

Lavonda Joe
Joe Residence - Cordova, Tennessee

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Date: March 20, 2024
Location: Cordova, Tennessee
Interviewer: Dr. Zach Smith, University of Central Arkansas
Transcription: Kayla Evans-Kennard, University of Central Arkansas
Length: 1 hour 18 minutes 17 seconds
Project: Arkansas Chinese Heritage Project

[Begin Lavonda Joe Interview]**00:00**

Dr. Zach Smith: Hello, this is Dr. Zach Smith with University of Central Arkansas's Center for Chinese Language and Culture, and I am here to interview Miss Lavonda Joe, about her Chinese heritage and her experiences growing up in Arkansas. We are conducting this interview on March 20th, 2024, in Lavonda's home in—what town are we in?

00:29

Emerald Dunn: Cordova

00:30

ZS: In Cordova, Tennessee. Thank you. The voice you just heard, is from a member of our steering committee, Miss Emerald Dunn, who's also sitting in on the interview. Thank you so much, Lavonda, for taking the time to speak with us. To begin, could you start by telling us your full name, your date of birth, and the town you were born in?

00:48

Lavonda Joe: Okay. My name is Lavonda Fung Joe. I was the 2nd one [January], 1950. Okay. I was born in Helena, Arkansas, which is about 28 miles from Ealing, Arkansas. You know, it's a small town. Our population is less than a thousand people, but I enjoyed, Ealing when I was little, because that's the time you have more fun is when you're little. Because what I did is, my sister, I follow my sister always, you know, because she's about a year older than I am. And whatever she does, I do, too. So, we, you know, when we were little, we just ran around the town, you know, and didn't worry about anything, didn't worry about the store or anything like that, you know, just had fun, you know. We, Ealing, was a nice little town because we had a cakewalk and parades there, you know. And so, and it was a fun little town, you know. And, you know, we got to have fun, you know, skating and ride our bicycle and, you know, did things like that, you know. It was fun when we were little, you know, it was real fun.

02:12

ZS: Great. So what do you know about how your family kind of first came to Arkansas?

02:21

LJ: Well, I don't remember any of that because, you know, I was little then and, you know, we don't think about things like that. But I think my dad came about in the 30s, 40s or something like that because I remember he told us that he was in a war. World War–World War II, and he worked on the plane. So he's sort of like a mechanic. But other than that, that's all I knew, you know. And I know he has a brother, but I never met him because he was older. That's Ping's dad. And I met one of the sisters, well, two of the sisters, really. One that, I'm not sure, I know there's one sister that's a doctor, her husband's a doctor, and they live in California. And I met one sister, but I can't remember who she was or anything, and then I met a younger sister and that was the two sisters, but I don't remember them or anything. I don't even remember my mother, you know, at that time, you know, because she passed away when I was about seven years old. And I just knew she always, you know, she never was in the store or, you know, I just remember her laying in the bed all the time, you know, that she was sick, you know, but then that's why she was pregnant with our brother, which I didn't realize, you know, that was happening, you know. So, you know, but I don't remember what she looks like or I have no memory of her. And I remember that Tommy Lowe gave us a picture of her, you know, because he said something about he used to be one of her classmates, and he sat behind her, you know. And that's the only picture I have of her is—and I went to see her gravesite because she was buried in Helena, Arkansas, you know, we went to go see that. So she died real young, real young, real young, so.

04:42

ZS: Do you know, so did she grow up in Arkansas?

04:45

LJ: I don't know. I'm thinking she, you know, when they got married, you know, they went to Arkansas, that's where we were born, you know, born in, you know, in Elaine, you know. I went to visit her brother that lives in Canada, the whole, my sister and my brother and his wife, we went to go to Canada. But he doesn't talk that much English, he has that broken English, but his wife, you know, talked a little bit, you know, a little bit, but not much, you know, because they don't really—she doesn't really know what's going on or anything, you know, so. But we went to visit them just to, you know, we, you know, the mother kept asking us to come and visit, but she passed, she finally passed away, and so we didn't get to see her, you know.

05:41

ZS: So as far as you know, though, was your father's generation the first one to arrive in Arkansas, or do you know if his parents or your mom's parents might have lived in the U.S. before then?

05:53

LJ: No, I think it's their generation, you know. His brother came in and then his sister came in, but I don't, he never talked, he never talked, you know.

06:08

ZS: So you mentioned you were born in Helena, but then you mostly grew up in Elaine?

06:10

LJ: Yeah.

06:11

ZS: How old were you when you all first moved to Elaine?

06:16

LJ: I think I was born there, so I guess, you know, I lived there all my, you know, until I went to college, you know.

06:24

ZS: So, but you were born in Helena?

06:26

LJ: Helena, which is close by.

06:29

ZS: Close by, I see. Okay, but so your family was already based in Elaine, it was just the Helena Hospital. I gotcha, I gotcha.

06:36

LJ: Yeah, because he may have...he may have lived at other places in Arkansas before he moved to Elaine, you know, but I'm not sure, you know, I don't know, because that's all I remember. There's four Chinese family that lived there, it's the Wong, the Lee, Edmund Fong, which is sort of like a cousin to him, and then my dad.

07:08

ZS: And what was your dad's name?

07:10

LJ: Lee Fong.

07:11

ZS: Lee Fong.

07:12

LJ: Wahshui Fong is his Chinese name.

07:17

ZS: Do you know how to spell that?

07:20

LJ: Wahshui, Wahshui is W-A-H, Shui is S-H-U-I, Fong, Wahshui Fong.

07:33

ZS: And Lee Fong is just L-E-E?

07:35

LJ: Yeah, well, at that time, they all, you know, how they reversed the name, because like ours, you know, was right, but my brother ended up being wrong because he ended up being a Lee instead of Fong, so when he got married, he has to change his name because it was wrong on the

birth certificate, so, you know, he had to go for that, but then me and my sister didn't have any problems, you know.

08:08

ZS: But your family name was...

08:10

LJ: Fong.

08:11

ZS: Fong. Okay. So when you lived in Elaine, did you live in a separate home, or was your living space attached to the store?

08:25

LJ: Okay, he had two different stores, okay, because the main store was Fong Grocery Store, that's the first store that he had, and he ended up, we ended up living there, and so we ended up having a little house that was behind the store, you know, and later on, when he remarried, he bought a, you know, he bought a house, separately.

08:57

ZS: And then you said he had a second store in town?

