I wrote my first fundraising letter, self-taught. But retrospectively, God prepared us because I was in Chicago. And then when I was with SAIC doing intern, I was in New York, and I got involved with the Church in New York, and I helped an organization set up a studio. I trained a whole bunch of volunteers. So there's a relationship.

[2:02:31]

Then we went to Michigan for two years, that we also get involved with Bible study group relationship over there. Then we went to Miami for two years, get involved with a church, relationship with there. So then when I wrote that letter, I just sent to the people that we know in all these four places and Chicago, so we have tons of those. Fifteen days passed by. The secretary were very somber and then she pulled me aside.

[2:03:01]

And she says, "I'm sorry. Nothing came in for you. I felt that I was prepared. But you know, there's still a needle going through my heart. Thankfully, it went out right away. And I said that's okay. I went into the studio, do sound mixing, and then just go on with my day. The next day was payday. The program director came in with a big smile on his face, and said, "Bonnie, come into my office." He said, "We were worried about you, so last night my whole family, we kneeled down, holding hand, praying for you.

[2:03:31]

Look what we have this morning is an offering, a donation coming from one of our contacts, and it's \$1,000." Enough to cover the whole month. And starting from that 1,000 check, offering envelope come flying in because it takes time going there and then come back, right? So three months later, Reverend (Kenneth Lowe) came back and had a long talk with me.

[2:03:59]

He's said, "Again, there must be something with you. Look at your account. You have accumulated this much." Of course, we only pay 1,000 a month, right? It's easy to accumulate. And he said, "How about doing development?" And I said, "What pm earth is development?" I had no idea what that is. And he said it in Chinese and I had no idea what (tojon) was all about. Right?

[2:04:28]

And then had said, "You don't know the term?" I said, "I don't." So he wrote a character on the paper. I still don't recognize that character. I said, "What on earth is (tojon) development? And then he said, "Well, that's fundraising." I said, "Oh, that's fundraising. Oh, no, no, no, no, I'm not called to do this. You know, honestly, I'm called to make program, not fundraise, I've never done fundraising." He said, "You just did and got good results." I said, "Oh, that's fundraising. I didn't even know about that."

[2:04:59]

And so he tried to persuade me, and in the end, he asked me one question, and this is going to be a very important question. Because in my life every

major decision that I have to make, this question come back to me. In the end, he said, "Bonnie, answer me. Are you here to serve your desire? Or are you here to serve God?" And I felt like I have a bam. I'm here to serve God.

[2:05:29]

And then that means it's not my choice. It's his choice. So but he also, you know, step back a little and make it a little bit easier for me. And said, "So how about that, Bonnie? You do 50% programming, 50% doing development? And I said, "Okay, but I tell you, I don't know what development is all about. I would not know how to go about." And he said, "That's okay. I know that you could do it." So that's how he got me, you know, get involved with development and I absolutely love it.

[2:06:02]

I see the whole purpose of development, not just developing the ministry itself, but development in developing and nurturing the giver, ministering to the giver. That in itself is a ministry itself. That is, you know, it's the ministry itself. And I see the beauty of it and I love it.

[2:06:26]

And I believe like going back to my art training, to see the unlimited and limitless as we allow God to expand ourselves, to see the thing - to do the things that we once think is impossible. I think what cut creativity off is when we say it's impossible. Then there's no creativity. There's no innovation. And when we say okay, let's try it, creativity and innovation come.

[2:06:57]

And so if you ask me, my life is packed with color, packed with excitement, energy, wonder. I totally love my life, you know, including the time that I spent when I was in Hong Kong, those miserable years because when I look back, those were meaningful years to me, also.

Interviewer: A very bright and colorful life indeed, rich with experiences.

[2:07:29]

And somehow, doing all of that, you were able to get, I think a total - you have a total of three master's degrees. How did that - how did you have the time for all of that?

Bonnie Ho: Well, I got my art degree from SAIC. Then after the traveling to Michigan back to Chicago, 12 years with Fareast Broadcasting Company.

[2:07:56]

And then right around the 12 years, we evaluate realizing that Hong Kong studio still can freely broadcast. Not anymore right now, as of now, okay. They are being clamped down. Our staff are under a lot of pressure, persecution. Right now it's very severe. But ten years after 1997, still the ministry was okay.

[2:08:28]

And then then that's the time that they - instead of decentralization, they are going to merge because when the decentralization plan execute executed, there was one studio in Chicago, one in California. And then we still have two studios in Canada, and then also Korea, Singapore, Taiwan. So but we want to merge because it's very expensive to produce.

[2:08:56]

The production costs is a lot more in the US compared to in Hong Kong. So to be good steward, we want to merge. And then right around that time, God graced us with a son. My son was born in 1997. Actually, the year that China took back Hong Kong, the same year, 1997. So from 1997 to 2000, that was the duration that I was with FEBC.

[2:09:31]

But then, I think - no, I was with FEBC before 1997 because they were preparing for 1997. So then when my son was born, I was still with FEBC. But it's becoming harder because who's going to take care of my son? At that time, my parents were still healthy, and I totally trust them because they would teach my son with the Word of God and they have open mind.

[2:09:57]

But then when he got to three years old, it's beginning tougher because he has to go to school, and they don't drive. So I will drop him at a nearby - at Concordia, which is very close to the studio, and then go to work. And then he was in half day. I need to go pick him up. But a lot of time I was not able to. It's my secretary or my assistant go, and I feel bad, you know? He's my son, and how come my staff will go pick him up? And then traveling was a lot harder for me.

[2:10:31]

I used to do a lot of traveling, representing FEBC. I tried to cut it down as much as possible. I begin to feel that I'm not I'm not able to serve FEBC the way it deserves or the way I wanted it to be. So then I already thought about what can I do, and then that was a time that the FEBC decided to merge.

[2:10:57]

So I decided not to go with the staff to go to California. Besides, after 12 years of serving, I know what I'm looking for. I want to go in depth with the Word of God and I want to go to (Moody). So that's what had happened. I grow up with my son. And then during that 12 years, I actually - the break in between two ministries, exactly 12 years.

[2:11:28]

So kind of like nurturing our son. And then I went back to school at (Moody), studying biblical study. And when I'm done, shortly after I'm done, my husband asked me, well, you're so involved with children ministry, but you never properly trained, don't you think you should go train yourself? I said, "What? I'm not a scholar like you. You want me to go back again?" So at first I kind of resist the idea.

[2:11:58]

But the way we started children ministry is like, you know, when God wanted something done, he might not necessarily call someone who's already have everything. But he more focus on someone who's willing. And then because it's not us. It's him who could do the wonder. So the way I started the ministry at the sister church in Bridgeport was I first - after the studio merge, so I don't need to go to work, and then I could go to church, my own church more regularly.

[2:12:33]

Otherwise, I'll be traveling to different churches. So I observed the ministry, realized that we had no children ministry. People who have young kids will go to a different church where they have children ministry. And it was also right around the time people started to ask me, "Oh, where are you going? Which church are you going to go to?" I said, "What do you mean? Why am I going to a different church?" Well, because your son, Brian is almost three years old, and there's no children program here.

[2:13:01]

I did not say anything. I just kept it to myself. When enough people ask me, I said I need to look into the situation. When there is no children ministry, it doesn't mean that you have to go. You could create one, right? So observing, and I talked to leaders, and they said, oh, don't even try, we tried that before, you know. Only one for three months and then and we are exhausted with manpower. But I look at the situation differently.

[2:13:27]

I see people who are very capable, who has potential, but they do not have a job. They do not have a position. They're idling. Sometimes they will be called to volunteer. And then after a few months, they dry out, and then leave. So then I talked to the pastor and the pastor wife. They also gave me the same answer saying that, well, we are not trying to discourage you, but we already tried, and several times it fail.

[2:14:01]

And said, okay, but if you're okay, that I will try again. I talked to the deacon. The deacon is very supportive. So then I work out a proposal, work out a presentation, and I actually observe, and I talk to individual, and I invite them. Not come as a volunteer. And I tell them that, you know, I want you to join this ministry, and then they say, "Oh, I don't know anything about it." We will go through training. I will supply training. Why don't you come to this information meeting?

[2:14:32]

So I rang up 37 people from a very small church. I will say the 37 pretty much are 37, you know, who are active. They came. After listening to the whole plan, including staff development, how we're going to support, and then I gave them a piece of paper to sign up, different position. Thirty-four of them sign up.

