

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

The Reminiscences of
Alexander George Bounyavong

Asian American Comparative Collection
University of Idaho
2020

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of recorded interviews with Alexander G. Bounyavong conducted by Kathy M. Min on July 12, 2020 and July 26, 2020. This interview is part of the Oral Histories of the Post-1965 Lives of Asian Americans in Idaho project, conducted in partnership with the Asian American Comparative Collection.

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

Transcriptionist	Kathy M. Min
Narrator	Alexander G. Bounyavong
Interviewer	Kathy M. Min
Session Number	1
Location	Virtually through Zoom. Kathy Min called from Boise, Idaho. Alexander Bounyavong called from Meridian, Idaho.
Date	July 12, 2020

00:00:01

Q: I think it's recording. Okay, so I'm Kathy, the interviewer, and today I'm interviewing Alex, and today is July 12, 2020. The interview is taking place over Zoom because of COVID-19. I think we're both calling from Boise, though.

Bounyavong: I'm in Meridian.

Q: Oh, you're in Meridian. Okay, and the proposed subject is an oral history about his life.

00:00:32

Q: So we'll start with the first couple questions. What's your full name?

Bounyavong: Alexander George Bounyavong.

00:00:41

Q: And when and where were you born?

Bounyavong: I was born April 15, 1995, at around 2:27 a.m. in Boise, Idaho.

00:00:52

Q: So you've lived in Boise all your life?

Bounyavong: Pretty much, yes.

00:00:57

Q: And what's your current occupation or educational background?

Bounyavong: Current occupation is that I'm a teacher at two studios. I teach hip-hop dance at Elevated Dance Project and Artistic Dance Company. I am a restaurant worker with my dad at my dad's restaurant, Chiang Mai House Thai Restaurant.

00:01:19

Q: Wait, no way! I didn't know that your family owned Chiang Mai. I used to eat there a lot when I was younger.

Bounyavong: It's one of the best. [Unclear.]

00:01:32

Q: Sorry, what did you say?

Bounyavong: Oh, I said small world.

00:01:36

Q: Yeah. What are the names of your parents?

Bounyavong: My parents' names. My dad's name is Saysamone Bounyavong, and my mother's name is Phonethip.

00:01:49

Q: Could you spell those?

Bounyavong: Yeah, so Saysamone. And then my mother's Phonethip.

00:02:01

Q: And how did you and your family end up in Idaho?

Bounyavong: They were refugees. So, they were going with the refugee program, trying to get sponsored to come to the States. One of my aunts was able to sponsor my dad to come to Vegas. My dad actually originally lived in Vegas for almost 10 years. And then my mom was sponsored by somebody on her side of the family to come to Idaho. And then my mom went to high school here, actually.

00:02:43

Q: Oh, that's cool. So did they meet in Boise?

Bounyavong: They met in the [refugee] camps.

00:02:48

Q: Oh, no way.

Bounyavong: Yeah, so the families knew each other. They liked each other, you know, “Here's my daughter, here's my son.” And yeah, I think that's when they first met. They're like seven years apart in age. Along with—

Q: Oh, sorry. Continue.

Bounyavong: —no that's enough. My mom was already kind of young when she first met my dad.

00:03:14

Q: How old were they?

Bounyavong: Like right now?

00:03:18

Q: Sure. And maybe when they met?

Bounyavong: My dad, he's turning 55 this year. And then my mom, she just turned 48.

00:03:33

Q: Okay. And then, do you know how old they were when they met?

Bounyavong: From what I remember, if they met in the camps, my mom was like, literally, maybe 10, something around that general age. Like eight or something. My mom was a little tiny girl.

00:03:57

Q: Wow. And so they just took separate paths via relatives sponsoring them, but then they both wanted to find each other and so rejoined in Boise?

Bounyavong: Well, my dad had a marriage before my mother. But, then that didn't work out. And then, so it was an arranged, you know, like, “Hey, we know this good family”—my mom's side of the family. My mom's parents said, “We know this good family. They have a son. He's a good man. He's good young man. We want you to marry him.”

00:04:38

Q: Okay. Do you know when they came to either the US or Idaho?

Bounyavong: Probably 1988 for my mom, I believe, around there. Maybe a few years before that for my dad, because he was living in Vegas.

00:04:58

Q: So, how old were they? You mentioned your mom was in high school, right at the time she came to Boise.

Bounyavong: Yeah, she was probably 14 by the time she came here. So she got to go to high school at Boise High.

00:05:17

Q: Woah, that's so cool! Do you know what the conditions were like in Laos, and what was causing them to leave in their particular situations?

Bounyavong: Yeah, so the Communists were taking over Laos and it was not a safe place to be, especially with the government, how it was being run.¹ It wasn't it wasn't a safe place to be. People were getting killed on the spot if they didn't have anything to give the Communist Party soldiers and all that stuff. It just wasn't a good place to be at the time.

00:06:11

Q: You mentioned that they were both sponsored by family members before coming to the US. It sounds like you had relatives who first came to the US. Do you know what their journeys were?

Bounyavong: So, I don't really. I just know that for the most part, if you're a bit of an elder and you have, you know, a better position in terms of, I guess, the government or just a better position, just in general—let's say you're a teacher or something like that—you had a better chance of getting out of the camps most of the times.

00:07:07

Bounyavong: If you have a higher education, you had a higher chance of leaving Laos and to sponsor somebody else to come in, you know, to bring your friends and your family. Yeah. So just like a chain reaction because everybody needs to get out. For sure.

00:07:23

¹ The socialist Pathet Lao, or Lao People's Front, seized control over Laos in 1975. From *BBC News*, "Laos profile - timeline," January 9, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15355605>.

Q: And have your parents ever talked to you about what it was like leaving, or what it was like being in the camps, or settling in the US?

Bounyavong: So what it was like in the camps, they said it was—I mean, there's not much to do. And it was very communal. Everybody kind of knew everybody a lot of the times. They moved around from camps to camp. They were in maybe the Philippines for a little bit—maybe, if I recall it right. But they were in Thailand, most of the time. And then they finally—they stayed in Thailand for the longest time—they finally came over to the States. So, those were the early days, back in the '80s, and they were just coming to the States.

00:08:26

Bounyavong: When they talk about it, they remember bits and pieces, they just remember that it [the camps] was very [unclear], you know, small, small bits, small community, people just kind of chilled. I don't really know what they did. I think they might have just played cards and stuff like that, smoked and stuff. But that's my answer, though.

00:08:57

Q: Yeah, that makes sense. And it sounds like they were pretty young at the time too.

Bounyavong: Yes, for sure.

00:09:05

Q: Sorry, I always forget the questions I want to ask. So is the rest of your extended family also in the US these days?

Bounyavong: Yes—extended as in cousins and stuff like that, right? Yeah, we have lots of family here [in the Boise area] on my mom's side. A lot. But outside, it's a bit more scattered. We got more of them on my dad's side in Vegas. A lot of more Bounyavongs in Vegas. But then my mom's side is definitely more here.

00:09:44

Q: How many siblings do your parents have?

Bounyavong: My dad has six. There were seven of them. My mother, my mom, has three, so four of them.

00:09:58

Q: And how old are they [Alex's parents] in relation to their siblings?

Bounyavong: My dad is the youngest, and the oldest would have been—she passed away early—she would have been close to 80 by now. And then my mom is the second oldest, she's the second. The oldest on my mom's side is her older brother. He was born 1967, I believe.

00:10:39

Q: Do your grandparents also live in the US?

Bounyavong: They did. They did. They're all passed away now. But yeah, so they did live here for a brief moment in time—

00:10:57

Q: So—oh, sorry.

Bounyavong: —My grandfather on my dad's side was the one that took care of me and my sister the most.

00:11:08

Q: When did they pass?

Bounyavong: My grandmother on my dad's side passed away 2001, the year my sister was born. 2001 or 2002, that's what she passed away. I believe it was 2002, actually. And then, grandmother—this is in chronological order, who passed away first—my mother's mother, passed away around 2005-6 time. My grandpa on my mom's side passed away around, 2008—7 or 8. I think 8, most likely. My grandpa on my dad's side, who raised us mostly, passed away 2013.

00:12:03

Q: I'm trying to understand the migration circumstances of your family. So it sounds like an older sibling on each of your parents' sides came first, and then, did your parents come with the rest of the family, or did they come on their own?

Bounyavong: Yeah, my dad's side came in segments. Because my dad's side of the family, his siblings more split up. They got to choose where they wanted to go. Some aunts—one of my aunts chose to go to Argentina and raise a family. One of my aunts chose to go to Paris, France, and raise a family there. And so did my uncle. My uncle chose to go to France, too, with my other aunt.

00:13:00

Bounyavong: My dad's the younger one, and the one right above him is his older sister. They chose to come to San Diego. They lived in Las Vegas and San Diego. My aunt lived in San Diego for a little bit with my grandpa and grandma on my dad's side, for a little bit, for a little while. We have some San Diego roots, definitely.

00:13:26

Bounyavong: So it was like segments, because they couldn't all go at once. They could not. My dad and my aunts were the last ones [to leave Laos]. That's why they're so close, though. Because they were so close in age, they were the last ones. The older ones got to go first and choose. And then they [Alex's dad and siblings close in age to him] finally got to go.

00:13:47

Bounyavong: On my mom's side though, I think they were able to come here as a family. Definitely. There were no segments. Everybody was far too young to be separated. Everybody [on Alex's dad's side] was already older enough, that they could go on their own, you know. My mom's side, the kids were too young, so everybody had to stay together.

00:14:11

Q: That makes sense. Do you know why some of your other aunts and uncles chose to go to Argentina and France and other places?

Bounyavong: I don't really know why. I think they just wanted to try it. And, you know, I have my aunt who speaks fluent Spanish. Yeah, she speaks Spanish; she speaks Lao; she speaks English; she speaks Thai. So it's cool. Fluent, though, you know.

00:14:49

Bounyavong: My uncle's [Alex's aunt's brother is] like that, too.² Because she has siblings. My aunt had children, and all those children speak fluent Spanish. My aunt in Paris, she has kids, and they all speak fluent French.

00:15:09

Q: So you also mentioned that your aunt knew Thai? Is that common among your parents' generation, like they all know a little bit of Thai?

Bounyavong: Growing up, Lao and Thai are very intermingled because it's so close in culture, one; two, just language. It's basically similar. The dialect is a bit more different. [Unclear.]

² Alex's uncle, his father's brother, speaks Spanish and Laos.

00:15:37

Q: Oh sorry, what did you say?

Bounyavong: The rivers are very close, just in terms of how they flow.

00:15:44

Q: Yeah, makes sense. How many cousins do you have?

Bounyavong: I couldn't keep track. So many, I'm sure, just like you probably have a lot of cousins too.

00:15:58

Q: That's true, although my family's Chinese. So it's like a lot of my family lives in China. And so a lot of them [Kathy's cousins] are just single [children] because of the one child policy. So it kind of contains the number of cousins I have.

Bounyavong: Yeah, I have a shit—is it okay that I curse?

Q: Yeah, that's fine.

Bounyavong: I've got a shit ton of cousins over here.

00:16:26

Q: Just even in the US, is what you're saying?

Bounyavong: Yeah, just in here, my mom's side of the family, we have a ton of just all of us. Growing up with this family—lit.

00:16:47

Q: Tell me a little bit about your immediate family. You mentioned you have siblings. How many siblings do you have? What are their names, ages, things like that?