08:59

LJ: Okay, that's when he built, in an inn, Elaine Grocery Store, in an inn, you know, he built his grocery store and some other stores there, too, you know, like a liquor store, and then rent some stores, you know, because he had houses that he'd rent, too, you know, in the middle of the, Elaine, you know, he had that, and he had farmland that he owned, too, and so, but...

09:38

ZS: So, what do you most remember about kind of like your family home?

09:44

LJ: Well, I really, I just remember that, you know, later on when I visit, it, it, it, what, you know, it's worn down and everything, so, also we had Edmond lived behind the store, which is also there, too, you know, behind the, you know, and he decided to live behind, you know, in the store behind the house, you know, instead of having a little house because it kind of deteriorates, you know, and when we lived in the other one, you know, our dad bought the other house, so we lived in that house, you know, and walked to the store, you know, walked to the store and walked to school, you know.

10:33

ZS: Did you ever work in the store?

10:35

LJ: Yeah, of course, they made us work when we were able to work, you know, and I, I, I didn't like it, but then I had, I had no choice but to do what they said, you know, because he's our dad, so, you know, of course I worked in the store, you know, you know. I like customers that came in, but it was hard work, you know, to, we had to put up the groceries and, and then in the summertime we had to clean the shelf off, all the shelves, and get all the dust and, and then we, we had to, you know, he told us to rotate every time we put in groceries, you know. So one day we had to do that, you know, what, you know, one day out, when he ordered groceries, but it got a little bit harder because in those small towns they charged more for him to make deliveries because I think they got stricter and, and they charged more, so therefore he ordered once a week, you know, and, but he seemed to have the business, you know, because we always had black people, you know, as our customers instead of, you know, they go to the white store, you know, so we, and we, we did the, at that time we, supplemental food at that time, and then it changed to paper, paper. But, you know, I remember that, you know.

12:27

ZS: So a really quick follow-up, what do you mean by supplemental food?

12:32

LJ: Oh, you know, the government gifted black people supplemental food.

12:36

ZS: Oh, like, like a, like a welfare system?

12:38

LJ: Yeah, right, and so what they do is they give them certain items, you know, I think I remember before they used to give it to them and then they, they change it where you have paper money where so much, you know, it's allowed, but then I remember they abused it too, you know, you know, you know, they, they got other things, you know, instead of what you call it, food, you know, but, you know, that, that happens, you know, so.

13:12

ZS: Did, did the grocery store operate on any kind of credit system, or is it all kind of—?

13:23

LJ: Well, my dad did all the, he did that, and I'm sure he charged to the, because, you know, when they get their money then that's when they pay for it, you know, so he, he did have credit, you know, I remember that.

13:38

ZS: And was the store itself located in, like, a mostly black community, or kind of where in the, in the geography of Elaine was the store located?

13:52

LJ: The second store was the entry into Elaine, because what he did, okay, well I shouldn't say he just had black people, he had white people, because they'd come in to go fishing and hunting, and so they'd go to our store first, and then, you know, he'd get business that way too, you know, the first.

14:16

ZS: But the majority of the customers were local black residents. And how— did he continue to maintain both stores for a period of time, or did he move to the new store?

14:28

LJ: Well, he moved to the new store, so he gave the other store to his cousin, you know, he has to, he has the original store, so.

14:40

ZS: And how long did most— did either store stay in business?

14:46

LJ: Well, they stood, as long as I, what you call it, went to college, they stayed, and then after that too, because I think our dad passed away maybe not quite 70 yet, because, you know, he had diabetes and heart disease and high cholesterol and all that, and sodium problem, and so he was 20 years different from his second wife. So she ended up, you know, with the store, and then she ended up with the business and everything, so. Because she had three girls, three girls, you know, and there's a difference of 20 years, you know, in our age, so. And I didn't really know them that well, except for the oldest one that stayed here in the house, stayed upstairs, you know, because she went to college, so, you know, I let her up, you know, stay upstairs, just, you know, I have her own little area up there, so she stayed me, she stayed with, Shirley stayed with me for a little while.

16:09

ZS: So you mentioned that you were seven years old when your mother passed away.

16:14

LJ: Yeah.

16:15

ZS: How old were you when your dad remarried?

16:21

LJ: Let's see, that's the time we went to Ping, so Ping is 80, and I'm 76, so it was a six years difference. I remember him being in, I think it's his senior year, or close to senior year, and so six years from that would be when I, you know, when she married.

16:44

ZS: And they also, they had children?

16:49

LJ: Three girls.

16:50

ZS: Three girls.

16:51

LJ: Yeah, they had a boy, but it was stillborn, so.

16:58

ZS: And were you close to your half siblings at all, or?

17:03

LJ: No, because there's a big difference in age, because I didn't really, because I left town at that time to go to college, so I, you know, we did our own thing, you know, when I moved, and then I didn't really know them when they grew up at all, you know, had no contact with them at all. The only time I saw them when they, when we got married, you know, when Sandra was the flower girl, you know.

17:34

ZS: And I'm sorry, you said you had a sibling.

17:40

LJ: Okay, I have an older sister and a younger brother.

17:51

ZS: Okay. And do you know if they, like your younger brother, did they still live with your dad?

18:02

LJ: Okay, my younger brother, which is a difference about seven years, seven years difference, he was home, so he grew up with them, you know, a little bit, you know, grew up. Because when we're, let's see, when we went to, our dad hired a Spanish couple to help. He worked in the grocery store and worked on the farmland, and then the wife ended up taking care of Craig at that time—Dennis I'm sorry, my son is Craig—Dennis at that time, and she, he stayed with her. He learned a little Spanish at that time, but then I guess he lost it all when we went to school. But, she took care of him. And they had one brother and then three girls, one boy and three girls. And so we grew up with them. They're like second family to us, you know, because they stayed in the country where they had the farmland, you know. And I like the, when I was little, I remember picking cotton and chopping cotton, you know. That was fun, too, when I was little, you know.

19:38

ZS: What was fun about it?

19:40

LJ: Oh, it was fun because just getting out and learning something different, you know. And, well, I was the last one, I always was the last one, because they helped me while I was at the end, and I was still at the end, you know. But they helped me chop cotton, you know. I did what I could, you know. But it was fun, and it was fun picking cotton, too, you know. I remember that growing up, so.

20:08

ZS: Did anyone else help out in your dad's store?