[2:15:00]

It blows our mind. Not my mind, but the church leaders said, "What? You got 34 people to sign up, and but are you going to be able to keep them?" So we started that, and how I learned to do that is my son went to Concordia. It's a lab school. They have one way mirror. I go there fulltime when my son was there. I just go from class to class. I observe. And I learned from those excellent teacher from Concordia. I brought it right back.

[2:15:30]

I trained the church people. They thought that I was professionally trained. No, I was just like stealing things from watching these people, and then trying to analyze, and then come back, and teach, and it worked. And then I actually have them trained, and then have them write lesson plan, and then have them teach. And then we do student teaching. You know, I never go through like educational program. But I don't know why I knew that.

[2:15:57]

And later on when I go through the educational program, oh, they do student teaching, and much like what we're doing. So they teach, regroup, and then

we critique, and they feel excited because every week they are getting things. They are being enriched. And therefore, the energy kept up, and they never go away, and they never run dry. You need to plug into the right place. So that ministry ran for ten years, until I joined the school as the fulltime principal.

[2:16:33]

That's the time that I thought I should devote in the main church instead of the sister church. So I passed my baton to the people. Back then where they were not involved with anything. Now they're church leader. They're church deacons. You know, they're church leaders and they're heading up to the ministry. The ministry keeps on running. The batch of people, once upon a time had no role, and now they have a place, and they keep the ministry going.

[2:17:01]

And for me move on to school ministry here fulltime.

Interviewer: And so was your church the Pui Tak church because I know there's a-

Bonnie Ho: Chinese Christian Union Church.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. That's just down the street, right?

Bonnie Ho: Right here. You're in the facility. This room, my office used to be the pastor's living room. I mean, bedroom.

[2:17:28]

So this section is the parsonage where the pastor used to live. There are three room. You know, they have daughters. And then downstairs were the living room and then a little kitchen. So it just, the facility is never built for school. We just make do. We just, you know, we create a place and just make it work for us. So CCUC, Chinese Christian Union Church is the founding church of Pui Tak Christian School 69 years ago.

[2:17:58]

CCUC also is the founding church for the center down the street called Pui Tak center. So out of these three organization, we make a very, I would say, impactful impact, impacting the community quite a bit throughout all these years. And I'm the fruit of it.

[2:18:27]

Right? Being a new immigrant, came to know Christ through this church, and now back serving in one of the church ministry. Yeah.

Ho_Bonnie

Interviewer: Quite the full circle.

Bonnie Ho: Yeah.

Interviewer: And that is the perfect time to start talking about the school and then your pandemic experiences. But before we get into it, would you like to take a break? You know, we are at about 2 hours and 20 minutes.

Bonnie Ho: I think it would be a good idea.

Interviewer: Yes. So what year was it then that you started working for the school?

[2:19:00]

Bonnie Ho: It was 2012.

Interviewer: Oh, so happy ten year.

Bonnie Ho: That's right. This is my tenth year. Yeah.

Interviewer: Wow. When will you celebrate the actual anniversary? Has it passed already?

Bonnie Ho: February 2012. I was still studying at Concordia at the end of my study, getting ready to graduate at that time.

[2:19:28]

Interviewer: And so I know that it was kind of because of your work with the student ministry that you got the Master of Early Childhood Education. Did you know that you were going to start at the Pui Tak school when you started the Concordia program or did it just fall into place?

Bonnie Ho: Well, while I was at Concordia studying, I was hired by the school to teach preschool classes. Back then they did not necessarily require -- at least the preschool department -- they were not requiring them to be certified.

[2:20:05]

Ten years later, I mean, after I became a principal, I started changing it. And so now our teachers are certified. But back then, it was not a requirement. They hired me probably because they knew that I'd been working with children for over ten years at the sister church.

[2:20:28]

And then I was also studying in early childhood, so they hire me. So I taught here for two years. At the end of that second year, I decided to take a break because I'm a very focused person. If I want to do one thing, I really want to

do a very good job. And I did not feel that I was able to give my all to my study. And I know that my study is going to be very important part of equipping myself to be to be a good teacher.

[2:20:59]

And I wanted to learn because I'm excited about learning. So then I said , oh, I cannot. Because my husband keeps [unintelligible 2:21:06]. The first year I was teaching here part-time. My top part-time student will leave at 11:30. But I did not go home until 6:00. And then he said, "Bonnie, are you working fulltime or are you working part-time? How come you come home at 6:00 when your half day is supposed to be at noontime?" And he said that, "Bonnie, you need to stop because you could forever improve your lesson plan.

[2:21:30]

There's no ending. So enough is enough." And I think being an artist, you know, teaching preschool, you make a lot of things, right? The project and things like that. So I know that this is my weakness. And at the same time, it's my strength. I need to know how to balance it. But then the second year, I was teaching fulltime. And then that is the time that I found that I'm not giving my best to my study.

[2:21:59]

So after that, I talk to the school and say I'm going to take a break, I want to finish my degree first. So then I kind of like resigned. That was the year that I was fulltime studying. But something took place at the end of 2011, I think maybe in October 2011. The school was under a huge challenge because one day my husband call me and said, "Bonnie, go turn on the TV. Pui Tak Christian School is on TV."

[2:22:35]

Judging from his voice, I know that it's not positive news. So I went to the news. The news was gone because it's primetime. So I went to the internet. I'm so sorry.

Interviewer:

Take your time. We've been talking for two and-a-half hours. The throat gets very dry.

[2:23:00]

Bonnie Ho:

So I quickly went to turn on the TV, but because the primetime is over, so I went to the internet. And then I see two news. I forgot the other one, but it generated about eight or nine response. And then the PTCF one, I see it

rolling is. It was over 100 people. People were, you know, expressing their thought and idea because the headline is unfavorable to the school.

[2:23:30]

It says Pui Tak Christian School duct tapes preschooler. That is a very deadly news. I was like, "What?" So I was like - I'm seeing people taking sides. Some people take side on the school. Some people take side on the parents. So I call the director, actually the vice principal at that time. Just want to give my support.

[2:24:00]

So then during those investigation time, being in contact with the vice principal just to pray and just to offer support. Immediately, the school is in a panic mode because we lost trust from the parents and because this is a bit complicated because the school has been running like independently.

[2:24:30]

But legally the school was under Pui Tak Center. It was funded by the church 69 years ago. About 25 years ago or more than 25 years ago, they founded Pui Tak Center. I think Pui Tak Center is 26 years now. So then when they founded Pui Tak Center, they said that the school is becoming too big, and then ministry wise, it might match with Pui Tak Center more.

[2:25:00]

So at that time, we got transfer to go under Pui Tak Center. So then that means like if there's a lawsuit, it's all connected. So sure enough, we had a lawsuit. These people, they're suing any leader name that they could find, which to me it doesn't make sense. They were suing our pastor. What does it got to do with our pastor? Right? What does it got to do with the executive director at Pui Tak Center? So it doesn't make sense.

[2:25:30]

But anyway, the whole incident is because this three years old became violent and it's not exaggerated. I taught preschool before. And I learned to self-defense because sometimes if the kid is out of control, if you don't know how to move your body, you got kicked, and you got like bite. Three-year-old could go really wild nowadays. So apparently, this is not onetime episode. It happened again and again.

[2:26:00]

But this time this child is hurting the other child. So when something like that happen, we need to remove the child. And you can see the facility is very

small. We don't have a counseling room. So everyone will get sent downstairs. Now if something like that, they will send to my office. Back then I don't even know if this room is used for the school. Maybe it was used for the church. So they had no room. So he got sent to downstairs and then he ransacked the office.

[2:26:30]

He like pulled bulletin board things on the bulletin. He was kicking. And I saw a picture of a teacher, you know, you see scratch with blood. Okay. This is how violent it could be. So to me, I think it's a technical foul. They decided to tape him to confine him, so that he doesn't hurt himself, and he doesn't hurt other people. But you never do that. You don't do that. It was a technical foul because the vice principal, she did not have educational background.

[2:27:05]

She has like administration background but not education. And to me is not in a million years. I do not believe she is abusive. She is not. She is definitely not abusive at all. I know her and I trust her totally.