Bounyavong: I have one little sister. Her name is Trinity. She's about to turn 19 in two weeks. That's the only sibling I have. Just me and my sister.

00:17:11

Q: And how would you describe her and your relationship?

Bounyavong: I would describe her as a young, little, rebellious—but responsible at the same time. She's the younger child, so obviously she didn't get the first child discipline. Because there's a transition in parenting styles, it's true. I've seen it happen. I watched it. So I got the hard one. I got the hard, straight-out-of-Laos kind of discipline. They eased up on us. Second, she's a girl. I got the really hard—you know. So therefore, she had more leniency and freedom than me.

00:17:58

Bounyavong: Sometimes, sometimes. Because I'm also the older child and the boy. So I had to push my luck too, sometimes, and I had to get yelled at. We both had to get yelled at for trying to push curfew.

00:18:12

Bounyavong: And yeah, it's an interesting relationship, though. Me and my sister, we're very close. She loves me and respects me a lot. She listens to me more than she listens to my parents, because growing up, I'm her hero, you know. I'm her idol. She's a little mini me, in all honesty. She's interested in all the things that I'm interested in, you know, and yeah, she's a little version of me.

00:18:47

Q: Tell me, also, a little bit about your parents, like their personalities, what they're like.

Bounyavong: Let's start with my mom. My mom is very, very social. Very outspoken. And has a huge, huge heart. Very empathetic, has a lot of compassion. But she's also a savage at the same time. And she don't even know it, though. She don't know how savage she is sometimes because she's so outspoken. She speaks her mind, you know. But that's, you know, that's why people love her. You've got to take it with a grain of salt, for sure.

00:19:29

Bounyavong: Can't be soft around my parents. Because my dad is a bit more introverted, but he's social. He's a social introvert—naturally. He prefers time on his own, but when he's with his friends, he's life of the party, you know. He's laughing, drinking, and he's having a good time. He knows how to have a good time. Charming. And really good with children. Very responsible. Highly disciplined.

00:20:02

Bounyavong: But, I'm telling you, when my parents are at any party, they're literally the most lit people at parties. Our house is known as “the karaoke house” at Meridian PD [Police Department]. So whenever we get a call, and it's directed towards our address, like, “Oh, the karaoke house.”

00:20:28

Q: So you also mentioned your dad, he owns Chiang Mai? So is that the family business then?

Bounyavong: My mom doesn't work there anymore. She works at a different company. It's called Hearthside Food Service. They make nutrition bars and stuff. So it's just me and my dad right now that work at Chiang Mai. Everyone's made their rounds working at Chiang Mai, in this household.

00:20:58

Q: Sorry, could you repeat that?

Bounyavong: Oh sorry. Everyone's made their rounds working at Chiang Mai in this household.

00:21:04

Q: So how have other people in your family worked at Chiang Mai?

Bounyavong: Yep, cousins have come to work, friends. You know, whatever they need. If someone needs a little part-time gig, yeah, come on by, we opened our doors. Our doors are open. Yeah.

00:21:21

Q: So your dad opened it? So when did he start Chiang Mai?

Bounyavong: Chiang Mai was an official business 2004. This is a side note—I remember them prepping in 2003 and I was in third grade. And I used to just go there and watch them literally clean up and arrange all the equipment. It used to be a Mongolian grill. So there used to be just a huge grill in the middle of the spot. And it's just crazy to see how many years it's been, because, [it feels] like it was yesterday, what we used to do when I was still in elementary school visiting after school.

00:22:20

Q: A few follow-ups. What were your parents doing before they started Chiang Mai, and also what was the inspiration for them to open it?

Bounyavong: My parents, one of their first jobs, especially when they got married, my mom used to work at Micron. She's on the assembly line or whatever, you know. My dad actually was a janitor for Micron. He didn't speak much English, so after he was a janitor, you know, he didn't work at Micron. He got a job as a cook with my uncle at Yen Ching [a Chinese restaurant in

Boise]. My uncle worked in the food business before my dad did. I believe he was a cook before my dad was.

00:23:21

Bounyavong: And then my dad really picked up on how to cook and eventually he started his own restaurant called Raja with my other uncle—I got lots of uncles, I’m just saying. And Raja was open for a few years, not that long. The first official Thai restaurant that my dad had opened with, you know, my uncles, aunts, whatever, was Siam Cafe. Now that was the original, original. Siam Cafe.

00:23:58

Bounyavong: Growing up with that, that place was huge too. Side note—I used to run into the screen room where the big screen TV was, and act as if I was in a kung fu movie or something. Because customers, they used to hear me playing by myself, doing those Bruce Lee noises and stuff because he's my idol.

00:24:27

Q: You also talked about how your mom did high school. She went to Boise High. So I was wondering, do you know what that was like for her? And also, I'm just wondering about your parents' educational background in general.

Bounyavong: Of course. Let's go with my mom first. My mom went to high school here. And she didn't speak much English, so she was enrolled in ELL [English Language Learner] classes and she learned as much English as she could. But she knew she likes to entertain. So she specifically told me this moment that she'll never forget, because they told her in English class to write a story about her experience at the refugee camps and her transition from Laos to the States. And she got the best grade in class. Yeah, like an A-plus.

00:25:30

Bounyavong: [Unclear] because she would talk about how much my grandmother had to sacrifice in order to get to where they are now in the United States. But the way she wrote it and the way she talked about, it was appealing. People wanted to listen, wanted to engage. They were there with her, you know, through that whole experience. And so she knew she loved to tell stories and she knew she loved to entertain from a very young age. Something that she really liked to do.

00:26:08

Bounyavong: She wasn't the best at math, but my dad was. Math was definitely something my dad was much better at. And me too. I think me and my dad, we had that most in common, that

we both like math a lot, and we like sports a lot. My dad didn't go to college, but he went to—they have these schools in Laos, where you get to choose if you want to go into a more educational purpose of academics or you could do sports. He chose sports. So he was a kickboxer and a boxer. He learned to do kator. It's like volleyball rules mixed with hacky sack and, you know, play that. He learned how to do all that. He was actually really good. He was the first of his class at the athletic school.

00:27:04

Bounyavong: This man, my dad, is the most competitive man that I know—for me, that I know. He is extremely competitive, extremely, to the point where he won't be afraid to yell at you. He needs to get something done, you're not doing it, he'll be like, "Get your act together! Come on, let's go!" But that's what makes him one of the best winners that I have in my life. He just knows he likes to win.

00:27:39

Bounyavong: That's definitely passed down in the DNA because we're all pretty highly competitive. We all like to win. He never had any education here in the States, but he had education in Laos and Thailand, for sure.

00:28:06

Q: This is not super in order, but, do you know why your mom's family, why they chose—if they had a choice—Boise?

Bounyavong: Boise was going through a refugee program. Yeah, they were going through their own program. There were lots of refugees and not just people in Laos, but people from Bosnia that were also being refugees and coming to America during that time in the '80s. So it was something that was happening, where they were welcoming refugees with open arms.

00:28:48

Q: Yeah, that makes sense. And I think you kind of touched on this earlier as well, but I'm interested in your relationship with your cousins. You've mentioned you've grown up with them in Boise. And I'm wondering, have you visited or met with your other cousins in Argentina and France?

Bounyavong: Let's just talk about that real quick. Argentina, no. France, yes. France, yes. And it was one of the best experiences of my life—even though I got kind of ill and had to get surgery, get my appendix taken out—I still had the best time in France, yes.

00:29:32

Bounyavong: It was just so different. Everything is older and everything's way different, you know. People walk to the grocery store; it's not a commuter place, like everybody walks everywhere. And everybody's not afraid to be romantic in public and stuff. You see people at the park and they're just not afraid to, you know, kiss and make out, all this stuff.

00:30:04

Bounyavong: It was different for me because that was not a normal thing here in the States. So I used to look and I would point [points finger]. And then I was already young. My grandpa would say, "Look, they're biting each other," in Lao. "They're biting each other." [Points finger again.] It was cool though, Disneyland in Euro Disney—a blast.

00:30:34

Q: So with your cousins in France, do you speak to them in Laotian [sic] or do they know English?

Bounyavong: A little bit of English. Mostly Lao that I speak to them with. And I haven't spoke to them in a while. I miss that. My connections are more closer here with my family, here in the States, especially around here and my family in Boise, Meridian. Got some in Utah. My aunt and my cousin lives in Utah. Those are closer in proximity, of course.

00:31:20

Q: Tell me a little bit more about what it's like hanging out with your cousins here.

Bounyavong: Yes. Oh man. So I'm telling you, all you need to start a Laos party is Heineken; Corona if you got it, you know; brisket, we always cook some brisket; and papaya salad. And you got a starter kit for Laos party. It's over. It's all you need. And we have the best time of our life, you know. Oh, and a Hennessy bottle too—don't forget that.

00:32:06

Q: What was your first language?

Bounyavong: Lao. I didn't speak English to begin with. I was raised by my grandparents. This experience was interesting because when they tried to enroll me into school I didn't speak English. So they [teachers] tried to speak to me in English, and I wouldn't say anything. So I just looked at them. And my dad told me, he said, "They tried to diagnose you as deaf when you were put in schools." I was like, "What?" He was like, "Yeah." But when they told him that, he's like, "No, he's not deaf. He just doesn't speak English. That's why we're trying to enroll him in the school."

00:32:50

Bounyavong: Very funny situation. So you could tell, that time, you know, that diversity wasn't as vast as it is now. The diversity was still being adjusted here in Idaho. "Yeah, we think your son's deaf." No!

Q: So—oh, sorry.

Bounyavong: I was just saying, here we are now, and I speak English with, you know, with fortitude.

00:33:32

Q: So, do you consider yourself multilingual then?

Bounyavong: Yeah, I can still speak some Lao, not as much as I would like. I wish I could speak way more. But I still speak it whenever I can. I speak it with my dad whenever I can. [Alex speaks Lao with] My mom, my uncle, you know, grandpas and grandmas on the sides of the families and stuff. And yeah, it keeps the brain healthy, you know. I think that's why I learned so fast, too, in school, because I was able to keep two languages in my brain. Things just kind of clicked more because I could do that, I think.

00:34:14

Q: Yeah, that's cool. Let's see. What world events had the most impact on you while you were growing up and did any of them personally affect your family?

Bounyavong: What do you mean by "what worlds"?

00:34:30

Q: What world events? That's open to your interpretation, but some might be like 9/11, the Great Recession. Maybe there's something happening in Laos and that affected your family. So I was just wondering if there's any that you remember being significant when you were growing up.

Bounyavong: Coronavirus! [Holds hand to mouth to shout.] That's definitely one. Other events, though, world events. Maybe the Recession in 2008. It was interesting. It was different but I don't remember us actually talking about it to the point where I was affected.

00:35:16

Bounyavong: And 9/11, I remember being at school, and then everybody let us go home and I just didn't know what the hell was going on, until I found out, you know, that we were being attacked. I remember coming to class and we put on the news, and I didn't know what was going

on. So, I don't recall a lot of it by the time I got home. [...] I actually might have gone out to go play or something. I don't know. Because I was literally oblivious. So, not a lot of world events, except this coronavirus, for sure. [...]

00:36:06

Q: Yeah, living through history. Describe a typical family dinner to me.