20:10

LJ: I remember he had some black people in the back, you know. But he mainly had crews that worked in the grocery, you know, helped in the store, you know. And mainly he did everything by himself because he would go to the back and cut the meat, and then, you know, come up front and get the money or whatever, you know. They just, you know, wait on them, you know.

20:49

ZS: And was the store a self-service store, or was it a counter service?

20:55

LJ: It was a— I remember we had a cash restaurant at the front, and then the meat market in the back, you know, meat market in the back. So it's not surrounded, you know, that type of, you know, it's open, you know. So it was busy on Saturday, you know, because he didn't have time, you know, when we were little he didn't have time with us at all, you know. Because customers would come and say, “oh, your kids are over there at the other end,” or whatever, you know. So, you know, so I remember when we were a little bit older, you know, he would, he's busy on Saturday, so he'd put us in a room, you know, to stay in a room because he couldn't watch us as well as do business by himself, you know, so.

21:47

ZS: Was the store open seven days a week?

21:51

LJ: At that time it was, until later on, you know, we closed on, I think we closed a half a day on, well we closed on Sunday or something like that, you know. Half a day on one day, you know, but it's mainly long hours, you know, long hours. So I remember going to the store early in the morning and going home at night, you know, late at night, so it closed late, so.

22:26

ZS: Were there, you mentioned that there were four other kind of families in Elaine, and so I know, so your father and Edmund Fong were close, right? Yeah. Did your family have any connection with the other Chinese families in town?

22:43

LJ: Okay, the Wongs was down the street from us, but they didn't stay that long in Elaine because they ended up going to California, because I think her husband passed away or something, so they moved to California, so we didn't really know them that well, you know. That was, you know, Henry Wah's wife.

23:11

ED: Henry Wah?

LJ: In Turrell, Arkansas. Okay, he got married to one of the daughters, and then Rosalind got married to one of the twins in Mississippi, you know, and then she moved to California, so

everybody moved to California, and Pat Lee was right in the middle. That's Tyrone's dad, okay, and his store got converted to a monument, sort of like, you know, where they come in, you know.

23:53

ZS: Yeah, a civil rights museum, I think.

23:56

LJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah, so I hadn't seen it yet. I don't know if they're finished with it or what, you know, but his store got built, you know.

24:07

ZS: Do you, were your, was your dad a member of any kind of organization of some kind of formal association of Chinese grocers or any other kind of community group?

24:20

LJ: Oh, at that time, I don't think they even had, you know, because, you know, he mainly, would you call it, worked hard, I mean, you know, long hours, you know, that he had, you know, half a day he'll go and visit maybe, you know, some of the, his relatives, you know, but no, I never know of any organization in the Elaine, you know.

24:51

ZS: Did you, among the, you know, the black community who shopped at the store, did your family have any close relationships with anyone kind of in the black community or?

25:03

LJ: No, I don't think so.

25:05

ZS: Customers in the store?

25:07

LJ: Yeah, they're just customers and they're paying customers, you know. He'd probably talk to them and everything but, you know, who knows who they are, you know. But like one of our, Edmund got shot by one of the customers, one of his customers and so when he got shot, that's when they end up, you know, Belle Lee was open still and Edmund was open, so after that, Belle Lee pulled out too, so both of them pulled out at that time and then the kids came in and took the mother to California, so that happened there.

25:47

ZS: Do you know about when this took place?

25:49

LJ: I can't remember when that happened. Tyrone probably would know more about it since his dad probably told him. I can't remember but it's got to be, you know, they've been in California for quite a while, you know, so.

26:12

ED: Belle Lee moved to Memphis. Belle Lee– Belle Lee was in Memphis.

26:21

LJ: Oh, he was in Memphis?

26:23

ED: Yeah.

26:24

LJ: Okay. Well, I know the mother is with the other son, you know, the other son, but I knew he'd end up passing away and then I think the only one that's left is Allen. Allen, unless he passed away, you know, but I don't know if he did or not, you know, because I know the two brothers passed away, you know, the oldest brother.

26:58

ZS: Was your family involved in any church organization?

27:03

LJ: I remember when we were little, we used to go to the Baptist church, you know, that's the only church that we went to, but I don't know if we, I can't remember attending a whole bunch of time because, you know, we had to work, but we grew up as, Baptist, you know, because that's the only church that was in Elaine.

27:31

ZS: And then, and so your father's store is not in operation today, right?

27:37

LJ: No, it's, the town is dead, you know.

27:42

ZS: So when, when, do you know, you talk a little about when some of the other families chose to kind of close their store and move out, do you know when your dad closed his store?

27:51

LJ: Well, that's that time my stepmother sold the store, so I don't know when she sold it, you know, because she ended up moving with, moving with the younger daughter, you know, Doris, you know, I remember that because she lives in Arkansas, Little Rock, Little Rock, Arkansas.

28:15

ZS: So I kind of want to talk a little about, you talked a bit about kind of working in the store, you mentioned kind of the hardships of all the things you had to do, was there anything else that you, was there anything that you enjoyed about working in the store or any positive memories you had?

28:35

LJ: [*chuckles*] Well, I like it better when I had the fun days [*laughs*]. But we had no choice because, you know, we had to, you know, you know, be a good little girl and do what we're told to do, that's all. But I, you know, I, I didn't really have fun, you know, but I did it, you know, I did it, so.

29:08

ZS: Well, when you were having fun outside of the store, what kind of stuff did you do? When we first started, you mentioned, you know, you kind of liked growing up in a lane, you kind of, you and your sister, you know, kind of having a run of the test.

29:18

LJ: Well, at that time, you know, when, Cruz and Ms. Shafie came over and brought their little, you know, their kids over, so we played with them some, you know, and so we had, we had some good times together, you know.

29:34

ZS: I'm sorry, can you say again who, Cruz and?

29:40

LJ: Oh, Cruz and Ms. Shafie.

29:42

ZS: Okay, and who were, what was their connection?

29:45

LJ: Okay, see Ms. Shafie's the one that took care of, Dennis and then Cruz is the one that, took, took the, grocery store, took care of the grocery store and took care of the, the field, you know, that we had.

30:02

ZS: So that was the Spanish couple you mentioned. I see, yeah. But yeah, so what other kind of things did you do kind of around town or for fun?

30:13

LJ: Well, we, well, when we hang around with Loopy, you know, Loopy and Violin, we just ran around and just had fun, you know. We always into some, something, you know, you know. I just follow them all the time, you know, because, you know, I just, whatever they do, you know, I do, you know. She said, you know, I just, we just did kid things [*chuckles*].

