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Interview with Dana Lee

Dana Lee

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Interviewee: Dana Lee

Interviewers: Jacqueline Mireles, Kelly Rivas

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Length: 00:30:37

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Born in South Korea in 1984, Dana Lee is an attorney for the state of North Carolina. She lived in South Korea until college and came to the US for graduate school. She recently became a U.S citizen. She took up sewing for a little bit and when the pandemic started, she began sewing masks to donate. She joined the Auntie Sewing Squad in November 2021 as a Sewing Auntie.

Thematic Outline: (00:00:00) Lee describes her life in South Korea as a youth. (00:04:38) She proceeds to detail why she decided to study her law degree in the United States. (00:08:02) Lee continues to explain how she viewed her life as privileged in Korea compared to the US. She also describes how she did not have the same experiences as other Asians in the US when it comes to racism and discrimination, but she did share their critique. (00:13:04) Lee explains the importance of continuing to share her Korean culture with her son. (00:15:23) Lee shares how she came to the Auntie Sewing Squad, how she began sewing and to whom she decided to donate her masks. (00:23:40) She recounts the stark contrast she observed as the pandemic unfolded in the US in comparison to South Korea. (00:26:09) Lee concludes by relaying her experience of becoming a U.S. citizen.

Dana Lee Oral History Transcript

00:00:11

Kelly (K): Okay so to start off the interview, today is April 28, 2021, and we're doing our interview on Dana Lee.

00:00:22

Dana (D): Dana.

00:00:23

K: Dana Lee, sorry. Do you want to say the first question Jackie?

00:00:32

Jacqueline (J): Yeah. I just wanted to double check we are recording, right?

00:00:34

K: Yes.

00:00:38

J: OK. So we just wanted to ask our first question, just tell us about yourself.

00:00:44

D: Ok, so my name is Dana again, and I was born and raised in South Korea. I lived in the U.S. in the 90s for about three years when I was in elementary school. Then I went back to Korea, graduated college there, and then came here for law school and currently I'm working as an attorney with the state of North Carolina. And I am married with my husband of nine years now and he is white. We have a four-year-old son who is going to be starting kindergarten in the fall.

00:01:29

K: Okay and could you describe more of your life in South Korea?

00:01:37

D: Ok, so I think when I first registered for this, I mentioned that I think my life was fairly privileged. I've been thinking on that a little bit, so I think it's privileged in that I didn't have to worry about paying for my education. By the time I was going to college, I think my family started out [I] think not as well off in the beginning growing up. So, for example, meat wasn't something that was on the menu on a daily basis. I think by the time I got to high school and college, I think it was when my parents could actually afford to shop at department stores and, you know, pay all of our tuition and such. Yeah, but I think it's privileged in that my parents both work for the government. My dad worked with kind of like the Department of Transportation,

construction, like HUD over here I think. My mom was a teacher, so we've always had steady employment, they had steady income, even though it wasn't you know, they weren't rich by any means. But we had a pretty stable environment growing up.

00:03:09

J: That's very interesting. A follow up question that I had was like I know you said you came to the US for college maybe, but what differences did you see in the education systems in Korea and here? If there were any?

00:03:34

D: So I went through college in Korea and law school here, so I don't know if I can, because I didn't go to college here, so I think it's a little different. I think the main difference is most of my friends commuted from home to college because South Korea is a country that is fairly small, pretty much half the country is located in or near Seoul, which is the biggest city in the capital. So, I grew up in the suburbs outside of Seoul and many of my friends were living in the area within commuting distance to the school. So over there, the majority of my friends were commuting from home to school every day. It's like the environment feels pretty different here because I think more people here are living in dorms and living near campus compared to living with your parents at home.

00:04:38

J: That's very true. Another follow up question too. The school, like, why did you decide to come to the US to study law specifically?

00:04:52

D: So I was an English literature major back in South Korea and as I was getting ready to graduate, I started thinking about what I wanted to do and I decided that, well, my parents have always said they wanted me to have more of a professional career, rather than just starting out, you know, as kind of an office labor kind of job. And then I agreed with that and also I wanted to learn something that was a little more relevant to the real world. As in English literature you're learning about, you know, novels and stuff and you're analyzing characters in a novel. But, you know, it's not very relevant to what happens in the real world so I thought law would be a good way to really learn something practical. And as far as coming to the US, rather than studying or getting a job in South Korea, I think I thought that I had a better chance of getting into a good law school compared to getting into a good job.

00:06:19

J: That makes sense.

00:06:26

K: How would you describe life here in the US compared to South Korea?