Bounyavong: A lot of the time, I'm telling you, you know, papaya salad, maybe some larb. There's different kinds of larb, though. Larb is minced up meat, your choice of pork, chicken, beef. Maybe shrimp, sometimes. And then you pound it in the mortar and pestle, and you add some spices. Some ginger. Some mint. And it's a concoction of this flavorful and delicious salad that has spices and meat, mostly, most of it [is meat].

00:37:10

Bounyavong: We eat it with our rice. The experience with the family—on a good day, we're actually [all together]. It all smells wonderful. I'll have, maybe some soup. Luckily, some sour soup—it's our favorite. My dad makes some really good sour fish soup. And we'll have some sticky rice and then we'll also have some normal steamed rice, because my sister, my dad like to go sticky rice a lot, and me and my mom like to go steamed rice a lot.

00:37:53

Bounyavong: We'll either cook up brisket or phing pha, which is, we'll broil fish. We'll eat lots of fish. We love fish, our family. As far as food, that's how it goes [unclear].

00:38:23

Q: Do you typically eat together as a family, and is it a certain parent that does most of the cooking?

Bounyavong: We'll sometimes eat as a family. Not often like, "Here's dinner time," you know, "Be here." But if we have food, we have food. And if we're home and we're home to eat it, then we will. My dad cooks most of the time. My mom will make the papaya salad. My dad's the main cook, for sure. He's the picky one.

00:39:05

Q: Tell me a little bit about holidays and traditions, if you celebrated any in your family.

Bounyavong: Lao New Year—Lao, Thai, Cambodian New Year—is the number one. Any other holiday, they don't really have in Laos. But that one in particular is the epitome and it falls under my birthday. My birthday is Lao, Thai, Cambodian New Year.

00:39:37

Bounyavong: And it's the most lit weekend because it starts on a Saturday. So it's Saturday, we always go on a Saturday. We go to the temple. And it starts at the temple with prayer. We're dressed up kind of nice. It's casual, comfortable enough that you can sit down in a certain way when we're praying with Buddha.

00:40:01

Bounyavong: And then the food comes. We have to feed the Buddhas first. So they get to eat. And then we get to eat after. We yaht nam, which is, we pour this water—we go out, we find a plant or somewhere where we can pour the water into the soil. Pray for abundance and prosperity and all this good stuff.

00:40:31

Bounyavong: By the time we're done with that, pouring water, we go back to pray a little bit some more. And then once that prayer is done, it's like [unclear]. It's the same thing every time, even when it's not Lao-Thai New Year, and they go to the temple on those new moons or whatever, how they go about it—I don't really know. But anyways, after that, pour water, probably one more time.

00:40:57

Bounyavong: Now we get to eat. Everyone gets to eat. Everyone's done eating, and then the best part—I skipped a part actually. So there's a first prayer, and then we have this big bin of fruits, candies, goods, goodies, sticky rice, and money. Then we stick it into these much larger bins as offerings, offering, offering [mimes giving offerings], all the way down. There's a whole line of us, just giving, giving, giving, giving [mimes giving offerings].

00:41:32

Bounyavong: So now fast forward. Now all that stuff, all those offerings, all those little goodies and fruits and stuff like that—they get to come back to us and we get to pick in these huge baskets. It's mostly the kids that like to do it, you know. That was the part that we would always, “Oh yeah, I'll trade you this. I'll trade you that.” We would try to see who got the best bag of goodies and stuff.

00:41:59

Q: How did you feel, either now or growing up, having it fall on your birthday?

Bounyavong: Some weeks, it wouldn't actually fall on my birthday. Because of the timeline of the year, my birthday wouldn't always land on a Saturday. But when it did—especially when I turned 21—it was the best. Turning 21; last year it [Lao New Year] was on my birthday. I said,

“This is going to be a lit weekend.” Especially with my family and my culture, we just love to have a good time. It's a feeling I can't explain, because it was literally just a blast. It was unreal, like a movie.

00:43:03

Q: Oh sorry, what did you say?

Bounyavong: Oh, I just said it was a good time.

Q: Sorry, I'm also trying to stay quiet, because I think whenever I talk, it cuts out your audio, so just trying to be a little more silent.

00:43:21

Q: Is there any importance to names and your family? Does your last name mean anything? Do you have a name in Lao? Yeah, sort of things related to naming.

Bounyavong: So I have a Lao name. My parents, my family members, and my cousins and stuff like that, they all call me a Thi Thi. And my dad is the only one, my dad and my sister—because my dad calls me this. My dad calls me Thi-Yai. Yeah, he was the leader of the mafia in Thailand, Laos, or whatever. This is a real gangster, I believe, that actually existed. He [Alex's dad] said he calls me that because he wanted me to be, you know, tough and strong, just like him [Thi-Yai]. So he calls me that.

00:44:18

Bounyavong: And then my sister, we call her a Numpik. That's her Lao name. Her real name's Trinity on her birth certificate. But all the Lao people call her Numpik. That means the water pepper. Pepper from the water. Which is funny because when she grew up, she did not eat anything spicy. Ever.

00:44:46

Q: I think we're going to move to my questions about growing up and childhood. So how would you describe your experience growing up here in Idaho?

Bounyavong: Safe. I felt—I mean, I was definitely different, you could tell. There was not a lot of diversity growing up, though people were still really friendly. I liked my childhood. I'm very grateful for what I had.

00:45:34

Bounyavong: I do remember just kind of questioning, like, why aren't there more Asian kids, Black kids, Hispanic kids growing up? It was just mainly the area that I grew up in. As I grew

up, I became more familiar with, just having a more populace of diversity engulfed into my world of friendships. My first best friend lived across the street. He was white; he's Caucasian. But then I also had a best friend who lives in the other neighborhood connected to mine, and he was Mexican-Argentinian.

00:46:27

Bounyavong: And we [Alex and his friend who was Mexican-Argentinian] shared something, though, that all the other white kids couldn't, is that we had culture, that we were actually different, you know. Our parties are actually different. Our parties are different from theirs. Our parties are probably more similar to each other's parties than it was to our white friends' parties. Our white friends' parties would end at 11, 10 [p.m.] with their parents or whatever and stuff, you know. Our parties don't end until four in the morning.

00:47:04

Bounyavong: So it's just, that's something we shared and that's something that we grew up with. And we're just like, "Yo." We just stuck together because we understood on a different level that minorities only can.

00:47:28

Q: And how would you describe—are you still living in the same house you grew up in?

Bounyavong: Yep.

00:47:36

Q: How would you describe your house and your neighborhood?

Bounyavong: For the most part, I live in a relatively peaceful neighborhood. We've had a few stuff stolen in the past, here and there. It's very rare.

00:48:03

Bounyavong: I grew up with a lit childhood, even in my own neighborhood, beyond my cousins and my family. My house—I have a common area right across the street [points forward past camera]. So if I wasn't playing at my house, I was playing at the common area. I'm looking at it right now. And we had neighborhood kids coming into my backyard, because my backyard was open. People could see my background. My gate, my fence was low. So you could just swing right around and you could see my actual backyard.

00:48:42

Bounyavong: I had so many friends on my block that it made my backyard look like a party. An absolute fiesta. And the random kids would be like, “Can we come play?” And we’d be like, “Yeah, come on! You know you want to.” Random kids, which developed into—it was literally lots of age groups, too. Kids two, three years younger than me, or some years older than me, some the same age. So it's like a lot of play happens in this neighborhood.

00:49:21

Bounyavong: And it was very meaningful, because I think it helped develop who I am, of course, but my imagination. We got creative and stuff. A lot. And we got to apply lots of art and imagination, creativity, as children, and just work with what we had. We had no cell phones, you know. We didn't have any of that. But kids nowadays do have cell phones. It's beneficial. I get it.

00:49:53

Bounyavong: But we had to get real creative. It'd be like walkie talkie stuff. If someone had to get ahold of us, we would have to call from the house phone, so otherwise people wouldn't know where you're at. Man, and we were still messing with AOL back in the day.

00:50:13

Q: [That was] Another time. You also mentioned that you're a dance instructor now. So I was wondering, did you grow up dancing?

Bounyavong: So I was never studio taught until I was in college. I was always self taught. I always liked the aesthetic of it, of being a breakdancer. I wanted to become a breakdancer. Didn't realize how hard it was until I tried it. And I basically gave up the life of trying to become a breakdancer because it was really hard.

00:50:49

Bounyavong: I nailed one headspin in my whole life. And I was in the first grade. And my cousin—I had at least had one person that walked in and saw me nail it—my oldest cousin. And he walked in, and his eyes just bulged up [opens eyes wide and points at his eyes]. He's just like, “Yo, yo, yo, he just nailed it! He got it!” He's like, “Do it again, do it again, do it again!” And I could not do it again. Not again. That one time that he walked in, he saw me nail it. One full head spin, then stopped on a dime. What!

00:51:19

Bounyavong: But I've always loved dancing, because it felt good. It felt good to do. It brought joy. I always did it. Me and my friends used to do it at the parking lot of U-Swirl [frozen yogurt store] Friday, Saturday nights when we had nothing to do after basketball games. You name it,

like we was out just in our front yards, in our garages just having our own party dancing, because it was fun. And it still is fun. I still do it.

00:51:52

Q: What other sorts of activities did you do when you were younger?

Bounyavong: Lots of basketball. Lots and lots of basketball. My main sport right there. That's my main squeeze. First love, for sure. Oh, man. I could talk about basketball all day. Beyond basketball, though, I remember living with a neighbor who had just really nasty dogs. They were actually terrible. Shitheads. Big time shitheads.

00:52:40

Bounyavong: So, I would have people over a lot of the times, and I'm talking about one of the troubles. This is like, I got in trouble, you know, quite often. Not often as much as most people probably get into, but enough to—we pissed off this dog enough that it dug a hole under and it was able to break through the fence and chase out and run towards all of us.

00:53:15

Bounyavong: But it wasn't me. That was my friends. So, we would always try to find the next thing, to just kind of stimulate us, I guess. But some of the stuff I wasn't down for. But then they would do it anyway. Jumping off the roof of houses, like what? Some of these guys are fucking assholes.

00:53:33

Bounyavong: And I had repercussions, even though I didn't instigate any of it. Just little fights here and there. I mean, not real, real fights, but snowball fights, building snowmen, you know. I remember getting nailed in the face one particular time. My cousin on my dad's side—my dad's older sister by a few years—lived on the block down the street over there [points past camera].

00:54:05

Bounyavong: So it's just having those neighborhood friends and being able to do snowball fights. It was a blast. The best part, literally, was having friends in the neighborhood and being able to play with them on a day to day basis.

00:54:23

Q: Aside from your cousins, were there any other Asians in your neighborhood?

Bounyavong: Yeah. We have my aunt—so it's not really my aunt but we call her my aunt and her husband—literally right around this block. They've lived there since as long as us. Maybe a little

bit after [Alex's family]. But yeah, they've always been there as long as we've been here, and we've shared lots of moments together, parties, get-togethers. It's a good time.

00:55:02

Q: How old were you when your parents opened the restaurant? 10?

Bounyavong: Real quick though, I'll answer that. I do have to say that besides them [Alex's aunt around the block], my best friend, name's Brandy, and she's Lao and Filipino. She lived a few blocks over too, in the same neighborhood. So growing up, she was also around definitely, too. But yes, okay. I had to say that. It just came up in my head and I had to let it go.

00:55:38

Bounyavong: When my parents opened the restaurant, I was eight? I was nine, even nine. Yeah.

00:55:50

Q: And did you grow up—I mean, you kind of mentioned it—but spending a lot of time in a restaurant? Were you ever working when you were younger in the restaurant?