30:44

ZS: So speaking of kid things, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what your school experience was like?

30:50

LJ: Oh, I wasn't that, well, I, I remember, doing my homework I supposed to do, you know, and, we go after we went to school, we had to go straight to the grocery store and, I just remember doing what I required to do and then work the rest of the day, you know. We, we didn't get to do any activities, you know, have any type of activity, go to the prom or go to meetings or anything like that. If we do it, we do it into school, you know, but we couldn't do any extra things, you know, yeah.

31:37

ZS: Now by the time you were in school, had the schools integrated yet or no?

31:45

LJ: [*pause for thinking*] No, I think what you call it, no, I think it's just what you call a regular school because the black went to the black school and, you know, the, I went where the white people went, you know.

32:06

ZS: Were there any other Chinese students like in your class?

32:09

LJ: No, because there were, they were younger, you know, because, because Pat Lee's children grew or younger and then Edmund got married later and so his kids were younger too. So, we were just by ourself really. My sister and I were by ourself, so.

32:33

ZS: Did you ever encounter any kind of discrimination or?

32:40

LJ: I didn't think of any discrimination, but, I was told that, you know, later on there was a lot of, you know, discrimination, you know, towards the black people, you know, there was a lot of discrimination towards the black people, but I didn't think about things like that, you know.

33:03

ZS: And you didn't directly feel like there was discrimination against you as a Chinese person?

33:07

LJ: No, no, but I'm sure there were other people thought about that, but, like, I was easy going [chuckles] at that time. I didn't think about things like that, you know.

33:20

ZS: Was school work really important, like, to your dad or did you get a lot of pressure to perform well at school?

33:27

LJ: Well, I did real good at school, but then when I went to college I didn't do that. My English was not that good, so I had trouble with school, you know, because, you know, since our town was so small, so I'm, you know, real little and everything, so, I don't think it was the education was good back then, really, I guess, you know.

33:53

ZS: Did your— you mentioned English, did your dad speak English at home or was it all Cantonese?

33:58

LJ: I don't know, I guess I just got it from school. It's just that I didn't pick it up, you know, as well as other people did. Because I remember having trouble in high school with English, you know, because in my... I remember getting second, you know, in class and everything, but then at that time we only had, I graduated with 28 people or whatever, so it was a small, really small, you know, it wasn't big as some other places, you know, so my senior year was real, real small.

34:37

ZS: But your dad and like your sister, I guess your brother too, did y'all mostly speak Cantonese at home?

34:47

LJ: Well, it's, well, trouble is, is our dad didn't talk to us because, you know, he was too busy working, so we lost it all when we went to school, so they didn't speak any Chinese to us at all and our stepmother never talked to us either, you know, so I didn't pick it up or anything, you know, so we only knew English, you know, we didn't, you know, we missed out on the Chinese, you know.

35:18

ZS: So I want to talk a little bit more about Chinese kind of language and culture at home, but to finish up on school, you mentioned a couple times attending college, where did you go to college?

35:29

LJ: Okay, first year I went to, I got a scholarship, so I went to Jackson, Tennessee, Lamberth College one year, and then I moved to, University of Memphis, I think it's University of Memphis at that time...

35:47

ED: Memphis State.

35:48

LJ: Oh, Memphis State, I got confused.

35:50

ZS: Well, didn't it change names?

35:51

LJ: Yeah, they changed it to University of Memphis.

35:53

ED: First Memphis State, University, then they changed it to University of Memphis.

36:00

ZS: Yeah, so, at that time it would have been Memphis State.

36:03

LJ: Yeah, Memphis State.

35:04

ZS: What was your major?

36:07

LJ: Dietitian at that time, and so I worked at the, the Med, at that time it was called Med. It had so many different names, you know.

36:19

ZS: What motivated you to do nutrition and dietitian stuff?

36:22

LJ: Well, I think somebody just told me to try that, and so I tried that, but I didn't go, I didn't, go through with it because we end up with the, you know, Stuart Cook, so we ended up downtown, and so I helped him out some, you know.

36:42

ZS: You and Stuart...Cook?

36:43

LJ: My husband.

36:44

ZS: Okay, your husband, I see.

36:46

LJ: Yeah, because we had a, all-you-can-eat, you know, buffet type of dinner, so, you know, they made buffet, so I helped him out, and then, he closed that, and then I went to Baptist work as a pharmacy tech, you know, and worked there for 26 years or 27 years.

37:14

ED: After the buffet, when did you have Chopsticks?

37:17

LJ: I mean, that's what Chopstick was.

37:20

ED: Oh, it was buffet?

37:22

LJ: Yeah, it was buffet, and I mean, he was, he was at two different locations, 76 Union, and then, 150 Jefferson, you know, because we lost our lease on Union because somebody else, you know, got the lease, and so we had to move behind the courthouses, which was pretty good, and I think about 12 years, 12 years, and then it was hard trying to find employees working, because we didn't open for supper, didn't open on the weekend, we only opened lunch, and that was it, Monday, Monday through Friday.

38:04

ZS: So your husband's name was Stuart...?

38:07

LJ: Joe.

38:08

ZS: Joe, and where, where did you all meet?

38:11

LJ: Well, we met at our cousin's house somehow, you know, because he was interested in me, I didn't notice it, you know, you know, so, finally he told me, and I said, oh, okay, and, and, so we got together, and, you know, got married in '76, and until he passed away, you know.

38:38

ED: 2019, like, when did he, when did he, he passed away in 2021, it's been what?

38:48

LJ: No, about 19...2014.

38:53

ZS: 2014.

38:54

LJ: 2014 is when he passed away, in July 7th.

39:01

ZS: And was he, I assume the last name Joe, was he Chinese?

39:06

LJ: Yeah, he was Chinese.

39:07

ZS: Did he grow up in Arkansas, or Tennessee, or Mississippi?

39:10

LJ: Mississippi, Roanoke Fork.

39:17

ZS: And you said you met him at a cousin's house, or was it some kind of organized?

39:23

LJ: Well, it was a little party, or get together, or something, and then, you know, he, we just met, and then, you know, been with him since then, you know.

39:35

ZS: So you mentioned working together at this Chopsticks Cafe for, you said, 12 years?