00:06:34

D: I think, for me, I have a better work life balance. I don't think...so a lot of people say they came to the US for a better life. I'd be pretty okay if I stayed in Korea and got a job there. I don't think I would be any less well-off compared to where I am now. But I do think I would be working a lot more nights and weekends if I was in South Korea compared to here, where as a government employee I usually can enjoy my evenings and weekends. And my brother-in-law and back in Korea is a government employee there and he does not get to enjoy his evenings and weekends usually.

00:07:33

D: Jackie, you are a muted.

00:07:42

J: OK, so the next question we had was about one of the questions you answered in the survey, which was what do you mean by "It's also been strange for me to think about being considered a minority when I did not grow up as one"?

00:08:02

D: So, especially more recently with everything that's been going on, with more violence and discrimination against the Asian Americans specifically. I think most Asian Americans that were born and raised here probably had experiences growing up, feeling a little othered or left out. But I really didn't have that when I was growing up because in Korea where those ninety-nine plus percent of the country is of, you know, the Asian race and, and like I said, I was fairly middle class growing up, I think. So I really didn't have that experience of feeling like I'm at the outside of, like, mainstream society I guess. So when I am seeing these things, I get upset. But on the other hand, I do also wonder like why I have the right to be as upset as I am, when I don't share many of the experiences people have even right now, you know, I live in a city that's mostly, you can't really go anywhere without a car. I've been working from home, I'm a government employee and a lawyer, so I don't have to worry about walking down the street and people, you know, I don't know, yelling at me or punching me because I drive everywhere. Like my government employee coworkers are generally not going to, you know, I don't have to deal with people that are...that I would be a little more scared of I guess. So it feels a little different while I'm feeling upset and, you know, a little bit scared, I also know that I'm probably not having the experience that a lot of other people are having. So I've been thinking about it a lot, and I don't really know how to explain that very well.

00:10:40

K: That's okay. I know you kind of already answered this question, but you did say you have a family, you're married and have a child. I guess I could ask, do you still have family in South Korea, your parents?

00:10:57

D: Yes, almost all of my family is still in South Korea. I have an aunt that immigrated to the U.S. decades ago and she is in Texas now, but other than that, all of my family are in South Korea.

00:11:14

K: Do you, do you go back to Korea now to visit?

00:11:18

D: Hmm, I usually do try every other year or so. We would have gone, I guess, this year but I don't think that's going to happen this year.

00:11:34

J: I was going to ask, do you have any, like, homesickness because like me specifically, I have moved away for awhile and I missed my family so much and I mean, I just can't imagine being like countries away instead of just cities, or states, you know?

00:11:52

D: Hmm, I think it's better than it used to be in that with the Internet and everything, I can keep up pretty well. I know my aunt that immigrated decades ago if I ever talked to her on the phone, I can tell that she can't remember some Korean words and things like that because she wasn't really able to keep up with things going on in South Korea and talking to her Korean friends and family on a regular basis. But I am able to do that. I do miss my family and I miss the food a lot. A lot of the food that we have there is not as available around here I guess if I lived in L.A. or New York, you know, it might be easier. But being here in a fairly, well, I'm in the south and we don't have a lot of Asians around here. So I do miss some of that.

00:12:52

J: You did also mention your husband was white, right, correct? Do you still speak Korean to your son?

00:13:04

D: So we speak English, for the most part at home, I am trying to teach him Korean. If it wasn't for COVID, he would have gone to a Korean school every Saturday and before COVID, I also used to volunteer as the teacher there as well to teach Korean to other Korean American children. But because of COVID, all of that has gone virtual and I didn't see the point of having a four-year-old do virtual schools. I didn't sign him up, but my husband doesn't speak, he knows a few

words of Korean, and that's it. But I do try to teach my son some Korean words, try to expose them to, you know, like Korean cartoons or something, as much as I can.

00:13:55

J: That's really great. So I think you kind of hit on this question as well. The next question was, what were you doing before COVID happened?

00:14:13

D: I had been working as an attorney with the state of North Carolina and other than the fact that I'm at home working from home now, it really hasn't changed. I still have the same job.

00:14:31

J: Any new hobbies you've picked up other than sewing?

00:14:35

D: I took up spinning, which is, I mean, I used to knit, I still do but then during the pandemic, I went one step further and started making my own yarn, basically.

00:14:50

J: That's pretty cool.

00:14:53

D: Yeah, so trying to learn something new keeps it, you know, breaks up the monotony a little bit, feeling like I'm actually at least doing something new even if I'm not leaving the house.

00:15:10

K: Next question is, how did you hear about the Auntie Sewing Squad and if you have any friends or family who are also part of the Sewing Squad?