Bounyavong: Working when I was young, no. The youngest I was was probably like 13, 14, when I ever started work. And it was scary. It was definitely scary. I was obviously a little child and I had to talk to customers and stuff and get out of my shell.

00:56:33

Bounyavong: I just recall that first day though, how nervous I was and how long that day felt. I did not know four and a half hours or five hours—I worked the whole day though—was that long, you know. It felt like forever. One shift, it felt like forever, because my psychological condition wasn't tolerant of it yet. I was always used to stimulating myself at home, with something like TV, whatever, you name it, but I was here working and work time was totally different.

00:57:13

Bounyavong: I just remember, I was like, “Why is the time going by so slow?” I was drained. I was hungry. I was so hungry when I ended the shift. Everything so—

00:57:29

Q: You couldn't eat on your shift?

Bounyavong: I didn't want to—it was busy, you know. I don't want to be that kid. So I waited until the end, but literally an hour or two before, I was telling my mom, “I'm so hungry. I'm

hungry.” She’s like, “You got to wait until the end. Wait till two o’clock” and stuff. I just remember starving. I was absolutely starving. I was famished. But when I ate—and everything sounded good too. Everything sounds good.

00:58:09

Q: Was there ever a particular moment in your childhood when you had an epiphany or realization that you were Asian?

Bounyavong: That I was what?

00:58:20

Q: That you were Asian.

Bounyavong: An epiphany. No, I don't know about an actual epiphany, like, “Oh, I’m Asian.” I knew I was—I didn't even say the word “Asian” when I was young, I’d just say “Lao.” That’s because that's what I was.

00:58:44

Bounyavong: With the fact that, you know, I'd have to check the box that said “Asian/Pacific Islander” or whatever, I was like, “Oh, that's me. Okay.” I think it wasn't much of an epiphany with the fact that it was more like, yeah, I realized what I was, and that this is a part of the process of living and checking that box “Asian/Pacific Islander.” Okay.

00:59:11

Bounyavong: But I did use to question why I wasn't something else. If I could be something else, what would I be, if I wasn't Asian? And I used to almost be kind of ashamed that I was different sometimes, because I grew up with so many white kids and I’m like, “Dang.” I imagine my life if I was a white kid, you know.

00:59:42

Bounyavong: So, there were times like that. I remember those thoughts. I do. I remember a lot of those thoughts. But I liked the attention and the uniqueness of where I came from, though, because I knew I also was just unique. I like being unique. I like being original. So I soon took pride in where I came from. By the time I was—I don’t know. I can't even recall the age or that moment, to be honest. I just know I really started loving where I came from. More, maybe when I was in high school. Definitely taking more pride in it in high school, I think, for sure. Maybe the most though in college. When in college, I probably started taking lots and lots of pride from where I came from and loving my history, my culture, as I developed in my adolescence. For sure.

01:00:53

Bounyavong: Growing up, you know, you're dealing with all those insecurities and finding yourself and your actual true confidence. You're just kind of rolling with the punches, you know. You don't really understand what purpose is, really, just living, going, being a kid. So I think once I understood what purpose was, I was able to accept myself much easier and much more. For sure. And that came with college education and my education in high school.

01:01:29

Q: Where'd you go for high school?

Bounyavong: Meridian High School.

01:01:34

Q: And what was school like for you, either when you were younger, high school. Maybe we'll touch on college later. But how was school like for you?

Bounyavong: I liked school. I liked it. But what I didn't like is waking up really early. I was late a lot. A lot to the point where I was in detentions in high school. I would miss the bus sometimes, in middle school and I would have to ask my dad for rides.

01:02:14

Bounyavong: It wasn't the best thing because he was working literally every day, you know, hardly any days off. And he wanted his rest in the morning. At 7 a.m. you're asking the working man to wake up before he needs to to take you to school. And it was my own fault that I'm late. So sometimes I would have to ride my bike to school because I didn't want to wake up my parents.

01:02:39

Bounyavong: But I liked school a lot. I liked to learn. The best part was the social aspect of school, being social. Friends. Always had lots of friends that I was able to have a good time with. In middle school though, middle school was different. I'll explain that. Sixth and seventh grade were more down years for me, mainly, mostly sixth grade.

01:03:14

Bounyavong: School was like a playground, you know. You don't have a sense of who you are, but you're just being who you are. So I naturally gravitated towards classes like art. I always had to be enrolled in an art class. I loved artistic expression. So I loved art classes. I loved PE

[physical education]. I was really good at math. And I liked math. I liked going to math [class]. I liked doing math problems.

01:03:52

Bounyavong: History was really fun in high school. I didn't realize how much I liked history until I learned about Asian culture. They gave us Asian culture books in middle school, in sixth grade. So I was like, "Oh, this is cool." And they talked about, you know, Greek mythology, which I was really into.

01:04:13

Bounyavong: Science, I wasn't always the best at. I was not always the best at. But something that stuck with me, that will never leave me, is the scientific method, which I use basically for everything. And Maslow's hierarchy of needs for science and psychology. So things like that stuck with me, but I didn't always get the best grades in science; my reading scores and my science scores were always lower. Because my mind, naturally, is philosophical-type stuff and poetic-type stuff. So I liked doing more artistic shit for sure. My mind wants to do that. That's my discipline.

01:05:04

Bounyavong: Though I love being active. Completely. PE was my shit. Sports, oh yeah. Fitness, my shit. Absolutely. 150,000 percent.

01:05:20

Q: Yeah. You mentioned basketball being a really big part of your life. I'm trying to think of a good question. Are there any moments playing basketball that stand out to you or how would you describe your relationship playing basketball? Things like that.

Bounyavong: Great questions. Very good questions. I saw my older cousins play basketball in a fashion that appealed to me. It was an aesthetic thing, like it looks cool to do, to be able to juke someone out, crossover, fake someone out, you know, make them look like a fool. And I like that. So I was like, "You could do that with a basketball?" Alright, bet. Give me one. I want to learn how to do that.

01:06:09

Bounyavong: And they didn't even need a hoop. You know, they was literally just dribbling. And so the aesthetic appealed to me. So I worked ends on ends and I was so naturally competitive, I wanted to be the best that I could be. I wanted to be better than them [Alex's cousins]. Because they were the ones that inspired me, you know, they would always be schooling me. I'd be like, "Cool. I'm trying to school you someday too."

01:06:31

Bounyavong: And I never stopped loving it. A lot of people stopped loving it. They'll always love it, but they stopped loving. They stopped partaking it; they don't practice it no more; it's not their religion anymore. It's still religious to me, basketball. Studying the game. Watching my favorite players play. Kobe Bryant. Michael Jordan. Allen Iverson. Carmelo Anthony. You know, players like these, their capacity—they were the best at what they do, especially Kobe and Jordan, my top two.

01:07:05

Bounyavong: Even off the court, though, Kobe is my absolute favorite person to listen to, observe, study, because as just a human being, he's a natural storyteller. And he's very sound with words and detail, and he can explain it in a fashion that appeals to my ears and all my friends' ears. If people listen to Kobe talk about the game, no one is able to break down situations and circumstances that I've heard, as a player too, that he can. So he's one of the best to ever do it.

01:07:47

Bounyavong: So it's an ongoing process, my love for basketball. There was a time where I tried out in high school, didn't make the team, but it didn't stop me from training and getting better and better and better. And you know, I say this now and I say this forever, but lots of those kids that made it to the team in high school, they don't play no more, a lot of them. So when I see them—this is pride and this is ego talking—so when I see them in pick-up nowadays, and I see that they don't really mess with this game like they used to. I'm like, “Okay.” So I always have this spiteful revenge energy. I'm like, “Okay.”

01:08:30

Bounyavong: They got to get the mix, you know, so I gotta put them in some work. I gotta put them on skates. I gotta score on them so they know that my love never died. And that's just that natural competitive thing. It's all love, it's fun and games, you know. But just know that on a pride and ego level, I do do that when I see old teammates. I'm like, “Ay, Imma show you what's good today.”

01:08:54

Bounyavong: So, yeah, it's always a good time, getting a basketball in my hands. It's very hard for me—my attention span is just boom [snaps]. For hours.

01:09:07

Q: Did you ever get into Linsanity³ or was that not really your thing?

Bounyavong: You know, yeah, I was into it. I was into it. I wasn't the biggest fan of—because I knew the longevity of it. I'm like, "Alright, we'll see how this thing can go." I didn't want to hop on it and be like—because everybody was hopping on it—but I was still a huge fan. But everyone was hopping onto it. I'm like, oh man. I mean, the trend was so high. I didn't want to just feel like a bandwagon, you know. But I always appreciated him and I respected him, because that never happens, ever, with people from, you know, Asian culture. Never does.

01:09:51

Q: I really don't know much about basketball, so you're going to have to forgive any ignorance. But I think I was seeing, there's this player from the Philippines.⁴ He's seven feet tall and he's going to join the NBA. I don't know if you follow these things, but I think I just saw it, because I was like, "Oh, this guy from the Philippines." But yeah—oh, sorry?

Bounyavong: I said I might have to look him up.

Q: I don't know his name.

01:10:29

Q: You also mentioned, with the last [Lao] New Year, you'd go to temple and it sounds like it's kind of affiliated with Buddhism. I was wondering if Buddhism is an important part of your life or your family's life?

Bounyavong: Yes, very much. Mostly my grandpa on my dad's side. He's a very spiritual man. I would catch him praying in the room every day, every night. And it's a practice that I believe is very important for the spirituality of people and for good fortune, good mental health. Because my grandpa hardly ever—in my experience—lost his temper, unless you made him upset. It was very hard to do. He was tolerant enough that if he needed to raise his voice at you, he will. But other than that he was such a kind, warm, and loving and playful man.

01:11:39

³ International enthusiasm beginning in February 2012 for NBA player Jeremy Lin, who is Chinese American. From Rick Maese, "Jeremy Lin causes Linsanity in the NBA," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/wizards/jeremy-lin-causes-linsanity-in-the-nba/2012/02/16/gIQAHXugIR_story.html.

⁴ Referring to Kai Sotto, who is set to play in the NBA G League as of July 2020. From Keith Schlosser, "Here's What To Expect From New NBA G League Prospect Kai Sotto," NBA G League, May 14, 2020, <https://gleague.nba.com/news/heres-what-to-expect-from-new-nba-g-league-prospect-kai-sotto/>.

Bounyavong: Buddhism is—my mom still practices. She still goes to the temple and stuff like that. My dad doesn't—he goes to the temple to support, but he doesn't pray how my grandpa did all the time. So, people are spiritual in their own ways, so I just kind of let it be at that, yeah.

01:12:11

Bounyavong: It's a religion that I definitely am not scared to welcome into my lifestyle, because it's very individual-based. It doesn't have a book of rules on how to live your life, and it doesn't tell you—at the end of day, it tells you what the other religions say, which are all similar and different. But at the core of it, there's, like anything [else], you get what you give, you know, Karma. Good Karma, bad Karma, all this type of stuff. It just relates to “reap what you sow.” All that stuff's entangled in Buddhism just as it is with any other religion, you know. So it has a lot of influence on my upbringing, a lot for sure.

01:13:10

Q: Let's see—

Bounyavong: Side note: I was a monk four times. So I become a monk each time that my parents pass away. Go to heaven. It's a spiritual thing that we do for the day. Yeah, to help our loved ones go to heaven.