39:40

LJ: Yeah, because he, he had about 12 years. His mother, his mother and him are the one that, and then he hired somebody to cook, you know. And he had, Kenny Wong for a while, he has his own restaurant now, Benhapp, you know. So, at first he had, at the first restaurant, he had Jimmy Dunn and Jenny as partners, and David worked as a partner too, but he cooks too. And, and then the, and then they got out, a couple of years they got out of it, so. But David stayed on for a while, and then he got out, and then found, he found Kenny to help him some.

40:33

ZS: Do you have any really strong memories of what working at the restaurant was like?

40:40

LJ: Well, I was the cashier, and then I ended up collecting the money, and then he ended up, he worked in the back cooking, and then they had somebody to, on the line to serve, you know, that type of cafe too, so.

40:54

ZS: Yeah, and it was like a buffet-style restaurant?

40:58

LJ: Well, it was, they, it's behind a line, behind, and so they served them, you know, because it's a, the, the favorite one, everybody liked was Chicken Delight. I remember that. It's a fried, battered chicken, that's all it is, and a gravy put over it, you know, an American-style gravy, I guess. And then, you get fried rice and then some type of vegetable, you know.

41:28

ZS: So, do you remember any other dishes they served at the?

41:39

LJ: Oh yeah, they had, they had some other one, they had egg foo young [芙蓉蛋], they had, broccoli with beef, you know, they had some type of chicken with, some type of vegetable, you know, so they had a variety, you know, because he changes, what he does is he has a special menu one day and then it rotates, but he still had the standard, you know, meals, you know, so they come in, you know, for a certain one, you know, so it's, it's like, for, from 11 o'clock until one o'clock it's busy, and then after that it's dead, but it's a lot of prep work for him to do, a lot of prep work for him and his mother, you know, because, you know, they made the fresh egg rolls, you know, because, you know, they wrapped up the egg rolls and stuff, so.

42:33

ED: Your mother-in-law made the egg rolls?

42:36

LJ: Yeah, she made the, well, both of them made the egg rolls, you know, they both made the egg rolls, and then she made the, she used to make the almond cookies, you know, from scratch, and, and that was one of, you know, customers' favorite is the almond cookies. But you made them, you know, so with the lard in it, make it real crispy, you know. But then they quit, she quit making that because they got kind of, a lot of work to do, so it's easier just to buy it, you know, buy it than to make it, you know.

43:09

ZS: And did she own a restaurant? Had she, like, been involved in the restaurant business before?

42:16

LJ: She's just a good cook. She's always liked to cook because, they used to live in Sky Lake, so they had Uncle Johnny and then, Stuart's dad, and then Aunt Jean on the other side, and Uncle Johnny's wife is the sister of Aunt Jean, you know, and so Sky Lake had a community of Chinese. William was on one end, and then at the other end was, the Kwan's, the, Wu's, and, and

Tommy Wong's parents was around there, and Kucine was down there, too. Kimu or whatever, she was there, so it's, it's, it was nice there at Sky Lake.

44:10

ZS: Yeah. So we started talking about food. I'm kind of curious about some other, just kind of Chinese culture in your family growing up. Did your dad cook at all?

44:22

LJ: Oh yeah, he cooked for us, you know, because when our stepmother came, she didn't, she couldn't cook at all. She's, you know, she's still a kid, but, yeah, our dad cooked for us, you know, he always had food on the table for us, so, you know, he cooked Chinese food and everything, so.

44:43

ZS: Were there any favorite dishes you had that he cooked?

44:46

LJ: No, not really, you know, we just ate, you know, but he was a good, he was a good cook, so.

44:56

ZS: Did your family celebrate any, like, Chinese holidays or, or traditions or Chinese New Year even?

45:04

LJ: No, mm-mm.

44:007

ZS: Did— once you got married and were working at the, at the restaurant, you had this kind of larger Chinese community, did you ever then celebrate, like, Chinese New Year or?

45:16

LJ: Yeah, that's that time his dad formed, well, him and some other people formed the Mid-South Chinese Association, and so that's where we grew, you know, our kids went to, to that clubhouse there.

45:30

ZS: So about what time was that, this Mid-South Chinese Association?

44:39

ED: Well, it started out, the group of Chinese business owners here found out that if you had a group, you could get better discount from the wholesalers, so that's why they formed this Chinese business organization, Chinese Business Association (CBA), to get the discounts from the local wholesalers. Then that evolved into the Mid-South Chinese Association (MSCA), because they wanted to be more inclusive, regardless of you being a businessman, they wanted the, the professions or other, other professions to join in this association to become more of a Chinese community, to preserve the Chinese heritage, and they bought this, this building, which is in Midtown, that served as a clubhouse, and they had several activities there, such as kite making, Chinese cooking classes, flower arrangements, all kinds of holiday activities for Christmas, Easter. They even had a family day on the clubhouse grounds, where all the kids came, and they had, you know, different activities for them. So, so it was good at that time during, like, mid-60s, up into 70s, I'm not sure, I think it stopped in '68. So that, that was, I would say the, the apex of the Chinese community was at its, the largest time, the largest population of Chinese, and young people, and it was really good for them, yeah, they also, the young people had their Y-O-U...Y...Young—What's it...Y-O-U—what does it stand for? Young Orientals United, or something like that, so they, they had their own activities, and they organized dances for different holidays.

47:56

LJ: Yeah, they did a Mid-South Fair, where they, they had a booth at the Mid-South Fair, where they did the egg rolls and fried rice.

48:04

ED: Yeah, so that, that was a fundraiser, yeah, that's one, they did this. So there's this particular man, Mr. Ju, George Ju, he was an artist. So he built this, this egg roll, they call it egg roll booth,

but it was shaped like a pagoda, and they sold egg rolls, fried rice as a fundraiser for the clubhouse. And they, they also did blood drives, so the, the Chinese community donated blood.

48:39

LJ: They did parades, you know.

48:42

ED: Yeah, I was trying to think what else they did...oh yeah, they had the Dragon Dance, they participated in a lot of the local, local...

48:53

LJ: Chinese New Years.

48:54

ED: That was like, International Day, or something, because they were in a parade, downtown, can't remember what, what it was, but they had, they had the Dragon Dancers, and what else did they have?

49:14

LJ: Well, they celebrated Chinese New Year's, too.

49:17

ED: Yeah, celebrated Chinese New Year's, yeah, yeah.

49:23

ZS: Did you participate in any of these activities?