00:15:23

D: So I heard about it through a Facebook group. It's called Legally Stitching, it's basically a crafting Facebook group for lawyers and somebody there posted, I think, around Oct/November that they were still needing more people to sew masks because of the third wave and I had sewn masks on my own for a little bit. I guess last spring for a while on my own, and then masks had become more available, I guess, by the summer so I had stopped. But then I saw this post saying, oh, we still need masks to donate. That's when I reached out to the group and signed up.

00:16:13

K: And do you have any other friends or people you know, who are also part of the Squad?

00:16:18

D: No.

00:16:20

K: No, okay.

00:16:24

J: The next question kind of ties up with this one. It is, how did you take up sewing and, you mention you were doing it on your own, like donating on your own before. How was that experience? Like who did you decide to donate to and why?

00:16:44

D: So I had a sewing machine that I bought in 2012/13. When I tried to teach myself how to quilt and I did that for a little bit and then I kind of stopped. And so I hadn't used the sewing machine since my last move to the point where I didn't have any sewing feet other than the one that was attached to the sewing machine. And it had been sitting there for a few years then. When the pandemic started and you may know this, but it started earlier in South Korea, so I'm talking to my family that are panicking over there, asking me, you need to stock up on masks because you're going to need it. By the time I started looking it up, there was, it was nowhere to be found or, you know, hundreds of dollars for a box of masks. And then they started talking about making your own masks. And I had the sewing machine. I had the quilting fabric leftover from my attempts at making masks. So I started making it. And then I think it was a way to feel a little less helpless about the situation. At least I feel like I'm doing something to be helpful, though. So I started making the masks, just looking up instructions online. I made them for my family. I made them for my coworkers. I made some extras and hung it up in our mailbox. Oh, for any neighbors that needed them to come and grab. And then I saw that I think it was Deaconess Hospital, they had a page where they were instructing people on how to mass make masks. But they also had a list of medical providers that needed masks. So I started looking through that list and just calling people with their phone number listed there to see if they needed masks. So I started doing that. And then I think the stimulus check came in and, you know, I still had a job. So I felt a little guilty about getting extra money when I wasn't really affected. So I used that money to buy more fabric. And, you know, some more masks. I think I've done around 300 masks by the end of spring to donate to local medical providers. I think some went to the local Department of Correction. You know, things like that.

00:19:31

K: Jackie, do you have any follow up questions from that one?

00:19:36

J: Not really just a question, more like a comment, like I think it's so awesome that people are like taking up being able, like wanting to donate and just wanting to help out. Like you said, you were still working. So I think, like, working and handling making the masks and distributing them was really, really awesome.

00:19:59

D: Thank you. I will say my employer does allow for a few community service hours each year. So I checked with my boss that I could use some of those hours for that. Though I did sew more than the hours they gave me, but I did use some of that. So I was able to do that during the day for a little bit.

00:20:22

J: That's pretty cool.

00:20:27

K: Next question. Do you see yourself being involved in other organizations in the future?

00:20:40

D: What do you mean when you say organization, what kind of organizations do you mean?

00:20:46

K: I guess anything where you can also donate or do community service. I know you said that you had also volunteered to teach Korean American kids Korean. So do you still plan to do that after the whole pandemic subsides?

00:21:05

D: I probably will. And as far as donating things, I think even back in Korea every winter they did a thing where you're knitting hats for, you know, babies, you know, sending them out. So I used to do things like that. So if it's something that I can do without stressing myself out too much, I like making things anyways. So that's a good way to do something that I somewhat enjoy and also help other people. I think I will continue to do things like that.

00:21:45

K: Now, I'm curious because you are an attorney. I imagine that you have a lot of work to do. And then how do you balance that life between being an attorney, being a mom, a wife, and also finding time to, you know, donate things or knit or sew?

00:22:08

D: So a lot of my sewing actually happens, you know, after my son goes to bed. So after he goes to bed, before I go to bed, I usually sew. Recently I had devoted watching *The Late Show* with

Stephen Colbert. I'm watching this, I'm having it on my phone and I'm sewing. So I try to make it so that it's, you know, it's a little bit of me time that I'm listening to a podcast or watching some kind of a TV if I do it, so it's not it doesn't feel like work. Yeah. I think my son said I think a month or two ago because I was sewing after my work ended and before he came up, came home, I was sewing and my husband picked him up and he came home and I was making it while, you know, he was eating dinner and he came over and said "Mommy you sure like sewing." Not exactly, but I have these masks that need to get made.

00:23:15

J: So another question that I had following up like COVID like, what are your thoughts on everybody, like, I know, like especially here in California, like certain things have opened. What are your thoughts on people going out but the pandemic still being real and going on?