01:13:38

Q: What does that entail, becoming a monk?

Bounyavong: What does that, what?

01:13:42

Q: What does it entail?

Bounyavong: Shaving my head and shaving my eyebrows. And wearing a robe or whatever, you know. Wear bedsheets. No, I'm just joking.

01:14:02

Q: Wait, so you're serious about the “shaving the head,” though, and the eyebrows?

Bounyavong: Very serious. So we shave it all, shave the head, shave the eyebrows, mustache, if you have a beard. And it has to be totally clear, you know? Totally clear, totally clean [gestures towards face]. Yeah, it's [unclear] for sure.

01:14:20

Bounyavong: First time I ever did it, it was for my grandma and I was a young little boy. It was the second grade going into the third. I just remember the amount of attention that I got from especially the girls, because they just wanted to touch my head. “Oh, can I touch your head?” I was like, “Yeah.” Brought a lot of good fortune to my life, though, to be able to do that.

01:14:59

Q: What do you mean by that? How was it good fortune?

Bounyavong: When you become a monk enough times, and you do it enough, we believe that it will help you prosper. Because you did that spiritual journey, you know, to help someone with something or someone outside of yourself to reach heaven. Yeah, that's the best way that I can explain it. And then you get what you give, you know. You gave a lot to that spirituality and that custom, to help something outside of yourself reach heaven, that good things come back because you gave your time and your energy and your focus.

01:15:50

Bounyavong: So I just remember, even though I had no eyebrows, no hair—my hair was bald and shaved and stuff—I got a lot of attention. I still felt welcome. People like my friends—I made friends still while I grew my hair back and all that stuff. And I just remember, I was worried that girls weren't gonna, you know, like me. But they gave me more attention, so I was like, “Okay, that's cool. Okay.” So, yeah.

01:16:26

Q: Let's see. I'm kind of moving to the “identity questions” of my question list. So how would you describe the ethnicity of your friends?

Bounyavong: Describe the what?

01:16:39

Q: Ethnicity of your friends.

Bounyavong: My friends. Well, my close ones were all foreign. I have some that aren't, of course. Not a lot though, but the ones that are close, very close, have foreign backgrounds. So let's talk about Brandy. Brandy's Laos and Filipino. Let's talk about José. José's Mexican and Argentinian. Luke, though. He's from here and he's Caucasian, but he's like one of those open-minded, you know, very kind friends that I have. Lifelong friends. Let's talk about Emmanuel, who's Nigerian. Sajjad, he's from Afghanistan, because he's Persian. And let's talk about Kofi. Kofi, he's actually Swedish, but he's from Ghana. He speaks Swedish. And he can

speaking Ghanaian and English. So let's talk about, Marcus. He's African American. Michael. Michael is from Romania. Just, it goes on. The list goes on, let me tell you.

01:18:18

Q: And were they all friends you grew up with, or are some of them from high school, college?

Bounyavong: Brandy and José, I grew up with them in the neighborhood. So we grew up—we went to the same school ever since elementary school.⁵ And Luke too, except Luke I went to elementary school, middle school with, but then he went to Centennial [High School], Mountain View [High School]. Emmanuel and Sajjad, I met in middle school. They went to Centennial; I went to Meridian. And I met the rest in college. Yeah, Kofi, Marcus, Michael. [Unclear.] Yeah, but for the most part, I'm telling you, all my friends—most of them are ethnic. From Puerto Rico, Filipino, you name it.

01:19:26

Q: Do you think that there's a particular reason why that is?

Bounyavong: Yeah—hold on, let me clear that [wipes camera]. Culture. It's just culture. People who share culture get people who have culture. And it's a different energy, something about it. It's a different energy that you literally give to the world that you live in, you know. It's your thoughts. It's how you were raised, you know. So not a lot of kids with culture—kids without culture interact differently, let me just say that. It's true, you know.

01:20:15

Bounyavong: It doesn't take away the fact that a person without culture doesn't mean that they're open to culture. So someone who's open to culture because they didn't have something to fall back on—those kids can be my friends too, you know, but they're open to it. It's an openness. They're curious about our customs, you know, because they want to get to know us better or they're actually curious.

01:20:50

Bounyavong: I don't know. I think that's the best way I could probably understand it, because when we share culture, we get to experience, you know, just a different level of relationship with somebody. Yeah, and it's I think it's almost easier to share culture when both parties have it. Whereas if someone doesn't have the culture, it almost seems like they have nothing to give. I think that's where the frustration comes when some kids, they don't know their own, they don't have a culture to fall back on, they struggle with people who have culture, because they have

⁵ Alex went to River Valley Elementary, Lewis and Clark Middle School, and Meridian High School.

nothing to really give, you know. And the curiosity isn't there. I'm a very situation-alert person, when it comes to the people who have some, people who don't have some culture.

01:22:06

Q: How would you describe how you get along with white folks?

Bounyavong: I get along with them. I definitely do. I grew up with a majority of them in my life. But I can only be me, so I know that I'm not white. So I don't know what it feels to be white. So it's just, to me, skin color really doesn't matter at the end of the day. But I know it doesn't matter to me, but it does matter to lots of other people.

01:22:45

Bounyavong: I'm very, just energy based, like remove the body. If you could just remove the body, and if we could energy-to-energy it in terms of our interaction, that's what I kind of feel out for. But yeah, because the body exists, because this material world exists, you know, that we can see skin color, I'll acknowledge that too. It's just really acknowledging the truth and kind of adapting, because I know enough now that I have friends that are white. It's just the people that are closest to me are not white. [Unclear.]

01:23:35

Q: Sorry, what did you say?

Bounyavong: I said, a majority of them are not white.

01:23:42

Q: While living in Idaho, have you ever experienced encounters with stereotypes or experiences of discrimination?

Bounyavong: Yes. Of course. I think if you're blatantly unique and different, somebody is gonna say something about it. You know, so the fact that my nose is different, you know, my eyes are different, my skin color, my hair is different. It grows different. All this stuff has been spoken upon about from people, white kids, you know, whatever. It doesn't even matter if white kids. Sometimes, you know, Asians will make fun of Asians. Hispanics will make fun of me too. It's all jokes. Like my Black friends.

01:24:40

Bounyavong: So in terms of discrimination, though. I don't know. I don't really take things too personally. I wouldn't know. I just know that, yes, growing up, it used to kind of irk me when I'd get picked on for being, you know, Asian, I guess. Here and there. But I built up enough

tolerance and built up enough strength where I could give some back, where I could give some joke back. If it came down to, like, “Okay, we can throw down, if you really want to take it that far” type of stuff.

01:25:24

Bounyavong: Stereotypes, yes, of course. “Oh, Asians are always good at math.” And I was good at math, though. I couldn't deny that. But “Oh you're Asian, you should probably be—you're pretty smart.” And yes, I was smart. It's not because I'm Asian, you know. I met dumb Asians before, so it doesn't matter. But yeah, I just happen to be one of those Asians that I was good at math. I was smart, you know. Yeah, I mean, I did like anime. I still do.

01:25:56

Bounyavong: Yeah, the stereotypes, they definitely exist. They don't fit the mold for everybody, but I did have to deal with lots of shit, for sure. But I think lots of people do need to go through shit like that. I think so, to build thicker skin and to be able to just protect ourselves, protect myself, from the world, because the world can be nasty, for sure. They'll attack you at no warning.

01:26:35

Q: Yeah, that makes sense. I think—what do I want to ask? I know you've kind of touched on it, but do you see a particular identity for yourself. Like, do you see yourself as Asian American or just American or any other kind of label?

Bounyavong: Well, American Lao. American Asian. I'm American Asian, because I was born in America. So I'm American Asian. “Asian American” means you were born in Asian, now you live in America. You had to adapt.

01:27:21

Bounyavong: Our transition as kids who grew up first generation here in the States, it's much different from our parents who grew up over there and had to come here. So they are Asian American. They knew what it was like to transition and go through the era and go through the decades of living, being Asian American. We grew up American Asian, so that dynamic switch and that change, I'm definitely more American Asian, because I did not grow up over there. I had to hone in on the culture and feel the energy of what it's like of Laos in the household. But beyond that, beyond my house, it's American. It's Idaho. Yeah, that's what I identify myself as; it's definitely more American. American Asian. So, simple as that right now.

01:28:17

Q: I think these questions are maybe more off into the future, but, if you were to have kids, do you think you would also want them to marry someone who's also Lao? Would you want to pass certain traditions on to them? And things like that.

Bounyavong: I want to pass them, you know, my principles and values, so they can use them to better themselves. And it's so they can make their own principles and values. But I'm not going to tell them who they can and can't marry.

01:28:57

Bounyavong: Of course there's people in my family, like, “We want you to have a Lao wife, because we just feel more comfortable.” Right. But hey, you know, it's not about—yes it is about, you know, you marry this person, you're gonna marry their family. But this person is about to be your life partner. So it's about who brings the best out of you, you know, brings you joy, happiness, all that. They add to your life. So if that person isn't Lao, to me in my case, then Imma be okay with it. I'm going to do the same thing with my children.

01:29:30

Bounyavong: If you guys love each other, then love is love. It doesn't have to be from one particular region of the country, you know. Yeah. That's simple and that's how I'll put it. Nope. They'll take things, growing up, from me that they like. They won't take everything, I know that. But they'll take the things that provide them rules, to grow in this world. So, won't limit them to their partners.

01:30:18

Q: The next couple of questions and more about college. And so you mentioned going to college, so what did you study? What was college like for you?

Bounyavong: I went to Boise State University. I studied theatre arts with a minor in dance that I didn't complete, because of a class that I didn't want to retake. So I basically didn't get the minor, but I have all the criteria of having the dance minor. But my degree was in theatre arts and I absolutely loved it. I loved it. It was the best decision I ever made. But my experience wasn't always the best one. It was bumpy to get there.

01:31:08

Bounyavong: So to further on that, to dissect on that situation a little bit more, is that I entered college with an agenda that it wasn't for me, actually. I was going to college for somebody else, like my parents, you know, my grandpa. I wanted to make them proud. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know what I liked. So I was basically undecided. I thought I was going to do

business economics. Nah. I thought I was going to be medical, become a doctor. No. Definitely no.

01:31:42

Bounyavong: I took my first intro to theatre class and met my professor, Ann Price, and everything just made sense. I loved that class. I loved it so much. I loved the work. It came to a point where I was looking forward to class and I just didn't miss class, you know. And I was like, "I'm going to enroll in the theatre department. I'm going to go join." And when I made that decision, I did not look back. Did not.

01:32:22

Bounyavong: I walked at the symposium. So as a theatre student, you have to enroll in this thing called symposium. And if people don't know what the word "symposium" is, it's basically just the gathering place. So every theatre student gathers in the black box theater, which is the Dana Peterson Theatre. So we're there every Monday at noon. Every Monday, unless said otherwise on the schedule. But we go there and we talk about updates. We just update each other on the next thing that's coming up. What's been done. If you have questions, comments, concerns about anything, they're there. You know, we're here for you. And it was cool.

01:33:04

Bounyavong: My experience at Boise State University, I gave it a lot. I gave it a lot. So I got back just as much in return. So I'm definitely grateful for my experience there, because I feel like I received lots, lots of knowledge and wisdom that I applied immediately. In the theatre department, we applied our knowledge immediately. And that's what I loved about it.