[2:27:28]

So what happened is, according to the spokesman, five minutes after they duct tape him, the father showed up because we call. They call the father to come pick up the son. The father is a police officer. What do you think he saw when he saw that duct tape? Handcuff, right? How dare you handcuff my son. Who will be handcuffed? Those are the criminals. So now nobody interpreted it that way.

[2:28:01]

But when I see the reaction, I think this is what happened. Immediately turned into like a very, very bad situation. The church people get also very, very concerned because the church was also being sued. I believe in dealing with this whole situation, the church did not - the church could do a better job.

[2:28:30]

But I understand why the church did it that way. Because they were so concerned because the church has no money, you know. What is it going to do? So the vice principal share with me. She's totally broken and hurt. Because she said that nobody cares about me. Nobody cares about my feelings. I said, "What do you mean?" Say, "The minute I walked into this deacon meeting, the first thing they asked me was, 'Are we going to get a lawsuit?'"

[2:28:56]

And she said, "I was already in tear and you don't ask me how do you feel? Are you all right? But you asked me, 'Are there going to be a lawsuit?'"

[2:29:03]

So I think everyone is so emotional, we're not really operating in the right mind. Everyone is thinking - feeling about themselves at that moment. So fast forward. We did not handle it really well. And DCFS was on our back, investigating, ordering that this person cannot be in contact with minor. There's a lot of things. And then in the end, we need to let go of her and then the teacher.

[2:29:31]

And then we had two vice principals at that time. The other vice principals said that if you let go of her, I'm leaving. So that's what's exactly happened. Both vice principals left. The teacher left. That left with our principal. Our principal is Mrs. (Silvia Wu). She served this ministry for 24 years. And she totally Godly, totally faithful.

[2:30:00]

But she's more focusing on the preschool section because that's her training. And then the vice principal were more on the actual elementary section. Mrs. (Wu) is not technical. You know, she's not caught up with technology. So like all of a sudden, you know, how are we going to operate a school without these two vice principals? So the whole thing is a chaos.

[2:30:28]

And then we pull in board member who had educational background to be interim. Did not handle well. I think the way to one public school and the way to one private school is totally different. So there's like issue after issue after issue. That was a time I was being called. Now before they call me, my husband already asked me several times, after you graduate, are you going back to Pui Tak Christian school?

[2:31:00]

At first I did not answer him. And then when he asked me enough, then I really need to think. The reason why I did not answer him is because I'm a human being too. We were in suburb. We were not in South Loop yet. So Concordia is in the suburb. The school that they send us to, to do student teaching and observation is all in the suburbs. Wow, this is a real school. Every time I go to a school, I say, wow, they have playground, or they have plenty of resources, and they have parking, or they have real classrooms.

[2:31:34]

We don't. And I was admiring them and said, if I were to teach, I'd like to teach in a school like that. So I could focus on teaching instead of I have to set up and break down every day. I was teaching in the gymnasium, setting up each day, breaking it down each day. We're talking about preschool classroom with a lot of learning center. We did that for decades.

[2:32:00]

So when he asked me enough, I know that I have to face this question. So I thought to myself, yeah, the question - the determining question came back. Am I here to serve my desire or am I here to serve God? The answer is to serve God. If serve God is go back to Pui Tak Christian school because for this school to hire good teacher is not easy because the pay is low. The work is double. Everyone you saw in this place they are committed. That's why they are here.

[2:32:31]

That's why I am here. And I also know that God graced me with a lot of like training. He equipped me again, again, and again, not for me to add to those already have plentiful, but to give to the one that has very minimal. So based on that, I already made a decision to come back. But never thought that I will come back as a principal, but the teacher.

[2:33:01]

So then when the situation took place, one night, my husband was - you know, my husband and I are very different. I'm a night owl. And also I could wake up in the morning and then function just like no problem. But at 10:00 p.m., he usually unconscious. But midnight, I hear him like making sound in the bedroom. Then I know that he was waiting for me.

[2:33:29]

So I say, okay, I better stop doing what I'm doing. Go into the bedroom. And then the minute I got in, he said, "Bonnie, we need to talk." And I said, "Okay, what is it?" He seemed like serious. And said, "Bonnie, I want you to know that nobody told me anything. Nobody tells me anything. But I want to ask you. You're almost graduating. Are you going back Pui Tak?" And I said, "I told you already. I am going back to Pui Tak." And he said, "No, I don't mean to go back to Pui Tak as a teacher. I think you are more than that."

[2:34:03]

I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "For example, doing administration." And I said, "Well, I never thought about that." Well, he said again, "Nobody told me anything and I did not hear anything. But I see God's handwriting on

the wall.” And he said, “If somebody approach you, do not dismiss that invitation. Take it back and we will pray about it.” And I said, “Is that all?” He said, “Yeah, okay, let's go to bed.”

[2:34:30]

So I still did not take it seriously. Then we went to bed and the next morning at 10:00 a.m., the phone rang, and it was our sweet Mrs. (Sylvia Wu). Said, “This is Mrs. (Wu). I'm calling on behalf of the school board. We'd like to invite you to consider to be our next principal.” I almost fell out of my chair. Not because of the invitation but because of the conversation we had. He literally told me that he see God's handwriting on the wall.

[2:35:03]

And my heart was pumping and I said, “Well, Mrs. (Wu), will let me pray about it. Let us pray about out it and I'll get back to you.” So that's all I can tell her. Then I called Dominic and Dominic said that come down, wait until I come down and we'll talk about it. So he came back. We talked about it and we decided to pray about the situation. Then Friday came. I drove my son to the church for youth group.

[2:35:30]

And then on our way down, I shared with him about the invitation. And he listened quietly. He was 14 at that time. And after that, he said, “Well Mom, go for it.” I said, “Son, you don't know what you're talking about.” Then I revealed the whole situation. Again, he listened quietly, and he said, “Mom, you're right. You might not be successful. It's too hard. But Mom, look. Look around. Have you looked around and find someone who could come closer to be successful than you are?”

[2:36:02]

I did not expect him to ask me such question. But I did pause for a moment, and I try to, you know, go through my mind. And then I said, “No son, I did not see anyone.” Then my son said, “Then Mom, you are the one.” I was amazed at age 14 to say something like that. But I did not take it lightly.

[2:36:30]

I usually am fast in making decision. But this one is the longest time. It took me about four to five months to make the decision. Because respectively I know why because 12 years with FEBC fulltime is very intense, you know, with traveling, with fundraising, with staff development, with programming, and then have a son, raising him with my husband for 12 years, finishing up two degrees, starting a children ministry.

[2:37:04]

That's more than fulltime again. So fulltime, full time, except this fulltime don't get a paycheck. That's all. And then now about to enter into the next chapter. It's sort of like, I climbed a mountain, come back, and climb another mountain. Now I'm almost done. I secretly - actually before this whole thing took place, I pray and said, Lord, after I graduate, can you give me four months? I don't know why I asked four months.

[2:37:31]

Can you give me four months just absolutely no appointments? I could sleep in, don't worry about the alarm clock. I could just relax. I told him that I need to rest for four months. Instead of giving me four months, he overlapped it for four months. So by the time that I made a decision, it was already January.

[2:38:00]

Eventually my husband and I decided we will go for it. So I call them back and say I'm ready to explore the possibility. So going through interview and then got hired. They want me to do fulltime. I said, no, I have to finish my degree. They said, okay, part-time. But the first day I come in, I know that we are fooling ourselves. You know, even the school is not sinking, it's more than a fulltime job. Now this Titanic is sinking.

[2:38:30]

You know, how am I going to get the morale up? How am I going to get the trust from the parents? How am I going to get the enrollment, right? And besides, I never trained to be a principal. Right? Non-trained. So but thankfully, there are things that work for me because I grew up from this church. I know the dynamic and I know why the school personnel or the school leadership were not in speaking term with the church leadership.

[2:39:04]

This cultural difference, we are all Chinese, but then American Born Chinese is different than me. I'm in between. I have the west and the east. So I know each side what they're thinking, and then be able to, you know, balance it out. So and I know what is lacking. The school definitely needs to be working on its technology.

[2:39:28]

When I first came as a principle, we were still using carbon paper to write receipt. And I said, okay. carbon paper was once upon a time. It was an excellent invention, but not 2012. We ought to switch to computer but we have no funding. So then before I came, I already found volunteer, those

experts to come. So day one, this team come in to assess the situation and they write a tailormade program that runs for the next ten years.