49:25

LJ: Yeah, yeah, we, we got on the floats, I mean, you know, I remember being on the float and then volunteering for the egg roll stand and everything, so, and then, you know, when our kids were little, we did all the activities with them, you know, Easter egg, you know, hunt, and, and so we always went to anything that they had there, you know, because it was, it was really, you

know, it's to get together, you know, talk chit chat with everybody, you know, they even had dance and stuff like that, too.

50:01

ED: Yeah, the young, the young group did.

50:04

LJ: Dance, yeah. But now everybody's gone.

50:11

ED: You know, that generation has passed on, they're in their 70s now, and, you know, somehow or another it lost its cohesiveness. I don't understand why that generation, why their children didn't continue, but, and I guess some of the— that generation moved out of town.

50:41

LJ: Well, they had their own, you know, they, they had their own school until they moved, like, you know....

50:47

ED: Well, yeah.

50:48

LJ: They, you know, because most of the volunteers would be the same old group that some volunteers, same people who cook, you know—

50:55

ED: Well, right, but after they graduated from school and, you know, maybe they got jobs out of town, and so, you know, they, they're married, but their families didn't grow up here, so you don't have that other following generation to take up the, the reigns for the organization.

51:16

ZS: And you really only, you, only once you kind of got to Memphis did you have access, like, in Elaine there was nothing like this.

51:25

LJ: It's when I moved here to a bigger, you know, bigger place, so, you know, because we didn't have that in Elaine, no. I don't think we could find anybody in there [*chuckles*].

51:41

ZS: Was there any kind of, I don't really know how to add access, but any kind of, like, I don't know, maybe culture shock moving from, like, you know, Elaine to Memphis?

51:51

LJ: Well, it was a culture shock, you know, because at that time, you know, because when I went to college, I, you know, took things, you know, swimming for the first thing. I took swimming because I never learned how to swim when I was in Elaine, you know, and, you know, took some other classes, you know, just, you know, to learn, you know.

52:16

ED: I think the, the shock for her was coming from a small town, small family, into Stewart's family because Stewart's family was very social. He had, Stewart's father, Alan Joe, was one of the community leaders. He was one of the founders of the Chinese Business Association, so he had a lot of friends, a ton of friends, and that's why they always had the parties on weekends in Sky Lake, this area she's talking about, because he was a fantastic cook and, and plus playing mahjong, so, you know, there was these mahjong parties and then you get together to eat [*chuckles*].

53:01

ZS: Now, your older sister, did she stay in Elaine or did she also?

53:09

LJ: Well, she went to the Memphis Art Academy.

53:13

ZS: Okay.

53:14

LJ: Yeah, she, but she didn't quite finish because I think she had to do, teaching, final...the final is to do the teaching, but then she went to the store to help them out, because George's mother, her husband passed away, and she was in the store by herself, so she helped her at the store, because none of the girls wanted to help, you know, or George, you know, had his own job, so, you know, and so that left her to help them. So she helped her out for a while, you know.

53:49

ZS: So, I'm curious, you know, marrying Stuart, was it important to you, or to your family, to marry someone who was Chinese, or did it just work out that way?

54:08

LJ: Well, our dad grew in our head that we couldn't, you know, mix, you know, it had to be Chinese, it can't be mixed marriage at all. That's when I grew up, but it has changed, you know, things have changed, because my son married a white, you know, a white person, so. But I was told not to, you know, and so of course, you know, I just followed the rules, you know, at that time.

54:37

ZS: Did he ever kind of explain why for him it was important, or?

54:42

LJ: Well, he, I think it's tradition, you know, tradition not to, you know, because at that time he went to China to do arranged marriage, but I didn't believe in a marriage marriage, you know. I didn't believe in that at all, so. But I was lucky to, you know, find him, you know, so. But I didn't date, you know, the *baak gwai* [白鬼] or, you know, outside, you know, only Orientals, you know, didn't try, you know. I had an attempt, you know, somebody asked me out, but, you know, of course, you know, I didn't, I said no, you know. But at that time, you know, tradition.

55:38

ZS: Well, then you said, like, when your son got married to a white woman, did that create any conversations between the two of you, or?

55:48

LJ: No, because, you know, to me, whatever it makes him, let him be happy, he'd be happy, so, you know, we were just happy for him that he found somebody, you know, because we, which I try not to be the meddling mother in law [*chuckles*].

56:07

ZS: And did you have any other children?

56:12

LJ: No, just one, just one.

56:16

ZS: I guess so, so you mentioned one thing that was important to your dad was that you marry someone else who is Chinese. Were there any other aspects of kind of, like, Chinese culture or Chinese values that you felt were kind of important growing up in your home?

56:36

LJ: Well, I remember our stepmother was telling us that, you know, like, on holidays or something, you're not supposed to work in the house or clean up the house, you know, and plus you don't wash your hair at a certain, you know, certain holiday or something like that, you know. So I believe in tradition, so I try to, you know, carry it on too, so, but I don't know if my son's gonna, you know, because since he's married to, you know, the *baak gwai* [白鬼], so, you know, I forget that, you know, but I still try to follow some of it.

57:17

ZS: And just to clarify, this term *baak gwei* [白鬼] is Cantonese, right?

57:23

LJ: It's Cantonese. A white...person.

57:25

ZS: For, it's like a white person. So you mentioned, though, growing up, you all didn't speak a lot of Cantonese, so some of these, like, Cantonese terms and phrases, is it just from being in the community in Memphis?

57:38

LJ: *Jook-sing* [竹升] [*chuckles*].

57:40

ZS: *Jook-sing* [竹升].

57:41

LJ: Okay. You know that.

57:44

ZS: Yep, yep. I've learned more Cantonese in the last year than I have studying Chinese for about 14 years before that. Yeah, Lucy is my Chinese, that's my Cantonese teacher [*chuckles*], although I don't know if my pronunciation's up to snuff, so... So I guess I'm gonna want to talk a little bit about sort of legacy issues, to an extent. I guess, I appreciate you kind of taking time to sit down for an interview, and I'm curious to know, what do you most want, you know, your son or future generations to know about kind of your experience growing up in Arkansas and then Memphis?

58:34

LJ: Well, I don't know, I just want to recognize, you know, since our, you know, my dad, he lived in Elaine, Arkansas, so I want to be recognized that at least we had a store there, and it was hard growing up there, but, you know, I just stuck with it. You know, I just wanted to people to know that we exist, at least, that's the reason, you know, reason for this interview, I guess. At first I didn't want to, what you call a talk, because I'm not good at talking, and then my sister didn't, you know, she wasn't, you know, going to do it, so, you know, I decided to go ahead and do it, you know.