01:33:34

Bounyavong: And my brain—how I naturally operate and what I like—I was in that field. And so when you're engulfed in that field of how your mind naturally wants to absorb information and apply it, you are in a state of bliss. It was literally—I was blissful doing all of it, doing all of the theatre. I was in complete bliss and it's a high that I strive to continue to get. I couldn't put a price on it; it's priceless. It's out-worldly.

01:34:18

Q: Yeah, that's really, really wonderful. So did you go into teaching dance straight out of college then?

Bounyavong: I was teaching days while I was in college. My professor, one of my instructors who I took my first dance class with—was jazz. So my jazz teacher offered me a position to teach [All] Boy's Hip Hop at her studio. At first, I said no. I declined it for a whole semester.

Yeah, a whole semester, almost a whole year, I declined that offer. But a year later, I believe, I accepted it.

01:34:54

Bounyavong: Because I felt like I wasn't ready. But something—when she asked that second time, she's like, “I really think you could do this and I really”—she was really persistent about it. “I just think you have a knack for this.” I didn't realize that at the time, the first time, but the second time, I had much more confidence in myself to have the courage to accept the opportunity and be a teacher.

01:35:24

Q: So how long have you been teaching for?

Bounyavong: 2017.

Q: Oh, wow. It's been a really long time, then.

Bounyavong: Yeah, three years, huh?

01:35:35

Q: Okay, I'm gonna ask a few questions about current events, and then we'll wrap up with your hopes and dreams for the future. But maybe you could talk a little bit about COVID. In what ways has it affected your life?

Bounyavong: Wow. Yes, so there's good and bad. COVID-19 has been good and bad. Let's talk about the bad news first, let's go bad. Bad is that we had shows—I had shows and I had workshops and I had opportunities this year that 1) were canceled and we had to push them, and then 2) postponed. Things just slowed down. Things slowed down; things were cancelled. I didn't get to perform anymore.

01:36:26

Bounyavong: I had this day where I had literally so much on my mind. I'm like, “What's going to happen in the world? What is life?” And I was dealing with these mixes of emotions that it almost got a little overwhelming and I didn't know how to deal with it. So, I got a phone call from one of my friends. He helped alleviate some of that negativity out of my mind, my energy.

01:36:53

Bounyavong: But that doesn't happen often. And when it does, it's special, because I deal with things usually almost, you know, fine. But that time, it was definitely COVID catching up

with—you just don't know what's going to happen in the future. And that's okay though, because my mind is forward-thinking a lot and my mind wanders a lot, so just being present more helped. I have to remind myself. It's a constant habit I'm trying to get [snaps], just be more present.

01:37:29

Bounyavong: So those are the bad things. Things were cancelled, things were postponed, people got sick. I got sick.

Q: Oh really?

01:37:38

Bounyavong: Yeah, so I caught it. But I'm good after the sixth, seventh day. The worst days with it were the second and third day, and then everything was okay. I healed up pretty fast compared to most people. Granted, I'm young and healthy. Some people get it worse. Some people got it, nothing at all. Some people were very asymptomatic.

01:37:58

Bounyavong: You know, I wasn't the only one, too. I had over a handful of friends that tested positive for COVID. And then, it slowed the money down. Things are going out of business. There's fear of the air. We're wearing masks. The government is going haywire. We have anarchy. There's things going on in the world, here [in Boise], from COVID, with COVID going on. There's racism that's getting in the air and all this stuff with world events. Right. And this thing, this disease, this virus—it's creating lots of more fear beyond what's already layered in the problems here in the country.

01:39:04

Bounyavong: But enough about the bad now. Enough about the bad. So much good that has come out from that too. The good is that, from the slowness, things have slowed down in a good way. At my work, I'm not working as much because they don't really need me there. But I get to enjoy a day a little bit more, compared to how hard I was working last year. I almost had no days off last year, after I graduated, no days off. I was working really, really hard. But everything slowed down. We were able to reflect more and be more grateful about, you know, being a human being.

01:39:46

Bounyavong: I got to hang out with friends on Tuesday nights, Thursdays, you know. I didn't get to do much of that [before COVID], you know. So the fact that we could do that because things have slowed down made me appreciate this time, because I'm still able to share it with friends and family, people that I love. *Because* of how things are. It's a year that nobody will forget.

01:40:29

Q: Was your family's restaurant affected with everything going on with COVID?

Bounyavong: Yeah, we're only doing takeout. We did dine-in for a few weeks. And then the cases spiked, the cases rised.⁶ You know, I had gotten ill. So we had to close it, quarantine for two weeks. Now I'm going back to strictly just takeout. Of course, business slowed down, you know, we're only doing takeout. Sometimes it gets pretty good business, gets pretty busy. It really depends. It fluctuates, you know.

01:41:07

Bounyavong: You just got to be patient. Just one step at a time. Baby steps. Just enjoying—there has to be something that we enjoy every day. So I'm still grateful that I get to work with people with good work ethic and want to keep the environment in harmony. I feel blessed, still blessed, even with this pandemic.

01:41:34

Q: And so you're still teaching dance. Is it remotely or—

Bounyavong: Yes—what was that?

01:41:39

Q: How are you teaching it?

Bounyavong: I was teaching dance through Zoom.

Q: Oh wow!

Bounyavong: Which is tough. And it's rough. But we had to do it, you know. [Unclear], but we have to wear masks now.

01:42:04

Q: That makes sense. It's also tough. Let's see. Yeah, 2020 is so much. I think we've also seen a lot of protests, in Boise and around the nation and the world, really, relating to Black Lives

⁶ Referring to the second increase in cases in Idaho in early July 2020 following the initial peak in April. From Associated Press, "Idaho coronavirus cases spike after businesses reopen," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-07-08/idaho-coronavirus-spike-after-businesses-reopen>; and *The New York Times*, "Idaho Coronavirus Map and Case Count," last updated July 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/idaho-coronavirus-cases.html>.

Matter. So I was wondering if that's something that has caused any reflection for you or if it's caused any kind of conversations in your family or friend groups or anything like that.

Bounyavong: Yeah, very much. It's caused a lot of conversations. A lot of things being brought up. A lot of issues. I'm behind it, Black Lives Matter. 100 percent. It's spotlighting because it's been swept under the rug so long that they've [the African American community has] basically just had enough. They've had enough. It's been pent up. I mean, you swipe enough shit under the rug, it's going to come back at you, you know. You have to clean it up at some point. So, those bones that you bury are there. They can come back to haunt you. So it's just the country dealing with that kind of circumstances and these issues, these topics.

01:43:39

Bounyavong: My friends are very passionate about it. They go all in. They want change to happen. They want the equality, even though this world is not equal, as much people as they want to think that it is, it's just not. So I try to be good. Be open minded, you know, be a good ear to listen to, because I know that even as a minority myself, as a Asian person, that when we walk out into the community, we're not looked at as a menace to society, you know, like Black people are. So that in itself is a privilege that we have to, that we don't get to admit as well, you know. So, it's something that we have to acknowledge and we have to understand that we shouldn't ignore the fact that we just have privilege. That our skins aren't black. Because that our skin isn't black, we have more privilege here in the United States.

01:45:03

Bounyavong: Even Hispanics too. This system, you know, was designed that—people deny this fact—that the system was designed so Blacks and Hispanics could fail. So minorities would have to stay under. And the people who don't see that—of course, it's just eight minutes.⁷

01:45:28

Bounyavong: We're doing much better about speaking up about it.⁸ I'm doing my best. I'm trying, working on it, on speaking up more about it, my beliefs. And I'm using my voice because my voice definitely matters, especially educated people, you know, people with education. And it's just, it's something we have to live with, something we have to keep progressing towards. So, just always being there, being a part of the fight.

⁷ Alex may be referencing the killing of George Floyd, although he later said he was not certain. In May 2020, Police officer Derek Chauvin held his knee in George Floyd's neck for approximately eight minutes, as captured on video and sparking widespread protest. From Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, "8 Minutes, 46 Seconds Became a Symbol in George Floyd's Death. The Exact Time Is Less Clear," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/george-floyd-timing.html>.

⁸ Here, Alex uses "we" to refer to anyone who stands behind the Black Lives Matter Movement.

01:46:08

Q: Is it something that you've been talking or thinking about with family, or more something like your peers?

Bounyavong: More so my peers, definitely. Because my best friends are colored [sic]. So they've dealt with lots of prejudices and stereotypes and racism, just like myself. And all our stories are different. They're all different. We've dealt with it, you know. It's a privilege that white people, they don't experience as much of the stereotypical prejudices and stuff like that, because none of that [stereotypes against white people] really exists in our culture. You know, it's just acknowledging the fact that that kind of situation exists. If you don't think it exists—ignorance.

01:47:05

Bounyavong: It's not as black and white as people wanted to think. It's a lot of gray area that doesn't get talked about. We try to speak upon it as much as we can. Be respectable. Some of my friends are much more—they're putting more effort than others, especially myself, because it's something that they are passionate about. It's what their mind wants, to really fight the fight. I'm just doing my best that I can to help out in any way I could. I also got to stay true to myself and my purpose because naturally, I don't really get into politics. Naturally, I don't really get into it.

01:48:08

Q: One last current issues question, and I know you said you're not trying to get into politics too much, but 2020 is an election year. How are you feeling about—not necessarily like how are you going to vote or anything—but what are your thoughts towards the upcoming election? If you have any.

Bounyavong: You know, this sounds terrible. This sounds absolutely terrible. But I haven't voted yet. Because the times that I had the opportunity, it was slim, because I actually didn't make time out of my day to go vote, when I have that right. Because I'm still so unsure about the political standpoints of stuff, you know. I haven't studied it, and I don't know enough about it or these people that I can make a decision. So I guess it's my own—just talked myself out of it and just haven't really done my homework enough.

01:49:19

Bounyavong: To me, that felt like to not participate is bad because it's my right. But I have no education and have no knowledge, so to go into it blindly is also bad. To just pick one and not know much about it, not doing enough homework. So I hadn't done enough homework to actually make the decision. I think this time I'll have to do enough homework, have to ask more questions. Because I do want to vote this year, definitely. I know every vote counts, for sure.

01:49:58

Q: Yeah, and I think just taking the time; it's a while until November. So you definitely have the time as well. And I think, last couple of questions. What accomplishments are you most proud of?

Bounyavong: I'm a proud person. So, accomplished in college, getting my college degree, my bachelor's degree. Finishing that took a whole six years, but we did it. Mama, we made it. Anything that I've ever started and finished, I'm very proud of, you know. I have a tendency to not want to finish sometimes. I'll start something, but I won't always finish everything.

01:51:02

Bounyavong: I'm a very startup kind of person, new ideas, something-fresh kind of guy. And there's value there. Don't get me wrong, but I think there's a different kind of psychological satisfaction from completing something, like getting my bachelor's degree, getting my high school diploma that I've done. So those things I'm actually very, very proud of.

01:51:34

Bounyavong: And just keep putting myself out there. I started a podcast. I'm proud of that. I'm proud of myself for starting projects. I'm proud of myself for performing, being a performer. Getting a lead role, proud of that, because I had two lead performances, back to back, when I was in college of my last year. Those were my first performances ever. And they were both leads. So I was like, "Everything was coming full circle." And I was the happiest kid in the world. I'm still happy, but when I get to perform, I'm a different level of happy. Definitely—

Q: Oh sorry. Continue.