[2:40:01]

Until recently. We switched to a store-bought like subscription type of program. Because this team dissolved after they wrote the program with only one volunteer left for all this ten year to maintain and continue to develop because the school keep on growing. Whenever there's a growing need, I just tell him and he will write a program. So we love the program. It works perfect, but then he keeps reminding me, what happen if I went back to the Lord, no one will give you support, and no one would know anything.

[2:40:35]

Because you guys are not technical. You guys have to think. So then now we are more capable in terms of finance. So then we subscribe into program. But nobody likes it yet. They like the old program more. But I came with like teams of volunteers before day one. So when I checked in day one, already like full force.

[2:41:00]

Then the first board meeting, I told them that you pay me or not, I want to let you know my hours are fulltime hours or more than two fulltime hours. And my study is again, you know, second priority now. But no matter what, I'm going to finish my degree and focus on the school. So that's how I started.

Interviewer: It sounds like a lot all at once. Was your degree postponed a little bit because of just the turmoil happening here or were you able to complete it?

[2:41:33]

Bonnie Ho: I was able to complete it on time. Yeah.

Interviewer: So when did you feel like you had your feet under you?

Bonnie Ho: You know, when they first introduced me, they rang up everybody in the conference room. And they introduced me to be the next principal with the staff and I saw staff sitting there like that. Who are you?

[2:42:00]

And some of them knew that I was a teacher and said, what do you mean, you were a preschool teacher, now you are my principal. And I know that they came with emotion because they have strong - some of them have strong relationship with the exited principal. So there's a lot of emotion going on.

Before they hire me, they also hire a school operation manager because they need the people.

[2:42:28]

This school manager, I knew him but not in a very close range. You know, we kind of know who's who. So right after the introduction, she just came up and hugged me and started crying. And I know how serious is. That means, you know, she was hired a month before me and she probably is under a lot of pressure. She is a person that is very calm and it's very unusual for her to do such a thing in front of everybody.

[2:42:59]

That means she cannot help her any, you know, anymore. So then I kind of nudge her and then walk outside and let her cry. So there is a lot of emotion, including the exit of staff. There's bitterness, definitely bitterness and is not healthy. I begin to - very soon school ended. You know, only four months, from February to June.

[2:43:30]

During those four months, the first thing I need to - one major thing I need to handle is misbehavior from the student body. It was literally, you know, they send student. They were lining up out there. That's how severe. But today you don't see anyone. Things change. For whatever reason, there were severe behavioral issues. I don't want to go into detail and I don't want to comment on the administration or how they operate before.

[2:44:02]

But the fact is there were enough misbehavior issues that I had to deal with and deal with parents. I remember going to the parent meeting. Like they have a parent group. The interim told me, okay, now that you are the principal, I will never go to those parent meeting anymore. And remember, when you go, put on your bullet vest.

[2:44:29]

I said, "What are you talking about?" He said that it's very harsh. You know, people attack and things like that. Okay, so I need to prepare. So I go, and I talked with them about partnership, and they were silent. And at the end, one of the parents said, "I haven't heard about the word partnership for ages. We will see." Kind of say I want to see if you really mean it or not.

[2:44:58]

But I think our action demonstrate what we intended to do a lot. I think by the time of the yearend, I actually did something very unusual because I assessed the situation. We had seven grades at that time, but the first board meeting, I told them that we need to cap the school at sixth grade. We do not have what it takes to get them graduated.

[2:45:29]

Number one, we had no classroom. People were, you know, taking classroom, you know, taking classes in area that is against code, in the hallway, you know, in a conference room that they need to move out, you know, from certain time because the church need to use it. It's not right. They need a better environment. And I said, right now, there's too much for me to handle. So before we could stand on our feet, let's cap the school. And then there's they said, "What are we going to do with the seventh grade? Next year, they're graduating."

[2:46:01]

So then we contacted a nearby Christian school, the principal. I was new, a new kid on the block. And, you know, somebody introduced me to her. And I just straight tell her the need. And she said she's more than willing to help. And then they took all of our seventh grader. And I said, our seventh grader, our parents cannot pay your tuition because it's a lot higher.

[2:46:31]

And she went to the board. The board agreed that they will pay Pui Tak Christian School's tuition rate but go to their school. That is amazing, right? When we are doing the right thing, God open up ways. And now we have to speak to the parents. The parents are already very agitated. And now you're talking about that. But after we take them there to take a tour, and then they are happy about it because they know that is, you know, more expensive school, and then you could pay less than half, and you get the education.

[2:47:04]

So we remain with sixth grade for two years. And then when we are ready, I told the board we are ready to go. So then we resume. And so ever since then we have eighth grade until now. So it was I think the point that I feel that things are under control, it was after the first summer.

[2:47:30]

Because the first summer I insist on having staff retreat. If you ask me how to do administration, how to do this ministry, the only way I know is to get everybody to embrace the same godly mission, to embrace the same Bible,

the teaching of the Bible. So the school had never had a staff retreat, but we had one, and I think that was very good.

[2:47:58]

Even nowadays, those who are, you know, the staff who stay until today still remember that retreat because we were able to do like heart-to-heart talk. Even the most harsh person going like this, had a talk with me, and, you know, get the - and I told her I understand. Whoever take the position will have that kind of treatment. It doesn't matter who that is because it's projected on that person.

[2:48:27]

That person is taking my friend's position, you know, even though it's not true. I totally understand. So at that retreat, I also did a survey and asked them, "What do you think about having 15 minutes of devotional time before we start the day?" And people, no, you know, we're busy in the morning, we're always rushing, and then we've never done that, you know, but I know that if I go with it, majority of them would not want to try. But then in the end, there's some things that I need to insist. I insist, but I tried to insist in a gentle way.

[2:49:02]

And we did it. And it lasted until today. And we treasure those moments. And I think if there's any success for the school, I believe morning devotion, and staff retreat has something to do with it. We take turn to lead devotion. And we kind of like equip each other and support each other.

[2:49:29]

And then sometimes we talk about our own struggle and that helps too. So it's very transparent. It's like very like family relationship. Sometimes we even talk about the deepest struggle we have. And people respect that and will not be gossiping and talking about it, just like praying. And those are very important. People know that, you know, we have each other's back.

Interviewer: That's wonderful.

[2:49:58]

And before we get into the pandemic, I'm curious to know. Do you guys follow like a bilingual program? Because I noticed that, you know, in the announcements that you sent me, things were written in English. And is it Cantonese or Mandarin characters?

Bonnie Ho: The writing actually is the same.

Ho_Bonnie

Interviewer: Oh, okay, so Cantonese and Mandarin, are they like dialects and like the speaking is different?

Bonnie Ho: Characters are the same, but the terms or the word that the Cantonese are using might not be the same, but the writing itself is the same.

[2:50:33]

Interviewer: Okay. So yeah.

Bonnie Ho: So we do not have a bilingual program. Our program is just like normal, regular preschool, and elementary, and middle school. But we do offer a Mandarin subject. That is a requirement from age three to eighth grade. Everybody takes this class. The focus is not to expect eighth grader, when they graduated, they could write a thesis in Chinese, but it's more on conversational Mandarin.

[2:51:01]

But at the same time, we do teach them how to write characters. So then they could write some, but that's not our focus. When they get to high school, a lot of times they tested into sophomore or junior Mandarin. And then that's the time that they learn how to type in Chinese. And some of our eighth graders, they know how to type in Chinese. So I think, whether they are Chinese or not, it is a welcomed subject. People want their kid to acquire a second language.

[2:51:31]

And then we also - besides the language part, we also focus on culture, teaching them the Chinese culture or the Asian culture.

Interviewer: And, you know, being at the heart of Chinatown, how does that intersect with your mission?

Bonnie Ho: If you ask my personal mission, I was into China ministry because FEBC is international.

[2:52:00]

But the division that I was with, it was focusing on Chinese, so I always in CM, China Ministry. Then I was in children ministry, also cm. And now is Christian ministry, a Christian education here. Unlike some people that focus on maybe I minister to Muslim people, or I minister to certain type, or the working class, or the single mom, so very particular.

[2:52:35]

To me personally, it doesn't matter what it is. To me is the great commission so that the world might know. Whether it's education, whether it's broadcasting, it's merely the tool that we're using. So this is how, my personally, you look at Mission. Yeah.