00:23:40

D: It's strange watching how things unfolded here compared to how they were in South Korea, because here just masks and lockdown and all of this had become so political. I think in Korea at least, you know, Korean politicians fight like any other politicians and the rest of the world. But I think at least everybody was in agreement that, you know, you needed to wear masks and, you know, staying away from other people was a good idea. Things like that. So it's strange to see some people so vehemently against science.

00:24:21

J: Yeah, definitely.

00:24:25

D: You have to kind of take things in stride because I have family and friends in Korea that complain about, oh, I can't really, I have to wear a mask everywhere, it's not as easy to go out and things like that. So my sister, for example, I talked to her fairly often. She is able to go out and get a cup of coffee, even if she is wearing a mask and she is able to go into a restaurant and eat when, you know, she wants to go out and eat and, I think she got on a plane within South Korea to travel. She's had a vacation. I think she and her husband's on vacation again. So they're out driving out to somewhere and, you know, seeing things and everything. And then it's like, oh, it's getting so bad here. There has been two confirmed diagnoses in my town and I hear that they go, if only there was only two people sick in my town, I would be dancing in the streets at this point. It's been interesting to see how careful they are over there despite their low, low numbers. And here it's literally thousands a day and people are just protesting about masks.

00:25:52

J: It's a big shift. So our next question relates to, we know you mentioned you're just becoming a U.S citizen. So we just wanted to ask how your experience was with that.

00:26:09

D: So for me, it was actually about as easy as it gets really. I'm sure people will be jealous when I say this, but it took me two months. Well, I don't know what I did that somehow those stars align where I put in my application. I knew I was eligible for a while, I had been eligible to apply. I had kind of put it off. But then, you know, my son is a U.S. citizen, then more than likely he is gonna be growing up here. So I thought it would be better for me to go ahead and become a U.S. citizen. And the process itself was, you know, I'm a lawyer, I did all my own paperwork. So it was, it's kind of like doing taxes, it's annoying, but, you know, I knew, as far as immigration goes, I think marrying a U.S. citizen is probably the simplest process. Yes, so that was not too bad. Now, I think I became a citizen in January of 2020, and then that country started falling apart in front of me. I was joking with my friends, I need to go get a refund.

00:27:37

J: That's very interesting to hear that it took you such a short time. I think I had mentioned to Kelly in one of our meetings that I'm going through kind of a similar process with my husband. He is applying for residency. But I told her, I was like I think it's really interesting to know her side of the story and how everything was for her, because it's an interesting journey.

00:28:03

D: Yeah. And I think I did it just before they started shutting everything down. I think the Trump administration pretty much shut immigration down using COVID as an excuse. And I think I got all of it done just before they started doing that.

00:28:19

J: Then it makes things go a lot faster, I've noticed.

00:28:25

D: And I think just regionally, the immigration officer that I interviewed with said it takes like two months here. But if you go down like three hours to Charlotte, it's like a lot more months. So probably this area moves it fairly quickly.

00:28:42

J: That's great though.

00:28:45

D: Good luck.

00:28:47

J: Thank you. Any other questions, Kelly?

00:28:53

K: No. Are you fluent in Korean?

00:28:58

D: Yes.

00:29:00

K: Oh. Would you mind saying a short sentence in Korean?

00:29:03

D: Just anything.

00:29:05

K: Yeah.

00:29:11

D: What should I say? (Speaks in Korean)

00:29:20

K: And that means in English, what does it mean?

00:29:23

D: I'm good at Korean.

00:29:28

K: Oh, wow. Jackie, anything else you would like to add.

00:29:32

J: I don't have any other questions, I just really want to thank you for donating your time to us and to this whole project that we have going on with our class.

00:29:42

D: Thank you. I think it is an interesting project. I hope you guys you know pull everything together and everything goes well.

00:29:50

J: Thank you so much.

00:29:52

K: Thank you. And it is wonderful getting to know you and your life story. And hopefully, you know, after this pandemic, you're able to travel back to South Korea and visit family.

00:30:02

D: Yeah, eventually.

00:30:05

J: I did want to just point out that we did send, I believe I sent it to you, the release form.

00:30:14

D: Yes.

00:30:16

J: And, yeah, that's pretty much the only other thing we need for the class. So whenever you have time.

00:30:21

D: Ok. I went ahead and sent it back earlier this afternoon. I think the only thing I said is I don't want to be on YouTube or other social media. My face, I don't want it on there. But other than that, if it's like on your school's website and stuff like that, that's fine.

00:30:36

J: OK. Thank you.

00:30:41

D: All right, we'll take care.

00:30:42

K: Bye

00:30:43

J: Bye.