59:29

ZS: Are you, if you feel comfortable, are you able to share any more about why maybe you didn't want to participate at first?

59:37

LJ: Oh, because I'm, I didn't want to, because I'm not good at talking, and especially myself, and that's the main reason is, you know, I get kind of nervous, and plus I don't tell everything. But growing up there, it's hard because, you know, our dad was the way, I guess all family were like that, but I think other family are closer together, but we weren't that close, I think, since our mother passed away, you know. So I think it was hard for him because to me they were treated a lot better than we were treated, you know, you know, second family was treated a lot better, so, but it's just the way it goes, you know. I'm sure he had to do what he had to do, you know. So I can understand that, you know, because you had, you know, because you can't work by yourself, you know, so that's probably why he had, you know, remarried so he can, you know, live the way he did, and, you know. Because, you know, sooner or later we would be gone and he'd be by himself, so, you know, and I respect that, you know.

1:01:08

ZS: Just to circle back a little bit because of the timeline, there was a period of time, so you mentioned your mother passed away when you were seven, but then by the time he remarried you were headed to college?

1:01:25

LJ: No, he got married before because we stayed a little bit with her, you know, and then we went to college, you know, so we still had to work, you know, but I didn't see her, you know, she learned English and everything like that, so, you know, she picked up and everything, but she didn't have her children until later, you know, but because there was a big difference in age, you know. I think the time we left, they, you know, they were still together, you know, for 20 something years, so, you know.

1:02:13

ZS: So, kind of thinking about more some of these issues of kind of legacy, I mean I've noticed, I'll say, you know, kind of coming to your house you have all this lovely art, we have these tons of pandas.

1:02:28

LJ: Well, let's see, most of the things are my mother-in-law's, you know, so I inherited a lot of it, but I don't know what's going to happen to them because I don't know if my son wants it or not because he's more country, and so, you know, I got too much, you know, too many Chinese things, so probably, you know, maybe Stuart's sister probably want some of it, you know. But the older generation, they don't care about oriental things anymore, they're too contemporary, you know.

1:03:04

ZS: The younger generation?

1:03:05

LJ: Well, you know, our kids and their kids, you know, don't care about Chinese things, you know. Because I think it's nice to have, you know, Chinese things, you know. The only reason I got this collection is this is what my son gave me in grade school, and so that started me on panda bears. Yeah, so, you know, he gave me, for those, he gave me that salt and pepper shaker, so that's what it started, and I said, oh, I'll do my kitchen in panda bears, you know.

1:03:42

ZS: Yeah. Is it, I guess maybe even more broadly, I don't know if this is a really giant question, but like, what does your kind of Chinese heritage mean to you? You mentioned you feeling like the, you know, the new generation doesn't care as much about it, but so for you, like, do you, is, is being Chinese really important to you and your identity?

1:04:07

LJ: Yeah, I think it's still important to me because I was, I think it's the way you were raised, you know, the values are still with me, so, you know. I'm gonna probably die with them, you know, so, you know, I can't really hand it down to him because, you know, he's, he's older and they, they, it's another generation, it's another generation really, you know, because they don't, you know, they have their own set mind in doing things, you know, so.

1:04:42

ZS: So you mentioned the kind of difficulty of passing on, you know, this kind of culture and heritage, and in some ways that's what we're trying to do with this kind of Arkansas Chinese heritage project.

1:04:53

LJ: Well, see, some families will do it, you know, they, they do pass it on, but with my family, I don't know, he may change his mind, you know. He may change his mind, but then I don't see it changing his mind, you know, because, they're too country, you know, they're, you know. Their house is in country, and so you can't decorate Chinese and country.

1:05:16

ZS: Yeah, well, I was gonna say, when you say they're too country, what do you, what does country mean to you?

1:05:18

LJ: They live in Nashville, so it's more country, you know, because their house is, you know, she decorated in country, and he likes it that way, you know. They, you know, they, they do homemade things, you know, they, they like white, because, you know, they told me to paint my house all white, and I said, there's no way I'm gonna paint that. It gets too dirty, you know, and, you know, so, you know, I, you know, I don't, I have my own way of, you know, you know, painting, you know, and stuff like that, so.

1:05:56

ZS: So how would, how would you like to see, kind of, Arkansas Chinese history preserved, or if you could, you know, find some way to memorialize or pass on this history, how would you like to see it shared with, you know, the public or with other people?

1:06:13

LJ: I don't see it with me, you know, maybe with certain family, you know, they would pass it down, you know. Because they're probably... appreciate, you know, the, the Chinese, you know culture, but I don't—would you pass it down, would you?

1:06:41

ED: Passing, I think you were asking how would you like to see?

1:06:53

ZS: Yeah, these stories told are kind of, these stories preserved, not even just in terms of, you know, the kind of rich objects, but just, you know, how do you, how do you see, you know, one of the things that's been, I think, a common theme is that this history is largely invisible, right? You know, if you take an Arkansas history class, you often can go the whole class and never learn that there were Chinese communities in Arkansas, and so I guess I just kind of want to know, insofar as we're trying to build a project that's, that's responding to the community, we just kind of want to know how people would like that history to be shared, or what themes you would want people to kind of know about, you know, the history of the Chinese in Arkansas.

1:07:40

ED: What would you like the, the historical project preserved– I mean, we're collecting stories, what, what else would you like to see preserved or saved? Would you like to see some kind of museum or like documents in the museum or, you know, these, some of these items that are...

1:08:09

LJ: Okay, it'd be good, you know, if they do have a museum in Arkansas where, like Mississippi has, you know, that'd be good right there. And that way, you know, like, some of this stuff can be donated, you know, and that would, you know, the–you know, I got that chopping block outside that, you know, that my father-in-law had in a grocery store. That was at Mississippi for a little while, and then it ended up in my garage again, you know, that could be good for donation right there. If you're thinking about having some type of museum in Arkansas, in Conway?

1:08:53

ZS: In the long term, I think it's an evolving project, right, and so in the immediate sense, we don't know where the space would be. But we're hoping that, you know, as we build momentum, as we get more people to share stories, as more people come to know about this history, that it'll continue to evolve. So, maybe is basically the answer. I think it also kind of depends on what happens long term with the Mississippi Museum, and so for right now, we just kind of want to know what people want, so that we can kind of continue to keep those in mind.