[2:52:57]

Interviewer: And I guess actually, one last question about the school before we start the pandemic. But, you know, how does your artistic background impact your philosophy as a principal?

Bonnie Ho: Hmm, that is a very good question. How has my artistic skill influenced me as a principal? I guess I have to look back in how I handle cases, situation.

[2:53:30]

For one, as a principal, I suppose to strategize. I suppose to lead the team forward. I suppose to expand the school. All this takes innovation and creativity. Take someone to think out of the box. As far as student care, staff care, and parents care, I also think that - well, you might not look at it as creativity.

[2:53:58]

But when I make conversation with my students, I believe a lot of times, I surprise them, and I caught them by surprise. Not because I want to catch them by surprise. It's just they never expect me will say certain thing. But it makes sense. And then really turn the direction around. And where is the idea coming from? Where is that observation coming from?

[2:54:30]

Where is that thought coming from? I believe every good thing is from above. Creativity is definitely from above because our God is the most creative creator. He created all of us and none of us are the same. That means he has to be extremely creative, you know, to create so many people that are so unique. We are wonderfully and fearfully made individually by the Creator.

[2:55:00]

And we are the imitator. Everyone has creativity because general grace and we, you know, made after God's image and some people more has more strength in one area than the other. Did I answer your question?

Interviewer: You did? Absolutely. And I appreciate the way that you answer my questions. It's a very good way to story tell, I think.

[2:55:33]

Ho_Bonnie

But anyway, kind of then moving into the pandemic. At the beginning of 2020, did you have any goals or plans for the school and for yourself personally?

Bonnie Ho: 2020.

Interviewer: Before you realized the pandemic was coming.

Bonnie Ho: It was just like any other year. We were ready.

[2:55:59]

We were actually getting ready to launch Project Nehemiah 2. That is our school expansion plan. We launched Project Nehemiah 1, phase one in February 2018. April 2019, we raised 3.5 million within that amount of time with no donor base to start out with. Again, his work. Again, it's a story. Okay. If you have time, we could talk about it.

[2:56:31]

But so a little over a year, 14 months, we close on the property on (Canal). So if you could hand me that paper right behind you.

Interviewer: This one?

Bonnie Ho: Yep. And so I believe this is the Chinese version, but that's okay. I'm just going to show you the picture.

[2:56:58]

So this is the property that we bought, right? There's a building here. There's a building here, and then there's a big parking lot, and this is the whole thing. So if you want to zoom in, you could see that it's like 11 lot and that is located on (Canal) and 31st Street in Bridgeport. Now this property costs 3.5 million, 3.53 million.

[2:57:29]

And we raise it, and then in the future, we ambition that it's going to look like this on the bottom. And then another, more maybe smaller, but nicer looking is this version. Right? So we got done. How we were able to close the deal on the building, we fundraise.

[2:58:00]

And then we got a loan from the bank. And we also get personal loan and organizational loan. So then together, we were able to close on the deal of the property in April. But by the end of the same year, we pay back everything. So that means from February 2018 to the end of 2019 all 3.53 million came in. And we exceeded it by a little bit.

[2:58:28]

Then it was already the end of 2019. So then we kind of like take a break and okay, situate ourselves and look forward and see how we are going to launch Project Nehemiah 2. Right around that we already you know, hear, you know, the virus going on, but you know, kind of not sure, you know, what's going to happen. And then also during that time, I was preparing the staff.

[2:59:01]

When it gets more serious, I remember one month before the governor announced to shut down the school that I told the staff during devotion that we need to prepare ourselves. I think e-learning is the next thing. So then everybody started preparing. I mean they educated. We were preparing ourselves and then also asking for - start asking people to donate secondhand laptop.

[2:59:28]

I know that not every parent could afford to have a laptop all of a sudden. So we start asking do you have laptop that you can, you know, give it to us. So we collected some. And then March 18th, that morning, the night before, I email everybody, and I said sometimes you cannot make it to devotion, but tomorrow you have to, I have an announcement to make. So then at 8:00 a.m. on that Friday, I made an announcement that we're going to go e-learning.

[3:00:01]

Because Chinatown got hit quicker, faster than any other neighborhood. Because people were in restaurant, and then the restaurant was shut down, and you would walk down the street, it's like a ghost town already. And parents were losing jobs. And it's becoming - I mean, we feel the heat earlier on because the profession that our parents have, like depending on surfaces, like nail salon, restaurant, hotel, they got hit first.

[3:00:35]

So I told the staff, okay, we are going to go e-learning from Monday. So and then 3:00 p.m. the same day, Governor Pritzker announced that CPS is going to shut down. So the difference is the CPS teacher found out the news from primetime news and it is very tough for them.

[3:01:00]

You know, how are you going to prepare yourself? Okay, Monday, I'm going to do email. What am I going to do? How am I going to connect? You know, it's very, very challenging. For us, we prepare for one month, and then we go

e-learning. And next Monday, things happen as we planned. Day one and throughout the entire time, we were able to give five and-a-half hour online, not telling the kid, okay, go ahead and do it and then turn it in.

[3:01:29]

We actually - I was able to hop from classroom to classroom easy. I just switch, and then go to a different classroom, and then see how they're doing. Perfect. Because they're interacting with the teacher assignment and then the teacher were using the presentation to show math and things like that. No issue. And then they were released for lunch, and then they check back, and then making sure that they are okay, and then release again. And but the concern was with the preschool.

[3:01:59]

Because we have predominantly Asian in preschool. They are not necessary - you know, they do not necessarily know how to do this technical thing. As much as we prepared, day one, we jammed with Chinese parents down there, asking us how do you do this. How do you connect? What do you mean by connect? It was really - like looking back, it was really funny. But at that time, all the entire admin team was trying to help the preschool part and the preschool teacher were actually conducting class in the classroom.

[3:02:34]

Because they have all the things there. So then we were running back and forth. And I remember one phone call, the dad calling. He says, "I don't know how to get into Google Classroom. How do you log on?" So then I was like explaining things. But he keeps saying things in Chinese. But some of the terms I don't know how to say in Chinese, right? How do you say Google Classroom in Chinese?

[3:02:59]

I know that there's a translation for Google, but I just did not know it at that time. So it was very difficult. Twenty minutes on the phone call, and say, okay, stay on the line, I'm going to take my laptop, and I am going to - no, I'm going to take my cell phone. I'm going to walk to your classroom, talk to your teacher, and work with you, and see if you log on because I cannot see. So eventually he logged on. It took us like a long time. So okay, your kid is on.

[3:03:29]

I came back and they said, "Mrs. Ho, go to the Children's Center. Mrs. (Campbell) is struggling with another Chinese teacher trying to, you know, fix the iPad." Because Mrs. (Campbell) doesn't speak English. So I went there

and she was sweating and trying to explain to a Chinese parent, and the iPad was on a Chinese platform. Everything was in Chinese. And she's trying to remember, okay, over here at this corner, I think English says this, right? It's very hard to navigate trying to read a foreign language and think that this might mean that.

[3:04:04]

And the parents are saying, what am I going to do, so I came in, and I know Chinese, and then I help out. So the first day was like that. But after the end of the day, we're going, ah, everyone know how to log on tomorrow. So second day, we have less problem and then went on perfect, even the preschool.

[3:04:30]

People will say you cannot run preschool like with e-learning. I say, yes, you do if you put a heart to it. We were able to go through weather. We were able to go through calendar, math, science, movement, Bible, all through e-learning. The amazing thing I saw was not only our child, our students were taking the class.

[3:05:00]

The siblings, the younger ones were there, grandpa, grandma, mom, and dad. And I remember they were doing a song with movement and then the younger one were trying to follow on the sofa. But the younger one did it wrong. Our students that no, not like that. The younger one is trying to correct. I said, wow, this is beautiful. And then we are seeing Grandpa and Grandma not necessarily understand but watching it. Like I see big smile on their face.

[3:05:28]

And the most amazing thing is I was encouraging our staff. This is once in your lifetime. It might never happen again that you could teach. You could bring Bible lesson into the living room and bedroom of your student that you could teach while the parents are listening, so do your best. And that's what we did. And then e-learning what's going on until the end of that year.