01:52:17

Bounyavong: Oh, I just said when I led roles, I felt on top of the world, like I can literally do anything. Yes. Oh, and I'm proud of filming my first professional movie in this year. Yeah. It's called *Free Meal*, comes out in November, I believe, so stay tuned.

01:52:40

Q: Yeah, definitely. That's so exciting. What's your podcast on?

Bounyavong: So it's called *Alexander The Curious George*. It's basically—it stems from my own curiosity. What am I curious about? So it's anything, everything, and nothing.

01:53:10

Q: Just two or three more questions, because I know you also have to go to work soon. Are you planning to stay in Boise long-term?

Bounyavong: I think I could settle here. I could settle down here, with the family. It's a beautiful place. Idahome, you know. It's Idahome. It will always be home. But I think in terms of for me to—I still need to grow and I'm itching for it. I'm itching for this growth. And I feel like I may need to step out for a little bit before I come back. Yeah. Very much so. It's definitely an issue and [unclear]. It's a feeling that I cannot ignore, that I have to extend my roots beyond Boise.

01:54:08

Q: Anywhere you're thinking of in particular?

Bounyavong: I don't know. I don't. I was thinking grad school, applying to grad schools. Yeah. The Yale School of Drama was actually one of them that I was thinking of.

Q: Oh, you should!

Bounyavong: Yeah, that'd be cool.

01:54:28

Bounyavong: University of California, Irvine. One of the best theatre schools, you know. So is Yale School of Drama. University of San Diego. Brooklyn. [Tisch] School of the Arts. Academy of Art University in San Francisco. Brown University. I want to go where the best of the best is, and where I can get a good deal. Of course I want a good deal for myself. I don't want to put myself in too much debt, but I want to go where the best are, so I can learn from the best in the country. I want a world class education. I believe I'm world class. I'm a world class student. I have that faith in myself, that I'm a world class student. I want to be amongst the best in my field. So I want that push. I want that challenge.

01:55:28

Q: That's really exciting. I hope it all goes well. So, maybe, last question. I know you've talked a little bit about goals coming up in the next couple years. But I want to know, what are some of the dreams and visions you have for your future?

Bounyavong: My future? So many dreams, visions. Let's clarify it. To clarify it, I want to keep being able to tell stories. And listen. To listen to stories and to tell stories, because that's a very important part, being able to listen and tell. And tell the good stories. Tell the stories that people haven't heard about enough. Fight the good fight, you know. Seek justice—my version of justice, of course. To maintain morality, spirituality.

01:56:35

Bounyavong: So in terms of career, I want to be able to reach people at different heights and to new depths. Let's say if I go to school and I do get a masters and go to graduate school, like I might even pursue a PhD, a doctorate in philosophy, in theatre, so I can be a professor at a university. Or where I can create my own business. And potentially, if I have enough leverage, I can create my own business or education system myself with peers. And to just constantly be a student of life. Take all the information and knowledge that I can, and then plant those seeds and students. And, you know, you can just watch it all grow.

01:57:38

Bounyavong: So I just want to keep being able to tell stories. I want to be able to perform. I want to be able to make movies, you know, to have a play, to write a play myself. Have a feature film with me in it. To be in my own movie. Yeah. Make a movie about my dad, you know, because he's one of the most mysterious and interesting men that I have ever met. I mean, he's my dad, but he's a very mysterious man that lots of people don't really understand.

01:58:20

Bounyavong: It's a curiosity thing, because I want to be able to just keep doing it. And it's exciting to talk about, because all those things are not far from my reach. But I know that it takes—I can talk about dreams all day. And inspirations. I just want to hopefully be able to capitalize on all those things because that's what makes it more tangible. That it can actually be more real. You can feel it. You know, it's there. So once I figure that out, it's over. It is.

01:59:15

Q: Yeah. That's all really, really exciting to hear. I know we're going a little bit over time, but last question is just, if there's anything we didn't cover in this interview, you can bring it up now. Otherwise, that's really all the questions I had.

Bounyavong: I'm just going to tell you a little story of what happened yesterday. Okay. We can end it on this. But I was really excited for this interview, knowing that it's going to happen, because this is going to be in the archives of Yale, right?

01:59:53

Q: Oh, it's actually at an archive at U of I [University of Idaho].

01:59:57

Bounyavong: Fine. But this is your research at the—okay. Well, anyways, this is a piece of history that is being documented. And it's going to exist for not just me to access, but other

people to access. So I'm already a part of history. Part of this project with you, I'm already really, really grateful for. But side note, I was excited—my mom just came out of the garage. Doing the interview right now.

02:00:36

Bounyavong: Okay, I'll tell it still. Yesterday I was working out. I was getting in the zone. My mind wanders sometimes and I was struggling to find focus. But I felt this energy, this aura of something's happening. Time's passing by. Something's changing. And I couldn't explain what it was. But something was happening. I felt good, though. It felt good. It was a good feeling. It was a feeling.

02:01:16

Bounyavong: And next thing you know, while I was working out—I wasn't even working out that intensely. I was literally just being there, being more present. I think it was because I was very present and just being there, that this dragonfly comes in. And, if you don't know, dragonflies very rarely fly from out of their environment, because they always fly near water. And a body of water is not close from where I live.

02:01:47

Bounyavong: So it's literally floating in the garage and it's in my vicinity. And these things could see in 360 [degrees], right? So I looked it up. I was like, “Why was a dragonfly in my garage in my vicinity, in my environment?” So I looked it up on my phone. And they said that the symbolism of what the dragonfly is, is that I learned that it doesn't fly out of its environment, from a body of water. It's very rare. So the fact that it shows up and flies in my garage with me and hangs around me for a little bit, I was like, “Okay.” It shows the symbolism of change, adaptability, and transformation.

02:02:33

Bounyavong: Which was cool, because I feel like it's something that's exactly happening right now. You know, this transition, this transformation, this change. Me adapting. So it was like a little “aha” moment. Like, man. It felt like one of those things that life kinda—little intricacies, like, “Hey! Here's a little faith, have some hope. Here's a little something for you.” And it was a nice little something for me to just kind of take in and realize—things are going to be okay. It'll all work out. Just be patient. Welcome this change and adapt to it. Be who you are.

02:03:31

Bounyavong: It was something I won't forget, because the only reason why I resonate with this thing so much because—before we end this—me and my friend Emmanuel had a conversation about another conversation that he had with an older gentleman. He says, his entire life, he had

this aura, this energy about him. And there's always like this, let's say, butterfly or dragonflies, something that fly, and it would always be in his vicinity, right wherever he was at, always around him—until the day that he passed away. So on the day that he passed away, and at his funeral, that thing—that little butterfly or dragonfly or whatever—it came back and it was flying around his casket.

02:04:28

Bounyavong: And because his best friend knows that, he's like, “Yo!” [Points.] “That thing, it's there. It's that thing that's always around him and it's here.” It was also a symbolism, when I looked it up, dragonflies—depends on what people believe—but that angels are around you, you know. They're here to help you. Help guiding you. So it was a nice little touch.

02:05:04

Q: Yeah, that's really cool and I wasn't aware of any that symbolism. So that's really cool. Yeah. Is there anything else you want to add?

Bounyavong: Just, thank you. Yeah, I think that's it. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriptionist	Kathy M. Min
Narrator	Alexander G. Bounyavong
Interviewer	Kathy M. Min
Session Number	2
Location	Virtually through Zoom. Kathy Min called from Boise, Idaho. Alexander Bounyavong called from Meridian, Idaho.
Date	July 26, 2020

00:00:00

Q: Let's see. Oh, also, just to let you know, some of the questions that I'll ask about, a lot of them relate to your family, stuff to do with your family history. And I think just a few small follow-ups for different things you said in the last interview. So that's kind of what the follow-ups are on. So I'll just record the lead really quick.

00:00:24

Q: So today is July 26, 2020. I'm Kathy Min, the interviewer, and I'm talking with Alex, who's the narrator, and this is a follow up interview from his last oral history interview. So first question, when were your parents born? Do you know the years?

Bounyavong: Yeah, my dad was 1965, and my mom was 1972.

00:00:48

Q: Okay. And then, do you know what years your parents came to Boise?

Bounyavong: My mom in '88. My dad, maybe, I don't know, maybe the same time, '88. Might have been '88. Something. I remember—

Q: Oh, sorry?

Bounyavong: —my mom was '88 for sure.

00:01:13

Q: Okay, and then you also talked about how your aunt and uncle are in Paris. And I was wondering, since there is that history of French colonialism in Laos, if that had anything to do with why they went to Paris.

Bounyavong: While they were in the camps and stuff, certain siblings, depending on how old they were, they got to choose first where they wanted to go. There was—France was one of them, Argentina was one of them, Boise was one, the United States, of course, and then just wherever they had the refugee program to get sponsored to come here in the United States. Boise just happened to be a very popular one. And Vegas in Nevada, because that's where my dad originally lived before he moved to Boise. But that colonization, yeah, I would think, France was doing there, probably sponsoring refugees to come to France because it just was a dangerous time.

00:02:32

Q: Have you ever been to Laos before?

Bounyavong: I have not. No, not yet.

00:02:38

Q: So you plan to?

Bounyavong: Yes, I would like to, definitely, one day, before I'm too old.

00:02:46

Q: Is there anything you'd want to do in particular if you went back?

Bounyavong: I want to meet the friend that my grandpa basically made. He has a friend of mine—he made me a friend. He's like, "You [the friend] are going to be friends with my grandson. When he comes to visit, you guys are going to be best friends." If I get to finally meet him, that'd be cool.

00:03:15

Q: Do you know what part of Laos your family was originally from?

Bounyavong: Well, my dad's side is from Sainyabuli. I think that's more up north. My mom's family's from Vientiane, more near the capital.

00:03:33

Q: And then I think the rest of my questions are more about life in America, but can you tell me a little bit about the size of the Laotian community here in Boise?

Bounyavong: About the size?

00:03:48

Q: Yeah, like if you know how many families or so make up the community?

Bounyavong: I don't know how many families. But there's a lot. There's a good little group. Some are blended. They're not completely Lao. Some are mixed, Vietnamese-Lao, all that stuff. I don't know. I couldn't count. There's a lot and it's big, but we all kind of know each other's faces and stuff, for sure.

00:04:27

Q: Could you say that one more time?

Bounyavong: The names of the family. Yeah, lots of the dads played soccer together, kator. I couldn't give you a number on the families though, yeah.

00:04:47

Q: And then you also talked a little bit about your dad's restaurants before Chiang Mai. So I was wondering, that first restaurant Raja, what kind of restaurant it was.

Bounyavong: It was more like Indian. Raja, it's an Indian name. So it was more like Indian, Asian style.

00:05:13

Q: Is it still open? Do you know?

Bounyavong: No, no. They were only open for two to four years.

00:05:19

Q: And it was one that your uncle had originally opened?

Bounyavong: So my dad and my uncle, a different uncle, had Raja. And then when that closed down, they made Siam Cafe, and that was a few, like maybe three or four, different owners. And then that stopped. And then my uncle who was on my mom's side, he made just Siam Thai Restaurant, and that was that was open for a while. And then my dad worked there for a little bit for a few years, and then he finally started his own in '03, '04.

00:06:05

Q: So what happened with Siam Cafe, do you know?

Bounyavong: Siam Cafe, it was a pretty big spot. It was quite big. I don't really remember what happened. It might have just not been busy enough and the rent was too high. Maybe even ownership clashes, you know. So from what I remember, I don't know. I gotta ask again. But from what I remember, it was open for a brief time but not a long time.