1:09:33

LJ: Well, that'd be a good idea if y'all, you know, do that project right there.

1:09:40

ZS: Well, is there anything else about your experience or kind of like your life growing up, really even in Arkansas or in Memphis that you want to share with the project or that you wish we had asked about?

1:09:58

LJ: I can't think of anything right now.

1:10:03

ED: I have a question about your father's farmland. Did he only grow cotton?

1:10:15

LJ: Oh, he subsidized it to the government, and so they tell him what to grow. So, you know, one year you grow corn, next year you do soybeans or whatever, you know. So, at that time, I think they did that, you know, subsidized, you know, because the government pays you, you know, pays you what you call it. And so, I don't know what happened to the farmland or anything like that, you know.

1:10:52

ED: Do you know why your father bought land?

1:10:55

LJ: Oh, he was in a lot of things, really, because he was, I guess at that time, you know, Chinese want to own everything, you know. A lot of it, you know, because, you know..he had a lot of a places in town, so, you know, he started, you know, the market, you know, he didn't market for a while until his eyes got bad, and then he couldn't read the newspaper anymore. So, you know, I just remember him having that farmland for a long time, you know, and I think he bought some outside of Memphis, you know. He bought some, but you had probably had that, my stepmother would know more about that than I do, but she was saying that he bought outside of Elaine, you know.

1:11:52

ED: He bought land outside of Memphis?

1:11:54

LJ: Yeah, I mean, outside of Elaine, you know.

1:11:57

ED: Oh, outside of Elaine.

1:11:59

LJ: He bought some more land somewhere else, you know.

1:12:05

ED: So, okay, so from the time that your mother died and he decided to remarry, what was the time length there when he decided to remarry? Was it within a year after your mother died, or two years?

1:12:24

LJ: Oh, that time we stayed at Ping's house.

1:12:28

ED: So you went when your mother was sick?

1:12:31

LJ: No, that's when she already passed away.

1:12:35

ED: She already passed away, and you went to stay with Ping?

1:12:28**LJ:** And then he went to China to find him.**1:12:40****ED:** Oh, and then he went to China, okay.**1:12:42****LJ:** Went to China to what you call it, find...**1:12:45****ED:** So I was wondering who took care of the store?**1:12:47**

LJ: I think they closed, had to close it, because there's nobody that would, you know, I'm assuming it was closed because nobody ran it at that time, you know. Because he told us, I think we stayed at least close to a semester there, not quite a semester there. In Hughes, Arkansas, we stayed with Ping, you know, because he took us around and everything, you know, took us to school.

1:13:17**ED:** That was in Hughes?**1:13:19****LJ:** Hughes, Arkansas.**1:13:20****ZS:** And Ping's father had already passed away at that time?**1:13:25**

LJ: Yeah, because I don't remember him at all, though he must have been a lot older, you know, and I don't know what he died over or anything like that. And then I knew another Fong, Man

Fong, from Hughes, Arkansas, too. So that's only two Fongs that I knew. And then there's some that a lot of were related to, but our dad didn't tell us, you know, anything, so I didn't know Ping [*chuckles*] until we went to stay with him. Yeah, until we went to stay with him, you know, that we were cousins. But I remember Ping said that he came to visit us and Elaine, but then I don't remember, you know, I remember vaguely, you know, you know.

1:14:15

ED: Yeah. So going back to your father, what branch of the armed forces was he in? You think he was in the Army? World War II, was he in the Army?

1:14:32

LJ: Well, I remember him just fixing—He told me he fixed planes, that's all, but he didn't tell us.

1:14:35

ED: You don't know where he was?

1:14:38

LJ: No, I don't know where he was or anything.

1:14:41

ZS: Do you know why your parents named you Lavonda?

1:14:50

LJ: What?

1:14:51

ZS: LaVonda? Do you know where that name came from?

1:14:55

LJ: No, I asked my dad, but he never explained, you know, where it came from because my name is unusual. Why my sister and brother are just common name and then...I asked him where my name came from. He wouldn't tell me so, you know. So I'm thinking that probably the *baak*

gwai [白鬼] probably told him that, I don't know. Because you know how they have different names all the time, but then I don't know Lavonda. I think I remember my son said when they worked the food truck, they met one of the ladies and their name, her name was Lavonda.

1:15:29

ED: Yeah, not very common.

1:15:33

LJ: Yeah, it's not, you know, I think I seen two people, that's it, you know, two people with my name, so. But I think it, I don't know where it came from, I have no idea.

1:15:45

ZS: And just to clarify again, the Cantonese, *baak gwai* [白鬼]... Black person [*laughs*]? I'm learning, I'm getting there. But that's correct, right?

1:15:53

ED: Yeah [*chuckles*].

1:15:55

ZS: Well Lavonda, thank you so much for sharing your time.

1:16:02

LJ: You know, it's short and brief, so, you know, I don't know that much, you know, so.

1:16:10

ZS: We appreciate it.

1:16:11

ED: Gave us a brief description of your time in Elaine. One thing we didn't ask—and you may have already left—was in 1968, which is when Martin Luther King assassination, but in Elaine, I don't think you were living there in 1968, were you?

1:16:35

LJ: Okay, I came here in the, let's see, I graduated in '69, so I went to college in '70.

1:16:45

ZS: Okay, so you were in Elaine when they had any race problems at that time..?

1:16:55

LJ: But I didn't even think about it, you know.

1:16:58

ED: You weren't aware of it.

1:17:00

ZS: Were there any like organized boycott or anything like that?

1:17:03

LJ: I just remember, you know, they had to go to a certain bathroom, and we'd go to a certain bathroom and stuff like that, I remember. And the theater was the same way, you know, there weren't, you know, but I reme-know they had a, they were against the Black people, you know, they treated them real bad, you know.

1:17:30

ED: Yeah, but your father's store was not affected by anything.

1:17:34

LJ: I don't think so. Yeah, because I remember when I came here...you know, they had that riot then, but kneeling, I don't remember any.

1:17:48

ED: No protests or anything?

1:17:50

LJ: If, maybe because I was in the store at that time when all that stuff, you know, happened, you know, working, you know. So that's why I said I was clueless, probably clueless, you know, what's going on, you know.

1:18:05

ZS: Okay, well thank you so much.

1:18:13

LJ: Okay, you're welcome.