[3:05:57]

And then in the summer, we set up an emergency team. And then we worked out the protocol and get ready for the next schoolyear. Then the next schoolyear came. We decided to keep the preschooler onsite, even though we're doing a good job because the community were talking about it because they never seen something like that. Because the other preschooler, they just

completely no school. They just stay home. But no matter how good of a job we did, I, as an educator, do not think e-learning is for preschool, for elementary, or for middle school.

[3:06:35]

So then we explained to the parent. I never had so many parent, teacher orientation. I had eight of them, like meeting with them online, explaining to them the protocols step by step, and then they were okay. They all came back. But for the elementary, I felt resistant. The argument point was when I meet with them is, "Mrs. Ho, we did not observe any learning loss.

[3:07:02]

You guys are doing a good job. Since you are doing a good job with e-learning, why risk, you know, contracting the Coronavirus?" And based on that, and they were very strong. And I said, "Okay, if you do that from the educational standpoint, a, b, c, d going to happen. Are you willing to be responsible?" So yeah, I don't think they know what they're talking about. But anyway, we were able to convince kindergarten to third grade to be onsite.

[3:07:31]

So from age three to third grade onsite. Four, and above, they were online. They were online until the fourth quarter. Right before the fourth quarter, I call another meeting for this group. And I said, "Parents, I'm observing something that you do not like and I do not like. And the thing is they were - they - now I think the first three months is new and they had no time to fool around. And then now they're getting used to it.

[3:08:00]

And then they have - because I go into the classroom. I know are you listening to the teacher? Are you listening to something? Because when the teacher ask you a question, and they are not responding, the teacher had to ask three times. And then when they started answering, they need to turn on the mic, and I hear music. So that tells me that they're listening to someone - something else and they just appear to be there listening to the teacher. And I also find out that the chat room, what's going on in chat rooms are totally not healthy.

[3:08:32]

The type of word that they use, the sentences that we did not teach you to write in such a way, this is not language. What are you getting yourself into? And then we also realized the chat group is not just our student. They are outside people pretending to be young people. This is very dangerous. So I

talked to the parent. I see this, this, this. Do you know what they're doing in the chat room? They said no, we did not know. I said you have to know. You are the parents.

[3:09:01]

And then I said, "Okay, you did not know. I'm going to tell you this, this. I have screenshot, everything showing them. And then they said, whoa. And I said are you willing to come back now? They said, yeah, yeah. They said, okay, we're going to come back. So then the fourth quarter, they came back. And then now is this current schoolyear. Of course, everyone is onsite. So as far as the learning part, we did our standardized test in October.

[3:09:34]

Interviewer: Of 2021?

Bonnie Ho: 2021. This is 2021, 2022 because before that, nobody is taking any standardized tests. So then I think 2021, fall of 2021, a lot of schools are still not taking it, but we said we're going to go. We want to find out where they are. I expected that we have a drop and we did.

[3:09:59]

But then when I compared to the other ten school, I realized that, whoa, we are doing like an excellent job. We ran, you know, number one. We usually ran number two, number three, in between those number. But then according to our calculation, we ranked number one. Because we simply - we have like 67% of student exceed like high average, meaning they're about 75 percentile.

[3:10:33]

But then the other bar, that I see, they have also 60 some percent, but not meet expectation. That's a huge difference, 60 some percent exceed high average to 60 some percent not meeting expectation. Some of the really good school are doing like - I've never seen like data from those school like that before.

[3:10:58]

So that tells me the pandemic actually has done quite a bit of damage. We are affected. I thought we were bad. But I said that we're not that bad. Because we were at the 90th percentile. So when it comes to 67, yeah, we had a drop. But when I look at our neighbors, okay, we're not too bad. But we just got done this week for the full battery. So I'm looking forward to see the result. So that's the educational side.

Ho_Bonnie

[3:11:29]

And at the same time, the admin team, actually the school found ourselves like not intentionally, but like taking up a different role during the pandemic. The first thing we did after we settled down with all the internet connection and technical issues is one of my staff who is trilingual, and I'm trilingual, so both of us taking the responsibility of making phone calls.

[3:12:01]

The other staff, they were, you know, helping us to keep the data, phone number, coming up with all those information. So within a month and-a-half or two months we made over 450 phone calls. So we only could handle 150 students max. So that means there's like 100 some parents, 100 some family, 120, 30 parents, families.

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That means each - some of the families received multiple phone calls, depending on the need that they have. The phone call is simply calling and finding out do you have any needs in terms of your child's learning? Do you have any questions? Is there anything we could do for you? They begin to open up. Some of them are actually - the voice over the phone actually is shaking telling me that, "Mrs. Ho, I don't have money to pay tuition anymore. What would happen to my child?"

[3:13:01]

And I said, "Don't worry. Keep your child in school. We will worry about the tuition later." Some of them said, "I don't have money to pay rent. I already did not pay rent for one month. Another month we're going to be out." Now back then, you know, some of the initiative has not still, you know, turned around yet, you know, so then I said, "Don't worry about it. Let me see if we could help." So and then we talk to our church here. So then they approve Benevolent Fund to help with paying rent.

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So these are non-believing families seeing us doing that. And they come and get the check and then they were crying. They say, okay, wow, I'm not paying tuition and you're giving me a check to pay for my rent. And some of them do not know where to find food, although we already sent out - like from that point on - actually before, I did not do that much translation.

[3:13:59]

But I realized I had to do translation because one of the phone call they said that no rent and then no money to buy food. And said, well we already sent

you a communication. You could go to the nearby public school on 24th Street, and then they have food for you, and she told me that I don't know where to go. And so you are in Chinatown for [unintelligible 3:14:19] and you don't know where (Hang) school is? Said no. It took me a while to explain to her where's 24, how to turn the corner, and how to get food.

[3:14:29]

And she said that, and then I said I already email you, and said, oh, I did not read the email because I see English, and I don't know what that is, and I just dismiss it. And id said, okay, no, I talked to the team, Okay, from now on everything has to be in bilingual, so that it takes work, so then we translate, and then so then the next round, I call this family, and say, "Oh, there's this kind of benefit. Did you get to it?" They said, No." "But it's in Chinese." They said, "No, it's in English." And I said, "No, scroll down, scroll down."

[3:14:58]

And I explained to her how to scroll down. And she doesn't know how to scroll down. I said, no, use the mouse, you press, and then you go down. Oh, it took me ten minutes, and finally, she scrolled down. Oh, I see the Chinese. Then I learned a lesson. Okay, next time Chinese will be on the top. I put the line, please scroll down for English. The English people, they know how to scroll down. But the Chinese one, they don't know how to scroll down. And if it if it is English, they say, oh, it's not for me, and then they will not benefit from the Chinese translation.

[3:15:30]

So even little things like that, we try to serve them, so that they could benefit from it. And you might think that it's, are you serious they don't know how to do it. It is true happening. So there were parents that - then we shift our fundraising instead of school expansion to fundraising for tuition. So when we have some funding coming in, I call this family back.

[3:15:59]

And said, "Now funding are coming in. Would you like to apply for the scholarship?" This particular parent were worried and said that, you know, please give me back - oh, that these parents said, "Can you give me back the tuition?" at one point, and I said, "I'm sorry, your tuition is already spent." It's not like we save money. We don't have money to save. And besides, right now tuition is not coming in. I have to fundraise because I need to pay the staff. I cannot not pay them.

[3:16:30]

And I don't have - and administrative wise, I cannot - in what ground did I give you back the tuition? I don't have the right. And said, "What am I going to do?" And said, "We will fundraise. You know, give me give us some time." So this particular parent I call back, and said, "Funding came in. Would you like to apply for it?" What is amazing is she said that, No." I said, no, why?" And she said that, "Well, my husband and I talk about it. And we are - we need the finance, but when I look at our neighbor, they need more than I do.

[3:17:05]

They need more than we do. Mrs. Ho, why don't you give the funding to them first? If you have left over, give it to us." Now this is also from a nonbelieving family. What changed their mind? What changed their - like not just the mind, the emotion, or the - how do they come around that? Now during that time, I also did one thing is I make recording.

[3:17:31]

I make recording in Chinese, like Cantonese, Mandarin, and English, like three versions of the same message where I say it three times and send it to them. And I devote myself in sending comforting message, sending them a message of hope, assuring them that the school has their back, and we will do this, do this, and do this. And don't worry about it, we will get through it together.

[3:18:01]

So basic message like that. And then as, you know, things evolve, and then we give them update, and also tell them where to get food, where to get these and that. So I made those kind of video and then send it to them. And I sensed that sometimes, maybe those message also calm them down. And it's a message of hope.