00:06:40

Q: And then, I know you've talked a little bit about your family's experiences with Chiang Mai. But I was wondering, do you know what it was like for them to open the restaurant? And then I was also wondering if there's a reason why your family chose to market it as a Thai restaurant, as opposed to a Lao restaurant?

Bounyavong: What was the first question?

00:07:05

Q: What was it like to open the restaurant for your family?

Bounyavong: Oh, I see. What was it like? So I was just a young boy. But of course, they had to contact the landlord, the Daos. And previously to Chiang Mai being Chiang Mai, it was a Mongolian grill, so they had to claim the space and give the name, of course. And the Chiang Mai, the original Chiang Mai, it wasn't Chiang Mai House. It was just Chiang Mai Thai Restaurant. That was a co-ownership between my uncle—a different uncle—and my dad for a while.

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Bounyavong: That was a process, because then, once the ownership switched to my dad completely, my dad changed the name to Chiang Mai House Thai Restaurant. I just remember being there as a young kid also. The cleaning up and helping build, watching, and sweeping, all that good stuff, like almost every day, every other week, kind of come right after school and watch him do that.

00:08:26

Bounyavong: So, once everything was settled, though, I didn't understand why they chose Thai, but then it's always been Thai, Thai food. So it was never Lao, of course, because popularity-wise, Thai was just bigger. Thai was more popular. And we could fusion some Chinese dishes into the Thai menu, but make it our style. So there's, you know, lots of Thai restaurants have Chinese options, because we understand the consumer and stuff. But how we approach it, Thai was just the more popular and more trending thing. The Lao menu, I would say it's not as versatile to the consumer here.

00:09:29

Q: Yeah. I don't have that many questions left. I think the rest of the questions are more about you. So, first question, did you ever feel like your histories were represented in school textbooks or in media?

Bounyavong: No. No, they weren't. So I'd have to explain myself a lot, about where I came from. Where I was at on the map. So I mean, Laos didn't have much to do with America. There's just not a lot of collaboration between Laos and America, until you know, Obama did his scavenge in Laos for all the mines, because Laos has the most unarmed, all those landmines.¹

00:10:33

Bounyavong: My parents and my grandparents would talk about that, too, about how there were so many mines in the jungle and stuff. And in the country, that you could just step and people would blow up. Yes, those eventually, I guess kind of died out, throughout time, but there's apparently the most landmines in Laos compared to all the other Southeast Asian countries.² Crazy.

Q: Oh, sorry?

Bounyavong: Crazy. But yeah, Laos wasn't talked about as much. I had to explain myself quite a lot.

00:11:16

Q: So I was wondering, did you ever learn about the Vietnam War, for example, in history classes, since I guess it's called the "Vietnam War" but also Laos and Cambodia were also involved too.

Bounyavong: Exactly. I did not, no. I didn't hear about the Vietnam War. But I knew that it was going on, of course. That's why there were so many of the mines seeping into Laos too. But, no they didn't. I was not informed on the Vietnam War as much, besides hearing from Vietnam vets that it was a war that shouldn't have never happened [sic].

00:12:00

¹ Barack Obama was the first US president to visit Laos in 2016. From Kathleen Hennessey and Josh Lederman, "Obama in Laos for first U.S. presidential visit," *PBS*, September 5, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/obama-laos-first-u-s-presidential-visit>.

² Jessica Pearce Rotondi, "Why Laos Has Been Bombed More Than Any Other Country," *History*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/laos-most-bombed-country-vietnam-war>; Rebecca Wright, "'My friends were afraid of me': What 80 million unexploded US bombs did to Laos," *CNN*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/05/asia/united-states-laos-secret-war/index.html>.

Q: And then I think this is a question that I had meant to ask, and I just forgot. But, how would you characterize the role of gender and/or sexuality in your life? And do you feel any expectations or stereotypes with your gender—and also how it intersects with race?

Bounyavong: Yes, say that one more time.

00:12:30

Q: Yeah, it was kind of a convoluted question. What has been the role of gender and sexuality in your life?

Bounyavong: I see. The role, you know, male. Just kind of to be strong. And my two big figures, my grandpa and my dad. If I'm getting this right, this question is basically asking my take on it, so two big figures is my grandpa and my dad. My grandpa, in his time in my life, he was a very spiritual man and he was very charismatic and was funny. And yet, if he needed to yell at you, he'll yell at you, but he wasn't always just gonna yell at you. He didn't have that bad of a temperament in my time. Maybe in his time when he was younger, but not when I was growing up.

00:13:55

Bounyavong: But my dad has a temperament of a champion. Highly, extremely competitive. [He had a will to win]—so that competitiveness, I took a lot from my dad, but the willpower to maintain control, I definitely got from my grandfather. And just to be more wise and calm, reserved. Playful. But my dad, definitely tough as nails, so that was my role that I took on personally, as a male figure in my household. So, just doing the best that I can.

00:14:42

Q: Do you feel like you face any expectations or stereotypes based off of gender?

Bounyavong: The stereotypical, you know, “Be a man. Be a man.” [Beats fist.] Kind of, ish, sometimes. I kind of fall in my own tradition from my culture and my family. I fall on that tradition, to an extent, but it's a big one. It's a big percentage of that tradition that I fall into.

00:15:25

Bounyavong: The other is just me being educated and the fact that I know that gender fluidity, all this stuff, sexuality, has been expanded. So I respect it. But I definitely try to maintain what I've been taught, because it's just, you know, in my DNA and my conditioning. But I'm very open-minded, just because I have family members that are gender fluid and transgender. So I respect it, yeah.

00:16:12

Bounyavong: Now, in these times, it's [gender identity has] never been as expansive as it used to be when I was young, growing up. The expansion of it now, it's good. It shows more open-mindedness, more steps towards being civilized in terms of acceptance. Not as much as it could be. But, you know, baby steps. So, good question.

00:16:48

Q: In the last interview, you also talked about sixth grade being kind of a “down year” for you. So I was wondering if you would want to talk about it. You obviously don't have to.

Bounyavong: Oh, no, no. I'd love to. I recall it [being] quite down, because it was this transgression from being a kid into this new stage of where, like in the kindergarten through fifth grade, to me, cooties were a thing.³ You didn't even go out with a girl and so—“go out with a girl.” They weren't your girlfriends or whatever until fifth grade or something. But even then, I would still kind of be off-putting about the fact that “girls are what we're attracted to.” But we're not doing anything about it, because it's that little elementary mindset [of avoiding girls], like, “Girls this, girls that.’ Come on, man. Be about the boys.”

00:18:03

Bounyavong: But then, when it switched to middle school, all that changed. It all changed. Everything was like, “Yo, girls, girls, girls, girls.” People would choose girls over their homeboys and stuff. And I'm over here, like, “Whoa, what happened?” It's only been a year. But girls were like developing, guys were developing,

00:18:27

Bounyavong: Some friendships withered away, because of this transgression that I didn't really conform to. I think it was a lot of me not conforming to how middle school actually was. Because you had to now deal with people who had boobs, and were going through periods, and guys' balls were dropping, all that stuff. And they were talking about how they could make out with this next girl, all this stuff, blah blah blah. Things were getting more sexual. And I was like, “Wow, this is really weird.” But I felt it in myself too. I felt it in my body. When I was growing much more testosterone, and so therefore my voice got deeper in seventh grade.

00:19:12

Bounyavong: That sixth grade era was me trying to figure out—because I'm so used to those kindergarten through fifth grade experiences, that this experience was just so new and I didn't know how to deal with it and conform to it. So I used to hang out in the cafeteria with close

³ Referring to the “disease” elementary schoolers imagine students of not their sex to have. From Jane C. Hu, “A Brief History of Cooties,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/brief-history-cooties-180971914/>.

friends, if I could find any. But during break time, lunchtime, I didn't have many friends to just kick it with. Sometimes I would just walk around by myself, maybe I'll see a classmate, say, "What's up," and I'll try to hang out with them. But I remember it was more of a lonely time at school. At school, I felt more alone.

00:19:54

Bounyavong: But when I came home, I had friends. I had neighborhood friends, and it was just weird because my neighborhood friends weren't my friends in school, because they were different grades and stuff, so I couldn't really see them all the time. And some of them had different friends in middle school.

00:20:16

Bounyavong: I was used to also being popular in kindergarten through fifth grade, and I wasn't that popular in sixth grade. So I was adjusting to that. I was not a popular kid. I was naturally more introverted because I knew nobody. A very small amount of us at River Valley Elementary went to Lewis and Clark [Middle School]. Very small amount. A good handful, maybe two of us. So making new friends was an adjustment and things didn't start picking up until seventh, eighth grade, for sure. But sixth grade, man. Even the workload and the stress, the longer school days, it felt like—it just caught up and I didn't like dealing with it. Too much stress for a young 11 year old kid who was about to turn 12. So the preteens.

00:21:29

Q: And then kind of fast forwarding a little bit. Is there a reason that you chose to attend BSU for college?

Bounyavong: A reason, yeah. One big reason is that I didn't apply anywhere else except for maybe U of I [University of Idaho], CWI [College of Western Idaho]. Yeah, I didn't really apply anywhere else. And, I had it kind of set in my ways that I was going to attend Boise State because my family loves Boise State and it's close to home.

00:22:04

Bounyavong: And at the time, where my family still kind of needed me, because my grandpa had just passed away, right when I graduated high school. So 2013, passed away, graduated high school, went to college. Same year. Being close to home was very important at that time. Plus my best friends were going to Boise State too, so I didn't see a reason why not to.

00:22:33

Q: And then the last question. Obviously, you don't have to answer this as well. But I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about your COVID diagnosis. I think just because

you are working in a restaurant, so you're getting exposed a lot. So I was just wondering, if you knew a little bit about how, if you have an idea of how you got it.

Bounyavong: I definitely got it in the downtown [Boise] outbreak, June fourth, fifth, sixth, and then the weekend after too, because I went downtown both weekends.⁴ And yeah, I work in the restaurant, but I definitely did not get it from the restaurant. We're pretty clean and sanitized over there. As far as I know, nobody else has gotten sick, unless you went downtown.

00:23:37

Bounyavong: Yeah, you know, I had to quarantine for two weeks. I got better within a week. And worst days were the first two to three. It was good and bad at the same time. Good, I'm glad I had it and got it over with. Bad, because the business had to take a plunge and we kind of had to reset. But then also good because I got to just rest and catch up on being able to chill in this craziness. But then bad, because people also are kind of like, "Oh, you got COVID?" [Waves hands as if scared.] "I don't want to get COVID!"

00:24:35

Bounyavong: Just because I had it, just because someone has it, they have this preconceived notion, like, "He's still probably contagious, you don't know." Some people are still like, "Yeah, we're not ready to have you around yet." And all this stuff. Interesting time.

00:24:52

Q: Yeah. Anyways, I think those were all my follow-ups. I'm sorry I didn't get the transcript to you before it, but I was wondering if there's anything that you still feel, since we've last spoken, if there's anything else that you want to have included in the final transcript.

Bounyavong: No, I think we went pretty deep. You know, very detailed. It was nice. I appreciate it a lot. Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

⁴ Increase in cases in Boise in early June 2020 linked to downtown bars. From Rachel Roberts, "Boise's coronavirus cluster tied to downtown expands; more bars connected to cases," *Idaho Statesman*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.idahostatesman.com/news/coronavirus/article243582657.html>.

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