[3:18:29]

So then this parent, when she said it to me, I like - tear came to my mind, came to my eyes, seeing that, wow, a person able to do that. That means she now has a sense of security. She sensed the peace. She's able to allow other people to take the benefit before she does. This is to me is a huge thing.

[3:18:55]

You know, when you are in financial difficulty, you really nervous, and you want to make ends meet, and you have kids, and you have elderly to take care, for them to make a decision like that is really something. So it was a lot of phone call. But I believe those phone call had done something very positive to our parents. I can sense that when we come back, they came to

appreciate Christianity. They came to appreciate the team a lot more. They've been very, very appreciative, but this is like you could feel the relationship.

[3:19:33]

You could feel the love. They actually loved us. And I think this is really a blessing out of something not welcoming like a pandemic, something ugly, but out of that, good thing, like you know, hope beyond the horizon.

[3:19:56]

Interviewer: And I think I should ask, how many of your parents are mostly Mandarin or Cantonese speaking? And yeah, like what's kind of like the demographics of the school?

Bonnie Ho: The demographic of the school for the preschool department is about 87% Asian, 87 plus percent. And when you average out both elementary and preschool, elementary is more diversified.

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So we have about 79% Asian. Then we have around eight to nine percent African American, and then Hispanic. And then we have a very, very small amount, like two to three percent white. Not all the Asian family are Chinese speaking. Some of them are educated and they could handle English.

[3:21:02]

More on the preschool side. More on the preschool side.

Interviewer: And you sent me a really wonderful folder of the announcements and the things that you guys sent out to the parents. And so some of those things were videos. And so you did those videos.

Bonnie Ho: It might be some of the videos that I mentioned to you.

[3:21:28]

Interviewer: Yeah, and so some of them you also did in Chinese.

Bonnie Ho: Mm-hm. Did I send you any Chinese? I probably only sent you the English, knowing that you might not - it might not make sense to send you the Chinese. So whatever you saw there, there's the Chinese versions. Yeah.

Interviewer: And, you know, you mentioned previously, when you were working for Fareast Broadcasting Company, you were, you know, determined to improve your Chinese again. Is it still as difficult though to access that language skill?

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[3:22:01]

Bonnie Ho: I improved my Chinese quite a bit because of the staff in FEBC because they spoke perfect Mandarin. I was put behind a pulpit after I took up the development position. And a lot of the churches actually Mandarin speaking churches. And of course, I could speak in English, but then I think most effectively is to use their home, mother tongue.

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So I begin to speak, but then not very accurately in terms of pronunciation. So one of the broadcasters actually helped me. Tt first I asked them, please help me to improve, nothing done, and then when I say I mean it. So then she designed a form, and with simple marking, and things like that, and then our staff, several of them carried that form with them. So when I read devotion in the morning, or whenever I speak bit announcement, they have that, and then they write down the word that I pronounce incorrectly.

[3:23:02]

Then the correct way to pronounce it and then they - it's very quick. They would just give me the paper. And if I don't understand, I'll go back. You know, can you demonstrate? So that way, like, if you do that every day, you ought to improve, you know. And now I could speak Mandarin with no problem. People understand me. I cannot say that - I think I have accent, like Cantonese accent.

[3:23:28]

My Cantonese I have no problem of course. In terms of writing, I must say that I'm much better than back then. But there are still character that I do not know. But now there's translator that helps. Right now the translation is - the tough thing is I do not know how to type. Not only I do not know how to type Chinese. I do not know how to type English correctly. The fingering is not right.

[3:24:00]

But for the Chinese I simply do not know the phonetic enough to do it. So all my writing sent to volunteer to translate and then came back to me. And of course, if we send it to outside translator, they sometimes will misunderstand. And then they will use the wrong term. So I need to do the editing. But that editing also takes a lot of time because I don't type Chinese.

[3:24:28]

For example, if I need to write the word sky, how do I write in Chinese? I cannot, so I will use Google Translator. I will type sky. Then it will translate

sky in Chinese and I cut and paste one by one. Sometimes the term I cannot find it. I just need to find a sound, and I just type it, and then it come up with it. So it's very slow.

[3:24:58]

But then I only do that when there's no time, and I have to get it out, and I cannot send it out. And right now my Chinese teacher actually is doing more of the translation. And her translation is like 89% correct. So that cuts down my editing time a lot. So it's a blessing.

Interviewer: And going back a little bit towards the beginning of the pandemic, I would like to know a little bit more about some of the specifics of, you know, you guys went to remote learning.

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And I think that one of the sheets you gave me was dated March 13th.

Bonnie Ho: March 13th. Was it the day?

Interviewer: Yeah, that you announced it. Does that seem right?

Bonnie Ho: It could be right. I probably gave you the wrong day in the recording. That's whatever that is, it was a Friday.

Interviewer: And so you talked about like the different ways that you would get work out to the students. So do you mind explaining that for the interview?

[3:25:59]

Bonnie Ho: Sure. So for the upper grade, there's no issue. They will be - just everything will be online and we try not to transport paper because it could be - back then, we did not know too much about the virus. So then we are trying not to transport like object from one person to the other to avoid cross contamination. So then but for the lower grade, for the preschooler, they don't have printer at home. They don't know how to print.

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So then we will package those. And then we will put it in Ziploc bag. We will put it in the gym, like apart from each other. And then they come in. They don't come into the office. They go straight, and then go grab it, and then they go home. And then I think the first summer when school was over, you know, we did graduation completely different. We did all of the year-end events completely different.

[3:26:58]

The kindergarten graduation was all pre-recorded. So then they were given their cap and gown, and then parents will take a picture, and then they send it to us. And then we edit it together and then make a kind of like a slideshow or movie, something like that. But we also - not besides calling, we also make visits. So my staff and I actually drive around town to go visit our parents and then give them things. I forgot what we gave them.

[3:27:31]

But we visit them and then some of them, they get a certificate or they get award. We just - we don't want them to miss that moment of being award. And so then they did it on the street because we don't want to enter into people's house. So they know that we've been - I think we had two teams. We partner with someone, so all four of us, we split like two different direction, and we were doing it, and then we make stop one by one.

[3:28:02]

And then we also call them, we are almost there, you know you're next. And so then, and you know, it's wonderful to see the kid. Actually, they were already on the street with Mom and Dad, you know, anticipating you know, and then when the cars coming close, and they were jumping, and say, oh, Mrs. Ho is here. And then, of course we were masked up, and then but we honor them, and we take picture. And still, you know, we don't want them to lose that moment.

[3:28:29]

We want to do - we want to provide them as much as possible as a normal day. But I think doing it on the street is also very interesting and very memorable for them. Yeah, we started out very early in the morning. We went home at 9:00 p.m. Both team going around town just to deliver those awards and whatever thing that we need to deliver to them.

[3:29:03]

And then I think in the beginning, the first package of work also we deliver to them. And then later on date, the parent will stop by to a gym, pick up - once a week to pick up the work. Yeah.

Interviewer:

And in one of the videos that you sent me, you talked about, and you talked about already in the interview, but about, you know, families, you know, being unable to pay tuition because you know, their businesses were closing and being laid off.

[3:29:32]

And you mentioned the Child Champions Campaign.

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Bonnie Ho: Yeah, that's the campaign that we were fundraising for tuition. Yeah.

Interviewer: And in the video, you mentioned that, you know, if 38 people gave a certain amount, it would cover everything. Is that correct? Did I interpret that correctly?

Bonnie Ho: Yes.

Interviewer: And was it successful?

[3:30:00]

Bonnie Ho: In a way, we did not raise - not like the full amount, but enough to cover everybody. And also, we were getting like some help from church. That's also helpful. Yeah. And then in the end, even if we did not raise the funding, we just write off. You know, it's not like they owed us money. And then after that, I started applying for grant.

[3:30:31]

PPP loan also help out. So even though individual funding did not come in enough, but then because of the PPP loan, it helped us out because we immediately had a half a million deficit. That's a lot. So if it is not for the PPP loans and other grants, we were not able to keep the operation going.

[3:31:00]

Interviewer: And was project Nehemiah kind of put off to the side? Phase two, is it?

Bonnie Ho: Yes. Right now we are at the edge of need to pick it up because I know that the momentum was built, and then if you leave it alone for too long, the momentum dies down, and you have to bring it back up. But the way to do Project Nehemiah 2 would be totally different than 1. I broke every single rules for fundraising.

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I don't think I break those rules for the sake of breaking rules or trying to be unique. I don't think so. It's just maybe being an artist I look at things differently. And like I said, we are very sensitive. We sense things. I know that it's absolutely not professional if you say I feel that we should do it this way, right? No, you need data to show the board, right?

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But anyway, we did it without following the normal way how people do capital campaign. For example, they need a quiet phase, I did not have quiet phase. I bang, go out there, and then it just it worked. But with phase two, I do think that we need to have that quiet phase because it's 28.7 million. We need

anchor donor. We need major donor, which for me, I came from a poor family, I don't have connection on that.

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So I need to rely on God to channel these people to us. We do have story to tell. But I need the audience to listen to me to tell, you know, what God is doing in this place.

Interviewer: And at what point during the stay-at-home order and the first two weeks of shutdown when the school was closed...

[3:33:00]

...or remote at least, when did you start to realize that it was going to go a lot longer than two weeks?

Bonnie Ho: It was after spring break because we were thinking that okay, we were going to shut down and then the possible time that we will come back is after Easter. You know, one week before Easter there's spring break. And I thought maybe we have enough time. But then very quickly I realized, oh no, it's no way we're going to be able to come back after spring break.

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And that was the time that I announced to the staff, okay, we need to go until the end of the schoolyear.

Interviewer: And how did you support your teachers during this time? You know, like I'm sure you guys were doing so much for the students, but, you know, how are you taking care of the teachers?

Bonnie Ho: We try to support them emotionally also. I know that for a lot of them it's a learning curve, depending on the age. If they're older or elderly it's harder for them to pick up the technology part.

[3:34:03]

So technically, we try our best to provide and kind of train them. And also student behavior wise, I tried to devote more time and really visiting classes, watch, and if I see anything, giving them support. At the same time I tried to decrease workload.

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In the past, every teacher will write a weekly newsletter. And I said forget about it. Don't worry about. Don't write a newsletter because you have enough communication. But everyday you're online, the parent already see you, and things are posted on Google Classroom. So don't spend time in

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putting these nice newsletter together. Forget about it. Whatever I could cut off, I cut it off. So then they will have less workload. Just focusing on teaching alone.

[3:35:00]

Interviewer: And did you mention, I think in one of the videos that you also canceled staff evaluations?

Bonnie Ho: Yes. It takes off a little bit of burden from them or tension from them. For one is how do I evaluate them doing e-learning, or do I evaluate them just as an educator?

[3:35:27]

So not necessarily that I don't have - I did not evaluate them. I evaluate them. Every time I go into the classroom, I evaluate them. It's just that I don't go through the normal procedure using the same template to evaluate them. Just to let them know that you are fine and you are doing well. And but I do monitor, and if I see a teacher is in need of certain help, right away, you know, give the teacher the help, or give her the suggestion, maybe you could do it this way, you could do it that way.

[3:36:03]

So then the coaching replace evaluation, but actually, evaluation is for staff development. Eventually is the coaching part. So we skip the evaluation. And then post evaluation takes time sitting you down, walking you through. But now I'm going to the classroom. I see things and then after school is over and say, hey, what do you think about this, maybe you could do this, and that. It served the same purpose.

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But then released the tension from the teacher that I'm being evaluated doing this thing called e-learning that I've never done before.

Interviewer: That makes a lot of sense. And we spoke about this when we took a little break, but, you know, physical assaults, verbal attacks, and vandalism against Asian people were increasing a lot, you know, especially in the beginning of the pandemic, and from what you told me, even today. Can you talk about that a little bit?

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Bonnie Ho: You know, when we were doing school expansion, people ask us, are you going to move away from this neighborhood? The answer, the collective answer from the board and myself is no because we believe we are called to

this neighborhood and we are committed. No matter how the neighborhood is going to turn into now, more than ever, the neighborhood need Pui Tak Christian school to be located here.

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It's true that with Asian hate crime and crime in general, the data, actually statistic goes up. We do need to be vigilant. We do need to be mindful and careful. We're not naive and say saying that, okay, we are fully protected by the Holy Spirit, so we could just walk down the street. We are trying to operate very carefully.

[3:37:58]

We've gone through lockdown, not a drill, but real lockdown when the fatal shooting took place, just down the street several months ago, and this affected our school community because that was a grandfather of one of our students, and he's only a second grader. You know, how is he going to cope with, you know what's happening with his grandfather? It's tough.

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So when that happened, we did not know it was his grandfather when the shooting was going on. It was I was actually in a Zoom meeting. And then I realized that something is wrong. So was just like, I need to stop and then just call for lockdown. And this time is for real. And actually, after that we need to counsel the kids.

[3:38:59]

Because when we were running drill, they did not feel fearful. They feel fun, you know, stop the math, and we're going to go to this hiding place, and it's fun for them. It's short, right? Then after the drill, I will visit every class and see how they're doing and then compliment them. You did a great job and say, hey, done. But this time is for real. And they were in the hiding place for a long time. And then kids asking question, "What happens if the bad person come in?" You know, asking all that kind of question.

[3:39:31]

I remember releasing one class from the bathroom in the gym downstairs. And when I went there, this is a fifth grader - no, this was a fourth grader. He was holding a wooden hanger because there's hanger in the bathroom. And he was like that. And I realized that he was nervous. You know, he was like getting ready. If someone attack me, I'm going to like fight back, and I realized that.

[3:40:00]

And so I asked, "How are you guys feeling?" They said, "I'm afraid." They tell me that they're afraid. They're scared. They're scared. So then I pull in the - we have our counselor, but not enough. We want to do it quickly. So I pull our former counselor in to help out. Our counselor help out, myself, and then the teacher. We equip the teacher to what to say to the student, and definitely more care for the affected victim family.

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The former counselor and I pay a visit to the family to visit the grandma, and then try to help as much as possible. And then we also have some funding coming in, like not full force campaign, but just like communicating with the community, asking for support, and then funding coming in for the family.

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That's the least we could do, whatever way we could. But unfortunately, I think one month later, another case took place. This happened to our summer program teacher's father. This one, thankfully, he survived, but he suffered like internal bleeding with his brain. And it was like staying in the hospital at UIC for a long time. So then just last - I think, ten days ago, another case took place.

[3:41:31]

This one, he was beaten up. His head was so deformed that no one recognized him. He was left there overnight and then the street cleaner found him. And then eventually they identified who he was. He did not survive. We first did not know who he was. But when I look at the pictures, I said he looks very familiar to us.

[3:41:59]

And then our principal emeritus told me that he is the person - he was the person who feed the pigeons in between these two buildings. Like, you know, he's a retired person. So then we have a lot of pigeon in the plaza, so he was the one who would feed the pigeon. And also, oh, no wonder why he looks so familiar to me. And see, these people, we might not directly related to them or indirectly related to them, but these are the people, these are the folks in the community.

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It's really, really concerning. I reached out to the police department and asked for more patrol. They came the next day after the fatal shooting. I talked with them. I really appreciate them, but then they only came one day. I understand because they are so shorthanded. And I cannot demand anymore because I

know. And then because of the case I share like about ten days ago, now if you walk down (Wentworth), there's more patrol.

[3:43:03]

They come to realization that they do need to stop this. And then also carjacking is tremendous. We have people dropping off. You would not think that you need to lock your door because from the curb to the front door is just a few steps, right? The preschooler, usually parent will walk them to the front. That's the time that they try to carjack. So we had a man just hop into the car and go through things.

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And thankfully, the keys were not there and then he went away. And then we did not see it at first, but then the car behind our other parents saw it, and said, "Mrs. Ho, do you know what happened to the car before?" And then she told me. Then I immediately write communication, both Chinese and English, explaining to them the situation in Chinatown, and I told them, do not leave your car unlocked, even for a few seconds.

[3:44:00]

Now is it beneficial to the school? Absolutely not. If you're a parent, are you scared to send your kid to a Pui Tak Christian school to a location like that? I'm praying but right now we're seeing people wanting to come to Pui Tak Christian school in spite of that. They're seeing the benefit of their student going through the education here. They are willing to be more careful, and they continue to send their students here, so I'm really thankful for that.

[3:44:35]